

Voguing

and its Discontents

BY SOLEM KRISHTALKA



I recently moved to Berlin, where almost immediately upon arrival, I had two encounters with voguing and vogue culture.

First, I attended the opening of Vancouver- and Berlin-based video artist Jeremy Shaw's *Variation FQ* at the Schinkel Pavillon. The film features Leyomi Mizrahi, perhaps one of the most broadly famous vogue dancers to have emerged from the contemporary ball scene, known for her blending of aggressive acrobatics and fluid grace (what is known in the scene as Vogue Fem performance).

Shaw's video is a clear homage to Canadian animated filmmaker Norman McLaren's *Pas de Deux* from 1968 and he employs the same visual effects: slow motion, stop-and-repeat printing and its attendant stroboscopic illusion. Mizrahi, dressed in a body-hugging leotard and heels, silhouetted against a stark black backdrop, runs through a vigorous routine of her signature moves, but at a dreamy pace: she flails her hair around, duckwalks, dips and death drops, all in slow-motion, leaving trailing images of her own limbs and torso behind her.

The opening was packed. A group of almost entirely white, wealthy European art-goers that could legitimately be called the cultural elite stood rapt at this video – by a young, white (gay) male artist of a young transgendered performer of colour from the New York underground.

The second encounter involved a small group called Berlin Voguing Out who host regular voguing workshops, and at the end of this past summer they staged a loose performance at a gay bar in Kreuzberg, a district of Berlin. A procession of by-and-large female cis-gendered professional dancers vogueed down a makeshift runway. It was entertaining, but hollow. The dancers hit every mark, and bent and contorted themselves up and down the runway, but athletics and dexterity and flexibility are the basics of a dancer's technical craft. In effect, their performance was studied, formal, over-disciplined: highly skillful and totally artless.

The recent ubiquity of cellphones with video-recording capabilities is largely responsible for the current resurgence of interest in voguing. It's not that vogue balls stopped happening between 1990 and now, it's merely that, in 1990, society at large relied on documentarians like Jennie Livingston and rapacious cultural magpies like Madonna to bring voguing to the fore. Now, endless clips from vogue balls are available to watch on YouTube, and, in and amongst the enthusiastic throng screaming their support for Mizrahi, or Javier Ninja or whichever upcoming legendary child, there are scores of iPhones documenting each drop.

Voguing in and of itself is a paradoxical, mercurial form. It is at once highly recognizable and rigidly codified: it has a set

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of movements, an acutely specific jargon, categories and subcategories (Old Way, New Way, Vogue Fem), each a system of movement interpretation. And, because of the culture from which voguing springs and from which it is inextricable, it

remains in a state of constant flux, its vocabulary explosively expanding with each new performance at each new ball.

Voguing emerged from house culture and the ball scene. To quote Dorian Corey, one of the pillars of Jennie Livingston's seminal (and perennially troubled – see sidebar on page 46)



voguing being one of a host of competition categories – have been a mainstay of house culture, with a continuous history that begins in earnest in the 1960s in New York, and has since spread across America, and then to Canada (Toronto’s House of Monroe being the first active and explicitly visible house in the country – see sidebar on page 43) and the rest of the world.

Voguing has always been competitive, and the development of its styles and expressions has been fuelled by extravagance and improvisatory bombast, both audience members and fellow challengers on the ball runway being a mutual incitement to go bigger, more elaborate. In that sense, voguing has always been a communal dance form, but what’s more, it has always been an amateur’s dance form. I use this term deliberately and specifically to mean non-trained, non-professional; all of the great innovators of voguing, the legendary dancers who have announced and expanded the parameters of the form, have been autodidacts.

Not only has voguing always been a vernacular form, it has always been – and what is far more interesting, remains – a dance of an underclass. While its practitioners have occasionally gained a broader (if not mainstream) cultural attention – Willi Ninja, called the godfather of voguing, appeared in music videos and became a choreographer; Leyomi Mizrahi was featured in Willow Smith’s *I Whip My Hair* video, as well as appearing on *America’s Best Dance Crew* – they emerged from a subculture formed in reaction to socio-cultural oppression, and what is more, they return to it. What is yet more interesting, while voguing itself has been brought into the mainstream (or exploited for the mainstream’s ends, depending on who you ask), that absorption by the mainstream has never quite stuck.

