

MATERIALS

Dance Machine

Reflections on the Installation *Dance Machine*, by Lee Su-Feh

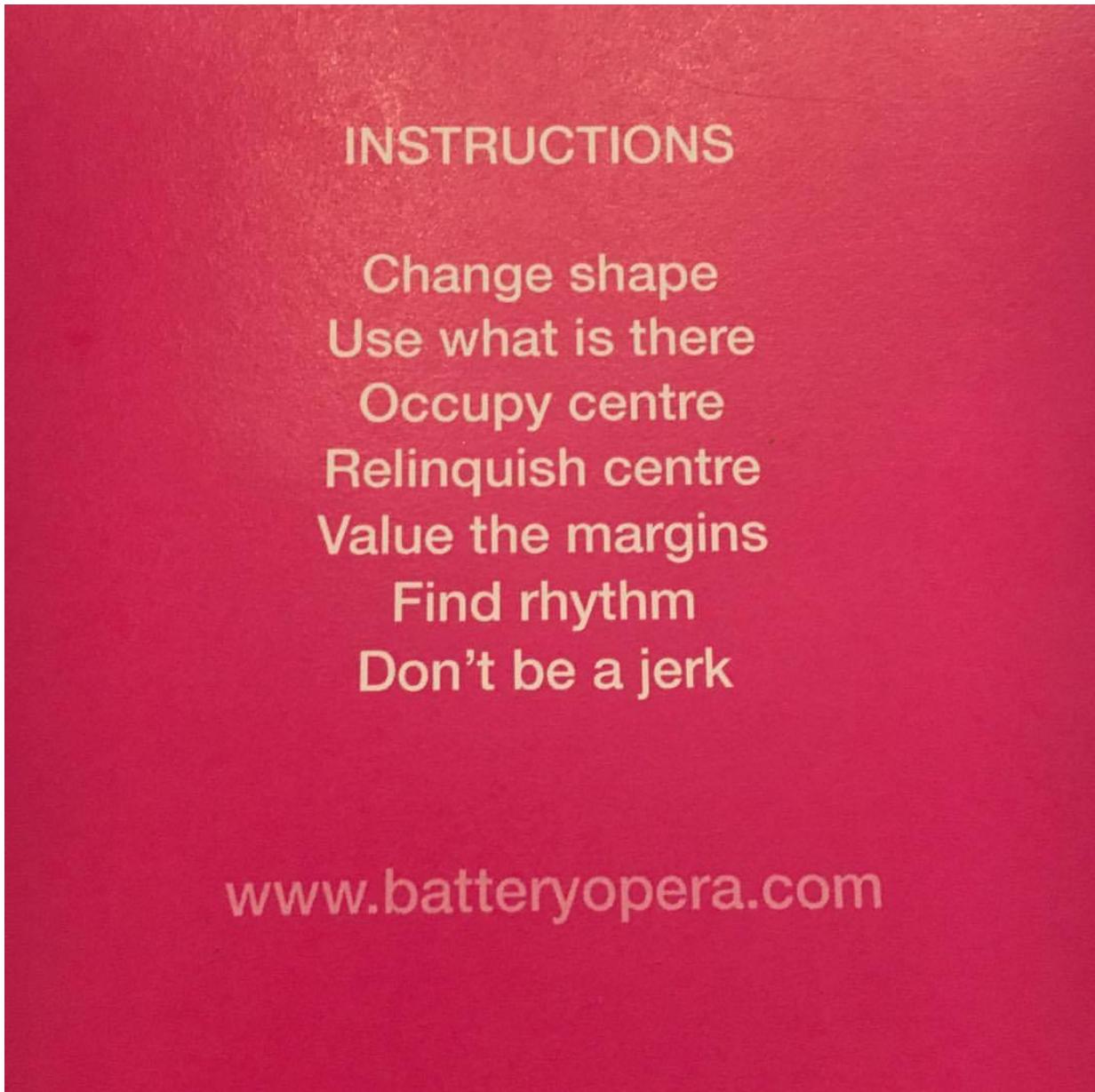
Daisy Thompson



Lee Su-Feh and Justine A. Chambers. Photo: Trung Dung Nguyen, courtesy of Festival Trans-Amériques

Produced by battery opera performance
Co-producer: Festival Trans-Amériques
Conceived by Lee Su-Feh
Designed by Jesse Garlick
Assisted by Justine Chambers
Guest artists: TBA according to site and context

Daisy Thompson trained in dance at The Laban Centre, London. She holds an MFA in interdisciplinary studies from Simon Fraser University, where she is currently pursuing her PhD in the School for the Contemporary Arts.



