
luciana achugar: Reclaiming Pleasure and Revealing Labor (Equality)



luciana achugar, *Franny and Zooney*
Photo: Alex Escalante

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Uruguayan choreographer luciana achugar believes that dance has the power to do many things. She deliberately chooses to write her name without capital letters in a way to minimize hierarchy. Through her creations and the process of making each one, she deliberately instills philosophies in the dance's structure and performance qualities to transmit her beliefs. When witnessing her work live, one is drawn into a unique experience of sensing the motivations of the dancers within its contemporary theatrical framework. Her values, based in labor equity and post-colonial thinking, infuse the environment with a sense of togetherness and being in the moment that is conscious and inclusive of the audience and every one of the performers. Her works progress with ritualistic repetition and easily engage the audience, while, as the director, achugar possesses the determination to reclaim the uncivilized female body and derive her movement vocabulary from the pelvis, as the root of pleasure.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Uruguay was in a state of political unrest. The government faced constant labor disputes and economic challenges. Her parents were staunch Marxists who demonstrated with their friends, hoping to provide support for a third political party and actively reporting missing persons to Amnesty International. Her family eventually fled the country to avoid becoming political

prisoners themselves when she was four and a half years old and went into exile in Venezuela. From abroad they continued to aid Amnesty International's civil justice efforts in their homeland. By twelve years old, achugar was a self-professed Communist. Looking back on it now, achugar thought her parents were "silly, thinking that they could change the world" (achugar, interview). Yet, she does hold true the importance of shifting consciousness that she learned from them. She translates this into her own passion for art, making works that concentrate on the individual inside of the group. About her process, she says, "I poured all that idealism [from my childhood] into the art making, because art making to me is an exercise in utopian kingdom. You are playing out a way to imagine what could be, what is next" (achugar, interview).

Currently living in Brooklyn, achugar moved to the East Coast after graduating from Cal Arts in 1995. She began her professional career dancing for notable contemporary choreographers from New York's Downtown scene, including John Jasperse, Wil Swanson, and Chameckilerner. The companies she worked for had a traditional top down leadership model. Even though the majority of the choreographers honor and credit the contributions of their dancers in the creation of their works, there is a lead directorial role that dictates the outcome of the final production. (Note that Chameckilerner was a dual directorship of the combined visions of choreographers Rosane Chamecki and Andrea Lerner melded into one.) It was during this time working for choreographers who perpetuate a single vision auteurs when she realized that audience members weren't necessarily connecting to the experience of the performances. She could see the disconnection in their faces, some asleep, as she executed deeply embodied movements that had more visual impact than capacity to generate emotional empathy. This was her first ah-ha moment that motivated her to establish a path for creating dances her own way — "Dance is a visual art form but it is an experience with feeling" (achugar, interview).

As a child of political activists, achugar's first impulse was to choreograph in partnership. She developed a collaboration with fellow dancer Levi Gonzalez that lasted from 1999 to 2003. By starting her creative pursuits with a peer, she laid a foundation of dialogue and exploration that inform all of her subsequent efforts (achugar, e-mail). Together they discussed and developed the context for the scenes they were setting and brought their whole selves to the research and discovery of movement material. At that time, the Downtown dance scene in New York, an evolution from the Judson Dance Theater lineage, valued an apparent 'neutral' body as the canvas to open interpretative possibilities and allow for a 'released' musculature. It was a call for a corporal training seemingly removed from any particular training style. In ballet, jazz or modern techniques, there are certain trademarks within their respective movement vocabularies. Alternately, the 'Downtown' aesthetic of the day relied on a fluid yet 'pedestrian' starkness that was

void of emotive or spectacular emphasis. Gonzalez and achugar consciously added tension and holding patterns in their body and into their choreography to infuse meaning and emotion to their movement choices.

