

MARTOS GALLERY

SOUND AMERICAN

Interview

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# JEREMY TOUSSAINT- BAPTISTE IN CONVERSATION

Nicole Kaack

Often working in immediate dialogue with architecture or choreography, artist and composer Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste frames his scores and performative projects within the action of black radical tradition. A serial collaborator, Jeremy has used partnership as a means of avoiding the static and object that might force his work to circulate in traditional systems of capital; following this evasion of ownership and consumption, Jeremy has designed sound for exhibitions and performances with Will Rawls, Tiona Nekkia McClodden, LaMont Hamilton, and André M. Zachery, among others. His collaborative compositions have responded to his contemporaries as well as to now-canonical musicians of the New York avant-garde, such as Julius Eastman. Drawing upon recognizable melodies and subtle themes, Jeremy weaves histories of sound that unsettle precisely because of their assumed familiarity.

Our conversation in October 2018 began in postmortem of Jeremy's sound design for Will Rawls and Claudia Rankine's *What Remains*, which held its New York premiere at Danspace Project in September. Jeremy's atmospheric soundscape incorporated the already-resonant space of St. Mark's Church—where Danspace is located—alongside and intermingled with eclectic references to existing compositions.

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NK I'm curious about the way that you use performance spaces themselves, amplifying the sounds of the room, including those that you produced. As you're putting sound into that environment, it recycles itself and becomes part of an escalating—

JT-B Atmosphere.

NK Yeah, exactly.

JT-B Yeah. That feels deeply rooted in a type of cultural practice that looks back and wants to either repurpose or find more purpose in what already exists, as opposed to trying to cultivate something new. "New" feels like a misnomer. It doesn't really encompass or encapsulate what comes out of mining what already exists. It's something else that is unknown but also refuses the sort of capitalist impulse, or the capitalist framing, that goes around newness. Especially when dealing with black cultural practice and integrating technology into that.

NK Is that in relation to a practice of sampling, bringing many things together? The productivity of pseudo-collage?

JT-B Absolutely. In regards to Will [Rawls]'s work, that collage emerges from bodies with objects and materials for the most part removed or being used in a purely functional way. The collage part is embodied in how we create and negotiate ourselves in the space sonically and physically, and as performative entities.

NK That reminded me of this part of Audre Lorde's "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" where she writes about precisely that; nothing new is going to happen, but how can you reframe what does happen every day?<sup>1</sup> I don't know if that essay is always framed as political, but there is something of that in the emphatic demand for a mode of looking that upends our established frameworks.

JT-B It's like not being satisfied. "No, I'm not good. Let's not move on. I want to double back and dig into that shit some more." Is how it often feels for me.

NK I'm curious to hear how that functions in relation to your work surrounding Julius Eastman and Steve Reich.<sup>2</sup>

JT-B For the projects at The Kitchen and at ISSUE Project Room dealing with Eastman, I was working with the title as a jump-off point for a performance, as opposed to thinking about the sonic material. I am probably going to say this so many times, but who wants to fucking repaint the Mona Lisa? I mean, I wrote most of it. I wanted to be very explicit that "I'm not playing Julius's music." Nor am I interested in doing so. I don't think he would be interested to see, "Gay Guerrilla" or "Evil Nigger" performed in 2018 in the ways that it is.

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NK Because it's about responding to your context, perhaps?

JT-B I think so. From all of the research and studying and conversations I've done around his life, work, and legacy, it seems to me that he had a really fluid approach to doing things. And so many of these pieces are becoming fixed in how they're presented. That gave me deep concern—what does it mean to try and fix work? When something goes from being malleable and fluid and relational to choreographic and composed and compartmentalizable.

NK Part of it is passing into a canon, right? In a way, that's amazing that Julius is now part of this history of New York.

JT-B Right. But what's lost?

NK Exactly. What you lose when it becomes too idolized.

JT-B Yeah, it's great that his work is being published. Especially given the circumstances. People have done incredible work to recover and unearth those compositions, and it's great that they'll be around for posterity. There's a radical way in which he was working and living that I hope doesn't get lost or sanitized as it moves uptown. But it felt really important to show the five-part work at The Kitchen, given Julius's history with the institution. And the sheer amount of archival material of his that they had. It felt really important to place it there. And ISSUE Project Room was incredibly supportive—they were happy to facilitate and co-present that as the last showing of my residency.

