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### Hysteria, Fear, and/or Delight

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HYSTERIA, FEAR,  
AND/OR DELIGHT

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BFA IN STUDIO ART  
WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS  
1 MAY 2020

*Abstract*

My Bachelor of Fine Arts thesis statement, *Hysteria, Fear, and/or Delight*, establishes the forms and concepts of my art practice as it stands as of May, 2020: performance-based and interdisciplinary. My practice implies narrative while acknowledging the audience. Physical language, in both dance and gesture, can be a means of communication or subversion. Pieces exist as ephemeral, often private, performances and then separately in archival forms ranging from video, to photography, to installation. The body of the statement details my thesis project, a remaking of *Giselle*, a 19th century Romantic-era ballet, into a performance series and video trilogy. The works walk the viewer down a non-linear path that is reminiscent of the original ballet, but my reinterpretations, new framework, and integration of external stories all distort the narrative. I use the romantic story to first perpetuate the original themes present in the story and later to subtly exploit them. I tread closely to those whom I admire such as Ana Mendieta, Pina Bausch, and Z Behl who all work near or within the greater realms of dance, theater, and performance. I acknowledge ways to interact with and subvert the spectator who may choose to experience delight in watching.

### *I. Prelude*

It is a late summer afternoon. The heat of the sun pierces my flesh but the rocks underneath me are cold and cavernous. They feed on my warmth. I feel the blood coursing from my toes and congregating in my head as I lay on the downward slope. I can only focus on the shrill buzz of the mosquitoes that are feasting on my body, a meal that has dropped itself before them, and displayed on a picnic blanket no less! I don't know how long I've been lying here. My pulse is loud in my temples but I am at ease, in fact, I feel powerful.<sup>1</sup>

The performative human body is my material of choice. Unlike other tangible media, it molds to my beck and call. Its gestures and movements are guided by my instinct and desire to communicate with an audience. I walk the tightrope separating the performing arts from performance art. The former is a skill-based category of art where the work is presented to an audience via a performer who is usually not the creator, but an interpreter<sup>2</sup>. It typically describes dance, theater, and music. The latter is a concept-based category of art where the work is the performer along with their actions, voice, and message<sup>3</sup>. As expected, I fall off to both sides of this tightrope and make work that moves between the two, relishing this space of ambiguity.

I direct the body to create gestures and movements that prompt the essence of a narrative, often one that is ominous, threatening, and unspoken. This narrative exists nonlinearly, unfolding and repackaging time and physical encounters. I may begin with a pre-existing story and use it to undermine its own archetypes or as a framework to bring forth a tangential idea. Conversely, I may begin with abstract movement in a deliberate setting as a way to sketch an idea or to offer an ambiguous story for the viewer to unravel. Environment and location guide me in this pursuit, adding

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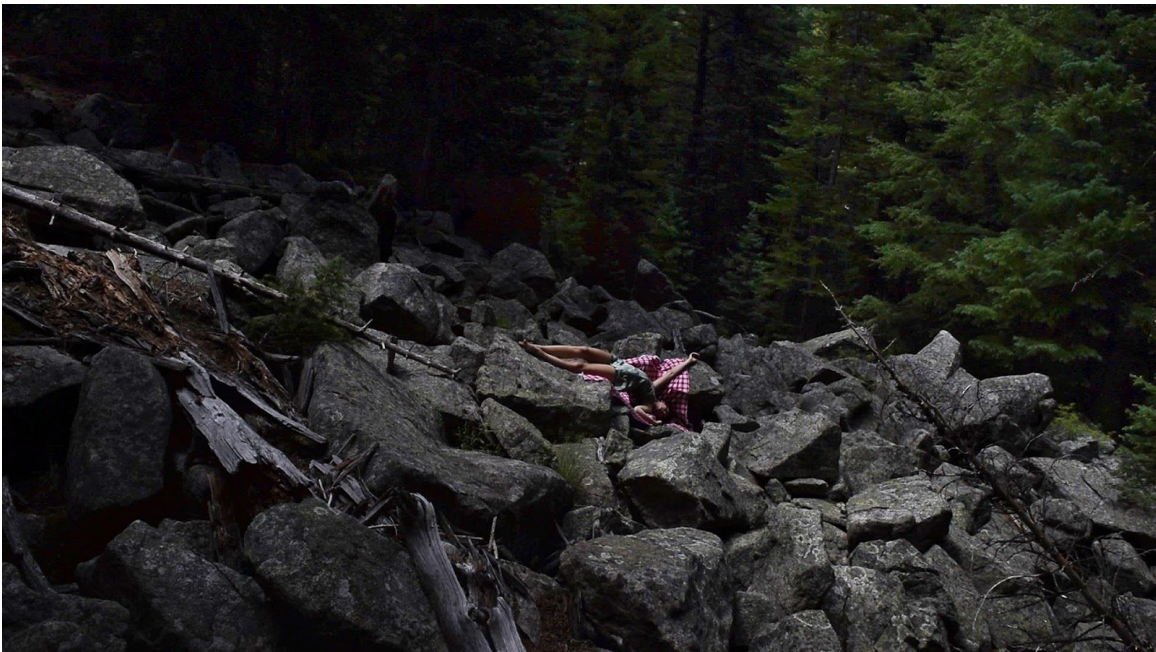
<sup>1</sup> Alessandra Ferrari-Wong, "Artist Statement" (Washington University in St. Louis, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Mark Westbrook, "Between Performing Arts and Performance Art," *Acting Coach Scotland* (blog), <https://actingcoachscotland.co.uk/blog/between-performing-arts-and-performance-art/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

