

A.L.I.C.E.: PERFORMANCE AS RESEARCH DURING A PANDEMIC

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

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ABSTRACT

A.L.I.C.E.: Performance as Research During a Pandemic

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How is the continued COVID-19 pandemic interfering with the live art and entertainment industry? Embarking on performance as research and making art about world events while they occur instead of a reactive piece made after those events have ended, creates a particular kind of knowledge. The research and development process for the live, immersive performance, *A.L.I.C.E.*, allowed for unique insights and experimentation with light, time, movement, text, costuming, context, alienation effects, liminality, mediation, auto-poetic feedback loops, technology, and the fourth wall. While the lessons learned about immersive performance are useful, just as important are observations about how we interact with technology, touch and other human beings during a devastating global health crisis.

DEDICATION

To my parents for always believing in me, my friends for their support, my faculty advisor Dr.

*Ball and the incredible Department of Performance Studies faculty and staff, and the many
passionate dance, music, and theatre educators without whom I wouldn't be the person or artist*

I am today.

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- Jeffery Watson (Props, Scenic design)
- Isabella Correa (Graphic design and marketing materials, actor, film crew, props assistant)
- Angelique Frando (Actor, film crew, stage manager)
- Gabriel Norris (Actor, film crew, props assistant)
- Amber Harris (Film crew, editor)
- Chandler Keller (Film crew, editor)

All other work conducted for the thesis was completed by the student independently.

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1. AESTHETIC MOTIVATION AND RESEARCH QUESTION

How is the continued COVID-19 pandemic interfering with the live art and entertainment industry?

My primary methodology is performance as research: my creative work itself provides my data regarding the nature of mediated experience in 2020. By developing this project, I am discovering answers, counterarguments, and generating new knowledge to investigate the changes brought on by the pandemic.

I am a performance artist. My work makes the interior world of the self exterior through world building. My work looks like theatre most of the time, incorporating dance, music, and the spoken word. Physical objects I create are almost always mixed media. These include costumes, cards/stationary, masks, and props. Narratives are common, though not always linear. Storytelling, no matter how simple the story, is always involved.

Most of the time, I am working intuitively off of a loose skeleton of a plan. When blocking a scene, writing a paper, or sitting down to watercolor, I know the major points I want to hit. Everything that connects those moments is fluid, leaving room for discovery. This often means forgoing a brush to more directly push the paint into place, breaking out the hot glue gun unexpectedly, or asking my collaborators dozens of questions. I am likely to say almost any of the following...

“Does this music feel like an ‘up’ to you?”

“It looked like your feet wanted to move there--you should try it.”

“Feels like we need to...” After a long pause, I move my hand in a pattern that means something in my head--and hopefully, something to my collaborators. If not, problem solving

will occur while we create a new shared vocabulary to better communicate. This mode of working was common in the Fluxus movement, in which Event Scores such as Alison Knowles' "Make a Salad" consisted of simple instructions, leaving room for all manner of discoveries to be made.

Theatre and live modes of performance are my area of focus, specifically audience/performer interactions. While I prefer working with a live audience, records of my work are posted to my YouTube channel and Instagram account. I typically do not create content specifically for digital audiences, instead using video as a way of archiving my work. I view the camera as simply a means to an end, a way of remembering a moment, stamping it with a date and time, and fixing it to a certain physical location on a hard drive.

As a result of my focus on a more immediate, in-person art practice, COVID-19 has significantly impacted my studies and artistic practice. Since March 13th, 2020, everything I make has been suddenly mediated by screens. My spring independent study--a live, interactive, stage musical--was postponed, recast virtually, and will be rehearsed and performed in a hybrid format. I am also president of an honors theatre organization doing its very first Virtual Student New Works Festival. In Fall of 2020, I collaborated with four other students to create a dance piece, "These Walls," about relationships and mediation.

"These Walls" was conceptualized virtually, late in August 2020. The opportunities and experiences lost in the spring had been mourned and I was itching to start a new project in the Fall. The dichotomy of being together while apart had permeated everyone's lives. While talking to a close friend, plexiglass was suggested. My Dad had been to the Post Office recently, where they had used shower curtains. Over the past few months, I had seen all manner of creative

contraptions by inventive businesses trying to stay open and family members trying to stay connected.

A few days (and mass emails) later, I had a team who I had never met in person. Places to rehearse safely were limited; Andrew Harris and I were dancing on the volleyball courts in the campus gym. For the first rehearsal, the curtain stayed folded on the ground--a mental barrier. We created the first section of choreography face to face, with extremely minimal touch to stay on beat. The next rehearsal, Andrew draped the shower curtain over one of the volleyball nets. The first time we went through the beginning of the choreography, which explored reaching out to the other person with little success, and tracing motions through the curtain... something unexpected happened. The curtain was clear but obscured the details of the other person's face... well, what could be seen over their mask. Palm to palm, you felt only smooth plastic and a hint of body heat. A moment in which we both stepped back from one another felt like a punch in the gut. Three hours shy of being total strangers, distance felt like a physical loss. I was tearing up well before the step back, but the sudden wave of grief pushed me over the edge. We had to stop for a moment to catch our breath after the unexpectedly emotional shock.

"I don't want to be away from you." Andrew remarked, offhand. Our choreographic style was very intuitive, with most of the movements emerging from what felt 'correct.'

"Me either!" I replied with a shaky laugh, "No, I don't like that at all..."

