

Levi Gonzalez

In conversation with Heather Olson

Levi Gonzalez interviewed by Heather Olson

Heather Olson: You just had a show, *ClusterFuck*. What ideas are you working on in it?

Levi Gonzalez: It sort of had a long meandering process in terms of where it started from conceptually and where it ended up. So, I started with this idea of looking at underground political movements or artistic movements. This was sort of fueled by the political reality—not just the political reality, but the day-to-day reality of being an artist in NY now versus maybe some fantasies or myths I have about NY in the past. It just seems like its harder and harder to find or maintain a sense of community. I do feel like I have a sense of community here but, (pause) it's harder to sort of create something outside of the mainstream culture and feel like you can do something outside of the system now in New York City. So I was sort of wondering, is there an underground left in New York? Can art still be underground? Everything is sort of marketed these days and there's so much information, there's so much media so much management and so much professionalization of the art world. I was just wondering, can there still be an underground. It seems like now would be a good time to have something resisting the dominant voice because I'm really... I, and most artists, have been really unhappy with the way the world has been going, and the way the US has been going in particular.

Heather: When you say the dominant, do you mean in general? Not just in the dance scene?

Levi: Yeah, in a larger sense: government, the direction of government, corporations, influence of money, class disparity. You know, little things like that.

Heather: The usual stuff! [laughter]

Levi: The usual! I always think my idea comes from some deep-seated frustration for peace and that I have to learn how to translate that into the language of dance or performance, however you want to look at it. And then we called the piece underground and then David Dorfman made a piece called *Underground* about the Weather Underground. I had actually seen that documentary also, as part of the research for this. I didn't see the piece but it seemed very different from what I was interested in doing, which was a sort of staging of a riot. I was not interested in that. I was more interested in what are the driving ideas behind an underground movement and can they exist? I don't know.

Heather: Were you thinking of it more abstractly?

Levi: Yes, I guess, but I never really thought how that would really materialize in a piece when I first had the idea. And the more I thought about it the more I was like uh, I'm not sure if this is going to work, or at least maybe the content doesn't carry over so clearly, maybe its just a place to start.

Heather: Does this, sorry I don't mean to lead this in a direction other than you were going in, but you've talked about chaos and trying to harness that, does that have to do with what you are talking about?

Levi: Trying to harness chaos?

Heather: The idea of chaos. Like as a... maybe it doesn't.

Levi: No, it's a big part. There's a weird through line to how the piece ended up and where it started from I feel like cause...

Heather: Right now we're talking about before?

Levi: Mentally, where I started from when making the piece.

Heather: Okay.

Levi: For me, part of what underground is is that it operates outside of the boundary of rules or established order so there is a sense of anything is possible. I think the best sort of underground or resistant movements have that feeling. You know, it's just like the war protest—a whole new world is possible when we started going to war in Iraq. It's like this sense of people functioning together without a sense of clearly delineated roles. Limitations don't actually hold you down; they can be sort of liberating. That idea of mess and chaos and lack of order, or how to operate inside a set of structures that maybe aren't so clean that maybe aren't so didactic in terms of telling you what to look at in terms of the structure of a performance. That's a huge leap from something very concrete to something abstract and self-referential in terms of performance, but that's sort of the process I went through.

Heather: Okay. The way you're talking it seems like there's a shift from these original ideas, what did it start to shift into?

Levi: A lot of it is brought on by conversations with my dancers of course, but I started to realize maybe political content doesn't work so well in performance. I actually know this for a fact cause every time I see it I always think it doesn't work. And still I keep trying to do it! I just had a moment of maybe what this is about is taking those ideas of decentralization or resistance or non-traditional kind of structures and transfer that over to the idea of what does it mean to make a dance and what does it mean to perform a dance for a group of people staying in a room with you. So it became much more about this sort of self-reflexive thing, of what are the mechanics and nature of performance? How can we have an authentic experience inside of that format? How can we work with the

established poetics of what dance and theatre are and try to tweak them in a way to maybe make you see them in a different way or, bring out the edges of the space in a very simple way or, bring up gently playing with expanding the boundary of the stated space into the audience or... just these little devices. Often with dance you start to understand what you're looking at and then you can sort of frame it. You consciously or unconsciously, I do it too, you're watching a piece and then you're like: I understand what parameters they're working with and now I'm looking at it in that frame. One of the things I wanted to do was to constantly try to mess with that frame for the viewer so that if they thought they understood what they were looking at then we could do something to shift it away from what the expectation would be. Which ended up being really hard, much harder than I thought.

