Restoring Connection

Alexa Velez
a.velez@wustl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/samfox_art_etds

Part of the Art and Design Commons

Recommended Citation
RESTORING CONNECTION

By
Alexa Vélez

A thesis presented to the
Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts
Washington University in St. Louis

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Chair of the Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art Program
Lisa Bulawsky

Thesis Advisor
Monika Weiss

Primary Advisors
Patricia Olynyk | Richard Krueger

Graduate Committee
Carl Craver | Monika Weiss

May 2021
# Contents

Introduction.................................................................................................................. 4

Finding Elsewhere: space and sound................................................................. 8

Being of Water: fins and fiction........................................................................... 21

Being of Air: breath and body............................................................................. 38

Conclusion............................................................................................................... 56

Notes......................................................................................................................... 59

Bibliography............................................................................................................. 63
I was driving through the middle of nowhere.

Dense forests lined the highway,

a blur of dark green.

Windows down, the air smelled alive.

Joni Mitchell was singing something about paving paradise

when blue sky spilled into my peripheral vision,

as I drove past a graveyard.

Behind a chain-link fence,

rows of headstones lined the manicured lawn,

a place where trees once stood.
Introduction
As a multidisciplinary artist, I draw attention to our disconnect from the natural world. My work seeks to restore that connection through movement and sound. The camera is my primary artistic tool. In my video art, I take on the role of director, cinematographer, editor, choreographer, performer, and soundtrack composer. My photographs and videos transform the ordinary spaces we inhabit into theatrical settings for storytelling, intertwining the familiar with the uncanny. By juxtaposing confined movement with soundscapes that evoke the vastness and the mystery of natural environments, I build an emotional tension that frequently remains unresolved in my work.

Nature is one of my primary sources of inspiration. By nature, I mean all living and non-living things on the planet that are not of human origin. However, because humans are creatures of Earth, we are nature. My definition of nature also includes the many mysterious and uncontrollable forces that exist in our world, such as hurricanes, lightning, and ocean currents. With conviction, I acknowledge that we cannot control nature. As Rachel Carson states in her final book *Silent Spring*:

The “control of nature” is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man.¹

The concept of “nature” has been widely debated over the years by philosophers and scientists alike. Still, humans continue to feed the delusion that they reign over the natural world. I align my understanding of nature with ecologists and biologists such as Rachel Carson. The idea that humans can control nature is dangerous. The idea that humans can exist separate from nature is equally dangerous. Despite advancements in technology, we cannot possibly reconstruct or duplicate the complex interconnected webs essential to all life on the planet. For many years, scientists have stressed the importance of learning to coexist with other lifeforms that inhabit
Earth. And yet, today, we continue to recede into artificial, sterile spaces devoid of non-human life.

Though I find inspiration in nature, indoor spaces provide the backdrop for some of my most recent work. As a society, we spend the majority of our lives indoors—engaging less and less with the outside world. According to a study sponsored by the Environmental Protection Agency, the average citizen of the United States spends 93% of their life indoors.\(^2\) We are growing increasingly disconnected from the natural environment, one on which we depend for our survival. Through my work, I seek to call attention to this disconnect. I hope viewers that experience my work are left with a longing to reconnect with the world that exists beyond our constructed walls.

I am an artist, not a scientist nor an activist. However, as an inhabitant of this planet, I feel deeply about the harm we inflict on the environment. Through my work, I promote and embrace an ecocentric view of the world, one that recognizes the importance of our connection with the natural world. As Linda Weintraub states in her book *To Life!*:\(^3\)

> When humans think of themselves anthropocentrically, as outsiders, they grant themselves the leeway to approach nature as a medium of exchange, a source of wealth, a repository of resources, and a depository of waste. Separateness from nature is viewed as a sign of progress and a mark of civilization.

I find this statement troubling. For too long, we have engaged with an anthropocentric view of the world, one that supports the idea that we are independent of nature. When in fact, we are very much a part of it.

In this thesis, I discuss how I use movement and sound to create affective experiences that sensitize viewers to the world around them. In the chapter titled *Finding Elsewhere*, I discuss how ambient sounds create an immersive sonic experience and how choreography for the camera can carry a narrative. In the chapter titled *Being of Water*, I discuss the nature of dreams
and the power of cinema. In the chapter titled *Being of Air*, I discuss how I use body and breath to create an experience that encourages viewers to restore connection with the natural world.
Finding Elsewhere: space and sound
I stood still in the middle of the forest
listening to the trees.
Their branches rippled through the air,
like waves in a green sea that smelled of earth and bark.
Limbs and leaves embraced,
entangling me in their secrets.
They whispered in a language that moved like water,
pulling me under.
And I let go of the longing to be
elsewhere.
My work titled *Elsewhere* (2020) is a 3 minute and 47 second video created during the summer lockdown of 2020. While working in isolation, my well-traveled DSLR camera and audio recording equipment were my most trusted companions. *Elsewhere* was inspired by the sound of cicadas and my own feelings of disconnect. By the summer of 2020, the global pandemic had brought the entire world to a grinding halt. At the time, I was in North Carolina with my sister who had recently adopted a puppy from the shelter. At night, I found myself sleeping on the sofa bed in the living room next to a teething furry baby demon with far too much energy for her tiny body. Every evening, we would go on a very long walk, and during these excursions, the cicadas would sing their nightly symphony. My sister’s apartment was surrounded by deep, dense, dark woods. I could hear the cicadas even at night while I was half asleep. When I would close my eyes, the primordial noise of these ancient creatures would transport me back to those woods, beyond the dull, white walls of the living room.

As a video artist, sound is an integral element of my practice. My ears are always open and my recording equipment travels wherever I go. That summer, I collected field recordings of the cicadas in the woods near my sister’s apartment. Listening to the percussive quality of the noise they produce inspired me to create a video piece featuring cicadas as an instrument in the soundscape. In his book *Silence*, John Cage addresses the use of ambient sounds as music, even sounds we would classify as noise:

> Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of a truck at fifty miles per hour. Static between the stations. Rain. We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but as musical instruments.⁴

I am fascinated by the strange and mundane noises that bombard my ears every day: the soft whoosh of traffic on the highway, the hum of the AC unit, the tap of my dog’s claws on the hardwood floor. These sounds created by non-instruments provide endless possibilities for
musical composition. It is impossible to ignore the sound of a forest full of singing cicadas. I have grown to appreciate this noise and, as Cage suggests, “find it fascinating.” When I give in to their drumming beat, I feel at peace. The hum of cicadas is deeply intertwined with my childhood memories of summer in Florida. That sound alone has the power to reconnect me with a distant time and place. It is the ability of sound to transport me somewhere else that led to the narrative for my work Elsewhere.

