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As told to René Kladzyk, 2330 words.

Tags: Dance, Performance, Process, Mental health, Inspiration, Beginnings.



On generating validation from within

Choreographer and fitness instructor Viva Soudan on finding solutions through the body, trusting your gut, and taking care of transitions.
Can you begin by describing what Bodyroll is, for the uninitiated?

Bodyroll is a collective movement, really. It's a philosophy and a collective movement practice that I've been developing since 2010. At the time I was going through a breakup and felt disconnected from myself and my body. I was going out a lot, and tended to find release and therapy through going to the dance club, and letting loose on the dance floor—just improving and letting the night take over.

I found myself constantly being in these situations where I would be in the center of the dance floor, and then I would have these wake-up moments when I'm in this kind of trance, club domination, therapeutic release. And when I would generate all of that energy, my instinct was to give it to someone else. I got really interested in that energy exchange of being in the club, letting loose, and then inspiring someone else to let loose and holding space for them to do that thing. And a few friends were in my ear about, "You should teach a class, you should show me how to do this." It was a joke "Oh, your signature move is Bodyroll. You're always Bodyrolling, you're always in the roll."

So, I rented a studio space in Brooklyn. And I vowed to do it once a week for a year. I started it like, "Come learn some club moves so you can dominate the dance floor." And I started realizing that I was really interested in repetitive movement as an access point to presence. And that if we could repeat, repeat, repeat—there's this aliveness that happens that's purely in the moment.

I was interested in having people come that were "not dancers" or they used to dance. The thing of, "I'm a dancer," also became part of the sort of collective movement, and the questioning of where this validation happens or doesn't. Myself being a "professional dancer," studying dance, being really invested in that art form, and realizing there is no validation.

This mystical illusion of validation is particularly hard in the dance world. Maybe you book a job, maybe you're actually paid—for a long time I was very focused on getting paid to dance and that was my proof of validation, which proved to me to not be true. Because then I was dancing things that I didn't really believe in, but I was getting paid. And right now I'm really excavating this question of, I am a dancer, what does that even mean to me?

Validation is something that is generated from within, and that echoes through a lot of art. A lot of choices that we make, we believe that we're validated by these external things, these proof of existence. Dance is even trickier because it is ephemeral; it is a felt medium.

What's validated me is actually helping people who are not in that vacuum of studying what it means to be a dancer. Dance is such an important part of our lives, everyone. That's why I've been so invested in collective movement, and trying to create spaces where people get together and move to support each other in our individuality, and in our authentic expression.

Thank you for all that. It's funny, I wish there was a way to convey for readers that you are literally dancing as you're explaining these things.

And I have to say, I'm coming into a new place with this, but I did not choose to be a dancer. Professionally, I don't know what else to do! [laughs] I wish I could just figure something else out. I've been trying—I'm a florist, I sell vintage, but it's so inside of me. I'm such a body person. I see solutions through body: whether it's theoretical, philosophical, or physical solutions for people, emotional. So I don't know how else to exist in the world, but trying to help people feel it.

I know that at times you've had some health challenges related to pushing your body to the limit. What's your attitude on finding that balance between endurance and safety?

That's been a huge recent lesson for myself. That's partly why I took a hiatus to Miami. I had been completely burnt out from pushing Bodyroll so hard, and pushing myself with other performance projects—creating this relationship with performance and movement that was really about risk and pushing myself to

the edge, to feel that aliveness. The way I was approaching it became very addictive. It's addicting to get into repetitive trance dancing and feel kind of nothingness, everything and nothing all at once. [laughs] But I got really addicted to it.

I felt a certain amount of pressure to be that hype girl: to go 120%. [I thought] I needed to do that as an energy worker so that my audience would believe it and could then feel it for themselves. I took on a lot of responsibility for generating the energy for others.

I was suffering these allergy attacks and just different health problems that were causing me not to be able to move, not to be able to dance, not to be able to generate too much heat in my body. And I'm like, "I need to cool down girl." I always talk about a cool down in class—I was never doing the cool down! So I started to reintegrate [and have] a self-practice, because so much had been outward.

I know you have a rich creative life beyond Bodyroll. Can you tell me a bit about where you are now?

Well, I've come back to New York with this fresh energy of really wanting to slow down and be here. When I left, I was in this burnout spiral. So right now I'm starting to research and be in development to restage a piece that I developed a few years ago with a residency I had at Otion Front Studio. It was right after my brother passed away unexpectedly. And it was about grief, about my relationship to grief, and to losing him. It was a solo that involved me and a plexiglass box. This was the first time that I had been in the studio alone in a very long time

This was the first piece that I was leading with myself and exploring that. And I decided to bring in the sculpture to respond to. I presented it and then I dropped it. I was just like, "Okay, I don't want to go that deep anymore. I want to go back to generating joy for the masses." But it's coming—this hunger, this drive. This desire is back, to further develop that piece and present it, and just feel what that feels like—to reenter the studio space in a different tone.

