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Narcissister's Performance of Race, Disavowal, and Aspiration

Ariel Osterweis



While spending some time during the winter of 1801 in M., one evening in the public gardens I chanced upon Herr C., who had been recently engaged as the leading dancer at the opera house and who had found exceptional success with the public there. I mentioned how surprised I had been to notice him on several occasions attending a marionette theatre that had been set up in the local market place, which entertained the masses with short dramatic burlesques interspersed with song and dance. He assured me that the performance of these puppets was a source of great pleasure to him, and he made it quite clear that a dancer who wished to improve himself could learn a great deal from observing them.

—Heinrich von Kleist ([1810] 1972:22)

By performing striptease and its reversal, Narcissister takes on roles such as Angela Davis, Marie Antoinette, Josephine Baker, Whitney Houston, a mammy, and a trucker, fluidly slipping between iconicity and stereotype, celebration and degradation. Her constant movement from persona to persona brings attention to the centrality of mutability in the performance of identity; in the end, Narcissister is *you*. Only ever appearing in a mask, Narcissister is, in turn,

a performer, a character, a caricature, an identity, and a façade. In work that calls upon performance art, dance, visual art, and activism, Narcissister performs as both a solo artist and through others who are invited to don her masks in everyday life. In her live theatrical shows, on video, and in her performances in public spaces she engages in what I am calling the *active disavowal* of majoritarian modes of performance (especially dance-based virtuosity) expected of black women. Narcissister's aesthetic of dramaturgical *disavowal* ultimately performs an alternate imaginary for the racialized and gendered "American" body.

Background, Upside Down

Raised in San Diego, California, in an academic, mixed-race family, Narcissister had an early interest in visual art practices. She took up African American studies at Brown University where she also embarked on modern dance training. After graduating, Narcissister enrolled at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center (AAADC) in New York. She tells me, "When I was training as a dancer, I loved the feeling of dance in my body and I loved moving my body to music [...]. It was very private for me, and I wanted to dance with my eyes closed."¹

Narcissister's artwork is informed by the liminality that has shaped her life. Between races and between genres, she performs at the intersection of multiple styles, finding audiences at burlesque clubs and experimental dance venues as well as in galleries and on mainstream television. For example, her live performance (also a video art piece) *Every Woman* (2010) takes us through a reverse striptease in which Narcissister begins nude (save her mask, merkin, and exaggerated Afro wig) and pulls items of clothing out of her mouth, vagina, and anus, eventually donning stockings, gloves, a tube top, and skirt, and accessorizing with a purse and pumps that emerge from her wig.² This efficient dance is accompanied by Chaka Khan's 1978 anthem "I'm Every Woman," creating a juxtaposition between the lyrics "I'll do it naturally" and the artifice of the materialist "bling" that comes to cover Narcissister's body.

Narcissister's aesthetic is built upon racialized inscriptions onto the body, and subsequent readings of her work are both enlivened and obstructed by her stylistic quick-changes and her exploitation of technique and ability. Virtuoso moments of dance and extreme yoga rupture the otherwise gradual titillation of striptease performance, and the "high art" choreography she interjects is given a backseat to the "lowbrow" spectacle of the writhing, exposed body. Embracing a DIY approach, Narcissister appropriates both material and image. Just as she con-

1. "I often got this feedback from teachers: 'Open your eyes!' They wanted me to be expressive with my face. But I really had no interest in that. I was feeling it so much in my body and I wanted to just concentrate on that experience" (Narcissister 2012).

2. A merkin is a vagina wig—itsself a kind of mask. Merkins emerged as a way for prostitutes and others to mask a pubic area affected by the hairlessness of venereal disease. Merkins have also been historically fetishized in pornography and burlesque performance, two of the various genres Narcissister straddles.

Figure 1. (previous page) This Masquerade, The Kitchen, New York, 2010. (Courtesy of Narcissister)

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structs her own sets and costumes out of scavenged fabrics, she constructs her appearance from commodified and over-rehearsed images of femininity as familiar as Barbie and Topsy. In doing so, she recontextualizes images typically associated with the objectifying gaze and commodity fetishism of capitalism, imbuing them with feminist resonance by placing them in experimental, reflexive performance settings that lie on the fringes of capitalist modes of commodity circulation. While Narcissister's imagery is indebted to the prescriptions of anti-feminist capitalist culture, her scavenging and insistence on recycling are a radical avoidance of replication.

Narcissister famously performed her piece *The Dollhouse* on the TV show *America's Got Talent* in 2011 where she danced to Diana Ross's song, "Upside Down." In this piece, Narcissister wears mannequin-like plastic masks on the front and back of her head and has a large doll head coming out of her crotch. This lower head becomes apparent when Narcissister inverts herself into handstands and her ruffled dress and petticoats fall upside down. Jumping onto the roof of her handmade larger-than-life dollhouse, she portrays the Topsy character from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, using humor to point to the racialized and gendered horrors that are part of US history.³ In "topsy-turvy" fashion, the image of a childlike doll gives way to a lingerie-clad adult doll. Such



Figure 2. *Narcissister, Every Woman, 2010. (Photo by Tony Stamolis)*



Figure 3. *The Dollhouse, 2010 (studio image). (Courtesy of Narcissister)*

3. Nevertheless, such historically and racially charged references seem to go overlooked by the show's judges, who focus on Narcissister's baffling, physically awe-inspiring feats.

multiplied imagery within Narcissister's pieces suggests sex-positivism, on the one hand, and victimization, on the other.

