

the complex path to 21st century black live art

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“black dance” proceeds from an engagement with africanist aesthetics: a constellation of formal concerns that underscore the ability of performance to fulfill itself. a generation of scholars and artists have pinpointed features of african-derived performance to encompass, at least, a percussive attack; an exploration of concurrent, highly complex rhythmic meters; an engagement of call-and-response between dancers and audiences; sophisticated structures of derision that are simultaneously personal and political; and above all, an overarching cool, palpably spiritual dimension to the performance. these hallmarks—africanisms—provide a theoretical framework for the identification and interpretation of diasporic traditions of art-making, including something recognizable as black dance.

when artists dip into these compositional|performative wellsprings, we feel blackness emerge, no matter the artist’s preferred racial identity. indeed, africanist aesthetics are imperatives that may be engaged by african diaspora artists and, significantly, by others following this tradition. in other words, black dance is available to any who would approach its complexities as artists, scholars, or audience members.

nota bene: black artists aren’t always interested in these aesthetic strategies, and don’t always make black dance or black live art.

for many, the awkward everyday experiences of being black in majority-white communities incite an unavoidably political outlook on how life is; that outlook becomes a primary marker of black art in general. as artists reference the **shared memories and experiences of black people**, they remind us, above all, of how we endure. the impulse to perform black presence—an oppositional, resistant, dissident social presence in relation to a white mainstream—has historical moorings: in other eras, black performing artists would “sing the master,” taking derisive pleasure in embellishing their slaveholders’ songs with extravagant harmonies; or dance the cakewalk, a stylized and exaggerated social dance that mocked the imported manners of southern whites. when these performance practices became popular in the commercial venues of broadway and hollywood, the political dimension of **performance as derision** that marked them as black fell away. but whether audiences recognized the parody underlying these performances or not hardly lessened their impact. the aesthetic structures endured, black artists engaged them to dance in the tradition. many others followed suit.

in time, black artists stretched these aesthetic constellations, and resisted the seeming requisite to “dance black” on public stages. an experimental black dance performance tradition came into view, one that imbricated itself into postmodern dance, and by 2012, one that underscores the vital live art scene. press rewind.

THIRTY YEARS AGO,

black was less porous, more territorialized, less expansive, more powerful, more and less chic.



by 1982, it may have been great to be black and in the large companies of african-american dance artists who claimed space on the facts of their excellence and assembly (think ailey, dance theater of harlem, philadanco); experimental live artists who resisted the labeling of work as black art, even if they sometimes identified as artists who happened to be black, withstood the double pressure of claiming an outside space to an identity that was already outside the mainstream. the nascent audience for experimental work by black artists formed slowly and inconsistently, and there was little to be gained by calling work black without the support of a committed black audience. mostly, the audience and critical record for any experimental work were white folks, and the level of exoticism surrounding black art staggered the imagination. then, folks still talked about **ethnic dance**, which was, for black artists, code for dance that actually mattered to people outside the circumstance of concert performance. postmodern dance in 1982 tended to be work that valorized the (white) individual or small (white) group as they solved a problem that mattered, mostly, to them. ethnic dance—like **BLACK ART**—lived in the world, and could speak effectively to familial affiliations, political disenfranchisement, articulations of sexuality, group communion, social movement across geographies, the pressing need for the staging of beauty. the 1982 **PARALLELS** artists spoke to these concerns, even when working in oblique, obscure manner; recognizing that the audience was a mix of some sympathetic folks of color, and mostly, white folks who had little idea of the complex strands of creative recovery operating in the worlds of this work. for black artists, even task-based postmodern dance conveyed a political sensibility, as it demonstrated the possibility to align a visibly-circumscribed identity and social history to the public performance of, say, walking in a straight line, or telling obscure family histories. bluntly: black artists engaged in postmodern work were always **representing the race**, even at the outer banks of creative downtown new york performance.

evidence: according to the critical record, **THIRTY YEARS AGO**, it seemed to matter that the artists of the **PARALLELS** series had all gone to college (gasp!). the reading lists for these artists were surely the Western great works, peppered with leading Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights era monographs: langston hughes, zora neale hurston, eldridge cleaver, gwendolyn brooks, amiri baraka, maybe even frantz fanon amid the keats, eliot, woolf, whitman. thirty years ago, references to black popular culture in terms of music and/or attitude were unusual for experimental artists hoping to be respected for their particular, personal work.

NOW, by 2012, we would be hard-pressed to locate experimental artists who hadn't found their way to live art through undergraduate or graduate work, and many of the younger artists studied with the older artists included in this platform. the standard reading list for live artists now includes european cultural theorists, phenomenologists, and philosophers, and a handful of americans (alphabetical grab-bag: bourriaud, deleuze, foucault, heidegger, merleau-ponty, noë, phelan, žižek), but fewer of the oppositional narratives that previously defined the possibility of identifiable black presence in the world. meaning: younger artists don't have to know anything about w.e.b. dubois or bell hooks in order to make work. still, they probably do. but they

sure better have an opinion about kanye and beyoncé. and they probably do.

THEN, as NOW, something inspiring and precious happens when **africandiaspora live artists** gather. shared experience is a powerful aggregator; survivors in any area see each other with curious and sympathetic eyes. for black artists, that seeing is combined with surviving the strangeness of being a dance artist from a community that values dance very highly (yes, black people dance, dance well, and value dance), and being a live artist who tells personal stories that are multivalent, complex, and at times inscrutable. a willingness to “do our own thing” is at the bottom line of appreciation for performance in the africanist grain; that thing can go where it needs to so long as its performance and execution are finely honed, honest, and make some passing reference to africanist aesthetics, even if only to resist their cultural pull.

BY NOW, dance may have shifted its own identity toward live art, to distance itself from the most flagrantly commodified visions of the hollywood-cablevision-youtube-gameverse. **THIRTY YEARS FROM NOW**, i imagine that lots of people will wonder what the fuss was around work by black artists, eternally distinguished from work by others. **BLACK LIVE ART** is particular work that makes reference to black identity, and all of us on the planet are connected to black identity: hook or crook, friends or foes, lovers or disinterested capitalists. black art has always executed an important task: eventually, it encouraged the colorless post-modern dance sensibility of the seventies and eighties to claim its race, gender, and sexual politics. by now, we can all recognize that it matters when white work makes no reference to its whiteness, misogyny, homophobia, or disinterest in disability. the worldview that allowed for parallel understandings of dance, performance, and live art has already diminished considerably; thirty years from now, any audience might be grateful for the work of any artist that is committed, focused, or interesting, no matter its theme or identity of origin. black live artists may number in the minority of experimental creators, and yet, **africandiaspora artists** will surely continue to push against the seemingly inevitable whiteness of performance, to make something unexpected and vital happen; to call on the spirits, yes we still do that, and i daresay artists of an african diaspora always will.

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