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## Locked-In Dance: Reflections on the Pandemic Experience

Linda Kvitkina

This essay documents and analyzes dance practices during the COVID-19 lockdown in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. The aim of the paper is to investigate corporeality in lockdown through dancers' own accounts. The essay uses the concept of 'thinking through the body' to conceptualize the experiences described in the interviews by performers and dance practitioners, including both professional and non-professional dancers. The au-

thor employs anthropological methods, including recorded semi-structured interviews with practitioners in the field, as well as auto-ethnography, to explore practices of dance within dancers' living spaces. The analysis suggests that the lockdown of spring—summer 2020 provoked a bodily rethinking of the living space, and a reconsidering of people's bodily relations with watched choreography and relationships with their bodies in general.

**Keywords:** contemporary art, contemporary dance, COVID-19, dance anthropology, dance studies, lockdown

One of the most significant changes that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about is a change in our views about the body: our own and others'. This essay explores how dancers describe their experience of the lockdown of spring—summer 2020 (supplemented by my experience of quarantine in December 2020) and relationships with their bodies. In my research, I focus on performers and practitioners of contemporary dance in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. One of my main questions here is how dancers' relationship to their own body and the bodies of other people has changed. In an attempt to answer these questions, I explore the lockdown through my experience of it in spring—summer 2020 and my experience of COVID-19 and self-isolation in December 2020. As a dance practitioner, I found these to be two entirely different experiences, so I decided to include in the analysis my notes on moving while infected with COVID-19. This essay focuses on dancers, dance practitioners, and choreographers in lockdown conditions: their own personal experiences, bodily practices, and imaginations that helped make sense of what was, or has been,

happening during the lockdown. I am presenting the dancers' accounts and my own as reference points for future discussions of movement at home during the pandemic and the experiences of touching and being touched. The main new features of movement that can be seen throughout the interviews I conducted are a greater gentleness of movement, the bringing of choreography into daily life, and a rethinking of one's living space through kinesthetic means.

I focus on contemporary dance in part because, as a dance practitioner, performer, and researcher, I am simultaneously within the field I am studying (as a practitioner and performer) and outside it (as a researcher). But moreover, I want to look at corporeality in self-isolation, which is also connected to how dancers think and conceive of bodily processes through philosophical and physiological concepts. In other words, contemporary dancers living through lockdowns tend to be attentive not only to the body, but also to the concepts that they think about through the body and otherwise experience, as is evident from the interviews I conducted. I look at dancers' processes of living through the quarantine and self-isolation by relying on the concept of 'thinking through the body' that not only views the body phenomenologically, as Merleau-Ponty did (1968), but also describes a conscious act of experiencing theoretical or philosophical concepts through the body (Shusterman 2012: 4). I draw on contemporary dancers because they are aware of, and observe, their bodies closely and reflect on their experiences using concepts accessible to dance researchers, such as those generated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, André Lepecki, and other theoreticians. 'Thinking through the body' also helps bridge the gap that separates the mind and the body in Western philosophical thought. Along with these reasons, I make use of the aforementioned concept because, as Richard Shusterman (2012) writes in his collection of essays on thinking through the body, performing arts draw special attention to the ways in which people think through the body, because the body in this case goes beyond being a medium of conceptualizing and becomes a medium of expression and a 'visual end product or art object' (p. 9).

My choice of methods and sources, which was to conduct and analyze semi-structured audio-recorded interviews and to examine my notes taken during the lockdown and quarantine, was driven by a desire to make these stories personal—as close to the body as possible. Another reason for choosing interviews has to do with the nature of oral sources: they may not contribute factual or chronological information about an event, but they let us see the importance of an event, or its meaning (Portelli 1981: 99–100), which is crucial when the focus is on personal experiences within an event. The observations presented here can be used in discussion regarding the space of dance, and in more general considerations of the pandemic's impact on corporeality. Additionally, I conducted ethnographic observations at a dance workshop I participated in during fall–winter 2020. These observations focused on my own and others' interactions with one another, and on how my attitude towards my own body and those of others changed over the course of my self-isolation in December.

