Introduction

Dance as Common

I open my iPad, a second-generation model, and find the 2014 application *Passe-Partout* produced by the 2wice Arts Foundation. I tap the app’s icon and am greeted with what sounds to my ears like a confused piano. The work’s title appears onscreen, after which I am provided with a brief tutorial and then prompted to “tilt or tap dots to start.”¹ I tap a gray dot, one of five different colors of dots on the left side of the screen. A duet begins between dancer Daniel Ulbricht and dancer-choreographer Justin Peck, both of the New York City Ballet. Both men wear gray shirts, and a gray bar extends across the screen to indicate the video’s progress. Despite *New York Times* dance writer Gia Kourlas assuring me that I’m the choreographer in her article on *Passe-Partout*,² my first time through, I am comfortable with my role as spectator and just watch the duet from beginning to end. The sequence is a friendly balletic competition of earthy athleticism that lasts about a minute. At the conclusion, I am invited to play back, share, or save the resulting video, or to start over. 2wice has produced a handful of iPad apps for dance, and I am curious to see how this one differs.

I tilt the iPad one way, then another, then another. The men’s solos and duets fill the screen, overlapping and fading in or out in response to my movements. Colored bars streak across the screen, indicating where each of the five segments comes in and goes out. Producer Patsy Tarr tells Kourlas, “As you work with these layers, you start to see unison and symmetry and repetition,” noting that the idea was to convey core principles
of choreography.³ My second time through, however, I don’t notice the men’s movement so much as my own, since it cues the different musical scores that accompany each scene. Am I doing it right? As the men’s dancing images proliferate onscreen, the sounds of piano, clarinet, marimbas, and harpsichord, among other instruments, layer atop each other as well. But because I’m tilting and moving the iPad, it’s difficult to track what the dancers are doing onscreen.

On the next round, I intend to sit still and investigate Ulbricht’s movement qualities when accompanied by drumming in the pink sequence, but when I start over, the pink and blue dots have been replaced by red and white ones. I decide to use the dots to control the timing of each sequence. The dots double in diameter when I tap them, and the scenes overlap without fading unless I tap the corresponding dots again. The two ways of interacting with Passe-Partout—tilting or tapping—have rather different effects on the outcome. Kourlas coaches, “In this choreographic pursuit, there are

Figure 1. Screenshot of choreographer and dancer Justin Peck (in foreground) and dancer Daniel Ulbricht in the iPad app Passe-Partout (2014). Concept and design by Abbott Miller, video by Ben Louis Nicholas, music by Aaron Severini. Produced by 2wice Arts Foundation.
no wrong choices. And unlike ballets for the stage, which disappear once
the curtain falls, [these] can be saved or shared through social media.”4 I
decide to play back the video of my arrangement. The dots and bars disapp-
pear, leaving only a video of the overlaid performances and sound scores.
Peck and Ulbricht seem suspended as they dance in their all-white perfor-
mance space, a prominent aesthetic used in dance-media. I am happy with
the result and contemplate whether to post the video online.

Many of the major formal devices this book explores around dance in
digital cultures are visible in just the example of Passe-Partout: situating
dance onscreen, employing repetitive and recombinatory approaches to
composition, inviting users to have co-ownership in the creation of a dance
experience, and enabling users to share the rendition of a work that results
from their participation. These have become familiar, even expected, ap-
proaches to reimagining dance for digital screens. Focused on the twenty-
year period from 1996 to 2016, Perpetual Motion: Dance, Digital Cultures, and
the Common proceeds from the position that digital technologies, and espe-
cially internet technologies, have thoroughly saturated the practices, cre-
ation, distribution, and viewers’ experiences of dance. Why should this sea
change in dance creation and reception matter? It is not only that digital
media have radically reformatted dance for an era of information global-
ization, accelerating and expanding the ways that bodily motion prolifer-
ates as it is uploaded, downloaded, and shared as data—though these are
important considerations. It is that, in thus remediating and reformatting
dance, digital media throw open, magnify, and broadly disseminate danc-
ing’s already powerful physical articulations of how we act in common.

