

Tanya Leighton



[Extra Extra INTERVIEW]

Jimmy Robert on Performing the Body as Score, the Mind as Place

by Fatos Üstek

In 2008, I attended the opening performance of Jimmy Robert at Cubitt. It was a rainy London evening in late autumn if my memory does not fail me. Bart van der Heide was the curator behind this interesting and outstanding programme of exhibitions. There, Jimmy knelt on the floor wearing jeans and lengths of masking tape stuck on his bare torso. The audience were invited to remove the tape when they pleased. Meanwhile, Jimmy recited excerpts of reviews from the 1965 New York staging of Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*. I did not walk forward to untape Jimmy, instead I preferred to observe the audience, the room and the charged space of suspense and trust. His practice encompasses two decades now, which provides

Berlin

Extra Extra, September 2022

Kurfürstenstraße 156, 10785 Berlin
+49 (0)30 21 972 220, info@tanyaleighton.com, www.tanyaleighton.com

Tanya Leighton

European Portraits, 2017



Courtesy of Jimmy Robert and PEER, London. Photo: Ollie Hammick

Jimmy Robert

a sufficient breadth of time to observe recurring conceptual threads from use of media to the repetition of gestures as well as his keen interest in the history of art and charging his practice with

references and referrals. The processes that he wraps himself in, his inquiry into vertical integration and the horizontal association of knowledge, is truly fascinating. We discussed larger than

[Extra Extra INTERVIEW]

Jimmy Robert



Courtesy of Jimmy Robert, Performa, The Glass House and Tanya Leighton, Berlin and Los Angeles. Photo: Michael Biondo

life concepts and practical solutions to providing access points to things that are complex and things that are simple and straightforward. Furthermore, we delved into less discussed aspects of

his practice and explored themes he feels drawn to and terms that he coined, such as 'erotic conceptualism.' Jimmy's artistic practice is visceral, tactile, sensual, durational, gentle and curious,

Tanya Leighton

as he delivers beyond the confinements of visual and performing arts, whilst strongly rooted to its foundations, history and heritage led by other artists, practitioners and thinkers.

in my work things tend to not stay on the walls, they slide down or they are laid on the floor. Early on, when I was at art school, I had this feeling about representation: it was something bound

Imitation of Lives, 2017



Jimmy Robert

Fatos Üstek: I want to start with a big question. And that is: what is your relationship to gravity?

Jimmy Robert: It is a very big question. I guess you're asking me this because

to fail. I was associating failure with the floor, with falling down. Things being not stable but being vulnerable materialised the idea of the fall for me. It may be wrong to equate the sense of

Tanya Leighton

[Extra Extra INTERVIEW]

gravity as a failure, because it signifies something that is still happening, in process. I then started to think about failure in relation to image making: if the image is failing, what happens to it once it's on the floor? How does it get up again? With the act of standing up, the whole notion of sculpture comes into play. There and then, the image is relating to the body, and being lifted gains a sculptural essence. This gradual shift from failure to standing – not necessarily meaning that standing is the success of the image, but the image trying to put itself together in order to assert a certain kind of power despite its fragility – is maybe a whole trajectory of gravity. Here, the image is faced with its own weight and fights to stand up. This could also be an existential metaphor for artistic practice: for an artist to produce images and to feel strongly about them, to feel confident that they are standing by themselves. In this case, for me, it means to have a voice and that I am able to make things.

Gravity also relates to performance. Let's say the body of the image is falling or in a flow, like when you are performing or you are working with other performers. Gravity plays a role as a form of resistance to all. It makes me think about my piece *Veneer* (2017), an instruction text, which was also presented as a performance. This idea of gravity is very interesting, because dance always involves standing. And we kind of neglect the fact that if the subject is right at the floor level, there's still a form that is composed of images and shapes informed by the body on the floor.

Fatos: Your inquiry about spaces and our spatialisation of sense of self reminds me of your work *Metallica* (2011) where you utilise sculptures that are affixed to the body of the performer. Is this about us fitting into the spaces around us?

