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Rudy Burckhardt,
*Untitled, 23rd street and
6th ave, 1970-78.*
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I am interested at the moment in recalling to you how it looks when one sees dancing as non-professionals do, in the way you yourselves I suppose look at pictures, at buildings, at political history or at landscapes or at strangers you pass on the street. Or as you read poetry.

In other words the way you look at daily life or at art for the mere pleasure of seeing, without trying to put yourself actively in it, without meaning to do anything about it. I am talking about seeing what happens when people are dancing, seeing how they look. Watching them and appreciating the beauty they show. Appreciating the ugliness they show if that's what you see. Seeing this is beautiful, this ugly, this is nothing as far as I can see. As long as you pay attention there is always something going on, either attractive or unattractive, but nobody can always pay attention, so sometimes there is nothing as far as you can see, because you have really had enough of seeing; and quite often there is very little, but anyway you are looking at people dancing, and you are seeing them while they dance.

—Edwin Denby

(Excerpt from the 1965 essay, "Dancers, Buildings and People in the Streets")

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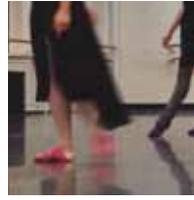
Sara Mearns and
Rashaun Mitchell
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DANCERS
BUILDINGS AND
PEOPLE IN THE STREETS

DANSPACE PROJECT PLATFORM 2015

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Top to bottom, left to right: Gretchen Smith, Silas Riener, Rashaun Mitchell, Sara Mearns, Kaitlyn Gilliland, Nathan Vendt, Jillian Peña, Jodi Melnick, Adrian Danchig-Waring, Will Rawls
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THE ACCIDENTAL CURATOR: WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF. . .?

Judy Hussie-Taylor



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It's curious how we arrived here, how Claudia La Rocco and I ended up working together on Platform 2015: *Dancers, Buildings and People in the Streets*, the ninth of Danspace Project's guest curated Platforms since 2010. It was unexpected, I think, for both of us.

Until two years ago, Claudia and I knew each other only in our formal capacities: Judy as Presenter, Claudia as Critic. In November, 2012 while standing in line at the MoMA cafe during Ralph Lemon's "Some sweet day" series she told me she was going to be easing out of writing dance criticism for the *New York Times* moving forward. That brief conversation became a series of conversations which eventually led to this Platform.

Her enthusiasm for bringing together dance's divergent worlds—ballet, modern and experimental dance, uptown/downtown and so on—aligned with my own interests. I am sure neither of us thought of her as a "curator" in those conversations. But her ideas were at-once catholic and particular, her observations keen, her care and curiosity for and about dancers abundant.

Over this same time period, I had been thinking about Danspace's 40th anniversary. Almost exactly one year after our original conversation, while taking the Q train from South Brooklyn to the East Village, I had an Edwin Denby flash. Denby (1903 – 1983) was a poet and devotee of dance and dancers and was a widely respected critic of ballet, modern and vernacular dance. In the 1960s he was actively engaged with New York School poets and painters. In the 1970s he regularly attended performances in Soho lofts, at Judson Church and at St. Mark's (before it was home to Danspace Project). He was a regular at the Byrd Hoffmann School, occasionally performing in Robert Wilson's work. Danspace lighting designer Carol Mullins told me she played Edwin in one of Wilson's productions in the '70s! And, as rumor has it, Edwin played a role in Danspace's founding, encouraging poet Larry Fagin (who co-founded Danspace Project with Barbara Dilley and Mary Overlie) to provide the post Judson, post Grand Union artists with a venue of their own. I invited Claudia to meet with me and brought with me a copy of Denby's "Dancers, Buildings & People in the Streets." I thought Denby was some kind of portal into all of the issues we had been discussing.

(1-2)
Jodi Melnick and
Sterling Hyltin
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Some days later I received this email from Claudia:

Dear Judy,

When you approached me about the possibility of curating a Platform, somehow following the themes of ballet and modern dance that we've been battling around for awhile now, I was both thrilled and overwhelmed: where to begin?!

And then I found these two paragraphs on the Poetry Project site—you had, I believe, mentioned them, after you showed me the Denby book as a possible starting point. I didn't at the time see Denby as a clear organizing principle. But actually seeing these words—reading about the three nodal points, and about Denby as a sort of critical connective tissue—sharpened my thinking around how I would want to proceed.

I would never posit myself as a Denby figure. He occupies too big a space in my imagination, for me to be comfortable with such a comparison. But, I do see how critics are uniquely positioned (and privileged) in New York to see a range of worlds within the larger dance world. And that, were I to step into a curatorial role for a moment, it would not be so much as a tastemaker but as a connector, a matchmaker of sorts (though of course there is always the inescapable element of tastemaking, isn't there?).

