



MADISON MOORE

## WALK FOR ME

### *Postmodern Dance at the House of Harrell*

The last thing you want when you compete in a vogue ball is to get chopped—especially when cash prizes, reputations, and trophies are at stake. “You have to be fierce because if you’re not, you’re going to get chopped,” the postmodern dance choreographer Trajal Harrell told me.<sup>1</sup> For those uninitiated to the peculiar rhythms and intonations of black gay slang, and ball culture slang more specifically, to get chopped is just as bad as it sounds. On the floor of a vogue battle it means to be disqualified, to be eliminated from the competition altogether. You can be chopped for a number of reasons. Maybe the other dancers did a better job than you or maybe your look just wasn’t *together*. Either way, “if you show up and if your shoes aren’t ready, you know you could be *chopped* and you may not get in the door.” That seems straightforward enough.

For Trajal Harrell, the only way to keep afloat in the literal and metaphorical competition—to avoid getting chopped—is to serve: to bring your fullest sense of self to the stage and to the moment of performance. “You have to be ready to serve it,” he insists. *Serving*, a term specific to house ball culture, is about the compelling power of black queer performance, a tradition that seasons much of Harrell’s choreography and performance works. Serving is a battle with yourself, a radical challenge to constantly deliver a compelling performance that upsets everything we think we already knew. It works by interrogating, if not wholly transcending, nearly every accepted notion, social convention, rule, or cultural practice.

At first glance it might seem odd to begin a critical essay on the importance of Harrell’s works by kiki-ing, or gossiping, about serving and getting chopped. But that’s what’s so unique about his artistic palette. The central question that has framed the majority of Harrell’s practice highlights a fascinating merge of two geographically disparate yet similar universes: “What would have happened in 1963 if someone from the ball scene in Harlem had gone downtown to perform alongside the early postmoderns at Judson Church?” The year 1963 is significant, of course, because it is the year after the seminal *Concert of Dance #1* at the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village,

Trajal Harrell’s  
*Antigone Sr./Twenty*  
*Looks or Paris Is*  
*Burning at the Judson*  
*Church (L)*, New  
York Live Arts, 2012.  
Photo: Ian Douglas

a presentation of postmodern dance pieces organized by students in Robert Dunn's experimental choreography course who were determined to show their work after being denied space uptown at the more mainstream 92nd Street Y.

Harrell's question about what would have happened if a voguer had danced at the Judson Church marks an impossibility. And it's no matter, because Harrell is not interested in recreating historical fiction but in thinking critically about the potential of postmodern dance. "We can't go back to 1963," the choreographer has said; "if we use our imaginations, performance can be the place where we do invite this impossibility. But it's an impossibility that invites us to rethink the possibilities we can have today." Serving, for one thing, might have been impossible at Judson Church. "[It's] not very Judson. It's not very postmodern dance, because they believe in a certain kind of neutrality and a kind of effacement. Through voguing I was able to critique that."

Harrell's work has appeared internationally, in the world's leading museums, galleries, and experimental art festivals, everywhere from the Kitchen and MOMA to the Institute of Contemporary Art (Boston). Harrell was raised in Douglas, Georgia, a tiny town in southeastern Georgia about a hundred miles away from the Florida border, and came to dance as a young boy by way of theater and gymnastics, which he pursued through high school. Harrell went to Yale, where he graduated in 1990 with a BA in American studies, an interdisciplinary program encouraging students to think critically about gender, sexuality, and sociocultural processes. During his time at Yale, Harrell did theater and studied with David Herskovits, who introduced him to director Anne Bogart's *The Viewpoints Book*. The experience afforded the young choreographer an important creative revelation. "It kind of brought me back to my body and to the kind of training I'd done as a young gymnast. I became very enamored by the process of movement, and I didn't want to speak on the stage anymore, I just wanted to move," Harrell remembers. Harrell began to create movement-based work, though the body of his interdisciplinary output frequently mixes movement with song and spoken word.

After graduating, Harrell moved to Los Angeles to pursue an acting career, even securing an agent. "I was going out for *Boyz n the Hood* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. I was up for that gig—not Will Smith, but the other kid on *Fresh Prince* . . . 'the cousin.'"2 Realizing quickly that LA was not for him, Harrell spent time at the Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, Rhode Island, where he received a scholarship. At Trinity, he was able to pick up the work he had started as an undergraduate, a kind of dance-theater-poetry-based movement à la music video. At the time, a number of his colleagues in the company told him that the works he was creating weren't dance and that they weren't really theater, either. "A lot of people said, 'Oh, what you're doing is very performance art.' I asked my dance teacher to look at what I was doing and I asked her, 'Do you think it's dance or do you think it's performance art?' She looked at me with the most haughty glance, and she snottily said: 'Well, I think it's performance art.' And I said, 'Well, I think I want it to be dance,' and she said, 'Well, I think you need to study dance.'"



