

Over the last decade, museums have been the sites of a proliferation of performative events specifically linked to dance. David Everitt Howe investigates the overtones of this fascination of the museum and the art audience with a human presence that becomes augmented form, inescapable and irresistible in the context of a place that harbors “perfectly dead” objects. Through three separate conversations between Howe and the choreographers Trajal Harrell, Adam Linder, and Alexandra Bachzetsis, new modes of exploration of this field emerge, questioning the viability of dance in spaces specifically devoted to art, and aspects linked to the presence of performers as an inseparable part of the work itself.

Dance in the Ruins:¹ Trajal Harrell,

Adam Linder and Alexandra Bachzetsis on their work, its institutionaliza- tion, and the art world.

BY DAVID EVERITT HOWE

1.

This is a passing nod to Douglas Crimp’s “On the Museum’s Ruins,” which is foundational to how we consider the role of museums in the postmodern era.

In April 2013, the symposium “Dancing with the Art World” convened at the Hammer Museum in LA. It brought together a bunch of fancy academics, museum curators, and dancers and choreographers to scrutinize why, exactly, the art world had become so fixated with—to the point of bald fetishizing—contemporary dance in the past 5-10 years.² During this time, exhibitions like “Move: Choreographing You” at London’s Hayward Gallery; “Musée de la Danse: Expo-Zéro”, a part of Performa 11; “On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century” and “Some sweet day”, both at MoMA—the latter featuring an especially catch-all and direction-

2. “Hammer Lectures: Dancing in the Art World Day 1,” The Hammer Museum, accessed September 3, 2015, <http://hammer.ucla.edu/programs-events/2013/04/dancing-with-the-art-world-day-1/>
3. Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 155.
4. Claire Bishop, “UNHAPPY DAYS IN THE ART WORLD? De-Skilling Theater, Re-Skilling Performance,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, December 10, 2011, accessed September 3, 2015, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2011/12/art/unhappy-days-in-the-art-world-de-skilling-theater-re-skilling-performance>.
5. Douglas Crimp, “On the Museum’s Ruins,” in *On the Museum’s Ruins* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1993), 44.

less framework—and countless others featured dance in exhibition and museum contexts. This year, the Stedelijk is showing “A year at the Stedelijk: Tino Sehgal”, where the artist will be re-staging a different performance each month in various spaces of the museum.

It’s perhaps interesting to use Sehgal as a lens of sorts when considering the work of Trajal Harrell, Adam Linder, and Alexandra Bachzetsis, three choreographers pioneering the field and questioning the specific spaces of art institutions, where their work is often situated. In the simplicity of many of his performances, not to mention their selling power on the art

market, Sehgal perhaps embodies the unique ontological fascination with the form, which is so related to minimalist interests in

site-specificity, the particularities of context, and personal agency. He often features a sole performer in an otherwise empty space, so that the body is the only presence—an outsized, even “impassively” threatening one. It’s almost a literalization of Michael Fried hysterically calling a minimalist sculpture “the silent presence of another person,”³ as if it might impulsively chew your face off. In that dance *does* feature the presence of a person, a human—a biological being, ultimately—it functions more than as an object or image, as its “spectralization” as a skilled form, to which art historian Claire Bishop attributes the art world’s fascination with it; while much dance after Judson aimed to de-skill the medium, Bishop argues that de-skilling requires skill in order to ultimately reject it. Even then, “pared down beauty” and “skill and seduction”⁴ remain almost as a contemporary variant of abstraction, something defiantly formalist.

Looking at performance in general—of which dance is a part—skill is only part of the equation. Left strangely omitted by Bishop—or perhaps left as a given, though it’s worth repeating—is dance’s finite, temporal nature. That is the key, fundamental thing that separates it from other, static artworks in an exhibition. While they can remain on a wall or floor indefinitely, dancers must come and go—eat, drink, and sleep. Otherwise, they would die, literally (and Marina Abramović might make good use of their bones). They point to the living, breathing, contingent limits of any given context, its place and time. In a museum, that’s hard to come by, and seemingly hard to resist; it’s such a depository for things that are “dead indeed,” as Hilton Kramer described salon painting.⁵

Speaking to Trajal Harrell and Adam Linder separately on Skype, and Alexandra Bachzetsis by email, I talked to each about their practice in general, their thoughts on their work’s employment in museum and gallery spaces, and the way their personal identity and those of their performers all come into play.

