

PARtake: The Journal of Performance as Research
Volume 3, Issue 1 – Spring 2020
ISSN: 2472-0860



Performance Review:
Digestion and Resistance at zürich moves 2019

Philip Wesley Gates, MFA—Philipwgates.com

Zürich, Switzerland
April 8 through 13, 2019

This past April, an activist drag cow named Soya serenaded the assembled crowd at *zürich moves!*—a festival of contemporary performing arts practice held annually in the Swiss financial center—with a set of original songs encouraging ethical interspecies relations. Showing off her udder in a look I can only describe as abattoir realness, Soya introduced a song called “Dairy Free.” “For some of you, dairy free is about food,” she observed. “For some of us, it’s about freedom.”

The word “freedom” has become a complicated one under the global order of neoliberalism, as Agnes Borinsky recently observed in *Slate*.¹ Given that the idea of freedom is used to valorize the unregulated movement of capital, with deadly consequences for bodies human and non-human alike, it may have lost its longstanding position as liberatory ideal. (“Don’t give us freedom,” Borinsky exhorts in her essay, “give us housing, health care, and meaningful relation!”) If the pursuit of freedom can be so easily distorted into a process of use extraction—of digestion—then perhaps food and freedom are more closely intertwined than Soya’s opposition of the two might suggest.

Following the Brazilian intellectual tradition of cultural anthropophagy, which theorizes a relationship between post-colonial cultural production and the act of consuming the other, artistic director Marc Streit organized the 2019 festival as a conversation between South America and Europe on questions of appropriation and exchange. (The program included performances, talks, and a research laboratory of eight European and Brazilian artists, organized in collaboration with Felipe Ribeiro of the Atos de Fala festival in Rio de Janeiro.) Across a week of performances, I saw artists confronting how bodies move and are moved inside of what the Brazilian writer Suely Rolnik, in a rousing lecture, called the “colonial-capitalist regime.” These works asked how we might instead move in resistance to the systems that seek to digest us, locating potential in embodied expressions of solidarity. They further suggested that digestion, rather than being an extraction of value, might instead be imagined as a process of mutual encounter and entanglement—a process that could in fact lead to freedom.

On opening night, just before Soya’s cabaret, the Uruguayan choreographer Tamara Cubas presented the second part of her Anthropophagic Trilogy, created by “digesting” three Brazilian choreographies and producing a work in response to each. (*To Resist*, the section shown in Zürich,

is a digestion of Marcelo Eveline’s *Matadouro*—the Portuguese word for slaughterhouse.) Five performers, clustered tightly together, begin a unified, repetitious in-out motion that maintains and mutates as they traverse an expanse of 1,500 wooden planks over the course of an hour. Their upper bodies extend and contract in rhythm; their legs bounce, stomp, and seek out footing on the unstable ground cover. By the time they reach the far side of the pile, vocalizations now resounding through the space, their exhausting journey takes on an almost triumphal quality. The performers are inside a relentless, punishing structure, but they persist in moving forward—and always as a group, their bodies finding and returning to one another even when the ceaseless rhythm makes this difficult. Here, the possibility of resistance emerges out of collective support and a shared determination.

Where Cubas’s work locates a kind of freedom inside of strict constraints, Luis Garay’s *Oro Lodo*—presented the following evening in the disheveled bar space of the Cabaret Voltaire—imagines its way out of constraint altogether. Over the span of three hours, the interactions of three male bodies create a phenomenological field that sidesteps everyday frameworks of temporality and functionality. The performers’ actions unspool with languid precision, echoing and repeating as the evening stretches on. Despite the work’s undeniable sensuality, the cum-driven economy of sex is absent from the relations between the three men; in its place is a “useless voluptuousness,” as Garay aptly puts it in the program notes. Every gesture is careful and deliberate, while seemingly unconcerned with producing specific results. And yet, through their quiet labor, the performers do produce something: a state of capaciousness and generosity, one that allows each body in the room to exist on their own terms. Lounging on the perimeter of the room with my fellow spectators, I could admire the dancers, let my focus wander, feel the cool breeze blowing in the open window. As the performers moved among us in their unhurried time signature, we were able to depart from our usual economy-oriented ways of being and moving in the world. In this space, we were given permission to be present without purpose—we, too, were free to be useless.

