Abstracts

Larne Abse Gogarty:

“When we dance it is not a mere diversion or social accomplishment”: Communist dance and jazz circa 1930.

In this paper, I address Edith Segal and Allison Burroughs’ performance of the dance ‘Black and White’ at the Second Annual Inter-Racial Dance at the Rockland Palace in Harlem on Saturday March 22nd 1930. Organised by the Harlem section of the Communist Party USA, Duke Ellington’s orchestra also played this event. In this talk, I explore the organic qualities invoked in Segal and Burroughs’ dance in relation to Ellington’s pronouncement that “I am not playing jazz. I am trying to play the natural feelings of a people.” How can we consider the relationship between feeling, organicism and vulnerability here? How do these qualities serve to illuminate the communist experience in the US as productive of a total, indeed ingrown world, as described by Vivian Gornick, and how does this open onto problems of scale?

Melissa Blanco Borelli:

"I've danced my whole life, but none of that is useful at all": Dance, "Vulnerability," and Lessons in Cultural Awareness

In Netflix's recently available documentary, We Speak Dance, dancer and former UN advisor Vandana Hart travels to Paris, Beirut, Lagos, Ho Chi Minh City, and Bali to dance with dance artists who, according to her, are revolutionising the way dance functions in their respective countries. This talk will problematise the documentary through its framing of the dances and the subjects dancing by situating it within the nexus of critical dance studies, colonialism/decolonisation, globalization, sexuality, gender, and power. By so doing, I will highlight ways in which cultural diversity projects (like this documentary purports to be) often undermine, and make more vulnerable, marginalised dancing communities of color who consistently labor to be agents in their own self-making.

Ciaran Finlayson:

Ralph Lemon On Value and Vulnerability: Outsider Art in Contemporary Dance

When asked by his daughter Chelsea, “What do you love most about black people?” dancer and choreographer Ralph Lemon replied “Our vulnerability.” The dual concern over blackness and vulnerability has characterized Lemon’s work since the 1990s but crystallized in the eight years of his collaborations with Walter Carter, a former sharecropper from the Mississippi Delta with whom Lemon worked until his death in 2007 at one hundred and one years of age. This paper asks of Lemon (and of ourselves) after political theorist Asma Abbas, “who are we who turn to vulnerability as something to study, what does it displace, what anxiety does it assuage?” and “what is it that those who are vulnerable do, and help us articulate as a kind of politics?”
Working with Lemon’s most recent publication, *On Value* (a collaboration with Triple Canopy) and the curatorial event at the Museum of Modern Art from which it emerged, *Some sweet day*, this paper asks as to the value of work made with and by ‘outsiders’ to the fields of contemporary art (via dance) by focusing on Lemon’s work with Carter in the light of his later editorial and curatorial relation to similar projects undertaken by Jérôme Bel (*The Show Must Go On* [2001], *Disabled Theater* [2013]) and Yvonne Rainer (*The Concept of Dust* [2015]). It proposes to treat Lemon’s recent meteoric rise in the realm of contemporary art as an occasion to inquire as to place of this anxiety around vulnerability in the recent valuation of ‘outsider art’, where the outsider is both the ground for recent advances in in the field while, in their ostensible structural vulnerability exploitation by the art and dance worlds, constantly threatens to expose something of whole apparatus.

Sabine Sorgel:

**Dance and Vulnerability: Practicing Resilience in a Traumatized World**

This paper interrogates the potential of vulnerability in contemporary dance practice in response to the psycho-pathological violence unleashed upon colonized subjects in the aftermath of Western modernity and globalization (Ignatieff 2017). The global impact of Western capitalist modernity may count as perhaps the most consequential pathos experience to impact on human existence, mental health, and psychological well-being on this planet. Dance and other embodied practices across a diverse range of geo-political conflict zones (Democratic Republic of Congo, Palestine, South Africa, Sri Lanka) thus appear as a forceful expression of vulnerability as strength to redress global psychological trauma and conflict.

Arabella Stanger:

**Wobbles, Rubble, and George Balanchine’s Choreography of Urban Displacement**

At the heart of George Balanchine’s *Agon* pas de deux (1957) is a wobble. Tipped into a nose-dive arabesque penchée, the woman stands en pointe secured only by one of her hands which grasps her partner’s upstretched arm as he, in turn, lies flat on the floor beneath her. This one-hand grip occupies the central space between their bodies as the difficulty of the pose sends their arms into a broad tremble. The choreography here exposes the dancers’ struggle against the probability of collapse. This kind of aestheticization of displacement has been identified by Brenda Dixon Gottschild as a marker of “the black text in Balanchine’s Americanization of ballet” (1996, 60) and reframed by Clare Croft to suggest the resistive embodiments of black dancers (including the pas de deux’s originator, Arthur Mitchell) claiming “space for a performance of blackness as blackness” (2015, 68). Thinking less about representations of blackness in *Agon* than of that ballet’s structural dependence on the material dispossession of racialized subjects, I read the wobbles of the pas de deux in relation to the rubble left upon Lincoln Square in the wake of the mass urban relocation project spearheaded by Robert Moses to make room for an arts complex in which Balanchine’s company would take up residence. Approved by New York City authorities less than one week after *Agon*’s premiere in 1957, this project led to the displacement of 7,000 working-class families, the majority of whom African American and Puerto Rican, from their homes to make way for Lincoln Center, a construction characterized by John D. Rockefeller III “a truly great civic development”. By thinking across these two choreographies of displacement
(a wobbling New York classicism and the histories of urban clearance on which it materially depends), I explore the aesthetic and economic co-implications of bodies that reside on ‘unstable ground’.

Alexandra Symons Sutcliffe:

**Magnesium, 1972**
Contact Improvisation is an improvisational dance technique developed by Steve Paxton in the early 1970s. CI uses the practices of aikido, specifically the principle of the roll or controlled fall, as the fulcrum for an improvisational structure in which two bodies come together at a point (ie: shoulder to shoulder, thigh to thigh, back to back) give weight equally to each other to create a movement dialog. CI has been variably described as a “sport dance” by Simone Forti, an “American martial art” by Nancy Stark Smith and by Steve Paxton as a “cultivation of pessimism.” Developed within the context of the Vietnam war and out of Paxton’s own stated dissatisfaction with the ornamental character of 1960s counter culture, CI was an experimental dance practice and a method of tooling for the state that of demise that Paxton felt he inhabited. The method and the tool of CI is the inhabitation of risk, the vulnerability and culpability of the body to another and in the process of the fall. This paper looks at material and bodily principles of Contact Improvisation, it’s political aspiration in the 1970s and it’s continuing legacy today.