

A Dramaturgical Analysis of *Contingence* in the Out of Orbit Festival 2021

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Abstract: The exploration of bodies and communication through the virtual medium was explored within this improvisational dance piece inspired by Cork, Ireland. Working in public spaces all over the world, the international set of dancers used an improvisational movement score to challenge and stretch the limits of communicating virtually and how it mirrors communication in the physical world. Taking into account body language as well and where it fits into both types of communication, the dancers worked with concepts of dissemination of information without speaking. Within the performance, the producer asked: How does the virtual stage allow for more malleable artistic processes through dance improvisation in a globalized context, while additionally recognizing the importance of the body in online communication? Through theories of globalization, programming, self-producing and risk, improvisation was explored and these findings led to conclusions on expanding the definition of 'stage', the importance of risk in performance and daily life and new questions on what is not seen and who does not do the seeing in improvisational performances.

Keywords: improvisation, dramaturgy, dance, globalization, producing

1. Introduction

During the Out of Orbit Festival, the piece, *Contingence*, produced, choreographed and performed in part by Diana Shepherd, existed in both the spaces of improvisational dance and live streamed performance, making it unique in the Festival. The piece touched on different aspects of current happenings in the world and arts industry, including online communication, the existence of the virtual body and the improvisational nature required to deal with the unpredictable nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. The possibilities of performing online with an international cast formulated questions around the precarity of online performances, the importance of improvisational mindsets in the current times and how the body can exist in two spaces at once: online and offline. These elements, and more to be dissected, contribute to the question: How does the virtual stage allow for more malleable artistic processes through dance improvisation in a globalized context, while additionally recogniz-

ing the importance of the body in online communication? In addressing the Out of Orbit Festival mission statement, *Contingence* was working towards inviting "...audiences into creative processes and conversations about the arts in a welcoming virtual space" (see Appendix B). The place that *Contingence* occupied in the Out of Orbit Festival was twofold; it existed in the dance works for the Festival, as well as the live pieces. The entirety of the Festival was virtual, creating a 'virtual stage' of sorts that was presented through the website via social media sites such as YouTube and Instagram. While this posed many difficulties, it also allowed opportunities that would not have been recognized absent these limitations. This is evident in the style of improvisation used in the piece, which emphasizes the improvisational techniques in communicative interactions in online spaces. Improvisation is used in everyday thinking and society, according to Leach and Stevens (2020), and these skills have only been exemplified in recent times during the COVID-19

pandemic, such as the constant changing of governmental recommendations and new variants, and the unknown territories society has had to move into on an almost daily basis. *Contingence* expresses the sentiments contained in the Festival mission statement, such as the desire to be reconnected to communities, as well as dealing with unending social changes, that demonstrates the impacts felt in the performing arts industries that caused many to be off centre and that rippled through all of society.

Expanding into the virtual and online performing arts and festival worlds, as other events had to similarly adapt, allowed the Out of Orbit Festival and *Contingence* to open new spaces for exploring artistic expression online and nonverbal communication. Research into online bodily communication is newly charted territory with the influx of online work, and the dance industry struggled to re-adjust to a two-dimensional world. This challenge is one that *Contingence* and its international set of dancers took on, by working on the virtual stage. Looking towards theories of globalization and cultural development, it is important to recognize the differences felt around the world through an improvisational dance piece and the artistic creation behind it. Globalization affected not only *Contingence* but the entirety of the Festival as it was completely virtual and accessible to anyone in the world with an internet connection. This connection created many lenses through which the Festival could be viewed depending on the background of the viewer. As a viewer, producer and performer, the author had to reckon with the topic of self-producing in the arts, which has also become more common in the current times with the move towards online performances. The social and cultural influences felt in the final version of the performance resulting from the involvement of the performer as producer and vice versa were present in the score used by all the dancers. Although this role of performer, producer and choreographer is not new to the dance industry, the combination of factors such as an international cast, a precarious live streamed performance and an online virtual festival created a rich base for which the artistic process had the opportunity to flourish in new and unexpected ways.

2. An Introduction to *Contingence*

Contingence was an improvisational dance piece performed in public spaces in five different countries and live streamed to a central virtual meeting location. The piece focused on the ideas of communication online and the importance and possibilities of the body on a virtual stage (see Appendix A). The piece came about through personal experiences the producer had dancing online within the COVID-19 circumstances and how different the body could be perceived in an online space. Together, through readings and discussions, the five dancers, including the producer, created a score based on dance exercises that mirrored the process of online communications, such as video calling a loved one (Shepherd, 2021 p. 259). The piece reflected a free Zoom video call of 40 minutes and the dancers worked collectively in the improvisational score to allow each person to explore how their body moved on a virtual stage, while balancing elements of chance and risk. Through analysis and reflection, these six points will be addressed and analyzed through theories of globalization, self-producing in dance performances, the dramaturgy of producing and the world of online dance and dance technology. Some of the main artistic and practical decisions were:

