



INNER WORKINGS

With her demanding choreography, Moriah Evans pushes dancers to grapple with conventions of performance while challenging audiences to learn new ways to watch.

by Sarah Resnick

THE JANUARY EVENING was gelid and black, but inside SculptureCenter the light was bright; the room, a rectangle in concrete and brick, fully illuminated. Chairs lined its perimeter for a performance in the round. A carpet stretched across the gallery, cushioning the floor. When they entered the space for Moriah Evans's *Figuring*, which premiered this year in a five-night suite copresented by the American Realness festival, the three dancers were already at work. Their small, fitful movements registered primarily along the torso: shoulders, chest, abdomen, pelvis. Their spines undulated awkwardly. Their arms reached for static positions—out to the side or up in front, rarely perpendicular. Knees bent in support of the upper body. Hips and glutes stabilized. Faces were free of makeup; hair was styled with dutiful practicality. The dancers sported knits in a mismatched array of vibrant colors: Lizzie Feidelson in a mustard yellow sweater with a standup collar; Nicole Marie Mannarino in a fuchsia three-quarter-sleeve wool crewneck; Sarah Beth Percival in fluorescent yellow leg warmers. Shorts on top of leggings, wool on top of cotton—the performers wore athletic apparel, but it was not athleisure. Their layered attire, assembled by Strauss Bourque-LaFrance, might serve well on a cross-country ski run. It was January after all, and the room was cold. A red sweater, evidently peeled from a body and tossed aside, lay collapsed in a pile, evidence that the layers were more functional than aesthetic.

All practices are available. Evans, seated against the brick wall, legs crossed, leaning forward slightly and clutching her notepad and pen, marked the start of the performance with her voice; it was the only perceptible sign that something had begun. The lighting, designed by Kathy Kaufmann, did not immediately go dark; the sound, a mix of tones, drones, and field recordings, improvised live with various electronics by Ka Baird, continued. The dancers betrayed no discernible change. They did not suddenly come to order, line up, and break into precise movement phrases in unison. For the next ninety minutes they continued their staccato vibration, each on an individual trajectory. Little jumps, two feet at a time; soft landings. Slowly, steadily, one leg extended in front of another or reached out behind. The dance seemed to be unfolding in a series of episodes, although nothing

Moriah Evans: *Figuring*, 2018, performance, with (left to right) Lizzie Feidelson, Sarah Beth Percival, and Nicole Marie Mannarino; at SculptureCenter, New York. Courtesy American Realness Festival. Photo Paula Court.

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like narrative could be used to describe them. What marked these segments—or, at least, what stood out in the dance as strikingly different—were moments of exchange between dancers. They bonded in twos, quivering back to back; or, holding hands, they walked, landing each step in unison, pausing to bend at the waist before turning 180 degrees to retrace their steps. At times, all three dancers came together as a pulsing unit, first upright, then entangled in a pile on the floor.

The dancers offered one another instructions, encouragement, or criticism. *Keep letting the energy flow. I think you can do better than this.* They vocalized, at first appearing as if straining to speak. They made guttural groans, low murmurs, grunts. They bleated and brayed. They cried out. They uttered banalities, quiet incantations, their addressees vague. *Does your best friend do dance too? I shouldn't have given you all those presents. You have to wear a scarf when it's this cold. Whatever happened to our poetry club? You could be a birth doula.* What had prompted the dancers to speak or what their speech meant in relation to the movements was not easy to discern. Still, it seemed most important that the dancers were speaking at all. Their use of pronouns—I, you—returned them from their private world into the world in which the audience resided. A world formed by language, a social world. And for this, it seemed, the audience felt relief. I heard exhalations, soft laughter. We were relieved, perhaps, because they were communicating in ways we could understand.

There is something that I often experience when watching a dance: my mind is seized by a spirit unabashedly American, the same spirit occupying the competitive dance shows on primetime television (“Dancing with the Stars,” “So You Think You Can Dance,” “World of Dance,” etc.). Who is doing it best? I feel compelled to rank the dancers or choose a favorite. But *Figuring* resisted this kind of evaluation. The movement vocabulary was inelegant, disorderly. The dancers moved gracelessly, persisting in asynchronous motion.

