

***Choreography is a technology of presence, and desire.
Adam Linder as told to Anaïs Nony***

Interview by ANAÏS NONY

Abstract

In an interview conducted on October, 26 2015 at the FD13 Residency for the Arts in Saint-Paul, Minnesota, Adam Linder talks about choreography as being both a technology of presence and desire. Starting off with a reflection concerning the diverse languages he uses in his artwork, Linder quickly turns his attention to the complex relationships between body movements, abstraction, and diverse forms of codification. He underlines how cultural influences are shaping production of languages and their commodification, and describes the technics he deploys for the body to remain a central mode of expression. Recipient of the Mohn Prize for artistic excellence in 2016, Adam Linder (b. 1983, Sydney) is a choreographer and dancer based in Los Angeles and Berlin.



Kein Paradiso, 2016 Stage Work
Image: Shahryar Nashat

Anaïs Nony: Your work seems to develop two different modalities of presence: one is the recent creation of the Services, which concerns artistic services in the context of today's cultural world; the other is a research project that comes from the Hip Hop culture, the operetta, and rhyme. Could you talk about these two modalities and how they work together or not?

Adam Linder: My interests and how they are formally realized are quite heterogeneous. But of course there is an underlying drive, an underlying area of enquiry that I have. I'm interested in languages. That's one of the points that I move out from. These are languages of the body, be it forms like classical ballet or Egyptian hieroglyphics, or verbal languages. And I refract that idea of language even into thinking about what constitutes a style or a genre or a type, a kind of categorized or codified cultural form. Hip Hop as a form –or rather rapping as a form– has come into my work because it's one form that is very present and very effective in culture today.

AN: In what sense effective?

AL: The reason I'm interested in rapping is that it's this very specific language technology. A form that has an African American history but has since gone quite global. As it's producing language it modifies language and this happens through experience. So through the rhyme, through the rhythmical formation of rapping verse, language becomes porous and it has this strong affective quality that might lead us to bodily response. So what I'm interested in with rhyme is the vernacularization of formal language. Rap is codified but it's constantly reinventing and changing itself through its own making and remaking. Whilst I was making the piece *Cult to the Built on What*, in which this form was the central focus, I wanted in my way to address this complex issue of cultural appropriation, so the piece very openly revolved around this question of "who can perform what?". As a kid growing up in the 90s I was so influenced by Hip Hop culture yet I'm white and so I was interested in trying to broach this polemic. But actually, a general motivation for my work is this idea of the rational meeting the expressive, the analytical meeting the visceral and this mind-body reconnect. Another of these motivations or byproducts of my work is a will to collapse "major" and "minor" forms, which has to do with this notion of right brain and left brain. I think that's how I began to work with rap. I don't want to fixate on that because I've worked just as much on thinking about the genre of the ballet, like with my piece *Parade*. Or I've worked just as much thinking about other specific forms. And now it's progressing to working in various ways to make discourse kind of musical or visceral. I've done that a few times in my pieces, where a very specific discursive thread has been made into singing verse or musical verse. I think part of this thinking about languages, forms, and categories is that what determines them is a matter of social value, how different social groups or social

narratives originate a certain form, how it's valued, how it's transferred, how it's potentially exploited. So leading back into your question, Services is really about a similar thinking but really about choreography, like a wholly encompassing thinking about choreography as a language, as a form. And I'm being very general about that. What are the conditions for how we can think of this as a valuable category.

AN: Valuable for the art world?

AL: Hhm... not necessarily, though yes, too. But I would even go beyond that and say: valuable for a world that so much worships objects and inanimate materials and – I would even go further – the objectified material of history. Because choreography is a technology of presence. It demands presence both from the doer and the witness. I think that the art world is one kind of microcosm for thinking about society. Choreography has been a very powerful machine for regulating and ordering culture, which has then regulated and ordered social life.

AN: How do you see yourself as an artist proposing something that goes in direct relation to the service industry, which is a characteristics of today's capitalism. Services have now replaced a lot of the relational-based behavior, such as the person that can help or that can be helped.

AL: In the sense that in our post-fordist situation, the service economy has been elevated to the degree that it replaces traditional types of industrialized labor?

AN: Yes.

AL: I think for me as an artist I really want to be thinking about and respond to the conditions of our time. So for me the service model is a way of working within a facet of our time. On the one hand there are certain influences that I've had that come from a feminist materialist relation to service, this idea of taking care, the affective exchange of supporting something. That was very much the first Service I made called Some Cleaning, a riff on this legacy of feminist materialism. But in general I use the model of service because it makes sense for choreography. The performing arts have always been in the service of affective exchange. They always have been serving ephemeral experiences.

AN: In what sense?

