

Opposite page: Reza Abdoh at a rehearsal for his *Tight Right White*, New York, 1993. Photo: Michael J. Vitti.

Right: Reza Abdoh, *The Hip-Hop Waltz of Eurydice*, 1990. Performance view, Los Angeles Theatre Center, 1990. Orpheus (Juliana Francis-Kelly). Photo: R. Kaufman.

LOOSED THREADS

JENNIFER KRASINSKI ON THE ART OF REZA ABDOH

This summer, theater artist Reza Abdoh (1963–1995) was the subject of an ambitious yet fractional survey at MoMA PS1, New York, organized by director Klaus Biesenbach with Negar Azimi, Tiffany Malakooti, and Babak Radboy of *Bidoun*. In February 2019, a version of this exhibition, produced with Krist Gruijthuijsen, will travel to the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin. Here, *Artforum* senior editor Jennifer Krasinski reflects on Abdoh's extraordinary body of work, examining the consequences of his—and his productions'—disappearance.



I MOVED TO NEW YORK in the early 1990s, a gawky young know-nothing, ravenous for the theater and performance and art that I'd read about and heard about in conversations with mentors and elders and others more worldly. (Once upon a time, nothing buffed an artist's aura quite as brilliantly as hearsay.) But New York in the early '90s was shattered, multivalent. Here there were heroes, but as many holes—fresh wounds in the world—where heroes once stood. Jack Smith and Cookie Mueller had died in 1989. The following year, Ethyl Eichelberger took his own life rather than suffer the virus. David Wojnarowicz was gone in 1992. Ron Vawter in 1994.

In the autumn of 1996, I was in rehearsals with Richard Foreman as a performer in his play *Permanent Brain Damage*. He was an exacting maestro, slow to offer praise, and with absolutely no predilection for social sugar. This general lack of lace gave his words the weight of truth. When he said one afternoon that the future of theater was in the hands of someone named Reza Abdoh, I believed him. When I asked where I could see Abdoh's work, Richard said I couldn't,



Left and above: **Reza Abdoh, *The Hip-Hop Waltz of Eurydice*, 1990.** Performance views, Los Angeles Theatre, 1990. Left: Eurydice (Tom Fitzpatrick) and Orpheus (Juliana Francis-Kelly). Above: Orpheus (Juliana Francis-Kelly) and Eurydice (Tom Fitzpatrick). Photos, clockwise, from top left: Patrick Veyssière, R. Kaufman, Patrick Veyssière.

Opposite page: **Twelve stills from Adam Soch's video included in Reza Abdoh's *The Hip-Hop Waltz of Eurydice*, 1990,** video, color, sound, 18 minutes 52 seconds.

It is not an overstatement to say that had Reza Abdoh lived even one more year, had he created even one more production, American theater would look very different now.

because he had died the year before. AIDS had taken yet another artist for whose work I'd wanted to be an audience. It would be eight years before an acquaintance of mine who collects rare films and videos would gift me digitized copies of videotapes from several of Abdoh's productions, allowing me to at last try to imagine what this future of theater once looked like.

The Hip-Hop Waltz of Eurydice (1990)

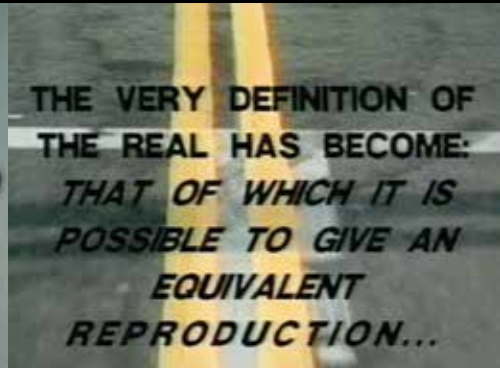
The performance begins with the sound of a razor being sharpened. In a bunker—albeit a domesticated bunker—that feels below everything, Eurydice is played by a man, Orpheus is played by a woman. Bald, eyes kohl-rimmed, red lips: They could be twins. Evil lurks somewhere, everywhere. Cavernous, spacious, though the stage feels a prison. Myths, too, I suppose, are a space from which we're loath to free ourselves. Orpheus is high-strung; his condition (and his pace) is *anxiety*. Eurydice, poor woman, stripped naked and tortured until . . . until . . . a “happy” ending.

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different now. It would *have* to look very different now so it wouldn't be prone to appearing merely quirky, amateurish, supplicating, or ambitious for career more than craft. Had he created more work in New York, rather than in Los Angeles, things might look different now, too.

