

# *Northern Lights + Magnificat* - REFLECTION

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As I just presented my latest dance piece, *Northern Lights + Magnificat*, at Studio II in March 2015, I would like to take advantage of writing as a platform to organize my thoughts of this ambitious project. This is not by any means a way to explain or defend the work. It is rather a form of logging and remembering of my thought process and dispersed interests as a reference for my practice in the future. Therefore, it is A LONG writing. It might be a good idea to scroll through to just see these images by Meghann Gilligan.

### **It started out as a rigorous experiment.**

In order to talk about this piece, I must talk about how this piece was a direct reaction against my ongoing interest.

I have been obsessively interested in this simple question, “what is performance?” in my artistic practice so far. In order to address this seemingly broad idea, I have taken a very personal approach: what is the essence of performance *for me*? Considering my past involvement with musical theatre, physical theatre (SITI Company’s Suzuki Acting Method and Viewpoints), and classical theatre, I have been aware of my value system, which aligns with “modern” performing-arts. American scholar Ira Chernus has articulated the Modern idea as opposed to one of postmodern in his essay “Fredric Jameson’s Interpretation of Postmodernism”, which is helpful here to clarify.

Many say that one main difference between the two eras [modern and postmodern] has to do with the question of unity, wholeness, and totality. In the modern era people wanted some kind of totality: a unified conception of the world, a unified set of values, a unified culture and lifestyle, etc...So modern people had a nostalgia for premodern times, when unified totality was possible, and they wished that they too could have this wholeness in their lives.

In terms of performing arts, I feel my inclination to value concepts such beauty, truth, entertainment, narrative, and virtuosity. In order to examine the essence of performance, I have been going against these ideal concepts that I am used to. In this process, phenomenology of performance, as a concept, has become my primary focus. There is me



who stands in front of the audience. And, there is audience who face forward and look at me and my action. Therefore, postmodern and post-structuralist philosophies have been insightful and resonant. What I didn't realize is that the moment I decide to take a personal perspective to the broad idea, specifying it as "my own unique" reality, I have already denied the modern idea of 'unification' and 'totality,' and directed my thinking process into the route of individualism and anti-conformity.

In any case, my artistic practice was immersed in the idea of phenomenology of live event called performance, investigating the experience, existence, and gaze of audience members in relationship to those of performers. Along with this concept, I have made three solo performance works from 2013-2014: *Think Here. Think There.*, *Hindsight*, and *Objecting*. Respectively, I investigated subjective reality of performers such as thought process and awareness of being watched (or objectified) while carefully constructing what and how the audience perceive and spend time.

During my constant travels in 2014, I somehow begin to question my own question: Why do I always question traditional ideals? Why do I have to always demand my audience members to think or sometimes to experience being objectified? Why do I always idolize postmodern thinkers and practitioners from 60s and 70s who have directly reacted against modernist doctrine, whereas I live in a contemporary era when postmodern has become decades-old and those reactions have already been labeled as historical? Towards the end of the travel, I was convinced that it was important and beneficial for me to step out and seriously address these questions above in order to gain fresh and embodied perspective on the idea of phenomenology in my artistic practice.

With the support from N.E.W. Expressive Works Residency program in Portland, I decided to create a performance of modern ideals, which aligns with what I usually avoid making; hence, the rigorous experiment. In addition, I decided to make a strictly-choreographed dance performance, challenging my insecurity (from my lack of extensive modern/classical dance training) of calling myself a dancer/choreographer.

### **My understanding of modernist ideals has its limit.**

The separation between music and dance, I believe, is also a trope of postmodern performance practice. When I realized my alignment to this postmodern ideal, I knew that I have to make a dance piece in direct relationship with music. I chose to work with a live choral sound by Choir (formerly known as Voices of Chud Alley) that local musician Jesse Mejía has started in Portland in February 2014.

Along with Jesse's enthusiastic positive response, he gave me two pieces of choral music that they have been practicing: *Northern Lights* by Ola Gjeilo (2008) and *Magnificat* by Arvo Pärt (1989). Both are sung in Latin with Christian religious meanings.

While temporarily living in NYC for a few months in fall 2014, I frequented NYPL Performing Arts library/archive, watching performance documentation of works by Mark Morris, Doris Humphrey, William Forsythe, Anne Teresa De Keersemaker, George Balanchine, and Lucinda Childs: basically, any choreographic works by choreographers, that I can think of, who use music as an inspiration. Besides exposing myself to as many historical refer-

-ences as possible, my main concern was to investigate how those iconic choreographers in the Western dance history have worked with music in relation with their crafts.

