In Conversation: Elliot Reed Program

Joshua Oduga: Hello, thank you for joining us for this virtual program "In Conversation -- Elliot Reed and Joshua Oduga." I'm Joshua Oduga, the public programs and exhibitions manager at Art + Practice.

We are very excited to share this virtual talk with you. This program is organized in association with Art + Practice's current exhibition "Blondell Cummings -- Dance as Moving Pictures," a co-presentation with the Getty Research Institute.

The exhibition is on view until February 2022. For this program, we welcome artist Elliot Reed for an intimate conversation around their work in practice. Hi, Elliot.

Elliot Reed: Hey, thanks for having me.

Joshua: Definitely. How are you doing today?

Elliot: I'm doing pretty good. I'm excited to join this call and record, and talk about some work with you.

Joshua: Very exciting. I should mention to everyone that you are an artist, and director based in New York City, but you're currently not in New York City right now.

Your work assembles bodies movement, and narrative within exhibition spaces and various other spaces, wielding performance as a tool. I became familiar with your work here in Los Angeles, seeing it in various different spaces. I think, myself, very much empowering you as a musician, back in the early days.

I wanted to start this conversation by talking a little bit about the origins of your practice, and the work that you're doing, the way that you see it. Can you talk to me about when you first started engaging in artistic practices and sharing work?

Elliot: The first time I started working creatively, I always attribute to my grandmother on my mom's side. She was an organist for the church that we grew up going to, and she actually gave me my first piano lessons. From what I remember, I don't recall being a super hyperactive kid.

I definitely know that music was a place where I could sit down and concentrate in front of the piano. It was great to have that extra bonding time too. Playing piano was the first creative space I had as a kid, learning notes and music, and stuff like that, and then once I got into high school, I actually started composing.

I started writing original music for the piano. Towards the end of my time in high school, I started working with electronics. I was using samplers and using free software I could find on my computer and trying to record things that I'd make on the piano.

That developed into songs. That's where it began. I can keep going. [laughs]

Joshua: I want to jump in really quick. What is really interesting is you started off and were thinking about composing, starting off at the piano, thinking about the organ as your first instrument and the piano as your first instrument.

That's really interesting, especially with my knowledge of some of the software that you mentioned, free and open-source software that you can find online. Oftentimes, people come to those electronics first. Then, from that, they may learn about composition.

It's really interesting, for your work, that you were considering yourself to be a composer already, and then within that, you were looking for other tools and other means to make this work available and share it with other people.

One of the things that's really interesting is in your early electronic music compositions, which I'm familiar with, there seemed to be a lot of collaboration that was creeping in. On one level, when you're using software and you're using tools like that, it is a collaboration. It's a collaboration with the people who designed it and all of those things.

I wonder how quickly in that learning; in that process did you also start thinking about other forms of where your music and the composition were going to be presented? How quickly did performance and visual aspects come into that?

Elliot: I think it actually came late. It's funny. When I left art school and first started performing more electronic music on my own, I always had a desire to sing as part of performance practice but was really self-conscious about my voice.

My first musical performance, debut performance I did was actually in Chicago, Illinois, where I was living at the time. I had a third-floor apartment where me and my roommates also had access to the attic, and it had a side door that you could enter from the street. We would throw shows there.

I remember we booked this band called Queening. I don't think they're a band anymore, but it was a two-piece from New York that was on tour and a couple local bands. I decided to throw myself on the bill since it was at my house, so very DIY.

The first time I collaborated with people at that show was when I had invited my old roommate and a few friends of mine. For the weeks leading up to the performance, I was writing songs with each of them individually. It was nice.

I would do something solo then at different points during the set, I would do a song with Raphael, then I do a song with [indecipherable 5:51], and then go back to doing my own thing. I think that's where the collaboration started.

All this desire that I felt, I needed a proxy or some kind of another body to perform through because I wasn't so confident using my own voice.

From that, I got into programming, playing synthesizers, drum machines, writing my own music, making my own sounds, and that is such a deeply personal and private endeavor. It's social when you get to play it live. It was interesting. It was like that energy inverted and that became a big core of my studio practice.

Was just spending time with all these electronics and crafting sounds from scratch. Then, later on, I started to sing more, and write music and sing. Then there's another transition after that, but I'll pause again.

Joshua: I feel like you were doing all of this organizing like DIY spaces, and that must have been inspiring on a certain level as well.

Being around that environment and inviting other people in, I'm thinking about that, I could totally see how that turned into then a solitary thing when you went back into the work, and you went back to the tools that you were using, which is really interesting.

When I first encountered your work, myself being an electronic musician, one of the things that I was interested in are the tools that you were using. The way that you were applying this, and then the language that you were using to talk about the work that you were doing.

You got into that, a little bit when you were talking about needing to have a proxy in terms of creating electronic music, and doing that.

I'm very in the beginning processes of researching, and doing work on other electronic musicians, and fore founders of the work that's being created. There's a ton of that when you look at Underground Resistance and other groups that go.