AL: In the sense that the economy of performing arts has always been a service economy. You buy your ticket to a performance and the people that fulfill that premise

are in essence hired for their specific corporeal skills. I'm collapsing the servicing legacy of the performing arts and this blatant 21st century commodification of service. I am on the market. I believe in a market structure as much as I believe in a certain transparency or ethic of how to be on the market. My Services don't resist commodification but through their commodification they put forward a very transparent mode of operation. I accept that we have arrived at this point in our political economy, the way our society has economically evolved. This is the system we've got. So how am I going to work in this system with the particularities of choreography and put forward a certain personal ethic? I wouldn't say that it's an ideology. I don't know how I feel about this term, ideology. It's an ethic; it's a code of conduct that I wish to engage with.

AN: So for you, performance doesn't stand outside of an attention economy? It's by collapsing a certain idea of performance, as being this art that stands outside of the market economy, that you find attention as the productive force for your artwork?

AL: I think avant-gardes of performance have attempted to put forward an alternative to other more commodifiable disciplines within art. I think it would be way too romantic to think that performance still holds a position outside of economic life. The way this very seminal avant-garde of performance, in the late 60s, early 70s, such as body art and conceptual or minimal performance practices, has been carried through time means that we have seen this legacy become entirely commodified. Additionally, the most commodified aspects have been the more tangible byproducts like the scores or the documentation. For me to hold to some idea of performance as some kind of last non-commodifiable refuge would be totally condescending toward the discipline of performance. It would feel ahistorical in relation to the moment we are in and it's too tied up in utopian sentiment that makes me feel uncomfortable.

AN: Terrific. One of the major shifts that happened is that now any project is tied up in a global capitalist structure. Now everything is economical, even the avant-garde.

AL: There's a particular frontier at that moment. I'm very weary of nostalgia, of looking back with a certain kind of romantic purview. It was a very different frontier of progressive action in terms of thinking about disciplinary ruptures and what we have now is a very different time and different conditions and how do we create certain ruptures or rethinking, remodeling within the situation we have now. I try to think of where we are at now, dealing with materials, with influences and sources that I find from today. Of course, I look back at historical factors but I'm mostly inspired by a mirror held up to our times.

AN: What are your current influences, and what kind of project are you working on

now?

AL: Right now, I've put the Services on ice. I made three Services over the last three years. I'm not planning on making another one just yet. I'm planning to make a stage work, another theatre performance. Again, I'm looking at a particular language; a particular genre that I find has produced certain interesting social resonances. That is abstraction. I'm thinking about how abstraction has evolved through modernism and onwards as a genre and how the mode of abstracting is used. And what is the purpose or what is behind this idea of not wanting to represent the concrete world. What is behind this idea of wanting to dissolve concreteness and resist representation? We happen to have this moment, particularly in visual arts – or you can also look at it more widely – where there is a new mantle of abstraction that is being taken up. My work isn't going to go into this question of economic abstraction or informational abstraction but it's all in the mix.

AN: What do you do with your body when the medium is abstraction?

AL: At the root of my thinking about abstraction is this paradox of abstract dance, which is a major form that came out in the 20th century where we saw an impetus or a focus put on form, line, pattern, geometry, and away from social specificity. But, how can the body ever escape its figuration? This question is the foundational question in my research right now. I'm reading, I'm thinking. I don't work through a process of movement research. I work much more within a text-based research mode that then leads me to imagine scenarios that I could work on physically. So that's what I'm dealing with right now. That's one thing. The other is a project that I'm working on with my boyfriend and long-term working partner Shahryar Nashat for later this year. It's a two-person show. Our work and our disciplines will interrelate in this show. I'm working on different vignettes, small ideas, not one totalizing thematic – I call them stations – thinking about the conditions of disciplinary relation between an object-based discipline and a body-based discipline. I'm thinking through these different scenarios of object-subject relation, object-object relation, subject-subject relation, the object of language versus the subject of movement's ambiguity. They are two different areas that I'm working on. The show with Shahryar will be at the Schinkel Pavilion in Berlin, and the new stage work will first be shown in L.A., then potentially in Liverpool and then Berlin.

AN: For theatre spaces, how do you work with design and the lighting? What are the language techniques you use and develop?

AL: I'm really interested in skill and context specificity. I'm not attracted to the fetish of the amateur or DIY "authenticity" or something that we have seen happening within

contemporary theatre practices of trying to break down or dissolve the artifice of the theatre, different attempts to destabilize the contract between performer and audience. When I work in the theatre, I really work with the theatre, with artifice. I think it's a powerful tool. I think that bringing an audience into a collective viewing scenario has a certain chemistry. I like to work with the saturated possibilities of lighting, the crisp amplification of sound. I feel like it can create very heightened images and rich scenarios. I always try and use the theatre to the fullest of my capacity, and I acknowledge and embrace the tradition of that. When working in a theatre, I often collaborate with specialists, lighting specialists, object specialists –Shahryar has often done my scenography–, and music specialists. The theatre has this wonderful history of being this meeting ground for different types of collaborations. Everyone has their skilled domain and yet they can come together and make something together. I take the overall authorship because my direction is the driving force, but it's a very fluid place of collaboration.

AN: Is there a specific theatre that you would like to be working in some day?