This dance did not subscribe to traditional aesthetic codes of beauty. When the eye roams in search of symmetry, in search of recognizable form, in search of something one can point to and claim, *I know this to be dance*, and when very few such things present themselves—when almost nothing in the dance looks like dance—the mind moves on to other considerations. This is one of dance’s great achievements. Is there a system in place, some organizing principle that the dancers are adhering to? To whom or what are they responding? To one another? To Evans? How much agency do the dancers have, how much restriction? What makes it a dance at all? Why do we watch dance to begin with? For viewers trying to answer these questions, the movement vocabulary recedes, and in the foreground are the ways the dancers were relating to and perceiving—themselves, one another, Evans, the audience; the ways that we in the audience were relating to and perceiving them.

EVANS CAME TO choreography late. Growing up in Columbus, Ohio, she studied ballet, starting at the age of four or five. As a teenager, she trained devotedly, attending high school half the day and conservatory the other half. There she was introduced to the movement techniques of Merce Cunningham, Martha Graham, and other titans of modernist dance, sparking an early interest in nonclassical movement techniques. After high school, however, she stopped dancing. At Wellesley College, in Massachusetts, she completed her undergraduate degree in art history and English literature. Afterward, she took a curatorial job in the contemporary art department at the Brooklyn Museum. New York pleased her but not because of its dance community. “I was not in the downtown scene,” Evans told me over coffee at a café in SoHo, a few weeks after the SculptureCenter run.¹ “I did not hang out in the dance art world. I did not hang out in the experimental scene.” In her three years at the museum, she attended a handful of classes and not a single performance. Had she, she might

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have seen Sarah Michelson or Ralph Lemon or Jennifer Monson or Ann Liv Young or Neil Greenberg, all of whom performed in New York during that time. She eventually earned a master’s degree from the department of visual arts at the University of California, San Diego. But not before she found choreography. Evans left California and, after a year studying contemporary dance on a traveling fellowship, returned to New York. This was ten years ago. She has lived there ever since.

From her earliest works, Evans acknowledged a debt to dance’s formalist and minimalist strains—to dance that distanced itself from a focus on psychological states and dramatic intrigue, and thus from characters and narrative, and moved closer to a kind of abstraction; the quality of simple, unadorned movement was paramount. Evans can be linked especially to those who took part in Judson Dance Theater, a loose assembly of dancers, artists, and musicians who between 1962 and 1966 staged a series of concerts that explored the structure of dance movement and dance itself. Like the Judson choreographers, Evans is suspicious of psychologically motivated drama and conventional theatricality. She works outside the company model, performing with and for friends, and friends of friends, and at alternative venues and multidisciplinary spaces, which includes museums. Evans’s works also suggest a debt to Conceptual art, and in particular those practices that are process-oriented or devoted to generating art via systems; in the way that Conceptual art is often about art and art-making, Evans’s dances are about dance.

But like any disciple looking to strike out on her own and make a name for herself, she took what she needed from her teachers and rebelled against the rest. Excess leeches from otherwise conceptual endeavors. *Out of and Into (8/8): Stuff*, Evans’s first evening-length performance (Théâtre de l’usine, Geneva, 2012), borrowed its setup from Samuel Beckett’s hypnotic, wordless television broadcast, *Quad* (1981). In that piece, four cloaked figures perform patterned walks around and across a square, turning counterclockwise at each corner. Beckett called it a “play,” but “dance” seems equally appropriate. In *Out of and Into* Evans and Sarah Beth Percival, the hoods of their black cloaks obscuring their faces, moved silently through a square in a similarly patterned series; like Beckett’s figures, they began by walking, but soon transitioned to crawling or dragging themselves along the square. About a quarter of the way through, the two dancers, still following the same pattern, upright once more but with spines hunched, began to scream. Around midway, the dancers, stretched out along the floor, shed their cloaks like moths emerging from their chrysalises, then coiled and writhed nude in a mess of foam. (When Evans and Percival performed *Out of and Into*, at American Realness in 2014, they jettisoned the cloaks for full-body white leotards embellished with inked impressions of rainbows, apples, and pineapples, trading sinister minimalism for blissed-out maximalism.) In *Out of and Into*, then, the increasingly hysterical woman disrupts the orderly (male) system, until the whole thing breaks down.

