

Frieze

Features /



BY MATTHEW MCLEAN
08 MAY 2020

Jimmy Robert's Body Language

The Berlin-based artist works across and between performance, text and image



There's a maxim, attributed to Elvis Costello, among others, that 'writing about music is like dancing about architecture'. It's always struck me as bullshit. There are dances 'about' all kinds of complex phenomena (love, addiction, sacrifice), just as there is writing about things that seem no riper for verbal description: paintings, grief, the weather. Don't we dance, too, about built spaces? Don't some make us move in different ways than others? I watch my two-year-old niece spontaneously bob up and down on her little legs when she enters a new, big room, and I have one answer. When I meet the artist Jimmy Robert in his studio in Berlin's Weissensee on a wet March morning, three days before the German border is closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, he recalls his first experience of dance. Growing up – Robert was born in Guadeloupe in 1975 before relocating to Paris as a child – his mother would often drum. Every time he heard the sound, he says: 'I knew I have to move. But how?'

This was evident in *Joie Noire* (Black Joy, 2019), premiered as part of 'Pause' at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin: a series dedicated to the late artist, curator and writer Ian White, who had been Robert's friend and collaborator. A collage of found sound, quoted text and reproduced images, *Joie Noire* opens with a recording of White reading a passage on modern embalming practices from Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death* (1963). Robert and his dancing partner, Courtney Henry (a six-foot-tall, classically trained African American ballerina), descend a staircase into the main performance space, where they dance a series of steps based on the pas-de-deux from *Agon*, a 1957 George Balanchine ballet, which Robert had discovered in the late Douglas Crimp's memoir-cum-essay-collection, *Before Pictures* (2016).

Joie Noire is scored with disco-era tracks by Grace Jones and Sylvester, along with The Smiths' tragicomic 'Death of a Disco Dancer' (1987) and moments of Cagean silence. A glamorous, nocturnal blue light bathes the performance, evoking the dark spaces of the nightclub and invoking David Hammons's provocative light installation *Concerto in Black and Blue* (2002) at New York's Ace Gallery. Ballet/disco, gallery/club: *Joie Noire* stages a cultural space that is hybrid and fluid. Robert characterized his friendship with White in a 2019 interview with Harry Burke: 'We went dancing a lot, and we thought about art at cruising bars.'

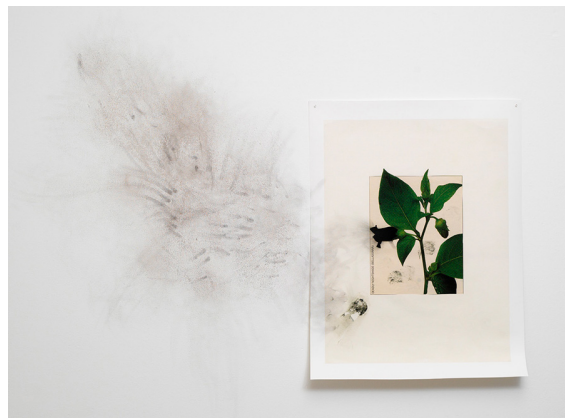
Frieze, May 2020

Tanya Leighton



Jimmy Robert, *Joie Noire* (Black Joy), 2019, performance documentation (featuring Jimmy Robert and Courtney Henry). Courtesy: the artist, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, and Tanya Leighton, Berlin; photograph: Frank Sperling

One evening, after seeing the Michael Clark Company perform at the Barbican in London for Robert's birthday, he and White simply decided to try to learn a dance. (This was some years before Ryan McNamara dramatized the dance-learning process in his lauded 2010 *Make Ryan a Dancer*.) The piece they chose was Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A* (1966). They presented their efforts alongside a video of the original at Tate Britain in 2004 as *6 Things We Couldn't Do, But Can Do Now*. Robert mentions that he met Rainer in person and, when I ask him, with the wide eyes of fandom, what she was like, Robert surprises me with his nonchalance. He was most impressed, he said, by how much Rainer cared about the piece, and her attentiveness to his and White's reproduction of the movements. In meeting Rainer, he says, he saw 'that the choreography really had a life'.



Jimmy Robert, *Untitled* (Belladonna), 2007/15, archival inkjet print, charcoal, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist, Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam, and Tanya Leighton, Berlin

Balanchine's *Agon* is still in repertoire and clips of it can be watched on YouTube but, for *Joie Noire*, Robert decided to approach it as an archival artefact. Starting with a publicity still of two dancers from the original production (which appears on a page in *Before Pictures*), he and Henry worked to reverse-engineer the poses based on their own capabilities. A self-taught dancer, who describes his language as drawing on 'Yvonne Rainer and yoga', Robert had to rely on Henry's expertise. 'I would point at images and ask her: "How do we achieve that?"' he says.

