Shadow of the Valley #10: Queering Digital Identities
Audio Transcript

Tal Leeds: Hello listener. It's your host, Tal Leeds, speaking to you from the traditional land of the Sana, Tickanwatic, and N̲ʉmʉnʉʉ peoples, commonly known today as Austin, Texas. Thanks for listening. As you may have noticed, this opening is unlike every other one I've done before, and that is on purpose. We're living in an extraordinary moment and I'd like to take a break from the routine opening so that I can address it. I'm recording this July 3, 2020. Coronavirus cases have exceeded 11 million globally. More than 55,000 of them were recorded in the US yesterday. For many here, overdue rent and bills were due two days ago, and a wave of evictions are expected unless unemployment benefits or stimulus money is delivered (which, unfortunately, looks unlikely). Black and Latinx communities are being hit the hardest by this virus and its fallout.

Sadly, that is hardly the worst of it. On May 25, 2020, the smartphone video footage of George Floyd's murder by a white Minneapolis police officer and his partners emerged. This, along with the steady stream of anti-Black racist incidents involving police killings, lynchings, and violent threats triggered protests in every state in the union. In the days and weeks that followed, the public's attention shifted to the undeniable, widespread pattern of racial injustice in America, from law enforcement and the prison system to virtually every area of our lives. And while the failed US response to the coronavirus has reclaimed center-stage for the moment, protests continue as I record this. These protesters are taking action as part of the proud American tradition of organized protest. The abolition of slavery, protections for workers, women's voting rights, civil rights for Black and LGBTQ people, protections for refugees and immigrants, the inherent sovereignty of the original people of this continent, and protection of the nonhumans and their ecosystems all come from this tradition. While many of these struggles have seen their tangible progress, our situation today reveals how much further there is to go.

For several years now, smartphones and social media have provided an ever-growing mountain of graphic evidence revealing the horrors that the public now agrees must end, once and for all. It must end because Black folks cannot leave their homes without fear or threat of being arrested,

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beaten, and simply killed for existing. In the case of Breonna Taylor, even her own home was not safe. Police entered that home using a no-knock warrant, and shot at her and her boyfriend, killing her with impunity. Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Freddie Gray, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, and the list goes on and on and on. Enough is enough.

I know that as a Jewish male, I inhabit a strange space in the racial divide. While in most cases I benefit from white privilege, recent history tells me that in the eyes of other white folk, I am an "other." As the grandson of a Jewish German Refugee and an Auschwitz survivor I am painfully aware of the dangers of racism and the generational traumas they inflict. This is why I am dedicated to using whatever privilege and platform I have in solidarity with Black people. While I personally will never fully understand the reality of Blackness in America, I stand in full support of the fight for justice. In response to the recent events I personally am committing to being actively anti-racist and doing far more than I have in the past to bring about the change our society desperately needs.

The conversation you're about to hear helped me reflect on strategies for taking effective action in a world that is increasingly coexistent in both virtual and physical spaces. It was recorded in November, long before the current moment that we find ourselves in began. After watching the livestreamed shooting of Philando Castile, my guest, dance artist Erica Gionfriddo, who is white, stopped and asked: "What responsibility do I have to my fellow human now that I know that this is happening? Am I using my talents and technologies responsibly?"

Part of their response was *Ether Junk*. An interactive dance work critiquing the shallow, lipservice-only relations that we too often see on social media. Take, for example, the many recent statements of solidarity for the Black Lives Matter movement from corporations made despite evidence to the contrary. In contrast, *Ether Junk* offers a new vision for hacking these platforms: a body-first, bottom-up approach, to expand and re-imagine the boundaries of our identities. It's with these new boundaries that Erica believes we can make deeper, more meaningful connections with people of different backgrounds and experiences than our own.

In a moment, you'll hear eight minutes and forty three seconds of silence, followed by the conversation I just described. Eight minutes and forty-three seconds is the amount of time Derek Chauvin kept his knee on the side of George Floyd's neck while his fellow police officers stood guard and did nothing to stop him. Please join me in honoring those who have lost their lives in the struggle for equality by using this time to reflect upon our responsibilities to each other and taking steps to pursue a more just and equitable future for our Black friends, neighbors, and loved ones. There are many useful things you can do during this moment of silence. If you'd like some resources to educate yourself about systemic racism or ways to support the struggle for Black lives, Erica and I have compiled a list of links. You can find it at shadowofthevalley.com/resources. We'll begin our moment now.

[eight minutes and forty-three seconds of silence]

Thank you. Now, on to my interview with Erica Gionfriddo of ARCOS Dance. As I mentioned, we got together to record this in November of 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread protests for racial justice began. At the beginning, we run through a description of the performance of *Ether Junk* before diving into the insights Erica gleaned from their process of creating it.

[music]

Tal Leeds: Welcome everybody to this special episode of *Shadow of the Valley*. I have with me Erica Gionfriddo of ARCOS Dance, and we're here to talk about their latest piece, called *Ether Junk*. We're going to sort of unpack what's contained in it because it's pretty dense, but it's really important and it's really interesting. So, let's do a quick intro.

