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2022

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Choreographies of Care

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Dance Theatre)

by

Melissa Cisneros

Committee in charge:

Professor Yolande Snaith, Chair  
Professor Julie Burelle  
Professor Robert Castro  
Professor Janelle Iglesias

2022

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University of California San Diego

2022

## DEDICATION

For Elián

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE .....	iii
DEDICATION .....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
LIST OF FIGURES .....	vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	vii
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS .....	ix
INTRODUCTION.....	1
LISTENING ALLOWS THINGS TO BE REVEALED .....	4
LISTENING TO THE NIGHT .....	8
TOGETHERNESS .....	10
AS WE ARE HOME.....	16
TANGIBLE SCORES .....	20
TIJUANA RIVER ESTUARY PROJECT.....	27
WHAT DOES A LANDSCAPE SAY? .....	44
CLOSING THOUGHTS .....	48
REFERENCES.....	49

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Four moments during Listening allows things to be revealed .....	2
Figure 2: <i>Listening to the night</i> .....	3
Figure 3: <i>Togetherness</i> at winterWorks '20 .....	10
Figure 4: <i>Togetherness</i> at NOW Festival .....	12
Figure 5: Light design for REDCAT .....	15
Figure 6: <i>As we are home</i> video-still .....	16
Figure 7: <i>As we are home</i> .....	17
Figure 8: <i>As we are home</i> .....	18
Figure 9: <i>Golden magic</i> .....	19
Figure 10: <i>Tangible Scores</i> .....	23
Figure 11: <i>Tangible Scores</i> at Studio Lab, UCSD .....	25
Figure 12: <i>Tangible Scores</i> at Studio Lab, UCSD .....	26
Figure 13: Detail of the <i>Tijuana River Estuary</i> .....	27
Figure 14: Details of the <i>Tijuana River Estuary Project</i> .....	29
Figure 15: Practicing “One, One, Two” at the estuary .....	33
Figure 16: Google screenshot .....	38
Figure 17: Tijuana River Estuary .....	39
Figure 18: (Un)traces .....	42
Figure 19: <i>WHAT DOES A LANDSCAPE SAY</i> , main Visual Arts Gallery, UCSD .....	43
Figure 20: <i>WHAT DOES A LANDSCAPE SAY?</i> Poster .....	44
Figure 21: “One, One, Two” practice at the gallery .....	45

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The journey portrayed in these pages is the culmination of invaluable interactions with people who have carved, in unexpected ways, my experience during my M.F.A. at UC San Diego. For their commitment and generosity during a very challenging time of unprecedented isolation, I want to thank Elizabeth Barrett and Harrison Foster. Bringing their curiosity, knowledge, and creativity to our processes and conversations has been of most value during these three years of collaboration. I am always grateful to my friend and partner in dance crime Manuel Gonzalez for his passion and unconditional help, always appearing at the right moment and reminding me how to tap into my *nahuál* to regain power and conviction. Eric Geiger and Liam Clancy for their continuous mentoring despite having departed from the Dance Program at UC San Diego. Half way through my studies they volunteered, even though it was no longer their duty, inspiring my conviction much closer to what they value in dance and life. Even now, our dance practice and conversations continue to nurture my reflections and writings, as they keep resonating in the pages that follow. Many, many thanks to Professors Ricardo Dominguez and Anya Gallaccio for their solidarity. Offering me a meaningful space and community at the Visual Arts Department that provided me with the conditions to work with and from a sense of belonging. The title of this thesis comes from my first virtual conversation with Ricardo around the Tijuana River Estuary, so revealing as he propelled me into many parts of what my research-creation ended up covering. My gratitude goes to Salvador Muñoz (Chava) for supporting the production of my thesis project as we embarked in generating the structures that, in the end, were able to hold everything together in the exhibition at the gallery. Paolo Zuñiga for his knowledge and valuable time, I wouldn't have made it to the opening day without his help.



Justin Tuerk for his kind eyes as we talked and thought together in relation to the display options for the archive. Kevin Vincent and Lucas Coffin for their support and help, making me feel at home at VISARTS, always available and helpful. Alexandra Beller for stepping in the last parts of my thesis with remarkable creativity and poignant dialogue, engaging me in a profound way with the ideas that I was trying to bring to life. Kevan Malone and Fátima Khayar Cámara for sharing their knowledge and research expertise around the border and the politics of movement, adding layers of meaning and potentiality to the project. Ana Mayra Tang, Verónica Santiago Moniello and Marta Sponzilli who have been inspiring me since immemorial times and who operated despite geographical distances. My work is encompassed within theirs, in complicity. Gratitude to the powers that closed the border during covid times because it made me realize the infiniteness of my task. I had to negotiate the vicissitudes of being a single parent and student-worker during this pandemic. My humble gratitude goes to my son Elián as he continues to teach me what being present and showing up for others means. Finally, my appreciation to the true original owners of the land where this border lies, as it never stops reminding me what resilience is and why we remain here, alive.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Choreographies of Care

by

Melissa Cisneros

Master of Arts Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Dance Theatre)

University of California San Diego, 2022

Professor Yolande Snaith, Chair

The ambiguous fortress mentality fed by the US/Mexico boundary impedes many who would rather build bridges. Not me, I showed up in La Jolla armed with the expressive rhythmic patterns animating the forms of dance that I have cultivated for more than a decade, ready to coalesce. Little did I suspect that this journey would culminate back at the estuary that stops at the Ocean and weaves in and out of the contours of such concrete and metal mesh.

I embarked on the scope discussed here with one hand on a bundle of questions as my rudder while the other one sensed forward listening and propelling me, as if the dynamic forms of this movement constituted a living process, all by itself.

My research became a solo journey since everyone around me disappeared from public space. The enactment of “meaning” discussed in these descriptions of my work did not emerge from the expressivity of the participant’s dance but from the intention to provide ever more accessible scaffolding where our edges could dissolve.

I seized the academic scope of this effort with a conviction to avoid being reduced to a manifesto that could easily be pegged. My agency here did not draw its main potency from the machinations of doing work or making something dazzling to be put on a shelf. I came as a cultural worker to see about activating something in the “body politique” that keeps so many at the arbitrary disposal of so few.

As I embodied philosophical questions that sand, concrete, chollas, river contours and human remnants asked me there, I realized that the dynamic relations between all material elements involved in my dance produced an “of the moment” sense. I discovered that such relations offered an expressive rhythmic pattern. Now, your movement is the vigilante listening with all your being for intruders' steps and now you are the prey’s spirit fleeing without leaving a trace.

When others joined me there our forms of dance were continuous. They were more than one movement or sensual feeling at a time. The relations of varied dynamics offered a new expressive force.

## INTRODUCTION

### Research Questions

These pages document the research in dance that I conducted as part of my pursuit of the Master in Fine Arts (M.F.A.) degree at the University of California San Diego (UCSD). In this time, I have continued to inquire about the power and potential that choreography offers to generate collective spaces where “being together” becomes meaningful in different ways.

Here are the questions I departed from:

- How can choreography function as a space for (collective) inquiry?
- How to generate collective spaces and temporal communities for people to come together in meaningful ways using dance and choreography?
- How can choreography facilitate collective experiences and (unplanned) encounters?
- How does participation or engagement of audiences in uncommon and unexpected ways change choreography, performance and the body’s presence?
- How can “social choreography” provoke transformative change in us?
- How does performance and choreography facilitate a space for rethinking and understanding my surroundings and the times that I am a protagonist of?
- How does dance as a (communal) space, (de)stabilizes (oppressive) systems and simultaneously propose other ways of being together?

- How can unconventional (non-theatrical) spaces promote horizontal contexts for questioning and sharing ideas based on empower experience, reflection and dialogue between people?
- How can one generate conditions that connect participants to something that transcends the performative space as a theatrical event?
- How would this opportunity affect us in an experiential manner?
- How can one change the lens through which we relate to others and to our immediate surroundings?
- How can I articulate and explore different meanings for my 'choreographic agency'?
- What strategies do I need to activate different ways of living, understanding and re-signifying the mobility of the body?
- How to explore diverse meanings of 'performance'?
- How to create a situation-event as a shared experience of given moments?
- How to keep my agency open to change?
- How to include the witness in my experience?
- How to foster flexible structures that allow changes and the unforeseen? Structures that can facilitate such decision making that dislodge both context and the work enabling them to shift interconnectedly?
- How to navigate itinerantly through shifting locations and across nomadic ways of thinking?
- How to manage the complexity and liveliness of relationships with the environment and with the passing of time?
- How to keep the body engaged through the senses, through its conscience of being present,

through its physicality, through its most empathic disposition? All that while remaining dynamically vibrant.

- How to weave the different contexts that arise and interact within the work, accepting what is taking place from one moment to the next and remaining transformable?

# LISTENING ALLOWS THINGS TO BE REVEALED

## A Practice of Receptivity



Figure 1: Four moments during *Listening allows things to be revealed*

*Listening allows things to be revealed*, is a practice of receptivity and not so much of doing things. We tune into our bodies and the environment to cultivate non-productivity as an ethical and ecological practice.

Not doing but rather receiving

How can we attend to the outside world as we simultaneously activate the insides of our bodies until the borders that separates us from the environment and others dissolve?

