

Performance Responses

edited by Chris Green

2020 Online Pride Parade in South Korea

Dotface via Instagram. 23 June - 5 July 2020.

By Dohyun Gracia Shin

During the global COVID-19 pandemic, the South Korean government strictly controlled public assemblies. The Queer Culture Festival and parade was not an exception. In this situation, the LGBTQ+ community in South Korea had to create alternatives to access public space. One of their efforts was realised in the form of the online Pride parade by Dotface (.face), a media company for social justice in South Korea. For the online parade, Dotface designed a webpage where participants could create an image of their own avatars parading on the road. For my own participation in the parade, I chose my avatar's expression, hairstyle, look, and flag on the website. It generated a picture of my avatar standing on the road. The website guided me to share the image on my Instagram account with a hashtag: #We_make_a_new_road_out_of_nothing. This single image did not mean a lot when it stood on its own. However, when I clicked on the hashtag, I could see all the avatars' images accumulated to create a virtual road. An avatar in an isolated grid—as I was in my own room—then was connected to other avatars (see figs. 1-3). I thought this community attempted to show our 'appearance' together in the pandemic situation where the institution (in this case, the government) limited public assembly. To quote Judith Butler, the 'claim of equality [...] is made precisely when bodies appear together, or rather, when through their action, they bring the space of appearance into being' (88-9).



Marcela A. Fuentes' idea of 'performance constellations' (3) was helpful for me to digest this experience, which encouraged me to reflect on the power and effect of digital activism. 'Performance constellation' refers to the power to change the offline world by connecting fragmented, individual powers scattered in the vast online space. In this case, anyone (who had access to the internet) could participate in the online Pride parade as long as they tagged the hashtag to their photos whenever and wherever. Instead of parading from the Seoul Plaza (Seoul City Hall) at the designated time, users could freely join the parade from June 23rd to July 5th by uploading a photo from various locations and, by so doing, overcame the limitation of the metropolitan-centered parade. The asynchronous and multi-sited performance of the participants brought about collective action, which made this act of hashtag-uploading function 'as' performance. Hashtags were not merely an index or comment but an 'affective, interpellative mode' (Fuentes 90) that required further actions—whether an agreement, participation, or even refutation. An Instagram user might not be interested in the parade and not click on the hashtag. Yet, images of the online parade could still infiltrate their timeline if anyone on their 'private' timeline uploaded an image. The act of invading one's customized, private timeline with the public hashtag (#We_make_a_new_road_out_of_nothing) 'contests the distinction between public and private' (Butler 71). Furthermore, the infiltrating virtual bodies (in this case, avatars) become the bodies who 'lay claim to the public, find and produce the public through seizing and reconfiguring the matter of material environments; at the same time, those material environments are part of the action, and they themselves act when they become the support for action' (Butler 71).



Fig. 1: Screenshot taken from Dotface's online Pride parade YouTube video. Photo by the author.

This act of exposure and claim *per se* is significant in South Korea, where LGBTQ+ visibility desperately matters.

Furthermore, Dotface and the participants used the online parade as performance to resist the queerphobic appropriation of the hashtag. In the middle of the parade, there was a moment when the participants faced hashtag hijack by trans-exclusionary radical feminist and homophobic protestors. They uploaded derogatory images with the hashtag, which intervened in the virtual road made up of avatar images. With Dotface, the participants chose to stand up against the transphobic/homophobic hashtag usurpers by creating a counter-narrative. This hashtag war was a performative act that attempted to nullify each side's semiotic, political, and affective message by tactically pushing the posts away. While the winner of the fight might be judged upon the quantity of hashtag images they uploaded, it was also importantly about the visualised camp fight—about who overwhelms the other and occupies more space on the virtual road on the hashtag timeline. Dotface officially reported the situation to Instagram to have the interfering pictures deleted, but the action did not happen quickly enough due to the liveness of the parade as performance. Accordingly, Dotface and the participants uploaded more parade images with the designated hashtag to shove the transphobic/homophobic off the grid and deliver the message: 'our solidarity is stronger than the phobia'. By this action, Dotface's online Pride parade visualised the fight against queerphobic hashtag usurpers by uploading hashtags in a form of performance as resistance—occupying, competing over, and reterritorialising of the virtual space.