Erica Gionfriddo: I'm Erica, and I'm a co-director and choreographer and often a performer in ARCOS Dance work. And we work at the intersection of technology and humanity, and most recently, specifically, hacking consumer technologies as a gateway to greater personal clarity. So using technologies that we encounter in everyday life and repurposing them in performance to understand new ways of our relationship to technology.

Tal Leeds: What I'm going to do now is just try as best I can to explain what it's like to sit down for a performance of *Ether Junk*, and hopefully that'll help you guys understand a little bit more about what ARCOS does. It is contemporary dance, but there's also room for commentary and play with modern consumer technology. [Audience sounds and music.] It starts out kind of like any contemporary performance almost. You walk into the theater, sit down like normal, but the theater is set up where there's space for the dancers to kind of walk into the audience a little bit more. Unlike other theater performances, you are encouraged to keep your phone on, for reasons you'll soon see. [phone sounds] And so everyone's phone is on and the show starts, and the dancers come out. [performance audio] They're moving in kind of stilted ways; it looks painful at times. And there's someone who's walking around with an iPhone and filming the dancers live, and that feed is being live-streamed on the internet at that very moment, and that live stream is projected onto the screen behind them.

Erica Gionfriddo: What we're seeing projected is on a delay about ten to fifteen seconds behind, so you see something live, ten to fifteen seconds later it shows up. [interview sound loops] And if you're filming the dancer and the screen behind the dancer, their images start to layer on top of each other in a loop effect...

Tal Leeds: Right, right.

Erica Gionfriddo: ...if you can kind of imagine that, so they kind of recede...

Tal Leeds: Kind of where they're all, they're all...

Erica Gionfriddo: ...yeah...

Tal Leeds: ...staggered...

Erica Gionfriddo: ...like the old effect when you would stand in front of the camcorder in front of the TV-VCR...

Tal Leeds: Right, you get the infinite mirror thing. Yeah, you put the two mirrors...

Erica Gionfriddo: Exactly, so this is a, we call it the "infinity loop."

Tal Leeds: You can see two different views, of one head-on from the live stream feed, which you would get, right, in a POV shot, point-of-view shot, just looking straight at the dancers. Or you can look from the side and you can see the relationship between the person doing the filming and the person performing for the camera.

Erica Gionfriddo: Yes.

Tal Leeds: And increasingly they're playing to the camera. Increasingly there's a weird sort of eroticism to the movement. It's clear there's some sort of desire that's trying to be fulfilled, or explored, or, you know, even perverted in some way. You can feel the neediness, right? You can feel the neediness for attention through it. And the voice over—and I don't remember the phrases, maybe you can remind me, but there were repeating phrases like…

Erica Gionfriddo: How do I look?

Tal Leeds: How do I look.

[performance sound]

Sarah Navarrete: How do I look? How do I look…

[performance sound fades]

Tal Leeds: And then things shift. There's the audio of different YouTubers…

[performance sound]

YouTuber: I would like to start off this video…

Tal Leeds: doing their videos…

YouTuber: …with full transparency and honesty.

Tal Leeds: ...into the camera. That classic YouTube style of just stare right into the camera and like, bare your soul. And the dancers are switching off duties basically lip-syncing to it, acting as if they are the person who would be in the video. And so you can again see the livestream of the video projected behind them, so it looks like a reproduction of what the YouTube video would be. And then you can also get the behind-the-scenes view, immediately, if you want to.

YouTuber: ...and be sure to follow me on Instagram. I will have a link in the description box down below. Let's do it!

Tal Leeds: Even though what's coming out of their mouths is the word authenticity, what they are doing is not authentic. What they are doing is a face, it is a façade.

YouTuber: ...I am just so happy to have you in my life, like literally, I may not know you personally, but I can feel your energy. This video is posted to the whole entire internet, but this video is true for every single viewer, and there's no doubt about that.

[performance sound fades]

Tal: So that continues to some comedic effect as well, that uncanny valley between, you know, comedy and tragedy, where it's kind of like a razor-thin precipice there where it very quickly be either. And then it just totally takes a left turn. Which is maybe one of the more fun parts of this piece. These two non-dancing performers are suddenly going into this chat about social and technological theories, including Donna Haraway's cyborg theory, amongst others.

[performance sound]

Rachel Nayer and Erica Saucedo: *Ether Junk*!

Rachel Nayer: Where we ask the big questions about...

Erica Saucedo: ...reality...

Rachel Nayer: ...virtuality...

Erica Saucedo: ...and living as hybrid creatures...

Rachel Nayer: ...with fluid boundaries.

Erica Saucedo: So we're going to take cyborg theory to another level!

Rachel Nayer: A deeper level!

Erica Saucedo: Moving from the external...to the internal.

