

THE BODYVERSE:
Shifting Criteria Earthwards

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DEDICATIONS (first things first)

To those trailblazing artists and ecologists who precede me, I write these words primarily as an expression of gratitude. As one of your many, many children, I smile to recognize your face in mine. I am thankful to feed upon the rich fruit your work has borne, nourishment which sustains me on my own journey from sprout to flower.

These writings are dedicated to all who have helped open my mind, my body, who chiseled patiently my commitment to diversity, who taught me to see my ribs not as a cage, but as a scaffold. To my grandmothers, muses and peers—you are too many to name! To the bees, who live collectively and communicate through dance—how I value your wisdom! And, of course, to my greatest teacher, the living, pulsing Earth—my thanks are infinite!

ON TRANSDISCIPLINARISM

“My Goals: to create an art that breaks down boundaries between the disciplines...an art that seeks to reestablish the unity existing in music, theater and dance—the wholeness found in cultures where performing arts practice is considered a spiritual discipline with healing and transformative power...an art that is inclusive, rather than exclusive, that is expansive, whole, human, multidimensional...”

—excerpts from Meredith Monk’s “Mission Statement” (1983/rev. 1996)

After a nearly twenty-five year ferment, I uncork Meredith Monk’s mission statement and take a long draught. The taste is as refreshing and relevant today as it ever was, and it exhibits the refined flavors and improved healthfulness of any good vintage. As I swirl her words across my tastebuds, I detect the subtle notes of a fundamental unity

¹ from Jowitt, Deborah (ed.) (1997) *Art and Performance: Meredith Monk*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD.

connecting not only the bodybased arts, but extending evenly beneath *all* the organic disciplines like bedrock.

Throughout my years of study in both ecology and the arts, I am continually struck by an overwhelming similarity between the guiding principles of Earth-centered, wholistic sciences (such as permaculture and whole-systems theory) and bodybased practices (movement, theater, music, storytelling.) Our feet sprouting from the same soil, riding the very same spirals of change, momentum and rest, improvisors and deep ecologists both offer paths towards connection between body and earth, telescope and microscope, stage and campfire.

Paradoxically, the easiest way to transcend can often be to seek not upwards, but downwards, towards our roots. And at this time in human history, as we hear the Earth calling us to return to sustainable culture, a very ancient, yet wholly postmodern transdisciplinaryism is emerging to lead us there, dissolving boundaries between life and art, reaching towards the “human and multidimensional” art that Monk speaks of.

As we begin to transcend disciplines in the arts, the challenge of establishing appropriate ways to evaluate and critique our art arises. How do we incorporate stewardship of our planet into our artistic goals? How can we learn to interpret the guidance offered by the Earth herself as valuable feedback? How can we use knowledge from related disciplines to assist the way we look at art? In the following pages, I will scatter some seeds which I hope will sprout into a healthy dialogue on these questions.

WHAT IS PERMACULTURE?

Permaculture has been described as “an ethical design system for creating human environments that...have the diversity, stability and resilience of natural ecosystems.”² The perma *culture* toolbox is large enough to encompass many social, environmental, economic, and cultural strategies—which include the arts—and it is no accident that the word “culture” figures so prominently in the name of the movement. I have listed below some of the basic guiding principles of permaculture³:

- *waste is merely an unused resource*

² see The Wilder Institute, www.permaculturenow.com

³ please see Mollison, Bill (1998) *Permaculture: A Designer's Manual*, Tagari Publications, Sister's Creek, Australia and Holmgren, David (2002) *Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability*, Holmgren Design Services, Victoria, Australia

- *work with nature, not against*
- *redistribute surplus*
- *localism: use locally available resources before imported*
- *use and value edges for their diversity*
- *relinquish authority and force in favor of self-governing systems*
- *the three O's: observe, observe, observe*
- *minimum effort for maximum benefit*
- *the problem is the solution*

These principles may ring a bell for dancers and actors, as we become carnally familiar with them whenever we improvise. Many of us have had the experience of holding excess tension somewhere in our bodies during a dance, perhaps in our hips or perhaps in a holding of the breath. We find that when we *redistribute this surplus* tension, letting it release into the floor or melt into our partner's body, our energy is freed-up and becomes available as precious momentum, flow, and breath.

