

Jesper JUST

Interviews: Jesper Just

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January 14, 2020 • Jesper Just on recoding the body in his new video installation, *Corporealités*



View of "Jesper Just: Corporealités," 2020 at Perrotin, New York. Photo: Jesper Just and Perrotin.

Jesper Just distorts rituals of movement through video and performance—two media he pairs in perverse combinations to destabilize museum architecture and to create plangent moving images that echo with anticipation and longing. His multichannel video work *Servitudes*—*shot in 2015 at One World Trade Center on the occasion of his solo exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris—brims with a restrained yet intense kineticism as its two mobility-limited protagonists internalize the skyscraper's haunted architecture. Last autumn and with seven performers from the American Ballet Theater, just made his newest video, Corporealités, at Perrotin's New York gallery, where the video installation will be on display from January 14, 2020, to February 15, 2020. He discusses the exhibition's genesis below.*

WHEN I BEGAN TO RESEARCH THE BASEMENT of the Palais de Tokyo for my exhibition there in 2015, I discovered it contained a vacant space originally intended as a cinema theater. After one screening, it became apparent that the acoustics created an unusual echo. The venue was retired and sealed off for

many years, and came to be known as “The Dead Baby.” I find this connection between the body and rejected architectures intriguing, as it prompts me to think about the kinds of bodies our built environment privileges. The Palais de Tokyo had a lot of mezzanines and many different floors, and, as is the case in most museums, wheelchair-bound visitors did not have the same experience as those who inhabit an environment built to accommodate their needs. I wanted to challenge the able-bodied, so everyone had to take the wheelchair ramp to view *Servitudes*. When I adapted the video for Lisbon’s Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology (MAAT) last summer, we again used ramps to obstruct the staircase that abled visitors use to navigate through the galleries. This restricted them to a single route, but also paid homage to Romantic English gardens, where paths open and close to offer alternate views, creating a narrative told through movement, rather than words. Shooting the film at One World Trade Center indexed a bygone architecture, a phantom limb in the skyline. One feels a similar lack while watching the ballet dancers at the Perrotin exhibition, where their most striking faculty—their mobility—is absent. Professional ballet dancers possess highly fetishized bodies, hyper-able to achieve contortions unattainable for most of us. The set-up entailed micromanaging bodies that are capable of something extraordinary, yet, in this case, were pacified until they were activated by electric impulses. In challenging the hyper-body’s capabilities, I hope to blur how all bodies are categorized and differentially valued.

When the Royal Danish Ballet invited me to collaborate on a performance called *Interpassivities* in 2017, I hadn’t worked with dancers before, and I started to think about how to erase choreography. In *Corporealités*, we hacked the TENS unit, an electrical nerve-stimulation device commonly used by dancers to relieve muscle pain, and connected it to a MIDI keyboard version of Fauré’s Romantic pavane *Op. 50*, which was programmed to send electrical currents to the dancers’ muscles with electrode pads.

At Perrotin, fragmented images of these bodies are dispersed on five LED screens, including one that lies on the floor, creating a sense of spatial immersion. Each display plays a certain number of notes from *Op. 50* that accumulate in a symphonic surround, while the fractured images align but never reveal a dancer’s complete posture. This distortion gives the film a disjointed physicality, and freestanding LED screens—which use the same technology as Times Square billboards—offer a different sensation than projection. Because the image comes from the light source, their internal

mechanics are integrated into the spectacle. The circuits connecting to the dancers' bodies in the videos find their counterpart in the cables connecting the LED panels in the gallery space. This adds a sculptural layer to moving-image work that projection cannot achieve. Video exhibitions generally try to erase the space—the audience is confined to a black box. My effort to break from this limited mode of spectatorship has, over the years, resulted in the distortion of my films through architecture, most recently at MAAT, where *Servitudes* was projected across various surfaces of the museum.

Corporealités is a loop without a backstory or conclusion. This subverts the imperatives of narrative cinema, which tend to view uncertainty as alarming. Art has potential to remain enigmatic. The stories ballet tells are typically strictly gendered, but visual fragmentation helps erase body paradigms. There's also a sexual tension that is left fluid, as ambiguous, perhaps, as a soft electrical current suddenly felt on the skin. The dancers' emotions and motivations are unresolved as they sit in passive, deadpan postures. I want these poses to conjure what Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Žižek have called "interpassivity," or the potential within immobility. There is a paradox in how we are interactive today: We live in a full-speed world in which we are constantly tranquilized by technology. There are expectations about movement and choreography attached to the bodies of professional dancers, but I'm interested in puncturing those expectations, as well as social conventions.

— *As told to Osman Can Yerebakan*