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Damman Catherine, *P.S. I LOVE YOU*, Catherine Damman on Yve Laris Cohen, Artforum., June 1st, 2018, print

ARTFORUM

PERFORMANCE

P.S. I LOVE YOU

Catherine Damman on Yve Laris Cohen



Yve Laris Cohen, *P.S. 122*, 2018. Performance view, Performance Space New York, March 7, 2018. From left: Yve Laris Cohen, Karen Eubel, Andrew Glass, Robin Tewes. On scaffold: Dominick Guida. Photo: Julieta Cervantes.

“ARROGANT ASSHOLE,” spits a man, not realizing that the words and their inflection do more to indict speaker than subject. Their target is, ostensibly, Yve Laris Cohen, the artist. We are sitting in the middle of Laris Cohen’s performance *P.S. 122* (2018) on opening night, and I wish everyone would shut up.

Laris Cohen spends most of *P.S. 122* stationed far upstage. The work’s title conjures the previous name of the hosting venue, which has recently been rebranded, to an admixture of chagrin and nostalgia, as Performance Space New York. He abandons this post only occasionally—in this instance, he has just done so at a purposive speed-walk, in an attempt to intercept the audience member who moments later will call him an asshole. The clamoring man had cut through the performance area and marched in front of rows of spectators, all because he wanted something he couldn’t quite have from his seat.

What he wanted was a glimpse of a canvas, the recto of which remains obscured to me. Before it, I can see a woman, Robin Tewes, with short white hair and an accretion of color on her shirt, each stain a trace of splayed fingers caressing abdomen, part of the inadvertent choreography that constitutes a painter’s labor: a daub, a dip, a wipe. Arching her back in concentration, she’s looking at the canvas too, but differently—not with the scopophilic acquisitiveness of a herd breezing through galleries, not to *have seen*; rather, she is looking with the tenderness required to usher an image into being. On a stool, her model sits with an impressively straight spine, his gaze steady. A stack of papers rests in his lap.

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I look from the sage of his shirt to the dim, praline water into which another performer, Sally Eckhoff, dips her brushes. She's behind the audience, seemingly unconcerned about being out of its view, instead focused on her own: the skyline. Early on, Laris Cohen threaded a halogen work light—the kind used to illuminate construction sites—through the aperture of a window near which she stands. At stage right is Karen Eubel, fixated on precision-steering an X-Acto blade through paper. Dominick Guida is perched on a steel beam, at work on the north-facing brick wall. Scaffolding lies in wait beside him, a crosshatched shock of ultramarine.

It's not lost on me that, if I'm thinking compositionally, it's because Laris Cohen wants me to—the performance arena has been defined by unstretched, undyed canvas, which covers the floor and curdles at its edges. The theater has recently been renovated, and so the cloth surface's mousy ecru only throws into relief the paint on the black box's walls—a darkness so fresh it looks wet.

Some needs will always conflict with others, but whose needs are met and how often are political questions.

We watch the artists work. Absorption in a task has long been a subject of painting. For scenes of preoccupied laborers, see Gustave Caillebotte's floor scrapers, Jean-François Millet's gleaners, Gustave Courbet's stone breakers. Such images, to contemporary viewers, can seem pastel, placid, passé. There's a tinge of this in the antispectacular quietude of Laris Cohen's tableau, and yet the reservoir of serenity offered up to the eye is, to the ear, countered with pure acid: A soundtrack at once electric and unyielding—from where?—fills the room, marring the silence with searing feedback and thrumming bass.

Suturing together the ostensible boredom of avant-garde durationality and the carousing lawlessness of a rock show proves heady: Audience decorum devolves. The painterly composition is soon pocked with the juiced light of less-than-clandestine smartphones; sotto voce remarks swell into full-fledged conversations. Permission is intuited, then received as contagious. It crests beyond the capacities of Laris Cohen's interdictions, a tide outside his control.

Laris Cohen's work invites ad hominem descriptors: stringent, withholding, imperious. It often gnaws or nettles. Its strict rules can make audiences into teenagers, cause them to act out.