We decided if an emotional response like that was probably a sign we were on the right track; however, we were hungry for a resolution. The ending, in which the two characters discover ways to work with the wrinkly, loud, slippery, and generally unpleasant barrier instead of against it, is definitely my favorite part of the piece. Still, the moment stuck in my head. Why did we have such a strong response to movements that we created?

Performance as research operates on the understanding that performance offers a unique way of understanding and interpreting the world, its inhabitants, and many changes. I am drawing on my experiences creating *These Walls*, personal art made since March 13th, 2020, and the work of other artists and scholars working at the intersection of theatre and technology, to create a theatrically framed multimedia performance incorporating movement, text, and projection. Audience members attended the one-on-one performance where a first-person perspective and a wide-angle recording were also taken for archival purposes.

From my experiences, I've learned that technology is now essential for the collaborative process. Under social distancing requirements, anyone with an internet connection can find creative ways to make work together. However, this process can be challenging. Normal audience to performer interactions have shifted or become impossible. Inherent and occasionally intentional alienation effects distance audiences in new ways. Different platforms offer unique ways to perform self and creative works. Collaborative relationships function differently when mediated by a screen.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, technology mediates the creation and distribution of live performance in many ways and is changing what it means to be 'Live.' Technology not only changes performances happening on social media platforms, it also influences everyday performances of self. Screens function as a new 4th wall, but do not always support generative feedback loops between audiences and performers, and unforeseen complications can cause 'glitches.'

I am exploring what it means for a screen to function as the 4th wall (or lack thereof). Some virtual performances are presented by ignoring the platform and attempting to recreate the

traditional theatrical experience, others lean into the unique features of their digital platform and integrate them into the performance.

Present in both methodologies, Brecht's alienation effect or *Verfremdungseffekt* is a method in which theatrical technologies are intentionally revealed to the audience to emotionally distance them from the performance. This allows space to process the work's broader societal commentary.

Unexpected technological interference aside, virtual audiences may or may not create Erika Fischer-Lichte's auto-poetic feedback loops during a live virtual performance--disrupting the typical action-reaction pattern expected to develop between a performer and an audience. The formation of feedback loops is explored in the two different ways that I am interacting with the audience during the performance; either in person, or completely asynchronously via a first person recording.

Mediation in collaborative relationships and the distribution of performance has been studied extensively by Performance Studies scholars; however, given the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, increased access to and shifting relationships with technology, and the unique social and political contexts of 2020-2021, there are new observations and connections to be made to better understand how we relate to art, technology, and one another. Remediation is the process by which an established relationship is renegotiated and understood in new terms or circumstances.

As we live, learn, gather, and create online, it is key to investigate how technology not only mediates collaborative relationships but daily interactions. How can the limitations or failures of technology give rise to new performance practices? How can an artist devise in ways that overcome limitations to connect with the viewer? What insights discovered about

technologically mediated performance can apply to our lives during the pandemic, and in the "new normal" that will emerge?

My creative work, a live one-on-one performance, draws inspiration from previous theatrical works. The stage has always been a space of technological mediation, the written word becoming an enacted story, the ekkyklema blocking the viewer's sight... As has been the case since the earliest days of theatre, artists have implemented newly accessible technology (iPhones, webcams, projectors, green screens, cameras) into their artistic practices. By presenting an original narrative that incorporates themes of mental health, the body, the self, and mediation, in a sci-fi frame, I am exploring what it means for a work to be mediated by physical objects, the camera, time, distance, and a devastating global pandemic.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT, DISCIPLINARY PARADIGMS, AND AESTHETIC STANDARDS

When devising my performance, I struggled to find the correct terminology for the media I was using. "These Walls," the initial jumping off point, was a dance that was filmed. The choreography's meaning was translated into the language of film and became its own, separate but related expression of my, and my collaborators' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. My performance could feel a lot like theatre to an audience member, given that it takes place in a Black Box and incorporates theatrical lighting, props, and a clear narrative. The use of projectors, pre-recorded characters and dialogue, interactive and immersive elements all complicate operating under the label of 'theatre.'

Theatre is a space of art forms coming together, where they impact one another in a myriad of ways. Art, music, dance, and the written word all interact, becoming something new entirely without losing the core elements of their media: the components make a unique expression while remaining recognizable. Chiel Kattenbelt describes theatre as a hypermedium, because it 'a medium that contains all media.' (Kattenbelt, 29) For this reason, while my performance is a theatrical work, the rest of the media connected to the project can be classified as transmedia. Three short films, a converted retro television, hula hoop dress, paint splattered canvas, a mask, a trailer, music, notebook, sketches, digital notes were generated over the course of fleshing out the story world of *The In-between*. Each piece supports the overarching narrative of the performance, while fleshing out the world itself by investigating its different characters and components.

Together, as a whole, the transmedia artifacts and multimedia theatre performance operate intermedially. Irina Rajewski points out that the term intermediality has become so widespread, that it is necessary for anyone using it to provide their operating definition. (Rajewski, 44) I am using intermediality to describe the ways in which work in one medium renegotiates how we experience work in other mediums, and the points at which those effects create new mediums altogether. Each additional artifact and component of the performance redefines the audience's understanding of the work. Going beyond hiding easter eggs (though there are plenty sprinkled throughout), these components speak not only to the plot, but to the key concerns of the work itself.