Most importantly, avatars—virtual bodies as extensions of ourselves—provided a safe, accessible, and inclusive alliance for the participants. According to an interview with Hepziba Kim, the designer of the avatars,





the main agenda was to give the users experiences of inclusion—‘the experience from which no one is excluded’ (‘Communication Winner’). For instance, in reviews, some participants said they felt safe in the form of an avatar where there is a less possible danger of an outing. Especially teenagers (who are still under the protection of their parent/s) shared that they could participate in the Pride parade for the first time in their lives due to its anonymity. Given the limits we had, Dotface’s Pride parade was not only about the participants occupying the online space but was also about how we presented our identities in a virtual parade as a celebratory protest—‘virtual forms’ of bodies. The participants explored diversified representations of identities with avatars, the bodily images. The users further edited the avatars—those Dotface provided for the users to customise—from their end. They added accessories, partner avatars, companion animals, and flags that were not designed by Dotface. Some transformed their avatars into characters from LGBTQ+ films with whom they identified and even into non-humans. They played with the limitation and boundaries of their other ‘selves’, which extended to the level of adding, transforming, creating, and counteracting. As per the etymology of avatar, ‘the incarnation of a deity in human or animal form’ (‘avatar’), it was a process of becoming a virtual ‘I’ with numerous potentialities that allowed the participants who are in a precarious circumstance to represent themselves in a safer way.

This performance, which created a road through the generation of avatar images, lasted for only thirteen days of the parade. The parade is over, and the avatars’ march might be interrupted by other users who upload unrelated photos with the hashtag. Nevertheless, if you scroll over the hashtag, the data of the parade is archived and exists. This

Fig. 2: Screenshot taken from Dotface’s online Pride parade YouTube video. Photo by the author.

archive bears a possibility of a revival and sustainability—as this online Pride parade came back in 2021. Also, Dotface’s virtual road was revived for the commemoration when the South Korean LGBTQ+ community lost Byun Hui-su, the first openly trans soldier in South Korea. It was another performance constellation that created online public space, contending the power of the community against anti-trans legislation and the power to protect online public space as an inclusive zone for the community to feel and be safe.

Dotface’s online Pride parade took shape within the limits that we faced in the pandemic, reflecting the idea of *queerness*: participants explored and expressed themselves; they navigated and defied heteronormative gaps and queerphobic actions in the form of avatars; and finally, they (virtually) walked towards the fluid direction of open possibilities. In so doing, the online Pride parade contributed to the event's vision by suggesting the potential use of the virtual beyond limits and boundaries. It crossed the lines between rural and urban (geographical limits and accessibility), ephemeral and archival (temporal limits), and one’s body and avatar (bodily limits). It was not (physically) there but was definitely there through a sense of affection, solidarity, and kinship that the participants shared (though the impact each participant felt might have varied). After the 2nd online Pride parade in 2021, some questions stayed with me. Will it be sustained and survive even after the pandemic? Would this event remain a temporal alternative to the in-person parade—an event which people are so ready to (re)attend? Or will it have its own vitality, walking along with the in-person parade, side by side? It is too early to have a clear answer for these questions. Yet, I am looking forward to future possibilities and to seeing where this virtual communal attempt will lead me next year.



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Fig. 3: Screenshot taken from Dotface's online Pride parade YouTube video. Photo by the author.

Body Guarding

By Bautanzt Here. Directed by Nadya Zeitlin. Perf. Julianna Feracota, Porter Grubbs, Amber Kirchner, Jenna Latham and Ellie Tsuchiya. *54 Columns*, Atlanta, USA. 24 October 2021.

By Erin McMahan



Fig. 1: Amber Kirchner, Porter Grubbs, Julianna Feracota, Jenna Latham, and Ellie Tsuchiya in *Body Guarding* at *54 Columns*. Photo by Arvin Temkar.