*Listening allows things to be revealed*, was my first year's showing. It took place at Scripps Beach in La Jolla, California (US) on December 6<sup>th</sup> of 2019 at 1:00 p.m.

The participants were: Marcos Duran, Paulina Colmenares, Verónica Santiago Moniello, Liam Clancy, Eric Geiger, Ariadna Saenz, Kirstyn Hom and Rebecca Chaleff.

- How can we extend the body through listening?
- How does listening displace the self?
- What does listen mean to each one?
- How are bodies composed when attending to the ear/ to the listening gesture?
- How to explore the physical/bodily process of listening?
- What are the social, ecological, political, cultural, ethical, economical, esthetical implications involved in listening?
- Listening with different body parts (observing with our ears, listening with our eyes)
- Listening as...(visiting): inhabit the subjectivity of another living thing, stones are also vibrantly alive and shifting at different speeds (geological time)
- Weaving: sand time, tree time, dog time...
- Explore how to displace our subjectivity (in one way or another)
- Attunement and Resonance of body (space-time)



## **Practice, Scores, Prompts**

### **Breathe and Breeze**

Choose a comfortable position and attend to your breath, as you inhale and exhale, feel your ribcage, your body, expanding and contracting, open up your nostrils and listen, how deep are you breathing? Now repeat but exhale through the mouth, feel your breath in dialogue with the breeze of the sea. Now listen to your whole body, can you hear your organs? Your heart pulsating, the blood streaming...your skin in dialogue with the environment

Which is the quietest sound that your body can perceive?

### **Listening in stillness**

In stillness explore and map the sonic environment surrounding you. What is the soundscape like? Now, attend to one sound and listen for its source, try to feel its distance? How far or close is the sound from where you are? What qualities or textures can you perceive? What does the sound tell you about your own acoustic discernments? How does the sound vibrate in your body? Where does the sound resonate in your body? Let it go...  
Now attend to another sound.... And another sound (3x)

### **Listening as...**

Wonder around and let yourself be drawn to any element you feel attracted to,  
Stay in touch with it (employing your body, your ear, your gaze)  
Listen to it as if you were that which you are engaging with.

## **Sounding the environment**

Listen to the environment; let all the different sounds converge simultaneously at your ear (and skin). Do not differentiate them but rather regard them as a full soundscape in its wholeness. How does it sound? Now, attune to what you listen and respond to the soundscape with your body and voice interactively as in a conversational way.

## **Soundwalk**

Mapping a sonic environment and sounding back to it as a call-response way.

Wonder around and let yourself be drawn to any sound you find inviting. Stay with it, with its presence, time, quality, duration... Let it resonate within you.

Walk towards the source of the sound.

Let that location inform your experience.

Respond to it with your body's movement for as long as it lasts.

Collect materials to share with the group and to assemble something together.

Share your experience with the group.

## LISTENING TO THE NIGHT

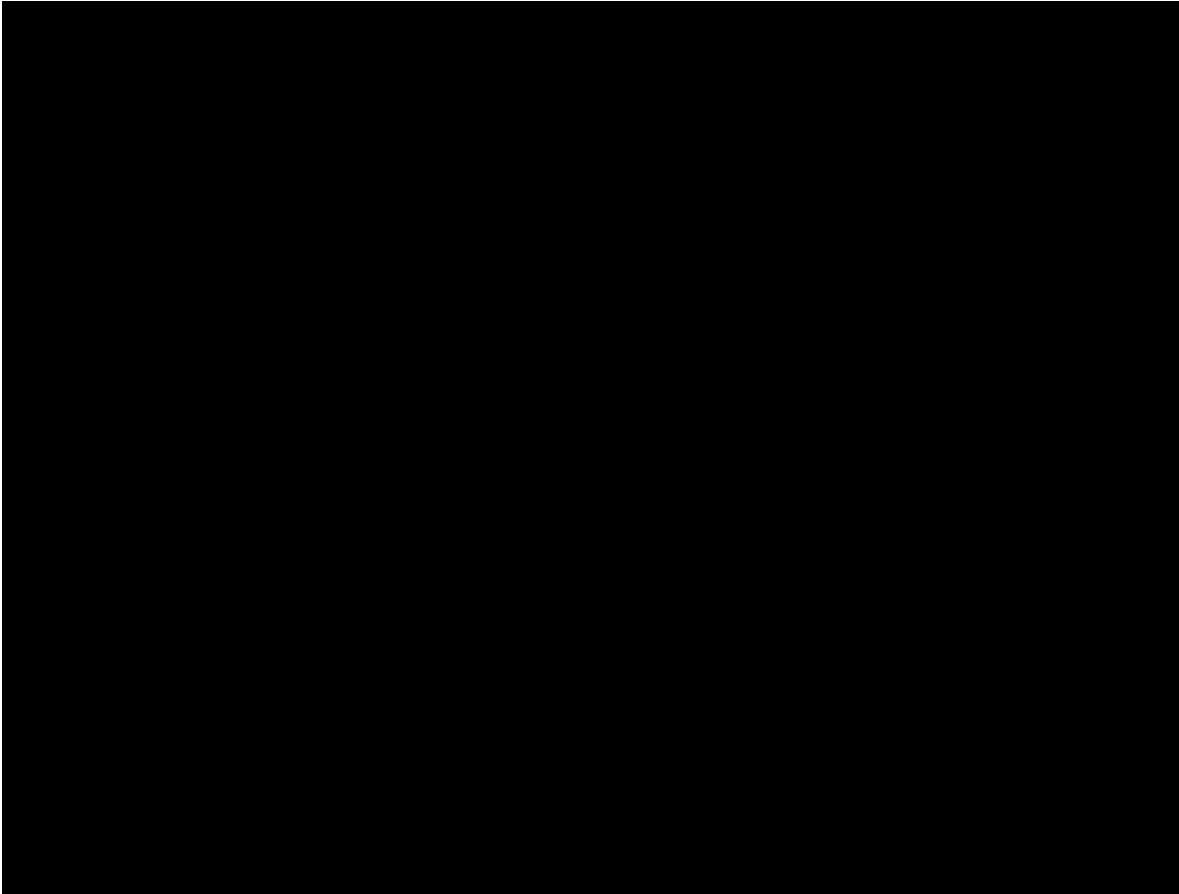


Figure 2: *Listening to the night*

*Listening to the night* is a journey, a walk towards the experience of feeling, of the interaction between what is inside and that which is outside. We explore the nocturnal environment through a guided soundwalk and a series of short meditations designed to cultivate whole-body listening, multisensory awareness, and connection to the natural world. Using found materials from the area with the idea to create a bodily-physical experience for the listener whilst in a kind of sonic journey.

*Listening to the night* was part of LISTENING ROOM - sonic experiments for body + mind, which took place at the Arts Center in National City, California (US) in 2019.

we are going to wander around

this wandering is simple, we are going to let ourselves be moved by the desire to listen,

we are going to wander around and let ourselves be moved by the desire to listen,

laying down

in a circle

in a cluster

near a ...

tree

grass

field

walking

or

in

stillness

## TOGETHERNESS

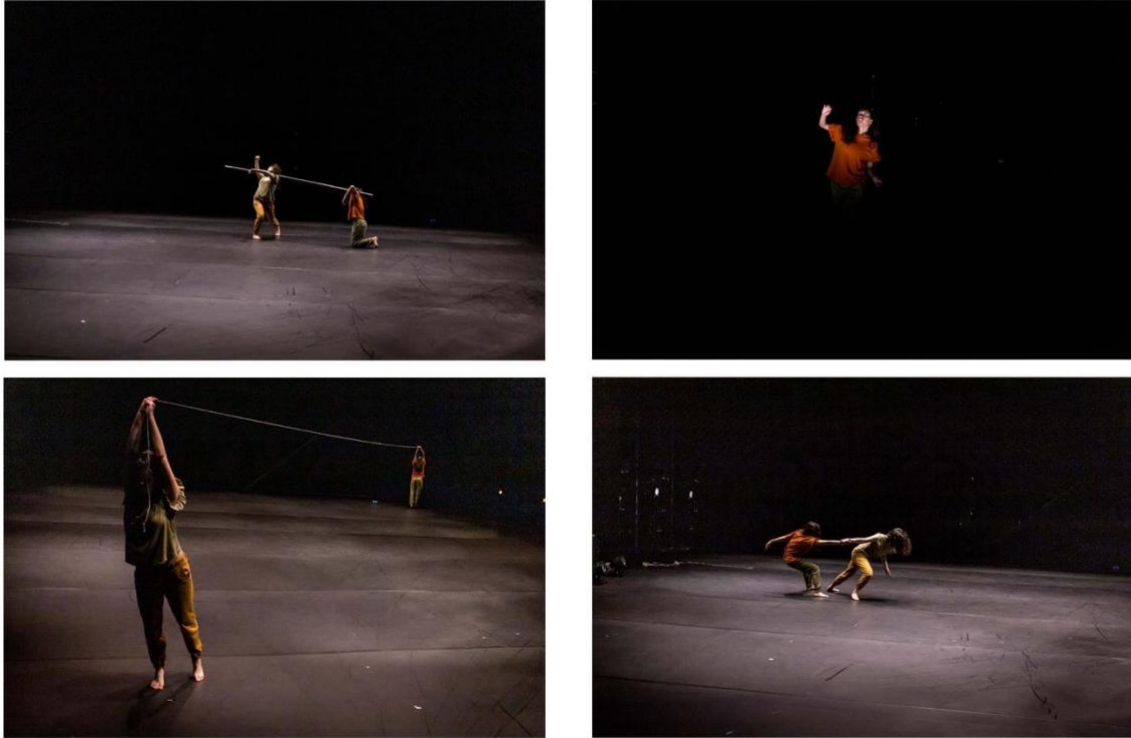


Figure 3: *Togetherness* at winterWorks '20

“In *Togetherness* Melissa sets up a series of deeply intimate agreements relying on feeling and sensing *Otherness* through the tension of distance. *Togetherness* offers an opportunity to experience the turbulence, complexity, and power that we possess, as individuals, and as communities. As I witnessed, I questioned my place in the world and what this brief time together means. It is profoundly poetic that it’s held literally on the eve of a mandated quarantine. *Togetherness* was performed, only once. Little did we know that we were headed into a long year of solitude, isolation, and profound yearning for more- togetherness.”

