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Office of Arts + Cultural Programming

PEAK Performances at Montclair State University

Claudia La Rocco

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Context is everything. (Is that like location?) PEAK Journal recognizes that audience folks are inclined to broaden personal experience before or after seeing a performance by reading an article or a bit of savvy criticism. As conventional media outlets abandon the writers who expand context, PEAK Journal offers articles inspired by the artists in our 18/19 PEAK season. Claudia La Rocco has brought together a passionate and notable group of writers to enhance what you might discover on The Alexander Kasser stage. Thanks to all for being a critical part of our season!

–JEDEDIAH WHEELER
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
EDITOR’S NOTE

In the two decades or so that I’ve been working as a writer and editor, news of the demise of arts criticism has been unceasing. I saw one such report just the other day, flashing across my social media as I was finishing an edit on one of the pieces you’ll find in this catalog. I didn’t read it. Didn’t need to. The end is nigh; the end is upon us; the end has come and gone: It’s always some variation on this theme.

And yet. Somehow the stuff keeps being written, and published, even read. As journalism has proven to be an unreliable home for arts writing, other intriguing possibilities have presented themselves, reminding that criticism itself, like any art form, is an unruly and adaptable entity.

Today, much of the criticism I find most illuminating is being created with the help of arts organizations, which increasingly recognize the need for thoughtful and expansive context around the art forms they support. This criticism doesn’t take the form of thumbs-up thumbs-down reviews or tidy biographical profiles, as it might in a newspaper. You find instead writers and artists thinking through and with the works of other artists. Art as launchpad—for the ideas in these pages, the ones on stage, and the ones in your head.

Claudia La Rocco
EDITOR IN CHIEF
IT STARTS WITH A JOURNEY. IT ALWAYS STARTS WITH A JOURNEY.

A young man crosses the Atlantic, east to west, to find something out. He is French, and his interest is the United States: What is this political organization, this assemblage, this implied social contract? He is compelled, maybe a bit skeptical, but the country is an ally of his country, their stories are already interwoven, and he wants to understand.

A quick century later, another young man crosses the Atlantic, east to west. He too may be constitutionally curious, but he has much he needs to forget. He comes from Ukraine: a Jew escaped from the pogroms. In Cuba he finds safety, a growing Jewish community, the chance of a fresh start. The push of his provenance, at first, overrides the pull of the destination. But once a traveler arrives, that distinction blurs.

The two journeys have little in common other than the crossing. Alexis de Tocqueville is an aristocrat — the French revolution has boomeranged, and he travels to America in 1831, at first to examine U.S. prisons and penal policy on behalf of the July Monarchy. He returns home after nine months, having investigated far beyond his remit. Oscar Pinis arrives in Cuba in 1924, with his parents. They are refugees; home has become an uncertain matter. Eventually, Pinis will settle in the United States, with a whole new name, Ascher Penn.

Each journey produces a text. And each text addresses, in some crucial way, the place of arrival and how it became a place — with its history, its distinctive pattern of traumas and glories, its precepts and its distortions. A nation, in other words: under construction, but of its own ever-shifting design. Inherently, a complicated place.

Tocqueville’s “Democracy in America” is a treatise, a work of comparative history, philosophy, and social science. It is a lengthy tome, taught today for its observations and assessments and for its method, its démarche. (At the start of the 20th century, Max Weber, convener of modern sociology, will make the journey to America as well. He will be struck by its industry, already outpacing Europe’s in scope and invention.) Pinis, in contrast, addresses Cuba’s inception through myth and tragedy. The tale of Hatuey, the chief who mobilized the Taíno people against the 16th-century Spanish conquistadores only to be burned at the stake, has moved him deeply. He retells it in a narrative poem, “Hatuey,” which he writes — having been in Cuba just seven years — in Yiddish.

Each of these projects — interpretations of a society by someone from elsewhere; in a sense, diagnoses — arrives before us now in yet another form, interpreted by another tier of “outsiders,” another set of creative interlopers.

“Hatuey: Memory of Fire,” with music by Frank London and libretto by Elise Thoron, is effusive, expansive, polyglot, compositionally promiscuous. It augments the legend of Hatuey with a fiction that finds Oscar Pinis in love with a revolutionary nightclub singer as the Cuban dictator Machado’s agents draw near. Layered, the stories eventually converge.

“Democracy in America,” reinvented by Romeo Castellucci, nearly discards the source treatise, save for a seed at its core. Social order rests on belief, and thus even secular arrangements present mystical issues: Are we elect, or forsaken? Is the new Jerusalem here and now, or only in the hereafter? Tocqueville elided the question, and arguably, so have we Americans, up to this day. So does Castellucci. The apparitions and voices in his hermetic production invoke what we know — or think we know — yet will not resolve.

There are questions of presumption here. Oscar Pinis identified, in some sense, with Hatuey, and through him with Cuba’s oppressed, its dispossessed, and its massacred. He wrote before the Holocaust, but he was intimately familiar with oppressive violence. He lost family
members in the pogroms, as well as the woman he loved, violated and killed by the Cossacks. In writing a Yiddish epic, legible only to some of Cuba's small Jewish population and the larger potential readership across the world's Ashkenazi Jewry, he celebrates Hatuey, but also instrumentalizes him — partly for the author's own catharsis and healing. In turn, Thoron and London instrumentalize Pinis in their fiction: As he falls for the singer Tinima and falls in with her revolutionary cell in spite of his initial instinct to stay out of Cuban politics, the character's agency thickens, and so does theirs.

But Pinis's Hatuey was also translated into Spanish within four years of its Yiddish publication and introduced into Cuban school curricula, much as works of literature or music by Jewish émigrés to the United States entered the American cultural canon. And though Thoron and London come from the American Jewish cultural tradition, its theater and its music, they have made what is also a Cuban production, and not just for the són and salsa that interweave with opera in London's score. The production's workshop took place in Cuba, in active collaboration with the country's populist Opera de la Calle, and though the version presented here differs from that iteration in progress, it has still absorbed that experience. The project has become part of a larger U.S.-Cuban cultural collaboration, which was renewing but is now once again under siege.

Castellucci, meanwhile, emerges from a European modernist and experimental theater tradition and, with this project in particular, an intellectual sub-lineage of European artists across creative fields who are drawn to the question of America. It is Tocqueville, and Weber. But it is also Jean Baudrillard, elegiac and deconstructive and weird and a bit naïve, with his mission statement: "I went in search of astral America, not social and cultural America, but the America of the empty, absolute freedom of the freeways ...” It is Wim Wenders directing Harry Dean Stanton trudging out of the desert in "Paris, Texas" and back into the rubble of his shattered families and lives. It is something of a ritual, in fact, now performed by Castellucci, who seeks that elusive American essence, not in a Western desert but in an implied Puritan New England, where his protagonists Nathan and Elizabeth face a choice of survival or sacrifice that carries quasi-Biblical stakes.

Since 1492, the New World has been a space of arrogation. A world taken and for the taking, its ideologies of power structured by the sense of availability (land, resources) and a baseline indulgence toward greed. Appropriation, today the subject of countless polemics, is the physical, material, foundational gesture of our societies. The dynamism of the culture, its restlessness, its constant generation of hybrid forms, draws its fuel in the continuing simmer of violence. All this makes us fascinating to others. And to ourselves: What is the thing we have made? And what is the sacrifice?

A decolonial critique — as a matter of practice, not ill intent — would query the edifice of stories, the project of their successive tellers, and their effects. What of Hatuey's people and those after them, the enslaved labor, the field hands and domestic workers and indigenous and African-Cubans whose economic status under successive regimes never matched the weight of their contribution to national myth? What of the indigenous Americans, the other side of the Thanksgiving table, whose presence and endangerment haunt the filigree of Castellucci's text and production? What is the political economy of the story, and indeed of this series, which has selected these performances for this moment and stage?

**THE PROJECT HAS BECOME PART OF A LARGER U.S.-CUBAN CULTURAL COLLABORATION, WHICH WAS RENEWING BUT IS NOW ONCE AGAIN UNDER SIEGE.**

This is healthy work, and legitimate. The title of Thoron and London's production, after all, references Eduardo Galeano, the great Uruguayan essayist, whose "Memory of Fire" proposes a critical, anti-imperialist history of Latin America in a fragmentary language that communicates dislocation and contingency. Another way of telling the story. We have also the screens that Castellucci lowers across the stage during certain passages in the performance, blurring the figures and their movements behind a translucent skein. They call to mind the veil of ignorance — the uncertainty, in the image of the liberal philosopher John Rawls, that compels fair and just treatment of one's fellow member of society. They evoke, too, the right to opacity that Édouard Glissant claims for the subaltern, the colonized, the oppressed, in reconstructing self and community.

