



PROJECT MUSE®

Futures of Dance Studies

Manning, Susan, Ross, Janice, Schneider, Rebecca

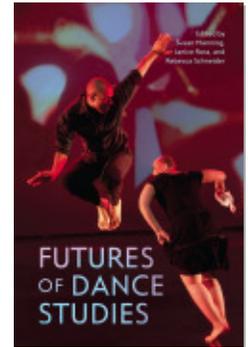
Published by University of Wisconsin Press

Manning, Susan, et al.

Futures of Dance Studies.

University of Wisconsin Press, 2020.

Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/71575.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/71575>

Disavowing Virtuosity, Performing Aspiration

*Choreographies of Anticlimax in the Work of
Yve Laris Cohen, Narcissister, and John Jasperse*

ARIEL OSTERWEIS

You are angling for a peek, standing up from your seat to try to see if he is actually doing it. Your view is partially obstructed by a four-foot wall that the artist has just spent a quarter of an hour constructing. It seems he is giving a man from the audience a hand job. As part of his performance, *Call Home* (2011), Yve Laris Cohen has painstakingly built a stage set that mirrors the structure of the venue, the Judson Memorial Church, the historic home of the 1960s Judson Dance Theater. Depending on where you are situated on the raked seating, you might see a penis struggling to stay hard; no “happy ending” ensues. This act comprises one half of an exchange between Laris Cohen and the anonymous man; earlier, you saw this man give cash to Laris Cohen. When you are standing, you can see the performers’ gestures and above-the-belt actions over the top edge of the wall. Thus, you and the rest of the audience witness Laris Cohen return the cash to the man after the sex act, which appears to have remained aspirational, not fully realized to climax. After returning the cash, Laris Cohen takes center stage behind the wall to perform a series of men’s ballet chugs (repeated turns *à la seconde*), the type you would encounter in the coda of a full-length classical story ballet. By building a wall and exchanging cash for sex work and, subsequently, cash for dance, Laris Cohen brings attention to the status of labor in various unexpectedly overlapping contexts—construction, sex, and dance.

In one sense or another (one more literal than the rest), all of these “jobs” qualify as types of manual labor. However, according to the transactions taking place, you are led to believe that the task of dance is not as valuable as that of sex, because Laris Cohen returns the cash to the anonymous man just before

executing his turn sequence, in effect paying the man to watch him dance. Might that be because Laris Cohen stumbles out of his turns? Regardless, all too often dancers dance for free or incur out-of-pocket expenses. Staging labor through task-based performance, Laris Cohen compels us to consider the value of human output in a live visual field that brings to mind, yet exceeds, Karl Marx's formulations of concealed labor in commodity fetishism. A familiar point of reference for dance studies, Mark Franko (2002), after Hannah Arendt, suggests that labor, like dance itself, is the force behind work and refers more to effort than any final (capitalist) product. In *Call Home*, physical labor is alternately concealed and revealed; we find that not all dance "work" exposes its labor. The turns *à la seconde* are framed through repetition, duration, and error as Laris Cohen interrupts a potentially climactic series with falls, stopping and starting again whenever he loses his balance. Because Laris Cohen has taken the action farther upstage, we catch glimpses of this teetering, as well as his extended leg, also known in ballet as one's "working leg" (always at the mercy of the stability or lack thereof of one's "standing leg"). His exposed chest reveals evidence of top surgery, and we become privy to markers of trans identity. During ballet training, a girl would not be taught these turns; they lie outside the scope of expectations for women in ballet. Gendered according to standards unconventional to classical ballet, Laris Cohen's turn passage, like the entirety of *Call Home*, is accompanied by a short excerpt from the climax to the score of the film *E. T.*—on loop. To perform these turns as a trans man, barefoot, inconsistently, and in the home of Judson Dance is to perform a sense of aspiration without the fulfillment of climax. Who is the extraterrestrial in this piece? Faced with the task of executing difficult turns, Laris Cohen, unlike *E. T.* and his young friend Elliott, never ascends into the sky via bicycle, spaceship, or any other apparatus. On loop and clumsily interrupted, the pursuit of climax is thus rendered banal, surging incessantly without resolution. What of this continuous, melancholic withholding of release?

