

# ARTFORUM

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## Murder on the Dance Floor

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**Yve Laris Cohen, *Fine*, 2015.** Performance view, The Kitchen, New York, May 15, 2015. Thomas von Foerster and Yve Laris Cohen. Photo: Paula Court.

I’VE SEEN (or rather, tried to see) performances by Yve Laris Cohen at The Kitchen three times now. The first time, I didn’t see anything at all. Unaware that viewers of *Seth*, 2013, had already been chosen, I was turned away at the door. For *Thomas*, 2013, four of us restlessly shifted on the floor of a disheveled third-story administrative office. In the dark, we listened to the even tick of a metronome and the rain hitting something metallic on the roof, illuminated only by an orange bulb flickering in the artist’s lap. That time, the audience was self-selected; volunteering meant missing all the other pieces billed in the evening’s “Dance and Process” program.

It would be wrong to call the third time a charm—Laris Cohen’s work is compelling, frustrating, urgent, yes, but hardly *charming*. To watch *Fine*, the audience shuffled into a compressed sliver of the black-box theater space, darkened and demarcated by a lowered curtain. The artist soon appeared in a stagehand’s pragmatic uniform: black jeans and T-shirt, mic pack in pocket, headset in ear, clipboard in hand. He shut the door behind us, ready to work.

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He began to speak, his cues becoming instructions, such as “state your name and profession.” Voices answered Laris Cohen from over the loudspeakers, emanating from bodies obscured from view. The first respondent was Ed, an engineer. Laris Cohen implored: “Describe, in as much detail as you can, the original piece.”

In some ways *Fine* is composed through its failures. The first is that of the unrealized project. Slowly rising, the first curtain reveals only another exactly like it. Ed tells us the plans for a massive, movable wall, unsuccessful for all the usual, boring reasons that dictate most of our personal abandonments (not practical, not enough time, not enough money). Of course, the wall was also to be distinctly unordinary: to be built like a dancer’s sprung floor, to be raked at the incline of a ballet stage, to be floated on casters. The idea was to slowly push the leaning surface toward the audience, herding them out of the theater.

*Fine* also intervenes in debates about performance’s most oft-beaten horse, its refusal to adhere neatly to the archive. Contra the staying power of documentation, Laris Cohen presents oral histories, with their glitches of memory and the incommensurability of each account. We listen closely for error: Was the wall supposed to be twenty by forty feet? Sixteen by forty-four? Why, exactly, didn’t it work out?

It’s a type of repetition compulsion, that rehashing in the subjunctive tense, the endless recycling of what could have been. The second curtain is raised to reveal another like the first. In *Fine*, the same series of questions are asked to a production manager, an architect, another engineer. At an estimated twelve thousand pounds, the project was also, unsurprisingly, deemed unsafe, though by who and at what point in its evolution remains an ongoing point of contention. How to ballast, to keep the whole thing from tipping over? How to keep it from crashing through The Kitchen’s acoustically isolated—and therefore structurally precarious—floor?

Each dialogue is punctuated only by production cues and the names of all involved: Tom, Ed, Brittany, Jeremy, Naomi, Karen, Zach. Some of these names remain unseen and unheard by the audience, ghosts in the theater’s machine. The familiarity of first-name basis is belied by one of Laris Cohen’s other questions: “Describe the nature of our relationship.” (Zach answers most succinctly: “professional.”)

Laris Cohen also asks, “What was the title of the original piece?” Most don’t remember, until someone does. It was to be called *Al Fine*, a term borrowed from directions that, in sheet music, indicate performers are to repeat a section of the composition until its end (marked *fine*). Thus the title describes the performance’s operations, as well as connects it to other of the artist’s works, such as *Coda*, 2012, at the Sculpture Center and *D.S.* (an abbreviation of *dal segno*), his contribution to the 2014 Whitney Biennial.

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In *Fine*'s most theatrical reveal, the third and final curtain, far upstage, is raised swiftly to rest just above a seated man in shorts, cane in hand, perceptible by spotlight. To Scott, a retired aerospace engineer, Laris Cohen addresses some additional directives, such as, "talk about the postcards you sent me when I was in college." The nature of this relationship is by turns tender and strained. Scott's daughter was friends with the artist when they were kids, when Laris Cohen was an aspiring ballerina in San Diego; there is a collective wince as he stumbles over the correct pronouns.

In the stage left wings, had there been any, is Tom, a performer in other of Laris Cohen's pieces, including *D.S.* and *Patron*, 2015, at Danspace Project, for which he read a staggeringly long list of all the New York City Ballet performances he attended since the mid-1980s (and the location of dinner afterward). The metronome-like click of a slowly turned winch—which has accompanied most of the performance—has actually been Tom all along, incrementally raising that frontmost curtain. Laris Cohen approaches Tom for a final pas de deux. Tom hoists Laris Cohen up, the artist's body crumpling over his shoulder: first the left side, then the right, then the left, and so on.

Sprung floors are designed to absorb shock. They are literally easier on your body, especially on bodies condemned or enjoined to repeat certain actions. Imagine all your weight landing on a single supporting leg, on the fragile joints of your knee and ankle. Now imagine a floor that acquiesces, that physically gives to accommodate your every move.

As the front curtain makes its way back down at an excruciatingly crawling pace, I think of Andrea Fraser ("We carry, each of us, our institutions inside ourselves... I can rip at the walls of my institutional body. But..."), and then of the work's title, which has mutated from the intellectual glamour of European pronunciation to our favorite American shorthand for both gritted resignation and the daily evasion of not telling someone how you're really doing.

I used to be a dancer (knees still shot from time on a distinctly unsprung floor). Like the artist, the nature of this relationship has changed. In his work I am always reminded of my own now critical distance toward the discipline, but also its residual spell. It didn't work out. It's fine. I'm fine.

— Catherine Damman