

Trajal Harrell in Conversation with Ana Janevski

At the conclusion of Trajal Harrell's two-year Annenberg Artist's Commission Research Residency at The Museum of Modern Art, associate curator Ana Janevski sat down with the artist to reflect on the project.

The collaboration started in 2013, when Harrell performed *Used Abused and Hung Out to Dry* in conjunction with the MoMA exhibition *Tokyo 1955–1970: A New Avant-Garde*. It was the very beginning of his research on the life and work of Japanese choreographer Tatsumi Hijikata (1928–86), a pioneer of *butoh*, a dance form created in part to resist the conservatism permeating postwar Japanese choreography. It was also a new moment in Harrell's practice and research; until that moment Harrell had been engaged with his long-term project *Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at The Judson Church*, which is based on the question, "What would have happened if someone from the voguing scene from Harlem would have come downtown to meet the pioneers of Postmodern Dance at Judson Dance Theatre in the early sixties?" Thus Harrell confronted the history, construction, and interpretation of contemporary dance, proposing the premise that history is always partly a fiction.

In his MoMA residency—titled *In one step are a thousand animals*, from a quote by Hijikata—Harrell pushed further the exploration of (dance) history, working with historical imagination as a way to rethink how to process and interpret the past, Hijikata's work, and the aesthetic possibilities of *butoh*. During its two-year span, *In one step are a thousand animals* comprised a series of public events, including performances, conversations, and open rehearsals, in different locations throughout the Museum.

Ana Janevski: Your Annenberg Artist's Research Commission Residency started after you performed *Used Abused and Hung Out to Dry* in conjunction with the exhibition *Tokyo 1955–1970: A New Avant-Garde*. This was your very first piece about Tatsumi Hijikata and *butoh*, as well as the very beginning of your research. How did it start?

Trajal Harrell: I had been in a long-term conversation about my work with the curator Jenny Schlenzka, who had moved from working at [The Museum of Modern Art] to MoMA PS1 in 2012. She told you that I was going to Tokyo. We met and I heard about the Tokyo exhibition. I was reluctant to contribute a new work as I was just beginning this new research. I felt it would be at least 10 years of research so things were just beginning. Nonetheless, it was a great opportunity to work with you and Doryun Chong, at the time associate curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture and the curator of the Tokyo show.

While I was in Japan, I had a conniption fit when I discovered Hijikata's work. I had only previously seen Sankai Juku, Kazuo Ohno, and other *butoh* artists, many of whom had worked with Hijikata; but Hijikata's work never came to the West. A small excerpt went to Paris, but he never left Japan. I also discovered his words "in one step, are a thousand animals." This gave me the encouragement to take my first step seriously, and to know that it could be extremely generative, and in some ways have Hijikata's blessing. Thus, I decided to try and vogue Hijikata. Despite perhaps disrupting something sacrosanct or perhaps disrespecting his legacy, I concluded that every *butoh* performance is an attempt to vogue Hijikata.

After *Used Abused and Hung Out to Dry*, when we started discussing the residency, you said that you would like to dedicate the last commissioned piece to Yoko Ashikawa, a mysteriously disappeared *butoh* dancer and Hijikata's muse. In *In the Mood for Frankie*, the culmination of your residency, Yoko Ashikawa has multiplied and dissipated into many different muses. Is Frankie all of them at once? Originally, I was thinking of the major projects as vogueing Hijikata (*Used Abused...*), vogueing Ohno (a solo *The Return of La Argentina*) and vogueing Yoko Ashikawa. Of course, over this three-year period my relationship to this body of work developed in ways I could not have foreseen, and the structure became more complex. I didn't imagine how much Kazuo Ohno would change my relationship to my own dancing. I was thinking of Ashikawa as the one for transformation of dancing, since she was the most recognized dancer of Hijikata. Ohno, though, surprised me, and awakened something very difficult to explain. So yes, by the time I got to the



Trajal Harrell. *Used, Abused, and Hung Out to Dry*. 2013. Performed at The Museum of Modern Art, 2013. Photo: Yi-Chun Wu. © 2016 The Museum of Modern Art, New York



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

culminating project, all the muses were there to inspire me toward perhaps a larger sense of voguing butoh. Two of the muses were Wong Kar-Wai and Sade. So the title was a mixture of Wong Kar-Wai's film *In The Mood for Love* and Sade's song "Frankie's First Affair." Looking back I guess it was somehow about falling in love with dancing again through these muses, through this piece, and through the trajectory of this residency. I came into this residency knowing I was transitioning from the *Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at The Judson Church* series. I had become known through this earlier work, but I don't think the series was as focused on a discovery of a way of dancing. In this Hijikata period, as I call it, I think, for better or worse, I am discovering how I want to dance and practice dancing, perhaps for a long time to come. So, I compare it to falling in love with someone and making a commitment to the relationship. Finally with *Frankie*, I was diving all the way in. Trying to commit fully to how I want to dance. And with the help of those muses trying desperately to accept myself in all my strengths and weaknesses. And that process of acceptance started with Ohno as muse, I must say.