The introductory part of the essay explains some of the theoretical background that I draw on throughout the text and elaborates on the

definition of the lockdown, self-isolation, or quarantine, notions that in the Russian context could be used interchangeably, since the language had no fixed, universal name for the COVID-19 prevention measures put in place. The measures themselves were ever-changing and dependent on the place in which they were introduced: for instance, Moscow had much stricter lockdown rules compared to those in Saint Petersburg. Thus, in April 2020, the Russian government announced not a lockdown, but a national holiday for three weeks, advising citizens to stay at home. However, holidays (or days off work) are associated with rest and recreation, and not with the stress of living through a global pandemic, so there was a major contradiction between the period's name and the feelings it evoked. The next section of the essay expands further on the context, mainly focusing on recalling the general atmosphere of spring 2020, and introduces some of the dancers I talked to when working on this research. I provide short portraits of some of the dancers I talked to, including descriptions of their movements that I observed during interviews. This is done partially to create a livelier picture, and partially to avoid some of the limitations of sources like oral history, namely the reduction of speech to letters and words (Portelli 1981: 97–98), inserting punctuation where spoken language has pauses, or breaths, that can work differently than grammar rules. Next, I consider the virtual and physical spaces that dance occupied during the lockdown and continue focusing on bodily experiences of self-isolation caused by the pandemic, including my own. In the conclusion, I offer some final observations and thoughts on bodily experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic for future discussion among performing artists.



Figure 1. Photo by Tatiana Krasekhina, April 2020 (courtesy of Tatiana Krasekhina)

## I. Context

I begin my reflections on the changes the pandemic brought to dancers' lives in March 2020, because this is when the restrictions designed to stop the spread of COVID-19 were put in place. Even though the first news about the new virus in China appeared in late 2019, it did not much affect the everyday life and practices of dancers in Moscow and Saint Petersburg (which are the two cities central to my case study). Even in February 2020, when Italy was already in lockdown and the number of new cases showed a noticeable growth, the overall mood in Saint Petersburg, where I am based, was quite carefree. From my observations, only a few people were starting to wear masks in public transport, and people were still traveling abroad.

In March 2020, people began to be diagnosed with COVID-19 in Moscow and other Russian cities, and disease prevention measures were implemented, mainly restrictions on using public transport and instructions to wear masks and gloves, reinforced with fines. After the World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines were released in early spring, there was a certain level of anxiety arising around touching and being touched. The advice mainly involved avoiding touching surfaces in public spaces and using hand sanitizer, rather than wearing masks, which became the focus later in the pandemic.

This brought something that used to be in the background to the foreground: bodily practices. People now had to control gestures and movements to which they were accustomed—touching one's nose, rubbing one's eyes, brushing hair away from one's face. This new danger coming from the virus forced people into being conscious of their mundane—and previously unnoticed—bodily practices. The concept of double touching, that is, when you touch your hand, you are not only actively *touching*, but you also feel *touched* at the moment it is happening (Trigg 2014: 254), rose to the fore in the COVID-19 pandemic. Information regarding the spread of COVID-19 made us immediately alert to the touch we inflict *upon ourselves* once we touch something or someone in a public space. We became generally much more aware of the double nature of touch (Merleau-Ponty 1968), and this came not as a peaceful experience of exploring one's corporeality, but rather as an alarming one, in an atmosphere of heightened anxiety around bodily and medical matters.

By the end of March, in many cities across Russia, employers began to make the switch to remote work, and the event management and live entertainment industries started to suffer, with venue closures and performance cancellations. Some dancers who had been registered as self-employed in 2019 received financial support from the Russian government in the form of a tax return or a payment equal to a monthly minimum wage. However, this amount of money was not enough to help struggling artists: 'Well, I got six thousand [rubles] plus a month's minimum wage for being self-employed, but thank God I work at a state-run company, and they haven't abandoned me' (Aleksei N. 2020, personal communication!). Many people in the creative industries faced difficulties, especially financial ones, since the government did

not implement specific comprehensive measures to support private companies in the arts and entertainment industries. Dancers mostly earned their income by teaching, either in private, or in government institutions. This was the case not only for performing artists in Russia, but elsewhere in the world as well (Tsioulakis and FitzGibbon 2020). Part of the issue is that in performing arts, many artists work at several institutions at the same time or are not strictly affiliated with any organization at all.

The reflections above are meant to highlight the feeling of heightened anxiety among artists during the period in question. Researchers point to this being a factor in difficulties when engaging in creative practices (Tsioulakis and FitzGibbon 2020). This observation of decreased creative potential during the troubled times is supported by my personal experience and by the experience described by my respondents. One of them did not dance because she 'just didn't feel like it' (Violetta Sh., 2020, personal communication<sup>2</sup>).

Back in March 2020, it was extremely unclear how teaching and other work within the performing arts was to be organized. Some freelance choreographers and performers went online and started live-streaming, for example, Vladimir V., who had a live 'show' on his Instagram (discussed below). Instagram Lives and Instagram Stories, where dancers now appeared more often than before the lockdown, in many cases shaped the quality of movement and its character. Instagram encourages (one could even say, demands) vertical framing of videos or photos posted to Stories or streamed live. Although there is certainly room for experiments (which some performers engaged in), many preferred the default format. This is particularly interesting in relation to contemporary dance, since the latter includes a lot of floor work that would not be shown in the vertical format.

