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A black and white portrait of Trajal Harrell. He is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark, collared jacket. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the left of the camera. He is holding a lit cigarette in his right hand, which is raised towards his chest. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

trans magazin
in conversation with
Trajal Harrell

Since the autumn of 2019, the American choreographer and dancer Trajal Harrell has been one of 8 house directors at the Schauspielhaus Zurich. His work has merged postmodern dance with theoretical ideas from voguing and butoh. We spoke with Trajal about his practice and his intention to find the activity again, which «we actually call dancing».

TM We were interested in you and your work, because in many of your performances and choreographies you reassemble and reconstruct the history of dance. The topic of this issue of trans is «reproduction», how do you see to that?

TH It's a very big issue in dance: reproduction and replication and imitation are big parts of the training. Dancers learn ideals of movements that people have to submit to in order to be successful. I'm speaking about classical ballet here, but it's true for other forms, classical modern dance, for example. When I started out I knew that I didn't want to work like that. I was coming from postmodern dance, theoretically; I knew that every movement every person had was different, and had a potentially different meaning, and a different way of rupturing how we think about the human definitions we give to behaviour. I started by working against that classical rigidity. There was no technique, no working together on vocabulary, we worked in a very heterogeneous way. I never tried to mould the work, nor the dancers, into something that had a vocabulary that was reproducible on the body in the way that a lot of dance is made.

Step forward to 2020 though, certain things have become part and parcel of how my work operates aesthetically. I've tried to bring those things into the work in a way that it doesn't mean that the dancers have to mickey-mouse me, or they have to reproduce what I produce in movement. «Köln Concert» was the first time I tried to synthesize everything down to one style of dancing. What is interesting is that you see it on seven different bodies, in the way that they interpret it. For me it was an achievement to get to this place where dance could be so defined as a style, yet no one is exactly the same. So my work doesn't reproduce itself, it reproduces itself in its stylistic impulse, aesthetic «cousinry» I call it. Like cousins we don't look all the same even though we share some familial roots.

TM Your dancers exist in their own context and as you just said you support that in the way that

you choreograph them, generously. Could you tell us about how your work developed in relation to its context? Would you consider it a personal development, or do you feel it more in relation to a history of dance?

TH I have an aesthetic and I have been working a long time towards a «way» of dancing. My work has a conceptual foundation, but I was interested in what dancing could be again – as an activity. Something that we could identify as «dancing», not the idea «ok I stand up – this is dance», not the idea that «I read a piece of paper, and this is dance». No! I was interested in this activity that we know. Where most people would say: «Ah, that's dancing!» What is that? What actually is that? I wanted to make that in my own way, which was really challenging, since I came out of early postmodern dancing. I do believe that when one stands up on a stage and reads a piece of paper: that can be the choreography, that can be a dance. But I was interested in the collective aspect, the understanding of something that most people say «Ah, that's dancing, that's not walking!»

At a certain point in contemporary dance, very few people were «dancing». They were doing these other activities, these other ways of behaving on stage, but they weren't doing this thing that was called «dancing»! And neither was I a lot of times! I thought that it was a pity, and that the audience was bored. We had taken conceptual dance as far as we could go. I wanted to interrogate what «dancing» was.

In the piece «The Köln Concert», we are dancing, that's all we do. It's dance. This is a style of dancing, that is mine, that I created over the years with the dancers with whom I work and we understand it. The dancers know how to do this style of dancing, but they don't do it exactly the way I do it. That's what's different to the modern dance techniques, where you learn to perform the movements exactly the way the technique teaches you. Because one choreographer or dancer has become the idol for that. The emblem for that movement is replicated throughout the technique, and that

technique then replicates it throughout a lot of people who come to study there and eventually get fed into the companies:

TM How do you relate to the concept of a role in the broadest sense? In your work as a director, producer, dancer?

TH There are roles and responsibilities. There are responsibilities that come with roles. I try to take my responsibilities very seriously and I try to understand the expectations of the role. But I try also to know that I am not the one to replicate every expected step. The role has to, first of all, fit into the artistic goals that I have. I am in charge of producing a dance company within the Schauspielhaus Zurich, that is my role. That prescribes a lot of different things: socially, economically, ethically, politically. I advocate for the dancers a lot, that I work with. I like to think of myself as a dancer's dancer. I have a responsibility towards many of them, and that responsibility becomes even more intense, because I am not from here. Not a lot of people like me have been in these roles. But I don't get too caught up in that, I ignore that most of the time. Every now and then I do give it its poetic justice.

