

FLASH ART

Jimmy Robert:
Reworking Performativity
by Eleonora Milani



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The work of Berlin-based artist Jimmy Robert (b. Guadeloupe (FR), 1975) is situated in the interstices between the art object, performance, and the history of art in a broader sense. More precisely, it explores the delicate relationship between performance — where and how it is implemented — and the public that observes it. In this conversation with Eleonora Milani the artist reflects on notions of performance and the performative, and on ways of liberating and legitimizing performative practice despite its medium-specific legacy.

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ELEONORA MILANI: "The 'performative' is an adjective commonly used to describe art, an artist, or an aspect of art that is theatrical, dramatic, or otherwise engaged in performance." This definition is from the book *Performing Image* (MIT Press, 2019) by Isobel Harbison, who also notes that the term "performativity" is drawn from the linguistic theory of J. L. Austin, in which "some aspects of language had a performative outcome," and was later reworked by Judith Butler in 1990. Today it is always more useful to look at a performance not as a circumscribed way to express visual art, or, even worse, as a *medium*, but, on the contrary, as something that has to be read in a broader sense. Thus it has more difficulty to refer to the practice of an artist who uses his body, defining him or her as a "performer." What should a performer be and in relation to what? I ask this question also of myself, for we are witnessing a strong return of dance, "gesture," and theater in visual art. What does "performative" mean according to your vision?

JIMMY ROBERT: I am aware of these different meanings ascribed to the words "performative" and "performance," but I would like to pick up on something in your question, when you speak about "something that has to be read." This notion of reading is for me essential in terms of how we should approach these terms, meaning there is work that still needs to be done — an action that locates itself beyond the act of looking and observing as a passive audience. Participation and engagement is required, and maybe that notion of "reading" the work is where the "performative" locates itself; it is not just that your attention is required, but one must participate, think, question, refuse or accept what is presented to you as an audience member and as a performer. There was this group show recently at MoMA titled "Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done," which was

about the Judson Church scene in New York and its legacy, and to me this also resonates strongly in terms of attempting to point at an action which has no end in the sense that it operates in the present, which is always different and continuously asks you to watch out, be alert, your senses are required, do not be a victim, you have agency. My sense of performativity is the one that reminds you of your role and significance in this equation: You are here with me creating meaning. I am not alone in this. You are being performative as much as I am.

EM: In a recent interview in *Pin-Up* you speak of failure in relation to representation and how it gradually led you to use the body. In what sense does the body not fail, and, if it fails, is the failure more acceptable?

JR: Oh, don't get me wrong, the body does fail too. This is the fragility of performance. It is not so much that this failure is more acceptable, but maybe we need to start looking at vulnerability as something that is not unattractive. Vulnerability within a man is still seen as a problem, and maybe this needs to change. As a performer my body shakes; I always think I could do things better and lack technical ability, as if this would change the value or what is at stake within the work. I need to remind myself that after making work for a while now I have developed a vocabulary which is my own and that I should trust. I guess my fear is located in the accuracy of my statements and whether objects, as well as my own body, can be accurate. Yet, although accuracy can be synonymous with precision, this does not preclude vulnerability. How am I to know how well I fail?

EM: The idea that space is a specific entity in connection with the body and the artistic object (with all the art-historical implications built into the relationship between the work of art and the spectator) is pivotal

in your practice. Three elements coexist in your work like a love triangle, alternating moments of harmony with intervals of crisis. Your references — to masculinity and gender issues, to figures such as Yvonne Rainer or Marguerite Dumas, and to club culture — are fundamental in your research. Nevertheless, it is in works where the use of the body is forced into an object or in close contact with it that something unbelievable happens. I am thinking of the performance *Descendances du nu* (2016) — a reference to *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* by Duchamp (1912) — during the homonymous exhibition at CAC Delme in 2016, where for more than ten minutes you moved about with a staircase-shaped object on your head. It's a moment of strange irony: perhaps Rosalind Krauss would see it as a satire on the failure of Minimalism. I am also thinking of *Paramètres* (2012), a video in which you try to "set up the parameters, adjust the structure" of technical drawings on shredded sheets of paper and fill in the blanks with parts of your face.