Walls function in numerous ways—as barriers, structural supports, and partitions. They can be indoors, outdoors, or both at once. They only fully enclose space with the addition of ceilings and are most often secured to the ground. Walls are material and architectural, but "wall" can also refer to an impediment or obstruction, psychic or social. In this essay, I locate in the work of three contemporary artists—Yve Laris Cohen, Narcissister, and John Jasperse—a shared interest in an aesthetics of concealment in the face of work that seems otherwise explicit and revealing. Through different means, these artists engage in a dialectics of concealing and revealing and deliberately aestheticize a kind of partial access. They invest in making art that addresses societal walls built to delineate identities and adjudicate degrees of excellence; moreover, such walls

are evoked through actual material constructions, as well as through choreographic processes of concealing through movement. Laris Cohen works with the materiality of wall and floor constructions to mine the status of embodied labor, Narcissister covers her face in a mask at all times to bring attention to bodily excess in hypersexual depictions of black femininity, and Jasperse folds black popular dances into (and within) formal choreographies that stage the evacuation of affect and the indiscernibility of appropriation.

All three artists disavow dance-based virtuosity through performances of aspiration—almost virtuosic but not quite. In the proper use of the term, “virtuosity” indicates something in excess of exceptional technical mastery that has been accumulated over time. In other words, as anthropologist Anya Peterson Royce (2004) has indicated, “artistry” refers to the fulfillment of a composition, while “virtuosity” refers to that affectively felt yet difficult-to-describe quality that exceeds the call of the composition. Additionally, virtuosity cannot be theorized in the absence of technique. Conceptualizing skill in degrees is important to an understanding of virtuosity: ability is inherent/latent, skill (and thus technique) points to ability plus training, and virtuosity is ability plus skill and that unnamable excess (which is identifiable with the help of charisma). Instead of presenting audiences with climactic resolution, slick mastery, and the excess inherent to virtuosity, Laris Cohen, Narcissister, and Jasperse expose the fraying, chafing, and awkwardly embodied exertion of effort. In their works, efforts conventionally directed toward virtuosity have been redirected from goal to process, from capitalist “success” to queer experiments with “failure.” However, they do not situate failure as loss or even escape from convention. Rather, they perform aspiration and shift our experience from one of spectating feats of virtuosity to confronting the uneven repetition and potential violence of its pursuit. Their aspirational performances labor through modes of questioning that offer glimpses into dance training, eventually detouring away from such conventional regimes of discipline. Rather than displaying unfettered excellence in any one medium or technique, Laris Cohen, Narcissister, and Jasperse all insist on bringing otherwise disparate forms and contexts into proximity with one another. As they all aspire to virtuosity rather than achieve it, their work makes clear that the pursuit of virtuosity requires the exclusion of alternative possibilities. Because they do not achieve the virtuosity they aspire to, the drive to exclude those other possibilities remains legible in their work and is marked, very often, as culturally heterogeneous. Such aspirationally excluded bits provoke a rub or a tension in their work that is palpable to the audience.

Formal heterogeneity in the work brings attention to the challenge of human coexistence, which requires relationality. Relationality is built on degrees of

care between people, but virtuosic performance, having achieved a degree of exclusion, eclipses the appearance of care—care both of the self and of the other. Even if one must care in order to achieve virtuosity, the kind of care at play when acquiring, mastering, and then exceeding technique is care about form and composition (as in training passionately and committedly) more than care about generating and maintaining holistic (bodily, emotional, social) well-being. After all, virtuosity is characterized by nonchalance in the face of overachievement. Virtuosos conceal the effort that goes into their performance and appear *as if* their work were effortless and often *as if* they had not worked at all. On the other hand, artists who adopt the kind of aspirational aesthetic I interrogate here uncover such labor while simultaneously withholding other aspects of performance. They do this in part to emphasize dynamics of care. The aspirational, even obsessive focus of Laris Cohen's, Narcissister's, and Jasperse's work suggests that stripping away virtuosity's excess excellence reveals the unevenness of processual labor. Taking care of one's self or one's peers is not typical in the training rhetorics of Western dance practices. A dancer in training commonly hears tropes of admonishment and advice borrowed both from athletics and from religion: "Toughen up," "No pain, no gain," "Sacrifice yourself," and "Be responsible toward your God-given 'gift' of talent."