Harrell took her advice. The next day he dropped out of the conservatory specifically to study dance. He was already in Providence, and Brown University was receptive to his work and allowed him to audit classes there. He then pursued an intensive course at the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance in New York, but the city was a bit too much for him to handle. And just like that, Harrell, who even today is always on the move, packed up and left for San Francisco to study at the San Francisco Art Institute. But he didn't find the kind of critical relationship to dance he was looking for there, so he finally decided to move back to New York, where he was able to score a residency with Movement Research, a leading laboratory for the investigation of dance and movement-based forms.

At the end of his residency, in 1999, Harrell saw his first vogue ball. This was the decade that Jenny Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* shook the world; the decade of the explosive publication of Judith Butler's seminal text *Gender Trouble*; right in the thick of the decade of the supermodels—Naomi, Cindy, Christy, and Linda; the rise of America's first mainstream celebrity drag queen, RuPaul; and the age of the club kids and Peter Gatien's psychedelic Limelight nightclubs. The time was ripe.

Trajal Harrell's  
*(M)imosa/Twenty  
Looks or Paris Is  
Burning at the Judson  
Church (M)*, Avignon  
Festival, 2011. Photo:  
Paula Court

## CATEGORY IS: VOGUING IN CONTEXT

As a creative, expressive form, voguing and house ball culture have never been more popular. Today vogue balls happen not just in New York, Detroit, or Atlanta—they pop up in Paris and Berlin, London and Washington, DC. Underground rap artists like Azealia Banks and Zebra Katz reference voguing and ball culture with their music and lyrics. The gay fetish-gear retail outlet Slick It Up sells a tank top that reads “Butch Queen/First Time in Drags/At a Ball,” a direct quotation from one of the categories in *Paris Is Burning*. And in some way, every episode of RuPaul’s *Drag Race* feels like an homage to *Paris Is Burning*. This is the cultural space where Harrell’s innovative voguing dance work fits in.

Jonathan David Jackson was perhaps the first scholar of dance to approach voguing as a pure dance form. For him, the dance form contains four aesthetic imperatives: “1) Stay true to the elements of Voguing; 2) Sense a close rhythmic relationship with musical or vocal accompaniment; 3) Become possessed or emotionally invested without actually fighting and 4) distinguish an individual style.”<sup>3</sup> At its simplest, voguing is a style of dance that borrows the language of its iconography and movement from poses seen in high fashion magazines. Voguing is, in other words, posing *as* dance: liquid moves characterized by long arms, femininity, fluidity, hand gestures that frame the face, hard angles and awkward positioning of the body. In contemporary voguing, however, the moves are less feminine because the top vogue beat producers, DJs like Vjuan Allure and MikeQ, serve hard beats that have more in common with hip-hop than did the old way of voguing. These moves are much more aggressive, evidenced by the “dying swan” or “suicide dip” where voguers begin a balletic pirouette and come out of it by suddenly slamming their backs against the floor on the beat.

Though not a member of the ball scene and not a voguer himself, Harrell is best known for his seminal series of works *Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church*, an enormous aesthetic proposition in seven parts that questions the relationship between postmodern dance and drag ball culture—Downtown and Uptown. Though unified by a singular title, the *Twenty Looks* series comes in seven different sizes—(XS), (S), (M), (Jr.), (L), (Made-to-Measure) or (M2M), and (XL). The inspiration to name his pieces according to size stems from the architect Rem Koolhaas’s book *S M L XL* and David Hammons’s *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, a performance piece where the artist sold different-sized snowballs on a street in Manhattan.

It was playing with a lot of things—who has access to means of production and distribution and how do you then subvert that if you know that what you bring that’s unique might not come back with you? On a formal level, it’s playing with scale. And playing off the certain marketing ideas around how to relate to different audiences, that your audience grows in scale, and what are some of the tools you can use to negotiate that.



