

# UNSETTLING ASSUMPTIONS

## THE TRANS-QUEER FORMALISM OF DEVYNNEMORY/BEASTPRODUCTIONS

photo © Bradley Buehring

by devynn emory, with Liza Coviello

devynn emory [*looking*] and Aretha Aoki in devynn emory's *This Room This Braid* at the Actors Fund in Brooklyn, NY, January 2014.

The following is an interview by curator Liza Coviello with choreographer and performer devynn emory. The interview and video documentation of emory's dance works were exhibited at NAPOLEON gallery (Philadelphia, PA) in devynn emory's Personal Public: On Gender Variance in Performance Art, September 5–26, 2014.

Liza's questions were formed with input by Jeanne Vaccaro, a postdoctoral fellow in sexual studies. In her essay on the NAPOLEON gallery website, Liza writes of her intention to craft questions that "elucidate how one gender-nonconforming performer feels about their own bodily representation with regards to the public viewing of it."<sup>1</sup> devynn's responses dive into the charged space between choreographer/performer and audience. In words and the work, devynn invites a complex view: one that is awake both to the intricacies of lived identity and to the formal structures that are the subject of the dance.

[A.A., CQ Ed.]

**Liza: How do visibility and recognition function in your dance practice?**

**devynn:** Revealing one's body can be complicated. Inescapably, one of the many facets of my body visibility is my identity; however, this is not the starting point or the focus of my dance practice. I am a person who was born and socialized female, who is on a slow and steady path toward masculinity while remaining in a liminal and fluid space, actively moving away from the dichotomy of male/female. Over the years, audiences have witnessed my continual "transition" as a transgender person on stage. As the dance world flirts more with the art world and moves from ephemerality to archiving, there is an additional emphasis on documenting my transition, increasing my visibility. I have questioned the viewer's interest in my transition as opposed to my work as a dancer and choreographer. Given the discrimination and violence transgender people experience, as well as how underrepresented we are in the art world, I feel a complex responsibility and simultaneous sense of honor in being made visible.

<sup>1</sup> From an essay by Coviello on the NAPOLEON website: [www.napoleonnapeleon.com/2014/09/02/an-essay-by-liza-coviello-devynn-emorys-personal-public-on-gender-variance-in-performance-art](http://www.napoleonnapeleon.com/2014/09/02/an-essay-by-liza-coviello-devynn-emorys-personal-public-on-gender-variance-in-performance-art)

[left to right]

Leandro Dahlstrom Gimeno, devynn emory, Jasmine Hearn, Casey Llewellyn, Sabina Ibarrola, Margot Bassett, Alex Samets, Meghan Milam, Ayo Ohs, Caitie Moore, and Zavé Martohardjono in *baby/ grapefruit baby/ one brown one crème* by devynn emory at Issue Project Room, New York, NY, April 2013.



photo © Damian Calvo

**How important is reception to your work, and do you consider the reception of all types of audiences?**

An active exchange between performer and audience is important to me. My choreography leaves an entryway for all audiences to experience what is being offered and revealed. My performers are inviting real-time relational moments with each other as a piece unfolds, which encourages the viewer to see us as relatable humans. As a hyper-classically trained dancer with a conservatory background, it is a constant practice for me to untrain the perception of and striving for a perfect body, one that shows zero authentic emotion. I aim to keep the formal structure of the dancing body while allowing the performers' intricate isms of humanity to seep through and remain present.

In my three-part work, *baby/ grapefruit baby/ one brown one crème*, I reached outside of dance and into my various communities to further this exploration of humanness. I offered written instructional scores to friends who had little to no performing experience and asked them to memorize them in a few days' time. The scores included interactive tasks, such as reading love letters written by our queer and trans elders. Without any rehearsals, we met on stage as a communal action to bring our collective otherness into a new space: the stage. As people who are "othered" in our society, we often meet in the underground, where we have become professionals at exchanging micro relations and codes. This is presented through body language, gait, and choice of garment (for example). The other collective space is out on the street. Here, our modes of being are about subtly cuing to each other whether it's safe or not: whether to come close or stay back, to touch or not touch, to hold on or move on. Judith Butler coined the term "gender performativity," which encompasses "reiterated acting." I would argue that, at least in this work, gender is

certainly not a choice. It isn't about acting. We are who we are because we decide to continually listen to our bodies and spirits, giving allowance and room to become our full selves amongst the confines of a gender binary society. If we are to stay present with our truth, it's about letting out what already is, without an attempt at performing or posturing.

In presenting a production, I practice pretending that the audience has a base level trans awareness or knowledge. I start the conversation without filling them in on explanatory details. In doing this, I am attempting to remove a film of separateness while letting my work move beyond identity. My experience of being both a mixed race and a transgender person is in every cell of my body. Performing is my sacred space, where I move beyond my visual and physical presence. It is where I go to find respite, and my work begins here.

**Where does representation fit in, get elided or confused? Is it important to represent a gender-nonconforming body explicitly to your audience?**

Years ago when I performed for Jérôme Bel, I found myself exposed to larger theaters and audiences. I began being approached by people stating that they had never seen a person like me on a stage or that they had a child who was trans who wanted to take a dance class but didn't feel there was any room. I found that when I was on tour in less populated cities, audiences had a huge response to my body. I became aware that outing myself as a transgender artist wasn't the focus of my work but a pathway in creating space for others, and important for pushing ideas in the field of dance. I began writing in my bio, "devynnemory/beast-productions makes space for gnc (gender-nonconforming) and trans performers." I've never quite fit into a repertory company, whose identity looks and stays the same, where



devynn emory [right] and Aretha Aoki dancing in a set by RJ Messineo in devynn emory's *This Room This Braid* at the Actors Fund in Brooklyn, NY, January 2014.

haircuts and body weight are required to be maintained to uphold the company image. I experience gender as a language an individual develops. As my gender shifts, my representation shifts.

