

## Editorial: Solo/Screen

*Harmony Bench, The Ohio State University*

*Simon Ellis, C-Dare (Centre for Dance Research), Coventry University*

**Keywords:** screendance, editorial, solo performance, alone

This volume did not start out as a themed issue, but similarities will emerge among any collection of essays when ideas and authors find themselves in proximity to one another. In our open call, we asked for screendance artists and scholars working at the intersection of film, dance, visual arts, and media arts to “expand and critique contemporary notions of screen-based images and changing choreographic practices, and [to] engage with theories and philosophies from interdisciplinary fields.”<sup>1</sup> An unanticipated commonality emerged among the contributions responding to this open invitation: solo performance.

There is, no doubt, an economy of means at work in solo performance. Holly Hughes suggests that contemporary artists have turned to solo performance due to a lack of financial support: “solos are all [theaters] can (barely) afford to produce.”<sup>2</sup> But as we see in the essays gathered here, the stakes and implications of dancing alone for a camera has a great deal to do with the time period in which that framing of the self takes place. What does it mean, for example, to conduct aesthetic experiments in a solo form during and after a political season in which ‘going it alone’ was a dominant theme? The success of the Brexit vote in the UK and Donald Trump’s presidency in the US—the two countries where we and a majority of our contributing authors are based—strike us as a particularly salient backdrop for querying solo performance. How does the impulse to create solos resonate with national and ideological isolationism and self-aggrandizement? In an article on solo theatrical productions, Jonathan Kalb notes that “Solo performance is, of course, a field rife with self-indulgence and incipient monumental egotism.”<sup>3</sup> Does solo performance reflect an impulse to withdraw from the world and amplify the self? Or conversely, does solo performance offer a space from which to critique such withdrawal? David Romàn, for example, describes solo performance as “one of the few forms of artistic expression that registers as democratic: nearly anyone can do it and nearly everyone does.”<sup>4</sup> To that end, we might also wonder if solo performance is more about exclusion than it is about exclusivity—if solo performance presents itself as a necessary avenue for female artists and artists of color who face discriminatory casting practices and who may view solo performance as a viable alternative.

Perhaps before advancing any moral or political judgments about solo performance, we should clarify what we think solo performance is. Rebecca Schneider offers a straightforward definition: "From a theater and dance perspective, we can understand solo performance to be, simply, a single body performing on a stage (or in any space). We might add to this that in solo performance as it developed in the latter half of the twentieth century, the single body increasingly performed in a piece authored and/or choreographed and/or staged and/or designed by that single body."<sup>5</sup> Ramsay Burt concurs, noting that solo modern dance is distinctive for performers' use of "dance material that is created on and by themselves."<sup>6</sup> In her introduction to an edited collection on solo dance, *On Stage Alone*, Claudia Gitleman reminds readers of the centrality of the solo artist to the development of modern dance, including the canonical figures Loïe Fuller, Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, and Maud Allan—female performers who all achieved notoriety as solo performers.<sup>7</sup> At least in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, there is an understanding that a solo is not only a performance given by an individual, but that the performance has been authored by that individual. A solo performance is thus different from a dramatic soliloquy or balletic variation in that solo performance is fundamentally an expression of self rather than an interpretation of a role.

With its emphasis on the self, an argument can certainly be made for the solo form as an unabashedly egomaniacal endeavor, but with Trisha Brown's death earlier this year, we are also reminded of her solo dances, with and without camera, and the ways she challenged the reduction of the solo to an individual ego. In particular, Johnathan Demme's 1986 film of the 1979 piece *Accumulation with Talking Plus Watermotor* undoes any quick assertion of the solo giving aesthetic form to the self as *a priori*. This film was deeply influential for both Harmony and Simon, as well as the larger screendance field. The dance itself was an intellectual feat, combining Brown's fluid motion with the challenge of alternating between two choreographies and talking at the same time. The film is warm and familiar, welcoming the viewer into Brown's studio space while also unraveling the mythic functions of both the studio and the screen. Demme's camera undermines the studio as a sacred space of creation and refuses to mask the apparatuses of filmmaking which appear in the frame. More interesting for this editorial, however, is the surprise of dancers quietly entering the space and watching Brown, and how their entering and watching becomes another kind of performance for camera. Brown may be the only one who is dancing, and her dancing may conventionally be called a solo, but Deeme's film begs the question—"Does one really dance alone in a solo?"<sup>8</sup>

