

certain  
difficulties,  
certain joy

DANSPACE PROJECT PLATFORM 2010



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**Danspace Project**  
**St. Mark's Church in the Bowery**  
**131 East 10th Street**  
**New York, NY 10003**  
**[danspaceproject.org](http://danspaceproject.org)**

Editor-in-Chief  
**Judy Hussie-Taylor**

Curator,  
Catalogue Creative Director & Editor  
**Trajal Harrell**

Copyeditors  
**Lily Cohen**  
**Huffa Frobess-Cross**

Translators  
**Huffa Frobess-Cross**  
**Judith Walker**

Printer  
**Digital Color Concepts**

Catalogue Design  
**Judith Walker**

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“Watching a performance one might learn about something, but one will mainly learn about how this object was addressed. So more than anything else, one learns about how to watch.”

- Alice Chauchat,  
*Watching, One Learns How To Watch*

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## Introduction

By Judy Hussie-Taylor

Executive Director, Danspace Project

Artistic Director, Danspace Project's PLATFORMS 2010

Danspace Project's PLATFORM 2010: "certain difficulties, certain joy" curated by Trajal Harrell marks the third platform in a series as part of Danspace's Choreographic Center Without Walls (CW2). The goals of CW2 and the Platforms are to explore new forms for presenting dance, to create context for the work being presented and to better support artists and the development of new work in dance. CW2 and the Platforms are made possible with major support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Certain difficulties, certain joy – when Trajal Harrell first suggested this as the title for the Platform I was drawn to it without knowing why. Like a sutra, koan or poem waiting to be unpacked, the phrase invokes more questions than answers. Why are the difficulties plural but the joy singular? Can there be joy without difficulty? Is joy a certainty? Isn't there really only difficulty? Or is exposing difficulties the secret to joy?

Much of the work selected by Harrell is concerned with objecthood and architecture. On the surface this implies neither difficulty nor joy. The title comes into play where the artists engage with objects and space. In the work presented here objects are not props; they are elevated to the position of performer. They have a will of their own; they assume the power of the fetish, things at once plain and strange, and imbued with power to affect bodies. Boxes and buckets get bossy - blurring the power dynamic between human and non-human entities. At times, physical sensation, object placement and/or sound drive choreography.

As minimalist sculptures of the late '60s and early '70s "performed" for an implied but largely imagined and/or invisible perceiver, these performances reveal the experience and the experiencer. Objects and bodies collide, making choreography and sculpture indistinguishable. There is no aesthetic distance here between perceiving subject and perceived object (although in most of these performances the audience remains a conventionally silent witness, a third party).

“In the same way we will need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body. But by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover our self, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception.”

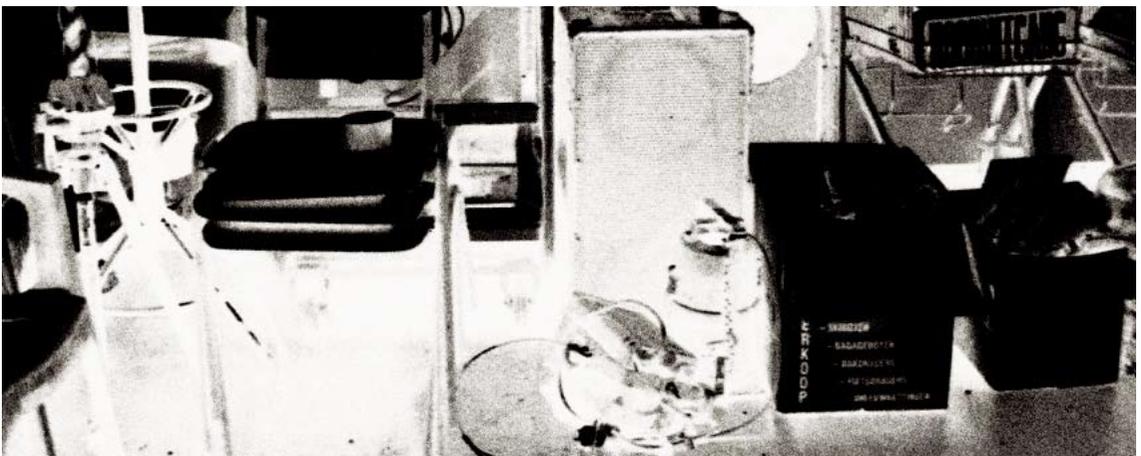
- Maurice Merleau-Ponty  
*Phenomenology of Perception*

But a “body” is not a neutral site. The body as object, object as performer implies neutrality—the body existing out of time and history as art object. However, the body as object does not really exist.