Figure 1. View of the artist recording cicadas for her film Elsewhere, photo documentation by Alexa Velez, 2020.
Elsewhere begins with the low drone of a distant lawnmower as a dark screen slowly fades to reveal the opening scene: a young woman lying on a bed in the middle of an empty room. The sound of the lawnmower drifts closer and then further away, punctuated by a dog barking in the distance. The character (who I perform and will now address as the dreamer) lifts her hand, reaching for the floor, and the scene momentarily shifts to the outdoors, the mattress resting at the edge of a forest.

The low hum of cicadas intensifies until it overtakes the drone of the lawnmower. The dreamer abruptly withdraws her hand from the grass, and the scene snaps back to the bedroom. She rolls over onto her back, pedaling her feet in the air as if walking upside down, and the scene cuts again to the outdoors. The scene continues shifting back and forth between the bedroom, rooted in reality, and the imagined wilderness that exists in the dreamer’s mind. The sound of the cicadas instigates the scene to shift from interior to exterior—the body and the bed tethered in

Figure 2. Alexa Velez, still from Elsewhere, 2020.
space. Momentum builds until she suddenly stops for a moment on the edge of the mattress to take a few breaths. All movement ceases.

The dreamer suddenly stands and faces the back wall of the bedroom. The version of herself in the forest faces a river disappearing around the bend. The dreamer in the bedroom closes her eyes, placing her hands over her ears. The cicadas crescendo and the version of herself by the river’s edge enters the water. The dreamer in the bedroom continues to listen to the cicadas, eyes closed, hands over her ears, the sound coming from her mind. She opens her eyes, falls back on the bed, and stares upward, only to see the white ceiling. As she closes her eyes, the scene cuts back to the dreamer further out in the water, walking deeper into the forest.

Figure 3. Alexa Velez, still from Elsewhere, 2020.

Elsewhere is a narrative triggered by sound. In an interview with the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Bill Viola describes the importance of sound in his video art practice. He states that even though he is best known as a video artist, imagery is not the most important aspect of
his work. He believes that what makes his work most impactful is the merging of image and sound:

Sound is the single entity that, like the angels in the ancient world or like Prometheus going up to the gods and down to Earth—the ones that can cross between the physical world and the non-physical world—sound is the element that goes between them. So, really, more than . . . the image . . . it is the combination of sound and image; and I would say even my pieces that are silent have a kind of sound, because you can feel the movement in it, and you can understand that as a kind of chord.  

Viola’s statement about the power of sound strongly resonates with me. Sound can act as a bridge between worlds. Sound can travel through walls. It can travel through the body, becoming an embodied experience. In my video Elsewhere, which is a work of fiction, sound has the power to travel through dreams.

In these times of environmental crisis, sound can also provide a voice for the planet. In a recent interview with the Asian Cultural Council, Susie Ibarra discusses her use of sound to call attention to climate change and the associated changing landscape:

The cascading effects of climate change create their own sound; but no one has really bothered to listen.  

The sound installation Water Rhythms: Listening to Climate Change (2020), which is a collaboration between Susie Ibarra and Michele Koppes, is a collection of field recordings of melting glaciers intended to bring awareness to global warming. The work was originally presented at the Jack Poole Plaza in Canada and the Innisfree Garden in New York. The installation showcases a speaker emitting sounds associated with melting glaciers to create a sonic experience for the audience that draws attention to the changing landscape and the diminishing supply of drinking water. Susie Ibarra uses sound to create both a meditative and ominous experience for the audience—one that carries an important message about our rapidly changing world.
I believe sound makes art come alive, deepening its connection with the viewer. I have discovered that an image paired with sound can be much more compelling than the image alone. Sound expands the sensorial experience for the viewer. We are creatures that rely on our vision and hearing to understand the world around us. I choose video as my medium because sound and image together create a more immersive experience.

Another aspect of video work that particularly appeals to me is that it lends itself so well to visual storytelling. In my early years as an undergraduate student, I was pursuing a major in English with a concentration in creative writing but felt very frustrated with language as a medium of expression. With video, I am not limited to telling a story through words alone. Video and film have the ability to portray a narrative to the fullest extent, engaging with both our visual
and auditory senses. When video technology first became available, Bill Viola recognized the power of film as a medium to explore the full breadth of an event:

> Just as the limitations of drawing and painting were becoming apparent to me, the new technology of video arrived in my life, and along with it came a rush of creative possibilities. I now had a medium that could represent the space before the thought arrives, watch it manifest as a turning-over on the surface of the mind, and then witness its aftermath: the resulting change and transformation in a scene and within an individual. This remains one of the fundamental aspects of the practice of cinema . . . .

Drawing, painting, and photography generally present a single moment frozen in time. Cinema, on the other hand, lends itself to the development of a narrative and an emotional arch. It allows for a progression to unfold over multiple moments of time.

I believe film, especially a work of fiction, creates a safe environment that allows us to fully engage with thoughts and feelings we may find difficult to confront. *Elsewhere* is a manifestation of my own feelings and concern for our growing disconnect from the natural world. This concern is not unique. As I was reading *Becoming Animal* by David Abram, I was drawn to his description of the distant relationship he observes between our modern-day existence and nature:

> . . . we seal ourselves into a numbing solitude—a loneliness already settling around us as the complex creativity of forests gives way to the numbered productivity of even-aged tree farms, as the diverse riffs of songbirds steadily fade from the soundscape, and the wild, syncopated chant of the frog chorus that once rocked the fields every spring dwindles down to the monotonous hum of a single street lamp.¹⁰

His words resonate with me because I know my own mental wellbeing is adversely affected whenever I find myself isolated for long periods of time from the visual stimulation found in the natural world. Even my dog will go stir crazy in my apartment if we don’t go out for a daily walk. Instinctively, we all need the external stimulation provided by nature. No living creature is designed to live in a box. The human-made spaces we inhabit, which are often devoid of nature—its sounds, colors, and diversity— isolate us in a muted, sterile environment. In my
work, I wish to draw attention to the artificial monotony of these constructed spaces that drastically deplete us of life.