Think of other artistic forms that have their genesis in American black culture: hip hop, R&B, funk, jazz – music and dance forms that have not only burst into the wider cultural sphere in the broadest possible way, but have completely reshaped it as well. Not so with voguing. Madonna may have pilfered the form, and her appropriation fuelled a broader fascination with its most superficial aspects for a brief time, but at its core, it remained (and remains) an underground art form.

The history of voguing is regularly dotted with these encounters with outsider fascination, and this is more or less inevitable, especially given that the developmental drive of the form is predicated on spectacle. Both Jeremy Shaw’s installation and the performance by Berlin

Voguing Out are, in and of themselves, respective microcosms of the perpetually troubled engagement of voguing with broader culture, no matter how adulatory the spirit of that meeting.

I found Shaw’s video to be highly problematic. On a formal level, his interventions leech out everything that makes

1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning*, “a house is a gay street gang.” If you want to be academic about it, a house is a form of social organization invented by largely poor, urban American black and Latino queers. It mimics an extended family unit – any given house has a mother and a father, who take on organizational and supportive roles, and its members are referred to as children. Admittance to the family is usually dependent on “walking” (or participating in) a ball. Balls – epic parties in which the various houses gather and compete,

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Mizrahi's performances so electric and so queer: her fierce kineticism, her mercurial oscillations between rhythmic aggression and graceful fluidity – so much of which depends on alternations of pacing and speed have been flattened to languidity, reducing Mizrahi to a music-box toy ballerina.

The politics of its display and reception (the latter admittedly less in Shaw's control) stand as yet another iteration of the pattern of white people pillaging house culture for their own ends – see Jennie Livingston (perhaps the most innocent and well-intentioned of these perpetrators), Malcolm McLaren, Madonna. Granted, Shaw's usage of Mizrahi's performance (again, no matter how adulatory the intention) comes nowhere near that popular scale. Nevertheless, having Shaw be Mizrahi's ambassador to a roomful of European cultural elites who otherwise have little to no engagement with house culture – and the class, race and gender politics inherent therein – is deeply troubling.

On the other hand, Berlin Voguing Out's performance highlights the artistic problematics of removing voguing from its context. While voguing might have a recognizable form and structure, it's not merely a repertoire of moves to be studied and perfected. Hand performance, duckwalking, spinning, dipping and floor performance are the canonical mainstays of a Vogue Fem performance. But just because they are codified doesn't make them analogous to the five ballet positions. The rawness of voguing's autodidacticism has just as much to do with its politics of class, race and gender as it does with the politics of its artistry. The art of voguing is not simply the art of movement improvisation, but the art of amateur invention. And likewise, the joy and excitement of watching a vogue performance comes, not from seeing a highly trained body go through the paces of a choreography, but through watching some dedicated kid who's been figuring it all out in his living room, with his friends, whose hot-doggery is arrogant and hungry. ~

Sommaire

« L'ubiquité récente de cellulaires munis de caméra vidéo est largement responsable de l'intérêt renouvelé pour le voguing », écrit le critique d'art visuel Sholem Krishtalka. « Ce n'est pas qu'il n'y a plus de « ball » depuis 1990, c'est qu'alors, la société dépendait surtout sur les documentaristes comme Jennie Livingston et les rapaces culturels comme Madonna pour mettre le voguing à l'avant-plan. Aujourd'hui, il y a une collection sans fin de clips de *ball* sur YouTube. Et parmi les foules en délire qui claironnent leur soutien pour Mizrahi ou Javier Ninja ou autre enfant légendaire en devenir, une pléthore de iPhone documente tous les instants. . . Si le voguing a une forme et une structure reconnaissable, il ne s'agit pas d'un simple répertoire à étudier et à parfaire. Les gestes de base du Vogue Fem sont le « hand performance », la marche en canard, le « spin », le « dip » et le « floor performance ». Néanmoins, leur codification ne les rend pas analogues aux cinq positions en ballet. » ~

Learn more >> jeremysaw.net



Sholem Krishtalka is an artist and a writer currently based in Berlin. His work has been exhibited in Toronto, New York and Berlin, and featured in numerous international publications. His writing has appeared in *The Globe and Mail*, *Canadian Art* magazine, *Bookforum* online and others.

