

READING

AMERICAN REALNESS

2013

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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 polyphonous 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



READING

CROSS-DRESSING CULTURES TO REINVENT DANCE

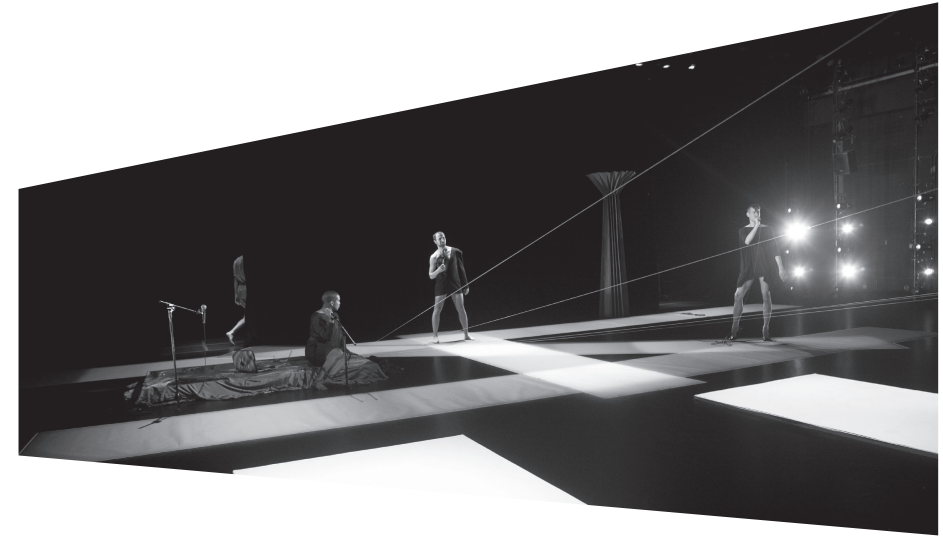
Antigone Sr. / Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at The Judson Church (L)

by Cristiane Bouger

“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.

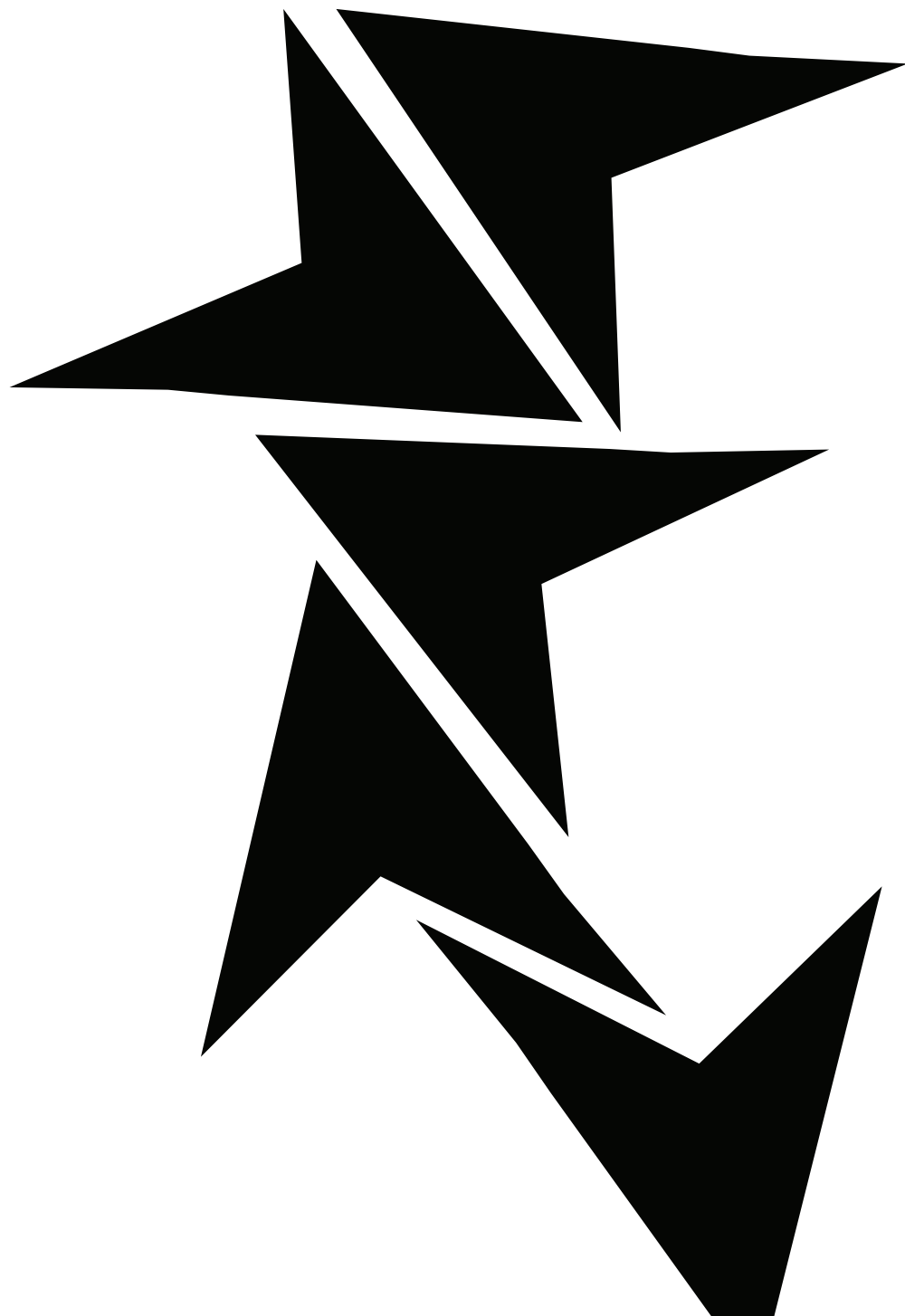


The costumes and characterization, created by Harrell in collaboration with his dancers are fascinating for their simplicity and visual impact, while the set design by Erik Flatmo is precise on its use of overlapped paper runways, creating scenes in a variety of perspectives and conferring a singular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



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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.

