If Facebook has ever made you feel paranoid, then the intriguing and appealing virtual reality experience CVRTAIN, by technology designer and director Yehuda Duenyas, is for you. Not because the piece evokes the kinds of fears that often accompany social media use—that your data or identity are being stolen, your “friends” are not really friends, or “liking” isn’t what it used to be. Quite the opposite, in fact. CVRTAIN, which received its world premiere in January 2017 as part of Performance Space 122’s Coil festival, infuses the idea of virtual identity and sociality with warmth and care. Even, perhaps, with love. And it does so the old fashioned way—through live performance.

On the doorstep of Gallery 151 in New York’s Chelsea neighborhood, my companion and I found a vintage-looking sign with a pointing hand, inviting us in to “experience a STANDING OVATION in stunning VIRTUAL REALITY. The thrill of a lifetime.” Inside the gallery, a staff member (Gabrielle Young) greeted us warmly and invited us to linger and discuss the piece afterwards, as well as to take pictures to post on social media, an invitation also extended by several more signs. A red carpet led us to the back of the gallery to wait for our preassigned time to enter the experience (visitors sign up online for five- to ten-minute slots). There, we contemplated another vintage poster, this one featuring silhouettes in formal 19th-century garb, bowing and curtseying, with the following instructions: “Les Gestes de Révérence: Try these alone or in

Figures 1 & 2. The red carpeting leading to the small foam-board proscenium stages of CVRTAIN. Gallery 151, New York City, January 2017. (Photo by Andrew Federman)

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combination.” Although the figures featured were not all ballet dancers, the instructions referred to the so-called *gestes de révérence* — the curtseys, bows, and other gestures traditionally performed by ballet dancers to express their gratitude to an audience at the end of a dance sequence or to acknowledge a teacher at the end of class.

Beyond this point awaited several small, almost toy-like prosceniums, in the 19th-century picture-frame mode, but made of printed foam board with images of columns and curtains on them, and hung as well with real curtains. With a smile, a staff member summoned each of us by name to go behind one of these curtains. Once there, a friendly technician (Thomas Kavanagh) positioned me in the middle of a circle of red carpeting, gently placed a VR headset and headphones on my head, and gave me two bright-red hand controllers, the same color as the carpet and curtains. The headset was heavy on my head and the bridge of my nose, and the feeling of being cut off from the world outside was initially a little claustrophobic. I was grateful for the strip of light I could see at the bottom where the mask left a small gap, reassuring me of the reality outside. I stood behind the curtain, facing back out toward the waiting area, and the experience began.

As the VR user, you see in the headset initially is the backstage area of a vast, virtual theatre whose curtain color and other elements echo the design of the foam-board proscenium arch she is actually standing behind. Then, the virtual curtain before you opens and you gaze out at what seems to be a large, old-fashioned auditorium entirely filled with people silhouetted in the glare of the stage lights. Raise your arms, bow, curtsey, and try to remember and perform other gestures detailed on the chart outside, and the crowd cheers, roars, whistles, and laughs its approval. Perform other moves and they have no reaction; there might even be a hint somewhere in there of derisive laughter.¹

But there’s another catch, which you may have already anticipated — or perhaps not, depending on whether you’ve yet seen others perform (I hadn’t). When the curtain parts in the virtual, it also does so in the actual (you can feel the air move as the curtain before you opens). Wearing an ungainly headset, bowing, curtsey-ing, and waving the controllers, you are on display, along with the technician, who nimbly holds up the cord and maneuvers around you to keep you from tripping. As the actual crowd gathered at Gallery 151 watches, you commune with your virtual audience.

*CVRTAIN* was only one of the technology-intensive shows featured at Coil in 2017. The festival also included Yara Travieso’s *La Medea*, a dance-theatre performance and feature film version of Euripides’s play that was live-streamed around the world with an interactive audience component; and Antony Hamilton and Alisdair Macindoe’s *Meeting*, a choreographic study and soundscape in which two performers explored space and movement to the beat of 64 robotic percussion instruments. *CVRTAIN*, however, was specifically commissioned by PS122 as the first piece in a three-year program called “PS122 Virtual” devoted to expanding ideas of what “live” performance

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¹. Users’ reactions to the experience may be viewed at http://CVRTAIN.com/.

Figure 3. A participant dons a VR headset, assisted by a technician in *CVRTAIN*. Gallery 151, New York City, January 2017. (Photo by Andrew Federman)
is in the context of new digital tools and platforms. “PS122 Virtual” was created by the organization in 2016 after they received a “Building Demand for the Arts” implementation grant from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation (DDCF), which pairs artists and arts organizations together to “drive public demand for jazz, theatre, and/or contemporary dance.” The foundation’s goal for their grant to PS122 and Duenyas was specifically to stimulate interest in arts and performance in “young adults already engaged in social media and online gaming” (DDCF 2016). Duenyas will stay on to curate two other artists in the coming years (Duenyas 2017).

CVRTAIN brings a new angle to the short history of artistic performance using VR, a technology whose single-user orientation, cost, and time to set up has tended to limit its uses in “live” artistic performance (Dixon 2007:393). Groundbreaking early experiments, like Brenda Laurel and Rachel Strickland’s Placeholder (1993), were experienced by relatively few people (2007:371). Other works, like Char Davies’s Osmose (1994–1995) enabled larger audiences to take part by means of a screen that displayed for them a single immersant’s visual experience (372). From the late 1990s into the 2000s VR emerged as a powerful scenographic medium in architectural re-creations, including those of ancient theatres, and, after 2000, in plays that placed live actors within VR environments and gave audiences head-mounted displays or 3-D polarizing glasses (384–89). In these works, the technological possibilities of VR are explored together by audience and performer. CVRTAIN, however, is less interested in these goals—the actual capabilities here are limited, since we can’t walk around in the world or manipulate objects. In CVRTAIN, the disjunctive and asymmetrical relationship between the VR user and her audience, together with the other elements detailed above, becomes a proxy for the relationship between users of digital technology as such and the “real” world. Watching other visitors wave their controllers and perform the révérence ritual, or just play around, highlights their blindness to the “live” audience and the gallery/theatre in which they stand.

