Jonathan Gonzalez on the benefits of documenting your work

November 8, 2017 -

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2031 words.

Tags: Dance, Process, Multi-tasking, Inspiration, Focus.

As a dancer who creates and choreographs a lot of his own work, how do you document things? How do you archive your work?

You have to have things documented if you want them to have a further life. I'm interested in some of my projects possibly reappearing again and I feel like I need the documentation in order to go back and understand what needs to change and what was effective and what maybe wasn't. It's nice to be able to look back at things and see how the choreography actually worked. The documentation is like my notation system.

The piece I'm working on now deals with a lot of problems and controversies around who gets to say things and who gets to claim authorship. Having my work documented also interests me as a way to disrupt that, to make more visual examples into the world, to put more conversations on the ground that include these kind of narratives that propose other ways to see bodies of color in performative acts. You want to document this work in order to help broaden the conversation in some way.

Choosing a space is always an important consideration. The architecture of the space is always a strong consideration in terms of what it means to show the work there. The performance space is thought of like a container, but it should be synonymous with the performer too, like another living body. That doesn't always happen, but you want the space to have a direct correlation to why the performer is there. It's never arbitrary.

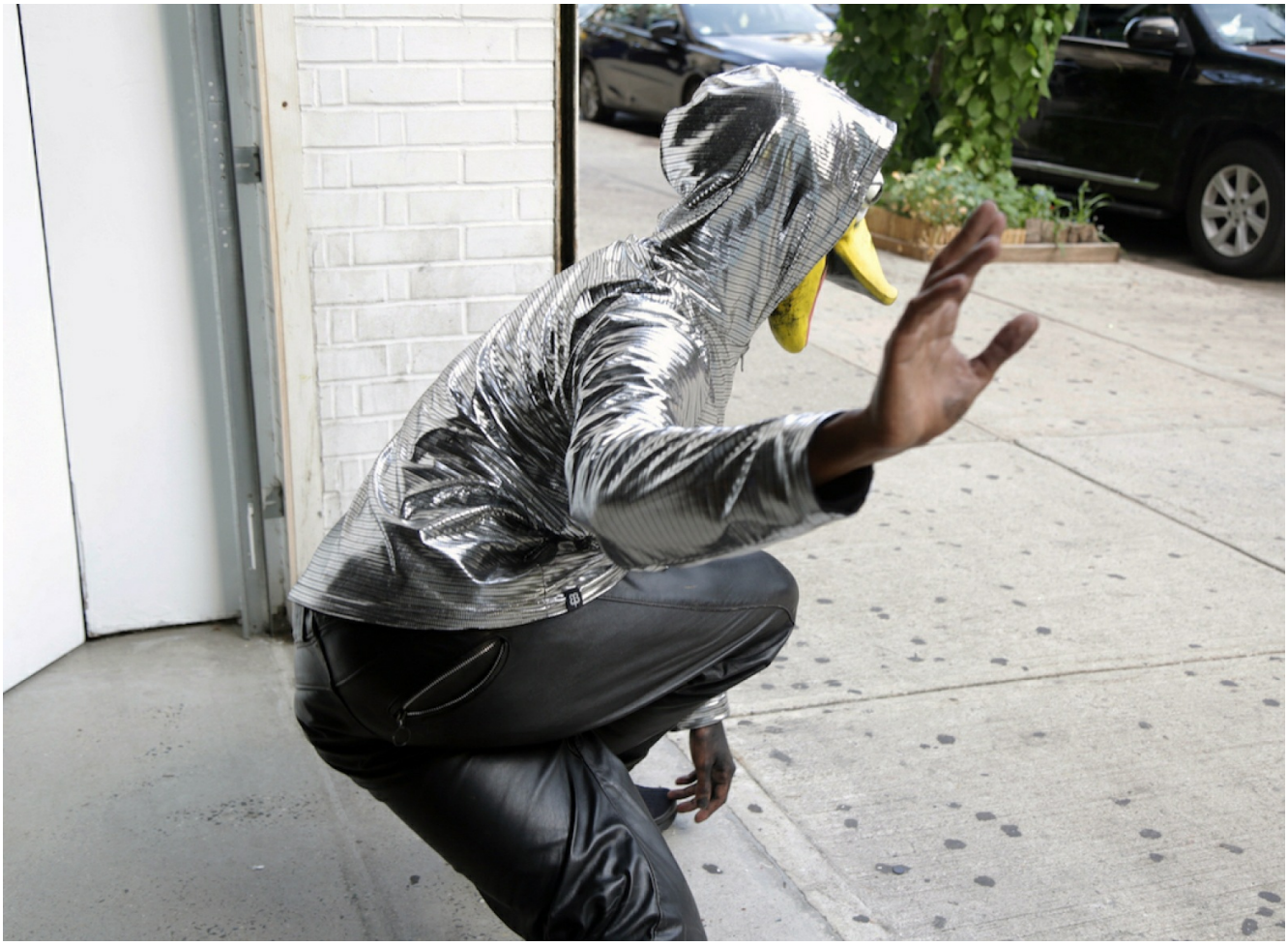

photo credit: Ravelin Magazine

For creators who are performers or dancers, the idea of archiving or preserving the work—which is often meant to be experienced in the moment or is based on the movement of your body and the experience of being in the room—can obviously be tricky.

It's hard. The gift of working in body-based and movement-based practices is that so much of it is really about what happens when everyone is in the room together. The archive process does something different, it captures a scaffolding of that experience. The audience sometimes only get the tip of the iceberg in terms of how much is going on underneath. I'm seeing what is behind the work—the hours and hours of struggling with something, the subtlety, the laughing together, the crying together, all of those things that are inside of the material. That is hard to document.

