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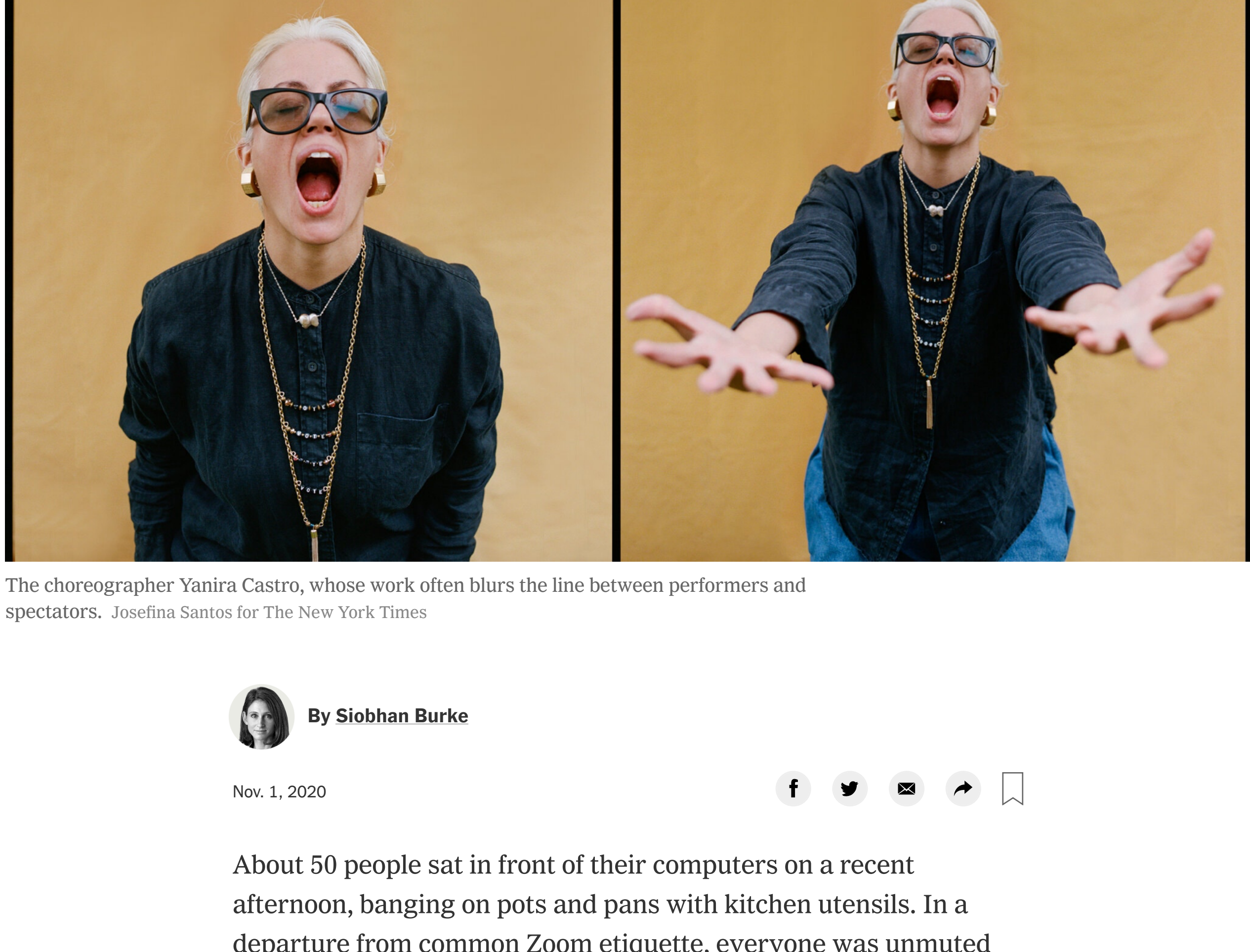
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Make Some Noise and Move: A Choreographer Provides Instructions

"I really didn't want it to be about the screen," Yanira Castro said about adapting a work for the pandemic. Instead, she made scores to try at home.



The choreographer Yanira Castro, whose work often blurs the line between performers and spectators. *Josefina Santos for The New York Times*

 By Siobhan Burke

Nov. 1, 2020



About 50 people sat in front of their computers on a recent afternoon, banging on pots and pans with kitchen utensils. In a departure from common Zoom etiquette, everyone was unmuted and making as much noise as possible. What began as an attempt to find a synchronized beat quickly unraveled into clanging, joyful chaos.

