

# This is where we have danced for quite a while – A Viewpoint/Reflection on Social Media Dist(d)ancing

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*“Restricting where we can go seems to focus us on where we are.”<sup>1</sup>*

On March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020, right at the start of the pandemic and right at the beginning of what would become a 7-month-long lockdown for us in Naarm (Melbourne in so-called Australia),<sup>2</sup> I made a tiny living room office dance video to Jessie Ware’s song “Spotlight.” I recorded the video with Apple Photobooth and chose the ‘plastic camera’ effect, which bathes the scene in a yellow and green light. I am a white person with short brown hair, wearing a slightly oversized black t-shirt. I am framed from the hip up in a medium shot. I am facing the camera. Visible in the shot are a bookshelf, a picture frame, the top of a fan and the top outline of a couch. While I recorded a 03:41 minute video of me improvising to the song, I edited out a shorter 00:33 seconds-long clip, which I posted to my Instagram account (<https://www.instagram.com/p/B90yMLHn425/?igshid=1w5fxeiti7ubj>) with a slightly longer-than-your-usual Insta caption (see screenshot below).<sup>3</sup>

The video has been viewed 116 times, got 22 likes, 9 comments, and a dance video response from popular dance scholar Melissa Blanco Borelli. In one of the comments popular dance scholar Alexandra Harlig states that, “I’ve been thinking, you’ve been training for this for years now with tiny office dances!”<sup>4</sup> When Harlig mentioned that I “have been training for this,” they were referring to prior casual Instagram dance videos I made and posted under the “tiny office dance” banner and hashtag, dating back to February 2017, meaning I have been here, online, hovering-dancing for a while.



**tiny\_office\_dances** Tiny office dances COVID-19 precarity social dist-dancing edition: So, here we are. 2 to 3 weeks into the new semester of the new academic year and as with all of 2020 so far, everything is balancing precariously on an edge. Faced with a global pandemic, those of us who can, are working from home - from social distancing measures to lock downs to quarantines to self-isolation. I finally found out we are going online as of tomorrow at both unis I work for. Hooray. I also found out I will be paid for the hours in my contract. Double hooray as this is not a given at all universities and for all my friends and colleagues - casual academic workers and casual other workers alike. And then there is the arts sector and independent artists... And the elderly and immune compromised.. And I am down to my last roll of toilet paper... Oh-oh..... Here I am turning to Lauren Berlant and think about the current moment in cruelly optimistic terms, as as an "impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on. Observable lived relations in this work always have a backstory and induce a poetic of immanent world making" (CO, 8). As dancing is my poetics of world-making I am sharing this with you and hope others join in tiny office social dist-dancing measures. #tinyofficedances #casualacaprecarity #socialdistdancing  
(PS: thanks 🙏 @mablanc for sharing this song. It's been a great solace)

Tiny office dances post from March 17, 2020. Screenshot taken by the author.

### Pause, Rewind, Reflect

What does this mean for this particular moment in time and the call of this special issue "This Is Where We Dance Now: Covid-19 and the New and Next in Dance Onscreen"? In an attempt to wander alongside (wonder about?) this question, I want to turn around and look at Katrina McPherson's viewpoint piece published in Volume 11 of *The International Journal of Screendance* (IJSJ) in 2020, which starts with her observation, also cited at the start of this piece, that, "restricting where we can go seems to focus us on where we are."<sup>5</sup> In the article, which McPherson wrote during the first lockdown in the UK, she walks the reader through her reflections of lockdown 1.0, the way the decelerated pace of living seems to bring a greater focus on the body, the purpose of art and art-making at this time, and how technology sits in relation to these temporal and spatial changes. When it comes to screendance practices, she asks, "An unexpected legacy of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic may be that screendance becomes more visible, shifting if not into the limelight, then perhaps at least out of the shadows?"<sup>6</sup> Riffing off Douglas Rosenberg's observation, made in an unpublished talk at Stanford University, that screendance is not new, but has been "'hiding in plain site,'"<sup>7</sup> she later notes that "a frequent hiding place for screendance are music videos..."<sup>8</sup> Both the question and this observation made me pause and have been hard to shake off since I sat down to write, always hovering and poking at the edges of my thinking-moving popular screendance body.

