

# Distant Objects, Intimate Others

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*Hayoung Chung (Curatorial Project Fellow, 2024) worked closely with Alexa West on her Open Process project, providing support and engaging in weekly discussions. This essay reflects on her time with the artist at SculptureCenter.*

In the basement of SculptureCenter, amid exposed cement and red bricks, two rocks lie on the floor. A low-pitched mechanical sound with percussive elements reverberates through the room. I stare expectantly at the elevator door, wondering if something is about to start, only to realize that the elevator ding is just part of the soundscape. Suddenly, the door slides open, and a dancer with a confused look on her face steps into the space, rhythmically tapping her foot like a horse cantering across cobblestones. Noticing the blue jumpsuit she is wearing, I recognize it's made of velvet—an unusual choice for activewear. The dancer bends to clutch at her left ankle. Caught in a self-made trap, she struggles to balance on one leg while simultaneously trying to free herself. Next to her, a rock seems to move slightly—or maybe not.

It's the third of Alexa West's *Open Rehearsals*, featuring the 40-minute work in progress, which the artist, dancer, and choreographer is collaborating on with four dancers.<sup>1</sup> Taking place on August 8, 2024, seven weeks into production, the performance is set in the basement, which West has activated and converted into an office, studio, and stage open to the public throughout the summer. Her new work “revisits the Balanchine ballet rendition of [the myth of] Orpheus,”<sup>2</sup> which the New York City Ballet originally premiered in 1948—a collaboration between George Balanchine, Igor Stravinsky, and Isamu Noguchi, who designed the stage and costumes. Despite the ballet's mixed reception, the *New York Times* described it as “an extraordinarily beautiful work realized in a rare theatrical synthesis.”<sup>3</sup>

Among the many variations of the myth across genres—from Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée* to Anaïs Mitchell's musical *Hadestown*—Balanchine's original ballet appeals to West due to the Japanese-American sculptor Noguchi's artistic contribution. Reflecting on her early twenties, before she majored in sculpture, West recalls training at the Martha Graham School, a dance studio overflowing with the influence of Noguchi, a long-standing collaborator of Graham.<sup>4</sup> Noguchi's minimal stage design for *Orpheus* consisted of a streamlined lyre, a half-transparent curtain, and other ethereal objects that contributed to a surreal void onstage. His use of traditional materials like wood, painted canvas, and wire for theater design

<sup>1</sup> From July 3 to August 15, 2024, West activated the SculptureCenter's basement as a public residency, which concluded with *Open Rehearsals*. *Open Rehearsals* featured variations with dancers Sharleen Chidiac, Benin Gardner, Jade Manns, and Isa Spector. During this time, other visitors and I observed her collaborations with set designer Mira Putnam, costume designer Kate Williams, and videographer Kayhl Cooper closely.

<sup>2</sup> Over the summer, I met with West every Monday afternoon to discuss her new work. All her quotations in this writing are drawn from those conversations, regardless of chronological order.

<sup>3</sup> John Martin, “Stravinsky Work in World Premiere; Ballet Society Features His ‘Orpheus’ at City Center to Balanchine Dance,” *New York Times*, April 29, 1948.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Friedman, “Noguchi's Imaginary Landscapes,” *Design Quarterly*, no. 106/107 (1978): 25–37.

contrasted with his primarily stone sculptures and created a rough, temporal aesthetic.<sup>5</sup> His pseudo-sculptural contributions nonetheless glowed under theater lights, embodying what art historian Rosalind Krauss described as the “extended temporality” of modern sculpture in theater settings.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike Noguchi, who considered set design to be an extension of his sculptural practice and thought it should be integrated into a production’s existing narrative, choreography, and music, West begins her dialogue about Orpheus with objects she will use onstage. This is particularly true for the two rocks placed in front of the elevator, with the smaller, third one on the upper ground floor. During our first meeting, West shows me that a Google Images search for “mock rock” yields ads of smiling women lifting hollow rocks with slogans like “blend them right into the landscape.” These commercially available rocks inspire her set design. With a playful yet confident tone, she says, “I don’t want a masterfully shaped rock.”

After several weeks of collaborative work on the set, the rocks materialize West’s words. They’re hollow, bumpy forms made from Amazon and Lowe’s shipping boxes layered with black duct tape and textured with fiberglass cloth and resin. They remain in an in-between state—clearly fake and still bearing their makers’ touch. Moreover, scenes where a dancer crouches silently beneath them or protrudes from behind them like a hermit crab illustrate West’s primary contention: “Objects need the dance to add new information.”

Various objects appear during the production process—a cake pop-like prop of Styrofoam spheres engulfed in mustard-yellow plaster and a balloon-sleeved burgundy blouse too extravagant for everyday wear—blurring the divide between the ordinary and the artful. Writer and curator André Lepecki notes that objects in contemporary performances are not props, scenic effect generators, or surrogate performers; they simply exist alongside the dancer’s body.<sup>7</sup> The same can be said of the objects on West’s stage. “If both [dance and object] are 50%, it makes 100% good. It’s like an economy of elements,” West succinctly puts it.

