

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTION

As part of the event series accompanying the exhibition «Suzanne Perrottet. After Dada, After Dance», OOR Saloon (Aio Frei & Franziska Koch) invited British Afro-Caribbean vocalist, movement artist and composer Elaine Mitchener to develop a newly commissioned voice and movement performance. The piece was performed by Elaine Mitchener on Sunday January 18 2026 within the spaces of Cabaret Voltaire, followed by a conversation with the researcher and curator Irene Revell.

The performance and the sonic contribution to the exhibition represents a further development of OOR Saloons curatorial–artistic approach, informed by an ongoing engagement with queer-feminist performance practice and embodied score-based work.

Elaine Mitchener is working between contemporary/experimental new music, free improvisation and visual art. Her artistic work is permeated by the awareness of past and present forms of discrimination, post-colonial wounds and its effect on humanity. A recurring and significant aspect of Elaine’s body of work is the engagement with black experimental artists and composers who came before her. For example, she performed a piece by the African American concrete poet N. H. Pritchard, using his typographic experiments as a score. She has developed *Vocal Classics of the Black Avant-Garde*, a programme consisting of a number of seminal works, drawn from the 1960/70s African-American avant-garde. In the *Jeanne Lee Project* she reinterpreted works by the vocalist, sound poet, composer and educator Jeanne Lee, or in *Moving Eastman* she deeply embodied the works by the African-American minimalist composer Julius Eastman.

Responding to the exhibition’s focus on Suzanne Perrottet—regarded as a pioneering figure in the development of modern dance—Mitchener introduced another, historically overlooked movement voice into the space of Cabaret Voltaire: that of Betty Baaron Samoa, who danced and worked with both Perrottet and Laban, yet whose presence and contribution have been largely ignored by dance history and scholarship.

The name and image of Betty Baaron Samoa first appear in dance history in Suzanne Perrottet’s biography *Ein bewegtes Leben*, which includes several photographs and emphasizes her talent as a dancer. In accounts by and about Rudolf von Laban, she appears both as a dancer and as a careworker for his children. In Fritz Winter’s book *Körperbildung als Kunst und Pflicht*, published in Munich in 1914, she appears in several group photographs of Laban’s school. In various photographs by Johann Adam Meisenbach, also preserved in Perrottet’s estate, Betty Baaron Samoa is present and active in images of Laban’s school on

Monte Verità.

Yet her origins and life story remain largely unknown to this day, and her role in dance history is considered a major archival absence.

Elaine Mitchener engages directly with this intentional silence of the colonial archive—an absence shaped by the ways racism, class inequality, and sexism have structured whose stories are preserved—and poses the question: “What would modern dance be if Betty had not been marginalised?” Or as Diagne, Ruprecht and Wittrock write in their essay *Speculations on the Queerness of Dance Modernism*: “Betty holds a power of appeal that urges us to reconsider dance modernism from the perspectives suggested by her presence.” Mitchener writes: “As a woman of color actively involved in the creation of a new dance movement, Betty queered the dance world in the early 20th century. Inspired by her strength and spirit, I will research and create—in collaboration with the choreographer and long-time collaborator Dam Van Huyn—a movement work that queers the space as querying motion, where the body is the score.”

Although Dada and western dance modernism emerged in response to the violence of the early twentieth century—shaped by industrialized warfare, technological acceleration, and the collapse of humanist ideals during the First World War—Western modernity itself is inseparably entangled with colonial expansion, extraction, and racialized hierarchies. Within Dada, acts of appropriation frequently drew on non-European, mostly African traditions, while leaving colonial power relations and racist language unexamined. The movement’s critique of Western rationality coexisted with these reproduced colonial imaginaries. Dada thus sits in a tense contradiction: as a protest against the violence of modernity, and as a practice entangled with the colonial conditions that made that modernity possible.

