A CONVERSATION BETWEEN PAUL CHAN AND HELEN MOLESWORTH

Paul Chan is an artist whose work takes place at the intersection of drawing, performance, and the moving image. Included in Dance/Draw is a "drawing" of a score for his series The 7 Eights. The piece is composed of torn bits of black paper randomly affixed to staff paper. The result is a kind of impossible image—a drawing, a score, a collage—a set of instructions for a performance we can barely imagine. I asked if he would be willing to think about why so many artists are currently interested in dance specifically and performance more generally. The following is an edited transcript of our conversation.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: First let me thank you for agreeing to have this conversation with me. As you know, I've been working on an exhibition titled *Dance/Draw*, which is a new kind of show for me, inasmuch as I've given myself a certain kind of permission to be intuitive. For instance, the show is not chronological . . .

PAUL CHAN: Where's the permission to be intuitive coming from?

HM: That's an interesting question. When I first started making exhibitions I had just come out of the academy. As a young curator I was interested in whether or not an exhibition could be a spatial argument. I was curious about whether you could take the essay form, which I think is art history's best form, and literally blow it up, spatialize it, and make it three-dimensional. I feel that I learned, through trial and error, how to do that. Now, as part of my own evolution as a thinker and exhibition maker, I'm more intrigued by contingency, or points of contact. I'm interested in horizontal forms of organization rather than vertical ones—which are really just metaphors about how we organize ourselves in relationship to knowledge. Partly my reliance on intuition is also because I am new to dance, so unlike my relation to the visual arts I do not have an elaborate critical discourse around dance.

PC: It's hard to have a critical discourse around dance.

HM: I agree. We are in the midst of this incredible explosion of interest in dance and performance. As an artist who's been involved in both performance and time-based media, you have an affiliation not with dance per se but with the performative in general. Do you think dance and performance are so popular right now because they lack a highly developed language of critique?

PC: I can't rightly say. I know my interest in dance increased because of my work on Sade, particularly the projection *Sade for Sade's Sake* [2009]. I needed dance to give the bodies I was animating and drawing both a new life and a new death. And the gestures, histories, and techniques of contemporary dance

became the way I could reimagine the things I was working on in a new light. Before that I would occasionally go to see dance and just enjoy it for what it was, which was to me quite baffling. For one reason or another, I'm attracted to things that I don't understand. For me, the gestures in good dance are so disassociated from the utility of the body that they hold a kind of sublime purposelessness, which is really the most clichéd version of talking about what is beautiful and sublime.

In a way it's like music: the more abstract it is, the more artificial it is, the more beautiful it can become. But dance is never untethered from the real. In a way, the more artificial it is, the more real it becomes, because it simply becomes what it is—as opposed to what it can do for others or how it fits into a greater frame of mind. Looking at dance was a way for me to find new liveliness and new deadliness in moving images.

HM: How do you square your sense of what you call sublime purposelessness with Judson Dance Theater's stated desire for this kind of pedestrian, task-based form of movement? For the dancers and choreographers associated with Judson it seems like what they wanted was not the sublimity or the purposelessness of the ballet, but rather the registration of an everyday body.

PC: It's a good question. Maybe we can approach this by way of asking what is real. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the real is that which resists representation in our mind. The real is the night of the world, as opposed to the symbolic (the realm of language and thought) and the imaginary (the realm of unconscious desires). The real is the fog that we can't think but can feel even though it is unknowable and unnamable. In many ways, I think the best artworks take us to that point, the point where we realize that what we're looking at is something real. For me, the Judson Dance Theater folks gave us a sense of reality that felt more real than reality itself.

By manifesting the everyday, those works didn't valorize pedestrian movements, but estranged them from daily experience so they illuminated both the gesture and the context in such a way that the work somehow put us in touch with a reality more real than the reality we live in. Because the reality we live in is so incredibly and stupidly unreal. It's abominable, frankly.

HM: It is abominable! I wonder if part of the current interest in dance by so many younger artists is due to a renewed interest in the nonverbal—this Lacanian fog outside of language. And is the nonverbal, in part, a reaction to the current mendacity and venality of language in the public sphere? You know, the low-rent quality of the public discourse...

PC: That is a nice phrase, low rent.

HM: Is it possible that the linguistic terms of conceptual art, the kind of affectless, bureaucratic, plainspoken language used by artists in the late 1960s and 1970s, can't function in the same way now because the language of our public discourse

has been so utterly perverted? If so, is dance a way to sidestep a problem of the linguistic and to get to some other version of what you are describing as a real that is more real than reality itself?

