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A compelling version of dance history could be narrated through human anatomy. Consider the spine: the spine! This neurological highway has been manipulated, imagined, constrained, and freed throughout the history of dance. Classical ballet demands verticality. Later, modernist artists such as Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham arched and bent the spine. Decades and countless artists after that, Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin developed the movement language Gaga, in which he imagines a “seaweed spine,” which perpetually floats as if in water, and listens to the body with infinite reactivity.

There is also the solar plexus, that soft opening behind the ribcage. For Isadora Duncan, mother of modern dance, therein lay the secret of life (provided it was perpetually projected heavenward). In Gaga, this space becomes “the box of the chest,” a kind of secular cathedral for the soul that operates on multiple planes. And Graham’s mid-twentieth century thrusting pelvis—that which made a woman a woman—transforms into the “lena” in Gaga. Located between the bellybutton and the groin, the lena is the engine of the movement, the source of all that unfolds. Human anatomy remains constant, but the language and imagery used to imagine the body changes throughout dance history, and so then does the movement that ensues.

It’s helpful to look back, because Gaga is relatively new. Naharin developed the form over the past twenty years as a method for tuning the dancer’s body for contemporary performance. Gaga is driven by invented terms and imagery that cultivates a protean movement quality in dancers, ranging from deeply human to almost extraterrestrial.

In Yale Dance Theater’s spring 2016 project, YDT dancers investigated the creation of new work using Gaga as the language for the process. Led by artists Saar Harari and Lee Sher, the project culminated in an open rehearsal and a public performance in the spring of 2016 in the Yale University Art Gallery’s exhibition, Everything is Dada. This process is the subject of this issue. As opposed to proposing any weighty similarities, our overlay of a Gaga dance into a Dada exhibition was primarily meant to be playful: the aesthetics share little in common, save for the spirit to counter dominant modes of rationality, with which each movement was named.

Our project was timely, for Gaga has begun to influence contemporary dance choreography worldwide and classes are now a staple at dance centers and conservatories. But the form remains elusive. Gaga is an experience, above all else, with only a scant body of critical writing and scholarship to date. In this journal issue, YDT editors Holly Taylor, Naomi Roselaar and Brittany Stollar in collaboration with graphic designer Laura Coombs skillfully translate Gaga to the page. Let go of any prior assumptions you may have had about dance as you read and think: “seaweed spine . . .”

WHAT IS GAGA?
A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

May 2017
Holly Taylor
Naomi Roselaar
Brittany Stollar

Gaga is a ‘movement language,’ which is similar to but not the same as a dance vocabulary or style. The movement of Gaga comes with its own
verbal vocabulary that provides impetus for the movement; words like ‘lena’ and ‘pika’ and ‘yoyo,’ for example, describe concepts unique to Gaga, including characterizations of the pelvic region, types of energy, and foundational feelings and impulses. Though this spoken vocabulary is the same for everyone, Gaga movement is unique to each individual dancing. Confused? Don’t worry, everyone is lost during their first Gaga class.

The basic rules of Gaga are few but strict: everyone in the room must dance as part of the class; no onlookers or outside eyes. There are no breaks; you move the whole time. No late comers. No closing of the eyes. No talking. No mirrors. Beyond that, follow the instructor’s directions and you’re home free.

To generate movement, Gaga relies on attenuated focus to physical sensation—turning on awareness of every part of your body at once. This includes eyelids, teeth, hair follicles, arteries, bone marrow, individual muscle fibers, everything. You are feeling everything, and doing so intentionally, and actively. The instructor guides the class through motion using imagery, calling for the body to physicalize earthquakes and volcanic explosions, to recall the feeling of floating in water, to conjure the taste of wine, to invite the joints to open like doors and spin like little balls. What may begin as imagining or envisioning the body responding to image-based prompts (imagining the body as filled with flowing substance, for example, or envisioning the body made of bones and muscles mutually wrapping each other) actually becomes a physical sensation—or, perhaps more accurately, existing but unnoticed physical sensations become available when our attention is drawn to them in hyperspecific ways. Our body is always feeling, sensing, moving, thinking—but do we know what all this feels like? Dropping into the body and paying attention to its sensations, often past the point of overwhelming stimulation and physical exhaustion, helps us access facets of our physical existence previously caught beneath the surface.

We would be remiss in failing to address the political complexities surrounding Gaga; although Ohad Naharin, Gaga’s originator, insists on the form’s complete divorcement from politics, the fact remains that Gaga began with his Israeli body in the midst of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—and now has been exported to the U.S. to be taken up into American bodies. Bodies are political—imbued with cultural and geographic specificities—and artistic exchange involves (and arguably relies upon) the bumping up and interacting of those entangled socio-political matrices that bodies contain. Gaga calls for availability, receptivity, a readiness to accept energy from other bodies in the room and a willingness to send out one’s own energy; this porous engagement offers a model for how to approach the political concerns shrouding Gaga. To begin unraveling what it means to dance Gaga here at Yale with our specific bodies, we had to engage, be available to incoming energy, and acknowledge the physical sensations in the body that help to compose our specific identities.

This journal details the internal workings of each YDT member as they encountered and then developed a relationship with Gaga, over the course of a semester long project working with choreographers Saar Harari and Lee Sher to develop an original work. The blog posts the dancers wrote throughout the project chart a path from initial confusion, to building familiarity, to sustained and continuing exploration. The journal also includes materials concerning YDT’s culminating performance: although Gaga itself cannot be watched, choreographic projects created using Gaga can be (untangle that little paradox). In fact, all of the images we have from the project are not actually of ‘Gaga,’ but of the performance in the Yale University Art Gallery. We’ve included responses from audience members taking academic classes in performance writing, as well as the perspective of Frauke Josenhans, the curator for the Everything is Dada exhibit, to render the only public aspect of the project as fully as possible.

Integral to this project was the participation of dancers from outside of the Yale community: four members of Elm City Dance Collective, a local performance group, joined the students in YDT for the duration of the
project, bringing their fierce intelligence and physical expertise into the mix. The project also included one ‘Gaga/People’ class, which is Gaga for the non-dancer and intended to facilitate community building and interpersonal exchange, much like the involvement of the ECDC dancers. One participant in the class agreed to share their response to Gaga in the journal.

The journal is designed to visually represent the embodied experience of dancing Gaga: the understanding of the core (the lena) as the source of all movement, the sinuous centrality of the spine, the inconsistent but continuous stream of stimulus and sensation that crystallizes in the body over the course of a class. Graphic Designer Laura Coombs has expertly rendered the pleasure and effort—not mutually exclusive experiences—so crucial to engagement with Gaga’s language, in her sensuous choices of material, color, and layout. The overall intention is to immerse the reader into the often overwhelming and contradictory world of Gaga, using YDT’s project research as a simultaneous anchor and compass.

EVERYTHING IS DADA AND GAGA

January 2017
Frauke V. Josenhans
Frauke V. Josenhans is the Horace W. Goldsmith Assistant Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art and Curator of Everything Is Dada.

In 2016, the Yale University Art Gallery celebrated the centennial of Dada. The original Dadaists were men and women from different backgrounds and countries who had escaped the horrors of World War I and wished to break free from the moral, political, and aesthetic dogmas of their time. Dada started with a series of performances at the Cabaret Voltaire that combined dance, poetry readings, and puppetry.

With an impulse for provocation and interest in popular culture, these artists believed that everything could be art.

Very early in the conception of the exhibition, I realized how important it would be to make this exhibition not only about the visual arts, but to also create a dialogue with other arts. Many of the Dadaists were not only painters or sculptors but also performers, with a background in dance or cabaret. For instance, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, in addition to being a visual artist working with textile, wood, and paint, also studied dance with the modern choreographer Rudolf von Laban in Zurich, and she performed at the Cabaret Voltaire in costumes designed by other Dada artists. Emily Coates, the director of the Dance Studies Curriculum, quickly embraced the idea of introducing dance into the exhibition, and when she proposed to juxtapose the Gaga movement language aesthetic and the Dada objects on view, in order to create a visual and physical dialogue. Molleen Theodore, the Associate Curator of Programs, and myself felt that this would be a fitting tribute to Dada.

Through the rehearsals it quickly became clear how challenging such a juxtaposition would be, but also what a unique opportunity this could be. The movement studies which then took place in different parts of the Art Gallery and exhibition galleries, incorporated the physical space, and the interactive scenography of the show—including mirrors, and curtains—in a highly creative and engaging way, in direct dialogue with the artworks on view, and the many visitors.
INTERVIEW WITH SAAR HARARI

February 2016
Nicole Feng

Saar Harari was the artist in residence for the Gaga project, working alongside Lee Sher to develop a new performance piece specifically for YDT. Originally from Israel, Saar danced with Gaga’s creator Ohad Naharin before forming his own performance company with Lee, LeeSaar, in 2000. Saar and Lee relocated to the U.S. in 2004 and have continued to create award-winning choreography drawing from the Gaga movement language. In this interview, YDT member Nicole Feng has a conversation with Saar about his experiences with Gaga as a tool of research and healing. Clarifying notes have been added in brackets for the reader’s convenience.

N.F.: Could you tell me about your training, and a little about yourself and your background?

S.H.: Yes, I trained with Ohad for 15–20 years. I began dance training at the age of three—my mother owned a studio and brought me up in the arts. I felt very connected to the outdoors, working on the farm and connected to nature. The time I spent in the army—it was very physical. It taught me a lot about listening to the body. Everything we do informs who we are. By listening, you find yourself where you want to be. A teacher must take classes. It is a different research, a different listening.

N.F.: Have you experienced injury or chronic pain during your dance career?

S.H.: I tore my meniscus eleven years ago. It was in a duet with another dancer who was not aware of where she was with it. It was nothing that came from my movement. I fell on my knee in a bad way. Surgery was three weeks later. It was a process—I had to be on stage, but it was a process. It took around a year to fully get back on my feet. Yes, I think Gaga is something. It was invented by Ohad [Naharin] to recover from a really big back injury. Something that I see every day, first of all when you do Gaga, you can prevent injury. It is about how you can connect effort to pleasure, not about dancing from ambition. When you aren’t working to fill ambition, it is really hard to injure yourself. When you do injure yourself, there is something about the process of listening, moving, engines, systems that Gaga has. It helps one recover, fast, but in the right way. All the tools of Gaga, the ability to share the effort with so many engines in the body—being aware of the engines, far engines letting go, ball movement—all these things really help our physical mechanisms to work organically in sync. We are always aware. Even when we use effort, we are aware of where it is coming from: effort coming from listening in details, not just effort in exploding our body. Effort in awareness.

N.F.: How is Gaga used in the medical context?

S.H.: We do Gaga for Parkinson’s. Right now there is research at the University of Atlanta—the guy that leads this was a physical therapist and researches Gaga, gathering scientific results of how Gaga can be a tool of recovery. It [the research] is mainly used in the end for Parkinson’s [treatment]. Parkinson’s is a disease of movement, with symptoms like getting stiff and shaking. What they [the therapists] try to do is they try to stop the symptoms, to give them [people with Parkinson’s] new range. With Parkinson’s, muscles get thicker, so the therapists work with thickness and softness, the practice of feeling it. Giving in, letting go. Flow of movement. Opening of doors. What also happens in Parkinson’s is in a way the brain stops communicating with the body, so it’s really helpful to start this conversation again.

N.F.: Can you tell me more about the research?

S.H.: Research started on dancers, with questionnaires done on dancers before and after [the physical research sessions]. 3D cameras are used as a way to measure movement and range. There are many
things you can measure: the way you feel; psychology can also participate. This research will eventually be taken to Parkinson's [treatment programs] at University of Alabama.

N.F.: Why do you think Gaga is different than other kinds of dance?
S.H.: For the people [non-dancers who participate in Gaga/People classes], it changes the quality of your life. But also athletes—there is more and more interest from athletes. Gaga gives you access to your body, strength and flexibility, and stamina, and speed. All these things are tools that athletes use the way dancers, the way we use it. To this extent of course I understand, you can replace Gaga with ballet. Because ballet, it’s movement; but it’s not coming so much from the listening. It’s not so developed as Gaga; Gaga is a new language that builds on a lot of knowledge, a very innovative language.

N.F.: Do you think Gaga is cerebral or academic?
S.H.: I don’t think it’s academic. Gaga includes a multilayer tasking, doing many things at the same time. The way Gaga uses the senses, these are ways we use our senses every day. What we don’t really do every day is to use the volume of our sense. These are things that we can train, we can tune our senses. In this way Gaga is very rich: you can do yoga and Gaga at the same time—Gaga is not cancelling anything. There is no one way to do it. You cannot do yoga and play basketball at the same time. Using the tool of Gaga to get access to the body, you can do yoga and do Gaga. Gaga includes many things without cancelling any knowledge that you have just added.

N.F.: How is Gaga shared?
S.H.: There is a Gaga handbook for teachers that contains all the terms and information. Gaga, what’s important and special about it, is that it’s developing every day. I’m really behind. Gaga takes responsibility in activating and informing all the teachers. You have to come to intensives—I do intensives to get updates, but also information, through meetings all teachers around world receive. Ohad’s classes with Batsheva [Naharin’s company, based in Israel] are being video updated. The teachers are people who work with Ohad. This organic process of training the teachers is a process of a few years where dancers are working with Ohad. It’s still an organic process that is really hard to create. We try to create a school for organic teachers. It is still hard to find the way to train teachers. We are growing, we have more and more teachers, with more and more demand for the right way and organic way to train teachers.

N.F.: Why do you think Gaga is getting more attention now?
S.H.: A lot of people who want to work out and get connected to their body, but without suffering, are coming to Gaga. In one [Gaga] class I have young people, old people, performing artists, doctors, office people—the range is so big. There is no particular group of people that is doing it more. I know and feel people are reaching out to us. The medical world is searching for ways to deal with pain, to deal with chronic pain, ways for people to heal. It’s a complex feeling of your brain, your fears, your physicality together constantly looking for ways. So many patients are getting painkillers, but not enough. The medical world is trying to find methods for people to be active and to deal with pain, to get tools to get better. So they’re reaching out to Gaga, because I think it’s not just about doing yoga and feeling relaxed after. You do Gaga and feel great after, but because you know more about Gaga and about yourself. And you get tools. So we’re seeing more people in the medical world who are interested.
INTERVIEW WITH KELVIN VU

April 2016
Holly Taylor

Kelvin Vu began his dance career during his years as an undergraduate at Yale, quickly developing an aptitude that landed him on the professional scene shortly after graduation. Now a member of the Batsheva Young Ensemble, a subset of Ohad Naharin’s company where Gaga originated, Kelvin returned to Yale in the fall of 2016 to give a Master Class and a lecture. Here, he shares his trajectory as a dancer and his experience with Gaga and Batsheva in an interview with journal editor Holly Taylor.

Holly Taylor: What was the trajectory of your ‘training’ in Gaga? If you could talk a little bit about what your Gaga classes looked like at SFCD, and what they look like now that you’re abroad?

Kelvin Vu: I took my first Gaga class with Yaara Moses at the American Dance Festival in 2011, right after I graduated from Yale. ADF was my first summer dance program, and I had never heard of Batsheva Dance Company, Ohad Naharin, or Gaga. Yaara taught Gaga and repertory for two weeks, and I remember not really understanding Gaga, its terms, or the aims of guided improvisation but enjoying the experience nonetheless.

Later that year, during my first semester at SFCD, the Batsheva Dance Company came to perform Naharin’s “Max” and taught a few Gaga classes at the Conservatory. I took class with Dough Letheren and Matan David. All of the Gaga classes were open to dancers in the larger Bay area community and were crowded as a result.

It wasn’t until Tom Weinberger came to the Conservatory that I felt a personal connection with Gaga and began to understand more about what it meant to engage in its specific physical research. By then, I had been at the Conservatory for about seven months, and physical research had become a daily practice through ballet, choreography, and improvisation sessions. By the time Tom came, I think that I was more equipped physically and intellectually (and more united between the two modes) to be able to process Gaga. After that, I took Gaga with Bobbi Smith during the SFCD summer intensive, during which she also taught Ohad’s repertory. And during the next year, I took Gaga classes once or twice a week with teachers from Gaga’s Teacher Training Program.

Until then, Gaga was most meaningful for me as a professional dancer when it was paired with repertory, when I had the opportunity to take a Gaga class and then apply the concepts with choreography.

Now that I’m in Batsheva, Gaga is my primary training tool. We take it every day with Ohad and with other experienced teachers leading us. What is special about Gaga in Tel Aviv and in Batsheva is that Ohad really uses each Gaga class as a laboratory. He researches with us and through us, introducing and developing concepts before they become codified or even named. In Batsheva, I feel closer to the source of Gaga and to its latest updates and experiments. Also, my job is immersed in Gaga. The choreography is communicated in terms of Gaga, and the application of the movement language is part of what I do everyday.

H.T.: Do you have any words on how you inhabit the movement language, how it feels for your body/how your body interacts with it?

K.V.: In many ways, Gaga feels like a language that I’d wanted to speak even before I knew it existed, not unlike the feeling that I had when I stepped onto Yale’s campus—somehow it felt “right.” I believe that many dancers who come to Batsheva feel this way, that they share many elements with Ohad’s language and Gaga even before they join the company.

Since I’ve been training in Gaga for a few years now, my primary lens of understanding language has become colored by Gaga. I feel that the
primary concepts—listening to the body, horizontal forces, giving in to go further, connecting effort and weakness to pleasure, connecting to groove, and playing with textures and “traveling stuff”—have become important elements of my movement instincts. I guess what I’m trying to say is that now, I feel that I don’t have to turn on the Gaga button quite as consciously and deliberately as I did when I first started. Now, it’s a bit more automatic and familiar.