Epitomizing Narcissister's repertoire, *The Basket* (2013) is a five-minute video directed by Josef Kraska, based on Narcissister's performance piece of the same title. Not merely a documentation of that performance, it is an archive of another sort, a simultaneous weaving and

unweaving. During the course of this five-minute journey, *The Basket* crisscrosses cultures: an Eastern European woman morphs into an African American mammy figure who, in turn, finds herself stripping down to a shiny red Louis Vuitton bra. Bound to the moving image, *The Basket's* cinematic time weaves multiple temporalities—historiographic, imaginative, textual, musical, and choreographic. By peeling off layers of clothing in real time against various painted backdrops of lost times (a bucolic European forest, a posh 19th-century American living room),



Figure 4. *The Basket*, 2013. Video still. (Courtesy of Narcissister)

Narcissister juxtaposes the disparate temporalities and visualities available to her through a combination of performance and visual art.

These juxtapositions comprise the melancholic mash-up of Narcissister's post-soul, mixed-race feminism. Drawing from her family heritage, Narcissister's scavenged imagery takes us on a trip from pre-WWII Eastern European folk dance to the blinged-out sexuality of Lil Kim's millennial hip hop America. Because her timeline seems to terminate with the year 2000 (the year Kim's song "How Many Licks" debuted), Narcissister is afrofuturist not in her choices of source material, but in her mutability. Her compulsive costume changes and her insistence on wearing a mask engage instability to perform a transgressive magic, one in which we are impelled to believe in a utopic fluidity of identity.

Ever one to try to take down the Marxist theorists who insist that society is defined by economic relations, structural anthropologist Pierre Clastres reduced the division between men and women in primitive Guayaki (Aché) Indian society to bows and baskets: men handled bows for hunting and women handled baskets for gathering (Clastres [1966] 1989). Queer theorists criticize this limited view since it fails to acknowledge the possibility of queer or trans* gender roles in primitive society (Clastres said that men who carried baskets metaphorically became women). There is an uncomfortable tinge to the stereotype of women as basket holders (and weavers); at the same time, we find images of the feminization of baskets in many cultures.

Narcissister's oeuvre depends on the recognition of stereotypes—both our belief in them and our desire to dismantle their hold. Moreover, she situates us as viewers within that shameful space of perceiving the degree of truth inherent to any stereotype. In *The Basket*, Narcissister is the basket holder: she does laundry and folk dances in a white mask that gives way to the black mask of a mammy, doing chores to Nina Simone's pained rendition of "Wild is the Wind." She holds the basket atop her head and also places it on the ground as a receptacle for clothing. Regardless of race, Narcissister's women-selves are subjected to basket holding, even once stripped down to a merkin and the fake-Louis Vuitton bra littered with metallic logos.

Throughout *The Basket*, Narcissister's flow is interrupted by calls—calls to change, calls from home, calls from the unconscious, calls from the future... She answers a series of old school phones buried in laundry baskets. Every time a phone rings, Narcissister answers her own call, and her present and future selves are indicated by a split screen, with one Narcissister on the left and another on the right. (The edges of the video frame are blurred, evoking a decaying filmstrip.) Pulled from within the basket, curly rotary phone cords conjure umbilical cords; she does away with this generation of telephones upon answering a clunky first-generation cellphone. Finally, Lil Kim's confident cunnilingual anthem—asking, “how many licks does it take till you get to the center of the?”—is interrupted by another ring, this time the sound of a more recent cellphone. Narcissister's hand (one presumably practiced in acts of self-care) reaches down to remove a cellphone from her pussy. Narcissister brings the phone to her ear, pivots around to reveal a basket overflowing with dangling phone cords atop her head, and inaudibly answers this final call. At once deliberate and unhurried, she saunters upstage in beat-up yellow pumps, her bare ass shifting from left to right, all while balancing her precarious load. Here we consider the abject, the penetrability of the feminine in the face of the impenetrability of Narcissister's gaze, ever hidden by the static façade of the mask. As her subject consumes and ejects its object, we are left to wonder when and how the object will speak, when it will become *thing-y*, even human.

Striptease and Mutability

In 2010, I was introduced to Narcissister over email by dance-maker Trajal Harrell, who recommended my services as a performance dramaturg. While intrigued, I was a bit hesitant to meet with her, given my feeling that dance and performance dramaturgy in the early 2000s had resulted in performances at venues such as New York's Dance Theater Workshop that at the time I referred to as the “let's put on layers and layers of clothing, walk around, remove layers and layers of clothing, and slither around naked” series. Perhaps it was because Narcissister was introduced to me as a performance artist (and not a choreographer) that I decided to meet with her. When Narcissister and I got together one afternoon in downtown New York City, we realized we had studied modern dance together at Ailey. This connection and reintroduction allowed me to reimagine the dancing body in contexts not typically reserved for dance. Ironically, I now find myself working with a performer who indeed dons and removes layers upon layers of clothing for her audiences. Yet most appealing to me about this endeavor is that Narcissister's striptease and reverse striptease are of a different order—not that of the dancer in a concert setting laboring toward a bare *nakedness*; rather, her relationship to clothing and skin is that of a stripper in popular burlesque performance, one who appropriates dance and the dancer's body, maintaining what Giorgio Agamben calls an aesthetics of *nudity*.

