

RALPH LEMON



MoMA



RALPH LEMON

MODERN DANCE

Thomas J. Lax

Series editor: David Velasco

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

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FOREWORD

The Museum of Modern Art's long relationship with dance and performance may be among the lesser-known parts of its history. As far back as the 1940s, the Museum had a Department of Dance and Theater Design, if only for a few years; various experiments followed from the 1950s onward, as Kathy Halbreich, the Museum's Associate Director and Laurenz Foundation Curator, describes in her introduction to this book. This occasional but serious interest was regularized in 2009, with the expansion of the Department of Media Art into the Department of Media and Performance Art. Founded by Chief Curator Klaus Biesenbach and now led by Chief Curator Stuart Comer, the department has developed a dynamic program of dance and live arts, articulating the Museum as a platform for performance in the context of the collection and the broader history of modern and contemporary art.

In its focus on performance, MoMA has anticipated an interest now shared by many museums around the world. This shift has entailed some fairly dramatic rethinking: historically, museum architecture has not been designed for performance or dance, and the museum collection must be reimagined if it is to embrace the human body moving in space and time. At MoMA we have begun to address these issues. This process, ongoing and incomplete, will be greatly advanced with the construction of a space tentatively called "The Studio," a priority in the rebuilding project shortly to begin. It will host diverse forms of performing arts and moving pictures: dance, music, theater, film, video, and everything in between and currently unimaginable.

This kind of change in the understanding of the nature of the museum must be the work of many people, and I am grateful to those at MoMA who have made it their goal. The group of publications of which this book is the first is the brainchild, inside the Museum, of Kathy Halbreich and, outside it, of the distinguished editor and writer David Velasco. Associate Curator Thomas J. Lax edited this volume, illuminating Ralph Lemon's work with rigor and insight. As always, I am grateful to MoMA's Trustees, and in this case particularly to Wallis Annenberg. Through MoMA's Wallis Annenberg Fund for Innovation in Contemporary Art, the Annenberg Foundation has supported many performances at the Museum in recent years and has also provided major support for these books. Finally, I extend my profound gratitude to Ralph Lemon. The diligence, curiosity, and grace that characterize his work also deeply inform this publication.

—Glenn D. Lowry, Director, The Museum of Modern Art

PREFACE

Modern dance loves a wrong place: for its practitioners, the stubborn physique of a church, a rooftop, a plaza, a street, or a gallery is a point of contact for kinesthetic innovation. So maybe it's no surprise that in the past five years The Museum of Modern Art, and in particular its Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium, has become a crucible for dance's experimentation with that long phenomenon called the "modern." The Museum was designed primarily for the static arts, and the Atrium is an impossible place for dance, open and hard—yet few choreographers have put down a Marley floor to cushion its knee-cracking slate.

When the Museum opened its Yoshio Taniguchi–designed renovation in 2004, the critic Yve-Alain Bois called the Marron Atrium one of its "senseless features . . . a pure sumptuary expenditure, the sole practical function of which must be to host fund-raising events."¹ The Atrium—as an "ambulatory space" antagonistic to MoMA's most art-historically cogent objects, its "canvases by Monet, Brice Marden, and Agnes Martin"²—may indeed be senseless, but only in being, perhaps, too full of sense for pictures to compete. It is an empire of senses for the taking, perfect if you're the kind of artist who likes the conundrum of people on a floor. Unclaimed, unprotected, the Atrium is allowed to be "other" things to "other" people, a space for those who are adjacent to the visual art canon articulated in the Museum's galleries but for whom that canon never really worked.

"The wind of the canon" is how choreographer Sarah Michelson described her experience of the Atrium in 2012. "It was amazing to experience the wind of the canon blow me and Nicole to smithereens."³ Her *Devotion Study #3* was part of a series called *Some sweet day*, in which choreographer Ralph Lemon invited seven artists to luff that modern wind. That canon and those dances inspired an entanglement of dance and art history at the Museum and the planning of a group of books, tentatively titled "Modern Dance," as the child of that weird, rich coupling.

Why "Modern Dance," a phrase so obstinately tethered to the group of adventurous and ideologically diverse twentieth-century choreographers that included Isadora Duncan, Katherine Dunham, Martha Graham, and Merce Cunningham? There are two reasons. The first is simple: it refers to the books' institutional home at The Museum of Modern Art. Lemon, the artist with whom we begin, as well as Michelson and Boris Charmatz, whose books are in preparation, have made significant work for MoMA, though the books are not tied to those works. The second is this: many of the qualities that stick

out in projects by Lemon, Michelson, Charmatz, and other choreographers working now seem to test and extend modern problems. These artists' questing after what dance *is*, their antagonism to the bourgeois (whatever *that* is), their interest in working with virtuosity/charisma, their no-yes-no to snaky spectacle, and their romance with the magic of singularity and self-mythology seem to argue with those "moderns" and "-isms" at play in the work of George Balanchine and Cunningham and Graham and Yvonne Rainer and scores of others who have made their mark upon the term.

When Rainer began to use the word "postmodern" in the early 1960s, historian Sally Banes tells us, it was in a chronological sense: the implication was that her peers in the Judson Dance Theater—Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, Deborah Hay, et al.—were "after" moderns like Graham or Cunningham.⁴ Of course, as Banes also notes, the Judson dance makers may have been more "modernist" than their predecessors, with their stripped-down, ecumenical approach, but still the description stuck. Critics eventually read the term as an epistemological breach, which it was for some but not for others. Consider Paxton's recent response to Lemon, on the subject of artistic inheritance: "[Modern dance] is a collection of artists who didn't do what they had been taught. I think I am a Modern Dancer."⁵

Bad students: among the many definitions of modern dance, I like this one best. Typological contests are, of course, another feature of modernism and even a sign of its growing pains. Modernism may have matured since the twentieth century, but it continues to be vividly lived. For better or worse, the world is more modern, even if we have substituted modernity's contingency for its precarity. These artists who make amid modernity's triumph have as much (if not more) truck with the modern as those who made amid its earlier pitch and yaw. And consider: What more appropriate response could there be to modernism's "secularism" than Michelson's *Devotion*, to its tendency to collect and cauterize than Charmatz's *Musée de la danse*, to the vacuous thrill of white non-space than Lemon's *Geography* lessons? These responses are not beyond the pale: they are a rendezvous with and within a canon. They are thinking the modern larger. They take this capacious category and make it wilder. Rather than flattening them in the mute "contemporary," why not open the modern's landscapes and allow those insubordinates and poor learners to terrorize its spirits? In any case, the choice isn't ours; it has already happened.

We conceived of these books as a way to offer our living dance iconoclasts the same resources afforded the plastic arts. We wanted comprehensive chronologies and sharp, analytic essays grounded in deep research: everything in one place, dedicated to the proleptic, curious other. And so the books follow a monographic protocol, presenting scholarship and expansive textual responses and an easily referenced list of works and bibliography. But, of course, they will not be identical. As questions arose, the shape of each book evolved. Why

represent this way and not that? How does and should a photograph relate to text? A text to a dance? One collaborator's voice to another's? The artists had problems to solve, as did the editors and writers tasked with putting it all to print. These books, to some extent, are the crystallized collision of artists and the people who think about them. Not crystallized as in set, but rather as a lattice that extends in many directions. Remember, crystals grow.

—David Velasco, Modern Dance series editor

NOTES

1. Yve-Alain Bois, "Embarrassing Riches," *Artforum*, February 2005, 137.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Sarah Michelson made this comment to the choreographer Ralph Lemon, who writes about it in his essay in the forthcoming Modern Dance book *Sarah Michelson*, ed. David Velasco (New York: The Museum of Modern Art).

4. Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987).

5. Steve Paxton, email to Ralph Lemon, February 26, 2016. Paxton and Lemon shared their exchange with the author.

SHALL WE DANCE AT MOMA? AN INTRODUCTION

Kathy Halbreich



Okwui Okpokwasili in *Untitled* (2008), part of the exhibition *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2011. Photograph by Yi-Chun Wu

Dance has a long, if discontinuous, history at The Museum of Modern Art. It begins in 1939, ten years after the Museum's founding, with a gift from patron Lincoln Kirstein of his personal archives of five thousand items relating to dance. With this collection from Kirstein (later a cofounder of the New York City Ballet) as its scholarly core, the Department of Dance and Theater Design was established in 1944, apparently the first such curatorial program in any museum; however, the department's exhibition efforts, including a display in 1945 of Barbara Morgan's photographs of modern dancers, were short-lived. The Museum, citing rising costs, disbanded the department in 1948 and transferred its archives to the MoMA Library. Despite the inclusive definition of modern art propounded by the Museum's founding director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., it's likely that, without any precedent, it proved too difficult to integrate dance and theater history into the galleries.

