Dance Dance Revolution

ARIANA REINES

BOOKFORUM TALKS WITH EMILY WITT ABOUT DANCING, DRUGS, AND BREAKDOWN

ARIANA REINES: Last time we spoke, it was over the summer, before *Health and Safety* (Pantheon, $27) came out. It was compulsive reading for me—at least five books in one. I don't know how you did it. You wrote an ecstatic account of music, drugs, sex, and expanding consciousness simultaneous to a sober reportage on practically every theater of social collapse of our time, but the book is also the lacerating story of a love imploding and—your subtitle—"a breakdown." I found it a deeply generous book, in the tradition of Tocqueville or Marco Polo—a traveler's description of place and places—and some of these places exist inside us. You turn your eye on culturally overdetermined sites—whether it's Bushwick, domesticity, the toilets at Berghain, or the recent past, which Freud (I think?) said is the hardest and even the most terrifying thing for a human being to look at. By now, you've gotten to hear what people are making of the book . . .

EMILY WITT: Mostly, I've been happy. There have been reviews in a couple of conservative publications where the headline construction is like, "Emily Witt Started Partying and Ruined Her Life." This happened with *Future Sex*, too. They'll say, "This is really well written . . ."

But . . .

. . . but they're basically accusing me of false consciousness. When I say at the end of the book that I don't think what happened was because of drugs, they are like, *No, she's wrong. It's because of drugs*. One review said that it revealed that progressivism is a mental illness.

So it's a crime to have a good time or to party, but the left could attack that as well.

Well, they have.

They ruined it, too!

The leftist critique is like, *Oh, she does cocaine and that's unethical.*

She wants to feel good and that hits on a maybe unspoken taboo in our culture? That it's wrong for a woman to want to feel good, or selfish for her to pursue any kind of pleasure that isn't somehow self-correcting . . .

. . . that it's decadent and wrong. But the thing that bothered me was that I wrote the book because I was trying to figure out if what had happened had been a comeuppance and a punishment for the way I have lived. That was an earnest examination, right? But then some people read the book and seem to overlook that whole self-inquiry.

One of the pleasures of the book is that there is a great humility and sweetness in what the narrator is searching for. We're supposed to believe that our culture is on a path of self-correction, and that as the managers of our lives we can continually optimize and correct. If you take the culture at its word and examine the ruins of a moment, it's poignant to discover that, in fact, it's not your fault at all. All the book seems to ask for is love, a happy homelife, and a neighborhood. That's such a small thing to ask of one's time: I would like love; there could be a cat. But then what the book finds in music, drugs, and dancing is a capacity to aspire to more.

The irony of the title *Health and Safety* is the same thing: this idea that if you just obey a bunch of rules you will have health and safety, right? And yet clearly not. In your book, *Wave of Blood*, you raise the question of free will. Milton says that *Paradise Lost* is an expression of free will, but, on the other hand, it's not. Satan is punished.

