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# URBANO: A HYBRID PERFORMANCE OF DANCE AND VISUAL ART

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# URBANO: A Hybrid Performance of Dance and Visual Art

## Synopsis:

The purpose of Higa's presentation is to describe and analyze the creative process behind the performance *Urbano* in order to provide emergent choreographers and dance students with an anecdotal lecture on dance composition, differing from that found in most choreography books. The concept for *Urbano* was born from Higa's desire to live in an urban environment within the rural state of Vermont. Higa's research process investigated themes of demographic saturation, social relationships, architecture, and financial status within society. During the presentation, Higa will talk through the key components of this hybrid performance and address the questions many emergent choreographers and dancers ask themselves when creating in this capacity.



### Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to describe and analyze the creative process behind the hybrid performance *Urbano* in order to provide emergent choreographers and dance students with a literature on dance composition differing from that found in most choreography books. In May of 2019, the spectacle *Urbano* premiered at Main Street Landing Performing Arts Center's Black Box Theater in Burlington, Vermont. The concept for the work was born from choreographer Paula Higa's desire to live in an urban environment within the rural state of Vermont. Higa's research process investigated themes of demographic saturation, social relationships, architecture, and financial status within society. Three books were essential to the orchestration of this project: *People in Cities: The Urban Environment and Its Effects* by Edward Krupat, *The Sociable City: An American Intellectual Tradition* by Jamin Creed Rowan, and *The City of Tomorrow: Sensors, Networks, Hackers, and the Future of Urban Life* by authors Carlo Ratti and Matthew Claudel. Throughout the creative process, Higa had the collaborative support of visual artist Matthew Binginot, lighting designer Sean LaRock, students from The University of Vermont (UVM) Theater and Dance Department, and high school students from Central Vermont Career Center in Montpelier. Readers of this essay will be exposed to key components of this hybrid performance and the answers to the questions many emergent choreographers and dancers ask themselves when creating in this capacity ("how do I begin?", "where did these ideas emerge from?", and "what kind of problems will I face when creating?").

*Keywords:* choreography, creative process, dance, urban environment, visual arts

## 1. Introduction

There is no final destination if there is no departure. In the beginning of the creative process, you may feel like all that occupies your mind is a cloud of muddled, fleeting thoughts; however, little by little, the mediocre thoughts will evaporate and the most vibrant ones will converge to eventually reveal the clear shape and form of the subject of your artistic study.

Being an artist means that we are constantly looking for ways to express and translate our political, social, and/or emotional views through our creative work. Some artists opt for written expressions (poems, novels, fiction, etc.) while others, like myself, prefer communicating through the visual and performing arts. Whatever mode of expression an artist may choose, one step is crucial along with the artistry: the research.

In beginning my research for *Urbano*, I wanted to delve deeper into my experience of living within an urban environment in contrast to the surrounding rural setting. I asked myself about the choices that people make when deciding to settle in a particular place. Which factors contribute to a living situation becoming permanent? According to economist Adam Millsap, "...People are no longer moving to where the jobs are..." (Millsap). If not jobs, then what is driving people to decide between rural and urban settings? Based on these inquiries, I decided to begin by analyzing my own experience of migrating to and from different landscapes. After a meticulous evaluation, I concluded that urban environments provide the lifestyle that accommodates my needs as a citizen of the world. From this vantage point, I created the performance *Urbano* to portray some of the characteristics of urban life that any ruralist would desire to be as far away from as possible.

The creation and research of *Urbano*, I divided my research into seven topics: architecture, sound pollution, demographic population, social life, social relationships, social behavior, and financial/monetary aspects. To support my kinesthetic research, I invited visual artist Matthew Binginot to create short media films to background and highlight the choreography and further articulate the themes illuminated by the performance. Binginot teaches Digital Media Arts at the Central Vermont Career Center in Montpelier, Vermont, and the initial idea was to involve his students in the creation of the media. Later on, I extended the production process to two UVM senior theater students. They designed the lighting for the show under the supervision of professional lighting designer Sean Larock. The aim was to provide these young minds with an opportunity to experience professional life while they were still undergraduates.

