

Ode to Alone

How can the studio space transition into a performance space, and what nuances in performing can I explore as I invite others into this aloneness?

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Artistic Intention

For about 15 years now, I have maintained a studio practice in improvisation to accompany my work as a soloist, choreographer, performer, dancer and visual artist. I go to the studio to dance, and my dancing is sourced in the present moment, with all the physical and imaginary materials at my disposal. It follows a long lineage of 'post-modern' dance paradigms that posit dancing not as a means of representation, but as a way for a subject to think through the body.

My time in the studio is heavily influenced by many years of mentorship and training with Australian dancer, Rosalind Crisp. Last May 2023, we saw each other again at her workshop in Malmö and when I asked her advice on how to cultivate more audience for solo dancing, she recommended to "just get people in the studio with you." I developed *Ode to Alone* as a way to follow and apply this advice.

My plan was to continue my usual solo practice; come to the studio, dance, write, observe, think, document, etc... with the additional factor of "getting people into the studio". Because my studio practice occurs during the day, while my children are at school, and because my community of dancers and artistic collaborators is international (based mainly in Brussels, Berlin, France, Australia and the United States), I assumed I would need to figure out how to share this studio time via 'remote working' platforms such as zoom. How can I maintain the practice, how can I document it, how can I share it? Those were the primary concerns going into the studio.

The Process

My goal was to come regularly to the studio and maintain a consistent solo practice that would enable me to not only deepen the dancing itself but also observe what conditions are necessary for it to occur in a consistently satisfying manner and for a live audience. I came to the studio from 9.00-16.00 (sometimes 18.00) everyday, and on Sundays for a condensed 2-hour practice that was mainly about connecting with live audiences abroad.

In addition to deepening my dance practice, I hoped to observe what conditions are necessary to nurture practice in and of itself. As a freelance artist and parent, it is difficult to find stability for self-initiated and autonomous projects. Usually they are crammed into the moments 'in-between' those projects that have more outward legitimacy—either because the latter earn income, contribute/adapt to the needs of the family, or are recognized by outside collaborators/institutions. There is little room for a truly long-term experimental, self-guided process.

So I learned to frame the practice not as something that begins when I start dancing, but as a cycle of events and transformations rooted in my daily life: the practice begins with leaving the house and walking or cycling to the studio. Sometimes I have to drop off children first, so I try to observe how the actions that precede my studio time influence my physicality. Arriving at the studio, I usually spend some time 'transitioning': organizing my thoughts, setting goals for the next hours or days, sitting at the computer to write, doing production work such as scheduling the upcoming 'zoom' meetings and sending out invites, reminding my network about the chances to view the work remotely or in-person, etc. My transition also involves making coffee in the kitchen (which inevitably involves emptying the dishwasher, cleaning counters, putting things away), saying hello to whoever is at Forsøgsstationen, cleaning the studio (sweeping, rearranging furniture, etc.), changing into 'dance' clothes.

Usually my days would break down into units of computer-work and movement-work. After sitting for an hour, I'd get up and start some very basic exercises meant to relieve some of my chronic back pain and prepare the body for movement. Sometimes this might involve an online yoga video or a guided class with my Brussels friend and mentor David Hernandez. Then I would spend about 1.5 hours dancing. These morning sessions usually alternated between moving, writing and thinking. I tried to create variation in how much time I dedicated to these activities, and notice how one might weave into the other. Then I'd have lunch.

Usually lunch involved getting some air. And so I noticed there was a second transition back into studio work in the afternoon. I work in silence most of the time, but after lunch I'd usually listen to some music, particularly songs that speak directly of loneliness or being alone, or else songs that convey a melancholic sense of being alone.

Every day I arranged for there to be 'audience' at 15.00 - either online or in person. My goal was to establish some kind of accountability for myself: knowing that I would have to share some part of this process, this dancing, this life, with someone at the end of each day meant setting up frameworks for understanding and 'presenting' what I do.

This moment with a live viewer is when the true experimentation begins.

I found myself facing a lot of questions. If my intention is to 'fold in the viewer' to what I'm already busy doing, then I have to ask myself:

How do I welcome the audience into this space and the singularity of my dance practice?

What do they need to know?

Do I introduce myself? How?

Do I talk about the practice? How?

Then, how do I continue the practice while taking into account this new factor of viewership?

How does sharing the practice affect its form?

What happens when the practice is over?

After every 'shared' moment, I took some time to talk with viewers if they felt like sharing, and then I would wrap up the day with writing, reflecting, stretching and 'closing up' the space.

Outcomes

One big, quasi-immediate change that occurred from having a longer amount of time in the studio and the prospect of consistent daily practice, was that I could write freely about the present moment without feeling like I was "wasting studio time". As a result, I began to 'journal' my experience rather than write from an analytical point of view. Writing became a reliable tool for transitioning from 'outside world' to the 'studio practice', it was a way of processing who I am coming into the studio and of leaving concrete traces so I could reflect on it later. My incessant journaling became an important pillar of my studio practice, and also a source for contextualising the practice for viewers.

On the first day, I discovered that one way to transition from being alone in the studio to welcoming online viewers was also to answer the questions above through action rather than talking. So instead of pre-planning an answer, I simply allowed the practice to be an opportunity for trying out an answer.

For instance:

How do I welcome the online audience into this space and the singularity of my dance practice?