Laris Cohen, Narcissister, and Jasperse all locate their work in the aspirational phase of training, one that imagines but never fulfills a virtuosic future. Thus, they work within a peculiar sense of spatiotemporality, somewhere between "queer failure" (Halberstam 2011) and "queer futurity" (Muñoz 2009), neither lamenting defeat nor untethering themselves from the present. If Jack Halberstam frames queer failure spatially as an "escape" (2011, 1, 3), José Muñoz imagines queer futurity temporally—queer as "not yet here" (2009, 29). The temporality of aspirational performance aesthetics I posit here is thus simultaneously one of past and present. Artists working in this mode are retrieving and slogging through once-held aspirational disciplines and practices without the resolution of arriving at the goal that should have been or was meant to be predetermined by the training. Their destination is arrived at instead by a burrowing within. Erstwhile goals (but not processes of attaining them) may have been abandoned in the face of difficulties of a technical or institutional sort—a lack of skill acquisition in dance technique or rejection at the hands of institutional curatorial structures. All three artists rummage through the muck of trial and error that is typically effaced from virtuosic concert performance. When bravura is dispensed with in favor of exposing dance labor, inevitable displays of erring make available the possibility of care, addressing minor failures, and tending to the well-being of those performing. As such, their aspirational aesthetics enliven a foundational motif that runs through so

much contemporary performance theory—the celebration of “repetition with a difference,” with the difference being the reinclusion of that which virtuosity conventionally excludes. There is a paradox in this celebration, however. The displays of care in these works emerge out of a need to respond to coinciding displays of struggle or violence, from physical exhaustion in Laris Cohen’s work, to bodily self-objectification in Narcissister’s work, to the violence of invisibilized appropriation in that of Jasperse. In the work of Laris Cohen, Narcissister, and Jasperse, walls—material and otherwise—delineate and aestheticize limits of inclusion and exclusion of regimes of corporeal discipline.

Yve Laris Cohen

“Between” is not the sort of transitional zone that compels me. The transitions I’m invested in are among, within, and elsewhere.

—YVE LARIS COHEN (Jaskey 2014, 198)

In task-based performances troubling the institutions of the proscenium and the white cube (of the gallery and museum), Laris Cohen lays bare the labor required of dancers, sex workers, and carpenters alike. Through repetition and duration, otherwise climactic tour jetés become a site of exhaustive return,



FIGURE 41. Yve Laris Cohen and Michael Mahalchick in *Duke*, December 8, 2010, performance view, Dance Theater Workshop, New York. (Photo by Yi-Chun Wu)

and buoyancy becomes chore instead of freedom. In a recent interview, Laris Cohen stated, “I benefit from this renewed interest in dance and visual art performance, but I’m not wild about some of the institutional modifications to the ‘white cube’ made in an effort to accommodate dance. Accommodation is the wrong strategy. I respond more to barriers and constraints than I do to gestures of inclusion. Often, new spaces in museums specially designed for performance have no use for me” (quoted in Jaskey 2014, 198). Instead of capitulating to gestures of accommodation made by museums and galleries in order to neatly package reskilling, Laris Cohen constructs his own floors and dismantles preexisting walls, building and tearing down architectural and figurative barriers that other performers might find untenable. While Laris Cohen actively disavows ballet-based virtuosity in his work, he also disavows the discourse of “deskilling” and “reskilling” that we find most recently taken up by Claire Bishop (2011). Ever one to cite labor disparities in his pieces, Laris Cohen intervenes in virtuosity’s formulation. If, as described above, ability is inherent or latent, skill points to ability plus training, and virtuosity is ability plus skill and that unnamable excess, then Laris Cohen purposefully lingers in the middle category of skill, performing both excellent training and aspirational imperfection (as we find in the turn sequence of *Call Home*). And by most often positioning himself in relation to other bodies and players—usually untrained, everyday people whose body types or ages lie outside expected parameters of concert dance performance—Laris Cohen rarely appears in the virtuoso’s domain as a soloist juxtaposed with a group. He suggests that the profane, relational body places pressure on the cult of the seemingly sacred, gifted individual typically championed through much of dance’s conventional thrall to virtuosity.

The reason Laris Cohen distances himself from tropes of deskilling and reskilling in contemporary art-world parlance is that he is skilled (and highly trained) in both dance and visual art, and he does not “deskill” to perform his work. In addition to childhood ballet training that included American Ballet Theatre summer programs, Laris Cohen studied art, dance, and performance studies at the University of California, Berkeley, before earning his MFA in art from Columbia University. Nevertheless, reskilling is not an entirely inaccurate description. According to Bishop (2011), reskilling can occur when an art form moves from its own conventional space of presentation to another. Thus, concert dance presented in the museum would require, inherently, a kind of reskilling. More resonant with Laris Cohen’s project, however, is the idea of “transing” as movement not only between genders but also between genres. Susan Stryker, a scholar of gender studies, reminds us that “*transing* [is] a practice that takes place within, as well as across or between, gendered spaces . . . a practice that assembles gender into contingent structures of association with other attributes

of bodily being, and allows for their reassembly” (quoted in Stryker, Currah, and Moore 2008, 13). As the epigraph to this section makes clear, Laris Cohen prefers the transitions *among*, *within*, and *elsewhere* to the liminality suggested by *between*.

