

World Dance Alliance Presentation
Tom Borek
The Global Overlapping and Interlinking of Arts and Culture Over Time
July 13, 2010 Tuesday 9:30 - 11:00
Room 904
Kimmel Center for University Life, NYU
60 Washington Square South, NYC

Intro:

In 1996 I gave a presentation at the Greenmill World Dance Conference in Melbourne, Australia on Global Art, A Long Tradition. I had been living and working in Hong Kong since 1989, teaching in the Dance Program of the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts whose Dean of Dance was Carl Wolz, one of the early founders of the World Dance Alliance. Also I wrote criticism and articles on dance. Traveling throughout Asia Pacific - Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, China, Thailand, Japan, India, and Australia - sensitized and fostered numerous insights about various cultures and art, even my home country the US and other countries and cultures previously visited in Europe.

Among my personal insights were the imagistic similarities between how a particular language is written and its resemblance to architecture, how possibly architectural design and shapes of buildings within a culture are similar to the shaping of the written text. Chinese is written in pictograms or ideograms and resembles the shape of its historical architectural buildings, like the pagoda. Western language alphabets are right angled and resemble its right angled buildings. Old Cyrillic alphabet swirls in Russian and Slavic languages resemble the architectural swirls in its older historical buildings. Might this affect modes of thinking? And dancing?

As said this presentation is compiled from the original 1996 version and expanded/updated to current times. I absorbed a flurry of ideas then and since about cultural and artistic fusions and interlinkings. As you might also about any artistic and cultural experiences you've had. My artistic and cultural fusions and linkings are not limited to dance but also shed light on other art forms. It's good to sense a broad spectrum.

Back in the early 1960s Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian communications theorist and cultural critic, predicted the coming of a global village. He was an original futurist. That would be a time when, with the virtual instantaneous worldwide sharing of information via technological communication, our trundling planet would reconfigure into a "global village." Paris, London, New York, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Melbourne would, in an informational sense, construct, or deconstruct if you prefer, into an all encompassing consciousness. The variety of people's views would synergize into a sort of mythic perceptual unity and framework. As with any utopian vision, and those times were full of utopias, how this is ultimately accomplished leaves history to provide the answers.

In this current new millennium, we are further along on the information superhighway. Computers, email, the internet, and websites have interlinked our separate geographical physiologies. What's ahead? Who can really tell? There are stirrings, sea changes in societies and cultures. You can see it in art, a transitioning, adventurous, with a shifting of values and views, always a time for experiments before forms become dominant and labels applied, before an art label sets a form on its way, with its correlative enrichments and constrictions. The contemporary words of art parlance trip off our tongues about these expansions: cross-cultural, multicultural, pluralism, internationalism, and yes, now global art. At the same time there also exist tandem notions of a global economy, and horrifically, global warfare. The word global is an evolving term. It can cover many areas: health, global warming, etc. And there is a recently published book titled "Globish" that identifies English in a culturally diverse way and its usage around the planet.

There have been a number of recent articles in the New York Times by Michael Kimmelman addressing globalism, and the usage of the internet and texting by Michiko Kakutani. Both tend to be wisely critical. Kimmelman states that globalism is a dubious concept, and Kakutani that the internet mashes up everything we know about culture and that it generates texts without context. A recent book, "Shallows," pushes the issue of the internet as allowing for shallow intellectual thinking. Yet Steven Pinker, one of the world's leading experts on language and the mind, in response advocated internet textual development. Interestingly, with the invention of the Gutenberg printing press in the 1400s, the printing of books expanded literacy, and the proliferation of periodicals became widespread, with the beginnings of music criticism in the 1700s. Where are we going? We have yet to see.

Within this contextual reappraisal of art and dance, the old familiar word *Zeitgeist*, again, springs to mind. We've always known that "the spirit of the time" affects and reflects much of what we do.

There is art that advances, grows, flowers, and is reenergized, that has borrowed from or been influenced by arts and ideas from other cultures. Thousands and hundreds of years ago this exchange usually happened by way of wars, conquests, trading, and explorations, by way of colonial imperialism. As long as people migrated, ideas migrated. Closer to our time, this exchange happens by a freedom of communication in art and a vast multiplicity of ideas as never before.

This is how art can renew itself, refresh itself, look anew at how it functions, how it redefines syntax, form, sensibilities, modes of expression. And how, as a corollary by contrast, it reifies and identifies the best in classical and traditional forms. Today, hardly any one form dominates any one art. For example, there is no one form of composition that holds sway in music. And in dance there can be and now are a multiplicity of forms, views, ideas on choreographing.