Heather: It's great to talk to you after I've seen the piece because I feel like structurally you've made really, really bold choices in the dance. I was really interested in the way you used phrasing, and I think this also relates to what you're saying about expanding the space. Especially in the dance sections, the phrasing felt really unique. It seemed like there was a lot of short phrases or something but they all kind of interconnected like *legos* or something. Were you conscious of that? I think it has to do with what you're saying but maybe I'm just interpreting it in a different way so I want to have you talk about structure and phrasing and how you ended up coming upon what it ended up being.

Levi: We had a lot of material. A lot of it was very disparate and it was kind of scary in terms of how last minute this piece came together considering the fact that I was working on it for basically a year. But I was really lost, I would say, up until the last month. I wasn't sure that I believed that there was a piece in there right down until almost the end of the process. A lot of the movement material existed but didn't have an identity inside the context of the piece until later. One of the things that I think happened for me with this process was that I tried to listen to the material rather than control it. There are parts in this piece for me that I don't really even understand, I can't give you a very clear conceptual statement on what this phrase means. I tried to sort of get myself out of that a little bit, and let it lead me somewhere. And then there's always some overarching idea that I'm pretty conscious of like the part of the piece where we first start stretching the space out and dancing after we've been still for a long time and there's train tracks and Kayvon [Pourazar] moves sort of over to the corner downstage.

I kept showing the phrase to people and a lot of the feedback I got was you're not giving us enough time to experience it—it's projected and then it's over. So, I just sort of tried to take all the different elements and stretch them and let them have their own identity inside of the "master phrase." And then it started to have a whole; it started to instruct me in terms of how to design it in that way. And the same with what I call the stumbling phrase which is the unison trio at the end. It started to take on a timbre or a quality once I understood its place in the piece. I don't know, it's like that part was kind of fun. Once I was able to let go of my panic about whether I was going to finish the piece, to sort of construct or build or design these movements. This movement material was kind of satisfying 'cause it seems like most of the moments provide their own universe and feeling in a way. Isabel [Lewis] has a spiral phrase that she does that existed

a long time ago and I knew I liked it so I didn't have to think about that one too much. It was a very clear idea in terms of what it was trying to do movement wise.

Heather: From my perspective watching the finished piece, there was more what you would call dance vocabulary than in other showings.

Levi: Oh, yeah.

Heather: I just wondered about that, I mean the dance, I found all the "dance material" very satisfying and I just wondered how that ended up happening.

Levi: We had dance material in the beginning and then it just felt like it didn't belong. It was sort of this thing that Tere [O'Connor] talks about, like you start making a piece and you have to make something just to throw it out, just to get started. Obviously, when I don't understand the ideas, I can still make a dance phrase, but it didn't seem to have a relationship to the piece, to the ideas we were working on. And then I kept showing it and showing it and there was so little dance material in what I'd show and it started to feel like it was always a projection of an idea rather than an experiential idea and I wanted something experiential inside of it to sort of balance out the other stuff. The phrase that I was talking about before, the train track phrase, I came into rehearsal one day and I was like, I'm just going to make a phrase that has absolutely no concept behind it whatsoever. I'm just going to follow my impulses while I'm alone in the studio improvising. Then I'll look at it and then it started to gradually shape itself and I had this feeling like if we keep trying to go with concept the whole thing was getting stuck, the whole process was getting stuck in ideas.

Heather: In a way, that's in direct contrast to THE idea, the concept was NOT controlling. Is that correct in a way?

Levi: Well, I would say it's more about trying to create structures of various kinds that you could then live inside or that you could execute in a way that still allowed for an authentic sense of presence. In a sense it was related because I was trying to create a situation where the meaning behind what it was wasn't fixed, that the performers could inhabit each structure in a way that had some play. I don't know.

Heather: How do you think that relates to the audience? Obviously you were thinking about the way the performers were going to experience it and I'd be interested to hear more about that, but I'm also interested in if you were thinking about how the audience was going to experience it?

Levi: Definitely, from the very beginning. In some ways I think that's the thing that's most confusing because you can't in a studio understand what it means to sit in a formal environment like in the theatre at DTW, and understand how that experience is going to read until you're in the theatre and performing it. So, in a lot of ways I feel like its been really informative for me in terms of what my intentions were about how the audience

would experience and how the audience actually did experience it. It's the thing that I think I feel the least, I don't want to say successful, but the least able to control.

Heather: Uhhuh.