Through a commitment to a mode of transing that insists on remaining *within*—as opposed to *between*—Laris Cohen is almost obsessively invested in rehearsing particular moments from the famed Romantic ballet *Giselle*, which is based on a tale of madness, unrequited love, exhaustion, and dancing oneself to death. (See Rebecca Chaleff’s chapter in this volume.) One moment in particular that preoccupies Laris Cohen is the scene in act 2 when Giselle hovers over Albrecht after Myrtha and the Wilis have forced Albrecht to dance into a state of collapse. In *Duke* (2010) a shirtless Laris Cohen in football pants and padding positions himself as Giselle in a deep lunge with arms spread and suspended over his fellow player, seemingly untrained in ballet and also shirtless. This *Giselle* allusion arrives after a laborious series of chores—moving planks and other performers around the stage. Task, support, exhaustion, and gestures of care come to the fore. Laris Cohen has cast new light on both task and ballet, rendering contrasting types of support equal to one another: in ballet, men are typically charged with lifting, and in *Duke*, the same amount of care is given to lifting wooden planks as is given to lifting fleshly humans. With exhaustion, though, comes emotion, and new forms of care emerge throughout the piece.

The theme of *Giselle* is repeated in *al Coda, from D.S.*, a performance that actually did involve a sense of between as Laris Cohen removed and transported a section of the wall of the original Whitney Museum of American Art downtown to the new Whitney building construction site as part of the 2014 Whitney Biennial. Creatively working within limitations unexpectedly placed on the performance by site managers, Laris Cohen had a section of the performance narrated in the absence of mobile propane heaters, which were meant to comprise a *corps de ballet* of sorts. A performer in the piece explained to hard hat-wearing audience members that the heaters were to have been positioned in the unfinished space in a formation that evoked the Wilis’ choreography in *Giselle*’s act 2.

Laris Cohen’s performances, in placing people and objects on an equal, relational plane, show us that care cannot be static and must be actively rehearsed. Even so, such repetitive, compulsive, or obsessive actions never quite seem resolved. Halberstam writes,

If success requires so much effort, then maybe failure is easier in the long run and offers different rewards. . . . Perhaps most obviously failure allows us to

escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. . . . And while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life. (2011, 3)

Laris Cohen's repeated efforts, though rife with a sense of trial and error, refuse queer failure, privileging an almost masochistic commitment to discipline. Nevertheless, he, like Halberstam, rejects the "positivity" of capitalist paradigms of success and looks back toward childhood, especially his childhood training as a girl in classical ballet. Thus, while Halberstam and Laris Cohen may share a disdain for neoliberalism's hyperprivatized individualism and celebrate the temporality of a backward glance, Laris Cohen's work offers anything but escape. Similarly, Laris Cohen works against what Muñoz (2009) refers to as the utopic potential of "waiting." In witnessing this slogging-through (this aspirational burrowing into time and space), we become privy to the potential of agency, of choice over chance.

Narcissister

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.

—NARCISSISTER (2012)

Like the airline steward who tells you that you must put your oxygen mask on first before helping others, Michel Foucault writes that care of the self is ontologically prior to care of others (1997, 287). While the airplane adage has taken on metaphorical status, it is in fact a matter of life or death in the event of an emergency landing or loss of cabin pressure. But how does this supposed ontological truth hold up in the context of those who are not or have not been taken care of to begin with? Performance artist Narcissister, who only ever appears in a mask, exposes the reality that black women's experiences often lie outside of Foucault's chronological demand that care of the self takes place ontologically prior to that of others. How often do we encounter representations of black women being cared for (by themselves or by others) *first*? Performing most often as a soloist or among a community of other people also masked as Narcissisters, Narcissister stages images of self-care. Appearing narcissistic and even autoexploitative, her performances are masturbatory inasmuch as they are about survival. Whereas Laris Cohen presents the manual labor of



FIGURE 42. Narcissister, *Upside Down*, 2010, studio view. (Courtesy of Narcissister)

a hand job through the framework of an exchange or transaction, Narcissister's hands are directed toward herself as she rubs the clit of a handmade soft sculpture vagina costume she wears in *AssVag* (2008). The anonymity of her mask is met with the privacy of her "parts," and she uses her hands to insert and remove objects into and out of her vagina, mirroring the audience's own fetishization, its oscillating, dildo-like acceptance and rejection of the foreign other, the object.

