

Artists Open Doors: Japan/UK

A report by Johannes Birringer

A four-day event at the Daiwa Japan House, Japan Foundation and The Place, London, UK. Thursday 25-Sunday 28 September 2008

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The event was announced as follows:

ResCen (Centre for Research into Creation in the Performing Arts at Middlesex University) is convening Artists Open Doors: Japan/UK to celebrate and investigate the state of the art - contemporary dance in Japan and England. The event includes performances, panel discussions, workshops and presentations that will stimulate debate on key issues. It is attended by artists, arts professionals, academics and students from the UK and Japan.

Leading Japanese artists Kentaro Ito, Un Yamada and Natsuko Tezuka join UK-based artists including Saiko Kino, Chisato Minamimura, Shobana Jeyasingh and Rosemary Lee, together with representatives from a wide range of British and Japanese venues, networks and agencies.

Artists Open Doors: Japan/UK is one of the largest gatherings of Japanese dance specialists ever held in the UK. The event is hosted by The Place, Japan Foundation and the Daiwa Foundation Japan House.

For full programme details see:

http://www.rescen.net/events/AoD08/AoD08_timetble.html

Thursday evening

18.30 – 20.45

New Ideas of the Dancing Body with Farooq Chaudhry (Producer Akram Khan Company); Kei Ito, Designer; Tokyo-based choreographer Un Yamada and Professor Christopher Bannerman

Daiwa Foundation Japan House

Friday

Keynotes: The state of the art

Professor Christopher Bannerman / Naomi Inata
Japan Foundation

Policy and Practice: how do those who work to extend the role of the arts perceive the policies that influence their work?

Panel: Shoji Shimomoto, Saori Mikami, Emma Gladstone, Chris Thomson, Richard Layzell

Plenary Discussion: Report back on discussions

17.00 – 19.00

DVD / Performance Presentations:

- DVD: "document" / Un Yamada
- European premiere Saburo Teshigawara dance video *Friction of Time – Perspective Study vol.2* 20min. Directed and edited by Saburo Teshigawara. Produced by KARAS, Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media
- Live performance: KENTARO!!

Saturday

Un Yamada: Workshop/Studio at Place Theatre

The Place

14.45– 16.00

Understandings of Contemporary: Do we share an understanding of the 'contemporary' in an increasingly globalised arts market, or is it specific to a cultural context?

Panel 1: Susan Melrose, Junko Takekawa, Alistair Spalding, Saiko Kino, Bin Umino

Panel 2

Contemporary Practice: How does the practice reflect the values of the artist and communicate with participants and audiences?

Panel: Naomi Inata, Un Yamada, Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, Shobana Jeyasingh, Graeme Miller

The Place

16.30 – 17.00

Plenary Discussion

Sunday

Community Arts Practice: How do we promote meaningful engagements for agencies, artists and participants?

Panel: Ken Bartlett, Norikazu Sato, Natsuko Tezuka, Rosemary Lee, Chisato Minamimura

Summary

Attending this event was a very good introduction to contemporary issues in performing arts and in cultural policies surrounding dance and performance and their sustainability as art forms, and instruments of cultural production in a larger socio-political sense (education, social therapy, community practices and development).

The event focused on contemporary dance in Japan and the UK within a framework for cross-cultural encounter; spearheaded and organized by RESCEN, the encounter was structured into a four day series of panels, discussions, workshops and performances/exhibitions. (RESCEN's funding was initially received from the Prime Minister's Initiative for research partnerships with Asia, and in addition received support from the Japan Foundation, Daiwa Japan House, and The Place).

On the opening night, the guests on the first panel and the audience were welcomed by Professor Christopher Bannerman ([Centre for Research into Creation in the Performing Arts at Middlesex University](#)) and the Vice-Chancellor of Middlesex University, and then a 2-hour symposium on ***New Ideas of the Dancing Body*** ensued, first introducing remarks by Akram Khan Company producer Farooq Chaudhry on the "cultural body" and the deliberate kind of "confusions" into hybrid dance forms/languages created in Khan's London-based dance troupe; this was followed by commentaries on design challenges for costumes or garment concepts with regard to different anatomies in Asian and European dance (Kei Ito), and by reflections on her choreographic practice and understanding of her own movement perceptions by Un Yamada.

