

Activating the Archive: On Trajal Harrell's *The Return of La Argentina*

By Sara Jansen

Trajal Harrell slowly dances his way to the front of the room. Passing through the audience, he presses a bright pink, flower-patterned dress against his chest, animating its ruffled skirt with his steps. He doesn't wear the dress, but holds it slightly in front of him, at times pressing it closer at the waist, or clasping it near to his heart with both hands, as if to cover up his body, or to protect the garment. The dress appears uncannily alive, suggesting the presence of another person, a dance partner, lover, or ghost.

The opening section of *The Return of La Argentina*, which was presented in a small second-floor gallery at The Museum of Modern Art in October 2015, is one of the rare moments in which Harrell's movements allude to something remotely resembling La Argentina's "Spanish dance." Then he sits down and starts over: "I've discovered that if I have some potato chips and orange juice from two bottles...that the dance goes better. We'll see if it works this time," he says. "Let's begin." However, he continues, "And then I must have yogurt.... And white peach jam and raw pistachios from Greece.... And before I finish...." As he speaks, the dancer walks back and forth to one of three piano stools, fetching more ingredients to prepare his bowl of yogurt. His movements trigger the jingle of the Japanese convenience store chain Family Mart. It is the only sound used in the solo aside from an iPhone alarm and the occasional voice seeping in from neighboring galleries.

It is immediately clear that *The Return of La Argentina* is not a re-enactment of *Admiring La Argentina*, the famous solo by *butoh* legend Kazuo Ohno (1906–2010) that inspired Harrell's performance. Considering Harrell's *modus operandi* in previous work, his choice to work on a specific, pre-existing performance is surprising. Harrell came to Ohno's solo by way of his archival research on Tatsumi Hijikata (1928–1986), who directed *Admiring La Argentina* when it premiered in Tokyo in 1977, and whose life and work is the subject of *In one step are a thousand animals*, Harrell's two-year residency at MoMA. *The Return of La Argentina* reflects on re-enactment as a privileged method through which contemporary artists can engage with history, as well as the nature of the archive(s) of dance, both institutional and corporeal. What interests me here is Harrell's selection of archives, how he enters the archives in question, and how he subsequently activates the historical source material he encounters, not as the basis for re-enactment, but as [choreographic/dramaturgical/movement] material that can be mobilized in a different way, experimented with, and transformed.

Where and how does [Ohno as] *La Argentina* return? Harrell's performative strategies quickly reveal

that she, of course, will not. The use of the dress in the first scene provocatively makes concrete the creative and critical distance he maintains vis-à-vis the original. It is precisely this gap that animates this solo, and that also finds its echo in other provocative gestures of "timing" and "spacing" that Harrell enacts throughout *The Return of La Argentina*. Contrary to Ohno, he resists wearing *La Argentina*'s clothing, dancing her dance, and playing her music. He gestures toward her/Ohno, but doesn't really go there. Similarly, for a long time the performance does not really begin, but rather stops and starts and, almost ritualistically, returns and repeats.

I am interested in how *The Return of La Argentina* works in, on, and against time, and mobilizes choreography's potential to layer and juxtapose temporalities and histories, to manipulate time and make it tangible, to "materialize" time. Dance here is, to cite Giorgio Agamben's words, "something that, working within chronological time, urges, presses, and transforms it."¹

Harrell started working on the Tatsumi Hijikata Archive, almost by accident, in 2012. In an interview about his *Used, Abused, and Hung Out to Dry* (2013), Harrell mentions that he initially resisted visiting the archive.² However, when he eventually did, he was "blown away" by the photographs, costumes, and other traces of Hijikata's experimental performances he encountered there. This discovery led to his current series of work, which, he predicts, will continue for at least 10 years. *Used, Abused, and Hung Out to Dry*, the first installment in the series, was based on a "fictional map," on which the choreographer initially marked



All images: Trajal Harrell. *The Return of La Argentina*. 2015. Performed at The Museum of Modern Art, October 2015. Pictured: Trajal Harrell. Photo: Julieta Cervantes. Image © 2016 The Museum of Modern Art, New York



two “locations”: Hijikata and Rei Kawakubo, designer of the iconic fashion brand Comme des Garçons. This map is continuously redrawn, as more and more representative figures are added, in ever shifting constellations.³

The purpose of the map, inspired by the notion of “three degrees of separation,” is not to identify real-life meetings between these artists, but rather to set up productive tensions between disparate elements to generate something new. Harrell plays on the distance between these “locations” as a space for the imagination to explore “a field of possibilities.”⁴ By adding additional elements, the narrative continues to shift. His radical constellations underscore the constant replication and circulation of ideas and forms (across time, space, and cultures) and counter the linearity of conventional dance/art historical narratives and their focus on white, male European and American artists.