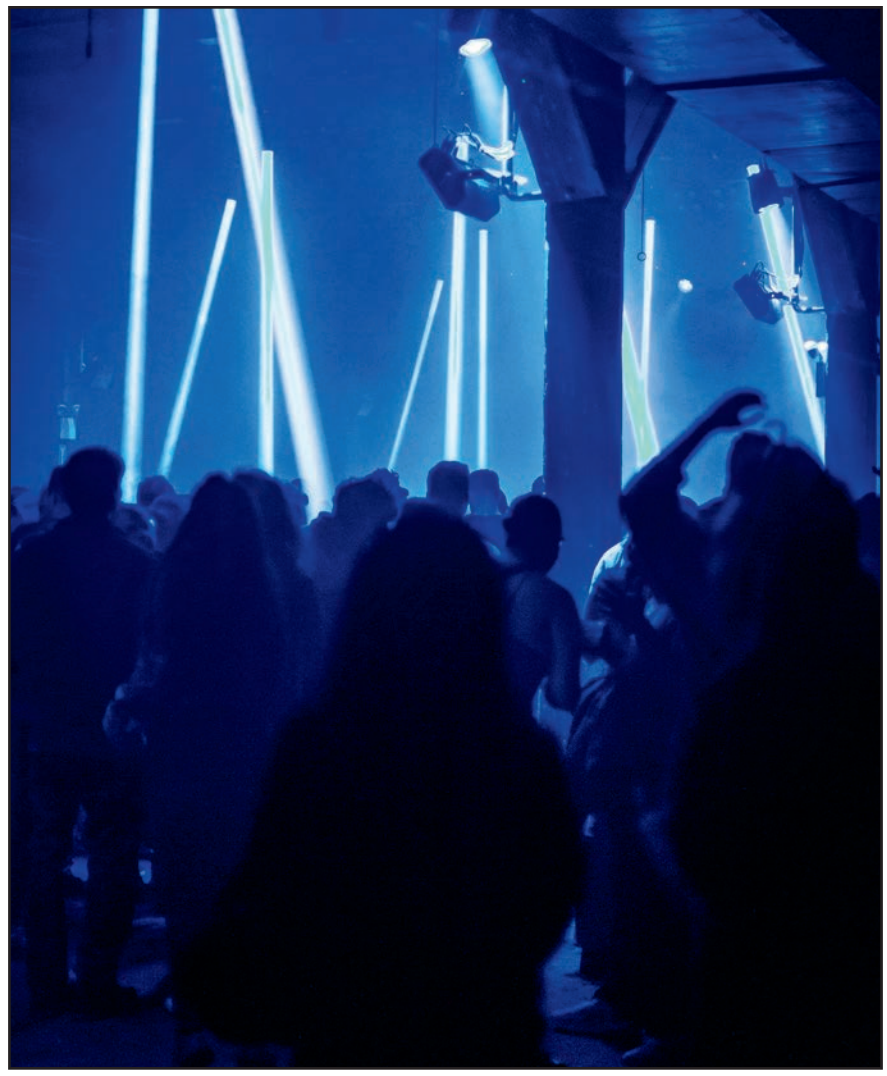

Photo by Luis Nieto Dickens for Elsewhere Presents, Flight Facilities at Knockdown Center, 2024.

Yeah, but he chooses to fall. My friends who are against the war or of the left—which I am, but I'm not sentimentally of the left in this way—are like, *If you don't feel this way, there's something wrong with you. You have to feel as I do. You must choose the way I choose*. I don't believe in that, and Milton doesn't believe in it, either. Milton's God is so much about free will, and it's more radical than people understand. People want to believe in a good God that wouldn't allow these evil things to happen.

There's a lot to this question of just trying to have a home and love and friendship. It seems very elusive, I think, to a lot of people right now. There's a feeling that you can't will it. There's also a sense with climate change or the wars that you have no agency. Being alive right now, there's a certain degree of surrender—or just clamoring online, but that doesn't actually feel like it has any impact.

The humility of the aspiration is part of the interesting ethics of the book because you're not asking for that much from your city or even your relationship. There's a blistering irony to the fact that everywhere you go—every form of violence, or every form of culture, that you're sent to document—it all short-circuits. And it would be almost comforting to be able to think, *Oh, it's because I did something that I shouldn't have done*. But aside from the idiotic moralizing of that—which has nothing to do with people's real lives—it's a narcissistic illusion of control. The idea that if you had done differently, everything would be fine would be a total misunderstanding.

And like I say in the book, it's also the lie of fascism that if you obey every rule, you'll have comfort and protection.

It's not only the lie of fascism. It's also the lie of the progressive left. It feels like the lie of . . . everything.

Yeah, and then the other question that came to mind reading your book was the extent to which there can be free will in writing. Or if you refuse to feel, your writing will die. A lot of what I'm describing in *Health and Safety* about journalism was a feeling that I was trapped in a system in which if I felt too much, the machine that I'm supposed to be producing information for would collapse. Nobody would read it if it was all feeling. And I am covering the election right now and I've never felt more. As you were thinking about how to write poetry about Palestine and Israel, how did you make sure your writing remained in tune with feeling?