Dance did not disappear entirely with the closing of the early department, although presentations were usually billed as ancillary or special events. For example, while modern dance appears to be absent from the Museum's programs in the 1950s, demonstrations by classical dancers from various countries accompanied international exhibitions such as 1955's *Textiles and Ornamental Arts in India*. Occasional films on dance were screened in the 1960s, but the discipline was largely overshadowed by the excitement surrounding multimedia productions, a new, more synthetic form shaped by artists involved with Happenings, experimental music, and film, as well as theater directors and choreographers. Artists were invited to appear with some regularity in a variety of informal settings throughout the Museum, including the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden, where Jean Tinguely's 1960 assemblage *Homage to New York* was designed, with the assistance of Bell Labs scientist Billy Klüver, to gyrate until it fell to pieces in an act of accelerated self-destruction. Another sort of history was made that evening when Klüver met Robert Rauschenberg. This introduction led him to work with the artist and many of his colleagues associated with New York's Judson Dance Theater in the early 1960s as they radically transformed

the definition of dance and foregrounded the natural alliance of artists across mediums. *Information*, MoMA's prescient 1970 exhibition of Conceptual art, made visible the new priority and interplay of disciplines by including the choreographer Yvonne Rainer, who had participated in the first Judson presentation, in 1962. But her sole contribution was a short and despondent catalogue statement that began, "I am going thru hard times: In the shadow of real recent converging, passing, pressing, milling, swarming, pulsing, changing in this country, formalized choreographic gestures seem trivial," and ended with "Maybe fuck it."¹

Reflecting a similar spirit of protest, two unanticipated performance interventions had disrupted the calm of the Museum one year earlier: Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama captured the front page of the New York *Daily News* in August 25, 1969, by directing a group of naked performers, who briefly occupied the Sculpture Garden for her piece *Grand Orgy to Awaken the Dead at MoMA*. In November, four members of the Guerilla Art Action Group, protesting alleged profits by MoMA patrons relating to the Vietnam War, entered the Museum's lobby and loudly began attacking each other, causing sacks of beef blood hidden under their clothes to spill. They then fell to the floor, as if the enemy had permanently silenced them.

In recognition of the aesthetic shifts that had become evident across disciplines, the four-part series *Projects: Performance* was programmed for the Sculpture Garden in August 1978. It focused on postmodern dance, music, and theater, including the work of playwright, filmmaker, and performance artist Stuart Sherman, who often displayed his silent choreography of objects on a card table furtively set up on the street. Choreographer Simone Forti began her long, if episodic, relationship with MoMA that summer. She would not appear again at the Museum until 2009, but, significantly, in 2015, after more than four years of conversations with the artist, MoMA acquired the rights to teach, perform, and reconstruct props for nine of her object-centered dances, likely the first such commitment made by a museum. This acquisition was championed by MoMA's six-year-old Department of Media and Performance Art, which had come into existence in 2009 when the title of the Department of Media Art, itself founded only three years earlier, was augmented to suggest its broader mandate. With this, dance became an ongoing curatorial prerogative at MoMA. I had arrived a year before in the role of associate director of the Museum, having been director of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, where a department for performing arts was officially established in 1970. However, for most of my sixteen years at the Walker, the majority of live events commissioned or organized by curators took place in partnership with other venues around the city, making it extremely difficult to elaborate in the museum the ways in which the histories of performing and visual arts were intertwined, if not mutually dependent. In 2005, with the opening of the Walker's expansion, designed by Herzog & de Meuron, a theater for 385 people with a stage the size normally found in a thousand-seat space

became the primary place for the institution's dance, music, and theater presentations. It is near to the galleries and the screening rooms. But my hope for a continuous beat of open rehearsals, encouraging the daily visitor to loop effortlessly between exhibitions and performances, proved impractical.

Some of that proselytizing fervor, however, found an elastic container in MoMA's Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium. A big volume of space that is a point both of transit and of gathering, it has been appropriately criticized as aggressively reverberant and impossible to adapt for proper theatrical lighting. Yet the Marron Atrium has been molded by artists into a strangely compelling place to experience dances, such as those created by choreographer Ralph Lemon or presented by him as part of the 2012 curatorial commission *Some sweet day*. Lemon recently wrote that the questions that shaped this effort were, "What is a good or a bad dance? What was the significance of the timing of the events, fifty years after the founding of Judson Dance Theater? What is the broader significance of the blues, black music, and race to contemporary dance? Which choreographers win in the tyranny of this anti-theatrical space? And, of course, which ones lose?"² This three-week series coincided with Hurricane Sandy, which essentially closed Lower Manhattan and cut it off from Brooklyn, making most of the performers' commutes arduous; however, due to the extraordinary commitment of artists, curators, and administrators, not one of the cross-generational presentations—dances choreographed by Jérôme Bel, Deborah Hay, Faustin Linyekula, Dean Moss (with artist Laylah Ali), Sarah Michelson, and Steve Paxton, along with a two-day performance by artist Kevin Beasley—was canceled. All played to large, appreciative audiences that seemed to have flocked to the Museum as much for a sense of collective well-being as for the art. The work they saw wasn't easy. When inviting the choreographers to participate, Lemon had directed each to explore ideas around black music; this prompt was never publicized, and the relationship between music and movement was more or less explicit, depending upon the artist. For instance, Paxton, believing the intellectual construct had little to do with his work, initially declined to participate, while Beasley attacked the problem with a vehemence that suggested his life depended upon finding answers. His thunderous sampling of slowed-down recordings of deceased rappers rumbled through the Museum at a decibel level so great that windows rattled and viewers described feeling the vibrations in their bodies. The Museum's usual canon was momentarily displaced, and blackness became the dominant, unavoidable aesthetic.

Histories of all sorts echo through the building when choreographers are in residence. In composing dances for presentation at MoMA, some have used the Museum's past and present practice as elements as decisive as the architecture. For example, in Michelson's *Devotion Study #3*, of 2012, choreographed for Lemon's series, she highlighted both the Museum's security staff, the majority of whom are people of color, and the pervasive impact of black artistic achievements on

this nation's culture, making visible the dominant whiteness of MoMA's collection, architecture, and staff. Michelson cast two guards, Tyrese Kirkland and Gary Levy, who raced up the lobby stairs, protecting her petite, auburn-haired dancer as if she were a celebrity. The trio was greeted in the Atrium by the choreographer, who began to DJ a score composed of songs on the Tamla Motown label, soul music produced by Motown Records in Detroit but sold primarily outside the United States. Between 1960 and 1969, seventy-nine of the one hundred top-selling records in the United States were produced by Motown,³ precipitating a convergence of black and white popular culture just as unusual then as it is in most museums today.

When theatrical purity is knowingly sacrificed, other compelling characteristics assert themselves, and performers often discover an engagement with their audience they haven't experienced before. Paradoxically, the collision of the Atrium's spectacular scale and the flexibility of its usually unregulated and unorthodox seating plan can result in increased intimacy. In 2011, Okwui Okpokwasili and Lemon, performing in the Atrium as part of the exhibition *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century*, pushed themselves to near-exhaustion in a dance that had been previously presented only once before, in the modestly scaled sanctuary of New York's St. Mark's Church. Despite the cavernous size of the Atrium, Lemon was startled to feel the audience's breath on his body as it gathered around him. He described this exposure as "changing everything for me. An Armageddon."⁴

Performances in this nontheatrical setting often upset the authority of an institution best known for its singular permanent collection; they also suggest why the proscenium stage, with its restricted focus, no longer serves the immersive needs of some choreographers working today. For example, Boris Charmatz, choreographer and director of the Musée de la danse, in Rennes, France, explained the significance of seeing dance within the context of a museum: "We are at a time in history where a museum can modify BOTH preconceived ideas about museums AND one's ideas about dance. . . . In order to do so, we must first of all forget the image of a traditional museum, because our space is firstly a mental one."⁵ Musée de la danse: Three Collective Gestures, a three-week, tripartite residency at MoMA in 2013, was Charmatz's attempt to demonstrate his institutional aspirations by juxtaposing the enduring qualities of objects in the Museum's collection with the ephemeral nature of dance and dancers' bodies. For one component of this program, twenty dancers of all ages and several cultural backgrounds colonized the Museum's public spaces and galleries, where they greeted surprised visitors and, after a short explanation, began to perform their adaptations of solo works created throughout the twentieth century. For example, in the gallery housing Richard Serra's massive sculpture *Delineator*, of 1974–75, a senior member of the Trisha Brown Dance Company invited the public to join her in replicating a sequence of Brown's most characteristic movements. In

another gallery, actor Jim Fletcher reenacted Vito Acconci's 1970 performance *Trademarks* while sprawled naked next to the painting *Self-Portrait with Palette*, of 1924, by Lovis Corinth, an artist deemed degenerate by the Nazis. Together the twenty differently trained performers created a living archive of both well-known and forgotten compositions, surrounded by works from MoMA's collection. Consequently, it was possible in a single visit to experience many art histories. By placing them in such close proximity, Charmatz and his team created, at least for a few days, a temporary institution that, in its inclusivity and exuberance, redeemed the equality of the thought, the thing, and the movement in the museum setting.