The setting for Elsewhere was a direct reflection of my own environment during the summer of 2020. Due to the pandemic, most of my time was spent alone in one of two places: inside, surrounded by four white walls or outside, surrounded by the vastness of the forest. It was a strange dichotomy. I found myself becoming hyperaware of the walls in the apartment and the box they created around me. Their presence felt constricting and suffocating. In her book To Life!, Linda Weintraub expresses her thoughts regarding our modern-day lifestyle and the enclosed spaces we occupy:

. . . humans tend to construct environments that are replete with boxes. Four perpendicular walls contain most settings where we learn, work, sleep, eat, play, and relax. Four right angles form the containers for most of our possessions. When we die, we are placed inside a box, and another box marks our grave.11

During filming, I sought to accentuate the striking contrasts between the boxed indoor space and the expansive outdoor space. Rather than filming from different angles, I made the decision to use the same composition throughout the video and tether the majority of the choreography to one space—the mattress. The camera was placed at exactly the same distance from the mattress for both indoor and outdoor scenes. By jump cutting from the mattress in the room to the mattress in the forest, my intent was to create the illusion that the character, along with the mattress, is being transported by the power of her own mind, triggered by the sound of the cicadas.
The lens of a camera provides creative potential to use perception and perspective to make images appear not as they are in reality. Janine Antoni’s video installation Touch^{12} (2002) is a nine minute and thirty-seven second piece in which the artist herself appears to walk on the horizon line. In order to achieve this optical illusion, she placed the camera at an angle to make the distant horizon appear to bear her weight as she walks on a tightrope. Her video piece creates the appearance that the horizon is a tangible surface. Antoni explains the intent of this work on her website: “I wanted to walk in this impossible place, to walk on the line of my vision, or along the edge of my imagination.”^{13} In a way, her performance is choreography especially designed for the camera. Through video and cinematic magic, Antoni is able to walk on a non-existant surface.

I find creating choreography for the camera particularly liberating because it allows me to craft stories without words and take the stage out into the real world. The language of dance
allows for movement, rather than dialogue, to carry the narrative. In my video piece *Elsewhere*, movement flows uninterrupted between the forest and the bedroom; this would not have been feasible on a traditional stage. Through video editing, however, I am able to project a stream of continuous movement on screen that more accurately reflects the nature of a daydream, which does not abide by the rules of time and space.

Over the past year, I have been especially interested in the work by Maya Deren. Her 3-minute piece *A Study in Choreography for Camera*¹⁵ (1945), captured on 16mm film, presents dancer Talley Beatty as he seamlessly moves in a landscape that shifts from forest, to living room, to museum. Through editing, he appears to initiate movement in one space and complete it in another. The choreography is uninterrupted, as the dancer gives the impression of traveling a vast distance in a short period of time. I admire Deren’s use of editing techniques to connect scenes filmed at different locations. The film is silent, so I can only wonder how Deren would

---

¹³ Two excerpts from my video piece *Elsewhere*.

¹⁴ A Study in Choreography for Camera (1945), filmed on 16mm.

¹⁵ A Study in Choreography for Camera (1945), captured on 16mm film.

Figure 6. Maya Deren. Still from *A Study in Choreography for Camera*, 1945, 16mm film. https://www.moma.org/collection/works/302825?artist_id=6912&page=1&sov_referrer=artist.
have utilized sound in a piece like this. There are multiple passages in Deren’s essay, *Creating Movies with a New Dimension: Time* that resonate with me because I also work in a time-based medium.

...A *Study in Choreography for Camera* is a demonstration of the idea that in dancing one achieves a more magic relationship to space than one does in the course of ordinary walking. After all, dancing is not only a way of moving one’s limbs—it also brings the dancer into a different relationship with his surroundings (both objects and space as a whole). 16

As an artist who creates choreography specifically for the camera, I feel Deren’s quote identifies exactly what dance achieves that everyday locomotion does not. Dance changes how the body engages with space. It is a silent form of communication through gesture and time. Walking from point A to point B gets the job done. But dancing from point A to point B introduces a visual vocabulary that relies on how the body moves through space to reveal the internal landscape of the mind. Deren uses the word *magic* to describe the relationship a dancer has with space.

Another word that comes to my mind is *mystery*.

What I appreciate most about dance is that, through the articulation of the body, I can say everything and nothing. Words are not necessary. In my mind, words are like boxes. I can label and describe something in the most infinite detail, but I will always be limited to the definitions of those words. I can’t tell someone how to dance; I show them how to dance. With movement, I can translate every feeling, thought, and experience into an energy that cannot be contained. After I perform live onstage, there is no trace left of the dance except for the feeling I carry in my tired body and the feeling the audience may take home for themselves. Although I value the unique experience of a live dance performance, dance film immortalizes an artform that lives in the moment, so the message contained within that exact moment in time can be shared with a larger audience.
Being of Water: fins and fiction
As soon as I learned to swim,
I was drawn to the deep end of the pool.
I would let go of the edge,
exhale,
and sink.
Ignoring the sting of chlorine,
I’d watch the sunlight ripple on the tiled floor,
and my long dark hair snake around my face.
It was quiet down below.
The muffled voices from above,
felt far away,
and I could breathe a little easier.
My work *Of the Water* (2020) is a 3 minute and 39 second video art piece that explores a longing to drown out the ambient noise of the surrounding environment by submerging the imagination in an underwater dream evoked by sound. Through dance and music, I examine our disconnect from the natural world by engaging with the element of water from a physical and emotional perspective. The choreography, which I perform, combines human and fish locomotion to create a character that bridges between species. The soundtrack features my performance of an original piano composition.

The video opens to the sound of a sharp *click* from a radio dial, as a young woman (myself) hovers over the radio on a kitchen counter. The woman (who I will address here again as the dreamer) quickly scans through channels, hearing snippets of music and news reporting on one catastrophe after the next. She stops scanning when she arrives at a gentle piano melody and proceeds to wash a pot sitting in the sink. Soap and water swirl. As the music picks up speed, the dreamer drops the sponge and begins tracing the water’s circling pattern with her finger. When
her hand moves away from the sink with fish-like fluidity, the rest of her body follows, as if no longer completely under her control. The energy from the water spreads from her hand to her spine, progressing down to her feet. For a moment, it is blissful. But the dance soon turns frantic, as the dream begins to lose its hold, the radio signal weakens, and the music cuts in and out. The video closes with the dreamer, standing alone in the kitchen, as the sound of the ocean floods the room.

When we dream, our minds can travel vast distances and imagine impossible things. In his book *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard describes the power of the mind to dream on a large scale:

> Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense. Indeed, immensity is the movement of motionless man. It is one of the dynamic characteristics of quiet daydreaming.\(^\text{17}\)

*Of the Water* is the embodiment of a dream in motion, but confined to a small space. In my piece, the dreamer indulges a longing to live in an underwater world, a vast space without walls. It is a longing so strong that, even though she cannot physically transform into a fish, the power
of her mind is able to break through the physical barrier of the space and summon the sound of the ocean.

