

Conversation with some of the U.S. participants in Impulstanz 2008 DanceWEB program: Milka Djordjevich, Nohemí Montzerrat Contreras Robles, Sarah Beth Percival, Will Rowles and Otto Ramstad

Alejandra Martorell: Sara, you were saying this is the end, and this is the end of the 25st Impulstanz Festival in Vienna. Can say your name and a little bit of what you've been doing here?

Sarah: My name is Sara Beth Percival. I'm from the states and I just spent the past two years in Brussels at PARTS. I took mostly coaching projects, which last a whole week and are 6 hrs./day—we would speak a lot and then try things. It's very different from spending most of the day at Arsenal (the center of the festival, where as many as 12 simultaneous classes are in process each day), and going from class to class. The group becomes more solidified. I was taking coaching projects and seeing performances almost everyday and socializing with many people from the festival everyday.

Milka Djordjevich: To give the readers a context for what the DanceWEB program is: many people from around the world apply to participate in the program. It's a five-week program that takes place over the whole Impulstanz Festival. The Festival is only four weeks and if you take part of DanceWEB, you have some extra time to interact with other people who are part of the program. We have 66 DanceWEBbers from 30-something different countries. We are brought together as a group that was selected by DD Dorvillier and Trajal Harrell, the DanceWEB coaches. The main format of the program is that we are all taking classes and workshops and seeing performances together, which in my mind served as a structure from which we can then start dialoguing and talking about our ideas. It gives a basis from which to connect since we're all coming from different backgrounds.

Otto Ramstad: I did DanceWEB in 2005 with David Zambrano. We did a lot more dancing and performing. We performed three-to-five-minutes improvised solos every day—not for everyone, but for one or more members of the DanceWEB. This year I'm what they call the frog, which is a term from the university system in the U.S. It's the people who live in the dorm, and help you figure things out. Here it's more telling people where to bike and consulting people on what workshops they should take, performances they should go to, and do they really think they can do 8 hrs./day for a month of classes. There has been a big difference in regards to the group, and it's not just what the proposition is from the coaches. When I did it, it was less choreographers and more dancers.

Sarah: Do you think that was an agreed upon criteria? Do you think DD and Trajal set out to get more creators?

Otto: Yes. That's what they told me. They got more people who are making, more thinkers.

Milka: When we were first meeting everyone, it was sort of surprising that everyone was very similar to my own situation—people who are very interested in researching and making their own work. Not necessarily to be a choreographer, but to have some sort of creative process, and also a lot of people who do like to perform, and also a lot of people who like to create discourse and dialogue.

Nohemí: My name is Nohemí Montzerrat Contreras, and I'm a DanceWEBber from Mexico. Currently I'm living in New York making my work and working with artist from US and Mexico as a performer and researcher.

Will: I'm Will Rowles. I live in New York City. I'm originally from Boston and I'm a DanceWEBber. I do a lot of performing in my own work and in the work of other people since I've been in New

York. I'm also very interested in research and developing that a lot here, and in the few months before coming here.

Alejandra: Part of the dialogue structured—there are these talks and the coaching projects. Is a lot of the dialogue the result of you being together in a dorm and happening among you because of all these common activities?

Milka: I think the biggest thing that actually started the dialogue was that DD and Trajal proposed this idea of creating public service projects as a jumping off point. We split into groups of five or six, and as a group we had to propose a public service project that we would actually do. It could be not dance-related. I felt like a lot of European artists assumed that public service was provided by the government, which from the U.S.'s perspective, I think of it more as a communal thing—an activist thing that comes more from privatized organizations or from people coming together. Once we had this thing to work from, if we're taking classes and workshops together, or eating breakfast together, or doing all these different things, is all on going all the time.

Sarah: Trajal also organized a parallel [process] with the critical endeavor group, who are judging and electing one of the young choreographers in the 8 Tension series for an award. We started discussions about who DanceWEB would choose to get this award.

Will: I think that because there is such a diverse group of people with common interests, there's a real potential when we're speaking about things that are not working and working for us, of trying to find out how to make things that are working more sustainable. I think it promises a lot of advances in creating several models of developing work and taking this social aspect and pushing a little bit further. Creating work not only in terms of gigs for ourselves, but also in terms of practices that we've all been engaging over the past four weeks, which is conversation, which is email and blogging and video, and trying to figure out how to use these various technologies to make dance a stronger forum.

Alejandra: Do you individually feel like there is a contrast between the discussions and opinions that you're forming processes as DanceWEBbers, and the performances you're seeing?

