

The Contemporary Performance Think Tank

CURRENTS



The Contemporary Performance Think Tank: Currents 2017

The Contemporary Performance Think Tank is housed in the John Wells Directing Program MFA at Carnegie Mellon University's School Of Drama in association with the Contemporary Performance Network and under the direction of Caden Manson. Each year the Think Tank focuses on a set of topics concerning the fields of Theater and Contemporary Performance and conducts research and interviews to produce a paper as a resource for practitioners. This year's topic is contemporary performing artists and companies redefining relationships with audience and pushing the formal relationships of architecture, artist, and audience. For this paper, the Think Tank chose five areas on the forefront of this research to explore; Contemporary Choreography, Mixed Reality Performance, Performance Cabaret, Immersive Theatre, and Social Engaged Art. Each section of this paper includes an introduction to the specific practice, a conversation with an artist, and a list of artists working in and around the specific practice.



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Contemporary Choreography

by [Philip Gates](#)

“Choreography is just a frame, a structure, a language where much more than dance is inscribed.”

- [Jerome Bel](#)¹

“Choreography” is used here as a term for a particular performance discipline, as distinct from “choreography” as used more generally to refer to specific steps or movement sequences within a performance. There is a proliferation of terms referring to this type of work: performances by the artists discussed below have also been variously labeled as “experimental dance,” “conceptual dance,” “choreographic performance,” “downtown dance” (in NYC), even “post-dance.” I use the term “choreography” following such scholars as Bojana Cvejić and Jenn Joy, who have written extensively on the field of contemporary choreography and its context within the broader fields of dance and contemporary performance.

As a rule, choreographic artists work within the legacy of dance practices and forms, but are engaged in asking questions that worry at the idea of what dance is or can be. They push form forward in a way that situates their work under the umbrella of contemporary performance. These artists organize their work around philosophical and/or theoretical investigations, as discussed in detail in many journals and books including Joy’s *The Choreographic* (2014) and Cvejić’s *Choreographing Problems* (2015), as well as Jo Butterworth and Liesbeth Wildschut’s anthology *Contemporary Choreography: A Critical Reader* (2009).

Cvejić writes of the distinction between choreography and dance: “The denomination ‘choreography’ suggests an insistence on the authorial position of the choreographer whereby the choreographer distinguishes her work from a traditional notion of craftsmanship in composing bodily movement.”² More specifically, she frames the work as engaged in the act of “choreographing problems,” a process in which the artist creates “ruptures between movement, the body, and time in performance such that they engender a shock upon sensibility, one that renders aspects of these choreographic performances hard to identify, recognize, or accommodate within the horizons of expectations of contemporary dance.”³

At the same time, it is important not to lose sight of the work’s legacy and continuity within the field of dance, or the training and background of most practitioners. Miguel Gutierrez, for example, has expressed his frustration with being labeled a “performance artist”: “I am deeply attached to my upbringing in dance but I am not attached about what this might mean about what my work ‘should’ look like.”⁴ Faye Driscoll describes the performers in her work as “awkward virtuosic bodies,”⁵ a phrase which suggests both technique and its subversion and/or deployment towards unexpected ends.

Choreography, then, beyond its technical definition as “the making of dance,”⁶ is a field that proposes modes of being rather than methodologies. Its object is the embodiment of thought, or most simply, putting ideas into motion.

Some choreographers create in close collaboration with artists working in other disciplines. [DD Dorvillier](#)’s *Extra Shapes* (2015) features three autonomous scores: lights by Thomas Dunn, sound by Sébastien Roux, and movement for three dancers by Dorvillier. The space is divided into three equal strips designed to evoke a slice of Neapolitan ice cream,⁷ each occupied by one of the three elements. The three scores are of equal duration (17 minutes) and are performed simultaneously. This 17-minute sequence is repeated three times, with the audience moving to a new side of the space with each iteration. According to Dorvillier’s website, her new work *Only One of Many* (another collaboration with Roux) returns to the idea of independent elements in conversation. Two music sequences and two dance sequences “are performed in all possible paired combinations”⁸ while exploring the question of what constitutes a single sound or a single movement.

Dorvillier's recent work is marked by an ongoing investigation of structure and form. In *Danza Permanente* (2012), four dancers embody the score of Beethoven's String Quartet #15, transforming the notated musical structure into movement.⁹ She writes that "the non-linguistic perception of abstract forms can be a catalyst for new knowledge and ways of relating to the world."¹⁰ Meanwhile, *A catalogue of steps* is an evolving research and performance project that pulls fragments of choreography from her early work (1990-2004) and re-contextualizes them in durational, site-responsive "visits."¹¹

Much as Dorvillier's project explores the personal history of her own work, [Trajal Harrell](#) engages explicitly with the history of specific forms and artists, provoking our understanding of the past. His most recent work, *Caen Amour* (2016), uses the hoochie-koochie shows of the early twentieth century to "complexify [the viewer's] own criticality to an imagined past and how each of us fills in the blanks from various political and social awarenesses."¹² He has also made several pieces exploring Japanese butoh and its founder Tatsumi Hijikata.

Harrell's largest-scale work to date is the series *Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at The Judson Church*, which includes seven distinct but related works (sized from XS to L and a Made-to-Measure, plus an academic paper posted on his website with the label XL). He articulates the question behind the series as, "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?"¹³ In *(S)* (2009), a solo for Harrell himself, he models the titular twenty looks and embodies the seemingly opposing impulses of postmodernism and ball culture.¹⁴ *Antigone Sr. (L)* (2012), for five male dancers, is a re-imagining of classical Greek drama through the lens of voguing.¹⁵ Across projects, Harrell describes his methodology as "posing a question that presents a historical impossibility and then I try to get the audience and performers to wrap their heads around the question together. It's the togetherness that I am after."¹⁶

[Faye Driscoll](#) expresses a similar interest in this togetherness, what she terms the "third event" that takes place between dancers and audience: "We wouldn't be here if you weren't here, and you wouldn't be here if we weren't here. That's really primary to me: the feeling of that feedback loop being amplified inside the work."¹⁷ Identifying as a choreographer and director, Driscoll probes the boundaries of self and other, performer and spectator, investigating communal space and shared reality.¹⁸ She has worked with paradigms of social relationships on very different scales. *There is so much mad in me* (2010) puts nine performers through a series of emotional extremes in an exploration of mob consciousness.¹⁹ Meanwhile, *You're Me* (2012) is a duet for Driscoll and a male dancer, an intimate but violent consideration of relationship and selfhood through the frame of duality.²⁰

In her most recent work, the *Thank You For Coming* series, Driscoll asks her audience to be present, active participants in co-creating the work, and through the work, a larger social reality. *Attendance* (2014) begins with a focus on the entangled and distorted bodies of the performers, before gradually dissolving the space between performers and audience and closing with a communal ritual.²¹ *Play* (2016) continues the series' investigations into collective social authorship, focusing on "the consumption and fabrication of stories to make our lives cohere."²²

The series form offers artists the opportunity to conduct choreographic inquiries that span multiple individual works, developing ideas beyond the constraint of a single evening. [Ligia Lewis](#), whose work centers on questions of embodiment, has at the time of writing premiered two parts of her triptych *BLUE RED WHITE*. Among other themes, the trilogy investigates how bodies of different races are read, represented, and performed. The first piece, *Sorrow Swag* (2015), is a solo for one white male dancer, incorporating text by Anouilh and Beckett, live music by the musician Twin Shadow, and a visual landscape of saturated blue light. The second, *minor matter* (2016), is composed for three black performers (including Lewis herself) and foregrounds the color red, moving from the sadness of the previous work to images of love and rage.²³ The third piece in the triptych (forthcoming) is entitled *Melancholy: A White Mellow Drama*.

Writing about *minor matter*, Lewis asks, “Can the black box be host to a black experience that goes beyond identity politics?”²⁴, and of *Sorrow Swag* she asserts that “the theater itself is throbbing with blackness.”²⁵ This insistence on the centrality of the black body within the very structure of performance extends beyond the duration of the work: Lewis takes a bow at the end of her performances even when she is not herself one of the performers, a political gesture that serves as a declaration of authorship. She notes in an interview that “since the tradition of white, male directors and dance-makers is so strong, she has had to consistently assert that she herself, a Dominican-American woman, is the creator of the work.”²⁶

The corporeality, agency and subjectivity of the body, particularly bodies that are often othered, is a concern shared by [Miguel Gutierrez](#), who works across disciplines to create performances that search for meaning in our bodies and our relationships to those around us.²⁷ The home page of his website announces, in all caps: “PROBABLY THE BIGGEST QUESTION I MAKE ART ABOUT IS: WHY ARE WE ALIVE.”²⁸

Gutierrez’s trilogy *Age & Beauty* (2014-15) “places a queer lens on mortality, the representation of the dancer, the intersection of administration with art-making, and an ambivalence toward futurity.”²⁹ *Part 1: Mid-Career Artist/Suicide Note or &:-/* is a duet for Gutierrez and dancer Mickey Mahar, twenty years his junior. The performance employs extensive unison phrases and emphasizes the physical contrasts between the two performers.³⁰ In *Part 2: Asian Beauty @ the Werq Meeting or The Choreographer & Her Muse or &:@&*, Gutierrez investigates his own artistic relationships and the business of art, placing several long-term collaborators (including performer Michelle Boulé, presenter/manager Ben Pryor, and lighting designer Lenore Doxsee) onstage in dialogue with Sean Donovan as Gutierrez himself.³¹ *Part 3: DANCER or You can make whatever the fuck you want but you’ll only tour solos or The Powerful People or We are strong/We are powerful/We are beautiful/We are divine or &:’///* assembles Gutierrez and a group of intergenerational performers who challenge received notions of what a “dancer” looks like,³² placing the focus on potentiality and the queer body.

The concept of queer futurity, as discussed most prominently by José Esteban Muñoz in his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), is evoked directly in work by Gutierrez and others, but it is to some degree inherent in the very strategies and processes of most contemporary choreography. Muñoz writes that queerness “is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”³³ Choreography as a field, with its cross-disciplinary collaborations, speaking bodies, and charged artist-audience relationship, seems particularly invested in (and suited to) this queer insistence on the imagination of alternate futures. As the English choreographer Jonathan Burrows noted at the 2015 Postdance Conference in Stockholm, “we’re always almost somewhere and the best pieces never quite arrive / leaving us thinking ahead to what might happen next.”³⁴

Notes

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9. "Danza Permanente," *human future dance corps*, accessed March 26, 2017, www.humanfuturedancecorps.org/danza-permanente.
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17. Siobhan Burke, "Faye Driscoll's Tingling Force Field With the Dance Audience," *New York Times*, November 15, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/16/arts/dance/exploring-the-space-between-performer-and-audience.html>.
18. "About," *Faye Driscoll*.
19. "There is so much mad in me," *Faye Driscoll*, accessed March 26, 2017, <http://www.fayedriscoll.com/projects/mad-in-me>.
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21. "Thank You For Coming: Attendance," *Faye Driscoll*, accessed March 26, 2017, <http://www.fayedriscoll.com/projects/thank-you-for-coming-attendance>.
22. "Thank You For Coming: Play," *Faye Driscoll*, accessed March 26, 2017, <http://www.fayedriscoll.com/projects/tyfc-play>.
23. "Ligia Lewis," *American Realness*, accessed March 26, 2017, <http://www.americanrealness.com/portfolio-type/ligia-lewis-3>.
24. Ibid.
25. Jaime Shearn Coan, "Out of the Blue: Ligia Lewis's Sorrow Swag Disrupts Identity Politics-as-Usual," *Brooklyn Rail*, February 3, 2016, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2016/02/dance/out-of-the-blue-ligia-lewis>.
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27. "About," *Miguel Gutierrez*, accessed March 26, 2017, <http://www.miguelgutierrez.org/project/about>.
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In Conversation with Alex Rodabaugh

Interviewed by Philip Gates

AmeriSHOWZ, the brainchild of choreographer Alex Rodabaugh, advertises itself as “one of the world’s largest direct performance selling businesses.” Sure enough, AmeriSHOWZ: Circle of Champions 2017 (presented at Gibney Dance as part of American Realness in January 2017) begins as a “training session” introducing the company’s business model. AmeriSHOWZ, we learn from several earnest representatives, allows you to buy tickets to a variety of performances at wholesale prices and then resell them to others at retail price, leaving you to pocket the difference. The cheerful irony of this opening section lays the foundation for a deeper investigation into the relationship between the arts and an economic system that fails almost everyone in it. (For a more detailed discussion of the performance, see my Contemporary Performance writeup [here](#).)

Rodabaugh and I sat down at Gibney immediately after the final performance to talk about the AmeriSHOWZ project, translating economics into choreographic constraints, and his desire to create a space for open discussion of financial struggle.

Philip Gates: Tell me about the genesis of AmeriSHOWZ.

Alex Rodabaugh: I had this fake Facebook profile for the show that I did before this, *g1br33l*, and somebody contacted that profile out of the blue and was like, hey, I’m looking for people who are really savvy with Facebook, we’re looking for entrepreneurs, all this stuff. And I thought, well this is nuts, clearly this is not a real profile, they can’t possibly think I’m a real person. But I kept on going along with it and eventually she asked if I wanted to meet up. So I met up with her at a Penn Station Starbucks and she gave me her presentation and I recorded it, which is legal—ethical I’m not sure. I wanted to get an idea of her performance when she was giving me this Amway pitch.

PG: I feel like I should know this, but what’s Amway?

AR: Amway is a multi-level marketing company, these are companies like Herbalife, Avon, Mary Kay... Basically you sell a product and then you sign up other people to also sell products. It is not a pyramid scheme, but it is very similar to one. It’s in this legal gray area where because these companies make so much money, and because our government is so corrupt, they don’t have any regulations. So they’re everywhere. They’re very popular right now because people are having a hard time getting by, so they see this presentation where all you have to do is sell things... It’s this idea that you put your nose to the grindstone at the beginning and then you’ll retire by the time you’re thirty or whatever. *g1br33l* was very clearly about a cult leader and a cult, and these multilevel marketing companies are similar, they’re economic cults. You know, “things are hard right now but your day is coming and all you have to do is stay positive and believe it’s going to happen and keep working towards this goal.” So I was interested in that and in watching this woman give me this presentation in complete sincerity. The opening of the show is verbatim a recreation of her presentation.

It was actually a really weird synchronicity, because I was already trying to investigate the idea of dance as a pyramid scheme. [Sarah Anne Austin] wrote an article a few years ago [for Dance/USA] talking about modern dance as a pyramid scheme. Her main point was that a lot of people are going into dance and are becoming teachers to support themselves, and they need a lot of students in order to support themselves. The article got a lot of backlash: these people aren’t making a ton of money, not everybody who takes a dance class wants to go on to be a dancer or choreographer, you can get so much out of taking a dance class... And absolutely that’s true. But I think what it really did touch upon is the student loan crisis. If you want to support yourself by teaching at a university, you are depending on a large number of students to take out a large number of student loans that will be going to your salary, and those are loans that they probably cannot pay back.

So the two things came together to ask: what would it look like if dance really *was* a pyramid scheme? Or in that gray area where you couldn't tell if it was or not.

PG: I saw *g1br33l* and this new piece struck me as, in some ways, a direct evolution. Were you always envisioning this piece as the next phase of that project?

AR: A lot of the visuals came together, the use of plastic, the white floor...

PG: Both pieces have geometric shapes on the floor that the dancers follow...

AR: And the opening is me talking, the second part is a ritual, the third part is a kind of finale. Yeah. After *g1br33l* I realized that I touched on a lot of spiritual things and spiritual beliefs but I wanted to talk more about... I didn't really touch on anything economic. So a lot of this stemmed out of Occupy Wall Street and wanting to capture how I felt and what I was thinking about when it was going on. I personally believe that as inequality continues to grow it's going to be reflected in everything, including the arts. You're gonna have a few people who are making millions of dollars off of their art, and a whole bunch of people who cannot make art, not without spending a bunch of money. The middle is disappearing along with the middle class. In the music at the end of *AmeriSHOWZ*, there's a Shepard tone, which is an auditory illusion where it sounds like something is going up forever but it's actually just repeating.

PG: Can you talk about the process of creating the movement in the second part of the piece, the ritual? Do you do improvisation with the dancers, or do you set things on your own and teach it to them?

AR: The posing in that section I created on my own. That was done by chance operations and a Rubix cube. I found points for the arms and legs and head, and instead of creating poses and teaching those, I taught the dancers where the arms and legs are supposed to be and let them decide how that was done. It was this idea of finding individuality. Trying to navigate a set system in your own way.

PG: Before we officially got started, you mentioned that this section is actually a live competition that determines who will dance the solo in the final section of the piece. Can you tell me more about that competition; were those rules you developed in rehearsal?

AR: We each have a different color of dollar bills and we take turns going into one of the squares on the floor. When you go into a square you have to drop a dollar, and you're trying to collect one of each of the other person's dollars. But you can't go into a square that has your color in it, so you can't go back to the one you were just on, and if you're trapped then you have to lose a turn. That's the first part of it. The second part is we count the dollar bills and it's an odds-even game, and people are eliminated that way.

PG: Is that something you've used before as a strategy for developing movement? Games, chance...

AR: No, I was just trying to come up with these nonsense, arbitrary elimination rounds. The first game is strategic, the second one is pure chance, and the last part is this competition. I wanted there to be... do you know those games, like you're inside of this cage and you collect dollar bills, there's wind and there's dollar bills all over the place--

PG: Oh, yeah, and you have to grab as many as you can--

AR: That's what I wanted, and then I thought, it's a little too literal. But the last section is this idea of collecting the most money, you have to place dollar bills in the right area first. I wanted this highly structured rule-oriented thing that was just complete nonsense to determine who was going to do the solo.

PG: You "won" the solo at tonight's performance. Are the other solos similar to yours? How did those develop?

AR: The solos are seven minutes long and they repeat. I was paying the dancers hourly for rehearsals, so I had to be very particular about who was rehearsing when and how often. I would meet with people one on one instead of having three people at once because it's very expensive. So we started filming improvisations with nobody in the room, just the camera. Then I took the solos and edited them. I chose the timestamp based on the stock market: I took the NASDAQ or whatever, the literal numbers, like 570 would equal five minutes and... actually six minutes and ten seconds because it carries over, and that's where I'd start the solo. And the next couple of digits would be how long, and then I just kept repeating and splicing them together. So there was some influence of the economy on the solo itself.

PG: I'm curious about the durational quality of the piece, especially at the end with the construction of the walls around the soloist. We watch the whole activity happen from beginning to end, and there's this horrible but fascinating inevitability of watching that process.

AR: I did want it to be a gradual thing. That part looks a lot different than what I imagined it was going to. I originally had wanted those green construction walls that you see in front of buildings, but I'm glad that it transitioned to something more abstract. The construction sounds [that are played as they're building the walls] came from living in my apartment and hearing construction all the time. Ever since I moved to New York it's been this perpetual sound of construction. And over time I felt that that was the sound of gentrification, it's the sound of money pouring into a neighborhood. It's this constant reminder that you're going to have to move out of your apartment. But it's a subtle, slow transition. Though it's also not slow in the sense that one day you look next to your apartment and you're like, how did that transition to a single family home? That's insane. When did this happen?

PG: Watching you dance as they built around you was this journey of losing access to your performance. Little by little, impediments start to come between us and you, and then eventually...

