**A LOUDER VOICE,**
**A FASTER CAR,**
**A FASTER PAINTING,**
**A MORE REAL PLAY.**


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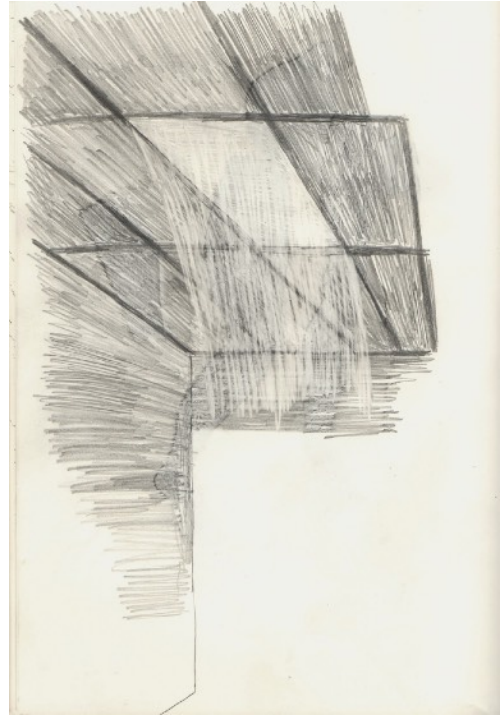

Emily Carr University Of Art + Design
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**"A radio is not a louder voice,
an airplane is not a faster car,
and the motion picture should not be
thought of as a faster painting or a more real play."**

Maya Deren, "Cinematography, The Creative Use of Reality" (1960)

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# PREFACE: SOME NOTES ON PLACE

This thesis was written on two coasts. Most of my time was spent in Vancouver on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh nations. I also spent a couple of months in the United States between Cambridge, which is Massachusett territory, and New York City, which is Lenni-Lenape territory. My words are grounded in my experiences of these urban centres and the time spent travelling between them.

I locate myself as a step in honouring Indigenous[1] stewardship of land, air, earth, and water. Issues related to territories and the people in them are also central to the cultural context in which I make work. I am writing in the midst of an "Indigenous

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[1] While documents like the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples are pan-Indigenous in their focus, I am referring specifically to First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples ("Indigenous" 7).

renaissance"[2], a moment when a growing number of settler institutions are highlighting Indigenous survivance[3] in the face of genocide. Simultaneously, campaigns like Idle No More, Decolonize This Place, The REDress Project and #ShutDownCanada mark ongoing colonial violence and resistance movements. Some crowds operate under the illusion of progress while others continue to face anti-Indigenous brutality. So acknowledging the land I live on holds a complexity—one that speaks to both recent history, and dynamics as old as the country that I call home.

I grew up in Ottawa, on unceded Algonquin territory. My heritage is German and British and I am white[4]. Despite my settler heritage, the specifics of my upbringing mean I cannot fall on the excuse of ignorance to justify complicity in the varied forms of violence embedded in my birth culture. My mother is an elementary school teacher and my father works for Indigenous Services Canada. Social justice issues were talked about at the dinner table, albeit through a settler lens. Newspapers were read. My formative high school years were spent as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission became a national conversation. Indigenous aesthetics[5] also thrive in the domain that I work in, commonly referred to as media arts. While Indigenous independent video and sound production is often overlooked, undervalued, and assimilated, it is essential in sustaining the spirit of artist-run media centres in this part of the world[6]. The

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[2] This claim of resurgence featured prominently in musician and composer Jeremy Dutcher's acceptance speech during the 2018 Polaris Prize. Dutcher's words reflect more the expanding mandates of settler institutions than any distinct shift in art-making. That being said, there has been a recent increase in Indigenous representation at venues such as the Venice Biennale, Venice Architecture Biennale, National Gallery of Canada, and awards like the Polaris Prize, Sobey Art Award, and Griffin Poetry Prize (Bethune).

[3] First applied in the field of Indigenous studies by Gerald Vizenor, 'survivance' is "an active sense of presence over historical absence, deracination and oblivion" (Vizenor 1).

[4] 'Whiteness' refers to both skin colour and, as Sonya Lindfors write, a "complex ideological field" that represents "the perception and ownership of certain values, like equality or democracy, and certain qualities, like civilization, education, intelligence and beauty, as 'western' and 'European' and white" (Lindfors 7).

[5] According to Steven Leuthold, 'Indigenous aesthetics' are "ideas about art held by Indigenous peoples…. that developed independently of the Western tradition in various parts of the world" (Leuthold 2). Victor Masayesva Jr. has since amended this definition by highlighting that these aesthetics are inter-cultural in nature and are defined and redefined through "accumulative experience" (Masayesva 169).

[6] In a text titled "Re:Wind", Dana Claxton highlights spaces like Video Inn, Western Front, Vtape, EM/Media, Saw Video, and Charles St. Video as being important venues for Indigenous media production. (Claxton 19).

methodologies carried out within my disciplinary community offer tools to address the impacts of living on stolen land and to imagine speculative futures.

The following 40 pages discuss artworks made on this land and the places I physically and conceptually inhabit through my practice. I spend most days in my studio, which has hosted hours of video, audio, and material exploration over the last two years. Other places include the white cube gallery, a miniature proscenium theatre, the false ceiling of a conference room, a block party on Massachusetts Avenue, and an abandoned mall that I have only experienced through videos on the internet. These places are physical locations *and* ideological vessels holding energy that propels me from one idea to the next.

In recognition of the land I write on and the expanded notion of place that guides me, I will use this preface to consider Indigenous epistemologies that function beyond notions of property and the act of settling. As artist and teacher David Garneau writes, occupational narratives "contradict traditional [Indigenous] practices of territory as negotiated—in both senses of the term: of negotiating boundaries through discussion and treaty; and in the personal, embodied sense of negotiating space, finding one's way through, over, or around" (Garneau). The idea of territory in flux is not meant to negate the very tangible effects of land-related issues. It is more to acknowledge that one's notions of self and space are also a constellation of elements that extend beyond physical borders. When a vocalist belts out "...our hOMeee and naaativve laAandd" at a basketball game, the land they are singing of is real but also a placeholder for all the intangible fragments that complicate national identity.

Garneau's sentiment might also help acknowledge that any fixed understanding of cultural citizenship is troubled when one considers the distributed presence that the internet allows for. As I will write about later, much of my work is born out of, and responds to, the geography of life online. To inhabit the 'web', the 'net', the 'information highway', or 'The Internet of Things' is to imagine oneself as part of a shifting composition of lines and points. Indigenous methodologies have preceded and can expand on this technoculture jargon, exemplifying, as artist Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew has stated, "a truly networked way of being" (191). Modes of existence built around

codependency and animism[7] can both dissolve the hierarchies between humans and technology and rework the perceived ephemerality of cyberspace. In a text addressing Indigenous storytellers working in digital media, Loretta Todd writes that "all relationships—mind and body, human and nature, hunter and prey—are interconnected and symbiotic" (Hopkins 343).  I read this and think about the rocks and minerals inside the servers, laptops, cameras, and recording equipment that my art-making relies on. My online activity has material consequences. My digital footprint is part of my physical footprint.