[laughter]

[performance sound fades]

Tal Leeds: And going into very deep scholarly language about this but also making it really fun and silly and entertaining. And then getting the audience involved. The audience members are asked to read something aloud something that's given to them on a tablet. And they do.

[performance sound]

Audience Member: That no single organ, or organism, or human, exists on its own. We only exist because of the intricate matrix of events, environments, and circumstances that shape us into being.

Erica Saucedo: Let's give it up!

[applause]

[performance sound fades]

Tal Leeds: And so these philosophical ideas enter into the performance. And then once that wraps up, instead of the experience of disconnection being sort of the endpoint, it takes a different turn. It gets very quiet. And a select number of audience members, which I think are not, they're just...

Erica Gionfriddo: They're all random.

Tal Leeds: They're all random, yeah...are handed a pair of wireless earbuds and projected onto the screen are instructions to take out your phone and navigate your browser to a particular URL and just raise your volume.

[performance sound]

[music plays from audience members' phones]

Tal Leeds: So we get this track that is now playing at staggered times throughout the audience. And different people putting these airpods in. The dancers are paying attention to them very well, and they're clearly hearing something, and some sort of instruction, because at some point they get up and they walk onto the stage. They stand there for a while, and they look into the eyes of one of the dancers that gave him the airpods. And it's a very intense moment. And they start reaching out to each other. And it definitely seems that they're following some sort of instruction, but it's like, a very kind of gentle touch, sometimes like to the cheek. Intense eye contact. You can immediately see, like, people getting emotional, feeling vulnerable. And at some point they're asked to choose another audience member and bring them on stage as well, and give them one of the airpods. And a similar thing happens. And then it just ends on that. And the lights come up, and that's the end of the show. And it ends with these two strangers just sort of engaging in really deep eye contact and making this really powerful connection with each other. And it turns into an authentic connection. With a complete stranger. And, you know, speaking personally, that was, like, the moment I...I was just moved to tears. And it spoke to the initial intent of these technologies: to connect people. Mark Zuckerberg was testifying in front of Congress, and here's this guy who's purporting to, "Oh, I want to connect the world." And look at the things he did, with his desire to connect the world. And then here's your performance, where you're actually connecting strangers, right. And maybe they're not from like across cultures, and it's a little more modest than that, but it is an opening in a real kind of a way, and not just this sort of, "they saw each other on a video chat, and so now they're friends." Like, yeah. Yeah, but...

Erica Gionfriddo: ...but are they?

Tal Leeds: But this was a different thing.

Erica Gionfriddo: Yeah, and I think that ultimately helped me understand how to take it from the personal out into a more social setting. And take it out of this personal inquiry and, ok, now how does it actually translate into the real world? And that's really where the airpods sequence came from, was this desire to move it beyond myself. And to see if others had these same questions about identity and performance and connection. And could I create the circumstances where they would be willing to imagine new ways of relating to another person in real-time. While being documented, while being witnessed.

Tal Leeds: So then, the experience for that audience member is they are in front of a live audience of strangers, and they are not trained performers, right? So, as anyone who's tried to do public speaking knows, that's terrifying in its own right. And then, of course, there's cameras all over the place, and they're sometimes being live streamed to the world, and also projected on a screen. So even more of the audience can see it more clearly. And they're put into essentially what the dancers were just in, in a maybe lighter version of it, is that fair to say?

Erica Gionfriddo: Yeah, absolutely. And I think the work that we've tried to let people in on for the previous hour of the piece is to expose enough of our process as performers to get them to trust our intentions are connection and not exploitation by the time they stand up.

Tal Leeds: I would say the airpods really did make it inviting to do it. I mean, it was done so subtly no one was asked—I don't think anyone was spoken to. It was, like, presented and they could kind of say yes or no and...

Erica Gionfriddo: Yeah. And some people did refuse, and then the dancer would go and pick someone else and try—it all had to be consensual, and that they had to have the opportunity to agree or disagree at any time. Which I think is something super important to me, and I think something that is starting to be talked about more in society, but consensual connection. You know, not sexually but in all of this. We should feel okay about refusing a connection if we...

Tal Leeds: Right.

Erica Gionfriddo: ...are not comfortable or we're not ready or someone has earned our trust to do so.

Tal Leeds: You touched on this in the show, so let's go into that a bit: how we relate to our technologies as human beings, particularly from the viewpoint of being a cyborg. We've talked about this in other episodes, but for those who haven't heard those, let's just start there: what in the hell is a cyborg?

Erica Gionfriddo: I think maybe the most basic definition of a cyborg is a human or organism with exogenous components or prostheses that extend them beyond themselves. [tapping sound] So, a blind man with a cane could be considered a cyborg because he uses this outside piece of technology to extend his senses and interact with the world. To social media... [Facebook sounds] ...where we create and form and play with different parts of our identity in digital spaces, all the way up to maybe... [beeps] ...implanting the chip in the brain that helps us navigate and does our laundry for us or something... [washing machine sounds]

Tal Leeds: Sure.

