

Susan Gibb

MYRIAM
LEFKOWITZ,

LA BIBLIOTHEQUE

Across a two-year development period, the artist Myriam Lefkowitz frequently employed the word “attention” as a way to mobilize spectators’ bodies and minds. Its utterance was an instruction to concentrate time and focus in the here and now, in a manner both urgent (this requires action) and generous (to give time). Lefkowitz’ interest in an attentive state can be traced back to her training as a dancer and choreographer, and most notably with the American dance-maker Lisa Nelson and her Tuning Scores — an improvisational composition practice that “... make[s] evident how we sense and make sense of movement, exposing our opinions about space, time, action, and desire, and provide a framework for communication and feedback...”¹

Over the past decade, Lefkowitz has been extending these somatic, sensory, and spatiotemporal intelligences to more interdisciplinary modes of performance. She does this through an ongoing process of sharing practice with a network of collaborators and workshop participants. From these she has distilled an ever-evolving catalogue of what she terms “choreographic tools”, which she enacts as designed situations in public space.

1. Lisa Nelson, “Lisa Nelson in conversation with Lisa Nelson”, *critical correspondence*, 1 February 2008, movementresearch.org/publications/critical-correspondence/lisa-nelson-in-conversation-with-lisa-nelson.

These include *Walk, Hands, Eyes (a city)* (2016–ongoing), an hour-long walk through an urban environment for which a participant is asked to close their eyes and be guided by a performer via a touch score: that is, the performer, in an alternating pattern, lightly touches the hands, shoulders and temples of the participant to indicate shifts in their direction and speed; at moments along the way the participant is asked to “open, then close” their eyes for a snapshot glimpse of a framed scene. In *How Can One Know In Such Darkness?* (2018), also experienced with eyes closed, this time it is a whole group who lie in silence. For up to an hour performers lightly place and brush textiles and everyday objects against the participants’ bodies to activate a sensorial-perceptual experience.

Lefkowitz has also staged these tools together in the collective art project *La Piscine*. First developed and presented over a two-year period (2014–15) in the ageing Leclerc swimming pool in Pantin, an outer Parisian suburb, Lefkowitz invited her frequent collaborators to learn and transmit her choreographic practices while doing the same with theirs—

such as Valentina Desideri’s “Political Therapy”, which mixes direct discussion of political issues with hands-on healing, and Ben Evans and Alkis Hadjiandreou’s *The Ignorant Tour Guides* (2011–ongoing), a walking tour with an audiovisual guide.² The pool replaced the studio as the setting for exchange, lending its unique architecture and daily rhythms to the endeavour: the cafeteria became a meeting point for aromatic cocktails and tea ceremonies; practices migrated into the water and found small utility spaces to occupy; regular swimmers became curious participants taking up the opportunity to participate in a session, returning for repeat visits afterwards, adding it to their pool routine. *Walk* became the way of moving between the spaces, and from one practice to another. New audiences attracted by the project made a new discovery in Pantin, encountering a diverse cross section of the community in action, and witnessing the dwindling government investment into public infrastructure of which Leclerc is a monument.

2. Lefkowitz created the first iteration of *La Piscine* with collaborators Jean-Philippe Derail, Valentina Desideri, Ben Evans, Alkis Hadjiandreou, Julie Laporte, Géraldine Longueville, Florian Richaud, Simon Ripoll-Hurier, and Yasmine Youcef.

Upon commencing her commission with *If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution*, Lefkowitz arrived with two desires: to further test the format of *Darkness* and *La Piscine*, and to develop a new choreographic tool that could address the relationship between text and embodiment through the act of reading. The seed of this enquiry lay in conversations with the political philosopher Cécile Lavergne and questions that arose from their mutual reading of the feminist writers bell hooks and Audre Lorde: “How could other forms of understanding, which include the sensorial, the affective, and the imaginative, participate in how we make sense of these texts? How could the actual ‘body’ be ‘rearmed’ by these theories? How could these thoughts be embodied and not just be theoretical material stuck in the head and only used to ‘argue’?”³

Through a series of workshops held by *If I Can't Dance* in Amsterdam, *La Ferme du Buisson* in Paris, and *Bulegoa z/b* in Bilbao across 2017 and 2018, *The Book Club* (2018–ongoing) slowly emerged in response. Staged with small publics and in closed sessions with her collaborators, each workshop

3. Email correspondence with the artist, 14 March 2019.

commenced with participants practising aspects of Lefkowitz' established attention tools before extending outwards into more open experimentation. In one workshop with *If I Can't Dance*, we found ourselves grappling with each other's bodies, turning, twisting, wrenching, dragging, while simultaneously reading opening paragraphs of Donna J. Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (2003). While discordant, Lefkowitz mediated the experience throughout, gauging feedback, understanding what we were feeling and what we were not, what stuck with us and what remained out of grasp.

