I Get Lost
Danspace Project Platform 2010
We would like to acknowledge all those who have contributed to this project including: DjeDje Gervais for the inspiration; Ann Rosenthal, Cathy Zimmerman and the entire MAPP team for the constant support; Mark Jarecke and Rob Van Wyen at FOUR32C for the design; Christina Burnett, Catherine Dinély, and Judith Walker for the translations and interpretations; Dr. Yvonne Daniel for joining the conversation; Andrew Lambert and Anthology Film Archives for opening the doors; Nina Westhof for her hospitality; Janet Stapleton, Baryshnikov Arts Center, the Danspace Project Board of Directors; thanks to Steven’s Taylor for the late night editing; the mighty Danspace staff including Jodi Bender, Peggy Cheng, Kate Garroway, Abby Harris Holmes, Lee Jents, Abigail Ramsey and Reghan Sykinsky; and of course the generous artists who have shared their work and process with all of us: Solo Badolo, Maria Hassabi, Judith Sánchez Ruíz, Robert Steijn, and DjeDje Gervais.

— Judy Hussie-Taylor, Ralph Lemon and Katherine Profeta

Dance “pushes beyond the limits that our ordinary understanding has set and our ordinary experience perceived, bringing through the dancing body...open spaces that we had not supposed to be there...”

— Karmen MacKendrick
introduction

BY JUDYHUSSIE-TAYLOR
Executive Director, Danspace Project

The Danspace Project platform I Get Lost, curated by Ralph Lemon, marks a new initiative and an experiment in presenting at Danspace. This platform, made possible in part with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, grew out of an identified need to develop alternative modes of presenting and commissioning artists with the goal of re-energizing these practices. As the first initiative in this research period, Danspace Project has invited select guest artists to curate multi-week platforms over the next two years.

The platforms serve as an opportunity for Danspace Project to pose questions about presenting practice and process. I invited Ralph Lemon to be the first guest curator because, having worked with him in various contexts for two decades, I deeply respect his capacity to challenge his own aesthetics, politics, and working methods. We also share an interest in artists whose work blurs the lines between forms and who push up against conventional notions about what “a dance” or “a work of art” can be.

In New York City, as in any arts capital, there is an extra-institutional dialogue between artists that spans forms and generations; it informs the future of the arts. As we consider the future of dance in the United States (or throughout the world, for that matter) it is important to look not only at the final production/product, but also to reveal working relationships between artists. I am interested in finding a way to illuminate these ongoing dialogues.
Ralph Lemon’s platform presents artists making work on multiple continents, and more specifically, artists probing Western European and West African art historical narratives and practices, as these address body and performance spaces as sites for transgression, transcendence, trance, and transformation. As scholar Karmen MacKendrick reminds us, dance “pushes beyond the limits that our ordinary understanding has set and our ordinary experience perceived, bringing through the dancing body...open spaces that we had not supposed to be there, that are not supposed to be there: spaces of transgressive delight.” These impossible-to-codify experiences are at the heart of this platform.

In 2005 Paul Schimmel curated an exhibition at Los Angeles’ Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) entitled Ecstasy. While the exhibition focused on work made under the influence of various psychotropic substances, it also brought to light an often unspoken drive to use art as a vehicle to go beyond the visible and enter an altered state. The catalogue essay cites the cult of Dionysus as an early indication that art in the western classical tradition has, at its root, the desire to go beyond conventional realms of experience and into a state beyond the limits of the body.

A little more than a decade ago, Lemon was inspired by Maya Deren’s Divine Horsemen, a film that contains rare footage of Haitian Vodou practitioners being possessed (or “mounted,” hence the film’s title) by deities (Loa), during sacred music/dance rituals. Deren, one of a small but influential group of seminal experimental filmmakers to emerge during the 1940s & 50s, became an initiate of Vodou during her Guggenheim-funded residency in Haiti, and was extremely hesitant about editing the footage. It was only after her death that her husband Teiji Ito edited the film, joining music to dances/rituals inaccurately. For Lemon, a decade-long research project ensued, at the center of which is the tension between form and non-form, control and release, authenticity and artifice.

The artists Lemon has invited to participate in I Get Lost — David Zambrano, Souleymane Badolo, Judith Sánchez Ruíz, Maria Hassabi and Robert Steijn — use the body to go beyond the body. In his catalogue essay for Ecstasy, Schimmel notes that in our time, when “the authentic, the transcendent, and the utopian have been subjected to sustained critique,” many artists have “nevertheless focused on the exploration of transcendent experiences through the creative act,” and that “their explorations are not driven by commercial or academic concerns but by their often utopian faith in the capacity of art to expand and alter perception and consciousness — an experience that can never be owned, only felt.”

While words like “utopian,” “authentic” and “transcendent” have complicated and loaded implications, the phrase “explorations not driven by commercial or academic concerns” is, across the board, relevant to the research and practices represented by the artists in this platform.

It is my hope that the works presented through Ralph Lemon’s platform do not provide a series of final performance products, but rather create a context for an open conversation between artists and viewers, allowing us all to ask questions to be further explored through the body over time.

