

# Simultaneous Translations

A Conversation with Sherwood Chen and Margit Galanter

FRESH Festival 2015—SF Bay Area, January 2015

While teaching at FRESH Festival, I had a first-time opportunity to experience Sherwood Chen's Simultaneous Translations workshop. Sherwood's moving is breathtaking, lucid, and his rigorous teaching experiments open up an imaginative field. On the first day of his class, we traversed across the space in self-organized passes for a full two hours, a nonstop flow that was a creative extension of the oft-used modern dance teaching mode of "going across the floor." The room's motion was magnified through the novelty in the material itself, which was contorted, wildly imagistic, destabilizing, and physically challenging, so we became like little rough stones polishing one another and ourselves as we tumbled down the stream. Sherwood's accompanying music mix—some familiar, some not—carried the action in cadence with the soundscape of our altered breathing, our physical exertions, and pauses to listen for the next wild proposition.

Sherwood's developing dance approach offers a rich territory by pushing the participants both physically and imagistically, which induces subtle yet intricate changes that affect the whole self of the dancer. Taking some days of his workshop gave insight into his inquiries and led me to want to understand the layers that preceded the practice. As I tend to find understanding through doing, from reflection, and in conversation, I started an email dialogue with Sherwood, which began to explicate the deep reflections and experiences that go into the art of his teaching. What follows is an excerpt edited by both of us. [MG]

A morning dance: *Peripheries and images* sunrise walk in the buzzing lavender field with the physical memory from the raging hail storm in the exact same place two days prior.

From Sherwood Chen's workshop in La Drôme, France, summer 2014.

## MARGIT (MG)

What a surprise class was today! What a delight to be worked in this rigorous way.

As you think back through this week, what are some of the sources for your imagery and actions? What stands out, and what has stuck for you over time, and why do you think these ones matter?

## SHERWOOD (SC)

I wonder whether in the fray of sweaty, physically and spatially dynamic movement material one can still refine images in the body. I want to provoke the managing, mismanaging, or interpreting of simultaneous states, be they task oriented, formal, imagistic, rhythmic, indigenous, appropriated, or otherwise. I currently frame my proposals as *Simultaneous Translations* to grossly name the performer's endless innate negotiations. That frame first came about around 2012, as I had to grapple with my work in varied cultural and linguistic contexts.

In recent years, I have been leading workshops which invite the short-lived constellation of participants to derive their own collectively negotiated imagery. The imagery is unique to the group and to the actual landscapes they occupy, and a direct result of the sensorial and kinesthetic



*Simultaneous Translations* workshop with Sherwood Chen, FRESH Festival, San Francisco, CA, Jan. 2015.

research I ask from them. The classes I offer this year in FRESH are too short to do this, yet in the spirit of bombardment, I introduced language-driven images anyway, invoking other landscapes to shoot through the moving body.

A performer's personal clarity of an image and its public legibility in performance are certainly not mutually exclusive. The tension between them interests me. When I say "legibility," I refer to the atmospheric and formal palpability of a performer's presence in a dance. Without the need ever for a witness to identify or "place" an image per se. Nor for the performer to resort to formal mimicry.

The images I draw from have a mix of origins, mostly coming from my own subjective associations excavated from specific movements, to material observations in daily life, to evoking other-worlds. Some images come from Body Weather training—particularly working with Min Tanaka, Oguri, Roxanne Steinberg, and Melinda Ring—which has fundamentally impacted me to this day. Image work provokes possibilities to put into play sensorial and cellular memory, from the most familiar lived sensations to otherworldly, surreal, and at times dadaist bodies. I've since elaborated liberally and capriciously with images, both through form and language. These images are fragile, can become formally and linguistically distant relatives to their origins, which had been already in full creative corruption far before my time. Imagery in this context is dynamic, unstable, and fleeting in the effort to transform the property of flesh in performance.

I've avoided a canonical approach to imagery. I want to intercut imagery in new contexts and see what remains, what deforms. Not out of irreverence. Maybe to find freedom from reverence. I've encouraged myself to make space for my own questions, sometimes recklessly. Though I fear I am not wild enough, yet, if ever.

