

# The New Criterion

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## Cease and “resist” at The Met

by Andrew L. Shea

Mega Bog (“experimental melodic jazz-pop” musician). Ojay Morgan (aka “Zebra Katz”). Shilpa Ray (self-described “fire breathing Cyclops”). Bassem Youssef (political comedian). DJ Mojo (at press time, 168 “likes” on Facebook). These artists, among many others, comprise the lineup for *Theater of the Resist*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s summer performance series of dance, music, film, and more, which has run for the past eight weeks and concludes on August 12. Widely considered the hottest new thing on east Seventy-fifth Street, *Theater of the Resist* has proven the place to go for your biweekly fix of revolution and institutional subversion. Performances take place on the fifth floor of The Met Breuer building on Friday and Saturday evenings.

An optimist might hope that the series is merely a last gasp of The Met’s Thomas Campbell era, which was marked by a dramatic increase in focus on contemporary art, whimsical playhouse-style programming, and identity-driven political correctness. Nominally, *Theater of the Resist* is presented by The Met’s performance division, MetLiveArts, in collaboration with Kali Holloway, the senior writer and associate editor of *AlterNet*, a left-wing “progressive” online news magazine. Holloway’s involvement exposes and explains the unabashedly political tenor of the series: the writer has next to no experience or credentials in art, having instead made a career writing for various governmental initiatives in New York City.

Nevertheless, one would be justified in wondering how a professional writer and editor might sign off on a title such as *Theater of the Resist*, which improperly employs the verb “resist” as a noun. Even if we justify the title as a product of poetic license, its advertised explanation is equally inexcusable:

*“Theater of the Resist takes its name from art making—a technique where [sic] the artist uses opposing material to “resist” the medium and thus generating [sic] negative space in which to create.”*

Nearly every word of this sentence, reproduced verbatim from The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s official website, is employed erroneously. “Art making” a technique? And how does using “opposing material” generate “negative space in which to create”? Was this writer aware that “negative space” is not a conceptual phrase, but the formal term for the empty space surrounding

the subject of a two-dimensional image?

Notwithstanding the jargon-laden blather, you'd think Holloway (again, a professional editor) wouldn't miss the glaring grammatical errors within this sentence and paragraph more generally. Or maybe what we have here is a "resist" against the oppression inherent within the institutional structure of historically white, heteronormative syntax? Small victories, I guess?

In all seriousness, however, the incoherence of the program's mission statement conveys two things clearly: first, that the project hopelessly lacks some definite and clear *raison d'être*; and second, that it is conceptually impossible to elevate these (mostly) silly performances onto the privileged level of high art that befits a museum of The Met's stature.

I carried these thoughts with me as I journeyed over to the Breuer building a few Friday evenings ago to watch in person one iteration of *Theater of the Resist*. I arrived ten minutes early, the fifth-floor venue, which contained stadium-style bleachers surrounding a small performance area, fairly empty. I decided to sit by myself to the side, wanting a clear view of the audience's reaction as well as the performance itself. As I sat in anticipation, people kept filing in, and soon enough the room was packed. This evening's master of ceremonies, Helga Davis (of New York Public Radio) started the show off with a bit of audience participation, asking, "What do you *resist* against?"

"Trump!"

"Bigotry!"

"Capitalism!"

"Work!"

"The Patriarchy!"

"Ecological Disaster!"

And the like. Ms. Davis responded with her assurance that this night, in this safe place, "We can hold some stuff here . . . together."

The first performance came from the dancer Davalois Fearon and her accompanist the clarinetist Michael McGinnis. The piece consisted of a critique of her graduate school's unilateral focus on dance of the Western tradition, cataloguing numerous incidents perhaps best described as "microaggressions." One might rightly ask whether Ms. Fearon cared to examine her graduate school's course listings before enrolling in (and presumably, paying for) her unfashionably Euro-centric education. In the middle of the performance (which combined skilled dancing with poor acting), Ms. Fearon quoted "theory" on "voluntary blindness" by the performance artist Jean-Jacques Label, then proceeded to blindfold herself for the next number—a feat I found physically impressive but conceptually vacuous. By the end of the performance, Ms. Fearon came to the somewhat depressing conclusion that dance was powerless to resolve her issues, closing the performance by saying emphatically, "It's Time to Talk." If that's her conclusion, I'd suggest she work on her acting chops.

The Mighty Third Rail, a “New York based trio that mixes the elements of Hip Hop poetry, beat-boxing, violin and upright bass,” performed the second set of the evening. The trio’s careful attention to craft and basic musicianship was encouraging, especially in the context of the two performances that surrounded it. Though performing jazz standards (the likes of Duke Ellington, John Coltrane, Billie Holliday) in the musical idiom of hip hop might feel somewhat overplayed at this point, the fundamental talent of all three musicians did shine through the sometimes overindulgent verse of the ensemble’s vocalist.



*Zebra Katz performing at The Met's Theater of the Resist. Photo: Andrew Shea*

It was only after this trio concluded their final song, however, that I discovered truly why the audience had made the trip to The Met this night. The introduction of the final performer, “Zebra Katz,” the techno-rapper “character” of Ojay Morgan, was met with a deafening ovation. After a brief technical delay—the dead time passed by the host Ms. Davis lampooning the national anthem for the audience—Mr. Katz, dressed in a metallic silver space suit and opaque black mask, emerged out of a cloud of fog to a thumping, minimalist techno beat and wild applause. For his first work, titled “Sex Sellz,” [sic] Mr. Katz repeated the titular refrain for about four minutes. I decided to leave before he began his next number.

It is important to consider whether bringing these sorts of performances—among them trance disco, slapstick comedy, and groupthink-inspired proselytism—into the confines of The Met enacts an elevation of the art form or a deprivation of the institution. Though the artist may benefit from being able to say that they have performed in the Breuer building, if The Met gains a reputation as a venue for programming typical of off-off-Broadway, are we really doing these artists a service? Part of me wanted to ask the audience members as well as the performers their thoughts on the

permanent collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. After all, the mission statement of MetLiveArts purports to put on their shows “in the context of The Met's unparalleled collection and exhibitions.” Of course, walking through the cold and sparse exhibition spaces of the Breuer’s lower floors reminded me that perhaps *Theater of the Resist* wasn’t the only, or indeed the most, significant example of artistic depravation within the halls of this institution.

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