The idea that screendance has been hiding in music videos, a play on Rosenberg's "hiding in plain site" comment, reminds me of Tom Gunning's observation that what he calls "the cinema of attractions," which is a cinema that has the "ability to *show* something"<sup>9</sup> via the technologies that the new medium had to offer, went "underground" with the increasing importance of narrative films after 1906/1907. It went underground, or into hiding if you will, in the aesthetics of the song-and-dance numbers in Hollywood musical films.<sup>10</sup> As someone who has grown up on musical films, dance films, and music videos (on MTV and later on YouTube when it was launched in 2005), as well as moved alongside social media dances, my thinking-moving body, made, unmade, and remade by popular screendance<sup>11</sup> over many, many years feels a bit wary of the idea that screendance has been hiding in, or under something or other until Covid-19 lockdown life has chased away the shadows in which it has been hiding. I would say that the limelight has been on it for quite a while, at least for a particular style/genre of screendance and its participant-viewership. The public has been interacting and playing with popular screendance media like music videos since at least the early 1980s when MTV was launched.<sup>12</sup> They have watched (and also made) amateur dance covers of music videos<sup>13</sup> and commercial dance class videos on YouTube.<sup>14</sup> Viral dances and dance fads have been created, popularized, and appropriated (with and without credit<sup>15</sup>) on social media platforms such as Vine, between 2013 when the app was launched and 2017 when it was closed (RIP), Instagram (launched in 2010), and now, of course, TikTok (originally launched in China in 2016, but becoming more globally popular and accessible since 2017/2018). But before all that social media dance hype and before even music videos became a thing, dance fads were not only circulated by Hollywood musicals and dance films, but also especially via early music television shows such as *American Bandstand* (1952-1989) and *Soul Train* (1971-2006).<sup>16</sup> For example, I learned from John Waters' 1988 musical film *Hairspray* that teens have danced along their television sets broadcasting these shows since they started airing "in plain site."

*"Perception is a way of facing something. I can perceive an object only insofar as my orientation allows me to see it (it must be near enough to me, which in turn means that I must be near enough to it)..."*<sup>17</sup>

The question of screendance hiding in the shadows, or in "plain site" (under our noses but not quite there yet), makes me wonder about questions of place, positionality, and orientation, of where people are coming from and how they look at and engage with the screendance umbrella. Here I want to turn around again and move back in time to 2010, when screendance artist and scholar Douglas Rosenberg published an article called "Excavating Genres" for the very first volume of *IJSD*. At the very start of this piece, he states that:

Both dance's and media's contingent origins thus conspire to create meaning that emerges from the cumulative effect of their grafting: traversing both temporal and physical geographies, dance and media

absorb something of the landscape and culture of each, thereby generating communities of practice that share both common languages and stylistic elements.<sup>18</sup>

Rosenberg's idea that dance and screen media traverse "temporal and physical geographies" to incorporate something of the "landscape" of each in order to create communities of practice, brings into focus these moves and turns we perform in order to situate ourselves and our practice within the world.<sup>19</sup> This world, in which we seek orientation and place through dancing on screens and by thinking about categories of screendance to be excavated, however, has been shaped by binaries of "art versus entertainment" and "high culture versus (low) popular culture" that carry within them traces of the logics of colonialism, capitalism, and whiteness. These logistical traces nestle in the crevices of questions around screendance hiding in the shadows, hiding in music videos, or hiding in plain site, where the issue of visibility is about where people look, not just what they see and how they perceive it, but also if they see it at all. In other words, does the looking come in the form of a cursory glance, a drifting over the content, or a looking in order to see, attentively and deeply? It made me think of popular dance scholar Sherril Dodds' observation that, "whether we speak our politics blatantly or live them quietly through how we move in the world, we take a position on the screendance that surrounds us: we choose what, how, where, when, and why we watch."<sup>20</sup> And also, what we participate in, where, when, why, and how. And even more so, what we know, or what histories and knowledges we get to know, often overshadowed by the binary logics mentioned above. Yet, as Melissa Blanco Borelli and Anamaria Tamayo Duque have noted, "These unproductive antagonisms no longer apply as together they mobilize cultural and relational models where lo popular becomes a mode from which to act, do, and dance."<sup>21</sup>

### Pivoting Back to The Beginning

@tiny\_office\_dances started on a whim at the start of Semester 1 (March to June), 2017. I was working as a casual subject coordinator at the University of Melbourne for a subject called "Rock to Rave," a cultural studies subject on popular music, for which I was assigned a temporary shared office space, out of which I started recording and posting tiny dance-break videos with short captions to my Instagram account when I was the only person in the space. I was listening to so much music in preparation for the subject, to which I had also added two weeks on dance—one on the connection between popular music genres and popular dance styles, and the other on dance in music videos—that it felt fitting to break out into dance. There was also lot of tempting floor space in the office, begging me to use it. Additionally, as someone who researches popular screendance across different screendance contexts and spaces, one of which is social media, where dance videos are created in casual home spaces as Archer Porter discusses in their contribution to this volume it felt like a continuation of my interests to participate in that space of casual Instagram bedroom/other random location dance

videos for fun, without any intention to develop it further. For example, my very first tiny office dance, posted on February 21, 2017 was set to Bruno Mars' song "24K Magic." Recording it on my phone, leaning against a bookshelf unit on the floor, means I am framed from the hip down in a medium shot with a slightly upwards tilted angle. I am wearing beige oversized pants and my feet are bare. The whole 23-seconds clip is focused on the playful movement of my feet, working with the rhythmicity of the song. The caption is equally short, sweet, and playful: "Tiny office dances = tiny feet dances. Just your average day. #tinyofficedances #dancewithme."<sup>22</sup>



Tiny office dances post from February 21, 2017. Screenshot taken by the author.

