Jenna Hubbard/ Adele Keeley

Creative improvisation jamming, under the COVID cloud

Abstract

This visual essay will explore the themes of collaboration, play, the digital intermediatory space and how we engage with the digital ‘other’ of yourself. The research builds on the work of Stark Smith's The Underscore (1987). This long-form dance improvisation structure is used to frame the creative journey which takes place within a jam session offers a platform to explore and consider how the experience might be re-framed with in an online context. The research also draws upon the writing of Weber, Mizanty & Allen (2017) who present digital conference tools as a method to create and teach choreography, and Francksen’s writing around how the use of digital technology produces the digital body, which can interact with the performative body (2014). The research further extends the understanding of these digital spaces as places for intangible, ephemeral, and communal play. This new practice gave a chance for reflection on both our artistic practices and our lives during the pandemic; Halprin’s Life/Art Process has been a supportive model for understanding the therapeutic nature of jamming practice (1995). The drawings and short films created during this project document the process, but also have currency as individual artefacts. The observations and recommendations below will be presented alongside empirical research about the relationship between the artists’ practice and how through drawing and movement they found beneficial creative exchange, in a temporary digital space.

Introduction

During the COVID-19 lockdown, as creative practitioners and educators we translated our studio-based improvisation jam practice into our homes, using Zoom as the platform for this shared experience. In this visual essay we explain how we translated our design and movement improvisation practices online exploring both collaborative practice and the digital representation of our own image. No longer inhabiting the same physical space, we created a new space for sharing practice and unearthed emerging research paradigms along the way. This intermediatory digital cloud space, created and framed by the lens of the laptop and phone camera, held the practice somewhere between two houses and created a catalyst for new lines of enquiry. This visual essay is written as an artists' reflection.

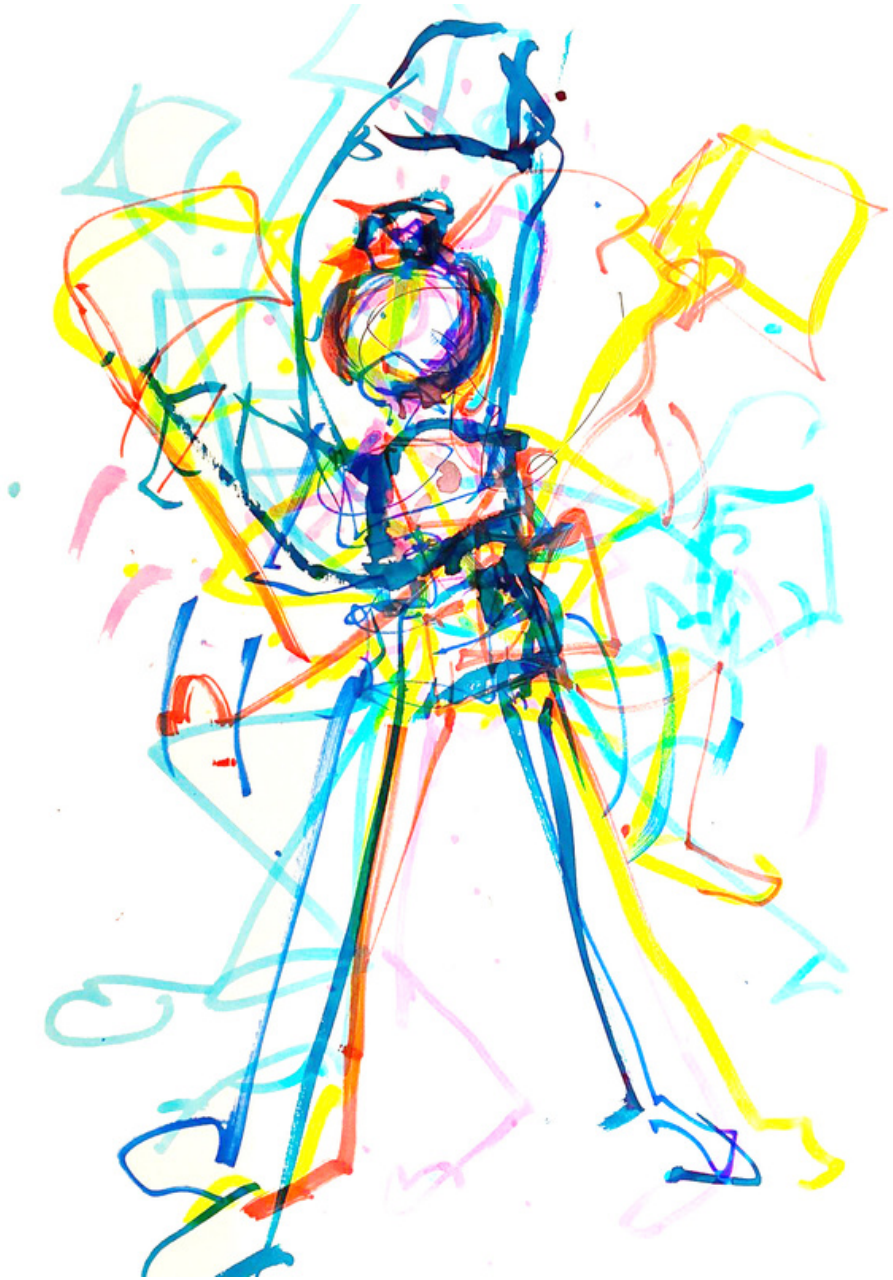

Figure 1: 'Movement drawing' by Adele Keeley, during online improvisation jam, 2020.