- ② Picking performers in specific locations for public space performances
- ② Self-producing and performing
- ② Practical decisions around Zoom
- ② Solo ordering: what was left up to chance and what was not
- ② Including a stage manager and having the producer perform
- ② Accepting risk and risk management

3. The Dramaturgy of Programming Collaborative Work in a Globalized Context

The cast of *Contingence*:

- Abigail Elliott: USA
- Brendon Fernandez: Singapore
- Carolina Carloto: Portugal
- Diana Shepherd: Ireland
- Susi Rosenbohm: Germany

(For Biographies of the Artists: Shepherd, 2021. p 244-5)

There were many factors that went into selecting these

artists, but the priority were their artistic abilities, their relationship to the producer and their openness to working with an international cast in an online environment. Each artist had experience with improvisational movement and expressed a desire to participate in this performance. Another part of the selection process involved the artists' abilities and willingness to investigate the relationship between audience and artist. Public space and online performances challenge the way the audiences and artists exist in a liminal space both as participants, as the artists may be the ones performing and the audience are the ones observing and performing their experiences in their own way, such as through reactions. Performance in itself is an "event with its liminoid nature foregrounded, almost invariably clearly separated from the rest of life, presented by performer and attended by audiences" (McKenzie, 2004). The selected artists dealt with being positioned in such a way reflective of Sheridan's Performance Triad as it was a technologically based performance (Sheridan, et al., 2004). In the Triad, the three roles are participant, performer and observer (Sheridan, et al., 2004). In the piece, the artists played more than one part, performing, observing and responding to each others' performances. They also participated in the virtual communication aspect from the score created through prompts given by the producer for movement research and ultimately led to a process that followed an online conversation, (Shepherd, 2021 p. 271). There were also two other sets of observers, the audience members watching online and the people in the outdoor areas who may have observed the improvisational movement outside. In Performance Triad theory, the conventional theatre performance lies at the centre with each collaborator contributing an equal amount, while technology surrounds the entire performance (Sheridan et al., 2004). In this way, the technology played a more influential role on the performance than any one of the collaborators alone. During the creation of *Contingence*, the technology was intended as a tool, but in reflection, it was a central piece, or even another performer, that connected each of the artists to each other and to the audience. This relationship between the real and virtual stages, in a similar way people work with technology, encouraged "performative conversation that might take place between man and machine and see how that

might impact on our understanding of ourselves, each other and of the world around us" (Sheridan et al., 2004). Each of these three collaborator roles had an impact on the performance outcome, y just as some dominating cultures have contributed more noticeably to the existing globalized world. This perspective works in a positive way towards a more virtually globalized and integrated world and allows for more empathy to exist in cross-cultural communications and interactions. In theories of audience perception and public space performances, the role of the artists was not only important to the performance and outcome, it also challenged the audiences' experiences in a public space while working the private sphere of a Zoom webinar (Calvi, 2013). Audiences in the public space are not always prepared for performances, whereas the audiences online for this piece were, due to their prior knowledge of the Festival. However, the situation of the piece and the artists to the audience created a setting that could have felt public or private, depending on the viewer. This situation required the artists to have an expansive awareness of themselves in a public space (Calvi, 2013), which was instructed through rehearsals and reinforced through practical elements such as safety and videography.

Another aspect of the selection process for artists was their comfort with not only public space improvisational performance, but also controlling their own camera. The research of Jennifer Nikolai (2016) began the producer's investigation into improvisational dancers holding cameras while moving. Similar to her "camera-dance", the artists of *Contingence* were able to see their movements and thus were involved in minute choices that affected the audience and other artists moving in the online space (Nikolai, 2016). Comparing the *Contingence* artists to the musings of Hillary Preston, "choreography and camera work are symbiotic" (2006). While self-directing their improvisational movement and camera angles, the artists were informed by the spaces around them and their cultural experiences (Sherman, 1998). Because of the great diversity in artists and backgrounds, the material presented in *Contingence* allowed for the largest possible variation in movement and filming.

The challenges presented when producing with such diverse cultural backgrounds manifested themselves in many practical ways, such as the quality of the internet

that varied greatly depending on the location of the artist, as well as their comfort level with filming themselves in a public space. Comparing the Asian to the Western styles of filming and photography contributed to the outcome of the piece because of the influence of “context-inclusive styles versus object-focused styles” (Babić et al., 2018). This manifested in *Contingence* in the differences between Brendon, the artist from Singapore and the other artists from Europe and North America and how they presented certain aspects, such as their head in relation to an object or physical background. However, there were many similarities in the movements, as well as the objects and body parts focused on during the piece, which could be attributed to globalization. The theory of globalization that was used during the research and creation of *Contingence* was from Dr. Nayef R.F. Al-Rodhan and Ambassador Gérard Stoudmann: “Globalization is a process that encompasses the causes, course, and consequences of transnational and transcultural integration of human and non-human activities.” (2006). Relying heavily on this concept, *Contingence* represented a larger section of the attending audience, while simultaneously showing the differences and similarities between the five countries and their cultural influence on the artists.

