Colin Self on constructing your own community

April 6, 2017 - Colin Self is an artist based in New York and Berlin who works as a choreographer, musician, and performance artist.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2199 words.

Tags: Music, Art, Dance, Identity, Multi-tasking, Process, Inspiration.

When people ask, "*What do you do?*" How do you answer them?

It's changed so much over the years, but at the moment I usually say I'm a composer and a choreographer or that I'm an artist. But I'm sort of feeling like those words are starting to shift again. I was recently rereading this interview I did with *PAPER* in 2014 where I'd quoted my Kickstarter video, in which I say I'm an artist, activist, entrepreneurist, DJ, and performer. It was this crazy long list. Right now, at least for the time being, I try and occupy the words that best represent what I think needs to be done in the world—or what I think I should be doing in the world—so composer and choreographer feel the most accurate.

Did you go to art school?

I went to Evergreen in Olympia. I started out in puppetry and experimental writing. I got a scholarship, and that was basically the reason why I was able to go to Evergreen. Had I not had that scholarship I wouldn't have been able to be like, "I'm going to study puppetry and be an experimental writer!" Then I went to school in Chicago for two years. I'm actually finishing my MFA at Bard this summer, focusing on music and sound. It's this program where all the different disciplines meet together. You talk to photography and painting professors about music and performance.

That seems in keeping with your creative practice, which includes all these different worlds.

Totally. I wonder how much of that is sort of a new part of our economic global state, where we have to be many things or have many practices in order to do what we do. For me, the only constant through all these things has been performance. When I think about it, there are some really crazy links in my work that go from puppetry to doing drag to the kind of work I'm doing now. Puppetry is this weird thing I often come back to because it's just such a weird metaphysical means of expression. It's crazy. I was having some feelings about calling myself a choreographer because I'm not trained in any way, but when Trisha Brown recently passed away I started re-watching these videos of her that I had watched back when I was student at Evergreen. It made me consider my own evolution as a creative person. It made me feel like "Oh, right. I am a choreographer. This is actually the thing that I do."

You are in the final stages of recording an album. How does making a record tie in with your other creative pursuits?

It all connects in different ways. As I imagine it there will be many iterations of live performance for the record. That's the main thing, for sure. I'm just sort of asking myself this question, too, about how a record about queer kinship and alternative forms of family, non-biological family, can be a platform for working with people. As I travel around the world, I want to get lots of different people on the stage. I also kind of want to do a version of the show as a drag show, where it's a different person lip-syncing to every song.

When it comes to music making, how does the process usually work for you? Is it usually you alone?

It starts with me by myself. I usually start with either voice or percussion stuff. Then when I get to a certain place, I usually start working with my arranger. My process this time around is becoming formal, but it's still kind of alien to me, these kind of official steps of doing things the right way. I've never had a super crystal clear trajectory of how to make a song other than that it usually starts on my computer or on my phone with me recording myself walking down the street or something. This record is also the final chapter in what I refer to as the elation series, which includes these operas and performances I've been doing since 2011. This is the last chapter from that. After this record is out and I've toured, I'm probably going to start something else.

Much of your work is about the idea of community. Did coming into your own as a creator have a lot to do with finding a community?

Finding these special environments for experimenting and trying things out has always been the most beneficial thing for me. Communal spaces have always been the most fruitful place to learn. Also, the dynamics of having so many different people in one space and getting to develop a conversation about something that you may be not even thinking about initially is so crucial. I really needed those weird bars and unusual queer-friendly spaces in order to figure myself out in public. I guess I had always felt kind of alien in the drag world. I was not really a drag queen, per se, and even though I was wearing makeup, I wasn't painted like the queens were. I have this relationship to lip-syncing and drag as kind of a dance. It was kind of my backwards way of being able to do dance performances and experiment with choreography.

Sometimes your job is to seek out those kind of spaces, but sometimes your job as is to create those kinds of spaces.

That's a huge, huge part. There's a quote that's driven this current project. Anthropologist Marilyn Strathern says, "It matters what thoughts think thoughts, it matters what stories tell stories, and it matters what worlds world worlds." It's essentially offering this idea that we are responsible for making the microcosms we want to exist in the world. For me, that's always felt like what drag was or what these performance spaces were. It's kind of like a universe within itself, with its own rules, and it's own kind of metaphysical relationship to the actual world that we live in. But it's actually not metaphysical. It's a very real thing. I'm always trying to think how to make those worlds, too, for myself and for other people.

Why are these kinds of public spaces so important to developing your creative voice?

