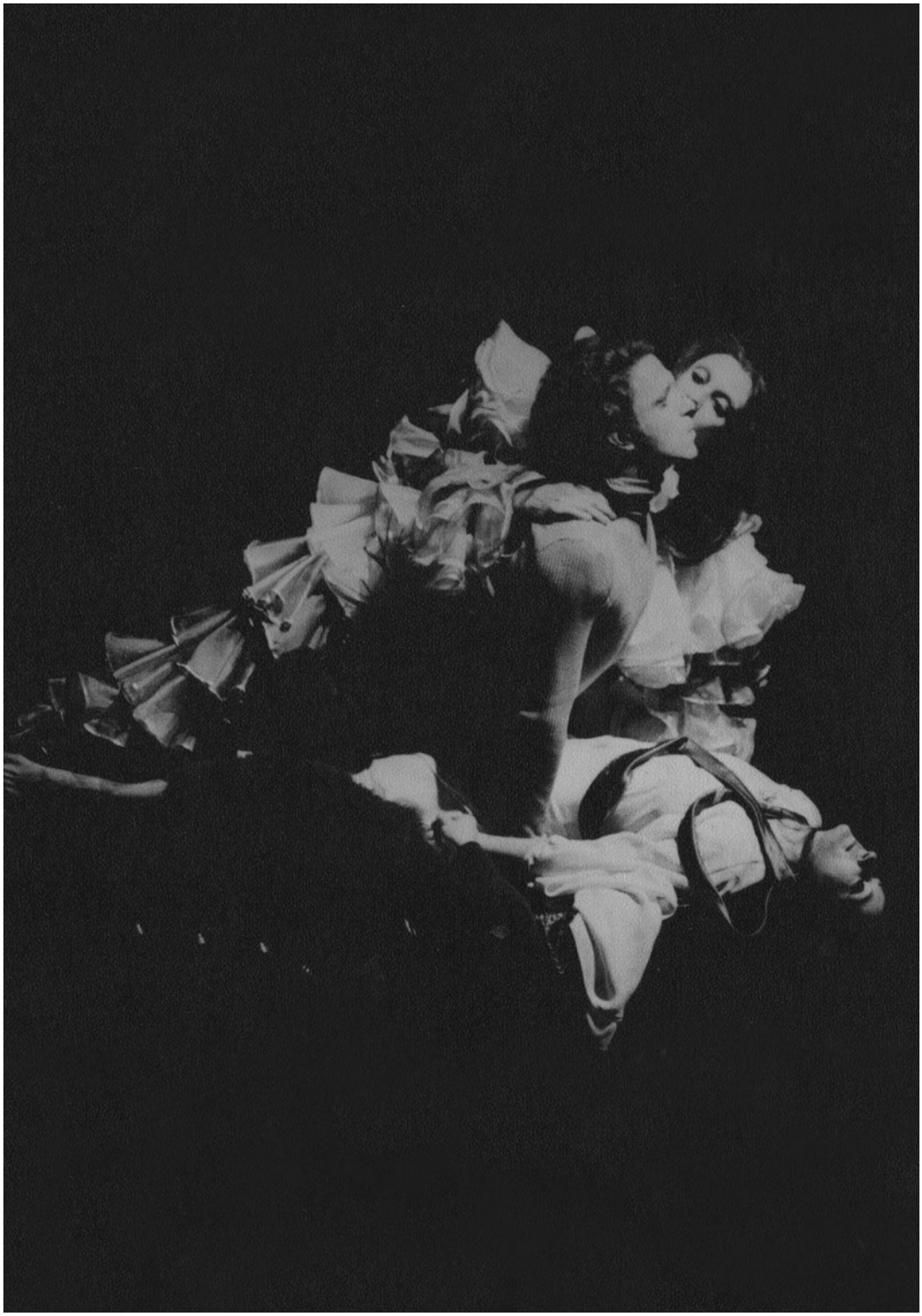
DRJ

Dialogue (in the Form of Letters)



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To Be Continued: An Exchange on Tiffany Barber's "*Ghostcatching* and *After Ghostcatching*, Dances in the Dark"

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> "What we see is partly a consequence of who we are".
>
> —Salman Rushdie

The sentence above leapt out at me while reading Salman Rushdie's evocative notes to Bjorn Amelan's first exhibit *7 Paintings in a Garage*.[1] Rushdie concludes his introduction to Amelan's works by saying that "their imagining provokes ours, and in the coming together of the two dreamers we understand the dream."

This is a tried and true argument: a work of art finds completion through the experience of others because intersubjectivity is at play. This thought seems relevant to the exchange of letters presented below. I could not agree more with Rushdie's comparison of the collective experiencing of art we call reception with the nonlinear, associative power of dreaming. In the case of this dialogue we are privy to the receptivity of the artist and of the scholar. Whenever either one attempts the articulation of art through language for the end of analysis (and this is always with the risk of simplifying or of over-reading), the experience of reception becomes an intellectual performance of sharable knowledge where the artist and the scholar challenge one another.

While reading Bill T. Jones's July 2, 2015 entry, titled "Signifying," in the New York Live Arts blog (Jones 2015), I recognized the cover of the April 2015 issue of the *Dance Research Journal*. With the immediacy of blog writing, Jones was responding/reacting to some statements expressed in two different articles (Erin Brannigan's "Dance in the Gallery: Curation as Revision" and Tiffany Barber's "*Ghostcatching* and *After Ghostcatching*, Dances in the Dark") from the *DRJ* issue, bringing new reflections into the discussion of our present.