Another Performance, presented at Danspace Project in New York in 2013, featured seven dancers, Evans, Alan Calpe, Maggie Cloud, Tess Dworman, Christina Evans, Sarah Beth Percival, and

Ondrej Vidlar, who performed with objects including nylon banners, shop vacuums, a sheet of silver Mylar, and plastic tarps. As with *Out of and Into* the dancers began by walking the periphery of the performance area. The stage was well lit and the barefoot dancers, wearing basic black shorts and tank tops, toured the stage while carrying the objects—except for Cloud, who sometimes walked and sometimes executed a complex choreographic sequence involving kicks and turns. Later, four dancers performed solos each wearing a black nylon vestment-like garment, designed by Evans, Evelyn Donnelly, and Alan Calpe, that lacked openings for the neck, arms, or eyes. As they spun and leaped across the stage, their arms outstretched but entirely encased in nylon, they were shapes—a spiral, a triangle, a cone, a diamond—rotating through space. After completing the solos, the four shapes came together onstage to repeat the same choreography. Whereas earlier the dancers carried objects, in this segment they appeared to become them. Later, in an arresting solo, Cloud bounded across a nearly blackened room in an intensifying sequence of complex leaps and turns. The movements were virtuosic, but it was Cloud’s metallic Mylar shroud that sent the dance into the realm of spectacle, casting splinters of light onto the walls and floor.

“*Another Performance* is about the creation of a performance,” Evans explained. How to render the process of dance-making visible on stage is one of the artist’s recurring interests, and here she has done so through explicit citation, borrowing from choreographers she calls the “white matriarchs” of American experimental dance—Trisha Brown (1936–2017), Lucinda Childs (b. 1940), Isadora Duncan (ca. 1877–1927), and Martha Graham (1894–1991). Duncan, who found ballet sterile and oppressive, developed a vocabulary meant to showcase pure expression, pure feeling. She performed flowing movements in bare feet and wore flimsy, ethereal robes, her hair loose. Even as her career was beset by scandal—effectively because she rebuffed the era’s social etiquette of polite society—Duncan was also the first to confirm that dance could be taken seriously outside the ballet academy. She paved the way for Graham, who used stark, serious choreography to access primal emotions like violent anger, that she believed more flowing, graceful forms of movement were unable to express. Childs and Brown were both members of Judson Dance Theater; like Graham, they rejected the notion that dance must be “beautiful” but were less invested in it as a means to express inner emotional states. With other Judsonites, they made dances using chance- and task-based composition strategies (à la John Cage) and incorporating pedestrian movements and everyday objects. By integrating motifs from the four choreographers—in the section with the dancing shapes, for example, Duncan is the circle, Graham the triangle, Childs the cone, Brown the diamond—Evans effectively recounted one particular history of dance and juxtaposed qualities that do not routinely appear side by side in choreographies descended from this lineage: the quotidian and the spectacular, pure form and expression, complex systems and excess.

IN 2015 EVANS premiered *Social Dance 1–8: Index* and *Social Dance 9–12: Encounter*, two performances that revisited these pairings, while also foregrounding a set of concerns having to do with social behavior.



Figuring, 2018, performance, with (left to right) Percival, Feidelson, and Mannarino; at SculptureCenter. Courtesy American Realness Festival. Photo Paula Court.

Look, she is saying, these utopian elements—the collaboration, the cooperation—are just display.

Index comprised forty-five dance steps that Evans sequenced using the square pattern on the marble floor of Issue Project Room's Beaux-Arts building, originally the posh ballroom setting for Elks Lodge social convocations in Brooklyn. The dance began as one by one the five dancers (Maggie Cloud, Lizzie Feidelson, Benny Olk, Sarah Beth Percival, and Jeremy Pheiffer) showcased a sequence of precise movement phrases along the marble grid, step touching, pivoting forward and back, sidestepping, turning on both feet—all with hands resting gently on hips, or arms swinging front to back or out to the side but never above the shoulders. After each dancer's solo, the performers regrouped to form a circle, holding hands and looking at one another while continuing their precise movements. The circle became a line became a circle again as the dancers moved in and out of unison. For the most part, the group seemed to be performing for themselves, except when they moved en masse to engage a seated audience member to join in their affectations of hand-holding harmony. Wearing deadpan expressions, the dancers came off as more sinister than kindly.

