

THE LANGUAGE OF ACCUMULATION

Or, Why the Rudy Perez Performance Ensemble Met the "Dance-Crazy Kid from New Jersey Meets Hofmannsthal"

No Longer Dance About Dance. Over the past three decades, contemporary dance has grown increasingly abstract, as it increasingly regarded movement as a source for content and eschewed narrative. Similarly, dancer/choreographer Rudy Perez has built a solid reputation presenting works which conform to modernist structures. In 1985, New York Times dance critic Jennifer Dunning characterized Perez' choreography as "uncluttered simplicity and dramatic intensity...the performers don't just dance the audience to attention, they stare it into alertness (Dunning, New York Times, November 4, 1985)." Village Voice dance critic Deborah Jowitt commended Perez' consistency after following his choreography for fifteen years:

If, unprimed, I were parachuted down into an unknown territory where a performance...was taking place, I think I'd be able to say, "Hmmm, Rudy Perez, right?" And I wouldn't be as smart as the natives might think I was; his style is that distinctive (Jowitt, Village Voice, November 26, 1985).

Nonetheless, Perez was never strictly minimalist. He regularly infused psychological and social content into the minimalist strategy of repetition, at a time when critics (like Susan Sontag in Against Interpretation) were downplaying the significance of meaning in favor stylistic innovation. Perez' commitment to meaningful issues set him apart from other choreographers and earned him the reputation as the "minimalist with a message (Perlmutter, "Performance Artist Rudy Perez," Playbill, 1987-88), " years before it became the aesthetic technique that would dominate the visual arts in the '90s (addressed by Lynn Zelevansky's 1994 MOMA exhibit "Sense and Sensibility").

Mindboggling Metaphysics. "The Dance-Crazy Kid from New Jersey Meets Hofmannsthal," Perez' most recent dance-piece, was loosely based on the early

life of Ruth St. Denis' (Young Ruth), her encounter with Austrian poet/Strauss librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal and her later marriage to Denishawn partner/male-dance advocate Ted Shawn. "Dance-Crazy Kid" reflects Perez', ^{desire to} explore the seminal movements of Ruth St. Denis, the clear provocateur of 'minimalism with a message'. Re-examining Ruth St. Denis is as relevant for the dance world as

it is for the visual art world, given this style's dominance in the '90s.

What separates "Dance-Crazy Kid" from his previous choreography is the specificity of the underlying reference (a quasi-narrative link to the life story of pioneer dancer Ruth St. Denis), a greater emphasis on visual style (here, form is integral to its function: it is neither interchangeable nor subordinate, as when form follows function) coupled with a host of symbolic imagery initiating meaning and bearing relevance beyond the original story.

St. Denis was one of modern dance's first casualties. In 1928, the New York Times dance critic John Martin chastized St. Denis' dances for relying too heavily on costumes, setting, and other exotic devices. Martin considered St. Denis' use of spectacle a crutch. Once aesthetic dancing was judged passe, modernist choreographers could freely investigate the materiality of pure movement and sociological struggle, but at the expense of attaining St. Denis' transcendental state. St. Denis described the power of the unreal as follows:

When I am dancing-when I am at any time expressing reality, I am nearer reality and in a more harmonious state of being than at any other time...a real escape from the limited sense of life that I ordinarily have (Suzanne Shelton, Ruth St. Denis: The Divine Dancer, p. 206)

Consistent with Positivist thinking in the '30s, Martin encouraged modern dance's shift from the immaterial, unreal, and uncertain realm to the more material, physical, tangible world. He viewed the forms of aesthetic dancing as kitsch and materiality facilitated a model of truth. Today, truth is everywhere deemed unknowable, so immateriality and uncertainty offer legitimate epistemologies. Perez' desire to reinvestigate St. Denis could be seen as the means to justify dance's return to more playful and less material moves.