It is not my goal to adopt these ideas as my own or represent them as sole perspective of Indigenous thought. Many of the people I reference acknowledge that the practice of reducing issues to a singular voice feeds ongoing imperialist narratives. In building this document, I've also reckoned with the ways in which my research stays within a colonial framework due to its grounding in books, think-pieces, and journals. Academic writing, and maybe most institutional text for that matter, is governed by the rigidity of library classification systems, the discriminatory algorithms of search engines, and the gatekeeping of online mega-publishers.[8] It is with these considerations that I look to art as a place to interrogate and defy the forces that have shaped my creative DNA. As is the case with all projects undertaken to address the realities of living in a settler colonial state, this task remains unresolved.

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[7] Animism: The belief that all objects, and the universe itself, possess and are animated (given being) by souls (Maskegon-Iskwew 191). This brings to mind the current wave of 'smart' objects that have found their way into homes, cars, and offices.

[8] See Noble and Lessig for more writing on these issues.
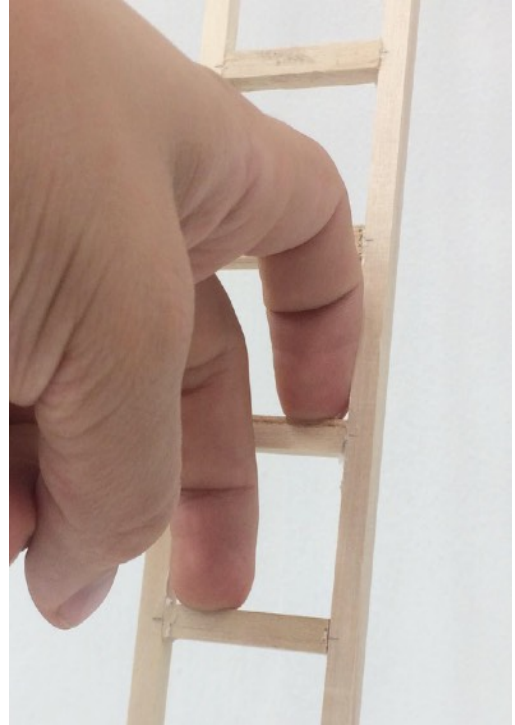
# INTRODUCTION

I work in video, performance, sculpture, and sound. A central focus of my practice is the live event. I use the language and tools of theatre, film, and music to work through the shifting definition of live performance[9]. What does it mean for something to be 'live'? What factors determine one's experience of liveness? And how does harnessing 'the live' set in motion questions related to technological mediation, history, geography, and identity?

Through essay and performance script, this thesis shares practical information about how my works function and the cultural phenomena that motivate me. The confluence of content and context is representative of a central development in my research. What started as a formal exploration of live audiovisual technologies has led to a broader interest in the political reality sustaining the media that I make and consume. I am pointing to the mechanics of the live event, both in terms of digital and analogue performance tools, and the structures of power that are implicated in these

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[9] I use 'performance' to refer to all live disciplines, however I mostly work in theatre and music.

formats. This means that addressing liveness in the arts also requires an exploration of the cultural climate that they are a part of. Liveness has become my framework for thinking about space, time, and my body in relation to the bodies of others.

Artworks are contextualized in this document through references to Arthur Jafa, Janet Cardiff, Érik Satie, Martine Syms, and a host of other creators whose work I am in dialogue with. Addressing liveness using disparate artistic touchstones is strategic, as the scope of my interest is, and has always been, interdisciplinary. I come from a family of musicians and educators. In my childhood, I was brought to plays, museums, festivals and other sorts of cultural entertainment afforded by a white middle class upbringing in the nation's capital. Consequently, my understanding of creative output is deeply connected to the rituals of the concert hall, the theatre, the gallery, and the school. Each has particular codes (e.g. how one moves through an exhibition, how to behave in music lessons, the etiquette of being an audience member etc…). These experiences reinforced the weird specificities of liveness within each discipline and at the same time planted the idea that moving between venues of art-making was possible.

To help connect areas of interest later in the text, I will write briefly about vocabulary. Concepts like 'interdisciplinarity' are limiting, as they were invented by the academy to solve a problem that mostly burdens the global West. As mentioned above, my birth culture is structured around compartmentalization. This is radically different than the practices of many non-Western cultures that recognize and encourage the inherent interrelation of lifeforms.[10] Consequently, I gravitate towards terminology that is multimodal, has varied meanings, and is conducive to thinking through topics like the expanded notion of place articulated in my preface.

This thesis uses the word 'liveness' to answer this need. However, I will begin by framing an exploration of the live through my practice of 'dramaturgy'. 'Dramaturgy' is a

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[10] For settlers like myself, the writings of philosophers Leeroy Little Bear and Ryan Heavy Head are eye-opening in understanding the limits of European languages and the capacity of polysynthetic Indigenous dialects to acknowledge shifting states of being. See Little Bear and Heavy Head.

nebulous term used in theatre that shifts meaning depending on context.[11] Central to all definitions is an attention to relationality and reflexivity. Theatre scholar Cathy Turner characterizes dramaturgy as "being about making connections, moving between elements, [and] 'forming organic wholes which are continually in process" (Turner x). Highlighting the importance of audience and context, she writes that dramaturgy, "entails a discussion of composition in terms of process and event, rather than the self-contained and singular artwork" (Turner x). Pulling from this interpretation, it is through dramaturgy that I understand art as critical practice.[12] Dramaturgy is both physical and cerebral, a play between being, making, and examination.

The following three chapters define liveness through dramaturgical processes. 'Dramaturgy' is not always addressed explicitly, but rather resurfaces through equal attention to the form, content and context of artworks. I will start by thinking through liveness in performance and then narrow in on specific definitions related to music. I will also clarify some of my conceptions of the world, my personal history, and what I actually spend all my time doing. This will lay the groundwork for a final chapter that speculates on the parameters of liveness in public space and describes the thinking behind my most recent performances.

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[11] 'Dramaturgy' is a noun that refers to theatrical form, (e.g. "the dramaturgy of a scene"), and process (e.g. to *do* dramaturgy is to analyze structural elements like plot and narrative tone, research a play's historical context, and sometimes oversee the cohesion of practical elements that haven't been fleshed-out in stage directions) (Turner 3). Dramaturgy' has also been adopted by the humanities, where sociologists like Erving Goffman employ theatrical terminology to describe the act of producing the self (see Goffman preface).

