

# Showing Support: Some Reflections on Vancouver's Dance Economies

by Peter Dickinson

*Now we move differently.*

This essay concerns two works of contemporary Vancouver dance that—as of this writing, in early November 2014—have yet to be seen (at least in their entirety) by a paying audience. I also discuss a work that will never be seen by such an audience. This is not to claim, paraphrasing Peggy Phelan on her clarification of how performance might escape an economy of reproduction (ironically via what now seems like an impossibly quaint reading of Marina Abramović), that these works avoid other forms of market-driven commodification (see Phelan 576). But it is simultaneously to register, along with Shannon Jackson in her recent rereading of Phelan, my experience of these works as having a surplus value that is principally affective and that, as a result, begins “to acknowledge the material relations that support the de-materialized act” (Jackson 39). All of which would seem to require some Phelanesque musings on the word “showing.”

As a noun, *showing* can refer both to the action of displaying something and the fact of being displayed; to the quality of a performance (“to make a good or bad showing”) and the evidence provided by a performance (“upon initial showing”). It is interesting to think about how these different senses get parsed in the world of visual art versus the world of the live performing arts, particularly theatre and dance. Whereas in the former, we tend to go to a “showing” at a gallery to witness a public exhibition of finished work (and to judge it accordingly), in the latter a “showing” usually refers to a run-through or partial excerpting of a work-in-progress, most often to receive feedback from a select group of invited guests. To be sure, I am constructing a problematic binary between product and process in casting such disciplinary aspersions. And yet, it is one that would seem to affirm Jackson’s comment in *Social Works* that when visual artists turn to performance they do so precisely to avow and engage the “wider systems of social and aesthetic support” undergirding their practices (41).

I begin with semantics as a way of explaining how I came to find myself at two different dance showings in Vancouver in the late summer and early fall of 2014, and why the internal value I ascribe to the privilege of attending such events is necessarily disproportionate to the ostensible external reasons for the invita-

tions having been extended in the first place. The first showing, at The Cultch’s Vancity Culture Lab in August, was of plastic orchid factory’s current work-in-progress, *Digital Folk*, in which choreographer and artistic director James Gnam is experimenting with ideas of the dance score as a kind of “retroaction” of the different rules and hierarchies of social dance. More specifically, the work uses immersive movement and rhythm-based video games to explore a wired generation’s understanding of its physical and social identity. Gnam sees these video games as defining the folk identity of the millennial generation who have become virtuosic adepts of mimicked musicality and movement in their own and friends’ bedrooms and basements, but in ways that paradoxically alienate them from a deeper kinaesthetic awareness of their embodied co-presence in time and space, and that thrust them into an isolated feedback loop with the technology that then becomes an extension of themselves.

As *Digital Folk* currently stands, the dancers first respond to different routines supplied by various immersive videos before turning the cameras on themselves as, in a series of slow duets, they start to mirror each other’s movements in more intimately responsive ways. Getting up close with each other in ways that they have only hitherto been with their virtual avatars, the couples sway and shimmy side to side and stare deeply, if somewhat vacantly, into each other’s eyes, as if trying to decide who is leading and who is following whom. We also see the six dancers call on the arsenal of standard club grooves that gets repeated in many of these videos as the dancers respond collectively—and in a strict geometric formation that recalls early baroque dance—to a looping set of instructions in digitally altered voice-over: to pump their fists; or thrust their hips to the right; or shake their booties like there’s no tomorrow. Finally, *papier mâché* furniture designed by Natalie Purschwitz is scattered about the set, at once a visual index of and a material support for the embodied social conversations and interactions that ideally precede or are a consequence of the videos’ virtual rhythmic entrainment. And, indeed, we are privy to improvised snippets of dialogue throughout the piece, which fittingly come courtesy of the GarageBand-playing house band in the corner. As invited guests to the showing of *Digital Folk*, we in the audience (many of us friends or acquaintances or collabora-



Natalie Lefebvre Gnam in *Digital Folk*, by James Gnam (2014).  
Photo by David Cooper, courtesy of plastic orchid factory,  
[plasticorchidfactory.com](http://plasticorchidfactory.com)