Chaudhry began by suggesting that over the course of the 20th century and due to shifts in body image, cultural perceptions, life styles and training, bodies of dancers had also become more muscular and athletic; the impact of sexual liberation, the women's movement and the fitness/aerobics culture helped the produce a new athletic iconography on the dance stage. He then commented on Akram Khan's background as a Bangladeshi dancer trained in classical Kathak, a highly systematized and coded North Indian dance form, but growing up in England and absorbing the new languages of contemporary dance into his body. The emerging hybrid, for Khan, did not so much generate a "fusion" as provoke a "confused body," and in his artistic work with his company he tried to explore forming a language from this confusion, inviting other dancers to examine these confusions further. Chaudhry argued that what emerges is a particular, highly personal style of expression, and that the body generally cannot but always convey a story. In Khan's company (and his frequent collaborations, such as with Sylvie Guillem [in "Sacred Monsters"] and currently on stage in a duet with French actress Juliette Binoche ("in-i," with set designs by Anish Kapoor), the body is never considered to be "abstract" or generalized but always particular; the dancers joining the company (from many part of the world) are of course high trained (technically), but they are high trained individuals, and Khan's choreography often looks for ways to unlock dancers from the straitjacket of training and strive for those moments, when the body becomes vulnerable. Then it reveals something interior.

Chaudhry concluded by making some more free-flowing (and contested) claims about what culturally coded bodies look like or how their movement expressions are perceived (he referred to "national" ballet companies like ABT or Royal Ballet Co. or "national" physical style in France, Russia or China), and the idea of anatomical-cultural difference in dancers in East and West was somewhat echoed in the subsequent talk by London-based Japanese fashion and costume designer Kei Ito, who has worked with Akram Khan Company and other dancers outside of her work for the fashion industry. In her stage work, Ito said, she often cannot follow her own whim or her more conceptual ideas about shape and design, but needs to help the dancers to wear clothes that are like a second skin or help to expand movement.

Un Yamada then introduced her choreographic idea by presenting a series of unusual propositions and allusions, many of them related to her sense (sensing)

of her own body image and what it meant for her to "choreograph" with this personal body and its experience. She confessed, for example, that she draws inspiration from the "rheumatic" body and from injuries and surgeries she has had, as well as from observation of everyday life and, for example, of traffic accidents and such incidents. Finding inspiration through gesture and action, her movement experience began with early childhood memories of herself not "knowing" her body, not knowing where it begins and where it ends. As Yamada spoke about this, she demonstrated by making a gesture delimiting an invisible border that seemed to lie a few inches beyond the edge of her fingers and hand. She added that she often felt confused by what belonged to the body (joints, limbs, etc), and by those locations in the body where pain is experienced, so that she often would separate her "I" (self) from the pain that was experienced by a body not hers. In a recent dance she created, she explored performing "crying" with pure movement (of her face): she performed the tears without emotion but through using facial muscles. Yamada then added a provocative proposition regarding the perception of borders between one body and another, suggesting that it might be possible – when seeing two bodies in one space – to see these two bodies as one body. She added that in her current choreographic practice she always aims at performing in the Now, the present moment, and rather than leaving footprints of the body or following footprints, she wants to dance unbounded by the knowledge of the past but think through the time of the Now and its possibilities, for example exploring muscles or parts of the body (arms, legs, upper body) which may not necessarily be directly related or connected to each other. She ended by suggesting that her choreography is not smooth but full of cuts (relating this term of the cut back to her discussion of injuries and the body's overcoming of accidents) which may seem difficult to memorize in the performance of her pieces but constitute their particular nervous energy and inventiveness.