The striking juxtaposition of the live audience with the virtual one evokes larger socio-political questions about the asymmetrical nature of relationships conducted via social media in contemporary culture, as noted above. The goal, after all, in CVRTAIN’s virtual theatre, is for the user to get what one of my students referred to as the “likes” of the crowd; meanwhile, gallery attendees are encouraged to take and post pictures to Facebook and Twitter, where even more “likes” may be garnered. But are the “likes” you get online the same as the ones you might get in a face-to-face interaction? Such questions are raised by CVRTAIN’s headset, which, unlike the computer or iPhone screen (one hopes), is a two-way mirror of sorts—the audience can see you as you are, but you can’t see them; you only see your imaginary fans. The asymmetry calls to mind the real-world consequences of supposedly virtual acts. At one point, my tall companion brushed
against the edge of the proscenium while performing and was guided gently back to her place by her technician. Those who safeguard our experiences online are all too often invisible, like the workers in the global south who filter questionable social media content for Google, Facebook, and the like; or ineffectual, as in the case of “GamerGate,” where irate male gamers used Twitter to hurl abuse at women in the gaming industry.3 With the technician also framed in the proscenium, CVRTAIN metaphorically puts on display the necessary and important work of curating and caring for the experience of the digital user.

CVRTAIN, with its preoccupation with the relationship between digital and theatrical performance, has more in common with multimedia performances by theatre groups over the last decade than it does with the specifically VR artistic explorations noted above. Performance groups such as The Chameleons Group, The Wooster Group, and The Builders Association, among others, incorporate film and digital media into their works in innovative ways in order to explore the shifting boundary between “live” and mediated. Like these works, CVRTAIN makes theatrical and digital performances bleed together, and explores the temporal loops that result. The celebrity-style treatment by an attentive staff, the red carpet, the révérence gestures, the Victorian amusements sign, and the proscenium arch all frame the VR user as a live performer from several different historical eras simultaneously. At the same time, our attempts to bow and curtsey—as well as to uncover a “mystery” gesture noted on the poster outside—resemble a player’s attempt to “level up” in a role-playing video game to unlock secret passages and collect stats and abilities. Finally, since the goal is not, strictly speaking, to perform, but instead to successfully acknowledge the cheers of a crowd after a performance, whose content remains a mystery, CVRTAIN raises questions that implicate digital and theatrical performance equally. Are we performing even when we don’t know it, whether in the theatre, the gallery, or the VR environment? Is our acknowledgment of our performance a part of that performance, too? Where does performance stop, and how much is the live then mediated and the mediated actually live?

Such questions have been frequently posed over the last several decades by academics as well as artists, especially in relation to the thorny and difficult question of defining “liveness” in the context of film and television. For Susan Sontag, Herbert Blau, and Peggy Phelan, the organic presence of the body—vulnerable, mortal, and “dying in front of your eyes,” in Blau’s memorable phrase (1982:134)—is a defining feature of artistic performance, which requires the physical copresence of performer and audience. Since recording technologies are assumed to separate the latter in space and time, media cannot be “live” and live performance cannot be mediatized without significant loss. “To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction, it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology,” Phelan wrote in 1993 (149). For Philip Auslander, by contrast, there is no significant difference between live and mediatized ([1999] 2008:7); whatever medium feels most live, intimate, or direct is simply the one that is culturally, ideologically, and economically dominant at a given historical moment (circa 1900, he notes, it was theatre, now, he says, TV).

The question becomes even more thorny and difficult when we consider digital performance specifically. What is digital performance? Or, more specifically, where and when? Today, digital platforms distribute dance, theatre, and concerts instantaneously around the world. Using smartphones, audience members can be the subversive agents of this transmission, as well as its archivists and editors—they can even be participants, remaking the performance at a tap using the smartphone’s suite of video editing tools. In the wake of such developments, it would seem to make less sense than ever to try to conceptually separate performance as an ontology of “live” visual and acoustic gestures from the archive that stores its traces. Increasingly mobile and multiple,
the digital performer and performance are archive and repertoire all in one (see Taylor 2003), breaking out of past homes and haunts in the theatre, the streets, and, more recently, the museum, to take up residence in a paradoxical nowhere and a no-when (see Franko and Lepecki 2014; Bench 2008).

But to deny the distinction between live and mediated altogether arguably gives a free pass to mainstream digital technologies’ erasure of their own materiality and embodied labor, and along with it any moral and ethical consequence to their output. Such a denial unchallenged the pervasive and damaging cultural assumption that, as Katherine Hayles puts it, “information and materiality are somehow distinct and that information is in some sense more essential, more important, and more fundamental than materiality” (1999:18). Although digital performance may be just as evanescent, surrogate, and uncanny as live performance, it often achieves this effect, in contrast to much live performance, by actively and intentionally hiding its means of production in the interests of the corporate bottom line. It’s possible to watch a Met opera “live” from anywhere in the world, but the hardware and software that make this feat possible aren’t visible; opera fans watching clips on Facebook have no way of seeing which one of the company’s massive server farms hosts the live stream or how much revenue Facebook generates with every click. Should they care? Perhaps. But as Gilles Deleuze put it, “it’s up to them to discover what they’re being made to serve” (1992:7).

CVRTAIN, of course, belongs directly within this discussion, because it finds inventive new ways to undo the liveness/mediation distinction. Audiences for film, television, and digital live streaming are often thought to be distinguishable from “live” audiences by their capacity for voyeurism. Steve Dixon notes that, for instance, “Watching film, video, and digital media is a more voyeuristic experience than watching live performance, since in the literal sense of the word, the onlooker is looking from a position without fear of being seen by the watched” (2007:130). Yet CVRTAIN turns a live audience into voyeur of a digital user. It subverts another related distinction by placing the solitary and socially isolated VR immersive into the communal environment of a live performance space. Finally, the responses of the virtual audience in the headset are “live” in the sense that they are different every time. According to one participant’s conversation with the artist, which she shared with me, the crowd’s algorithm is somewhat unpredictable and can produce different outcomes when given the same user gesture.