Otto: There are two common questions when face to talking to someone in DanceWEB: what are you doing this week, and did you see so and so last night? I think the discussions are pretty different than most of the shows because Impulstanz almost never premieres work. They really program a festival for the general Viennese public. Most of the intro-festival—the DanceWEB, the teachers—don't pay full ticket prices. When we see Ultima Vez or Jan Fabre, and all these uber kind of choreographers of Europe, frankly a lot of it is really crap.

Sarah: I think watching these performances every day forces you to figure out what you like and then it informs what you think and how you talk to people.

Will: I think a lot of what DD and Trajal are thinking about is this idea of proposing your present situation as potential content or form for your art. I think when you're seeing all these shows and you're taking bits and pieces of the shows and bringing them back with you, and thinking about them and figuring what works and what doesn't work, then that can feed the proposal of today. I've been in workshops where there's this title and this workshop description, and they've been about absolutely nothing related to what was written and what I read four months ago. What is this idea of a dance life that's created somewhere else and that I imagine that I'm moving towards? I feel that this festival has helped people be so much more in the present with what is right now my dance life. And DanceWEB constitutes that immediate dance community and these performances are feeding that and helping it grow. I think my focus and my emphasis has been really about re-proposing the present moment at this festival, over and over, and figuring out how my practice is exhausted for the day or is really growing.

Nohemí: For me the performances are connected to our discussions as they affect this social sphere created in this festival. They are a starting point for discussion that touches personal understanding in every performance, and oneself in a 24/7 negotiation within this social frame. The lack of time to digest or locate yourself in a performance produces tension, and suddenly you have to give an answer as soon as you walk out of the theater. It's like this interview, we haven't finished a process yet we want to answer your questions, so what can you say from this constant changes and adaptations, your present.

Milka: In terms of looking back at all the performances, it's really interesting to see the ones that really still resonate with me, whether or not I enjoyed them or I didn't. The ones that really upset me, that I really had problems with, I feel maybe I got more out of those than the ones I liked because it really made clear to me what my concerns are as an artist and what I'm interested in seeing. Often times people see performances and they're like 'don't see it, it was so bad'. One thing that came up for me was well, we all have different opinions and that's something we learnt very quickly in this festival. And the other thing was that if someone really hated it, I actually want to see it more. I want to see why, what's happening? I feel like I'm a generous viewer, I like to separate my own personal aesthetic and opinion and try to appreciate work, but maybe something about the intensity of this festival, I feel like I've been more vocally opinionated about certain things than I have ever been before.

Alejandra: That makes me think about what you were saying Will, about the now. Because it doesn't mean you might not like it if you see it two months from now, but right now, you're so full, so alive that you can sharply say yes/no.

Will: Yes, and we have all these feelings about being in motion and this idea of your personal theory of dance in motion, but then also when you're reacting to these things, it's like you're putting a stake in the ground, at every moment, and pulling it up again as well and moving forward.

Alejandra: The body that I've been picking up from all of you is a moving body, a geographically activated, social body. Often the word practice comes up, but here practice seems to be more what Sara was talking about, the level of intensity. It makes me think, even 20 years ago, the body was a very different thing.

Will: I think the definition of choreography and dance keeps expanding. Trajal keeps talking about how we're in this really conceptual moment in dance, and I feel that it goes hand in hand with the idea of the expansion of the information highway into this enormous global network and locating ourselves in that. The body has expanded to take on those questions and those wires that have been connected. I feel that without that global network, dance practice was much more local. There was a New York scene that was focused on particular practices and concerns, and I feel that locality is really shifting. Even though we are still developing relations to New York City or to our lives in New York.

Milka: I think most everyone applied to participate in the program as a way of being mobile, as a way to get out of their local environment and create a network beyond their immediate community. I don't know if it's because we dancers are more social beings, and we do move. I wonder if there's something about expanding what it is to be a body or how you relate to other bodies. With globalization and the expansion of the Internet and information, of course communities are going to expand and grow and cross borders. Another thing that is interesting to me is how being a dance artist in Europe is like: 'oh, I'm from Poland but I live in Paris and work in Amsterdam'. The sense of identity that we had before, of 'you're from this country so this is how you're like', is totally being broken down. It's been interesting to see how identity shifts based on where you are in the present moment, versus where you're from or where you're going to.

Alejandra: Do you think that there's a relationship between how the mobility of whole communities, the mobility of professional dancers moving around, relates to the diminishing

amount of actual movement on stage? Is there a correlation? I wonder if the wide lens is on and the movement of one, two, three bodies on the stage is just not at the center of attention.

