In the pages of this zine are thoughts, intimate descriptions, confessions, associations, analyses—a wide range of possibilities for writing about dance.

It’s time that we put aside the adage that dance escapes language. It’s time we take courage and risks to describe what many of us are obsessed by and cannot stop doing and insist on the importance of it.

These texts address specific performances in this festival but are not all specifically “about” the performances to which they relate. Writers and artists were invited to play with the standard templates of engaging work. They look in from the outside, reach out from the inside, sit next to and around the work they address. Dancers write about choreographers. Theorists write about friends. Strangers assemble polyphonic artistic voices into poetic improvisations. Artists remember.

Reading is interpreting a situation through perception and association. Reading pulls from visual signs, physical gestures and auditory signals and translates those cues into critiques delivered with sharp truth and witty flare—performing is reading. How do performers read audiences in order to deliver performance? How do audiences read performance? This collection of writings helps read American Realness 2013.

Enjoy!

— Moriah Evans, Ben Pryor & Buck Wanner
Dear Alastair,

Thanks for the questions.

The title “American Realness” was created for the 2010 festival. Its intention was to call attention to the proliferation of choreographic practices being employed in contemporary work that transcended the traditions of “lights and tights,” which has in some ways been the main identification of American work from many international perspectives. The title was also a reaction to an article Michael Kaiser from the Kennedy Center wrote for The Huffington Post titled “Why I Worry About Modern Dance”.

When his piece was published I was working as Director of Operations at CPR - Center for Performance Research. I read the article while John Jasperse was finishing his work Truth, Revisited Histories, Wishful Thinking and Flat Out Lies in the back studio, and Miguel Gutierrez was on his way in for a meeting with me about touring his forthcoming Last Meadow. Where is the future of Modern Dance!?!?!? I was living it and this esteemed performing arts professional is publicly admitting his cluelessness?! In my opinion a professional in a role such as his shouldn’t be confused about where the future is coming from. They should be cultivating it!!

The fact that he is even still using “Modern Dance” to describe work being made today is evidence of his disconnect with the contemporary moment. I felt an urgent need to call attention to the rigorous experimental work I was experiencing in NYC that was somehow being overlooked by performing arts professionals around the world. My desire was to show this work in a context that would help inform the nature of its construction and intentions. Putting the festival container around the work, keeping it all in the same building and showing it in such a condensed time frame all help do that.

Speaking to your American question... The festival features work by American choreographers based in the US or internationally. This year Tony Rizzi is the only internationally based American artist, but this has been a through line in the festival’s curation since 2010 with artists including Jeremy Wade, Daniel Linehan, Tarek Halaby, Eleanor Bauer and Jennifer Lacey. There has also been work made by foreign-born choreographers who have been making work in the US for the past ten to twenty years - Maria Hassabi and Yvonne Meier for example. So the work is informed by its creation via an American context and US systems of support - meaning different American institutions have invested in the work and American dollars have enabled the works creation. Not necessarily exclusively, but primarily.

Realness, for me, means a few different things:

1. The term “Realness” comes from the Drag Ball context and has to do with passing as something that you are not. With the festival, I consider Realness in relationship to the performativity of personhood and identity and how these ideas are played with in contemporary work. How are performers representing themselves on stage and WHAT are they presenting of “themselves”? For example many people have trouble separating Ann Liv’s characters and actions on stage or in performance from who she is as a person off the stage. I am really interested in that slippery space. It creates a heightened state of attention for the audience. They are forced to work through their own sense of confusion about what is happening.

2. There is also a level of “realness” that relates to the underfunded nature of American work in relationship to international work. It is about acknowledging that there is more frequently a DIY, raw aesthetic employed in this American work versus its international counterparts. With that however, we are acknowledging that this is the case and making a conscious decision to work with it and call attention to it. We may not have everything that we wanted to do this, but we are making it work with what we have and not apologizing for it. Artists keeping it real.
3. There is the level of marketplace that is somewhat transparent, perhaps less so for the public, but very much so for the programmers coming to the festival. Many of these curators and programmers are literally shopping for work. In the traditional American entrepreneurial spirit we have set up shop and we are for sale.

There are a few other curatorial threads running through the program over the past four years:

Keith Hennessy, Miguel Gutierrez, Jeremy Wade, Jeanine Durning and Meg Stuart (not that she has been in AR, though I would love to show the work if I can ever come up with a REAL programming budget...) present bodies in heightened energetic states on stage in their work. These ecstatic bodies are working with movement that comes from an internal place of feeling and experience versus a place of external construction exclusively concerned with line or shape. These states are magnified manifestations of emotional experience - the body responding to the sensory overload of daily life in our mediated age or the body responding to specific experiences of emotional turmoil. The 2013 program reflects these ideas in Hennessy’s Turbulence (a dance about the economy), Gutierrez and Fennelly’s Storing the Winter, BodyCartography’s Super Nature in which they are pursuing the experience of shared empathy and Jeanine Durning’s inging through which her non-stop speaking generates a state of emotional exhaustion manifests in her physicality throughout the work.

Self-reflexivity or “the self-reflexive voice” is another curatorial through-line of the festival. We find this in the early more obviously constructed works of Ann Liv Young (Michael, Snow White) or in many of Jack Ferver’s works including Mon Ma Mes presented in this year’s program. Ferver begins the performance with a scripted post show talkback in which the audience is presented with cue cards containing the questions they will ask. This constructed situation allows Ferver a space of reflexivity; a moment in the performance when he as the performer can refer to himself from inside the performance, provide commentary on it. Big Art Group is another company presented through AR that employs this tactic in their work.

A third through-line has been desperate and/or celebratory pop-spectacle. Many works in the festival over the past four years have used the overwhelming desperation in pop music as a point of emotional reference or to set a tone in the work. The familiarity of the pop music employed allows multiple entry point for audiences. We see this in the “parade” section of Gutierrez’s Last Meadow (AR 2010) in which the three performers strip off their costumes and dance around the theater (on stage and in the house) to a blasting Madonna track while fog fills the space and colored lights suggest debaucherous night life. We see this in all the stage works of Ann Liv Young (ALY Does Sherry at AR in 2010, Mermaid Solo at AR in 2011 and Sleeping Beauty Part 1 at AR in 2012). For AR 2013 we see this in Trajal Harrell’s Antigone Sr./Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at the Judson Church (L) and Judson Church is Ringing in Harlem (Made-to-Measure)/Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at The Judson Church (M2M). He uses pop music throughout the works to set an emotional tone and build referential connotations for the audience. The use of Zebra Katz’s Ima read in Antigone Sr. is evocative of the buzz created when Rick Owens used the track as soundtrack for his Fall / Winter 2012 Paris Fashion week runway show. The track is based on the performativity found in the ball culture exemplified by Paris is Burning. The explosion of popularity as a result of its use in the Owen’s show works perfectly in relationship to the ideas Harrell is presenting in his work. We also find this in Neal Medlyn’s Wick ed Clown Love, which focuses on the Juggalo men’s movement born around the Wicked Clown Posse. Medlyn has recomposed the music of the Insane Clown Posse and presents, in the work, a version of the cult-like culture that has cropped up around the band.

It is unfortunate that in the DIY underfunded nature of American Realness I haven’t really had the time to get all of these ideas out in the most visible public forum. I am extremely grateful for your prompt to write some of it down, and I hope it provides further insights to the works you are seeing in the program.

Let me know if there are any more questions. I will try to practice brevity if so.

All best and see you again tomorrow,

Ben
Dearest Maria,

I am writing you from the edges of the sand where liquid horizon touches sky. Thinking of you in Cyprus or perhaps now in Athens and soon to return to New York City where we will meet for the next iteration of SHOW. From this distance, temporally and geographically, it felt necessary to consider our mode of address—the languages and locations from which we speak, I write and you dance. And always you are dancing, with Hristoula, with Robert, or alone; “breathing and trembling are my movements,” you remind me.

Your work explicitly stages a precarious mode of address, one that acknowledges my complicity as witness and asks me to participate (and not only during the performance but in thinking about it as well). Writing of this precarious relation, Judith Butler points to the constructed quality of such tremulousness attention. We do not decide to be addressed, but rather are called, invited, placed in relation, one to the other. To acknowledge this would require a consideration of the facts, ideologies, obsessions, politics, aesthetics determining these relations. Often these conditions, dare we call them shadows, imperatives, or ghosts are never so visible. Yet I sense in your work an impulse toward their revelation. Could this be a way to think about Solo or SoloShow? Two works that take the image as a point of departure, then edit and transform it into something quite else, something that calls out to our too easy recognition of iconic postures to reveal the less stable, shaking, tears along the edges of what is seen.

DECEMBER 30th, 2012
by Jenn Joy

This is what I remember of Solo:
You begin lying on your back under the carpet off to the side of the space; white noise, footsteps, cars passing, horns, audience conversations fill the space. You lie still long after we enter. Slowly propping up one knee, you pause, then roll over, then pause, then climb out from under the carpet. You pause. Now splayed out on the carpet, your leg catches on the fabric. You rise to roll up the carpet and it becomes less surface skin and closer to a collaborator in your spatial negotiation. Now perpendicular you arch your back and your head disappears. This distended figure pauses, again. The duet with carpet continues—falling, leaning, wrapping. Later standing against the back wall, you appear almost camouflaged staring out over the crumpled carpet. Yet it seems to call you and as the lights dim you carry it to the edge of the stage before returning to the wall.

This is what I remember of SoloShow:
You sit on the edge of the platform in stillness as I enter the theater. Dressed in creamy beige pants and translucent tank top, your skin seems almost indistinguishable from the fabric. Spotlights illuminate half of the platform so that it almost disappears into the dark. You uncross your leg and turn away from me, one leg propped on the platform with one arm resting and the other draped off the edge. You move your arm from knee and place it behind as you lean back. Your tendons strain as your neck extends. The poses are long, almost too long, almost long enough to lose me. Yet this never happens, I remain entranced. Your chest lifts and lowers with each breath as the sound, a crush of white noise cut with fragments of conversation and an occasional song lyric, fills the space. You continue for almost an hour carefully exchanging positions, executing a choreography of excruciating transition across the platform.

1 Solo premiered September 29-October 4, 2009 at Performance Space 122 in partnership with PERFORMA 09. The piece was conceived as part of a diptych with SoloShow, a performance that premiered November 12-15, 2009 at Performance Space 122 in partnership with Crossing the Line. Both pieces feature lighting by Joe Levasseur, clothing by ThreeAsFour, dramaturgy by Marcos Rosales and Scott Lyall, sound score by James Lu, set design by Scott Lyall and Hassabi.
When you shift from a contemplation of image to that of task, your translation remains marked by a tremulous intensity of extreme presence and virtuosic groundedness. Your duet with Robert Steijn renders a gorgeous intimacy drawn out over time through a subtle positioning and repositioning in the space. Your gaze is for Robert alone and his for you; I remain outside. Yet from this distance I cannot look away. What is more seductive than to witness the machinations of attraction, energetic or erotic, even as performed? Following one performance, DD Dorvillier described the prismatic sparkle as a “capture of light in the liquid of your eye.” Exquisite proximity: a spasm of tears releasing.

This is what I remember of Robert and Maria:

You and Robert walk onto the stage and look into each other’s eyes. At first you stand near me. You embrace then walk onto the sanctuary floor. Lit by a pile of black stage lights, you face each other. This will be the refrain and structure of the work: to gaze deeply into each other’s eyes. I remember Rosmarie Waldrop’s words: “Eyes breathe. Like open wounds.” At once simple and gorgeous, the duration of your gaze renders a devastating address. It is not a gaze that reifies the cult of the visible, but rather transports me to a more sensuous moment of its undoing. As you stand in front of Robert, looking up and into his eyes, tears flow down your cheeks. Not once, but a series of times throughout the performance, so I am never certain if you are crying from emotion or physical fatigue or memory or any combination of these.

In a later moment, Georges Didi-Huberman whispers: “Here is exactly what dancing is, I then told myself: to make of one’s body a subtracted form, even if immobile, of multiple forces. To show that a gesture is not the simple result of a muscular movement and a directional intention, but something much more subtle and dialectic: the encounter of at least two confronted movements—those in this case of the body and the aerial milieu—producing, at the very point of their balance, a zone of arrest, of immobility, of syncope. A kind of silence of the gesture.”

