

Towards an Uncodified Vocabulary: Movements in *liquid blackness*

by Dorothy Hendricks



Gathering Wild Dance Company performs *Heart of Palm*, choreographed by Jerylann Warner

Before the first *liquid blackness* Symposium, I was able to interview choreographer Jerylann Warner about the dance piece she put together for the opening night program. She explained the process of choreographing the dance that the Gathering Wild Dance Company would perform, and when I asked how she introduced the concept of “liquid

blackness” to the performers, she answered that she moved from the “literal to the abstract.” She underscored the importance of the music speaking to the dancers, a tenant that the troupe unanimously agreed with. This perspective is a highly unusual one because it is a reversal of the ways “liquid blackness” has most commonly been approached from an academic standpoint: as academics and students we tend to lead with the abstract, the conceptual. In my own writing and research, I’m guilty at times of failing to reconcile theory with the material present. The choice to include dance at the *liquid blackness* Symposium enabled a concrete envisioning of movement from the literal to the abstract. Certainly, performance art resists the impetus to hover just above the physical and instead collapses the two in compelling ways.

Performance art resists the impetus to hover just above the physical

The structure of the opening night of the Symposium capitalized on these tensions. In focusing specifically on the dance performances presented at the Mammal Gallery reception (two live performances and a short film), it’s my contention that the night was, ultimately, about movement, crossing boundaries and moving between registers and through embodied modulation. In his study of Grace Jones’s video *Corporate Cannibal*, Steven Shaviro describes the modulations of Jones’s imaged body as: “Schematic and implosive rather than free-floating and expansive [...] There is no proliferation of meanings, but rather a capture of all meanings.”¹ Where modern dance appears more free-flowing than the notoriously strict ballet—just as experimental and short video appears more open-ended than narrative film—I’d like to frame the two kinds of work offered at the reception in terms of Shaviro’s description of something that entails more than just open-endedness and ambiguity. By all accounts, most art forms harbor the potential of loosing what remains restricted and it’s also true that the scholarly aims of initiatives like *liquid*

blackness work to do the same. Although the Symposium was invested in particular kinds of art and their specific theoretical underpinnings, the very form of the Symposium resisted a limited approach. We were then faced with the possibility to experience the capture and collapse of multiple conflicting meanings instead of indulging the desire to chase down defined meanings or generalized definitions.

The friction caused between different modes of viewing is a place that I think bears further scrutiny. The reception opened with a short film by Bubba Carr, titled *Flô*, and was promptly followed first by soloist, Indya Childs performing an excerpt from *Post Up* choreographed by T. Lang, and concluded by the Gathering Wild Dance Company performing *Heart of Palm* choreographed by Jerylann Warner. Thus our mode of spectatorship fluctuated between the funneling of our collective omniscient gaze, unobstructed and directed at an accessible screen, to two different configurations of dancers that fell in and out of individual fields of vision. Though the pieces were unconnected and conceived apart from each other, their tenuous relationship reflected more than thematic relevance but also an impulse towards a resistance to representation. Jerylann Warner explained her proclivity to employ modern dance, asserting that the form “doesn’t have to stick to a codified vocabulary.” Viewing all three of the pieces framed by “liquid blackness,” it’s undeniable that they share this same position.

bcarr[works]’s *Flô*, was projected on an overhead screen and became a collective focal point. Bodies moved sensuously, dripping with unknown liquids; figures were superimposed atop one another and the movements were lyrical, stylistic, and utterly exposed. Viewing practice, here, reflected content and rewarded the desire to see and fetishize physical bodies. Our relationship with the content was problematized by the flatness of the medium, encouraging haptic encounters with the on-screen bodies that were both intimate and distanced at the same time. In her piece, “Video

Haptics and Erotics,” Laura Marks writes:

The term haptic visuality emphasizes the viewer’s inclination to perceive haptically, but a work itself may offer haptic images. Haptic images do not invite identification with a figure so much as a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image.²

Marks goes on to suggest that it is the shallowness of video and the desire for “a multisensory experience” that speaks to a “dissatisfaction with the limits of visibility.”³ Reading the short film as an invitation towards identification forecloses the potential trajectory that *Flô* sets into motion. We long to see more, even from our choice vantage points; even while the film immerses us in flesh, it’s not enough to satisfy. We might read this

Indya Childs performs *Post Up* — an excerpt, choreographed by TLang Dance



in terms of Alessandra Raengo's discussion of the idea of pornotopia in which, she writes, "any one molecule is susceptible to be both the object and subject of desire."⁴ Carr's work speaks simultaneously to desire and lack even as it visualizes Raengo's explanation of "liquid blackness" as viscous, dense, and liquid.⁵ It also forces the viewer to separate the two (the object and subject of desire) and experience them disjointedly and literally as liquid on physical bodies, mediated by a camera and further distanced by our comfortable viewing position.