Simultaneous Pluralism. As Perez has done before, he invited independent collaborators (composers Michael Bayer, lighting designer Liz Stillwell, dramaturg Strawn Bovee and visual artist Steve De Groot) to originate "The Dance-Crazy Kid from New Jersey Meets Hofmannsthal." Dance critic Donna Perlmutter lamented "In the end, however, one gets the feeling of multiple and separate contributions rather than the ongoing intensity of a single vision-Rudy Perez's trademark (Los Angeles Times, September 22, 1992)." It's odd that

she would view each collaborator's diversity as Perez' relinquishment of authority and the dance's shortfall. Rather, 'simultaneous pluralism', the combination of different approaches under the same banner, is the optimum methodology at the end of utopia. There's no longer one particular pluralism, but myriad independent groups whose constituents share common values, yet maintain diversity. Simultaneity suggests the "relatedness of unrelated parts, ...without forging the disorder or lack of associations of the whole"...a way to "create order by way of contrast or conflict (Frederick Karl, Modern and Modernism, 1985, pp. 270-1).

Chance Operations. Perez not only encourages his collaborators to work independently, but he prefers untrained dancers. Perez' decision to foster chance operations (inputs dependent on the collaborators' creative decisions and the street dancers' unknown talents) grew out of his interest in the late John Cage's thought processes (his collaborations with Merce Cunningham and Robert Rauschenberg). The freedom he grants his collaborators sets him apart from autocratic modernists, like the late Martha Graham, whose personal visions entirely framed their works. Perez has acknowledged, "But I always go to the limit and then let the cards fall where they may and work with that. I think by chance they fall into the best possible places (Susan La Tempa, LA Style, March 1988, p. 67)." Susan La Tempa observed, "[H]e does not direct the other artists, explaining that his work proceeds independently of music or visuals, though it might be enriched by both, and expecting that their work will similarly proceed independently (Ibid., p. 68)."

Transience is No Tragedy. The more Perez has pushed aside modernist dogma, the more he has relinquished modernism's insistence on materiality, timelessness and monumentality in favor of pre-modernist transcendence, ephemerality and ethereality (minus its visual excess- spectacle, kitsch and ornamentation). As early as '88, LA Style dance critic Susan La Tempa noticed this change. "The first thing that struck observers was no longer Perez' own notorious brooding intensity or "monumental" performing style, but the ensemble's ability to sustain potent, theatrical group pieces that vividly suggested entire worlds and societies-sometimes dark and apocalyptic,

sometimes wry and satirical (La Tempa, p. 68)."

Jacki Apple located his dominant themes under the rubric of urban transience: isolation, alienation, oppression, liberation, anonymity, powerlessness, and loneliness (LA Weekly, August 26-Sept. 1, 1983). Another recurring theme investigates one's struggle for self-respect and dignity amidst a society which preferences automatons over individuals (Ibid.) It's not surprising that "Dance-Crazy Kid" specifically thwarts many of modernism's rigid postures. Fortunately, Formalism's stress on purity, unity, and truth has given way to more wholesome, dissonant, and elastic forms. However, Perez' style still adheres to modernism's anti-bourgeois conscience, truth to materials and honest activity. Trim props remained on the stage after their scene, becoming detritus or markers of past events, and make-shift costumes complemented basic dance moves. Another set prop, a luggage dolly (an exquisite example of minimal sculpture in itself) not only evoked the boat-dock activities of unloading/loading, but doubled as a resting spot for the actors in between scenes.

In fact, most of "Dance-Crazy Kid's" theatrical devices could be categorized as metaphors for transcendence, ephemerality and ethereality. The prevalence of dissonant sounds, a poking/tapping blind character and the repeated mimicking of unity served as metaphors for transcendence that subvert objective knowledge. Rolling tires (symbolic of time change, travel, or moving locales) marked with uncertain words, continuous uninterrupted movements (gliding, twisting, floating of Hofmannsthal, Ted Shawn, and the ocean liner), hand-powered wind turbines, and myriad cast shadows amidst an ambiguous historical frame all suggest a time warp (metaphors for ephemerality). Finally, the presence of casual streetwear, singers in wire-mesh cages, trompe l'oeil backdrops and airy muslin that is twisted/folded/tossed/wrapped/draped evoke immateriality (metaphors for ethereality).

