

## In the Dance Lab With Martha Graham

By **GIA KOURLAS** May 25, 2018

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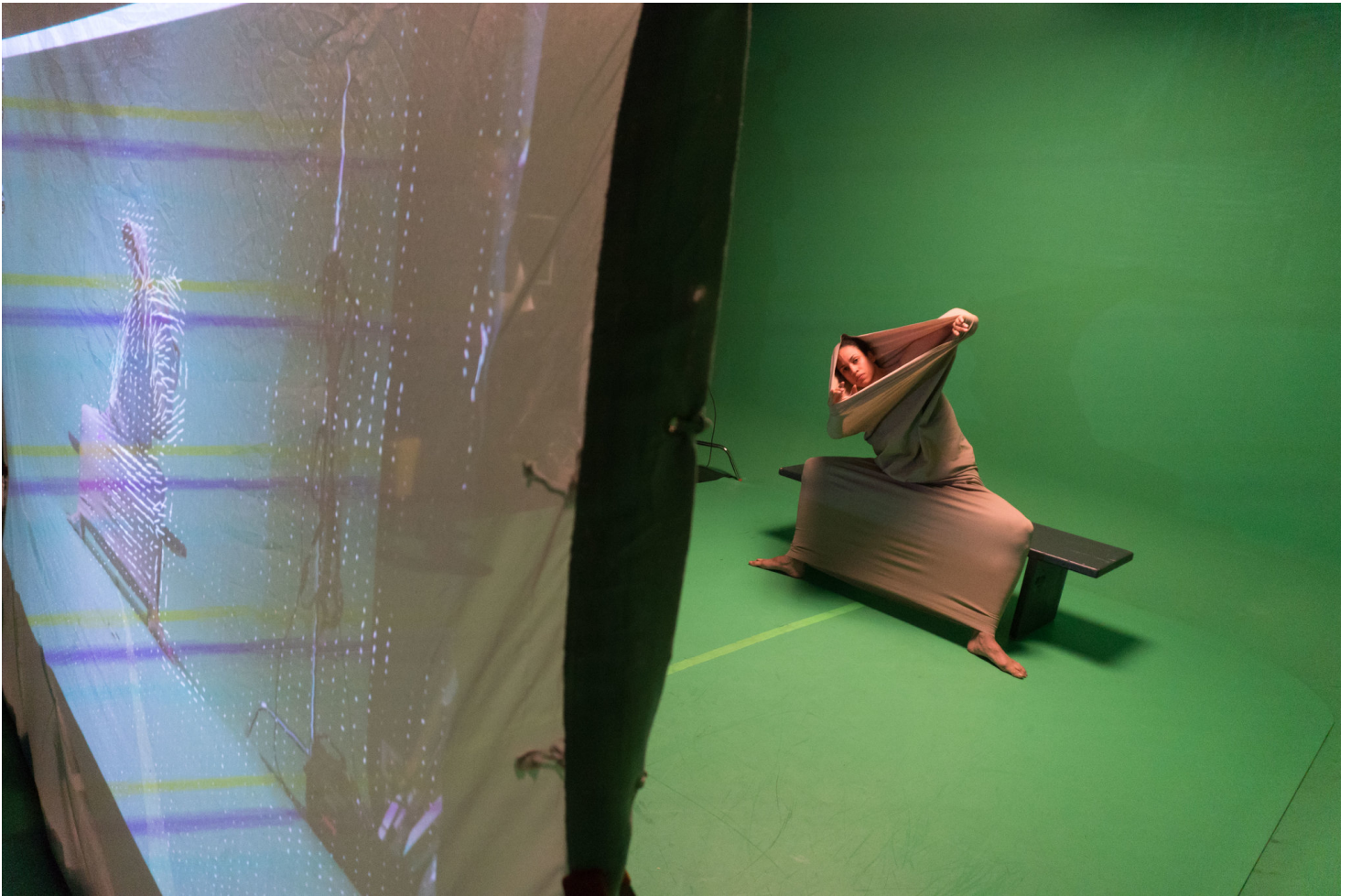


Laurel Dalley Smith during the Martha Graham Dance Company's Google residency. Ramsay de Givé for The New York Times

At Google's New York offices, a tiny room with bright green walls and a maze of wires had been transformed into something resembling a science lab, by way of a Danny Kaye movie. But instead of microscopes and white coats, there were dancers and leotards.

