



Minor Matter: An Interview with Ligia Lewis

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As a performance practitioner and viewer, I relish performance experiences that don't fully reveal themselves to me, that are working in a way I can't immediately grasp. When I first saw Ligia Lewis's *Sorrow Swag* at the American Realness festival in New York City in January 2016, I could tell there were deep and complex layers of significance informing the work, a developed vocabulary and particular inner logic. I knew I was not yet fluent in this language, so I went back to see the show a second time. I processed this experience in writing, and was left with many potent questions on expressions of power through the body, language, and theatrical convention.

I was glad, then, to learn that Lewis was coming through my home city of Minneapolis just a few months later, through a residency with FD13. Joined by dancer Jonathan Gonzalez and Minneapolis-based vocalist Sarah White, she shared a work-in-progress version of her new piece, *Minor Matter*, in Minneapolis and in St. Louis. At Public Functionary in northeast Minneapolis, *Minor Matter* unfolded within a white-walled gallery bathed in red light. Gonzalez's movement was, by turns, angular and liquid, constantly multitasking and cycling through images, affects, and tasks. The work conveyed the nuance of research, suggesting a tension between internal and external forces working on Gonzalez's body. At the end of the work, the red lights were turned off, and my eyes saw blue. In this moment, as in the dance, every image contained its opposite—an underside, an inherent contradiction, and meaning to be mined in the opposition.

A post-show Q&A covered many of the basics about the work-in-progress, and gave me a foundation to probe deeper about the specificities and implications of Lewis's practice. She mentioned that the piece began as a response to Black Lives Matter, eventually spinning off into a physical practice involving questions of aesthetics and embodiment. I was happy to speak with her on her last morning in Minneapolis, to learn how she approaches audience and composition, theory and practice, abstraction, and identity politics.

Emily Gastineau: I'm going to start with one comment from the Q&A last night. There was one thing that surprised me—, you said that you wanted it to feel like everything was happening for the first time. I've been so compelled by the density of the images, and the layers. I can see how that happens through improvisation, but it also seems like there's so much intention in every moment, that it has to be crafted. I wonder if you could talk about that—how you create images, and the density and the layers within that?

Ligia Lewis: I knew that I was working specifically, on this particular work, with a very strong relationship to space, and so I wanted to animate the periphery as much as possible. That was a good starting point. I knew that I was trying to interrogate a certain type of body and a certain type of embodiment. I was trying to play also with duration, or at least with creating a relationship to time that had an articulation of memory, and the present, and a sort of posturing towards the future, sort of happening simultaneously. That happens also within the sound score, which morphs through various musical references from classical to baroque to avant garde to contemporary music. When the work began, I was thinking, how can I animate this space of being low, or down? And this is not only emotionally, but also physically. It did start there, and through this iteration, I arrived more within a celebratory space, because I felt like that was

important now – to create new images for black bodies that are also celebratory. But I started in a more melancholic state in the beginning. This idea of creating something from nothing is the backbone. And so we started to build a physical practice, and we played with a lot of rhythm and timing, and how to engage a public inside a sort of processual, choreographic score. The attention to the public is important. The choreography is constructed with this idea of relationality. So there are a lot of ideas inside of it.

EG: Could you give a really nuts and bolts kind of example of how a score would be expressed?

LL: In this work, the opening score begins with this very simple idea of a mark in space. There's this very famous piece by [Merce] Cunningham that I was looking at, and I was geeking out on Cunningham's relationship to the materiality of the body in space, and the way that he plays with abstraction with bodies. I have a very contentious relationship with abstraction, at least in early notions of abstraction being "pure" or unadulterated form, so I go in knowing that I'm not entirely going to get that, or maybe not entirely interested in it, but it's an interesting place to start for me—to approach it with the intention to fuck with it. So riffing on Cunningham's points in space, I was thinking about marks and traces in space, which is me thinking through what it means to be a marked body on stage. How do you leave a mark or a trace? And this is sort of riffing off of a text by [Georges] Perec, one of the number of things that we were reading during this process together. I often bring texts that interest me into the studio within a process. I was looking also at some of [William] Forsythe's stuff, about how he creates a kinesthetic field of abstraction. He plays a lot with lines in space as well, and we just sort of started trying that on our bodies, and mixing it with this idea of being hyper-present, so everything that we're thinking has to be articulated in real time—or at least trying to invite that in. So the score begins with a simple task of approaching a method of movement, then I added other qualities to that method, including qualities of the erotic body, images of celebration, and nuanced engagements to space and time. The process of practicing contributes to the layers. Rehearsal is important.

