What's Safe

**Mélika Hashemi, Maryanne Casasanta,
Lauren Runions & Heddy V. Graterol**

Abstract

What's Safe (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j16JuRlq81c&feature=youtu.be) is an ongoing response to Toronto's social distancing measures. It is a dance score documented cinematically in Trinity Bellwoods Park, with movements inspired by Deepa Iyer's framework (Mapping Our Roles in Social Change Ecosystems, 2020) and Jay Pitter's open letter to Canadian urbanists (A Call to Courage, 2020). The project was conceived, performed, and captured by the authors of this paper. The two dancers, our second and third authors, engage in creative problem-solving by facing the reality of socially-distant grounds for play and suggesting a different type of productivity, one which is conducive to individual and social growth. The movements are then captured by our multimedia creator (or fourth author), while our artist-researcher (first author) curates and provides critique throughout. The final project considers artistic practice in response to social change as informed by (un)productivity. It uses productive imagination (e.g., play, improvisation, creative problem-solving) to investigate parameters of safety (e.g., surveillance, control, space). Through the dancers' improvisations, we attempt to navigate these tensions and better position ourselves in relation to our current socio-geographical circumstances.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic made us aware of the things we can and cannot control in today's society. White circles painted in Trinity Bellwoods Park, Toronto, Ontario, imply agency and safety, where we are alone but still together. The first, second, and third authors of this piece saw these circles as an opportunity to intervene, hence the emergence of our project, *What's Safe*: an ongoing response to Toronto's social distancing measures. In what follows, we provide photo stills of the final project, alongside descriptions of the energies and thoughts that went into its creation.

Mapping out What's Safe

The city traces circles in white — the same colour used to paint road markings — instructing us to maintain our boundaries and literally "stay in our lane." What are the ways in which these tracings mimic mapping practices (e.g., city boundaries and other limits), and how do the consequences compare (e.g., impact on the community)? We could argue that these circle tracings are imagined borders within which all that exists is also imagined (e.g., the city mows the grass, retraces the circles, and people follow along). This preoccupation with privatizing public land makes the invisible borders visible (Hunt & Stevenson, 2016). The city

may not have painted those circles to 'privatize' the land per se, but if I were to invite myself into a circle with someone already in it, I would be impinging upon their privacy. There is thus a sense of agency that comes with making a 2D circle into one's own 3D bubble. The question of power and equity then lives in that liminal space between circles: in that moment of transitioning between circle and non-circle, between occupation and navigation, the sharing of time and space (Hook, 2001). How do we navigate between private and public geographies?

What's Safe is a dance score documented cinematically in Trinity Bellwoods Park using a limited time shooting permit granted by the city of Toronto through the DJI Pilot App.[1] Two dance artists (our second and third authors) move through the circles synchronously while maintaining social distance. They wait until the sun is at the right height, and the space to be unoccupied. Within the socially-distant grounds for play, they engage in creative problem-solving by suggesting a different type of productivity, one which is conducive to individual and social growth. They use movement and play at the intersection of body and site to investigate the relationship between public and private. Their movements are inspired by Deepa Iyer's framework (Mapping Our Roles in Social Change Ecosystems, 2020) and Jay Pitter's open letter to Canadian urbanists (A Call to Courage, 2020). In operating the drone, the multimedia creator (our fourth author) experiments with visuals to inform the role of surveillance. The artist-researcher (our first author) curates and provides critique throughout the co-creative project, opening space for accountability. In the process, we became aware of our capacities: The second and third authors as interpreters-beyond-dancers, the fourth author as witness and surveilled, the first author as ever-present but absent. We also became aware of the consequences of recording and digital surveillance. What would it mean to be untraceable? Is such a thing even possible? (Warren-Smith, 2019).

Conscious Imagination as Creative Problem-Solving

Parks offer escape from the reality of urban stress, displacing us from the 'real world' (Grahn & Stigsdotter, 2003). But how do we escape when other stressors like crowds are present, and circles are taken? Can we ever really escape? As the COVID-19 pandemic goes on, the first, second, and third authors are exploring a number of play-based pieces, like *What's Safe,* that are grounded in conscious imagination. Imagination can often be unproductive and non-confrontational, like with daydreaming, where a sequence of thoughts plays

on loop. Productivity can also be unproductive, as well as unimaginative, like being pushed to return to work amid a global health pandemic. But with intention, the dancers in *What's Safe* engage in creative problem-solving, whereby they face the reality of socially-distant grounds for play and suggest a different type of productivity, one which is conducive to individual and social growth (Parnes et al., 1976).

Embodiment and movement provide potentials for transformation that engages the mind and body in a meaningful way. According to embodied performance researcher Marth Munro (2018), when new information is retained in a way that involves moving and performing, elements within the immediate environment are activated, owing to "how and where the body is moving in space" (p 10). An element activated in *What's Safe* is surveillance. Our physical experiences were recorded through a digital trace through both movement and surveillance as well as parameters of safety, which were articulated through circle tracings made by the city.

---

[1] The DJI Pilot app assists the user in controlling drones, transmitting pictures in real time, and controlling the camera and its playback.

