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## Being Virtual Together: Creating Connection in *dist[Sense]*

by Naomi P. Bennett, N. Eda Erçin, Greg Langner, Irina Kruchinina, Johanna Middleton, and  
Cynthia Sampson

### **Abstract**

This co-authored paper is a reflection on our collective and individual experiences creating and performing in *dist[Sense]*, a virtual performance experience for one audience-participant and one performer-participant to be present together in a single Zoom box. *dist[Sense]* was created as a reaction to global stay-at-home orders and a widely-shared sense of isolation and need for human connection during the summer of 2020. Using Zoom Telematics, *dist[Sense]* created a shared virtual space in which the performer-participant and audience-participant could be co-present. Through writing this performance reflection, we (the creative team) have wrestled with our own definitions of presence. What does it mean to be both materially alone and virtually together? Can we really achieve shared meaning with another? Or is the experience of mutual understanding a projection of our thoughts and desires? Although these questions exist in Face-to-Face interactions, the virtual shared space of *dist[Sense]* brought their urgency to the forefront. In *dist[Sense]*, the medium became the message: the medium of Zoom became the meaning we learned about — how to connect in virtual space. Through the creation and performance of *dist[Sense]*, we each found our own way to be present and find connection in a time of mass isolation.

Keywords : Virtual Touch, Telematics, Digital Performance, Presence, Zoom, COVID-19

## Introduction

*On October 2, 2020, at 12:00pm U.S. Central time I stood (not) alone in my home studio. Looking into the Zoom space at my partner, I smiled. The energy that radiated across the virtual distance from their reciprocated smile sent the same shivers down my spine that I remembered from the before-times, from before the COVID-19 pandemic. The tiniest of movements sent goosebumps up my arm and as our hands tentatively brushed against each others' projected bodies, I felt tears well up in my eyes. We were touching.*

(Bennett, Personal observations while performing in *dist[Sense]*, October 2, 2020.)

Designed as an experience for one audience-participant and one performer participant without dialog, *dist[Sense]* was as a collaborative effort to connect in a time of social distancing, an exploration of what it means to be physically present in virtual space, and a moment of focus in what had become an increasingly unfocused world. Originally presented as part of the Hopkins Black Box virtual performance season in October, 2020, *dist[Sense]* was created as a direct reaction to the shift to virtual performance spaces due to global stay-at-home orders during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Building on the previous work of director Naomi P. Bennett in telematic video performance, *dist[Sense]* used Zoom Telematics to connect one audience-participant and one performer-participant in an exploration of connection, touch, and the ways in which we can come together to create a shared experience across time and space. This co-authored performance reflection is an effort for us, the creative team, to work through our discoveries, dilemmas, and (re)definitions on what it means to connect with one another in an increasingly technologically entangled world.

While many pandemic performances were attempting to recreate the communal feeling that comes with being co-present with a large group in the same physical space – the type that was possible in a pre-COVID audience – a handful of artist and performance companies shifted their focus to the solo audience member, creating one-on-one encounters that directly engaged the individual as an active participant in the performance experience. Performances such as *The Telelibrary*<sup>1</sup> by Yannick Trapman O'Brien and *A Thousand Ways: Part One* by 600 Highwaymen both utilized the telephone to connect with individual audience members during the most

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<sup>1</sup> As of spring 2023, *The Telelibrary* continues to be available as an ongoing one-on-one performance experience.

isolating time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, several non-performance based experiences became important means of connection during pandemic isolation: QuarantineChat, which uses conversation prompts to connect strangers via telephone; and Human Online (a video-only connection) which began just prior to the pandemic but offered a way in which individuals could connect across geographic and linguistic borders. Focussing on this potential in the one-on-one encounter, *dist[Sense]* utilized the visual-physical nature of Zoom to create connection between the performer-participant and audience-participant. We use the terms audience-participant and performer-participant to indicate the shared process of co-creation. In regard to the structure of *dist[Sense]*, these terms not only describe the type of active engagement expected from audience-participants, but also our attempt to create a non-hierarchical structure in which both parties were simultaneously performer and witness to the experience.

Throughout the month-long performance run of *dist[Sense]* we, the creative team<sup>2</sup> danced, laughed, hugged, held hands, and pet the occasional cat or dog that entered our frame. We explored what it meant to be fully present with another living being. There was no clear agenda, no set expectation, and no narrative framing the experience. And even though it was a joy to see old friends, the most intimate and honest moments happened with complete strangers. The following pages are a reflection on the individual and collective experiences of the creative team. Taking on multiple roles as performer-participant and DJ,<sup>3</sup> each of us found ways to be present, be together, and create connections across the digital divide.

### **Inspiration and Creation Process**

*No matter how many times I enter the space, the anticipation of waiting for the familiar ding is just as nerve-wracking. The ding that indicates the audience-participant has entered the waiting room and it's time to begin. As the stage manager (or DJ as we called them) lets them in, I prepare for the next thirty minutes of being present with another body in Zoom space. While virtual touch and contact were the initial*

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<sup>2</sup> The creative team of *dist[Sense]* included: Naomi P. Bennett as director and performer; Irina Kruchinina, Johanna Middleton, Greg Langner, and N. Eda Erçin as performer-participants, and Cynthia Sampson as dramaturg and lead DJ/stage manager.

<sup>3</sup> DJ was our title for the stage manager/technical support during each performance experience. DJ's were in charge of playing the music, letting in the audience-participant, and being a back-up for the performer-participant in case of emergency.

*inspirations, through the process of performing we discovered that there are so many more ways to connect.* (Bennett, Personal observations while performing in *dist[Sense]*, October, 2020.)