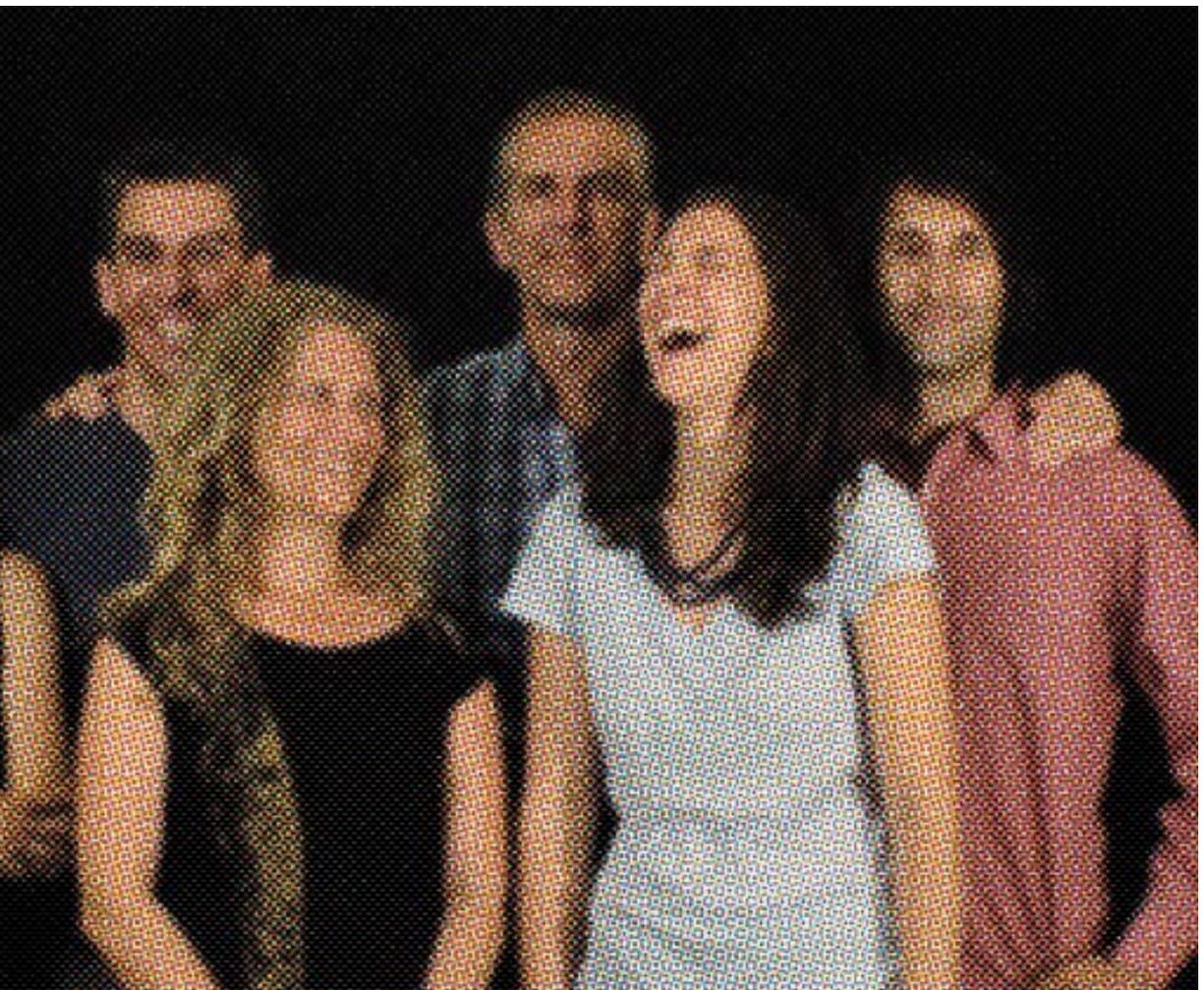
The pieces in “certain difficulties, certain joy” go further, recognizing the body as a site for multiple collisions – between histories, geographies, psychologies, religions, and sexualities. These artists exuberantly and intently give us all or nothing choreographies in which they reveal conflicting *grand narratives* and *petit recits* in post-genre joyous disturbances.