In another sense, though, the piece is not about these categories at all. Academic discussions of liveness and many new media performance techniques explore the bleed between live and mediated, but they are often concerned to expose it, in order to show the degree to which we are mistaken about what is live and what isn’t. The Wooster Group’s Hamlet (2007), for instance, presupposes an audience of Susan Sontags, who think a theatre piece cannot, or should not, be made out of a film (surprise—it can be, and they did) (Sontag 1966; see Worthen 2008:308). Recent explorations in the new genre of cell phone performance similarly aim to unsettle participants, challenging assumptions about intimacy and privacy in “live” online encounters (see Mee 2016; and Schotzko 2016). However, such gestures of exposure are foreign to CVRTAIN, despite the conceit of the simultaneous virtual/actual curtain reveal. Perhaps this is because Duenyas and PS122 are seeking, via the DDCF grant, to build demand for the arts specifically with millennials, who were raised not in the 1960s–1980s—the era of big media, which also birthed performance studies, with its ontology of liveness—but in the 1980s–2000s, the era of small media, immersive and interactive, in which the gesture of exposing the live as mediated no longer has the power that it once did.

Instead of exposing liveness as mediated and media as live, CVRTAIN explores the (mostly) positive emotions generated by digital performance and proposes that performers and performances at the interface of the virtual and actual be cared for—even loved. In

4. In a more concrete sense, of course, without the presence of the living, dying, vulnerable body to distinguish its products from digital media, film, and television, the performing arts might have no reason for their existence, or more particularly, for state and private funding. Duenyas told me there has been considerable pushback against the project of PS122 Virtual for its endangerment of the mediated/live distinction (2017).
this, it borrows from a particular view of the theatre. Duenyas’s vision of theatrical performance, which we experience via the headset, is not primarily about seeing and being seen, an interplay of presence and absence that—as in Blau’s account—reminds us of our mortality; instead, theatre is produced and constituted by emotional exchanges—often unintentional—between performer and audience, as some recent theatre scholars have argued (Ridout 2006; Hurley 2010; Bernstein 2012). The cheers of the crowd suffuse us with a feeling of being loved and admired, but, as we try to remember the right gestures, a little bit of shame, too. (An acquaintance who visited the show after me had the idea of simulating a heart attack instead of attempting to perform the reverence gestures, but the love of the virtual crowd persuaded—or perhaps shamed—her out of it.) In the gallery itself, the friendliness and personal attention of the staff on the day I visited replicated the virtual appreciators; the technicians who helped us don our headsets and kept us from tripping over the cords were warm and solicitous, as if to deliberately offset any feelings of exposure and negativity that might accompany the theatrical reveal. There was something affecting, finally, in watching other people enjoying, blindly, their imaginary, loving crowds. In defiance of the voyeuristic set-up, and in tune with the feelings in the room, I wanted to protect them, not expose them.5

So what is digital performance? CVRTAIN answers not with what it is, but what it should be: a medium of communication, connection, social responsibility, and trust, whose users, however immersed they may be in their virtual worlds, also remember the blindnesses and the vulnerabilities that immersion entails, both in themselves and in others. If it is essential, as Hayles argues, to understand the ways in which the “entanglement” of the body and technology is the central condition of contemporary digital culture (Hayles 1999:29), then CVRTAIN suggests that this understanding need not come by way of the traumatic exposure—the big, par-anoid, reveal. It can come instead by way of more loving, careful, and everyday revelations and reminders—little nudges, lasting 5 to 10 minutes. One wonders if it might be possible to cultivate this understanding again and again as needed. Is there an app for that? There will be. CVRTAIN will live on; Duenyas plans to release a version on the HTC Vive store and possibly the STEAM VR store, as well as to make a mobile version (he notes that on a cell phone, the bowing interactions will be “more limited, but still accessible” [Duenyas 2017]). Perhaps, after too much social media use, when we feel a need to remind ourselves that there are two sides to the virtual mirror, we can pull out our phones and play with CVRTAIN for a while.

Or, we can just go to the theatre.

References

5. Duenyas has a sustained interest in the question of how to generate trust and love at the interface of the virtual and the actual, as seen most strikingly in his Emmy-award winning “Love Has No Labels” PSA for the Ad Council (accessible at http://www.ps122.org/ddcf-yehuda/). He also has a background in theatre, where he has become known for his work in helping actors feel comfortable in intimate scenes (see Paumgarten 2015).


Space for “Speculative Friendships”
Keith Hennessy and Jassem Hindi’s future friend/ships

Robert Avila

For us, the words of Captain Picard of the USS Enterprise resonate strangely, as a promise of joy and hospitality: “Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the Arab friendship. Its eternal mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before.”

— “Manifesto” (Hennessy and Hindi 2015)

The future was clearly in the offing, but which future and whose exactly? Here in San Francisco, as I prepared to enter CounterPulse on 16 December 2016 for future friend/ships, “a performance/installation/science fiction salon,” according to an accompanying zine created and performed by Keith Hennessy and Jassem Hindi, the plates beneath the city felt as slippery as ever. It was just five weeks after a national election that filled the predominantly liberal Bay Area with foreboding, and five weeks before the historic crowds of a national Women’s March answered the government’s formal consecration of naked predation with an exuberant inauguration of its own. Unofficial, and for the time being largely unstructured, such local gatherings grounded in popular will and solidarity brought like-minded voices together. Tonight’s audience augurs the marches to come in just this way, and seems less of a leisurely night out than a

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huddle of strangers and friends seeking a frisson of community.