Narratively, three human characters occupy *The In-between*; Alice, No, and Yes. Alice fell into the world in 2020, Yes in the 1970s, and No in the 1930s. All characters are played by me. Each character appears in a short film. Alice is the girl in "These Walls," while No and Yes share a film that speaks to their duality. During the performance, footage of No, Yes, Alice in "These Walls" and the antagonist Nothing is projected onto shower curtains. Alice interacts with these characters as if they were present live, however they are simply light. The fictional Dr. Mendez serves as the audience's guide for the performance. Her family has been studying the *In-between* since the 1930s. A handful of lab assistants prepare the audience member to enter the 'high tech imaging space' of the Black Box. They don white jumpsuits, face shields, and latex gloves--in addition to the facemask they were required to wear to attend the performance. Masking tape, spray paint, and other identifying marks applied to technology from various decades all bear the name Mendez. In the Black Box, Dr. Mendez assures the audience member that she will be nearby if they need anything or any help. She serves as the panic button, should the audience member wish to exit the performance at any time.

The audience, Alice, Yes, No, Nothing, Dr. Mendez and her assistants all occupy different worlds (expressed by different media) that are only contextualized by their relationships to one another. This is representative of the ways in which COVID-19 fragmented what I viewed as a collective experience (college) into an individual one (doing class remotely from my grandparents' home). By fragmenting the chronological narrative into the different transmedia artifacts, it becomes an expression of the way my experience of time changed during the pandemic. The use of video during the performance complicates what it means to be live, while the clear view of the projector creates an alienating effect that disrupts the immersive quality of the performance--while the use of touch, costuming, and direct address all attempt to pull the audience member in. While these are the meanings I created and discovered in the work, due to the intermediality of the story world as a whole, new ones will emerge. All of these ideas point to the concept of remediation.

To emulate how I felt in the months following the COVID-19 outbreak, I set my performance in a non-space that had no discernable time period. After struggling to find the appropriate terminology to describe this concept, Mark Fisher's work on Hauntology proved a useful perspective for expressing the past and commenting on a future that does not yet exist. Martin Hägglund comments that in Hauntology, the specter cannot be totally (physically, mentally, temporally) immediate to the 'audience', signifying a relationship to "no longer or not yet" (Hägglund, 82) Fisher restates this observation in this way,

'Not really now not any more,' points to the postmodern impasse, the dis-appearance of the present and the possibility of represent-ing the present. But it also points to an alternative temporality, another way in which time can be out of joint, a mode of causality that is about influence and virtuality rather than gross material force. (Fisher, 22)

Time not only felt disjointed, as routines were interrupted and events were postponed... we were also living with the ghosts of the lives we thought we would be living, imagining our own separate alternate realities.

I haunted my project in two ways. Firstly, by incorporating a variety of different out-of-date technology as props and disgusting any chronistic signifiers, the already sterile first floor of the Liberal Arts and Humanities Building becomes even farther untethered from the present. Secondly, two of the characters projected onto the scene in the Black Box theatre do not wear masks; they are styled as echoes of past artistic movements. The 'In-Between' is simply "Not really now not any more."

The fictitious world, performance, Black Box theatre, and Liberal Arts and Humanities building are experienced as a liminal non-place. Viewing the pandemic as liminal was an essential coping mechanism for me during the summer of 2020. If the pandemic is a doorway, or hallway, or airport, or whatever metaphor you find most concrete... then that means someday, it will be resolved. By starting the audience's experience of the performance in a side hallway, asking them to move down it and through the theatre along a specified path, and ending the performance in the main hall, it is made clear to the audience that the 'In-Between' is not an inhabitable location. The experience (and the COVID-19) will end. We all have one foot on one side of the doorway, haunted by memories and media of the 'before times' and are stepping with uncertainty through to whatever will come next.

Setting a performance in a non-place sounds intriguing theoretically, but starts to create problems when trying to envision the textures, sights, sounds, and smells it possesses. While the exercise was created as a dramaturgical tool, I found Elinor Fuches' "EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play" to be helpful in taking the In-Between from a black hole

to a more tangible world. Asking questions is a key way I collaborate with others, and as I discovered, a way to translate abstract ideas into something more concrete. The elements of the intermedia story world are all rooted in my research. In answering Fuches' questions, I made the following discoveries about the In-Between.

- Space - vast, empty. There are no defining features. It is a non-space. It is not a blank canvas--there is nowhere for things to go, no way to make a mark on the landscape. Gravity here is slightly heavier than the earth we are used to. It is large enough to swallow up sound, and if you let it, your soul. It is overwhelming like looking up at the sky.
- Time - Time flows in unexpected ways. At times really fast, at times impossibly slowly. Because there is no way for humans to mark time, its perception is entirely up to human understanding. Time is linear, in that how the audience experiences it is the same as that of our character. Time travel is not possible (that would be cheating)
- Climate - It is cool--just cool enough to be slightly uncomfortable. There is air--but only air. It smells like disinfectant and hand sanitizer and hospitals. Breezes are few and far between, but when it strikes it's a hurricane. Earthquakes are also common. It is a place where what is built is easily destroyed. There are a few remnants of those who have surrendered before.
- Mood - A somber, contemplative mood--easily shattered. Temperamental. Mood is created by the weather, the lighting. There are only harsh edges and angles to be careful of. Anything curved indicates a human/the natural/the rare.
- Music - It is aching, painfully, silent. Not silent like a library or a forest that whispers

with life, but silent like a tomb. Each man-made sound echoes, and twists, and shouts back to its source.

- Public/private - There is no private space. There is nowhere to hide. Everything is public.
- People patterns - People are loners, it is very rare to meet someone. Ideally, you will never meet someone, as they could be an illusion.

