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‘Suspended Limbs and Liquid Spines’: Richard Kennedy Debuts ‘Both’ at Artists Space

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Performance still of Richard Kennedy’s *Both* at Artists Space, January 18, 2017.

LUIS NIETO DICKENS/NOSLEEP.CO

Richard Kennedy, dressed in camouflage-print sweatpants and a beanie cap, began his new ballet, *Both*, by crossing Artists Space’s long gallery in Lower Manhattan with a long butane lighter in one hand before lighting two pillar candles. The ritualistic action recast Kennedy from a potentially foreboding figure to a sort of spiritual authority, an apt start to a work that commixed violence and self-care, suggesting how misreadings of the former create a need for the latter. A recording of Claudia Rankine reading her poem “Stop and Frisk” played. “And you are not the guy but you still fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description,” her voice called out with a deadpan lilt, introducing a slippery sense of contradiction into the space, referring to systems of control and strategies of endurance. Following the dialectical logic of Rankine’s refrain, the ballet suggested policing, with its inherent biases, as choreography, and choreography as a response to these modes of institutionalized alterity.

Taking the shape of three 12-minute movements divided by two short intermissions, Kennedy’s three-person performance, commissioned by Artists Space, carved out a vocabulary of brooding fluidity, enhanced by a soundtrack mixing Indian pop fusion from Sheila Chandra, angst-ridden electronica from VIOLENCE (a one-person project by Palm Trees), and experimental cello music from Kelsey Lu, as well as the artist’s own live vocals synthesized by a vocoder. Joined by dancers Elayna Lopez and Quetzal Arias, in varying combinations of one, two, and three bodies on the stage at a time, Kennedy choreographed suspended limbs and liquid spines, at once light with a sensual joy and heavy with mournful emotion—a rare alchemy available to the dancer’s dancer who can metabolize anguish with vocational grace.

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While Kennedy's most recent works have been two experimental operas staged at Signal Gallery in Brooklyn and a debut pop music EP, *Open Wound in a Pool of Sharks*, his career trajectory spans Broadway musicals and the Bushwick underground. He's toured with productions like *Fosse* and *Wicked*, as well as the dance music project *Hercules Love Affair*. He was also one of six choreographers behind the collaborative community performance project *Authority Figure*, and he continues to act as a mainstay of New York's queer nightlife scene, filling his work with both theatrical virtuosity and principles of non-hierarchical social organizing. As he underscores the pleasures of watching highly trained bodies in movement, his ballet—and it's important he's using that highly regimented form—provokes a conversation about reskilling performance art spaces.

The history of performance art is marked by the deskilling of theatre, and in recent decades the intermingling of dance and visual art in the non-dance and conceptual dance movements has spotlighted the untrained or amateur performer in gallery spaces. Kennedy instead explores the disruptive potential of imbuing a classic form, marked by deep-rooted traditions of exclusion, with justice-minded politics. As the most unqualified president in U.S. history begins his reign, it's worth questioning the well-worn idea that celebrating amateurism is automatically democratizing. Glorifying anti-skill at this moment feels more like an irresponsible move than a punk one. Celebrating virtuosity, on the other hand, especially as a vehicle for addressing otherness and violence, seems a promising antidote to expressions of privilege masquerading as anti-establishment populism.

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