In 2010 I was reintroduced to Narcissister over email by dance maker Trajal Harrell, who recommended my services as a performance dramaturge; as it turned out, we had trained together at the Ailey School and shared the privilege and burden of being mixed-race. 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. Thus, she works through feeling both *between* and *within*, doing so through a dynamic of nudity and shrouding, baring and covering her skin while making reference to black dance and performance traditions. She trained formally in modern dance at Ailey after graduating from Brown University

and moving to New York City, and though her Ailey-inspired dance passages may appear as haphazard citation, they are instead a form of critical homage. This inversion, or undecidability, between criticality and homage runs through her work on many levels. For instance, she performs striptease and its reversal. In her video and live performance *Every Woman* (2010), danced to the 1978 Chaka Khan song, Narcissister begins almost nude; she is in a mask, a merkin, and an Afro wig. One by one, she removes items of clothing from her bodily orifices—mouth, vagina, and anus. After she dons one piece of clothing at a time, her final outfit consists of tights, gloves, a tube top, and a skirt; a purse and pumps emerge from her wig. Khan sings “I’ll do it naturally” as Narcissister covers her body in artifice. 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. In her live theatrical shows, on video, and in her performances in public spaces she engages in a disavowal of the 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 body racialized and gendered as “American.”

Foucault suggests that proper care of the self necessitates avoiding abuses of power (1997, 287). Narcissister’s exploitative images of self-care move toward perversion and could be labeled hyper-self-care. While her performances involve passages of sexual (and aesthetically formal) climax, such climax is taken to the extreme—too objectifying, too long, and too pleasurable. Because these passages follow explorations into virtuosic dance, yoga, and burlesque routines, they arrive after Narcissister has generated an expectation for resolution. Instead, she displaces virtuosity’s technical excess onto her masturbatory sexuality. This is to say that if a virtuoso dancer derives pleasure from performing in excess of technique, Narcissister’s performances suggest a desperation in the pursuit of pleasuring oneself—a metaphor for the struggle of minoritarian self-care. Like Laris Cohen, performances of the self that exercise agency and effort that is not beholden to an outside authority do not necessarily amount to freedom. 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: to observe Narcissister inserting her hands into or extracting objects from her vagina is not to gain access to her subjectivity or sense of self. We couldn’t be further from the trope of the body as a temple. Narcissister 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 hyper-self-care are especially poignant in reference to popular culture’s inability to render

images of black women being cared for, but they reek of an internalization of cultural imagery that objectifies.

Theorists of blackness, modernism, and “cool” in the humanities have repeatedly turned to the mask (Thompson 1983), and Narcissister’s performances—in their refusal to reveal her face—inherently question assumptions of diasporic representation and racialized performance. In “Racial Kitsch and Black Performance,” Tavia Nyong’o (2002) 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 shame in the African American and antiracist viewer and promotes 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 kitch 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. 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 bodily 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 uncostumed) in a way that questions the fluctuating status of objecthood and subjectivity in performances that cite racialized and gendered figures from history.

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* (2012), performed at the Box NYC, Narcissister performs in a larger-than-life wedding-banded hand costume that covers her face and body. She inserts a series of turns from the Horton technique into the performance, the kind in which the dancer extends her arms in a vertical overhead parallel position, tracing a circular right-back-left-front pattern. Ailey choreographed a series of these very turns in his piece *Memoria* (1979), an homage to Horton dancer Joyce Trisler. 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 displays how *disavowal*, too, can take on dramaturgical qualities. If avowal is a promise but not a contract, then disavowal—as performed

by Narcissister—functions as a promise of an alternative, an acknowledgment of normative visual regimes followed by movements that escape their hold. Material articles do not always remain on her body, and her body communicates in the absence of utterance. Narcissister’s disciplined transgressions perform an inexhaustible mutability that refuses to commit to the binding performances of race and gender scripted by mainstream culture.

John Jasperse

I am working on disorienting myself.

—JOHN JASPERSE (2013)

At first, choreographer John Jasperse wanted to frame the stage of his 2014 dance *Within between* with bracket-shaped side walls, thus removing the wings of the theater. “Square brackets,” according to the *OED*, “are mainly used to enclose words added by someone other than the original writer or speaker, typically in order to clarify the situation.” If parenthetical commentary is meant to reveal a writer’s own subcutaneous thought, then brackets are installed by a writer when making an addition or inserting a comment into another’s quoted words. They are also used when erasing or omitting words when quoting another



FIGURE 43. Maggie Cloud, Stuart Singer, Simon Courchel, and Burr Johnson in John Jasperse’s *Within between*, 2014. (Photo by Yi-Chun Wu)

person's words. Isn't quotation a form of appropriation at its most basic level? And the original author has no control over what someone else will [clarify] in brackets. Perhaps it is no accident, then, that Jasperse initially imagined his stage bounded by enormous brackets, as if to clarify that his dance occurs within the dance of another.