In the discussion that ended the first panel, several commentators picked up on the controversial subject of the "cultural body" and its signifiers, and Bannerman wondered whether artists today are not very self-consciously playing with identities rather than operating on more essentialist notions of identity politics as they were expounded in the 1980s during the rise of multi-culturalism (and political correctness). When Chaudhry was asked whether Akram Khan's choreographies in fact display a "confused body," Chaudhry responded that this concept was explored in the rehearsals but not necessarily in a finished work on stage (although some discussion ensued about the mixed reception of Khan's current collaboration with French actress Binoche; the actress had worked for some months to train herself a movement awareness not reliant on her usual actorly approach to moving "only" when there is a reason to move). In today's global context and within metropolitan contexts where there is a high rate of cultural diversity, such as in London, one expects to see hybridity as today's common language.

"Confusion" does not exist at a technological/analytical level either, Ghislaine Boddington argued, pointing to motion capture and the collection of data from a body's motion (with severely reduced perception markers, generally placed on the skeletal joints) and to the "recognition" of an individual's posture and movement based on just a few "markers." This led to a discussion about empathy and how one watches dance (observing pure movement?), and the idea was proposed that movement reception can be considered a universal mode of knowledge – shared between different cultures – as it is pre-verbal (pre-linguistic) to the extent that every viewer can experience motion kinetically inside their own bodies, drawing on muscular memory or (in neuroscientific terms) on the bodymind/brain's processing of sensory-motor stimuli. At the same time, fashion designer Kei Ito remarked that obviously she has been dealing with

different body sizes and shapes in her work as a costume designer, and she offered some viewpoints on the "Japanese" body, which had to do with measurements (shoulder blades line, or distance of nape of neck to waist, shorter torso to legs relation, etc) as well as differently placed centers of energy or gravity (the latter, for example, lies lower in Akram Khan and Japanese performers trained in Suzuki technique). Ito also said that she observed a tendency amongst contemporary dance companies in the UK to prefer minimalist design (often using plain materials and form fitting black/white tights or clear references to everyday high street fashion) rather than exploring a more shape-changing design.

While I might not be able to reflect the full range of stimulating ideas brought up in the first panel, as well as in some of the subsequent panels (I did not attend all of them), it could be argued that the opening panel also did not fully work as an exposition to the event, since the intellectual, artistic, cultural and research context(s) motivating the convening of this conference were not clearly spelled out. An unsuspecting audience would not have been able to gather why we were meeting. The selection of panelists on the first night (***New Ideas of the Dancing Body***) did not quite do justice to the thematic focus that appeared to emerge on the following days, and thus the opening night was hardly able to prepare the ground for the series of workshops or investigations.

Two days later, on Saturday (***Contemporary Practice***), the contradictions between artistic challenges (in dance and to our understanding of dance as choreographic practice) and economic or socio-cultural challenges (regarding the funding infrastructure and the market, community outreach policies and dance artists' particular need for subsidy) were still not resolved insofar as most of the discussions seemed directed at institutional frameworks – for producing dance or making dance more widely available and building audiences – rather than intrinsically artistic questions (what kind of dance is being created in the 21st Century, what new movements in dance practice and dance research do we observe in Japan and the UK, what kind of collaborations are emerging, etc). What do the "new ideas" refer to? Were they meant to invoke a non-aesthetic or non-artistic concept of dance that tended towards an expansion of the idea – to a more generalized cultural sense of "dancing" (social dance, clubhouse scene, youth dance, etc) or dance education? Or did the organisers wish the participants/audiences to entertain the question of new ideas of "contemporary practice" (dance and dancing) across the whole spectrum of developments, amongst artists, dance companies, networks, educators, schools, producers, theatres, festivals, community centers, agencies and cultural policy makers, etc?