And then when something gets put into the archive and shared, it takes on another form. It's interesting to think about the work being viewed in another time, another context. If my work re-emerges in the future, it's obviously going to re-emerge because the person who came across it needed it in some capacity that won't have to do completely with the reason I needed to make it.

You're working on two different pieces right now—a piece of your own and something done by another choreographer. How do you balance that? Does it involve two different ways of thinking or feeling?

It's definitely two different ways of working and thinking. The other day I went back to the school where I did my undergrad studies to speak to a group of seniors. It made me pause and think about the fact that I'm still somehow out here performing. I never thought I would get here. I'm looking at these 21 year-olds who are freaking out about graduating and asking me, "What is the world like?" I basically just told them, "Get the hell out there and find out for yourselves. There really is no structure to any of this. You just have to do it. I can't really tell you anything."

I never thought that this would happen for me, or that I would have a professional career as a performer separate from making my own things. I realized at some point that you have to give yourself the opportunity to shift your focus, your aesthetics, and be flexible. That's what performers do. Our bodies—even our psychology—are like clay. If anything, that gives me a sense of breathing room, an open border, so I sit down with the people that I'm working with and say, "Okay. This is something that I can think about that's very separate from my own creative practice and that's fine. I can do this."

Personally, I like to take time improvising with the people that I work with and get to understand them and to see how they're using space and time. That's different in some ways from other people I've worked with, who might have a very clear way of how to enter the room and what's going to happen in every point of the work. These are not the kinds of operations that I always like to work in, but sometimes I do. For me, the performance is always changing and the engine to make the thing work—in terms of the concept—is also always changing, depending on where you are in your life. Having a performance practice alongside a making practice gives you the luxury to feel out what it means to be in front of audiences in different ways. It's a toolkit that I can't deny at this point.

Sometimes I'm performing for artists who work specifically in the museum or gallery or theater space. At the point where I am in my own work, I don't have the luxury to be able to fund work of that scale. But to be privy to the inside business of working in those spaces is enlightening. It gives me a point of entry into that world.

