

## Artist Talk – Ligia Lewis

**Joshua Oduga:** Hello. Thank you for joining us for this virtual program, Artists Talk Ligia Lewis. I'm Joshua Oduga, public programs and exhibitions manager at Art + Practice, and we are very excited to share this virtual program with you. This program is organized in association with our current exhibition, [inaudible], Dance as Moving Pictures, which is the co-presentation with the Getty Research Institute. The exhibition is on view until February of 2022. For this program, I'm very excited to welcome choreographer and dancer, Ligia Lewis for an intimate conversation around her artwork and practice. Through choreography, she develops expressive concepts that give form to movements, speech, affects, thoughts, relations, utterances, and the bodies that hold them. Her choreographic work slides between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Hey, Ligia.

**Ligia Lewis:** Hi, Josh.

**Joshua:** How are you doing today?

**Ligia:** I'm good. How are you?

**Joshua:** Doing really good. Really excited to kind of share this public conversation, which I think is a continuation of many little conversations that we've been having over the past few months. We're recording this virtually and I'm currently in Los Angeles. Where are you now?

**Ligia:** I'm right now in Berlin.

**Joshua:** Berlin. Great, great. Berlin in the studio, I believe. Really excited to talk about so many different things in your work, and one of the things I really wanted to start off by saying is that experiencing your work in a theater was one of the first times that I experienced dance in a theater setting, and it really was a transformative experience for me thinking about what could happen within a theater. I have a background in theater, so I had spent so many times in theater, but I had never went to experience a dance piece. And one of the things that I really wanted to ask you, even years ago when I experienced that piece at [inaudible], was how did you start to come into choreography and into dance? And we've been talking about that a little bit in our conversations, but I really wanted to talk about the origins of your practice as a choreographer and dancer, especially as a person that didn't study dance. I'd love to know how did that all start for you?

**Ligia:** Yeah. Cool. Well, firstly, thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to be in conversation with you, also within the frame that you've created around [inaudible] work, so this is really an honor. I started dance kind of relatively late, let's say, for how dance education is perceived, I guess, more or less, also in the context of the United States. I started when I was 15, 16? I mean, I was kind of an aspiring athlete and involved in other things, and I had the fortune to get introduced to dance early through my sister, Isabelle Lewis. She's also a choreographer and artist. Her taking ballet classes and my oldest sister, Sarah Lewis, who also works in performance. So they were busy taking dance classes and I was kind of busy still playing basketball, whatever, and running track.

And then, so they were at a performing arts high school, Booker Washington... Excuse me. Oh Lord. I'm all messed up today, sorry, being in the studio late. I ended up at a performing arts high school,

basically, in Sarasota, Florida. And I was very fortunate that that program introduced very early on in our education experimental choreography, basically. So I was introduced to dance through the works of not only legends like Alvin Ailey, Trisha Brown, Merce Cunningham, but also through the experiments of Jawole Zollar and Urban Bush Women, as well as Bill T. Jones' work. So I was already kind of introduced to these kinds of experimental performances, let's say, that were happening within the theatrical frame. And it was just immediately fascinating for me, because I was coming from being an athlete, coming from having a very strong physical practice, but also having a kind of curiosity, and also kind of intellectual curiosity about what is the capacity for the body to express something beyond its immediate action?

So somehow I, I mean, I was very young. I mean, I was still in high school, but already those kinds of works... Also I'm thinking about Mark Heim, who is also a brilliant choreographer who's also experimenting a lot with music and dance and choreography. He was also a guest teacher at this performing arts high school. And really, that's kind of how it happens. You see a work and it touches you deeply and immediately you're like, you don't know why. Also, at that age I was like too young to really fully understand the kind of depths of some of these works that I was being introduced to, but nevertheless it struck a and curiosity and it pushed me to continue to study dance and to continue within university at VCU. And once again, the program was run by a really wonderful professor, Dr. James Frazier, who immediately engaged us, critically, in performance, and more specifically in the complexities of aesthetics and thinking more critically about aesthetics, and more critically about racial embodiment specifically. And was just... Yeah, it's just, I was... It's literally like being in the right place at the right time.