Another popular inheritance from the Judson era was partnering duets with two dancers sharing each other's weight. These were derivative of Contact Improvisation, with flowing, sweeping gestures and smooth rolling landings. In contrast, Gonzalez and achugar were challenging their lineage by using socially weighted actions, pushing their identities to the forefront, and exploring ideas in a horizontal structure. Sexuality and theatricality were other devices they introduced into their collaborations. Their 2002 duet *Hit* consisted of the dancers literally slapping each other repeatedly. The promotional photographs of the piece illustrated both performers in bloody make up with bruises and cuts on their faces. achugar's "desire to be expressive" may not have been a popular trend in the 90s, but she none the less found willing collaborators in Gonzalez initially, and, after 2002, in casts of female dancers. She deliberately worked exclusively with women as they were the majority in the dance work force and regularly passed up for male counterparts. She structured her group choreography as collaborative laboratories, based on her socialist upbringing, believing that "everything should be a collective... [it] sounds beautiful to have full consensus" (achugar, interview). The sense of equality is elevated with the dancers wearing the same uniform, a worker's navy blue smock. Being together, the trust and confidence that is gained is essential to cultivating the strength necessary to access expressivity, rooted in deeply personal aspects of the female anatomy, exposing energies and body parts from within the craft and forms of the dances. achugar's performances channel the feminine, removing shame that has been imposed on women over decades of colonization, patriarchy, and capitalism. Having recently heard that scientists believe that the honeybee, a social community-based being, could be relaying information to one another through vibration, achugar feels validated by this hypothesis of a system of vibratory intercommunication as it is the basis of her dance movements (achugar, interview).

It wasn't until achugar stumbled upon the Occupy Wall Street protest in New York, that she fully recognized these tendencies from her passionate political upbringing. As Occupy state on their website, Occupytheory.org:

On September 17th, 2011 Occupy Wall Street was born. A hundred people occupied Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan and opened a space for imagination. We began to share food, clothing, and shelter. We sought refuge in the shell of a concrete jungle and found community. Inspired by our actions, occupations began throughout the globe. In a matter of months nearly all of them were crushed by the weight of repression and co-optation, but occupy cannot be stopped. It is a collective unleashing of anger and frustration at a dying capitalist system and points toward a new world. Let us create this world together.

Unlike her parents, she does not identify as Marxist but still strongly feels that making a profit from someone else's labor is wrong. "I had an immediate fascination with the occupy movement and followed it online. I wonder why in the dance world we don't talk about labor, why didn't dance get involved, dancers are used to struggling [financially]" (achugar, interview).

Once achugar started her own group productions, she decided to lay out the economic reality of each project for her dancers from the very first meeting together. "I explain payments in advance [because] you need to know" (achugar, interview). This sense of transparency and fairness extends to how she treats her dancers in creation too. She foregrounds the chorus and does not establish any soloist roles, giving the platform for all and not the exceptional. As a result, one feels the power of the group when watching her choreography, established from the process to the finished production.

From the perspective of Hilary Clark, achugar's dancer since 2005:

Pleasure in the body, and the feeling and being in the experience, is the highest value. Like deepening into a meditative state, in luciana's work there is a similar task as to meditation, only we deepen and experience one's self through the frame of what we were are working in, the pleasures of sensation in the body, the endurance, and emotional landscape of the body. How I am experiencing it is the driver of the host of ideas we are working within.

The realness of the sensations is the key. The dancers must exude this sensual vibration as communication with each audience member as absorbent extensions and witnesses. Clark continues to explain that achugar "creates a communal feel by envisioning the potential of the audience, [who] are considered in the experience, they are experiencing, and have the potential to feel what we are doing and performing."



Luciana Achugar, *Super Natural Return to Love*
Photo: Briana Blasko

That communal feeling is a practical aspect in the movement generation but is also part of the structure of the choreography as a whole in space. The working relationships between the dancers provide the unity of the group, each body the site of communication, and the use of the architecture is vital to the enveloping of the moment. In each of her works, Achugar considers the surroundings as part of the performance, often having the performers enter and/or exit from the audience area. Each completed work takes on a ceremonial tone, acknowledging the agreement, we as audiences and artists have together, within the inhabited theatrical experience.