As creative practitioners and educators, we have been bringing together our passion for improvised drawing and the intertwined practice of movement and music, in a series of jam sessions, since 2016. These experimental sessions have evolved into a research paradigm exploring the relationship between the free expression of improvised drawing and the intertwined practice of movement and music. This shared improvisation practice emerged from a desire to play creatively together in a space; to get lost within our own creative disciplines, whilst allowing our practices to develop with one another. Alongside the sharing of practice, the jams have always had a focus on stress relief and wellbeing, through self-expression and being lost in the creative practice with one another. As Stark Smith describes,

> Where you are, when you don't know where you are is one of the most precious spots offered by improvisation. It is a place from which more directions are possible than anywhere else. I call this, The Gap. The more I improvise the more I am convinced that it is through the medium of these gaps - this momentary suspension of tension points – that comes the unexpected. (1987)

We found this gap through sharing a physical space with one another, through an improvisation practice that allowed our creativity to emerge and merge with one another, creating new interdisciplinary experiences, fuelled by drawing and movement at the core. As part of this exploration, we hosted several jam sessions, initially with other Arts University Bournemouth staff, where we both teach, then with other local artists, and with our student cohorts. Our work is similar to the work of Lucy Algar's Drawing & Scenography Research (Algar, 2017); Algar's work focuses on the pedagogic development of the art of drawing dancers, as performance. We also acknowledge the work of Dr Maryclare Foá, whose drawing practice comes from revealing the narrative-in-the-moment. Foá et al. focuses on the drawing practice as a "performed process rather than focused through the lens of a particular technique" (2020, p217). Unique to our jam sessions, the participants meet, establish themselves as individuals, and then as a collective, the gap emerges, and within it, the creative activity becomes visible. Participants are encouraged to explore an interdisciplinary practice and not feel drawn to their core artform. Whilst the participants of each jam fluctuate, a consistent core group of artists lead the practice; Heidi Steller, Sophie Douglas and Paul Keeley join us as leaders, curators, and participants of the jams.

Figure 2: Collage of images from improvisation jam sessions, pre-COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020. Images by Jenna Hubbard and Adele Keeley, 2019- 2020
Link to filmed excerpts from improvisation jam sessions, pre-COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020.
Film by Jenna Hubbard, 2020.
Available at https://youtu.be/EtAx3uOhqyM

Context

We had noticed the emergence of a regular pattern to our jam sessions and looked at The Underscore (Stark Smith 1987) as a theoretical lens to contextualise this. We had started to observe that our in-person jam sessions had loosely used The Underscore as a frame, but within a more interdisciplinary improvisation practice. The Underscore is a long-form dance improvisation structure developed by Nancy Stark Smith. Each operation of The Underscore has a name and graphic symbol, which is a general map or frame for the improvisation to sit in. “Within that frame, dancers are free to create their own movements, dynamics, and relationships—with themselves, each other, the group, the music, and the environment” (Stark Smith 1987).

