

Arts & Culture



PHOTO BY SHAREN BRADFORD

Moving In the Ether

ARCOS Dance Company explores the interzone of real and virtual **BY WAYNE ALAN BRENNER**

ARCOS Dance Company is preparing to flip the power switch to On and present its latest project, *In the Ether*, to both globally online and intimate, in-person Austin audiences at the beginning of August.

You'll be able to reserve a seat at any of multiple locations across this city – at least one in each of Austin's 10 districts, is the plan – to witness talented performers engaged in “durational movement practices.” (You know: What most people would, at least tentatively, call *dancing*.) And you'll be witnessed, yourself, via the physical sites' livestreaming cameras. Meanwhile, online audiences will navigate an interactive, browser-based multimedia experience, with access to view all locations' live-streams simultaneously, as the performers invite viewers into a virtual “third” space called the Ether.

Note: This is not, by any means, a stop-gap sort of maneuver.

ARCOS, which started in Santa Fe and moved to Austin in 2014, isn't working this hybrid form as a reaction to the restrictions required by Our Pandemic Situation; the company has been working the liminal fields between the real and the virtual, the embodied and the abstract, since their beginning. The exploration of that cross-over area – and what lies within and, potentially, beyond it – is what fuels the beating heart within the collective ARCOS body.

“It seems there are extremes in every area of society right now,” notes Eliot Gray Fisher, co-director of the venturesome troupe, “and there are extreme reactions to technology, too, with a lot of people rejecting technology outright. Even a lot of people in the performance community are in the rejection category. Like, ‘This is what we do: We're doing stuff with *bodies*, and it's *live*, and we need to *have people physically here*.’” A smile shifts around sympathy

within his thin beard. “But that's not just a losing battle in the face of advancing technologies,” he says, “it's a battle that doesn't need to be fought.”

ARCOS co-director Erica Gionfriddo expands the thought: “This past year with the pandemic, it was surreal,” they say, “and certainly not the circumstances that we'd want everyone to have to experience for the first time. But it was *exciting* in some ways, too, because a lot of people had to let go of the binary thinking around the relevance and value of technology – because it had become our only option. So we were offering a lot of technological and emotional support to people, because we'd already been there. Not just, ‘How do you use Zoom? What are the tricks and tips?’ – there's *thousands* of those – but offering more of a *framework*, an understanding of how to approach the technology, to know that it's something we can be a hybrid with and can actually find pleasure in and move some things forward with. Rather than just, you know, saying, ‘This is awful!’ and putting our heads down and not thinking about it. Like Eliot said, it's a losing battle to try and hold it at bay.”

ARCOS began *Ether* more than five years ago, shortly after the livestreaming video feature was available on major social media platforms. As the company's program notes reveal: “On July 6, 2016, Philando Castile's murder by police officer Jeronimo Yanez livestreamed to Facebook, as Castile's girlfriend Diamond Reynolds broadcast from her phone while her 4-year-old daughter watched from the backseat. The immediate online access to this horrific act exposed urgent ethical territory.”

Since then, the *Ether* series has scrutinized the way emerging tech like smartphones and social media shape our understanding of ourselves and our bodies, and how people relate to other bodies encountered online and offline. “Our work is based in elements of cyborg, queer, and embodiment theories,” says Gionfriddo. “We focus on everyday technological devices and habits by repurposing them – ‘hacking’ them – for other than their intended use.”



PHOTO BY ELIOT GRAY FISHER

Above: Taryn Lavery watches herself in projection in the interactive *Ether* installation *Potential Future Pasts*, 2019 East Austin Studio Tour

Left: ARCOS co-director Erica Gionfriddo (back to camera and in livestreaming video projections) performs in an iteration of the *Ether* series, 2017 Dance Gallery Festival

Still, using some tech the way it *was* intended is part of what makes being an audience at (or within) an ARCOS production a remarkable experience: Besides peeking into rooms throughout local neighborhoods where the performers will be livestreaming, the browser-based show also offers viewers a chance to rummage the company's archive of previous dances (recorded in rehearsal and performance since 2016) and to curate multiple synchron-

nized views of an ensemble sequence that was filmed at Austin's Ground Floor Theatre earlier in the summer.

So, *In the Ether*. Is it faux? Is it real? Is ARCOS Dance Company itself, ah, *faux real*? Fisher and Gionfriddo and their team, though not lacking the sort of playfulness that informs much creative intelligence, suggest a more important question: “What is our responsibility to each other as our everyday technologies transform our relationships?”

Now, whether you walk through a door in

meatspace or more easily touch a keyboard to access virtual cams, you can press Enter and participate in some of the provocatively kinetic answers yourself. ■

See our Arts Listings, p.28, for performance times, dates, and locations. More info at: arcosdance.com