We is of course a fraught term. It is both presumptuously inclusive and
manifestly exclusive. It draws a boundary that separates what does from
what does not belong. But the “in-common” tempers this we. Acting in
common requires coordination and thus implies both the nonconformity
of multiplicity within a collection and an enabling agreement that gathers,
organizes, and directs participants’ energies. Acting in common implies
proximity and mutual participation as well as beginning from shared
ground or moving toward a shared goal. Dancing, whether done alone or
as an ensemble, physically enacts and thus makes visible the relationality
within a social sphere that enables this in-common to emerge and take
shape. Formal changes brought about by digital media alter screen-based
representations of how we act in common. But dancing as a physical practice also registers the constraints and possibilities of these spaces, merging embodied realities with screen spaces to imagine and enact new ways moving together. Dance-media, in other words, not only make visible the ways we already move together and act in common in an era of computing and information globalization but also craft new possibilities through their specific combinations of bodily expression and digital cultural production.

COMMONS, COMMON

My primary framework for understanding how dance circulates through digital cultures is the common or commons. The participatory commons appeals as an alternative to the extractive neoliberal financial logics that govern much of contemporary life in the United States and beyond, and scholars across academic disciplines have turned to the commons to explore these alternative social and economic arrangements. As a historical and theoretical model for social organization, the commons primarily relates to land and water rights and the administration and distribution of natural resources. Although there are many examples of communities sharing and sustaining common-pool resources, as economist Elinor Ostrom and others have amply demonstrated, scholars typically invoke the commons in Europe that were, for the most part, eradicated during eighteenth-century enclosure movements that forcibly removed peasants from common lands and privatized natural resources. In such discussions, scholars tend to emphasize enclosure as a social, political, and economic tragedy while leaving to the side the European feudal system of which these commons were a part, thus enabling a contemporary discourse in which the commons signal open access, anticapitalism, and radical democracy. Although this romanticized version of the commons may be useful for imaging contemporary social projects, historically, the commons were not the progressive social model they have been made out to be.

Dance scholar Ramsay Burt offers one application of this model of the commons in his book *Ungoverning Dance: Contemporary European Theatre Dance and the Commons*. He argues that the dance practices that European movement artists working within the theatrical tradition produce and employ are usefully viewed as a commons. Contemporary dance constitutes a field of knowledge in which movement techniques, improvisational
practices, and choreographic processes are shared among practitioners. Burt argues that “many aspects of dance as an art form—such as dance techniques, theatrical devices, generic compositional structures or improvisational processes—are common-pool resources accessible to dance artists.” It almost goes without saying that a community is identified by its shared practices, but in calling contemporary dance a commons, Burt points to an economic model underlying theatrical dance that, he says, contradicts the institutionalization of these practices with the contemporary dance market. Burt can make the claim for contemporary dance as a commons because he focuses his investigation on a specific genre of dance-making within the geocultural boundaries referred to as Europe. In contrast, the digital media at the forefront of my own investigation reach farther and wider than the festivals and metropolitan theaters to which European dance artists might tour their stage-based productions. Furthermore, these media bring all possible dance forms into the flattening space of the computer screen, blurring distinctions among movement practices and communities and disarticulating them from their histories and cultural situations. Whereas Burt posits the commons of contemporary dance, I employ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s language of the common to distinguish my usage from a default understanding of the commons as a shared resource.

