

## **Screendance 2.0: Social Dance-Media**

Harmony Bench  
The Ohio State University, USA

Volume 7, Issue 2 (November 2010)

### **Abstract**

This essay argues that, as dance and screen media conjoined to create the hybrid art practice of dance-media, so too are dance-media and social media converging to produce an area of artistic experimentation I call social dance-media. This essay explores three strands of social dance-media—crowdsource, flash, and viral choreographies—and provides examples of each. Following protocols from social media, each of these modalities represents a form of participatory choreography or performance that evidences social media's impression upon dance in contemporary popular culture.

**Keywords:** dance-media, social media, crowdsourcing, flash mobs, viral video, choreography, performance

When Sherril Dodds wrote her groundbreaking text *Dance on Screen: Genres and Media from Hollywood to Experimental Art* a decade ago, the primary storage and transmission media of screendance were film, video, and broadcast television. Today, the internet and computer screens are just as likely, if not more so, to be the vehicles of dance onscreen. In particular, the integration of video into social media platforms has enabled dancers and choreographers to create an internet presence for dance, which has ballooned online since 2005. What, then, are the implications of internet technologies and particularly social media for dance practices? What impact do social media have on choreography and spectatorship? How do online viewers participate in dances that have been conceived for or are transported into social media environments? Given the centrality of interactivity to computer use, what role does audience reception play in the circulation, distribution, and spread of dances? This essay begins to articulate the relevance of social media for the contemporary dance

landscape. I argue that social media enable the emergence of new social dance practices defined not by music genres or by movement vocabularies, but by modes of composition and circulation within social media environments. Specifically, I outline three interrelated compositional strategies and/or effects apparent in the intersections between dance and social media, what I call crowdsource choreographies, flash choreographies, and viral choreographies. By redefining the contours of dance for social media platforms, the pieces I discuss in this essay reach audiences that may not seek out dance in theatrical contexts, but enjoy dance in televisual and popular media contexts.

Circulating in internet environments, crowdsource, flash, and viral choreographies elaborate upon social media's ideologies of participation while remaining in the image-based domain of dance-media. They reassert a social priority for dance, which is to say, they reconfigure dance as a site of social exchange and engagement by providing the vehicles for sharing and circulating dance. In contrast to dances crafted for the theatrical stage, which are intended to be more or less passively consumed by an audience, works of social dance-media present themselves as evidence that dance should be shared, copied, embodied, manipulated, and recirculated rather than preserved for the professional and elite dancer. In this way, social media and dance-media join to produce what I term social dance-media, which take full advantage of social media to create new grounds upon which to establish movement communities. Though I discuss crowdsource, flash, and viral choreographies as more or less distinct categories, they are not mutually exclusive and frequently overlap. All, for example, blur the conventional boundaries between performer and audience, and all intersect with and/or specifically reference a networked online milieu. As a hybrid form, social dance-media differentiates itself from stage-based choreography by insisting upon public engagement and participation. In order to pursue its agenda of 'accessibility', social dance-media often favors technologies and web platforms that have become a familiar part of everyday life in information cultures. As structures of participatory choreography and performance, crowdsource, flash, and viral choreographies reinvigorate dance as a social practice in an era of digital technologies.

### **Dance-Media/Social Media**

In dance-media, dance is presented primarily, or at the very least secondarily, as a visual image. Though examples of dance-media can be found from Feuillet's late 17th/early 18th century dance notation system to Loïe Fuller's experiments with fabric and light, the most prominent forms of dance-media historically have been the screen-based dances in film and television: from Hollywood dance musicals and Bollywood films to the dance films of Maya Deren, Charles Atlas, David Hinton, Thierry De Mey, and others, from dance for camera

programs such as the Channel Four series *Dance on 4* in the United Kingdom to popular dance and competition shows such as *Soul Train* and *Strictly Come Dancing/So You Think You Can Dance*. Dance-media also includes experimental videos, gallery installations such as Liz Aggiss and Billy Cowie's *Men in the Wall* (2003) or The OpenEnded Group's *Loops* (2001–2008), internet-based works such as Katrina McPherson and Simon Fildes's hyperchoreography pieces (2002–2007: [hyperchoreography.org](http://hyperchoreography.org)), as well as home videos and dance documentation posted online. In short, dance-media has come to refer to dance in any form of screen media.

Also enveloping multiple screen sites, social media are the subset of Web 2.0 technologies through which internet users share and comment upon others' posted content, whether pictures, videos, or their own thoughts and ideas. Indeed, social media depend on users to generate web-based content. Status changes and other updates, book and restaurant reviews, blogs and RSS feeds are the mainstay of social networks. This type of user participation marks the difference between Web 2.0 applications and the uni-directional flow of information that was the hallmark of the previous generation of web content. The familiar examples of, YouTube, Flickr, Twitter, WordPress, and Facebook social media platforms do not follow the traditional model of information distribution, in which content travels from a small number of providers to a large audience of receivers. Social networks put computer users in touch with each other, greatly widening the pool of information and opinions available for consumption, and increasing the number of opportunities to engage with those ideas and each other. This is not to say that all computer users reflect the image of the 'ideal user' that Web 2.0 and social media have constructed. In point of fact, user participation is unevenly distributed when it comes to producing the majority of online content [1]. Nevertheless, actual inequalities do not mitigate social media's strong guiding narrative of participation, which ensures that computer and internet users continue uploading, downloading, manipulating, commenting on, and reading and watching web content, thereby building and reinforcing web communities and social networks.

When dance-media and social media merge to form social dance-media works, the result is not simply additive. Posting a comment on a YouTube video, for example, does not constitute an example of social dance-media, since the commentary does not alter the work as such. The choreographic component of social dance-media must accommodate and reflect the use of social media strategies in composition as well as reception, which allow a creator to integrate users and audience members not just as commentators, but also as collaborators of a sort.

Social dance-media projects thus stand in contrast to other dance-media works, even those whose creators found new ways of working choreographically with the 'interactivity' afforded

by internet technologies in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Because high-quality video was not yet a feasible option, most of the first attempts to construct dances for the web relied upon text, sound files, still images, and animated GIFs, followed by animations made in Macromedia Director and Flash. Such works include Molissa Fenley's geographic exploration *Latitudes* (1996); Troika Ranch's animated snapshot dance *Yearbody* (1996–97) [2]; Marianne Goldberg's feminist poem-portrait *Be To Want I* (1998); Koert van Mensvoort's self-surveillant motion capture animation *Drift* (2002); and Nicolas Clauss's nightmare *Somnambules* (2003) [3]. With the advent of Web 2.0, dance's internet presence has shifted away from the 'interactive' domains of net.art toward the 'participatory' domains of social media [4].

Whether users contribute video files or performance scores to a larger web-based work, participate in flash mob performances, or re-perform performances made popular on websites such as YouTube, social dance-media requires participation from at least some users. Otherwise, the dynamic, circumstantial, and unexpected aspects of the work cannot be fully realized. As a result of user participation, work that is made for, finds its way into, or mimics social media remains fundamentally open. It can be modified, adapted, changed to fit new circumstances, or deviate from an authorial plan. Although instructional videos, performance documentation, formal and informal online competitions, and hyperdance or net.dance are all important manifestations of dance on the web, with few exceptions, they are not specifically tied to social media and do not challenge the boundary between performer and audience as to the examples of social dance-media, namely crowdsourcing, flash, and viral dances, to which I will now turn.

### **Crowdsourcing Choreographies**

As we will see with Simon Fildes and Katrina McPherson's *Move-Me*, Filipe Viegas and Brahim Sourny's *Move Out Loud: The Biggest Choreography Project Ever*, and Dance Theatre Workshop's *Twitter Community Choreography*, crowdsourcing choreography reworks collaboration for online environments, rendering composition a communal process. Such choreographies build upon collaborative models of composition that dance artists such as Liz Lerman, David Dorfman, Pat Graney, and many others have developed over the years, which incorporate non-professional dancers and local community members as performers in stage-based work. Dance filmmakers and screendance makers have also turned to non-professionals in their work, including Douglas Rosenberg and Li Chiao-Ping's *Grace* (2002), in which a group of seniors and dancers delicately move across the surface of a frozen lake, and Margaret Williams and Victoria Marks's *Veterans* (2008), in which young American veterans working through post-traumatic stress disorder 'play' war. Crowdsourcing

choreographies are not unique, therefore, in their desire to incorporate audience members or participants from outside the 'dance community' into a dance work, but in how they achieve that integration.