Trajal Harrell



Trajal Harrell lives and works between New York, Vienna, and Athens. He is considered one of the most important choreographers to emerge from a new generation. He became well known for his “Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church”, a series of works that theoretically juxtapose the voguing dance tradition with early postmodern dance. With the help of a two-year Annenberg Residency at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, he is turning his attention to the work of the Japanese founder of butoh dance, Tatsumi Hijikata. By looking at butoh through voguing’s theoretical lens of “realness,” Harrell is creating a number of works that combine a speculative view of history and the archive with contemporary dance practice. His works have been seen internationally at theaters and festivals, and he has also shown performance work in visual art contexts such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York; MoMA PS1, New York; Performa, New York; Fondation Cartier, Paris; the New Museum, New York; the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam; Margulies Art Warehouse, Miami; the Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York; Museu Serralves, Porto, Portugal; Centre Pompidou Metz, France; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; Art Basel Miami Beach; and most recently, Doug Aitken’s *Station to Station* at the Barbican, London. His work *Judson Church Is Ringing in Harlem (Made-to-Measure) / Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church (M2M)*, was the first-ever dance commission at MoMA PS1.

Trajal Harrell, *The Practice*, 2014. © 2014 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy: the artist and The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Julieta Cervantes

David Everitt Howe

So what are you touring right now?

Trajal Harrell

I’m touring all the works. You know this series I have?

DEH

“Twenty Looks”?

TH

“Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at The Judson Church”, yeah.

There are seven performance pieces in the series, and they’re all touring. I just premiered a new piece that’s not in this series, in June, at the Montpellier Dance Festival in France, *Le Fantôme de Montpellier Rencontre le Samourai* (The Ghost of Montpellier Meets the Samurai). That piece is starting to tour now as well.

DEH

Is it related to *Paris is Burning*?

TH

Not really. I’m doing a new body of research, looking into Butoh dance, through the theoretical lens of realness, which is based on voguing. So it is related in a way. I think the research that I did on voguing will always be part of my work, because it’s like my formal training, my way of thinking about representation on the stage, and performativity. So that will always be there, but the subject matter is not *about* voguing.

DEH

I and others have criticized some artists in New York for appropriating the minority voguing community in their work. Have you ever been targeted for that?

TH

In the “Twenty Looks” series I didn’t work with voguers, nor with African American dancers. In fact, I didn’t work with

American dancers at all. Some people didn't realize—and I don't know why—that this was on purpose. I thought it would be too easy. If there had been five African American dancers, it would be so easy to label that a kind of strategic representation. I wanted to strategically make that more slippery, in the viewer's own seeing of it and how they think vogueing history is represented or called into question. It's called into question in the work, but I wanted it to literally be called into question by casting. I have my vogueing sisters in the ballroom community, and I've done some projects with them, but not the "Twenty Looks" series. I tried to keep the distinction very clear.

DEH

I agree that it's problematic to use them so directly, the insinuation being that you are "helping" them, in scare quotes, or giving them an artworld context that they don't need or want, in a way perhaps not so unlike Thomas Hirschhorn's *Musée Précaire Albinet* in 2004, for which he imported a modern art museum to the Paris suburb of Aubervilliers, for example, as if the community there was uneducated or wanted modern art in their existence. There was something patronizing about that.

In any case, for this issue of *Mousse* I'm interviewing you and two European dancer-choreographers, and there are very different economies and funding structures between the two continents.

TH

For sure. People have this dream that you'll get taken up by Europe and make a living, because it's very hard to make a living in contemporary dance in the States. There is one way, which is to build a behemoth company, but most people from my generation don't think that's possible any more. What you need to do to accomplish that... well, it's very difficult. For my generation and my group of artists, we've tried to create some kind of transnational existence.

DEH

So you're in residence at MoMA for two years. What does that mean?

TH

I decided I wanted to work on performing in the museum in different situations, to learn how the museum work would affect the theater work, and vice versa, so I could create, through the project, this circle of influence. So I'm working on performance visibility for two years. I have a show coming up there this month, in the galleries, and also in May. In between I'll have some talks.

DEH

Where are you performing in the museum?

TH

Different spaces. The first piece, in February 2013, which led to this residency, was staged in the Agnes Gund lobby. In September I did something called *The Practice*, in a gallery on the sixth floor. This month we will also be in a gallery. But it's very difficult to get a gallery, since they have to negotiate it with the curators. In May I'll do a piece in a hallway that I love.

DEH

Is it challenging for you, coming from a theatrical space, to have three or four sides of a room, and no delineation between stage and audience?

