



En route to the Seattle Festival of Dance and Improvisation (SFDI), July 26, 2015.

# The Practice of Form

## a class by Ralph Lemon

remembered by Aretha Aoki

**W**e wrecked the room.<sup>1</sup>

All 40 or so of us cluster loosely around Ralph, who is wearing silver sneakers and whose smile is wide, warm, maybe mischievous. He says, *Oh, this is going to be bad*, looking at the crowd of us—well over the announced capacity of 24.

He urges us to come closer (*Come closer! Even closer. Closer.*) In front of him an open laptop, silver like his sneakers. He proceeds, a cascade of words—poetic, paradoxical, exact—from the mind of a maker: upending meaning, incising moments, extracting jewels.

Possible to feel the charge of a thought, the sensation of ideas

*I'm interested in...*

From the loopy scribble of my notes and pieces of recollection, I recall:

### Part 1: Madness

**Ralph:**

*When it feels good and then it doesn't feel good,  
when there is fluctuation between making and unmaking,  
when there is no center*

*How to be really good? No, how to make bad good dance  
The tension between the fake and the real*

*How does one lose agency?*

*I prefer the word "maker" to "improviser," though there  
is improvisation to making, and once I tried not to make  
a dance, but this was a choreographic contingent*

*It's about being mindful and present, which are overused  
words, much like rigor*

*What I mean is the unsafe, risky place to be,  
destabilizing where you think you are*

*You're in an ocean, trying to surf*

*What is the choreographic order, the tonality, the music of it?*

Ralph rocks forward



Century Ballroom, Seattle, WA.

*Today, I was walking my daughter through the park and saw a kind of performance of Jen Monson's class, saw that there was no hierarchy. In the chaos of the pedestrian, the homeless, the order of the dancers, there was productive confusion. What am I looking at? This is the question that generates work, something wondrous, something capacious, something that keeps changing.*

*Pigeons pace and strike at the ground. Dancers balance on the benches. Strollers and sunglasses stride past. A hare bounds across the pavement toward the grassy hills. A man, a homeless man, takes slow steps. A bright woolen blanket balancing precariously on his head. He is different. He catches my eye, he is all I can look at. Madness.*

Ralph scratches his nose, adjusts his glasses, continues

*The homeless man plods past the dancers, the birds, the pedestrians, and arrives at the piano, carefully adjusts to sitting on the bench, and places his hands on the keys. He begins to play, with delicacy, with purpose, with deft precision. I no longer know what I'm looking at. And I begin to weep. I don't know what I'm looking at.*

My eyes fill, I blink, I jot down

*In this class, we look for the equipoise in the noise.  
The kind noise.*

## Part 2: Labor

### **Ralph:**

*I'm thinking about the Container, what holds your work, what holds your body? Ask yourself immediately, what's holding me now? As the container continues to change.*

I board in Hartford, fly to D.C., then onward to San Francisco before landing finally in Seattle. The assignment is to

document Velocity Dance Center's Seattle Festival of Dance and Improvisation (SFDI)<sup>2</sup> for CQ. Having never documented or even attended a dance festival, I rely heavily on the fancy audio recorder I borrowed for this week. I begin at the airport. The task of listening enhances all sounds, even the Doobie Brothers playing faintly through speakers at the gate. On the plane, I drift into the sounds of the engine. I'm held by the rigidly upright seat, the sky to my left, and the folded tray table inches in front of me.

Once at SeaTac, I travel by train to Westlake station and wait for a bus. There is a woman staring at me, squinting. I look at her. Her hair is dyed red, her slight slouch unmistakable. We move slowly, questioningly, toward each other until we meet, side hug, and separate. She is my childhood best friend whom I haven't seen in twenty years. We grew up across the street from each other, rode bikes, listened to New Kids, built snow forts. She says, "You look exactly like your Mother." We exchange stories about our aging parents: my mother's stiffening gait, her jumbled speech. Her father's heart—how it stopped, then started again. Then my bus pulls up and we shove some words at each other and I leave.