#### MG

I am very interested in what your definition of technique might be. I tend to use the word "technology," oddly

enough, or "tools," as they imply a base of operations and procedures from which one can access choices. No simple recipe. In the context of aesthetic experimentation, the architecture and rigor of the tools can come from multiple locations and realms of experience, but intricacies indeed are necessary in order to breathe something into being that is potent and coherent. I felt this in working with you. What is the function of your floor work? How is it preparing the being/artist?

#### SC

I struggle with the word "technique" because of dominant implications of fixed vocabulary, movement, style, and the training required to move closer to achieving it. In training across the floor, I consider different objectives. Warm-up, physical training, examining limits, exhaustion, non-conservation, speed(s), scale(s), synapses, interpretation, inundation, group energy, reading each other's bodies, degrees of mental dis/engagement, placing the body in a state of figuring itself out, placing our mind in a state of trying to figure the body out.

I'm less concerned about whether someone can or cannot execute what I propose and more interested in *how* they work with what's hurled at them. Their curiosity. Sometimes I dare to propose movements or speeds which I cannot execute, as a question. When I lead, I bring into playful battlefield all my own habits and blind spots. It takes a large degree of vigilance, supported by group energy, to push past what I know. This is the incisive and ultimately individual spirit I'd like participants to cultivate for themselves as we work together.

#### MG

What are you training the person and body for when you teach?

#### SC

For practical purposes, I use the word "teach" in daily contexts, but it is always with some hesitation, because I like to construct my workshops and trainings from

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questions. I suppose what I had inherited from Body Weather culture, if such a thing even exists, is re-framing “teach” as “lead” because the former is so rife with set/affirmed knowledge and notions of mastery. What resonates with me in Body Weather is that there is no definitive situated place of knowledge. It’s all a damned fight, which is an exhausting mandate. Leading and knowing are two different things which sometimes intersect. I’m leading, sometimes from the not-knowing. Hopefully this induces a degree of participant autonomy in observation, experience, and reflection.

While I’m permanently wired to question teaching or being a teacher, I strongly believe in teachers and have actively pursued masters in my life’s trajectory to date.

On scholarship in early 2002, I plunged headfirst into the world of classical Central Javanese *alusan* (refined male) and *putri* (female) character court dance of the Kasunanan style. When I showed up on the scene, I remember swiftly accepting the impossibility of attaining the tradition’s fluid splendor and restrained ecstasy, even though my teachers were actively sculpting me towards an unattainable (to me) form. It was too late for me in this lifetime to taste joint hyperextension, to cultivate a mystical discipline and cultural and linguistic fluency, to even be groomed and/or traumatized by the typecasting which classical dance forms are infamous for. I was simply compelled by the form’s power, vibration, and perfume. Cultural tourist? Admittedly, yes.

Training in Java—with Bambang Besur Suryono, Rusini Hendro Purnomo Sidi, the late Sri Sutjiati Djoko Suhardjo—and subsequently in California with Nanik and Nyoman Wenten at Cal Arts, was the one and to date only period I delved into any classical form. I am as grateful for the concurrent cultural translations, bridging, and insight that Java-based Californian artists and scholars Jeannie Park and Alex Dea offered me. In the heart of a hyper-codified tradition, I couldn’t have been more awakened to how I was formed from deconstructionist modalities. I inherited an understanding of dance loftily equated to radical tear-downs, with an unreasonable mandate to

be leery of existing, repeatable form and its associated “meaning.”

My sojourn in Java flew in the face of all that, and it shook me deeply.

Early on in my court dance training in Solo I met movement artist Suprpto Suryodarmo. While he demonstrated in full force both a formidable formal quality in his dancing and an interaction with the teeming environment, he generally allowed people to move the way they needed to, never imposing specific form. Despite formal and pedagogic differences, Pak Prapto’s training and Javanese classical court dance each touched on seemingly common frequencies I was trying to surface in my body. I remember reaching a black-and-white turning point, when I considered scrapping my classical studies to join him and his community of artists and searchers, quite a few of whom fluently toggled between the court and his proposed experiential and experimental realms. I stopped myself from quitting my classical studies. I resolutely convinced myself that under his generous, esoteric directions without formal (dance) restrictions, I would run the risk of importing all my preexisting improvisation habits.