**Joshua:** Yeah. That's what it sounds like.

**Ligia:** And you just follow that thread and then...

**Joshua:** What's really interesting to me is you started off as an athlete, and when I think of athletes I think about how regimented and structured, especially in a high school setting, being an athlete is, a basketball player and all of that. And then coming to dance, which is also very structured and regimented, but then very early on being introduced to experimental means of working through it. So things that are against the norms that maybe push against those regiments and those things I think are really interesting when those so introduced to people at a young age. And then thinking about Jawole Zollar and all of the kind of deep thinking that then was introduced to you, I think as well. You spoke of your teacher, James Frazier. And him really looking at aesthetics, I think, and really kind of hammering that in to your practice. I think that that's really interesting. And you spoke a little bit about one specific work by Bill T. Jones. That was a little bit transformative for you. Do you want to talk a little bit about that as well?

**Ligia:** Yeah. I mean, I saw the work like a little bit over 20 years ago, but it was last supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin, the promised land. And this is this incredibly epic stage work. Very experimental in nature, intertextual, he's working through a number of threads of thought as well as there are tons of literary references, obviously Uncle Tom's cabin being the most obvious. But also working in visually on representation and thinking critically about this figure of Uncle Tom and kind of transforming the way in which we understand this figure. And while simultaneously building a really complex thread through an embodiment through this multiracial cast. I mean, some of the... It's wild. I mean, some of the scenes are just... Oh, they're so hard to describe, but it's just [crosstalk].

**Joshua:** Yeah, and I think we wanted to show one. How about we show it and then we can both just maybe talk about it a little bit? Because I think that's one of the things that we talked about. It's really good to see work and then it experience it. So let me, I'll share my screen. We'll watch it and then we can kind of get into a little bit of discussion about it.

**Ligia:** I think it's a great idea to show this clip and to also... I think it's in a studio setting, but...

**Joshua:** Yeah, let's take a look at it.

[Video Clip Plays]

**Joshua:** Such a great piece.

**Ligia:** Yeah. It's really... It's beyond it. There's so many scenes. It's really... I remember it also being really, really long. Anyway, I saw Sean [inaudible] also in the ensemble, but he had always works with incredible performers as well. Yeah. I'm just like sitting with some of the eloquence of Bill T. Jones' words and thinking this very question of why something. You know what I mean? You have this possibility to ask some pretty profound questions and then you have to negotiate that in space and time with others. And that seems like such a beautiful... I feel very lucky, very fortunate that I get to call this my job. That's what you do. You ask yourself tons of questions. You don't try to answer them, but you see what those questions kind of agitate and then you deal with their unfolding. And I think that piece specifically, yeah, does that. And I would love to see it again. It's crazy. In a way, I don't want to see it re... It would be difficult to see it re-staged with a different cast.

**Joshua:** You want to see the original, right? I think about that all the time. I think about that all the time as I get a chance to work within archives and even just working with [inaudible] work and seeing so much work, and also realizing that some dances, you need to have learned it from the person that originated it, or it's just going to hit different a little bit. Those things are something that I think is kind of fascinating for me. I want to find more reading about that and talk to more people like you who have the understanding of that to figure it out. Because I think what it tells me is that these practices are so embodied. And I think that word is used a lot by people and dancers, and I think oftentimes it may be hard for people who don't move in that world to understand what that means, but it's like you're giving so much, to me.

**Ligia:** [crosstalk] this thing of an embodied practice, it's not only that. It's not only what you've been practicing. Let's say in order to realize this production, it's all the history, all of that, that you carry in your body. The body kind of is an archive of histories, memory, experience, et cetera, et cetera. And so that's why performances can be so precious, and especially experimental performance. And I am particularly drawn to choreographic work that still negotiates itself a relationship to the folks in the room, dealing with them and their histories as well. So it makes reproducing the work or re-staging it a little less exciting. You know what I mean?