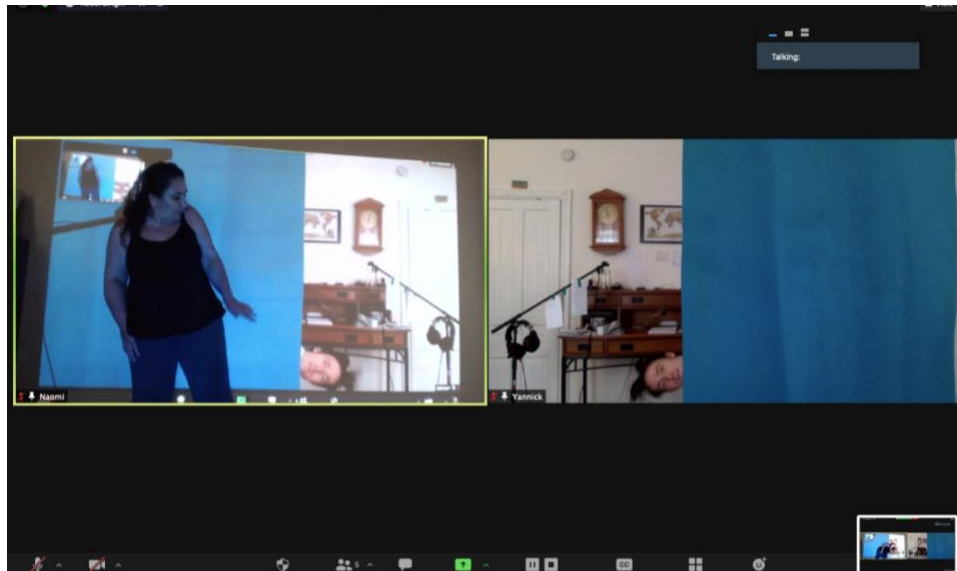
Inspired by Paul Sermon's 1994 version of *Telematic Dreaming* featuring Susan Kozel, *dist[Sense]* is an adaptation of the style of telematic video performance in which one (or multiple) bodies are projected into a performance space to interact in real-time. In her book *Closer*, Kozel writes about her experience performing *Telematic Dreaming*, describing a range of encounters that elicited sensations of pleasure, pain, and physical violence done to her virtual body (96-99). Informed by Kozel's experiences, part of the preparation for *dist[Sense]* included discussions of non-verbal consent, possibilities for violence, and exit strategies for the performers if the audience began to take advantage of the vulnerability of the virtual space.

Keeping this in mind, the creation process began by focusing on exploring possibilities, limitations, and physical rules of Zoom space. As the instigator and director, I (Naomi) was interested in two main questions: first, how could we connect our individual, three-dimensional spaces as a co-creative shared virtual space; and second, how could we create an experience of physical connection with another through the visual medium of Zoom. The following is an account of the work that the creative team of *dist[Sense]* began from our living rooms during the isolation of 2020, and now finish from the isolation of our living rooms, kitchens, and offices as we have scattered across the globe. We hope that our thoughts will shed light on the ways we were able to learn to connect in a time of disconnection, and how powerful the screen can be if you know how to traverse the virtual landscape. While *dist[Sense]* did not get rid of the Zoom box, it did allow us to recognize one another, more intimately, despite the limitations.

### **Zoom Telematics and Thirdspace**

In order to bridge the digital divide created by the individual box structure of Zoom, *dist[Sense]* used Zoom Telematics, a technique developed by Naomi P. Bennett (director and co-author), Twyla Kowalenko, and Ray Louter earlier in the summer of 2020 as part of the Canadian Association for Theatre Research's Somatic Engagement Seminar. Telematics, a general term that describes technology which allows for real time interaction across distance, is often used in digital performance to allow a remote performer to be telepresent onstage

through a live-feed video projection. Zoom Telematics takes this concept and applies it to the co-presence of two or more remote bodies telematically placed together in a single Zoom box. To achieve this effect, each performer-participant had a projector, which was set up to cast the full-size image of the audience-participant's Zoom box onto a blank wall in the performer-participant's personal space (figure 1). The audience-participant was then instructed to pin the performer-participant's video, creating a closed feedback loop that placed the virtual bodies of both participants in the same Zoom box.



*Figure 1. Projected image of Yannick Trapman-O'brien with Naomi P. Bennett (left), and Trapman-O'brien alone (right), during dist[Sense]. Screenshot by Cynthia Sampson, 2020.*

This merging of the two physical spaces creates a shared virtual space, combining both “the abstract and the concrete, the real and imagined,” or what Edward W. Soja calls Thirdspace (56). Building off the work of Henri Lefebvre, Soja’s trialectics of spatiality includes Firstspace as that which is perceived or tangible, Secondspace as that which is conceived or mental, and Thirdspace as that which is lived or social. Thirdspace is both a combination of material reality of Firstspace and imagined conceptualization of Secondspace, and more. It is the space between and beyond, an expansion of the possibilities encompassing both real and imagined space. Soja’s Thirdspace elicits a unique overlap with Wallace Bacon’s conception of the *third body of performance* in the oral interpretation of literature, that is, “a third body

which *becomes* [emphasis added] the performance” (356). In other words, as the *body of a performer* negotiates how most appropriately and effectively to embody and publicly present the *body of a cultural text* (e.g., literature), in order to craft and create the *body of a performance*, Thirdspace comparably constitutes a plain of possibilities found and negotiated through shared, collective embodiment; and forms a perspective of possibilities beyond the capabilities of any singular imagination. Much like the medium of a message inextricably influences the *meaning* of a message (McLuhan, “The Medium Is the Message”), a performance is essentially inseparable from the space(s) in which the performance takes place. As we experienced through *dist[Sense]*, though at a distance from one another, Thirdspace negates the binary between the tangible (physical space) and the conceptual (virtual space), providing language to be able to talk about the shared realness of spatial experiences in virtual environments. Using Zoom Telematics as a way to access the virtual Thirdspace, *dist[Sense]* was able to transcend the geographic distance and stay-at-home orders and allow for the visual and virtual blending of each individual's private (or public) spaces.

### **Acoustics of the Thirdspace: Language and Music**

The creative team collectively leaned into the possibilities of nonverbal forms of communication as a productive and critical limitation. Language and music became important elements to consider as having the capability to either create connection or divide between the performer-participant and the audience-participant. From the beginning, *dist[Sense]* was designed as an experience without words, but we soon realized that some minimal written communication was necessary to orient the audience-participants both upon arrival and exit from the experience.

