



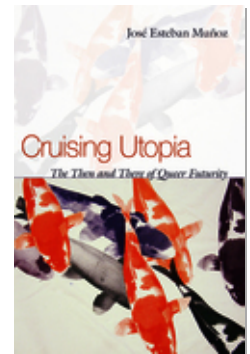
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Cruising Utopia

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A Jeté Out the Window

Fred Herko's Incandescent Illumination

SURPLUS VALUE IS a loaded concept. Its origins exist in Marxian political economy. Surplus value is the value of work done or commodities produced that exceeds what a worker needs. It is the source of profits for the capitalist in bourgeois society. The process of production is essentially the production of surplus value. Within capitalism surplus value becomes profit in the form of capital for the capitalist, and it is at the expense of the alienated worker. This strict economic understanding of surplus value is transformed when we consider aesthetic theory. In Ernst Bloch's work, surplus becomes that thing in the aesthetic that exceeds the functionalism of capitalist flows. This supplementary value, which is at times manifest as aesthetic excess and at other times as a sort of deviance from conventional forms, conveys other modes of being that do not conform to capitalist maps of the world. Bloch understands art as enacting a "preappearance" in the world of another mode of being that is not yet here. In this chapter I examine the work of Fred Herko, a choreographer and performer affiliated with many countercultural performance groups, primarily the Judson Memorial Church, as both a choreography of surplus and a choreography of minor movements. I do so in an effort to frame Herko's movement as utopian traces of other ways of moving within the world. In this sense the notion of surplus I am invoking is also akin to Antonio Negri's nuanced description of surplus value as an uncontrollable and potentially disruptive integer within late capitalism's formulations.¹ Thus, I write about a surplus in movement that does not simply align itself with abundance for the capitalist but instead, to borrow Andre Lepecki's useful formulation, involves kinesthetic stuttering, that represents a problem within modernity's compulsory dance steps.² Herko, as I show in this chapter, represents movement that not only stutters but twitches, vamps, leaps uncontrollably, and ultimately whirls out of control into the void.

Central to this underground figure's subcultural legacy is his final performance, his suicide. Herko's suicide was staged as a performance, with only one unsuspecting friend in attendance. Herko, who was then known as a major figure in New York's queer avant-garde but who was somewhat homeless, took a bath in the Cornelia Street, Greenwich Village, apartment of his friend, the Judson lighting designer Johnny Dodd. After emerging from his bath, Herko did a nude dance in front of his friend while Mozart's Coronation Mass in C Major played. The dance was described as typical of Herko's whirling excess. We can perhaps decipher "typical" to mean a highly energetic mixture between the postmodern dance that worried the divide between theatrical and quotidian movement and an excessively campy, neoromantic style. Its conclusion, his leap out the window to his death, was an exemplary theatrical act bridging camp excess and real life (or, in this case, death) movement. Years later, when Dodd was finally able to talk about the incident, he described the leap as a perfect jeté. No part of Herko's body touched the window frame.³ This suicide took place four years after Yves Klein's famous fake "Leap into the Void" and a year after Buddhist monk Quang Duc gained fame when he was photographed setting himself on fire in a suicide protest against the Vietnam War. We cannot know how or even if these performances influenced Herko's final leap. I nonetheless invoke them as a possible backdrop to Herko's "excessive" final act.

Herko's ultimate performance is legendary in different subcultural worlds. Speed freaks throughout the world can understand Herko's dramatic gesture even if they do not know his name. His imprint lingers in queer experimental art movements. I am interested in the traces left by Herko. By traces I mean different lines of thought, aesthetics, and political reverberations trailing from this doomed young artist. To approach one's object of study in the way I write about Herko is implicitly to make the argument that the work of queer critique is often to read outside official documentation. This chapter follows three important engagements with Herko's work authored by three eminent dance scholars: Sally Banes in *Democracy's Body* (1983, reprinted 1993), Susan Leigh Foster's essay "Improvising/History" (2003), and Ramsay Burt's *Judson Dance Theater* (2006). These three leading dance scholars have understood Herko's relevance to dance history. While I draw on the performance descriptions these three books offer, I want also to align Herko with the larger pantheon of sixties countercultural and queer artists. To that end, I also draw from considerations of Herko's film work for Andy Warhol, a film by Elaine Summers

that actually depicts Herko performing, and other ephemeral items such as his résumé and glossy photos that I encountered while doing research in the Downtown Collection at New York University's Fales Library. Indeed much of Herko's story is located in ephemera, archives where "another history," queerness's history, can be glimpsed.

Gay and lesbian studies is often too concerned with finding the exemplary homosexual protagonist. This investment in the "positive image," in proper upstanding sodomites, is a mistake that is all too common in many discourses on and by "the other." The time has come to turn to failed visionaries, oddballs, and freaks who remind queers that indeed they always live out of step with straight time. Thus, this drug-addled dervish should have a central role in a queer performance studies. Herko's presence in/absence from queerness's history functions as a Blochian no-longer-conscious, which is to say a place and time in which potentiality flourished and was extinguished. Yet its example nonetheless promises a return, a reanimation, in a future time and place, a not-yet-here. There is no more appropriate example of extinguished yet animating queer potentiality than the case of this neoromantic dead gay speed freak and his inscrutable aura.