Because my work is investigating how the pandemic is sparking, framing, and influencing creative work, the places where new restrictions and regulations were of special interest. One of the key challenges (and therefore meanings) discovered during “These Walls” was pandemic induced restriction on the body. “Wear your mask... Don’t touch your face... Stand here...” Every thirty minutes in one of the busiest buildings on campus an announcement is made reminding students to wear their masks and social distance. When looking for a reference for these prescribed behaviors made necessary by the COVID-19 pandemic, the costumes from Oskar Schlemmer’s Triadisches Ballett became the perfect parallel. Whimsical, strange, and fantastic, the costumes restrict the dancers’ bodies in many ways. They are heavy and unforgiving. Many feature masks and completely hide the dancer’s identity.

Inspired by Oskar Schlemmer’s costumes, the character ‘No’ wears a dress made from six hoops that encircle the body. Connected by wide ribbon, the hoops wobble and bounce like they have a mind of their own. When wearing it, one cannot raise their arms and are forced to take small steps. “No” refuses to move and is forgotten until she is discovered in the In-Between. To mirror the character born from restriction on the body, “No”, an opposite was required; freedom.

Fluxus is an art movement that started in New York in the 1960s. Fluxus works are characterized by being anti-establishment or non-art like “Total Art Matchbox” by Ben Vautier,

Event Scores like Alison Knowles “Make a Salad”, and the element of chance that John Cage often embraced. While incorporating Futurist and Dadaist elements (eliminating boundaries between art and life, renegotiating the power structure in the art world, redefining relationships with artists and audiences), Fluxus work often has a sense of playfulness. Fluxus is often a mode of working, in which a state of flow and indeterminacy are not only utilized, but a key thematic element. In creating the short film for “Yes”, I decided it was imperative to make a mess. We filmed outside, on a huge piece of muslin, and my ever-patient friends threw watered down paint at me. Upon seeing the aftermath of this process, “Yes” runs into the forest and disappears through a plastic curtain into the In-Between (Figure A.1).

By drawing on the established art movements and theoretical concepts to abstractly translate my experiences, I increase the chance of my piece resonating with as many people as possible.

3. EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT

March 19th, 20th, and 21st, audience members stepped into *A.L.I.C.E.*, a twenty-minute immersive experience (See *A.L.I.C.E. Performance Recording* in the Appendix). After signing up to attend the performance, audience members receive an email. It reads:

Hello,

Thank you for your assistance in this matter. This email contains important information. Please read it in its entirety.

This mystery has been perplexing my family for decades, and I look forward to working with you to solve it.

A.L.I.C.E. (Anomaly Locator and Imaging Computer Equipment) is an extremely delicate system. With that in mind, please be aware of the following:

1. Please certify the following before arriving at the lab.
 - a. I have not tested positive for COVID-19 in the past two weeks
 - b. No one in my household has tested positive for OR displayed COVID-19 symptoms in the past two weeks
 - c. I do not have a fever
 - d. I have not/am not experienced/experiencing these symptoms in the past week
 - i. Fever or chills
 - ii. Cough
 - iii. Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
 - iv. Fatigue
 - v. Muscle or body aches
 - vi. Headache
 - vii. New loss of taste or smell
 - viii. Sore throat
 - ix. Congestion or runny nose
 - x. Nausea or vomiting
 - xi. Diarrhea
2. Please wear a mask.
3. If you are unable to stand for approximately 20 minutes or could be affected by flashing lights, let me know so I can make accommodations.
4. At the lab, your temperature will be taken and to protect the integrity we will provide additional sanitized PPE for you to wear while in A.L.I.C.E.

If you have any questions, please, don't hesitate to reach out. Looking forward to working with you,

Dr. Mendez

Upon arriving at the Liberal Arts and Humanities building for their single-person time slot, audience members are checked in by 'lab assistants' (volunteer student actors), who take

their temperature, verbally ask about any COVID-19 symptoms, and provide basic story information. (Figure A.3). The usually bland and dimly lit theatre hallway is littered with technology from across the decades, seemingly daisy-chained together with extension cords. A tall man in a lab coat asks if you have a latex allergy, then assists you into gloves, a face shield, and a white jumpsuit. (Figure A.4) He instructs the attendee to follow the cords around the bend in the hall, where they connect to a modified retro television set with the screen removed. Inside, lights blink and all manner of little gadgets are hard at work. (Figure A.8). More cords run into through a doorway into the next room. The doors are open, but it's dark. There is a choice to make, do they take the risk of stepping through the dimly lit doorway into an unknown space? Most of the guests have not been in the Liberal Arts Building before, let alone the winding theatre hallway. A major factor in how I chose to set the performance in this space is its relative unfamiliarity to most people outside of the student theatre community at Texas A&M. When the audience member is ready, they step through a plastic shower curtain in the doorway and into the Black Box which is lit with a green tinted artificial light.

Dr. Mendez greets the audience member, telling them briefly that if ever they need to exit the system, shout and she'll shut everything down. She also invites them to do whatever they can to reach or impact the anomaly(s) except breach the barrier between their world and A.L.I.C.E.. Plastic shower curtains make a wall, splitting the sparse black theatre space in two. The fluorescent work lights cut off and projectors flicker to life, telling the story of Alice, Yes, and No, while I, the performer, interact with them.

After completing my initial research into theories and methods that will be useful for me to apply to my performance, crafting the scenery, filming the projections, choreographing my movements, training my assistants, and securing the personal protective equipment... it's time

for me to put on my purple dress, dance shoes, mask, and tuck myself away behind the curtains to wait for the performance to begin.