a spatial layer to the conversation and grounding the work in an active setting. A performance or event may occur on the outskirts of a construction site, in a blackbox studio, even on a rooftop or a rockslide. In each case, the location has something to contribute to the vignette I create. The final form of my work often results as a stark image, video, or interactive experience.

Whether live or documented, my work acknowledges the viewer and sometimes even requires an action or contribution from them. Through interaction or gaze, the audience partakes in conversations with the work. As a response, my work embraces the external voyeur. This spectator, who normally goes unseen and delights in observing without consequence, becomes acknowledged as an audience. The acknowledgement is subtle, but makes the audience aware of their own position. The sense of control teeters between the work and viewer, leaving no one at ease and no one in power.



1 Alessandra Ferrari-Wong, *Luncheon on the Rocks*, photograph, 10.5"x6", 2019

The performance is a visceral experience for myself or my performers. It is often private or presented to a small audience. In *Luncheon on the Rocks* (fig. 1), I laid on the downward slope of a rock slide. My body was strewn across boulders, as if fallen and unconscious, but perfectly placed atop a picnic blanket. The performance consisted of five-minute segments of meditative performing and filming, where I remained mostly still with some small, subtle movements. It was a live cinematic tableau for passing hikers to stumble across. During the performance I was only aware of my camera watching and recording me on its tripod. I was unaware when other eyes were on me, but to them I was only a red dot in the distance. The work is now represented by photographs: three stills extracted from the video footage. It is an iteration of the live component and can be accessed by a wider audience.



2 Ana Mendieta, *Creek*, super 8 film, color, silent, 1974

Ana Mendieta, a Cuban-American artist who worked in performance, body art, and land art in the 70s and early 80s, had a similar meditative and private process. In her *Siluetas Series*, she used her

body to form shapes in various landscapes and then documented herself or the trace that her body had left with photography or on film.<sup>4</sup> She felt a need to be close to the environment because of her feeling that she had been “cast from the womb (nature)”<sup>5</sup> when forced to immigrate to the United States from Cuba in her youth in a mass exodus. Her sense of displacement moved her to make work that could reconnect her body to the earth. Although I do not share a similar background or motive for my own work, private performances like *Luncheon on the Rocks* similarly allow me or my performers to wholly connect to a space, to become wrapped up in an auditory realm or the physical qualities of the environment.