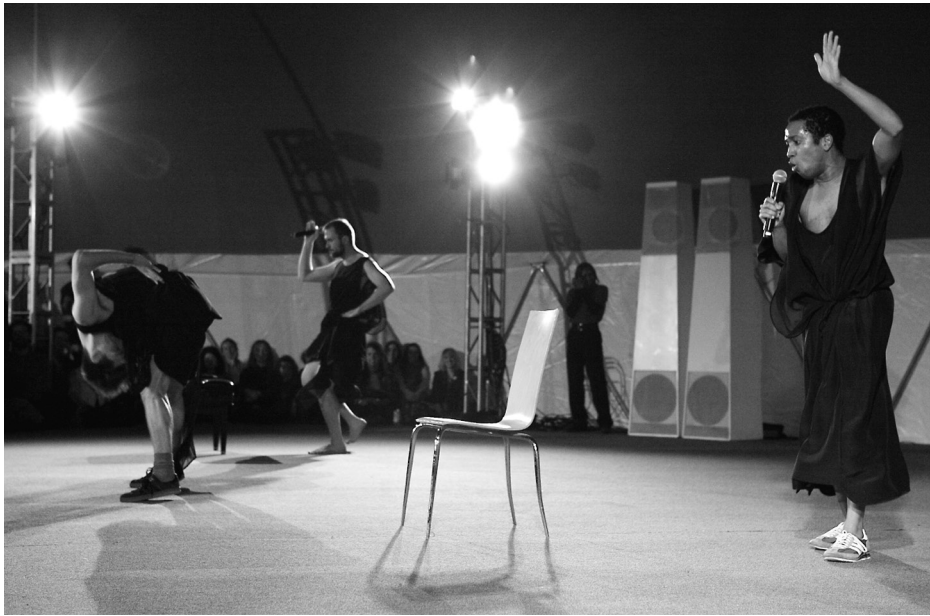


The central question this work poses, to cite it again, is: “What would have happened in 1963 if someone from the ball scene in Harlem had gone downtown to perform alongside the early postmoderns at Judson Church?” By the time Harrell reached the late parts of the series, he had formulated an inverse: “What would have happened if one of the early postmoderns from Judson Church had gone uptown to perform in the voguing ballroom scene?”—a question he posed in his recent piece *Judson Church Is Ringing in Harlem (Made-to-Measure)/Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church (M2M)*.

These questions have a rich history. In New York City, the history of the drag ball stretches back to late nineteenth-century Harlem and Greenwich Village, where female and male impersonators staged lavish drag contests—the most sickening, or outrageous, being the yearly Hamilton Lodge Ball, which first appeared in 1869 and extended through the 1930s. George Chauncey writes that in the late nineteenth century, Harlem was the place where black gay men could gather socially.<sup>4</sup> These men were

Trajal Harrell’s  
*Judson Church Is  
Ringing in Harlem  
(Made-to-Measure)/  
Twenty Looks or Paris  
Is Burning at the Judson  
Church (M2M)*, MOMA  
PSI, New York, 2013.  
Photo: Miana Jun

*Judson Church Is  
Ringing in Harlem  
(Made-to-Measure)/  
Twenty Looks or Paris  
Is Burning at the Judson  
Church (M2M)*, MOMA  
PS1, 2013. Photo:  
Charles Roussel



frequently unwelcome in majority-white night spots downtown and managed to transform Harlem into an entire gay social world, much to the titillation of moneyed whites downtown. The uptown Hamilton Lodge Ball did much to frame that unique gay world. Every year, hundreds of drag queens, female and male impersonators, and thousands of spectators, most of them black, but also many of them whites from downtown, gathered for the spectacle.<sup>5</sup> By 1925, there were an estimated eight hundred people in attendance at the Hamilton Lodge Ball; in 1930 there were fifteen hundred.<sup>6</sup>

Great parties almost always start underground, but by the time word gets around they are splashed on the front pages of newspapers and memorialized in literature. The balls were so popular that in his 1963 autobiography *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes described them as “spectacles in color”:

Strangest and gaudiest of all Harlem spectacles in the '20's, and still the strangest and gaudiest, is the annual Hamilton Club Lodge Ball at Rockland Palace Casino. It is the ball where men dress as women and women dress as men. During the height of the New Negro era and the tourist invasion of Harlem, it was fashionable for the intelligentsia and social leaders of both Harlem and the downtown area to occupy boxes at this ball and look down from above at the queerly assorted throng on the dancing floor, males in flowing gowns and feathered headdresses and females in tuxedos and box-back suits.<sup>7</sup>

The drag ball, from which the tradition of voguing emerges, has for more than 140 years, then and now, been the space where queer people of color have removed themselves from the gendered and racist politics of everyday life and created their own unique social worlds and aesthetic interventions. This history frames the specificity of Harrell's work. Though we know the history of the drag ball itself, the specific origins of voguing as a dance form are not certain. One story suggests that Pepper LaBeija, who appears in *Paris Is Burning*, had a long-standing interest in couture and high fashion and incorporated fashion modeling and poses into his performance. LaBeija studied runway walks and recreated these gestures on the dance floor, which led others to mimic him, and his unique moves eventually caught on as a popular form of expression.<sup>8</sup> But you know what happens when there are too many personalities, too many legendary queens in the house: contradictory sources of origin. A competing story suggests that Paris Dupree—hence “Paris is burning”—was caught dancing in a nightclub with a *Vogue* magazine in her bag. In the middle of her dancing she took the magazine out, opened it to a page and posed like that model on the beat, turning to another page and stopping on the beat again, just like the model in the picture. A queen quickly approached Paris and did a pose, and she responded with another pose. And there they were—each one trying to outserve the other through posing as dance.<sup>9</sup>