Pictured: Hermes Maltois
Photographed by Anja Hitzenberger
Ralph Lemon, in Miami to make an experimental documentary on the Haitian-American community, sits in a crowded, drum-filled restaurant. Suddenly, a few tables over, a young woman begins flinging her body violently against the furniture, eyes rolling back into her head. Someone whispers, “she is just learning, does not yet know how to let the spirit ride her.” A few months later Ralph observes an older priestess enter a trance — her passage, by contrast, is smooth and expert.

Ruminating on those two events, Ralph turns to Maya Deren’s footage of Haitian trance. He doesn’t yet realize that what he thinks he sees is different from what he’s actually seeing, which is in turn different from whatever once happened in front of Deren’s lens in 1940’s Haiti. He asks a room of five West African dancers to take their inspiration from those slow-motion trancing bodies. But no one says yes. His request is out of bounds, and dangerous, for a group of men who understand trance and possession as an almost-mundane fact of daily life. They cannot travel in that direction without proper context and protections. Backpedaling, Ralph explains that he wants to explore something like trance, but not trance, but still like it. He tries calling it “a secular sense of freedom” but that doesn’t work, as real trance is anything but freeing. Realizing he’s been painfully naïve, Ralph shelves the idea — for now.

Mr. Wang, a farmer/musician from China’s rural Yunnan province, speaks of shamanism and demonstrates a song designed to appease the dead. He sings lying on his back on the floor, tapping his hand in an unpredictable rhythm. A room full of performers from locations across Asia, Africa and America watch, then try to learn. At the end of the day, Mr. Wang informs Ralph that he must never perform this onstage, for fear of “bringing on the ghosts.” Ralph shelves this point of inspiration once again.

Ralph works with a group of four American dancers and one West African dancer. This last is Djédjé Djédjé Gervais, who has continued to collaborate with him since 1997. Ralph asks the group to experiment with “dancing outside the body,” taking their inspiration from violent episodes in African-American history and the concomitant wish to transcend them. They call the resulting improvisation “Ecstasy.” The performers remain more lost than found for a grueling five minutes, courting a complete dissolution of form. Djédjé explains to me that Ralph’s instructions are not dangerous to him this time around because all the elements are not in place for real trance. Still, he understands his job differently than the American performers — he must play with the edge of getting lost but not go there completely.
Ralph is not done. He experiments with restaging Ecstasy with the same cast of five, pushing it even further, letting it fall apart, reconstituting the broken pieces, and letting them fall apart once again. He asks them to try it drunk, or stoned, or both. They discover that the intoxicated body does not in fact provide the experience they are looking for — that particular loss of control is too familiar, leaving no room for the essential unknown. However, maybe it can help them begin to understand what they are looking for.

Meanwhile Ralph begins to formulate a platform for Danspace around the idea of trance, or not-trance, or something-like-trance. The word is equal parts helpful and problematic. As French ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget has clarified, while the potential for trance may well be granted to all human beings, the potential, when it occurs, is always socialized. It only endures when it is reconstituted, and letting it fall apart once again. He asks them to try it drunk, or stoned, or both. They discover that the intoxicated body does not in fact provide the experience they are looking for — that particular loss of control is too familiar, leaving no room for the essential unknown. However, maybe it can help them begin to understand what they are looking for.

Ralph is not done. He experiments with restaging Ecstasy with the same cast of five, pushing it even further, letting it fall apart, reconstituting the broken pieces, and letting them fall apart once again. He asks them to try it drunk, or stoned, or both. They discover that the intoxicated body does not in fact provide the experience they are looking for — that particular loss of control is too familiar, leaving no room for the essential unknown. However, maybe it can help them begin to understand what they are looking for.

The performers Ralph invites have contrasting rapport with his slippery theme. In particular, some have concrete cultural experience with trance or possession. Others understand those terms metaphorically. They all, however, can get lost in one way or another, to one end or another. They all research that transient realm of embodied experience, into which language does not manage to follow. And they all share the impulse to channel their research into a contemporary performance format, in front of you, a performance-going public in 2010 New York City — another very specific cultural context.

Ralph reported a visceral reaction to Soul Project, when he first viewed it in 2008. The state it engendered in its performers was contagious. As a viewer he felt inhabited, spurred to join the soloist, to get equally lost in these voices — even as the work implicitly discouraged audience participation. The tension between watching and doing was intriguing, as well as the interplay of individual against collective. David, when he hears from audience members who felt compelled to join the dance, considers it a great compliment. He understands the decision to remain still nevertheless, to witness from within that tension, as extending from “a basic human need for contemplation.”

