

How to relate in Contemporary Dance: Jared Gradinger, Angela Schubot

*Whom or what do you relate to in your choreographic work?*

We made this series in a very similar way to how I made the garden, which is working with an energetic vortex, calling in the beings or the consciousnesses that are part of the work we intend to make. So, who is this? First, the consciousness of the piece itself—even at the beginning, when it is still unformed. And nature or Pan. [*Pan?*] Well, we don't know Pan so well, but it is what allows the communication to be clear. It creates what's between us, almost like a telephone line: it makes the connection. Then, the plants we were working with: yew, of course, but also clover, moss, oak, beech, fern, echeveria, and stinging nettle. And the Angela-Jared consciousness, as we later had to recognize, when there was this group of other human performers we had to deal with. The botanical garden Blankenfelde-Pankow was definitely an entity that we were working with as well as the theater stages of HAU3 and HAU2. In the rehearsal process you really get intimate with the space, acknowledging that they are real collaborators or homes, and they take a lot of energies through them. But there are also the natural elements or, in the alchemistic terminology of Paracelsus, the sylves (air), gnomes (earth), salamanders (fire), and undines (water), which are also in our bodies with the bones, the minerals, the blood, the lungs, the sex, etc. You can meet a plant through what you share with it: these forces at play. There might be a certain flow or rhythm you can synchronize with, because this plant shares the same kind of alchemy.

*How do you relate to these entities? What are the means of relating? How do you approach them?*

We approach them very naively. Especially with non-human entities or natural forces it's a lot of listening. You have to learn to listen first. You basically sit with them and meditate in order to strengthen your intuition for information that is not produced by your own mind. You have to enter into a very slow rhythm, because for most of those entities time is differently configured than for us, and into the materiality of your body in order to be infused by what is in front of you, in our case: the plants. In the form of how they infuse you, you can begin to differentiate. Even *where* they meet you is already part of the information.

There are many layers of listening, not necessarily connected to the ears. First of all, you don't speak, you don't send out. Then, you can listen through your body. For example, you can sit and listen to the floor through your bones. You open up to the other through the whole body, so that your own fulness gets re-inscribed by the other fulness. To achieve this, you need to come to your volume as a sensuous body, not as an object-body controlled by your mind. Or, through emptiness, you can listen with the mind. You empty your mind like a screen and then you see what shows up on the screen. However, once the connection is established, you can work with intention. You can ask things and really be clear—it's not just a vegetable listening! But, initially, softening, quieting the mind—that's the work. While the plants, they really meet you where you are, they join you in your thoughts. The distinction between what's mine and what's not mine gets blurry.

*What do they make you do?*

The process started with a naïve and almost impossible desire or question: Can we be moved by them? We dreamed of being taken over by these plant bodies. And then you try to meet such a body and you can move from this meeting, even from the trying. Or, you just allow yourself to be seen by them. But there were also very concrete things that we tried to translate from plant life into our corporeality. The idea that there is no front, that there is a 360° focus. Or, the idea that there is no giving and taking, perceiving and growing, but circulation. We tried to move as if we had no brain and muscles, or as if we had no front, or as there was no translation from being to acting. When we tried to relate to blossoming and decay as entities, and to both at once, the internal time changed completely. First, you meet the plants in the visual, then you enter into a loop of reciprocity with these beings and they start to form clearer pictures, in the inside as well as in the outside.

[We connect in the beginning of every session or show. But sometimes it's also really shallow. It's work, you know: all of a sudden you have to connect with nine plants, and feel really personal, and do a show at the same time—that's a lot. However, I believe the piece contains this. We are only one part of this. And we don't have to be so responsible, because the piece itself is doing something: it's a vortex. We are just carried together.]

*What do they do to you? What is in it for them?*

They use you. The plant or specific plants create consciousness about them or excitement around them, they spread through you. Take Ayahuasca, for example. It comes from a specific region in the Americas, but in the last ten or fifteen years it has made its way around the globe, even just in the idea of it. This plant is travelling through everybody it touches and meets. You carry it with you and it works through you on many levels. Yet, the spreading is also quite abusive to the plant. It is clearly rooted in deeply problematic structures of commodity trading. It extracts the plant from its cosmology and exploits it for profit. On the other hand, you could say that ayahuasca is working with these things, working with capitalism and with humans to its advantage, to spread and proliferate.

Or look at Instagram: These young people are just buying plants to take pictures in their house with them, to get the most views and likes, because plants are so hip right now. The weirder the plants, the more plants you have, the better. And it's for clicks, of course. But if they're really creating a relationship with these plants, if they're spreading the consciousness of plant love or responsible relationships of coexisting, it's amazing actually. If they killed the plant the next day after they take a photo, that's another story.

*How does the particular environment or situation influence the relation?*

We were very clear from the beginning to create a piece for the theatre in cocreation with nature, yet without presenting nature by putting a lot of plants in the room, but by acknowledging that the room is nature itself, that the entities are energies that we invite into the room, creating a garden with those energies—and then to complete this garden with the other humans that then joined us, the audience. We didn't know what it would be like until the premiere. And every night the entire work was contingent on the people, on how they behaved. The people were really like weather: sometimes like a big storm blowing through the show and sometimes just like stuck stones [*laughs*—a landscape that was unique for each show.

In the botanical garden it was different: for one thing, when you're outside—you don't give up responsibility—but you're a little more with yourself. But then again, you're with *everything else*. Now your face is not anymore on the dancefloor, but you're with your nose in the dirt, metal scraping your face, and a hand crawling

across while the sun is setting and the wind is blowing and the birds are there. To intentionally be a part of an environment, an ecology or eco-system and, in the best case, to not be the star of that show, because, you know, you can't compete with the sunset, you don't even want to—or even the wind blowing through a tree. So, suddenly, you're in a relation to it. Yet not highlighting it, but rather allowing, accepting, inviting it with this audience. We could do this on ourselves, of course—and we do initially, in the rehearsals—, but this other moment eventually comes when it is completed by the other other entity, the audience and its consciousness. And what that environment does to them is almost more important than what it does to us.