In the performance “The Body Is The Score – 1. Betty” Elaine Mitchener addresses these forms of extractivist appropriation through the example of Tristan Tzara, and opens it with quoting *Bamboula! Dada Performance as Sonic Blackface* a Text by Hilary Whitham Sánchez: “Tzara’s use of the term “bamboula” exemplifies how European stereotypes about African diasporic art forms foundational to modernist art were folded back into the language deployed to describe their own artistic interventions, suggesting how the dadaists’ performance at the Cabaret Voltaire can be understood as a form of sonic blackface.”

Through a complex entanglement of references—expressed in precise bodily gestures, movement sequences, the distinct use of voice, breath and its absence, shifts in light, the sound of ankle bells and

other additional sonic materials—Elaine invoked and embodied Betty’s presence and agency, restoring her to her rightful place in a history from which she had been erased.

Following the performance, Elaine Mitchener was having a conversation with researcher and curator Irene Revell. Together, they discussed the development and research process behind the performance, embodied forms of notation and memory work and methodologies to engage with the gaps produced by the colonial archive.

A recording of the performance “The Body Is The Score – 1. Betty” by Elaine Mitchener has been reworked to a sonic trace and is presented within the exhibiton until February 2026.

EXCERPTS FROM THE CONVERSATION BETWEEN IRENE REVELL AND ELAINE MITCHENER

Irene Revell: [...] we share a kind of nerdy interest in scores, which is slightly how this conversation started. I’d like to start by asking about the title of this new work and opening up, I guess, your journey with Betty, so “The Body Is The Score – 1. Betty”.

Elaine Mitchener: [...] “The Body Is The Score – 1. Betty” came about because, I guess, it taps into the things that I do working with movement. I’m not a trained dancer; I have trained with dancers and a particular choreographer, Dam Van Huyn, for around 15 years, and I’m really intrigued by how the body holds information and how that information is transmitted through movement. And as a trained musician I know how to read notated music; I also am a free improviser, so I make music on the spot and draw inspiration from my surroundings or what’s going on, but I’m not second-guessing anything — I’m very much 100% in the moment. So “The Body Is The Score” for me is this kind of physical memory, you know, that everyone has. [...] So with Betty I was thinking about her presence, what was in her life at that time, when she had encountered working with Laban and his colleagues, what she might have brought into that space with her young life and how she might have expressed that. She already had a score; she was a very good dancer, she was a very talented dancer, as Suzanne Perrottet has said, and so she already had her own scores, and that score is documentation.

IR: I wanted to see if you wanted to share any of the elements of the piece. I mean, she’s in the photographs [by Meisenbach, also seen in the exhibition] and now invoked in your work as well. And there’s multiple [spoken] texts in your work.

EM: I start with the first. So on the actual track that you could hear, I take the performance by Tzara [note: and other Dadaists] of *The Admirals Searching for a House to Rent* (“L’amiral cherche une maison à louer”), (note: where he used the rassist term “bamboula”), and so I play with that and chop that up and kind of turn it into a trippy experience. Because also being here — it’s my first time at Cabaret Voltaire, right — so this is monumental for me, this is momentous, so thank you for having me. But also it brings it home, you know; it kind of — you can read about a place, but when you’re in the space itself it has a very strong energy about it, and this sense of history and these incredible, subversive, fantastical, courageous political things that took place. And then I think about a very young Black woman, probably an adolescent girl really, who kind of was part of this, engaged with it, knew about it, she was there. And so I wanted in the piece to kind of invoke her, to bring her presence here, to receive her, and then to not be her, but then to express how I feel about that and how I feel about her contribution.

IR: Is there anything else about the new piece? I’m thinking — you mentioned this was the first time you used the ankle bells.

EM: Yes. I got the ankle bells as a present 10 years ago, since then I had them staring at me for 10 years until this opportunity came. And when I went to the studio I didn’t have them, and I said we need to charge the space somehow, but in a very subtle way — but it’s present, it’s there. So the ankle bells have served this piece really well, and they’re perfect, because they’re not loud, you know, but you’re aware of them, and also they’re suggestive, they evoke lots of things.

IR: Sort of trace-like, sonically speaking.