It's almost impossible. I love the parts in *Health and Safety* where you diagnose how dispassionately describing what you're reporting on was like some kind of nauseating ouroboros—like you couldn't get "outside" the events themselves, and also how, culturally, a journalist is expected to narrate them. There's something carceral about the state of mind doing this journalistic work produced. On the one hand, the reader is in a uniquely privileged position to go with you to all these different places, reporting on all these moments. At the same time, you're documenting that the way you have to write about them leaves an essential part out. It feels like it's only regurgitating the situation without your being able to become exterior to it. Our writing's supposed to help us gain some kind of perspective, but the perspective of journalism itself is now not enough, maybe.

In my case, I'm choosing not to put my hot takes on Twitter or heap shame or opprobrium in one direction or another, even though I'm feeling it exploding in my body all day. But the decision not to do that is a meditative decision. It's based on faith. For the most part, it's not possible to write poetry about this.

This is just a pet conspiracy theory of mine, but I feel like there is a conspiracy against language itself. There's a way in which human beings are being made to feel ashamed of language, and in a sense we can't say anything or write anything. No matter what we say, it either won't be enough or it will be wrong. This is doing something to people.

Yeah, I've noticed it. Recently for work, it was my job to go to a Kamala Harris rally and write about it. There was a voice in my mind that said, *You could write an article that just said "Gaza" for 3,000 words*. Maybe for someone, that was the only moral thing to write about the presidential election as it was unfolding.

It's like that Tao Lin poem, "The next night, we ate whale." Do you remember that? My favorite thing he ever wrote.

I love Tao Lin.

The next night we ate whale.

And yeah, if I turned that in, it would be naive. I wouldn't get paid for it.

It could just be a meaningless de-authorization. It makes me think of something that Leonard Cohen talked about—sorry to be such a fucking cheeseball. Somewhere he says we don't get a manual for living with defeat. We aren't taught that; we might simply not know what the fuck is going on. The spiritual and political conditions under

PHOTO: LUIS NIETO DICKENS.

which we're living feel like hell. But because we're able to enjoy a sunny day, and relate to each other as human beings, it feels fine, even though we know everything that's going on, and even though this morning I was incapacitated because I was sitting with my phone in this illusory confinement of powerlessness and meaninglessness. On some level, it all feels like a manufactured condition.

Yeah, and in writing, I think it's already become cliché and kind of annoying when Sally Rooney in *Beautiful World, Where Are You?* is like, *There's all these sandwiches. We are living under capitalism*. You don't want to write that way.

OK, let's talk about mushrooms. In the book, mushrooms provide you with existential insight into the conditions of your heart and your vocation as a writer. There's a way that they seem to center you in your mission as a writer. They make it possible for you to traverse different ways of being and ways of reporting on beauty, ecstasy, absurdity, violence, dismay, and absolute breakdown with a great deal of presence and courage. Mushrooms seem to play an oracular, even sacred role in the book compared to the other drugs, but there's an admirable detachment in how this is narrated. And which drugs you're taking when and why—that's something that evolves. In a way it's also true of the artist's life, at least when it comes to where inspiration is to be found. What worked three months ago doesn't necessarily work now. The mind turns in new directions. Maybe that's partly why journalism becomes a closed circuit compared to everything else, in spite of new events—because there's a prescribed way that journalism somehow has to speak, which renders it almost absurd. We're in a dynamic process of awakening because we are alive. In that sense, this book refutes—expands—the consciousness that you were in when you brought *Future Sex* into the world. That's a testament to living. It's a record of change.

Yeah, I think that's true. At the beginning of the book, my first experiments with psychedelics are all with plant consciousness. And then with LSD, I was like, you know what, I don't want ritual. I want the drug that was invented by a corporation and the nuclear age that doesn't have anybody's heritage attached to it. It's as manufactured as the world around us. Maybe now I'm ready to be a little bit more of a hippie again.

