



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 7, Issue 2

Winter 2024

Review: Ocean Hester Stefan Chillingworth, *Blood Show*, Battersea Arts Centre, 12-23 November 2024: Transition, violence, and the choreographic

Marcus Bell

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 December 2024

Date of Publication: 31 December 2024

Citation: Marcus Bell, 'Review: Ocean Hester Stefan Chillingworth, *Blood Show*, Battersea Arts Centre, 12-23 November 2024: Transition, violence, and the choreographic', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 7.2 (2024), pp. 137-142.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v7i2.1866.g1973

volupte.gold.ac.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Ocean Hester Stefan Chillingworth, *Blood Show*, Battersea Arts Centre,
12-23 November 2024
Transition, violence, and the choreographic

Marcus Bell

Goldsmiths, University of London

Ocean Hester Stefan Chillingworth and Craig Hamblin face one another. Ocean is covered from head to toe in fake blood: an exuberance of concocted liquid pain. Craig is caked in clown white. They stand within an arm's distance of each other; noiseless, expectant. Craig raises his hand to check the quality of the gap between them, one of the many gestures which comprise the durational score that both dancers will repeat on loop throughout the performance. A breath. Suspension. Until the sickening crack of contact breaks the silence. A slap, which moves them both into the concussive rhythm of a sequence of fight choreography which rotates around the space. Navigating a set of modernist design pieces – a white sofa, a white potted plant, a large white rug, a small white table on which sits a water urn (filled with blood) and plastic cups (to hold this blood) – the performers describe broken noses, teeth clamping down into flesh, knees colliding with ribs. As they move there is a transfer of sweaty materiality, red streaks across Craig's neck, marks on the back of his white jumpsuit where Ocean held on for balance, painting the objects and one another as, negotiating the planar folds of bodies in motion, or redirecting force to sketch the trajectory of a wound, they leave traces. Simultaneously, they offer to us the tender revelation of flesh and musculature underneath blood red, bone white. Two bodies begin to heave and sweat alabaster, sweat crimson, under the heat and pressure of death.

It is Craig who, after being thrown over Ocean's shoulder in an exacting backward roll across the floor, emerges victorious. He pins Ocean down. The loop's wails and keens of pain subside into muffled peace as his hands wrap around his duet partner's throat. Ocean's body writhes. It is hard to mark the difference between their final attempts to fight back under the crushing vacuum and their body's involuntary spasms, its death throes. Starved of oxygen and

consciousness, their flesh screams and gasps into darkness. Craig watches them. This final gesture lasts minutes.

Transition is a violent process. The body opens, collapses and is resurfaced continuously. As we age we are worn, we fold and bend. At the cellular level this gentle cataclysm is ongoing, always liable to go wrong, open to mutation, transformation, glitch. It is happening right now as we breathe and the transfer of inside and outside works across fleshy, porous membranes, mucus, microbial ecologies belching, all our holes and surfaces working barely, just. ‘We are networks of blood’, Ocean reminds us.¹ Transition is constant. This violence is generative and at one level this is how the duet works, as ‘a trans celebration of destroying things, including ourselves, in order to create something new’.²

Through the performance we are also called to participate in what Dionne Brand has called the ‘calculus of living and dying’.³ This calculus shapes destruction, demolition, and acts of exuberant self-annihilation – seen in the horrifying rates of suicide which peak in minoritized and subjugated communities, self-destruction as self-expression of the systemic and violent murder of queer and trans people that is a core drive of the colonial machinery.⁴ This necropolitics, shapes the choreographic encounter in which a figure of total whiteness commits a sustained act of violence for the audience to witness. We know this destruction. We know the fear and grief. Queer and trans people feel this acutely in our daily fight for survival, in our failure to hold on to life. The performance score encompasses these histories which flow out of state and police repression that has a 200-year arc in the production of the identity categories that come to define us today.⁵ The recent undermining of the Equalities Act in the UK through the ban-extension on puberty blockers, is one of the latest indexes of this distribution of pain. But the performance score also indexes acts of destruction which work to smash out of and destroy those enclosures. The force of both forms of violence and demolition shapes the enfolding choreographic encounter, it is negotiated by Ocean as they scream a fist toward Craig’s head, it’s held in Craig’s body as he stands over Ocean’s gently breathing corpse.

However, as we sit in our ponchos ready to be splattered the frame of the work breaks open. Reader, do not worry, the stage violence is constructed (but you already knew this), and depending on which angle you see it from you can spot the gaps between skin and bone, spot the dancers knapping to produce the impacts. The performers are, as Ocean tells us, ‘increasingly worn down and done-in, not from violence but from the effort of simulating violence – the effort of intentionally not being violent’.⁶

The loop begins to reset. Rushing into the space comes a third performer: enter ghost, floating above the scene in a gentle bounce as Ocean and Craig head to their respective corners of the ring and begin to re-cover their bodies in pain. Toward the end of the night this demand for recovery leaves Ocean on their hands and knees scraping blood from the carpet to cover their face, their knees, and hands. The ghost guides Ocean back to face their double. Measuring the emptiness, Craig prepares to move. Ocean tells us:

This is a kind of dancing my body seems to understand. In some ways, it’s a very tender headspace (or, body space) to be in. It feels like saying: *Let’s use our bodies in a totally caring and connected way to convince people, momentarily, that we’re trying to kill each other. And then let’s start again. And again. And again.*⁷

At the end of the preceding loop Ocean tapped Criag’s leg, giving the signal for another suffocation: as if to say ‘more’, ‘give me more’, ‘again’. Craig places his hands over Ocean’s nose and mouth sealing off all airways. Criag watches them, as minutes pass in the enclosure of this dying act. Ocean’s diaphragm jerks as their body lifts off the ground in involuntary ecstasy. This loop unfolds as the ghost hovers between them and haunts the back of the space. Beyond the confines of the ring she begins to sing: ‘I’m going in for the kill, I’m doing it for the thrill’, [...] ‘but don’t let go of my hand.’

