

BROOKLYN RAIL

Dance

Savage Logic

By [Erica Getto](#)

“If one is poor in spirit,” wrote poet, performance artist, and Dadaist Tristan Tzara in his 1918 manifesto on the movement, “one possesses a sure and indomitable intelligence, a savage logic, a point of view that can not be shaken.” Dadaism developed in the midst of World War I, a period of immense violence and destruction. In this era of uncertainty, its adherents turned to the absurd, irrational, and illogical—they embraced creative chaos, not control. Performa 17, New York City’s biennial colloquium on performance and visual art, looks to Dadaism as its self-described “historical anchor.”

Among Performa 17’s artists, Xavier Cha, Eiko Otake, and Kelly Nipper all present dance pieces that seem inspired by Dada art; they can be loosely classified as a choreographed collage, a high-tech assemblage, and a multimedia sound poem, respectively. But whether they capture the spirit of Dadaism is more difficult to parse.

Among the trio of performances, Cha’s and Nipper’s appear to be spontaneous and illogical—perfect material for an audience looking for a jolt. In their programs, however, both these dances announce exactly what it is—about digital communication, machine creativity, and our relationship to technology—that they hope to address through their work. That they tell us this so explicitly risks shutting down the mystery and energy they might otherwise create.

Otake’s *A Body In Places*, in contrast, maintains a degree of spontaneity and shock in spite of its straightforward conceit. Otake’s work is grounded in photographs of radiation-laden Fukushima, Japan, after its 2011 earthquake and nuclear disaster. And yet it does not present itself as a didactic, resolute work. Instead, it is elemental, intimate, and—from one performance to another—malleable. There is no pretense of meaning slathered across its surface. Instead, Otake’s live performance and its accompanying visuals let significance wash over *A Body In Places*, ready for an audience to witness and react.



Eiko Otake, *A Body In Places*, MET Breuer. (Photo: Paula Lobo)

Cha's *Buffer*, presented at BAM by both Performa 17 and the Next Wave Festival, consists of three seemingly disparate performances that are spliced together like an absurdist Max Ernst collage. The first features actors Babs Olusanmokun and Cassandra Freeman sitting on a lavender and orange-flecked couch. Their identities—names, professions, residencies—are nebulous, but their relationship is decidedly domestic. A laptop rests on Freeman's lap; a boxy suit hangs from Olusanmokun's shoulders. They sit and talk, weaving through conversations about dreams and memory. The second set of scenes delves into a dense drama featuring five cyborgian dancers, opera singer Michael Maniaci (dressed like a Norse warrior), and an unsettling libretto by Juliana Huxtable. And the third world that *Buffer* explores consists of two male adult film stars in an intimate moment on the West Elm-style couch.

This particular combination of scenes—visually, tonally, spatially—is confusing at first. What does a thrusting couple have to do with a guttural line like “We’re in tight orbit. It tastes like trash?” And how does the woman’s reminiscence of a dream about a tiled floor and green plants relate to a set of dancers who lope across a stage like scavengers and writhe in a tangled, heaping mass?

It seems natural to examine these connections. Perhaps the dance portion of the engagement is a twisted version of the woman’s dreams and the men are the embodiment of passion that the man and woman seem to lack. (At one point, the couple cranes towards each other for a kiss, then pull back as their faces approach. The audience, somewhat perversely, laughs at the visual gag.)

*And yet *Buffer* is at its strongest when it rears its head and comes after the audience with such force that one forgets the scene that preceded it, the aborted conversation*

that could conceivably follow, and the ties that potentially connect them. When the dancers enter the stage for the first group scene, for instance, they burst towards the audience with such abandon that it is difficult to avert one's eyes.

Unlike the staid couple in conversation earlier, these performers appear as such oddities, donning outfits with cut-out holes and mismatched mesh, fit for Frankenstein's monster. Their movements are seemingly instinctive, guttural, and random; they alternately take giant steps with their hips thrust out and rock on their knees. They jump, arch out their chests, roll, and twirl with their arms fluttering—no, chopping—around their heads. Throughout, they project a sense of urgency. As with both couples in *Buffer*, so with these dancers, it is also tempting to try and deduce their relationship. Are they seeking a means towards survival? Are they enemies? A cult? Atoms? No matter, really.