## 2. The Creation Process

The idea for *Urbano* was born from my desire to live a more intense lifestyle inside the rural setting of Vermont. According to the most recent demographic census, Vermont is the second whitest (Caucasian) state in the United States with a population a little above 627,000 people spread out over the state's 9,614 square miles (Vermont Population). In the state's most populated city, Burlington, a person can easily find restaurants, lodging, and tourist attractions, such as dozens of local breweries, lots of trails for outdoor lovers, and a pretty standard college nightlife where bars and clubs are filled with students. A waterfront walk of Lake Champlain is also an option for those who enjoy lakeviews, boats, and/or a refreshing dip at the local beaches alongside the shore. However, Vermont is not only developed around Burlington. Many small towns such as Stowe, Rutland, Middlebury, and Montpelier, the state's capital, offer a plethora

of options for indoor and outdoor activity appreciators. The downside of this lovely state, though, is its lack of diversity—and by diverse, I mean ethnic, cultural, and even gastronomic.

This lack of diversity triggered my instinct to create a show about more diverse urban environments in response to the lack of diversity within my current urban environment. At first, my research was based on pinning down the characteristics that differentiated rural and urban settings along with those that intersected these two sceneries. The purpose was never to compare and contrast the pros and cons of living in each domain, giving more credibility to one or the other. It was never my intention to classify one territory as “better” than the other. What I wanted to portray were the cosmopolitan aspects either not vividly present in rural settings or, perhaps, present—but only on a small scale. After consulting literature in urban lifestyle, I came up with the following titles for the choreographic works that make up *Urbano* : “Landscape”, “Noise”, “Crowding”, “Club”, “Friends”, “Isolation”, and “Money”. These seven dances will be described and analyzed in the following pages of this paper.

## 2.1 “Landscape”

*“yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ, sabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhammanti.”*

“Whatever is of the nature to arise, all that is of the nature to cease.”

– *The Buddha*

Even before the era of Ancient Greece, philosophers, poets, writers, and artists alike reflected on the beginning of existence, the theme of creation, through their creative works. They inquired about creation and the origin of life through scientific, religious, and utopian perspectives. For instance, the origin of life can be explained and seen through the micro-molecules in quantum physics, organic decomposition and the role it plays in fertilizing

the ground, or simply by the belief that there is a powerful entity who has the gift of creating and transforming beings and matter in the universe. The truth is that whatever the principle or whoever the guiding force behind creation may be, we all know there is a starting point, a catalyst, that will initiate and propel the process of creation to an end.

To identify the beginning of *Urbano*, I decided to experiment with how dance performances usually begin. Consequently, I offered up multiple beginnings to the audience by getting rid of a traditional performance beginning. My intent was for the spectators to witness not only the choreographed moments of the show but also the minutes of preparation before the official, choreographed beginning of the performance.

As the audience members found their way to their seats, they faced a non-traditional setting. Dancers were on the dance floor warming up for the performance. House lighting was deliberately dimmed to highlight the purple, blue, and green cues set for the mood of the first choreographic work, "Landscape". A projection of cosmic clouds was amplified on the movie screen, which served as a backdrop for the whole show. The 32-minute-long music started to play, creating, again, this feeling of uncertainty among the audience. "Is the show already starting?" they may have thought. No, it was not. As mentioned before, the idea was to include the audience straight from their entrance of the theater until the end of the show. There was no intermission or pauses between each choreographic work. This idea came from one of the verses in the lyrics of Fred Ebb's song "New York, New York": "I wanna wake up, in a city that doesn't sleep".

The performance was scheduled to officially begin at 7:30 p.m. Around 7:15 p.m., ushers directed audience members to their seats. During this "pre-show", dancers had specific lighting

cues to go to their spots before starting to dance. For every five minutes in the music, there was a blurred white cloud image projected on the screen. This image was repeated three times to inform the dancers when to take their spots on stage. By 7:35 p.m., the dancers were in place; the theater doors were closed; the audience was in their seats; and the 32-minute-long music was on the right cue point to begin “Landscape”.

When creating this first choreographic work, my aim was to evolve the theme of creation through three developmental processes: the cosmos, nature in its organic roots, and the urban civilization. To begin, visual artist Matthew Binginot designed an abstract image of the cosmos by blending blue, purple, and green colors. After the creation of this mass-energy, the image transitioned to the formation of organic elements found in nature. Binginot and his students mixed and edited media from “Projections In the Forest” by Tarek Mawad and Friedrich Van Schoor to support the idea of evolution from abstraction to something more concrete. While the film was being projected on the screen, dancers created shapes that abstractly resembled tableaux, such as trees in a forest, branches, tall grass, and, later on, geometries found in and around urban architecture.

