

Yanira Castro

talks to Alejandra Martorell

Alejandra Martorell: I'll ask you to give a very brief bio to give some context or ground to...

Yanira Castro: ...who am I?

Alejandra: Who are you?

Yanira: I was born in Puerto Rico, came here when I was eight. That was a tremendous shock—language, vocabulary, physical vocabulary, and in every way, felt very outsider. Because we moved into a very small town that was largely white and, you know, sort of Protestant, and very different from where I had come from. And that was this really huge shock for me. I think, for me, a lot of my life since then, has been about feeling a little bit outside of culture, in a way. That's sort of my heritage.

I went to Amherst College in Massachusetts, which is a small school and part of the five college system, and that's where I first saw what you would call modern dance. The first piece I saw, which blew me away was by Sankai Juku. The name of the piece was something... I don't exactly remember. It might have been just "Egg" or "*something* egg." Here's this gorgeous man pulling this huge egg from out between his legs, and I was like 'if that's possible, and I can do whatever I want to do, I want to pull a huge egg from between my legs.' (Laughs.). That was my introduction to dance or modern dance. I had seen ballet and stuff like that, but that was the first thing that excited me. So, I started to see everything I could 'cause I didn't have any training. I came to New York for six months in the middle of my bachelor year, and saw everything I could at that time. And I fell in love with New York City, fell in love with the scene, and decided, 'O.k., I guess I want to try this.'

I was interning for Ping Chong at the time. He was doing his 20th anniversary, and he had a show at La Mama of a piece called *Nosteratu*, and just hanging around with him and his performers gave me a clue into what that life was going to be like. And I knew that it was going to be really difficult, it's going to be really wrong, financially is going to be really terrible... And yet I really had this passion for it. So I went back to school, finished and came here. And just started making work right away.

Alejandra: I'm curious about what you said about the contrast in physical vocabulary. Did you come from a rural Puerto Rico?

Yanira: No. It was sort of suburban; it was right outside of San Juan. But I came from a really large family, and very loving and inclusive, and I always felt like I was in arms or on laps. Of course, when you're a child and your small and compact, you just feel all this warmth and this body, like there's just this huge sense of body. And then I came to this country, and there wasn't any touch. And I remember that. I remember feeling like there was all this distance between bodies. and I was really unaccustomed to it. What is interesting is that my parents changed too; their physical distance seemed further. That's the biggest memory I have of first coming here, besides, obviously, not knowing the language at all.

I actually feel that's in my work in some way. I always feel, when I see the pieces—even when I'm going for intimacy—that there's always a sense of distance between the performers, and I get very frustrated about that sometimes. I want to break that!

Alejandra: Some things are there for a reason and they stay there. I have larger questions and also curiosities about the project you are working on. Do you want to start by talking about the latter?

Yanira: About *Fetus(Twin)*? It's a duet. I made it right after this large project called *Beacon* that I did in January 2005, at the Brooklyn Lyceum. I did it because I was commissioned by Amherst College, for a weekend of productions by alumni. They gave us money to build the installation. It was literally created in maybe a month, with two weeks of rehearsals. It was really surprisingly successful. It was one of those things—you are working on a project for three years and then you do one in one month... (laughs), and you're like 'why do I spend all this time making one piece, when I can do one in a month!' So, that's where it started.

The Chocolate Factory had given us a space grant in order to rehearse that piece. When it was presented at Amherst, I felt like it had a second life to it. But, I had decided to take a sabbatical, sort of time away from dancing, from doing all this, since I'd been doing it straight for eleven years, and was exhausted. But when I came back, I still felt like this piece had a second life, and I really wanted to give it that.

The theme is actually a theme that's been with me since 2000. I was reading back then about conjoined twins, and since then, it seems like they are constantly in the press, conjoined twins that are being separated... I don't know if you remember these women who were adult conjoined twins, and their decision to separate... It was really resonant at different points of my life about different things: ending relationships, people I knew who had gone through miscarriages, abortions... So, I was dealing with these issues of being conjoined, or being one, physically—your DNA, your structure—but also, physically meaning actually connected bodies. And this decision to become separate, and what was that

about. In the case of the women, they wanted to be separated so badly—because they felt they had such individual lives—that they were willing to risk death. And, in fact, neither of them made it.

