

# INTERVIEW: ARTIST JIMMY ROBERT ON THE BODY, SPACE, AND POWER

By [Harry Burke](#)

“The words emerge from her body without her realizing it, as if she were being visited by the memory of a language long forsaken,” wrote Marguerite Duras in her 1990 short novel, *Summer Rain*. The notion of the body as a vehicle of language permeates the inquisitive practice of [Jimmy Robert](#). Born in Guadeloupe, and based in Berlin, Robert — who works in performance, photography, installation, and film — uses the body to ask questions about how spaces are constructed, and what it means to see and be seen. His artworks are often formed through processes of translation and transition, as he constructs meaning out of the differences that exist between various sites, texts, and media. A rigorous attention to collaboration runs throughout his oeuvre, and extends even to his relationship with his artistic godmothers: Duras, Yvonne Rainer, and other feminist figures who have brought visibility to issues of desire and movement while problematizing how power operates within the visual sphere. Earlier this year, Robert staged a performance titled *Joie noire* at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, and is currently participating in the 2019 Chicago Architecture Biennial (until January 2020). To encounter Robert’s work is to understand that art can be judged as much for what it does as for what it is: viewership is a provocative and participatory process.

**Can you describe your work for the current Chicago Architecture Biennial?**

The title of the installation and performance, *Descendances du nu*, is a play on the French words for descending and legacy — its starting point is Marcel Duchamp’s 1912 painting [Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2](#). I first performed the piece in a former synagogue in France. I was thinking about what it means to bring a body like mine into an art space with strong religious connotations while reflecting on Duchamp as a patriarchal figure — Sherrie Levine, Elaine Sturtevant, and Louise Lawler have all appropriated his work — and trying to locate myself between matriarchal and patriarchal figures. I wore a headpiece that looks like a staircase — I was like an architectural anomaly, or symbiosis. In

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Chicago, other performers are performing the piece on a staircase in a big cultural center from the late-19th century. It's a neo-baroque extravaganza accompanied by a sound piece by [Ain Bailey](#), and a text by [Élisabeth Lebovici](#) who writes about cabaret, Josephine Baker, camp, and the notion of the pedestal.



Jimmy Robert. Portrait by Paul Hutchinson for PIN-UP Magazine.

## **What's your relationship to feminism?**

My works owe a lot to how feminist art has paved the way for questions of performance, the body, touch, the crossover of genres, and the ability to transport between different forms.

## **Your body is often present in your artworks.**

I am reclaiming how I want this Black gay male body to be seen and represented. I feel that I have to do this myself, otherwise there's a risk of misrepresentation. But, like in Chicago, I'm ready to open it up: to delegate, have

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other people perform. It's taken time to understand what's at the core of the work, in order to let this happen. To get to the point of not necessarily owning it, and knowing what the real questions are.

## So what are they?

I work with various translations between object and image, image and text, text and performance. I materialize these transitions, and ask how they manifest themselves and make sense. I'm interested in site specificity, and what it means to bring one's body into specific spaces. I also want to address art-historical questions, and those of what the audience is doing, and what they are looking at. They have to do some work in how they position themselves. I want people to feel like they have a role in interpreting and reading the work. Not everything is laid out for them. There needs to be an investigation.



Slide 2 of 4: Jimmy Robert, *Imitation of Lives*, 2017. Performance view: The Glass House, 2017. Photo by Michael Biondo. Courtesy of the artist, Performa, The Glass House and Tanya Leighton, Berlin.

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**In 2017, you presented *Imitation of Lives* (2017) at Philip Johnson's Glass House in Connecticut. The piece responds to the building's iconic architecture. It evolved in dialogue with Lucy McKenzie's painting *Loos / De Bruycker marble*, as well as David Hammons' *In the Hood*, texts by Jayne Cortez, Marguerite Duras, Audre Lorde, and Lorenzo Thomas, and other references. Intertextuality is very important to you. Why?**

It's a way of opening things up, of layering, and of showing that things are complex and can't be reduced. Whether it's language, literature, or painting, these are different forms of collaboration.

## **Collaboration is vital within your work.**

It stems from a desire to learn from others: what their work is, what their work is about. I once worked with (artist and choreographer) Maria Hassabi and found a shared interest in the body becoming an object. Collaboration is expansive and nourishing. It's a bit like appropriation, which is about absorbing different practices and concerns.

## **Perhaps collaboration is consensual appropriation?**

Ha! There needs to be a deeper sense of responsibility about how things are appropriated and borrowed. In appropriation, there's an archaeology of knowledge, of how you construct yourself and your practice. My relationship to Marguerite Duras has been obsessive: watching and reading everything, knowing I needed to process ideas about masculinity, femininity, colonialism, and desire. Appropriating is a way of devouring. It is a cannibalistic approach to art: devour it to emit it back, transform yourself, and grow.

**You recently presented *Joie noire* at KW, Berlin, within the context of a program dedicated to the late artist and performer Ian White. What was your relationship to Ian?**

We met when he showed some of my films at LUX in London. Once, we saw a Michael Clark piece at the Barbican, and thought, "Ah, we could do that!" So we found a way to do something together by learning *Trio A* by Yvonne Rainer. It's meant to be a democratic dance that anyone can learn. We weren't dancers, and we thought, "Can we really do this?", but we figured it out, and performed it at Tate Britain and MoMA. Ian's particular interest was in how to change the dynamic of the auditorium, and how people interact with films. Through him, I became interested in challenging relationships to institutions, art, and its interpretation.

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## What did *Joie noire* consist of?

We traveled through different spaces in the building, questioning time, and how long the audience would watch and listen. Choreographing the action of looking — that's what I'm interested in. In the work, there was a recording of Ian talking about embalming, which he gave me before he passed away. It's a meditation on death, and the nightclub. We went dancing a lot, and thought about art at cruising bars: these places are not about reflection, but that's how we used them. There were seemingly disparate elements, but historically connected, through AIDS and activism in the 1990s. It was important that the work be staged in Berlin, the last city of decadence.



Slide 2 of 4: Jimmy Robert, *Joie noire*, 2019. Pause: (After Ian White). KW Berlin, 2019  
Photo by Frank Sperling. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin.

## Why performance?

I've always found representation to be failing. I'm interested in analyzing what questions come from this failure. I started with photography, which produces a distance. I wanted to challenge this distance. The body became a transition between the moving image and the still image. Performance feels political because the body, a site of interference and resistance, is there. You have to face it.

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