For Agamben, nudity, or the infinite event that marks the irreversibility of the original sin that rendered impossible pure “corporeal nakedness,” finds its most fitting paradigm in striptease:

Striptease, that is to say, the impossibility of nakedness, is [...] the paradigm for our relationship with nudity. As an event that never reaches its completed form, as a form that does not allow itself to be entirely seized as it occurs, nudity is, literally, infinite: it never stops occurring. (2010:65)

Maintaining an active relationship to clothing, striptease's reliance on the materiality of the object reminds us that the undressed body doesn't necessarily grant us access to corporeal nakedness (what Agamben refers to as the purity of God's grace). Moreover, striptease's location at the intersection of the body, commodity, and sex is a far cry from most concert dance (from the mainstream to the experimental) and its impulse to reveal subjectivity, content preoccupied with the conscious, the internal, or the emotional. Narcissister extends the stripper's reliance on clothing's objecthood by insisting on the mask and the merkin.

Both in her use of objects and the manner in which she almost renders herself an object, Narcissister insists upon a particular type of corporeality, one that rests somewhere between the animate and inanimate, the human and the mechanical. Appearing uncannily like a doll or puppet, she, in turn, surprises with the sinew of a yoga contortion or fluidly muscular port de bras (arm movement) evocative of ballet. Narcissister is animated by an African American performer of mixed heritage. While her skin tends to be read as black, she plays with the limits of racial legibility in her use of lighting, costuming, and multiple mask tones (including transparent and various shades ranging from cream to dark brown). Like a stripper—in contrast to the typical concert dancer—Narcissister draws the audience’s focus to surface and genitalia, as opposed to movement quality and choreography. The mask functions both as a temptation (to seek the face beneath the covering) and as a deterrent, one that shifts our focus instead to the actions and (un)coverings of the body. The merkin is simultaneously an exaggeration of the natural and the artificial, exemplifying the tension central to Narcissister’s image; “corporeal nakedness” is rendered impossible within the context of highly commoditized tropes of the feminine body, no matter how bare. Subjectivity and charisma are discerned and made legible through the face, whereas mutability and virtuosity belong to the domain of the corporeal.

For Narcissister, surface is always supplemented by—and even becomes—material *thing*; even when a piece of clothing is removed, it leaves a trace, a reminder of nudity’s infinite quality, the impossibility of corporeal nakedness. And without exception, Narcissister never performs without mask and merkin, *things* that haunt even in their presence. In *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, Robin Bernstein asserts that “performance is what distinguishes an object from a thing” (2011:74), an idea that gestures toward Jane Bennett’s vital materialist theory of “thing-power.” For Bennett, Kafka’s Odradek functions as a kind of remnant of culture—neither subject nor object, animate or inanimate. “Thing-power,” writes Bennett,

gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience. [...] I present this as a liveliness intrinsic to the materiality of the thing formerly known as an object. (2010:xvi)

By wearing—and often presenting herself as—“man-made items,” Narcissister offers a mobile challenge to Bennett’s particular concept of the vibrant “thing.” In an inadvertently coincidental inversion of terms, Bennett argues that, “We need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature—to counter the *narcissism* of humans in charge of the world” (xvi; emphasis added). Far from fitting the profile of a “human in charge of the world,” Narcissister’s play on narcissism points more to aspiration toward power than a sovereignty that holds power in its grasp. That Bennett links affect with materiality and insists on the political potential of *things* opens up the possibility that Narcissister’s seemingly solo performances are in fact duets, trios, and quartets (xiii). Does her Afro wig play a role as central as her quivering quadriceps or contracted buttocks?

In her reading of Josephine Baker’s modernist spectacles in photography and on film, Anne Anlin Cheng suggests that surface performs, and she examines the way skin participates in such performance. Narcissister’s dressing and undressing is a hyperbolic performance of Baker’s manipulation of surface at the level of costume and skin. She exaggerates the unreliable, mobile nature of identity. Cheng writes, “There is a predicament of embodiment and visibility that fetishistic and democratic recognition share. And it is the crisis of visibility, rather than the allocation of visibility, that constitutes one of the most profound challenges for American democratic recognition and civil imagination” (2008:68). Cheng suggests that civil rights efforts to render visible otherwise “invisible” African American subjectivity have been operating superficially at the level of the visible (skin color), and this allocation of visibility is both static and differentiating. Instead, she urges us to reconsider our ways of seeing and sensing to account for critical *visuality* as a practice of engaging with surfaces in motion that may exceed the imme-

diately *visible*. Narcissister's project inherently and inadvertently enlivens Cheng's call for critical visibility.