AR: Eventually you're just staring at a wall. Those construction walls are like, you're not going to be able to live in this building. Whatever they're building, that green wall means that is not for you. You can't see that anymore.

PG: You've worked quite a bit with Miguel Gutierrez, and I was thinking about something he said [in an interview](#) about creating a utopian vision in the bodies onstage. He has this utopian project, whereas aspects of your work seem dystopian. Are you setting out to intentionally reflect the bleakest of what is happening now? Or is it more that it's not dystopian, it's just reality?

AR: Miguel is doing more around queer utopia, more about gender and family and sexuality-- which I think there is definitely a place for within economic dystopia. I did think, what's the point of making something that's just reflecting something terrible, why not come up with some fantastic utopian alternative? Every time I thought about making something positive it just felt fake and wrong. I need to reflect how I'm feeling about this stuff right now. I would hope that other people would want to have a space where they can not try to escape it. Because it feels like people don't know... like, why aren't people rioting in the streets all the time? I guess things just aren't bad enough yet.

I'm very doomsday, clearly. But I do legitimately Google the collapse of America, like, every night. So that's where I'm coming from. I'm not living in a reality that's like, good things are around the corner. The idea that things can be better or there is a possibility for something better, it always feels like it's for someone else because that's not what I'm experiencing. And I think it's important to talk about how we're all struggling, because I don't think that happens. You don't want to talk about your economic issues in public with other people, or admit you might not be doing well, because we have this American dream psychosis that if you're not doing well, there's something wrong with you. So it's hidden.

PG: That makes me think about the visible presence of literal money in your work, using actual dollar bills onstage. There were dollar bills in *g1br33l* too, right? And in both pieces you distorted the bills in some way.

AR: I just like the idea of real money as props. Honestly it's from counting money at the end of a restaurant shift and being like, paper, I'm counting paper. It's this mass illusion that we're all agreeing on. When you're really struggling to collect it, it just feels like picking up paper. But yeah, I do see *AmeriSHOWZ* as a Part Two. I don't know if I would go on to a Part Three... The other part of Occupy Wall Street that I didn't touch on is politics. The cultish feeling around political parties, and the performance of a politician and the performance of canvassing and the performance of having strong political beliefs. But I don't know what I will do after this. We'll see what happens after APAP. Buy my show!

[Edited for length and clarity.]

In Conversation with Jen Rosenblit

Interviewed by Sara Lyons

Jen Rosenblit has been making performance in New York City since 2005. Her Bessie Award-winning work questions intimacy inside of problematic spaces, uniting choreographies, text, and design towards philosophical quandaries. Her work has been commissioned by The Kitchen, New York Live Arts, Danspace, and others, and she has been a resident artist with Movement Research, LMCC, and others. Clap Hands was recently presented at the 2017 American Realness Festival at Abrons Arts Center, and Jen and I sat down after the closing performance to discuss the piece. The following is an excerpt of our conversation.

Sara Lyons: Tell me about the development of *Clap Hands*. What were your initial questions?

Jen Rosenblit: Early on I was reading a lot of [Lauren] Berlant, and she said: “The reorganization of life makes us lose our objects,” and I was just a bit haunted with that. So pretty quickly I realized I wanted to be working with a material that wasn’t anything, that didn’t represent something, that wasn’t an object that somebody could recognize, and I thought just material itself: fabric folded up in a pile, just fabric. I guess it could mean some things, but it also really doesn’t mean much. I sat with it for a long time. I did different things with the felt: I covered my whole studio in felt, I covered a table and a chair in felt, I quickly made this felt monster suit, just really playing around. And then as soon as we had assembled the performers, we really started diving into scores that were dealing directly with this idea of solo, both in the theatrical sense of the singular performer—a kind of stardom—as well as solo in terms of the philosophical aloneness, lonesome, dipping into elements of lonely.

SL: It almost sounds Buddhist in that way--the eternal human suffering of being separate from the rest of the world.

JR: Yeah, my biggest questions are really basic, they’re really philosophical and simple. What does it take to come together with other people and other things, and what happens when we do that? I have feelings that beautiful things happen, and then also some harder things happen. So I’m interested in the problematics of coming together. Which I think, inside of togetherness, reveals a lot of autonomy, a lot of separation. Not just separation and isolation, but a kind of agency of the thing: so I am completely myself, or this chair is completely the chair, but then when it’s painted yellow, and next to the table, it looks like it’s part of a set, or a family. So we started to apply a lot of theatricality onto these ideas of “this is this, this is that.” That’s a table, that’s a chair. There’s a boxer, there’s a fencer. All of these things weren’t so important in what they mean in the world—I wasn’t trying to comment on sports—but it felt right in order to speak about the singularity of a figure, to use a character.

SL: I think that idea by itself it can seem very dark and lonely, but I appreciated that *Clap Hands* was shining a light on the labor of collaboration given that separateness, and how sort of just awkward and funny and beautiful that collaboration can be. That to me is very hopeful.

JR: I find a lot of joy in problematic spaces. I find potential and availability and space and a lot of futurity in these spaces that are a bit difficult. We purposefully, methodologically are constantly adding problems. So, the felt is for some reason so hard to carry when we don’t get to use our arms, when we have to all carry it all together in the middle of ourselves. And then, on top of that, one of us has to get into a felt suit, and one of us has to find the felt bag in the pile. So it’s adding these silly problems, but they’re also pretty real. Like, most of my real big issues in the world are very simple problems. Like, I have too many things, I don’t have enough things.

SL: I could feel that too in how the space is set up, because it's in the round, because the lighting design was never telling me where to look.

JR: It's a bit awkward and diffused like a gymnasium, you know? Like, this light is for functional purposes of seeing.

SL: Right, until you decide that it's not. The moment when the lights actually came down for the first time, I thought, wait, I'm watching a show. But I love that. That's how we live in the world, everything is just functional to us, until we decide that—

JR: We decide that it's poetry.

SL: Exactly.

JR: This is where the final performer comes in, Lexi Welch, who is sort of the operator around the space. Lexi came on with this large notion of care. We take care of the felt, we take care of the table, we take care of the chair, we take care of the audience. It felt important to have another person who could take care of us.

SL: But it's unsentimental care.

JR: Yeah, I definitely resist sentimentality. I think it's just very easy to land there. Of course I crave sentiment, I crave intimacy, but in terms of crafting theater, I'm interested in a slightly more sarcastic entry point. I love for people to feel sentimentality, but I don't want to create images that feed it into the work. If we're going to talk about togetherness, we have to get a little absurd.

SL: The word technology kept coming up for me while watching this—the minute and grander technologies of how we come together in the world. Like the giant boom mic, it becomes a tool for intimacy.

JR: We talked a lot about the things in the room. There is a moment when we start to really address the things in the room as connecting prosthetic, like, this table now, if I'm touching it, it's making me more massive than I am. If I can hold that boom, it's the extension of my arm and my arm is now this close to your face. So we are really dealing with body in this way as it relates to thing-ness.

SL: And the audience becomes just as much a part of that, too, when you just move the seats around mid-performance.

JR: Yeah, very early on I kind of had this mandate that got super challenging to uphold, which is "all parts flexible." And I felt like, OK, these metal benches are here and they're so definitive, and they're actually the most representative of anything—they really bring you back to bleachers at school, you know? And I was like, if these are gonna be here and be speaking, they need to be flexible, and they need at some point be able to move. That's the practice we're engaged with the whole time. This should go here, no it should go there. I'll stand over here. You come stand over here with me. Let's put the table there. No let's put the chair by the window. It's just a bunch of shifting, re-assembling.

SL: It feels very much like you're entering the space in as present a way you can, as opposed to coming in and showing the audience a form.

JR: That presence in front of people, especially when they're so close—which I tend to like—I think it's very particular. It's not that I'm not interested in virtuosity or form, but I think we talk a lot about letting the weight sink down so that other people can sink down and relax, because there's a lot of preparatory inhales in performance.

SL: Especially with dance!

JR: Yes, it's sort of embedded in my training. I've had to go back and be like "why does my body prepare itself like that?"

SL: Earlier you said that you're not really actively engaging questions of representation. But at a certain point, isn't representation always at play?

JR: Yeah, I mean, to hear it said back to me is like, oh, I'm a liar [*laughs*]. I think I'm interested in a contrarian behavior or analysis. I say constantly "this is, and this is not about us." So what that means for me is it has to be 100% about you, and then you have to have the ability to completely not perform yourself but know that you're only performing yourself. So that's really just a bit of a mindf*ck, it doesn't really make sense. And in the same way, I'm working not with images, but I am not shy about them occurring. They're the distraction. The table and the stool, they are the distraction. The felt monster is a distraction. Anything that you can see and really go "that's an image, that's a picture," it's there to hold the space for something more delicate or precarious happening in the corner. For example, lying naked on a table is not something I would really do in a performance without a lot of other distraction. Because I wouldn't take that to be so serious. So it's about these two distractions coming together—the nude on the table, and the felt monster being silly, the joker. For me, they're the same. Or they cancel each other, or they're repeating, it's a confusing thing. So, I am deeply interested in representation, but not in a way where I think it's the most important thing. I just think it does exist.

SL: Right. It's another problem that's being layered into the work. I think it's really interesting because I feel like when I look at your work, it screams queer, but at the same time, you're not directly engaged with image, or icons, in the way that queer art so often is. Do you think of your work as situated in the legacy of queer art?

JR: I don't think my work holds my identity, I think my body holds my identity. I mean, we are all people who are queer people in the piece, and yes that feels important, it's just moving toward what I'm interested in. The work is also all about a flirtation with all things. Hailing the audience, putting out the call, seeing if anyone answers. So for me, it feels like, well, I want to hail other queer people, so it makes sense that I would craft this with them. And [it is] absurd. I think I relate and identify more to absurdity than anything surrounding sexuality or identity politics of people coming together, it's more the absurd.

SL: It seems like a lot to negotiate as the creator and choreographer and writer, and also performing in the work.

JR: Yeah, and I'm interested in directing processes for sure. And I think my work is shifting and has been shifting over the past two years. I'm definitely attracted to working with people who are not exactly like me. The aesthetic of this work is not of my own—they're all collected from the people making the process and input and proposals. It's a series of proposals that I'm asking for from people, what would you want, what would you do, and then OK, as it

comes near what I want, it's gonna change a little bit, but let's see then what that monster looks like. But I get a lot of joy out of crafting a piece, and also having to step into another role, which is performing it. But I also have a lot of tricks in there about, like, going to the floor, turning around to let someone else explore the room without the eye of me watching them. There's a lot of kind of going invisible at certain points in this work, for all of us.

But I'm also making directly from the inside. There's no form that doesn't come from an internal felt space. So these choreographies are more about proposals rather than like, you kick twice and then I'll jump and make sure the angle of your leg is here. That's definitely faded from me over the years. That kind of precision I've reincorporated into a collection of proposals. Precise proposals rather than the precision of the technique, you know?

SL: Right, it's about what problems you're setting yourselves up to deal with in the moment of the performance.

JR: Yeah.

SL: What is your working definition of a problematic space?

JR: Oh, I think just adding more. A space that is flexible and could potentially house a lot of things is problematic. A space that keeps a sort of feminist swing to it, like—there could be more room. It doesn't mean it will be easy and it doesn't mean I want to do it, and I might not create more room, but there could be. It's this potential.

SL: Yeah, it feels more about your relationship to it, how you're seeing it, how you're finding possibility. I want to hear more about your process, too—you mentioned that your development for this started with philosophy, with reading.

JR: Yeah, in general I'm interested in reading queer theory and philosophy for sure. Existential questions are where it's at for me, phenomenology. This is the kind of reading and thinking process that I feel like I can engage with rather than making a piece about climate change or something. I wouldn't quite know how to go in that direction, but through this side door of the phenomenology of things disappearing, I feel like this is directly related to major problems in the world today. Like, bodies that are disappearing because people are killing them. Epidemically, which bodies are disappearing and why, and who are they disappearing from? Who's doing the killing, and who's being killed? Who's being persecuted and who's doing the persecution? So for me, the philosophical is not void of the political. But sometimes I wonder, how does dance speak politically? I think the body just does, uncontrollably. But the body is different than crafting a show. So yeah, I think these existential questions lead me to things that are really a problem in the news.

SL: When you're making a show, how do you move from reading theory to practice, to the body?

JR: For me it's not such a big movement away. Language for me is a very flexible form. I have a relationship to language that is poetic, and I have a relationship to the body that is poetic, and so writing doesn't feel so far off from tangentially letting the body move through space. But I guess in terms of the translation of reading and writing, I guess I enjoy having these dramaturgical pinnings but I also know that making work, it just starts going in its own direction. So I'm not looking to marry anything, I'm not looking to marry the research with the outcome, I'm just

researching and I know there will be some sort of outcome. And I think, based on that understanding, they will work together.

SL: What's next for you?

JR: I've been working on a sister project for this. Using the research for this, I'm making a new work that will premiere at The Kitchen, March 1-4. It's a collaboration with Geo Wyeth, who's a musician-performer-artist. And we are very different.

SL: How so?

JR: I'll let you see the show!

***Jen Rosenblit** has been making performance in New York City since 2005. Works include *Swivel Spot* (2017), *Everything Fits in the Room*, a collaboration with Simone Aughterlony (2017), *Clap Hands* (2016), a *Natural dance* (2014), *Pastor Pasture*, in collaboration with composer Jules Gimbrone (2013), *In Mouth* (2012), and *When Them* (2010). Rosenblit is a 2015-16 Movement Research Artist-in-Residence, a 2014-2015 LMCC Workspace artist, a recipient of a 2014 New York Dance and Performance "Bessie" Award for Emerging Choreographer for a *Natural dance*, an inaugural recipient of THE AWARD, a 2013 Fellow at Insel Hombroich (Nuese, Germany), a recipient of the 2012 Grant to Artists from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, and a 2009 Fresh Tracks artist (Dance Theater Workshop). Rosenblit was included in MoMA PSI's quintennial Greater New York exhibition in 2015, and has received support for her work from The Jerome Foundation, The MAP Fund, and *Women and Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, and through commissions from The Kitchen, *The Invisible Dog*, Atlanta Contemporary, New York Live Arts, *Danspace Project*, and *Issue Project Room*. Rosenblit has also collaborated and performed with artists including Simone Aughterlony, Young Jean Lee, Ryan McNamara, Yvonne Meier, Sasa Asentic, Anne Imhof, Miguel Gutierrez, A.K. Burns, and Kerry Downey and Joanna Seitz. Recent works focus on an improvisational approach to choreographic thought, locating ways of being together amidst impossible spaces. Rosenblit currently works between NYC and Berlin.*

Selected Artists Exploring The Field Of Contemporary Choreography:

Artist	Location	Website
Alex Rodabaugh	NYC	http://www.amerishowz.info/
Annie-B Parson & Paul Lazar/ Big Dance Theater	NYC	http://www.bigdancetheater.org/
Antony Hamilton	Australia	http://antonyhamiltonprojects.com/
Beth Gill	NYC	http://www.mancc.org/artists/beth-gill/
Boris Charmatz	Paris	http://www.borischarmatz.org/en
Dan Safer/Witness Relocation	NYC	http://www.witnessrelocation.org
Dana Michel	Montreal	https://vimeo.com/danamichel
David Neumann/ Advanced Beginner Group	NYC	http://www.advancedbeginnergrouop.org/
DD Dorvillier/ human future dance corps	Paris	http://www.humanfuturedancecorps.org/
Faye Driscoll	NYC	http://fayedriscoll.com/
Heather Kravas	Seattle	http://www.foundationforcontemporaryarts.org/recipients/heather-kravas
Ishmael Houston-Jones	NYC	http://ddpaa.org/artist/ishmael-houston-jones
Jack Ferver	NYC	http://www.jackferver.org/
Jen Rosenblit	NYC/Berlin	http://jenrosenblit.net/
Jennifer Monson	NYC/Illinois	http://www.ilandart.org/
Jeremy Wade	Berlin	http://www.jeremywade.de/
Jerome Bel	Paris	http://www.jeromebel.fr/
Jillian Peña	NYC	http://jillianpena.com/
John Jasperse	NYC	http://johnjasperse.org/
Jonathan Burrows	UK	http://www.jonathanburrows.info/
Karol Tyminski	Berlin/Warsaw	http://americanrealness.com/portfolio-type/karol-tyminski
Katy Pyle/Ballez	NYC	http://www.ballez.org/
Kyle Abraham/ Abraham.In.Motion	NYC	http://www.abrahaminmotion.org/
Larissa Velez-Jackson	NYC	http://larissavelez.com/
Ligia Lewis	Berlin	http://ligialewis.com/
Luciana Achugar	NYC	http://www.lachugar.org/
Meg Stuart/Damaged Goods	Berlin/Brussels	http://www.damagedgoods.be/
Michelle Ellsworth	Boulder	http://www.michelleellsworth.com/
Miguel Gutierrez	NYC	http://www.miguelgutierrez.org/
Ni'Ja Whitson	NYC	https://vimeo.com/nijawhitson
niv Acosta	NYC	http://www.nivacosta.com/

The Contemporary Performance Think Tank: Currents 2017

Nora Chipaumire	NYC	http://chipaumire.tumblr.com/
Okwui Okpokwasili	NYC	http://mance.org/artists/okwui-okpokwasili/
Pavel Zustiak/Palissimo	NYC	http://www.palissimo.org/
Ralph Lemon	NYC	http://mance.org/artists/ralph-lemon
Sarah Michelson	NYC	http://ddpaa.org/artist/sarah-michelson/
Simone Aughterlony	Berlin	http://www.aughterlony.com/
Tere O'Connor	NYC	http://tereconnordance.org/
Trajal Harrell	NYC	http://betatrajal.org/home.html
Will Rawls	NYC	https://willrawls.com/

Mixed Reality Performance¹

by Rachel Karp

“mixed reality performances deliberately adopt hybrid forms that combine the real and virtual in multiple ways and through this, encourage multiple and shifting viewpoints”

- Performing Mixed Reality, *Steve Benford and Gabriella Giannachi*²

As technology continues to invade and evolve our lives, so too does it continue to invade and evolve our theater. While seeing technology on stage is nothing new, more and more theater-makers are investigating entirely new forms of performance that completely revolve around high-tech modes and devices. The traditional Western separation of audience and actor is being usurped by performance pieces that put art literally into audiences' hands through the likes of apps, iPhones and iPads, webpages, and VR sets.