Whereas the performers in works conceived for the stage or film/video may not be conventional concert dancers, they usually work under the direction of a choreographer who workshops scenarios and movements to nurture trust among the performers and develop material for public presentation. Such works typically follow familiar compositional paradigms suited to either stage or screen: theme and variation, an arc with a beginning, middle, and end, and so on. In contrast, crowdsource choreographies such as *Move-Me*, *Move Out Loud*, and *Twitter Community Choreography* do not follow these same processes of development. They enact compositional strategies borrowed from crowdsourcing and explore the aesthetic effects that result.

Crowdsourcing is a process of harnessing the knowledge and creative input of a widespread population rather than an expert few. Fueled by volunteerism, crowdsourcing in effect outsources problem solving and creative labor to a crowd, a scenario that can be perceived either as a fulfilling form of digital community service or an exploitative manner of profiting from others' uncompensated work. Crowdsourcing espouses a belief in what James Surowiecki calls the 'wisdom of crowds'—left to their own devices, the collective intelligence of a crowd is comparable to or may even surpass that of a few well-trained individuals. This theory suggests that the more participants get involved, the more accurate the results and the better served the business or community. Such a model works particularly well where users are engaged in the collective production of knowledge and debate (Wikipedia, blogs), products (beta-testers and focus groups), maps (Google Maps) assessments (rating and review sites such as Yelp or Amazon), and for the development of opensource software (Linux, Ubuntu). Some reality television programs such as *American Idol* crowdsource the selection of winners in competitions as a way for home audiences to feel more involved, and therefore more dedicated to watching a particular program. Unlike crowdsourcing's business or television applications, however, in crowdsourced choreographies there are no data to average, no assertions of fact or opinion to be substantiated or debunked, and often no implicit or explicit agreement on a language, syntax, convention, or function of the crowdsourced elements.

For their crowdsource choreography project *Move-Me* (2006–08), dance-media artists Simon Fildes and Katrina McPherson oversaw the construction of an apparatus similar to a very large photo booth [5]. Installed in high-traffic venues, the Move-Me booth travelled throughout the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand, capturing performances of everyday individuals out shopping or waiting in foyers. Upon entering the Move-Me booth, participants were greeted

with instructions on choosing one of eight contemporary choreographers from Europe and the United States whose performance score they would like to dance. Parents and children, dancers and non-dancers, young and old followed the choreographer's spoken instructions. A video camera in the booth recorded the dance, which was then uploaded to Move-Me.com, a Webby-nominated site built specifically for this project, where it joined a thousand other such recordings. Fildes and McPherson created the conceptual architectures that supported the project, but all content came from outside their artistic partnership, most notably the choreographers who contributed performance scores and the various participants whose danced interpretations are stored on the website.

Not all participants were equally persuaded by the project. Because the artists installed the Move-Me booth in locations where diverse populations might be persuaded to dance for the camera, the dancers' individual aesthetics, their savvy in using the booth, and even their willingness to follow a choreographer's instructions are left to chance. In one clip, an elderly woman performing a score by Deborah Hay stops singing in an imaginary language while turning a slow circle to declare in exasperation 'This is stupid' before being persuaded by her daughter to continue. Others quickly vanish upon realizing that they are being recorded, or else they accidentally record themselves listening to the instructions and stop recording just as they are about to perform the choreography. The responses thus vary: some participants are raucously enthusiastic, others appear confused or nervous, some seem to suspect that they are being set up to look foolish, and still others disregard any and all choreographic suggestions and dance to their own tune.

Online users exploring Move-Me.com see the on-ground dancers' responses to the project, the confidence and embarrassment, exuberance and vulnerability that participants convey through their movement and bodily cues. Users are not limited to watching the videos, however; the site has been created to solicit metadata from users. Organized in a grid on a white background, selected videos pop out in their own window, offering viewers the space to rate and 'favorite' the videos as well as add tags and commentary to guide others through the site. Users can personalize their experience, navigating and sorting videos as they wish. At the invitation of the artists, some users have even curated sequences of videos to be viewed together as a cluster.

The glossiness of *Move-Me's* Flash web design stands in stark contrast to projects that rely on users' familiarity with extant web services such as YouTube and Twitter, which is the case for Dance Theatre Workshop's *Twitter Community Choreography* (2009–present), or that use videos uploaded to a website in QuickTime or a similar format, like Filipe Viegas and Brahim Sourny's *Move Out Loud: The Biggest Choreography Project Ever* (2008).

*Move Out Loud*'s user experience is hampered by non-intuitive design, which includes hosting the work on the Amsterdam-based website Rhiz.eu [6] (which hosts almost 2000 internet projects) rather than on the site that advertises the project (moveoutloud.net), and the placement of the beginning of the piece several pages deep into the site. Once users find their way to the work, they are treated to video clips of dancers and choreographers—some of them known internationally for their work—who have created thoughtful and engaging choreographies for the project. Although geo-data was not provided for all the submissions, it is clear that the majority of videos came from European countries with additional submissions from Brazil, Australia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and other locales, but very few videos from North America and Asia.

In contrast to the participants in *Move-Me*, many of whom came across the project by chance, Viegas and Sourny solicited video contributions from dancers and choreographers around the globe and instituted a rigorous process for participation. Users could not simply upload footage of movement phrases at will. First, would-be participants in the online dance video chain had to indicate their interest to the project directors and wait to be contacted. Then they were given the video clip that would precede theirs, with the mandate that they had to submit their own video within three days. Like the multi-authored stories that twist and turn around campfires on dark summer nights, each participant in *Move Out Loud* began their phrase with the movement that concluded the previous clip.

Each of the 65 videos in *Move Out Loud* can be viewed separately, but the connections between them also allow users to stay with the work for a prolonged period of time, watching each of the scenes and awaiting the next intriguing juxtaposition of movement that ends one video and begins another. Because the videos cover a range of dance styles, the shared point of movement eases transitions between the diverse movement vocabularies represented, offering a breath or pause between contrasting styles. *Move Out Loud* does not simply jump from style to style, however. At one and a half to three minutes long, the videos are quite lengthy for internet time-scales and provide ample time for willing and patient viewers to sink in to each new aesthetic before moving on. The artists have further reduced the potentially jarring shift among movement phrases by editing the videos together into sequences of about five clips each. The adjoining clips prolong each phrase across the cut, covering the gap between them with a shared gesture.

*Move Out Loud 24 to 28*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OW9h3irR1jA>

Although a good deal of orchestration was required to sew each of the clips in *Move Out Loud* into a chain of movement, the overall aesthetic effect remains one of juxtaposition. While *Move-Me*'s internal coherence results from the consistency of the choreographic scores, *Move Out Loud* utilizes the linked gestures to form the glue holding the work together as a whole. Indeed, both works value the fragments out of which they are made; the pieces foreground rather than try to disguise their patchwork quality. Dance Theatre Workshop, in contrast, has moved from highly disjunctive pieces to more conventional compositions in its *Twitter Community Choreography* series. Whereas *Move-Me* collected video clips from people performing well-known choreographers' scores, and *Move Out Loud* collected video clips from dancers and choreographers, *Twitter Community Choreography* gathers movement ideas as 140-character tweets, which are performed by local dancers and choreographers in residence at DTW in New York, recorded, and uploaded to their blog and to YouTube.

Led by DTW blogger Adam Smith, *Twitter Community Choreography* began in 2009 and has produced 21 dances to date. @DanceTWorkshop's followers, or subscribers to DTW's Twitter feed, are asked to submit specific steps and actions, adjectives describing movement quality, internal and external motivations for movement, and other cues around which to organize a dance. For example, *Community Choreography* #10, performed by Jillian Sweeney, asked @DanceTWorkshop followers to tweet actual movements, which elicited recommendations such as 'walk like a bug with your tentacle fingers sprouting from your face un [sic] the ugliest manner' and 'Stop, Hammertime!' In response to DTW's prompt 'do over', *Community Choreography* #14, which Ursula Egly performed, included the tweet 'summarize your life in movement if you had not made that crucial mistake in summer of 1998'. Followers offered such suggestions as 'nose crinkle', 'finger race', and 'elbow accelerate' for #21: 'body part + verb', performed again by Sweeney.