Her first group work premiered in 2004 and was called *A Super Natural Return to Love*. She describes this work as a manifesto, a collective return to feeling, privileging the female body's experiences, and moving from a place of pleasure. Her website lists that "*A Super Natural Return to Love* takes over the stage with six uncivilized women in a hyper-drama in perpetual transformation." The dancers, all wearing navy blue factory worker smocks, perform staggered unison movement phrases weaving in and out of formation with a similar camp aesthetic to Busby Berkeley choreography for musicals from the 1930s. Unlike Berkeley, Achugar's sequencing erodes over the course of the work as the initially synchronized movements based on typical flight attendants' demonstrative safety gestures break down to unearth the true motivation for the performance, "pleasures of the flesh, desire and excess of emotion" (lAchugar.com). With leading the movement choices from their pelvises, Achugar and her dancers don't repeat the Berkeley-esque objectification of women and his display of their cookie-cutter body parts. Her dancers with various body types take liberties as they embody sensuality, exposing fishnet stockings under their identical smocks,

and the blood red stains which leaked onto their hips from the red paint previously stored in their dress pockets. The piece ends with the dancers inverting their bodies in crab-like positions literally using their pubic bones to guide them around in space.

From the original assembly line workers movement patterns, parading around the stage, to their informal waiting against the constructed wall on a break as individuals, achugar quietly comments on the nation's current activities in the Iraq war by illustrating a nostalgic vision of women working during World War II on the factory floors, supporting the war effort at home by building needed equipment for the Allies. However the ending sequence of *Super Natural* brings in a twist with dancers moving like B-movie groin-headed creatures from an alien invasion theme. The image is uncomfortable and tormented. One could translate this to display how far today's society has pulled women out of their body's sexual core energetic centers competing for places in a man-dominant world. Additionally this scene could also reenact the perception of colonizers arriving to a foreign land, seeing 'natives' for the first time, and judged indigenous peoples as strange, ignorant and without a mastery over their bodily urges, seen as these genitally driven mindless animals.

Her follow up piece, *Exhausting Love at Danspace Project* from 2006 was meant to name the various locations it was performed in as part of the title but was never toured beyond the premiere at Danspace Project, an influential dance venue housed in Saint Mark's Church in-the-Bowery's sanctuary in the East Village of New York City. As described on her website, this group choreography where "the dancers become the blue collar working class of the art form; performing the labor of the body, the labor of dance, the labor of love," circles the audience and wraps them into the movement repetitions in a conceptual communion experiencing sensations and emotions. There is never a narrative in achugar's creations and this one is no exception. There is however clearly felt logic and transformation derived from the innate sense of being built into the choreography. By enrobing the audience with the choreography, they are woven into the performance. The retention of the blue workers uniforms from the previous piece eliminates the layering of meaning that a customized costume for this spiritual structure would have added. Audience members have the ability to see the work over the design of the visual environment. The church's sanctuary is iconic, the costumes recycled from the last work, the group of women performing are nearly the same. It is the content of the work, the dance and its reason for being that is foregrounded. The movements become hypnotizing as the dancers sway into position in the space and keep pace with their breath, audible and inviting. Village Voice dance critic Deborah Jowitt writes about being spellbound by achugar's work and how "she makes you intensely aware, sometimes at very close range, of the performers' breathing, their body heat, their sweat."