It is important in presenting Herko's case to be attentive to his relationship to life, death, and art as a radical understanding of the naturalized hierarchies and epistemologies that organize these concepts. Death is often viewed in Western thought as quintessentially antiutopian because it absolutely defines the end of potentiality. But to make "death art," especially in the flamboyant manner that Herko did, is to move beyond death as finitude. Herko's final queer act helps us look at queer life and cultural labor as resonating beyond traditional notions of finitude. His suicide is the first performance I describe in this chapter, but I do not stop there. Indeed, I want to contextualize his short and colorful oeuvre in an attempt to further explicate queer utopian performance and performativity.

In *POPism: The Warhol '60s* (1980), Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett explained that the people Warhol really liked most were show-business drop-outs such as Herko.⁴ Herko came to New York to study piano at Julliard. He did not take up dance until he was nearly twenty years old. He met the poet Diane di Prima in Washington Square Park, becoming her muse and best friend. Di Prima edited the groundbreaking literary journal *The Floating Bear* with her then-lover LeRoi Jones. Herko and avant-garde jazz musician Cecil Taylor stapled the first few issues. Taylor was Herko's accompanist during the first Judson Memorial Church dance concert, for a

duet entitled *Like Most People: For Soren*. We are left to imagine what the relationality between these queer avant-gardists looked like. Susan Leigh Foster speculates that their love of ballet and homosexuality may have trumped the racial differences that these artists might have felt in the Cage-influenced art world of modern dance. More often than not, the Judson's postmodernism is associated with work that can be described as minimalist, such as that of Yvonne Rainer. But as descriptions and commentary on Herko's dance practice indicate, there is nothing minimalist about his practice. Indeed Herko's work, work that di Prima described as neoromanticism, was excessive, campy, and in Bloch's sense of the word *ornamental*.

For Bloch the function of the ornamental surpassed the merely aesthetic. Functional form is aligned with a normalized spatial and temporal mapping of the world, whereas the expressive exuberance of the ornament promises something else—another time and place that is not hamstrung by the present. Herko wore insane outfits and performed at a very high level of faggy flamboyance that could only be understood as expressive exuberance. Herko represented a crossroads between postmodern dance and other emerging queer subcultures. Later he was also a luminary in the freaked-out amphetamine subculture of what many participants and memoirists called “the Mole People,” a group of queer men and straight women who established a circuit of belonging in relation to drug use and opera.⁵ Herko would also perform as part of Fluxus, playing a comb in a concert by John Cage disciple George Brecht. But it was not the minimalism of plucking the teeth of a comb onstage for which Herko was known. Herko was known for elaborate costumes, erratic and beautiful movement, and decidedly eccentric comportment.

Herko's camp theatrics are always mentioned when he is included in the history of postmodern dance.⁶ In many ways he did not conform with the aesthetic codes that dominated the movements of which he was a part. His flamboyance made him something of a difficult subject for some audiences and critics of his day, as well as for today's cultural historians. I suggest that it is also his politics that render him difficult to deal with. The political valence of his work is that of cultural/aesthetic surplus of queer potentiality. Al Carmines, associate minister at Judson, described the ways in which Herko stuck out from his contemporaries at the Judson: “Fred Herko seemed to me the most ‘out’ of the general tempo and style of the dance theater as a whole. His work was often piquant and ironically flamboyant, with cadenzas of pure lyrical movement. His work tended to be more directly commentary-like than most

of the other dancers.”⁷ Carmines’s comment differentiates Herko’s work from that of the other dancers for primarily aesthetic reasons; yet I nonetheless suggest that it was indeed the critique implicit in the work, the “commentary-like” nature of the aesthetic practice, that marked Herko. The fact that Herko invoked a style that I am describing as “ornamental,” as distinct from the composed intensity of Yvonne Rainer or David Gordon (two dancers with whom Herko began dancing in choreographer James Waring’s classes), does not separate him too much from the Judson Dance Theater project. Herko’s ornamental style, impulsive and extravagant, denaturalizes movement, sometimes through excess and sometimes through a certain stuttering off-courseness, in a way analogous to the reframing of everyday movement performed by Rainer and Gordon. Both the more avowedly minimalist work of the majority of Judson artists and Herko’s ornamental and fairy-tale-like performances denaturalize movement, theatrical and quotidian. To denaturalize the way we dwell (move) in the world is to denaturalize the world itself in favor of a utopian performativity.

Yet denaturalization is not in and of itself utopian. At the risk of seeming reductive, the differences between both styles of Judson performance are most apparent in Judson choreographer Elaine Summers’s film *Fragments* (*Judson Dance*). Summers’s film offers glimpses into the world of Judson Dance intercut with shots of children at play, traffic in the city, some animation, and nature scenes. Cut into the fifteen-minute experimental film are vignettes of Herko walking out the front door of an apartment building with a large oval watering can. Each time he walks out he completes the same chore of watering the garbage cans that line the front of the building. The enactment of such a quotidian act certainly jives with one aspect of the Judson project, but the absurdity of watering garbage cans locates it squarely in Herko’s domain. Furthermore, Herko is sometimes costumed in an odd cape, and sometimes he is wearing nothing but skimpy briefs, leather boots, and a sort of Greek fisherman’s hat. His movement itself is ordinary, as if watering the trash is exactly what one does in the morning. Herko does seem to be aware of the fact that he looks good. He preens for the camera. Each time Herko appears, he is more dressed up. By the end of the film he walks out in what must have been one of the elaborate performance outfits for which he was so noted: a large fur coat; a tight, seemingly velvet suit; and a big hat. This time when he waters the first can a large bundle of daisies pop up—thanks to the magic of in-camera film editing. Then as he waters the cans different bouquets of flowers spring

out of them. Herko picks some flowers and then nonchalantly discards them. He stares at the camera as the sequence ends, just at the end of the whole film. So Herko's quotidian action yields utopian results. This queer little garden in the gutter nicely corresponds to what Bloch called "utopian wish-landscapes," animating the desire for a time and place that is not yet here.⁸