Erica Gionfriddo: ...in the future.

[sound from *The Matrix*]

Neo: "I know Kung Fu."

[film sound fades]

Tal Leeds: Or even, you know, other levels like a pacemaker.

Erica Gionfriddo: A pacemaker. [pacemaker beeps and heartbeat sounds] Exactly, so then there are the more kind of normal things like your eyeglasses, my contact lenses. Any of those things would make us cyborgs, as we are using technology to change, alter, augment, extend our physical self. And that's sort of a place where a lot of people like to stay.

Tal Leeds: Yeah.

Erica Gionfriddo: And they like to stay, and particularly like to stay, in this realm of digital prostheses and kind of keep imagining in that direction. The place that I sort of landed over the last year or so of research into cyborg theory, mostly through Donna Haraway and other scholars, is to bring that idea of a hybrid creature with fluid boundaries into a place of identity, so bringing it back into the internal, into the personal. So that idea that we are already hybrids with our technology was something that really only started to make sense to me when I encountered the intersection of cyborg theory and queer theory, as a place of hybridity, and a place where we can experiment with different technologies to imagine and create a new hybrid self.

Tal Leeds: For those who are not, you know, familiar with the definition of queer, how are you using that term?

Erica Gionfriddo: This is all relatively new territory for me, and I've been very careful about the way that I use and start to claim my own queerness. But it has also been the place where I have been able to acknowledge and understand how queerness has always been a part of my life and is something that has always been expressed through my art-making, whether I knew how to name it or not. Queerness in a broad sense for me is related to imagination, and the ability to imagine beyond the current reality or beyond the dominant reality. Yeah, to "queer" something would mean to imagine it differently.

Tal Leeds: Imagine it differently from the…

Erica Gionfriddo: …the way that we are maybe socially conditioned or brought up to think about reality. This is who I am. I was born female and I was raised female, and if I have questions about that, I can't imagine outside of that, so there must be something else wrong with me, you know. Being able to imagine something that's not either black or white, or male or female, but imagine some sort of fluid hybrid in between that doesn't yet exist, and it doesn't have to be any of the other labels that exist either. But using the current moment to imagine a reality that allows me to move more easily in the world.

Tal Leeds: In a sense, if you are born with a male body and you get surgeries to have a female body, that's the form of cyborgism, right?

Erica Gionfriddo: Yeah, there's a really beautiful article by Cayden Mak called "Cyborg Theory, Cyborg Practice" that really broke all this open for me at some point in the last year, where he really speaks about how he has used technology to become a hybrid that he is right now. And not just with surgery, or hormones, or scissors to cut your hair, or not just those surface things, but down to an understanding of self and the use of language and figuring out how to hack language to invent definitions of yourself that don't exist yet. So this idea of hacking in order to imagine things that don't yet exist is an inherently queer activity. To be able to imagine something that we don't already have. I feel like maybe I should share a little story about my personal experience with social media...

Tal Leeds: Sure, yeah, ok.

Erica Gionfriddo: ...that might help put it into context and—because I was, at a certain point, very cynical about it all, as many of us can be about social media. And also about this idea of performativity and performance. And we're always performing a part of ourselves in some way, either in reality or in these spaces. And I was just recently in grad school, which is a process of slowly tearing apart every facet of yourself and rebuilding it, if anyone's interested. And I got some pushback about performance and about digital spaces from my thesis committee, who countered with, "you know, for some people these are the only spaces where they can experiment with their authentic selves," or "performance is the only way to truly be their fullest selves." And around this same time, I was performing in an experimental theater-film piece by Bug Davidson. And I was playing a trans character in this show and exploring masculinity through my female form, among many other things, and realized how right that felt for the first time. And how I found that in a moment of performance. That, like, in performance was when I realized some deep truth about myself outside of performance. And around that time I also started following on Instagram a bunch of queer artists and activists, and trans writers, and all the hashtags and things like that. And sort of filled my digital space with representation of these different forms of reality in a way that helped me validate my own experience and come to terms with my own queerness and my understanding of my gender in a digital space enough to the point that I was able to talk about and realize those things in the physical space.

Tal Leeds: And to clarify, so this is some revelations about what parts of you you're looking to explore, along the spectrum of gender, from masculine to feminine, and all the spaces in between—and maybe outside.

Erica Gionfriddo: Yeah, totally. What was so surprising to me is I wasn't setting out to explore those things. I was sort of abruptly...

Tal Leeds: Stumbled on them.

Erica Gionfriddo: ...confronted with them through performance and through social media. And so that has sort of been a shift in the way that I perceive these things, because I have personally benefited from the kind of connection, or maybe representation, that is available, that was not readily available to me in my daily circles in a way that had never allowed me to question or even consider these parts of my selves that I had kept stoic, and kept less fluid, and allowed to come to the surface.