Blast Theory has been using interactive media to create groundbreaking theatrical experiences that explore “the social and political aspects of technology” for over 20 years.³ One of its current creations, *Karen* (2015), is entirely confined to an app—part of an interactive performative field known as app-drama.⁴ The app consists of a life coach, Karen, who asks a series of questions taken from psychological profiling but embedded into a less sinister-seeming context.⁵ At least at first. The experience is episodic, consisting of short interactions (usually 3-5 minutes in length)⁶ in which Karen asks a few questions, the “player” (as Blast Theory calls the solo audience member) provides answers, and the app then directs the player to return a number of hours later.⁷ The experience is immediately intimate, from limitations of the system—the sound only functions when headphones are plugged in—to the content of the questions—“Do you ever lie awake thinking about someone you shouldn't?”⁸—to the way, if notifications are turned on, Karen frequently interrupts a player's life, as often to discuss her own well-being as the player's. After a few of these interactions, it becomes clear that Karen doesn't have many boundaries, and things go far beyond what would be expected between a life coach and her client.⁹

The project was developed with National Theatre Wales starting in 2013, with Blast Theory wanting to make an intimate smartphone experience in which each audience member interacted directly with the work's protagonist. This led to an investigation into big data and how governments and large companies collect data on users, usually without consent, and how they rely on various psychologist-developed techniques to measure personalities through the data they collect. Blast Theory makes these ideas explicit at the end of the experience, when each player is offered a personalized data report that details how the player behaved and how decisions affected Karen. Players can also compare their reports to other players'.¹⁰

As Blast Theory explains, “We feel it's our job as artists to pose questions about this new world where technology is ever more personalised and intrusive. We love having our services tailored to us and we're scared of the price we're paying for that personalisation.”¹¹ A [New York Times profile](#) of the app echoed this sentiment, describing it as “deliberately unsettling [...] an intriguing tool for exploring the knotty relationship between digital personalization and human solipsism [...] that asks,] Where do we draw the line between our devices and ourselves?”¹²

Another company that has experimented with the line between device and self is **Rimini Protokoll**, led by Helgard Kim Haug, Stefan Kaegi, and Daniel Wetzl. The trio has been making theater together since the year 2000. They describe the focus of their work as “the continuous development of the tools of the theater to allow for unusual perspectives on our reality.”¹³

For Rimini Protokoll, the tools of the theater often involve use of the latest technologies. To this end, they, too, have experimented with [app-drama](#).¹⁴ They have also relied on other smartphone-style technology within larger theatrical works. A prime example is [Situation Rooms](#) (2013), which has toured extensively over the past four years. A

“multiplayer video piece,” *Situation Rooms* gives audience members an intimate view of twenty lives that have been shaped by the arms trade. These lives include a hacker, child soldier, arms manufacturer, lawyer, sniper, peace activist, gunship pilot, refugee, member of parliament, surgeon, and war photographer in countries including Syria, Switzerland, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Dubai, Mexico, Gaza, Pakistan, and Abu Dhabi. Throughout the experience, audience members carry iPads and wear headphones that, via commands, guide them on individual paths through a film set that recreates the world of weapons.¹⁵ Audience members assume ten different identities, for about 7 minutes each.¹⁶ In these identities, they often interact with other audience members who assume other arms-related identities, as the iPads show video of the real people whose stories are being told and were filmed telling their stories on the same set.¹⁷

As Rimini Protokoll describes on its website, “The audience does not sit opposite the piece to watch and judge it from the outside; instead, the spectators ensnare themselves in a network of incidents, slipping into the perspectives of the protagonists, whose traces are followed by other spectators.”¹⁸ When the show toured to Australia’s Perth Festival in 2014, a [review in *The Guardian*](#) called it a “remarkable experience” and summarized it as follows: “it’s theatre with the audience as actors; journalism with the consumer interacting directly with the story; a video game where the screen bleeds into real and constructed worlds.”¹⁹

Mixing video game and performance is a major trend within the mixed reality world. [Hwa Young Jung](#), a multidisciplinary artist who often combines artwork with science through what she calls “interactive non-fiction,” also works at the intersection of game and performance.²⁰ Her recent work [Beba me - Drink Me](#) (2016) is a web-based game created with Sabrina Lopez (writer), [Saulo Jacques](#) (biologist), and Aline Furtado (architect). They made *Beba me* in Brazil during the 2016 Interactivos?, “a collaborative laboratory for developing projects.”²¹ The focus of Interactivos? 16 was “water and autonomy,” with an explicit goal of encouraging “cross-disciplinary action between popular, scientific, technical and artistic knowledge to create solutions to water issues through a citizen perspective.”²²

Beba me, available to be played in Portuguese and English, explores how humans can affect the water system in Serrinha, a city in Eastern Brazil.²³ It has both a journalistic and fantastical feel, beginning with a small fish telling the player not to drink the water from the Rio Alambari. If they decide to heed the fish’s warning and talk to it rather than risk a drink (which is the better move, because drinking leads—in good dark humor—to immediate death), players learn the water is polluted and are given two options: go west or go east to try to find clean water. While navigating geographically, meeting other talking animals and some humans, too, players learn about different ways people and animals thrive and struggle in Serrinha and specific technologies they rely on to try to get clean water. In addition to choosing where to go and what to talk to, players can click certain highlighted words to learn even more about practices specific to the region. Death does creep throughout the game, but a back button allows players to correct their wrong moves in the essential search to quench thirst.²⁴

[Victor Morales](#) experiments with gaming, technology, and intimate performative experiences in a very different mode. Victor is a director, performer, and designer who works in video animation, game design, text, sound, puppetry, and movement. For just under fifteen years, he has been “obsessed with the art of video game modifications and has implemented different game engines into most of the works he has participated in or created.”²⁵

Morales’ latest work, *Skiff/Faustroll* (2017), recently played at [3LD](#), a preeminent venue for experimental, “technology-driven” theater, where Morales is an Associate Artist and the Digital Technical Director.²⁶ *Skiff/Faustroll*, inspired by the Alfred Jarry text “Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll,” relies on a number of technologies to create an augmented reality journey that explores fears of global warming, inequality, and technology. Created by a video game engine, the piece also makes use of projection mapping, real-time mocap, and

physical computing, and the set relies on arduinos, servos, and stepper motors to create an environment that acts like a pop-up book.²⁷

AR is increasingly being incorporated into performance, as exemplified by *Skiff/Faustroll* and the previously described *Situation Rooms*, which Rimini Protokoll calls “augmented reality as three-dimensional as only theatre can be.”²⁸ Another company experimenting with AR is [The Builders Association](#).

Since 1994, The Builders Association has been making work that mixes performance and media, taking inspiration from contemporary life.²⁹ Their [Elements of Oz](#) (2015), which also played recently at 3LD, riffs on *The Wizard of Oz* and its creation. Builders describes the work as follows: “Through the use of YouTube tributes, a re-contextualization of the film, and the incorporation of new technologies, ELEMENTS OF OZ celebrates and deconstructs this incredibly rich cultural artifact.”³⁰ What are these new technologies? Before arriving at the venue, audience members receive an email in which they are instructed to download an [app](#) called, also, “Elements of Oz.” Upon arrival, various members of the staff and production team make sure that audience members have followed instructions, and they also offer device charging for those who might need some extra power to use the app throughout the performance. The app is to remain open for the performance’s 90 minutes, and at times it indicates to hold the device up to the stage. When this is done, digital imagery overlays what is seen with the human eye. Tornados, poppy fields, and flying monkeys all jump up on the screen, and if viewers move the screen, the augmentation tracks along.³¹ While viewers remain seated a la the more traditional separation of audience and actor, the AR app puts the performance experience much more directly into the audience’s hands. As the [Time Out New York review](#) summarized, *Elements of Oz*, “taps into a modern feeling of technological wonder while demystifying an earlier one.”³²

In addition to AR, VR is also invading the theater world. [CREW](#) is an experimental company that describes its work as “Scientific Fiction,” aiming to give audiences “a glimpse of the future by questioning new digital possibilities and putting them to use in an alternative way.”³³ To this end, they have been mixing realities for years. Their 2008 work [W \(Double U\)](#) is an immersive work for two participants that lets one see through the others’ eyes. Each participant wears a helmet that uses a “head-swap” technology developed by CREW with [EDM](#), the Expertise Centre for Digital Media at the Hasselt University.³⁴ With this technology, goggles fully cover a participant’s own vision, a camera above the goggles feeds video of what is seen to the inside of the other participant’s goggles, and sensors track head movements to enable the image to adapt. The resulting effect creates “an illusion that one is not looking at projected images but actually is present in that [other] world.”³⁵ Over thirty minutes,³⁶ the pair works together so that each of them may make their way through a public space.³⁷ The experience opens up the possibility for empathy,³⁸ which has become something of a buzzword for VR.³⁹

CREW’s [C.A.P.E. Drop Dog](#) (2016) is a more recent project in “virtuality performance.”⁴⁰ C.A.P.E. stands for Cave Automatic Personal Environment, CREW’s technology through which, they say, “we can shift your presence from one place to another in no time.”⁴¹ First released in 2010, but clearly building off the technology used in *W (Double U)*, C.A.P.E. works as follows:

A visitor is equipped with video-goggles, headphones and a portable computer. This 'immersive device' allows him to enter a different reality. Pre-recorded or real-time 360° film images in the video-goggles and omni-directional sound puts him literally in the middle of the image. He can look around into this filmed environment at free will. Moreover, he can move around and walk inside the virtual space. He is, so to speak, teleported from one place to another or from one time to another.

The combination of looking, hearing, moving (and sometimes even touching) creates this bewildering illusion. An important mechanism here is the so-called sensorial deprivation: the lack of observation of one's own body, in favor of a newly represented body, intensifies the experience.⁴²

In *C.A.P.E. Drop_Dog*, currently on tour, the virtual space is inspired by two short stories by acclaimed Dutch

writer Tonnu Oosterhoff.⁴³ Upending the typical experience of sitting down to read a story and seeing it only in one's imagination, *C.A.P.E. Drop_Dog* enables participants to experience the stories on their feet.⁴⁴ Participants are guided through the stories with aural and tactile input. Each story is eight minutes long, during which time the text serves as floating thoughts that merge with images to construct an immersive narrative through juxtaposition.⁴⁵

Yehuda Duenyas is another theater artist working in VR. Duenyas, formerly a member of company National Theater of the United States of America (NTUSA), is now an experience designer who makes immersive encounters that draw on a background in theater, gaming, interactive technology, physical computing, ride design, and reality TV.⁴⁶

His most recent VR creation, *CVRTAIN*, premiered at PS 122's COIL 2017. In it, a person puts on headphones and a VR headset and holds sensors equipped for haptic feedback. The image that appears is that of a red curtain, which parts to reveal an ornate theater filled with an adoring audience waiting to see what the person will do. For five to ten minutes, the person can explore a range of motions to see how the virtual audience will respond, subverting the typical audience-performer relationship.⁴⁷ To add another layer of complexity, those waiting for their turn can watch those experiencing it, adding a real audience to the virtual one.

Other VR experiences by Duenyas includes *Airflow*, in which a rider travels over a mountain range as if by jetpack,⁴⁸ and *The Ascent*, "the first mind-controlled ride/game," in which an individual can levitate more than 30 feet by the power of their focus.⁴⁹ (For more on Yehuda, see interview below.)

All of these hybrid theater works allow for a new kind of personalized experience, with a level of intimacy that is much harder (and some may say impossible) to achieve by having audience members sit in seats and watch a work unfold before them. As our technology has become more and more individualized, and as we treat it with more comfort and give it more access to all aspects of our lives, these theater-makers—and many more like them—have tried to create art that is just as personal and present. Our technology won't be going away anytime soon; the continued challenge to make theater more reflective of our technology-obsessed world is unlikely to, either.

Notes

1. Steve Benford and Gabriella Giannachi, *Performing Mixed Reality* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011).
2. Ibid., 4.
3. "Our History & Approach," *Blast Theory*, accessed May 29, 2017, <http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/our-history-approach>.
4. Erin B. Mee, "The Audience is the Message: Blast Theory's App-Drama *Karen*," *TDR: The Drama Review*, 60 no. 3 (Fall 2016) : 165-171.
5. "Karen," *Blast Theory*, accessed May 29, 2017, <http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/karen>.
6. Mee, "The Audience is the Message," 168.
7. "Karen," *Blast Theory*.
8. Blast Theory, *Karen*, Phone Application, 2015, <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/karen-by-blast-theory/id945629374?mt=8>.
9. "Karen," *Blast Theory*.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Frank Rose, "Karen, an App That Knows You All Too Well," *New York Times*, April 2, 2015, <http://www.nyti.ms/2IBiabW>.
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In Conversation with Yehuda Duenyas

Interviewed by Rachel Karp

Rachel Karp: I thought we could start with you talking about your background and the many different things you've done, and how you got to do the more immersive experience design that you're focused on now.

Yehuda Duenyas: How far back do you want to go?

RK: I'd love to go back to NTUSA days. Did you have a more theater-oriented background?

YD: I've always been involved in theater in some way, for a long time. I went to Skidmore College and studied theater and directing there. And during that time I lived in Prague with a performance company that we started out of school. This was, 90s, mid-90s—so we were really influenced by Reza Abdoh and Robert Wilson—that kind of American avant-garde. Wooster Group and Richard Foreman.

Then I moved to New York and tried to be an actor. I auditioned for a Richard Foreman play and got into a Richard Foreman play and toured with him, with *Pearls for Pigs* for maybe nine months or a year. And then I was in a Rich Maxwell show called *House*. We toured that for maybe two and a half, three years, on and off.

And then I was coming back from those experiences and I was looking for things that I wanted to perform in. I really wanted to come to the city and be in Dar a Luz, in Reza Abdoh's company. But he died before I graduated. [Reza Abdoh] was the most inspiring thing that had happened to me at the time, so I was really looking for that. Where is that most inspiring thing that I can be part of. So I decided to start directing my own stuff and I applied to the American Living Room Series at HERE and I made my own piece with Jesse Hawley and James Stanley and that's the core of what eventually became the NTUSA. The three of us worked together for maybe four years before NTUSA started. And I was the director. But I was also a performer and I missed performing and it was problematic with me just being a director and a writer. I like those early experiments that we did, but the voice was coming from one place, which was me, and it was a much more interesting collaboration when the voice started coming from everyone. So eventually James wrote a show that he wanted me and this guy Ryan to be in, so we just decided that we would all direct it together and all be in it and sort of do everything. And at the same time, in parallel to this, Dar a Luz became chashama.

They did this really cool show right after Reza died called *Junior Black's Office*. It all took place on a second-floor building and they got this huge transmitter and they pirated a radio station. And you came to the thing with radios, and you would tune into the radio station so everyone was holding radios, listening to it outside. And then watching all these scenes happening in the windows. It was beautiful.

So chashama was just starting. Anita [Durst] got a row of storefronts on 42nd Street, which is now the Bank of America building. And around the same time I became the technical director of those spaces and started cleaning them out. She would get them one by one but we cleaned them out and then we would repurpose them and make them artist studios or dance studios or theater spaces. Also when a space would open up I would sort of get first dibs on it.

Anita had just gotten the keys to the Henry Miller Theatre, which is where *Urinetown*—it's on 43rd Street. And it had been the Xenon night club through the 70s. It was built in 1922 or something like that. It was a Vaudeville house. And it hadn't been opened in 10 years. And she kind of threw me the keys and was like, Go to the Henry Miller Theatre and see what's in there that we can salvage. This was one of the most amazing theater moments of my life, prying open this door that hadn't been open in a long time. We salvaged a lot.

There was a lot of discovering all this territory that was in plain sight in New York—it was this real estate that you don't see from the outside but we had this really cool vision of it from the inside.

And I was really, kind of not demoralized but there was something about that, to do a show in New York you had to apply to like HERE or PS122 or Ontological. You would apply to these things and someone would tell you, you can or you can't do your art. And that always really bugged me. And I loved Anita's whole ethos which was: everyone can be an artist if they want to. They just need the space and a little bit of resources to carve out a space for themselves to do it.

In the Henry Miller Theatre, we started rehearsing in there because there was this really cool upstairs space behind the balcony. The show was that show that James wrote for me and Ryan for NTUSA—we started rehearsing it there and we were actually gonna do it there. But then *Urinetown* happens, and they gave the contract to *Urinetown* and then we were out of that place. And so Anita was like: we have this tiny little basement of this other space and you can use that space. And we were like, Oh man we're being relegated from the Henry Miller Theatre to the basement? So we were like, Alright, let's bring the Henry Miller here. So we built a scale model of the Henry Miller Theatre into the basement, and that was this show called *Episode 23*. And we charged people nickels and dimes to see it. And that was one of those beautiful moments. When we made that show we started the National Theater of the United States of America.

We toured a little bit. We did another show called *Placebo Sunrise* in a different storefront. And then we did *What's That on My Head!?!* in Dumbo, which was a ride.

And then space started drying up. And so we started trying to figure out what to do next and that's when we came up with *Chautauqua!* It was sort of an easy idea. We won the Spalding Gray Award through PS122, and with that money, and a couple other grants, we built *Chautauqua!*. We wanted to build a travelling show that would use local talent. We traveled with a small company, a small amount of set pieces, and we would use local people and fill out the program. And that was a super fun project. We got to meet so many amazing people all over the country, everywhere that we performed. It was really cool to be inside of these different communities and really kind of pull out all the diversity and find out what was happening in all these communities and incorporate them into our show.

And around that time, theater just became a rewardless experience for me. It was so much work and so little money. The incredible rewards that we had had in our late twenties and early thirties, building spaces all night and creating these really gorgeous, bespoke experiences for audiences to come in. We really looked at them as gifts, that your \$20 ticket price was nowhere near the cost of what it actually takes to make any of this stuff. So we really would try to go completely overboard and make the most amazing experience that we possibly could and not leave any detail unturned.

And then in 2008 the economy crashed and the election and it was just a crazy mess, and I started trying to figure out what to do next. My friend Jeff Stark—wonderful person and an amazing connector—he called me and he's like, Dude I'm in this grad program at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. They're paying me to be here and I can work on whatever I want. And I get access to their resources and technology. So, I applied and I went there for two years and that was a big life-changer for me as well. Moved out of New York, which was hard to break the New York seal, but then once I did it was the most rewarding, eye-opening thing.

I started making work there and really all I had to do was learn about new media techniques and electronic arts, interactive technology, and start applying these new media techniques to the work I already did. I was really thinking, what should I be getting into? I didn't know. So I just started taking engineering classes and video game

classes and sensor classes and the electronic art core curriculum that they had there. And I had this moment. I made a video game that you experience while you're hanging in a harness, and you're wearing this pre-virtual reality headset, and you flip, do somersaults, and that's how you fly through this environment. And so we were asked by Johannes [Goebel], who is the artistic director of EMPAC. EMPAC is this incredible facility, and what was so unique about it was their attitude toward networking. It's not a very new concept now but it was to me in 2009 when I got there—oh you can use the light board to control sound in a different theater. The whole place was networked in a way that you can start to think about how you control things and how they respond to you and react to you and how you can also control elements in a completely different way than I'd ever thought of before.

So Johannes asked us if we could recreate this video game that we made but instead of have it be the digital content that's moving, that you're actually moving, because they had this new 4D rigging system they had just installed and no one had used it yet. And so I was like—yeah. One of my jobs in New York was as a stage rigger, so I really understood fly systems and just rigging in general. So we got to work with an automated rigging system, and we started getting user control to an automated rigging system. Whereas someone would be sitting behind the computer board and doing the cues of what the rigging would be, I was trying to get it so that you could control yourself flying around the room.

RK: Did that become *The Ascent*?

YD: That's what became *The Ascent*. We got an iPhone to control it so you're holding an iPhone. But it still feels like a video game—I just want to think it. So then we started researching brain interfaces, and hooked up a brain interface to the rigging system, and I had an undergrad student who was working as my assistant and so we strapped her in and we put the EEG headset on her and she closed her eyes and started levitating up to the ceiling. And it was a beautiful moment. It was a life-changing moment.

So that whole thing really sent me on this different trajectory. Also around that time, I had been trying to figure out what to do after school. I had started pre-interviewing for Disney Imagineering while I was at school. But then, RPI was trying to do a partnership with Disney Imagineering. So, completely unrelated they brought five Imagineers to Rensselaer, and they laid out 10 or 15 things around campus, and *The Ascent* was one of the things that they laid out for them to see. So they got to come and try it. And then they invited me to interview. So then I went to Burbank and eventually was able to work at Disney Imagineering for a year.