As if to embody these states, "Dance-Crazy Kid's" Young Ruth's impatient, jerky, punchy moves characterized her as quirky, feisty, and idiosyncratic. Two incidents suggest the inevitability that for better or worse, female wisdom overrides youthful bravado. First, Young Ruth's awkward movements are

contrasted against the soothing taps of a blind person's cane, then she loses a physical tug-of-war with him. Second, Ruth separates from Young Ruth in the manner that resembles a butterfly separating from its cocoon. By letting go of youth, Ruth gains a different kind of freedom. Young Ruth can be seen as the edges and tactility of the pre-literate world, while the laconic motion of the older characters' (Hofmannsthal, Ruth, Ted Shawn) depicts western culture's dominance by the eye and the literate world's emphasis on continuity.

Perez' insistence on vivifying St. Denis stands as a direct jab at early modernism's faith in logical and rational thinking (the technical and theoretical) at the expense of human desire, personal relevance, and sensibility. "Dance Crazy Kid's" stress on ephemerality, ethereality and transcendence, suggests Perez' desire to doubt the omnipotence of the experiential and to open up the possibility for out-of-body experiences. With "Dance-Crazy Kid," Perez used the familiar tools of modernist dance language, but repackaged them to explore relevant ideas, investigate possibility, invent fiction, and provoke imaginary sequences.

Stillness as Active Dancing.

**Now they are angry...
Are taking the outer city from me
I can but hasten
To my last stronghold of Silence
And wait the power of the inner law
To bring awakening and light.**

**-Ruth St. Denis (the poem "I am a Beleaguered City,"
Shelton, p. 232)**

The formal aspect of Perez' choreography that most represented dance practice resembles the preparatory movements (more like non-moves or pauses) that serve as the impetus for choreographic phrasing. This activity, which prepares the body prior to each position, involves pulling one's body upward, broadening one's shoulders, extending one's legs and focusing one's vision on a point in space. An integral part of ballet, it has been phased out of modern dance practice, but its shadow lives on in Perez' choreography of stillness. Any tension present stems from Perez' push/pull movements, such as saving and spending or flow and fluidity arrested by restraint. It's not surprising that since 1967, the primary viewer complaint/observation has been "[N]othing

happened" (Jowitt, Art in America, 1971, Issue #3, p. 102).

Critics consider 1964's "Countdown," in which he sat on a stool and slowly inhaled a cigarette, to be his seminal work. This piece established him as a "charismatic performer of powerful intensity," as he exuded "the force of concentrated energy contained in the simplest gestures (Apple, p. 25)." Jowitt noted that in Perez' choreography, "the smallest whisper of a gesture is so carefully shaped, so tensely performed that it emerges as a shout (La Tempa, p. 66)." One viewer observed his work as a "dance concert in which movement is mostly agonizing potential (Ibid., p. 66)."

Silence was present in every aspect of "Dance Crazy Kid." Flowing white fabrics dominated the stage, stillness permeated each dancer's movements and the score was repeatedly interrupted by bursts of silence. Apart from "Dance Crazy Kid's" obvious lightness, whiteness, and wholesomeness, this dancework was uncannily summery (evoking long days, lots of light, zapped energy, drout, dust). Reviewing a Perez dance twenty years earlier, Jowitt related the summery images to "the same arrested motion as the dancers' bodies (Jowitt, 1971)." Summertime is the natural 'break' from the rest of the year. Perhaps, each sluggish dancer's stored-up-energy rests poised to explode amidst an arid arena for action.

Whiteness/"White Jade", The color most associated with both "Dance Crazy Kid" and summer is white. Although both black and white symbolize silence, black evokes silence with no possibilities, while "white has the appeal of the nothingness preceding birth (Karl, p. 67n)." Kandinsky described the color white as:

a symbol of a world from which all colour as a definite attribute has disappeared. This world is too far above us for its harmony to touch our souls. A great silence, like an impenetrable wall, shrouds its life from our understanding. White, therefore, has this harmony of silence, which works upon us negatively, like many pauses in music that break temporarily the melody (Ibid., p. 67n).

St. Denis' personal obsession with white as a metaphor for the powers of silence comes to fore in "White Jade," her provocative study in stillness. "In the opening scene, what the audience responded to without in the least analyzing it was the held vibrations of the body." St. Denis said, "I am not

just standing there. I am dancing (Shelton, p. 208)." The choreographer of "Countdown" and other equally concentrated dances would surely sympathize.

