



Speak: Beyond Gravity

by **Jess Curtis**

with jose e. abad, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Gabriel Christian, Abby Crain, and Rachael Dichter

Founded in 2000 by Jess Curtis, 'Jess Curtis/Gravity Inc.' has primarily functioned as the vehicle for the production and administration of Curtis's work. In the last several years and in the context of the rapidly changing cultural landscape of the San Francisco Bay Area, Curtis and Gravity Program Director, Alley Wilde, have begun to formulate ways to make Gravity's production, administrative and institutional resources available to a wider number of emerging artists.

Jess Curtis: My artistic practice has always been very collaborative and involved in community. From my early days with Contraband through the seven years of my co-directing 848 Community Space my relationships to many different communities have informed and fed my work. At a certain point I got a little burnt out on the service side of things though and started creating more infrastructure around producing my own work and focusing more on that, which has served me very well. I founded Jess Curtis/Gravity Inc. as a 501c3 non-profit corporation and with various collaborators and administrators we've done a pretty fine job of creating an extensive body of work.

In recent years I began missing a larger element of community interaction and service in my work. It occurred to me that we might be able to re-organize Gravity in ways that allowed it to support the work of other artists, and allowed them to not have to spend a bunch of time to re-invent another non-profit wheel to make their own work. While several Bay Area organizations provide related services, we thought Gravity might offer a more comprehensive array of services—and more personal attention—to a smaller cohort of artists we feel directly related to both aesthetically and politically. Gravity's new Artist Services Program is the result of that effort, and Beyond Gravity will be the first full evening mainstage artistic product of those programs. With the support of the Kenneth Rainin Foundation's Impact program and SF Arts Commission's Cultural Equity Program, Alley Wilde and I began to re-tool Gravity to serve as more of a community resource. We began offering Fiscal Sponsorship, curating a Pop-up Performance Project, Mentoring around production, fundraising and administration, Co-producing important international artists that we think Bay Area Artists need to see, advising Bay Area artists about getting their work seen abroad, and recently we began piloting our Access Services Program to help artists and venues make their work accessible to diverse audiences. We think this as an important kind of New Model that responds to the increasingly difficult economic landscape that independent artists face in San Francisco.

In October, Beyond Gravity will premiere as an evening of three intersectional body-based performance works by some of the artists involved in Gravity's Artist Services Program: **jose e. abad, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Gabriel Christian; Abby Crain; and Rachael Dichter** presenting her collaboration with Mira Kautto from Finland.

I'm really excited by the work each of these artists make—Experimental, Queer, Political work asking important questions about what it is to be a body in this world. I also find it a bit inaccurate to describe them as 'emerging.' Each of them are mature artists with important voices that have been making work for years. When the editors of In Dance invited me to write about Beyond Gravity and Gravity's Artist Services program, I thought what would make the most sense would be to invite them each to write about what they are working on for Beyond Gravity. I'm super excited to read about what they are each making and how they are thinking about it. I hope you will be too!!

Rachael Dichter: From the room beside me

Mira (Kautto) and I met at a dance festival in Vienna in the summer of 2015. She gave a talk on failure and we were both interested in knowing each other more after seeing each other's work. We've had two residencies in Turku, Finland over the past two summers and what we'll be showing in Beyond Gravity is what we've found together during those meetings.

Living and working primarily in San Francisco where the funding structure for contemporary performance is so extremely limited, being able to bring Mira from Helsinki to San Francisco is a rare, very sweet and much appreciated opportunity. The San Francisco dance scene is often quite isolated from Europe and conversations happening elsewhere, and I'm really excited that Gravity is offering the support to bring someone with a different perspective and aesthetic.

Mira and I approach work and ways into making very differently, and most of our process has simply been about exploring those differences. I tend to approach making from ideas, or an emotional landscape that I'm interested in exploring, whereas Mira's process has much more to do with music and physical improvisation. It's been really interesting to explore each other's approaches and really exchange ways of working. It feels like a rare gift to get to work with someone who I respect whose process and ways of working question my assumptions around what's interesting and what the interesting questions are to ask.

We're working with the idea of a peep show. Experimenting with creating a more intimate, private space for ourselves on the proscenium by creating a "box" (out of curtains that flow and rustle slightly with movement) that stop a few feet short of the floor to reveal feet, and have sets of eye holes spaced at intervals so that a number of people can simultaneously approach the box and look in. Inside we engage – dance/perform intimately with each other in the small space, interested in how larger dance movement is compressed and intensified in this smaller container, and how the moments of closeness and quiet intimacy are pressurized. The audience will be invited to sit on all sides of the square where they can hear our breath as we move, see our feet, and when they desire they can approach and engage with us through the eye holes. The holes will be positioned such that when you look in you are looking directly across at another set of eyes on the other side, and in this way it becomes a very intimate and active experience for the audience as they decide how they wish to participate with the performance, and also become part of the performance and visible in this mobilization. Where you choose to direct your gaze also becomes part of the performance. We're also interested in what the audience experiences when they are seated. What the mysterious, imaginal space is that is created through seeing the curtains sway as we dance near, hearing our breath or our voices, seeing our feet as they move and stand still, or catching occasional glimpses of our bodies as they momentarily appear if we sit or move close to the ground. We're curious about what can and can't be transmitted through this intermittent and only occasional access, and what this does and doesn't produce in the bodies of the audience. We want to use the idea of peep show to experiment with ways of investigating the lines between public and private, and the possibility of being alone onstage together with each member of the audience simultaneously.