All of the posts in 2017 and 2018 follow a similar pattern. I am playfully moving (and captioning). Feet-focused dances are intermingled with dances focusing on the upper body. I am unwinding, grooving, and twirling between my shared office space and home.

In March/April 2019, the tide began turn, so to speak. When I speak of turning tides, I am speaking of the way that the already precarious positionality of casual academic laborers in our school (and also generally across local and global institutions), slipped further into precarity. While always hovering at the edges of my precarious body, it all became more visible, more tangible, and more unstable.<sup>23</sup> As a result, I started posting dances with longer captions centered around the notion of precarity, tracking the atmosphere and feelings with my thinking-moving body. Not just to share, but also to get through.<sup>24</sup>



Tiny office dances post from May 27, 2019. Screenshot taken by the author.<sup>25</sup>

Sharing is caring, as the saying goes... Or, as Tavia Nyong'o has remarked, "perhaps precarity is not solely intrinsic to life in its individual existence but also in and through its collective repetition across lives."<sup>26</sup> To being, as Jean-Luc Nancy states, "singular plural,"<sup>27</sup> where precarity is, to pivot back to Nyong'o, "more concerned with compassion, with co-passion, co-presence, a being in common with that which we do not know, and with those whom we can not speak for."<sup>28</sup>

And thus, I arrive at the beginning, in March 2020, when all dancing became, more or less suddenly, confined to home spaces and when the home became the office became the home became the office ad infinitum. It also marks a further slippage into precarious conditions and seemingly never-ending flexibility. Making tiny office dances and writing captions, in which I started interweaving diary-style reflections with critical theory (of texts and authors that left a mark), became a lifeline for me that also became increasingly more critical as a practice in the way that I started taking it seriously as a critical practice. Thinking about the "singular plural" in relation to this means that I have to give a big shout out to the people who took this seriously as a critical practice way before I did and kept dropping more or less subtle hints that I should, too.<sup>29</sup>

#### Coda: Screendancing Singularly Plural

Another thing that really struck me as part of the pandemic screendance response on social media was that besides all the popular screendances I have participated in over the years (like learning Galen Hooks viral choreo to "River" off the screen in 2017—no, there is no video documentation) and the tiny office screendances I created myself (whimsical and serious and not viral at all), I was now able to access dance classes by people and companies, who had so far only been accessible in physical, material, f2f spaces, via Insta Live. Suddenly, I could do choreographer Ryan Heffington's "Sweat Fest" dance party, or do a Cunningham technique dance class offered through the

Merce Cunningham Trust's Instagram page, or take ballet classes with American Ballet Theatre's principal dancers Isabella Boylston and James B Whiteside, which they taught together-yet-separate from their respective kitchens in NYC. Even if joining live-live was not always an option due to the time difference between the US and so-called Australia, I was able to do these classes within the 24-hour time period that they stayed up on Insta Stories. Despite not always being live-live (for me at least), the experience felt communal, creating a shared space for movement based on platforms that already existed, and where screendance has already been happening for a while. Same-same but different maybe? It is certainly bringing into greater focus the restrictions on where we have been going/screendancing and where we are at now and why.

## Biography

Dr Elena Benthaus is a Casual (Adjunct) Lecturer, currently living and working in Naarm (Melbourne) in so-called Australia. As a very very interdisciplinary dance studies scholar, her research on dance on the popular screen sits in between the disciplines and theoretical lineages of screendance studies, screen studies, cultural studies, popular culture and popular music studies, and fandom/spectatorship studies. Elena's scholarship can be found in *The International Journal of Screendance* and *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Competition*. They also currently serve as the Chair of PoP Moves Australia/Australasia and create so-called tiny office dances on their Instagram account with the handle @tiny\_office\_dances.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> McPherson, "Walking in the light," 52.

<sup>2</sup> The 7-month lockdown started with stage 3 measures in March (stay-at-home orders, which meant, there were only four reasons we were allowed to be outside: shopping for food and supplies, exercise, medical care and caregiving, work and education—if necessary), an easing of restrictions in June, back to full stage 3 restrictions in July, and stage 4 restrictions from August to October (which meant an 8pm curfew, only 1 hour of exercise outside, and remain within a 5km radius from home).