Yeah, I just think there's a time to every purpose under heaven. There's a reason why you need to take the CIA-created lab drug into your body. And there's a time when you need the fricking alien shrooms. It's a very uncomfortable thing, embodiment, and there's a way that it's not moral or immoral to live. It's not moral or immoral to breathe in poison. We just already are. Politics doesn't like that, religion doesn't like that, journalism doesn't like that, but that's what art is, that's what love is made of.

Edward Said was a scholar of Joseph Conrad and was obsessed with him because he couldn't see outside the totalitarian system of imperialism. He could only express unease or self-consciousness. But Chinua Achebe says Conrad is just a racist who described a Black man wearing a suit as looking like a dog. So is it a cop-out for me to think that all a writer can do is self-consciously observe the world around them?

But you hoist your own book on that petard repeatedly, ultimately revealing to us how self-punishment itself becomes a cop-out. The book exhausts your own capacity for self-punishment and in a way that's witty and humorous, deeply moving, and sad. But also funny: the collapse of the relationship actually reflects a lot of the somewhat incoherent imperatives of our culture—that ruthless self-cruelty is ethical, that overidentifying with the suffering of others to the point of almost stealing it is virtuous, that wanting to be happy is stupid, just another primal drive that must be managed at all costs.

In the book, as the Andrew character breaks down, that's what really undoes your own impulse to self-laceration. The more insane he becomes—this tall, handsome white guy who plays golf—the more he is using the language of the oppressed against the narrator and the more he is narcissistically getting beaten by cops. There's a specific kind of white guy who does this—I have so many stories like this from my own life. He believes that because he has some empathic connection to the people who are actually oppressed by state violence in this country, he is a good guy and you are a bad woman. The more he does that, it demolishes the impulse to mercilessly self-correct. That is precisely the cul-de-sac that you're rebelling against when the book begins. It's like, this can't be all there is to life. And you get mad at yourself for getting tired, you get mad at yourself for needing to be in a good state of mind in order to write. But writing is your sacred mission according to the mushrooms.

According to the mushrooms.

In a sense, these ecstatic experiences are generous to culture. They move people in a certain direction. In the book, an experience of music fusing with drugs produces a deeper, bigger, broader, wider, spiritual yearning. These things are lighting up for you, and I wonder if it's sort of like a Terence McKenna idea: being pulled forward by the future. I forget how he puts it, but it's this notion that via drugs, you can experience a kind of quantum future that attracts you toward it. It is pulling culture out of the mire toward a more expanded expression of being.

Yeah, I've definitely had those thoughts and inclinations. But then I question whether it's a kind of messianic delusion.

How could it be messianic, though? It's not like, "I'm going to save everyone."

It's more like I'm privy to some secret information. The affinity I sometimes feel with other drug people is a powerful one that is expressed aesthetically. I was in Los Angeles a couple of weeks ago at a dinner party, and I was talking to a DJ. He just mentioned in conversation that up in the Catskills, he had been feeling a lot of kinship with the millipedes. That's the music—I want to listen to that person's music. It's not that taking drugs gives you that. It's maybe just people who pursue estrangement, whether they do it through reading experimental literature or anything that alters their frame of reference—for a lot of people, it's traveling physically. Anything that helps your mind occupy a different experience of time and space and culture and your place in the social order in a real way, not like trying to put yourself in the shoes of somebody you're reading about in an article.

Do you feel like an evangelist for music itself or for dancing or for drugs?

No, and I hate people who are. I'm guilty of this, having written the book, but the more these experiences get pinned down and analyzed and written about, the less interesting they become.

I wanted to ask you about Berlin versus New York.

For twenty years, probably a little more, Berlin was the playground of a certain people of a certain class and inclination. As everything got more expensive, it was the place where you could work less. In the US, raving, electronic music, and clubbing had a really moribund moment from like 2000 to 2010. If you lived in New York, in the so-called indie sleaze era—which was really just hipster days—it sucked. It's not that you couldn't go to good parties, but they definitely weren't . . .