Elliot: Underground Resistance, I love them. There's such a rich history of boundary-pushing, super-intelligent, black musicians, specifically, from the Midwest, which I was inspired by. I've loved rock music and stuff.

What you mentioned, Underground Resistance, famous to tre, techno, collective, electronic music, also like Drexciya which is amazing. For a lot of people listening who don't know, I feel like I'm going to write something about this at some point, because I know there's like debates.

I'm like, who invented a house music and this and the other? There's a specific energy within the Black/POC community, where in places like Chicago, Detroit, even like Minneapolis, Milwaukee, where people, I don't know if it's the cold weather or what, but folks were taking these new technologies, because this is a time if you think of the '80s and '90s, early 2000s, it was before YouTube.

If you wanted to learn how to use an MS2000 Korg synthesizer or something, you couldn't just watch a tutorial for it, you had to buy it, read the manual, understand how to use MIDI programming. This is actually super technical work.

I know you understand this, but I feel like I need to speak out in excerpts, like a history. I don't want to be lost. Definitely, a lineage that I see myself a part of, even though I'm not making so much electronic music now.

There's a deep spirit in history of ingenuity with super high-tech stuff, which maybe some people don't know about, and even too like...it's not techno, but I can think of Prince, from Minneapolis.

There's a whole part of his practice and his work that maybe some people aren't aware of, beyond just being a good songwriter. Running your own recording studio is not an easy thing to do.

They're called M sound engineers for a reason. It's an extremely technical job to know what microphones to use to record different instruments. These machines are not...

You look at some of these things that someone, like Prince or someone like Juan Atkins, or something programmed a song on it, looks like a VCR player, not something friendly. Everyone's used to touchscreens now.

One more thing I'll say about this, the fact that Black musicians, people of color were able to not only use these extremely challenging new technologies to create music but actually could create narratives and stories behind it.

No shade to craft work. I love craft work. At least in the US, people were able to push it beyond a techno fetish phase and actually bring different histories, different stories, different narratives, different characters, and a playfulness to the music that every day inspires me to think of, "Wow, this is literally just some person."

Sometimes it's kids like 20 years old that save up their money and are working their asses off to make really amazing, complicated music that no one's ever heard before, because synthesizers are still new, right? Your mom can't tell you how to play the synthesizer. It's like you're learning. Yes, all of that...

[crosstalk]

Joshua: ...a really interesting sense of community starts to happen because it's like, "What kind of gear do you have? What do you have? Let's come together."

I don't know how to use this, and how to use it. I think it becomes, in its own self, a really interesting form of education, educating yourself. When you're trying to build another role, then you're trying to build some form of sustainability for yourself as well.

One thing that's important to mention in all of this is that while the individuals that we've mentioned were using the tools and all that, they're also building a means of commerce for themselves, which is important when you think about record labels and Drexciya, they were selling records. People were selling this stuff, not here.

In overseas, there was a lot of opportunity for this medium to be consumed. One of the things I wanted to talk to you about, and to move it back to your work specifically, is to spend some time talking a little bit more about your studies.

When I mentioned studies, that's not necessarily at an institution. It's things that you're doing on your own to acquire knowledge in the spaces that you're operating in. What was interesting and exciting for me is I was following your work for a while, and then you became an artist and residence at The Studio Museum. For me, that's a really amazing educational opportunity.

I wanted to talk and give you space to talk about the means that you're using to acquire knowledge and how you're putting that into your work.

Elliot: Sure. I would call myself an autodidact. That's only half true. There's a lot of things I taught myself, but I guess desire was my main teacher. I was lucky to have a grandmother who played music and taught me how to play. Beyond that, I have piano teachers through elementary school, high school.

I had one amazing teacher -- shout out to Wynn-Anne Rossi -- when I was in... I don't know maybe 6th grade to 12th grade if that long, maybe less. She was one of the first people who pushed me to compose and saw that...I love to focus, but I hate to practice, if that makes sense.

I'm the kind of person where it's like I don't like being told what to do, but I also don't like being told no. I realized early on that something needs to get done. Either it's not important to me and I don't do it, or I will stay up for days straight and just make sure it happens.

That's the tricky thing with learning music. There's a lot of rules after a certain point. If you want to get good, you have to improve your technique and practice. What was so great about Wynn-Anne is that I still got to practice playing the piano.

Once she saw me start to buck a little bit at going to like, "OK, now play Beethoven. Now we're going to try this Chopin piece," whatever. She noticed that I was playing a lot of things by ear and was doing a lot of improvising. Her way of getting me back into technique was challenging me to actually write and transcribe the things that I was making on the piano already.

Basically, through the back door, I had to learn music theory because it's the only way to write...I would use a pencil and paper and write down on staff paper. Since then, that skill has gone somewhere deep into the recesses of my mind. That was a formative educational experience.

