

LIGHT NOISE: a dance performance by Lucy Yim - REFLECTION

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I initially planned to write a descriptive and rather academic paper on Lucy Yim's latest dance performance *LIGHT NOISE*. Yet, given the fact that I myself performed in this piece as one of four dancers, I thought it would make better sense to write my own personal account in the process of making this piece.

In this entry, I decided to focus on my experience and reflection on duets and solo section with a brief discussion about a section she called "7-minutes." There are three other distinct sections in the final piece, which I don't go in details below: 1) opening sequence where four dancers face front, traveling horizontally yet proceeding forward one line at a time, 2) glazing section where four dancers circle slowly in one place while inviting the viewers to observe their body, and 3) the last rather satisfying section called "stacking" where four dancers lay on top of each other to create layered almost-uncanny sculptural objects on stage.

After the opening sequence, which four dancers dancing across the stage horizontally as they inch forwards towards the audience, there comes a section called "7-minutes." The name of the section comes from a British choreographer Jonathan Burrows' book *A Choreographer's Handbook*. One section of the book titled "Beginnings" says

"The choreographer Jerome Bel said this: 'The first seven minutes of a performance are for free, the audience can accept anything – after this is another problem, then they want what they have paid for – but during those first seven minutes, as choreographer, you have total freedom. You can try to attempt something else, to put the audience on a different track than the usual one for the rest of the performance. It's after those seven minutes that they start to yell at you.'"

Lucy was intrigued by this specific time frame that Bel and Burrows articulate. In the final version, this 7-minute section did not become the beginning nor a place of "total freedom" as they say in the book. It was rather an introduction after a striking imagery and before the rhythm of the performance starts to resonate. Or maybe it is a daydream within a performance, enigmatically floats around in the current of time. In terms of conceptual logic,



I believe it functions as a section of self-objectification before allowing the audience to objectify the dancers or the imageries on stage. Rather than describing it from my perspective, I will hand this over to the choreographer herself. I include this quote from her, which is taken from email conversations between she and I had about this section.

“This question: ‘Can we contextualize our bodies with our own gaze?’ This needs to enter our exploration of seven minutes. I mean, you are already doing it in that first image. Coming out, looking forward and then turning and having an intimate moment with your body, with the space around you, showing yourself to the audience, looking at them but in a way that is more about allowing them to look at you vs. asking them for attention. A gaze that says, ‘see me’ without screaming. That to me is such strength in you as a performer. And then it goes on, it changes. What if we make it more about the face/gaze? So this play with gaze, of face, of presence, of presentation, of theatrics vs. non theatrics inside roaming around in 7 min, adds another layer. Quietude. Yes, that is part of it, but I want to disrupt that, like the cow running through the field, so it doesn’t become a ‘scene’ that it is still an ‘action.’ So quietude exists to be disrupted.”

I believe this quote eloquently explains what I strived to do in this section.

It was ten months ago before the final showing when Lucy initially asked me to be part of this project *LIGHT NOISE*. (Lucy and her collaborator Jesse Mejía had been working on it for three to four months prior.) At that time, we mainly worked with two duets: between Lucy and Leah Wilmoth, and between Keyon Gaskin and me.

There was one night only showing in November at a gallery space in South East Portland. Even though these two duets consisted of one with two female dancers and another with two male dancers, it revealed more than the superficial divide such as femininity and masculinity. Through various imageries that two human bodies can create by connecting, supporting, pulling and pushing, they expressed Lucy's interest in the display of human bodies and the pleasure of viewing its organic shapes. The duet of Lucy and Leah often involved with unison movements, creating an image of strange organisms that are made up of two bodies, rather than two distinct bodies doing the same action. Keyon and my bodies were treated like moving threads or fabric. At one moment, the threads intertwined into one shape then unfolded into two separate entities. At another, each body functioned as a piece of fabric, wrapping the other shrunk-up body or layered one on top of the other.

How strange our human bodies are!

How malleable and smart our human bodies can be!

After so many reiterations, this paring continued to live in the final product.

This conscious objectification of bodies in these duets has a dialogue with the 7-min section. The performance was displayed to be seen, rather than presented to communicate message or story. Personally, I appreciated this performance of invitation, which resonates with the philosophies cultivated in 1960s in American dance scene. At one point in our rehearsal period, I sent her an email with two quotes I found in Carrie Lambert-Beatty's book *Being Watched – Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s*.

“Displaying the moving body for you, without any attempt to seduce or affirm you, does not remove dance from the condition of exhibition, after all. It reduces the performance situation to the fact of display.”

–Carrie Lambert-Beatty

“I love the body, its actual weight, mass, and unenhanced physicality.”