EM: Yeah. And this sine wave which comes out and you’re like, “What’s going on? Why is it still there? I wish she would turn it off.” — that is there for a reason, to irritate, you know. It’s there, it kind of pierces the space, you know, and it’s like an arrowhead, and it just pierces the space, and it’s there, and it’s going to be there. And for me it’s like Betty is there and I’m still here, and I’m not going anywhere — I’m here, you know. So it’s that kind of thing of just remembrance and kind of fortitude and determination.

IR: I want to ask you why history is so important.

EM: History is important to me because we’re supposed to learn from our mistakes, right, but we tend to repeat the same things. But I also look at it as a way — particularly when it comes to social history, political history — of understanding the things that we used to subjugate people, to keep people down. We need to find out why that happened, how we allowed that, how society allows that, and to know what we can do to

make sure that doesn't happen again. And we have to keep learning, relearning, looking, re-examining. So, I mean, I'm not a politician, but I try to do that with my work in terms of examining these things and questioning these ideas and interrogating them and the history. Looking at it, re-examining it, hopefully helps for a better future. But our better futures are determined by what has happened and then what is happening. I feel I need personally to keep connected to what has happened — not to stay in the past, but to move forward.

IR: To change how you listen, to change how you see things.

EM: This project has actually allowed me to do that. It's been transformative for me because I didn't expect it. And I think what Suzanne Perrottet has done is remarkable, and the fact that she wrote what she wrote about Betty is so important. And then I saw those photos, and that was like — I respect what Suzanne Perrottet has done, but I need to do a piece about this person. And so, you know, I said to Aio and to Franzi, I need to do this! I need to do this! She won't let me sleep. She wouldn't let me sleep, and I haven't slept. I might sleep tonight, though.

BIOGRAPHIES

Elaine Mitchener is a British Afro-Caribbean vocalist, movement artist and composer working between contemporary/experimental new music, free improvisation and visual art. She is founder of electroacoustic collective The Rolling Calf, with Jason Yarde and Neil Charles, and currently a Wigmore Hall Associate Artist. Regular collaborators include: George E Lewis, Jennifer Walshe, Tansy Davies, Sonia Boyce, Christian Marclay, The Otolith Group, Apartment House, London Sinfonietta, Ensemble MAM, Ensemble Klang, Klangforum Wien, Dam van Huynh, Moor Mother, Loré Lixenberg, Saul Williams, Pat Thomas and David Toop.

Originally from Southern Vietnam, Dam Van Huynh is a UK based dancer/choreographer and founded his company in 2008, Van Huynh Company. As a child refugee, his family and he fled Vietnam after the war and settled in the USA where Dam was raised. His work is an implicit and ongoing attempt to synthesize the most dynamic and revolutionary aspects of the dual dynamic of his Vietnamese heritage and Western influences. His latest touring productions include Moving Eastman, Exquisite Noise, Re:birth and In Realness.

Irene Revell is a researcher, curator and serial collaborator. She teaches on the MFA Curating at Goldsmiths, and is also Senior Lecturer in Sound Research at CRISAP, LCC, where she Co-Leads the Scoring Warnings

AHRC project. She has had a long-standing involvement in archives and collections including the Her Noise Archive, and Cinenova: Feminist Film and Video. With Sarah Shin she co-edited *Bodies of Sound: Becoming a feminist ear* (Silver Press, 2024).

OOR Saloon is an artist-run production-context at the intersection of experimental sonic arts, performance and self-organized knowledge exchange in Zurich. Since 2014, we have been organizing listening formats with a focus on ethics of listening—exploring socio-political, embodied, and queer listening practices in their respective situated contexts. From 2014 to 2022, OOR Saloon was part of OOR Records, a collectively run experimental record and art book store in Zurich.

Aio Frei and Franziska Koch have been collaborating since 2013. Their transdisciplinary artistic practice combines research-based sound art, performance, curation, self-publishing, and emancipatory, queer-feminist listening practices. Since 2014, they have jointly curated the program of OOR Saloon.

CREDITS AND THANKS

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