

**BEYOND TERRAIN: CREATING NEW SPACES
THROUGH SITE-SPECIFIC DANCE PERFORMANCE**

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At the World Dance Alliance-Americas Conference at The University of Hawai'i-Manoa in July 2015, I viewed an itinerant dance performance that featured site-specific choreography set at different locations on the university campus. The choreographies in relation to the selected sites provided delightful viewing, but they also created new spaces; that is, spaces of artistic and social understanding enacted through the pairing of site and choreography.

In what follows, I offer observations of three sequential dances along with my understandings of the spaces created from the site and choreography interrelations. Undoubtedly, other audience members constructed different interpretations of the choreographies, sites, and the choreography-site interactions. After viewing the performances, I contacted the choreographers who kindly allowed me to interview them regarding the development of their dances in conjunction with the sites. I thought this material would supplement my observations and provide information on what they brought to the site—that is, what concerns beyond the terrain and topography informed the creation of these particular works. Had time permitted, interviews with performers other than the choreographers as well as other audience members would have provided

more nuance to the appreciation experience. What follows then is partial, but also represents an opening for consideration on how site dance performances may construct new spaces of social and locational understandings.



“Ode to the Islands”

Choreography and photo by
Yeh-Ying Chen

I first observed “Ode to the Islands,” choreographed by Yeh-Ying Chen, a graduate student in choreography at Taipei National University of the Arts in Taiwan. This restaged work encompassed the lawn of the University of Hawai’i administrative building and a busy sidewalk connecting the campus grounds and a well-trafficked public street. Chen’s dance then radiated out from the campus and spilled into a larger sphere, one that bridged community and collegiate worlds.

The site on the campus periphery, in contrast to a more centralized and contained campus site, exposed audience and performers alike to discordant noises and clashing energies. This location decision on Chen’s part reflects her artistic and social explorations as she seeks to highlight oppositions operating in sites. Regarding her site selection, she notes:

I wanted to choose a “gray zone,” a place where conflict happens. For example: the contrast of a gray sidewalk and green field, pedestrians and cars side-by-side

at the school, the sound of construction machinery, human sounds and singing birds. (Y.Y. Chen, personal communication, September 29, 2015)

The choreography and site together amplified this gray zone or space—a place of shifting events and focus that was beyond artistic control. As a transitional location—one connecting an administrative building, recreation center, pedestrians and vehicles—there was continual flow of non-rehearsed movement through the site. Chen chose to highlight this flow in her composition. The cast of nine performers were diffused throughout the site in solo, duet, trio, and larger group formations. The dancers also mingled among the audience, moving in and out of the crowd at times to perform choreographed movement. They performed technically difficult and exacting phrases as well as partnering motifs amidst the hub-bub of people traveling through the site. Mirroring overlapping pedestrian flows, the beginning and ends of dance phrases were designed to overlap one another in different areas within the site, which encouraged the audience to change position and vantage points throughout the performance. While constantly shifting in the location, the performers maintained a psychic barrier between themselves and the audience and, seemingly, between each other. Varying from what could be described as internal to proscenium gaze (that is, looking far out onto the horizon) even while performing difficult weight sharing and partnering, the dancers seemed to make little attempt to connect visually with others.

The cultivation of social exclusivity is an issue that concerns Chen. She is troubled by divisive alliances and identities she observes playing out in contemporary Taiwan (personal communication, September 29, 2015). In her artistic statement in the program guide, she asks, “Why are people so exclusive, and why can’t people tolerate each other? Why is it so difficult for people to live with others in peace?” (2015, p.64).

To this end, Chen's site selection and choreography highlighted the varied activities and peoples that co-exist without forging connections.

Peaceful co-existence occurred in this performance; there was no observable conflict between those involved in their day to day lives and those involved in the performance. Yet as an audience member, I sensed that Chen seeks more than this outcome. Toward the end of the dance, the choreography transformed into pedestrian and minimal movement as the dancers dispersed among the audience, underscoring the commonality between the dancers and audience. Augmenting this theme, a solo male performer wandered among the crowd and began to play a hand-held electric organ. He sat down in the grass and launched into the 1980's pop tune, "We are the World," underscoring what seemed to be Chen's message: we are all part of the world, more alike than different, and spaces for social tolerance and acceptance must be created.