TH

No, I've always made work for galleries and museums, from the very beginning. I've also always had strong relationships with certain visual artist colleagues. So I've always done work like that anyway. But of course it is very challenging, and I'm still learning how to do it, but I'm very interested in it. I love the theater—I will always be a person of the theater—but I also like working in the white cube. I like what it does to the body, how you see the body differently. I like the intimacy, the different way that people deal with time.

In September when I was at MoMA doing *The Practice*, I made

two pieces, three minutes each. I think they're really, really good—perhaps some of my best work. But no one would ever show that in the theater because there's no space and economy for a three-minute work—unless it was in the lobby at intermission or something, I suppose. But the museum actually can accommodate a piece that long. So for someone like me, I ask myself what's distinct about making a dance in a museum? What kind of practice do I bring to that? What questions and what forms are specific to the work that I want to make?

The Practice forced me to work really quickly, and to get a lot of answers quickly. I didn't have any intention to make something in particular; it just happened. I haven't decided yet what to do with them.

DEH

You can move forward with it as you wish, I guess. What do you think about dancers who resist the idea of dance in the museum? That the museum is fetishizing dance? That choreography is almost like a fad, or an art form of the moment?

TH

I'm in a very privileged position on this account. After all, I have a residency at MoMA. Also last year, I had a residency at ICA Boston. I've always had projects in galleries and museums. Right now, dance is the "hot" thing, but it's really about performance in the broader sense, and museums are developing performance departments, and dance and choreography are going to be part of that. So I think it's here to stay, and the question is, how do we want to participate in that? I understand that it's tricky. That's why I say I'm in a privileged position: I'm being asked to give feedback, to give my opinion.

I do think some of the issues about dance being this animating, social-hub space of the museum can be valid sometimes. But the people I'm working with are aware of that criticism, and they're not operating from that place. It's easy to problematize. I've found that people like seeing live bodies in addition to what else they're seeing in the museum. They're attracted to it, they come to it. But I think it's about the work that we show, and I hope that museums will commit to showing difficult work and work that isn't economically feasible to show in theaters. And hopefully it doesn't easily get pigeonholed in a place that's just for viewers' light entertainment.



Perle Palombe in *The Ghost of Montpellier Meets The Samurai* by Trajal Harrell, Theatre Garonne, Toulouse, 2015. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Orpheas Emirzas



Christina Vasileiou in *The Ghost of Montpellier Meets The Samurai* by Trajal Harrell at Theatre Garonne, Toulouse, 2015. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Orpheas Emirzas

Adam Linder



Adam Linder is a choreographer based in Berlin. He makes work for the theater and "Choreographic Services." Recent solo presentations of his work have taken place at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (*Some Riding*, 2015) and HAU Theatre Berlin (*Auto Ficto Reflexo*, 2015). His *Services* have been hired by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej, Warsaw; and the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, among other venues.

Adam Linder, *Auto Ficto Reflexo* in "Tanz im August," Berlin, 2015. Courtesy: the artist and Silberkuppe, Berlin. Photo: Sarah Bohn

David Everitt Howe

So what are you working on, Adam?

Adam Linder

A stage work. It's called *Auto Ficto Reflexo*. There are two performers, it's fifty minutes long, and it's structured as a series of levels, thinking in and around modes of language that are utilized and leveraged by cultural production. So criticism, gossip, public policy rhetoric, institutional correspondence, artist interviews, all these different modes of language that surround cultural production. I've repurposed them back into the work.

DEH

How?

AL

So that they're conceptual generators for various danced situations. I've also got this solo show that just opened at the ICA in London, the third "Service", *Some Riding*.

DEH

Trajal and I were talking a bit about the institutional fetishization of dance—in which he readily acknowledged taking part, since he has been involved in "animating" the permanent collection galleries at MoMA. But he didn't think it was much of an issue, or at least he felt that everyone involved was self-aware enough to navigate its complexity. What are your thoughts on the topic?

AL

I think art has always co-opted different disciplines, for better or worse. It's just that at the moment certain properties of dance are appealing to the art world. It may or may not last. Most of my work in the visual arts field, mainly my "Choreographic Services", sets forth the conditions of engagement with the institution or client. So I believe, to a certain degree, that they protect the work from unbridled attention—they move the live activity away from eventhood. The complications of showing "ephemeral" work in environments where objects are worshipped are in a sense sewn into the conceptual premise of the "Services".

DEH

Do you know Yve Laris Cohen?

