

Panoply Performance Lab founders Esther Neff and Brian McCorkle in conversation with Li Cata

Esther Neff and Brian McCorkle are the dynamic duo that comprise [Panoply Performance Laboratory](#), a performance collective and performance space, located at 104 Meserole St. on the Bushwick/Williamsburg border. Their curations and performances betray a sympathy with experimental and oppositional aesthetics and politics, and the shows they host are by donation with all money given to the artists. Li Cata sat down with them at their space to talk about their work at Panoply, and the DIY scene in New York. Discussion inevitably turns to the age-old quandary of public/private money for dance and performance, and how money, politics, aesthetics, and social factors interact in today's dance and performance art scenes in New York.

Interview date: April 28, 2014

Li Cata: Thanks for meeting me for this. I wanted to talk about the idea of DIY (Do It Yourself) performance, and whether a DIY scene in New York, or if there needs to be one, why it would or would not be of value.

Esther Neff: I think it's a really interesting question, as to what doing it yourself looks like, or what that means operatively. Like what are we talking about? Or what would—if you have a conception of people who are or are not doing it by themselves—what do you mean by that? I think one of the reasons why we, who do some dance-type work, end up in performance art, or are really embraced by the “performance art community,” is because we're sharing the same economic and social issues. Part of the DIY ethos includes the practices that you're pursuing, whether that involves working a job for a potentially unethical organization like, say, Starbucks or that you are an independent dog walker for ladies on the Upper East Side, or what have you, that those considerations are incorporated into your artistic practice, does that make it more DIY? Or does separation of pursuing funding for the artistic practice make it more DIY? Or just that fact that you're writing your own grants and own proposals and doing your own self-production even within the institutional models rather than hiring a publicist or development director, does that make you DIY? Does making your own props or costumes make you DIY, regardless of level of funding?

LC: I mean, maybe the point is not to determine who's DIY and who's not, but to define what are the issues of making and presenting work in New York City.

EN: I guess from an artistic point of view, any problems with the way that institutions operate have to do with meeting our expectations of what we think we deserve and/or want. If we are artists who feel that our work should be widely disseminated, that we should be paid for what we do, that we should receive a living wage, that our work is valuable, then I guess it is a problem that not very much work is seen as valuable. But, a lot of work is. I mean, all of the institutions have programs year-round, so I think the problem that there isn't enough support for artists seems kind of constant, historically in the United States, as far as what our government and our culture values.

LC: Do you think the idea that artists do not receive a living wage for what they do is a problem for art-making in New York?

EN: Yeah, and also because of capitalism! Where capitalism is this idea where you always will need more money. So there's never going to be enough money if you always think you need more.

Brian McCorkle: Of course.

EN: Yeah I think it's tragic. I think it's tragic for dishwashers too. I think systemic poverty and racism are problems which affect everybody, and probably *not* most of all, artists. We have it fairly mid-level, based on the—and this is a huge generalization again—but I think artists tend to be a privileged

class. So, I don't know that we can necessarily leverage complaints about the ways in which we are given philanthropy or charity by institutions that we feel should be doing so.

LC: But there is this other world of independent spaces that are less beholden to those criteria.
B Yeah and I think Panoply is—to toot our own horn momentarily—a good example of an alternative economic model. Everything is donation-based, and the artists get the money from the door. That's it. And we sell, we are generously sponsored by Brooklyn Brewery, so we are able to provide alcohol at a fairly cheap price, which gives us a tiny fraction of our rent, which enables us to subsidize our studio and rehearsal space.

EN: Where we also live. ...And we also work jobs.

BM: We also work jobs, yes.

LC: Let's talk specifically about your space, [Panoply Performance Laboratory](#). How did you start it? Why are you doing what you're doing?

BM: What I always tell people is that Panoply Performance Laboratory, along with Valerie Keuhne, originally moved into this space so we could have our own rehearsal space in order to support our own artistic practices. This was our studio and rehearsal and living space. After about six months, we all realized that we needed something to help pay for the space.

EN: In 2009, we started curating work that we thought didn't have any place to get performed, when we were living and working at [Surreal Estate](#), which was at 15 Thames St. It's now condo loft buildings but it used to be a 50-person arts and activism space. We got a marley dance floor installed, donated, totally donated, lights donated, massive sound system, this guy Carey that lived there was a sound engineer; it was a fantastic space. So, I was really looking for a space to continue curating. I started doing independent curation at other gallery and performance spaces, but...I don't know, what Brian says about rehearsal space—certainly rehearsal space number one, and secondly, rehearsal space and performance space for others.