One of Herko's earlier performances, a solo included on the bill for the first Judson Memorial Church dance concert, *Once or Twice a Week I Put on Sneakers and Go Uptown*, was meant to ridicule the culture of straight proper citizens who would go slumming downtown. The piece's critique is implicit in its title, as it alludes to the reversal of a phenomenon in which slumming uptowners dress in casual footwear to go downtown to watch the bohemian freakshow. Or perhaps alternatively we might think of fey art boys going uptown to Harlem and attempting to mix in that lifeworld. If Herko's going uptown meant that uptown, echoing the drug motif in his life, then the movement might not have been scored to Cecil Taylor or Erik Satie but to the soundtrack of Lou Reed's wailing about going uptown to meet his (pusher) man.

Keeping all these potential readings of the title in play, there are a few descriptions of this legendary performance worth considering. They are all cited first by Banes in *Democracy's Body* and later by Susan Foster. This chapter is indebted to that early research by Banes and attempts to add to it a queer performance analysis for the purpose of thinking about Herko as a source of queer utopian aesthetics. Banes cites a trio of critics from the period, starting with Allen Hughes:

Fred Herko came out dressed in multi-colored bath or beach robe with a veil of lightweight metal chains covering his head and face. . . . One's attention was riveted to his dance, which was no more than a kind of unvaried shuffling movement around the floor to the accompaniment of a piano piece by Erik Satie (Satie, incidentally, would have loved it). . . . This was "Sneakers" dance, but Mr. Herko was barefoot all the while.⁹

Jill Johnston paid attention to Herko's quotidian movement:

Herko did a barefoot Suzie-Q in a tassel-veil head-dress, moving around the big open performance area . . . in a semi circle, doing only the barefoot Suzie-Q with sometimes a lazy arm snaking up and collapsing down . . . [and] with no alteration of pace or movement.¹⁰

Less approving was Herko's colleague dancer/choreographer Bill Paxton, who was not only on the same bill but was also on the program's publicity committee:

It seemed very campy and self conscious, which wasn't at all my interest. As I remember he was a collagist with an arch performance manner. You would get some ballet movement, none of it very high energy. Maybe a few jetés every now and then. As a dancer his real forte was so very, very elegant lines. But in terms of actual movement, transitions from one well-defined place to another, he did it very nervously. Holding a position is what he did more than moving from place to place.¹¹

Banes reports on all three reactions but does not take a stand in relation to these different perspectives. I, on the other hand, follow a theoretical agenda of my own making. What turned Paxton off ignites my imagination, reminding me of what Donald McDonagh describes as Herko's incandescence,¹² a word I employ in this chapter's title because it indexes my desire and investment in this lost object, this man who represents a no-longer-conscious. To describe Herko as incandescent is to regard him as a lost object that provides an anticipatory illumination of another world. Paxton's descriptions help me see Herko as close to Jack Smith's wonderfully arch, layered, and fecund performance practice.¹³ Herko, according to Paxton, appears to parallel Smith's paradoxically languid and kinetic theatricalism.

I wonder if Smith ever attended a Judson show or if Herko ever went to one of Smith's legendary loft performances. Queer theater legend John Vaccaro indicated to Dominic Johnson that since Smith and Herko shared friends and acquaintances such as drag star Frances Francine and di Prima, they must have known each other. Gerard Forde, a researcher working on a Herko biography, informed me of the fact that Smith designed costumes for Frank O'Hara's *Loves Labor* (February 14–March 8, 1964) in which Herko played the role of Paris. Both artists incorporated failure into their oeuvre in compelling ways. Dominic Johnson links Herko's and Smith's work through what he calls a politics of failure: "Posing the queer thought of a *politics of failure*, these projects perform collisions between the pitiful and the stoic, the majestic and the wretched, the horrific and the laughable."¹⁴ This point of collision in the work of both artists, queer failure as a rejection of normative protocols of canonization and value, illustrates

queer performativity. As Shoshana Felman has shown, failure, or infelicity, is intrinsic to J. L. Austin's speech act theory. In *The Scandal of the Speaking Body* Felman turns to Molière's *Don Juan* to explain all the ways in which speech acts are especially predisposed to fail or, in Austin's terminology, misfire. Associating this kind of failure with the performative, we can discover a utopian kernel: "The act of failing thus opens up referentiality—or of impossible reality—not because something is missing, but because something else is done, or because something else is said: the term 'misfire' does not refer to an absence, but to an enactment of a difference."¹⁵ The misfire, this failure, is intrinsic to how the performative illustrates the ways different courses are traveled in contrast to what heteronormativity demands. Heteronormativity speaks not just to a bias related to sexual object choice but to that dominant and overarching temporal and spatial organization of the world that I have been calling straight time. This "something else" that Felman frames may indeed be a response to a "something missing" in Bloch's sense. Queerness and the politics of failure are linked insofar as they are about doing "something else." And in both cases they may be doing something else in relation to a something that is missing in straight time's always already flawed temporality. Thus, we think about how Jack Smith is legendary for "failing" to start his loft performances on time and keeping audiences waiting for him to emerge. We think also of di Prima in *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* talking about how Herko was always late.¹⁶ Deborah Hay recalls that he would "arrive late and très flamboyantly always."¹⁷