An intriguing notion emerged in Western art some years back in the 1920s and '30s, perhaps true, if not romantic, to think of artists as the “antennae of society.” The artist feeling, sensing, recognizing, and anticipating ideas that later become known as fact, and the belated recognition of that by the rest of society. This was posed, or patently stated, by Ezra Pound, the American poet, and viewed by him as a modernist literary quest. Pound might say today that the artist is the antennae of societies. Then, too, disavowals of conventional boundaries have always been the elemental stripe of an avant-garde, now more ordinarily called “cutting edge,” whether in dance, literature, music, theater, or the visual arts. My view of art is that it allows for a wider and greater reality versus the limits of functional reality that binds us.

Perhaps many an artist’s antennae are now transcending any particular culture and time, as well as precedents of historical influence and separation. Perhaps many an artist is now both within and outside a culture, knowing it from both the inside and out, synthesizing, conflating place and time as a past, present, and future that is mostly a present.

Look at almost any major choreographer who has changed the face of dance, and preserved its soul, and you will see some synergetic web of modernity and philosophical underpinning, aligned with a devouring, transforming intelligence that has absorbed, or borrowed if you will, what the world has to offer. This again, is how art renews itself at a more idiosyncratic level. At root though, with art that is considered modern or contemporary, there is always the individual, superseding any art form by their authenticity. That’s when we shed labels like postmodern, neoclassical, and neorealism and recognize an artist’s signature, possibly genius, that shines through. Such artists always prove that art is always a becoming.

George Balanchine resuscitated 20th century ballet from its creaky posturings. Coming to New York City with his Russian ballet heritage he took to the high energy and speedy pace that pervades this metropolitan beehive. His choreography reflected this tempo and quality, and with his innate musicality and invention sparked a ballet renaissance. It may have helped, too, that the New York art Zeitgeist in the 1950s had Abstract Expressionism in the air that fed into such a ballet as *Agon*. As it may have also imploded in the choreography of Merce Cunningham at that time.

Ever the avant-gardist, Cunningham also transmogrified Zen philosophy into a choreographic working process which avowed that music did not have to drive the choreography but could co-exist in synchronicity. And even in his later years Cunningham used computer programming, *Life Forms*, to generate his choreography.

One of the key founders of Japanese Butoh, Kazuo Ohno, studied with the German modern dancer Mary Wigman, and that intense expressiveness of early modern dance may have become an indelible part of this stark form.

Ancient Chinese poetry in the concision of its imagery exerted an influence in the 20th century on the modernist theories of the American poet and critic Ezra Pound who edited T.S.

Eliot's seminal poem, "The Waste Land." One could say that in this indirect route, the likes of Chinese poetry eventuated into the modernism of Western culture. Along further literary lines, the sensibility of Japanese art and haiku poetry found their way into the poetry of American poet Wallace Stevens. And ironically, one of the most popular songs in the US during the 1940s and now a state song is "Moonlight in Vermont" with lyrics by John Blackburn that have a haiku poetry form. And the so-called "primitive" art of Africa was imbibed by Picasso in his modernism.

Martha Graham, the high priestess of classic modern dance, owed a certain debt to Japanese Kabuki theater that so impressed her and significantly informed her later work. And so it goes, unending examples of cross-currents in dance and art that can fill encyclopedias, even before this era of global art - the Roman conquests and the acquisition of Greek Hellenic art and ideas, as well as those that influenced Isadora Duncan, the passing of Hellenic art into the culture of Iran then into Chinese art, the absorption of Chinese ceremonies, language, and poetry into Japanese culture.

Much has changed over recent decades in our global world. Communication, how and why we communicate, text, body language, media, TV, films, art, theater, and choreography which has expanded creatively. Though we still have ballets and folk dance, Shakespeare plays, music by Chopin. Audiences for dance have an opportunity to witness works first hand that combine new and different views and ideas, shedding conventional ways of looking, seeing, feeling, and thinking. Each of us has their own cognitive persona and the world challenges interpretations.

There have been some recently published reviews and articles in newspapers that offer fascinating insights about fusion of dance forms and a better understanding of what has been a cliché dance form label.

* Deborah Jowitt, Village Voice, July 7-13, 2010, in reviewing a dance performance as an eclectic hybrid of Cambodian dance in a postmodern way by choreographer Emmanuele Phuon at the Baryshnikov Arts Center, NYC.

*Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop, International Herald Tribune, June 24, 2010, on Singapore choreographer Picet Kluncun creating a work based on photographs of Vaslav Nijinsky's interpretation of Thai dance performed in Danse Siamoise with the Ballet Russes.

*Alastair Macaulay, NY Times, May 23, 2010, revoking the clichéd term African dance in its known popular moves of West Africa versus its spread of dance forms across the continent of Africa.

There will be many companies and choreographers performing in the US this summer and fall from Asia and Europe in festivals at BAM, Jacob's Pillow, and Lincoln Center. Lincoln Center Festival brochure states that it has theater, music, dance and opera from around the globe! with an exclamation mark.