[12] This sentiment aligns my practice with the idea of "critical interdisciplinarity" put forward by postmodern theorists, which was meant to challenge the patriarchal, hegemonic trappings of earlier modes of cross-disciplinary art-making and organization. William Condee writes, "while holistic interdisciplinarity in the twentieth century often searched for universal patterns uniting works of art across time, space, and culture, or found value in "comparing" works of art across disciplines, critical interdisciplinarity seeks to intervene, disrupt, and deconstruct" (21). In my own work, I find myself moving between these two modes of interdisciplinary thinking.

# LIVENESS AND CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE

The following section shares how my work *Live Table* (2018) explores what I understand as the defining features of live performance. This interest in liveness stems from two cultural shifts that have emerged in parallel to my own art education. The first is the influx of performance in art galleries, and the second is the introduction of pivotal audiovisual technologies in the Western world. These two histories are intertwined and it is in their overlap that a fixed definition of liveness is troubled.

**Live Table**

In *Live Table*, I perform at a wooden desk that has been outfitted with a video camera, projector, microphone, amplifier and lighting system. By changing the conditions of each device, I create small vignettes as if the workspace were a stage. Simple narratives and illusions are constructed using my hands, a glass of water, an

egg, a tape measure, and a roll of paper. I have also introduced a number of elements such as a curtain and ladder to further define the table as a space of theatre[13], complete with front and backstage.

Live Table is informed by three solo performances featuring male hands. The first is a sequence in Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* (1925) where he performs a dance routine with two bread rolls. The choreographies of vaudeville, clown, and boxing are reproduced on a tabletop. I also look to Pina Bausch's *Nelken* (1982), in which a dancer gesticulates the lyrics to a song by Gershwin in sign language. Lastly, I find inspiration in Alexander Calder's manipulation of miniature wire figures in his work *Circus* (1926-1931). In playing the role of performer and technician, Calder's hands are as prominent as the puppets he animates.







Live Table is a product of studying the ways in which these artists tell stories with limited means. Even more so, I am interested in how their theatrical choreographies are in dialogue with the gaze of the camera. *Live Table* has become a way to explore technological mediation of the live event. Over the course of 20 minutes, short scenes play out while audience members surround the table at all sides. Everything that happens on the table is filmed and relayed to a projector in real time. The cinematic space of the projection and the theatrical apparatus[14] of the stage frame each other. It is

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[13] Theatre is a technology. The origin of the word comes from the Greek word 'theatron', which translates as 'the place of seeing'. Christopher Salter writes that the theatre is "both a physical and perceptual space ordered by technology: an architectural zone where the spectator [sits] to watch the drama unfold, and a perceptual one that [mediates] the visual and acoustic relationship between the worlds of stage and audience" (Salter xxii).

[14] An 'apparatus' is what Giorgio Agamben defines as "anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings" (14).

in this dynamic that *Live Table* attempts to distill a collapse between event and document.[15] To perform *Live Table* means restaging the ways in which video and audio can permeate one's experience of the 'live'.
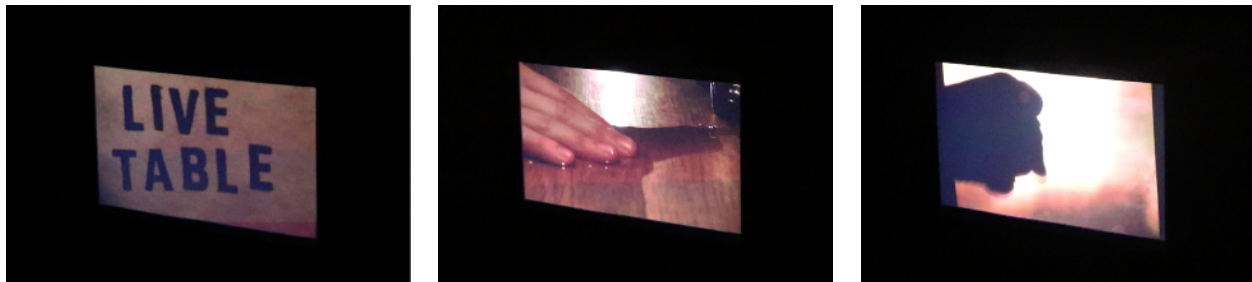


## Performance in Physical and Digital Space

Many of the museums I visit are currently faced with the task of archiving and displaying performance ephemera. The discipline is now part of the canon. This has brought forward a paradox: a medium that is supposedly contingent on its transience now lives on through the material it leaves behind (Goldberg 227).[16] Not only this, but the contemporary landscape of theatre, music, and dance is made up of forms that respond precisely to their documentation and dissemination. Questions open up about the cardinal understandings of the genre. Does performance always happen in 'real time'? Does performance require the co-presence of spectator and performer? Can the essence, or the liveness, of performance be held in objects rather than people? As I move my hands around the *Live Table*, these questions are performed through a rotating combination of objects, actions, and technologies.

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[15] Performance scholar Philip Auslander writes that 'the event' "is staged primarily for an immediately present audience", whereas the 'document' "is a secondary, supplementary record of an event that has its own prior integrity" (4). Auslander notes that these definitions are complicated by artists such as Cindy Sherman, where events are "staged solely to be photographed or filmed and had no meaningful prior existence as autonomous events presented to audiences" (5).

[16] Impermanence has long been a supposed facet of performance and live events. As performance scholar Peggy Phelan writes in 1993, "performance's only life is in the present. Performance's being … becomes itself through disappearance," (146). Taking this thought further, Paul Schimmel writes in a 1998 catalogue essay that performance is marked by an "underlying darkness" that represents a Freudian death drive (14). By depicting performance as a medium of loss, it is continuously situated as anti-history, anti-memory, and anti-archive (Folkerts). It happens, and then it is gone.

The expanding curatorial scope of galleries has also emerged in tandem with rapid technological change. Portable electronics and audiovisual platforms have undoubtedly influenced my consumption habits.[17] Youtube was introduced when I was 10; The iPhone, when I was 12; Instagram, when I was 15. The ubiquity of phones and cameras mean that one's ability to record, scrub through, and play back life is not only a given, but an embodied sensibility that is carried around.[18] Under the facets of supermodernity[19], anything can be shared, and anything can be social. Individual experience is augmented with a rapid stream of images, sound, and text from other

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[17] I often find myself wanting to fast forward or pause a performance like a movie.  Many times I like the documentation of a performance more than the work itself.

[18] A word that could be useful here is 'convergence'. Anne Frieberg writes that 'convergence' "has become a literal description of the codependency of the movie screen, tv screen, and computer screen...Cinema now merely forms an ordinary visual system for a complexly diverse set of "postcinematic" visualities" (Friedberg 6). 'Convergence' helps in thinking about how life is now read through the lens of the screen, whether audio visual technologies are used or not.