After training at Sarah Lawrence College, Jasperse danced professionally in Brussels with Rosas, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's company. He is also influenced by the work of Trisha Brown, among others. In *Within between*, Jasperse formally deconstructs ballet and black vernacular dance forms to the extent that they appear as something other; stripping ballet, stepping, and twerking of their accompanying affect, Jasperse aestheticizes the way cultural and artistic appropriation can go undetected. We find here the coalescence of Laris Cohen's commentary on classical ballet and labor and Narcissister's reappropriation of black dance forms and focus on objecthood. Radically distinct from one another in their approaches, Laris Cohen, Narcissister, and Jasperse share a common interest in referencing culturally specific dance techniques within wider experimental, queer choreographic contexts that critique capitalist exploitation.

In 2013–14 I worked as a dramaturge with Jasperse during the creation of *Within between*. The process of working on the piece was often laden with a sense of occlusion, which I found difficult initially, but ultimately occlusion fit the piece's eventual aesthetic. Given that *Within between* was to explore black vernacular dance forms such as twerking and stepping, I had some initial trepidation about entering into a dramaturgical relationship with a white choreographer with this interest. Yet what attracted me to Jasperse was that I detected in him a dual uncompromising formalism and a self-doubting vulnerability that was more about the integrity of the work than about egocentric self-deprecation. Early in the rehearsal process I wrote to him:

Why stepping? Why the MLK speech excerpts? What I find in these sections . . . is a generic "America." And the way I see these symbolic glimpses into "America" functioning is through an acceptance of the view that America is inherently Africanist, that black performance is already an aspect of America's whitenesses, blacknesses, Asiannesses, hispanicnesses. . . . Moreover, moments that call upon collegiate marching band-derived dances and performances stage questions more than they provide definitive answers. The more time I spend in rehearsal with you and the dancers, the less I feel that we can demarcate a true shift between a "Jasperse style" and a "post-Jasperse style." Trying things on seems to be how you've arrived at your idiosyncratic and highly explored movement style, and no matter how "foreign" a trope might be—whether a collegiate dance form

like stepping or a theoretical concept like perception. If we consider Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "minor literature" (which refers to Kafka's writing), we might ask ourselves if these moments in your new piece generate a minoritarian choreography . . . or, if they point to minoritarian culture within a choreography that is already (differently) minoritarian in its queerness, its careful embrace of a rigorous vulnerability. Would it be too crude to ask, how does choreography that emanates from a white gay masculine consciousness inform and ingest black performance (oration, music, dance)? Alternatively, the collective effervescence of university sports arenas (the occasion for marching bands and their accompanying cheers and dances) is hardly a comfortable context for the queer kid, the experimental choreographer, or the contemporary dancer. While I think it would be overwrought to claim a "post-Jasperse style," I want to leave a question out in space (a queer space?): how is your new choreography racializing and gendering its "America"? Does a generic America exist? Or is the US only ever a personal, particular amalgamation of disparate cultural, historical, and symbolic images, experiences, and commodities?

Jasperse was interested in working from a place of difference, not affinity. In a mode similar to choreographer Ralph Lemon (especially his piece *How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere?* [2010]), Jasperse wanted to challenge both his preexisting movement vocabulary and his conceptual vantage point. Initially, he gave me the task of analyzing and describing his earlier work in an effort to assist him in initiating a pivot away from his previous aesthetic habits. What had stood out to me from his previous work was a consistent engagement with objects that moved—*things* with agency. Recalling players such as jeans, leaf blowers, sculptures, penises, mattresses, emptied water bottles, and inflated pool rafts, I was continually struck by the way Jasperse was able to create choreographically political ecologies. Without disregarding the formal precision of a nuanced tilt of the head or the spiraling energetics of a connected trio moving across the stage at twenty miles per hour, he maintained an undertone of sociocultural critique. In *Misuse liable to prosecution* (2007), Jasperse brought to our attention the desperate financial mechanics of putting together a dance performance, commenting on the scarcity of resources for artists working within a commodity culture of waste, investigating capitalist materiality through corporeal materiality (money through the body).

But in rehearsals for *Within between*, I thought, where did the objects go? No rafts, hangers, orange cones, or boxes! While some work in the humanities has recently taken a turn from cultural to ecological framings, I noted an inverse shift in Jasperse's work from the ecological to the cultural. Whereas Jasperse's

stages were once littered with animated things, they had been stripped down to bodies—just people. He told me he wanted to try on culturally foreign movement styles.