While there is a core group of aficionados who attend every performance at MoMA, the majority of visitors come to dance by chance. Once, while I was waiting on a balcony for Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker to begin a section of her 1982 dance work *Fase: Four Movements to the Music of Steve Reich*, part of *On Line*, a visitor squeezed in beside me and asked, "What's going on?" I paused in my conversation with an actor from the Wooster Group (a staple of New York downtown theater), who had come especially to see this performance, but the action below began before I could answer. All three of us were silent and still for sixteen minutes, while De Keersmaeker's slow, circular, and repetitive movements etched a drawing in the sand spread on the Atrium floor; as the performance ended, the visitor said, "I never knew such a thing existed, and I am thrilled to have seen it." Certainly, some impatiently turned away, but for this visitor the unanticipated encounter had a special persuasive, focused power.

The opportunity to connect a dance to a work of art in the collection amplifies a historical moment in ways that usually are truer to the artistic process and period than viewing the disciplines separately. Annette Michelson wrote in her influential *Artforum* essay in 1974 that "the New Dance . . . set out in much the same manner as the new sculpture of the 1960s to contest, point for point, esthetic conventions which had acquired an ontological status, by rehabilitating, installing within the dance fabric, the task, the movement whose quality is determined by its specifically operational character."⁶ For example, when given the assignment by his teacher Robert Ellis Dunn to make a one-minute dance, Paxton "simply" sat on a bench and ate a sandwich. In 2012, Paxton—a choreographer who, Rainer jokes, invented walking—restaged his *Satisfy in Lover*, of 1967, with a customary mix of both trained and amateur performers, each of whom ambled undramatically across the Atrium. This framing of the repetition of unspectacular, pedestrian motion reminded everyone—performer and viewer alike—what every child learns and adults necessarily forget in order to move forward: these quotidian actions are complicated and require great physical erudition. Despite the affectless quality of the movement, one couldn't help but notice the infinite individual quirks that gave shape to the group. There was an obvious continuity of concerns between Paxton's desires and the cool, non-illusionistic

sculptures of Minimalists such as Robert Morris, who also made performances and occasionally danced with Rainer; however, there was an even greater resonance with the irreverent and humorous ways Rauschenberg, in abjuring the heroics of Abstract Expressionism, minimized the distinctions between the artist and the audience, treasure and trash. In fact, there are myriad connections between Rauschenberg and Paxton, who danced for Merce Cunningham's company at the same time the artist served as its stage manager. Besides sharing a loft, they participated in many of the same productions at Judson Memorial Church. And, despite his sensational success—at the Venice Biennale in 1964, Rauschenberg was the first American to win the grand prize in painting—he understood what could be learned from his less well-known friend, remarking once how much he “admired and envied the situation of the Cunningham dancers . . . because for them there never was a definitive way of doing things.”⁷

It isn't difficult to imagine, then, how aware Paxton must have been in October 2012 of occupying for the first time the same institution where his colleague's paintings had hung for many years. But, in mining further the history of these two experimental giants, it appears that neither artist nor choreographer was fully accepted by MoMA until recently. For example, two of Rauschenberg's greatest paintings—*Rebus*, 1955, and *Canyon*, 1959—were passed up for purchase by Barr when he was director; happily, both were acquired by the Museum over the past decade.⁸ Only by layering the narratives of these two innovators is it possible to truly chronicle their individual trajectories, the cross-disciplinary thinking that has shaped so much of the art made in New York, and MoMA's own curatorial proclivities over the last sixty years. It's a history, made of zigzags and circuits, that has yet to be fully documented. It certainly sets in motion an alternative to the progressive linearity of the modern canon as it has come to be inscribed by this museum.

As I write this, MoMA is planning an expansion. One of the spaces, tentatively identified as “The Studio,” will be fully outfitted for all sorts of performances. Perhaps most importantly, this intimate but technologically and acoustically sophisticated space will be located in the middle of a sequence of galleries containing contemporary painting, sculpture, works on paper, photography, design, architecture, video, and film. The history of modern dance, music, and theater will be intimately and routinely connected to that of other art forms. Curators will rehearse a more complex drama of objects, moving pictures, and live performers that together portray the wildness of the questions that shaped the twentieth century as well as those that unsettle the status quo today. While still using the Atrium and other spaces when appropriate, performers at the Museum will finally take their bows on a stage that properly embodies the capacious revolutions of modernism. And, in the future, it may be possible to register a continuous history of dance at MoMA, with Kirstein's archives once again providing an invaluable public resource. This book, the first in MoMA's Modern Dance series on practicing choreographers, is just a beginning.

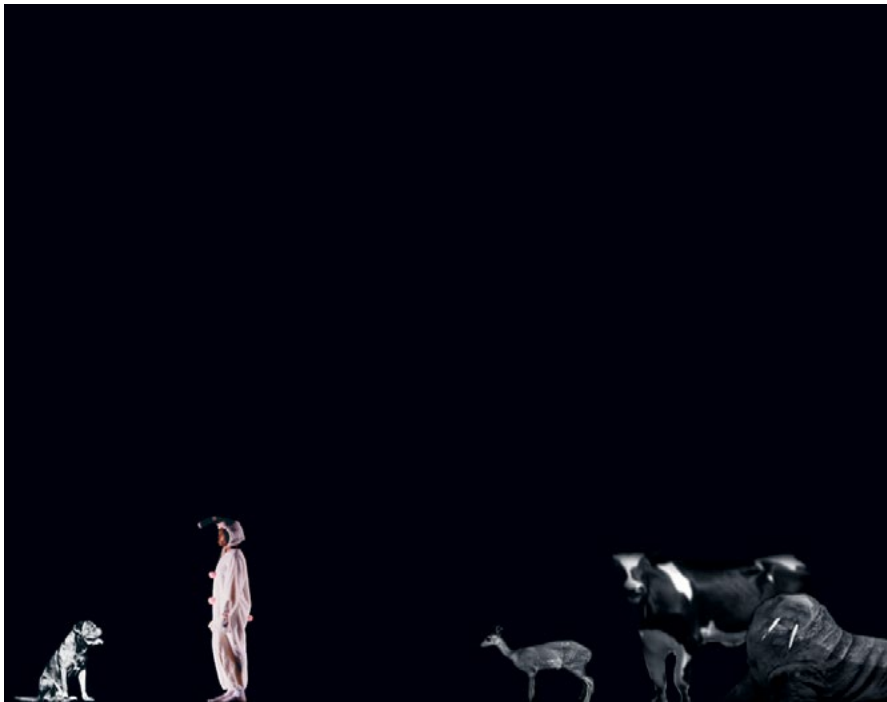
NOTES

I am extremely grateful to past and present curators at MoMA who believed in a museum of many moving parts and to director Glenn D. Lowry for realizing it. We all would be far more reticent to reconsider the Museum's own history were it not for the daring of the artists whom we learn from every day.

1. Yvonne Rainer, artist statement in *Information*, ed. Kynaston L. McShine (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1970), 116.
2. Ralph Lemon, “I'd Rather Talk About the Post-Part,” *Triple Canopy*, August 4, 2015, <http://canopycanopy.com/series/passage-of-a-rumor/contents/id-rather-talk-about-the-post-part>.
3. Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll* (London: Sphere Books, 1971), 247.
4. Lemon, email to the author, June 30, 2015.
5. Boris Charmatz, “Manifesto for Dancing Museum” (Rennes, France: Centre chorégraphique national de Rennes et de Bretagne, 2009), www.borischarmatz.org/sites/borischarmatz.org/files/images/manifesto_dancing_museum100401.pdf. For the French version, see “Manifeste pour musée de la danse,” www.borischarmatz.org/sites/borischarmatz.org/files/images/manifeste_musee_de_la_danse100401.pdf.
6. Annette Michelson, “Yvonne Rainer, Part One: The Dancer and the Dance,” *Artforum*, January 1974, 58.
7. Calvin Tomkins, “Everything in Sight: Robert Rauschenberg's New Life,” *New Yorker*, May 23, 2005.
8. The first painting by Robert Rauschenberg to enter MoMA's collection was *First Landing Jump*, of 1961. It was acquired eleven years after it was made, following the purchase of groups of prints and drawings in the early 1960s.