That said, Gaga and my relationship with it is continually changing. Certain concepts took me longer than others to understand, and with more time, others deepened and became more complex. Some things feel easy for my brain and my body to comprehend and inhabit, whereas others take time to shift from something more foreign to more available.

What I find amazing in Gaga is also what I find most interesting in dance more generally: the blend of intellectual and physical rigor and the combination of research and instincts. For me, working to inhabit Gaga is a process of encountering a certain principle, trying it on, working to understand the sensations of it, applying those sensations, and ultimately folding the concept into my body of work and toolbox of options. In this way, I feel that I’m continually adding to my toolbox and the range of options that I can choose from in movement.

H.T.: Where have you traveled with Batsheva? Do you have any impressions of the audience reception in those places?

K.V.: I’ve traveled around Israel and around the world with Batsheva. Here’s a list of places outside of Israel that we’ve toured to: Austria, Brazil, Chile, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Reunion Island, and the United States.

From my experience, audiences have been incredibly warm and receptive. I know that there have been protests against Batsheva in the past because the company receives funding from Israel’s government, but none have happened on any of the tours that I’ve been on. In fact, audiences abroad tend to be even more enthusiastic and excited than our audiences at home. Generally, they seem very engaged with the work and thankful for the dancers’ performances and efforts.

H.T.: What has your experience been being on tour in America with Batsheva? Audience reception, publicity measures, anything like that.

K.V.: I’ve only been on one tour to America with Batsheva so far. We traveled to perform Deca Dance at Williams College in Williamstown, MA, and at the Joyce Theater in New York. The tour was an amazing experience, especially because it was the first time that some of my family and friends had seen me dance professionally. Williams was a great start to our tour because not many people actually knew about Ohad Naharin or Batsheva or concert dance more broadly. They have amazing facilities and the campus is beautiful, and we were able to find our feet there without the craziness and hype that New York would bring.

In New York, we performed eight shows in six days, with double shows on our last two days. Usually, we only perform three or four shows at a time, and with Deca Dance, only one show per day. Despite the physical and mental demands of performing so many shows, we had a very nice run to sold out audiences who gave us a standing ovation for every show. Also, we had a few post-show receptions with patrons, and they were all very enthusiastic about us being there and appreciative about what they had just seen.

Coming to New York is always important for Batsheva because it’s the easiest way to stay connected with the contemporary dance scene in America and because we have many supporters, donors, and future Batsheva dancers in New York. I’m not sure of all of the publicity measures, but I do know that Batsheva personally invited many people from the dance and arts communities to the shows. Also, I’m sure that the Joyce also publicized as they normally do.

Overall, Batsheva maintains a very strong connection with America; there is typically a tour to the States and Canada every two years for the main company. This was the first time that the Ensemble (the junior company) had its own tour to New York, but I think that judging from its success, there will be more in the future.
H.T.: What do you do, as an American dancing with Batsheva, with the political connotations people assign to Gaga? Have the political/military tensions influenced your relationship with the language?

K.V.: Honestly, I don’t really associate Gaga with the political situation in Israel or even with Israel itself. The connection is there, of course, because Batsheva, Ohad, and Gaga are all based in Israel. For me, training in Gaga and dancing with Batsheva feels somewhat like living in an independent ecosystem that could exist anywhere. That’s not to say that I, or my colleagues, don’t think about politics, the military, and the state of things in Israel. On the contrary, most of us lean liberally on our politics, and Ohad is an outspoken critic of the government’s policies, especially in regards to the settlements and actions against Palestinians. And most of the Israeli dancers fulfilled their mandatory army service. As a result, it’s impossible to not feel that being in Israel involves me in complications here. But Ohad’s work and Gaga feel separate. The demands and results of Gaga—listening to our bodies, staying in the moment, researching continually—are so rich that there doesn’t seem to be enough brain space to think about the political and military tensions abound in Israel, at least in the moment.

That said, being an American in Israel does have its complications and contradictions. Since I am not Jewish, I didn’t have any strong personal connections to Israel before moving here, and I also didn’t have any prior experience. I had only a vague notion of my stance on politics. Now that I’ve lived here for three years—and through one military escalation and through one national election—I feel that I have firmer grasp of just how complicated dynamics are here. Of course, there is the larger existential question of Israel’s statehood. But in a more familiar way, there are so many conflicts inside of Israeli circles that echo the same conflicts around the world: economic policies, gay marriage, immigration. As a foreigner here, I feel that I can examine these dynamics with a slightly less biased lens than I would in America, but many of the arguments and fights feel not so far from home.

WRITINGS BY THE DANCERS

In addition to participating in studio rehearsals, YDT members write—about their experience of the physical work, their impressions of the rehearsal process, their revelations, confusions, likes and dislikes. YDT members therefore engage in two forms of research, embodied and written, to help them grapple with Gaga and the choreography Saar and Lee threw their way.

February 7, 2016
Naomi Roselaar

We’ve been in rehearsal for 3 weeks I think. Five rehearsals—because of one snow day. That’s three hours lost. That’s a lot.

The structure is always one hour of Gaga class. We always play by the rules here. No fucking up like we can, and should, for anything else.

The rest of rehearsal has an enormous tension between preciseness and exactness—in sharpness of movement, in intention, in body placement, intensity, and motivation. And wild uncontaminability. We snap erratically, break from the rhythm after the third repetition, and feel forces and engines move our bodies rather than solely our minds and muscles.
But in class we obey all the rules. No mirrors, no hesitations, no lateness. None.
It isn’t Saar, it’s the rules.
Despite the freedom of choice in movement, Gaga is strictly structured.
We start every class sinking into water. I forget quickly, but as Lee reminded us this Saturday, you’re always in water. And you don’t stop moving. Ever. The pauses are just a return to resting movement, not a stop.
It’s part of the no interruption thing. We can’t ripple the water. Well we’re probably supposed to ripple it, but we shouldn’t climb out of the water and get back in. No leaving for the bathroom or a sip of water, or sliding in after everyone else. No being late. Ever.
Continuity is key.

Then there’s the movement. It’s all from our lena (and pika and yoyo) but it’s really hard to find, even then. I have difficulty losing the embellishments I automatically give it.
I’m not human enough. Learning Trisha Brown’s work showed me how much stiffness I hold in my sternum. In every warm up I placed one palm in the center of my chest and willed myself to soften. Lengthening into Alvin Ailey’s and Matthew Rushing’s choreography demanded the same release, and I focused on creating more space from sternum to spine in every transition. Saar’s word for that perpetual upper body rigidity is “the box.” I don’t think it’s quite the box on my body anymore, because after Irène and Renee I can catch it on myself. But I have trouble grooving, and I autocorrect to inside my glass eyes. The truly present act of seeing the room and other dancers constantly fades if I don’t keep it at the forefront of my consciousness. I also struggle to move from my feet up. Energy entering my fingertips flows fine. I connect and ‘mix’ the muscles/flesh of my upper body. But the balls in my ankles and metatarsals don’t spin the same way. It’s not gravity (something we’re never supposed to give in to because we’re in water, remember?) The tiny doors in my joints down there are creaky and the motion sensors only pick up the extra tall people.

RESEARCH IN STRUGGLE
February 24, 2016
Nicole Feng
While Gaga class offers a place to freely research, I find that in the process, I am also constantly struggling. I grapple with the verbal prompts that we work with, because the neural connections that we must make are new and unfamiliar to me. It is much like carrying out a task using the nondominant side of my body, or clasping my hands together with the other thumb on top. As a result, I experience new sensations and
awaken the dormant areas of my body. What I currently find to be especially challenging is making connections between opposites and extremes. Connecting horizontal to vertical forces. Connecting pleasure to pain. Letting go to receive more. Being simultaneously aware of internal sensations and external surroundings. Keeping effort to certain areas of the body. Letting go to explode. Giving and receiving both at once. Falling into floating in water. Hiding the beginning.

At times, they seem like impossible tasks, but perhaps they are meant to be impossible. Maybe we are supposed to be overwhelmed. Maybe failure is okay. And in this struggle, I find my mentality changing. I recognize and accept when I fail and simply try again. I attach less value and judgement to being able to master a prompt or skill quickly with relative ease.

In fact, I am beginning to wonder if mistakes even have to exist and if it is all in our perception and control. For example, Saar often says matter-of-factly, “If you fall, you fall.” But it is about the way we fall. By riding the fall, we harvest that movement for investing into something new, thus, reappropriating a would-have-been mistake. By opening our bodies to possibility and new perspectives, we are able to perceive the moment as something other than just falling. I can fall, but I don’t have to.

UNTITLED

February 17, 2016
Kellie Ann Lynch

I’ve not had much exposure to Gaga in the past, but I have a lot of experience with improvisation and dance. For me, Gaga is bridging the gap between sensation based explorations and improvisation as a tool to make choices. It feels almost like a somatic practice by way of the language and imagery used, yet it asks you challenge your physical threshold; and it’s extremely rigorous, because Gaga asks you to explore movement pathways you didn’t realize your body was capable of finding. My body is feeling pushed, energized, and sometimes exhausted. My whole self is deeply appreciative of the emphasize on organs, tissue, bones and deep bodily sensations. For me, Gaga is bringing together two aspects of dance I sometimes feel like I live in.

TEACH ME HOW TO BE COOL... PLEASE

March 23, 2016
Mary Chandler Gwin
Saar loves to tell us to “be cool,” but before that happens I’m going to need somebody to teach me how to do that. I have firmly accepted the fact that I am not “cool” nor ever will be “cool” in the calm and collected sense (or any sense really but that is not being asked of me in this instance). How am I supposed to be calm, cool and collected when my hands are dripping with sweat as I roll less feet away from a work of art that three people warned me of its fragility? The part I most related to is in ‘cows’ when we trip over ourselves and then look behind us to see what we tripped over (a daily occurrence for me). I tear up in my classes when I become overwhelmed with joy, fascination, and awe as we discuss a major discovery in the field of discussion; I definitely do not possess a calm response mechanism. All I can do in between now and our performance is watch Saar and my fellow dancers in order to get as many tips on how to ‘be cool.’ From what I have observed it’s a matter of remaining loose and receptive. Whenever I am in the midst of a very ‘uncool’ moment like when I ended up horizontal on the corner of York and Elm, my body tenses up. While I laid on that
sidewalk, I could barely respond to Holly as she attempted to pick me up off the sidewalk, due to laughter and full body contraction. So maybe in this example if I were ‘being cool’ I one probably wouldn’t have fallen, but two could have responded to Holly and the fellow observers. So maybe ‘cool’ is more a state of peak availability. It is the mode in which we can do the most research and receive the most information. This definition of cool is not as alienating for me and seems more along the lines of what Saar intends. However, I still need to work on being cool if that is the definition and will continue to observe the other members of YDT. If anyone has any tips on how to be cool, in either the availability or calm and collected sense, please let me know.

I did not expect to love Gaga as much as I did. As our classes and rehearsals progressed, I found myself craving the release that the technique provided to me. Floating through our warm-up cleared my mind and focused me to a point I usually struggle to reach. Releasing a float into a burst of speed was exhilarating. I found myself teaching my friends how to move with their “seaweed spines” and how to move from their center of energy, or “lena.” Every new prompt was exciting, in that I never knew what new movement it would unlock in my body. My favorite part of Gaga was the understanding that there is no “right” way to move through the prompts. Everyone interprets the language differently, both mentally and physically. There is no room to be self-conscious in your movements when you know that whatever you do will be right for you. When you move as if your body is being coated in honey, do you emphasize the stickiness or the smoothness? Would your limbs jerk outwards or curve inwards? What if your arms and legs were all connected by a rope? Watching the rest of the ensemble come to understand their bodies was just as beautiful as coming to understand my own body.

I will always carry this Gaga training with me. Dance will never be the same for me. Gaga brought new joy into this art form that I already gathered so much joy from. The irony in performing our final piece in the Dada exhibit came to me during our dress rehearsal in the space. Dada and Gaga have similar and yet opposite goals. Both seek to dismantle existing constructs around art and dance,
respectively. However, where the tagline for Dada is “Art is Dead,” my tagline for Gaga would be “Dance is Reborn.” Thank you, Saar and Lee, for bringing such important work into our lives.

**COUNTING**

February 13, 2016
Naomi Roselaar

I focus on the words to distract myself from thinking too much about what my body is doing.

In my seaweed spine, in the thread of my arms, the rope of my legs; in lifting my pika, feeling my lena, using my yoyo; in giving, in receiving, being available, feeling each moon of my sole and its connection inside my pelvis; yielding, exaggerating, floating, sensing, really seeing; feeling the rub of clothes on skin, feeling my bones melt into the juice of my flesh, feeling my flesh wrap and hug my bones, mixing my hips with my pelvis; tasting honey in my mouth; feeling energy and sensitivity in my palms, feeling the ball movement; knowing the tiny doors are all open between every joint and turn of my limbs, grooving, letting information travel wrist to forearm and calf to ankle to feet to moons. I quake, shake, groove, float, am human, give, receive, listen, watch, dance.

10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

When I count, I don’t think about moving, my brain goes to my mouth, to the words, to the hurry. The push of energy. Anything can happen if I can always get bigger, wider, stronger, reach further—because it’s almost over, just 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

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All of the language in the first paragraph came from within our Gaga classes with either Saar or Lee.

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**UNTITLED**

August 4, 2016
Nicole Feng

The Gaga language is not only a movement language, but also a codified (?) verbal language that is integral to the form. Without the words or tools that inspire movement, the movement quality is not generated in the same way.

What is the etymology of the technical terms from Gaga such as lena, pika, yoyo, magna (spelling?), etc.? These tools seem to be set apart from the other phrases, as a more specific knowledge is necessary in order to use it. The words alone don’t inspire movement. They need to be translated and understood.

How do you help an audience understand a piece of Gaga work? If they aren’t familiar with what it feels to do Gaga, can they appreciate the full extent of what Gaga offers? Is Gaga then, meant to be experienced more than observed? There are moments of stunning beauty in a showcase, but Gaga holds an even deeper value... What is the difference between a Gaga performance elevated to a stage versus one that is interactive with the audience? From what I’ve gathered, Gaga seeks to get rid of performance and to find honesty and humaness. Is it important where Gaga is presented?

I was sitting in a café on a rainy day, at a table beside a window. I could see there was a particular section of cement on the sidewalk that was particularly slick—quite a few people slipped over that spot. Interestingly, as I observed them struggle for balance over a split second, it seemed like they were doing Gaga and using faraway engines, as if external forces were working on them. We all can do Gaga, but maybe we don’t believe it, because we hold onto insecurities, unnecessary tension, inhibitions. When instinct kicks in, that all dissolves, and we become available for possibilities.

I look for ways to apply Gaga to my life. How can I go about my daily life and also do Gaga? When I am using too much effort, how can my lena or...
pika help me? Why am I tense—are the pearls in my joints spinning? Am I available for movement even as I sit at my desk? Am I aware of the plethora of different textures around me? How can one ever be bored?

SENSE AND NONSENSE

August 25, 2016
Eva Albalghiti

The walls of the gallery scream, above the din of names and dates and other stuff that’s much more beautiful outside context, that Dada is political. Art is political.
When I first stepped into this space I wondered, “what does Gaga do here?” I wanted to know what we came here to add. I understood that the work of Dada must not be done, but how Gaga acted as its continuation was less obvious.

For maybe the millionth time in human history, the answer came from completing a triangle: art is one leg, and politics is another. What binds these two together? What stabilizes this shape, what allows it to pass from a convenience out of our imagination to something that can’t help but exist where we live?

Personality. That is: the personal, the subjective, the felt-rather-than-thought, the done-rather-than-wished.
In Gaga, art is political, but it’s personal too. By extension, the personal is political (the transitive property?) and the political is personal (the reflexive property). The triangle collapses as soon as you see it and you realize that they’re all one and the same and it’s very messy, but maybe this is for the best: objectivity is no object. The entire concept of value is abolished. No one can demand you “make sense,” or “justify,” or “explain yourself,” and that should be a comfort because most of the time what people mean when they ask you for those things is for you to tell their truth in their language even as they use those things to silence you.

This feels a lot like losing your mind—or maybe just temporarily drowning it in the body. This is a satisfying simile for me, because I’ve always thought that temporary episodes of insanity is the personal bubbling to the surface, pushing everything artificial out of the way when it comes (“coming from far away”). What happens when you really listen to the body is the realization (sinking or soaring) that you are no longer in control.

At my darkest moments this became a kind of comfort. It was understanding (without asking to understand) that no matter what I might be telling myself, I was alive and had as much a right to be living as any other body, and that in living I sent a something special out into the world that existed outside reputation, outside right, outside important. And
I think maybe that’s what we all really want whenever we think we want to be “cool.” For a moment, I did not need control, and that was cool. And yet the moment passes, and I recoil from the loss of control as from a memory of pain or humiliation. Why is this?

Control is the ideal of the old world that needed to subordinate one human being to another in order to work. If we earnestly seek to do away with injustice, we have no choice but to stop chasing control. But what do we chase instead? I don’t know; perhaps it’s nothing and perhaps it’s something that’s different for everyone and perhaps those are one and the same and perhaps that’s the whole point. I, right now, will choose a single word substitution and see where I end up: “control” à “ownership.”

What do I mean by ownership? I have some ideas, those winged whims that stuck around, buzzing about my head in those moments after everything else had been obliterated. If I had to classify them I guess I’d call them habits. They’re not really things you can have or actions you can do, but something in between—things you can inhabit and that somehow make you more you even as you’re letting go of so much.