Levi: But it's similar. Not only did I want the performers to be able to feel like they could bring themselves negotiating a structure into the piece rather than executing a design, I also wanted the audience to feel they were aware they were sharing an experience in the theater with these performers. I mean, for me what's valuable about dance is that it's not film, it's not visual, it's not... There's so much design in culture. We've gotten so sophisticated at packaging imagery and packaging experiences that one of the unique things about dance is that you're sitting in a room with a bunch of people and experiencing it live and there's a real sense of energy and presence in that environment. And my goal—I think it's a continuous goal actually with my work—is to create a situation where they're not just passively taking in the design but actively engaged in what that experience is. I didn't want to do something like totally alter the space. I felt like I wanted to see if there's a way to keep the traditional theatrical structure of here's the audience and here's the performers and have some sort of interaction between those two spaces.

Heather: I read this thing that you wrote after an initial showing of this piece, "Thoughts on *Springdance*".

Levi: Uhhuh.

Heather: A couple things were really interesting that I feel like relate to what you're talking about. This is a quote: "Art is always in dialogue with the culture that surrounds it. That culturally-specific relationship is what gives it resonance and meaning." That's a really great way of thinking about things. I just thought that you could talk about that in relationship to this piece.

Levi: Yeah, I mean, I feel like this piece is a total response not only to the larger world or the larger situation we're in where this idea about media and design relates, but also to the use of the objects. I was trying to create a sense of clutter and noise, and of how do you find authenticity inside an environment that's visually busy, that has actual obstacles, while you're trying to execute material that maybe doesn't account for those obstacles. In that way it's sort of like a little metaphoric life, you know, like our day-to-day subway commutes and money anxieties and questions about the meaning of why we're here. I'm really influenced by all the ideas that are floating around in the dance community and I feel like there's a lot of questioning of what does it mean to perform? What is the meaning of all of us coming together in a theater and having this experience together? What is the stage? What is the theater? What is that space about and how many assumptions do we take for granted when we walk into the theater. And how can we kind of subvert or re-see or see those things in a new way or see the assumptions exposed? I think that is really big in a lot of the work that I've seen around me and I'm really influenced by that. I really feel like it has something to do with September 11th because I

think it's made people question—it's certainly made me question—why dance? Why even make a dance piece? What's the value of it in relationship to all these larger, really heavy issues going on like, there's a war—what can a dance do? In a way, my sense of things is that a lot of dance work has become really pared down, really distilled in a way to sort of concentrate, to look at, okay, what is dance, what is its value, what is the thing itself and you know, what is the value in this experience in relation to a larger cultural situation that we're in?

Heather: Yeah, well in a way it's like we're in an unspeakable situation right now, and that fits really well into dance 'cause dance can distill down to, I don't know, an emotional level or just an experiential level.

Levi: Yeah, and it doesn't have an agenda beyond the experience itself. We're not trying to get someone elected into office or sell something.

Heather: Yeah.

Levi: Experimental dance is not a commercial enterprise. It's a really open space in that way, I feel like. There's this writer, Dave Hickey, who I mentioned in the program who... I'm still reading that book—I'm a slow reader. He was talking about art criticism and about his relationship to writing and how he always wanted to capture that “woosh”—that was the word he used, which is like the feeling you get at a good rock show or when you see a painting that excites you or when you hear a great song or when you see a basketball player do an amazing move. He found whenever he tried to write about it, writing killed the *woosh* in a way. It's like you always end up destroying that thing that's so resistant to being pinned down, by writing it. I think dance is like a form where you don't have to pin it down, which is not to say I'm just going to do whatever I want onstage.

Heather: Well, you have to take responsibility for it.

Levi: And you have to craft it. You make decisions all the time when you're making a dance so, it's not as if you're being passive. But it's not in the service of anything other than itself and that's kind of another one of the powers of dance maybe. [both laugh] When I said that thing about *Springdance*, that art is culturally specific, it had a lot to do also with seeing other people's work from different countries and seeing, kind of transposing—if I had seen this piece in New York maybe it wouldn't have resonated as strongly knowing the place that it was actually being performed at and the immediate environment that it was responding to. In that sense, again, it's about decision-making. It's about, my context is being a dancer here and living here and that's what I know and that's where my decisions are coming from. There's a specificity in how we shape things that has to do with ourselves, and our environment. In a way there is no pure dance; there is no pure abstract form that exists outside of context. There's always meaning there somewhere but the meaning doesn't necessarily have to be $X+Y=Z$. It can sort of be like $X-Y+Z$. [both laugh] I don't know. The equation doesn't have a solution or resolution.

Heather: I want to hear a little bit more about, I don't know how you phrased it, but it's something about the questions being asked of you by your collaborators, by your dancers, and how they helped shape the piece. If you could just talk a little bit about working with those people, both the dancers and James [Lo], the composer.