AL

Yes, actually!

DEH

He likes to appropriate an institution's lack of financial support, for instance, or codes of conduct, or overall workings, and incorporate that into his performances in a way that's reflective of the institution at large. It seems like you're doing a similar thing.

AL

It's interesting you bring up Yve's work. I do feel an affinity with his sensibilities. I think he's really interested in the specificity of the site, and in that way has a closer relation to institutional critique than I do. But I do feel an affinity with that reflexivity. In my work it happens much more in the language and the source materials. Often they are cut, pasted

and collaged to the point where they can't be attributed to any single source. I'm not as interested in "the institution" per se as in reflexivity around the institution itself. For me, it's always closer to the conditions of the body, and how language...

DEH

Yeah, but isn't *Some Cleaning* keyed in institutionally?

AL

Sure, that was the first "Service". It's definitely thinking about a transaction between the performing body and the client that hosts it, whether it's a private entity or an institution. And of course then there's this taking care, or choreographic taking care, or organizing of the space. But it's not specific to an institution. If a client who's a private individual hires me to do *Some Cleaning* in their lounge, it would be exactly the same as doing *Some Cleaning* somewhere like the ICA. I'm much more interested in how performing bodies are institutionalized. If it is institutional critique, it's located in the transaction of bodies.

DEH

You're interested in economies of labor. I read a text by Lanka Tattersall in *Sleek* where she quotes you saying you differentiate between choreographic practice and labor. But aren't they always one and the same? How do you see them as different?

AL

I think they're interwoven. But all practices are labor, and as soon as the choreography is activated in a public scenario where there is the potential for a certain recuperation—whether of audiences' attention, or of the cultural capital of programming a certain thing—I think it does become somehow defined as labor, a profession, an expertise. I think they go hand in hand. With the "Services" I've managed to collapse them into each other, so that I'm evolving my choreographic practice at the same time that my labor is being hired. It's a practice that's defined as labor and framed as labor. It also divides my work time and my "free" time. I wouldn't want to glorify the word "practice."

DEH

Why not?

AL

There's something about "practice" that feels to me like it's behind closed doors, a bit like naval gazing. The idea of practice makes me think of "the artist" endlessly searching in the studio. Maybe that's ultimately what really works about choreography: the fact that it needs to be socialized. And if it needs to be social, then in this world, in a highly economized world—economized to the *nth* degree—it needs to safeguard its expertise.

DEH

So are you trying to equalize the terms between a performance practice and a more object-based practice?

AL

Mmm...



Adam Linder, *Choreographic Service No. 3: Some Riding* at ICA, London, 2015.
Courtesy: the artist; Silberkuppe, Berlin; ICA, London. Photo: Mark Blower

DEH

Well, it just seems like you're emphasizing the compensation of labor as being very important. Are you insinuating that you're trying to address a discrepancy between these kinds of commodities (or what have you)?

AL

I don't know if it's, like, let's hit the baseball field and level this with one another...

DEH

[laughs] Right.

AL

I don't know if I feel *that* way. But we do live in a world where there's a highly focused attention on material value, even if it's just the *idea* of an object, of holding something or possessing something. What's interesting about choreography is that you can experience it as a viewer or keep company with it, but you're never able to possess it. So the "Services" model allows for this choreography to be compensated, though it doesn't defy its true nature—its ephemerality. You can't possess the performers who bring the choreography to life. My "Services" are like when you go to the physiotherapist; they do their job and you reap the benefits, but you don't *become* a physio and you don't get to take that physio home with you.

DEH

Unless you're good at seduction, like me! Kidding. You make this all sound so working class, as if getting a handyman to install a shelf is tantamount to doing a "Service".

AL

I am working within this model. I use the term because it makes sense for what I do. I'm thoroughly on the market. I'm saying, "Here is this expression, which also can double as a commodity, which has a value, is available for hire, and is going to be fulfilled by experts." There's no anti-capital stance. It's just more about putting forward a certain ethic, one that resonates with the discipline of choreography.

DEH

I'm interested in this because some friends of mine, Gerard & Kelly, sold their work *Timelining* to the Guggenheim recently. And they had very specific labor terms in the agreement. Whenever the piece is restaged, its performers have to receive a certain hourly rate, or flat fee, I'm not sure which exactly. Of course, in general, this tightly regulated commodification of performance is highly influenced by Tino Sehgal and his works' immaterial economy. He also sells performance work with very specific financial terms.

