



**“With a Body Made of Time”:  
Andrea Geyer’s *Time Tenderness*  
and Contemporaneity at The New Whitney**

By Saisha M. Grayson

“It’s all right here.”

So says Jess Barbagallo, the magnetic narrator of Andrea Geyer’s *Time Tenderness*, a performance piece for two dancers and one performer, comprised of twelve speeches, four choreographies, four poems and four songs. The work was commissioned for and performed during the months following the opening of the new Whitney Museum of American Art in 2015. Dressed in a pigeon blue suit and with an assertive voice, Jess speaks about the convergence of many things—the historical works adorning the recently built walls of the space; performers and audience; the times past and present that come together in that meeting. Yet these words also invoke something else. As an art historian and curator deeply invested in arguments around what the role of art museums can and should be in contemporary culture, “It’s all right here” resonates at that moment for me, in those newly installed galleries of that re-imagined peon to “American Art,” with a combined sense of relief and disbelief. All those debates, critiques, and years of conversation behind the scenes in hopes of someday changing some monolithic idea of “the museum” and today I see light glimmering through cracks in that wall. The new Whitney emerges in this inaugural presentation as an institution trying to respond to and willing to engage an (art) history that is more complicated, more politically fraught, more plural than it once appeared. Jess’ words attest to my presence at a public opening that could also open onto new models of history and contemporaneity for art museums in America, if they dared. That these ideas have not only impacted what is visible in the room around us but, through Geyer’s intervention, are being made critically legible and available for further interrogation by all who are listening around me feels profounding moving, even if I know at the same time that museum business goes on as usual in innumerable other ways. Geyer’s performance becomes a tuning fork that day, tapping on the wall of each gallery and amplifying the potential radicality implicit

in the Whitney's collection-based exhibition, *America is Hard to See*. It also demonstrates the invaluable role of artists in pushing these conversations even further, as the inquisition that she and her performers stage within this museum illuminates the challenges that all museums face in trying to keep alive the intermingling multitudes of productive energies that are encapsulated in the series of objects pulled from storage and placed on display. Sure, it may be all right there to see, but it is Geyer's interpolation that walks us through the significance of these shifts, asks about the false start, skipped steps and rough patches yet ahead. Following her performers through the entire building, through the arc of the twentieth and twenty-first century, serves as a primer in bringing the urgencies of the present into the museum experience and ultimately becomes as a user manual for how we can turn museums into time machines that serve the future as well as the past.

We begin on the eighth floor. The chronological chapters of *America is Hard to See* unfold starting from the top of Renzo Piano's spacious and light-filled building abutting the High Line, winding towards the present as you approach the ground floor. In an historic move, for their opening season downtown, the Whitney had decided to devote the entire building to works from their permanent collection, so this progression is a journey through American histories, art histories and institutional histories simultaneously. The way these histories intertwine, constructing and deconstructing each other, makes the exhibition's title profound, as visibility and invisibility are made contingent and open for critical analysis. While waiting for the performance to start, I circle the first gallery and am thrilled to see women artists and artists of color highlighted as present, even central to the birth of American modernism and the Whitney collection. As Jess and two dancers, Lily Gold and Omagbitse Omagbemi, take up places in the gallery, I notice they are standing next to or in front of these very artists' works. Then they call out their first names and those of artists with identity positions previously sidelined within the master narrative of American Art, a roll call that will continue throughout the performance as they enter each new gallery. "Jess, Marsden," the narrator names themselves, a transgender performer, and the homosexual painter Marsden Hartley,

whose guarded memorials to lost lovers no longer need to be obscured by discussions of color and plane. "Lily, Georgia," says the female dancer with curly hair tied bohemian-style under a wide scarf, introducing herself and invoking Georgia O'Keeffe, one of the few women modernists whose work has been consistently recognized as crucial to art history. "Omagbitse, Elizabeth, Isamu," intones the other dancer, an African American woman acknowledging the presence of works by African American and Native American sculptor Elizabeth Prophet, and Japanese American sculptor Isamu Noguchi. The use of first names creates a sense of intimacy and allegiance between the performers and these artists and their work. Furthering this sense of intimacy and attentiveness to inclusion (and exclusion), Jess addresses the teeming audiences spilling in and out of that gallery, making contact with eyes around the room, "Art needs the layman, it needs their backing, their opinions, their criticism." Resisting perceptions of performance art as particularly esoteric and of an isolated art world, this opening line invites everyone present to feel entitled to participate. It also names a truth often obscured by historical accounts that emphasize genius and individual exceptionalism: that Modernism and the New York museums that canonized it in the first half of the twentieth century were predominantly started by networks of women, women who in their time were almost always characterized as amateurs, who had to self-educate, organize, and persistently promote a vision that was not authorized by professional titles or PhDs. Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, a passionate writer, artist, collector and founder of the artists' club that would become the museum in which we stand, was treated as a dilettante. Juliana Force, who would assist Gertrude in these pursuits and be the museum's first director, was originally hired for her secretarial expertise. By opening with the story of these two women, *Time Tenderness* not only honors the Whitney's founders but it rewrites





