

The Third Coast Dance Film Festival and COVID-19 Adaptive Programing in 2021

by Rosie Trump

Abstract

The Third Coast Dance Film Festival celebrates the intersection of contemporary dance and the moving image with a screening series of short dance films. The festival programs films that reflect diversity in genre, form, and representation. Low budget/high impact and female driven work are of high interest to the festival curators.

The Third Coast Dance Film Festival was founded in 2010 in Houston TX and is now based in Reno, NV. The chapter discusses the festival's curation process, economy, driving values, and audience demographics. Starting in February 2020, the impact of and navigation of COVID-19 are detailed at various steps of the festival from initial planning to curation to and to screening events.

The essay concludes with questions for the future regarding social formats, economy, purpose, and values of the Third Coast Dance Film Festival and screendance festivals.

In a companion piece, 2021 curators Ellen Duffy, Eve Allen Garza, and Laura Gutierrez are featured in conversation with festival founder and chief curator Rosie Trump. Specifically, they discuss the curation process and how COVID-19 influenced the process of choosing a screening program.

Introduction

In the first part of this essay, I trace the origins of the Third Coast Dance Film Festival with discussion of the personal, geographical, and logistical issues that shaped the festival in the early years and what continues to inform the festival now. This is motivated by a desire to contribute to and recognize how and why dance film festivals have proliferated, especially in the last fifteen years.

In the second part, I present the case study of adaptive programing the Third Coast Dance Film Festival employed during the COVID-19 pandemic by approaching the effects on makers, presenters, curators, and audiences. Ultimately, these reflections offer ways to analyze and understand the pandemic era and prompts questions for the future concerning issues of economy, value, purposes, and social media.

A discussion with the 2021 curators Eve Allen-Garza, Ellen Duffy, and Laura Gutierrez in interview format is included as a companion to this essay in the Interviews section of this issue.

Festival History

In 2010, I began a new job as the Director of Dance at Rice University in Houston, TX. One of my preliminary goals going into this job was to leverage the resources of my new institutional



affiliation to begin a dance film festival. I was a transplant to Texas, having lived the previous five years in Southern California. My founding intentions for the Third Coast Dance Film Festival were twofold: 1.) to support the Houston dance community with a local dance film festival and 2.) to create a platform for dance filmmakers like myself, specifically female-identifying with DIY approaches to making.

I come to the dance film festival world as a dance filmmaker and choreographer. My first exposure to the possibilities of dance and digital media was at Slippery Rock University as an undergraduate dance student. I took in a course called Dance and Technology taught by Jennifer Keller in 2002. In this class, we worked with DanceForms software, choreographed and edited video dances, and created digital portfolios. There was a novelty to animating virtual dancers and an allure to the portability of a portfolio on a CD, however I became enamored with making screendance and hybridizing live performance with projected video. The following year, I had the opportunity to work with Troika Ranch in a guest artist residency at Slippery Rock University. They introduced students to Isadora software and creating interactive video dances by combining projection and performance.

I worked as a Videography and Archives intern at the American Dance Festival (ADF) in 2002 where I attended the Dancing for the Camera Festival: International Festival of Film and Video Dance. While I had seen screendance on the small screen in educational settings, this was my first time attending an actual festival. The crafted curation, the excitement of premieres, and the impact of the large screen captivated my imagination. My experiences at ADF inspired me tremendously to commit to the creative work of translating movement to screen—I knew I wanted to make work like what I had seen in the Dancing for the Camera festival.

While pursuing a Masters of Fine Arts degree in experimental dance choreography, I worked with video artist Hilja Keading and filmmakers Erika Suderberg and Bridget Murane at the University of California, Riverside. Their mentorship further shaped my value system in the form: centering concept and appreciating low-fi, experimental methodologies. I was encouraged to contextualize screendance beyond the field of dance performance. I was asked to think beyond the cinema and movement techniques and to connect the body on screen to ideas in media, cultural, and women's studies. Over time, my interest in multimedia performance waned, but my fascination with screendance grew larger.

While living in Southern California, I regularly attended Los Angeles's screendance festival Dance Camera West in the mid 2000's. I saw an amazing array of screendance programming at Dance Camera West, especially shorts programs. Though, I also saw a programming bias towards male directors, male choreographers, and works with large budgets made possible by established funding in Europe and Canada. Even in Los Angeles, the movie capital of the world, few local artists were programmed into Dance Camera West's main events, at the time.

As an emerging screendance artist I asked: Where were the venues for artists that were making work without access to big budgets? Where were the screening opportunities for artists making experimental work without the high production values? When I looked at peer dance filmmakers, I saw women making films with a strong engagement with DIY approaches and aesthetics. I saw work that resulted in high impact because of movement invention and cinematic point of view.