The repeating phrases on display were pared-down interpretations of vernacular dance movements, drawn from what is often called "social dance," those sequences of steps meant for the dance floor at the club or the wedding party: the Charleston and the Tango, the Foxtrot and the Box Step, the Big Apple and the Lindy Hop, the Twist and the Pony, the Electric Slide and the Grapevine. Evans selected a handful of these and abstracted them to foreground their structure, reducing what ordinarily are expressions of joy and catharsis, even self-determination, to pure form. Although the dancers' steps were circumscribed by the floor pattern, their arm movements were less restricted; they could choose from among seven. What they did with their heads was entirely up to them: which way they turned or cast their eyes; the nature of their facial expressions. Again, the system was closed but also porous; personality, expression, could creep in. The costumes reinforced this tension: designed by Alan Calpe and Christopher Crawford, the sparkly black tanks and shorts, adorned with mesh panels and long fringes, seemed somewhat at odds with the dance's constrained, minimalist choreography. The garments would not have been out of place in a teenage dance recital or a football halftime show, where "personality" is so essential as to be over-performed.

In the second half, the dance became more dynamic, more exciting, the group alternately dissolving and re-forming. A series of duets saw the performers dancing face-to-face, in unison, as intimates—or prospective intimates—might at a nightclub, but always with restraint. In one brief segment Feidelson and Olk embraced, holding each other's butt cheeks, stepping forward and back and then to the side. In other circumstances it would almost certainly have been sexy, carnal, but here the eroticism was muted—as if the movements were performing the people rather than the other way around.

One aspect that distinguishes Western concert dance from social dance is that the notion of an individual author or choreographer is arguably not appropriate in the latter.² The idea of dance as a thing to be created first and performed later dominated nineteenth-century ballet culture, wherein the choreographer (usually a man) imposed abstract patterns of movement on the bodies of others (usually

women) who carried them out. Modern dance has continually challenged the stark duality—after all, modern choreographers often made their dances for themselves first, as solos. So-called postmodern dance, including works by Judson choreographers, further complicated this relationship by making dances within "collective" settings, which have been celebrated by many critics as upending certain hierarchical relationships and "democratizing" dance's production and reception.³

So it's notable that with *Index*, Evans has taken a form of dance that symbolizes a certain kind of freedom—that is to say, without the direction of a choreographer—and restrained it with tight, minimalist choreography. Evans herself points this out even before the performance has officially started, when without much cordiality she escorts audience members in small groups to seats she has chosen. It is her way of telling us who is in control. With *Index* Evans seems to offer a kind of utopianism without ever fully believing in it. Look, she is saying, these utopian elements—the collaboration, the cooperation—are just display. Evans is questioning the ostensibly utopian interpretations of postmodernist dance-making strategies that seem a bit facile, in light of the way postindustrial economic labor relations have brought participation, collaboration, and human contact to the very heart of contemporary capitalism. The dancers, after all, were contractors for hire.

Encounter, performed in October 2015 at Danspace Project, homed in more precisely on how facial expressions cue social exchanges. The audience was once more seated in the round, this time on foam cushions surrounding the stark white floor. Six dancers (Maggie Cloud, Lizzie Feidelson, Irène Hultman, Rashaun Mitchell, Lydia Okrent, Benny Olk) sported full-length body suits designed by Strauss Bourque-LaFrance. The costumes' black-and-white vertical symmetry—the front was white and the back black, or vice versa—paid homage to Merce Cunningham's *Beach Birds* (1992). When the audience entered, the dancers were already there, seated on the floor toward the edge of the stage in informal postures, like those one might have when hanging out with a friend: with legs out in front, or tucked under, or thrust to the side. If you were there, a dancer might have sat facing you and stared into your eyes. You would probably have stared back. You might have wanted to speak but would not have, even though no one had explicitly given instructions; it is a convention of these spaces not to speak to the performers unless spoken to first. And you probably wouldn't have been able to look away. It was the dancer who ultimately got to decide when the engagement would begin and end.