In order to intentionally refrain from spoken language between the participants, we used written instructions in the chat and on the screen to deliver and regulate the rules of the entry and the exit. The need for such framing to signal the beginning and the end of the experience occurred during the rehearsals. How could we make it clear to the audience that the performance had already started when they saw us, and it had already finished when we disappeared? The way we welcomed the audience-participants in and led them to leave stemmed from the conventions of social interaction in contemporary performance practices

including contact improvisation, participatory and immersive theater as well as the norms that arose for meeting in Zoom space.

The absence of spoken words made the textual content used for framing more visible and audible dramaturgically. We decided on multilingual opening instructions and a closing slide to guide the audience (figure 2). The instructions were written in three languages, English, Russian and Turkish, representing the mother tongues of the creative team. For the purposes of inclusivity and accessibility, we wanted to represent the languages of each member to open the experience to a wider geography. The initial aim was to include the friends, families and social networks of the international members of the creative team, but it ultimately pointed to the ethical and political responsibilities of language in digital performances. We are aware that having three languages on display did not decenter the power that the English language holds and the whiteness it enforces in contemporary global performance. However, it became a meaningful gesture raising the question of representation in the context of a seemingly transcultural and *neutral* (in other words, non-theatrical) nonverbal virtual space.

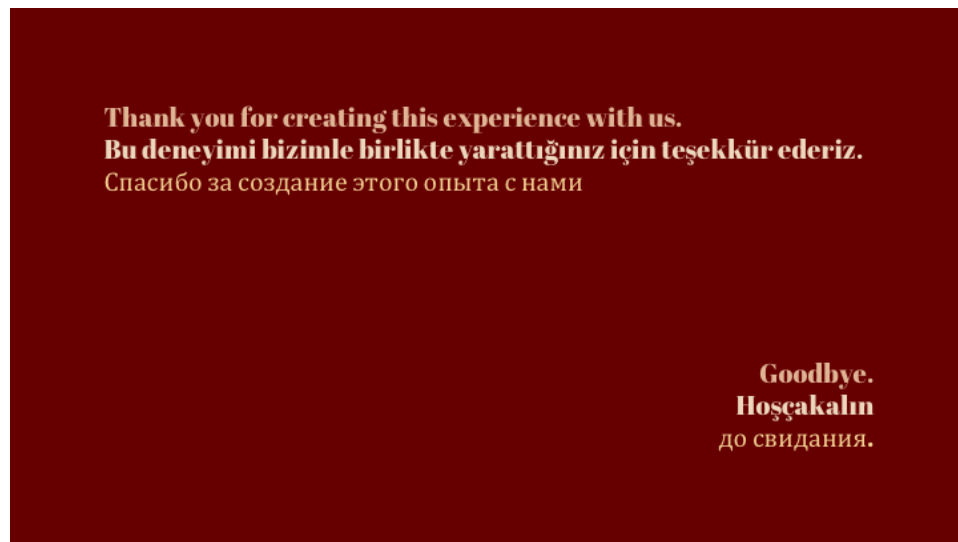


Figure 2. Closing slide for dist[Sense].

Along with language, music became a powerful element of connection that we struggled with throughout the development of *dist[sense]*. We discovered that music had the ability to work similar to breath, connecting audience-participant and performer-participant in a shared acoustic rhythm and further developing the dimensionality of the virtual Thirdspace. The challenge came in finding a musical score that was neutral, that would elicit the same affective response across cultural, linguistic, and geographic borders. Although we ultimately settled on a meditative droning soundscape, even this ultimately bore the markers of white western meditative practices. This question of neutrality in music and language that reaches across borders was never fully resolved, and is one that we are still working through even as we write this performance reflection.

### **Presence, [Dis]Connect, and Medium is the Message: Eda**

*We both know that you are not in my room. What you see is a perfectly emptied corner. It is four square meters with a projection on the wall. The blinds are shut, the door is closed, the furniture is rearranged. I pulled, pushed, and piled everything to open this space for us to meet. A dresser, two crowded desks, a tall bookshelf, a queen-size mattress, an open airing rack with an overflowing laundry basket underneath, a dog crate. This corner you see is and is not my room. I set it up before the performance and will strike it after. If you wished to see the rest of my space, I wouldn't show it to you. It would look too messy, unintentional, perhaps a bit too daily or private. What I am hoping to share is deliberate and personal but not necessarily private. Eye contact, hand gestures, arm swings, a deep sigh, my child-like excitement, even the mole above my left eyebrow, you will witness them all. But I'd like to think that I am still in control. I am still a performer in this corner. (Erçin, post-performance reflection in the form of a letter to my first audience-participant with whom I never met before and after this experience, December, 2022)*

I woke up earlier than usual to prepare. I put on something other than my indoor COVID clothes. I asked my partner to watch our dog, Bruno, so he would not cry at my door during the performance. I signed in about 30 minutes before your arrival, checked the projection, sound,

image and Wifi. Everything was working. I warmed up, even put on perfume! Five-minutes before our slot, I sat on the floor staring at my screen and waiting for you. Phenomenologically speaking, I am not in my room either. Not anymore. I have entered a shared virtual Thirdspace created by our Zoom connection. Even prior to your arrival, you changed my relationship to 'here and now'. You signed in. We saw each other. We start performing. We perform presence. Presence, according to Giannachi and Kaye, is both a practice and an experience which is not bound to a unique location of "being there" but is contingent upon a series of "performative and temporary encounters" with self and/or an other "with regard to place, position, and so relation" (2-3).