I think that really set me on a track to feel like I could use whatever was at my disposal to make something, also being active in the DIY, do-it-yourself, music community in Chicago, Illinois. At the time I was there, it was pretty cool. Are you familiar with the website Pitchfork, the music website?

They're based in Chicago, but at the time, they were still independent. Recently, they were purchased by Conde Nast, which owns "Vogue" and all these other huge publications.

Even though they were super popular, the culture around the website and also the music festival felt a little more legitimately independent. Now there's a big thing for music artists where you have to sign a proximity clause in your contract.

If you're booked to play a big festival, like Coachella, or Pitchfork, or Lollapalooza, or something, there's these contracts that artists have to sign that for...Sometimes up to a whole year, if not a few months, they're not allowed to play within a 350-mile radius of a concert because these big companies want people to spend money to go to their shows and not see the same bands at bars for $10.

I remember -- this is probably 15 years ago or so -- there was bands that were popular and were touring, and you could play, these big festivals were still linked into the underground punk scene.

You could see a band that was headlining Lollapalooza. Then they do a secret show in my neighborhood on the southwest side for free. Now it's not so easy for things to do that. This all connects. Basically, this communal way of doing things, if you were in the know or in the scene, "Don't spend $300. It's a secret. If you come to this place on Thursday night, XYZ is going to be there."

To my first shows, it was before Instagram, before Facebook. Now it feels like it's always been here, but that wasn't the case.

In order to get people to come to things, I made flyers. I would go do events and hand them out to people in a one-to-one communication, or if I booked a band from Iowa or some other faraway place I don't know, you'd sell it like, "Oh yeah, Supersonic Pistol is playing. They're super harsh. You're going to love it. There's another band that's playing. It's going to be wow."

You're just like on the move a little bit.

Joshua: Yeah, it's interesting. I think of what you're talking about nowadays in contemporary art and all different sorts of practices, there's this idea of self-sustainability. You're doing contemporary art to be seen in the gallery. You can do an artist in space and operate it that way.

It sounds to me that your formative education and all of that happened in two different spaces in a very much traditional educational matter where you were learning with teachers, and you were becoming a composer in that traditional sense.

Then, at the same time, you were in these DIY spaces and operating in a way that, like you were saying, it allows you to think in so many different levels. As a graphic designer, as a promoter, as an artist yourself. All of these different things.

It's really interesting when I talk to people like yourself who are doing that. How there is a constant need to constantly be educating yourself, and still be learning so much, and still be

doing so much. That's why I think it's really great that you engage in opportunities like The Studio Museum and things like that.

One of the things that I was not so familiar with that I wanted to talk to you about is your work as an educator as well. I know that you have worked on some projects with JACK Studio and specifically high school students at the Kaufman Music Center.

I think that all of these things that we have talked about are really interesting in terms of them going into doing something like that. I wanted to show a little bit of a video of you working with some students and then we can talk about it a little bit if that's OK.

Elliot: Great.

[pause]

[video starts]

Joshua: I really, really enjoyed that piece for a lot of different reasons. Oh, let me stop it.

[video stops]

Joshua: I watched that and I didn't know that you studied as a composer at such a young age and you were already composing at such a young age. I just learned that in this conversation that we are having now.

I'd love for you to first talk to me about the origins of that, what people were just seeing there, and then I have some other follow up questions as well.

Elliot: Sure. That clip you showed just now was me working with an extremely special group of high school students in Manhattan, this institution called the Kaufman Music Center, which you mentioned.

All those students are a part of the program called Face the Music, where students from all burrows of New York City are able to audition and be a part of after school program that focuses on technique, they offer private lessons, but also teach kids how to work in ensembles and compose if that's what they want to do, at a lot of different levels.

Everyone who's there, super focused, super talented. This is on top of going to school five days a week. They come in on Sundays to do three hours of music, which is amazing. Part of the program is they have a commissioning wing. They bring in artists to do original works with the students. Sometimes composers will bring work they've made for other ensembles and have the students perform it.

In my case, I made a new work to go with the students. What I proposed to them is...we're talking about my background in music. Now, this piece is recent, it's from 2020. I'm now working work in contemporary art spaces, doing performances. What you saw was a way of me

blending my recent work in choreography and performance art and translating it into experimental music.

The piece was inspired by a lot of 20th century composers and artists, flutists, people like Benjamin Patterson. Also, the work of John Cage, Yoko Ono, these process-based experimental art makers. The music that you heard them play was a really interesting process each of the students went through individually.

I made this piece by interviewing the students as a group, asking them questions such as, "What's the number of the building you live in on your street?" For example, if they lived at 324 XYZ Lane...that's a bad example...342 Grape Lane. Grape starts with a letter G. G is a note. I would have them compose and improvise phrase to start with the note G. Then they would play that in a three, four-time signature or something.

Each time, I'd ask people how many siblings they have, people's heights, if they have food allergies. Just like I'm talking to you and by using these conversations, I would take this back home, turn it into notes, and make it into music. The nice thing about it is that there was a built-in pneumonic device. All the students had a personal attachment to the sounds that they were making.