Jimmy: *Metallica* was produced as part of a residency I had in Belgium. This place had an amazing metal workshop, and I was fascinated by the idea of working with metal. It was important to go beyond the confinement of the material and its associations with the ultra-masculine and larger than life forms. What I ended up producing was a skirt. I was interested in that big paradox of productivity and masculinity. Producing something that is sharp and at the same time very fragile, appealed to me. The form I built hence has affinities with paper – sharp, fragile, as well as foldable. The sculpture I made is an object that simultaneously facilitates movement while also restraining it. The performance was choreographed in relation to this dual nature. The choreography questions the notion of control and awareness of our bodies and the way we allow ourselves to move.

At the end of the day, what does it mean to bring one's own body to perform in whatever institution – whether it's a synagogue or an art museum? The question I asked myself is: what does it mean for me to come here and do a performance in this particular space? And then I ask myself again: well, I've been invited, but is it about my body, specifically?

Fatos: This makes me think of the notion of agency. I would like to recall works where you have handed over your agency of performing to other bodies and minds. In those circumstances, how do you negotiate?

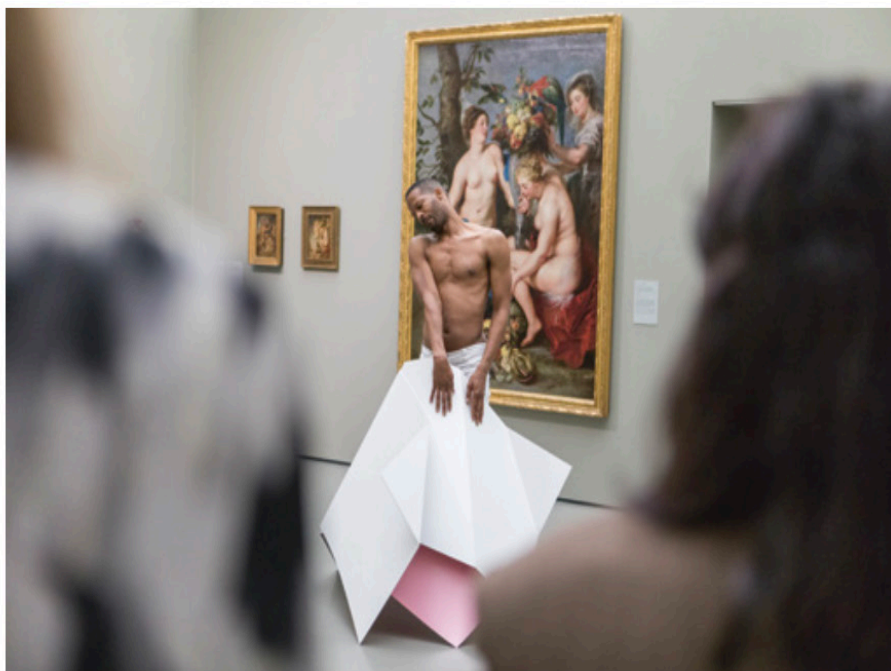
Jimmy: I am interested in allowing a secondary agency to bring another reading and interpretation of the idea; the choreography. Like you trust artworks that do not require performative components, you need to be able to trust the person who is entering into the space of the exhibition and, thus,

Tanya Leighton

Metallica



Courtesy of Jimmy Robert, Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam and Tanya Leighton, Berlin and Los Angeles. Photo: Florian Braakman



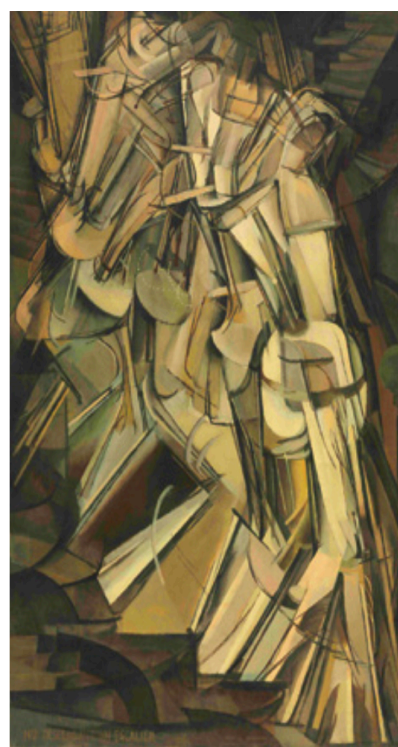
[Extra Extra INTERVIEW]