EG: How is that applied within a theatrical context?

LL: There's a level of deviancy that I'm just interested in, in general, in performance—you know, how you can sort of stretch the borders of a certain space, and ways of seeing and understanding that space. With *Sorrow Swag*, which played in a proscenium theater, we played a lot with my performer [Brian Getnick] just sort of disappearing and then reappearing. He's constantly stuttering through a series of actions and tasks, but then it sinks into more concrete images that people can hold. And then in this piece [Minor Matter]—which at the moment has been presented just in gallery spaces—within the piece, he goes behind the public, and he animates that space as well. He extends the borders of the performance space, and it dissolves the separation between the public and himself. It's just a performative gesture, but I like these kinds of gestures that play with how we see a subject.

EG: I'm noticing that you refer to "the public" as opposed to "the audience" or "the viewer". I wonder what that term means to you—what is wrapped up in that, how you're imagining or construing the people who are viewing the work.

LL: That's a really good observation. That's really funny. I've noticed I like this idea of the public. That's what draws me, really, to the theater. In an audience, maybe the connotation is a little bit more specialized. Or "spectatorship" is a very specialized term. It's as if everyone

understands that role or what that means, and “public”, I think, is a little bit more open. It’s for whoever happens to be watching at that moment or at that time. I guess there’s something there, why I’m using that term. I don’t like to take any sort of position in relationship to watching for granted. I never want to assume that anyone knows how to consume what I make or what I do. I’m interested in making work for what I consider to be a more general public. That’s really important to me, that there’s a range of eyes that can enjoy or participate in what I’m making. And also, I’m not interested in dumbing down anything or totally catering to the audience or the public. It’s just something—when I go in, I’m asking, is this interesting for many eyes?

EG: In the discussion last night, Junauda [Petrus, a local artist] asked you what your questions were during the piece, and you said, “Can you abstract a black body, and should you?” Then afterwards, my partner [Billy Mullaney] was like, “She didn’t answer it! She didn’t say what she found!” So I wonder if I could ask you, what was the outcome of that research? I know it’s ongoing.

LL: It’s ongoing, it’s ongoing. I think in terms of abstraction in relation to dance and embodiment—I don’t know if that’s a place that anybody should go. I think the question should be more directed: whether just pure abstraction is worth anyone’s time. I don’t know. Of course, for some people, it’s really interesting for them, but for me, it’s not that interesting. It’s the fact that I have problem with it—and that problem interests me. I start there. I don’t believe entirely in this idea about the autonomy of art. I’m not interested in that, because I’m already aware of the fact that that requires a very specific type of public to view it- a specialized public to appreciate the nuances of that abstraction or gesture. So already, that puts me at odds with it. I’m interested in other forms of generosity, and it doesn’t lie entirely in dry formalism. It relies more in placing bodies in space that you believe merit that space, desire that space, and that you invite them into a rich practice that hopefully they enjoy, and that they take on. Form arrives later in my process. My work attempts to be more dialogical, and that’s what draws me to performance, and not painting or object-making. This thing of making an object out of a body is difficult for me. Although I am entirely engaged with the materiality of the body, looking at it through the lens of just formal abstraction is difficult. I prefer layered activities that engage a process of thinking in real time and inviting that into the work—making work thick and messy, rather than clean and beautiful.

EG: What did you learn about abstraction from kind of trying it on, or recontextualizing it? Or even working with an idea that you have a lot of problems with? Because I’m assuming that if you’re working with abstraction in that way, your method of using it is going to change what abstraction is—not as an object, but the way that it’s being embodied in the work.

LL: It’s disrupted constantly, because at the moment that it becomes coded within the formalisms of dance, he [Gonzalez] is invited immediately to shift his attention to the public, and invite their eyes into his interpretation. It’s a really playful score. I really respect Forsythe’s formalisms, and especially Cunningham’s, but in the 21st century, I don’t know how relevant that is. I’m not interested in a very concrete, stable object, or performative object. At every moment in the process, the moment it becomes too stable, I will invite a destabilizing element to the material, for the performers and for the public, be it through sound, the use of light, or the invitation for the performer to abandon the task and begin again. And this is a way for me to maintain a certain kind of liveness. I think formal dance is dead. Not to say that you can’t use it, invoke something else by embodying it—I think that’s probably more interesting.