As evidenced by the contents of their own Twitter feeds, many of the contributors participate in a larger experimental arts scene that welcomes innovative uses of web-based technologies in the arts, while others seem to be dancers and dance enthusiasts. Some of the early experiments in *Twitter Community Choreography* included tweeted balletic vocabularies, others referenced very specific social dance steps, and still other tweets presented themselves as poetic ruminations on the nature of movement and choreography.



@DanceTWorkshop's followers who participate in the project are not audiences in the traditional sense, then. They are active in the creation of these short choreographies. Recognizing the creative influence of these Twitter users, many of the recorded performances include the tweets as subtitles accompanying matching actions or, alternately, as part of the video credits appearing at the end of the video along with the names of performers, camerapeople, editors, sponsors, and so on—all those people and roles necessary to the creation of a film.

DTW has shifted its process as it has continued to experiment with the crowdsourcing format. For the first several community choreographies, the performers who animated the tweets approached the scores somewhat hesitantly or perfunctorily. Transitions were uneasy, and sometimes the performer returned to a 'neutral' standing position in between movements, signifying the end of one tweet and the beginning of another. Eventually performers began to add their own sense of composition, creating micro-narratives within the short pieces and exploring the different possibilities afforded by specific sites. For example, Dance Gang performed #15 in and around an elevator, and Tyler Ashley made good use of a reception area and the sidewalk outside its floor-to-ceiling windows for #16. Both smoothed transitions between otherwise unrelated movements such that patterns and phrases began to emerge from the fragmentary nature of the tweets.

*Twitter Community Choreography #16*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJomsqnU64Y>

Beginning with *Twitter Community Choreography #20*, the process has included a crowdsourced workshopping phase, pushing online choreography further by asking users to collectively craft the material. Now community members not only indicate what types of movement should be performed, they are also given an opportunity to suggest the sequencing of those movements, the manner of their execution, and the inclusion of sound or music. DTW posts drafts of these works in progress on its blog, and members of the online community offer changes and suggestions for improvement. Since embarking on this new format, more attention has been given to the possibilities of lighting and camera angles, and DTW has begun incorporating overhead shots and close-ups, a moving camera, and other cinematic modes of composition to accompany the choreography. In other words, DTW has

begun to recognize that it is working in a hybrid dance-media form and that images, too, require choreographing. Taken together, these differences indicate a reassertion of composition as a craft in a more traditional sense, that is to say, involving a greater consideration of how movements and images fit together to achieve an overall trajectory or effect, while maintaining and even furthering the communal authorship of crowdsource choreography. *Twitter Community Choreography* thus combines crowdsourcing as a compositional strategy with preexisting models of collaboration and craft, allowing new shapes of choreographic practice to emerge from an engagement with social media sites such as Twitter.

Amassing contributions from a global (but strongly tilted toward the European and American) dance community [7], *Move-Me*, *Move Out Loud*, and *Twitter Community Choreography* reframe the act of composition as one of collection. Whereas *Move-Me* and *Move Out Loud* collected video material of performances, DTW adds the intermediate step of collecting text-based representations of movement that are then performed and recorded. For *Move-Me* and *Move Out Loud*, the end result is a database or chain of independent but interrelated dances, while each *Twitter Community Choreography* results in a single dance composed of tweeted fragments. In all instances, participants offer their individual fragments, frequently in ignorance of what others have contributed or unaware of the shape of the larger work. Crowdsource choreographies thus often explore aesthetic disjuncture that is the product of accumulating and juxtaposing material that has not necessarily been conceived for its integration into a larger whole.

Because crowdsource choreographies draw individual elements from diverse sources, each reflecting their own influences and histories, the emphasis for a creator of a crowdsource work is on the structure that will house everyone's contributions. Indeed, it is the structure that made social media platforms such as YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook successful—their creators did not create the content of each site, but provided an architecture in which users could upload their photos, videos, and status updates. Similarly, crowdsource choreographies approach user-generated movement as raw material to be collected, combined, and juxtaposed within a temporal collage. As such, there seems to be an attempt on the part of the artists and project directors to operate from behind the scenes, if not removing themselves from the process by leaving content creation and editing to contributors, then by emphasizing what an invented structure allows others to do. Whether artists build extensive software applications or are reliant on extant web services, crowdsource choreographies provide conceptual architectures that solicit contributions from users, who fill the works with their content.

The desire to distance oneself from the actual act of choreography and to delegate sequencing and composition to an external process of course recalls Merce Cunningham's chance operations, which determined the ordering of movement phrases and the spatial distribution of dancers. Chance methods as an historical precursor do not, however, offer a sufficient parallel to crowdsource choreographies' ideology of radical inclusiveness, which intensifies contemporary choreographic models of collaboration in which dancers share a substantial responsibility for producing material for the works in which they perform, nor do chance procedures anticipate the reality of exclusivity built into such projects—only those who happened across the Move-Me booth were able to upload their videos, for example, and *Move Out Loud* favors professional dancers and choreographers while *Twitter Community Choreography* is limited to Twitter users who also follow DTW's feed. The communities called upon—whether communities of dancers, choreographers, erstwhile spectators, or 'outsiders'—has as much to do with the work that is created as the structure designed to solicit, facilitate, and organize that participation. Indeed, crowdsource choreographies are just as much a reflection of who does not participate in their creation, and the absence of users or the absence of specific communities of users shapes the outcome.

As a strategy that dance borrows from social media, crowdsourcing need not be limited to choreography as in the cases I have mentioned. The above examples emphasize the contributions of individuals and small groups to larger processes and pieces, the development of which is facilitated but not dictated by the lead artists. Crowdsourcing can also extend to performance, for example when masses convene to dance in a public place. Flash mobs, which serve as the primary model for flash choreographies, crowdsource performance in that unless they are professionally organized events, the performers are unlikely to know one another and no one knows in advance who will actually come to participate in the seemingly spontaneous public performance.

### **Flash Choreographies**

Flash mobs, which are large gatherings of individuals at a specific time and place in response to a call sent out via email or text, began appearing in June of 2003 (Nicholson: online) with the rise of social computing. They have sometimes been feared by law enforcement because of the size of crowds that gather, and sometimes dismissed because they seem to have little purpose other than to disrupt public space. Judith Nicholson suggests that flash mobs 'shone briefly and brilliantly', as the trend was 'officially declared passé' in September of 2003 (online), while Jeffrey Schnapp and Matthew Tiewes describe them as a brief fad that brought together 'crowds of the underemployed and overconnected [... who] assemble for the simultaneous performance of quirky gestures' (xvi). It is unclear whether it is the faddishness,

quirkiness, or presumed lack of employment that offends Schnapp and Tiews, but I suspect that, like the Happenings of the 1950s and 1960s, flash mobs' greatest sin for onlookers and skeptical scholars is their indecipherability. One manifesto for flash mobs specifies that while a flash mob 'may express an **opinion** or a **statement**', it '**doesn't have a purpose**' (original emphasis, Aglomerarispontane: online). The amusement equivalent of *l'art pour l'art*, flash mobs as 'purposeless' events generally conflict with the spaces in which the action occurs—pillow fights in the street, for example, silent discos in the subway, or 'pagan' rituals for abstract art. Flash mobbers are also 'purposeless' performers, in that after the action has been completed, they disperse as though nothing had happened, and they do nothing to indicate that they had been a part of the event. The apparent denial of one's participation before and after a flash mob is a hallmark of the form.

Although the flash mob format has been appropriated for advertising and marketing, the author(s) of the *Flash Mob* entry on Wikipedia suggest that the term 'flash mob' does not apply 'to events organized by public relations firms, protests, and publicity stunts'. To call such events flash mobs is to misconstrue the character of flash mobs, as Nigel Lythgoe (producer of Fox Television's *So You Think You Can Dance*) did in describing organized events celebrating National Dance Day in the U.S [8]. Not all public performances fall under the umbrella of flash mobbery, nor do all choreographed community dances fall under flash choreography.

