

SEE-THROUGH

In pursuit of a cohesive transdisciplinary practise as a means of extending the capabilities of dance performance



Photo by Jennifer Amelie Vogel

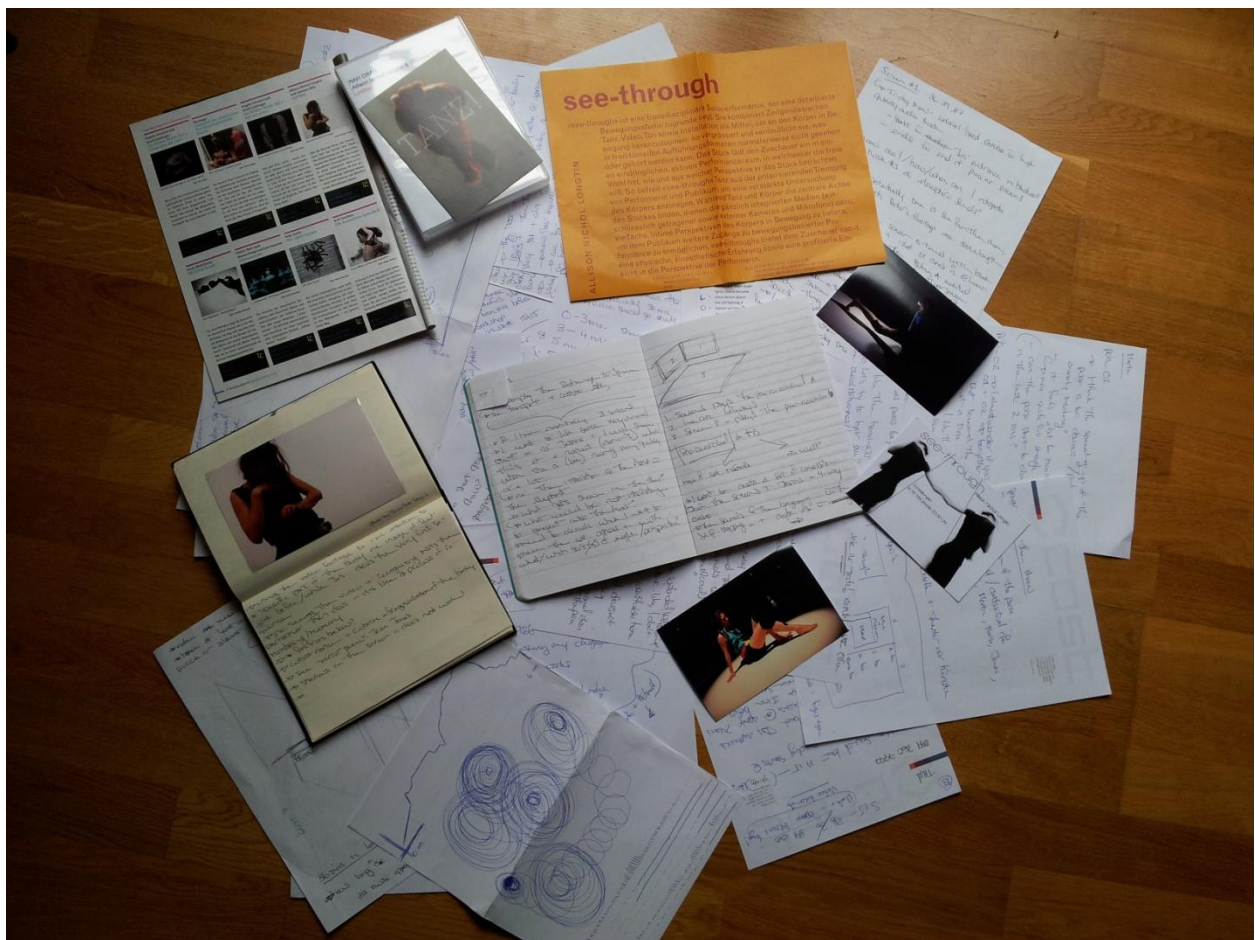
ALLISON NICHOL LONGTIN
MASTER'S THESIS PROJECT
REFLECTIVE WRITTEN ASPECT

MA TRANS.