To me, there was something very powerful about that, because in any relationship, when it ends, it's this total death, and there's this experience of life aborted. And that process is often a very difficult one, even though is often a very cleansing one. Those are all the issues that I feel I've been dealing with in various forms, and it's coming to an end, coming together, in this piece... which is a duet for two women—Nancy Ellis and Pamela Vail, who I've been working with for 11 years. That, in itself, is something! Nancy just moved to Portland, and Pam just left a few years ago to Pennsylvania. So this relationship we've had of dancing together for more than 10 years is, I don't want to say coming to an end, because you never know, but it feels different. We're not in the same city together, working together, having that physical intimacy.

The last thing about this project is that it's an installation, which is something that started doing in the last six years; creating an environment for each dance. I'm working with Charles Houghton on that. This is our first project together, and that has been really wonderful. We've been friends for a long time, but it's been a revelation. We've sort of experienced a whole new side of our relationship, being collaborators. I think the installation he's created is really beautiful.

Alejandra: My idea from that very far memory I was telling you about, of seeing your work a very long time ago, is I remember it being very visually-oriented in some way: having some objects, distinct, elaborated costumes... Now you said you only started doing that six years ago. It seems from a far away perspective, my own, that your work is married to a visual sensibility. Do you have a background in visual arts?

Yanira: I was not trained visually. I've never taken a visual art class in my life, and I can't draw. But I've always had this real sense of place, if that makes sense. I always felt that these things belong in homes of some kind, and I could never accept the theater as a neutral space. It always seemed to me that it is a very specific situation. You could make a piece that could have a home in that, and I think there are, obviously, a lot of projects that are really successful at that. But, for me, I always have this sense of an interior life for the dances, and then, after I've created this movement, I wonder, 'What is the space that they belong in?' I don't usually think of the space first and then the movement, but work from the interior and then out.

I think that some of the visual aspects of the work have to do with the people I've collaborated with. The costumes, for instances, I've been collaborating for every piece I've made in New York, with Albert Sakhai, who is from Iran, and is an amazing designer. It was one of those things in New York, where you walk into a store, and meet this person, and he changes your life. I was like 21, I literally

walked into this store and said “I’m looking for a petticoat.” He says, “I make petticoats. What do you need one for?” I said, “A dance piece.” He said “How much money do you have” “Two hundred dollars.” “A petticoat costs a lot more than that.” “That’s all I have.” “Alright, I’ll do it for you.” And not only did he do the petticoat, he did the entire show, for two hundred dollars. And since then, we’ve been connected at the hip.

But the person who is doing the costumes for this project is Suzanne Dougan, who was my teacher at Amherst. Actually, she is one of my major visual teachers because I took a class with her, and the thing she said to me that I remember the most was that when she looked at my dances and my drawings of space, everything I did was really about spatial layout—how things are arranged in an environment and what that environment is. So she kind of clued me in, early on, to the fact that that was how my brain worked. It’s kind of funny how you need somebody to tell you even to recognize that that is what you do.

Alejandra: When you say that you start from the internal and go to the external, is there something that is anchoring the creation of the movement that is also the source of the costumes or installation? Or is it that by the time you finish the movement, that’s when it becomes clear what it needs or where it belongs?

Yanira: I think for me, the start of almost every project that I can think of—I’m sure as soon as I say this, I will think of something where it’s completely the opposite—is a very inner, personal place, either some experience that I’ve had or some very particular place that I’m in at that time in my life. Something clues in to that and becomes a symbol for that. In the case of *Fetus(Twin)*, again, I was experiencing, with a lot of female friends of mine, this thing about wanting to have children—because we’re in our thirties, maybe not been able to have children. The push and pull of that decision, and sometimes very painful experiences. And realizing that, a lot of times, this happens in silence. It’s extremely intimate, and it’s not talked about.

This particular piece came from that emotional place for me: what is this intimate silence? It’s your body, you know, your body transforming, potentially transforming, and becoming this cocoon for this thing that’s attached to you, but it’s not part of you. And I did a lot reading, and these images started happening for me about (this is going to sound maybe extreme) the fetus as a tumor, and how it feeds off you. There’s actually this article in *The New Yorker* that was talking about—I don’t remember the name of the situation—times when the fetus has a very different blood type than the mother, so that there is actually an invasion of the mother’s antibodies. And it becomes this sort of pull within the womb of who’s going to survive, the mother or the fetus, and the antibodies actually fight it out, in a way.