This group activity, based on a choreographic score called “Thunderous Clash,” was an online introduction to a largely offline project, Yanira Castro’s [“Last Audience: A Performance Manual.”](#) Before participants left the Zoom event, they received a PDF of the score — basically a set of written instructions — so that they could try it in full on their own. (The complete “Thunderous Clash,” inspired by the form of pot-banging protest known as a [cacerolazo](#), Spanish for casserole, calls for running and shouting with a large group of people, “for a good long time.”)

“Last Audience: A Performance Manual” is an effort to maintain the liveliness of performance by handing over the instructions for a work’s creation. The manual, to be released in November by the [Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago](#), contains 28 scores from Ms. Castro’s 2019 work “Last Audience,” adapted so that anyone can try them at home. The scores involve everyday movement and household items — no dance training or elaborate materials required.

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Ms. Castro, 49, a choreographer whose work often blurs the line between performers and spectators, had planned to bring “Last Audience” to MCA Chicago this fall. But as the coronavirus pandemic escalated in the spring, the museum began to rethink its fall programming without in-person gatherings.

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A canary torsi, Ms. Castro’s group, performing in “Last Audience” at New York Live Arts in October 2019. *Maria Baranova*

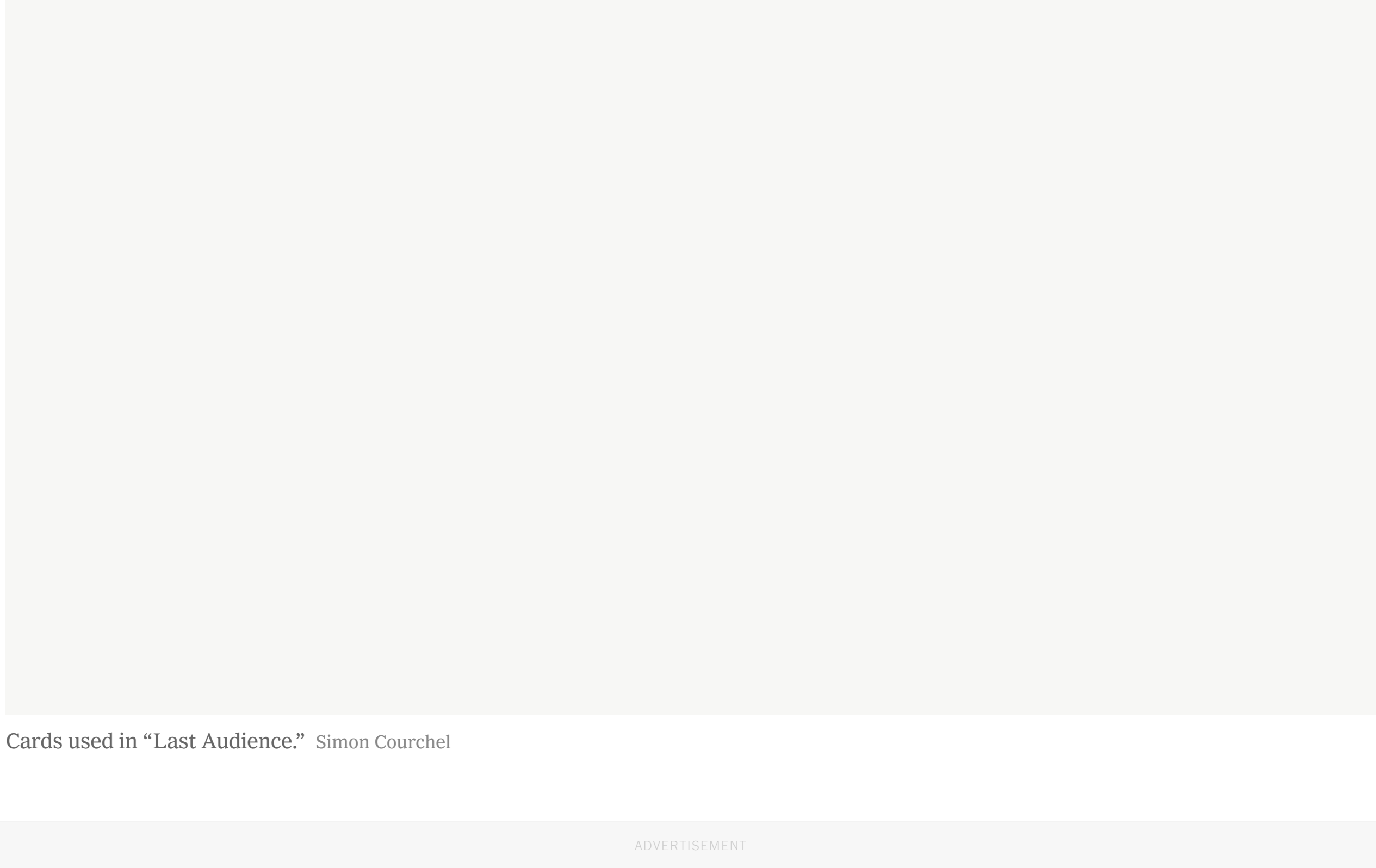
Rather than canceling or rescheduling the engagement, Tara Aisha Willis, a curator of performance at the museum, invited Ms. Castro to reimagine “Last Audience” in an another format. While many choreographers were adapting to digital spaces, making dance films and Zoom dances, Ms. Castro felt herself pulled in a different direction.