The role of globalization in the research for and creation of *Contingence* was felt not only in the international cast, but in the influences on the dance score, which included Western prominences based on the training of the producer and most of the artists. Additionally, connecting to the overall virtual Festival, *Contingence* relied upon the fact it was “broadcasted online around the world” to expand the reach of the piece, and all events, to a global audience (see Appendix B). Although the improvisational score was reflective of the cultural background of the artists, dance is not a reflection of culture, but an extended expression of it (Kringelbach & Skinner, 2012). One area that was researched for the score was the cultural influences on gestures, hand movements and positions. Different cultures tolerate different things when it comes to movement in public spaces and one reflection from an artist while rehearsing outside was the comfortability of self touch in a rubbing sequence, as opposed to a shaking sequence, because rubbing your

hands together has a purpose and is more culturally acceptable (Shepherd, 2021, p. 274). The relationship between culture and movement is dynamic and untethered in definition, which was mirrored in the performer-videographer relationship, as the performing artists were their own videographers. The cultural influences felt in the movements were also literally seen in the recording styles of the artists, in what they focused on and what they decided to film. The recording by the artists was as improvised as the movement, in that the score had few suggestions for movements and even fewer suggestions for how to hold and where to direct the camera (Shepherd, 2021, p. 271). This took a toll on the producing and dramaturgical intentions since the producer was one of the performers. Each artist was ‘self-producing’ their videography as well as their movements, which involved them in the choreographing, as well as the dramaturgy of the piece almost as much as the performing as reflected in the work of Jennifer Nikolai,

“dancers holding cameras while moving can choose to look at what they are shooting as they are shooting, or, alternatively, footage can be viewed later. Either approach provides opportunities for immediate or retrospective viewpoints on improvised choices – on movement within the frame.” (2016).

Existing in the ‘in between’ space as a performer and producer, reflects the similarities in producing and dramaturgy as they also exist in the ‘in between’. Both practices, producing and dramaturgy, must have a view of the overall piece, while not forgetting the importance of each individual artistic piece. There was also an innate weaving of producing, dramaturgy, and for *Contingence*, choreography and dance as creative processes required for the production of the Festival because of the very dependent relationships of producers and performers in the new, online setting. The dramaturgical intentions of producing such a piece of live streamed improvisational dance also included the producer’s intentions of creating “kinesthetic empathy” (Nikolai, 2016) between performers and audience members, not only in using influences of everyday body language, but also in the practical use of the newly commonplace platform of Zoom. Using this platform to discover the role technology plays in dance performance, research into its practicalities and influ-

ences created the impactfully virtual performance of *Contingence* for producer, performer and audience member.

4. Dance and Technology: The Dramaturgy of Programming Dance Online

The fluid relationship between a physical body dancing and technology invites a sense of improvisation. Layering that relationship into an improvisational dance score creates a reflexive cycle, which could be seen in *Contingence*, as it was a single live performance that was recorded (Contingence, 2021). The importance of a fluid relationship between a dancing body and technology can be seen in the relationship between producing and dramaturgy and performer and audience member, as well. When working dramaturgically, one must be aware of each individual detail while a performance flows and when producing, one must look to the flow of the performance, without missing any details. The activity or passivity of audience members in an online, live streamed performance is felt in their individual interpretations of the piece, including the intention to bring awareness of the importance of the body in online communication. Finding similarities to the work in the improvisational dance field, Jennifer Nikolai writes about her desire for the audience and artists “to engage with micro-choreography, and invite[s] a focused respect for the micro—the nuance, the slow breath—unheard, to be seen” (2016). Dance is an embodied practice and by taking the physicality of a body in a space out of the performance, it takes a toll on the audience and artists alike. In bringing dance to the virtual stage, many artists may desire to secure authorship and ownership, which is compounded by the fact that improvisation as a dance technique is unrepeatable (Whatley & Waelde, 2016). These limitations and possibilities produced that fluidity and allowed the research, creation and artistic processes that made *Contingence* a distinct and innovative challenge.

Working on Zoom meant that the producer and stage manager, who was brought in as part of the decision for the producer to perform, needed to have some amount of control over the artists and attendees on the Zoom call. The decision to use a Zoom webinar instead of a Zoom call meant that the attendees could be in the per-