How could a film festival buoy the do-it-yourself and multi-hyphenate makers? How could gender representation be more balanced in festivals?

These questions guided the formation of the Third Coast Dance Film Festival. The platform I wanted to build would attempt to amplify the work of artists who may not appeal to the bigger festivals. Figuring out how to build screening programs that value process, not just product, and challenge stylistic questions of what can be considered dance guided my interest in curation. This was and is an ongoing, imperfect, and evolving model of responsiveness that guides the Third Coast Dance Film Festival.

From the start of the Third Coast Dance Film Festival, shorts were my main interest. Uncertain of what the responses might be that first year and under the moniker Rice Dance Film Festival, I put out an open call for dance films under twelve minutes. The call resulted in a shorts program of local and national makers.

By happenstance, the Contemporary Art Museum of Houston was exhibiting *Dance for Camera*¹ and we collaborated on co-presenting several events. Sharon Lockhart's *Goshogaoka* (1998, 63 minutes) which was part of the *Dance for Camera* exhibit screened at Rice Cinema in conjunction with the inaugural Rice Dance Film Festival. The CAMH hosted me and the Houston dance community in several live dance performances at the museum during the exhibit.

With the initial year momentum taking the festival beyond Rice University's campus, the name changed to the Third Coast Dance Film Festival and became an annual event. The success of the CAMH partnership indelibly shaped the festival; partnering with visual arts venues is now woven into the fabric of the festival programming. The early years of the festival would not have been possible without building foundational relationships in Houston with the dance company Frame Dance Productions, film venue and non-profit Aurora Picture Show, and dance writer Nancy Wozny.

Currently over a decade old, The Third Coast Dance Film Festival celebrates the intersection of contemporary dance and the moving image with a screening series of short dance films. We program films that reflect diversity in genre, form, and representation. Low budget/high impact and female driven work are highlighted in our curatorial point of view. The festival is now based out of Reno, NV.

The Third Coast Dance Film Festival programming includes a premiere event with one to three shorts screenings and an ad hoc screening touring to various arts venues and universities in Pennsylvania, Alabama, Nevada, California, Nebraska, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, and Texas. I am the founder, director, and chief curator of the Third Coast Dance Film Festival. Guest curators have included Jodie Barker, Charli Brissey, Ellen Duffy, Jordan Fuchs, Lydia Hance,

¹ On view at the Contemporary Art Museum Houston from August 7, 2010 - October 17, 2010, *Dance with Camera* is an exhibition that considers artists and dancers who make choreography for the camera. The exhibition features art works in film, video, and still photography that exemplify the ways dance has compelled visual artists to record bodies moving in time and space. Featuring 26 artists and filmmakers, *Dance with Camera* has been organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, and is curated by Jenelle Porter, ICA Curator.

Ashley Horn, Jennifer Keller, Rosa Lina Lima, Rebecca Salzer, and Noelle Ruggieri. The 2021 festival guest curators were Eve Allen-Garza, Ellen Duffy, and Laura Gutierrez.

My own identity as a female-identifying choreographer and filmmaker paired with my academic career are undeniably enmeshed with my roles as dance film festival director and curator. These two roles impact how I've shaped the festival, built its audience, and focused the programming.

Economy and Audience Reach

The Third Coast Dance Film Festival has a modest, self-sustaining budget, by choice. While I retain the ability to shape the festival uncompromisingly, I also recognize the limitations of running a festival this way. The festival cannot afford to hire regular support staff or apply for grant funding, and programming possibilities hit a ceiling of limitation that is set by how much I can manage.

I see the potential and opportunities for expansion, however I have prioritized balance. It is small, it is regional, it is niche. A resistance to building the infrastructure to support the economics needed to sustain growth.

It has taken me ten years to be comfortable talking about this structure, owning it as a choice rather than a failure to incorporate into a non-profit, to exponentially expand, to capitalize. It is a more precarious structure, but not a less viable one.

The Third Coast Dance Film Festival's audience falls primarily into three categories: college students, dance viewers, and/or film/visual arts enthusiasts. Audiences are built from the local dance communities, venue patrons, and my academic affiliations. The touring venues combined with my professional association means the majority of the viewers are young adults/college students.

There is often a secondary impact for these viewers. The screening event may be the first-time viewers visit the venue, such as a museum. For example, our regular screening partner since 2014, the Nevada Museum of Art, which is the only accredited art museum in Nevada, is only 1.3 miles from the University of Nevada, Reno campus. Many Third Coast Dance Film Festival college student attendees express having never visited the museum prior to the screening and enthusiasm for returning.

