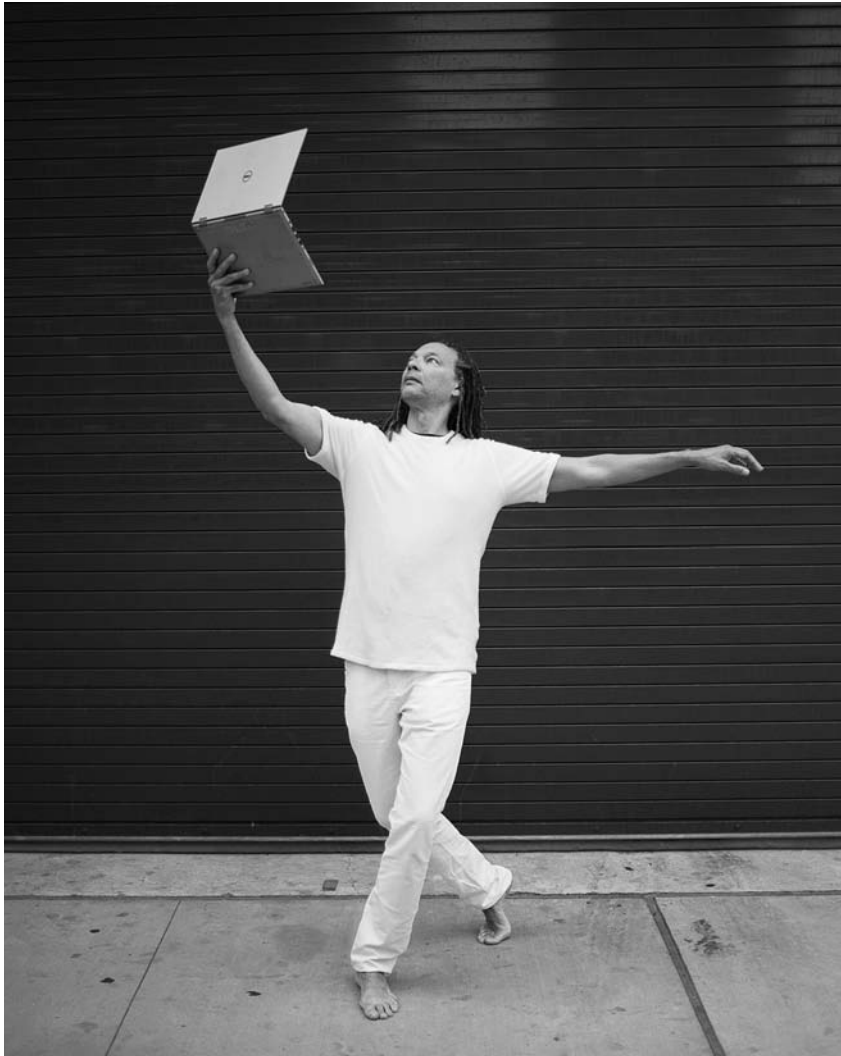


Thomas DeFrantz
in Netta
Yerushalmy's
Paramodernities,
New York Live
Arts, 2018. Photo:
Christopher
Duggan



THOMAS F. DEFRA NTZ

THE TALKING | DANCE SERIES

Around 2012 the interdisciplinary performance research group SLIPPAGE: performance|culture|technology moved toward a format of talking|dances. These works found their realization in prepared text more than in movement or live-processing interfaces that had been our sites of experimentation. The format emerged fairly organically as opportunities to “perform research” landed in our inboxes. These gigs were largely one-offs, invitations from festivals to offer up something that represented our current concerns and speak to shifts in the performance art market from the perspective of academic inquiry. SLIPPAGE projects tend to encompass a ten-year life cycle from first prospectus to final performance, so the arrival of the talking|dances seemed distended and almost unremarkable. We still had other dance-intensive works in production and on tour, and we were still engaged in new dance experiments, so these talking|dance works arrived alongside other processes in motion.

By 2015, we had probably performed a half dozen talking|dance pieces that explored Africanist aesthetics in dance, queers-of-color assembly, and family ancestries. Ben Pryor, director of the super hip and happening American Realness festival (sadly, now defunct), approached me about participating in the “Discourse” offerings for AR 2016. (Actually, I probably approached him about participating because the timing seemed right; luckily, he included us in the mix.) For *I Am Black (you have to be willing to not know)* [published as a performance text in *Theater* 47, no. 2] we decided to go decidedly lo-fi: a speaker, a platform, a microphone, a laptop, a few MP3 files to play sound, occasionally, through the event. We conceived the piece as a truth-telling rant, a manifesto, and a resistant withholding of information from the expected audience who would attend the show.

I Am Black fully intended to trouble the continual “arrival” of Black creativity into systems of experimental performance, and especially the ongoing validation of one or two Black artists into the hallways of “notable folx.” We thought about it as the pos-

sibility of Black speaking back to systems of power and the assumptive logics that tend to proscribe how artists of color participate in systems of museum and festival curation. We tend to be called on to explain our presences within these systems and implicitly to account for the disappointments of small audiences of color who attend these sorts of events. The text was originally prepared as an improvisation; I recorded myself talking for an hour into my phone and then edited a dictation software version of what I had said. *I Am Black* includes a speculative accounting for the number of Black people who might be in the room at an “experimental performance event”; remarkably, the number was spot-on for the premiere of the work in January 2016.