"CLINE"

Choreography by Chiao-Ping Li
Photography by Courtney Kuhn

The next dance was choreographed by Chiao-Ping Li, a professor of dance at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Li restaged “Cline” from her larger work “Rise over Run” on the lawn of one of the major administration buildings, Hawai’i Hall. The gracious and elegant outdoor setting was paralleled in the structure of the choreography. Adept in formalism, Li created spatial balance as she moved groups of dancers through the performance space with dexterity. Clad in white, the dancers fluidly performed what could be categorized as postmodern/contemporary dance vocabulary that included partnering and weight sharing, inversions, and successive body movement while they continually traversed the site. Li punctuated the perpetual movement phrases with momentary vertical postures and poses, referencing the mountainous backdrop, architectural columns on Hawai’i Hall, and towering trees. The audience remained stationary on a walkway which provided a traditional frontal performance perspective. The dance meticulously unfolded in the spacious and carefully cultivated lawn, and it seemed as though the choreography and setting reinforced the inherent dignity of one and another.

Adjectives such as “gracious,” “elegant” and “carefully cultivated” speak to me of acquired polish or skill, but also a level of mastery in which the strenuous efforts involved in achievement aren’t necessarily revealed. The choreography and site aptly fit this description. As an experienced site choreographer, Li takes different approaches to address individual sites. She notes, “Some spaces/places have a greater interest architecturally, while others are meaningful historically. I try to let the spaces and places speak to me” (C.P. Li, personal communication, September 15, 2015). Li mentions that she chose this particular site for, “practical and aesthetic reasons” (C. P.

Li, personal communication, October 24, 2015), and for me as an audience member the site and choreography were in perfect alignment.

Yet the creation of aligned choreography requires a great deal of work—as does the maintenance of Hawai'i Hall and its surrounding landscaping. As Li discusses her creative approach to “Cline,” it is apparent that hard work and steely grit provide the foundation for accomplished elegance:

In “Cline” such choices as incorporating inversions connect to my Extreme Moves work as well as my background as a gymnast. Transitions connect to how I see change, on micro and macro levels. My movement preferences such as direct versus indirect flow or strong versus light weight, etc., can be seen as reflecting my efforts, as a small Asian female, to be a more forceful presence in a male-dominant world, or perhaps references my fighting spirit. (C.P. Li, personal communication, October 24, 2015)

While watching the dance, I never observed belabored movement phrases or sensed that the dancers were overworking to accomplish choreographic demands. The movement was athletic, but as skillfully designed and performed as it was, I had full faith that the performers would always remain in control.

The medley of manicured site and masterful choreography created an elegant yet slightly restrained artistic space. But the dancers' weighted and dynamic performance on site made apparent the underlying work and skill necessary to produce elegance. From this, the audience witnessed a space of graciousness that resulted not from the absence of effort, but was produced instead by arduous work combined with accomplished crafting.

“A Perspective from an Island Girl”

Choreographed by Jazmyne Koch
Photography by Kali Kasashima



The third dance observed was a solo choreographed specifically for the selected site by Jazmyne Koch, creative director of StudioJaz, USA in Hamburg, Germany. The site, the outdoor courtyard of the Art and Art History department building, was intimate in scale and small enough so that the audience, seated and standing on a walkway that surrounded a stone and bamboo grove, could at times reach out to touch Koch. The dance’s title, “A Perspective from an Island Girl,” references Koch’s personal history as a native Hawai’ian, and the dance in connection with the site unpacked Koch’s complex identity as a Hawai’ian-born contemporary global performance artist.