<sup>3</sup> Benthaus, "Tiny office dances COVID-19 precarity social dist-dancing edition."

<sup>4</sup> Harlig, "I've been thinking."

<sup>5</sup> McPherson, "Walking in the light," 52.

<sup>6</sup> McPherson, 55.

<sup>7</sup> Rosenberg, cited in McPherson, 55.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 55.

<sup>9</sup> Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]," 382. Original Emphasis.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 382.

<sup>11</sup> I have been learning "how to popular screendance" from music videos beside my training in ballet and modern and contemporary dance when I was growing up. I am still learning from dancers/choreographers such as Parris Goebel, who is also someone who has come up through popular screendance, ie. music videos, which has in turn shaped her practice.

<sup>12</sup> See for example, Melissa Blanco Borelli's article "Dancing in Music Videos, or How I Learned to Dance Like Janet . . . Miss Jackson" on learning to dance like, and as an extension, learning how to screendance from Janet Jackson.

<sup>13</sup> See for example, Harmony Bench's article "Screendance 2.0: Social Dance-Media" in which she talks about viral choreographies and the way they work as a form of participatory choreography, or Philippa Thomas' chapter "Single Ladies, Plural: Racism, Scandal, and "Authenticity" within the Multiplication and Circulation of Online Dance Discourses" on how Beyonce's music video to "Single Ladies" created a multiplicity of online responses in the form of homages, parodies, and reinterpretations.

<sup>14</sup> See for example, Alexandra Harlig's article "'Fresher Than You': Commercial Use of YouTube-Native Dance and Videographic Techniques" on the commercial use of web-native and amateur video and dance aesthetics in music videos and ads.

<sup>15</sup> See: Jasmine Elizabeth Johnson's short-form essay "In My Feelings" on the Drake "In My Feelings" dance challenge and Naomi Bragin's chapter "From Oakland Turfs to Harlem's Shake: Hood Dance on YouTube and Viral Antiracism" on how "hood dances," such as the Harlem shake and Oakland turf, as particularly localized sub-categories of hip hop dance, shape and at the same time obliterate political memory and social/racial identity when going viral within the structural antiracism of participatory media and the global dance industry. For this, also see mainstream media pieces on the topic, such as: Battan, "A Decade of Viral Dance Moves"; St. Felix, "Black Teens are Breaking the Internet and Seeing None of the Profits"; Diep, "The 'Milly Rock' Remains New York Rap Dance Royalty."



<sup>16</sup> See for example, Alexandra Harlig's chapter "Communities of Practice: Active and Affective Viewing of Early Social Dance on the Popular Screen" on television dance party shows like *American Bandstand* broadcasting the Twist and other new dances in the 1950s and 60s and Thomas DeFrantz's "Unchecked Popularity: Neoliberal Circulations of Black Social Dance" in which he looks back to *American Bandstand* and *Soul Train* to highlight the neoliberal logics in contemporary circulations of black social dances.

<sup>17</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 27.

<sup>18</sup> Rosenberg, "Excavating Genres," 63.

<sup>19</sup> He later poses a series of questions, designed as a methodology for "excavating" genres and thinking about the different types/styles of dance on screen texts that exist under the more overarching screendance umbrella that help to direct the focus in a more specific way.

<sup>20</sup> Dodds, "On Watching Screendance," 145.

<sup>21</sup> Blanco Borelli and Duque, "A Word from the Guest Editors," 7.

<sup>22</sup> Benthous, "Tiny office dances = tiny feet dances."

<sup>23</sup> Simultaneously to the situation becoming more visible and unstable, a more organized pushback started to happen through the casual network of the University of Melbourne's National Tertiary Education Union branch.

<sup>24</sup> The inspiration for my practice came from gender non-conforming writer and performance artist's Alok Vaid-Menon's Instagram account (<https://www.instagram.com/alokvmenon/>), on which their personal, critical, and creative writing accompanies and juxtaposes their pictures to record and share their art and activism.

<sup>25</sup> Note: Only I can see the full post these screenshots refer to on Instagram at this moment in time, as it has been blocked due to copyright issues with the song I used. This was not always the case as the post has 76 views, 15 likes, and 11 comments.

<sup>26</sup> Nyong'o, "Situating Precarity," 158.

<sup>27</sup> Nancy, "Of Being," 1.

<sup>28</sup> Nyong'o, 159.

<sup>29</sup> These people are: Melissa Blanco Borelli, Sherril Dodds, Alex Harlig, and Laura Saunders.

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