-Eric Geiger, Mentor/Advisor

*Togetherness* proposes a series of movement constellations that turn around the questions:

- How to be together?
- What does being together feel like?
- How can we create an intimate space for transformation?
- How is the dance moving us now?
- How can we listen and attend to the space around us?
- How can we feel and support each other as, we attend to our dance/presence/moment?

Working ourselves through the dance, in *Togetherness* we engage in these questions with our body in order to produce a specific kind of attention and presence for ourselves and the audience.

In close collaboration with the light design and the real-time sound amplification of performers and of their interactions with props (two pairs of maracas, a thin rope, and a black PVC tube) we follow our latencies, sometimes moving together and at others on our own but, always holding space for each other. Operating with an austere minimal aesthetic, we keep the dance alive in a trance-like state.

The end result is the dynamic pendulum between approximation and distancing, silence and sound, what is opaque and what is visible. Maintaining space for each other, we witness our movements, dance and transformation.

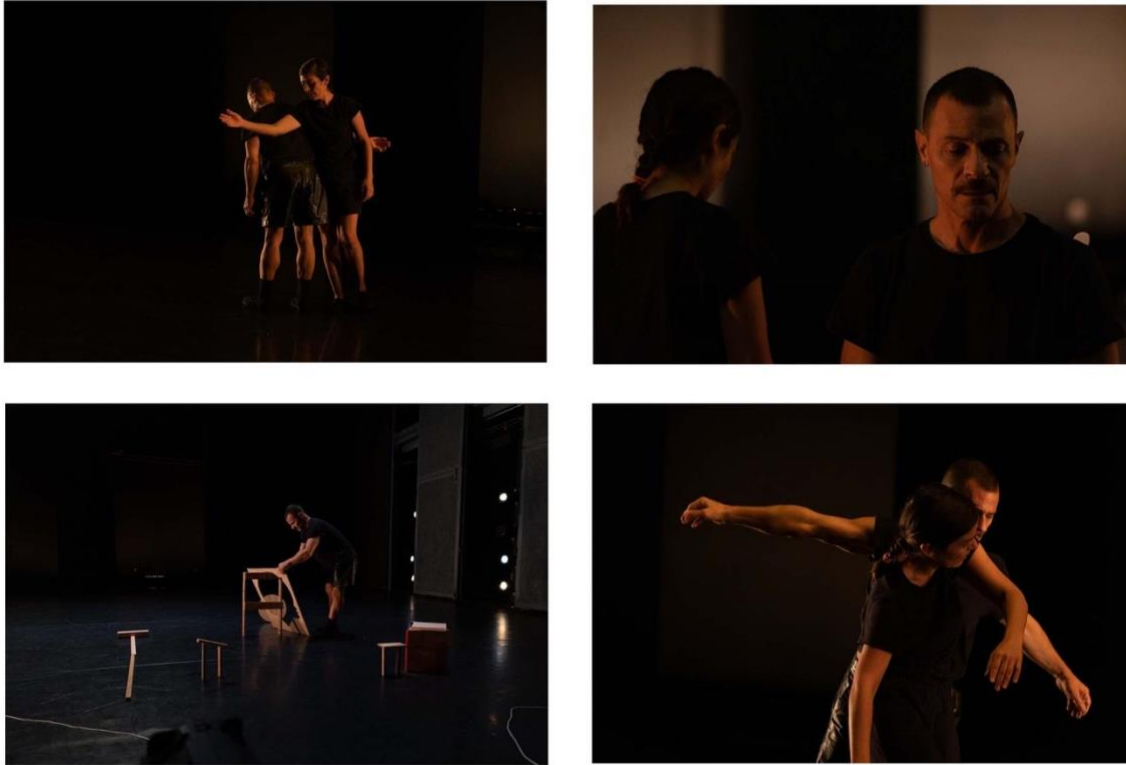


Figure 4: *Togetherness* at NOW Festival

*Togetherness* was originally created in collaboration with students Nataly Rojo and Madelyn Astaundu for winterWorks '20. A dance evening program composed of choreographic works made by dance professors, guest artists and graduate students from the dance program at UC San Diego. This event is usually hosted at the Mandell Weiss Forum Theater. Unfortunately, we did not have the opportunity to perform it in front of an audience because exactly on that weekend of March 2020 the COVID-19 canceled every public event. We were all sent into isolation at home for an indefinite period of time.

In the summer of 2021, I had the opportunity to restage the dance before a live audience as part of the New Original Works Festival 2022 (NOW Festival) at REDCAT in L.A.

We made a fundamental decision to continue this dance and to revisit the questions we had originally tackled through its agency. Considering that we had endured for more than a year the deleterious effects of the pandemic and upon witnessing its effect on the (collective) body. We desired to come together and to be close and intimate, in performance. We discovered the healing potential that sharing this work offered to others.

### **Movement descriptions for score making**

**360°:** move from/with the question: what if I had eyes on my whole body?

**Collapse (Head-Weight-Tail):** explore weight and gravity (bones and flesh)

**Maracas:** with eyes closed follow the sound-trace of the other one, keeping the same distance from one another

**String:** sense the presence of the other through the string. Allow yourself to be cared for by the other, realize tension and distension (of string/of body)

**Shake:** work with the fascia and whole-body vibration/resonance, allow movement to travel in your body

**Togetherness:** sculpt a collective body

**0 -100:** move at different speeds gradually accelerating your velocity

**Building something together:** using found wood pieces + togetherness + string build something together



## **Credits**

### ***Togetherness at winterWorks '20***

Collaboration with Nataly Rojo and Madelyn Astaundu

Harrison Foster (light design)

Mandell Weiss Forum Theater

UC San Diego

March, 2020

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2wtwduotEw&feature=youtu.be>

### **New Original Works Festival 2022 (NOW Festival)**

*Togetherness 2021* is a dance piece by Melissa Cisneros in close collaboration with Eric Geiger

(movement and dance) and Harrison Foster (Light design)

Roy and Edna Disney / Calarts Theater (REDCAT)

October, 2021

Los Angeles

Link: <https://www.redcat.org/event/new-original-works-festival-2021>

During the performance at REDCAT we used pre-recorded sound from the rehearsals including sound of maracas, rope and footsteps and played it in real time, juxtaposing what was happening on stage with the pre-recorded sound of the performers during rehearsals.