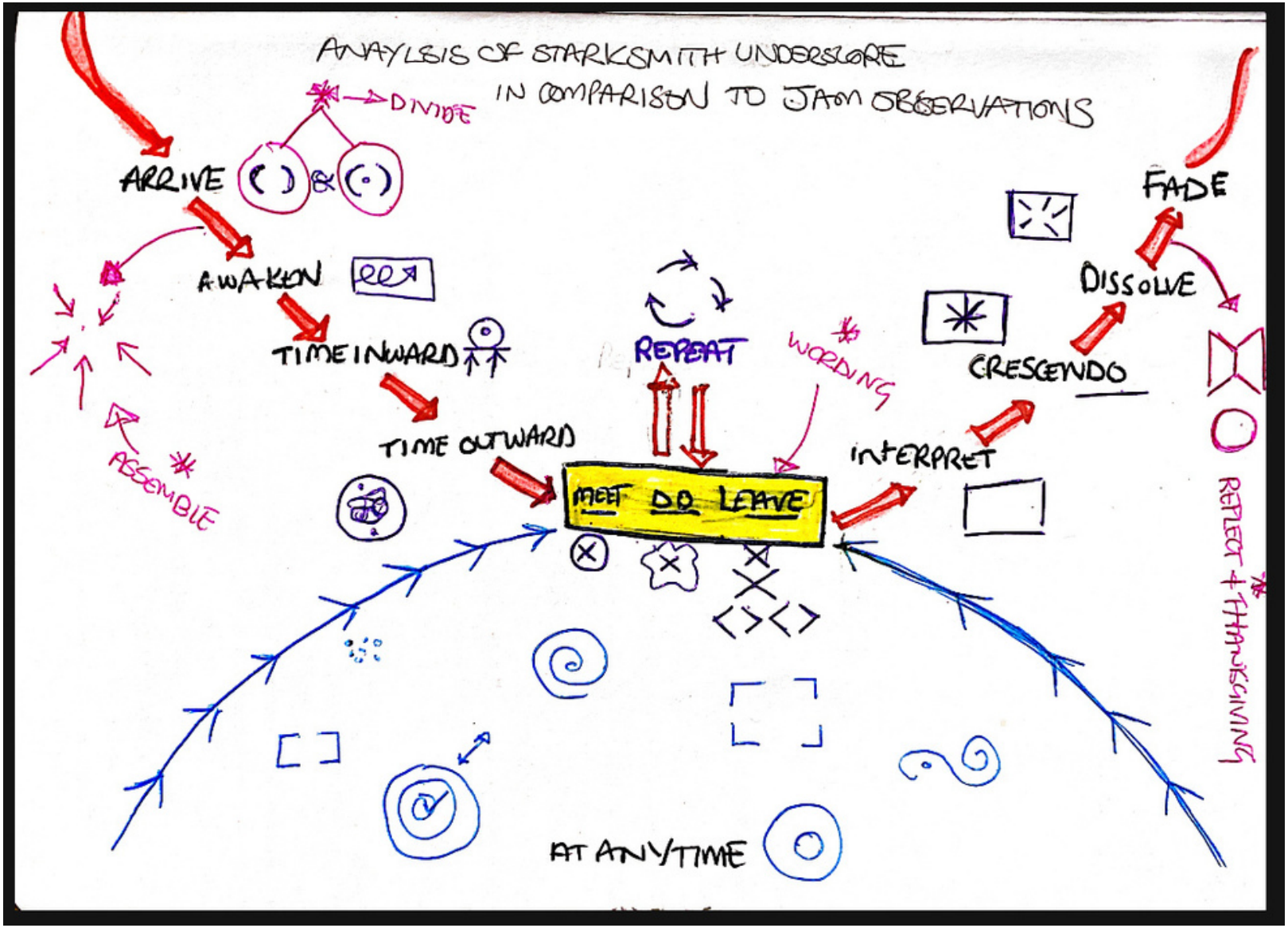

Figure 3: 'Analysis of Stark Smith's Underscore (1987)' by Jenna Hubbard/ Adele Keeley, 2020.

These Underscore operations were evident in our in-person jams, although we had not explicitly made our participants aware of each operation, nor that we were deliberately tracing The Underscore through each session. The Underscore provided the context for what had started to emerge in our practice; a ritualised and repeatable way into and out of the work, which acted as a guide to support the work, rather than an instruction. Before we could start a full analysis of The Underscore, our in-person jams were suddenly bought to an abrupt halt. In March 2020, the UK went into lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic and we had to consider an alternative mode of practice. This created a significant and new level of gap, as we were unable to be in the same physical space as one another. The shared physical space had been the catalyst for experiencing something together, and we had recognised the emotional and stress relieving power of this. The Life/Art Process of Halprin investigates the “complex and potentially transformative relationship between artistic expression and life experience” and we noticed that the enforced isolation could have enforced a stop in the practice (Worth & Poynor, 2004, p35). Rather than stopping, we translated our studio-based jams into our homes, using Zoom as the platform for this shared experience.

No longer inhabiting the same physical space, a new space emerged for our shared practice. Not knowing what would happen through this Gap, we started to unearth emerging research paradigms. This became a practice-as-research project which investigates the agency of remote online working and creative jamming from a phenomenological viewpoint.