In Didi-Huberman’s peculiar text the dancer appears as a bird of prey suspended in air. A kind of silence of the gesture. It is an intimately precarious mode of address. A magical gift, thank you.

Over coffee last month we spoke of another philosophic seduction not Gilles Deleuze but Alain Badiou. For Badiou dance acts as a “thought-body” as a “metaphor for thought.” Yet I want to hold onto the deeply material, physical, desiring bodies of the dancers and audience and not allow our seduction to end only in metaphor. “You dance inside my chest where no one sees you, but sometimes I do, and this sight makes our dance,” you intimated about Robert and Maria. A work that Ralph Lemon describes as an “aesthetics of love.” SHOW brings us even closer, placing us inside the dance with you and Hristoula to propose an aesthetics of desire.

This is what I imagine of SHOW:

Waiting. Still waiting. Time amplified by the intense heat from the pile of stage lights. Waiting. Still waiting. A subtle entrance as you and Hristoula walk into the space among the audience dressed in gray with long black hair. A duet doubled, at least: you with Hristoula, you with me, Hristoula with someone else… A multiplicity, if I were to steal Didi-Huberman’s term.

You speak of this dance as a mode of language, of communication that exists only when the audience is present. It is not concerned with duration, but rather details or intensities of heat, light, proximity. Neither image, nor task, nor steps, the choreography of SHOW evolves from the delicate articulation of distance between you and Hristoula, between each of you and the individuals composing the audience. When you stretch out your arm behind me, you create space or establish a trajectory although you rarely reveal these patterns. Instead you secretly shift from one encounter to the next and wait, as we waited in the beginning, for me for her for him to acknowledge the encounter as well.

SHOW might appear very quiet; at moments you and Hristoula almost disappear into the audience or into the dimming lights. And yet, the trembling sweating sensitivities of each moment articulates the subtle violence of togetherness and this is the paradox of SHOW—as imperative and as title. There is no illusion of theatricality. We feel the heat of the lights and the relief as they dim. I move with you in this “space of consciousness,” of desire, of attention.

It is an intimately precarious mode of address. A magical gift, thank you.

Sending love until we meet,

Jenn

2 Robert and Maria premiered as the final performance of (part two) a 2001 PLATFORM curated by Ralph Lemon for Danspace Project in Winter 2010. I witnessed this initial performance and then saw the piece again on 10 January 2012 also at Danspace Project in St. Mark’s Church in-the-Bowery, New York City. Robert and Maria was created and performed by Hassabi and Robert Steijn, with lighting design and installation by Ji-youn Chang and Hassabi.
We pushed our bodies beyond their capacity in every rehearsal, our senses of self were similarly driven far beyond the point of familiarity; I became other to myself.

Faye is fascinated by the relational construction of self, the behavioral adjustments produced in any new interaction. But there is more to her work than a surface investigation of the continuity of the performative self. What is at stake in Faye’s work - especially the duet You’re Me - is a question of how far the performance of self can be extended. What kind of radical intervention could break open a space in the social fabric that will give us back some choice, the possibility to be other than who we have been conditioned to be? What is the impact of enacting this rupture? What if choreographed performance can help us imagine a new field of possibility for self-realization? What if we don’t know, or can't even imagine who or what we’d like to become; what choreographic and performative methodologies might help us imagine and then enact extraordinary, unrealized entities?

Faye’s work proposes that it would take heroic acts of abandon, catastrophic physicality, manic/hypertrophic embodiment of gender stereotypes and meticulous structure to achieve transformation (to enact the extraordinary). You’re Me also demands of its performers a profound and dangerous union; it is from a constantly shifting relationship that the chaos, failure and promise of transformation emerges.

Faye has constructed a ritual of togetherness whose very inscription and repetition in live performance enacts a devastating and exquisite metamorphosis of the performer’s bodies (my self, our selves). You’re me - this is as much about Faye and I (and now Aaron) as it is about the relationship between audience and performers. You - the viewers - are us, the performers. This experiential identification instigates reflection, flux, a disavowal of stasis.

You’re Me is structured to showcase a mosaic of representations of archetypal male, female, and mythic-beast characters. The level of detail in this choreography is both maddening and extravagant, and the specificity is important. We try again and again to convince every cell in our bodies that we can be in one moment Adam and Eve, in the next a warrior princess, a baby bird, a wolf-lizard amalgam. It is our failure to perfectly enact these tropes that create a generative friction. Our imperfection agitates these containers of idealized embodiment we can’t quite fit ourselves inside. You’re Me ruptures the seams that try to enclose us in the exertion toward perfection, a settled singularity of identification.

Early in our process, Faye expressed a desire for us to look the same at some point in the work. More than enacting “twins,” she ultimately wanted us to become each other. It started with the external: we both wore the same red shorts and blue t-shirts and had on matching shaggy, short, blond wigs. We named each wig Chad. We started to improvise. We weren’t just trying to mirror each other. We were trying to fully become the other person. Every subtle facial movement or tiny body gesture was instantly perceived, translated into sensation, and then performed back; our performance of our selves began to overlap. If I started to smile, Faye would instantly smile back at me, her face distorting to match her perception of me smiling. Immediately upon seeing her face, I would try to smile back at her, becoming a reflection of the distortion of my own smile. This process of simultaneous, anticipatory and amplified matching was hysterically funny to us. We danced and babbled and sang and laughed for an hour. This process became an anchor of our improvisational practice. We named it “chadding.”
Sadly, chadding never made it into the final version of *You’re Me*, but it encapsulates the yearning for transformation that fuels this work. Ultimately, Faye and I failed to become each other - but through this relational effort, we each became something, someone else. Together, we created a different way for both of us to be in the world. Even though chadding is absurd and fleeting, it offers a real moment of delightful escape, a window into a different self made possible only by the complex interdependency of one person with another. And, like all Faye’s choreographic work, it requires an intense discipline and commitment. The lightness is born out of a deep physical attention, an unswerving empathic sensitivity to the totality of another’s experience.

Dancing changes me. I feel it: my cells re-organizing themselves, tissue tearing and healing - getting stronger or weaker, and at the deepest level - my structure shifting - bones gliding, degrading. Movement costs the body.

Dancing reminds me that I am never the same. The body is always in a state of change, but it is a *dancing* body that highlights, accelerates and marks this constant process in movement. For me, the affirmation of change through the act of dancing is glorious. In movement, I am unfixed, always different. Paradoxically, I feel most like myself when I am moving. Dance teaches me that the me I think I am is not so stable, not so constant.

In Faye’s work the unfixed dancing body meets the radically unstable performative self. *You’re Me* proposes a profound relationship between materiality and performativity: As partners in this creative process, the stakes were high for us. I pushed my body beyond its capacity in every rehearsal, my sense of self was similarly driven far beyond the point of familiarity. I became other to myself.

Wonderful things happened to me.

I kept expanding.

I demolished walls that kept me from doing things I thought were not possible or allowed.

This is the most power I’ve ever felt in my life: the power to become anything, anyone - and to have - no matter what - the support or better yet the challenge of this other body alongside me - rooting for me, pushing me further.

I was and am desperate for this freedom: I want access to an experiential totality of myself - an immeasurable, gaping, chaotic, ecstatic fullness and emptiness all at once.

We enabled each other.

The end result cost us.

Our bodies: we are instruments at once profoundly, painfully limited and completely unbound.
PAY NO ATTENTION TO THAT MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN
by Josh Lubin-Levy

JLL: American Realness asked me to do an impersonated interview with you, is that cool?

JF: Sure, but what’s an impersonated interview?

JLL: From what I understand, I write both my questions and your answers.

JF: So it’s fake.

JLL: More like imagined. It’s a conversation between me and the you that lives in my head.

JF: Or even between the me that lives in your head and the you that lives there as well.

JLL: Exactly. So...

JF: That sounds fine, the real me just wants to see it before it goes to print.

JLL: Of course. You know normally I’d leave this to a more accomplished playwright (yourself included), but I have to say it seems like a fitting way to introduce your work: on stage you often manifest your psychological world for the audience to spend time in, so it might be interesting to flip the tables and consider how you inhabit one of your audience member’s minds.

JF: My work is certainly personal, but masculinity I’m not so sure about. I’m more interested in the messy chthonic parts of our lives. We might try to control those parts, but I certainly don’t think I’ve mastered anything, and I definitely don’t make work just for myself. “I make work so that people don’t feel as alone as I’ve felt.” And that can be a rather messy affair.

JLL: Although feeling alone can sometimes be about preservation, about survival as much as despair. If we think of making work for oneself as pulling in, isolating, do you think that kind of work can’t be for others as well?

JF: My work is certainly personal, but martyr I’m not so sure about. I’m more interested in the messy chthonic parts of our lives. We might try to control those parts, but I certainly don’t think I’ve mastered anything, and I definitely don’t make work just for myself. “I make work so that people don’t feel as alone as I’ve felt.” And that can be a rather messy affair.

JLL: I want to come back to the script you use, but I can’t help but think here that maybe part of what performing yourself on stage allows for others to make good use of you. I think Masud Khan said something similar about the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott – that his “inviolable me-ness” allowed him to be so available for others to make use of him in so many different ways. Do you think the closer you get to performing “Jack Ferver” the greater variety of Jacks there can be for others?

JF: Now that’s an exciting proposition, because it gets us past the idea that the performance is bound to the narrative or story. As much as I might be the reliable figure for the audience (something they can make use of), the script or story is that reliable figure for me. It’s within the stories I put on stage (often drawn from films) that I find room to move. Movies are a great example of what I mean here, because, as you and I have talked a lot about, movies used to be the most reliable world for me as a kid. Pretending to be in my favorite movie, watching it over and over, is in some ways was about the security of a world in which I felt I could exact change because I knew what was coming next. In that security a wealth of creative strategies develop for surviving between fantasy and reality.

JLL: Then I guess what I’m wondering is how do you build a structure in that inbetween space? How do you build a structure out of text and movement, one like the house in Rumble Ghost that provides the psychic setting for the performance. For instance, and for those who don’t know, at the end of Rumble Ghost five of you sit in a semi-circle performing a group therapy scene, while Reid Bartelme and Breanna O’Mara perform in the shadows all around you, doing this incredibly controlled dance that gets closer and closer to piercing into the lit semi-circle. It was always my sense that Reid and Breanna were essentially holding up the world around you which finally closes in at the very end.
JL: Being there seems to be an important theme in your work. Can you talk more about that?

JF: I think performing is always about the relationship between the performer and the audience, and how they struggle to be present with one another. But performing can also be about how the performer is present with him or herself. When we talk about ourselves, whatever dramatic or painful thing happened to us that we want to share, we’re always talking about our past. So there’s always that moment where you have to wonder “but where am I now?” and how can I move between here and there.

JL: You know that scene in The Wizard of Oz when Toto pulls back the curtain to reveal Oz is just an old man working a bunch of levers and cranks?

JF: Of course. I love The Wizard of Oz.

JL: I hate The Wizard of Oz.

JF: Really? How come?

JL: All that work to go back to the same place she started from – what a waste of time.

JF: True! I really love Return To Oz – where Dorothy is so haunted by Oz she has to go back.

JL: Yes! Finding a way to live in her dreams.

JF: But what about The Wizard of Oz?

JL: Oh, just that when Oz is revealed to be this old man he says, “pay no attention to the man behind the curtain” but I always thought he was saying pay close attention to the man behind the curtain. I always loved how the revelation that Oz was a hoax seemed to bring them all closer because they have to work together to make a space where Oz could still exist, rather than staring passively in awe at some hologram or spectacle. I feel like your work does that in some ways too. It sets up this large persona, but often in a rather dark and barren space. It doesn’t just present something to an audience, it asks them to participate in building it, in imagining it into existence.

JF: Or maybe not even imagining so much as manifesting. It’s not artifice that I’m presenting, it’s not Oz – it’s about writing down real relationships that exist between people, whether those relationships include me or whether I’m just observing.

JL: You’re touching on something people don’t often talk about in your works – which is how tightly controlled the script, and I mean the actual text, often is. I’m thinking of Mon Ma Mes, where you’ve written the questions and answers for the audience Q&A that opens the performance.