When she later returned to Amsterdam in November 2018, it was with a fully articulated score that employed deep touch. The application of more dramatic alternations of weight and pressure, alongside subtle rotations, reorientations, and vibrations of the body distinctly differentiated *The Book Club* from her previous tools. Interspersing this touch score was the spoken word, with the performer softly reading passages of feminist theory sourced from numerous texts by Judith Butler, Prudence Gibson and Monica

Gagliano, and Haraway, to name a few. These words become fleshy resonances, bound to the impression of touch in their reception, non-illustrative settling-ins taking root in the body.

In parallel to *The Book Club*'s development, the idea of the library emerged as a site of interest for Lefkowitz to practice and deposit her tools. Like the public pool of *La Piscine*, in the library she found a public institution in which diverse members of the community gather, intersect, and participate in open forms of knowledge exchange on a daily basis. She also identified it as a point of conflict between the social ideals of democracy and the political and economic rationalizations of neoliberalism as libraries increasingly must justify their need for resources, while facing unique changes to their historic function with the rise of digitization.

In *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life* (2018) the sociologist Eric Klinenberg defines 'social infrastructure' as "the physical places and organizations that shape the

way people interact”,⁴ emphasizing the value of human acts, civic engagement, and social interactions within these places.⁵ He writes passionately of libraries, as “places where ordinary people with different backgrounds, passions, and interests can take part in a living democratic culture”.⁶ Likewise, the scholar Tim Huzar writes in a 2014 paper “Neoliberalism, Democracy and the Library as a Radically Inclusive Space” that the library’s sociopolitical potential lies not in its being an instrument of democracy, but its initial assumption of equality among those who use it. How might Lefkowitz’ catalogue of “choreographic tools” work across this open selection of books and subjectivities existing in the library? What new reading and knowledge practices could be formed by putting these tools to use, taking advantage of their focus on the body, senses, and perception? How might these practices help shape political subjectivity and its mobilization?

4. Eric Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*, Crown, New York, 2018, p. 10.

5. Other social infrastructure places include: “schools, playgrounds, parks, athletic fields, and swimming pools, . . . sidewalks, courtyards, community gardens, and other green spaces. . . . Community organizations, including churches and civic associations, . . . regularly scheduled markets for food, furniture, clothing, art, and other consumer goods. Commercial establishments. . . , particularly when they operate as what the sociologist Ray Oldenburg called ‘third spaces,’ places (like cafés, diners, barbershops, and bookstores) where people are welcome to congregate and linger regardless of what they’ve purchased.”

6. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

In answer, Lefkowitz, with collaborators Lendl Barcelos, Alkis Hadjandreou, Annick Kleizen, and Zoe Scoglio, occupied the University of Amsterdam (UvA) Library. For the month of November 2018 they used the library to test their propositions, followed by a week of public presentations, a culmination point in Lefkowitz' If I Can't Dance project. From the outside, the library is non-descript. Located in the city centre, it is directly bordered by the popular shopping streets of the Kalverstraat and built too close to the road to have an entrance that could announce it as a destination. However, once through its doors, the library unfolds as an entanglement of architectural styles connected by a labyrinthine system of corridors. The west wing has the grandeur of Golden Age architecture, home to the administrative quarters and conference rooms; this clashes against the Modernist design of the book stacks styled with brown-brick walls and bold geometric designs, lacquered wood and corduroy seating. The east wing holds various rooms designed for different modes of study: private booths, rooms filled with nothing but desks teeming with students and their laptops,

a collaboration room complete with signage in bombastic fonts and modular seating native to the corporate ideal of group think and alive with chatter and flirtations.

In between, passages serve as exhibition space and for the “Circulation Room”, a room walled by numbered red plastic drawers, an automated future where books can be checked out without need of the familiar human presence of a librarian.

Across the way is a leather massage chair facing a stock image of a tropical beach.