From the very beginning you were also sure that you wanted to perform the last piece in the hallway leading from the film entrance to the escalator. In *Used Abused and Hung Out to Dry* you asked the public to take off their shoes and leave them there before entering the Agnes Gund Garden Lobby, the adjacent performance site. In both pieces this space adopts a ritualistic/ceremonial function in the performance. What kind of potential did you immediately notice in this non-space in the Museum?

Funny, it seemed like a place Hijikata might pick. It was difficult and uncanny but yet the trajectory of the space held a certain power in its "in between-ness." I think I kept thinking of imposing performance in the

museum. In a sense I was always thinking about the original impact of butoh, which I can never experience or really know but must imagine. This non-space felt like a rude choice. Not very glamorous. Slightly ugly and somewhat pedestrian or rural as compared to other more obvious choices. These are qualities I associate somehow with butoh. So it rang true as an appropriate challenge. In the end, having the work squeezed in between the escalator and the elevator was everything. The dance framed the escalator as an incredible piece of sculpture with which it dared to collaborate.

The limited seating—24 piano benches and the floor—and the late timing of the performances—10:00 and 11:30 p.m.—encouraged mainly a very devoted and eclectic public. The atmosphere was very intimate and "underground," despite the fact that the performance was happening in the middle of New York City and in The Museum of Modern Art. You opted for a "contained culmination" of the residency. Why?

I'm obsessed with this original impact of butoh. It fascinates me. It's not a historical proposition but it is another way of thinking about the historical imagination for me. The question is, how can you bring something violent and ugly and taboo, like butoh was purported to be, into The Museum of Modern Art? I think those words are generative only in that I didn't feel I had to represent them. I felt I had my own sense of poetry to lean on. So I kept just going for specificity of ruptures, breaks, altercations, and heaviness while maintaining the overall elegance of the context. I instinctively felt the juxtaposition would be right-on somehow, and would be moving in its unexpectedness. Oh, I also trusted that more people hearing about it might be as powerful as its presence for a few. This, too, I relate to butoh strategies of doing things in faraway places or unknown venues. I guess I was trying to trick myself into making something for an unknown venue but install it in this celebrity of a building and institution. Again, I sensed the polarity would yield something quite resonant for the viewer that might not be easily identified or placed, therefore yielding the strongly experiential.

Is this the reason that you decided not to video-record the performance? You mentioned being interested in alternative ways of documenting this performance. What kinds of "reconstruction" strategies are you considering?

One reason was the darkness of the work. I knew the video would go in and out of viability because of perception of light in the space and not be representative of what the eye could see in the performance. And mainly I wanted people to know they could only be here now. If they missed it, they missed it. But there is something else. In the performance, I am working strongly on togetherness and how we imagine things together as a performative belief system. So if you aren't there, the stories we tell about being there become another source of the system

that has performative resonance. I've done this with *Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at The Judson Church (XS)*, *Caen Amour*, and now *Frankie*—working with oral history. If people want documentation, I put them in touch with someone who has seen it and they exchange oral history. Of course, it creates another procedure regarding expanding the historical imagination of which the work addresses. With *Frankie*, for the first time, I would like to make a video the exact length of the work of a few viewers who saw the piece with their accounts of what they saw. I would like these stories to be the documentation of the work.

In many of your works, and particularly in this residency, you are approaching and working with history through the creative process of “fictional archiving,” of researching and re-imagining. Now that you are looking for other people’s imagination, are you pushing this process even further, as if you are anticipating and complicating the history—its holes and fissures, the incompleteness of the archives—while speculating about your own piece?

If you mean the people who do the oral history by voice and video, then I would say yes. The idea of archiving as a particular performativity becomes more operative and multi-productive relative to the work. As I've begun to do more work in the museum and the question of the preservation of my work has become raised, I've had to begin thinking about—and have been advised to not wait to start considering—my “legacy.” Part of me has a hard time taking myself seriously regarding such a time-honored word, but if I suspend my own disbelief, I can consider that the processes I invoke have to match the work. So of course, my own history must be problematized and re-imagined, questioning its own completeness. The postcolonial feminist writer/scholar/filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha had a big impression on me during my studies, and I am always returning to this quote by her: “The story depends upon every one of us to come into being. It needs us all, needs our remembering, understanding, and creating what we have heard together to keep on coming into being.”