[19] Also referred to as late or high modernity, postmodernity, or advanced or late capitalism, supermodernity is defined by three 'figures of excess': 'An excess of simultaneous events', 'excess space', and 'excess individualism' (Augé 177).

times and places. 24-hour connectivity creates a feeling of hyper-proximity to others and, at the same time, offers distance to observe life as it flies by (Merriman 148). Supermodern subjects have no choice but to assume the role of both spectator and actor (Merriman 148). To be both in and outside of a performance makes everyday life a practice of dramaturgy.

Performance in the gallery only accentuates this reality. In opposition to the black box theatre, the white cube is what writer Claire Bishop has deemed a 'grey zone'. Galleries are "a [performance] apparatus in which behavioural conventions are not yet established and up for negotiation" (Bishop 36). The only certainty, Bishop writes, is "the extent to which photography and social media are unavoidable" (36). In this sense, liveness in the gallery is now determined by physical space, and also by the social space that exists between phones, cameras, and the internet.[20]

**Mediated Liveness**

Curiously, technological change has not fundamentally altered what resonates with people about live performance. It is telling that concerts are one of the only ways musicians can still make a living in an era that pushes streaming (Biagi 92). Recent reports from both the Canada Council for the Arts and the United States National Endowment for the Arts highlight the popularity of performance in person and online ("Arts" and Sutton). In Canada, the majority of those who watch live streamed or pre-recorded events say that this does not change their attendance habits, with a remainder reporting that it increases their in-person attendance instead of reducing it ("Arts"). Although the current mediascape privileges temporal co-presence, which broadcasting and the internet can produce, spatial co-presence (attending an event in-person) is still valued by multiple publics. These reports also remind one that in-person spectatorship has not been undermined by the influx of digital media, only changed. Attention is not diluted, but rather diffused across various physical and digital planes.

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[20] Theorists like Nick Couldry have used liveness to explain community formations in cyberspace. Couldry writes about 'online liveness' being "social co-presence on a variety of scales, from very small groups in chatrooms to huge international audiences for breaking news on major websites, all made possible by the internet as an underlying infrastructure" (Couldry 4). There is also 'group liveness', or "the liveness of a mobile group of friends who are in continuous contact via their mobile phones through calls and texting" (Couldry 5).

Changing technologies and gallery mandates require a malleable, holistic understanding of what constitutes liveness. As Philip Auslander has stated, liveness is "a historically contingent concept that is continuously redefined in relation to the possibilities offered by emerging technologies of reproduction" (Auslander). That being said, these emerging technologies are in a constant state of flux as well. Artist and curator Wanda Nanibush writes that "technology is not a thing but a *potentiality* activated by what it is in relation to, such as the body of the artist or a spirit derived from a specific context and location" (emphasis added, Nanibush). While *Live Table* harnesses the same audiovisual tools as 50 years ago,[21] what has changed is their omnipresence. The widespread use of live video in surveillance, communications,



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[21] Use of live video in artworks has historical precedent. As early as 1943, American theatre designer Robert Edmond Jones speculated that "the drama of the future will deal, not with objective experience or subjective experience, but with both varieties of experience at the same time, expressing our essential duality in a new theatrical idiom, involving the simultaneous use of the stage and the screen" (Jones 43). Jones' vision was concretized when a wave of American artists like Joan Jonas and Nam June Paik got their hands on consumer-grade video recorders like Sony's Portapac (Goldberg 29). This laid the groundwork for new generations of contemporary performance-makers, some of whom now use live video under the genre title of 'Motion Theatre', or 'Live Cinema Performance'.

entertainment, sporting events, advertising, medical imaging, safety, and religious ceremony means that I expect an innate understanding of these forms of media baked into the psyche of my audience.[22] Aside from live video, viewers might also feel an affinity towards other media production gear that is used in *Live Table*. The microphone could refer to the setups in the world of podcasting and radio. The small halogen lights are sourced from video-editing stations. The projection is about the size of a laptop or computer monitor. Devices are placed in proximity to further demonstrate how technology, and by extension liveness, is constructed through context.

In other words, technology and liveness are relational. And live performance is not only informed by emerging technology, but technology is enacted through performance. In summarizing Félix Guattari's definition of 'the machine', Christopher Salter imagines "a bundle of heterogeneous forces perpetually criss-crossing and transforming each other in a constant state of becoming" (Salter xxxiii). Returning to the language of theatre, there is a parallel between his phrasing and Cathy Turner's understanding of dramaturgy. As previously quoted, she writes of "organic wholes which are continually in process" (Turner x). If Salter imagines technology in a "constant state of becoming", then it emerges through an exercise not unlike that of theatre.

Seeing technologies as performative then complicates their depiction as threats, solutions, or markers of progress. Instead, one could understand technology as what Andrew Ross deems "a fully cultural process soaked through with social meaning" (A Ross 3). All audiovisual devices can embody the aforementioned contradiction at the heart of supermodernity. On one hand, they connect people, and on the other, they bring about incredible social stratification and loneliness. Perhaps it is this contradiction from which liveness emerges. Contemporary performance is ruled by a desire for proximity (Auslander). The absorption of performing arts by the white cube and the integration of video and audio in performance are attempts to lessen the distance between people. Roselee Goldberg proposes that increased performance programming in the gallery caters to the appetite of patrons wanting visceral engagement with art *and* with artists (249). Josephine Machon attributes the popularity of immersive

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[22] While the level of digital literacy in one's audience can never be assumed, I still feel that a majority of viewers experience *my* work having already come in contact with live video technologies.

performance, participatory art, and theatres of the real[23] to an influx of people looking for "conviviality and congregation" (23). Jenn Stephenson adds that this demand is driven by a thirst for realness, authenticity, and truth (17).[24] One could also attribute the use of a jumbotron or backstage camera to a similar need for unfettered access. Yet, the task remains unfulfilled, for in the binary of 'performance initiator' and 'performance spectator' lies the impossibility of closeness (Auslander, Stephenson 17). It is this disparity, this promise of intimacy and its failure, that maintains the power of liveness and a desire for live performance.

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[23] Carol Martin uses 'Theatres of the Real' as a catch-all term to address "documentary theatre, verbatim theatre, reality-based theatre, theatre-of-fact, theatre of witness, tribunal theatre, nonfiction theatre, restored village performances, war and battle reenactments, and autobiographical theatre" (5). While theatre of the real does not have a set definition, all of these forms "claim specific relationships with events in the real world" (5).

[24] In her book *Insecurity: Perils and Products of Theatres of the Real* (2019), Stephenson poses that the trends surrounding "organic", "grassroots", and "clean" food, as well branding by the New York Times and Washington Post highlighting aggressive fact-checking, are evidence of a public desire for authenticity. These trends along with contemporary theatre movements turn 'realness' into a commodity.