contemporary visitors' relation to them. It brings Gertrude and Juliana into the gallery, so we can consider together the choices, the originating values and the personal pathways that created an invaluable, but not inevitable or invariable, establishment for the artists and artwork important to them at the moment this all began. While Jess speaks, the two dancers begin a duet, two bodies moving as one. Their movements gently lure awareness back and forth between Jess' words and the insistent presence of animated bodies in the museum. At times their choreographed gestures seem to provide commentary on the point being made and at other times to pull away from any narrative towards the body's own logic. These fluctuating demands on our attention instantiate the complex relationship that Geyer's works map between spoken language and the knowledge associated with it, and with the language and knowledge that inheres in bodies as they respond to the spaces and times in which they move.

Jess' opening monologue winds down, "It is comfortable for us to look today at collections and simply trust the decisions that formed them. Yet we all know how foolish this would be." And yet this had been the unstated assumption underpinning modern art museums since the ascension of New York as a cultural capital after World War II. This came with an attendant ascension of certified art professionals, museum directors and corporately-sourced board members who did claim authority as objective arbiters of values and whose whiteness and maleness were supposed to have no bearing on the "universal" tastes (and investments) they promoted. Within the first few minutes of the performance, in the first room of the new Whitney, Geyer has brushed away as foolish this stubborn ideological effect of Modernism. No longer useful, hardly believable from where we are standing now, she replaces it with an opportunity to discover what a contemporary vantage on the invention of Modernism reveals: a Modernism that has always been more diverse, more fragmented and multivalent, more aware of its own positionality and politics, than Modernist histories of Modernism allowed. Even more surprising, she makes this all seem self-evident, as if a universalist interpretation of Modernism hadn't been the looming institutionalized boogie-man that feminists, postcolonial critics, poststructuralists, critical race and queer theorists had railed against

for generations. We get to encounter instead a Modernism populated with people, events and artworks that had always been there, alive to us within histories suddenly made available in the present.

In the next room, the dancers engage in a duet before Richmond Barthé's *African Dancer* (1933). The living dancers, the dancing sculpture and the undulating pink and blue petals of the O'Keeffe behind them merge into swirling abstracted but familiar forms. A rocking, digging motion with arms turns torsos on an axis; a balletic arabesque pose melts back into a half-seated position. The two performers lock legs, then arms, leaning back into each others' supporting curves. Following Geyer's signature strategy of combining found texts with her own commentary, Jess reads a quote from O'Keeffe and then pulls a scroll from a pocket (a nod to Carolee Schneemann) and reads a poem by painter Florine Stettheimer, which includes the lines, "When I meet a/ stranger/ Out of courtesy/ I turn on a soft/ Pink light/ Which is found/ modest/ Even charming./ It is a protection/ Against wear/ and tears.../ And when/ I am rid of/ The Always-to-be-/ Stranger/ I turn on my light/ And become/ myself." I get chills, the confession is so personal, the metaphor so relatable, I can't help but catalogue the times I've done the same.

Then Elisabeth Prophet's words echo through the gallery, "The intelligent thing is not to complicate that which is simple, but to simplify that which is complicated." This lesson is one that certainly extends across centuries of artistic pursuits. It speaks to the female Modernists who braved discouragement and dismissal while pursuing pure forms and pared down structures in their work. It also underscores Geyer's feat of bringing complicated notions of histories' mutability and co-existence with the present into the simplest form, as embodied presence before us. There are certain works in a period that crystallize and make available to those not immersed in theory or debating philosophy the essential core issues at stake in that moment. They make the theory so apparent, so resonant with one's own life that anyone experiencing it can suddenly come into a new ontological knowledge about themselves and the context they share with that work and the world. The same way Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-80) seemed to encapsulate a decade of writing on deconstruction and the mediated performativity

of postmodern subjecthood, Geyer's *Time Tenderness* brings the writings on contemporaneity into the gallery in a way that is immediately understandable at an intuitive, embodied level.