Some dancers, like Aleksei N. and his wife Olga, also a performer and a choreographer, started to teach pay-what-you-can online classes, which became a widespread practice. Prospective students were invited to contact the tutor on social media, for example, through direct messages on Instagram in response to a Story. The teacher would then send a Zoom link and a phone number tied to a bank account that the students could use to transfer money for the class. The pay-what-you-can system became a worldwide phenomenon in the lockdown: instead of being asked for a specific amount of money for a class, as is typical of dance schools, people could set their own price, based on their financial situation or their rating of the class. Consequently, the agency in defining the cost of bodily knowledge also shifted.

Aleksei N. works for a state-run dance company that does not have a permanent theater residence. This allowed the company to be flexible during more stable periods, outside the extraordinary conditions of a global pandemic. During the lockdown, the company produced online content related to nutrition, equipment, and indoor and outdoor training in ballet and contemporary dance techniques, which served to promote the dancers and the company itself. Other institutions organized online classes on Zoom, for children and adults alike, that were led by their regular instructors (Violetta Sh., 2020, personal communication). However, many students would either skip

lessons or drop the class completely, whether because they were overburdened with online activities or because they or their parents took a more relaxed approach towards online classes (Violetta Sh., 2020, personal communication). A situation where dancers earn most of their income through a permanent job in a state-run dance company or educational institution is not new (McRobbie 2011), but it became more visible during the pandemic. For many performers and dancers, just performing or dancing is not enough to make a living: they also have to participate in the education system and thus, in power-imposing structures, even if they believe in sharing knowledge horizontally rather than hierarchically.

In summary, creative industries and the performing arts have suffered significantly from the restrictions introduced to reduce the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the public health system. This was the case not exclusively in Russia: the same observations have been made in different countries across the world (Graeber 2021), with governments not always being able to implement adequate measures of support for the creative industries. Many creative professionals had to seek other sources of income to support themselves throughout the pandemic. On the one hand, teaching pay-what-you-can classes can be seen as promoting and implementing the concept of fair pricing as defined by the consumer; on the other hand, it introduces instability in creative professionals' income streams.

## 2. Introduction to Personal Stories

Dancers used very different descriptions when talking about the period of self-isolation. For instance, Aleksei N. says, 'Put fancily, it was a black swan that came flying in and destroyed everything I had planned, everything I had hoped to do.' He also called the pandemic and the associated lockdown an apocalypse and 'hell' during the interview (Aleksei N., 2020, personal communication). Another dancer, on the contrary, saw it as a positive development. 'It wasn't a tragedy for me—it was an opportunity' (Vladimir V., 2020, personal communication<sup>3</sup>). There was also no fixed lockdown period in Russia. First of all, there was no 'lockdown,' 'quarantine' or 'state of emergency' announced at the national level. Secondly, the measures introduced in Moscow and Saint Petersburg differed drastically, with Moscow having much more severe rules in place. Thus, the Russian lockdown has had no particular dates or other markers of time. It can be interpreted from the perspective of multiple temporalities, i.e. multiple ways of seeing and thinking about time (Koselleck 2002), and, therefore, experienced in different ways, too. Still, the scale of the disease prevention measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented (Loskutova 2020), which made the future of physical interactions look more unstable than before.

I would like to introduce some of the performers with whom I talked when working on this essay. All of them (eight in total) are based in Russia, living either in Moscow or Saint Petersburg. It is important to say here that, along

with professionally trained dancers, I also spoke with non-professional dancers; my own background can also be classified as non-professional dancing. Most of my interviewees' work centers on performing, but most of them also teach dance, so during the lockdowns they either taught independently (usually with a pay-what-you-can system) or within an institution. The ratio of male to female interviewees is unequal, with five being women, which means the perspective on bodily thinking here may be skewed, as our relationships with our bodies tend to be gendered. Another limitation of the sources has to do with the nature of audio recordings. Some conversations were recorded in person; some were video calls, with only the audio recorded; finally, some of the calls were done using only audio. Where possible, I attempted to incorporate my observations of the interviewees' movements during the conversations into the portraits provided below. I felt it was important to include these particular descriptions because they represent the different ways of conducting the interviews; besides, they show that the lockdown context varied for these people depending on their work situations. Maria Sh. is an independent dance artist who teaches classes, Aleksei N. works for a state-run company and teaches dance, and Anastasiia D. is a choreography student, which gives you a glimpse of their different relationships to lockdown.

