

Offerings on the Practice of luciana achugar

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I started making work out of a kind of frustration with contemporary dance being so formal in a way that was not dealing with theater as a frame, not dealing with why we are dancing or what is dance – not asking any questions, but just continuing a legacy. Postmodern dance is a beautiful aesthetic, but...¹

The first time I saw the work of luciana achugar was in August 2014 in Biel/Bienne Switzerland. I'd traveled there to write about "Le Mouvement," a Swiss sculpture exhibition tweaked by its curators to survey the history of performance in public spaces. I knew nothing about achugar or "The Pleasure Project," the piece she presented there. I simply showed up and stood in the crowd of people who'd gathered along the shopping street where the dance was to take place.

It was dusk, and the street was greasy, grimy from an afternoon rainfall. Waiting for the piece to begin, I saw a blonde woman sitting on the ground, propped against a lamppost. A bearded man was slumped against the wall of a storefront behind me. It was time for the dance to begin, but not much seemed to be happening. Slowly, certain bodies on the street began to distinguish themselves. Though dressed in street clothes, their minds and bodies seemed to be elsewhere—as though they were in a trance, an altered state, drugged or perhaps performing some kind of rite. Over the hour of the performance, they simmered to life: writhing, crawling, stomping, grunting, and finally jumping, running, and shouting, their energy boiling over into a kind of Dionysian release until they just disappeared into the night.

At the time, I didn't know what to make of what I'd just seen. How was this eruption, this disruption, a dance? Yet long after it was over, my mind would return to the scene, remembering tiny, vivid moments: a woman's platinum hair sweeping along the ground as she crawled in and out of the audience; the sound of another one's rings clanging against scaffolding she was hitting with her hands; a third leaping as gracefully as a gazelle across the grim, gray pavement. Looking over my notes from that night almost a year later, I read the following scribble:

Abandon AND abandoned? Dance evacuated for wilder, more feral forms?

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Months after seeing "The Pleasure Project," I am invited, through funny twists of fate, to write about achugar. On being asked, I remembered my confusion in Biel/Bienne, how I couldn't wrap my head completely around what she was doing, how I wasn't sure how I felt about the performance. There is a dusty adage that echoes in the brain of every writer who sits in front of a blank page, unsure of the task at hand: *write what you know*. There is a smarter adage, however, that considers that same uncertainty a propeller, not an obstacle: *write what you want to know*.

This year, achugar has been working on "An Epilogue for *OTRO TEATRO*: True Love," the third dance in trilogy that includes "The Pleasure Project" and "OTRO TEATRO," both dances from 2014. I'm invited to attend three days of rehearsals for "An Epilogue" at a residency at MANCC in Tallahassee, Florida, where on the final day achugar will present her work-in-progress to a small audience. With her are dancers/collaborators Michael Mahalchick, Jennifer Kjos, Molly

¹ Conversation with the artist, May 5, 2015.

Lieber, Nikima Jagudajev, Gillian Walsh, and Oren Barnoy, all who previously worked on both “The Pleasure Project” and “OTRO TEATRO” and are now deeply steeped in “the practice.” For this piece, achugar is also collaborating with Peter Jacobs, a performer/DJ who will spin house music during the show, a new element for the newest piece. The show will debut in early December at Gibney Dance as a co-presentation of The Chocolate Factory.

As it is with any artist pursuing a new form, achugar finds herself in these months of rehearsals mid-leap between here and her imagined there. In the pursuit of a new form, any artist—any creator—must face the certain appearance of chaos, of failure. Whether it’s beauty and transcendence in the appearance of chaos and failure, or whether they are in fact the outcomes of her pursuit depends on who’s looking, of course. It’s not news to anyone that an artist’s work has as many fates as it does eyes upon it. The same can be said for a writer.

A dance is a living thing, not only because it involves bodies as material, but also because it is fuelled in essence by the simple fact of aliveness. It is a focused, transitory experience of now. I can witness a dance; I can never see The Dance. The same cannot be said for a piece of writing.

To speak about an unspoken subject is to betray it, to mark it rather than allow it to remain plainly unexpressed. Susan Sontag admitted this transgression as implicit in the work of writing; Joan Didion referred to this catch as “selling somebody out.” By this reasoning: observation, thought, writing—all are acts of treason.

In the case of this piece of writing, the “unspoken subject” is of course a dance in the moments of its becoming, as it is still materializing. Guided by the desire to understand, observe, and preserve a complex, beautiful system of creation as it passes by, I quickly realized that such a record is about as true as pinning down a butterfly’s wings to try and understand what compels it to fly.