Dance Machine Instructions

Lee Su-Feh's Project Description

Dance Machine began in 2009 as an exchange, a conversation between myself and Paris-based designer Alexandra Bertaut, about the energetic relationship between the body, objects and matter. It has evolved, through a long period of wide-ranging research into the body and its relationship to objects and machines, into an exploration on ceremony and what that might entail.

It is also part of a larger consideration on place and belonging. I was born in Malaysia, a former British colony with a complicated set of socio-political realities. When I immigrated to Canada in 1988, these complexities were then juxtaposed onto the complexity of Canada, with its history of settler-colonial oppression, its history of displacement of indigenous peoples from their land and culture. As an immigrant, I confront and grapple with my role in the settler-colonial machine. In my recent works, my focus has simply been: how to acknowledge who we are and where we are -

Thompson

how to embed this acknowledgement in all the works in a way that is unique and coherent to each work, so that this acknowledgement becomes part of the protocol of making work here in the Americas. This continues to be my concern with Dance Machine, and I am interested in inviting others—artists and the public—into a dialogue about how the history in our bodies encounter the history of where we are.

Dance Machine posits dance-making as a communal process: dancing as an act of being together - woven into the fabric of labour, rest and play. It also puts into question the notion of authorship and creative territory: asking when a work stops being mine and becomes another's. It invites others - artists and public alike - into a conversation about what dance is, what dance can be and what dance can speak to. It invites them into a conversation around issues that concern me – philosophically, politically and aesthetically.

Dance Machine is an attempt at expressing my body through the construction of a set/ costume rather than through an orthodox “dance”-making i.e. making gesture and movement. It remains “choreography” because it deals with time, space and the human body – both mine, and others. As an extension of myself, it must contain principles that matter to me and yet must be open to ideas of others.

www.batteryopera.com



Natalie TY Gan, Justine A. Chambers, and public. Photo: Trung Dung Nguyen, courtesy of Festival Trans-Amériques

Daisy Thompson:

I acted as “host” within the *Dance Machine* in 2018 for the iteration presented at the Anvil Centre, New Westminster, British Columbia. My experience within the process raised many embodied

questions related to both my personal life and my practical and theoretical research in dance. The work, having no front or back, is to be encountered from all sides; one can play within or quietly observe from the peripheries. My day-to-day sense of time changed, slowed down. It took a while for the forward-moving logics of political and economic progress ingrained in my body to subside. The feeling of becoming entangled in the multidirectional pathways became a departure point from which to question the entangled connections of my body to land, technologies, disciplines, and institutions. During my three days within the *Dance Machine*, I experienced and witnessed how the structure foregrounded spaces of being together, where creative and collaborative practices of movement re-invested in the individual and collective mobile body.

Dear Su-Feh,

New Westminster. On our last day with the Machine, I got hives. I took this to be an initiation, a rite of passage. It was as if the rashes were a sign that I had finally spent enough time in the Machine. The cedar was absorbing into my pores, shifting my chemistry and turning my skin erratic blotches of red. I welcomed it. The tops of my hands and feet felt hot with sparks.

We thought the load-in and construction of the Machine would be more smooth and manageable at home. It wasn't. It was harrowing for you, enough that it kept you up at night. I do believe it takes an incredible amount out of you every time, but I've seen that it always gives back. At least for a moment (how deep is your love how deep is your love), or two, or three.

I had one of those moments in New West. For a first and a last time, the Machine gifted me something that I think it had been offering the public all along; something I hadn't been ready to receive until I hung up my host hat for the last time at the Anvil.

In New West, I felt big. I felt roots and wings. Each three hour shift flew by.

Montreal. Festival Trans-Amériques. I felt so inadequate surrounded by established artists so damn steadfast in their resolve. Artists with a distinct and distinguishing point of view from where they were standing, and they were ready to argue for it. I can hear it right now in my head— in Zab's assertions and in the palms of her feet, in Peter's low mutter, in Bryan's stories, in Justin's wise exhaustion. What did I have?... A clarity of some impulses, a desire to play and meet the unknown, and my overwhelming desire to be loved by you. Such an overwhelming want to do good for you.

When we listened to George Wahiakeron Gilbert of the Mohawk Nation speak, and you invited us to consider how the history of the land we are on informs our relationship to the Machine... I listened to George's words, foolishly hoping that they would shift me— the ignorant, colonized settler into someone who knows how to take up space without wrecking it. I recorded pieces of his stories on my cell phone. A year later I am still struck by the quality of his voice, and how one's last name can draw maps.