The gestures you're looking at, I worked with them on creating a system of numbers and symbols. So instead of reading sheet music from start to finish, the performance happened live because, for example, Mary Sue's gesture for number five would be different than like Michael Germane's gesture number. These are weird fake names, but whatever...Gesture number five.

This chance element or unexpected element for the sound was my artistic proposal or my conceptual proposal to the students. We all know what music can be or what it's supposed to sound like.

What if instead of starting with a melody, we start with ideas, or start with things that are personal narrative, and think of ways to dissect it, build it and create a composition out of this work.

Joshua: Yeah, that's really amazing. I think that also, you've just summarized some of the work that you make in a beautiful way, the way that you're thinking about this. I think it's great that you then work with a group of...I'm assuming they're high school students that we saw and...

Elliot: They're all like 13 to 17.

Joshua: Challenging them to think about the conceptual means in which they're working with the instruments and the things that they're working with. I think that's amazing. It also speaks to Blondell Cummings a little bit and what she was doing and why I wanted to reach out to you and have you been a part of this program series.

Because I was thinking about all the different work that you make. We've talked a lot about the music that you make, but as you mentioned, your practice now encompasses so many different things -- video, sculpture, installation, all of these things.

In all of it, there's a little bit of...I want to say problem-solving. That's just neat. That's me that's saying that. It's a little bit of trying to figure out lots of different things simultaneously. One of the things I think that's interesting, and as I mentioned, what drew me to your work is the technical aspects of that, the technology that you're using.

Even in movement, some of the movement work that you've done, and working with other collaborators who are dancers and you being a choreographer. In a sense, all of these things are really interesting.

I've learned so much working on this exhibition and being in Blondell's work. Being immersed in her work, I should say, about how oftentimes, when you're working in these performative practices, there's an exchange that happens when you're working with people.

I wanted to take it back to your time at The Studio Museum, and talk a little bit about the "Duets" project that you worked on there. I spent a lot of time with that project as it was happening. Just watching all the things that you were putting out. I'd love for you to talk about it in your own words. Then we could explore little pieces of it by me sharing my screen. Go ahead.

Elliot: First off, shout outs to The Studio Museum, the coolest institution on earth. Sorry, to every other institution I've worked with past, present, and future. They're very special. I just finished the residency last year, but it really feels like the benefits and community for that is multiplying every year.

Every day I'm just like, wow, because I remember even when I applied to go to art school, just like looking at that program and seeing Simone Lee and David Hammons. All these people that I'm inspired by them.

To be in that lineage, to have my name on the list. Every day, I'm just like, "Damn, so cool." While I was at The Studio Museum in Harlem, the COVID-19 pandemic started. I moved from Los Angeles to New York in 2019. To start my time, the residency, around September, October 2019. During that time in 2020, obviously, March lockdown started.

As part of my closing exhibition, which still happened at MoMA PS1, which is traditionally the artist in residence at The Studio Museum in Harlem, spend a year working on new projects. At the end, there's an exhibition where you can show what you've been doing.

Our shows at PS1, I originally had planned a live performance, but that wasn't possible because of COVID restrictions, we cannot people-gather. I made an installation in the gallery that was video, sculpture, sound. For the performance aspect, I did a series of works called Duets, which you mentioned.

Similar to how I was working with the high school students in the last video you showed, Duets started to me as a question or, to borrow your phrase, as a problem that needed to be solved.

I normally perform on stage or in a room with groups of people, but because I'm legally not able to have a gathering in a public building, like in a museum, what is my audience? How can I think creatively about my restriction for having people gather in a room?

Fast forward, working in the studio, thought about it, and I proposed this idea for Duets. Basically, going through the protocol at MoMA PS1, up to two people could be in a room together, masked, at any given time, if it was within a certain size. I was like, "Great, it'll be me, one other person for an hour, we'll improvise a duet together."

What made the proposal unique is that there was five cameras inside of the room. What I added to this proposal was that we were doing a live feed of the camera angles.

The audience wasn't able to watch us because we were hidden in a private room for safety reasons. They could watch in the lobby of the museum on a monitor. What they were watching on a monitor was a manipulated feed of the camera.

Not only was me and the other person I was dancing with moving in real time, we were also controlling what was being seen. We could change the camera angles, have things stretched, then shrinked, flipped backwards. In that way, it's like I'm adding another layer of performance, another layer of artifice, in lieu of having a live audience.

Joshua: Yeah, I think that that's really interesting. It adds another layer to the work that you do as a director. Really thinking about the way that the output that you're creating is going to be perceived. I think that's really interesting within an institutional space, a place like MoMA PS1.

A lot of things happen at MoMA PS1 in terms of performance and thinking about that. I think you're also working in a really interesting lineage in that space. One of the things that really struck me about the Duets project are some of the individuals that you actually do edit with. I think it's a really great group of people.