My kinesthetic research for this work was based on the observation of shapes and structures found in nature and contemporary architecture. As an example, I asked dancers to investigate the small dance that trees perform when a soft breeze blows their branches. They also worked on expressing the sensation of trees falling down by human-driven and natural deforestation. The same research process was practiced when it came time to portray the lines and contours of buildings and skyscrapers in urban environments. The priority was to investigate geometry, topography, and maps of big cities. Binginot created a transition from the cosmo to the



forest and then to the metropolis by using Google Earth satellite images. Around the 9-minute-mark in the first film, the images of mountains, forests, and all the greenery found in the forest landscape shifted; there was an ascent away from the natural landscape to an aerial view of the ground, and then a descent into a close-up view of the cityscape. Through this transition of images, audience members could observe the deforestation and, consequently, the birth of the concrete jungle. Dancers executed sharper and faster movements, such as gestures expressing anger, fear, irritation, and pain. This could be seen as a response to the organic loss via deforestation, global warming, ecosystem shifts, etc.. As the scene departed from organic to inorganic tableaux, the movement vocabulary also registered the dynamic and energetic feel of big cities. Such movement vocabulary returns in later choreographic works in the show. This continuous process of evolution—the process communicated through both the visuals on the backdrop screen and the movements of the dancers—guided the audience from the beginning of existence (the cosmos) to the formation of organic elements (the forest) to the inorganic concrete jungle (the metropolis).

## 2.2 “Noise”

“New York is great. I've got so much noise. Subways. Horns. I can't stand nothing quiet, I go nuts.”

– *Jazz musician Miles Davis in the San Francisco Chronicle Review, 1981*

For a great many people, being surrounded by noise pollution can be as irritating as driving on busy freeways in a big city like Los Angeles, continuously hearing a squeaky chair, or even trying to get your work done when screaming kids are around. On the other hand, for some people, noise can be music to their ears, a moment of euphoria, a way to feel less lonely. Ideally,

bucolic settings are the perfect environments to help ease stress levels, anxiety, and phobias. This impart is due to the high level of calmness that rural setting can offer in contrast to the stress that big cities can cause within a living being. In *Prescriptions for Choral Excellence*, Emmons advises readers to imagine “...Scenes that produce great calm and relaxation, such as running water, a favorite bucolic setting, and so on...” to help reduce mental anxiety (Emmons 283).

In Krupat’s book *People in Cities: The Urban Environment and Its Effects*, he mentions the psychological and cognitive effects—based on the research of David Glass and Jerome Singer—that noise can cause within someone (Krupat 1972). Glass and Singer experimented with noise and social stressors, concluding that when noise is inescapable or unavoidable, it makes people feel as if they are at the mercy of the environment (Krupat 115). The results of this research are no surprise for urbanites, or really for anyone, who is constantly exposed to sound pollution. In contemporary days, studies in neuroscience and psychology have proven that stress is still one of the major factors associated with urban lifestyle. It is extremely difficult to stay relaxed and calm during one’s daily commute during rush hours. Moreover, there is sufficient scientific evidence that the constant noises in the cities can cause health problems, such as insomnia, migraines, hearing impairment, and cardiac arrhythmias, among other pathologies. Modern architecture has been heavily invested in sound-proofing solutions to help homeowners, hotel chains, and business entrepreneurs reduce noise levels. As mentioned, on the opposite end of the spectrum, there are people, like musician Miles Davis, who perceive noise as music to their ears.

As I write these lines, I hear the external ambient sounds. I notice noises from a construction site across my home: sounds I was unaware of until they became annoying due to

their repetitiveness. The other sounds are unperceivable, but not because they are inaudible. It is mainly because some noises are part of my cognitive environment; my brain is informed not to perceive these noises. This is exactly what composer John Cage was trying to point out when he wrote “4’33”. Noises are everywhere; so, we don’t pay attention to them unless they become a source of distraction, irritation, or annoyance. As Kyle Gann explains in his book, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage’s 4’33*, it is utopian to believe that there is absolute silence outside of the vacuum; “Cage therefore never uses in his pieces absolute silence, but, instead, the varieties of sound such as those caused by nature or traffic, which ordinarily go unnoticed and aren’t usually regarded as music...” (Gann ix). Another topic worth discussion is the meaning of noise. In his study of noise, Hainge reflects on the word “epistemology”, realizing that its meanings and definitions are highly subjective and unstable (Hainge 5). This overall thinking is not a surprise to the reader. What may be considered “noise” to one person, may not be considered “noise” to another person. Noise is everywhere and exists in all pitches.