FOR STARTERS

Thomas J .Lax



1. Still from *Fairy Tale*, part of *How Can You Stay In The House All Day And Not Go Anywhere?*, 2010. Video (color, sound), 7 min.

*Full of beginnings without ends. . . .*¹

—Ursula K. Le Guin

The first work of Ralph Lemon's I saw was *How Can You Stay In The House All Day And Not Go Anywhere?* in 2010. Moving between the death of a lover and the disappearing rituals of a Southern community formed in the aftermath of slavery, the work was at once personal and epic, idiosyncratic and laden with historical gestures. In it I found something I had been longing after: brutal, grief-stricken, *How Can You Stay's* emotions came before the explanations for them. When I first met Ralph, two years later, I asked him, "What does it mean to you now?" He answered with silence.

For Ralph, evasion and erasure are counterintuitive; they mark history's traces and court the past's return. History—with its discrete epochs, nameable masses, and willful actors—is neither salve nor refuge for those who lie beyond its rules. But by holding onto and abstracting the objects, gestures, and words of those around him—anonymous and known—Ralph extends the timbre of a voice or the chill of an emotion for us to touch. Individual voices bleed into one another as Ralph steals words first uttered offstage and then asks someone else to speak them again. Yet, despite their suspended reference, the words always retain their specificity. The tracks he leaves for us are his Easter eggs; perhaps these truths are already being mythologized in this book's origin story.

Attics' Voices

Certain scenes, gestures, and figures recur across Ralph's forty years of dancing, writing, and making art.

Consider in Ralph's work since the early 2000s the role of attics, secret spaces where histories are often packed away. The 2004 performance *Come home Charley Patton* (fig. 2, see following spread) features dancers Djédjé Djédjé Gervais and Darrell Jones interacting in what Ralph calls the "Attic Space," an open-frame box on wheels, to which the sculptor Nari Ward added retractable trip ladders that the



2. From left: Okwui Okpokwasili, David Thomson, Darrell Jones, and Djédjé Djédjé Gervais on the set of *Come home Charley Patton*, Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2004. Photograph by Dan Merlo

performers climb up and fall down. The attic, videotaped and then looped back to the audience on a large flatscreen monitor, is a stage within a stage. In front of the monitor, Okwui Okpokwasili, Ralph's self-appointed avatar, describes her first sexual encounter, which also occurred in an attic, it too accessible only by ladder.

In 2006, Ralph reconstructed the "Attic Space" as a cinema at the center of his gallery installation (*the efflorescence of*) *Walter*. This steel-and-plywood "Attic Space"—adorned with wallpaper and white plastic chairs—housed a video featuring Ralph giving off-screen prompts to Walter Carter, a former sharecropper turned gardener. Carter was first introduced to Ralph in 2002 as the oldest living resident of Yazoo City, Mississippi, and, for the next eight years, acted as another one of the choreographer's muse-doppelgängers.

The metal trusses and sprung floor of the "Attic Space" resemble the structure in yet a third work, the 2014 *Scaffold Room* (fig. 3), which Ralph called a "lecture-musical" among his collaborators.² A stage on wheels, this attic, equipped with everything from a collapsible video screen to a bed, accommodates the work's two performers, Okpokwasili and April Matthis, as well as video recordings of Carter's wife Edna, as they conjure a range of black female archetypes across the color line and gender matrix, from Moms Mabley to Amy Winehouse, from Kathy Acker to Samuel R. Delany. The structure, with its RV-like autonomy and mobility, demands different supports depending on where it's placed.



3. Ralph Lemon and Okwui Okpokwasili in rehearsal for *Scaffold Room*, the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2014. Photograph by Gene Pittman

Where do Ralph and his things belong? Migrating from proscenium stage to gallery floor to a kind of proscenium in itself, his garret has gone by different names: sculpture, set, installation, stage, and, once more, sculpture. At times the attic's context has emphasized its relationship to narrative and certain forms of dance theater; at others, its frame has allied it more closely with what Frank Stella described as "What you see is what you see"³—an aesthetic of truth in materials associated with Minimalist sculpture. Rather than setting these strategies in opposition, Ralph conjoins them, sourcing, for example, the attic's set furniture and wallpaper from a secondhand store, while using foam to make pallets that resemble the finish of cut wood.⁴ In this way, the attic confuses clear-cut distinctions between truth and artifice, original and reproduction, naturalism and expressionism—binaries that have historically separated time periods and art-making disciplines (so-called postmodern dance theater in the United States in the 1960s and what transpired after, for example), as well as forms of cultural posterity (the modern art museum's collection that acquires and recontextualizes objects according to hierarchies of taste and value, versus the archive, which foregrounds the organization of materials according to their original sequence). Rather than prioritize one over the other, Ralph situates his work in both and neither of the categories he invokes. Equipose, after all, is what keeps us from falling down.

Importantly, Ralph's building materials and adornments conjure the idea of a home even as the juxtapositions he creates trouble the notion. The home,

a longtime touchstone for debates around black and feminist spaces alike, has been invoked as everything from refuge, site of bondage, place of work, reproductive sphere, and zone of exclusion. French philosopher Gaston Bachelard writes about the house as a body of images in which the attic is filled with memories of solitude and creativity: “We return to them in our night dreams. These retreats have the value of a shell. And when we reach the very end of the labyrinths of sleep . . . we may perhaps experience a type of repose that is pre-human; pre-human, in this case, approaching the immemorial.”⁵ At once melancholically absent and indelibly present, Bachelard’s attic is the house’s psyche—indifferent, animal-like.

Within the cultural history of the black Atlantic world, the attic has been a particularly fraught space, simultaneously a place of captivity and flight. Harriet A. Jacobs’s antebellum slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861), narrates a condition of freedom as simultaneously won and lost during the seven years she hid in a small attic in Edenton, North Carolina. Jacobs’s attic is both an extension of the bondage of slavery and, as she referred to it in one of the novel’s chapter titles, the “loophole of retreat” from which she surveyed her master and watched over her children. Consider also Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography* (1847) and its fictional character, Bertha Antoinette Mason, the first wife of Eyre’s husband Edward Rochester and a Jamaican-born white woman. Taken to England, where she is locked in an attic, Mason eventually commits suicide. In postcolonial writer Jean Rhys’s retelling of Mason’s story in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Rhys renames her protagonist by her birth name, Antoinette Cosway, and ends the story with Cosway narrating her own experience in the attic: “There is one window high up—you cannot see out of it.”⁶ While Rhys’s ending is no less tragic than Brontë’s, in narrating Mason’s story across two continents, in the first-person, and from the author’s twentieth-century position, she portrays Jamaica and England, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, captivity and liberty, as intimates of one another.

Ralph’s crawl space, like Jacobs and Rhys’s before him, is a vexed site that he returns to and reinhabits, as if to enter into a historical scene made coeval with the present. With each iteration, the idea of an original attic diminishes and is replaced by his rewriting and its multiples. Across Ralph’s three works, the attic is a space both of intimacy and publicness, a protective yet transparent environment for the inquiring viewer who looks in from outside. It is also a space where its protagonists—Okpokwasili, Matthis, and Carter—can perform and indeed assemble a sense of self from the scripts they construct with Ralph. Their belonging—like the attic, located at the most remote part of a home—is contingent upon another person and lies at the limits of identification. Ralph traverses these edges as he moves between disciplinary homes— theater, gallery, publication—reshaping codes at each location, deferring his alignment with any one.

No-dancing

In *4Walls*, of 2012 (fig. 5, see p. 27), dancers Darrell Jones and Gesel Mason perform two twenty-minute solos one after the other on a sprung floor with viewers seated on all four sides. The audience may freely wander into a pendant space where two monitors screen video documentation, from two different angles, of six dancers (including Jones and Mason) performing movements prompted by the live score. Each video plays twice to last as long as the forty-minute live performance. Even in the pendant space, one can hear the live dancers’ pre- and postverbal exasperations, their unscripted *nuhs*, *woos*, and *aahs* we know from fucking or praying or wailing (or fucking and praying and wailing)—here forcibly displaced onto the unknowable bodies of the taped performers. Ralph calls the rotating, spinning, and pounding that make up the performers’ ever-downward motion a “dance with no form.” This name belies the intense physicality and virtuosity required of the dancers, and obscures the history that structures the no-form movement.

