

minor matter, 2016, performance at HAU Hebbel am Ufer Berlin, Berlin, 2016. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: © Martha Glenn

Following the US election in November, every cultural event seemed to include a caveat in the press release or the opening statement: “In light of recent events...” or “As dire as the situation may seem...” followed by a halfhearted attempt at optimism that only exacerbated the feeling of hopelessness.

FEELINGS MATTER: ANESTHETIC AESTHETICS AND THE CHOREOGRAPHY OF LIGIA LEWIS

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BY ELVIA WILK

“Feeling bad is never a public gesture. Feeling bad is always supposed to be a private, isolated expression, but it’s not, because feeling bad is, I believe, quite normal—we could be together in that.”
—MYSTI¹

Everyone I knew was depressed, worried, angry. The bad feelings manifested physically. Friends described new ailments. A disk in my lower back slid out of position and I spent a week contemplating fascism while immobile on my sofa.

And yet my inbox continued to fill. The pace of events and exhibitions accelerated—as if we hoped to find relief in aesthetic experience. I took one ibuprofen after another and dragged myself to art shows in search of palliative care. I found an assortment of objects in a bright room, a crowd providing a semblance of collective experience, a beer. Alleviation, sedation. Not only did the art I saw refuse to acknowledge my pain, but it denied my pain, shrugging, laughing, or giving the finger.

In late November I saw a dance piece by the choreographer Ligia Lewis at Berlin’s Hebbel am Ufer called *minor matter*. By the end of the hour-long performance, I felt I had gone through a profound catharsis along with the hundred others in the theater. I was in no less physical or mental pain, but the feelings had been alchemically transmuted, brought to the surface. I was able to hold onto the feelings; I was able to feel them.

Lewis performs *minor matter* with two others, Jonathan Gonzalez and Hector Thami Manekehla. The piece opens in total darkness, with Lewis’s disembodied voice emanating through the theater: “You shift, you shift and shift... because you know this is the last tomb of an invisible age of the dead.” A rhythm pounds through the dark, and three bodies emerge in spotlights, outfitted in color-coordinated athletic wear. Throughout the first half they strike dramatic poses, grapple with each other, and occasionally break into individual monologues, which revolve around the uncontainability of certain emotions and taboos against their expression. “All the emotions start to fill up inside of you, they start to spill over,” pants Lewis into a microphone. She turns to the audience, demanding, “Is that *too much? Really?* Because I just started.”

The work’s climax is an ecstatic, three-bodied version of the famous *Bolero* solo choreographed in 1960 by Maurice Béjart—but Lewis channels the movements through contemporary step dancing

(a percussive style known for being performed by African American college fraternities and sororities). The outpouring of rhythmic energy, which is extremely moving, is followed by a descent to the floor, a disintegration, an estrangement from the beat. The coda of the work consists of a rehearsed game: the three repeatedly pile onto each other in an unsteady balancing act until the group collapses. Describing the finale, Lewis told me, “It’s weirdly hopeful in a dark way, in a pessimistic way—this is a mess, we’re going to celebrate this mess, this death, this darkness.”

Celebration and death, futility and passion, health and pain: all are inseparable in *minor matter*. So are togetherness and individuation. In a description of the work, Lewis states that a guiding question for the piece was: “Can the black box be host to a Black experience that goes beyond identity politics?” One way she tried to do this, she told me, was to “saturate the black box with Black sociality,” that is, to instill a sense of oneness between all three performers, who are Black, while also creating space for “difference within difference.” To counter the violence of identity politics with boundless individuation; to counter the pain of expression through more expression.