Throughout the performance, Geyer allows time to become tangible. Time in a historic sense, as well as in a personal, experiential sense within the museum. The ongoing dialogue between the dancers, Jess, the works in each gallery and the interpolated audience emphasizes the inevitable presence of lived time when looking at art. After Jess delivers each speech, the dancers flow between individual sequences of choreography and short segments of improvisations. Willfully taking up space and pushing out from walls and across rooms, the dancers turn the galleries and their holdings of art and audience into stage and set. Their movements resist the expressive tendencies of dance as their gestures and demeanor seem to have an almost demonstrative quality. At various points on each floor, as they engage in these tasks, Jess addresses them with a list of statements and observations as if testing to see which will resonate or solicit a reaction. The call and response of Jess' poetic list telegraphs between a personal perspective ("She smiles at the struggle") and historical and conceptual fragments ("War/ Intangible temporalities"), further investigating how knowledge resides simultaneously in language and in bodies. The dancers at times acknowledge the ideas proposed to them, most often not, maintaining the tension of language as a script to be enacted as well as a transcript of actions past. Throughout this passage, pronouns stay slippery and loose. Listening, I play the name game, thinking of which individual is implied for each "she" but also how many others could occupy given signifiers, from Gertrude and Juliana, Georgia and Florine, to the dancers to perhaps the mother in the family next to me. When the litany is completed, the three voices of the performer finally join together in song. The rolling melody,



thigh-slapping timekeeping and amateur sing-along-style suggest a traditional work song or folk ballad that we might all join if only we remembered more of the words. On each floor, the first stanza changes, but the chorus repeats verbatim with the affirmative declaration: “No hiding of power/ in bodies with scars/ revealing us time in present at last/ revealing us time in present at last.” This chorus of singers implies the chorus of artists we’ve been introduced to on this floor—with bodies both powerful and fragile, like ours, revealed as potential comrades for the chapters ahead.

Then the performers head “off stage” to the outdoor balcony that extends from each of the floor-thru galleries and we, the audience, are left to our own devices. We mill about and take in the panoramic views of the new New York that this new Whitney inhabits—the elevated factory train track transformed into the curated, landscaped High Line Park melding into the mod-inspired Standard Hotel and bracketed by the still industrial skyline of New Jersey across the Hudson. History and intimations of the future fold in and out of an urban landscape taken over by late capitalism and driven by its economic and ideological cycles. It’s all right here, staring back at us.

Fifteen minutes later, we gather on the floor below, where Abstract Expressionism explodes across the walls and floor and the performance’s cycle begins again—names of women, minority and queer artists are called, a joint dance in front of Lee Krasner’s monumental *The Seasons* (1957) and an address taken from the archives; this time, a 1919 New York Times article “Poor Little Rich Girl and Her Art” about Gertrude Whitney, the title’s condescension ringing in dissonance with the museum’s expansive new presence and the bold presentation of its collection. The dancers move, inserting their presence between large canvases and floor-bound sculptures, firmly grounding us in the now, followed by another poetic list and song. We continue on to another smaller gallery, encountering the same structure, more names (the list keeps getting longer), more speeches mixing historical texts with contemporary philosophical meditations, more dance, more call-and-response recitation followed once more by the song—rollicking, hopeful, empowering, revolutionary.

Models of museums are at the same time always models of history and value, which offer competing models of who we were, are and want to be. One way to dissect what is at stake as institutions rethink their role in society is to ask whether a museum is attempting to be a contemporary museum or a modern museum, not in terms of what period of work it shows, but in terms of which ideology of time it enacts. The Whitney Museum, with an impressive collection that spans from the emergence of Modern art to the present in the United States, is particularly well-equipped to tell a variety of stories, and the choices it has made for this institutional renewal register as more than just an aesthetic selection. As canonically put into practice uptown at the Museum of Modern Art, the Modernist tradition as it has been defined in its own terms is linear, progressive, singular, confident, with history narrated as the unfolding march of innovation towards one goal after another (abstraction! flatness! dematerialization!). This is not to say that Modern Art can only be seen in this way, but that a Modern presentation of its history will look one way while contemporary presentations of the same art could and would explore different aspects of those objects’ histories. Increasingly, theorists of culture are marking a distinction between this modernist perspective and what seems to be the essence of our contemporary experience: defined not by progression but by the simultaneous coexistence of a variety of narratives, geographies and temporalities that are perpetually and productively agonistic. In his 2010 book, *What is Contemporary Art?*, Terry Smith described this contrast between modern and contemporary temporalities:

It is commonplace that modern times recognized themselves above all in what was seen as the irresistible nature of the world’s incessant shifting from past into present, processes that occurred in the name of the future. The current situation... is characterized more by the insistent presentness of multiple, often incompatible temporalities accompanied by the failure of all candidates that seek to provide the overriding temporal framework—be it modern, historical, spiritual, evolutionary, geological, scientific, globalizing, planetary... We might also say that time is, as well, moving in many different directions: backwards traveling, forward trending,



sideways sliding, in suspension, stilled, bent, warped or repeated. Only for some, nowadays, does time move inevitably forward. It is, therefore, being experienced differently—as if we were all, all over the world, existing in different times and places, in distinct cultures and settings simultaneously.<sup>1</sup>

If this contemporary experience is to be put into practice in the art museum context, it would require an institution to publicly wrestle with the meanings that various historical trajectories and temporalities will have for an ever-changing present. *Time Tenderness* actively performs this process of wrestling with history in the space of the museum. It presents history as public, up for debate, porous, problematic, likely to change, and diverse and divergent in its narration. In so doing, the performance highlights how feminist, queer and multicultural concerns have changed the face of not just America today but the America we can now see as we look back with different eyes and interests, attuned to recognize things we have been taught to overlook. It suggests the way deterministic societal structures and political events intersect with the inexplicability of fate and idiosyncratic individual lives to produce a million moments of unexplored potentiality, endless lessons to be learned. We are invited to become co-present with the artists in their historical moment, to see their choice to make this thing, this way, as an exhilarating discovery coming out of persistence, precision and risk, rather than an inevitable (and inevitably laudable) arrival at a foregone conclusion.

Seen through this lens of Geyer's intervention, the Whitney's permanent collection—what it includes and actively excludes—is re-framed as a churning set of arguments about who we are and how we got here. *Time Tenderness* turns this recognition into form, adopting a narrative structure that is elliptical but straightforward, poetic but precise. Enacting in each gallery the transhistorical, cross-cultural, interpersonal connections that are so frequently cited as art's special transportive power but are so rarely demonstrated in action, the performers help us not only navigate but critically reflect on what is unleashed when history is put into motion. As a museum curator whose primary role is to place objects on display, I am left wondering what is translatable from Geyer's approach to institutional practices, and how static installations might better

inspire similar communion and critique. Without Geyer as a guide, how do we encourage audiences to become participants with agency in their own wrestling with what's on view; what are the tools that help one stretch and slip through time while wandering through galleries? I don't leave with any answers, but with the invigorating sense that the importance of these questions has been recognized and that they define the crucial, communal project for my generation of museum makers.

Geyer is explicit in her intentions, both within her works and in her writing around them. The critique of modernist, totalizing histories that she forwards is not new but the precision and clarity with which they are delivered, enlivened through embodiment and embedded through repetition, gives them affectivity and personal and ideological resonance. There is also a productive shift enacted in her work, from an earlier feminist focus on rewriting historical events to insistently grounding her inquiry in the present. She invites us to ask how and why we participate, in the here and now, in collective omissions of undeniably important and impactful historical truths.

She lays out the challenge of operating in a present suffused by consciousness of a constantly redounding, resignifying past, in the structuring of *Time Tenderness* and directly in the script itself. On the Whitney's 7th floor, Jess, borrowing language from theorist Wendy Brown, proclaims:

Times of understanding history as unified in a singular story of progress are long gone. "Other" histories continue to emerge around us, claiming space, claiming minds, like cracks in a pavement. While the past becomes less easily reduced to a single set of meanings and effects, the present is now forced to orient itself amid so much history and so many histories. Yet even with our



feet standing on such upheaved grounds, there is an undeniable persistent longing for the master narrative, master history, the master, genius, white god, men. We have not jettisoned them as a source of political motivation or as sites of collective loyalty.

The future might appear to you more uncertain, less predictable, and perhaps even less promising than the one figured by the terms of modernism. But for some of us we see that these disruptions suggest in the present a porousness and uncharted potential that can lead to futures outside the lines of modernist presumptions. [Pause.]