Where is the source of this movement? Trying to locate where Jones or Mason physically initiate reveals no clear point of origin. As a rotation becomes a fall becomes a roll becomes a strike, each is so different from what came before or will come after that one cannot register the mechanics of any isolated movement. The movements bear the traces of the everyday without being pedestrian, and carry such fierce emotional charge that detecting a movement’s physical initiation or expressive cause is impossible. The sequencing does not code an internal hierarchy or cue meaning, further frustrating our ability to see a single moment as anything other than part of one long whirl.⁷ We can know the intensity and specificity of the performers’ physical exertion only in its arresting formlessness.

The movement’s only organizing mechanism appears to be its alternating centripetal and centrifugal forces, moving toward and away from a center. This center exists in both the three-dimensional space of each individual performer, who moves in circles, recursively, as well as in the planar space of the stage on which the dancers progress through predetermined yet randomized pathways. Forestalling release and resurrection, the dancers build a sense of uncertainty as if attempting to bang out a world of their own making.

Each of these twenty-minute solos has been performed under many titles. Before it was “a dance with no form,” as billed for *4Walls*, it was the twenty-minute “Wall/hole” in *How Can You Stay* (fig. 4, see following spread), and the three-minute “Ecstasy,” or “drunk dance,” in *Patton*. Before that, it existed in rehearsal and was prompted by keywords, including “rapture” and “transcendence.” In *How Can You Stay*, Ralph preps us to watch “Wall/hole” by recounting *Patton*’s “Ecstasy.” In *Patton*, he tells us, he “was searching for compositional formlessness—a no-style, no-dance that was, in fact, a dance.” But the no-dance’s near-trance states, its simultaneous senses of ascension and apocalypse, did not



4. From left: Gesel Mason, David Thomson, Darrell Jones, and Omagbitse Omagbemi in *How Can You Stay In The House All Day And Not Go Anywhere?*, the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2010. Photograph by Dan Merlo

originate there. In rehearsals for 1997's *Geography*, Ralph asked his dancers to perform possession rituals; they refused, agreeing instead to imitate their out-of-body sensibility. Tracking each gesture's emergence is a task as quixotic as finding the physical initiation for the movement. Indeed, this self-referential buildup mirrors the movement's logic. The dancer not only moves downward but rises up, backward, to move forward. While it occurs in real time, it resembles the blur or retrogression of a video—and in particular, the way that in this mediated time-space, a fall can avoid ever quite reaching the floor.

Language holds the dance together. The work is built, unbuilt, and rebuilt through keywords that Ralph gives to his performers: “falling, not up or down”; “suspension”; “take your body apart and put it back together.” As Jones described the making of the six-dancer *How Can You Stay*,

We started off with improvisations based on the single word ‘transcendence’ or something similar to that. Then [Ralph] started to videotape it... I think we all felt like we needed structures in order to sustain the type of thing he was talking about. So we started to go back and look at the places on the videotape where there were connections and we tried to recreate them. Sometimes that worked; sometimes that failed. The one word turned into many words.⁸

The various points Jones calls “connections”—open mouth pressed to open mouth, kicks and holds—maintain the movement's inertia. Eye contact, energetic transfer, and touch clarify and proliferate the meaning of Ralph's keywords. The dancers translate these linguistic cues into movement, expressing them for each other and—for those viewers who make it to the other side—for us.

While reiteration and language internally organize the movement's downward force, its meaning is accessed through narrative. At the end of *Patton*, before the no-dance begins, a video recorded by Ralph's daughter, Chelsea, on the streets of Duluth, Minnesota, begins to play. The video depicts Ralph standing below a yellow streetlight, where, we are told, a plum tree once stood; there, a young man called Elias Clayton was publicly lynched in 1920. Ralph waits, then seems to lose his sense of gravity, knocking into the pole. He sits against the pole, gets up, wanders and stumbles, falls to the ground, lays down. In the live performance, Ralph speaks over the video, assuming the role of both narrator and Clayton, shifting from witness to victim and keeping the viewer's certainty at bay:

Elias did get into trouble one summer . . . creating rituals, improvisational memorials throughout the state, places where something bad had happened. He was so serious.

“This is an act of sympathy,” and that's what he told the police officer, quoting James Baldwin. It was a really interesting idea, but all fake-finding. He would suspend his body from specifically chosen vertical objects, hanging, falling-in-space, not-up-or-down, falling-up-and-down from bridges, streetlights, trees. Once from an open fire hydrant. There wasn't much falling distance, but he did get really really wet. But not here. Here was a yellow streetlight pole. And a few memories. One was of all that water.

He was arrested that summer in Duluth, on his birthday. Spent a few days in the county jail. When he got home, he made this dance.

A scrim rises to reveal a second stage with a glossy mauve curtain on three sides. Reverend Gary Davis's song “I Am the Light of the World” plays, describing Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life four days after his death; Ralph moves to the stage within a stage and begins to perform his version of a buck dance.⁹ Gervais enters stage right with a fire hose and begins to spray Ralph as Mason enters downstage and performs the same buck dance. David Thomson, Jones, and Okpokwasili follow suit. The first stage performance of no-dance ensues, and like the trauma to which it refers, the dance repeats itself, seemingly without end.

Patton is about what Saidiya Hartman calls our capacity “to honor our debt to the dead”;¹⁰ about the way a gesture or a movement can hold something sharper than memory. Ralph, in avoiding monumentalizing or memorializing Clayton, refuses to secure the certainty of his end. *Elias did get into trouble one summer . . . creating rituals, improvisational memorials throughout the state, places where something bad had happened.*

The rituals and improvisations are as much Clayton's creations as they are Ralph's violent attempts to come to terms with the unnamed and ongoing "something bad." These physical enactments—suspending his body, falling up from bridges—are non-events. No one would recognize Ralph's movement as a form of historical redress; unmarked, however, his counter-memorials might offer Clayton repose.

Performance is like trauma, ubiquitous and paradoxical; both repeat themselves and neither can be fully held in language; each relies on the other. In his essay "Mourning and Melancholia," Sigmund Freud proposed that the conscious mind can revisit grief through catharsis; a failure to process trauma adequately, however, results in the perpetual and pathological unconscious he describes as "melancholia." In *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (1999), Giorgio Agamben describes the conundrum of recounting the truth of the horrors of the Nazi death camps as an aporia, a challenge to the very structure of testimony. "[T]he survivors," he writes, "bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to."¹¹ Ralph's *Patton* responds to Freud's melancholia and Agamben's remnants with resurrection, attending to Clayton's loss via the "Ecstasy" of movement and African American religious song. The no-dance begins with an image of Ralph falling, an image that recalls but refuses to reenact Clayton's body or the many documentary images of civil rights-era antiblack violence that saturate the national imaginary. Unable to withstand the hose's water pressure, Ralph falls, gets back up, and prepares himself to be raised once again.

Down: A Short History

The origins of authorship are often discussed along nearly Biblical or Oedipal lines, as in fathers, or occasionally mothers, who beget offspring with fraught resemblances to the generation before them. Yet when artistic genealogies are described using lateral relations—as in brothers or sisters perhaps, or spores dispersed by the wind—lines of influence that move in multiple directions replace notions of descent.¹² Authorship, like kinship, involves assuming somebody else's voice in order to have your own. It entails getting inside someone else, which is always physical, a temporary violation of another's bodily integrity. But being inside someone else certainly does not make this person yours; in fact, it more likely means that you belong to him or her, if only for a passing moment. The genealogy of Ralph's artistic practice is full of such lateral relations, many of them unclaimed or unexpected.

Bruce Nauman, curiously, is one. In 2003, while Ralph was working on *Patton*, he was invited to perform at the opening reception for the exhibition *How Latitudes Become Forms: Art in a Global Age* at the Walker Art Center. For the occasion, Ralph recreated Bruce Nauman's 1968 *Wall/Floor Positions* (fig. 6, see p. 32). The idea had emerged from a *Patton* workshop in which Ralph had asked his collaborators to bring in cultural texts that don't signify as black; together, Ralph



5. Gesel Mason in *4Walls* at the Curtis R. Priem Experimental Media and Performance Art Center (EMPAC), Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York, 2012. Photograph by Ethan Kaplan

proposed, they would “blackify” the selected works. Ralph brought in Nauman’s now germinal piece. The black-and-white video, which Nauman described as being “about dance problems,”¹³ features the artist, alone, dressed in a white T-shirt and black jeans.¹⁴ Enacting the work’s title, Nauman creates distinct poses between the wall and floor of his studio. Over time, as he moves his body, the wall and floor appear to switch positions so that the vertical plane looks to be horizontal, as if the video camera has turned ninety degrees; as if Nauman, even though he does nothing more than stand, bend over, and crouch, begins to hang, or fall, upside down. The wall and floor shift positions while the artist’s white, boyish, barely affected body remains constant, the meter for his evenly timed adjustments. It is no longer the floor that supports the wall but Nauman; his body becomes the ground, and the architecture emerges as figure. Context becomes theatrical content.