JF: Text is usually where my work starts. There’s always a script there, usually one I’ve written but sometimes with elements borrowed from films or even just the rhythm of everyday life. And I think the more I’ve grown as an artist, which is to say the less I’ve made work impulsively, the more I’ve come to know what works and what doesn’t. In that sense, the script has gotten tighter. And the tighter the script gets the harder the choreography has to work to find room to move in and outside of it.

JL: I can’t help but imagine you putting your work in this vice. Squeezing it harder and harder.

JF: Very that. But also doing that with care, without abuse. Putting pressure on what ever I’m working on so that it cracks open but doesn’t explode.

JL: Why crack it open at all?

JF: Apollo and Dionysus, control and chaos. I wouldn’t be happy with a performance that didn’t have both. It’s why I love the psychological, it’s never either/or – it’s always both.
At a party a few weeks ago I told some friends that I’d been asked to write a small essay about Juggalos. I got exactly the kinds of responses you would expect. Some cocked their heads and wrinkled their brows, while others laughed incredulously. My best friend from high school looked down, shook his head and muttered, “No...just no.” A grad school colleague sympathetically offered, “Sometimes I like to watch ‘Miracles’ when I need to feel better about my life choices.” When I told them I was definitely going to write the piece, another friend exclaimed, in mock-horror, “I knew it! I always suspected that he was down with the clown!”

For the record, I am not now, nor have I ever been, down with the clown. However, as a professor of media studies, I often tell my students that part of my job is to encourage them to look seriously at things that look silly. I tell them to do this not because, say, Hannah Montana or Axe Body Spray commercials are fine art. Rather, it’s that these ordinary cultural objects tell us a lot about the society in which they are produced. They give us an extraordinary opportunity to understand what the structures, tensions, privileges and anxieties in a particular society are at a given point in history. And they also give us a sense of what people are considered central and what people are considered marginal, or “Other,” in any given society.

This is the main thrust of Roland Barthes 1957 book *Mythologies*, which is as important a text to contemporary cultural studies as you can find. When faced with the “Other,” Barthes argues, a dominant society responds in at least one of two ways. The first is to assimilate the “Other” through the commodity form. The symbolic threat of the punk rocker, for example, can be transformed to just another consumer choice available at your local shopping mall. Alternately, the “Other” can be rendered into what Barthes describes as a “pure object, a spectacle, a clown.” In this case the values, tastes, and indeed the very being of the people considered to be “Other” are held up by mainstream society for mockery and contempt.

Such is the case, I’d argue, with Juggalos. We’ve all had a good laugh, I suspect, about “Miracles” and just how it is that those fuckin’ magnets work. And we’ve all been very much concerned about violence that emerges out of ICP concerts. Some of us may have been equally amused and pleased that our very own Federal Bureau of Investigation has classified Juggalos as a criminal gang. But as an individual that is deeply invested in DIY and independent arts and music, as an academic interested in the formation and circulation of fan cultures, and as a person that grew up in dying rust belt towns where kids felt alienated and abandoned by American consumer culture, I’ve never been able to treat Insane Clown Posse, or their legions of fans, only as a punchline or a folk devil. And, the more I think about it, the more I think that you shouldn’t, either. One of the true virtues of Neal Medlyn’s “Wicked Clown Love,” I think, is its refusal to turn its subject matter into an object only to be ridiculed or demonized. There are many reasons why we should not allow ourselves to transform Juggalos into an exoticised object, and instead, try to understand them.

To begin with, you simply cannot tell the story of DIY music in the US since 1990 without mentioning Insane Clown Posse. As people invested in independent arts and culture, we should all be heartened by the success of two independent artists who committed to a weird, independent aesthetic, found like-minded folks to collaborate with, and made it work. The duo of Joseph Bruce (“Violent J”) and Joseph Utsler (“Shaggy 2 Dope”) have been releasing hip-hop records since 1989, mostly on the Psychopathic label that they founded in 1990. Shortly after releasing the Dog Beats EP in 1991, Bruce and Utsler changed their name from “Inner City Posse” to “Insane Clown Posse,” inspired by their meeting with Detroit horror-core MC Esham. Since then, ICP has released 11 LP’s, 7 EP’s, and 10 compilation albums, selling almost 7 million records, with the vast majority of those releases coming from outside the major label system. And longevity and commercial success aside, ICP has also been extremely influential in crafting transmedia experiences for their fans. Since the mid-1990s, the group has utilized documentary, narrative film, video games, comic books, web content and even professional wrestling to explore different facets of their wicked clown personae, and elaborate upon “the Dark Carnival,” a model of morality, judgment, salvation and the afterlife that was articulated across the first six ICP full-lengths, collectively referred to as the six “Joker’s Cards”: *Carnival of Carnage* (1992), *Ringmaster* (1994), *Riddle Box* (1995), *The Great Milenko* (1997), *The Amazing Jeckel Brothers* (1999), and *The Wraith* (2002).
None of this makes ICP “great,” whatever that might mean to you. There are certainly far more technically skilled MC’s out there. You may find ICP’s films absurd and their cosmology ham-handed. But if you’re someone that complains about the way that pop music has been increasingly homogenized and standardized by an ever-more corporatized major label system, the success of ICP should be good news to you. Say what you will, but slapping on clown paint and embarking on a ten-year six-part meta-concept-album that is flanked by pro-wrestling events and cowboy movies is not the kind of idea that just rolls off a corporate assembly line. It is a legitimately idiosyncratic aesthetic vision that has been crafted and circulated in about as independent a way as is possible in our current media environment. In that way, they’re a lot closer to Fugazi than almost any platinum-selling artists I can imagine.

But to a media scholar, what makes ICP most interesting to me is their fans. Juggalos and the culture they’ve created almost certainly represent the most active and vibrant fan community to spring up around a single musical act since the Deadheads. This has come at a time when fan communities have moved from their formerly marginal position to a central one. Twenty years ago, a passionate, engaged and creative fanbase was not enough to get a band on the radio, or keep a show on television (just ask Star Trek fans). Now, actively participating in fan communities is part and parcel of media institutions strategies (witness: LOST), not stigmatized as the province of obsessives or super-nerds. Media studies academics, following the work of Henry Jenkins, call this the rise of “participatory culture.”

While hugely successful bands like Led Zeppelin understood their fans to be more or less passive consumers of their music, Insane Clown Posse fosters an atmosphere in which the Juggalos actively participate in the creation of the media experience (witness: mini-economies (trading and selling cakes together, and establish booming mini-economies (trading and selling all manner of goods and services – showers, narcotics, food, cigarettes, camping gear, you name it)). Juggalos have cultivated their own distinctive slang (“whoop whoop!”), fashions and hairstyles (Hatchet Gear, spider legs) and even their own cuisine. At the Gathering of the Juggalos, fans go for the music, sure, but they also go for the “family,” the communion with other Juggalos from all over the world.

Like all subcultures, Juggalos utilize highly visible and unusual style (facepaint, tattoos, fashion, braided and dyed hair, copious consumption of Faygo cola, etc) as a form of resistance to mainstream culture. What distinguishes a subculture proper from any other style community is that a subculture’s style serves as a critique of dominant social or cultural values. Writing about the mods, punks, and teddy boys of 1970s London, Dick Hebdige argues that “spectacular subcultures express forbidden contents (consciousness of class, consciousness of difference) in forbidden forms (transgressions of sartorial and behavioural codes, law breaking, etc).” Similarly, Juggalos wear their own marginalization and disempowerment from American consumer society (the “mainstream,”) as a badge of honor. In a fashion, Juggalo fan culture represents an alternative community where you don’t need to be embarrassed that your family drinks off-brand, cut-rate regional colas—instead, you baptize yourself in Faygo. Ours is a consumer culture that routinely communicates to working class, rural, and poor people that they are dumb, ugly, ridiculous and “trashy” (this is the message of “Here Comes Honey Boo-Boo” and “Jersey Shore”, is it not?) and then commodifies their tastes and fashions (remember those John Deere trucker hats you wore in the mid 2000s while drinking PBR?). In this context, there is a utopianism to Juggalo culture: the Gathering promises the joy of giving the middle finger to a system that consistently tells you that you are not good enough. That’s why “clown love” and “family” are such a key part of the fan culture that surrounds ICP—it is both a critique of existing American consumer society as well as an alternative to it.

Still, we can’t lose sight of the fact that there is much to be criticised and even actively opposed within the ICP universe. Most obviously, ICP’s lyrics are often cringe-inducing for their misogyny, homophobia, and glorification of violence. Still, this is not unique among the hip hop and nu-metal scenes with which ICP is most closely associated. As early as 1991, media studies scholars were attempting to understand misogyny in hip-hop. Robin D.G. Kelley argues that the violent lyrics of rap music should not be taken literally, but rather represent fantasy narratives that “embody a challenge to virtually all authority (which makes sense to people for whom justice is a rare thing)” and “create an imaginary upside
down world where the oppressed are powerful.” 5 Kelley points to the structural changes in the American economy (factory closures, class stratification, deepening urban poverty, etc.) as factors influencing a late 20th century crisis in working-class masculinity that influences hip-hop lyrics. 6 In addition, the Reagan-Era rhetoric of “personal responsibility” and “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps” channeled working-class frustration not toward an exploitative capitalist system, but inward, toward the self and immediate surroundings. As a result, Kelley argues, disempowered working-class males often directed their symbolic aggression toward women. Lyrics that highlight sexual conquest and dominance over women became a way to assert one’s masculine identity and individual agency in the context of a structural and economic disempowerment. The fantasies represented in Juggalo narratives (both described in ICP lyrics and enacted at the Carnival) clearly have some resonance with this line of thought.

With that said, it is important to acknowledge that the bigotry and violence in Juggalo culture is not always metaphorical. It is also real, material violence. At the 2002 Gathering, fans so disapproved of “mainstream” performer Bubba Sparxxx that they chased him off the stage, tossing obscenities and garbage alike toward the stage. Since that event Juggalos have bestowed the “Bubba Sparxxx Award” at every Gathering to artists that are not sufficiently down with the clown. Artists like Kurupt, The Yin Yang Twins, Andrew W.K. and Method Man have all received the honor. This kind of fan violence is part of the “participatory culture” of the Gathering, wherein the group showers the performer with hatred rather than adulation. In this case, outsider-performers must prove their worth by withstanding the abuse, or reveal their unworthiness by leaving entirely. This ritual reached its ugliest extreme at the 2010 Gathering, when reality-TV star Tila Tequila was greeted by Juggalos with orchestrated sexual harassment and a torrent of misogynist slurs. According to reports, while performing Tequila was pelted with rocks, bottles, rotten food, firecrackers and human waste. When the diminutive performer was escorted offstage with multiple injuries, members of the audience pursued her, surrounding her trailer until police arrived on the scene. While such behavior is not at all universal among Juggalos, we also cannot pretend that such events are isolated, or that the misogyny that it showcased was entirely spontaneous and isolated. While some ICP fans have attempted to address bigotry against women, people of color, and other marginalized groups within the context of Juggalo culture, it is undeniable that there are deeply problematic issues at play.

While all of us can and should condemn such attitudes and behaviors, those of us who stand outside Juggalo culture should be careful not to turn ICP into a “folk devil” to be simply re-viled. It is easier for us, I’d expect, to speak up against the misogyny at the Gathering because it so flagrantly falls outside the confines of bourgeois “good taste.” But can we honestly argue that the lyrical violence on ICP records is worse than the spectacularized material violence of the NFL? Is the misogyny of the Gathering truly more odious than the misogyny that has produced a government mandate for transvaginal ultrasounds? I do not think so. If we are serious about eliminating racism, or sexism, or other forms of institutionalized bigotry, I would argue that we must be mindful not to focus our condemnation exclusively on working-class or “uncultured” people. The problem would not be that our criticism of Juggalos would be unfounded. The problem would be that we would let ourselves off the hook for our own complicity in these systems of oppression.

At times, we might find ourselves strongly critiquing Juggalos, or hating their music, or finding the whole surreal idea of a Juggalo Gathering spectacularly weird. This is okay. Most likely you will find yourself doing all of these things while watching Medlyn’s “Wicked Clown Love.” Or maybe you’ll find yourselves identifying with, feeling sympathy for, and even enjoying the Dark Carnival. That’s fine, too. What I would say is that we should remember that the conditions that have fostered Juggalo culture are also the conditions that have shaped all turn-of-the-millennium Americans, and if we seriously consider Juggalos, we can potentially learn something valuable about our culture, and ourselves. But what, exactly, might that be?