AL

It's an interesting time, where there's a lot of attention and thought and reflection happening around this discipline. My model is actually a little antithetical to those transactions, in the sense that I'm defining a model of "Service" to differentiate between something that can be compensated yet remains in the domain of the subjects, as opposed to something that can be possessed. The two artists you mention are both selling objects. They sell an object that has certain stipulations.

DEH

It's not really an object though.

AL

Well, it *is* an object in the sense that its form is a score, or its form is an idea.

DEH

I suppose a score is an object, though an idea isn't.

AL

A score is something that's held, defined—a definitive product that can be obtained. And then the onus is on its objecthood. And how that performance is presented or displayed as an object. I am interested in putting the onus on the people who do the choreography, who are the performers. So when you hire a "Service", you're hiring Adam, or Adam and Justin and Jonathan. I'm trying to keep the subjects the primary material, not the concept or the score. Whereas in those works, in that model, there are all kinds of arrange-

ments for recasting, and so on. But for me a performance is the performers.

DEH

I think it's a fuzzy delineation, how you separate authorship like that. The subject being Lauren or whoever, but the work is someone else's. Your work is still authored by you, right?

AL

Yes, absolutely, the work is authored by me. It's my work. But the performers who activate my work are absolutely named and visible and have responsibility. They are somehow, in their small, freelance way, safeguarded by the fact that if *Some Proximity* is hired, they're part of *Some Proximity*. They're indispensable in that way. That's what I believe in: the real juice, the real meat of the work is contained within the corporeal skills of the subjects. You can have the idea, there can be the concept, but these are the people who carry and activate this thing. That's what differentiates it from objects.



Adam Linder, *Auto Ficto Reflexo* in "Tanz im August," Berlin, 2015. Courtesy: the artist and Silberkuppe, Berlin. Photo: Sarah Bohn

Alexandra Bachzetsis

Alexandra Bachzetsis (b. 1974) is an artist, performer, and choreographer based in Athens, Basel, and Zurich. Her professional background includes a wide range of disciplines: theater, dance, and visual arts. Her work constitutes an inquiry into genres of performing arts, techniques of choreography, and forms of scenic behavior. Bachzetsis has received the Swiss Art Award (2011) and was nominated for the DESTA Prize (2011) in Athens. In 2012 she won the Swiss Performance Prize, and her work *Etude* was included in dOCUMENTA (13). Her piece *The Stages of Staging* (2013) was presented at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam; Fondation Beyeler, Riehen, Switzerland; and Museu Serralves, Porto, Portugal, among other venues. Her recent work *From A to B via C* (2014) was commissioned by Tate Modern, London; the Jumex Museum, Mexico City; and the Biennale of Moving Images in Geneva.

Alexandra Bachzetsis, *From A to B via C*, 2014. Courtesy: Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City. Photo: Moritz Bernouilly



David Everitt Howe

What I find to be an interesting common thread throughout your performances—at least visually—is the aesthetic prominence of your AV equipment, particularly cables, the cameras and television monitors (like the old-school Sony kind), and how you filter yourself and your performers through this very strong presence of the apparatus; it sort of reminds me of how Walter Benjamin viewed the camera, as this almost surgical device. It represented “the most intensive interpenetration of reality with equipment.” Benjamin was writing about this in the 1930s. How do you see this coming forth in your practice now?

Alexandra Bachzetsis

Through technical devices—such as video on monitors, or video beamed on a screen or the back wall, or through placing a mirror wall as a background for performance—I try to make the audience aware of what they’re looking at while they’re watching the performers dance, or strip, or move or talk. Confronting the audience with their own voyeuristic gaze, I often use parallelism and paired occurrences to express dualities, or relate the work to the exchangeability of show business. It can happen inside the structure of the work—as a tool to divide two different points of view or to give it another perspective at the same time—or it happens within the choreography as a doubling of performers or personas. The audience gains presence through the fact that my performances are clearly directed towards them; they’re made for the audience to watch. Almost all my work is directed towards the front of the stage, as if it were a one-dimensional picture plane set for an ideal spectator who isn’t there, or as if it were staged for a camera that doesn’t record. The attitude of the performers starts off very intimate, personal, and almost quiet. Over time, they become very exhibitionistic and at times aggressive, since that simultaneously forces and invites the audience to look at the show. They’re constantly switching between being aware of their own gaze and forgetting it, just gazing.

