

Reflection of THEA360D Project ADRIFT

I am one of the two choreographers and dancers in this project. Before the ensemble was formed, I got a project proposal to create a 3D animated dance video using motion capture. My original proposal was kind of similar to Claire's (note: Claire Woyke is the director of this team project), in that we both targeted "mental illness" as our topic. As a result, I, as the choreographer, joined Claire's group and I illustrated my ideas to Claire first. Originally inspired by "Just dance: Sink or swim" (2017) by Louis-Jack, the main idea of my proposal was to show the character drowning and swirling in his or her psychological struggles, finally got self-salvation in the end. In contemporary societies, people commonly suffer from psychological problems. I am one of those young guys struggling with depression and anxiety, and as an artist, I am often trying to make artworks around those topics or literally, just to do some artistic self-expression through a series of art forms. I usually evince my interpretation of despondency in an abstract way. I hope that my audience can recognize my rendering first when observing my artworks, then perceive a sense of desolation from them. Solitude is permanently a popular topic and easily causes mental illness. As long as my works elicit empathy or even just "sympathy", which means by then my audience would comprehend deep in their heart by themselves, my works would have various versions of positive meaning. When this is applied to choreography, one feature of my choreography is that the movements always include

twisted limbs and convex/concave body. Another thing worth mentioning is, I have a devised theatre background, which means my performances always include improvisational components. Therefore, as a choreographer, I am used to assigning tasks — I call them “movements tasks”, for the dancers to memorize and then do partly improvised performances on stage. From my perspective, this is an efficient way to arouse performers’ innovation and creativity. This method is also relevant to “the Happenings”, which is a postmodern art concept that advocates contemporary arts to focus on the liveness and liveliness, as well as the accidental part of the art-making process (Hedden & Milling, 2006, p. 73-74). Since the choreography created by this methodology performed excellently in this project, I would like to continually use it as an effective tool for choreography in my future performance projects including live shows and films.

I emphasized Louis-Jack’s “Just dance: Sink or swim” (2017) to our team before we got the shooting plan, especially to Claire. Claire loved this dance film because the choreography in this dance film is combined with modern dance and conventional ballet. I would say modern dance is fabulously applicable to demonstrate the struggles. Claire agreed on this idea and got inspired. She assured me to choreograph by modern dance and also invited Samantha Nascimento (Sam) to work together with me. Claire hopes Sam could take the ballet part of the performance and choreograph based on ballet. We three had a series of discussions and idea exchanging at the

beginning of the project. We all agreed that if we can take advantage of the spinning elements of ballet, we can easily interpret the conceptions of swirling or drowning. We also got the concept of the flow of soft fabrics and hair and the fluidity of body movements inspired by Nick Cave's fabric sculptures from "Soundsuits" and "Chicago" (2016). We were encouraged by a short advertising video called "Smooth (the swim)" (2016) by Klarna as well. Flowing, smooth, watery, floating, melting...adjectives like that then came out gradually. Claire liked the "hair" concept and introduced this to the animation team. We did actually refer to these designs when the animators were creating the animated characters. However, due to the unexpected COVID-19 pandemic, we at last, unfortunately, could not accomplish this goal anymore. The animation team explained that due to the tremendous amount of rendering time and the fact that they had to move from the school dormitory, they were unable to meet our original plan but leave the project unfinished. The instructor permitted the arrangement and we all show understanding. However, since we kept our documentation and the unfinished project, which is still a good piece, we can redesign the animation and even make it better after the pandemic is gone.