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“I’ve found watching dance to be really hard online,” she said in a phone interview. “There are times when it has made me cry, because I just want to be there.” For her project, she wanted people to have an experience “really rooted in their bodies.”

“I really didn’t want it to be about the screen,” she said.

“Last Audience,” which had its [premiere last year at New York Live Arts](#), lends itself naturally to the form of a do-it-yourself manual. It relies on scores that can be written down, functioning as a script or stage directions. And it’s highly participatory, contingent on the active involvement of an audience, while also interested in audience refusal and ambivalence. The process of creating the manual, Ms. Castro said, “in some ways felt like the project becoming more itself.”



Cards used in “Last Audience.” *Simon Couchel*

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In the stage version, Ms. Castro and several members of her company, [a canary torsi](#) (an anagram of her name), guide participants through a series of scores that change with each performance. (The idea, she said, was to keep the performers “in a place of discovery with the audience.”) When I attended last year, I was asked to join a chorus whispering variations on the phrase “have mercy,” and to illuminate the space around me with a flashlight. The stage teemed with activity, as individuals and groups completed various tasks, or declined to take them on.

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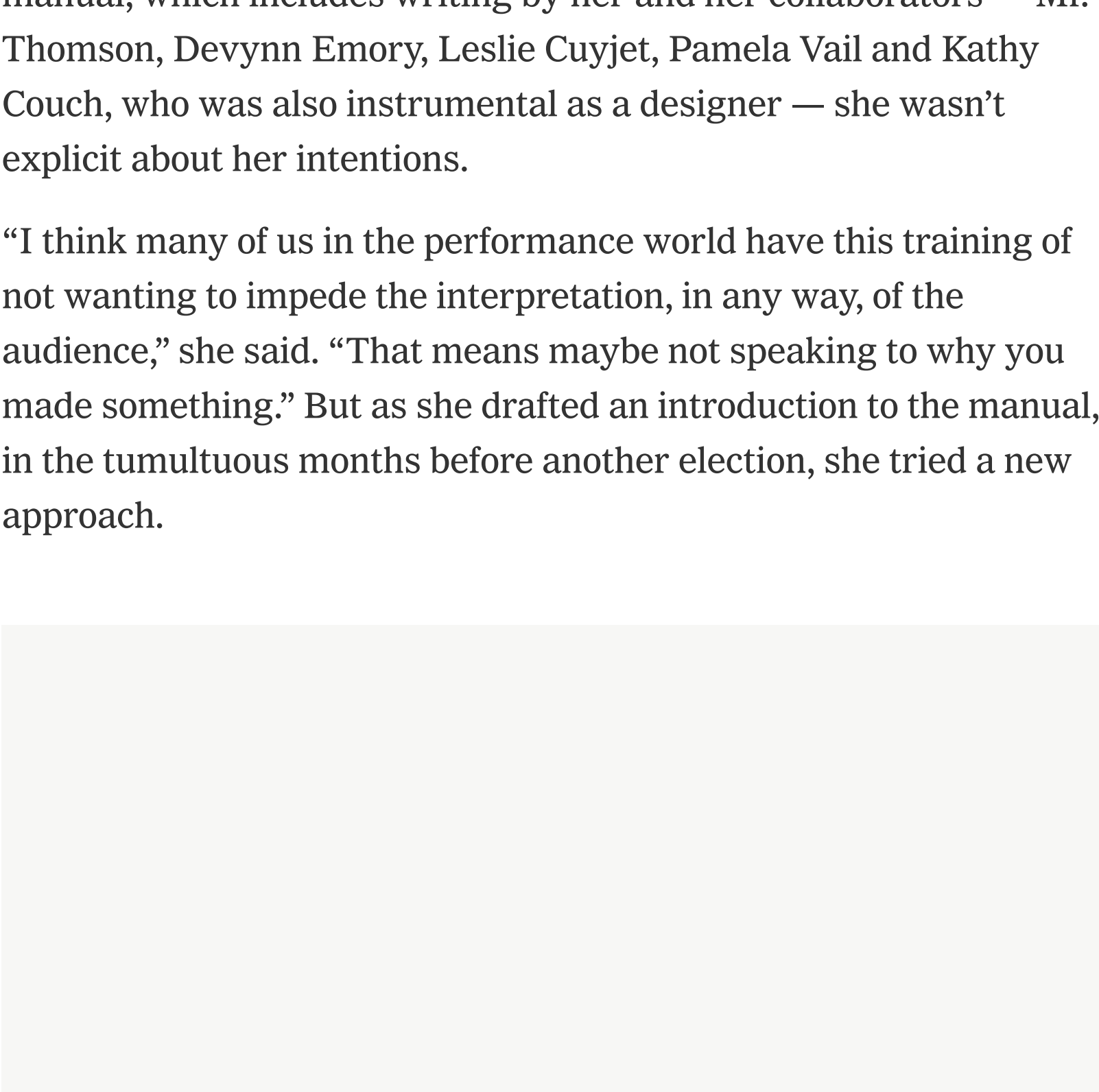
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“It’s energetically a lot to negotiate,” said David Thomson, one of the performer-guides, reflecting on his role in the show. “It’s like having a party. Some people are bored, and you have to be OK with it, and other people are unruly.”