**Joshua:** Yeah, definitely. And I think this brings me to another question that I wanted to ask you in a really beautiful way. My perspective of your work and how you're creating is you're very much a student of the world and your experiences. You're going through and you're taking in so many different things that you're translating through your work, and that's kind of what we were just talking about, I think in a way. And then you do this and take it all in on a personal level, I think, translating your ideas through so

many different things, movement being maybe the beginning, but sound, film, the idea of collaboration, all these different things that come together. And I was really interested in some of the origins of things that you think about when you're bringing this all together. How is it all coming together for you? What's the starting point, if that makes any sense?

**Ligia:** Yeah, it absolutely does. I mean, there's always kind of starting point. Although when you start, you realize you were probably asking yourself these questions years before, and that you finally arrived to the time where you feel like you can actually deal with it. So I have just a collection of notes and notebooks. I'm always, I'm kind of... I like to feel as if I'm always kind of in process, but I stay with things that kind of are haunting for me, or stick with me, and similarly to what Bill T. was kind of reflecting on, you have these kinds of questions of why and then you want to kind of deal with it.

And one piece leads to another, which leads to another, but I'm in the studio right now, preparing some new materials, and it's inspired in part by things that I am reading and what's in the room with me at a certain point out of a certain kind of curiosity, and then a word sticks, or an image, or a... And you start to piece things together. And I've been meditating a lot on a lot of questions about race and representation. And that's a very broad, I mean, it doesn't really say very much, I think. But because I'm dealing with the theatrical frame, I'm often always trying to figure out a space, way, possibility to make that frame as complicated and as messy and as historically potentially violent as it is a kind of place that I could inhabit and make my own. That produces just so many questions for myself and then spins me off into a whole bunch of reading and blah, blah, blah.

And then, and then... I mean, God, each piece starts in such different ways, but it's really a collection of so many thoughts, images, and then music gets introduced. I mean, the piece that we're going to show a little bit later, *Still Not Still*, kind of began actually through me falling upon this musical, *Complaint*, and just kind of falling in love with it and then reading a little bit more about it. And then already having had a kind of interest in this kind of dance macabre and already... You'd be surprised how you start to make notes, and how you're starting to make associations, and how you're starting to throw a kind of tapestry for a world that you might want to build. And when that tapestry gets thick enough, I have enough concepts, I'm asking myself enough questions, there's enough curiosity, and enough that pulls me into kind of moving...

Because I don't always start from movement. That's another thing, it's a little bit different maybe than some. I do have a kind of rigorous movement practice, but it doesn't always necessarily produce things that I'm going to stage. And then once I feel like I have this possibility for a world, I go into the studio like I'm in now and I start to try to make sense of thoughts, and notes, and things. And then once I feel like I have a little bit of an outline or a kind of architecture for something, I then start to seek out collaborators. So I'm like, "Okay. I know that I want this to be a three person performance. Who is the cast?" I'm very deliberate about my casting, because I love performance. Love, love, love it, so I'm often seeing as much performance as possible. And I've had the fortune of seeing just all these exquisite performances and all of these exquisite... And with that included all these exquisite performers. And then you always are kind of keeping in mind like, "Oh, there might be a time when there'll be an opportunity to work with-"

**Joshua:** I'm sure that affects the work, too. I'm sure that those people are all bouncing around in your head and it sounds like the process that you have is such a layered and generative process, that really no

one thing is above another in the hierarchy of what you're doing. I think it's really interesting that you said that, "Oftentimes I don't begin with movement," and oftentimes the movement doesn't translate into what you see in front of you as a finished work. I think that that process is so interesting. And to really take it back to [inaudible] for just a second, being able to sit with her work is when I really started to realize how much contemporary dance, I'll say, I guess, is pulling from that, how much it's so important that the process be so layered in that you think about who your collaborators are or where the space of the work is going to be perceived, whether it is in film or whether it is in a stage.