Zulfikar Ali Bhutto / photo by KalilMa Amlak

jose e. abad, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and Gabriel Christian: Alif is for Annals

As artists across phenotypically brown diasporas, we three must allow ourselves the breadth of narrative usually denied us in front of audiences used to witnessing only a myopic entanglement of bodies and stories. Working in San Francisco has been instructive to us about the kingpin of survival methodologies for (brown) artists: transdisciplinarity. Gabriel, Zulfi, and jose each metastasized through the arts until, by fate, we collided. Since then, we have collaborated in every permutation of a duet, but never as a triad. We have varying relations to Gravity, either having been commissioned, fiscally sponsored, or brought in as a collaborator.

Our work/world initiates in the aftermath of our envisioned global queer revolution of apocalyptic proportions. Flaring up in the Middle East and the African continent, this uprising eventually made its way to the center of the plutocratic, apathetic empire – the United States – spreading first like wildfire from the thousands of redlined neighborhoods of black Americans. Having successfully dismantled Western imperialism, ecoterrorism, colonial-settler projects and white supremacy, new leaders emerge in this blighted terrain.

Faluda Islam (Zulfikar), a bearded Muslim drag queen guerrilla warrior was one of those martyred, killed by American-backed rebels and, miraculously, resurrected using Wifi technology. Her resurrection confuses the borders of time, asks us to suspend our expired mythos for her arrival. Her survival is contingent on Black Bussy (Gabriel), a night/mare born at the ruins of the Stud Bar in San Francisco, and jose, a necromancer and re/cycler, as no future can ever truly be a simple, solitary project.

What does the world post-radical-liberatory-revolution look like when its players are queer as fuck, high femme, high glamour and more extra than terrestrial? Do we make the same mistakes with each other or do we correct the pains inflicted on us by those who came before: straight white men with a narrow sense of fashion, politics, desire, time and space?

This dystopia emerges from the Quran and the Day of Judgement, symbolism associated with the Arabic letter Alif, storytelling traditions in South Asia and the Middle East, Afrofuturism and memories. Most importantly, however, these past-futures are a distorted way of returning us to our predecessors, those wound up in the movement of the 1950s, -60s and -70s, in which Black radicalism reigned in black leather and the Islamic bloc of nations held less of a religious identity and more a leftist and anti-imperialist one. Many blamed the death of these movements on the neo-liberalism or neo-conservatism of the 1980s (and are they really that different?), but could a simpler reason have been heterosexual hubris?

Abby Crain: Lindenau (Rifle Club)—party for the other siblings

It seems fitting to me that at this point in time, Gravity asked us to show things in this group show. Gravity is one of the organizations in the Bay Area that continues to give me a tiny spark of a hope that perhaps live art-making can provide some sort of actual IRL sustainability. Gravity is one of the organizations who continues to believe in eccentric, illegible and sometimes unmarketable art-making as important to support. Gravity believes that we have the right to make a living from our work and Gravity works hard to move us towards finding that in each of our practices. Gravity is an organization that has not forgotten its roots in the days of 848 Community Space and a studio that never locked its back door and the strong belief and practice that community makes us stronger and better and more vulnerable and true.

I am thinking lately about dancing and money. To be honest, this is something I am always thinking about. Dancing as a feminized form that thus doesn't yield much profit. Dancing as a body based practice. Dancing as witchcraft. Dancing as an ineffable and adjacent practice to living. Dancing as a form that speaks to things that we just can't fucking speak to in any other way. Dancing that has both ruined and saved my life. I have no savings to speak of, no retirement, no job security, but I have logged hundreds of hours of ecstasy and delirium and I have learned to make myself invisible, to be part of the wind and to set myself on fire.

In small town Texas, the dance halls and the gun clubs are in the same building. These are often the buildings that are rented for family reunions, weddings, and the like. I have been thinking about these buildings a lot: shared spaces in the midst of brutally hot and shadeless pastures with a few scruffy cattle on them so the owner gets the livestock tax break; land with more gnarly and spiky mesquite trees than

anything else; land with grass that is full of spikes and fire ants and rattlesnakes and scorpions. It is in fact a pretty brutal landscape, so the guns thing makes sense to me. But why dance? Why a dance hall? How is it that these people who teach their men not to move their faces and teach their women to say yes ma'am and yes sir never go to church without mascara on, are the same people who build huge beautiful monuments to movement with soaring ceilings and beautiful floors in the middle of the countryside? The cynical part of me sees this as a part of the capitalist machinery of fostering coupling, and childbearing as a means towards the creation of capital in the form of a workforce, but part of me wants to believe that these buildings somehow express a desire for something that is different.