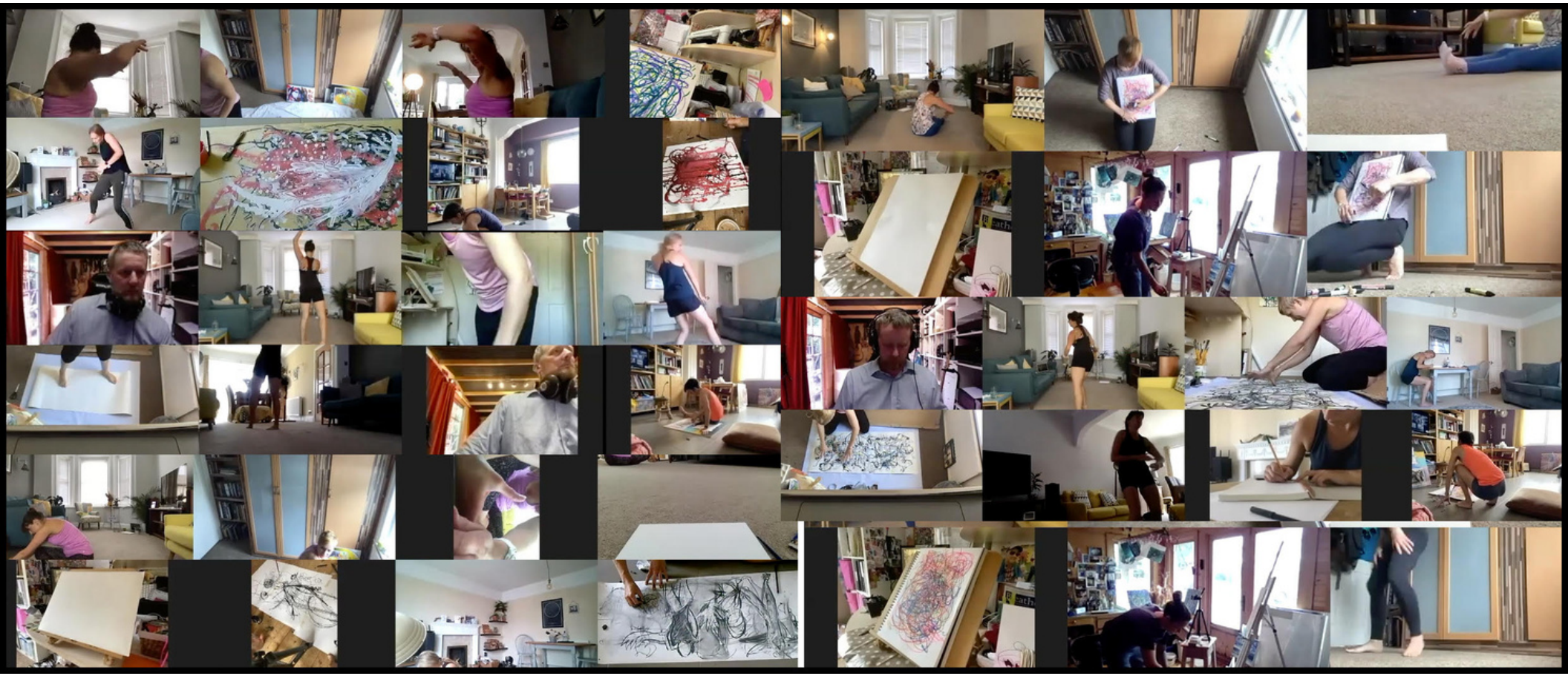

Figure 4: Collage of images from improvisation jam sessions, during the 2020 UK COVID-19 lockdown. Images by Jenna Hubbard and Adele Keeley, 2020
Link to filmed excerpts from improvisation jam sessions, during the 2020 UK lockdown. Film by
Jenna Hubbard, 2020
Available at: https://youtu.be/Ts5UyDlz2Q4

Research Methods and Questions

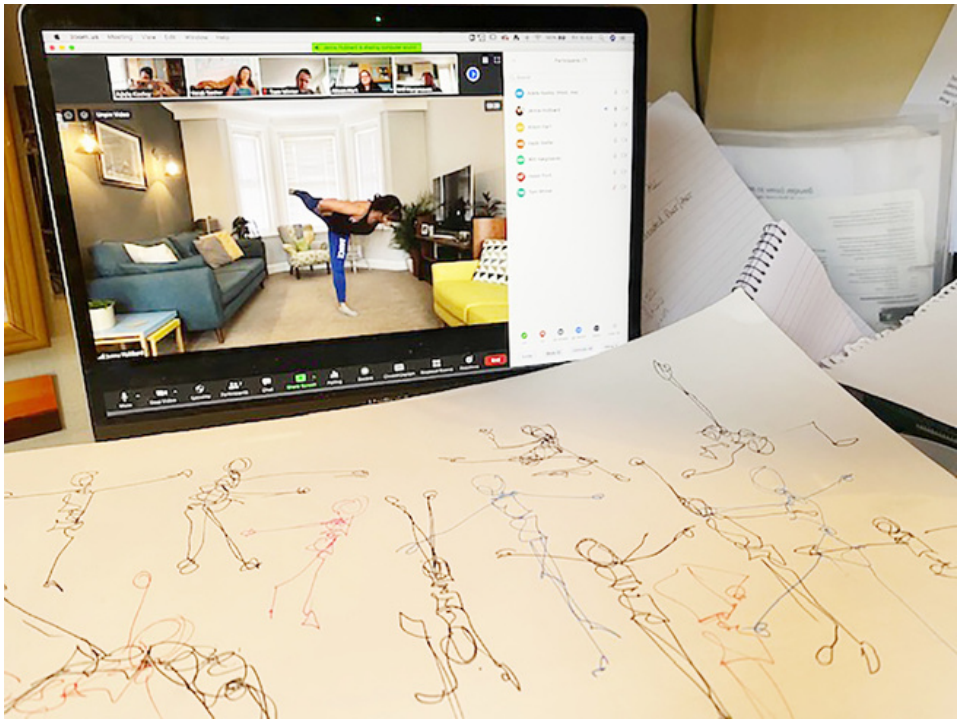

Figure 5: ‘Jenna dancing; Adele drawing’. Photo by Adele Keeley, 2020.