Later, when we went around the circle introducing ourselves and what is important to us, I had such a profound aversion to speaking. I wanted permission to not know, to not define, and to be an observer, a listener, to be failing. I remember that I spoke to my concerns about being too good a host, and that it is often a concern for me, as a Chinese woman, as a model minority, that my hospitality leads to my annihilation. How might I balance this fear with the urgent need for all settlers to give space, and make space, and learn from those who know and hear the land? This kept me thick in the sludge of discomfort the entire time.

There was an important moment where the group had to unpack "white spaces" together.

In Montreal, we learned to wait and let the Machine breathe. Each four hour shift felt like a lifetime. In Montreal, I found that I couldn't share secrets with the Machine while you were in the room.

Ottawa. The room had fuzzy red carpet. It had pentagons. We could put all of our weight on the bamboo. The acoustics felt dense. Where there was no carpet, the floor was wooden. In some ways, it seemed like the space was made for the Machine, with a pentagonal skylight directly above her copper disk. This meant daylight would dominate at the beginning of our shifts, and then cross-fade with the more dramatic lighting in the evening.

It was the first time I ever took part in a smudging and I was terrified. I watched completely mesmerized as each person in the circle found their own ritual of receiving the smoke— washing the face, soothing the eyes, painting the arms, inhaling the smoke through the skin.

Our Haudenosaunee Elder was named Claudette Commanda. So much spirit and humour. She sat in the Machine with us on a plush green chair. I remember the profound connection made between Claudette and Christine Friday. She spoke a great deal about bears, about their power to heal, their wisdom and knowledges. I loved this. I'm always talking about bears. She spoke to living in a good way, in an honourable way. She talked about ecosystems of diversity and how each animal brings their own gift. Each of us has a gift; if you are an artist, that is your gift to give. To question your gift, to recoil from it, is to deny your responsibility to give that gift to the world. We are all needed, and we need one another. This was a moving and heart-breaking notion as I began to think softly of all the ways that our societies are sick and how we break our own. The lives valued less, the missing, the murdered, the forgotten.

I felt like I knew what it meant to be hosting, by this point. By then it was much easier to wait. I felt like I had the muscle well-flexed. The smaller room made it feel easier to dance with chaos. Ottawa was the first time that Su-Feh expressed there is space for rage. We learned how to give no fucks about the people who weren't worth it. We learned our own boundaries. We learned that caretaking involves disowning guests.

My sister came again and she sat in the corner.

I wear the same clothes often when I am in the Machine.

The Machine is a mirror to oneself. It is a mirror, conveying sonic consequence, spatial consequence, and consequence to others in the Machine. We've spoken a lot about that evening. About violence. Why we don't police the Machine, because we want to encourage the body/fascia/frequency of the Machine to affect the bodies it meets. To organize, to choreograph.

I brought one of the men, one of the inebriated three going hard at the yanking of counterweights in order to slam the bamboo against the disk— I invited him to join me inside for a moment of rest underneath the bamboo (because naturally, the room settles down when this occurs) and he didn't last long, hurriedly exiting after a matter of seconds.