Who is the dancer that completes the existence of the rocks? Is it Orpheus entering hell? Unlikely. West’s variation only faintly retains the myth of Orpheus. Set in three locations within the basement—in front of the elevator; a long, arched tunnel; and a carpeted room—the performance’s first noticeable figure is Eurydice. West’s company reimagines Orpheus’s wife, whom he tried to bring back from the underworld with his passionate lyre playing and singing, as an independent protagonist with a secret desire. “She’s a hedonistic lady at the club,” West explains, “like your friend who you have to drag home, and they’re like, ‘No!’” Is the dancer who steps out of the elevator solely portraying Eurydice in a prelude to a new story set in the basement of SculptureCenter (or Hades’ underworld)? West firmly answers, “No.”

On West’s stage, no reinterpreted or constructed narrative exists. For her, choreography is not a means of representation but rather “an abstraction of the [dancer’s] body,” where everyday habits such as eating, sleeping, and exercising are amassed and the dancer’s nervous system gets reshaped through training. Thus, rather than having specific choreography that embodies a character from the myth, the dancers—ranging from one to four—exist fluidly in specific “moments where

<sup>5</sup> Friedman, “Noguchi’s Imaginary Landscapes,” 25–37.

<sup>6</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, “Mechanical Ballets: Light, Motion, Theater” in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York, NY: The Viking Press, 1977), 201–242.

<sup>7</sup> André Lepecki, “9 Variations on Things and Performance,” *Esferas* 6 (Spring 2016): 87–108.

they take on that character identity.” West finds this approach feasible due to the four participating dancers’ consistent dance training backgrounds.

West’s approach to character identity in *Open Rehearsals* is particularly pronounced when compared to her recent performance: *A lounge, a lobby*, held at Lomex Gallery, July 11–13, 2024. Although this performance also eschews an illustrative, linear narrative that weaves “transitions through varying states of boredom and routine,”<sup>8</sup> it features distinct characters on a minimal stage resembling a hospital waiting room, complete with a frozen wall clock. The vivid contrast between the characters’ arises from the “four different dancers” who each bring unique body characteristics, technical backgrounds, and movement histories. However, in her *Orpheus* adaptation, West emphasizes more on the dancers’ similarities in movement style, allowing their bodies to create a more cohesive scene.

The process of composing these “moments” of character identity begins with gathering body movements from both reference media and West’s own choreography. Her references include gabber dance from the 1990s Dutch hardcore music scene and flamboyant group dances from the popular 1970s Spanish television program *Esta Noche Fiesta (Party Tonight)*. While natural in their original contexts, these movements become abstracted, unpredictable sequences when absorbed into the bodies of West’s dancers within the subtle framework of *Orpheus*—like found objects woven into an abstract sculpture.

This transformation is apparent in a note found in a corner of the carpeted room after one rehearsal in July. Titled “For Benin,” it contains a simple chart with a list of words like “Rumble pusher, Stag jumps, Baby goblets.” These seemingly childlike phrases are, in fact, fragments that make up the choreography. Nonetheless, these simple, descriptive words do not straightforwardly map onto specific movements. The words do not merely reiterate their dictionary definitions; instead, they encapsulate extensive revisions and discussions between choreographer and dancer, reflecting their mutual acknowledgment of freedom.

Under the arched tunnel with exposed gray concrete, West’s approach of treating dance as equal to objects on stage comes into focus. Here, the dancers, without any illustrative choreography, abruptly hit, kiss, and poke one another. With the sampled sound of an unanswered phone ring, their repetitive, disparate movements build in tension, making it difficult to identify any of them as *Orpheus*, *Eurydice*, or anyone else. Instead, the notions of “miscommunication and disconnection” manifest before our eyes in these fleeting moments of bodily contact. At one point, a dancer drives their hand into a pipe embedded in the tunnel wall, grabbing the arm of the dancer at the opposite end. The ensuing tug-of-war, so serious it’s comical, reveals that the SculptureCenter building itself—a former trolley repair shop—functions like the rocks, reminding us again of West’s “economy of elements.”

Once through the tug-of-war, the dancers finally coexist on a neutral light gray carpet, engaging in individual or shared movements without ever making contact with one another. As a series of cheerful, commercial-like musical sounds play, sweat beads on the dancers’ faces. Despite the breeze from a large standing fan, the air grows thick as the prepared dance comes to an end. Only after the applause, when our gazes shift from the stage, do we notice the strangers with whom we have shared these intimate moments in the basement. We also recall

<sup>8</sup> Lomex Gallery, “A lounge, a lobby,” accessed August 14, 2024, <https://www.lomex.gallery/exhibitions/a-lounge-a-lobby>.

those who attended West's ever-changing rehearsals throughout the summer. Like Orpheus leading the way out of hell, unable to look back, and Eurydice, who may have wanted to stay in hell and possibly felt a sense of euphoria when he looked back, we ask ourselves: Were we together or alone?