The song we used to apply was *Effleurer Du Doigt, Déplacer Les Masses* by RQTN, because we thought this fit our project conception. Slowly progressing melodies with a climax happening towards the end of the song, and we planned to choreograph responding to this. Nonetheless, we realized that technically we cannot

do a 2-minute piece within 3 months (the project was expected to be completed in early April, while the preproduction began in late January), so we turned to using my song called “Fall”. I wrote this song within a similar construct likewise. “Falling down, losing all, mental struggling”. Just like its title, I aimed to build an image of collapsed, fragmented and swirling psychological journeys. Considering the technical difficulties and the feasibility to accomplish a project within this short 3 months period, Claire cut the original song into a decent 1-minute piece by my advice and we added a pause with a deep breath sound effect into it, in between the unfolding prelude and the sharp-turned first climax of the song. Then Sam and I started to choreograph on site. The making process of our choreography was actually divided into two phases, one was the choreography for the performance, the other was the choreography for motion capture. In late January, Sam and I met in the lighting studio at C building to try to visualize Claire’s notes of her choreography imagery as our first studio workshop. Anoop was the cameraman and documented what we choreographed (Links: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1tdvg9dulf5yXKR1U2BIvrszdUtd_CI5E).

Claire’s notes had 5 sections in which she hoped we could get 5 independent series of movements. The edited version of my song “Fall” was also divided into 5 sections and we needed to follow the divided melodies to properly create corresponding movements. Those 5 ideas originally were:

1. Depression – black tar, slow movements, raising from the floor.
2. Bipolar – one blob forms a shadow that is trying to escape, maybe both doing different dance moves, trying to be independent of each other
3. OCD - the two snap together forming one body and an eye appears on the head with arrows piercing out of it, eventually taking over the body forming the particles for Alzheimer's. Starts to do ballet perfectly and when it morphs into Alzheimer's they start to stumble and forget the steps
4. Alzheimer's – asphyxia, particles fly away and strings unwind to show the static body of anxiety underneath (while spinning?)
5. Anxiety – static particles in the shape of a human form, jittery/stop and go contemporary dance, slowly fade out covering the screen

According to these notes, I built my own interpretation as it would work for the choreography better. I concluded five comparable ideas by five adjectives: depressed, extreme, obsessive, forgetful and anxious. To some extent, I also found there is relevance and transforming relationships between depression and anxiety. As a consequence of my own experience that I am suffering from mild depression and minor anxiety, these two mental issues are interchangeable and always happen to us simultaneously. Four years ago, I was diagnosed with minor depression. I kept taking

medicines since then and I gradually found I hardly felt depressed anymore, instead, my anxiety made up my main psychological problem. Therefore, I decided to make the end of choreography echo the beginning. I intended the choreography to start with me squatting and huddling, with hands and arms wrapping around the knees, and end with the exactly the same gesture. Sam had a similar idea. In order to leave potential options for the end of choreography, we recorded four versions of the anxiety part with different endings. We eventually chose the idea of echoing and produced our final video this way.

I used to take charge of the first, second, third and fifth sections. Here is my first version of notes for choreography:

1. depression crouch/pray/look up/raise up hands (stretch as much as possible trying to catch something)/kneeling/crawl (the cat)
2. bipolar stand up/walk/lose balance/stumble (face to face opposite way) the when opposite character vanishes, the mirroring appears
3. (mirroring) hold the position/ repetition of OCD behaviors/stand still/repetition (toes touch four points to draw a square, repeat this)/arm drawing (space cat) back to neutral body “hand wash”
4. Ballet
5. Popping/Shaking/trembling/nervous/jittery/commedia dell'arte?

As a result, for the first section, the “depressed”, I assigned these tasks to myself: from a low position, reach out my hands to a higher position; pray or trying to send SOS message or looking for help; from the interior to the exterior; squat, self-struggle, crawl, kneel, shove, from body extension to body contraction. After several experiments, I fine-tuned this part as the clip shows. However, when this piece of choreography got motion-captured because the precision of our MoCap equipment is not as high as we needed, the model collapsed when my arms, feet and hands got crossed and overlapped. I had to specially modify my choreography to fit the MoCap environment. I tried to split my limbs without touching and simplify the choreography — try not to crossover, not to twist my limbs too much. I did some MoCap filming later with the revamped version of the choreography. Finally, Claire collaborated with Sam to make another simplified edition of this part, following the basic design of my original choreography, then we adopted that one. I also figured out the camera angle design for this part. For example, I would like the view to track the hands stretching towards the ceiling, followed by a pausing transition and a shift of scene with the deep breath sound. I showed a demo of my cinematography to the first part of the performance to Claire and she appreciated what I had designed. We then came to an agreement and showed the demo to the animation team. The animators accepted this with excitement and made the animation of this part as planned.