There is respect, for how can we claim to know what’s best for another once we’ve seen the idea of “best” fall to pieces?
There is forgiveness, for how can we demand consistency when so much is out of our control?
There is love, for what else will give us a reason to be here?

Three points of contact (lol more like 1.5 cuz unfinished) on worth.
Gaga is, so far, the only form of dance I’ve experienced that feels really, truly for the dancer. I mean, these rehearsals mark the only times I’ve heard “you are not performing” from an instructor and felt they really meant it. Gaga has a project, one that’s even more explicitly articulated than the project of many movements in art and dance, but it nonetheless remains for the dancer too. I think that’s the reason I, despite the frustration of diving into a movement vocabulary so radically different from (and maybe incompatible with?) the training written on my body, have fallen quietly (reluctantly?) in love with it. There is no passion, yet—ours is the kind of unobtrusive love that’s grounded mutual respect, with not an ounce of codependence throwing everything off balance.

I’ve always struggled to feel worthy and to feel valued. The diversity I felt I poisoned and the heritage I could not claim and the love I doubted in the dark of night—every night, every night—and the beauty that I believed in when she looked me in the eye and said “you are enough,” but not after.

On crazy motherfuckers.
I’ve always had a weird romantic attachment to the idea of losing my mind. I guess to me insanity meant surrender of responsibility.
I need nothing, I want nothing, I am nothing. I owe you nothing. What you get is what you see.
I feel as if I’m telling a different piece of truth. The corner of the truth you can only tell in a story that everyone knows is not real. Yeah, we can be joking, but don’t forget that this is me, and it’s you, too.

February 17, 2016
Nailah Harper-Malveaux

My very first impression of Gaga actually wasn’t in this workshop. I had come across it while taking a class on experimental writing and performance. We went to see Sadeh21, choreographed by Gaga’s creator, Ohad Naharin. When I first saw it, I remember thinking: this is not your average professional dance company. The athleticism is astounding, the lines impeccable, and the musicality breathtaking, but it looks nothing like any other dance I have ever seen in my life. There is a sense of spontaneity to it. The dancers bravely play on the margins of danger. They seem to take things a bit further, completely unafraid of falling. In fact, at the very end of the performance, the dancers one-by-one fall behind a screen as the credits roll. The act of falling takes different shapes: a cannonball into a kiddie pool or a limp drop, your
body turned slightly by gravity’s affinity for your good side. The fall can be shared, lovers falling away from each other, yet still holding hands. Your can leap majestically into the air as you fall to the heights.

As I started these rehearsals, I felt like so much of the pressure of dancing was taken out of the equation. It was not about getting the moves “right.” It was not about looking a certain way and following a prescribed technique. It was about listening to your body, allowing your body to be available for the impulses that you feel. It truly is about finding your own groove. As one of the dancers in the group who has had less technical dance training, I actually think that I have an easier time at points, because I haven’t been taught to move my body in a regimented way. I’m used to dancing at parties, feeling the groove of the music and changing it up. My friends and I dance casually and often, never forgetting to involve the pelvis, the pika and the lena, even though I didn’t know we were using them.

I feel Saar pushing us towards this spontaneity, reminding us to not be afraid of falling. Perhaps it is the falling itself that can be beautiful. We often try to let go. We use our engines from far-off places in our body. We yield to different parts of our body and allow our limbs and appendages to extend and become bigger than they are. We don’t stop, but always keep pushing. Our joints are balls, our legs trunks and there is an invisible thread that runs from hand to hand through our chest. At times, I find myself overwhelmed trying to think of all these different images and terms, but then I just remember to follow what my body wants to do and focus on being present. When dancing Gaga, I feel my body open up to all of the possibilities of movement. I feel less constrained. It is encouraged to “fuck it up.” It is encouraged to be a “crazy motherfucker.” There is pleasure in pain and beauty in your inner demons. Gaga is about letting go and truly feeling free.

FOLLOWING PLEASURE

March 1, 2016
Mariel Pettee

I’ve been thinking and reading lately about pleasure as a radical tool. Many of us can relate to the feeling of not belonging somewhere, of putting ourselves in places that were not constructed for us. That feeling can obviously vary widely based on our identities and contexts, but the essence of what I’m trying to say is that often we feel hopelessly subjected to our surroundings.

When I feel this, it’s easy to give into grumbling. Coping mechanisms for feeling stressed, out-of-place, tired, trapped, bored, etc. include losing focus, closing off physically and mentally, and wallowing in mental agony and self-pity. Never am I more aware of this than in a particularly dull morning lecture in which I feel subjugated by the clock, forced to endure the remaining minutes.

I mention all this because one of the wonderful surprises about the construction of Gaga movement is the simple notion of allowing pleasure to guide one’s movement. Inspiration and novelty can wane, but pleasure is the river flowing in a steady stream through us—it will always tell us a step forward if we are present enough to listen to it. And in the times when I feel I am following pleasure, the notion of endurance withers. My attention is effortlessly sharp. It’s the equivalent to laughter breaking out—the joy of it snaps me to my senses.

Perhaps most excitingly, pleasure gives me agency in any context. Whether in the studio, the classroom, waiting in line, driving in traffic, or any other situation in which I’m aware of time passing, tapping into pleasure gives me power over my surroundings. Rehearsals can be long, physically taxing, and challenging, but even during moments of effort, Saar reminds us to find the pleasure driving everything we do. In seeking out the pleasure, the effort itself lessens. It’s for this
reason that these rehearsals, though initially a daunting time investment, have become havens for me. It takes work to stay focused and present, but the rewards have been more than worth it. I step into the studio, put up my hair, and take off my watch. With no mirrors, phones, or clocks in sight, I’m swept up into the daily rhythm of my body much more easily.

GIVING IN
February 25, 2016
Eliza Quander
I find myself repeatedly writing about the distinction between the mind and the body in my Yale Dance Theater Blog posts. Saar Harari’s Gaga classes have prompted me to further explore this distinction. More specifically, they’ve prompted me to question it. Harari’s classes challenge me to think using my flesh. I think with the skin under my elbow, my pelvic muscles, and the fleshy pads of my feet. I listen to the rhythms of my body. All the while, using my eyes to pay attention to what’s going on in the room around me. I find it challenging to combine an inner focus with an outer awareness. We have to both listen to rhythms of our own bodies and be ready for anything that happens in the space around us. And as this careful attention and action grows exhausting, Harari encourages us to give in to that exhaustion. But you don’t give in by stopping. You give in by connecting your pleasure to your pain. You bend more, you jump further, you reach higher. And it seems that a kind of humility is necessary for this giving in. You don’t give in by becoming more than human. “Be human,” Harari tells us. I’m still unsure of what being human means in Gaga. But maybe it has something to do with erasing the barriers we put up between our minds and our bodies.

GAGA: DANCE AS MEANS OF SURRENDERING CONTROL
February 25, 2016
Kathleen Voight
Gaga encourages losing control—giving in to gravity, to one’s body, to the external forces. It is this loss of control that epitomizes the stark contrast between Gaga and all other dance I had previously encountered. Frequently during our classes, Saar directs us to “Give in to the forces. Let go.” He urges us to move without thinking or predetermining our movements and, instead, to rely on that which is innately driven. It is the movements that arise when one gives up all control that reveal the most authenticity and vulnerability. For myself, many of these movements form as momentum builds and I continue in paths naturally appearing from each preceding moment. To move with the things that move me is to relinquish all consciousness of control, to admit these forces upon myself. Today, we were instructed to capitalize on this feeling of giving in: to release one’s body “into water,” indicating a lessening of bodily effort, and to use the movement gained in this moment of release. We collapse our boxes, our centers of structural support—chest, ribs, pelvis, shoulders—and fold inwards, riding on the wave of travel gravity provides. Gaga work with these forces—natural laws of the universe, bodily desires, naturally ensuing movement—instead of attempting to counteract them and, thus, the innate human joy of dance flourishes.
UNTITLED

February 24, 2016
Mariel Pettee

I couldn’t help smiling in the last couple rehearsals as we discussed letting information travel through our bodies—the timing with the recent discovery of gravitational waves was too perfect. In the scientific world, I’ve been thinking about the implications of our bodies being squeezed and stretched due to unseen ripples in spacetime, the effect of masses far and near. In the studio, I get to translate this sense of rippling, of gaining information through touch and proximity, into a practical tool to make my body more accessible to new movement.

These Gaga warm-ups leave me with a fantastic kind of soreness. I often hear many small pops in my joints during the first hour of each class all over my body, much more so than even in a yoga class. By mixing movements in my joints and keeping my back very fluid, I feel as if I’m opening every space between vertebrae and other bones in my body. That warmth and pleasant pain helps me feel a deep activation and preparedness for receiving choreography. I definitely hope to take this sensation with me beyond this semester.

A fascinating element of this experience for me has been noting the similarities between our rehearsal environment and the environment I’m more used to in the context of a theatrical rehearsal. Authenticity is key in guiding our research here and serves as the external validation for movement. Much as in a play rehearsal, we constantly ask ourselves, “Does this feel natural? Does it make sense?” A director might give me a note to deliver a line as if I were speaking to my little brother on his prom night, say, to ground the scene in something personal and authentic. Similarly, Saar’s directorial aesthetic consists of giving us ripe visual and visceral metaphors to play with: “grow cherries from your palms,” or “taste some honey,” or “move like a fish darting out of the water.” This idea of a consistent internal logic is deeply appealing to me as both an actress and a dancer. It requires a sincere self-awareness and commitment because halfhearted movement won’t read as effectively to an audience.

UNTITLED

February 17, 2016
Lindsey Bauer

The imagery in Gaga reminds me of the imagery used in Alexander Technique or Feldenkrais. It is so rich and descriptive that I can actually see the forces at work, changing the way that I move. Gaga asks me questions about my habits. I don’t have the answers yet, but I am exploring.
February 17, 2016
Mary Chandler Gwin

There are the finest crests and troughs on the white washed walls of BRL. Rubbing my hand, thigh, and shoulder blades up and down and traveling along the back wall, I have run into countless door hinges, a fire alarm, a first aid box, and almost hit a red emergency button. I have become very familiar with the wall but am always relieved to finally make contact with another body. The wall doesn't receive my weight or give me any of its weight, except for the force exerted due to Newton’s 3rd law. There is a divide between our surfaces; they do not melt or morph into a joined being. Without the wall giving me weight, I have been unable to fully lean into the wall while doing my phrase. I remain two to three inches away, putting just enough pressure to trick myself into believing my lena is committed to the action and the relationship. However once I have contact with Holly's skin, the movement changes. We continue our phrases, leaning into and wrapping around one another. Holly and I move closer increasing the thickness and intimacy of our movement as we press our lenas together. This is an intense exchange of information. During this moment I am reminded of my own humanity as I interact, listen, and receive information from a fellow human.

Saar prompts us in class to give and receive information to and from the space. Holly and I are able to put this into a tactile practice as we give and receive weight and movement. Experiencing the difference between doing the same phrase against an inanimate object and a human allows me to feel what Saar and Lee mean when they say, “be human.” To be human while dancing is a concept that I have been struggling with since I took a post-modern dance course last year. A main part of being human for me is trusting my body to perform actions, to stop thinking about the movement and the aesthetic and do what is natural. It is easier for me to be human when I am engaging with another person because I am able to trust them in our shared performance space. I look forward to exploring the idea of being human both in groups, with a wall, and as an individual.

June 2016
Kathleen Voight

Gaga cultivated within me an increased awareness of body, self, and surroundings; of others, their movements, and their presence in space. The ability to detect the hidden preparation before a movement spawned from this, which enabled us to dance together with movement cues or counts. Each dancer was available to the slightest detection. And the sensitivity that resulted allowed the group to move as a unified whole. A single consciousness arose. We absorbed information “with open eyes.”

Initially, I experienced Gaga as an internal, individual experience. I frequently turned inward and lost myself in the sensation of stretching and curving flesh. However, this individual experience exists as only part of the larger collective experience. This internal quality extended beyond myself or the group, instead encapsulating the space, the audience, and the entire gallery. Unity developed between dancers, viewers, security guards, and museum visitors; we formed a microcosm of shared availability.

March 23, 2016

*NSYNC
Mary Chandler Gwin

Yvonne Rainer after watching a portion of our rehearsal was fascinated with the clump section, specifically a group of people doing movement in synchronization. I tend to avoid synchronization when I choreograph dances because I don’t want to accidentally fall in the trap of it occurring at all times, and I don’t find my movement/arrangement of dancers to make those moments interesting. However reflecting on this section and ‘cows’ I find that synchronization provides the dancer, or at least me as a dancer, with a substantial amount of power. Nothing feels better to me than nailing a group unison section, the energy that I am able to pull from those moments can help carry me through the rest of a piece. During the clump section I feel a buzzing energy of anticipation and preparedness as each dancer waits for the cue for the next movement sequence. I feel a strong sense of community and collective energy during unison moments. I am now beginning to have a fascination with unison and it’s impact on the dancer and what aspect of that the audience is able/should feel.

GAGA AS INDEPENDENT STUDY

Four YDT members treated the Gaga project as an academic course in the format of an independent study. Meeting and writing weekly, the independent study dancers each pursued Gaga through a specific (and often mutating) academic lens, bolstering their in-studio observations with theoretical and discursive references and external sources. Each student also produced a final paper, tying together their physical research with more traditional academic modes to rigorously press their understandings of Gaga. Given the volume of writing the independent study course generated, only a selection of the work is included in a journal. This selection is intended to demonstrate the range of in-roads the dancers took when approaching Gaga academically.

A GAGA CATALOGUE

February 17, 2016
Zoe Reich-Aviles

language, language, language! without it, we are lost

the three cardinal rules:
Ø  No mirrors
Ø  No observers
Ø  No stopping; never stop moving

the lesser rules:
Ø  Sub-rule: No latecomers
Ø  Keep your eyes open (unless specifically told to close them)
Ø  Have music playing (though “we don’t need the music”)

the vocabulary (an unfinished list):
Ø  Thread of the arms
Ø  Rope of the legs
Ø  Moons (of the hands and feet)
Ø  Seaweed spine
Ø  Lena
Ø  Peka
Ø  Yoyo

the commands (an unfinished list):
Ø  Float
Ø  Cancel the box of your chest
Ø  Feel different engines ignite
Ø Move from far-away engines
Ø Find your groove
Ø Find the ball movement in your joints
Ø Open the doors of your joints
Ø Sense [the echoes of your movement, information for the room, ...]
Ø Find different [volumes, textures, rhythms] in your movement
Ø Enjoy the effort
Ø Give in to the effort
Ø Feel the pleasure [of you movement; of your effort]
Ø Receive the floor
Ø Move your flesh
Ø Bounce

Ask anyone. Gaga is a tricky thing to define. Try to write a sentence that encapsulates “what Gaga is” (I dare you). Soon enough, you’ll realize that you can’t. The words fall short, or they say something you don’t mean.

Even when Naharin is asked to define Gaga, he stops short of doing so. He’ll explain that he practices this “movement language” with his company Batsheva. He’ll explain the uses of Gaga and what it is meant to achieve: “[It] has to do with recognizing our weaknesses, our blockages where we have atrophy in our body, and developing an efficient way of movement. It has to do with being able to develop speed, texture and recognizing dimensions and distance between points in our body;” OR “With Gaga, we discover our movement patterns, and we become attuned to our weaknesses and to the places of atrophy in our bodies. We become more efficient in our movement and it allows us to go beyond familiar movements. We connect to our joy of dance and to our explosive power.” So, Gaga is meant to give us bodily self-awareness, to expand our movement potential, to help us connect to our pleasure; these are its purposes. But what are its characteristics?

What is Gaga?
Perhaps this “ineffability” derives from the fact that Gaga is meant to be experienced. It is a bodily undertaking—and an explosive, unpredictable, instinctual one at that. To wrap Gaga in words and present it as a neat little package is against its very nature.

Perhaps Gaga, “by definition,” is not meant to be defined. When asked about Gaga, Naharin is clear that it is a language, not a style (or worse yet, a technique). In fact, he actively avoids the idea of style because “when you have a style it becomes dogmatic and closed.” And this is contrary to what Naharin wants of Gaga! He does not want it to be dogmatic and closed. He does not want it to be readily definable.

And yet, there has to be something that makes Gaga, Gaga. Its rules (see “cardinal rules” above). Its language (see “vocabulary” and “commands”). The rules of Gaga set a structure for its practice. They set the stage and define the context in which its practice is possible. But more than
anything they protect. Think about it. Why have these rules in the first place? To protect RESEARCH, LISTENING, SELF-DISCOVERY, PLAY (all of which are somehow “tarnished” under the observer’s eye). What if the language of Gaga is meant to do the same? It’s remarkable, given the diversity of Gaga instructors and that ever-changing format and content that is a Gaga class, how consistent its language is. I’ve now taken class with seven different Gaga instructors, over the span of three years, on two different coasts. In each class the content and format has been different: I’ve laughed on the floor for five minutes straight, sung at the top of my lungs, “wrestled” with a partner, and dance-partied in a circle. But in every scenario, no matter the place, person, or circumstance, the language of instruction has been the same. “Quake;” “Spread the moons of your feet;” “Wake up your seaweed spines.” The specificity of language is remarkable. In fact, there’s an incredible specificity of language even in the way one talks about Gaga: a “movement language” in which we recognize our “weakness” and find more “efficient” movement.