When crafting the choreographic work “Noise”, my aim was to portray the discomfort produced by noise pollution in urban centers. However, it was never my intention to label noise as something inherently negative because not all noises and sounds are harmful to living beings. Like Davis, I do believe that absolute silence can be equally as harmful as noise pollution, especially when considering mental and emotional health issues. And, as mentioned earlier on in this section, the definition of “noise” is not clear. What is considered to be a noise or not depends on the person who is listening to it.

For my kinesthetic research, I intentionally focused on the annoying and irritating aspects of noise. I asked dancers to walk along straight lines that were mapped out by red elastic strings.

The intention behind using the string was to confine the dancers on a rectangular kinesphere in which there was no escape. Dancers walked back and forth in this path while gesturing exasperation, impatience, and anger. I also portrayed the physical impact of noise on and within the body by having one dancer shimmy, her body in a movement of convulsion. Repetition was the primary choreographic tool used in this section. The music choice was “Fuer Den Untergang” by experimental German band Einstürzende Neubauten. At the moment, there is no official translation or publication of the lyrics. Since German is a language I’m not fluent or familiar with, I have no way of verifying whether or not the lyrics of the song are related to the subject of noise. Nevertheless, what drove me to choose this song was the continuous repetition of the chords, the high pitched sounds, and the overall industrial elements in the composition.

As for film background, Binginot dove deeper into the urban centers. In this section of the video, the audience was exposed to skyscrapers, highways, bridges and their steel trusses, factories, and other metropolitan images. To play with distortion, blurriness, and other effects, the video had shots of city architecture where images were inverted and rotated and zoomed in and out on. The images were also in a fixed color tone color: brown and yellow to highlight the lack of color in the majority of urban centers as well as to contrast to the colorful pallet in rural settings.

### 2.3 “Crowding”

“Why Ho Chi Minh City? It is crowded, noisy, scruffy, crazy, but always interesting and things are happening all at breakneck speed.”

– *Doug Rice in his interview with Expat Arrivals, 2013*

It is not a new finding that the world is overpopulated. Thousands of scientific studies have been published on this issue. Developing countries, such as China and India, deal with social, economical, and political issues tied to their high demographic rates. Overpopulation is indeed a big problem for the planet. Talk surrounding overpopulation and the rate at which the population is growing has consistently been voiced by the United Nations, human rights activists, and a number of environmental organizations. Majority of the time, the conclusion is always the same: the Earth is suffering from the consequences of overpopulation.

When crafting “Crowding”, I wanted to capture this conversation surrounding overpopulation by focusing on the physical and emotional aspects of crowding; however, due to the broad scope of this theme, I narrowed my research to focus just on the space we inhabit. I developed my research around movement theorist Rudolf Laban and his Body, Effort, Space, and Shape (BESS) system. Laban defined the category of “space” as the place where we move. Laban was interested in investigating the relationship between the spatial architecture and human movement. His research was developed based on the mathematical and geometrical ideas and laws of Ancient Greek philosophy; furthermore, Laban’s research found and stated that the same general laws are applicable to and effective in the arts (Fernandes 195). As for me, I was interested in investigating one’s kinesthesia in the space as well as the reactions of one’s nervous system, particularly that of the “gray matter”.

Some of my inquiries for this choreographic work stemmed from wondering about the psychological effects that habiting tiny spaces has on an individual. The concept for the choreographic work of “Crowding” came to my mind after undergoing my first Magnetic Resonance Angiogram (MRA), a type of Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI). MRIs are a very

common medical exam that dancers and athletes undergo due to frequent injuries, and, although I had heard about the procedure, I had never experienced the sensations of taking the exam firsthand before until I had one to diagnose my neck pain.

When it came time for the imaging, for me to finally experience the MRI process, I was told to remove all my clothes and jewelry. I was asked if I had any metal implants in my body, tattoos, and/or was prone to anxiety attacks due to claustrophobia. The nurse explained the procedure to me and then asked me to lay down on the MRI bed. I was not told how fast my bed was going to slide into the machine or how close to the top of the cavity I was going to be. I felt like I was put alive inside a coffin. If I had lifted my head forward, I would have bumped my forehead on the radio frequency coil mechanism at the top. The sensation of being trapped in that machine with no escape triggered a feeling I had never had before: anxiety. My breath became heavy and deep. I could not open my eyes. I grew desperate for fresh air. I was told by the MRI technician to turn my head sideways and look up. I could notice a cold breeze coming from the top of my head. I was not completely in a closed space.

This whole story may make no sense for an emergent choreographer, but, for someone who has been creating works for a while, having a eureka moment is as important as finalizing the work; without it, there would be no work. My MRI experience brought a lot of thoughts to my mind. The one that caught me the most was to investigate the sensations of habitating a small space. “Crowding” is this investigation and depiction.