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Another note, this time from an early draft of this essay, working title: *In Praise of Treason*

achugar and I meet for a late lunch a few days before she leaves for her residency at MANCC. At this moment in time, she has been making her own work for over twelve years, having pushed her medium into unexplored territories, aligning it with forces outside the acceptable realms of contemporary dance. She is Uruguayan born and now Brooklyn based for twenty years. If in the interest of expedience a writer can reduce all the varied lessons of an artist’s life into a single strand of knowledge that pulls her forward, let this be it: she grew up the daughter of Marxist Catholics who fled to Venezuela when she was four and a half years old. Oppression versus expression, whether political, spiritual, sexual, aesthetic, or otherwise: this tension—this dynamic—has become the central nervous system that charges her ideas and propels her dances time and time again.²

² For an excellent overview of luciana achugar’s work-to-date, see: Steinwald, Michèle. “luciana achugar: Reclaiming Pleasure and Revealing Labor (Equality).” Walker Art Center Blog. June 3, 2013. <http://blogs.walkerart.org/performingarts/2013/06/03/luciana-achugar-reclaiming-pleasure-and-revealing-labor-equality/>

Around 2014, achugar began to more boldly reimagine how a dance could be made, how a choreographer could work not only on the development of her own aesthetic, but how she might rewrite the choreographic process entirely. Her pursuit was prompted by sharp questions. How to buck dance's traditional hierarchy of choreographer and company, of an artist and the bodies in her service? How to refuse dance's complicity with capitalist modes of production? How to puncture Postmodernism's legacy of the neutral body? How to tap into dance's primal driving forces, to release its ferocity and potency and magic?

A great part of our conversation that day focused on "the practice," an essential gesture, a kind of ordinary choreographic directive that achugar has been working with throughout this trilogy of dances. What I learn is that "The Pleasure Project" was the first public presentation of this gesture, which she has developing and deepening since that time. "The practice" began as a rehearsal technique, a way for the dancers to open up and prepare themselves for achugar's ideas. At first, she encouraged the dancers to begin from "a place of pleasure," to listen and attend to their bodies' sensations, following what simply feels good. No one needs to agree or speak of what their particular experience of pleasure is; is for the body to reveal, and for the dancer to honor. achugar gives me an example of how pleasure might be experienced, how "the practice" might begin:

*If my arm is resting on this table, then I might just feel the weight of my arm pressing against it, and notice how it feels good, or maybe just like pressure. I can decide it feels good to press against the table, so I do that. And maybe if I keep doing that, then it leads me to another movement.*³

After "the practice" became a part of the rehearsal process, she became interested in how it could function as a means of production, as a way to rethink the way in which dance is created. Empowering the dancers to follow their bodies' desires rather than perfect a choreographer's dictations would naturally deepen their involvement in the process of creation. As well, if a dance is to materialize from a particular now-moment of feeling and being and exploring, it can never be exactly reproduced. Each iteration of a dance would be its own. Every body would be self-possessed. All dancers would be creators, working both singly and together to carve the space of dance. "I just feel like dance, to me, is really about *being*," achugar tells me. "My fascination with dance as a form has to do with how it isn't a representation—how it's the thing itself. How it's *us*."⁴ From here, achugar developed a manifesto of a kind, which she articulated for audiences of "OTRO TEATRO" in a quick yet commanding paragraph:

*To grow ourselves a new body. To give our body their voice back, with a practice of pleasure; to practice growing a body as one would grow a plant; a utopian body; a sensational body; a connected body; an anarchic body.....with a brain that melted down to the flesh, the blood, the bones, the guts, the skin...a body in pleasure with eyes that see without naming, they see without knowing...*⁵

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³ Conversation with the artist, May 5, 2015.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://lachugar.squarespace.com/projects/>

When the audience arrives to see “OTRO TEATRO” (“Other Theater”), achugar—wearing only a long, shimmering black veil draped from her head to her ankles—kisses their feet to welcome them. The dance begins opens with the choreographer alone onstage. The theater is dimly lit, and the mood is somber as she chants *un día, un día* (*one day, one day*). At the same time, she turns in place nearly half an hour until her presence becomes sharper, more pointed, almost aggressive. She stomps, she collapses, like an exhausted shaman. From there, the performance escalates, much as it did in “The Pleasure Project.” A dozen or so dancers seated in the audience begin to moan and move, stretch and shudder, as though overcome or possessed. Over the course of two hours, they descend from their places, taking over the stage, each performing moves that appear wild, ecstatic, disorienting, erotic, and invigorating. Clothes are shed, bodies freed. The only sounds to hear are those that the dancers make: chanting, stomping, clapping, crying out.

The dance doesn’t end so much as it is released. It fades, calms, as though a spell has been broken. As it winds down, the audience leaves but those who stay a while longer see achugar and the dancers creating a web out of brightly colored masking tape along the back wall and on the floor of the theater, as though perhaps mapping a new territory—as though the dance had been performed in preparation to reclaim this space, to repurpose the theater for another kind of presence.