...Touching is a way of establishing a certain form of knowledge...

take a leap of faith into their interpretation skills. When I work with other people who are interested in performing my works – which has happened a couple of times now – it's very important for me to have their sense of agency as I take their subjectivity into consideration. I try to form an alignment between their bodies and how my body would move in space. It is very important that this alignment needs to be worked through, and cannot be taken for granted.

Fatos: If we think about your production of image as a notion, as an object and as a body, I feel you are operating in an expanded field. This field includes not only images printed on 2D surfaces but also sculptures and choreography. You create images that create forms that create images. For instance, we could take *Descendances du nu* (2016) as a point of reference.

Jimmy: I've always been fascinated by images. I consume images, whether passively or actively. I observe how images are produced in various fields from advertisement to billboards covering the façades of our built environment, from museums to reproductions of artworks in editions, publications and even merchandise and question our relationship to images. I take this inquiry to my performance works. For me, performance is linked to the question of representation and its failure of being able to do so. It's the



Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2 (1912) is a Modernist masterpiece by Marcel Duchamp that treads the line between Cubism and Futurism. It was rejected from the 1912 Salon des Indépendants in Paris by the Cubists for being too Futurist and was met with much criticism at the 1913 Armory Show in New York. The painting in oil on a 147 × 89.2cm canvas depicts a nude

Tanya Leighton

figure in movement, supposedly descending a staircase. The figure is fragmented and made up of abstract, geometrical parts, which fuse together to depict the stages of movement. In the background, we see the staircase depicted in darker colours. At the bottom of the composition, Duchamp indicated the title in French: 'Nu descendant un escalier.'
Courtesy: Margaux Stockwell, Singulart.

Untitled (Descendances du nu), 2016.
Courtesy of Jimmy Robert and Stigter van Doesburg Gallery, Amsterdam



same for an image, which is not able to represent itself and therefore needs to be either attached or correlated to another body in order to complete or expand – as you said – itself. It goes through a process of filtering. The filter is the image of the body that is located within this culture of image-making, which allows the image to come out of its frame, to go beyond its boundaries, to spill over its confinements. That is, its frame, to go beyond its boundaries,

to spill over its confinements. That is why I hardly frame anything. I am after the porosity, and I want the image to be accessible like a surface, a skin that can be touched and is relatable.

In the context of the nude descending the staircase, I focused on the passing movement and studied the nudity. The painting was transformed into a patterned curtain made of velvet. It was invitingly tactile, whilst it was also broken down into micro-movements. The painting was not recognisable in the first instance and one could not identify it as the famous painting. I am inspired by the appropriation movement and the female artists who have been its pioneers such as Louise Lawler, Elaine Sturtevant and Sherrie Levine. I could say that I followed their footsteps in questioning authority and the established positions of respective patriarchal figures and quoted the colour from Marcel Duchamp's painting *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912).

The transformation of painting into a curtain, reminiscent of a theatre prop, was an important repositioning of the body within the staircase; and then I decided to become the staircase. Becoming an object for me was a gesture to relate to the living, breathing body as an object, which is also trying to position itself within art history.

This piece is a study of orientation for me, in a larger sense – it's an outcome of my question: where do I stand among the fathers and mothers of art history? Maybe one can interpret this as an inquiry to find a form of legitimacy within the art world. Meanwhile I was reflecting, exploring my body, as a performer who is not a trained dancer.