Maria Sh. is a performer and dance artist with a degree in choreography from the Vaganova Ballet Academy in Saint Petersburg. Maria has, in her own words, 'a haptic personality,' and it is important for her to express sympathy or affection for people through touch. My conversation with Maria took place in person after a performance and dance class in autumn 2020. She was one of the workshop's organizers and instructors, and I was one of the students. During the interview, Maria took her time to think about her responses and gave careful consideration to questions, meanwhile rolling cigarettes and changing her position in the chair. We also kept moving from the dressing room, where most of our conversation took place, to the rehearsal hall, where she would open the window and climb onto the windowsill for a smoke while we continued to talk. During the self-isolation period, she organized and took part in an online performance as part of a festival. She also attended several workshops and courses and completely reevaluated the concept of productivity, culminating in a research-through-practice workshop at the end of the summer.

I spoke with Aleksei N. during the summer of 2020, and we used a video call for this interview. At the time, he was in Moscow and had just moved into a new apartment. This decision to move to a new place was made during the lockdown and implemented in the middle of the pandemic. I did not record the video of the conversation and did not take any screenshots. During the conversation, Aleksei changed his sitting position many times. Sometimes he would move his head, probably to relax his neck muscles. This type of movement is something that I had noticed in summer 2019, when I had a chance to attend his regular contemporary dance classes in Moscow. During the lockdown, he continued teaching, using the pay-what-you-can system for his Zoom classes. During late spring and summer 2020, he participated in organizing and performing an online live event exploring domestic

space in an unusual way. The lockdown led him to reinterpret the space of his and his wife's apartment: he made multiple observations and came up with vibrant metaphors for describing the lack of movement in the lockdown, one of my favorite ones being 'the itching body,' that is, a body that is itching for movement and that always wants more, no matter how much a person moves physically.

I talked to Anastasiia D. on the phone, even though we attended to the same workshop and regular classes, and were living in the same city. In 2020, she was a university student studying to become a choreography teacher. Due to the pandemic, her university classes as well as dance classes outside university moved online. She described her confusion about how the process was organized and the inconveniences that naturally came with it. Some instructors themselves were not sure how to conduct classes online, and were quite skeptical that the medium would work, at least at the beginning. Anastasiia D. published short videos of her dancing or moving within the space of her apartment, including on the balcony and in her room, to her Instagram Stories. She also shared notes on international classes she was taking during the lockdown. After the end of the strict lockdown regulations, Anastasiia went back to offline classes. However, she continued to participate in international classes on Zoom. For her, the lockdown was particularly important because she had a chance to slow down and be gentler and more attentive to her body, especially to a previous knee injury.

Even though I could not provide a portrait of every performer here, I have tried to offer a closer look at the people with whom I talked while preparing this essay. I deliberately did not share any last names in order to prevent readers (as far as possible) from creating a hierarchy between their accounts of self-isolation and quarantine experiences. It is worth noting that some of them have met each other personally and have even worked together on various projects. The performing arts community in Russia is rather small, at least in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, especially when it comes to contemporary dancers and dance artists.

### **3. The Space of Dance, Practiced and Watched**

Lockdown practices of online dance sustained and emphasized the prioritization of the visual side of dance performance, at least as it is understood in the Western tradition of performance (Schechner 2007: 10). Alongside this, the lockdown conditions made dancers renegotiate their relationships with dance spaces, physical practices, and performances. Dance has become more intimate, more experimental, and yet more accessible to everyone involved in a performance, including viewers, because we all face the same condition of being indoors. In my own experience, I started to associate different kinds of dance with different spaces within my apartment. The kitchen was my place to dance to my all-time favorite music or hits from the 1980s, while the bedroom became the place to experiment, a small dance laboratory of my own.

This was partially due to the fact that the floor in my bedroom was warmer, and there was more space.

There are some practical criteria for choosing where in the apartment to dance. This may be determined by the space itself (whether there is room to dance or not) or by the characteristics and purposes of the space. Some practices required a mat, because a dancer did 'not enjoy lying on the parquet [floor]' (Mila V., 2020, personal communication<sup>4</sup>), which meant choosing the room best suited for lying on a mat. With regard to narratives of cleanliness of the living space, some noticed that at the beginning of self-isolation, they started to clean the flat: 'I washed everything I could, organized everything that could be organized, [but] the next week I was totally apathetic... Earlier you would get home late and wouldn't care [about cleaning], but now you find yourself in downward dog looking at these dust balls.' (Violetta Sh., 2020, personal communication). 'Oh, [your question] is interesting, by the way. Nobody feels eager to dance in dirty spaces.' (Mila V., 2020, personal communication). This can partially be attributed to the fact that contemporary dance involves quite a lot of floor work, and it is crucial to have clean surfaces even in a dance class, because otherwise you get dust all over your hands, feet, and clothes, and it stops being a pleasant experience.