I see your room. You positioned your computer in a central spot, so I can see most of it (figure 3). Your bookcase is filled with books and your walls with frames, pictures, objects. I see your bed, even the color of your beddings. You haven't had a chance to make it this morning. Is it morning for you, too? You are standing at a distance. It feels strange to witness all of this. Are you fully aware of how much I can see you? We remain still. I keep facing the computer to show you that I am looking at you, that I am present. We both hear a meditative lo-fi soundscape being shared through Zoom. I start moving my upper body gently. You come closer to your screen, too. We follow the soothing rhythm of the soundscape for a while. I constantly move. Stillness feels vulnerable. We mirror each other through slow-motion actions, everyday gestures or clown-like expressions. No-one says a word. No-one breaks a rule. You smile. I smile back. I feel obliged to offer a smile, all the time. Smiles communicate consent, I decide. You are attentive and kind. I read your willingness to follow me and to stay online as kindness. You know you can leave at any minute. But you stay. You stay magnified on my wall. The pale wall paint blends with your skin. Are those goosebumps on your arm or is that just the old skin of my wall? You are woven in the fabric of my room, Merleau-Ponty would say. We are caught and entangled in this new environment, new hybrid ecosystem.



Figure 3. Projected image of Giuliana Funkhouser with N. Eda Erçin (left), and Funkhouser alone (right), in *dist[Sense]*. Screenshot by Cynthia Sampson, 2020.

Marshall McLuhan defined environments as invisible “active processes” with “ground rules [and a] pervasive structure” which change our sensory engagement and function as an extension of our embodiment (“Understanding Media” 68). Almost six decades ago, before the internet, instant video and social media, before you and I were born, McLuhan made a statement: “the medium is the message” (McLuhan and Fiore 7-22). He challenged the form and content dichotomy in studying media (new media, in particular, the radio, telephone and TV of his time). In communication, the medium imprints the message, he argued. The medium is what affords, enables, and transmits any content, which cannot be received, processed, or studied without studying the medium itself. The medium itself, the space where our virtual bodies meet, becomes inseparable from the message.

*dist[Sense]* is a new environment, a new medium, an emerging ecosystem. This four-square-meter, high-tech corner (technologically, the most advanced spot in my house) is the performance. Creating and sustaining it together, technically, tangibly, imaginatively, and even spiritually as a safe and accessible place with all human and non-human bodies involved (such as electricity, power sockets, internet, equipment, trust and breath) makes the performance.

There is always a slight lag in the visual feed. My moving body makes shadows on your frozen telematic self. Every glitch is a reminder of an unknown (a technological, socio-cultural, or interpersonal unknown). This presence is not an “interpretative” but an “affective experience” (Reason 84). There is so much to say and yet most is ineffable. We touch beyond the economies of binary and heteronormative sexuality. I don’t know if you see it, but I tear up when the chime sounds, signaling the end of our time. I turn off my camera. That is the rule. And I watch you for a few seconds before you leave, looking at the screen which has just swallowed my image. I am still here though, and you know it. We linger in this corner that we craved and conceived. We are entangled in the medium, a decentered plural horizon of instant messages. “Performance is always already an instance of intra-human and human-nonhuman entanglement” says Sarah Hopfinger (106). Without the blind on the window, the extension cord on the floor, this modem, the latest software update of Zoom, you, me, and the millions of visible and invisible particles colliding in motion, there is no corner.

### **Meeting at the Intersection: Irina**

Between tangible and imagined realities, I hit a wall: a type of a limit, where circumstances, on the one side, and interpretations, on the other, interfere and weave reality in the form of a physical experience of what’s imagined. In other words, tactile and mental images take an appearance of a type of reality where aspirational interpretations of an event neither sublimate nor rearrange its elements, yet enable me to act therein.

You come into my room while remaining simultaneously in your personal space: how much of you does actually enter? The projection of your body in your room takes room in my bedroom (figure 4): in which form are you here? Are you an illusion of you? I feel your presence, you take up space in my room, you break my wall: you see what’s around, you assess it, you move through my room as if you are home, and you are. What makes your presence tangible? *dist[Sense]* perplexed me with the urge to redefine presence, or rather what senses I use to acknowledge, understand, frame the contiguity of another person, as well as the boundaries between us. If we are not in the same place, what holds us accountable to maintain a shared space? The virtual character of our encounter highlighted the corpo-reality of the

emerging meanings that are not yet furnished with a shared language, just like the new space of its signifiers itself is still being in the process of formation. The experience is emphatically non-verbal.



*Figure 4. Projected image of Johanna Middleton's Zoom space projected on Irina Kruchinina bedroom wall during rehearsal for dist[Sense]. Screenshot by Cynthia Sampson, 2020.*

Are you paying attention? Why did you show up? Do you look at me as another human you don't know and need to be gentle with, or somebody putting on a show for your entertainment, or a stranger on whom you project your fantasies, or a curiosity for a bored observer?

Through my Zoom window, I'm looking into yours: do you see me? Maybe, not. Can we still dance? Well, I can dance with you: I won't let you out of my sight, I will turn my every movement into a response to yours, even if you are not looking. Would it not look like a dance: you lead and I respond? But would you feel my touch, my breath? At the end of the day, I only respond to what I look at through the Zoom window. A mere human, I learned to trigger other senses with my sight that so easily sees what I want in what it is not, and what's more dangerous - I feel them! I look, I move - and my tangy solitaire seems to be a fulfilling

interaction with you, until an obvious mismatch of steps reminds me the dance has been an illusion, and I, invisible to you, jump over into the next open window.

The short-lasting mirages of connection became an undercurrent of my experience of *dist[Sense]*. In the first exercise, we were asked to organize our six Zoom windows in a gallery view, all muted, and pick a partner to dance without sending them a sign of invitation. As the dance unfolded, we could seamlessly switch partners at our preferred time and pace. I have never escaped the unease from sensations that would never root in what I would call with certainty connection.

When the projection of a person in their room claims to visually extend my personal space, do they claim to remove or push my wall of privacy? Does this virtual act of invited intrusion suggest a representation of an encounter between strangers, or even good acquaintances: we superimpose each other's spaces and try to touch each other's hands, or sit silent, or stare, or make jokes and pretend to play the known games to avoid strangeness? Am I stimulated by my imagination that activates the fluids in my body and initiates a flow - an illusion of connection? I "touch" your hand and the goose bumps of loneliness stream through my back. Who is your projection? It is your thought of me, it is your assumption of what we are supposed to do with each other? The design of the performance looks like a model of human interaction, where the virtual component visualizes in real time and space the silenced moments of inviting awkwardness, where recognizing a wondrous unapproachable otherness, I stay with the person and wait what is going to happen.