In their book *Commonwealth*, Hardt and Negri note the inadequacy of the commons as both precedent and metaphor for contemporary reinvestments in a cultural commons. They write instead of the common, of which they posit two main types: the “natural” common of limited resources, such as land, air, and water, and the “artificial” common “that resides in languages, images, knowledges, affects, codes, habits, and practices” as well as gestures. They define the common as “those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production.” Ideas, customs, and practices that are collectively generated and make it possible to live together are exemplars of the artificial common. Produced rather than discovered, the common is neither public nor private, and it provides an alternate avenue for theorizing social and cultural production. Hardt and Negri’s aim in exploring the common is to uncover market economies’ ongoing dependence on—and their corruption of—the common for the purposes of continued financial growth. The common provides the
resources and ingenuity upon which neoliberal capital depends. However, in registering that “contemporary forms of capitalist production and accumulation, paradoxically make possible and even require expansions of the common,” Hardt and Negri do not attend to the negative consequences or imbalances of that expansion. They analyze capitalist expropriations of the common but do not fully consider the politics of dispossession by which materials are appropriated into the common. In other words, they do not acknowledge the parallel structures of neocolonial and neoliberal logics that unevenly distribute the benefits of access.

If the common expands infinitely within globalization, what gets appropriated into the common that was previously privately held, owned, or shared within an exclusive community? Kimberly Christen summarizes these tensions in her work on the rights of indigenous peoples to curate the flow of cultural heritage information through digital media. In internet culture, she remarks, “the commons signifies openness, the exclusion of intermediaries, and remix culture that is creative, innovative, and politically disobedient.” However, she contends, “ongoing legacies of colonialism cannot be jettisoned for the wish of a global commons.” Dance scholar and political theorist Randy Martin similarly advises wariness of the common or commons in the current era of financialization: “What it means to own something, just like what it means to be possessed of oneself, undergoes significant modulation under financialization... [which] spreads ownership around in vexing ways.” He goes on, “Now that ownership is so thoroughly spread around, far more can partake of the entitlements of others.” For Martin, parceled out and indiscernible ownership does not portend greater social responsibility or ideals of the common good. On the contrary, under such circumstances, what is common is generated through dispossession, which refuses to share in the wealth generated by and predicated on the very availability of the common.

Partnered with the ideology that “information wants to be free,” digital technologies have altered the means, reach, and speed of information dissemination. The emergence of an exuberant ideology promoting freedom, open access, and the digital commons within the space of the internet positioned itself as resistant to corporate greed but did so without distinguishing among knowledge communities and their relative (dis)empowerment. Christen assiduously observes that an uncritical celebration of
openness “has resulted in a limited vocabulary with which to discuss the ethical and cultural parameters of information circulation and access in the digital realm,” limiting conversations to binaries of open or closed, public or private. This limited vocabulary impacts all sides of the debate, not just those who favor unlimited and unregulated access to the world’s knowledges and practices.

For example, scholarship in dance studies continues to favor the explanatory framework of cultural appropriation to describe the spread of dances and movements beyond the communities invested in their production. This is due, in part, to the focus of much dance scholarship on the politics of modernist aesthetics in concert dance of the first half of the twentieth century. Scholars have demonstrated that within this field, ideologies of openness and cultural fluidity rooted in the notion that dance is universal have historically favored those with greater social capital. Some artists, generally hailing from outside the community in question, were in a better position to profit individually from something that had been created and maintained collectively. Notably, Brenda Dixon Gottschild has forcefully demonstrated how white ballet and modern dance choreographers were heralded for their innovations when they incorporated uncredited Africanist aesthetics into their work, and Jacqueline Shea Murphy has likewise shown how white American choreographers observed and appropriated imagery from Native American dances. Jane Desmond and Priya Srinivasan have sifted through the creation of early modern dance choreographer Ruth St. Denis’s orientalist dances. And Susan Manning has described the process by which white choreographers turned the experiences of African Americans into a “universal” metaphor of struggle. Scholars have repeatedly shown that, in the field of dance, unregulated access to a cultural commons results in the enrichment of the cultural mediators who facilitate dance’s reproduction beyond the communities that create and sustain these practices.