There’s always this harmonious image of the mother and the child, especially within the womb, and I don’t know that many women experience that. I think

there are moments of harmony, but I think there is also a lot of conflict and stress and fear. And I think I wanted to try to create a piece that, in a way, dealt with that emotional place. That's what I mean by interior. I start with this feeling that I'm having in my own personal life, and then it gets attached to a very specific image, like conjoined twins, and then it grows from there into this movement that always feels very frustrating. Because I feel like that's the core, if I can just get this vocabulary that addresses this emotional state, then everything else can come to life. But I think that's the hardest thing to do. I'm often really frustrated, you know, battering my head against the wall: How do you get to that stage? How do you create this? How do you keep it alive each time? Because sometimes you see it in a rehearsal—"that's it!"—and the next time you come back, and it's gone. So, I also have a lot of questions about what is it that creates that? Is it a very particular movement vocabulary? Is it a way the performer addresses the vocabulary? Is it all these things combined?

Alejandra: That sort of takes me to another level of question, which is precisely that question that you just asked. I feel like I've asked myself that many times. I think it is very common to be frustrated when you work on one thing and you try to pull it out of this one form, say, the movement vocabulary. Ironically you are somebody that I feel has always worked very closely with many elements.

Yanira: I do not think of myself as a pure movement worker, at all. I've never done that. But the word that came to mind while you were speaking about that is this idea of possibility, and that what I feel we try to do, as performance-makers, is to create a situation where there is the possibility for an experience to happen. There's what you contribute to it as the maker, but then there's also what the audience contributes to it, as the people coming into the work and sitting there together. I always feel that the audience is at least 50% of the project. What they come in with, and how they choose to inhabit this world that they are in for however long the dance is, that's the conversation and that's the possibility. That's the moment that can happen. Everything prior to that performance is trying to create a place, or a situation, where that can happen, where there's that possibility—which can totally collapse. (Laughs.) It can totally collapse! The audience might not be there; I might not be there! Who knows? Some aspect of it is there one night, but it's not there the next night. There's this really fragile thing, I feel like, that dance can be. That it has the potential to be. That it can be transformative, or not.

Alejandra: How do you attend to having the audience be 50% of the event? How do you, in your work, address that issue, if you do? Or, how do you think about it?

Yanira: I started thinking more about the audience and their relationship to the event, other than, you know, ticket buyers, a couple of years ago, around 2000. I made this piece called *2:1*. It was a duet also, and it was the first piece that I made that was trying to address this twin issue. It was commissioned by Peculiar

Work Projects and they gave me this room at Judson House, which no longer exists—it was torn down; they built this NYU building. Before that, I really mostly performed in theaters except for a few galleries here and there. They told me I could do anything I wanted to this room. It really opened my mind to this idea of creating an environment. What we did (Kevin Kwan worked with me on it, he's one of these people who can do anything, but in this particular case, he wrote the text and worked with me on the visual side of the project) was, we stripped everything in the room, and painted it five layers of glossy white. There were two doorways and one interior window, and we covered those with gauze and let the audience peer in through those openings. Only about 15 people could see it at a time.

That was the first experience I had of really creating a very specific viewing experience for the audience. For me, it was one of those breakthroughs that I didn't realize as I was making the piece, would be transformative, personally. I really felt 'this is how this dance is meant to be seen. It's meant to be seen through gauze, through windows and doors, peaks in, not seated at a theater or full-on.' It was meant to be seen in a voyeuristic sort of way. Ever since then, I have been thinking about what is the audience's relationship to this, and how can I create an environment that really enhances that.

For instance, the last project, *Beacon*, had the audience in four bins that could only contain 12 to 15 people. They were built by Rick Murray, who I've also been working with for a long time. Each box was surrounded by Plexiglas and by a red curtain. When the audience first entered, they were inside this very small box, very tightly packed, and they couldn't see anything beyond this red curtain that was right in front of them. The image for those boxes was sort of jury room, or witness box. I really wanted to make the audience aware of the fact that, as viewers, they are active; this is not a passive experience. That had to do a lot with my experience, at that time, of the images coming out of Iraq and September 11th and that whole experience. The sort of passiveness of watching these events and feeling distant from them, when, in fact, the very fact that we're seeing these things means that we're actively participating in them.