Within this setting, Lefkowitz and her collaborators formalised *La Bibliothèque*—a collective art project that offered hour-and-a-half one-on-one sessions for five participants three times a day for a five-day period. In each session the guide was free to select from the choreographic tools that they had learned to compose the experience in collaboration with the participant as they went. Alongside these sessions was a staging of *How Can One Know In Such Darkness?* over a single day from morning to dusk.

When I arrived home from the experience of each, I wrote the following notes:

When I arrive, I am paired with Lendl Barcelos. He escorts me to a room of lockers that are powder-coated khaki green and starkly lit by the fluorescent lighting in the low hanging ceiling. He hands me a euro, I pick a number and store my coat and bag freeing my body. Once locked, he instructs me to close my eyes. The glare is filtered out by the soft red glow of my inner eyelids. We then proceed to move using the touch score of Lefkowitz' *Walk, Hands, Eyes (a city)*. The red alternates in tone as we traverse different lighting conditions. I feel changing texture under foot. I hear rushes of conversation alternating with hushed silences, keyboards being tapped, paper being turned.

When instructed, I open my eyes. I am standing by a wooden bench in a hallway alongside a reading room. Rows of students in concentrated study can be seen through a sliver of a window. We sit down. Barcelos lays a black silk scarf patterned with white polka dots between us. Fanned in his hand is a Thoth tarot deck.

He requests that I pick three and ask a question if I wish. I choose the cards but forgo the question. Barcelos places each card face down on the scarf in the order I chose to them. One by one he turns them over, offering a reading of each in relation to its position. The first (Ace of Cups) is interpreted as my past, the second (Two of Disks) my present, and the third (Queen of Swords) my future. He then offers me a fourth card (Four of Cups), which presents a general influence across all three. The reading takes approximately thirty minutes. The context shifts the focus of the tarot reading. That is, I am not so much being asked to believe in the cards' potential for divination, but to engage with the practice of reading and how we edit the meaning of any given moment.

The tarot becomes one way to navigate the experiences that follow. While not framed by a specific question, the reading touches upon perceptions I have around my experiences and ways of being in the world. These impressions linger, folding over and under the layers of sound, temperature, movement, touch, and sight that gather as we navigate our way forward. Nearing the end

of another *Walk*, Barcelos asks me to run my hands along the spines of some books, until I find one that feels satisfying to choose. When I open my eyes, the book I am holding is *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy* (2006). Barcelos asks me to choose a page. I land upon a section about Denis Diderot's great contribution to the secularization of learning, a description of the *Encyclopédie* (1751–66) and its espousing of the mechanical arts. Like the tarot, I start to read into it for its possible signification.

We *Walk* again. When I am next offered vocal instruction, it is to lie down on the floor. I am aware that I most likely can be seen and that this activity is at odds with the environment. I have slept in a library before, my head on a table. But now horizontal, my sense of time and location becomes displaced. I drift in and out of attention, my mind wanders as if on the edge of sleep; there is the subtle sensation of perceptible touch, like an itch or breeze, so light that it is hard to know if it is being generated by something outside of myself or internally. I recognize this as *How Can One Know In Such Darkness?*

Barcelos instructs me to stand. As we go he offers me snapshot impressions of the library, until I am asked to select a final book. The one I choose is on the architecture of the Cistercians—a French abbey founded at Cîteaux that valued manual labour, self-sufficiency, and a fervent adoption of Benedictine rules. The book is in German, which neither of us can read, so I select a passage and Barcelos uses his Smartphone to translate it.

We end the session seated on a low brick wall. A student comes to sit next to us, unaware that a performance has just ended and that they are an extra in a single-take *mise-en-scène*. For some time we stay silent, watching the life of the library pass us by. When we speak, it is to recount aspects of the experience and to gauge the resonance across the various readings, discussing impressions and significations that may have been formed. It feels strange to depart, without applause, and because a bond seems to have formed between us. I pass by some of the other spectators from my session—in the cafeteria, by the lockers, emerging from a restroom—and who like me are

now de-partnered. I wonder what they saw and what they experienced? One gives me a knowing nod. When I get home, I call a friend to enquire about his session the previous week. He recounts another tool, in which he and the performer drew imaginary tentacles coming out from each other's bodies. I think back to the library, and imagine everyone as alien octopuses, a virtual articulation of the spaces that circulate and connect them across their difference in this time and place.

How Can One Know

In Such Darkness?