### **Problematic Screens: Johanna**

I am bothered by screens - cell phone screens, TV screens, computer screens. Their light strains my eyes and gives me migraines. I feel anxious on social media sites. I resent that I have to use all of those screens in order to participate in society. And yet. I love that I am able to meet people from my couch. I love that I can see my parents' faces everyday even though they live across the country. I love that we've still been able to commune despite this pandemic. I entered the rehearsal process of *dist[Sense]* with this tension. My own personal research began with a desire to resolve my own relationship with the screen. How could I reconcile my negative screen associations with my respect for their utility as means of communication?

*dist[Sense]* offered new respect for the possibilities of screen interaction. Instead of thinking of our Zoom experience as a lesser recreation of a performance that should have been live, I was able to explore what specific opportunities the virtual experience offered. A chance to be in two rooms at once (figure 5). A chance to share intimate space (our Zoom experiences usually took place in our homes). A chance to play with the meeting of our bodies in ways that could not occur in “real life.” The experience also stretched me as a performer.



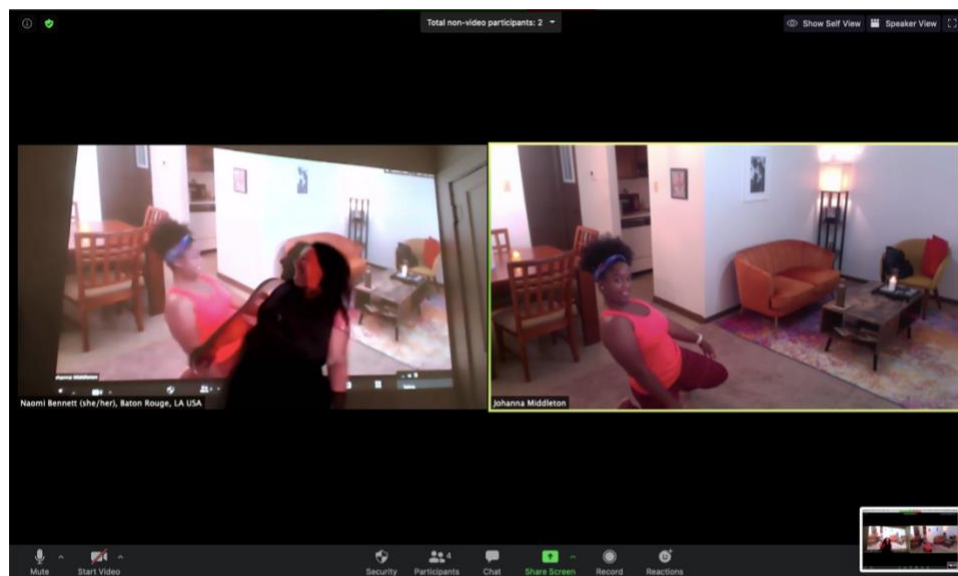
*Figure 5. Projected image of Kalli Champagne’s Zoom space projected on Johanna Middleton’s living room wall in dist[Sense]. Screenshot by Cynthia Sampson, 2020.*

In one rehearsal I compared the task to online dating - offering or accepting proposals without the immediate feedback of confirmed connection. Knowing that connection could be happening for one party and not the other. Unlike online dating, in *dist[Sense]* we remained in the interaction anyway and kept trying to connect. This required a new level of vulnerability for me. In other performance situations in which I have interacted with co-performers for an extended period without dialogue, I have known my co-performer and have already established nonverbal vocabulary with them. Through the performance process, I learned how to confront the fear of loss of connection or lack of a strong connection by continuing to stay present. The screen became a shared playroom where co-participants could discover more about the virtual medium together. I learned a different way to be present through *dist[Sense]*. Furthermore, the

Zoom experience we co-created felt unlike other screen communication experiences. I am interested in exploring how the virtual medium demanded a new mode of being present and designed a unique phenomenological experience of the screen for me.

### Entering without Expectations: Naomi

How do you manage audience expectations when you want them to enter with none? This was constantly on my mind during the creation, rehearsal, and performance for *dist[Sense]*. The purpose was not narrative, not even to create a spontaneous narrative. The purpose of *dist[Sense]* was to just be. To be in [virtual] space with another person, another body, another energy (figure 6). To be together in a time of un-togetherness. So how do you ask an audience to let go of expectations? In the end, this proved to be the most challenging for me in *dist[Sense]*, but one that seemed to be easier with strangers, and even easier with non-performance people – but not always. Thinking back, there are three interactions that stick in my mind: one audience-participant who I knew well, one who I barely knew, and one who I did not know at all.



*Figure 6. Projected image of Johanna Middleton with Naomi P. Bennett (left), and Middleton alone (right), during rehearsal for dist[Sense].*

*Screenshot by Cynthia Sampson, 2020.*

The first interaction was with an audience-participant who I knew well and who was also a seasoned performer. They entered the space with a bang. Immediately finding ways to

transcend our two disparate spaces, we created our own shared Thirdspace through the energetic connection and physical-visual cues of one another's bodies. It was fabulous. It felt like a performance. But it wasn't. It was an experience in connection. Connection has always been hard for me, which is probably why it is central to my work. Finding connection in the context of *making performance* does not really work. At least not that deep, satisfying connection. That requires work. It requires vulnerability. And it requires letting go of expecting anything to happen. In this instance a performance happened in the context of finding connection (at least from my point of view).

The second interaction was with an audience-participant that I barely knew. At the time, I remember being uncertain of what would come of our encounter. But as we stood there, bridging the divide between our physical spaces, their very presence made my whole being flutter with excitement. We had talked before, exchanging pleasantries in the hallways or at the coffee shop. But we had never touched – or felt the impulse to touch. Now, without the ability to speak, touch was less intimidating. And being excited to touch each other was okay. Because after all, this **was** a performance. This was not the hallways or the coffee shop where that touch that sent shivers up my spine would require a follow up, an explanation. We had an explanation as long as we both let go of our expectations.