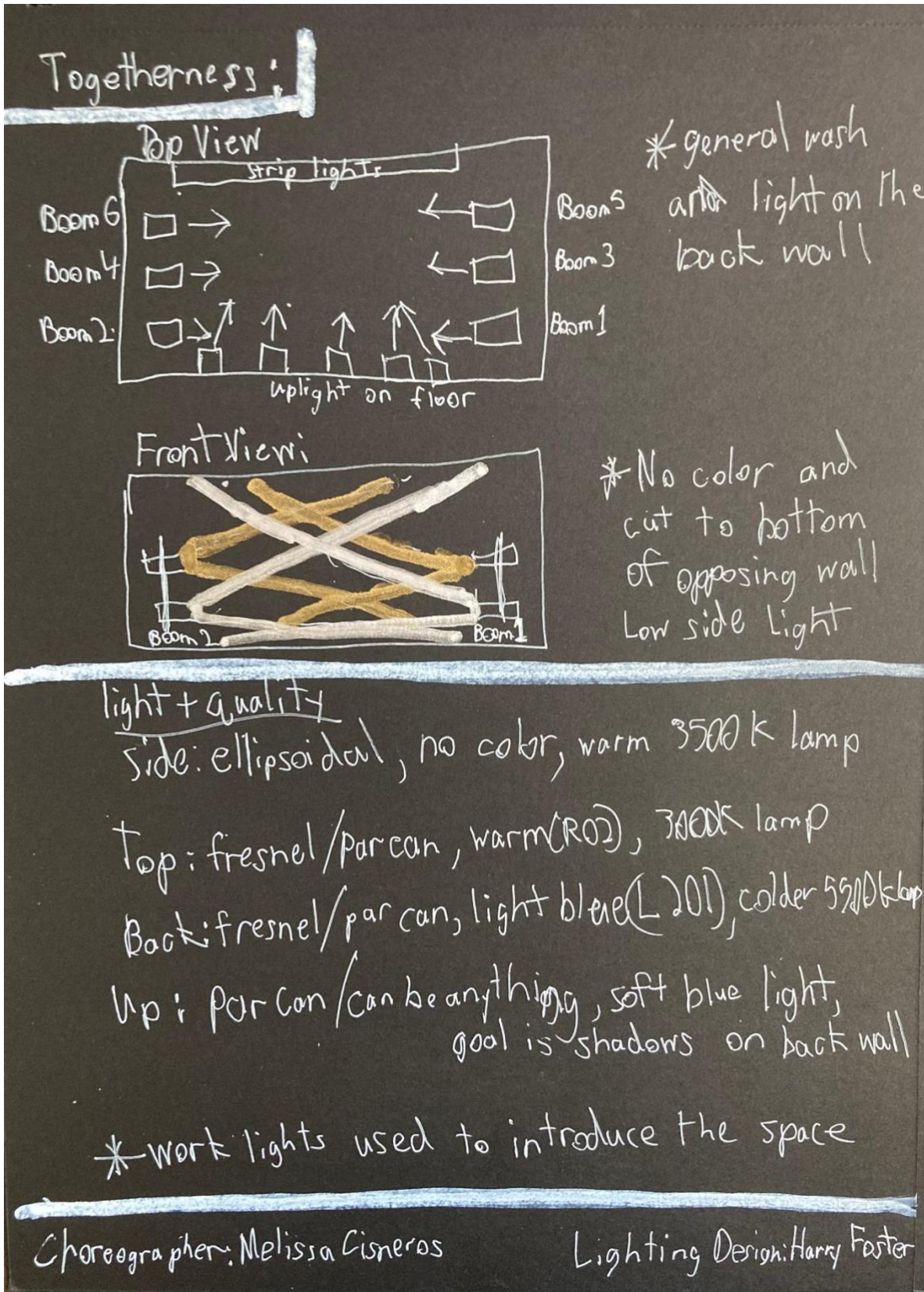


Figure 5: Light design for REDCAT

## AS WE ARE HOME



Figure 6: *As we are home* video-still

*As we are home* developed in conversation (remotely) with Ana Mayra Tang (Mexico City) during the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. In this project we are busy attending to our hands and skin as a way of understanding, feeling and sensing our environment beyond what we can see. The images below were developed simultaneously during the same process.

This work was commissioned by The FRONT Gallery as part of the “13th Annual International Women's Day exhibition Insurgencies: Women's Art at the Border in the Era of Cold War” curated by Sara Solaimani.

