

In Conversations

Arco Renz &
Tang Fu Kuen

Tang Fu Kuen: Arco, you were born German—it would be interesting to hear how you first encountered Asia during your time of growing up in Europe? What kinds of fascination or curiosities did you have?

Arco Renz: There is no specific event that marked my affinity with Asia. Rather, it was an opening that existed before I was aware of it. It became physical when I encountered Chinese martial arts in early 90's Paris. A friend told me about a practice called Qi Gong and Tai Ji Quan which I did not know then. Through this practice, I gradually connected to other movement practices from Asia.

In tandem, curious about traditional Asian performing arts, I was able, in Paris, to watch Noh theatre, Kathakali theatre and various Indian dance forms, and Chinese opera. What fascinated me, amongst other things, was that the masters were not young—they were above 50 years old. In the European dance stereotype of the "ballet cult of youth," a dancer should be athletic, young and beautiful. Traditional Asian performing arts have a very opposite notion of what is "valuable." Hence I started investigating: why is this and where does this come from? Culturally and physically, what techniques enable a body in its 50s to be at the peak of performativity and expression? This investigation obliged me to read and to practice beyond the visible surface of movement. It obliged me to understand and to work with internal principles of movement, that exist before formal expression. The image (of a movement, of a body) became the subject matter of inquiry. Subsequently, this has become crucial for my approach to choreography.

What then propelled you to venture beyond Europe after your graduation? What revelations and physical challenges unfolded that led you to embracing a different semantic of choreo-history?

I was in the first cohort of P.A.R.T.S when the Brussels-based school started its trial. The curriculum was remote from anything Asian as it focused on Anna Teresa de Keersmaecker's work (and Flemish dance); American

postmodern dance (Trisha Brown, Merce Cunningham, William Forsythe) and German Tanztheater (Pina Bausch).

In parallel, however, I found time to do workshops back in Paris with an association related to Théâtre du Soleil that regularly organized intensive workshops with international dance and theatre masters, with a certain focus on Asia. The workshops in Chinese opera "Kunqu" with Pei Yan Ling and in Kathakali with Sadanand Balakrishnan were a formative initiation to a different physicality and embodiment from my education in Paris, Berlin and Brussels. I later met theatre director Robert Wilson, also during my time in P.A.R.T.S, with whom I worked in an opera, Luigi Nono's *Prometeo*, in Brussels in 1997. I followed Wilson to New York to continue working and touring with him. One project, *Hot Water*, toured Singapore in 2000; during then I made several encounters which initiated my practical work in Asia. This is how I began my approach: it is about the personal encounter.

In Asia, I have made encounters that have been inspiring and revealing to me, on both professional and private levels, and I simply follow these encounters intuitively and conceive my projects this way. I do not really have an agenda about Asia—it is instructive for me not to think about East and West, Asia and Europe, and that we are different, for the differences are inherent anyway. It is when we get closer to each other



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and take time to look and listen, that we realize we share fundamental experiences.

One instance, banal but central, is that we all experience time passing, albeit in different ways. We all experience breathing, again in different ways. And we all experience verticality, physically speaking, a resistance to gravity. Around these basic parameters, I then structure the work that I do with performers in Asia as well as in Europe. A work that intends to bring forth and share experiences through the body in movement. I do not work differently in Europe than in Asia—it is the same approach I have come to call (because at some point it needed a name): “abstract dramaturgy.”

The use of simple parameters—such as time, space and physical bodily energy—in order to write an experience or story which is not narrative but abstract. Yet it is not entirely abstract because the human body is concrete. The architecture of the body, like actors, articulate a script of affects and perceptions. In between all these elements lies a tension which I seek to explore. As these parameters are fundamental, whether we are European or Asian, or from any part of the world, we can relate to them in some ways.

Your current work is a solo piece. The act of making a solo—what does it mean to you? What is at stake?

My first solo, *States*, marked the beginning of my trajectory with Kobalt Works in 2001. In 2010, I made a second solo called *1001*. I am now preparing a third solo titled *EAST*.

Solo work is always a confrontation with oneself. From 2001 to 2015, a span of nearly 15 years, my body has changed, the world has changed, I have changed. But the principle of putting oneself against oneself remains the same. In a way, all the work I have done, including group works, are conceived as solos. The starting point is the individual human being, no matter from Asia or Europe, in groups or alone. The question is about individual freedom in relation to one’s environment, in relation to surrounding structures and conditions, to people within the milieu, and how to position oneself in relation to that complex.

In *EAST*, what are some of your concerns since 2010, aggregating towards this new creation, that you are seeking to address or resolve?

Since 2010, I have worked with different groups of performers in various Asian countries. In *Crack*, I collaborated with classical Khmer dancers associated with Amrita Performing Arts. In *Hanoi Stardust*, I worked with the Vietnam National Ballet, an independent contemporary dancer and a hip-hop dancer. In *Coke*, I worked with members of a diverse ensemble, who are professionally associated with the entertainment

industry in Manila, to examine entertainment as a means of survival (or survival as a means of entertainment). In Sumatra, Indonesia, I made a group creation with graduate students to explore their relationship to the heritage of Pencak Silat martial arts.