My kinesthetic research for “Crowding” involved the use of proximal and distal movements, loud breath, and outwardly expressing the sensations of confinement. Four dancers performed in this piece. I asked them to investigate the emotions that show up in anxiety or panic

attacks. For this experience to be as realistic as possible, dancers had to retrieve from their personal memories situations where they either were exposed to or experienced these feelings firsthand. These expressions were portrayed in some sections of the choreography. For instance, during one of the sections of the choreography, dancers were placed in pairs as close to one another as possible. Whenever an arm movement coming from another dancer was proximal to the other dancer's body, a kinesthetic reflex was depicted in the form of a breath exhalation, eye squints, or a shoulder girdle lift. Following Laban's principle, the majority of the movements performed by the dancers reached near their kinesphere. There were moments when the movements were more relaxed and free, but the duration of this relaxation and freeness was always very short.

As for the video background, I asked Binginot to select some images of crowding around the world. He selected video clips depicting an overpopulated train in India, favelas in Rio de Janeiro, a crowded swimming pool in China, skyscrapers in Atlanta, etc. We decided to zoom in on the images so that the audience could not identify what was being projected initially. As the dancers continued to perform, the images were then zoomed out, revealing these examples and situations of crowding occurs across the globe. The music was another important element that framed the movement and visual art. The idea was to pick a song that would support the composition by offering the same sensations of crowding while not oversaturating the work. After lots of research on industrial sounds, I found the English band Test Dept. Originally, they used bass guitars and other conventional instruments, but these were rapidly dropped as the band obtained more industrial percussion and found that these alternative instruments created a stronger and more consistent sound. From the album *Beating the Retreat*, I chose three songs that

embodied the urban atmosphere that I was looking for. In this album, there is a compilation of three songs featuring all kinds of urban sounds, such as bus horns, helicopters, and train whistle (just to name a few). It was the perfect choice to musically frame the choreography and visual elements of “Crowding”.

Within “Crowding”, testimonials were also included and became apart of this section’s soundtrack. This part of the work was designed to inform the audience as to why some people prefer urban over rural living. I asked Binginot to interview urbanites and ask them about their reasons for choosing a big city as their home. We selected seven testimonials in which the messages contradicted some of the overall thinking and stereotypes pertaining to urban centers. It is a common mistake to assume that bucolic environments are the only ones able to provide mental and physical restoration. As mentioned in the section on “Noise” (2.2), it is true that the effects of modern urban life are more often associated with stress level, irritation, respiratory issues, etc. However, even though research shows that we cannot generalize or make assumptions about the quality of life because each individual’s experience and response to their environment is so different and what they want from their environment varies. Most of the time, the pros of urban life outweighs the cons. Some people latch onto these pros and find the benefits of settling in a metropolis like Manhattan, Los Angeles, Tokyo, or São Paulo worth all the cons they will encounter. As stated in the testimonials section, some urbanities appreciate the city’s energy by looking at the faces of pedestrians passing by on a busy sidewalk; by observing the city’s breathe in the frenetic rhythm of cars, subways, and peoples’ gaits; by knowing that the city never sleeps; or by seeing the city as offering hundreds of opportunities and places to be explored. Besides this, modern architects have designed, and continue to design, ways to bring



more rural characteristics into the urban environment. Proof of this is the constant rise in the number of urban green spaces popping up in cities. These spaces are a great example of what it can look like to live in an urban space with some features of rural settings.

#### 2.4 “Club”

“There is no social commentary in night clubs.”

– *Jay Z*

In the whole context of *Urbano*, the creation of the “Club” section was one of the quickest to develop. It was fast due to the fact that I wanted to keep the club experience as authentic as possible; so, this meant more freestyle within the choreography. Nightclubs are a place for social interaction, where people can get together to dance, consume alcohol, engage in conversation, listening to loud music, flirt, sometimes consume drugs. With this concept in mind, I decided to start the whole choreographic process of creating *Urbanoby* creating this section “Club” first.

After brainstorming my initial ideas, I asked the lighting designer to replicate the same lighting plot of nightclubs. This request brought to light the first problem within the production. The dancers were not able to see one another while performing because of how many lighting cues were flashing around the dance floor. We had to find a balance between the club authenticity and the lighting plot to ensure the safety of the dancers. Because the lighting design couldn’t give life to this piece in the way that I wanted, I relied heavily on Binginot and his visual skills to create a backdrop that would inject the desired energy. In creating the visual backdrop, Binginot’s research led him to a video called “Club Drunk” by Mitchell Crawford. Respecting Crawford’s artistic rights, Binginot created an outstanding background for my piece.