Dreams have the power to reveal our most hidden desires. In the film *The Shape of Water* (2017) directed by Guillermo del Toro, a dream sequence artistically discloses to the audience what the protagonist longs for most—to live underwater. The film introduces this concept in the opening scene, as the camera glides through the protagonist’s apartment completely submerged in water to find her floating above a couch sound asleep. This dream provides a window into the protagonist’s internal landscape, setting the stage for the development of her relationship with the fish creature she meets later in the film. I appreciate how the opening dream sequence in *The Shape of Water* reveals to the audience the protagonist’s most hidden desire without resorting to words. In my video piece *Of the Water*, the dreamer discloses her hidden desire through gesture and dance—embodying her longing to become a creature of the water.

Bill Viola’s video installation *The Dreamers* (2013) incorporates the element of water and the experience of a dream. The work is comprised of the large-scale video portraits of seven people submerged underwater with their eyes closed, appearing to be asleep. The only indication that they have not drowned is the occasional air bubble that escapes from their nostrils and floats to the surface. A dream is an immersive experience that all human beings share, but it is often a very private experience. We dream in solitude. Viola’s piece transforms the act of dreaming into a shared experience between the underwater dreamer and the conscious viewer. In my piece *Of the Water*, I transform a dream into a moving image in the form of a dance and share this experience on a screen.

In this era of the Anthropocene, my video piece *Of the Water* can be interpreted as a story about coping with the current state of the world and the turmoil that surrounds us. In particular, it is a reflection on climate anxiety. The dreamer in the video immerses her imagination in a watery world, one that is soothing but also alarming, as it considers the possibility of an apocalyptic future in which global warming submerges our world in water, returning humans to the sea. *Of the Water*, however, is not about humans becoming fish, at least, not in a literal sense. The conflict, which lies within the mind of the dreamer, is revealed through an affective dream-like experience and articulated by movement and sound. From a personal perspective, this video work is a story about coping with the suppressed, anxious energy that often circles in the back of my mind until the body grows nauseous. *Of the Water* is a tale about finding temporary release from reality, as well as coming to terms with the turmoil that exists within it.
When I began experimenting with the choreography for *Of the Water*, I was intrigued by the idea of creating the illusion of a body suspended in water, although still very much on dry land. I took a barstool from my studio, leaned my upper body over the seat, and lifted my legs until they were suspended parallel to the floor. It was a rather ridiculous stunt, but it was my initial attempt at imitating a creature that moved without being connected to the ground. In the weeks that followed, I continued exploring movement inspired by fish locomotion. These scaly creatures float through space; they are not as intimate with gravity as we are. In order to create motion with that kind of fluidity, while limited by a human body that is very much grounded, I embodied the essence of a fish with my hand.

The transformation of hand to fish in *Of the Water* is initiated by the energy and movement of the water itself—a circular, spiraling visual pattern found often in the natural world. In her book, Linda Weintraub identifies the spiral as a prominent form in nature:
“The sun at the center of the solar system and our hearts at the center of our bodies are both hubs of spiral vortexes. Kernels, bracts, and needles reveal spiral patterns of growth for corn, pinecone, and cacti. Seashells, electrons, seaweed, hurricanes, blood, lava, fire, whirlpools, and galaxies all revolve in micro and macro cauldrons of spiral movement. As blueprints for beauty and functionality, spirals manifest the cosmos’s great canon of design.”

When left to its own devices, water is a fluid substance that follows a winding path. As Weintraub states, “Water is pumped through straight pipes to arrive in the faucet, but it spirals when it flows freely down the drain.” In my video, as the dreamer scrubs the pot in the kitchen sink, the water immediately forms a tiny whirlpool with a contagious energy that spreads to her body. The choreography that follows incorporates many curves and bends. In the piece, no gesture travels in a straight line. The choreography is intended not only to create the illusion of a body immersed in water but also to remind us that water flows within the body itself, and that we are beings of the water.

Although I initially titled the video Becoming Fish, the piece is not about becoming a fish. It is about remembering we are beings of the water. They say that life on Earth began in the water; it was our first home. But what is the point of portraying a character that moves like a fish? I believe non-human animals are more connected with the sensorial world than humans. David Abram explains in his book Becoming Animal:

Learning to dance another animal is central to the craft of shamanic traditions throughout the world. To move as another is simply the most visceral approach to feel one’s way into the body of that creature, and so to taste the flavor of its experience, entering into the felt intelligence of the other.

Moving like a fish is a way of conjuring the energy of a creature that is more deeply intimate with the element of water. I use dance like a wizard uses a wand and a spell to channel an outside force. Just as a Ouija board summons the spirits and a lightning rod channels electricity, I use
movement to summon and channel an energy that is beyond my understanding in order to reconnect with the natural world.

The idea of becoming animal originates from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. In their book *A Thousand Plateaus*, they explain the complexities surrounding this concept:

Becoming is certainly not imitating, or identifying with something. . . . Becoming is a verb with a consistency all its own; it does not reduce to or lead back to, “appearing,” “being,” “equaling,” or “producing.”

The act of becoming involves a state that is always in between, always unfinished. Through the choreography in my video *Of the Water*, I attempt to embody the act of becoming by exploring movement that is a cross between fish and human: the fingers flex against the cheeks like gills expanding, the head moves side to side like a fish propelling its body through water. The choreography seeks to construct a hybrid creature that exists in between.

In March of 2019, I visited the St. Louis Art Museum and experienced the work *Betweenness* (2018) by Oliver Laric. The work is a 4 minute and 48 second video comprised of a series of black and white animations of living things moving and, in some instances, transforming into other living things. The stark simplicity of the animated creatures allows the eye to focus on the outlines of the figures in motion as they change and evolve. Nothing is ever stagnant. I was captivated most by that instant in which one figure morphs into another, and I am unable to determine where one creature ends and another begins. These moments of “betweenness” remind me of the interconnectedness that exists between all species.
As a dancer and choreographer, for many years I have been an admirer of Pilobolus, an American dance company well-known throughout the world for their creativity, physicality, and theatricality. I have had the opportunity to see Pilobolus perform live on stage; their choreography is like that of no other dance company I have seen. *Symbiosis* (2001), a duet choreographed by Michael Tracy, takes inspiration from biology and is one of my favorites. The piece begins with a clap of thunder illuminating a male and a female dancer lying close to each other on the stage floor. The male dancer reaches for the female and their bodies move closer, until they envelop each other. Through masterful partnering, they form shapes that resemble a number of living creatures: a sea anemone, a spider, a snail, a bird, a human and many others. The movement is slow and sinuous; the music is eerie and mysterious. The performance reflects
the interconnectedness of life on Earth. No art form other than dance could express this quite so movingly.