There are also smaller works, like *Alpha* with Eisa Jocson and Daniel Kok, a pole dance duet with these two fantastic performers. In *solid.states*, I collaborated with Eko Supriyanto and Melanie Lane, exploring their relationship to traditional Javanese culture, with Eko being a classically-trained Javanese dancer and Melanie being half-Javanese, raised in Australia.

In all these works made in the last 5 years, I have been working with performers from Asia in the capacity as a choreographer. Such a situation can be quite tricky, and what has been at stake for me in these projects is to challenge the stereotype of a Western choreographer becoming a post-colonialist when working in Asia. I have sought to assign myself to a transparent role—almost like a catalyzer rather than a choreographer—to create certain frameworks and conditions for the experiences to occur, always starting with a blank page, never knowing exactly what I want or with any projection how the performance would look. In some cases, we would start a process without deciding if the consequence would be a performance. In the Philippines, for instance, things unfolded organically and took a good turn, so we decided to make a performance.

I developed many strategies—both choreographic and logistical—to sustain a transparent framework that allows a third space to exist between all the participants: the performers, the creation team, myself. A third space in which we operate with parameters that we are all familiar with, such as breathing and dealing with time. As far as possible, within the rehearsal frame of the third space, we occupy the same page. This pivotal aspect is what I am now exploring unto myself in the solo *EAST*.

Another key aspect in this body of works is the negotiation with existing movement or performance languages. This negotiation process transpires on a very core level and I try to work as internally as possible, rather than working on the language itself, so that the transformation of the language is a precipitation of an internal process stemming from breathing.

The choreographic methodologies that you have elaborated were built with and from the contingencies of context. In *EAST*, what kinds of historical research and question underpin your process? At what stage are you now in extracting and reframing the data towards an autonomous grammar?

I have delved into the details above because these are processes that I now transpose from my oeuvre in the past five years into my solo process. In very simple words, what I went through from the outside as a choreographer with dancers that I worked with, I am now going through physically as a dancer myself in *EAST*.

The research began from the word "orientalism," because it was a lexicon I did not understand. When the desire arose to create a solo by translating the process of ensemble works to the context of my own body and capacities as a performer, I struggled with how to start. I began with a small research on the representation of Asia in the history of performing arts in the West and I came across, of course, the Denishawn Company by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, the famous pioneers of Western modern dance, known for their orientalist choreographies at the dawn of the 20th century. I tried to understand where the fascination for Asia came from at that time, especially for Ruth St. Denis herself. And her orientalist repertory became one of the starting points of *EAST*.

I quickly discovered that "image representation" lies at the heart of Ruth St. Denis' Orientalia. Often choreographically simple, with beautiful costumes, her dances are sometimes referred by herself as "sculptural dances." This plasticity of the "image" is very different from the way I work, for I am interested in where the image comes from and what constitutes the image. The image not as finality but as the expression or precipitation of what goes on inside of the image: the process that precedes the image.

Thus I gave up the re-enactment of Ruth St. Denis' choreographies and instead turned my attention to her working process which comprised of collecting travel photos of Asian performing arts as the inspiration for her early choreography hitherto largely imagined, since she had never physically travelled to Asia. Her calling to become a dancer, for instance, was when she found the image of the Egyptian goddess Isis on a cigarette box in America, and that started her creations inspired by goddesses and Asian legends, et al.

I started selecting and composing my own images from the archives available today, primarily located in the internet. Out of this overdose of images, I chose a number of physical images to form the basis of my choreography, with which I negotiate with different physical tools. By "negotiate," I mean I appropriate them and possess them through creating an experience that is physically real for me. So I am not just becoming an image that I am actually not. This negotiation oscillates between interiority and exteriority, an internal experience and its expressiveness as an image, and how far these two connect or disconnect.

Another strand in *EAST* involves distilling physical

principles before the images exist. I revisited martial arts techniques during a residency in Hong Kong under master Lee Kong in the "white crane" kung fu style. He said: "In martial arts, when you hit, you do not actually hit with your arm. The moment of hitting, of impact, is actually a full body vibration in zero seconds." All martial arts are about vibrations'. That instantly clicked in me—it suddenly created a link and meaning to all the physical practices I have been engaging in. The phenomenon of vibration and the vibrating in different frequencies is a bedrock not only to Asian movement techniques, but also to a worldview. Because vibration is movement, vibration is transformation, vibration is constant movement, and the vibration frequency is constantly changing.

The body in vibration hence signifies a changing world that does not stop. It is a dynamic principle of movement and sensing that exists, even if you do not see it. It epitomizes vitalism, force and flow that connect people beyond received stereotypical cultural distinctions.

Another crucial element is the collaboration with light designer "Kinsei" Fujimoto Takayuki, the composers Phu Pham and Marc Appart, costume designer Jean-Paul Lespagnard and stage designer Laurence Malstaf. Set, music, light, costumes and dance are interweaving layers of language, creating an abstract dramaturgy of interactions and change.

Lawrence Malstaf, for example, is creating an installation of inflatable spheres that I interact with. These spheres are outside of me, forming a kinaesthetic relationship between myself as the performer and their physical manifestation. *EAST* is therefore not wholly a solo because I am never alone. These spheres represent many meanings but I prefer not to prescribe them in too many words. They are not me and they are there. That is very important. They are filled with air, they move through the air just like me and you.