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The first rehearsal of “An Epilogue” I attend is also the first rehearsal for Peter Jacobs, achugar’s collaborator and DJ. achugar brought him on not only because of his knowledge for House music and culture, but as well, Jacobs is a performer and theater maker in his own right, having begun his career as a friend and collaborator with Reza Abdoh. On this day, achugar and he decided that the music should start after she and the dancers had worked inside “the practice” for some time in silence. The rehearsal, as every one of achugar’s rehearsals, began with the dancers dropping into “the practice.” All find places in the studio space—on the floor, against the wall, wrapped in a curtain—and begin to allow their bodies to find their pleasure. From there, all follows a similar arc to that of “The Pleasure Project” and “OTRO TEATRO:” from meditative simmer to wild release.

When it came time for Jacobs to turn on the music that afternoon, it threw the dancers off. During a conversation between achugar and the dancers afterwards, Gillian Walsh confessed that she’d found the music disruptive, especially the first song that played – a remix of gospel singer Donnie McClurkin’s “We Fall Down.” She explained that it felt too heavy for the interiority, the intimacy of “the practice.” Others agreed.

I wrote in my notebook: *Why would music interrupt the build rather than assist it?*

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To an observer, “the practice” can be mysterious; its mechanics aren’t easily visible to the eye. When I ask some of the dancers what “the practice” feels like, they unanimously told me that their experience is only theirs; ultimately, it’s a very personal thing. It’s also not a solid, steady event, I learn. It’s permeable, porous, affected by context, mood, audience presence, hunger or fullness, thirst, injury, a wandering mind, or any number of sensations, much like a meditation practice. Also like a meditation practice, it’s meant to be a healing, empowering experience for the dancers. achugar talks about it as a means to strengthening a dancer’s physical,

psychological, and spiritual cores all at once. “Commit to the rigor of *not* creating the piece yet,” I hear her tell the dancers one day. “Instead, consider rehearsal a healing ritual.”

Molly Lieber articulates what achugar is encouraging the dancers to achieve as “a virtuosity of embodiment.” Of achugar’s directive to “build a new body,” she tells me: “It’s like we are a kind of craftspeople, and this is a very specific craft. My body has changed. It’s become more sensitive, and it’s become stronger in certain ways.” Michael Mahalchick, one of achugar’s closest collaborators, describes it as an experience that’s “good for the soul. “When you’re in ‘the practice’ and you’ve gotten very deep,” he explains, “you suddenly feel free, free in a way you don’t get to feel all the time.”

“‘The practice’ is such a gift,” says Jennifer Kjos, who has been working with achugar for over ten years. She tells me that it has, as strange as it sounds, helped to heal her body. The license achugar gives the dancers to follow the body’s impulses, to express its being as it is and not as it should be—this approach allowed Kjos to remain dancing though she suffered a stress fracture earlier in the year. “To have the time to get all your juices flowing, to get your body where you want it to be,” she explained, “the pain would lessen the more I did luciana’s material. The healing: it’s for real.”

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To actually shift your experience of your body and become another body, you can only do this through time. This is what duration is about: transformation.

achugar thinks about the audience quite a lot, though not in terms of their opinions; rather, she wants viewers to experience something alongside the dancers, to connect with what they’re seeing regardless of what they think about it—to be moved, in some way. By bringing a DJ into the space of “An Epilogue,” she is hoping that the audience will dance too, or at least feels the impulse to dance. “I don’t think everyone has to join in,” she clarifies. “I don’t think the work is necessarily a failure if they don’t dance with us. I want them to feel that they *want* to.”

In the live arts, the quote—passive viewer—unquote is perhaps the most deeply rooted and least examined myth of all. What’s more, attention is rarely afforded the status of art form, encouraged as a craft to be practiced, a pursuit in and of one’s self. Generally it is acknowledged that attention has *span* and *focus*, but we rarely speak or hear of its *depths*. If Roland Barthes famously pronounced in 1967 that from the death of the author springs “the birth of the reader,” what analogous proclamation can be made by the live arts regarding “the birth of the audience?”

Sitting in achugar’s rehearsals, I return to this idea over and over again: although her work invites participation, it is more roundly a call for a reformed practice of attention—for a developed sensitivity and refinement of the art of being an audience. If part of her proposal is that no dance will ever be performed the same way, it is imperative that the audience attend to it as a singular experience. If the dancers are autonomous creators within a shared commitment to building a single piece, the audience must become aware that the movements emanate from within the dancers.

It is not just for an artist to propel art forward; the audience too must carve out a new space for it to happen. They might recalibrate their senses, uncover an empathic and creative spectatorship, and work alongside achugar and the dancers to better see the vision before them.