And so, who would I want to bring together at Danspace? People from these three deeply experimental traditions: Judson, Cunningham, City Ballet ... the lines are muddied now, thick with other influences. But still so strong, and still so strongly related in their New York-ness. (December 10, 2013)

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Claudia has used this idea of the three nodal points of experimental dance making in the 1970s as a kind of score, certainly not positing that they were the only important experimental traditions of that time but more as a prompt to ask questions about such assumptions. We must acknowledge the absence of women and artists of color in this 1970s shuttling between experimental traditions. Alvin Ailey and Twyla Tharp are two giants thriving in the 1970s not included in this grouping. And there are many others who warrant recognition, retrospectives, reconsiderations and re-imaginings.

It turns out, Claudia's editorial acumen was transferrable to curating. We started meeting regularly, and soon brought in Emmanuel Iduma, a writer from Lagos, Nigeria, and a student at the School for the Visual Arts' MFA in Art Criticism and Writing where Claudia teaches. Without any prior knowledge of American dance or performance art from the 1970s, he threw himself into researching New York circa 1974. His contributions proved invaluable and we invited him to write an essay as well as be a contributing editor to this publication. Like Platform 2012: *Parallels*, curated by Ishmael Houston-Jones, the book has turned into a platform of its own in conversation with the live performative aspects of the Platform but which allows for idiosyncratic and diverse voices to be part of the mix.

While in Paris last September I visited the Centre Nationale de la Danse (CND). There I found a black and white post card which read: CREATION IS THE ACT OF EXCHANGE. What I hope this Platform offers is the

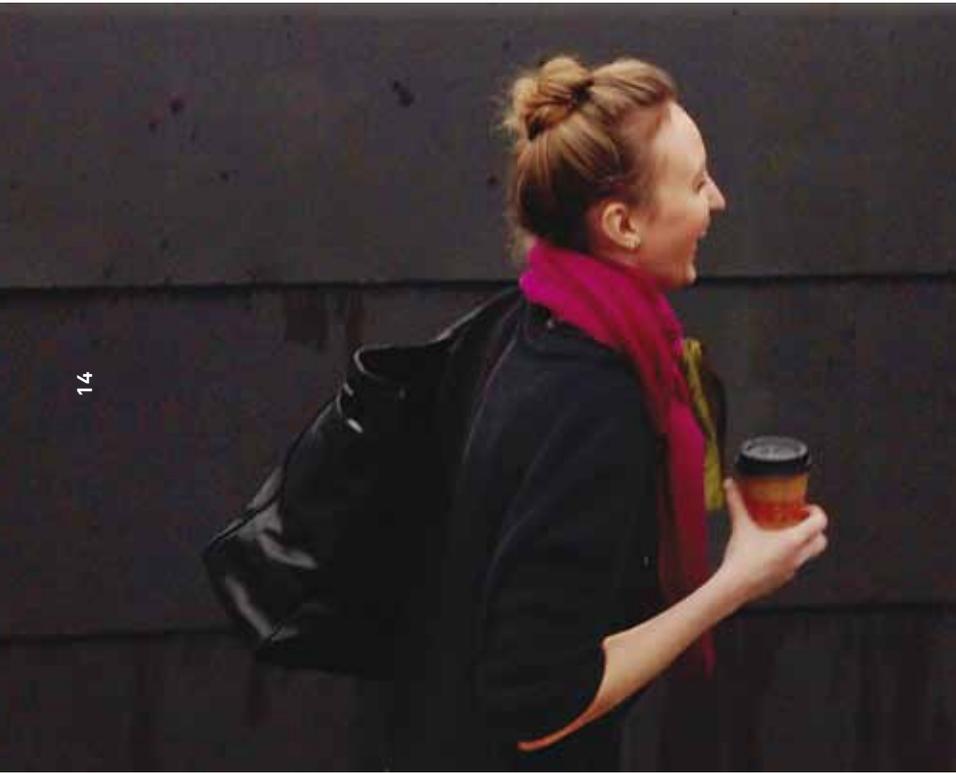
opportunity to exchange outside of our “silos” (as Claudia has often called our micro-worlds) to share histories, form new alliances and challenge our own belief systems. As she writes in her curatorial statement “A lot of what sparks my interest is curiosity. What would happen if...?”

Indeed, what will happen when we come together to exchange, perhaps to create something we can't yet name or know?

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Claudia La Rocco

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A few weeks ago, while trying to start this introduction, I wrote to Judy that “I have been stalling writing to you. First because yes, where to begin, but also because I think that on some level I don’t want to contextualize these works. I want them to spin around themselves and each other undisturbed.”

But. Maybe there are a few things to say.

1. This Platform developed out of two ongoing conversations between me and Judy: one about how poetry and dance intersect, and one about the lack of meaningful engagement between artists from ballet and contemporary dance. Judy came upon this little paragraph on the Poetry Project website, and became interested in the idea of Denby and the poet-critic as a possible framework:

Toward the end of 1974, a group of dancers calling themselves The Natural History of the American Dancer—Carmen Beuchat, Barbara Dilley, Suzanne Harris, Cynthia Hedstrom, Rachel Lew and Judy Padow—approached Larry Fagin (then Assistant Director of the Project) about the possibility of performing in the Sanctuary. Fagin was enthusiastic: he had been a keen dance-watcher for years (shuttling between New York City’s three nodal points of Balanchine, Cunningham and the Judson Dance Theater) and was one of many to credit Edwin Denby with having taught him how to look and see, and for allowing him to make connections between ballet and downtown dance.