With *Fetus(Twin)*, there's only going to be 20 people watching the dance, because I wanted to create an extremely intimate experience, where you're very close to the performers—they don't have to speak loud and performatively, but can actually speak to you like we are here across this table—and you can have an intimate relationship to this event that you're witnessing. Again, this idea of creating this potential intimate experience for the audience, by the way they sit; how close they are to the performers; what they can hear, what they can't hear; what they can see, what they can't see; that they actually have to get up, out of their chairs, walk to another room, put headphones on; different physical, tactile things; so that they realize, 'I'm a human being. I'm standing here. I'm watching this. I am present. I don't have to just sit back on a chair and let it wash over me,

but I can be actively participating in what I'm seeing and actively engaging in it.' I think dance actually requires that.

Alejandra: You've mentioned a couple of times text. How did that enter your work? When in the process does it come in? Where is the decision to include it, and how does that feel?

Yanira: I think text is one of the strangest things, and I always feel that it slips in through the back door. I'm like, 'What are you doing here?' But it happens a lot, and I fight it a lot. In this last project, *Beacon*, there was all this text in the beginning, and by the end, it was literally like two lines, a total of 10 words that Heather Olson speaks in the middle of the piece. It's as though it's asserting itself, even though I'm very conflicted about text in dance. But it wants to be there. So, I have to say, 'O.k., you're here; we'll accept you.'

In this piece, I'm working with Kevin Kwan on the text. He and I have been fascinated by conjoined twins for about the same length of time. We've been in this dialogue for about six years about what that emotionally is for each one of us: this idea of a lost sibling or a lost mother; this other half of yourself. One of the stories that we're both fascinated by is this young boy who is seven years old and he has all these stomach pains. They take him to the hospital, and they do an x-ray and see that he has a tumor, so they decide to remove it. And when they do, it's a ball of hair, nails and teeth. It turns out that it was his twin brother that had embedded in his body, inside the mother's womb, and had actually been eating off his blood supply, which is why he was getting ill. This concept of your twin brother sucking the life out of you! It's really freaky and amazing. And it's about exactly how I feel about a lot of relationships. (Laughs.) And I think about how Kevin feels sometimes about a lot of relationships. So, we had this connection about that. For him, it's been an exploration about text, and for me, it's been an exploration about space and movement. We've come together to create this aural, dance environments, with text, that try to deal in some way with this exploration of separation and oneness at the same time.

Alejandra: Do you have any thoughts about how text communicates versus how the absence of text communicates? When you are making something that includes both, do you feel that they complement each other, or does it ever become a little bit of a conflict?

Yanira: For me, there is a conflict between the spoken word and the physical vocabulary. And I find that tension interesting. So, I don't think that because there's conflict, it's necessarily negative. But I've also experienced this place where the verbal and the nonverbal are able to fold into each other, and that's also really gorgeous. I sometimes feel like these things are the process of discovery or accident, or how they are performed even that one night, you know. It's one of those things that I feel sometimes slips out of my hands. What I have a difficult time with—and this goes back to my own problem with language, even

going back to when I was eight, and didn't know English—is the idea of speech having meaning, if that makes any sense! Because coming from a place where you learned this one language, and then you come to this other place, where you don't know the language at all... There's all these sounds coming from this person, and you know they are speaking, but it means absolutely nothing to you.

I have all these images of mimicking sound, like the Pledge of Allegiance, for instance. When I was eight years old, I didn't know what I was saying, but I knew it was like 'wawanee, weena, weenah, wah...' I remember just making the sounds, and not knowing what I was saying or what it meant. For me, language is this alien, horrific construct, this verbal thing that we have. And that we all decide, as a community, that a specific sound means this. I have all these questions about how arbitrary that is. That's my conflict with language, and I think that it shows up in the work, this sort of dread of the meaning of words. And how loaded they can sometimes be, especially in a dance piece, which is this vocabulary that's malleable because it's physical, and it's experiential. And then, this word pops right into the middle of the piece, and it's so concrete, and we all have decided that it meant a specific thing. And my question is, how can we open that up, so that it can be as fluid as movement vocabulary?