Her ability to concentrate her energy, to hold it in suspension, made White Jade the most refined of her oriental solos, the simplest yet the most profound. The impersonal nature of the dance was enhanced by its costumes and setting. The stage suggested whiteness, simplicity. Her draperies massed St. Denis' body into a flowing, sculptural form, a neutral background against which each gesture appeared in relief. Each movement was made deliberately yet serenely, with just enough weight behind the gesture to indicate the texture of porcelain, its smoothness and coolness, its delicacy (Shelton, pp. 208-9).

This dancework must have appeared unusually abstract to an audience accustomed to exotic costumes and elaborate movements. With "White Jade," St. Denis' transported her audience beyond the vase's visible reality to its symbolic realm of transcendence. St. Denis must have recognized that whiteness indicates the possibility for constructive renewal. Working from an "inner state of harmonious suspension and peace (Shelton, p. 239)," she transfigured her body into a vessel (containing the water of life), from which her spirit poured (Shelton, p.97). It's not surprising that Perez found this level of intensity, concentration and flowing energy compelling.

A Gathering Force. Absences, in particular those of visual art's blank tableaux (whiteness), music's silence and dance's stillness, engender future activity. It's not surprising that Perez often cites John Cage as his greatest influence. In 1952, Robert Rauschenberg's all-white paintings inspired John Cage's infamous piano concerto, "4' 33", " the penultimate exploration of silence. "Without silence we could have no conception of sound; without stillness, no understanding of motion; and no knowledge of color if black or white didn't exist (Jowitt, 1971)." Jowitt distinguished the procreative nature of Perez' stillness when she remarked that Merce Cunningham (Cage's dance collaborator) "pit stillness against bursts of virtuoso movement," but Perez "shades it into minimal movement and back again. His brand of stillness is not so much the temporary absence of movement as the charged potential for it." The dancers in Perez' "Topload/Offprint," "sit for what seems an eternity...they look ready to explode (Ibid.)."

Since modernism's birth over a century ago, silence, stillness and whiteness have proven invaluable forces; driving and inspiring culture,

and even knowledge. "Social discourse and literary discourse, once thought to be continuous, were disjunctive, and the result was silence (Karl., p. 33)." Stephane Mallarme was probably the first to consider the "pause" an activity. He termed the embodiment of absence, "ptyx," which characterized the pauses, junctures, history's discontinuity, and boundaries that shift into gathering forces, as they gain momentum.

Silence is a valid response to the very elements that made Modernism possible: the onslaught of new knowledge that forced rethinking in every field and which, inevitably, forced a reciprocal arrangement with the arts, both as reflection of other realities and as response in its own languages....Silence was a new form of ecstasy. It could be as sensual and passionate as music that yearned (Ibid., 31-32).

Ptyx breaks forth into a renaissance of creativity when opportunities for self-reflection, collecting one's thoughts and looking forward push artists toward new frontiers. Mallarme's silence was the "white space or the void, of emptiness confronting words, of words struggling to assert themselves against a sea of space, of language welling up not as expression but as a survivor of emptiness foreshadows form and meaning in nearly every art form. The note [musical], the brush stroke, as well as the word, become outposts of meaning in an emptiness (Ibid., pp. 15-16)."

It [the embodiment of absence] becomes, as it would later in Proust and Kafka, an affirmation once it is directed into creativity. That quest for nothingness leads, by 1885, into a flowering of the self, a Renaissance of the self floundering in the "fog which imposed a limit on infinity," as Mallarme phrased it. (Ibid., p. 66).

Many of these concepts have recently come full circle (stillness leading to silence, then rebirth and then new activity, etc.), It's to be expected that one of the most ptyx-oriented poets was Ruth St. Denis devotee, Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Prefiguring this stress on absence, Hofmannsthal observed aesthetics entering a new phase: it was "no longer the ornamentation of a bourgeois society," but its own response to the "pluralism and absorptive qualities of that bourgeois world (Ibid., p. 30)." He also noted that to "be modern, one succumbs to every revelation of beauty. One surrenders to colors, metaphors, images, allegories, intense silences." He tallied the "problematics of language: the absence of suitable voices to express fragmentation and atomization (Ibid., p. 30)."