LC: But did you start as a space for others to perform?

EN: Yeah we started curating almost as soon as we moved in here. The first thing that happened here was [Bushwick Open Studios](#), which happened a day after we moved in, and we've been doing stuff here ever since. But I do think that it's increased because of our need to supplement the rent ...which is really stupid because we give all the money to the artists, so we actually don't make money doing it at all. But there's the sort of idea, that oh people will support us if we give them something, which is a model of reciprocity that I think people in the DIY community kind of rely on.

LC: Do you mean that those people come to your shows?

EN: They'll buy beer, and they'll curate us as artists, too. We get money from artist fees from performing at other spaces, which are curated by people who we initially curated here. As we get older, those reciprocity models become more and more apparent, because people move into certain positions of power at certain institutions. So there's certainly a lot of politics and social interplay, interpersonal interplay of who curates who at what time and where. Just being known. The politics of attention. So curating becomes a really crucial part of DIY practices, especially if you have a space. And because you love what they're doing and you think it's really important and you want others to see it.

BM: Or you're interested in what else is out there. Like you were mentioning, before we technically opened this place, we did start have the open mic.

EN: Yeah, we have this thing called Performance Art Open Space, where people could come in and perform for ten minutes, and it was totally uncurated. We curated a lot from that. We curate from

open calls. People can send us an email anytime. And then we curate people that we meet, people that we know, people that other people know that they send our way. And we end up oftentimes collaborating as artists with the people that we curate, or the people that are doing stuff here. I don't know, curation doesn't even seem like a good word. People are often like, Hey I'm doing this crazy thing, and I need a space to do it and I don't have any funding and I don't have a space, so I can't rent space. Is there some place free where I can actually make this happen? Yes, there are lots of spaces like that, and this is one of them.

BM: Yeah, in terms of our own practice—which is related to the space—whenever we propose things to other spaces, we almost always enter into a very serious discussion with them about how we will be working with them. To try to make it a win-win situation for both the space and the performing company.

EN: Like when we did a production at [Brick](#), we split 50-50 at the box office, which was a *lot* of money. We funded our production doing that. That was, by no means, what I would consider an inept model. Maybe if we wanted to have real water coming from the ceiling as the rain, or something else with really intense production value, maybe that would have been a different story. And that's a whole other question about what you're planning to do.

LC: And you guys just got a crap load of people to come out to the show?

EN: Yeah audiences are no problem. This is something you will never read an article complaining about. This is New York fucking City.

LC: But no, I hear people complaining about audiences all the time.

EN: Really?

BM: Then, they're not putting out press releases, they're not talking to people, they're not going to other people's shows. You've got to go to other people's shows. You have to put out press releases. You have to talk to everyone you know. You have to make postcards, you have to make flyers.

EN: And don't—I think people get really turned off by people constantly self-promoting without doing anything for other artists in return.

BM: Right. You've got to give back.

EN: People come to your shows, if you are planning on or have given them something. And that may seem really cold it some ways, but yeah you get what you give, to a certain extent, in terms of audiences, I think.

BM: That's another thing that I was going to mention about one of the best parts of having a space, is that I get to see so much work.

EN: Without paying for it.

BM: Without paying for it, and I get to communicate with the artists before and after the show. It's fantastic for finding out about other people's practices and getting to know them. It's wonderful. There's no better way. And every night that we don't have a show here, and I don't have something else going on, Esther and I usually are at somebody else's show somewhere in the city, and so presenting in New York is hard because there are so many shows you have to go to. Not because you don't want to go and you're like "Oh I have to go to this show," but because it's great work! And you want to support it, and if you don't support it—

EN: Who will?

BM: Yeah, who's going to support it? And then when you talk to them later, they're going to be like, so did you get to see my show, and because we are talking about live art here, it only happens a few times. If you don't see it, you missed it. That's it. You fucking missed it.