Your work prominently features a specific relationship to costume or clothing as objects. In *The Return of La Argentina* you never wear the costumes but just press them against your body. And in *In the Mood for Frankie* there is a wonderful moment when you, Thibault Lac, and Ondrej Vidlar are just passing the clothes to each other. Is this also a form of refusal of reconstruction and re-enactment?

Yes, definitely. I want to distance myself and the audience/viewer from any kind of representation. Rather, I'm trying to activate the imagining in the present moment. It's less about what we see and more about how we together imagine something.



Trajal Harrell. *In the Mood for Frankie*. 2016. Performed at The Museum of Modern Art, May 2016. Pictured: Ondrej Vidlar, Thibault Lac, and Trajal Harrell. Photo: Julieta Cervantes. © 2016 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

***Used Abused and Hung Out to Dry* ended with your solo in front of Auguste Rodin’s *Monument to Balzac* in a dark museum, with bouncy sway and smooth, slow motion, while you are holding your hands up defensively, referring to butoh. Even if you have never intended to reconstruct butoh, from the first piece through the two-year residency you were immersed in something aesthetically completely new. Those movements suggested the idea of abandon and ritual grief. They are also present in your solo in *In the Mood for Frankie*, with more pain and love, and even more abstract. How did you develop new movements and new language throughout the residency?**

I didn't set out to develop a new language or movement, but a consolidation of movement terms happened. It's a bit of what I was saying earlier: as the work developed, I went more precisely and more directly toward dancing and voguing butoh. I also think there is a big difference between the instinctiveness of the first solo, where I was trying to vogue Hijikata, and later in *Frankie*, where I can hone in craft-wise on choreographing and distinguishing very specifically a new language of movement. For sure, my work on Ohno was the pivot. I couldn't believe the way he was dancing. I saw him dance when he was alive; and I certainly didn't get it. And now I watch the videos; he leaves me speechless. I can say, “He was the best dancer in the world.” But the minute I say that, I know Ohno didn't care to be the best dancer in the world. He just immensely loved dancing and couldn't stop dancing. Seeing him freed me in a way. I had the grammar of this language I had been developing with the dancers—especially with Thibault Lac and Ondrej Vidlar—but Ohno helped me go from writing to talking to breathing. When the Japanese and New York-based choreographer and dancer Takeshi Koma Otake saw the work-in-progress of *Argentina*, he said he could see Ohno pushing me. It took me a while to

understand how deep Ohno is. But it's particularly the Ohno of *Admiring La Argentina*, as directed by Hijikata. So I don't know if I can separate the two. Perhaps the residency was on a very deep level my way to be a student of Hijikata and Ohno.

Practically speaking, I also felt Ondrej, Thibault, and I had so much performance history under our belts—and had developed together this way of thinking about this movement of language—that I was ready to make a pure dance piece with no huge conceptual superstructure. So I went into a studio in Delhi and made the dance on my body. I knew them well enough to dance their parts and knew that they knew me well enough to take that and reformulate it as something completely in tandem together through our imaginations.

In that sense, could you talk more about *Odori, The Shit!*, which you developed during the second iteration of *The Practice*?

After Ohno, *Odori, the Shit!* was the other turning point. I made that piece in public. I didn't know it was coming, but I loved this pure dance. I made something that embodied all the ideas of voguing butoh but it didn't look like butoh or an imitation. And I could see all of my history of movement in the body, from minimalism to runway to the experiments of the residency with butoh aesthetics. It started from a section from my recent piece *The Ghost of Montpellier Meets The Samurai*. This section at the end was a trio for me, Thibault, and Ondrej. I took myself out and stayed this time on the outside and started there. I don't remember how it went from A to B to C to D, because with this public iteration of *The Practice*, I don't have time to think. I am just fully invested in making. So I could see at the end something had been essentialized and I loved what it embodied. It was eight minutes. Perfect, I felt, for museum viewing. It was recently shown at Palais de Tokyo in Paris. But these eight minutes, as perfect as they are, gave me the courage to make *In the Mood for Frankie*.