According to Cheng, racial fetishism employs a mode of partial recognition similar to the concealment of labor that Marx identifies with commodity fetishism:

Racial fetishism [...] continues to inform contemporary American racial dynamics in various ways, from egregious racial stereotyping in legal and popular commodity cultures to the different though equally troubling effects of identity politics, in which an affirmative political or social identity often seems to reassert the stereotype it was meant to rectify in the first place. (38)

Cheng brings flesh into her study of surface in relation to the 1935 Baker film *Princesse Tam Tam*: "The metaphor of bare skin thus comes to stand in for the materiality of exposed flesh"

(60). Cheng's statement that Baker's "nakedness never stands alone" resonates with Agamben's discussion of nudity (60). One of Cheng's most provocative arguments marks the erosion of the distinction between Baker's skin and its ornamental costume and surface quality. In its sheen and gloss, Baker's skin is at once her own and extraneous; it is its own supplement:

The distinction between the organic and the synthetic blurs in such a way as to render Baker's skin itself costume, prop, and surrogate [...]. Is the fabric or animal skin on which she leans extraneous ornamentation or ontological companion? [...This] effect [...] has to do with what Bill Brown calls the indeterminate "ontology of modern objects," the inability to fully separate the animate from the inanimate. (60)

While danced to the lyrics "I'll do it naturally," Narcissister's *Every Woman* renders organic the otherwise ornamental; she structures the piece such that the audience wants nothing more than for her to don the glittery gold belt that emerges from her mouth. After all, how else is Narcissister to offset her bulbous Afro wig? Her thin physique begs for supplementation. That Baker's breasts are often exposed, while meant to titillate at the crossroads of racial and sexual fetishism, can be partially attributed to cultural (French) context, one at once comfortable with exposed skin and with colonial exploitation. Narcissister, too, plays within this space of simultaneous objectification and agency: her criticality is founded upon spectacles of sexual excess. Cheng refers to skin in motion as a "mobile outline": "The only authentic thing we can locate in [Baker's] performance is the virtuosity of movement—a virtuosity that does not allow Baker to transcend racial, gender, or national differences, but that, counterintuitively,



Figure 5. *Every Woman*, 2008. (Courtesy of Narcissister)

precisely reveals those distinctions to be built on transferable disembodiment and disarticulation” (60). “Baker’s supposedly African and primitive choreographic diction,” Cheng continues, “is in fact a collage of various styles [...]. The scene of discrimination is thus [...] a scene of stylistic *indiscrimination*” (65). It is often stylistic indiscrimination—rather than skin color—that serves as a racial marker. According to Cheng, “racial legibility has less to do with the visibility of skin color than with the visibility of style”—style can “out” someone (65). That ontology can be structured through a mutability of form—that the dancing body can, paradoxically, establish its being through the donning and shedding of multiple styles—is a radical notion that contests both discriminatory racial readings of surface as color as well as racial studies that attempt to combat such exclusionary tactics by narrating a figure’s singular subjectivity based on surface. By actively disavowing dance, Narcissister takes dance’s ontological paradigm one step further: by merely citing virtuosic dance and joining it with performance art and burlesque, she suggests that performance in general (and thus identity) generates its ontology through the mutability of style *and genre*, operating within and across forms.

Concerned with that which lies beneath the skin’s surface Hortense J. Spillers identifies that flesh comes before the body:

I would make a distinction [...] between “body” and “flesh” and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the “body” there is the “flesh,” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies [...] out of West African communities in concert with the African “middleman,” we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the *flesh*, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding. If we think of the “flesh” as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or “escaped” overboard. (1987:67)

For Spillers, exploitation of the black body occurs at the level of flesh. Taking the dancing black body into account, it would seem that labor occurs in the domain of the exploitable—that corporeal beauty is created at the very locus of a person (flesh) that is injured in racial violence. What the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT) continually rehearses is the suturing of what Spillers refers to as the African American body’s historically “seared, divided, ripped-apart” flesh into a corporeal unity manifested through clearly executed technique and choreographies of virtuosity. Narcissister displaces such consistent disciplining of the flesh for choreographic purposes by undoing Ailey’s aesthetic of corporeal unity. Moreover, she tears apart Ailey’s pairing of the sacred and the corporeal, insisting on the profane body, bringing us closer to flesh, the original site of American racial violence. At once focusing on—and distracting us from—her body’s flesh, Narcissister relies on the status of her mask as a *thing* to “do” the performative labor that is assumed to be outside the sphere of a man-made object’s capability.

Racial Kitsch and the Mask

Theories of blackness, modernism, and “cool” in the humanities have repeatedly turned to the *mask*, and Narcissister’s performances—in both their refusal to reveal her face and in their invitation for all of us (regardless of race) to become Narcissister by wearing the mask (for example, in her ongoing community project, *Narcissister is You*)—inherently question assumptions of diasporic representation and racialized performance. In “Racial Kitsch and Black Performance” (2002), Tavia Nyong’o expands Clement Greenberg’s proposition that kitsch is failed seriousness to include the idea that racist kitsch, from historical ceramic figurines of black children to the self-conscious curating of such imagery in the Spike Lee film *Bamboozled*, generates in the African American and anti-racist viewer shame and oppositional spectatorship. Nyong’o

suggests a mode of spectatorship that seeks to locate a way to transform the shame of feeling less than human that comes with racist kitsch's oppositional spectatorship into an experience of racial kitsch that escapes scapegoating and instead engenders self-recognition. He wonders if there is a way for the African American spectator to regain innocence without the bloodletting of—and identification with—the scapegoat in black performance.