# SONIC LIVENESS

When watching a concert, one of the biggest draws is experiencing the anomalies that arise out of music being performed live. A guitarist might go out of tune, a violinist might fall out of sync, or a singer might put the national anthem through vocal gymnastics. It is these irregularities in rhythm and melody that give liveness another dimension. Liveness exists in the space between spectator and performer, and also in the distance between notes or beats. Jazz musicians might call it 'swing' or 'suspended time', funk musicians might call it 'groove', and classical musicians could refer to it as 'tempo rubato', or 'stolen time'. It can be intentional[25] and/or caused by technical restraints.[26] Nevertheless, all of these words account for the ways in which 'real time' (meaning lived time, body time and analogue time) stray from the confines of digital time (the time of clocks, machines, and the grid) (Krukowski 5).

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[25]It has long been a tactic of artists within Black musical traditions to "worry the note" to challenge the fixity of European notation (Dean).

[26] An engineer could also attribute sound imperfections to the latency of amplifiers or recording equipment.

This 'sonic liveness' has offered me endless inspiration and invaluable mental grounding[27]. I grew up in a family that values music. I learned folk songs and carols passed down via vocal tradition and I was in music lessons for most of my childhood. I was exposed to the classical music rituals of my German relatives and the singsong-y limericks that only my British family understand and like. Funk and rap also entered my life, bringing with them an entirely different relational sensibility. Rappers, producers, and DJs scramble the linearity of time, perform the old anew, and treat history as a product of the present. The sound and styles of Black America were absorbed by me and my white friends, a fraught reality that is explored using my performance titled *Tourist* (2019) in the final section of this thesis.

Most importantly, the more I was exposed to different sounds, the more it became clear that positing sonic liveness as only existing in 'real time' did not account for all the levels of mediation that make up contemporary music. For instance, liveness also emerges from events that combine the immediacy of listening to music 'in the flesh' with perfect pitch and quantized rhythm made possible by digital technologies. To experience Autotune, DJing, lip-syncing, or a performance that "sounds like the album", is to hear and feel the complexities of sonic liveness at work. This section locates some mediated forms of sonic liveness in a mosaic of visual, spatial, and technological formats that have accompanied my experiences of sound.

**The Hawthorne Plaza**

In 2018, I created a Youtube playlist featuring two music videos.[28] I noticed that Taylor Swift's song *...Are You Ready for It?* and a trailer for Travis Scott's album *ASTROWORLD* featured the same abandoned mall. Over the next few months, I
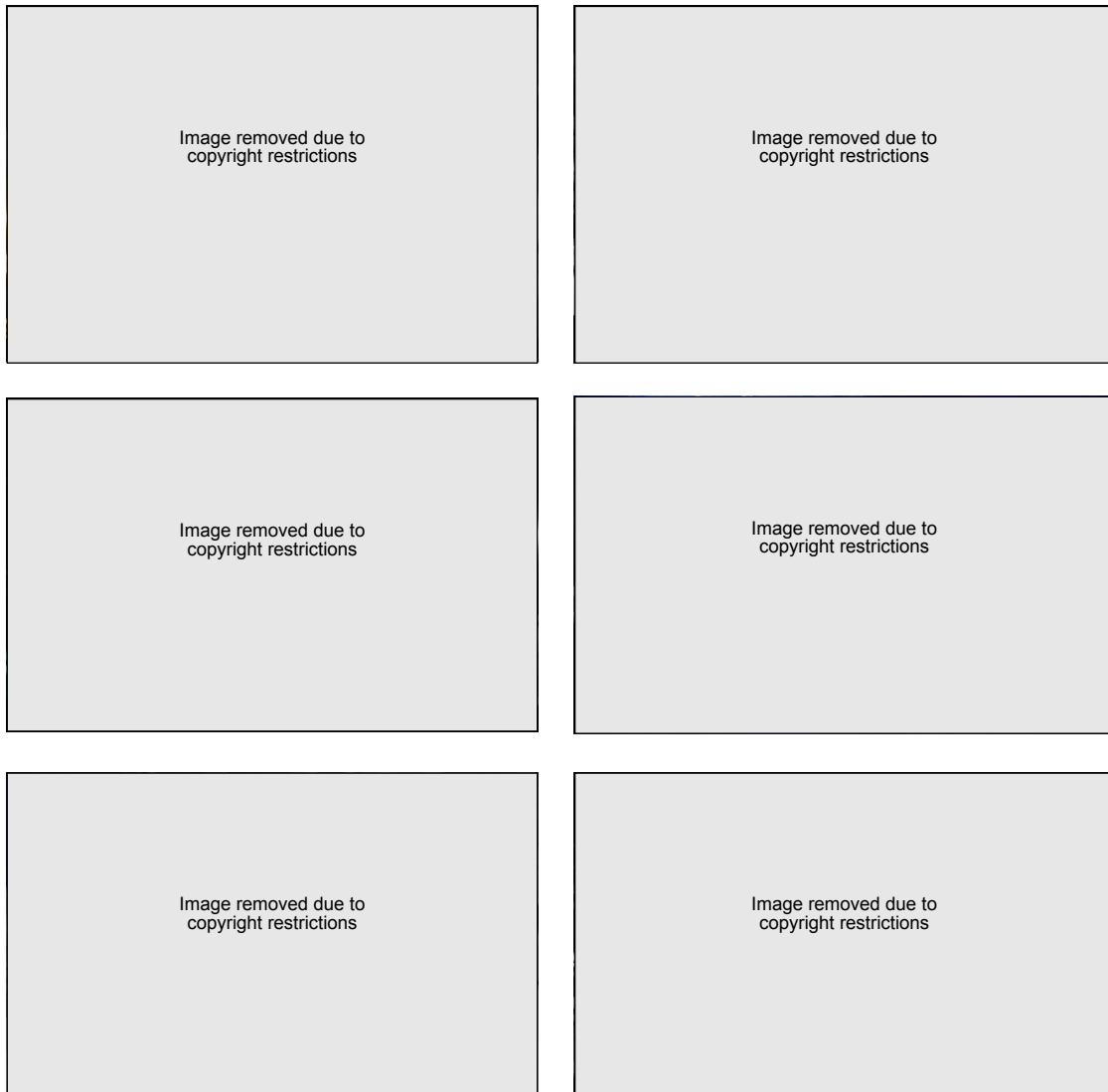
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[27] I won't dwell on this too much, except by quoting music critic Jessical Hopper, who writes, "Sometimes, usually early in the part of the morning that is still night time, mostly especially lately, I am painfully aware of every single thing that I need from music, embarrassed by what I ask of it...I have an appetite for deliverance, and am not really interested in trying to figure out whether it qualifies me as lucky or pathetic" (11).

[28] This process is representative of my everyday practice of organizing found media. My 'groupings' can exist in Google docs, Youtube playlists, notes on my phone and desktop, sketchbooks, and scrapbooks. While I'm not always sure why I take interest in the things I group, eventually patterns emerge over time. I use 'groupings' as opposed to collecting because collecting implies ownership and maintenance, which is not really my interest. Grouping is not archival either, in the sense that I might bookmark a Youtube video and a year later it will be taken down.

stumbled upon more videos shot in the same location. With the help of message boards and keyword searches, my list grew.