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DESCRIPTION OF THE PIECE —

“see-through” is a transdisciplinary solo performance piece with an in-depth movement study at its core, combining contemporary dance, video, sound as well as installation as a means of zooming in on the body in motion in order to amplify and magnify that which is not normally seen or heard in a traditional performance setting. The work invites the viewer into an immersive, active performance space in which the viewer is encouraged to choose how and from where to view the work, freeing dance from the polarizing separation of performer and public to stimulate an intensified examination of the body. While dance and the body are very much the central axis, the wholly integrated media (including worn as well as external cameras and microphones) function to provide multiple intimate perspectives of the body in motion as a means of offering the public further points of entry into movement-based performance. “see-through” offers the viewer a real, physical, kinesthetic experience as well as rare insight into the perspective of the performer.

Concept, choreography & video: Allison Nichol Longtin; Interpretation/performance: Jasmine Ellis; Music composition: Martin von Allmen; Costume design & creation: Marisa Tiefenthaler; Photography, translation & video: Jennifer Amelie Vogel; Video documentation: Peter Kadar; External mentor: Simone Blaser; Graphic design and publicity: Adam Brooks

Disciplines — contemporary dance, video, sound & installation



INTRODUCTION —

One of the primary motivations behind creating this particular work within the context of a Master's program was to develop a creative process that was both productive and reflective within an academic setting and to track the progress. As my interest in creating multidisciplinary work has grown so too has my desire to more closely study the process of integration involved in such a process and to better understand, via active practise and constant reflection, how my own creative process is being transformed by these external influences.

While this work does not represent my first transdisciplinary endeavour, it is the first example of a truly conscious, intellectualized, and examined creative process involving more than two disciplines in my portfolio. Although I could certainly have begun to create this work outside of an academic institution, the end product would not and could not have been the same without having been affected and permeated by such a program.

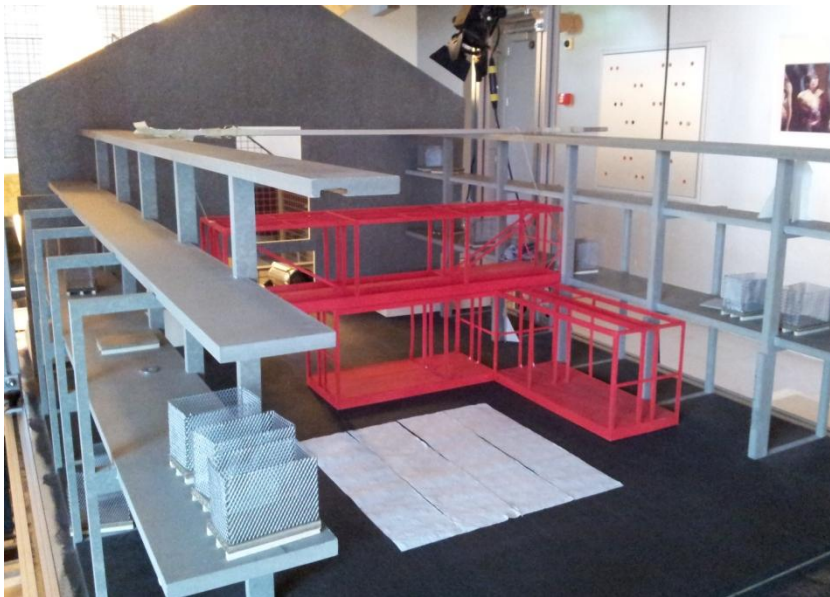
The task of constantly having to evaluate the progress of a creative process as well as trace the development of a work before it has begun to take shape and discuss/think critically about what is being produced can at times prove more confusing than helpful, however, it has allowed me to stand fully behind all of the decisions I have made with respect to the work, regardless of whether I would now make different choices having seen the final product.

The following is a summary of the creative process from a reflective standpoint with the goal of establishing a response to the work having now gained some important distance from the production. The purpose of this discourse is to address a variety of questions and answers that have evolved throughout the process in such a way that knowledge is generated, which can be used to both continue to develop this particular project, but also to embark upon future transdisciplinary processes with greater awareness.



REFELCTION UPON/RESPONSE TO THE PRODUCT —

When I started to think about how and in what kind of setting I wanted this work to be presented it was clear to me that I wanted an untraditional performance space, one that was 360



degrees, such that the audience could actively choose how and from where to view the work. The concept of a central performance space was also important as I wanted to create the sort of environment that would encourage the audience to move through the space, rather than remaining static. The ultimate goal of a 360 degrees setting was to bring the audience closer to the performer and to eliminate traditional physical boundaries.