At the same time I was trying to build my own company based around *The Ascent*. We did *The Ascent* in Brooklyn in 2012 and are still trying to get that put up and run it like a ride somewhere. When we built that in 2011 and were trying to explain it to people, people were like: What? What are you talking about? What do you mean there's a sensor on you and what do you mean it reads your brainwaves and what do you mean it's a ride and what do you mean it's also a game? It was such a hybrid of so many different elements. It really wasn't until Fitbit came out that people started to be like, Oh, right. You wear something on your hand that you can attach to a computer.

RK: That seems so silly that Fitbit would have been what changed things for people.

YD: Yeah but really that was a huge turning point. Some game show friends came to see *The Ascent* and said, Let's make a game show out of this. So I went to LA and we wrote a mind-controlled game show. And we're pitching it around and everyone is like, What are you talking about? What do you mean? But there was a real turning point.

We did pitch it to the Mark Burnett Company. And one woman there, Wendy, took it to Mark, and Mark was like, This is the coolest thing I've ever seen. I need to meet this person immediately. So I took this whole demo to his house in Malibu and set him and his wife up and played mind-control games with them. And he basically bought the

concept and we signed with them to get it done. And we kept pitching it to production companies and to networks, and it wasn't until that moment when Fitbit came out and it was a thing that people were like, Oh right, because I wear my Fitbit. It was a real turning point culturally.

I actually find myself in that position fairly often where we're pushing new technologies and redefining what experience could be or what theater could be or what performance could be, and it's almost too early for people to want to understand what it is. You know, *Sleep No More* happened in 2009—it's when it really opened and kind of blew up. But for probably 14 years before that, GAil GATes started in Dumbo and they were kind of an immersive theater—it was called site-specific then, immersive wasn't really a word—but they were site-specific, making stuff out of their space in Dumbo. Our company was making things in alternative spaces in New York. We're certainly not the first people to be doing alternative things. Annie Hamburger and En Garde Arts and even Reza used cool, different types of spaces. But I feel like that, 15 years beforehand, started planting new cultural seeds for those things to really take root. Which doesn't take away—Arthur and Jonathan, and Punchdrunk, did an incredible thing building this nexus of really fun nightlife theatrical entertainment. But these things come and they build on top of each other.

So I find myself a lot in the early stages of that where no one understands it yet. But I'm like, This is gonna be a thing. When the first Oculus Rift came out and I got one and was taking it around to industry people. I'm like, This is gonna be entertainment. And they're like, Uh, ok it's cool but I don't—it's still really early for that type of thing.

RK: So was *CVRTAIN* a hard sell?

YD: No. *CVRTAIN* came about because PS122 has always had a really interesting digital angle on the work that they do, and even have a program called PS122 Digital. So they did a piece with Ryan Holsopple a couple years ago [*dataPurge*]*—*there was online participation, stuff like that. They had applied for a grant from the Doris Duke Foundation, which was building demand in the arts, and for them it was among millennials. So they asked me to be the artist attached to that grant. They asked me to make the first work and then this year and next year I'll be curating two other artists and working with them and applying tools of new media. And by new media I mean just the way that people communicate now: social tools, even just something as simple as using the internet to enable your performance in some way and reach more people.

I'll back up a little bit, because there are a few different trajectories happening at the same time in here. In 2014, one of my old high school friends who has been in [advertising]*—*I've gone in and consulted with people and given ideas. The word “experiential” started creeping into the advertising space. And again I started seeing “experiential” stuff in the 90s. There was kind of a slow build in terms of this idea of experiential stuff in the ad space.

I think it was in 2014, I was contacted to create this piece for Audi. We made this six-hour live stream in a hangar in the Santa Monica airport, where artists would come in, make work, and people would tweet at them and that would modify their work in some way. It wasn't the most solid concept but it was interesting. It was people on Twitter communicating with the artists, and shaping the work, and watching it all kind of in a feedback loop, a livestream happening in real time, with a Twitter feed the whole time. It was the first time that had been done, particularly in that advertising space. People had certainly, especially at RPI, used Twitter to do all sorts of controlling stuff.

I'm really interested in that type of thing. The way we communicate now is so radically different than it was ten years ago. Less. In order to reach the amount of people that you should be reaching as an artist, I felt like, through this PS122 grant, that that's what I wanted to leverage.

And after we made “Love Has No Labels,” which reached, first day, 50 million people. That was amazing to watch.

It spread like wildfire on the internet. So seeing that you could make something that's a fairly simple idea, and execute it, and, with the power that basically you have in your pocket, with your phone, you can reach the world.

Another reason I felt like I wanted to leave theater in New York was that it's such a small community. It's like 5,000 people that are all just speaking to each other, and once I left New York, oh my god. There are so many ecosystems of thought and people doing things and social activations and pockets of interest. It's such a big world in so many ways, as small as it feels, it's very big, too. I felt like the artists in New York, and how hard you work on a show, for years, a year and a half on a show that's gonna perform for a week.

RK: Hopefully.

YD: Right. And you put your whole soul and all your money and all of your time into this thing that is so meaningful to you and it's only seen by a house with 60 people in it, six times. So 400 people are gonna see your show. Given how we can now communicate in the world, that seemed really, very. Theater has always been accused of being a very slow-moving art form because it is live and it's all happening in real time in a way. So the way that the art form communicates, the way that it mutates happens much more slowly because it has to transpire in real time. You have to go to a show, you have to see it, an artist has to work on a show for another 6-8 months, or a year, and then you see that show, and you get little pieces and you see echoes of people's work in other things. This sort of language evolves. But because the community is so insular in a way it really only goes so far.

There are so many ways to communicate and there are so many people to communicate with and there are so many things to say and that people want to hear, and ways to communicate and connect with people. So that's what I really wanted to bring to the PS122 thing.

So *CVRTAIN* was an idea. And also to make a VR piece; it was my second VR piece. The first one is a flying experience [*Airflow*].

RK: This is a negative way of putting it, but do you not have faith in more traditional theater?

YD: What I have faith in is people. The artists. What I'm worried about is: the barrier to entry, the outreach, the lack of people wanting to use new technology. There's something that feels stuck or old about it to me. The only reason why that bothers me is that people are not gonna see your work and they should see your work. I feel like the whole world should be able to see a Radiohole show or a Big Art Group show or your show. Why not? There's no reason why not. And the tools are there, it's so easy to do now. The tools exist. The tools exist that people in other countries can even participate in your show. They can be in your show, from another part of the world. It requires a different type of thinking.

When we were at the Doris Duke, we went to a convening for them. I was kind of silent the whole time until technology came up and someone was like, I don't believe in this social media thing. And I was like, you don't have to believe in it, but you can't ignore it, because it exists. And if you wanna not believe in it then make a point of having people take off their shoes and drop their phone into a bag before they get there. Make it a thing, instead of just not liking it and being blind to it and not seeing that it's a really powerful feature, for better or for worse. I'm really agnostic about all technology. I think that it's not good or bad. I think that it's what we do with it and how we want to use it. I do think it's changed the way that we communicate, and that could be good or bad, but I feel like that's up to us, and what we're gonna do with it, and what we're gonna make with it.

So no I'm not unhelpful. Oh but, another thing people were talking about was, We just want a better lighting grid in our space. When I go to theater now and I sit down in one chair and look in one direction the whole time, this seems

so outdated to me. I keep telling PS122, I think the best thing that happened to them was their building got into construction. I think that the decentralizing—it's hard for them, but it's just that one space. And then everyone's like, well what are we gonna do with that space, how are we gonna make that space different. And that was the only thing I ever asked myself, at PS122 or HERE or Ontological, because you'd seen so many things there, and all the spaces have such intense personalities already because they're not clean voids. There's a pillar in the middle of one of them, and a subway that rumbles underneath every seven minutes. I always used the personalities of all the spaces to inform the work that we were doing. I remember on the first show we did with the American Living Room Series in that space in HERE with that pillar in the middle of it, and I was like, we should go see a show there the week before, just to see the theater. And we got there, and holy fuck there's a big pillar in it. I'd never seen it before. And so that last week we changed the whole thing to be about the pillar, and that was great because it felt like we used the space and that was built.

RK: In *CVRTAIN* it felt like you really built a space. But *Airflow*, does that have the same sort of built space or is it all virtual?

YD: It's got an apparatus that you strap into and step into but, no, it's more about the virtual space. Virtual reality is really boring to watch people in it.

RK: Not in *CVRTAIN*, though.

YD: Right, exactly, but in general a lot of the VR stuff that you see is just someone with a headset on waving their arms around. I find those behaviors actually hysterically funny. Because people are behaving in a way that is completely divorced from our reality. And when you start to look at it as, they're in a different reality, in a virtual reality, then for me—if you can tap into that philosophical feeling, that's when it becomes really interesting. Because someone is existing on one plane of our reality but they're experiencing something completely different so their behavior does not match with what we expect to see in our normal everyday life. So I wanted to highlight that in *CVRTAIN*. And so that's why you're on stage—you're on double stage. You're on stage in real life and then you're on stage in virtual reality.

RK: When I went to *CVRTAIN*, I went the earliest possible slot in the day, so—

YD: So there was no one else there—

RK: I didn't know that was an element, and so I did the experience but then I watched my friend do it and then other people do it and it just blew things open.

YD: It was kind of joyous.

RK: Yeah.

YD: I love being in there and watching everyone doing it. And other people standing around laughing. I just thought it was a joyous, fun experience.

RK: And it was amazing to see how people took the challenge on, because some were really comfortable with it and some, like me, were somewhat less so.

YD: Right.

RK: And this dual audience was just fascinating.

YD: And that's something I've always been interested in, messing with the audience-performer relationship. And so, one of the early pieces I did at chashama, they had a storefront window, and so I built a theater in the window and then brought the audience in through the back way. They didn't exactly know where they were going. And then you go sit in the window and the curtain is closed, and then as the curtain opens you realize that you're actually on the street, looking out of a window, and then everyone on the street stops and looks at you, so there are two audiences suddenly happening at once. A lot of other things happened as well, but I've always been really interested in that. As an audience member, don't you just want to be completely transported, and taken out of your mind.

RK: Are there any new things you're working on now that you can talk about?

YD: I'm working on touring *CVRTAIN* right now and setting up that infrastructure. We'll be at the Virtual Reality Conference in LA in April and then in Chicago and then in Australia. And. After the election, I suddenly just felt different about everything.

RK: How so?

YD: After November, I'm working on my advertising stuff and that's bill-paying. They're great jobs because I get to use all the weird skills that I have and be creative. But they're not my artwork. So in terms of my own artwork, I have a few ideas right now but I'm really trying to figure out what the best thing to do is right now. "Love Has No Labels" was such a binding, connecting thing. I feel like it brought so many people together. It happened in a year when SCOTUS made marriage equality legal. It felt like it was part of a real zeitgeist of forward thinking. And since the election, I feel like a lot of the harsher elements of culture were always there, but now we're actually seeing them come out. So I'm really trying to think about what else we can do to unite people, to create more common ground between people.

[Edited for length and clarity.]

Select Artists and Festivals Exploring the Field of Mixed Reality Performance:

Company/Artist	Location	Website	Projects
Atom-r	US	atom-r.com	Kjell Theory
Adam Orth	US	threeonezero.com/games	ADRIFT
Amar C. Baksh	US	sharedstudios.com	Portals
AntiMatter Collective	US	antimattercollective.org	Old Bones
Augmented World Expo (AWE) USA Conference	US	augmentedworldexpo.com	--
BeAnother Lab	International	beanotherlab.org	The Machine to Be Another
Blast Theory	UK	blasttheory.co.uk	Karen
body>data>space	UK	bodydataspace.net	Molding the Signifier
The Builders Association	US	thebuildersassociation.org	Elements of Oz
Coney	UK	coneyhq.org/h	What's She Like
CREW	Belgium	crewonline.org	W (Double U), C.A.P.E. Drop_Dog (also: listing of productions crewonline.org/art/projects)
EK Theater	US	ektheater.com	Masque of the Red Dead Redemption
Ellen Pearlman	US/Hong Kong	signalculture.org/ellen-pearlman.html#.WJhzbYrLeQ	Noor: A Brain Opera
FMX Conference	Germany	fmx.de/home	--
Frederik Duerinck, Marleine van der Werf	Netherlands	famousdeaths.nl , marleinevdwerf.com	Be boy be girl
Future of Storytelling Festival	US	futureofstorytelling.org	--
GoodbyeWorld Games	US	goodbyeworld.squarespace.com	Close Your
Hannah Nicklin	UK	hannahnicklin.com	A Bonfire
Hwa Young Jung	UK	slyrabbit.net	Beba me
Ida C. Benedetto	US	uncommonplaces.com	Accused
Javier Molina	US	javiermolina.net/bio	To Be With Hamlet
Lawrence Lek	UK	lawrencelek.com	Notel
Physical Plant Theater	US	physicalplant.org	Dreams of Riley's Texts
Rimini Protokoll	Germany/ Switzerland	rimini-protokoll.de/website/en	Situation Rooms
Sashko Danylenko, Shawn Peters, Barry Cole	US	vimeo.com/sashkodanylenko	Traces
The Skin Deep	Netherlands	theskindeep.com	{THE AND} Live Experience
Taeyoon Choi	US	taeyoonchoi.com	Future Proof
3LD	US	3ldnyc.org	--
Victor Morales	US	vimeo.com/moralvictor/about	Skiff/Faustroll (see also: Quantum Joy)
Yehuda Duenyas	US	mssngpeces.com/directors/digital/yehuda-duenyas/about-yehuda/	CVRTAIN, Airflow, The Ascent

Performance Cabaret

by Sara Lyons

Performance Cabaret queers the classic cabaret refrain “Let me entertain you!” towards work that engages high and low culture together, uniting crisscrossing roots in musical cabaret, variety, comedy, drag, burlesque, and performance art. Performance cabaret is typically driven by an auteur who acts as writer/performer, utilizing formal training in one or more of the aforementioned traditions and a developed performance persona towards work that weaves contemporary social criticism, activism, and identity politics with ironic humor, drag ethos, and pop culture deconstructions. Typical to performance cabaret are identity politics as a point of entry for performance content, direct audience engagement, and bright and scrappy performance aesthetics. While performance cabaret emerged from underground late-night drag, music, and comedy scenes created by and for marginalized communities, it now interacts with conventional/mainstream theatrical crafts, showing increased embrace of theatre design and dramaturgy, with artists sometimes crossing over to work in mainstream theatre, performance, and film.

Performance cabaret artists include a sweeping list of actors, writers, comedians, musicians, and more, most with shared roots in queer performance and identity politics developed in the United States in the 1980s and 90s. The queer, embodied political ethos inherited from this period along with hybridization of artistic forms solidify performance cabaret as part of the legacy of American queer performance, embracing concepts of queer failure and utopia as closely intertwined foundations. As queer theorists such as Judith Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz have argued, failure in performance is inherently political as it “dismantles the logics of success” and is “a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline.”¹ In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz also discusses queer failure: “I mean to explicate the ways in which these artists thematize failure as being something like the *always already* status of queers and other minoritarian subjects in the dominant social order within which they toil. Queer failure, as I argue, is more nearly about escape and a certain kind of virtuosity.”² In this way, many performance cabaret artists harness lifetimes of marginalization towards artistic innovation, creating performance work that not only reflects their unique subjectivities as queer people, but also challenges and subverts the very systems of meaning which oppress them. As Muñoz reiterates: “Queer failure is often deemed or understood as failure because it rejects normative ideas of value.”³

“Trans-genre” artist [Justin Vivian Bond](#) (pronouns: “V”) rose to recognition performing as the septuagenarian retired lounge singer “Kiki” in their cabaret act “Kiki and Herb” with Kenny Mellman. Kiki and Herb grew to popularity in drag cabaret circuits in the 1990s first in San Francisco, and then downtown New York City. Their banter and songs meshed drag performance with musical cabaret and solo performance, and were by and for queers, punks, protestors, and other outsiders, often driven by their daily fights during the AIDS crisis and other political events of the time. Between 1993 and 2008, the duo developed a cult following and performed on Broadway and at Carnegie Hall. After their split in 2008, Mx. Bond harnessed the pair’s momentum to launch V’s own individual work in performance as well as film, songwriting, visual art, theatre, and curation.⁴

As an individual artist, Mx. Bond’s work is united by evolving critical relationships to politics and queer identity, as well as formal training in music, visual art, and writing, and V’s unapologetic individual presence in all work. In an interview in BOMB Magazine, Bond commented, “I’m always where I am when I’m doing cabaret shows,” noting the lack of fictitious character and location in V’s recent cabaret work.⁵ While performance cabaret artists tend to adopt a spectrum of hyperreal performance personae, this ever-present and transparent relationship to self, place, politic, and audiences is typical of the form.

The multifaceted artist [Taylor Mac](#) (pronouns: “judy”), equally well-known for performance, acting, music, playwriting, and performance art, also describes judy’s arrival to performance cabaret through a queer lens. After a childhood spent acting in plays in conservative suburban California, Mac frequently cites judy’s participation in the

AIDS Walk of 1986 as a critical turning point that continues to drive Judy's creative work. In an interview with Tim Sanford of Playwrights' Horizons, Mac said: "The first two things I do when I sit down to write a play are to ask myself what don't I want the audience to know about me and what I'm ignoring about myself and the world. Then I make the work about those things. And those techniques come as a direct result of being ashamed of my queerness and then discovering, in a moment of mass queer activism [1986 AIDS Walk], I didn't have to be."⁶ According to Mac, much of Judy's work revolves around a practice of queer heterogeneity, as both a political act and artistic practice: "I grew up in a place where you were supposed to be one thing and I was not one thing. I was many things, as was everyone around me. I was trying to express the multifaceted nature of things."⁷ And further, "there are people who have hardly any traditional craft at all, but they have a craft in who they are as human beings. That's what a lot of queer artists have. They spent so much of their life having to craft who they are because the world was telling them to be something they weren't."⁸

Mac discovered and honed in on this point of view early in Judy's career, performing numbers in drag clubs in New York City. "I started going to the clubs every single night. And the amazing thing about the clubs is you don't have to ask permission to be creative. [...] So I started doing that and pretty soon people would pay attention enough that I could do monologue-type numbers and what ended up happening is, I started bringing the theater into the clubs. Then once I started to kind of get a name for myself in that world the theaters started calling, and then I started bringing the clubs into the theater."⁹

Mac's journey from theater to queer clubs and back again invokes a critical engagement with standards of craft that is central to performance cabaret. Mac has said, "I believe wholeheartedly in craft. I believe craft is essentially a commitment to learning the past, living in the present, and dreaming the culture forward. But I believe establishing standards for craft will not create great art but will foster the patriarchy."¹⁰ In Mac's performance work, as well as that of Mx. Bond and other artists, this point of view can be seen in morphing formal practices, equal engagement with high and low culture (performance theory meets pop culture), and consciously selective reverence for theatrical conventions like Aristotelian narrative and the 'fourth wall'. Also on form, in the grand tradition of queer failure, Mac states: "I believe authentic failure on stage is one of the great art forms."¹¹

Playwright, musician, and performer [Daniel Alexander Jones](#) offers another interesting vantage point to examine performance cabaret. As a playwright and actor, Daniel Alexander Jones works alongside his alter ego Jomama Jones to write and record albums and create full-length live shows. For Jones, Jomama is a fictional tool to reach towards an audience in real time, and turn them towards black queer futures. "She's a construction with flashes of realness—in her soothing but powerful voice, we hear the girl she once was and the star she always longed to be."¹² Jones has imagined Jomama as a legendary soul singer and vision of black futurity, who supposedly left New York City in the 1980s "when the youth culture lost its heart"¹³ and rebuilt a new life in Switzerland. Jomama appears in full-length performances including *Duat*, *Black Light*, and *Radiate*, all authored by Jones with music director Bobby Halvorson. They combine original R&B songs with monologues, audience interaction, and brilliant sequin gowns. Jomama's shows exist somewhere between musical theater, solo performance, and live concept albums—un beholden to narrative, but richly woven together with a playwright's keen eye for dramaturgy and shape. Formally, they resemble cabaret as Jomama moves seamlessly between songs, monologues, and banter with the crowd. "This isn't a traditional musical, or even something like Hedwig and the Angry Inch, where the songs serve to tell the story. Instead, they merge with the narrative to underscore Jomama's basic message: Open your heart, love one another, and be positive to make changes."¹⁴

[Dynasty Handbag](#), aka Los Angeles-based performance artist Jibz Cameron, is another artist performing queer failure as what Muñoz calls "a sort of quixotic bag lady dressed in an outfit that appears to be something of an eighties fringe-laden aerobics costume."¹⁵ Dynasty's performances are off-center mash-ups of comedy, music, dance, and literature, employing broken pop images in deceptively scrappy and brilliantly disorienting shows. In

short and full-length performances, Dynasty often responds to or adapts works of classic literature, queering the very foundations of western thought by inserting her unhinged, almost alien persona. Her 2006 show *Hell in a Handbag* is based on Dante's *Inferno*, with each level of hell reimagined as an area of Dynasty's life that she finds intolerable, the classic story destroyed by the queer quotidian. In 2014's *Soggy Glasses: A Homo's Odyssey*, Dynasty Handbag embarks on a "hero's journey" (literally inside a giant hero sandwich), guiding the audience through a queer feminist analysis of her own body. Dynasty juggles multiple layers of social critique inside a performance that is almost slapstick in its strange and hysterical physicality and aesthetic. "*Soggy Glasses* satirizes both Homer's master narrative and the third-wave feminist suspicion that leads Cameron to critique it. The subtlety of this critique-on-critique is part of what makes her work so funny."¹⁶ Each performance by Dynasty Handbag is a page in the character's ongoing performance journal, employing not narrative but glimpses into moments of life and ways of thinking interpreted through warped costumes, songs, dances, and monologues.