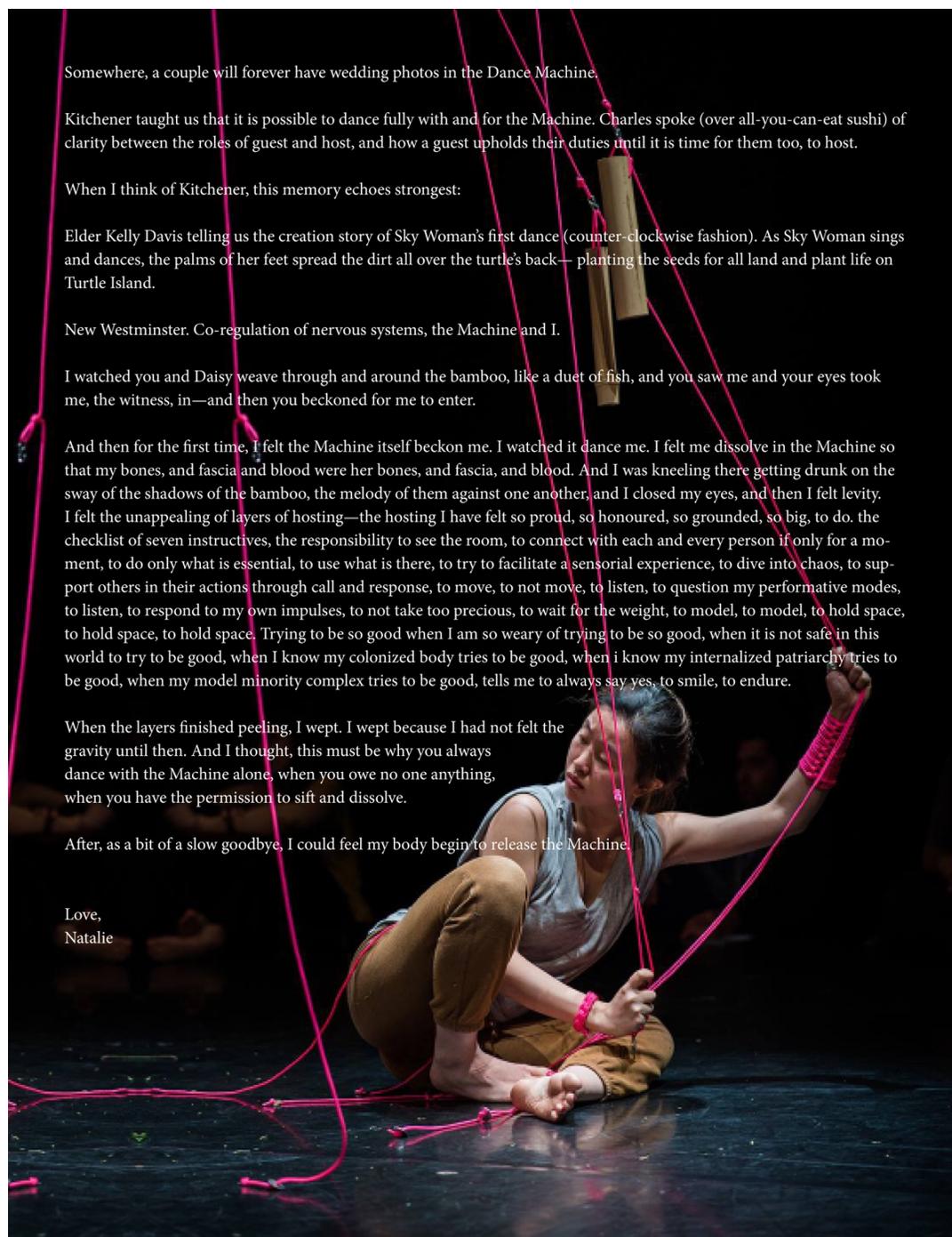
I'm aware that if I didn't feel in service of you, I may not have been so bold to occupy centre, when the temperature and the chaos was rising. I wrapped my arms around the bamboo, in a very literal expression of no more. what else? and this led to a long contact improv dance in the bamboo column. I remember them surrounding me, covering me up in cedar. And I was really hoping that I was the one in control. I was enduring. And I promised myself that I was situating my body in curiosity and desire first. I was scared, and I wasn't entirely certain that I was safe, but I was determined to move in my pleasure. I knew the others of our team were there on the margins.

I made my way to standing, and then one of them from the side made some comment hey, we got her and it stung deeply with humiliation. I immediately parted the counterweights and exited. Su-Feh asked me if I was okay and I said I thought so, and I asked her if it had appeared that I was the one in power, and she said yes. And that was very important to me, I wanted to know that they hadn't asserted their violent dominance, hadn't consumed me into submission, hadn't robbed from the Machine. That night, we hugged the Machine and cried with it. The next day, our last day, was gentle and healing.

I don't want to forget the moment with you and Jeanne and
I've been afraid of changing 'cause I've built my life around you.

Kitchener.

'Cause honey your soul can never grow old, it's evergreen
Baby your smile's forever in my mind and memory



Somewhere, a couple will forever have wedding photos in the Dance Machine.

Kitchener taught us that it is possible to dance fully with and for the Machine. Charles spoke (over all-you-can-eat sushi) of clarity between the roles of guest and host, and how a guest upholds their duties until it is time for them too, to host.

When I think of Kitchener, this memory echoes strongest:

Elder Kelly Davis telling us the creation story of Sky Woman's first dance (counter-clockwise fashion). As Sky Woman sings and dances, the palms of her feet spread the dirt all over the turtle's back—planting the seeds for all land and plant life on Turtle Island.

New Westminster. Co-regulation of nervous systems, the Machine and I.

I watched you and Daisy weave through and around the bamboo, like a duet of fish, and you saw me and your eyes took me, the witness, in—and then you beckoned for me to enter.