In working with that title, "Evil Nigger," and thinking about Eastman's organic *music* principle, I was expanding that to an organic *compositional* principle. When I say "compositional," I mean visual, performative, and sonic. What would it mean to incorporate his organic principle into the performative composition? The principle basically states that in a series, each subsequent work should incorporate elements of the previous. So it gets into these questions of overwriting and how much information one thing can retain before having to let it go. As someone who is thinking about looking backwards and mining, I wonder how much of that cultural, ancestral, aesthetic weight can I carry before something gets lost?

In that project, there were five performances. One, three, and five were in relation to one another in terms of material, physical materials, and performative framing. And two and four were in conversation. All of them more or less repurposed the same foundations of materials.

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NK      Meaning structure, or ...?

JT-B     Yeah, so the square, that large tarp on the floor, was deliberate. And has been reused over the course of multiple showings. I think for ISSUE Project Room, we used the same ones. For The Kitchen we started with new ones and let them accumulate new markings over the course of 24 hours. Some people did see all five parts. I felt like I should pay for their therapy after that. You just subject yourself to it.

In terms of responding to [Steve Reich's] *Pendulum Music*, what's exciting and radical to me is built into the work. It's already there. I'm sort of ignoring the history of how it's been presented. I think subsequent performances by new music groups and chamber groups or whatever, have, again, sanitized what the piece could be.

NK      What to you is radical about it?

JT-B     Looking at microphones, cables, amplifiers, hanging structures semiologically. Those things signify really important aspects of mundane life. The voice. The ear. Or the body speaking, the body receiving. The structures which dictate our trajectories or by which we abide.

NK      A literally top-down regulation.

JT-B     At some point I realized that the cables from which the microphones swing create these beautiful shadows that intersect and diverge.

NK      It's already sculptural.

JT-B     Yeah. It was always a sculptural piece, but there's an implied relational aspect to it that I think is often downplayed or ignored for the sake of minimalist removal of the human form.

NK      The idea that you need a body to begin with?

JT-B     That, and also these things are like voices and ears intersecting and creating beautiful feedback and disharmonious feedback. Seeing these lines crossing, I'm thinking about precarious existences that find strength, value in solidarity and intersection. Just the idea of two cables crossing is very exciting and political to me. As opposed to being parallel or completely divergent. When two things cross they become relational. Being outwardly, directly relational or embracing a filial type of relation, feels radical in an individualistic society that places emphasis on doing your own thing.

NK      I was interested to see that you were working with *Pendulum Music*. In preparation for this, I watched a brief interview from 2016—maybe it was when you were at Brooklyn College? It's a very short interview clip about your thesis. Even then, you mention that pendulums interest you because they very particularly engage the body. Or as you say now, literally imply a body, which is an interesting distinction.

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JT-B It's exciting when you think about positioning it next to Bruce Nauman's work, because he was, in a lot of ways, working with the same principles of bouncing and swinging with a body.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes to shocking effect.

I don't know what has happened over time to contribute to the sort of sterilization of *Pendulum Music*, but it's always been there. It's also a funny work. It takes itself seriously but also has a sense of humor.

NK To your point about individualism and relational practice, your work is so entirely collaborative. I was thinking about it in precisely the terms you mentioned earlier, about this anti-capitalist impulse to make work that is only ambiguously yours or shared in a way that is already negating a system where I can download your music and listen to it. That it is necessarily about all of these things at once in an intermedia form that cannot travel—the sculpture, the performance, the sound.

JT-B Yeah. The grad program I did at Brooklyn College was entirely collaborative. I definitely went in thinking, "I will come out a solo artist making sound art and doing installations in places, but only of my own volition and thought process and creation." Being in a two-year, fully collaborative environment just did away with that. Who wants to do everything themselves? It's too much responsibility.

I have learned so much from my collaborators, and continue to—I value my time with them maybe more than I do working on what people would consider my own projects. And then, when I return to my own solo practice, I find that while in collaborations things were being explored and expanded upon aesthetically, and the concerns are pretty similar. I don't know if it's a function of all of us being interested in similar things in terms of research, or if it's a really exciting transference and sharing of ideas that's happening.

NK You don't feel limited by your collaboration.

JT-B Not at all. And it helps me stay slippery. Maybe it works to my detriment a bit to not have a foot in any one particular aesthetic realm, but I don't know. The performance crowd still wants to understand performers as performers. The fine art crowd still wants to understand people who make work as fine artists. There's a division between those worlds. Sound is really interesting because it seems to be a bridge between the two. But since it's often immaterial, it can still be a bit slippery when working with the visual art world, which might find primacy in objects.

NK To some extent, I would compare what you're saying about not having songs to not providing objects, right? You are avoiding things that are exchangeable or identifiable.