3 Alessandra Ferrari-Wong, *Marionette*, behind the scenes photo from live, interactive performance, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/332958782>

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<sup>4</sup> Ana Mendieta, Stephanie Rosenthal, Adrian Heathfield, and Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Ana Mendieta Traces*, (London: Hayward Publishing, 2013), 10-13.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

In another one of my earlier works, *Marionette* (fig. 3), a curtain of fabric separates a performer from the audience. The curtain reveals her doubled silhouette. She reacts to a looped soundtrack of four pre-recorded words that have nurturing connotations: “mend, hold, caress, embrace.” Off to the side, a list of verbs with violent connotations including “trap, scream, kill” hangs over a recording device, suggesting to a viewer to step up and record a word with their own voice. The audience members indulge and new commands interrupt the performer’s nurturing gestures. She improvises physical actions for each of them, as if she is the audience’s marionette. The new words accumulate and play on loop, and as more and more words are recorded, the performer’s actions become increasingly frantic. I am drawn to both the beauty of the immersive atmosphere in the work as well as the psychological impact of controlling a concealed human being like a puppet. Through my setup of the performance, I am, in turn, controlling or conducting the actions of the audience, however, also giving them the agency to make their own decisions. As in fables and fairy tales, there is always an underlying message within the depths of the story, an allegory to be revealed to the spectator while they are watching or afterwards. *Marionette* deals with choice, responsibility, and body agency; what does it really mean to control someone else’s body?



## II. Sonata

My thesis project is a remaking of the romantic-era ballet *Giselle* (1841) into a performance series and video trilogy. Short, live performances were filmed and later transformed into separate video works. I work with the story of *Giselle* because it is one of many romantic-era story ballets still widely performed even though it values a problematic characterization of women: innocent, simple-minded, forgiving, and importantly, helpful companions to men. The trilogy is structured as a sonata: the Exposition (the statement of subject matter, brisk) being *The Mad Scene*, the Development (expansion of subject matter, slow) being *The Wilis*, and the Recapitulation (restatement of exposition in a new way, a quick and rousing rondo) being *The Wandering Womb*.<sup>6</sup> The first two parts of the trilogy are directly linked to the ballet, and named after iconic scenes and characters from the plot. The final work starts and ends with a *Giselle* theme, with two other narratives dealing with female suffering and triumph threaded throughout it. The “wandering womb” refers to a term coined in the ancient Mediterranean world to rationalize female hysteria, the belief that the womb or uterus wandered like an animalistic creature throughout the female body and caused hysterical misery.<sup>7</sup> Hysteria and wildness in relation to control is an important overarching theme within the trilogy.

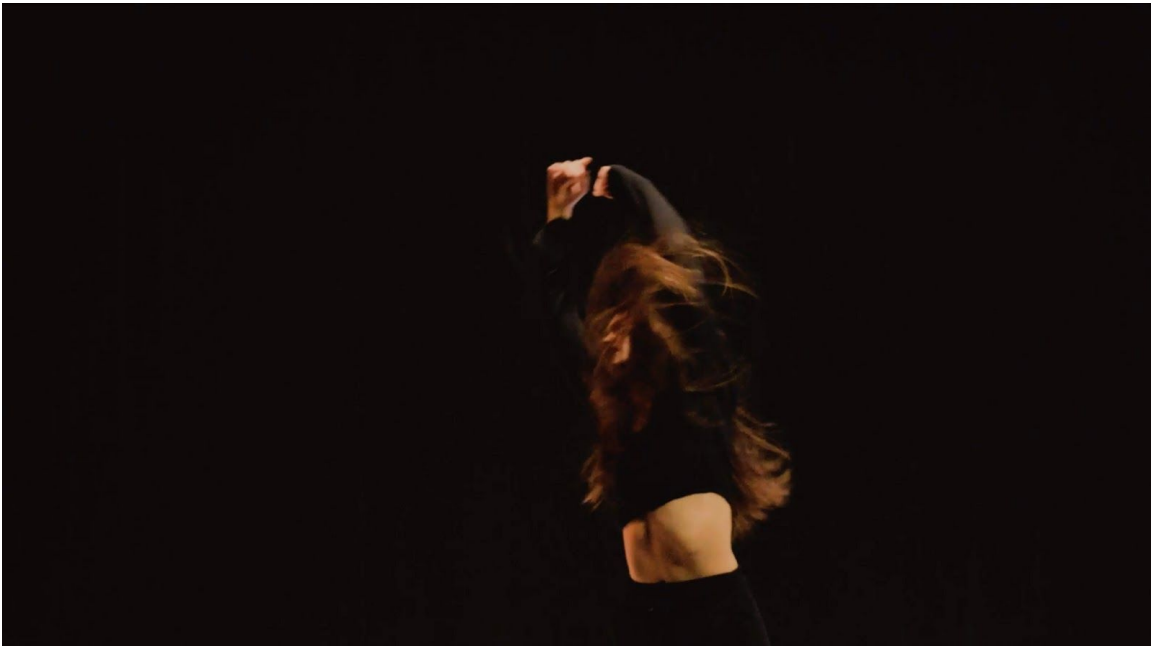
The original story of *Giselle*, conceived by scenarist Theophile Gautier, is one of innocent love turned to betrayal. In the first act, *Giselle*, a peasant girl with, literally, a weak heart, falls in love with a philandering nobleman disguised as a peasant. Charmed by her beauty and innocence, he is persistent and wins her over by offering his eternal love. He is already engaged to another woman, however, and when *Giselle* discovers his betrayal, she goes mad and dies from heartbreak.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Bernard Jacobson, “Sonata Form,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., last modified October 28, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/art/sonata-form>.