Other works in the festival, however, served as a reminder that not all bodies experience the privilege of “permission to be present.” Structural oppression often expresses itself by dictating where a person is or is not allowed to be; as André Lepecki points out, “the police function first of all as a movement controller.”² In his *Gente de là* (“People from out there”), the Brazilian artist Wellington Gadelha called our attention to the spatialized nature of the violence—segregation,

incarceration, police execution—perpetrated against black bodies. With the help of an array of resonant objects, Gadelha conducted a furious ritual of reckoning, defiantly claiming space not only for himself, but on behalf of many more not present. Flying a small black kite, he demarcated a circle in the middle of a cozy neighborhood intersection, standing his ground while cars maneuvered around him. Later, having led the (mostly white) audience into a gallery space, he encased himself in a black garbage bag and mapped the perimeter of the space with his body, emitting clarion shouts from within the bag as he rolled across the floor. Gadelha’s insistent presence refused the distancing referenced in the work’s title, and the violence both inherent within and justified by that linguistic act of othering. His body was not something “out there”—something to be policed, contained, and kept apart by force—but unmistakably right here, with us.

Alice Ripoll and her company REC (all born, like Gadelha, in Brazilian favelas) also tapped into the festival’s often racialized performer-spectator dynamic, staging the complicity of some (affluent, white) bodies in the policing of others. In their work *aCORdo*, four performers—all male-presenting people of color—relieved spectators of their belongings. At first, they picked up bags, jackets, and other easy-to-reach items, redistributing them amongst the audience. Soon, though, they began to reach for phones, jewelry, and wallets—and began keeping more and more items on their own persons. Finally, laden down with our things, the performers lined up against the back wall of the space, palms pressed to the wall in an all-too-familiar posture of enforced humiliation. When they failed to stir from this position, it gradually became evident that they would not move until we retrieved our belongings from their bodies. And so, eventually, we did: reaching into their pockets to find our phones, prying their fingers from the wall and guiding bag straps off their shoulders. The forceful clarity of the gesture was breathtaking: we can only have what we have (our belongings, our freedom) if someone touches those bodies in violation. Colonial-capitalist subjectivity requires this forcible objectification of the other in order to constitute itself. Often, we either don’t see it happening, or we deliberately look away. But in that room, unable even to look on from a safe, spectatorial distance, we had to do the touching ourselves.

Later that night, Vincent Riebeek’s *One of a Kind* continued to demolish the assumption of safety, while celebrating the unruly, anarchic potential of the queer body. “We are coming towards the audience,” the exuberant performers sang ominously while doing just that. “Can you

feel the heat? / We are looking for some straight people / to participate!” The target of Riebeek’s barbed commentary isn’t straight people per se, but rather a homogenizing culture that recuperates difference by incorporating it. In response, the work gleefully feeds on that culture itself. The performance deploys and carries to excess the very forms and impulses it critiques—as in an extravagant musical number called “It’s Not Just For Gays Anymore” that praises the expanding commercial appeal of that hopelessly faggy institution, The Theatre. The bodies of the four performers are in excess as well, on display as sites of unrepentant, joyful corporeality. They stretch and strut, exchange erotic contact, combine to create grotesque hybrids that engage in impossible contortions. In refusing to separate pleasure and vulgarity, queerness here asserts itself in defiance of a marketable respectability politics that seeks to contain or rehabilitate it, instead finding the freedom in being “too much.”

In its final moments, *One of a Kind* offered an unexpectedly poignant image with which to close the festival: an aerial silk ballet. As the naked performers flailed in the fabric to the bombastic chords of Arcade Fire’s “My Body is a Cage,” the spectacle was every bit as over-the-top as all that had come before—but it was also, suddenly and simultaneously, sincere. *Set my body free*, cried the band’s lead singer; and there they were, four bodies spinning in solidarity, throwing themselves about with awkward and joyous abandon, reaching together toward something beyond. Beyond the cages of factory farms, prison cells, and cultural expectations; beyond the movements demanded or prohibited by systems dedicated to preserving capital at the expense of life; beyond a global order that seeks to consume the other rather than recognize that the other already (as Suely Rolnik writes) “lives effectively in our body.”³ In that moment, at the close of a week filled with the meaningful relation Borinsky calls for, freedom felt like an ideal too vital to surrender. Dairy Free—I could almost taste it.

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1. Agnes Borinsky, “On the Radical Potential of Faggotry,” *Slate*, October 31, 2018, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2018/10/radical-faggotry-camp-irony-seriousness.html>.
 2. André Lepecki, “Choreopolice and Choreopolitics: or, the task of the dancer,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 57, no. 4 (2013): 16.
 3. Suely Rolnik, “The Spheres of Insurrection: Suggestions for Combating the Pimping of Life,” *e-flux* 86 (November 2017), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/86/163107/the-spheres-of-insurrection-suggestions-for-combating-the-pimping-of-life>.