2. I am not so interested in the idea of critic as judge. Of course judgment is often inescapable, and happily so ... but as an end point it makes for tedious criticism. However, the critic as connector (which is of course the same thing poets try to do, I think, in different ways)—that is exciting. Denby was that for so many people. And so when Judy approached me about being a curator, something I have no experience with (so little, in fact, that I had to ask her after our meeting if she was actually intending for me to do this. Ha!), I glommed onto the idea of a critic as partially-informed connector between worlds that are, as Barbara Dilley puts it, so demanding that those truly steeped in them (in a way critics aren’t) often have no time to glance over at abutting worlds.

(1)
Kaitlyn Gilliland
© Devin Alberda

And so I responded to Judy's prompt by offering 12 artists from these nodal points (some of whom disagree with me about their relationships to these points), with the idea that they would work in six pairings, artificially created by me, a poor-man's Denby: Emily Coates and Yve Laris Cohen, Adrian Danchig-Waring and Silas Riener, Sterling Hyltin and Jodi Melnick, Kaitlyn Gilliland and Will Rawls, Sara Mearns and Rashaun Mitchell, Jillian Peña and Troy Schumacher. And then Pam Tanowitz, a full day for Pam ... because she is already working in all of these worlds. So we paired her with herself, both on and off the page.

A lot of what sparks my enthusiasm here is curiosity. What would happen if...? I don't have a sense of what these pairings will come up with, whether or not it will "work" or even will be meant to work, whether it will lead to new things ... so those possibilities, those known unknowns or whatever, are exciting in and of themselves.

Specific to all of the individuals in these pages is a bristly intelligence—for some this is structural, for some physical, for some linguistic, philosophical, and so on—but I see it in every one of them. And there isn't anything I like more than intelligence. Even when intelligence fails, it's interesting. (From the beginning, Judy and I talked about not wanting to create a situation in which artists had to make successful products. I'm not sure if we've done that, if we've created a good space for failure. I hope so.)

It's very easy for me to mix and match in this way, to get dazzled by ideas and possibilities—it's quite another thing for those tasked with responding to my prompts. To deal with the reality of creating something with somebody you've never met and maybe aren't particularly compatible with for an audience who has very set ideas about who you are and what you do, for example, or to tackle a muddled and private and fraught topic for a catalogue—this can be a lot to take on. And so, not that this need concern you, dear reader, but maybe it's interesting to know: I do feel very protective of these artists (who don't need my protecting!) and grateful to them for accepting this invitation.

3. It also might interest some of you to know that this was the invitation I gave to these 12 artists for their catalogue pages: "The idea is that this space is for you to represent yourselves in any way that you would like—it could be a single line of writing (by yourself or someone else) and one image, for example, or something closer to an essay that relates to some of the themes of the Platform (two pages equals roughly 1200 words, should any of you go the essay route). It could be a drawing, a series of questions, a choreographic score. It can be playful, serious, provocative, nonsensical ... really, it's up to you. This is your space, whether you think of it as a page or a performance, or both."

4. I do have considerable experience as an editor, and as a writer who works with editors ... my strategy with this book (working with a truly fantastic editorial cohort) was to reach out to smart people and give them adequate containers to fill with their thoughts. I tried not to micromanage. I tried not to let my ideas for what the pieces should be trample the ideas of those doing the heavy lifting.

I like logic that doesn't go in through the front door. Something Judy said once about content being delicate, that you have to give it awhile before you can frame it, otherwise the frame is too heavy, it makes the whole thing crash down. I think she was talking about curatorial frames, but the same could be said about criticism, or any sort of language that surrounds art—it's often so heavy-handed, so sure of itself (in its syntax and politics, even while proclaiming itself to be unsure). Certainly I think the poet-critic tradition can be heavy-handed and smarmy and overwrought, but at its best it does allow for uncertainty, and for distinctions that aren't about hierarchies (as I think John Yau said of Frank O'Hara's criticism).

We want so badly all the time to be on the right side of things. I see this in many of my young students, how conservative they are, how everything pushes them to be conservative. It takes real courage to resist that push, a sort of banal daily courage—when I think of the writers who first gave me that courage, and who still do, ill-behaved critics like O'Hara and Jill Johnston were high on that list. And I came to Denby through O'Hara, actually, not dance initially—he also didn't fit into a neat box. And a few years ago, as Judy and I were beginning this conversation, and as I was leaving a very secure position as a daily dance critic, he was another slippery figure who gave me courage, who maybe helped me to be a little less uptight.

5. In other words, maybe the most useful ones I can write here: this book isn't meant to explain anything. Especially not itself. It was made with a great deal of care, and delight, and hope. I love the generosity and particularities of these assembled, jostling voices, and hope you will, too.

Clr.

13:23, November 16, 2014