Kurfürstenstraße 156, 10785 Berlin

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

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Jimmy Robert, *Old Masters*, 2019, performance documentation. Courtesy: the artist, David Roberts Art Foundation, Ministry of Sound, London, and Tanya Leighton, Berlin; photograph: Mike Massaro

Images of bodies – sometimes, but not always, those of black or queer people – inhabiting spaces in which they aren't always fully at home recur in Robert's work. He used Agon as the source choreography for *Joie Noire* in part because it was the first piece by the New York City Ballet created for a black principal: Arthur Mitchell, who later co-founded Dance Theatre of Harlem, originally danced the ballet's almost painfully intimate pas de deux with the white principal Diana Adams. Balanchine dramatized the contrast of black male and white female flesh throughout the sequence; by re-casting both roles for black dancers in *Joie Noire*, Robert is both celebrating this moment of pioneering visibility and questioning its racialized optics.



Robert's performance *Imitation of Lives* (2017) was created for The Glass House, the iconic high-modernist Connecticut home designed in 1948–49 by Philip Johnson for himself and his partner, David Whitney. It began in response to a photograph of Jimmie Daniels – a Harlem Renaissance cabaret singer who was Johnson's first lover – by the gay photographer Carl van Vechten. The portrait is in colour and unusually formal: Van Vechten captures Daniels's unsmiling head and shoulders, posed against a red and ivory fabric, its stylized pattern looking, at a glance, 'exotic' and vaguely reminiscent of the work of Henri Matisse. (Closer inspection reveals it to be a folksy Alpine fantasy of pine trees and deer.) The portrait, for Robert, conjures up the vexed relationships between whiteness and the other throughout art history – the African fabrics that Matisse appropriated, say, or the tribal sculptures that Pablo Picasso denied having been the inspiration for *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907). As Johnson's temporary lover, Daniels represents an elite, white culture's simultaneous embrace and disavowal of black culture. The three characters who dance through the space – dressed in a grey hoodie, an African wax-print shirt and a security guard's uniform – by turns channel visibility and invisibility, surveillance and being observed, just as the walls of The Glass House itself make a gesture of radical transparency tempered by the privacy that Johnson's wealth and status secured.

The shirt from *Imitation of Lives* hangs on a wall in Robert's studio, alongside a table laid with tomes on Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Josephine Baker that relate to the artist's project for the upcoming Glasgow International (postponed to 2021 less than a week after my visit). Nearby, I spot the dense catalogue for the Musée d'Orsay's recent survey of black models in Western art, 'Le Modèle noir de Géricault à Matisse' (The Black Model from Géricault to Matisse). I missed the show and ask Robert his impressions of it. Robert was most impressed by

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the curator's efforts to identify previously anonymous subjects, he says: 'The most important thing, in a way, is who has a name.' I ask him about one of the named works in the catalogue, Anne-Louis Girodet's *Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Belley* (1797) – the Haitian revolutionary and first black Deputy to the French National Convention. Robert used the image in his own work *Untitled (Olesen)* (2015), where it appears cropped, with Belley's head inset on a shot of Robert's own body, whose head is also cut off by the picture edge. Girodet's homoerotic vision of Belley caused a scandal when it was exhibited due to the then-outrageous rendering of the hero's bulging genitalia silhouetted in his trousers; Robert explains how the context in which he first encountered the work – the artist Henrik Olesen's art-historical compilation *Some Faggy Gestures* (2007) – further obfuscated the political resonance of the image in favour of its sexual theatrics. What draws Robert is the double-edged nature of the visibility granted the black subject, the possibility for tension and contradiction within being seen. What kind of visibility counts? Which kinds of being seen should be welcomed and which questioned?



Jimmy Robert, *Imitation of Lives*, 2017, performance documentation (featuring NIC Kay and Quenton Stuckey). Courtesy: the artist, Performa, The Glass House and Tanya Leighton, Berlin; photograph: Michael Biondo

Touch is another of Robert's preoccupations: 'We are not meant to touch art,' he tells me. 'I'm interested in what happens when something can be touched.' In *Joie Noire*, the appearance of his hands in a photograph pre-empt a moment in which Henry reads from an Act Up publication about cultural sensitivity to touch. Audre Lorde is quoted, and we talk briefly about the role of lesbians in the AIDS epidemic – in particular how 'these women would be touching men who everyone else was afraid to', in Robert's words. In *Untitled (Belladonna)* (2007/15), a textbook image of the titular plant is reproduced with one of Robert's thumbprints blown-up nearby within the picture; a cloud of charcoal thumbprints overlays the print and the surface of the wall it hangs on, a smudgy testimony to a frenzied desire for palpable connection. For 2013's *Untitled (Ompdrailles)*, Robert posed in a frozen tumble in Brussels's tony Avenue Louise district, at the base of a statue depicting a slain gladiator held in the arms of another: the artist's upturned foot touches the dangling foot of the bronze figure. 'Touching art is like when something is made dirty, or falls on the floor,' Robert continues. 'The image that falls onto the floor is very interesting to me.' For his solo show at London's PEER in 2017, the artist transferred onto a piece of fabric a 16th-century portrait by Bronzino from the collection of the UK's National Gallery. He then draped the fabric over himself while lying down, like a bedsheet or a winding-cloth, before leaving it, folded in a fan shape, on the floor.

