



MOVEMENT IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION:

A PANEL

*Yasmeen Godder, Opiyo Okach, and Yvonne Rainer
Moderated by Thomas F. DeFrantz*

The following discussion took place on November 12, 2008, at the Yale University Art Gallery, as part of the Festival of International Dance at Yale. Remarks have been edited for clarity and concision. —Ed.

THOMAS F. DEFRANTZ *Dance and performance have answers about globalization as they simultaneously raise questions. In dance, we are concerned with the immediate moment and being committed to action. We stage the possibility of action, and the presence of the moment. These are internal concerns in all of these artists' work, but globalization often has to do with flattening terrains and—to use a word that really makes no sense to me—“universalizing” experience. “Globalizing” an experience is not necessarily productive to everyone—or in all kinds of symmetrical fashions. So I'd like to start with this ideal of the “glocal,” asking you to locate yourself. Yasmeen, how would you describe where you're from and where you live and work?*

YASMEEN GODDER You're touching exactly at the very point of confusion, but also the essence of some of the things I've been dealing with. Today I see myself as an artist living in and working based in Israel, and particularly in Jaffa. That's where I live. It's an ancient city next to Tel Aviv, and it's interesting in particular in the reality of Israel today because it's a mixed city where you have people of different faiths and backgrounds living together.

And so I really connect my identity to a really small place, the city that I live in and where my studio is. When I think of where I belong, this is the place where I see myself relating to and connecting to on the level of identity. But then again, it is very much a shifting thing, since I was born in Jerusalem, I grew up in New York City, and went back to Israel in my twenties. My grandparents are from Poland, Syria, and Palestine, and one of my grandmothers was Christian, so this kind of complexity has made me question preconceptions about my own sense of belonging and culture, and ultimately translate these into aspects of my work by playing, among other things, with layers of authenticity and superficiality when it comes to a sense of identity. Where do I really belong? My way of dealing with it is by committing to where I am at this moment, and saying, “I'm from Jaffa.”

YVONNE RAINER Where am I most comfortable? New York! I'm thinking of the places I've been where I've exposed my work: Canada, Europe, Australia, India—many years ago—and in turn have been affected by these travels, of course. Globalization has kind of nasty implications today, as well as idealistic ones, and it's difficult. . . . There was a time in the 1960s when the avant-garde that I was a part of was appropriated by the government to send minimalist artists—especially various

Yasmeen Godder
leading dance
workshop, Yale
University, 2008.
Photo:
Ashley LeFrak

sculptors—under the U.S. auspices all over the world. And these artists were accused of being in the service of a kind of U.S. imperialism. I remember when the shah of Iran was still in power, and he did this enormous festival that brought a lot of American artists over.

The one time that I felt part of an imperialistic process or system was when I had a fellowship in the 1970s in Berlin under the *Deutsche Akademische Austausch Dienst*, a German cultural exchange program, and West Berlin at this time was this plumped-up economic center that was a showcase for Western culture and commodities during the cold war. So globalization is a multi-edged concept, and it's hard for me to say where I fit into it today. Since I've been around so long and was part of this 1960s ferment which has influenced a lot of contemporary dance, I'm aware of this kind of interaction and exchange, which has in turn affected me, so it's a complicated thing.

OPIYO OKACH I live in Nairobi. And I work in Nairobi. I live in France and I work in France as well. In Nairobi, nobody comes from Nairobi. Everybody comes from the village. You know, every time I'm back in Nairobi, I feel like I never left. I leave sometimes for six months. When I go back to France, it's always like I've never left. I've been to New York a couple of times, and each time I've felt that I never left—that things stopped when I went away—and when I came back, things continued. In Kenya, the average person would have gone to school in English. I went to school in English. I'm schooled in English. My mother tongue is Luo. Our national language is Swahili. English is the official language. I have a first name that I don't use very much, which is a Christian name, Bernard. My mother goes to church on Sunday. The rest of the week, we do other ceremonies that have to do with tradition and people lead multiple lives in multiple times and multiple geographies in any one day. And that's where I come from. My training is in mime and physical theater.

I work with traditional African dance, and all these multiple experiences are also what my body is. Through the years it has absorbed and inhabited different cultural experiences and realities. Yes, that's what I think I am—all these really different things.