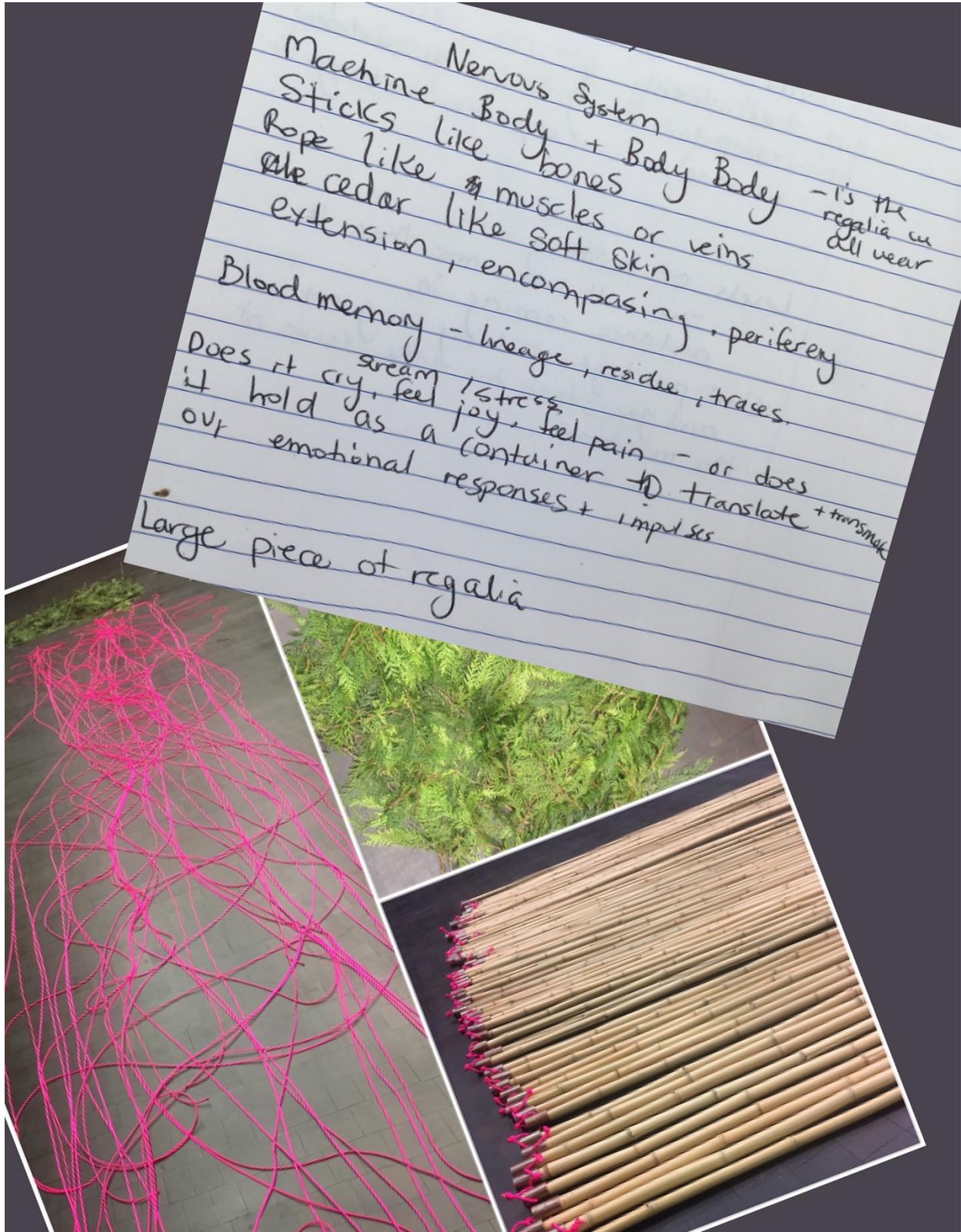
And then for the first time, I felt the Machine itself beckon me. I watched it dance me. I felt me dissolve in the Machine so that my bones, and fascia and blood were her bones, and fascia, and blood. And I was kneeling there getting drunk on the sway of the shadows of the bamboo, the melody of them against one another, and I closed my eyes, and then I felt levity. I felt the unappealing of layers of hosting—the hosting I have felt so proud, so honoured, so grounded, so big, to do, the checklist of seven instructives, the responsibility to see the room, to connect with each and every person if only for a moment, to do only what is essential, to use what is there, to try to facilitate a sensorial experience, to dive into chaos, to support others in their actions through call and response, to move, to not move, to listen, to question my performative modes, to listen, to respond to my own impulses, to not take too precious, to wait for the weight, to model, to model, to hold space, to hold space, to hold space. Trying to be so good when I am so weary of trying to be so good, when it is not safe in this world to try to be good, when I know my colonized body tries to be good, when I know my internalized patriarchy tries to be good, when my model minority complex tries to be good, tells me to always say yes, to smile, to endure.

When the layers finished peeling, I wept. I wept because I had not felt the gravity until then. And I thought, this must be why you always dance with the Machine alone, when you owe no one anything, when you have the permission to sift and dissolve.

