Radical Movements: Gender and Politics in Performance

Last month in San Francisco, Hope Mohr Dance hosted their 2017 Bridge Project, Radical Movements: Gender and Politics in Performance. This year the program was organized around the question “What does it mean to have a radical body?” Maxe Crandall and Selby Schwartz attended each night of the festival and wrote a fragmented response to the themes that emerged from the program. During the course of two weeks they saw Judith Butler and Monique Jenkinson dance under a disco ball, boychild get into a drag-remix conversation with fan Jack Halberstam, Lisa Evans use sound to challenge identity, and Maryam Rostami teach the audience how to cry, among other collective actions.

In this piece Maxe Crandall and Selby Schwartz return to precise moments of these performances in writing, as a way of re-seeing them from new perspectives. A needed ventilation shaft, away from the usual trappings of convention, consumerism and institutionalized thought. They write while waving mainstream au revoir, a gesture that grows into movement, integrated to that of the performances they witnessed.

- Amelia Bande, co-editor
Each year as part of the Bridge Project, Hope Mohr Dance hosts a series of multi-disciplinary performances, workshops, and panels to highlight where dance is already in conversation with theory, politics, and activism. Conceiving of “curating as a form of community organizing,” Mohr describes the Bridge Project in terms of the relationships it fosters—in particular, relationships between “artists and activists in the struggle toward equity.” This year’s programme, Radical Movements: Gender and Politics in Performance, included Monique Jenkinson & Judith Butler, boychild & Jack Halberstam, Lisa Evans of Peacock Rebellion, Maryam Rostami, and Julie Tolentino with her collaborators in the Community Engagement Residency Amara Tabor-Smith, Larry Arrington, Xandra Ibarra, and Maurya Kerr, joined by Debra Levine and Scot Nakagawa.

Conversations like these can be galvanizing in this political moment, but they can also fall out of memory all too quickly as we move to organize and resist. Because so many of these performances were concerned with the marking of time, and because we were moved by the urgency in Radical Movements, now we attempt to make space for remembering what happened. So we ask, **What can happen in two weeks?**
In the opening conversation, “Ordinary Practices of the Radical Body,” Judith Butler and Monique Jenkinson danced onto the CounterPulse stage under the giddy whirling of a disco ball. Recounting their own histories of dance and gender, Butler and Jenkinson produced a score that centered vulnerability and touch while allowing for improvisation. By “helping each other to persist,” as Butler said, we can create more conversational choreographies—embodied dialogues that reflect how we lean, pull, and support each other. At one point, Jenkinson introduced Butler to one of her own “ordinary practices”: one person rests on the floor, and the other holds the full weight of her head, cradling the base of the skull. Small rituals like this opened up space to discuss “how the body theorizes,” how to “share weight,” and, overall, how to move against the norm that says dancers dance and academics think.

“And how did you become a theory queen?” Butler playfully asked Jenkinson. In order to answer the question—who becomes a theory, or a queen, or both, and how?—they swerved into storytelling. Butler confessed that as a young person she had wanted to be “either a philosopher or a clown,” and Jenkinson reminisced about her years in ballerina drag.

Both Butler and Jenkinson were undergraduates at Bennington, it turns out, but by the time Jenkinson was reading Irigaray, Butler was spending the summer in New York with Wendy Perron (now Dance Magazine’s Editor-at-Large), who was then dancing for Trisha Brown. Perron and Butler would pick a fancy restaurant, plaster themselves to the windows, and slide dramatically down the glass, like slow-motion roadkill. “We would wait to see if the good bourgeois people were alarmed,” Butler said. (They weren’t.) These “choreographies of collapse,” as Jenkinson called them, lead to the floor. And so both Butler and Jenkinson fell to the marley—“’cause if you kept going in those shoes, girlfriend…” Butler remarked when Jenkinson kicked off her heeled boots—and then rested there, their bodies stilled. They talked together in that state of rest: fascia, the pelvis, the pain of joints.

The conditions of the everyday—including those that “make mobility possible for some,” as Butler pointed out—can determine so much of where our bodies can take us. At the end of the two weeks, the final performance looked back on this beginning, with Debra Levine remarking, “60,000 people marched in a Nazi demonstration in Poland this week. [Judith Butler] got denounced and screamed at in Brazil this week by the religious right. Last week she was here, talking about dancing in the street.”

When do we sing, and when do we fight?

Before anyone has spoken, boychild stands like a boxer at the edge of a dull ring of light on stage. She throws a shoulder forward, cagey and light, and then twitches it back fast. Her hands pulse, as if her fingertips were enunciating something electrical. In the absence of words, in the presence of rhythm, the deconstructed fight that boychild throws herself into demands a concentration of breath. There is an intensified silence where we are enveloped into the complex space of these small movements. The effort seems to emerge from shifting impulses: to construct and demolish, to work and to dance, to perform art or to return to basic physical response. Through the lens of the conversation with fan Jack Halberstam, boychild’s experimental drag challenges the
boundaries of the body and remixes conventional drag repertoire with futuristic technologies.

The drag toward the self is rarely considered as a labor of ordinary practices: breathing, warming up, moving over, turning back. boychild’s miniscule movements become extravagant world-making—"a rehearsal for the future," as program notes called it. In Lisa Evans’ solo performance, *You Really Should Sit Like a Lady (or how I got to femme)*, the drag towards selfhood was staged through embodied anthems of resistance. Evans’ storytelling overlaid a soundtrack of Motown, R&B, and Evans’ own live mixing of vocal performance. The attention to sound—and how it can produce collective identity, new selves, and political movements—draws on Evans’ experiences as a multi-disciplinary artist and community organizer with Peacock Rebellion in Oakland.