Histories of appropriation among ballet and modern dance choreographers are irrefutable. However, present-day participation within global digital cultures involves complex corporeal negotiations that cannot necessarily be reduced to so many examples of cultural theft or capitalistic expropriation in an era of information globalization and participatory media. One aim of this book, then, is to contribute to the vocabulary through
which to articulate how dance perpetually moves through digital cultures without favoring openness for its own sake or condemning what performance theorist Diana Taylor calls “acts of transfer.” In approaching dance as common, it is necessary to continuously examine how the common repackages ideologies of freedom and universal access in the project of proliferating and circulating movement, while simultaneously acknowledging how dancing can craft a sense of mutual belonging through the sharing of movements and gestures.

For these reasons, my approach to dance as common includes movement as common-pool resource and shared vocabulary as explored by Burt, but it also includes the common as a shared orientation that arises from what theater scholar Elizabeth Dillon calls commoning practices, of which dance is a notable example. Dance is not only a resource of gestures and steps that dancers can mine as they generate material; it is also a means of recuperating common spaces and performing a common world. Here I follow Dillon’s articulation of the “performative commons” in New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649–1849. Examining a colonial public sphere in the “long 18th century,” Dillon explores the social and cultural work of theater in forging—through representation—“the common people as a sovereign political force.” Much like social media today, eighteenth-century popular performance functioned as an avenue for political expression and representation in which audiences vigorously participated. Dillon foregrounds corporeal practices and dramatic performances rather than the written word, which, in her study, expands a consideration of the eighteenth-century public sphere in the Atlantic world beyond the lettered peoples of a Habermasian public sphere to include the participation of indigenous, colonized, and enslaved populations whose expressivity was channeled into nonliterary forms. In her view, a performative commons enables an account of commoning practices, or the means available to “articulat[e] relations of mutual belonging in a collective whole.” For Dillon, the commons is spatial, interpersonal, and, above all, a relation.

I similarly find that digital media, especially the space of the internet, offer contemporary performative commons in which individuals both perform and contest their belonging through practices such as dance. Notably, I do not argue that dance is common, because such an assertion rests on the modernist precept of universality that scholars have worked to
debunk. Whether and when dance is common is a point of conflict and debate within movement communities, because core ethical, political, and aesthetic values are entangled in the question of what is common. Indeed, with nationalist and populist sentiments on the rise throughout the West, ascertaining what is common and determining what boundaries of community result from that articulation is an urgent social and political issue for the twenty-first century. Employing the lens of the common allows me to approach the ways dancers corporeally and rhetorically configure dance within digital cultural practices. What can dance, movement, and gesture afford—and what conflicts arise—when they are perceived as common or utilized to enact a common? How, why, and for whom are assertions of dance as common meaningful in digital contexts? In *Perpetual Motion*, I consider these questions in the ways interactive media purport to make-common by inviting users into the creative process of dance composition, in dancing’s activation of the common dimensions of public spaces, in how artists employ dance to appeal to and perform a common world in a global era, and in the sharing of a corporeal common of movement and gestural resources that circulate across dancers’ bodies.

**APPROACHES AND CONSTRAINTS**

When I began thinking and writing about dance in digital media, I was very confident about the dance forms represented. For the most part, what I saw came from the same lineages of ballet, modern, and postmodern dance in which I had trained for decades as a performer. Digital dance was a niche phenomenon, and participation was a mark of privileged access to the enabling resources and technological infrastructures that enabled high-profile collaborations between choreographers and technologists—seen, for example, in Paul Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar’s large-scale collaborations with choreographers Merce Cunningham, Bill T. Jones, and Trisha Brown.24 This was in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Screendance artists were not yet sharing their films on Vimeo, the general population was not yet recording and uploading videos to YouTube, and there were no gestural interfaces for video games. With few exceptions, there was a wide gulf between “serious” artists developing new technologies to support their aesthetic investigations and amateurs posting animated GIFs of dancing hamsters online.25
That gulf has all but disappeared. Now movement artists routinely make work specifically for online consumption. Online archives documenting performing artists’ careers make lifetimes of work freely available in digital form. Music video has migrated from television to the web, where fans and satirists post videos of themselves performing versions of popular dance routines in response. Studio dance instructors share videos of their classes and combinations to showcase their talent and improve their employability in the commercial dance industry. Video games and online tutorials offer opportunities for the dance-curious to learn new moves without social pressure. Dance challenges regularly circulate through social media, and pop music and dance artists turn to the internet for inspiration for their latest creations. I have followed dance’s travels through digital and online spaces as it looped in all manner of dancing and dance styles. Many of these practices have now grown into significant genres of digital performance worthy of sustained investigation in their own right.

