



EMILY COATES

## MOVING BETWEEN, AMONG, IN THE MIDST

*Intercultural Kinesis*

**kinesis** (from Greek *κίνησις*, motion) an undirected movement of an organism that occurs in response to a particular kind of stimulus

**intercultural** of, relating to, or representing different cultures

I should probably begin with when they moved me into the position of Mary Mother of God, and the twitching and wheezing Jesus-man they laid across my lap. But let me start earlier: I am in the middle of a circle recently cleared of men. They left after the brusque business of stomping around, knees jerking up and down, beating and banging against their chests. I am alone with three other women, uninitiated like me, and one male interloper. The woman who led me there, clearly in the know, reappears at my side and whispers, “Be with me.” I bend at the waist and copy her gestures, circling my arms slowly, one foot extended forward, staring at my hands. I am lulled into a feeling of belonging. I move like her, and share her space; I must *be* like her. A dozen or so people stare at us from the edges of the stage. One hundred and twenty people ogle us from afar. Several large sculptures frame our actions, including an enormous headless, armless, hollow torso, flying downstage right. Eventually, the woman pulls me down to the floor beside her. Turning my head awkwardly askew, she leaves me sitting there for a while longer, until a high-haired man later identified as Pedro shows up, looks me in the eyes, and leans in close. I lean forward, too. Without moving his lips, he commands, “Go away now.” Stung by his words, I retreat to the periphery.

This scene is just one example of the many “insider” versus “outsider,” “me” versus “other” dichotomies that *Nameless forest*—a work of dance theater directed by American choreographer and multimedia artist Dean Moss, created in spring 2011 in collaboration with Korean sculptor Sungmyung Chun—pushes and pulls its way through. While sitting in the auditorium offers the most extreme feeling of voyeurism, from any vantage point *Nameless forest* manipulates sensations of intimacy and belonging in relation to an imagined community, engaged in fictional rituals. Indispensable to the ceremony, the onstage audience experiences wildly contradictory actions, ranging from weighty human pileups to oddly compassionate half nelsons. More than the escalating sensa-

*Nameless forest*,  
created by  
Dean Moss and  
Sungmyung Chun,  
Iseman Theater, New  
Haven, 2011. Photo:  
David Barreda

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*The Case of the Spectator*, created and performed by Maria Jerez, Teatro OUTOFF, Milan, 2009. Photo: Amedeo Novelli/FotoUp Agency

tionalism that follows, my exchange with Pedro shocks me, because it abruptly breaks the illusion of membership established in the women's choreography. In later performances, I watched this same scene from a distance, no longer directly implicated in its workings. From there, I could not hear words, only perceive the shell of body language. The male performers leaned in beneficently; the female audience members gazed up expectantly. Power structures elided, cause unseen, the women wordlessly disappeared.

*Nameless forest* forces its audience-participants through a physical experience of cross-cultural exchange—a disorienting tour of cultural identification and ownership, and cultural alienation and disassociation. Identification here is as fictional as the community in which it is enacted. A feeling of belonging may come about through shared gender, spatial location in the theater, or forced participation in one of the group's vaguely defined rituals. That the identity politics are fabricated makes the experience no less real. The order to “go away,” however softly delivered, jarringly broke my illusions of insider status, sitting center stage, and made clear that my fleeting feeling of belonging was based on neither my own agency nor reality but the actions of the performers and, ultimately, Moss's controlling hand. The choreographer invites the audience in to walk the walk, and talk that talk, until that moment when he tells you to get lost.