As we enter the space through the theatre’s side corridor, the stage, bric-a-brac with objects and open for mingling, conveys nothing so much as the temporary, nomadic, unsettled state of things. Yet hospitality offers, at least for the moment, something like terra firma, as artists Jassem Hindi and Keith Hennessy, each wearing only a rubber butcher’s apron, wander among their arriving guests proffering greetings and Middle Eastern sweets. The strains of an Arabic pop song are in the air, and everything is bathed in an orange light the color of Tang, as the audience gingerly inspects the onstage scene.

What appear to be mementos, talismans, evidence, building blocks...are strewn loosely about the stage. It’s hard to miss the poster-size photograph of Palestinian-born scholar Edward Said leaning against the right wall, his hand cupped demurely over a laugh; or the other large-print photograph, leaning against the back wall, this one of a youthful Nazik El Malaika, the Iraqi poet, also smiling, her expression confident and serene. A bright, over-long floral-patterned drape, hanging from the light grid but tethered for now at one side of the stage, cascades into a colorful pile on the floor. At the opposite end from it, taped to the corner of the back wall, a painted banner shows the words “Cold War,” “Civil War,” and “Holy War” blooming from a set of leafy curving vines.

Setting down a bowl containing fragrant herbs soaked in water, Hennessy invites those standing nearby to refresh themselves in what, he explains, is a spring ritual practiced in Syria and the Levant, Jeudi des Plantes, ancient enough to straddle the Islamic and pre-Islamic pasts. Several audience members, squatting beside him to listen, partake of the ablution. Dispersed across the floor are more elements of the presentation to come: some small toy drones; a loose cassette tape; a fist-full of small bells; a small open jewelry box; childlike drawings in crayon; an inflated exercise ball; a copy of Bagdad Calling by photographer Geert van...
Kesteren; a voice recorder; a mixing board, microphone and effects boxes connected by looping cables; a weathered LP titled “Europa” duct-taped to the floor as well as to a mic cable and a strand of wire rising to the ceiling.

Most prominently scattered about the stage are two dozen or more photo portraits, lovingly framed with colored paper or aluminum foil, each labeled in both English and Arabic with the name and title of the subject: Nizar Qabbani, Poet; Ruqia Hassan, Journalist; Samuel Delaney, Writer; Anousheh Ansari, Astronaut; Octavia E. Butler, Writer; Donna Haraway, Cyborg; Etel Adnan, Poet; Munther Hindi, Inventor; Mohammed Fares, Astronaut; Sun Ra, Alien; Asmahan, Singer; Omar Aziz, Decent Man...

Some of the faces beam from official portraits, for example, the several photographs of astronauts, dressed in their flight suits. Many of the photo subjects, we soon learn, are from Syria; most are from the Arabic-speaking world, their expressions almost invariably smiling or relaxed: overlapping categories of scientists, astronauts, activists, poets, musicians, writers, physicians, feminists, political dissidents, journalists, fictional TV characters impersonating Arabs (in the case of “Jeannie,” the bottled Orientalist fantasy portrayed by Barbara Eden in a 1970s American sitcom), and real Arabs transported into TV fantasy (in the case of King Abdullah bin Al Hussein of Jordan, in costume for his guest appearance in episode 35 of Star Trek: Voyager).

Jeannie notwithstanding, the individuals from the USA (Sun Ra, Butler, Haraway, Delaney) at first seem to form something of a distinct constellation as dissident citizen-subjects of the empire. But they more confidently take their place in the same firmament as their Arab counterparts once we remember their common investment in science fiction (SF) across their respective fields—music for Afrofuturist free-jazz artist and intergalactic pioneer Sun Ra and his Arkestra; the novel for Octavia E. Butler, who brings African American experience and spirituality to bear in socially and psychologically acute interventions in the genre; fiction and essays for Delaney, whose forays into SF explore the systemic logic of race and class; or the cybernetic interspecies feminist theory of Donna Haraway, who in foraging for new narrative worlds multiplies SF into a continuum of affinities and parallel universes: Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation, String Figures, Speculative Feminism, etc. (Haraway 2016). Together they contribute to a set of coordinates that demarcate a kind of hyperspace of possibilities, the Arab Futurism that Hindi and Hennessy soon explicitly invoke.

For what is about to unfold, science fiction entails the emergence of a political imagination whose utopian drive can be gleaned from a corresponding dismantling, circumventing, rewriting, or transcending of dominant constructions of identity. These include especially the received categories of race, ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, and biology that go into defining the narrative limits, the territorial claims, all the embedded aggressions and inducements of global capitalist culture.

In this terrestrial but space-friendly and space-seeking environment, any lingering focus on electoral politics starts to feel limited not to say purblind, and indeed soon dissolves in the orangey pool of sounds, signs, and faces as the audience arranges itself on the risers or, more intimately, on cushions at the front of the stage. Some more expansive, hybrid consciousness is being seeded, even as general anxiety about the nation-state and the orientalist logic of Western empire emerge as a perilous substratum of this makeshift landscape.

**Lift Off**

With the audience at last seated, Hennessy sits onstage with a handset and begins operating one of the toy drones, which proceeds to warble and skid into the feet of those seated on the cushions at the front. Naturally, this playful effort proves distressingly impossible to mentally separate from the lethal exercises of the toy’s Predator cousin, hovering invisibly and with consummate technological sophistication over the heads of Syrian or Yemeni or Iraqi or Afghani children. Meanwhile Hindi, stationed at the sound equipment and effects pedal stage left, is running his fingers along the amplified wire anchored to the LP on the floor, accompanying Hennessy’s ultimately aborted attempt to lift the sputtering toy off the floor with a buzzing, menacing drone of his own, whose sonic reverberations spread everywhere, permeating the space.
Leaving the sound looping, Hindi places a box with a painted smiley face on it over his head and begins to dance around. Hennessy dons a falcon head, like a cap atop his own, and joins in. Their movements are ludic and faltering, both grand and trivial as they pass by one another in vaulting sweeping steps, slow plodding turns, oddly executed footwork. Half blind in their headgear, they sometimes glance off one another or lock arms for a short twirl. The scene is quietly wrenching in its passion and precariousness, its boldness and awkwardness. It comes to appear like a shaky, pliant dance with some overweening force, a flailing and ecstatic exorcism waged against an incommensurable order.