Hofmannsthal had praised St Denis' dancing at the onset for her stillness and characterized it as an "art of movement born of stillness (Shelton, p.84)." Foreshadowing Perez' polar attitudes (fluidity and aridity), Hofmannsthal remarked that St. Denis' explored the limits of sexuality when she danced her "Radha," yet remained chaste (Shelton, p. 75). Indubitably, the absence of "suitable voices to express fragmentation and atomization" permanently unites St. Denis, Hofmannsthal and Perez. Returning to the United States by 1909 enabled St. Denis to escape the authoritarian direction (utopic) that European modernism would pursue. However, she had associated there mostly with pre-modernist devotees of beauty (practitioners of Art Nouveau/Jugendstil).

Trim. Deborah Jowitt articulated Perez' trim style. "Everything unnecessary is stripped from his work, and the bare bones are polished until they gleam (Jowitt, 1971)" and Jennifer Dunning described it as "uncluttered simplicity and dramatic intensity (Dunning, 1985)." Fifteen years later, Jowitt still insisted that "The clarity is familiar; so is the stylishness with which he arranges bold, simple moves; so are the intensity and intense control required of his dancers." Trimness accompanies Perez devices such as minimalism with a message, chance, indeterminacy, absence, stillness born as movement, ephemerality, and elasticity of material, all aesthetic qualities that foreshadowed how visual abstraction would adapt meaning in the '90s.

Despite the scores of themes and motifs that Perez assembled to visualize "Dance-Crazy Kid," it generated an amazingly trim, poignant example of dance theater. Perez' goals appeared manifold, because "Dance-Crazy Kid" afforded him the opportunity to moisten modernism's dryness, to crack its monumental pretenses, to foster greater stylistic flair and complex meanings, and to continue his lifelong exploration of the art of movement born of stillness.

Perez incorporated St. Denis dances "Soaring" and "The Delirium of the Senses" to reflect his focused lean approach. The predominant recurring theme in "Dance Crazy Kid" were floating fabric squares, in which each scarf corner was held and then tossed, making it balloon like a parachute (from "Soaring").

St. Denis considered this piece to be the pure visualization of music. Her dancers wore flesh-colored leotards and their movement evoked the wind, waves and clouds. For 1906's "Delirium of the Senses," St. Denis lifted her right arm toward heaven and placed her left hand over her heart.

Essentially Raw. Perez' comfortability with chance, every day movement (untrained dancers/every day clothes) and ethereality has paralleled the activities of 'Rawniks', early '90s sculptors who specifically engaged ephemerality and valued unadulterated materials for their natural behavioral traits, in particular elasticity. Rawniks desired an "honest usage of materials in everyday situations...By emphasizing transiency and reducing an object's meaning to its personality, the 'Rawnik' vision also relate[d] to the Conceptualists' who wanted to collapse an artwork into its idea, or linguistic correlative (Spaid, "Essentially Raw," August 1991)."

"Dance Crazy Kid" specifically referenced St. Denis' influential dances that explored pure movement, such as "White Jade", "Soaring" and "The Delirium of the Senses." Perez explored the elasticity akin to pure movement and activity. Composer Bayer's decision to let male voices chant long tones at the same pitch manifests elasticity, as no two voices could ever match up. This disunity results in split beginnings, a fission of beats between pitches. Similarly, slight disunities among the dancers suggest an irreverence towards the primacy of precision. Further, that Perez selecte Steve DeGroodt to design the visuals affirmed certain 'Rawnik' affinities, as De Groodt was one of seven artists originally included in "Essentially Raw" (the 1991 group show at Sue Spaid Fine Art that explored Rawnik thinking).

What really links Perez to Rawnik methods was his commitment to capture St. Denis' authenticity and intentionality, in spite of the material's uncontrollable behavior. "Any posited intentions inevitably get subverted by the elastic materials they [the Rawniks] prefer- flexible metals, formless paper products, soft pillows, flimsy fabrics, disintegrating wood, terracotta and flour (Ibid.)."