Some facts about Abdoh's life: He was born on February 23, 1963, in Tehran, the oldest of four children. His father, Ali, was a wealthy businessman and a former boxer of some repute who was once featured in *Life* magazine. Reza and his father didn't get along: The father was bullish and ultramasculine, the son intelligent and imaginative. His mother, Homa Oboodi, a beautiful woman who had Reza when she was sixteen, always encouraged her son's preternatural love of theater, even acting in the plays he put on in their home. In 1973, Reza was sent to boarding school in England. The family enjoyed good fortune until the 1979 revolution, when Ali's execution was ordered due to his affiliations with the Shah.

The Abdohs moved to Los Angeles, where Reza spent a semester studying at the University of Southern California. That same year, he published a melancholy volume of poetry titled *The Sound of a Poet Breathing in an Imprisoned Air*. Its first lines are eerily elegiac: “There stretched in the starry doom / sits a poet by a





Left: Reza Abdoh, *The Law of Remains*, 1992. Performance view, Diplomat Hotel, New York, 1992. From left: Priscilla Holbrook, Anita Durst, Sabrina Artel, Juliana Francis-Kelly. Photo: Paula Court.

Above: Reza Abdoh, *Tight Right White*, 1993. Performance view, 440 Lafayette Street, New York, 1994. Rafael Pimental. Photo: Brian Palmer.

Below: Nine stills from Adam Soch's video included in Reza Abdoh's *The Law of Remains*, 1992, video, color, sound, 23 minutes 15 seconds.



Four stills from Reza Abdoh's
The Blind Owl, 1992, video,
color, sound, 84 minutes.

Abdoh created seventeen productions for the stage, many of which were grand-scale, ambitious works propelled by unbridled rage, tender lyricism, unnerving audacity, and an exceptional surety of vision.

marred tomb.” In his author photo on the back of the book, he wears a heavy coat and a scarf tied tightly around his neck, looking as though he’s from another time, evoking the air of Charles Baudelaire, whose work he loved. If nothing else, his composure suggests the self-seriousness of a young man who had diligently studied how a poet should present himself to the world.

When Ali died suddenly of a heart attack, leaving his family members to fend for themselves, Reza worked odd jobs, sometimes hustling to make ends meet. In 1983, he directed three plays by Howard Brenton at the Fifth Estate Theater, his first professional productions. After seeing them, actor and director Alan Mandell, his mentor at the time, claimed that the twenty-year-old Reza was already so advanced as an artist that Mandell should really be assisting him rather than the other way around.

The Law of Remains (1992)

This is my third attempt to watch this video. I’ve stopped it twice already out of frustration—can’t see or hear a thing clearly enough. Option: Praise “the dropout” of the image and the sound as a space for “cocreation,” but I know my own mind well enough and am here to know Abdoh’s. Jeffrey Dahmer stars in a movie of his life! By Andy Warhol! (Cannibal meets parasite?) I’ll read the script, but the texts and their performances never synchronize. Most of the cast wear slinky sex-club/sex-work gear. This is the land of shadow pleasures, transgressions. A place where a person can fuck the flesh and eat it too. When the cast lines up to dance, the lights go black. We can’t see. Lights go up, and the cast falls down. They shout as though they’re in a stadium, or at a protest. Warhol leads the call and response: *Thumbsucker! . . . Anal blood! . . . Ten-inch cock! . . . Bottoms up! . . . Up all night!* Everyone joins in the chorus: “Bend over bend over bend over!”

Over the twelve years of this largely untutored prodigy’s career, he created seventeen productions for the stage, many of which were grand-scale, ambitious





Left: Reza Abdoh, *Tight Right White*, 1993. Performance view, 440 Lafayette Street, New York, 1994. Gerard Little. Photo: Paula Court.

Left, below: Reza Abdoh, *Tight Right White*, 1993. Performance view, 440 Lafayette Street, New York, 1994. From left: James Williams, Royston Scott, Randi Pannell. Photo: Paula Court.

Right: Spread from *Vibe*, February 1994 (detail). Cast of Reza Abdoh's 1993 *Tight Right White*.