The blur, the dance, the music — these are democratic resources. There is damage that needs healing, and spiritual work, as much as political work, is required. We benefit from the journey — in the company of any guide of good will, citizen, or stranger — to the place where ideologies of the commonwealth draw from sources of agony and ecstasy.
I SET OUT MY HEAVY BOOKS AND MAPS TO COVER THE ENTIRE DESK. A FORTHRIGHT TENSION PERVERDES THE ROOM UNTIL A MACHINE-LIKE, UNTHINKING FLUENCY BEGINS TO TAKE OVER, “WORDS THAT COME IN SMOKE AND GO.”

Why do I push myself to constantly reconfigure the edges of my own voice? At the very instant they fall and become recognized as sounds they are quickly stamped as unearned, abandoned, a hanging without wall ...

As a poet I want to feel surrounded by structures that I can both see through and live inside of. This seems a result of my chronic formal restlessness, the fact that I have always placed a premium on outrunning my voice rather than “finding” it. This is a perfect mindset for any poet who wishes to obliterate the burden of narrative.

It has often been said that over the course of their lives, all poets are secretly writing a single work, whether branded as an epic or not. The interruptions of books and individual titles can barely conceal my long history of tracing architectures within language. Whichever forms of traction I can find, I then subvert, certain I will never see that first construct again anyway. It was the great poet Jack Spicer who dismissed certain of his early poems as “one-night stands, filled with their own emotions, but pointing nowhere.”

The voice rises and falls and sometimes dissolves its own scaffolding. How perilous is the footing of music? I feel as though I have spent 10 years building an electric organ that might cradle my voice. Tonight, I would like it to sound as though it were buried under wet sand.

She

tortures
the curtains of the window
shreds them
like some
insane insect,
creates a
demented web
from the thin folds,
her possessed fingers
clawing she
thrusts them away with
sharp jabs of long pins
to the walls.

– JOANNE KYGER FROM “THE MAZE” (1958)
So much is at risk in anyone’s attempt to compose an anthem. It almost feels like an impossible task to ever consciously take on. Last year I began to put together a composite text of lines culled from “I Have Spoken: American History Through the Voices of the Indians,” “Indian Oratory,” and “Great Speeches by Native Americans.” I would mark every line that caught my eye or ear (my heart) and eventually type it into the text. I remember adding lines of poetry to this mix as well to give it some buoyancy. These passages were obtained through random opening of a postmodern anthology. I can’t remember the exact title. This weaving of the various materials into an urtext produced a persistent delirium for the entire three weeks of its composition. Below is a short excerpt from the initial text:

“... I shall own a book of old Chinese poems and binoculars to probe the river trees. You issued the first soldiers and we only answered back. Frogs sing in the green rushes, everywhere the same call of being to being. I was born upon the prairies where there was nothing to break the light of the sun. I want to die there and not within walls. I have not and never did have any motive of poetry but to achieve clarity. Somber clouds waver in the void. I have laid aside my lance and bow and shield. I have no little lies hidden about me. With the hair of their women to hold them back. The road clear from her body past the window glass. Are the commissioners clear as I am? The posts must be removed and the steamboats stopped. My life is buried with all sorts of passage, both down the sides and on the face turned down to earth ...”

I thought that by corralling the most luminous lines into one text and then cutting it various ways, I might gain the contours of a new voice, or even a literal message to be delivered. I now realize that I was seeking evidence of what Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs often referred to as “the third mind.” Here is a section from the middle of the poem, currently titled “The Prisoner’s Song”:

Looking Glass is dead
The circular blue paper is the sky
We see some green spots which are pleasing
Are the commissioners clear as I am?
I gave them a blue flag which they pretended to cherish
I live in hopes. I do not have two hearts
The Illinois River will rise
A single warrior to write beyond without me
Death at the hands of the long guns
Did I say death? Or the springs are drying up?
Find the break where blood runs clear
Through the love you bear your gallant little band

Writing this poem felt like fiddling with the knobs of an old crackling car radio until its wires suddenly crossed to connect me with the dead. It felt as if its signal could only come alive within the desert of West Texas, where I was then writing. All kinds of edges and tailoring of the line would emerge. The only way out was literally through the raw text. I cut and rearranged until I felt I had uncovered every change in every possible key. I had successfully destroyed my own instrument. Near the end of this work I included a quotation from Joy Harjo that seemed to speak directly to the scope of its process, “Not to reverse history, but to draw out the strength.”

In this current, sickening political climate I have come to think of every poet as a wayward soldier who at some point will function as a prophet, degraded crown and all. I often think of Amiri Baraka’s clarity in reminding us that misfortune often arises when we stop struggling.

Note: The quote “words that come in smoke and go” is from Michael Palmer’s Notes for Echo Lake (3), (North Point Press, 1981)
IN DISCUSSION:

FAYE DRISCOLL
AND TAYLOR MAC

PEAK PERFORMANCES' PeArl (Performing Arts Research Laboratory) program offers an artist extended residency time over one to two years, knitting together the work happening onstage with work happening in classrooms across campus, and featuring the commission of a new piece. The choreographer Faye Driscoll is the second PeArl fellow; her “Thank you for coming” trilogy will be shown in its entirety over the current peak season, culminating in the premiere of part three. We asked her which artist she would most like to be in conversation with to discuss her work: she chose her friend and collaborator, the celebrated theater artist Taylor Mac. Here are edited excerpts from their April 2018 conversation.

FD: I saw one of the six-hour shows at the Ace, and it was —

TM: Oh, you did!

FD: Yeah, it was amazing. I was up in the balcony with my friend who had just had a baby, so we didn’t run down to the stage or anything. (laughs) But it brought me so much joy to be in that theater with all the however thousands of people and you.

TM: Very sweet. So let’s talk about the trilogy — are you making part three in Montclair right now?

FD: Yeah, I’m just in the early phases. It’ll premiere in a year here, and we’re also going to do part one and part two earlier, in the fall.

TM: How has the process been, taking many years to focus on the project? You know, it always feels like your work, my work, artists that we know — most of our work is all part of a series, anyways. (laughs)

FD: Yeah, exactly. That’s partly why I made the series, because I was noticing that there was this conversation happening through the work. But the funding systems and the premiere systems that we have just say “it’s your new thing!”

TM: Right.

FD: I was feeling so burned out on that and wanted to think bigger and think about putting an umbrella over multiple years. It has deepened my thinking about my work and pushed me as an artist. I’ve also felt like I’ve had to come up against some stamina and feeling around, like, “Oh! Actually, I was also addicted to that.” Like, “It’s a new thing! It’s a new thing!” — which is a very capitalist, neoliberal system that we’re in. But I’m starting to trust all the labor that I put into one and two and that that work and that research really gets to be there, as a foundation. Part one was this joyous hit; it connects to a lot of people, which is great. And then making part two, I really felt, “This has to be totally different!” And I fought and struggled a lot in that process; it’s darker, and I had to go through some of the pain of letting it not be as pleasing. (laughs) And now I’m like, “Oh, it’s all part of one big thing!” Part three can look like the other parts if it needs to. It’s OK if they actually are in dialogue.

TM: It seems liberating. The thing that I noticed about your work is that you’re interested in complexity; you’re interested in the whole range of the subject and your themes, and so you’re not trying to do just one thing. But when you spread it out as a series, it allows you to compartmentalize a little bit more. You can still do the whole complexity of it, but isolate experiences slightly.
**FD:** Mmhmm, mmhmm. Which is hard for my brain because some of that complexity that I love, I need to parse out a little bit. “Faye, not every single idea.” Not every single idea at once. (laughs)

**TM:** “It has to be right here,” and that’s not natural.

**FD:** Yeah, which feels like a kind of maturation, letting things have these distinct tastes. And also, I think, because the work is hybrid, or it is in my brain; if I had to separate them, part one is the dance, part two is the play, and part three I’m thinking of more as installation, in that it lives in a longer duration and it’s something that you could possibly come and go from. It also deals with leaving stuff in the space that you can visit; during the day you could come and just be with the objects.

**TM:** There is often a lot of stuff in your pieces, in terms of objects, like in the duo show, “You’re Me.” Is that accurate?

**FD:** That’s accurate. Actually, that’s funny, because that piece was one of the first where I had a bunch of residencies, and so I didn’t have to schlep all the stuff and move it every day. So it was purely a function of like, “Oh my God, I can leave things in the studio; therefore there’s going to be things in the show.”

**TM:** Support does change the work because you don’t have to think small, you don’t have to think easy. You don’t have to schlep.

**FD:** Right? Me and my suitcases.

**TM:** And that experience, did that get you excited about more objects? Or is it just that you’ve always loved it?

**FD:** I think it got me more excited. We are dependent on things: they’re really these extensions of our bodies and ourselves and our identities. They become a part of our animal, but they’re also this artifice, you know? This thing we’re putting on, taking off. So yeah, I think I got stuck on that.

**TM:** Do you think about the objects as dancers, or are they objects?

**FD:** I think they’re in relationship to the dancers in that I want them to be able to be seen multiple ways. I’ll often take an everyday thing, a duster or something, and then we’ll wrap it in some shimmery gold and the way the performer uses it, it becomes some sort of crazy wand. I like it when the objects have multiple reads and have a little bit of a feeling of like, “Wait, what is that thing?” That’s how I want the audience to see people too, like, “Oh! That’s — oh wait, no actually they’re that? I was convinced they were this, but I’m now seeing them some other way.” So it’s a little slippery, but also relatable. Like, also — I can kind of tell that’s a, you know, a duster. So.