By now the most prominent form of social dance-media, flash choreographies retain the mischievous and whimsical intent behind flash mobs, and preserve their recognizable structure: converge, perform, disperse. However, flash choreographies are not flash mobs, strictly speaking, and there are cultural specificities to flash mobbery that cannot be reproduced in dances that have been preconceived and staged for public performance. In contrast to flash choreographies, which are rehearsed in advance, flash mobs by and large do not require any specialized skill sets among participants and so do not require more than the dissemination of specific instructions that can be performed by anyone who knows about the event. Some flash choreographies do remain grassroots efforts, among university students for example, but the form has been so effectively used in advertising campaigns for television shows and other events that it is difficult to separate flash choreography from its commercial implementation.

Flash mobs may have been written off as early as 2003, but flash choreographies exploded, particularly as a form of advertising, in 2009. For example, parachute pant-wearing dancers hit streets and shops of Los Angeles to advertise A&E's reality show *Hammertime* [9]. Fox staged flash mobs for its song-and-dance drama *Glee* in Rome, Tel Aviv, London, Dublin, and elsewhere [10], and Trident announced a free Beyoncé concert with a flash mob of 100

'Single Ladies' dancers at Piccadilly Circus (Beyoncé: online). These and other highly visible flash choreographies are in fact 'publicity stunts' that are staged with the clear intention of being recorded for circulation through virtual channels. They are highly choreographed affairs with high production values and employ professional choreographers and dancers. Anyone can throw a pillow, after all, but not everyone knows the Hammer Dance or the choreography to *Single Ladies (Put a Ring On It)*. At over 22 millions views [\[11\]](#) on YouTube in addition to being broadcast as a television commercial, T-Mobile's January 2009 dance in London's Liverpool Street Station is perhaps the best-known flash choreography. Less widely known is the work of Flash Mob America, a Los Angeles-based group that formed in 2009 and that uses the flash choreography form to raise awareness around social justice issues, in addition to performing for hire in a variety of contexts. The intentions behind flash choreographies differ in each of these contexts, but all of the above-mentioned examples share a by now familiar set of attributes in their choreography and in their videography.

At 11:00 AM on January 15th as train passengers walk through Liverpool Station, the first wails of the song 'Shout!' pipe over the station speakers. A single man in a hooded jacket rises from a slightly crouched position and slowly raises his arms overhead. He is soon joined by a small group of people dancing with him. Then more join in, and more. People in business suits and ties, trench coats, hats and scarves who had seemed to be spectators just moments before break into dancing, gradually overtaking the floor as 400 dancers move in unison to eight different styles of music. Onlookers surround the floor and peer over railings and balconies to watch the action grow beneath them. As director Michael Gracey explains in a rehearsal for what is known simply as *The T-Mobile Dance*, 'What you're part of is so big, you can't take it all in' (Making: online).

One of the project director's stated objectives was to get people passing through the station to join in dancing. The performers were told not to be so concentrated on their own dancing that they forgot the presence of those around them (Making of T-Mobile Dance: online). Audience participation was considered key to the event's success. The dancers young and old disco and waltz, and they invite those nearby to mash potato and twist. A smiling lady shakes her hips and snaps her fingers, an elderly woman dances with her cane in the air, a pair of male hands wave as though conducting an orchestra, and others pump their fists in the air or side-step. Hidden in Coke machines or carrying what look like ordinary duffle bags, camerapeople pan the crowd unobserved, catching spectators' impromptu dancing, but they also focus in on the number of people calling, texting, photographing, and video recording the flash dance. That is, in addition to dancing, the cameras are meant to document other acts of recording that extend the reach of the performance beyond the comparatively small number of London commuters who witnessed the flash choreography first-hand. In this way, the line between performer and audience is blurred. The objective of the flash choreography is to encourage

audience members to transform themselves into performers for the camera. Theirs is a performance largely constructed through video editing after the event, geared toward reception by yet other viewers who would see the flash choreography in the guise of a commercial advertisement on television or on the internet.

*The T-Mobile Dance*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQ3d3KigPQM>

As soon as the last notes ring over the speakers, the performance dissolves. The dancers evaporate into the crowd; their everyday clothing is a camouflage that makes them indistinguishable from non-dancers and, dispersing in all different directions, they leave no trace of their performance or their identities. Applause erupts confusedly from the onlookers and fades quickly because the foot traffic resumes its normal patterns, leaving no one and nothing to applaud. The buzz remains, however, as spectators reflect upon the bizarre and unexpected event. The video advertisement concludes with T-Mobile's signature trill and campaign slogan: 'Life's for Sharing' appearing over a shot of a woman talking on her cell phone while laughing with another woman at the content of the latter's cell phone screen. Whether or not *The T-Mobile Dance* creators could predict the effectiveness of the flash choreography as a performance or even as a television commercial, the video quickly went viral on the internet. The commercial spot has long since stopped appearing on TV, but the YouTube video continues to reach new and repeat viewers. Indeed, for a flash choreography such as this one, the online viewership surpasses the depth of audiences for traditional broadcast media. One might even suggest that users of social media are the target audience for this advertisement, having at their disposal the means to fulfill the campaign slogan by posting the video and sharing it with their friends—thus crowdsourcing the ad's distribution.

*The T-Mobile Dance* surprises passersby with its size and scale—the enormity of the group, its spectacle of energy and joy, the accessible but precise dancing. Flash Mob America events, which are routinely staged at popular Los Angeles destinations such as Hollywood and Highland, The Grove, and Universal City Walk, all of which are shopping areas where a combination of locals and tourists gather, similarly catch their audiences unawares. Representing a social justice turn in flash choreography, Flash Mob America events attempt to raise awareness around a specific issue. They have performed to raise money for

homelessness, for earthquake victims in Haiti, and for Heal the Bay efforts in Southern California.

Because Flash Mob America formed soon after Michael Jackson's death in 2009, and in some ways in response to his passing, many of their early performances are danced tributes to Jackson and his work [12]. In their *Flash Mob for Haiti*, the Flash Mob America group reprises Jackson's 'They Don't Care about Us' with music and choreography from *Michael Jackson's This Is It*—the film comprised of material shot during rehearsals for Jackson's unrealized comeback tour. The 2010 earthquake that devastated Haiti occurred just six months after Jackson's death, and two and a half months after the theatrical release of *This Is It*. With its use of 'They Don't Care about Us' from *This is It*, Flash Mob America ties together Jackson's own critique of neglected populations in the song's lyrics [13], the shock of his death, and the tragic earthquake in Haiti. Flash Mob America was joined in this endeavor by *This Is It* choreographer Travis Payne and dancers Daniel Celebre and Dres Reid [14], thus explicitly linking these events in a way that reflects their experiential concurrence for many Americans, particularly in Los Angeles where memorializations of Jackson continued well into 2010 alongside fundraisers for Haitian earthquake victims.

In military cadence, 'Atteeeention!' summons a group of performers from the crowd. The group marches in place in a triangular formation to a steady beat, alternating their marches with a slow straight-legged goose step. With the precision of a drill team, the dancers hit their positions, arms V-ed outward or hugging close to the body, one arm down while the other bends sharply at the elbow, finger pointing away with a flourish of the wrist. When the dancers salute as if to conclude, a pause in the music brings in more performers from the crowd. Cameras pan the audience for reactions, resting for a moment on a woman describing the event to someone on her cell phone as interspersed overhead shots show the group of dancers doubling in size. Marching again, the dancers cross their right arms in front of their chests and reposition them at the sides of their bodies with every other step as 'They Don't Care about Us' begins. Legs mostly marching, the dancers increase the complexity of their arm positions, maintaining Jackson's military quality—indeed, maintaining Jackson's choreography throughout. Arms outstretched to the sides, one arm out front and one crossed, both crossed, both down, the dancers punctuate the movement of their arms into 45 or 90 degree-angle relationships to their bodies as they introduce other staccato movements of their heads and shoulders.

*Official Haiti Flash Mob—Hollywood*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUJICDJNnqM>

In contrast to *The T-Mobile Dance* and other commercial implementations of flash choreography, including others by Flash Mob America, it is clear that this group of dancers includes a range of abilities, from dance enthusiasts and fans of Michael Jackson to ‘expert’ dancers including Payne, Celebre, and Reid. As the performance ends, the dancers disperse and disappear into the crowd, while cameras again capture the reactions of audience members, many of whom are still holding their cameras at the ready as they turn to each other to talk about the performance. Someone hands out cards advertising Flash Mob America and an ebullient man goes on at length about the ‘amazing!’ show as the video fades to black. Text appears onscreen informing viewers that the performance raised over \$3,000 for Haiti, though it is unclear from the video how and where the collection of funds to benefit earthquake victims took place. Online viewers are encouraged to donate by SMS, and it is likely that the same text-to-donate information was contained on the cards handed out at the event. As a fundraiser, there is a clear hope on the part of the organizers that spectatorship will transform into action, which in this case means the low-stakes action of donating money to relief organizations.