When going through some Judson archives, I ran across a folder marked "Herko" that contained his résumé. From its last entry I surmise that he must have given it to some potential employer a year before he died. I cannot help but see it as a document of Herko's own brand of queer failure. Half of it is typed on onionskin paper. I imagine that it is the same typewriter that Diane di Prima used to type *The Floating Bear*. The other half of it is hastily scrawled in blue ink. His typed list includes all his summer-stock dance and theater experience (1958, Detroit and Flint—*Okla-homa!*, *King and I*, *Girl Crazy*), and on the bottom half of the page Herko mentions his TV work (*The Ed Sullivan Show*). On the very top of the onionskin paper in block ink letters is written, "Sorry—I'm Slow—FH." How can someone on amphetamines be slow? Drug use and queer desires led to Herko's experiencing the world differently. Certainly by the criteria of straight time a junky is a failure. Drugs are a surplus that pushes one off course, no longer able to contribute labor power at the proper tempo.

Here, again, surplus is not simply an additive; it distorts—a stuttering particularity that shoves one off course, out of straight time. I looked at Herko's frantic and messy résumé and assumed he did not get that job for which he was angling. His address, "309 East Houston Street," is crossed out in ink. So are his personal measurements—his height, weight, inseam, and so on. We are left to think about how long-term amphetamine use might transform the body. I recognized the address as the same as the one at the top of *The Floating Bear*. By the time he turned in this résumé, he no longer lived in the apartment below di Prima; he had begun his nomadic life of couch surfing in bohemia. In his last major performance at the Judson space he played the role of "The Wanderer" in *The Palace of the Dragon Prince*. By then, Herko was a local street character who walked around Greenwich Village in a black cape, playing a pipe. The local street kids called him Zorro. I surmise that by that time his body was showing the withering signs of addiction to speed—maybe that is why his measurements needed to be revised. His résumé qualifies him for the position of perfect mess and proto-queer icon. It is easy at this point to feel condescending pity for poor Freddie. Yet such moralism needs to be avoided, and instead we need to think of Herko's life and body as becoming particular, to imagine the artist striving for another way, leaping away from the here and now of a stultifying straight time and attempting to reach another time and place, a not-here and a not-now that is utopian.

The history of actually realized utopian enclaves is, from a dominant perspective, a history of failures. Hope and disappointment operate within a dialectical tension in this notion of queer utopia. Queerness's failure is temporal and, from this project's perspective, potentially utopian, and inasmuch as it does not adhere to straight time, interrupting its protocols, it can be an avant-garde practice that interrupts the here and now. To perform such interruptions is not glorious or heroic work. This aspect of Herko's story speaks to the material toll that a burning queer incandescence takes.

Herko's fans, Warhol and Frank O'Hara most prominent among them, loved the dancer despite the "flaws" in his style that Paxton notes. Warhol famously remarked that if he had known that Herko was going to kill himself, he would have asked to film the event. Reading that statement now, in the context of a man whose life was temporally condensed, as many gay male temporalities in the West have been in the past century, and whose quirky oeuvre concluded with a performance of death, we can better

SORRY - I'M SLOW - FH

Fred Herko

Actor's Equity

A&MA

AFTRA

309 East Houston Street
New York 2 N.Y.
Oregon 7-9150

Height 5' 11"
Weight 150
Hair Brown
Eyes Brown

Suit 36
Neck 14 1/2
Sleeve 32
Waist 28

Inseam 32
Shoe 8 1/2 E
Hat 6 5/8

- STUDIED THERE WITH -
V. PERCY ASLAVIC, ✓
160R SCHWETZOFF, ✓
WILLIAM DOLLAR ✓
ANATOLE VILZAK ✓
WILLIAM GRIFFITH ✓
EDWARD CATON =
ALL THESE ARE FAMOUS
BALLET TEACHERS.
- 4 YEAR SCHOLARSHIP AT BALLET THEATRE -
- 1957 Ballet Theatre Workshop - Phoenix Theatre
- * 1957-63 ^{has bunch of 7 yrs} James Waring Company
- 1958 Ballet Theatre Workshop - Phoenix Theatre
- 1957 Ballet '57 Carnegie Recital Hall
- 1958 Stock Detroit and Flint Michigan Oklahoma Mikado
King and I Fanny Happy Hunting Where's Charlie
Girl Crazy
- 1959 Jacob's Pillow "Wise and Foolish Virgins" Gloria Contreras
choreographer
- 1959 Off-Broadway
Come Play With Me York Theatre Dance Captain
Madrigal of War Living Theatre Stage Manager and (JOHN WULF)
Understudy
Love's Labor Living Theatre Paris (Part of) (FRANK O'HARA)
- * 1959 ^{BALLET BALLADS the musical} Stock Toronto Assistant Choreographer Guys and Dolls
Student Prince Brigadoon Show Boat
- * 1960 Katy Litz Company Dracula Henry Street Playhouse
- * 1960 Guber Ford and Gross productions
South Pacific Abner
Student Prince Dance Captain
- * 1960 New York City Opera Carmina Burana John Butler,
choreographer
- * TV -
1960-61 ED SULLIVAN SHOW
* LAMP UNDER MY FEET - JOHN BUTLER (CHOREO.)
* LOOK UP AND LIVE - BUZZ MILLER - (CHOREO.)
* PLAYED YELLOW FEATHER IN LITTLE MARY
SUNSHINE IN NYC (LAST 2 MONTHS OF
THE RUN)
* CHOREOGRAPHED + PLAYED YELLOW FEATHER
LAST SUMMER IN PHILA - (LITTLE MARY)
* JUDSON DANCE - ETC.