Levi: Oooh! How long we got? [laughter]

Heather: Five more minutes, no I'm just kidding. Start with the dancers.

Levi: Part of the interest when I'm "casting" a piece [giggle] is to find people who I already relate to as performers in terms of the aesthetic choices they make as performers, not necessarily that I make those same choices but that they have a strong sense of choice-making. And these are all people that I felt that way about for sure. And I also liked that I felt they all made really different choices. I thought it would be helpful in terms of this idea of if we're all doing the same thing but we're all doing it slightly differently, it kind of actually emphasizes this sense that it's not about design but about how the design is inhabited by presence and how many variations, subtle shifts, or how much the person itself contributes to the way a form finally takes shape. Usually we create a structure or shape of something and I try to find a situation where they can navigate that in their own way. It helps to have people that are confident about that, which they all are. So they are able to make those choices and I don't have to hold their hand because I don't think that's something I'm good at. I don't think I'm a born director. I feel like it's a really hard role for me and I'm sure they'd agree with that if you interviewed them. It's hard for me to kind of take charge. But, also everyone had a different role in the process. You're making a dance and you're kind of like a misfit family that has sort of weird hierarchical roles. The role of director is the one I'm really uncomfortable with. Hristoula [Harakas] is the one who, when I try to make them write a political rant, she is like, why? What does that have to do with everything that we're developing? Isabel at one point had said something like, I feel like you're composing this piece in a way that has this formality that doesn't really have anything to do with how we've been working or what your ideas are. But now that you are trying to compose something you're imposing—I'm paraphrasing her of course—you're imposing a certain formality that seems from the outside of our process. Just like little things that they all would see.

Heather: It seems like she was accusing you of being a poser! [Laughter]

Levi: Yeah!

Heather: Like coming in with these ideas and then...

Levi: Well, I mean, she said it and I was like, oh yeah, you're right! It was more like the panic of trying to put something together and creating. Of course, you pull from what is familiar—these sort of default mechanisms of dance composition that then suddenly give things more importance than they might actually have.

Heather: Do you feel like you took a step forward with this piece?

Levi: Definitely, yeah, I mean...

Heather: Seems like it.

Levi: I feel like at one point I was finally just like, you know, you always... I asked for a full evening gig at DTW and I get it, and then it's like that's what I naturally thought I wanted and sort of the next step for me in terms of continuing my work. And then it's like, oh, I have a full evening at DTW and you realize your situation. You sort of create a structure to make that happen. My structure was I'm going to hire three dancers, I'm going to pay them a little bit, ha ha, I'm going to get a sound designer or composer or whatever and I'm going to get a lighting designer and we're going to do the press for this and I'm going to market and I'm going to write my little blurbs about it—way before I even know what the hell the piece is about—and get residencies and try to finance this thing and apply for grants and so that whole system of what it is to have a show, the pressure of that. I think you always underestimate it before you're actually inside of it, and how much it actually influences the decision-making process. How hard it is to resist the panic of it needs to be a successful piece, it needs to be good, people need to like it. I need to get a good review so I can keep making work, and then I can do my next grant proposal and it's like there's this sort of panic that I think is really strong in New York, to succeed. And I really felt that.

And then I felt at one point, god, I don't know, this piece might not even be good, it might not even exist if I don't just figure out what the hell I'm doing. This was sort of later in the process. I feel like I got to a place where I let go of worrying about whether it was good or not, and tried to make something that was reflective of our process—my level of comfort with being a director, my level of comfort with the elements I was dealing with. Tried to listen to what I was doing and why I was doing it and make choices from that place. I was surprised at how hard that was. But I really felt like I actually went there more completely than I ever have before.

So, overall I feel really happy with that in particular, that I really, not totally, but I let go a lot of my neediness of what will people think. Will it be successful? Is it pushing the envelope? Because it was for me so that's sort of all you can do. It made me realize how specific, how non-neutral a space DTW is. How it really frames what you're looking at in a very specific way. It also made me feel like, Okay maybe... this is something that Luciana's talked about a lot too, maybe I don't want to be part of this constant grant cycle, production cycle. Maybe what I need to do right now is think about some of the questions this project raised and address those from the beginning in terms of how am I negotiating this system of dance presentation. You know, how do I enter into that in a way that maybe allows for more space for me to make choices. It's maybe less pressure, less about financial anxiety, less about hierarchical roles in terms of director.