In an associative snapshot of then recent events (President Obama's moving moment of singing *Amazing Grace* following the shooting at the Emanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina, after the *n*th acquittal of police officers for brutality against black unarmed citizens), Jones framed in one paragraph our present full of contradictions, marked by events that had been calling our attention to old wounds in America and new questioning.

The article that captured most of Jones's attention, and eventually inspired the content of the blog entry, was Tiffany Barber's "*Ghostcatching* and *After Ghostcatching*, Dances in the Dark," an in-depth

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investigation of Bill T. Jones's collaboration with digital artists Paul Kaiser, Shelley Eshkar (as Riverbed, the creators of *Ghostcatching* in 1999), and Marc Downie (in addition to the duo as the Open Ended Group: the creators of *After Ghostcatching* in 2010).

Paul Kaiser, who is quoted in Jones's blog entry, was invited to write his own response to the article. What follows in this issue is Kaiser's letter to the editor and Barber's response to that letter.

And so a dialogue has begun...

I highly recommend reading, if missed earlier, Barber's article in the April issue and Jones's blog entry. By bringing Barber's article into the conversation of the "now" (news events, programming at New York Live Arts, the meaning of signifying in semiotics, and in his personal memory archive), Jones was echoing one of the questions that the author had rhetorically raised in her article: does race still matter? As Barber passionately revisits the decade that separates *Ghostcatching* (1999) from *After Ghostcatching* (2010) , trying to identify crucial changes about the politics of bodies and identities in the twenty-first century and entertaining a critical conversation with relevant theories on race in the last decade, Jones also wonders: who are the potential interlocutors of scholarly articles?

I remember seeing *Ghostcatching* at Cooper Union in 1999 long before my idea of writing a book on Bill T. Jones's work materialized (2010). I had heard Kaiser talking about *Ghostcatching* and *Biped* (the "Riverbed" collaboration with Merce Cunningham in 1999) on a few occasions, including at the conference "Performative Sites: Intersecting Art, Technology and the Body," at Penn State University in fall 2000. At that time the fascination in the performing arts with the physical interaction of bodies and "new" technologies, as they were still called back then, had reached its peak. At the conference the Australian performer Stelarc and the French artist Orlan, whom I had seen performing in Europe in the previous decade, were both scheduled to appear (Orlan never showed up).

As we cannot wash away our own subjectivities as writers and as the act of writing is part of a collective processing of a specific historical context, my analysis of *Ghostcatching,* several years later, was shaped by the contemporary discourse around art and technologies and also by my personal involvement in feminist activism during my years as a student of performing arts in Bologna, Italy. My work was also highly influenced by the theoretical works of Donna Haraway (1991) and Rosi Braidotti (1996), among others.

Some of the preoccupations and questionings in the broader performing arts landscape in the 1990s were focused on how new technologies were complicating the dream of transcending the body, centered on the discussion of the organic body versus the technological one. Was the body really obsolete, as Stelarc was professing with his third robotic arm? And were Orlan's aesthetic surgeries the ultimate feminist rejection of socially imposed standards of beauty? When the somatic body visually disappears, as it does in *Ghostcatching,* could Jones's *digitally*[2] mediated choreography and storytelling—aesthetics and histories—still perform politics? This brief interaction between the creators of *Ghostcatching* and *After Ghostcatching* and Tiffany Barber provides a simple reminder that artistic intentions and creative impulses are differently voiced in collaborative projects. It also reconfirms that a work of art in the encounter with viewers once translated onto the page through the differing perspectives of artists and scholars inevitably leaves things out. Or gets lost in translation.

Kaiser describes in his letter one of the goals of their artistic practice: "we asked questions and made works to ask more questions." If *Ghostcatching* has the capacity to continue generating new questions, as it has done so far, it may come to fit the description of a "classic" proposed by Italo Calvino as "a work that has never finished saying what it has to say" (Calvino 1986).

Toni Morrison in her seminal essays, *Playing in the Dark* (1992), brilliantly investigated the assumptions involved in the American literary imagination, breaking what historically had been the rules of literally

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discourse in matters of race—"silence and evasion" (Morrison 1992, 9). Barber, echoing Morrison, in her essay articulates the technological imagination behind *Ghostcatching* and *After Ghostcatching,* challenging current theories on race questioning "post-racialism," as Morrison had challenged certain claims in the name of "humanism," in the complex context of American society. The "imagination activity" involved in the relationship between artists and audiences, as that envisioned by Morrison between writers and readers as well as that between writers and other writers, is a performative one, where "imagining is not merely looking or looking at, nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, *becoming*" (Morrison1992, 4)—an open-ended set of questions.

For our dialogue, this interaction should be read as a call for investigations on how technologies are renegotiating the interface between bodies and issues of race in our artistic practices, theories, and pedagogical methodologies.

Dance studies, a still relatively new and quintessentially interdisciplinary field that from the very beginning has been integrating dance histories, practices, and theories in its conversation with other disciplines in the humanities, has recently been engaged more directly with science and technology.[3] This embrace should also enter the focus of our dialogue, which may enable us to ask and even reformulate a more self-reflective question: whom do we write for? How can we engage with a larger community of artists and scholars?

To be continued. . .

Notes

1. Bjorn Amelan is Bill T. Jones's longtime partner and creative director of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company whose set designs have been a signature of the company's performances for the last two decades. The exhibit *7 Paintings in a Garage* was shown from April 26 to May 8, 2016, in a garage at 89 Jane Street, New York.

2. The emphasis on "digital" versus analogical representation would need a longer parenthesis.

3. Just to mention two examples of a longer list, I am thinking of Thomas de Franz's project-based course Performance and Technology at Duke University and of Emily Coates who has been co-teaching a course with physicist Sarah Demers at Yale.

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