*future friendships*, which premiered in Hamburg in May 2015 and had its US premiere at American Realness in New York in January 2016, tends toward the sociable. The performance is ingenuous and direct. In a self-produced zine offered to all interested parties at the conclusion of the performance, its cocreators describe the work as “an idiot’s perspective on violence and despair, made from oracles and drones and childish dances” (Hennessy and Hindi 2015). In addition to images and texts from the performance, the zine (designed by Chris Cuadrado) offers further elaborations and fabulations related to objects from the stage. More than a souvenir or an attempt at explication, the publication and its gifting reinforce the artists’ strategy to vest meaning and political possibilities in acts of social exchange—or, maybe more precisely, “speculative friendship,” which we learn from the zine is Hennessy and Hindi’s own contribution to Donna Haraway’s concatenation of definitions for SF. “SF,” they paraphrase Haraway approvingly, “keeps politics alive” (Haraway 2016:150).

Indeed, faced with the spiraling immensity of death and destruction being visited on an ever-growing expanse of what gets called variously and inadequately the Muslim world, the Middle East, and the Arab world, these childish dances of Hennessy and Hindi have about them a hint of madness, despair, and defiance all at once. It’s an unsettled and unsettling soil from which the piece seeks to bring forth tenuous shoots of affinity, the flickering beginnings perhaps of newly imagined, transnational communities.

As an Arabic hip hop song breaks in, the two dancers now move with even more abandon, executing big, reckless, carefree leaps in a frenzy of foolish fun that brings to mind the cannily inept masquerade of the Swiss contemporary artist duo Peter Fischli and David Weiss in the soiled, sagging costumes of their recurring alter egos, Rat and Bear. A moment later the mood shifts again as we hear a female chanter sing an achingly romantic Arabic ballad from what sounds like the 1960s or ’70s. Hindi and Hennessy clasp arms and spin each other around. Then Hennessy drops to the floor and scoots sideways on his bottom for a few seconds before bounding to his feet again and delivering some high kicks as both performers attempt more awkward bare-assed leaps in their flapping butcher aprons.

Finally, the music drops away and Hindi and Hennessy doff their masks and plant themselves center stage, facing one another across the bowl of scented water, the Jeudi des Plantes the audience experienced earlier. Panting and sweaty, they wash their faces, gently ministering to one another. Another delicate Arabic song is heard. The performers unleash the large
floral-patterned curtain stage right and draw it across the full width of the stage, effectively cutting it in half; we see as it unfolds that it is two distinct floral patterns stitched together. Hennessy and Hindi disappear behind the curtain as it billows and breathes like a tent, portending some transaction or metamorphosis underway in designer (and cocreator) Dennis Döscher’s crepuscular lighting.

When they emerge again a moment later, they are costumed, chameleon-like, in fabric that matches their respective sides of the curtain. Hindi, stage right, also wears a hairless rubber flesh-toned mask with only a few small holes in it through which his eyes, nostrils, and mouth are just visible; Hennessy, draped in the second, more violet-colored floral pattern at his end of the sheet, wears a drooping conical hood of the same material, blending completely with the background. Each carries one of the large portraits that were leaning against the walls of the stage—Nazik El Malaika and Edward Said—holding them up to one another and to the audience, before placing them against the wall of fabric behind them. They then retrieve each of the smaller portraits as well.

Each portrait is held up and its subject verbally introduced to the audience. Hindi’s manner is unroused and unguarded. Sometimes a word or two suffices, sometimes Hindi decides to dwell longer and expand on a detail of the given individual. Here we learn, for example, that the inventor Munther Hindi is the performer’s own uncle, a decent man without necessarily any wider claim to fame. We learn about Ruqia Hassan, a Syrian blogger from Raqqa killed by Daesh (ISIS); and another blogger/writer, Razan Ghazzawi, still alive somewhere in Syria but unable to travel; and Yasmin Khan, artist, curator, and the publisher of the Arab online science fiction journal *Sinbad Sci-Fi*. We learn that the singer whose voice we have been listening to is the great Syrian-born Egyptian singer and actress Asmahan (1912–1944). We meet cosmonaut Mohammed Ahmed Faris, “the first Syrian refugee in space”; Anousheh Ansari, the first Iranian and the first Muslim woman in space; artist Larissa Sansour who, in her 2009 video *A Space Exodus*, became “the first Palestinian in space.” And this is when we learn that in 1995 Jordan’s then crown prince, now king, a descendent of the Prophet Muhammad and a serious devotee of *Star Trek*, became a crewmember of the USS Voyager for one episode.

The combination of intimacy and an almost flippant presentation makes for a canny contrast. Hindi makes clear that the subjects are known (to him and Hennessy, among others) and therefore knowable; at the same time, his off-handed delivery turns almost mischievously on the fact that they are also unknown, at least to most in the audience, and at least to this point: Did we in the audience know there were Arabs in space? Or that that particular figure you might recognize was from the Arabic-speaking world? At the same time, each fleeting detail speaks of a personality and experience that can’t be reduced to any nationality or ethnicity alone, pointing as they do to the unknowable, because limitless, depth and expanse of any human life. Perhaps more than anything else it’s this excess of being that, in defying all preconceptions or stereotypes, restores their integrity, and also their relation to the rest of us, as the portraits pass...
from the hands of the performers to those of
the audience.