Upon meeting with the Bühne A Theater crew it was made clear to me that such a setup would not be possible. It was then that I literally went back to the drawing board, spending hours manipulating and documenting the model of the theater. The result was admittedly a compromise that had its own advantages and disadvantages. The ultimate use of space was far more traditional than the original concept and offered privileged perspectives from which the work was best observed, whereas others did not allow for the work to be fully perceived.



The resulting setting also did not encourage the audience to move around the space throughout the performance, such that nearly all audience members chose to view the piece from only one perspective. However, the design of the space was successful in creating a more intimate environment within a larger space, which was achieved through the use of the red frames/structures as false walls.

While the ultimate staging of the work did not achieve the goal of removing physical boundaries, it did allow for the work to be perceived in its entirety, or in other words, for each of the elements to be viewed simultaneously, when seen from one of the privileged perspectives, namely from the corner in line with the intersecting screens. Although this was not the desired effect, it is one that, especially once all of the elements are in play, proves advantageous.

A major aspect of the final product that I had not expected, but that proved to be serendipitous in a way, was the fragmentation and disorientation of both space and time as a result of the many screens and cameras used. Through the use of the external camera, which filmed the dance floor/performance space from above and projected its image onto the second vertical screen combined with the pre-recorded worn GoPro camera's footage as projected directly onto the white dance floor (or horizontal screen), one's sense of the space became confused and transformed as the vertical screen picked up both the live dancer as well as the GoPro footage on the floor, which in turn also picked up the footage from the screens as well as the volume, dimensions of the space within a performance context. This fragmenting of space was most evident to me when the projection onto the floor was first cued and the image of the ceiling (the dancer's perspective at the time) appeared on the vertical screen and suddenly gave the sense of a malleable, active performance space in flux.



Photo by Jennifer Amelie Vogel

As this particular aspect of the work was something of a surprise to me and was only discovered once we were in the theater it is an element that I intend to further develop and play with in future presentations of this work.

When I began this work it had been my intention to use a worn camera on the body to transmit live, real-time images of the dancer's perspective as a means of offering the viewer a physical, kinesthetic experience. While the GoPro camera can be controlled remotely and the images viewed by a smart phone or tablet, with a slight delay, these images cannot then be exported onto a larger screen. As all cameras capable of performing this function were far out of reach in terms of cost, I decided to use pre-recorded footage from the GoPro camera as filmed in the performance space and play with the timing, in order to make unclear whether the footage was live or pre-recorded, and to even at times, make unimportant whether or not what was being seen had been manipulated or otherwise. This sense of not knowing, of confusion and at times perceived coincidence I personally found very exciting as the performer, so familiar with the movement material and her own perspective within it, was able to cleverly play with what became her own dancing partner in a way and move in unison or faster, slower in a delightfully puzzling duet.

Having seen the result of the initial obstacle, I now would not have chosen the alternative for this particular work, which would have offered only the possibility of a direct 1:1 live transmission of the dancer's perspective, as the fragmenting of time created by the pre-recorded footage added an unexpected element, which in effect made the work more active.