As the art critic Craig Owens once observed, “To strike a pose is to present oneself to the gaze of the other as if one were already frozen, immobilized—that is, *already a picture*.”<sup>10</sup> The pose-off as a competition or battle of movements frames the iconography of Harrell's phenomenal work *Antigone Jr.* in the *Twenty Looks* series. In one intimate performance of the piece, Harrell and the beautiful Thibault Lac occupy the small space of an imaginary runway, Harrell dressed in black, Lac dressed in gray. “When we first began doing the kind of runway walking, we treated it like ballet. How do you walk on a runway? Where do you put your foot? We watched the tapes and really imitated the girls and really treated it as if it was ballet,” Harrell remembered.

Initially seated with the audience—a recurring Trajal Harrell performance trope meant to destabilize the spectators' experience—seconds into “I Want Your Love” by Chromatics, he lunges forward out of the audience on an invisible catwalk, his back to the crowd. When the heavy beat strikes, Harrell jerks his entire body around and walk-jumps to the beat of the music. There's not much space. He is feminine; the arms are loose and flail around, creating invisible brushstrokes. His body feels malleable and wavy. When the first verse strikes, Lac moves forward out of the audience for his chance at the representational space of the runway. Walking on the tips of his toes, either *en pointe* or on invisible high heels, Lac's movements feel much less free than Harrell's. Palms resting on the front of his body, where pockets normally go, the shoulders are raised and each movement is tight, wound up, intentional, hard. Muscles tightened, each of his moves hits on the classic four-on-the-floor dance beat. Harrell, for





*Antigone Sr./Twenty  
Looks or Paris Is  
Burning at the Judson  
Church (L), New  
York Live Arts, 2012.  
Photo: Ian Douglas*

his turn, continues to move freely throughout the space, and Lac prepares for his quasi solo within this duet. Lac, who already looks like a model, serves serious face, and his hand gestures frequently frame it. He contorts his upper body, placing his hands on his hips, thumbs facing the audience, and lunges his elbows forward to create that iconic butterfly-shaped haute couture pose, and then moves into and out of it to the beat of the music.

The effect is marvelous because it encapsulates what happens when high fashion movement is brought to postmodern dance, and what postmodern dance can offer high fashion movement. As the performance continues, the audience has the sense of watching a vogue battle, a ballet, postmodern dance, *and* a high fashion photo shoot all at once. For Harrell, posing is dance.

The relationship between dance and fashion movement is not accidental, particularly since a number of fashion models as early as the 1960s were known for their spirited dance moves on the catwalks. Contemporary Canadian top model Coco Rocha, who is known for posing as many as one hundred times in less than a minute, was celebrated for her Irish dance skills before she appeared on the covers of major magazines and walked for the most important designers. In 2007, Rocha opened the Jean Paul Gaultier runway show with an Irish jig down the catwalk. The connection between modeling and dance is not so far removed after all.

Foreseeing the connection between postmodern dance movement and the worlds of high fashion is precisely what makes Harrell's work so crucial. Voguing, a dance form tied to poorer communities who use the street as public performance space, and the runway walk, which is of course tied to commercialism and the sale of expensive commodities, proposes a ripe theoretical intersection. On the one hand, the movement on a ballroom floor is more creative and is a means to its own end. Reputations are at stake, and it is certainly important to do well on the ball floor but because the ball world is its own fictitious, queer subcultural universe, balls have a means to their own end. Where high fashion modeling is concerned, however, everything is at stake. During a fashion show you have to *sell* the look to ensure that buyers, bloggers, and editors, as well as shoppers, take interest in the commodities put forth. Millions of dollars are on the line. The machinery is much bigger.

But even Harrell understands the optics of selling and uses it in his performance. In the piece described above, Lac is clearly the star. Not just because he is beautiful, but because the movement story he is telling is much more captivating to watch. His moves are definitive, decisive, and he manages to embrace rigidity and fluidity in one, whereas Harrell's performance in this work appears less self-assured, more stream-of-consciousness, less choreographed, and less virtuosic. Put bluntly, Lac is "dancing," even as he poses, whereas Harrell appears to be doing "not-dance." But what if that is precisely the collision he is proposing we think through?