For the audience-participants, it was unclear what would happen next, or why; you were just along for the ride. The manual reveals much more, not only the scores themselves, but also some of the thinking behind them. Ms. Castro, who was born in Puerto Rico and lives in Brooklyn, began creating “Last Audience” in response to the 2016 presidential election and what she calls “a real reckoning for the country.” (She also notes how ubiquitous the word “reckoning” has since become.) But until assembling the manual, which includes writing by her and her collaborators — Mr. Thomson, Devynn Emory, Leslie Cuyjet, Pamela Vail and Kathy Couch, who was also instrumental as a designer — she wasn’t explicit about her intentions.

“I think many of us in the performance world have this training of not wanting to impede the interpretation, in any way, of the audience,” she said. “That means maybe not speaking to why you made something.” But as she drafted an introduction to the manual, in the tumultuous months before another election, she tried a new approach.

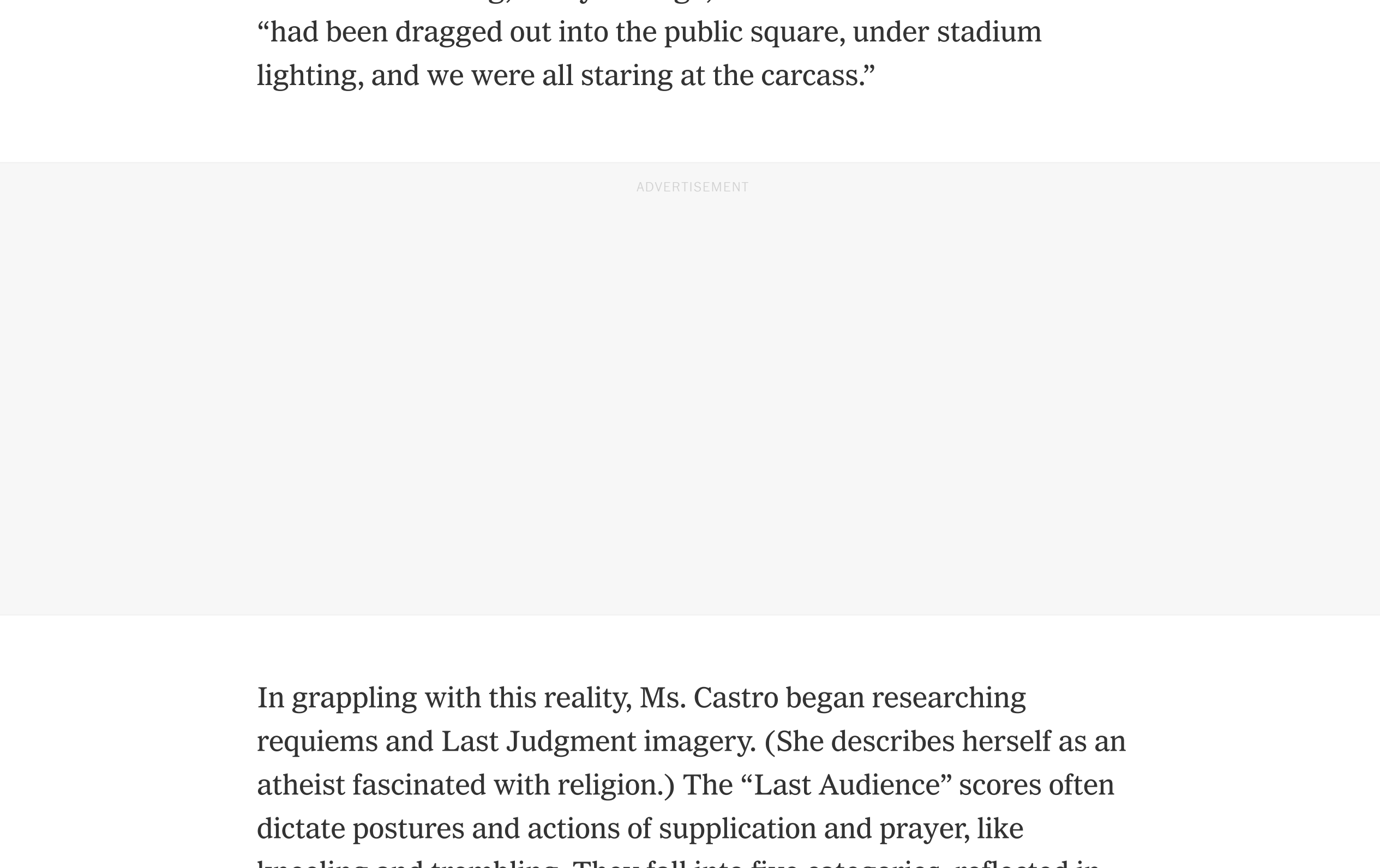


“I’m going to do that thing I never do, which is to say: This is why I did this piece.” *Josefina Santos for The New York Times*

“I’m going to do that thing I never do, which is to say: This is why I did this piece,” she recalled thinking. “I’m going to tell you directly why, and it’s about slavery, it’s about genocide, it’s about our common American history.” In the introduction, she writes about her visceral feeling, four years ago, that these violent histories “had been dragged out into the public square, under stadium lighting, and we were all staring at the carcass.”

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In grappling with this reality, Ms. Castro began researching requiems and Last Judgment imagery. (She describes herself as an atheist fascinated with religion.) The “Last Audience” scores often dictate postures and actions of supplication and prayer, like kneeling and trembling. They fall