formance without disturbing the five performers on the screen (Zoom, 2021a). The stage manager was the host of the webinar, so they could let people in and spotlight the dancers. The call was ended at 37 minutes to replicate a free Zoom call (Zoom, 2021b) because it represented the precariousness and hardships of online communication that many people have dealt with in the past 18 months. It was the responsibility of the stage manager to make sure the artists were spotlighted for only the first 30 seconds to one minute of their solos because it was discovered that when someone was spotlighted, the audience could not see any of the other dancers (Shepherd, 2021, p. 279). Including a “Digital Stage Manager” came about through discussions with the technical director for ease of use, considering the producer was also a performer, as well as the possibilities the Digital Stage Manager position could allow for on Zoom (Ponce, n.d.). This aspect added to the dramaturgical interpretation of the piece as the catalyst of the artists’ movements were no longer easily deductible because the other artists were unseen, thus the audience would not know if the artist was creating a chain reaction or merely moving as a part of one. Artistically, this added to the risk-taking within the piece from the artists and audience perspectives. The practical decisions around the use of a Zoom webinar for *Contingence* were considered because of their contribution to the expression of the difficulties of virtual communication and how the moving body creates a new lens through which the virtual stage can be seen. As a producer, the decision to use Zoom was based on myriad details related to the themes the piece intended to address, as well as a deeper connection to the online Out of Orbit Festival. While working within the mission of the Festival, it was important to the dramaturgy of the piece that it took into account the clear sentiments of acceptance of the audiences and artists into the online spaces (see Appendix B). In the role of dramaturgy, the producer wanted to deepen the conversation to more of a position of analysis (Turner & Behrndt, 2008) on the role of the online space in the arts and performance, such as improvisational dance. Programming in itself is “like a puzzle [...] a science...” (Trommer-Beardslee, 2013). To solve this puzzle, the Festival and *Contingence* connected together, focused on developing the audiences’ perspectives’ on virtual artistic work, including the

importance of creative thinking when improvisation is imperative to existing in the world. For the producer of *Contingence*, as well as every producer in the Festival, the added job of creating a “cultural atmosphere” (Jonas et al., 1997) online meant that curating the flow of the events was just as important as the flow of each performance. This manifested itself in the dance pieces being on the first day of the Festival and the improvisational pieces being on the odd days, one and three. Two pieces, which were closely related to *Contingence*, *Collision* and *Romantic Rhythms of Rebirth*, both involved separate but overlapping elements. *Collision* used dance, but in a highly choreographed and fashion-inspired way, while *Romantic Rhythms of Rebirth* was based on the process of jazz music improvisation, which has the same roots and uses similar methods as improvisational dance, but neither piece related closely enough to *Contingence* to allow for further analyzing.

Another aspect to be addressed when working virtually is the relationship between the artists and the audience when the former cannot see the latter. This concept of visibility is discussed in Hupkens' work on the dramaturgy of programming in theatre in the Netherlands (2011). In *Contingence*, Hupken's words on “what is seen and who does the seeing” (2011) contribute greatly to the audience's perception of the work. For this piece, the artists were able to see each other and relied heavily on one another to assess the duration of the piece and influence their movements, but were completely unable to see the audience or gauge any of their reactions. Nor were the audience members able to see each other or contribute their reactions to the piece. These practical and dramaturgical decisions, including turning off the chat ability of the audience members, came from the decision to remove excess distractions which are present online. In analyzing theories of communication, the artists cross the levels of communication they are trying to achieve. Given the situation they are in, they are presenting an interpersonal level of communication on a more organisational or group stage (Fawkes & Gregory, 2000). This process also questions the ability of the audience to self associate with the artists on screen so as to grasp and grapple with the concept of online body

language and communication. The audience was meant to question whether people are using the body to the best of its abilities online. In analyzing the final video (*Contingence*, 2021), that question may not have been fully understood as the topic of the piece because of the amount of mirroring that took place between the artists, as well as the minimal amount of face to screen time that could be interpreted as more personal and ‘in your face’. The failures of communication also came through as represented by Sarah Whatley and Ross Varney, who expressed the ideas that dancers do not fully invest themselves into their movements when they know they are on camera and with the knowledge of what the camera can and cannot capture (2009). This problem was seen throughout rehearsals and the performance, and although the artists did experiment and perform physical research into the best ways to avoid these headspaces, once again, the movements captured in the final performance do not expand into the unknown as much as they could have within the online frame.

5. The Dramaturgy of Self-Producing on the Virtual Stage

The idea of the self is thought to be superficial online (Wesch, 2009). The work of *Contingence* was to reflect how a human body exists on a virtual stage, and where the focus was on communication that could be lost when it goes digital. *Contingence's* creation and programming was intended to show the realness of how a body can move online, how another may perceive that body and how to continue to question the body on virtual stages. Although each artist brought themselves to the online space, the risk of self-producing and performing was added, while the producer's self was analysed much in the same way to any of the other performing artists (Kay, 2015). Considering this aspect of risk that was added to the performance, there was the advantage of producing the entirety of the Festival within a group, Opal Productions (see Appendix B). The decision to self-produce came about through necessity, but allowed the producer to incorporate more into the performance and added an increasingly intimate relationship to the international cast as a majority of the connection between artists was through the producer. Considering the nature of the re-

relationships, it was clear that it would be more seamless to bring in the producer as a performer, than to bring in an unknown artist. Geographically, it also connected the performance of the piece to the rest of the Out of Orbit Festival, as many of the other pieces had performers that were Irish or in Ireland. Also, as seen with every other producer, the desire to bring in more connections to the online space developed with the creation of the pieces, along with the mission to bring the artistic processes to the audiences (see Appendix B). This desire was not unique to the self-produced and performed *Contingence*, it allowed the producer to be in direct relationship to the audience, unlike other festival pieces.

