

# IT'S ALWAYS BETTER TO BE A LITTLE BIT HUNGRY

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In: *The Soul in Limbo*, Roma Publications

*It's always better to be a little bit hungry*

-Agnes Martin

## STAGE

Choreographer Peter Brook talks about the empty stage and if you cross it you assume an audience, or you affect one. I can take an empty space, he says, and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space while someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theater to be engaged. (1) The clock-like jumping of the dancer in Jennifer Tee's *Star Crossed 1* is like a warming-up exercise. Later, all five dancers shake their hands and arms as though they are about to get ready for the start. But we're *in the middle of things*. So this is an in-between movement, a getting-ready-for-the-moment of physical preparation, in the middle of things. Almost the entire choreography of *Star Crossed* is a string of non-movements, of non-choreography, as though the warm-ups, the muscle pulling and stretching, the breathing and the loosening up are as important as any other more designed movement. The posing, the postures, the resting – the whole performance is a like a string of pearls, or a beaded necklace; each pearl, each bead is whole, and still connected to its neighbor. Each movement a whole but connected to the others. Each dancer an individual but connected to the group. And this string of movements copies the one long line of urns and large-scale jars and containers next to it. Each set of stringed movements mirroring the title of one of the twelve ceramic vessels.

These empty vessels range from funerary vases to healing bowls to water jugs and their shapes echo the movements of the performers. Or, rather, the movements of the dancers repeat and pay homage to the shape of the vessels. The titles are stamped on the side of the vessels and are important: *Star-crossed; replacing a great miss; ancestral sacrifice; hair, heart, liver, ovary; infinite worlds; inner process; recovered memory; transcend & escape; healing; secret selves; spiritual retreat*. The great importance of the titles lies in the meaning of the movement. Just as the performance mirrors the material's shape, the title underlines the meaning of the vessel and the choreography binds them together. Leveling out all three elements so that there is no hierarchy between word, movement, material – or – title, choreography, object.

## OFFERING -> TALISMAN -> AMULET

The overarching title, *Star Crossed*, refers to the notion that our destinies are set in the stars, or at the very least, are set by a force beyond our own will. Which brings up a crucial element in Tee's practice: the spiritual. But not the spiritual divorced from its earthly roots. On the contrary: the spiritual very grounded in material.

An object in Tee's practice is *set into motion* by the performance, serving almost as an offering in the act of a ritual. And, like an offering – that is, a fragment that points towards, on the one hand, the belief to which it belongs and, on the other, the ceremony to which it also belongs – Tee's objects are formally metaphoric for their narrative sites. But only partially so. The objects themselves, in their very being, hold on to the meaning of the narrative (visualized in some cases by the performance, if one is involved). And though they might be construed as offerings servicing this larger narrative, they are not merely metaphoric in nature. They do not only stand in for something else: they hold the magic in themselves.

So instead of concentrating exclusively on "offering" we need to move further into the realm of what? Magic? Spiritualism? Belief? And consider the "amulet." The amulet might be closer to the key of Tee's things, for the amulet possesses natural magical properties. On its own. Where the talisman has been invested with its power, the amulet just has it by its own *nature*, intrinsically. The difference might seem semantic, but it is appealing to think about here. Take the vessels in Tee's *Star Crossed 1* (or 2), could they be considered amulets or talismans? Do the titles refer to their own meanings, or to functions? Or do they stand in for the thing they name? Does the performance consecrate the object, name it, so to speak, make it into the thing it is titled? Does it charge the vessel with its magic? Or, the opposite: is the performance subjected to the power of the object – the performance thus becoming *an explanation* of the vessel? Let's come back to that question.

## EMPATHY

Agnes Martin said, "In graphic arts and all the arts technique is a hazard even as it is in living life." (2) Regarding perfection, she also wrote, "I hope I have made it clear that the work is about perfection as we are aware of it in our minds but that the paintings are very far from being perfect – completely removed in fact – even as we ourselves are." (p.8) There's an exercise that tests the mirror neuron where one person stands in front of the other. A starts to move an arm while B has to follow. A looks into B's eyes and B into A's, and only peripherally can A or B see their own hands and arms moving, but as they do move, and follow, and start and stop, B loses sight of B's own responsive role and A begins to doubt if A was the one instigating or following. A and B

inverse their roles and reverse them so quickly that neither knows who is following whom. They melt into each other, into one synchronous movement; arms and hands and eyes are shared and there's no ending and no beginning.

If we are to presume that the mirror neuron is responsible for empathy then it is this neuron that warns the brain when it is concerned that the neuron it's about to watch dance (or move) is not up to speed. Tee is not a dancer, not a trained dancer. But she has participated in her own performances (*Entwined Bolero*, *Gridding Sentences*). This could potentially make someone nervous – a feeling of temporary embarrassment if tuned to the idea of watching a “dance” performance. But for Tee it's not about the craft of dance as such. It's about the relationship between the body and the object, about the repetition of movement to create an almost meditative state, a place of exercise where the mind and the body can meet. The mirror neuron in this case, you could say, connects not only viewer and performer, but also somehow manages to locate itself in the animate *and* the inanimate. Linking the object and the movement and the stage and the body, the viewer and the viewed. And, crucially, leveling notions of aesthetics, technique, and attempt.

## RUMOR

Coming back to the question of the status of the object in Tee's work: does the performance allow the object to be or is the thing an excuse for the performance? Looking at *Gridding Sentences* might afford an answer.

