

Motivating Strangeness and the Erotics of Specificity: Takahiro Yamamoto's Direct Path to Detour: Single Focus

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September, 2017

On September 9, TBA hosted an afternoon on dance dramaturgy. In collaboration with dramaturg and scholar Kate Bredeson, the series featured guest speaker Katherine Profeta, a longtime dramaturg with choreographer Ralph Lemon, followed by a panel discussion with Bredeson, Profeta, and local dramaturgs and artists Lu Yim and sidony o'neal. During her talk, Profeta introduced the notion of "motivating strangeness" to describe a quality of catalytic items that a dramaturg might introduce into a rehearsal process. The ensuing conversation between panelists and attendees considered the potentially colonizing impulse of being motivated by strangeness, especially when working within a Western art context. How does motivating strangeness not slip into exoticizing? Furthermore, how can one's motivation to make the strange less strange not initiate a neo-colonial process of discovery, ownership, and domestication?

Companion questions continue to be asked during many TBA:17 performances. Can we sit with not knowing and still be present? Can we suspend our desire to understand? Is it enough to experience something without defining it? What is to be learned from a question if we cannot ask Siri to look it up? This week, artists such as Will Rawls, Faye Driscoll, sidony o'neal and keyon gaskin have asked their audiences to sit for longer than usual; listen to half-told stories; squint to see in the dark and plug their ears. These performances are the opposite of TED Talks. They give too much and too little. They withhold and flood the senses. They distort and distract. They refuse to deliver a sense of completion, climax, or resolution. But by and large, they do not alienate their audiences, and perhaps that is one of the major differences between experimental performance in 2017 and in previous decades of postmodernism. TBA audiences this week have been welcomed in—given pillows and ear plugs, invited to write parts of the story, treated to textured whispers, and even hugged—to contemplate messiness with the artists, encouraged to take care of ourselves in the process.

Portland-based artist Takahiro Yamamoto's presentation for TBA, *Direct Path to Detour: Single Focus*, works in this vein. His solo performance offers audiences an experience of witnessing a journey—a journey that does not reach a destination but opens up more pathways. Yamamoto's solo is one part of a three-pronged project that includes an ensemble performance (which debuted at PICA in May) and a book. Like the other two components, *Single Focus* is an exploration of identity that withholds disclosure and instead



savors ambiguity. This does not feel like a bait-and-switch. It feels more honest than a straightforward confession.

As I entered the playing space—a multipurpose room in PICA’s downtown location, cordoned off by a curtain—Yamamoto was chatting with audience members, presumably people he knows in his hometown of six years. He and sidony o’neal, composer for Single Focus and a collaborator on every component of the project (in addition to presenting original work, *Dead Thoroughbred*, with keyon gaskin in TBA:17), giggled and waved as they saw people enter that brought them smiles. We sat in a big circle inside the square room, many of us cross-legged on the floor, some with pillows, others in folding chairs behind us. Small battery-operated lights, like white doughnuts encircling glowing spheres, punctuated the perimeter of the circular playing space. At one point, the audience hushed, collectively convinced that it was time to start. “I’m not performing now,” Yamamoto assured us with a laugh. Nervous giggles pealed throughout the crowd and the low murmur of chatter resumed.

When it was time to start, Yamamoto exited the space, slipping his feet into flip-flops first. When he returned, the lights (designed by Jeff Forbes) softened and o’neal, seated on a rug behind a laptop, began to play her score.

Yamamoto begins and ends with deeply concentrated yo-yo play. He is intensely focused on the object and yet sometimes maintains tenuous control over it. He casts it into the air with such velocity that it rebounds off of his palms. He stretches the string overhead, pulling his body into two directions at once. At some point I begin to wonder if he is controlling the toy or if the toy is controlling him?

Eventually, Yamamoto tosses the yo-yo to o'neal. Free of the object, his arms become serpentine, wave-like. He follows paths of energy through his arms, flowing into his spine and pelvis. Sometimes his eyes are closed, even when abruptly shifting to the floor – tailbone in the air, feet pressing near ears, or pubic bone pointing to ceiling and shoulder blades holding his body like feet. He often lands very close to an audience member. One woman tucks in her feet. I imagine him being tossed around in a sea of ocean waves; but that isn't quite right, because he also is the wave. What forces are in control; what or who is being controlled?

Yamamoto breaks this mode suddenly, almost like a film director yelling "Cut!" in the middle of an emotionally charged scene. Now sweat-drenched, Yamamoto says, "Ok," walks to his flip-flops, slips them on, and leaves through the curtain. He swiftly returns with a wooden stool, slips off his shoes, and places the stool in the center of the floor. Holding a plastic toy that resembles a microphone or an ice cream cone, he talks directly to us, sitting on the stool and spinning 360 degrees to address each side of the room. He asks one woman, "Where are you from?" "New York," she answers. He muses a few associations with New York and launches into a monologue that begins by explaining his immigration to the US from Japan 18 years ago and morphs into a story about meeting his hero, Neil Patrick Harris. As he talks, the low hum of soft music peaks in volume, drowning out his voice. When his back is to us, we can't even try to read his lips. After a few minutes of this deliberately obstructed confession, he concludes matter-of-factly, "That's enough about me."

o'neal tosses Yamamoto the yo-yo, but this time, we are prepared to see it anew. As Yamamoto rolls the object with excruciating slowness, it takes on a defamiliar quality. And in this moment, the thrust of the piece crystallizes for me: instead of motivating our desire for strangeness, and satisfying that desire by making the strange known, Yamamoto begins with what we think we know and makes it strange. He leads us to question our assumed labels and categories, from yo-yo to immigrant, by revealing how little we actually perceive. Lu Yim, who worked with Yamamoto as a dramaturg on *Direct Path to Detour*, shared a phrase with Yamamoto during their ensemble rehearsal process: "the erotics of specificity." Yamamoto claims that he still doesn't know what that means, but its power as a motivating concept is present in each component of his three-part project. The desire to understand, know, define, and locate each other is seductive. Sometimes it is necessary. But Yamamoto asks us to pause, experience, observe, take a detour, and perhaps never arrive.



image by courtesy of PICA