

CONNECTION COEXISTENCE NOT KNOWING

-A small meditation on performance making in Spring 2021-

Takahiro Yamamoto

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"We all want connection no matter what you do in life or where you live." This ghostly echo occasionally shows up in my mind. I cannot remember who said this to me or when. I usually do not take these types of universalistic sentiments seriously; yet, this one has been sticking.

I know that this "connection" shows up in various forms and qualities. In performance, there are connections between a lead artist and performers, between collaborators, between viewers, and between viewers and performers. As temporary as it is, I have always been fascinated by the last one: the connection between the seeing and the seen.^[1] And, this particular connection is mutually agreed upon: artists intentionally decide to present their work while viewers intentionally decide to take time to engage with the performance. And this agreement gets challenged and reconfigured in performance because the viewers are also seen by the artwork/performers. This is as true during transitory encounters on the street or a performance for which one purposeful travels to show up. It involves two groups of subjective beings facing one another.

As I write this in solitude in April 2021, I reminisce on my occasional desire and intention to tour my performance works, physically traveling to an unfamiliar space to invite strangers to connect. The connection (and sometimes disconnection) feels visceral. When the experience of physical proximity with others was abruptly challenged in March 2020, the idea of touring as well as any in-person performance came to a halt. Yet, I experienced multiple attempts at connection, receiving messages from people across the globe who I hadn't seen for a long time. "Long time no see. Thinking of you!" "How's it going in your part of the world?" "Are you talking with people on a daily basis?" As the space of collective gathering vanished, we gained more time to rekindle connections through text messages, DMs, emails, video calls, and even virtual events. In a twisted way, this pandemic has made me reflect on what it means to be "not alone." This is the result of two groups of subjective beings making an effort to acknowledge and see one another.

I always pay attention to my subjectivity both as a performer and a viewer in live performance. Things get messy when subjectivity is involved. This probably has to do with empathy and emotional investment. Even in seeing virtual performances on my computer screen, I find that the connection can be still messy. Each viewer and each performer

comes with their own idiosyncratic memories, experiences, and background. In addition to this empathetic messiness, the surrounding environment hugely affects its experience: sounds of traffic from the street, the comfort level of a chair, the number of layers of clothing I have on, sporadic yet significant technological difficulties, etc.^[2] As a maker of performance, I am often reminded of this messiness. And this reminder, as frustrating as it can be, forces me to surrender my desire to perfectly control EVERYTHING, especially viewers' reactions.

I frequently rephrase the word "connection" to "coexistence." Doing so lets me drop my tendency to always "do" things and instead allows me to "be in" the situation. This rephrasing applies to my personal life and the social conditions within which we live. And yes, the more I think about it, the messier it gets. As I place these nuances and complexity of coexistence conceptually in my recent performance projects, I arrive at more questions with no clear answers.

What would it take for me to tangibly feel the relations with others?

Why do I care about what others think?

Would I be able to accept that my existing relationships might change in shape and quality as I myself transform day by day?

This shift from connection to coexistence makes me think about the power of acceptance for not knowing. It calls for contemplation and self-reflection without a need for a quick answer or solution. The practice of relating, listening, expressing, and accepting allows for empathy without feeling the threat of losing one's subjective stance or identity.^[3]

In the last several decades, studies and practices of performance making have been a leading platform for critical dialogues about identity, embodiment, and political action. As a passionate viewer, this power of not knowing challenges my own level of intellectual comprehension and allows me to perceive an event embodied by another subjective person/people on the visceral and experiential measure. As a maker, this insistence of coexistence makes me feel like I am not, and I don't have to be, alone in this world although the external world sometimes makes me feel like I ought to be.



^[1] I am using this verb "to see" as a broader term that encompasses an uncountable number of senses.

^[2] I indulge in reminiscence of the messiness of experience as a viewer of live performance. It involves the choreography of hugging and shaking hands, being in a room with an ex-partner and trying to be civil in public, random eye contacts that results in smile and nod or pretending nothing happened, awkward navigation in the space with a heavy backpack and a big coat, scouting for a good seat but ending up yielding to folks who could use it more than myself, figuring out a social dynamic to approach and talk with a person with whom I've always wanted to be a friend, having to leave Q&A and feeling slightly bad about the decision for my artist friends, etc.

^[3] Social movement for equity touches on this very idea. Each individual with one's subjectivity, feelings, memories, and histories exists in this shared society. Yet, the social and ideological structure perpetually invisibilize certain people's subjectivity, worth, and existence based on social categories or visible cues. The systemic and social organization leads to the denial of "co-." It seems that it is easier to comprehend and beneficial for the advantaged to stick to the categorizations in the name of tradition or historically-inscribed accomplishment of civilization rather than questioning the existing social categories for the sake of valuing equal coexistence of people from myriad of backgrounds. This questioning asks for the future that is not precedented or known.