Encounter eventually transitioned from the face to the body, with each individual dancer moving independently. The dancers began with simple, near-slow-motion bends, tilts, and rotations, executed with precision and control, and by midway through had elevated the energy into a kind of frenzy, still moving independently but at a feverish pace, privileging flesh over form. The piece closed with the dancers seated on the floor again, spread out in a wide circle, facing one another, their backs to the audience, maintaining eye contact until it was time to get up and walk off.

By calling attention to eye contact as a basic form of exchange, *Encounter* accented the ways we observe and are ourselves observed, the ways our bodies transmit sensations and feelings outside of language.



Another Performance, 2013, performance, with Maggie Cloud; at Danspace Project, New York. Photo Ian Douglas.

Social Dance 9–12: *Encounter*, 2015, performance, with (foreground, left to right) Rashaun Mitchell and Irène Hultman; at Danspace Project. Photo Miana Jun.



The dancers' initial exchanges with the audience members, which proceed from facial "scores" authored by Evans, end up influencing the way the dance unfolds. The face-to-face encounters set up a chain reaction, the way such interactions so often do as we make our way through the world, as humans encountering other humans. One exchanged glance can throw off a day—or drastically improve it. But the piece adds complexity by accounting for setting: what does it mean to exchange a private gaze in public? What does it mean to witness a private exchange in front of a group? What does it mean to be a spectator, which is to say, to direct a gaze but not have it returned? In *Index*, the dancers seemed to be restrained by Evans's choreography. But *Encounter* had, at times, something of the opposite effect. The choreographic system was more subtle, and as I watched the dance, I felt that the dancers were being imposed on less than I was—restrained by the social conventions of the performance space and by social etiquette more generally. I felt self-conscious and hyperaware of how I was expected to behave.

NINE SETUPS, five duets, two walks. Think of them as a roadmap through *Figuring*. I have access to this map because in the weeks following the performance, I spoke with Evans. I also spoke with Feidelson, whom I worked with for several years at Triple Canopy. The setups have names like "group attachment," "juxtaposition as viewpoint," "burger de deux," and "sonic chorus," and you can think of them as miniature worlds. The worlds have their own rules, and in them each dancer has a set of precise roles to play. The rules, the roles—they are strategies for relating. Throughout the entirety of the work the dancers engage five energetic modes of movement (*vibration, displacement, drawing, electrocution, rhythm*). In ninety minutes, the dancers try to move through all nine of these worlds, performing the duets and the walks as they do so. They don't necessarily get through all the material on every occasion, however; for instance, they may end up performing all nine setups, but only two of the duets. The roadmap tells the dancers where they need to go (i.e., the setups and so on) but, crucially, not how to get there or in what order. The dancers, through a kind of nonverbal

group communication, make these decisions as they are performing the dance. The sequence of worlds is determined by the dancers; Evans is merely watching them.

When Evans began rehearsals for *Figuring* in December 2016, Donald Trump was weeks away from being inaugurated president. "We were at a frightening place historically," she said. "I didn't want to tell people how to be in their bodies or what to do with their bodies. I didn't want to impose historical dance models onto the performers." Evans addressed this problem by inviting the dancers to join her in trying to articulate a system for dancing that would begin with "sensation inside of the body" rather than with a preformed image of what the dancing body should look like. Each movement would start with a thought or a place of sensation. Dancers think a lot about where movements are initiated, and it tends to be somewhere on the body over which we have voluntary control: initiate from the fingers; initiate from the pelvis; initiate from the nose (in one segment of *Encounter*, for example, scores instruct the dancers to initiate movement from somewhere on the face). But for *Figuring*, the dancers were asked to initiate movement from an organ. Any organ. Heart, liver, pancreas, brain; it is up to the dancer to decide.

A dancer in "juxtaposition as viewpoint" who has been assigned the mode of *displacement* may decide to initiate movement from her liver. She could imagine the liver or try to access it through sensation. What does *displacement* look like when initiated from the liver? There is no "correct" answer to this question. But the dancers know. Evans knows. They know because together, through an entire year of near-daily rehearsals, they have practiced initiating displacement from the liver (and other combinations of energetic modes and organs). Through this practice—which Evans characterized to me as "research"—they have arrived at an agreement about what displacement from the liver feels like and looks like—not only inside the body but as a kind of energy (for lack of a better term) transmitted to and perceived by the other dancers.