After, as a bit of a slow goodbye, I could feel my body begin to release the Machine.

Love,
Natalie

Natalie TY Gan. Photo: Trung Dung Nguyen, courtesy of Festival Trans-Amériques



Notes and photo courtesy of Jeanette Kotowich

An artist host is dancing on the ground.

His movements shift the fallen leaves of cedar branches around the space.

I recognize and feel the pathways in his body from certain dance training techniques.

I feel pleasure as I watch him move skillfully, gracefully, and with sensation.

The host is dancing amongst the long lengths of bamboo.

As he moves, the strings and bamboo are pulled along with him until they reach their length, at which point they pull back at his body and change his movement and direction.

I feel lightness in the moment of tension between the two materialities of the body and machine, and link this feeling with the moment of suspension and release immediately after the pull.

The dancer is in conversation with the sculpture, responding to its liveliness, following the pathway toward which his body is pulled.

Likewise, the bamboo bounces in response to the movement of the man.

Three audience bodies lie peacefully on the cedar branches in different directions and in close proximity. Each one has several lengths of bamboo resting on different parts of their bodies.

One lies still with a slight smile on his face;

another is slowly testing the weight of the wood through her foot moving it up and down.

I feel the muscles in my face and shoulders relax,

a kinesthetic response to what I perceive as their state in that moment.

It seems that they are measuring their bodies in relation to time, weight, and depth.

There is no urgency to move forward from this moment, and the sinking of the bamboo into the skin, along with the cradling of the body by the floor, seems to offer relief from the

gravitational

pull

of

verticality.

Transcription of some of the conversation between Daisy Thompson and Alexa Mardon

AM: Well...I was able to be with the Dance Machine in a few different places so I was at Impact Festival in Kitchener, I was at the Debajehmujig Creation Centre for the 6-foot festival, and then also the Anvil Centre and then ...in Toronto, and so there's something about re-entering the project each time in a different place, that Su-Feh very much built in to the content of how we work which is where we meet with somebody who is representative of that land. And so everytime we started the project there was something about arriving to a place and relearning or unsettling what my role is as a visiting artist, so here where I live I'm a visitor so in all of those other places I am doubly a visitor. With the Dance Machine we build the environment we are in as a team of artists, we are literally building the container that we are going to inhabit for the next amount of time. So to go there and do it at each place, to know, for me, that the conversation underlying us is an acknowledgement or re-acknowledgment about the story of where we are. We also question ...wow there are so many things that I can say. So in the way that the dance machine, like the structure, the rules for the Dance Machine or the guidelines, a lot of those phrases can be taken literally and metaphorically. As I'm talking about the Dance Machine, like building, structure, are also literal because the Dance Machine is a structural thing, but they are also metaphors for the way that we are working.

DT: You've hosted in the Dance Machine in several different places. When I think about my experience in the dance machine at the Anvil centre, it was such a profound experience listening to Brody talk about him and his ancestors and their connection to the land where we were, which is now called New Westminster, and thinking about us here now in a dance studio, sitting on this hard black marley dance floor, there was something about being in the Anvil centre and listening to Brody that emphasised the occupation, and the structure of the centre itself became interfering, more jarring to be there. So thinking about the different places that you visited, was there differences in feeling in relation to the buildings that you were in, or land that you were on?

AM: yes, as you were saying, some places had more interference then others, so in some places the obstacles to having those conversations were more embedded or less embedded in the space, for example when we were on Manitoulin island we were hosted by the Wikwemikong Nation, by an indigenous theatre company where they have created a way of making theatre that's based on the 4 directions that are based on traditional Anishinaabe teaching, and not only did we not have to seek out those conversations or push against things to have these conversations, we were like the new born babies in that space and just in complete all, I don't speak for everybody but for me, we were asked to show up for these conversations in such a real and day-to-day pick the tomatoes, gut the chicken, make the bread kind of way, like this is where you are and this is how we work so put on an apron and lets go. And then in Dance Makers Brian Soloman was with us and he spoke a lot about land acknowledgements in Toronto, and that how often they are...like the colonial history of Toronto is so complex that even today now the

standard land acknowledgment erase many of the complexities of how Toronto came to be what it is now. We talked a lot about how there were various levels of erasure, like there is the city of Toronto, the concrete the way that the concrete has overlaid the waterways, and then there is the distillery district which is this hyper gentrified kind of neighbourhood with boutique stores and high rise condos, which is where Dance Makers is, and here arts organisations were offered newer spaces and we are right on the edge of the lake, which is also very sacred place but there's a freeway running between us and the water, and then history of Dance Makers but things are shifting now, but the weighted history of that place and who is allowed to be in that building, who gets privilege there, and so the way that we were coming at that unsettling in different places was very different. I was thinking about the way that Su-Feh thinks about choreography as structure or systems that move bodies and so in that way the Dance Machine is like, just the act of getting Dance Machine in a room and getting a bunch of people to set it up and then setting those conversations in motion is like a choreography that will trickle out in to the world in some way, before even the public comes in.