Koch’s dance was structured around what could be called zones of signification, and she used different areas of the performance site to problematize aspects of her identity. As she moved from place to place within the site, Koch added or subtracted costume elements (e.g., high heeled shoes, a contemporary woman’s skirt, a traditional

grass skirt) while she performed the different personae layered within her evolving personal identity, including a traditional Hawaiian artist, contemporary-jazz dance fusion pioneer, and scholar. She further augmented the portrayal of the different personae through the injection of spoken text. In terms of movement characteristics, there was gentle fluidness in the more traditional Hawaiian dance movements; an assertive—even aggressive—quality to her contemporary movement profile; and a nervous, scattered, and frantic energy permeating the scholarly profile. (“Mrs. Coates, Mrs. Coates, what is your thesis?!” the recorded text demanded of Koch at one point while she played the academician. Her response: a flustered scattering of papers which elicited some empathetic chuckling from audience members.)

While viewing the dance, I felt that I was traveling with Koch through important times and places in her life, and elements of the site supported these visitations. The site was integral to the varying roles portrayed, and, indeed, these roles were aligned with particular places. In speaking to her site selection, Koch explains:

The site immediately connected with me on so many levels. It really felt “me” and what my performance was about. It was the space itself as a circle. I could walk around and around it, and rediscover new things every time—a reflection of the path in my life leaving Hawaii and coming back again, leaving again and coming back around again, circling the world to discover something new about my homeland every time. The tall hovering bamboo stocks resonated with my Japanese background, and when they blew in the wind they created a sound so deep and eerie. The *pohaku*, stones that were in the space really made it feel like a sacred space. . . . There was also a mirrored ornament hanging from the bamboo, which reflected me and my surroundings—a perfect prop to represent my identity as I talked about me and this surrounding that turned me into who I am. (J. Koch, personal communication, October 16, 2015)

Koch’s recursive exploration of personal roles in relation to specific site features created a kaleidoscopic space of identity presentation. As she shifted from place to

place, physical aspects of the site seemed to signify familial, cultural, and geographic contexts that nurtured her development. Yet, Koch is also critical of aspects of these contexts. She notes:

There were definitely multiple layers to the performance. I spoke about my identity rooted to place—my deep connection to the Hawaiian Islands and my love for this place, yet I also presented a critical view of it. I spoke about my multifaceted identity presented in the many different roles or “hats I wear,” that then lead to conflict as they intermix and intertwine into one. I ended with a commentary about identity and especially historical identities in the islands and how these identities over the years have formed within the community to connect people but also segregate them—something I grew up with and have witnessed. (J. Koch, personal communication October 16, 2015)

Through Koch’s shifting kaleidoscopic space of identity presentation, I saw how the different “hats she wears,” or her displacement from context to context can involve messiness and awkwardness. Yet, her choreographed movement through the site, which paralleled her movement through life, alerted me to the co-existence of contradiction, conflict, but also, coalescence within the space of identity presentation.

Heightened Spaces

As an audience member viewing these dances, I witnessed more than choreography adapted to or inspired by sites. Instead, the choreography and site I perceived together offered a view of enhanced artistic and social spaces, epistemological entities that would not exist if I viewed either the site or the choreographies by themselves. Chen’s conflicted space provided commentary on discord while at the same time spoke of a desire for tolerance and cooperation. Li’s elegant space demonstrated harmony and graciousness, but the well-honed physicality of the dancers moving through the highly cultivated setting demonstrated the strenuous

effort and skill needed to perform elegance and restraint. Koch's kaleidoscopic identity space embraced varied personal narratives in conjunction with specific areas or zones of the site. Through the transitions from role to role and place to place, she revealed the messiness involved in combining disparate places and roles. These three dances in conjunction with their respective sites presented to me unique temporal spaces that dissolved from existence after the performance event. Yet, while these physical sites remain in the world, it is these enacted performance spaces that remain most vivid in my memory.

References

Chen, Y.Y. (2015, July). Artist's statement. Program notes from World Dance Alliance Americas: *Spaces and Places: Exploring Dance Narratives through Alternate Lenses*. Oahu, HI (p.64).