WAACKER EM FATALE *versus* VOGUER MOTHER TROUBLE NUANCE

VOGUING and the ballroom scene were born along with house, hip hop and bboying in sixties and seventies New York. It has infiltrated the mainstream less than street dance but the forms maintain their hereditary connections. Emily Law (Em Fatale) and Matt Sweet (Mother Trouble Nuance) – two dancers who are putting voguing on the Toronto stage early in 2014 – talk influences, cross-pollination and keeping it real.

Emily Law: What is the connection – or is there one – between waacking and other urban dance forms and voguing?

Matt Sweet: Hmm, whatever I say is wrong. [Laughter] Waacking has more street cred with the urban dance crowd. I'm not sure they know what to do with voguers. I think it's fascinating that they are similar but there's just enough difference that there's a reaction from the two sides of the form.

EL: And now in European street-dance battles there are vogue categories ... though we haven't seen this as much in Canada. There seems to be a new presence of voguing in street dance.

MS: That's really exciting to hear.

EL: I see the connection between waacking, voguing and house music as all having been fostered by the gay community at some point. Waacking and voguing were both created by gay men.

MS: Oh those gays ...

EL: Has the music affected the dance? Did Old Way [pre-1990] become New Way because of the music?

MS: Old Way was more about the extreme poses that you could achieve and New Way is about catching the beat. So, absolutely, the music has had an impact – now, if you can land that giant dip on the beat, you've got it made.

EL: Are there other forms impacting the ball scene the way martial arts did in the



past? I'm thinking of maybe twerking coming into the Sex Siren category? ...

MS: [Long pause] ... You are not incorrect. [Everyone laughs] I think there are things that are drifting in, but it's subtle – because the kids are sticklers for the rules.

EL: Tell me about the kiki ballroom scene.

MS: The Toronto Kiki Ballroom Alliance, started by Twysted Monroe, is about capturing the young people who are interested – it's kind of a safe training ground.

EL: Kiki is a word that has many meanings. [Laughter] [NB: In ball culture, to kiki means to gossip about your competitors; in other cultures kiki is slang for female genitalia.] Is there anything that defines the Toronto scene? What is TO known for?

MS: The scene is so young here – we need to find our footing. The history of ballroom in Toronto is the history of the House of Monroe. Within Canada there's not much else going on. We know it exists almost everywhere, with classes and what not, but the culture itself seems to be centred in Toronto.

EL: I've heard of balls happening in Calgary.

MS: Really – I'm surprised. ... But we don't really know – not every house has



a website. Part of that may be to protect the privacy of those who are closeted, etc.

EL: Can you talk a bit about gender and voguing for biological women?

MS: There has been controversy there – at the Latex Ball in New York they had a performance category for women and a trans woman got up and vogueed. They stopped the competition and said she couldn't compete because she wasn't born a woman – but in her eyes she was in the right category.

Gender in performance in vogue has always played a very big role. There's this thing in queer culture about being masculine – anyone who's feminine is lesser in some way or subjugated – but it's just hard to vogue and come off as butch.

I think everyone in the ballroom scene is very sensitive to gender and is willing to accept that it is absolutely a fluid concept. But there are still those people who are sticklers for the rules and that's when there's tension. There's no easy solution because identity is self-defined.

EL: What are some of the categories at a ball?

MS: Voguing gets the most attention; it's usually at the end of the ball. It usually gets the most prize money (as it should), and it charges up the crowd the most. My category is Bizarre – take Halloween Nonsense and High Fashion and shove it in a bag – it's all about the creation of a

look, but there are other categories such as Sex Siren, which is all about seduction and ... stripping. And there's Body which is all about physical health and looking healthy, and there's Realness, which is a homosexual man or woman passing for straight in subcategories of Executive, Club or School boy – if you can pass as a straight version of one of those things then you are 'real'. There's also Face. And many more.

EL: Have the categories changed with the times?

MS: Probably not that much, though what it looks like or means may have changed over time. House of Nuance invented a category that we think is awesome, though a lot of people in the community don't think it's great.

EL: What is it?

MS: Hairgraphy.

EL: Is the scene becoming more publicly presentational?

MS: I think we're starting to see voguing more in those presentational formats (theatre, etc.). A ball is definitely presentational but it's not eligible for a Toronto Arts Council grant or anything.