When Shobana Jeyasingh spoke about her work as a choreographer and the values reflected by artistic practice, she seemed to suggest that it is very difficult to define what contemporary dance is. After briefly addressing her dance experience in London and the choreographic approaches she observed (ranging from high technical dance and a more affirmative, audience-pleasing aesthetic to radically personal styles, extreme expressionism and futuristic conceptions of a post-human body), she asked what kind of "society is created on stage." Her concerns then shifted to schools (and their often streamlined training paradigms) and funding bodies, and she professed to be opposed to current emphases on corporate marketing and branding; she warned that it is to be expected that the increasingly powerful imperatives of "selling" dance make it harder for the value-giving role to remain in the control of the creators.

Graeme Miller (who claimed not to belong to the community of dance practitioners) offered a lengthy, humorous but too distractingly meandering meditation on

originality and the “value” of repetition to wrap up a panel that began with Un Yamada presenting her principles of working both as an artist/choreographer and as a community workshop facilitator (at times involving young children, elderly people and non dancers). Yamada in fact argued that these practices present the two sides of her identity, that they related to each other like a side dish to the main staple, even if it wouldn’t be correct to suggest, she added, that her choreographic work draws on her workshop experiences. She continued using her food metaphor (of the traditional Japanese cuisine and its preferences) yet confessed she also liked junk food. Her lively presentation was preceded by Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto’s comments on art and education and Naomi Inata’s brief historical reflection on the emergence of “contemporary dance” in Japan.

Yoshimoto emphasized the new outreach initiatives for dance in the regions, noting that the rising appreciation of dance often happens through community workshops and people’s body exercises and physical experience of their own creativity, not through artistic stage performances. Alluding to Hijikata, the founder of butoh as a particular Japanese avant-garde artform and existential conception of the body in the 1960s, and to the impact of Pina Bausch’s first concert tour in Japan (1986) and the French nouvelle danse of the 80s, Inata argued that Japanese “contemporary dance” emerged as a fusion of performance art styles that resisted the traditional (imported) ballet and modern dance forms, with younger generations of artists (Teshigawara, Itoh, Kisanuki, Yamada, etc) developing distinct methods of training or drawing on diverse influences to form their own practice. Some artists also incorporated communal methods of living and working together (Inata referred to Min Tanaka’s farm as an example). One of Inata’s comments was particularly noteworthy; she referred to the importance of self-criticism in the development of artists, presumably, who want to raise their work and the artform to a higher level. This idea of self-criticism and a formal understanding on dance choreography was not discussed, unfortunately, although we returned to it later in the day during the Plenary Discussion, when Inata briefly responded by saying such self-criticism is reflected both inside the form and in the dancers’ decision “to step outside of dance”, for example in workshops dealing with children or with movement therapy. During the Saturday Plenary Discussion, one Japanese performance artist, who had devoted himself to the study of butoh dance in the 80s, told us that he left to join a butoh company and, he smiled, well, it meant going into the “underground” and losing the family support. “They cut all relations,” he said, “and disinherited me. I knew what I was doing.”

Then he added that the government has no interest in contemporary art, or rather, that policy making can mean that perhaps last years Minister of Transportation is appointed this year's Minister of Culture, and he wouldn't know an axe from a pottery wheel. We all know of cultural ministers posted by their parties into a role that is perhaps hard to fill for someone not acquainted bottom up with the arts. As several of the European participants commented, that is why in England or on the continent there have been councils for the arts, advising governments, established with experts and peer reviewers involved in the funding policies and award schemes. We tend to think that they know more intimately what is going on in the arts and the culture, and Shobana Jeyasingh added that public arts funding in Britain had been historically linked to a notion of social responsibility and accountability, explaining today’s emphasis on dance education, social health and audience development. What most panelists had also agreed on was the sense that the expert panels also of course determine policy directions and define criteria for what gets funded and what gets excluded.