Another example occurs during a contact duet: as soon we fixate upon a rigid idea about how the dance *should* look or *should* feel, instead of a constant receiving and working with what *is*, the dance becomes clunky and awkward, and can even be dangerous. Here, our own bodies demonstrate how we exert ourselves unnecessarily and become prone to injury when we try to force the dance instead of applying the principles of *localism* and *working with what we already have*. This same use of force in the landscape results in modern plagues such as soil depletion, water pollution, war, and extinctions of countless species and cultures.

In a theater improvisation, when we stumble upon material that seems edgy, embarrassing, even frightening, we are encouraged not to view this as "waste," but rather to regard it as a rich resource. Instead of retreating into familiar material and habits, we learn to *value our edges* and explore them. Likewise in permaculture, we seek to use edges and boundaries to our advantage, recognizing them to be repositories of that precious diversity which is the source of our strength and resilience.

Finally, one of the most valuable skills we can gain in the improvised arts is how to simply *observe* and be present in the improvisation before responding. Practice teaches us that acting upon assumptions or habit in an improvisation quickly creates disconnection and confusion. In permaculture, we see this same emphasis upon proper observation as they key to good, efficient design.

DEMONS, WEEDS, AND WASTE

“What was denied becomes acceptable, and demons become creative resources.”

--Ruth Zaporah⁴

When I read Ruth Zaporah’s statement above, referring to the practice of *Action Theater*, I am reminded of the ways in which my permaculture teachers have taught me to reframe my concept of *weeds*. Most of the so-called “weeds” in my garden are edible, medicinal, or both. They grow easily and abundantly, not requiring me to coddle them, protect them, or even water them. They provide shade which shelters baby sprouts. Their “pernicious” taproots bring vital nutrients to the surface and break up tough subsoil. And they help to hold in the precious moisture needed by the (literally) billions of creatures which live in each teaspoon of soil.

Instead of waging a constant war against weeds, I am learning that gardening *with* weeds saves precious time and energy, and I find the results to be more beautiful, too. The modern aesthetics of straight-lines, monocrops, “clean,” weed-free soil, and neatly clipped lawns are descendent from the land practices of aristocratic European medieval estates, practices which developed with little regard for food productivity or humane treatment of those working the land, and especially not for responsible stewardship.⁵

Since most of us were raised with this “neat and tidy” suburban-lawn aesthetic, we consider it normative, and input incredible amounts of time, energy and chemicals to achieve it. However, I believe that as our basic values shift towards sustainability, we can come to discern the reek of slavery, domination and dysfunction in these practices.

In the arts, as in the garden, I see many of us who feel a real need to free ourselves from exclusionary standards of tidiness and virtuosic technique in favor of the exhilarating flow of acceptance and cooperation with whatever sprouts. The enormous amount of energy we spend on painstaking control of the creative process can be redirected towards active distribution of the basic tools of improvisation and organic movement to the public, as well as reeducation of our audiences (and ourselves!) to value participation, inclusion and social change as much as virtuosity and entertainment.

⁴ see Zaporah, Ruth (1995) *Action Theater: The Improvisation of Presence*, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, CA.

⁵ see Flores, H.C. (2006) *Food Not Lawns: How To Turn Your Yard Into A Garden, and Your Neighborhood Into A Community*, Chelsea Green, White River Junction, VT.

IMPROVISATION: A PEOPLE'S TOOL

Morning Yoga: The whiskers of the broom make a satisfying click on the floor as crumbs of sleepiness are swept from my muscles, sliding into the compost bucket. I switch hands, twisting to lubricate the other side of my spine. It feels good to be awake. On the next exhalation, I bend my knees gently to grasp this five-gallon bucket of offerings, now on its way to the compost deity. As I walk, bucket half-full (be kind to the joints, Mama say!) a scene in the pay-per-gym flashes through my mind. Must we now pay for the privilege to release steam? Must we incarcerate with all of our huffing more horsepower than ten engines, shovel and wheelbarrow abandoned to rust in the field? I breathe again. I empty the bucket. I mop my brow with my sleeve. The day is beginning.

-journal entry, Marrowstone Island, April 2007

After more than fifty years of auto-based sprawl carved into the flesh of North America, the need for physical healing of the living land and creation of truly humane dwelling systems is becoming more and more apparent. To retrofit an entire continent in a compact style based once again upon the length of the human stride—instead of the depth of the gas tank—is a goal that will require enormous amounts of manpower, and womanpower! This task will be a grand work of art, possibly the grandest ever undertaken. But how do we begin?