During the residency we experimented with various formats and spaces, from the open rehearsal for *The Practice* on the sculpture platform, to a solo and another *Practice* in the white cube galleries, to a close workshop, and a conversation with Eiko Otake and Sam Miller. It was a "blind date" between you and Eiko, as you met for the first time on the stage the day of the event. It was a very passionate exchange about inverse trajectories, yours from the States through Europe to Japan, and Eiko's from Japan through Europe to the States. What has stayed with you the most from this evening?

I want to keep dating Eiko. It's a pity we haven't had more time to keep the romance going, but from afar it's very strong. I guess timing is everything. I almost took another residency because she was going to be



Trajal Harrell. *In the Mood for Frankie*. 2016. Performed at The Museum of Modern Art, May 2016. Pictured: Trajal Harrell. Photo: Julieta Cervantes. © 2016 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

there, but we would have been in the studio when the other one wasn't. So besides not being the best time for my schedule, I felt it was too much of a set up for a let down. I'm waiting for when we can really spend time together.

In his essay *From Voodoo to Butoh: Katherine Dunham, Hijikata Tatsumi, and Trajal Harrell's Transcultural Refashioning of "Backness,"* the Japanese scholar Michio Arimitsu has done very compelling research into how "Dunham's voodoo inspired performances along its torrential imports of other African American/ Afro Caribbean images and cultural forms into post WWII Japan, had much more crucial role in the early aesthetics of butoh than has been generally recognized." What is your reading on this subject? The idea of blackness was also one of your entry points to butoh and Hijikata's "dance of darkness."

It makes sense. So many of my early images of butoh are completely similar to those of vodun. Seems she would have given him the impetus to look into Japanese shamanistic practices. It's an important discovery for dance history.

The idea of blackness, yes, in a post-black sense of the word. People had often divided butoh into black butoh—the violent and taboo-breaking Hijikata branch—and white butoh—the more aestheticized Sankai Juku branch. I was interested in black butoh and separating this blackness from race. I think in this trying to reimagine the initial impact of butoh, I am in black-butoh imagination. However, with *Frankie*, there is that elegance—those muses—and a highly aestheticized installation being staged in MoMA. Then I try to crack it open. That's a kind of violence, but it takes place without any representation of violence, but there's grief for sure and some feeling we can't describe in the room. We can only feel it pulsing in the absences and presences that we dance and imagine.



Trajal Harrell. *In the Mood for Frankie*. 2016. Performed at The Museum of Modern Art, May 2016. Pictured: Trajal Harrell. Photo: Julieta Cervantes. © 2016 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Your research in Japan started with an idea of the map, from Re Kawakubo to Hijikata, his successors, Kazuo Ohno, and eventually the two years of work and development of the project at The Museum of Modern Art. What did you learn?

It was three-and-a-half years in total if we count *Used Abused and Hung Out to Dry*. It's perhaps also important to include the works *The Ghost of Montpellier Meets the Samurai* and *Caen Amour* as well. Although they were not shown at MoMA, they were coming out of this research and experience as well. I wanted to create a circuit of influence. I wanted to see how the museum work would inform the theater work and how the theater work would inform the museum work over time—informing one to the other. This circuit of influence yielded another level of craft. *Caen Amour* is the piece I wanted to make for theaters and museums, so it's quite special because it contains a lot of the advancements, particularly as it relates to choreographing the viewer/audience and the theater as archive/object. I learned how to keep advancing the sculptural discourse in the work. The way I started using the platforms and the space of the platforms in *Used Abused* and *The Practice* to how they developed in *Frankie* is a big aesthetic achievement for me. We are re-installing *Frankie* at the Singapore International Festival of the Arts, who coproduced the work, and the decision-making is completely based on this work as an installation. The theater conventions are bypassed. So I learned how to work through that line. And yes, I learned how to make and consolidate my work into a style of dance. It's there. I know what it is. And I know how to dance it, and Thibault and Ondrej know as well. One critic remarked about *Ghost* that one could see a new vocabulary of dance in my work pushed beyond vogueing. I think with *Frankie* you can extend that statement into a new style of dance—fully standing

on the shoulders of giants. The actual roots of the movement mixed with the performativity and syntax is mapping a distinct stylistic territory that separates this period from the Twenty Look series. I learned how to do that. There's a clear line in terms of developing movement and dancing style from *Argentina* to *Odori* to *Caen Amour* to *Frankie*. And if I isolate certain sections of *Frankie*, you can see the development of style into a distinct language. However, I didn't essentialize the movement language from beginning to end. *Frankie* is still a bit gypsy, and this I love.

In one step are a thousand animals is organized by Ana Janevski, Associate Curator, with Martha Joseph, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Media and Performance Art.

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