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While I'm in Tallahassee, I begin reading Clarice Lispector's 1964 novel *The Passion According to G.H.* In a short paragraph that's part dedication, part prescription, she addresses herself "To Potential Readers," a precise yet generous naming of who, if anyone, will continue turning the pages. In an unusual move for a prefatory note, Lispector aims her pen at the reader she's after, rather than introduce the text to come:

People who know that an approach—to anything whatsoever—must be carried out gradually and laboriously, that it must traverse even the very opposite of what is being approached. They and they alone will, slowly, come to understand that his book exacts nothing of anyone. Over time, the character G.H. came to give me, for example, a very difficult pleasure; but it is called pleasure.

Though genteel, Lispector's point is also sharp: her reader must possess a certain sensitivity to the labors of creation, open themselves to a sensibility that 'exacts nothing' from them. For silently stowed inside the idea of "potential reader" is the possibility of "the potential text." Between the book and the reader, she hints, lies the true work—and, perhaps for the reader, the experience of *a very difficult pleasure*.

I mark this idea, hoping it will come in handy when writing this essay.

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The night before the final presentation, I go with achugar and the dancers to have dinner nearby during a break from rehearsal. Jacobs stays behind to play records and rehearse building and arcing the beats. All day, he and achugar were still trying to decide when the music should come in, so that it would give the dancers an element to tap into rather than, as it had been on the first try, to distract them.

"Why House music?" I ask achugar, wondering how the genre relates to inclusivity, to healing, and to "the practice." She tells me that this is the music she danced to in the clubs when she first arrived in New York twenty years ago, and that although it has its own culture, its own identity, those clubs were always open to everyone. "It's a kind of no-no in the dance world to dance to the beat," she continues, "it's thought of as too simple, too superficial. But it isn't trivial to just dance to the music. It's actually really profound. To feel the rhythm, to dance to the rhythm, to keep that constant beat? To me it's touching on our essential connection to music that's so primal, so ancient."

When we return from dinner, we walk into the rehearsal space and the music is thumping through the speakers. Jacobs is in high form and, rather than stop him, achugar and the dancers begin "the practice" that night to the music. "There was something on a cellular level," achugar

remembered later. “You feel the energy and the vibration; the presence of the music is filling the space. The space is thick with this music. That’s when I realized, *This is it.*”

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On the day of achugar’s public presentation at MANCC, achugar talked with the Director Carla Peterson about whether or not chairs should be provided for the audience. achugar wanted the attendees to feel free to move about the space, to change their vantage points as they wished, to immerse themselves as far as they liked in this center-less dance. “I don’t want people to be physically uncomfortable,” she clarified, “I just want them to understand they’ve got a lot of agency here.”

The dancers gather in the performance space a few hours before the presentation is to begin. They’re tired, stiff. Rehearsal had lasted the night before until one in the morning, and sleep is tough for some. “After all that talk of healing,” achugar sighs, “now we’re all destroyed.”

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When the audience arrives, they enter the space alongside the dancers. The music is playing, and pounding rhythms fill the room. The dancers each take a place on the floor, and begin “the practice.” achugar stands below one of the speakers, jogging her legs and moving her hips to the beat. Gillian and Michael lie down, stretch out, in a pose that looks as though they’re ready to absorb what’s happening. To me, the music at first seems at odds with the dancers’ moods. They look to be in a contemplative mode, but as the time passes, and Peter continues to build the rhythms around them, the energy slowly amps itself until the dancers are all on their feet, embodying the beat. The dance began to take shape, though there was no arc to follow, there was so much to see.

I took no notes during the presentation, deciding to let memory work a little harder this time. The details that have remained in my brain: Michael spins and spins, arms held wide like wings; Oren puts on a long green shirt and dances club style, while Nikima puts on an audience member’s platform sandals, and kicks like a colt, long-limbed and powerful, across the stage. Mirroring happens: Molly and Jennifer begin to step in unison, creating a repeated form at the back of the space, while Nikima, Oren, and luciana stand facing each other, in relevé with their arms overhead, holding themselves as long as possible. Gillian jogs around the stage to the beat; luciana and Molly entangle themselves and roll on the floor as a single body; Jennifer walking in time around the perimeter with Michael sometimes ahead of her, sometimes behind.

The energy in the room was combustible, and as I looked around at the audience, I could see them keeping time, tapping their feet, looking as though they might at any minute get up and join in.

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Weeks after we return from MANCC, achugar and I meet again. She and the dancers had since been rehearsing “An Epilogue” at The Chocolate Factory in Long Island City, and would soon move to Peter Jacobs’s basement so they could continue to practice with the music. She tells me that as she sees it now, the final performance will last anywhere from four to five hours, the duration necessary to build an experience between dance and transcendence. “I want to transform

the audience's bodies through duration as well," she says, "There will be ones that will stay, or maybe go and come back. Maybe they'll succumb to it, or give in." She pauses for a moment. "Or not," she smiles—allowing uncertainty to take its rightful place in the absolute pleasure of what it means to be an artist.

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