Tal Leeds: Yeah, so I'm going to bring that up because we are in this age of identity politics rising a lot more quickly with the advent of the internet, right. Because very quickly, for good or for ill, you can find people who have a similar experience or who will expose you to an aesthetic that will generate that kind of epiphany. That will show you an aspect of yourself that you may have never explored or encountered before. But because it's not embodied at that point, right, because at the point that you encounter it, it is a specter, right? It is like this...

Erica Gionfriddo: A digital...

Tal Leeds: A digital phantom...

Erica Gionfriddo: ...in order for any of those revelations that happen in this digital space, or in this not-physical realm, it has to be replicated in the physical world in order for it to be fully realized, and...

Tal Leeds: Right, right. It's not guaranteed.

Erica Gionfriddo: No. No, it's not. In fact, there are many places in the world where you simply cannot actualize or entertain that possibility in the real world because you will be killed, you know. So literally, the digital space is maybe the only opportunity you have to express parts of yourself.

Tal Leeds: Because it augments so much of how we are, it's not comfortably contained within those dualities, is my personal observation. That it's too big to fit into that small a keyhole. And there's two kind of primary reactions to that, because it is a dual thing, right. One is to, you know, let go and just kind of embrace and just dive into it. And the other is the reactionary thing that we're seeing, which is like, pump this up all the way so that our dualist, kind of small container is just maximized, you know. I want to bring something else back into this, which we touched on earlier, which was your comments about imagination, right?

Erica Gionfriddo: And I think that that's where queer theory has so much to offer us in this present moment, is being able to imagine things that don't exist yet, and imagine them outside of the categories we already know. And I think maybe imagination gets limited for many people in terms of, "Well, I'm not this, so I must be that. It's not black, so it must be white."

Tal Leeds: It does seem like the central piece. And it seems like it plays into the centrality of the body in this equation.

Erica Gionfriddo: Those digital connections are valid. They are definitely real. And they are not the fullest expression of a connection, and that can only happen when our bodies are involved. And being in physical space, to have your body physically react to the presence of another person…

Tal Leeds: Right.

Erica Gionfriddo: …is an entirely different kind of connection than the very real, and very sometimes intimate, connections that can happen through digital spaces, or social media, or tinder.

Tal Leeds: Why?

Erica Gionfriddo: These platforms and these mechanisms want us to think they're the same because it will guarantee and continue our engagement and use of them. And if I could make one connection on Facebook and then go meet the person for coffee and make a real connection, and then we meet every Thursday for coffee, and then we join a book club together, and then we develop our own friendship, that was only one engagement. Rather than, "no, if you just continue to interact with each other's content, that's also connection."

Tal Leeds: But Erica, I have five-thousand friends on Facebook.

Erica Gionfriddo: Damn, that's the limit! Then you've reached it. You've reached Nirvana. You are…

Tal Leeds: Why aren't I happy yet, Erica?

Erica Gionfriddo: Yeah, I'm tired thinking about it. Nathan Jurgenson describes it as every moment as a potential future past. So it's, you know, overlapping these planes of time but that, as we have become obsessed with documenting and archiving our life—especially on social media—we are increasingly less and less in the present moment. Literally, because we're thinking about documenting it and simultaneously think about how it's going to look in the future as a past moment that has been documented. So the present is constantly mired in the past and the future in a very specific way with these digital technologies.

Tal Leeds: You're basically recreating that experience…

Erica Gionfriddo: The frenzy, yeah.

Tal Leeds: …within the theater.

Erica Gionfriddo: In real-time, yeah.

Tal Leeds: In real-time.

Erica Gionfriddo: The strategy that I developed over the last several years is how to be fully embodied and fully present inside this loop when you're constantly confronted with the pressure of performing for the camera, that you were sensing from the dancers a little bit towards the beginning, the pressure of performing for a live audience and a virtual audience, and then having to review what you just produced in the present moment and…

Tal Leeds: Right, yeah.

Erica Gionfriddo: …it's less ephemeral than regular dance practices. And you do it and then you see it again from a curated angle from whoever's manipulating the phone…

Tal Leeds: Right.

Erica Gionfriddo: …and then it gets repeated again and again—that you can't escape it. And so your choice is to either reject it completely and continue to be only concerned with the audience, or yourself, or you can choose to interact with your past self, your past digital selves…

Tal Leeds: Because you actually did this solo for a while, right?

Erica Gionfriddo: I did it solo for quite a while…

Tal Leeds: So walk us through, like, what's going through your head, and what do you choose, and why.

Erica Gionfriddo: The most successful way that I found through it, and I tried many different versions for a couple years, was to use that kind of literal arc that we were just talking about. And I would enter the frame understanding that I'm performing for the camera. And so I began by looking not at the filmer but looking into the lens, and not just at the lens to understand what I look like, but at an actual perceived audience on the other side of that, and…

Tal Leeds: So you would internalize some sense that there is a viewer out there…

Erica Gionfriddo: I know, yes...

Tal Leeds: ...and they are watching me, and I am aware of this.