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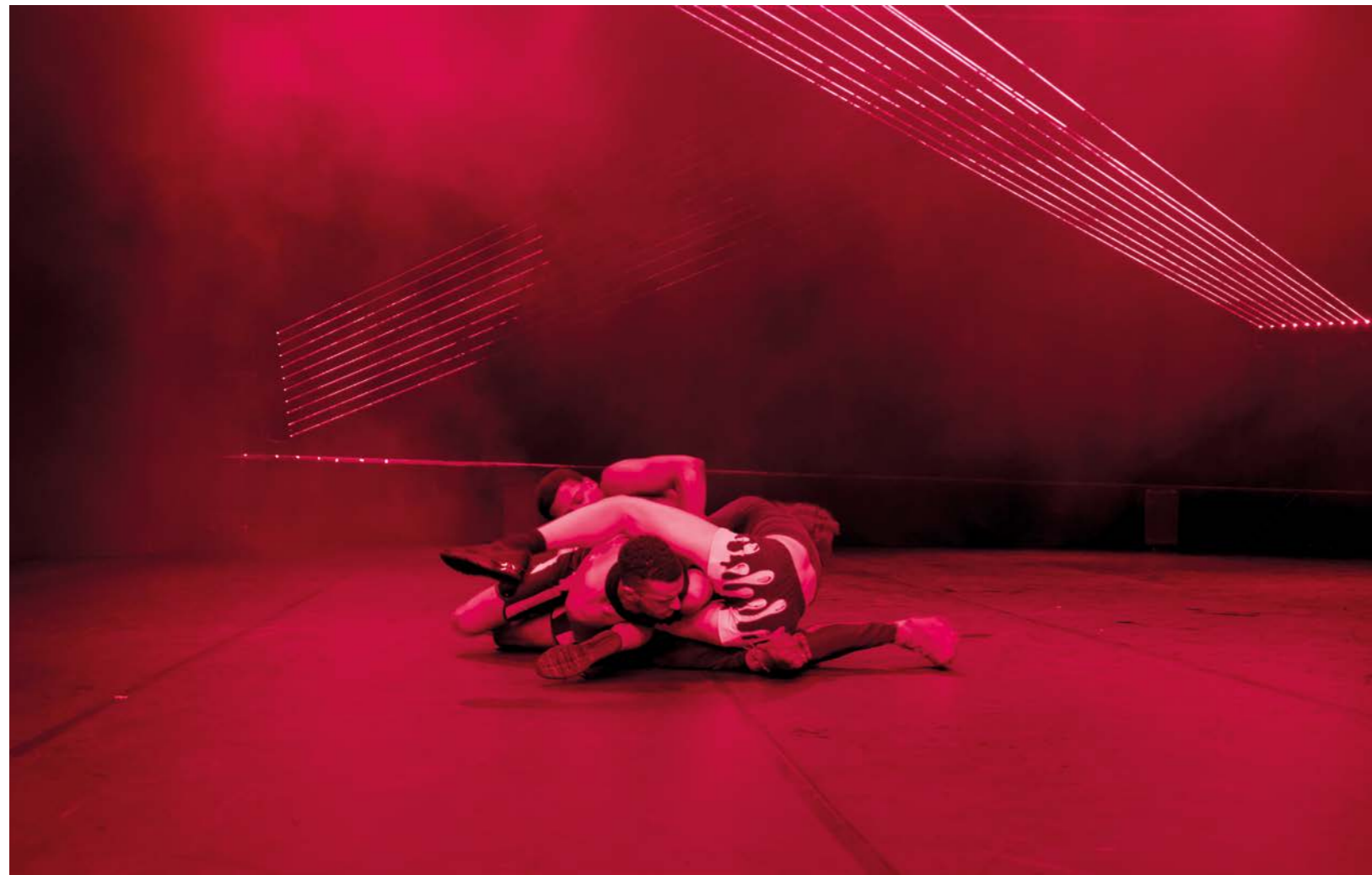
In an essay from the early 1990s called “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,” the writer David Levi Strauss argues that in mainstream culture, as well as in much artistic practice, aesthetics have become understood as a method of pain control. “Since the modern social condition has been defined by overstimulation and sensory overload,” he writes, “the aesthetic has increasingly been replaced by an anesthetic urge, a narcotic need to reduce stimulation and ease the pain.” By his account, from commercial imagery to decorative hospital art to contemporary art, the goal is to suppress overwhelming or negative feelings. But “the anesthetic only masks symptoms; it does nothing to treat the root causes of pain, to trace it back to its source, give it meaning, or counter it with pleasure.”²

As opposed to today’s “soothing” art found in hospitals, waiting rooms, and places of suffering—which I would argue includes all institutions, including art ones—much pre-capitalist aesthetic practice believed that imagery could heal through catharsis. As an example, Levi Strauss points to the Isenheim Altarpiece, an enormous,

Next spread - *minor matter*, 2016, performance at HAU Hebbel am Ufer Berlin, Berlin, 2016. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: © Martha Glenn