For Barthes, anyway, the key thing to understand about “myths,” the artificial and constructed messages of popular culture, is not that they are artificial and constructed. Rather, what is important about myths is how they naturalize the existing social order, treating bourgeois society and its attendant hierarchies, exclusions, and privileges, as if it were not, in fact, totally made up and subject to change. If we critically examine our “natural” reactions to Juggalos, like the ones my friends offered at that party, we can see how our culture trains us to reproduce social (and economic, and gender, and raced, etc.) hierarchies, and start working on our own shit.

2. To put that longevity in perspective, Jay-Z (who is older than both ICP members) was getting tiny cameos in Jaz-O singles in 1990, and was still serving as a hype man on a Big Daddy Kane tour four years later.
6. In its light, it seems relevant than ICP fans use a specifically gendered nomenclature: “Juggalo” and “Ninja” are masculine terms, “Juggalette” and “Ninette” are both feminized and diminutive forms.
I started AUNTS with Rebecca Brooks. We had just become lesbian danseur funny fashion buddies. We took dance classes together, dressed up for mad queer events, dance events. We were going to Chez Bushwick that summer of 2005, super fun and super male, gay male. The curators of the series at the time were Jeremy Wade, Miguel Guiterrez and Jonah Bokaer. In general gay males were really dominating the dance scene at every level except the bottom. That was one reason why I started AUNTS.

WE / I / IDEAS Rebecca Brooks and I started AUNTS together and worked out many of the details that are still in function today. We parted ways after year one due to differences in opinion and life changes; she started her Alexander training. I can be very controlling and bossy and was ripe with confused energy overflow at that time in my life, hard to work with I imagine. After Rebecca left I ran AUNTS by myself, with a little help from my friends, until I gave it over to Lili Dirks and Laurie Berg in 2009. Lili and Laurie had been at AUNTS since the beginning, helping out more and more and then it was theirs. I built what AUNTS is from that first year with Rebecca. She was truly incredible to work with, laying down the foundation that I, then Lili and Laurie, built upon. I can’t remember who came up with what initial ideas exactly, I would say that Rebecca and I came up with them together, and then I just kept working them out, adding and modifying through the various iterations of AUNTS events.

THE NAME AUNTS maybe came out of feminist theory? I think Rebecca made it up. Maybe we saw the Aunt as a once-removed caretaker person who seemed to have the very exciting life your mother did not? The clincher was pronounced one way it rhymed with DANCE.

FEMINIST THEORY I wanted AUNTS to be representative of the downtown dance field so I made up a percentage of what I thought I saw around me—something like 85% females. I failed feminist theory at UC Santa Cruz because I had a hard time sitting around an academic talking about how repressed we all were, but truly, in the NYC dance world, the females were repressed. There is a certain gay male mafia in the dance world. They are all buddies and together make a strong voice and presence. So AUNTS had to represent what was my perspective of my surroundings. My surroundings were also very white and bougie, but I didn’t address that issue.

ACTION RESPONSE I don’t think I ever really addressed anything directly with AUNTS. AUNTS was entirely responsive. I wanted to take action rather than complain about it. I didn’t think that I could change anything, but I wanted to be part of a very experimental dance scene in NYC that I didn’t think was happening at the time. I moved to NYC at the end of 2000, and always felt like I missed out on a happening dance time. It was still fun, but I didn’t feel a swirl of ideas. There was no “no-pressure place”, to just try out ideas in front of some people, not in a studio. I felt like the exchange of beliefs around me was very diluted and stale: in part because you didn’t get to try things out that might truly fail, in part because there were few unprescribed situations for dancer people to hang out. AUNTS events were designed to be a structured situation where you could see one magical performance, flounder your piece softly, social dance, invite someone to be in your next piece, get a new shirt.

There is probably nothing new or revelatory in my recall of AUNTS as I knew it. I sent a draft to Lili and Laurie and Lili told me she had pretty much heard it all before.

- Jmy James Kidd
As much as AUNTS was the situation for performer people to try something out, the AUNTS platform was where I tried out many of my own cockamamie ideas of curating, community organizing, questions of the zeitgeist, humanoid relations, currencies. The FREE Boutique and FREE Bar I still use today, as admission to performances at my studio in Los Angeles.

CONTROL PANEL After the first year hosting with Rebecca I receded the visibility of the leader/host role of AUNTS to give the events a more organic, radical feel. There was certainly a devised structure to each event—efficient, functional, minimal. This structure was given away, not imposed. People had choices as to where they wanted to perform and how many times they wanted to perform. They had to negotiate with other performers within the structure of the event. It was all very basic. There was no attachment to a figurehead. This is something that can be complicated. This is the thing that Lili and Laurie and others call me about most often.

Who owns AUNTS? It is a community, a cooperative in a sense, but to create a community there must be borders and leadership. Free-for-alls don’t work for long, ideas fizzle out, they need to be tended. Catch the raindrops in a container—or maybe this is not true, maybe one should just let the raindrops fall to the earth. Humans, though, need shelter, food, water, love and means of communication to survive and thrive. It is a constant negotiation and AUNTS is just that: a constant negotiation.

COMMUNITY CONNECTION I never wanted to be identified as a community organizer because of my quite dysfunctional hang-ups and super insecurities about everything, but AUNTS was completely the 70’s recreation center. I would be taking class at Movement Research or Cunningham and like the vibe of someone there I didn’t know and ask them if they were working on something or wanted to show something, anything at the next AUNTS event. At the time it seemed like there was always one coming up. I ran into Megan Byrne on the street one day around the Cunningham Studio and asked her to show work. Megan’s brother Jim would come to the shows, Lili Dirks was at the shows (because of Laurie Berg maybe?), they got together and are about to have a baby!

There was really nothing to lose. It was just time, ideas, performance, people. I really do enjoy being a community organizer, and AUNTS was my own personal lab for materialized ephemeral reciprocity conduits.

RESPONSIBILITY I don’t know why I feel such a sense of responsibility to my community; I am starting to explore this issue in therapy now. It is something that doesn’t always work for me. One reason I feel this responsibility for sure is that I have some money from my family I get every year, and not everyone has that financial cushion. I grew up without much of anything; money later came into my family through a marriage. I am very lucky to have this fatty pad in my life, I do what I can to give back to the universe that is giving to me. It is important to me to give back. Dance supported me through my life; it truly saved my life growing up. The dance education I landed in gave me a consistent structure and order and I got a chance to express and to be around a bunch of queers. That was fantastic for me! Everyone gives back in their own way and AUNTS was one of my ways.

NOW I don’t know so much of what happens. I performed at AUNTS on a boat a couple of years ago and that was super fun to get to just be a performer at an AUNTS.

TO EACH HER OWN Lili and Laurie seem to be very organized and in a good steady flow of their own with AUNTS. I sometimes get phone calls or emails about AUNTS, maybe I am an AUNTS Aunt now. I guess we are all family now, our own version of family.

THE ESTABLISHMENT INSTITUTION Laurie Berg and Liliana Dirks-Goodman, the current organizers of AUNTS.

Laurie: I have been thinking about how to simultaneously protect AUNTS and also make it accessible to as many people who are interested. To me, AUNTS has always acted outside of the institution. A platform for artists by artists. So in the spirit of experimentation, how can AUNTS interact with institutions without killing AUNTS? Can we invite institutions to participate with AUNTS just as we would
invite an artist to perform? Is AUNTS itself an institution? I do not want to say yes to this prompt, but maybe the word “institution” doesn’t have to be negative, maybe it simply denotes a presence and structure.

In discussing who owns AUNTS, what is “good” for AUNTS, I came to the conclusion that AUNTS can die and be reborn as many times as it wants to—a born again virgin! If an experiment goes wrong, or isn’t interesting, then it won’t be tried in the same way again. It will be improved or abandoned. That is exactly the same structure that Jmy describes above in “action response” in reference to the artists who perform at AUNTS: the chance to fail, to flounder softly, to see or make something magical. Those things/tools/ideas are also present and available to the larger structure of AUNTS. It’s a strange loop! If this relationship can really work both ways, then I say give it away and hope it sticks. Maybe I don’t want to give it away exactly. But I want it to change the world.

Lili: There isn’t necessarily a lashing out against the establishment and I’m not sure there ever really was. Although it seemed to bubble up at times, it’s not part of the structure to be anti. AUNTS always felt to me that it started from a deep need to just be able to make something and share it, so it’s always moving on regardless of the establishment—a lot of different establishments, dance institutions, the economy, etc.—the making and sharing goes on.

Recently I have been thinking of AUNTS as a collection of individuals, not a collective; a platform that enables individual artists to experiment and that values the creation of individual style and craft; of being weird and autonomous, but with other people doing the same thing at the same time. AUNTS does not intentionally produce any specific aesthetic or quality, but one does emerge from the collection of artists present at any given time. Laurie and I facilitate this: we find and pay the rent for the venue, we send the email invites and promote as we are able, we cart clip lights all over town, and we try to accumulate as many other resources for each show that we have time to find or afford.

Money. I don’t know how to talk about that part. No institution or entity is responsible for establishing a value system around an artist’s art, especially if you want to do something that deviates from the norm—the artist is responsible for that. Money comes with a lot of expectations. There are very few sources of cash that will just let you go experiment and maybe not come back with a product, even selling tickets changes things. I hope that this is not harsh and that it can also be empowering to artists. I want AUNTS to be an open, nurturing place. I want artists to make the things they want to make and I hope we can help create a value system around it, whatever it may be, but I don’t think that we can do that by avoiding the establishment. We need to be talking to everyone, not just preaching to the choir.

In the end, I think that if we as individual artists stick with where we began, making our art because we just have to, that we will be ok, there will be enough opportunity, money, audience, and community, and this will start to change the current value systems.
POEM ESSAY
by Tere O’Connor

Here is a paragraph from an article I wrote some years back in the Movement Research Performance Journal:

My dances feel successful to me when they imitate a train ride. On a speeding train, one can pass by a scene of a farmhouse, and minutes later, a scene of bodies strewn on the ground from a car accident, and then after that, of children running in a field. None of these events is important in itself or carries more weight than another. What is defining is the contrast of these and how one perceives them. How the second image makes one feel relative to the third, and perhaps, how on the third image the first has been forgotten. It is the forward movement of the train that creates the meaning. And certainly given the terrain, another farm will reappear, and then many others. They will not re-explain the first farm, they may just say “It’s farmy here.” A viewer may alight on the first farm and see it as thematic. Yet what remains in the memory after the dance is over is its farminess as background, not the importance of the first farm viewed. By the end of the ride one may have forgotten the horror of the car accident, solely through the passage of time or maybe because they went past an inordinately long stretch of ocean.

I am fascinated with the slippery relationship between the surface of a dance and its complex internal time currents. It has come to define my whole perspective on dance making. There is a sort of letting go achieved by my years of recalibrating the relationship between sensing the dances and looking at them; an embodied listening. This letting go reveals to me that the surface of a dance is immaterial or at least “just” material. The distribution of this material throughout the layered strata of time in a given work is important. It provides the meaning or better, multiplies potential readings. By surface I mean imagery. The surface is made up of the faces of the dancers; the color of their skin and hair; their bodies, the images created by shapes; the costumes; the number of dancers; the lights; the spatial designs; the styles of danced used; the narrative suggestions of events; even the sound contributes something to the visual-ness of a work. If the performers just stood there the surface information would be very important. But once the choreographer puts all this into the juxtaposition blender and pushes the buttons at varying speeds, the “dance” begins and the surface becomes mutable. All elements are defined relative to what comes before or after. Any references, with their attendant politics or histories, are destabilized through sequencing and even further through speed variations. The speed of remembering and forgetting provided by the audi-

ence is another application of time that mitigates the primacy of image in dance. Everyone is carrying different imagery forward in memory from the beginning of a dance until its end. This happens at different speeds for everyone. Each person is letting images go or remembering imagery that they loved until the dance tells them “I am going to deal out an endless amount of information. I am just moving forward and dragging imagery into my forwardness. There will be no conclusion, no summary, no arrival point.”