For some dancers, the lockdown became an opportunity to experiment and work with the mundane, focusing on routines that would go unnoticed in normal circumstances. For instance, Vladimir V. says, 'I always danced at home and was trying to find the unusual within my home ... [in order] to refract the routine [*prelomlenie bytia*]' (Vladimir V., 2020, personal communication). For others, it turned into an endless workshop on exploring one's living space through dance, a practice that used to take place in the specially designated areas of rehearsal rooms, stages, or dance classes, with necessary equipment provided. Instead, some used a chair as a barre (Violetta Sh., 2020, personal communication) or danced in the bathroom or other rooms that did not have as much space as a dance hall would (Mila V., 2020, personal communication). This is of significance because, unless you pay attention to the surroundings and keep alert, you can injure yourself or break something accidentally (Anastasiia D., 2020, personal communication<sup>5</sup>).

The process of rediscovering one's home in a bodily sense adds to the discussion of Merleau-Ponty's (1964) view on the relationship between body and space. Kinesesthesia as the awareness of the body (not including seeing, hearing, smelling, and the sense of balance) can be interpreted as primordial (Shusterman 2012). However, this sense of the body develops in response to new spatial situations, rather than being preconditioned<sup>6</sup> (Merleau-Ponty 1981). In the situations of lockdown or quarantine, many either introduced dance into their home environment or, if they had danced at home before self-isolation, started to do it more often (Mila V., 2020, personal communication), thus rediscovering a space that is supposed to be extremely familiar, even from the perspective of thinking through the body. Even if, before self-isolation, they used to dance at home as well as in class, many interviewees said they had to adapt to the 'new' space and be more careful with their movement.

In a way, the home turned out to be best suited for laboratory or research activities, which dancers enjoyed more than regular classes because of their new need to rethink and even re-map the space kinesthetically.

Moreover, the physical space of home was connected to that of the internet. Since all workshops and performances were conducted online, the two spaces became connected not only in terms of being simultaneously in one place, home, and online. On the one hand, dancers explored their homes' physical environments using instruments provided by online platforms, such as video-based classes or practices. On the other hand, these places were dramatically different from one another: home is a private space, while online spaces are open and accessible to everyone with an Internet connection. Regardless of how different the spaces of our homes were, we all—both spectators and performers—used the same platforms and software to interact with one another. For instance, one dancer did not just perform alone in the closed space of his apartment, the 'intersection of rooms'; he held a 'Morning Show' on Instagram Live (Vladimir V., 2020, personal communication), thus making a private event a public one.

One of the most prominent works showing dancers as explorers of their living spaces was the performance *Farewell to the Old World (Proshchai, staryi mir)* by the Ballet Moskva company, which premiered on the 31st of May, 2020 (Ballet Moskva, 2020). This performance explored the space of dancers' apartments by inscribing the body and bodily practices onto surfaces inside and outside the apartment, especially unusual ones: for instance, the kitchen counter or the bathtub. *Farewell to the Old World* fits with the framework of relations between dancers and machines that dance historians have used to analyze modernity in connection to dance (Bryson 1997: 74). This signified a new space for experimenting, as dance moved not into another public space, such as the museum (Lepecki 2006: 69), but into the private space of apartments as well as into stairwell landings (which are communal, yet not quite public). From the point of view of a spectator, the dancers resembled aliens in their own spaces, using the surfaces in highly unconventional ways and renegotiating their place in the apartments.

It was during the lockdown that conditions of watching shifted dramatically: from sitting in a designated seat throughout a performance (say, in a theater), to moving around the flat with your laptop, or even lying down to watch something. At one point, I found myself walking around the house in my pajamas (clothes that are far from what I would be wearing to the theater), watching *Giselle*, choreographed by Akram Khan. As I watched it online with my friend in the United Kingdom, I was moving alongside the performers on the screen, even though my movement was very ordinary and out of synch with the dancers.

