

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Bruce Hooke

A Cool Cushion Between Realities

by Ellen Chenoweth

I walked down a long, dim hallway, unsure what to expect at the end. Cool blue lights were strung along the baseboard, leading me into a dance studio transformed to an installation, designed and built in a week by the three-person team of Seattle choreographer KT Niehoff, architect Cameron Irwin, virtual-reality designer Jake Fennell, and a small squad of volunteers. I felt like I was entering an aquarium or a spaceship, everything in a palette of soothing blue and white. Whether I was underwater or in the air, the experience of *Before We Flew Like Birds, We Flew Like Clouds* was new.

The installation was part of a festival weekend at Earthdance Creative Living Project in late September. Most widely known as a home for contact improvisation jams and workshops, [Earthdance](#), located in Plainfield, Massachusetts, partnered with Dance Films Association for The IMAGINE Festival: Film, Technology, & the Body in Action. (I was also one of the invited artists.)

In the studio, large spherical white balloons (more sci-fi fantasy than kid's birthday party balloons), encased in structures of blue straws, were calibrated to remain at audience level. The room, suffused with a gentle calmness, also conveyed a sense of wonder. Four translucent pods, built to fit one person at a time, and each with a virtual reality headset sculpture at its center, hovered in the room. The artists acted as docents when needed.

These elements—balloons, pods, blue-white environment, headset sculptures—were supportive scaffolding for the heart of the work: four short, virtual-reality films. Each film explored an extraordinary experience of embodiment, with the four central narrators including an astronaut, a professional speed skater, a paraplegic athlete, and a near-death experience survivor. Three of the films featured the performers talking about their histories, the way they think about their body, or how they like to use it. The fourth, focused on astronaut Soyeon Yi, showed a movement sequence filmed on top of a mountain. Animations flew by Yi's head, including white balloons encased in blue lines, a beautiful blurring of realities. Movement was presented as another way of telling a story, as legible as the text-based

narratives.

Despite the coolness of the lights, there was nothing cold about my experience. As I slipped on a headset for the first time in one of the pods, [Niehoff](#) gently guided my hands and head into position with her own hands. Audience members were free to stay in the space for as long as they liked, and to view the videos in any order they chose, or go back for repeat viewings. The freedom was glorious and allowed each viewer time to process as needed. The attention to detail was impeccable; my glasses had their own resting nook inside the pod and each of the headsets was a sculpture designed to reflect the subject of the corresponding video.

Every previous VR experience I've had has only helped me get in touch with my inner crank. Usually I take off any kind of viewing apparatus with mild relief and primly think to myself that regular reality is just fine for me, thank you very much. This was the first time I felt VR live up to its promise of letting the user swim around in someone else's experience, to feel what it's like to be in a body different from your own. It felt exactly right that a choreographer should be the one to lead this discovery. An expert in leading bodies through time and space, as Niehoff is, naturally has an advantage in guiding bodies through a virtual space. The balloon-filled studio acted as a buffer zone, mediating between the different realities. More like floating than flying, the sensation has stayed with me, a blue journey to someplace I hadn't been before.

The IMAGINE Festival: Film, Technology, & the Body in Action, September 30 – October 1,

Earthdance Creative Living Project, Plainfield, MA. <http://www.earthdance.net/imagine>

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