



DANCE

Review: CounterPulse’s ‘Split’ a combination peep show, escape room, haunted house and confessional

Charles Slender-White creates a show in part to explore identity formation, particularly among queer individuals.

Lily Janiak | September 10, 2021 Updated: September 12, 2021, 11:23 am





Plexiglass separates dancer Katherine Neumann from a lone “Split” audience member.
Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

In describing FACT/SF’s “Split,” creator Charles Slender-White calls it a cross between a peep show and an escape room. There are no puzzles to solve, but unlike a gallery or museum exhibit, it’s timed. Audiences have a set number of minutes in each room, the first two offering visual and installation art. In the third — a one-on-one performance with an in-the-flesh dancer — a plexiglass wall divides performer and audience member.

Yet those two intriguing comparisons offer only a partial idea of what to expect in the piece, which opened Thursday, Sept. 9, at CounterPulse as part of the company’s namesake festival. A couple others that might apply: confession booth and haunted house (though not in a kitschy way).



Katherine Neumann performs in what could be a peep show or confessional, depending on the viewer’s perspective.
Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

So specifically timed is the piece that audiences get a five-minute window in which to arrive at the venue. Come any earlier, instructions caution, and there might not be a place to wait. When your time comes, you proceed by yourself down a flight of stairs, around corners, down a corridor.

The first stop is a photo gallery, featuring portraits by Robbie Sweeny of the artists behind the show as well as “community” interviewees who helped shape it. The subjects’ expressions gleam with mischief and mystery, defiance and curiosity, yet there’s something elegiac about studying them by yourself in a quiet room, especially since each image features a kind of double of its subject’s face — a reflection, a blur, a ghostly presence.



In twisting, lunging choreography, Katherine Neumann seems to be searching for a pose, but warily, as if the presence of a viewer sullies things and unsettles her.
Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

Slender-White created the show in part to explore identity formation, particularly among queer individuals.

“A curiosity I have is wondering if there are moments when we feel misaligned from a sense of self or askew from a sense of self,” he said. “Sometimes I describe it as a diagram that doesn’t overlap. You have the experience that you’re having and then you have an understanding of self that is over there.”

Among his inspirations were “The Picture of Dorian Gray” and “Angels in America,” as well as his own experience as a new gay dad. He found his reality as a father frequently butting up against what more experienced parents kept telling him to expect. “Everything changes” was a frequent refrain. (“Some things proved to be true,” he said. “Many didn’t.”)

All those connections manifest only obliquely or metaphorically in “Split.” An eerie, disassociated feeling rings out clearly, though. In the second vestibule, a video installation with three screens plays; a guide instructs audiences to don headphones. Synthesizer swells. Sometimes it’s warm, uplifting, but then periodically a timbre of a faraway shriek bleeds in. (Dan Cantrell did the multilayered score.)

Onscreen small white objects swirl. Insects? Snow? No, they’re bubbles in clear basins of water, for faces to dunk themselves inside, to smile or scream or merely look back at you. The whole time, the curtain dividing my viewing chamber from the rest of the venue was rippling, and I kept expecting one of the frightening, mournful countenances on the video to pop inside next to me.



Katherine Neumann is one of four solo dancers that the audience might see perform in “Split.”
Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

Yet it’s the last sequence that’s spookiest. A guide instructs you to walk down another hallway and around a corner by yourself, this one lined with walls of black fabric. You’re told the signal for when the in-person performance starts and when it’s over; you’re also given two safety signals to use in case you want to leave at any time.

A little chair in front of a little window constitutes the peep show structure, but depending on your point of reference, you might think more of a Catholic confessional, especially once the performer enters. Mine was Katherine Neumann — each audience member sees one of four dancers, and each solo is different — and she shot me a soul-boring gaze, but not in a judgmental way. Her look recalled the expressions of the subjects of religious art, with eyes that seem almost vacant, but only because they see through you into the beyond.