Though Flash Mob America’s social justice projects set them apart from other groups, they also perform for reasons unrelated to fundraising. They have performed, for example, to market Oscar Mayer foods, Suave Professional hair products, and the Toy Story 3 videogame. They describe themselves as a ‘full service Flash Mob production company’ (Brooks: online) (they even secure music rights for their performances), demonstrating a clear movement of flash mobbery away from disruptive grassroots events to professionally organized and commercially oriented flash choreographies. Flash Mob America manages to support both commercial and social justice interests with a single choreographic format, slipping smoothly from raising awareness to raising money to raising a product’s profile. For the time being, flash choreographies remain able to grab the attention of onlookers, and in an economy where ideas and products fight equally for the attention of potential buyers, flash choreographies have proven themselves to be valuable tools [15].

Because they take place outside a theatrical venue, and because they upset the relationship between a space and those who live and work in it, it is tempting to compare flash choreographies to site-specific performance. Melanie Kloetzel and Carolyn Pavlik explain,



however, that site-specific dances ‘take a particular place as both the inspiration and the setting for the dance’ rather than moving from a dance studio into what they call the ‘blank slate’ of the theater (2009: 1-2). Site-specific dances are created for a particular place, and choreographers often research the site, its history, its sounds and smells, and the ways people move through it. In contrast, these examples of flash choreography are detached from place as such. Although they may give viewers pause, with their here-and-gone aesthetic, flash choreographies do not renew intimate relationships to a site or facilitate audience members’ reflection upon the importance of a location to a specific community. Whereas a site-specific performance cannot be transported to another site without radically altering the work, the spectacular flash choreographies to which viewers have become accustomed are both transferable and reproducible [16]. Flash choreographies are site-relational, however, in that they are created for a certain type of space, namely public places.

Flash choreographies cater to an audience of onlookers and passers-by (in contrast, for example, to an audience of ticket-holders), and are usually performed in what might be called ‘the commons’ such as they exist today: shopping centers, city streets, subway and railway stations, beaches, public parks—sites both public and privatized in which individuals find themselves together for commercial transactions, leisure, or transport. Insofar as they draw their dance and music content from popular culture, flash choreographies also establish movement and musical vocabularies held in common. As Jacques Rancière says of relational art, flash choreographies suggest ‘a way of redistributing the objects and images that comprise the common world as it is given, or of creating situations apt to modify our gazes and our attitudes with respect to this collective environment’ (2004: 21). Flash choreographies’ reference to and frequent commercial ties with popular culture is a means of recirculating what we hold in common culturally, while their occurrence in public places establishes a collective ground and a common space—whether or not they are performed in sites designated as public property.

Furthermore, public spaces are built to accommodate the presence and movement of ‘the public’, and as such they provide wide expanses of performance space for large gatherings of dancers. The dancers, however, are routinely embedded in the crowd rather than limited to a visible ‘performance area’. Flash choreographies thus also require public spaces because such spaces provide a public amongst whom the performers can conceal their identities. Dancers in a flash choreography rarely begin dancing all at once, it is almost always the case that the dancers accumulate over the course of the performance. Until they hear or see their cue, the dancers perform spectatorship alongside other onlookers. Flash choreographies are frequently recorded and posted online, and just as flash choreographies follow a distinctive pattern of accumulation and dispersal, flash videography follows conventions of focusing on spectators’ responses to the dancing in a manner reminiscent of television shows such as

*Candid Camera*. Videos frequently cut between shots of the dancers and of the audience to authenticate the performance as a flash choreography as if to suggest that this category of event can be identified and validated through spectators' looks of surprise. For online viewers, the flash choreography form reverses the expectations of performance: while the dancers feign spectatorship, the spectators become the performers—their reactions become part of the larger performance for the camera. Similarly to situations Philip Auslander has analyzed where a performance occurs only for a camera and exists only as document (2006: 2), for all audiences not present at a flash event but who see the video online, the video documentation becomes the performance. Flash choreographies blur the distinction between performers and spectators as onlookers reveal themselves to be performers and as those who remain spectators become performers for a deferred audience of online viewers.

Far from the quirky incomprehensibility of early flash mobs, flash choreographies have appropriated and modified the flash mob format to become highly organized public performance and public relations events. Flash choreographies share with flash mobs a characteristic disruption of public space, but because flash choreographies are preplanned and rehearsed events, they are more exclusive than even invitation-only flash mobs, drawing on a narrower population of dancers and people willing to invest the time to learn a dance routine, either in person or following an online tutorial. In addition, those who direct flash choreographies are more likely than those of flash mobs to publicize an event through social media after it has occurred, and with their spectacular unison dancing, flash choreographies are more likely to go viral as videos and to be recreated by others. Indeed, an important aspect of a flash choreography's success, though it is by no means a defining feature of the form, is the ability of the video to go viral. Flash Mob America, for example, explicitly states that it combines 'creative expression' with 'viral marketing' (though, in fact, none of their videos have gone viral—all remain under 100,000 views, nowhere near reaching the one million viewer barrier), and *The T-Mobile Dance* has reached over 22 million viewers thanks to a video of the events circulating on the web. A viral video grants a piece or a group more visibility than could be imagined for a flash choreography, which is always a 'live' performance event. Whether or not it goes viral, the online life of a flash choreography is thus a central consideration, not only for those who employ the form as a marketing tool, but also for those who explore the possibility of choreographed public performances.

### **Viral Choreographies**

In addition to being a flash choreography, *The T-Mobile Dance* has circulated as a viral video and has been restaged by viewers in local shopping centers, plazas, and university quads. In its reproduction by bodily as well as digital means, *The T-Mobile Dance* has become a viral

choreography. Like viral videos, which, with their rapid circulation and broad viewership—into the tens and hundreds of millions of hits—establish a common ground of cultural reference points for internet audiences, viral choreographies circulate contagiously. However, instead of simply transmitting themselves along peer-to-peer networks, viral choreographies take advantage of these same mechanisms of distribution while additionally requiring that users take a step away from the computer and in front of a camera. While viral videos travel from computer screen to computer screen, asking little more than a mouse click or two from otherwise inert viewing subjects to propel themselves through the internet, viral choreographies travel from dancing body to dancing body via a media interface. They reassert through electronic space what Susan Foster calls the ‘interkinesthetic connectivity’ (2008: 46) of dance.

Reproduced in the bodies of viewers, viral choreographies, like flash choreographies, are not limited to the screen—they implicate and rely upon the bodily engagement of fans and other online viewers. For example, university mascots, marrying couples, and high school talent show contestants have restaged Judson Laipply’s ‘Evolution of Dance’, which, with over 150 million hits [\[17\]](#) remains the most-viewed dance video on YouTube (online). Others, mostly junior high and high school boys, have preferred to perform ‘The Apache Dance’, a dance lifted from an episode of the 1990s American television sitcom *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (‘Viva Lost Wages’). At its heart, a viral choreography is one that inspires faithful, if sometimes imprecise and/or satirical, remakes or covers of itself.

Though it is now common practice to create videos with the explicit intention for them to go viral, viral videos and viral choreographies are defined not by their intention, but by how many viewers are persuaded to share the video or embody its choreography. As Ben Huh says of internet memes—a distant cousin of viral videos, “Usually, the birth of a meme is unknown, it’s like an immaculate conception, it just happens. No one knows how it happens, but it happens somehow” (online). Similarly, viral videos and viral choreographies are audience-determined. They occur only when online audiences find in them something worth sharing—usually humor or unexpected talent. As such, they can only be spotted in retrospect. Viral videos are easily spotted by finding a video’s view count and upload date or by referring to one of the many sites dedicated to tracking viral videos in the making or cataloging viral videos after the fact. Collecting enough evidence to substantiate a dance’s claim to viral choreography, however, requires more research because one must track individual instances of a single choreography in the hands of users, rather than a single video file that friends and friends of friends link to and forward. Huh continues, “If you’re by yourself, you can’t make a meme. The definition of a meme requires that third parties get involved [...] Until other people get involved, it’s technically not a meme, it’s a viral video” (online). Like internet memes, which are units of information that are recontextualized or modified with each iteration while

still referring to a recognizable 'seed', viral choreographies require the involvement of other parties who quote the original upload without duplicating it exactly (because the medium of reproduction is the body and its movements prior to the electronic duplication/distribution of the video online) and may or may not actually appear online themselves. Because popular dance routines are taken up by fans and users, a choreography may branch into other videos and other performances, sometimes crossing over into meme territory as satire, and at other times cropping up in places from high school pep rallies and talent shows to Super Bowl advertisements, as part of its own process of becoming-viral.