This experience of moving as a spectator when watching a dance performance does bring a new perspective to choreography. On some level, the choreography became part of my movement, and I would find myself days later thinking through the choreography with my body and reproducing movements from the performance in situations far from performative, like

cooking or washing the dishes. This is in line with neuroscience research demonstrating that when we look at movement, our brain reacts in the same way as if we were moving ourselves (Shusterman 2012: 213). We react to the movement that we observe with muscles (among other responses). However, I found that it was easier to relate to the observed movement at home than in the public space of the theater or cinema, perhaps due to the cultural rules related to behavior in public. Thus, while we may see little girls after a ballet performance posing in the theater hall pretending to be ballerinas, as if trying a particular movement on to see if it suits them, we would not expect the same kind of behavior from adult spectators. Perhaps if we thought about the bodily dimension of choreography when our physiological response to the performance was still fresh, we would be able to perceive dance in a different way. During the lockdowns, this could be explored freely, with no etiquette constraints imposed on the viewers, through rehearsing the movement and thus imprinting it onto the body in a more efficient way (Shusterman 2012: 213–215).

Having considered video-based practices and performance spectatorship, I would like to dwell briefly on another medium for learning and conveying dance, namely, sound. 'I used sound-based practices. I did that even in the bathroom or while washing dishes, because I was tired of my laptop and started to hate it, since I had online courses at the time as well.' (Mila V., 2020, personal communication). If dancers did use video-based platforms (like Zoom), they could switch their camera off during the class, and not be fully engaged, choosing to participate only partially, or not to dance at all (Maria Sh., 2020, personal communication<sup>6</sup>).

Some dancers experienced an ability to make an imagined picture reality. Maria Sh. talks about an episode during one of her online courses:

'And she [the instructor] says this phrase: "Imagine yourself somewhere you want to be right now, maybe at the beach or in the mountains," and I'm sitting there, and I realize clearly that right now I want to be on the balcony with a coffee and a cigarette. And I did it. And she is saying "and dance," and I begin to dance, like, my hand is dancing because it is stirring the coffee and I am taking such pleasure in sitting down on the balcony, lighting up a cigarette, and I have a screen [in front of me] where people are dancing, beautifully, and they are enjoying dancing, and me, my mind dancing by observing other people in accordance with the will of the non-dancers' (Maria Sh., 2020, personal communication).

In the conditions and space of a regular dance class, this situation would not have been possible: it could only be imagined, never made into reality at the moment of thinking. The lockdown, however, allowed exactly that.

#### **4. The Dancer's Body within Four Walls**

The nature of self-isolating required a lot of dance to become solo work, which some interpret as a glorification of individuality and personal virtuosity (Burt 2017: 118). In the same vein, the struggles of not only performing alone, but



Figure 2. Photo by Tatiana Krasekhina, April 2020 (courtesy of Tatiana Krasekhina)

practicing dance alone, contribute to the broader discussion of living with oneself (Burt 2017: 119) and living with one's body. Many difficulties faced by those I spoke to for this research took the form of a lack of practice or major shifts in how people practiced and performed dance in lockdown conditions. However, not only the private nature of dance troubled and drastically altered attitudes towards one's body; so did the inability to dance with/alongside others. As one of the interviewees has put it, 'I thought our first in-person class would turn into an orgy because we would all want to touch each other... which is exactly what happened' (Maria Sh., 2020, personal communication).

I would like to refer here to the nostalgia for touch expressed by many dancers: 'You got used to the energy in class, [where] you can touch someone, and it was really strange for me seeing them, and it was cool, but I couldn't touch anyone' (Anastasia D., 2020, personal communication). Most of the respondents noted that they missed touching someone, and called themselves haptic personalities, so self-isolation turned out to be quite difficult. Some noted that they had different feelings towards people they knew and strangers (Anastasia D., 2020, personal communication): you could touch and hug your friends, but get suspicious of interactions with people you encounter in a shop or on public transport. Apparently, we tend to perceive touching and being touched as extremely connected with other people, while noticing self-touch only in situations where we are paying express attention, exploring it, or focusing on it for other purposes. Some of the respondents pointed out the otherness embedded in the feeling of touching one's own body. It also raises questions such as 'What is *touch*?'. Thus, when we consider touching

in terms of physics, especially if we look into quantum theories, we are never touching anything in the cultural sense; there is always a space between objects, subjects, or between one part of one's body and another (Barad 2012: 206).

One is never properly alone when one finds oneself in front of a computer camera that, unless turned off, functions as a mirror (Landay 2012: 129). Even during an online class, one sees not only the other participants, but oneself, too, breaking the loneliness of the experience. Interaction with the camera made the process of dancing quite unusual for those working in the field of contemporary dance, since in most classes, contemporary dancers rely on an internal sensation of movement rather than the way it looks, unlike in ballet, for example (Landay 2012: 130). For some, the camera came to be associated with surveillance (Maria Sh., 2020, personal communication), and thus, the feeling of interaction with it can hardly be called enjoyable.