Left to right: Vanessa Goodman, Lexi Vadja, Natalie Lefebvre Gnam,  
and Jane Osborne in *Digital Folk*, by James Gnam (2014).  
Photo by David Cooper, courtesy of plastic orchid factory,  
[plasticorchidfactory.com](http://plasticorchidfactory.com)

tors) were to a certain extent responsible for modelling a parallel conversation, both in our anticipatory lobby chatter and our post-performance talk about where the piece might go next, including the question of how to enable direct audience participation in subsequent iterations of the work. That, in the months since, I continue to have a version of the latter conversation with James in the lobbies of performance venues around the city speaks to the gap between different financial and social economies of scale that I am attempting to map in this essay.

The second showing was at the EDAM studios at the Western Front in early October. Ziyian Kwan, of dumb instrument Dance, previewed two sections from *bite down gently and howL*, a series of four linked solos for herself, Gnam, Kokoro Dance's Barbara Bourget, and Vanessa Goodman, a member of The Contingency Plan and also a much sought-after independent dance artist and choreographer in the city. Kwan has conceived *bite down* as a riff on "Goldilocks and the Three Bears"—by way of Nancy Sinatra. She and I have had an extended and ongoing discussion about the different symbolic and pop culture frames through which one might interpret her work. However, what I want to emphasize here is, following from Judith Hamera, the "relational infrastructure" of Vancouver dance being mapped via the bodily labour of Kwan and her collaborators, a social and aesthetic network of mobile intimacy that must be extended to the two other bodies watching along with me on that beautiful October afternoon: Natalie Lefebvre Gnam, wife of James and artistic producer of plastic orchid factory; and Bevin Poole, who frequently performs in plastic orchid's work. If, as Hamera persuasively argues in connection to the intersecting dance communities of Los Angeles, dance technique can be situated as part of a larger archive of the social work of bodies in "practices of everyday urban life," one in which "movement with and around other bodies" at once binds people "together in socialities with strategic ambitions" and produces "modes of reflexivity" that "tactically limit or engender forms of solidarity and subjectivity" (3, 22), where do I, a non-dancer, fit into such an economy?

The short answer would be to say that I'm a critic and that as a result of my previous blog writing about plastic orchid and

dumb instrument—including presentations by each at the most recent Dancing on the Edge Festival (DOTE) in July 2014—I was sought out by James and Natalie and Ziyian as a sympathetic outside eye. But that is both to claim an authority I don't believe I have yet earned in my writing on Vancouver movement aesthetics and to reduce to a fixed and perfunctory transactional exchange the fundamental motility of each experience, in the flow of both bodies and ideas that form part of the larger social and civic contract I want to suggest is being performed in and by these showings. To this end, let's dance backwards, like Ginger Rogers accompanying Fred Astaire, to the series of embodied encounters with Ziyian that immediately preceded my arrival at EDAM to catch a glimpse of *bite down*: a chance meeting outside my local grocery store in which Ziyian first mentioned the possibility of a studio visit; a hug at the showing of *Digital Folk* and a thank you for my blog post on *a slow awkward*, the duet with James that Ziyian had premiered at DOTE in July, and in which she wore a pair of bright red spike heels that inspired a reference on my part to Rogers; and, finally, a conversation as fellow audience members at another DOTE show at the Firehall in which we first admired each other's blonde dye jobs (there's been a lot more of that since) and I reminded Ziyian that we had danced together once. It was then, at the end of my blindfolded tour of the city as part of *Projet in situ*'s mounting of its site-based work *Do You See What I Mean?* at the 2013 PuSh Festival, that Ziyian took my arm and whispered into my ear, "Now we move differently."