Erica Gionfriddo: Right, and I'm not just dancing into the void. I know there's someone receiving this on the other end, so I'm going to be performing for them in this moment. And I would take a few cycles of the loop to perform something for that virtual audience and then wait for it to appear in projection and review what I had just done. And then either choose to interact with that or complement that in some way.

Tal Leeds: Right, you make this move and it's captured on the camera, and then you can, within seconds, see it on the screen and respond to it as if you're disconnected to it.

Erica Gionfriddo: Or as if it were another person in the space with me.

Tal Leeds: Right.

Erica Gionfriddo: And depending on the camera angles, if we're getting a full body shot, if we're getting extreme close-up, it starts to distort reality. Because it could feasibly just multiply me back into infinity like the mirror we were talking about, but when you start to play with camera work, we get into these moments that really, truly are these moments of revealing interiority. And that I am maybe engaged in dancing, or I may be intent on watching the previous loop, and the camera will come in for a close-up of my face that's not performing, but processing. And giving that filmer role agency in the relationship, so it's not just a passive observer, is sort of the driving factor that can change the relationship, or instigate a change with the performer.

Tal Leeds: Sure, because in the digital age it's all interactive, right, like...

Erica Gionfriddo: Sure, yeah.

Tal Leeds: ...literally the content choices that someone might make if they are a creator can be based on the feedback that they get, right?

Erica Gionfriddo: And it's a truly exhausting practice to be inside of, and it was extremely frustrating for a long time. And there was a whole period where I was trying to choreograph the past, present, and future. Like, not just choreograph in real time, and what is my body going to do, but, how do I lay the bed for a future interaction, and then be in the present moment, but then catch that moment that I laid in the past and make some clever confrontation with myself. And that was infuriating and exhausting, and ultimately not what we were trying to say with it. It was just feeding into this cycle of production. And I had to constantly be producing, and there really wasn't a chance to be present.

Tal Leeds: Each performer is going through a kind of heightened version of what any YouTuber would potentially go through, right?

Erica Gionfriddo: Totally, yeah, and then because they are highly skilled dancers, they have, I think, sort of the advantage of being able to work all that fully, physically in their bodies. And not just wrapping their brains around how is this going to look later, but they get to really use their body as a tool to be processing in real-time how they're feeling and how they're reacting to these overlapping past-present-future simultaneous different audiences.

Tal Leeds: Right.

Erica Gionfriddo: And all of that comes out in their physicality, and maybe their physicality helps them understand their feelings about it.

Tal Leeds: But it also kind of speaks to the inherent weirdness that happens to your identity when you have this existence in the past, in the present, in the future, kind of all at once, kind of all swirling around you, in these weird loops...

Erica Gionfriddo: In the ether...

Tal Leeds: In the ether, right, yeah, exactly. You hear a lot of, you know, internet-based performers talk about a burnout that happens or a weird head space that they get into based on trying to have some sort of control of that, and trying to meet the demands of the algorithm. You know, and the demands that there's constantly some sort of content so that the viewership stays interested. It seems like you ended up in your own version of that in the lead-up to the performance

Erica Gionfriddo: As you were just talking about these swirling layers of past-present-future, which can tend to stay in the realm of performance, and the realm of presenting, and "I'm going to curate myself and package something to present for the loop, for now, and for the future," the way that we started to hack that idea in this piece in particular was to allow for that to happen, and then see if we could find a moment where it could switch to simply observing, or maybe capturing and revealing interiority. For lack of a better word, maybe finding the dancers in a moment of "candidness" rather than "performance." And I think that that was really the catalyst for me really reevaluating my relationship to Western contemporary dance. And I think that incessant need to be producing for the digital loop was compounded with my sort of impulse to be extremely flashy and athletic and daring in my movement at all times. And the two of those things together was stamina-wise not really possible.

Tal Leeds: Right, right.

Erica Gionfriddo: And for what? What was I proving by pushing myself so physically and producing these things that are then captured—like, it's just so much content. And so I spent a lot of time kind of re-evaluating what I wanted to do with my body and how could I get more range out of my body that doesn't necessarily need to be this high-intensity production level. And I think that that is sort of the aesthetic that you saw come out in *Ether Junk*. And I think the reason it was so effective, and lent itself towards the grotesque and the erotic and these ideas of desire, was because I've been able to harness and hack language to translate these ideas into the body and into movement.

Tal Leeds: You describe this is an exploration of identity, right? So I want to bring it back to that, because in a sense, what I'm hearing here is that when confronted with this sort of infinite loop, the identity seems to kind of fall apart. Almost like, you know, digitally induced schizophrenia that…

Erica Gionfriddo: Totally.

Tal Leeds: …that is demanded of it. There's a lot to try and process in a certain moment and a lot of confusion around like how, where do I even go with this, right?

Erica Gionfriddo: Exactly, and really the first two, well, half of the show for sure, the dancers are in conflict. And they're figuring out how they can work through the same things that I worked through, basically.