This choreography can be understood as a kind of kinesis, or movement response, in this case to the cross-cultural exchange motoring the work. While other artists contribute to the piece, the collaboration between Dean Moss and Sungmyung Chun is central, and the flow of ideas is largely unidirectional, from Chun's desolate sculptures into Moss's multifaceted translation of these images in movement. The complicated "othering" in the *Nameless forest* choreography both attracts and repels because, I believe, while the collaborators represent certain geographical, cultural, and disciplinary differences, there is also a strong element of identification. Moss reports that he experienced "a visceral connection to Chun's imagery."<sup>1</sup> He feels it physically—in his gut—and with connection comes a fleeting sense of belonging. The allure of cross-cultural dialogue for an artist lies in expanding one's sense of self, in discovering that there are other subjectivities out there with which to identify. But there is a limit to such identification; an expanding, one might even say increasingly global, subjectivity leads to the paradox represented in the choreographic play with membership, as if to say, "You don't really belong here. You do . . . but actually, you don't."

In his book *Tree: Belief, Culture, Balance*—part travelogue of his pilgrimage through India, China, Bali, and Japan—the American choreographer, writer, and performance artist Ralph Lemon describes a related sentiment in an anecdote involving Wu Wenguang, a Chinese artist with whom he has spent time. Wu asks, "How does one exchange language, music, performance, culture? Perhaps it is important to never know each other."<sup>2</sup> His comment places the burden of refrain on those engaged in the effort itself. It is not impossible, merely important, not to try to fully understand another, he suggests. Whether self-imposed by the artist, reinforced by the community or some larger politic, or simply existential truth, in cross-cultural work gatekeepers to membership abound. *Nameless forest* presses the audience's bodies into motion to explore these unavoidable questions: to what, and to whom, and *how* do you belong? Intercultural kinesis is the physical response: a sensation of boundary crossing that is observable externally, but above all experienced internally, in motion, as one experiences a dance.

*Intercultural* and *cross-cultural* are often used interchangeably to refer to an encounter between two or more different cultures, but their prefixes do not describe the same idea. *Inter-* imagines spatially—that which is between, among, in the midst of, occupied mutually, reciprocally, together. The more proactive *cross-*, a verb doing double duty as a prefix, describes action—movement across something, or action from one individual or group to another. Both metaphors of space and action capture aspects of reaching out across foreignness and unfamiliarity, and the confluence of elements, somewhere in the middle. While *inter-* suggests peaceable exchange, *cross-* allows for the possibility of a power differential. One side may initiate or take more aggressively than the other. For the purposes of this article, I flip between these prefixes to describe different aspects of the artistic process. I use *cross-cultural* to describe the transmission of ideas. Alterna-

tively, in my imagining, “intercultural” marks a destination of sorts, a zone of relative stability in which elements commingle. Intercultural kinesis takes form in this middle ground, acting as the bridge across perceived distance, enabling the dialogue while also holding a shape all its own. For however fraught and uneven a creative process, or constantly in flux movement may appear, choreography eventually stabilizes into a legible entity.

Within these mechanics, *culture* implies that what moves through the cross-cultural exchange is finite and classifiable, made up of familiar and foreign elements. It also assumes ownership—this is yours, and this is mine. In her article on *Nameless forest* included in this issue, scholar Elizabeth Son further elaborates on the assumptions in the “often-static ideas of what constitutes the cross-cultural, in which culture is defined in national terms.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, historically, *cross-cultural* has applied to exchanges between nations of the West and non-West. Rather than dissecting the artists’ national histories, Son chooses to elaborate on Moss and Chun’s working relationship, characterizing it as one of gentle respect, humility, and vulnerability.

Within these interpersonal dynamics lie the beginnings of a way to understand cross-cultural exchange that skirts the idea of culture as bounded and assignable to this group or that, in favor of greater specificity. Describing *Nameless forest* as a “Korea/USA” encounter, as Son notes of a recent advertisement, hardly captures the unique alchemy of Chun’s Seoul art world/Koreanness mixed into Moss’s New York City downtown dance/Americanness. A host of cosmopolitan influences runs through each of these subcultures, for one thing. And how do we make sense of the highly subjective filtering when an artist processes his or her environment and experiences? Intercultural kinesis digs into this specificity. It understands cultural exchange as movement through other individuals’ worldviews, and they through yours, which may be identifiable as coming from this culture or that but, on closer scrutiny, fractures into a million fragments of human experience that we internalize, select, and reassemble, consciously and not. In this way, contemporary life is an ongoing process of highly specific kinetic encounters and transformations, inside art and out.