He added layers to Crawford's original film by juxtaposing other images, such as beams of light and abstract animations. By redesigning Crawford's short-film, Binginot brought the club mood to the piece that the lighting designer could not.

All this said, the overall idea and atmosphere of "Club" was easy to execute. On the other hand, though, the movement vocabulary was extremely complex and took more thought and revision. For my kinesthetic research, I made a few visits to local nightclubs in the Burlington area. The intention was to observe the movement vocabulary of casual dancing nowadays. When I attended a disco club on Church Street, I was pretty shocked to see that there was a lot of twerking on the dance floor, and the movement was not situated in the context of African diasporic movement but, rather, that of a sexual context. Although the energy among the crowd was mesmerizing, I felt that observing the modern moves that now populated the present nightclub-scene were not necessary for my research.

I decided to retrieve information from my memory by chronologically reviving the moves from the late 1970's through the 1990's. I found it interesting to piece together fragments of popular dance from these eras. For instance, in the seventies, specific choreographed dance phrases were taking place in the discotecas—the very moves depicted by John Travolta in the classic film *Saturday Night Fever*. This film contributed significantly to Travolta's career, mostly because of the impact that disco moves had on society at large. Discotecas were becoming more popular, and so were the synchronized dance sequences that were happening on the dance floor. Another iconic dance move was the Soul Train Line Dance. I made sure to incorporate some of these aesthetic dance influences into "Club". Hopefully, audience members were able to identify the Soul Train Line and Travolta's influence during a small section of

“Club”. Another movement that I purposefully added to the piece was a modern dance move called flossing. As a choreographer, I enjoy giving the audience familiar moments in my pieces, even if just for a minute, that they can recognize and connect with culturally.

## 2.5 “Friends”

“You are a cyborg everytime you look at a computer screen or use a cellphone device.”

– *Amber Case quoted in The City of Tomorrow (Ratti and Claudel 57)*

In his book, *People in Cities: The Urban Environment and Its Effects*, Krupat dedicates a full chapter to discussing social relationships. Krupat argues that due to the increase of the population in the cities, segmentalization of human relationships is inevitable. In part, what contributes to this division is the amount of diversity found in urban centers; “...it is impossible to come to know others as whole persons” (Krupat 51). People tend to know one another superficially, anonymously. The relationships are transitory and momentaneous, especially now with the advancement and prevalence of technology. People are becoming faceless; online, they are creating fake and idealistic profiles to portray only a part of themselves, a version of themselves, or someone entirely new all together. Proof of this is the use of social media applications, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Tinder, to “make friends” and “build friendships”.

During my research, I investigated how friendships on social media do not correspond to those in reality. On Facebook, there are some accounts where the number of friends exceeds the amount allowed by the platform; so, the account owner creates another profile to allow the new “friends” to join their community. Of course, this endeavor is not exclusive to urbanities as this desire for more friends is not a symptom of location; it seems to be a general desire of humanity.

Krupat's analysis of social behavior paralleled what I observed on social media. He states that, in the city, proximity to others is less important than in the country; people may be unfriendly towards strangers because there is a desire to avoid contact (Krupat 54). This contradiction of craving virtual "friends" while avoiding friendly interactions in real life highlights the incongruity between social media and physical life.

Based on Krupat's study, I designed the choreographic work "Friends" to illustrate this incongruity. For the visual arts aspect, I asked Binginot to include all the emojis that a Facebook user can choose when "liking" someone's post. For movement vocabulary, I based my research on tableaux where dancers portrayed smiles, happiness, and superficial friendship. To support this scenery, one of the dancers carried her cell phone while dancing. I asked this dancer to take selfies during her performance in this section. At one point, one of the dancers yells "I need a friend" to signify the rejection of such an artificial environment. The dancer carrying her cell phone then gives it to the dancer who desperately yelled for a friend, thus signaling how people turn to social media to feel less alone. The new dancer with the cell phone then interacted with the audience by asking them to be friends with her. After this short interaction, audience members and dancers take a selfie and pretend that the photo would be added to Facebook. Seconds later, after the post gets many "likes", the dancer said to the audience members that they no longer need to be "friends". This represents the temporary friendships that Krupat mentions in his chapter titled "Isolation and Integration: Social Relations in the City" (Krupat 128).

