

Mother Would Like a Cash Award: Trajal Harrell at MoMA

By Tavia Nyong'o

"It's getting hot in here! Up in this atmosphere" is an apt but unusual chant to hear echoing down the busy corridor opening onto The Werner and Elaine Dannheisser Lobby Gallery on the fourth floor of The Museum of Modern Art. Along with dancers, costumiers, and other collaborators, the artist Trajal Harrell had invited two vocalists to join him in *The Practice*: three days of open-studio rehearsals Harrell conducted in the Museum's galleries in September 2014 (it will be repeated in October 2015). The practice was a rare opportunity to witness the choreographic process conducted against a light-filled backdrop of windows opening onto the Sculpture Garden. The rapid-fire "pows!" from legendary ball announcer Selvin Mizrahi and the soulful singing of Imani Uzuri "living on stolen breath" came together with Harrell's own vocal improvisations, inciting and corroborating the movements of the dancers. "I give them a little," Harrell told the audience at one point, "and I get a lot."



How do artists retrieve and repurpose historical techniques and practices—when they are not, that is, interested in direct reconstruction or reenactment? How do you capture in an artwork the creative and critical relationship to the past that everyone instinctively possesses, but that gets flattened out by earnest attempts at fidelity and homage? What the artist Ming Wong does in relation to classic Hollywood and Singapore cinema; what the sound art and performance duo Mendi + Keith Obadike do in relation to 1980s arcade video games; what the painter Mickalene Thomas does in relation to 1970s fashion photography: each in their own distinctive ways, these artists seek their answers to this question. The dancer and choreographer Trajal Harrell—who is midway through a two-year research residency at The Museum of Modern Art—represents his own answer, born of a truly hybrid career lived between the U.S. and Europe. Tackling the mercurial legacy of Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, originators of the avant-garde dance tradition of *butoh*, his research residency—which he has titled *In one step are a thousand animals*—represents a new direction for Harrell, albeit one that draws on some of his oldest and deepest affinities.

"Fictional archiving" is the name Harrell gives to his creative process of researching and reimagining, and it is worth dwelling for a moment on the insight that this paradoxical formulation bears. The philosopher Henri Bergson believed that the entirety of the past—from our own individual histories back to the beginning of time—moves with us virtually at every step, if only we are aware.¹ Hijikata gave Bergson's claim a poetic formulation when he stated, "In one step are a thousand animals." Harrell, who has adopted Hijikata's formulation as a motto for his residency, is an instinctive Bergsonian. Whether two minutes or three hours long, his dance pieces work by bringing into their duration a whole impossible history of gestures and feelings, of rhythms and responses, that together deliver an entirely different response to questions of aesthetico-political sequence and succession than is ever captured under the rubric of "reenactment."² Neither a re-enactor nor a reperformer (of his work or others), Harrell is instead an afrofabulist: an artist who summons shards from the virtual past and ritualistically reintroduces them into the present, making them glow and glimmer under his strange new light. The alchemical process of body transformation that lies at the heart of *butoh* resonates with the method of intimate metamorphoses that Harrell has long used to bring himself, his dancers, and his audience in to another history. It is a history that, as the film theorist Marc Siegel remarks of another performative visionary, Vaginal Davis, is "neither true nor false; it is fabulous."³



Trajal Harrell. *The Practice*. 2015. Photograph © 2015 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo by Julieta Cervantes

The Practice the first iteration of Harrell's residency, grants the public rare access to a dance studio session. It thus suggests answers to a question that outsiders to the choreographic process may ponder: how do words turn into movement? What is the relation between the instructions of the choreographer and the movements of the dancing body? Is the choreographer commanding, commenting, or coaching? Or can they become—as seemed to happen over the course of *The Practice*—themselves percussive and performative elements of the composition? After all, Harrell is a performer who can make a simple bowl and spoon sing and spark with life; why not accept that he can also make words dance? A fabulist is also a storyteller, and it is fitting that the stories Harrell tells through words and gestures (enacted through himself and others) should render the transition from practice to performance a turn of unmistakably dramatic, even tragic, proportions.

In his concerts, Harrell is usually on or near the stage: sometimes dancing, sometimes commentating, sometimes just watching, sometimes walking, eating,

or even sleeping. There is no fourth wall in his performances, even if he never admits outsiders into his rehearsals. (His studio is no Warholian factory, but a real couture house of choreography.) *The Practice*, a happy exception to his typically closed studio, provides a rare opportunity for both the choreographer and his audience to experience something that is not, as he clarifies, in itself a piece or show, but an open-ended and collaborative play with his dancers and collaborators. It is a temporary, if glorious, stage—a little floating island—for developing ideas that might or might not end up being incorporated into performance.

This element of contingency and carefully assumed risk is apparent in many of his prior pieces, including *Antigone Jr.*, a duet for himself and the French dancer Thibault Lac, a recurring Harrell muse who also appeared, along with Imani Uzuri, in Harrell's 2013 performance at MoMA: *Used, Abused, and Hung Out to Dry*. Part of his series *Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at the Judson Church* that was recently presented in its entirety at The Kitchen, *Antigone Jr.* mixes ancient

Greek tragedy with postmodern fierceness in a manner that is at once nonchalant and heart wrenching. The dancers use the audience seating as a changing area; at one point, Lac's black underwear fell in my lap. At another, the dance appears to go awry; a cue has been missed and our immersion in the theater of the piece is disrupted until we realize that the disruption has been planned and staged, and the dancers are still in, which is to say *out of*, control.