Fred Herko's résumé. Image courtesy of Judson Memorial Church Archives, Fales Library, NYU.

understand what Warhol meant. If one recalls early Warhol's interest in cinematically capturing the downtown demimonde and its weirdest denizens, at least before Valerie Solanas made her indelible mark in his life, the desire to preserve more of Herko's flickering incandescence—especially at the point of its physical and psychic transformation—strangely makes sense. Herko's nervousness and resistance to traditional movement certainly qualify as failure by Paxton's standards, yet by a different criterion, one better attuned to utopian aesthetics and their linkage with failure, we can begin to feel the dead artist's incandescence.

Carmines, with whom Herko also worked at the Judson Poets Theater, explained that Herko "always included humor and pathos and high class camp. He was an unusual actor and audiences adored him. He learned to be totally accessible to an audience."¹⁸ We can see how the work affected other spectators in Johnston's rapt attention to Herko's Suzie-Q dance move (which Sally Banes compares to "the twist") and Hughes's parenthetical invocation of Erik Satie's loving Herko, which is certainly as much about Hughes loving Herko.

Herko was Warhol's dropout, and even his best friend, Diane di Prima, had some seemingly nasty things to say about him in her collection dedicated to the dancer, *Freddie Poems*:

For Freddy, Fucking Again
 I think it's disgusting
 To be offcourse, in love
 Midwinter afternoons is excusable
 Especially if it rains
 But how is it you are always off course these days
 & not that much in love
 will you never grow up
 at least if you'd gone off to gather those blue flowers
 (are they called periwinkles?)
 or mussels, from the seaweed
 but no, you're off for adventures in grimy bars
 and the props not finished
 and the show is in four hours
 I think its pretty bad¹⁹

Di Prima worries about her friend and his "off-course" nature, but for those who read the entirety of her *Freddie Poems* it is also clear that, despite a



Fred Herko. Image courtesy of Judson Memorial Church Archives, Fales Library, NYU.

sometimes maternal fretting, di Prima loves him for his queer way of being in the world. Her mention of “off-course” behavior again speaks to the ways in which Herko’s movement through the world and the performance space was always disruptive, always linked to the force of failure, the aesthetics of excess with minimalism, temporal disjointedness, madness, and a utopian surplus. In the poem di Prima worries about Herko’s slutty behavior. Stephen Koch, in his account of Herko’s penis-flashing star turn in Warhol’s *Haircut*, describes the artist as resembling a lurid Times Square hustler.²⁰ He seems to mean this in a bad way. The connection here between controversial sexual comportment and aesthetic experimentation, both linked to a poetics of failure (“I think its pretty bad”), underlines the categorical entwining of slut and postmodern dancer/superstar. This connection is most compelling in Herko’s Warhol collaborations.

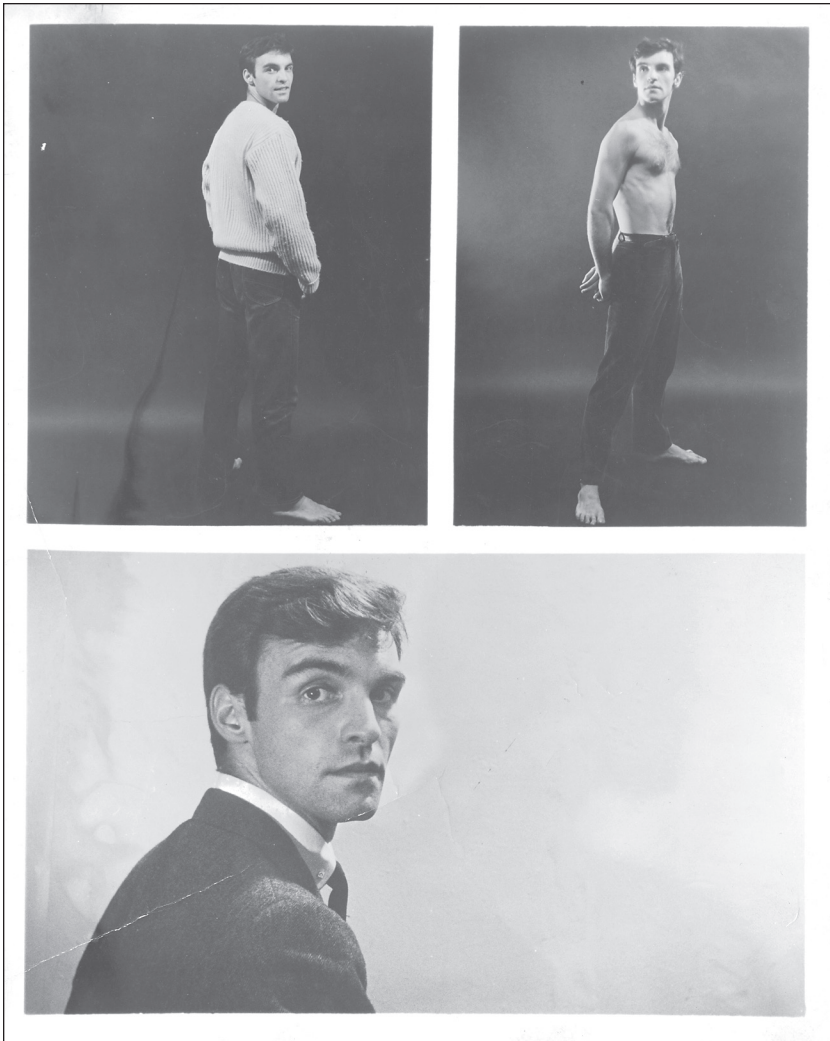
Andy Warhol was in the audience in May 1963 when Herko did his one-skate performance, *Binghamton Birdie*. The dance was named after one of Herko’s friends, part of the amphetamine-propelled coterie of gay boys who would listen to opera and shoot speed in the back of the Factory. Herko came onstage with one roller skate and a superhero-like tee-shirt with a made-up insignia that spelled out “Judson.” The Judson Memorial Church’s performances, as I indicated earlier, ushered in postmodern dance by making quotidian movement something worthy of staging, and Herko’s appearance deconstructed the divide between art and real life—or maybe, better put, between art, life, and play. Herko was often accused of being temporarily out of joint, of being childish or infantile. Susan Foster points to moments when Herko was called childish, the most stinging perhaps being the choreographer Maxine Munt, who put it this way: “Fred Herko is indeed the enfant terrible, and his Little Gym Dance . . . shouted ‘look at me, look at me’; he has yet to prove he belongs with this group.”²¹ The accusation of childishness reverberates alongside many dismissals of queerness as childish, disrupting straight comportment and temporality. Herko’s deliberate childishness interrupted the protocols of straight time. It also challenged a conservative version of minimalism. But certainly Herko was not just excessive. At times his movements were minor and not at all the “energetic” ballet that Paxton expected. Like Ray Johnson, Herko was a collagist whose source material was, on one level, spare and, on another, deeply layered.

