

PERROTIN

Jesper JUST

Jesper Just's enigmatic vision of our technological dystopia

January 2020

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In his new work ‘*Corporealités*,’ the artist explores cyborg theory with dancers from an American Ballet Theater.

The dancers’ bodies remain immobile, save the occasional blink or intake of breath. Some lie on the floor, muscles slack and spines curved in repose; others stand together, casually intertwined in a tangle of latent kineticism. They are fragmented, displayed on loop across the five freestanding LED screens; cords snake around their intersecting bodies and outside the display, where gaps in the LED screen reveal the circuitry connecting it to the gallery space. The music emanates from each display in distinct, separate notes which together make up Fauré’s Pavane, Op. 50. It’s a haunting romantic soundtrack with which the ballet dancers are all familiar—but now, each musical note is programmed to send a painless electrical current to an individual muscle through electrode pads on their skin. In response, hands tighten to a fist, a shoulder jumps, biceps clench. Their faces remain passive and unmoved, eyes focused on the middle distance even as their muscles contract in eerie synchrony.

Featuring seven performers from the American Ballet Theater, artist Jesper Just’s newest work *Corporealités* was created on-site at Perrotin’s New York location, where the video installation will be on display from January 14 through February 15, 2020. He joins Document to discuss the exhibition, finding inspiration in cyborg theory, and his artistic practice.

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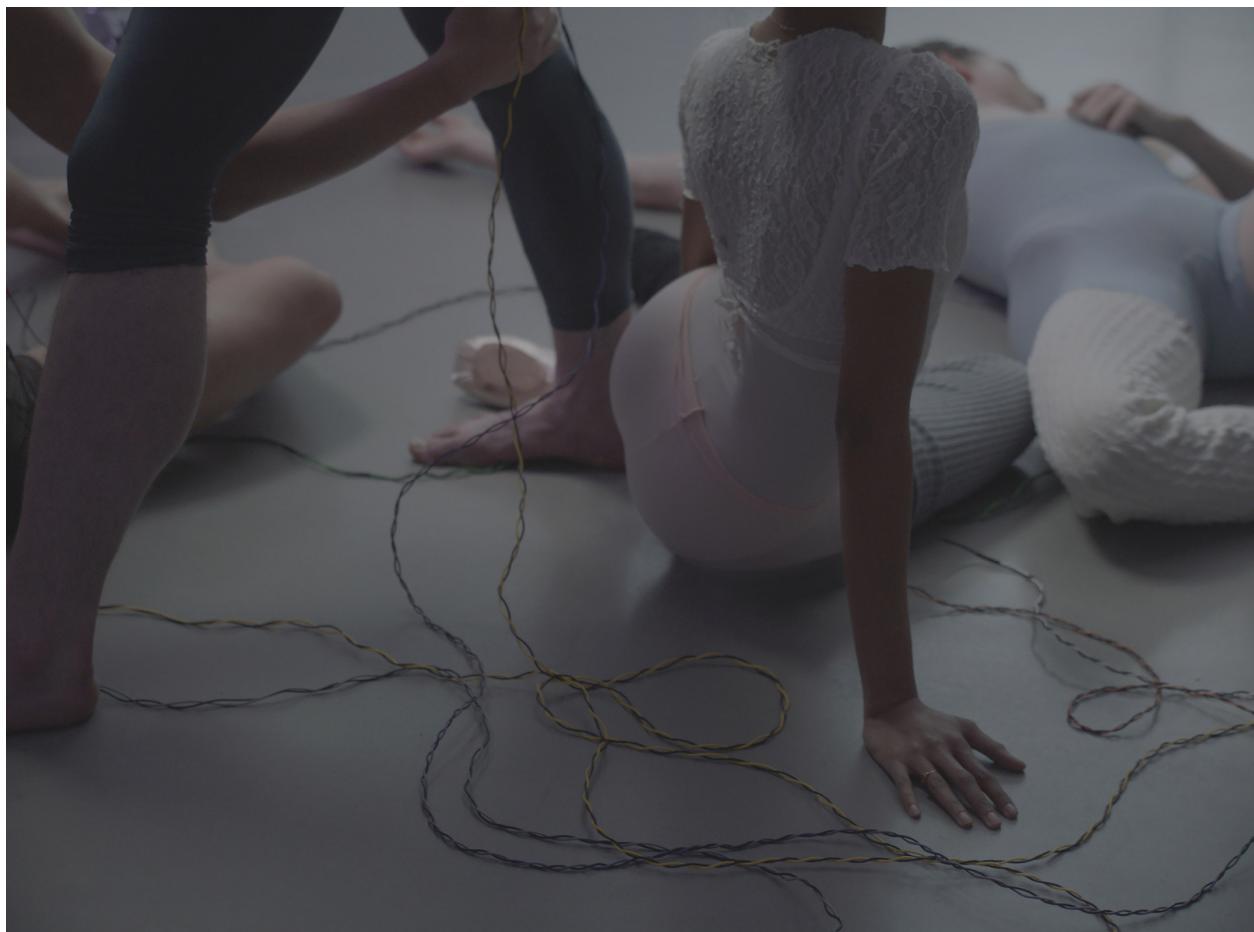
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Camile Sojit