My own academic work started shifting around this time, in obvious response

Thomas F.
DeFrantz's *White
Privilege*, American
Realness, Gibney
Dance, New York,
2018. Photo: Ian
Douglas



to these talking|dance experiences. Writing projects took on the performative turn of open questioning and pointed rhetorical devices rooted in stories Black people share among themselves, especially about experiences of family. Narrated experience, from the perspective of being an African American artist working in academia and experimental performance, became a preferred mode of address, in sharp variance from my previous writing as well as from previous SLIPPAGE projects. By 2018 I had performed *I Am Black* a dozen times in the US and the UK and realized that live-processing events would be useful moving forward in this mode.

Pryor and *Theater* magazine cocommissioned *White Privilege* in 2018 (published as a performance text in *Theater* 48, no. 3). If *I Am Black* had addressed the experience of being one of few people of color in the context of experimental performance, *White Privilege* meant to call out systems of supremacy that create awkward containers for Black experience. Too often, well-meaning white people fail to recognize how they are entirely complicit in the disavowals that craft Black rage. They imagine social circumstance as a somehow “natural occurrence” and become satisfied by witnessing Black creativity as difference. The terms of white privilege allow for this detachment, as if we were not all incredibly traumatized by the racist, genocidal deeds of racist ancestors. Technology returned more pointedly here, as this work deployed the Synth Ball, a live-processing controller developed in the SLIPPAGE lab to underscore portions of the spoken text. Again the text was improvised, dictated, and then edited into a potential form; sections of spoken improvisation connect and disrupt the ultimate performance. Other movement crept into the series: whereas the speaker in *I Am Black* never rose from the lone table onstage, the speaker in *White Privilege* moved among the audience, demanding participation by moving nearer to the group.

By the third and final installment of this series in 2020, American Realness was dead. Eva Yaa Asantewaa, senior curatorial director of Gibney Dance (the New York venue for the 2018 Realness presentation), stepped up immediately in response to our inquiry about presenting *Soundz at the Back of My Head* during the annual meetings of APAP (Association of Performing Arts Professionals) in January, once again partnering with *Theater* as cocommissioner. We were given a black-box performance space and a week of production time in the space to develop the work. This iteration used a wearable device that produces sound based on data from the performer’s gesture; the speaker moves and dances in sections of improvised *Embodied Activation*, bringing the series back to identity as a talking|dancing|dance.

Soundz tries to get at the incessant noiziness of a creative drive and the contradictory information streams that overlap and diverge as any of us go through our days. In particular, it tries to account for an artist of color’s preoccupations in the time of crafting work. Its themes are those of the everyday enagements that color Black life—the questions of technological advances that impact us all differently depending on our

privilege and our resource pools; the endless loops of citation that bring ideas forward in performance making; the always-emotional space of reflection on family. Most of all, though, this work takes on predictive algorithms and the inevitable futures for Black life that are entirely entangled with our impossible tasks. SLIPPAGE had been involved in a yearlong research project on ethics in the design of artificial intelligence; we became increasingly concerned that AI models tend to be trained on information of past behaviors. If Black people have had severely limited access to notions of, say, experimental performance, what sorts of predictors could imagine an enlarged, enlivened Black presence? If AI relied on the missteps of the past for data, how could it predict a usable future for Black people?

As with the previous projects the text for *Soundz* was created through improvisation, but this time with very little safety net. Spoken ideas were not transcribed until a day or two before the first performance; the speaker talked and danced for an hour, moving among the archives created by the vestiges of research leading up to the event. The collaborating technologists improvised as well, and the practice revealed the form and the content of the event. Once we found ourselves in the thrall of figuring it out while we worked, unexpected possibilities arose, most of which are accounted for in the text of the work published here. Weirdly, while the work's meta-activity offers critiques of predictive algorithms and the ways that they seem to preaccount for behavior that we want to imagine as a more-free will, that's not really what happened for us as performers. We tended to realize what we were about to do along the way just as we did it, looping us all back into a queer temporality of things that we sort of already knew. We didn't manage to disassemble our choice making in allowing the event to emerge; rather, across the three performances of the world premiere week at Gibney, we discovered how to better share the things we feared, the things we didn't know, and the tactics we had assembled in working together. Performing improvisationally, we crafted our own predictive behaviors. The unknown variables—like those of today's living among COVID-19—remained elusive and blurry, a bit in the distance, slightly out of range.

The three texts at the core of the talking|dance series have been published by *Theater*, granting their ideas a coherent, shared living beyond the space and time of their original performance.¹ These published texts are translations and fabulations: speculative renderings toward a possible, more ideal form yet to be realized. No single performance included all of the information found in any of these three documents. In some ways, committing these events to a fixed textual formation undercuts their emergence as resistant provocation. But we improvised these events to force a reckoning with the nervous certainty that something else—something unspeakable—is already in motion, and we are along for the ride.

NOTES

i. Other works in the series include *imadeamess* (premiered at the Explode Queer Dance Festival, JACK, New York, 2017), and . . . *the future has always been black* (premiered at TanzKongress 2019, Dresden).