In relation to the self-produced and performed aspect, it was quickly clear that it was necessary to bring on a "Digital Stage Manager" (Ponce, n.d.). That process was very similar to bringing on a traditional stage manager, such as creating a cue sheet with the producer for the stage manager, the technical director and all the artists. Further research into this role showed that the steps taken by the *Contingence* team aligned with other "Digital Stage Managers", including controlling the start of the live stream and spotlighting different videos at different points (Pounce, n.d.). However, there were still technicalities that prevented creating a more engaging performance, such as a delay caused by the live streaming element. During the live performance, the time between admitting the audience and opening the cameras allowed for a longer build up than was intended, which is not fully represented in the YouTube recording (*Contingence*, 2021). This created an alternative dramaturgy to the one that was crafted by the improvisation score. This challenged the producer in ways they wouldn't have been had they not been performing, "[t]he main challenge of self-producing is the element of unpredictability." (Kay, 2015). There is also a higher level of investment that comes with self-producing and performing in the same piece, which creates a narrative of self-perceptions based on the amount at stake and the possibility for self-errors that are unconscious in a live performance. Stepping out of the producer's role to create an immersive performance for the other artists and audience members allowed for self errors by the producer in the overall dramaturgy, as the importance of the liminal

elements of the performance were replaced with improvisational choreographic details of performing.

The curatorial aspect of producing *Contingence* and the Out of Orbit Festival involved many types of programming, including the aspect of dance and improvisational programming. Maaïke Bleeker, and the theoretical discussion he had with A.J.D. Hupkens' work brings into focus the idea of perspective and its connection to perception and how the former informs the latter. They do not work synchronously (2011). Bleeker points to the consequences of perception because of one's perspective, which plays into the desires of the producer for the audience's understanding and takeaways of the piece (2011). Taking into account the concept of the "disembodied eye or I" (Hupkens, 2011), the audience of *Contingence* very much took on this existence because of their virtual nature. In the dramaturgical decision making process, the viewer was expected to view this piece through the virtual stage of YouTube, which, depending upon their personal perspectives on YouTube, would influence their perceptions of the piece as well as their preconceptions about dance and improvisational performances. The difficulty of taking the viewer out of the space to the degree needed for a virtual performance on Zoom and presented through YouTube continued to push towards more openness in the relationship between audience and artist than would have happened in the pre-COVID 19 normal (Ponce, n.d.). In post-performance analysis, it also contributed negatively to the othering of the artists, which was not the dramaturgical goal. This increased distance was meant to allow audience members to associate more with the divided feeling of the dancers and recognize the distance virtual stages put between artists. This sentiment was expressed at great length by all of the work of the Out of Orbit Festival. However, the live aspect of *Contingence* created more urgency in the relationship between artist and audience not only because of the live element, but additionally because of the improvisational aspect. This imparted to the audience an uncertainty to the performance, similar to any virtual conversation or communication. This could be due to faulty internet or devices and the artists in *Contingence* faced those same uncertainties. However, in the dramaturgical decisions in the creation of the piece,

choosing one position can limit the view of the audience, allowing for a true or false understanding of the art piece (Hupkens, 2011). Contrary to Hupken's writings on a single perspective, the influences on the audience from *Contingence* had the intention of allowing a myriad of understandings about the purpose of the piece, with the ultimate goal of creating questions in the audience's minds about the importance of the online body for communication and dancing.

The dramaturgical decision to have the artists hold their cameras "selfie style" connects to the idea of perspective of the audience, as the artists worked to create a more intimate setting between themselves, each other and the audience (see Appendix A). Nikola's work on the camera-dancer included having her dancers hold their cameras, "[t]he camera-dancer became an observer, a participant, a partner, and an instigator, distinct from the conventional camera as an archival machine in performance and rehearsal." (2016). Connecting this performance element to the mission of the Out of Orbit Festival, the practice of the artists being physically connected to the camera was another way for the audience to be involved in the artistic processes of the work. This artistic and dramaturgical decision allowed the audience to not only feel more intimately included in the artistic process, but to hold more potential perspectives because of the multiplicity of views. It also allowed for the improvisational decision making to take on a dramaturgy of its own, as each artist improvisationally decided the angle, depth and focus of their video for every movement. This sentiment came through in the dramaturgy of *Contingence*, "[i]n an improvisation, the dancer can make an immediate decision to align an action experienced live with an action captured on camera (seen through the viewfinder), in order to deliberately frame a moment or movement." (Nikolai, 2016). The rehearsal practice with the artists explored how this aspect of the virtual stage creates a new dramaturgical story for the audience in every moment, allowing for a more open-ended interpretation of the piece and raising different questions. The intentions of *Contingence* and the questioning by the audience could expand Hupken's work on the importance of abandoning the singular perspective setting for view-

ers and change the negative idea of the "disembodied eye or I" (2011) because of embodied practice of dance and improvisation and the physically connected relationship to the virtual artist through their camera.