Seeing (or not seeing) oneself during the class has a lot to do with perceiving and objectifying the body. Ever since modern dance emerged as a distinct style, it has developed away from the objectivization of the body and towards increased freedom (Cvejić 2015: 22). During the lockdown, some dancers noted that their principles for working with the body had shifted to de-objectivizing it:

'... Being able to engage with your body without objectifying it as much, without evaluating it as much, and without limiting it with rigid criteria—that's what got me results. For me, these results were my students discovering things, coming to know their own bodies better, through the flow [the students] were existing in, through observing themselves' (Aleksi N., 2020, personal communication).

However, dancers' intentions can clash with audience perceptions. This was the case for Vladimir V., who said in the interview that his 'Morning Show,' mentioned earlier, required a costume, and he chose 'shirtless' as his costume (Vladimir V., 2020, personal communication). While this caused some comments regarding Vladimir's appearance and physical shape (Aleksi N., 2020, personal communication), his motivation was to emphasize how 'the ribs, hips, everything [moves], which I'm always trying to explain in my classes... The absence of a costume was the costume' (Vladimir V., 2020, personal communication).

Some dancers, including me, found themselves not dancing at all, or much less than usual: 'I just didn't feel like it... I did classical dance, but it was more like exercise, I didn't really see it as dance. The exercise went fine for me, but as far as dancing or improvisation goes, coming up with new ideas, I didn't have any inspiration. I wanted to dance, but not in that space, not in those conditions' (Violetta Sh., 2020, personal communication). Some did not attend any regular classes but took part in workshops, finding that their preferred format (Mila V., 2020, personal communication).

My personal experience involved trying to build a physical activity routine including ballet workouts and back and leg muscle exercises, but I found it too boring to sustain without the external motivation of a trainer giving me encouragement in-class or correcting me. Instead, I repeated some warm-ups

used in workshops that involved elements of improvisation. This was drastically different from my experience of moving inside my flat when I had COVID-19. During the spring-summer lockdown, the flat felt like too small of a space for movement, while during the illness, it felt too big. The struggle to get out of bed and get to the kitchen was, without any exaggeration, overwhelming. I could not focus on analyzing what was going on, nor could I do any creative work. My hands felt as if the fasciae (the body-wide collagenous web that connects muscles [Myers 2009: 282]) had shortened overnight, and my fingers moved as if I had taken an extremely strong sedative that influenced my coordination and movement.

Even when I got better, my movement still felt extremely unstable. On some days, moving would make me downright overjoyed and I would feel much better, and on other days, I could not drag myself from one room to another without thinking that, perhaps, food was unnecessary after all, and I did not need anything in the other room and had better stay put. All the memes from the first lockdown, about traveling in 2020 (Figure 3), felt like less of a joke and more of an accurate depiction of reality. One day, during my second week in quarantine, I decided to do a little floor work. I tried moving on the floor with as little movement as possible, and still got extremely tired after 30 seconds.

## COMMUTING IN CORONA TIMES

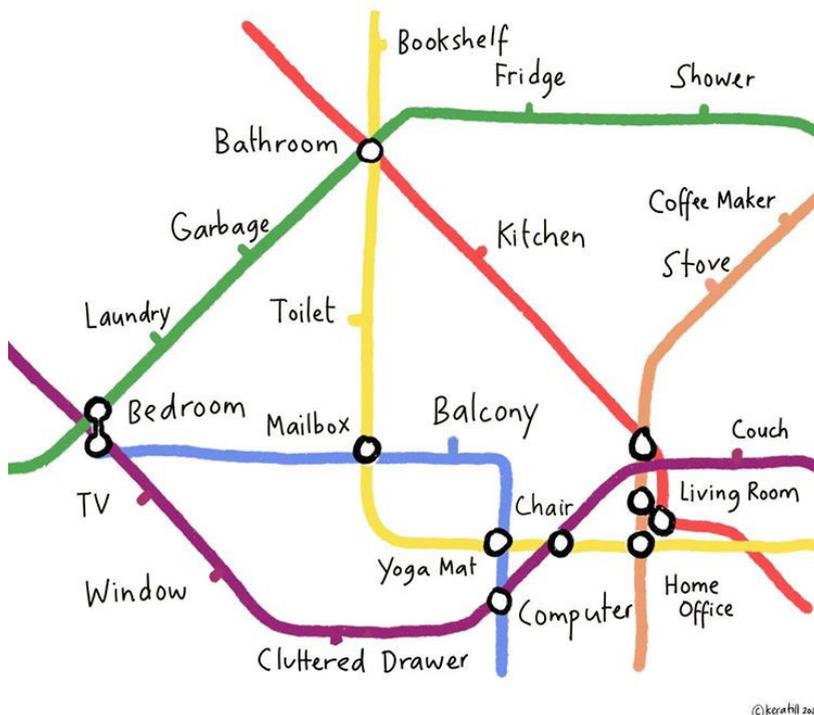


Figure 3. Kera Hill, *Commuting in Corona Times*, 2020 (courtesy of Kera Hill)