The more I watched those documentations of past European dances, the less confident I became about this challenge. I was confronted by the lack of my own physical ability/flexibility and training to execute control, finesse, elegance, elevation, tenacity, and emotionality, which those dancers were exhibiting on the screen.

Out of all the videos I saw, I highlighted three: Balanchine's *Concerto Barocco*, a ballet he made on students at the School of American Ballet to Johann Sebastian Bach's *Concerto in D minor for Two Violins*, BWV 1043, Mark Morris's visual illumination of music through meticulous dance phrases, and Lucinda Childs' repetitious phrase works for Philip Glass's music. Watching these works helped me shine the path to this challenge: to take a formal approach to the music rather than emotional or expressive approach.

Rather than lamenting on my lack of training, I decided to use whatever I got at this moment in time. My involvement with Xavier Le Roy's *Retrospective* and its daily performances in the fall have helped me bring my self-esteem up, accepting what I have rather than what I wish I could have.



### **Keyboard Suite No. 3 in D Minor, HWV 428**

I occasionally listen to classical music. And, I have been fascinated by the effect and its concept of Passacaglia. It started out of Handel's *Keyboard Suite No. 7 In G Minor, HWV 432 : VI. Passacaille*. Passacaglia, in short, is a musical form of continuous variation in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time. It is a courtly dance. It is similar to, or if not the same as, chaconne. I admit that a lot of nuances and details about this musical form are lost in me. But out of my naïve



research, here's what I said to Jesse the conductor,

"What I like about passacaglia is the incessant repetition and the increase of complexity over time, in a very simple system. Each section repeats two times (at least for this Handel's piece.) I'm interested in that choreographically."

Retrospectively speaking, craft of repetition by Lucinda Childs and Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker has probably a lot to do with this inspiration. But in my *formal* approach, I wanted to look at this simple approach of repetition or doubling, inspired by Passacaglia, in relationship with music, choreography, and a piece as a whole.

As I listen close to Handel's keyboard suite (the album I listened to is recorded by Evgeni Koroliv and released in 2000), I was confronted by the emotional tone that these pieces of music inherently possess through its speed, melody, texture, suspension, and masterful performance. No wonder how filmmakers have used classical music to highlight and enhance its plots. No wonder how historically Western classical music, probably in its origin, is strongly tied to Christianity as it deals with life-death narratives, heroicism, emotion, and dedication.

The biggest question at hand was...how do I find or create a relationship between music and movement? Mirroring my past process of *In Traveling* (2013), I decided to tackle this challenge by first creating a short solo performance for myself. It allows me to incubate and experiment my ideas. It also was a way to communicate my initial ideas to my collaborators without explaining them only in words. Finally, it helps me identify what I don't like viscerally and visually without making others go through with it.

As I listened to this album by Koroliv more and more, I noticed that Handel's keyboard suite No.3 in D minor, HWV 428 has a 5th section, which partly consists of five variations of the same melodic undertone. Each variation is about 60 to 90 seconds, differing its speed, complexity, fluidity, and tone. From my novice, yet formal viewpoint, this idea of variation excited me. I found the structure to work with.

Essentially I created five different ways to relate to music through movement.

- Variation 1 (upstage left)  
Moving through four poses, which I find classically beautiful, in a constant slow speed.
- Variation 2 (downstage right)  
Movement phrases on the floor, focusing on the undulation of body tied with undulation of music, ending with taking off shirts.
- Variation 3 (center stage)  
Putting on the shirts, then move (sway) with rhythm using Rick Astley's iconic movement from his 1987 song "Never Gonna Give You Up".

- Variation 4 (upstage right)  
Clapping on each melodic note (I believe notes played by right hand).
- Variation 5 (starting from downstage left)  
Choreograph with what I understand to be traditionally classical or modern movement vocabularies, which physically illuminates the emotional tone from the music.

As indicated in parentheses above, spatially, each variation is placed in five geometrically separate areas except the last one, which travels through the whole space. I also repeated the same music and the whole five variations twice, gauging what this simple doubling would do to the viewers' experience. Besides the Fieldwork session (through the residency at Studio II,) I performed this piece 8 times for an individual audience member respectively, receiving each personal feedback.



### **Basic building blocks**

This piece is performed by three dancers: Allie Hankins, Julia Calabrese, and myself. Roughly speaking, the dance portion of Northern Lights + Magnificat has three sections.

- Three solos
- 1.2.3.
- 5 poses with soft movement in between

### -Three Solos

Movement vocabularies for each solo are randomly chosen/choreographed according to a combination of circular movement, horizontal movement (e.g. side to side, traveling in the space), or vertical movement (e.g. jump, top to bottom, getting up). Then systematically we organized each sequence of choreography in the order. Below is the order for Allie Hankins for example.