To invite chance into a composed piece is to court this history, which strikes, as Walter Benjamin reminds us, unexpectedly, like a flash of lightning.⁴ This happened last spring during *Antigone Jr.*, when Lac delivered a speech in the character of Ismene, sister to Antigone and the deceased Polynices, whom the king had forbidden the sisters to bury. Halfway through their heated debate over defying the law and burying their brother anyway, the image of a slain Mike Brown, Jr., left untended for hours on hot pavement in Ferguson, Missouri, arose unbidden and undeniably into my mind. I felt cursed to be alive and powerless to do anything but helplessly witness this crime against humanity. Would I risk death, as Antigone did, to show my contempt for the brutal and inhuman law?

The philosopher Judith Butler has seen in Sophocles' Antigone a queer and feminist heroine, one who defies the law in order to perform a radical fidelity to human kinship, even at the cost of her own life.⁵ Harrell's Antigone, whose persona courses through *Twenty Looks* and even endures as a trace in *The Practice*—in the shape of the little "islands" of marley flooring Harrell first began using while choreographing *Antigone Jr.*—adds an Africanist element to Butler's formulation. As each dancer steps onto the island to take an "open shine," in which black, European, Japanese, and American dance elements meet but do not exactly fuse. Instead, they perturb and challenge each other, much as Antigone and Lesley McSpadden (Brown's mother) perturb and challenge the police power of the state with the virtual insistence of a black life that survives all attempts to regulate or extirpate it.

The larger scale *Antigone Sr.*—also from *Twenty Looks* is modeled in form and length on a Harlem drag ball competition: the two categories the dancers walk are "The King's Speech" and "The Mother of the House." And, as in *The Practice*, Harrell can be observed to conduct himself very much like a mother of the house to his dancers in this piece. Those who bring clichéd images of the choreographic process gleaned from shows like *Dance Moms* will be surprised by the nurturing and protective attitude Harrell takes towards his dancers during the open rehearsals and performance. He is also regularly vulnerable himself: he sings karaoke in some pieces, and in *The Practice* he debuted a new line of flight: stand-up comedy in the social commentary tradition of Richard Pryor and Crystal LaBeija. One punchline: "Mother would like a cash award!"

The line is Harrell's, but it reminds me of an unforgettable moment at the climax of Mother Flawless Sabrina's underground cult classic film *The Queen* (1968), a scene in which a jilted entrant into the drag queen pageant at the center of the documentary takes the judges, the winner, and the hostess Sabrina herself and proceeds—as they say—to read them to filth. Directing her particular ire at Harlow, the ingénue who clutched the trophy and now literally cowers in a corner, an irate Crystal Labeija ridicules the competition as a travesty, a boondoggle, and a setup.

Decades later, people still ask Mother Sabrina—now a grande dame of gender illusionism mentoring a new generation of transgender artists like Zachary Drucker—whether she agrees with Crystal's claim that she was robbed of her rightful victory. Ever the diplomat, Flawless won't say one way or the other. But the epic tirade Crystal delivers on film—which can currently be viewed in its entirety on YouTube—is itself a victory of self-assertion for a certain mode of black queer fabulation that has perhaps been made a little more mainstream by television shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race*, but that must have struck audiences like a thunderbolt when they first encountered it one year before the Stonewall riots.

When brought to bear on the legacy of Hijikata, Harrell's on-stage chemistry with Lac brings out the transgressive heart of early butoh as a defiant embrace of the low and even vulgar in defiance of social refinement. The incongruous juxtaposition—so reliable a source for camp performance—acquires a tragicomic dimension here, a mixed mode that has everything to do with the unpredictable fashion in which history wells up in the present.

The affinity between the countercultural drag of Flawless Mother Sabrina and Crystal Labeija on the one hand, and the transvestism and surreal vulgarity exhibited in key pieces of butoh history—such as *Admiring La Argentina* and the queer transgression of *Kinjiki* (debuted by Hijikata in 1959)—represents a vivid store of historical impossibles that Harrell is just beginning to mine.

Tavia Nyong'o, a cultural critic and historian and an associate professor of performance studies at New York University, writes on art, music, politics, culture, and theory. His first book, *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory* (Minnesota, 2009), won the Errol Hill Award for best book in African American theatre and performance studies. Nyong'o is co-editor of the journal *Social Text* and the *Sexual Cultures* book series at New York University Press. He is completing a study of fabulation in contemporary black art and performance.

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- 1 Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory*. Translated by Nancy Margaret Paul and William Scott Palmer. New York: Zone Books, 1988
- 2 "Incompossibility" is the term that the latter-day Bergsonian Gilles Deleuze employs to explain the relation between virtual and actual realities. The multiplicity of the virtual past that Bergson discovered, Deleuze argued, gives rise to a series of potentialities that are not so much mutually contradictory (or impossible), as they are disjunctive (or impossible). See also Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Translated by Tom Conley. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992
- 3 Marc Siegel, "Vaginal Davis's Gospel Truths." *Camera Obscura* 23, no. 1 (2008): 155
- 4 Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings, 1938-1940*. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael William Jennings. Vol. 4. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003. p. 25 and passim
- 5 Butler, Judith. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000