6. The Dramaturgy of Risk: Virtual Dance Improvisation Performance and Producing

Risk is inherent in every dance and physical performance, to the artists, participants, audience members, producers and anyone else in and around the performance space. For *Contingence*, it was a set of public spaces in Ireland, Germany, Portugal, the US and Singapore. With the addition of the virtual staged aspect, the risk was increased through the means of virtual performance, public space and the global pandemic, even considering the physically distanced and internationally separated cast. Although the virtual aspect of the performance was initially considered because of the limitations from COVID-19, this limitation resulted in the use of an international cast. Embracing risk allows for more openness (O'Grady, 2017) and this openness creates opportunities for cultural and artistic exchange to happen on the virtual stage. As evident in *Contingence's* event descriptor the possibility for risk was established before the performance (see Appendix A). The purpose was to encourage critical learning in the artists and audience members alike in a method similar to how public space "activist artists attempt to expose the participants' own role in constructing an exclusionary version of the world by placing them at risk in order for growth and change to occur." (O'Grady, 2017). For this paper, risk is defined as an unknown outcome to an action, inspired by the Merriam-Webster definition "to expose to hazard or danger" (Merriam-Webster, 2021). This risk was set up due to the precarious nature of performing in an online space, as shared by the entire Festival. This allowed every Festival piece to "embrace the risks associated with leaving gaps, spaces, cracks, and crevices for people to explore" (O'Grady, 2017) for the artists and the audiences. These "cracks" and "crevices" were created through the liminal or non-spaces available only to virtual stages, as the performers worked in public spaces internationally, while a global audience watched in a variety of public and private spaces (Augé, 2009). By allowing the public into the

private, the audience were not only encouraged, even forced, to take on that risk, albeit one with a low percentage of negative outcomes, as the performance could simply be turned off. This form of risk “implicates audiences in the action” (O’Grady, 2017) which is driven by the need for more risk in daily life. However in the current circumstances, there is a less drastic contrast between risk and safety in most daily occurrences because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering the outcome of the performance, as evident by the website data (Shepherd, 2021, p. 253-5) and the audience reactions (see Appendix C), the willingness of the audience to invite risk into their viewing of artistic performances is still present.

A term used in Alice O’Grady’s work on risk, participation and performance, “risky aesthetics”, defines the improvisational structures used in creating *Contingence*, as well as the intention for audience growth around risk acceptance in performance (2017). “Risky aesthetics” came to mean an unknown outcome, which is an intention set out during the creation of the piece (O’Grady, 2017). There was the additional risk of performing in public space which has long contended with political and social constraints on public space expressions, especially within the surveillance cultures of the US, Singapore and Germany (Lyon, 2017). Dramaturgically, the added risk allowed for openness and new artistic possibilities when it came to the actual physical movements performed during *Contingence*. There was risk in bringing together an international cast, most of whom never met in person and allowing their creativities to collide with one another, although this space created some sense of relational calm which the artists expressed during the physical practice and warm-up. At its core, dance improvisation is a risk-filled endeavor that would not exist if risk was not invited into the process. The technique of embracing uncertainty is necessary while working dramaturgically with dance improvisation and the score created for *Contingence* promoted seeking out the “gaps” for the artists “to explore” (O’Grady, 2017). In comparing *Contingence* to other public space performance risks, scholar André Carreira inspired a similar technique of allowing the space to also create “a type of dramaturgy”, which in this case, were the international public spaces and the virtual stage. The dramaturgy created by the virtual space sep-

arated the audience members as much as the artists, in contrast to a typical proscenium performance setup that only separates artists and audience, while allowing each group some contact. In more conventional dance performances, risk is also involved, in the creation, in the box office and even in the dancers’ bodies. Considering the set up of the performance, only the five artists’ videos were shown, and at certain points, only one was visible to the audience, this created the dramaturgy of risk; risk of missing the initiation of a movement or the risk of the audience losing track of a performer. These elements, although set up by the improvisational score, were unknown to the audience in the hope that it would increase the audience’s and artists’ openness to the unknown.

By creating a dramaturgical set up for openness, risk was invited into the performance of *Contingence* by artists and audiences, alike.