Maria Jerez’s 2004 solo show *The Case of the Spectator* purports to be neither dance nor a work born out of cross-cultural exchange. But at its core, the solo captures another dimension of intercultural kinesis. Spanish-born Jerez deals with murder mysteries and Hitchcock films—mid-twentieth-century Americana—by staging a series of miniature vignettes of violent crime, using a collection of objects: a leather armchair, martini glass and wet bar, a blond wig, toy car and phone booth, a flying knife, cocktail umbrella, ice pick and duct tape, and most important, Barbie dolls. With a live-feed video camera, she simultaneously produces and projects these scenes onto a screen, which creates the effect of a widespread cultural ritual—glazing out in front of the living room TV. Someone dies in every vignette. Often it is Barbie who dies. Sometimes Jerez inserts her own body onto the screen—an eye, her mouth, a foot—to represent the victim. Certain scenes make even the audience feel threatened.

Lest the viewer think the interaction with objects in *The Case of the Spectator* is child's play, the first Barbie is duct-taped, raped, and beheaded minutes into the piece. The cross-cultural encounter lies between the performer and these objects, circa 1950s consumable goods that circulated through the film industry, and through the general mass exporting of Americana abroad. (Jerez's



*The Method Gun*, directed by Shawn Sides, Yale Repertory Theatre, New Haven, 2011. Photo: Lowell Bartholomee

fascination with images of American pop culture runs through her recent work, too. A movie she created with her sister, Cuqui Jerez, was shot entirely inside a small townhouse using household items. In homage to Hollywood spy thrillers, an iron and an ironing board, for instance, stood in for the stock scene of a plane touching down on the tarmac.) As with *Nameless forest*, the viewer is implicated in the performance, this time through technology: the camera assumes the point of view of the killer. Offscreen, Jerez moves the camera rhythmically in and out over the doll, breathing heavily into a microphone taped to her chest. On-screen, the audience sees and feels the aggressive, pumping action of rape.

Jerez has said that the violence against women throughout the work is merely a side effect of her raw materials. Her main concern lies with layering fictional realities and revealing the production apparatus behind them. Still, it is worth wondering about the nature of these particular artifacts, as they act upon Jerez's body and imagination. Cultural historian Robin Bernstein has theorized about the way objects in everyday life become things that assert agency into the world and influence human behaviors. She writes, "Things script meaningful bodily movements, and these citational movements think the otherwise unthinkable."<sup>4</sup> In quoting "the otherwise unthinkable," Bernstein draws on Joseph Roach's notion of the kinesthetic imagination. Both theorists are arguing for moving-as-a-form-of-thinking, on and off the stage. In a feat of mutual choreography, Jerez takes in and controls the objects, even as they script her actions. The "unthinkable," that which cannot be articulated any other way, has crept into Jerez's movements, seemingly despite her intentions. For what are Hitchcock, Agatha Christie novels, martini shakers, and Barbie dolls but complicated formulas of mass marketability and domestic escapism, pitched largely toward women, to which Jerez's body responds by imagining, through meticulously timed coordination, the brutal victimization of female bodies?

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But *violent* is too broad a trope to describe Jerez's intercultural kinesis, as is any kind of simplistic Spanish-American dichotomy. Her particular kinesis lies in the microdetails of the choreography that she uses to deploy her fictions. If Moss's performers internalize and mimic Chun's sculptural objects, Jerez learns to dance nimbly alongside hers. In one memorable scene, Jerez stands behind a wet bar and mixes a martini, while from the waist down, behind the bar, she stages a murder with the aid of live-