This violent contempt towards my moving base—real, imagined, or otherwise—kept me in the classical vein as a crystallized strategy to hack at the ways I had been formed prior. Through hindsight, it was my own limitations, not the practice itself, that made them mutually opposed.

#### **MG**

How do your classes serve your own creative juice? What do you feel are the necessary things to share?

#### **SC**

I’m slowly understanding that my workshops are a form of artistic expression. I sometimes see my trainings as ephemeral works driven by the miraculous, one-time-only assembly of participants. It’s a nice way to start.

What is necessary for me to share all depends on the duration we have to work. When I lead longer intensives, I have of late been designing them foremost to recognize





photo © Robbie Sweeny Photography

Sherwood Chen in the solo *Eye of Leo: A Future Life / 23kg*, directed by Sara Shelton Mann.  
Joe Goode Performing Annex, San Francisco, CA, 2013.

participants as rich sources of input, not only from their own sensate experiences, their individual material, but equally in the construction and negotiation of group work. What can arise from a group, their temperature and temperament? How does their profile color specific trainings that I propose? The challenge in designing workshops in these past years—particularly when immersed in the outdoor landscape—is to construct a sequence of generative, creative input from participants, scored to ultimately yield dances which could not exist otherwise.

It's inspiring, hard work. And I'm learning to embrace scores with disastrous results, to read or draw immediately from when things fall apart or are trumped by environmental circumstances. I thank Anna Halprin, who has influenced me ever since I participated in her Sea Ranch gatherings in the late '90s through the aughts. She instilled in me ways to score and re-score, to honor each participant's experience, and to stay ever supple and responsive to the inevitably unexpected.

All this to say that thematically and artistically, I can't yet and may never shake notions of gap, of loss, and corruption in translation, hence the titular framework of my research. That gap has everything to do with ambitions of understanding movement and the body in unanticipated, unmastered (or de-mastered) ways, missing the mark included.

I suppose I talked at length about my time in Java for this very reason. That period was an explicit, albeit not entirely conscious, effort to immerse myself in and around the power of my teachers' mastery. That refined tradition contained me, held me, no matter how clumsily I thrashed through it. All the while, I understood that my body, despite its shortcomings, could become, at the very least, an exquisite articulation of said gap. A translation so to speak. I am looking at this sometimes metaphoric, sometimes literal act of translation as something to amplify. And that is consistent with the destabilization that I value.

#### MG

I was really sore yesterday, and I was interested in how your images led me to use parts of myself I don't often access or engage. For example, when you asked us to take steps lunging forward, with our knees exposing the insides of our legs, not only were we in the physical challenge of walking low and wide, but also there was an implicit sense of enlivening this quiet area of ourselves; it was evocative and exposing a part of ourselves that is often just facing in or that can go unnoticed frequently in dance. The combination of the rigor and the novelty invited a subterranean vulnerability that shifted my presence over the course of action. This was all the more true as we had been traversing with so many other intentions, so perhaps this complexity led to a kind of softening of self-consciousness. I had to organize all my attention to achieve the action.

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photo © Robbie Sweeney Photography



Sherwood Chen in the solo *Eye of Leo: A Future Life / 23kg*, directed by Sara Shelton Mann. Joe Goode Performing Annex, San Francisco, CA, 2013.

Also, the quality of directionality that you set up by going across the floor was fantastic. So much was potent, and I think I will be riffing off your images for much time to come.

You mentioned “propulsion” in class today. I picked up on it because I’d heard poet Fred Moten say it earlier today (on YouTube), after I had written it myself in regards to my current artistic threads. Moten was talking about sociopoetics and the becoming of black expression. He spoke of blackness as a kind of radical force that is not owned. In Moten’s poetics, he connected social variance, radical dislocations, propulsions—movements of life. “Propulsion” comes up in this context as a kind of act that reveals the complexities of social truths. It reminds me of some of the ways your movement works—multidirectionally, and with a desire for rupturing. Now I wonder about your thoughts about propulsion in both physical and imagistic realms.