into five categories, reflected in the titles of the five booklets that make up the full publication: “One Body,” “Sever,” “Judgment,” “Mercy” and “Blessing.” Ms. Willis, the curator who worked closely with Ms. Castro, describes the booklet format as “somewhere between an instruction manual and a prayer book.”



A spread from the “Mercy” manual. The curator Tara Aisha Willis describes the booklet format as “somewhere between an instruction manual and a prayer book.” *via Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago*

While the project takes “an analog approach to the moment,” Ms. Willis said, it also has some digital components. An accompanying website, [lastaudience.com](#), provides video and audio recordings to help with enacting some of the scores. Participants are also asked to document their performances with photographs of the household items or spaces they used — pots and spoons, for instance — and upload them to the website, where they become part of a publicly viewable archive.

Anyone who purchases the manual (which is also available as a PDF) is invited to join an online gathering on Dec. 13, around a meal of arroz con gandules (rice and pigeon peas), a Puerto Rican dish that Ms. Castro served before live performances of “Last Audience.” The manual includes a recipe, its own kind of score, so that anyone can make the dish and bring it to the Zoom table. The Chicago-based artist and chef Jorge Felix will join Ms. Castro and members of her company for a conversation about food and other forms of nourishment.

The online meal is also a chance for people to discuss their experiences with the scores, even if they have only read them. Ms. Castro said she has no fixed expectations for how people will use the manual. “It’s hopefully a gift that’s like, you can do this if you want,” she said. Some might choose to do the scores in full. But for her, “being present with the page” is also enough, its own kind of live experience.

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