Part of growing as an artist is getting over the fear of being in front of people and also being able to gauge a public reaction, even in the relatively safe company of your peers. There is this one person, a queer performer, who I always see performing in the subways station at Union Square. He's always wearing a tiny miniskirt or a bikini with devil horns or something like that and will just be dancing like crazy to Lady Gaga. And it's not necessarily part of some larger performance project or something, it's just what he does. To do something like that in a very public space is what I think of as being real queer resistance. I think it's so powerful. You can feel the sort of tension of the environment when there is this aggressively queer performance confronting people in a very public space. Whenever I see him performing I get into this very weird adrenaline mode where I suddenly feel ready to jump in and fight if anyone tries to intervene or mess with him. I'm hoping that someone like that can be recognized by New York as a really important part of what makes the city what it is. I also find that kind of creative risk—the literal physical risk of doing things in public—to be very inspiring.

I always remember this thing that Anohni said once in an interview about how one of the most violent things a person can do is sing in public. It's kind of like this radically powerful, dominating thing to do in public space since you are touching every single person with your voice. That always stuck with me and made me think about what singing could be. I've really started investing time and energy into my own voice as well as thinking about the voice as an instrument of change, as an instrument of resistance and activism. Singing can present the same kind of resistance as the person dancing in Union Square. The voice is one of our most powerful resources. In fact, there are arguments that people were singing before they were speaking.

When you're doing work that bleeds over into so many different areas and involves so many different practices, how do you organize your creative life?

God, it's so much chaos. It's so much chaos control. It's like the communities I have, the kind of queer or non-biological families I'm a part of, are very much a part of how I'm able to support my creative work. I have lots of ongoing projects with different people, so having multiple families or multiple communities that I live inside really sustains me. It's like a self-sustaining force to live within these families.

It's rough sometimes though. It fulfills you in a certain way, but I was just talking to my therapist about how living this extremely transient, crazy, all-over-the-place life is actually so hard and has made me really want stability and something kind of not so crazy. I have people who could potentially be serious boyfriends, but there's no way for me to enter into that kind of life, for at least the next six months to a year. My life is just too crazy and that sort of intimacy is something that doesn't work. So that's a trade off.

So do you think of your community—your queer non-biological family—as your most valuable resource as a creator?

Yes. It's a beautiful thing, too, the way that sharing information kind of opens up new information. The other big thread of this project I've been working on is about research as the binding agent of a family, the research of care, of being like, "Here's this quote, here's this book, here's this piece of art that really means a lot to me, or has moved me. Let me share it with you," and how that is strangely a way to help inform the worlding, or living in the world, that's going to best take care of you. I think about that all the time, in terms of these people I have relationships with. We send each other Samuel Delaney

books in the mail or songs or quotes, or whatever. It's funny that sharing things has become kind of a weird and essential part of both my creative practice and my relationship building, through this "I send you *this* thing, you send me *that* thing."

When you have a natural curiosity about trying everything, how do you decide where to direct your energies?

Well, I'm a Sagittarius, so I'm curious all the time. I'm like, "This thing is cool. That thing is amazing. What's that? What's this? Let me try that!" The issue is getting myself to stick to one of those things I'm excited about. I think the older I get, the more focused I become. It's great to be curious and try things, but at a certain point you have to ask yourself: *Do I want to put in the work?*

That's a huge part of it, the diligence, the true diligence to be like, "I'm going to do this." I also just like a challenge. I like when the process of learning is actually a part of the practice itself. Coming from a weird DIY world, that's how I learn things—by doing them. For now, I know that I want to keep making music and opera and creating music-based performances. I want to play Carnegie Hall one day. My fantasy is to play in all of the great opera houses of the world. My passion is to make these big, large-scale performances. I think that's something I'm going to be doing until I'm very old.

Nina Hagen's "Smack Jack" - One of my favorite songs and music videos and undoubtedly one of those moments for me in my late teenage years of seeing this video and thinking, "This is what I am going to do with my life."

David Wojnarowicz's collection of writing, Close to the Knives - One of my favorite texts and a deeply influential piece of writing for me. Do NOT buy it on Amazon though. They are scum. Try half-price books.

Donna Haraway gives a talk here, an eloquently beautiful talk in lieu with a text she wrote called "Making Kin", another deeply influential perspective for my current projects.

I am currently obsessed with this incredible woman and thinker, Delores Catherino. In this video, she talks about the troublesome method by which western culture makes music mostly within a 12-note internal, when in fact there are 160 notes within that spectrum. She makes polychromatic music. Iconic queer genius.

This incredible ensemble, the Georgian Gori Women's Choir sing this incredible song Archacia I, composed by Josef Katchakhmadze. I highly recommend listening to the full record of the same name.

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Vocation
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Fact

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