In my previous work, *This Horse is not a Home*, we developed a practice of trying on each other's body container and attempting to move as the other. It was a wildly transformative process that revealed a lot about projection of self—the learned self, the defended self, the actualized self, and the self who has been trained in the system of dance. In this work, eliding, confusing, and untangling representation was part of the process in revealing truths, with options to “transition” in the moment to another self. This became a beautiful part of the material generated.

**What kinds of bodies are made stable or vulnerable in your choreography?**

My work pushes the performer to deviate from what is stable, diving into the vulnerable. Performers are invited to explore their individual experience in relation to the elements of the work (set, sound, space, other bodies, structure). I almost always hire queer and trans musicians, set designers, lighting designers, and performers, creating a powerful engine of support and community for each step of the process. By the time the performer steps on stage for the show, vulnerability has been a part of the lineage and bonding behind the scenes. There is space for the performer to feel mutable from night to night, discovering new

ways of approaching the materials. I have seen traditional male/female roles replaced by queer bodies in the field. devynnemory/beastproductions isn't interested in replicating the norm; it's interested in expanding the itness of the body, of exploring the charge and the vibration of every given moment. We have found strength in developing options of openness for liberation outside of confines. In my most recent work, *This Room This Braid*, I worked with dance artist Aretha Aoki. I was aware that based on my masculine

presentation and Aretha's more feminine presentation, we could appear to be in such a fixed dichotomy. In this work, we began the piece topless, to allow the audience to achieve this expectation, so that we could move on and continue with the work, revealing the focus of unfeigned intricacies. People will read what they read as a result of what they are bringing to the show; who they are; their histories, projections, and identifications. As a feminist who thinks with a postcolonialist mind, I enjoy supporting and massaging modes of being from my performers, exposing and respecting who they are. This allows room for power in the vulnerability and stability in the vulnerable.

**Are the dances you make for your body only? And/or how would your choreography “fit” onto another body?**

When I have attempted removing myself from my work, I am met with protest and am told that my body is the most important image. I don't agree and am not interested in being visible as the author, however I am persistently interested in my body in relationship to the other bodies I'm drawn to working with. As a severely dyslexic person, I must place myself inside the work to understand where the bodies are in relation to each other, and the square we are in. From here I design meticulous maps and patterns based on the math of the space, which become a crucial designed logic to the overall arc of the dance's structure. Then, within the container where the performance is presented, there is an incredibly alive space between the lines made from there to here, point A and B. These spaces in between become charged transitional zones. The interstitiality is where I find the trajectory of the dance. It is through this type of traveling that I relate to my undefinable body.



photo © THEY bkyrn

[foreground L to R] devynn emory [kissing foot] Megan Milam, Jaamil Olawale Kosoko, and [background] Margot Bassett in *This Horse is not a Home* by devynn emory at a New York Live Arts (NYLA) residency in New York, NY, February 2012.

Although this visceral experience isn't transferable from one body to another, I am humbled by the challenge in offering a matrix of complex designs to my performers as a way of transcending states of being, by having them experiment with being between two points.

**Do you see this as an opportunity to create a space where the intimacy of queer lives can be made public?**

I see it as an opportunity to create a space where queer embodiment can feel empowering and can be received as such.

**Do you feel that your work falls into the category of queer art or art as activism? Is it important to you that it fall or not fall into either of these categories?**

My practice is multitudinous. I see through a queer lens. I am both American Indian and white. This doesn't mean my work is Native art, although I'm sure my experience as a mixed person influences my creative lens also. As soon as you name something that is slippery, it loses its curiosity and strength. The power in naming it as such, however, can connect our queer communities. I am aware that there are contradictions in what I am saying. And this, too, is precisely one point of clarity in what it's like to be a queer presence on stage. Pushing my body to be seen on a large scale, pushing my body to heal after surgeries and hormone interventions, to keep moving, to keep allowing space for more growth, and letting this be a part of my work, is activism. Outside of identity, my values are focused on how my work can disrupt a narrative while at the same time augmenting my relentless commitment to formalism and abstraction. I believe I can thrive in a liminal and fluid space in my body while sustaining this commitment.

**There is a lot of conversation going on about effecting change by destabilizing existing structures of gender and sexuality, particularly those in the art world. Yet the controversy lies in the idea that the paradigm must shift from "performing gender" to representing it. How do you feel your work plays a role in shifting this paradigm whether intentionally or not?**

I am interested in exploring queer elements in contexts in which they are not normally apparent by moving away from socially constructed identities. I move my body to circumvent a categorical definition. This is not about myself or my work having an identity; rather, it's an unwavering critique of identity as a landing spot. In my work, this shows up as space carved out for constructing and reconstructing, developing and untangling. If I am to stay in conversation with my body, my collaborators, and the space I am asked to be in with the bodies that arrive to see my work, undoubtedly the performer/audience binary must also shift. I am asking for an awakened eye, one that lets go of the grasping expectation of a fixed body or a fixed story of one. By approaching what my body and the work are asking for with curiosity, I am in a process of exfoliating and agitating what is revealing itself. It is through a confluence of events and recalibrated states that a container for steady progression is brought into being.



**To contact the author:** *devynn emory*, [devynnemory@gmail.com](mailto:devynnemory@gmail.com); [www.devynnemorybeastproductions.com](http://www.devynnemorybeastproductions.com)