#### VOGUE AND POSTMODERN DANCE

Harrell attended his first ball in 1999, but he didn't want to participate or draw creatively from any personal relationship to the community. "I looked but I was very clear that I didn't want to participate," he said. "I knew that I needed to stay very clear in terms of how I want to problematize my own position. I didn't want to gloss over that because I'm not from that culture. I did come from a very privileged educational background, and I thought it was very important that there wasn't a clear connection. I didn't want my relationship to it to be based in identity politics." What interested him the most about voguing was how it might help him push postmodern dance forward by questioning the Judson aesthetic. "The Judson aesthetic was kind of taking over. And it really felt like no one knew how to push forward."

But what precisely is the “Judson aesthetic,” and how did voguing help guide Harrell through his aesthetic dilemma? Judson’s branch of postmodern movement research extends from a group of dancers and choreographers who took an experimental, Zen-like dance seminar organized by Robert Dunn between 1960 and 1962. The class showcased the final results of their experiments, if they can in fact be called final, at the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village during the summer of 1962, to much fanfare and an audience of three hundred. This *Concert of Dance #1* took place in the sanctuary of the Judson Church, a community center known for its strong community engagement and its arts programs and for already being the site of “Happenings,” not to mention a gallery of pop art organized by Howard Moody that showed works by Jim Dine, Tom Wesselmann, and Claes Oldenburg.

It all started when a group of young choreographers—Steve Paxton, Marni Mahaffay, Simone (Forti) Morris, Paulus Berenson, and Yvonne Rainer—enrolled in Robert Dunn’s choreography class taught in Merce Cunningham’s studio at the Living Studio. Everyone in the course wanted to move beyond the strictures of modern dance. The seminar included both highly experienced and untrained dancers, and its lessons focused on collective, experimental processes. Dunn himself—the teacher—was not even a dancer or choreographer. This led to a deep sense of play and to explorations of freedom and chance movements within the choreography, as well as a questioning of what “dance” meant. Because the seminar was inclusive, and all the participants came from different backgrounds, technique and virtuosity were not as fruitful or interesting to the group as the overall movements themselves.<sup>11</sup>

Lessons were driven by thinking about process or about the invention of forms. According to Forti, one of the first assignments was to create a dance that included different body parts and different spaces, while moving either to the left or to the right. “You could end up, for example, with ‘eye, hand, neck; left, right; here, there.’ And then you would make up slips of paper for each option. So if you picked three combinations arbitrarily, you might get: ‘hand, right, there; eye, right, there; eye right, there.’ And you’d use those results as instructions, as a score to make a dance.”<sup>12</sup> This teaching style marked the unlearning of modern dance’s emphasis on expertise, training, and virtuosity. “The work that I did there was first of all to flush out all my ‘why-nots,’” Steve Paxton said. “‘Why not?’ was a catch-word at the time. It was a very permissive time.”<sup>13</sup> The “why-nots” led the choreography to feel unpolished and even “real.”

Perceiving the dialogue between the “realness” of voguing and the “realness” of postmodern dance was a key point of departure for Harrell. “I think that when I noticed the historical parallels between Judson and voguing, but also this kind of ironic relationship between voguing and the Judson idea of ‘realness,’” Harrell says, “I thought, ‘this is something that may have a real dynamic theoretically, and no one has ever looked at this.’”





The choreographer positions his work as a direct response to Yvonne Rainer's "NO Manifesto" from 1965—a canonical text in postmodern dance and the Judson aesthetic. The thing is direct and wastes no time, as manifestos usually go:

NO to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe no to the glamour and transcendency of the star image no to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved.<sup>14</sup>

The purpose of the manifesto was to revolutionize dance and bring it back to its essential elements, a question that has affected nearly every major art movement. Rainer's "NO Manifesto" shares a lot with similar antispectacle propositions that also appeared in the 1960s, namely, Daniel Boorstin's condemnation of celebrity culture and mass media in his classic work *The Image*, and *The Society of the Spectacle* by Guy Debord, whose aphoristic prose highlights the ways modern life has been fundamentally degraded by the spectacle, "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images."<sup>15</sup>

*Antigone Sr./Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church (L), American Realness Festival at Abrons Arts Center, New York, 2013. Photo: Ian Douglas*

But even though postmodern dance had called on the removal of the cult of personality and a return to form, when Harrell emerged on the dance scene in the 1990s, he felt that there had not been much movement since the 1960s and 1970s—hence his polemical question tying voguing to postmodern dance. “I wanted to push past Judson and at the same time give a critique of Judson that I thought was very important,” Harrell remembered. “Judson in a way was my lineage, but Steve Paxton always said, ‘You guys never rebelled against us.’ And so in a way, voguing was my way of rebelling. That was the main question: how do we push dance forward? So by looking at both Judson and voguing, it allowed me to turn all those ‘nos’ in the manifesto into ‘maybes.’”