<sup>7</sup> Mark J. Adair, “Plato's View of the 'Wandering Uterus',” *The Classical Journal* 91, no. 2 (1995): 153, [www.jstor.org/stable/3298478](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3298478).

<sup>8</sup> Marcia B. Siegel, “A Newly Old “*Giselle*,”” *The Hudson Review* 64, no. 3 (2011): 485, [www.jstor.org/stable/41300703](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41300703).



4 Alessandra Ferrari-Wong, *The Mad Scene*, stills from performance video, 5:45, 2020, <https://vimeo.com/392775159>

In *The Mad Scene* (fig. 4), the first work in my trilogy and the “exposition”, I introduce the idea of female hysteria and perpetuate the ballet’s portrayal of Giselle: a weak and innocent girl who

gives her love to a man, only for it to become her downfall. I perform a reinterpretation of the famous mad scene from the end of Act 1 of the ballet, mixing the original mime with my own improvised and choreographed gestures. The movements are pained and melancholic. The character plucks the petals off of an invisible flower, “he loves me, he loves me not,” drags an invisible sword before attempting to stab herself, and shoves away non-existent people who try to hold her back and calm her down. In the final video work, I mix still and shaky camera footage from the performance to further emphasize the character’s hallucinatory state, and layer footage to superimpose multiple bodies on one screen. In doing so, I not only collapse time from the live performance but also reveal the character’s various states of mind and jumbled thoughts, as though her mind is split between memories and reality. The footage reveals the black box studio setting as well, referring back to the story’s origins in ballet.

The second and final act of the original ballet focuses on the Wilis, vengeful female spirits who have died from their lovers’ betrayals. They trap any wayward man who enters into their territory and force him to dance with them until he dies of exhaustion. The characters are summoned by their leader and attempt to kill Giselle’s lover when he visits her grave. They dance in a unified mass, floating across the stage in long, white romantic tutus. Despite her lover’s disloyalty, Giselle saves him and, by doing so, also saves herself from becoming one of the Wilis.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



5 Alessandra Ferrari-Wong, *The Wilis*, stills from performance video, 5:33, 2019, <https://vimeo.com/377692124>

*The Wilis* (fig. 5) is the second work of my trilogy and serves as the “development”. It is my own interpretation of these supernatural characters and is the point where I begin to resolve the issue of the weak and helpless female. The performers are each veiled under a mass of very fine, white tulle

to reference the costumes from the ballet. The performance portrays the characters' ritual awakenings, but the once graceful movements become actions of constraint. I compare these ghostly creatures to insects by choreographing their actions to the calls of cicadas. Performers move in and out of synchronization as different layers of video haunt the screen. Mixed into the soundtrack of insect recordings are sounds of cars driving by and human voices. Upon hearing any indication of human presence, the performers stop what they are doing and turn around to address the camera or audience with their gaze. With this gesture of awareness, the performers begin to break down the barrier that separates them from their spectators.