As opposed to mimicking a new dance style, Jasperse wanted to translate dialogue about such styles into movement, which is a type of abstracted praxis, a “doing” of theory (and he does this differently from Trajal Harrell, who uses voguing as a “theoretical praxis” in his long-term project, *Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church*). Such abstraction skirts around embodiment. Rather, it means to embody an idea about a dance form instead of embodying a dance form itself, privileging the affect of translation over the integrity of precise replication. What I find in this method is a commitment to form and structure. Jasperse was ever willing to admit his failures and displeasures, but there is always a return to structure.

In a section of *Within between* that is the result of the twerking experiments, we find a great distancing from the original referent. Engaged in a duet, Simon Courchel and Burr Johnson receive each other’s jiggling body parts—a buttocks on the shoulder, a leg in the hand—amounting to a humorous yet tender exploration of teasing and support. The movement feels comfortably queer, but the faint echo of a marching band in the background conjures questions of the US preoccupation with gays in the military. How do we as audience members perceive movement passages that allude to cultural experiments with the likes of twerking (if we perceive them at all)? Jasperse could be commenting on Eurocentric classicism, race, modernist abstraction, high and low culture, or the idea of “America.” At the level of choreography, what qualifies as “American”?

All four dancers (Courchel, Johnson, Maggie Cloud, and Stuart Singer) perform a repeated stepping passage from upstage to downstage in a minimalist vein and with very low affect. The first time through, the dancers are costumed in black and white, and the second time they are in brightly colored printed costumes. Are they tourists along a journey of cultural dress-up? We encounter stepping in black colleges; both entertainment and competition, it is a performance of aspiration. Jasperse contrasts and integrates culturally disparate dance techniques and evacuates them of their aspirational qualities. The audience is made aware of aspiration through its absence, the sense that some quality is missing from the dancers’ delivery of the movement. For example, in one section, the four ballet- and contemporary-trained dancers execute the kinds of methodical tendus and port de bras you might find at the beginning of the center section of ballet class—fifth position, croisé, and so on. There is a creepy nonchalance to this sequence of movements, a restraint you wouldn’t find in a ballet class in a classical ballet academy, but the kind you might find in a

“ballet-for-modern-dancers” class, like a rejection of *épaulement*’s reach, its aspiration. More specifically, if virtuosity includes a curious brew of technique and charisma (in perfect excess), we find in the example of Jasperse that the dancers perform a basic level of skill without the expected degree of charisma.

In other words, Jasperse, Narcissister, and Laris Cohen alike play not only with approximations of virtuosity but also with the presence and absence of qualities that comprise aspiration—skill and charisma. Jasperse challenges us with such ambivalence in a collegiate section with allusions to cheerleading in which the dancers barely crack a smile, a far cry from the plastered patriotic glee of televised cheerleaders or effervescent frat boys. Is this Jasperse’s way of rejecting “America” or of refiguring its commoditized affects and rendering them banal? Who owns these images? How are they felt in our bodies? Distortion is introduced into the ballet section, contaminating—or freeing—the dance.

Jasperse has stated that he still believes in skill amid a terrain of postdramatic choreographers such as Jerome Bel and Xavier Le Roy, who present choreographies of deskilling and nondance. William Forsythe comes to mind as a contemporary of Jasperse who also holds onto skill. Nevertheless, Forsythe’s is a choreography that embraces classicism and certainly a relationship to ballet (whether enlivened, dissected, distorted, or displaced). It would be remiss, however, to mistake Jasperse’s ever-footy articulations with something balletic. They are decisively not. The balletic foot is pointed; it is pointed by discipline. The Jasperse foot is undisciplining and redisciplining, adhering to something more modern or postmodern. The Jasperse foot is both highly articulated and unapologetically pedestrian, gritty even—a great oxymoron in terms of concert dance. A seemingly minor issue, the foot indicates something more profound about Jasperse’s work.

Toward the end of the rehearsal period, a thing re-entered the studio. *Within between* began to feature a pole dance of sorts. This pole appears only at the beginning of the hour-long piece. Instead of the transparent, light-catching attributes of clear plastic bottles and blow-up pillows (of *Misuse*), *Within between* begins with a nudge. A pole threatens to penetrate the audience. Contact? A probe? A rifle taking aim? Initially weaponized by a dancer, the pole becomes a structure of support, and two dancers lean on it while somehow keeping it suspended atop their toes and shoulders. As the dancers embark on the ballet section, they kick away the pole with their feet, as if to reject a fallen ballet barre. Not merely an allusion to moving from barre to center in a ballet class, this gesture of kicking away the barre indicates a rejection of classical modes of artistic support, a movement away from the institutional.