Circle	Vertical	Horizontal
Vertical	Horizontal	Circle
Vertical	Circle	Horizontal
Horizontal	Circle	Vertical
Circle	Horizontal	Vertical
Horizontal	Vertical	Circle

There are 18 movement pieces total (3 variations, 6 rows). Each dancer would have a different order of the organizational system. This system randomly came from an image of tick-tock-toe structure in a park.



After we collectively constructed a sequence for each dancer, I coordinated and tweaked the sequence in strictly visual or visceral relationship to the space, other two dancers and the audience. Specifically, I was concerned with time: duration of each movement, pause in between, floor pattern, how much space to take up, where to face towards, timing of when a phrase starts and ends. Years of viewpoints training from Mary Overlie and SITI company paid off here.

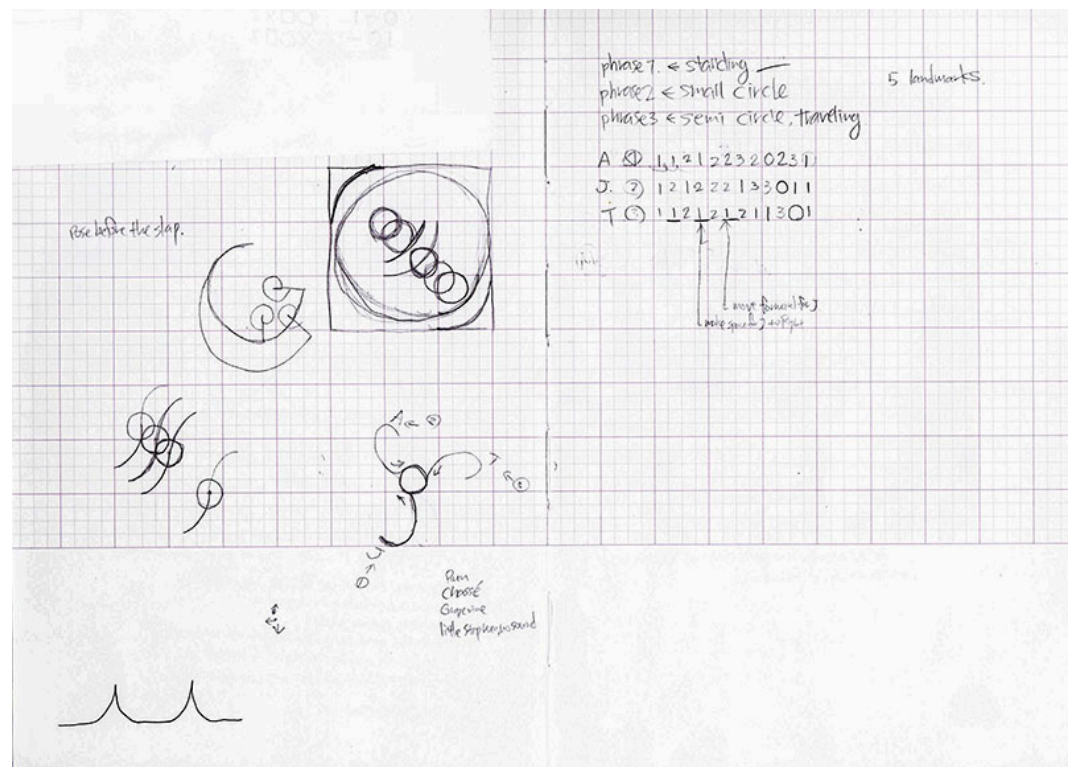
-1.2.3.

This section is directly influenced by Anne Teresa De Keersmaekers' classic choreographic score for Rosas Dance Rosas. Although her practice is not necessarily aligned with Modern value that I looked at, I was drawn to her dancers' virtuosity and the systematic approach to her choreography. I choreographed 3 short choreographic phrases, all of which engages with circular shapes and patterns either in hand gestures, floor patterns, physical movement, and turns. "1" is more contained around the parameter of body. "2" traces a medium-sized circle. "3" travels in a narrow oval shape through some suspended movements. I randomly assigned a sequence of those numbers to each dancer as follows.

Allie: 1 1 2 1 2 2 3 2 0 2 3 1

Julia: 1 2 1 2 2 2 1 3 3 0 1 1

Taka: 1 1 2 1 2 1 2 1 1 3 0 1





Here, O calls for running in the space in a circle. As we go through these sequences, all three dancers are gradually moving forward in a diagonal line (Upstage Left to Downstage Right). I am attaching a scanned page of my notebook here. The diagram I drew for this is the upper-right hand corner of the left page. (Initially, it was from upstage left to right. But after I decided to place the choir on the stage right, I changed the diagonal.) On the right page, you can see the numbering I re-typed above.