Dance is a series of shifting velocities, all moving forward. The temporal motors of dance are very important in my work. By temporal I refer to the ever-present blend of real time, imagined time, accumulated time, historical time and of course metered time, with rhythm employed as a knife, chopping it up or as a strong hand kneading it into the mind. My challenge as a choreographer, or even my purpose, is to spend my days in a futile effort to reshape time; to take its long line of forwardness and make choreographic origami from it—interrupting it, fooling it with elliptical structures, with stillness, acceleration. Time moving forward erases imagery so erasure must be employed in constructing dances. Imagery loses potency of meaning in dance through repetition. Like a story that defines you for a moment, one that you repeat to everyone you meet, over time it becomes replaced; its power may still resonate but it is no longer central. Even though you may still want to tell it, it sits yelling from a distant crevice in you.

Rhythm in its musical sense is a big part of my work. But its most important application comes in the overall structures of my dances, as they bubble up and stop and speed and careen and dirge and splinter and act like the mind; the mind as it creates subterranean rhythms underneath language. In Poem I really fell into this idea. I borrowed much conceptually from the gentle shaping systems of poetry: stress, caesura, falling meter, elision, rising meter, aposiopesis and on and on and on. I did not apply these directly, but revealed in the idea that so much complex thinking goes into the creation of rhythm in poetry, forging a methodology for resituating language. The ways in which poetry treats language forces one to rely on its metric structure as it teaches the words how to act differently from their original context. I used structural thought as a way of perpetuating the dance forward, not worried about any accidental accumulated narrative, but rather looking for a specific structure that served the dance in its singularity and erased the surface readings of the images. I am not against narrative but I have learned by practicing choreography that creating storied cogency isn’t necessarily the best thing dance can accomplish. It can do something more forceful in my opinion, which is to make us access a more expansive view of consciousness where language is only one aspect of our knowing and definition is less important than the nature of the ride.
“What would have happened in 1963 if someone from the voguing ball scene in Harlem had come downtown to perform alongside the early postmoderns at Judson Church?” This proposition was the leitmotif of Trajal Harrell’s acclaimed series Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at The Judson Church, in which the artist investigates two distinct realms from the 1960s counter-culture scene in New York City. Harrell started to develop Twenty Looks in 2009 and since then his hypothesis has amazed dance enthusiasts with six related works, each distinct in size and length, currently ranging from (Jr.) to (L).

Harrell, who has defined his work as an investigation into the “spaces and gaps of historical omission”, has been working in the crossed dissection of the aesthetics of voguing and the early postmodern dance legacy for approximately twelve years. For Antigone Sr./Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at The Judson Church (L), he integrated another influence to his plate: the ancient Greek tragedy Antigone, written by Sophocles in the 5th Century B.C..

In the Theban classic tragedy, the brothers Polynices and Eteocles were expected to alternate power over Thebes after King Oedipus’ death, but when time comes, Eteocles refuses to concede power to Polynices. When Polynices leads an opposing army in a way against the city, the brothers kill each other during a spear fight. Their sister Antigone challenges the edict imposed upon the city by her uncle and King Creon, which prohibits the mourning and burial of Polynices. As his punishment, the King demands that the body of Polynices be left unburied on the battlefield to be slaughtered by dogs and birds, dishonored without receiving the proper death rites. The tragedy develops when Antigone, considering King Creon’s order immoral and against the will of the gods, disobeys the law and buries the body of her brother, aware that doing so will incite her own death.

Harrell is not interested in the historical reconstruction of Antigone. Instead, the sources that inform the work are crisscrossed, intertwined on the fabric of influences he designed along with his collaborators, which include dramaturg Gérard Mayen. The work is nonetheless a movement commentary on the dance history Harrell praises and which influences his craft as a dance artist and thinker.

In the voguing tradition attitude and dance skills are among the attributes highly appreciated and defining of those who become icons in the underground ballroom culture. On Harrell’s runway the body is the central cue to reveal and disrupt the narrative of Antigone. The performers Thibault Lac, Rob Fordeyn, Stephen Thompson, Ondrej Vidlar and Harrell himself are clearly devoted to their task: the imperious cast delivers a fearless performance in every movement, while Apollonian and Dionysian atmospheres sharply transverse or sequence each other. The piece is sensuous and languid at some moments and energetic and ferocious on others, using control and exhaustion as entrancing strategies to engage the viewer in the work. Sometimes the dance seems to refer to a nightclub ambiance; on another moment, to a Bacchante feverous rite. The catharsis in Antigone Sr. is not triggered by tragic actions, but by the state the dancing and vocal bodies acquire along their performances.
A destabilization of language also strikes the piece. In the mixed-genre that Harrell has meticulously crafted, voguing meets ancient theater conspicuously, conducting us to unexpected relations, such as a moment in which Harrell embodied hip-hop and gospel utterances to present Antigone’s fate with highly emotional lament or rage, resembling the M.C. and hip-hop influence on the contemporary ballrooms. Conversely, the M.C. could also resonate as a parallel to the leader of the Greek chorus (Coryphaeus). At a certain point, a dialogue between Antigone and her sister Ismene (Thibault) cleverly displayed dialectic or correspondent relationships involving contemporary culture, consumerism and fashion. The runway walk could be read as a solo version of the unison turn and counter turn to one direction and its opposite in the choric movement structure. Beyond that, having male actors represent multiple male and female roles was the norm in ancient Greece, since women were not permitted to participate in the ancient theater productions.

The costumes and characterization, created by Harrell in collaboration with his dancers are fascinating for their simplicity and visual impact, while the set design by Erik Flatmo is precise on its use of overlapped paper runways, creating scenes in a variety of perspectives and conferring a singular spatiality and depth to the stage.

Curiously, in the Greek etymology, the name Antigone means “against birth”, “in the place of a mother” or “opposed to motherhood”. Even though each interpretation differs from another, their meanings allow relations to the role of the “mothers” and the House system in the ballroom culture, in which generally a drag queen or transgender adopts voguers to walk and win trophies in the name of their Houses.

The envelopment inherited by gender and race can be read in Antigone’s narrative as well as in the politics of voguing, which by assuming the embodiment of the otherness—be it sexually, culturally or socially speaking—prompts the empowerment and individuality in that specific marginalized culture.

Antigone Sr. is a blissful crossbreeding of conceptual dance and virtuosity. It prompts an evolving, intertwined narrative on fashion, history, myth and queer sexuality with a sophisticated discourse on contemporary dance and theater phenomena. It is a sensuous in-depth experience of Trajal Harrell’s mind and his unique vision on how fashion has shaped the culture he embraces. It is his query on advancing the discourse on how Judson Dance Theater influenced his work, and a way to re-imagine the legacy of their anti-spectacle investigation hand-in-hand with the ultimate glamour of the voguing tradition.
We had another show we did in New York at the COIL Festival in 2009, called Holiday House,” Otto Ramstad, half of the core creative duo behind Minneapolis dance company Bodycartography Project, was explaining to me. “The set was a living room and a dining room and there was a tree in it. And our lighting designer had a daughter who was maybe three years old, and they came to see the show in Minneapolis before we toured it to New York. And she came up to us after the showing—she just walked up onstage in front of all of us—and she said, ‘Some of the things that are supposed to be outside, are inside. And some of the things that are supposed on the inside are on the outside.’ So Olive asked her, ‘Was that confusing, or was that exciting?’ She said, ‘It was confusing and exciting.’”

“So that’s been sort of our mission statement or underground philosophy for all the work we’ve made since then,” Ramstad’s collaborator Olive Bieringa continued. “What’s on the outside is on the inside, and what’s on the inside is on the outside,” Ramstad summed up. “It’s confusing and exciting.”

The result was a piece that raised more questions than they had time to explore in France, and which provided the basis for Super Nature. Specifically, they were trying to develop a choreographic language that would provide a means for a deep communication with their audiences. In the past, Bieringa and Ramstad had freely crossed boundaries to create visual art installations—works which offered audiences intense personal encounters with the artists, and in creating Super Nature, they attempted to replicate that sort of empathetic communion in a more traditional performance space.

Part of their approach to achieving that sort of empathetic response is through an appropriation of the language of melodrama. “We’re big fans of this little interview from Guy Maddin, the filmmaker,” Ramstad told me. “He wrote The Saddest Music in the World and My Winnipeg, and he works in melodrama or a silent movie aesthetic—over-acting, a lot of crazy camerawork. And he said it was so strange in film that people were so into Realism now. That no one comes up to a painter today and says, ‘That’s a really great painting, but it just doesn’t seem real.’ And he’s saying people say that about film all the time, and so when people say that about him, he talks about how the feelings that you have, in your daily life about small situations, if you were to act physically and sonically, make sound and yell, or just totally collapse when things happen, that it would look melodramatic. But we have this social conditioning that we modulate everything with. So he’s saying his films are realistic in that he’s portraying how people would actually respond to their feelings if they were to enact them.”

Visually, the piece incorporates sound, video, and installation components to real-
ize a complex reimaging of the body as an expressive vehicle. The dancers’ bodies serve as projection screens. The sound-score was developed by Zeena Parkins, and the design features contributions from Ramstad’s brother Emmett, a visual artist. Previously, the work has been paired with an actual installation (which will sadly not be in New York), allowing audiences diverse, direct means to engage with the conceptual elements of the work.

“We did maybe five work-in-progress showings, and the installation, so we really got test the ‘if we do this, what kind of empathetic response happens?’ So we actually oddly achieve this goal of doing something paradoxically impossible,” Ramstad explained. “And I think it’s an interesting piece because it starts in the social, and we’re really playing with interruption, and this social response people have, and at some point it drops into the forest.”

“It nose-dives, you don’t even know how it got there,” Bieringa continued. “And then instead of the social—which a very vertical sort of relationship—it gets really horizontal and spread out and goes into the poetic and personal-emotional,” Ramstad said.

“It really asks people to shift how they’re watching it,” Bieringa concluded. “It’s an experience.”
Jeanine Durning speaks without stopping for 30+ minutes. The duration of each performance is contingent on that run’s audience and space—it is a vague negotiation between everyone present that Durning works with and against. The staging of the piece remains mostly the same for each iteration of the performance: seated behind a desk with books, a small video camera, computer and cup of water, Durning faces the audience with three screens showing projected images behind her. On each of these screens is Durning, talking before a camera, her expressive hand gestures elaborating a barely audible soundtrack of speech. Before us (the audience), is also a live Jeanine Durning, speaking and gesticulating. As she speaks, the constraints of her challenge (exercise? performance?) are revealed through a series of implicit and explicit denials. There are no pauses, except for the obligatory quick breaths and swallows. There is a cup of water, which she refers to and even holds in her hands, but does not drink. It becomes apparent that drinking water—though desired—would create an unnecessary pause or break in language. Part of watching Durning is figuring out the rules of her performance. Once they are established, we can then begin to observe how easy or difficult it is for her to comply with them. We can then begin to recognize her struggle more clearly, which Durning also narrates at times: “Is it cheating to take a drink of water?” or “When you swallow are you cheating?”

Durning’s strict commitment to the constraints of the performance suggests that the Durning we see and hear speaking is not “in character”. This is not to say that she is or is not “herself”. Rather, she is a self that is actively resisting habit—the physical and linguistic tendencies that contour a character and make them all the more recognizable. Of course, Durning cannot completely escape her own tendencies and movement vocabulary: they are necessary to continue the half-hour to hourlong chain of utterances, grunts, sounds, speech. In this way, she is performing a resistance and not an escape—Durning is moving through a set of self-imposed constraints. She is cornering herself in a process where movement, whether through speech or gesture, is a practice of resistance.

The texture of the work is filled with tiny but fleeting tensions, like a magician’s knot that unravels in the act of tightening. Each push to keep uttering leaves nothing in its wake—no content, narrative, or meaning. The trace of Durning’s effort is located in her strain: the increasing pinkness of her cheeks, the sheen of sweat on her face, the eventual gasping of breath, the contortions of her body that seem to both assist and perpetuate her agitation. Sometimes when Durning performs the piece, tears collect and fall down her face. This is also without definite meaning: it is exhaustion materialized, the effect of intense effort.