When the girl falling in the video dips off screen, I count to three and fling myself through the curtain in the darkness onto the stage. The exaggerated thump cues a purple wash over the stage, providing enough light for me to start exploring the space. Until now, the flow of the experience has been fairly standardized. Each lab assistant has a script and was asked to keep answers to questions brief and minimal. Variables have been eliminated wherever possible. The true experimentation begins now. With each run of the show, I am able to learn more about the impact of my choices and adjust my actions to better match the desired impact.

3.1 Test 1

This individual was an acquaintance (friend of a friend) that I had met the day prior. Issues with lighting resulted in some unexpected hiccups. Communication needed to improve so that I and my lighting technician knew which cues were visual and which were audio. The audience member talked to themselves throughout the performance.

“Whoa, it’s dark.”

“Who’s there?”

“Are you Alice?”

Because they were asking questions, I felt the need to answer them. For the narrative purposes of the performance, there were some questions that I couldn’t answer. Some of the shaky moments from this first test scenario include this gem, “Hello?” Alice asks into the void, “Where am I?”

The audience member didn’t know how to respond, and answered to the best of their ability, “The Liberal Arts Building, in College Station.”

I wasn't sure if I liked conversing with the audience during the performance, but decided to leave it in for the next few runs of the performance.

The speaker for the performance was placed to the far left of the audience member, and one of the sound effects was an ominous rustling. The audience member jumped, yelped, and asked, "Who's there?" It seems that the crunching of leaves in the film sounded like someone touching the plastic or approaching them. At the conclusion of the performance, the audience member remarked, "Back to the scary dark." I had failed to take into consideration that the audience would not be as comfortable as I am in a dark theatre.

3.2 Test 2

No major changes were made during this performance; however, it was key in determining that conversing with the audience member was an absolute no-go. The following interaction really made it easy to decide.

"What's today's date?" I asked.

"March 19th, 2021."

"Oh... when I fell, it was March 13th, 2020."

"You've been here a long time, nice that they gave you a mask though."

I was so thrown for a loop by this response, even though it was entirely logical from the audience member's point of view. I was asking far too much of the audience to suspend their disbelief to such a level. How were they supposed to know what to say, and what not to say? I had given them no context, and no indication of how to handle themselves during the performance. Telling them that they are the 'expert', and they can do whatever they want, was far too broad and created a strange kind of pressure. I was asking them to solve a puzzle without giving them any of the pieces.

3.3 Test 3

This was the first run of the performance where Alice did not speak. Partially because I was tired, and had a headache, but mostly because it felt... incorrect. The performance felt much smoother. To accommodate this change, I simply pantomimed my speech. This looked like... cupping my hands around my mouth, taking a visibly deep breath, and standing on my toes to call for help. There is a moment about halfway through the performance where one of the characters tries to communicate with Alice by holding their hands in a particular circle shape. On an impulse, I quickly signed *Hello IX-SELF Name A L I C E*. (Note: Alice is a hearing character; however, she cannot hear or see the other audience member through the barrier.)

This was also the first run where an audience member made a movement that surprised me: they tried to touch my hand. While a clip from “These Walls” is being projected, I approach the curtain and whenever possible mimic or trace movements made by either of the dancers. A hand on a face, a caress, a push... The plastic crinkles as I interact, and my focus is rattled by a sudden presence. The audience member was anticipating my movements and matching them. Our hands would make contact every few seconds. Even though narratively, I could not acknowledge this, it was comforting to know that they were trying. It reminded me of when my friends would hug goodbye during video calls over the summer.

3.4 Test 5

In this run, I realized that I could interact/block light from the projector to fill in some of the choreographic gaps during “These Walls.” The ability to repeat the performance over and over with an audience member allowed for near-constant experimentation.

3.5 Test 6

This audience member was the most adventurous! They asked Dr. Mendez if they really could go anywhere in the space, and she responded affirmatively. So, about a fourth of the way through the performance, the audience member began making their way around the giant plastic curtain to be on my side! While it was challenging for me to stay focused while trying to keep track of this new body inhabiting my space, I was delighted. Instead of touching palms through a shower curtain at the end of the performance, this audience member pulled me into a warm embrace. It was lovely, and I found myself tearing up.

It was closure, a ritual that has been absent from performance practices for over a year. When we wrapped filming on ‘These Walls,’ the team took a photo without touching, and went home. No celebratory hugs or going out to eat as a group, just intense emotional intimacy and an unsatisfying end to a project about being lonely.

Back in the present, one of my collaborators wipes my eyes with the back of her sleeve while helping me shove on my shoes and slip on my jacket. Quick change completed, we make the mad dash to the elevators to complete the final moments of the performance.

3.6 Test 7

This audience member attempted to dance with me through the shower curtains, holding their hand high, low, and as far left and right as possible. We touched foreheads through the curtain, and they picked up my head to cup my face. The gloves, shower curtain, and thematic distance created by the physical and metaphorical fourth wall allow for more familiar touches if the audience member so desires.

3.7 Test 11

This audience member was very excited when I first initiated contact. Through the curtain, we rubbed noses, ran up and down the curtain patting our hands in a staccato rhythm. It was a playful intimacy that demanded both of our presence and pushed me far out of my comfort zone.

