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## Walk: Artist's Statement

Yozmit Walker

*Independent Artist, Los Angeles*

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## WALK

Yozmit Walker, Artist's Statement

Thomas Leabhart is a very important figure in my life, a true master who evoked the artist within myself—someone who helped me open my mind's eye by using the physical "body" of a performer as a portal for transformations towards an awakened awareness.

I met Tom when I was twenty-nine years old. Before I met Tom, I was a fashion designer in Los Angeles. This explains very well that I was a visual person by nature. Back in late 1990s, LA fashion wasn't really fashion; the industry was very much focused on garment manufacturing for mass consumption. I was struggling quite a bit because I knew I was a creative person, but doing fashion in LA wasn't challenging my creativity, which created huge conflicts in my artistic psyche.

Even before I met Tom, there was my mother. My mother was a singer, a frustrated one. When she was in high school, she wanted to be a singer, but in 1950s Korea, being a female singer or entertainer was almost equal to being a prostitute in a social hierarchy that was a very conservative, family-oriented, Confucian. She often sang in a jazz club in the American army base in Seoul secretly after school. When her brother found out about this, he came to her gig and dragged her offstage, beating her in the process. He took her back home saying that her action was a shame to the family name. Shortly after her high school graduation, she married my father and became a housewife, and a few years later, I was born.

I liked creating fashion but I was always interested in wearing my own creations to show in front of audience or clients rather than designing for other people's need. At the end of my fashion career in LA, I started to style for the Korean pop artists. This made me end my career as a fashion designer and move back to Korea to start a new career as a pop singer. I felt that if they can do what they do, I could do it too and do it better. After a year in Seoul there was not much progress in cutting an album. Conflicts arose with producers and production companies over artistic direction and my gender identity. I had to come back to LA. But I realized that I still wanted to be a performer, and that I had to carry on with my music. Having to work in the fashion industry again to make a living was very difficult, but this time I had a sense of purpose. I was working full time and at night I spent my time producing music and taking various performing arts classes. One of my close friends suggested that I needed a teacher if I was serious with training—and that was when Tom came into my life.

Tom suggested that I take his workshop in Paris in order to study with him intensively as his student. I packed all my things along with the memories and heartache from Korea in one backpack, left LA behind, and moved to Paris.

Studying mime with Tom was as difficult as cutting an album in Seoul, especially learning to move my body vigorously in my thirties without much background in dance or movement. It took me six months to a year just to move my neck in the manner that Tom taught. But I went to class every day, eight hours, five days a week, without missing a day. I realized I was an artist in this beautiful city of light: Paris.

For about five years I was a research assistant and Corporeal Mime apprentice at the Claremont Colleges where Tom is a resident artist and professor in the theater department. I spent about ten years working under different masters, including Tom, to transform my body and mind into that of a performer. Tom's mentoring and influence attracted other masters for me, including performance theater master Rachel Rosenthal, teachers of *Pansori* Korean traditional singing, and modern dance. Out of all these teachers, I will never forget Tom. He was my first teacher in the arts to give Apollonian discipline to my Dionysian soul. He handed me a tool to organize thought into action by re-establishing the flesh and bones of my artist body. Until this day, I think Tom never expected I would show up at that workshop in Paris, and I like to think that I surprised him by doing so. I definitely surprised myself and brought out my higher self by meeting Tom.

After this period studying, I moved to New York City to establish myself as a solo interdisciplinary performance artist incorporating sound (singing), visual arts (fashion), and movement in a short abstract cabaret piece at the avant-garde performance-based nightclub, The Box. I have traveled and performed for the last seven years with this company, until I began to work as a headlining performer and artistic director. I also performed in Marina Abramovic's *The Artist is Present* at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 2010.

When Tom invited me to perform during a conference on Gordon Craig, the organizing concept was "Action, Scene and Voice." I showed one of my pieces called WALK—a silent, durational, meditative walk in monochromatic and sculptural costumes. It is inspired by the medicine walks of Indigenous/Native American shamanistic tradition. It incorporates a *butoh*-paced walk, costumes I wear in nightlife performances, and recordings of my own songs supplying the sound elements. Looking back on that performance, I see that I put together all the things I learned and gathered: my Action (Tom), Scene (fashion) and Voice (my mother).



Yozmit and performers in WALK at Pomona College, March 2013.

This WALK was developed during the time of recession in NYC when I lost a lot of my performance work. One morning, out of helplessness and frustration, I decided to walk the neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn where I used to live, in a nightclub costume that was no longer getting used. No agenda, no plan—just walk and see what happens. WALK is a combination of my prayer meditation and visual performance art practices.

To walk slowly is to slow down time, to go completely internal, especially in a world where people move and think too fast. I wear monochromatic costumes to reflect how society is a parallel monochrome; everyone doing and following similar interests in a superficial world. Through masking the physical appearance of self and visage, I become a totem for myself and the people around me to awaken the spirit of the space for that moment. Doing this I become part of the void, transcending myself, and become the audience to the performance of life around me.

Since its inception in 2000, WALK has encroached into public spaces such as hotels, clubs, retail stores, and various streets in London (England); Sofia (Bulgaria); Berlin (Germany); Chuncheon (South Korea); New York City (New York); Los Angeles, Claremont, and Joshua Tree (California); and South Beach, (Florida).

*“walking is something very ordinary, but something very special, like the present moment—called life”  
—yozmit*

I am currently based in Los Angeles, where I met Tom, and I am launching an awareness-based performance art/music/fashion project called \*DO GOOD DO YOU\* which is also the title of a single on my new album. I will be combining multilingual lyrics with minimal-techno based world music as a musical direction, performance theater, and fashion of my own creation to promote the message of DO GOOD to yourself and DO GOOD to others, help yourself realize your dreams and help others to do the same, creating win-win situations by collaborating between artists, using art as a tool of healing and transformation. "DO-ing YOU," that is, to be fully self-realized, is "DO-ing GOOD" for the world. Tom and my mother definitely were a primary source of making me DO GOOD to myself, to realize—MYSELF.

**Yozmit Walker** is a singer and interdisciplinary performance artist. Through her ritualistic performance art, Yozmit combines theater, dance, pop culture, fashion, gender identity, mythology, and shamanism onto a single canvas. She sees her art as a form of research that helps define the unknown mysteries of her universe. Yozmit is currently based in Los Angeles and performs regularly in NYC and London. She is currently working on an album and a solo show that intertwines world music and electronic sound with the Buddhist approach of transcendentalism. With this approach, Yozmit uses the art she presents to a mainstream audience as a medium of healing of the human consciousness.