On the practical artistic side, regarding performances, workshops or exhibitions, we were treated (Friday evening) to a 45-minute performance by Kentaro!!, a young dancer from Tokyo who recently established his own company, TOKYO ELECTROCK STAIRS after winning several awards as an emerging choreographer and soloist, and who fuses the skill and spirit of hiphop and the dance club scene with hybrid contemporary dance styles. His solo "Far away the one in the world, was a beautifully performed eclectic solo tour the force (to an equally eclectic mix of pop songs and soundtracks) displaying a distinctly individual style of expressive gesturally-based movement-story telling developed through a clearly structured choreography of (tanztheater-like) series of sketches. Prior to Kentaro!!'s performance, there was an exhibition of Un Yamada's portfolio of dances (on DVD), called "document", showing her latest work ("guesi") and previous choreographies ranging from "Wife" to "Gessouku." Furthermore, there was a premiere viewing of Saburo Teshigahara's new dance film "Friction of Time – Perspective Study Pt.2", a stunning digital video composition featuring Teshigahara and a female dancer, to music by Teshigahara and Rihoko Sato, and lighting by Teshigahara (produced in Japan at YCAM, Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media, 2008). This DVD was brought to the London event by Tokyo dance critic/curator Naomi Inata.

On Saturday afternoon, I attended the dance workshop by Un Yamada at The Place, and experienced a beautiful, sustained study of non verbal movement communication and contact expressive improvisation initiated through Yamada's exquisite physical interweaving of all the persons attending the workshop and taking part in the exploration. Yamada's energetic, humorous and inspirational facilitation of the workshop created a strong sense of sharing and mutual support in the exchanges between the Asian and European participants.

The panel discussion that concluded the Saturday workshop crystallized the general thematic focus of the conference, which was directed at a key question raised on Friday ("Dance for all?" – Contemporary dance is growing in both Japan and the UK – how do the agencies work with artists to reach the audiences"), bridging investigations into the notion of the "contemporary" with a deeper concern about cultural policies and dance agencies working (on behalf of governments, producers and funders/policy makers) towards outreach, community arts programs and dance education (building wider audiences).

It became apparent, from the choices of the invited speakers, that dance critics, producers, and curators were asked to talk about community dance (rather than new choreographers, stage dance or independent or avant-garde practices and developments), cultural policies, and efforts in Japan and the UK (here mostly addressing the programming of the various dance agencies) to build audiences and awareness for contemporary art and performance.

It was observed that unlike the Arts Council England with its programs and funding resources, apparently it is less easy for young artists in Japan to develop their own work and get sufficient funding to produce and show new or experimental work. Saori Mikami and Shoji Shimonoto pointed out that local communities have certain possibilities (because there are many big town hall theatres in Japan that were built for large-scale music concerts, theatre, etc.), but there is no concrete overall policy in place yet to help emerging artists except the ones now generated by new organizations such as JAFRA (Japan Foundation for Regional Arts Activities), established for the purpose of planning the development of a region, rich in local traditions and creativity, through the promotion of art and culture, for example by creating workshops and residencies for younger artists who win at an audition. Similarly, Saori Mikami described the efforts of Setagaya Public Theatre, where she works in the production department

and is in charge of supporting performances by emerging dance companies or inviting dance companies from abroad, for both workshops and performances. She also mentioned JCDN (a dance network), set up to make information about contemporary dance more widely available. The panel presenting these producers from Japan paired them with Chris Thomson (Education Director at Place Theatre) and Emma Gladstone (Producer at Sadlers' Wells), the latter speaking about her understanding of whether cultural policies influence what a professional dance venue such as Sadlers Wells produces. Gladstone pointed out that Sadlers Wells is not eligible to receive Arts Council funding and can base its commissions and its presenting choices on artistic decisions and the producer's perception of the excellence of ideas and artistic values found in contemporary choreographic practices. While Thomson admitted that one side of The Place Theatre's mission is clearly directed at building audiences and offering workshops, thus helping to provide access to dance guided by the spirit of some of the ACE funding guidelines (involving concern for communities, social health/social exclusion, youth dance, and strategic planning, e.g. Olympic games 2012), Gladstone frankly brushed off the need of her revenue-based operation (ticket sales, private/corporate donors) to adhere to agency policies, and she summed up her position by stating that "nobody makes art in response to arts council policy."