I first became interested in the Wilis because of their place within the breadth of female, supernatural creatures that were molded for romantic-era operas and ballets. Sylphs, water nymphs, shades, and swan maidens, all arose at the time because “they aligned with the interests of the Romantic movement, interested as it was in fantasy, the uncanny, and an idealized womanhood”<sup>10</sup> as determined by men. Each of these supernatural beings associate women with wildness, otherworldliness, immortality, and sexuality. They are creatures for a male character to chase and capture. Despite fitting into this lineage, the Wilis also reverse their role from captured to capturer in the way that they pursue any man and bring him to his demise. They have some control over their cursed condition, and some control over the audience.

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<sup>10</sup> Serinity Young, *Women Who Fly: Goddesses, Witches, Mystics, and Other Airborne Females*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 81.



6 Alessandra Ferrari-Wong, *The Wandering Womb*, stills from performance video, 4:47, 2020, <https://vimeo.com/408780730>

*The Wandering Womb* (fig. 6) is the final work of the trilogy, the “recapitulation”. In music, the recapitulation is psychological and builds tension before presenting the initial subject matter from

the exposition in a new way.<sup>11</sup> The work features a female protagonist from three different stories with live performances broken up so that each narrative was performed in a separate location. I combined all of the footage in the video to create a visual rondo with a recurring theme that begins and ends the piece and separates the sections in the middle. The recurring theme is a movement sequence of sharp, frantic gestures that reflect both a wild creature and a frantic woman. It is woven throughout the narrative scenes. The first storyline to occur is the innocent Giselle meeting her lover from Act 1 of the original ballet. Another is interpreted from the lyrics of the Romanian love song “Cantec De Dragoste” by Romica Punceanu about mythological creatures visiting women at night and making them suffer from feelings of heartbreak. The last narrative depicts a strong female character, Penelope, from the *Odyssey* who weaves on her loom during the day and unravels her work at night. She deceives and holds off forceful male suitors by telling them that she will choose a suitor after her weaving is complete. I incorporate flashing text and superimposed video to add to this dreamlike collage of female hysteria and empowerment.

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<sup>11</sup> Jacobson, “Sonata Form.”



7 Pina Bausch, *Bluebeard. While Listening to a Tape Recording of Béla Bartók's opera "Duke Bluebeard's Castle"*, performed by Tanztheater Wuppertal, photograph by Ursula Kaufmann, 2020, <https://www.ursulakaufmann.de/gal/index.php?/category/1416>



8 Pina Bausch, *Bluebeard. While Listening to a Tape Recording of Béla Bartók's opera "Duke Bluebeard's Castle"*, performed by Tanztheater Wuppertal, <https://vimeo.com/338870708>

My working with preexisting narrative and the intersections of performance art and dance has turned my attention to the works of the late German choreographer Pina Bausch, and specifically her



reproductions of operas into dance-theater performance. One of these reproductions is *Bluebeard*.<sup>[sic]</sup> *While Listening to a Tape Recording of Béla Bartók's opera "Duke Bluebeard's Castle"* (1977). In this production, Bausch creates a cyclical and erratic restructuring of Bartók's opera to intensify the already present gender battle.<sup>12</sup> Her protagonists follow the libretto and choreographic cues of a tape recording of the opera that is being operated (constantly played and rewound) by the male protagonist on the stage. The libretto consists of two characters in dialogue: Bluebeard, a wife-murdering husband, and Judith, his latest wife, who convinces him to reveal the contents behind the locked rooms in his castle and eventually discovers his previously murdered wives and her fate.<sup>13</sup> At the halfway mark in the production, significant sections from the first half of the dance are repeated with the gender roles reversed.<sup>14</sup> The plot moves both forwards and backwards, and this gender reversal allows both the "Bluebeard" and "Judith" protagonists to wield power at different points in the story (see fig. 7 and 8).

My thesis trilogy operates similarly, as previously mentioned, perpetuating themes of the original ballet *Giselle* but also building new meaning upon them. My methods to do so include extracting scenes and placing them in fragments alongside other narratives, or by creating subversive moments which call attention to the audience's gaze that sometimes parallels the male gaze within the plot. At the end of *The Wandering Womb* the cyclical rondo form of the video is broken and the performer escapes her suffering. She lays still on the ground for a moment, referencing perhaps the dead Giselle after the mad scene or the sleeping girl from Puceanu's love song. She begins to laugh to herself. Still laughing, she acknowledges the presence of the camera and then saunters up to it and turns it off. This moment is the character's refusal of any gaze upon her and is a gesture of her control.