I cite this kinetic geography less to bolster my insider bona fides than to suggest the ways paying attention to the mundane social topography of performance—the dailiness of the sites that give rise to it, the labour that goes into it, and the communities it engenders—allows for a different perspective regarding its contributions to civic economies. In such a framework, art and creativity need not be wholly subsumed by the logic of financialization that persists in measuring their public worth solely in terms of a return on (capital) investment. Rather, by accounting for (including counting up) "the artistic skills required to sustain the Life side of the supposed Art/Life binary," performance emerges in Jackson's bold reassessment of public art's historical anti-institutionality as



Ziyian Kwan and James Gnam in a *slow awkward* (2014).  
Photo by Chris Randle, courtesy of dumb instrument Dance, [dumbinstrumentdance.com](http://dumbinstrumentdance.com)

a system of “interpublic coordination,” one that reminds us that “no one can ever fully go it alone” (Jackson 29, 9). Consider, in this regard, a potential day in the life of Natalie Lefebvre Gnam, who performed in the showing of *Digital Folk* and watched and offered feedback alongside me at the showing of *bite down*. The day might begin with Natalie taking a master class at The Dance Centre that she would have helped to coordinate through the artist-run Training Society of Vancouver (on whose board she serves as president); teaching her own class at Harbour Dance or Arts Umbrella in the early afternoon; rehearsing or offering feedback on a new work at EDAM in the later afternoon; grabbing a few minutes at a coffee shop post-rehearsal to revise plastic orchid’s latest grant application or to meet up for a chat with a fellow traveler in the not-for-profit arts community of Vancouver; guest-performing in a local production at the Firehall or watching a touring show at the Roundhouse that evening; before rushing home to put her son, Finn, to bed.

In tracking the social, kinaesthetic, and “interpublic” overlaps that derive from Natalie’s only somewhat hypothetical daily movements throughout the city, I am not only interested in where our social pathways potentially intersect: at EDAM, for example; or the coffee shop; or the Firehall, and Roundhouse. I also want to make visible—to show—through these intersections the work of living (for both Natalie and myself) that goes into making and

supporting the work. In this, I am drawing from my own volunteer labour as a board member of a not-for-profit performing arts society in Vancouver (the PuSh Festival) to affirm Jackson’s assertion in *Social Works* that in “emphasizing—rather than being embarrassed by—the infrastructural operations of performance” (from research and rehearsal to grant writing and governance to production facilitation and staff management) we discover “a different way to join aesthetic engagement to the social sphere, mapping a shared interest in the confounding of insides and outsides, selves and structures” (29). Certainly in terms of my own support for the performing arts in Vancouver it is impossible for me to separate or keep clearly defined my roles as academic, board member, donor, audience member, and writer. Sometimes, as Jackson suggests, sustaining those various levels of support can feel constraining, as when, for example, after a long day of teaching that is followed by a PuSh board meeting I may not want to sit through the performance to which I have been invited, let alone facilitate the talkback to follow. However, as Jackson points out, part of the contract of performance, like that of the social welfare state, is to commit to being inconvenienced by the various claims it and its practitioners make upon you (42).

Likewise, in a stunning essay that examines the shared “derivative logic” underpinning global financial structures and local dance networks—both of which are premised upon notions



Tara Cheyenne Friedenberg in a publicity still for *Porno Death Cult* (2014).  
Photo by Wendy D. Photography, wendyd.ca, courtesy of Tara Cheyenne Performance, taracheyenne.com

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of “generative risk” and “mutual indebtedness”—Randy Martin asks what it might mean to re-materialize within the “corporal economy” of the body the apparently immaterial movement of finance as it flows inequitably between scarcity and abundance: “Sensing dance from the perspective of the derivative, between the fluid ephemerality of networks that vanish without a trace and the static durability of organizations that lurch from crisis to crisis replicating their structures, opens approaches to embodied

ensembles that leverage further movement and value” (75). This is not to minimize, as Martin is quick to note, the actual financial precarity that attends the daily life of most dance artists (among the hardest working and lowest paid of all arts professionals!), nor the additional bureaucratic regulation and oversight that often contributes to that precarity—something Lefebvre Gnam incorporates into the eponymous solo *Natalie* (2014), in which we hear a voice-over loop of emails sent to her from various government agencies detailing their application, disbursement, and reporting requirements.<sup>2</sup> Nor does it mitigate the increasing pressure faced by artists of all stripes to model, as Jen Harvie argues in *Fair Play*, a creative entrepreneurialism based on productivity and profit. At the same time, “[s]eeing how a derivative logic operates in dance holds the double promise of giving notice to what dance generalizes as social life beyond itself, and what sustainable principles may already be at hand in what otherwise appears as a world in ruins” (Martin 66).