RESEARCH. LISTENING. SELF-DISCOVERY. PLAY. In what Gaga is, and what it can be, Naharin wants to preserve possibility. He doesn’t want Gaga to be pinned down or quarantined into a narrow definition. So when he talks about Gaga, he uses very specific, very precise language that has “space” in it. This space gives Gaga room to change and evolve (as it naturally will), but also to be many things at once. That is to say, Naharin is very conscious of the language he uses to describe Gaga, lest he betray Gaga’s very spirit and make it something dogmatic and closed. In the same way, Naharin wants to preserve POSSIBILITY in the movement generated in a Gaga class. He wants any movement to be possible at any moment. So he established very specific, very precise language for the instruction and transmission of Gaga. He carefully chose language that has “space” in it—space enough for individual dancers to be able to hear those words and in response, create movement that comes from a place of research, listening, self-discovery and play.
cates it at what is the true middle of most people’s bodies—“between the navel and the private,” as described by Saar Harari, the creative director of YDT’s spring project. He always tells us to form our motions “from the lena.” It initiates and leads where we go.

For several reasons, this seems like an odd concept for most people, even many dancers. Depending on the dancer’s body and training, she initiates motion from different places. For ballet dancers, the engine is the back, from which stem long, graceful lines and deep arching. This often causes an opening of the chest that gives a regal, floating quality to the body, but it can also give it a rigidity that seems cold, serious, and aloof.

We can take another example from hip hop dancers. Their engines often lie in the torso, especially the chest and pelvis. At first, the pelvis may seem similar to the lena, but they are not the same; the pelvis is the region around the hip bones, often including the pubic area. Motion that comes from the pelvis is first felt in the lower body and passes outward. Because hip hop often uses isolations, the initiator can change between steps. Even if a step is initiated by the pelvis, it soon transfers to another location because the active body part is the initiator of the movement. While these parts are working, there can be stillness in the others, and the movements in different parts of the body do not need to be connected or originate from one area. Motions reverberate (think of a body roll), a form a path that gives this style its dramatic effect. The focus and action shift continuously through the active parts. There is also a grounded-ness to this style that contrasts Gaga.

On the other hand, Gaga is supposed to display connectedness of motion.

No matter what the motion is, it is caused by the lena, which is always “on;” even when we are not moving, the lena’s energy stays alive in our bodies, keeping them ready for whatever the lena leads us to next. All parts of the body, in order to move, need to receive energy from the lena. Because it is at the body’s center, energy flows outward in all directions at the same time.

There is no delayed reaction; an impulse from the lena moves all appendag-

Because so much of its movement is improvised by each dancer individually, Gaga does not have a set of steps or motions that must be memorized and re-used in different sequences to form new pieces. Instead, Gaga provides a set of terms, like the lena, that help facilitate each dancer’s personal creative process. This vocabulary allows dancers to tune into their bodies’ sensations. Ohad Naharin describes this Gaga “toolbox” as “a process of listening to the body rather than telling it what to do; a self-analysis which responds and reacts to the echoes of movements as they travel through the human form.”

Dancers move according to the demands and commands of their engines, especially the lena. Movement is not arbitrary because it can be traced to specific sources, both within the body and outside of it.
The lena’s energy does not stop at the tips of a dancer’s fingers or toes, though. It keeps going outward, into the shared space, inspiring and informing other dancers. In this way, each dancer’s lena is connected to those of others, because their energies interact in space and go back through the dancers. Every person’s movement affects others’ in a sort of sharing of energy, power, and motivation.


2  Ibid.

Saar tells me over and over again that I must let myself go, release the box of my chest, allow my bones to collapse into the ground. A few times I get close to doing it right. I think I have allowed myself to go fully limp, but I realize that I keep falling exactly the same way, independently of position or momentum. Let’s try again. I fix that, but then, although I think I am hitting the ground limply, time after time, I end in a position in which I’m still tense, holding body parts up in order to maintain my position. If this is the case, I couldn’t have fallen correctly. So, I try again.

I begin to understand that the only way to release every bone evenly is to start the collapse from a single engine. I choose the “lena.” Instead of consciously shutting down every component of my body, I feel a rush of energy go through my body, and then I begin to drop.

Now that I have gotten this far, all that is left is maintaining my limpness even after I hit the ground. I have to make sure I don’t catch myself, while at the same time staying aware enough to make sure I don’t get hurt. So, I keep on trying to do this, frustrating myself, because although I don’t know exactly what I am doing wrong, I know that I’m also not doing it quite right.

Then, I do it. Right. Once. Having finally accomplished this feat, which doesn’t sound particularly difficult at face-value, I realized that I had just, for one second, done something that was properly “Gaga.” I was a human on stage. At that point, I was not a dancer such as I had previously defined myself. What I had just done was not for the audience or the choreographer, or even to accomplish a specific purpose. Rather, I had been given an impulse and I reacted to it the way a person would. I don’t know what that impulse was, it could have been anything, but that fall was my reaction to it. And it was just as real as any reflex could be.
This experience is something that I have rarely, if ever experienced either in a studio or onstage. Usually, I feel a need to be placed, to predict my movement, and to make sure that I have made something available for consumption. However, in falling, I was not doing any of this. As in life, I became subject to a variable future. I could not plan exactly how I was going to fall. I experienced something at least partially out of my control onstage, and instead of having the urge to reign this unpredictability in, I accepted it.

While this was an interesting experience in a studio, I think it would be even more out of the ordinary if I were to do it in front of an audience. Moving like this is completely counterintuitive to traditional ideas of performance and staging. The audience isn’t paying to see someone else have an experience, but to have an experience themselves. They want to see emotion or ideas brought out of artifice, not out of being. However, whatever the Gaga-trained dancers are doing, it seems to work. Although I have never seen work developed through Gaga live, the exact movement that I spent so much time struggling with, the fall, can be seen in a trailer for the upcoming film about Ohad Naharin. It is so simple, but so incredibly powerful, even through a camera lens. Perhaps the engrossing quality of the movement is just a matter of novelty, or perhaps it is a matter of empathetic response. Maybe in watching a genuine action be manifested onstage, it does not matter that it is onstage, but that we can feel the movement ourselves.  


INITIAL MUSH

January 31, 2016
Holly Taylor

I get really overwhelmed by how much I need to keep open, or keep on. I haven’t figured out how to keep things on while I’m not paying attention to them, and as a result I’m either constantly trying to monitor everything or neglecting parts of myself. Keeping the thread of the arms connecting the palms to the heart and softening the chest, these are only the doings, the outcomes, visible results, but it’s only a small percentage of what is needed, what the body speaking Gaga needs. So much traveling stuff! Inside, blood obviously, but also small tinges very lightly and finely forming channels down your limbs. Glittery traveling stuff. And then there is the traveling stuff that is much thicker, deep red-brown, raw meat. There are probably others but these two are the ones I find most consistently. It’s difficult to experience even just two kinds at once. Immersive. Submersive. Submarine tour of your own body, sink down into it and float along. February 6, 2016. This is right after class with Lee. “You can think of flowers, yes, but also steak.”

Gaga class: listen to the traveling stuff, be available, ball movement, in water, floating, thick, feel more flesh, soft in the chest. It’s overwhelming, this awareness. So much to feel. We aren’t trained to feel very much in our culture, so this is doubly difficult because we are so underprepared. We don’t listen to our bodies, we don’t listen to our emotions. The two are wound up in each other. I am bad at feeling, at least. I think that’s going to be how I start my writing entries: body check in, emotions check in.

Body: knees are stiff. I’m congested in my nasal passages. I have a slight tingling in my feet from putting pressure on them. My mouth is buzzing because I am drinking spiced tea. I’m kind of buzzing on my shoulders and in my arms too, I think that’s the echo of gaga class. My back is fatigued, it stretches really painfully across my back ribs if I breathe
deeply. I am a good temperature but I think I will get cold soon. The 
buzzing is also in my jaw—the traveling stuff. I think the rest of my 
body is fatigued, too, but I’m choosing not to test it. Flexing my quads 
etc. reveals soreness. I’m not as tight in my hips as I normally am.

Emotions: I don’t actually want to write about those. Traveling stuff. On first 
check I’m fine, which means I’m not digging into the wet leaves to 
feel what is beneath the fine-ness. Why not. I’m afraid. I’m not sure. 
Maybe I’m daunted by the volume, which I don’t really know since it’s 
all buried, so why I think things are so huge underneath I’m not sure. 
Maybe because of the thickness of being fine. It is a very thick layer.

Don’t be afraid of the effort, connect it to pleasure. I think I’m afraid 
of feeling uncomfortable. Discomfort. Like having eaten “too much”, 
fullness, I am afraid of fullness. Can I connect fullness and discomfort 
to effort so that I can find pleasure in them? Yes, there is effort in ac-
cepting discomfort, sitting with discomfort. Not distracting myself so 
that I can move past it. Sitting with it. Moving around in it. Like moving 
around in your clothes and feeling the cloth against your skin.

So that’s my project for this spring, then. The translating of bodily effort into 
emotional effort so that I’m not afraid of the digging or the feeling. 
This is my first try, I don’t really know where to start. I think I’ll write 
about the movement to see if I can get to a starting place.

Movement: I feel blocked in my hips and pelvis. I find the outer limits very 
quickly and haven’t figured out how to break the pattern my pelvis 
normally moves in. It’s frustrating. Engaging from the inside of the 
pelvis helps radically, actually. I can’t do it for very long right now, 
those muscles are not used to being engines. But engaging from 
underneath, the pika and the yoyo relaxes my femurs in the hip sock-
ets and lets my pelvis float. Sometimes I knock my own breath out of 
myself when I source my movement underneath my pelvis. It’s like, 
oof, something warming and unsettling how forceful it feels. One 
heck of an engine.

I have found a lot more availability in my arms, shoulders, and back. I have 
to constantly check to feel my chest soften and my shoulders relax 
checklist, am I turned out, is my chest lifted, are my hips square, like 
in ballet. It’s like sinking into a bean bag chair and trying to have your 
whole body touching it at once—constantly shifting and relaxing 
and exhaling and trying and trying all at once. Or running through a 
whole field of horizontal pinwheels trying to keep them all spinning 
at once. You just run around spinning the, and if you see any slowing 
down, you reboost them but there are always more to spin. I’m not 
very quick running through the field yet but I imagine with practice I’ll 
be able to keep the awareness, and therefore the engines, on.

February 7, 2016. Body check in: I am cold, wearing my winter coat but my 
fingers are bony and cold while typing this. I have an intense pain in 
my stomach and I can’t unclench my jaw to see if water would help. 
This doesn’t feel like hunger, it feels like I ingested a small animal and 
it is trying to get out. I’m keeping the rest of me very still, because of 
being cold and on account of my stomach. I freeze up when I’m in 
sustained pain, as if the only thing that is allowed to move is the pain.
It flickers, like flames. It’s traveling stuff too I guess. My eyes are tired. My lips are dry and have cracked so they spike with pain every now and then. I would write about my muscles but I can’t really feel anything right now, the stomach animal is making too much noise so I can’t concentrate on what else might be happening. I have the glitters channels running down my arms though. That’s good.

Emotions: yeah nope. I’m not really functioning properly right now but I feel like that kid who tries to “clean” their room by shoving everything under the bed or in the closet and the mom opens the door to the closet and everything spills out onto the floor. I’m running out of places to stuff things. Reaching capacity, I gotta put some of this stuff away otherwise I’ll lose sight of my own floor. Also I think I’m angry but not sure because I don’t get mad that often and this is unfamiliar. I have so much to do before tomorrow and can’t quite justify taking the time to sit in this uncomfortable place. It’s going to be worse later and I am not looking forward to that.

This is where I am.

Gaga is the first movement vocabulary that has felt good in my body. It feels so good! Pleasure and effort. Ballet is very obviously a poor fit for my body, at least as my hamstrings are currently reminding me. Modern too often has shape-making at its core and is rigid in terms of those shapes. Postmodern I love dearly but don’t always feel my body engaged. Gaga feels like I was born doing it.

I wonder if everyone feels that too.

Also there is so much pleasure in constantly moving, continuing to move, no stops. No stops! You don’t ever drop the groove or go dead or cold or even need to relax because you are relaxed and just easy. Dropped into water. But it has to be the thick kind of water, that you wade through, not light splashing water. You know what it’s like? It’s that strange moment in high school when all of a sudden the image popped into my head of being suspended deep in the ocean, dark blue and quiet and thick, and talking to God, who was a whale in the distance so He looked small. Peace is underwater, which means it is no stretch for God to be a whale. In that suspended place it was quiet and yet still moving, and there was some deep sound, low or unhearable or imagined, and I had never felt so close to God. And never felt so safe. I used that image for a long time in high school and into college when I needed security or comfort or a break or forgiveness or whatever. God is pretty chill as a whale, and beautiful. I can’t believe I forgot about that. That’s my healing image. How poetic that Gaga is also in water, and used for bodily healing.

February 24, 2016
Zoe Reich-Aviles
“Cancel the box of your chest.”

We stand scattered around the room, eyes wide, collarbones reaching for the ceiling, threatening to escape our chests. The top half must strain, you see, to make room for the leg bellow, which wants to float outward and up.

“Cancel the box of your chest.”
Come back collarbones! Stop! Don’t pull away! Give in to the effort of that reaching, stretching, floating leg. Come back, be soft, and let the effort move you. Listen, and you will hear its echoes. Give in to the effort. Revel in it, even. Enjoy.

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As dancers, we have a pesky little habit of dividing our body into parts: right arm; right leg; left arm; left leg; chest; core; butt; back; collar bone; neck; right foot; left foot; head. Even when the parts work simultaneously—right leg rises, left leg stands, head tilts ever-so-slightly upward, collarbones reach for the sky—they are worked as separate entities. Each part follows a separate command (lift; stand; tilt; reach).

The language of Gaga however, aims to disintegrate the barriers between parts. Throughout class, dancers are urged to consider “the thread of their arms,” “the rope of their legs,” their “seaweed spines.” One imagines a single thread that reaches from fingertip to fingertip, traveling through the chest; a single rope that reaches from one foot to the other, traveling through the pelvis; a fluid spine that will have nothing to do with boxed rigidity. When a body translates this imagery into its physicality, there can be no movement in the right arm that doesn’t affect the left—for they are of one thread; there can be no movement in the left leg that doesn’t implicate the right (as well as the pelvis in between)—for they are of one rope. To feel this sensation is to feel the connection between body parts, to feel the channels of the body open.

The channels of the body. This concept is key. In Gaga, the body is composed of a network of channels (the thread of the arms and the rope of the legs, connected by the seaweed spine). When open, these channels can carry movement, the memory of movement, and its echoes. When open, these channels can give movement or they can receive it. A rolling motion in the right ankle travels through the rope of the legs and up the seaweed spine, causing it to undulate. The undulating spine then sends a wave of movement through the thread of the arms, causing one arm to lengthen and the other to rise. Fingers splay and curl gently (and every-so slightly). Here, the right ankle “gives” movement and the fingers receive it (along with the rest of the body, the entirety of which partakes in the movement’s “journey”). But in a Gaga class, the body is constantly moving; in fact, this is one of the few rules of a Gaga class, that you never stop moving. So the channels of the body are constantly giving and receiving, often doing both at the same time. While one arm jerks and sends a wave of movement to the opposite foot, a knee bends and sends a shoot of energy through the pelvis. Simultaneously, a circular motion passes through the seaweed spine. At every moment, the channels of the body must be ready to give and receive, give and receive.

Give movement and receive its echoes.

To allow for this “transfer” of movement however, one must be able to listen. If you command your chest to pull towards the sky—tensed and perfectly placed—while your right leg floats freely beneath you, the chan-
nels in your body break (the chest becomes a box and severs from the seaweed spine, which in fact becomes rigid and no longer responds to the movement of the pelvis) and information ceases to travel. You eliminate the possibility of hearing the legs’ movement echo in your chest. And in the lexicon of Gaga, this is a great loss. Reflecting on his love of moving, Ohad Naharin writes, “I’ve learned that listening to the body is a lot more meaningful than telling it what to do.” More meaningful, he says. Perhaps this is a matter of movement potential. While a command to the body only allows for a certain range of motion (there are only so many ways you can tilt your head the right), listening to the body allows for limitless possibilities. A jolt in the leg can send a quiver through the spine, which radiates through the head and arms, moving you in ways you’d never expect. Maybe this capacity to surprise oneself makes listening more meaningful. Maybe the process of constant discovery and play gives the movement meaning. But there’s also more to this meaningfulness, I think, and it has everything to do with the ability to give and receive. In class, Saar has told us repeatedly to give and receive. Receive the floor, receive the room, receive information from your fellow dancers; give information to the floor, give yourself to the room, give information to your fellow dancers (be “generous” Saar once said). Give movement and receive its echoes. This constant giving and receiving creates an inherent multi-dimensionality in one’s movement. It creates a sensitivity in one’s body—so that you’re ready to receive at any given moment—as well as a readiness and availability to both move and be moved. This, I think, is what Naharin refers to when he talks about the meaningfulness of listening to one’s body. To listen is to be constantly sensitive, constantly available, ready to give and receive at a moment’s notice.

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In a brief tirade against mirrors, Naharin discusses what the body should aim to do without the influence of soul-spoiling mirrors. “To get to the real discoveries of [your] abilities and potential,” he says, “you must sense. It’s not feeling, it’s sensing.” Clearly, the difference between feeling and sensing is imperative, and once again, I think it has everything to do with giving and receiving. To ‘feel’ is to experience a sensation (perhaps passively) with one aspect of your physicality; to ‘sense’ is to know a sensation with the full artillery of your person, to let it travel throughout the body, to let it ripple and echo unimpeded. To sense is to give and receive, to know the full engagement of your awareness and physicality.

2 Ohad is quoted in various interviews saying, “the mirror spoils the soul.” Here, the quote is from: Lewis, Kristin. “The Elusive Ohad Naharin: A Conversation with the Artistic Director of Batsheva Dance Company.” Dance Spirit Feb 2006: 103&125.
3 Lewis, 2006.