They weren't that good.

They weren't that good. And so all these people going to Berlin experienced this other mode of partying that now has totally become a cliché. So even including a kind of rote Berghain essay in the book is a little bit embarrassing, and yet, how could I not? In Berlin, electronic music, techno, is just pop music. I think every European probably goes to a festival and takes an ecstasy pill by the time they're twenty-two. For a while in New York, it felt very hard-earned and—I don't want to say it was political, but people were working out a way of being in the world. They needed that space to work it out. I can't be that cynical about Berghain. I think people take it for granted, and there aren't very many places like that on planet Earth. But a good party in the US just feels like it comes from a place of struggle and it's that much more special because it's constantly threatened and could be taken away at any moment.

Maybe the sincerity at the core of the book is the most unallowed thing.

Yeah, to go back to not being able to see outside the totalitarian system of imperialism or capitalism or whatever reigning system dominates your time: maybe the phenomenon of the Trump presidency and whatever's going on is, like, OK, we can't understand this. We could try to just describe it in as much detail as possible. And that's what people will read against later. There is a desire to historicize this moment.

I want to return to sex and love. The narrator feels like it's uncool to want monogamy or intellectually lazy to desire happiness.

I have a complicated relationship with convention. When I want monogamy, for example, I can never tell if it's because I want monogamy, or because I want control. I just don't want to be the kind of person that turns myself off to experience because I'm scared. I think you can be totally monogamous, and the thing you worst fear can still happen to you. It happens all the time. And when it comes for you, it's not because you were monogamous or not.

Part of the plaintive and beautiful lament in the book—or one of the kinds of music that it sings—is the surprise and joy of domestic happiness.

I think the line in the book is, "I tried on convention and found that it fit like a glove."

Maybe for a time.

For a time, but the whole book is testament to the fact that eventually my commitment to convention almost destroyed me. It wasn't the drugs, it was my obsession with—or my desire to have—a quote unquote normal conventional life. The way that it feels so good when you're in a heterosexual partnership, and you can just go out to dinner at the table built for two, and you go home for a holiday and nobody's weirded out that you're alone. Going out in the world in a dyadic partnership, you feel very affirmed. And my longing for that kept me in a situation that nearly destroyed me psychologically. My fear of ending up alone and getting older alone almost destroyed me.

My silence and reluctance to tell friends what was going on was also just a very classic dynamic. He was saying that if I told people what was going on, he was going to tell everybody how bad I was and how I was violent and abusive. It was very DARVO: deny, attack, reverse victim and offender. And because I wasn't a perfect person, I wasn't a beatific participant, it got really confusing. I was like, *Oh, I don't have the right to tell people that something's really wrong*.

And the pandemic. It is so hard to remember how that felt now. At the time, it was so all-encompassing, the feeling of isolation. And now we don't even really want to remember or acknowledge it. It's kind of embarrassing to think about—it feels melodramatic. But I know so many people who had breakdowns that year.

In a way, it's a testament to the (relative?) health of our society that we are still waking up to how profoundly having "society" taken away from us during the pandemic fucked a lot of us up. It's something worth pursuing: to seek a meaningful life, to be able to circulate freely, to lose yourself with people, to become saturated with music. These are privileges that we haven't fully appreciated on some level.

Even before the breakup happened, the pandemic happened and I was like, OK, I need to write a eulogy. At the time, I wasn't sure any of this life and these parties in this social world were going to come back. It felt like if too much time passed, it would never resurrect itself, which didn't turn out to be true. It did resurrect itself. I actually can't live without a party.

That's a beautiful note to end on.

Yeah, it would be a . . .

Horrible, squalid little life. □

Ariana Reines is a poet and playwright. Her new books are *Wave of Blood* (Divided, 2024) and *The Rose* (Graywolf, 2025). (See Contributors.)