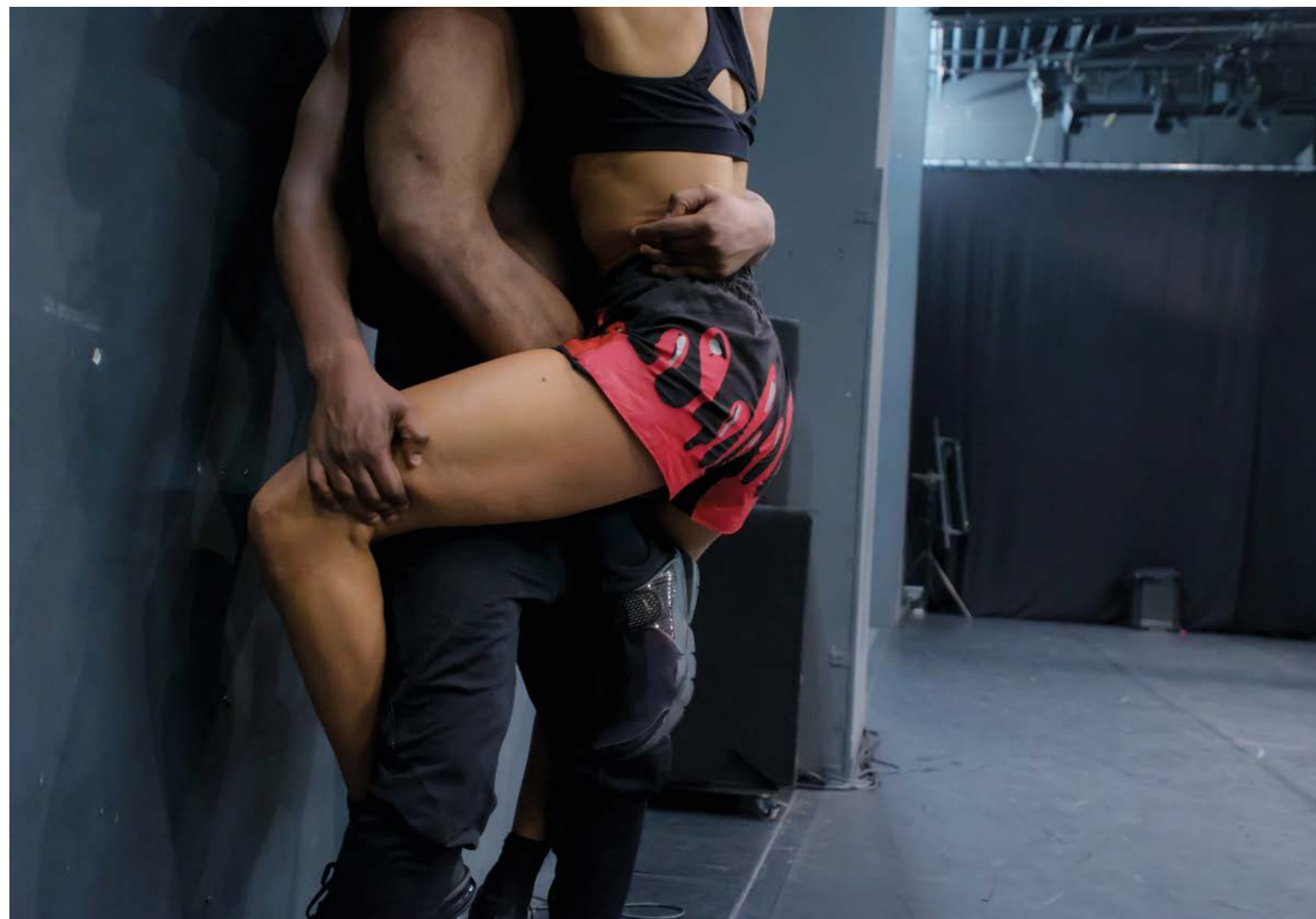
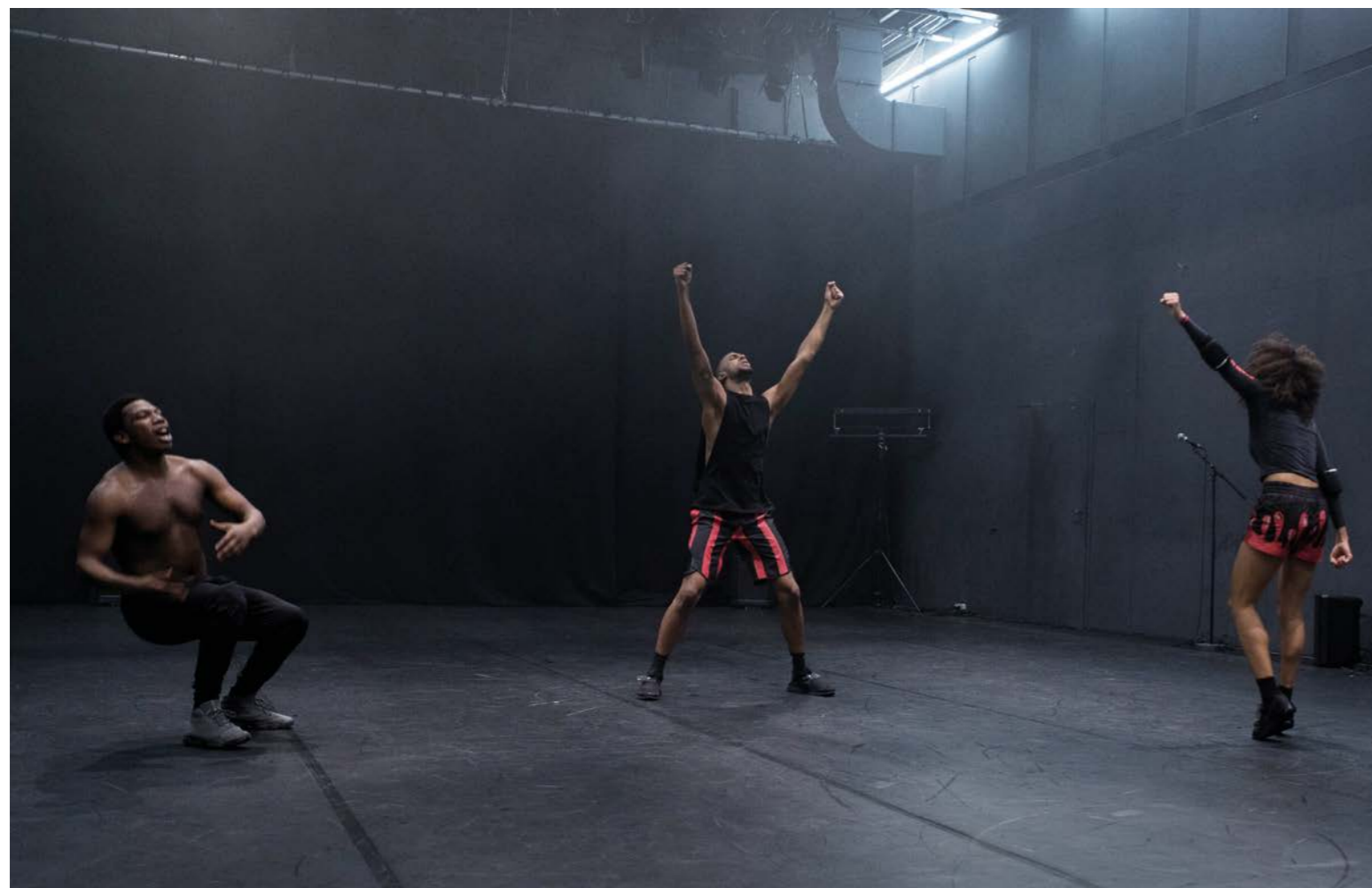
1. <https://holdmyhairback.wordpress.com/2016/11/30/a-little-trifle-who-argues-big/>.
2. David Levi Strauss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,” in *Between Dog and Wolf: Essays on Art and Politics* (New York: Autonomedia, 1999).