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The image displaced, handled and dropped to the ground also figured in the show Robert had opened the week before we met, 'Apropos Papier: Jimmy Robert - Plié', at the Leopold-Hoesch-Museum in Düren, maquettes for which were still in his studio. In the exhibition, large-scale printed images of the artist in dancing poses were folded, like two-dimensional origami, or crumpled into balls - ready to be thrown away, perhaps, but, in the meantime, occupying space. The body as image, manipulated into sculpture. Robert named a 2008 show 'Légèrement Manipulés' - a term which translates literally as 'slightly handled', used in the trade to describe the condition of second-hand books. For part of the PEER performance, Robert leaned his whole body up against the gallery's floor-to-ceiling window, where a text he had written had been etched: skin touching words.



Jimmy Robert, *Reprise*, 2010,
archival inkjet prints on A4 paper,
fibreboard table with beech
vener, 70 x 180 x 300 cm.
Courtesy: the artist, Stigter van
Doesburg, Amsterdam, and Tanya
Leighton, Berlin; photograph:
Gunter Lepkowski

'How long do you have to talk?' Robert asks me a couple of hours into my visit - a sign, perhaps, that it is time for me to go. (He has done a few interviews of late, he said at the outset, and is looking forward to someone else's words on his art.) Well, how long is required to understand an artist by talking? How long is required to understand an artwork by looking? Documentation of the PEER performance records the responses of passers-by, given a view of Robert through the glass from the street: some glance, some linger, some smile, some are nonplussed. *Old Masters* (2019), commissioned by David Roberts Art Foundation (DRAF), saw him perform as part of a packed schedule at London's former Ministry of Sound nightclub the week of Frieze Art Fair. Dressed plainly, Robert moved through the crowd pushing what looked like the corner of a gallery booth made mobile; on one white wall, he mounted a piece from the DRAF collection by Valie Export, complete with label. (Robert picked Export, he says, because her performances are less circulated than her more saleable photographic works.) While the point of the piece was to challenge the conventions of experiencing art - the appropriate setting, the time required, the presence or absence of cues and distractions - even he was surprised by how hard it was to engage the audience. The 'space of performance', Robert tells me, is something that has to be 'won'.

Later this year, Robert will be back in the UK for an upcoming career survey at Nottingham Contemporary. *Joie Noire* will be performed alongside a display of texts, sculptures, installations and some of his earliest film works on 8mm. 'Some of it may be cringey,' he considers with a grimace, 'but I wanted to look honestly [at the work].' The show also offers a chance to look

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back at the country in which Robert began as an artist. In the aftermath of Brexit and the scandalous deportation of many of the 'Windrush' generation of Caribbean-born British subjects, the UK today makes for a desperate contrast to the teeming diversity that was his first impression of the country in the 1990s.



Jimmy Robert, *Descendances du nu* (Descendance of the Nude), 2016, performance documentation. Courtesy: the artist, Centre d'art contemporain – la synagogue de Delme and Tanya Leighton, Berlin; photograph: O.H. Dancy

Moving from Paris to London in 1999, Robert says, he was immediately struck by the 'intense visibility' of black people – in adverts, in newspapers, in culture. The absence of these kinds of representations in France – one that he feels persists to this day – made it impossible to be an artist there. He begins to list names: 'Steve McQueen, Stephen Lawrence ...' One is an artist, with prizes and an Oscar to his name; the other, a teenage victim of racist violence, whose murder in London in 1993 sparked a still-unfinished conversation about racial justice in the UK. Robert's choice of examples attests again to the strange variations of 'visibility' and the sort of haunted doubling his practice evokes.

'Visibility', I venture toward the end of my visit, is the most-used word in Robert's vocabulary. He doesn't agree – but doesn't demur. My intuition is underscored when we talk about the cigarette he smokes in the middle of *Joie Noire*. I don't notice any smoking ephemera in the studio, so why, I ask, did he incorporate a cigarette into the piece? 'It's a pause,' he says. 'But people are paying attention because of the gesture. I mean, it's smoke, it's literally nothing. But you put it under a light and it appears.'

Jimmy Robert's recent exhibitions and performances include Old Masters (2019), David Roberts Art Foundation, London, UK, Joie Noire (Black Joy, 2019), KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, Germany, and 'Apropos Papier: Jimmy Robert – Plié', which runs at Leopold-Hoesch-Museum, Düren, Germany, until 6 September (currently closed). Forthcoming projects include a solo exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary, UK, which opens in September, and a new iteration of Joie Noire for Block Universe, London, in 2021. Robert will also take part in Glasgow International, UK, with a solo exhibition at Hunterian Art Gallery, University of Glasgow (postponed until 2021). He lives in Berlin.

This article first appeared in frieze issue 211 with the headline 'Jimmy Robert'.

Main image: Jimmy Robert, Old Masters, 2019, performance documentation. Courtesy: the artist, David Roberts Art Foundation, Ministry of Sound, London, and Tanya Leighton, Berlin; photograph: Mike Massaro