EN: There was a document released by this coalition of independent theater artists a couple of years ago that was an outline of what artists should do to help the economy of the theater arts market. They laid out these parameters and one of them was a strong encouragement to artists to stop making work that's not fully funded. They were like, Stop making so much work. Wait until you have the money. Apply for grants. They were trying to get theater artists to shift from a DIY model into this institutional model, because they were saying if you perform a bunch of work for free, the work won't be valued and you'll never get grants because people will see that you're working for free and therefore you don't need money. That you're impacting the lives of those many people, it is kind of irresponsible to just create work and create work and create work and not be able to pay those people, or not participate, in the same way you participate in a job, in economies.

EN: Yes, there's a problem for you. I think that's on the artist expectation side: what does professional mean? I don't know if you can be a DIY artist and be a professional.

LC: Professional meaning not having another job?

EN: Right. I don't know. And I think—maybe because I feel the temptation to play devil's advocate—I think that sort of economy, where artists are working actual “jobs”, makes artists a lot more integrated into society at large. It forces us not to be autonomous and to really involve ourselves in other economic and social and political systems, which some artists have attempted to remove themselves from, with perhaps this idea that, oh we're objective, we see society from this other higher vantage point.

LC: Or *not* to point out problems in society at all. To have content that is not political or propagandistic because there's a stigma against socially engaged art.

EN: Well I think that the more the artists themselves are socially engaged, the less the work itself needs to be propagandistic. I mean that's a pretty complicated statement. But I do think there are relationships between the ways in which artists live and the kind of work, the ways in which the work itself engages with political or social structures. It changes how your care operates too.

LC: So, for the idea of modes of presenting that may or may not conflict with values—being a professional artist, does that conflict with your values?

EN: I mean, I would prefer not to work a day job, certainly. I would prefer that, somehow through the merit of my work, quote unquote, I would be one of the few artists that was selected to be supported through mainstream institutionalized culture.

BM: MacArthur, Guggenheim, these kinds of fellowship grants.

EN: Sure, sure. I think every artist has that kind of carrot in front of them, because we are part of capitalism, and those are the opportunities, or possibilities, or potentialities that we are educated and trained towards. Whether I hope that actually happens to me or not? No. I guess it's kind of like a “me” vs. “I” problem, where “I” hope that, but some more ideological or didactic “me” hopes that that never happens, so that the work is made in the crevices and cracks. [Laughs] I don't know. And I don't wish that on others either. That's the horrible thing, when you *are* working with other dancers, you're working with a cast, you want to be able to pay those people so they don't have to be at work all the time, you want them to be able to focus on their craft, you want them to be able to warm up and cool down, you want them to have good food to eat.

LC: And also to not be in that position of exploiter.

EN: Right. Yeah and I think that's something that institutions can do. This is kind of counter-intuitive to a lot of these arguments about funding and institutional support—that institutions provide more artists with less funding. To give 500 dollars, 250 dollars, 1000 dollars, to a hundred artists, rather than giving 50,000 dollars or 100,000 to one artist. But that's part of an ideology that conflicts...

LC: But that's counter-intuitive?

EN: Well I think it is because when a major institution, let's use the Baryshnikov Center as an example, when they're selecting their season and they're inviting extremely famous artists to present work, those artists channel funding into the institutions through their high budgets. There are very, very few institutions which raise their own funding, which they then trickle down to the artists. And that trickle down model is a lie—again—across spheres. It's actually the workers who support corporations not vice versa. It's actually the McDonald's employees who are supporting McDonald's. Do you want to become really famous and pull in a lot of funding for this space to be here? Is that our role? Or is our role to create works which are in demand by a general public.

BM: Cultural capital.

EN: Yeah.

BM: As it's problematically called.

LC: There isn't a definition of what it means to be an artist, like what the right way is to support yourself and make things. Or what the right balance is of life and production.

EN: Yeah, and I think that would be an article that I would like to read, about the problem of agency—that individual artists not necessarily attempt to align their lifestyles and their modes of production with the perceived content of their work, and that they have certain expectations for support of their own autonomy. That—I'm blaming artists—artists themselves do not want to engage with these questions on a level that informs their work. They just want to make work and get rewarded for making it at all, which I don't think has ever occurred and I don't think is ever going to occur. There is no inherent value to being an artist. Art itself is valuable, and art-making itself is valuable, as practices, but *being* an artist, as a person, does not require more support. It requires deeper thinking on the part of that person, as to how they want to approach these models and institutions and modes of production.

LC: Before we end, I want to ask that, in case people are interested in following your model and creating some sort of institution that can support work that might not draw an audience or might not be able to support itself, etc, how do you start? How easy or hard is it to find a space to have shows out of?