DEH

Is there perhaps an organizing principle to the references you use? In *From A to B via C* they range from athletics to goofy music video/hip-hop movements to classic ballet to No Doubt, over twinkling piano. I didn’t know you were such a No Doubt fan! Hahaha. How are you thinking about pop? As a great equalizer? It would seem to be a way to break down the esoterics of dance.

AB

I don’t think there’s one organizing principle. If I have to describe it, it might be somewhere between looking into structures and mechanisms of established systems—such as genres—and fundamental research on gesture vocabulary. This push and pull of genre choice and typology of individual gestures is a red thread that takes me through all my work. *From A to B via C* specifically is a work composed from a

set of online tutorials. All the existing material in the piece was learned from the Internet, appropriated, and finally embodied on stage.

I’m interested in how you can educate yourself with these new forms of learning online, where instructions are shared with a wide audience. I also focus on intimate, everyday spectacles, in training and its drama. My movement is culled from the way the self is staged in everyday life, and is found through taking action and following an attraction at the same time.

As for No Doubt, I’m less a personal fan than more generally interested in pop music being a great outlet for emotions, where all kinds of individuals find themselves represented.

DEH

What choreographers or dancers have been particularly influential for you? Your background is in dance?

AB

Yes, my background is in dance, and there have been *many* dancers and choreographers that were influential and important to me at different times: Josephine Baker, Vaslav Nijinsky, Rita Hayworth, Jennifer Beals, Ian Curtis, Michael Jackson, Pina Bausch, Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker, Michael Clark, Jérôme Bel, Missy Elliott. But one that always and forever strikes me is Yvonne Rainer.

DEH

Do you primarily show your work at art institutions or in more traditional theatrical spaces?

AB

Both.

DEH

How do you see the two relating? Press materials for your BMW Live performance claimed you felt the two typologies were “parallel,” but obviously there are big differences between them. With art spaces in particular, there’s a lack of the proscenium’s “fourth wall” and a different kind of scale; it’s small, with a close proximity between performer and viewer. Or is it the networks and structures of the art world in general that interest you?

AB

A different approach to answering the question of how art and theater spaces relate would be the fact that a rehearsal never happens once; it usually is about revisiting a repetition of a clear setup of tools, movements, props, and situations that happen again and again, and appear as a superimposed display of given elements. I like to examine the dynamics of a working process that leads to a work’s creation, and that manifests itself in each piece.

I feel like the studio space—or the immaterial space of the mind where the work gets elaborated—is just as important as the framed reality that represents the work when it’s being placed in a defined context. Each context has its own conventions, which subsequently means each piece is different.



Alexandra Bachzetsis, Julia Born and Gina Folly, *From A to B via C*, 2014.
Courtesy: the artists

Nell'ultimo decennio, una crescente proliferazione di eventi performativi legati alla danza ha coinvolto l'ambito museale. David Everitt Howe indaga le peculiarità di questa fascinazione del museo e del pubblico dell'arte per una presenza umana che diventa forma aumentata, ineludibile e irresistibile nel contesto di un luogo che ospita oggetti "perfettamente morti". In tre conversazioni con i coreografi Trajal Harrell, Adam Linder e Alexandra Bachzetsis, si delineano nuove modalità d'esplorazione del campo e di messa in discussione degli spazi specificamente artistici, nonché degli aspetti legati alla presenza dei performer come parte imprescindibile del lavoro stesso.

Nell'aprile del 2013, all'Hammer Museum di Los Angeles si è tenuto "Dancing with the Art World". Il convegno ha riunito un gruppo di sofisticati accademici, curatori museali, ballerini e coreografi per indagare l'esatto motivo per cui, negli ultimi cinque-dieci anni, il mondo dell'arte si sia infatuato della danza contemporanea al punto da trasformarla in un vero e proprio feticcio.² In quest'arco di tempo, eventi come "Move: Choreographing You" alla Hayward Gallery di Londra; "Musée de la danse: Expo-Zéro", all'interno di Performa 11; "On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century" e "Some Sweet Day", entrambe al MoMA (quest'ultima sfoggiava una struttura particolarmente polivalente, priva di una precisa direzione) e moltissime altre hanno presentato la danza all'interno di contesti espositivi e museali. Quest'anno, lo Stedelijk propone "A Year at the Stedelijk: Tino Sehgal", in cui ogni mese l'artista allestirà una performance diversa in alcuni spazi del museo.