Luciana Achugar, *Franny and Zoey*
Photo: Alex Escalante

Turning not only the performers' focus inwards as is the case in her first two group works with women exploring internal sensations of their bodies, the 2007 group piece *Franny and Zoey* was reflective of the rehearsal process it was born out of and the established "challenge to be as transparent as possible about the creative process. Making the work not as a representation of something but rather as the thing itself" (lachugar.org). Through ritual and dedication, her actions demanded to be executed in the moment and not repeated for the sake of an audience to witness. Within the evolution of her group work, achugar's choreography continued to strip layers of unnecessary design and superfluous aesthetic inspirations and get closer to the dancers' labor and political purpose within the performance, almost as a protest or activist demonstration in itself. Performed on stage, with a video background of rehearsal footage, the dancers in *Franny and Zoey* often face the back relating to their practice of the performance from the past (projected video), putting their attention to the raw and uninhibited dancing. In contrast, the piece starts with a hypnotic light show that bleeds into the audience seating and illuminates the surfaces in the theater in a spectacle of circling follow spots and pulsing flashing colors. In the video we see a dance studio with a cat lounging on the floor. As the recorded dancer enters the frame, she is warming up her wrists, pressing into the floor, entertaining the cat. We observe the cat watching, teaching us to be attentive to weight and texture as the dancer feels her way into fuller movements. One can almost taste the sensations within the dancer's body. The live choreography builds from there. We see the dancers articulating their legs and arms inside their joints. We can feel the sensuality of rotating limbs from the inside. Video footage voyeuristically examines notes in a journal about the future, video projection that becomes the actual light design and

cues for the show. The video lingers, revealing the improvisational testing of final choreographic ideas. As dancers on stage act out the images projected on the back wall, a ghost of the past's internal landscape of the dancer's practice is mirrored with the external exhibitionistic live presence. Dancers take turns with the material, entering the stage dressed with the top buttons undone sometimes, and panties off and smocks hiked up other times. The follow spots return at the end of the work, reminding us of our active gaze on their exposed body parts. The piece ends with the dancers undressed, smocks in the air, tossing them in celebration of their ecstatic embodied state. No longer a need to unify the bodies, each bares their individuality.

Berkeley specialized in musicals, innovatively creating elaborate sets and parading women in identical costumes doing geometric movements. There are clear patterns of spectacle and unison in Achugar's early works that draw on his influence. His tactics created trance and fantasy encouraging the male gaze. Although Achugar enjoys a kaleidoscopic aesthetic with mesmerizing patterns of spiraling movements, adversely to Berkeley, she empowers the women in the performance's roles to share their experiences of themselves and not negate their ability to enjoy and display sensation that is distinctively not pornographic. This is similar to feminist artist Carolee Schneemann's placement of nude bodies in her visual and performance works from the 1960s and 70s. Schneemann explains:

The body has always been central to my art because the eyes are part of the body and the hand receiving the energy and information from the eyes is part of the body, and the sexual body is the energizing core to feeling and thinking, even if it's displaced conceptually as it often is. But for me, it's always had an integration. It's fluid. It's dynamic.

In response to works such as Schneemann's famous *Meat Joy* from 1964, Performance Art research pioneer RoseLee Goldberg claims that, "in terms of Feminism, it reflects as much as leads the way in terms of consciousness-raising. Performance allowed artists to really go out and activate—put into action—these various ideas that they were looking at." Schneemann's 'Kinetic Theater' was combating the negative sexual image women had in society, confronting taboos, eroticizing performance and skirting pornographic stereotypes. Achugar brings emotional resonance to contemporary dance exploration from a conceptual non-narrative foundation. From her early political upbringing in Latin America to now a recognized contemporary choreographer in New York City, her stated mission is that "within my process there lies the fantasy of erasing hierarchical power structures to allow the collective experience of the group to become the content of the work..." and that "there is an almost utopian desire of being transparent and sharing the process; and there is an almost childlike, innocent desire to be closer to or "touch" the audience."