Raymond Pinto, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Ron Athey and Samantha CC. Can you talk to me a little bit about where the collaborations originated from and why you thought about bringing on these individuals?

Elliot: Sure. Well, those are all my friends, which helps especially during such a chaotic spring. People I felt comfortable sharing space with and communicating about having this dialogue with. To be completely honest, that's where it started.

Ron Athey, that was special because he lives in Los Angeles. We met in Minneapolis, that's a different story. He actually was in town opening a show at Participant Inc., in New York City, it's a gallery there. I was performing in his video, we traded off. I was in his piece; he was in my piece.

Samantha CC, I also met for the first time. We performed together at a place called Coaxial in downtown LA in maybe 2018, I want to say. What was so great is that, Samantha, she was actually pregnant with her now child. That was the first time we met. It was before I knew I was moving to New York and then now we got to reconnect.

Ishmael Houston-Jones is legendary. Choreographer, dancer, one of the kindest and most fun to talk to people I've ever met. I got in contact with him through The Studio Museum. He was my mentor for the year. Legacy Russell set us up together.

Joshua: That's amazing.

Elliot: As the many perks of that program, each person gets paired with a mentor. That was my guy, and now we're still friends.

Joshua: Ishmael has collaborated with Blondell in the past. That's a really interesting thing that I thought was amazing as well. What you just mentioned, it goes back to what you were saying about your origins, and operating in these DIY spaces and thinking about this community.

You're given this opportunity at The Studio Museum and you formulate a duet that you want to do, or multiple duets, I should say. You go to your community; you go to your friends and also individuals that you collaborated with in other DIY spaces.

A space like Coaxial, another really amazing space here in Los Angeles that supports performative practices and experimental practices. I think it's really interesting. I want to just briefly show a little bit of some of these duets, really quickly.

Elliot: Sure.

[background sounds only]

[video starts]

Man 1: It is a block. Therefore, it is a green block. It is a block that is green, it is a green object that is a block. The block is green, green is the block.

Elliot: Is it possible to stack together several blocks and make a different shape?

Man 1: I'll have to think about that. I'm thinking. I can think. I'm visualizing a green block. I'm visualizing another green block. First, they're side by side. If I can imagine putting the second green block on top of the first green block green, then they're two green blocks, one stacked upon the other.

Yeah, it should be possible but I'm not 100 percent sure. I've never done it before so I don't know if I can know anything that I've never done.

Elliot: I believe in stacking. I think it's a very real possibility, the stack.

Man 1: Do you remember? You might be too young, but do you remember that phase in New York restaurants, really expensive restaurants, where they stacked the food and it looked really nice when the food came to your table, but it was impossible to eat without knocking the stacks over?

Elliot: That sounds like a dangerous game.

Man 1: It was really dangerous. It was the same time when they were sprinkling sauces with squeezy bottles onto plates, which made cleaning the plates for dishwashers really hard. It was a horrible time in New York culinary history.

[video ends]

Joshua: Can you talk a little bit about what we just saw there?

Elliot: Oh my god, I love Ishmael. We used to joke so much. He's so cool. I like every day. He's someone whose work I really admired for years. The fact that we got to meet, there was no guarantee that we would like each other, but I'm glad we do. [laughs]

That clip you showed was really great, because I think it expresses to the people watching. The videos are all online for free if anyone wants to watch it. They're still host on the MoMA website.

Basically, it was just me, one other person in a room. In that short clip, you could see I changed the camera angles, I picked up a microphone and moved it, I slid some stuff around. Each piece is an hour. Within the course of an hour, there's some visual things that change and a score.

The score for the duet was one hour, no rehearsal. It starts when the timer stops and it ends when the timer ends and that's it, which is really fun for someone like me and also a lot of performers I know, but it can be challenging for people who are used to working with a script.

Joshua: Definitely. I wanted to ask you that as well. What's really interesting is someone like Ishmael and Ron. Their work is so composed in their very singular vision. You then bring them into your world.

You do a really good job of doing that. In the clip that we saw with the kids and what you just explained with that, you do a really good job of bringing people into your world and figuring out these ideas that you're working on.

How is it, from your experience, to do that type of work, especially when you're constantly thinking about how it's going to be perceived as well? Can you talk about that a little bit?

Elliot: Thank you, first. That was a really nice compliment. That's something I take pride in. It doesn't always work, but it's great when people trust me, which is what it starts with.

Yes, I pay people, but also, no one has to say yes. Every time I show up with an idea and people are like, "OK," I'm really going to put my neck out here because the whole point of the work is

that it's impossible to know what's going to happen until it happens. Sometimes I do more composed things, but trust is a big thing.

Sorry, you asked me how do I navigate that when I'm also...

[crosstalk]

Joshua: Yeah, because you're thinking about that, you're thinking about how people are going to trust you, how your collaborators are going to trust you. At the end of the day, you are a contemporary artist and you're making work that is to be consumed on one level. The final vision always comes into play, right?