For the second part, I used adjectives like split, opposite, extreme, paradoxical. It

thus became a duet. Sam and I decided to stand still, overlapping each other, face to face, and the task is to utilize our upper body to draw a square by four points as music as we can. In order to show the contradiction of personality, my order of movements is “top right, bottom left, bottom right and stroke to top left.” Sam’s order is exactly the opposite (from my view): bottom left, top right, top left and bottom right. We need to try our best to stretch our arms and fingers when doing this drawing. We kept this idea when it came to motion capture and this worked well. I designed the camera angle to encircle around the figures and the director and postproduction team members adopted this to make the final production. Compulsive people abnormally force themselves to do something meaningless multiple times, which usually influences negatively on their normal life. Anoop was reading OCD’s definition on Wikipedia when Sam and I were thinking about how to interpret the feeling of OCD to the choreography. I was then inspired by the behaviour of “washing hands repeatedly” from the definition (“Obsessive-compulsive disorder”). Inspired by this, I got the task for the “OCD” - “obsessive” part. Use two hands to draw circles in front of my chest and make the circle become bigger and bigger; keep drawing circles until the circle is the biggest one that my arms can draw; then the circle starts to eat me, to flood me — with two hands wrapping up my head — indicating the obsession finally filled up my mind and then I was losing my mind and got lost in my mindfulness. The speed of the circle drawing gets intense as the melody goes, except for the last two

biggest rounds. We adopted this choreography and this part worked well both in Motion Builder and Maya.

Sam took charge of the choreography for the fourth part “forgetful”. We kept the initial idea to do an elegant piece of dance based on ballet. The only note I had for this one was: while repeating the entire choreography for the second time, try to make some obvious changes to a certain small part of it, increase the speed of movements and the tension of power here, going against the peaceful melody. Sam succeeded in this and the animation was applied a highlight of this by four abrupt spins, which disrupts the rhythm. In my opinion, everyone keeps losing memories. When we get worried about some important reminiscences, we try to recall but fail, we may probably have been experiencing a similar situation without consciousness.

Nonetheless, we can never copy anything exactly the same, the point is to look forward to the future rather than be trapped by the past. Following this idea, Sam’s choreography for this part was successful to express the essentials of “forgetfulness”.

For the last part, “anxious”, my original idea was to utilize space cat, with full convex and concave body as well as “stop and go” with flow and tension, to do an improvised piece. However, Claire suggested that we would better fine-tune every piece of choreography so that we could save time and effort for animators to succeed in postproduction, so soon we quit this idea. Sam took this part, created another gorgeous piece of ballet styled choreography and integrated this part into the fourth

one so that the choreography became continuous and coherent within the fourth and last sections. This also helps the movements fit the song because from the beginning of the fourth section the melody is consistent until the end.

I also came up with the cinematography for the last part. Anxiety reminds me of when I am extremely anxious, sometimes I feel the world is going spinning and upside down. Therefore, in order to show nervousness, I suggested the camera angle go for a vertical spinning while Sam was doing a horizontal spinning dance. Then the scene should have a cross-shaped dynamic balance there, which should be strongly immersive and impressive. Claire and the animation team were excited about this idea. Arsalan Sadiq (the main animator and film editor) agreed and said this was technically super easy to accomplish. The strong emotional engagement and the empathetic arousal caused by this were proved when I saw this part of performance in the final production. The cinematography and choreography integrated beautifully with other and together led to a peaceful and solid ending. I then realized I can always use this idea to shoot and edit films to express melancholy or unhinged feelings in my future productions.

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