In both the in-studio jams and the online ones, the methods that emerged within and through the practice included explorative mark making, movement improvisation, music and sound, text, and voice, and sculpting the environment through three-dimensional making. We used video and photography to record the sessions and collected reflections from participants, which formed our exegesis in this earlier work and unknowingly to us was also generating a body of artwork. Because a recording device creates (time-based media) documentation and editable footage it, therefore, anticipates that it will be watched by an audience (Foá et al 2020, p26). During the online jams, we reflected upon the differences in our practice through the screens, utilising Zoom conferencing software to host our shared space. In our early online jam sessions, we asked ourselves the following questions:

·How could we translate our creative jamming practice into a digital format?
·How would the technology work and could it be the gateway to new discoveries?
·How would the intimacy and connectivity of in-person jamming be possible remotely?

Our initial way into jamming together online included short and specific, clear exercises with one another, to test whether we could draw, see, move, and respond simultaneously. Whilst these exercises allowed us to become familiar with using the technology, the spontaneity and emergence in our own creative practice was lacking. We would need to trust that our free flowing, unpredictable jam practice would survive through the digital space, and that duets, trios and whole group activities would emerge spontaneously as they would within a live jam.

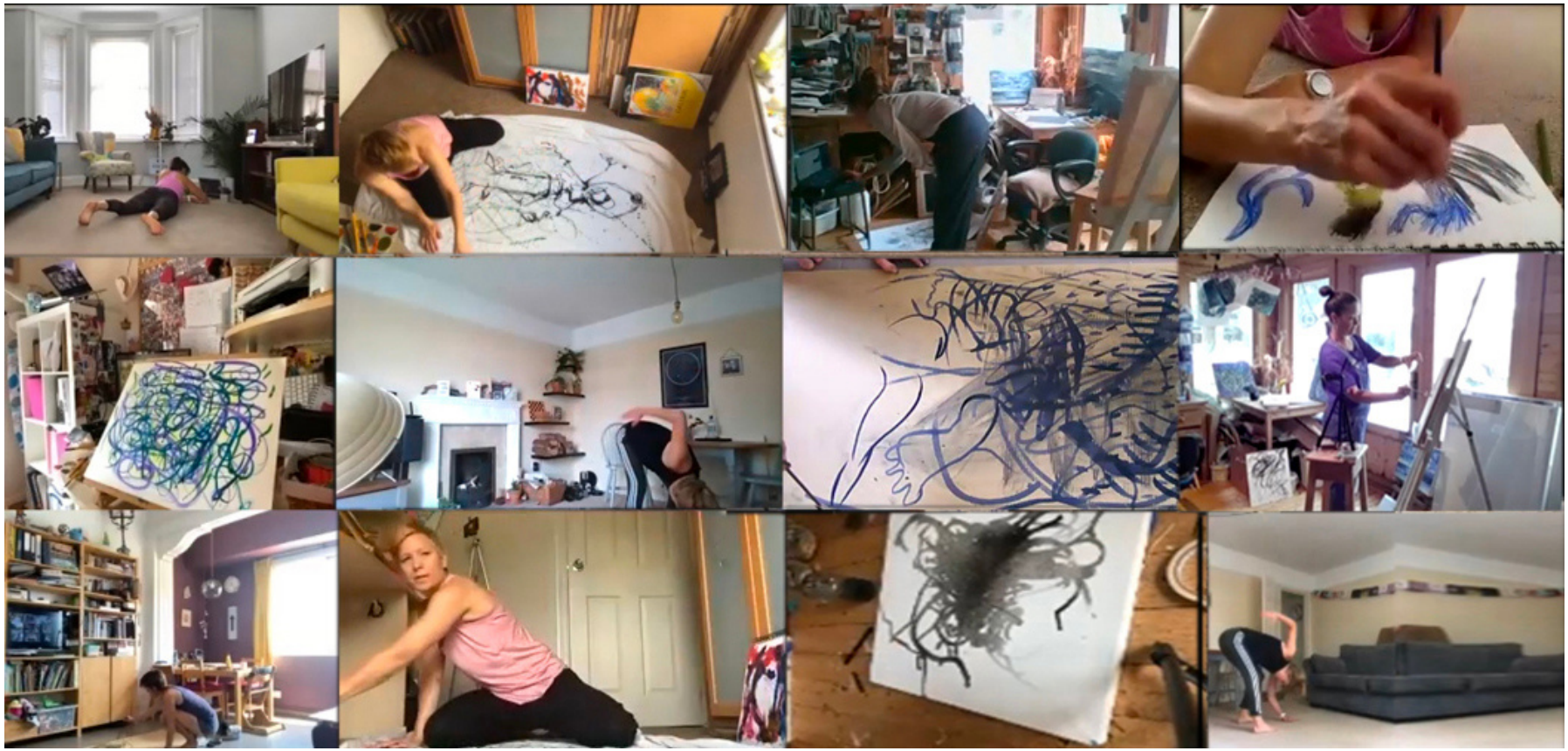

Figure 6: 'Zoom jamming' Image by Adele Keeley, 2020.