This is where art begins.<sup>2</sup>

This is the theoretical version of tough love, standing in a room flanked by images of lynched black bodies (almost an entire wall, featuring artists from José Clemente Orozco to Paul Cadmus), trench warfare (Jacob Lawrence's *War Series* (1947)) and economic and political injustice (in works by Ben Shahn, Alice Neel and others), the cracks in the American Dream. We can literally see how history might seem less promising when the master narrative gives way; when, for example, the second quarter of the twentieth century is no longer oriented around the march towards abstraction but around urgent intersecting political and artistic struggles. Yet this disruption is necessary to our own struggles to assert black lives matter, resist the rush to military solutions and defy the dehumanizing logic of capitalism; it puts us in touch with creative comrades in arms from the 1930s and 40s, and gives different shading to the contours of the present. If this is where art begins, it is also where new alliances become possible, where new confrontations, born of new knowledge of old confrontations, are emboldened. Exploding anachronistic ideas of autonomy, Geyer insists that art is riven with purpose and it is up to each of us to do the work of seeing it in its own time and out of time, before history reduces it to a single set of meanings and assigns it a fixed place in the past.

Such straightforward statements and demonstrations of artistic stakes can make further explicating of Geyer's projects feel like repeating points she herself has already carefully crafted. So it is good to remember that Geyer is interested in the power of repetition. While her

practice has always taken inspiration in historical moments and their relation to the present, since 2010 a suite of works has brought voices from the beginning of the twentieth century, from moments at the brink of political revolt, redefined ideas of gender, and artistic transformation, and created space for them to appear before us, repeating themselves in language as contemporary in its convictions as any that might be spoken amongst creatives and activists today. These projects themselves have also taken on a structure in which insistent concerns find new forms, overlapping moments are revisited to find their multiple meanings, historical subjects and relationships figure in one piece and then another, shifting media, tone, but constantly pushing towards an appreciation of potentialities unlocked in each return to a different present.



In *Infinite Repetition of Revolt*, a collaboration with Josiah McEhleny, Geyer's performer contrasts the argument by Rosa Luxemburg for consensus-based organizing and alliances amongst the disenfranchised with Louis Auguste Blanqui's proposition of a revolt led by a small elite. Performed at the Tate Modern, the speaker's new context—London, July 2011 vs. Berlin, 1919—allows this repetition to function as insistence, one comrade speaking to another as though we are all in the room ready to organize and overthrow together. To appreciate the currency of such encounters, consider that six months before, a collective public occupation of Tahrir Square led to regime change in Egypt and two months later the leaderless movement now known as Occupy Wall Street would foreground revolutionary models based on consensus and alliance-building.

For *Comrades of Time* (2010/2011), the speeches, essays and letters of Luxemburg and her contemporaries from the Weimar Republic period in Germany—such as Helene Stöcker, Walter Benjamin, Alice Salomon, Sigmund Freud, Elisabeth Sussmann, George Grosz and





others—are condensed into individual monologues. In seven separate videos, different performers sit at the exact same Bauhaus-style desk and sincerely engage the viewer with ideas that are urgent to both their present and ours. In one, we find Jess in a smart black suit with white tie speaking in startlingly contemporary terms about embracing the full spectrum of sexual desires, orientations and identities, about refusing the label of sexual deviancy and celebrating difference, about the fear and self-interest that motivates those who deny queer subjects political agency—all in words taken from Magnus Hirschfeld, a cross-dresser and sexual sociologist during the Weimar era. *Comrades of Time* takes its title from an essay of the same name by art theorist Boris Groys, originally published in *e-flux journal* December 2009 as part of a two-part issue asking, “What is Contemporary Art?” As noted, Geyer’s recent practice opens onto and can be understood in relation to a wealth of critical writing on contemporaneity.<sup>3</sup> It is at first unsurprising that Geyer would cite Groys’ text, as one of the key contributions to this discussion (“comrades of time” being his translation of the German word, *zeitgenössisch*, meaning contemporary) and one that focuses not only on what it means to be contemporary, but on repetition as essential to this experience. In many places, Groys’ essay reads as a treatise explicating the significance of Geyer’s recent projects exploring the Modern in relation to the present. Groys argues that, following the fall of Soviet Communism that defined the ideological and artistic stakes of the twentieth century:

...Contemporary art can be seen as art that is involved in the reconsideration of the modern projects... Classical modernity believed in the ability of the future to realize the promises of past and present... But today, this promise of an infinite future holding the results of our work has lost its plausibility... The present has ceased to be a point of transition from the past to the future, becoming instead a site of the permanent rewriting of both past and future—of constant proliferations of historical narratives beyond any individual grasp or control.<sup>4</sup>