Each and every one of us has been gifted with a body—a perfect microcosm of the organic systems that repeat themselves all throughout the Earth and atmosphere, and a perfect place to gather information on how to proceed. Since our bodies are quite literally made from and of Earth, practicing these arts not only helps us understand directly how Earth systems work, but concurrently sensitizes us to Earth and environmental issues. Because of this, it is perhaps not surprising that many bodybased artists are naturally sympathetic to ecological causes.

I believe it is very important at this time for us to act on this sympathy. If we are to achieve a sustainable culture, we have much physical labor to accomplish. Luckily, Earthwork is a perfect venue for both the creation and expression of strong, healthy bodies. Instead of being cloistered in the halls of academia or hoarded among professionals, the tools of the arts belong with the folk, where they can be put to use on an everyday basis in service of massive, grassroots change in our communities and community gardens.

THE YOGA OF GARDENING

Before our movement class, I am recording in my notebook the details of our last session in the studio—working with imagery of stone, mountain, water, leaves; “mud-luscious,” describes Walt Whitman. The sun shines on my face, and for a moment my attention flies out the window to the beautiful, large rock almost completely overgrown by grasses in the empty lot next to this building. Rock speaks. She tells us she was cast clumsily aside by Vulgar Bulldozer. She says she will wait as long as it takes for us to come outside and roll her to her place of honor in the garden wall. She is very heavy. We are dancers, we say. We cannot come outside because we want to stretch our legs. We want to make our legs strong. Rock waits patiently.

—journal entry, Oakland, CA, January 2006

As rents for rehearsal studios, theaters and hi-tech production equipment skyrocket, we artists have the opportunity to achieve the ultimate alchemical act of improvisation—turning a *problem into a solution*. Don't have the funds to pay for studio time? Why not do a walking meditation over to the neighborhood pea patch, allow ourselves to *observe* what the garden and the neighbors need, and dance our response to these needs?

Gathering and spreading a wheelbarrow full of compost is a great warmup, taking us through several yogic poses, including warrior one, and downward dog. When done mindfully, placing rocks in the garden wall and raking leaves for mulch is a butoh experience. Like our ancestors have always done, we can sing and tell stories while we harvest the kale and broccoli for dinner. The beneficial effects of our bodybased art practice expands beyond personal revelation to include nourishment of garden, neighborhood, Earth-community.

In moving our art out of the studio, and into the world, how can we acknowledge process and experience to be critical feedback in itself? Can we truly bring bodybased practice into form by *performing* what we learn upon the stage of the landscape? How do we form adequate ways of assessing and critiquing this type of activist art?

WHAT IS CRITICISM?

In order to understand the role of the critic, let us examine the Indo-European etymology of the word “criticism.” The root sound *-skeri-*through which this word is related to many other languages, from Hindi to English, from Gaelic to Polish—means “to slice, or separate, or sift.” Slicing clean the meat from the bone, *discerning* the wheat from the chaff, we are *describing* precisely what feeds us and *prescribing* what heals. If the critic's role is to help separate what nourishes us from what does not, then it is our responsibility as artists

to make sure those critiquing our work are truly serving the work, not merely commodifying it in an attempt to relate it to the wallet of the consumer.

At this unique time in history, as modern humanity gazes directly into the hyper-reality of its own limits, we are faced with an enormous challenge: relearn how to respect the natural laws and limitations that apply to every single creature and process on Earth, or perish. Yet, all of us are still enveloped by a society which demands our allegiance to the (impossible) creed of Earthly limitlessness.

As the contradictions between these two demands become more glaring with each passing headline, and each passing day, I believe old criteria for assessing what constitutes “art,” and certainly “good art” are quickly becoming irrelevant. I find myself continually asking the question, if my work contributes nothing to this “Great Turning”⁶ of humanity towards a just and sustainable culture, can I realistically consider it art?

LOCAL FEEDBACK AND ENGAGED CRITICISM

I tend to agree with the views on criticism of John O’Neal, as expressed to Jan Cohen-Cruz, in her book *Local Acts* (2005): “It’s okay if you draw my attention to an error impeding getting to where I/we want to go. If we don’t share the same goal, however, then criticism is nonsense.”⁷

My own work is inspired principally by three questions: How do we address—both artfully and practically—the (increasingly louder) calls towards sustainability? How do we develop commonsense translations between what amounts to two different, but closely related languages: the language of ecology and the language of the body? How do we use these translations to encourage crossfertilization of the participatory and healing arts with the sustainable-community and sustainable-horticulture movements?⁸

Given that I live in a society whose behavior largely demonstrates profound denial of these questions, and often outright hostility towards them, it is usually difficult to find adequate mainstream (or even not-so-

⁶ see Korten, David, C. (2006) *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, CA.