Remembering that moment, standing side-by-side in our co-joined Zoom box, the anticipation of that first touch of our fingertips was electrifying. Sensing this potential of the virtual connection felt viscerally in my whole body. The “superiority of the analog” as Brian Massumi names it, in which “[d]igital technologies have a connection to the potential and the virtual *only through the analog*,” or in other words, the embodied experience (138). Physically connecting through the visual, our bodies were able to remember and relive the sensation - and anticipation - of touch. As my eyes felt our fingertips glide up each other's arms, I recalled Laura U. Marks' theory of haptic visuality, in which the eyes function “like organs of touch” (162). Engaging proprioceptive memory, haptic visuality invites a focus on the details, texture, and tactile nature of the image. In this sense, I found my attention during our encounter was drawn to the movement of our fingertips, the texture of our skin, calling on the knowledge held in my body which in turn created sensations of virtual touch.

The third interaction was with an audience-participant that I had never met before, who arrived while I was DJing for another performer-participant. I watched as they came with their own expectations of what *dist[Sense]* would be, what their role as the audience – not audience-participants – should be. A radical shift from the intention of the shared experience of *dist[Sense]*. They did what an audience will invariably do, what makes the live performance LIVE: they broke the rules.

Rather than the individual audience-participant we were expecting, the camera opened to a group of five individuals ready and waiting to be passively entertained, all settled in to watch the “performance.” Except that is not what we were offering. We were offering connection, touch, and an opportunity to be present. As we had discussed in rehearsal, it was up to the performer-participant to make the call whether or not to shut the performance down if they felt unsafe. They could go off camera, get their cell phone, text the DJ. But they didn’t. The performer-participant that day stayed with them, being open and offering all five of them the chance to connect. Some got bored and left. Some got up to get pizza. Some took out their phones. One did have a moment of connection, but then seemed to get self-conscious as they realized the other four were watching. Some tried to instigate a “show,” and when they weren’t entertained, they too got up and left. But only connection was being offered. And clearly that was not what they expected.

### **The Ethics Watching: Cynthia**

My role in *dist[Sense]* was that of DJ, a sort of stage manager for the Zoom room. I let in the participants, cued up the music, and watched them play. Most of the audience-participants had no idea there was a witness. If they understood how Zoom worked— and took the time to notice— they could’ve easily identified a third person on the participants list. But, I imagine the anticipation for the experience and the anxiety of what they were even showing up to obscured my presence. It was good that someone was there if the performer-participant needed help. It was necessary for a technically smooth show to have someone else running the controls. I was, in short, a voyeur. The production’s peeping tom. An audience to a performance I wasn’t a part of but that I had created.

In a traditional theater space, it's easy to forget the stage crew that sits in the light booth and in the wings running and watching the performance event. In Zoom space, I didn't feel that same ease that came with blending into the background. Perhaps because it didn't feel like blending in? Were the audience-participants *of dist[Sense]* familiar enough with Zoom to know that even though I shouldn't be acknowledged, I was still present? Or, was this platform still new enough, foreign enough that they didn't consider me to be anything but the platform itself? It's this distinction that troubled me. That made me more/less than crew and more or less a secret.

### **When the Audience Doesn't Do What You Want: Irina**

I had two contrasting experiences in the beginning and at the end of the month during which the performance took place. The first one was with a man who did not show any signs of willingness to interact, and I just sat with him in his room for the entire length of the performance session: we kept looking at each other, acknowledging we are sitting together, while remaining untouched, undisturbed in our own homes, in our thoughts, daily energy (figure 7). Yet I cannot say we were sitting in our shells, because we were affecting each other like pets' presence transforms the space where they silently sleep on their comfortable spot. The decision to stay with each other and pay attention created a context. As a performer, I relocated myself into the space where all is predicated by the slightest expressions of intentionality, either to stay still or acknowledge my presence, of the participant. Relieved from the burden of words as the constraints of the performance did not allow words, we did not need to look for meanings to create a common context. The merged space of yet secluded rooms of ours turned into a new context without narrative, without predication, without physical threat of potentially harmful interaction. The space actualized the possibility to discover a different type of corpo-reality through the physical impact of another person who is not physically there yet informs my psychosomatic state. The latter depended to a high degree upon my guesses of what we are supposed to do, of what is expected, yet exactly because no word was said, I slowly saw the guesses pass leaving me in plain full-body attention towards another person, not as a source of meaning, danger, or potential of interaction, but as a self-containing non-predetermined life form.



Figure 7. Projected image of Josh Hamzehee's Zoom space projected on Irina Kruchinina's bedroom wall in *dist[Sense]*, (inset: Josh Hamzehee).  
Screenshot by Cynthia Sampson, 2020.

I felt alleviated from the predications of social implications in another session that started off as a potentially harmful experience as the rules of the encounter were broken. I entered the room with five people sitting comfortably on their soft chairs and couch in front of the Zoom window and expecting me to perform for them. They were eating and talking between themselves which gave them power to treat me as an alien element they were watching like a TV behind the glass protection screen. Yet in the physical safety of my room and no words to frame the situation in the meanings I have vocabulary for, I proceeded with an intention to offer them my hand, inviting them to draw theirs towards me. Even though they reluctantly did the gesture in a doubtful fashion, the glimpse of reality of our interaction was informed by their confusion and my fear tickled my back. *dist[Sense]* sharpened my alert awareness of unconditionality of human interaction predicated by our ability to invite each other's integrity in mind and body as a source of impulses and intentions.