Heather: To try to find a space to just work on process, just be an artist

Levi: Yeah, I don't really like going to the studio and just being really free and open. I like to make performances and I like to have that sense of goal to it, to some degree. A

sense of, this is being designed for a specific experience. I get lost if I don't have a sense of terminus point or a sense of shaping and crafting towards an end. But it's like the translation process of choreography. You have an idea, you start making stuff and then the ideas are not so interesting and what you make is more interesting and you get more ideas and it's like this kind of dialogue with the thing itself that you're making. That process is what's interesting of course, but it does have a little pushing from one end and the other end. It's a constant back and forth, a constant negotiation between giving yourself freedom and giving yourself limitation. But maybe that means it's a solo, I don't know. I used to hate the idea of solos [laughter]. Maybe that means it's not a full evening or I start playing with ideas and do little showings until I feel like I'm ready to make a larger piece. I'm not sure yet but I think maybe not jumping into that career trajectory pattern of the half evening, the full evening...

Heather: Right.

Levi: ...the next venue. Getting international touring you know. This sort of established ladder would be interesting to step back from and question what that system is and whether that actually serves you.

Heather: And especially since it feels like for a lot of people of our generation, and we're the same age, that structure system might not be a reality at all anymore. It's being chipped away and chipped away.

Levi: Yeah.

Heather: So we kind of have to find our own solution or way of doing it.

Levi: Yeah, and has to reflect what your interests are as an artist and what you want from your work. Maybe I'm not the artist that wants eternal fame or that wants to be internationally recognized. It's hard to know.

Heather: You don't want to be too hopeless; we don't want to be like...

Levi: Bitter. [laughs]

Heather: It's never going to happen, no one is ever going to know about us. But on the other hand, there is this undercurrent of feeling. It seems like a lot of people, like you mentioned way earlier in our talk, identify with this idea that we're talking about, like not having expectations or something? And I just wondered how—this is a big question—do you see yourself in a certain place in the New York dance scene?

Levi: I've actually been having a lot of conversations about this recently 'cause I feel like when I came to NY there was this sense of, you work for more established people maybe that have a company and you kind of learn from them, and after a while maybe you're ready to make your own work if that's what you want to do, if you're interested in making your own work at all. And that as that company model seems less and less able to

sustain itself, if you look at the choreographers in downtown dance that are considered successful, they have for the most part a very difficult time maintaining their company. It's a very unstable existence for them. Very few, I would say no downtown dance choreographers can hire dancers full time. Dancers are always having to take another job which means also there's going to be at some point, probably, when they say, I'm tired of doing this. I'm tired of constantly negotiating, compromising all these aspects of my life to continue to do this work. Companies have become more transient in terms of how long people stay. People don't end up staying with someone for as long and really getting inside that work.

Heather: Even if you are with someone for a long time, you have to work with multiple people, so you start to get stretched.

Levi: Yeah, totally. Then I feel like there are the people who've come to NY in the last 5 years or so. They don't have any expectation of, I need to get into a company or I need to start establishing this sense of infrastructure. I'm really impressed by the people who've started making work in the last four or five years that are younger and just not afraid to sort of stake out on their own immediately and figure it out from there. I like some people's work more than others, and there's always a value in the more you practice making things, the more subtle you get at it. But it has to do with how the system hasn't sustained itself so why should we buy into that system. I almost feel like an "in-between" in a way. I'm seeing this sort of new movement away from institutionalization, but having spent a lot of my life inside of those structures and trying to understand what's my articulation of that situation. How do I relate to it?

Heather: It's interesting 'cause it seems like this piece was a little bit maybe your articulation of that. When we first started talking you were talking about discourse, frustration, rules and structure and how those things interlock. It seems like a lot of that kind of internal thought or subconscious thoughts, sub-linguistic thought came out in this piece. So, that's pretty cool! [laughter]

So, is there anything...what else do you want to say?

Levi: There's something, just responding to what you just said. It's funny because it's kind of the funny thing about art because everything you're thinking or experiencing ends up becoming part of your choice making or designing process inside of making work. I mean even when you're not conscious of it as you're making it. It just comes out.

Heather: I've been thinking about that a lot lately. Where is the line between art making and therapy or something?

Levi: Sure.

Heather: Maybe the line is structure or something, I don't know.

Levi: And there's so many takes on structure too, you know.

Heather: Yeah.

Levi: I've never really had therapy, so maybe I am using art as therapy, hah.

Heather: I think if, like you said earlier, you're going to get rid of coming at it from just an idea, keeping with the idea, hammering in the idea, by using a set of rules that maybe we learned in college. If you're going to let go of that and let things bubble up from underneath, like that thing of pushing one way and pushing the other way, that you were talking about. If you're going, let that happen then of course what's going on is going to have to come through, so you don't really have any choice. It's pretty ha ha, that's the experience.

Thank you!

Levi: Thank you! I feel dorky.