**TM:** (laughs)

**FD:** Yeah, that visible magic thing: it’s happening in front of you. You’re seeing all the labor.

**TM:** I guess that part of that question was about how much is movement for movement’s sake a part of what you do. It doesn’t seem that that’s something you’re interested in, and that’s one of the reasons why I’m always jazzed by your work; there’s an intent behind it. But at the same time, I feel like that’s an immature response on my part. (laughs) I think the movement for movement thing is something that is kind of sophisticated.

**FD:** Yeah, I’m a little immature too. I do love movement, or just the pure sensation of bodies moving in space. But I just can never get away from the fact that this is a person, and I’m fascinated by this person. I mean, all those questions that are going on when you look at even movement for movement’s sake: “Look at that person’s butt.” Or: “Do you think he’s gay?” All those little things are happening in my mind even when I see the most gorgeous, stripped-down Trisha Brown piece. So even when I do a lot of those experiments where we really come from a somatic place in my process, I end up wanting to layer it and bring out that space between performer and audience. It’s definitely full of intent and usually a kind of complex, layered intent, with some bones that are connected to that movement for movement’s sake thing.

**TM:** Yeah. OK, so switching to the idea of an installation. How are you thinking, especially as you tour, of performing in different spaces — are you trying to work with what is there, or do you go in thinking, “Now we’ve got to transform the space for our piece”?
FD: As we've been touring we're definitely trying to work with what's there, to make it work within the design and the intent of the work. And usually if we can, we like to have a little extra time in the space in order to find its unique qualities, what we're going to draw attention to.

TM: It struck me, when I saw “Thank You for Coming: Attendance” in Belfast, that you weren't just plopping down your show, that you were considering the room that you were in.

FD: Absolutely. And we even had a little bit of Taylor Mac glitter on the floor, I think. (laughs) So we worked with that. That's always what I want, to bring people to where they are and its liveness and uniqueness. Sometimes there's some stuff that's unworkable. You're like, “OK, we just have to cover that up.” But it's definitely made for each space — sometimes to the chagrin of the people in the work, because they're like, “Another change? Another idea?” Another thing's going to come up because of being influenced by the space that we're in.

TM: I always know that I'm doing good when I win the techies over. But it's often a challenge. (laughs)

FD: It is. They're like, "Wait, what?"

TM: Could you talk about the distance between the audience and the performers and how that is either changing or not changing between the three pieces?

FD: In part one, everything gently sets you up to be slowly engulfed in the piece, from the eye contact, to touch, to hearing your name sung, to the way the set transforms and moves the audience into different configurations. And then in the second one, it's a bit more about bringing the voice of the audience into the work. We have them chanting, and they help co-write part of it.

TM: Oh, neat!

FD: And they watch it, though, mostly from their seats. Which I struggled with a little bit — it's harder for people to break their contract once they're in that position, their fixed gaze.

TM: And sitting is such a sad visual. (laughs)

FD: It really is! I don't know why we as humans have built this whole life for this position of the body, which is really terrible for us. And when we move our head, we un-fix our thinking. So with the third one, I'm thinking that it's going to be, again, in the round or be set up in a way where you have to move through it. I guess I have three different audience choreographies.

TM: That's neat.
FD: I think it's just they know the rules. People really want to know the rules, even though we want agency and to feel like we made a free-will choice. But it's really, "What's the authority here?"

TM: Do you feel like you're the authority, or the show is?

FD: I think I am, although I'm trying to challenge that a little in myself with the third one, to let there be a little more room. There's something we've worked really hard on, and that we've structured, and there is a particular experience I'm trying to manifest. There's room in it, but it's still a show, in this certain type of way, which is kind of old school.

TM: Yes, I'm right there with you. I want there to be room for people to disagree and even shout back every so often. But it's still a show; we still prepared. So let us do what we prepared.

I'm interested how you allow that to be in the room, and are there moments when it goes too far for you? How do you establish the rules for both your performers and the audience, in terms of the improv element? You know, like when everyone's all clumped up and they're all moving in those big clumps. There's a kinetic response between the performers that can't be exact, right?

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FD: **WE HAVE THIS IDEA THAT CHOICE IS THE HIGHEST THING WE COULD HAVE. THE CHOICE TO BUY THIS OR THAT, TO DO THIS OR THAT. BUT I THINK WHAT I WANT, REALLY, IS FOR PEOPLE TO FEEL THEIR BODIES AND FEEL THE COMPLEXITY OF THEIR SENSES AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS AND THE CONTRADICTIONS AND IMPOSSIBILITIES JUST RIGHT THERE IN THEMSELVES.**

FD: Yeah, there is. Sometimes I get a question, which is different than what you're saying, at postshow talk backs: "Was that improvised or was it set?" I think people are looking at it going, "What is this?" And then wanting to understand and fix the story behind it. And it's both. For sure, the performers have a lot of agency; I try and build that into the process, because so much of it is coming from them and who they are and their choices. And then it's highly scored and crafted and rehearsed to look very specifically messy, often. But there's space for them; it needs to be alive, it needs to 100 percent responsive and alive and about choice-making.

I think there's sometimes embedded in that question a hierarchy. People think things that are set are "masterful," like a composer composing some sort of masterful score. But I think improvisers are the most incredible masters — and I don't think I have that level of mastery, to create a situation where people could do that and not have it be really worked on in a certain set sort of way.

TM: Oh no, it does in a roundabout way. It like the cliché of, "We're all on our devices. Our heads are all down, our necks are all down." As you were saying, you've got to move your head around to see other things; our vision is so shallow, because we're always looking at our phones and, "Oh, the theater is a place where we get together and we can be free of that, and we can look around and we can be with other people." Is that all that theater is supposed to be now, because of the...
Faye Driscoll's "Thank You for Coming: Play." Photo: Hayim Heron

demands of social media? It feels shallow to frame this old, old, old art form around something that is so new, and that the only purpose of it is to free us from this new technology. (laughs) At the same time, it so seems to be what we need right now!

FD: Yes, yes. It does seem like live performance is needed more.

TM: And when I see something like Trump and those rallies and those people, that's what they need as well. Right? That's why they're all gathered. So it does make me want to rebel against getting everybody excited about a cause. (laughs)

FD: Yes, there's problematics just in the efforts of getting people to join.

TM: There's some crisis. I'm having an existential crisis. A midcareer existential crisis.

FD: Right, yeah, hmm. But if we are getting people excited about being with their complexity, all the layers of their experience, and there is theatrical manipulation used to do that …

TM: Well, this is what I appreciate about the complexity in your work. A Trump rally is not about complexity, and a sporting event is not about complexity, and going to church is not about complexity. It is about rooting for one team, one god, one candidate. One ideology.

FD: Right, and going to church also gives you that feeling of being a part of the fabric of the culture and that you did something good that day for the world or for yourself, and then you might see someone in the supermarket later who was there, too. And with sports you definitely feel like you're among other like-minded people. I think people really crave feeling like they're a part of, and that they're participating. When I see your work, I think it's giving people that: "Wow, I'm a part of. I'm among. I'm in a movement of some sort." And because it's clear and complex and it is my kind of church in that way, so.

TM: All right, so, talk to me about companies. You don't have a company, and yet you kind of do, and it's that sweet spot — it's very similar with me — of working with many of the same people again and again and yet not making it official. Is that freeing?

FD: I am interested in a mutual desire and consensuality. “You want to be here? I want to be here? Great! Let's keep going.” So that could be the same people, or it could be that it's, “OK, babe, it's time to move on, or I'll see you in a couple years, when I do the next thing, and it's right again.” History can be really powerful when you have the same group and they “get you” but it can also be its own constraint. So I'm working in the pickup company sort of model where that might mean someone I've worked with for 10 years is around and someone I'm just starting to work with is around, because we all want to be there. I like that mix.

TM: What's your relationship with leading?

FD: I have a complex relationship with it. I do love it. I love looking into the people around me, seeing things and pulling things out and that strange alchemy where there's this third space between you and I'm helping orchestrate that and direct that. I do love the feeling of this little glimmer of something I was imagining starting to manifest. And then I also get freaked out by it. I get freaked out by the responsibility, and I have embarrassing moments where I'm like, "I want everyone to really like this, and I want you guys to all contribute." And then I'm like, "Oh, Faye, you're being a baby; you want them to contribute, but then you also want to be totally in charge." I just have to be honest about that sometimes in the room and be like, "Oh, I'm asking you to affirm me right now, and I think that's a little weird. That's not your job." (laughs) There's sometimes this thing right now that I hear in conversation around decolonializing things, where it's assumed that even being a leader at all is somehow bad, you know?

TM: Evil, yeah.

FD: Yeah! And I don't think that's true. I love it when there's a clarity and structure to it and as a performer I get to really manifest and be my part in it. If it's like, “Who's in charge here?” — it's really hard to do that well, and it's not always beneficial to the art.