Following *Binghamton Birdie*, Warhol and Herko made a movie in which Herko skated around Manhattan on one skate. Like the concert, the movement in the film was dynamically “off course.” That film, like a lot of

Warhol's earliest work, is lost and exists only as lore or, more nearly, queer evidence. The story indicates that Warhol filmed Herko for days, and at the end of the filming Herko's bare feet were bleeding. Herko's sacrifice both for art and for Andy anticipates the blood work of queer performers Ron Athey and Franko B.

Warhol then cast Herko in another early film, *Haircut* (1963), along with Billy Linich—a Judson artist and Factory regular who was later known as Billy Name—choreographer James Waring and John Daley. The group participated in gay male theatrics. The film reinforced Judson Dance Theater's project of making art from the quotidian while making queer bonds and sociality into art. It should go without saying that the film was extremely radical in 1963. But also the film is worth considering as an example of queer relationality, a precursor of a modality of queer ontology that had not-yet-arrived. Linich cuts the other man's hair. Herko performs a series of everyday movements, walking toward the camera and then turning around and walking away, disappearing into the shadows of Waring's apartment. He then reappears, presents a pipe to the camera, and then packs the pipe with marijuana and smokes. In the film's final sequence Herko strips for the camera, briefly exposing his penis. Throughout the film the gay men flirt with one another and rehearse a mode of queer belonging that had yet to be screened. Their comportment, though not "overtly" sexual, is sexy and signals a queer kind of becoming. Herko's performance was his own because Warhol's directing consisted mostly of setting up a scenario and letting the camera record the action. Herko bridges the Judson style with postmodern film. His insistence on public drug consumption and flagrant, ludic nudity surpasses the strictures of typical Judson minimalism. Or, again, more nearly, it keeps that modality of minimalism from being swept under a larger modernist rug. I identify this queer move as having a utopian impetus that imagined another time and place that was not yet conscious. At this historical moment, when queer politics constantly defers to the pragmatic struggles of the present, the bold and utopian experimentation of *Haircut* seems especially poignant.

Herko starred in another Warhol film, *Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys*. In that film, Warhol collects some screen tests, including Herko's. A majority of the screen-test subjects blankly stare at the screen, transforming their faces into stationary portraits. Not so with Herko, whose minor movements transform the screen test into a choreography. In *Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys* we see Herko resisting Warhol's protocols and performing instead his own drugged-out agency. A year later Herko ended his own life.



Fred Herko. Image courtesy of Judson Memorial Church Archives, Fales Library, NYU.

But in this screen test our eyes should not be content to see a drugged-out homosexual who made some underground films and danced at the Judson. What I see in this film is the artist in all his embodied cultural surplus. Twitching and moving in ways that tell us that this time and place is not enough, Herko enacts a critical impatience with the present, a dissatisfaction with the here and now. Furthermore, I see desire. Herko cruises

the camera and the spectator; he flirts with it, not able to sit, wanting to display himself beyond the limits of Warhol's portraiture. Herko wants us, his future—a future he will choose not to meet—to see him as a desiring subject, in all his uneasy embodiment. Callie Angell, in her impressive catalog of *Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys*, agrees with James Stoller, who sees something tragic in Herko's performance. Stoller recalls his reaction to the portrait: it became "excruciatingly moving as I uncontrollably invested in Herko's glowering expression with meanings brought from outside the film."²² This reading is difficult to discount, but I am arguing that there is something else available to the spectator who looks at the dancer's twitchy comportment as something more than negativity. In *Haircut* Herko is clearly and laughingly flirting with the camera. Sometimes Herko's performance in *Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys* seems just dark, and then sometimes I see it as a dark, drug-tinged cruise, purposely brooding and deliberately conveying a certain intensity that probably served Herko well in countless bars and shadowy public spaces.