We recognised the new Gap which emerged through the absence of a shared physical space, whilst noticing that we could curate our own space, which included different resources depending upon our dominant artistic practice. There were of course limitations including no physical touch with one another or sharing the same resources. We found ways to share objects by working with something similar, such as card, paper, inks, or charcoal or even objects to hand around the house like blankets or sheets which became a great tool for improvisation. Copying became one way we would connect, and we would echo colours, marks, or movement which we would share on the screens. We were also for the first time able to curate the angle and viewpoint of the other participants by moving and adjusting the camera lens, or even disappearing from view. These new methods prompted us to broaden our theoretical thinking and ask new research questions:

·Could the technology be integrated into the practice, and what new strands of improvisation would emerge as a result?
·How do we and other participants engage with each other?
·How would we engage with our own digital ‘other’ (ourselves) during an online creative digital jam?

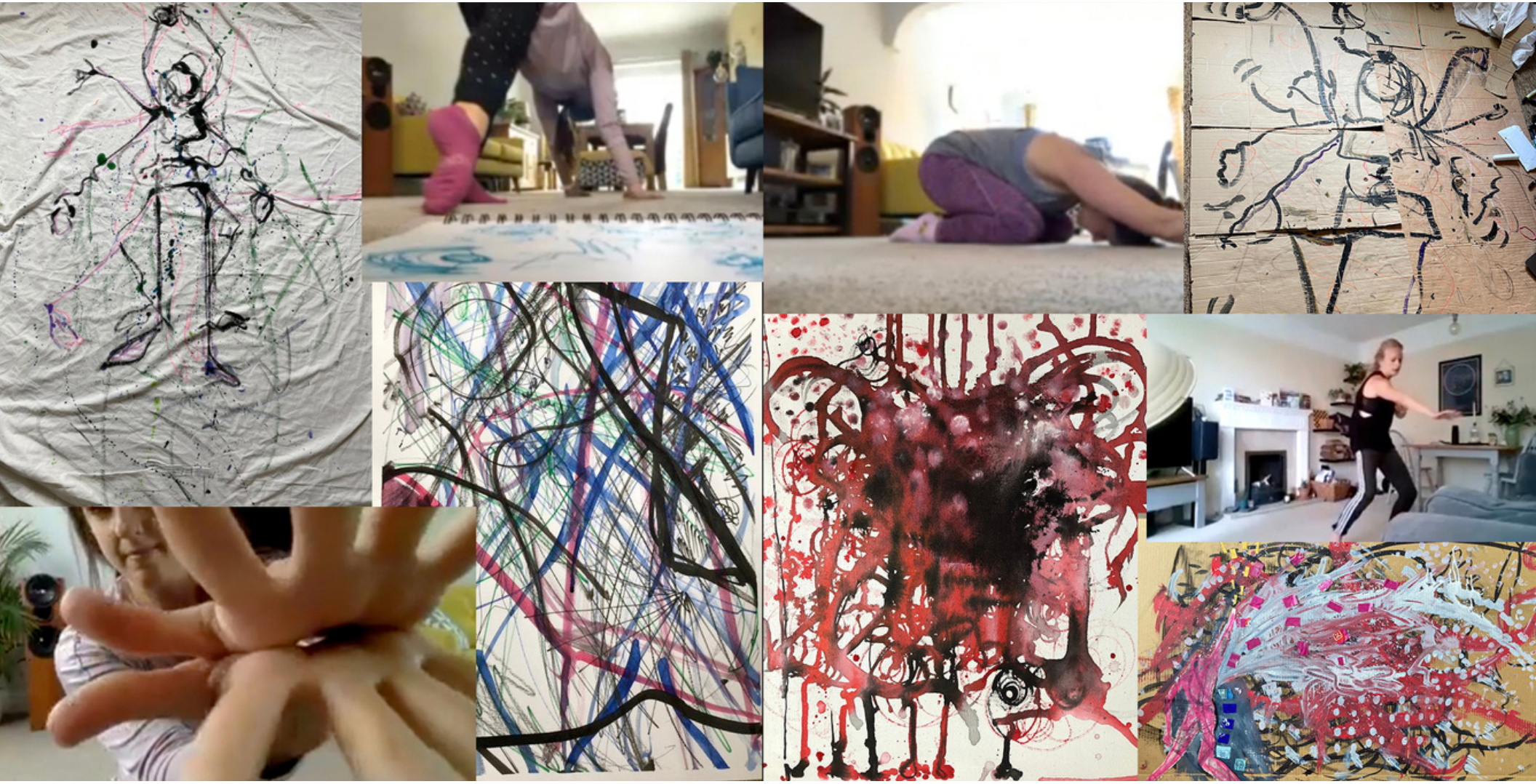

Figure 7: ’Zoom jamming’ Image by Adele Keeley, 2020.