The dancers' bodies were wired to move, though not just for movement's sake: This was a laboratory for dance experiments.

Google — through Google Arts and Culture — is on a mission to find new ways of braiding technology with culture. For two weeks in May it partnered with the Martha Graham Dance Company for a residency in which members of the Graham team worked with artists and Google technologists on several experiments. (Google has held several artist residencies in its lab in Paris, but this is the first time dance has been featured.)



Archival imagery of the "Lamentation" solo was projected onto Ms. Diamond-Walker as she moved. Ramsay de Givie for The New York Times

Why the Graham company? For M.J. Newman, the project lead at Google, the relationship with the Graham organization is, in part, because of its forward-thinking mentality. "The Graham center has always been very eager about being on the cutting-edge of technology and looking for what's new," he said. "They were the first ones that jumped into my head."

It's fitting: The company's founder, Martha Graham (1894-1991), was a revolutionary. Considered the mother of modern dance, she transformed her art form by stripping her movement, rooted in the pelvis, down to its purest essence.

This isn't the first time the Graham organization and Google have teamed up. The first came in 2011 when [they created the Google doodle](#) in honor of Graham's 117th birthday. Next, beginning in 2015, was a partnership with Google Arts and Culture [to create exhibitions for the Google site](#).

During the recent residency, some projects were more successful than others, but all were well worth watching: Dancers moved silkily inside 3D environments that were then projected onto screens for mixed-reality experiences. Graham's "Lamentation," from 1930, was reimagined using archival imagery of the solo projected onto a moving dancer. And a Graham dance was captured in 3D, transforming Anne Souder, in a motion-capture suit, into an avatar — like a figure in a video game — when her performance was transferred to the screen.

The residency didn't just expand the Graham company's relationship with Google. It was also a continuation of what Janet Eilber, the group's artistic director, has been doing for years — [experimenting with Graham's core collection of works and technique](#).

"We have discovered that the essential Graham canon — the very best of Graham — is so pure that it can be dressed up in a whole variety of ways and still speak clearly," Ms. Eilber said in an interview. "You can decorate it in many different ways or use it as a springboard for many different things." For Ms. Eilber, technology is a tool with which to do that.



Would Graham approve? "She, if anyone, understood and desired new ways of getting to audiences," Ms. Eilber said. "Martha wanted those techniques."



Janet Eilber, the Graham company's artistic director, said of Martha Graham: "She, if anyone, understood and desired new ways of getting to audiences. Martha wanted those techniques." Ramsay de Giv for The New York Times

## Lab Work

"Let's do the pelvis," the visual artist SoHyun Bae said in one of the sessions.

Ms. Bae was [referring to "Pelvic Terrain," from her "Jasper Lake" series](#) of paintings that inspired a new work created with [Tilt Brush — a Google tool used to make 3D paintings](#). The result was a virtual-reality environment for dance improvisation.

As the Graham dancer Natasha Diamond-Walker put on a virtual-reality headset, Ms. Bae said, "Just think of yourself as water."

Onlookers couldn't see what Ms. Diamond-Walker was looking at through the headset — the environment Ms. Bae had created — but her sudden stillness registered that she was enthralled. "Oh, wow," she said softly. "I see a pelvis here. And a tailbone."

Gradually, Ms. Diamond-Walker began to move, stretching ribbonlike arms as she carved through the space. Ms. Eilber asked three other dancers, Laurel Dalley-Smith, Xin Ying and Ms. Souder, to enter the performance area, one by one. "You decide when to come in," she said. "Build off the nymph that goes in before you."

The three additional dancers, headset-free and interacting with Ms. Diamond-Walker, mirrored movement quality of one another, sequentially. It was a sensual, gossamer melding of bodies that grew increasingly layered.

When it was over, Ms. Diamond-Walker described the environment she had seen in the headset: "You could see the brush strokes — there were no sharp endings. It was feathered out and curved like a ripple almost, like if you had dropped something into water."

It's a sensorial shift for dancers to enter virtual reality, one that has changed their relationship with their bodies and with their dancing. "You become so absorbed in your world that it's almost freer," Ms. Dalley-Smith said. "You're not so self-conscious; you're not thinking or just feeling about what's coming next. You're fed by this world."



Anne Souder, Xin Ying, Laurel Dalley Smith in a virtual reality experiment. Ramsay de Giv for The New York Times