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Eventually I learned that the subject of my fascination was The Hawthorne Plaza. The Plaza is a decommissioned mall in Hawthorne, California, half an hour outside of Los Angeles in Tongva/Chumash territory. First symbolizing suburban prosperity and now economic downturn, it is currently available to rent out for staging post-apocalyptic video sequences. In learning about its second life as a set, I became interested in the discrepancy between the hyper-aestheticized worlds of the music videos and the blunt

reality of a mall that now profits off of its decay. This led me to turn my playlist into a multi-channel video projection.
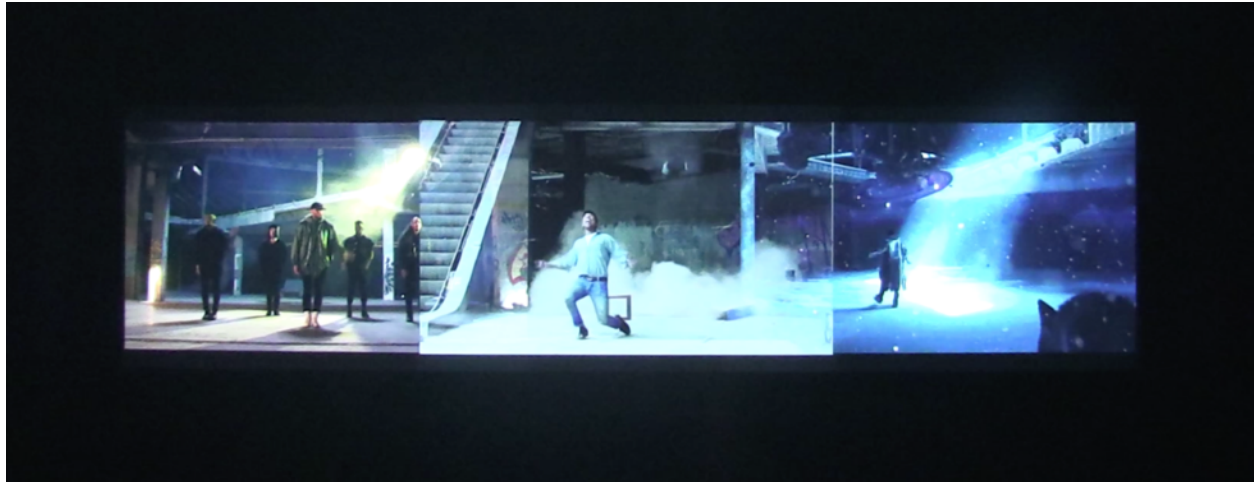


My work *The Hawthorne Plaza* (2019) presents seven popular music videos in a looping, fragmented, panorama. Using three projectors, the architecture of the shopping mall is reconstructed through its mediated image. A soundtrack of audio samples plays from speakers mounted in the ceiling to reference the sourceless muzak that would have been pumped through The Plaza in its earlier days. To use the terminology of artists Arthur Jafa and John Akomfrah, I place music videos in "affective proximity" (Da Costa). They bleed into one another, calling attention to the common infrastructure between them. These videos emerge from the same industry and location, but also the same cultural framework. Musicians in *The Hawthorne Plaza* offer a bleak, pessimistic vision of life. In the timespace of an empty mall, America is a shell. Lone figures wander through endless combinations of blue and grey interior space, meditating on the failures of capitalism, technology, and youth.

It is in highlighting common aesthetic tropes in these videos that made me understand their political implications.[29] I see this relational gesture functioning as what Laura Marks calls "a materialist understanding of virtual media" (178). Marks writes that

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[29] Tom McDonough writes , "politics, we could say, do not reside in the individual clippings or photographs themselves but in the spaces joining and separating them" (Tillmans 14). In this sense, politics are relational and exist in any grouping, whether that be a group of images (like a collage), a group of videos (like a montage), a group of sounds (like a piece of music), or a group of people (like an audience).

materialism "can simply remind us to perform an economic analysis of who profits and who suffers in the production and exploitation of online space" (178). Placing videos in physical proximity might lead to discussions about the economic forces that have shaped the mall's trajectory. One might also think about the commodification of ruin, or the suggestion that all of these musicians together are a visual manifestation of the data centres that house content for Spotify and Apple Music. These ideas are for another paper and I will not dive into them. For now, I will stress a sentiment already articulated in the preface of this thesis: The digital is rooted in the physical. These "intangible" music videos share the common history of an abandoned shopping centre that sits on the Western coast of the United States.



## Furniture Music

Making *The Hawthorne Plaza* marked a moment in my practice where found media, installation and music converged in ways that they had never before.  I felt as if I was building a documentary of sorts, an installation that aspired to be an essay.

Reading and writing became a larger part of my process and I spent many hours in my studio pouring over books.

In reading about the treatment of sound in shopping centres, I came across writing on the French musician Erik Satie, who published ambient compositions under the title 'furniture music' during the early 1900's. Satie's terminology became a guiding force in the months that followed. Studio exploration revolved around the varied ways in which sound is embedded in objects and spaces. I wrote melodies with a 30-note music box. I removed the acoustic tiles from the ceiling of a conference room. I compiled a playlist featuring 150 covers of Joni Mitchell's song *Big Yellow Taxi* (1970). The iconic lyrics *"They paved paradise and put up a parking lot"* are forever etched in my mind.

Thinking through music brought forward another definition of liveness, one that referred to reverberation (Long 931).[30] I was reminded of my longstanding appreciation for Janet Cardiff's *The 40-Part Motet* (2001), an artwork that immerses listeners with a multichannel recording of Thomas Tallis' *Spem in Alium.*[31] In addition to the simple



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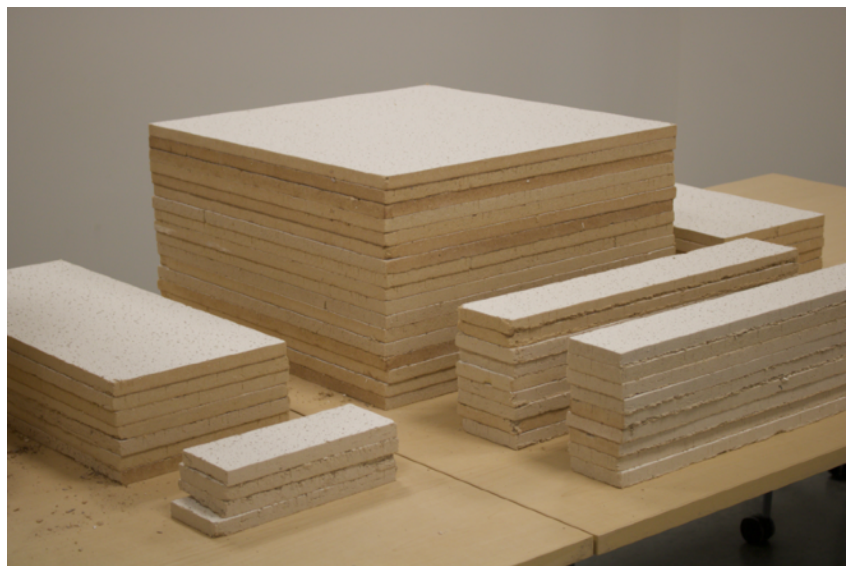
[30] Acoustic liveness is quantifiable in decibels (dBs) and calculable through formulas like the Sabine Equation (See Elwyn and Middleton 40). All spaces, from shopping centres to concert halls, are defined by different levels of sound decay.