Fatos: I'm reminded of your exhibition at PEER, in East London in 2017, where you printed famous paintings from old masters onto large textiles and you

Jimmy Robert

[Extra Extra INTERVIEW]

Descendances du nu



Tanya Leighton



Courtesy of Jimmy Robert, Centre d'Art Contemporain – la Synagogue de Delme and Tanya Leighton, Berlin and Los Angeles. Photo: O.H. Dancy

The title of the 2016 installation and performance is a direct reference to Marcel Duchamp's 1912 painting. Originally performed at the Centre d'Art Contemporain – la Synagogue de Delme, a former synagogue in France, the performer's body crawls on the ground. Here he appears vulnerable, suggesting a new approach to the space. Courtesy: e-flux

Tanya Leighton

[Extra Extra INTERVIEW]



Kurfürstenstraße 156, 10785 Berlin
+49 (0)30 21 972 220, info@tanyaleighton.com, www.tanyaleighton.com

Tanya Leighton



Kurfürstenstraße 156, 10785 Berlin
+49 (0)30 21 972 220, info@tanyaleighton.com, www.tanyaleighton.com

Tanya Leighton

[Extra Extra INTERVIEW]

engaged in a form of *pas de deux* with the image-object. Would you refer to this work as an attempt at the destruction of the authority of the image, whilst you create yet another image?

Jimmy: I searched for a different sensory fabric from velvet – I chose viscose. I like your use of the word ‘destruction’ because it is the method that I used in order to create something new. And there are many different forms of artistic use of destruction, from destroying images to reconstructing the camera. This morning I was thinking of the Canadian artist Christopher Williams and the way he pushes images to their conceptual edge. In *European Portraits* (2017), I am trying something different from Williams, addressing the hierarchy that these images denote. They are under protection, displayed behind glass, protected by museum walls, and they have their own authority. This is my angle, where I introduce questioning of authority through destruction. Sometimes it can manifest itself through punching a hole in the wall and showing that what seems solid is also fragile. However, the destruction in this work is closer to debasing with authority.

Fatos: I want to explore an aside here and bring to mind your piece *Reprise* (2009) that references Jeff Wall's *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* (1993) that refers to Hokusai's woodcut print titled *Travellers Caught in a sudden Breeze at Ejiri* (1832). Your piece creates waves, it appears and disappears from the surface; even the photographs look as if they have fallen out of the frame. Your mention of a punch onto surfaces makes me think of the thin red line between something happening at random or in absolute precision, in a way that I think your version can be considered as intentional constellation informed by entropy.

Jimmy: It's about choreographing the image and adding dimensions to it, in a similar way to how Jeff Wall positioned his in a light box. This piece originated from its 2D presentation as a print, and Wall inserted another dimension by creating a sculpted form for its viewing. I intended to further this dimensional expansion. I am interested in multiple cultures, from African to East Asian. This piece for me was an outing for my keen sensitivity and interest in butoh dancing, the Japanese logic of self-expression. I wanted to explore ways to reconcile movement and the image and their interrelated consequentiality. Additionally, the original woodcut print depicts a group of men, and how they appeared in the image informed my choreography; in a way I used it as a score in order to represent it again but under a different light and through a different phase of processing. Thus, it is a presentation of a representation of a presentation.

Fatos: You employ looping as a method. I wonder if you listened to songs on repeat when you were a teenager? In other words, where does this passion for loops come from?

Jimmy: Songs on repeat, yes, yes, yes! I use ‘looping’ as a device or as a strategy for making things. I used to listen to records in the 1990s, mostly techno grooves that are recorded on loop so you can listen all day long without needing to turn the record over. I was fascinated by these, and listening on repeat allows you to discover details, minimal components that you don't pay attention to at first. Looping is also a learning method. You learn lyrics by heart when listening to songs on repeat. I remember singing out loud along to Morrissey of The Smiths with my best friends in the Paris metro. That was a fun way of learning English.

*...it embraces the
erotic, and touching
something is charged
with desire – as well as
resistance and giving in
in some cases...*

Fatos: If we think of looping as a repetition, it also gains an erotic charge. I remember many years ago visiting Maria Eichhorn's solo exhibition in Berlin, which was composed of 16mm film projections of repeated touches of the fingers, the tongue on erogenous parts of the body: all close-up shots of a lover repeating minimal gestures of pulling a nipple, licking an armpit. I remember blushing next to a colleague, wondering if he saw the effect of these images on me.