Brooklyn-based performer [Erin Markey](#) is also known for her offbeat, wild comedic full-length shows, which combine a distinct brand of ironic humor, monologue, and music inside autobiographical work.

Notes

1. Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 88.
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3. Ibid.
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15. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 174
16. Iris Cushing, "A Performance Artist's Absurd Anatomical Odyssey," *Hyperallergic*, October 22, 2014, <https://hyperallergic.com/157304/a-performance-artists-absurd-anatomical-odyssey>.

In Conversation with Erin Markey

Interviewed by Sara Lyons

Recently named one of "Brooklyn's 50 Funniest People" (Brooklyn Magazine), Erin Markey makes music, shows and videos. She has shown work at Under the Radar Festival, A.R.T., New Museum, PS 122, New York City Comedy Festival, Ars Nova, Lincoln Center Director's Lab, UCBeast, Bard Spiegeltent, Tasmania's Festival of Voices, San Francisco Film Society and frequently at Joe's Pub at the Public Theater. She is the recipient of a Franklin Furnace Grant, a NYFA Cutting Edge Artist Award, an Eliot Norton Award for Outstanding Performance and is frequently recognized by Time Out New York as a Top Ten Cabaret Artist. She was listed in Artforum's Top Ten Best Music of 2016. Her musical, A Ride On The Irish Cream, co-composed with Emily Bate and Kenny Mellman, premiered at Abrons Arts Center in January 2016 and was co-presented by Abrons and American Realness Festival. Irish Cream just completed its first tour and recently released an album available [here](#). Her new show Erin Markey: Boner Killer premiered at Joe's Pub for Under The Radar Festival in January 2017 and began touring in June 2017. She is currently creating a new surf-rock driven show to premiere at the Bushwick Starr in 2018 called Little Surfer.

She recently co-composed music for and performed in Ghost Rings (New York Live Arts) as a company member of Obie award winning Half Straddle.

As an actress, she has appeared in several web series including Paula Pell's and James Anderson's Hudson Valley Ballers (Above Average), Monica (The Mini Series), Rods and Cones (Wifey TV), Your Main Thing, The 3 Bits, and the upcoming New York is Dead (Tribeca Film Festival). She was also featured in the LOGO television show Jeffery and Cole Casserole. Film credits include Valencia (The Movie/s), Junkie Doctors, The Joanne Holiday Show (NoBudget) and Fits and Starts (SXSW) directed by Laura Terruso.

Sara Lyons: Thank you for taking the time to talk. So, when I talk about performance cabaret, I mean work that builds off of cabaret traditions, but also engages a more rigorous theatrical dramaturgy, and moves fluidly—or is a hybrid—between comedy, musical theatre, theatre, music, performance art, burlesque, etc. I also think there is a common foundation among most performance cabaret artists in queer and feminist performance practices, inspired by queer and feminist performance art from the 80s and 90s, but that has moved away from that really direct activist work, or tell-all storytelling, into work that is more ironic, or fluid. Do you see yourself and your work as fitting this description? In your own work, have you thought about moving into a particular genre of work, or is it project-by-project?

Erin Markey: I definitely see myself in your description. I feel like I've played around with trying to allow different containers to inform the work that I do. Like, I was performing a lot more in stand-up comedy nights for the last year—more stand-up comedy than I had ever done before, for sure. And just doing the work that I do but in that world—that was exciting to me for a little bit, but it's not exciting to me right now because I don't love the premise of "this will be funny." I just like to surprise people with comedy. But, I think that it is sort of becoming process-by-process because as much as I love surprising the audience and working outside of their expectations, the key to that is surprising myself. And the best way to do that is to get to know other forms. So, right now I'm learning Ableton Live, an audio software program. So that's really intimidating and fun and a whole new world, and I'm sort of recontextualizing my work in more of a music/band sort of way—but not completely. It's just letting that be one of the many filters that can lay on top of what I'm doing. But I think really that style is the anchor, and I'm less concerned about obeying the rules of any one genre.

SL: Are there genres that you had really strong relationships with growing up? Like, were you a musical theatre kid, or a dancer?

EM: I watched a lot of TV. I had the TV guide memorized. I could tell you everything that was on at any given hour during the summer. I also loved specific musical theatre things. Our dad was obsessed with Phantom of the Opera, so that meant our entire family had to be obsessed with Phantom of the Opera. He was so himself about the way that he loved it—he would blast it out of the windows of our house on Halloween every year, and it would scare a lot of children away, which really delighted my dad, even though he's really sensitive, kind, like, child-loving dude. I guess I was more, like, watching other people have their relationships to things, and kind of living through them. I'm a younger sister to my very dominant older sister. And I just feel like that's how I learned to look at the world—through the eyes of somebody else.

SL: How many years between you and your sister?

EM: Three. I felt sort of competitive but like in a very sly way. Like, in stupid ways, where I could win, that weren't developmentally related. Like we would be eating pudding as a dessert, and I would be like: let's have a contest to see who can eat their pudding the fastest. And then I would deliberately lose, because in my mind, really the winner is whoever can be sitting there with pudding, when the other one doesn't have any pudding left.

SL: That's genius. You have to make your own rules up from the beginning, and you have to rely on surprise or some kind of self-invented intellectual superiority.

EM: And it's a power thing. I mean you can't dismantle the master's house using the master's tools.

SL: So clearly this is, like, the first instance of queer performance in your life. This is pure queer failure. From the very beginning you identified rules of the universe that are not inviting for you, and you figured out how to use what you want out of the them without being tied down to them.

EM: None of that being conscious, of course. These were just impulses that I was following through on. I mean, it's so first world—but that's what I am.

SL: So I'm wondering how discovering a queer identity as you got older played into all of that, and if you feel like that part of yourself has driven the stylistic choices that you've made in your work. Of course the content is what the content is, but I wonder how your formal choices might interact with your queer identity.

EM: Well, I feel like I have no choice but to always be commenting on the form that I perceive I'm working inside of in any given space. Like, if I'm doing a short piece in like a live setting, or even if I'm making a funny Instagram video. I kind of feel like I have no choice—it's my inner, I don't know, like integrity meter for how my taste will manifest itself. And I think that that's just what I've actually been doing for a long time. Making more full-lengths, big projects like *A Ride on the Irish Cream*, and revising *Boner Killer*, and then I have a piece coming up next year called *Little Surfer*—that stuff can exist in and outside of that realm a little bit, because I can workshop them in lots of different environments, and it's more building its own universe that isn't relative to anything else. But if you're on a bill for like a nightlife situation, you kind of have to situate yourself relative to everyone else, otherwise you're not being present, or live. That's how my performance chops were built, in nightlife. And that's how my performance chops were built growing up—basically performance on a shared sibling bill.

SL: In conventional theatre, so much of that early education is based on deep sincerity and earnestness, you know, psychology—all these things that our society takes as normalized universal truth about being a human being. So you started out in nightlife, but have also worked in TV, theater, comedy and all these other forms—is it hard for you to reach outside of the nightlife commentary norm? Is it protective?

EM: Yeah, I think it's a little protective. I don't think it's work for me—it's not any more work for me than it is to be commenting. If I can sort of give in to it—and maybe *that's* the work—there's an extreme ease, I can let go of my clenched stomach a little bit, you know what I mean?

SL: Yeah.

EM: So, no, now that I have the muscle to know that I can build my own worlds, and that there's a place of support, and resources, and a group of human beings who want to be there for it, watching it or being a part of it, then it's really great and awesome to let it flow naturally. The way that I figure out the smaller problems inside of those [full-length] projects is to force myself to go back into a nightlife, live audience place, and I can take that larger project universe/feeling with me, to make it less relative to everybody else on the bill. But you still keep a little bit of that, cause you know, it's cool to acknowledge that you're there with other people.

SL: Totally. And that feels really important for whatever this form is too. It's an interesting problem of a full-length show in this form—you're world-building inside the show but you're not putting up a fourth wall between yourself and the audience. I feel like for you in particular, you play tons of characters but you're always also Erin Markey, and the audience always understands you as Erin Markey. And you're able to hold all those things at the same time and have them all available to you.

EM: The intention is to demonstrate that a self can contain multiple voices and narratives at the same time. Not *can* contain, but *does*, and *should*, and it is not that big of a deal to hold them all to be true at once.

SL: It changes the demands on an audience, then, than in a traditional theatrical environment. It sounds like it can be undue work on an audience to not have it be super clear to them exactly who you are and exactly what they're supposed to believe in any moment, but actually the heart of the work is that fluidity, and creating a space where we can all sit around and hold lots of contradictions together and enjoy them and enjoy the virtuosity of being able to move between them.

EM: Yeah!

SL: So you said you were working on re-working *Boner Killer* right now?

EM: Yeah. We made it, in some ways it felt really fast. I was playing an instrument, which I never do, and learning it really fast. And so that felt like a huge risk, and it felt really scary to do that, and also, you know, this feels like an especially personal, like, raw story. It's definitely a show that I'm more scared of than any other show I've made. It's like pulling teeth to get me to touch the keyboard. Which is interesting to me, because what is it about show that's like that? What we came up with by January was about an hour-and-thirty-five-minute-long show. Which is too long in my book for a solo show—it's not actually a solo show, it's more like a two-person band-driven show where I'm doing all the talking. The goal with this time around is to convert some of the storytelling into the music, making it shorter, and making more music. But I'm terrified to work on it. So we'll see what happens.

SL: Can you talk a little more specifically about the content of the show?

EM: I think that the audience walks away from this show not sure what happened to Erin Markey and what Erin Markey is making up. The bulk of the narrative of the show, I am telling a story about having accidentally been a sex worker, but as a character: my Aunt Jan. So it's confusing in that way, because I know that the story is very true. It feels really scary to offer that to the audience because I've always felt like this particular story is not to be shared. The thing that feels secretive is the shame—the professional shame that I've attached to it because you don't want to

talk about having been a prostitute, because suddenly you're not marketable, you know what I mean? At least, that's how my brain has been working for the last however many years. And just being honest about it on stage—I had a similar experience finally talking explicitly about being a queer woman onstage. Kind of later than you would think—I would say in like 2012 or something like that. I mean I had a queer audience, and that was always just joyfully implicit, but it shifted when Whitney Houston died. And the show kind of is about that too on some level.

SL: From the outside, the way you approach intimacy in your shows is kind of detached into absurdity or irony or pop culture or the like. Does that become a way for you to process or handle the intimacy?

EM: It has been, but I feel like now my shows are moving more towards diving in way too deep into a really—for lack of better language—*witchy* self-seriousness about—about, like, how deep these colors run (*laughs*). That feels pretty all over the map, but one of the ways it feels is good.

SL: You mentioned earlier that you're letting each show dictate what form, or what sort of performance genres you bring into each show. Can you talk a little bit about how you build shows? Do you start as a writer typically, or do you start in other ways?

EM: I feel like I start from more of a body place, because it's performance, and because I'm the one performing. When I'm doing some kind of energy practice like yoga or qigong or meditation, that's when my mind clears, and goes to different realms where it can't like race or worry or overthink. Then, like there'll be some little nugget, some little golden nugget that makes me laugh—like, I was like coming out of a meditation and I decided to "namaste" out of it because I was like, it would be cool to say thank you in that way. I wanted to sort of make it my own, and what came out of my mouth was: "the kind and generous little girl in me sees the kind and generous little girl in you." And it was just like really funny and real and spooky at the same time. And I just kept doing it, and making some other people in my life start doing it, and then, you know, that becomes huge. Then my brain starts to like consciously and unconsciously orbit around whatever that is, or like different little pieces. It's like I have four or five like chunks of something, whether it be writing or body-driven or whatever, that I'm like into, and then the rule is how do I draw the lines between them for a show, because these are the things I'm thinking about now, and I trust that they're connected and that that's the show.

SL: Right, so sort of following the intuitive impulses and finding some constraints around them, but letting them be.

EM: Yeah.

SL: And your shows must change a lot audience to audience, too.

EM: Yeah, it depends. Like—I just did a stand up night at a museum in Massachusetts. I was very confused when I got there because I did not expect this—I thought it was going to be an intimate setting. It was a 1,000 person house. And a lot of—a lot of people who wouldn't normally be in my shows, who're a few generations older than me, sitting right in front. And I was having people get up and be very physical, forcing them to like do the splits and I was like—OK, this is only gonna last for so long with this crowd. And that is correct. It did only last for so long. So, yeah, when I go out of town, you never know who's gonna come because I'm not normally responsible for bringing that audience, you know. I don't have a following in any other city. So I'm really at the mercy of the venue, and I kind of love that because you know, it teaches me a lot about like how far I can and can't go with all different kinds of people.

SL: Is there anything else that you would like to say or share on the record before we close out?

EM: Been eating a lot of seaweed. It's really good for your kidney.

SL: Is that true?

EM: Yeah. I'm studying five element theory, this like ancient traditional Chinese medicine, and I highly recommend it. And that's ON THE RECORD.

SL: This has been great, thank you so much.

EM: Thank you, I'm excited to be a part of it.

Select Artists Exploring the Field of Performance Cabaret (American):

Artist	Website
Taylor Mac	http://www.taylormac.org
Erin Markey	http://www.erinmarkey.com
Becca Blackwell	http://www.beccablackwell.com
Adrienne Truscott	http://www.adriennetruscott.com
Daniel Alexander Jones (Jomama Jones)	http://www.danielalexanderjones.com
Dan Fishback	http://www.danfishback.com
Jibz Cameron (Dynasty Handbag)	http://www.dynastyhandbag.com
Narcissister	http://www.narcissister.com
Justin Vivian Bond	http://www.justinvivianbond.com
Nath Ann Carrera	http://helixqpn.org/post/65612332391/an-interview-with-nath-ann-carrera-by-katherine
Chris Tyler	http://www.out.com/entertainment/popnography/2014/04/19/chris-tyler-pop-culture-obsession-blowjobs-gaga-trl-drag-brooklyn
Bridget Everett	http://www.bridgeteverett.net
Molly Pope	www.mollypope.com
Cole Escola	http://www.coleescola.com
Susana Cook	http://www.susanacook.com
Justin Sayre	http://www.themeetingshow.com
Salty Brine	http://www.thesaltiestbrine.com
Ikechukwu Ufomado	http://www.ikehimsself.com
Neal Medlyn	http://nealmedlyn.com

Immersive Theatre

by Stephen M. Eckert

In an era of binge-watching, live-tweeting, and the Oculus Rift, how can theatre compete as all-consuming entertainment? Perhaps it's our desire to be more than spectators—to be sucked headlong into alternative worlds—that has fueled the recent boom in immersive theatre, which trades the fourth wall for winding hallways and dance floors, in the hope of giving audiences not a show but an 'experience.'

- Michael Schulman, *The New Yorker*¹

Immersive theatre is a performance form emphasizing the importance of space and design; curating tangible, sensual environments; and focusing on personal, individual audience experience.² The form has emerged over the past two decades as a major movement in performance and finds itself today within a mainstream moment. As a form which subverts much of the established relationships of conventional theatre, its success can be seen as reflecting a larger need in today's audiences. With much of contemporary life taking place in ungrounded, digital spaces audiences long to exist as physical bodies in actual locations; presented with a culture that is two dimensional, today's audiences seek expansive, visceral stimuli; within a society lacking privacy, audiences find the prospect of an intimate, personal experience alluring.³

When an audience goes into a regular theatre, they know what they're getting – seats, a programme, ice cream, a stage, two halves – and as a result they slump, switching off three quarters of their brains. I wanted to create productions where the audience is physically present, so that they are driven by a base, gut feeling and making instinctive decisions. That sort of show leaves a far larger imprint on you than just watching something.

- Felix Barrett, *Punchdrunk*⁴

Contemporary practices of immersive theatre can be seen as a fusion of installation art and the physical and visual theatres of the 20th century. Elements of modernist practices are reflected in contemporary work including considerations of scenographic design, the actor-audience relationship, and highly physical performance styles.⁵ The happenings and environmental theatre of the 1960s with their open-ended composition, focus on immediacy, and acknowledgment of the importance of duration also lend elements to the immersive form today⁶ with installation and live art practices from the 1960s onward inspiring much of the aesthetic of intimacy and participatory focus seen in contemporary immersive work by placing the viewer within the work itself, subverting critical distance.⁷

Companies making immersive theatre today are greatly concerned with physical space, with site-specific productions in warehouses, hospitals, or nightclubs common, and great attention paid to tangible details of the environment. Productions often draw inspiration from the location, or choose the venue based on the subject of the work, but the transformation of a non-theater into an immersive space is widely practiced.⁸ This connection between the work and the location, embedding the dramaturgy of the space within the production, is in many companies an essential aspect of their practice.

Space—whether a suspended pause, a blank area, an empty room or a limitless cosmos—performs... it is the fundamental immaterial-material utilized by designers creating sites for theatrical performance. Space is the stuff of architects (who construct it) and scenographers (who abstract it); experienced by inhabitants (immersed within it).