[31] A permanent install of *The 40-Part Motet* in the Rideau Chapel of the National Gallery of Canada means that I often revisit it during trips to Ottawa. It is the artwork that I have spent the most time with.

beauty of 40 speakers each representing a body, the work demonstrates Cardiff's acute understanding of site and reverb. When speaking of her process, she has said that *Spem in Alium* felt "dead in two speakers" and "[needed] to be alive" (Cardiff and Miller). In this statement, there are two provocations. First, that Cardiff made the work 'alive' by using a method that is painted as the antithesis of liveness—recording it in 40 parts. And second, there is the implication that in order to activate the music as it was originally intended to be heard, it had to be spatialized. Cardiff's situating of sound also means hiring a tonmeister to mix the work to the acoustic specifications of each venue it shows in (Cardiff). In development and display, maintaining the liveness of *Spem in Alium* involves engineering the interplay between sound and environment through technological mediation.

Alongside reverberation, there is the relationship between sound and social context. In a conversation with Jennifer Higgie titled "Life in Sound", artist Oliver Beer suggests that "one [cannot] build a space without building a musical note" (Higgie 27). I quote this to address both the inevitability of reverb and the particular sonic cultures that emerge with different environments. As Dahlia Borsche writes, "the site-specificity of music rests in part on actual geographic circumstance" (Borsche).[32] For example, to locate hip hop as emerging from 1970's New York City (Rose 25)[33] or UK punk flourishing in the neighbourhoods of working class Britain (Moore 310) acknowledges how musical movements are imbued with the places that nurture them and vice versa.[34]

As Janet Cardiff makes audible, however, the process of situating sound in the presence of audio and visual mediation is not clear cut. The physicality of music might be contested due to the fact that anyone with a laptop and music software can artificially construct their location using filters and effects. But despite this, it is still materially

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[32] Borsche offers the example of an alpine horn, an instrument whose size and shape is designed for mountainous environments (Borsche).

[33] Early hip hop is often thought to have been partially born out of racist urban development practice included the mass razing and relocation of black and brown communities in the South Bronx for an expressway (Rose 25). For these reasons, architect Michael Ford has deemed hip hop "modernism's post-occupancy report" (Ford).

[34] I think of the words of architect Neelkanth Chhaya, who proposes the built environment as a "process of life" (121) consisting of negotiations "between disparate vitalities" (120). I have attempted to highlight examples of this negotiation throughout this thesis by addressing the notion of territory in flux via the words of David Garneau, the evolving performance etiquette of the white cube articulated by Clair Bishop (Bishop 36), and how the Hawthorne Plaza is continuously reimagined in popular music videos.

located, for digital sound processing feeds into a larger project of controlling the noise brought about by industrialization and urbanity (Thompson).[35] The acoustics of digital space are therefore responding to the acoustics of physical space. As I listen to the canned reverb on Travis Scott's vocals as he floats through The Hawthorne Plaza, the contradiction of sound emerging from and erasing its context feeds my curiosity. Sonic liveness, like liveness in the theatre, is a moving target. To understand its changing definitions means shifting one's focus from sound to soundscape.[36]

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[35] Further steps to control noise in the early part of the 20th century included the adoption of sound-absorbing building materials, like ceiling tiles, and the creation of music venues that privileged amplified sound, like Radio City Music Hall (Thompson 3).

[36] As defined by Emily Thompson, 'sounds' are "the waves of acoustical energy permeating the atmosphere in which people live". 'Soundscapes', on the other hand, are "the material objects that create, and sometimes destroy, those sounds," the "cultural aspects [that] incorporate scientific ways of listening [and] a listener's relationship to their environment," and "the social circumstances that dictate who gets to hear what" (3).

# CURRENT WORK
# (SEPTEMBER 2019- PRESENT)

In building *Live Table*, *The Hawthorne Plaza*, and test works under the title 'furniture music', I have come to understand liveness as an active and relational phenomenon that emerges out of the space between elements. After touching on audience/performer dynamics, notes and beats, reverberation, and events in the gallery and online, the final chapter of this thesis revisits liveness in relation to my body. Whereas my earlier works considered technological mediation and spatial co-presence on a grand scale, I now attempt to root these issues in the personal.

This section addresses two works combining the presence of my own body and video installation. *Tourist* (2019) makes use of individual and collective history, found media, and music to build a fragmented narrative exploring race and public space. Finally, my work *Reprise: A Solo Performance in Stereo-Video (*2020), sets family archives in motion using dual-channel projection. To foreground my own subjectivity through these works has been a way to acknowledge that a concrete definition of liveness has never been fully realized, nor could it ever be comprehensive. None of my projects are about proposing 'new' forms of liveness as much as they are about acknowledging the plethora of experiences within 'the live' that can exist.

**Tourist**

*Tourist* (2019) takes the form of a lecture. Sitting at a small table equipped with a microphone, projector, and computer, I share my memory of a community dance party in Cambridge, Massachusetts. A live feed of my desktop is projected on the wall in front of me and my voice is amplified through speakers. Using my desktop as a stage, I present video clips, websites, maps, and music playlists to illustrate the lecture. For more information on the narrative arc and structure of *Tourist*, refer to the annotated script and video that can be found in the appendix of this thesis.

I started this project to speculate on the reasons why I felt unbridled joy while dancing at the party. Firstly, I know this joy was connected to the liveness that emerges

from the controlled chaos of thousands of people moving in the street. As previously mentioned, liveness is fed by the allure of congregation and community. But more than that, I have decided that my feelings were informed by all the visual and sonic reference points of my upbringing. In my exposition, I state that "this event was a vision of diversity that I was raised to aspire to. [It] felt like a Coke ad, a charity Christmas card, an urban planner's post-racial pipe dream, a weird, happy bubble." As I speak, I pull up clips from film and advertising showcasing multiracial crowds dancing in public space.[37] The 'melting pot' ideology engrained in my birth culture is made evident in text and visuals.



