When I entered CounterPulse to watch Jess Curtis/Gravity’s *The Dance That Documents Itself*, words were projected across the side and back walls of the performance space: *concrete block, side, water pipe*. On some level, of course, I knew those structures were there, but I had not really thought about the fact that the space necessitated their presence. In front of the projections sat one of the performers, Dag Andersson. He was seated in a folding chair, engaged in a text conversation on his smartphone.

*The Dance That Documents Itself* is a collaboration between choreographer/director Jess Curtis, video artist David Szlasa, and sound artist Sheldon Smith and features performers Rachael Dichter, Abby Crain, and Dag Anderson.

The first section began when Jess Curtis entered the space. He took a few selfies, and then handed his phone to one of the audience members. “Take a picture when you see something interesting,” he said. He then walked to the center of the performance area. “I’m standing,” he announced. He lifted his arms. “I’m raising my hands,” he said. The section continued for a while, eventually ending with Curtis invoking an articulated version of Bruce Nauman’s 1967 film *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*.

Dag just sat there, texting.

Eventually Abby Crain entered. She and Curtis exchanged short, text-like prompts. “Slouch,” ordered Crain, and Curtis obeyed. “Stand up straight,” Curtis retorted, and
Crain corrected her posture.

Dag finally moved. He began filming himself with his phone, and the images were projected onto the walls surrounding the performance area.

The performers were joined by Rachel Dichter. They moved, danced, directed each other, or communicated in terse sentence fragments, all the while filming their actions. The walls of the space shimmered with video, as well as the captured images from the audience.

Sixty minutes into the piece the intermission was announced. Curtis left the theatre and rode his bicycle through San Francisco’s Mission District, intermittently stopping at closed down performance venues and talking about the experiences he had had at each venue. The ride was broadcast onto the walls of the theatre from a camera Curtis had attached to his body.

Near the end of the piece a naked Curtis stood next to a scantily-clad Rachel Dichter. For several minutes, the couple exchanged a series of I want you… prompts that were sad and tender. “I want you to be able to afford a house and health insurance,” Curtis said. “I want a puppy,” Dichter responded. “I want you to be able to afford a house a puppy would enjoy,” Curtis replied.

The irony of these poignant moments was that the technology used to capture them was the reason many of the venues Curtis visited on his bike ride were forced to close. Landlords and other real-estate investors, eager to get a piece of tech-industry money, had raised rents so high, they forced art spaces out of the area.

The Dance That Documents Itself is more than a bit of nostalgia; it asks us to question the vulnerability of artists in the city’s new economy. Like the projected labels in the beginning of the piece, we need to remember that what we often think of as the formative elements of our culture rest on the unrecognized efforts of artists and performers who need affordable space to continue their work.

The Dance That Documents Itself ran December 4 - 14 at CounterPulse in San Francisco.