If the “NO Manifesto” said “no” to camp, eccentricity, spectacle, and the star image, Harrell’s reply is “wait and see.” (*Mimosa/Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church* (*M*), the “medium” in the series, is perhaps the most blatantly camp, psychedelic work in *Twenty Looks*. It follows the story of Mimosa Ferrera as four performers—Cecilia Bengolea, François Chaignaud, Marlene Monteiro Freitas, and Trajal Harrell—each say they are Mimosa. “I am the real Mimosa,” each of them claim, multiple per-

*Antigone Sr./Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church* (L), American Realness Festival at Abrons Arts Center, New York, 2013. Photo: Ian Douglas





sonalities all at once: a butch queen, a ballet dancer, a drag queen, Prince. The audience knows that it is impossible that they are all the real Mimosa, a double commentary on the notion of realness in voguing and house ball culture and the emphasis on realness in postmodern dance. The question of realness is cut even further as the performers change looks on stage from within the audience, a recurring Harrell trope. The audience watches on as the performers prepare themselves, change, apply makeup, all of which critiques what “realness” means and reminds us of the constructed nature of the image.

Toward the end of the piece, Harrell does a humorous monologue that punctuates his interest in the themes of “realness” in voguing and postmodern dance. Seated in a chair, fabulously, wearing sunglasses and a red scarf, in the monologue Harrell talks about the importance of realness. He claims, of course, to be the real Mimosa:

You know, I’m going to tell you a little secret. You know how they have fake Vuitton, fake Prada, Gucci, Dior, even Miu Miu, Fendi, Balenciaga, Chloe, yeah. It’s cute, it’s real cute. And I’ll tell you: I got some fake stuff in the closet. I do. I do, I do. Because you know, sometimes when you go out to a club or a kiki function, you do not want to take your real shit. Because the kids got tricks, and they will steal it. Yes they will. See, you’ll be at the club with your legs crossed, sipping on a kai kai, wearing your little Chloe slip dress, kiki-ing with your girlfriends. See you put your purse down by your feet so when everybody walks by they’ll look at your shoes. See when you turn around, it’s gone. So you have to know when to take the real shit and the fake shit. And you have to be able to distinguish between the two.

Not only is the monologue funny, but it also rearticulates the question of realness by thinking through luxury goods and luxury consumption, a subject most people can relate to even if the complicated means of gender and identity slip past. But the delivery is punctuated with intonations, patterns of speech, and words (cute; kiki function; and kai kai) taken directly from house ball culture.

The delicate traces of black gay culture sprinkled into the context of postmodern dance ultimately make Harrell’s work compelling. In *Antigone Jr.*, Thibault Lac has a voguing solo while Harrell cheers him on from the audience. “Werk, sista! Werk, bitch! Werk! Flip it. Dip it. And turn it the fuck out.” This practice appears again in *Antigone Sr.* when Harrell abruptly stops the dancers. “Stop the show!” he exclaims. “Stop the motherfucking show!” The room becomes pitch black and Harrell breathlessly raps, quickly, “Face, face, face, face. Legendary face, legendary face. Give me legendary face. Stop the beat! Stop the motherfucking beat!”

A vogue ball, like Harrell’s work, is as intensely sonic as it is visual. The dynamics of Harrell’s rapping culls from the unique voguing practice of chanting, where a commentator or “Master of Ceremonies” narrates what a voguer does on the floor to

the audience. DJ Vjuan Allure explained chanting to me: “When you’re coming out on the runway, it’s like the beat is there, and you’re working to the beat, but the commentator is giving you extra. Most of the time they’re around the person, which makes you go for it even more. And it adds to the crowd, it adds more.”<sup>16</sup> The role of the commentator, therefore, is to add intensity to the space, to encourage the voguer while he or she is on the runway, all in the service of pushing each performer to serve. There are typically three layers of sound happening all at once at a ball. First there’s the voguing music, a unique style of dance music with its own unique rhythmic punctuations and sounds. The audience cheers a voguer on while he or she is in the middle of the dance battle. But it is the commentator who adds emotion to the entire experience. The generic role of the commentator is to keep a sense of order. But his role is greater than that. Chanting is a musical device that is very close to rapping: witty comments delivered in a harsh yet monotone speaking voice that narrate what is happening on the runway.

The audio signature to Harrell’s performances can be mesmerizing. “People always ask me for the soundtrack to my shows,” Harrell told me. No need to ask what’s playing in the instantaneous age of Shazam. If there is an audio signature, then there is a visual one, too: the runway. His runways are either an actual catwalk, as seen in *Antigone Sr.*, or the imaginative one in *Antigone Jr.* But what is a catwalk if not a long plank built for the display of spectacle, the display of commodities?

