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CONVERSATIONS | NOV 5, 2007

Beth Gill in conversation with Yasuko Yokoshi

Eleanor & Eleanor

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Beth Gill: I was going to say that I think this work is bringing up a lot that I feel I need to be doing with my work, but that probably won't get done for this project.

Yasuko Yokoshi: Where do you think you're heading to?

Beth: We spend so much time building form and structure. I just noticed that we're starting to scratch the surface regarding

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how to embody that form and that structure in the work.

Yasuko: Do you see that it's a departure from what you have previously been doing?

Beth: No. I feel like I am falling deeper and deeper into [it]. [My] past work was so intuitive that it would sort of gesture to ideas, but it wasn't understood by me so much. Over time, I am starting to be able to see where I was gesturing or pointing to. Now it feels more like work for me, like I can actually sit down with it and think about it. I don't know what IT is. I feel like that's problematic, that I'm calling it IT, but...

Yasuko: Maybe that's why. If you can't say it, it has to be delivered visually-it's not an IT.

Beth: I was saying this to two friends a little while back, and they thought that I was crazy for saying it, but I feel like I want to be really serious with myself in the future. They were like, 'you already are serious!' By serious I mean to be really rigorous about the level of honesty I have with myself regarding what I'm making and what my actual interests are. I don't feel always like I can keep that...

Yasuko: Have you, though, so far in this? Have you compromised?



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Beth: Yeah, I think that there have been times when I don't let myself direct in the way that I actually want to direct inside of the work, because...

Yasuko: Direct the dancers?

Beth: Yeah. It's hard. I'm uncomfortable. I'm naturally in conflict with how strongly and clearly I want to see things. I feel in conflict between that and the actual working space that I want to have with other people. Maybe the compromise is not a bad thing—you make compromises in the world all the time, and I think a lot of times that's good. That we make compromises means that we are working with people.

I make these choices or these compromises really silently. It's not out of a point of conflict with my performers. I just already, going into it, know that I don't want to be the kind of director or dictatorial voice that I feel there is a part of me that wants to be.

Yasuko: What's your preference of choosing who you want to work with? What's your foremost priority when you work with dancers?

Beth: Up until now I think that that choice has been about people. I would have to go project by project so I can think about it,

because I feel like it's all circumstantial in a way. This particular piece, the casting actually shifted a lot. It's funny because it started with really particular choices that felt symbolic to me.

Yasuko: I think that what I'm interested in is... Your work appears to be abstract-as that very pure, abstract execution of quality, time, space, but...

Yasuko & Beth: It's NOT! (laughter)

Photo: Jason Somma, Thumbnail photo: Beth Gill

Yasuko: For me that's the beauty of it, why I'm fascinated by it and why I love how you work. But my question is, when you make the work and it becomes your repertoire, do you think of it as being reproduced again by other dancers? Would the work stand on its own but with a different cast? Meaning [the] choreography stands on its own. I think I'm talking about the work-how to be preserved and that kind of thing.

Beth: I don't think so. When I'm building the work, there's a way that I really think about the physical space, the bodies, the movement and gestures that are happening in the space-everything. I'm thinking about all of it in almost a uniform approach: everything is being dealt with sort of

equally, in that abstract way. However, I'm trying to be really honest and real about what those things are. So, if Eleanor [Hullihan] or Danielle [Goldman] or Kayvon [Pourazar] or Julie [Alexander] is in the space, the fact that it's Eleanor or that it's Danielle or that it's Julie or Kayvon, is hugely different.

Yasuko: I agree. I think this form of dance that we're doing is been done, for me, only by live people. We're seeing motions, movement, but I'm so interested in execution-that person being so present, being so that person, even [if they] don't move, it's so fascinating.