The three projections displayed behind Durning, which are included in every performance, are documents of the first three times she attempted this experiment in front of a camera. They function visually as resonance, implying that this challenge is part of a series, a larger practice. They also act as certain talismans for Durning, as do the other props on the table: water, a stack of books, camera. These objects are part of what Durning refers to as the “hidden dramaturgy” of the piece. Each object is a marker of Durning’s two-year performance research. Sometimes when performing, she will make use of these objects, but none of her decisions are premeditated—wholly unscripted, Durning’s piece is clearly improvisational. Her insistence on being present forbids her from falling into any script or pattern of moving and speaking. Rather, she momentarily dips into past movements and memories but navigates through them anew. The present becomes a mode of being, of pushing herself to inhabit a place (whether it be familiar or strange) in an uncalculated and inventive way. The past and present overlap: syncing up at times and at others appearing distant.

It is an unusual kind of improvisation in that it vigorously resists citation. Improvisation is an ongoing practice that builds and expands an archive of gestures, phrases, and movements. In relation to the inextricable textual and embodied elements of Durning’s performance, I think of the fluency of skilled drag performers, flawlessly citing and revising idiomatic expressions—the virtuosity of “not missing a beat”. But Durning is both building her archive, as she continues to perform this piece, and actively resisting it. Feeling her way through the 30-60 minutes without attaching onto anything—an idea, an object, words: she stutters a lot, repeating words and sounds; she struggles. Whereas drag performance utilizes an improvisational prowess to perform an identity, Durning uses it to break down an identity.
under duress. She leaves incomplete metaphors, anecdotes, and thoughts. She is careful not to fall into any script or to lose herself in one. Similarly, she resists catharsis and release. Her performance (almost synonymous with her awareness) is measured, inviting and demanding the audience to articulate this measure along with her. In this way she is cultivating a fluency and flexibility in her own discomfort and presentness—and maybe the audience is too.

The conditions Durning starts with in inging are always the same; however, the duration of the piece, the number of people, the intensities, pauses, and content fluctuate within and between every iteration. Durning describes the piece as a “confrontation with expectations”. She asks us to be in a space, grounded not by our own expectations but by our own present and shared condition—the chairs, the room, her voice and breath, an incessant and un-anticipatable rhythm, movements that are both big and subtle. She demonstrates the differences in hearing, thinking and feeling in a room together and without expectations. The silence she stands in when her speaking stops, is one that she describes as activated by and shared with the audience. It is a thick and touching silence but not one of relief. Durning has activated the space through her relentless vocality and embodied rant. When she stops and is silent, holding us with her gaze, all that is left we share. I see inging as a meditation on how we choose to name our constraints, how to improvise within certain terms, and how we acknowledge material conditions and effects as interwoven with the psychosocial.
Shreds or torn to a wild shower, ours to share; every combination and animal outside of advertisement reduced to fossil. Rare if and when in hesitation swallowed, here are my general fragments as they splatter to the floor. What we actually do is to try to sit exactly where she or he has become increasingly important for me to not think that I use. Of time, the room, the people (artists and audience)—in the practice of our concerns, to us—what does it provoke in us as long as possible?

We pulse with this constant query. Full heart, I ask to be of those pieces on a stone I had. Subvert it, destroy it, harmonize within hungry dogs we try to find or inhabit, we interpret and understand. A dream where the car was vast, turbulent—I have a notion each moment is the animal aesthetic stand, it is a mad scientist for us to take in then mop up without a language. Performance in nothing else reveals of a structure of a person where we are not. How can those presences play inside our words? How revisited or forgotten of expansion I am, of an animal assimilation to a poem I am. Beasts on images start to bend where it does shake. Do they haunt us? We are approached, and over again what breaks is an idea: if I approach improvisation whole, if I enter, how do they roam, these creatures? Strange ways in every gesture—for me the how is a trace filed away in a new notion.

A method which is based on sameness recognizes a situation in the most uncomfortable position. That doesn’t have to dictate obsessions, aesthetic... I (interaction with the fray) have been unpredictable or spontaneous in as considered a form, and other times, it seems it only functions to please an audience. Find the space outside it, beside it, not inside it; process discordant memorization and move toward a performance. What is not so interested in listening to the material, is going to end up the material. Take control of our bodies and choreograph, sound artist, the very nature of our potions not knowing. Rely heavily on words like with caution I falter. Dances to cultivate brewing strange culture, perhaps a bit like words such as it dances but sometimes takes shape, of his vocabulary a bit like a way of thinking. Improvisation is—improvising is like being on the breaking point of—space to see what locates repetitive aches, seek pleasures, difference. A sorcerer’s apprentice.

And, true, closer to a physicist or a biologist experimenting, how we are the textures, intensities, dynamics, and which may have commonalities or ideas. However, not a familiarity based solely is the hidden. Our collective understandings of such, itself the community of participants, are together as musician instability properties, rules of something or just being and making interested in making feeling explicit. Bend it for an audience making to create the moment exploration making of how I—I am myself! I could say what kind of side effects it makes us realize then. What kind?

Time and sometimes even space. How can we use the material presented? With improvisation, I believe, over, of a place. Where does it? An improviser or ourselves is as close as possible to its own necessary construction. Of? The simple fact of putting presences and a “real time” composer is inside of the engagement. Of? Our wits (an object or thoughts on it) is stronger than what we can do. We roam when we insist on it. See, to be this body whether in dance or in what happens to make meaning, or rather to live a life of potential material for a someone who will make it happen, a political (and of movement) music produces to the materiality or not the obvious built on practicing—sometimes has that sound, and through movement, relationship, created from polemics or in multiplicity an ensemble? Is a dancer? And a stillness, what is idiosyncrasy of dance but happening to go places? Comfortable as us, makers to say when and how beginners can mind, when do objects that are anything do that moving a radical practice, our common texts or sounds are differently one image? Make not with anything it makes, or together their own, our start in space.
LIVING WITH TONY RIZZI
by Norbert Pape

After having spent a night in our living room, a guest noted this was the closest he had ever got to sleeping in Facebook—the walls covered with a mosaic of polaroids taken by Tony Rizzi depicting friends, lovers, children, relatives, the man from the Moroccan food store downstairs, smiling faces, dancing bodies, bodies having sex, kissing, holding hands, blurred, fading images, Penny Arcade, Jan Fabre, William Forsythe and other well known protagonists of the theater and performance world.

Knowing Tony Rizzi through his work, but also as his flatmate and friend, it seems like reflecting on the notion of the private in relation to his work is an appropriate entry point into the complexity of his artistic practice. In an era of so-called post-privacy, how can intimacy, the private or the personal be dealt with productively in the theater context?

Certainly, in often displaying explicitly (homo)sexual content, addressing the implications of his HIV infection on his life, the complications of life as a sex worker, and the seemingly banal challenges of the everyday, the work of Tony Rizzi can be read through the feminist slogan of the sixties “the personal is political”. Yet his work further complicates the relations between private and public.

Tony Rizzi’s works embrace life, its many facets, paradoxes and depths in a seemingly light-footed and naive way—always through the filter of his subjectivity—not aiming to provoke, but rather weaving the uncensored (yet often invented) voices of many into the fabric of a show. Opinions, scenes, pictures, heterogeneous physicalities, dances, anecdotes, pop songs and jokes are the materials of which his complex imaginative narrations are made of. Impersonating others, creating mysterious and multi-faceted characters, storylines filled with ruptures and inconsistencies, he blurs the lines between biography and fiction.

The peculiar quality of his works, which are often described as direct, honest, touching, humorous, visceral (and sometimes perceived as overly anecdotal and self-referential), is strongly related to his modes of production. Refusing institutionalization or the founding of a company, keeping the administrative work to a bare minimum, working with very low-budgets and neglecting the necessary social grooming needed for sustaining long-term working relations with production houses, his survival and continuous artistic development amidst the heavily bureaucratized German Performing Arts subsidy system seems somewhat of a miracle.

The liveliness, reactivity and impulsiveness of many of his creations show no signs of the life-draining processes of conceptualization and forecasting required by standard European co-production application procedures. His work does not come with a prefabricated discourse or follow the logic of the art market, but rather addresses local issues, points at friends in the audience, comments on local history of dance and theater.

The fostered identification of the audience with the work of Tony Rizzi—along with a sense of expectation based on a celebrity (and curiosity) status he has acquired throughout the years of performing and living extravagantly in Frankfurt—both charges the theater space with a party-like energy and sets the ground for a mutual trust: one vital for him to try things out, to allow fragility, to risk being human.

“There is no show without a public!” states Penny Arcade. An attempt to fail at groundbreaking theater with Pina Arcade Smith aims to prove that statement. The piece has the chance for complete failure—even more so as it travels the world—yet with the help of the public, lights will work, costumes will be changed, texts understood and dance seen.
I’m fascinated by the problem of knowledge—the idea that we can never directly know anything. We’re only seeing light reflecting from objects, not the objects themselves; we’re not actually hearing something that makes sound, we’re hearing the air it pushes around. It means the world is always at an elusive distance, and yet I can’t shake the feeling that it’s a gap I could somehow bridge if I only tried hard enough.

I’ve tried with Jaime Fennelly’s music. I first encountered it in the mid-00’s, when I became a fan of his trio PSI (a name the group soon changed to the more phonetically-explicit Peesseyeye). But when I listened to their music, I found it tough to tell exactly what Fennelly or either of his comrades—Chris Forsyth and Fritz Welch—contributed as individuals. That was part of what made their work attractive. Their sound was so unpredictable and unclassifiable that it felt as if it had been generated by a collectively-formed mega-brain rather than three separate musicians. Peesseyeye had an uncanny knack for forcing me to defocus and disengage my over-analytic side—to make me listen to the whole rather than get distracted by any particular instrument.

I got a little closer to Fennelly’s individual sonic personality in 2011, when I heard The Voice Rolling, his first full-length LP under the solo moniker Mind Over Mirrors. But again the connection hasn’t exactly been direct. Fennelly’s music is so dense and enveloping that I find myself less interested in individual elements than their overwhelming effect. The thick drones wave and pulse, dip and crest, and breathe and heave as if possessing their own respiratory system. It’s like the music is made of flesh and blood, and even though I can feel distance between what I hear and the actual technical machinations that Fennelly employs, Mind Over Mirrors still heads straight for my nerves and muscles. The music is a physical potion, a gut-stirrer. You might even call it body music.

So even though I didn’t know until just recently that Fennelly had collaborated with dancer Miguel Gutierrez (first as the duo Sabotage in the early 00’s, and now in a rekindled form), I certainly wasn’t surprised to find out. The sonic drapery that Mind Over Mirrors hangs is a perfect canvas for someone who uses their body to make art. It’s a wide-open vista on which a dancer can paint all kinds of colors. As described on the web page for Sabotage, the pair want to explore “the all-consuming corporeality of sound,” which is nearly a perfect phrase for the effect Mind Over Mirrors’ music has on me.

The idea that drone-based music could be “all-consumingly corporeal” is perhaps not a common one. A stereotypical view holds that structured, melodic music is the most “danceable”, and experimental music is something to think about, something for the brain rather than the limbs. But to me, structured music is artificial, funnelling sounds through conceptual constraints like melody and meter—constraints that come from the brain more often than the gut. Drone, by contrast, gives the natural flow of sound at least an equal chance, with its creator responding just as much to his or her own intuitions and internal rhythms as thoughts or ideas. Of course, such distinctions are ultimately trivial; all kinds of music, and all kinds of art, are ripe material for both the brain and the body. But experimental sound has a unique ability to invoke visceral response.

I’ve been thinking about this a lot since I recently talked to Gabriel Saloman, one-half of the excellent noise/drone duo Yellow Swans. Saloman has recently collaborated with dancers in order to explore the physical side of his work. “A lot of folks weren’t able to go there with Yellow Swans over the years. It was music made to be physically felt, but people didn’t reciprocate with their bodies as much as I always wanted or hoped,” he told me. “So getting to see how my music works with bodies is the most exciting and inspiring thing about making music for dancers.”