#### SC

When I mentioned propulsion in class, it was a pretty physical directive. One knee an acting force, the other the recipient. But if you analyze it, this propulsion is as much an image, because where the propulsion comes from remains ambiguous....

#### MG

As I begin the festival, I am exploring through propulsion what necessity is, as well as intention, motive force, and how the nexus of these qualities produces purpose in action; how movement is derived from artistic passion, from the logic of movement itself, and from the fascinations of daily life. What do we need to do? What are the movements of a larger life (and social body), and how do they connect with the movements of dance practice? How does this relate to a social body and the multiplicitous potential of the dancer’s lived actions?

#### SC

In today’s overload malaise, I’m leaning towards playing with the function of “patchwork,” which, intentionally or otherwise, turns away from a singular, often representational rootedness, instead bending towards a certain structured chaos with its own logic. A patchwork sensibility is irresolute and loaded territory. It can represent major privilege yielding dumb, appropriative pastiche. It can also articulate a socially marginalized, hybridized identity and/or body constructing its way out of or towards something.

The other day over coffee, performer, writer, and curator Sophia Wang and I discussed the technical use of the terms “immigrant” and “expat” as we mused on our lives as children of Taiwanese parents and the messy-beautiful degrees of bicultural navigation they and we have experienced. Is it that immigrant implies *coming* to a place

and expat implies *going* to a place, or vice versa? How do the roles of systems, agency, and self-identifications parse out the differences? Are there implications of duration or in/stability associated with either word? Is the latter typically associated with more privilege or empowerment in the face of dominant American culture?

Taking a leap from social bodies to the dancing body, what then is contemporary foreignness or displacement in dance? I ask myself this question a lot in my current performance work and in my workshops. This cannot guarantee interesting dance to watch. But sometimes it does. Cultivating the endless vigilance to break away from one's self-expression is an underlying objective in my trainings, which, if achieved, subsequently changes how we consider watching dances, too. How does all this translate into performance? How then do we manage or evaluate current readings of work as good or bad?

How do we identify through our movements what is indigenous and what is inherited/integrated? What is a foreign movement which is nonetheless generated by the same (indigenous) body? It's contradictory. Awkward. These are the initial questions I will research in Marseille at Dans Les Parages, inclusive of a public laboratory entitled *Alien Weavings*. I want to score the means to identify and generate movement without disparaging our inherent individual "weave" of habitual movement patterns. These patterns may be acquired in life, physiologically, socially, and psychically informed—mastered, inherited, appropriated, or otherwise. I want to use these patterns as a basis to hammer out, in theory, the implied surrounding negative space. Trying to approach an alienness which can exist in, can be derived from, the same body. Like I said during the first day of class this week, there's a lot of impossible ambition to this, pushing incrementally and likely in a nonlinear fashion, without ever being able to fully arrive at closing that gap.



*A version of this conversation was previously published on (and printed with permission from) BAYWATCH, an online forum for writing about contemporary dance in the San Francisco Bay Area, March 6, 2015. <http://baywatchbaywatch.com>.*

**FRESH FESTIVAL: Performance / Practice / Exchange** is San Francisco's annual festival of Experimental Dance + Performance. The 6th incarnation took place January 2–18, 2015. [www.freshfestival.org](http://www.freshfestival.org).

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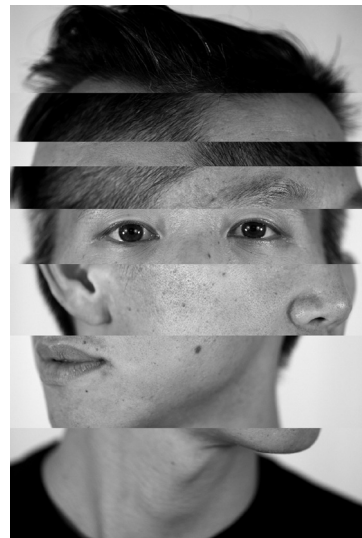


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