BM: It's impossible.

LC: How easy or hard was it to find this space?

BM: It was impossible. It was totally by chance.

EN: Well, I don't know if it was by chance. I've been asked this question a weirdly large number of times in the past couple weeks, which was "What is your advice for young artists who want to organize things?" The fuck if I know, but the only thing I can really say is—this is exactly the same thing as what we were just saying—engage, engage, engage. People around you will support you. While we have this kind of martyrdom principle as far as the performance of the work, and maybe that's because—that's our very particular positions. I think that martyrdom is something that people

who have white privilege can do with their bodies. It's tied into all of these other things which are particular to us.

LC: Us white people?

BM: Us, Brian and Esther.

EN: Us as mid-westerners. We have BFAs. We don't have advanced degrees, but we do have education in our discipline. We've received training. We were able to study abroad. Various amounts of privilege, right? Almost everything that I would lay out would be forms of privilege that put us in the unique position to work jobs, to get hired easily, and to then rent a space where we can live and make work. The space is very cheap, we got it through engaging with people whose work we supported. Thomas Bell and Christina DeRoos, who founded [SpreadArt](#), when they relocated to Detroit, we resigned the lease because we had been artists-in-residence here, paid rent to them to support their artistic practices. Everything that happens is a process of mutual support and engagement.

BM: Absolutely.

EN: So the more people you start to support—say you get curated somewhere, figure out a way that you can invite the artists whose work you really like into that show. Even you could start curating—I mean curating is a really vague kind of term for a lot of different forms of organization. The more that you can support other people, the more you will be supported, and you will find yourself in a position to continue that support and to deepen it... Especially if you write your emails clearly and with good syntax and respect. You know, there are little things that accumulate to being in a certain position. Kindness and friendliness and other ethics of interpersonal engagement.

BM: That's really all there is to it. As my parents said to me, Don't fuck it up. [Laughs]

Panoply Performance Laboratory (PPL), a collective and space formed by Esther Neff and Brian McCorkle, is unbounded by discipline or field, we collect ourselves around processes, theorizing social systems, ideological structures, modes of production, and epistemic genealogies via actions, relational constructs, images, noise, text, interactions, and objects. Past projects have included a durational diner, a silviculture museum, full-length operas, workshops, dances, solo and duo actions, conferences, concerts, gallery exhibitions, and large-scale collaborative works of constructional institutional critique. PPL's engagements have included residencies like LMCC's Swing Space, LPAC, University Settlement, incubation at IRT, chashama, Gruntaler9 (Berlin) and engagements with organizations across social spheres. Projects have been hosted by Glasshouse, Grace Exhibition Space, The Brick Theater, the cell, Dixon Place, Silent Barn, IV Soldiers, English Kills, AUNTS, Casita Maria, Bronx Arts Space, ABC No Rio, and Fitness Center for Arts and Tactics (to name a few in NYC) and Defibrillator Performance Art Gallery (Chicago), Contemporary Art Institute of Detroit, University of Kentucky, Ohio State, LA GALERIA at Villa Victoria (Boston), The Lemp (St. Louis), 119 Gallery (Lowell, MA), Charlotte Street's La Esquina Gallery (Kansas City), ACUD, KuLe Theater, and BLO Atelier (Berlin), The Pumpehuset (Copenhagen), and many festivals, fairs, public sites, and other contexts. PPL the project space and in Bushwick, hosts interdisciplinary performance practices and projects. Our current dance-opera, *Any Size Mirror is a Dictator*, made in collaboration with Lindsey Drury and many other performance-makers will culminate September 5-October 19 at Momenta Art. www.panoplylab.org

Li Cata is a performer and dancer from Baltimore. Form is a significant consideration in his work: his messy pieces suggest a queering of form. Though he holds dance as his main practice, he is excited about exploring text, voice, experimental theater techniques, mise-en-scene, and other aspects of performance to deal with the elusive goal of making sense of being in the world. Li has performed at Baltimore's H&H Building, CopyCat Building, and the Baltimore Theater Project. In New York, he's

performed at the AUNTS, Judson Church, Panoply Performance Lab, Dixon Place, Lab Gallery, and Triskelion Arts. He's currently working on solo stuff, a collabo with Amanda Hunt, and a project under choreographer-savant Mina Nishimura, as well as organizing a queer performance workshop series in June at the Bureau of General Services Queer Division.