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Dance Video Review

Works & Process Artists (WPA)

Virtual Commissions

The Guggenheim, 2020

Accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/user/worksandprocess>

All we hear are bagpipes as a blurry image gradually comes into focus. We begin to make out the dark torso of a man who appears to be suspended upside down. His arms are folded beneath his head. A faint drumbeat starts to play and his right arm begins to trace the ground several inches below. For the next four and a half minutes, Jamar Roberts will wriggle and pulse through a rectangular performance space not that much bigger than his body. The camera angle will change, as will the volume of the music accompanying him and the speed at which he moves through his confinement. Watching the piece is an exercise in disorientation. Which way is up? Is Roberts lying down or dangling by his feet? We struggle to find our bearings as we watch him navigate his own. The odd pairing of bagpipes and drums adds to our slight discomfort, to say nothing of the fact that the image calls to mind the haunting lyrics of “Strange Fruit”. The last few moments see the dancer, now drenched in a blinding white light, softly snap his chin to the right before going limp.

According to the Artist Note by Roberts, the performance piece, called “Cooped” (2020), “was inspired by the release of recent statistics showing the disproportionate amount of black and brown bodies being affected by the Covid-19 crisis.”¹ Imagining a “fever dream”, Roberts set out to explore “the anxiety of quarantine” among minority populations already politically

1 Jamar Roberts, “Cooped”, 24 May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3GgOpXxufI> [accessed 5 January 2021].

ghettoized. Roberts was one of dozens of artists benefiting from the Guggenheim's performing arts series *Works & Process Virtual Commissions*, which was launched in April to help artists create shorts works while abiding by social distancing guidelines. More than \$150,000 was allocated by the commissioning organization, which is now in its 35th year.² A few performers were selected to participate in special Bubble Residencies, held through summer and fall 2020 across the Hudson Valley. Some of these culminated in live shows at the Kaatsbaan Festival in Tivoli, NY, and some were filmed at Lincoln Center in New York City. All 37 performances can be watched on the *Works & Process* YouTube channel.³

The performers and their pieces feature a wide range of diversity, spanning different genres, subject matter, age, body type, and professional notoriety. Some names, such as the prestigious Dance Theatre of Harlem and the Tony-nominated Joshua Bergasse, are well known to audiences. Others, less familiar. The pieces too display a diversity of aims, and along with those, of achievement. Some artists, like Roberts, use their bodies and various media to explore the psychological and emotional angst of inhabiting a world battered by COVID. Others, like "100 Days" (2020), featuring the quirky yet lyrical movement of Ballet X dancer Chloe Perkes, are much more lighthearted.⁴ The lighthearted pieces seem to be a better fit for their digital medium, as their creators appear aware of the constraints of the project and work within and around those limits.

That's not to say that all such pieces will be everyone's cup of tea. "O Circle" (2020), a six-minute piece showing dancer Burr Johnson merely spinning around in a circle as classic nursery rhymes are read in the background, seems overly simple.⁵ "Is this... *all?*", I asked myself every few seconds, not sure why such a capable dancer would be content to sign his name to this. But that's the risk with art: it can and does disappoint some of its audience, at least some of the time. Another risk – or, perhaps better said, an avenue of promise – is that even when it disappoints, art invites its audiences to engage with it, with themselves, with the world. There have been many times since the start of the pandemic that I've found myself, like Johnson, spinning idly through

2 The Guggenheim 2020.

3 <https://www.youtube.com/user/worksandprocess> [accessed 5 January 2021].

4 Caili Quan, "100 Days", 14 June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxQvb6BJLSo> [accessed 5 January 2021].

5 Burr Johnson, "O Circle", 16 November 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJtOmZbJrRQ> [accessed 5 January 2021].

my surroundings, staring blankly at the wide horizon of nothing-in-particular-ness around me, and reading children's books. Perhaps, then, Johnson's performance is a visual representation of many of our journeys through 2020.

In fact, we share a lot in common with the *Works & Process* performers. Like them, we are trying to navigate the challenge of finding new ways of being-and-moving-in-the-world. Our normal work- and life-spaces have been overturned, locked down, closed. We are trying to find our footing on new ground, aware at all times that one wrong step could end up costing us dearly. We are all, like Roberts, disoriented. And yet we forge ahead. The curtain is already up; it always is. We are on stage. We are who we perform ourselves to be: what new characterizations have we discovered within ourselves as we've moved through our own quarantines? Limitation is the very condition of possibility.

Our quarantine spaces are stages of sorts. Those spaces don't exist somewhere out there, but are constituted by our very movements within them. If we adhere to the strict recommendations laid down by the Centers for Disease Control, then our performance space spans the roughly six-foot distance between us. Dancer Gabriel Lamb explored this theme explicitly in her piece "5x8", named after the dimensions of the Persian rug on which she danced around her Hamilton Heights neighborhood.⁶ During her five-and-a-half-minute performance, the camera captured Lamb dancing fluidly in several different locations, never straying, however, beyond the boundaries of the rug beneath her feet. "Home and the outdoors have been our refuges during this time of uncertainty", she wrote in the accompanying Artist Note, "so there was a peculiar logic in the combination." Home, in other words, is often thought of in opposition to that which is outside of it. Yet what happens when we relocate the most intimate spaces of our home outdoors? Is home something we carry with us, like a rectangular piece of fabric? Or maybe home is the musical setting that continues to play within us as we move between both spaces.