In a recent conversation, Harrell expressed his interest in the fissures of history.⁵ The “historical impossibility” he finds himself in—the space between himself today and the historical moments he explores—becomes a productive theoretical and political space from which to imagine history differently. In addition, he seeks out what is not documented in dance history, or what unfolds in its margins, around its edges, in its ruins. His work both dwells in and imaginatively sutures such historical fissures. Harrell’s speculative historiography mobilizes the imagination, fiction, partiality, and interpretation that are always already part of historiography, as well as the fragile position of dance in relation to history, in order to open up spaces in which a multiplicity of other stories, counter-histories, and new relationships can emerge.

In relation to the Hijikata archive, Harrell’s theoretical “radical juxtapositions” reveal connections and issues that remained invisible in the conventional narratives, and activate possibilities not yet realized in the past. While he foregrounds his personal encounters with the archival material as the basis

for his explorations, his work also charts alternative entry points into the archives he chooses to examine, and sheds light on aspects and resonances that are perhaps not yet fully understood (or were covered over).⁶

Rather than studying the details of Hijikata’s work, Harrell engages in particular with the failures and holes of the archive, with the unknown and the irretrievable. His work takes on the image we have of butoh today, and the politics of the way in which its knowledge has been transmitted. Hijikata’s dance, in particular, is not well documented, accessible only through photographs, stories, and the interpretations of second- and third-generation butoh artists. The incompleteness of this archive leaves ample space to imagine the performances and to speculate about the impact they might have made in 1960s and 1970s Japan. In addition, butoh, Harrell argues, is already “kind of dead,” making it a particularly exciting new territory to “get lost in.” The question driving *Used, Abused, and Hung Out to Dry* became: How do you vogue Hijikata? “I know,” Harrell mentions, “in some circles, this is a sacrilegious question. Of course! Because every butoh performance, in a way, is trying to vogue Hijikata.”⁷ This statement underlines butoh’s problematic relationship to re-enactment, originality, authenticity, and appropriation, issues Harrell had also explored in previous works. In *The Return of La Argentina* he pushes this premise further by investigating how he might vogue Ohno voguing La Argentina.

While the first installment mapped out Harrell’s initial discoveries about butoh, *The Return of La Argentina* delves deeper into the material he uncovered, questioning the position and agency of the artist and muse in the field of dance. The first performance Kazuo Ohno presented outside of Japan, *Admiring La Argentina* marked the start of his long, successful international career—and shaped the way in which butoh continues to be perceived outside of Japan.⁸ Ohno, who was 71 at the time of its premiere, considered the solo his “birth” as a butoh dancer. It was directed by Hijikata, a fact not widely known even though it clearly bears his imprint, and opens with a re-enactment of the very first dance Hijikata ever choreographed for Ohno.⁹

Admiring La Argentina speaks to the way in which the archive, as Jacques Derrida has argued, is fundamentally bound up with specters and returns. In the solo, Ohno revisits the memory of his encounter with La Argentina/Antonia Mercé in 1929, when he saw her perform in Tokyo, by variously channeling, embodying, becoming, and dancing with the Argentina-born Spanish dancer and muse. Nearly 30 years after the fact, their brief meeting continues to haunt him, and he recounts how her influence never ended. He was moved to create his performance in response to a



number of apparitions by La Argentina.¹⁰ In addition, in the original program for the show the artist states that she will likely remain with him, even after his death.¹¹