JR: I cannot help but think of Yvonne Rainer's autobiography, *Feelings Are Facts*, as we go along — the factness of feelings against maybe the notion that Minimalism was always meant to be against a certain sense of subjectivity or emotion. Rainer's autobiography shows beautifully how in the end all these suppressed emotions are actually very present in all these very austere-looking artworks. I tend to remove access to the face, to hide expressions, which I hope resurface in movements or texts. *Descendances du nu* is very funny and camp. Sometimes it looks like yoga, sometimes like a vintage pin-up parade. I tend to say between sexiness and the ridiculous, but very seriously questioning the notion of nakedness versus nude representation, the black body in art and art history's legacy of underrepresentation of

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women and people of color. *Paramètres* also flirts with a certain flippancy, a humor I inherited from my time in the UK, playing hide and seek with drawings but eventually with language, revealing how much it is a construct that permeates our perception of selfhood – the way we are limited by language and question its authority while enjoying its sonority at the risk of appearing foolish. Failing again? I wonder...

EM: Since your close collaboration with Ian White (1971–2013), which made its debut with *6 things we couldn't do, but can do now* at Tate Britain in 2004 — a reworked version of *Trio A* (1978) by Yvonne Rainer that you made together — your interest in the relationship between the audience and art spaces has grown. In particular, you focus on the spectators' interpretation or reaction to video and performance. In the case of *European Portraits* (PEER, London, 2017), in which a soundtrack with disturbing dialogue and persistent pauses accompanies your movements in space, there is a further element: the audience is made up of passersby that involuntarily interact with you through the large glass windows of the gallery. In what way has the audience changed since you performed *6 things we couldn't do, but can do now* with White?

JR: It is not a reworked version of *Trio A*. We are actually performing it three times, but from different angles and each time moving the monitor it is displayed on, effectively becoming a trio with Yvonne Rainer performing it on video with us. We went to New York and learned it from Pat Catterson, who is appointed by Yvonne, who came herself toward the end of the process to check how we were doing and make small corrections. An object that is very alive in some ways. I miss Ian a lot, and a lot of the things I do are with him in mind – his spirit, his wit and rigor. The sound that you mention in *European Portraits* is an