### **Ralph:**

*I'm calling it the Perfect Gesture and it's like rigor, and it's extreme. What are those moments that pass but exist? I would say it's the thing possessing the whole. Where's the humanity, art, labor, society, the politics, in a movement investigation? The thing that holds everything also holds these things. Also, call it "the thing." It's perfectly efficient. Build confidence through acknowledging its efficiency.*

*The vulnerable, fragile, what Steve Paxton calls "making the body available." I saw Yvonne Rainer perform recently. I saw her body crying. Does something feel Urgent? An impulse, desire, need. Is there a place where you can feel it as energy?*

*Might that be a requirement at some point?*

*What's visible inside and out?*

*Generational efficiency, the aging body, honoring where you are*

*What kind of communal system gets created? You can try to wreck it but can you scratch it?*

*Generosity, the Hare in the Moon story*

*There's no limit to what you can be aware of and do. Yes, fear comes up. You can use that fear and discursive noise as generative, and there's no hierarchy.*

*It's a Good Labor.*

I arrive at Century Ballroom in the Odd Fellows building on Pine Street and ask to record. Ralph says, *please do not record*, and suggests instead that I *recall* his words and the events of the class in an (unreliable) *memory exercise*.

### **Part 3: The Wrecking**

We stand in a 40-plus-person circle at the edge of the room. Ralph asks Jen Monson to enter the circle, says *let her beginning movement be the container for the dance*. The two of them stand, heads together. He whispers a direction? an image? a joke? into Jen's ear, then rejoins the circle. We watch:

Jen is casual, Jen is a field of horses. Jen blows a kiss to the chandelier above and exits

I think, "Or I will call End to imprint this overture in memory."<sup>3</sup> The room is meringue, poised, perfect, and I want to call end, curtain, adios

80-plus eyes blinking, wondering what to do

What about what happens after the Perfect Gesture? Anything else is dense air on the whipped peaks

A brave hare enters, allowing others to follow. They do their compositional duty. They echo, they add, they relate, they oppose. I get in there, that familiar rhythm, warm water. Soon there are too many to track to build a thing. It's messy. What am I looking at? Who's watching? Where's Ralph? Why care where he is? I do, though, and imagine him watching me and judge myself for it.

The urge, when perceiving a border, to cross over. But I don't. I go down the rabbit hole of "here I go again, down the rabbit hole," always needing to break the rules but not brave enough to actually break them and what's this fixation on rules, anyway? Whose rules? The dance giving nothing to me and I nothing to it, I pace the perimeter, toy

with the edges. I imagine throwing rocks at the windows, shattering the glass, and diving out onto Pine St. I sit in a chair and think, ooh, you're sitting in a chair, fucker. Someone grabs a different chair and plunges in. I take the red tablecloth I'm clutching, wrap it around my head and enter the fray blind. A person in front of me is still, and his body affords safe harbor in the storm. Maybe mine, too, for him. We press our heads together. Silence. We move slow, whispering pines. I remove the cloth, he has brown eyes. I shove the cloth under his shirt, causing his belly to bulge, and me and my pregnant partner thrash and claw—two wrestling wolves in the fog and forest of the room. Shapes and colors emerge into view: a pair of orange pants, metal stanchions, and tables capsized and strewn. Clumps of shirtless euphoric dancers here and there. Feverish duets and trios. Solo wanderers. Somehow, eyes open, I am outside again but no longer resistant to my state. I find solitude, then passing moments of friendship with a chair. Lying on the floor, I raise my arm. White flag? A person lies beside me and together our arms fold, extend, pause, fingers flickering, arcing through air.

### **Part 4: Meaninging<sup>4</sup>**

We sit in a sweaty clump.