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<sup>12</sup> Sophia Preston, "Looking backward in order to move forwards in an analysis of Pina Bausch's *Bluebeard*," SDHS Conference, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

The aforementioned moment is also one that disintegrates the division between audience and performer. A trend of breaking the fourth wall emerged in the mid to late 1960s. In *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* Jill Dolan writes, “against a background of social radicalism, theatre practitioners endeavored to use their art to persuade people to change their consciousness.”<sup>15</sup> Dolan is referring to a political, ideological, and social consciousness. Around that time, a tactic of Richard Schechner’s Performance Group was to have the audience participate in performances to “join in the collective unconscious” and ultimately reside on the same mental and physical field as the performers.<sup>16</sup> By breaking the fourth wall myself, I also considered these performer-audience relationships but through my own contemporary, feminist lens. I confronted the desire, or perhaps the blissful ignorance, of the spectator who remains interested in watching the old and backwards tale of *Giselle*, one that was historically designed for the likes of the hegemonic male spectator.



9 Z Behl, *Geppetto*, still from 16mm film, 20:00, 2019

<sup>15</sup> Jill Dolan, *Feminist Spectator As Critic*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 43.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

Another reinterpretation of preexisting narrative is Z Behl's feature film *Geppetto*, a current project and the second iteration of her short film also titled *Geppetto* (fig. 9). The protagonist is a female Geppetto who hides her gender identity in order to have independence and work as a carpenter. Out of frustration after her identity is revealed, she begins to carve a piece of wood into a brush, paints her body in wood grain, and at last attaches the brush to her nose, unknowingly turning herself into Pinocchio.<sup>17</sup> The creature is wild, untamed, and unafraid. She is flowing with creative energy and wreaking havoc, almost destroying the entire village before she must escape. Behl reworks the plot of Carlo Collodi's original story of *Pinocchio* as a way to "take apart the idea of a male genius artist and...to find something more of a collaborative and less gendered, less heteronormative spirit".<sup>18</sup> She creates a work that is both playful and serious, thwarting male power through a female spirit split into two personas. Like Bausch and myself, Behl is using narrative and conventions of narrative to her advantage to talk about power relations that are tangentially related to the story.

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<sup>17</sup> Z Behl, "Geppetto," *Cinemart 2019 Application*, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Nadja Sayej, "8 Artists To Catch At New York's Armory Week," *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, last modified March 7, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nadjasayej/2020/03/07/8-artists-to-catch-at-new-yorks-armory-week/#640a44a8ad52>

### *III. Coda*

There is a subtlety in the way I chose to present my trilogy, and purposefully so. For those familiar with the ballet, the story is clearly recognizable and though visually different, it initially seems to perpetuate the same problematic characterizations of women. I do this so that the audience can become captivated by the storyline and, just like one may be delighted by the beautiful dancing in the ballet, one may also be delighted and preoccupied by the lyrical and aesthetic qualities of my videos. However, upon taking a closer look past the hysteria, fear, and longing of female characters in the story, the audience may become aware of my critique of the power dynamics between gender in the narratives as well as between the performers and themselves, the voyeurs.

This trilogy has pushed me towards an exciting choreographic realm, and I am beginning to reconsider the accepted definition of “choreography” being movements that are set, unchanging, and repeated. The unpredictability of movements interpreted from an idea or from a set of parameters can be even more raw and emotional. Memory plays such a large role in traditional dance that taking it away and turning towards movement as a response to something goes back to my interest in blending the boundaries between dance and performance art. Moving forward, I am interested in challenging myself to define choreography under my own terms and to consider how costume and props could potentially be incorporated.

The current global crisis of COVID-19 has caused this thesis project to take a slight turn. The original plan was still to remake *Giselle* following a nonlinear structure, but in the form of a short live production with a small group of performers. The COVID-19 pandemic has also caused a change in consciousness and perspective of much of the entire human population, a very large audience. I hope my work can reflect the self-consciousness that many of us are experiencing and perhaps somewhere

within it, my audience may also find intellectual pleasure in their awareness. Please sit back, relax, and enjoy the show— but know that the performers may be watching you.

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