- Dorita Hannah, *Performance Perspectives: A Critical Introduction*⁹

Immersive theatre provides sensual experiences with audiences encouraged not only to hear and see a production, but to touch, taste, and smell it as well. Scenic designs fully consume audience members with each aspect researched

and specifically designed and enacted.^{10,11} Food and drink are often featured as a part of the experience and productions may contain opportunities to physically interact with scenic elements.^{12,13} Sound in immersive practice similarly focuses on grounding and tangibility, seeking to place an audience within the piece, to put them inside a new world.¹⁴ These elements are considered as thoroughly as the space of the performance and all are similarly dramaturgically supportive of the themes of the work.

“Some of the things Punchdrunk crew and collaborators create still amaze me. For Sleep No More we built a town called Gallow Green, and one of our designers mocked up this old railway timetable. It is accurate and functioning, but he adapted it to include Gallow Green among the real stations. It is emblematic of the Punchdrunk experience: 97 per cent meticulously real, but with minuscule, crucial subversions to mess with your mind.”

- Felix Barrett, Punchdrunk¹⁵

Within these spaces performances can be either directed and linear, designed as an on-the-rails experience; or sprawling environments that emphasize choice and exploration. In either case the experience of the individual audience member is the focus of the work. Immersive work needs an audience to exist and much of it seeks to empower or challenge audiences.¹⁶ Many companies and artists are creating work with one-on-one relationships between the audience and performers. Audience members may be separated from the group and guided by one or more performers for all or some of the experience, performers may provide intimate moments for participants within a larger event, or the entire experience may be limited to one participant at a time. One-on-one work may also partner participants with each other, further blurring the line between audience and performer.¹⁷

It's not just the numbers but much more about the theater of intimacy... I think audiences want this because it flings the challenge of creating meaning and interpretation back on the audience members. It's the way we've always imagined the virtual world, but it's alive.

- Vallejo Gantner, PS122¹⁸

Founded in London by Felix Barrett in 2000, but having since expanded internationally, **Punchdrunk** pioneered the contemporary immersive form in which free-roaming audience members experience large-scale dramatic events within highly-detailed theatrical spaces. Combining canonical texts with physical performance, sensual scenographic design, and site-specific locations, the company subverts the conventional theatrical expectation of passive spectatorship.¹⁹ These productions are an off-rails experience with audiences unable to see every scene element, and forced to choose which character or narrative to follow, or not. Audiences are also asked to don Venetian-style masks throughout the event, giving them a scenographic function as well as providing a carnivalesque anonymity and a relaxing of typical social rules.

The company's most recent production, *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable*, occupied four floors of a long-shuttered Royal Mail sorting office, transforming the space into the fictitious Temple Pictures film studio. With an aesthetic of Hollywood's golden age and narrative pulled from elements as diverse as pulp novels, film noir, Ray Bradbury, and *Woyzeck*, critical reception was highly positive.²⁰ The project was also a collaboration with the National Theatre, not the first time the company has partnered with a larger, more established entity (*The Crash of the Elysium* was in coordination with the BBC, built around the characters and worlds of *Doctor Who*²¹), but representing a bridge between the old guard of conventional theatre and the new immersive form.

Punchdrunk started as an idea I had with some friends at university. It was born from a desire to create work in which the audience is at the centre of the experience. We wanted to wrench them from the safety of traditional theatre seats and place them at the heart of the action, equipped with identity and purpose.

- Felix Barrett, Punchdrunk²²

Also founded in 2000 and led by Artistic Directors Zach Morris, Tom Pearson, and Jennine Willett, **Third Rail Projects** aims to reframe dance and performance, and bring together art and the public through diverse elements of site-specific performances, dance theatre, installation art, video and multimedia projects, and immersive performance environments.²³ Third Rail greatly considers their spaces while developing work, with theme, structure, and scenographic choices directly inspired by the production's site. Morris frequently describes the importance of "listening" to a space.²⁴ While similarly grand in their scale, Third Rail's immersive installations differ from those of Punchdrunk in their dance-theatre focus and much more guided, on-the-rails direction. Rather than roam freely, audiences proceed from space to space more linearly.

Third Rail's New York production of *Then She Fell*, a whimsical and surreal take on *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* mounted in a former medical institution, is in its fourth year,²⁵ while their balmy 1970s fountain-of-youth resort experience, *The Grand Paradise*, ran to acclaim in both Los Angeles and New York this past year.²⁶ Both pieces feature curated one-on-one encounters and were notably funded via online crowdsourcing. *Learning Curve*, developed with the Albany Park Theatre Project in collaboration with the Goodman Theatre, places participants into a Chicago high school and was created with the local community of students, teachers, and parents.²⁷ *Sweet & Lucky*, commissioned by the Denver Center for the Performing Arts,²⁸ invited audiences into a mysterious antique store leading to an evening of dreamlike encounters surrounding themes of memory and mortality.²⁹

Our job is to, hopefully, create a bunch of really interesting dots. But the audience's job is to connect those dots. And they can connect them however they want. The thing that's kind of cool about this type of theater is I'll walk out of a show and you'll walk out of a show, and we may have seen many of the same dots, but my picture will look very different from yours. And that's sort of what's amazing. And a very different way to think about storytelling.

- Zach Morris, Third Rail Projects³⁰

Founded in 2011 by Artistic Director Annie Saunders, the California-based company **Wilderness** takes its name from the disused spaces where they mount their site-specific productions. In these unexplored and uninhabited places, they "create immersive, experiential and interdisciplinary theatrical events that disrupt the boundaries between observer and observed."³¹

Their 2015 production of *The Day Shall Declare It* was a guided dance theatre experience featuring a cast of three performers, texts from Tennessee Williams and Studs Terkel, a series of rooms combining "Great Depression-era décor with a contemporary urban industrial aesthetic," and a sound design even "more resonant than anything that's spoken by the three-person cast."³² *Antigone Project*, a work in development set to tour in 2017/18, is an "intimate theatre duet" retelling the Oedipal myth "situated in a huge blanket fort, born out of Antigone's imagination whilst she is buried in the cave" aiming to create "an up-close and human exploration of the heroine and the brother she buries."³³ The work was created with support from the Getty Villa, San Francisco Playhouse and the Harvey Milk Center.

When I got to L.A., I was kind of trying to figure out what I was going to do here and driving around and seeing a lot of really intriguing, seemingly abandoned space, especially downtown. And so I decided that I wanted to make work that kind of occupied those spaces temporarily. I mean, I just really was feeling like I wanted to explore those buildings, and I thought maybe this is the kind of work I want to be making in L.A., like inviting people into these spaces and creating these kind of temporary worlds.

- Annie Saunders, Wilderness³⁴

A UK-based, German artist working in several mediums including visual art, film, installation and performance, **Britt Hatzius**' work "refers to or often takes the format of the moving image, both in its technical and conceptual form, exploring ideas around language, interpretation and the potential for discrepancies, ruptures, deviations and (mis-)communication."³⁵

In her immersive piece, *Blind Cinema*, audiences are seated in a theatre, blindfolded, and have a projected film described to them by whispering children through a funnel up to their ear. The work focuses on "that which lies beyond the sense of sight (leaving the illusory reality of cinema to re-enter that of the imagination), the attention oscillates between each shared but internal world guided by the whispering voice, and the shared physical space of the darkened cinema."³⁶ *This is Not My Voice Speaking*, a collaboration between Hatzius and Ant Hampton, divides audiences into "Ones" and "Zeroes" and guides them through experiences utilizing older technology including a turntable, slide projector, cassette tapes, and 16mm film. Participants are tasked with following a physical and vocal instruction 'manual.' Doing so "results in the voice jumping from cassette to vinyl and, eventually, being synchronised with what appears to be old 16mm footage of a bearded newsreader." The work "moves the audience-performer around within three communicative elements forming an uncanny triangulation: the human voice, the instruction 'manual' language and physically manifest (last generation) recordable media."³⁷

The Extra People is rather dangerous actually, not to the public, but to notions of representation and participation (...) plunging us deep into the defining social and economic reality of our times: empty, disconnected, monitored, vaguely menacing and very public: on a stage, in fact. As we prepare to leave, another group enters and the show goes on.

- Molly Grogan, Exeunt Magazine³⁸

Shasta Geaux Pop is the creation of New York-based multidisciplinary performer **Ayesha Jordan** and director Charlotte Brathwaite. The piece was produced at Under the Radar Festival in 2017 and at The Bushwick Starr in fall of 2016, but the character was developed for many years previously by Jordan.³⁹

An "immersive underground hiphop party,"⁴⁰ the work stars the titular character, a "pop star-tist and entertrainer [sic] making jaws and booties drop one song at a rhyme...I mean time."⁴¹ The production transforms theaters into immersive basement parties and blends elements of immersion (focus on space, tangible design) with those of cabaret and solo performance. Shasta equally performs for and interacts with audience members throughout the performance which fights a simple, linear narrative or story and instead builds an open-ended environment for audience experience.

...it isn't a show. Better to think of it as a gathering. An event, where I can reveal the inner workings of myself...thru music. We can make intimate connections. You know? I feel like I am more than a performer, more than an artist. I connect. Let's call it a connection. We are all going to a connection.

- *Shasta Geaux Pop*, New York Theatre Review⁴²

Maybe the biggest change to immersive theatre over the last decade has been the growing acceptance and indeed embrace of the form by conventional theatrical institutions. In addition to the previously mentioned pieces from Punchdrunk and Third Rail, several immersive productions are being developed in collaboration with conventional theatrical institutions. U.S. regional theatres are showing interest in the form, with the Guthrie premiering Sarah Agnew's *Relics* as part of their Dowling Space Initiative⁴³ and Center Theatre Group commissioning Geoff Sobelle's *The Object Lesson* as part of a similar initiative.⁴⁴ La Jolla Playhouse continues to host the annual Without Walls Festival of site-specific work.⁴⁵ Immersive theatre can even be found in the center of mainstream American theatre, Broadway houses, with productions such as Ars Nova's *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812*⁴⁶ and Simon McBurney's *The Encounter*⁴⁷ filling Broadway theaters this year and using the immersion label as a major

selling point. One can speculate the reason for the increased visibility and success of immersive theatre, but it is clear that it is resonating with audiences in ways traditional theatrical form cannot.

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In Conversation with SHASTA GEAX POP

Interviewed by Terrence I. Mosley

New York City is known for being packed with performance in January. Scanning through the performances offered, I stumbled upon Shasta Geaux Pop, which was a part of the Public Theatre's Under the Radar INCOMING! Entering the theater, I was immediately transported to a basement party. Red lights that reveal as much as they conceal spill onto my skin as hip hop rattles my bones. The hour or so that followed introduced me to musical artist Shasta Geaux Pop, who is not your typical pop princess. She charmed the crowd with songs about thrusting exponentially, spicy hot chocolate, and the power of kegels. She was all at once satire and a role model.

The women behind Shasta Geaux Pop are New York-based multidisciplinary performer and creator Ayesha Jordan and New York-based Canadian/Barbadian/UK director Charlotte Brathwaite. Jordan has multiple international credits and recently understudied the groundbreaking Broadway production of Eclipsed at The John Golden Theatre. Brathwaite, who was the recipient of the 2010 George C. Wolfe Award from the Princess Grace Foundation, has a rich directing practice that includes international directing credits and teaching at MIT. Ayesha, Charlotte, and I discuss the evolution of Shasta and how they came together to give her voice.

Terrence Ikechukwu Mosley: Just to kick us off, where are you from?

Ayesha Jordan: I am originally from Winchester, Virginia. Ever heard of it?

TIM: No, is that in Europe?

AJ: Right. No. Yes. *(Laughter)* No. Winchester is a small town... it's in Northwestern Virginia so it's about an hour and half outside of DC. It's literally 15 miles from West Virginia.

Charlotte Brathwaite: My family's from Barbados. I was born in England and raised in Canada. I moved to New York City when I was 15.

TIM: So what was the purpose of the move? You moved without your family to the states at 15?

CB: My home life was less than satisfying so I left home early.

TIM: How did you get your start in performance?

AJ: I began... Well, I mean, if you go way back as a kid I enjoyed it.

TIM: Give me the whole story.

(Laughter)

AJ: The whole story nothing but the story. So I say I started performing sort of in the 5th grade when I was in Odyssey of the Mind. I don't even know if they still have that in schools now. They have, you know, groups that do like math and then groups that do... Ours was specifically performance-based and we did a version of *Charlotte's Web* and me being the only black kid they cast me as Templeton the Rat but anyway... Alright, I'm a leave that one alone... but I've always enjoyed it. I went to Clark Atlanta University which is an HBCU [Historically Black College or University] in Atlanta, Georgia. I'm so happy I did that cause growing up where I grew up I had the *other* experience. They have a theatre department and I decided the end of my sophomore year to take a theatre class so I

took an Oral Interpretation class with Carol Mitchell-Leon. She was a wonderful actress, and artist and teacher. She's no longer with us but, you know, that was my first taste and it's funny cause the first time we had to do something in front of people I was scared out of my mind. I literally cried in front of the class... This is ridiculous but she asked "Do you want to stop and start over a little later?" I was like "Yes." After I got through it, I was like "Oh, this is what I want to do." After that, you know, that was kind of all she wrote doing theatre. Doing internships, acting internships at the St Louis Black Rep... Now I'm giving you my whole bio... *(Laughter)*

CB: I ended up completing my last year of high school in Westchester, New York. Half the year was regular high school classes, the other half of that year they allowed students to do an internship. I was searching for theatres to intern with and La MaMa was the only one at the time, that allowed students to work directly on shows. I eventually started working there. Ellen Stewart, I don't know if you know of her, but you should totally look her up if you're studying contemporary performance, Ellen was essential to my understanding of global performance and theatre making. Ellen took care of me, I ended up working with La MaMa as a performer in the Great Jones Repertory Company and two weeks after I graduated high school, I was on a bus in Eastern Europe with 30 people, a snake and making theatre. I was the youngest in the company at the time, Ellen just kept telling me "You can do this. You can definitely do this." So I did, just because Ellen told me I could. That's it.

(Laughter)

TIM: Did you have a hard time seeing yourself in the performance world? What were some barriers for you in terms of entering the theatre?

CB: I have to be honest, I can't say there were barriers. Theatre, music and art were always a part of my life from when I was really young. I was in dance classes at eight years old and attended a high school for performing arts in Toronto. By the time I got to New York I knew I wanted to make art, but I wasn't into doing the Broadway knockoffs that we were trained to do. I was like, "I don't know what else there is but there's got to be something more...there have to be other options." I feel lucky that La MaMa found me, or I found La MaMa. Ellen created a situation I could thrive in both as an artist and a human being. There are few people like her in the world who love people that much. She was like "...you want to do this thing? Here are shows you can perform in... here are 90 plus shows a year you can see for free." At the time, La MaMa was presenting something like 90 shows a year and I went to see everything. I eventually became the production coordinator. I had a job. I even lived on top of the Annex Theatre (now Ellen Stewart Theatre) for a while. She provided a situation, she gave us support. She gave all of us a family. We were all making theatre and struggling but living in the joy of what it meant to create things that really expressed the life we lived, who we were and what our real experiences were. It was a multidisciplinary, multi-cultural, intersectional highly creative environment—way before those terms became catch phrases. It was like running away with the circus. It was fantastic. I never had any money. I guess that would have been a barrier to some. Nothing was ever handed to me. I worked for everything. I entered into a professional theater situation with a black woman running everything. I had the perfect role model. Ellen taught me that I could do this thing in the way I wanted to do it. At the time I wasn't even cognizant of what that all meant because I was a teenager just happy to be performing, travelling and living the dream. But when I think back, I can't thank Ellen enough for that time, it was fundamental to who I am today. I think about her all the time, especially when I make work. I'm sorry she never got to see any of my work.

TIM: Ayesha, what made you seek performance?

AJ: I think I just really enjoy affecting people on some level and that's one of the best ways I feel like I know how. I mean, yes, I'm a ham so there is that... I don't know... It's the feeling that I get. It's the way I feel like I best know how to express myself. It's the thing I feel like I'm truly best at. I mean, there are other things I think I'm good at

but I feel performance is something I know how to do well.

TIM: So both of you are in long tradition of Black American artists who have spent time in Europe. What brought you to Europe?

AJ: So the company I worked for in Atlanta, the Youth Ensemble [of Atlanta], we did an exchange project with three companies in the Netherlands called Rotterdams Lef, Onafonkelijk Toneel and another company, that's now defunct, called Made in Da Shade. We did this exchange and our group collaborated with their group. They brought in people to work with our group and then we did these three pieces and one of the companies, Made in Da Shade, asked me... Initially, my partner was working with them at the time and they asked if he wanted to stay and work with the company and they needed another person and he was like "Hey, if you need another actor, Ayesha can stay and do it too." So I ended up going in and doing their show and they basically moved us to Amsterdam. We went back to Atlanta, packed up all our stuff, and moved to Amsterdam to do the show with Made in Da Shade. The show toured the Netherlands, Belgium, and a few other places. We ended up staying there for two and half years.

CB: After La MaMa I went to undergrad in the Netherlands, the Amsterdam School for the Arts.

TIM: What was your experience studying there?

CB: It was different than the education in the arts here. In the US, you have programs in acting and directing. In the Netherlands, the program I went to was for theatre makers. I graduated with a class of eight people—we all performed, wrote or devised original work, directed, and designed to a certain extent. It was definitely focused on performer-generated work.

TIM: How did you two meet?

AJ: I met Charlotte because the person she was seeing at the time and the person I was seeing at the time were in the same program called Das Arts. She and I met and we both said "Ahh two black Americans, North Americans, in Amsterdam... Let's stay friends," and we just started hanging out and we worked together a little bit there. We stayed in touch and then I moved away to London for a year and half and I think at some point she moved to Germany, I can't remember when...

TIM: What took you to London?

AJ: I was studying dance at a school called Laban. They have a professional diploma in Dance Studies so I did that course. I was going to stay and pursue my Master's degree at the Central School of Speech and Drama. I was accepted into their Performance Practices and Research program. I was so excited but I couldn't get the money together.

TIM: How did you two start working together?

CB: We became friends. We were both North American, Black and Ayesha was fun people to hang with! I was making a show, a devised piece about the women in the shadows of the Red Light District in Amsterdam. I found out working on that project that many of the women were trafficked. They're not there on their own accord. Many people think prostitution is legal in Holland, but many of those women and girls are forced to be there. It's one of the most undercover corrupt, seedy places ever. I was making this show and then I invited Ayesha to collaborate with me on it.

TIM: When did you all come back stateside and start working together?

CB: They left Holland but we stayed in touch. Ten years later or so, they moved to NYC.

AJ: I said “Well, my money has expired. My visa expired.” So, London and I were done. We [Ayesha and her former partner] packed up all of our stuff. We had to get our stuff out of storage in Amsterdam and move back to Atlanta. I think we were in Atlanta for three years from 2005-2008 before I moved to New York. Basically, a job opportunity brought my ex to New York. So we moved to New York for the project he was working on and that was all she wrote. I started my New York hustle. Been here since 2008.

TIM: How was *Shasta Geaux Pop* born?