MARCH, 7 to MAY 8, 2020

Insurgencies: Women's Art at the Border in the Era of Cold War

13th Annual International Women's Day exhibition

Curated by: Sara Solaimani

The FRONT Gallery

147 West San Ysidro Blvd., San Ysidro CA 92173

Link: <https://vimeo.com/531955969>



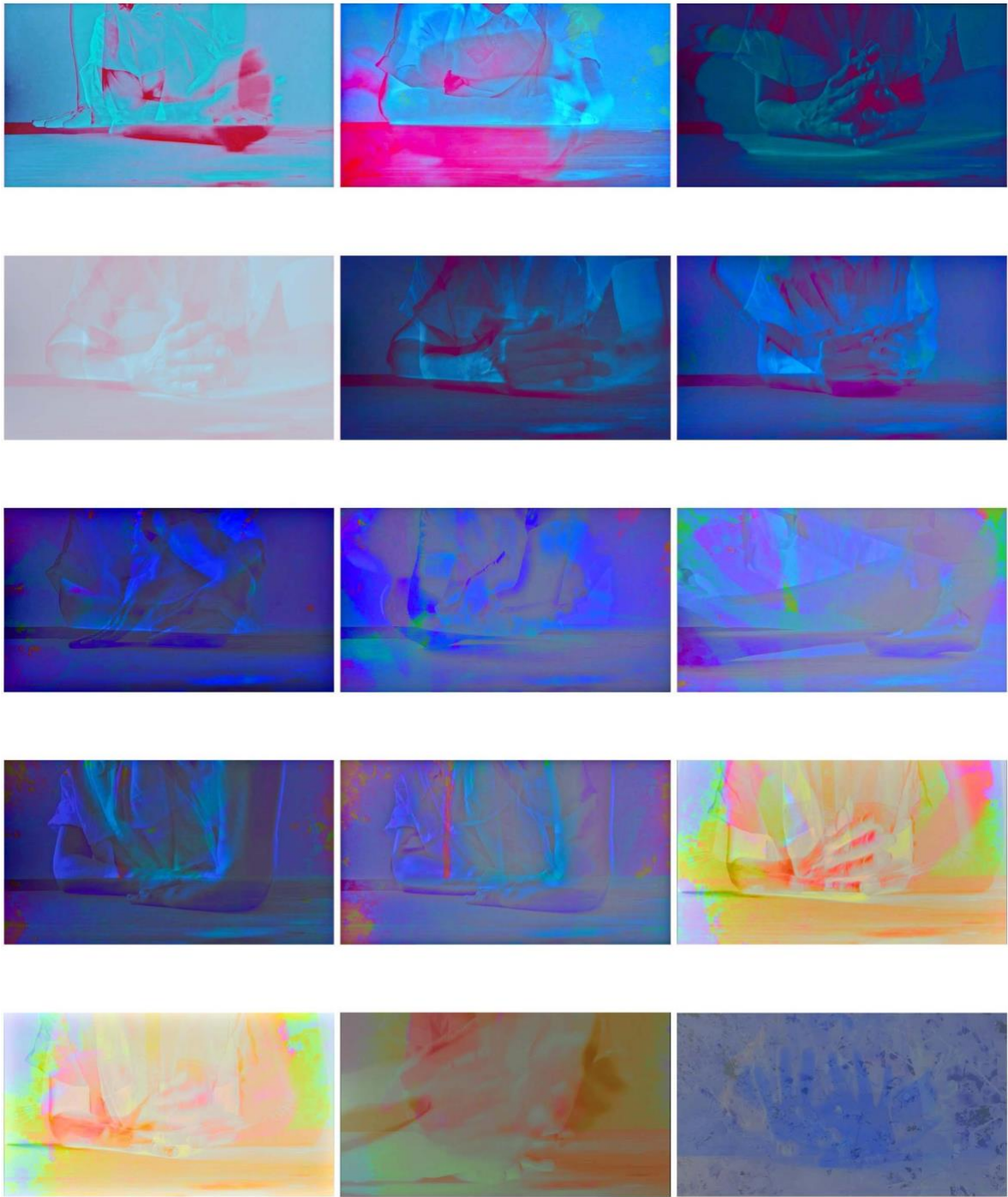


Figure 7: *As we are home*

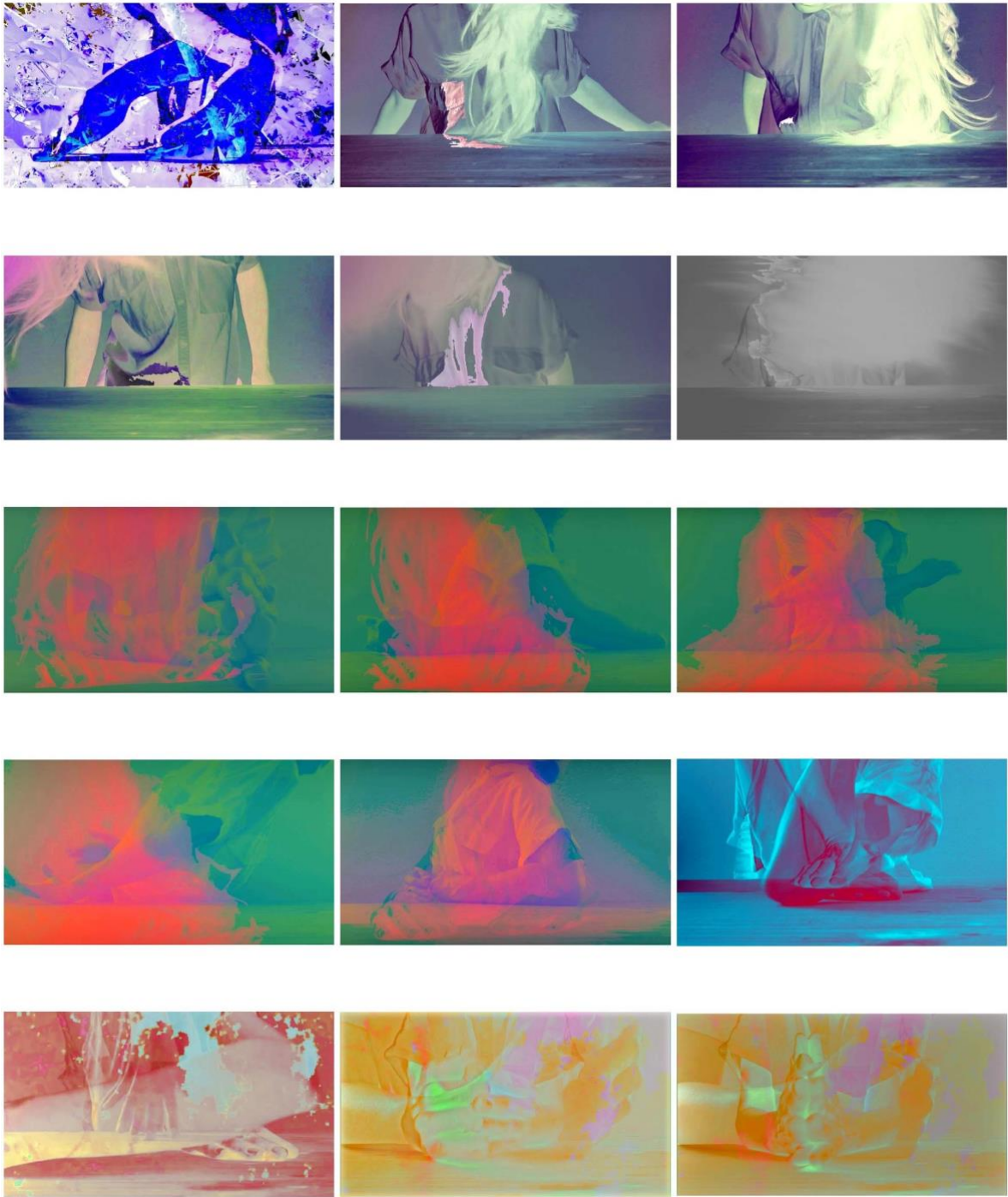


Figure 8: *As we are home*



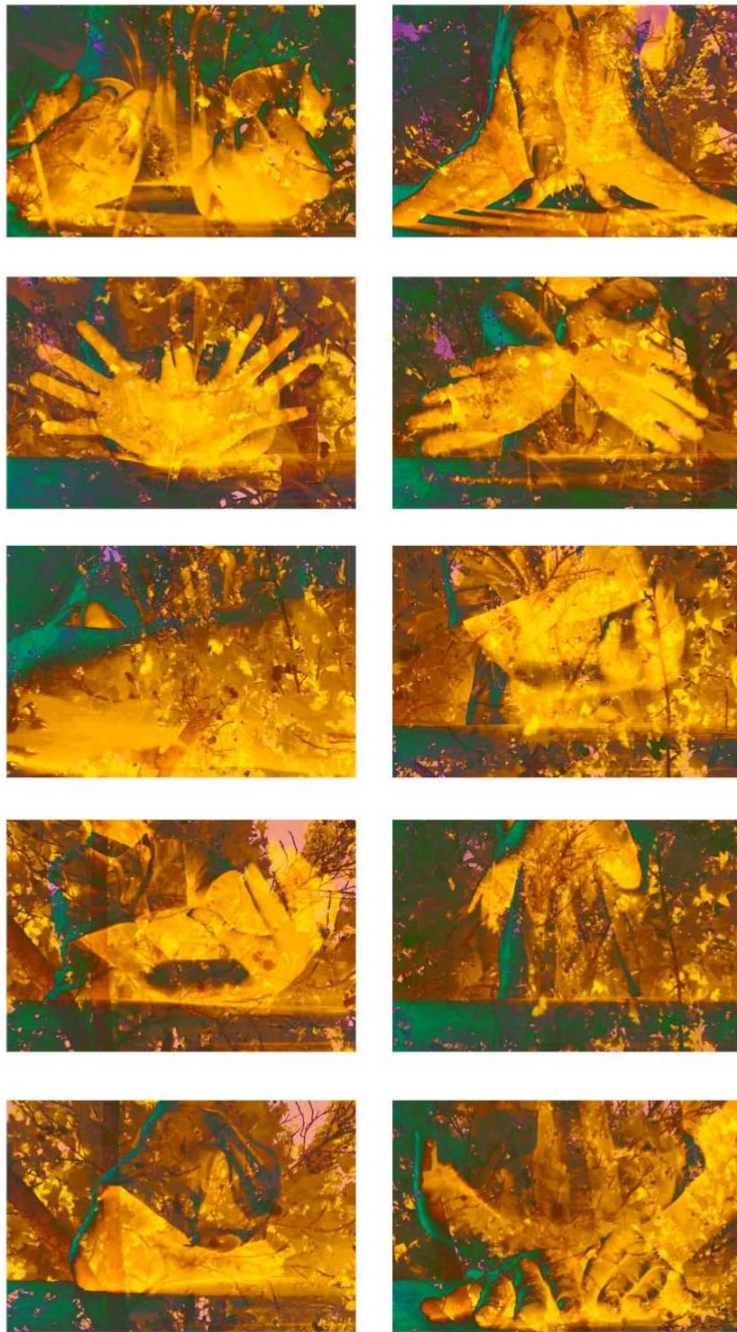


Figure 9: *Golden magic*

## TANGIBLE SCORES

Connecting with what we can touch

In “Tangible Scores” I had shifted to the new emphatic agency that online collaborations allowed and rejoiced in the discovery of my participant’s courage to be on screen with their own poetic selves and a resolve to help each other to attend somatically to our individual and collective mental health.

*Tangible Scores* has so far materialized as an “interactive” online performance. Through the Zoom digital platform, we held workshops to explore and experiment with the body, the skin, and the sense of touch, drawing attention to our home and its textures. We asked ourselves if we could reappropriate our home by refining our senses, rediscovering its spaces, presences and voices?

In *Tangible Scores* we guided participants through sensory practices related to their particular environment and then invited them to share about their personal experience with this work in an open dialogue at the end of the event. Each participant connected from their own private space at home and then was invited to engage in a series of explorations featuring a sense of touch.

This work was born during the lockdown period caused by the COVID-19 pandemic as a way to come together in a new manner, which would bring us at the same time to focus on very concrete things like the body and the skin, the house and its textures, and to reflect on how we can talk and share, through online medias, exercises that are normally linked to the field of art, movement and dance explorations or meditative practices.

We came across a very little-known Manifesto of the Italian artist Marinetti. He was one of the founders of the Futurist movement in 1909. We had gathered references about his research while constructing *Tangible Scores*. Marinetti addressed an “Art of touch”, the importance of gaining a deeper sensitivity of our skin, as a way to survive and to better inhabit the present moment. He prepared some “tactile boards” made of different materials and devised a *taxonomy* with the sensations and emotions that the boards elicited.

Marinetti addressed the importance of touch in a very different context<sup>1</sup>. His reflections had emerged after the First World War. Nevertheless, his relevance resonates with us in present terms. When a large part of the activities of our lives have moved online and flounder under a social-distancing regime, our ability to relate to people and objects comes into question as much as it did in Marinetti’s context. We recognized relevance in other references as in the work of Amanda Baggs “In my language” where Baggs confronts us with her unique connection with the environment as a result of her neuro-diverse perspective developed under the autistic spectrum:

*“My language is not about designing words or even visual symbols for people to interpret. It’s about being in constant conversation with all aspects of my environment, physically reacting to all parts of my environment. Here the water does not symbolize something, I am just interacting with the water as the water interacts with me. Far from being purposeless, the way I move is a continual response to my surroundings.”*

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<sup>1</sup> The post-World War I



On the other hand, and in the same way, the guided experiences of Sensory Awareness by Charlotte Selver and Deep Listening by Pauline Oliveros are practices that require entering in a state of listening and receptivity towards the world that can reveal a much broader dimension of one's immediate space at the moment when we activate our perception. The arousal of a fresh attitude allows us to sense how things dynamically change. As if one would be looking at them "with different eyes..." -as in a different state than usual.

In *Tangible Scores* we ask the participants to close their eyes and move their attention to the sensations of their body, listening to the skin and breath and opening up their gaze to an apparently well-known space in their home, refreshing their perception of their surroundings.

Moreover, allowing for the possibilities that the web unveils, expanding into a sense of networking and connecting across different geographical areas, opening a window to other contexts, *Tangible Scores* is a portal where a group can enable a dialogue centered more fully around the participant's own intimate experience and visually located in a most trusted setting.

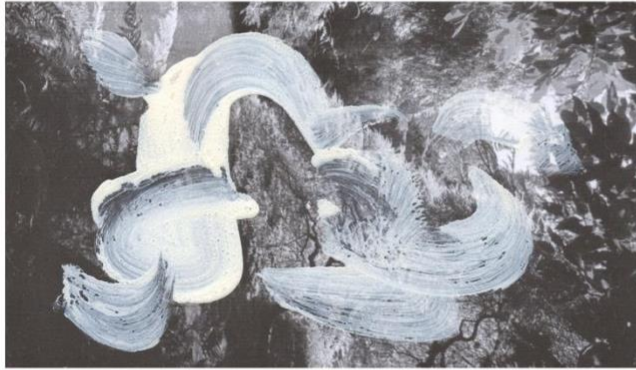


Figure 10: *Tangible Scores*

*Tangible Scores* is made of 4 parts and it is followed by an after-talk:

- Score I, attending to the fingertips and a collective dance using the hands.
- Score II, a blind-walk in the space that surrounds us.
- Score III, building a tactile board, inspired by Marinetti's.
- Score IV, reconnecting with the feeling and atmosphere of the space that houses you.
- Conversation, sharing thoughts.

### **Credits**

#### ***Tangible Scores - Connecting with what we can touch***

A performance collaboration between Melissa Cisneros and Marta Sponzilli

Language: English, Spanish, Italian

Duration: 60 minutes approx.