Opposite page: Twelve stills from Adam Soch's video included in Reza Abdoh's *Tight Right White*, 1993, video, color, sound, 18 minutes.



works, often punctured by assaultive yet eloquent video projections, and propelled in equal measure by unbridled rage, tender lyricism, unnerving audacity, and an exceptional surety of vision. Even in their afterlives as video documentations, the works pummel the viewer with hurricane force. (He also made eleven videos and a feature film, the last a loose eponymous 1992 adaptation of the chilling Persian novel by Sadegh Hedayat, *The Blind Owl* [1937].) Scholar John Bell recalled another director describing Abdoh's aesthetic as "vomiting ideas," which was intended to insult. But what more efficient way to launch thoughts into the world—what better cure for "mourning sickness"—than to use theater as an emetic?

To be sure, one sees in Abdoh's plays the influences of grand avant-gardists like Foreman, Antonin Artaud, and Robert Wilson, but perhaps he's closer kin to a younger generation that includes Wojnarowicz (whose company Abdoh sought out), Kathy Acker, Ron Athey, and Bob Flanagan, artists who directly fought against America's fatal conservatism, embracing the latent violence in desire within a culture that preaches a knotty and problematic entitlement to bodies, whether that of another or one's own. Nudity, blood, Dionysian eruptions of song and dance, simulated sex acts, dialogue delivered at such speed and volume that performers audibly gasped for breath: These were some of Abdoh's signatures.

Abdoh was an admitted media junkie, indiscriminately downing TV shows, from news of global atrocities to the glycerin tears of telenovelas. His productions, though very much singular creations, pulverized the stuff of popular culture—including film, songs, images—into odd, anxious underworlds, but the velocity of context being what it is, his reference materials quickly shed their origins to make themselves useful, meaningful, inside his stories. As it turns out, great artists don't, in fact, steal. They devour, digest. "There is so much food for thought and observation in American culture," he explained to an interviewer in 1994. "And every day when I wake up I'm just amazed at the thickness of this culture." He would make use of all of it: America the cacophony, with its pulped heritages, its long military reach and its short temper, its bankrupt masculinity, its fear and

loathing of anyone or anything queer, its perpetual sales pitches for a reduced democracy, its murderous loyalty to white supremacy. "I'm sort of like a receiver," he told scholar Philippa Wehle about the origin of his script for *Tight Right White* (1993), "and I filter all this information to write the final thing."

Tight Right White (1993)

The video is almost illegible. Have to sift out moments of clarity or at least vivid details. Snippets of dialogue. About love and slavery. Ku Klux Klan members all doing sloppy jetés in a circle around . . . who? Can't see. They hold a stick. Wear a flannel shirt. In theater the image always seems more menacing than the action. A Klan member fucks his prey. A Confederate flag. Actors of color perform in whiteface—the paint is thick. Harrowing, crass, scary. Big dance number to Curtis Mayfield's "Pusherman." *Mandingo*. White performers in blackface—at some point, the paint is wearing off. Another performer is bright red. Watermelons. Men in dresses. I am awestruck and horrified all at once. Someone sings Anita Baker's "You Bring Me Joy" while a man hangs from the ceiling and gets walloped on his ass and screams bloody murder. To think about: skin as a site for quotation, which is yet another form of cruelty.

Some artists look to art history for a paterfamilias to kill, while others look to history in search of his permission, his approval. Abdoh never had much love for Daddy; his appropriations and adaptations are wildly free-form, and the feral arcs of his narratives (such as they were) resist easy encapsulation. *Father Was a Peculiar Man* (1990) was an epic production Abdoh staged on and around a 125-foot-long dining table installed on Little West Twelfth Street in New York's Meatpacking District. As the neighborhood prostitutes conducted business as usual, Abdoh's sixty performers presented his take on Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*—a bastardization that included a re-creation of John F. Kennedy's assassination complete with Jackie O., a car, and gunshots.