In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty writes, “The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible.”

Harrell has curated an experience that unfolds over six weeks with choreographic works that offer an open, kineasthetic communication with the world and through their time-based nature expose the fragility and inexhaustibility of experience. And what greater difficulty, or joy, is there than that?







## Curatorial Statement: *What good is a happy artist?*

By Trajal Harrell

Curator, Danspace Project

PLATFORM 2010: *certain difficulties, certain joy*

As we are living in the second or third or fourth coming of Meryl Streep (I mean who's counting... let's not complain!), we find the Queen of the Academy no longer the forlorn Meryl of *Sophie's Choice*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, or for that matter, "Dingo got my baby!" This time around, she has us laughing as she romances our asses off. Don't laugh too loud though! Often we grant a different kind of permissiveness to 'movies' than to contemporary dance, as perhaps any 'serious' art had better watch the comedy and/or lightness for fear that we forget our deportment, *épaulement*, and the essential questions posed by art. Dance as an art form of individual expression had to fight for serious artistic honors, and perhaps, still struggles with its own inferiority complex. The modern dance, although not without its famed bacchanalians such as Isadora Duncan, found its signature and cultural footing in struggle not happiness. It is not by chance that the modern dance, in its reverence for the inner soul, found in the darker corners of the psyche a more fruitful well. There is but a stone's throw from Martha Graham's stylized heavy hand on the forehead to Alvin Ailey's "wading in the water" to Pina Bausch's back against the wall where the continuum between American modern dance, German dance expressionism, modernism in general, and the very advent of the African-American find their bread, butter, and jam in the place where everybody sometimes gets the blues.

Postmodern dance did not suffer from a lack of funny, ironic, crazy, or madcap moments, though, by and large, the pomo giants eschewed announcing aspirations of pleasure and joy for more "neutral" fare. In the 1960s, concert dance was working to prove itself, not as a grandiose melodrama, but as a serious intellectual endeavor on par with minimalist sculpture and the rebels of experimental music. Although I may draw a black and white distinction, seriousness in Art with a capital A is one way of demanding a place in history alongside the other fine arts even if those arts have embraced popular culture. Supposedly, it's not the content that defines art's seriousness; it's the frames of reference and the depth of investigation.

The platform title "certain difficulties, certain joy" enjoys its quotes and comma, almost appearing like a line in a play or a tag of poetry, or even perhaps one of Meryl's lines from the movie *It's Complicated* about her on-again-maybe-off-again marriage to Alec Baldwin. For those who have enjoyed this guilty pleasure, who can forget the show stopping scene in the movie where Streep and her new beau, played by Steve Martin, enjoy a late night video chat snuggle via laptop computers? While Streep leaves the room for a moment, a surprise seduction is put into motion. Baldwin enters and takes a place in the bed (unbeknownst to the absent Streep) naked as a jaybird. And soon without missing the spot-on-comedic-beat, Martin finds himself face-to-face or screen-to-screen with the original Romeo's phallus. "Wherefore art thou Juliet?" has never made more and less sense at the same time.