Può essere interessante usare Sehgal come una sorta di lente d'ingrandimento quando si esamina la produzione di Trajal Harrell, Adam Linder e Alexandra Bachzetsis, i tre coreografi che stanno esplorando il campo e mettendo in discussione gli spazi specifici delle istituzioni artistiche, dove spesso si situa la loro produzione. Nella semplicità di molte delle sue performance, per non parlare del loro potere d'acquisto nel mercato dell'arte, Sehgal forse incarna l'eccezionale fascinazione ontologica verso la forma, strettamente collegata agli interessi minimalisti per il site-specific, per le particolarità del contesto e l'intervento personale. Spesso si avvale di un solo performer in uno spazio altrimenti vuoto, in modo che il corpo sia l'unica presenza, una presenza fuori misura, persino "impassibilmente" minacciosa. Una trasposizione quasi letterale dell'esilarante definizione data da Michael Fried della scultura minimalista come "la presenza muta di un'altra persona",³ quasi che potesse mangiare la faccia dello spettatore da un momento all'altro. Dato che la danza prevede *di fatto* la presenza di una persona, di un essere umano – di una creatura biologica, in ultima analisi – più che come un oggetto o un'immagine, essa funziona come la sua versione spettrale, come una forma dotata di capacità ulteriori, e in ciò consiste il motivo, secondo la storica dell'arte Claire Bishop, della fascinazione sperimentata dal mondo dell'arte nei confronti della disciplina; se dopo Judson gran parte della danza puntava a dequalificare il mezzo, Bishop obietta che la dequalificazione richiede una qualifica da rifiutare successivamente. Anche in questo caso, "bellezza ridotta" e "qualifica e seduzione"⁴ rimangono una sorta di variante contemporanea dell'astrazione, qualcosa di provocatoriamente formalista.

Osservando in generale la performance – di cui la danza fa parte –, la qualifica è solo una parte dell'equazione. Ciò che stranamente Bishop omette – o forse dà per scontato, benché valga la pena ripeterlo – è la natura finita, transitoria della danza, l'aspetto fondamentale che la differenzia dalle altre

opere d'arte statiche in una mostra. Se queste ultime possono restare appese a una parete o disposte su un pavimento a tempo indeterminato, i ballerini devono andare e venire (mangiare, bere e dormire), altrimenti muoiono, e non in senso figurato (e Marina Abramović potrebbe fare buon uso delle loro ossa). I ballerini evidenziano i limiti in carne e ossa, contingenti, di qualsiasi contesto, del suo tempo e spazio. È qualcosa di raro e irresistibile in un museo, deposito di cose "perfettamente morte", per usare la definizione che Hilton Kramer diede della pittura di *salon*.⁵

Dialogando individualmente con Trajal Harrell e Adam Linder su Skype, e con Alexandra Bachzetsis via e-mail, ho discusso con ciascuno della loro pratica in generale, delle loro riflessioni sull'uso che viene fatto della loro produzione negli spazi museali e galleristici, e sul modo in cui la loro personalità e quella dei loro performer entrano in gioco.

1. (Nota al titolo) Si tratta di un fugace accenno a "Sulle rovine del museo" di Douglas Crimp (trad. italiana in Cecilia Ribaldi (a cura di), *Il nuovo museo. Origini e percorsi*, Volume 1, il Saggiatore, Milano 2005), testo fondamentale per il modo in cui consideriamo il ruolo dei musei nel postmodernismo.
2. "Hammer Lectures: Dancing in the Art World Day 1", The Hammer Museum, consultato il 3 settembre 2015, <http://hammer.ucla.edu/programs-events/2013/04/dancing-with-the-art-world-day-1/>
3. Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago e Londra 1998, p. 155.
4. Claire Bishop, "UNHAPPY DAYS IN THE ART WORLD? De-Skilling Theater, Re-Skilling Performance", in *The Brooklyn Rail*, 10 dicembre 2011, consultato il 3 settembre 2015, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2011/12/art/unhappy-days-in-the-art-worldde-skilling-theater-re-skilling-performance>
5. Cit. in Douglas Crimp, *Idem*, p. 105.

David Everitt Howe Allora, cosa stai portando in giro al momento?

Trajal Harrell Tutti i miei lavori sono in tournée. Conosci la mia serie?

DEH "Twenty Looks"?

TH Esatto, "Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at The Judson Church". È una serie composta da sette performance, tutte in tournée. A giugno, al Festival di Danza di Montpellier, ho presentato per la prima volta un nuovo pezzo che non fa parte della serie: s'intitola *Le Fantôme de Montpellier rencontre le Samourai* (Il fantasma di Montpellier incontra il samurai). Ora anche questo comincia a girare.