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JT-B Maybe it would be exciting in some world to release lots of compositions for people to download at home and have. I did a piece for *aCCeSsions* journal, earlier this year, which sounds different on every set of speakers you listen to it on. So it still evades objectification.

What excites me most about sound is that it's physical. What happens when it's experienced coming from a source and with people? There's a lot more potential in that than the individual's experience of listening to music through headphones at home.

NK I was thinking about that particular function of live performance watching Eli Keszler play last week. It's so different to hear his work in person than through speakers. Feeling it in your body is part of the work, I think. The day before the performance, he participated in a conversation at The Kitchen, and we played one of his pieces as an introductory presentation. We were in a room full of people listening to one of his compositions distributed equally across the house speakers, which is of course much less dimensional than hearing it performed. So it was an unsettling transposition of an individual experience onto a community experience. It was a strange feeling—it didn't feel like listening to music together, even though we were. It's a different format, where it's ostensibly still a presentation, or in some way performance, but different from it being actually executed.

JT-B It doesn't sound too dissimilar to how I would feel as a kid having to sit at the orchestra or something. Now, I would love it! And I'm here for it. But when I was seeing that type of music most frequently, what I wanted was to be in a mosh pit and surrounded by sweaty bodies. [It] speaks to wanting to have a more social experience of music and sound.

NK Absolutely. Performances that I have been going to recently have been making me think more about the decisions institutions make with regard to the audience. The difference in experience between standing and being seated. How does music or sound ask for your embodiment as an audience member? I always particularly feel this during dance performances—especially during *What Remains*, there are particularly beautiful moments in the music that make you want to move. In terms of dance, but also music to some extent, there is a mirroring desire.

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JT-B During a Studio Visit program at the Segal Center, Rizvana Bradley was in critical response to Jaamil Olawale Kosoko's *Chameleon*, which I designed sound for. In some ways, *Chameleon* is about the value of remaining evasive in queer and black or marginalized communities. Bradley brought in this really brilliant André Lepecki quote that speaks of concert dance as opposed to social dance, which positions the choreography of concert dance as a colonizing gesture, creating a rigid framework that doesn't allow for expression of humanity. I find that a lot of Western classical or new music also creates this distance between who's experiencing it and who's presenting in a way that turns both into a type of object. It's something that I try and work against. I'm not doing participatory work by any means, but I think that acknowledging and being gracious to an audience is a de-objectifying gesture. Or allows both of us to experience one another subjectively.

NK It is a consideration that speaks to the acknowledgment of someone else's embodiment.

JT-B Absolutely.

NK But it is about relationship.

JT-B Yeah. And it might get nasty in there. I might make some sound that makes you nauseous.

NK Yeah, but thinking about the exchange still.

JT-B Thinking about it still. I don't think I would ever actually attempt to hurt someone with sound, or in a performance. But I think you can still challenge audiences, and that begins to happen with a sense of graciousness and care. In the same way that, in my home, I can debate with family members, and we can have really heated conversations but there's a type of care in the disagreeing.

NK In valuing someone else's opinion and not agreeing with it, but wanting to hear it.

JT-B Right. Of course, there are some opinions that are just invalid. Fascism. All this shit that we're contending with—America 2018. But caring for your audience is small potatoes compared to that. So I think that we can have a little more space to go back and forth with it.

NK Continuing to think about architectures, both social and spatial, I'm reminded of Renee Gladman<sup>4</sup> or Seamus Heaney.<sup>5</sup> I think both authors explore how we govern ourselves and our language and our poetry. Or, conversely, how each in turn governs us. How do we respond to the fact that there are existing structures that we fit ourselves into, and they more or less create us? Maybe that emerges in what Rizvana said about making an image or a structure that becomes flat to some extent.

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JT-B I think it's exciting that you brought in the word "architecture." When I approach work and think about a space, I'm responding less to the landscape and more to what the architecture of the space dictates. The architecture, and thus the structure. Or at least, physical structure of the space dictates so much. Even in terms of working with sound.

NK Almost especially.

JT-B Yeah. Which I think you got some idea of at the ISSUE Project Room showing, the way that there was no amplification there. It was solely voice and that room.

NK Which is so resonant.

JT-B It's one of my favorite rooms in the city, to be honest. Performance Space New York was an opportunity to work more collaboratively with Tiona, which was really exciting.<sup>6</sup> She came over and did a studio visit and I got really off on this tangent about using subwoofers on top of spaces to create structures in which bodies could drive from beneath or in the beneath. Existing sub-sub was like a shorthand of how I've been talking about it.

NK What does that look like? You would have the subwoofer suspended in some way?