As his son Yoshito remarks, Ohno here takes stock of his own [dance] history. He does not simply embody La Argentina; his gestures also betray, for example, his training in German Expressionism.¹² Ohno's solo presents as a corporeal archive of encounters, and reflects on the way in which encounters with teachers, influences, and diverse corporeal practices—in this case from flamenco, tango, and *Ausdruckstanz*, to religious rituals and Jean Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers*—shape the dancer's body, how they are embodied (and, indeed, continue to return over time).¹³

Admiring La Argentina is a veritable knot of returns, origins, and histories, and is reminiscent of the historical model that Georges Didi-Huberman, referencing Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin, terms “survival,” an “anachronistic” model that merges memory and history, a “ghostly and symptomatic time” and “a counterpoint or counterrhythm to influence and fact and chronology.”¹⁴ The solo challenges the traditional succession (in Japanese arts) from generation to generation, linear history and its relation to the experience of time. Here the past is not really dead; it shows up in the present in the form of specters and unconscious habitual gestures. Ohno moves back and forth in time, in a perpetual play of haunting and being haunted, dying and being born again. Much like Hijikata's work, *Admiring La Argentina* is a heterochronical “montage of times.”¹⁵ It stretches time and makes it tangible, not only by experimenting with very slow movement, stillness, and repetition—the “plasticities and fractures” and “rhythms and jolts of time”¹⁶ characteristic of butoh—but also by introducing the time before birth and the time after death into its temporal texture.

As *The Return of La Argentina* continues, the tension builds up. The opening section, in which Harrell introduces us to the rituals of [his?] daily dance

practice, guides us into a whole series of ceremonial gestures and rituals. His movements gradually intensify. The sound of a scraping spoon becomes more and more rhythmic, the dancer's whole body starts to join in the circular movement of stirring, and he gets increasingly carried away, as if in trance. Something similar happens later on, when he puts on a black skirt, shakes and ruffles it repetitively with both hands, and pulls it up and down more and more vigorously. At times he pulls it aside, in a movement reminiscent of flamenco or bullfighting. He stomps his feet more and more forcefully, makes a hissing sound, blows through his teeth, and hobbles, almost childlike, over to his bench, to quickly return to the task of folding and arranging his clothes.

Harrell appears to tap into the fragmented, suspended, and expanded temporality of butoh—its obsessive returning, moving back and forth in time and between life and death—and Ohno's expressive sense of pathos. He plays on butoh's incessant merging of incongruent and unlikely subjectivities, specters, and ghosts. *Admiring La Argentina* then offers another angle from which to examine the meaning and politics of re-imagining dances and dancers from other times and places in the contemporary context.

Harrell does not explicitly engage with the specific political gestures of butoh and the Japanese postwar avant-garde, but he does (re)insert Hijikata's work and Ohno's *Admiring La Argentina* into a broader conversation. His theoretical juxtaposition of butoh and early modern dance calls attention to the continued indebtedness of the form to German Expressionist dance, and the fact that butoh is fundamentally imbedded in global circulations of art movements and ideas. Harrell counters the modernist approach to dance, which continues to haunt butoh to this day, by foregrounding choreography as practice, and the history and archive(s) of dance as constructed, subjective, and temporal.

Kazuo Ohno becomes La Argentina by putting on her dress. By not wearing it, instead holding his fragile

Comme des Garçons dress out in front of him like a “paper doll,” Harrell gestures toward—but also resists—appropriating Ohno’s appropriations of the Spanish dancer. Harrell’s provocative gesture of spacing evokes Ohno’s uncanny ghostly presence, the destabilizations and transformations of the self he performs, and the complex gender politics of butoh. This gesture makes concrete the space Harrell opens up for himself to re-imagine the work in the present, and for the viewer to image his (shifting) relationship to Ohno, to La Argentina, and to *Admiring La Argentina*.

Like the other objects in the performance, the items of clothing circulate, transform, and take on different layers of meaning throughout the solo. Harrell activates historical material as afterlife, as objects, which he manipulates, recombines and refashions. He works directly on the material in performance, and with the materiality of the body, objects, and costumes.