Figure 6. *Narcissister is You*, video installation still, Petrella's Imports, New York, 2014. (Courtesy of Narcissister)

Narcissister calls upon the objecthood of racist kitsch and then complicates it with the performance of the moving body. By donning hard masks and inserting doll heads into various orifices, as in her topsy-turvy performance of *The Dollhouse*, Narcissister places the brittle surface of the racist kitsch object (such as that of Nyong'o's figurine) onto—and into—the mutable, muscular surface of a live fleshly body. Her performances in masks and merkins are costumed (and un-costumed) in a way that questions the fluctuating status of objecthood and subjectivity in performances that cite racialized and gendered figures from history. While auto- or object- or thing-based penetration can perform self-care, Narcissister's appropriations of culturally rehearsed images such as the Topsy doll can also evoke masochism and rape. As Bernstein writes, "The scripts of black dolls often merged servitude with violence" (2011:206). The "scripts," according to Bernstein, are the dolls themselves: "A scriptive thing [is] an item of material culture that prompts meaningful bodily behaviors [...], a script for a performance. The script is itself a historical artifact" (72). Bernstein provides the example of the "rape imagery" of the topsy-turvy doll (206) and asserts that, "in play" all dolls "trouble the boundary between person and thing—the terror at the ontological core of slavery" (222). *The Dollhouse's* "skirt-flipping" performance is eerily precise in its mirroring of Bernstein's discussion of Topsy as a scriptive thing.

With her doll-like presence, Narcissister has found a way to harness both the "animatedness" of racialized performance—the affective quality haunting black popular performance—and the eternal *stranger* that is the masked player. Her Barbie-like mask and body (one artificial, the other fleshly) recalls what Sianne Ngai refers to as the "interplay between the passionate and the mechanical" (2007:91). In her book, *Ugly Feelings*, Ngai writes, "As we press harder on the affective meanings of animatedness, we shall see how the seemingly neutral state of 'being moved' becomes twisted into the image of the overemotional racialized subject, abetting his or her construction as unusually receptive to external control" (2007:91). She goes on to suggest that Stowe's Topsy exemplifies how blackness has historically been linked to the "highly visible body": "emotional qualities seem especially prone to sliding into corporeal qualities where the African-American subject is concerned" (95).

Narcissister self-consciously highlights this troubling dynamic in American culture—the conflation of affective qualities and the bodily in racialized performance—and she does so by exaggerating visibility, excess, and the corporeal while withholding the facial, the subjective, and the soulful. She thwarts expectations that "truth" is always only found in her "highly visible body."

By reappropriating cultural stereotypes such as Topsy, Narcissister lays bare Ngai's concept of animateness and what Nyong'o refers to as the oppositional spectator's reaction of disgust in the face of racism and abject humor. However, by refusing to linger in any one character or style Narcissister provides a way for the spectator to circumvent the scapegoating to which Nyong'o refers, ultimately drawing attention back to herself, yourself.

As Nyong'o reminds us, Manthia Diawara has put forth a concept related to (but different from) racist or racial kitsch, namely that of "afro-kitsch" or the "kitsch of blackness," which [Diawara] defines as the 'imitation of a discourse of liberation' in the service of 'mass identification'" (2002:385). AAADT's aesthetic of liberation, evident in their work between the late 1980s and 2011, fits squarely within Diawara's framework. Choreography initially committed to politics of the civil rights movement in the 1960s became, over several decades, performed as an imitation of itself. If traditional notions of Western high art are associated with value, kitsch is thought of as mass-produced imitations of high art, lacking in value. The Ailey aesthetic, while implicated in the kitsch of blackness, is not devoid of value in its recent iterations. Rather, value is transferred to its announcement of a certain kind of racialized virtuosity, inaugurated by the dancing of Desmond Richardson in the 1990s (the time period when Narcissister studied at The Ailey School). Although the AAADT emphasized Richardson's hypermasculine image of athletic strength and muscularity, the company also showcased his unique ability to call upon his extreme flexibility, as his legs seemed to extend higher than others and his technique spilled over into hyperability.⁴

As a term popularized through the advent of newspaper journalism, "virtuosity" is an indicator of critical judgment and public taste-making. Racial and gendered biases generate designations of virtuosity's supposed excess, or that which surpasses critical standards of excellence in technique. Most importantly, it is a term used to describe soloists (as apart from a group), to alternately celebrate and denigrate, and typically to define boundaries between high art and mass-produced popular culture.⁵ I situate the term in the context of queer of color critique⁶ (and/as dance) to expose and disrupt culturally biased judgments of virtuosic performance and to develop my term "choreographic falsetto" to describe dance that generates an aesthetics of queer masculinity by calling upon hyper-flexible movements typically reserved for women dancers.