Body Guarding is a site-specific dance theatre performance created and performed by the Atlanta-based company Bautanzt Here at *54 Columns*, the Sol Lewitt art installation occupying a corner of the city's Old Fourth Ward neighborhood. The company's artistic director Nadya Zeitlin conceptualised and choreographed the piece and dancers Jenna Latham, Julianna Feracota, Porter Grubbs, Amber Kirchner, and Ellie Tsuchiya performed it on the 25th and 26th September, and again on the 24th October 2021. For a company whose name in German means

'building dances', the Stonehenge-like *54 Columns* seems like a natural, though temporary, home: cinder block columns of various heights rise up from an open field and are often mistaken for a construction site; a building in progress. Sol Lewitt designed the piece to suggest a city skyline, taking inspiration from its urban surroundings.

I, too, am inspired by cities: I've intentionally made myself a resident of truly beautiful and exciting metropolitan areas whose density of both people and opportunity far exceeds that of my hometown in rural Tennessee. The past two years, however, have seen COVID-19 turn living in close proximity to others into a health liability. The livable sphere of cities shrunk as lockdowns, establishment closures, and curb-side services took effect. Instead of embracing the vibrancy of interconnected communities, residents isolated, sanitised, and protected themselves as best they could, or as privilege would allow. Through *Body Guarding*, Bautanzt Here explores the emphasis placed on the health of our bodies due to the pandemic and the effects of isolation, as well as the joy of cautiously reopening and reconnecting to community. The piece aims to investigate a post-lockdown city while addressing the inevitable life-style changes brought on by COVID-19.

As the performance begins, a lone dancer, Jenna Latham, wanders out in front of the columns, examining the sculptures, the sky, and the wonder of a gathering outside. As Latham observes, the four other dancers begin to walk truncated lines between columns. With their initial movements, I find myself in a simultaneous past and present: I recall the abrupt isolation at the start of the global outbreak, apart from others like the initial dancer, who then watches the movements of the others from afar, not dissimilar from my own voyeurism via internet newscasts and meetings. I am also in the present. Latham emerges into the world and cautiously encounters others, much like all of us now emerging, tentatively planning and communing once again. Simply by naming the piece *Body Guarding*, the company evokes my own reflection on the precautions I now take to literally guard my body. As we learned more information about the virus, of course, some precautions have been abandoned. I don't wipe down all

of my groceries after shopping anymore. I'm willing to meet in small crowds outdoors, much like the crowd waiting for the performance to begin. I do, however, wear masks indoors or in large outdoor crowds, I avoid indoor crowds, and I use hand-sanitiser after touching literally anything, but I no longer feel an obligation to move through my days in physical isolation. In his description of the piece on Bautanzt Here's website, Sergey Medvedev describes *Body Guarding* as a reunion. It's an opportunity for the artists to finally gather and practice together after many months of uncertainty.

Once the dancers have entered the space, the percussive soundscape created by Ptar Flamming/Rogue Jury gets louder. The beat pulses steadily, encouraging the dancers to move with purpose and urgency. While Latham moves slowly and delicately, staying low to the ground, the others take turns emerging from behind the columns, leaning out momentarily before hiding again. I see the tension between isolation and participation as Latham occupies the space between aloneness and togetherness: they are physically separate from the other four but watch them, moving cautiously in response to their bold movements. All five wear gray trousers and lavender long-sleeve tops, and all but Latham wear their hair in braids. The dancers capitalise on their uniformity as a head peeks out stage left while a leg visibly points to the ground several feet away stage right. They play with imagery that dissects the body between the columns, each one a magic door or portal. At one point, Latham continues to look on while the other four clasp hands and emerge from a central column like a row of paper dolls. The dancers embody an extreme togetherness, tethering themselves to each other. I see the movements as a metaphor for our interconnectedness and the notion that the actions of one affects us all. After pushing and pulling one another for a brief 8-count, they break apart and begin to move into open spaces to frantically test their ranges of motion. One whips their arm around like a windmill. Two dancers simultaneously stretch their upper back, rocking their chests open and closed. The columns isolate each dancer and frame their movements, much like a window or a Zoom screen. I think of my graduate housing in London:

rows of windows in a high rise that act like mini TV-screens showing similar yet distinct routines side-by-side. The dancers' desperation for movement mirrors my own hunger for it at the onset of the pandemic in my own compartment of that building. Movement became more essential as my geographic range of motion shrank.