Amid the anarchy, Eckhoff fills in an indigo sky.

But what I see, tucked behind the facade of confrontation, are supreme acts of generosity, the mechanisms of care. Often playing choreographer, producer, director, and principal performer all at once, Laris Cohen—here and in other works—both wears and conceals that authority under the mantle of art handler or production assistant. Throughout *P.S. 122*, the artists' hands beckon, and at their call he comes, to clip a lamp onto an easel, freshen brackish brush water, or gather scraps of paper and shuttle them away. In as gorgeous a lift as I've seen on any ballet stage, Laris Cohen releases safety locks on the scaffold's wheels and then wraps his fingers around the structure's edges, stretching his wingspan and hefting the massive thing, with Guida atop it, over just a few feet. His body hinges, making a transverse line of epaulement and effort, as if those were not always already the same.

The sheets of paper on Andrew Glass's lap are passed around; from them, the audience learns that the work's title refers neither to the elementary school once housed here nor to Performance Space 122. Rather, it abbreviates Painting Space 122, a nonprofit studio that has been operating in the building since 1978. The artists working before us are some of its earliest members.

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Yve Laris Cohen, *P.S. 122*, 2018. Performance views, Performance Space New York, March 7, 2018. Sally Eckhoff.

After setting up four large speakers and a mic stand, Laris Cohen escorts a man named Tom, who has appeared in several of his works, to center stage. Tom reads aloud, identifying himself as a consultant in the protracted renovation process of this very space. (In fact, he is quoting the words of the theater's actual consultant.) His speech is essentially a dissenting opinion, an inventory of all that was recommended and advised against. Barely audible, his voice is no competition for the music, by Dither, which is unrelenting. Tom describes the ways architecture might address—or fail to address—what he calls “constituent user needs.” He catalogues his disapproval of the newly blown-out roof, the lack of a catwalk for technicians, the unsatisfactorily sprung floor, the lighting-storage-room doors that open into the theater in a way that is both unsafe and visually distracting.

Not long after they are invoked, those doors are opened. Eyes snap upward and east, in a collective pose of supplication, as if to a cross on high. Reverb and pulse spill out of the opening, and inside we see four guitarists—they've been there, invisible but doing their work, all along—the combined might of their twenty-four strings, unleashed, growling into the theater. This revelation is high drama and, like the denouement of a film by Michael Snow or Chantal Akerman, both sates and unsettles; it makes you reconsider your own investment in climax.

The sediment of history in buildings and in bodies is a primary engine of Laris Cohen's work. Watching *P.S. 122*, I think of recent discourses around accessibility; how voices must compete to be heard over whatever is amplified, how “constituent user needs” go chronically unmet. Some needs will always conflict with others, but whose needs are met and how often are political questions. How the past is remembered plays a part in all this, and here it's worth mentioning that Guida's patient attentions to that wall, the results of which are hard to discern at first, have been in the service of faux-aging new brick to look old.

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Yve Laris Cohen, *P.S. 122*, 2018. Performance views, Performance Space New York, March 7, 2018. Robin Tewes and Yve Laris Cohen. Photos: Julieta Cervantes.

We live in a world gummed up with mostly wrong words, governed by built environments that burden and exclude, surroundings that are successful in that violence because of naturalization's mollifying force: Things have always been this way. But what we call ourselves, what we ask to be called by others, matters greatly. Names are not just constative but do things in the world, make possibility or foreclose it. It could have been different. It still can be.

Toward the end, Laris Cohen partially strikes the set, yanking the thick black speaker cords toward his body; they skate backward along the canvas like re-coiling snakes. In theater, *to strike* is not a verb referring to work's cessation, but rather describes a type of labor that is performed unseen, long after the audience has gone home. You make a space, a set, with lathe-turned specificity, for a performance to take place in. And then, without fail, on closing night, you unmake it, you tear shit down. Like it or not, something new will come live in its stead.

Catherine Damman is an art historian and writer.