"Virtuosity" points to that which exceeds the normal and the normative, lingers in ambivalence, and generates a kind of excess that is already affectively queer (see Osterweis 2013:69). The common assumption is that virtuosity signals a victory of the mechanical over the spiritual, especially in the context of black concert dance. Richardson's virtuosity is both uniquely developed and ever-imitated (in fact, he frequently guest stars on *So You Think You Can Dance*). His dancing was the prototype for those studying at the AAADC in the 1990s, and Narcissister's relationship to modern dance is grounded in this era and aesthetic. In her work, Narcissister cites such dance-based virtuosity in a way that points to virtuosity's excess while denying us access to its excellence. The queerness of Richardson's virtuosity (his choreographic falsetto) was already indicated in his dancing at the AAADT, but not fully realized until transplanted to his own company, Complexions.

4. In an article entitled "The Muse of Virtuosity: Desmond Richardson, Race, and Choreographic Falsetto" written for *Dance Research Journal*, I develop the term "choreographic falsetto" to describe "the deliberate use of otherwise feminine-identified movements in the service of a queer masculinist aesthetic" and suggest that this aesthetic emerged for Richardson at the AAADT and was fully realized in the repertoire of Complexions Contemporary Ballet, the company he cofounded with Dwight Rhoden (Osterweis 2013:53–74).

5. Max Weber has pointed to the religious aura of the virtuoso ([1948] 1991), while Theodor Adorno has noted the way the conductor's virtuosity is fetishized even in the absence of the musician (1991).

6. I refer to the term as discussed by Roderick A. Ferguson in *Aberrations in Black* (2004).

Richardson's movement style at *Complexions* is at once fluid, punctuated, sinewy, and break-neck, as ballet, modern dance, voguing, and hip hop come together in an unexpected comingling of cultural forms: a typical passage includes a *penchée* (the leg extended 180 degrees to the back) leading into a distorted shift of the hip followed by a downward circling of the leg with the torso trailing and popping into a new position—a stream of seemingly impossible feats for the human body. At Ailey, his virtuosity was put to more heteronormative, stereotypical use, and this is the phase of virtuosity most relevant to Narcissister's particular intervention, one that I would posit as a queer of color critique. Whereas Narcissister as a soloist rarely functions in relationship to a group, she indeed explores the queerness comprising virtuosity's (and Richardson's) excess. Virtuosity endures a curious relationship to temporality in the sense that once a virtuosic mode has been repeatedly emulated over time, it runs the risk of hardening into its own kind of kitsch object.



Figure 7. Desmond Richardson, 1997 (studio image). (Photo © antoine tempé)

Disavowal and Aspiration

Narcissister's active disavowal of dance-based virtuosity—always delivered in a mask—projects an eerie ambiguity, one devoid of facial expression or stylistic stability. Such performance functions in stark contrast to the virtuosity of Richardson, one of technical versatility and individual expression. In Richardson's dance, often teeming with facially and corporeally legible joy or angst, we are urged to feel with him. Even though his versatility of (dance) style evidences a kind of mutability, the appeal of his performances functions via some level of subjectivity. Access to his face invites assumptions of his subjectivity in a way that is inhibited by a mask. Moreover, his facial expression (debates about sincerity, performance, and character aside)—paired with, but distinct from his virtuosity—lends him an undeniable quality of *charisma*, or what Joseph Roach refers to as the “It” quality (2007:1). Richardson has a way of making each person in the audience feel he is performing *just for them*. We have access to Richardson's face, but are denied access to Narcissister's, the consequence of which is critical at the level of artistic consumption. It is precisely Richardson's combination of virtuosity and charisma that draws people in, the idea that the viewer is privy to both exceptional (“superhuman”) skill and access to his *soul*—both unattainable and accessible at once. The eyes are often referred to in popular culture as the “windows to the soul,” and in denying us access to her eyes, Narcissister discards the

normative Christian trope of the eyes' access to the soul as well as the trope of "soul" reserved for black culture.⁷

By denying us access to her own feelings, Narcissister provides no instructions for how or what we should feel. Certainly not devoid of affective fodder, however, her performances rely on the spectator's cultural knowledge in order to recognize references ranging from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to gangster rap to yoga to early feminist performance art to porn to tropes of burlesque performance. Narcissister is astute in citing moments of AAADT choreography that epitomize virtuosity's dual quality of popular appeal and difficult execution, while withholding all but a snippet of "virtuosic" movement. And if Richardson's versatility is one that hybridizes multiple dance techniques, Narcissister's is one that lays bare brief moments of various forms of art and performance. Artistry is eclipsed by art-making: the pursuit of generating pleasure for the audience—that found in "artistry"—is abandoned for glimpses into the uneven terrain of process, making the audience privy to the hangnails of pastiche. Insisting on the handmade, Narcissister's pastiche lies just outside the realm of the smooth, mass-produced sampling we find in commercial hip hop and also outside of Richardson's seamless meld of popping and locking with ballet.