I timed the O sections to respond to the heightened (loud and dramatic) section of two music score. It is like the circular running part is the fireworks and all the section preceding to it is the prep.

-5 poses with soft movement in between

I was interested in slow movement in consistent speed. I called it Soft movement. I wanted to dramatically change the tone of the piece from fast-moving circularly visceral time to static, heavy, yet soft time with ethereal quality. I used the very sharp movement vocabulary taken from the music video of Pop by N'Sync.

In this section, I envisioned to create a serene, quiet, formal, and High-Art-ish quality: images, which rich elitist retired ladies would enjoy. My imaginary target audience for this section was specifically ladies who live in upper eastside in NYC and ladies in Downton Abbey who, I imagine, would uphold modernist values and tastes.

Each dancer has five poses. I came up with some of them, and Julia and Allie came up with others. Baroque Western sculpture or statues inspired some. Some were taken



by classical images of Mikhail Baryshnikov and George Balanchine. Again I organized those in visual relationship to the other.



### **Pieces of a jigsaw puzzle laid out on the same flat table**

A lot of choreographic materials and inspirations come from my various observations of cultural images such as iconic images of Baryshnikov and classical statues, specific movements from works by Balanchine and Mark Morris, American TV shows such as *Will & Grace*, *Friends* and *In Living Color*, music videos from Janet Jackson and N'Sync, and ordinary movements of pedestrians. Instead of pinpointing specific movement or section to connect to each image, I am going to use this passage by Chernus since it eloquently describes my random method of combining disparate images.

Although the signs may comment about each other, we do not expect them to relate to each other in any stable or unified way. They are related to each other primarily by the differences among them. Postmodern artifacts display an 'absolute and absolutely random pluralism...a coexistence not even of multiple and alternate worlds so much as of unrelated fuzzy sets and semiautonomous sub-systems.'

In a way, I decided to embrace modernist values and interests by approaching it through postmodern process and philosophy. I initially intended to resist my post-modern tendency all the way. However, I was conflicted by the contradiction between the interest for the

modernist aesthetic and the interest in my own individual approach. My solution to this contradiction was to focus on my interest in modern values and aesthetic without censoring my making process.

### **Musicality of Movements**

Since I started working on *Keyboard Suite No. 3 in D Minor, HWV 428*, a word “musicality” has been constantly on my mind. This word was the key to place music and action (dance) on the same table. In an interview for the NBC Sitcom *Will & Grace*, James Burrows, a legendary sit-com director, mentions that he often doesn’t even look at the actors on stage. He focuses to listen closely to the flow of the play (scene) through the sounds of the dialogues and laughter of the audience. I was inspired by his sense of time in relationship to the actions of the actors.

Retrospectively speaking, this deep thinking about time leads to the Japanese concept of MA: an interval, a pure and essential void between all things. I remember madhouse (Ben Evans and I) was interested in this before while working on a piece called *myself* in 2008. I intended to consciously craft the timing of MA between actions or choreography in relationship with the music. Through this meticulous choreography through MA, I wanted the audience to experience a sense of time. In order to accent this musicality, I assigned a unique slapstick routine to each dancer: Allie with slap to Taka, Julia executes shirt-business to Allie, and Taka with pushing Julia. Those actions were incorporated and weaved into this musical flow of the performance. In addition, by taking advantage of long dark hair that three dancers happen to have, I inserted hair toss to bring the focus back to the body amidst those theatrical slapstick actions.

### **Anticipation in Repetition**

As in the case with my solo *Keyboard Suite No. 3 in D Minor, HWV 428*, the whole choreography repeats itself twice. The first part runs 10 minutes with *Northern Lights* within. The second part also runs 10 minutes with the same choreography as the Choir sings *Magnificat*.

While all the movement vocabularies are repeated twice, I decided to intentionally utilize the anticipation that the viewers would experience in the second time. (I learned this from the feedback I got from my solo.) To play with this anticipation from the audience’s memory, I decided to treat the slapstick business separately from the rest of the choreography. There are two sections for each dancer to do their bit in the each 10-minute choreography. Instead of considering it as two sets of 2 actions, I considered them as four actions in 20 minutes where each action leads to the other, accumulating according to the expectation from the last.

Although these slapstick actions are in sequence, it was important make each as independent as possible so that the narrative is created in the audience’s mind rather than imposing it from our end.

Sensations, thoughts, feelings, and desires are still there. But they are free-floating and impersonal... There is no longer a tension between outward experiences and their inner meaning.

