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Choreographer Jess Curtis is back with exploration of social media

By Allan Ulrich

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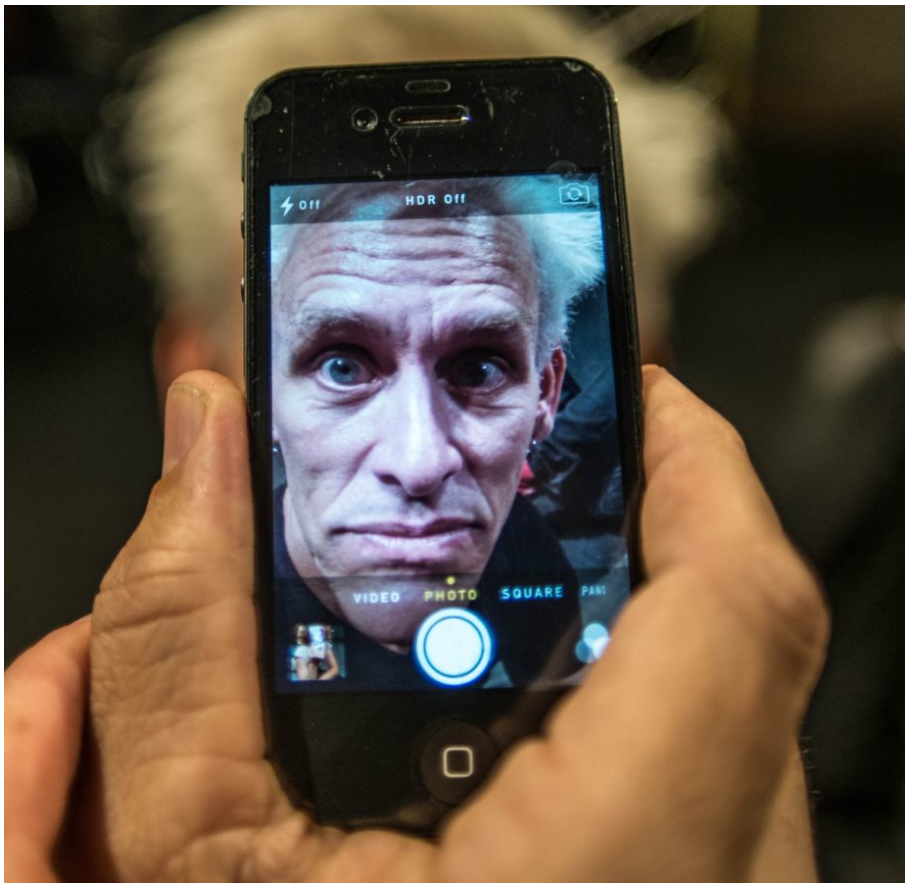
Jess Curtis, who splits time between California and Berlin, will premiere his new piece, “The Dance That Documents Itself,” in S.F.

Jess Curtis is the kind of dance artist who asks questions in public. They happen to be the important questions, like what should be the place of technology in our lives? These days, Curtis, who was one of the founding members of the Contraband troupe decades ago, splits his time between his native California and Berlin. This month, he’s back in town with his Gravity company for a multimedia world premiere. We chatted a couple of weeks ago.



Q: How would you describe what you do professionally?
A: I usually refer to myself as a choreographer-director, and depending on how many words I get in a bio, also performer, and that can trail off into researcher, teacher and writer.

Q: In words of three syllables, what is your new work about?
A: It’s about several things. At the center of it is a look at the incredible explosion of our ability as humans to document our lives on an ongoing basis through social media. Then, from the inception, I have been daily posting on our Facebook page

everything, including our grant proposals, making everything transparent for the audience before they come to the theater. How, we wonder, is this affecting our process?
On the other hand, at a certain level, I think the amount of time we spend potentially taking selfies of ourselves and reporting our status five times a day, at a certain point tips over into a solipsistic self-reflection that becomes less productive, particularly for body-based artists. How does it take away from my time in the studio when I've got to stop to post my latest Vimeo?

Q: Isn't this craze for selfies a form of narcissism?
A: I think it can be. The selfie thing can also be informative and generous, depending on how one uses it. I see people creating very odd and beautiful things with them. The history of art includes many artists who have made portraits of themselves; how you use the tools is what matters.

Q: How have selfies affected you?
A: They have shifted my visual awareness, my visual literacy. I passed something the other day and thought it would make a beautiful image, and I had a moment and thought, don't shoot it, just notice it.

Q: You first moved to Europe in 1998. Now, you have permanent resident status in Germany. What is it about Berlin that appeals to you?
A: The economy. Berlin is an affordable place for young, body-based artists who need cheap living and rehearsal space, thus generating a food chain of the young coming in and training, learning, auditioning and being available for old guys like me. I don't know how poor young dancers can even think of coming to San Francisco these days, but in Germany, speculative profiteering does not outweigh the public duty to house people.

Allan Ulrich is The San Francisco Chronicle's dance correspondent.
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If you go
Jess Curtis/Gravity: The Dance That Documents Itself: 8:30 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 4-Sunday, Dec. 7. Through Dec. 14. $20-$30. CounterPulse, 1310 Mission St., S.F. (877) 297-6805. www.counterpulse.org.

Original Link: http://www.sfgate.com/performance/article/Choreographer-Jess-Curtis-is-back-with-5932977.php