TM: Another thing I've noticed about the work I've seen of yours, until "Thank You for Coming" — the work went toward the apocalyptic. It was all building to this grand battle, this grand departure. “Thank You for Coming” felt like the opposite. It starts with the apocalypse, and moves into something else. I haven't seen part two, so I'm wondering how that's shaping up and if you're interested in the divine mess of the apocalypse in any way. The divine mess of things is a very queer aesthetic.

FD: Definitely. I've been interested in the ecstatic and in oppositional extremes living side by side — those dark notes next to the absurd and — God, I guess, I don't know — the internal things being kind of purged outward. I don't know if I'm interested in the apocalypse, or apocalyptic things.
There's that moment in “You’re Me” where the music is getting more intense and all the various costume changes are being put on you, and there's a freneticism to the gestures and —

Yeah, there's multiple climaxes.

And it could be that — oh, we're moving toward climax. And that could be like a midcareer, middle-aged type of thing — where “Thank You for Coming” moved away from that, and it's neither good or bad, it just is.

Actually, in part two, I had an ending, when we premiered it at BAM, that was very much that “Howl!” kind of climax ending that I loved. It felt very familiar: “This is me doing me, and I'm at BAM.” And then as I reflected on the structure, I ended up changing it, when we toured the work. It now ends in this much quieter, more contemplative way, and that had felt very uncomfortable, but it's more aligned with some of the questions and intentions in the series. Even though screaming in the dark really good, how is this work functioning in the world, and what is it doing? And that premiere did feel really good because Trump had just gotten elected. Everything in me right then just wanted to scream. But I think I am questioning the desire for climax and excess and yeah, chewing on things a little bit differently, as a result of making a series and situating myself within its conceptual parameters.

So, to switch — I've never interviewed someone before.

You're doing such a good job.

It's funny to be on the other side of it. I wanted to talk about sexiness: sexiness is always so overdone in our culture. But at the same time, we're queer and sex is part of our understanding of the world and the way we communicate. I find that the sexiness in your work is ridiculous, which is what makes it even more sexy. (laughs)

I think the sex in the work is in a lot of different modes. Like, I'm thinking about the "Stop-Action" section, where there's a group orgy in stop-action animation. And it's so absurd, and it still somehow turns you on a little bit. So it's playing with that manipulation. But in my work there's also grotesqueness and sensuality and, like, guts and body and, you know, a toe coming up to an ear; there's something just about a presence and intimacy. I'm always looking for it to be a little bit wet, if that makes sense. Even if it's not directly sexy, there's something about that sensation of like, the sweaty pits. (laughs) That's what's so problematic often, about the way we learn about sex. It's really anesthetized — when there's actually so much beautiful ugliness in it.

So, yeah ... Where are you right now?

I'm actually in New York. But I'm about to go to Iowa. (laughs) Right in the red states!
WHEN ANN CARLSON’S “ELIZABETH, THE DANCE” PREMIERED IN SALT LAKE CITY, THE FIRST THING THE AUDIENCE SAW WAS A FREESTANDING, WHITE, RECTANGULAR WALL. Light rose from vertical lines of bulbs that traced the ceilings and would-be wings, revealing the stage as otherwise bare. The pairing of set and light directed attention to depth and edges, so that the audience had to notice the very thing performance often works to make people forget: they were looking at a stage.

“Elizabeth” is not the only dance in Peak Performances’ season that forces a close look at this thing called a stage. The choreographer Liz Gerring will complete a trilogy commissioned by Peak with a work that (as of this writing) is titled “Field,” following “glacier” (2013) and “horizon” (2015). Her abstract choreography, virtuosic yet somehow warm, unfolds in the trilogy in intensely demarcated space — a result of a particular combination of the dancing and Robert Wierzel’s set and lighting design.

In “glacier,” a long, softly lit panel runs the width of the stage, extending well into the wings and accentuating the work as a rush along the horizontal. In “horizon,” two luminous panels (materials repurposed from “glacier”) hover: one a back wall and one floating at a slight tilt above. The top panel functions as lid, pressing energy back toward the dancers. Their movement is amplified because the space pushes the eye back toward them.

To notice the physical space in which dancers move seems the easiest of audience tasks. In theater spaces with proscenium structures — a clearly demarcated playing space, a stage, viewed through a frame, often an arch — the audience stares straight forward and through the frame. Ancient Greek theater makers imagined this
architecture to delineate audience from performer and to highlight that there was an ideal perspective from which to watch the performance. The structure asks audiences to look in a certain way, and centuries of doing so has inculcated us to not notice our noticing.

American concert dance has taken this to an extreme. Due to a combination of modernist aesthetics and economic reality, sets are rare in dance, and lighting often focuses on illuminating bodies rather than the space more broadly. American concert dance audiences learn to ignore the frame in which dance unfolds as though bodies move in open space. In their works presented this season, Carlson and Gerring counter this history by making visible the possibilities of the proscenium and embracing them.

Generally, when dance artists have sought to make the proscenium visible, they explode or reject the structure. The work of the American-born, Germany-based choreographer William Forsythe, for example, marks, often harshly, the realities of the theater space. Forsythe generally strips away such elements as the curtains that hang across a stage’s back wall and sides, softening the proscenium edges. By removing these (or sometimes using them differently — lowering them only halfway, for instance), Forsythe reveals the building’s mechanics. On the surface, his choices seem largely aesthetic, but the works’ origins in Germany draw associations with the more politically focused, functionally similar choices of the early 20th-century German theater director Bertolt Brecht. Brecht revolutionized Western theater by refusing to prioritize illusion over a constructed reality, because he thought illusion produced complacency, whereas harshly presenting reality in the theater space would spark political engagement. Brecht pulled the curtains away to remind audiences they were at the theater.

Early New York postmodern dancemakers went a step beyond the Brechtian critique of the proscenium. Many artists, among them Yvonne Rainer, Anna Halprin, Twyla Tharp, and Trisha Brown, rejected dance norms related to the theater, either testing what could happen in a proscenium or even that dance should happen in a theatrical building at all. In her 1963 “We Shall Run,” Rainer limited the movement vocabulary to running. In the late ’60s, Tharp put dances in stairwells and on lawns. In 1970 Brown managed to reject the proscenium, but still reach simultaneously for spectacle and the mundane with “Man Walking Down the Side of the Building,” which premiered on the side of a wall in New York’s SoHo neighborhood.

Both Carlson and Gerring could be categorized as current manifestations of postmodern dance’s refusal to see the stage as dance’s one true home. Carlson’s desire for non-theatrical spaces has grown from a decades-long commitment to the site-specific, to the “non-dancer,” and what she calls “naïve gestures.” She choreographed for the track team while an undergraduate at University of Utah, and her “Doggie Hamlet,” performed in meadows with a cast of sheep and dogs, is currently on tour.

Gerring, like Carlson, comes from conservatory modern training (Juilliard). But she spent years post-college as a competitive bike racer, returning to dance by way of visual art spaces where she created installations rather than theatrical performances. Gerring says her choice had much to do with economics: visual art’s experimental spaces were where, in her early years as a maker, she could afford to make work on the cast she could afford (herself). But she also feels drawn to that world: “I sort of think of myself as a visual artist, but my medium is movement. If I had been able to draw, we’d be having a totally different conversation.”

Why, in 2018, would choreographers, particularly choreographers who have been successful in more flexible venues, choose the theater, the proscenium? History teaches us this traditional space can be dangerous. In the proscenium theater, social stratification is normalized: there is one ideal perspective against which all others are measured. Dance history (not to mention economic reality) teaches us that there are other spaces where dance can thrive. Why go see dance in proscenium theaters then? How can that experience teach us ways we need to see, to pay attention, in our contemporary moment?
Carlson's and Gerring's works and histories suggest there is much to learn from and in the proscenium space. “Elizabeth” uses the proscenium space to reckon with modern dance history at the scale of the personal and of the community. The work was originally created for Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company in Salt Lake City, a company founded by two of Carlson's former university dance professors. In school Carlson puzzled at the stage's power, but also the limits imposed on it. She scoffed at the notion only some people's movements belong on a stage. (That's how she wound up making work with the university track team.) She also felt intimately what it was like to be told movements important to her own body were not allowed onstage. Early in her time as a choreographer, Carlson was banned by a teacher from continuing work on a study she made for two women, which, in retrospect, Carlson realized had lesbian overtones. In “Elizabeth,” this personal history pulses alongside a longer story of women in dance. Sections of the dance honor modern dance's female icons, Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham, who helped create the field by allowing women public stages to embrace their bodies and their bodies’ stories of gender, sexuality, and desire. The mix of possibility and critique is palpable. The work feels crafted by someone who cares about, even loves, theaters. After all, Carlson's dance life began when her mother took her, age 5, to a ballet performance in a suburban Chicago high school. In the car afterward, Carlson informed her mother, with awe, “I want to do that.”