And so I think you had mentioned to me your interest in experimental German theater, specifically, and different works, and I think for me having had the privilege of experiencing some of those works, in a re-staged manner, which I think is also interesting given what we've just talked about, I think I can totally understand how that would also be something that would be such an effect on the work that you're making. I don't know if you want to talk just a little bit about that, potentially.

**Ligia:** Yeah. I mean, for sure. I mean, when I first came to Berlin, I was just very thirsty for artistic expression. I was like, "What is going on here?" And I had the privilege of going to the [inaudible] and catching shows randomly and just intuitively kind of stumbled across... Yeah. Just went there without even fully knowing the weight of that particular theater, it's history. And then I was very seduced by some of some experiments. I mean, [inaudible], it's a German theater director whose one experimental theater piece that I saw very early that kind of stuck with me is one of his stage works. It was, once again, similarly to the experience I had when I saw Bill T. Jones' work, where you're just kind of in awe. You're like, "Wow, all of that is possible?"

And I didn't have words to name what I was experiencing or seeing, but the images were haunting and they stayed with me. And I'm trained as a dancer, not in theater at all, but I just felt like it was super important to take the opportunity to sit in a theater and to see what else is going on here, because there is a kind of theatrical apparatus that's always at play and one wants to learn it and to use it, especially if I'm thinking critically about representation within that frame. So I just was... There are many things that influence and inspire work, but I would say that in general, I've just been quite thirsty for performance in all its different forms, and I just tried to see as much of it as possible, in as much as possible a kind of non-judgmental manner, just out of a kind of curiosity. And the things that stay with me, I'm always surprised. I'm just like, "Wow. Okay." And I try to think about why, and then I... Yeah. Then I'm like, "Okay, I want to create a similar experience, but yet with very particular questions."

**Joshua:** Yeah. Yeah. And I think that this is a really good place for us to start thinking about showing Still Not Still, I think. And just to kind of touch on what you just said, I've very much been thinking about your work, especially in the past year, and as I've been working on this exhibition and thinking about leading up to this program with you, in the various different mediums that you work within working on a stage, working in film a lot recently. And I've been thinking about how you're mastering both of these things and thinking about each of them distinctively and simultaneously. So I'd love to talk about, just briefly, what we're going to show. The work still, not still, and then we can get into it and have a small conversation about it after.

[Video Clip 2 Plays]

**Joshua:** That was great. I've watched it a few different times since you sent it to me, and every time I just pick out a different thing, so I'm actually not really sure where to take it, because I have so many questions. But I'd love for you to just give a little bit of context or talk about whatever you want to talk about now that people have [inaudible].

**Ligia:** Yeah, sure. So, this piece... Well, Scenes for Camera, it's the stage work Still Not Still and then me and Moritz Freudenberg who I collaborated with on the film version picked out scenes and shot them specifically for camera. But the stage work itself for that whole entire creative process took place over a span of six months, let's say, at least the production side, and then the research for a couple months before. But yeah, so it's a continuation of a work called Deader Than Dead that I made for Made in LA and with similar themes, and still using this musical, Complaint. Deader Than Dead is made with the museum in mind and exhibition space. And it went through a number of iterations, but arrived at this final film version, and Still Not Still was conceived specifically for the HAU [inaudible] theater here [inaudible] space.

And I was interested in this thing of flatness and this kind of dance macabre, or otherwise called a [inaudible] dance, and it these Gothic descriptions of death. I approached that in a very kind of playful way. I mean, it was just a point of departure, but I knew that I was going to work on this idea of a kind of endless loop and these things where all of these performers are going to constantly refer to creating their own grave. So it's a lot of physical narration and the actual stage work extends over it... It's it lasts an hour and 40 minutes, let's say, and it's this kind of recurring images of these recurring macabres that keep happening over and over again in all these different ways. And then it kind of builds up to this dark rodeo, kind of Western-like rodeo that gets all kind of fucked up.