From the little I’ve seen of Fennelly and Gutierrez’s work together, the pair work from similar inspiration. But I can’t speak for them. Whatever goes into and comes out of their collaboration—whether planned conceptually, expressed verbally, felt
physically, or anything in between—is something only they can know. All I can know is my response. And now that I know about the Fennelly-Gutierrez partnership, I’m hearing Mind Over Mirrors freshly again. As I sit here typing these words by thinking of them first and moving my fingers next, the pulsing “Memorandem” is pouring from my speakers, and I’m hallucinating bodies in motion. I’m seeing Gutierrez in response to Fennelly’s sounds tugging the air. It’s making me imagine—and that might be the most direct connection any art can make.
Jennifer Monson has a life-long practice of dance improvisation. When we talked recently by phone—me at home in Brooklyn and her from her family’s house near Joshua Tree—she described the earliest creative movement classes she took as a child in Southern California. By my count, that means Monson has been improvising for over 40 years. Her body of work is well known for being collaborative by nature—she often engages community members, scientists, and other artists as a part of her process. In fact, she started a non-profit institution—iLAND—dedicated to interdisciplinary collaborative art practice. She also has long-term collaborative relationships with other artists: Zeena Parkins, DD Dorvillier and Yvonne Meier, to name a few.

Interestingly, Monson’s newest project, Live Dancing Archive, was born out of a desire to turn inward—to “pay attention to my own dancing,” as she put it—citing Steve Paxton’s observation that the best dancing happens in one’s 50s. In a larger sense, Monson seems to be reconciling the intensely private practice of solo improvisation with a desire for connection—to other performers, to the audience, to the space of performance, and to the world at large.

Monson started working on Live Dancing Archive in 2010. The project explores, in Monson’s words, “the dancing body in conjunction with the moving image of video and other media as an archive of place, experience and systems,” and includes both online and live components. In this work-in-progress showing at the 2013 American Realness Festival, Monson will use material from The BIRD BRAIN Osprey Migration, one eight-week section of a multi-year “navigational dance project” that brought outdoor performances, workshops and discussions to migratory bird habitats along the Atlantic Flyway from Maine to Venezuela.

With the BIRD BRAIN Project, Monson situated her improvisatory practice in animal habitats—delicate ecosystems defined by complex relationships between humans, animals, and local and national governments. Monson draws an intriguing parallel between the dancer’s nomadic life and the osprey’s precarious migration. By inviting the migratory patterns of birds into the two-way relationship between performer and audience, Monson also pushes us to confront the representational. Are the birds in a sense present, through their implied movement? Are the improvisers taking on the qualities of birds? Bird movement itself would never be read as representational; we know it to be a biological necessity. Does improvisation, and perhaps a majority of human movement, live somewhere in between the representational and what is biologically necessary? In Monson’s notes from 2002, she writes of her “odd, shy transition from person to dancer,” which seems to encapsulate this gap. Indeed, when I asked Monson about that transition, she described the way in which when she dances, she is constantly negotiating her inner kinesthetic experience with the audience’s desire for meaning.

Live Dancing Archive will premiere at The Kitchen this February as an evening-length theatrical production. It is interesting to think about its in-progress context in the American Realness Festival, itself an in-between moment. In the promotional materials for American Realness, Monson is not credited as sole author of Live Dancing Archive. The press release reads, “Jennifer Monson/iLAND will share...
excerpts of performance and video from *Live Dancing Archive.*” When I asked Monson about the boundaries between Jennifer and iLAND, she laughed. Apparently, it gets confusing. Indeed, in Monson’s endeavor to more deeply investigate her body of work as a soloist, she seems to have unearthed the connections that deeply root her to various communities: scientific, artistic, activist. When she talks about the impact of queer activism on her art practice, I wonder if what she has created with iLAND (and *Live Dancing Archive*) is a queer institution—an institution dedicated to radical practices, spaces and environments. Monson, by collapsing individual and institution, invites a subtle but provocative critique of the traditional way in which we think of an institution “inviting” an artist into its folds.

Any body of work is problematic to archive—perhaps most especially by its author—but a body of improvised work is perhaps particularly tenuous. It is not a coincidence that dance artists are becoming creative archivists of their own work—Eiko & Koma and Bebe Miller come immediately to mind—in the same moment that museums are taking an interest in how performances might be collected by an institution. Monson remarked to me that *BIRD BRAIN* doesn’t translate well in video. Similarly, the journals from her process, while detailed, perhaps fail to convey the depth of her creative research. Monson’s alternative, a multi-year creative research project into the very nature of archiving, is a playful but deadly serious proposition. Perhaps the best way to archive dance is by making more of it.

3. All Monson quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from this phone conversation which took place on December 30, 2012.

**THE BUREAU FOR THE FUTURE OF CHOREOGRAPHY**

The Bureau on The Bureau

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1. How important is documentation in the creation of myth?
2. Are questions better than answers?
3. Is archiving the same as producing?
4. Does collectivity imply a desire for group subjectivity?
5. What would group subjectivity be?
6. Would this work without a residency, this group?
7. Is a collective predominantly circumstantial, or motivational, or self-motivated?
8. Can Evelyn ask a question?
9. Is an author or an authoritative position (not necessarily an authority figure) necessary for a collective to function?
10. Does specialization create hierarchy?
When did The Bureau for the Future of Choreography become a collective?
Has it become a collective?
Do we hide behind notions such as—authoritarian, dictatorial, emancipated, egalitarian—just so we can avoid the unknown of being together and truly negotiating with each other’s irregularities and subjectivities?
Has anyone in this room ever seen Tino Sehgal’s This Situation and is the questions score inspired from it?
Why do we care so much about history?
Should The Bureau take a field trip; should the Bureau engage in some kind of collective research outside of a studio space?
Is mythology necessarily grounded in history and vica versa?
Is mythology a device through which the present relates its future to the past, or conceives of its future in relation to the past?
Should there be contracts even in the most informal set-ups for either collaboration or collectivity?
Is the emotional—or the emotions of people in a group—important for the way in which that group functions?
Do people’s emotions have more significance, value and power than a goal or a mission?
In the future, what will The Bureau for the Future of Choreography think of collectivity and itself in this moment, looking back on it?
Does anyone know what The Bureau of the Future of Choreography is?
Can mystique be a strategy for the BFC to gain momentum?
Can a sentence be only verbs?
Can a movement ask a question?
Can a question be a movement?
Is it possible to produce art based on philosophical questions that does not have terrible aesthetics?
Are all disciplines capable of asking the same questions or posing similar statements?
What’s in a question?
Does having an administered question, as a premise for artistic research, produce more questions or does it produce bad art?
Does a conceptual premise create abstract dance?
Does a conceptual premise create demonstrative work?

This is a transcription of one round of Questions Score on November 17, 2012 while The Bureau for the Future of Choreography was in residence at The New Museum as a part of Movement Research in Residence at the New Museum upon the fiftieth anniversary of Judson Dance Theater. Members in attendance: Alan Calpe, Evelyn Donnelly, Moriah Evans, Kyli Kleven, Steve May, Rashaun Mitchell, Sarah Beth Percival, Suzan Polat, Tatiana Tenenbaum.
ANN LIV YOUNG OR SHERRY
by Natalie Robin

She yells. Sometimes at you. Sometimes at other people. She wears a dog collar at the end of a leash. She offers one-on-one therapy sessions. She pulls bloody tampons followed by blueberries out of her vagina. She makes lattes in her pink truck. She throws the tampon in someone’s lap. She is vulgar and mean but somehow also kind hearted. She just wants to help.

Audience members recoil. Technicians storm out. Presenters stop the show. Patrons ask “How dare you present this? How dare you call this art?” “How dare you?” She gets kicked. She gets attacked with beer bottles. She gets spit on. She has started traveling with body guards. To protect her. From us. She is Sherry. She is not Ann Liv.

“What is wrong with people?” asks Ann Liv Young. “I studied acting. Why wouldn’t they think I am acting? Why can’t they tell the difference?”

Young’s work as Sherry is a performance. She is always in control—of herself, of the audience, of the situation. She and her fellow performers always know their own set of rules. They just might not be the rules other people play by. Young wants to obliterate the idea of being in a theater. She wants us to forget it is a performance. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t one.

Even with technicians, she doesn’t want to tell them everything that will happen. She doesn’t want to lose the tension that gets built. But she wants them to know not to take it personally. This is performance. This is not real life. The conflict arises when they don’t realize that the reasonable, down to earth mother of two whom they met at sound check is the real Ann Liv, and what happens in the show is a show. The slipperiness between being and acting is what drives the work, not what limits it.
Sure, sometimes it’s crazy. Sherry hurts people’s feelings. She picks on the audience. She tries to bring her idea of what is good for people to their attention. She breaks down the walls of their comfort zones. She wants it to be emotionally dangerous. And it gets personal.

Sherry elicits rage from her audience. She draws out their passion, pain and hate.

“They think I put on my costume but I am still me.” Ann Liv, though, is clearly a consummate performer. Sherry is a character. Although she is fully embodied and fully rendered, she is not real. Sherry is yelling, but Ann Liv is acting. Sherry is cruel, but Ann Liv is saying lines. “The goal” Young says, “is to seem like I am really Sherry.” This is different than losing her own self in the performance.

True: Young uses Sherry to engage us. And to break down those walls. And to say things people shouldn’t say. Sherry is brash and up front and loud. She is vulgar. She can be cruel, but only because her audience lets her. They let her in. They take it personally. And she makes it personal. “I can’t always smell it as me, but when I am Sherry, there it is,” says Ann Liv. It is the vulnerability, the combative, the rejection that the audience brings into the room with them. If you don’t buy into it, if you don’t let yourself have fun, if you fight back, Sherry will fight you. She zeroes in on the private and makes it public, thereby eradicating the distanced viewer. We aren’t witnesses. We are participants. Whether we like it or not.

Ultimately, this is all for our own good anyway. Young reassures us: “Sherry really just wants to help.”

As the Associate Producer and Production Manager for American Realness, I have worked with Ann Liv Young at all four years of the festival. We met the first year mostly via emails and then an accidentally missed technical rehearsal. The 2010 Festival was my first exposure to Sherry. Ann Liv had been lovely and accommodating. Sherry was the opposite. She did in fact pull a bloody tampon out of her vagina and throw it at a presenter (before the show Ann Liv had promised me no bodily fluids and she promised nothing dirtier than blueberries; the line was already a little blurry). She screamed at the tech crew. I have since encountered technicians who won’t work with her because of this blurriness between performer and performance.

In 2011 Ann Liv performed *Mermaid Solo for American Realness.* When I asked her to bring tarps to cover the floor and to help with the water clean up she did. When I was worried she had broken her foot in her new 6-foot long silicone tail and that she was allergic to the raw fish she had consumed whole, she smiled and reminded me it was all in the performance.

In 2012, she covered the Experimental Theater in fake snow, but only after asking my permission and sending along information about a variety of snow machines before purchasing one that we agreed on. She has always been respectful of the spaces and the staff. She is a pleasure to work with.

All of the incidents I mentioned I either saw or heard about from Ann Liv. There is no exaggeration here, regardless of how ridiculous it might seem.
A.L. STEINER

1. A group of us—collaborators, lovers, friend & colleagues—started W.A.G.E. (Working Artist and the Greater Economy http://www.wageforwork.com) in the winter of 2008. We'd become sick & tired of the inequity, naivety, hypocrisy, passivity within the arts community. We were tired of complaining, of feeling pissed, confused, silent. This is right when the crash occurred, and many people said, "How can you start a group that advocates for artist’s payment NOW? There's an economic crisis!" Of course, this was not a new crisis for us—this was an ongoing crisis that we'd been preparing to confront, that many others were also experiencing and confronting, or ready to confront and speak up about. When was there a better moment—were already prepared with clarity and determination before others even knew what was happening, in terms of a semio-capitalist sphere.

Social movements are important and many should be supported, but they are social independently of the politics purported. There is an ultra conservative social movement against gay partnership going strong.

MÅRTEN SPÅNGBERG

1. Crisis lives some dubious existence between total doomsday, necessary evil and new beginning: on the one hand completely rhetorical and used by the transmitter to produce desired attention, and on the other, an indication of some asymmetry that can be addressed as much as an inconvenience as a moment of rejuvenation. What we might need to fear isn’t crisis, which after all generates desire, what is really to fear is equalisation of life into a sort of flat-rate existence producing a numb population, but luckily we don’t need to worry as our present forms of governance have understood how to transform crisis into forms of commodity. It is both the up- and down-side to crisis that it “awakes hidden potencies” because as much as these potencies can be used by the “good guys” the bad ones will also use them and probably to suck even more value out of the people.