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Following the film, audience members shuffled forward to crowd a ground level stage while Indya Childs performed a solo. The dancer fluctuated between altitudes, at times center stage, standing upright and other times stage right or left, at ground level. This modulation between stances and her propensity to drop out of sight caused an obvious physical response in the audience and we collectively picked up aspects of modern dance as well, shifting our weight, engaging out kinesthetic memory. The desire to see was physically articulated in the shifting crowd and the restricted visual access. The visceral reactions caused by a single dancer, standing close enough to touch, not on a platform, created a jarring denied distance—though the performer never made eye contact with the audience, there seemed little literal or figurative distance. Perhaps most distinctive was not her obvious skill and technique or even the more recognizable aspects of modern dance as a genre but the aesthetics of her body and the affect created as her rib cage expanded, filling with air horizontally through violent, stylized breaths. What's the difference between the two? Why differentiate between a jeté and a breath? Why distinguish a contraction from a sharp breath?



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We might turn to Jose Gil's discussion of modern dance in his piece "The Dancer's Body" to tease out the potential of suppressing (even if only for a moment) the desire to consume bodies that self-represent:

This explains why the emptying out of the body's gestures can never attain a 'degree zero of movement,' or a 'degree zero of gestures.' If the body can negate the world and the representation of itself without self-destructing, it is because something of it escapes its self-representation. Something that resists, prior to representation. In taking a bow, a body is representing a body taking a bow, but the representing body never fully coincides with the represented body it is 'figuring.' Something holds back, remaining outside the actualized image of the body: something that is not only of the order of actual movements, but also of the order of virtual movements; something that is neither represented nor representable, belonging to the blind zone of their imbrication. What holds back is also what triggers the expressive or mimetic image. It is the body virtual.⁶

Gil also writes, “dance always preserves a non-representational element that escapes the production of signs.”⁷ I think this encapsulates precisely why modern dance corresponds so well with the abstract underpinnings of “liquid blackness.” There is also the desire for the body to be a readable surface and also for a “profound desire for race to represent difference.”⁸ Still, in this performance, even the dancer’s physical body slipped in and out of view, falling sometimes completely out of the field of vision and denying any fixed understanding of the material body available to us. In addition to the self-imposed shifting elevations of the performance, the choice of micro-movements might also be read as a resistance of resolution and a rejection of a traditional and desired crescendo. The Gathering Wild Dance Company finished the program with *Heart of Palm*, a work that offered a coda that spoke to the two performances that came before. Where T.Lang’s work demanded that each audience member search for a window from which to view the soloist, Jerylann Warner’s dance dispersed perspectives and resisted one complete picture. The dancers emerged from the crowd to take their places. The dance consisted of beautiful lines, leaps, and flexed bodies but there was also a strange unevenness that the performers articulated through balance work, lateral shifts, and releases. The dancers leaned on each other, often bearing each other’s weight before quickly breaking away, moving just out of reach and creating more unresolved tension. The dynamics were ever-changing and responded to a mixed meter leaving the audience unsure of what came next and unable to differentiate the middle section from the end. Warner’s choreography visualized the move from concrete to abstract in waves. The dancers were heavily weighed down, leaning, bracing themselves, and then freed for a moment, at times alluding and referencing the material real but then flowing away from any fixed set of meaning. Thus, the performance also spoke to the open-endedness of a conversation that has only just begun to take place.

In searching out and employing the uncoded vocabulary of

contemporary performance art, the performances at the *liquid blackness* Symposium certainly reflected liquidity, a foundational aspect of the research initiative itself. As the material moved in and out of vision, whether overlaid in static video or physical bodies dropping from sight in a performance, the pieces call out to our bodily reactions and desires. They demand that we put forth the effort to see, follow, and continue to experience the back and forth between the abstract and the concrete, always underscoring how the two promise to collapse but always dissolve again.

⁷ Steven Shaviro, “Grace Jones, Corporate Cannibal,” *The Pinocchio Theory*, entry posted July 23, 2008, <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=653> (accessed May 1, 2014). A longer version of this post was published in Shaviro’s essay, “Post-Cinematic Affect: On Grace Jones, *Boarding Gate* and *Southland Tales*” published in *Film Philosophy Journal* in 2010.

⁸ Laura Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

¹⁰ Alessandra Raengo, “blackness, aesthetics, liquidity,” *liquid blackness* 1, no. 2 (April 2014), <http://www.liquidblackness.com/LB2.pdf> (accessed May 1, 2014).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Jose Gil, “The Dancer’s Body,” in *A Shock to Thought: Expression After Deleuze and Guattari*, ed. Brian Massumi (New York: Routledge, 2002), 117-27.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁴ Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2013), 5.