In *La danse en solo: Une figure singulière de la modernité*, a volume collating talks from a 2001 symposium of the same name at the Centre National de la Danse in France, the authors repeatedly remark upon a paradox within solo performance. The solo performer may be dancing by themselves, but at the same time, they are never alone:

the solo is a representation of the world (Ropa), a creation of the world (Monnier and Nancy), multiple (Pradier), and collective (Schneider).<sup>9</sup> “There is no solo in itself,” declares Jean-Marie Pradier.<sup>10</sup> The solo is a synecdoche. For Schneider, the solo is a “becoming ensemble”—not a totality, but a togetherness manifested through “citing other work, co-opting other work, creating an action by acting or reacting, enacting or re-enacting, making of the single body a stage across which whole histories (the multitudes) are brought to bear.”<sup>11</sup>

The possibility of solos as multitudes resonates with screendance practices, where the relationship between camera and dancer already multiplies the self on screen (as Hetty Blades argues in this volume), as well as the prominent method of practice-as-research, which encourages a depth of practice achieved through reaching from the self toward society. Practice-as-research is an increasingly common approach to conducting research in the UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Europe, and is growing in the United States. A key principle of the method is critical self-reflection (questioning one’s own practice) and such reflection is built into iterations of artistic practice. At its best, this critical attitude makes possible new processes and ways of understanding that extend beyond the artist-researcher’s personal curiosity. At its worst, it produces solipsistic work existing within a bubble of self-importance such as Kalb critiques above. Though practice-as-research is full of creative and intellectual possibility, limited resources for postgraduate and postdoctoral artist-researchers that enforce small scale—and often solo—projects exacerbates any tendencies toward self-indulgence.

Regardless of the conditions of the development of artistic work within or outside of the academy, when producing solo work (or work that is some kind of negotiation with the self), the question remains: how does this version or understanding of the self contribute to—or change—how we understand others, or even ourselves in relation to others?

The question is most exciting when artists (or people not even *identifying* as artists) are making films, working quickly and unselfconsciously with readily available hardware and software technologies. Australian student Anastassia Krstevska’s 17-second film (originally posted to Facebook<sup>12</sup>) *When old men tell me to smile more, I scowl so hard my scowl melts off my face to produce another scowl which melts off my face to produce art*<sup>13</sup> gets to the heart of the self on film. She seems to be saying, “Here I am, this is me, and then this is me as well, and well, here I am again showing you all just how much of me there is.” It’s laced with humor and irony, and while openly political it carries energy and hope that elevate it beyond cynicism.

London dance-artist Ellie Sikorski’s *Wonderful Woman*<sup>14</sup> displays a similarly playful attitude to the self. In the film/music video Sikorski’s replications of her nonchalant, *cool* self are deliciously lazy. It is bare-bones film-making, and her confidence and

willingness to perform a kind of corporeal disengagement or boredom while the edit is screaming “Here I am” is both absurd and generous.

Of course neither Krstevska nor Sikorski are making screendances narrowly construed, but their work (and play) is delicately choreographic in its sensitivity to rhythm, space, time, and image. Perhaps their lack of interest in categories or nomenclature in order “to produce art” reveals a politics of identity and self that resists singularities. It is a dizzying politics in which we are each finding our way own in relation to social technologies, screens, and the moving image.

The articles, provocations, and interviews in this volume likewise present the solo as a paradoxical vehicle for expressing an artistic identity or self that opens onto political questions of identity and belonging, and philosophical questions of space, time, movement, and perception.

Anna Macdonald opens this volumes with a meditation on that ultimate act undertaken alone: death. She focuses on a temporal suspension of progress in the ways bodies onscreen can seemingly move without going anywhere. She draws upon the Hollywood musical *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) and her own work *Walk* (2016), made in the wake of her mother's death, to explore what she calls moving stillness. Both films offer viewers an intensified now, a temporality of an extreme, distilled, or thick present that collapses past and future, thereby inhibiting progress, which Macdonald likens to the Kairos of death. Comparing her own solo film with Gene Kelly's exuberant solo dancing, Macdonald suggests that film's ability to blur the distinction between motion and cessation of motion is consolidated in screendance's specific relationships to a moving body in time.

Kyle Bukhari takes us in a different direction with his analysis of Yvonne Rainer's film *Hand Movie* (1966) and Richard Serra's film *Hand Catching Lead* (1968)—two virtuosic examples of solo performance for screen. Bukhari is interested in how these films point to a movement of media. Both films take the artist as the presumed subject of the film and concentrate the artists' identities not in their faces, as might be expected in the solo performance genre, but in their hands and the activities their hands undertake in self-exploration (Rainer) or action (Serra). Bukhari uses these films to think through each artist's aesthetic migration from one artistic medium to another. Rainer hailed from dance, Serra from sculpture. Both found a pivot-point in film that allowed them to test the boundaries of their own disciplines and to explore alternate avenues for advancing choreographic and sculptural ideas.