PC: Yes, I can go there with you. I think there is the general sense that the old adage "knowledge is power" is no longer compelling. In fact, I think many people's experience is that the more knowledge they have, the more powerless they feel, because they feel burdened by the interconnections that come from this globalization of everything around us. In any case, maybe the body is the way we return to first principles. I think when we've gone through a time in which social tumult seems to be the norm, artists, and perhaps others, return to a kind of first principles...

HM: What do you mean by first principles?

PC: I think when people feel like the landscape around them is falling apart they go back to what they are directly in touch with, like the body. So I think the rise of performance, in the U.S. anyway, comes in part from having gone through this incredibly tumultuous time.

HM: That's interesting. I wonder if there is a way to talk about dance—both its return and its emergence—as being related to the relatively new discourses and practices around transgender issues? Here the body is seen as utterly malleable, and gender and sex are imagined as almost infinitely fluid. At the same time, however, this period of extraordinary wealth production (for an increasingly fewer number of people) we are living through has been accompanied by a lot of really regressive ideas around gender. So if a return to our bodies is indeed a response to social tumult, a response to the military, economic, and political trauma of the past decade, if there is a return to first principles, then is that return bound up with desires to inhabit bodies that are imagined differently than the ones that we've either been given (the gendered ones that exist as if ready-made) or that we're asked to occupy?

PC: I think what we're calling "first principles" can be both productive and regressive. Progress can be regressive. When we return to first principles—to the body—we want to believe we're returning to something that is directly under our control. On the one hand this signals possibility, new steps, change, but on the other hand, the return can also be regressive—a rerun of old ways of thinking and of who we want to be.

HM: While organizing this show I watched several episodes of *Dancing with the Stars*. I watched it because this resurgent interest in dance is hardly limited to the art world. *Dancing with the Stars* is one of the most popular shows on television and, much to my dismay, the show is utterly regressive.

PC: What do you mean, Helen? You don't like sequins? [Laughter]

HM: If ever there was a show on television dedicated to maintaining strict gender distinctions, *Dancing with the Stars* is it.

PC: You are absolutely right. It reinforces everything we don't want in an open society. It's funny, but isn't *Dancing with the Stars* a kind of luxurious sublime? It also reminds me of *American Idol*. The singing on *Idol* and the dancing on *Stars* both strive to show that mechanical perfection is what makes expression artistic.

HM: Both shows are also bound up with a fantasy around the "amateur." We live in a time when the culture has conflated elitism and expertise, which has led to a dismissal of expertise in the name of a false populism. I'm thinking of a whole host of examples: politicians with no experience, Wikipedia, blogs, reality TV shows. There is a fetish around amateurism. I don't think this was the case in dance and drawing from the 1960s, despite artists' desires to democratize dance with gestures and movements that "anyone" could make. I am puzzled about how one might think of these two impulses—the avant garde's desire for "anyone can do it" and this potentially regressive amateur impulse—in tandem with one another.

PC: I think about it a little differently. For me it connects to the rise of the service economy. I think the valorization of the amateur you talk about is an outgrowth of the rising needs of the service economy to squeeze more labor out of the workforce in the form of service in all strata of society. It's no secret that the reason why reality-based shows are so dominant on television is because they are cheaper to produce. So, production is increasingly dependent on fetishizing performance as a kind of public service.

When you talk about the explosion of performance in the art world I tend to see it in relation to relational aesthetics of the 1990s. Those works emerged within a discourse about collaboration, sociality, and the performative. But relational aesthetics also coincided with the expansion of globalization and the rise of the service economy in the U. S. and elsewhere—a rise that changed the fundamental nature of the U. S. economy, starting in the late 1970s, from one about manufacturing things and materials to one that became increasingly dependent on servicing people for social and economic growth. There was a need to imagine what that labor shift looked like. We needed to re-describe what service means in an age where the differences between public and private were eroding, and work began to look more and more like never-ending relationships. So for me relational aesthetics emerged when we needed a new way of thinking about what a service economy would be like. And the kind of the celebration of the amateur that you see in *Dancing with the Stars* and *American Idol* is connected to what it means to have a world in which we service—or perform for—one another as the main economic mode of existence.

HM: Do you think the proximity of relational aesthetics and the service economy is also connected to the current vogue for performance in museums? I'm thinking about the Marina Abramović exhibition and the Trisha Brown performances in the atrium of MoMA, for instance. Did the relational aesthetics group break open our expectations of what we could do and see in the museum, as part of a new and improved service economy? And subsequently, is this return to dance and performance part of a desire to expand upon that, to articulate its prehistory?

