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Dancing Alone

JUNE 2020

By George Kan

“The music ain't worth nothing if you can't lay it on the public...” — *Louis Armstrong*





Gillian Wearing, *Dancing in Peckham*, 1994, color video with sound, © the artist, courtesy Maureen Paley, London.

Gillian Wearing, *Dancing in Peckham*, 1994

We can't hear the music, just the echoed footsteps and mutterings of passers-by. But it appears *she* must hear something, as her body wiggles and shakes to this unknown beat. Bopping her head, she whips and flips dark hair across her face. Bouncing in her knees, her wrists flutter at her sides, feeling for the groove. She's lost in it, endless oscillation, shimmying up and down.

Her moves are loose, sloppy, indifferent, not made for *others to see* but for *her to feel*. She's dancing alone in her room; she's letting go. Except, she's not. Surrounding shoppers idle past. As seen through the VHS recording, the brown and beige tones of her boot cut trousers and floral top match the faux marble floor. Center-stage, she's lit by the domed glass ceiling of a shopping center.

A specialist in self-portraiture, who often works with masks, Gillian Wearing has always been invested in that barrier between the private and the public. Here, she's severed, superimposed. Her flailing arms, her private dance, detached from passing crowds. The Peckham public barely regards her—and she jiggles on regardless.

Her autonomy is like the autonomy of art, a disinterested output, aloof from the lives of the public. Yet, watching the work closely, there's a subtle faltering. A man in a trilby hat looks back over his shoulder. Another in a purple jacket brushes right by her, hurrying off somewhere past the camera. Immediately, I am skeptical of her indifference. Instead, I avidly await these brief fizzes of interaction that tug on her mask of indifference, that dissolve the public/private border.

Of all the public spaces, why choose a shopping center? At the temple of ordinary life, Wearing displays herself among the shop window mannequins, the bored teens, the discount racks, and packaged food. Ready for consumption, she signals the art market's eager eyes primed to buy, sell, and exhibit her work.

Her private dance is for us. Yet, as she catches her internal rhythm and finds her flow, it seems it is for herself, too. The sneering sideways glances of passers-by betray a look of jealousy. What if I let go like Wearing? She gets low, jamming on her air guitar, swinging forward over her feet, then back, head banging, riffing a silent boogie.



Blackhaine, *FOUR THOUSAND HOLES IN BLACKBURN, LANCASHIRE* [excerpt], Dazed Instagram.

Blackhaine, *FOUR THOUSAND HOLES IN BLACKBURN, LANCASHIRE* [excerpt] 28th March 2020

Joining the dim room, I squint. A solitary pink light stands in the corner. Instagram informs that 161 other users are somewhere here too, watching the live stream. The phone camera struggles to adjust to the darkness as it scans the small area. A light switch and plug socket reveal it is a domestic space, emptied out to form a stage yet still intimate enough to make our gaze feel like a prying one.

There's a figure here: a tall, thin frame and a bald head. His pale flesh blending with the walls, both tinted in pink light. The rest is cloaked in black: sweatshirt, sweatpants, and sneakers.

His movements are frenzied, twisting. He writhes, elbows and shoulders jerking ahead of him, his head rapidly changing direction, juddering as if rapt. At times he slows, curling into a ball on the floor, or leaning back against the wall, eyes rolling, gently rocking, breathless, mouth agape to the ceiling, only to lurch into motion again.

Watching through the phone screen, we play witness to this private world. The gestures are agitated, tormented. Both feverish yet restricted, they evoke something trapped—caged and wild, skin and flesh. As he leaps against the walls, we grasp the smallness of the room, echoed in the smallness of the phone screen through which we peer.

At moments when the movement is particularly frantic, virtuosic even, viewers hit the heart shaped button and a flurry of hearts billow out across the screen. Their rainbow cheeriness falls mute across Blackhaine's torment. This visual contradiction, that comes as a substitute for applause, symbolizes a kind of wrestling with the online medium—a struggled striving to connect. Silently, we witness a body in isolation, desperate to demonstrate his entrapment, to make known an inner anguish.



Eiko Otake, *Room*, 2017, film still, shot by DonChristian Jones.

Eiko Otake, *Room*, 2017/2020.

A room. Small, yes, but the walls here are translucent. Light pours in through the wall to the left, while, to the right, blurred shapes beyond, perhaps branches, cast faint shadows. The room feels worn; the pale, narrow floorboards are crooked and delicate. Eiko, gazing up at the misty glow, moves as quietly as a breath.

The room is Robert Rauschenberg's studio in Florida, from the 1970s. Having been isolated in China in January, and later quarantined in Japan, Eiko has assembled this short film from footage of her dancing there in 2017. Though unable to share her performance live, Eiko personally invites any viewers to write to her via her website. This invitation for correspondence opens up the intimacy of the artist's studio—both Rauschenberg's and her own.

Having previously performed among the ghosts at Fukushima, and the bustling commuters at Fulton Center station, Eiko is adept at responding to each environment. Replying with movement, her work begins a conversation with unique histories, both of the space and her own.

And though, at first, *Room* appears to be about isolation, there emerges communion. Unlike in Blackhaine's work, the handheld camera moves in step with the dancer's soft tread. DonChristian Jones, who often dances with Eiko, takes on the role of the camera. In filming her, his attentive following of her gaze and gesture makes *Room* feel more like a duet.

In her hand, a red cloth, the very same that has appeared in her many performances across the world. She holds it up to the afternoon light. Floating, she too appears taken, absorbed in some internal world. Carrying it up toward the translucent wall, there is a delicate force in her grip. A quiet determinacy, a gentle pressure toward the outside.

Blackhaine's *FOUR THOUSAND HOLES IN BLACKBURN, LANCASHIRE* [excerpt] was performed live on Dazed Instagram. Soundtrack by Low Power State. Blackhaine is part of ALL CHOREOGRAPHERS ARE BASTARDS, a Manchester-based collective.

Eiko Otake's work was filmed in residency at Rauschenberg Foundation. *Room* and other works are available through her virtual studio with Wesleyan's Center for the Arts.

Contributor

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