As they philosophized on the power and the pain of growing into oneself, Evans transformed into and out of a series of femme and Black avatars. Their opening line (“I always thought femme was just a queer version of ‘lady’--another thing I could never be”) established the struggle for identity within an intersectional frame. “It always begins with the circumference of my wrist,” Evans announced, introducing us to their father, a black belt in taekwondo, who obsessively trained them from an early age. In a pointed revision of this training, Evans brought the audience to its feet, teaching us a self-defense move that requires synchronized movement to free the wrist. In its incorporation of song and fight, Evans’ revolutionary lyricism dramatized the urgent movement toward becoming.

**When does surface become depth?**

At the gate of a summer-house outside of Tehran, Maryam Rostami remembers in her solo *Untitled 1396*, her mother and grandmother stood watching a procession of worshippers as they walked through the streets. “Bitter, urgent tears” ran down their faces, and their backs were flecked with blood: their bodies were marked by grief. But
the grieving—the weeping, the flagellation, the mass of mourners—was for a death from centuries ago. “How can you be so upset about something that happened 1300 years ago?” she asked the audience. How can you reflect the past on the surfaces of your present body?

In a folding chair set so far downstage that her black silk dressing-gown almost brushed the knees of people in the front row, Maryam Rostami began to teach us how to cry. First, you make a slope of the sides of your eyebrows; then, flattening the nose, flaring a little in the nostrils, bowing and rounding out the lips; finally, a beautiful welling at the lower eyelid, a single tear gathering itself. You let the breath catch in your throat. But, as in lipsync, the body doesn’t produce its own expression: the body makes a surface.

In the stage-light, that surface reflects all of the ways that bodies are inscribed. Rostami was twelve years old, that year in Tehran; it was her first time wearing a hijab. She recalled the feeling of “fitting in”—of being wrapped in the fabric, with its unambiguous gendering. Draped over her body, a gleaming golden sheet stood in for the hijab, for the disjunction of years across calendars, for the impossible space of time. How to make your face cry: all of these structures and surfaces collude to produce a single tear.
How do we get to radical intimacy?

Entering the Joe Goode Annex on the closing day of the Bridge Project was a return to the hive. Attendees entered and left in a continuous stream during the three-hour piece, while Julie Tolentino, Larry Arrington, Xandra Ibarra, Maurya Kerr, and Amara Tabor-Smith offered their “performance-in-practice installation,” which unfolded across a shifting landscape of evolving activities. A.U.L.E.—an un-named lived experience explored nearly every surface of the annex. Tolentino’s old friends, Debra Levine and Scot Nakagawa, provided live reflection that swept in and out of conversation, their words projected on facing corners of the room.

“Are we at Party City?” Levine typed, riffing on the black balloons that were being repurposed into a kind of companion body by Kerr. Over near the entrance, Arrington was building a decomposing garden from string and dried flowers. In the opposite corner, performers and audience members rifled through a pile of slides over a square light table. When the bodies of the four dancers came together, they tangled. Kerr was bundled up like a chrysalis and dragged across the stage, the points of her elbows poking upwards, a butterfly in a body bag. Ibarra leaned over Arrington, chin to chin, jawing her mouth open and closed in wordless dialogue. In the last part of the piece, the four dancers retreated together to the back wall, where a swath of butcher paper had been laid down. They entwined like a swarm on the paper, rolling and falling. As they were moving, they took up black chalk and began tracing the chaotic outline of their massed bodies.

A.U.L.E. devised a shared processing space for recentering, reconceptualizing, reintegrating. From inside the work, Levine mused, “I think of Julie as mapping out an entire environment so that everyone is aware of the terms of their engagement.” The floor light became a microphone for Tabor-Smith; the slides became a singular mess rather than a collection; our own bodies were animated as fixtures within the space,
especially when Tolentino layered mirrors, plastic, and fabrics over the audience near the end of the piece. The scale felt both epic and miniature, a cascade of gestures across aural, physical, and visual landscapes. Their active deconstruction of the collective became an invitation toward a next communal form.

In the Q&A, the artists discussed their cultivation of intimacy in practice, putting virtuosity and training in the service of “the possibility of generosity with each other,” as Kerr explained. “Technique is overrated,” Tabor-Smith declared, “and connection is underrated.” In their exploration of relations between objects, each other’s bodies, and performance and practice, they were seeking a center that only appeared at the edges, where forms overlapped. “We were focusing on the periphery of everything,” Ibarra said afterwards. The unnamed experience, too, suggested that first, the social bonds are formed, and then we make things from those relations. Levine and Nakagawa, perhaps unknowingly, provided a back catalog of all of the things Tolentino has made from community, as they remembered their own histories of AIDS activism and care-taking with her.

The Bridge Project reimagines and even celebrates conversation as a form that brings us body to body. What can we do, together, with the bodies that we have? And what can we do with the bodies that we have together? At the conjured intersections between different ways of doing, these collaborations suggest how we can tend to the queer bonds between bodies and ideas. Radical movements, both physical and political, sometimes remain in the realm of the airy, the ideational, the abstract; they only become movements when you do what you say. In both cases, there is risk; in both cases, there is togetherness.