In “Elizabeth,” the theater space feels special in what it can hold, if perhaps not as ideally as 5-year-old Carlson imagined. The lights above the stage draw the eye in, inviting an appreciation for the stage's volume, for the close-looking that makes the stage the stage and the audience the audience. The proscenium's clear divisions create difference, as well as something called an “audience.” This clear marking of an “audience” has long offered women in dance something to manipulate, to push against, rather than only an amorphous, but omnipresent panopticon that limits the female body to be forever object, not actor. Carlson marks the frame of “Elizabeth,” asking us to find ways to see the multigendered cast, to see what they are doing because of how we see.

Gerring’s work also moves in a long trajectory of questioning how we see, and it offers questions about the nature of the frame that might be specifically contemporary. Looking at the slight shifts in structural framing devices across her Peak Performances trilogy, it becomes clear the labor Gerring requires of her audience is one of attuning to difference within familiarity. She asks us to see not just bodies but notice the frame and its variations. In a world where so much comes to us through these tiny rectangular frames — including the one on which I write this essay right now — it is imperative to remember not all material within frames receives the same gaze. Spectatorship oriented around a frame might seem passive (“sit here, look here”), but we constantly make subtle adjustments to our seeing. We need to be adept to change within frames, to notice the feedback loop between what we look through and what we see within.

Even when frames offer similarity, we should focus differently, look anew. “Glacier” brings us through horizontal passages, while “horizon” asks us to sense the pressure among and between bodies; surely “Field” will take us on yet another journey. We have to work today to avoid being lulled into seeing everything as image-driven spectacle, yet another visual list through which we can scroll. Gerring’s trilogy lets us practice how we notice the frame in order to see the whole — even re-imagine what constitutes the whole as produced by all the elements, the between-bodies as much as the bodies.

“WE NEVER LOOK AT JUST ONE THING; WE ARE ALWAYS LOOKING AT THE RELATION BETWEEN THINGS AND OURSELVES.”

– JOHN BERGER, “WAYS OF SEEING,” 1972
THE LAST WOLF
The last wolf hurried toward me 
through the ruined city
and I heard his baying echoes
down the steep smashed warrens
of Montgomery Street and past
the ruby-crowned highrises
left standing
their lighted elevators useless

Passing the flicking red and green
of traffic signals
baying his way eastward
in the mystery of his wild loping gait
closer the sounds in the deadly night
through clutter and rubble of quiet blocks
I hear his voice ascending the hill
and at last his low whine as he came
floor by empty floor to the room
where I sat
in my narrow bed looking west, waiting
I heard him snuffle at the door and
I watched

He trotted across the floor
he laid his long gray muzzle
on the spare white spread
and his eyes burned yellow
his small dotted eyebrows quivered

Yes, I said.
I know what they have done.

– MARY TALLMOUNTAIN

TRY THIS. GO OUTSIDE, TAKE OFF YOUR SHOES. WALK AS SLOWLY AS YOU CAN FOR AN HOUR, TWO.

You will find a way to slow breath and agitation, your will to move faster. Your feet will find the tiniest of rise and slope you wouldn’t otherwise notice. Your legs will tire at the pace, then grow accustomed. You might be surprised at more than one thing. You might feel delight.

And what of an hour? Two? To walk slowly? By this I mean time to tend, to listen, to pay attention to self and place. Is it luxury? Responsibility? To get to know the land you walk?

AS YOU READ THIS, DO YOU KNOW WHOSE LAND YOU ARE ON?

I have spent time on the land of the Yawuru people, in Broome, and also in the Kimberleys — both in what some people call Western Australia — where Marrugeku dance theater is based. The pindan, the bright red soil, stained my feet and legs. It is not hard to listen, to pay attention to this land. It is so bright, so beautiful, so encompassing as to stain your feet as you walk. One morning I spent time at Nagula Jamdu, Broome’s Aboriginal women’s resource center, which is also an art and textiles workshop that serves as a vital gathering and work space for Indigenous women. The director and I started up a yarn — a conversation — about block-printing and design and fish and fishing and fish-scales and fish-skin sewing, and the next morning I was picked up at 5 a.m. to go fishing on the other side of Broome, with her family who were in from Alice Springs.

Standing at the water’s edge, I was taught to swing the line above my head, release it (eventually without tangling it around my feet), and pull back in. When I felt a strong tug, I lost all sense of sense and pulled the line in, fist over fist, the nylon line cutting into my hand. But I landed the fish! A big trevally. Oh! I lay it down next to one more our group had caught and gave them both a solid bonk on the head. In the evening we ate up that fish four ways. “Our old ones must be looking out for you,” I was told. A few days later — I forget which shop I was in, someone asked, “are you the one caught that big trevally?”

– EMILY JOHNSON
Driving home from Mowanjum Aboriginal Art and Culture Center, through the Kimberleys, I was told to get back before sundown, as the sun coming down on the straight road is glaring and makes it hard to see not only the road trains — the huge semi-cattle-trucks — but the cattle crossing the red road. Well, I couldn’t help it. The drive back took twice as long as it should have because I had to stop — sometimes every 30 feet — pull over and just stand. Stand on the land, with the land, in proximity, in awe, in breath and stillness with those anthills and those Boab trees — which the person I love calls strange beasties. I listened to the strange beasties, and the anthills and the land. I kept pulling over again and again to listen.

In Australia, you have to be especially ignorant not to know whose land you are on, whose land you have stolen, whose land you occupy. Here, in the United States, we make it a little easier, and for now, ignorance abounds.

The Aboriginal voice and politic in Australia are powerful and heard. Sovereignty, treaty, Blakpower are words with movement behind and in front of them. Indigeneous land acknowledgement is a protocol at every public gathering. Welcome to Country, a different practice offered and received with reverence. There has been a national “apology” (in quotation marks because some feel the words are empty), a recognition from the settler society of genocide, land theft, and the Stolen Generations. When I come home to Lenapehoking (the New York City area), from Narrm (the Melbourne region), where I spend most of my time in Australia, I am invariably filled with a little more power, a little more wherewithal to face the perceived invisibility in existence in the United States. For that, I am so grateful. Yes, there is still work to do in Australia as there is across the world, but in terms of recognition of Indigenous peoples — of our existence — of the fact we are still here and always will be — the United States is perhaps furthest behind.

AS YOU READ THIS, DO YOU KNOW WHOSE LAND YOU ARE ON?

In the United States, our Indigenous communities are also strong. We have power and sovereignty. We stop pipelines. We galvanize. We are 562 nations making our contributions to the world via language, art, knowledge. But there is also a deep, taught resistance from the settler society. A resistance to acknowledge and be in relation with us and with our land. So much so that most people in the United States do not know whose land they occupy; there is thus rare public land acknowledgment, there has been no government recognition of genocide, land theft, treaty breaking, the Indian Removal Act, the Dawes Act, the Indian Relocation Act, the forced removal of children from homes to Indian boarding schools, and the Oliphant decision, which, according to the Indian Law Resource Center, allowed for the rape and murder of Indigenous women on reservations at rates 10 times the national average.

But this — this lack of recognition of us — is shifting, as it should. And we, Indigenous leaders and artists, are the generators of the shift.

LISTEN.

The way I see it is that through dance, theater, story, and song, through reciprocal relationships, the power is surging now and flowing back. As it should. A reciprocal flow of power and inspiration. Something started here in New York City, on Turtle Island with Spiderwoman Theater, the American Indian Movement, Black Panthers, National Black Theater in Harlem. That something moved across the ocean to Australia and Blak theater, the Blakpower movement and self-determination, and now comes back to Turtle Island with a momentum for change. The past few years have seen incredible organizing and creative collaborations between Indigenous
artists from Australia and the United States, leading to the development of new works, of a new Indigenous global performance network, and the growing practice of land acknowledgment here. As our Indigenous stories and songs and plights and brilliance and lands are known, as we are recognized, we can better effect the needed change for this land — in policies, in relationships, in consciousness.

Look where we are. This is not a country that is healthy.

**LISTEN TO ME. WE DON'T HAVE MUCH TIME.**

“It’s been years, and it’s never been raining.”

Standing Rock, an Indigenous action, has spawned environmental actions across the world, including in Australia. Water Futures was a three-day gathering hosted by Arts House, Tipping Point Australia, and AsiaTOPA, involving participants from across Australia and the Asia Pacific: artists, scientists, Indigenous elders, economists, activists, politicians, diplomats and the community came together for a crucial conversation on water. At Water Futures, many Standing Rocks were called for.

Standing Rock, as a place, is homeland of Lakota people and the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. It is now famous for the Indigenous-led movement against the Dakota Access Pipeline in protection of water. It is also a place where sacred sites were bulldozed, these actions enforced by police and private security contractors.

I met Dr. Anne Poelina, a Yimardoowarra, Nyikina woman at Water Futures. She is from Lower Fitzroy River in Australia. She is campaigning for the Fitzroy River to be recognized as a sentient entity. She fights “flaws in native title laws, which leave Indigenous Australians and the environment vulnerable to genocide and ecocide.”