Perez' elastic material was the quixotic nature of St. Denis' moving collage, which blended Delsarte Exercises (a scientific analysis of the ways body gestures correspond to particular emotional and spiritual states), turn-of-the century mysticism and a Christian Science

upbringing. Her choreography combined spoken texts, choral chanting, specially-composed music, drapery/folded fabric and floating imagery. She championed Oriental imagery (dances and elaborate costumes from Indonesia, Egypt, India, Vietnam). Such eclectic accumulations are considered typical of American Exoticism, whose affects are more spectacular than raw. Nonetheless, as long as Perez remains causally bound to experiences beyond his control (her story/personality), the approach resembles the Rawniks, especially since her story offers a compelling model for artistic 'freedom'.

Conclusion. It's not surprising that Perez found pioneer dancer/transcendentalist Ruth St. Denis' story so compelling. She began dancing professionally at the turn of the century when being a "dancer" was considered unacceptable (ranking up there with prostitution). While she's not the only dancer responsible for making dance an acceptable artistic profession, she is specifically recognized for: organizing one of the first professional dance schools (Martha Graham was one of her students), using off-stage narrators, openly addressing bi-sexuality, struggling between Apollonian and Dionysian forces, expanding the boundaries of the space-time continuum (transcendence), convincing churches to allow dance performances and being married to Ted Shawn who organized one of the first all-male dance troupes at Jacob's Pillow (which still serves a summer dance center). Perez's "Men's Coalition" during the 1977-78 season has been attributed to Ted Shawn's all male troupe of the 1930s (La Tempa, p. 67).

Prior to 1900, most danceworks consisted of dancing the Virgin. American dance emphasized static pattern and completed pose, or 'living pictures.' St. Denis began as a skirt dancer, meaning that she rediscovered movement flow by retaining the vocabulary of classical ballet and adding "the grace of flowing drapery, the value of line, the simplicity and naturalness that were characteristic of Greek dance (Shelton, 28)." The skirt dancer manipulated her petticoats, added acrobatics, and called the finished product Greek, Spanish, Egyptian, or Oriental, acquiring both the luster of exoticism and the respectability of a reference to Civilizations past. Her skirt dance was a compromise "between the academic method of ballet and the grotesque step-

dancing which appealed to the popular taste of the time (Shelton, p. 28)."

At the 1900 Paris Expo, Henry Adams of Boston observed the cultural split away from unity, toward infinity and chaos. Influenced by Art Nouveau (the "symbolic rendering of the forces of dynamism, an organic style that emphasized evocative line and decorative surface (Shelton, p. 42)"), St. Denis' ever-popular charged erotic images (then recognizable and desirable) became even more desirable, as her dance linked the observer to the divine, which led her closer to God. Again, this notion of modern art's exalted status reflects its huge faith in both its significance and its power. St. Denis thought that if knowledge was based on sensory perceptions, her dance would capture life as it ought to be (Shelton, p. 69).

"Art Nouveau ruptured from the force of its own internal pressures (Shelton, p. 69)," which led Hofmannsthal to locate multiplicity and indeterminacy everywhere, as each artist sought to unravel the world's enigma in his own way. In fact, Hofmannsthal appreciated St. Denis' immediacy, detecting the spirit of modernism in her experimental nature. He valued its purity of aesthetic pleasure (an art for art's sake). He considered it to be the most beautiful danceform, embodying "the Greek ideal in theatre, a fusion of poetry, drama, and music that produced a social and religious experience for the audience (Shelton, p. 82)."

To sum up, Perez' "Dance-Crazy Kid" combined St. Denis' dance motifs, texts narrated in English and German, a challenging dramatic musical score, elegant sculptures and visual details with the themes of stillness, wholesomeness, transience, elasticity, and dissonance. Hardly just a story of one person's life, it's actually an optimistic tale engendering possibility. Perhaps, this is to be expected at the end of another century. Hence, St. Denis' under-recognition probably reflects the invisibility of stillness, which is finally relevant again.

There's an awful lot that gets tossed about, but it's veritable Perez, salted by collaborators Steve De Groodt, Michael Bayer, Strawn Bovee and Liz Stillwell, and peppered with a St. Denis pose, a Cagean moment, some Hofmannsthal prose and Kandinsky's dash of white. In fact, "Dance-Crazy Kid"

is so well blended, it's difficult to pick it apart. Hofmannsthal was right to lose faith in language's communicative capacity. Dance theater is infinitely more spacious.

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LOS ANGELES

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