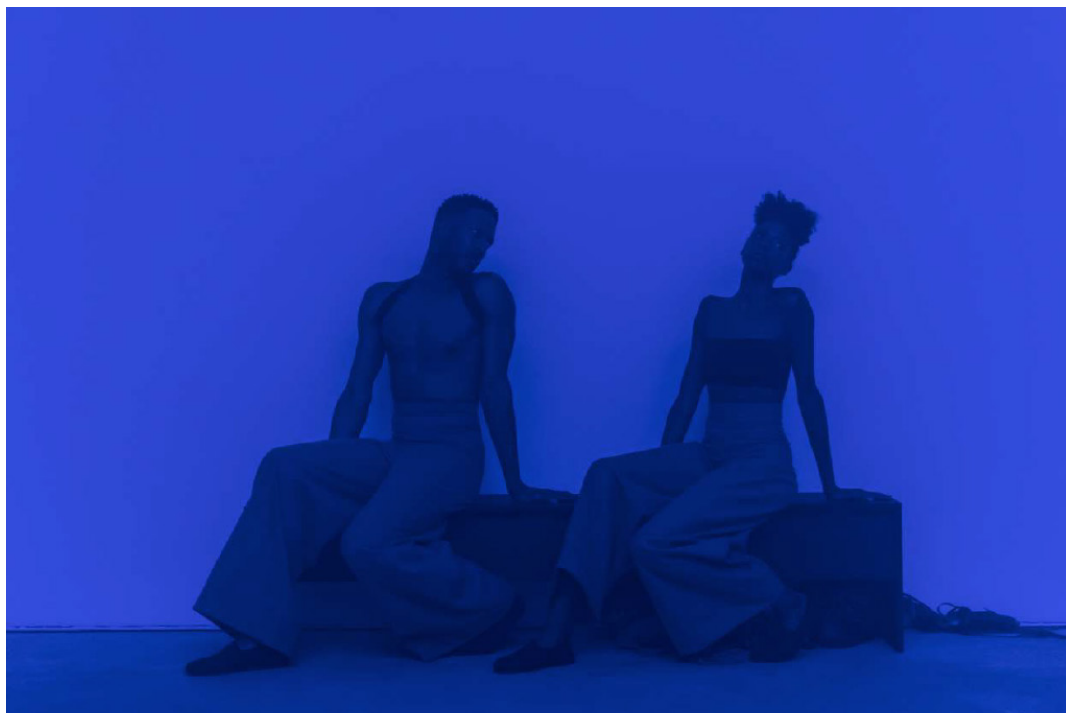
actual piece composed by Ain Bailey, in which she somehow deconstructs language and uses mostly the gaps where there is no text to compose a sound piece; once the performance is over this is a remaining element of the installation and functions to me very much like a performance of its own. I have a feeling that when we performed with Ian people were like, "What is this?" And now they are used to seeing more performances around, but I am not sure the question is not still the same; meaning, I am not sure that seeing more performances has widened our knowledge about it as subject, or even provided ways of talking or writing about it. It is still very much a form in the making; there is not yet any authority to go against. So the audience is more familiar, perhaps knows what they like or not, is still fascinated or irritated, but what makes a good performance is also knowledge or experience, perhaps both, so in this sense a lot needs to be learned, and I feel like I am still learning a lot.

EM: I saw your new performance *Old Masters* (2019) at the Ministry of Sound on the occasion of an "Evening of Performances" by the David Roberts Art Foundation during the latest edition of Frieze London. On that occasion you performed in a real club and shaped your "stage" by threading your way through the crowd (unaware of what you were about to do) with an architectural fragment containing a four-foot photographic work by Valie Export. To what extent might the club atmosphere have changed the audience's perception of your performance?

JR: *Old Masters* was the first time I wanted to break down this hierarchy between seeing an exhibition and experiencing a performance by showing that they are on the same plane in so far as they are both about experiences of looking. How long does it take to look at an image? Listen to

a piece of music? Watch a choreography? Pay attention to a spoken text? I wanted to heighten the relation that people may cultivate with the space they are entering and propose a stylized form of visit through different materials – punctuate things a little and suggest something other than mass consumption, maybe at a slower pace where there is time to manage the information you are given, to process it and create associations, empathy, or arguments and contradictions, like pitting ballet against disco like Douglas Crimp does in his biography *Before Pictures* – which I think a space like the Ministry of Sound is fraught with. I was initially quite conflicted, but I thought that was enough to engage with such a space – which at the end of the day I am very familiar with but have kept very separate somehow. The question was *why*. And this has probably to do with a certain hierarchy of looking and reverence which I wanted to emphasize by moving around with an artwork from the DRAF collection by an artist who has addressed such questions throughout her career as a performance artist and to bring her into the conversation again and not forget her legacy. At once highlighting the absence of performance in art fairs and reminding of the labor that is necessary to bring art works to light, such as art handling – another form of invisibility, a form of choreography too. There was an initial disdain from some of the audience at first, when they did not recognize me as a performer – a certain tension until they made space for what was understood as a moment of "spectacle" and finally gave their attention. All of this drama was more visible from the balcony, where some of the audience could observe the audience downstairs closer to me, which I think was your point of view. I had created that same space at the Glass House for *Imitations of Lives* for Performa 17 when two of us, black men, were dressed

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as security guards at the entrance and became almost invisible as performers.