THE PLEASURE OF BEING HUMAN

February 19, 2016

Olivia Facini

I never really connected dance to pleasure until I took a Gaga class. What?! It feels strange to write that, especially as someone who has been dancing all her life. Clearly, there is something pleasurable for me about the experience of dance that has made me want to continue it... Maybe it’s because I never really gave it much thought. Simply in the fact that I didn’t dislike it, I continued dancing. But why was I more tuned into my possible negative feelings for dance than of I was to my constant positive feelings for it? Is it part of human nature to accept the status...
So why did Gaga awaken me to the full pleasure I can derive from dancing? I think it came from the “always on” consciousness that Gaga constantly demands. Ohad Naharin states, “There are many things in it: the importance of yielding and collapse, of delicacy, connecting effort to pleasure, working without mirrors, learning to listen to your body before telling it what to do.”

Ballet comes as a sort of second nature to me, so there are moments when I can reduce my consciousness and rely on muscle memory—like during pliés at the barre.

But Gaga is inherently different. It totally eliminates the concept of muscle memory because there is nothing to remember; it is all improvisation, generated originally every time I take class. The movement that I create results from my listening to my body. It directs what I should do, how I should move. Specifically, my body tells me what feels good to do; it has me tune in to pleasure. So instead of pleasure coming from the movement, as it does when I make a nice shape in ballet, in Gaga the movement comes from the pleasure.

When talking about Gaga, dancers often use words like “joy, pleasure, healing properties. Naharin explains: ‘Being attentive to pleasure keeps one aware of taking care of oneself. The pleasure connects the flow of energy and information to your body, it heals you by giving you joy instead of punishment in movement.’”

This is radical for me! But why, since there is something so innately human about listening to one’s own pleasure? Gaga asks us to be 100% human 100% of the time. The movements feel right on my body because my body wants to work to full capacity, to be completely alive and engaged—that’s its purpose!

Now I look forward to the total waking up that my body gets from taking Gaga class. It has become hard for me to dance without first engaging my seaweed spine, stretching the thread of my arms, rolling out the moons of my feet. Gaga made me realize that I had been dancing half-awake, sometimes mentally, sometimes physically. Now that I’m conscious of it, I’m disappointed in myself when I revert back. Just like anything in life, I get the most out of my dance experience when I’m fully engaged.

Naharin explains this feeling: “‘When the dancer is really turned on by the sense of discovery, he can find happiness on a daily basis. It’s very important for me to be surrounded with happy people.’” It makes complete sense; people are their best selves when fully awake, engaged, and happy. The concept of listening to pleasure both feeds this and is strengthened by it.

But of course, this requires effort; it’s hard work. That is why Saar Harari always tells us to “connect the effort to pleasure.” Gaga is not always a cake walk; it can push dancers’ bodies to their limitations. It is hard to feel happy when I’m tired. Gaga teaches giving in, but not giving up. The giving in is part of the pleasure.

Tiredness is a limitation we have to push past. We need to change its psychological occurrence for ourselves. Dance requires effort, but so does everything worthwhile. So instead of associating effort with pain, we must choose to associate it with pleasure; we have to choose to “have a party”—let go more, open up the channels of our bodies, enjoy the movement-making process, acknowledge that our effort is worth it because we enjoy what we’re doing. We can make something beautiful from something beautiful; dance can come from listening to our bodies, from being 100% human.


2   Ibid.

On Saturday, we performed in front of audience members for the first time, albeit in an open-rehearsal format. As I write this, there are just a couple hours until call for our final performance. As I have been trying to wrestle some of my ideas to the ground, there is only one thought that really seemed of any import, and it’s a simple one: it is really different to perform in front of people.

Whenever I have performed, the audience has been an added complication. Most particularly, this complication is the nervousness of performing in front of others. When this is the concern, the only real question is whether or not you are going to mess up the choreography. With this show however, the audience is a much more complex factor; they do not evoke nervousness, but the groundwork of Gaga, its availability, becomes so much harder when performing in the presence of others.

The audience’s gaze is always a tough thing to handle, and it is even harder when the audience is just a couple feet away. When someone sees a dancer performing, they are not looking at another person, but an object, a tool of entertainment. They can look at the dancer, even examine them, but there is never human to human connection. The power dynamic between audience member and dancer can never be “natural” in the way that Gaga intends. The performer becomes a construct, and when their eyes meet the audience’s, there are only two options for the interaction. 1) The performer can drop their performance quality in order to communicate with an audience member on a peer-to-peer level, or 2) the performer can decide not to drop their performance quality, and despite being “available,” would still be unable to have a human interaction with the audience member.

Trying to reconcile this fact through my performance in the art gallery was perhaps one of the hardest parts about the dress rehearsal on Saturday. In addition to trying to stay available, not placing my mind inside the construct of ‘performance,’ something I’ve relied on for the past decade, I had to make sure I was not looking into the audience’s eyes. However, this seemed like I was once again disobeying the rules of Gaga, because I was so blatantly fighting an instinctual urge to communicate through eye contact. It was as if I was caught in a series of ‘Catch 22’s that would not end. Every time I made a decision as a dancer, I was afraid that I was just leading my movement into a realm of artifice. And then, this very line of questioning struck me as very “anti”-Gaga.

However, despite the difficulty of this experience, this rehearsal was the first time I began to really understand why the Gaga language has the rules it does. It became clear why nobody can watch classes. Perhaps really gifted dancers would be able to manage this, but for me, there is no way I would be able to reach the same level of availability through movement. It is so difficult not to be influenced by the presence of humans, by being watched.
This funny thing happens when we get ready to dance. We get our “game face” on. We organize our bodies. We tug at our shirts or tuck a stray strand of hair behind our ears. We do everything we think we must do before moving. Then...we stare. It doesn’t matter where you stare really—up at the “imaginary balcony”, down at the floor, at the neck of the person in front of you—so long as you look without seeing.

Everything changes under observation.

“Just be human, guys.”

How many times has Saar uttered these words? “Guys.” “Just be human.” Most often, Saar’s comment is directed at our eyes. He has no patience for “the dancer stare.” When we get ready to dance, he wants us to really see. He wants us to simply stand, expecting nothing, but ready for anything.

Much of this ethos, I think, is learned from Gaga. Gaga, too, has no patience for the “dancer stare.” While floating your bones in water, firing up far-away engines, and waking up your seaweed spine, Gaga requires that you see. No blank stares, no gazes that seem as if they’re searching for far away stares. JUST SEE. See the room; see the other moving bodies in the room. SEE with your very regular, very human eyes (STAY HUMAN). As a continuation of the same ethos (namely: STAY HUMAN), Gaga also does away with the “dancer pre-movement shuffle.” And it does so with one simple rule: No Stopping. Throughout the entire hour of a Gaga class, you commit to using and engaging your body, to never dropping the body’s research. This means that you never “reset.” You never prepare to move (even at the beginning of class, you just “start.” Mid-conversation, you realize Saar has moved to the middle of the dance floor and started to float; so you float, too). As a result, you never get a chance to do all things one does before beginning to move.

Expect nothing, but be ready for anything.

Gaga teaches this, too. In fact, I think it might be the point of Gaga, to teach us this skill.

While moving through the various prompts—float, quake, bounce, groove—you learn to surprise yourself, to let the movement move you; you learn to be constantly available (available to give movement, to receive movement, to jump in the air or crouch on the ground). And this, I think, is the humanness Gaga wants to protect. It wants to protect one’s ability to do anything at any moment, without anticipating and without imposing ideas of what the movement “should” be.

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I’m interested in the way that Gaga’s language and Gaga’s rules protect the pursuit of humanness.

Lee once asked us, “Do you know why I give you all these weird stories and all this language?” (“cut your neighbor;” “you can think of flowers, yes, but also steak;” “you know those packing bubbles you get in a package? step like you’re about to pop the bubble”) “To help you be human.”
It's so easy to transform under a watcher's eye. We want to perform. We want to show our best selves. But Gaga, and Gaga's training, ask that you just show yourself.

And yet, Gaga recognizes the power of the observer. It knows that humanness changes under a watchful, “judgmental” eye. So, wanting to protect the mover's pursuit of humanness, the Gaga class removes the observer: no outside onlookers and no mirrors (because doers can be onlookers, too).

If the language and rules of Gaga are its ritual, might the pursuit of humanness (which the rituals protect) be its spirituality?

SECOND WRITING
February 21, 2016

Holly Taylor
Check ins:
Body: feeling pretty good overall. Starting to get a heavy feeling in my eye-sockets which makes me nervous about being able to stay up and finish my work. My shoulders and neck are so tense its painful to sit still for too long. My leg muscles feel like they are lined in flannel; it's a fuzzy fatigued feeling from using them so much today. There is now a small pulley track on the inside of my skull on which something is wheeling—it goes around a horizontal, internal orbit in my head, at the level just above my ears and eyebrows. It feels like the wheels on a grocery store cart. I’m turning down the brightness on my computer and drinking some water, I think that will make it go away. The muscle I strained across my shoulder blade is no longer so tender, but I still need to be careful with it otherwise there is a twinge of pain every now and then.

Emotions: also in a pretty good place, as far as places go. Good weekend,
general fatigue with the prospect of another week as busy as last week, little volleys of worry rocketing from the back of my brain about ADD details and schoolwork and already travel anxiety about going home this weekend (but also excitement for being home this weekend and seeing Urban Bush Women ohmygoodness). Was thoroughly distracted today in church but that's alright, I guess I wasn't in the right state for deep self-engagement, Gaga took that out of me earlier.

Movement: today we worked on making space in the body by pushing the muscles out with the bones. Often when dancing I feel constrictively compact, my muscles and motions contained and relatively unsatisfying. During class I decided to try naming what my body was experiencing ‘spacious,’ instead of ‘contained’ as I normally do. I wondered what would happen if I took the normal sensations, which I thought felt restrictive, and considered them to be in fact expanded in a vast cavern of myself. The traveling stuff and the ball-movement availability became this swirling galaxy that was somehow at peace with, and not ‘kept in’ by, the outline of my body. My skin was not a restrictive barrier, a prohibition; it was an easy ally, it let the galaxy roam. Sometimes I felt like my skin and cosmic insides encompassed the whole room, and everyone was in this glittery haze of traveling stuff and ball-movement planets.

Questions I've been thinking about recently/researching/figuring out how to research:
Is the American reception of Gaga different than other countries' receptions because of American relationships with Israel?
What does it mean that Israeli culture is being exported to the U.S.?
How do we negotiate the politics of a body moving with the politics of geographic, religious, ethnic, and military conflict? It always matters which body is moving, and always matters how that body is moving, and where that body is moving—what do I need to be aware of as an American body in America dancing an imported form, from a country financially propped by the United States?
Would we receive a Palestinian dance form differently? (Reviews of Ga-
ga-based dance performances often note how the dancers' bodies seem to be moved by external forces, contorted, animalistic, and, not surprisingly, violently human. Connections between the movement onstage and the origins of the movement form are easily made—are they correctly made? How could we find that out? Would we see similarly forceful reminders of humanness in Palestinian dance?)

My current thoughts: This is so complicated. What am I complicit in? Gaga makes me think about bodies as repositories for lived history. Your research is infinite, metered by your ability to perceive sensations in your physical self. Saar tells us never to be satisfied with where we are in our research, to always look for more places, push further, with the implication that there is always more to be found. This particular kind of research—that is, body research—is unique in that the methods used to observe, record, and tabulate data are not divorced from the data themselves; feeling is both the method and the data. Engaging in body research therefore compiles a log physically maintained in the body, no data point ever escaping into forgotten territory, only becoming lost in folds of other information. The body is therefore one of the densest of libraries. I imagine my body like the walls of the Grand Canyon, layer upon layer of river silt deposited and compressed to form impervious structures of varying composition. Taking a cross-section would reveal a history of silt deposit over time in the coloring and form of each rock layer. The body is like that, but non-linearly, and in flesh. New information can interact and alter old, instead of being segregated by layers. Information continues to move after being logged, instead of solidifying. Your entire lifespan’s worth of experiences lives in and under your skin.

Thinking about the body this way gives one in-road to understanding the political implications of dancing gaga. Saar teaches us ways to move that are rooted in his own bodily history, and we discover ways to translate his history into forms our bodies can understand, internalize, and incorporate into our own histories. This melding of personal contexts is unique to gaga because of its inquiry-based nature as a dance language. We are therefore receiving, processing, and responding to a specific body’s politics at a fundamental level every time we walk into the studio. What this requires of us as dancers is a heightened imperative to be self-situated, that is, to know or at least endeavor to know who and why and how we are within the body—a physical knowing/feeling. We can then differentiate ourselves from the information we receive from Saar and from others, if only to better see how that information settles within us and eventually becomes indistinguishably our own.

TO SEE WITH TWO EYES

February 24, 2016

Zoe Reich-Aviles

“Keep your eyes open.”
“Take in information from the room.”

In a Gaga class—especially if it’s your first class—the immediate instinct is to close your eyes.

“Float. Feel water around your flesh. Let it lift your bones.”
“Open the doors in your joints.”
“Feel the movement echo in your body from far away engines.”

To see the image in the mind’s eye, to translate it into the body’s physicality, is a difficult undertaking. Especially if the prompts are new—unfamiliar to the body and strange to the imagination—your mind wants complete focus. To reduce distraction, you let your eyes close softly. This after all, is a time for introspection, for individual research, for discovery.

“Keep your eyes open.”
Dammit.
Though the impulse is understandable, to close your eyes is one of the (very) few no-no’s in a Gaga class (add to the list, no mirrors, no late-arrivals, and no stopping, and that pretty much covers it). While you grapple with continuously changing prompts (not to mention the layering of prompts), Gaga instruction encourages you to STAY HUMAN. Yes, the language of Gaga asks that you continuously see with the mind’s eye—see your seaweed spine, see balls in your joints, see the thread that connects one arm to another, traveling through the chest—but at the same time, the rules of a Gaga class ask that you continue to see what’s right in front of you, with your very normal, very regular, anatomical eyes. Take in your surroundings. See the other moving bodies in the room; see what information they give you. Remain curious.

When I first delved into a Gaga practice, this simultaneous “double-sight” was the sensation I most struggled to internalize. My mind wanted to live in a world of pictures: imagine melting flesh; imagine balls circling throughout your body; imagine engines in every unit of your body and ignite them. Even with my eyes open, I failed to see beyond the pictures, beyond the bounds of my own body. Only when I watched my instructor demonstrate choreography did I begin to understand the difference. Although the choreography itself was not and could not be Gaga, Gaga was the practice that informed her movement and you could see it in her every step. But where I saw it was her eyes. She had this look that I couldn’t identify; something that made it impossible for me to look away. Only after many rehearsals did I realize what the look was: even while she danced (with all the aliveness of Gaga imagery: melting flesh, floating bones, multiple engines firing at once) she continued to see—the walls, the floor, the dancers—with curious eyes.

This is what a Gaga class asks of you: to see inwardly (the images that elicit multidimensional movement) and outwardly (the world which surrounds you) with equal attentiveness. Such a feat is nothing short of very impressive multitasking, but I believe that’s exactly what Gaga is after. In an interview in which he was asked to make a choice—choose one person you would like to be stuck in an elevator with—Ohad Naharin responds by saying, “Whenever you choose one thing, it’s always the wrong thing. We should always choose more than one. Like one idea, even if it’s the best idea, is a bad idea.” Although this comes in answer to a rather light, silly question, I believe it speaks to an important ideology that can be seen everywhere in Gaga. As you move from floating to shaking to grooving, you’re asked to keep each of the prior ideas in play. Float while you shake; float and shake while you groove. Similarly, in the concept of bodily engines, you are encouraged, as you awaken more and more engines, to use as many as possible, all at once. Surprise yourself. MULTITASK. Choose more than one idea.

EVERYWHERE A ROAD TO TAKE

February 28, 2016
Olivia Facini

“If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will take you there.”
—George Harrison, “Any Road,” inspired by Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland

Personally, this quote has always meant a great deal to me, not only because I inherited from my music-loving father his preference of George Har-

rison above the other Beatles, but also because it really speaks to me. It is more than just a song lyric, but a motto for life.

College spans four critical years of a young person’s life, a self-formational time filled with difficult questions and the often-stifling inability to answer them. At this juncture in my development into a “real person,” people constantly ask me what I plan to major in, what career I want to pursue, where I see myself post-graduation, etc. It seems like the need to plan is inescapable; I can’t even schedule my day without thinking about when and what I’ll eat. (Well, maybe that’s a personal struggle, but I digress…)

Point being, we live in a tomorrow-centric world, often causing us to forget about right now. Really, right now is all that matters because this moment holds infinite possibilities. Right now, I can choose to walk away from this entry and never look back—screw it, I can say, (Saar Harari might even use stronger language for the concept of abandoning a plan) and forget all the plans I’ve ever made, whether to become an English major or to have grilled chicken for dinner.

Carpe momentum. Seize the moment. No plans, no predictions, no schedule. No pre-meditation, no artful anticipation, no built-up motivation. That is the spirit of Gaga.

I was drawn to Gaga for its adherence to this mantra of availability: letting whatever wants to happen in that moment happen and being open to anything. Much of the movement is generated through improvisation, in which the dancer does not follow the typical process of inventing a motion then figuring out how to adapt her body to move in that way. Instead, the movement comes from the internal engines and the body moves however the impulse inclines it.

Ohad Naharin describes how “the letting go, the yielding, is an important concept in Gaga. It is not about collapse or relaxing but about turning to where we block the flow of energy, where we are holding ourselves and do not allow our joints to be available for movement so that our movement becomes stiff instead of soft.”