Giorgio Agamben privileges gesture as a modality of movement that resists modernity's totalizing political scripts insofar as it promises a politics of a "means with out end."²³ Herko's dancing, as it exists for us in written accounts, oral histories, and films, is that of the suggestive, imperfect gesture. The gesture is utopian in that it resists the goal-oriented tautological present. The gesture is a cultural supplement that, in its incompleteness, promises another time and place. Thus, through Herko's twitch we see the gesture as the choreography of the not-yet-conscious. Randy Martin has succinctly argued for the importance of "critical moves" in a politicized dance studies. Martin makes words such as "movement" and "mobilization" do double duty as his research links theatrical dance movement with the politics of collective social movements.²⁴ This metaphorical link provides dance studies with a powerful materialist approach. I look at Herko's choreography of gesture and see it working alongside Martin's analysis to a point, then diverging. The divergence has to do with a politics that may not have the overarching coherency of a movement yet but may nonetheless represent a valuable interruption in the coercive choreography of a here and now that is scored to naturalize and validate dominant cultural logics such as capitalism and heterosexuality. A gesture is not a full-fledged resistance, but it is a moment when that overwhelming frame of a here and now, a spatial and temporal order that is calibrated against one, is resisted.

Herko's camp surplus, what I am calling his ornamentation, is not quite the garden-variety camp of pink flamingos or feather boas. Camp, as I have

suggested elsewhere, resituates the past in the service of politics and aesthetics that often critique the present.²⁵ The past on which Herko called was often a distant, magical past like that of fairy tales. Di Prima meditates in her autobiography on “Freddie’s groping for the allegory, the ultimate fairytale that could tell his story, could maybe save him.”²⁶ Today we can see the allegorical utopian function of Herko’s work and imagine that the fairy tale was intended to do more than simply save himself, that it was in fact interested in saving di Prima and the collectivity that she and all their friends represented. It is therefore worthwhile to consider Herko’s last dance, *Palace of the Dragon Prince*—a failure according to Warhol—as Herko’s invocation of a mythical past or fairy tale. Here, turning to Bloch on the utopic work of the fairy tale can help us understand Herko’s performance.

Of course the fairy tale world, especially the magical one, no longer belongs to the present. How can it mirror our wish-projections against a background that has long since disappeared? Or, to put it a better way: How can the fairy tale mirror our wish projections other than in a totally obsolete way? Real Kings no longer exists. The atavistically feudal and transcendental world from which the fairy tale stems and to which it seems to be tied has most certainly vanished. However, the mirror of the fairy tale has not become opaque, and the manner of wish-fulfillment which peers forth from it is wish-fulfillment which is not entirely without a home. It adds up to this: the fairy tale narrates a wish-fulfillment which is not bound by its own time and the apparel of its contents. In contrast to the folktale, which is always tied to a particular locale, the fairy tale remains unbound. Not only does the fairy tale remain as fresh as longing and love, but the evil demons that abound in fairy tales are still at work in the present, and the happiness of “once upon a time,” which is even more abundant in the fairy tale, still affects our visions of the future.²⁷

Before addressing Bloch’s thesis, I want to consider the best source currently available to gather an impression of *The Palace of the Dragon Prince*, Herko’s last major public performance at the church. Di Prima recounts that the performance was based on “some Russian fairy tale he’d found somewhere. It was to be huge, an epic.”²⁸ Aesthetically it included “lots of romantic music,” “flowing costumes, shmottas,” and “what somebody called the “junk store aesthetic.” Many people did not seem to get it, and

THE PRINCE OF THE DRAGON



A BALLET BY FRED HERKO

DANCED BY CARLA BLANK, ABIGAIL EWERT,
TERRY FOREMAN, FRED HERKO, ROBERT HOLLOWAY,
DEBORAH LEE, SANDRA NEELS, Phoebe Neville, ELSENE
SORRENTINO, POLLY STEARNS. WITH ADDORATIO JONES
AS THE PRINCE

AT 9 P.M.

JUDSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
55 WASHINGTON SQUARE SOUTH
by reservation SP7-0033

FRIDAY AND
SATURDAY
MAY 1 AND 2

Dragon Prince poster. Image courtesy of Judson Memorial Church Archives, Fales Library, NYU.

di Prima recalls Remy Charlip, one of Herko's frequent collaborators, telling her that he thought it was "appalling." But she describes it with much greater critical generosity:

A full-out work—I thought it was extraordinary. Oh, I could see as well as anyone the flaws, the places it needed to be cut, the technical mistakes. Or the places it got corny: too much emotion and you had to say no in self-defense. I could see all this, 'cause these were the kinds of things I'd come to recognize as necessary risks. . . . I saw the dance as extraordinarily brave.²⁹