Yeah, the energy of Bodyroll is so joyous and ecstatic. And so, being willing to just sit with really hard feelings in creative expression, it seems a very different kind of mode.

It's the yin and the yang. I've been in my yin phase, literally living in Miami, it's much slower there. The ocean, the palms, the heat makes everything slow down. And I'm an extremist, so I had to go be literally in the tropical heat to fucking literally make me slow down. But I'm trying to learn how to find more of a strategy and strength in my willingness to commit to a place of risk that has not served me in the past. Might have been some amazing performances. I've had a lot of amazing experiences that I hold with me, but they were very dangerous.

In what way dangerous?

Well, what I'm looking for is how to feel alive. Either through cathartic, exercising- exorcising- movement, or discovering it through performance art, durational art, site-specific creation. Setting up these barriers and these challenges to get through live as a performance, I've always been very interested in that. Bodyroll is essentially a performance piece. We have a task that we have to get through, it just happens to be with strangers.

There's always been this interest with my creative performance work of, "How do we get to the other side?" "How do we find freedom?" And I think I've been so willing to be confrontational, push boundaries and expose this rawness. And it's not my job to do that. I was in this performance piece where every night, the whole goal was I had to break the chair with my body. Somehow I had to break the chair. I feel I'm on the other side of that now, where I had to feel this force to be real.

Yeah, I think the danger is part of what can be intoxicating about that kind of freedom, going to the brink of bodily harm.

Yep. It draws back to also being an adrenaline junkie. Being a person who finds their creative expression through the body—I mean, we're athletes. It's fucking hardcore. You're putting your body through a lot of shit. Just because I know a lot about the body, doesn't mean I always take care of it. Which I've learned through all this health stuff I've gone through. That's what this life has taught me. I might have this sixth sense of how to access some kind of freedom through movement, but it's also got this shadow side that I push to the limits. "If I'm not sore, I'm not alive." All of that, that is shifting in me.

I've just had this zoom out thing going on, and when my brother passed away, it was just right in my face. And when I went into the studio and started working on that piece, there was breath, life. And then I freaked out and was like, "Ah, I don't know. I don't know, this feels really raw in a softer way, not raw [like] throwing my body against a fucking chair every night." That's what I'm savoring, and I'm interested in biting in deeper—the rawness without this sort of violence that I've channeled before.

It's been tricky because I feel a little Jekyll and Hyde. This other presentation that I've been giving to my community, to the world, it's so different. It's like the opposite—all about joy, dressing in drag, making people laugh, being so campy and fun. And there's this other part of me that kind of hasn't been able to fully express herself. I'm trying to really create some space for that part of me, to see who that is, see what's going on.

Do you have any personal rules that you follow as an artist?

Gosh, I've always kind of joked, "Commit to the delusion." And maybe that's shifting in me a bit to pull back. But commitment, in general, is something that I really believe in. If you're going to do something, just commit to it. I kind of wish I had found this earlier. So I think for someone that's maybe getting started, carve out time and space for self-development.

Something I've learned a lot over the years is that developing personal practices that equalize and centralize your nervous system is so essential in how we operate with relationships, so that we come from a place where we're not just reactive all the time. That's been something that's coming in for me: Am I letting all this shit just dump on me? Or do I have some sort of shield that protects my energy? I don't think I knew what that was for a long time, and I'm still figuring it out.

Being a performer and presenting something out into the world is some kind of energy work. You're diving into other people's emotions, symbology, all of it. It's a lot that we are taking on. And so I think developing that sort of "my dance space, your dance space"—

A protective bubble.

That little bubble—just don't take on other people's shit. Don't bring it. Don't put it on. It's not yours. And trust your gut! Trust your gut. Get good gut health. That's been a huge issue—think about what you're eating and gut health, big time.

But trusting your gut psychically as well as physically?

Psychically. And if you are bloated all the time, how the hell are you going to trust your gut because you got a brain fog? It's so connected: like what we eat, how we spend our time. Giving yourself enough transition.

This is another lesson I always say—transitions. How are you taking care of the transitional time? Whether it's literally in your day, you're running around, you got different stuff going on, how are you transitioning from one thing to the next? Don't just pack it on. That's something I have learned. Just because you can, doesn't mean that you should. How do we transition, that sort of closes the container of whatever we were doing, and lets us recalibrate the nervous system, so that we can enter into the next thing.

Literally through dance, that's what I teach, is how to transition from one move to the next. That's what we practice all the time in Bodyroll, is how we get into one move and then we switch to a new move. Because that is a challenging aspect of life, is how to transition. If we practice only one way of moving, we develop a little bit of a tunnel vision—that sometimes is necessary. We just need to be aware that we're in the tunnel.

Viva Soudan Recommends:

Bodyrolling underwater.

Gut health! This is your lighthouse.

Buy a wig and feel the fantasy.

Move your body every damn day ~ dance, sweat, whatever, otherwise fascia spiderweb will spin you into immobility!

Feel the wind while driving a convertible car, preferably red.

Name

Viva Soudan

Vocation

performance artist, dancer, choreographer, movement coach, director

Fact

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