Participants: 15 participants maximum

### **Presented at:**

Spring 2020 Theater + Dance Virtual Studio Lab of UC San Diego, June, 2020

Online Performance Art Festival (OPAF) based in New York, August 2020

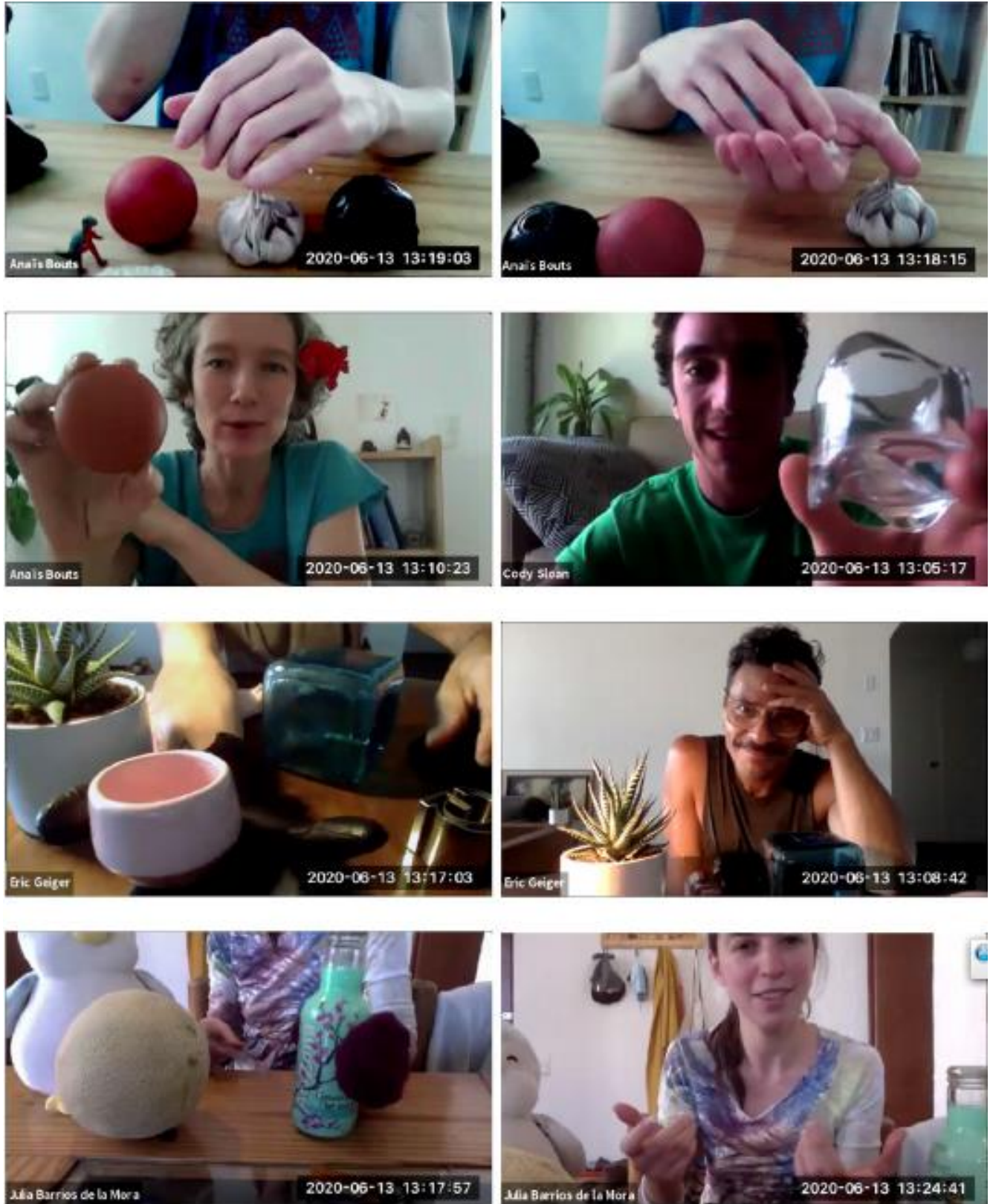


Figure 11: *Tangible Scores* at Studio Lab, UCSD





Figure 12: *Tangible Scores* at Studio Lab, UCSD



## TIJUANA RIVER ESTUARY PROJECT



Figure 13: Detail of the *Tijuana River Estuary*

The estuary that hems on the North to South side of the border called me into its dance.  
What did it want from me?

I have been working on establishing an experiential practice at the Tijuana River Estuary by the San Ysidro-Tijuana border since the winter of 2021. Research in this location has been challenging and at times awkward: its history, human and more-than-human relations, the geopolitical and environmental forces that cross it are coexisting in a constant state of negotiation.

I was drawn to the Tijuana River because it knows no borders, its flow problematizes the very principle that the border wall stands for. The river's movement and fluctuations disrupt the arbitrary politicization of its terrain.

I came up with a number of strategies. Some were devised in order to interact with the specific features of that landscape. Other ones, focused on the interaction with the forces that are present.

- Researching maps of the area in different time periods to observe and analyze the malleability of this territory over time.
- Embodying alternative mapping practices: walking, wandering, getting lost, finding oneself
- Tracing your own shape or embodied contours. Acknowledging how your presence modifies the topography.
- Becoming attuned with the Tijuana River Estuary: creating light, sound, movement and drawing scores.
- Compiling audiovisual documentation from our walks and findings to capture the 'spirit' of that space, committing what we experienced to a retrievable archived version.
- Surveyed<sup>2\*</sup> Those whose agency at the intersection between artistic and scientific endeavors might have illuminated particular features of the Estuary: the border, binational relations between Mexico and the US, water agreements between countries, sprawling

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<sup>2\*</sup> Jennifer Monson, Ricardo Dominguez, Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Visual Arts, UC San Diego, Kevan Malone, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of History, UCSD, Dr. Briana Latarola, Department of Communication, UCSD, Mai Thi Nguyen, Director of The Design Lab – UCSD, Sara Solaimani, Ph.D. Candidate in Art History, Theory, and Criticism, Department of Visual Arts, among others.

urbanization, land restoration (fauna and flora), environmental impact of the border.

Welcomed collaborations particularly with dancers.

- Archived all of our materials and findings for future development





Figure 14: Details of the *Tijuana River Estuary Project*

## Some scores developed and were practiced at the Tijuana River Estuary

“8 minutes & 20 seconds” - Harrison Foster

- Supplies:     White Drawing Paper  
                  Pencil  
                  Camera

This is about how light is both a particle and a wave, a means to appreciate time and space and to notice something that is always present in various forms, but forgotten. On average, it takes 8m and 20s for sunlight generated from the sun to reach earth. This is all dependent on the earth's rotation/axis at the time but on average, 8m 20s.

Find a place to sit near an interesting or strong shadow. Place your notebook in a way that catches that shadow and attempt to outline it. After you are content with the image generated, turn the page in your notebook and place back exactly where you had it previously. Now set a timer for 8 minutes and 20 seconds and close your eyes. You can either lay back or remain sitting. Think about the shapes you see behind your eyelids and feelings you have. Having this barrier between you and light makes it something physical, and the fact that they are your eyelids ought to make it more personal.

1. Light can move in so many different ways and sustains us. People need it to function and to thrive. Plants and animals are the same. Solar energy is harnessing this force but force is too strong a word. Harnessing this care. We do the same all the time.

After 8 minutes and 20 seconds, open your eyes and try to look at the notepad. It took the image you are looking at 8 minutes and 20 seconds to reach that point, being blocked or diffused in the interim.

“Taking in the shape” - Elizabeth Barrett

- Supplies:     Pad of paper  
                  Charcoal stick/Pencil  
                  Timer

This score is about taking in the shape and form of what is around us. If trying to capture a tree, you are not focusing on each individual leaf but instead the shape of it as a whole and the volume it takes up in space.

Find your subject and set a timer for a minute. With your charcoal pencil draw the mass of the object. Do not linger on small details but instead, try to capture the shape of the object. Draw with the side of the pencil to create thick bold lines. Seek out which portions of your subject have the most weight and where do they taper off.

This score is to help you focus on what you see instead of what you know. We often draw objects as symbols. A leaf looks like an oval with a stem, a face is a u shape, a flower has teardrop shaped petals. For this exercise you need to remove any preconceived ideas of what an object looks like. Instead focus solely on absorbing what you see in front of you.

“One, One, Two”

This is a movement score and no supplies are needed for practicing it, however, you can choose to work with found materials from the environment as part of your dance. As you prepare to start, choose a location and a partner to work with, and decide who will start first.

Once this is clear, person A begins to dance for one minute and person B observes. Switch roles after a minute has gone by, person B dances for one minute and person A witnesses the dance. Afterwards, dance together for two minutes.

Continue alternating roles and dancing together for as long as you wish. You can exchange thoughts on what you experienced after completing each cycle or when you feel it necessary.

Decide to work with a timer to keep track of time and afterwards move towards a more “biological” sense of time to determine when a minute or two-minute cycle has transpired.

I learned this movement practice from Professors Liam Clancy and Eric Geiger during our seminars in the dance studio. For this particular purpose, we adapted the practice to the estuary, interacting with the elements found in the environment. We had the visual reference of the border wall and were located near an abandoned train station; this was relevant for our movement and dance. I would suggest practicing the score outdoors as the environment adds interesting information when moving alone and dancing together.