The thrill of not knowing is hard to reconcile, though, with the fact that the performance explicitly casts itself as an analog take on the digital experience of Internet browsing. The program notes articulate *Buffer*'s aim to “replicate the experience of digital consumption through strictly analog means. Comprising three scenes that toggle back and forth like browser windows in a state of perpetual buffering, it lays bare the intimate yet alienated relationships we have with the bodies on our screens.”

Buffer does visibly “toggle” among the scenes through blackouts, and all three scenes have built-in analog glitches that resemble digital ones. They stall, repeat, and cut out at unexpected intervals. The adult performers, for instance, pause mid-caress for more than twenty seconds—a move intended to recreate the eponymous sensation of a buffering video and, perhaps, the feeling of impatience that accompanies it. In the other couch scene, Cha loops the live footage she has created. “I remember every moment from the start,” says the man to his companion at one point. He repeats the phrase four times, like a YouTube video that won't load. On his fifth go around, the lights go out, the plug pulled on the moment, and the performance shifts to another of its worlds. Though Cha is deft at matching what audiences see on their screens to what they see on BAM's stage, in doing so, she also strips the work of some element of randomness, surprise, and, in turn, delight.

Kelly Nipper's performance piece *Terre Mécanique* also pulls from the Dadaist tradition to create something of a high-tech assemblage, or three-dimensional collage built from recognizable objects. Nipper's work features four dancers and a massive, suspended vat filled with a clear, gelatinous substance. The hemisphere, it turns out, is part of a 3D printer; a second part of the apparatus, a printhead, is suspended above the gel like a drone on a leash.

The piece drums up intrigue before its audience even enters the performance venue. When this writer approached the 371 Broadway space, a throng of patrons formed a line down the block. It nearly slunk across the street, towards the hawkers who assure

you that the Louis Vuitton handbags resting on blue sidewalk tarps are real. It is not dissimilar to the attention-grabbing, cool-chasing crowd that forms for the launch of a Supreme clothing collection. This doesn't seem to be a coincidence: the red-and-white logo for Performa bears a striking resemblance to the design for the fashion brand. Artist Barbara Kruger designed this year's Performa branding. She also hosted her own clothing "drop" as part of the festival, taking a direct swipe at Supreme, which has been appropriating her work for years. Nipper's event is also a "drop" of sorts, but what awaits beyond its front door is nebulous.



Kelly Nipper's Terre Mécanique. (Photo: Paula Court)

Inside, this group confronts what looks like an empty retail space with pulsing music. At its center is the transparent hemisphere filled with a gelatinous substance and a man pulling what looks like black wires out of it with his bare hands. He's masked but otherwise wearing a hoodie and jeans with tools on his belt. Two women perch on platforms on either side of the vat. One sits, wearing a black, structured, Rei Kawakubo-style cape; the other has her legs up against a mirrored box, her white tights reflected in it. As the man circles the vat and sticks his forearms into its jellied depths, the women twirl, roll, and swoop like spikes in a machine.

The whole endeavor is gripping, and the disparate parts create a sense that this intimate audience is privy to something experimental, even dangerous. When the man scavenges through the gel and pulls out black, rubbery, umbilical ropes that seem to sprout from nowhere, there is some magic to his movements. The audience is variably shocked and confused, and the man makes no effort to clarify what, exactly, he is up to.

What the engagement's literature (and a vocal audience member who shares, unprompted, the gospel of Nipper) lays out, though, is that this audience is witnessing a process—not a series of random, nonsensical steps. The man is printing digital, 3D drawings in the vat; isolating the art (the black strings and the webs they form); rinsing them in a shallow bath off to the side of the sparsely decorated, abandoned space; and hanging them on wires to dry.