Beth: Some of the discussion that we are having now about presence started really with the project at The Kitchen [*wounded giant*]. Because this project and the one in between [*marginal strip*] and then The Kitchen-those three projects are really the beginning of me working with a group of people for an extended period of time. There was a dialogue about the work as the work was being made that was new for me [with] the piece at The Kitchen. We started to talk about presence and it's very complicated. I feel it's very complicated what they are trying to do inside the work because they are operating with a laundry list of really

detailed and specific directions, but then on top of that or inside of all of that, they're also being asked to be themselves, to also represent something that is really present or honest in themselves in that moment.

Yasuko: Do you use *improv* at all?

Beth: It's used in very specific ways. It's used to create a potential for chance or things that I was not anticipating a lot of the time, but with more of an agenda than I would normally classify as improvisation.

Improvisation is complicated for me inside of the process. I knew that there was an aesthetic of the movement that I was interested in. Sometimes I needed a tool or a mechanism to help me generate some ideas, but at the same time I was skeptical whether it could really actually generate something that was interesting.

Yasuko: So, having Kayvon and Julie, when they come out... I mean, to have such a theatrical effect. I hate to say in such a flat way 'theatrical'.

Beth: It is that, though. It's theatrical. Why is it theatrical? When I think of theater, it's about illusion or magic-like making the effect of what you're seeing. Maybe there

are two things that are present: there's the reality of what's happening, but then there's also the effect of what's happening.

Yasuko: How much do you know before you make?

Beth: I know a lot, but I know a lot in ways where I don't know fully. I work on paper a lot, so often I'll use that as a place to be intuitive, to draw and look at things in space. But then there is the imagining of what I've just drawn, and in the imagining is when there's this other thing that happens, when I can start to be more premeditated; I can start to think about the potential of those images that were sketched out. For example, I think that image you're talking about... I know exactly how that started because Jeff Larson, who was doing the set, we talked for a long time about how we set up the space as a diptych.

Yasuko: Diptych?

Beth: Diptych in photo or in visual art will be like two things that are presented in tandem, next to each other as a unit although there's separation between the two of them, but they're designed to be looked at together. I thought I wanted to make a diptych very early on. But then I realized that I didn't want to make a diptych, I just

wanted to make a duplicate. I wanted to look at two things that were the same thing but they were two. How do you divide the space? As he started to talk about it, we did a lot of photo exchanges. There's this whole series of pictures that I took once on this beachside where I was looking at natural duplicates and diptychs in the world, in life, and I was framing them with a camera. And he sent me some pictures back, and one of them was a boardwalk that was wood paneling in this pattern that was mirrored basically and it just went on forever. I didn't see it as mirroring but he saw it and he got really fixated on it. At first I felt really uninterested in it because it wasn't the original image I had of two things moving in unison, but then I started to let myself really think about it and I got really obsessed with the idea of having both of those things going on at the same time in the space.

Yasuko: But how it evolved into or from is what is interesting because it looks like that, and suddenly you see it here like that, and then suddenly this way, so that the space goes like... my eyes... it's like... [gesturing]

Beth: When they like... [gesturing also]
Totally! When I watch that section I feel like the space that runs down the center line,

from downstage to upstage, it's being carved out by them, [it] becomes charged somehow.

Yasuko: It's really aggressive and I don't want to say dramatic. It is so nothing before, but what happens before and then what happens after, it's dramatic.

Beth: I think one of the reasons why it does have an inherent drama to it is because when those two women [Eleanor and Danielle] initially walk across and lie down this way, I feel like they set up this plane and so, initially when these two [Kayvon and Julie] walk out, they're still kind of dealing with that plane but when they come down the center, it's a breach of the way your eye has adjusted to looking at the space.

Yasuko: It's like video or filming-that things are moving this way and someone enters downstage and the camera shoots from the back of the head. And suddenly your frame or depth of field completely shifts just in an instant. But you're not doing a film, you savor it in dancers, so the magic is almost more organic and dramatic. [In] film [it] looks like a gimmick if it's overused or is done in too dramatic a way, but on live

performance, if it's done in a very subtle, careful way, I really love that. The piece has a lot of it, very odd play of my visual...

