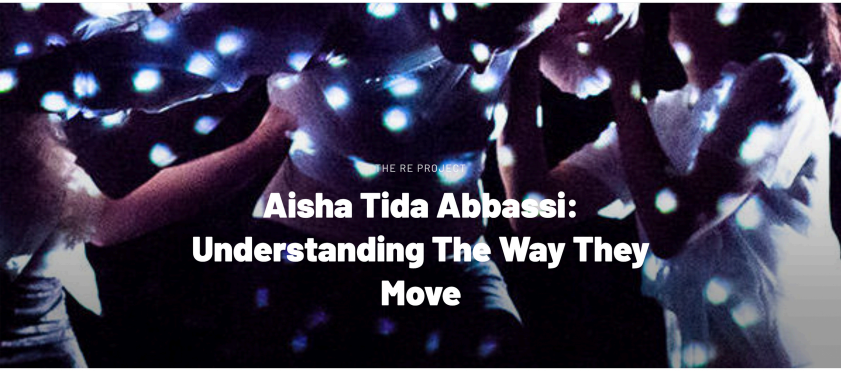

THE RE PROJECT

Aisha Tida Abbassi: Understanding The Way They Move

On ARCOS' Infinity Loop by Aisha Tida Abbassi.

On a clear, brisk day in late November, I followed thumping music off the street into a multi-warehouse venue situated in the heart of East Austin, a burgeoning art and culture district in the Texas capital. For two weekends in November, Austin Distribution Hall served as the site for the annual, 'free, self-guided art event' that offers members of the public the chance to engage with local artists, typically in their own creative spaces. Along one wall of the main warehouse hung large-scale portraits by Sarah Annie Navarrete, a Texas-born interdisciplinary photographer, and dancer. Local DJ and music producer Abe Yellen got down to his own beat, the electronic music drawing visitors towards the adjacent interactive performance installation 'Infinity Loop' staged by ARCOS Dance.

About the experience

Two animators, dressed head-to-toe in black, took turns making pointed movements across the white expanse, their images documented by a simple smartphone atop a tripod that captured video that is projected back into the local space and streamed on Facebook, consequently producing an "audiovisual layering of multiple looping timeframes." Curious visitors wandered into the frame to strut, twirl, and pose, developing staggered choreographies with several of their past selves available for review on scene. Each person demonstrated a varying ability to consider and plan how their layered present, past, and future movements could interact between the physical and virtual dimensions. Standing back to watch as visitors of all ages and abilities experimented, I was fascinated by the carefree nature of children, whose aptitude for play allowed them to explore unhindered, whereas I saw my own preoccupation with behavior and fear of repeating mistakes manifested on screen. My time anxiety and concerns revolve around how seemingly minuscule decisions create an infinite number of potential outcomes. I enjoyed watching others interact with the piece, but I had no desire to cross into it. I moved on because I had plans to meet the artists, Erica and Eliot, the driving forces of ARCOS Dance.

About Erica

Erica Gionfriddo (they/them), born in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1984, was surrounded by the arts as a child. Their parents encouraged Erica to try anything that piqued their interest with one condition—they had to endure each activity to its end. While opera vocal training, visual arts lessons under the wing of a neighborhood sculptor, and dance classes hosted in the lobby of a local church gave Erica a taste of various forms of creative expression, it was not until they were a junior in high school that they were introduced to the rigor of the dance realm.

At the age of sixteen, Erica traveled with a friend to sample a course at the New England Dance Conservatory in Massachusetts, a short drive from their hometown. Captivated by this unlocked dimension of dance, Erica entered the pre-professional training program in 2000, drilling relentlessly to catch up to their peers who typically begin formal training as early as three years old.

After receiving their BFA in Dance in 2006, Erica pursued further training, accepting a scholarship to a summer intensive training program at Moving People Dance in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Having never heard of the city, they moved there and discovered a small, yet vibrant arts community that changed the trajectory of Erica's career. In a few short months, Erica took on a handful of responsibilities beyond performing at 'Moving People' Dance, including teaching, administrative, and graphic design duties, eventually stepping in as the School Director.

Introducing Curtis

During their five years there, Erica began brainstorming with Curtis Uhlemann, a choreographer, artistic director, educator, trainer, and touring performer with ‘Moving People’. Together, the two co-founded ARCOS Dance in 2011 with the ambition of “imagining a new standard” of dance based on lessons learned at ‘Moving People’. Tagged as a “bridge between scholastic training and professional careers,” this new model started off as a hybrid company that trained and performed with both students and professionals; however, in 2012, the company began working only with professional dancers to separate themselves from the conventions and limitations of operating as a school.