*Nameless forest*, 2011.  
Photo:  
David Barreda

feed video. From the waist up, she crushes the ice, jiggles the shaker, pours it lavishly into a glass, and sips. On-screen, the audience sees, from the ankles down, a flirtation between a woman and a man. The woman, played by Jerez's own feet, flaunts her dark pumps, while the man's shoes remain threateningly planted. As Jerez tends to spotlight the artifice involved in producing the fiction, I do not think I am spoiling the piece to relay that the "man" is conjured up using a poster drawing of a man's hard-soled business shoes, taped up inside the minibar. On-screen, the woman's foot turns sideways and limp at the moment she is murdered. Dropped from the cocktail bar above, the ice pick and a splash of red cherry juice fall into the frame—the weapon and the outcome. The lifeless pump is dragged out of the picture, and Jerez as the blond martini maker freely moves into the next scene.

In an article in this issue, performance theorist Sue-Ellen Case analyzes the violence in Jerez's work, helping to inform our understanding of the kinesis at work here. Case suggests that violence is the social order of the piece and the world it represents. But the piece plays out this violence with ironic distance, at the level of composition. The violence is disjointed, represented in the form of one narrative fragment after another. We are given no backstories or history and know nothing more about the victims other than that they are threatened and killed. Notions of who or what might constitute a "victim" jump around. This is postmodern fracturing on all levels, and the disjointed character development, narrative arc, and denouement disallow us full empathy.

This postmodern aesthetic occurs even at the level of Jerez's kinesis, which possesses two main qualities: tasklike fragmentation, and virtuosity. The piece does not establish one continuous movement quality or idea but instead deploys a patchwork series of physical tasks required to enact Jerez's murder scenes. The narratives start and stop, each with a setup, climax, and denouement that she must *move* into action and move through. She positions the objects around her with a sense of purpose. Isolated parts of her body show up in the narratives. Her upper body does one thing while her lower body does another. Only toward the end of the performance does the narrative open out, and her full body becomes the character that is threatened.

The fragmented movement in conjunction with operating live-feed video during live performance demands the second characteristic of her kinesis—virtuosity. To enact her stories, Jerez developed a very precise coordination, which juggles breathing into a microphone plugged (very visibly) down her dress, deft adjustments of the camera angle, the quick flick of the ON button, setting up the "scenery" of toy cars and miniature telephone booths in alter-world garages, the manipulation of Barbie dolls and poster-board feet. It takes exceptional expertise—I would even venture to say it takes forging new neurons in the brain—to execute these movements in the consistent rhythm with which Jerez performs the solo. Herein lies the intercultural kinesis. The tasklike fragmentation and virtuosity constitute the artist's physical response not only to the object-commodities, pulp images, and social violence but also to the deeper encounter between the human body and technology.

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I must quickly point out that fracturing, on whatever metatheoretical level one cares to understand it, for a practitioner quickly reassembles itself as the new coherence. Dancers know this as muscle memory, the imprinting of whatever movement challenge poses itself into the body's coordination. Most people, save for the lost-cause clumsy, can teach themselves to pat their heads and rub their bellies by repeating it over and over, and the same goes for the most intricate of physical feats. So even as Jerez appears to be splitting herself in two to tell the tale of the martini murder, we are actually witnessing a finely honed reassembly, a coordination and muscle memory that permits the delicate coincidence of martini prep and footsie.

Where does this fragmentation and reassembly in the work leave us with regard to intercultural kinesis? At the end of her article, Case neatly brings *The Case of the Spectator* around to a more conventional definition of interculturalism—not as a technological encounter but a cultural one—when she suggests that the Chinaman murderer that appears halfway through is a stand-in for the Spanishness of the artist as Jerez encounters what Chase calls “gringoland.” There are multiple cultural encounters, then, from the Euro-Spanish–inflected subjectivity of the artist, to the midcentury Americana and twenty-first-century technology. If *The Case of the Spectator* represents conversations between cultures, however broken up Jerez's intercultural kinesis appears to be, a new organization emerges underneath. It emerges in her muscle memory, and her movement. In short, her body figures it out.