DT: yes trickles out, and carries its history and so interconnected to the fabric of all matter - the building, the conversation, the different bodies, the land. So, is there a poignant moment that you can describe.

AM: This isn't really a moment but we talked about it a lot, so when is the need to perform, when is the need to dance in the Dance Machine, and I feel like we dug in to that in Toronto a little bit more, and Su-Feh was really interested in this question of why can't we perform with the Dance Machine? As long as we are not performing AT it. And so for many of the other people in the project along the way they hold in their bodies dances that have been silenced or erased by narrower definitions of dance, and what kinds of dance is the kind of dance that people come to see in terms of contemporary dance. And so Su-feh was interested for herself and other people in having a journey of what's the dance that you want to have in the Dance Machine, and go find that dance. For me it was a questions of what both my pleasures and my traumas stem from this lineage of dance, which is this dominant white Eurocentric dance form, like how do I hold the complexity of that and how do I find my dance when the thing that I am doing that might give me pleasure isn't necessarily pushing back against this dominant aesthetic that the Dance Machine is questioning...trying to work against how that dominant aesthetic constricts time, constricts space, constricts the gaze, constricts the bodies that are in it. And so I guess to say that poignant moments for me when there were both things happening in the Dane Machine, that were both and sometimes at the same time very perfunctory and very sacred, so like there was a time in the rehearsal period where Barak sat inside the edge of the outside bamboo and was reading passages from Claudia Rankins book "Citizen", as Brandy was doing this slow rolling through the cedar dance, and then Barak dropped the book and moved towards her and started singing to her.



Lee Su-Feh. Photo: Trung Dung Nguyen, courtesy of Festival Trans-Amériques

Transcription of some of the conversation between Daisy Thompson and Natalie TY Gan
18/09/2018

DT: When did you start with the Dance Machine?

NTYG: it's either, I guess it's probably either 2015/2016. Su-Feh was preparing it to be seen by Donna before the summer that it showed up for *Dancing On The Edge*, I suppose. Su-Feh and I had already done our yearlong mentorship, and she asked me to come in and play with the machine and help to set it up in the Hop Bop shop. I have this fantastic memory, we were there with Su-Feh's son and we were all very slowly trying to figure out how to tie these knots in a way that was going to make it work, it was super messy, we were like cutting and shaving stuff off and trying to do the math and everything, we were dealing with the bare bones. Jesse (Garlick) at that time was very involved because we needed him to be, he was the first one to design the map of it all. There was this one day where Su-Feh and Justine (Chambers) were in the studio playing around, and to my absolute terror Su-Feh asked me to join them, I remember how, yeah, we were practising these, we did this warm up together of these ... Blocks, that focused on spirals and circles and then we took that in to the space to inhabit the dance machine, I just remember that I was absolutely bodging it, I was so disembodied and one at a time we would go in to play with the Dance Machine, this was my first experience with it. You can't just sit there in front of Su-Feh and Justine watching you, you know taking centre, you are such a foreigner to the space to the machine, you've just watched Justine have these incredible transcendent moments in there, and you are trying to find your own curiosity while being fully aware that you are being watched. I have a distinct memory of how out of body that experience was

DT: so then after that Su-Feh invited you to participate in further presentations of the Dance Machine?

NTYG: yes

DT: because my experience hosting with you and observing you in the Dance Machine was the opposite to what you just described, you looked to me that you were so in tune and at ease with the Dance Machine, like you knew it intimately, and it's interesting hearing you talk about that out of body experience because I was struggling, and on reflection it was a good struggle, an intense feeling of being unsettled – a word often brought up during the preparation/rehearsals – it made me question my judgements, made me re-visit or should I say give space for my intuition to resurface which I realised whilst in the Dance Machine how suppressed it had been., I was constantly questioning my role and mostly in this state of not knowing and uncertainty, and when observing you and Su-Feh I was thinking “oh they have such ease and what do they know, what is it?”. So I'm curious, can you describe the journey from your first experience of Dance Machine to the last that we participated together in at the Anvil Centre?