EG: Right, there's no purity to that.

LL: Exactly. If anything, I'm interested in just taking it on to make it messy. To complicate it. Not to tear it down, but to—

EG: Poke holes in it, maybe.

LL: Yeah, to poke holes in it. That's a way of putting it. The more and more I develop work, the more I am compelled to make more difficult objects.

EG: I'm interested in that research in abstraction as it relates to how you were responding to Black Lives Matter. I'm curious in particular about how you're using an activist movement, or set of ideas or occurrences, inside of art.

LL: This relationship between aesthetics and politics? It's a good question, and it's complicated. Black Lives Matter—for me, that's a whole activity and set of labor that I can't entirely speak to, because I don't at all work from the position of activism. My work is not grounded in activism at all. I really work in aesthetics, and in dance specifically, and so that should be made very clear. But this moment of Black Lives Matter I thought was very compelling, not only the groundwork made by the movement but more conceptually—what that hashtag means, or could mean in relationship to the poetics of time and space. So how can that be translated into a dance? So for me, this thing of riffing into minor matter has already a different connotation. It's not declaring anything; it's just being there, present. I wanted to play with a certain kind of materiality, and moving towards a kind of sonic and physical abstraction. It begins with a problem that stays unresolved. And I like problems because they force a complicated engagement. That's why there's such a strong sonic exploration inside of the work, and to move away from declaring, but rather just sort of being in a mess of sound and light, in its excess with the flesh. And that links to why the peripheral space is animated, the hyper-relationality of the space. I often think how to alleviate bodies of color from having to represent more than they can. That's why the voice is so important inside of this work, and this interrogation of subjectivity is so important. I try to get away from any identitarian stance in relationship to this, and arrive at something that's more slippery, and that's potentially more nuanced. I want to work through this notion of difference, multiplicity, and that's why the piece will end up with three performers versus one.

EG: I think part of the reason that's interesting to me is a lot of the work that's dealing with politics here [in Minneapolis in particular, and the United States in general] is very activist-oriented, and even if it's complicated aesthetically somehow, there's always a stance within it. I wonder, do you feel a tension in that? Have you gotten an activist's perspective on it? Do you care about that?

LL: I haven't. I would love to. I'm very curious. I read about it from afar. I'm based in Europe now, and in Germany now, the refugee crisis is what's very present, and I do think that some of the language and some of the discourse emerging out of the Black Lives Matter is hugely important. I hope there's a way that that thinking around this political moment makes its way to Europe. I always have to really underline the fact that I'm making something alongside it, because I recognize my work doesn't exist in a bubble. I'm fully aware of the political backdrop from which this work emerges. I mean, that is kind of the point of departure, but really, a very

early point of departure. I immediately responded, and since I've had a lot of time to think about the work, and the more I think about it, the further away it gets from anything specifically related to Black Lives Matter. There's certain sort of language around the way in which they organize, and that I think is really beautiful and is also very poetic. One could probably look this movement and its relationship to poetics as well. There's a certain type of movement or dance that's happening there, on a conceptual level, that I think is interesting, that I can invite in and sort of play with it in my thinking—but it's still very far away from my reality. Their movement and my dance should not fold into one another.

EG: But there are parallels too. Of course, I can't really speak for that, but Black Lives Matter didn't endorse a presidential candidate. That's a way of not taking a stance.

LL: It's so funny. Especially when you deal with race, everyone wants you to have a stance. I think a position is important, but to have an answer? I'm like, really? I think we all need to be asking more questions. There's a lot of people that think they have answers, but I think we're in a place where all of us just need to be in the process of asking more and more questions, and inviting problems into the work. I don't like this idea of having sort of a moral relationship to what I do. I mean, I worked with a white performer before, and of course his identity is part of the texture of the work, inevitably, but I'm trying to avoid any sort of ideology in relationship to what and how I work. I'm still engaged with a certain ethos, this sort of affectively charged, choreographic work. That's what I'm busy with, and all the work is sort of linked a bit to sadness, and that's sort of response to where we're at, culturally and politically.