The careful and deliberate handling and placing of objects in *The Return of La Argentina*—a reference, perhaps, also to the tasks of early postmodern dance, visual arts performance, and happenings—increasingly takes on a ritualistic feel. At times, the stage looks like a dressing room: the dancer sets it up, prepares something to eat, checks his phone, dresses and undresses. At other times these everyday rituals and routine actions develop into ritualistic ones: stirring in a Japanese bowl until it starts to sing, deliberately folding up pieces of clothing and holding them up in his arms (almost like a body), or arranging objects on, under, and around the three piano benches, as a makeshift altar.

Harrell does not re-present, but rather constructs and deconstructs images. As in previous works, he draws on the tension between the “authenticity” of postmodern dance, and works with and on what is present on the stage in the here and now, and on the artificiality of “realness” in vogue, or the pursuit of an illusion to the point where everything is revealed as a construction. He inserts diverse counter-practices into [his own] dance history, sets up tensions between historical elements and the present of performance and of the everyday, and brings together different kinds and levels of performativity. He moves back and forth between various modes of presence, presentation, and interaction with the audience. All these procedures and strategies underscore the fact that a performance is an “object in the making,” rather than a finished product.

In relation to his research residency at MoMA, the artist refigures his choreographic method itself as an act of archiving. Harrell’s “fictional archiving” involves a personal, affective process of collecting and incorporating a range of historical material over an extended period of time. He archives it for himself, through/in the body, and activates it by means of the “physical imagination,” which he foregrounds as the basis for knowledge production in dance.

In addition to the dancer’s body, the practice of



doing or making dance, alone and with others—along with individual performances and the series of which they are a part—presents as an archive. “Fictive archiving” does not merely concern the material and the memory accumulated in the choreographer’s own body; it also includes the memory of his practice, and what is passed on between bodies.¹⁷

Harrell’s process shows that choreographic practice takes [its own] time. He works on the same material for a number of years, and wants to “stick to it and go deep.”¹⁸ Research, daily practice, repetition, and numerous returns to the same material are part of the process, and of the temporal texture of the piece. He takes the time to make the material his own, so it can generate its own language, and the thinking process “generates its own kind of materiality.”¹⁹ The time of performance is expanded to include a whole series of works of different formats and sizes. Disparate ideas, concepts, and influences come together, circulate, and disperse in and across performances, in a manner that counters the conventional linear narrative of history. Individual performances have a history, and the writing and rewriting of history happens as an integral part of the structure of the work. It opens up and produces different meanings, interpretations, and knowledge over the course of time. He marks new figures on the map in order to reframe the premise, destabilize meaning, or insert new tensions, and draws on an ever-expanding number of references, sources, returns, and directions. History is not fixed; knowledge is situated in time and space, and continuously transformed, shifted, and overturned.

Looking at other, lesser-known archives of dance, and setting up new relationships between archives, is also part of the necessity to challenge this [corporeal] archive, and to “challenge what has solidified into the known in order to approach the unknown.”²⁰

Harrell does not re-enact or even, really, take on *Admiring La Argentina*. He chooses from it, and archives what is useful for him. He speaks of finding “nuggets of information” that he mobilizes

differently over time.²¹ While *The Return of La Argentina* incorporates elements from the original work or material encountered in the Hijikata Archive, it activates this archive by resisting it. The distance, the gaps that animate the project variously materialize in the performance. The procedures and strategies Harrell applies instigate or secure an opening—for the imagination, self-reflection, humor, and for thinking and activating differently. They keep the archive porous, mobile, and performative. Yet simultaneously there is an increasing intensification, sedimentation, or condensation of time, gesture, material, and history because of the turning and returning over the course of the solo, the practice, and the series.

As I watch multiple instances of *The Return of La Argentina* at MoMA over the course of two days, the dance appears to become increasingly intense. The material takes hold of Harrell's body differently, and his movements become more vigorous, wilder, more personal and emotional. The Japanese ceramic bowl drops to the floor and his spoon breaks in two. Yet I also see the opposite movement, a kind of expulsion or exorcising of this material (or a set of ghosts). There is a tension between "fictive archiving" as an authentic, personal engagement with the material over time, which leaves more and more traces in the body and the work, and on the other hand the unsettling of this archive by inserting new questions, activating other absences, and not "going there" somehow, or undoing the archive. Harrell inserts a sense of repetition, time, and duration into the archive, and a sense of fluidity and flexibility as well. Material and materiality take on a different meaning. History and the archive are incomplete. Archival documents appear less fixed and less of the past than conventionally assumed, and movement, gesture, and dance seem, perhaps, less ephemeral, invisible, or immaterial.