Alejandra: I can relate a lot to that mimicking thing. Sometimes when I read an English text, I have memories of what it felt like not knowing how to read something. When you are far enough that you know what most of the words mean, but not knowing the rhythm, the syntax, how to read—which word makes sense with which one.

Yanira: I have that experience now with Spanish, because my Spanish vocabulary and syntax is very elementary, is that of an eight-year old. I can say very simple sentences, but when I read, Garcia Marquez for example, with these really complicated structures, I can't follow them. I know what this adjective means, and I know what this noun means, but the way they are structured in the sentence, I don't know. And, you know what? I'm saying that, and it's very frustrating when you're reading a novel, but that's exactly what a dance is. I know this, and I know this, but how are they created in this construct together? That's the dance! That's the performance!

Alejandra: It's that old thing, about what comes before and what comes after. Sometimes when you're watching a dance, about a third of the way through, you know where it's going, but then when it goes where it goes, it turns out you didn't know, or you were wrong. And it is because the sentence wasn't finished yet.

Yanira: And that's really exciting. Right now, I really love pieces that don't work, whatever that means. I don't know what that means—people say that a piece works or it doesn't work. I know that a piece works or doesn't work for me, maybe. Anyway, right now I'm loving pieces where I'm questioning why they made that choice. What brought that person to this place? How did they make

that choice? I don't understand that choice. I'm fascinated by that, and I can think about that for a really long time. When you've seen so many dances, it's the thing that challenges you that's interesting, more than the thing that pleases.

Alejandra: Sometimes what pleases, does so because it opens this road. It uses the stuff that there is in a way that I couldn't have foreseen, like breaking new ground.

Yanira: I think that goes back to the idea of engaging the audience, because I think a lot of people stop at that road when they don't know where it's going.

Alejandra: Exactly. And they feel like they've failed!

Yanira: I didn't go with you, so I didn't get it. I think that's that block. I think there is this potential and this possibility, again, where this road can take a turn and take you somewhere else. And it's whether or not you're willing, as an audience member, to go down that road, even with the potential of it falling flat or disappointing you. Or, even taking you to a place that frightens you. I think sometimes that's what it has to do with, the fear of going down a road that is unknown.

Alejandra: And that's true also for the maker, not being afraid of... It's almost like the word following doesn't really belong, because you're not following, you're actually going somewhere you don't know. That's really hard.

Yanira: That is really hard, to say 'I'm going to keep walking in this direction, because I can so easily make it something that I know, and something that is safe.' I think that's the real challenge. Sometimes I come away from rehearsals, and I feel 'that was too safe.' And I think it's because you're working with all these other people—performers, collaborators, designers—and you're all trying to get to that place together, where you're all pushing yourselves, and that can mean different things for different people. But there has to be this humongous amount of trust to try to go to a different place together.

Alejandra: You've been lucky to work with a group of people consistently.

Yanira: That's changing now. This is the first year that I'm starting to work with people that I haven't worked with for five, ten years. And that's really exciting and fucking frightening. Sometimes I walk into rehearsal—this is actually for a new project—and I see these new faces, and there's nothing scarier. How do I build trust with this person? We're in the studio for the first time... That, in itself, is the conflict and the new road. How do you keep it scary? How do you not run away from yourself, or from this person, and maintain this place of possibility?

You are trying to create something and they are coming at it from a different place. And inside you, at least for me, I always have all these worlds that I have

to translate to them, and it's completely impossible. And, I'm not the performer! It's hard enough to go through that transformation within yourself, but to take that transformation to someone else, who is also going through their own transformation, it becomes this point of contact. And that's what you have. And that thing that you have, is distance, in a way. This comes back to this distant idea. It's the meeting point between what you're able to express, and what they are able to express, and what you're able to understand about each other. And it's never that thing that you feel inside yourself.

Alejandra: There's always an imperfect attempt, approach, always very short-of anything that you could desire.

Yanira: I'm about to say something that is very extreme, but I think it's true. Desire is never or very rarely achieved. It's this goal that is never quite fully met, but it's such a hot piece of candy, you know. But maybe that's what's exciting. When I go see other performances that I find engaging, it's about seeing the attempt.

Alejandra: So, you're not dancing in your own pieces?

