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# Block Universe and the Meaning of 'Post-Dance'

BY ELLEN MARA DE WACHTER

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London's annual performance-art festival probed the unsteady relationship between dance theory and practice, and the uneasy split between mind and body





Arguably one of the festival's more hermeneutic offerings, *Portnoy (Born 1936) Improvises* (2018) saw artist Michael Portnoy team up with art historian Claire Bishop, who introduced the 'real' Portnoy as someone who, having masqueraded as a much younger man for decades, was finally about to reveal his true self in all its octogenarian glory. From his early work with Fluxus to the time he 'picked bits of fish and meat out of the floorboards at Judson Church' after a performance of Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* in 1964, Portnoy had been an important if unrecognized player in numerous art-world scenes. It was only the recent trend in rediscovering artists 'decades after menopause' that had inspired him to 'come out', Bishop said. Her talk was funny – stand-up comedy for at an art-world intelligentsia who would recognize such factoids as poppycock – but it was also sobering, corrosive of art-world myths and revealing of the ungracious relationship contemporary art can maintain with its past, from artists mining the work of precursors without acknowledging their indebtedness to dealers biding their time until an elderly artist's oeuvre is transubstantiated into a lucrative estate.

Finally, Portnoy arrived, encased in a full prosthetic head and dressed in a maroon suit and Vetements T-shirt (in case anyone still had doubts over his real demographic). While demonstrating a repertoire of deeply intended and awkward moves, he issued a disquisition on topics ranging from his granddaughter's views about Instagram ('something doesn't exist if it is not on it') to the ambiguous merits of contemporary dance ('it's a fool's game, which is why it's so compelling'). Gleefully eviscerating the very thing he was performing, Portnoy admitted that he liked 'ruining people's joy'. It must have been very hot inside that prosthetic head because, at one point, while moving in front of me, he spilled a gush of liquid through his mask's mouth hole. Yes, I thought, here is the body of the performer. Why stop at tying yourself in knots over theory when you can also dance, sweat and salivate on people at the same time?