JT-B At PSNY, we built a seven-foot platform and enshrouded it in black cloth, so it's completely dark on the inside. Heavy, heavy black Duvetyne so no light's getting in or out. And on top of the platform I put a subwoofer that was playing a composition right at the threshold of human hearing. It's not about listening to anything in the space, but about having these vibrations cover you.

Two or three years ago, I was going to the beach on Labor Day, which was the same day as the West Indian parade. You have all these floats with massive subwoofers and speakers happening on Eastern Parkway. When you go below ground to catch the train, the ground creates an amazing wash of sound and bass in the subway tunnel.

It was completely serendipitous. I am thinking about that experience along with reading Fred Moten and [Édouard] Glissant's writing on opacity, errantry, and the notion of the undercurrent.<sup>7</sup> What structures can exist? Where can bodies thrive in the beneath? And how can architecture and structure, which is frequently used to confine—

NK Delimit?

JT-B Delimit, yeah, or delineate. How can that be used both to indict itself but also to find a new sense of excitement and possibility? A couple of years ago some conservators were working on Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*, and uncovered a fucked-up comment or scribble under it, in French. It's something like, "negroes fighting in a dark cellar."<sup>8</sup> So with *Black Square*, which is just black, there's this weird ...



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NK      There is this undercurrent.

JT-B     That's intended to be dehumanizing and objectifying in what I think we would now call a problematic or racist way. I don't think they had words for it back then. *Negroes fighting in a dark cellar*. Recognizing the way that discursive and ideological disagreements within marginalized communities are being seen as a spectacle and used against them by dominant communities. So, what if we could fight in a dark cellar, without having to worry about being seen and thus having that be used against us? And beyond that, what can exist when you can't see it? What can happen? What impossibility, what type of organization, what type of joy, what type of pleasure, what type of failure can exist when you aren't seen?

NK      Yeah. It's almost something that exists before language or before understanding. How can we remove our understanding of something?

JT-B     Exactly. Just creating these dark rooms and filling them with bass—this vibrational quality that I think excites bodies. Some people react negatively to vibration. Some people find total joy in it. It feels important not to be able to see or be seen in these spaces. Which also maybe goes to constantly evading this capitalist impulse.

You can't Instagram that. So much contemporary installation work is about the experience—this is one that you can't capture, via lens, at least. You can only capture it in your body. You can hold it in the body archive, but not the Cloud. Using a structure, an architecture, to allow bodies to evade capture. Of course, it's fantasy. We can't evade representation or representing outside of the fantastical space that I'm attempting to construct with these works. But, as I said to Rizvana last night, we're aesthetic practitioners. We don't necessarily have a responsibility to reality. We can play with it and challenge it and contradict it to find different ways of looking to and at things.

Knowing that as soon as the 17 seconds a person will generally give to experiencing a work of art are up, they are back into the world where the weight is again crashing down upon all of us. So I want to revel in the dark space of unknowing possibility that is completely unreal. For 17 seconds.

I'm not trying to disprove [Frantz] Fanon in any way.<sup>9</sup> The reality of the dermal and what's happening at the skin level is real, and it can't be discounted.

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NK This year at The Kitchen, the L.A.B. conversations center on the word “representation,” which I’ve been thinking about through frameworks of architecture and language. Preparing for the past conversation, I was reading a review of a participant’s exhibition, and the critic leveled the question—of a body of work responding to the American political landscape—of “whether his rhetoric is sometimes not too explicit.”<sup>10</sup> Later, I was reading *Government of the Tongue*, in which Seamus Heaney, in precisely those words, questions poetry written about the experience of the trenches in the first World War. “A bit explicit?”<sup>11</sup> I’m interested in precisely that fraught relationship between reality, or truth, and beauty. I’m curious that you are dealing with it, but not in a representational way. As a reaction against. Or perhaps there is a parallel to the *Undercommons* in the sub-sub, being in a room where you’re avoiding representation.<sup>12</sup>

JT-B When Moten and Harney are writing or talking about the *Undercommons*, that’s a phenomenon that occurs and exists because those bodies would cease to exist otherwise. I guess I’m positing that same thing with these dark spaces. They’re not so much a reaction to dominant culture, but a function of it. Without that culture, we wouldn’t need those spaces. And I don’t know that we want them. But they must exist.

1 Audre Lorde’s “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” argues the necessity of art as the expansive ground upon which we may lay the foundations for ideas beyond available language. At the end of the essay she writes, “For there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt—of examining what those ideas feel like being lived on Sunday morning at 7 A.M., after brunch, during wild love, making war, giving birth, mourning our dead—while we suffer the old longings, battle the old warnings and fears of being silent and impotent and alone, while we taste new possibilities and strengths.” Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 39.