Tourist ends up revisiting one of the core provocations of this thesis—the ways in which audiovisual technology mediate experiences of the live. Furthermore, it attempts

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[37] This includes footage from Step Up 2, Mazda and Baby Bell ads, and LMFAO's music video for their song Party Rock Anthem.

to link liveness to the maintenance of a white imaginary[38] that commodifies the cultures of marginalized groups while rendering these communities invisible, tokenized, or as spectacle. In the clips I pull up on my desktop, breakdance is appropriated as a cool way to activate urban space. However, when it is used, it is often whitewashed or distanced from its roots in Black radical tradition. Instead, breakdance is made to tell stories of tolerance and cross-cultural understanding. These liberal depictions of progress strategically ignore the ways in which racialized communities that birthed hip hop are overlooked, disenfranchised, surveilled, and policed. Liveness is depicted through the creative force of black art and culture while propping up whiteness as the dominant mode of being around which all else is centered.



At the same time, *Tourist* is a lecture about pleasure and about contending with one's positionality. The performance locates my joy in both the celebration and subjugation of Black life. I maintain that this is the violent truth many white people who

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[38] Ian Haney Lopez writes, "whiteness exists as the linchpin for the systems of racial meaning in the United States. Whiteness is the norm around which other races are constructed; its existence depends upon the mythologies and material inequalities that sustain the current racial system. The maintenance of Whiteness necessitates the conceptual existence of Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, and other races as tropes of inferiority against which Whiteness can be measured and valued" (132).

breakdance or listen to rap must contend with. It is also a truth that many of my closest white peers continue to evade, despite the unquestionable dominance of hip hop.[39] *Tourist* is about the dissonance of cultural exchange, when rap has become pop, when intellectual debate can never quite account for the the bliss of dancing with others.

Notably, it is hip hop that has taught and encouraged me to work through these tensions. In a book chronicling rap's meteoric rise as a global movement, Tricia Rose writes that "it is the contradictory nature of pleasure and social resistance in the popular realm that must be confronted, theorized, and understood" (25). My version of this confrontation involves using tools of hip hop like DJing and sampling to interrogate my own position within the culture.



I see this gesture doing two things: First, it re-stages the experience of the dance party. I am sharing a story about DJing by actually DJing. Like a producer chopping up an old jazz melody for new ears, past and present become one. In a 'post-racial' era that pushes the fallacy that racism is over, the value of performance lies in its ability to make any subject 'of the present'. Secondly, this implicates myself in the subject of

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[39] As of 2017, a Nielsen Music Report confirms that hip hop and R&B have overtaken rock as the most consumed genre in the United States ("Hip Hop").

critique. Instead of pointing to an issue that I am external to, I attempt to place myself at its centre. It occurs to me that being within and without again speaks to the dramaturgical processes that span my practice.



Sometimes this reflexivity feels self-defeating. I end up doubting the extent to which I can critique and perform at the same time. What happens when I perpetuate the very thing I aim to dismantle? In some ways, this is the crux of the work. My general insecurity in performing *Tourist* necessitates its liveness. Audience members have offered feedback on my intonation, my gestures, the places I stumble, and the moments where I have picked the wrong word. No matter the response, I want *Tourist* to be read as active, a work of constant revision. In the case of a public dance party, liveness is a push and pull between community organizers, police, property managers, DJs, and the general public. The rules of the gathering are repeatedly modified. It is in the same spirit of revision that I attempt to address the dynamics of this event with urgency and nuance.

**Reprise: A Solo Performance in Stereo-Video**

My most recent work, *Reprise: A Solo Performance in Stereo-Video* (2020), traces my paternal family's musical heritage. Archival photo and video of my grandparents playing classical music are put in motion using handheld dual-channel projections. Spectators sit in a semi circle formation like that of a chamber orchestra while I project images on the wall. Combining elements of video, animation, and puppetry, *Reprise* considers the weight and beauty of intergenerational memory, time, and cultural inheritance.



While it is currently unfinished, *Reprise* has already hybridized my interests across performance, architecture, video, and music in unexpected ways. Most exciting is the ability to 'play video' like an instrument. By holding a micro projector in each hand, I can choreograph movement in relation to the look and sound of my family archives. I might mirror the actions of my grandfather conducting an orchestra or position my hands as if I was my grandmother teaching recorder. The result is, in the words of artist Anthony McCall, "video that shares the same time as its audience" (McCall 244).

Suddenly, footage that I have always known as fixed has been given new life. Activating video through the live event has been an opportunity to consider the symbolism of (literally) upending one's personal archives. In a family whose social fabric has been shaped by the ideologies of linear, quantized music, messing with the grid and fixed viewpoint has offered space to question the stodgy trappings of this heritage. Conversely, the wobble of my hand and lack of stable horizon lends itself well to illustrating the dynamics of sound. I find myself looking to the early visual music of Norman McLaren or Mary Ellen Bute as I rehearse. "Stereo-video" has allowed me to challenge the culture that I was born into while also honouring it.

The result is a feeling of living history. I trace the movement of Super 8 video that was filmed 30 years before I was born. I call up the interactions of relatives I never knew. The ghosts of my extended family float across the wall only to disappear beyond the projection frame. The time of experience and of memory become one. Event and document collide in a slideshow that is only fully realized through the movement of my body.

History is not only destabilized, but addressed at different scales. At the sonic level, there is echo, reverberation, and melodic reprise. In between musical sequences, it is important to listen to the moments of quiet, the sound of what once was. There is also history at the scale of the body. Like *Live Table*, *Reprise* focuses on the choreography of hands. I take cues from Martine Syms' *Notes on Gesture* (2015), a video installation exploring the racial and gendered signification of body language. Throughout my performance, musical fingerings are projected, eventually shifting to a range of nondescript hand signs. Enacting the physical vocabulary of my relatives could represent the ways in which culture more broadly is embodied and transferred via what Carrie Noland deems "corporeal performance" (Noland 18). My muscle memory is engaged as the darkness of the wall becomes a torso and the viewer is left to consider the symbolic energy of each new gesture.

Personal history is always in dialogue with collective history. It is in building *Reprise* that I've noticed how my family archives also chronicle developments in portable camera technology. Monumental shifts in culture are visible in the documentation of a birthday party or a car ride. The camera turns the most mundane of

activities into a spectacle and I'm often quick to define these moments by their audiovisual mediation. A shift in technology becomes the marker of time gone by. Of course, this is sometimes the case. It could be argued that *Reprise* is distinctly of this moment because it is made possible by the recent invention of a projector that fits in the palm of one's hand. But it is also a performance made of mostly light and a semi-circle of people. Like the music recitals of my relatives, the dance party at Cambridge City Hall, or *Live Table*, it is a gathering. With each new assembly comes the task of finding the language to describe the size of the group, its social conventions, and the distance between flesh and flesh. The parameters of congregation might be altered, but the potential of the live remains.

# APPENDIX

All files are in [Google Drive](Google Drive)

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