Texas is confusing to me. It is supposed to somehow be my home, but it somehow is not. I have a hard time in a culture that considers watermelon a sufficient vegetable for dinner, though I am proud to sign my line in the name of bad ass fun loving tough ladies with whisky in their trunks and cigarettes in their hands.

In Lindenau (Rifle Club) party for the other siblings I am taking the Texas dance hall, a structure that figures prominently in my personal family history, as a site where the culturally devalued (dancing) and the culturally overvalued (gun owning) are roommates. I am interested in this. As I am interested in dancing, but have never touched a gun, my interest is from the perspective of what it invites into the dancing. If dancing is worshipped in the same shrine as firearms, it must somehow be considered an important, if lunatic, activity.



Rachael Dichter / photo by Elena Zhukova

Thus, my project in this piece is to value my work as a dancer, as if dancing was something as central and revered in American culture as gun owning. Part of this is logistical and practical: I aim to keep as much of the money as possible from the fee for the piece as salary for my labor as a maker and performer. Anyone who has logged unpaid, unseen hours of labor as a homemaker or caretaker knows that no matter how much we love something, money imparts value and wields power. It means something. I want to see how it changes the work if I consider my own labor to be important enough to be decently paid. Part of this is craft based: I am working on the dancing. I am training. I am working on the dancing cuz I know those dudes are shining their guns. Part of this is existential: I am practicing believing that what I do is important, relevant, and essential. I am practicing believing that it matters, cuz they believe their stupid guns matter.

To do this work, I am calling on freak ancestors and misfits and dancing fools to call me out and move with me. I am a firm opponent of human exceptionalism so some of these are not human. I am calling out the ones who haven't been invited to the party, to the reunion, the ones

who disappeared, the ones who were made invisible through systematic omission and withdrawal of support.

This past summer I saw an alligator gar. These are huge, ugly prehistoric fish that live in the murky brown waters of the Texas countryside. The one I saw must have been five feet long. They are systematically killed because they eat the sport fish, but these monsters still persist. They are crucial for the balance of the ecosystem in the water, even though no one is taking their picture to put on their wall.

The alligator gar is invited to this party.

jose e. abad is a queer social practice performance artist exploring queer futurity through an intersectional lens. abad is a collaborator in two queer performance collectives, Yum Yum Club and Lxs Des, and has performed solo and collaborative works nationally and internationally with artists including Joanna Haigood, Keith Hennessy, Scott Wells, Anne Bluethenthal & Dancers, NAKA Dance Theatre, Seth Eisen, Ivo Dimchev, Brontez Purnell Dance Company, and detour dance.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto //Faluda Islam is an artist, performer, zombie drag queen and curator of mixed Pakistani, Lebanese and Iranian descent. Bhutto was curatorial resident at SOMArts Cultural Center where he co-curated, The Third Muslim: Queer and Trans Muslim Narratives of Resistance and Resilience and is a fall artist in residence at the Headlands Center for the Arts.

Gabriel Christian is a multidisciplinary black artist. After receiving a BA in Theatre Studies from Yale University in 2013, they shifted coasts and work from their native New York to the Bay Area. His oeuvre has pivoted from stage performance to reifying queer desire, genderfluidity (or "juicyness"), and black resilience through a broader spectrum of movement arts. They have mounted commissioned work at Finnish Brotherhood Hall, Counterpulse, SOMArts, Mason Chapel for San Francisco International Arts Festival 2017, and Red Poppy Art House for FRESH Festival 2018.

Abby Crain is a San Francisco Bay Area based artist who makes dances and other structures for performance. She also works as a teacher and performer. Her solo and collaborative work has been presented in the San Francisco Bay Area, New York City, Liverpool, Chicago, Cork, Berlin, Portland and Los Angeles at a range of venues including Counterpulse Theater (SF), Headlands Center for the Arts, Berkeley Art Museum, Movement Research, and Show Box LA. Her work has been nominated for a Bay Area Izzie four times.

Rachael Dichter is a San Francisco based dancer, performer, choreographer and curator. Having studied dance and art history at Mills College and was a 2015 Dancweb Scholar, and 2017 Artist in Residence at Caldera and a recipient of the Robert Rauschenberg Residency. Her work has shown locally and in Berlin, St Erme France, Portland, Seattle and she had been lucky to collaborate with a number of fierce and talented folks and for four years she co-curated the San Francisco based live arts festival THIS IS WHAT I WANT.



About Jess Curtis

Jess Curtis is an award-winning choreographer and performer committed to an art-making practice informed by experimentation, innovation, critical discourse and social relevance at the intersections of fine art and popular culture. In 2000, Curtis founded his own trans-continental performance company, Jess Curtis/Gravity, based in Berlin and San Francisco. Curtis is active as a writer, advocate and community organizer in the fields of contemporary dance and performance, and teaches accessible Dance, Contact Improvisation and Interdisciplinary Performance courses throughout the US and Europe. He holds an MFA in Choreography and a Ph.D. in Performance Studies from the University of California at Davis.
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