The Sublime is Us, achugar's 2008 work for women continues with the navy blue worker's smocks but strips back yet another layer of theatricality and brings the audience into the actual dance studio where the piece was created, seated in chairs closely facing the room's rehearsal mirrors. At the beginning, dancers trickle into place as audience members get acclimated to the unorthodox performance setting. Dancers take time to feel their way around the space and add waves of movement which the close any gaps between the viewers and the performers, pushing the air around. Dance scholar Susan Foster defines labor and dance as opposites:

The phrases dance as labor, or the labor of dance are at one level oxymoronic: labor is alienated, dance is completely engaged; labor is productive, that is, it produces things, dance is non-productive and vanishes as it is performed; labor is useful, dance is not useful; labor is hard and dull, dance is easy, spontaneous, sexy, and fun.

The Sublime is Us contradicts Foster by remaining "easy, spontaneous, sexy and fun" and at the same time demonstrates and initiates the audience in the true conditions of the dancer's tasks, observing through the mirrors the dance, tracking performers' movements, immersed in the proximal 'live' choreography. The New York Times review noted that "by turning the mirror into the principal means of seeing the piece, Ms. Achugar also suggests that the audience personifies the critical gaze that dancers direct at themselves during rehearsal." This further emphasizes the labor aspects of the dance making. achugar at one point in the performance turns off the lights and gives verbal visualization cues to her dancers prompting them to move from the pelvis. It is an unofficial invitation for the audience to do the same in the privacy of the darkness. *The Sublime is Us* is the work to become a dancer and to perform a dance. It is all 'dance' from the outside stemming from an internal narrative and all 'labor' on the inside resulting in transparency for an outside perspective. The audience experiences it through clever placement of participants in relation to the material. Foster does conclude that:

However, there have been some new developments in the organization of the work place and some new theorizations of the nature of labor within the global economy, and these may make it possible to think productively about what it would mean to approach dance as a form of labor and also to envision what dance can say about the act of laboring that might help us understand work better.



Luciana Achugar, *Exhausting Love* at Danspace Project
Photo: Briana Blasko

Her final in this loose series of works is *FEELingpleasuresatisfactioncelebration-holyFORM*. This kaleidoscope of naked bodies (the smocks are gone), straight hair (wigs with long locks to their waists), and the velvet stage curtain, is a true amalgamation of each of Achugar's previous pieces. Ritualistic repetition of articulated leg positions bond the female dancers into one unidentifiable being

behind the hair lengths. The piece progresses from their initial placement in the audience front row to their slow interactions with the stage's drawn main curtain. Labor is executed in a majority of the dance when each one of the dancers endeavors to put on their denim blue jeans without using their hands. The amount of effort it takes for a pair of stiff pants to be coaxed against gravity up the uneven surface of their legs requires tension, tenacity, wiggling, thrusting, humility, and improvisation. achugar explains, "it's a lot about sensation and indulgence, which is how I think of movement."

achugar's group works with women are more like chapters in the same book. Through her works she is reclaiming a feminine perspective and sharing it as a communal experience. achugar, "I was making work that spoke very much about what the role of the dancer is. All of those pieces with women had a lot to do with the anger or resentment or rage that I had about how hard it is to be a dancer." The strategies she uses derive from her fundamental beliefs that every dancer must be treated equitably, and their contributions honored to each oeuvre they perform. All the while uncovering the primal intelligence rooted deep in the female bodies' sensual experience of dance movements in the moment. This consciousness expands into how achugar includes the audience in the structural design and contextual integrity of each of these choreographic works since she began directing group pieces for women. Visual arts curator Mary Jane Jacob instructs that environment can be felt and we, "as a culture, understand organic in another way: it's natural and living; it is also responsive, and in the process things can grow or wither; it all depends on the conditions." Through achugar's behavior, her choreographic works thrive and generously expand our consciousness to our surroundings and everyone in them. After watching achugar in performance, *Village Voice* dance critic Deborah Jowitt noted that "the night air outside the theater has never seemed so fresh and bright."

I wrote this research essay as part of my studies at the Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance and invite any feedback you may have. Thanks!

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