Rather than reinforce divisions among these practices by cataloging markers of generic identity or reasserting a hierarchy between formal and informal performance modalities that dance scholars have long eschewed, I determined early on that all examples of dance in digital cultures were legitimate expressions. However, I struggled with how to include them within the reach of this book without it becoming either an encyclopedia or an unorganized mess. I decided, in the spirit of the ascendance of social media during this time frame, to foreground how amateurs, fans, spectators, and bystanders are invited to participate in and contribute to dance onscreen, how digital cultures reimagine who gets to be a dance performer or choreographer, and how digital technologies mediate bodily proximity among dance practitioners. I placed some additional explicit limits on what I address in this book, largely due to attention such work receives from other scholars. I do not address intermedia works made for the concert stage, nor do I include Hollywood dance films even though they circulate online as part of a vast archive of popular culture.

I am most interested in how digital logics reformat our understanding of how dance artists make and share their work and how dance enthusiasts make and share their responses. *Perpetual Motion* thus cuts a very particular trajectory through multiple and multiplying examples of dance-media, drawing on examples from across digital milieux, although the book tends
heavily toward the web as a site that gathers and circulates these creative expressions and YouTube as a privileged (and era-specific) platform for this sharing. I attempt to think these various practices together in the manner that I have experienced them together, as someone who participates in the circulations of dance onscreen and who thus jumps among various media platforms and practices. I have also tried to capture some aspect of the global reach of dance in these digital media. Nevertheless, *Perpetual Motion* is positioned within a Western, specifically white, English-language-dominant, U.S. worldview, which manifests clearly in the examples I have included. My IP addresses, my online search histories, my interpersonal connections, my social positions, and my aesthetic inclinations have all acted as content filters prior to my curating examples for inclusion. Even with its expansive scope, this book thus represents a snapshot rather than a survey, and my examples are indicative rather than exhaustive of how dance appears, circulates, and functions in digital cultures.

I contend that the scale of danced participation in digital cultures demonstrates that, despite being identified as the art of the body par excellence, dance proliferates across bodies in large part because of its perpetual movement through digital media. Far from realizing some techno-utopian dream of disembodiment, each of the examples I consider in this book points to the ways in which digital cultural production implicates corporeality. Dance makes visible how cultural processes recruit participants at the level of their embodiment, offering an opportunity to consider the various political, cultural, and technological projects into which we are enlisted without our full awareness or knowledge. Dance scholars thus have an opportunity—perhaps even a mandate—to contribute their deep investments in bodies as sites of knowledge and practice to such analyses of digital cultures as I pursue in *Perpetual Motion*.

An additional consideration when writing about dance in digital spaces is that the phenomenon of disappearance, that specter that haunts discourses of performance, never ceases to be a problem. The “consecrated theoretical motifs [of] immediacy and disappearance,” in dance and performance studies, alongside more recent articulations of ephemeral media, thus inform my approach to writing this book, namely, in my extensive use of description. Description is critical for analyzing practices that do not enjoy widely shared forms of documentation or techniques of inscription.
I employ movement description here because, even though dances are now widely recorded and shared on video and other digital media, I have been writing about dance in digital environments for long enough to understand that, like performance, these media are unstable. Web pages disappear on a daily basis. A longitudinal study of link rot by the Chesapeake Digital Preservation Group discovered that in the seven years between 2007 and 2014, over 50 percent of the URLs in their sample no longer worked.\(^2\) As digital theorist Wendy Hui Kyong Chun remarks, “the always-theness of digital media was to make things more stable, more lasting,” yet, she argues, “digital media is degenerative, forgetful, erasable.”\(^3\) Although my digital objects of analysis linger for longer than the duration of a single performance event, changes to software and hardware resituate ephemerality at the heart of digital media’s documentary capabilities. System and software updates may stall obsolescence somewhat, but in many ways, rapid changes in technology push digital media’s recent past to a distance beyond reach, a distance created by the inaccessibility of digital artifacts rather than the passage of time per se.\(^4\)