Saturday, 24 November 2018

Every hour and a half during library opening hours, ten people are led from the foyer up two flights of stairs to a corridor in the administrative section of the building. Here Lefkowitz asks them to take off their shoes explaining the silent experience of repose to follow. If anything becomes disturbing, they are asked to make a gesture, such as raise a hand, and a performer will attend to them. If they feel tension in their bodies, they can adjust their positions. A performer's voice will indicate when the experience is over. They are then asked to close their eyes, and leave their hands resting freely by their sides.

In successive turns a performer collects a single person, using the light touch of a hand to a hand to guide them into the hall. Once inside they are laid down on a yoga mat and a piece of felt is placed over their eyes. Quotidian objects, like the spilled contents of a domestic life, are arranged around them and then placed on or moved across them: a plush lion toy, snail shells,

rocks, crystals, jewellery, balls of wool, rope, make-up brushes, an airplane neck pillow, bath mat, a domino, Rubik's cube, furry blankets, a mesh net, etc.

I participate in a morning session. While my eyes are closed and covered, I can still see, but it's a different kind of vision. I become aware of my sight going inwards, focusing on touch and sound. I drop deeper and find new weight while expanding outward, upward, becoming lighter, less body-bound. I cannot exactly tell where one sensation begins or ends, or what produces them. A certain stillness and supernatural movement seems to occur at once in my body. The erotic is also at play, though one outside of sex and firmly based in sensation and its resulting revelations. I later think of Audre Lorde's "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power": "[T]he erotic is not a question of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing."⁷

Augmenting this staging of *Darkness* is Lefkowitz's allowance for spectators to stay and watch.⁸ Across the day I sit in on three

7. Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*", in *Sister Outside: Essays and Speeches*, Crossing Press/Freedom, California, p. 54.

8. Since 2017 Lefkowitz has been practicing the *Darkness*, in spaces that can be affected by changing lighting conditions as well as allowing participants in the *Darkness* to watch it in practice. She first opened the sessions up at presentations at La Galerie and La Ferme du Buisson, Paris.

more at morning, midday, and dusk. It is interesting to see how the time of day and light play into the collective experience. At midday there is some restlessness in the room, people's bodies are more on the go. Some even express where they need to be next when they arrive. At dusk it is different; the bodies seem content to submit. Someone even falls asleep, his deepening breath forming a rich acoustic swell complemented by a burst of church bells ringing in the day's end. This casts an inescapable magic across the room and the performers visibly surf, following the vectors of their own and each other's movement with the objects and the audience's open reception. All clearly enjoy the moment.

In watching *Darkness* with eyes open, I am struck by what happens to the face of the spectator as their eyes close. Without sight, the shape of their mouth changes, it often drops. It is as if the darkness removes a mask. This continues as I watch them in repose. Visible psychic dramas play out in their bodies. It is like witnessing someone dream, but with more consciousness. While observing, it is clear that for some people the experience is not so easy, in contrast to the open curiosity I felt.

Small twitches and tension reveal different reactions and apprehensions. Where some bodies drop down, others rise up slightly and contract, exposing inscriptions of memory manifest as reflex. While minutely played out, I am moved to see how the performers pick up and attune to these feelings, creating adjustments and space for them to occur and be moved through. While viewing one person with the lion toy nestled on their shoulder, I think about children: the vulnerability of being thrust into this world, without language and in total need of another's body; the imaginative games played to test the parameters of understanding and making oneself in the world; and the physical things that keep them grounded.

Lefkowitz stages fragile theatre that operates with the barest means of body, time, and space. It also steers clear of theatrical tricks like illusion, as well as the art of representation, locating itself instead in the apprehension of experience and the bodily mechanics that allow us to perceive the world—the movement between the senses and cognition.

How do these moving affects and energies find themselves in words and actions? How do they move between us to shape us as people and a community? And how can they let us apprehend anew the social relationships and places we participate in? Perhaps this is the politics of Lefkowitz' work, a call for an attention both urgent and generous, to be paid to the moment-by-moment making of meaning. A witnessing of the movement between feeling and opinion, as an understanding of this is where any seed for change must occur.

IF I CAN'T DANCE, I DON'T WANT TO BE PART OF YOUR REVOLUTION

MYRIAM LEFKOWITZ,
LA BIBLIOTHÈQUE
Susan Gibb

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Performers

Lendl Barcelos, Alkis Hadjandreou, Annick Kleizen, Myriam Lefkowitz, Zoe Scoglio

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