Gaga is all about eliminating limitations and “giving more” to the movement.

Whenever we feel a blockage or a stiffness, we need to get back in touch with our engines, especially our lene, and move energy through that area, leaving it “available” for motion and the transfer of energy.

Saar Harari often reminds us to maintain our “ball movement availability.” We have to release all tension in our joints and places where body parts connect in order to facilitate any motion that wants to manifest itself there. This frees us to move in all directions, reaching into space and engaging with it.

Availability is essential because it allows communication, both within a dancer and with other dancers around her. Openness and freedom of motion within the body clear the channels that carry impulses throughout the body from the various engines.

Energy flows through the body and expands outward into the space around the dancer. This impulse can then travel to other dancers, facilitating the process of “giving and receiving,” which Saar Harari cites while we improvise in class. We have to be available to take the stimuli
we receive from others’ movements and internalize them, at the same time as we give something to them as we move.

Availability, the possibility of doing anything in the moment, giving in to whatever wants to happen, gives Gaga its refreshing spontaneity. No one knows what will happen—what movement will spontaneously generate from the dancers’ bodies, either individually or considered together—so dancers are always attentive so as not to miss what is occurring among them.

Saar Harari tells us to “stay alive” and present in the space so we stay in tune with the energy flow. We cannot lose focus and daydream about the past or future because none of that matters. What matters is happening right now, and we need to be there to feel it and take it onward.

We need to be available to take all roads, because any and all lead to where we want to go, if we let them guide us.

In fact, there seems to be an absolute refusal toward voyeurism of any form. Mirrors are not allowed, watching a class is not allowed. The focus revolves entirely around the notion of the inner self. Furthermore, a lot of the movement, while allowing the performer to explore their own truth through movement, can be very hidden to those who watch. Saar often tells us to “hide” our movement, or at least the beginning of it. So, though we may make every effort to reveal the actuality of our movement to ourselves, it seems that we intentionally obfuscate it from the audience. However, there are some ways in which this does not hold.

Although we hide our movement, it does not necessarily mean we must hide our energy as well. Watching Saar demonstrate what the movement is supposed to look like, it is incredibly honest. Kinesthetic information is shared between the artist and the viewer. Even if he hides the beginning of his movement, one can see the effort, and see the energy growing within him. It builds tension the pervades the room. It makes me wonder what the performances will be like. So far, we have been studying, honing our movement and our ability to wrap our minds around the complexity of Gaga’s instructions.

However, this has been done in a completely closed space, in which any transfer of information is either taken in or shared, but never freely given away. So far, we have in no way focused on pure generosity in our movement. Perhaps this will change as we become more proficient in our movement styles, but it also may not. However, I am also willing to believe that perhaps it is not necessary to be generous to create an intriguing performance for the audience. And perhaps, the we may not be deliberately sharing our information with audience members, that may not stop them from reading it.

In terms of the way that audience will interpret this information, it is hard to tell. From watching the work done in class yesterday (1/30), what became obvious is that emotional subtlety comes through quite well with work developed in this language. However, the kinetics can still remain a mystery. I believe this will change as we become more com-
comfortable with the Gaga language. As I do not yet fully know what it can look like to see an entire group, well-versed in the vocabulary, it is still very hard to tell what this kind of movement could eventually be seen as.

THE G WORD

February 25, 2016
Olivia Facini

Pleasure (plezh-er) (noun): a feeling of happiness, enjoyment, or satisfaction: a pleasant or pleasing feeling.¹

The word pleasure for me contains a hint of something sexual, something illicit, something that makes me squirm a little. I don’t know if this is a product of American culture, or whether the word actually has underlying signification of this kind. It isn’t as innocent as delight or as simple as happiness. Pleasure has satisfaction in it. But satisfaction implies desire, and desire implies sexuality—it seems inescapable.

Because Gaga always tells us to connect effort to pleasure, there is something inherently sexual about it, too. In Reading Dancing, Susan Foster discusses how this heightened sense of sexuality was one of the many traits that separated modern dance from what had come before. She states, “[Isadora Duncan’s] style, for example, revolutionized the dance world partly because she featured the solar plexus as an independent and motivating source of movement. [Martha] Graham continued this radical departure from the fixed torso of the nineteenth century ballet by introducing the lower abdomen and pelvis and an isolable area.”² This sounds very much like the lena and its job as an engine. Foster explains that much of Duncan’s “action begins in the abdomen, codified as the site of libidinal…desires. The symbolic contents of the abdomen radiate through the body, twisting and overpowering the body with their message.”³ This is very much how the lena operates. Its placement within the body—between the navel and pubis area—is the main factor in its sexual nature. In addition, its ability to “overpower” the body conjures a sort of sexual submissiveness.

Foster’s account continues, “movement of the pelvis was associated, and it still is, with sexual…instincts and desires; the chest indicated emotions and feelings; and the head was thought to symbolize intellect, rationality, and the process of thinking.”⁴ I really appreciated this break down of body parts’ symbolic significance. Still holding true today, these associations demonstrate the ideas viewers hold, often unconsciously, when watching dance.

Foster also describes how Graham used different techniques to communicate the messages and feelings of her dances, including what Foster calls a “replicative mode.” “Although the movement is reminiscent of gestures of emotional and sexual expression, it could not be said to resemble those gestures. Graham’s use of bodily contraction, for example, suggests sexuality but also anguish, tension, and a general intensity of emotional experience. The contraction replicates the interconnection of these emotions by delineating a relationship between the body’s center and its periphery and between the pelvis and the rest of the torso.”⁵

Similarly, Gaga replicates sexual feelings without using overtly sexual motions. It frequently uses contraction, giving even the simple movements of collapsing or melting a sexual quality. When I asked Saar Harari about this seemingly-inevitable tendency of the movement, he
suggested that a better word to describe it is sensuality. This brings with it a different connotation; it makes the experience about the senses.

Ohad Naharin describes the goal of Gaga, “We look to unlock the treasures inside [the dancers]: the ability to create sublimations of their sensuality, demons, anger, into movement. How to give up their ambitions and connect more to pleasure, research and discovery. We teach them that yielding is an advantage.”6 All of these “treasures” contribute to Gaga’s underlying sexuality/sensuality.

When I asked if this is a purposeful aspect of Gaga, Saar responded no. By asking dancers to be “always on,” Gaga creates in them a hyper-awareness and tuned-in listening to their senses. Specifically, they look for what movements and sensations feel good on their bodies—that which is pleasurable. These movements are the ones that give in: collapsing, melting, contracting, emptying the chest, allowing ball movement. This freedom of motion and the willingness to let the body take over is really a surrendering to pleasure, and that is, of course, clearly sensual, if not sexual.

So if the sexual association is not strictly a product of the Gaga movement language yet is ubiquitous in dancers’ practice, then it must be a product of some other aspect of the movement. My theory is that it relates to humanness. When people see dancers fully engaging their senses and connecting to pleasure while giving in, they witness something deeply personal—intimate in a way. The process of giving and receiving invites others into the dancer’s physical and mental space as she connects to her body.

While encouraging us to watch others so we can give and receive more effectively, Saar tells us to look at their legs if we’re too embarrassed.

This embarrassment comes from a sense of voyeurism we get from the process. When I watch other forms of dance, it is rare that I feel like I’m intruding where I don’t belong. Here, I’m meant to be an observer. This is why Gaga forbids observers. If you aren’t contributing to the giving and receiving, you’re disrupting an intimate moment. Mirrors also aren’t allowed because they take a dancer out of her sensory exploration and cause her to evaluate herself based on irrelevant standards; what’s most important here cannot be discovered in a reflection. And it must be shared.

That makes me wonder: does the necessity to share the movement created by Gaga require other people? Saar tells us we can give and receive with the walls and the floor, so I guess not. But the experience cannot be isolated to a dancer’s body alone in a void that can give and receive nothing. Is part of the dancer’s pleasure sharing her energy? Is there a sense of satisfaction that comes from it? Humans are social creatures, and as a manifestation of humanity, I would expect nothing less from Gaga.

1 http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pleasure
2 Foster, Susan Leigh. “Reading Chore-
March 22, 2016
Holly Taylor

Check-ins:

Body: my butt is tired from sitting. I am wearing new jeans and they are more comfortable than I thought they would be. My nose is still stuffed and running simultaneously, and the cough persists when I think about it. I took a modern class last night (which was eh, I realized how spoiled I was from Gaga) and it went alright, I only had to dust off a few cobwebs. During the combination I did something I never do which was let go completely. There was a lot of falling and running out of things but I think the end result was using my body more fully than I do when I control and contain. Last week before I got sick I went to the gym and since no one was there (praise) I turned my back on the mirror and started to float, and just continued to move to my groove until I was really warm and sweating. I missed moving around. I've been moving around my kitchen, sometimes my brother will copy me and what I do w/ my legs. My body wants to be back in the studio doing what it does best, moving the way it feels good to.

Emotions: fairly neutral right now. Just got a coffee since I was falling asleep so will be caffeinated soon. I'm nervous (understatement) about losing what I have gained in strength and nuance this semester, since I'm not training everyday. I think about it constantly but haven't found a way to reconcile that with the amount of work I have to do, largely tethered to the computer. There is a dark cloud looming in the back of my head which I find really unpleasant but am not sure how to dispel. It is all the un-done things that must be done in the future, everything that is up ahead. The journal and my WaM piece and the ADD show especially my duet with MC and the YDT show too and then the musical and summer which despite my efforts is still a huge ? and the only thing I know about it is that I can’t live at home and I have to be moving. I need to learn how to do nothing. I hate it.

Writing: in our last conversation Olivia brought up the problem of sensuality vs. sexuality. Gaga is incredibly sensual. You sense things, you
listen with your flesh, you find pleasure, effort, texture in the body. It is physical and it is a sensory experience. Which inherently connotes sexuality, or better, sexualness. I think ‘sexuality’ needs to be taken up into the sister discourse of the sex/sense debate, that of Gaga and gender. The sensuality of Gaga in the way Olivia was talking about it relates more to sexual feelings than to sexual expression/identity. Perhaps that delineation is also worth discovering. Anyways, I find that immediate leap from sensing to sexiness really...something. It seems to be a common response for audiences watching Gaga, too.

I've been reading Foucault’s History of Sexuality for another class (Sexuality and Religion w/ Kathryn Lofton—you need to take it) and have found it curiously instrumental to my understanding of Gaga’s relationship to sex. One reason why might be Foucault’s injunction to never be satisfied that you know where something comes from or how it works. We must always, he says, question why we do this, why we think that, what is at stake in our underlying assumptions? I argue that Westerners, particularly Americans, have accumulated a great many assumptions surrounding the upkeep, management, and mediation of bodies, which has serious implications for both sex and dance in American culture. The assumption that the body is something to regulate and monitor, in health, appearance, behavior, racialized and gendered contexts, where a body can and cannot be in space and time—we live and breathe that assumption, the body must be managed. Rules about sex and about dance stem directly from this need to control the body. (I rather like the relationship I am setting up between sex and dance, but if you think I am implying that dance is inherently sexual or that acts of intercourse are a kind of dance, you have grossly misunderstood my point).

The American body, being something to manage, is granted 2nd rate status to the ‘cool,’ ‘clear,’ ‘rationality’ of the mind. We use the body as a conduit of the mind, and often ignore its particular saliences. Alternatively, we produce sensationalized versions of the body under the pretense of respecting it, which are really bodies constructed with/by the mind and not true bodies at all (or are understood to be true bodies, but that understanding is still mediated by the mind). One example of this dual dismissal at work in American culture: there are those at Yale frustrated that an athlete can get into the university based on her athletic prowess while not being as academically minded or rigorous as those here for their ‘smarts.’ Clearly, body knowledge that athletes bring to the table is not as valuable as the heady knowledge of other students. The ‘dumb jock’ stereotype says more about the stereotyp...
performed gender etc.) including sexual activity. Sensual pleasures (eating, drinking, love making, aesthetic beauty) are temptations that must be closely monitored. We try to put the body’s needs and experiences into terms that the mind can understand (like I just did above when listing sensual pleasures) that don’t allow for the plurality of sensation. We don’t let the body just feel, we dictate how and what it is feeling by using categories that may not be the best model (the only analogy I can think of right here is how Europe divided Africa up by geographic markers instead of along ethnic lines—that kind of organization may have made sense to European colonizers but it completely overlooked the existing cultures of the peoples they were colonizing (duh); maybe we need to let our bodies decide the categories instead of coming down hard along lines our brains feel make sense...this analogy is highly problematic though because it aligns the mind with Europe and the West, and the body and sensation with Africa and by extrapolation other colonized peoples, and there is a whole history of perpetuated discrimination borne forth by that exact line of discourse…) and as a result, there is a lot of bleeding over, a lot of blurring in between. Which allows for confusion between kinds of pleasure, at least so far as the mind is concerned: this seems like sexual pleasure but it also seems like moving pleasure and I don’t know what to do about the fact that I can’t decide. Every sensation we can confuse into being sexual, every bodily motion we can confuse into being dance. It is our mind that has decided we need distinctions between the two, and the mind that comes up short when attempting to preserve those distinctions.

Foucault has a lot to say on why we as a culture are so obsessed with sex in particular. Why do we think we are sexually repressed, that we need to encourage free sexual discourse and practice? He points out that we actually talk about it all the time, if within specific frameworks. But why are obsessed with sexual freedom as something we must achieve? Why is every bodily anything ultimately related back to sex?

Why is dance, and particularly Gaga, held hostage by this assumption that sex is at the root of everything and sexual freedom must be attained? Foucault’s inquiries into these relationships are helping me get a handle on why we are having trouble with the ‘sexual’ aspect of Gaga (interestingly enough, it seems like Lee and Saar have no trouble with it… cultural influence again appears to be implicated) and whether it will complicate our presence onstage. Foucault is not the ultimate answer, and I don’t agree with (or understand) a lot of what he says, but I wanted to offer up some of the thoughts his arguments have provoked for me and invite others to engage as well.
hone his duet choreography on some of the dancers.

...Four couples stand, randomly placed, around the studio. Each couple works on their own choreography as Saar goes around making adjustments, imitating their movement and then working his own direction into their movement. There is an independence to each couple, they reside in their own space and communicate solely with each other. Watching them do this feels strange. The sensation is not particularly voyeuristic. Rather, it evokes a sense of odd detachment from the space and energy being shared between dancers. Each dancer visibly searches themselves with each movement, going through a checklist as they undulate, contract, and explode. “Where is this coming from? Why am I doing this movement? What engines am I using?” Along with this often comes confusion, or perhaps frustration. But, there is also relief and joy in the movement. As a viewer, this all comes together to create a beautiful, perceived fragility in each dancer, even in their most aggressive movements. Even within the confines of another’s choreography, the dancers show that they are doing their own research through movement. As such, in watching them, there is a piercing awareness that is even more moving than the choreography itself. As I have said in previous writings, they are experiencing life onstage.

I am also struck by the availability of Gaga. In Olivia and Holly’s duet, they stare at each other, slowly moving from side to side in perfect unison. Watching them, I know that something is going to happen, but what exactly? It’s impossible to know. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, they break the serenity of their relationship and hiss in each other’s faces. Although I had seen them do this duet before while working on my own duet, seeing this from an audience member’s perspective is completely different. This time, I actually jump at the hiss. This unpredictability is a motif in Saar’s choreography. In this particular piece, it’s as if each couple is about to face some sort of catastrophe.

Like the hiss, the details of what’s to come are blurry. When and how it will occur are left as events just out of reach. And this is part of what makes Saar’s choreography so interesting. It languishes in the perils of uncertainty and in doing so it forces the audience to ruminate on where the dance is going.

RULES AND DECONSTRUCTION: A FALSE DICHOTOMY IN THE GAGA PRACTICE?

March 29, 2016
Zoe Reich-Aviles

Richard Schechner identifies seven steps in what he calls “the whole performance sequence:” training, workshops, rehearsals, warm-ups, performance, cool-down, and aftermath. Immediately, I have to wonder where Gaga falls on this spectrum. According to Schechner, “training is where known skills are transmitted” (Schechner, 99). Workshops on the other hand are “a deconstruction process, where the ready-mades of culture (accepted ways of using the body, accepted texts, accepted feelings) are broken down and prepared to be inscribed upon” (99). The distinction seems to go something like this:
training consists of the transference of an established, codified form (structured by rules and expectation of “right” versus “wrong”) while workshops consist of breaking rules and creating anew.

Based purely on this “training versus workshop” dichotomy, it seems that the practice of Gaga should fall into the category of “workshop.” Or perhaps I should say that Gaga intends (or intended in its genesis) to fall in this category. “Accepted ways of using the body, accepted texts, accepted feelings” are “broken down.” That sure does sound like Gaga.

1. Accepted ways of using the body:
Isn’t that the point of Gaga? To reduce one’s dependence on “standard” movement and reveal an expanded movement potential within the body? In another way, too, Gaga deeply challenges the accepted ways of using one’s body—especially in the context of a dance class. A Gaga practice allows one to be silly: laugh out loud for no reason at all, have a dance party in the early afternoon, or crawl on the floor like a wildcat. It allows one to be unapologetically passionate, encouraging participants to feel the pleasure of their movement, to taste something good in their mouths, like fresh strawberries or chocolate. It allows one to research: to try, fail, try again, and keep going. All these states of being are intensely physicalized. And in this way, Gaga is shockingly irreverent. The pleasure of the body will not be taboo; silliness will have its place in the classroom; there will be no single model of “success.”