TM Regarding your projects based on research in the drag movement for instance, how do you relate to a potential subversive moment in a role that you play?

TH There are many drag movements and ways of defining and thinking about drag. It's not been my primary research but certainly there are overlapping discourses. My particular research has been in the voguing dance tradition and butoh dance.

When I went to the balls, for the first time, I thought that this is where postmodern dance was happening. And I made this little piece, «It Is Thus from a Strange New Perspective That We Look Back on the Modernist Origins and Watch It Splintering into Endless Replication». I formalized ideas from the runway since I had seen this operation through voguing at the balls, and filtered this through minimalism and the modernist grid and it was – to my shock – quite a success at Judson Church that evening. I got into it, I understood the political and social implications. But the real thing is: I was just blown away by what happened! I didn't expect people to be cheering. I don't think I will ever hear applause like that again. It was a shock of the new going in both directions and that made it a historical moment.

That said, I don't represent the voguing dance community, I am not a voguer, I have never walked a ball. I work «in» the imagination. I am not making an effort to be subversive. I am trying to make the most honest, truthful, beautiful pieces, I can make. I'm very old fashioned in that way. My work is a lot about feeling. There are gaps in history that I try to fill in, and ultimately I'm trying to get a feeling. When I started, you could not emote on stage. It was taboo. This was unthought of when I came to start doing dance in Europe in 2006.

But, I think these changes are just a cycle. I don't get involved with too much critical apparatus. I did a lot of that in college. I read a lot of theory and now I've done a lot of performing and I've done a lot of looking at other peoples' work and now I have to paint freely. I am just trying to do my work, and if it can help people, if it can move people, it can get people a vista onto a part of themselves they haven't had access to... I go into it with the highest possible integrity, to find out what I can find and come back and report. That's it. I don't care if it's subversive.

TM That's beautiful. How did this switch? Do you think this development originated from a subversive moment to go beyond and «paint freely»?

TH Well, you become more established. When I first made «Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church», I was driven by the question: what happens when someone coming from a non-dominant space brings his cultural product into a more dominant cultural product space? We know what happened with the blues into rock n' roll. That's why I came up with this idea of making pieces based on the different sizes of T-Shirt. I flooded the dance market! At the time people made one piece every one or two years for the market. That's all the market could process in terms of touring.

There were artists that inspired me: David Hammons' «Bliz-aard Ball Sale» from 1983 and also Rem Koolhaas' book «S, M, L, XL». I just saw the title and thought that I could make the pieces in different sizes! I thought I could disrupt the mode of cultural appropriation that happens when you go into a dominant cultural space. I started to do these series and no one was doing that. But was that subversive? I was «in» imagination! I was just working. I thought, that's what an artist was supposed to do: rethink, rearrange and look at the world from either the «strange made familiar» or the «familiar made strange». I can look at this glass of water, but nobody can see it the way I see it. My job is to go as close as possible to show it to you as I see it.

This is all I try to do. It really also came from these sizes: I made XS-, S-, M-, XL-Jr- Plus-Made-to-Measure works and that became the series – «Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church». This will always be in my DNA as a choreographer. Any artist has options of scale. You can make the tiniest thing and it can be important.

TM How do you decide on the size or scale of a piece? When you have an idea for a piece do you translate that into different sizes or does each idea have a size?

TH I think of size as a dynamic. The dynamic has to do with the volume of the work itself in space, with the number of people who see it, and also has to do with the size of the space. A piece takes a very long time to develop and create and I start with an idea, 5 or 6 years before it gets to the stage. Along the way there is no formula, the research is a huge part of the project fuelling the performativity.

In bringing voguing and early postmodern dance together, we were working on realness and authenticity. Where is the line? Watching it, you could identify this shifting back and forth. I am looking at butoh with the theoretical lens of voguing and voguing through the theoretical lens of butoh. I tried to share that, but I don't try to overburden the dancers because I want them to be «in» the imagination. We try to discover certain nexi of theoretical propositions that underline the questions that I am asking. We use that as a way to be in an imaginative process, not in a process of replicating past dance forms. As in «Caen Amour», I am trying to make a hoochie-coochie-show from the 30s, but I've never been to a hoochie-coochie show!