Viral choreographies have come about largely thanks to the drastically reduced timescales required for someone to acquire footage from which they can learn a choreography and then record and post their own version. The result is a rapidly emerging pool of competing and complementary performances. Within weeks of the release of Beyoncé Knowles's *Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)*, YouTube had been plastered with what Kathrin Peters and Andrea Seier call 'home dances', or the publicly posted videos of privately performed dances (2009: 188). Babies, toddlers, children, teenagers, adults, boys, girls, football players, television shows, and animated films have turned this choreography into an epic dance phenomenon. Like viral videos, viral choreographies can jump across media, and, in migrating to a digital format, breathe new life. Michael Jackson's 1983 masterwork *Thriller*, a viral choreography before the advent of viral media, has surged back into the forefront of cultural consciousness with the numerous public and online performances of its famous shoulder-shrugging hip-thrusting dance sequence.

Directed by John Landis with choreography by Michael Peters, *Michael Jackson's Thriller* was released to an American television audience for whom music videos were still a new phenomenon—MTV had only begun its television program in 1981. Landis and Jackson agreed that they were interested in creating a short film rather than a music video per se (*Making*), and their collaboration resulted in a hybrid fourteen-minute work that was unique in its integration of filmic elements into the music video form—for example the movie within a movie and the parallel storylines of the horror film that opens *Thriller* and the subsequent population of the screen by dancing zombies. In addition to the movie/music video playing on television, *Making Michael Jackson's Thriller* (1983), a documentary containing rehearsal footage as well as the *Thriller* film in its entirety, was sold for home viewing on videotape. Between these two sources, home audiences were able to learn the key two-minute dance sequence between Jackson's macabre transformation into a zombie and the escape of Ola Ray, Jackson's co-star and girlfriend in the film, to a nearby house. It is this sequence that constitutes *Thriller's* viral choreography. Slotting the VHS tape into a VCR (itself a new addition to American homes in the 1980s), American youths gathered in front of television sets, playing, pausing, and rewinding the tape as they gradually mastered *Thriller's*

choreography. They then taught the dance to friends. Learning *Thriller* was almost a rite of passage for young dancers.

Thanks to VHS, *Thriller* was a viral choreography before personal computers were a fixture of American home life, but the internet and social media have since made these videos even more accessible, and a number of online instructional videos have sprung up for those who want to learn or remember the dance material. As a result, Halloween parties routinely perform the dance, people dance *Thriller* at wedding receptions, and the sequence is a mainstay of flash choreographies, having been performed in many major cities (Amsterdam, Tel Aviv, Stockholm, New York, and London to name only a few) for every imaginable reason—spiking with Jackson’s death and its anniversary. When dancers perform *Thriller*, they usually maintain the triangular formation, but they allow the shape to grow or contract to accommodate the number of dancers and the space in which it is performed [18]. A male dancer in a red jacket frequently leads the troupe through the air-clawing number in honor of Jackson, though not always, and dancers may or may not appear dressed as rotting corpses. Costuming and formation are secondary concerns for a viral choreography. It is the bodily reproduction of the choreography—the steps, gestures, and timing of movements—upon which a viral choreography hinges. Indeed, it is the consistency of the choreography combined with the always changing contexts in which Jackson’s fans stage the material that allows a choreography to continue circulating without growing stale. Even as they remain faithful to the choreography, each performer brings something new to the dance, and each venue frames the piece in such a way as to allow for new significance/signification.

*Thriller* has been a frequent popular cultural reference in both American and international movies, television shows, and commercials for over 25 years. Arguably, Byron F. Garcia orchestrated the most infamous present-day implementation of Jackson’s viral choreography for prisoners at the Cebu Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Center in the Philippines (“Thriller” (original upload): online). The video begins with Vincent Price’s ‘rap’ as inmates gather in the courtyard, gradually surrounding two performers who stand in for Michael Jackson and Ola Ray. As the inmates close in on the two, Ray’s character crouches and screams and Jackson’s character begins to take on zombie movements. As the camera zooms out, it becomes clear that in Garcia’s version, the typical triangular formation of dancers at the center of the courtyard is framed on either side and in the back by blocs of inmates/dancers—over 1500 CPDRC inmates in all, according to Garcia (online).

"Thriller" (original upload)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMnk7lh9M3o>

Posted to YouTube in July of 2007, in an era of mash-ups and re-makes, Garcia's viral video of the CPDRC's dancing inmates has become as iconic as Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. Zombies in orange jumpsuits point not only to the contagiousness of the choreography, but to the globalization of American dance and musical forms, dance as discipline, and complicated intercultural histories of coercive 'recreational' performance [19]. Viral choreographies accrue meaning with their performance, especially as certain interpretations become linked (hyperlinked as well as enmeshed) with the imitated choreography.

*Single Ladies* has a much more recent history as a viral choreography than *Thriller*, but it has already become a classic. Because so many people have learned this dance, and because it appears on television and computer screens in endless iterations, some commentators have described it as a dance craze. Unlike a dance craze, however, *Single Ladies* is neither a style of dance within the conventions of which dancers improvise, nor a specific step that dancers can include in their repertoire of moves. Instead, *Single Ladies* introduces an entire three-minute choreography into a communal lexicon. Dancers reproduce the *Single Ladies* choreography sincerely, spreading faithful copies throughout the internet and other media [20]. The *Single Ladies* choreography, like *Thriller* before it, moves through popular culture and through American bedrooms as if it was communally created and owned and not subject to copyright [21]. That it does so while making explicit reference to well-known and not so well-known dances in the process makes this viral choreography rather unique.

By now it is well-known that the *Single Ladies* music video samples a 1969 piece by choreographer Bob Fosse ('Mexican Breakfast') [22], punctuated with J-Settes or eight-counts, a style of precision dancing made popular in black gay dance clubs in the American South. A mash-up composed through bodily movement rather than in the editing suite, *Single Ladies* generates replicas of itself with which it becomes entangled. The iterative performances form a part of the larger visual and written discourse around the work, creating a complicated network of intertextual movement references.

According to an interview with *Single Ladies* co-choreographer Jaquel Knight, Beyoncé wanted choreography for the music video that fans could easily perform (Scott: personal conversation), and on February 23rd, 2009, after many *Single Ladies* videos had already

been posted to YouTube, Beyoncé announced a dance contest [23]. Participants were to ‘adhere precisely to the iconic “Single Ladies” dance routine performed by Beyoncé and her two dancers in the original clip’. The rules stipulated that ‘no new choreography should be added’ (online). Herein lies the recipe for viral choreographies: a viral choreography requires the restaging of an entire choreographed routine. It is not a meme or a detachable snippet, a step, gesture, or image (examples of which might include the moon walk, hair flip, and ‘Evil Bert’) that circulates independently while still referring to a previous, if not necessarily original, context. Viral choreographies, in other words, are bodily reproductions that resist abbreviation or mutation in the choreography, even as all other elements are open to reconfiguration.

The filming and editing techniques used for both *Single Ladies* and *Thriller* facilitate the task of faithful choreographic reproduction. Beyoncé and her two dancers are in full view for most of *Single Ladies* and although Jackson and his backup dancers often appear in close-up, the choreography repeats enough that dancers watching the video can piece together missing information from different shots. There are no cutaway shots to other action as there frequently are in Hollywood musicals, and because there are very few edits that disrupt the dance sequences, the transition from a film or digital platform to a bodily platform is easily achieved.