Jasperse reintroduced his penchant for the ecological to the otherwise cultural landscape of *Within between*, creating a meeting point between political

things and social people. We might ask, then, where does identity reside in this work—in the dancers, in Jasperse, in the pole, in the idea of “America,” or in the choreography itself? It has been said that movement is fleeting, but what, then, of the way we attach ourselves to a dance? In a tender duet, Courchel and Singer begin by facing each other and giving each other movement directions. This section culminates *Within between* and is the only one that includes speaking. From rehearsals, I had remembered commands given in the second person (such as “You kneel”), but these had shifted in performance to first-person statements (such as “I get up” or “I sit”) that functioned as dual first-person descriptions of movement in real time, as well as second-person directives. As opposed to coming to climactic conclusion, the piece ends in a moment of aspiration as Courchel and Singer try to fulfill each other’s descriptions with their eyes closed, devoid of visual cues. Isn’t it with our eyes closed that we listen most closely? Courchel and Singer develop a quiet intimacy, then one of them utters, “I leave.” Both dancers walk offstage. The audience is silent, unsure if the next moment calls for applause or attention. Incrementally, a few claps are joined by more, and the applause surges.

Through an uneven dialectic of concealing and revealing the dancer’s labor, Laris Cohen’s, Narcissister’s, and Jasperse’s work draws and drags us into ambivalent loops of aspiration, recurrently citing the nearly impossible climaxes of virtuosity’s promise. Laris Cohen painstakingly builds and disassembles physical walls to suggest societal barriers while repeating and reappropriating gestures of care that emerge from heteronormative ballet narratives. As such, by creating an unexpected spectacle of the mundane working body while simultaneously rendering the romantic balletic gesture banal, Laris Cohen creates space for us to reimagine—and trans—hierarchies of the physical. In the work of all three artists, we find pointed vacillation between physical bodies and physical objects. Narcissister preempts the audience’s knee-jerk tendency to objectify the black female body by presenting herself as an object. The uncanny animation of her doll-like presence and techniques of self-exploitation render care obscene, ultimately pointing to the absurdity of society’s racialized, gendered, and classed standards of feminine beauty in and around dance and popular culture. Jasperse’s performances of incomplete embodiment—skill in the absence of charisma—subtly stage the banal violence of appropriation. By surveying and distorting aspirational dance traditions, he traces the pedagogical process of technical acquisition in a culturally confused “America.” Faint, sonic snippets of marching bands and Asian tones evoke the clashing of the militaristic and the spiritual inherent to any nationalist project and its embodied practices. The work of all three artists is comprised of alternating moments

of violence and care strung together by effort and error. Their disavowal of virtuosity and subsequent performances of aspiration ultimately urge us to question how we will carry on within spaces that may not readily embrace our practices.

Works Cited

- Bishop, Claire. 2011. "UNHAPPY DAYS IN THE ART WORLD? De-skilling Theater, Re-skilling Performance." *Brooklyn Rail*, December 10. <https://brooklynrail.org/2011/12/art/unhappy-days-in-the-art-worldde-skilling-theater-re-skilling-performance>.
- Foucault, Michel. 1997. *Ethics—Subjectivity and Truth*. Vol. 1 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984*, edited by Paul Rabinow. Translated by Robert Hurley and others. London: Penguin Press.
- Franco, Mark. 2002. *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Jasperse, John. 2013. Phone interview. August 8.
- Halberstam, Jack. 2011. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Jaskey, Jenny. 2014. "Among, Within, and Elsewhere: Yve Laris Cohen." *Mousse Magazine* 42. <http://moussemagazine.it/yve-laris-cohen-jenny-jaskey-2014/>.
- Muñoz, José. 2009. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press.
- Narcissister. 2012. Interview with the author. Brooklyn, New York, July 30.
- Nyong'o, Tavia. 2002. "Racial Kitsch and Black Performance." *Yale Journal of Criticism* 15 (2): 371–91.
- Royce, Anya Peterson. 2004. *Anthropology of the Performing Arts: Artistry, Virtuosity, and Interpretation in a Cross-Cultural Perspective*. New York: Altamira Press.
- Stryker, Susan, Paisley Currah, Lisa Jean Moore. 2008. "Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?" *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 36 (3–4): 11–22.
- Thompson, Robert Farris. 1983. *Flash of the Spirit*. New York: Vintage Books, Random House.