For example, the iPad app with which I opened this introduction, the 2014 piece *Passe-Partout*, was no longer supported when Apple released iOS 10 in 2016. The production company did not update the application for the new operating system. Ironically, I was still able to access the work in 2018 because my iPad is too old to support a system upgrade. I have no empirical data regarding the failure and disappearance of websites, CD-ROMs, videos, applications, games, and other forms of dance-media, but experientially, I know it to be quite high. The absence of works in this book that other scholars might consider exemplary is thus due not only to my own curatorial choices but also to my timing. I am certain that I am not aware of many examples of dance in digital environments that could have productively contributed to this book because they became obsolete before I could encounter them. Thus this book represents an archive of my own experiences, and I must rely on other scholars to fill out additional dimensions of dance in digital cultures not included in this text.

Readers will also note that I have included web-based works that no longer function. More, surely, will go offline in years to come. I have provided original URLs so that readers may find at least some of these works through the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine at https://archive.org/.
This does not provide a solution for the CD-ROMs, apps, and video games that will soon become obsolete and inaccessible, for which screenshots and additional visual materials will necessarily function as a partial archive. Just as historians pull together fragments of past dances and dance practices from firsthand accounts, drawings or photographs, and the occasional film clip, so too will future scholars rely on a combination of written descriptions and snippets of media to better understand dance’s leap into the popular media of the internet era as the devices and platforms for which they were made cease to function. I have tried to facilitate future scholarship with both the descriptions and extensive number of screenshots I provide.

Methodologically, I employ choreographic analysis throughout *Perpetual Motion*. Although choreographic analysis is rooted in dance studies, choreography has for some time exceeded dance as its principal or privileged object and enables a consideration of any structured movement. My intersecting investments in dance studies, media and performance studies, and critical theory and cultural studies shape how I employ choreographic analysis in this book to connect dance-media to larger social and political trends. In my view, choreographic analysis foregrounds the forces through which movement is produced, maintained, constrained, accelerated, directed, and made legible. As a social analytic, choreography is concerned with issues of bodily discipline and regimes of movement. It is worth emphasizing, however, that choreography is necessarily plural. Any complex system simultaneously brings together multiple contradictory forces and pressures, along with multiple structures for organizing movement. These may materialize in the form of dance, or they may materialize in the forms of gestures, postures, mobilities, constraints, pathways, and flows, among other manifestations.

Choreographic analysis offers many ways into movement, dance or otherwise. For example, a choreographic analysis of *Passe-Partout* might consider the steps Peck has composed in each of the scenes, the gendering of the performers and what their movement suggests about masculinity in contemporary ballet, and/or their use of space and their timing in relation to each other and the music. It might also address the dancers’ relationship to the camera, the mobility of the camera within the performance space, and the way the camera presents an additional set of spatial logics
in its conical view of the space in which the men dance and how it frames them. A choreographic analysis could also include the iPad’s affordances and limitations as a technological platform, including the arm, hand, and finger movements required for someone to manipulate and interact with the device. It might further explore the algorithmic elements that incorporate user input into each performance of the work, and how sharing final videos dispatches traces of the work into social media to circulate independently of the iPad application. A choreographic analysis might also evaluate the artists’ choice to invite users into the roles of co-composers and distributors in light of similar trends in social, political, and economic domains.