As the beat rages on, Latham joins the rest of the company and I notice my eyes fixating on all of the dancers' hands. In the performance I saw on 24th October, there were many instances in which the dancers waved their fingers as their arms swept through the air or before they touched a column or before they touched another dancer. With such a renewed emphasis placed on hand-washing, it was impossible to miss. Hands carry. They carry physical goods, meaning through gestures, and they carry disease. In the performance, dancers fan their fingers as they move their hands about the space, visually mapping the spread of a virus. I'm also struck by the scenes of work and productivity that play out. One dancer squats with her back against a column, ankle crossed over the opposite knee, as she types away on an invisible laptop. It seems to move away from them, asking the dancer to stretch desperately before giving up. I realise that the dancers are no longer in constant motion. They've all found a column to cling to in a display of exhaustion and listlessness. The pandemic buzzword 'languishing' comes to mind. As they mimic work and productivity in isolation, I see them trapped in a world that speaks the phrases 'unprecedented times' and 'business as usual' in the same breath.

As the second half of the performance unfolds, the dancers experiment with rigidity and regimented movements that synchronise and break down, allowing for each dancer to showcase athleticism and grace. Then, in the climax of the piece, Feracota steps forward and draws a square in the air with their fist. They start to form a line facing stage left. A second dancer steps forward, faces Feracota and repeats the motion before joining them in the line. All five move into the line this way, conforming to the agreed upon motion. The dancers then move back into the rest of the space continuing to draw squares in the air. Four move around a central column, marking with the squares as if to

sanitise the structure. Whereas earlier in the performance the dancers interacted with each other with frantic and asynchronous movements, they now work as a team with a purpose, shifting from chaos to stability. A sense of teamwork and community is restored.

Finally, Amber Kirchner breaks apart from the team and moves into the same space initially occupied by Latham. They observe the space as Latham did, now carrying the weight of the past 20 minutes. The other dancers follow and line up with their chests facing the audience. They embody stillness for a moment. This stillness is different from the languishing seen earlier. It is confident and calm. *Body Guarding* approaches its conclusion when Julianna Feracota connects back to the music. A smile spreads across the dancer's face as they bob their head, bring movement into their chest, and move their hips and legs as the dance flows freely. The end is joyful as they all start to move as if in a nightclub. I think of the explosion of freedom documented over the summer. Concerts, sweat, bodies reaching for each other after months starved of touch. The dancers mimic a world moving back into a natural rhythm, all while Kirchner cautiously explores their own range of motion. Observing both styles of movement is cathartic— I feel myself delighting in Latham, Feracota, Grubbs, and Tsuchiya celebrating together, their bodies moving relaxed and loosely, and yet my eyes gravitate towards Kirchner's serenity and calm, hoping to steal some of it for myself. Eventually Tsuchiya, Grubbs, Latham, and Feracota move out of sight behind the columns. The piece ends with a solitary Kirchner who, like us, is left to make meaning for themselves of their recent lived experience.

Body Guarding grapples with some of the questions emphasised during the pandemic: in what ways must we protect and care for our physical body? Where are the boundaries, if any, between physical and mental health? How do we balance a necessity to isolate ourselves with our intrinsic human need for community? The scenes in *Body Guarding* continually oscillate between rigidity and freedom, isolation and community, calm and hysteria, and search for answers in those extremes. As I walked toward the *54 Columns* ahead of the

performance, I realised that I hadn't seen a live performance since the start of the pandemic. I wondered how many spectators would show up and how close together we'd be. But my need for art and community overrode my instinct to avoid risk. Like the dancers, I'm finding what is essential to my well-being: freedom of movement, community, and the precautions that allow me to return to them.

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