Findings

We looked for other artists and researchers who had been practicing together online and found the work of Weber, Mizanty and Allen (2017) to be a useful guide to exploring conferencing technology for collaborative practices. Their work focusses on making choreography through digital platforms, with each dancer being in a different place but, the performance of the work was live in a studio together. We similarly found that “the experience of creating via technology was both the grounds for an immersive research practice and also fodder for the content of the work being created” (Weber, Mizanty and Allen 2017). The more we jammed together, the more adept we became at using the technology for effective connections with each other. We started signing into the jams with more than one device and placing them in distinct locations around the room, allowing us to frame our activity in unusual ways. We used the Zoom pinning tool to focus on one person, or to locate different people within our own physical space on individual devices. The Gallery view allowed us to observe everyone simultaneously and we could notice similarities within the drawings, or a movement that several people were exploring together.

Figure 8: ’Jenna’s duet with her digital other’ Image by Adele Keeley, 2020.

Another key discovery was the ability to observe your own image, simultaneously through a range of angles and views. The slight delay through zoom meant a movement we would make towards one device would be repeated back to us with a delay, from another angle, from another device. Jenna commented that “I was suddenly able to see my body move from 3 different angles at once, which was disorientating but also inspired me to respond creatively to my digital echo” (Hubbard 2020). The work of Francksen was useful here in contextualising these experiences of working with and through our digital other images. We understood that we are jamming with each other, but also with a digital version of ourselves, which looks like us, but is different to our lived and felt experience; the somatic feeling of ourselves. Francksen’s work also notes that to work creatively with our digital image by responding to it in real time, that we must find a way of bridging the gap between the digital and live. Jenna reflected that “seeing my digital self move allowed me to recognise the joy, creativity and playful nature of physically working through the emotions and stress of lockdown” (2020). Lovatt has extensively researched the power of dance to reduce anxiety by allowing focus on the perceived, physical body and to stay present to the moment, which was challenging during an unprecedented digital time (2020). There had been a disconnect between our perceived and somatic bodies during the lockdown, so creating a blended digital and real space was an important part of our research at that time. Francksen says that “the materialisation of the dance doesn’t presuppose the live or the digital, but suggests that the digital and physical is somehow set free in an ontological resonance that encapsulates both mediums” (Francksen 2014). We started to understand that the video conferencing platform, Zoom, placed us neither here nor there in the real world. Instead, we had something other; a movement and drawing space suspended through the ether, that included both live and digital bodies. During this time, we also started to recognise that the exegesis of drawings and recorded footage served as both a record and additionally as a body of work on their own.

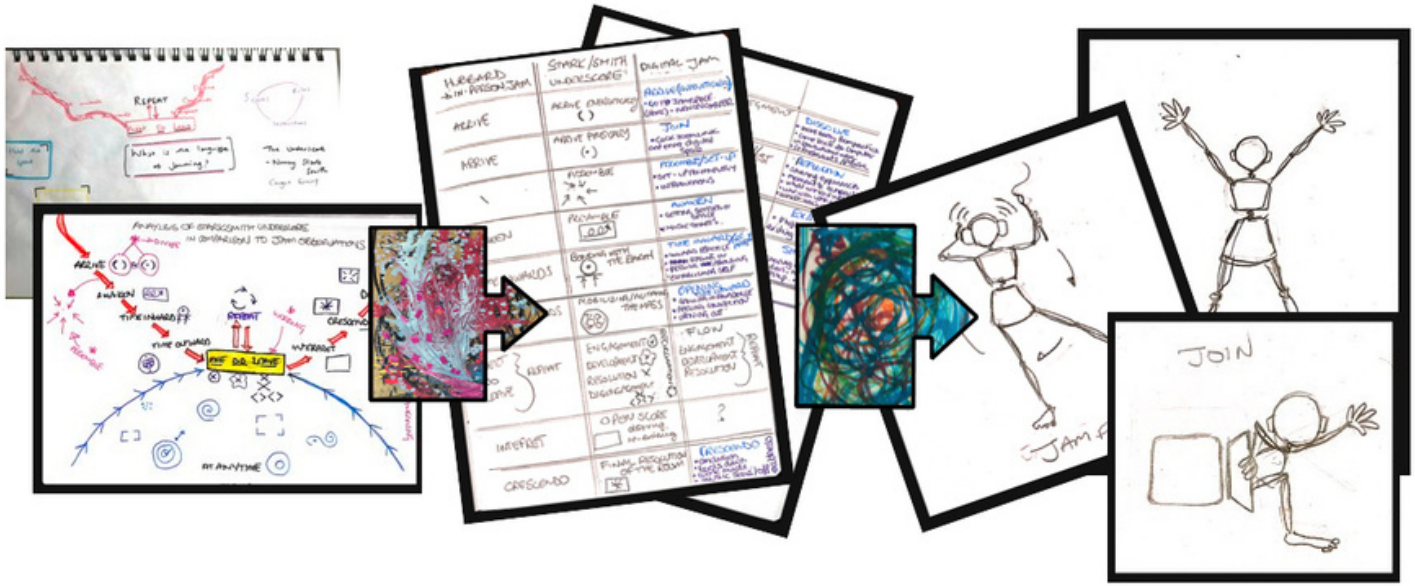

Figure 9: ’Development of the digital underscore’ Image by Adele Keeley, 2020.