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1 Giorgio Agamben, "What Is an Apparatus?," in *What Is an Apparatus and Other Essays*. Trans. by Kishik, D., and Pedatella, D. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009, p. 47.

2 Gia Kourlas, "Trajal Harrell Talks about Bringing Butoh to MoMA," in *Time Out Magazine*, 2013. Available at www.timeout.com/newyork/dance/trajal-harrell-talks-about-bringing-butoh-to-moma. Similarly, the choreographer postponed visiting the Kazuo Ohno Studio and viewing the recording of *Admiring La Argentina* until his own solo was well underway.

3 *The Return of La Argentina* (2015) is the third installment in this series based in part on research Trajal Harrell carried out at the Tatsumi Hijikata Archive at Keio University in Tokyo. In addition to Kazuo Ohno and *La Argentina*, he has so far added Dominique Bagouet and Ellen Stewart (in *The Ghost of Montpellier Meets the Samurai*, 2015), and Loïe Fuller and the *hoochie koochie* show (*Caen Amour*, 2016).

4 Trajal Harrell in the program for *The Ghost of Montpellier Meets the Samurai*, Festival d'automne à Paris, October 2015.

5 Post-performance talk at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg, Germany, January 21, 2016.

6 The notion of the "return" figures heavily in butoh, and in the narratives created around the form and its mythic founders. Since the 1970s, and particularly since his death in 1986, Hijikata's body of work has frequently been inscribed into ideological (nationalist, essentialist, orientalist) debates, and framed as a "return to Japan" in Japan, or analyzed as a traumatic "compulsion to repeat" in the West.

Harrell's approach is "anachronistic" in the sense that it offers an opening today to examine this work differently. The provocative premises of his choreography as speculative historiography, and his performative activations of the Tatsumi Hijikata Archive, displace conventional narratives and, in turn, reveal new or neglected aspects