https://www.ted.com/talks/pilobolus_a_dance_of_symbiosis#t-527658
Despite the quiet and still nature of photographs, I often find inspiration in this medium for my video art. The audio of the ocean at the end of my video, *Of the Water*, was partially inspired by a photograph created by Gregory Crewdson. One untitled photograph from his *Twilight* series depicts a young woman floating on her back in a partially flooded living room. Her eyes are open, unfocused. The sunlight coming through the windows is soft and diffused, almost the color of an early morning sunrise. However, the water that fills the lower half of the frame is dark and reflective. While it is impossible to infer what may have led to the woman’s death in this fictional landscape, the uncapped medicine bottle that sits on the coffee table may provide a clue. And the presence of a large body of water in the domestic space speaks greater volumes. To drown in one’s thoughts is to be consumed by them. Crewdson’s use of water expands on the psychological complexities of this particular moment frozen in time, providing a visual representation of the dead woman’s internal landscape—one that contains a darkness that drowns her.

My video *Of the Water* concludes with the sound of the ocean flooding the tiny kitchen, in a metaphorical sense. The soundscape streaming from the radio transports the mind of the dreamer to a quieter place. Although her physical body is tethered to the space, her thoughts are immersed in the waves. The concept for this video art piece focuses on the dreamer’s relationship with water, but the radio plays a very important role in the narrative as well.

The 2013 film *Gravity* directed by Alfonso Cuarón incorporates radio static as an integral part of the soundscape throughout the film. In the film, sound contributes to the representation of the lonely mental landscape experienced by the female protagonist (a first-time astronaut) whose child died young. In an interview, Cuarón—who also co-wrote the script—describes the metaphors he employed in the movie to reflect the protagonist’s internal conflict:

[She] is a character who’s drifting towards the void: a victim of her own inertia, getting farther away from human communication, living in her own bubble.29

A critical scene from the film in which sound augments the protagonist’s isolation occurs when the protagonist, who is the last living survivor of her spaceship, makes contact with Earth via radio in a final attempt to call for help. The person that responds on the other end, however, does not speak her language. This is a poignant moment in the film when contact with another human being is finally reached but communication cannot be achieved. The audience does not see the individual on the other side of the conversation; it is a one-sided dialogue between the stranded astronaut floating in space and life on Earth. I find this sort of tension created through sound absolutely compelling and affective. This scene was so powerful that a 7-minute short was created providing a view of the other side of the conversation.30 The radio static represents an invisible connection between two drastically different spaces: outer space, which is devoid of life, and planet Earth, which is teeming with life.
In my video *Of the Water*, I was interested in creating this type of tension. The radio static that disrupts the music represents the protagonist’s fleeting connection with the real world—one she is trying to tune out and forget. At the end of the video, that fleeting connection builds and transforms into the sound of the ocean. The radio static provides a bridge between reality and the dream.

Nearly two years ago, I attended an artist talk with Dana Levy. In her presentation, she screened a fragment of her 3-minute video piece *The Fountain* (2011). I was absolutely captivated by the way she uses sound in this work. Shot in portrait orientation, the video depicts a crane slowly lifting a tree from a lake. At first, we only hear the sound of birds singing and the hum of the crane. But as soon as the tree’s roots emerge from the water, thousands of water droplets fall from the exposed roots and hit the mirror-like surface of the lake, mimicking the sound of rain. It is a peaceful sound, but juxtaposed with the visual of an uprooted tree, the sound of rain reminds me of tears. Though the video is straightforward, the underlying metaphor conveyed through imagery and sound continues to haunt me. In a way, Dana Levy uses a sound that is typically associated with a pleasant experience to deliver an ominous message. I see this work as an environmental message regarding the displacement of nature. As an artist who also uses video and sound, I find this technique incredibly effective.
I composed the music for Of the Water after the piece was filmed and edited. This approach allows the movement to find its own pacing without being forced to conform to a pre-determined beat. This approach also gives me the creative freedom to find a rhythm that complements not only the movement contained within each scene but also the pacing of cuts that I stitch together in the editing process. When I am composing a musical score for a video piece, I sit at the piano, roll the footage, and let my fingers dance on the keys responding to the movement on the screen. The soundtrack for Of the Water provides an emotional musical arc that responds to the choreography. As the choreography transitions from blissful to desperate, the music progresses from melodic to dissonant. If the body spirals, the music swirls. My intent was for the music to behave like water.

Elegy for the Arctic is an environmental music video released in 2016 featuring an original song by pianist and composer Ludovico Einaudi. The video depicts the musician performing on a grand piano as he floats on a platform amongst melting glaciers. The song begins with a progression of soft, minor chords that gradually develop into a melody infused with sadness and longing. A series of descending scales accentuate the moment a large chunk of ice falls from a glacier and crashes into the water. Elegy for the Arctic is intended to raise awareness about climate change and its grave consequences. I find Einaudi’s musical approach incredibly effective at delivering a message about global warming. The piano composition is evocative and captivating while addressing troubling subject matter.

The soundscape for Of the Water opens with a series of radio announcements delivering alarming news about the state of the planet. The music, which follows, is intentionally melodic. By this, I attempt to create a pleasant listening experience that juxtaposes the heaviness of the
content. Music plays an integral part in *Of the Water* as it encourages the viewer to have an emotional investment in a narrative that carries an underlying environmental message.
Being of Air: breath and body
I was walking through the parking lot late one night,
when my eyes fell upon the wings of a dead butterfly
illuminated by the light of a streetlamp.
I paused and stared at this being of the air,
lying so still on the asphalt,
a surface as devoid of life
as the face of the moon.
My work *Of the Air* (2021) is a 4 minute and 36 second video art piece that explores our relationship with air through a dream evoked by sound. The choreography, which I perform, combines human and avian locomotion to create a character that bridges between species. The soundtrack features my performance of original piano and woodwind compositions.

*Of the Air* is a work intended to accompany *Of the Water*. The concept for this second video work manifested as I was in the process of creating the first. While filming and editing *Of the Water*, I had felt ambivalence, at best, towards the air conditioner lurking in the background of nearly every single frame. At some point in the editing process, however, that ambivalence transformed into curiosity. It was an older, rather large, AC unit that had been haphazardly mounted in the wall. It struck me as an eyesore, partly because I was not familiar with this kind of machine. I grew up in a house with a central cooling system, and the air conditioner that was responsible for sparing us from the summer heat lived in the backyard—out of sight and out of mind. The AC unit in the apartment, where I was filming, lived in the kitchen wall, very much on display. It was there in the morning, sitting quietly in the corner as I brewed a cup of coffee. And it was there in the evening, hovering over the dinner table, like an uninvited guest. During the winter, its presence was tolerable. But during the summer, its existence was impossible to ignore as the monotonous drone would spread to every corner of the apartment.