2 Between 2015 and 2018, Jeremy partnered with performer and artist LaMont Hamilton on a series of works—*Evil Nigger* (Pt. 1–5)—written as paean to the legacy of Julius Eastman. The fourth and fifth parts of this corpus were performed at ISSUE Project Room in 2017 as part of Jeremy’s residency there. In January 2018, all five parts were shown at The Kitchen in the span of 24 hours in conjunction with the exhibition “Julius Eastman: That Which is Fundamental.”

In fall 2018, Jeremy conceived an arrangement in dialogue with Steve Reich’s *Pendulum Music*, 1968, but reimagined for the geodesic dome in the courtyard at MoMA PS1. In both cases, the historic work became a point of departure for Jeremy’s contemporary exploration, functioning as reference rather than as notation for reinterpretation.

3 Jeremy’s October 2018 performance of *Pendulum Music* at MoMA PS1 coincided with the opening of “Bruce Nauman: Disappearing Acts.” Nauman—along with Richard Serra, Michael Snow, and James Tenney—was one of the original performers of the composition at the Whitney Museum in 1968.

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4 Gladman’s poetic fiction describes the navigational practice of the day-to-day—a social, political, and always embodied choreography that is continuously rehearsed yet always requires improvisation. I shared the following quote with Jeremy in relation to his exploration of built environments through sound installations: “Architecture again. It always comes to that. I can never get inside it; the singing structure eludes me. All my life, I swear that this has been true: I look at a shape, then look out into the world for the contents to fill it, but the thing I bring back does not fit—it more than not-fits, it destroys the shape altogether. As though putting my hands on things causes their distinctions to blur, as though I am not right to touch.” Renee Gladman, *Event Factory* (Urbana, IL: Dorothy, 2010), 93.

5 Perhaps more particularly, I am referring to Seamus Heaney’s *Government of the Tongue* as framed by Kevin Young in *The Grey Album*: “Tradition is meant to be broken, an inherited tongue we must interrogate. But it is also a tongue that binds, that ‘governs,’ as Seamus Heaney would have it.... Heaney focuses on a dialectic between the tongue as governing—the inspirational, generating, freeing forms of poetry—and the tongue as governed, as ‘minded’ by a tempering force. That second sense of ‘government’ is one of tempering, of social or public forces.... But what if that tongue is overdetermined? What if that governing is not freeing or confiding but rather oppressive, confining?” Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2012), 107.

6 In fall 2017, Jeremy participated in an exhibition at Performance Space New York (PSNY) organized by Tiona Nekkia McClodden. Titled *CLUB*, the exhibition and series of events and performances celebrated the 1980s Lower East Side club scene.

7 This is a particular reference to Fred Moten’s “to consent not to be a single being,” 2010, which opens immediately upon Édouard Glissant’s *L’Intention poétique*. Through Glissant’s text, Moten speaks to an inescapable action that sidesteps the imposition of social and cultural constraint: “forced by ourselves, against force.” Moving from the implied poetic of Glissant’s name to the notational cue *glissando*, Moten proposes a praxis of evasion as involuntary, a “chorographic philosophy, thinking on the move, over the edge, as exhaustive, imaginary mapping of an underworld and its baroque and broken surfaces.”

8 The phrase “Negroes fighting in a cellar at night” refers to a 1897 work by Alphonse Allais, which is understood to be among the first modern monochromatic compositions. Comprising merely the French inscription and a rectangle of black ink, this image was one in a sequence of monochromes intended and understood by Allais’s contemporary audience as humorous.

9 This comment is tied most closely to the construction of blackness that Frantz Fanon theorizes in his 1952 essay “Black Skin, White Masks,” which is angled through the relationship of a native people to colonial power and, consequently, imposed racial, social, and cultural norms. Fanon describes the psychological responses caused by the correlation of race—be it one’s own or that of another—to a sense of virtue or merit.

10 Moritz Scheper, “Ajay Kurian at Sies & Höke, Düsseldorf,” in *ArtReview* (March 2018).

11 Seamus Heaney, “The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov’s Cognac and a Knocker” in *The Government of the Tongue* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1988), xv.

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12 In *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney respond to the place of marginalized communities in contemporary systems of capital, be they political, cultural, or financial. From a place of skepticism of the cultural power of institutions including but not limited to the academy, Harney and Moten write as a means of “planning,” praxis, or “rehearsal” for a future in which these individuals will no longer be made accountable for their own discrimination.