In *Perpetual Motion*, I attend, at various points and to varying degrees, to each of these dimensions: choreographies of dances and specific arguments or claims embedded in them, choreographies of the camera as it frames dance content for viewers, as well as choreographies of the interface and the ways digital platforms enlist and entrain bodily participation. My concern, however, is not with what choreographic analysis can reveal about dance but with what choreographic analysis and dance together can illuminate about articulations of the common in digital cultural production.

**STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK**

*Perpetual Motion* consist of four chapters, each of which focuses on a single web-native dance created in the twenty years from 1996 to 2016, bolstered by numerous additional examples drawn across digital media during this same time period. The case studies that anchor each chapter are outliers among dance-media explored in this book in that they are lengthy and episodic or consist of multiple scenes. Their structural complexity allows me to delve more deeply into the compositional and relational trends in dance-media they represent. *Perpetual Motion* opens prior to the advent of social media with a consideration of interactivity at a historical moment when artists turned to the early web and CD-ROM to explore dance and movement composition for the screen. It closes before social media came under scrutiny for promoting inflammatory rhetoric and politically polarizing its users. The time period under consideration thus represents social media on an upswing, and *Perpetual Motion* reflects a kind of playful hopefulness embedded in the works discussed. A project that continued beyond
2016 would need to address the darker sides of social media, which I do not pursue here.

I begin *Perpetual Motion* before Web 2.0 in part for reasons of history: social media offer the current culturally dominant logics of creation and circulation, but how dance operates in social media appears in greater relief when considered in context with dance experimentations on the early web. By and large, dance experiments from the late 1990s and early 2000s have not been written about, and many of them are accessible only in deteriorated form. Nevertheless, they paved the way for later incarnations of dance in digital cultures and established expectations about the ways dance can be presented in nonproscenium digital environments. These expectations include the promise of freedom and democratization through interactivity and the use of repetition in composition.

Chapter 1 thus takes repetition as its central theme in an analysis of intersecting replay loops in hyperdance, with specific attention to the 2003 web-based Macromedia Flash work *Somnambules* by Nicolas Clauss, Jean-Jacques Birgé, and Didier Silhol. I turn to Gilles Deleuze’s analysis of repetition and difference in conversation with Friedrich Nietzsche’s formulations of the eternal return to argue that, contrary to claims of freedom of interaction and navigation that produce ever-different user experiences, the looped structure and limited possibilities for input prevent users from introducing differences that can make a difference. Hyperdances cannot deliver on their promise of freedom of choice and collaborative authorship because interactive systems are designed to facilitate selection rather than creation. While outwardly, hyperdances seem to foster inclusivity and making-common by bringing interactors into the work, they also constrain users’ agency and trap screen dancers within replay loops. This shared lack of agency masquerading as freedom becomes a narrative focus for *Somnambules* and other works that dramatize onscreen performers’ digital capture. I argue that it is not until the choreographic structures of interactive media give way to participation that the repetition built into dance-media experiences can transform into something new through what Jean-Luc Nancy calls unworking.

Building on and intensifying the early-web rhetoric of interaction and democratic co-composition, dance in social media developed along many trajectories that favored participation. The participatory media of Web 2.0
were to succeed where interactive media failed by providing platforms to facilitate social interactions rather than dictating which interactions could take place within a system. Where interactivity focused on the human–machine interface, participation focused on computationally mediated human–human connections. The shift in how dance appeared onscreen could not have been more profound. Animated GIFs, the early motor of the web in motion, fell out of favor (only to make a comeback in 2012), and fewer artists created screen-based dance works in specialized software such as Macromedia/Adobe Director or Flash. Instead, YouTube was the preferred platform, followed by other video-sharing sites. Fulfilling YouTube’s slogan-as-command to “broadcast yourself,” dancers turned their video cameras on themselves. Online dancing videos varied widely in aesthetic, purpose, and production values, but a few trends emerged from the mid-2000s to early 2010s. Professional dancers and fun-loving amateurs recorded themselves dancing in public, whether solo or in large flash mobs; choreographers and filmmakers turned to techniques of crowdsourcing their content to showcase the diversity of humanity; and the mechanized repetition of interactive media became the reperformance of shared choreographies in social and participatory media, with people posting videos of themselves dancing routines from music videos and video games. These trends are explored in chapters 2–4.

