thINKingDANCE
Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photos: Erik Carter and Jaamil Olawale Kosoko

Down With The Regime

by Mira Treatman

If the purpose of post-secondary education is to prepare a new crop of workers for the market, then why study dance in college? This was the (problematic, ironically pigeonholing) question on my mind after hearing noted dancemakers, performers, scholars, educators, and now collaborators, Thomas F. DeFrantz and Jaamil Olawale Kosoko give a lecture-demonstration. Their talk lasted for what felt like barely enough time. Hundreds of students and their doting faculty packed the gym studio at the Gershman Y, right in the middle of the semester's end. The work was immense and category-defying, neither solely scholarship nor art. This installment of University of the Arts' Knowing Dance More series, curated by Assistant Professor of Dance Lauren Bakst, was the final of the year. The series aimed to "bring into focus current issues within the production, performance, and practice of dance works and will hopefully foster ongoing conversations about knowing dance (more)." Past presenters have included Miguel Gutierrez, Boris Charmatz, Eiko Otake, Tara Aisha Willis, and Claudia La Rocco, just to name a few. Knowing Dance More has teeth, both in its curatorial vision and in the raw truth handed on a no-nonsense plate to the undergraduates.

Notions of labor and personhood emerged as crucial to both artists' work. The opportunity for students to see socio-political commentary with transparency about the economics of how and by whom dances get made is an absolute necessity. Kosoko and DeFrantz gave first-person accounts of how they have tried to reinvent oppressive models of dance making and self-representation. DeFrantz focused on the relationship between choreographer and dancers, while Kosoko spoke to his recent experiences performing for primarily white audiences in Europe. DeFrantz's talk particularly applied to the seniors preparing to present the final works of their college careers. If the seniors are to continue creating dances post-graduation, they must find structures of making that empower themselves and their collaborators through equitable valuing of their time and in respect of one another. DeFrantz spoke to the tendency for choreographers to dominate the process and dictate all creativity, then offered this alternative from his own work: "Like other choreographers, I make dances, but these works are usually open spaces that allow a group of collaborators to do what they want in response to the prompt of our shared labor… I work to reconfigure how a choreographer might be understood to function."[1] Giggles

and loaded glances filled the room as undergraduate collaborators knowingly identified with his descriptions of the creative process. DeFrantz added further that, “as a project leader, a choreographer is often conceived like a political leader with ultimate veto power and the ability to engage violence to define the state. So in other words, the choreographer can cut sequences of movement or tell people what to do or not do to define the final dance, to define the state. This is in the same way that a dictator or the state decides what is allowed among its citizens through the use of violence.”

At first, I was troubled by DeFrantz’s use of the word “violence” in this context. The overuse of the term can render it meaningless. However, DeFrantz considers violence in relation to authorship and personhood, and in this context I do think it merits use. DeFrantz’s singularly-authoring choreographer, as a determinant of who is visible in performance, has a disproportionate amount of power to wield. It is also worth mentioning here that literal emotional and physical violence has a storied history in the dance field, but that is not DeFrantz’s “violence.” His violence is largely invisible and stemming from micro-aggression. It’s more intelligence than brute force or bullying, which makes it all the more dangerous.

Where DeFrantz left off with notions of violence in labor between choreographer and dancer, Kosoko picked up between audience and performers. Hot off of several years of international touring, Kosoko shared how his work was received by primarily white and European audiences. He remarked on touring *#Negrophobia* that the “work was received in a peculiar way,” particularly in the Netherlands and Germany. “Usually when I’m in situations like that I tend to turn inside… But instead of doing that, I tended to move outward, and I wanted to create a response in my own way to take control of the situation.” As a result, Kosoko said, he made his film *White State | Black Mind* in collaboration with Marcia de Michele, which was then screened at the lecture.

Throughout the twenty-minute documentary short, DeFrantz’s notions of personhood in relation to statehood echo clearly and profoundly. The continuity between Kosoko and DeFrantz’s perspectives is both striking and saddening. Striking that their work is so aware of and in conversation with each other, truly cementing the collaborative ethos preached earlier by DeFrantz. Saddening that examining violence within and as dancemaking is a keystone of both artists’ content. On screen, Kosoko describes his work as “investigating the black body erotic and its contradictory desire and fear that these bodies face in their everyday lives… [*#Negrophobia*] becomes a site of grief… archive… performance.” In the context of University of the Arts, it is especially significant to me that Kosoko and DeFrantz’s work is so much about human lives in relation to the state rather than dancing in relation to audiences. I am in a dance conservatory, am I not? I wonder what the students, dressed in skin tight technique clothing and athleisure warm-ups, think of this. I can imagine a dissonance between their study of dance technique and that of theory, but perhaps I am projecting my own ideas onto their education.

The film itself offers sincere snapshots of Kosoko and his collaborators and fellow performers Imma and Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste. Credited as a choreographer and performer for *#Negrophobia*, Imma is a beautiful, statuesque dancer with pliable limbs that seem to go on forever. Classically trained at Atlanta Ballet and the Alvin Ailey School, she tumbles, struts, and extends her legs in every way,mixing vogueing with ballet in eight inch leather boots. “My role was about the digital aspects… and about manipulation and creatingrealities…” she remarks. Wearing a horse mask designed by Kate Watson-Wallace, Imma struts holding an iPhone documenting the setpieces, the audience sitting in the round, and Kosoko himself in costumes ranging from a gold lamé ensemble to a white sweat suitprinted with the words “Say it loud, I’m ____ and I’m proud.” Crediting Imma as both performer and choreographer is a prime example ofwhat DeFrantz encouraged earlier. Her choreographic contributions, her labor, were represented with the kind of transparency I believecannot exist under a dictating choreographer. Imma, who could have just been used for her powerful, sexy stage presence, isempowered through the space Kosoko has provided for her self-expression: literally, on the stage, and by respecting her authorship inthe choreographic process. Sound designer Toussaint-Baptiste shares the immediacy of editing in his work on *#Negrophobia*. He altersthe sound design for each performance to reflect the most immediate stories of the day. Audio sampled from news coverage isseamlessly melded with atmospheric soundscapes and pop music. He works within DeFrantz’s “open space” unbound to particulardirection from Kosoko. Toussaint-Baptiste puts his take on the process of working with fellow Black artists: “I just love to make work withmy people.” This love, so far away from DeFrantz’s aforementioned violence, is very apparent on screen. The students in the lecturehall are rapt; no texting, no giggles.

The film fades to black and the room erupts in applause. Kosoko and DeFrantz transition into the question and answer period before the students disperse for senior project rehearsals. The hall is buzzing with impatience. So clearly and directly the lecturers have provided options for how dance can be made nonviolently. I am hopeful for the class of 2018 despite the challenges inherent to working in a field oversupplied with labor. I don’t know exactly where the new graduates will find a place to call their own in the job market, but when considering Kosoko and DeFrantz that doesn’t have to be the point. The return on investment of a dance education is cultivating intimacy with the artform beyond knowing it as simply artistic labor. I wonder if knowing dance more implies a relinquishing of past ways of knowing in favor of embracing dance divorced from any previously maintained regimes.

Knowing Dance More Series, Thomas F. DeFrantz & Jaamil Olawale Kosoko, Curated by Lauren Bakst, The University of the Arts School of Dance, April 4, www.uarts.edu/dance-events*.*

[1] The direct quotations throughout this article from Thomas DeFrantz, Jaamil Olawale Kosoko, Imma, and Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste were transcribed either from video documentation of the lecture, courtesy of University of the Arts, or directly from Kosoko’s film, *White State | Black Mind*.

By Mira Treatman
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