Noonkanbah Station is a little southwest of the Lower Fitzroy River and Fitzroy Crossing. It is the place spoken of in “Cut the Sky.” It is site of another infamous land-rights dispute in August of 1980. It is another place sacred sites were desecrated when oil exploration was forced upon them.

There is relation. Between Indigenous people and land. Between attempted genocide and ecocide. Between Standing Rock; Noonkanbah Station; the Lower Fitzroy River; Montclair, N. J. — a land of sewer overflows, disturbing air quality, toxic waste.

Is it difficult to understand land when you do not come from land?

**WHAT DO I MEAN BY THAT?**

We are all born on earth. But we do not all come from land. The evidence for me is in how some people treat the land.

**LISTEN.**

To say Marrugeku and this work, “Cut the Sky,” come from land — well, it’s a kind of fact for me. But it is also a dangerous thing to say. Perhaps the words wash over you: Land, Indigenous, People, Sky — and carry no particular weight. Perhaps they reinforce a stereotype you think you know: Land, Indigenous, People, Sky.

Or perhaps the words are part of a larger truth:

**LAND, INDIGENOUS, PEOPLE, SKY.**

This is how I think of it: we do not all come from land, but we can all learn to listen to it. We can all learn from the land we live on. This learning starts with knowing whose land it is.

My reality is this: in 2016 at a residency at the Headlands Center for the Arts near Yelamu (the San Francisco Bay Area), climate scientists asked me how to deal with and express, as in share, their grief. One said to me, I live this every day. I already mourn. The world we knew is gone. How do I give people the chance to grieve? Can that grieving move some to action more than my data does? It isn’t going to save the world, but it will delay the death.

I am not sure I have fully processed what she said to me.

When the crocodile says, “All kingdoms are built by blood.”

What do you hear?

When Dalisa Pigram yells, “I’m not frightened of you …”

Who do you think she is talking to?

When a strange beastie or I suggest you pull over or pull off your shoes to listen, will you?

How much time do you think we have to change what we can?

**AS YOU READ THIS, DO YOU KNOW WHOSE LAND YOU ARE ON?**
WHEN I IMAGINE CIRCUS- AND HUMOR-BASED FORMS, A HOST OF CULTURAL MEMORIES ARE SUMMONED. As an American, my memories call up the great silent clowns, Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton; the eccentric dancers who came into focus during the explosion of the vernacular jazz dances of the 1920s and ‘30s; the variety acts in the Orpheum vaudeville circuit; and the troubling and painful history of minstrelsy. Recalling the side shows of traditional traveling circuses, such as the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, I remember cotton candy and stuffed animals. All are the cultural debris of possibility and failure — memories that are sensorial, tactile, evoking wonder and fascination.

Circus- and humor-based arts have long created bawdy and subversive sociopolitical interventions into cultural spaces. Tricksters “derange the stability of order into disorder;” ¹ using physical illusion, metamorphosis, and a non-sequitur splicing of imagery. A clown is constructed through collaged identities, mashed up from personal memories, social contexts, traditions, and experiences both lived and imagined, in which the “characters evaporate, crystallize, scatter, and converge. But a single consciousness holds sway over them all — that of the dreamer.” ²

Orange hat, red cartoon sweatshirt, baggy pants, half suspender, clown shoes. A lumberjack, chimney sweep, grump growler. In a deep squat slugging along, riffing the right arm in twang twirls, clumsy falls, and laborious maneuvers, flapping, stomping, pity-party shuffle, childish runway, curl into a ball, and grump offstage.³

In 2005, I began a dancing dialogue with the theatrical clown and actor Bill Irwin. We would meet at the now closed Fazil’s on the edges of Times Square in Manhattan to experiment with hat tricks and eccentric dance-inspired improvisations; Irwin’s rubbery physicality and free associative approach to clowns remain deeply influential to clown therapy, the improvisational performance practice I’ve developed. “Watching Irwin’s limbs move in dozens of directions simultaneously is like seeing Fred Astaire’s body possessed by all four Marx Brothers at once.” ⁴ In performance, I remember sensing the circuitry of his nervous system, wired to read every reaction from the audience. I witnessed the reprisal of his 1982 work “The Regard of Flight” at the Signature Theatre in 2003 and still remember his cartoon-like wiles, metamorphosing from one moment to the next. Jumbling soft-shoe with eccentric dance slapstick, all while being sucked off the stage as if succumbing to an invisible gravitational force, he reigns through his constantly mutating comic form.

Or take Felix the Cat: Cubist and metamorphosing, the silent film-era cartoon subverts existing social structures through a...
trickery of form, relating to “the literary theorist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin’s definition of the ‘grotesque’ as ‘a body in the act of becoming’ — one that ‘is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body.’” Felix embodies the plasticity of the animated line, continuously stepping outside the bounds of reality through slapstick and comic antics. His irrepressible, “chameleonlike qualities coincide with one of the most fundamental devices used by the trickster — the ability to shape-shift ... Felix can lose his head or be cut in half; he can fly; and he can survive underwater.”

Circus encompasses visual trickery and virtuosity — both ways of making the impossible come to life. As part of this historical imaginary, the circus holds a particular space of fantasy, which for me lives through the syntax and rhythmic timing of humor. Jokes, puns, slapstick, and gags are the hard arts of this lineage; these simple forms, bawdy in their bodily representations, offer a vital materiality so often erased from the high-art cultural canon. While surrealism and dadaism drew upon the aesthetics of humor as early as the 1920s, and conceptual art and postmodern dance have been influenced by deadpan, comedy is often placed in a lowly stance to abstraction and modernism, its contributions to the avant-garde erased. In a contemporary aesthetic often signified by mathematics and minimalism, by the severe theatricality of modern dance traditions, is there room for humor, for the absurd? To ask the question another way, is traditional circus allowed to be experimental, or must 21st-century circus artists align themselves with other traditions to claim contemporary legitimacy?

Finding their origins in a multiplicity of contesting histories, the circus arts aren’t typically archived within institutional spaces. As an archivist and artist, I’m interested in the ways artists can intervene in this cultural canon, offering a material lens through which the past can be excavated and remade through the present. Play and experimentation are lenses through which history can be composed and recomposed; Sean Gandini of Gandini Jugglers and Raphaëlle Boitel take up these strategies as artists working within contemporary circus, a form which has continued to evolve in Europe since the 1990s.

Originally from Cuba, Gandini described the presence of magic in Havana, including a chance meeting with a taxi driver who gave him a collection of tricks. He witnessed a juggler at Covent Garden in London; captivated by the geometry of the five balls rotating in the air, he became obsessed with the form. Boitel, who relates more to the discipline of physical theater than circus, began as a street performer at age 9 as a way to earn money to study with the French clown Annie Fratellini. Learning of the story, and how Boitel and her brother paid for the workshop in coins, Fratellini invited them to study in the National Circus School in Paris. Years later, Boitel began her professional career with the Swiss circus artist and grandson of Charlie Chaplin, James Thierrière.

Gandini and Boitel enfold elements of dance, theater, and visual arts within their approaches to circus, borrowing from multiple histories to extend the possibilities of their forms. Through conversations with each of them, I learned of their mutual interest in German choreographer and theater director Pina Bausch. Known for her luscious blending of theater, performance, and visual design, Bausch is a legendary creator from the German Tanztheater lineage, a form of expressionist dance that emerged in central Europe during the 1920s. Bausch often used a laboratory setting for the making of her pieces, workshop environments engaging interdisciplinary creation. I remember watching a scene from Chantal Akerman’s 1983 film, “One Day Pina Asked...,” shot by Babette Mangolte, in which Bausch described the violence of pinning a bug to a wall and asked her dancers to respond with a sound score from this idea. Her approach to choreography was multifaceted, foregrounding the performers’ humanity.

Akin to this laboratory approach, Gandini talks about his artistic process as “catalyzing: planting things that get turned into real-world artifacts, things to be modified, watermarked, transposed.” His juggling practice was developed concurrent to studying release-based postmodern dance forms; at the gym where he used to practice, he studied with Scott Clark, who is now a Feldenkrais practitioner, and the former Siobhan Davies Dance Company member Gill Clarke, who
passed away a few years ago. Clarke continued as a collaborator with Gandini Jugglers for many years. Somewhat like a postmodern dance lexicon, Gandini's work uses gravity, momentum, causation, and a choreographic manipulation of gestures in time and space.

This postmodern approach to composition extends to Gandini's distortions of time and duration. The Flying Karamazov Brothers were possibly the first to look at juggling as a rhythmic form; the narrative syntax in traditional circus forms lives in short durations, but Gandini explores variations that extend to longer stretches of time. His ways of playing with rhythmic distortions are complex. In one example, he explains, "The throws always respect the pulse of the movement, but in more complex versions we play with polyrhythms in which we throw a third or a fourth before the beat."

This search for a meticulously structured lexicon reminds me of the postmodern dance choreographer Trisha Brown, with whom I worked closely as her performer and archive director. Brown explored the joints of the body through incremental and accumulating compositions; Gandini, like Brown, is fascinated by mathematics and forms of notation.