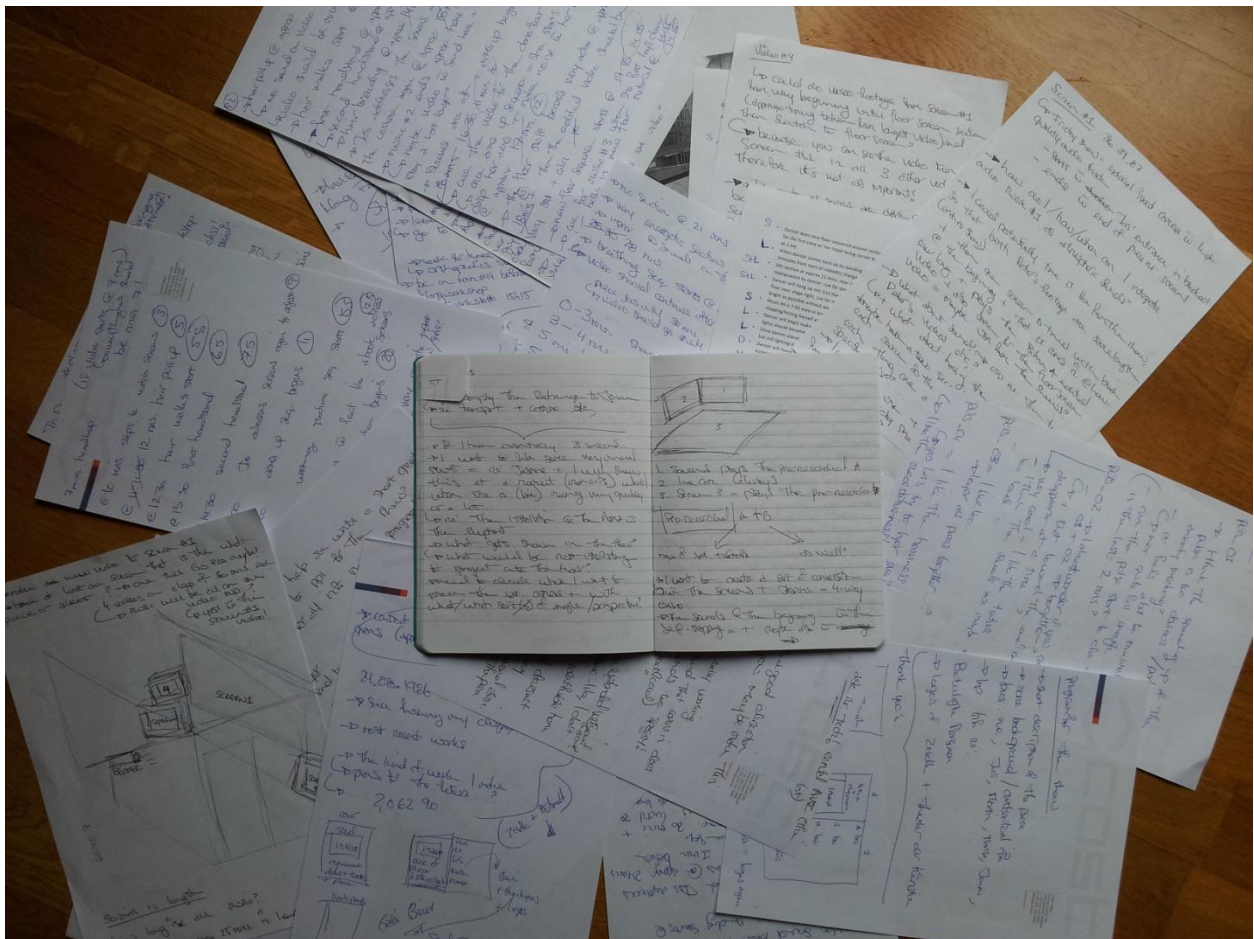
While I am still interested in working with a worn camera that would be able to output the images in real-time, for this particular work such an option would have appeared too didactic and at times predictable, especially with the live external camera filming and projecting a 1:1 image.

An interesting question was posed by Jens, one of the jury members at the Diplomkolloquium, regarding the technology used in this work. By asking what my ideal in terms of technology and infrastructure would have been, Jens was trying to get a better understanding of the aesthetic of the work. I was surprised by my answer, in that, in truth, I don't believe that the ideal would differ greatly to the actual end product. While I am interested in the use of technology in dance performance as a means of extending the possibilities and pushing the concept of state-of-body and offering the viewer a physical, kinesthetic experience, as explored in this work, I am less interested in using technology as a gimmick to the extent that the presence of the human body in motion becomes irrelevant. As there is a trend toward combining technology and dance, one must be clear about the goal and the purpose of using such technology as well as the relevance of integrating external elements. While I find certain advances in technology as related to the possibilities offered to dance performance within a research context to be of value, in many cases, I still do not believe that it has a place in performance settings as such. It was my aim with this particular work that all of the elements used serve a purpose and contribute to the ultimate goal of bringing the audience closer to the body in motion by offering a physical experience. It is my personal opinion that the use of technology in dance performance often serves to create the opposite effect in that one feels even further removed or disconnected from the body and that it eliminates or makes less important or secondary the individual, the performer within the work. In this sense, I am interested in the experimental use of new technologies in terms of movement study and within a research context, although I am generally skeptical of its use within live performance settings, as I question its relevance to the overall aesthetic of a work.

DIPLOMAUSSTELLUNG (INSTALLATION) —

The opportunity to reflect visually upon the show in a gallery-style setting and to be able to address some of the questions that remained or came out of the experience of seeing the work at the Bühne A Theater proved helpful to the continuation of this project and certainly to the writing of this reflective portion of the thesis.

