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TRAJAL HARRELL'S (EMAIL) JOURNEY FROM JUDSON TO HARLEM

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Trajal Harrell Interviewed by Ariel Osterweis over email in early September for PICA's Time-Based Art Festival.

Ariel Osterweis: The last time we sat down to discuss your work, we reflected on *Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at The Judson Church (S)*. What struck me from that discussion was your claim that, for you, voguing functioned as a “theoretical praxis,” that you refused to embody it. How has that notion changed, developed, or remained the same since that time? For example, does taking a voguing class (if you have) undo that claim? And how has your idea of voguing as a theoretical praxis brought you to your current work, which you will be presenting at PICA's TBA festival?

Trajal Harrell: I think it is always important to say that I am not a voguer. I don't make voguing. I make contemporary dance. I work with voguing *and* early postmodern dance as theoretical praxes. I am not trying to learn voguing moves and fuse them with postmodern dance moves, if those exist. I am addressing the theory and tenets underneath the two different aesthetics. Mainly, I am working through voguing's idea of

“realness” and postmodern dance’s “authenticity.” Yes, I have taken a few [voguing] classes, but class is not the praxis I speak of. When I speak about voguing, I am speaking about the voguing ballroom scene. You cannot learn that in a class. It is a form of social performance and a practice of community.

In terms of the two pieces I am presenting at TBA, it is the same thing—“twirling,” so to speak, between “authenticity” and realness. Too often, I think people forget about the early postmodern dance part, and they focus solely on the voguing. With the *Judson Church is Ringing in Harlem* piece, the early postmodern dance praxis is hard to miss.

AO: Twirling between (voguing’s) realness and (postmodernism/Judson’s) authenticity! (Do we want to make explicit a discussion of quotation marks here? I’m more inclined to put quotation marks around “authenticity.” I feel the ballroom scene and Judith Butler have done a pretty good job of defining realness, allowing the word to mean what it performatively means—performing to the extent that one passes and cannot be “read”; whereas, “authenticity” opens up a huge can of worms.) I’m excited about *Judson Church is Ringing in Harlem (Made to Measure)/Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at The Judson Church (M2M)*. How does it differ from the other “sizes” I have seen (such as *S*, *(M)imosa* and *XS*)? You suggest that your praxis is a sort of practice-meets-theory in which a particular socio-cultural history (of ballroom culture) informs your choreography and interacts with Judson’s postmodernist explorations of authenticity. Do you even like that word, “choreography?”

I agree that the term “fusion” has no place in describing your work. First of all, fusion indicates a mixture of two or more elements, and when it refers to dance, it typically indicates the blending of codified techniques (or at least highly stylized forms). Whether embraced or shunned, the word “fusion” tends to emerge alongside a colonialist or exoticizing impulse, at least in common discourse (think “Asian fusion” cuisine, for example. The “Asian” is inevitably effaced or bastardized at best). And there’s something anti-colonialist or recuperative about your project, about exploring what could have happened if a Harlem voguer from the ballroom scene in the 1960s had gone downtown to collaborate with the Judson Dance Theater (famous for Yvonne Rainer’s *No Manifesto*, which declared “no to virtuosity” and “no to spectacle”). Of course, voguing’s end goal is virtuosity, specifically virtuosity that can be described as “fierce,” virtuosity so precise and breakneck that it can’t be touched by questions of realness (so “unreal,” colloquially speaking, that it is undeniably “real”). If size *S* served us deceleration and *(M)imosa*’s exploration of drag was a total gender-fuck, how might you distill “*(M2M)*?”

TH: Church! And, yes, I like the word “choreography” and think we should indeed place quotation marks around “authenticity.”

AO: Church. You had mentioned gospel. Are we now going uptown to a church in Harlem? What does this mean for Yvonne and her Judson cohort? I mean, on some level they must have loathed having the name “Church” associated with them, as in the Judson Dance Theater rehearsing at the Judson Church. Do you think postmodern “authenticity” embraces the idea of the secular person devoid of religion? So often in concert dance training (especially, in my experience of ballet and modern—think, Graham and Ailey), one speaks of a “calling,” a “gift” of talent that one holds a responsibility to fulfill (similar to but not identical

to Weber's Protestant ethic of capitalism), and this is not far from a religious mentality. However, the Judson aesthetic seems so stripped of religion and spirituality. I'm curious to hear how you envision Judson at church. What kinds of praxes are at work in this project (M2M)?

I know it's not my turn to email, but something just struck me. I was reading a *Time Out* magazine interview of Wendy Whelan describing her new project, and she says she found Kyle Abraham so "hot and passionate and intense" that she wanted to "feel what that feels like" and subsequently asked him to choreograph on (!) her (8/15/13). We don't need Miley Cyrus' recent VMA antics to tell us that appropriating blackness is one of the foundations of American popular culture. But what of high art appropriations? Claims of "authenticity" often come with charges of appropriation. So, what would it mean (and what would be the stakes of) appropriating the Judson aesthetic? What happens when we accuse (or don't accuse) performers of appropriating whiteness?