However, despite identifying the present as an endlessly active site for rewriting past and future, Groys’ ultimate proclamation on this state

of affairs emphasizes delay, boredom, loss, waste, excess—being “stuck in the present as it reproduces itself without leading to any future.”<sup>5</sup> For him, the art that best expresses this condition is exemplified by Francis Alys, *Song for Lupita* (1998), a looped animated video in which a woman pours water from one vessel to another indefinitely. This repetition with no difference and no goals represents both the end of teleological thinking and suggests for Groys, following George Bataille, an “escape from the modern ideology of progress.”<sup>6</sup> Repetition without difference, according to Gilles Deleuze, also goes against everything in the natural and historic order. Groys celebrates this radical rupture with progress and the continuity of life as “the point at which art can indeed become truly contemporary.”<sup>7</sup>

This is obviously a far cry from how Geyer employs repetition. Following Gertrude Stein, she emphasizes the inevitable, subtle alteration of each utterance as a way to retain the dynamism of existence within representation and gain new knowledge through this process. Groys’ essay, written from the perspective of loss, conflates the end of teleological projects with the end of projects worth pursuing, and the abandonment of a unified idea of future-oriented progress with the delegitimizing of progress itself. However, given the different relationship that female, queer, and non-white bodies have to these “unifying” projects of the past, artists such as Geyer are far more inclined to keep these concepts separate and find potentiality in the proliferation of historical narratives for themselves and their comrades in struggles that are ongoing and hardly defined or suspended by the collapse of Soviet Communism.

The powerful, productive significance of temporally-transversal projects is exemplified in the interconnected assemblage of pieces that originate in Geyer’s 2013 research residency at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and extend to *Time Tenderness*. The video *Insistence* (2013) was produced in response to finding that, despite being the acknowledged founders of MoMA, there were no archival records or photographs documenting the relationships between Mary Quinn Sullivan, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and Lillie P. Bliss. When Geyer asked about this absence at the Rockefeller Archives, she was told by the archivist that relations between women at that time were not considered worth

preserving. Confronted with both the need for and the limitations of a feminist revision of this history, Geyer turns to Stein’s lecture *Portraits and Repetition* (1934) in which remembering functions as repetition, with “insistence that in its emphasis can never be repeating, because insistence is always alive...”<sup>8</sup> According to Stein this repetition-as-insistence has the power to shift that which is stuck in master narratives, in ideology, in the status quo into new orientations, and to affirm a continuous and powerful agency for things that have already happened through their contemporary reverberations. Geyer’s *Insistence* follows this lead and seeks to animate the networks that the MoMA’s three founders instantiated, to flow through moments of creative catalytic connections that, when traced from one present to the next, lead to a very different emphasis within a contemporary encounter with a new past. The video performs this process, showing a wooden table on which photographs of the women, their associates, lovers, business partners and friends, are placed one on top of another, insistently building a historic present out of fragments and clues. Geyer narrates in voiceover, switching between telling the story of these women’s visionary endeavors and directly quoting Stein’s text, allowing it to comment on this form of portraiture that is actively enacted rather than captured and contained. Hardly analogous to pouring water back and forth endlessly, the productivity here does not need a future goal to be valuable. The shift in emphasis in the present is a real, valuable effect that is not primarily about these women’s reputations but about what we gain from a recast Modernism.

Emerging from this same research, and a desire to bring it to life by making it urgent once again, *Three Chants Modern* (2013) was a performance for video, ultimately shown as a two-screen installation. Similar in narrative structure to *Time Tenderness*, six performers dance in pairs through the otherwise deserted galleries of the Museum of Modern



Art. Quotes from the archive, facts about its founding, and poetic texts recited as a group echo through the spaces. The empty whiteness of the galleries is foregrounded as the women move in isolated duets, interact with the architecture, and pause to consider paintings and sculptures that render women as objects. They quietly contemplate Modernist masters, collected and championed by their foremothers, donated but also ideologically expropriated into an exclusionary narrative. Unlike the live performance at the Whitney, however, there is no audience to engage, no direct communion with the artists on the walls, and little affinity to be found in the curatorial ethos. Rather, the dancers feel like ghosts, on the one hand searching for traces in galleries that had actively excised their presence and refused their centrality; and on the other, by posing for family-style portraits with Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1911-12) or Louise Bourgeois' *Quarantania, I* (1947-53), claiming this space inevitably as their own. Like in *Time Tenderness*, the performers come together in three songs. The last line of their final song underscores the feeling of omission: "It's loud and it's here, a story in line, in books and in pictures, but truly not mine." One can read this earlier work as a first step towards Jess's more confident opening in *Time Tenderness*. This implies "it's all here" but buried—deliberately made hard to see, to feel connected to, to be included in, to find oneself within.