#### **Distance from *dist[Sense]*: Greg**

I find myself grateful for the ongoing distance from *dist[Sense]*, a span of at first a few but necessary months, and then well over a year, then beyond a second, to reflect on how the

experience progressed from conception, to rehearsal, to performance, to community response, and beyond. The once-new kinds of connections we sought and discovered certainly retained impressions and elements of the familiar, that is, interpersonal exchanges of gesture and dialogue that were little different from those well-learned in our face-to-face interactions. But these familiar exchanges and utterances felt subordinate within the overall process, certainly contributing to its efficacy and to the interpretation of the overall experience. That is, with an “anchor of familiarity” carried over from our everyday patterns of social interaction, the uncertainties of unfamiliarity are simply easier to deal with. Yet, familiarity alone cannot dominate an experience viscerally defined by experimental exploration and, to an extent, defined by acceptance of the *unfamiliar*. In short, as I reflect back on this process, though surely an ongoing process itself, I continue to recognize the kind of work facilitated by *dist[Sense]* as a resource for learning and adapting to an increasingly and irreversibly individualized culture of self-expression. The work requires us to push the boundaries of our conventions of communication and connection, while at once challenging us to experiment with and discover new possibilities for finding and co-creating shared meaning.

Nevertheless, I also have no doubt the recurring and effortful practice of trying to connect with my fellow performer-cast members, just as we would with performer-audience members, eased my anxieties at a time when the most potent source of uncertainty and instability was a persistent and deepening sense of dreadful isolation (for myself and many others world-over). In particular, the images of projections overlaying bodies (figure 8), and bodies moving in reply, seems to have served as a graphic representation of social stability, reminding me what physical human connection can simply look like, but also reinforcing my (then) nearly-atrophied desire to eventually experience such connection once again, sans Zoom. In short, working on this production helped me stay a little more hopeful about the future, while the connections we achieved couldn't simply replace the ones we'd lost, nor did I feel the connections we were exploring were intended as a replacement.

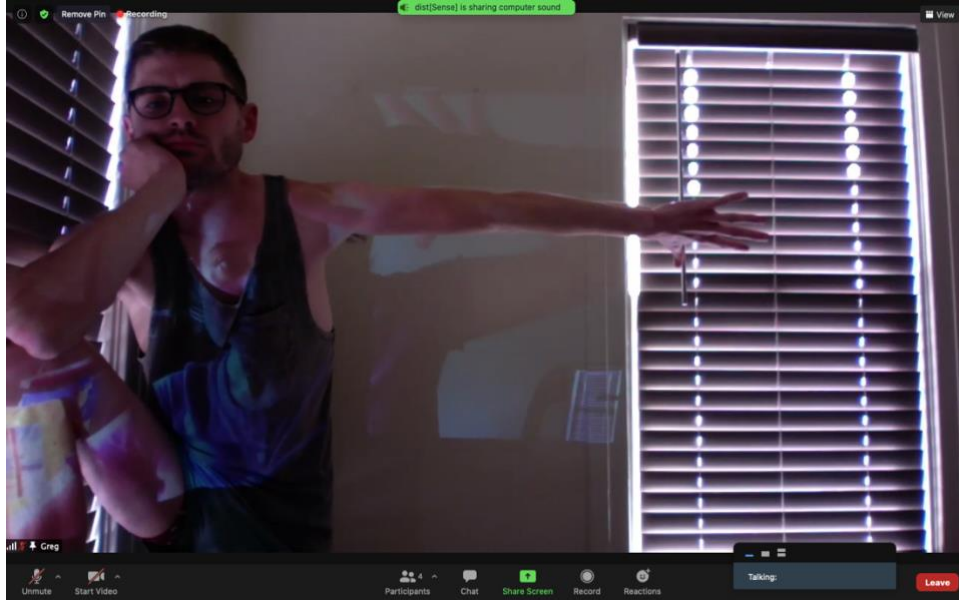


Figure 8. Projected image of N. Eda Erçin overlaid on Greg Langner's body in *dist[Sense]*. Screenshot by Cynthia Sampson, 2020.

Though a bit inelegant, I'd like to end with a string of blunt thoughts interpreted from personal notes I recorded throughout the process:

We often did not know what to do, which was predictably productive. If we already knew, what would be the point of the show, and our process? Things like glitches and disrupted connections would occur, but we learned early on they were clearly going to be a part of any digital ecosystem in this era, and so a part of the virtual environment we were creating, or outlining, for this show. I loved how neutralizing of an experience performances could feel at times, elevating audience to performer and vice versa. Or, put another way, more starkly revealing how audience and performer are always at once performer and audience, respectively.

The medium is the text. That is, the medium of "projection-enhanced" video chat served for this performance a strikingly similar function as literary text might serve for a performance interpreting literature. The medium, then, is always the text, but demonstrably so in *dist[Sense]* wherein the performance was, essentially, a productive and intentional use of virtual and physical space as an aesthetic medium of cohabitation.

## Final Reflections

[Johanna]

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how critical connection is to our well-being and how crucial adaptability is for survival. School and book clubs and museum exhibitions soldiered on and survived during COVID-19 – with varying degrees of success. *dist[sense]* certainly represents a victorious effort in adapting through technology and innovating community-making through performance, but also goes a step further. The performance demanded that performers break out of our individual bubbles (which became even less porous in the turmoil of the pandemic) and collide into each other without our normal protections. At times this produced discomfort, confusion, and pain, but it also created the opportunity for vulnerable connection, which surely must be a right way forward into the future.

[Irina]

*dist[Sense]* served as a form of exposure in the midst of public isolation: I meet a stranger, a distant acquaintance, a colleague, a lost friend, and I find myself at the palm of their hand, since the projection magnifies their bodies in my room in relation to myself. Usually, I would think about exposure as redundant and equivocal state of body and mind, yet as a counterweight to heavy curtains between people, exposure enabled me to experience the virtue in being seen and dependent on the other who either kindly plays with me, or refuses vulnerability and fills the time with busy games, or trusts to share an intimate space with no action or expectation. Ironically enough, projecting people on my wall put me in the position of not projecting unto them whatever I think I want them to be and rely entirely on what happens between us.