John White focuses more on the solo viewer (voyeur) than solo performer in his articulation of screen-based intimacies and the camera as a tool of surveillance in Katrina McPherson's film *The Truth*. The way a camera can bring a dancer into proximity to a viewer holds promise for White, in that the relationship, along with the rhythmic aspects of editing, can foster empathy on the part of the viewer. White is

interested in the entanglements of intimacy with surveillance, however, and finds that a camera tracking dancers' bodies and particularly the use of close-ups can amplify emotional connection by placing the viewer in the position of voyeur. Like Bukhari, White draws attention to the ways the dancers' bodies are framed so as to emphasize body parts and trajectories over the coherence of identity. But for White, the surveillance-style approach used in *The Truth* creates the sense of a private show for an individual viewer.

Like Bukhari, Ariadne Mikou focuses on intermediality in her consideration of the impacts of built environments on film projection and mobile spectatorship. In some of the filmed components of her project of performance-architecture there is a goggled solo presence on screen, circling, round and round, looking down some kind of rabbit hole, watching us—the audience—reconfigure the space. It is her interest in the spaces between audiences and choreographic materials that provokes her suggestion that—like choreography—screendance is an expanded field.

In our Provocations and Viewpoints section, Hetty Blades looks at Polly Hudson's *Vis-er-al* (2015) and Jonathan Burrows, Matteo Fargion, and Hugo Glendinning's *52 Portraits* (2016) through the lens of the self-portrait, and asks us to consider how self-representation is problematized through the mix of authorial voices in the collaborative work of filmmaking. Cara Hagan likewise draws our attention to representation through the visual politics of dance onscreen. She reflects on the American Dance Festival's series *Movies by Movers*, which she curates, and documents demographic trends in what is submitted and subsequently screened at this festival. Tracie Mitchell provides us with the tour of dance online for this volume. She narrates her own explorations as an artist while pulling out works that were particularly influential to the development of her own practice.

Anna Heighway has interviewed Rosemary Lee, and Rosemary Candelario has interview Eiko Otake for this issue. Both interviews offer perspective into the artists' work and collaboration with others. Heighway and Lee discuss the intense visuality of Lee's work, particularly the film *Liquid Gold is the Air* (2014), and Candelario and Eiko examine the intricacies of a collaborative artistic life and Eiko's recent forays into solo work with *A Body in Places* (2014-17).

Four reviews in this volume give readers an opportunity to further consider how artists, curators, and scholars are currently shaping the field of screendance. Marie-Louise Crawley reflects on the 2015 online danceworkbook from The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, *A Steady Pulse: Restaging Lucinda Childs, 1963-78*. Katja Vaghi reviews the 2016 *Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies* edited by Douglas Rosenberg. Carol Breen examines the 2015 bilingual publication *Art in Motion: Current Research in Screendance* edited by Franck Boulégué and Marisa C. Hayes. And Harmony Bench

reviews the 2017 New York City Dance on Camera Festival in its 45th year of screening dances for camera.

We encourage readers to consider the stakes and politics of dancing alone, and the contexts in which such dancing occurs. What kinds of relationships do solo performances establish between self and society? How do solo performances reflect artists' political orientations? When is solo performance a creative strategy borne of economic necessity, or of representational politics? Who gets to dance alone and who is forced to? And if solo performers are not alone even when they dance by themselves, who (or what) constitutes their silent collaborators, their co-conspirators, their witnesses, their audiences? Who decides whether solo performance is defiant or indulgent? And what is the place of the screen in solo performance? By what procedures does the screen facilitate opening a self onto the world? As it becomes increasingly common for individuals to turn their cameras on themselves and post the results for the world to see online, what can screendance offer to the theorization of self and screen?

With long-standing screendance festivals and a growing body of literature, the screendance field is at an exciting moment in its own evolution. Thanks to video sharing on the internet, dance onscreen is becoming less of an exception and more of a rule. Screendance scholarship is manifesting the need and desire for an international conversation more attentive to screen practices outside a dominant white Euro-American norm. We are therefore happy to announce that Volume 9 of the *International Journal of Screendance* will be guest-edited by Melissa Blanco Borelli (Royal Holloway University of London) and Raquel Monroe (Columbia College Chicago) on the theme Screening the Skin: Issues of Race and Nation in Screendance. Volume 9 will be published in Spring 2018.