January 22, 2020

Camille Sojit: Much of your work plays on the viewer's expectations. In *Corporealités*, the conventions of ballet, control, discipline, and aesthetic, are disrupted through use of technology—in this case, an electric shock therapy device that has been hacked and connected to the musical track. How did you arrive at this idea?

Jesper Just: Once you see a hyper-able body, you have certain expectations about what you're going to experience: a performance. Instead, we have a program that's orchestrating the music and sending it directly into the muscles of the dancers, who are passive but become reactivated by technology.



Jesper Just. Corporealités (detail of film still), 2020. Produced by Perrotin and Anna Lena Films. Photo courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Camille: In the films, we see the electrical cords which apply shocks to the dancer's muscles, causing them to contract in response.

Jesper: Yes. The dancers, who are from American Ballet Theater, are all familiar with the sensation—but they usually use it when they're recovering, or to increase muscle control.

Camille: In a way, it's a perfect tool to disrupt because it's part of the same system.

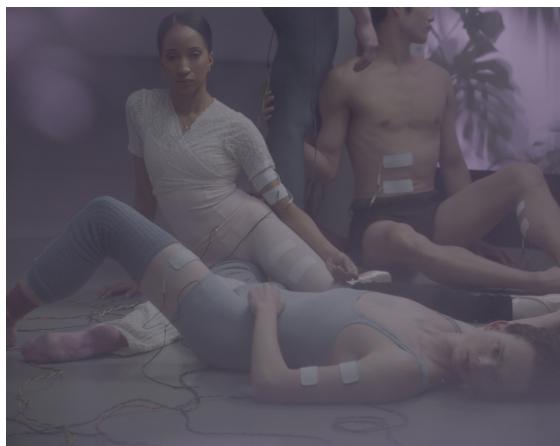
Jesper: Yes. When ballet works, the music and movement are like one. We are playing with that and turning it into a way of choreography, because the music—Op. 50, a training piece with which they are also familiar—is then merging straight into the dancer's body.

Camille: There seems to be a disruption of the usual hierarchy. The dancers here are no longer in control of the movement, but the music, which triggers the movement of the dancers, is not being played by a human being, further complicating the idea of who is orchestrating the performance. Can you elaborate about some of the concepts that inspired this work, such as the idea of interpassivity?

Jesper: I started reading about the concept of interpassivity and delegated enjoyment. An example of this is how canned laughter in a show functions as a tool, interacting with itself so the viewer can not watch the show. You may have it on in the background, but you don't need to laugh, because the TV is already laughing. The experience of joy is delegated, but you still feel that someone is having it on your behalf.

Camille: Could that extend to the way we outsource tasks and experiences to technology? The feeling that the tool is an extension of the self, that you are still the agent of the experience even if something else is executing it.

Jesper: Yes. In this way, the project is just playing a little bit on the whole idea of Donna Haraway's 'Cyborg Manifesto': the body is a project that is being controlled by technology. Here, they are being mobilized by software that is playing a musical piece, but at the same time, the relation is de-structured and fractured. It's hard to decipher detached limbs and tangled bodies interrupted by circuitry, so you are also erasing the boundaries between them—queering the body somehow.