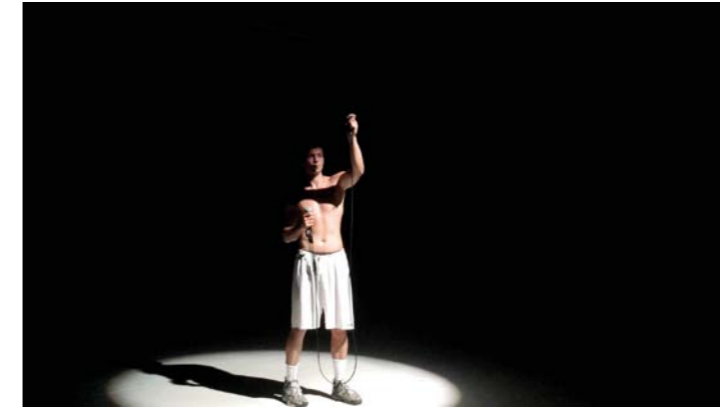


Above - *minor matter*, 2016, performance at HAU Hebbel am Ufer Berlin, Berlin, 2016. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: © Martha Glenn

Right and opposite - *Sorrow Swag*, 2014, performance at Uferstudios Berlin, Berlin, 2016. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: © Martha Glenn



nine-paneled painting made by the enigmatic artist Grünewald in the early 1500s. The work was created for an Anonite monastery in Alsace, where resident monks were known for treating disfiguring diseases, particularly ergotism (“Saint Anthony’s Fire”). The biblical



scenes of the altarpiece depict these diseases with often grotesque realism; in the most famous panel, Christ on the cross suffers not only from the crucifixion but from a gruesome skin affliction.

