

An experiment: Attending a CounterPulse show, first online, then in person

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Lily Janiak April 27, 2021 Updated: April 27, 2021, 6:59 pm



Agnes Palotas looks at “Human/ID” by artist StratoFyzika at CounterPulse in San Francisco. Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

In July, the dance and performance art presenter CounterPulse asked its audiences what their attendance desires and safety preferences were, thinking it might be able to safely host indoor events again at its Tenderloin venue by fall.

“This survey told us we should pump the brakes in reopening,” recalls Justin Ebrahemi, the company’s director of communications and advancement. “A lot of people were not comfortable being in a full house again or waiting in line to purchase a ticket.”

But respondents did express willingness to see outdoor shows. Additionally, “a lot of people were more interested in seeing installation-based work with limited audiences,” Ebrahemi says.



“Human/ID” by artist StratoFyzika at CounterPulse in San Francisco. The art installation allowed pods of up to four people at a time to view the installations in Combustible Residency 2021. Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

The second discovery gave rise to a new format for this year’s Combustible Residency. From April 14 to April 18, audiences could visit the show’s two installations — “are:era” by San Francisco artist Pseuda and “Human/ID” by Berlin- and Lisbon-based collective StratoFyzika — inside CounterPulse, in pods of up to four people for half an hour at a time. Additionally, for those uncomfortable attending any sort of in-person show, CounterPulse would stream the pieces on Twitch once over the course of the run.

As producers, artists and audiences speculate about the future of pandemic-era digital innovations in the performing arts, I saw the chance to make an experiment of Combustible Residency 2021. What if I attended the show twice, both online and in person? What distinct qualities would I get out of each separate medium, and what experiences would hold true across both?