EG: Is it important to you to present the work in the United States, then? To be part of that conversation?

LL: I love showing work here. It's hard to make it here, because there are no conditions to make work in the United States. It's a problem. It's a huge problem, but I love to show the work here, because I think people are engaged on multiple levels. There's a very strong political conversation happening, and for me, it's always good to test material here. I'm super impressed, always, by who comes and what people think, and what they have to say. People are very tuned into their own experience, and have very strong opinions in relationship to what they see. It's always charged. That's a little bit different in Europe, for me. I don't have the same kinds of conversations, and I think people look at the work more formally, perhaps, and less for what it proposes politically.

EG: Interesting. So I wanted to ask you specifically about the word “minor”, and what that means to you, because that can have a lot of referents. I also noticed last night that you guys were using it as a verb.

LL: I said “minorize the space”, like to turn everything into the minor. It's the minor versus the major. I'm thinking, there's also the minority figure, and then there's of course the minor being the one in relationship to the many—being the audience—and then there's the minor sonically, that's sort of operating on the level of basso continuo, the continual bass. He [Gonzalez] sings “minor matter”. He is a very good singer, so he can play with it, sing in minor key or major key. He plays sonically between the minor and major, vocally, and then we have this continual bass track. There's a sort of playfulness in relationship to how music happens and operates in the space, and my interest in noise, and I think that's very related to minor aesthetics—the use of the

peripheral space, minor aesthetics, the pitched-down mic, the space for this sort of rant—which is not predetermined, in the case of Sarah White, who performed it here in Minneapolis. I just invited her to say anything she always wanted to say in a public space, and let her go off. That was really one of the highlights of the piece, and that's also linked to desire and linked to black aesthetics, I think. So I try to really exhaust this idea of the minor, so that it's not about identity, but instead about practice, and I think that's something that I'm consistently busy with.

EG: I was wondering if it was a reference to Sianne Ngai. [In] this book called *Ugly Feelings*, she talks about minor affects.

LL: I like this idea of minor affect. My practice is grounded in that, and grounded in those aesthetics and that sensibility, absolutely. I was reading—I guess everyone is reading—a lot of [Fred] Moten, and I recently started to read Hortense Spillers, and I'm trying to build a certain relationship to the body or the flesh that's deemed maybe irrelevant, or hasn't been really fully articulated, especially within the dance canon. I know there's a strong literary turn to affect, and maybe it's a cultural moment, but I'm totally interested in that: feelings and emotions, and the difficulty that we have with emotions. It's linked to empathy, also.

EG: Since we're talking about reading materials, I wanted to ask you about how those texts get linked into the work. Is it more of a general context? Do you work with that text or that language in scores? I'm always curious about that relationship.

LL: Absolutely. I'll do research. It started before Jonathan arrived, and I have a notebook of notes and thoughts that I keep, articles or things that I've read that interest me, and I compile them all. Then when I was trying to build a certain score for the opening, I was particularly taken by this idea that's used by Karen Barad, intra-action, and then also some ideas Edouard Glissant talks about in *The Poetics of Relation*. Then I just tried to build with those ideas. I tried to construct what that might look like, and it's very complicated. I write out either phrases or words that for me, are very generative, and can evoke a certain creative energy or impulse into the practice. It's through the practice of doing and reiterating what the ethos of the work is, and that makes its way through practice into the piece. It should never feel like it's imposed. I feel like that's difficult, when language is imposed on the body. It's better that it sort of comes from within, that it's like this sort of mantra. It emerges at the end, this idea of making something from nothing. It's a very simple idea, but it sort of links to a lecture on blackness and nothingness. Making something from nothing, for me, is a very hopeful gesture, despite seeming otherwise—and when I look especially at dance history, from a western perspective, we don't have anything to look back on, because we've been written out of history. How do I try to make something from nothing? And so that's the ethos of this work, or a position from which the work begins. And these ideas of leaving a trace, a mark of what we've done, what happened in the course of 50 minutes, are expressed in the spinning moment. So language does emerge, but it's not overbearing at any moment. Language is within the body. Language is within the space, as within the sound. So trying to not give too much importance to theory, or rational thought—although theory can be very generative. It can help shape a certain type of relationship to embodiment, which I'm interested in.