The lives gently limned in this way shimmer momentarily like the distant stars that flicker across the viewing screen of TV’s retro-starship of the future, the Enterprise — each exceeding the grasp of any box or frame that would try to fix it in place. This disruption of categories of identities at work in future/friendships makes room for the empathy and solidarity the piece urges and longs for. It’s as if the increasingly fragmented world, so brutally and irrevocably signaled by the geopolitical black hole engulfing the onetime birthplace of civilization — and despite continued declarations of global unity by the failed institutions of the post–Cold War order — nevertheless makes room (this room, this now) for new, unexpected, temporary configurations of solidarity and possibility.

Kneeling in the folds of the enormous curtain, Hindi takes a microphone and presses his lips and tongue through the mask in an effort to speak, as he reads from the text of a manifesto (reproduced in the zine), while Hennessy manipulates properties around him or places a fraternal hand on his shoulder. Accented with fictitious or half-fictitious details such as, “In 1950, Keith and I started a series of paintings entitled: ‘Donna Haraway as the mythical city of Baghdad,’” the 500-word manifesto yearns for a path through intractable exigencies: “The fragile status of women, the aggressive meddling of imperial interests, the pressure of wild capitalism, the corruption, the prejudices, the lack of historical understanding... What is then left for us to offer? Our capacity to charm our friends with our imagination. Our capacity to help them slip into the night” (Hennessy and Hindi 2015). The night full of stars, with new worlds to explore and create, Hindi and Hennessy embark on a collective project of imagination that they call, after Haraway, “speculative friendship.”

We want a fictional future. We need a new place to host our guests, a tent, a cave, a pyramid, or even a hammam. We are the astronauts of our territories. We will walk all the way from Detroit to Ramallah — in space suits if we have to. We need an interstellar program, a gender disruption department, a department for the satellites of our solitude, a great animal reconciliation program, a research facility for biological and nonbiological sentient presences. We need a particle accelerator capable of clashing metaphors against metaphors. (Hennessy and Hindi 2015)

**Dissent into Final Frontiers, Strange New Worlds**

Hindi disappears behind the curtain and begins creating sounds, manipulating parts of his makeshift electronic rig to produce buzzing low drones and washes of static. Hennessy pulls back the fabric curtain a moment later, hooking it behind two tables stacked at the rear corner of the stage, revealing Hindi in a tracksuit crouched over his instruments on the floor. The stage goes dark for a few minutes except for some white slashes of light that cut across the stage, and which begin to fill with swirling smoke until they become roiling planes of dust like the rings of Saturn. Hennessy, wearing a shimmering sequined tunic, begins to sing a lament, the melody rising and falling, his words slowly drifting and reverberating in space, as he moves languidly around the stage. Floor lights cast a spectral glow as Hindi continues to manipulate the instruments on the floor and work the amplified wire, further uncoiling the sound mix like a tether to Hennessy’s wandering solo.

A recorded voice is heard, modulated into a high alien register: “When the madness of the people knocks at the door we go and open.” Hennessy is now standing in profile atop the tables at the back of the stage, the falcon head perched on his cranium. The droning soundscape has ceased as the voice continues. Hindi, meanwhile, in striped track pants, is slowly crawling crablike along the floor of the stage, looking like a daredevil on the face of a skyscraper. Hennessy, now on the floor, is striking poses nearby, eventually balancing atop the inflated exercise ball in the red-orange punchbowl light. A recorded male voice is heard singing a song in Arabic. The smoke dissipates; another recorded male voice recites a poem, a passage from “The Arab Apocalypse” by Etel Adnan, as Hennessy and Hindi continue their
strained balancing movements about the stage, which is slowly growing brighter.

The final movement of the piece invokes a stunning transformation of the performance space itself, courtesy of lighting designer Döscher, who incrementally bleeds the contrast from the room with a rarefied light that very gradually washes away the audience’s depth perception. Three-dimensional space collapses, and Hennessy and Hindi become one with the plane of their pastiche environment, joining the picture portraits in the plane of two-dimensional space. Space collapses before our eyes and time itself seems to slow almost to a standstill. What is this space, this place, this flattened frontier? Is this the future, now realized? Adnan’s words continue—“In our wakeful hours there are flowers which produce nightmares.” The speaking then ceases, leaving only the clicking, looping static of the sound mix and the breathing of the performers as they come to a halt.

In the face of the overwhelming and incommensurable suffering of the Syrian people and so many others in the wider Middle East, the naïve posturing of future friendships contains more than a hint of ambivalence and ambiguity, as if weighing the immense drag of gravity on the collective project of liberation the performance channels. Nevertheless, in a move that evokes both the countergenealogical practice of “temporal drag” as described by Elizabeth Freeman (2010) and the utopian horizon charted by José Muñoz’s reading of queer futurity (2009), the piece couches its deep cry and appeal in a beautiful collage that reconfigures disparate triumphs, agonies, and visions into a dream of its own—the dream of a house with many residents and an open door, or better yet a spaceship with a village aboard, bound for contacts across space and time in a multiverse of speculative fabulations. Its course points us back beyond the stage to the events of the day, and the mass mobilizations around the country and world. The Woman’s March that will follow in the coming weeks, the marches and movements that preceded it and that will follow—all resonate with the same claim to community and possibility, the speculative friendships bound for new horizons.

References
Choreographic Transmission in an Expanded Field

Reflections on “Ten Artists Respond to Trisha Brown’s Locus”

Hope Mohr

with contributions from Larry Arrington, Gerald Casel, Gregory Dawson, Peiling Kao, and Xandra Ibarra

Photos by Margo Moritz

Introduction

I’m a former Trisha Brown dancer. I also direct the Bridge Project, a presenting program committed to multidisciplinary exchange. The Bridge Project began in 2010 as a platform for investigating the post-modern lineage with a special commitment to female choreographers, but has shifted to programming that expands the canon. I approach curating as a form of community organizing. When I envision or evaluate a program, I use a multi-disciplinary lens and draw on current conversations in literature, politics, and visual art.