As I mentioned above, a viral choreography is recognizable only in retrospect through the proliferation of copies. Performances and videos of performances that make a choreography viral preserve the sequence and timing of steps, even as costuming, number of dancers, body type, sex and gender identities, race, and other immeasurable and infinite differences between bodies are introduced with each iteration. For example, Shane Mercado, one of the first to post a full version of *Single Ladies*, framed his very queer self informally in his bedroom with an umbrella and wet towels hanging in the background (‘Single Man’: online). On the television series *Glee*, a team of football players performed the *Single Ladies* dance as a strategic diversion enabling them to score (‘Preggers’). Cast members of *The Color Purple* Broadway show performed *Single Ladies* for a benefit concert (‘Beyonce’s [sic] Single Ladies’: online), aspiring musician Nic Billington created a version starring four ‘moody head bangers’ (Single Heavy: online), and innumerable other dancers on YouTube, many wearing variations on Beyoncé’s tight black unitard, perform in their college dorms and in basements. Even the music, an integral part of a viral choreography as such, may change or be muted as users try to circumvent copyright restrictions. Only the steps necessarily remain the same in a viral choreography.

*Single Man Dances to Single Ladies*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGemjUvafBw>

Social media's impact on the global circulation of dance has been profound. In this essay, I have addressed only a small portion of dance in social media, leaving the bulk of dance online—in particular instructional videos and documentation of concert, club, folk, and other dance events—aside in favor of exploring those practices that, I believe, manifest the ways dance and social media change each other as they come together. The hybrid forms of what I call social dance-media reconfigure screens as sites of participatory choreography and performance. Crowdsourced, flash, and viral choreographies all integrate users into their creation, production, or dissemination in ways that have been anticipated by other types of artistic experimentation and other media, but which social media have made possible and/or exponentiated.

The survey structure of this essay prevents me from going into detailed analyses of each piece I turn to as exemplary of crowdsourced, flash, and viral choreographies, but I have tried to hint at the trajectories of such analyses, such as the relationship of social dance-media to site and the role of mastery in negotiating 'professional' and 'amateur' online performances—analyses I undertake elsewhere. I also try in this essay to frame social dance-media as sets of intersecting artistic and social practices. Whether such works ask individuals to contribute material, stage public performances, or evidence the mediated transmission of a choreography as bodily knowledge; whether they suggest models of communal authorship or communal ownership of dance, I find that social dance-media projects specifically amplify the popular and social aspects of dance, reimagining the sociality of dance practices of and for a digital era.

**References**

Aglomerarispontane, 'Manifestul Aglomerarilor Spontane / A Flashmob Manifesto' (2004) [WWW document] URL <http://aglomerarispontane.weblog.ro/2004/12/05/manifestul-aglomerarilor-spontane-a-flashmob-manifesto/> [visited 10/09/10].



Auslander, Philip, 'The Performativity of Performance Documentation', PAJ, 84, 2006, pp. 1–10, print.

Be To Want I, chor. Marianne Goldberg (1998) [WWW document] URL  
<http://www.technorhetic.com/3.2/response/Kendall/goldberg/index.htm> [visited 10/09/10].

'Beyonce 100 Single Ladies Flash-Dance Piccadilly Circus, London for Trident Unwrapped' (2009) [WWW document] URL <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLj5zphusLw> [visited 10/09/10].

'Beyonce's Single Ladies by Purple Haze', perf. Darius Crenshaw, Grasan Kingsberry, and Brian Brooks (2009) [WWW document] URL  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UPGWvAzRJA> [visited 10/09/10].

Brooks, Conroe and Staci Lawrence, 'About' (2010) [WWW document] URL  
[http://www.flashmobamerica.com/?page\\_id=2](http://www.flashmobamerica.com/?page_id=2) [visited 10/9/10].

Dodds, Sherril, *Dance on Screen: Genres and Media from Hollywood to Experimental Art*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, print.

Drift, dir. Koert van Mensvoort, music Artefact, dance Nancy Mauro-Flude (2002) [WWW document] URL <http://drift.koert.com/> [visited 05/03/09].

'Evolution of Dance', chor. and perf. Judson Laipply (2006) [WWW Document] URL  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMH0bHeiRNq> [visited 8/20/2010].

'Flash Mob', Wikipedia, 2007, [WWW document] URL [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flash\\_mob](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flash_mob) [visited 10/09/2010].

Foster, Susan, 'Movement's Contagion: The Kinesthetic Impact of Performance', *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*, ed. Tracy C. Davis, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008, pp. 46–59, print.

Grace, dir. Douglas Rosenberg, chor. Li Chiao-Ping, 2002. DVD.

Huh, Ben, 'Ben Huh Stars as a Lolcat, Talks Twitter, Memes, and Going Viral,' *Huffington Post*, 10 Oct. 2010 [WWW document] URL [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/10/ben-huh-stars-as-a-lolcat\\_n\\_756498.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/10/ben-huh-stars-as-a-lolcat_n_756498.html) [visited 10/25/10].

Kloetzel, Melanie and Carolyn Pavlik, 'Introduction', *Site Dance: Choreographers and the Lure of Alternative Spaces*, eds. Kloetzel and Pavlik, Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2009, pp. 1–24, print.

Knowles, Beyoncé, 'Beyoncé Announces Official "Single Ladies" Dance Video Contest' (2009) [WWW document] URL <http://www.beyonceonline.com/us/news/beyonc%C3%A9-announces-official-single-ladies-dance-video-contest> [visited 10/9/10].

Latitudes, chor. Molissa Fenley (1996) [WWW document] URL <http://awp.diaart.org/fenley/title.html> [visited 05/03/09].

Loops, digital artists Paul Kaiser and Shelley Kaiser, chor. Merce Cunningham, 2001–08, installation.

Making Michael Jackson's Thriller, dir. Jerry Kramer, perf. Michael Jackson, John Landis, Rick Baker, 1983, VHS.

'Making of T-Mobile Dance' (2009) [WWW document] URL <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVFNM8f9WnI> [visited 10/09/10].

McPherson, Katrina and Simon Fildes, 'Hyperchoreography' (2008) [WWW document] URL [www.hyperchoreography.org](http://www.hyperchoreography.org) [visited 10/09/10].

Men in the Wall, dir. and chor. Liz Aggiss and Billy Cowie, perf. Jeddi Bassan, Sebastian Gonzalez, Thomas Kampe, and Scott Smith. 2003. Premiere 23 Feb. 2004. ICA, London, installation.

'Mexican Breakfast', chor. Bob Fosse, perf. Gwen Verdon, *The Ed Sullivan Show*, 1 June 1969, television.

Michael Jackson's This Is It, dir. Kenny Ortega, chor. Travis Payne, 2009, film.

Michael Jackson's Thriller, dir. John Landis, chor. Michael Peters, music Michael Jackson, perf. Michael Jackson, Ola Ray. nar. Vincent Price, 1983, television.

Move Me, dir. Katrina McPherson and Simon Fildes, prod. Ricochet Dance and Goat Media, installation and web, (2006–08) [WWW document] URL <http://move-me.com/> [visited 05/03/09].

Move Out Loud: The Biggest Choreography Project Ever, dir. Filipe Viegas and Brahim Sourney (2009) [WWW document] URL <http://www.rhiz.eu/artefact-7757-en.html> [visited 10/09/10].

Nicholson, Judith A., 'Flash! Mobs in the Age of Mobile Connectivity', *Fibreculture Journal*, 6, Dec. 2005. [WWW document] [http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue6/issue6\\_nicholson.html](http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue6/issue6_nicholson.html) [visited 10/09/10].

Peters, Kathrin and Andrea Seier, 'Home Dance: Mediacy and Aesthetics of Self on YouTube', in Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (eds), *The YouTube Reader*, Lithuania: Logotipas, 2009, pp. 187–203, print.

'Preggers', *Glee*, Fox, 23 Sept. 2009, television.

Rancière, Jacques, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran, UK: Polity Press, 2004.

Schnapp, Jeffrey and Matthew Tiews, 'Introduction: A Book of Crowds', in Jeffrey Schnapp and Matthew Tiews (eds) *Crowds*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2006, ix–xvi, print.

Scott, Ariel. Personal conversation. 14 May 2010.

'Single Heavy Metal Rockers', perf. Nic Billington (2009) [WWW document] URL <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZsLyAvTPod8> [visited 10/09/10].

Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It), dir. Jake Nava, perf. Beyoncé Knowles, chor. Frank Gatson and Jaquel Knight, Sony BMG, 2008, music video.