I contend that "dancing" in quotes, the kind that signifies on all others - the kind we know and love, and grow to hate, and then attempt to know and love again - is like Alec Baldwin's, or shall I say, the original Romeo's phallus. It's all symbolic of the symbol of our first love, primed in juvenile antics, plagued by mistaken identity, threatening to take back its place at the top of the heap, and downright cuddly. And that, my friends, is the current problem of contemporary dance in a nutshell. What do we do with a cuddly phallus? How do we express ourselves in a form, which we of course love, but has shown itself to be an empty well for the moderns, the antidote for the postmoderns, and downright intoxicating for the family feuds ignited by the classicists? Forget about it! Of course, that's what any sane person would decide. Too much weight to bear! And so it has gone in contemporary dance.... Dance has been shut out of the house of contemporary dance.

The breakdown between disciplines in postmodern art followed by the conceptualist dance of the 1990s has left dance begging to get back in its own door. Now it's so cool not to dance that, personally and frankly, it's not cool at all to me--at all, if you follow my drift. Now, as a choreographer and dancer, I find myself immensely interested in that thing that I know most people, the everyday Joe and/or Jane, think of as dance. It's the fact that they think it's dance that I find most fascinating. It's as if they are Meryl and Steve hanging out over their MacBooks with some cocoa and chocolate chips, looking for the romance (in dance) again. Little do they know that not only is Jane's cue coming up, but so is mine. I have the possibility to be Alec Baldwin --- all hirsute, louche, and ready at any moment to steal the show. But, let's face it; I'm not trying to mimic Alec Baldwin, though I do know how to work a cue...

Since 2007 I've been considering in my own work some of the conditions that would make "dancing" possible from a place of contemporaneity - that is, bearing in mind the traps of intoxication, absurdism, and emptiness outlined earlier. For me, this has involved a close consideration of the subtext of competition onstage and in the contemporary dance community; the possibility, or not, of sincerity on the contemporary stage; and historical revisionism at the religious site of contemporary dance's break from the image of the modern dancing body. Likewise, it is perhaps this pursuit of a thinking body that has propelled many contemporary choreographers to erase the image of "dance" from the form itself. (And we will continue to see a proliferation of this third and fourth generation "nondance" especially as the visual art scene and discourse has taken up performance and choreography.)

"certain difficulties, certain joy" is not about producing the emotion of joy in an audience nor is it about representations of joy on the stage. It is more about works which assert that alternative possibilities exist to reroute our perceptions of dance and its relationship to "dancing" and dancing's relationship to a body that either moves out of and/or into pleasure and joy. In this discussion, the works and artists that interest me presently do not negate the thinking processes that filled the contemporary stage in the '90s and beyond. These artists are fully aware of the dangers of spectacle, yet are not willing to say "no" all the time. I am not objective, I must admit. These works align with my own work and its propensity toward replacing the 'No' of Yvonne Rainer's "No Manifesto" (often overprescribed and uncleverly interpreted by those third and fourth gen nondancers) with "Maybe." In "maybe," joy is not far off, but neither is it guaranteed. In 'maybe,' joy is not glamorous, but neither is neutrality. In "maybe," the possibility exists to let the romance of "dance" back in the door, but there exists neither a warning to watch out for pedestrians nor a blinking beware sign that reads "NO PEDESTRIANS." We flirt with the iconic image of the conventional blissed-out dancing body --- head thrown back, celebrant *au courage* --- and even if it doesn't appear, the notion is somehow essential to the production of new icons.

Among many other things, the works presented play with the problematics of this presence-absence. Some play consciously and some not, but the referent remains, and the unfolding of such conditionality makes for a performative theater. It is difficult to name and perhaps less certain to capture in words, but from my thoughts and notes, it is by framing choreography through architecture, language, romanticism, and/or objecthood that these works shift how we perceive dance as belonging to joy, fabulousness, awesomeness, celebration, the fantastic, pleasure, and/or the ecstatic; and how we consciously and unconsciously attach to the signifying phallus in its many guises and show stealing numbers. By working within the aforementioned frameworks, the artists in "certain difficulties, certain joy" underscore a discussion not about "is it dance?" but "how is it that we grow to love and hate... and hate and love...dancing in its own medium?" In other words, they settle into the proverbial moment after Meryl Streep leaves the room.