The air conditioner is one of many machines humans have created to harness the forces of the natural world. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, 75% of homes in the United States have an air conditioner. This amounts to millions of machines running 24 hours per day, 7 days per week during the hot summer months. Thanks to climate control technology we are able to live anywhere in the world, as Linda Weintraub points out:

> Where people live does not determine what they consume, nor does where they live depend upon a location’s rainfall, temperature, and soil conditions. Technologies that
produce life-sustaining conditions enable us to frolic in Las Vegas, sip beer in the Antarctic, and take naps in outer space.\textsuperscript{34}

As we use air conditioners to cool our homes, however, we are actually making the planet warmer and contributing to a global problem. According to the Climate Institute “...using and producing air conditioning equipment exacerbates climate change.”\textsuperscript{35} Living in Florida, I have witnessed firsthand the growing intensity of hurricane activity over the past few years, a biproduct of global warming. Though air conditioners are not solely responsible for rising temperatures, they contribute to the problem. In my video \textit{Of the Air} (2021), I question our dependency on a machine for survival, a machine that most of us possess in our homes.

\textit{Of the Air} (2021) opens to a dark screen and the sound of a high-pitched \textit{beep} followed by the heavy drone of a large fan, as it picks up speed. The scene materializes to reveal a young woman (who I perform and will address here as the dreamer) standing in front of an air conditioner in a small kitchen. A radio sits on the counter, as the evening news airs. The
newscaster warns of another heat wave and advises listeners to conserve power. The woman
leans her cheek against the roaring AC unit, closes her eyes, and breathes deeply. As she exhales,
the AC unit gives out. She pulls back to stare at the machine for a beat. On the radio, a gentle but
eerie piano melody begins to play. She presses the button to restart the machine, but the air
conditioner remains unresponsive. Almost inaudible, the whoosh of a mysterious wind flows in
and out of the room. Drawing her hand away from the air conditioner, her fingers twitch. A piano
chord strikes and the wind intensifies, as the dream takes hold. The dreamer’s arm shudders and
rises in the air, no longer under her complete control.

A strange duet begins to unfold between the dreamer and the wind. Sometimes, her
movement appears to be incited by the wind. Other times, the dreamer seems to lean into the
invisible current, as she lets her body float. With arms extended like a bird’s outstretched wings,
she circles the kitchen. Her movement is fluid but broken, as the wind appears to manipulate her
body with every gust and grows to resemble the breathing of a living entity.

The dream begins to lose momentum as the dreamer’s body sinks to the floor, giving in
to gravity. She stares up at the ceiling, where the light fixture bathes the space in a yellow light.
The wind howls, and the dreamer twists and rolls over into a low crouch, one arm crookedly
outstretched. The piano melody picks up speed, keeping up with the quickening pace of the
wind. As the music swells into a whirling crescendo, the movement becomes more frantic and
disjointed. Until suddenly, the wind calms, and the dreamer is left gasping for air on the floor in
a crumpled heap. She notices something in her hair. Two minor chords strike—like the chime of
a clock—as she pulls out a feather. She lifts it up to the light, which encircles the fragile sight in
an ethereal glow.
"Of the Air" is intended as a gentle reminder that even though we live in structures that isolate us from the natural world, we are part of that environment and depend on it for our survival. In the United States, we spend a significant portion of our lives indoors. In a recent interview, Bill Viola expresses his concern for our growing disconnect from the natural world:

Human beings need to touch the ground. There is a reason why we call it Mother Earth. And I’m very, very concerned today, that we—with our high rises and airplane travel and stuff—are floating . . . somewhere else.36

There is a brief but primal moment in the video in which I drag my fingers across the ground. Although this piece could be considered a conversation about our relationship with air, this gesture in the video is about seeking a physical connection, wanting to break through the yellowed linoleum to the earth below. Human-made spaces erase all traces of the surrounding living environment.
After filming two video pieces in a tiny apartment kitchen (Of the Water and Of the Air), I gave some thought to the characteristics of the space that had attracted my attention. The peeling paint and crooked walls could have been part of the allure, but its lack of uniqueness intrigued me most. Nothing about this space divulged where it was geographically located. This kitchen could be anywhere in the world. The “non-place” defined in Marc Auge’s book Non-places: An Introduction to Supermodernity is “... a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity ...” These spaces plague our modern-day world. A grocery store in Florida looks just like a grocery store in Texas. A hotel room in Georgia is indistinguishable from a hotel room in Missouri. As Auge states: “The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude and similitude.” A world without uniqueness is nothing short of an apocalyptic nightmare.

Images of nature overtaking human-constructed spaces fascinate me. I was lucky enough to get up close and personal with a piece by photographer Lori Nix when I was working as a photo lab technician at the University of North Florida, and my colleagues and I were installing a show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Jacksonville, Florida. Nix’s photograph titled Library (2007) from her body of work The City depicts the interior of a two-story dilapidated library. A photographed diorama, this work is an apocalyptic scene on a small scale. A living tree stands in the middle of the crumbling space. Its topmost branches poke through a hole in the ceiling, where a beam of sunlight leaks in. On her website, Nix describes the intent and function of her work:

Because my work features a model and not a real place, it creates a safe space to think about these larger ideas of disaster. Devoid of people, these spaces become meditative and full of possibilities.
This photograph, in particular, resonates with me because of the way the tree is depicted as the focal point in the space. I am attracted to the idea that nature has the upper hand in this landscape devoid of humans. I find the work peaceful, yet riddled in mystery. The photograph is a window into a world that looks familiar and uncanny all at once.

There is something intriguing about the dynamics of a tiny world that resembles reality.

In her book *On Longing*, Susan Stewart explains the allure of the small-scale tableau:

> In its tableaulike form, the miniature is a world of arrested time; its stillness emphasizes the activity that is outside its borders. And this effect is reciprocal, for once we attend to the miniature world, the outside world stops and is lost to us.\(^2\)
This passage caught my attention because a video or a film, in a way, is like a tiny tableau of life frozen in a loop. Once captured, we have complete control of that moment in time. We can alter it and replay it as many times as we like. Video provides a digital space composed of pixels that can reflect imagined realities, while at the same time, removing us from them. Video allows us to engage with the imagination, and dream without consequences.