Someone speaks, others too, something of the Container and themselves in relation to it. What was it that just happened? Slippery it. Sitting here, persisting, the pitch and tremor of it

**Ralph:**

*The erotic, the elephant in the room. It's sexual, Dionysian, but then there's more*

*The horror, it's so messy but it doesn't matter, I'm here*

**Joyce:**

*What is the difference between dancing in a park and dancing in a theater? Why were we here and not outside?*

**Ralph:**

*It's authorial control versus a lack of it. But then there's site-specific dance, which maybe Jen, you could speak to*

**Jen:**

*For me, dancing in the park isn't "site-specific." It's part of a continual process. It could be watched or not, that's not the point*

**Ralph:**

*Agency—to act or to hold. There is the messiness of the world and the messiness of the room. We navigate the social contract, the invisible hierarchies, expectations, judgments...we agree on a piece's meaninglessness. Meaning is localized...it's*



photo © Aretha Aoki

Cal Anderson Park, Seattle, WA, July 2015.

*valuable to me and the people I make work with. I'm making work for like-minded people*

**Jen:**

*Meaninglessness? I saw your Scaffold Room, I don't agree. It was full of lucid, forceful meaning*

**Kaitlin:**

*I also saw Scaffold Room. I brought my mother to it, my Midwestern mother who has never seen a dance, has no context for it. She felt the political resonance. It altered her. Your dance has value and meaning. If it can reach her, then...*

**Ralph:**

*The work has value. But as far as "meaning," my responsibility is to be as articulate as I can about the questions that I'm asking. You can't hold or do all of it*

Pause.<sup>5</sup> A shimmer of light on the worn planks—all those heels, metatarsals, and toes pressing in.



**Ralph Lemon** is a director, choreographer, writer, and visual artist. He currently serves as the artistic director of Cross Performance, a company dedicated to the creation of cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary performance and presentation.

**ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup>“Wrecking<sup>®</sup> is a method for interference,” originally developed as a choreographic tool by dance artist Susan Rethorst in 1995 in New York City. <http://susanrethorst.com/wrecking>. For a history of Wrecking<sup>®</sup>, see Rethorst, “Stealing, Influence, and Identity,” *CQ* Vol. 37:1, W/S 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Velocity Dance Center’s 2015 Seattle Festival of Dance Improvisation took place from July 26–August 3. Ralph Lemon’s drop-in class, *The Practice of Form*, happened on Mon., July 27. SFDI is a week of intensives, classes, jams, somatic labs, site-specific workshops, performances, and discussions focused on fostering the study and practice of dance improvisation. [velocitydancecenter.org/program/sfdi/](http://velocitydancecenter.org/program/sfdi/).

<sup>3</sup> Lisa Nelson, “Fragment of a Tuning Run,” *CQ* Vol. 39:1, W/S 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Dance artist Jeanine Durning uses the double gerund “inging” in her performance piece of the same name (2010) to propose the insistent practice of unscripted nonstop languaging as performance, where speaker (performer) is in direct relation with listener (audience) at the moment of articulation. [http://www.jeaninedurning.com/?page\\_id=31](http://www.jeaninedurning.com/?page_id=31).

<sup>5</sup> Borrowed from a “call” from the Tuning Score, developed by dance artist Lisa Nelson as “a communication and feedback system for a group of players who act equally as directors, performers, and spectators.” [http://olga0.oralsite.be/oralsite/pages/Testpage\\_Lisa\\_Nelson\\_\(general\)/](http://olga0.oralsite.be/oralsite/pages/Testpage_Lisa_Nelson_(general)/).

*The next issue of CQ, Vol. 41, no. 2, Summer/Fall 2016, will feature a folio of writings and images from the action and thinking generated by the 2015 Seattle Festival of Dance Improvisation. Additional writing will be posted on [www.contactquarterly.com](http://www.contactquarterly.com)’s **CQ Unbound** and on Velocity’s online journal of choreographic culture, **Stance**—[velocitydancecenter.org/program/stance/](http://velocitydancecenter.org/program/stance/).*