Chapter 2 considers the impact of dancing in public, particularly in a post-9/11 American landscape. The chapter focuses on the 2011–12 online serial Girl Walk//All Day directed by Jacob Krupnick with lead performances by Anne Marsen. I additionally discuss an array of flash mobs and other dances performed in public spaces, documentation of which circulates on the internet. By introducing the unexpected into public spaces, particularly transit hubs such as airports and train stations, flash mobs, group dances, and even solo performances transform the affective dimension of these sites. Turning to commentary by Judith Butler on assembly, Hannah Arendt on appearance, and Jacques Rancière on the politics of aesthetics, I argue that such public performances have a loosening effect on sites that have tightened under the regulating tendencies of state surveillance and policing. Occurring onsite and circulating online, public performances activate the shared dimension of public sites by enacting the very
common to which they lay claim. Such performances can thus recuperate a sense of the common within public spaces.

The performative enactment of a common is further developed in chapter 3, which extends this enacted common from a public space to a world. This chapter focuses on the series of YouTube videos that appeared in 2005, 2006, 2008, and 2012 under the title Where the Hell Is Matt?, in which Matt Harding travels the globe performing a quirky, signature dance. His relationship to the inhabitants of the locales he visits changes over time, moving from postcard images of sites emptied of people except himself to scenes full of participants sharing in his project of bringing the world together through dance. Harding is only one example of utilizing dance to unite a world through movement and gesture and, moreover, of leveraging the creativity of the crowd to do so. Inviting participation from others, artists extend their reach and contribute to a performing world that specifically uses dance to stage being-in-common in an era of globalization. Utilizing different strategies for organizing incommensurable differences within the space of the screen, I argue that the pieces analyzed in this chapter move from what Jean-Luc Nancy describes as the abstract and meaningless globe of globalization toward what he calls mondialisation, or a worldly world that holds meaning for its inhabitants.

What constitutes a common world and how it is enacted are also central concerns for chapter 4, which builds on the notion of shared gestures and choreographies and considers how they travel between the culture industry and fans. My principal case study in this chapter is Pharrell Williams’s 2013 durational music video 24 Hours of Happy and the ways fans reperform the work and use it to facilitate their own social interactions and even promote themselves. Digital media facilitate the perpetual movement of gestural information that fans embody, thus enabling them to share in a corporeal common that globalization makes available. The ethics of these gestural transfers across cultures and movement communities are ambiguous. Digital cultural production as a global phenomenon thus requires a rethinking of how gestures and dances can circulate through media and across bodies without repeating the colonial violence of dispossession in the name of open access. In this final chapter, I turn to anthropological theories of the gift, including by Marcel Mauss, to analyze dance
at the intersection of gift and market economies in music videos, video games, and online spaces. I argue that in digital cultures, dances migrate as a gift of the common. As common, dances circulate freely, but as gifts, they circulate with social obligations attached—including obligations of reciprocity. With this notion, I think through dance’s circulation beyond the boundaries of community while preserving an ethics of transmission.

*Perpetual Motion* takes a snapshot of dance in digital cultures from 1996 to 2016. The account provided here, which contributes to a contemporary history of dance onscreen as well as critical cultural commentary on popular media, is not intended to be exhaustive. But by gathering examples of dance-media across two decades, *Perpetual Motion* asks what is achieved as dance circulates through digital spaces and how digital cultural production and movement practices mutually inform and shape each other in the first decades of the twenty-first century.