If postmodern dance focused on everyday pedestrian movements such as sitting, standing, and walking, what better place to critique the pillars of postmodern dance than within the walking space of the catwalk? “Just the words ‘cat *walk*’ and ‘run way’ in relationship to postmodern dance were very interesting,” Harrell told me, “because postmodern dance was completely predicated on pedestrian movement. Running, walking, sitting, standing. But then voguing also deals with walking and standing, but they appropriated it from the fashion world.” Voguing innovated by borrowing its iconography from fashion runways, like Pepper LaBeija or Paris Dupree, who both claim to have started the form. For Harrell, postmodern dance could innovate by taking lessons from the voguing and fashion worlds. That’s why the catwalk becomes a signature for Harrell’s work, a “zip” à la Barnett Newman as Harrell puts it—the architectural meeting space between the worlds of voguing, fashion, and postmodern dance. “I was interested in the catwalk as a kind of architectural space where the base of pedestrianism could become a way in which we question spectularity. Putting a kind of pedestrian/Judson articulation on a runway makes it different. It’s like putting it on a pedestal in a way.”

Harrell’s project is successful because he poses a question that has been right before our eyes all along but that nobody has asked. Even with postmodern dance’s pretense to pedestrianism, the removal of virtuosity, and the lack of emphasis on training or structure—a kind of democratization of dance, to put it differently—dance still remains

*Antigone Sr./Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church (L), American Realness Festival at Abrons Arts Center, New York, 2013. Photo: Ian Douglas*



a high art form that is largely accessible to only a select few. It has a canon, and real dance enthusiasts can catch the references and citationality in the movements. Voguing, on the other hand, has roots in low culture and the street, and though it requires training in learning how to vogue, it does not require any previous academic knowledge of dance. Voguers likely did not follow what was happening in the postmodern dance scene, just as the postmoderns did not follow voguing culture. But why not?

The major difference between the two is that postmodern dance was about questioning the rubrics of dance, whereas voguing is about the celebration and interrogation of *queerness*. And though there are generous aspects of queerness laced throughout Harrell's work, queer identity politics is not the primary aesthetic concern, and it is a missed opportunity. Voguing is always an exercise in queer world-making. Balls happen late, they last for several fierce hours, and they are frequently removed from the pressures of everyday life, with unique categories that have little to no meaning outside of the specialized space of the ball floor. More than that, voguing creates a community of queerness. Harrell wants us to think about the intellectual possibilities of dance, and even though his work is not as queer as it could be, he forces us to imagine an interesting hypothetical question: what would have happened if these two worlds met?

#### LEGENDS OF THE BALL

Trajal Harrell's creative work tackles a range of important theoretical concepts: serving, postmodern dance, music, realness, voguing, gender, black gay culture—and what all these things have to contribute to one another. Harrell's choreography is difficult work: lengthy, often intermissionless performances, acrobatic moves that require a certain level of endurance for the performers as well as the audience, resulting in the dancers sweating profusely on stage, toweling off between numbers. But it is also work—with an *e*: a labor of fierceness. *Werk!!!*, that is. Karl Marx famously argued that labor or work resulted in a loss of the self, because the laborer working in a factory feels no connection to the goods he produces. That labor, then, is alienated, distant from the person who made it.

But in black queer spaces, *werk!* is as much a compliment of a job well done as it is the labor of transgressive, interdisciplinary creative forms. In thinking about queer werk, as in, for instance, the “Werk, bitch!” chanted in *Antigone Jr.*, “werk” becomes a way of reclaiming the body and the creative labor one produces. For Marx, the laborer is removed from and alienated by his product. But when we think about werk in its congratulatory context, in this queer context as a way to show and prove one's own aesthetic imagination in addition to one's ability to assert oneself through performance, we see that werk is the specific embodiment of labor, the time and energy spent in the act of aesthetic production.<sup>17</sup> If for Marx the relationship between the laborer and his

work is one of distance, *werk* is a process of reclaiming and closing the gap between the laborer and his product, because he is his product—the result of his own creative labor. Even when it is not produced in ideal situations, and even when it is long and boring and involves sweat and bruises, work—with an *e*—means the investment of time, love, and skill into one's *own* creative output.