7. Dramaturgical Analysis of Audience Responses

The responses of the audience members and their experiences in relation to the outcomes of the performance from the producer’s, artists’ and choreographer’s perspectives contradicted some central ideas, as well as brought up new points not yet made by the *Contingence* artists. Audience member one, Alex, expressed the precise aim of the producer: to remind the audience of other video calls they have experienced in their personal lives, such as with their families (see Appendix C). This connection came about through the final section of the piece that addressed the goodbye-ing performed when communicating online. The situation of the performing artists was similar to that of anyone that would like to finish a virtual call and feels that is unattainable. The artists being unaware of when the piece would end, created a feeling of liminality, instead of finale. This feeling contributed to the dramaturgical aspects of the creation in the sense that the end would be unknown, similar to the improvisational movements that would not be known until they had finished. In such a way that having a live performance adds levels of risk for the artists and audiences, this unknown ending created an over-imposing sense of risk because the artists had the same information as the audience, which is counterintuitive to a classical dance performance. This opposition also relates to Alex’s observation of the staccato movements that

disrupted the overall calmness of the piece, which can be found in many canonical dance improvisation scores. Alex also addresses the intensive use of the extremities and limbs, which was an opposing reaction than what was desired for the performance because of the ease of availability limbs have when self recording.

The second audience response came from Nicole, who expressed their reaction through poetic verse, which was a pointed reaction that came from watching the performance (see Appendix C). There is immediately the recognition of the virtual stage of the performance, Zoom, and its intricacies such as the way the sound cuts in and out from different microphones. Empathy with the performers is also almost immediately established based on the names of each artist containing their locations. Nicole addresses the production choice, also limited by the virtual stage platform, to not rearrange the artists' Zoom box locations on the screen. This positive feedback based on the limitations of the online performance concludes that the artistic decisions created by virtual stages can expand the dramaturgy of the choreography. There is also the sense that the viewer is drawn into the virtual space with the artists, expanding the sense of freedom felt from watching a performance virtually, in private and at one's own tempo. Lastly, Nicole addresses the desire to communicate, join and respond with the artists in their spaces which is unique to this performance, one that was dance improvisation presented on a virtual stage that is focusing on communication in an online space. The ability of the audience responses to focus on the main points of *Contingence*, the virtual stage, and the online body, point successfully to the outcomes set up by the event performance, creation and development through the producer's research into online space and dance improvisation and the artists' creativities through a virtual medium.

8. Conclusion

This exploration of the processes relating to the self-producing of *Contingence* for the Out of Orbit Festival intended to develop the question of how the virtual stage allows for more malleable artistic processes through dance improvisation in a globalized context, while ad-

ditionally recognizing the importance of the body in online communication. *Contingence* was an improvisational dance piece performed live with an international cast made up of bodies online, showing the processes dealing with the body in online contexts. The piece, and the Festival in general, worked in a globalized world and sought to recognize the influences on the performance from the different participants' backgrounds, such as being a virtual or physical viewer or a performer outside of the Western world and how the globalized view alters the focus. This was also influenced by the use of technology and each individual's experience with it, especially considering the extent to which their main contact was Westernized.

In terms of the virtual stage, the word 'stage' was concluded to mean something distinct from its traditional interpretation, because it could be something in a private space, such as a home, which created more intimacy between participants, both artists and audience. This intimacy was also present because of the physical closeness of the artists to the cameras they held in their hands. While this created a more bonded feeling, it also unlocked more spaces, more openness, more 'in-betweens' for the dramaturgical aspects of producing *Contingence*. This openness was emulated in the improvisational aspect of producing a piece so entwined with technology. Technologically-involved pieces require much more openness than traditional performances; openness to failure, change and playful possibilities. In conclusion, a new question, that would require much more research, has formed around the virtual body: how does one feel a virtual body? Although this question remains unanswered, there were practical decisions that went into the production that contributed to the dramaturgy of the piece for virtual bodies, the spaces created and the interpretations processes. Returning to Hupken's words on "what is seen and who does the seeing" (2011) allowed the unpacking of the thesis question to begin in this analysis, and hopefully continue with further investigation into the research on *Contingence* as it morphs into newly formed performances.

Contrary to the producer's expectations, the loss of experimentation was felt in the final recorded performance of *Contingence*; however the audience feedback did confirm some of the desired outcomes created through the artistic process of the rehearsals. Additionally, working on a virtual stage means accepting the selfish nature of working online and the ease of falling away from the collective and into the self-satisfaction of working physically alone because of the difficulty of emphasizing with virtual worlds. This was felt not only by the artists of *Contingence*, but by the entire Opal Productions team. The balance of many roles was also present in the work of the producer, who choreographed and performed in *Contingence*, which shaped the piece in a vastly different way than had it been created in-person. The virtual aspect allowed not only for an international cast of artists to come together and exchange artistically in a globalized context, it also allowed each individual to play a set of unconventional roles that created the final performance. Finishing on the element of risk on performance, especially virtual performance, leaves another open question: what was not seen and who did not see, while still acknowledging the existence of multiple views on a virtual stage. Risk is always present in performance and adding the virtual aspect requires more mediation because of the newly created unknown outcomes, similar to the practice and performance of improvisational dance. Creating an improvisation dance work for the virtual stage in a globalized context, allows for more risk taking, which positively leads to more openness, empathy and a new creatively artistic process crafted in part by all the participants and their physical bodies as they communicate in a virtual space.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Contingence Event Descriptor:

The exploration of bodies and communication through the virtual medium is explored within this improvisational dance piece inspired by Cork, Ireland. Working in public spaces all over the world, the international set of dancers will use an improvisational movement score to challenge and stretch the limits of communicating virtually and how it mirrors communication in the physical world. Taking into account body language as well and

where it fits into both types of communication, the dancers will work with concepts of dissemination of information without speaking. The dancers will be live streaming from their cellular devices to a central virtual meeting location and will have their cameras on, selfie style, to capture their communication in all spaces. By inviting precariousness into the live performance and reflecting the lived experiences of modern times, *Contingence* embraces uncertainty; the dancers may appear, the performance may happen. The audience is invited to watch and interact with the movers as this once-in-a-lifetime performance springs to life, and live, wondrously. As people of the world grapple with virtual communication and its inopportune limitations, this piece is a reflection of our bodily ways of informing, internally and externally, while welcoming an improvisationally open mindset to online interactions.

Artists: Abigail Elliott, Brendon Fernandez, Carolina Carloto, Diana Shepherd, Susi Rosenbohm

Producer: Diana Shepherd

Appendix B

Out of Orbit Festival Mission Statement

Mission Statement

Out of Orbit is a once-off arts festival rooted in Cork, broadcast online around the world and produced by the MA cohort in Arts Management and Creative Producing at University College Cork, Ireland. The festival programme features a diverse range of artforms including theatre, music, storytelling, dance and fashion.

As emerging producers driven by the belief that the arts are essential, we want to reconnect audiences to art, artists and creative communities. Our festival presents vibrant performances by established and emerging artists and invites audiences into creative processes and conversations about the arts in a welcoming virtual space.

Orbits are repeating cycles and over the course of the pandemic the world has been pushed into a new cycle, a new orbit. Our festival plans have been made, unmade,

and remade, and the result is a unique constellation of artforms and experiences that exist quite happily Out of Orbit. As producers we aim to shed light on the power of creativity and its potential in the now. We aspire to bring a festival atmosphere to our audiences wherever they are and to share a sense of joy, hope, and excitement for the future.

Celebrate the arts as essential. Join us as we drift Out of Orbit. May 2021.

Appendix C

Audience responses:

Audience Member 1 (Alex)

"Contingence – an audience experience

Watching *Contingence* was a very calm experience overall. Set in the serene outdoors, I was able to watch the performers move between exploring their extremities and just observing the world around them. The delightful twisting and turning of wrists, hands, and fingers in and out of the frame was a recurring theme and allowed for sudden movements to stand out further from the calm nature of the piece. As an audience member, I found myself entranced by the constant limb movement and it made the cuts to the scenery jar you into a new perspective in appreciating the silence of the surroundings. The piece reminded me of when I have done improvisation outside. In the moment, you are dancing and then you just need to stop to appreciate how the light comes through the trees and how they softly blow in the wind. As we moved further into the piece, the performers moved from the extremities towards their faces. Towards the end, the performers started to move their faces and bring back their hands as if they were trying to say goodbye on a video call that just wouldn't end (I was having flashbacks to when I chat with my family on video chat). Overall, the performance left me with a smile on my face from watching some talented folks explore their extremities and their environments on these video chats we are all so familiar with."

Audience Member 2 (Nicole)

"I am watching post-premiere. When I am ready, I press play. I see the familiarity of the grainy zoom boxes whose

frames cut in and out. I hear the sound being filtered, cancelled, and switching sources. I notice names, places, and the colors of the skies. I wonder what time it is for each of them. Each box does not move, yet I see the information inside shifting. I find myself searching for what is hidden. I think I missed something. I rewind. Play. Rewind. Play. Rewind. I have control. For a while this observation continues; I notice small details: a nose ring, a flower, trash, 2, 3, 4, red fingernails. I am darting my eyes between the people in digital boxes. I feel that they are confined. I get a little dizzy and close my eyes. I can hear them moving. I can hear birds chirping. And when I open my eyes, everyone is gone. I feel alone. And then the rules change. A cut to full screen at full force. Susi is running. Susi looks at the camera as if to ask if I am watching. As if to ask if I see the box has grown. I feel freedom. We commemorate by zooming in to see a flower. Susi can smell the flower. I wish I could smell it too. Throughout the performance, I feel desperate to see myself. As I do so, I am a shadow on Brendon's leg. I am a reflection in Abi's eyes. I am reflected as a phone in Carolina's hand. I feel small. In a smaller box than the one Carolina is in. I allow myself to actualize in everyone's boxes. I am standing in the rain with Diana. I am face-to-face with Abi. I am dancing at night with Brendon. I feel invited to communicate. I feel compelled to respond. I feel in control. I feel controlled. I feel confined. I feel invited. I roll in the daisies. I climb the trees. I am in an overcast, lamplight, and clear sky. I hear birds. I feel grass. I smell the flowers."