TM After the pieces were shown, how are you concerned with the idea of preserving them? How do you document your work? Is that important to you? Or do you think that once you performed it, it took place, that's its value, and it's gone?

TH I love to tour, and I want the work to tour for as long as it can. I think about it as live-work and it needs to be seen. I just got the approval for three rehearsal directors in Zurich, they will be in charge of physically making sure that there is physical archiving of the work. Usually rehearsal directors know the repertoire. They know either how to jump in and take people's place or how to teach people. To finally have that is a big deal for how we work, and for the future, we haven't had that up until now. Some of the pieces I want preserved in museums of course, because they have the means

to preserve them. I don't want to build a huge company as a means to preserve my work. I have other things that I want to do in the later years of my life. So, I hope that the museum, in the visual art world, will preserve some. And maybe some will be preserved in theatre repertoires. So, yes, I would like some of the work preserved. I have begun to think about that – you have to think about that.

TM What has been your experience of working at the Schauspielhaus so far? We were very interested in whether, or how, the novel set-up of having 8 in-house directors working alongside each other has influenced your practice?

TH It's not my first time working in this sort of context. I worked for three years at Münchner Kammerspiele, that's why I came here, Benjamin von Blomberg [now co-director of the Schauspielhaus] was the chief dramaturg there. I also worked at Schauspielhaus Bochum. But this particular consortium, working with seven other artists sharing an ensemble, is new.

The project at the Schauspielhaus is very interesting for me, because I don't want yet to run my own theatre or my own institution. So it's perfect for me, because I am happy to work with the artistic directors and the team there with direct support for the work that I want to make without having to have the burden of running the institution.

I like working on all scales and that's why I wanted to come to Zurich. I want to be able to make big pieces, but also want to be able to make very small pieces. I'm making this very small piece for the Gwangju Biennale, maybe it will be shown in Zurich because they have co-produced it. Hopefully, if things go well, my autumn 2022 piece for Schauspielhaus will be in the Schiffbau, and it will be my biggest piece to date. I like performing in front of all different kinds of audiences, and they have been very supportive of that, they knew that was how I work.

Of course they are an institution, they have certain responsibilities, they need to make the big pieces – I want to make the big pieces! There is no point for me going to the Schauspielhaus Zurich, if I don't want to take advantage of all the resources they have to make big pieces. The Schauspielhaus gives me the opportunity to have resources similar to those Pina Bausch or William Forsythe had. Not on that scale yet, but the apparatus is there. On the other hand, I will not be there forever, it wouldn't be wise of me to only make work in this time which

I will lose because I later don't have the means to tour it, or keep it in my repertoire. It's a principle of mine – I will always make work of different sizes. I will make those XS pieces, I will always make those S pieces, I will always make M-sized pieces, L pieces, those XL pieces, plus-size... That is now my framework.

TM To finish could you speak a little more about how it's been working with the seven other house directors at Schauspielhaus?

TH The ideal is that there will be dialogue, there will be influences. But honestly, Covid has changed everything. We haven't had time for interactions that we hoped to have. We do sometimes share performers, because the performers are all part of the ensemble, and the scheduling around that is difficult and challenging.

I've done a number of collaborations, and now I am not so interested in producing work with someone else. I only have a few pieces left in me, not a lot, I need to be very focused. But I enjoy having these colleagues very much. We have a strong administrative voice in how the Schauspielhaus works, a lot of decision-making happens with us, the artistic directory, and the dramaturgical team. And sometimes with the ensemble as well, there is a lot of contributing of ideas around the administration. Who knows, never say never. I am working with Asma [Maroof]; Asma does the music for Wu Tsang and she's gonna do some music for me for some pieces. So little things happen, but these things take time, you can't force them. This kind of rhizome, bubbling, that happens – it really needs time – and we haven't had that. I've accepted the invitation to stay through the 2023–2024 season, which is this artistic direction's five year appointment – so we have a few more years to go.

Trajal Harrell is a dancer-choreographer working internationally in theatres, festivals, museums, and other creative contexts. His next works can be seen at Gwangju Biennale, Schauspielhaus Zurich, Kunsthalle Zurich, Holland Festival, Impulstanz Festival Vienna, and São Paulo Biennale. He is building a new dance company as one of the house directors at Schauspielhaus Zurich.