On another day, a strange assortment of characters emerge: Gumby doll, Olive Oyl, Road Runner. Cartoon characters in melting disarray move through a flipbook in motion. The musical and absurdist sense to shape-shift and create havoc becomes the score.

Boitel draws upon Bausch's theatrical language, which comes to life through quotidian situations and human relationships. She describes her affinity for Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin and the incredible way they could tell stories with their bodies, making you laugh and cry at the same time. Boitel takes up tragicomedy as a way to laugh about sad situations; think, for example, of the vaudevillian gags, illogical logic, and cinematic trickery that lend Keaton films a comedic eloquence. In "The Playhouse" (1921), he riffs off this notion of multiple images by using trick photography to "produce an entire vaudeville cast and audience populated by multiple Busters." Using cinematic technologies to construct a surreality of form, Keaton's vaudevillian slapstick is awakened through optical trickery. Boitel, equally inspired by cinema, explores a choreographic dystopia in her new work, "When Angels Fall." She draws from the films of Chris Marker, David Lynch, Terry Gilliam, and Stanley Kubrick, among others. High and low aesthetics offer a fractured reality to highlight Boitel's dystopia.

Tracing a line through and across these bordering forms, I am left with the image of a wayward clown. The impulses are physical, visual, aural, spatial, temporal, emotional. They require something of an improvisational mind. I am reminded of Gertrude Stein and her automatic writing, in which the act of free association is connected to the body and its rhythmic, repetitive, reflexive movements. Something of a humungous motor.

Yellow wig, bubble gum pink crop top, men's tie, granny hat, one white glove. Body crazed in a non-sequitur stream of images. Wrists flexed, pumping the air, space fondling, strut ting, baby crying, leap, land, thrust, shake, punch that m-----f-cker, flap arms, dip down, in old man praise, spin, turn, slam, jab.

Boitel and Gandini are not overt tricksters; they do not rely on improvisation for the survival of their forms. Gandini works in pattern and choreographic refinement, while Boitel, who uses ensemble improvisation in her creative process, constructs theatrical worlds. Yet ideas of failure live within formalist frames. While not necessarily bawdy or grotesque in comedic insanity, their trickery of form becomes a way of revising what circus arts can be. The concept of history becomes a portal through which the past and present come into dialogue, fluid and unfixed, while tethered to particular lineages and cultural memories. Lineage, mutable and dynamic, becomes an animated conduit for memory.

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3 This and later examples are automatic writing descriptions drafted from clown therapy sessions in 2015. Clown therapy incorporates visual collage, dress-up, and wearable sculpture. At the beginning of a session, we close our eyes for five minutes and move — kineticizing any interests that emerge through our physical bodies in a stream-of-consciousness riff.
6 Vettel, pp. 78-79.
ON SHANGHAI TIME

BY SAMANTHA CULP

ON FENYANG ROAD IN THE HEART OF SHANGHAI’S FORMER FRENCH CONCESSION, BETWEEN A FRUIT VENDOR AND A CRAFT COCKTAIL BAR, THERE IS A DARK WOODEN DOOR WITH THE OUTLINE OF A VIOLIN PAINTED IN GOLD. IF YOU’RE WALKING BY IN THE DAYTIME, BUFFETED BY THE ROAR OF SCOOTERS AND GRANDMOTHERS BARGAINING FOR APPLES IN LOUD SHANGHAINESE, YOU’LL LIKELY MISS IT. But on occasion — perhaps in a quiet moment at dusk — you’ll hear the keening strings from inside. Testing, tuning. When the door is swung open, it reveals a long corridor hung with small paintings and burgundy carpeting leading deep within the building. For decades, this has been the shop of a luthier, a maker and repairer of violins.

The neighborhood is home to dozens of other music shops (many that have remained in business for almost a century) clustered near the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, which was founded in 1927 just up the road. On these gray stone streets lined with platane trees, you’ll find piano tuners, sheet music stores, even classical coffee shops; you can sit in the cafe dedicated to the works of the legendary writer Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing) at the ground floor of the art deco building on Changde Lu, where she lived and wrote in the late 1930s, drinking an overpriced latte and listening to the same Beethoven concertos she so loved.

In her era, they would have been played at concert halls and tea dances by a diverse array of musicians — Chinese, Russians, exiled Eastern European Jews — or amplified through a scratchy Gramophone. Today they’re streamed through the Bluetooth speakers hidden around the vintage, wood-paneled space. And when you get up to pay, instead of leaving a few heavy coins, you scan a QR code with your smartphone. Hail a cab with the same app, and walk out into the increasingly futuristic present.
In a city that has such a special relationship with time and memory, music is a particularly charged portal. Because of its association with the roaring '20s glamour of Shanghai's cosmopolitan heyday, "Shanghai jazz" is a well-known cross-cultural reference, evoking nightclubs, mod qipao, and Art Deco typography.

But Western classical music was an earlier and arguably more far-reaching import that helped shape Shanghai's identity. In the capital of Beijing, Western culture was viewed with caution for centuries, as a potentially destabilizing foreign intrusion to the center of political power. By contrast, Shanghai evolved as a trading port, with an inherent openness to international exchange. When foreign colonial powers began to carve up the city into "concessions" as part of the 1842 treaty to end the First Opium War, this accelerated the influx of Western art, trends, and technology. As the critic Lynn Pan once put it, "Shanghai style" was style itself — its openness and hybridity became part of the city's cosmopolitan identity and a point of pride. New phenomena like the electric streetcar, movies, and chicly tailored suits were of course tied to the fraught power imbalances of colonialism, but also embraced as symbols of modernity by Chinese elites and later the general public. Cultural forms like Shakespeare (first performed in China in 1902 at St. John College in Shanghai), sonatas, and symphonies were never only or easily foreign, but adapted and transformed for local purposes, especially when they resonated with deeper currents of Chinese tradition. The long years of practice and discipline of the Western classical musician were somehow familiar to the Chinese sensibility, which demands the same of any true artisan (from ink painting to martial arts). Over time, classical music in China gained the same positive association of mastery and refinement that it already had worldwide.

This complex history lives on in the work of the Shanghai Quartet, the renowned classical group celebrating its 35th anniversary this year. In 1983, the Chinese government wanted its brightest music stars to participate in — and win — an international string competition. This was the inception for the Quartet, all Shanghai Conservatory students who had known one another since childhood — including Li Weigang and Yi-Wen Jiang, who remain members today. The troupe took second prize at that competition and went on to global fame in the ensuing three decades — a time period during which China experienced a rate of economic and urban growth unprecedented in human history. Shanghai, of course, transformed along with it.

The year they formed, Li recalls, the streets around the Conservatory were full of bicycles, with only the occasional car. "When you see a sedan," he said, "you know it belongs to some government official." In summer, people wore white shirts; in winter, dark blue or gray, in contrast to the rainbow of trendy fashions Shanghai had once been known for and is now again. Most importantly, Western classical music had only barely come back into the mainstream.

During the tumult of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), classical music became a taboo, seen as an artifact of Western imperialism and a marker of the elites. The Shanghai Conservatory was closed, but not before several professors were persecuted to the point of suicide. Though the Quartet members all came from musical families, practice was conducted in secret throughout their childhoods. When Jiang was 8 years old, his musician father took him to audition for a professor — he played with a heavy metal mute on his violin, so that nobody would hear and report it.

Li recalls his mother practicing some Mozart on the violin when a knock came on the door downstairs. A high school-aged Red Guard burst in and demanded to know, "Have you read Mao's writings today?"

His mother gestured to the book on her bedside table and said, "of course."

"What are you practicing?" he asked.

"Why, just the Long March Symphony," she replied, referencing one of the few pieces of accepted, revolutionary music (ironically written in the Western classical mode). The young Red Guard, still suspicious, could only take his leave.

But by 1976, after Mao's death, the Conservatory re-opened, and classical music could be played openly again. In a city like Shanghai, the audience — and players — had never really gone away.

A century after it became known as the Paris of the East, Shanghai has become shorthand for a city of the future. It's one of the world's leading financial capitals, with a skyline full of glittering skyscrapers, former industrial districts transformed into vanity museums, and an influx of young upstarts, local and foreign, in search of opportunity. In a way, things have come full circle. Traditional Chinese philosophy considers history as cyclical, not linear. Then again, history unmakes and remakes us all into something new each time.

A single piece of Beethoven, composed in early 1800s Germany, popularized in '30s Shanghai by émigrés fleeing the Holocaust, driven underground in the '60s, drawing together four young men in the '80s and sending them far beyond their homes — now, being played again, to celebrate 35 years of this music. The same notes reinvented each time they are played. Absolute continuity and total change. Never the same river twice.
Contributors

Clare Croft is a dance historian and theorist, a dramaturg and a curator. She is the author of Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange (Oxford 2015), the editor of Queer Dance: Meanings and Makings (Oxford 2017), and the curator of EXPLODE queer dance. Her writing about performance has appeared in The Brooklyn Rail, The Washington Post, the Austin American-Statesman, and a range of academic publications. She is Associate Professor at the University of Michigan.