Jimmy: In *Imitation of Lives* (2017), I'm together with another dancer and furniture in a house. We engage with the question of how to inhabit this place better, how to touch what is around us and through that connect with our bodies. It's not only about dancing, it's literally about touching things that normally are – in this museal kind of situation – not supposed to be touched. You're not supposed to linger. You're not supposed to inhabit that space. For me, inhabiting that space also meant touching it. Movement or dance primarily starts on this note, with this notion of touch – whether it's the floor or the other dancer. Touching is a way of establishing a certain form of

knowledge. I find myself asking: how do I know that I'm occupying the space if I'm not touching it? And, of course, it embraces the erotic, and touching something is charged with desire – as well as resistance and giving in in some cases.

I was reading a super-interesting text in *The New Yorker* about the sense of touch by Adam Gopnik. The article – titled 'Feel Me: What the New Science Says about Touch' (2016) – was arguing that we don't know much about touch in the beginning, yet we start to learn, for instance how to hold an egg without breaking it. So how do we know what is the right amount of pressure to hold something without breaking it? How do I know that a touch is erotic as opposed to one that breaks something? All of this is done through memory, knowledge and experience, but this sense we have acquired is not a given. For instance, the article mentioned a case where a severed hand was replaced by a prosthetic that established a connection between the brain and the sense of touch with an accurate amount of pressure. This is definitely something I want to take further in terms of my research. I think it is inherent in my relationship

Jimmy Robert

Tanya Leighton

[Extra Extra INTERVIEW]

Untitled (Ompdrailles)



Courtesy of Jimmy Robert and Tanya Leighton, Berlin and Los Angeles

to paper: it can be transformed under various degrees of pressure such as being torn, or folded, and it can also stand still.

Fatos: This all makes me think of the concept of a tipping point. It is the threshold that holds the before and after of an event: like water starting to spill out of a glass, or paper tearing after a certain amount of force being exerted on it.

Jimmy: Because there is a point when maybe pleasure becomes disappointing. A bit like: oh, I can't bear it or it's too fast or it's too rough. One needs to establish the right degree of touch, and resist at the tipping point of when it's no longer pleasurable.

Fatos: Going back to repetition and touch, how do you know or negotiate the tipping point in relation to the audience?

Jimmy: By doing and trying. I've asked other dancers and people who work with performance how they define this threshold, and they said it's through the gaze and communication. In my performances, I leave the space initially undefined and I choose to negotiate where I will be standing or performing in a silent, consensual conversation with the audience. I don't define where the audience will be present, yet at the same time I need them to move when I want without my talking. Once, I had an encounter during a performance where I needed to tell an audience member to move, who afterwards told me, 'Oh, but you were looking at me so intensely, I could not just take my eyes away.' It was really funny. So, I guess you define that boundary through experimentation and pruning positions for dealing with moments of resistance and dis-acknowledgement. It's through eye contact, gesture and sometimes words since there's no other way.

Fatos: Carte blanche or obstruction? What excites you the most, which one makes you go into the flow of creativity?

Jimmy: I think it's a negotiation of both. I'm not saying this just to be diplomatic, because you can have extreme situations. One example is when you don't want the people attending your performance to be too far away but you don't want them to be too close. You don't want to be in any form of negotiation for who stands where and for how long. I guess it's a bit like calling out. Saying, 'You're going too far now', like in some practices such as S&M. You need a buzzword to communicate 'OK, now it's too much. OK, I got it.' Of course, every context is different. For example, my partner would love me to have a piercing but I'm truly afraid of the pain. And so do I need to brace myself and go through the pain? While I am negotiating with myself regarding the pain that presumably will give pleasure, I wonder if the pleasure I will have will cancel out the pain. When I see people with piercings in their nipples, I can't stop myself but ask if they still have any feeling or if the ring increases the feeling. I haven't had a satisfactory answer to date – some say they lose sensation.