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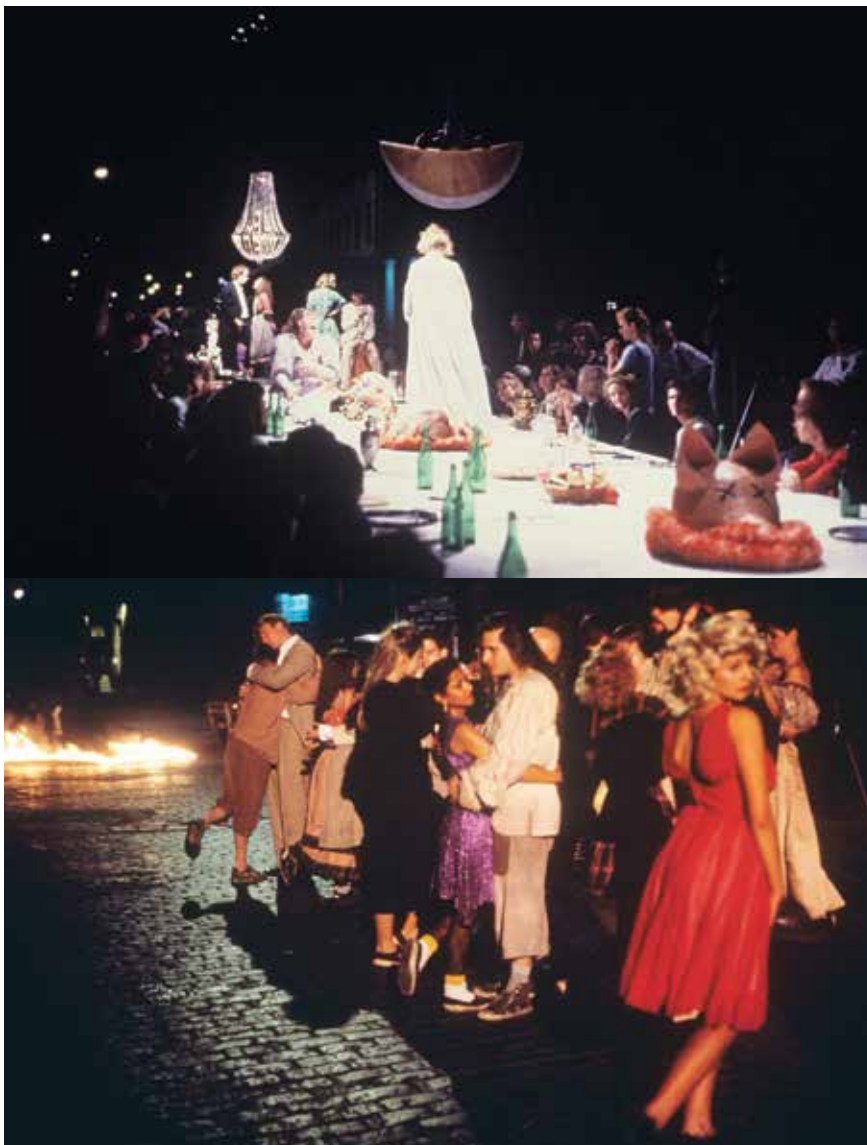
To live in a present full of unnatural absence
can catalyze a muscularity of attention.

Above: Reza Abdoh, *Bogeyman*,
1991. Performance view,
Los Angeles Theatre Center, 1991.
Photo: R. Kaufman.

Above, right: Publicity image for
Reza Abdoh's *Bogeyman*, 1991.
Photo: R. Kaufman.

Right: Nine stills from Adam Soch's
video included in Reza Abdoh's
Bogeyman, 1991, video, color,
sound, 30 minutes 9 seconds.





Reza Abdoh, *Father Was a Peculiar Man*, 1990. Performance views, En Garde Arts, New York, 1990.

Later, he premiered *The Hip-Hop Waltz of Eurydice* at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, a playhouse that nurtured Abdoh's epic visions from the very beginning of his career. Then came *Bogeyman* (1991), also premiering at LATC, a play-cum-house of horrors for which Abdoh entwined his childhood memories with his experience living with HIV. ("Is death fast or slow? Is death fast or slow? Is death fast or slow?" a performer incants from the stage.) That year he founded a company, Dar a Luz (translation: "to give birth"), which brought together equally relentless and dedicated performers and artistic associates including Sabrina Artel, Anita Durst, Tom Fitzpatrick, Juliana Francis-Kelly, Peter Jacobs, Tom Pearl, Adam Soch, and Tony Torn. Like Rainer Werner Fassbinder before him, Abdoh owed a great deal of his success to his unerring choice of collaborators. Once, when asked what he looked for in a performer, he replied cheekily: "I'm a big fan of talent."

In *The Law of Remains* (1992), Abdoh imagined Warhol making a movie about the life of the gay serial killer and cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer. For *Tight Right White*, his most controversial work, Abdoh flayed open the film *Mandingo* (1975), a gruesome plantation picture once billed by Hollywood as a "story of love," in

which black women are raped by white men, white women rape black men, and the children begotten are killed. *Quotations from a Ruined City* (1994), Abdoh's final work of theater, written with his brother Salar, is a comparatively sedate, contemplative show, in which the subjects of love, terminal illness, transcendence, and torture collide inside a whirling world populated by Puritans, mummies, corporate Americans, and other manifestations of the living dead.