These agreements exist but they are in effect fragile agreements. They are fragile because when a consensus is arrived at by these four people it can easily be questioned or undermined. There

is always subjectivity; there is always interpretation. With so few people, it takes only one to withdraw from the consensus to upset it. This dynamic means each dancer is encouraged to pay attention to her own body and assert her presence. It means each dancer contributes to the making of the dance. It means each dancer has some say about what she is doing with her body. The group's "research," then, is never complete, the system of dancing never closed; the dancers can always advocate for modifications, can attempt to redress misunderstandings. Evans and the dancers have in a sense formalized this dynamic by including the "coaching" role in certain setups. At moments in the performance when the dancers seemed to be offering each other advice or encouragement—*Keep letting the energy flow; I think you can do better than this*—they were performing the coaching role, a role that ordinarily only the choreographer would perform.

But these responsibilities, while empowering, come with a price. Consensus building—in this case, to oversimplify, on *how* to do the dance—is about conflict as much as it is about agreement, and conflict making (and resolving) was essentially built into *Figuring*. The dancers, Evans included, were invited to challenge each other. Conflict is not an inherently adverse experience but it can be emotionally stressful, even when it is resolved respectfully. Preparing for *Figuring* required the dancers to engage an expansive set of intellectual, physical, and relational responsibilities that pushed bodily limits and tested choreographic agreements. Evans is in search of dance's utopian potential while also expressing doubt about the possibility of same; or to put it another way, utopia appears and then it disappears, and all you can do is to try to find it again.

NINE SETUPS, five duets, two walks. Movement initiated from internal organs. Energetic modes and strategies. *Figuring*, with its head-spinning number of potential permutations, with its emphasis on nonverbal group communication, is astonishingly complex. Evans herself used a complicated spreadsheet to keep track of the permutations, while Feidelson prepared flash cards to memorize the various components of the dance, and routinely consulted them in preparation for unannounced quizzes. *Figuring* is also difficult to watch—*difficult* as in requiring skill or knowledge; *difficult* as in, at times, uncomfortable (all that vulnerability). Part of the difficulty is that on a superficial level the movements can seem lacking in any need for skill or virtuosity and entirely random. Watching the dance for ninety minutes dispels any notion that the dance requires no skill on the part of the dancers. Traditional choreography tends to privilege the external aspects of the movements—their execution and expression. In contrast, *Figuring* privileges the dancers' internal states; the dance is transpiring privately even as it is being staged publicly. I saw *Figuring* twice. I understood something about how to watch it because I have seen some of Evans's previous work. The longer I watched the dance, the more I learned about how to watch it, the more I was moved by it. I concluded something exceedingly complex was transpiring and attention-wise I was rapt; still, I left even the second performance without much sense of the dance's structure though it seemed part of Evans's intent.

On January 10, dance critic Gia Kourlas posted a brief, edited video of Feidelson, Mannarino, and Percival on the *New York Times* Instagram feed with the hashtag SpeakingInDance. The camera moves around the dancers and in between them as they warm up for the performance, alternately zooming out to frame the group and zooming in to focus on individual dancers. Much of the foot-



Social Dance 9–12: *Encounter*, 2015, performance, with (left to right) Feidelson and Benny Olk; at Danspace Project. Photo Ian Douglas.

Pity the choreographer, for among the visual arts, dance seems especially susceptible to being misunderstood.

age is shot from below, the camera angled toward the women's torsos. The video is accompanied by a brief description of the dance penned by Kourlas and includes quotes from an interview with Evans. By mid-March, the post had been viewed more than 420,000 times and elicited 4,600 comments. "Epileptic crisis?" "This is not art, this is not dance . . . This is a sure sign of mental illness." "Wow so empowering. You brainlets just don't get it." "Love!!! ♥♥♥♥♥" (The previous week's post, about the Brooklynettes, the official dance team of basketball's Brooklyn Nets, got only 116,000 views and drew forty-eight comments.)