Curatorial Process and Point of View

I serve as the chief curator and invite two or three different guest curators to review films and shape the program. The curation process for the Third Coast Dance Film Festival takes place over three rounds with each film submission being reviewed by at least two curators. A call for films short films under 12 minutes is published, circulating through social media, email, and the network of makers the festival has built over ten years of programming. In 2018, the festival began using the FilmFreeway online platform to accept submissions.

The umbrella curatorial point of view prioritizes three ideas: 1.) diversity in genre, form, and representation 2.) low budget/high impact and 3.) female driven work/ female-identifying makers are highlighted in the programming. The curators are encouraged to select films that speak to their

individual aesthetics. Works that include humor, unusual approaches to movement or cinematic method and content, and question what dance is, have been hallmarks of the festival.

Ultimately, between fifteen and thirty short films are selected for the screening program annually. The festival gives out two types of awards. The “Best of Festival Award” is granted by each curator to highlight their top pick, resulting in three to four film awards each season. One “Spirit of the Festival Award” is chosen collectively by the curators to highlight a film that exemplifies the festival’s interest in female-identifying driven and low budget/high impact work.

The identity of the Third Coast Dance Film Festival is grounded in the curation. The films are selected each season with an eye towards challenging what dance on screen is and can be conceptually and technically. Specifically, this is achieved by embracing and prioritizing low-fi, DIY, and experimental approaches in selections.

Impacts and Pivoting Programing for COVID-19

COVID-19 began impacting, and subsequently shaping, our programing concretely in April 2020 and unwittingly as early as February 2020.

The Third Coast Dance Film Festival annually presents a touring screening at the Kaleidoscope Arts Festival in Slippery Rock, PA. The event coordinators contacted me in early March 2020 with notification that live events were being canceled, and the festival was ultimately going to be canceled. I responded with a proposal to offer a virtual screening of the Third Coast Dance Film Festival. This was a novel idea, at the time, though we know it now to be normal. I used the online video sharing platform Youtube to present a virtual screening for the Kaleidoscope Arts Festival. Because distribution in this way was a new concept for most, the biggest challenge was Kaleidoscope figuring out the logistics of how to get their patrons the information (link) for the digital screening.

Then college campuses began closing and instruction was moving online. As my social and professional networks filled with the expressions of worry, panic, and anxiety of the unknowns, specifically how to translate dance into the virtual world and how to generate content to fill a digital space, I saw a small need that the Third Coast Dance Film Festival could fill. Based on the successful pivot to online content with the Kaleidoscope Arts Festival, I offered a one hour screening program to my social media network of university faculty. Colleagues from the California State University, Long Beach, the University of California, Berkeley, Davidson College, the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, and the University of Nevada, Reno incorporated screenings of the Third Coast Dance Film Festival in their courses. Largely, these virtual Third Coast Dance Film Festival screenings replaced the canceled live performance viewing assignments for students in Spring 2020.

I remember beginning the administrative work for the 2021 season in February 2020 and thinking to myself how COVID will never impact an event scheduled for February 2021. I even thought that by scheduling a call for films in June, we would “jump” past the pandemic period. In retrospect that thinking was so naive, but at the time, city, state, and national shut downs had yet to begin. In those early Spring 2020 days, there was a (very) misguided hope that the worst would pass by summer.

The 2021 call for films opened on May 1, 2020. My state of residence, Nevada, had stay-at-home orders in place for a month at this point. It became clear that the national landscape for the arts had been decimated with cancellations, postponements, rescheduling, resulting in wide-spread unemployment and irrevocable income loss. I waived the submission fee (\$15) for the regular deadline. Since we started charging submission fees in 2015, the festival offers waivers for anyone who finds the submission fee cost prohibitive. 2020 demanded blanket economic relief, and fee waivers was the small contribution the Third Coast Dance Film Festival could offer.

The call for films closed on July 1, 2020. Ellen Duffy, Eve Allen Garza, Laura Gutierrez, and myself served as the 2020-21 curators, reviewing the films over the summer and finalizing the line up by September 2020.

The main programing for 2021 included three screening events in February:

The Virtual Screening #1 was on February 18 at 6 pm at the Nevada Arts Museum in Reno, NV. A ticketed event, though free for museum members and students. Following the one hour film screening there was a Q & A with filmmaker Marta Renzi and myself moderated by NMA director of public programs, Christian Davies.

The Virtual Screening #2 was on February 20 at 7 pm co-presented by the Holland Project in Reno, NV. This was a free, one hour screening event.

The Video Installation was available for in-person viewing Feb. 1-28 at The Holland Project Gallery at 140 Vesta Street in Reno, NV. The installation featured 25 minutes of films on a continuous loop and was available for viewing during gallery hours or by appointment.