DEFRA NTZ *This sort of panel is not something that happens often in the United States. And I was really taken with the fact that Yasmeen talked about political identity, while Yvonne was talking about aesthetic identities, and Opiyo talked about family identities and family locations. These are three ways individuals can make sense of globalization; we can make sense of the different passages and transmissions of information and our own bodies in different geographies. We have to find our way through, because it's not simple. It is different in different locations and times, as Yvonne brought up. Another thing that tends to happen when we think about globalization is that issues that seem important to us here and now play out very differently in other parts of the world and other communities. I would like to talk about some of those issues. Maybe we can think about gender and how gender plays out in terms of the work that you make, and the work that interests you, or as you think about it in terms of your own particular home bases, or your artistic identity.*

OKACH The dance scene in Nairobi is not a big one—it's quite small. It's about ten years old. There are about fifteen or so professional dancers, people who earn their living from dancing, contemporary dance. Two are women. The rest are men. That, somewhere, has something to do with responsibility. Often viewed as either somebody's daughter or as somebody's wife, the female dancing body is not regarded as morally correct. Today, in the city, in Kenya, in Nairobi, if you are somebody's daughter, dancing is not something you'd be doing for your future. For women there is very little space in between being somebody's daughter and somebody's wife—that one actually has the freedom to do

whatever it is that they want with their lives. Very quickly, there comes the feeling that yes, one has a responsibility to one's children and family, and I think that that complicates the gender situation in dance in Nairobi.

RAINER Generally since I've returned to dance, I have only women in my work. But the women do things that men traditionally have done, like lift each other, take on hip-hop gestures, transgressive gestures, and read things aloud that apply only to male biology. Things like that. I'm very interested in mixing up gender references. And from early on in my work, I gave men and women the same things to do. There was no differentiation. Which you might say is another kind of problem, like ignoring difference. But it was a way of transcending or challenging the social stereotypes and socially confining expectations or lack of them for women. For this present situation, next weekend, one of my dancers couldn't be present, so we taught some of her roles to a man. Now we will have women doing some very feminine things, and the man will also. So it gets mixed up even further.

GODDER I feel that gender has been a major subject in my work. I think that perhaps in the beginning, I was not so aware of this emphasis and with time, it came out of my body and psyche, making me realize that these intellectual and personal questions that were present in my life were becoming more visible in my work. One way of dealing with this big question of gender has been through the use of role-playing. More specifically, I created a work called *Two Playful Pink* for two women, myself and Iris Erez, with whom I've worked for many years, and we were searching the process of embodying positions, physical positions that were considered feminine and associated with being a woman, and of re-questioning those positions, by taking them onto ourselves and seeing where do we personally, psychologically exist within them. How do we

relate to them? Maybe we're not even aware that we feel comfortable or uncomfortable in them. All of this alongside with looking at two women onstage, and all the connotations that exist within this on its own. And when I say "role playing," I mean not only how the body expresses itself when taking on positions but actually playing out different roles that women have in their relationships together, as seen both from within, and from outside, ranging from the connection of teenage girls to the pornography of two women together. By playing out these different conventions, we are also playing with the expectation of the audience using our bodies. Employing the stage as an opportunity for a live experiment allowed us to question what we're doing and how we feel about it, sometimes getting empowerment and strength from it, and other times being intimidated by it, and allowing that to be present, too, for the audience.

On the other side of that, in a more recent piece called *I'm Mean I Am*, I wanted to search for the opposite. It's related to what you are saying, Yvonne: I wanted to be able to enter a male physicality and question how my body exists within these forms, or where my psyche goes when I enter into physical forms associated with a male body. Can I feel it? Can I enter that from the outside? In general, when I work with other performers, we've taken on different gender roles as kind of assignments, as possibilities, working with images that can be our gender or not our gender. In this research of transformation of bodies and minds, my interest has been to be able to transform in order to enter something other than oneself but, ultimately, I am not sure about the use of the word *other*, because these experiments and ways of working came out of the idea that we can embody and identify with everything. Or that through our minds, our imaginations, our bodies can transform as performers. This has been a central aspect and question in my process.

DEFRANTZ *I'm delighted that you bring up this idea of reception. In dance, we often think about making work, but we also have to contend with how it's received: whether there's intentionality as opposed to impact. Someone might make a work and say, "I wasn't thinking about gender," but the work will be received however it's received, as a statement about sexuality or masculinity, for instance. There is an interesting open space for dance to do things that its creators may not intend. That is part of the space that's between us here now, the space between the stage and the audience. There's a gulf, and we have to find ways to connect across it. But also dance and the thematic references of dance don't create or hold the same meanings in different places. It depends on where we are and the contexts we build for an event. That makes a difference in how performances are received locally. For instance, to return to gender and sexuality as examples, you're each courageous to ask questions and then try to stage them, to share them with a local audience and see what kinds of conversations come up there. In that respect, I'm curious how you conceive of erotic elements in your work, and what that does for you as a concept or paradigm in this global/local context of creation.*

RAINER In dance, eroticism is always an issue. One of my strategies is to deal with it as a quotation. For instance, a lot of my source material now comes from photos. Some are from the Ballets Russes, where eroticism is always presented as some kind of romanticism, doomed love or yearning or failure or un-consummation. So there are all kinds of poses or conventions. I'm very drawn to replicating these poses from photographs—but I'll have two women, rather than a man and a woman, enact one of these poses, so of course it takes on a whole different resonance.