Kelly Nipper's Terre Mécanique. (Photo: Paula Court)

The appeal of the performance doesn't hinge on whether or not a patron knows what she is witnessing. One of its pleasures is gazing at the dancers who maintain their alignment and precision as they crane, wobble, and spin their bodies like globes on tilted axes. Science, like magic, is something to marvel at. And there is a thrill in feeling included in what feels like a vigilante project. Perhaps the challenge for audiences here is, then, to at once appreciate Terre Mécanique as a piece that features humans and technology coexisting and to avoid deriving a revelation, takeaway, or resolute opinion on the relationship between the natural and the digital. Why try to reconcile these forces when you can immerse yourself in a set of spidery, sprawling drawings that are spun out in front of you and hang like fabric on a clothesline?

Eiko Otake's A Body in Places also has elements of Dadaism woven into its fabric—it is reactive, illogical, and a response to a distinctly dark historical moment. Still, the piece differentiates itself from the first two performances in that it does not set out with a point to prove or even a presentation to make. Otake aims to navigate post-earthquake Fukushima through photographs, text, and a movement-based engagement with these visuals.

Her subject matter is clear, her goal so very human. “Struck by the loud, superficial efforts to ‘decontaminate’ and ‘normalize’” the disaster, she writes in her program notes, “I came to feel even more convinced that disasters need to be remembered and not treated as disruptions that can be forgotten when the inconvenience of their repercussions wanes.” Her aims are to rattle people into recognizing history, nature, and the sobering reality of disaster. It is how she handles this material that is Dada in spirit—it is exploratory, with no map and no pretense of authority.



Eiko Otake, *A Body In Places*, MET Breuer. (Photo: Paula Lobo)

For each of the three Sundays during Performa 17, Otake takes up at the three Met locations—the flagship building, the Breuer, and the Cloisters. For the duration of the museums’ business hours, she projects a series of distinct, never looping images from her trips to Japan. Taken by photographer-historian William Johnston, the pictures depict an abandoned Fukushima: cars with front seats that are lush with overgrown weeds; a clock outside of a beauty parlor that is fixed at 2:46, the minute the earthquake hit; a set of soft drinks left at a memorial for the dead. Many of the pictures also feature Otake, wearing the same purple throw blanket that she drags around the museum spaces.

As each image and, sometimes, accompanying text appears in the slideshow, Otake takes it in visually and reacts viscerally. Wearing sandals that threaten to slide off her feet and and bundled in fabric that she bunches in her hands, she alternately arches and hunches; kneels and rises up on her toes; and collapses onto the projector table, jostling the image on the wall. Sometimes, she matches the pose she strikes in the photographs; in other moments, she does not even seem to recognize the two-dimensional version of herself and even recoils from it.

Her movement is studied, glacial but also, in spirit, spontaneous—the intimate, ever-changing audience is witness to a woman grappling with destruction and, in a way, its banality. One of the slides depicts the Japanese character 人 in red, painted on cars and houses. “The character means person,” she states in the subsequent slide. She then notes that an artist added the painted figure to the destruction site. “I thought each character might stand for a dead person.”

Dada writer Tristan Tzara saw danger in “savage logic” and resolute opinions. How, he suggests, can a person claim absolute certainty in a world that seems so unpredictable? On what authority can an observer find order in chaos? He is more concerned with untested truths on a world historical level, but a similar, more gentle logic can be applied to Performa 17. How can an artist be totally sure of what transpires in a performance piece, even one that she has conceived?

It is the moments in which Terre Mécanique, Buffer, and even A Body In Places seem most sure of what they are trying to accomplish—a scene that just won’t load, for instance—that the performances feel the least grounded. And it is the instants that are reactive that are most resonant: when the 3D artist gracefully nudges the suspended and somewhat rogue printhead back to the center of the vat; when Otake flings her body into the projector cart and sends an image of her flying around the room.

Tzara knows that there is possibility in the unknown and direction, or at least worth, in randomness. “Try to be empty and fill your brain cells with a petty happiness,” he recommends. “Always destroy what you have in you. On random walks. Then you will be able to understand many things.” Dada’s adherents embrace confusion, contradiction, and shock; so, too, do each of these performances, in their own way. And it is up to these artists’ audiences, in any case, to view the works with an open mind, ready to be shocked.

“You are not more intelligent than we,” Tzara notes of his readers, “and we are not more intelligent than you.”

Contributor

[Erica Getto](#)

ERICA GETTO is a writer based in Brooklyn.