About Eliot

While in Santa Fe, Erica was introduced to Eliot Gray Fisher, who was raised by a writer of poetry, prose, and theater and a visual artist who worked across mediums long before the concept of interdisciplinary art practices was widely accepted. Studying piano and acting from a young age, Eliot continued exploring the realms of music, theater, film, and writing at Wesleyan University (BA in Film Studies ‘05) before returning to his hometown of Santa Fe in 2007. In 2011, Eliot joined ARCOS as a collaborator, leading the musical, writing, media, and technical aspects of the company in addition to performing.

In 2013, Eliot took on a larger role as Multimedia Director while teaching at a local high school in Santa Fe. Curtis served as Artistic Director from Austin while Erica divided their time between the two cities as Associate Artistic Director and Executive Director. After several months of ARCOS performing in both locations, shrinking performance opportunities in Santa Fe drove the company to take the leap and move to Texas in early 2014.

About the co-operation

In 2015, the three artists agreed to move towards a more democratic collaborative approach, updating their roles and titles to reflect the abolished hierarchy. As equal co-directors, the three opted for broader terms, dropping the description “contemporary dance company” and co-penning ARCOS’ new mission: “experimenting rigorously to discover adventurous new forms of contemporary performance.” The group’s practice continued to shift as they began developing what Eliot now calls one of ARCOS’ most “maximalist” and “sensational” productions to date.

When asked what collaborative development looks like for ARCOS, Eliot Gray Fisher answered without a second thought, “Play. Playing together. Seriously. Rigorously.” While independent work is not completely eradicated, collaborative work is a principal component of ARCOS’ development process. Working together and discovering together from the very beginning is crucial because the team actively tries to bring forth and simultaneously challenge whatever acclimations and conventions individual contributors bring from their training and background as the team works together to develop ideas.

The breaking of convention extends to the typical director-dancer dynamic and shifts the expectations of what is possible from individual dance artists. The choice of the term “dance artist” as opposed to dancer highlights the company’s conscientious use of language and advocacy of agency, which reflects their attention to toppling typical hierarchies. In Eliot’s perspective, a “dancer” is a “denigrated term” for an “obedient person who enacts the thing that the director or choreographer defines,” while a dance artist implies the agency of a “fully realized creative being.”

In a typical performance company, there is a predetermined amount of rehearsal time before the director or choreographer instructs the dancers exactly what to do and then irons out the flaws up until showtime. In the case of the Ether series, endless discovery replaces the typical rehearsal format and collaborative improvisation is favored over rigid, director-led choreography. Each performance ranges in the number of performers, types of media, the extent of narrative choreography versus improvised movement, and forms of audience engagement. Erica wanted the Ether series to remain playful rather than developing it into the type of “codified performance” that most dancers and performers are accustomed to.

Dance artists who opt to participate in ARCOS’ avant-garde work take on an incredible amount of risk. Erica, they, elaborate, when performing with ARCOS, “they’re risking part of their identities as dancers, as performers, as professionals” because they become complicit in ARCOS’ rejection of traditional forms of dance performance. Pushing the definitions of dance comes with the potential of limited opportunities in the traditional dance arena; for this reason, the integration of each collaborator’s knowledge, skills, and values is primary to building group trust and solidarity. Collaborative play between everyone in the room is essential to creating work that honors each contributor’s artistic interest, philosophical position, and readiness to take risks. While it may seem counterintuitive, creating a playful environment takes difficult, yet vital work.

About transmedia praxis

In February 2016, the group had an epiphany of sorts while participating in Open All Ports, the 15th Biennial Symposium on Arts and Technology at Connecticut College's Ammerman Center. Inspired by a lecture by Snow Yunxue Fu, a fellow Symposium resident and video artist who often works in series, the group began to think further outside the production conventions of the concert dance arena. Rather than developing a singular work for individual performance opportunities, ARCOS began imagining how smaller projects could be combined into a larger whole.

From the Ether Series to the Infinity Loop

ARCOS has continually explored the profound influence that rapidly evolving media technologies have on our identities over the course of the past four years through 'The Ether Series'. The transmedia framework has undergone twenty or more different phases of evolution, each time culminating in an experimental performance whose "investigation of embodiment and our virtual identity" takes a different form. Five iterations later, In the Ether (October 2017, Dance Gallery Festival) included ARCOS' first experiment with the "infinity loop" mechanism. The continuous experimentation, improvisation, and performance of 'The Ether Series' and 'Infinity Loop' generated a need to reflect theoretically on the interaction of physical and digital realities.