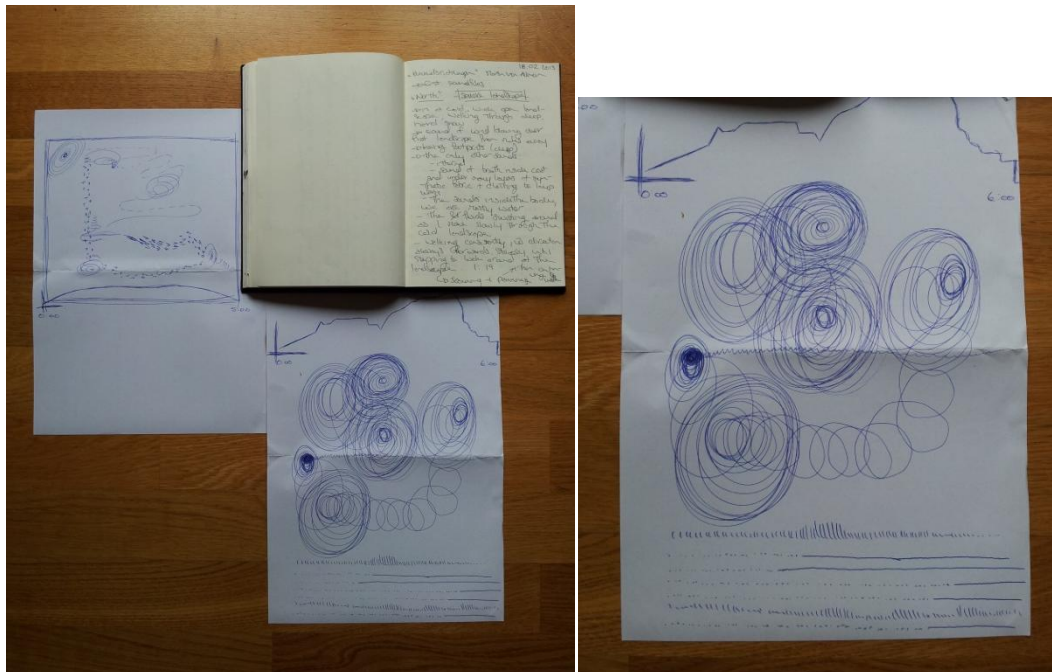
One of the main questions that came up for me throughout the creative process was whether or not the work was too over-stimulating, whether it was overwhelming to the extent that it was no longer possible to perceive the work itself. Although for me the work is not overwhelming, or at least not consistently so, such that the few moments in which it does feel as though it is almost too much to take in, I actually find very exciting, I still questioned how this was being read from the outside. I become wary of my own objectivity at a certain point in the process as I begin to feel as though I can no longer really see the work...rather that I already know it, that I am so intimately familiar with it that I can no longer really see it with fresh eyes. As such, this question of whether the ultimate work was too much to perceive all at once was something that I wanted to address, test, and treat in the installation at Dittinghaus.



I chose to work with the idea of multiple screens with multiple perspectives of the performance in its entirety and to place the screens in such a way that only one screen or perspective can really be perceived at a time whereas the other images then blend or fade into the background while still contributing to the overall picture or impression of the installation. The concept of fragmentation, with which I worked throughout the process, is further evident in the installation.

While admittedly, I could have, and would have very much liked to have gone further with the installation in terms of pushing the concepts of fragmentation and over-stimulation, I believe that the installation functions as an interesting experiment into a more permanent and independent form of the original work. The platform of the installation has also allowed me to further push the idea of encouraging the viewer to choose how and from where to view the work and the active process of deciding which screen to watch and when is of great interest to me. Although I do find it curious that many of the visitors to the Diplomausstellung seem hesitant to go into the installation space. I do not know whether this in some way reflects the choice of having an enclosed space, or if the space seems so "inszeniert" that it appears to the viewer that it should not be disturbed or entered. I am as yet uncertain of how such a problem might, within the context of the Diplomausstellung, be resolved.

It would have been ideal to have had more time to prepare the installation. Either in terms of having had more distance from the performance itself before creating the installation, or to have had more time to test out other possible configurations as the installation still possesses privileged perspectives, rather than having a more active, encompassing space.



Above images: excerpts from workbook, sketches for new soundscapes

THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS —

One of the initial motivations for me when I began this program was to collaborate with artists from different backgrounds and different fields. For this project I was able to collaborate quite extensively with a dancer, musician and a costume designer, among others. Each of these collaborative experiences varied greatly.