AL: Oh, I would love to make big pieces, which is antithetical to a lot of contemporary choreographers, to a lot of my colleagues. They are moving away from the theatre or away from a certain idea of spectacle. I feel like I'm moving towards it. I love it. Right now, the theatre that I work the most with is the HAU Hebbel am Ufer in Berlin. I feel close to them and I love working there. But I would love to make a piece somewhere like BAM – Brooklyn Academy of Music [laughs]. I went to the theatre when I was young. I just find it so exciting, that you step into this scenario and there is this temporal calibration where this collective moment of expectation creates this very specific anticipation. And that's really exciting. It's like a technology of desire. There is a desire to be transported, to be intellectually challenged, to be taken on a journey.

AN: You mentioned earlier in the conversation that choreography is a technology of presence. Would you say that choreography is also technology of desire and that presence and desire are very related to each other in your work?

AL: Absolutely. Totally. One idea about choreography is that it's alive at the same time that it's dying. I perform a gesture and in the moment that it's being registered, being enacted, it's also disappearing. This potential for enlivening, or making life, or making lives of the body is really interesting. Digital cultures right now allow for historical re-imaginings in terms of the way that we can access materials and knowledge, thus making history available to us in non-linear structures at any given moment. So there are these potentials for digital life to spurn alternate histories, which is a very strong political antagonist to the fact that Western history is written as a dominant narrative.

Our digital cultures are really creating an opportunity to re-imagine, to produce counter-narratives, subaltern narratives. In a way the body allows that, too, because there is this ability for the body to contain all of these sources and all of these materials at any moment and remix them in a de-contextualized or non-narrative way. What's interesting to think about is the fact that as we move more and more into the potentials of digital life, so does the potential of the body. Yet we think of them as so oppositional on the spectrum because the body is made of organic matter. Something that's so perishable and vulnerable as the body is technologically on par with what's happening digitally. I think that may relate to your question of desire or re-imagining.

AN: It's very interesting. In your work, the body can be thought of as a field of technicity that allows for a re-writing of a certain relation to history. Do you foresee working more directly with digital technology?

AL: I think I will always be interested in engaging with digital potentials or digital theories or even methodologies to inform an equivalent or a simultaneous process with the body. I have taken it on board in my work to often invite a new form into my practice for each successive work. It's not that I have to work with a new bodily form but it has just happened. I'm classically trained. I'm versed with various forms of modernism, contemporary dance, phenomenological ideas of perceptual improvisation. But I have also recently trained myself how to rap or how to glide or how to tap-dance or how to pop. I'm always trying to build this container. Of course, one informs the other. They are not discrete forms. In a way you could liken that to how different materials are contained within different folders on a digital desktop. Or how influences interrelate through a platform like Youtube. With such platforms, dance forms can evolve and then be self-recorded, uploaded and disseminated. It's totally empowering. I'm not interested in a straight analogy or of bridging some sort of gap with digital technology. It's more like there are these two spheres that have similar potential and how can they in their autonomous way inform each other. The Internet really informs my work in a way that has contributed to the development of how my body moves.

AN: In media theory there is one recent challenge that has been highlighted: most algorithmic modes of production now operate beyond the realm of our motor-sensory capacities and yet directly affect our sensorial milieu. In a very similar way, the body also operates outside of the realm of the consciousness, yet transforming the field of knowledge and awareness. It is not an analogy but about very interesting modes of operation that resonate with one another.

AL: It's like an osmosis.

AN: It's not possible to get rid of the body even in the digital age.

AL: I just love this basic idea that the system of the Internet was based on the operation of the brain. Dance is obviously an area for actualization. It's not my area of enquiry but I know that there are all kinds of choreographic practices that are being thought about in relation to this whole burgeoning field of neuro-semantics and neuroscience in general. Someone like William Forsythe has done a lot on that. I'm not as interested in the science of dance. I'm more interested in its socializing capacities. In my new project I'm not particularly moved by abstraction, which is why I'm doing this project. I don't make abstract work. I have never been attracted to making abstract work but I'm perplexed by the abstract. What is this phenomenon that has been so powerful and so widely subscribed to? I'm hypothesising that there is some kind of relation between Eurocentric ideas of Universalism and abstraction. We see other cultures much more interested in representation and symbolism. So that's the social crux of this question for me.

AN: Do you think of abstraction as a pseudo-heritage of the enlightenment?

AL: Pseudo is a good word. What I'm thinking about is that abstraction is a veil, a cover or decoy for not talking about realities lying underneath. What's interesting is that abstraction has become this kind of decoration.

AN: Abstraction as an ornament?

AL: It's even almost come full circle. In its wanting to escape ornament and through its omnipresence it has become an ornament again.

AN: In between the two wars abstraction was developed because of a difficulty to express a certain madness. This is no longer the case. What is the power of abstraction in a world that is saturated with visuals and images? Maybe abstraction now stands as a sort of ornament?

AL: I haven't yet thought about abstraction enough in relation to this question of the ornament. The way I was thinking about it thus far has led me to this notion of proxy decoration.

AN: Thank you so much for your time.