In the course of the weekend, it was of course most intriguing to compare the statements made by the Japanese visitors (whose lecture presentations were translated or shown bilingually on video projections) with those by the UK policy makers or producers who seemed to realize that the funding scenario as well as the "market" were perhaps better developed in Europe or offered artists and researchers more opportunities (Gladstone mentioned that Sadlers' Wells has its own research program, from which Wayne McGregor's Random Dance Co., for example, has benefitted, and also commissions new media/dance installation pieces from time to time), which may be the result of a longer history of publicly supported major art forms (music, performing arts, museums, libraries, etc) as well as a substantial network of independent arts organisations and experimental venues (with links to university performance, arts, and media departments).

The bridging of the cultural-political viewpoints and the artistic and pragmatic concerns of dance creation in the current climate of globalisation (which may not be completely noticeable or comparable in local or regional contexts "under development") thus provided a fruitful arena for exchange during this exciting weekend workshop. One of the most positive aspects of the gathering was the range of speakers invited from both Japan and the UK, and the opportunities afforded to the audience, especially on the weekend at Place Theatre, to see the choreographers (Un Yamada, Kentaro!!, Rosemary Lee) in action and to experience workshop situations or approaches that were addressed so often in the panel discussions, even if the audience in London could not be compared with the model of the "community dance workshop." The London audience was almost entirely academically-based, and given the apparent magnitude of the cross-cultural events, the numbers in attendance were surprisingly low (circa 30 or 40 on a given day). The different co-sponsors worked well together, and the young interpreters did an outstanding job in negotiating the different languages and sometimes the nuances of the speakers' comments. Un Yamada's physical workshop followed by her presentation at the Saturday panel was one of the highlights of the weekend, and I shall end with a description of it. The first hour of her physical work with us (contact improvisation and partnering) was completely silent. Then, after the ice was broken and everyone in the room had been "connected" with one another, the ensuing exercises and movement improvisations lifted our spirits, as Yamada facilitated the proceedings with her

fine sense of quirky humor and her laughter, making us play games and dance in close eye-contact and hands-contact with each other. I enjoyed it thoroughly, since it was not a workshop that promoted or advocated a technique or a signature, but allowed for open-ended sensory movement discovery and quite a bit of playfulness. In the talk later on, she referred to her workshop method, which begins with a lengthy greeting or "shaking hands" dance, as a progression from (1) the initial hand shake and whatever movement might emerge from it, to (2) creating a pipeline between herself and the individual participants (she said the participants are almost like plants, and her role is it to water them), to (3) making the pipeline transparent and thus moving beyond it appearing influenced by her (it is now no longer watered by her but all contribute to the growth), to (4) achieving the moment at which all movers feel they are unconsciously, phenomenologically and spontaneously dancing. Finally, all pragmatic methods depend on the participants' sharing and opening up, understanding the basic logic of exchange at work (in contact improvisation terms, the sharing and exchange of weight and energy means that if you support me with larger power, I will give back in equal terms, or if you apply a tiny little pressure, I respond in kind, or I can also alter the dynamics as long as I maintain awareness and respect of the partner). Umada summarized her philosophy by saying that each workshop is unique, that she does not want to rely on previous "data" but recognize that what happens in the present has been situated in the Now.

I missed the Friday morning sessions, and really would have liked to hear more, at that point, how the key speakers (Christopher Bannerman / Naomi Inata) perceive new dance in Britain and Japan, what examples they might give for the "contemporary", and what forms or kinds of works they think represent the "state of the art." But then again, perhaps it is good to have missed this session, since it is always problematic, I think, to speak on behalf of a whole "nation" or look at a contemporary artform produced (by a wide and diverse range of practitioners) in a particular country. The song "Gracias a la vida" is surely a major, important Spanish language/Latin folk song, written and first performed by Chilean singer Violeta Parra, yet it may tell us anything about Chile. Or is there an uncomfortable truth in Shobana Jeyasingh's proposition that one can look at dance, at how a particular choreography embeds human/gendered bodies in space and in contact with one another, to recognize something about the society in which we live?