![Figure 19. Alexa Velez, still from Of the Air, 2021.](image)

The choreography for *Of the Air* embodies the movement of a bird. Being creatures of flight and symbols of freedom, birds are more intimate with the element of air than humans and most other creatures on Earth. The dance portrayed in the video reflects the incomplete transformation of a human into a bird. This transformation is similar to that of werewolves in legends and folklore, as suggested in the final shot of the video—a light fixture resembling the full moon. The dance can also be interpreted as an awakening and a longing to reunite with a living, breathing world. In her book *Animal*, Dorothea Lasky describes one of the many benefits of engaging with animals in art as well as real life:
What does the animal do? It reminds us that living and dying is the thing we must do. Its simplicity is the poetry of living.\footnote{43}

In this respect, humans and animals are the same: we are born, we live, and we die. Thanks to the pandemic, I have been able to spend a lot of time with my dog over the past year. I have come to realize how much she lives in the present moment. For her, there is no tomorrow; there is only the here and now. I find her presence so grounding. She reminds me that sometimes I need to pause, breathe, and just be. Like a breathing meditation, \textit{Of the Air} encourages viewers to take notice of their breathing, to feel their own lungs expanding and contracting, and recognize that they too are beings of the air.

The choreography for \textit{Of the Air} pulls inspiration from movement explorations in my previous video art pieces: \textit{Darkness} (2019) and \textit{Unfurling} (2019). Both of these videos engage with a hybrid form of movement that merges human with winged creature.

![Figure 20. Alexa Velez, stills from Darkness, 2019.](image-url)
Darkness is a 3 minute and 6 second video that takes place in an empty, underground parking garage. In this piece, I explore a nonlinear narrative that incorporates elements of dance and sound to depict the possibility of a future devoid of all living things. The character I perform in this piece introduces herself, and her abnormally avian locomotion, in the very first scene as she jumps into the frame, feet outstretched, arms pulled back like wings—similar in form to a bird landing. In designing this character, I intended her to appear human, wearing everyday streetwear: sneakers, leggings, and a plain black jacket—nothing out of the ordinary in urban culture. Her movement, however, as she traverses the cavernous concrete space would hint to the viewer that perhaps she is not entirely human. My research and preparation for this character included nature documentaries featuring avian locomotion, such as The Life of Birds with David Attenborough. Additionally, I spent several weeks experimenting with different ways a human body can emulate flight. My most successful experiments—those in which I created the most convincing phrases of avian-like choreography—were held outside in an open field exposed to the free-flowing air. Here, I could actually feel the air pushing against my skin. The sensation of physically engaging with the invisible resistance created by air greatly influenced my choreographic decisions.

Figure 21. Alexa Velez, stills from Unfurling, 2019.
Unfurling is a 2 minute and 18 second video completed shortly after I finished filming Darkness. The choreography for Unfurling was inspired by visual representations of emergence in nature, such as a moth emerging from a cocoon and weeds growing in cracks on the pavement. Combining elements of dance and contortion, I perform the entire piece on a crack running through a concrete slab just outside of a warehouse. I am encouraged by the resilience of nature. In a harsh landscape composed of dust and concrete, weeds find a way to break through and thrive. The character in this work is eager to take flight. The conflict lies within her body, struggling to lift up from the ground. When I began choreographing this piece, I was intrigued by the idea of confining a dance to one spot on the horizontal axis, allowing it to progress vertically, rather than horizontally, as it would across a stage. With this single parameter in mind, the choreography focused on the tension articulated by the spine, shoulders, arms, and fingers, as the character rose from the ground.

Brooke Shaden’s self-portraits are relevant to my practice because of the way she uses the body to convey an idea. In her book Inspiration in Photography, she identifies a crucial element in her imagery:

I have noticed that in the work of many dark artists, there is a lot of tension in the character. Often something is happening that the character is reacting to, and often that event is not a pleasant one. . . . If ever I want to make a picture appear darker, I will tell the model to tense his or her muscles.⁴⁵

In Shaden’s still images, the tension is frozen in time, providing no release or resolution. Though I appreciate this particular characteristic of still imagery, sometimes I am left wanting the photograph to move beyond this moment of unrest. In the moving imagery I create, I engage with tension through multiple frames over time. When the muscles of the body contract and release, a visual rhythm naturally develops with a clear rise and fall. Through editing, I can heighten this visual tension by cutting at the exact moment the body tenses. By stitching together
moments that repeatedly build tension without resolve, I can create a sense of unrest over an extended period of time.

As I mentioned earlier, the choreography for *Of the Air* pulled inspiration from my explorations of avian movement in *Darkness* and, especially, *Unfurling*. My intent with the choreography for this piece was to make the body appear as if it were yearning to fly. The movement is meant to feel expansive while confined to a very small space, not unlike that in *Unfurling*. However, the most challenging aspect of this particular performance was creating the illusion that the wind is in control of my body.

*Of the Air* is a duet between the air—a shapeless and weightless substance—and the human body, which is grounded by gravity, confined in space, and limited in motion. When I initially choreographed the piece, I was left feeling unsatisfied. The gestures felt lifeless and predictable. They were too composed. I soon realized that carefully planned and well-rehearsed movements would not best capture the essence of air. Although we cannot see air, we feel wind the moment it collides with us. Once air flows like wind, its path and force can be unpredictable. It became apparent to me that an element of unpredictability was missing from the choreography for the video piece.

For me, as a choreographer, improvisation is often the best approach to embrace unpredictability. The movement for the scenes in the video in which the pacing picks up were created in the moment—improvised. I would frame the scene, hit the record button, step in front of the camera, and surrender to the feeling of my lungs expanding as they filled with air and contracting as the air left my body. By the end of each take, I was breathless and dizzy. Although this particular sequence in the video is only 34 seconds long, over an hour of footage was
captured in order to stitch together the fragments of movement that best engaged with tension and suspension in the space.

Over the years, few feature-length films have embraced dance as an essential part of the narrative. One example that comes to mind is the 2018 remake of *Suspiria* directed by Luca Guadagnino. Although I have many unanswered questions regarding the ending of this film, one particular quote from *Suspiria* resonates with me:

> Movement is never mute. It is a language. It’s a series of energetic shapes written in the air, like words forming sentences.\(^{47}\)

In this fragment of dialogue from the film, *movement* is described as a language. When it comes to communication, I would even suggest movement goes beyond language. *Movement* is a much more inclusive system than language. We might not all speak the same language, but we all move. We all silently communicate with the physical body in ways that are sometimes even louder than words. To move is to engage with an energy that lives within all of us.