To aid in the excavation, Geyer began *Revolt, They Said* (2012- ). Initially a tool for Geyer's expansive research on women and Modernism, this seven-foot long, hand-drawn chart of the early twentieth century avant-garde from a feminist perspective has recently become its own stand alone work. As part of this explosive map of eight hundred and fifty names of women and their allegiances across class and cultures, Geyer and her research assistants also built a database to collate biographical information on each protagonist. Databases are infrequently thought of as a way to make anything more lively, with their deadening, stenographic collapsing of lives into spreadsheets, tabs and tags. Yet like all databases, which image their potential dataset as infinite, this creates a leveling of the historic playing field. Gathered from years of research, Geyer's data represents a generation of women making, dancing, doing, talking, sharing, writing, traveling, meeting, loving, learning. Though predominantly focused on the American context, the networked

invention of Modernism spreads in all directions, potentially inclusive of all participants, and as such this historical material is ironically reinvested with catalytic combustibility.<sup>9</sup> Each point of connection is a miracle that makes something else possible, each person is central to some node, whether mapped or not or not yet, that will link to other as yet unrecognized moments of great import.

But this too, the idea of greatness, has been rethought and redistributed. The criteria have shifted, and it is now up to us and the next generation to redefine what is important within this sea of energetic activity. It's not all here yet and never will; the database is an incompletable task. Names are added to constellations on the map, new lines are drawn between far corners of the compositional universe. The limitations of space and scale will eventually cut off the transfer of data to drawing, but I suspect the synergies found in the map and the spreadsheet that holds its stories will feed into Geyer's thinking in other ways for a long, long while. Starting with the women who founded MoMA, then finding the links and overlaps to the Whitney women and artists they supported, the drawing delineates their productivity but also now reflects Geyer's interconnected, generative engagement with this material and these institutions. She is drawing as she creates new historical memories for the museums and its viewers and for her oeuvre simultaneously.



We are coming to the end. I've followed Jess, Lily and Omagbitse to the fifth floor galleries, into spaces crammed with low-fi feminist video, conceptual art and the early institutional critique of Hans Haacke. Surrounded by the cacophony of styles, mediums, and personal "messiness" that the sixties' demands for inclusiveness and respect for difference brought into the artworld, Jess does not turn to historic texts but speaks with the voice of Geyer, asking the question that almost always



emerges around projects that still force a confrontation with the master narrative:

When it comes to art, why still talk about women? Queer? Transgender? Native-American? African-American? Latino? Asian-American? Why disenfranchised? Working class? Less privileged? Differently educated? I sometimes can't believe, I still need to ask these questions, ask them here with you. Given we all live in the same world. Or do we? Believe me, I am not interested in statistics, in feel good numbers equated by reason. The truth is, what I am interested in is the fact that we don't know the potential of these words, these classifications, these identities in this country until many more who are described as such are rendered visible to culture, to politics, to the everyday and the latent sensibility that comes from those positions can be recognized at large. What would happen if all of us could be turned on, infatuated, guided and lead by the thought, that art, that dormant reason of women, queer, Transgender, Native-American, African-American, Latino, Asian-American, disenfranchised, working class, less privileged in the same way we have been turned on for centuries by a dominant culture which is widely exposed?

Importantly, Jess answers by turning this set of questions from a modernist mode, concerned with statistics and who is in or out of a canon, to the contemporary model invested in meanings and potential. This is a good reminder that the contemporary museum is not simply a modern museum that has updated its selection by adding a few women and people of color, or is focused on the hot art of today. The contemporary museum will be where we are turned on by other values, other experiences, other pasts and futures that are not congruent with and challenge the ones we thought we knew. That is, the contemporary museum can become an urgently needed space for constantly reenvisioning the self and society, and for generating empathy in a divisive world.