When my assistant in the light booth feels that my moment of interaction with the audience is ending, the lights begin to fade. I step away, slip through the curtains, and dash into the Scene Shop for a quick change. Throwing my body into a folding chair, another assistant helps me shove my feet into sneakers, tie my shoes, and put on a jacket. They ditch their lab coat and together we walk down the hall towards the elevators, talking about nothing of importance. The audience member is being assisted out of their PPE by Dr. Mendez, who explains that they were very helpful. Dr. Mendez looks at me and my friend, smiles, proclaims that she feels very hopeful for the future of her research, and informs the audience member that they can reach out if they have any questions.

A few days later, an email arrives in the audience member's inbox. It reads:

(Guest's name),

Apologies for not updating you sooner, it's been hectic in the lab. Since your visit, there has been an exciting development. The anomaly has vanished without a trace, but we are still seeing low levels of activity in the area it was located. All of our tracking equipment has been nearly silent, and we're working to figure out where to go next.

It seems that, for now, this particular mystery has been resolved but there are other anomalies popping up on our radar.

I will of course contact you if there are any further developments.

Thank you again for your assistance,
Dr. Mendez

This final communication was left open ended, as a reference to the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. In hinting that there could be other mysteries to be solved, a door is left open in case I want to return to the story world of the In-Between to create new works.

4. REFLECTION

Since following a creative impulse down the rabbit hole, I found a host of research in the field of Performance Studies on the intangible forces at work in theatre and technology of the stage. From Brecht's alienation effects to hauntology and devising techniques, each pushed me to consider my work in new ways.

My target audience is an interesting mix of faculty who have a wealth of experience with immersive performance, students connected to the arts, and friends attending to see their friends in lab coats. In attempt to make the performance accessible for everyone, I chose to keep my core narrative short and fairly simple; a team of researchers is working with an anomaly. That anomaly is a girl who fell between the cracks of reality and is trapped. Contact between the audience member and the girl allow her to escape the void, find her friend, and ultimately carry on with life in the new normal. While loosely modeled on my experiences in the last year with COVID-19, video calls, and being separated from family and friends; A.L.I.C.E. is a story of anyone who feels isolated. No matter the reason for it, isolation can be strange, lonely, scary, quiet, and confusing.

In the same vein as many of the immersive performances I researched for this project, the first and last contact I have with the audience is as Dr. Mendez via email. By modifying my usual writing patterns to aim for a particular balance of professionalism and warmth, I leverage text to provide exposition for the performance alongside crucial safety and logistics information. Now over a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, my audience has become accustomed to questionnaires asking about symptoms and masking requirements. Presenting this still-important health information alongside story elements makes it more eye-catching, increasing the chances

of the reader absorbing and following the guidelines. This worked well, with the exception of one individual who sent me the following text:

“Hey, I’m very confused by your email thing for the performance. Although, that might be because I’m drunk. How can I reserve a time slot for tomorrow night at 7:00 pm?”

I applaud this person for their attention to punctuation while tipsy and count their experiences as an outlier. The rest of the audience had no issues signing up for a timeslot, and I received positive feedback on the concept of receiving email from the characters.

The COVID-19 pandemic did create an interesting intertextuality between my work and the time period in which it was created. In *7 Types of Intertextuality*, Miola states that there are seven types of intertextuality; revision, translation, quotation, sources, conventions and configurations, genres, and paralogues. While the references (both spoken and contextual) to *Alice in Wonderland* count as revision, translation, quotation, the utilization of sci-fi aesthetics and are employment of genre, conventions, and configurations. I am most interested however, in the generative intertextual paralogue that occurs (and will continue to evolve) between my work, the pandemic, and the ever-changing cultural context.

Intertextual paralogues are, “texts that illuminate the intellectual, social, theological, or political meanings in other texts. Unlike texts or even traditions, paralogues move horizontally and analogically in discourses rather than in vertical lineation through the author's mind or intention” (Miola). If one steps back to consider culture as text, as many Performance Studies scholars do, culture and the art it creates are constantly speaking to one another and creating new meanings. Given this fact, what new meaning was generated in the conversations occurring between my work and ‘these uncertain times?’

I cannot speak on the meanings my audiences walked away with, but I can describe my observations. Just as it occurred six months prior, touching someone else through the curtain caused an emotional reaction. Even something as simple as touching hands with friends, mentors, and strangers, but being unable to communicate them made me tear up. There was a frustrating, all too familiar barrier between the two of us. The actress playing Dr. Mendez commented that it felt strange not to be able to shake anyone's hand as they entered the Black Box. Touch has become an even rarer thing (in an already physically distant American culture) during the pandemic. Hugs, handshakes, partner dancing, high-fives, and other movements I previously took for granted are now off-limits. This is likely why I became so emotional when an audience member gave me a hug—I just needed one. After months of political unrest, cultural reckoning, and COVID-19 pandemic... I think everyone needs a hug.

Feedback on my performance focused mainly on missed opportunities with technology and the format of immersive performance. It was difficult to make out details in the video being projected. Other than the loose storyline of Alice meeting various characters before going home, any details were completely lost. Colors, shapes, movement, and high contrast lighting all translated really well when projected on the shower curtain. I wonder what would happen if I used more projectors and more shower curtains to fracture the space. Would it turn into a crinkly kaleidoscope?