Figure 15: Practicing “One, One, Two” at the estuary

**(Un)choreographed notes from my journal**

My desire is to give something back to this (border) landscape

For holding this space together

Despite a man-made wall

For being a place of refuge for many

Despite adversities

In return

to

heal

together

ilanding / Fragment of score 65: Collaborative Observation of a Site / page 25

How can we use our sensing body to learn about these systems and how do they function in the  
larger context of this environment?



In conversation with Liam:

How much do we interfere with what is already happening there?

How much do we recognize what is already happening there and guide the attention to the viewer?

What is the choreography of this place?

How to hold that space (the estuary) rather than capturing it?

Noticing the shape of what already is there: Speaks-Resonates

#### Theme & Variations

Water

Light

Sound

Scores

Reflecting

Mirror

Giving something back to this place

Walk

Walk

Pollution

One ecosystem divided by a wall

The river knows no borders

¿Cómo cambian la sensación de escucha según la incidencia del sol? / How does the sensation of listening change according to the incidence of the sun?

I am trying to swallow the landscape with my whole body as I walk

What if this is what I need now? D. H.

What if what I see is the source for my movement? D.H.

(Un)documenting

Echology

(In conversation with Professor Ricardo)

A sensory experience where the viewer activates his/her senses and simultaneously activates the estuary's space enacting certain rituals (actions & intentions)

Source-reflection-recurrence-memory

Birds-Wings-Helicopter rotors

Who is your audience?

(Jennifer Monson in reference to the idea of performing *Danzas Clandestinas*<sup>3</sup> at the estuary)

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<sup>3</sup> Clandestine dances are dances meant to be performed with no audience in locations within the estuary that are usually off limits, leaving afterwards only traces.



Border patrol, my audience: imprints with the question: What does a landscape say? declared on  
the wetlands for the border patrol to find

(we are in the same space but at different times)

I encountered border patrol agents, coyotes, (un)documented individuals, horse riders, nostalgic  
immigrants, rangers, hares, mice, snakes, palm trees (invasive plants), light-footed clapper rails,  
and more...

### **Reflection (more questions)**

How does the dance emerge from a body that seeks interaction with a powerful and  
dynamic natural environment, but that exists also within political limits/interests, polluted,  
corrupted, and in danger? Is the environmental crisis also a crisis of the body? Can we think and  
experiment in terms of system-wide concepts while articulating new agreements and new ways of  
bonding? Could this renewal of our agency be based on caring for and listening to the landscape?

## The estuary is a filter

### People also ask

Do estuaries filter?

**Estuaries and their surrounding wetlands filter out pollutants such herbicides, pesticides, heavy metals and excess nutrients and sediments.** For this reason, estuaries comprise one of the most fertile ecosystems, but also have the potential be the most polluted. Sep 20, 2016

<https://www.delmarvanow.com> › columnists › 2016/09/20

[Vulnerable estuaries: Where land, sea and pollution meet](#)

Search for: [Do estuaries filter?](#)

How do estuaries act as a filter?

Are estuaries used as a filtration system? As the water flows through wetlands such as swamps and salt marshes, **much of the sediments and pollutants are filtered out.** This filtration process creates cleaner and clearer water, which benefits both people and marine life. Dec 18, 2021

<https://lisbdnet.com> › FAQ

Figure 16: Google screenshot

## The estuary is a wildlife refuge

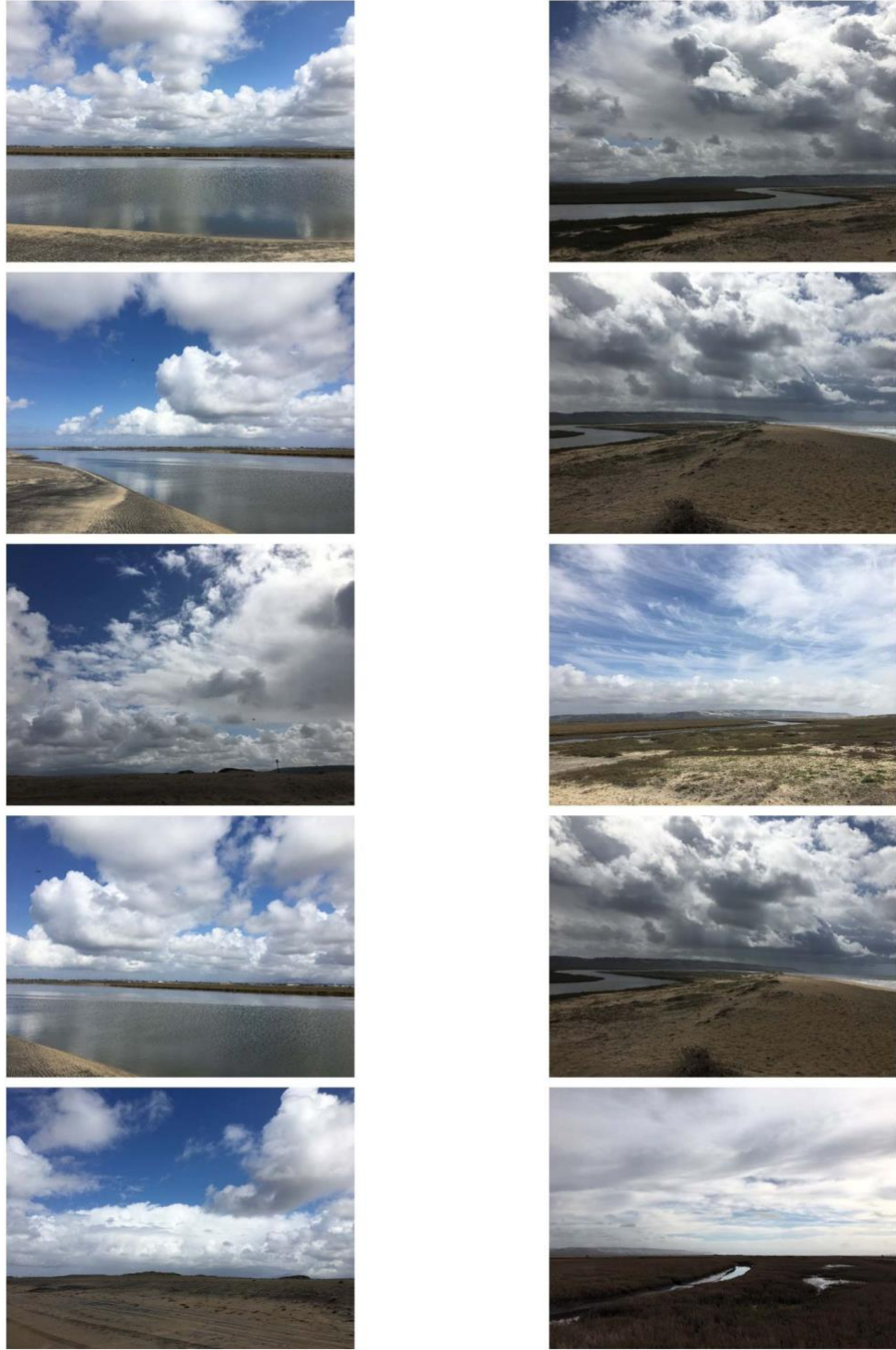


Figure 17: Tijuana River Estuary

## **Walking and Wandering**

Walking and wandering on the wetlands became a fundamental part of my research practice. I allowed myself to be taken by the landscape's choreography. My senses connected with whatever I found on the way. This intuitive approach deepened my engagement with the estuary.

I journeyed into the estuary, walked for long periods of time. A certain feeling of disorientation grew within my body and inside my eyes. As time passed, I felt lost. The helicopters were no longer present. It was high noon, the sun was at its zenith, my skin burned as I walked in the sand over cholla plants.

Being lost at the estuary is not a casual thing. It is the result of a strategy aimed to the steps of an 'undocumented' body, to one crossing the border illegally, it is one of the many deterring layers strawn and camouflaged in this space.

I kept walking despite feeling disoriented, until our practice became endemic to the space.

After spending some time at the estuary, I encountered border patrol agents, coyotes, (un)documented individuals, horse riders, nostalgic immigrants, rangers, hares, mice, snakes, invasive trees, light-footed clapper rails, and more...

Elements that interfere with the border patrols choreography at the Tijuana River Estuary:

- Sound that is not part of the estuary's soundscape (helicopter sounds belong, to a certain extent)
- Sounds that interrupt natural sounds
- (Un)recognizable traces on the sand (shoes-animals)

### **(Un)tracing**

In my wonderings, traces became an important element to attend to. Traces at the estuary are very present as border patrol agents are trained to read them as “the palm of their hand” in order to understand who and what is traversing this space. As time passed by, I focused on building a stamp with the question WHAT DOES A LANDSCAPE SAY? to be used for printing on the estuary as a trace to be found and read by others.

Huellas ancestrales



Figure 18: (Un)traces



## WHAT DOES A LANDSCAPE SAY?



Figure 19: *WHAT DOES A LANDSCAPE SAY?*, main Visual Arts Gallery, UCSD

I intend to distill the research conducted so far at the Tijuana River Estuary Project and let it be informed by an audience. The layout and activation of archival material in the mediums of video, photography, sound and movement offer a generous and robust panorama that is illuminated by the guest lectures and activated through dance performance.

The archival material gathers a year of research-practice at the estuary and was developed in different levels of conversation and engagement with very valuable accomplices.

