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Dana Michel, Lift That Up, Toronto, Progress Festival, curated by Dancemakers

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Dana Michel
Lift That Up, 2016.
Photos : courtesy of the artist

Dana Michel (with Amanda Acorn, Ellen Furey, and Simon Portigal) *Lift That Up*

The title of Dana Michel's most recent dance piece seems, at first, relatively straightforward. *Lift That Up.* It's a simple three-word phrase, a concise directive. Quickly, however, questions start to bubble up around the edges of this erstwhile uncomplicated command. The referent is missing, and the "*That*" floats untethered. What is meant to be lifted? And by whom? And how far? And then what? Do we lift "*That*," and continue lifting it interminably?

Indeed, throughout Michel's piece, as with its title, simple things become complicated, convoluted, and riddled with inconclusiveness. Near the beginning of the work, dancer/collaborator Simon Portigal sets about making coffee. This is, of course, a relatively mundane task—a daily ritual for many. And yet, there are choreographic forces at work here that intervene in the efficiency characteristic of daily brewing habits. Portigal's movements are stilted; the surfaces of his limbs seem to seek the back wall of the shallow depression in which he sits, despite the awkward corporeal positions this impulse necessitates. His activity becomes a sequence of eyes rolling and squinting to see, uncomfortable reaching, arms and hands quivering from over-extension, and making a mess with spills and splashes. Not to mention that this entire procedure begins with Portigal pulling a Bodum from the crotch of his comically oversized jeans.

During this sequence another question arises: do the choreographic processes at work here render a simple task confusing? Or rather, are such tasks already so? Have actions like making a morning coffee always been circumscribed by the uncertainty, and even absurdity, of human endeavor, however trivial?

A word has already begun to repeat in my thinking with Michel's piece: task. And indeed, *Lift That Up* comprises many tasks. In one moment, two dancers are busy, side-by-side, with different activities. One transfers colourful liquid between containers that increase in size. The other moves marshmallows from one tray to the next. It is almost tempting to refer to such sequences as task-based choreography. Immediately, however, a number of contradictions arise. The designation "task-based" typically refers to the work of the early postmodern choreographers working at and around New York's Judson Church. On a formal level, this canonical example of task-based work was significantly more streamlined than what we see in *Lift That Up*, generally less based on the actual use of objects than the distilled gestures of using them. For these artists, task-based choreography responded to specific artistic and cultural contexts. Choreographers like Yvonne Rainer sought to do away with the disciplinary requirements of modern dance and to challenge gender assumptions, in part, as the scholar Frank Camilleri has noted, by locating neutrality in the body. Camilleri cites Rainer: "The incorporation of ordinary experience into the context of the dance proposes a strategy for demystifying movement and for neutralizing the chargedness of the performance space and the performer's highly trained body."

But if task-based choreography was meant, for the postmodernists, to demystify and render the body legible, something very different is taking place in Michel's work. Here, we encounter a version of task-based movement that is enthrallingly and delightfully perverse, operating more through opacity than clarity. Indeed, as Dancemakers curator Amelia Ehrhardt writes in the performance's program, Michel's process is "both deliciously impenetrable and supremely inviting." Again, Michel's choreography, here, serves less to warp quotidian gestures than to enact the always already warped experience of the everyday.

Indeed, a politics begins to emerge, where what Ehrhardt calls the "singular poetry of dancemaking, its special fuzzy

logic" becomes indexical to the fuzziness of contemporary existence in late capitalism. And when the language of corporate executives or financial analysts sneaks into the dancers' mumbled speech, amidst rambling non-sequiturs and barely understandable elocutions, the spectre of this social context feels increasingly unavoidable. In her essay "Our Aesthetic Categories," Sianne Ngai identifies the "interesting" as one of three aesthetics (alongside the "zany" and the "cute") emerging from late capitalism and indicative of its "most socially binding processes." Ngai identifies circulation as the correlative of the interesting, which comprises "a serial, recursive aesthetic of informational relays and communicative exchange." The speech acts that take place throughout Michel's choreography both enact, and subvert, this aesthetic formulation. The dancers rehearse the form of continual communication, while making its content impenetrable, and rendering these performances of circulation both bewildering and humorous. In one moment, Portigal stands bare-chested and bewigged with a microphone, repeatedly making peculiarly heartbreaking attempts to vocalize. Here, communicative circulation fails before it gets off the ground, or out of the lips.

Of course, like informational accumulation, material accumulation is another essential process of capitalism. And yet, the mass of collected objects that fill *Lift That Up* resist clear purposes or productive economic uses. What is more, throughout Michel's piece, dancing bodies and objects move toward a seemingly non-hierarchized plane of materiality. As we enter the Theatre Centre's intimate performance space, we come upon an abundance of items: a table draped with fabric, metal containers and implements, heaps of denim. Once the audience has settled among the few rows of seats, dancer/collaborator Amanda Acorn slowly crawls into the space. Moving horizontally, floor-bounded, Acorn's body takes on the shape and orientation of the inert material filling the space. The other dancers enter similarly, rolling and slouching over one another; piles of limbs become visually synonymous with surrounding piles of objects. As the piece progresses, the boundaries between the dancers' bodies become porous, as do the surfaces between these dancing bodies and the inanimate bodies they move, carry, fill, and displace.

All these blurred edges and indeterminate entities may seem, rhetorically, to recall the neutrality of postmodern propositions. And yet, even as the bodies and objects of *Lift That Up* become diffuse and difficult to define, they are certainly not neutral. They are idiosyncratic and impractical. Their strangeness ricochets from one to the other, growing and shifting through circuits of carefully confused movement and action. This may be a convoluted logic, but it is precisely such a logic that courses through Michel's choreography, and constitutes our experience of it, even after the dancers withdraw, skipping and laughing.

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