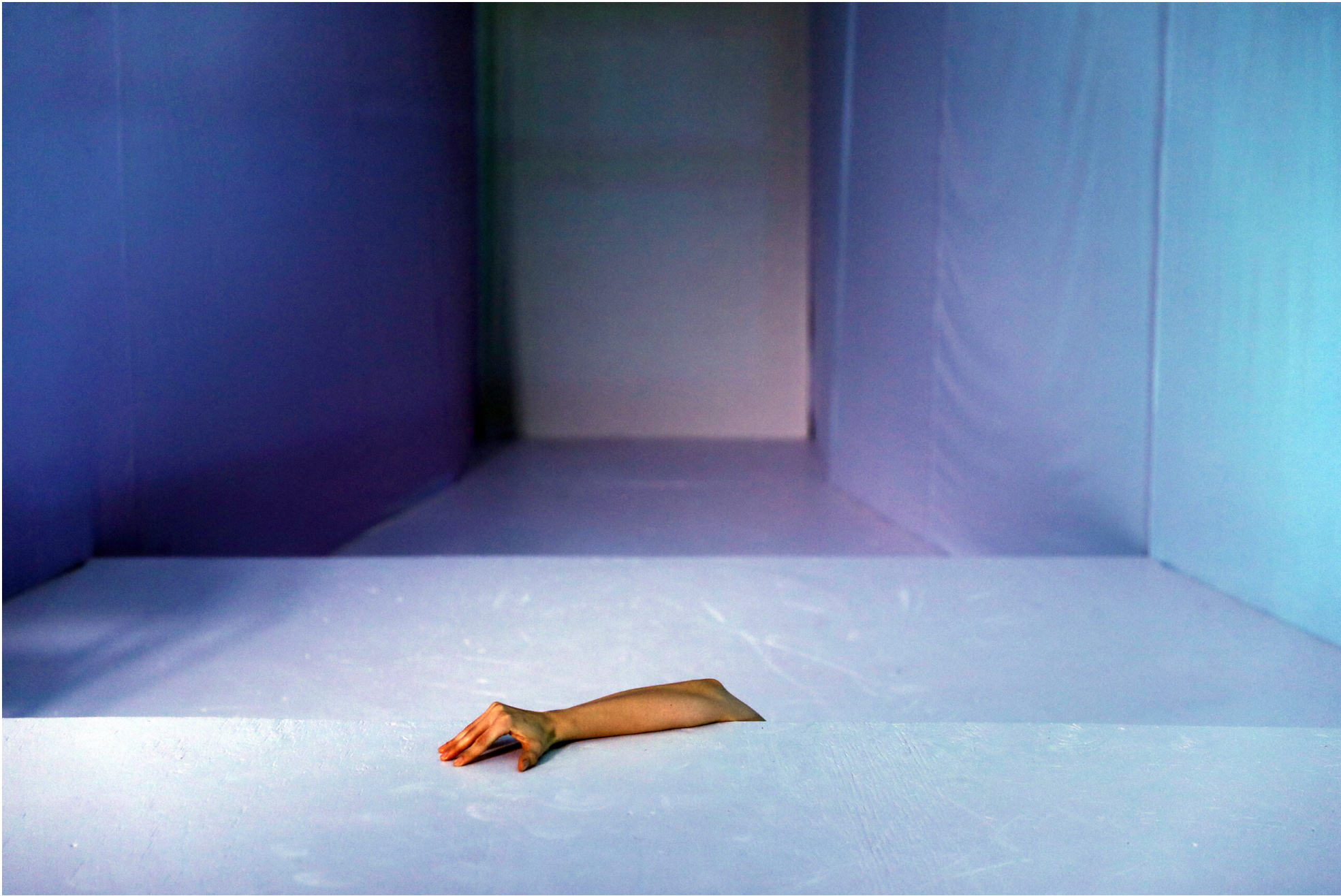
Katherine Neumann’s expressions recall the subjects of religious art, with eyes that seem almost vacant, but only because they see through you into the beyond.

Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

Yet if the set (by Jax Blaska, Robert McCole, Del Medoff, Maryam Rostami and Slender-White) resembles a confessional window, it’s one with such disorienting perspective you might think you could fall inside it. On the other side of the plexiglass is what almost looks like an altar, but one angling downward toward a single vanishing point. Medoff’s lighting design, making frequent use of spectral pastels, makes the set look like a portal into another realm.

In twisting, lunging choreography, Neumann seemed to be searching for a pose, but warily, as if my presence sullied things, unsettled her. At one point, walking backward on all fours, her backside seemed to become the head of a hoofed animal; at another, she seemed to sacrifice herself, leaving only a twitchy arm in view. At still another, she looked stuck on the bottom of a pond, not quite struggling to the surface, not quite becoming one with the currents.

The whole show lasts just more than half an hour.



| Katherine Neumann disappears, leaving only a twitchy arm in view.
Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

If “Split” can feel abstract in its beauty, it nonetheless represents a bold vision of how to use a venue and what counts as a complete artistic experience.

Above all, it serves as a reminder that in-person performance isn’t just about communion with fellow audiences; it’s also a designated time apart from your life and its rules — it’s time with yourself.

“**Split**”: Created and directed by Charles Slender-White. Through Oct. 30. 35 minutes. \$30-\$40. CounterPulse, 80 Turk St., S.F. 415-626-2060. www.counterpulse.org

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