'Single Man Dances to Single Ladies', perf. Shane Mercado (2009) [WWW document] URL <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGemjUvafBw> [visited 10/09/10].

Somnambules, digital artist Nicolas Clauss, prod. and comp. Jean-Jacques Birgé, chor. Didier Silhol (2003) [WWW document] <http://www.somnambules.net/> [visited 12/30/05].

Surowiecki, James, *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many are Smarter than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies, and Nations*, Doubleday, 1994, print.

“Thriller” (original upload), Byron F. Garcia, (2007) [WWW document] URL <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMnk7lh9M3o> [visited 10/09/10].

‘The T-Mobile Dance’ (2009) [WWW document] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQ3d3KigPQM> [visited 10/09/10].

Twitter Community Choreography, Dance Theater Workshop, (2009–present) [WWW document] URL <http://www.dancetheaterworkshop.org/blog/category/twitter/> [visited 10/09/10].

Veterans, chor. Victoria Marks, dir. Margaret Williams, perf. Manuel Flores, Aaron McCollum, John Tingley, Cidkyee Williams, Felton Williams, MJW Productions, UCLA/EMPAC, 2008, DVD.

‘Viva Lost Wages’, Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, NBC, 13 Nov. 1995, television.

Yearbody, chor. and perf. Dawn Stoppiello, digital artist Mark Coniglio (1996–1997) [WWW document] URL [www.troikaranch.org/yearbody.html](http://www.troikaranch.org/yearbody.html) [visited 5/03/2007].

## Notes

[1] For example, a 2009 study found that only 10% of registered Twitter users produced 90% of the micro-blogging site’s content. In other words, most Twitter users followed other users’ feeds but infrequently or never updated their own feeds, thereby duplicating the one-to-many broadcast media model of information flow. See ‘Twitter Hype Punctured by Study’, BBC News (2009) [WWW document] URL <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/8089508.stm> [visited 10/09/10]

[2] Yearbody is no longer online.

[3] The work is online, but does not appear to be operational.

[4] With the increase in broadband access, artists, producers, and computer users have also utilized internet technologies to supplement and occasionally fulfill the function of broadcast television. Music videos, recorded clips of dance programs such as *So You Think You Can Dance*, and even webisodes such as *LXD* (League of Extraordinary Dancers) are housed on the web.

[5] For a reading of this piece from the perspective of digital archivization, see my essay 'Computational Choreographies: Performance in Dance Online', *The International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 5.2 and 5.3, 2009, pp. 155–169.

[6] The website shares a similar intent with the more familiar New York/New Museum-based Rhizome.org, which is to support innovative digital and internet artworks.

[7] Because these works are web-based, they obviously exclude populations who, for economic and infrastructural reasons, do not have access to the internet.

[8] Created by Nigel Lythgoe and recognized by congressional act, National Dance Day effectively replaces International Dance Day, a holiday observed every April 29 since 1982. The signal difference between the National Dance Day events and flash choreographies is their widespread advertisement beforehand. Viewers of *SYTYCD* were encouraged to go online and learn a routine choreographed by NappyTabs (Napoleon and Tabitha D'umo), and, having learned the choreography, arrive at designated locations on July 31st to perform the sequence with the others who had gathered. While flash choreographies typically disrupt public spaces, the National Dance Day events were sanctioned events with spaces prepared to accommodate dancers. Stages had been erected and there were guest performers and speakers on hand to raise awareness about dance and physical fitness. If there were flash mobs among the National Dance Day events, they were 'unofficial', 'unsanctioned' events that appeared before an unsuspecting public.

[9] See 'Hammer Time Mob Dance' (2009) [WWW document] URL <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwzN4633mpl> [visited 10/09/10] See also 'Random MC Hammer "Can't Touch This" Street Dance' (2009) [WWW document] URL <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JyGn5Bfilz8> [visited 10/09/10].

[10] 'Glee – II FlashMob' (2009) [WWW document] URL <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NhbK2bMTRbl> [visited 10/09/10]; 'yes glee flash mob Tel Aviv' (2010) [WWW document] URL <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZB22aYHLII> [visited 10/09/10]; 'Glee Flash Mob – Grafton Street – Dublin, Ireland' (2010) [WWW document] URL [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1zVigP\\_T9k&p=C7724D0671B57B0B&playnext=1&index=31](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1zVigP_T9k&p=C7724D0671B57B0B&playnext=1&index=31). [visited 10/09/10].

[11] As of 20 Aug. 2010.

[12] According to their website, Flash Mob America was formed when Conroe Brooks and Staci Lawrence 'were moved to re-create Sweden's Beat It Flash Mob tribute in the United States' in the wake of Michael Jackson's death. Conroe Brooks and Staci Lawrence, 'About' (2010) [WWW document] URL [http://www.flashmobamerica.com/?page\\_id=2](http://www.flashmobamerica.com/?page_id=2) [visited 10/09/10].

[13] Two music videos exist for 'They Don't Care About Us', both directed by Spike Lee. The 'Prison version' was set in a prison environment and contains images of police brutality and human rights abuses [WWW document] URL <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97nAvTVeR6o> [visited 10/09/10], while the other version was filmed in the favelas of Brazil, highlighting the poverty of the region [WWW document] URL [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNJL6nfu\\_\\_Q&ob=av2n](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNJL6nfu__Q&ob=av2n) [visited 10/09/10].

[14] Travis Payne, Daniel Celebre, and Dres Reid taught this same choreography to the inmates of the Cebu Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Center in the Philippines, the group of dancing inmates made famous by their performance of Jackson's Thriller which was posted to YouTube. In the CPDRC version of 'They Don't Care About Us', Payne, Celebre, and Reid stand at the apex of their triangular formation, their non-inmate status marked by black pants, gloves, and, most tellingly, belts. All of the dancers wear black *This Is It* t-shirts, but the prisoners keep their orange bottoms. [WWW document] URL [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mKtdTJP\\_GUI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mKtdTJP_GUI) [visited 10/09/10].

[15] This is not to say that flash choreographies always succeed. Size and scale remain important factors, along with the technical skill of performers and the willingness of audiences to be seduced by dance.

[16] Indeed, searching YouTube, one can find innumerable reproductions of both *The T-Mobile Dance* and *Frozen Grand Central*.

[17] Figure as of 20 Aug. 2010, which does not include copies of Laipply's video that users have duplicated and uploaded.

[18] Just six dancers squeezed their performance onto a London train, for example. 'Thriller Dance on the Tube—Michael Jackson Thriller' (2008) [WWW document] URL <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6EDAZ3crdY> [visited 10/09/10].

[19] See for example Saidya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, New York: Oxford UP, 1997, print.

[20] When users adapt the Single Ladies look, style, or steps to unusual circumstances, for example in parodies, animations, and machinima, Single Ladies can be said to function as an internet meme.

[21] Interestingly, online videos are frequently pulled down because they reproduce music or film clips that are still under copyright, but videos are never removed for faithfully reproducing a choreography. See Anthea Kraut's work for explorations into dance's complicated historical relationship with copyright law. 'Race-ing Choreographic Copyright', *Worlding Dance*, Susan Leigh Foster (ed.), NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 76–97, print. "Stealing Steps" and Signature Moves: Embodied Theories of Dance as Intellectual Property', *Theatre Journal*, 62, 2010, pp. 173–89, print.

[22] Although Beyoncé has utilized Fosse-inspired choreography in other videos, she concedes that like other YouTube users, she was introduced to this particular Fosse choreography through another mash-up called 'Walk It Out, Fosse' posted in 2007 by team members of the design company Diamond Creative [WWW document] URL <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-SlfHHd3qI&feature=related> [visited 10/09/10] which set the footage of Gwen Verdon and two other dancers to the D.J. Unk song *Walk It Out*.

[23] Although the dance contest did not serve as the catalyst for *Single Ladies* as a viral choreography, it helped to combat digital atrophy and ensure a future for the routine in electronic and bodily memories by occasioning the multiplication of performances. Viral choreographies require ongoing performance in order to sustain themselves, or rather, to sustain the interconnected acts of performance of which they are the nucleus.

### **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason for their helpful comments and feedback on this essay.

**Biographical Note**

Dr. Harmony Bench is Assistant Professor of Dance at The Ohio State University.

Email Harmony: [bench.9@osu.edu](mailto:bench.9@osu.edu)