To frame the movement and visual arts in "Friends", I chose the song "Easy To Be Hard" by Three Dog Night. I usually avoid using music with lyrics due to the fact that it can lead the audience to a precise interpretation of the work. However, this song was perfect for the

choreography, exactly because of the pointed lyrics. The lyrics tell a direct message about human relationships, asking the listener to question why people seem to be so superficial and heartless.

## 2.6 “Isolation”

“Solitude, isolation, are painful things and beyond human endurance.”

– *Jules Verne, The Mysterious Island, 1874*

Studies have proven that social isolation and loneliness are among the main causes of mental health issues, such as depression and an uptick of suicides. Feeling lonely and isolated can also drastically reduce a person’s lifespan. More and more, people have also been taking advantage of technology to conduct day-to-day life. By 2009, smartphones had become nearly ubiquitous, bringing with them a new dimension to the city and a new mode of interacting with and within an urban space (Ratti and Claude 65). Since then, this landscape has changed, for better or for worse, depending on who is analysing the scenery. Nowadays, more and more networking systems have been developed to facilitate our lives, which means more virtual interactions and less physical contact.

Therefore, how does this new interface contribute to isolation? The answer is simple. With these new systems enabling real-time virtual interactions, people are becoming more isolated than ever and removed from opportunities for physical interactions. They are isolating themselves in their own bubble. For instance, the basic necessities for human existence are water, food, exercise, and social interaction. Having on hand a technological system, such as a smartphone, allows a person to interact more with the virtual rather than the physical reality. For instance, a person can order food online without leaving the house. A person can also exercise at home with their own virtual instructor. Last, but not least, a person can find the love of their life

by swiping through pictures of candidates on dating apps like Tinder. This app specifically tracks a person's profile preferences and then matches them with other similar profiles. In reality, the evaluation is solely image-based. If you like another person's profile picture, you then swipe to the right. If you don't like it, you swipe left on the person's profile. Tinder does not allow a person to use other qualities outside of visuals to make a decision about whether or not they like a candidate.

When developing "Isolation", I took into consideration all the aspects described above, plus recent studies on urban lifestyle. Data research has proven that more people are opting for a single life rather than following societal patterns that mean coupling up, such as getting married, starting a family, and sharing a physical space with another person. Researchers do not know for sure if this behavioral change is based solely on technological progress, but they do know that network systems are contributing to this elimination of the chemistry of social relationships.

For these reasons, I chose to present this choreographic work, "Isolation", following "Club" and "Friends". In a general sense, my endeavor was to illustrate urban social life through the perspective of solitude. Between these three pieces, I created a short narrative: a person socializes by going to a dance club, captures the momentary friendship by posting photos on social media, and, at the end, finds herself alone. To support the idea of isolation, lighting designers projected square configurations on the floor, thus limiting the area where the dancer was performing. The squares would appear and disappear as the dancer traveled through space, signaling that, if you choose a lonely life, no matter where you go, the isolation will go with you, too. At a later point in the piece, another dancer joins the soloist. The idea was to portray the idea that even though sometimes people share the same space, and time, they are unaware of each

other, even though they are doing exactly the same thing. This was translated into the piece by presenting short unison phrases where dancers could see each other, but their gaze was as distant as their emotions.

## 2.7 “Money”

“Money is not the only answer, but it makes a difference.”

– *Barack Obama*

It is almost impossible not to associate money with big cities. Urban centers have the best opportunities and highest paid jobs. Data from U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) has shown that the areas in the U.S. with the highest average wages per capita are San Jose, California (Silicon Valley’s largest city); New York City, New York; the suburban metropolitan area of Bridgeport-Stamford, Connecticut; and the metropolitan area of San Francisco-Oakland-Hayward, California (O’Connell). These areas are among the top for job choices among Millennial and Gen Z individuals because they offer growth opportunity in their aspiring careers. Powerful companies like Apple, Google, and Amazon, are situated in the Silicon Valley area. In NYC, there is Wall Street, located in the financial district of Manhattan, which is the dream locale for most business or economics majors. This eight-block-long street is home to some of the most important economic systems in the U.S., attracting top investors such as national and international banks, the stock market, and the commodity market, among others.

By all means, superstar cities such as the ones mentioned above are also polarizing because the high-paying jobs and the range of opportunities that one can find there are not endless. Therefore, the influx of these financial centers shines not only on the economy but also on the overall amenities of the urban core. As you walk down the main streets of some cities like

Manhattan, San Francisco, Boston, and Seattle, luxurious cars are parked alongside the walls of exorbitant architecture—buildings which house the most expensive merchandise which can be purchased by the wealthy or admired by the ordinary citizen. In other words, where there is money, there is social status, power, and competition.