Rather than appear in front of the camera and say hello, which prolongs a sense of 'social interaction' with all the baggage that elicits, I opted to share the space as I saw it: by using my phone's camera rather than my laptop's for zoom, I could be mobile in the space and 'introduce it' by simply filming it and slowly unveiling as much of the space as possible to my remote viewers. For the viewers, the moment begins as they collect in the zoom "waiting room". Everyone is then admitted simultaneously into a deep-red source of light (my finger covering the lens) and a melancholic song playing in the background. Just like going to a show at the cinema or the theatre, there is a gradual transition into shared image space by gently 'pulling back the curtain': I slowly take my finger off the camera lens to reveal a steady, slow panning motion to 'sweep' across the studio. To the rhythm of the music as it fades into the background, I walk through the space, showing tables and chairs, my laptop, the studio walls, the floor, the emptiness, the door overlooking the courtyard. I maintain a slow 360 degree-turning movement on my axis in a smooth, continuous gesture. I also show the ceiling and floors before gradually setting the camera down in a spot that offers the viewer a full view of the main 'dance space' – the empty studio. In silence, I take time to transition from being the 'cinematographer' to know appearing in the image space and beginning my dance.

Do I introduce myself?

Yes, but not verbally. I take time for my body to enter the image space. I take into consideration the time it takes a viewer to 'read' my body in the space, on/through their screens. I always add an extra 3 seconds to any change I make, allowing time. Time is the introduction.

Do I talk about the practice? How?

It occurred to me that rather than initiate a conversation, I could extend the poetic space of shared practice by simply folding the viewer into my writing process. At first I tried to read excerpts of my journal

as a kind of voice-over, the camera framing an empty space, my voice gently speaking into the microphone from the side. Later I adapted this into an interaction with the computer, by scrolling the text and enlarging it on my screen while filming, and adding lines or reading it aloud and then improvising a continuation of the text (unwritten). I also experimented with alternating between my own voice and the 'computer voice' by having the text be read aloud using "text-to-speech". I alternated between voices, voice-overs, existing text, improvised text, writing text, and the movement of my fingers as they manipulate the keyboard in order to alter the text. And always while simultaneously filming, so that I would also play with the camera angle, close-up or zoom-out, and even 'entering' the computer screen by pressing my phone right up against the light from my laptop so that the session ended on some abstract colours and pixels.

I opted to stay in this form for the duration of the research, in order to observe the transitions from zoom to studio, studio to writing, writing to camera, and practice to an end. It reflected what turned out to be my meta-research on how to transition from 'daily life' to 'studio practice' to 'showing/sharing'.

The main outcome was not only that consistent practice and daily hours in the studio greatly improved my relationship to dancing and live composition, but also it led me to consider formats for sharing that straddle both virtual and in-person audiences simultaneously. It never occurred to me that these two audiences could nurture one another in their viewing, as well as create a very subtle, unexpectedly charged place for me to perform and dance. I invented a process for 'answering questions through doing', which in turn led to some decisions I'd like to repeat and develop further: a 'videowalking' introduction for online audiences that also gives another reading and visibility of the space to people who are there in-person; a focus on the transitions from one mode of seeing to another; and concluding in a hybrid online/live exploration of text as spoken word and image.

Conclusion

The practice led me to formulate a personal artistic thesis: that the intimacy of my dancing and of my experience as a solo artist is framed best in a hybrid online/in-person viewing situation. The online component allows me to have an alternative 'space/time' to transition to and from, whereas the in-person viewership allows me to dance with full attention on live composition. The viewers in the room with me also have an added layer that brings nuance to the solo practice – they are invited to consider the experience of the online viewers, for whom everything is very cinematographically framed. This creates a kind of 'triangulation' of spaces: my space as a performer, the space of the audience in the room with me, and the virtual space of the online audience. But this also affords an alternative relationship for the viewer: not only is our experience a conversation between performer and spectator, it can also be one between spectators. More time with this practice will be necessary in order to confirm this hypothesis or to uncover and further develop alternative formats/strategies for sharing.

I promised myself that this research would not end with the residency and I've tried to sustain this momentum by continuing to come to the studio as regularly as possible. As a result, I've continued to share soloing online with Rosalind Crisp (Australia), and I've been invited now to perform in a curated online festival called BMSWGM (Brief Moments of Solidarity in a World Gone Mad) initiated by Andrew Morrish (Australia). I feel like there is still a lot to explore in 'live improvisation for in-person and online audience' so I'm going to pitch this work to the current Det Frie Felts call (for their 2025 edition).

I had my doubts about sharing my studio practice online but now I feel confident that it affords interesting opportunities to compose with meta-elements that go beyond my dancing, and so I hope to integrate some of the scores from this practice to other projects that are online due to circumstance (such as living far away from my collaborators). With my collaborator Claire Barrera in Portland, OR, USA, we plan to develop an online performance component to our ongoing project *and or with but on in to...* which uses children's book author and educator Gianni Rodari's "Fantastic Binomials" as a starting point for inventing new forms of danced storytelling. Many of the strategies I've explored in this residency will be useful as we build our Fantastic Binomial practice at a distance.

This residency has truly helped me embrace online practice as a form in its own right rather than seeing it as a less-adequate substitute or a "necessary evil". And it has emboldened me in my desire to share this solo dancing. Rosalind's advice is indeed sound advice: my priority at this stage in my career and practice will be on ensuring that there is always some component of sharing or witnessing in anything I do, so that my work can develop and flourish rather than feel stifled and hermetic. I will continue to find ways to fold in the audience – either by inviting from within my own network, or by initiating a platform for sharing between professionals and/or with an audience (for instance, a monthly "Studio Sunday" where performers can show work in a casual setting and the audience can enjoy brunch in-between performances, or curating online performances or 'round robins' with other improvisers). I hope to find partners for these endeavours in organisations like Forsøgsstationen.