The shift to online jamming also allowed us to revisit Stark Smith's Underscore and observe it in a way we had not imagined we would do. We considered how we entered the digital space, how the activities emerged and how we closed the practice. The dedicated online time has given us the frame to consider Stark Smith's work within the context of online jamming, and develop our own framework based on her work. We are in the process of formulating our own visual language to use as a road map for other jam experiences, exploring whether the frame we have created and tested ourselves is a robust enough model for student participants. In March 2021 we tested the model for the first time with our students online; they had never worked together in a studio, and most were exploring interdisciplinary practices for the first time. One student commented that "I found myself doing things that I wouldn't normally do" (Participant A 2021) whilst another commented that "the lens of the camera made me focus on moving and then drawing hands and feet, which was different" (Participant B 2021). Several of the students described the sound and movement as providing moods or scenes to draw, and that the pinning tools in zoom allowed them to gather and respond to different people throughout the jam. This development is ongoing and needs testing further, although the initial results are promising.

Figure 10: Collage of images from improvisation jam sessions with students in March 2021. Images by Jenna Hubbard and Adele Keeley, 2021
Link to filmed excerpts from online improvisation jam session with students in March 2021. Film
by Jenna Hubbard, 2021.
Available at: https://youtu.be/rs-IRshSqoo

Conclusion

This research is in its initial stages and continues to emerge through the practice. We have explored and created a model for translating our improvisation practices into our homes, creatively exploring the technology and the digital representation of our own image. The gap created by the COVID-19 lockdown brought with it new creative elements to our jam practice, including using the technology as a mode of enquiry, rather than merely recording the sessions. We discovered that creative jam practice can continue in a digital space, which opens the possibilities of collaborating across space and geographical boundaries. Though there are elements that we will never be able to replicate online, such as touch and direct physical interaction, the practice itself is emerging with its own playground of possibilities and research opportunities; and new play mates, even if that playmate is a digital reflection of yourself. We found the experience enjoyable and released the anxiety caused by the uncertainty of the pandemic; we observed that participants would repeatedly comment on how they felt better after a session and needed that connection for their own well-being. In this way, the jams provided a much-needed space for healing as our domestic spaces and artistic spaces blurred into one another, demonstrating an explicit new understanding of the Art/Life Process (Halprin, 2000; Lovatt, 2020).

This project has unearthed other areas of enquiry including theories of play, intergenerational creativity, and well-being and how these are contextualized within a temporary digital space. As we have started to transition back into our in-person practice, we are noticing that we are bringing elements of our journey under the covid cloud with us. These include a greater use of screens and technology to project images as they are being created, and increased access, with participants joining us from other locations via Zoom. Our jam practice has always been a test bed for emerging ideas and practices, and continues to be a place for innovation, collaboration, and play. With every new iterance of the jam practice, The Underscore has continued to serve as a guide, map, and toolkit in which to navigate this shared and emerging space.

Figure 11: Improvisation jam session with students in March 2021. Image by Adele Keeley, 2021.

References

Algar, Lucy 2014. “Drawing and Scenography Research”. Accessed Jan 25, 2022. http://www.lucyalgar.com/gallery-category/drawings/

Foá, Maryclare, et al. 2020. *Performance Drawing: New Practices Since 1945*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, London. ProQuest eBook Central.

Francksen, Kerry. 2014. “Taking care of bodies ~ tracing gestures betwixt and between live-digital dancing.” Body, Space, Technology Journal. Vol 12. 10.16995/bst.42. http://people.brunel.ac.uk/bst/vol1201/cover.html

Halprin, Anna. 1995. *Moving Towards Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance*. Wesleyan University Press, USA.

Halprin, Anna. 2000. *Returning to Health: with dance, movement and imagery.* Life Rhythm, USA.

Hubbard, Jenna. 2020. Reflections on jamming. Unpublished.

Lovatt, Peter. 2020. *The Dance Cure*. Short Books, London.

Participant A. 2021 (Student at AUB) in discussion with the authors, March 2021

Participant B. 2021 (Student at AUB) in discussion with the authors, March 2021

Stark Smith, Nancy. 1987. “Taking No for An Answer.” Contact Quarterly. Vol 12.2. (Spring/ Summer) 3. https://nancystarksmith.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Taking-no-for-an-answer.jpg

Stark Smith, Nancy. 2021. “The Underscore.” Nancy Stark Smith. 07/08/21. https://nancystarksmith.com/underscore/

Weber, Rebecca, Mizanty, Megan, & Allen, Lora. 2017 “Project Trans(m)it: creating dance collaboratively via technology – a best practices overview.” Research in Dance Education. Vol 18(2). 116-134. https://doi.org/10.1080/14647893.2017.1354840

Worth, Libby, & Poynor, Helen. 2004. *Anna Halprin.* Routledge, Abingdon.