SOULEYMANE (“SOLO”) BAROLO AND JUDITH SÁNCHEZ RÍEZ bring two independent solo works which, through their placement side-by-side in a single evening, will inevitably create a conversation. Solo was born in Burkina Faso and his work has occurred there, here, and in Europe. His dancing extends in large part from his understanding of his own cultural and spiritual heritage, as a descendant of the powerful Gurunsi masks in the village of Kya. He brings customs and rituals on the edge of permanent loss forward into the present and beyond, evolving them within a contemporary art context — thus to a certain extent he inverts the initial proposition of this platform, dancing in order to not get lost. For Danspace he has prepared an evening to honor his late mother, who bore 15 children and saw only 3 survive. A key element of his exploration is one of the several names given him soon after birth: “Yaado,” which means cemetery. The gesture was homeopathic, designed to protect him from the fate the
name evokes. Solo/Yaado casts himself as an intermediary between those still here on earth and those within the cemetery, who have passed to the other side.

Judith was born in Havana and now works in New York. Her work is a carefully chosen mix of composition and improvisation, highly responsive to the immediate present of performance. She explores the multidirectional architecture of the space around her, drawing lines and creating tunnels that relentlessly disassociate body parts and destabilize her sense of place. She aspires to a state in which she can “let the body lead,” developing images and emotions that emerge unexpectedly. Her solo, And They Forgot to Love, makes use of her own voice, as recorded reading passages from an autobiographical work, and thus the act of listening to the self reflecting on the self is built in to the piece. For Judith getting lost is part of the magic of the moment of creation, evidenced by the improviser who steps offstage with absolutely no memory of what just occurred.

Maria Hassabi and Robert Steijn, in response to Ralph’s invitation and challenge, collaborate for the first time on a performance. Robert has worked in the past with the concept of performance as shamanism, and collaborated with the Korean shaman Hiah Park. He used be in the habit of staging his own death, again and again, whenever he found himself on stage — rehearsing for that ultimate, irreversible loss of self. These days he hopes to achieve a transformational moment when death and life find a sort of integration.

Maria’s previous work has not demonstrated such an explicit connection to Ralph’s theme — or, at least not at first glance. But through her careful, formal elaboration of the presentational body she creates a ritualized space in which the audience is invited to wander, to lose itself. Maria’s work points out the extent to which transformational states are not achieved through utter formlessness but rather through an intricate devotion to form.

Maria and Robert’s theme together — their chosen vehicle for getting lost — is Love, specifically Eros. Robert says he hopes to seek “truth by Eros,” an allusion to Plato’s definition of Eros as a spiritual aid, insofar as it reminds the soul of Beauty in its most perfect form.

And then there is one more who is lost because he is no longer here, no longer part of this platform. Djédjé Djédjé Gervais, born in Côte d’Ivoire and now working in the US, had planned to participate as a performer, until he suffered an injury rendering him unable to continue his research in time for this project. Djédjé has worked with Ralph through all the investigations into an elusive danced transcendence, from those first misguided steps in 1997 to the most recent grueling research. As an initiate in his home culture, Djédjé has experienced trance as part of religious life. In his current work, formed in part by 12 years of conversation and performance with Ralph, he seeks to explore controlled trance as a form of artistic expression. Regardless of his absence, his artistic aims endure as part of this platform. Without the influence of his wisdom and body intelligence, Ralph would not be asking the questions he is asking today.
Thinking about...how the way we act, the way we are possessed by something — an idea, a belief, a spirit, a love — how the most basic human actions may have everything to do with our patterned (but unreliable) chemical mind-bodies. "Neural pattern maps," "convergence zones," "body loops"... and whatever sun, moon, star, wind, rain, landscape we are in. Primitive and present, always at this very instant.

This thinking (instant) takes time.

Below are some thoughts I wrote down in December '08, while on an airplane to someplace warm and sunny, the beginning language in discussing this platform (in response to some Zizek I was reading...) but not the beginning of the feeling, the brain-body idea, which I have been grappling with all my creative life:

Hmm.

If by "morally" he means according to a belief system, a body-mind belief system, I get it. If not, I don’t.

Of course, Hume thought this a long time ago.

"The culturalization of spirit": is that perhaps what we’re discussing? And therefore, the liberation of spirit? Not a retreat, not a spiritualization of culture, with terms such as "authenticity," "honesty," "truth," "sincerity"... But rather the freedom to be singularly "moral," stripped bare to something concise, emphatic, simple, and as a consequence, practicing a position of "universal doubt." Becoming universally human, and therefore powerfully vulnerable. And therefore, generous.

Universal doubt, one of our few profound truths. (Death is another one.) Communicating this may be the best art.

An empirical body (and theater) to overcome... it seems.

A cultural/chemical body to embrace. That morality, love.

This is meant for anybody who dances, I guess.

I ran into many of the participants in Paris, of all places, Summer of ‘08 – a few old friends, some new. Saw shows, lots of dancing, sensed similarities, talked, drank, got intoxicated, excited. Later on, more sober, I came up with these questions:

What is the belief network of your art practice, the belief system in your thinking and in the chemical responses of your body?

What are some of the (shifting) essentials of your formal concepts? Is there a pattern that has become manifest over time?

Do you think your body has a point of view in this (conceptual) thinking, a faith? An agreement, and/or an argument?

I got lost.

Let’s see what happens.