PC: That's a good question. I can only speculate, and my speculation comes less from my focus on how relational aesthetics moved within the contemporary art world and more from how I think about the shift from a manufacturing to a service economy. Because of that shift we had to reconsider how we deal with our bodies and our time. I think our interest in performance and dance is connected to that shift.

HM: You talked earlier about becoming interested in dance in part as a way to imagine new ways of thinking about the body for your Sade project. One of the phrases that appears frequently in the literature around dance is that the body produces its own form of knowledge. When you hear a phrase like that what does it mean to you?

PC: I think specifically of aches and pains. I think about Adorno's idea that knowledge can't really know suffering; and that's why we look to art. I don't think it means that art is simply suffering or that it's merely an expression of suffering. What Adorno's saying is, when we get to know something we have made it understandable and in understanding it we take the edge off of it, so to speak. So if dance produces its own knowledge, then that knowledge must be something knowledge itself can't comprehend. For Adorno, the thing that reason cannot truly comprehend is suffering, the way our bodies bend in pain and agony.

HM: That's interesting in terms of the temporality of dance. One of the things that I love about dance is how impossible it is to write about it, because it doesn't exist; it's gone the minute it happens. . .

PC: That's not true! [Laughter] You're playing this up just a bit.

HM: Well, maybe. But I do think there is a quality of looking and remembering that dance asks of its audience. My memory is very well trained for the recall of images, but when I try to remember a dance I feel, to paraphrase Yvonne Rainer, that my mind is a muscle, and that it's weak! I'm using a part of my mind that is not used very often and, as a consequence, it is feeble in relationship to the task of memory. This is interesting to me in relation to how many younger artists are interested in the history of Judson Church, and then use that history to explore certain fragile areas of cultural memory, memories that contain within them some form of suffering and/or loss. I'm thinking about Emily Roysdon's interest in the abandoned piers of Manhattan vis-à-vis queer life pre-AIDS, or Rashaad Newsome's attempt to create a lexicon around vogueing in order to better preserve it, or Igor Grubić's use of dance to memorialize the first gay rights marches in Serbia. In your work—the work on Sade or the ~~*Light*~~ series—do you think about the role of time and movement in relationship to something as big and amorphous as memory?

PC: I'm going to tell you a story. This past weekend I went with a friend to see Douglas Dunn at Danspace in New York. And I went because this friend of mine has become interested in seeing more dance, and the reason is because her body is falling apart. She recently learned that she has cancer. She's been in chemotherapy for three months and it's not working and now she's on this experimental

treatment and it seems to be working. She feels better—good enough that she can go out. Now, because of this ongoing experience she realizes that she'd better do the things that give her pleasure, and one of these things is dance. So we're watching the performance where this older man (Douglas Dunn is in his seventies) tries to mimic younger dancers on the floor, awkwardly and without much luck. And my friend starts quietly and unreservedly to cry.

I never asked her why she cried. But my guess is that the dance triggered a feeling in her about what it means to have a body and how it can fall apart—how it can all go wrong and how we still have to go on. I think that feeling stands in for remembering, for recalling images or individual moves and gestures. I think the new knowledge that we're talking about is this interrelationship between what we see, what we feel, and how this feeling helps us remember the body that we have. With the ~~Lights~~ and the other projections, I don't care if you remember what I draw or how it is animated or even what it looks like. I only care about how once you see it, once you're exposed to it, that that exposure reminds you of the time and the body that you have in the space where you were exposed. My hope is that the experience gives people more of a sense of what it means to be here.

HM: Your story reminds me that this exhibition began with my fascination with Trisha Brown's drawings, which she makes either using her whole body or just her feet. These drawings are poignant because she is no longer capable of performing in the same manner because her body is aging. On the one hand, you can see this as a kind of no-nonsense practical solution to a physical problem, but on the other hand, you can see it in relationship to what you are suggesting, which is that the body in its breaking down, the body in its failure, the body in relationship to some kind of traumatic encounter with another or society or itself produces a kind of awareness, and that dance may be the language—the only language we have that is not medicalized or pathologized—for that awareness, the awareness of all of that pain.

PC: Yes, yes. I agree, not pathological, not medical, not mechanical; and not holistic or spiritual either.

HM: What do you mean by not holistic?

PC: It could seem that we're saying that dance makes us feel more whole, that somehow in being enriched by the exposure to dance, we feel like we are more of a whole person. People could think that we feel "wholer," and maybe even "holier," because with dance we have more of a connection to our body. But for me that's not it. I think dance is an acknowledgment of how incomplete and how un-whole we are and that we have to go on anyway. When you talk about Trisha Brown drawing because of a breakdown in her body, the word "breakdown" is not quite right. To me, it's just the usual wear and tear of what it means to be alive—going on anyway is a kind of dance wisdom, I suppose, and I think it's a wisdom that warns against the idea that we can ever be whole.