DEH È collegato a *Paris is Burning*?

TH Non proprio. Sto sviluppando un nuovo filone di ricerca che guarda alla danza Butoh attraverso la lente teorica della "realness" (credibilità estetica, NdT), a sua volta basata sullo stile di danza vogueing. Quindi in un certo senso è collegato. La ricerca sul vogueing sarà sempre parte del mio lavoro perché è un po' la mia educazione formale, il mio modo di pensare alla rappresentazione sul palcoscenico, e alla performatività. Quindi questo aspetto ci sarà sempre ma il vogueing *non* è il tema.

DEH Io e altri abbiamo criticato certi artisti di New York per il modo in cui si sono impossessati del movimento di vogueing delle minoranze nel loro lavoro. Qualcuno ti ha mai rivolto questo tipo di critica?

TH Per la serie "Twenty Looks" non ho lavorato con esponenti del vogueing, o con danzatori afroamericani. Anzi, non ho proprio lavorato con danzatori americani. A qualcuno è sfuggito – e non capisco come mai – che è stata una scelta ben precisa. Se ci fossero stati cinque danzatori afroamericani, sarebbe stato fin troppo facile etichettarla come una sorta di rappresentazione strategica. E io invece volevo, strategicamente, che fosse tutt'altro che scontata, dal punto di vista del pubblico e della sua percezione di come è rappresentata o chiamata in causa la storia del vogueing. È chiamata in causa nel lavoro ma volevo che fosse letteralmente chiamata in causa nel casting. Ho amici che praticano vogueing nell'ambito della "ballroom community" (scena underground LGBT, NdT): abbiamo anche collaborato per alcuni progetti, ma non per la serie "Twenty Looks". Ho voluto che la distinzione rimanesse molto chiara.

DEH Ritengo anch'io che sia problematico usare questi soggetti così direttamente: potrebbe sembrare un tentativo di "aiutarli", nel senso peggiore del termine, o di farli entrare in un contesto artistico che per loro non è né utile né interessante. Potrebbe sembrare un'operazione analoga a *Musée Précaire Albinet* di Thomas Hirschhorn che nel 2004 ha portato un museo d'arte moderna nella banlieue parigina di Aubervilliers, (scena dove pensano di poter vivere del proprio lavoro. Un modo c'è, ed è costituire una grande compagnia ma ormai quasi nessuno della mia generazione crede più in questa possibilità. Il percorso necessario ad arrivare a un risultato simile... beh, è davvero complicato. La mia generazione e il mio gruppo di artisti ha cercato di creare una sorta di esistenza transnazionale.

In ogni caso, dovendo intervistare altri due danzatori-coreografi europei oltre a te per questo numero di *Mousse*, mi rendo conto che ci sono notevoli differenze a livello di economia e meccanismi di finanziamento tra i due continenti.

TH Senza dubbio. Negli States è davvero difficile mantenersi con la danza contemporanea, e allora molti sognano di venire in Europa dove pensano di poter vivere del proprio lavoro. Un modo c'è, ed è costituire una grande compagnia ma ormai quasi nessuno della mia generazione crede più in questa possibilità. Il percorso necessario ad arrivare a un risultato simile... beh, è davvero complicato. La mia generazione e il mio gruppo di artisti ha cercato di creare una sorta di esistenza transnazionale.

DEH Quindi tu sei in residenza al MoMA da due anni. Cosa significa?

TH Ho deciso che volevo lavorare sulla performance nel museo in diverse situazioni per capire che influenza avrebbe avuto il lavoro per il museo su quello teatrale e viceversa, quindi attraverso il progetto sono riuscito a creare un cortocircuito d'influenza. E da due anni lavoro sulla visibilità della performance. È in programma un mio spettacolo questo mese, proprio nelle gallerie, e poi anche a maggio. Nel frattempo terrò qualche incontro.

DEH In quali luoghi del museo ti esibisci?

TH In diversi spazi. Il primo pezzo, che ha portato alla residenza, risale al febbraio 2013 ed è stato messo in scena nell'Agnes Gund Lobby. A settembre ho eseguito un altro pezzo intitolato *The Practice* in una galleria al sesto piano. Questo mese saremo di nuovo in una galleria. Ma è difficile ottenere le gallerie perché occorre l'autorizzazione dei curatori. A marzo farò un pezzo in un corridoio, uno spazio che mi piace molto.

DEH È difficile per te, che vieni da un contesto teatrale, utilizzare tre o quattro lati di