Left: Jesper Just. *Corporealités* (detail of film still), 2020. Produced by Perrotin and Anna Lena Films. Photo courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Right: Jesper Just: *Corporealités* (installation image), 2020. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Photo courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Camille: In 'A Cyborg Manifesto,' Haraway posits cyborg theory as a rejection of biological essentialism and traditional gender norms. She begins by addressing the breakdown of boundaries between human and animal, self and other, culture and nature, and the ambiguity introduced by evolution and 20th century machines that blur the boundaries between natural and artificial... all themes that are very present here, where we see a natural movement caused by an artificial stimulus.

Jesper: Previously, one saw technology and biology as two different paths, and now they are totally converged. Maybe it's not how we expected it to be in science fiction, but it's definitely happening.

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Camille: Even in our thoughts—we are so used to thinking of technology as an extension of the self, whether it's a source of information, improvement or anxiety. It used to be science and biology that we relied on to tell the truth... Now technology is more efficient and accurate. People trust technology to tell them about nature.

Jesper: Yes, because nature feels so uncontrollable—now more than ever. Of course, there's always new things coming and people being scared of the telephone or the radio or TV, but it's happening at a different tempo now, and we can't understand the implications ahead of time. I mean, Steve Jobs wouldn't even let his son use an iPad.



Jesper Just. *Corporealités* (detail of film still), 2020. Produced by Perrotin and Anna Lena Films. Photo courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Camille: Red flag! [Both laugh]

Something that you obviously consider in your work is the body—mobility, disability, performativity, the way the body moves through space in different paradigms. How were you considering the experience and bodies of the viewers in this exhibition?

Jesper: I really strive to have the audience be a bit of a performer in the exhibition; as you move, your motion's creating an emotional narrative in the spaces, like you have in cinema. The same is true of architecture; buildings can have phantom limbs. I did this when I filmed at One World Trade Center, using the structure as a prosthetic—you know that it's one building, but it's impossible to not see two, to look at that place and not feel what was there before... Another thing I've done is having you experience the exhibitions through ramps, which for the able-bodied viewer is obstructing, but for anyone who is wheelchair bound, ensures they are going to get exactly the same experience—in some way disabling the able-bodied by obstructing normal patterns of use. *Reverse-abling*.

In this show, there are concrete structures all over the space obstructing free movement. You are in a way being guided, but you have to constantly renegotiate the space between you and the other viewers, so the audience becomes the focus of the exhibition and part of it for the other spectators.

Camille: That seems like such an interesting way to keep the body active... You experience the connection between technology by activating it from the viewer's position too, so they can't just intellectualize it from a static place.

Jesper: Yes. The structure may not be physically mirroring the film, but they have to amplify each other. Like with the music, it's one soundtrack, but you only hear some notes from one side of the room or another, so you have to move through the space and be active in order to experience it, which also means it points back at your own body when you're watching these bodies on screen that are hyperable. My hope is that it creates a sensation for the viewer, to see these bodies

while navigating the space... It's a very different experience than watching a movie on Netflix.



Jesper Just. *Corporealités* (detail of film still), 2020. Produced by Perrotin and Anna Lena Films. Photo courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Camille: It seems like it must also be a new experience for the dancers, who are in some ways inhabiting the role of a performance artist—it's their bodies that are being intervened on, even if it's by a machine and a sensation they're accustomed to. Can you speak a little bit about the process of collaborating with them?

Jesper: Working with a classically trained dancer is so different from working with an actor; you have a certain aesthetic tool box, whereas with an actor you

are talking about motivation and seeing where it takes them. I've now staged two performances with classical ballet dancers, and it's always surprising to find out it's something they would never have been asked to do on a classical stage; the rules are so old that that in some ways, it is like a museum.

Camille: Right! The boundaries of an institution like ballet are so strictly maintained, it's almost a cultural artifact.

Jesper: Honestly... If ballet were to be invented today, I don't think it would be legal.

Camille: That's a great quote.

Jesper: I mean, it is amazing what a big change arises from switching one small thing, gender or anything else. Not that I'm the first person to do it, but I had three men just taking turns lifting each other, which they had never done... it became very touching. They had to do it in a different way, and something very beautiful came of that.