Di Prima believed in Herko's performance despite its excess, its corniness. She never hesitated to describe the artist's work as romantic vectoring on the magical. At another point, she refers to a performance memorializing the life of Sergio, an Italian friend of Herko's and di Prima's husband (and Herko's ex-boyfriend), Alan Marlowe, explaining, "When Freddie danced *For Sergio* at the New Bowery, he made a dance that was also a ritual. He magically 'did' something. Transformed something. It seems so simple now. But at that point many of us were groping our way backward to art as magic."³⁰ This "magically doing" speaks not only to the performative force of Herko's performance but also to how it was calibrated to provide an idea of another way of being in the world that was not allowed within an antiutopian hermeneutic. Herko's performance practice, like Bloch's fairy tale, "narrates a wish-fulfillment which is not bound by its own time and the apparel of its contents," and this "unboundness" interrupts what I have described, after Halberstam, as straight time, a naturalized temporality that is calibrated to make queer potentiality not only unrealized but also unthinkable. Indeed the present is replete with beasts that need to be vanquished, which is to say that investing in a fairy tale need not be a retreat from reality but can be a certain way of facing it.

To that end, the allegorical nature that utopian critique employs in various modes of artistic production is important to consider. Bloch preferred ballet to American jazz dance, and as in Adorno's pronouncements on jazz music, Bloch betrays a discomfort with North American vernacular art, especially African American expression. Bloch scholar Vincent Geoghegan suggests that the philosopher's investment in ballet betrays his allegiance to the Soviet Union. Nonetheless Bloch's description of ballet's performativity, what it does, speaks of the form's utopian force:

The dance allows us to move in a completely different way than the way we move in the day, at least in the everyday, it imitates something which the latter has lost or never even possessed. It paces out the wish for more beautifully moved being, fixes in the eye, ear, the whole body, just as if it already existed now.³¹

Perhaps Bloch would have been less approving of minimalist dance practices that rehearsed quotidian movement, but his interest in fairy tales and ballet seems to be aligned with the romantic experimentation and excess that characterized Herko's work. Herko is interested in pacing out a more beautifully moved being. Movement in this passage from Bloch exists at an allegorical juncture between aesthetics and political movement. Another scholar associated with the Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse, offered the following formulation:

The analysis of cognitive function of phantasy is thus led to aesthetics as the "science of beauty": behind the aesthetic form lies the repressed harmony of sensuousness and reason—the eternal protest against the organization of life by the logic of domination, the critique of the performance principle.³²

The pairing of sensuousness and reason is relevant as we consider the allegorical nature of queer utopian expression. The performance principle is the cultural logic that is a manifestation of a capitalist ethos. For utopian philosophers such as Bloch and Marcuse, dance and its sensuousness exist alongside a political impulse. Movement is thus always already doubly valenced because it enables a mode of cognition that can potentially disattach itself from the performance principle and all the negation it represents.

I do not know how many steps separate my apartment from 5 Cornelia Street, the address of John Dodd's apartment, where Fred Herko took his own life. I am not patient enough to count, but let us say it is about five hundred, a few short city blocks. As I neared finishing writing this chapter, I walked to 5 Cornelia Street. This was a morbid little homage, a private performance fueled by a minor and abstract necrophilic attachment. This stroll made me think about the abstraction of writing about a suicide "as performance" and how that misses something. I did not expect to feel much, but my expectations proved wrong. I thought about a young friend who tried to take his own life and, luckily for himself and all the people who adore him, failed. I thought about another beloved person in

my life and remember the shattering sadness he felt when he lost an ex-lover, who ended his life a few years ago with a leap from a bridge. But mostly I thought about my best friend from graduate school. He took his own life several years ago. I recall all the dreams I have had about him, still have about him, in which he is mysteriously still alive and living in the walls of my apartment. I discover his lingering presence in this recurring dream, and I somehow know that it is my job to get him out, to save him. I never do. I always fail. When reading all of Herko's friends' responses to his death, even Andy's wish to have filmed it, I get the impression that they too felt like they failed.

In chapter 4 I discussed Elizabeth Bishop's famous poem "One Art." As Bishop wrote, "The art of losing is not hard to master." As much as I like the sound of that line I realize that there is something artless and brutal about losing. Bishop's lover of many years, after their eventual breakup, took her own life. Was Bishop's poem about Lata? Was Bishop trying to describe the art of "losing" her lover, or was she giving her Brazilian lover instructions so she would be able to let the poet go? Was it the poet's way of reconciling that terrible loss, or a document of her failure to reconcile? Queerness and that particular modality of loss known as suicide seem linked. And to write or conjecture about suicide as a queer act, a performance of radical negativity, utopian in its negation of death as ultimate uncontrollable finitude, and not think about what it symbolizes for a larger collectivity would be remiss.

Suicide is often the end of hope, and indeed a critical and strategic notion of hope is often snuffed out for a collectivity. I have risked romanticizing Herko's loss in discussing the transhistorical relevance of his queer incandescence.³³ As I stood on the sidewalk where he ended his life I noticed a small record store in the building's bottom floor. It was cramped and seemed to be temporally "offtrack." Subterranean Records would be easy for my everyday eye to miss. I walked inside and said hello to a store clerk, who fidgeted as he sort of rocked on the stool on which he was only partially sitting. There was another potential customer in the very small store. I looked around and quickly noticed a lot of Patti Smith CDs and records, and a vinyl album I cherished when I was seventeen, The Gun Club's amazing *Fire of Love*. It was priced at fifty dollars. Then I imagined how Herko would have enjoyed punk if he had stayed around for another fifteen years. Along the same line of thought, I wondered how gay liberation would have affected his life. Would being gay have made his utopian and vexed queerness any easier or more painful?