The artist-researcher and dancers-as-interpreters sought to investigate movement as a way of retaining and transferring learning (Munro, 2018). Movements are inspired by Deepa Iyer's (2020) framework Mapping Our Roles in Social Change Ecosystems. Iyer also coincidentally uses circles to illustrate the various roles that people have throughout the processes of social change, which sparked a connection for us regarding the circles drawn in Trinity Bellwoods Park. In using the circles to map out our social roles in times of crises, the park becomes a playground for interventions and transformative gestures. The second and third authors' bodies 'read' the space together publicly; lifting the framework off the page and planting it into space through dance score. One moment, they are "visionaries," the next, they might be "weavers." By the time the pandemic runs its course, they may have occupied some or all of these roles and spaces.

In performing the framework, they build familiarity in understanding the text as embodied before it is understood intellectually: they listen to their bodies until their minds catch up (Bie, February 2020).Through movement, the artist-researcher and dancers-as-interpreters explored several reflection questions formulated by Iyer (2020):

- ❖ How does your role connect to your privilege and power?
- ❖ Are there roles where you might be taking up too much space (or not enough)?
- ❖ Where could you stretch yourself and take bolder risks? (p. 6)

In her open letter to Canadian urbanists, A Call to Courage, placemaker Jay Pitter (2020) asks us to "research the history and untold place-based stories related to all urban design and development projects" (p. 3). Based on her work, further questions that the first, second, and third authors aim to explore are:

- ❖ How is equity-based placemaking (re)defined in the time-space of this pandemic?
- ❖ What relationships emerge between the dancers and their playground when engaging together in socially distant interventions and gestures on this site?
- ❖ What critical discourse are we in need of during and following these interventions?
- ❖ What other roles are at play that we weren't initially aware of?

Conclusion

We envision participants joining us in these improvisations inspired by the roles that come to them intuitively in Iyer's framework and our questions formulated based on Pitter's letter. *What's Safe* is a work in progress; we leave the questions open to readers and viewers to answer with us. Through our improvisations we attempt to start to answer them and better position ourselves in relation to our current socio-geographical circumstances.

References

Bie, S. (2020, February). Reading the Actions: Unsettling Toward a Conciliatory Imaginary. Presentation and discussion conducted from the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education.

Deepa Iyer, SolidarityIs, and Building Movement Project (2020). Mapping our Roles in a Social Change Ecosystem. Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 4.0. Retrieved from https://buildingmovement.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Final-Mapping-Ecosystem-Guide-CC-BY-NC-SA-4.0-Handles.pdf

Grahn, P. & Stigsdotter, U.A. (2003). Landscape planning and stress. Urban Forestry and Urban Greening 2, 1-18.

Hook, D. (2001). "Discourse, knowledge, materiality, history: Foucault and discourse analysis." London: LSE Research Online.

Hunt, D. & Stevenson, S.A. (2016). Decolonizing geographies of power: indigenous digital counter-mapping practices on Turtle Island. Settler Colonial Studies 7(3): 372-392.

Munro, M. (2018). Principles for embodied learning approaches. South African Theatre Journal, 31(1), 5 – 14.

Parnes, S. J., Biondi, A. M., & Noller, R. B. (1976). Creative actionbook. C. Scribner's Sons.

Pitter, J. (2020, June). A Call to Courage: A Letter to Canadian Urbanists [open letter]. Retrieved From https://static1.squarespace.com/static/546bbd2ae4b077803c592197/t/5ee184b9c2d74f6080b079cf/1591837881790/Open+Letter+-+A+Call+To+Courage+-+Final+-+June+2020.pdf

Warren-Smith, G. (2019, May 14). Hito Steyerl, Surveillance & The Digital Image. Cognitive Sensations [web log post]. Retrieved from https://www.cognitivesensations.com/blog/2019/5/19/hito-steyerl-surveillance-and-the-digital-image

Author biographies

Mélika Hashemi is an Artist-Researcher based in Kitchener, ON. Using art as a device, she finds ways to renew intersectionality and empowerment through the curriculum beyond screens and institutional walls. (www.melikahashemi.com/)

Maryanne Casasanta is an artist educator working in photography, video, and performance. Her practice currently centers food performance as a way to generate embodied encounters that offer occasions for reflection and questioning. Grief, history, immigration and identity are just some of the personal affiliations that surface when cooking, baking, eating and discarding are enacted with deep awareness and intention. Maryanne earned a BFA from OCAD University (2005) and holds an MFA from the University of Guelph (2014). She is a Master of Education candidate in the Educational Policy program at the University of Toronto with a focus on disability studies and critical pedagogy. (www.instagram.com/maryannecasasanta/)

Lauren Runions (she/they) is a dance artist, choreographer, urbaner and educator based in Tkaronto/Toronto, ON. Lauren's project I/O Movement offers performances, community workshops and residencies with the intention to activate spaces while considering the flexibility of place, and inviting movement into daily life. Overall, their practice comes down to one thing: love of place. Through experiments of scores, improvisation, sounding, drawing, walking and routine dailiness Lauren questions how our own embodied awareness relates to our relationship and responsibility to living with our urban and natural ecologies. (https://cargocollective.com/laurenrunions)

Heddy V. Graterol is a multimedia creator and designer experimenting with visuals, sounds, and the use of bodies to tell stories of resistance and resilience. Through his experimentations and studies, Heddy's goal is to create immersive experiences that inform and heal the mind and body in hopes to move people in a visceral way through the use of new technology to transform, transmutate and translate. (https://heddyvargrate.carbonmade.com/)