

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Jonathan Stein

Portal Into Our Times, and It's Live!

by Jonathan Stein

How and what live performance do you do in a pandemic? Approaching the storefront art gallery in South Philadelphia to see *portal perspective*, I was already inspired by the commitment of the performers to pull off a 2020 Fringe Festival performance before a live audience, a gutsy rarity of our pandemic times and this Festival. There are only seven such live shows among the 118 total being presented by FringeArts.

In an [Informance](#) earlier in the week, presented via Zoom by Philadelphia Dance Projects, director Megan Mazarick explained that she and her co-creator collaborators, Jess Conda and Danielle Currica, were looking to “find new methods for creating live performance during the pandemic and using the limitations to inform the work.” Perhaps Mazarick’s compelling [boundaries](#) work performed with Conda last February on the cusp of the pandemic was a subliminal precursor for this work. The rehearsal process for *portal* included improvising upon recorded or spoken text, taking the text away, and “dancing from the feeling inside.” By choosing the condensed space and frame of a store front’s glass facade, their work evokes Stephan Koplowitz’s [Fenestrations](#) (1987) by enhancing the power and two dimensionality of tightly enclosed performers.

The small masked audience stands on separated X’s chalked onto the sidewalk adjacent to the Wanderlife Gallery looking into a tripartite glass front. Les Rivera’s video projection onto a screen flat to the window introduces each of the performers. The video segment of Currica captivates our attention as her long limbs and torso, and close proximity to the window plane allow a close look into her breadth of nuanced movement, gestures and facial expressions; these presage conflict and contradiction especially when she closes with her live silhouetted form engaging her video image.

Currica’s solo evinces a theme of being pulled between alternative states of being and conflicted emotional states. We hear text of “more cases showing up in New York,” and anxious word of “postponed shows.” Currica transitions from undulating, sensuous movement to the free spirited, assertive lyrics of [Erykah Badu’s “Appletree.”](#)

which she lip-syncs, into more introspective and at times anguished, shuddering movement to the text of current events. Her final, slow descent to the floor to Badu's "down, down, down" is, in this setting, disturbing and poignant.

Conda brings an interlude of comic relief and interaction with the audience on the sidewalk that dissipates fourth walls, both the glass façade and that of social distancing. She begins with a cheery and obsessive spray cleaning and wiping of the front glass, bouncing rhythmically in athletic shorts to the task at hand. Obsessive cleaning of hands and surfaces is the "entertainment" we all share today. She directs the audience to join in a collective bird game of "Animal Go Home" and we hear a news report that "wild animals have noted our absence." Although separated, she commiserates, asking us through the glass in closing, "How do you feel?"

Mazarick's final section layers in the spoken words of her four year old daughter in conversation with her mother trying to explain the coronavirus and why people are wearing masks. One feels this weighs as heavily on the artist and mother as much as her dashed "hopes and dreams for 2020" dance creation. Mazarick brings her vigorous, accented physicality and staccato, angular gestures into her solos that seem like she is exorcising the virus while lip-syncing to [Britney Spears' "Work Bitch."](#) She finds, too, a quieter, more lyrical dance and closes to an elegiac interlude ([Forrest Swords' "Border Margin Barrier"](#)), which she suggests is where she is and where we can be too.

[portal perspective](#), Megan Mazarick, Wanderlife Gallery, 2020 Fringe Festival, Sept. 11-12.

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