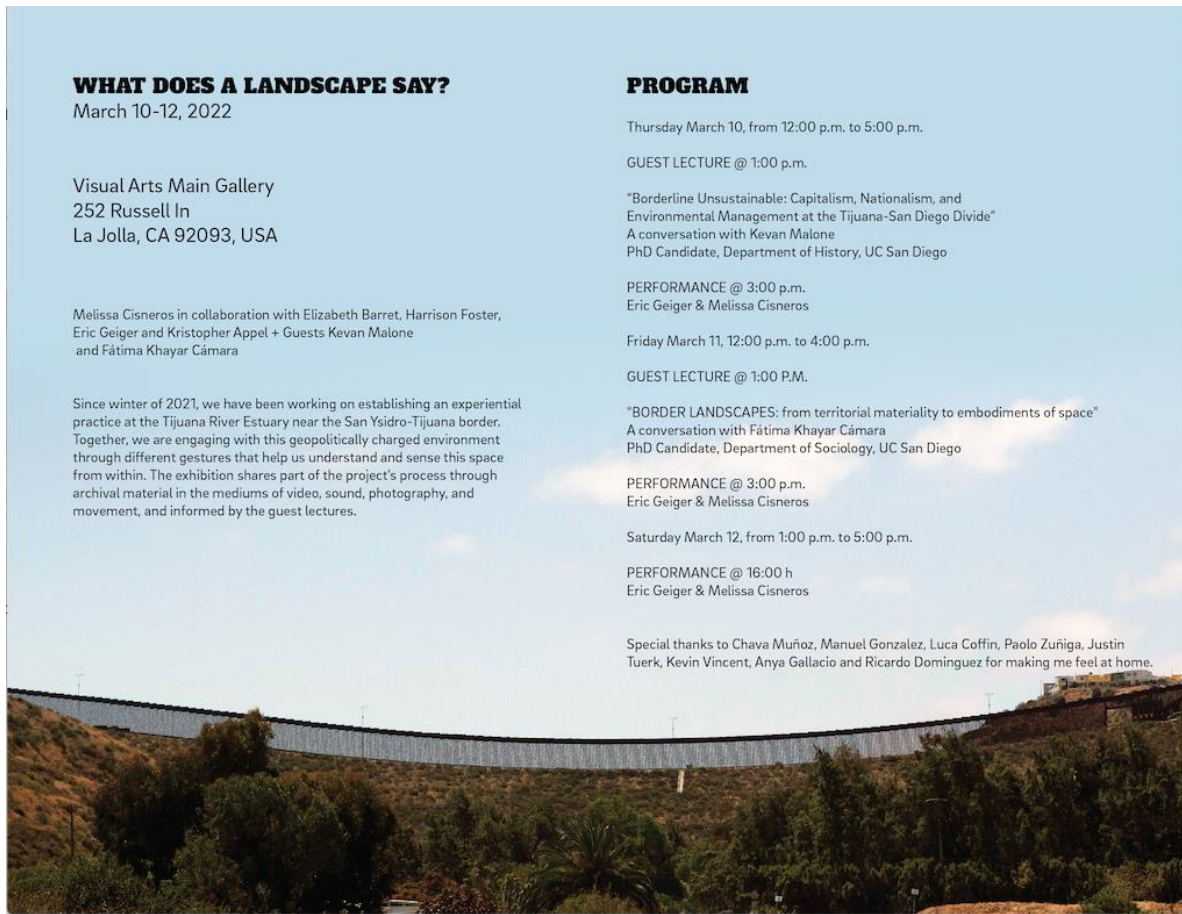


Figure 20: *WHAT DOES A LANDSCAPE SAY?* Poster

Just like in a dance, the material captured and displayed in the exhibition *WHAT DOES A LANDSCAPE SAY?* becomes ephemeral, the landscape was dynamic: always changing, never resting, consistently resilient, in constant recovery, birthing from within.



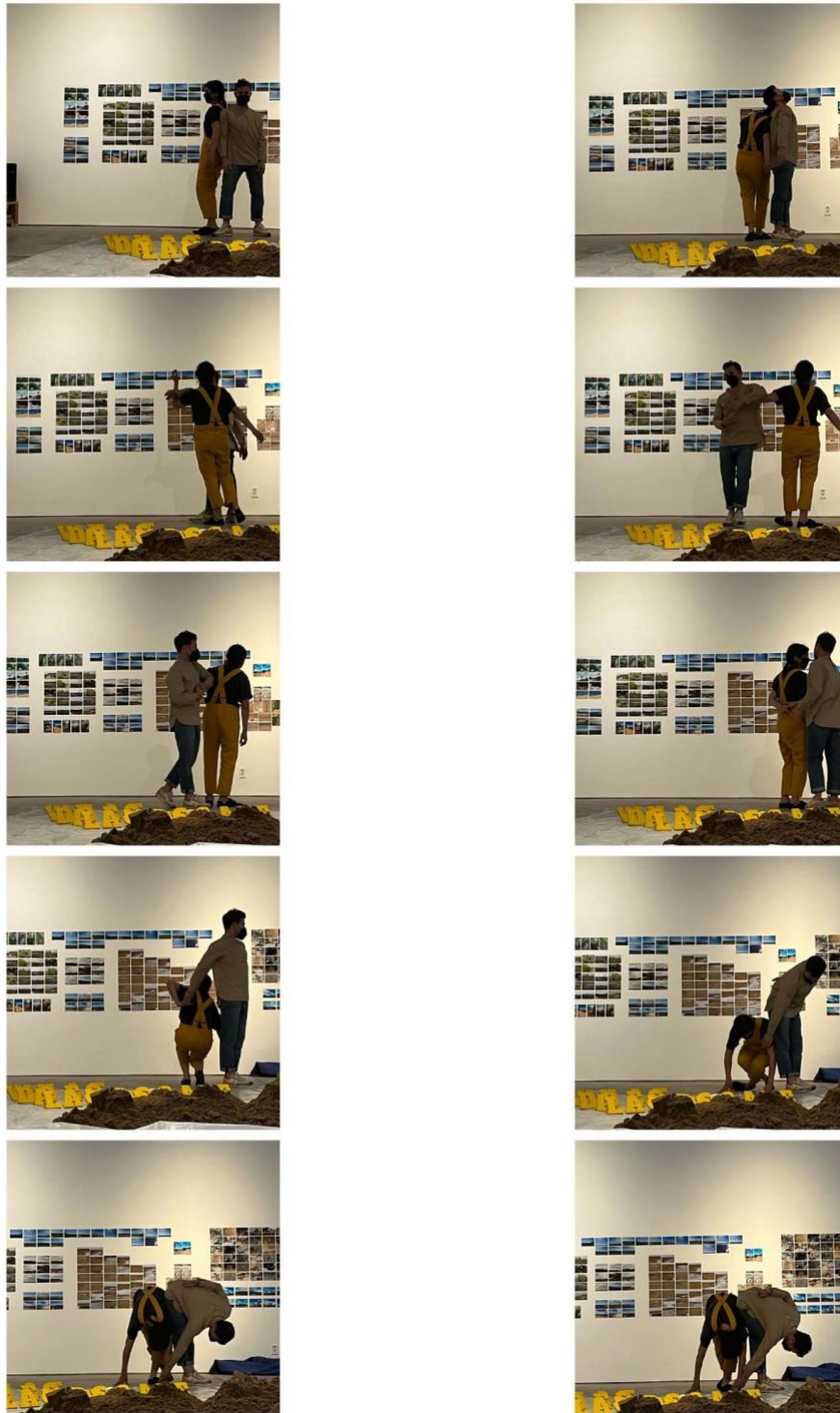


Figure 21: “One, One, Two” practice at the gallery

## **Performance Activation of the (Embodied) Archive in the Gallery**

Expressive power drawn from the dynamics of all elements converging at the estuary

The moving form engendering expressive rhythmic patterns

Synchronizing in the estuary's spatiality

(Un)forming

How did the forces present at the estuary continue to pour into each of the elements from the (embodied) archive?

How did each of the elements interact with the forces present at the estuary?

How did each of those letters generate (non)meanings?

What new meanings radiated from the interaction of the elements in the gallery?

How did the dynamics of each element resonating with the bodies (movers and witnesses) generate yet another expressive dimension during the exhibition?

Osmosis

Relational Space

Ephemerality

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

Satisfying the expectations set forth by the University of California in San Diego and the Theatre & Dance Department became unusually difficult. The practice-based research that I had honed over the last 12 years of work had to be profoundly adapted. The suspension of the M.F.A. in Dance program at the conclusion of my first year, the setbacks caused by the covid-19 pandemic (which involved the closure of the US/Mexico border for two years), the departure from the Department of two main professors who had been appointed as my program's mentors.

I managed to overcome a flowing state of continued emergencies. The survival strategy that I learned to fashion from one setback to the next forced me to take nothing for granted, particularly, any institutional support.

The constitution that I finally show up with, in the end, is the fruit of a lifelong personal search for those virtues that nurture sustainable communal empathy. This work has rewarded me with the most inspiring gifts offered by young students and key allies that strengthened in me a trust for the intuition that opens one to receive. This made me realize that dance-making is not so much about being creative and expressing a unique voice for a responsive audience but, above all, it is about refining those artistic skills that will promote flourishing in heart, body and soul within the life of a community.

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