Perhaps it seems incongruous to be writing about this dance for a journal on decadence, as its poetic force works because it has a spare and economical score. The quartet – Ocean, Craig, the ghost, and 75 litres of blood – always threatens to resolve into a psychoanalytic conceit (‘oh they are fighting themselves’) before it spirals onward, and the overdetermination of meaning rends

interpretation down toward bone-feeling, with each loop introducing only one or two more choreographic devices into the mix. This time both artists can pause, for example, or now they can repeat a gesture so that an eye gouge happens in triplicate, and by the time both Ocean and Craig find themselves on the ground once more they rest, breathing heavily, checking in with one another before they go onward toward one more deadly suffocating clasp. Perhaps it doesn't seem decadent at all, and yet, there is something in the accumulation of violence, something threatening – boundless – that cannot be contained by the score. There is doom hidden beneath the once pristine white of the set, jumpsuits, and props. The looming terror of dying, the messiness of rebirth, a trans poetics of the bloody and gory mess of transition, and still beyond that a pain screaming to break through the fabric of the work.

We are in a balloon of gore. As these three phantoms respawn and loop, the atrocities in Palestine and Gaza amass. The terrifying genocidal and colonial campaign wrought by Israel and funded, technologically scaffolded, aided and abetted by the UK, USA, France, and Germany spills into Lebanon, Syria. Over 45,000 dead in Gaza, and the ability to report on those dying and sick devastated. Hospitals, schools, homes: ruins. We witness these planetary necropolitics also in Congo, Sudan, Yemen – the flush of war on our politicians' cheeks.

There is a gap between the violence of the dance and the world from which it was made. Suddenly the loop collapses. 75 litres of blood are unleashed in a deluge. Out from underneath the sofa cushions, out from underneath the potted plant, come buckets of red. A blood bath, then sequences which mime gunshot wounds, blood gurgling from a half-open mouth, exhaustion, a body rent through the space again, and again, and again. Encounters with the ghost: a human trying to measure up to death, an empty embrace. Until eventually Craig and Ocean begin to leave.

Blood Show is one part of a series which Ocean calls the *Extinction Trilogy*, a network of attempts to 'obliterate and transcend the human body'.⁸ It is comprised of

three works (*Monster Show*, *Blood Show*, and *Nature Show*) [which] present a slow experiment in masking performers and trying to delete humans from the stage, in

order to make us think more about the limits of the human body, why we want to know what people ‘really’ look like, and how dangerous the idea of ‘the natural’ is.⁹

Some of us have never been (fully) human. The natural is truly a deadly idea. We are in the wake of the collusion of these two concepts (human, nature) as they have been brought together or torn apart by coloniality. And here, as the performers exit the stage, there is an invitation to read this as the ending of man. I am with Ocean. Our concept of the human needs to be undone, and this leaving is a form of self-reflection also suggested by other such climate-inflected works – another invitation into self-destruction, perhaps – but I am more interested in the possibility for radical transformation.

I am hailed by the wake of the ‘human animal’ – I am caught by ‘the inconceivable decibels of all the things we’ve lived before’, as Dionna Brand puts it¹⁰ – I am in the vibrating blast-radius, the doom metal of disability,¹¹ and with Sylvia Wynter I know that being human is a verb that can be reshaped.¹² But to do this work we need to form critiques and find the mode of action capable of dismantling and breaking out of the enclosures that drive the ‘gore capitalism’ of which we are a part,¹³ the brutalism shaping the ongoing genocide in Palestine, the horror in Yemen, Sudan, Congo, and Lebanon.

I think the concept of extinction and the way it has been worked, driven and turned into profit is one way to get us there. Ocean’s trilogy when seen in full might articulate such a critique of violence through a deep exploration of this idea. But on its own I don’t think *Blood Show* does it. The final image is astounding, however, transcendent. As darkness falls over the pool of blood, we are left with the ghost spinning and singing – lifting spirals out of the earth.

¹ Ocean Hester Stefan Chillingworth, ‘Tender Brutality: The Violent Dance Of “Blood Show”’, *Dance Art Journal*, 16 October 2024 <https://danceartjournal.com/2024/10/16/tender-brutality-the-violent-dance-of-blood-show/> [accessed 29 December 2024].

² Chillingworth, ‘Blood Show’, *Chapter* <https://www.chapter.org/whats-on/blood-show> [accessed 29 December 2024].

³ Dionne Brand, ‘On narrative, reckoning and the calculus of living and dying’, *Toronto Star*, 4 July 2020 https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/dionne-brand-on-narrative-reckoning-and-the-calculus-of-living-and-dying/article_47884274-07ad-561a-973b-027ef2cbc8fb.html [accessed 29 December 2024].

⁴ See the Trevor Project for statistics and support.

⁵ Jules Gill-Peterson, *A Short History of Trans Misogyny* (Verso, 2024).

⁶ Chillingworth, 'Tender Brutality'.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Chillingworth, 'Blood Show'.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Dionne Brand, 'Prologue for now – Gaza', *Jewish Currents*, 27 October 2023, <https://jewishcurrents.org/prologue-for-now-gaza> [accessed 29 December 2024].

¹¹ Johanna Hedva, *How to Tell When We Will Die: On Pain, Disability, and Doom* (Hillman Grad Books, 2024).

¹² Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter, 'Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?: Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations', in Sylvia Wynter, *On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. by Katherine McKittrick (Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 9-89.

¹³ Sayak Valencia, *Gore Capitalism* (Pluto Press, 2022).