Lamb's project is different from many of the others because its compilation was public, a fact of which she gradually became more aware during the filming process. "During my shoot with cinematographer Melissa Wu, I noticed that outdoor rug dancing provokes a lot of curiosity in passers-by", she writes in her Artist Note. While New York City has been off and on under

6 Gabrielle Lamb, "5x8", 3 August 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbtbf-2_kl_k [accessed 5 January 2021].

strict quarantine orders since the beginnings of the pandemic, many residents continued to spend time out of doors, exercising, going to grocery stores, walking pets. Imagine the surprise of New Yorkers, whose theater lights have been dimmed since March 2020, finding a sole dancer performing her craft out in the world. What a delight that must have been – for those, that is, who stopped to take in the experience. Not all of them did.

Not all of us do, either, which was one sad takeaway from violinist Joshua Bell’s 2007 incognito subway performance. We are surrounded by a world of animated beauty, but we don’t always make time for it. “It” being our noticing of what is always happening, because, to be sure, the beautiful is always already around us in dazzling abundance. We are, understandably, more primed to experience it in the world’s great performance halls. But where will we find it when they are closed? Because, as COVID-19 has taught us, even the most prestigious ones can be closed. When that happens, what will happen to art? To a world improved by art? To artists?

The Brookings Institute estimates that the fine and performing arts industries in the US suffered a loss of 1.4 million jobs and \$42.5 billion in sales.⁷ And anyone who has purchased a ticket to a live performance in the past few years can certainly understand how quickly those numbers can be arrived at. We live in an age when four-digit Broadway ticket prices are quite common, when succeeding as a dancer requires a childhood of expensive training. The performing arts, for all the good that they offer the world, remain off-limits for many people who can’t afford to participate in them. Which is why funding projects like *Works & Process* is so crucial to arts development, particularly at a time when a global pandemic has brought down the curtain. Artists need to continue to eat. Beyond that, however, they need to continue to create.

Some of the most interesting virtual commissions showed performing artists navigating their private lives. Married dancers Ashley Laracey and Troy Schumacher offered a glimpse into the daily routine of their lives as parents.⁸ The film “7:30/7:30” opens with the New York City Ballet dancers waking up and immediately beginning to care for their young twins. As Schumacher’s piano music plays in the background, the couple play with their children, feed them, bathe them, bounce them in front of a mirror. Throughout the piece, Laracey and Schumacher are seen stretching and putting their bodies through

7 Florida/Seman 2020.

8 Ashley Laracey and Troy Schumacher, “7:30/7:30”, 2 August 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6qe_YFyekI [accessed 5 January 2021].

various ballet technique drills. At the end of the video, the couple embrace, no doubt exhausted from having performed these rewarding yet demanding parenting roles. The couple dedicate their performance to “everyone raising children during these unprecedented times”. Their Artist Note is worth quoting in full:

It’s special and beautiful to be together as a family, exhausting without a minute to spare, and a struggle to find enough time to maintain our identities as artists. Capturing every moment during a single day gave us the opportunity to zoom out and see what we are really working on right now: the art of raising two humans into this world.

What Laracey and Schumacher have performed is that which enables every performance to be what it is: the behind-the-scenes goings-on that allow the performer to study, to rehearse, to grow, to improve, to take center stage. The performed world that supports the performance – that supports the performance that acknowledges its performed-ness – is absolutely vital for the latter. Without a world to support it, the art cannot be created. Without a world to support *her*, the artist cannot create. Some of this support will come in terms of funding and budgets, and some will come from reliable childcare and the not-having-to-worry that next month’s rent will be paid. All of these things belong to the scaffolding that holds up the stages on which artists perform their crafts. Audiences typically do not see them, however. Laracey and Schumacher’s piece brings this scaffolding to the fore, and reminds audiences that erecting and maintaining these structures is as much a part of an artist’s work as any other performed aspect of it.

Another real-life married couple whose work offers a glimpse into their home life is tap dancers and body percussionists Nicholas Van Young and Carson Murphy.⁹ In “Hook, The Moon”, Young and Murphy create intricate rhythms to a simple track composed by Young, which are then layered over other rhythms, visually and audibly. The couple have an impressive command of their bodies. Even as they create drum beats with their hands and feet, their bodies move with precision, fluidity, and grace. Several times during the piece, their child Immy appears in the frame and dances around with the joyful abandon of a toddler. Young and Carson receive credits for choreography

9 Carson Murphy and Nicholas Van Young, “Hook, The Moon”, 6 September 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Yrs1WqELB0> [accessed 5 January 2021].

and improvisation, which is a welcome reminder that the best performances often feature a combination of both. Performing artists create within the confines of their or their director's vision – but they *create*, which is to say, they bring forth something new. Always. Every time an artist performs a piece, she offers the world something that wasn't already there. The meter for Young and Murphy's piece was set, as were many of their choreographed time steps. Within those parameters, however, they were able to bring forth something new. There's a lesson here, perhaps, for those of us struggling to find our creativity in quarantine: the rhythm of our routine may be set in a predictable meter, but we are nevertheless capable of playing within those boundaries.

As a dancer, it's encouraging to see my colleagues experiment with new ways of being and making in a COVID world. As a human, it's a welcome reminder that I, too, am being called upon to cultivate a life of beauty and goodness within the confines of the spaces I inhabit. *Works & Process* is a clear testimony to the virtually unlimited creative potential of the human soul, which often discovers itself within the movement of the sole.

Bibliography

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