- of Hijikata's practice and the status of its material traces preserved in this archive. In addition, there are many fascinating resonances between Hijikata's choreographic methodology and the relationship to art and dance history it enacts and Trajal Harrell's interest in the fissures of history. Around the time of their collaboration on *Admiring La Argentina*, Hijikata was publishing his writing in the journal *Shingeki* and developing his choreographic method, working with his muse, Yoko Ashikawa, and other female performers. In a series of scrapbooks, he/they pasted and vigorously marked and annotated numerous clippings from mainstream art journals of the time. Reminiscent of a Dadaist collage or montage, these documents bring together eclectic fragments of reproductions of paintings from different periods, genres, and styles, as material from which to develop gestures, costumes, and set or lighting designs. The scrapbooks show an enormous breadth and depth of material, and reveal that the artist was exploring the limits of dance and the dancer's body by looking to other artistic disciplines (painting, sculpture, literature) and movements (surrealism, Dadaism, anti-art, happenings, political protest movements, etc.). They enact a dialogue with international art history, and with debates concerning the status of the art object and the materiality of the body, as well as of gesture and movement, and the medium of dance.
- 7 Gia Kourlas, "Trajal Harrell Talks about Bringing Butoh to MoMA," in *Time Out Magazine*, 2013. Available at www.timeout.com/newyork/dance/trajal-harrell-talks-about-bringing-butoh-to-moma
 - 8 *Admiring La Argentina* was performed for the first time abroad in Cannes, France, in 1980. Its U.S. debut, at La Mama in New York City, took place in 1981.
 - 9 In an expansive chapter on *Admiring La Argentina* in *Kazuo Ohno's World*, Ohno's son Yoshito only refers to Hijikata's role once, as the director of the performance's premiere, and does not provide any additional insights into the nature of their collaboration. In *The Palace Soars through the Sky*, Ohno himself recounts how one day Hijikata showed up in the studio with an enormous amount of notes, which he read to Ohno, who struggled to keep up writing down his words. This collection, Ohno writes, continued to feed his dance for many years to come.
The first part of *Admiring La Argentina* is a re-enactment of *Divinariane* (1960), in which Ohno takes on the role of the cross-dressing prostitute Divine, in Jean Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers*. Ohno and Hijikata, who are generally considered to represent two very different strands of butoh, first performed together in the mid-1950s and actively collaborated from 1959 (*Forbidden Colors*) until 1967 on a series of experimental interdisciplinary Dance Experience events organized by Hijikata. Ohno notes that Hijikata's *Rebellion of the Body* (1968), on which he was an assistant, was so overwhelming that he retired from the stage altogether, to return 10 years later with a return to their very first collaboration. See Kazuo Ohno, "Katariai (Talk)," in *The Palace Soars through the Sky: Kazuo Ohno on Butoh*. Tokyo: Shichōsha, 1992, p. 208-212; and Kazuo Ohno and Yoshito Ohno, "Admiring La Argentina," in *Kazuo Ohno's World: From Without and Within*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004, p. 143-169.
 - 10 Kazuo Ohno first recognized La Argentina in an abstract painting by Natsuyuki Nakanishi at a Tokyo gallery in 1976. Upon his return home that day, he encountered her photograph in a program sent to him from New York by former students Eiko and Koma. The portrait spoke to him, inviting him to dance with her. Later, La Argentina also appeared to him in the window of a New York City high-rise. See Kazuo Ohno, *The Palace Soars through the Sky: Kazuo Ohno on Butoh*. Tokyo: Shichōsha, 1992.
 - 11 See Kazuo Ohno and Yoshito Ohno, *Kazuo Ohno's World: From Without and Within*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004, p. 184.
 - 12 See Kazuo Ohno and Yoshito Ohno, *Kazuo Ohno's World: From Without and Within*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004, p. 162.
 - 13 Kazuo Ohno studied with Baku Ishii and Takaya Eguchi and his wife Misako Miya, who were students of Mary Wigman. He also mentions being inspired by Harold Kreuzberg and Kurt Jooss.
 - 14 Georges Didi-Huberman, "Artistic Survival: Panofsky vs. Warburg and the Exorcism of Impure Time," in *Common Knowledge*, volume 9, issue 2, p. 274.
 - 15 I am referring to Jacques Rancière, "In What Time Do We Live?," in *The State of Things*. London: Koenig Books, 2012. This article, in which Rancière identifies political potential in bringing together different temporalities in works of art, also resonates provocatively with Hijikata's project and Ohno's performance. Both may be read as heterochronical, in the sense that they present "combinations of times that are normally incompatible" (p. 34) or "a redistribution of times that invents new capacities of framing a present" (p. 36). He writes, "I think it is possible to explore their capacity to echo what happens in the intervals and the interruptions that tend to distend or disrupt the time of domination. Today, just as yesterday, the tension of living in several times at once remains unsolved. This means that it remains at work." (p. 37)
 - 16 Georges Didi-Huberman, "Before the Image, Before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism," in *Compelling Visuality: The Work of Art in and out of History*. Ed. by Farago C. and Zwijnenberg R., Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 31.
 - 17 In the room adjacent to the one in which we encounter *The Return of La Argentina*, Trajal Harrell and dancers Thibault Lac and Ondrej Vidlar offered a glimpse into the creative process in open rehearsal sessions titled *The Practice*. During one such session, Harrell emphasized the importance for the work of their shared history, the vocabulary, tools, and modes of communication they developed together over the years, and the way in which movements and methods not only sediment into his body—become his own, through vogueing, and over time—but also pass between bodies.
 - 18 Gia Kourlas, "Trajal Harrell Talks about Bringing Butoh to MoMA," in *Time Out Magazine*, 2013. Available at www.timeout.com/newyork/dance/trajal-harrell-talks-about-bringing-butoh-to-moma
 - 19 Personal interview with Trajal Harrell via Skype on June 21, 2014.
 - 20 Adrian Heathfield and Jonathan Burrows, "Moving Writing," in *Choreographic Practices*, volume 4, number 2, 2013, p. 143.
 - 21 Gia Kourlas, "Trajal Harrell Talks about Bringing Butoh to MoMA," in *Time Out Magazine*, 2013. Available at www.timeout.com/newyork/dance/trajal-harrell-talks-about-bringing-butoh-to-moma