Freely recalling Zizek, people, or we engaged in social movements in order not to take the situation at hand for what it really is: totally fucked up. Social movement is like popular ecology, about not having to deal with the fact that the apocalypse is arriving no matter what. Hence, contemporary economy and governance is using social movements, whatever affiliations and style as a kind of smokescreen for what is really going on. More over, social movement designate recognisable forms of organisation, what is needed today is new forms or organisation that can not be classified as anything at all until the day they take over administration all together. Social movements inherently desire authorisation, recognition through dominant discourse, and as long as “we” stay in dominant discourse, as long as we remain in an established grammar, nothing more than “a little bit” this or that will change.

In France, and there is, or was a sort of queer leftist social movement in Sweden against any kind of couple based authorised partnership. The problem is not this or that social movement but social movement in the first case. Basically, social movements don’t take the crisis seriously enough. They are like a sweet spanking on the ass, a confirmation that we are engaging in experimental sex. Social movements are Redbull for people with identity issues, feel-good zero risk confirming a good deed.
"The only war that matters is the/war against the imagination/ all other wars are subsumed/ in it"

"War is the absolute failure of the imagination, scientific and political."

2012. Bifo
"The European collapse is not simply the effect of a crisis that is only economic and financial—this is a crisis of imagination about the future, as well."

2. Are you an imagination activist, or do you approach your work as a vehicle for addressing failure or crisis of the imagination? How does the current economic situation (yours, the art or dance market, global finance...) inspire or stymie your imagination about the future?

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2. The term ‘imagination activist’ is intriguing. I do identify with Emily Roysdon’s proposition regarding ecstatic resistance—that queering possibility can presuppose normativity, and that artistically-identified communities and practices can present strategies of protest and resistance. She states in her essay, "[Ecstatic resistance] develops the possibility of the impossible alongside a call to re-articulate the imaginary. Ecstatic Resistance is about the limits of representation and legibility—the limits of the intelligible, and strategies that undermine hegemonic oppositions. It wants to talk about pleasure in the domain of resistance—sexuality in modern structures in order to centralize instability and plasticity in life, living, and the self. It is about waiting, and the temporality of change...to think about all that is unthinkable and unspeakable in the Eurocentric, phallocentric world order."

I don’t know exactly what I am because I try to operate within a multiplicity of intentions, identities and arenas. For the most part, capitalism knows how to harvest, and makes no difference between good or bad ideas, but it knows an efficient idea. The power of imagination is today a force that has become obedient and something utterly useful. Creativity is something every individual, worker, parent, child and artist is obliged to utilise in order to produce further efficiency. Imagination and creativity have become well behaving commodities or strategic instruments in the centre of financialisation. Yet, there is no other tool to use to get out of, or fight the world we today participate in maintaining and producing.

A. L. STEINER

Our problem is not whether imagination is this or that, nor if our present predicament is a crisis of imagination. The real problem is that the enemy and the sponsor of the emancipation is one and the same, or in other words that the very formation of imagination has been corporatised and if capitalism is based on endless expansion “it” will indeed be very very happy the more and weirder we use its imagination. Capitalism knows how to reconstitute its social and erotic tellect “reconstitutes it’s social and erotic body, capitalist rule will be come obsolete.” Obsolescence presupposes a replacement with something updated, improved, something that is needed—that capitalism won’t be necessary. I try to imagine the potentialities of such scenarios—that vision, desires and pleasures will be reoriented, reconnected to our minds and bodies alternately. As Bifo quotes from Wittgenstein, “to be able to think what cannot be thought...”

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2. Italicentric societies, as J.K. Gibson-Graham proposes, do not allow for systemic knowledge—the implications and effects of our imaginations and decision-making processes; our desires and actions become naturalized and automated, without consciousness. I have a locational & transitional relationship to automatism, agency and autonomy. I am intrigued by Bifo’s core proposition that “money and language have something in common—they are nothing and move everything,” and that when the general intellect “reconstitutes it’s social and erotic body, capitalist rule will be come obsolete.” I try to imagine the potentialities of such scenarios—that vision, desires and pleasures will be reoriented, reconnected to our minds and bodies alternately. As Bifo quotes from Wittgenstein, “to be able to think what cannot be thought....”
3. I want to be traditional. It’s the one and only thing I have ever strived to be. To become fully and completely traditional but with one condition, that it is traditions that I don’t serve but live, that I don’t try to complete but can exist with. Tradition against confirmation. Tradition against beauty, against Rancière and against negotiation. I can only tolerate unconditional tradition, that negates any kind of negotiation. Traditions that are completely no more Mr Nice Guy, that submit to the sublime, perhaps using beauty but certainly not relying on it.

To become traditional is a means of losing organs. To be fully traditional implies an over-striation to the extent where it ends in smooth. A system so totalitarian it falls over into excessive smoothness. The revolutionary subject is always absolutely traditional, and thus it fails radically to be subject. The non-trivial unconditional tradition is a moment of losing perspective and becoming horizon. Absolute tradition and revolution is like becoming rainbow. Dance strives to lose its organs to vanish into tradition, to be tradition, and it loses its organs through the endless organization in and of time and space. To dance for real is to become tradition, to decay, to plunder and mess about in graves.

3. Yes—via Community Action Center, A.K. and I affirmed that we see the entirety of one’s body and mind as a sexual organ, oppositional to the heteronormative “naturalized” notion of phallocentric-oriented genitalia as transcribed through a hegemonic monothetic patriarchal view. We see sexualities/sensualities/eroticisms as creative processes rather than actions reflecting anatomy, gender and economy. I was taken by Bifo’s writings regarding “sensibility”, “acceleration” and “sensitive organisms” in relation to poetics and artistic practices, the “reopening of the indefinite.” Economics is now our universal mind/body language continuum, and it must be challenged, refused, replaced. I’m looking for the affect of sensuality, humor, pleasure, and their connections to typologies of consciousness, transformation and liberation. When our communications—and our silences—are meaningful and purposeful, better things feel possible; when, as Bifo recognizes, “art and therapy and political action” are gathered. If art is a “composition

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of chaos that yields vision and sensation” as Deleuze and Guattari propose, we must begin to develop the possibility of bringing that into the everyday—much like you and I share the everyday lived practice of feminism.
The festival, the art binge. An international crossroads of culture mafia mobilizing in time and place. At conclusion, the individuals disperse with refreshed senses to digest, address and generate contemporary performance in a multiplicity of locales and moments. With bold artists at the center of American Realness, the circulation of their ideas, practices and teachings among other makers enables a healthy rhythm of creation in cities nationwide.

In addition to the work of those in multiple areas of the dance ecosystem (presenters, funders, managers and beyond), the proliferation of artist-led platforms for the exchange of contemporary performance and experimental dance practices strengthens the generative capacity of local artist communities. These maker-centered gatherings privilege workshops, dialogue, artistic relationships and works in process rather than focusing on formal performances. Engaging with several artist-organized hubs on the West Coast, I observe DIY platforms to be populated by, what some may call, “artists’ artists” - visionary and risk-taking thinkers, teachers, collaborators and provocateurs, many of whom attend and are curated into contemporary performance festivals such as American Realness. Their sharing fuels the growth and rigor of local artistic communities in which the exchange efforts are situated.

With festivals serving as major nodes of circulation for experimental dance and performance work, events including American Realness, Portland Institute of Contemporary Art’s Time Based Art Festival, and gatherings taking place in Europe during summer months provide opportunities for visiting artists, often those performing, to see the work of one’s peers and socialize. With performance being a major emphasis, festival formats often include workshops and artist conversations adding layers and textured interfaces to the gatherings.

While related, artist-created exchanges remain distinct from festival structures. These maker-centered grassroots platforms also differ in emphasis from artist-curated performance programs. While in New York, contemporary artistic learning exchanges are encouraged and supported by formalized organizations such as Movement Research and Center for Performance Research, communities of artists without such specifically dedicated venues for makers are creating similar opportunities and functions through DIY collaborations, space acquisitions and word-of-mouth invitations. They also embrace a raw aesthetic conducive to process, research and experimentation.

I see these workshops and process-based activities by artists as outcroppings and extensions of festival events with a specialized focus on fellow makers. Many of the same individuals circulate through both festivals and DIY exchanges in the United States, however, the grassroots communities of practice conducting the exchanges with local and visiting artists extend the impact of contemporary performance festivals by expanding the geography and duration in which the artistic voices reverberate. In these platforms, the practices of colliding artists stretch and adopt localized translations of ideas and approaches. The function of makers in regional artist-created containers is to shape the engagement into one of generative possibilities.
Artists, especially those operating outside The Big Apple, seize ownership for their growth and devise opportunities to develop artistically and provide platforms for contemporary work, which may not get presented in a particular region due to the local venue mix or existing curatorial visions at established institutions. While exciting and invigorating to flock to say, New York City in January or Europe in the summer to be exposed to new practices and ideas, the artist-created platforms and exchanges ensure vitality on an ongoing local level in areas that do not possess formal festivals and organizations dedicated to experimentation and research. The exchanges are vitamins for rich and progressive contemporary performance communities nationally. Not unlike some of the autodidactic “public school” models, which emerged from the Occupy movement, DIY artist exchanges are often based openly on skill and idea barter without a curriculum or affiliation to institution.

To cite a potent example, Meg Wolfe’s Showbox L.A. is one location of grassroots exchange, which has developed a place for Los Angeles’s experimental dance community, serving as umbrella for a number of collaborative artist-led projects and partnerships. The environment fosters work by local makers and invests in building relationships with artists nationally and internationally. Creatively conducting events in spaces like the gilded Palm Court Ballroom in the Hotel Alexandria and the Bootleg Theater, Showbox L.A. features local performances and workshops alongside visitors like Miguel Gutierrez, Gob Squad and Ishmael Houston Jones, deepening the critical dialogue related to performance in the city. Supporting creative research, they publish itch Dance Journal, host Wild Mind conversations and advocate for the craft. During the past few years, Showbox L.A.’s grassroots efforts have created a powerful hub of experimental practice and dialogue that did not previously exist in the area.

Another example is Kunst-Stoff Art Building Consortium in San Francisco formed by Kunst-Stoff Arts, Alternative Conservatory and The Off Center. The collaborative body hosts an artist-run Visiting Artist Series Exchange (VASE) with a similar commitment to creating opportunities for local makers to learn from and share knowledge with national and international artists. “We live in a fast developing global maker community. To hold space for this made complete sense to us. So here we are.” comments organizer Ernesto Sopprani. He also mentions American Realness artists Jeremy Wade, Tony Rizzi, as well as, Katie Duck, Papiluk Supernova as visitors in 2013 conducting classes, lectures, workshops and showings, mostly independent of formally presented performance engagements.

The artist-identified goal of the consortium is for the area to grow as a hub for contemporary artistic expression and discourse while deepening the Bay Area’s presence and connectivity with makers in other cities. Their dynamic Fresh Festival does just that, incorporating San Francisco artists including Sara Shelton Mann, Kathleen Hermesdorf, Keith Hennessey, Jess Curtis, Abby Crain, Laura Arrington and Jesse Hewit. Similar efforts by committed artist organizers in the city have brought Action Hero to CounterPulse and Robert Steijn to the Joe Goode Annex.

There are, no doubt, numerous other DIY exchanges mobilized and growing in the United States to create junctions on the global maker community map, increasing connectivity, inquiry and exchange. The DIY efforts feel distinctly American, emerging from ingenuity, self reliance and a driven work ethic. Additionally, the grassroots platforms are part of contemporary performance making, pushing at the edges, challenging existing frameworks and addressing gaps.

Through creative efforts to identify allies, collaborate and pool resources for the circulation of artists, the experimentation and fresh contemporary performance fed by communities of practice echo through American Realness. The festival electrifies the circuit, offering a node of exchange, which has maker-centered outcroppings across the country. So as you are challenged, provoked and awakened by your art binge at the festival, consider this fast developing global maker community and the very real and American way in which many of these artists are creating across geographies during this contemporary moment.
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tbspMGMT is an experiment in new models of management, curation and presentation for new dance and contemporary performance. tbspMGMT builds support to produce and diffuse artists’ projects through a network of national and international residency centers, contemporary art centers, festivals, universities, foundations and municipalities.

As the financial crisis continues, it is ever more challenging to fund the creation of new work. As such, it is urgently necessary for larger global networks of support to emerge. Through the maintenance of ongoing dialogues between artists and institutions, tbspMGMT works to identify and strengthen these networks through partnerships around new research and artistic production.