Within hours #Figuring had become the "latest dance craze"; no longer the title of a performance, it was the name of a style of movement, a social dance like the ones that Evans used as the foundation for her choreography in *Index*. The original Instagram post inspired a flurry of copycat videos, mostly of people trying out the dance at home or at work (a bearded man with disheveled hair wearing a leopard-print shirt and dancing in what appeared to be his bedroom found no shortage of appreciation on Twitter). On "Dish Nation" cohost Porsha Williams tried out #Figuring and suggested it might be a replacement for twerking. (Evans told me she has been approached by two hip-hop artists to choreograph their music videos.) Viceland's wildly popular late-night comedy duo, Desus & Mero, who respond to the latest news and internet videos with crude, unfiltered, spontaneous riffs, were crueler. As they played the *Times*'s one-minute video on a loop, they snickered at the dancers and mocked them. "This is just awkward white twerking." "This is just Friday at Baby's All Right," a reference to the hip Williamsburg bar and music venue. Other contributions to the #Figuring meme found humor in affectionate pastiche, making use of recontextualizations and unlikely juxtapositions. A number of tweets and videos, for example, joined *Figuring* with weed culture. ("*Takes edible* / I don't feel anything.' / One hour later / [video of *Figuring*]; "When your edibles turned out to be a little stronger than you anticipated.")

Memes on the internet are ubiquitous but they are also the exception; most content posted remains obscure. The reasons one piece of content goes viral and another does not are not well understood (or easy to predict), although there are certain characteristics, like how broadly a particular joke can be appreciated or how easily a derivative can be generated, that seem to be part of the equation. In our current moment, for instance, torching political sendups are a favorite. The "dance craze" is itself a time-honored category of internet meme (Gangnam Style and the Harlem Shake are two examples), meaning that there was already a blueprint for the meme. Yet *Figuring* is not the first obscure contemporary dance to be featured on #SpeakingInDance. Why would it catalyze a reaction that other dances (or, more accurately, videos or images of dances) did not?

There is no simple answer to this question. What the internet saw, however, was a one-minute video that, while undoubtedly made with good intentions is a highly stylized interpretation of a rehearsal and served as a poor stand-in for a dance that emphasizes internal states over external ones; for a dance that audiences need to learn how to watch. The attempted provision of context, with the description by

Kourlas and the quote from Evans, was of course insufficient, given the intricacy of the dance's structure. On Instagram, image is everything. What the video did was separate the appearance of the dance from the crucial world-building ambition of its choreography.

Pity the choreographer, for among the visual arts, dance seems especially susceptible to being misunderstood. "The subject which has suffused the choreographer with high enthusiasm may not [. . .] please an audience or be comprehensible to it at all. The one inescapable condition surrounding the choreographer in his chosen art is the hard realism of 'now.' All other arts can wait for the verdict of history if they are rebuffed by the contemporary world—the choreographer not so."⁴ So remarked Doris Humphrey, a pioneer of American modern dance; she understood something of the millstone around her neck. She was writing in the late 1950s, not long before her death (her book was published posthumously). Here is Yvonne Rainer, in 1966, plain as day: "Dance is hard to see."⁵ Dance, she is remarking, is an ephemeral art; even as we are looking at it, it is disappearing before our eyes. A painting can be studied again and again, every brushstroke examined ad infinitum. Once a dance is finished being performed, however, that iteration of the work is gone. The ways in which dance is documented—through scoring or video—are translations into another medium. Here, I am referring to dance created for the stage and/or the art world, as opposed to dance that appears in music videos or dance that we do in the club. That a dance performed is a dance disappeared contributes to its station as something of a rarefied discipline, and compared with other visual arts, the public has fewer opportunities to encounter it.

There is a way in which the internet's response to *Figuring* can be interpreted as a new manifestation of an old dynamic. At least as far back as Romanticism, art has generated fierce reactions from the general public. These responses can be triggered by new styles and movements that do not meet our expectations for what art is and what makes art good (verisimilitude, for example, or demonstrable virtuosic skill). Such responses are often supported by sentiments that the art world is a space of moneyed irrelevance and elitist backslapping. There is no doubt that art spaces have been overwhelmingly white, and middle- to upper-class. Dance is no exception. In 1972 the Tate Gallery in London exhibited a collection of satirical cartoons about the modern art that drew the most ire from the public (Manet, Duchamp, Picasso, and Matisse were all popular targets in their time). The exhibition, humorously titled "A Child of Six Could Do It!"—that perennial barb—tracks a tradition that, inasmuch as it must deal with the familiar, tends to exploit stock situations and rehash what has already been established. Today, the satirical cartoon as a genre is far less ubiquitous than it was in the twentieth century; this seems to have more to do with the decline of print—there are simply fewer venues for cartoons—than that the public has lost its appetite for satire and critique. Meme culture, perhaps, can be seen as an emergent space for the kinds of responses once captured in cartoons.