NTYG: that reminds me that what I think is scary about the Dance Machine is that it is a mirror to yourself. It is a mirror to where you and your impulses are, and how it shows you what

you are doing, it makes very transparent how grounded you are or not, so it's beautiful you ask that because in many ways this letter, I have it broken down by city, and it was a steep learning curve and Su-Feh and I have been talking about that, like is it that you gotta date the Dance Machine three times minimum? There is something about the getting to know you process, when you are battling your ego it really inhibits your ability to both take centre and relinquish centre, and that's something that I write about in the letter is that yeay...in Montreal I was so conflicted about my right to be there what I could offer the machine, when was it going to stop feeling so foreign and intimidating, and then surrounded by eight other artists who all looked like they really knew what was up, and they really knew both in a concrete way both intellectually and physically what they were bringing, and I was just looking in to my pockets and I had nothing. I was well aware of the fact that being the youngest and the most un-senior one there, I knew that it was problematic that I had the desire to please Su-Feh. So I was grappling with how can I let go of that, when can I let go of that because that's a real trump card in terms of my dancing with the machine. So getting those pieces out, having a lot of relationships and moments within the Dance Machine that were really provocative and poignant and moving, and being able to weave and quilt those experiences, allowed that to come to the surface more than all of the static judgements of: who am I; what am I doing here; does Su-Feh like it; is she unhappy with me; am I not doing enough and all of that. I would say that by the time I got to Ottawa, more and more I was able to trust myself, more and more I was able to stand on my own two feet, and feel powerful and generous.

NTYG: I think that it is very very hard, I would say that I had one moment in the Dance Machine, from all the times that I have been in, all four times in all four cities, I have had one moment where I had unabashed free embodiment, and it was only when I was off shift, and it was when I was parting with the Dance Machine at the Anvil Centre for the last time, and when you say that I think about how it really felt practically impossible to be hosting on seven different levels and then have a moment where you bring all the embodied knowledge that you feel that you have and all the listening and have a full dance with the machine when the public are there, yeah that is such a tall order. And we had so many conversations about this in terms of...and this will go on the record although I haven't fully fleshed it out, but we talked a lot about gender, and you know when you asked me about how did I come to be there in the machine feeling so available and competent and capable of listening and speaking and hearing and sounding, it was I think...it was just from a...practising doing it all you know in a very lip service way, where I could make eye contact with everyone walking in to the room, I could see and feel everyone who was sitting in the machine, I knew what the DJ was doing, I could feel how the lights were changing, I could smell the theatre, I knew where Alexa was, I knew where Su-Feh was, I knew where Sujit was and I could feel my impulse to take centre now, and I could tell that in the last two hours that this hasn't happened but this has happened, this image stood still but we've also done this and this and this, and being able to grasp all of these things in this kind of wide fish lens, I was like this is a nice time for me to go now. Or, this is a nice time for me to try taking this risk. For me it came from practising doing all of the impossible at the same time.



JP Longboat. Photo: Trung Dung Nguyen, courtesy of Festival Trans-Amériques

Dance Machine has a history reaching back to 2009 and carries the dances of:

2009

Alexandra Bertaut
Paris, France
Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh Territory

2012

Justine A. Chambers
Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh Territory

2014

Jesse Garlick
Justine A. Chambers
Josh Martin
Tiffany Tregarthen
David Raymond
Bracken Hanuse Corlett
Dancing on the Edge Festival
The Dance Centre
Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh Territory

2015

Adam Kinner
Marie-Claire Forté
Peter Trosztmer
Zab Maboungou
Winnie Superhova
Agora de la Danse
Mohawk Territory

2017

Justine A. Chambers
Natalie Tin Yin Gan
Adam Kinner
Peter Trosztmer
Zab Maboungou
Alessandro Sciarroni
Brian Solomon
JP Longboat
Nasim Lootij
George Wahiakeron Gilbert
Festival Trans-Amériques
Mohawk Territory

Christine Friday
Crazy Smooth Marie-Claire Forté
Claudette Commanda Canada Scene
Canada Dance Festival
Algonquin, Anishnaabe, Mohawk, Huron-Wendat Territory

Charles Koroneho
Bruce Naokwegjig
MT Space/Impact Festival Debajehmujig Storytellers
Anishnaabeg Territory

2018

Natalie Tin Yin Gan
Jeanette Kotowich
Sujit Vajda
Tada Hozumi
Ray Hsu
Aryo Khakpour
Daisy Thompson
Alexa Mardon
Brodie Halfe
Anvil Centre
Qayqayt Territory
Brandy Leary
Supriya Nayak
Brian Solomon
Barak Adé-Soleil
Dancemakers Centre for Creation
The Mississauga of the New Credit, Anishnaabe, Huron-Wendat Territory

(compiled by Lee Su-Feh)



Nasim Lootij. Photo: Trung Dung Nguyen, courtesy of Festival Trans-Amériques