Interestingly enough, among people who asked me about my experience of the illness, only dancers who were sick at the same time inquired about the way my moving patterns had changed. My parents, for example, who had already had COVID-19 by the time I got infected, did not ask me about it and could recall their experience of moving only when I asked them about it. With COVID-19, along with the general condition of my body and mind, my capability and willingness to move would fluctuate as if in waves: on some days, I would feel that I needed a stretch, even though I would get incredibly tired from doing it within minutes or seconds; on other days, I would be willing to stay put as much as I could.

My observations in both lockdowns differed drastically, from constant searching for new ways to engage in movement to seeking to move as little as possible. Our experiences of the lockdown and its relationship to movement will be quite different depending on whether we have had COVID-19 or not, and if so, how severe the symptoms were and the extent to which they affected our capacity to move and the quality of movement. It is still too early to draw conclusions as to how post-COVID movement will intersect with thinking about the body and dance, and into thinking through the body.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Throughout my observations during the lockdowns and while conducting the interviews, I noticed that digital, or virtual, space strongly stimulated all sorts of workshop activities. These entailed reinhabiting familiar spaces through bodily practices that were drastically different from the ones previously practiced there. During the lockdown, both dancers and spectators (even when they were the same person) were driven by a sense of exploration, as well as the power of imagination. This is seen through one of the uses of the word 'virtual' in dance literature, as something with potential for being imagined, for coming into being (Burt 2017: 212). Living with choreography and being able to incorporate it straight into bodily practices unrestricted led people to reconsider, and pay more attention to, their kinesthetic perception of choreography and its role in thinking through the body. It is easier to incorporate gestures and choreography when they are lived through right after seeing the performance, which shows how mirror neurons allow us to mimic or repeat and memorize choreography bodily, and which demonstrates that staged choreography can, in certain cases, be embedded into the everyday, blurring the lines between practices and performances of dance and movement.

Dancing at home, however, is not just about renegotiating the space available for dance and performance. It is also about a general trend in dance as a field towards being 'the visible action of life' (Cunningham 2012: 28). Dance has become more honest, moving away from virtuosity and objectifying the body towards treating it gently and prioritizing what is best for the dancer. At least, this is the intention expressed by many of those who had time to themselves during the quarantine and had to rethink their approach

to injuries (Anastasiia D., 2020, personal communication) and bodily practices in general. Since, for many dancers, it has been rather difficult to create under the conditions of heightened anxiety and stress, and more enriching to explore dance in the format of workshops, we observe a movement away from narratives in dance. The rejection of narrative, already prominent in contemporary dance, now opens a path to dance as life itself (Sirotkina 2021: 57).

Another noticeable trend has been a shift towards the gentleness of moving that some of the dancers I interviewed were going to bring into post-pandemic conditions, including being kinder to their body, paying more attention to work-life balance, and eating healthier. Moving with minimal effort, going even further away from displays of virtuosity (Rainer 1974), has grown in importance for those returning to training and rehabilitating their bodies after COVID-19. Many dancers stated that they would like to preserve and maintain this caring attitude to their bodies. Thus, I propose that we can expect to see more happenings and fewer performances in Russian contemporary dance (which is still highly influenced by requirements for strict training and bodily prowess, since many artists come to the contemporary dance field from a ballet background, with its rigorous training to ensure results). This movement towards paying more attention to the body and rediscovering bodily thinking can be attributed to an increased awareness of touch, both exercised and received, that appeared during the COVID-19 pandemic. This took place in the context of heightened anxiety around touch and public health campaigns promoting a change in gestural and movement habits.

1. AN (2020, July 30) Personal communication, FaceTime audio-recorded interview, dance during the lockdown.
2. VSh (2020, August 2) Personal communication, face to face audio-recorded interview, dance during the lockdown.
3. VV (2020, July 29) Personal communication, audio-recorded interview via phone call, dance during the lockdown.
4. MV (2020, September 8) Personal communication, face to face audio-recorded interview, dance during the lockdown.
5. AD (2020, September 11) Personal communication, audio-recorded interview via phone call, dance during the lockdown.
6. This primarily refers to non-disabled bodies.
7. MSh (2020, October 24) Personal communication, face to face audio-recorded interview, dance during the lockdown.

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