Tal Leeds: I think this is a great lead-in to a concept that you also mentioned in that philosophical portion, pleasurable…

Erica Gionfriddo: …confusion, which is an idea of Donna Haraway's, and what happens if we take pleasure in the confusion of our borders? So when we're thinking about a cyborg as a hybrid creature with fluid borders, if we can confuse those borders not just for the sake of doing it, so that we can, you know, extend beyond ourselves, but what if we actually take pleasure in that process? And for me, that made so much sense when I started to sort of confront my own identity borders, and, you know, came up against things that I thought were solid and immutable and that I couldn't change, and all of a sudden they melted.

Tal Leeds: Right, right.

Erica Gionfriddo: They turned into something else.

Tal Leeds: It seems like the conditions of your piece…

Erica Gionfriddo: Yeah.

Tal Leeds: …sort of manufactured that pleasurable confusion.

Erica Gionfriddo: I think that imagination is the most basic thing that we learn as children and the hardest thing to actually harness...

Tal Leeds: Right.

Erica Gionfriddo: ...in our lives. And this whole journey that I've been on with my relationship to social media and to technology has been about imagining other possibilities of what this thing can do, what I want to do with it. Imagining what I could maybe be in these spaces, and what maybe I want to be in the places outside of those digital spaces.

Tal Leeds: Like maybe you don't want to optimize it for what the mainstream currently values.

Erica Gionfriddo: No. No! Exactly, but I think it's...

Tal Leeds: I know that's blasphemy, but...

Erica Gionfriddo: No, I think, I maybe...I think I spent a long time kind of lamenting and railing, and then getting, you know, a good dose of rage around the way that social media practices manipulate and distort our understanding of ourselves and our reality. And it's inherently tied to capitalism, because they incentivize capitalistic behavior no matter which way around it. You know, these platforms, their only goal is continued and increased engagement. Like, they just want you on the platform.

Tal Leeds: Right.

Erica Gionfriddo: And so that we as humans are the ones that have turned it into this personal branding and marketing, where we feel like even in our most authentic moments, we are selling our authenticity to each other for likes and engagement and continued whatever.

Tal Leeds: What a concept, right?

Erica Gionfriddo: Oh god, yeah.

Tal Leeds: Selling your authenticity.

Erica Gionfriddo: Yeah.

Tal Leeds: I'll be authentic with you if you pay me.

Erica Gionfriddo: Right. Pay me with your attention, you know. Please like me. Pay attention to me.

Tal Leeds: Right, right.

Erica Gionfriddo: And now it feels kind of slimy to be talking about it that way, because I sort of have arrived at a more nuanced, maybe, or tender, understanding of what that means, and why people do that.

Tal Leeds: So why do people do that?

Erica Gionfriddo: It's this process that we all know, we don't even think about it anymore. We take two or three photos and we pick the best one. And then we swipe through ten or twelve different filters to find the one that makes us look the best, and then we choose the witty caption, and we tag the people and we tell everyone how happy we were. Except a minute before we had been staring silently across the table and not having conversation at dinner, or after that we get in a big fight or something, or anything in between. So we're like crystallizing these moments and packaging them for consumption basically. And that gets really tricky when it gets into that's now how I am conceiving of my identity. So it's less about just sharing and more about actual personal development, and if there's not a certain level of engagement, then I actually am starting to value the moments of my life differently, or value things—it's going to change my value scale based on this totally fucked up system of attention and engagement on these platforms.

Tal Leeds: Where this brings us, I think, is the ethics of it, which I think is the ultimate message of your piece, right? Which is, whether we like it or not, we're cyborgs.

Erica Gionfriddo: Yeah.

Tal Leeds: And we have this great power, and this great responsibility, first and foremost to ourselves, to wield it to make the world that we want, instead of just the default.

Erica Gionfriddo: Yeah.

Tal Leeds: Because if we just default, this is what we're getting.

Erica Gionfriddo: Yeah, that's beautifully put. And Donna Haraway talks about "response-ability," the ability to respond. And if you can only imagine two options, or a set of categories as options, you are not going to imagine a new response…

Tal Leeds: Right.

Erica Gionfriddo: …to anything. And that actually brings me all the way back to 2016, when I very first started experimenting with this livestreaming in live performance mode. And it came shortly after livestreaming hit the social media apps. And that summer was one of the first times that we saw a police shooting in real-time stream live to Facebook. And also we saw, like, makeup tutorials in the same breath. And I was so rocked by that. I was like what am I supposed to do with this new window into humanity? What's my responsibility to my fellow human now that I know that this is happening? And it's different when it's a real person in their car with their family being confronted by a police officer. That's way different than reading about it on the news six hours later.

[sound of news reports]

News Reporters (montage): The officer who shot and killed Philando Castile…Philando Castile…Philando Castile…Philando Castile…Philando Castile was shot when his vehicle was pulled over for a traffic stop.