For the Walker performance, Ralph used a plywood structure made up of a simple wall and floor and, with Gervais, enacted his version of Nauman’s work. Each of their movements is distinct, Ralph’s more virtuosic than Nauman’s pedestrian motions, and Gervais’s rather faithful to the earlier artist’s, albeit through his own vernacular. In the video documentation, the text on Gervais’s T-shirt, handwritten in thin, black magic marker, is discernible: “Bruce Nauman is black.” Ralph’s observation is in part an art-historical argument about the space Nauman has created for himself to consider race both culturally and aesthetically. Throughout his body of work, Nauman refers to blackness as at once a color and a social fact, from his constant evocations of “black death” in his works on paper, neon sculptures, and mobiles,¹⁵ to his four Art Make-Up films, made between 1967 and 1968, in which he applies various pigments, including black, to cover his upper body and face.

But Ralph’s recreation of Nauman’s work is more than art-historical reference. Pointedly, Ralph inverts the typical direction of racial appropriation and theft, claiming Nauman as an artistic brother across the color line. In restaging the work with a beginning and end (Nauman’s was played on a loop), a live audience, and a duet with two black men, Ralph emphasizes the theatrical, social, and racial content already latent in the earlier artist’s work: Nauman’s falls, safely executed in his studio, echo the falls of African Americans from hosings, bombings, lynchings, and assassinations outside his studio walls. Ralph considers precisely that which was presumed outside the frame of the original performance, further expanding Nauman’s spatial shift to include the ground of racial protest underlying and produced by artistic freedom.

Steve Paxton is another point of contact between Ralph and an artistic predecessor, in particular his 1972 dance *Magnesium*. The work was performed by a group of men in a gymnasium at Oberlin College, the culmination of a three-week workshop, and the dance from which Paxton would later develop his concept and practice of contact improvisation. The falling, rolling, and colliding that characterize the majority of the dance—what Paxton called a “high-energy

study”—temper as the work ends with five minutes of standing, or “small dances,” Paxton’s term for the choreography’s stillness.

Although the two scales of movement are visually distinct, both alert performer and viewer alike to the effect of gravity on the body. Indeed, for Paxton, an exploration of gravity animates the work: “I just wanted to be able to leave the planet and not worry about the reentry. In other words get up into the air in any crazy position and somehow have the skill to come back down without damage.”¹⁶ Preparation, bodily intelligence, and timing diffuse the risk in the act of falling by mediating the transfer of energy from the body’s vertical plane to the floor’s horizontality. Paxton’s attempt in *Magnesium* to shift from one plane to another informed his later development of “the sphere,” what he calls the space around the body from which one can peripherally gather information: “The sphere is an accumulated image gathered from several senses, vision being one. . . . But skin is the best source for the image because it works in all directions at once.”¹⁷

Although the connection between Lemon and Paxton’s *Magnesium* may not be immediately apparent, Paxton’s claim that, in making an image, touch might be more determinative than sight suggests the two artists have more in common than appearances let on. Ralph’s “Ecstasy” makes this case most clearly. Both *Magnesium* and “Ecstasy” share an interest in suspension—what Paxton calls “the passage from up to down” and Lemon describes as “falling, not up or down.” Might we deduce from this that they feel like one another? To be inside of either would be to experience spinning around a center, or swaying side to side, or having a body pressed close to your own, or risking physical harm. But we might also go further and argue that *Magnesium* and “Ecstasy” not only feel *like* each other; they also feel each other. Which is to say that Paxton and Lemon touch one another; that the aesthetic and social capacity of one dancer is expanded, extended, repeated, and refracted by the other.

What would eventually become Paxton’s contact improvisation, like what would eventually become Ralph’s no-dance, relied on memory, on what had happened before. (Paxton has cited several origins for *Magnesium* including studies in Akido, a previous idea for a solo, a former workshop with students, and a performance in New York.) The role of memory in contact improvisation is paradoxical: on the one hand, Paxton observes that “memory of past judgments tells me that pre-judging is not secure”;¹⁸ on the other, he recounts how he decided to learn falling skills, which have since become muscle memories, because he “figured [his] chances of survival were greater with these skills than without.”¹⁹ Too little memory kills a work; too much memory makes it unnecessarily dangerous.

Memory is paradoxical for Ralph too. In *How Can You Stay*, Ralph describes how Carter forgot about their collaborations, calling this lapse a “brilliant critique.” Later in the work, a simple dialogue, borrowed from Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1972 film *Solaris*, appears on the screen with no indication of who is speaking

to whom: “Did you ever think of me? Only when I was sad.” Here, emotion—sadness in particular—prompts memory rather than memory eliciting emotion. Feeling precedes its referent, as if mourning were the resting state, so that the person being remembered and invoked in Ralph’s dialogue can be filled or re-inhabited by the loved one or the performer with the right talisman.

While this kind of intimacy has been understood under the sign of psychoanalytic transference and intersubjectivity, nowhere is the ritualistic and performative character of this dynamic better articulated than in the practice of spirit possession, particularly in Haitian *Vodou*. What colloquially we may describe as a trance, *Vodou* conceives as the experience of a horse being mounted by a master—a *lwa*, or spirit—who allows for communication between the world of the living and the dead. In her book *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (1995), Joan Colin Dayan explains that *Vodou* is in part “the preservation of pieces of history ignored, denigrated, or exorcized by the standard ‘drum and trumpet’ histories of empire” and that it “must be viewed as ritual reenactments of Haiti’s colonial past, even more than as retentions from Africa.”²⁰ *Vodou* links the past to the present, bringing into sensual relief the shattering terrors experienced under slavery and colonialism otherwise lost to grand historical narratives.

Vodou’s form of inheritance thus animates yet a third of Ralph’s lateral relations: Marxist filmmaker Maya Deren. When in 1995 Ralph disbanded his modern dance company, with its “straight legs, elongated spines, and pointed feet,” he began his ten-year project, the *Geography* Trilogy, by visiting the “‘invisible’ . . . island off the coast of Florida” where he found himself “inventing Africa.”²¹ During a June 1996 workshop rehearsing for *Geography*, the first work in the trilogy, Ralph broached the topic of what he called “trance dancing” by showing his African collaborators Deren’s *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*.²² While several films dating from the period after the US occupation of Haiti have made *Vodou* available to American viewers, Deren’s work is notable for its interest in dance and use of choreography as a filmic structure. For Deren, film structure could be informed by “‘human choreography’s’ ability to expand the technical repertoire of cinema, creating distance, suspension, and chance through choreography rather than through montage.”²³

Deren’s description of the possibilities for moving images offered by choreography reads like an annotation for Ralph’s own inquiries. Although her film—which captures rituals such as passing a chicken over one’s head to wash away impurities and evil and offering a goat to transfuse life to Papa Gede, the *loa* of the dead—would be posthumously edited by Deren’s widower, Teiji Ito, and his second wife, Cheryl, into an ethnographic realist style (one that did not coincide with Deren’s wishes), her accompanying book-length narrative of the same name is perhaps truer to the possibilities of “human choreography.” Much like Ralph, she too shared an interest in trance’s aesthetic experiences. Deren writes:

Slowly still, borne on its lightless beam, as one might rise up from the bottom of the sea, so I rise up, the body growing lighter with each second, am up-borne stronger, drawn up faster, uprising swifter, mounting still higher, higher still, faster, the sound grown still stronger, its draw tighter, still swifter, become loud, loud and louder, the thundering rattle, clangoring bell, unbearable, then suddenly: surface; suddenly: air; suddenly: sound is light, dazzling white.²⁴

Punctuated yet ceaseless, Deren’s language is hyperbolic, mimicking the unbearable abandon of the “sudden” experience through her phonic prose. Like Ralph’s request to his dancers, Deren’s invocation attempts to translate an inscrutable experience with a surfeit of description.