As an artist who embraces the visual language of movement, I hope viewers feel they can approach the work. I hope they recognize that they too speak this language that is “written in the air”\(^{48}\)—one that it is not reserved for the dancer’s tongue. In order to create more relatable choreography, I try to stay away from movement that is readily associated with traditional dance, such as an arabesque or a grand jeté. The movement I create, especially in *Of the Air*, is motivated by a *feeling*—the feeling of gravity, the feeling of longing, the feeling of release. These experiences are often difficult to articulate through words. In an interview, Meredith Monk explains this limitation regarding language:

> “Real emotion—we don’t even have a word for it. It is not anger, sadness. It is like subtle shades of feeling or energy.”\(^{49}\)
Words are rigid and limited by their definition. Emotion is a fluid energy that never grows completely still and is best described by movement. Through dance, I seek to harness this indescribable energy in order to articulate something authentic and real.

Once the choreography for *Of the Air* was finalized and filmed, I began the process of composing the soundscape. My first challenge was to figure out how to create a realistic sound for moving air that could be controlled and manipulated. A song from Meredith Monk’s album *Impermanence* (2008) provided the inspiration. The song titled “Little Breath” is a 1 minute and 44 second recording of vocalists breathing and articulating sounds in harmony. No lyrics. In my mind, this song is what the wind would sound like if it could sing.

Since I have no vocal training but some experience with woodwinds, I opted to use a wind instrument to create a voice for the air. After several failed attempts, I discovered that by
blowing through the fipple of a tin whistle, instead of the mouthpiece, I could produce a *whooshing* sound that resembles the howl of the wind. I was able to manipulate the tone of this human-powered sound by the way my fingers covered the finger holes on the whistle. It was a bit awkward at first, but with practice, I was able to create a variety of wind sounds that paralleled the different types of movement on screen. Eventually, I figured out a way to produce vibrato with the air, creating a pulsing sound that provided a more sinister feel. After the recording process, I added a bit of reverb with audio editing software. This final manipulation gave the voice of the wind an echo that could live in the Grand Canyon.

*Of the Air* and *Of the Water* both incorporate sounds that are bigger and grander than the space they occupy in the video pieces. I was attracted to the idea of juxtaposing the vastness of a sound from the natural world with that of the confined human-made spaces we inhabit. An ocean cannot fit in a small apartment kitchen without flooding the space. A powerful wind cannot be contained in a small apartment kitchen without tearing apart the place. Sound alone can communicate the scale and magnitude of a space. In his book *Space and Place*, Yi-Fu Tuan explains how “sound dramatizes spatial experience”\(^5\) in our everyday lives:

> Sounds, though vaguely located, can convey a strong sense of size (volume) and of distance. For example, in an empty cathedral the sound of footsteps tapping sharply on the stone floor creates an impression of cavernous vastness.\(^5\)

In my work, I create tension by pairing an interior space with an external sound that does not quite fit. Because sound is invisible, I hope this aspect of the work instills in the viewer and listener a sense of curiosity for that which is unseen in the natural world.
The piano score for *Of the Air* was the final component created for the video. As a starting point, I revisited the music I had composed for *Of the Water* and used the same key, keeping it whimsical and mysterious with an extra dash of eerie. Moments in the choreography when the body shivers or convulses unexpectedly are visual cues for the music. To punctuate these visual cues, the music responds, often by striking a dissonant chord. When the body floats downward and lingers, the music descends, leaving the listener dangling on the edge by a note.
Music does not play throughout the entire video; moments of silence are intentionally placed so the ear can hear the rhythmic inhale and exhale of the wind.

By using music and sound to amplify the movement on screen, I seek to create an immersive experience that takes viewers by the hand and asks them to hold still, even if just for a moment. When people encounter my work, I want the outside world and all of its distractions to grow quiet. I want the presence of the air to feel heavy in the space. Ultimately, I hope the work I make instills in viewers a longing to reconnect with the natural world.
Conclusion
I was a small dark speck in a sea of white.

The buildings were gone,

no more than silhouettes in a fading landscape,

as the snow continued to fall.

Hush, hush, hush.

The sidewalk was gone.

No beginning, no middle, no end

at the center of a city gone quiet.

A church bell tolled,

threatening to pull me back.

I kept walking.

A car alarm sounded,

taking a hold of my coat sleeve.

I shook it off and kept walking.

Nothing was going to take me from

there.
As an artist, I believe the environmental message embedded in my work should not scream out to the viewer. Instead, I seek to whisper in their ears. Through the fictional narratives portrayed by my video art, I hope to plant seeds of concern for the state of our environment in real life. As a society, I believe we can listen to the voices buried deep in our ancient subconscious. We can realize that we are part of the natural world, merely one of many species sharing a planet—one we have neglected.

I am hyperaware that I live in a world full of noise. Sometimes I need to close my laptop, turn off my phone, and forget about rising sea levels, global warming, forest fires, and deadly viruses. The waves of chaos and destruction that flood our world can be overwhelming. The work I make is not intended to present itself to the viewer as an obvious call to action about environmental causes. I am not a scientist. I am just a human being who feels deeply about our planet and channels these emotions into art in an attempt to encourage others to care about the planet as well.

The work I make is a reflection of my own emotional landscape. It is a manifestation of my dreams and fears about the world in which we live today. My work calls attention to our disconnect from the natural environment and gently reminds us, myself included, that we are part of a world that exists beyond walls and screens. Through my video art, which ironically exists only on a screen, I tell stories in the languages of movement and sound in hopes that anyone from anywhere in the world can engage with them. Of the Water and Of the Air are reminders that we are beings of the water and beings of the air. We rely on these elements for survival. As living, breathing creatures, we are inextricably intertwined with a world in crisis. Our survival is undeniably connected.
Notes


5. Ibid., 3


15. Maya Deren, “A Study in Choreography for Camera,” directed by Maya Deren (1945; Kino Classics, 2020), DVD.


18. *The Shape of Water*, directed by Guillermo del Toro (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2017), Apple TV.


22. Ibid., 36-37.


38. Ibid., 63

39. Ibid., 83


44. *The Life of Birds*. Directed by Brock White (BBC Video, 2005), DVD.


46. *Suspiria*, directed by Luca Guadagnino (Amazon Studios, 2018), Prime Video.
47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.


51. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 16.

52. Ibid., 14-15.
Bibliography


The Life of Birds. Directed by Brock White, BBC Video, 2005. 9 hours. DVD.

The Shape of Water. Directed by Guillermo del Toro. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2017. 2 hr., 3 min. Apple TV.