And the images of dying are just kind of recurring, and so Bruegel's Triumph of Death was one of the references. I was also interested in Steve McQueen's Dead Pan film that's very funny, very simple. And of course, when I'm thinking about the theater and choreography, or the choreographic, it's like you're writing time basically, so of course, this very beautifully and just to-the-point film of Steve McQueen's, it doesn't have the same effect within a theatrical frame. So, so I really wanted to use duration and to kind of exhaust this theme of these kind of recurring images of dying, but the problem with the dance macabre is it's this idea that everyone will be equal when laid to rest and the provocation for me was, "No, we don't live in that and we're not there yet." And so the Still Not Still is this inability to find the stillness and the whole piece kind of builds up to this one monologue, [inaudible].

Where it's kind of like, okay, "It's the end of the world and you want me to be left with the spoils of what's left." It is a complaint, actually. Like the musical, like an actual complaint. So it builds up to this one kind of monologue and an actual complaint, and the piece is kind of built formally on this musical complaint by [inaudible]. It is dystopic. I have a tendency to work through and with dystopia. It's not to say that there's not some degree of hope or something inside of it, but certainly you go... I approached Still Not Still with a lot of humor. I was like, "Okay, how can I deal with this kind of village of folks and not equalize everyone, and we still deal with how everyone's marked differently, raced differently, but at the same time it's a collective action?"

**Joshua:** It's a collective action. And yeah, I mean, not to cut you off, but that's one thing that I think is really amazing. Because I was thinking about the frame a lot and what was happening, because I'm doing the video. I'm doing the scenes. And I think it's really amazing in a couple different places. One, when you pull back and you see the entire theater and you see what's happening there. That's one of

the things that really struck me. But then when everyone's together, when all of their bodies are together, I thought, I was like, "Okay, here is where the film element of this is really exciting." And I have no context for the stage version because I haven't seen it, but I think you're directing. You're working with your collaborator and you're thinking, "How can we pull out elements of this piece and..." Not make them better. It's just a form of revision, I will say, for film. And I think that that's really interesting. I think that this piece specifically is a really good way to kind of illustrate that in your work, especially, because I think all of those people coming together are the aspect of that. You said you love casting and you love thinking about who's going to be in the piece. The actual bodies, the humans...

**Ligia:** [crosstalk] effort inside of... There's so much human effort that goes into a production like this. You know what I mean? It's not only the bodies that you see present, but I work with brilliant light designer, brilliant sound designer. I mean, it's a huge team effort and I'm fortunate that they all trust me to kind of guide it and direct. But yeah, it's incredibly dynamic, let's say, and a lot of human effort. Both on what you see and also what's behind it, all of the... Yeah. All things it takes to put a work together. And then once you translate it to camera, I mean, it's even more... Oh boy. It's a lot. It's a lot. It's a lot. It's a lot. But it's worth it. It's worth it.

And then also what's nice about having this document is that it's a kind of permanence. I've always struggled with what it might mean to archive my work, let's say, or what that might look like and something you and I discussed. It's like, "How do you go about archiving?" There's so much that goes into the process of making a piece. The very early experiments that don't make their way to the theater. There's so much shaving off, also, of every production I make. There always too much and you just kind of shave it down, and all of the... So much laughter, and turmoil, and ugh inside of the studio with all of these different creatures trying to express and all of that.

In these kinds of consolidated documents, ones I made for Deader Than Dead and this one with Moritz, it's like, "Yeah, I feel really fortunate." I'm like, "Yeah, this..." It becomes something else and that's very clear that it's a bridged version, obviously, of a stage version, then it's made with the consideration of the camera, so we were really able to work with Moritz on the choreography of camera and movement. And anyway, the stage work itself is quite cinematic and you saw [inaudible], also quite cinematic. So I have a tendency anyway to be interested very much in that frame and animating that frame through sound, and light, and expression and there's text, blah, blah. And I was fortunate that, also with the scenographic components, that this piece was able... I had a good feeling that it would translate well to camera. I didn't know for sure, but I was like, "I think that this..." I was like, "We have to take this opportunity." Also, it was during COVID. I was like, "I have access to an empty theater. We need to jump on this."