I have one more example of intercultural kinesis, from a scene embedded in *The Method Gun*, a 2008 theater production by the Austin-based ensemble called the Rude Mechs. At the start of *The Method Gun*, the Mechs announce they have received a grant to research the Stella Burden Company, an ensemble that worked in the 1960s under the suspiciously fantastical guru Stella Burden. For nine years, Burden's actors honed their skills working on a production of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, without Stella, Blanche, Stanley, or Mitch. The Mechs take up the story after Burden has mysteriously disappeared in South America, leaving the group to continue her eccentric (and often masochistic) acting methods and premiere the work. The play contains several layers of fiction: the Mechs play themselves, the Burden company members, and the Burden characters playing characters in *Streetcar*. *The Method Gun* parodies Method acting techniques and the actors who follow them religiously.

The scene of greatest interest to intercultural kinesis comes near the end, when the players recap the scenes from *Streetcar* covered during the play, only without the words, just the movement. The actors touch and separate, sit and circle, cross over and duck under each other, just as they did when speaking the dialogue. On one level, the scene hammers home the theme of reduction; it is one more stripping away in a play that has already been stripped of its main characters and their contribution to a coherent narrative. It allows us to focus on the placement of the bodies and their relationships, and we understand better the operations of blocking on a scene's meaning. Above all, the scene radically leaves behind the very acting methods the actors have so

carefully developed. They perform the movements as tasks, with concentrated expressions resembling the neutral faces of American postmodern dancers. If anything, their faces are laced with fear, for as they move, swinging through them are three massive, weighted metal balls. If they lose their balance or their timing is off, they will be hurt, possibly even, we speculate, killed.

I am tempted to read into the Stanislavsky diaspora meeting a cast of white, all-American actors, or the flight of their mentor across borders to South America that drives the piece and causes this intercultural kinesis. But if I do, I will be overlooking the most important aspect of the kinesis in this scene. To me, the pure movement represents an encounter between two fundamental cultural mediums: language and movement. We see what remains when words depart, the raw movement of their psychological angst, drained of overwrought interpretations, and it is breathtaking.

Meaning both proliferates and collapses in translations. The source of *Nameless forest's* imagery, Chun's fraught-eyed sculptural figures, are most often male, and they appear to have been tortured, with no clear cause represented. To this poetically absent source of suffering, Moss assigns literal action: a character mimes hurling a grenade, guns are held to heads, and Pedro shrieks like a petrified, dying animal. In another scene, a character lays a small wooden body the size of a baby doll on a bed of yellow petals inside the gaping torso. The first scene reduces Chun's mysterious metaphors to the singular image of wartime behavior. In the latter scene, in contrast, meaning expands; we understand, because of the choreography, that the site of trauma can become a site of nourishment and rebirth. Toward the end of *Nameless forest*, a performer is stripped and laid in the laps of two carefully selected audience participants. I was one of the chosen. I patted his chest and cradled his head. We embodied the image of the *Pieta*. I was in the role of Mary. He was . . . it was uncertain who he was. After it was all over, he leaped to his feet and flashed the sign of a V for victory. I felt altered. It was unclear who had been initiated—him or me. In intercultural kinesis, the lines blur between self and other, and physical sensation is the barometer of the exchange.

More than a conclusion, this article is a provocation in motion.

## NOTES

Definitions from *Oxford English Dictionary* (*kinesis*), 2011, [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com); *American Heritage Dictionary* (*intercultural* and *inter-*), 2009, [www.thefreedictionary.com](http://www.thefreedictionary.com)

1. Elizabeth W. Son, "Touching Worlds: Performing the Cross-Cultural in/through *Nameless forest*" (Talk, World Performance Project at Yale, March 30, 2011).

2. Ralph Lemon, *Tree: Belief, Culture, Balance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004).

3. Son, "Touching Worlds."

4. Robin Bernstein, "Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race," *Social Text* 27, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 70.