Samantha Culp is a Los Angeles-based writer, producer and strategist who spent the past decade in greater China working at the intersection of art, media, and futurism. Her writing has appeared in publications such as Artforum, the New York Times T Magazine, the Wall Street Journal and as a contributing editor of China’s leading art magazine LEAP (艺术界). She’s a co-founder of Paloma Powers, a consultancy developing artist-led solutions for realms beyond the art-world, and of Culture™, the publication and conference exploring the role of brands in creative culture.

David Dewitt managing editor) spent almost 20 years as an editor at The New York Times, including many years working on its Arts desk handling articles in dance, theater, music and other forms. He also wrote film, theater and television reviews for the paper. David has master's degrees in English and acting and is a member of SAG-AFTRA and Equity.

Faye Driscoll is a Bessie Award-winning performance maker who has been called a “startlingly original talent” by The New York Times. Driscoll’s work has been presented at venues nationally such as the Wexner Center for the Arts, the Walker Art Center, The Institute for Contemporary Art/Boston, MCA/Chicago, Wesleyan University, Danspace Project, The Kitchen, and the American Dance Festival, and internationally at the Théâtre de Vanves’ Festival Artdanthé, Théâtre de Gennevilliers, Festival d’Automne à Paris, Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb, Melbourne Festival, Belfast International Arts Festival, Onassis Cultural Centre in Athens, and Centro de Arte Experimental (Universidad Nacional de San Martín) in Buenos Aires. Her work was exhibited in Younger Than Jesus at the New Museum and included in NYC Makers: The MAD Biennial, the first biennial at the Museum of Arts and Design. Driscoll has collaborated with theater and performance artists such as Young Jean Lee, Cynthia Hopkins, Taylor Mac, Jennifer Miller, and the National Theater of the United States of America, and recently choreographed for a new film by Josephine Decker. Driscoll has received a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Creative Capital award, a NEFA National Dance Project, Production Residencies for Dance Grant, a French-US Exchange in Dance Grant, and a Foundation for Contemporary Art Grant. She has also been funded by the MAP Fund, the New York State Council on the Arts, Jerome Foundation, Greenwall Foundation, and Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. She is a grateful recipient of a 2016 Doris Duke Artist Award and a 2016 USA Doris Duke Fellowship.

Emily Johnson is an artist who makes body-based work. A Bessie Award winning choreographer, Guggenheim Fellow, and recipient of the Doris Duke Artist Award she is based in New York City. Originally from Alaska, she is of Yup’ik descent and since 1998 has created work that considers the experience of sensing and seeing performance. Her dances function as installations, engaging audiences within and through a space and environment—interacting with a place’s architecture, history, and role in community. Emily is trying to make a world where performance is part of life; where performance is an integral connection to each other, our environment, our stories, our past, present, and future. Emily’s written work has been published and commissioned by Dance Research Journal (University of Cambridge Press); SFMOMA Transmotion Journal, University of Kent; Movement Research Journal; Pew Center for Arts and Heritage; and the recent compilation, Imagined Theaters (Routledge), by Daniel Sack. Her choreography is presented across the United States and Australia and most recently at Santa Fe Opera with Doctor Atomic, directed by Peter Sellers. Emily is a lead collaborator in the Indigenous-artist led Healing Place Collaborative (Minneapolis, MN), focused on the vital role of the Mississippi River in the life of residents along its path; she was an inaugural participant in the Headlands Center for the Arts’ Climate Change Residency, a member of Creative Change at Sundance, and served as a water protector at Oceti Sakowin Camp at Standing Rock. As a facilitator she has worked with artists and communities most notably during TIME PLACE SPACE, NOMAD in Wotjobaluk Country, Australia and during UMYUANGIGKAAQ with PS122 on Manhahtaan in Lenapehoking, a durational Long Table/Sewing Bee focused on indigenizing the performing arts and the world at large. Her most recent work, Then a Cunning Voice and A Night We Spend Gazing at Stars - an all night outdoor performance gathering taking place on and near eighty-four community-hand-made quilts - premiered in Lenapehoking (NYC) with PS122 on Randall’s Island in summer 2017 and will tour to Chicago, San Francisco, and Narrm (Melbourne), Australia. Currently, she hosts...
monthly bon-fires on the Lower East Side in Mannahatta in partnership with Abrons Art Center and is, with colleagues in Australia and Canada, developing a Global First Nations Performance Network.

**CLAUDIA LA ROCCO** (editor in chief) is the author of *The Best Most Useless Dress* (Badlands Unlimited); selected poetry, performance texts, images and criticism; and the novel *petit cadeau*, published by the Chocolate Factory Theater as a print edition of one and a four-day, interdisciplinary live edition. She edited *I, Don't Poem: An Anthology of Painters* (Off the Park Press) and *Dancers, Buildings and People in the Streets*, the catalog for Danspace Project’s PLATFORM 2015, which she curated. *July*, the debut album from animals & giraffes – her duo with musician-composer Phillip Greenlief – has just been released by Edgetone Records. She is an *Artforum* contributor, was a critic and reporter for *The New York Times* for many years and is now editor in chief of the arts and culture platform Open Space for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

**TAYLOR MAC** (who uses “judy”, lowercase sic, not as a name but as a gender pronoun) is a playwright, actor, singer-songwriter, performance artist, director and producer. “A critical darling of the New York scene” (*New York Magazine*), judy’s work has been performed at St. Ann’s Warehouse, where the complete “A 24-Decade History of Popular Music” made its premiere in October 2016, as well as at New York City’s Lincoln Center, The Public Theatre and Playwrights Horizons, London’s Hackney Empire, Los Angeles’s Royce Hall, Minneapolis’s Guthrie Theater, Chicago’s Steppenwolf Theatre, the Sydney Opera House, Boston’s American Repertory Theatre, Stockholm’s Soda Theatre, the Spoleto Festival, San Francisco’s Curran Theater and MOMA, and literally hundreds of other theaters, museums, music halls, opera houses, cabarets, and festivals around the globe. Mac is a MacArthur Fellow, a Pulitzer Prize Finalist for Drama and the recipient of multiple awards including the Kennedy Prize, a NY Drama Critics Circle Award, a Doris Duke Performing Artist Award, a Guggenheim, the Herb Alpert in Theater, the Peter Zeisler Memorial Award, the Helen Merritt Playwriting Award, 2 Bessies, 2 Obies, and the one judy is most proud to be associated with, an Ethyl Eichelberger Award. An alumnus of New Dramatists, judy is currently a New York Theater Workshop Usual Suspect and the Resident playwright at the Here Arts Center.

**SIDDHARTHA MITTER** writes about contemporary art, urban politics and urban histories, American cities, African Cities, and the American South. Mitter is the recipient of a 2018 Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. He teaches in the MFA Art Writing program at School of Visual Arts. Mitter has contributed regularly to *The Village Voice, Boston Globe, Popula*, *Artforum*, and *The Guardian, Al-Jazeera, The Atlantic, Chamber Music, Even, Foreign Policy, Hyperallergic, The Intercept, The New Yorker, The Oxford American, Paste, Quartz, Scroll and The Wire* (India), and the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) and the publications of Teachers College and Columbia University have published his work. Mitter was on staff as the Culture Reporter at WNYC from 2006 to 2009.

**CORI OLINGHOUSE** is an interdisciplinary artist, archivist, and curator. Her work has been commissioned by Danspace Project, New York Live Arts, BRIC Arts Media, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Movement Research, and Brooklyn Museum of Art. Recently, she was the recipient of The Award (2015-2016), and a participant in Lower Manhattan Cultural Council’s Extended Life Dance Development program made possible in part by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (2016-2017). Olinghouse danced for the Trisha Brown Dance Company from 2002-2006, and served as the Archive Director from 2009-February 2018. She is the founder and director of The Portal Project (The Portal), a living archives initiative dedicated to the transmission of performance through archival and curatorial frameworks. Drawing from twenty years of experiential research as a performer in improvisational forms, a somatic practitioner, and time-based media archivist, she uses experimental methods to map the embodied knowledge from artists practices into interdisciplinary structures. She is currently engaged in a series of projects with choreographers Jean Butler, Mina Nishimura, Rashaun Mitchell + Silas Riener, Melinda Ring, Gwen Welliver, and Kota Yamazaki. She serves as visiting faculty at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, and has lectured at the Museum of Modern Art, Duke University, Lincoln Center, among other institutions. She holds an MA in Performance Curation as part of the inaugural class at the Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance at Wesleyan University.

**CEDAR SIGO** was raised on the Suquamish Reservation in the Pacific Northwest and studied at The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute. He is the editor of *There You Are: Interviews, Journals and Ephemera*, and author of eight books and pamphlets of poetry, including *Royals* (Wave Books, 2017), *Language Arts* (Wave Books, 2014), *Stranger in Town* (City Lights, 2010), *Expensive Magic* (House Press, 2008), and two editions of *Selected Writings* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2003 and 2005).
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