Fatos: How do you involve another body in your performances?

Jimmy: It's always a negotiation: identifying personal limits, outlining where trust lies and learning where the tipping point is. Whether I delegate the work to somebody else, or I'm performing it with somebody, there's still this notion of trust and friendship. At the end, with my collaborators it's about getting to know who they are, then getting to know who I am and then becoming familiar with one another, being intimate.

[Extra Extra INTERVIEW]

...the intimacy that touches me is that which surprises me – it is a feeling that happens almost unexpectedly. It is the rare moment that is unplanned, or rises unexpectedly...

This is important because we are dancing and moving together. There is an intimacy that requires a certain level of trust in the other person.

Fatos: How would you define intimacy? And where can it happen?

Jimmy: I love to see intimacy anywhere. There is fantasised intimacy and there is real intimacy. Most of the time, the intimacy that touches me is that which surprises me – it is a feeling that happens almost unexpectedly. It is the rare moment that is unplanned, or rises unexpectedly. I guess my education, culture, religion, and everything that structured my psyche prevents access to some forms of intimacy. When we were talking about the erotic, it seems to be kind of going against each other. For instance, if it's too conceptual, can it still be erotic? We need to bring looping into the picture, to find a way to everything that is learned, and that is a construct. Just like representation, I feel the urgency to deconstruct intimacy, in order to be able to access it fully, through unthinking and undoing. When we access intimacy, it may be

that we are not so prepared to allow it to happen to us. I come back to an availability, a readiness for intimacy, which is probably not accessible through thinking, but debasing. I don't like the idea of innocence. But I would say more readiness, openness and accessibility or allowance. I'm allowing myself to receive the touch and respond to it, and making it not more complicated than it needs to be. Here I paraphrase Arundhati Roy from her book *The Cost of Living* (1999): To not complicate things that are simple and to not simplify things that are complicated.

Fatos: For instance, at your latest show at Tanya Leighton Gallery, your works collage many objects, including body parts. These are like cut-outs, taken out of their context and placed into a different context into a new wholeness and unity, detached from the human form.

Jimmy: There are a lot of things that I am actively doing in the sense of finding an answer, acknowledging the fact that questions may remain unanswered. It is a weird thing. To desire is to ask

Tanya Leighton

somebody, something for what they don't have. To go back to the beginning: I have the same relation to the image – I require something from the image that I know it cannot give. Hence, why do I keep making images? What do I want? Or what do I aim at, by continuously

Jimmy: This reminds me of the notion of hyperobjects and the way things relate to each other on different levels. When you're touching an object, this object may become part of your history. And now, suddenly, everything is entering a system of

Reprise, 2010



Courtesy of Jimmy Robert and Tanya Leighton, Berlin and Los Angeles

Jimmy Robert

making images and not giving up? It is about repeating again and again, endlessly the same action.

Fatos: In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Maurice Merleau-Ponty defines an image as the representation of an object in its absence. If we regard this definition adhering to the production of images in the 20th century, today's forms of image-making have shifted their qualities. Like your reference to the image as an object, the image is not a porous skin that tries to represent something in its absence, it is a presentation in its own right.

relations. It's no longer as mellow as Merleau-Ponty puts it; there are no longer clear separations of what is absent, what is present, what the image is, what the object is, what the body is, what the non-body is, and we are all part of that same conversation of the real. For me, this exploration into the abyss of the real opened so many doors, in terms of representation, because I no longer have to be in this struggle with the image, as I am part of the image. I am part of the image's molecules; some of my skin is painted in this image. We are part of one ecology of the real.

Tanya Leighton

[Extra Extra INTERVIEW]

Joie noire, 2019. Courtesy of Jimmy Robert, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, and Tanya Leighton, Berlin and Los Angeles. Photo: Frank Sperling



Kurfürstenstraße 156, 10785 Berlin

+49 (0)30 21 972 220, info@tanyaleighton.com, www.tanyaleighton.com

Tanya Leighton



Jimmy Robert