–Yvonne Rainer

Before the final showing, these duets had gone through many iterations. Lucy's obsession with Martha Graham's practice had inspired her on some level, I think, to include several symbolic shapes, dramatic gesture, and energetic force within. However, these rather expressionistic moments had taken away immediately after without getting incorporated into narratives or transcending into any emotional truth. The bodies and expressions were simply displayed and objectified as they were.

We continued working on the piece in the following Spring. This time, Lucy introduced an idea of solo for each dancer. As she demonstrated her solo that she created for herself, she clearly stated, “I will show you the skeleton of what I did. I don't want you to do exactly

the same thing as I did. Create your own version with the same qualities.” The qualities she specified had names such as “emphatic”, “zero-state,” “crescendo build,” “frontal expression,” etc. It was an improvisatory process, yet the structure, or skeleton, was very clear. Each dancer developed several movement vocabularies based on those concepts, then shuffled them to build up a coil-up energy towards the end. Each movement doesn’t dwell in time too long. It took a moment, and got taken away. This vanishing relationship with time was quite similar to the final version of duets. Yet, for solo, it was executed more abruptly with repetition like looking at an oscillating pendulum from the side. Only you don’t know when the ball came at you.

Personally, I struggled. As my acupuncturist would attest, once I start a fire, it goes on burning and burning and burning. My energy would escalate in a climbing diagonal. Rather than creating a pendulum-like experience, I was constantly pounding the metal ball at the viewers. In this process, I have learned the importance of occasional pause and stillness in a development of building energy. More than the performer himself, viewers need to breathe and stop on the way in order to fully experience the ride to climax. It is the quietude in the center of a tornado. It is the void that residual memory can reside, which leads to the power of shift. It is also the break to reveal the beauty of human body while the physical energy evaporates it away.

At one rehearsal, Lucy asked the dancers to bring clothing to figure out a costume idea. She provided a list of words and phrases to base off of. I don’t remember all the words except one, which was “titillating.”

Roland Barthes in his essay *The Pleasure of Text* writes about tmesis: “source or figure of pleasure,” as he compares striptease and narrative.

“The pleasure of the text is not the pleasure of the corporeal striptease or of narrative suspense...the entire excitation takes refuge in the hope of seeing the sexual organ (schoolboy’s dream) or in knowing the end of the story (novelistic satisfaction.)”

He further articulates his argument, stating that the readers’ eagerness for knowledge propels them “to skim or to skip certain passages... in order to get more quickly to the warmer parts of the anecdote.” This absence or “flaw” is important in identifying novelistic structure and its rhythm.

“The author cannot predict tmesis: he cannot choose to write what will not be read. And yet, it is the very rhythm of what is read and what is not read that creates the pleasure of the great narratives.... Thus, what I enjoy in a narrative is not directly its content or even its structure, but rather the abrasions I impose upon the fine surface: I read on, I skip, I look up, I dip in again.”

[Although this idea of striptease might correspond to the topless dancers in *LIGHT NOISE* on the surface level, the core analogy I present here is quite different. While Lucy’s treatment of the toplessness was directly connected to the idea of corporeality and its organic display that I mentioned in the first part of this writing, Barthes’ mentioning of it is related to the intellectual and erotic pleasure in timing.]

As Barthes says, Lucy did not plan to present *what will not be seen* in this dance performance. Yet, she successfully composed this titillating rhythm within each section (solos, duets, and group). Sometimes the flow was disrupted as three dancers running through the space diagonally in 7-min section. Another time, an image got vacuumed into the back spatially as I drag Keyon's body in the back wall. Repeated and lingering movements, while providing rest and ease in the sequence, existed to highlight those striking accents in time. In this rhythm, the performance teases the viewer, suspending the expectation in the hope of seeing where the experience is led up to.

Both reading a novelistic text and seeing a dance performance are time-based artistic medium where series of ideas or events follow one another, creating narrative and association. Even if it does not tell a specific story, our experience lives in this liminal space in between. For that, we rely on our memory. We rely on our physical experience. Overall, *LIGHT NOISE* consists of four group sections, four solos and two duets, sectionally presented one by one. This pragmatic and image-driven display of bodies invites the viewers to objectify moving bodies, allowing their subjective views to form their own meaning. However, within each section, Lucy artfully inserts emotional draw, corporeal beauty, idiosyncratic expression, and quietude as she was keenly aware of viewers' perception of pleasurable rhythm.



Burrows, Jonathan. *A Choreographer's Handbook*. London: Routledge, 2010.

Lambert-Beatty, Carrie. *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008.

Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Translated by Richard Miller. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975.

image: curtecy of Lucy Yim