In 2016, as director of the Bridge Project, I initiated “Ten Artists Respond to Locus,” presented in association with Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, 14–15 October 2016. For the project, I partnered with other curators to commission 10 Bay Area artists from multiple disciplines to learn Brown’s dance Locus (1975) and respond with new work. The Locus project was the first time that the Trisha Brown Dance Company (TBDC) had allowed one of Brown’s dances to be transmitted beyond the company for the explicit purpose of inspiring new works of art by artists who hailed from disciplines other than dance.

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Figure 1. Isaiah Bindel and Hope Mohr in Gregory Dawson’s 15, part of “Ten Artists Respond to Locus,” 14 October 2016, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. (Photo by Margo Moritz)
Locus exemplifies Brown’s use of what she called “pure movement,” or, in her words, “movement that has no other connotations. It is not functional or pantomimic. Mechanical body actions like bending, straightening, or rotating would qualify as pure movement provided the context was neutral” ([1975] 2002:87). To make this “abstract dance,” Brown “designed an imaginary cube for each performer to inhabit, with points on it labeled with numbers corresponding to the letters of the alphabet. Dancers’ gestures literally spelled out sentences from a statement written by Brown as a professional autobiography” (Goldberg 2002:39). As former Brown dancer Mona Sulzman writes, Brown “immersed herself in self-imposed restrictions [...b]y remaining within the imaginary cube, adhering to the sequence of numbers (which once were letters and words), and using only one or several of the twenty-seven points as her sources for a given movement” (1978:122).

As the project director, I wanted to facilitate a conversation inspired by Brown’s work that included artists from a range of artistic disciplines and cultural backgrounds. I also wanted the culminating performances to bring together different aesthetics. To these ends, I made some initial selections, including a poet (Frances Richard), a visual artist (Tracy Taylor Grubbs), an experimental performance artist (Larry Arrington), and a choreographer with a connection to the Brown lineage (Gerald Casel, who danced with Stephen Petronio, Brown’s first male dancer). I then asked several curators rooted in different disciplines in the Bay Area to add to my list by nominating an artist, which resulted in the following cohort:

- Xandra Ibarra (performance art — nominated by Keith Hennessy)
- Affinity Project (theatre — nominated by Erika Chong Shuch)
- Cheryl Leonard (new music — nominated by Pamela Z)
- Amy Foote (new music — nominated by Adam Fong)
- Peiling Kao (choreography — nominated by Dohee Lee)
- Gregory Dawson (choreography — nominated by Yerba Buena Center for the Arts)
- Larry Arrington (choreography — nominated by Hope Mohr Dance)
- Gerald Casel (choreography — nominated by Hope Mohr Dance)
- Tracy Taylor Grubbs (visual art — nominated by Hope Mohr Dance)
- Frances Richard (poetry — nominated by Hope Mohr Dance)

The above artists participated in an intensive two-week workshop with Diane Madden, co-artistic director of the Trisha Brown Dance Company, which included daily morning movement classes and afternoon sessions dedicated to learning Locus (or rather, as much of the dance as was possible given time constraints and the range of people in the room). After an additional two weeks of independent rehearsal, the project culminated in 10 premieres, all in one evening, by the participating artists in response to the process. The 10 pieces comprised Ten Artists Respond to Locus, which was presented for two nights at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

Alongside these new works were performances of Locus Solo, a solo version of the original Locus quartet, by four different dancers: Karla Quintero, Jenny Stulberg, Sarah Chenoweth, and myself. One version of Locus Solo was performed at the start of the program each night and one happened in the lobby at intermission. The combination of new work and repertory placed challenges on Madden, who faced the task of not only transmitting the dance as repertory, but also mentoring the 10 artists to make new work, all within a short time period.

The Locus project was part of the TBDC’s renewed commitment to sharing Brown’s legacy with a broader audience. Traditionally, choreographic transmission of Brown’s work has occurred from body to body among current and former company members or from company members to other dance companies, often with the assistance of archival video and always with rigorous dedication to historical accuracy. The Locus project instead posed new questions: How do you transmit a historical work of art to inspire contemporary authorship, as opposed to transmission solely to inspire allegiance to the original? How do you transmit a work of art in such a way that allows artists from different backgrounds and disciplines to engage with the form on their own terms? These are questions not only of structure and resources, but also pedagogy, ethics, and aesthetics. Following are images from a selection of the new works, artist reflections written after the completion of the project, and curatorial questions inspired by the process.
Xandra Ibarra’s *a view from outside the cube* was a duet performed with floor fans edged with neon lights blowing large translucent plastic tarps across the space. After a sequence of mirrored gestures, Ibarra and dancer Jenny Stulberg crawled under the tarps and delivered a guttural song into the fans.

What are the political and aesthetic implications of the premise of “pure movement”?

“Pure movement allows the individual to be seen.” — Diane Madden, Co-Artistic Director, TBDC, speaking to commissioned artists in a morning movement class.

“I viewed *Locus* as an attempt to define absolute exactness, dimension, and space. This then led me to want to move against mapping and measurement in Brown’s work. I attempted to create abject movements and sounds that reflected my position as racialized subhuman other. I played with plastic to create metaphorical spaces devoid of matter, movements that conjured animalistic and insect type qualities, and vocalizations that were sung to exhaustion. I created an ‘Alphabet song’ as a nod to Brown’s use of the alphabet in *Locus*. It helped me to address language as code or grammar of Western imperialism. I sang the alphabet while exhausting each note and the voice produced a quality of sound that is monstrous (but pleasurable) and could be associated with speech disorder, primitiveness, or someone who has difficulty enunciating words or sounds.” — Xandra Ibarra, performance artist (Oakland)
Choreographer Gerald Casel and dancer Suzette Sagisi in Casel’s Taglish, part of “Ten Artists Respond to Locus,” 14 October 2016, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. (Photo by Margo Moritz)

Choreographer Gerald Casel and dancer Suzette Sagisi in Casel’s Taglish. Taglish brought together “Filipino and American elements in one space to represent what our bodies have been exposed to as dancers. Contending with the tensions between lineage, appropriation, ‘biculturality,’ and representation, the dance asks whether it is possible to present the body adorned by and simultaneously devoid of its culture and history through performance.” (From program notes by Gerald Casel)

Is “pure movement” universal?