Another aspect of immersive theatre that I was unable to incorporate into this project is an open world aspect. There were very few things for the audience to discover. While there were the modified television set and little piles of technology in the hallway, nothing was interactive! If I did the project again, I would use the rooms adjacent to the hallway as Dr. Mendez's office and the lab assistants' break room. On the desks, there could be notes, sketches, and diagrams to

read. Laptops could be playing relevant audio transmissions, perhaps edited to sound like old recordings. I would love to have a couple radios scanning, and another lab assistant or two running around doing ‘research.’ If I am asking the audience member to step into the role of an expert and help solve a mystery, there needs to be a clearer problem to fix. Taking inspiration from escape rooms and other immersive experiences could be a possible way to make my audience feel more involved. Another solution could be shifting the audience’s role; instead of an expert, perhaps they are government budgeting officials touring a lab seeking federal funding!

With the next project, I would like to involve more of the audience’s senses into the project. Touch and sight were easily accounted for in A.L.I.C.E, but I would have liked to sprayed disinfectant to emulate the smell of a hospital or laboratory’s ‘clean space’ in the Black Box. If the project was more focused specifically on pandemic theatre, the smell of burning dust on a lighting grid that has been turned off for months would make total sense. There were bottles of hand sanitizer at both the check-in and PPE desks, however I would rather find the gel-based, slimy feeling type that was the only kind available during the height of the pandemic. The texture of that particular, smelly gel oozing onto my hands is one of the feelings that I’ll never forget from the summer of 2020.

An image burned in my mind is that of an audience member, a bright white column of personal protective equipment, alone in an empty theatre. Many theatres have been dark for over a year at this point, with limited audiences slowly returning. From community theatre performances with face shields, to cautious Broadway performances for audiences of vaccinated health-care workers, live theatre for live crowds may be possible again. In this moment, where gathering indoors in large numbers is the worst possible scenario... creativity, patience, and

extra measures are required to keep audiences and performers safe. This project has taught me to view limitations as opportunities, an outlook that I am sure will be useful throughout my career.

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APPENDIX: CREATIVE ARTIFACT

A.L.I.C.E.

A.L.I.C.E. Performance Recording

My Creative Artifact is a recording of the live performance that has been edited together, following the experience of those who attended and signed photo release forms as they entered the building. The video, titled, “A.L.I.C.E. (Creative Works LAUNCH Thesis Performance Recording)” is available in OAKTrust and on the YouTube channel Olivia Grace Creates. With a runtime similar to that of the live performance, the ten-minute long video follows one individual as they journey through the performance. Supplemental footage from other runs of the performance have been intercut in order to fill in specific gaps. The culmination of months of research into artistic movements and the work of Performance Studies scholars, “A.L.I.C.E.” mixes first and third person perspectives in order to most effectively translate the story of the live performance into video format.

Below are photos from my sketchbook, and of the performance set-up.

Sketchbook Photos

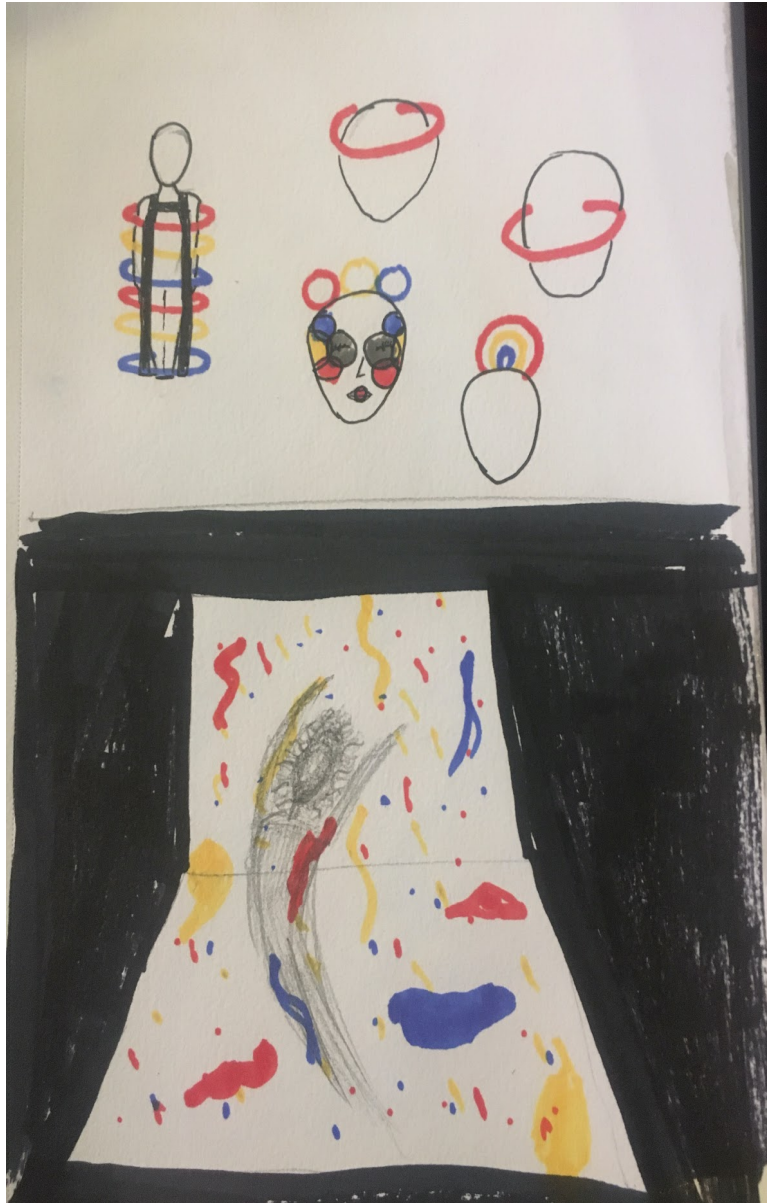


Figure A.1: A concept sketch of No (above) and Yes (below). While conceptualizing how these characters might look, it was helpful to doodle. The six-hoop dress No wears, and the visual of Yes dancing in paint were especially hard to verbally describe to my collaborators, a visual was required.