Finally, we'd like to thank the many individuals who have helped put this issue together: Claire Ridge at C-DaRE, and to our assistant editor Carol Breen also at C-DaRE. Thanks also to our Reviews Editor Tamara Tomić-Vajagić, and to Maureen Walsh and The Ohio State University for their ongoing commitments to IJSD's digital platform and distribution.

## Biographies

Harmony Bench is Assistant Professor of Dance at The Ohio State University, where she is affiliated faculty with Theatre; Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies; and Translational Data Analytics. She co-edits *The International Journal of Screendance* with Simon Ellis. She is currently working on a database of early 20th century touring dance

companies and, with Kate Elswit, exploring the touring and travel of choreographer Katherine Dunham. These projects in progress can be found at [Movement on the Move](#).

Email: [bench.9@osu.edu](mailto:bench.9@osu.edu)

Website: <http://www.harmonybench.com>

Simon Ellis is a choreographer, dancer, film-maker, dramaturge and teacher. He is from New Zealand but now lives in London, and is a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Dance Research at Coventry University. He is particularly interested in the limits and possibilities of collaboration in choreographic processes.

Email: [simonkellis@gmail.com](mailto:simonkellis@gmail.com)

Website: <http://www.skellis.info>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "International Journal of Screendance Volume 8: Call for Papers."

<sup>2</sup> Holly Hughes and David Román, "O Solo Homo," 2.

<sup>3</sup> Johnathan Kalb, "Documentary Solo Performance," 14.

<sup>4</sup> Hughes and Román, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Rebecca Schneider, "Solo Solo Solo," 32.

<sup>6</sup> Ramsay Burt, "Alone into the World," 34-35.

<sup>7</sup> See Claudia Gitleman, "Introduction."

<sup>8</sup> "Danse-t-on vraiment seul dans un solo?" Remy Bernard, "Solos-Multitudes," 37. Translation Bench's.

<sup>9</sup> See *La danse en solo*.

<sup>10</sup> "Il n'y a pas de solo en soi." Jean-Marie Pradier, "Les Multiples du Un," 64. Translation Bench's.

<sup>11</sup> Schneider, 40-41.

<sup>12</sup> Krstevska's Facebook post can be found [here](#).

<sup>13</sup> See "Diva."

<sup>14</sup> See "Wonderful Woman."

## References

- Burt, Ramsay. "Alone into the World: Reflections on Solos from 1919 by Vaslav Nijinsky and Mary Wigman." In Claudia Gitelman and Barbara Palfy (Eds.) *On Stage Alone: Soloists and the Modern Dance Canon*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012. 31-54. <https://doi.org/10.5744/florida/9780813040257.003.0003>
- "Diva." Dir. Anastassia Krstevska. YouTube. May 31, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQBmOgB9d9c>
- Gitelman, Claudia. "Introduction." In Claudia Gitelman and Barbara Palfy (Eds.) *On Stage Alone: Soloists and the Modern Dance Canon*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012. 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.5744/florida/9780813040257.003.0001>
- Hughes, Holly and David Román. "O Solo Homo: An Introductory Conversation." In Holly Hughes and David Román (Eds.) *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance*. New York: Grove Press, 1998. 1-15.
- "International Journal of Screendance Volume 8: Call for Papers." *Centre for Screendance*. May 17, 2016. <https://screendance.wordpress.com/2016/05/17/international-journal-of-screendance-volume-8-call-for-papers/>
- Kalb, Jonathan. "Documentary Solo Performance: The Politics of the Mirrored Self." *Theater* 31.3 (Fall 2001): 13-29. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01610775-31-3-13>
- La Danse en Solo: Une Figure Singulière de la Modernité*. Claire Rousier (Ed.) Paris: Centre National de la Danse, 2012.
- Pradier, Jean-Marie. "Les Multiples du Un." In Claire Rousier (Ed.) *La Danse en Solo: Une Figure Singulière de la Modernité*. Paris: Centre National de la Danse, 2012. 63-76.
- Rémy, Bernard. "Solos-Multitudes." In Claire Rousier (Ed.) *La Danse en Solo: Une Figure Singulière de la Modernité*. Paris: Centre National de la Danse, 2012. 37-49.
- Schneider, Rebecca. "Solo Solo Solo." In Gavin Butt (Ed.) *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005. 23-47. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470774243.ch1>
- "Wonderful Woman." Dir. Eleanor Sikorski. 2017. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYJ3l-TJU1g>