[news report sound fades]

Erica Gionfriddo: This is a much more visceral…

Tal Leeds: The filter's gone and…

Erica Gionfriddo: It's not documenting, it's experiencing, and that—I just had so many questions around that, and that's really where this whole inquiry started. And so I started using this livestreaming in live performance to figure out, like, what is this actually doing to us, and how are we responding to it? And then, of course, I had to go into my whole personal excavation in order to come back outwards with *Ether Junk*, to where I think I'm finally able to, with more clarity, be able to start to address that initial question of: what is our responsibility to one another? Given the paradigm of everything we just discussed here.

Tal Leeds: Right, and so your work is your answer: to play and to hack, right? Hacking is a big theme.

Erica Gionfriddo: Yeah, and I guess hacking is about imagination. Like, you you get in there and you don't accept the way that you've been told this thing works. And you get in underneath the hood, and you imagine what would happen if you put things in different relationships, or if I put this thing over here, what happens? Yeah, and I think that's the kind of like active participation we could use more of, in everyday relationships, in society and politics, certainly.

Tal Leeds: We can't put the genie back in the bottle either.

Erica Gionfriddo: Non-participation is no longer possible. We're way past that.

Tal Leeds: And that's another thing that was very clear in this piece. You almost had to make a concerted effort to not participate.

Erica Gionfriddo: And what was so fascinating, and some of the feedback that we got from people, is that even if they made that concerted effort: "No, I'm going to turn my phone off, and I'm not going to take it out, I'm not going to follow any of the prompts, and I'm not going to laugh, have a good time," by the point where the airpods start to happen, they started to feel left out. And they were sort of jealous. And they were like, "Ooh, I kind of wish I was up there doing that." That's been sort of a reaction in various versions of this work.

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Tal Leeds: And again the—I'm reminded of another layer of the kind of beauty I was seeing in that moment, which is how much we've been deprived of exactly that. The drive to get online to make those connections and to seek that is rooted in how disconnected we've been from that emotion. And it's almost like the struggle to get to that point of connection is such a tug-of-war between all the forces that have kept us away from that in the first place and then thing itself, you know. And so there was that kind of catharsis of like…

Erica Gionfriddo: Totally.

Tal Leeds: "That's what I've been trying to get!" And you feel it in your body. You feel it just because of the basic empathy of watching someone else experience it.

Erica Gionfriddo: And I think we also just wanted to offer the possibility of taking pleasure in that confused process of getting there. How maybe could we start to find the ways of pleasure, really, to enjoy our lives, and enjoy the process of re-imagination.

Tal Leeds: Maybe utopia isn't supposed to be in the physical world. Maybe it has a different purpose being in our imagination.

Erica Gionfriddo: Utopia by definition is a non-place, it actually it doesn't exist, and, you know, it's…

Tal Leeds: Right, it means "no place."

Erica Gionfriddo: And so this idea of forever arriving at something is maybe the idea of utopia. A motivating factor for imagination. If you desire something then maybe you can imagine new ways of getting there.

Tal Leeds: Right.

Erica Gionfriddo: And then you probably won't arrive at that desire.

Tal Leeds: Right.

Erica Gionfriddo: You're going to arrive somewhere else entirely.

Tal Leeds: The imagination is a motivational tool. And you're not motivated when you get there. You get there, you're no longer motivated, so you...

Erica Gionfriddo: ...so you have to keep arriving, yeah...

Tal Leeds: ...so you have to keep arriving, right?

Erica Gionfriddo: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Tal Leeds: This was fantastic. This was a great journey. And watching your piece was a great journey. I'll say this: I think a lot more about my cyborg self with some seriousness and some intention. In a way that I did not before. That I didn't even really think was possible. The discovery of it was epiphanous, it was just, wow. I discovered something I—that blindsided me. I'm a millennial. Got AOL when I was about fifteen years old or so, which is twenty years ago. And, you know, it just blew my mind wide open and it did a lot for me personally, in terms of growth, in terms of how I developed as an adult, eventually. But then there's been a dark side to it. And I've kind of always felt like I'm just driving blind in it. And that's just a part of being that first wave of young people on the web. These are the growing pains of a humanity that is very suddenly thrust into that infinite possibility, and we're still navigating it. We're still like in the really shitty part of it.

Erica Gionfriddo: Yeah, it's a real messy puberty.

Tal Leeds: It's real messy. And I feel like your piece is of sort of reminding me of what the intention was, and how it's still contained in there somewhere.

Erica Gionfriddo: That's great.

Tal Leeds: But we got to have to dig it out a little bit.

Erica Gionfriddo: I hope, if anything, *Ether Junk* helped maybe illuminate is that it's going to take a lot of labor. That it's not going to be easy and that it's going to require us all to work at it.

Tal Leeds: I pray that we get through it. I hope we will. And I feel like, you know, personally, a piece like this gave me a lot of hope that it's possible, so thanks for that.

Erica Gionfriddo: I'm so glad you got that. Thank you.

Tal Leeds: Yeah, my pleasure. Thank you.

[end of transcript]