Just as postmodernity signals a relationship to modernity, disavowal contains a degree of avowal. Likewise, Narcissister's disavowal of her Ailey dance training is not a complete denial; rather, it is a rejection of its end goal of a virtuosity that conceals evidence of its own labor. The focus shifts from virtuosity to aspiration: instead of fulfilling a sustained aesthetic of virtuosity, Narcissister stages through partial embodiment and incomplete performance no more than a *striving toward* excellence. In doing so, temporality operates such that, while viewing her work, one might be reminded of a time in the past when a vision of one's future included the attainment of virtuosity. Thus, Narcissister brings attention to the aspiration for excellence, that clunky, liminal phase in one's artistic training that often ends in failure, not success. On the one hand, Narcissister is always sure to mention in publicity materials that she trained at The Ailey School; but on the other hand, the only times she makes reference to such dance technique in her performances is when she makes almost mocking use of movements typically reserved for frenzied, climactic sections of choreography. Whether draped in dozens of dresses or clothed in nothing more than her own sinewy musculature, her particular engagement with dance and virtuosity ultimately functions as disavowal or displacement, as fragmentary quotation that leaves us wanting more. For example, in *Hand Dance*, which Narcissister performs in a larger-than-life wedding-banded hand costume that covers her face and body (2012), she inserts a series of turns from the Horton technique, the kind in which the dancer extends her arms in a vertical overhead parallel position, tracing a circular right-back-left-front pattern. The arms and upper body circle through the air as the legs execute traveling turns. Alvin Ailey choreographed a series of these very turns in his piece *Memoria* (1979), an homage to Horton dancer Joyce Trisler. This type of traveling turn (with arms circling overhead) is a favorite one to use when parodying the Ailey aesthetic, especially because it looks ridiculous when executed haphazardly. It is also the type of movement that those of us who trained at Ailey might use to parody the extreme nature of our training.

To reference such a turn sequence is to comment on expectations and imperatives for popular black performance to be presentational, outwardly directed, and deliberately kinetic. Narcissister's disavowal of virtuosity—and its fetishization of the cult of individual persona—

7. Brenda Dixon Gottschild has written about "soul" in American dance. In *The Black Dancing Body*, she writes, "Soul represents that attribute of the body/mind that mediates between flesh and spirit. It is manifested in the feel of a performance. It has a sensual, visceral connotation of connectedness with the earth (and the earth-centered religions that distinguish West and Central African cultures) and, concomitantly, a reaching for the spirit" (2003:223).

asks us if and *why* we want to know what lies hidden under her façade and what we expect of racialized performance. Dancers in AAADT are applauded for facial and corporeal expressiveness, but the irony is that we are made to feel we have gained access to the dancers' individuality through facial expression when in fact we are consuming a cultural type endorsed by and for mainstream culture. While Narcissister normally performs in a mask that is separate from the rest of her costume, in *Hand Dance* her face is hidden behind a dark mesh portion of the hand costume (her legs and feet comprise the costume's fingers and nails). Whether performing the Horton turns behind mesh or in a mask, Narcissister colors our reading of both the turns and the mask: we can read the masking as a minstrel "mask," an allusion to European modernism's obsession with African masks, or as a sign of anonymity. The latter is most fitting; Narcissister's masking disrupts expectations



Figure 8. *Hand Dance*, 2011 (studio image). (Courtesy of Narcissister)

that the dancer is baring her soul, offering up her emotion in the service of both the audience's pleasure and a higher spiritual power. Unlike contemporary dancers influenced by the Judson Dance Theater's pedestrianism —after Yvonne Rainer's imperative "No to virtuosity"—an Ailey dancer would not pair Horton turns with the masklike gaze of a Judson dancer wary of theatrical expression.⁸ That Narcissister's mask is made-up like a Barbie of a darker hue, her façade theatrical but frozen, suggests that stereotypical expressions found in mainstream performances of blackness are only ever static.

In disavowing the kind of virtuosity that has come to be expected of the black dancing body in the United States, Narcissister strips technical bravura of emotional affect, and pivots presentation away from charisma. By mobilizing dance technique's means to different ends, Narcissister inadvertently confronts the *aspirational* phase of training, one that imagines (but may never fulfill) a virtuosic future. Rather than suggesting that her performances of aspiration inherently signal failure, I mine the space of the anticlimactic as that which is actively generated

8. Rainer's "No Manifesto," actually first published as a paragraph in a 1965 *TDR* essay, has come to define for many the impetus behind the Judson Dance Theater's aesthetic (even though it really only served as an element of a piece during its time): "NO to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe no to the glamour and transcendence of the star image no to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved" (Rainer 1965:178).

through disavowal. Judith Butler has brought attention to Michel Foucault’s lectures on the performative potential and dramaturgical attributes of avowal in the juridical sphere. Foucault writes, “Neither performative nor symbolic, I would suggest instead, in changing the usual meaning slightly, that avowal is of the order of drama or dramaturgy” (2014:210). Narcissister displays how *disavowal*, too, can take on dramaturgical qualities. If avowal is a promise, but not a contract, disavowal—as performed by Narcissister—functions as a promise of an alternative, an acknowledgement of normative visual regimes followed by movements that escape their hold. Material articles don’t always remain on her body, and her body communicates in the absence of utterance. Butler and Foucault remain fixed in a discursive realm, but the efficacy of Narcissister’s disavowal lies in her refusal to speak, as we witness things acting and the body performing the other of the other.