Ralph asked the *Geography* cast to cultivate the same energies as those in Deren’s film and text—rocking, flailing, and stumbling, their eyes rolling to the back of their heads. Interestingly, each cast member refused to render expressly spectacular the history of colonialism and dispossession coded in the act of spirit possession. The stakes, they claimed, were too great; a trance performed on a proscenium stage would only denigrate the act’s integrity. In this way, the cast responded to Ralph’s request with a tactic similar to the one Haitian novelist Marie Chauvet opted for in her semi-autobiographical *Fonds-des-Nègres*. Chauvet tells the first-person account of Marie-Ange Louisius, a light-skinned bourgeois woman from Port-au-Prince who goes to live with her grandmother in rural *Fonds-des-Nègres* where she learns about *Vodou*. Unlike the romanticization and heroism associated with the peasant-story genre, Louisius describes bearing witness to possession in a Haitian Creole so bare it emphasizes the everydayness of the spirit world all around: “Agwe, you have mounted me, Agwe oh.” Chauvet, then, escapes an overblown description of spirit possession.²⁵ Like the refusal of Ralph’s dancers—their “no” that would eventually come back as the no-dance several years later—Chauvet’s move away from describing ritual for prying eyes becomes a means of spiritual return, albeit in a different form.

The Warren

Near the end of *How Can You Stay*, in a passage called “Fairy Tale” (fig. 1, see p. 18) Ralph stages his own flight from human language. In a video projection Ralph made in collaboration with Jim Findlay, Okpokwasili, dressed in a bunny suit, kneels to face a computer-altered fleshy hound dog. In this choreographed encounter, the two animals sit with each other’s gaze. The dog approaches the rabbit. One by one, other CGI animals enter: a flamingo, a deer, a tapir, a cow, a giraffe, a walrus—a landscape of animals that do not belong together, an ecosystem made in excess. This video is sandwiched between an eight-minute passage in which Okpokwasili sobs onstage without narrative cause (we are told that she’s



6. From left: Ralph Lemon and Djédjé Djédjé Gervais recreating Bruce Nauman's *Wall/Floor Positions* (1968), the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2003. Photograph by Cameron Wittig

crying for all of the world's sorrows) and the work's concluding scene, a duet in which Okpokwasili is tasked with neither looking at nor speaking to Ralph. The passage is a kind of silence, a placeholder for chance encounters.

In Ralph's ecology, rabbits and hares abound. A 2014 photograph depicts Albert and Geneva Johnson—relatives of Walter and Edna Carter—staring unenthusiastically behind bunny ears in their home in Little Yazoo, Mississippi. Ralph's bunnies—the Carter family, Okpokwasili—hijack Br'er Rabbit, the *urtrickster* figure of African American folklore. Although the journalist Joel Chandler Harris was the first to marshal the stories of this unreliable narrator into fiction in his late-nineteenth century *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus*,²⁶ Br'er Rabbit dates from several centuries earlier. Developed on the slave plantation, the rabbit is a historic figure of indirection and subterfuge.

Ralph's rabbits may also have another lineage in which critters become political actors on the historical stage. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), Karl Marx used the figure of the mole to narrate the process of revolutionary advancement. The mole, who surfaces only during periods of heightened class struggle, otherwise remains below the surface in order to dig new tunnels, in effect preparing for future periods of struggle.²⁷ Moving slowly underground, the mole is systematic and swift, refusing the allure of daylight and the impositions of consciousness. Georges Bataille wrote in 1929 that "'Old Mole,' Marx's resounding

expression for the complete satisfaction of the revolutionary outburst of the masses, must be understood in relation to the notion of a geological uprising. . . . Marx's point of departure has nothing to do with the heavens, the preferred station of the imperialist eagle as of Christian or revolutionary utopias. He begins in the bowels of the earth, as in the materialist bowels of proletarians."²⁸ Rabbits, like moles, are fossorial, living in groups in underground burrows. Ralph's story begins in the mud, in the Delta earth from whose gumbo he builds his characters. We go to the warren to die and to begin again.

Ralph's work holds multiple, sometimes conflicting sensual experiences: laboriousness and pleasure, pain and devotion, stamina and excess. His works are not only of this Earth; they are made from its undercommons.²⁹ While Ralph's reuse of objects, movement phrases, and characters could arguably be evidence of stylistic consistency or conceptual congruence, in fact they reflect his radical disbelief in tidy narratives. While Ralph's career is often detailed as a series of breaks or ruptures—the dissolution of his company, the end of the Geography Trilogy, the death of his partner—here I have tried to describe its continuities, those elements that persist across the many names by which he has gone and the doubles, avatars, and carriers he has consistently regenerated for himself. The recursiveness of Ralph's work not only refuses periodization—the master logic by which artistic careers and grand narratives of history alike are written—but also allegorizes and instantiates history's own formless reappearances. Indeed, Ralph the narrator appears only as a subject who perpetually disappears into history. Each writing is at once a rewriting and an erasure, an emphatic anticipation of the future through retrogression, faith, and doubt.

The Ant's Burden

"The Ant's Burden," a passage from *Folktales*, of 1985, opens on an empty stage.³⁰ We hear the sound of birds chirping and flying, thunder cracking, rain falling. A young black boy, age ten or eleven, enters. Dressed in a Hawaiian shirt and khaki shorts, he recounts Aesop's fable of the fox and the stork. The fox invites the stork to share in a meal, but serves the soup in a bowl, which the stork cannot easily drink with its beak. The stork, in turn, invites the fox for a meal, served in a narrow-necked vessel that the fox cannot access. Trickery begets trickery. The boy exits, and Ralph enters, suddenly, stage left, shaking as if he were trying to warm himself up or lose something off his person. After moving through a series of energetic phrases to a woodwind track, he says "oops" and leaps.

Ralph moves on to the next fable. "A father and his son were very clever farmers," he begins, narrating a West African morality tale about a man who attempts to outsmart his son. During a drought, the son finds a dwarf able to generate rain when tapped lightly on the hump with two small branches. The father, wanting to outdo his son, scales up the size of his branches and aggressively strikes the dwarf, in hopes that the increased force would increase his own bounty. The dwarf drops

dead, and the king forces the father to atone for his greed by forever carrying the dwarf's body on his head. But the father, ever the trickster, dupes an ant into taking on the load. Ralph narrates the story using figurines and props mid-stage, with tree branches arranged in an arc forming a small proscenium. Using the same object that brought both crops and death to his characters, Ralph constructs an environment in which to animate a miniature world: he creates a theater. Despite the patent falseness implied by the plastic toys, Ralph treats the natural world and its plastic representations equally, performing a duet with a wooden bird and producing noise from a machine that generates a moo sound.

In retrospect, the passage's pairing of text and movement, image and narrative, functions as a codex of the many aesthetic strategies that would come to characterize Ralph's work: his emphasis on storytelling; his interest in myth, folklore, and forms of knowledge that are passed down through oral and physical communication; and his collaboration with self-taught and nonprofessional performers who stand in for everyday experience—and, as often as not, for Ralph himself.

In *Folktales*, the Harlem Storytellers, a group of African American preadolescent boys Ralph found at Miss Ruth Williams's Harlem tap dance studio, fulfills this final strategy. With each vignette, they return to the stage to explain natural phenomena or describe Earth's beginnings—to relay, as Ralph's young surrogates, origin narrative after origin narrative under the cover of genealogical inheritance. The moral structures in these tales don't divide good and evil into discrete, simple terms; instead responsibility for both good and bad is shared across an entire ecosystem. The trickster fox, for example, deserves trickery from the stork in return; the ant and the dwarf he is conscripted to carry end up in the son's fields. Here, morality is lived through narrative ambiguity, which rather than offering a way out of the brutality of our everyday lives, attaches us to one another. Drawing our attention to the small yet exhausting work of the ant and his burden, Ralph cunningly invites the onlooker to step in closer and enter his hilly field.

NOTES

1. Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 165–70.
2. Ralph Lemon in a conversation with the author, March 1, 2016.
3. Frank Stella quoted in Bruce Glaser and Lucy R. Lippard, "Questions to Stella and Judd," *Art News* 65 (September 1966): 58–59.
4. As in, for example, the set for *Come home Charley Patton*, designed by sculptor Nari Ward and engineered by R. Eric Stone in collaboration with Lemon.
5. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (New York: Orion Press, 1994), 10.
6. Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1966), 179.
7. My analysis of Lemon's movement is indebted to Carrie Lambert-Beatty's description of Yvonne Rainer making *Trio A*. Whereas Lambert-Beatty emphasizes the mechanicity of Rainer's movement, I argue that Lemon's is more animal or animal-machine. See *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008).
8. Excerpt from dramaturge Katherine Profeta's 2005 interview notes, shared with the author.