HM: That's very helpful to me. Much of the dance I find most interesting often involves points of contact between people, dances within which the body is not imagined as autonomous. I'm thinking of a wonderful program of Trisha Brown pieces that were performed at MoMA a few months ago. In *Scallops*, 1973, the dancers walk in a suite of perpendicular lines, almost like they are making a methodical drawing in space, but they can only walk if they're connected to another person. Then again in *Sticks*, 1973, there were three or four dancers, and each was carrying a very long and very thin pole. The object of the game was that while they moved individually the ends of their two poles had to stay touching. This was impossible, of course, because the circumference of the pole appeared to be no more than an inch. But ironically the futility of this tactile exercise produced a very affective elaboration on the "dumb" fact that my body doesn't exist in a vacuum; it only exists in a profound relation to other bodies. What struck me that afternoon in MoMA is that paintings, however complicated they are, and many of them are very complicated, always imagine some version of autonomy, either in their making, their viewing, or in their mere existence, while dance always requires an other; it begins with the notion that there is no such thing as autonomy. This rhymes for me with your sense of dance as a registration of how incomplete we are.

PC: This connects back to *Dancing with the Stars* and *American Idol*, because those shows believe in the sublime, in mastery, as a form of completeness. They offer a vision of performance as an autonomous force that wells up and completes itself—from the vibrato to the gendered dance swagger. They stage a desire for perfection. But this image or version of perfection is grotesque. I think avant-garde dance, and perhaps any art that is in truth art, sees a challenge in not being grotesque, and one way to do this is to not make a fetish out of completeness.

HM: I want to ask you just one more question. You are someone who draws and I think of you as someone who has participated in both the expanded field of drawing (through your animation pieces) and dance (through the way the figures move in your animations, but also through your involvement with theater and performance more generally). What is the relationship between dance and drawing for you?

PC: I go back to what you said about dance producing another kind of knowledge. Drawing is not hard for me. I have a piece of paper, I have my hand, and then I either draw with scraps of paper or pen or pencil. Whatever I use, it takes me out of mind in a way that allows me to think other thoughts. I liken drawing to flying because when I fly, I don't want to think about flying, I want to do something else. And so when I draw, I may be physically handling something, but my mind is wandering, my mind is gone and that kind of time is really precious to me because if I didn't have it, I would simply be here and that would be miserable. So drawing affords that kind of time in which I'm engaged physically, but I am elsewhere, and this kind of tension is important to me because it's when I'm most productive.

HM: So drawing for you is not a form of presentness? You're describing a split modality: your hands are doing one thing, your brain is doing another thing, and that bifurcation allows you to then split from whatever space-time continuum you're in. Is that right?

PC: I think it gives me another sense of what presentness can be. T. S. Eliot wrote, "A lifetime burning in every moment." If he's right, that means that even when you are present you may not be here. What I mean is that how we arrive at here is by way of a past that always shapes what here actually is for us. The idea of what it means to be present—whether in a conversation, or with a loved one—is so complex and multivalent. When I'm drawing, I'm physically engaged but my mind can wander and not focus on that engagement. I find the space in between those two things feels more present than if I were focusing directly on what I was doing. And how many times have we been at dinners or parties or on the street talking to someone, and you realize that they're not here. They. Are. Just. Not. Here. So the question is, What does it mean to be here? Maybe dance is an attempt to remind us of how it feels to be here.

HM: One of the things I have noticed as a curator is that a lot of the people who come to the museum really want something and they're never quite sure if they're getting the thing they want. Do they want the thing in front of them, or is the thing they want in the next room? Or is it in the café, or the bookstore? One of the things I vainly hope is that the display of dance in the exhibition might slow the public down, that maybe the experience of that physicality will allow them to feel like they are "simply" here.

PC: To make them feel like they are here. I think that's the perfect phrase for it.

HM: That is partly what the exhibition is striving for, an audience member who stays for an hour rather than twenty minutes.

PC: Yeah, and even if they only stay for twenty minutes then make it feel as if those twenty minutes last a lifetime. Because time is so elastic for us. Even five minutes with someone, or with a work of art, can feel like a lifetime. I think the challenge with your exhibition, with dance, with art, is to make time as elastic as possible, not to feel the dead time of Chronos, but the live time of Kairos.

HM: That's lovely. That's a great place to stop. Thank you, Paul.