EG: There's one other thing related to representation. I'm curious about your choice to work with performers who are men, and your role constructing those representations of masculinity, *Seeing Sorrow Swag*, [I thought] men are always representing themselves in dance, and it felt so

different through that frame. It's very obvious, but the implications were really far-reaching, so I wonder if you could talk about that choice.

LL: These codes of masculinity that Brian performs within *Sorrow Swag* are part of what he is wrestling within the piece, along with his wrestling with language and the theater. He's constantly failing at it. I was working with these ideas of grief and sadness, and there are so many representations of sadness and grief linked to the female body within theater, and I felt like that association is dead. It's not doing anything anymore, and in order to get it off an identity, to which it is always linked in the theater, the work ended up with a white male figure. The textures of masculinity that operate within *Sorrow Swag* are very playful, in the sense that I'm inviting him to perform something that's very far away from him still, despite his white maleness. He is failing at the archetype. He stutters his way through it. He also morphs into a horse, a dog, and many other figures. It's this constant stuttering, like I said. Gender is a part of it.

EG: It made me—*Sorrow Swag*—think about the backlash, or sense of disempowerment that very privileged white men feel when their privilege is disrupted in any way, and the vulnerability that that brings out, but also the aggressiveness.

LL: Well, that reading already links very much to identity. You know, white male identity is not that interesting for me, or that the entire piece should be read just through that lens. Of course, identity is part of the work, and one which Brian “performs” and wrestles with. He is like an actor; he is playing within this fiction that I created. I know there are these terms “white privilege”, “white fragility”. There are all these terms that are supposed to describe experience. I think these terms fail at describing very much. I think life is much more complex. I think the failure of “identity” talk is that it gets stuck, trapped in what this one body represents. One body can't carry that burden. One body cannot, and how foolish that we live in a society that we focus on what just the one body does, and one body's failures versus the failure of systems that create these bodies. So when I put a body like Brian's in space, I am aware of the fact that identity is present. It's one of the many textures, but it's one of the many. and it's not a piece intended to make people feel bad for or fear white people, not at all. Brian fails within these prescribed connotations and within his own representation within the theater. In the end, his image disappears and we are left with a scream. It's a pity that'd be lost on a conversation just about his identity or his purported “white fragility”. The intention is for people to sink into sadness and to sink into a reality from which grief is real. And “culture” and notions of progress still fail us. In my work in general, I want to create a different relationship to space. I want a different relationship to the theater. I want failure to be part of the theater. I want to de-stabilize and/or reimagine identities, including the theater's. I wanted to work on grief and its representation within the theater, but without having it collapse into a woman's or a person of color's body, because I don't want to create more images of women or people of color suffering. So how do I create other images of grief that aren't totally affirmative? This is tricky terrain, I know, and I am inevitably in trouble regardless of who performs this work, but it seems as if I can't escape trouble. *Sorrow Swag* is a difficult piece that even I wrestle with, but I felt I had to make it. You know, I often start with problems, and through a process I arrive somewhere I couldn't have imagined beforehand.

EG: Of course, all of what you just said is going on too. It was just that thinking about the framing for me that opened up something else in terms of representation.

LL: Maybe it appears to be an obvious feminist posturing, but I am still interested in the idea that I can, as a woman of color, build a relationship to that figure, and author that relation. This is important to me. I mean, it's still very much linked to my body, as I created the work and because I do all the practices within the work—but I thought, maybe I don't have to be visible in this piece, or maybe the work could be even more poignant through my invisibility.

EG: That seems related to the question of taking a stance too, because if you're representing yourself too, it's really hard to avoid taking a stance. That's all about constructing what your own stance is.

LL: In a way, but this is a way to make it a little bit more nuanced. When it passes through multiple bodies, already you have multiple positions in relationship to your own. It already makes it that much richer, that much more complicated. That's just the space that I'm in now, because I don't have solutions. I have feelings. I have a sensibility, and I have desire to shift things, or shift the way we see things, or to create new images. I know that the theater has that quality—you end up in this very symbolic realm, and that's why I'm so interested in this idea of interiority, or why the thoughts are so present. My performers get into the sub-symbolic, so I think that's where the symbolic sort of starts to crumble. We start to see the nuances of subjectivity and how these subjectivities operate within certain conditions and space and time. I think that's where I'm trying to go.

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