

Welcome to Asbestos Hall

TRAJAL HARRELL

No applause, please!



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La verrière, Brussel, in het kader van Kunstenfestivaldesarts 2025

What does it mean to attend a performance that insists on not being a performance? What is asked of us, as an audience, when we are told "to wander where we like, towithhold our applause, to let the work happen" - or not happen - without resolution? These questions swirl around in my head as I step into *La Verrière* in Brussels, invited not to attend, but to 'visit' Trajal Harrell's latest research-based project 'Welcome to Asbestos Hall' at Kunstenfestivaldesarts 2025.

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When I arrive at the venue, there is no ushered anticipation, just a slow drift of visitors seeping into the room like a cloud slowly engulfing the landscape. Small groups are murmuring between themselves; some of them are loners, like myself, keeping a quiet distance. At the periphery, though always at the centre of attention, Trajal Harrell and his artistic team occasionally greet arriving guests. A warm smile, a nod, a clasp of hands.

When the doors of studio space open, we enter what on first glance appears like a rehearsal space. (Actually, the 'Asbestos hall' in the title of this event refers to the old asbestos factory where Tatsumi Hijikata, the founder of the Japanese butoh dance lived and rehearsed). Here, everything is visible. The table of sound equipment, full of wires and amps. A rack of clothes (costumes, probably) left casually in one corner. Stools form a circle around what must be the centre of the ‘stage’. A white chalk circle, already half-vanished, quietly suggests that what we’re witnessing is already in motion, already dissolving. Rehearsal is only a rehearsal if someone is rehearsing. Two dancers - Vânia Doutel Vaz and Perle Palombe - are already present, already ‘performing’, though even that word feels insufficient. They seem in a sluggish state. Their bodies hang low, faces fixed in a slack grimace: chin forward, eyes half-closed, arms draped as if too heavy to lift. They move with a kind of resistance to their own animation, like wax figures at the point of melting.

Through the crowd, small pieces of paper, are being circulated hand to hand. One lands in mine. It reads: ”This work draws from the play ‘The Solitude of Cotton Fields’”. I confess my ignorance. No footnote, no explication. Another paper appears later, shifting our gaze to the architecture: Does the shape of the studio influence what we see?” Well, of course. The circular arrangement makes voyeurs of us all. We sit facing each other, eyes brushing over strangers and dancers alike, pulled into a shared intimacy. There is no backstage. Only entry. And continuation.

When the music arrives it is as if another current is switched on. Subtle electronic pulses play in Asian-inspired soundscapes. The dancers cheer up. Their movement become joyfull, and their eyes are suddenly alert and start looking for our reciprocal gazes. It is a searching that dares contact, that flirts with complicity. One of them smiles. Another meets my gaze. I hold it for a second too long and - before I can remind myself not to - I smile back. There is something charmingly disarming in these exchanges. The room shifts, perceptibly, into warmth.

The circle becomes kinetic. One dancer, clad in a buttoned bustier, moves vigorously until the garment slips and her breast is exposed. She continues unperturbed, pointing with a wry smile to her eyes, reminding us of the gaze itself. For the second time in minutes I become aware of my automatic gestures as I catch my gaze drifting downward despite myself. The provocation is not crude, nor is it incidental. It is a calibration of attention.

Through it all, the presence of Harrell himself is arguably the main act, although he never moves from his seat.

The dancers swap clothes mid-movement. With each new costume (inspired by fashion designer Rei Kawakubo / Comme des Garcons), their bodies change too in posture, tempo, presence. From the cheerful playfullness they return to the animalistic. Then again, just as seamlessly, a shift to the sensual as voguing and catwalk elegance exudes from their limbs. Suddenly they are fierce, defiantly feminine. And again - shift. Beastly now. Standing face to face in a final confrontation, their bodies merge butoh’s ghostliness with urban aggression: mimed pistols, bent knees, cramped arms. A dance battle, unapologetically idiosyncratic.

With the ease of this shifts and transitions, the mixture of the vocabularies, the speculative nature of movemenet histories, it is impossible not to think of Harrell's long history with this kind of hybridized vocabulary. Vogue meets butoh, runway meets ritual. He has been working toward this fusion for over a decade or more, across museums and venues, between Harlem and Tokyo, with a reverence for legacy and an irreverence for history. Yet even here, in this ostensibly unfinished 'visit', the refinement of his process pulses through every gesture.

Through it all, the presence of Harrell himself is arguably the main act, although he never moves from his seat. He sits opposite me, notebook open, eyes flickering between documentation and immersion. We watch him watching. We see his frustration when something aligns wrongly. We see his joyfull rapture and visceral abandon when a sequence finds the right flow. Like us all, he is part observer and part participant, part subject and part object.

This open-studio format - a durational, porous encounter - has the appearance of an anti-capitalist gesture. No polish, no product. Just process. But of course, it is only possible for those with the legitimacy, the funding, the name to hold such a space. Harrell has all three. And here, he uses them not to dominate, but to experiment. Still, I can't ignore the economy of access. Tickets for Kunstenfestivaldesarts are not cheap. Most of us will see only one visit, while some (maybe) may follow the project as it continues in June at the Holland Festival, where Harrell is this year's 'associated artist'.

The dancers and Harrell himself naturally benefit most. They are given space to express themselves and experiment without the pressure of delivery. It feels sincere, even utopian, in its community-oriented slowness. But what role do we really play in this experiment, us paying customers who are allowed to visit and watch the development 30 minutes at a time?In truth, only the artists can really tell us how the work progresses, and what may emerge out of it in the end. From my little peak into Harrell's world, it seems apparent that the audience remained, very much a group of onlookers. In their serene, reverent, curiousity they remain, unmistakeably, spectators watching a spectacle. At the end, the applause breaks out, and Harrell has to remind us all that this is no performance. 'No applause, please'.