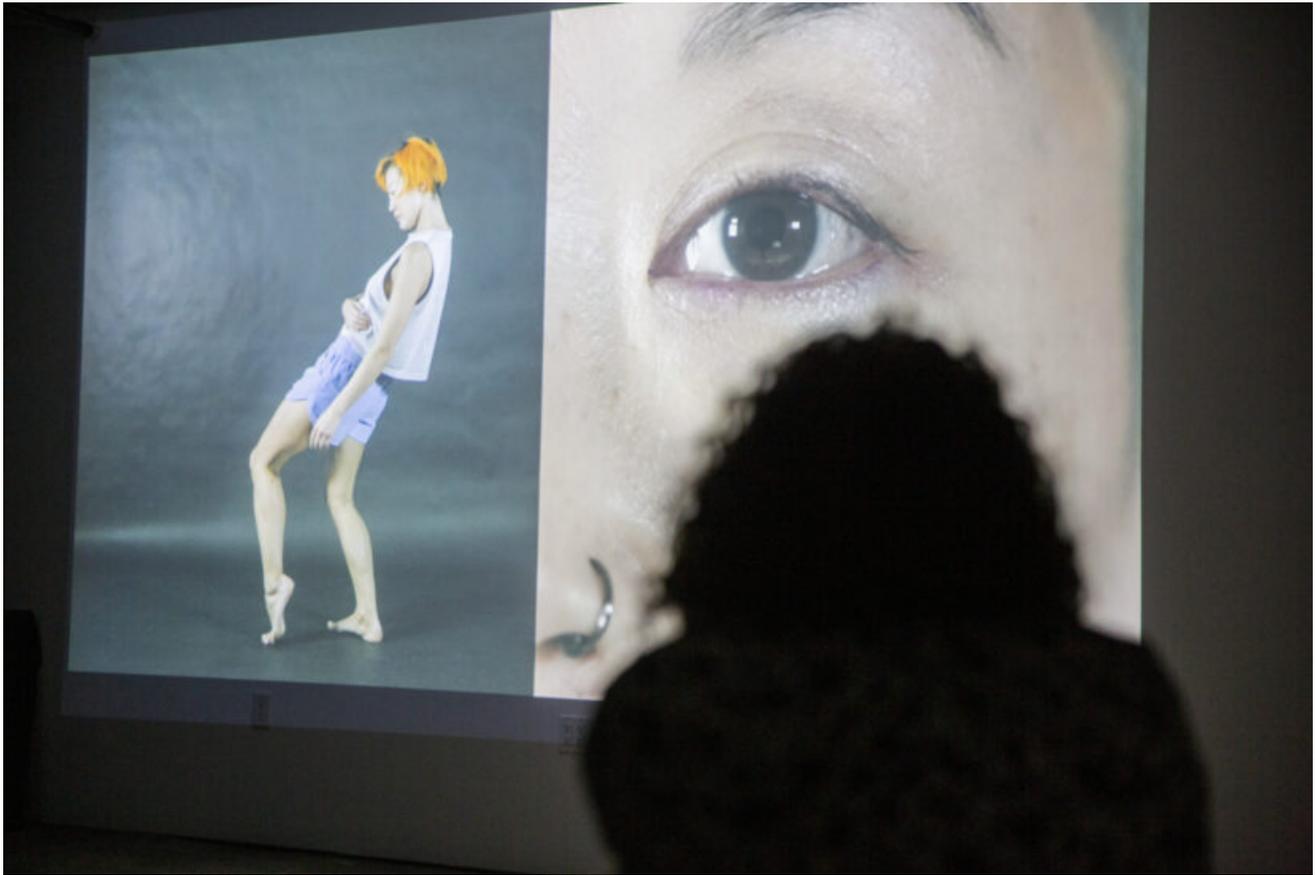


“Are:era” by Pseuda at CounterPulse in San Francisco, part of Combustible Residency 2021. Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

Perhaps my bias showed in the order I chose, attending digitally first, in person second. As a die-hard believer in the unique power of physical gathering, I suppose that in the back of my mind, I wondered if it were possible for an online show to offer anything I couldn't get in the venue itself, with its built-in sense of occasion, its immersive powers, its enlistment of all my senses.

“Human/ID,” the second piece on the bill, upended that assumption. Inside a darkened room, a group of screens displayed two performers, Hen/i and Daria Kaufman, in various poses and in increasing degrees of close-up. After a long introductory silence, bits of sound (designed by Danishta Rivero) sprinkled in: grunts, glottal stops, flicks of the tongue against the teeth, puffs of breath through the lips, a million little stiflings. As their frequency increased, I thought of aural confetti; it was sometimes like the patter of rain, sometimes like a snowball fight in the mucous area of the throat. My brain kept trying to synthesize the bits of aborted speech into words, phrases and sentences — as if I could understand if I just concentrated a little harder — then quickly grew overwhelmed at the effort, but kept trying anyway.

Eventually, the sound started migrating from one headphone to the other, which had the effect of making me think there were marbles rolling around inside my head, or a rat skittering from one corner in the attic of my brain.



Hannah Ayasse looks at “Human/ID” by the artists StratoFyzika at CounterPulse in San Francisco. Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

Getting ready to attend the next day in person, I was curious whether that effect would translate. I presumed we wouldn't be wearing headphones in the space itself, which meant the sound might not register with the same pinpoint precision.

Though I was right about the dampening of sound — and the hum of an air filter in the piece's basement space didn't help — what I didn't predict was that the visual element came through much stronger in person, where I was no longer looking at a bunch of screens captured on my computer. Online, I couldn't even be sure how many screens the piece used; they're placed at such angles that you can't really see them all at once from any single vantage point. In person, as the close-ups got closer, the intense focus on particular facial features — the nose, the face — made them look strange and wonderful, suddenly no longer familiar.



Agnes Palotas checks out “are:era” by artist Pseuda at CounterPulse as part of Combustible Residency 2021. Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

The screen issue applied to “are:era” as well. In the piece, four tall screens resembling giant smartphones face each other in a square. Each shows a film of a dancer in the middle of them, captured from their various angles. In person, you can walk into the center of the square, where the dancer was, but online at home, you were limited to the point of view of a roving cameraperson, who stuck to the periphery. In the center, you can trick yourself into thinking that if you just keep turning your gaze from screen to screen, you can somehow put together the four images into a three-dimensional whole. That illusion requires full immersion that isn’t quite possible from home.

Perhaps the difference I anticipated least was the effect of the commute to the theater. When you see a show online from home, even if you take precautions — finding a private room, silencing and hiding distractions, dimming lights — it’s difficult to make the full transition from roommate or family member or chores-doer to audience member. I knew I missed my meditative, freeing time in lobbies and theater seats before shows started, but I’d never previously thought about how, when we leave our homes to see a show somewhere out in the world, we bring the world in with us — the hardworking street percussionists at Market and Powell, the woman in a ruched brown dress walking down Turk with a live fluffy white rabbit in her arms.

We're fuller as audience members when our scopes widen beyond our kitchen tables and sofas, when we see a show against the backdrop of a block, a neighborhood, a city. We can more readily project what we see at CounterPulse, and elsewhere, onto something larger than ourselves.

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