EL: How will voguing/ballroom stay real and true to its socio-political roots?

MS: That's something I struggle with as the Mother of the House of Nuance – partly because I'm a white person. I worry about the line between celebrating the culture that we love and co-opting it. We work really hard at trying to make our functions as legitimate and real as possible. I think that just by having a ball it's a political statement: we are exactly

who we want to be and no one can tell us differently. And I think that ties in with all of ballroom always. I hope we can live up to that. Ballroom is about being your most authentic self. ~

The Mix Mix Collective remounts its Fringe hit *Jack Your Body* as part of the Next Stage theatre festival January 9th through 19th at Factory Theatre in Toronto. The work showcases house, hip hop, voguing and waacking dance styles and features Emily Law, Ashley Perez, Jasmyn Fyffe, Kevin Fraser, Kristine Flores, Sze-Yang Ade-Lam and Jelani Ade-Lam.

House of Nuance present the #artlive Vogue Ball opening event for the World Stage Festival on February 1st at Harbourfront Centre in Toronto.

TRANSFORMING THE DOMINANT SCRIPT OF DANCE ILL NANA/DIVERSECITY DANCE COMPANY BY KEITH COLE

I am a forty-eight-year-old, cis-gendered, white gay man who is currently tipping the scale at 220 pounds. I am reluctant to enter into any dance studio these days and take a class. I am just too big. I have had training in ballet, jazz, Limón, Graham and Horton techniques and I am also an award-winning tap dancer. In heels, I am a six-foot-six drag performer and not aging especially gracefully, but still – I want to vogue. I want to walk in a ball. Not just to be an onlooker, but as an active participant showing everyone that my feminine side is just as fierce, powerful, vulnerable, sexy and scary as my masculine side. I am not invisible and I'm not a cliché and I will not tone it down in order to stand in the back row of your production of *The Nutcracker* and do what I am told. It has been suggested that a dance studio is an unpretentious

place. Yet, it can also be a place that is full of old, possibly oppressive, models and structures of hierarchy that may be unwelcoming to faces of colour, bodies of varying types and to people of different economic classes, physical abilities and sexualities. In short, a dance studio is not always a safe and benign space.

Enter ILL NANA/DiverseCity Dance Company or, simply, Ill Nana. This unusual collective was first recommended to me by Reginald Vermue (a.k.a. Regina the Gentlelady of the Toronto-based musical duo Light Fires). Reg has been taking free Right to Dance drop-in classes in hip hop, ballet, house, contemporary and voguing taught by Ill Nana in a deliberately non-oppressive framework.

Classes take place in a small, third-floor dance studio at Toronto's 519 Community Centre on Saturday

afternoons and Tuesday evenings. On average, the class consists of five to seven students. Straight off, Sze-Yang Ade-Lam – one of the three Ill Nana company members teaching – explains that students are free to improvise, face a wall or a mirror, take as many counts needed to finish an exercise and that no one needs to be silent. Here there is no obvious teacher/student hierarchy. Catching my attention immediately is the warm-up music at the ballet barre. We are doing pliés, petit battements and dégagés to pop music by Kelly Rowland – it sounds and feels fantastic.

Ill Nana is a three-member dance company like no other in Toronto. According to co-founder, dancer, and choreographer Sze-Yang, the company is "hard to place because we are not one thing. We are connected to the Toronto



dance scene and yet we are a contrast to it as well. We value art in the clubs and in the communities where we teach. We have a connection with people and their stories, not just with the community that can afford a \$35 or \$40 dance ticket at Harbourfront."

Fellow company member Jelani Ade-Lam adds, "We are a part of and not a part of. We are a part of the dialogue in the city and although we are certainly not the only company trying to resist hierarchies or homophobia, the difference is our process, our mandate and the platform we provide. Everybody deserves to dance." To that end, says, Sze-Yang, Ill Nana is always working to "create safer spaces, to shape and share stories and acknowledge that levels of power do exist. We fill a need within our community." Ill Nana's proud outsider position becomes clear when company

members discuss the emphasis that is put on performance dance that happens on a conventional theatre or concert stage (or "over there" as they put it). "What happens on non-traditional stages and spaces is just as valuable," says Sze-Yang. "Besides, that is where I see people who look like me. I can be myself in alternative spaces."