In the theatre, by convention, you have more focus on the performer body. In the encounter you really have to carry them through your body. And you are held responsible for the dramaturgy of the piece: how long things take, etc. Outside, this is different: the human way of being is not looked at in the same way. And you're less responsible for time: it would be so arrogant to try to be the master of time there. The piece is a bit slacker in the garden and there are more contingencies.

*To what extent is the relationship based on knowledge? Can you describe the forms of knowledge?*

The knowledge that is required or produced by the encounter is neither stable nor is it *about* the plants. Rather, you know how to connect to the plant that knows. The knowledge you need to have is only to make the connection to that which actually knows. Knowing means not to capture something, store it inside of yourself, and be able to always access it, but knowledge of connecting—and that is the very moment you receive the relevant information. This approach is indebted to the practices of shamans and healers. It's such another way of knowledge production in that world than the more masculine way of producing knowledge by extracting it from natural processes and storing it as if it wasn't changing. It rather comes from a very intuitive and alive contact and communication. You cannot put it to test and proof that it will always work. If you tried so, it wouldn't work, precisely because it has to emerge out of a vital connection. A lot of the information is just the resonance of that specific encounter. It's so tied to the moment—and yet it's so much bigger than this moment. It's the whole cosmos but

still it's that very moment. And you have to accept that this knowledge might change while you put it in words. While your subjectivity is actually tied to it. It is just made for this moment—to dissolve this immobility. It's very idiosyncratic and not a monoculture, especially when it comes to plants.

*Can the relation fail? And if so, how?*

The relation can fail, if you're not open, if you're in your mind—then it's very difficult to connect. In a traditional sense of failing, I suppose it means no reciprocity in our case: I'm changing it, but I'm not changed by it— that's a one-sided, abusive relation. Although I'd say that failing is in fact part of the encounter, teaching you what failing means or where you are at the moment. However, I think the plants, they don't operate in those terms. On our side, however, it depends on the intention. Artistically, I believe in consciousness. As an artist or a maker, I cannot work with it, when it doesn't reach my consciousness. Then, of course, I can still say that unconsciously something big is happening—and I'm sure it does. It might come out in other ways, but I prefer when things arise to my consciousness and I can work with it as a potent counterpart.

*Do you experience the process of relating as an appropriation or mediation of the other? (Both? How?)*

It's an encounter! But, it would be naïve to think that it's not an appropriation or mediation at the same time. It depends on the historical moment and your definition of the concepts. You might understand appropriation today in regards to the commodity form in capitalism, in which you earn from the gap of having something and selling it. In that sense, appropriation is an abuse that creates value. The encounter with the plants however feels more like channeling, a reciprocity loop. But sometimes it feels more like it's just rushing through you. This is a very pure form of mediation, where you basically become the vessel for something else—and it's not easy to always be there. This is not necessarily better though: appropriation is at play here too, since we're creating a piece out of this encounter and show it to people, sell it on the market. However, any real encounter meets the other in changing each other. Any real encounter has therefore a segment of mediation and a segment appropriation—and a hole in between!

If I want to meet this tree, for example [*he's pointing to a tree*]. Would it be considered appropriation if I take my form to become that tree in a mimetic act: I assume the form of the other and that is actually a very beautiful gesture; in my best most earnest way, I dedicate to the other. But through this mimicry also meet a threshold: form meets form—a door is opened and then things are able to flow after that. While at the same time, in regards to plants, politically everything appears to be appropriation: in twenty years the abuse of nature in capitalism will be limitless. I honestly don't know how to respond to this. There's so much trauma in this and everything is infused with it. I could never say I could do anything that's not part of this appropriation, but you can still highlight the things that are knotted and work with a good intention, I think, for lack of a better word.

*How is power and authority distributed in these relations? Does violence play a part here?*

Violence used to play more part when we started to work together about ten years ago. We both enjoyed to feel each other through hard impact. We liked this fleshiness of being in the world. We liked to sweat and to move and to push and be taken, to be able to surrender and to agree in the violence. We both were kind of impact junkies, if you will. This changed now: there is less being into each other, but more co-existing next to each other. In what ways can we exist together without having to become one. It also has to do with age and injuries—that's a reality.

But there's also a lot of violence in plants. How do you experience a tree that was hit by a lightning, torn apart, but that creates a home for millions of creatures—and anyway the offspring are everywhere etc.? This is like the blip of death ... and life! When we met this violence in meditations, there was always so much wisdom inside that violence and so little judgment. But we pushed it even further in the last piece, the group piece, so that it doesn't become a passive body, but a body with desire and intention and force—forces—, to live this violence not as a bad thing, but as one of the many beautiful ways in which one can be in all this.

At the same time, plants have a lot of authority! To trust other authorities than the mind was extremely important for the process. That doesn't mean not to think, but to serve other authorities, which is really still so challenging. Then it's not about the brain/mind anymore that judges, and how it sees the world—this actually

comes from a very small place of fear. To share the authority as an artist with the entities co-creating the work is so liberating! You've got to believe in something outside of you and your fucking artistic decisive brain who always needs to come up with the best answer. This artistic power has a lot to do with the questions of who takes space and who gets the right to express, to get heard, to manifest and to create. But that could be just capitalist logic again: the idea that if you take space, you take it away from others. Again, the plants tell a totally different story: there are so many other ways to navigate about but more or less—also allowing for asymmetries. As we two have learned from the plants: it's ok that the proportion is not always 50/50 in every aspect!