I think navigating those things, you do that in a really interesting way. I think you already answered exactly what I wanted you to.

Elliot: I will add to that, though. I spend a lot of time doing profoundly unfun things in private. The goal is, once I find a performer I want to work with, or an institution, or a school, or whatever, that asks me to do a piece, I do everything in my power to make sure that the people who come to work for me, it's as easy and free as possible.

Of course, I have goals. I have directions. I think my style as a choreographer, as a director, I've learned that people give the best performances when they're relaxed, and that requires a lot of legwork beforehand by the director.

It's work that I'm willing to do in order to make sure that the second anybody I work with shows up, that they feel supported, they feel free to push their own limits, to try something weird and try something different.

The work that I'm doing both behind the scenes, and also in front of the camera is jumping in and out to try and suggest certain things for my performers, but to also encourage them. If there's something that I like, there's different ways I get on. Whether it's through my body language, or through a direct speech like speaking to them.

It's a constant game in development. I think, unintentionally, from my years of working independently, I'm not really sure. Maybe I'll know why I'm able to do this by the time I die, or something. It's a skill, it's an aesthetic and the more I create performances, I'm realizing that this is just...

One of my tools is being able to support people in doing things that they wouldn't normally do. I don't know how much this applies to Ishmael Houston-Jones, because he's everything when it comes to performing.

With the high school students and a lot of other people, the talent is there, the skill is there, the energy is there. It's my job to look critically at what special thing everyone can bring to the table, and how I can leverage everyone's strengths to get the best possible outcome. That's my role.

Joshua: It's so funny. When I was taking down notes for this conversation, one of the things I have on my notes is, I just wrote "building collective energy." When I see your work, there's a lot of that even if it's just you on the screen. I think that there's a lot of as a viewer, you're tasked with getting yourself to view what you're viewing.

You've talked about a lot of things that lead me to another work that I wanted to show and that we wanted to talk about. "Two Businesswomen Tracked To An Undisclosed Location."

What's interesting about this work is the site-specific nature of it. I'm going to show it, and then we'll just jump into a conversation about it right after.

Elliot: Perfect.

[video starts]

[video stops]

Joshua: I struggled to think about where to end that clip. I wanted to show the whole thing, but I think it's also something that people should go out on their own after this and explore.

I will have a link to everything that we've talked about on our Art + Practice website so people can get a link directly to this. Can you speak about it a little bit in your own words?

Elliot: Sure. First off, I want to give an eternal shout-out to Latifah Green and [indecipherable 43:51] Fidel who are the two performers I worked with on this piece. Latifah Green auditioned in... she was wearing the black jumpsuit. That was my first time working with her and she was amazing.

Then [indecipherable 44:04] Fidel in the black and white polka dot dress is an artist, dancer, performer, energy worker from Los Angeles who I've had the extreme pleasure of working with for a few different pieces. What they did was extremely challenging.

This is a piece that was commissioned as part of a public art project at Union Station in Los Angeles.

I was thinking, I'm doing a site-specific proposal. What are train stations for? They're for getting from point A to point B. What's the pace like in a venue like this? It's certainly quite hurried. People are either trying to arrive early or running late or they're waiting for a loved one to arrive or something. There's a charged energy.

It's also really exciting because the Union Station as a landmark is the only Los Angeles landmark that's designed to take you somewhere else, which is interesting to me. Most places you go to it's like you go to the Griffith Park Observatory or you go to some park but this is the only place you go to leave. From that, I took these bigger ideas and compressed it down to something really simple.

I was like, "OK, I'm going to take a banal, mundane gesture, which is a walk, and put these two people that might not be out of place any other day."

A woman in a dress, maybe she's going to work, maybe she's meeting a friend, I don't know. My fantasy was I cast them as businesswomen. I put them on a walk, a choreographed walk from one side of the station to the other.

The goal was for them to try and get from one entrance to the other in an hour, which is just the amount of time blocked off for the performance. They made it about halfway through. There was a few other directives I privately gave the performers which I'm going to keep secret, but they had little beats to hit throughout the work.

A lot of core strength to walk that slowly, and also, too, the emotional focus required on both of them to stay in character for an entire hour, they weren't allowed to speak. Of course, they could speak if it was emergency. Luckily, there wasn't one and we had safety.

There's people working for the event, if anything were to happen, but they were just placed in the station. Everything you see with people gathering around them with cameras was all organic. I requested when we made the piece to have no signage. There's no announcement over the loudspeaker.

If you knew about the event, there was a website for it. It just said, "Elliot Reid -- Two Businesswomen Tracked To An Undisclosed Location, 2:00 PM." That was it. At some point during 2:00 PM, the piece would happen, and maybe you'd find it, maybe you wouldn't.

