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DANCE

IN CONVERSATION

GERARD & KELLY with Stephanie Joy Del Rosso

Since they began collaborating in 2003, Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly have produced interdisciplinary work using dance, writing, and visual art to reframe perceptions of queer consciousness, complicate relationships between performer and viewer, and explore our collective memory. In the centerpiece of *Timelining*, their new project at The Kitchen, performer pairs ranging from an engaged couple to roommates recite the timelines of their lives while enacting a choreographed score. The result is a mesmerizing “literary portrait” of intersecting histories. Gerard & Kelly sat down with Stephanie Joy Del Rosso at The Kitchen to discuss voyeurism, vulnerability, and the current state of contemporary dance.



Gerard & Kelly, *Timelining*, 2014. Performance view, The Kitchen, New York, NY, 2014. Pictured: Lissy Vomáčka and Anna Vomáčka. Courtesy of the artists, Kate Werble Gallery, New York, and The Kitchen, New York. Photo: Ian Douglas.

Stephanie Joy Del Rosso (Rail): The Kitchen describes *Timelining* as a piece rooted in “producing ... unscripted moments of intimacy.” The intimacy between the performers is clear in their shared remembering, but there also exists an intimacy between performer and viewer. Particularly when I was the only person in the room, I wondered if I had earned this intimacy, if I had earned the right to hear this litany of deeply personal memories from strangers. Do you think an intimacy between performer and viewer is necessary for a performance to occur?

Ryan Kelly: I definitely know that the performance will continue whether or not the viewer identifies or dis-identifies with what’s taking place. The piece is activated and impacted by the viewer’s arrival, but because the performers are so tasked with their own business, “playing for an audience” is completely unnecessary. We were kind of borrowing from Yvonne Rainer: the performers are doing their thing, and the audience is doing theirs. Still, there is an interdependence with the viewer which situates it in contrast to the durational performance work of Marina Abramović or Terence Koh—which is actually indifferent to the presence of the viewer. It’s funny, when we did *Reusable Parts/Endless Love*, we didn’t anticipate an experience of an intimate encounter on the part of the viewer.

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Rail: That was unexpected?

Kelly: That was unexpected. And a lot of people were reflecting on it. We created a special kind of spectator situation for the viewer, to keep her active, moving around, and uncertain where to be—displaced. But I didn't anticipate this sense of identification. We were more aware of this possibility with *Timelining*. In editing the timelines we were really thinking about emptying or draining them until they were just the events, just the information, so that the viewer can have the space to project her own experiences.

Rail: Is there a relationship between intimacy and a kind of voyeurism?

Brennan Gerard: The question of voyeurism is interesting because we're attempting to make you aware of your own spectatorship—in that your presence activates the scores—but at the same time the score isn't performed for you specifically. The pairs are very much performing to each other, for each other. So you must ask yourself: what is my responsibility? And I think there is a vulnerability there. We're not using the strategies typical in contemporary dance right now, which model spectacular culture and celebrity, or use nudity. In *Timelining*, there's so much that is revealed and then so much that is not: their names, their bodies, their identities.

Rail: I felt much more vulnerable watching *Timelining* than I would seeing a naked performer on stage—even though the intent of nudity is often to cultivate a sense of vulnerability. Do you ever worry about somehow creating too much vulnerability between the viewer and the performer? Is that possible?

Kelly: We are formed by being undone by one another. So I can't imagine a situation with too much vulnerability. I can understand that in relation to the performers, but they have a lot of agency in their enactment of the score. They're responding to the energy in the space and have a lot of tools at their disposal. In some ways I think the score undoes them too. But I'm not at all concerned about the vulnerability that the viewer might experience, because I think that kind of undoing is really productive. I worry that the viewer might get hit by a bus when she crawls back to 10th Avenue because she's so caught up in thinking about the piece [*laughter*] but—

Rail: But that's kind of out of your control. How does this work connect to the idea of queer temporality?

Gerard: Queer time is something we're very consciously borrowing from the book *Time Binds* by Elizabeth Freeman. She thinks of time as material—which is very similar to thinking of memory as material, just as copper, or wood, or movement, or sound is. *Timelining* avoids and questions a normative understanding of time: the fact that there would be a beginning, middle, and end. It even questions the idea that you could contain this thing called *Timelining*—because it's happening right now, maybe, if someone is there to watch. It asks: are there pockets of resistance to the regimentation of time under the dominant system, in which our lives are very structured according to a logic of production, both in work and in leisure, and in a 24/7 culture of spectacle?

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Kelly: I think that having the six weeks of the exhibition as a kind of container to be filled and refilled everyday from noon until 6 p.m. is a standard itself. It's certainly not innovative, but I do like the way it creates the possibility for all kinds of different encounters. Sometimes there's an audience that forms. Sometimes there's only one person in the space, and that's a completely different encounter. Once, someone just stayed in the room after two performers finished, and there were 20 minutes of silence. No one else walked in, so the piece never restarted, and they all just sat there: together but not together.

Rail: I almost felt a camaraderie with the people I watched *Timelining* with—and there isn't a space for that sort of interaction in most performance experiences.

Kelly: It is a kind of group relations experiment. The evenness of the light and the ability to have a circuit of gazes in the room does allow us as viewers to be aware that we are watched as much as we're watching, and that we are performing and presenting in front of others—which is part of thinking about a possible queering of time. I think it also has to do with what's modeled by the performers: that one's life doesn't happen in order, that you have a chronology that you are constantly being thrown off of by the other, that in fact our lives are embedded with the lives of others. This rendering versus a normative vision of time as beginning and progressing toward some telos, some meaning.