I have taken three Right to Dance classes with Ill Nana and I feel as though I am on my way to winning a Virgin Runway competition at a vogue ball coming up soon. The teaching method is relatively simple: relax and do what your body does best. You know your body better than anyone else – its limitations and its strengths – so work with those. Follow along with the music or totally go your own way. If you need twelve counts to finish a movement phrase instead of the eight counts suggested, then take

the twelve. Take what you need. Find the movement in your own body. Vogue movements are not difficult: it's more about owning them and performing with attitude. Listen to the music, watch the instructor for tips – but do not copy. Make every move you do count. Do not be lazy. Be strong – full of flash, passion and sexiness. Choose to walk on the beat. Or not.

Taking these classes has left me thinking about cultural and actual day-to-day survival. In re-examining the alienation that dance and its traditional performance venues can evoke, one can perhaps enact a different dialogue for dance, in all its many forms, one that opens us to the potential for a new cultural discussion of the art form. ~

Learn more >> illnana-dcdc.com

PARIS IS STILL BURNING

BY KATHLEEN SMITH



Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning (PIB)* was and remains the primary window by which outsiders may glimpse the magical world of voguing and ballroom culture. One of the few worthy documents of the scene's early years (during which, as Sholem Krishtalka points out in his essay *Voguing and its Discontents*, ubiquitous sharing of cultural events via digital devices was not the norm), the film has also become a valuable resource for those who walk the ballroom runway, connecting them with the pioneers and legends of the form.

Furthermore, in the years since it was made, the film has come to embody a genuine and energetic cultural flashpoint.

Feminist bell hooks wrote about Livingston's film in her book *Black Looks*, calling it "... a graphic documentary portrait of the way in which colonized black people (in this case black gay brothers, some of whom were drag queens) worship at the throne of whiteness, even when such worship demands that we live in perpetual self-hate, steal, lie, go hungry, and even die in its pursuit." She didn't like it. And neither did American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler who derided the film's "simultaneous production and subjugation of its subjects."

Perhaps as a result of the backlash, the wider art world has seized the film for its own, using Livingston's exploration as a launch pad for critical analysis, commentary

and, in an endless loop of utility, as a way to investigate, associate with and understand a doggedly underground culture and its meaning. Degrees of exploitation can be debated endlessly but best not to discount the authentic interest, curiosity and, yes, enchantment that voguing culture evokes in anyone (including artists) with an eye for beauty.

In addition to the Jeremy Shaw work *Variations FQ* mentioned earlier in these pages, there are a couple of other *PIB*-connected performance works worth mentioning (and who knows how many more might be in the works).

American choreographer Trajal Harrell's solo *Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church* incorporates the conventions and gestural language of ball walking. Making the work led Harrell to the realization that the modern dance milieu of Judson Church and voguing ball culture were born in the same city at approximately the same time. Fill in the poignant socio-political blanks as you will in an effort to understand why one scene has been so thoroughly chronicled and the other hasn't. Harrell has since made a number of group iterations of *Twenty Looks* that explore the intricacies of the concept.

Los Angeles-based artist, performer and filmmaker Wu Tsang (who spoke recently at the close of his *Show's Over* exhibition at Gallery TPW in Toronto) has also used *PIB* as source material

(and has collaborated with Jonathan Oppenheim, the picture editor on the original Livingston film). Both Tsang's performance project *Full Body Quotation* and his short film *For How We Perceived a Life (Take 3)* reference the movement and words uttered by the subjects interviewed in *PIB*, lip-synced by actors being fed the lines via earpieces.

Like ripples in a pond, the reverberations of Livingston's film and the cultural moment-in-time it encapsulates continue in a conversation with the future that's been decades in the making. ~

Learn more >>
trajalharrell.org; wutsang.com

Many have expressed a wish for a documentary "sequel" to *Paris Is Burning*, an update that documents how the scene has changed since Willi Ninja and other revered progenitors of voguing movement styles stalked the runway. As far as I can tell nothing has been made that could challenge the immediacy and resonance of *PIB*, but the footage of both Old and New Way dancers in Wolfgang Busch's *How Do I Look* (2006) is still killer. And Sheldon Larry's *Leave It On The Floor* (2011), ostensibly a dramatic feature, also boasts awesome ballroom dance sequences. Both are available for download through iTunes, Amazon or (sometimes and in sections) YouTube.