And yet, there may also be something else transpiring. Inscribed into movement—even everyday movements as simple as walking—are experiences of class, race, ethnicity, age, and gender, and in many ways, we mark ourselves socially by our manner of movement. In a performance scenario—inherent to which is a dynamic wherein, at least

traditionally in the West, there are those being looked at and those doing the looking—all these inscriptions are on display. This element of voyeurism is one of the reasons dance can be such a vulnerable medium. Historically performed dance (and here I don't necessarily mean concert dance) has put on display an idealized physicality. These ideals may be slightly different from one historical moment to another, and across lines of class and race, but what tends to unite these ideals when a woman's body is on display is that it is meant to please, to cater to fantasy, aspiration, and desire—for women, sure, but foremost for men. Contemporary dance has in many ways set out to challenge these norms—by including dancers with different body types, for example—but these norms persist nonetheless. A body moving in a way pleasing to men is still the widespread expectation of what dance can be.

With *Figuring*, Evans, Feidelson, Mannarino, and Percival created a style of movement that exists outside dance's traditional codes of representation. The dancers were provocative and they were sexual; they reminded us that we are venereal beings, fleshly things. But they were manifestly not sexy. They were not dancing for the gaze that thousands of years of patriarchy has sanctioned and reproduced. The *Times* video, however, through its chosen camera angles, pans, and zooms, cued viewers to look at the dancers as sexualized bodies. In one sequence, for example, the camera closes in on Mannarino's abdomen and moves up toward her shoulders, lingering on her breasts. Women who are perceived to challenge male-centric norms, even in seemingly innocuous ways, set themselves up to be targets of antagonistic sexism and misogyny (being a straight, cis woman who for many years wore her hair cropped tight to the scalp has provided me with no shortage of anecdotes). The responses to *Figuring* that

were most cruel targeted not the dance itself—its choreography or structure—but how unattractive the dancers were *as women*. In the era of Trump, misogyny is the internet's lingua franca. "Goodness gracious, ladies. Tie them things up. At least wrap em with some Ace bandages or something," wrote one man, who, in a representative comment, expressed his deep "concern" for the dancers' well-being. Or the comments offered explanations for the dancers' unfamiliar movements: it must be drugs; it must be mental illness. The #MeToo movement is making strides, but one need look back only as far as the 1990s to see that every advancement toward equality brings retrenchment. A backlash is bubbling. Meanwhile, Evans is undeterred: "I'm staging the activity of perception for the public; it's your work. You have to learn how to read it. . . . As a choreographer I'm forever in search of dance. It happens and then it disappears and there is no guarantee you can do it again." ○

1. All Moriah Evans quotes from an interview with the author, New York, Feb. 1, 2018.
2. The social dances of the upper classes in England and France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were choreographed in a sense by dancing masters who devised step sequences for couples set to various kinds of music. This tradition was brought over to the American colonies where it persisted at balls through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; dance masters selected in advance the individual dances to be performed and designed the order of their performance.
3. See especially Sally Banes's *Democracy's Body*, Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 1993, as well as her *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, Middletown, Conn., Wesleyan University Press, 1987. See also Nick Kaye, *Postmodernism and Performance*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 1994.
4. Doris Humphrey, *The Art of Making Dances*, New York, Grove Press, 1959, p. 28.
5. Yvonne Rainer, "A Quasi Survey of Some 'Minimalist' Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of Trio A," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Survey*, ed. Gregory Battcock, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1995 [1968], p. 271.



Social Dance 1–8: Index, 2015, performance, with (clockwise from center) Cloud, Feidelson, Jeremy Pheiffer, and Olk, and (back right) Percival; at Issue Project Room, New York. Photo Paula Court.