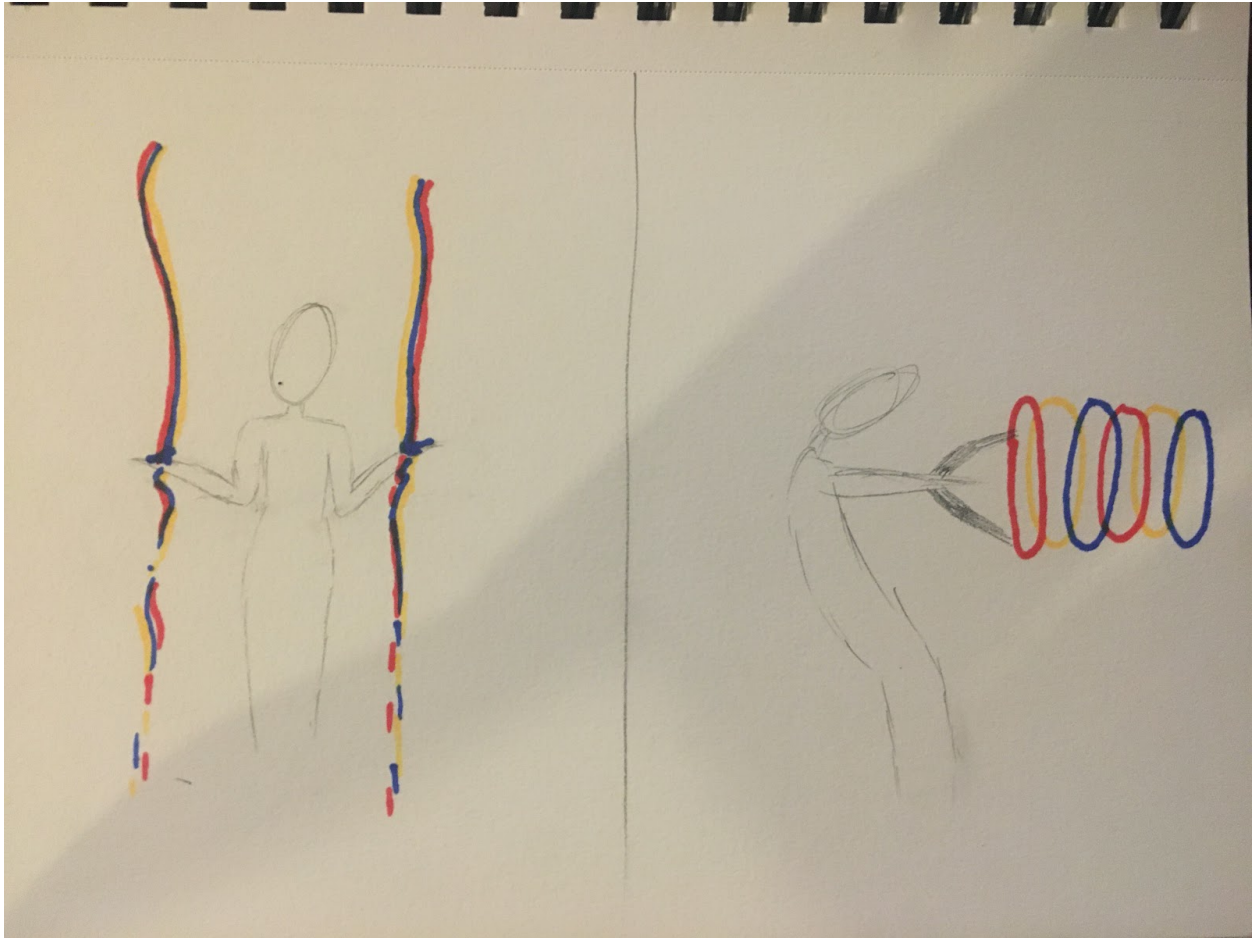


Figure A.2: A second concept sketch for Yes (right) and No (left). I was attempting to show the differences in energy flow between the two characters, which is only slightly easier to draw than it is to describe.

Performance Set-Up Photos



Figure A.3: The check-in table to enter the labs for A.L.I.C.E. performances.



Figure A.4: Photo of hallway leading up to the table (left), and close-up of the personal protective equipment set-up table for A.L.I.C.E. (right).



Figure A.5: The hallway set for A.L.I.C.E. performances.



Figure A.6: The Black Box with 'the works' (overhead florescent lights) on in-between A.L.I.C.E. performances.



Figure A.7: The exit for A.L.I.C.E. performances. A plastic shower curtain was cut into strips and secured to the doorframe with Velcro strips.

Detailed Scenic Pieces



Figure A.8: The modified television set.



Figures A.9: Close up photos of the hallway props for A.L.I.C.E. Communication and signaling devices have been connected, with the main cord running down the hallway towards the television set. Alarm clock, tape recorder, rotary phone on a wooden block (top left). CD player with headphones, light, and tape player on wooden block (top right). Camera, radio microphone on a wooden block (bottom left). Blender, antique radio, answering machine, and voltage tester stacked on wooden block, and microphone hanging down over the pile (bottom right).