TH: Ha! That is super-loaded, and here I have to quote myself a bit: "My position in all of this is not without problematization. Though I am African-American, I am not a voguer from Harlem. I am much more from the legacy of postmodern dance [and Judson Church]. I wanted to problematize this location and the space I occupy within it. Therefore, I also felt the series had to have the classic double migration. So, we go back from Judson Church up to the balls in Harlem. For this I wanted to go directly to my own personal cultural roots and see how they affix themselves between these two locations. The Made-to-measure size, thereby, activates a singular position that I needed to acknowledge in the final piece of the series." That's all to say, most people do not come to me to appropriate blackness. My work is steeped in post-blackness (maybe the "post-" isn't fulfilling enough). My roots are also in "white" culture. I don't feel at all that I am appropriating whiteness. I am aware that the Judson aesthetic was developed by white artists, but I don't think minimalism and pedestrianism nor any of Yvonne Rainer's anti's are white, per se. Sure, we cannot separate the means of production and distribution from the realities of sex, race, class, and sexuality, etc. Regardless, authenticity was a fiction that Judson constructed as well. In terms of performativity, we find it very useful in the work that we do. What people do appreciate in the work is this problematization, because if we are honest, that's where everyone sits. My career and Kyle's have blossomed in the same historical moment. I hope one day someone looks specifically at the links and differences.

I turn the proposition around: what would have happened in 1963 if someone from Judson Dance Theater had gone uptown to perform in the voguing ballroom scene? What would it mean to come from Judson Church, to go uptown from Judson to Harlem? In my imagination, you would have to "give church" at the balls. In a voguing context or African-American context, "giving church" means giving it your all or taking it to the umpteenth degree.

AO: I appreciate your reflections on authenticity and appropriation. Because of my mixed-race identity, I am continually preoccupied with the idea of belonging. Your discussion of "roots" and your use of the pronoun "we" intrigue me. What exactly do you mean by your "cultural roots" and who is the "we" to which you refer?

TH: By cultural roots, I mean the topography of influences and socialization that have informed my personal

identity and history: Polo Ralph Lauren, Madonna, The Flintstones, country and western music, the Clintons, CNN, Andy Warhol, Ralph Lemon, Adele, fried chicken, South Beach, bell hooks, Andre Agassi, Mark Rothko, Marguerite Duras, the Indigo Girls, Patti Labelle, the list goes on and on. And the “we” I refer to are me and the dancers with whom I work.

AO: Can you tell me about your upbringing and your experiences growing up? I mean, (pop)culturally, we are urged to “own it,” on the one hand, but not to steal it, on the other. I wonder if “owning it” is only a message for the marginalized or weak, or if it gives license to appropriators at large, regardless of race or class. You and your fellow performers own it all over the place!

TH: I grew up in a small town in southeast Georgia. There were no voguing balls and no contemporary dance, but I did lie when I was eight years old about what time my gymnastics class got out. I said it was an hour later so I could stay and watch the girls’ ballet class. No boys took ballet, but I was always there with my head in the door, watching from 4pm-5pm.

AO: Ha!

On the one hand, you seem to point to blackness (and/as gay black men and queer black masculinity), but on the other hand, you are working with forms that you haven’t necessarily lived with for a long period of time (voguing and postmodern), relatively speaking. What I’m wondering, more specifically, is, how and when do you find yourself an insider in ballroom culture (whether or not you vogue or don’t vogue) and how/when do you find yourself an insider in the Judson tradition (and perhaps more broadly, in “Western Civ,” since you tackle Antigone and Greek mythology in one piece you present at PICA)? Conversely, when do you find yourself an outsider?

TH: As an artist I am constantly shifting my location between insider and outsider. It goes beyond Judson and voguing. As an artist it is important for me to simultaneously occupy that dual positionality in order to experience the world.

AO: I assume that these terms (insider/outsider) are problematic for you, which is why I ask these questions. Especially now that I teach in a university environment, I find the issue of education very interesting in relationship to dance. Those of us who grew up in conservatory environments (not to mention the ethic driving American pop culture) were encouraged to “shut up and dance” and the trope of the dumb dancer persists today. Nevertheless, we find tension in the dance world between those who speak and those who do not (by choice or otherwise). More “conceptual”/“experimental” dance makers rely on text, discourse, and dramaturgy in a way that is sometimes looked down upon by more traditional/presentational concert choreographers. Few compelling contemporary dance makers steer clear of such reliance on a discursive backdrop, one informed by certain bents of critical and performance theory.

TH: I think that relying on text, discourse, and dramaturgy can be limiting when you want to engage more than a (S)mall audience. That's what I worked on in the series. Too often in experimental dance, that's where dance makers stay, and it blocks engaging a larger audience. In (S)mall, the performative operation is transparent. That is what makes that work important. But after (S), [my concern is] that too much focus on the performative operations can block the experience of the work.

I have never heard someone say, "I can't wait to go read that dance." My work is founded in theory, but I work to build on the theory, not to rely on it as a status symbol. So both sides have a point—the presentational and the conceptual. I'm interested in making Art with a capital A; and for that, I must always remember that theory and discourse are tools, not the thing itself.

AO: It's interesting to hear you discuss size not only in terms of a piece's scale, but in terms of the size of an audience in relation to a piece's reliance on (or exposure/concealment of) theory.

Ariel Osterweis is Assistant Professor of Dance at Wayne State University (Detroit, MI). She earned her Ph.D. in Performance Studies at the University of California, Berkeley and B.A. in Anthropology at Columbia University. At work on her first book, which theorizes virtuosity, race, and sexuality in the dance career of Desmond Richardson, Osterweis also researches contemporary African dance and the disavowal of virtuosity in feminist and transgender live art and performance. Publications appear in *Dance Research Journal*, *Women and Performance*, *e-misférica*, *Theatre Survey*, *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and the Popular Screen*, and more. She danced professionally with Complexions Contemporary Ballet, Mia Michaels, and Heidi Latsky, choreographers, and is dramaturg for choreographer John Jasperse and performance artist Narcissister. Osterweis is currently living in New York City.

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