“Formal constraints have the capacity to invigorate creativity, however, they do not function equally for all bodies. More precisely, there is no such thing as pure movement for dancers of color. In my view, it is difficult to separate structural and systemic power from race. Dancing by brown and black bodies is read differently than dancing by white bodies. One of the assumptions that postmodern formalism arouses is that any body has the potential to be read as neutral—that there is such a thing as a universally unmarked body. As a dancer and choreographer of color, my body cannot be perceived as pure. My brown body cannot be read the same way as a white body, particularly in a white cube.” — Gerald Casel, choreographer (Santa Cruz)
Choreographer **Peiling Kao** and visual artist **Tracy Taylor Grubbs** in Kao’s *per*mute*ing*, which paired Kao’s interpretation of the *Locus* vocabulary, freed from the confines of the cube, with Kao’s own movement. Painter Grubbs unrolled a long scroll of rice paper with her feet throughout the dance.

*Are culture and form inseparable?*

“I incorporated the movement from all the dance forms I’ve encountered, adopted, rejected, and absorbed living in this Taiwanese dancing body. The dance lineages that I carry in my body via years of movement training have shaped my identity as a mover and choreographer. No one seems to have a problem seeing me as an Asian dancer when I do Eurocentric dance forms. Ironically, when I did Taiwanese/Chinese movement in *per*mute*ing*, viewers started seeking cultural meanings. An audience asked me if I was ‘trying to empower my Asian identity.’ But I have never thought of empowering my Taiwanese identity by using Taiwanese movement in my work. The audience’s feedback led me to several questions: How do people assume and perceive the separation between Western and Eastern dance forms? Why do I need to do anything to ‘empower’ my Taiwanese identity? Why does the doing of Taiwanese movement or speaking Taiwanese suddenly allow people to see me as Taiwanese? From my perspective I am already a Taiwanese, and nothing can change that. There is no need for empowerment.” — Peiling Kao, choreographer (Oakland/Honolulu)
Madison Otto and Cameron Lasater in Gregory Dawson’s *15*, a work that featured six contemporary ballet dancers moving in and out of a grid of square light projections with dense, driving movement inspired by Brown’s original sequence of numbers on the imaginary cube.

*How can choreographic transmission acknowledge the historical, cultural, and political experiences of the bodies involved?*

“I was interested in what happens when the cube moves. And how the cube limits choreographic possibilities. I was also interested in applying a creative concept developed by a white woman into my gay African American male creative thought process. My cultural questions were consciously a part of my development process; culture was a factor I could not neglect.” — Gregory Dawson, choreographer (Oakland)
Larry Arrington in *quarter*, a solo by Arrington that began with her balancing on a rock and raising her arms repeatedly to the sky. The solo featured other repetitive movements, such as turns in relevé, as well as several props, including an aquarium, which Arrington filled with water, a potted plant, and silhouettes of horses made from plastic and tinfoil. At the end of the dance, water was poured from the catwalk down onto the potted plant.

*How can choreographic transmission be a platform for contemporary authorship?*

“You can use material from *Locus* if it is ‘a borrowing that furthers your work.’” — Diane Madden, Co-Artistic Director, TBDC, in conversation with the commissioned artists during the workshop phase of the project.

“Diane Madden has danced in Trisha Brown’s work longer than I have been alive. I was so inspired by her beautiful leadership and her spirit as a dancer. Having Diane Madden introduce Trisha Brown’s work put a welcome spin and complication on a Western approach to expertise. My exposure to the monolith of the Judson canon has been frustratingly void of body, heart, context, time, and relationship. Having the dancer, Diane, centered as the expert made my heart full. In this way I was finally able to situate Judson in the very situatedness that I love about dance: how it is something that is passed from body to body.” — Larry Arrington, choreographer (San Francisco)
Curatorial Directions for Further Research

“Ten Artists Respond to Locus” illuminated the importance of creating space for cultural questions as contemporary artists engage with work from the past. As the project organizer, I initially chose to take a hands-off approach to questions of cultural identity in order to avoid interfering with the process of choreographic transmission and the participating artists’ processes. However, in retrospect I see my neutrality as complacency—a curatorial blind spot. Christina Sharpe refers to the “violence of abstraction” in relationship to the African American experience (2016:100), indicating that in some contexts, abstraction can be dehumanizing. As curators, we can’t take the neutrality of abstraction for granted. How can curators make dialogue about cultural identity essential not only in the context of presenting artists of color, but also for white artists, so that whiteness is no longer the default cultural perspective?

Transmission of historic dance forms enables contemporary artists to situate themselves in a progression of ideas. Dance legacies, like forms of history, are valuable archives that both “influence and challenge the definitions we construct for ourselves” (Rankine 2016:12). How can we engage with archives while recognizing that a driving force behind a creative act may lie not only in influences from past forms, but also in the ways an artist perceives those forms? Choreographic transmission in an expanded field involves valuing the subjective perception and embodiment of the original material as much as valuing the material’s original conception.

What methods might facilitate choreographic transmission in an expanded field? We need more research that approaches choreographic archives as open scores. Incorporating improvisational practice in relationship to source material could be one way to honor participant subjectivity and embodiment in the process of choreographic transmission. Diane Madden and I discussed the need to incorporate improvisational practice in the Locus project. Indeed, improvisation was a central aspect of Brown’s original dance. However, time constraints prevented us from fully utilizing this essential tool.

As curators, we must attend to the methods through which we interface with artistic archives and bring them into current cultural awareness. In our conversations with the past, and with each other, we must cultivate consciousness on all sides about which paradigms to preserve and which to change.

References