EM: Your work is currently on view at the Chicago Architecture Biennial with *Descendances du nu*. How did you adapt the work to this new context? Has Chicago affected it?

JR: This is one of the few times where I did auditions to find new performers to replace me. So after seeing about twenty different people I ended up with these five amazing women, all local to Chicago, whom I felt had very strong personalities that would come through the piece and give it a new life. *Descendances* is performed on the landing of a large nineteenth-century staircase in the impressive Chicago Cultural Center, which was initially a library. The performance becomes a form of architectural intervention in the space as it also comprises an installation made of appropriated images and a deconstructed version of Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, which is transformed into a mere decor and printed on fabric like a theatrical curtain, thus displaying a genealogy through art history but trying to place bodies which are not usually part of this history in its forefront, having them literally carving a space for themselves through it, somehow between the father figure and the mothers – as Elaine Sturtevant, Sherrie Levine, and Louise Lawler are all appearing and appropriating Duchamp too. So Chicago affected the work by its pure distance, and it forced questions: Could we think of performing this piece several times? And by which bodies? Whereas it was initially such a site-specific piece, performed in a former synagogue turned contemporary art center, I thought it might be difficult to render there. But I went for a less precious approach, which entailed identifying what is most important in this work: Who is performing it? Where it is performed? Or why is it performed at all today? The city has both an

amazing art collection and architecture, and I think the value the city will throw in is the same as anywhere else, meaning depending on how much time anyone has to spend time with the work and see it unfurl over time as these bodies take it and make it their own "until no one understands the why of such desire," as Duras writes in *Hiroshima mon amour*.

EM: What do you think of the role of performance in relation to the rise of nationalism and other isms?

JR: This is a hard question. Performancisms? I don't know what is happening, and I am both scared and empowered, which is a weird and ambivalent feeling – but this must be the same for a lot of people and creates this dichotomy. Does performance have the power to address and redress such contemporary questions? What it surely does is put to the fore those bodies that are being questioned and make them undeniably visible whatever the point of view, whatever the opinion, making it difficult to ignore and therefore part of the conversation. Challenging who is visible and who is speaking and for whom. Identities are fragmented and complex and cannot be reduced or compartmentalized. We are in times of necessary conversations that need to happen with everyone, not just a few. It is time for dialogue, one of our most distinctly humane qualities, and perhaps performance asks for this repeatedly in a way that is needed: always urgent, beautiful and fragile and aware of its own vulnerability and fleetingness.

JIMMY ROBERT's *Descendances du nu* is currently on view at the Chicago Architecture Biennial through January 5, 2020; Upcoming solo exhibitions will be at The Hunterian art gallery, part of Glasgow International, April 24 through May 10, 2020; at Nottingham Contemporary from May 31 through August 31, 2020, and at Leopold-Hösch-Museum, Düren from March 8 through June 2020.

ELEONORA MILANI is *Flash Art* Editor.

- i-iii *Descendances du nu*, 2016. Live performance and installation at Centre d'art contemporain – la synagogue de Delme. Photography by O.H. Dancy. Courtesy of the artist; Centre d'art contemporain – la synagogue de Delme; and Tanya Leighton, Berlin.
- iv-vi *Old masters*, 2019. Live performance at Ministry of Sound, London. Photography by Mike Massaro. Courtesy of the artist; David Roberts Art Foundation, London; and Tanya Leighton, Berlin.
- vi-vii *Joie noire*, 2019. Live performance at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin. *Pause: After Ian White*. Performer: Courtney Henry. Photography by Frank Sperling. Courtesy of the artist; KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin; and Tanya Leighton, Berlin.
- viii-ix *Descendances du nu*, 2019. Live performance and installation at Chicago Architecture Biennial, 2019. Performer: Lili Jean Ryan-Lozon. Photography by Daris Jasper. Courtesy of the artist; Chicago Architecture Biennial; and Tanya Leighton, Berlin.