Today, years into the *Twenty Looks* project, Harrell's performances are met with critical acclaim. Deborah Jowitt, writing for the *Village Voice*, sees beauty in the subtlety and intellectualism of Harrell's work, calling him "a master of the sultry stroll, the aggressive stride."<sup>18</sup> Claudia La Rocco called Harrell's performances "irresistible" and "smart."<sup>19</sup> But as with any new cultural form that aggressively pushes boundaries and surfaces challenging intellectual questions, Harrell's project and aesthetic propositions have not always been well received. At the beginning, "people really spat on the work—'Oh, I wouldn't pay to see that.'" Alistair Macaulay, writing for the *New York Times*, wrote a scathing review of Harrell's appearance at the 2013 American Realness Festival. Holding nothing back, Macaulay called the performance of *Antigone Sr.* "overlong, perplexing, self-indulgent, often obscure and often tedious exercise in pseudo-intellectuality and camp."<sup>20</sup> If that wasn't enough, he found the performance of *Antigone Sr.* "even more boring," questioning Harrell's abilities as a dancer, the implication being that his dancers danced better than he did in his own piece.<sup>21</sup>

Harrell remembers that in 2001 the dance community was not supportive, perhaps being suspicious of someone who used fashion as a source of creative inspiration. Of course, by 2001, many visual artists, such as Andy Warhol, Cindy Sherman, and Sylvie Fleury, had long used fashion in their works. "But in dance," says Harrell, "fashion meant luxury, a lot of things which dance thought of itself as not being." At the end of the day, fashion is about the body in the everyday. Dance is about the body. "It's like RuPaul always says: 'You're born naked and the rest is drag.'"<sup>22</sup>

Even though Harrell's project engages the pleasures of *werk* and queer labor, sometimes the work does feel too theoretical and too inaccessible for a project that's tied to the pleasures of voguing and fashion, with some performances going on for more than two and a half intermissionless hours. Voguing is fun to watch and a thrill to participate in, and people follow fashion culture because it gives them something to believe in. But sometimes, a Harrell performance can feel long, drawn out, or downright boring—not that those qualities aren't produced on purpose. What's missing from Harrell's oeuvre is exactly what he set out to do: he wanted to use the language of voguing and house ball culture to interrogate the parameters of dance, sure, but without being a member of the voguing community and without participating in the culture. What was to gain by presenting his works in high-powered art institutions rather than on house ball floors or in nightclubs? Why does he use trained dancers rather than actual voguers? Wouldn't the connection between trained dancers and street voguers make his important hypothetical question even more urgent? And why are his fellow



dancers usually white men, when voguers are almost always black or Latino? All told, it was an aesthetic choice, because Harrell has been taught by voguers and has his own private connections to the community. But that is precisely what's missing from Harrell's unique performance oeuvre: an even closer relationship between his ideas and the real ballroom community.

So now, allow me to pose my own hypothetical: what would have happened in 1999 if Trajal Harrell had collaborated with ballroom legend Willi Ninja to create a body of work that interrogated voguing and postmodern dance?

## NOTES

1. Trajal Harrell, telephone interview by the author, May 10, 2013. Unless otherwise noted, Harrell's quotations throughout the article come from this interview.
2. Gia Kourlas, "Strike a Pose: A Show Pony Choreographs His Obsession," *New York Times*, January 25, 2007, [www.nytimes.com/2007/01/25/arts/dance/25kour.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/25/arts/dance/25kour.html).
3. Jonathan David Jackson, "The Social World of Voguing," *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* 12, no. 2 (2002): 36.
4. George Chauncey, *Gay New York* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 278.
5. *Ibid.*, 246.
6. *Ibid.*, 258.
7. Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), 273.
8. Chantal Regnault (photographer), *Voguing and the House Ballroom Scene of New York 1989–92: Photographs*, edited by Stuart Baker (London: Soul Jazz Records, 2011), 116.
9. Tim Lawrence, "A History of Drag Balls, Houses and the Culture of Voguing," in Regnault, *Voguing*, 5.
10. Craig Owens, "The Medusa Effect, Or, The Spectacular Ruse," *Art in America*, January 1984, 104.
11. Sally Barnes, *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962–1964* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).
12. *Ibid.*, 42.
13. *Ibid.*, 36.
14. Yvonne Rainer, "Some Retrospective Notes on a Dance for 10 People and 12 Mattresses Called 'Parts of Some Sextets,' Performed at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, and Judson Memorial Church, New York, in March, 1965," *Tulane Drama Review* 10, no. 2 (1965): 178.
15. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 12.
16. Vjuan Allure, interview by the author, March 15, 2012.

17. The nineteenth-century British art critic John Ruskin develops a theory of creative labor that, in contradistinction to Marx, would recognize the value in work, labor, and creative expression.
18. Deborah Jowitt, "Tajal Harrell, Pam Tanowitz and Other APAP Showcases Turn New York into One Big Runway," *Village Voice*, January 19, 2010.
19. Claudia La Rocco, "Where All the World's a Fashion Show," *New York Times*, October 2, 2009.
20. Alistair Macaulay, "Greek Tragedy, Economic Mayhem and Other Sources of Modern Movement," *New York Times*, January 14, 2013.
21. Ibid.
22. Here, Harrell is quoting RuPaul's famous maxim, which originally appeared in RuPaul, *Lettin It All Hang Out: An Autobiography* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), iii.