PERFORMANCE

MOVING HOME

October 21, 2021 • Jess Barbagallo on the New Now Festival

DRIVING THROUGH DOWNTOWN SEATTLE, I saw construction everywhere, luxury housing for tech employees rising up around small tent cities. I was a tourist, visiting for a week to check out the New Now Festival, which is being presented by interdisciplinary performance venue On the Boards and curated by its artistic director, Rachel Cook. This is the first time in eighteen months that On the Boards has been open for business, although the space provided residencies and support to artists during
quarantine. Before a performance of Beyond this Point’s *Reclaimed Timber*, executive
director Betsey Brock reminded audiences that we were gathered on the unceded home of
the Duwamish (a federally unrecognized tribe) and other Coast Salish peoples. To those
unfamiliar with land acknowledgment, she wryly suggested that they consider “paying
rent.” Later, trying to parse her proposition, I perused On the Board’s website and found a
link to Real Rent Duwamish, a campaign imploring Seattleites to make monthly rent
payments to the nonprofit Duwamish Tribal Services. According to the site, as of late
September, there were currently seventeen thousand “renters” in a city that has
approximately 750,000 residents.

The festival features three acts: choreographer Faye Driscoll (whose show opened after I
left town); choreographers jumatatu m. poe and Jermone Donte Beacham; and Beyond
This Point, a flexible collaboration that specializes in experimental percussion and is led by
musicians John Corkill, Rebecca McDaniel, and Adam Rosenblatt. Their piece is a
housing-justice-inflected interpretation of Michael Gordon’s 2009 composition *Timber*:
Inside OtB’s black-box Merrill Theater, six plainly dressed percussionists somewhat
resembled priests, their soft mallets looking ritual ready as they stood in a circle behind
miked wooden slabs (or simantras). (For this production, Beyond This Point was joined by
musicians Nonoka Mizukami, Mari Yoshinaga, and Garrett Arney of the Seattle-based
ensemble arx duo.) Their drums were all built from lumber sourced at the workshop of the
BLOCK Project, one initiative of the Seattle nonprofit Facing Homelessness. Paper lanterns
decorated with depictions of rowhouses in Baltimore—the first site of Beyond This Point’s
tour—framed each drummer’s respective station, building a moving history of
gentrification’s violence across the US. Rosenblatt explained that if attendees paid close
attention, they would find six lanterns representing BLOCK Project homes scattered
throughout. Soon, the lanterns were illuminated by multicolored LED lights, which pulsed
to the piece’s ebbing rhythms—a composition of wavering intensity and accelerating
complexity. Forty milling patrons, the business of the lights and sound, and the narrative of
a national housing crisis formed the baseline of this haunting, real-world melody. Nearly
overstimulated, I was incapable of fully sinking into the sonic experience.
Several days after the concert, audiences were treated to poe and Beacham’s multipart *Let ’im Move You*, an homage to Black femme innovation. Poe and Beacham have been collaborating for a decade, drawn together by their mutual love of J-Sette, a call-and-response dance form that was originated in the late ’70s by Black southern majorette teams. On a Thursday at dusk, I convened with a small crowd on a nondescript street corner in the city’s Rainier Beach neighborhood for *Intervention*, part one of the performance. The title reflects the artists’ aim: to activate historically and/or predominantly Black neighborhoods with extended outdoor dance processions, a strategy they first began in Philadelphia in 2016.
A posse of performers wearing distressed white T-shirts and pink visors appeared across the street from our gathered claque as poe performatively crossed the road to join them. “That’s how you take an intersection,” one of my companions murmured. Like baby ducklings, we dutifully followed poe as the dancers (including cocreator Beacham) assumed the roles of captain and responders, forming lines along the sidewalk. As the leader initiated movement (sans music) from the front, dancers in the rear echoed, the company speaking in a deeply satisfying and at times surprising gestural code. Particularly enthralling were the moments when performers—Black, brown, and femme—slow-danced with one another on the beaten sidewalks, becoming a single, swaying model of vulnerably public queer touch. Walking toward the Atlantic City Boat Ramp, the movement crew expanded to include the Seattle-based contingent of the *Let 'im Move You* squad, credited by poe and Beacham as “Audience Infiltrators.” I’d been marching beside these anonymous and brilliant ringers for about 40 minutes—including the work’s cocurator Dani Tirell—and when they joined in the choreography, I found myself briefly floored by how the suffocating distinction between amateur and professional disintegrated before my eyes. It seemed everywhere I turned—from an enthusiastic sambusa vendor crying out, to a little boy break-dancing in response to the big kids’ moves—there was a person with a gift to offer.
Audiences were invited back to the Merrill the following night for *This Is a Formation*, a performance installation that employed the same movement vocabulary as *Intervention* with the addition of several other theatrical elements, including live lighting design and musical remixes by Zen Jefferson. Basically, it was a top-notch dance party minus booze or a dress code. Groups of ten were ushered into the theater by company members who asked us to enter the work in the spirit of “attentiveness.” Inside, fabric banners hanging from the grid served as screens on which images were projected from a live-feed camera station that was used throughout the night by dancers and audience members to amplify the rhizomatic nature of the proceedings. The audience was asked to use their phones only at designated moments, and to tag any snaps they posted @moveyou. If I had taken pictures, they might have included: a row of asses humping a wall; a performer casually undressing in front of a costume rack that was intermittently ransacked and rolled across the stage; a
long-haired audience member who spontaneously wept as he slid down a darkened wall. One of the Audience Infiltrators from the night before bent down to hold him.

Eventually, the movers drifted out of the theater and onto the streets, then snaked their way back into the building, disposing of the imperatives of dramatic structure in favor of a weirder, looser denouement resembling a “cooldown.” Performers remained committed to the movement vocabularies we’d all been taught at the top of the night as the audience thinned to the diehards. Bodies vibrated as the company honored us and themselves for two and a half hours of raw kinetics, thereafter triumphantly departing for the dressing rooms. Small talk ensued and we guests casually basked in our shared exhaustion and admiration. Comparing hometowns and postshow plans, I experienced a bizarre sense of déjà vu at this kind of happiness and recalled once feeling a similar hope in another black box a long time ago. Resigned to the choreography of my own fractured urban life, and perhaps a touch jaded, I was glad to excavate that memory.

— Jess Barbagallo

The New Now Festival is being presented at On the Boards in Seattle through November 6.

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