**Joshua:** Yeah, it's a generative process, I think, and that sums up so many of the things that we've just been talking about. It's such a generative process. It's such a thing where you're not like, "I'm going to make a work for the camera." It's looking at the work and saying, "Hey, some of these elements would really pop on the camera and there's things that we can do to change it and to make it different." And I think just to take it back a little bit, and I think this might be a really good way to kind of wrap up the conversation, but I think what you were saying about archiving your work and about the pieces that get shaved off and all of that. What I'm realizing is that personally, I'm so much more excited about those things, and oftentimes, I may not need to see them.

And we've talked a little bit about this. You have to experience the work in person sometimes, and even a photograph or a picture is just not doing it justice and it's actually taking away from that experience. And I think more and more what I'm learning from speaking to people like yourself who are making work, and collaborating, and using their bodies and their minds simultaneously is that those elements that do get shaved off, that's the bread and potatoes right there. That's all the stuff. Because inevitably, even if it's not shared with the public or shared with a person myself, it's the things that motivate you to move forward in the work and it's the building blocks for future things and for the best of your work. So I think, yeah, I don't know if people need to really document and archive everything. I thought that this experience of working with [inaudible] work would definitely solidify for me that, "Yeah, you need a really amazing archive and you need to do that." But I also think that there is something about the theater, or there's something about the one-time experience, in the ways that even if you document those things, it becomes something else totally different like you just said. So yeah, I think you may be right in terms of that.

**Ligia:** I think I'm just one of those... I feel like it just depends on the kind of personality you are. I'm still seduced by magic. I'm still trying to make something. You know what I mean? And all of those little intricacies, and intimacies, and the nuances, and all of the struggle and this that go into the making is something that, maybe it's with me. I love to think that that all of these stage works, the traces of this work are still in the bodies of people that were in the room creating it. You know what I mean? And how do we go about sharing that in more explicit or kind of transparent ways? I don't know. And I think it's super exciting to hear that you, just to see what you've done with [inaudible] work, and [crosstalk] all of... I mean, especially because her work, and I'm so glad that you introduced me to her work, because I was shocked that I didn't come across her work earlier. It is incredible. And the translations that she did for camera, also of her stage words, and the scenographic elements, and the... Yeah, and how cinematic.

**Joshua:** And there's so much more that no one has seen, just to kind of take back what we were just talking about. There's so much more that I think this exhibition was only the origin of that stuff beginning to come out. I'm hoping that so many more to people will be able to see it, be able to go into things like an archive as an artist like yourself, and just go and find that inspiration. I don't know if it has to be such a public thing. I don't know if it always has to be out, but I think what you were just saying is that people like yourself and people like me are always trying to figure it out, and I think also the public as well. I think that people are figuring out where they want to go to see work and how they're going to consume it and all of that is a part of the whole situation. So thank you for operating the way that you do and being really experimental, and so thoughtful, and diving deep in it, because I think it helps for me when I'm trying to figure out all of this stuff to have people like you to look to and be like, "This work is amazing and this is what needs to be, be happening." I wonder if there's anything else that you would say to wrap up.

**Ligia:** No, I mean, same to you. I love whatever struck your curiosity or interest in [inaudible] work and the way in which you're caring for it by creating space for it is wonderful. I think that, yeah, we're just at such an interesting moment and so much interest more and more in choreography, embodied practice, and how do we care for these things beyond the life of the folks that have created it? And I think these experiments are wonderful, like the exhibition that you've created. It's like, "Yeah, how do we start to think of how we care for these gestures and hold them and create space for them to be able to share them in a different light?" And I think that's just as an educational tool, that's kind of everything. You know what I mean? So, thank you.



**Joshua:** Sure. Definitely. And all the stuff that we've talked about, we'll put a link underneath this program wherever you're viewing it so you'll be able to view the videos that we watched on your own. I really encourage you to spend time with it because I think that's exactly what we're just saying, is that it's up to everybody to go out and experience those things at their own pace and at their own level. Thanks again, Ligia. Enjoy the rest of your evening.

**Ligia:**

Yeah. Thank you so much. I will. You too. Thanks so much for...