The fervor that generated around the performers, I think it's just such a testament to the skill and focus of [indecipherable 47:11] Fidel and Latifah brought, and just how through this really tiny gesture slowed down. I love this video, and I love that piece. It has a lot of gravitas to it and takes out a different meditative, potentially like sinister, like an otherworldly-type energy.

[crosstalk]

Joshua: Describe it like science fiction tote. I like big in my mind that they're traveling to another world or place like that, when I viewed it. I think that's the beauty of working in the manner in which you work is that oftentimes, it's left up to the viewer to perceive what they're seeing and how they should unpack what's happening.

I think also the beauty of working with an ensemble, working with so many different people, when you're doing a site-specific work like this, the public becomes a part of it in a really beautiful way as well. I think you really have shown in this talk, in this conversation that we're having, how you think about these different things.

How you think about the duration and all of that, how it goes together. I now want to show some images that you shared with me of a few different things. We'll just jump into it.

[pause]

Elliot: All right. This is a piece from 2018, I want to say, also done in Los Angeles, called "America's Procession." This is a piece that I co-choreographed with the spirit of my great grandmother on my mom's side.

The grandmother who taught me how to play piano, it was her mom. She was a musician, self-taught. She sang, she wrote poetry, and she even paid to have a record made of her singing like devotional songs which someone in my...I need to get my hands on a copy.

It's somewhere, some family member has it. I don't have one but basically when she was young, I don't remember exactly how old. It was less than 55. She died while singing in church, and my whole family was there, like so my grandma was there, all of her siblings, my grandfather, the whole congregation.

The story is like really traumatic, but as I was going through my personal history and thinking of what might have been something that led me to be an artist, because my family is filled with a lot of diverse thinking and smart people. My immediate family is all numbers folks, like my both my sister and my dad are mathematicians.

My brother is a game designer, and my mom has worked in banking since she was 16. That's really like a lot of analytical stuff. I thought like where can I trace a creative lineage? There are like musicians, teachers and other people that do creative things in my life.

Through talking to my family, and going through our archive, the story of America Bell Miller, was her name. I decided to like invoke her as like a presence to help me move forward in my practice. I dedicated this piece to her and did the stance where I had all six performers memorize every part in the piece.

You can go the next slide. I think I sent you a couple of these. Each section of the artwork...This is the cache shot. Lovely, gorgeous. All of us. To my right side, you can see [indecipherable 50:57] Fidel who was in that last piece, who I also worked with. A lot of people I work with multiple times. Next slide, please.

Joshua: I think these are the only two I have.

Elliot: OK, never mind.

You can go back to this one. The person wearing the red dress, in this picture, Dove Allende. Her character had a bowl, and at the start of every section, Antonio Harper, who's wearing all white, who is the composer. He would start each section with a new song. She would come out and bring the characters on a sheet of paper.

All the actors in black had 10 seconds to pick a character. When the music started, they would perform. The idea was that the piece could never be performed the same way twice, because it was up to chance, who would play which character when, and for how long.

With the story of the artwork, which is also interspersed with a script that I wrote, the idea was that the spirit of my great grandmother, America Bell Miller, was co-deciding with me or directing, choosing when we opened the curtain who would perform what and how. I just prepared the actors for anything that could happen.

Joshua: That's amazing. From this experience, I imagine that it seems when you're working, and especially working with an ensemble this big, there's a before, during the performance, and then after. I imagine that this experience is very unique for a lot of people and engaging.

When you work with a group like this, is there a process that happens after where you decompress what has happened and you all talk about the work that you've done together?

Elliot: We had a party.

[laughter]

Elliot: Deejayed by the amazing DJ Bebe. That was our gift. I like when we did the budget for the shows like I need...I've got to have this DJ. I must. I got my wish.

Joshua: Taking it back to the days of organizing shows. That's always a good one.

Elliot: It was fun, too, because everyone in this picture works so hard. It was a moment where all the performers got to decompress. It was an after-party for the show. The whole audience was there. It was something that became communal and shared for everybody.

Joshua: Amazing. We wanted to end by talking a little about your recent work. The next images I'm going to show are of your most recent exhibition. I'll jump into it and we can start talking about it.

Elliot: Thank you so much. These upcoming photos are from a show that opened earlier in September, so previous, it's October now. I have a show up in Glarus in Switzerland at Kunsthaus Glarus called "Rhythm."

For this show, I did two large-scale room installations. There's one upstairs called "An Occasion," which is all white, and one downstairs, which is called Rhythm. For this work, there was a series of gestures. I am not performing live in this work.

There's videos of me and my body moving, but I took the museum as an opportunity to think about how the choreographic impulse influences the way that I make artwork. All the pieces are very physical.

Even though there's not a person there, the way that they're made implies a certain exertion or physicality or energy. This is a close-up of one part of the work where a hundred knives are stabbed at a 45-degree angle into a wall.