2. Accepted texts:
Most of the “Gaga script” is literally an invented language. In fact, the very name “Gaga,” is an invented word. To stay true to his mission, to leave space enough in his commands that they could be interpreted and used as a launching pad for the embodied exploration of one’s body, Ohad Naharin decided that his best bet was to make up a new vocabulary. After all, every word carries a history; it’s unavoidable. So if you want to subvert the standards, connotations, and established structures that come with any known word, why not make up your own?

And even beyond creating new words, Ohad creates instruction with no (or little) precedent: “feel the doors of your joints open;” “let your bones float in water.” Even the first instruction of your standard Gaga class “float,” “let your bones float in water” has little practical precedent; when was the last time you floated with your feet planted firmly in the ground? The script of a Gaga class, its “text,” is full of possibility. And it rejects known or accepted words and scripts to create that possibility.

3. Accepted feelings:
See “accepted way of using the body above.” Silliness, passion, ferocity, nonchalance—all are feelings and states of being welcomed in a Gaga class. Such feelings threaten the façade that one presents to the world, and as such they are considered “dangerous,” for they make one vulnerable. But in a Gaga class, even the most unacceptable feelings (by society’s standards) are made acceptable. In fact, it seems that “unacceptable” feelings are intentionally evoked and physicalized throughout the Gaga class. This, I think, is in an attempt to let (and make) one feel human.

All of this is true of Gaga. So it fits Schechner’s definition of workshop perfectly, right? In some ways yes, but in others, no. As Gaga became more recognized, more sought after, more frequently transmitted, it transformed. Obviously, it is important to Gaga’s “mission” that it continue to deconstruct accepted norms. However, to exist as a practice, or as a “language”—as Ohad likes to call it—Gaga needs certain rules, certain standards. And the more this practice or this language gets transmitted, the more its rules and its standards become codified, the more Gaga begins to create its own standards. In this way, the very practice of Gaga and the ability to practice it becomes a “skill,” one that is known then transmitted from “master” (very few people in the world are certified to teach Gaga, so the title of “master” is not so far off) to “student.” And is this not the very definition for “training” that Schechner provides?

So, if we must pick a side, which is it? Is Gaga a training practice or a work-
shop? Maybe in can be both. In fact, I think it’s critical that it be both. In Schechner’s thesis, the ritual that exists in performance occurs as a result of a process he calls the “restoration of behavior,” through which a person becomes “other” than one’s present self. The ritual he sees in performance is a product of self-transformation. However, in the application of Schechner’s thesis to Gaga, there are two major sticking points. For one, Gaga is not a “performance” (and “performance” or one’s preparation towards it, is the only place Schechner seems to allow for the possibility of ritual). Even if we accept that a performance can exist without observers, there remains the fact that Gaga’s primary end-goal is research, NOT performativity. On another level, Gaga does not aim towards “self-transformation” (which Schechner seems to require of “ritual”). In fact, Gaga decidedly aims towards preservation of one’s self, of one’s distinct and ever-present humanness. For me, the ritual of Gaga lies in its characteristics as a “training” practice. Its rituals are the rules that codify it as a practice, that allow it to be transmitted from one knower to another.

The second in-road I have been pursuing is that of Adam Pine and Olaf Kuhlke’s ideas on space, place, and dance, in particular their question, “how does the meaning of dance change as we contemplate the different interconnections between the diverse locations where dance occurs?” Taking this geographic studies approach to dance alongside Gay Morris and Jens Giersdorf’s work on war and choreography in the 21st century, where globalization and privatized warfare have redefined the interactions between body and state, I have investigated the concept of ‘Israeli dance’ as it pertains to Gaga and to America’s political and military relationship with Israel. Though none of this research is conclusive, due to the complex and shifting meanings contained within moving bodies and national identities, the scholarship I draw on here has given me new tools for working through the studio work and physical practice that comprised my experience with Gaga.

This essay will also attempt to integrate a practice I adopted over the course...
of our eight-week rehearsal period: of transcribing my bodily and emotional states into writing before any notes I took as part of my research and as a prologue of sorts to each blog entry I composed. This practice was to encourage availability of and integration between different kinds of ‘feeling’ in the body, and to connect written research with our physical work in the studio.

While the transcriptions were intended to capture a single moment of my bodily experience with no responsibility to duration, I found much of the language I had available to me was temporally tagged and reclined upon the notion of past, present, and future body. This locating of the body in time sits well with Deidre Sklar’s assertion that “the body does not hold experience; rather, it is experience, a process rather than an object,” and therefore acts also as a continuing re-orderer and reworker of history. With this in mind, it is doubly important to bring the body into any written work about political entanglements within physical encounters: the body actively takes part in not only facilitating but interpreting and dialoguing with any exchanged cultural significances between two people dancing.

2 Ibid. pg. 4

MY THOUGHTS ON THEIR THOUGHTS

February 21, 2016

Liam Appelson

The following is a collection of ideas and reactions I have had in response to reviews and videos of Batsheva and LeeSaar. In many reviews, I saw the word primitive come up. Movement developed through the Gaga language does not just defy Western choreographic rules, but all rules, and sometimes it even disobeys this rule and will find itself adhering to classical techniques. It is focused on making movement that responds to the core of the performer, without the use of artificial influence to evoke unique reactions in performer and audience member alike. Jane Sato writes in a review of LeeSaar’s “Grass and Jackals,” “It encourages dancers to move in a more primitive, animalistic quality, taking the everyday human gestures and manipulating them to skew their meaning.”

There is freedom in their movement. There is a perceived ‘reality’ about what these dancers do onstage. Because of this, they can even get away with things that would, if done by other choreographers, be ridiculed as cheap and
attention-seeking. In Naharin’s Max, performers orchestrate a ‘dance party’ onstage, as we have done in the studio before. “Pretend you are at a high school party,” Saar says, and we jump around, kicking our dignity out the door. To imagine this being done onstage (and being a success) means that both incredible direction and focus needed to go into the movement. However, when it comes to movement developed through Gaga, this can really come down to the fact that the performers are supposed to be as honest as possible in their movement. It is not about creating a false impression onstage, but about feeling direction and manifesting it. The impulse is the only thing that the choreographer has control over. The results of this impulse, the echoes, are entirely left up to the dancer. In doing this, what the audience sees onstage is completely real. And in reading reviews, it seems that this works. Although a “dance party” onstage may not be as lighthearted as a night at the club, there is something that comes across to the audience. However, whether the audience’s emotional and cerebral response to this dance party is that of being at a dance party, or possibly a more cynical and scrutinizing evaluation of this choreographic decision is hard to say.

Another motif that kept on popping up, which I found very interesting, was the way in which these choreographers, especially Naharin, try to make a personal relationship with audience members during the performance. There are a few instances of this that I was able to find on video and through our studio research. In a piece called “Kamuyot,” at the end of the performance, the dancers walk around the edges of the stage making eye contact and holding the hands of audience members. This elicits a cacophony of reactions from audience members and performers alike. For some, it is embarrassing, for others, very deep. In watching video of a performance of “Kamuyot,” this is quite obvious. Dancers smile or stare. With some, you can feel the tension. It is awkward. It puts you on edge, most likely a purposeful tactic by Naharin.

A second, similar example takes place in Naharin’s piece “Decadance.” Near the end of the piece, audience members are brought onstage to dance, cheek-to-cheek with the members of Batsheva. This, unlike holding hands with the audience members, erases the boundary between the “watching” and “watched” even more. In bringing audience members onstage, Naharin brings his movement to the people in a way that is not really possible without breaking the fourth wall.

The final example is something that I have seen in footage of both Batsheva and LeeSaar’s work and we have also worked with it in our own studio research. This idea is minimalist movement. In the Gaga language and in pieces developed with influence from it, there seems to be an obsession with making movement that is subtle, barely perceptible to the dancer’s eye, let alone the audience member’s. In many cases, we quake, and are often reprimanded for making the movement too loud. We must keep it quiet. So small that perhaps we are not even quaking.
Perhaps there is just potential for doing so. In doing this, there is a huge amount of trust put into the perceptual capacity of the audience, as well as a belief in the manner in which information is transferred between dancer and viewer. Naharin, Harari, and Sher all understand that the audience does not need to take in movement through their eyes, translate it into a digestible idea, and consume the idea that has been produced. They know that audiences can just feel the tension of quaking. People have an immense capacity to feel movement and pick up on subtlety.

Reviewer Gadi Dagon of *Time Out Chicago* picked up on this subtlety, writing (rather satirically), “‘I cannot teach you to see,’ Ohad Naharin has said, but the Israeli choreographer certainly trusts that you can . . . They [three dancers] move their heads about a dozen times from side to side, departing from symmetry by only about half an inch, max. From where they sit to the rear of the house of the Auditorium Theatre is about 200 feet.”

In describing this idea of subtle, minimalist choreography to someone, they may imagine the end result would be immensely boring. However, this is not the case because of an empathetic response the audience has to this kind of panicked movement. The audience is not watching a quiet adagio, but a series of mini-explosions. Quaking is a deeply loaded movement. It signals instability, worry, danger. The audience feels and understands this. In fact, I’d find myself on the edge of my seat watching dancers quake more than I ever would watching a perfect tour jete.
Why do words follow each other? Well, if they proceed according to English syntax it's because that's how my body (word) is comfortable, trained. Like carrying the box of your chest because of ballet training. The goal is to see comfort zone, know it, and to move in and out of it with comfort, too. So syntactically that means a hijacking of structure, perversion, at times complete disregard, other times vague adherence, and still other times serendipitous correspondence.

Why does the body move at all? What guides the action? Why does this word decide to follow (or not decide, happen to follow) this word? There should be prompts, like in Gaga class, I think. Some sort of exploration that the word knows it is part of.

Oh of course duh that the word is one body and a sentence is all that same body. Because I’m writing it. It can’t be any body but mine. In order to not have a solo piece, then, a whole bunch of us would have to write at the same time, or write and have the writers in the same space. The page could be a stage. This makes me think: I wish I could build a computer program that was a blank white screen and flashed our writings up one word at a time, and where the words flashed at a given point would be determined by the choreo. If a dancer walks around in a circle, the words of her writing would show up one by one in a circle on the screen. You could have twenty different stories occurring at once! Maybe they’re the same story, like a choreographer set material, but the company is built different so it appears in different...handwriting? spellings maybe. Or maybe only the meaning of the story is preserved but all the words are slightly different. The dancers know the story but they write their own words. That’s only one specific kind of choreography but it’s the kind I like so let’s stick w/ that.

But maybe this kind of written representation (? not representation. Thought-sister?) would give another way to tell how complicated it is to watch a dance. Bc it’s literally watching/reading a whole bunch of stories moving around on their own time, you miss all but the stickiest of words—like Edwin Denby’s pointe shoe striking like a knife through the heart of the floor in that Balanchine arabesque lift he wrote about.

For me to be writing in English is akin to my American born body moving. Trained in Western thought. Influenced by American lifestyle. What I would write during any particular Gaga session is not only personal, it is nationally rooted. Doesn’t matter when I where I write. America is an idea and less of a place, anyways.

I don’t know how no mirrors/watchers will influence the Gaga writing. Because it will be read, at least at first as it’s developed. And also because I think it will be edited. Kinda fucking with linear time there but maybe you can’t go in and cross out, maybe you have to re-write w/ the edit in. So in a way, editing is like rehearsal when Saar has us do and re do and re redo and change individual movements. Ok that’s a rule: drafts. That’s how we solve the rewinding time to fix something earlier in the sentence. So if you misspell sth by accident (not intentionally) then you have to leave it, and can fix it next time maybe if you remember, or keep it in bc it was interesting, or understand it to be you messing up a little bit in this go-round. So maybe my falling section in cows, my individual movement (if I were making sth up right now) would be

- bassoon nano blossom fume
- bassoon non blossom fume
- boson nono blossom fugue
- boston neno blossom fume
- bostonono bloston fume
- bostonoonomossom fume

and then I would get frustrated because it had gotten mushy and try again with the first-ish one (as well as I remember it, and I’ve covered it up now so I can’t cheat by going back in time)

- boson blossom nano moon
- and so on and so forth.
- maybe what I find really interesting is just blossom noon
- and practice that
blossom noon
blossonoon
glossomnoon
glassomnoon
glassblown noon
glassblown moom
glass blown moon
and now I have two versions I like so maybe I do one w/ the other after
glass-blown moon blossom noon
or cut and paste
glass-blown blossom noon
and start to get something more repeatable:

“note: all of this was handwritten. Originally markings/spellings were preserved. The final iteration of my written falling phrase differed from line to line, because my handwriting changed each time I wrote it, until I got comfortable writing it and the letters started to come out the same way every time. Needs to be done by hand. Computers are like watching yourself move in the mirror.”

Critical Responses
The following essays are audience responses to the Yale Dance Theater performances from students in Brian Seibert’s course, ‘Writing About Movement’ and Margaret Spillane’s course, ‘Writing About the Performing Arts.’

Gaga Dada
April 2016
Georgia Kennedy
Gaga Dada as a dance cannot be removed from its logistical setup, which included the audience being corralled, reprimanded for standing too close to the Twentieth Century paintings in the gallery, and pressed to spit out their gum while craning their necks and shuffling through bottlenecks to view bits of the dance.

Pre-Dada artists in Yale University Art Gallery’s exhibition pushed against notions of how and why to make art, but remained “within the frame.” Aptly, in the first half of Gaga Dada, the audience had to tuck close together on the square floor’s perimeter, facing in to view the action. Next, plainclothes dancers populated the floor. A pedestrian swarm moved erratically, with a few dancers sometimes isolating from the mass. I drew loose associations with themes of collective consciousness and sexual violence, as the group formed a ring; shouts of “No!” resounded; the dancers grunted, and two dancers repeatedly embraced forehead to forehead. Briefly, all dancers smiled in euphoria. The first half concluded with the majority-female group dragging the one male dancer along the ground.

Gaga Dada was more pleasurable in its first half, but more conceptually akin...
In the vast lobby of Yale University Art Gallery, seventeen dancers are lying down in straight line and the audience surrounding them in a square. To abstract and lyricless music, the dancers slowly lift themselves up with blank faces, and at slow but continuous pace squirm until they find their own undisturbed spaces. But the peace is momentary. The music soon turns jagged, and the dancers move towards each other with agitated expressions, aggressively pushing each other from behind to get in a clump. Pants slip and shirts lift, but they are too oriented towards this simplistic task to adjust them. Something’s absurd about their level of concentration and their desire for conformity. Only when the tension becomes unbearable, they break apart, bawl out “no, no!” and crash onto the floor. The sprawled bodies suggest the aftermath of a bomb.

This past Sunday, April 3, Yale Dance Theater presented their newest piece in the Yale University Art Gallery. This year, YDT invited dance artists Saar Harari and Lee Sher of LeeSaar the Company and dancers from Elm City Dance Collective to collaborate with Yale students. Together they juxtaposed Gaga, a movement language developed by choreographer Ohad Naharin that resists codification, and Dada, 20th century European avant-garde art movement characterized as anti-art, anti-war, and anti-bourgeois. The result is this new and obscure choreographic work for gallery spaces: Gaga Dada. The dancers recollect themselves from the wasteland and swiftly climb up to
the fourth floor where Dada works are in exhibition. They break into small groups and continue their Gaga practice in different rooms of the gallery, often obstructing or being obstructed by the flow of the audience. The upstairs gallery space is too narrow to accommodate the 50ish audience members. Security guards continually intervene to secure pathways for the dancers and to caution the audience from standing too close to the artworks on the wall. Audience members are growing more and more impatient, but a stiffer air of agitation fills up the space as the dancers repeat abrupt and violent movement snippets with growing force or haltingly crumple their faces as if they were in pain. Everything is chaos and disorder.

**YALE DANCE THEATER’S EXPLOSIVE REHEARSAL**

April 2016
Stephanie Cruz-Rincon

On the first floor of the Yale Art Gallery, there is a large square space cleared out for the dancers. Wearing mainly jeans and t-shirts, they soon spread themselves out in seemingly random positions. With no music in the air, the sudden onset of movement comes as a surprise. The movement starts in a few of the dancers toward the center of the floor, each experiencing an abrupt push backwards as if some unseen force had just shoved them brusquely. It radiates outwards and the effect intensifies as it reaches other dancers. A pattern begins to unfold. Rapid, violent movement stopped almost abruptly and followed by an agonizing stillness before the next explosion. One girl jumps slightly as she slashes the stillness with her arms, bringing the rest of her body into a low crouched waiting stance. Waves are shot through another dancer’s body, propelling her leg into the air swiftly, but then defying gravity in its slow plunge back down.

At times some dancers seem to experience the movements: they are done to them. For instance, there is a reverberating moment in the dance in which after lunging forward on hands and knees across the floor, the formation of dancers is violently forced backwards onto their backs. Legs braced against the floor as if about to give birth, the dancers clasp their hands together in between their spread legs, creating the illusion of holding a gun. They then shout out resounding “NOs” moments before thrashing their upper bodies left or right, away from some unseen menace. These screams followed by quick twists of the upper body away from the front are repeated several times, giving the impression that some unholy act is being done to them. Perhaps it is the unseen force that ravages their bodies with its movements.

Other times, the dancers demonstrate more autonomy. The movement surges up from within. In one motion, all the dancers bend over, grabbing their legs and push backwards into each other madly. One is reminded of insects scattering frantically, except this movement is directed in the region between them that they all struggle to occupy. This movement is meant to rise from within; one of the choreographers advises one of the dancers to follow her motor, to feel it somehow. Whether the movement arises from some external force or from within, it always provokes the notion of violence. The explosions the choreographers mention throughout the rehearsal manifest by means of the dancers’ bodies.
MOVEMENT

April 4, 2016
Holly Taylor

Before we left the studio on Sunday afternoon, Lee asked what was the most important part of the performance we were about to give. We answered: be human. Be available. Don’t perform. Don’t be romantic. As she nodded approvingly one of the dancers added, and don’t be serious. It’s only fucking dancing. Then we filed out the door into the clear sunlight of just another day.