⁷ Cohen-Cruz, Jan (2005) *Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, especially Chapter 5: *Criticism*

⁸ see Shifferd, Patricia, A. and Dorothy Lagerrhoos (2006) *Converging Streams: The Community Arts and Sustainable Community Movements*, XIV International Conference of the Society for Human Ecology, appearing on www.communityartsnetwork.org

mainstream) assessment of my work. Fortunately, my drive to actively address these questions in my life does not in any way feel optional, so I continue with my work. Instead, for feedback I rely upon my intimate community, and the Earth herself. As I walk in the garden, my dance feeds back directly to me, my body tuned to its own origins, my intuitive sensing of my path heightened.

After many wrestling matches with critics, both external and internal, I have begun to question whether I should seek to receive criticism at all from beyond the immediate communities or goals towards which I work. With this statement, I do not intend to declare myself some kind of an art-cowboy, stoically opposed to self-inquiry, immune to self-doubt. Rather, I am calling out to others in our field for help in developing a model of engaged criticism that has room for goals of sustainability and social change as much as traditional goals like aesthetics, marketability, and world travel. Jan Cohen-Cruz, founder of the Center for Art and Public Policy in NYC, reminds us that criticism exists to serve the art:

Engaged critics take time to understand a work's intentions and do not assume that every work comes out of the same aesthetic tradition....While it is true that [mainstream] critics do not tend to write about community-based art anyway, artists rely on reviews as a part of fund raising. We need critics able and willing to be responsive to various kinds of art that are meaningful to various audiences.⁹

Importantly, I also wish to underline the need for a healthy measure of self-direction. When attempting work with a strong ecological/social activist component, following our hearts is a skill whose value cannot be overestimated. In a strange world where art and art reviews are bought and sold for profit, it is more important than ever for activists to tap regularly into our instinctive sense of what is right, and follow it.

WITNESS AND TRAUMA THEORY

The presence of witnesses—including roles variously called audience, spectator, mediator, bystander, jury, judge, and therapist—is a crucial part of the equation not only in the performing arts, but also in the healing arts. The details of our story told to a sympathetic ear catalyzes the alchemy that transforms obstacle into teacher, trauma into treasure, personal into universal. Good listeners help us integrate even the most overwhelming experiences into our life's frame of reference, redistributing the burden of events which would overload the

⁹ see Cohen-Cruz, Jan (2005) especially Chapter 5: *Criticism*

individual.¹⁰ The performing arts have always played a crucial part in this conversion of the stresses of life into growth in indigenous cultures, and therefore hold great promise as we re-indigenize ourselves to place and planet.

How do we train each other how to listen and witness constructively? How can we create forums in which to air the stories of a rapidly changing world? And what happens in the absence of a constructive critic? Perhaps we might also consider that there is indeed something/someone always listening, that “audience” is everywhere around us. An assuredness that every single thing we do is being witnessed, always, makes thin the line between action and activism, between life and art. In this new culture which is sprouting even as the old is crumbling, is there room to dedicate our dance to our children seven generations hence? How will we assess this goal?

i raise i hands into sky. i am dance unfold. i knees bend. i hand cast seed. blue and cloud in pond below i muck-boots, rippling. i you in bayou. i close i eyes. i see you. you open i's eyes. you see i. eye you i. i dance for you, blue. sprout i dancer. i witness i. why i dance? i grow i seed.

--journal entry, may 2007

CONCLUSION

Bodybased artists are making essential contributions to the “Great Turning” of humanity towards a just, healthy and sustainable culture—a synergistic relationship based on cooperation with all life-forms, instead of competition and domination. As improvisers, we enact this shift every time we say ‘yes’ to the raw material presented to us by our psyches, our bodies and our partners. By using what we are given to mold works of art in an organic process that mirrors those of other natural systems, we gain a deep, bodily knowledge of nature that can then be applied beyond our personal understanding.

For all bodybased artists who reject being isolated in blackboxes and ivory towers, who wish to have our feet on the ground, hands in the soil, improvising sustainable solutions, I write to encourage us to bring our art into physical form in the landscapes and communities around us. This activist art is profound, and the Earth is our witness and critic.

¹⁰ see Herman, Judith Lewis (1992) *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, Pandora Press, London, UK.