While the piece in its entirety is a set work of choreography, the process of working with the dancer was highly collaborative in that the initial movement study, as created throughout the first semester served as a series of structured improvisations and set phrases which were then learned and transferred to the dancer. At this point I was then able to give direction and manipulate the movement material externally. There are still certain sections of the work which are tightly structured improvisations which have been developed through a back-and-forth process of experimentation, improvisation and detailed, precise direction. It was important for me to be able to work with an interpreter on this work, rather than performing it myself as the work quickly became extremely complex.

To create the soundscape and the music used throughout the work I collaborated with Martin von Allmen. Initially we met to discuss the concept and my vision for the work and then began to brainstorm.



I presented to him the concept of using only sounds created by the body as the source material to then abstract the sounds and create a series of “mini scores” for the overall work. We then discussed the installation of the space and where speakers would be placed as well as the movement of the soundscapes through the space in order to set the tone and create the environment in which the work would take place. Using the existing set choreography of movement material we recorded a number of phrases as well as developed together some new movement motifs, out of which Martin then made several short propositions. These initial proposals then laid the foundation for the four pieces of music which were woven into the work. Working mainly via correspondence including detailed descriptions of the choreography, extensive drawings and followed by my own impressions and interpretations of his further proposals, we eventually met again to discuss how

these four pieces of music would move through the performance space. Once we started staging the work in the theater Martin worked closely with the sound technician to design the soundscape “in situ.”

Working in this way was a good and effective solution for this particular project, however, ideally we would have had more time to work together in the studio and in the theater as well as to work with the dancer.

To create the costume I worked with a Berlin-based costume designer. I described to her the concept of fragmenting the body in order to show, hide and highlight certain body parts through a modular costume into which the small worn camera could be integrated. We then discussed materials and fabrics that would create different types of textural sounds during movement and when being manipulated. The designer then saw the work-in-progress. We discussed in detail my aesthetic, specifically related to this work and its athletic nature.



Photo by Jennifer Amelie Vogel

DAS DRITTE —

All of the used media and elements are essentially geared toward the ultimate presentation of the body in motion. It is important to be clear that *I am approaching and creating this work as a choreographer looking to employ a variety of media to extend the capabilities and the range of dance performance.*

This project and its ultimate product are inherently transdisciplinary in nature in that the core discipline (contemporary dance) is fundamentally shaped and altered by the integrated media and disciplines being referenced (video, sound, installation) to the extent that *the creative process and the eventual product could not have resulted from a purely single-disciplinary approach.*

While the fundamental form of this Master's thesis project is a performance, the motivation behind creating such a work within an academic institution was to examine a creative process in flux. The goal of this study was to create a work that functions as a cohesive whole with truly integrated media, such that the end product does not represent or reinforce a hierarchy of disciplines rather that it exists not as one medium or the other, but a third medium, something else entirely. "see-through" represents a third kind of medium with respect to my own work in that it has resulted from a greatly altered creative process.

OTHER WORKS OF NOTEABLE INFLUENCE/RELEVANCE —

Douglas Gordon, "Play Dead; Real Time," 2003.

This particular work, as seen at MOMA in NYC in March 2013, emphasized the slowness of movements and had a meditative effect, which was lacking in my work at the time. Having seen this work I then decided to film several slow sequences, real time, but slow and almost still sequences. This new element



contributed to the back-and-forth between the live performer and the screens in that when the dancer was moving quickly the screens could be more passive and calm, even still at times.

Ragnar Kjartansson, "The Vistors," 2012

In January 2013 I saw this work at the new Migros museum as part of the Stadt Klang Forschung workshop with Andres Bosshard. The many perspectives offered by this work as well as the fragmenting of both time and space, while still maintaining a driving force, in this case, a song, influenced my use of this particular concept (fragmentation).



Meg Stuart, Damaged Goods, "Violet," 2011.

This work, which was presented at the Theaterhaus Gessnerallee in 2012 and features pedestrian movements repeated to abstraction reflects my own aesthetic and the aesthetic of "see-through" in its anatomical exploration of the capabilities of the moving body as well as exhaustion through repetition. The state of body on display is representative of what I have sought to do with this work in terms of the very human presentation of the body in motion while pushing the boundaries without looking to portray the "dancer's body."