AJ: So Shasta... That’s my home girl. I manage her and she goes way back to the days of Atlanta. I remember living in Atlanta... Oh God, this is so funny... This is around the time Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie kept getting arrested over and over again for doing the dumbest shit. I said “What is this? They just keep getting more and more famous. This is crazy!” So I started writing. I wrote the song “Drunk and Famous.” Then there was the other part of me that said, “Ok. I’m an actor and I live in Atlanta...” Atlanta is this place, if you live there and you’re an actor, you know, you can get cast in film and TV roles but primarily you’re going to get a day player part. You need to either be New York or LA to get a lead role or you need to be a rapper. I said “Wait a minute... If I become a rapper...” I mean, “If *Shasta* becomes a rapper and I manage her then I could totally get cast in movies and stuff.” So Shasta was born. “Drunk and Famous” was her first hit single that is waiting to be recognized but they’ll get it. They’ll catch on. So she was born. It started with Shasta performing “Drunk and Famous” in the most random places. On a bar counter at a bar in a room full of five people or in a living room or whatever. It just grew into this thing and then more songs were written. So essentially Shasta was going to help me be cast in film and TV because she’s going to become a famous rapper. The music is really going to be good and people are gonna wanna listen to it. They’re going to say “Who is this? I want to cast her!”

TIM: How did Shasta get her name?

AJ: For one she’s has the 80’s/90s vibe, feel on some level. I have a thing for S-H names. I like “Sh-uhs” in names. You know, Shasta soda? I used to love that soda as a kid. I remember it being super colorful. You know, “soda” is also called “pop” and she makes fun of pop culture on some level. She is pop culture and also satire about pop culture so I was like “Oh! Shasta Goes Pop.” Then I was like “Go Pop... ‘go’ needs to be spelled G-E-A-U-X cause she’s from New Iberia, Louisiana, which brings in the whole French, Creole thing. Shasta’s a Leo. She was born August 17th. It was one of those “Ah-ha” moments mixed with some meditating and marinating on other ideas that brought together this name.

TIM: How did you get involved Charlotte?

CB: I left Europe when I got into grad school at Yale. After that I ended up coming back to New York to work. After several years Ayesha was like “I want to make something with you.” She had been doing the Shasta character in clubs and at parties. I said, “Yeah, you should do something with this. This is awesome.” The time kind of came around and we created the show, *Come See My Double Ds*. Ayesha wanted to talk about her experiences dealing with divorce and the passing of her father, so the double Ds were death and divorce. We created it with our friends, composer/performer Justin Hicks and lighting designer Tuçe Yasak who both worked on *Shasta Geaux Pop*. We were like, “Okay, let’s do another,” and Ayesha had been talking to Noel [Allain] at Bushwick Starr and he said “Yes, we’ll support you doing a Shasta show.” So we started on that.

TIM: Why do you think you two work so well together? What are some of the highlights of working on *Shasta Geaux Pop*?

AJ: For one, she's a friend. Two, we come from a similar theatre-making background and I think our aesthetics fall in line with each other. Our history and our friendship plays a part as well as both of our extended networks and the way they come together. She brought Justin [Hicks]. This is where our personalities are different but this is what I need... She's one of those people who, if she knows what she wants, is very specific about it, knows how to address it, and make something happen. Me? I can be a little less decisive and she helps focus me. She helps me make a decision which I think is the scary part, sometimes, of creating something. She tells me "Make this decision. It doesn't have to be final." She helps keep the process moving forward. She likes gives us room to create. Justin and I would create music and our other collaborators, Akhmose [Ari] and [DJ Avg] Jo, who's the DJ, we would all work together, work on the material, work on the music then Charlotte would come in later and share some ideas. We would talk about what we could do with this or what we could do with that or how we could expand a moment. She gives me room to create, comes in, and helps shape things. She brings form and inserts other ideas that expands and clarifies themes. You could say that our script is a bunch of songs but our collaboration created the meat in between and the order and flow of the evening. It worked similarly with *Come See My Double Ds* except *Come See My Double Ds* wasn't as music heavy as *Shasta*. The interaction was very different in that show. I feel like she helped shape me. She's my sculptor.

CB: It's such an awesome team. Justin, Tuçe and Ayesha are a group of my artistic loves. It's great to work with them. At *Under the Radar*, we also added DJ Avg Jo as well as Rucyl Mills. Rucyl is awesome. She helped us with Shasta's online media presence. It's a group of folks I love to work with. They're also artists I'm working with on several other projects. It's such a pleasure when you're able to express yourself artistically with people you love and who love you. You're in these spaces of creativity where you're dealing with subjects you all care about deeply, but you're also laughing a lot, having fun and creating really exciting work.

TIM: What were some of the challenges of creating *Shasta*?

AJ: We asked a lot of questions like "Ok... Well does this show need to have some sort of linear thing? Does it need to be a specific event happening or is it just going to be a concert?" I think the challenge initially was figuring that out. We had so many different ideas that totally got pushed away. We were like "Maybe she went off to some monastery and had to go find herself." So the show was about her like rediscovering herself and now it's her big comeback. That didn't make it. So I think initially it was about what is this and what does it need to be about and what experience do people need to have. We thought, "Well, you know, let's just make it a party! Ok, welcoming people into the space... Ok, well how do we make this a party that is more than just singing songs as an actor?" We explored the questions like that. Other big questions for us were "What do we do in between the songs to help shape it?" and "How make it a more active experience?" We wanted to make it more than just me singing to you.

CB: Money, space, and time. Everybody wants more of those things. I don't think there's any artist that's like "No, no, no, I don't need the money." (*Laughter*) Those would be great things to have more access to. I think we've been really lucky both with *Bushwick Starr* and *Under the Radar*. They've both really supported the work and us as artists. I hope we can continue to find other avenues that support this kind of collaborative work.

TIM: Are there future plans for *Shasta*? How do you want to see *Shasta* grow?

CB: We're in conversation with different venues who want to tour in the U.S. and internationally. I would love us to not only tour the version that we did but have a developmental period that allows us to continue to expand the work and the world of *Shasta*.

AJ: I want to see the brand of “Shasta Geaux Pop” grow. I want to make more music. I want to get the music out there. I would love for the show to tour, to be further developed, and be something that can change. We’re working on creating a web series. Of course, there is a lot of work that needs to go into that but we shot the “Shasta Geaux Pop for President” videos. I think with this whole presidential bullshit... I think it’s a good time for Shasta. I’ve had four years to play with it. Oooh the things I could do in four years with “Shasta Geaux Pop for President”.

TIM: What are you working on right now?

CB: I’m working on a film that’s tracing my family through the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. I did an Ancestry.com test and found out that I have a connection to the Togo/Benin area. I’ve been shooting in Barbados and I’ll continue to shoot in England and hopefully in Togo and Benin eventually. It’s a very personal project. I would also love to work in film and television. Shows like “Atlanta,” “Insecure,” “Queen Sugar,” and movies like *Get Out* are incredibly unique. It’s an exciting time to be working around all of that. I’ve also had the pleasure of years of working with incredible musicians. I recently did a project called, *Can I Get A Witness?: The Gospel of James Baldwin*, a collaboration with Meshell Ndegeocello based on James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* and at the moment I’m working on a project called “House or Home” with long time collaborator Justin Hicks; and a project called *Bee Boy* with Guillermo E. Brown [aka Pegasus Warning]. That project is in development at MIT this spring. All these projects involve me working collaboratively with artists I love and with elements I love—music, text, visual art and film/video. I want to continue to do more work in this direction.

AJ: In terms of Ayesha, as an artist, I just have so many random ideas I have to pare down some things. I work as an artist for hire. I’m also an actor. I’m on the audition circuit. I was just in San Francisco doing “Eclipsed” [directed by Liesl Tommy] at the Curran. I want to continue collaborating because I really love our crew of collaborators. I think we have something really strong and powerful that we need to keep working and harvesting. We have so many golden nuggets. Justin Hicks, he did the music, most of the music, for “Shasta.” He’s so incredible and the work he’s making on his own is incredible. I want us all to just keep working together and making stuff together.

[Edited for length and clarity.]

Select Artists And Festivals Exploring The Field Of Immersive Performance:

Company/Artist	Location	Website
Punchdrunk	London/NYC	www.punchdrunk.com
Third Rail Projects	NYC	thirdrailprojects.com
Dream Think Speak	London	www.dreamthinkspeak.com
Fruit for the Apocalypse	London	www.fruit-for-the-apocalypse.eu
Speakeasy Dollhouse	NYC	speakeasydollhouse.com
Bricolage	Pittsburgh, PA	www.bricolagepgh.org
We Players	San Francisco, CA	www.weplayers.org
Secret Cinema	London	www.secretcinema.org
CoLab Theatre Company	London	www.colabtheatre.co.uk
Difference Engine	London	differencengine.co.uk
Dante or Die	London	danteordie.com
You Me Bum Bum Train	London	www.bumbumtrain.com
Defibrillator	London	www.defibrillatortheatre.com
Hydrocracker	London	www.hydrocracker.co.uk
House Theatre	UK	housetheatre.org.uk/about
Wilderness	Los Angeles	thisisthewilderness.com
RIFT	London	www.r-ft.co.uk
Andrew Hoepfner/Houseworld	NYC	houseworld.nyc
Cynthia von Buhler	NYC	www.cynthiavonbuhler.com
Pig Iron Theatre	Philadelphia, PA	www.pigiron.org
Ars Nova	NYC	www.arsnovanyc.com
The Immersive Theatre Project	NYC	www.theimmersiveproject.com
Screenshot Productions	Los Angeles	screenshotproductions.com
Shine On Collective	Los Angeles	www.shineoncollective.com
Annie Lesser	Los Angeles	annielesser.com
PearlDamour	NYC/New Orleans	pearldamour.com
Complicite Theatre	London	www.complicite.org
The Industry	Los Angeles	https://theindustryla.org/
Gruff Theatre Company	UK	http://grufftheatre.co.uk/
Cristian Luchian	UK	http://cristianluchian.co.uk/
Seattle Immersive Theatre	Seattle, WA	http://www.seattleimmersiveproject.org/
Four Larks	Los Angeles	http://fourlarks.com/
Britt Hatzius	London	http://www.britthatzius.co.uk/
Artangel	London	https://www.artangel.org.uk/
Belt-Up Theatre	London	http://beltuptheatre.blogspot.co.uk/
Coney	London	http://coneyhq.org/
Ant Hampton	UK	http://www.anthampton.com/

Social Practice

by Terrence I. Mosley

“The Public has a form and any form can be art.”

-Paul Ramirez Jonas

Curator Nicolas Bourriaud introduced the term *relational aesthetics* to the world in 1996. It was Bourriaud’s attempt to investigate and index work that could not be contained like a painting or a sculpture. Bourriaud defines relational aesthetic as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.”¹ An example of Relational Aesthetics comes from Cuban-born American artist Félix González-Torres called *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*.

Created in 1991, the work consists of 175 pounds of “candies individually wrapped in multi-color cellophane” that can be installed just about anywhere.² While you are free to engage the pile as you see fit, the late González-Torres encourages spectators to take a piece of candy with them. The candy is a representation of González-Torres’ lover, Ross Laycock, who died of an AIDS-related illness at the height of the AIDS crisis. One hundred and seventy-five pounds was Laycock’s ideal weight. Jennifer Tucker of art database Sartle says, “The shrinking pile of candy is supposed to represent Laycock’s dwindling weight as he moved towards his inevitable demise.”³ To ensure his lover never ends, González-Torres instructs that the pile must be continuously restored to its original weight. The art is not the colorful pile. The art is the guilt you feel taking of Ross and the sweetness you taste as you consume “him.” The art object isn’t actually an object. It is the experience.

Since Bourriaud’s introduction of the term, Relational Aesthetics has been absorbed by the art world and taken it by storm. Some say the term is overused. Kyle Chayka of Hyperallergic says, “The standard cliché summary of modern (and contemporary) art is that now, anything is art [...] After so long, we’ve started to run out of things to suddenly deem ‘art.’ But relational aesthetics, or the posing of an artist-constructed social experiences [sic] as art making, is the latest step in this process of turning everything into art.”⁴

Relational Aesthetics is one part of a constellation of terms and practices focused on the “social”. Some other terms are social practice and socially engaged art.

The key differences between socially engaged art and relational aesthetics lie in how the spectator is utilized. Socially engaged art, like relational aesthetics, produces an experience. Unlike relational aesthetics, in socially engaged art the “spectator” participates in the making/creation of the piece. Pedro Reyes’ piece *Palas por Pistolas* is an example of socially engaged art. Reyes organized a campaign that invited citizens to exchange their guns for a coupon that could be redeemed for appliances and electronics. Reyes reports:

1527 weapons were collected. 40% of them were high power automatic weapons of exclusive military use. These weapons were taken to a military zone where they were crushed by a steamroller in a public act. The pieces were then taken to a foundry and melted. The metal was sent to a major hardware factory to produce the same number 1527 shovels [sic]. The tools were made under specifications such as a handle with a legend telling the story. These shovels have been distributed to a number of art institutions and public schools where adults and children engage in the action of planting 1527 trees.⁵

The art is in the experience Reyes enabled for the community through the community’s participation. As Reyes describes it, “this ritual has a pedagogical purpose of showing how an agent of death can become an agent of life.”⁶ As Ben Valentine from Hyperallergic writes, socially engaged art, “places emphasis on process and commitment over a single end-product; collaboration over the artist as the sole maker; engagement especially with new audiences

often under-represented in the art world; re-introduces a sense of functionality to artwork, which traditionally has rejected utilitarian goals; considers setting as fundamental to the work.”⁷

Reyes is shaping the public and is using the public itself to do it. Socially engaged art’s focus on process not only changes the people involved, it changes the world for people unaware of the work. Pedro Reyes’ work changes the world yet his work isn’t very visible. Valentine posits, “The work of Social Practice is on the rise, but compared to the traditional art world news of auction prices and gallery openings, it doesn’t seem to be receiving as much online attention[...] many news sources are slow to the show and struggle with representing the immersive projects. Could the qualities of Social Practice as a field be incompatible with global media outlets, especially for the internet?”⁸

Valentine’s question is an intriguing one. SEA is not a genre that is unknown or even new. Since the 1960s, Bread and Puppet Theatre has made socially engaged art with work like *King Story* which was incorporated into the 1963 March on Washington.⁹

Like relational aesthetics, SEA has an ever-expanding list of texts that focus on the field, including [*Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*](#) edited by Nato Thompson, [*Claire Bishop’s Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*](#), [*Shannon Jackson’s Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*](#), and [*Pablo Helguera’s Education for Socially Engaged Art*](#). Socially engaged art literally changes the world, yet the work doesn’t get as much attention as more traditional forms of art.

Perhaps it is the genre’s resistance to being documented. SEA is even more ephemeral than its progenitor because of its complex interactions. Artist and spectator become one to effect change in the world. The process of making is varied and different in every project. Perhaps the media can’t allow for complexity to take up space for more immediate artistic gestures like linear narratives. Andy Horwitz at Culturebot feels there is “a tendency for visual art practice to resist deep embeddedness, valuing concept and theory over application and implementation, documentation and creation of the ‘art object’ over actual impact.”¹⁰

Perhaps this fetishization of concept and theory obscures work from artists like Aaron Landsman. In his own words, Aaron Landsman makes “performances and other projects using people, language, space and time.”¹¹ His best-known work is *City Council Meeting*. As described by Landsman, the piece is performed participatory democracy. The piece was inspired by a real life city council meeting Landsman attended while visiting Portland, Oregon in 2009. He recalls that it was boring until a man in a suit got up to testify and dumped a plastic bag filled with hypodermic needles, used condoms, and dirty diapers on the lectern where he was speaking. The man was trying to make a point about “the deterioration of a neighborhood that was supposed to be designated as child-friendly.”¹² Over two years, Landsman visited local government meetings across the country.

The New York Times reports he “drew on a range of material for the script—from a banal but humorous tribute to a departing commissioner in Bismarck to rancorous testimony from Oakland, Calif., about the city’s crackdown on Occupy Wall Street protests.”¹³ The piece is mostly performed by audience members who choose how they will participate. Roles include “a speaker, who reads real testimony from one of the cities; a supporter, who is instructed by the staff to respond positively to certain speakers; or a bystander, who gets to sit back and just observe.”¹⁴ Landsman and his collaborator Mallory Catlett cite Plato’s idea that “democracies lack requirements for public office, meaning that anyone — no matter how smart or dumb, sane or insane — can govern.”¹⁵

Landsman’s current piece, *Perfect City*, started in 2012 and is projected to last twenty years. Landsman says “*Perfect City* is a dialogic art process about the way major cities like New York, London and Sao Paulo (among others) harness seemingly progressive values to create citadels for the rich. [*Perfect City* is] developed with multiple

publics, and created with young people on the Lower East Side, urban planners, architectural interventionists and activists.”¹⁶

Landsman makes his participants the engine and the driver. *Perfect City* empowers both the teen participants and the professional participants in the work by connecting them. Connecting planners with teens in such a way could result in a variety of changes in NYC developed by either community. The art will eventually have an aesthetic value but right now the art is the discourse occurring.

Another possible obstacle to visibility is the nomenclature used to describe socially engaged art. Michael Rohd’s [HowlRound essay](#) on socially engaged art (though he prefers the term “civic practice”) adds additional dimensions that are useful when considering SEA through the lens of performance. Rohd, who is the author of *Theatre for Community, Conflict, and Dialogue*, is on faculty at Northwestern University and heads the Center of Performance and Civic Practice. He says he has “begun to define Civic Practice as activity where a theater artist employs the assets of his/her craft in response to the needs of non-arts partners as determined through ongoing, relationship-based dialogue.”¹⁷ This definition is the foundation of the company Rohd founded, Sojourn Theatre.

Founded in 1999, Sojourn Theatre Company partners with non-arts-sector organizations such as city and state legislative bodies and social service agencies, as well as cross-disciplinary arts centers around the country. The company, led by Rohd, has a unique structure of 15 artists living in 8 cities.¹⁸ Sojourn has a repertoire of 25 works. Their piece *How to End Poverty in 90 Minutes* represents core values of the company’s work. *HTEP* asks how to attack the problem of poverty in America and focuses on the community where it is being performed. Over the course of 90 minutes, the audience engages this question by deciding how to spend \$1000 of the ticket sales from the performance.¹⁹ Portland critic Dennis Sparks wrote, “This is a tough question with no easy answer... it gets people talking about it.”²⁰

The piece uses clear methodology to engender dialogue. The audience is split into groups and the performers ask a series of question that investigate poverty and how it can be solved. The audience then has to decide whether the money should be spent on one of five categories: Direct Aid to a person or group, Systemic Changes, Education to individuals or groups. Making Opportunities for individuals, or Daily Needs for a person or group. Sparks adds, “Dialogue is the key to any solution to any problem. When the digging for answers stops, and solutions found, then the erecting of a firm foundation can begin.”²¹

In an essay entitled “Living as Form,” Nato Thompson quotes prolific SEA artist Tania Bruguera. She says “I don’t want an art that points at a thing, I want an art that is the thing.”²² The less pointing that occurs, the closer the thing moves towards the public. Pointing creates isolation. Sometimes distance gives us the perspective necessary to engage the things that need to change. While pointing can be useful, it creates a clear division between the person pointing and the thing being pointed at. Perhaps the field and the public are comfortable with the vision of art that only points. After all, our world thrives on pointing. However, there is so much potential in socially engaged art, no matter its nomenclature or the particular approach artists like Pedro Reyes, Aaron Landsman, and Michael Rohd use, because it is democratic and inclusive. SEA is always moving towards the dividing line because “great art accumulates relevance and meaning as it moves beyond the control of its creators.”²³

Notes

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In Conversation with Aaron Landsman

Interviewed by Stephen M. Eckert

Aaron Landsman is a playwright and performance artist whose work is occasionally co-authored with community members. His most recent piece, Perfect City, is a long-term collaboration with young people on the Lower East Side, architectural interventionists, and activists about the politics of urban planning. City Council Meeting, another multi-city collaborative project of Landsman's, concerns the "architecture of power, and the comedy of procedure."