*Gridding Sentences* recalls the misty sound and the muddied colors of an old Callanetics video. The precise postures, sometimes slow, other times fast forwarded poses, mirrored, repeated, complicated and awkward positions of the five performers come across as a somewhat uneasy workout underpinned by a Lynchian soundtrack. The stripes and dots on the bodies, written onto the skin of the legs, look like specks of light and shadow, pulling the bodies into the space above the rug, extending the rug upwards and gluing onto the bodies, as though lights reflecting lines and stripes shine onto the rug/now stage. The dancers use the rugs as a platform and stage. Again, the dancers' movements are limited by these crystalline forms. And when they finish, when they leave the stage, their presence is burned into the rug and the rug – the object – is, you could say, charged by the memory of their presence. What would *Gridding Sentences* have been like without the choreography? If one does not experience the performance directly, if it lives instead through a rumor? Would a mention, a word-of-mouth of the choreography be sufficient to activate the talisman quality of the rug? I believe so.

Again, I turn to Agnes Martin, who pointed out that it is up to the viewer to get what he/she wants from the painting. Martin: “And as a painter

you couldn't give something to the viewer who didn't come looking for something. Like a cow that can give milk only if it has grass and water." There's a concentration and a rest in Martin's work that – if you want – you can experience, too. So there's a weight in the thing itself, a quality in the actual product that determines its condition of presence. Could that quality for Tee lie in the actual formal characteristics of the rugs (*Crystalline Floorpieces*)? The shape of the rugs is based on the crystal form, and a crystal is a thing in a state between liquid and solid. An in-between that also repeats itself and becomes a motif or a pattern. This form, the stripes, the pattern, also works as a kind of "map"; in the case of *Gridding Sentences*, it maps itself even up and onto the dancers.

If indeed the rugs in *Gridding Sentences* recall a floor version of Agnes Martin, could we say of them as Agnes Martin said of her gridded paintings?

"My formats are square, but the grids never are absolutely square; they are rectangles, a little bit off the square, making a sort of contradiction, a dissonance, though I didn't set out to do it that way. When I cover the square surface with rectangles, it lightens the weight of the square, destroys its power." (3)

The form subverting itself and in doing so avoiding the static nature of a thing in perfect balance. The repetition thus not an underlining of exactness, but an emphasizing of attempt.

## SYNCHRONICITY

The question is: should she (Miri Lee) the performer go on indefinitely during *Rugs and Bones*? Is there a reason to stop? As though she is depicting a state of mind rather than moving through linear choreography. The music moves rhythmically like a breathing. Like we are inside her mind, her self, and witnessing her body breathing. *Concrete Interior* makes other performances, including *Rugs and Bones*, clearer: the focus on the dancer (again Lee) on only one *Crystalline Floorpiece* filmed on a rooftop in Lower Manhattan, underscores the lack of objects. The fact that it is a solo performance – one dancer, one female dancer – points to the absence of a dynamic between things (or people), the deficiency of a between, of associations, becoming apparent. It's not happening out there. The viewer is instead invited inside, inside the mind of a woman – a woman considering what is possible. (*Concrete Interior* is a response to the Adrienne Rich poem "What is Possible.")

If Tee jumps on this state of reflection, inhabiting it and presenting it to an audience, for example, if she *occupies* Andre Breton's *Nadja*, does she also claim to *be* the soul in limbo in question? To *be* the reflective woman in *Concrete Interior*? This might be an objectionable question to

pose. Acceptable only because the answer could determine how close the viewer is allowed to approach the work. How close the viewer is allowed to have a sense of his/her own limbotic nature. Does the experience remain at a distance, an arm's length? Is it *a telling* instead of *a sharing* of the soul in limbo?

A state of limbo is naturally one where all things can occur, a potential for things to happen (or not). As synchronicity is an offering of multiple solutions. Where movement, thing, words, objects, colors, stage, sculpture, music, sound, quotes are presented equally. And it is this equality which is vital to Tee's work.

#### AND, FINALLY, THE ULTIMATE WINDOW DRESSER

Allan Kaprow spoke about how in the West "purity" and "impurity" have been important concepts for understanding the nature and structure of reality as well as for evaluating it. He said, "In the largest sense they have defined the goals of human and natural activity, explaining the world's events as an ethical passage from one condition to the other." (4) But what if these states were only two points in an array of possibilities?

So if one considers that there are traditions in art making that have fought to keep the product humble, subservient to the process creating it (making process equal to or worthier than product) and others that hold onto craft maintaining its authority over concept, and still others that advocate that the thing itself, coming out of the world itself, preserves its un-authored domination and holds hands with the eager institution, one might be able to argue – no, one would be able to insist – that Tee's work slips through all the cracks. She separates the thing and its process and the craft and its history only to glue them back together again in such a way that the viewers, the audience, the experiencer, can all feel these ingredients were once separate, but in a time before their encounter with them. And now they can't figure out where the one starts and the other ends, nor do they need to.

- (1) Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, 1968 (Penguin edition, 2008)
- (2) Agnes Martin, *Writings*, Edited by Dieter Schwarz, Kunstmuseum Winterthur, edition Cantz (2005), p.24
- (3) Agnes Martin, p.14
- (4) Allan Kaprow, *Essays on The Blurring of art and Life* (1993/2003), "Impurity" (1963), pp. 27