Manifesting, Animating

Narcissister recently asked me to draft a manifesto to accompany sales of reproductions of the masks and merkins she wears in performance. These objects are part mass-produced and part feminist craft, individualized by Narcissister’s artistic hand. She wears removable plastic masks used to adorn Styrofoam female heads made for wig display; the merkins are hand-sewn and attached to an elastic much like a stripper’s g-string. The idea behind selling them is that to don the mask is to be(come) Narcissister, for a small price. Our manifesto is provisionally entitled *Narcissister’s Amerkin Manifesto*. A manifesto declares a *making manifest* or *making public*, and in selling masks and merkins with accompanying manifestos, Narcissister encourages the proliferation of Narcissisters, further removing herself from a singular identity or legible self (Browning and Osterweis 2012:270). The manifesto does not manifest some “truth” about Narcissister; rather, it manifests certain criteria for becoming one’s own Narcissister, establishing a performative conduit from text (manifesto) to action (Narcissistering).

Ultimately, a manifesto is an aspirational text. An intermediary guide, it is neither an avowal nor a disavowal. As audience members at a Narcissister performance, our touch remains at a distance from the fuzzy merkin; yet, as we purchase and don our

own merkins, smoothed against our skin (or pubic hair) by a swatch of fabric, we will only feel the fuzz from the other side, as our hands fondle our own/Narcissister merkins. What kind of minoritarian affect ensues from such materiality amidst abstraction, affinity amidst anonymity?

By creating a multiplicity, Narcissister invites others to dance with their eyes closed, to feel something under the mask. While multiple mask-wearing Narcissisters do not make public the private, the internal, the subjective, they indeed have the capacity to make (more) public Narcissister’s affect. In performances such as *This Masquerade* (2011), Narcissister is joined by additional Narcissisters, indicated as such by nothing more than their nearly identical masks, wigs, and merkins.



Figure 9. *Narcissister, The Workout, 2007. (Photo by Kristy Leibowitz)*

What is never made public is explicit penetration or even a glimpse of her “natural” organ, even when we find Narcissister pulling various accouterments from her vagina in the reverse striptease of *Every Woman*. After DeCerteau’s argument that *perruque* is a tactical appropriation of dominant/majoritarian-governed goods or time by a minoritarian underclass, I refer to Narcissister’s fuzzy performances as “perruque of the pussy,” tactical appropriations of the otherwise profane.⁹ In *The Basket* and *Every Woman*, she inserts dildos and removes cellphones and entire outfits from her vagina. Potentially the most intimate of bodily spaces, her vagina becomes the site of a penetrability that is nothing more known than a universal sign of (self-) pleasure. Narcissister seems to equate self-pleasure with self-care, as she repeatedly slaps her masked face against a large brown dildo dangling from above the stationary bike’s handlebars in *The Workout* (2007) while riding a butt plug that she has attached to the bike seat. Such moments of self-care — as self-pleasure — are especially poignant in reference to popular culture’s inability to render images of black women being cared for (Browning and Osterweis 2012). Accompanying Narcissister’s embrace of multiplicity through the incorporation of multiple masked Narcissisters is a simultaneous self-sufficiency and auto-abjection, a lonely series of self-pleasuring endeavors that never seem to lead to prolonged satisfaction or ecstasy.



Figure 10. *Narcissister is You*, video installation still, Envoy Enterprises, New York, 2012. (Courtesy of Narcissister)

While *Narcissister is You* is the title of an ongoing community project of public Narcissisters, it is also the title of a 2012–2013 exhibition of photography and video at envoy enterprises in New York City that documents one particular period of the entire durational project. The video portion of the exhibit is a triptych of screens showing three video loops, accompanied by live electronic noise music. Narcissister invited people of any gender and race to go about their everyday lives in replicas of her mannequin-like mask. Until this project, Narcissister was embodied by a single performer; *Narcissister is You* allowed others to take on her identity. Singular, dispersed autonomous wearers of the mask each become Narcissister, ever aware of their minoritarian status, on the one hand, and of their ability to burrow beneath a stereotypical facade, on the other. In the video we witness Narcissisters walking dogs, having sex, visiting galleries, and challenging bans on public toplessness. Although *Narcissister is You* could be otherwise described as a collective endeavor, it was marketed as the artist’s first *solo* exhibition. Paradoxically, her invitation for others to don the Narcissister mask gestures more toward a politics of individuality and self-care than sameness and cohesion. The imagined community of Narcissisters is one that refuses nation while relying on the very codes produced by its economy.

By involving an international community of Narcissisters, no matter how dispersed or domestic in their everyday masked endeavors, Narcissister ultimately disavows the soloist dimension central to the notion of virtuosity. Indicating a performer apart from a group, the virtuoso is celebrated in the glow of a spotlight, and Narcissister extinguishes such auratic

9. That her vagina remains unseen and offscreen (even during penetration and extraction) renders her performances other than pornography, according to Linda Williams’s definition of pornography in *Hardcore* ([1989] 1999).

near-religiosity through her insistence on the profane, the collectively abject, and the uneven texture of the handmade DIY craft. By doing it *herself*, she takes great melancholic pleasure in suggesting an alternative freedom of doing it *yourself*. By transferring the technical control required to execute a 30-minute dance by Alvin Ailey to the less visible control of holding a wardrobe inside one's vagina, Narcissister's disciplined transgressions perform an inexhaustible mutability that refuses to commit to the binding performances of race and gender scripted by mainstream culture.

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