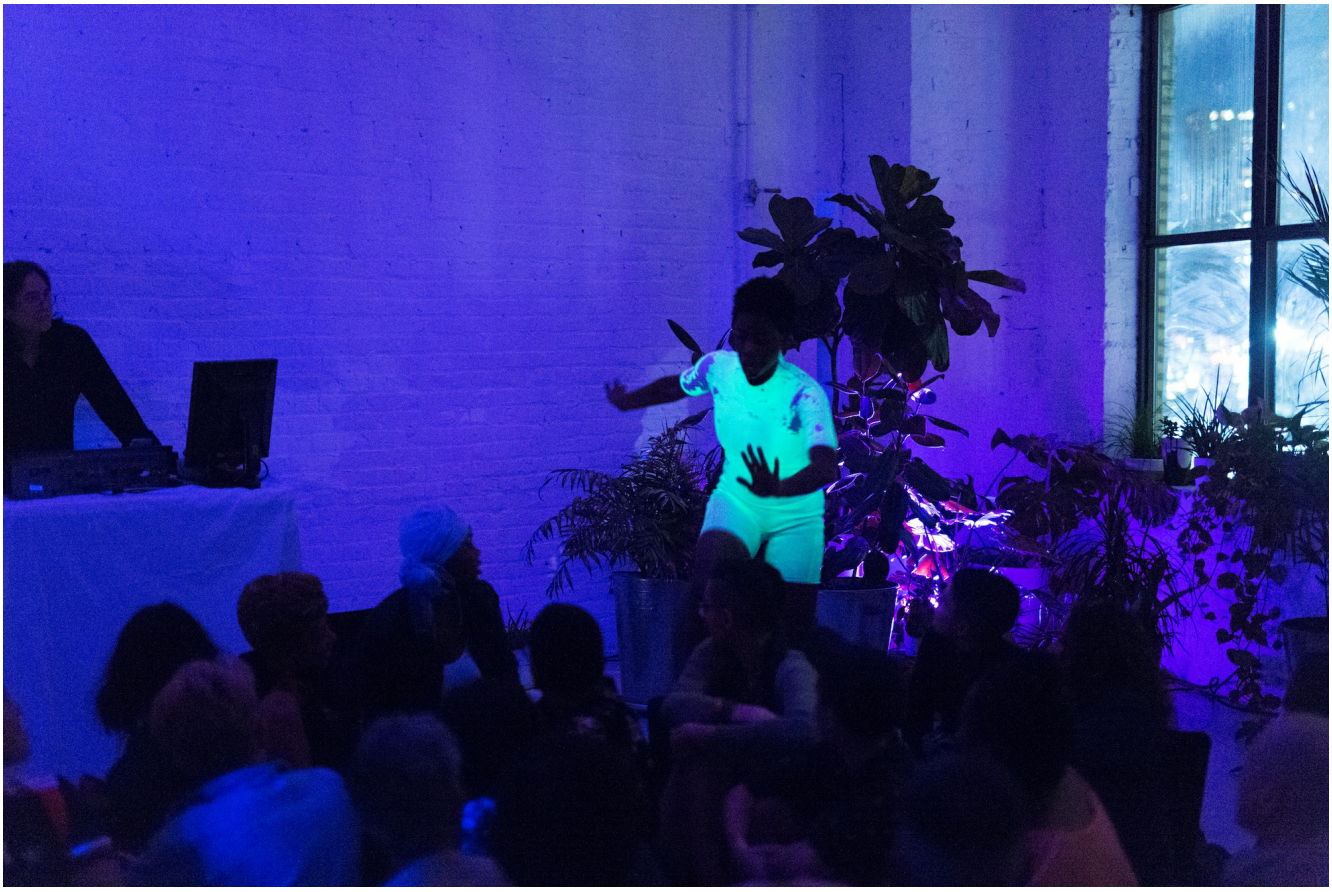

photo credit: Lanee Bird

Is it freeing to dance in someone else's work in the sense that you don't have to be responsible for every creative decision? You can just show up and do your part.

Yeah, that's nice. It can also sometimes be a pain in the ass, for sure, to go through the process of things with someone else. You have to keep yourself in a place of being generous. And that's the struggle too. It's like, "How far am I willing to go?"