DEFRANTZ *Many audience members come to dance because they feel an erotic attraction, to the idea of people on display or people engaged in purposeful aesthetic action.*

RAINER Or the body! Just to be an observer of beautiful bodies.

DEFRANTZ *But this isn't something that has driven you, necessarily?*

RAINER In fact, I went in the opposite direction. I thought of a lot of modern dance as unacknowledged exhibitionism. It was an assumption, a given that dance was erotic. The function of leotards and tights was not only to facilitate movement. So early on, I had my dancers wear baggy clothes. Action and task replaced exhibition.

GODDER I think there's an element of eroticism in performance. It's not necessarily related only to sexuality. I don't know why, but when you say something is erotic, I think of vulnerability and exposure and provocation. These are associations I get. I think of sharing that brings you to places that aren't necessarily exposed on an everyday level. I guess there's something in the theatrical experience that allows for an eroticism that can communicate differently from the stereotypical sensuality. So that's the first thing that arises when asked this question.

Second, it made me think of my new creation, *Singular Sensation*, in which I searched for "working with the senses," and for isolating sensation. That came about in part because I work a lot through my head, and of course my body, but I wanted to be able to stop my thoughts a little bit, and just research sensation. I've had a lot of response to the eroticism in this work, which is perhaps not the central theme that I was working with but obviously relates to the kind of experimentation we did with sensation. I also find myself interested in the gentle boundary between what can be seen as both erotic and aggressive. When I made my work *Strawberry Cream and Gunpowder*, which was about war photography, we worked with images we saw in the news, especially in newspapers, which



were repetitive depictions of various extreme situations (for instance, in the territories where soldiers were meeting Palestinians). I specifically wanted to work with this subject because it's very charged and I felt it was part of my reality, and therefore I wanted to be able to bring it into my work. One of the things I noticed in this image research was that many photographs exposed the body in an almost erotic way to be looked at closely by the viewer on an almost pornographic level. I think that in the piece, despite the intensity of the situations, the body nonetheless expressed the vulnerability and pain exposed in these photos. So when I spoke earlier about this thin line between eroticism and aggression, these are the kind of places I'm interested in exploring—where you're not sure whether you're turned on or disgusted.

DEFRA NTZ *Certainly in the United States mainstream cultures restrict us to certain stereotypical notions of sexuality and eroticism. I appreciate that you're willing to complicate that and take us to other dimensions. I don't presume that my sense of what might be erotic—as an American born in the Midwest, now living in the Northeast Corridor—are somehow coherent with your sense, Opiyo.*

OKACH The erotic is not an idea I deliberately work with. But some of my work—such

as *Abila*, a piece I created in 2003—has a lot of traditional movement in an explicit way. Bodies are exposed, and traditional movement brings with it something that can be seen as erotic. That wasn't something I was working with or trying to question, but sexuality comes across by default in some of the movement, some of the articulation of parts of the body: the hips and undulations that come with that dance. In my pieces that incorporate traditional dance, there's something about the body that comes across as being erotic.

RAINER Opiyo, when I saw your piece *No Man's Gone Now*, I was astounded. I thought, *This is by an African?* So I wondered what modern dance you were exposed to in London when you went there to study mime. You must have seen a lot of stuff.

OKACH At the time, at the beginning of the 1990s, work like DV8 Physical Theatre, Siobhan Davis, Théâtre du Complicité. I think that at the time I watched a lot of video. I was discovering dance, a lot of dance video, dance for the camera.

RAINER Did you see any American work? Like Merce Cunningham?

OKACH I saw something by Lucinda Childs at the time. But, no, but I didn't see much American dance. It was mostly British dance artists.

Opiyo Okach,
Yale University,
2008. Photo:
Ashley LeFrak



Yvonne Rainer,
Yale University,
2008. Photo:
Terry Dagradi

RAINER It invoked memories of early-1960s people like Steve Paxton, who refused to access his classical training and virtuosity—critics called it “antidance.” I mean, the audacity! Paul Taylor did this dance in the late 1950s where he stood still. And Steve Paxton walked and was still. But here I was so struck by the simplicity and directness of your walking around that stage, lying down at the beginning of the dance, and doing tiny movements. I couldn’t believe that came out of Africa! Talk about globalization!