When I first thought about developing “Money”, what came to my mind was Kurt Jooss’s 1932 piece *The Green Table*. Jooss created this work as a manifestation against Hitler’s tyranny back in the early thirties to express his feelings about World War I as well as critique the possibility of a World War II. The piece opened up with dancers around a green table, wearing masks and costumes to represent diplomats. Jooss’s *The Green Table* was a direct anti-war message to the audience and to the world and, because of its impact, this ballet became one of the most iconic repertoires in dance history. Inspired by Jooss’s artistic response, I created “Money” as literal as its etymology. Throughout the choreographic work, dancers interacted with golden coins thrown about all over the stage.

As a choreographer, I kept in mind the meaning of the word “money”, adding other layers of interpretation, along with the literal, onto my artistic understanding. Money is frequently associated with success, power, greed, and desire. Based on these lexicons, I asked dancers during the creative process to experiment with the sensation of power leading into an enlightened pleasure. How does it feel to not be worried about the lack of money? How does money affect your morals and values? What kind of feelings emerge from being surrounded by hundreds of golden coins?

After this emotional-awareness research, I began creating the kinesthetic aspect of the choreography. The majority of the movements were randomly choreographed. Therefore, I



decided to highlight a gesture that could represent one's greed for money. Dancers swept their arms as a way to collect as many coins as possible. This figurative action prompted me to add another layer to the piece. As a choreographic tool, I intentionally made use of entries and exits; every time a dancer entered the stage, a bunch of coins were tossed on the floor. This specific movement was a reference to the Bible passage Matthew 26:6-16. The scripture mentions Judas Iscariot as a betrayer of Jesus. Judas revealed Jesus's identity to the soldiers of the High Priest by kissing him. In exchange, Judas received thirty silver coins. There are scholars who do not consider Judas's act and exchange as one of bribery. Ehrman argues that what Judas actually told the authorities was not Jesus's location, but rather that Jesus was secretly teaching that he was the Messiah (Ehrman 216).

As for my research, I was not into the veracity of the facts regarding Judas's intention. My aim was to resemble the image of Judas's death as narrated in Carol A. Hebron's book *Judas Iscariot: Damned or Redeemed*. She described Judas' regret when he attempts to return the thirty pieces of silver coins to Caiaphas. With his bag full of coins, he confesses, "I have sinned, in that I have betrayed innocent blood! Matt 27:4." Caiaphas is not interested, ignoring Judas' pleas. In a fit of desperation, Judas raises his arms and the coins drop from his money bag. For one brief moment, Judas stands in a crucified position, the coins falling like droplets of blood—an allusion to 'blood money'" (Hebron). In an act of desperation, Judas then hangs himself in a tree. As his body swings to one side and the other, the bag of coins rips and all the coins fall to his feet. This powerful image was the reason that I asked dancers to toss the coins at each other's feet. Overall, I wanted to communicate that money comes with hard work and perseverance; however, having too much money can mean not always having a clean conscience.

### 3. Conclusion

Crafting *Urbano* was an exciting and challenging experience for me as well as for the dancers, visual artist, and lighting designers involved. The entire project was put together in less than ten months. From a choreographer's perspective, this may seem like enough time to craft the dances and concept, but, in reality, it is an audacious endeavor. In my mind, creating a choreographic work requires as much time and dedication as cultivating a garden, writing a poem, or stroking some brushes on a canvas to create an abstract painting. It requires a continuous process of examining your own ideas and emotions while balancing your critical thinking. For Binginot, he said, ““The biggest challenge was balancing the right amount of picture to not overcome the dancing. It was hard to create a film that was impressive while holding back to not override the dancer's performance.”” (Binginot). The feedback that I heard from the students who had a hand in designing the lighting for the show was based on the limitations of the lighting resources, such as no LED lights and sideways booms. They also had to create live lighting cues on top of the ones recorded for “Club” since the aim was to portray a real club atmosphere.

In spite of all the challenges that I meet when crafting *Urbano*, I was very satisfied with the end product of this performance. As dancemakers, we all know that choreography is just a scratch on the surface. If I had more time, I would adjust some parts of the work. When the performance premieres, you have no choice but to end—or at least put a pause on—the creative process. I hope this essay supports emergent choreographers, dance composition students, and anyone else who is curious about the “behind the scenes” of the choreographic process.

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