We are all increasingly like a stereotypical schizophrenic. We experience the world and other people as random collections of flat meaningless images, which have no coherent relationship to each other. We learn to experience ourselves as similarly meaningless collections of disconnected signs.



### **Jesús Rafael Soto**

I just happen to come across Venezuelan Sculptor Jesús Rafael Soto's work at two museums in 2014, inspired by his sometimes systematic and sometimes organic lines in his works. The one that I most excited about was a piece called *Vibration* (1959), which was exhibited at Guggenheim last fall. I saw organic scribble-like patterns on the foreground while a number of vertical lines cover the whole square in the background. This juxtaposition of lines in two different quality makes me look at the places that they intersect and places that they don't intersect. At the same time, when I step back a few feet back, they start to mesh together. Yet, my eyes fight for it, making the organic line float to the front, feeling like I'm looking at a leticular image. This sense of lines gave me a hint for my choreography and its floor pattern.



As I read his extensive conversation with Ariel Jiménez, Soto says this about his work:

Among the things I tried to do are those first Repeticiones I mentioned, where the concept of composition no longer exists because it is an order that can be repeated ad infinitum, and where every segment is equal to the whole. The work was just the fragment of an infinite reality. (42)

His *Repeticiones* series does evoke the idea of continuity as if the work extends outside of the actual piece. Like Soto, I wanted to use my repetition to create this conceptual and imagined time and space in the viewers' perception. Repeated action with two different soundscape associated to it. In order to achieve this, the whole choreography needs to be set as well as performers' stoic emotionality.

There is a sense of elongation and flow like a stream taking us to a ride in both *Northern Lights* and *Magnificat*. Maybe, considering Christian/religious lyrics in Latin, it might be referring to a journey to heaven or another world. Also, in both pieces, there are ups and downs, progressively escalating the intensity two times in both journeys.

Both *Northern Lights* and *Magnificat* have a section where it builds up and gets louder and fuller. I timed this louder section of each sounds in relationship with the latter part of 1.2.3. where a dancer is running through the space.



### Jesse Mejía's Choir

It was, from the beginning of this process, very important to incorporate the choir as a vital part of the performance. The last thing I wanted to do was to make them provide a mere soundtrack in the background. Their physical existence was as important as the dancers. (it's hard to ignore when 19 bodies are on stage, too.) It was just like how I always think of the audience as a part of a performance event.

The image of choir members in line downstage as a wall came from, again, Jesus Rafael

Soto's *Vibration* (1959). The vertical stripes in the background transcoded, in my mind, into 19 bodies of Choir standing up in a horizontal line, cutting across the stage. As if each line cut through a loaf of bread into slices in a bakery. Yet, the choir entrance happens after dancers start the performance. It is as the choir is insisting on their presence, starting the piece again.

The entrance and exit of the choir played a big part in this performance since symbolically it acts as a theatre curtain (or film clapperboard) and a smoke machine. It indicates the sense of beginning and the ending of performance, which, theoretically, can continue endlessly like Jesús Rafael Soto's works. Their action of switching positions in between the songs and embellishing the sound of flipping scores are there to claim their existence in the space.

Highlighting conductor Jesse Mejía at the end came natural to me. Having Xavier Le Roy's *Rite of Spring* in the corner of my mind, his physical movement throughout the piece was visually a crucial aspect of the performance. I had him dance, in other words, to have him continue dancing without choir, at the end. Jesse was the consistent thread throughout the piece. He never leaves the space. He leads us to the space, and he ends the piece in the air.

### After

This performance and its process, as are most of my works, were my way of thinking about ideas about relationship between modernism and post-modernism as well as entertainment (passive viewing) and concept-focused performance. My choices were made based on unfamiliarity (or newness) of the idea/concept as well as my curiosity to actually embody those. Finally, I will end this with Jesús Rafael Soto's quote that helped me validate this process.

Art was not a means of expression but a way of thinking, a way of responding to the questions posed by history.





Chernus, Ira. "Fredrick Jameson's Interpretation of Postmodernism." University of Colorado at Boulder (1992). <http://spot.colorado.edu/~chernus/NewspaperColumns/LongerEssays/JamesonPostmodernism.htm> (accessed April 10, 2015)

Jiménez, Ariel and Jesús Rafael Soto. *Jesús Soto in conversation with Ariel Jiménez = Jesús Soto en conversacion con Ariel Jiménez*. New York: Fundacion Cisneros, 2012.

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Photo credit

Meghann Gilligan -Northern Lights + Magnificat (Portland, OR)

Farrington Starnes - Objecting/Hindsight (St.Paul, MN)