Beth: Yeah, like your eye becomes adjusted to a kind of mechanism that's been built in the space and then the next thing that happens really forces you to have to rearrange the way you're looking at it. Sometimes there are these moments when their bodies are standing in space in a sort of profile, and then when they turn flat, the sheer dimension of their full "frontalness"-in that moment when those two face forward like what we're talking about-I keep feeling like the people themselves, their impact, can be really impressive to me sometimes. For me, a lot is set up in the initial images of the piece-in constructing flatness in the body. The only place where I feel like that really, really breaks down for me is when I watch Eleanor in this brief moment by herself. I feel like her body feels more three-dimensional.

Yasuko: For some reason, it's circular. I don't know why because just that tilt makes this circle...

Beth: It's true, because it's like a collapsing of a thing?

Yasuko: Suddenly all the corner gets round.

Beth: That movement that she does is really different from anything else that happens in the piece-it's deflation or collapsing. This piece has been such an awesome opportunity to study. Its formality is so simple that I can really look at it. And I can look at a moment like that and really try to understand what is making-why is it round like that? That's really fascinating.

Yasuko: Yeah, it makes you constantly wonder just as I [did] watching. [It] is such a great meditation. I can just see and taste, just be with it. And it's very rare nowadays.

Beth: I just spoke to my mom last night and she was asking about the piece. She was like 'Is the piece really slow, like all the other pieces?' Actually I feel like this piece is much more rapid than other pieces that I've made for some reason. Everyone is still moving relatively slow but its evolution-[it] changes much more. I was trying to explain that to her, but in explaining to her I thought to myself, she probably has a totally different perception of time in the work than I do. Although I feel most people are probably more related in their experience of watching things...

Yasuko: In daily life? Generally?

Beth: Okay, I don't feel comfortable backing that statement up, but then I try to understand when we both say that we have that experience when Eleanor does that thing that it comes around to like a circle- that seems to suggest something that's more.. universal, and less... Okay, maybe it's not universal, maybe it's circumstantial.

Photo: Jason Somma

Yasuko: But I wouldn't underestimate our capacity of silence, you know. I think that what we are surrounded by is overly stimulating, an overly sped up thing. But in general people are much more capable of slow [and] silence, because the heartbeat- we are made of that. It's kind of strange to go off the subject matter completely, [but] I was at the Dalai Lama speech. He was for four days in NY, so I went there, spent hours just watching the Dalai Lama talk, right? And he talks in Tibetan language and there were things that were really difficult, beyond my comprehension, so I just basically watched him move, just move. And people just watched the guy talk about emptiness at Radio City Hall.

Beth: That is so great and weird and beautiful. Everybody really wants to hear about emptiness.

Yasuko: Yeah, [the] experience of being empty, and that's what he's communicating. I just realized how much people are capable of that, New Yorkers. These massive amounts of people come for days for however many hours, and they watch and maybe take on this word emptiness and wow! It was like a performance. It can be a dance performance-to watch [a] person move and talk and have certain artistic message.

Beth: I wonder if the Dalai Lama thinks of himself as a performative entity.

Yasuko: [Laughs] I don't think so. I'll be attacked by Tibetan religion. Anyway, I was just going off the subject mater. People have a kind of elemental need to do that as much as they want to see sports or a rock concert.

Beth: The thing about my Mom saying that really got me thinking. I think of that conversation that I had with her and then I think of a conversation that I had with Isabel [Lewis] when she came in to watch the piece. She talked about how her experience of time is not related to a linear sense of time at all, and that [the piece] is making it so that how much time has passed feels sort of impossible to gauge.

Yasuko: But time isn't really... [It] has no slow or fast, it really doesn't.

Beth: Right, it's just the perception of time. [Laughs.] I'm going to think about that a lot-time has no slow or fast. It's true.

