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Performing Quarantined Isolation in the Spring of 2020

Dani Snyder-Young

In this edition of *Theatre Journal*, I examine two digital performances commissioned and premiering within the context of quarantined isolation in April and May 2020: Mike Sears and Lisa Berger's *Ancient*, which kicked off the La Jolla Playhouse's Digital WOW Festival,¹ and Emily Mast and Yehuda Duenyas' *How Are We*, which was commissioned and presented as part of the Onassis Foundation's ENTER project.² Andy Horowitz (2020) identifies how *How Are We* "stands as evidence of an inflection point, the moment just before everything changed once again"; the same is true of *Ancient*.³ These performances are, in the words of Ann Cvetkovich, "repositories of feelings and emotions"—an archive of affects produced by the onset of social distancing to curb the spread of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020.⁴

Ancient focuses on a diverse ensemble of people performing repetitive everyday tasks such as shucking peas (1:25), washing dishes (3:10), and folding laundry (3:53).⁵ Its central argument is that humans have been doing such activities for thousands of years, and this pandemic is not the first through which humans have cooked, cleaned, taken care of children, grown things, exercised, meditated, and played music (fig. 1).

The early pandemic experience was quiet, lingering, and internalized, marked by an unfamiliar sense of powerlessness and fear. *Ancient* captures the uncanny affect of temporal dislocation, of the feeling that time had stopped. Jennifer Chang rocks a small child with a look of dead-eyed exhaustion on her face. She sits in a room in a middle-class-looking home with a framed newspaper cover on the wall trumpeting the election of Barack Obama. In the window behind her, the sun either rises or sets (2:02). Is it dawn or dusk? It does not really matter; she is so very tired. As Jaclyn Pryor puts it, "the temporality of capital idealizes certain modes of being in time (pro-

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¹ See La Jolla Playhouse, "Without Walls," <https://lajollaplayhouse.org/without-walls/>.

² See Onassis Foundation, "What Is Enter?" <https://www.onassis.org/enter/about>.

³ Andy Horowitz, "On How Are We," *How Are We Critical Texts*, 2020, available at <https://howarewe.xyz/critical-texts/#ah>.

⁴ Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.

⁵ *Ancient* can be viewed for free on the La Jolla Playhouse website, available at <https://lajollaplayhouse.org/ancient/>.

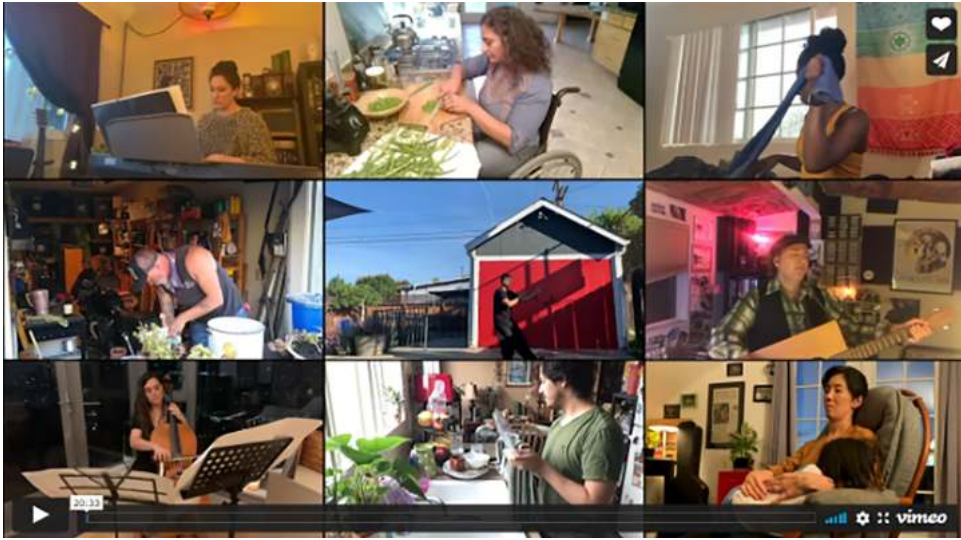


Figure 1. Moving left to right across the rows, beginning with top left: Caitie Grady, Bhavna Mehta, Bibi Mama, Mike Sears, Daniel Yin, Shawn Rohlf, Temi Hason, Joey Prete, and Jennifer Chang in *Ancient*. (Photo: Courtesy of La Jolla Playhouse.)

ductive, efficient, and punctual).”⁶ Those modes of being were materially disrupted by stay-at-home orders. *Ancient* reflects the affects produced by this disruption and tries to soothe within the throes of the trauma. It argues for a *practice* to manage grief through participation in an imagined collective. However, (as I argue in the essay this supplement accompanies), *Ancient*’s portrait of collective coping flattens differences across the lived experiences of people who are positioned differently in relationship to structural systems of power.⁷ In so doing, it mourns the trauma of the pandemic’s onset in ways that do not recognize the ongoing traumas of racial injustice and the victims of capitalism’s cruelty.

This stands in contrast with the more polyvocal approach *How Are We* takes to representing the experience of quarantined isolation. *How Are We* is a twenty-five-minute-long digital film featuring ninety-second, movement-based works by Barnett Cohen, Constance Hockaday and Faye Driscoll, Darrian O’Reilly, David Adrian Freeland Jr., Dorothy Dubrule, Emily Mast and Yehuda Duenyas, Hana van der Kolk, Heyward Bracey Jay Carlon, Jessica Emmanuel, Jennie MaryTai Liu, Mireya Lucio, Shannon Hafez, Stacy Dawson Stearns, and Terrence Luke Johnson. A young nonbinary person (Shannon Hafez) playing in their yard with their dog (0:49), is not the same as a woman (Jennie MaryTai Liu) who cannot get out of bed to attend to a house full of small children (5:45), is not the same as a Black man (David Adrian Freeland Jr) bottling rage and fear to put on a composed and pleasant face (15:28). Each separately authored piece reflects a distinct experience and understanding of quarantined isolation. In its poly-

⁶ Jaclyn Pryor, *Time Slips: Queer Temporalities, Contemporary Performance, and the Hole of History* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 5.

⁷ Dani Snyder-Young, “We’re All in This Together: Digital Performances and Socially Distanced Spectatorship,” *Theatre Journal* 74, no. 1 (2022).

vocality, *How Are We* is a more complex work than *Ancient*, representing a wider range of feelings and experiences, and one that was created using a more diverse array of artistic techniques. The indexical qualities of diverse artists' bodies as represented in the performance highlight the ways in which (to borrow from Judith Butler) "it is *this* body, or *these* bodies, or bodies *like* this body or these bodies, that live the condition."⁸ The differences across these experiences talk to one another, revealing the ways that structural systems of power interact with lived experiences of sheltering-in-place.

Both *Ancient* and *How Are We* forward the idea that "we are all in this together," a common refrain during the initial period of social distancing designed to slow the spread of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020. Both performances implicitly ask audience members to identify and empathize with a diverse array of performers. However, they do this in different ways. *Ancient* invites audience members to imagine themselves as part of a community experiencing quarantined isolation in fundamentally similar ways; *How Are We* emphasizes the variety of experiences and feeling states experienced by people under such circumstances. In my essay "We're All in This Together: Digital Performances and Socially Distanced Spectatorship," I examine the ways in which these cultural products that advance themes of togetherness performed the social legibility of pain and loss within the public sphere, documenting whose pain and loss was socially recognized through the spring of 2020.

⁸Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 10 (emphasis in original).