Yanira: I stopped a long time ago. I think in 2002. It's been a long time now. This is the first year when I really felt it. In the sense that now, I have questions about my own body. Well, we always have questions about our bodies, but when I'm in rehearsal, for the first time I feel that I haven't been dancing for many years. And it feels different right now than in 2002, when I was taking class and I was rehearsing not just as a choreographer, but also as a performer in my own work. I'm having a lot of questions about what does that mean about my movement vocabulary; about the authenticity of the movement that's coming out of my body now—is it less authentic because I'm less clued in, or is it more authentic because I'm not as clued in to a specific vocabulary or a specific way of training my body? I don't know.

Alejandra: Is all the vocabulary coming from you?

Yanira: I have different ways of trying to get at movement. I think everybody does. I try not to come into the studio with set movement. I often feel that, at least for me, those are the more frustrating movements in my work. When I can go, 'Oh, I created that movement in my bedroom at 10 o'clock at night, and it's dead. It was a dead piece of wood before it ever got on stage.'

We do a lot of work, where I come in, and again, because I'm trying to find this sort of core of an experience or an emotion, I try to find that physicality in front of the performers, and I let them take the phrase from me, or whatever they see. And then they create something around it. We often talk of the mother phrase, this original improvisation that I did in front of them, that originated the movement that theirs come from. It is really interesting for me, when I watch their individual

phrases from that mother phrase—which I can never repeat, because it was improvised—that there’s an emotional element that’s there, even though there may be four different variations of it now. And that’s what interests me, that emotional quality, when it’s successful. There’s this feeling that it all comes from the same emotional place, even though the movement can be very different, because of what they saw.

And another thing that I do a lot too, is I will create a phrase and—because I find it so frustrating as a phrase, often times—really deconstruct it. Turning it into numbers that then get shuffle around, and it’s almost like a mathematical problem. I feel like, if I could just get the math right, it would sing. And that emotional quality will come through that I’m looking for. If you repeat that movement three times, it will finally say what it is that it is trying to say so desperately. That’s the battle with body and movement.

Alejandra: Do you want to talk more about what you said about space? You’ve got the “neutral” space of the theater, and you’ve got the bodies.

Yanira: Right, you’ve got your rectangle. I actually love rectangles! We’re working on a circle for *Fetus(Twin)*, and rectangular shape is very dynamic. (Laughs.) I think for me there’s something very exciting about, as an audience member, having something very close to you and having something very far from you. And what happens for me that’s a little bit frustrating—it happens to me too when I go to museums, sometimes—is that I really want that dancer right on top of me. There’s that fourth wall thing. I have a hunger for this *tactileness*. Like when there’s this ‘wall’ between me and the art in the museum, even though I could reach out and touch the painting if I wanted to, but there’s this feeling that you’re not supposed to.

Alejandra: And sometimes there’s even that cord, or the alarm that goes off.

Yanira: I know that for me, there’s this real hunger to be able to have this tactile connection to the work. And especially with dance, which is all about the body—not all about the body, but it’s so much about the body—and this tactile, kinesthetic sensation. I have this desire to see the audience in the square, in the rectangle.

Alejandra: Has that taken you to work in alternative spaces that are not proscenium?

Yanira: Yeah. I look back and think, was that a decision or a discovery? Or, is there a difference? I didn’t set out to make work that was not in theaters. It just kind of happened with that piece I told you about, *2:1*, and then with the next piece, I was like, ‘I really want to find that again, that relationship between the audience and the performers, in an environment where we are all in the space

together. I wanted to find that again.’ And since then, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it that way.

Alejandra: Are you using both spaces in the Chocolate Factory?

Yanira: Using both spaces, the upstairs and the downstairs. And it really utilizes the space and the audiences’ relationship to the movement in a very specific way.

Alejandra: I love how that space is allowing so many people to use space in different ways.

Yanira: A lot of interesting things. I think the city needs more spaces like that, that are less... institutionalized maybe? There’s definitely room for institution, but these spaces that have the potential for various uses.

Alejandra: Do you have any observations about the current ‘scene’?

Yanira: I think there is now a broad question about experience—in the theater—that reaches the audience in an active level. I think as makers, I see a lot of people asking questions about what is the audience doing in those chairs. How can they be engaged in a very different way? Which can be threatening, which can be conflicting, which can be completely immersing and transformative. And all those things I find personally exciting right now.

Alejandra: Thank you very much Yanira.

Yanira: Thank you.