Stephen M. Eckert: Since this is for a white paper on social practice and socially engaged art in contemporary performance, let's start with a working definition. What do you think are the necessary elements of the form? What makes it distinct from other focuses?

Aaron Landsman: Well, "social practice" and "socially engaged art" as I understand them are not necessarily interchangeable, the way you have them in your question. Social practice was a term coined by, I think Harrell Fletcher, to describe a sort of dialogic, social form of presentation from within the visual art world. Socially Engaged Art is Pablo Helguera's term (*Education For Socially Engaged Art* is his book and it's an awesome, short read). And that is more about working with communities and individuals who are not necessarily thinking of themselves as artists—often this has a more overt political agenda or ethic. There's definitely overlap between the two (maybe something like Paul Chan's *Godot In New Orleans* is a project that could be called both, as well as conceptual art) but they came from different people, with somewhat varying intentions.

Social practice is espoused most explicitly by an annual conference Fletcher started called Open Engagement. It's also, for me, co-opted by the academic world as a piece of relatively watery jargon. Socially engaged art as discussed in Helguera, is more specific—a set of problems, conditions and questions that allow artists and communities to work together.

Which is why, maybe, I'm going on at length here, and throwing the question back to you. Which of these two is more interesting for you to research and talk about? That's a good discussion of the pros and cons of certain approaches and names.

Last thing—both these terms come from visual art. Visual art is a bit ahead of theater in the conversation around community collaboration, aesthetics and politics. Not sure the work is better, but the conversation.

SME: Obviously within this kind of work there's a great deal of contentious discussion surrounding these very terms. Since you brought up the differences between visual art and theatre's approach to this topic, could you expand on that point a little more? The idea that you're not sure which is better, but that you enjoy the conversation. Also who you think are the foundational makers or thinkers from the theatre side?

AL: I just think there is no equivalent book to Pablo's book, *Education For Socially Engaged Art*, so that's why I would say it's a bit farther along in visual art. It just seems that no one seems to be taking Shannon Jackson and Claire Bishop and synthesizing it into something that practitioners can use. I just think Visual Art theory is generally just a little more established. So that's just where that impulse comes from, and I think that having worked a bunch at Project Rowhouses in Houston, that was a really fundamental and very transformative experience for me and that came from a very visual art mind even though it hosted all kinds of activities, not just art. I guess for me in terms of theatre practice I feel like Boal, even Teatro Campesino, you know, non-western, U.S. forms. That's really interesting to me. I often feel like the work that gets done in Boal's name is kind of problematic, or at least aesthetically I'm not crazy about it, but I feel like it does involve community members and it does consider ethics and it does consider aesthetics at the same time. Probably more weighted towards ethics than aesthetics. I think

Michael Rohd, have you talked to him? He's doing something called civic practice and the big difference there, which makes for a great conversation, is that to him civic practice means that a civic body is asking for something to be dealt with via theatre. So the police department needs to deal with police violence or a battered women's shelter needs to deal with sexual violence, or elder care facilities deal with Alzheimer's. And him or his company, Sojourn, comes in and does work with that group of people and they do participate and do make the work. So, I feel that's one. His work is really interesting, even though he again doesn't do what Pablo does which is really balance aesthetics and good kind of politics and ethical concerns. But Michael's amazing. He's also just an amazing speaker about the work. I don't know though. I'm not a huge fan of what the Living Theatre's work generally looks like now, but I feel like they were trying to make rigorous work with members of the communities that they worked in, and I'm sure there's lots I'm leaving out.

SME: And what does the crossover with visual art mean for future artistic forms?

AL: Um... Hoooo! (*Laughs*) I guess I'm curious why that question interests you.

SME: I think this discussion about this kind of collision between aesthetics and politics is so important and I think it's reflected in this crossover between visual art and theatre.

AL: Right. I'm going to lump a lot of theatre together and say that so much of it presupposes a set of conditions that have to happen: like there has to be a dark room with seats and a stage. And I know tons of theatre is site-specific, and I like some of that, but I also feel like that is often about saying, "Look! We're not in a theatre! Neat!" It kind of does a lot of the dramaturgy, and especially it's representational. So, one of my favorite collaborators is Mallory Catlett who says she's more interested in real communication than in representation. By that she means she doesn't really care... She says as soon as she's thinking about the accuracy of a representation she's sort of done watching a show if that makes sense. And I feel that's where the sweet spot is, where visual art and theatre conversation can make something really exciting. So it doesn't have to be representational but it could involve a more careful dramaturgy through time in the way it's thought out, or it could involve like even rehearsal. Like visual performance doesn't generally rehearse. There's a guy named Gregory Sale who is a visual artist who works with performance and very much socially engaged work in Arizona, and he collaborated on *City Council Meeting* with us, and he was like, "Yeah, there's no rehearsal. You spend years crafting a gesture and then try it and see." And there's an interesting question of what does that do? How does that impact the people who are in the room with you watching? But there's not a sense of practicing the gesture and so I feel that's a place where theatre can bring something in. And for my *Perfect City* project we're trying to think about can we rehearse a conversation with strangers even more loosely than *City Council Meeting*.

I've been trying to teach a workshop (to varying degrees of success) called *Form, Content and Context*, and I actually have people make a spreadsheet. You can take any work, something like Shakespeare in the Park's most recent *Hamlet* and we'll say formally it's representational theatre, classical text, modern dress, whatever the trappings are. Then the content is Shakespeare's play, and the context is a public park, free show, etc etc, and 2017. And we try to do that with any work that a student wants to make. And I feel like we often don't take context into account as theatre-makers. It's like once you get to the theatre there's a certain set of behaviors that are expected. Even though visual art kind of does have the artists and practitioners and critics that think that way, like "Oh! You just go the gallery," but I just think there's an opportunity in that crossover.

You know one group, The Foundry Theatre, really has done what people would call social practice for years, and in a very theatre-y way. I feel like their work is really great that way.

SME: What can you tell me about your work? In what ways does it meet this definition of socially engaged work? Why do you make this work/why are you drawn to it?

AL: I can tell you the basics—which is my artist statement, which, speaking of jargon:

I construct performances using people, language, space and time. I often start with questions: how does technology affect the ways we remember? How do we perform power, and who gets to play which roles? Can the person who made you who you are, be the person who messed you up, be the person you forgive now? Some of my work is co-authored with community members over long periods of time; some is developed through ongoing relationships with other artists; all of it honors collaboration as a driving force. I write about misfits, overheard spaces and people, the ways we welcome each other or don't. I reject the notion of branding myself to one style, approach, cause or story.

Beyond that I am currently working on *Perfect City*, which is focused on young people (17-25) from New York City, around issues of displacement, zoning, urban planning and policy. We meet twice per week, talk about these and other things, and everyone gets paid. And then from our conversations we evolve forms and content that seem right—a series of roundtable theatrical works for invited publics, a campaign with small business owners around the phrase “You’re Next,” and possibly some videos made with people who work within the gig and sharing economies (Uber/Lyft, Craigslist, etc).

Perfect City maybe fits the “social practice” definition used by others, but for me it’s more Helguera-inspired, because questions of authorship and co-authorship come up a lot, and how we share power is part of the conversation. Where it does seem like social practice (or conceptual art) is that it’s long term (we think of it as twenty years) and its forms are dialogic.

The other big project I’m working on is *Squares*, which is a collaboration among director Mallory Catlett, designer Jim Findlay, me, and a photographer named Paul Shambroom—Paul has a treasure trove of 584 found snapshots from a processing lab in Minnesota in 1976. We are making a piece around them.

SME: What do you think are the particular challenges in creating such work? Many of your projects, including *Perfect City* and *City Council Meeting* are collaborations with several very diverse groups, including those from outside of “the arts.” Do the politics/power dynamics inherent to any collaboration have particular weight in social practice?

AL: Particular challenges:

- exploitation by white artists, sanctioned by the arts (even the experimental arts) establishment, of disempowered communities of color; same risk with regard to gender conformity.
- power-sharing between artists and non-artist partners; who gets credit for the work, and how can you control that? If *Perfect City* is co-authored, but the arts world still calls it “Aaron Landsman’s project with young people on the Lower East Side,” how do we contradict that? It involves open conversations about money, withholding certain information from press and presenting partners, and empowering the co-authors to call bullshit on the way people think the art-making process really goes (lone genius creator and adoring simple minions).
- fundraising when you don’t know the form the work will take.
- resourcing long-term process.
- ethically working with people who may be considered ‘at risk’—in *City Council Meeting* we worked with a woman whose life was going to hell and at one point I ended up on the phone with Child

Protection Services in Arizona, who'd come to take her son from her. Was I qualified to evaluate her fitness as a mother? All I knew is that she was showing up for work with us.

SME: The questions you pose in making *Perfect City* address head-on much of the somewhat heated theoretical discussion on socially engaged work, on aesthetics versus political efficacy, and the place or purpose of art within capitalism. What insight on these questions has the project given you so far?

AL: I feel like it's kind of hard to say except that it's important that people get paid to think, and in a way that simple fact allows a little bit of amelioration of the distance between me as a kind of mid-career art-maker who can get fellowships based on prior work and people who maybe don't have a college degree, but are smart and creative and inventive. There's just so much history of work that Bishop talks about with the community art movement in the U.K. where people are basically exploited for their time because they're community members and artists go on to claim credit. And so, at the very least being able to pay people. We pay people 18 bucks an hour for meetings and for rehearsals, and we're having a really great intense debate about how much time then for some fall work-in-progress launches of *Perfect City* we can afford to give away. But I try to have really open conversations about money. Like the budget is transparent. My ability to get paid after the fact based on prior work is something I try to bring up a lot, and then also what that does is give the working group members who haven't had exposure to a lot of different kinds of work-lives, like the idea of the self-determined work-life that in your 40s you can arrive at by doing 27 different jobs and it's not like one prescribed thing. It's a lot about just who we are in the room, so that's one. And for *City Council Meeting* we always paid people to work with us. I guess the other part of it with *Perfect City* is, we think about it as a 20 year project so I've always said, look if you want to leave the group you can decide that you don't want us to use the material that you brought in. You can say you own our right to perform or present stuff that you may have brought in or instigated even if it's changed a lot since then. We can have that conversation. And everybody gets final say over intellectual property or if we publish something. It would be naive to say that that solves everything though, since I still have more access to resources, but it's a beginning I guess.

SME: Does the fact that the resources are accessible by you, I mean it's not that you are directly paying your collaborators, but how does that affect the politics of the work?

AL: It's a good question. I'd say that there's a relationship between money and time. So, the first say six months I was paying people and I'd raised all this money, and I was like, "I think we should do this!" with these round table performances, and after the group got more comfortable together there's a sense that other people could run meetings when I was gone, and could still get paid for them. That if it's a 20 year project, that we were working toward shared leadership, and then this year we're going to try to raise 10 grand via a crowdsourced fundraising thing, partially so that everybody has some agency in raising the money and paying ourselves. So they're incomplete solutions, but I think there's evidence of trying to share power and knowledge, differences, and move in a direction rather than solve it.

SME: As someone who also writes more "play-like plays," how is that process different?

AL: I'm not beholden to anyone else when I write. I'm basically trying to capture what I hear in my head when I wake up in the morning, the multiplicity of voices. The ethical considerations are very different (more, "will so-and-so recognize that I'm writing about them?" versus, "how can so-and-so be treated fairly and recognized for their collaboration?"). The process is often shorter, the constraints and opportunities clearer.

SME: Who else do you think is making great social practice work? What institutions are presenting it?

AL:

- Tania Bruguera is amazing.
- *Invincible and Complex Movements* in Detroit.
- Some of Matthew Moore's work in Arizona, and Gregory Sale (mixed feelings about the work, but happy about his process and questions).
- Also Rick Lowe and Project Row Houses in Houston are amazing. Kind of a gold standard.
- Autumn Knight (grew up at Row Houses and has worked on a couple of my projects) is a young artist who's working somewhat this way.
- Laundromat Project in NYC.
- Caroline Woolard does great work.
- *Artificial Hells* has great background on S. American work that fits this conversation—Bishop also has a great essay called “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics.”
- Clarinda Mac Low/CulturePush
- Jill Sigman
- Hassan Elahi (visual art but interactive/dialogic)
- Some of Dread Scott's work, maybe.
- David Levine's more conceptual work.

SME: What do you think is the future of social practice and socially engaged art?

AL: My fear is that the jargon will take over and the delightful formlessness will go away. My hope is that marginalized artists and communities will have more agency and voice.

[Created from two interviews in February and March 2017 by Stephen M. Eckert. Edited for length and clarity.]

Select Artists and Festivals Exploring the Fields of Social Practice and Socially Engaged Art:

Artist	Location	Website
Aaron Landsman	NYC	http://www.thinaar.com
Sojourn Theatre	USA	http://www.sojourntheatre.org
Michael Rohd	Chicago	http://www.thecpcp.org/who-we-are
Pedro Reyes	USA	http://www.pedroreyes.net
Cornerstone Theater	LA	http://cornerstonetheater.org
The Foundry Theatre	NYC	http://thefoundrytheatre.org
Ping Chong + Company	NYC	http://www.pingchong.org
Fusebox Festival	Austin	https://www.fuseboxfestival.com
Paul Chan	USA	http://www.greenenaftaligallery.com/artists/paul-chan
Creative Time	NYC	http://creativetime.org
Project Rowhouses	New Orleans	https://projectrowhouses.org
600 Highwaymen	NYC	http://www.600highwaymen.org
Jim Findlay	NYC	http://jimfindlaynyc.com
Tania Bruguera	NYC	http://www.taniabruquera.com
Caroline Woolard	NYC	http://carolinewoolard.com
Angela Melitopoulos	Europe	http://eipcp.net/bio/melitopoulos
Suzanne Lacy	USA	http://www.suzannelacy.com
Los Angeles Poverty Department	LA	https://www.lapovertydept.org
Rude Mechanicals	Austin	https://rudemechs.com
Theaster Gates	Chicago	http://www.theastergates.com
The Civilians	NYC	http://www.thecivilians.org
Timeslips	Milwaukee	https://www.timeslips.org
Ai Weiwei	China	http://aiweiwei.com
Josh Greene	LA	http://www.josh-greene.com/
Mammalian Diving Reflex	Toronto	http://mammalian.ca/

Jeremy Deller	London	http://www.jeremydeller.org/
Bread and Puppet Theatre	USA	http://breadandpuppet.org/
Public Movement	Israel	http://www.publicmovement.org/

Author Bios:

Stephen M. Eckert

www.stephenmeckert.com

Stephen M. Eckert is a queer theatre director focused on the creation of new work and critical engagement of canonical texts. His work examines themes of marginalization, dysfunction, communication, and masculinity. His artistic practice emphasizes composition, design, economy, and clarity. Eckert has directed in the U.S. and U.K. As the artistic director of the award-winning Promethean Theatre Company in New Orleans, he directed over 10 productions in its four year history including *Equus*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and the regional premiere of Annie Baker's *The Flick*. Recently he adapted and directed Marlowe's *Edward II* with Carnegie Mellon's School of Drama, premiered *ID, Please*, an opera 'for the age of Brexit and Trump' at the TÊTE À TÊTE Festival in London, and is currently workshopping the performance piece, *****NOT CLICKBAIT***** with playwright Izzi D'esposito, an exploration of trauma, makeup vlogging, and alien abduction. This spring Eckert will adapt and direct his thesis at CMU, Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*.

Sara Lyons

www.sara-lyons.com

Sara Lyons is a queer feminist director, performance-maker, and teaching artist creating new work across performance disciplines. Based in NYC and Pittsburgh, she seeks to explode convention in form and politic, creating work that is critically embodied around issues of gender, sexuality, race, and contemporary technology. Recent work includes *I'm Very Into You*, an original adaptation of the published email correspondence between Kathy Acker and McKenzie Wark. Her work has been presented at Wild Project, Ensemble Studio Theatre, HERE Arts Center, Fordham University, Culture Project, LaMaMa ETC, Dixon Place, and more. She has worked with students of all ages across New York City as well as in Mexico and South Africa. Sara holds a B.A. in Theatre and Gender Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison; is an alum of DirectorsLabChicago and the EMERGENYC program for political performance-makers at NYU's Hemispheric Institute; and is currently studying for her MFA as a John Wells Directing Fellow at Carnegie Mellon University.

Philip Gates

www.philipwgates.com

Philip Gates creates and develops original theatre and performance, with an emphasis on queer, choreographic, and participatory strategies. He is currently based in New York and Pittsburgh. His work as a director and performer has been presented at HERE Arts Center, Ars Nova, the Fisher Center, La MaMa, Dixon Place, Incubator Arts Project, The Brick, Cloud City, The Tank, and other venues, as well as with companies in Minneapolis and Maine. He has collaborated with Big Art Group, Witness Relocation, and AntiMatter Collective, and worked for several years as assistant to playwright David Adjmi. Current projects include a performance installation for one audience member exploring big data and digital participation, recently presented as part of the MIT Hacking Arts Festival. Philip holds a BA from Bowdoin College, is an alum of the La MaMa Directors Symposium, and is pursuing his MFA as a John Wells Directing Fellow at Carnegie Mellon University.

Rachel Karp

www.rachelkarp.com

Rachel Karp is a theater director whose work challenges language, legislation, and the status quo. She has developed and directed original work through Mabou Mines, Ars Nova, Incubator Arts Project, Actors Theatre of Louisville, IRT Theater, Women Center Stage, Dixon Place, Theater for the New City, and SPACE on Ryder Farm. Rachel has also developed and directed new plays at Carnegie Mellon University, Actors Theatre of Louisville, The Flea Theater, Powerhouse Theater Festival, the Samuel French Off-Off Broadway Festival, and Columbia University's

undergraduate and graduate schools with writers including Anne Washburn, Lucas Hnath, and Emily Schwend. Rachel has associate and assistant directed productions by some of the top theater directors and ensembles working today including Les Waters, Lila Neugebauer, Young Jean Lee, Aaron Landsman, The Mad Ones, PearlDamour, and Woodshed Collective. Always wanting to be exposed to new work, Rachel has been a script reader for The Lark and the Bushwick Starr and has worked as a dramaturg at the Jewish Plays Project, a literary assistant at Second Stage, and a literary intern at Soho Rep. She is a member of the Lincoln Center Theater Directors Lab, a former Resident Artist at Mabou Mines, a former Resident Director at The Flea, and a former Directing Intern at Actors

Terrence Mosley

www.terrencemosley.com

Terrence I Mosley is a writer/director born in Chicago, IL. After earning his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Acting from Syracuse University, he went on to work as an actor in some of Chicago's most esteemed companies including Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, Court Theatre, and Northlight Theatre. As a director, he has worked with the BBC, The Goodman Theatre, and Steppenwolf Theatre Company. Terrence is alumni of the Professional Leadership Program at Steppenwolf and served as the School at Steppenwolf Assistant Coordinator. He's the writer of ONE and GILBERT OR FRANK. Terrence's work concerns itself with exposing the social systems that a play is built on in order to build healthier, more equitable systems.