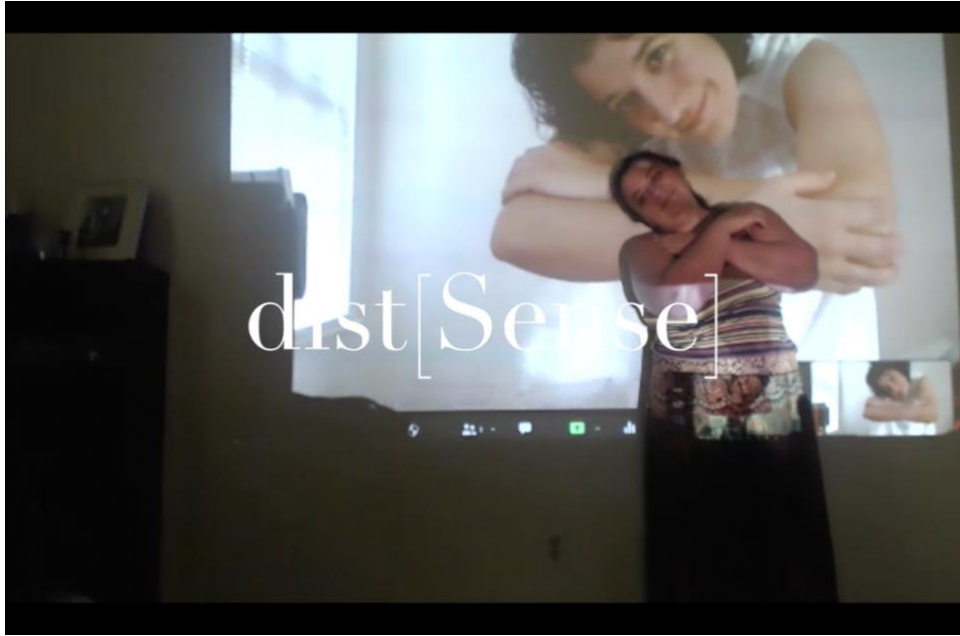
[Greg]

*dist[sense]* was a collectively brazen act of critical inquiry, in stark contrast to a world seemingly sinking into progressively greater depths of despair and uncertainty, as a global reckoning with the COVID-19 pandemic became increasingly local, and painfully personalized to each of our circumstances. I mean, we put into motion — with guidance/direction from Naomi, and through a great deal of group dialogue — an almost immediate response to a drastic and daunting situation which we, ourselves, were experiencing and straining against in real-time

and in myriad ways. We were a small, albeit, important community to one another; we centered one another's expressive strengths within our simultaneously digitized/physicalized bodies, as well as unchoreographed dances and exchanges of gesture and always-in-motion virtual "touch" with one another. Beyond enacting a collaborative and unique response to the pandemic, and to the increasingly-immersively-virtual experiences we were all essentially expected to embrace, working on *dist[sense]*, I truly and critically believe, provided those who participated — as both performer and audience — with a slivered but ominous and visceral view into the future of human relationships and human society.

[Eda]

It was my birthday at the dress rehearsal, a hot September morning in Central Standard Time. I will not forget. Naomi was present with me (figure 9). I am still mourning the loss of connection that I found virtually with some of my audience-participants, students and co-performers over the COVID years. The pandemic expanded cross-cultural practices of presence and challenged one-dimensional judgements about virtual communication as being an obstacle to attaining presence. Presence is a practice. Eugenio Barba, a pioneer of laboratory theater practices, defines it as "an extra-daily energy quality which renders the body theatrically 'decided', 'alive', 'believable'" (9). In any environment, presence requires intention, technique, persistence and embodied labor. In *dist[Sense]*, I didn't experience myself as a fixed body image, text or identity when I *was* present. I experienced myself as time, warmth, an electromagnetic wave, a strange dance or a sneeze. Communicating through movement, play, synchronicity, delay and glitch felt like home. But I also found myself absent or a stereotype with fear (of losing interest of and in the other). As a performer, my question was not about reality or authenticity. It was about the possibility and sustainability of (co)presence. It still is. More relevant and urgent than ever.



*Figure 9. Projected image of N. Eda Erçin on Naomi P. Bennett's body in dist[Sense]. Screenshot from the recording of a rehearsal. By N. Eda Erçin, 2020.*

[Naomi]

In the time that has passed since our final performance of *dist[Sense]* the isolation of that first year of the pandemic has simultaneously faded from my memory and forever changed my very being. How I interact with the world, how I interact with myself, how I approach performance and presence. The idea for *dist[Sense]* existed well before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the sudden and abrupt global shutdown made it a necessity. *dist[Sense]* made isolation bearable. It taught me how to value those small and fleeting interactions between strangers that just as quickly disappear into ephemerality. Yet make a lasting impact. This is what I got out of *dist[Sense]*. Not in the realization of the initial concept or as the director, but as a participant meeting each new face, each new body, each new interaction with excitement and anticipation. We discovered in *dist[Sense]* the potential for deep connection – **If** the audience-participant was open to it. **If** they could let go of their expectations. **If** they could be reached through the dimension beyond the screen.

## Conclusion

Although *dist[Sense]* was created as an ensemble with a common goal, we approached each encounter as our individual selves. Bringing our personal, cultural, and social history into the virtual encounter. The bridging of physical and virtual space grew in response to what we as performer-participants brought, as well as what our audience-participants brought. Sometimes that was stillness, sometimes that was boisterous laughter, and sometimes that was unexpected expectations. *dist[Sense]* created a Thirdspace in the shared Zoom box, a space of connection and co-presence, producing a person-to-person vulnerability that was rare to access in the isolation of that first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

*dist[Sense]* was an experiment in social interaction, intimacy, and touch in an emerging performance medium, the Zoom space. Within the structure of the capabilities of Zoom and our own restriction on being a non-verbal performance experience, the unknown became the audience-participant. Would they interact, or just watch? Would they even show up? And more importantly, would we physically, visually, and aurally feel the connection we were all longing for? What we learned, what we felt, was that physical distance could be mitigated through means of virtual communication. We discovered an exemplification of the creative capacity of the greater human experience to facilitate and find endlessly intuitive opportunities for intimate human connection. Through *dist[Sense]*, we were able to physicalize a shared virtual space, a Thirdspace, where the rules of co-existence were defined through our interactions. For a short time, we were telematically present with another body, turning the confines of the Zoom box into a space of connection.

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