Part of the appeal of art school is that it can give you entry and access to the art world that you might not have otherwise. Is that also true for kids who go to school to study dance and performance? You are getting the technical training, but does it also prepare you for what it means to be a professional dancer?

That's a hard question to answer, in terms of higher ed for dance training. In terms of the history of dance in this country, we've had a really strong, domineering hand from Modern Dance in terms of these kind of epic names—Alvin Ailey or Martha Graham or Isadora Duncan. Those modes of thinking, which are very Formalist, are still very influential in terms of what kind of technique people are getting.

Contemporary dance creates a bridge inside of that world. You start getting guest artists to come in and share their practice and there are definitely some institutions in this country that are trying to bridge that divide. More than ever, because of the way culture is changing, different disciplines seem to be intersecting, which means performers need to have a diverse training and a willingness to do different things. This requires performers to be able, on a basic level, to be able to speak or sing on stage and move simultaneously.

Over time, you get into this space where you realize that the isolation between disciplines, when it comes to performance, mostly has to do with capitalism. It's less about getting what you need in order to be doing what will be required of you out in the world. Because when you get out there, you can be expected to do *anything*.

When your creative practice involves your physical body, how do you deal with the inevitable changes that come with aging?

I've been recording myself in the studio for the last 10 years. I was recently looking through this photo journal I have on a hard drive. I went back to these hours of being in the studio and existing in a kind of perpetual motion, moving a lot and moving big and fast and needing that in order to make something.

Now, some days I just really need to take my time to even *want* to get there. I have to warm up my body. I have to think purposefully about why I'm even doing the thing before I start, before I can be like a jack rabbit running around the room. Over time things will change, like the anatomy. I work with a lot of performers of very different ages and the idea of still making it work as long as you can is definitely a mantra on the ground.

You adjust things, you change the shape of things. If you can't do the jump, then you go low, but you make the low work. There are all these kind of like catchy tricks of the trade.

What it comes down to aesthetically is basically "What works for you?" To just be where you are and to fully inhabit that. When it comes down to it, the practice of dance is so much about presence. There's virtuosity in that. And then everything else, all the complexity of what it means to memorize actions, that comes after. That stuff is a skill in itself that can be practiced. The practice of simply being present is something that is very intuitive and very natural in some ways.

photo credit: Jessie Young

Also, there are pieces that are going to be more powerful when you're seeing a person that's in their 40's, 50's, or 60's doing it than it would be if you saw a 20 year old person performing it. It would mean something different.

It's like a date. It's like sex. It's how you get comfortable with yourself in a social experience. Not saying that all of us get easier with it over time, but I'm saying to be vulnerable with someone in a kind of romantic exchange or to really let yourself be unfolding and unfolding and unfolding and let *all* the moments of anxiety, the moments of anger and these peaks be there, too—that's amazing to see.

I watch the work of my fellow classmates, some of whom have been doing it for much longer than me, and I see that in them. I recognize that there is still a journey for me to go on. That there is still more for me to learn, because I'm watching them deal with time and have patience with themselves. That really is something that you can't know in theory. You have to really feel it. You have to live it

Recommended by Jonathan Gonzalez:

My mother introduced me to *Luther Vandross* (2001) on our long car rides to visit family. This album taught me everything about matters of the heart.

Frank Lima's poetry breaks me to pieces still. He introduced me to the pleasures of solitude and disappearing. A good guide for the restless solo traveler.

#lifehacks. How do you make a homemade flan?

3/4 cup sugar
1 package (8 ounces) cream cheese, softened
5 large eggs
1 can (14 ounces) sweetened condensed milk

1 can (12 ounces) evaporated milk
1 teaspoon vanilla extract.

It’s hard to believe I was five when *To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything! Julie Newmar* made it onto our illegal pay-per-view. For two-months I timed an early morning rise at 6am to watch it from beginning to end. John Leguizamo! The looks! The final scene! Woah! So much inspiration for a baby queer emerging in suburbia.

Fernet-Branca: A companion for all occasions

Name
Jonathan Gonzalez

Vocation
Dancer, Performer