At the tallest point, it's 9 meters, which is a little...I think it's maybe 14-ish feet or so, down to about half a foot above the ground. As you can see, they actually built a second wall in front of

the stone wall and stabbed a knife in. Once a viewer comes in, this is on the far backside of the gallery, so this is like a faint gray outline.,

When you get closer, you witness this history of violence, or exertion that was required to make the work, and the narrative unfolds. Thank you. This is the full shot of it. Also, the single knife that's on the left-hand side of this image, that's about six feet to give you an idea of scale.

Thinking about how choreography can translate into objects, and ways to translate energy and liveness into sculpture. This picture, right now, this green room, green walls, green ceiling, it's lit by green neon light, and I made a special audio clip which you can't hear in this photo, excuse me, but it's an hour drone that I made from digitally layering my voice.

The effect, I'll just describe it. When you are in the room your whole vision is subsumed by this bright green color, the volume is quite high and my goal with the audio is to have something that vibrates you to your bones a little bit.

So, this is a very physical experience. Even though you are not confronted with any objects, technically the sound is so present in the room that I wanted to fill the space as if it was an object, or something present, even though it can't be seen.

Joshua: Definitely.

Elliot: This is a close up of a video from the white room upstairs with the knives. This is me trying to rearrange my face for five minutes. I'm playing an HD video loop in the corner. Obviously it's impossible.

My features are stuck where they are, but thinking of the body as the material, I shot this up against the white wall and started to think about, I'm a performance artist who works with their body, like if I was a painter and I worked with canvas, I have a substrate or an object to speak through that I manipulate and create my image on, but what does it mean when your material is your own flesh?

Also, with a bit of humor, riffing on the idea what it means to perform inside of a museum. This video is me treating my face like a sheet of paper, trying to erase things, draw things, move them to different places.

I interrogate that relationship of what it means to be a performer versus what it means to be a more traditional plastic artist. Then, on the small monitor on the corner facing my face video, it's me jump roping facing towards a wall.

Everything in this room is silent with the knives except quietly you hear the sound of a jump rope echoing in like a loud tiled floor. It's like a pulse in the room. It's a little eerie. It's a little abrasive, but it's also funny to me that the loudest thing in the room is also the smallest thing in the room.

This piece at the bottom is part of Rhythm. I wrote a proposal for this piece not knowing how to pay for it but we got sponsorship from Yamaha. Shout out to Otto, the exhibition director at Kunsthaus Glarus.

The idea with making a sculpture out of motorcycles was what they represent to me in the world, which is just energy, power, noise, focus, but also in a very sensual way, a machine that's so intimately connects with your body. It's like you have straddle this kind of sport bikes, and lean forward.

Even the curves kind of become like an extension of like, your arms, your back, you sort of become like an alien or something when you're on one of these bikes. I position them facing the entrance to the gallery, so the viewers are confronted with these four motorcycles in a small room all facing towards you, but they're on stands.

Inside each of the bikes, I put an mp3 player. And each mp3 player is playing a recording of sharp, inhaling breaths. It kind of sounds like this. [inhales] At different pitches, in different intervals, but I wrote the sound, so there's gaps of silence, and because they are at an angle, it kind of echoes at different depths. There's like another sort of physical element to it.

Then each bike has a spotlight. It goes in descending color order from red, orange, yellow, white, which coming from the green room, it's sort of like a stoplight in reverse or something.

It's like you...Yes. No, this is the perfect picture for it.

You're confronted with the bike in white, and the red bike is closest to the door for the green room. You have to walk through the green room before you get to these bikes that are sort of like frozen, artificially kind of held.

There's a deep charge, or kind of potential there, which I feel connects with the work upstairs with the knives, where it's like the history or the suggestion of a lot of potential energy that's kind of been like clipped or sort of contained. I wanted to kind of catch this feeling of like lightning in a bottle, like an excitement, something that's just about to happen, but hasn't quite broken open.

That's what I'm working on now.

Joshua: Amazing. I think it's a very logical progression. I can see from the work that you talked about really early on it, and composing and thinking about creating compositions, and now composing physical space, I will say. And then thinking about all these different elements, I'm really excited to see where you take this in the future.

I wish that I could get to the museum to see this exhibition, but I don't think it's going to happen.

Elliot: Maybe it'll tour.

Joshua: Yeah.

[laughter]

Joshua: I really hope so. I think, no matter what, I'm excited to see the next work that you make, and really glad to have been in conversation with you. Thank you again for doing this with us. Is there anything that you want to add to the end of this conversation?

Elliot: Yeah, thank you so much for inviting me to participate in this program and to be an extended part of the conversation around Blondell's work.

I think it's really exciting to be making art in a time when people are thinking more creatively and critically about what choreography is, what performance is and how liveness, physicality, and presence factors into art making, especially now.

So, I wish Blondell was here now to get more of her flowers, but I'm glad that, you know, I get to keep working now. I can be part of this conversation with your work, and other people's work. We can kind of keep stretching, you know what's possible in the now.

Joshua: Yeah, totally. Thank you so much.

Elliot: Yeah.