

Traversing the virtual realm, choreographer Erica Gionfriddo imagines new possibilities

Having long probed the intersection of dance movement and technology, Gionfriddo explores new ways to move the world beyond the parameters of a dance studio. “We want the world to move differently (right now), and we want to move differently in it.”



Erica Gionfriddo, standing in *In the Ether* (2019). Photo by Kyra Schmidt.

By **Molly Roy** - June 20, 2020

It is a Tuesday morning, countless weeks into stay at home orders, and I am pivoting around my living room floor, being challenged to look at, and really see, the space I am moving through.

From my laptop, tuned into Facebook Live, Erica Gionfriddo, founder and co-director of ARCOS Dance, is gently urging me to take in my surroundings, not only with my eyes as they are carried along by my skull, but also with the back of my head, my pelvis, my limbs. I thought I had looked at my living room in every way possible by this point, but evidently, I was wrong.

Gionfriddo has been leading the Tuesday morning Class and Coffee community dance series since 2015. (My schedule has never permitted me to attend in person—one of those unexpectedly positive pandemic opportunities.)

Even before COVID-19, the classes had slowly been drifting away from a standard format, evolving more into facilitated movement research sessions. This shift mirrors Gionfriddo’s own personal investigation, challenging ideas and judgements about advancement and success in the dance world.

“For quite some time I’ve been trying to interrogate this technique that I’ve inherited,” Gionfriddo tells me via Zoom. “(I’m) going through a long and painful process of breaking with some traditions and figuring out the trauma that is embedded in some of those systems that we all inherently know and understand as dancers, particularly trained in the Western classical tradition, and those of us who have gone through higher education dance programs.”

“What is my body of technique and how is it valuable outside of those traditions?” Gionfriddo asks. “When the lockdown happened, it blew up in my mind. Not only do I have these questions but we don’t have access to the things that make those traditions possible.”

Moving Tuesday class online was a relatively smooth transition then, as Gionfriddo was interested in continuing to offer explorations of embodiment that could be undertaken anywhere, and were not reliant on the parameters of a dance studio.

“What are we using all of this training for? How is it helping us to be better humans? How is it helping us stay connected to our identities, even in times like a pandemic?”

Training a New Future

For the month of June, Class and Coffee has been subsumed by a larger, extended workshop series called Re/Training, “a digital, donation-based embodiment experience,” with the expansive aim of imagining new possibilities for ourselves and our world.

“I really wanted to offer a place for my peers and other dancers, to invite them into the same questions I had,” says Gionfriddo. “What are the systems we’ve inherited through (dance) training and how do those systems show up in us outside of our dance training? How do they affect our beliefs and values about ourselves, and how does that affect the way we act and move in the world?”

Initially, Re/Training was a way to digitally adapt the summer workshop series that has become a core component of ARCOS’s programming. It was going to be divided into two portions, Physical Practice sessions and Audi(O)smotic sessions, with the latter planned in conjunction with a now-remote residency at Laboratory Spokane.

Yet on June 1, when the workshop launched, protests and social movements were rising across the country against anti-Black racism and police brutality. Gionfriddo questioned how to proceed, feeling strongly that their energy needed to shift more toward direct action.

“ARCOS, as a white-led artistic organization, presenting work in this moment, and taking up space in this way, it has to be useful, and relevant, and something needed in the world,” Gionfriddo says.

Paring down the programming was the strategy, placing the exploratory Audi(O)smotic sessions on hiatus, to focus the work more explicitly on addressing white supremacy and systems of oppression. Coordinating with Laboratory Spokane, Gionfriddo arranged for the residency to be transferred to an artist of color and put forth funds to increase the stipend.

The Physical Practice sessions have become a platform for practicing embodiment in relation to sustained social movement, a place to process, unlearn old patterns, and develop intentional paths of connection. The sessions are also serving as a critical forum for sharing resources and cultivating a community of accountability and informed action.

“How does this physical practice get us through the current moment?” asks Gionfriddo. “How can we actually use it, aside from becoming embodied and connected to our physicality as humans, how can it also be a vessel for deeper investigation or stamina building?”

That the whole workshop takes place on Zoom has made this type of responsive adjustment much more feasible. Guest artists Rulan Tangen, Sidra Bell, and Catherine Cabeen will be dropping in to lead as well. And Kai Hazelwood and Sarah Ashkin of Practice Progress will lead a discussion and movement session on anti-racism/anti-Blackness.

At the end of the month, ARCOS will match all donations received and distribute the money to a racial justice organization that the community collectively agrees upon.



Erica Gionfriddo in Re/Training, a digital, donation-based embodiment experience,

In the Ether

ARCOS has been traversing the virtual realm for a number of years now, across a span of residencies, performances, and interactive projects in Kentucky, Montana, New Mexico, Texas, and Virginia, referred to collectively as the *Ether* series. The evening-length work *Ether Junk* premiered at the Mexican American Cultural Center in the early Fall of 2019, incorporated mobile devices, ear buds, and looping livestream video footage in a compelling exploration of tech-enlivened interconnectivity.

“We’ve been working in these digital mediums for a long time,” says Gionfriddo. “All of my work with the *Ether* series [has been] about this sort of connection and understanding of each other, and now we’re plunged into it. So, I think for me personally, it’s not as scary or as daunting as it has been for some other people to make this transition.”

The root of the *Ether* series dates back to Summer 2016, when the Facebook livestream of the police killing of Philando Castile went viral.

“That totally shook my entire view of technology, social media, and my connection, as a citizen, to other people,” recalls Gionfriddo. “There was something about the liveness of that feed, putting us into direct contact with these injustices and violence in a way that a news report could never do. The series started with this question of what is my responsibility now, as a citizen of this world, now that I have this more visceral live connection to these things. What do I do with that information? How do I help? What is my responsibility?”

Since then, Gionfriddo has continued to examine structures, systems, and practices of social media and technology, considering how they impact our identity and work both to our benefit and detriment. The dancemaker remains intrigued by the relationship between social movements and social media, as well as the overarching concept of using technology to foster embodiment.

While the Audi(O)smotic project has been shelved for the moment, it points toward the next phase of the *Ether* series. Combining “audio” and “osmosis,” this idea represents full-bodied sound absorption, and the possibility of moving from sound, rather than with sound.

“I have a lot of questions and convictions around the differences between reacting and responding and reflecting to what we hear and this process of trying to shift our dancer impulses,” Gionfriddo explains.

That process started with a choreographic project at Texas State University, as well as at the University of Texas, where Gionfriddo is an assistant professor of Practice in Dance. Even while the present moment has called for different plans and models of engagement, there is a clear thread across all of ARCOS’s endeavors, linking artistic inquiry, social action, and envisioning for the future.

“For me, it translates or transfers to this process we’re all deeply entrenched in right now...trying to educate ourselves, and we’re listening, and how are we able to absorb that, and not just react with or against or immediately respond, but do the work of absorbing it and understanding it and embodying it, to then act or move differently in the world,” says Gionfriddo.

“Because that’s what we want right now. We want the world to move differently, and we want to move differently in it.”



ARCOS Dance’s “In the Ether.” Photo by Sharen Bradford/The Dancing Image.

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