In addition to virtual programming, there were two significant programming additions in 2021. There were an unprecedented number of student film submissions in 2020. The Third Coast Dance Film Festival has never offered a student category for film submissions, however I saw this aberration as an opportunity to support young dance filmmakers. Fresh from the energy of the added university screenings in April and May of 2020, combined with the impressive student work submissions, I reached out to middle and high school performing arts educators from my personal network. After gauging their interest in virtual content, I created a YOUTH screening program in addition to the primary shorts screenings. The YOUTH program toured to three pilot schools, two in Reno, NV and one in Baltimore, MD.

The second program addition was a month-long video installation to complement the short screening in partnership with the Holland Project in Reno, NV. This program element was in response to the surge of films we received that would work well on a mid-sized screen, some of which were COVID responsive. The video installation ran in a gallery space, intentionally intimate and framed as an in-person, socially distanced dance film experience for one or two people at a time.

In summary of the immediate impact of COVID, the Third Coast Dance Film Festival expanded its touring programing and pivoted the annual live screening to all but one virtual event resulting in programming that could be viewed across geographies.

Since the summer of 2020, I have attended more dance film festivals and viewed more dance on screen than I have ever had the opportunity to before. The level accessibility virtual screenings have given to this form is unparalleled. The Third Coast Dance Film Festival is currently located in the city of Reno in the state of Nevada-- a fairly isolated city in a state with many remote and rural communities. Access, specifically virtual access, is an issue that cannot be ignored moving forward.

Questions for the Future of Screendance Festivals

When I think of the future, I think of questions. These questions help me dream up what may yet be possible and to contemplate the reality COVID continues to indelibly shape.

1. ECONOMY

Will festivals shift towards and/or utilize corporate, third party platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo to present their content? What are the economic implications of such platforms? This trend potentially transfers resources and relationships away from local community partners, yet increases audience reach beyond locality. How does this impact issues of growth/sustainability and audience engagement/reach?

Will artists continue to be able to pay festival entry fees? What are the ethics of entry fees, specifically? How do they feed into festivals' production budgets? Can paying screening fees become a norm?

2. VALUE

In 2020/2021, the demand for the skill set of translating dance to screen and live performance to virtual presentation increased. What will the long-term impacts on the field be as more dance artists learn and use the camera to present dance? Will the value of these skills remain elevated beyond the immediacy of the pandemic? Will workshops and class offerings in the genre expand?

During the pandemic, many funding/commissioning entities included virtual performance and dance films into their parameters. Will the screendance and virtual performance continue to be considered in a foregrounded manner?

In the July 2020 New York Times article, "The Dance on Camera Festival, When Dance Is Only on Camera," choreographer Annie-B Parson remarks "We're all becoming filmmakers." I have been thinking about this quote since then. When all choreographers are screendance makers, how are these skills regarded? Is there an elevation, devaluation, or evolution that happens when we all become filmmakers?

3. PURPOSE

What are the larger goals of screendance festival curation? For many years, the Third Coast Dance Film Festival's driving goal was to showcase the sheer possibilities of dance on screen. Specifically, spectacular sites, novel techniques, and cinematics feats of time and rhythm. Now I want to be driven by what screen dance can do for the viewer. Facilitating a festival during the

COVID pandemic has prompted me to move away from crafting programming that proves the validity and showcases the capabilities of the form. Instead, I want to move towards creating programming that highlights the affective impact and responsive relevance of dance on screen.

Many screendance festivals organize screenings into thematic programming. Virtual screenings (and the absence of physical financial and logistical barriers) expanded how many screening programs and themes they offered. Will this continue as festivals transition back to primarily in-person events. What is lost/gained when programming shrinks?

4. SOCIAL MEDIA

In 2020 searching for connection, physicality, and entertainment, people consumed an inordinate amount of bite-sized screened dance through the social platforms of TikTok, Youtube, and Instagram. Social media seemed easy to dismiss as faddish and trivial over the last decade. How will screendance meet viewers where they are—on social media?

How can, or should, dance made for the social media screen be considered in screendance festivals? How could this bring new, and diverse audiences and makers to the form? What are the inherent limits to work made on commercial apps and corporate platforms? How can makers use and manipulate technological tools to define, drive, and expand the presentation of moving bodies on screen?

Conclusion

Dance film festivals responded to the pandemic in diverse and unprecedented ways, especially around access to programming. Dance artists turned to the format of dance on screen as an alternative to live performance, and the form significantly evolved and continues to evolve in turn. Audiences learned to consume virtual content through new platforms and formats, with altered attention spans, and with unparalleled capacity. In the years since 2020 many conventional practices, such as live screenings, have (delightfully) returned. However, other new, hybrid, and virtual modalities have remained and are still emerging. New questions continue to surface around commercialization, space for experimentation, and risk-taking in programming.