Rail: I read Ryan's piece "Notes on Dancing with the Art World," and I was particularly interested in your reference to the Claire Bishop *Rail* essay, "Unhappy Days in the Art World?" in which you—rightfully—push against her championing of dance's "plenitude." How do you both aim to upend this conception of dance in *Timelining*, *Verb Dance*, and in general?

Kelly: One thing I'd say is, for us, *Timelining* is not dance. Not at all. And actually I don't think we thought about a kind of dialogue with past dance work. We were much more involved with thinking about post-Minimalist sculpture and recent work in relational aesthetics.

Gerard: And literature.

Kelly: Right. I don't even think we were thinking about dance when we were making *Verb Dance*. We were thinking more about Richard Serra. The work uses movement, and absolutely thinks about choreography, but actually those terms are under the surface of much installation art. For me, the viewer's experience of the space is more what is being choreographed. With *Verb Dance* we were actively trying to push these trained dancers to get to a literal sense of the movement. And over time, they really landed on it—which is very hard to do. In many ways we were considering: how can we see what it is to chip oneself, without it becoming a choreography of chipping?

Gerard: In *Verb Dance* we wanted the performers to move onto the next verb at the moment they felt that dance appeared. So it's not subjective, but it required them to think.

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When I watched the piece I felt like I could watch dance again. I find it very difficult to watch dance. And so it became an experiment in how to see it again, maybe at its threshold of becoming dance.

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Rail: Why is watching dance difficult?

Gerard: For me, seeing is a mode of thinking. And when a lot of people see dance, they turn off the thinking. The idea that dance is ephemeral or vanishing has never been valuable to me. What is valuable to me about dance is the way that certain marks are made in space and time, and starting to understand what those marks are, or what they might signify. Many dances are constructed so as to erase those marks, or to stop you from thinking about that level of mark-making. So I just see an idea or a style. A kind of blur.

Rail: How do you think dance can achieve critical acclaim while also remaining true to what Ryan termed “our common and contemporary experience”? Or in other words, how do you navigate working within “the system” (the Whitney Independent Study Program, UCLA’s M.F.A. program) and outside of it?

Kelly: I’ve danced since I was a child, and my worldview is formed by that experience of movement and embodiment. I believe that dance and dancing have an extraordinary potential for consciousness-raising. But I entirely agree with Ann Liv Young and what she said in the *Rail* that the field of dance is not where the most interesting experiments are taking place. That doesn’t immediately mean that the visual art world is the alternative. Nor do I want to say that the dance field has no innovators. But I think that its system of production and distribution has failed to create a sustainable field, and to produce discourse that can move our understandings of dance forward. There are a few people paying a lot of attention right now to what dance is doing. Mostly I mean people who are bored with the laziness of relational aesthetics and the banality of art fairs. And they are really excited, these 10 people [*laughs*], by work which feels a part of our “common and contemporary experience.” This means work that articulates a space where we can share, and be vulnerable with one another, and occupy space and time without it being derived in some way, or instrumentalized by some corporation somewhere. It’s the kind of experience we want to have on Facebook but can’t because we know that everything we’re doing is production for Facebook. At its best, this is what dance can contribute: a space of interaction and sharing. Sadly, I don’t think the dance field is doing that. I see scarcity, and fear, and anxiety, and the reproduction of known quantities.

Rail: Who are the people who are pushing past this scarcity, fear, and anxiety? Who are you excited about?

Kelly: I think Ann Liv is fascinating. I’m not sure she’s the cleverest, but she’s a really smart person and a ballsy artist. She doesn’t fit any better into art than she does into dance, but history is written over a long arc. So I’m very interested in her persistence and her critical sense. We like Simone Forti, Tere O’Connor, and the integrity of their projects—in such different ways. Tere couldn’t be more different than what I’ve been

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talking about, in some ways, because he insists on the proscenium and that container. But it allows him to work with time. It's a demand upon the viewer to pay attention, and he is working choreography to make meaning. Simone is bringing writing, movement, and improvisation together to make this very strange, hybrid work which is somehow not dance, not poetry, and not performance art—which means it's the beginning of something.

Gerard: With all of those artists what you see is this attempt to have movement, to have dance, to have that kind of plenitude, but to also have thinking, and an intellectual project, and real questions. I don't want to name people on either side of the spectrum, but I think that right now there is a widespread and dangerous anti-intellectualism, a kind of backlash from what people thought was an over-theoretical discourse. With Tere, Simone, and Ann Liv, I experience a real understanding of what performance is, and at the same time they're encouraging the spectator to keep thinking, to move the discourse forward.

Kelly: I think Tere is presenting a kind of dialectical way of thinking. He's showing you the front and back, what we think we know and what we think we've let go of. He allows for a lot of different times to exist in the work because he's working in a dialogue with past dance. Working within a history of choreography, thinking about all these things existing in a kind of endless conversation with one another, is a way of queering time.

Rail: Having experienced both coasts, how would you describe the differences between the art communities in Los Angeles and New York?

Kelly: L.A. is an extraordinary place. People seem to complain about living in New York, but everyone in L.A. is so excited, so self-consciously aware that they're in the right place at the right time. It is experiencing an interesting moment in the way of art—like Bushwick right before it became gentrified. You know something's going to happen and that it's not going to be this way forever, but right now just one thousand people are involved and it's the perfect number. You almost feel like you know everyone. And it's in the shadows of this really important industry: entertainment. So it's almost not important. Conversely, New York art feels so important. The stakes feel so high. And I think among my friends everyone's trying to figure out how to keep the stakes low, how to find some shadow to hide under, to keep their lives together, and not feel completely given over to some panic of “now or never.”