Leveraging the superabundance of value I locate in Vancouver movement practices has meant, most recently, rethinking my methodological approach to researching dance-theatre in the city and, to borrow from the deeply instrumentalist language of SSHRC, the outcomes of that research. To this end, I recently had the opportunity to collaborate in the studio and on video with Tara Cheyenne Friedenberg, a Vancouver dance artist who special-



Ziyian Kwan in *bite down gently and howL* (2014).  
 Photo by Chris Randle, courtesy of dumb instrument Dance,  
[dumbinstrumentdance.com](http://dumbinstrumentdance.com)

izes in comic character-based solo performance that is anchored in her technically proficient and highly precise movement training (including years of classical ballet). The impetus for our partnership—an invitation from the Centre for Imaginative Ethnography (CIE) “to explore humour as a form of imaginative ethnographic practice”—is not especially important. Nor is the result, although the video has been posted to the web for public viewing (see Dickinson, Friedenber, and Harris). What is important is that I felt comfortable taking a risk, translating my normal talk about dance into a decidedly unfamiliar and precarious dance with talk precisely because I was supported by both my chosen discourse community and a community of movers that, sometimes without even knowing it, has very much chosen me. My colleague Dara Culhane, who issued the CIE invitation and who is my partner in performance studies crime at SFU, immediately understood the value of me making a fool of myself without worry of the intellectual benefits that might accrue as a result. Tara, as my expert informant in walking and talking, likewise knew that in terms of kinaesthetic debts incurred one of them was most certainly not

going to be mastery of any kind of dance technique. Rather, to echo Martin, she showed me what somatically sustaining techniques of the body I already—and quite literally—had to hand, and how I could use them to tell a funny story. That there was another Tara in the room, camerawoman and research assistant extraordinaire Tara Gallagher Harris, whom I could rely on to edit out and/or humorously showcase my missteps post-production, attests to how much intersubjective support I had in pursuing a project that only a small coterie of friends and colleagues would see and whose very purposelessness and derivativeness would be a way for me to imagine my world otherwise.

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Part of my interest in dance-theatre as a form is the way it uses the representational frames of the theatre to gesture toward—“to show,” in a Brechtian sense—what otherwise remains occluded in dance-as-Dance, including the time and labour that goes into creating it. Moving in and out of different characters before us on stage, Tara Cheyenne will sometimes pause, drawing our attention to the pose she is holding, or the “pointy thingy” she is doing with her foot—and often precisely because the comic discursivity that is such a prominent feature of her practice frequently precludes people from seeing—and valuing—the work as dance. But from working with her on developing my own style of posing, I also know that in that stilled moment Tara is constellating the efforts of a larger collectivity of moving bodies that contributed to her perfecting of that pose. Thus, in her discussion of the relationship between Brechtian epic theatre and the practice of institutional critique in contemporary art in *Social Works*, Jackson asks “whether it was in fact the theatrical *medium* that Brecht sought to expose, or the conditions of its *support*, a question that in turn begs other ones about how we can divide the two” (106; emphasis in original). Likewise, in *Performing Remains* Rebecca Schneider reclaims the “*theatricality* of time” that goes into the “inter(in)animation” of performance art re-enactments in part to re-materialize the labouring bodies that artists like Abramović at once rely on but would prefer not to acknowledge in staging their singularly “original” presence in the museum setting (6; emphasis in original). This is partly what draws me to the new theatricality in so much contemporary dance—as opposed to the so-called pure movement of postmodern analytical dance: that it gestures to all those conditions beyond the individual dancer on stage that enable her will-to-move.

It is, in this sense, that I want to think of the “theatre” of Vancouver dance-theatre as a system of economic, social, and aesthetic relations that must be showy almost in spite of itself: it spends more than it has (which includes artists discussed in this essay waiving fees to reprint images of their work); it is per force exhibitionistic in its appeal for attention from a largely indifferent public; and it is promiscuous in its collaborative affections.