He would accomplish all of this by the age of thirty-two.

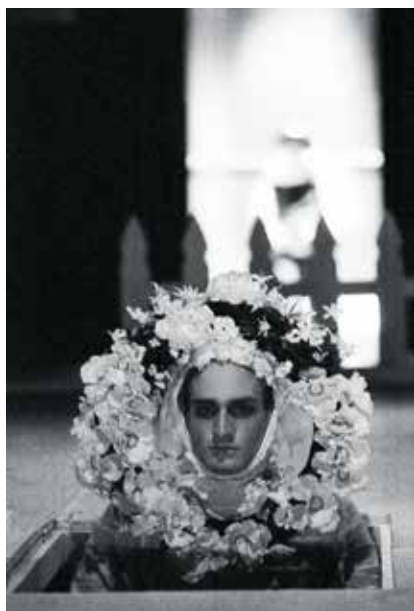
He would have turned fifty-five this year.

Quotations from a Ruined City (1994)

This play begins with the idle conversation of two Puritans (later, they kiss!). Entwined with the slaughter in Serbia, this is a nationless, timeless space—or rather, nations are irrelevant now. Collapsible present, collapsing world. *Sarajevo*, a woman whisper-hisses. From the whiplash of action comes a shout: *BE CIVIL, WILL YOU?* Oxygen masks cover a face but do not transform it—lend it no character. The lover cannot catch his breath, because death is chasing him. Abdoh speaks the language of horror rather than asking horror to lower its voice.

This page and opposite:
Reza Abdoh and Salar Abdoh,
Quotations from a Ruined City,
1994. Performance views,
448 West 16th Street, New York,
1994. Photos, from left: Jan Deen,
Paula Court, Paula Court, unknown.

Acts of preservation lock the past into the past. There must be livelier, more vigorous forms of recovery, in which experience expands to account for lost possibilities.



Descriptions of torture of a man named Mustafa, who's stuck like a pig. Is the re-presentation of violence a bull's-eye or a cheap shot? Everyone wants to be a movie star, but it's the body bag that steals center stage. "I carry the ruined city under my skin . . . and so do you, motherfucker." Taken from an interview with John Bell:

JB: There seems to be some kind of political philosophy imbedded in *Quotations*. Could you describe it?

RA: I believe that one has to not be a victim.

Being at a loss, but not one of the grief-stricken: This is a particular, and formidable, cultural condition brought on by the AIDS epidemic. To live in a present full of unnatural absence can, if one resists surrendering to merely what is, catalyze a muscularity of attention. Being an audience is a creative act, too, after all, even if untapped and undermined much of the time by the primacy of the artist/creator. (The object economy appears to have little use for reverie, other than for what it can produce.) When a life ends, it looses threads in the world. There is always unfinished business. When a life is cut short, these loosed threads are charged with currents that connect this now to other nows, lighting up a simultaneity of here and gone.

Acts of preservation, necessary as they are, lock the past into the past, offering a mind the materials to simulate memory. But there must be livelier, more vigorous forms of recovery, in which experience expands to account for lost possibilities,

to unleash an explosive moment. One can sit inside a theater and see who's not there, too. One can resist the urge to clean or cauterize or suture these wounds. Let them gape. Let the holes left behind be treated not as pure loss but as portals through which to keep moving.

This proposal, still forming, grasps at only one of Abdoh's loosed threads:

In *Reza Abdoh: Theatre Visionary* (2015), a documentary by the artist's long-time collaborator Adam Soch, friend and company member Tom Fitzpatrick remembers a telephone conversation with Abdoh shortly before his death. "I've decided I'm going to go," Abdoh told him. "This is no life." Soon after, he stopped taking his medications. As well, he forbade the posthumous performance of his works, removing his productions from circulation. For a theater mastermind, this was at once self-annihilation and self-preservation, but might also be read as the staging of a kind of disappearing act. At the very least, Abdoh was having the last word in his death sentence. "I think death exists in the fourth dimension," he once said. "Not as a reality or a concept that exists or brings to an end, but as something that provides the opportunity for regeneration."

The show would not go on without him, but the remains of his art, these ghosts in the machine, at once here and not here, stick in the system—the palest figments of brilliant visions not merely to be remembered, but to be kept close, ever in the present tense. □

JENNIFER KRASINSKI IS A SENIOR EDITOR OF *ARTFORUM*.