Yasuko: If time does not matter and that's agreed, even if it's ten hours or one minute. I saw Elevator Repair Service's *Gatz* about *The Great Gatsby*. It's seven hours long. It's long, but it needed to be like that. I'm constantly reminding myself when I was curating Mika [Kurosawa] and she wanted to do a piece that was ninety minutes plus *improv* so that would make it like hundred twenty minutes.

Beth: I feel like the New York audience would have freaked out.

Yasuko: And then when I said 'that's too long; I can't convince Deb to curate that,' she's 'what do you mean when you say it's too long?'

Beth: Good for her! That's amazing.

Yasuko: When I am talking to her on an artist level, I totally know what she is talking about. But as a curator, I just can't take a two hundred minutes performance to New York. I would just straight out say that.

Beth: That's inspiring. I mean, I haven't been able to make anything that is longer than twenty-five minutes. I really can't do it. And I mean, I'm going to have to eventually but...

Yasuko: But that is only the wall that you create really. Time is a very flexible thing.

Beth: That's a question I have as I think about this piece and as I think about work in the future-the kind of scale that a person sets up for themselves. In some ways I feel like I build chugging along, you know, chug, chug, but I also notice, something really does start to happen usually around twenty minutes or so where it just gets really difficult to take any more steps. I just really feel like I can't move forward anymore.

Yasuko: You know the writer-there's short-story writer and long-story writer.

Beth: I'm a short-story writer.

Yasuko: It could be. But sometimes short-story writers suddenly write long, long, long novels. But short story can be great also. Raymond Carver is a short-story writer and within those ten pages, he talks about the universe. One minute can be one year. But I wouldn't propose you think about making longer pieces as a destination. It can be shorter.

Beth: What would have happened if she would have just done that piece?

Yasuko: I do regret the times when I censor myself. I mean she has a lover who, it's really crazy, he hangs himself.

Beth: What!

Yasuko: He hangs himself everyday as a ritual and performance. So he started it really short because it's really dangerous. But now he find out how to do it-the right amount of weight and the right amount of muscular strength, and he can hang... He does it in his garden. He can do it for fifteen minutes.

Beth: How does he stop doing it?

Yasuko: I don't know, I've never seen him, but somehow his performance is called *Hanging Takuzo*. He does it in the garden in his house in Tokyo and he invites people to watch. And after the performance, he serves rice porridge.

Beth: Do you think Mika was appreciated by the New York [*Times* article] audience?

Yasuko: I hope so. For her to come back to New York was a big deal for me. Knowing her personally was the greatest affirmation-some artists on earth exist like that. She

performs a lot and she writes a lot and talks a lot and she's very active but it's not about going to BAM. In her mind exploring doesn't involve more people or a bigger theater or anything like that. She does what she wants in a really serious, rigorous way and she's on stage almost untouchable.

Beth: I remember the people that I was with that night-that her work was really hard for them, it was really challenging. The second piece was challenging for me because I felt like there was-I know that it was not at all casual-but there was like a casualness in the second half of the show, or just a lightness about the formatting of that second piece that made it hard for me to really feel the impact or appreciate it.

Yasuko: Casual? It was the treatment of the format?

Beth: Yeah. Something, I don't know. It becomes easier then to dismiss the gestures. I don't know what I mean. It felt like I could just turn my head away or something like that, but I didn't feel that way about the sound. I was really blown away by Hahn [Rowe]and Skank. The performance of them actually was kind of amazing because they both basically didn't move at all.

Yasuko: They just thought about stay there twenty minutes. They couldn't even look at the watch. They feel the twenty minutes and the last ten minutes they call it 'belly clock'. They listen to their body like 'what's twenty minutes?' and they start playing.

Beth: Did Jen [Monson] have a bike the first night?

Yasuko: No.

Beth: What did she have the first night?

Yasuko: Nothing.

Beth: So the first night all three of them were just standing there.

Yasuko: See that's an interesting comment because I always wonder why people move.

Beth: That is just the question, why are we moving?

Yasuko: Because the idea is you stand and not ever move out of the location, and the most interesting thing is to stand, to absolutely stand.

Photo: Jason Somma

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