9. The buck dance is a solo percussive vernacular dance based on rhythmic foot patterns in the lower half of the body while the upper body remains calm. It was developed on the antebellum plantation by hybridizing West African and European social dances, and in the nineteenth century was commonly used during blackface minstrel performances. Today it is performed in the Southeast by dancers of all ethnic backgrounds.
10. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 170.
11. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 13.
12. See Helen Molesworth, "How to Install Art as a Feminist," in *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 498–513.
13. Bruce Nauman interviewed by Michele De Angelus, "Oral History Interview with Bruce Nauman, 1980 May 27–30," Oral History Interviews, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-bruce-nauman-12538>.
14. Nauman first made *Wall/Floor Positions* as a live performance in 1965 as a graduate student at the University of California, Davis. In 1968, he turned the work into a sixty-five-minute video.
15. See, for example, Nauman's 1984 mixed-media sculpture *White Anger, Red Danger, Yellow Peril, Black Death*.
16. Steve Paxton, "Contact Improvisation 1972," video of dancers performing contact improvisation at John Weber Gallery, 1972, with narration by Paxton. YouTube video, 9:31, posted 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FeSDsmleHA>.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. See Joan Colin Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 14–15.
21. Ralph Lemon, *Geography: art/race/exile* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000).
22. Deren wrote and filmed her *Divine Horsemen* after traveling to Haiti as an assistant to choreographer Katherine Dunham and watching the raw footage for anthropologists Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead's 1952 film *Trance and Dance in Bali*.
23. Massimiliano Mollona, "Seeing the Invisible: Maya Deren's Experiments in Cinematic Trance," *October* 149, Summer 2014, 166.
24. Maya Deren, *Divine Horseman: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New Paltz, NY: McPherson, 1983), 261.
25. Dayan, 112.
26. Harris, who worked on a plantation as a young man, collected and adapted the didactic stories recounting, through the fictionalized voice of Uncle Remus, the conflicts of Brother Rabbit, Fox, Wolf, Bull Frog, Bear, Tempy, and Tildy. For a critique of Harris, see Alice Walker, "Uncle Remus, No Friend of Mine" *Southern Exposure* 9 (Summer 1981), 29–31.
27. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: Labor News, 1951).
28. Georges Bataille, "The 'Old Mole' and the Prefix *Sur* in the Words *Surhomme* and *Surrealist*," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. and trans., Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 35, as cited in Devin Fore, "Introduction," in Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's *History and Obstinacy* (New York: Zone Books, 2014), 459.
29. I borrow this term from Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013). Thanks also to Moten for drawing my attention to the role of moles in Marx's work.
30. Ralph first choreographed *The Ant's Burden* in 1984. On the evening of March 7, 1985, he debuted the work twice: first, as a solo performance; then, as a passage in *Folktales* ("The Ant's Burden"). The version I describe here was part of *Folktales*.

PHOTOGRAPH CREDITS

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Additional caption information for Ralph Lemon's "Image Essay"

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Page 38: From left: Hetty King and Michael Nolan in *Joy*, the Joyce Theater. Photograph by Beatriz Schiller

Page 39: Kelly McDonald in a publicity image for *Joy*, premiere at Hopkins Center for the Arts, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, 1989. Photograph by

Beatriz Schiller

Page 40: Detail of a score for an unfinished dance by Ralph Lemon, Paris, 2008

Page 41: Portrait of Ralph Lemon, Carnegie Hall

Page 42 (top): From left: Goulei Tchépoho, Akpa Yves Dider, and Djédjé Djédjé Gervais in front of bottle curtain designed by artist Nari Ward. Photograph by T. Charles Erickson

Page 42 (bottom): From left: Akpa Yves Didier, Carlos Funn, Djeli Moussa Diabeté, Kouakou Yao, Nai Zou, Djédjé Djédjé Gervais, and Goulei Tchépoho, Yale Repertory Theatre, New Haven, Connecticut, 1997. Photograph by T. Charles Erickson

Page 43: From left: Asako Takami, David Thomson, Wang Liliang, Bijaya Barik, Li Wen Yi, Carlos Funn, Wen Hui, Manoranjan Pradhan, Ralph Lemon, Cheng-Chieh Yu, Yeko Ladzekpo-Cole, and Djédjé Djédjé Gervais, Yale Repertory Theatre, New Haven, Connecticut, 2000. Photograph by T. Charles Erickson

Page 44: Ralph Lemon. *Motel installation in Selma, Alabama*. 2001. Taxidermic bird and porcelain figurine, dimensions variable

Page 45: Ralph Lemon. *Memphis, Tennessee*. 2002. Digital image, dimensions variable

Page 46 (top): From left: Djédjé Djédjé Gervais, David Thomson, and Gesel Mason in *Come home Charley Patton*, Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2004. Photograph by Dan Merlo

Page 46 (bottom): David Thomson in *Come home Charley Patton*, Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2004. Photograph by Dan Merlo

Page 47: From left: Djédjé Djédjé Gervais and Darrell Jones in *Come home Charley Patton*, Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2004. Photograph by R. Eric Stone

Page 48: Ralph Lemon. *Untitled*. 2006. 5 × 7" (12.7 × 17.8 cm). (Walter Carter in Little Yazoo, Mississippi)

Page 49: Ralph Lemon. *Untitled*. 2006. Digital image, dimensions variable. Walter and Edna Carter in Little Yazoo, Mississippi

Page 50: Ralph Lemon. Partial score for

Rescuing the Princess, a commission for the Lyon Opera Ballet, 2009

Page 51 (top): From left: Gesel Mason and David Thomson in a rehearsal for *How Can You Stay In The House All Day And Not Go Anywhere?*, BAM Harvey Theatre, Brooklyn, New York, 2010. Photograph by Antoine Tempé

Page 51 (bottom): Eneka Bordato (foreground) and Harris Gkekas (background) in a rehearsal for *Rescuing the Princess*, Nouvel Opéra, Lyon, France, 2009. Photograph by Jean-Pierre Maurin

Page 52: Letter from Merce Cunningham inviting Ralph Lemon to a benefit honoring the memory of John Cage. The event was held at the Merce Cunningham Dance Foundation, New York, on October 31, 1992

Pages 54–55: Ralph Lemon in the "Sunshine Room" section of *How Can You Stay In The House All Day And Not Go Anywhere?* On screen is an image of Kris Kelvin in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972), the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2010. Photograph by Dan Merlo

Page 56: Ralph Lemon. *Untitled*. 2010. Archival pigment print, 40 × 40" (101.6 × 101.6 cm)

Page 57: Ralph Lemon. *Untitled*. 2010. Archival pigment print, 40 × 40" (101.6 × 101.6 cm)

Page 58: Ralph Lemon. Detail of a score for an unfinished dance, Paris, 2008

Page 59 (top): From left: Darrell Jones and Djédjé Djédjé Gervais performing "Wall/Hole" in *How Can You Stay In The House All Day And Not Go Anywhere?*, Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2010. Photograph by Dan Merlo

Page 59 (bottom): From left: Darrell Jones, Omagbitse Omagbemi, Gesel Mason, Djédjé Djédjé Gervais, and David Thomson performing "Wall/Hole" in *How Can You Stay In The House All Day And Not Go Anywhere?*, Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2010. Photograph by Dan Merlo

Page 60 (top): Ralph Lemon. *Untitled*. 2013–14. Archival pigment print, 14 × 21" (35.6 × 53.3 cm)

Page 60 (bottom): Ralph Lemon. *Untitled*.

2013–14. Archival pigment print, 14 × 21" (35.6 × 53.3 cm)

Page 61 (top): Ralph Lemon. *Untitled*. 2013–14. Archival pigment print, 20 × 30" (50.8 × 76.2 cm)

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Page 63: Ralph Lemon. *Untitled*. 2013. Archival pigment print, 15 × 20" (38.1 × 50.8 cm)

Page 64: Ralph Lemon. *March des Fiertés LGBT*, 2008. Digital image, dimensions variable

Page 65: Ralph Lemon. *April*. 2014. Archival pigment print, 30 × 20" (76.2 × 50.8 cm)

Page 66 (top): Okwui Okpokwasili in *An All Day Event. The End* as part of Platform 2012: Parallels at Danspace Project, New York, 2012. Photograph by Ian Douglas

Page 66 (bottom): Okwui Okpokwasili in a rehearsal for *Scaffold Room* during a residency at the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography, Tallahassee, Florida, 2014. Photograph by Chris Cameron

Page 67: Ralph Lemon. Detail of score for an unfinished dance, Paris, 2008

Pages 68–69: Ralph Lemon. *Scaffold Room*. 2013. Acrylic, pencil, and ink on paper, 22 ½ × 30" (57.2 × 76.2 cm)

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