Will: I don't know if it's an anxiety or just a pulsating energy from being exposed to so much information. That when you step into the studio, which is a place that is sort of cut off from that information, you're asking yourself questions about what you brought in with you and what are you leaving behind. Like that in itself is such a complicated separation process. I think a lot of the work is leaving some of those really active bodies behind in order to leave room for some of these other associations, which an informed choreographer knows his audience will make. So there is like a tablet for that information to be projected into the dance, although it's interesting because I think a lot of the work that I haven't liked has been work where there isn't movement but there's also no room for me to get inside the piece. It's so hermetically sealed that it has shut down on itself, almost like a safety or defense mechanism.

Nohemí: There is within our group this urge for movement, but it's not as easy as 'you want to move'. There are so many questions you get *perpleja* (perplexed). The DanceWEBers are really into critical thinking and all of a sudden they say I want to move, but then there's a silence. So there's something, I don't want to say changing, but there's something pressuring in between these two tensions, this social movement and lack of movement on stage. I think within those tensions, there's something that might be produced—when, how, you can't say that.

Sarah: I find somehow even when we travel really far, we still belong to certain class or group. We're mostly funded by subsidies or fellowships—most people I know except for maybe the U.S. people. (Laughs.) Yeah, maybe you're in a different game. But the idea of bringing public service within the frame of DanceWEB was a big question. How are we serving the public when we are still in this bubble of this environment? Did anything that we did actually reach a broader public? Not to be pessimistic about it but just to bring the question up. Not that my work has so much to do with socio-political topics, but it's something that I'm aware of in my own life and talking to people. I think about the Superamas performances. It stressed the issue of the incapability of contemporary dance in Europe to effectively raise issues of politics outside of our context. And it does it in a somewhat cynical way, but it does it very strongly. It forces the issue of how to be socially and politically aware beyond our network.

Will: We're always talking about how dance is so insular and self-reflexive, and therefore it's not effective in the outside world. But we're also going through this process of being really mobile and having our lives be in so many other places, and learning about lives of dancers that are happening in so many other places, and the social body. So, we are that broader public that is taking this work further and not just in the dance context. I think that it's really hard; it's still a problem of choreography and how it's affecting a broader public. But I definitely think I'm part of a broader public through which I can work these concepts and develop these concepts.

Alejandra: Since it's almost the end of the festival, what is poking at you every day when you wake up? What's on your mind at that first level of milking this experience?

Will: I'm trying to reserve judgment until after the festival. I think that the way DanceWEB has worked is that all the experiences are running together. I literally go from one conversation to a show to a conversation to a party, and there's really a commonality in all of that, which is about researching movement and researching people and ideas. I'm very interested in what happens next, and how to put things to use.

I think the mobility of choreographers and performers in Europe, of being able to travel from place to place, and move within very different contexts with more ease than there is to go from NY to Europe or anywhere else, is very interesting. I would love to find that kind of mobility either in my own, back home in NY, or access it in Europe and beyond Europe as well.

Milka: I'm realizing that for me the most pleasure I've been getting from the experience has been hanging out with everyone, more than the classes, workshops or performances. It highlights the

fact of why I'm a dance artist—because there is a heavy social element to it, because I move with other people. That's something that I've been stimulated by. I feel like I barely know people, but I'm so enriched and happy, like I love everyone. Another theme for me has been the politics of what this large, heavily funded festival produces. In some ways, it's made me feel very proud to be working where I work, and living where I live. Whatever sort of insecurities I've had about living in New York City or what I do, they're gone.

Alejandra: The internationalism has reaffirmed your sense of specificity and locality.

Milka: Yeah. Not to say that I think it's better. I don't mean that at all. But I like that my locality gives me a reference point from which to interact with other localities. And then, when I go to other localities, it stimulates that, which has been fantastic.

Sarah: I kind of have the same feeling as Milka—this very positive experience of being immersed in a huge group of people who are very amiable and have similar interests. I'm thinking about how I would like to continue to be just as active in my practice and with other people who are in the same field and doing the same things. My task for myself is, when I leave—wherever I end up—how to remain at this level of stimulation. I would like to find out the things that I can take away from it—connections to people, communication, the dialogue that started—to carry on somehow.

Alejandra: Y tú Nohemí?

Nohemí: For me, my locality is New York and Mexico, specifically Puebla and Monterrey. So it makes me think what it means to bring this information with me along and what roles do I play going back and forth. And after Impulstanz experience, what are we going to do after this? We had a meeting and we were talking about not being nostalgic about this within years, but what can we do to make these kinds of connections a way of supporting each other and continue understanding our development as artists and researchers. What can we do to have it not be just an event and a good time—meeting each other, taking classes and everything that involves being here—but to really support each other and engage outside the bubble of Impulstanz and DanceWEB. I think that's a challenge for all of us.

Alejandra: Any last thoughts?

All: You should do an interview like five months from now.

Alejandra: That would be lovely. We can do an email interview.

All: We'll all be in New York.

Alejandra: Then I guess we can meet.