In other words, the exact opposite of a “Goldilocks economy,” the term coined by financial strategist David Shulman in 1992 to describe an economy that is neither too hot nor too cold, balancing moderate growth with low inflation.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, I couldn't help thinking to myself at a second showing of Ziyian's work in mid-November, just before flying to a conference at which I was presenting a paper on plastic orchid factory and Tara Cheyenne Performance, what an interesting choice she had made to de-centre Goldilocks as the focus of her piece. Rather, as she makes clear at the outset, after the seductive ritual of donning the upper half of her furry costume, she is some deliberately schizoid version of Ziyian-playing-Goldilocks-becoming bear, the choreographer-as-character/observer who is at once inside and outside of the work, the animating force that binds the autonomous parts (Barbara as Mama Bear, James as Papa Bear, Vanessa as Baby Bear) into a whole while also dealing with the chaos of the forest that is always with us—on this particular day a misbehaving sound system.

I tried to articulate some of this to Ziyian over a drink in the neighbourhood following the showing, explaining that in the kin-aesthetic relationships being enacted by this quartet of Vancouver dancers who know each other's movement function and emotional dysfunction so well, I was also witnessing a model of kinship relations that extended beyond the stage, a bear/bare economy of dance as social choreography where the hand that feeds is as likely to be that of the partners who support you as your own. As such, the biting down on that hand must be as physically gentle as the connective howl of recognition to follow is affectively fierce. Because as Jackson notes at the end of *Social Works*, in a moving discussion of San Francisco dance artist Joe Goode, “To avow support is to expose the conditions of unconditional love” (247).

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CODA: As I am putting the finishing touches on this essay, at a time when I am not feeling much institutional support, I have also begun rehearsals for *Le Grand Continental*. A big, joyous celebration of social dancing choreographed by Montreal's Sylvain Émard, the work is a large-scale outdoor line dance featuring anywhere from 75 to 200 nonprofessional movers of various ages and backgrounds performing a mashup of styles. Having debuted at Festival TransAmériques in 2009, the piece has since been performed all over North America, and was programmed as part of the PuSh Festival. The first few rehearsals didn't go so well. I had trouble remembering the steps and following the counts. I kept putting the wrong foot forward, or turning left when I should have been turning right. But I was not alone in my confusion and awkwardness, and Sylvain and rehearsal director Lara Barclay, along with assistants Anna Kraulis and Caroline Liffmann, have been unfailingly kind and patient. More and more of us are coming to rehearsals early to take advantage of the extra time for one-on-one instruction or, as is more often the case, to work with each other in small groups to figure things out on our own. In short, we are showing each other the support we need to succeed with the piece. And already we are moving differently.

Information, among nine identified arts occupations, dancers were the lowest earners, with a median income of just \$13,167 in 2005 (*A Statistical Profile* 9).

- 2 In *James* (2010), the companion solo to *Natalie*, James Gnam also references the collapse into financial insolvency of Ballet BC in 2009 that led to his layoff as a company member and his need to seek employment elsewhere, including as a last-minute Cavalier in a semi-professional production of *The Nutcracker* in North Vancouver. Likewise, in her site-specific “dance, protest, busk experiment,” *what i am dancing*, begun in the summer of 2010 to draw attention to the latest round of cuts to arts funding in British Columbia, Ziyian—eventually joined by more than twenty fellow dance artists in Vancouver—occupied through dance on successive Sundays the Mount Pleasant intersection of Main Street and Kingsway to assert that “Even though [artists] are marginalized in the economic infrastructure of BC, we insist on thriving” (Kwan).
- 3 As Marc Pilkington notes in *The Global Financial Crisis and the New Monetary Consensus*, Schulman wrote his strategy paper “The Goldilocks Economy: Keeping the Bears at Bay” in March 1992 while at Saloman Brothers, a Wall Street investment bank (see Pilkington 88).

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## Notes

- 1 According to a 2009 Hill Strategies Research report partially funded by the Canada Council for the Arts, and based largely on 2006 cen-