OKACH For that piece I worked with Julyen Hamilton, an improviser. Even though we haven’t worked together for a long time, I think there is a connection back to Steven Paxton. Working with Julyen Hamilton made great resonance with African dance as well. We often think of African dance as something that has a percussive exteriorized energy, but that’s only one side. I was interested in ritual, certain ritual ceremonies are much internal, interior things. I wanted another energy, another sense of time. For me that meant making connections between that kind of work and traditional dance.

RAINER The second dance was less surprising because you used African idioms and music. I thought it was especially effective, the combi-

nation of the narration in the first dance about returning to Africa, and then this postmodern choreography.

OKACH Between the two pieces, I think there’s a state of body in which I try to find correspondence to my reality as a person—to arrive at a place that perhaps resolves the different influences and different experiences as anybody living in Nairobi today. In some ways, it is a search for the state of body, a choreographic language where all those different things resolve themselves into some kind of authentic identity for myself today. I have other pieces like that which raise questions: “Is that African?”

DEFRANTZ *It takes us back to where we began: What is African? Where are we? What is globalization? What’s the “glocal”? What are these circulations of movement, ideologies, how are they allowed access to stages, and how do we come in contact with them? These questions cannot be resolved, but we can always approach them. We can at least consider different ways that their terms matter, because they do matter: Who has access to the stage; who travels where and when; and how that work is received, according to who knows what in the audience or who doesn’t know what. It’s always a question of where are you*

going next. It's a funny question, but it is one that satisfies something in us.

Let me ask all of you, what's next? Are these pieces going to be traveling in the future, or what's the next project for you?

RAINER The program presented at Yale is going to REDCAT in Los Angeles in June 2009, and it'll go to New York as part of Performa 09 in fall 2009. I also have some ideas for a new piece. I only get to work with my group in the summer, for four or five weeks, because I'm mainly in L.A., and they're in New York, and we're all teaching and working. It's the price the choreographer pays for having abandoned any idea of having a stable company, which I did a long time ago. By hook or by crook, I seem to make one new piece a year.

OKACH The program I did last night was two new pieces: *No Man's Gone Now* and *Border Border Express*. This was the second performance. The first performance was in France on Thursday last week. And there's a quartet that I'm planning on doing in 2009 and 2010. There's also a project for nonconventional spaces that's probably coming up in 2010 and 2011. But these solos I'll probably be working on again in April and May because we're presenting them at a festival in Paris. My work tends to develop in several stages, and we'll be having a second work stage in April or May 2009 to continue the project.

GODDER I'm touring with *Singular Sensation*. We're traveling quite a lot this year, to places ranging from Japan to Belgium and Holland. So we're running the work. I'm also going to present another work of mine called *I'm Mean I Am* in Germany in a few days. And I've started working on a new project, originally commissioned by Les Substances in Lyon, using classical waltzes as a starting point. I've never used classical waltzes or classical music in general in my work. At first I felt disconnected from the idea, and rejected it. But it's

also related to the theme of this discussion: "Here are the waltzes, what do you do with them?" Suddenly I realized my "placement"—I'm in the Middle East—so I put on these waltzes surrounded by palm trees and Arabic music played from passing cars. The whole approach to the work is about this, about being *more* naïve than I am, to try to feel or understand what that means, to pretend that I don't know the history, that I don't know the cultural connotations of this music. Can I really *receive* this, almost like in an envelope, the culture of another time, of another country? Where is that in relation to where I am located? Dance like this makes me more aware of my locality in relation to this globality. Where and when these two things meet emphasizes the dislocation. At the same time, I search for ways to connect to a reality that I'm in. That's been very "global" in some ways. We'll see where it takes me.

DEFRAANTZ *Does that piece have a timeline, or is it open?*

GODDER I'm trying to keep it open because I always have timelines, but supposedly by the fall, it should be an evening. I'm trying, unlike *Singular Sensation*, on which I worked for eight months, to do little stations where I will present it in progress, just to open up my process and get a sense of how it's being perceived and keep opening it up. And that's the next thing. Because I like to close the door and be with my group of performers and just research and research and research. And suddenly, I discovered through this work that was commissioned in a very short time that there's something very interesting about putting work together quickly, and seeing how it resonates and taking it on to the next . . . so that's where I am right now.