‘Performing’ Gaga-based movement is a paradoxical project. The choreography asked us to be open to all possibilities at all times, to be at once hyper-aware of our bodies and of our normal, coffee-and-wine-drinking humanness. We constantly battled performative instincts—drama was eliminated, as was the dream-like protective mask performers often robe themselves in. We were to be ourselves walking to our places onstage, ourselves arriving there. ‘Stage presence’ was not a costume, but an emanation of humanness. There needed to be rawness, permeability, an agreement to be here, now, in this way. If we denied the romance in favor of just being, our movement became prisms of infinitely refracting story, instead of beholden to a single meaning.

In the gallery, amidst the (much larger than we had anticipated) crowd of audience members, the temptation to be performatively romantic was erosive and cloying. Dancing in a space not normally danced in, watched by so many normally unheeding eyes, how were we supposed to maintain any level of that humanness we relied upon to loosen our bodies within the choreography? We could feel eyes handling our humanness, evaluating the exposed edges of the everyday selves with which we moved. Lee told us to spread nervous energy throughout our limbs, to send laughter, if something struck us in the middle of the performance, away from the face to fuel other engines: our arm-pits, our thighs, the soles of our feet. She told us not to ignore the audience, nor to intimate we knew they were there. We were people, they were people. And above all, Saar entreated us, don’t be so serious. Romance tended to coagulate in the face, seriousness to calcify the eyes. Just as we sent nerves and laughter down, we summoned availability and movement upwards to break apart dramatic focus. The ‘traveling stuff’ is a crucial element of Gaga class, availability comes from listening to all the motion underneath one’s skin. The more we mixed the flesh of the face with that of the shoulders, of the calves with the hips, back of the neck with collarbones, behind the knees with palms of the hands; the more travel we allowed between what we thought of as distinct ‘parts’ of the body; the more ‘echo’ we felt all over from one specific gesture, the more seriousness dissipated. Humanness, and the decision not to perform but to be, became accessible to us in the art gallery as we re-found attention to our bodies. Dancing itself, then, and the openness we achieved through moving, was what allowed us to go through the performance ‘only’ dancing.
The dancers begin alone, scattered in space, but synchronized. In one heart-beat they seem struck, their bodies responding with contractions and thrown ligaments. Then with movements slow and softened they quietly recover before another pop, this one even louder, shudders through them. A final blast drives them to move before another can come, and they find each other in an uncomfortably snug clump. They seem to have woken up.

“Too serious!” Choreographers Saar Harari and Lee Sher are giving notes. “Don’t be dramatic... maybe you have a moment, but then be in Brazil, rocking in the water.” The dancers are charged with cutting to the next phrase rather than holding onto the last—“don’t perform!” says Sher.

My legs are starting to fidget, so I sit down on—not the heater, motions a museum security officer—so I sit down on the wood floor and return my attention to the fireworks. The fireworks who are not to know they are fireworks. Each one embodies the choreography uniquely, rejecting the uniformity that might be found in other performances. When swept up in the shared motion of condensed formations, a few always seem to fall away from the crowd. The dancers extend their arms upward to find each other’s palms and bend their knees to drop, but two remain standing, embracing, seemingly rising as the crowd around them sinks. They repeat the phrase, and while most of them remain on their feet, one falls flat to his back, dissident in his inanimacy. The dancers leave the lobby of the Yale Undergraduate Art Gallery and drift to the fourth floor Dada exhibit, leaving us to follow them and their portable speakers. Narrow corridors upstairs force them to weave between spectators, and some dancers become spectators. One group of dancers scrutinizes themselves, making faces in a mirror. Others watch each other, mirroring their partners’ movements. Many dissociate themselves entirely from performing, shifting from observed to observers. Consistent with the Dada artists’ rejection of artistic authority, the dancers try to blur the distinction between themselves and their audience.

Taking their leave of the audience by elevator, the dancers ditch their own show. The anarchists avoid bows, applause, encores, but the carefulness of their nontheatricality seems like its own sort of performance. I wait for the elevator to return to the fourth floor, step inside, and watch the curtains close.
There was a moment near the end of the dance in which women had paired off and were facing each other, mirroring each other’s movements or touching each other’s faces and waists. Each pair maintained intent, unbreaking eye contact. Walking through the gallery in which they were performing, I thought: Women in love. But where is the softness? Some other performers were circling the pairs stone-faced, brushing against audience members crowding to see, and I wanted to reach out: touch a shoulder, maybe. But I had the feeling that they were charged with static electricity—that if I had, I would have been shocked.

The dancers, from the Yale Dance Theater and the Elm City Dance Collective, were in the Yale Art Gallery’s Dada Exhibit and they were performing Gaga, a contemporary dance movement out of Israel pioneered by Ohad Naharin. On the website about Gaga listed in the program, Naharin is quoted saying, “We are aware of the connection between effort and pleasure, we are aware of the distance between our body parts.” The Gaga dances I have seen cycle through slow writhing movements, sudden seizures and freezes. They wear their muscles like an exoskeleton. Naharin says: “body builders with a soft spine.” They move compulsively, in torture or ecstasy. Their pleasure or pain—orgasm or electrocution—moves them beyond logic into climactic sensation. It is only ambiguously emotional.

Just before the pairs, I had been watching a trio of women. They looked at one another to aim acts of violence—hitting one another, or pushing—but looked right through the others with dull eyes as their arms caressed: floating numb through the gulfs between body parts. They took of their shirts and exchanged them, wearing them like pinnies over still-exposed abdomens: defiant?

There was one male dancer in the performance. In the opening segment, staged in the art gallery lobby, the dancers walked in wearing street clothes: jeans, solid colored t-shirts, sneakers. A few minutes in, they were all moving together on the ground in a mass on their backs, and then in a characteristic jolt they bolted up and screamed “No!” in unison. This happened maybe five or six times. It looked and sounded like a chorus of assaults with invisible perpetrators. Just before the dance broke apart and the dancers configured into a constellation of mobile units to be followed through galleries, the women dragged the singular man on his back to the side of the stage, and left him. Then they all got up and left us.

This is a description according to the gendered bodies of the human performers. But while reading sex and love and violence into their flinches, hits, and caresses, I was plagued by The Killer’s age-old question: are we human or are we dancer? Were the female-bodied dancers “women” as such? Was the man a man? And who were they to each other? Was this sequence of assaults personal? National—given the aggressively militarized context of Israel? Otherwise collective? Naharin consistently uses “we” pronouns to describe the “awareness” of the dancers in a way that feels a little cultish. But watching them dance, they don’t, in fact, seem quite like individuals.

The choreographer writes: “Especially when we move fast, we learn to love our sweat, we discover our passion to move and connect it to effort, we discover both the animal we are and the power of our imagination.” Maybe this quote was changed by having been written in a second language or translated from Hebrew, but the resulting syntax is rather miraculous. “Our sweat” and “our passion” might refer to each
dancer’s own forces but it might also mean loving these powers in one another. Does “our imagination” drape us in the same co-woven dream or send us shooting away from common presence into our own worlds?

“The animal we are” might be one collective monster made of whole-human parts like the Chinese New Year dragon. Or it might mean a jungle of predators and prey. What is within is all confused in what is without, doer and done-to all knotted up.

“That’s the dance” a yoga teacher used to say to my class when describing forces in tension: elongating through a twist, or heels pressing down while hips press up.

That’s the dance: a constellation of energy with no singular locus. Maybe we push and pull against one another in order to feel; our movements are internally contradictory and only partially referential. We are ourselves: strange, damaging, surreal.

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**GAGA FOR DADA:**

NOT PERFORMANCE, NOT ART

April 2016
Lora Kelley

“Everything and nothing is art,” read the wall text in the first room of the Dada Gallery. I stood a foot away from a hanging shovel as a group of seventeen young dancers in street clothes stuck out their tongues and contorted their faces. At the Dada Gaga open dress rehearsal at the Yale University Art Gallery last Saturday, a group of student and young local dancers practiced and tweaked a movement piece that blended the themes of surrealist Dada art and Israeli Gaga movement. Popping, restoring, and gyrating, the dancers fed enriching energy into the gallery space without ever literally interpreting the visual art.

Wandering through the gallery, following the dancers and the other intrigued members of the audience, I felt the porous dance absorb me.

Saar Harari, the male choreographer co-directing the group, wore a speaker on his chest, strapped into what resembled an infant’s Snugli. Out of his speaker thumped a driving beat: the sound you make when you flick your pointer finger against a taut cheek. The music provides less of a road map than a steady current to guide the dancers. Grounded in dancing improvised gestures and forming physical shapes, Gaga technique allows dancers to flow. The dancers shouted words—“No! No!” as they writhed on the floor—and made guttural chest noises as they flung up their hands in unison. They moved in a pack, leading and following each other to the four corners of the gallery lobby.

At one point the only male dancer collapsed in a heavy, choreographed fall onto the lobby floor. It wasn’t until this moment that I realized he was the only man in the group. Before now, my focus was on the group...
and not on the individual players. He collapsed, and the sixteen women left standing contorted their faces into eerie fake smiles as they continued to sway in their clump. Two women dragged the man's limp body out of the lobby, and with that the first section concluded. The crowd then followed the dancers from the first-floor lobby to the fourth-floor Dada temporary exhibition. We all stepped around the man's body, still stretched in front of the doorway, then scampered up the three flights of stairs.

Upstairs, inside the exhibition _Everything is Dada_, a line of dancers stood making silly faces into a long mirror. Other dancers moved simultaneously through red curtains into another room. For a moment, I didn't know where to go. Since there was no clear leader, the audience had to choose which dancers to follow into which space. I felt as aware of the other audience members as I was of the dancers. Every body contributed the architecture of the space.

I followed some women into the small blackbox room projecting a surrealist Dada film. In this space, a male and a female dancer lay on the floor on top of each other. Gently rolling right below the film screen, they did not steal focus but provided an additional piece of visual interest. Flanking either side of the room were dancers on benches and the floor, nearly still but occasionally twitching. I felt my focus wandering between the various bodies and the screen—I was engaging with the dancers as if they were paintings in a gallery. No dancer demanded total attention, but I enjoyed letting my eyes bore into the minute details and movements of their bodies as they caught my eye.

“Don't perform! It is not performance!” the female choreographer Lee Shar scolded the dancers as they began a new section of choreography. The strange, fascinating Gaga performance was porous enough to handle these interruptions in rehearsal. Dada Gaga lets the audience, dancers, and wall art contribute to the energy of the space in the gallery. An exercise in modulating energy to a room, Dada Gaga joined various textures into a moving work of art. Rich and encapsulating, the dance piece folded me in.

_GAGA SONG_

April 24, 2016

Lee Sher offered a Gaga/People class for the Yale Community on April 24th,
2016. Gaga/People classes are Gaga classes geared towards the non-dancer, following the same arc and rules but with slightly more inclusive prompts. After taking the Gaga/People class with Lee, one musically inclined participant felt inspired to respond through song.

Gaga Get You Into My Life
Revelations on the dance form "Gaga"

Baritone

Bass

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T. m.p.
Yale Dance Theater and the Yale University Art Gallery have invited dance artists Saar Harari and Lee—of LeeSaar the Company—to create a new choreographic work for the gallery spaces. In the process, Harari and Sher have used Gaga, a movement language developed by choreographer Ohad Naharin. Juxtaposing 21st-century Gaga aesthetics with Dada works of art, the project culminates in an open rehearsal on April 2 and a public performance on April 3 at the Gallery with a guest performance on April 3 at the Gallery with a guest appearance by Elm City Dance Collective. Generously sponsored by the Lydia Winston Malbin Fund; cosponsored by Yale Dance Theater, Dance Studies Curriculum, and the Theater Studies Program, with support from the Yale College Arts Discretionary Fund.
Yale Dance Theater
Open Rehearsal
Saturday, April 2, 2016
12:30pm
Performance
Sunday, April 3, 2016
2:00pm
Yale University Art Gallery
1111 Chapel Street
New Haven

About the Performance
Yale Dance Theater and the Yale University Art Gallery have invited dance artists Saar Harari and Lee Sher—of LeeSaar the Company—to create a new choreographic work for the gallery spaces. Harari and Sher have used Gaga as a tool to create a performance that juxtaposes 21st-century Gaga aesthetics with Dada works of art. Developed over many years by choreographer Ohad Naharin, Gaga is highly influential in international contemporary dance and performance. Gaga “…deepens dancers’ awareness of physical sensations, expands their palette of available movement options, enhances their ability to modulate their energy and engage their explosive power, and enriches their movement quality with a wide range of textures.” To learn more about Gaga, visit gagapeople.com/english/about-gaga. Please note that this performance may include loud noises and abrupt movements.
The Gale Project
Choreographed by Saar Harari and Lee Sher (LeeSaar the Company)

Music Selections
Soundtrack edited by Saar Harari
LNR6/Motion Dust
Moral Divide (Endless)/Silent Servant
The Last Parade/Barn Owl
AGF/edit

Yale Dance Theater
Eva Albalghiti, DC ’17; Liam Appelson, SC ’19; Olivia Facini, PC ’19; Nicole Feng, JE ’16; Mary Chandler Gwin, SY ’18; Naijah Harper-Malveaux, PC ’16; Mariel Pettee, M.S. candidate; Elizabeth Quander, SY ’16; Zoe Reich-Aviles, DC ’16; Naomi Roselaar, TD ’17; Brittany Stollar, MC ’17; Holly Taylor, DC ’17; Kathleen Voight, JE ’19

Yale Dance Theater Faculty Director
Emily Coates, B.A. 2006, M.A. 2011, Director, Dance Studies Curriculum; Assistant Professor Adjunct of Theater Studies and Drama

Coordinators
Naomi Roselaar and Holly Taylor

Production Manager
Grace O'Brien, M.F.A. 2004

Sound Advisor:
Nathan Roberts, M.F.A. 2010, Production Manager; Lecturer, Theater Studies

Elm City Dance Collective
Lindsey Bauer, Kellie Ann Lynch, Samantha Russell, and Millie VandenBroek

This program is part of the Dada Un-Symposium, generously sponsored by the Lydia Winston Malbin Fund. Cosponsored by Yale Dance Theater, Dance Studies Curriculum, and the Theater Studies Program, with support from the Yale College Arts Discretionary Fund.

We would like to extend special thanks to Jock Reynolds, Pamela Franks, Molleen Theodore, Frauke Josenhans, Susan Cahan, Penelope Laurans, Joy McGrath, Daniel Harrison, May Brantley, Nicole Slabaugh, Nathan Roberts, Rose Bochansky, Kathryn Krier, Justin Deland, Michael Marsland, Matthew Regan, Pam Patterson, Stephen Davis, Tanya Wiedeking, Robin Hirsh and Pierson College.

About the Artists
Saar Harari was born on a farm in Israel to an artistic family and danced until he joined the Israeli Army, at the age of eighteen. He served as a commanding officer in the special forces for six years. At the age of twenty-four, he left the Army and returned to the dance world, dancing with Israeli choreographers. Harari created his first work as an independent choreographer for a dance festival at Suzanne Dellal Center for Dance and Theater in Tel Aviv. In 2000, he cofounded LeeSaar the Company with Lee Sher, and in February 2004, Harari moved to New York City with the company and received an American green card for extraordinary achievement in the art of dance. A former Six Points Fellow (2007–9), Guggenheim Fellow (2008), and New York Foundation for the Arts Fellow (2008), Harari is a Gaga teacher and manages the Gaga activities in the United States.

Lee Sher began her acting career at the age of seven, performing on Israeli television. When she was fifteen, she was accepted to the Alef High School of Arts in Tel Aviv. Lee joined the Israeli Army at eighteen, and served in the parachute unit. Following her army service, she studied at the three-year acting studio Nissan Nativ in Tel Aviv. Between the years 1998 and 2000, she received scholarships from the America-Israel Cultural Foundation. In 2000, Lee cofounded LeeSaar the Company with Saar Harari. The company received a scholarship from the Mosman Art Gallery in Sydney, where she wrote and directed the play Ester. The play was selected to open the spring season of the Tel Aviv City Hall Theater and was performed there for two years. Lee moved to New York City with LeeSaar the Company and received an American green card for extraordinary achievement in the performing arts. A former New York Foundation for the Arts Fellow in choreography. Lee worked as physical director on the revival of The Miracle Worker on Broadway. She is also a Gaga teacher.

About Yale Dance Theater
Yale Dance Theater (YDT) is a faculty-led extracurricular initiative that enables Yale students to work with professional artists on the reconstruction of existing choreography and development of new work. YDT is conceived as a practice-based research initiative that allows students to investigate choreographic ideas and their historical context through a rigorous, semester-long rehearsal process, resulting in a final public performance. As part of the research, YDT dancers regularly post blog entries about their experience. YDT’s mission is to track and contribute to current discourses in dance through an inquiry distinctly grounded in physical experience. For more information on Yale Dance Theater and to read the students’ blog about the project, please visit ydt.yale.edu.

About Elm City Dance Collective
Since it was founded in 2008, Elm City Dance Collective (ECDC) has been an active participant in the New Haven art scene through performances of original choreography, adult classes and youth workshops, collaborations with local arts organizations, commissioned performances, and professional development and education. ECDC is committed to contributing to the presence of dance as an experiential and accessible public art.
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