In the final gallery, I hear this very hope for the institution echoed back to me in words that tickle a memory from a few days before. I look up and realized that, standing before Glenn Ligon's glowing white

neon "America" sign (*Rückenfigur*, 2009), Jess is reciting from Michelle Obama's speech for the Whitney's dedication ceremony, held outside the new building a couple of weeks prior. After almost two-hours of hearing voices from multiple temporalities set in the broad poetic strokes of Jess' running monologue, it is startling to be brought up to the absolute present by the First Lady's plain-spoken, pointed statements about what such a museum can mean today for all of us.

I cannot think of a better theme for this inaugural show than "*America is hard to See*." 'Cause that title isn't just a statement of fact, it's a challenge that the Whitney has embraced with open arms, the challenge of truly seeing America in all of its glory and complexity. With this exhibit, all of you have asked the question of how can we truly fully witness the melting pot of culture and sensibility and struggle that make America unlike any other country on earth. This is a bold, very hard question. And this exhibit isn't trying to provide any kind of definitive answer, instead it's doing something even more important. It's inviting us to answer this question for ourselves. Each of us reflecting and rethinking our assumptions as we walk through these galleries.

It is also startling and poignant to confront the mixed promise of progress and frustration implicit in ending our journey with this tableaux: hearing the words of this brilliant, strident African American woman who is now the First Lady of a country founded on slavery, making the same argument out there for the potential of the contemporary museum as we have been exploring right here; within this last gallery which is one of the darkest and most difficult of the day. Entitled "Course of Empire," this room is full of work addressing America's trumpeted War on Terror and its less publicly declared war on the poor and people of color. Watching this group of performers with diverse cultural and social identifications speak, flow and feint before Ligon's simultaneously shining and faulty beacon for "America," reminds us again how language's symbolic power can overshadow and be undermined at the same time, can be reversed and turned inward within a body, can claim presence and at the same time withdraw. While Jess via Michelle

Obama questions the privilege of the space we all stand in today, the dancers Lily and Omagbitse's alternation between choreography and improvisation reinforces an awareness that all the bodies in this room are described and inscribed within this larger discourse of access, of legibility, of privilege. The performers halt for a moment and face the audience one last time for a song: "Remember my friend things always keep living / echo through noise and strongly dimmed lights / on walls of museums, in motions and visions / they master our time gleaming us bright." Then they turn to head "off-stage," dispersing and disappearing into the crowds of museum visitors, leaving us—the audience and the works in the gallery—as the only remaining agents for change.

Surrounded by art that condemns but can't alone end America's wars, we are reminded that museums may also function as mostly symbolic; that words are often in danger of being confined to rhetoric; and that we sometimes get thrust backwards as we go forwards, in bad ways as well as good; that progress isn't always progressive; that this artistic journey may encourage our striving towards unrealized potential but it remains our task to figure out how to actualize this in our lives, in our dealings with each other and in the future worlds we are building together.

And yet, seeing each other is a good—perhaps the only—way to start. And it is one, *Time Tenderness* suggests, that art and its museums, premised as they are on the history of vision as much as visual culture, the seeable and its relationship to the sayable, are poised to launch.

Artworks like these are prisms reflecting time. Bodies like yours are prisms reflecting life. It's all right here. No longer out of time, but with time. Inviting us patiently and persistently to be present to what it means to be alive.

1. Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010), 196.
2. From the unpublished script for *Time Tenderness*, with quoted passages from Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2001), 5.
3. In addition to Groys, see the many other contributions to Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle, (eds) *e-Flux Journal: What is Contemporary Art?*, (NY: Sternberg Press, 2010); Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010); essays in anthologized by Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee, (eds), *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), and Giorgio Agamben's essay 'What Is the Contemporary?', in *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, (Stanford University Press, 2009): 39–54.
4. Groys, "Comrades of Time," *e-flux*, December 2009. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/comrades-of-time/> (accessed September 17, 2015).
- 5.-7. Ibid
8. <http://www.andreageyer.info/projects/insistence/Insistence.html>
9. A lot of energy has been devoted recently to theorizing the agency of non-human entities, for example, in Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 2010) in which she describes "thing-power" manifested through assemblages of humans and non-human actors. While Geyer's map could be related to such interests in tracing networks in which a painting, a building and a woman are all co-conspirators to produce an effect in history, it strikes me as more important to recognize that until very recently, women were considered things, objects whose private conversations, personal relations, and various activities were imaged to be as far removed from the motors of history as a table, tree or glove before object-oriented ontology. Therefore, looking back into the past from the present in order to trace their networks and see them as actors is to dismantle the presumptions about Modernism, both its shape and its ideology, and to allow the process of narrating history to change that history.