Regarding Cyborg Theory and Queer Theory

In 2018, Erica matriculated into the MFA in Dance program at Hollins University (Roanoke, Virginia), where their research introduced them to cyborg theory which prompted a critical realization: the Ether series was more than just a performance, but "the fabric of our identity as humans and cyborgs living in a cybernetic world."

Cyborg Theory became one of the central tenets of the Ether series, hugely informed by Donna Haraway's 'A Cyborg Manifesto', originally published in 1985. Erica, they, elaborate that a cyborg is a hybrid of machine and organism is a "human or organism with exogenous components or prostheses that extend them beyond themselves," citing a walking cane as a simple example of an external piece of technology that extends the senses and allows the user to interact with the world. Erica also cite social media as a prominent example as we use it to “create, inform, and play with different parts of our identity.” Erica clarify that identity is not a predetermined state, but rather something that we constantly “do” or “perform” through reiterative actions.

This ability to imagine beyond the current reality and cross over into fiction is what Erica, they, call “queering reality.” Living as a creature of both the present and the future requires an ability to imagine, reimagine, and continually construct the self regardless of how we are socially conditioned to think about reality. According to Erica, whether we like it or not, we are cyborgs. Interactive performances within the Ether series create a hybrid virtual-physical space where the mind and body work as one to confront the overlapping of past, present, and future as we continue constructing, “performing,” or even choreographing our own narrative identity.

Regarding socio-cultural challenges

In early 2020, political unrest in the United States challenged Eliot and Erica to further reconsider their praxis on an individual and organizational level. “After managing to survive this far and we have a certain amount of clout and security, then we do feel a responsibility to be challenging assumptions in many categories as a company. We’re really focused on how every aspect of the company can be doing that work of disrupting the isms and entrenched power.” ARCOS instead pays special attention to what they consciously and unconsciously support through their work and collaborations, from how works are produced to the policies and values partner organizations uphold.

The rapid spread of COVID-19 and civil uprisings against police brutality throughout the country further pushed ARCOS into a new mode of service. “For several years, the performance side of the company has continually diminished its presence and the training and development, the outreach, and the service organization part of the company has been the most active here in the Austin community,” say Erica. And Eliot, becoming more actively anti-racist also serves as a release from capitalism, white supremacy, and an exploitative model of productivity often found within industry practices of the performance arts that promote hyper-individualism. Eliot admits that ARCOS’ response to the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 may have looked very different if his and Erica’s financial positions varied.

Coronavirus would have brought a different degree of devastation for the company was it five years younger. “Ultimately, we have as much as we could possibly need, especially if we share with each other,” he says.

Since spring 2020, ARCOS has focused on helping fellow artists adjust to the COVID moment through virtual programming, serving as fiscal sponsors, and sharing best practices for drafting funding proposals. To both, ensuring that other artists have the opportunity to continue their work despite decreased opportunities “feels like a valuable use of [ARCOS’] time and energy as a company.” ‘ARCOS Presents’ is just one component of the company’s training and development programming, a ‘production mentorship series’ for emerging and mid-career independent artists based in Austin, Texas.

Originally, the co-directors dreamed that ARCOS would become a full-time, self-sustaining project that paid their salaries. Although the company has matured, it never reached that point, which brought its own unexpected benefits. Personal financial security from Erica’s role as an Assistant Professor of Practice at the University of Texas at Austin has allowed ARCOS to remain flexible, small, and nimble, with enough of a foundation in the community to be able to take risks.

Despite the fact that corona wiped out all gig opportunities, the luxury of professional and financial stability has granted ARCOS the privilege to slow down and reflect on their civic duty to communities of color as a white-led organization. The pandemic has acted as a catalyst for the company to get radical and continue pushing against the mentality of scarcity by demystifying processes to artists who are disinvested by the system.

I am stunned by the serenity of the collective to synchronize the artistic and the organizational, the theoretical and the activists’ spheres. Everything that is part of the professional realm shapes it, and the way they engage with juxtapositions and tension fields nurture the seeds to reinvent themselves. Let me learn from them.

REFERENCES

Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from a two-part interview of ARCOS Co-Directors Erica Gionfriddo and Eliot Gray Fisher, conducted by Aisha Tida Abbassi on

August 13 and November 25, 2020.

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LINKS

arcosdance.com
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