Grünewald likely used the patients themselves as models, transposing their suffering onto the holy imagery—not to soothe their pain, but to transform it through self-identification. Levi Strauss calls this approach to aesthetics “therapeutic realism.” It is therapeutic not because it pushes the viewer (sufferer) toward “health” as a default positive state, but because the idea of absolute health is destabilized altogether, and pain is validated as a fundamental aspect of existence, even a path to transcendence.

Much contemporary art of recent years has obsessed itself with health, fitness, and physical perfection as sold by mass media. A cross-section of work from the 2016 Berlin Biennale provides a panoply of such references: the healthy-lifestyle aesthetics of Debora Delmar Corp’s juice bar installation *MINT* (2016); the fitness imperative playfully applied in the weekly “Open Workouts” led by a series of artists; the portrayal of a cozy, productive, conflict-free sociality, as suggested in the installation *In Bed Together* (2016) by M/L Artspace.

The imagery is overwhelmingly of attractive, healthy people eating, drinking, and wearing attractive, healthy things. With some exceptions, disability and difference are portrayed only to signify the general “inclusivity” of identity politics.

Whether such reproductions of the mainstream health cult are complicit or critical (this has been hashed out endlessly elsewhere), from an aesthetic standpoint, most are decidedly anesthetic. They do nothing “to treat the root causes of pain, to trace it back to its source, give it meaning, or counter it with pleasure.” The artist references his or her pain only through its negation. The anesthetization of suffering—and erasure of difference—already so efficiently done by mass culture is replicated in the art context, anesthetizing us further. Breakdown, illness, or overwhelming emotion have no place in allopathic art any more than in allopathic society.

Making anesthetic art requires artists who are themselves anesthetized. The market does a good job of this; any successful artist has to be physically capable of meeting its demands. Brad Troemel refers to a version of this figure as the “aesthlete”: the hyper-producing, clicking, liking, tagging, careerist artist whose self-exploitation reaches a near-euphoric exhaustion.³ While Troemel focuses on the bodybuilding aspect of manic content production, in which Olympic performance is part and parcel of the content, there is a narcotic aspect, too. Any careerist artist knows how much Adderall, Vicodin, and MDMA are necessary to fuel a productive lifestyle.

Anesthetic art is also a privilege of the unmarked body (unmarked racially and otherwise). As Hannah Black wrote in a review of the Berlin Biennale: “The individual privilege of producing art... becomes analytically indistinguishable from the collective privilege of being white.”⁴ By definition, the commercialized health imperative is normative, racialized, and ableist, relying on identity politics.

The idealized pictures of health we are provided by mass culture—a white bodybuilder at the gym, a white woman eating salad (the image of which has been successfully lampooned by biennale curators DIS)—effectively align the marked body with the unhealthy or the painful. Yes, there is pain; feeling it becomes a fundamental aspect of resistance. As Lewis shouts directly to the audience in *minor matter*: “Feelings matter!”

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minor matter forms the second work in a trilogy called *Blue, Red, White*. Lewis choreographed the first work in the series, *Sorrow Swag*, for her own body, but then ultimately chose the white male dancer Brian Getnick to perform it. The choreography is inflected by machismo—a thumb to the nose, an uppercut, a crotch grab—movements culled from popular culture as much as from wrestling, boxing, and martial arts. But these recognizable actions repeatedly break down into displays of emotion, leaving the performer increasingly vulnerable, until his performance devolves completely into a prolonged primal scream, his screaming mouth illuminated under spotlight.

Sorrow Swag is immersive and, as Lewis told me, “emotionally manipulative” in that it fully draws the viewer in by exploiting the seduction inherent in the theater apparatus, only to spit us out at the end. This intense emotional inversion—not to mention the reversal of the typical mode of representation by which a white male



represents a Black female body—deeply problematizes the (majority white) audience’s tendency to over-identify with the performing figure. And we are openly chastised for our desire to do so. Gold-grilled, Getnick’s teeth flash as he mutters and wails to the audience in one monologue: “You are all DAWGZ! D-A-W-G-Z-DAWGZ!” and “I spit on all your happinesses!”

In Lewis’s work, the abundance of physical expression is systematically undermined by emotional or physical breakdown. “A driving part of my practice is to give space for sadness, for all those things we deem disruptive to productivity,” she says. This is therapeutic realism. It allows identification without an appeal to identity. It does not try to suppress overwhelming feelings (as art so often does), to commodify them (as identity politics so often does), to pathologize them (as the health industry does), or to undermine them. It simply acknowledges their realness.

Above, from top - *Sorrow Swag*, 2014, performance at Uferstudios Berlin, Berlin, 2016. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: © Martha Glenn; *minor matter*, 2016, performance at HAU Hebbel am Ufer Berlin, Berlin, 2016. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: © Martha Glenn