

CONTENT, CONTEXT, AND CULTURAL COMMITMENT: CURATING THE PERFORMING ARTS

ON JANUARY 26, 2002, Philip Bither, curator of performing arts at the Walker Art Center, and Baraka Sele, curator and producer of NJPAC World Festival, New Jersey Performing Arts Center, Newark, sat down to discuss current issues and trends of global performing arts presenting. Following is an edited version of that conversation.

Philip Bither: During the last century, in the United States, you might say that our field witnessed an evolution from “international” to “global” programming. International programming goes back at least to the great impresarios of the early twentieth century, including Sergey Diaghilev and Sol Hurok. In addition to the presentation of large ballet companies and European classical orchestras, there was also a trickle of academic and ethnomusicological importations of culture. In the 1980s the interest in performing arts from around the world greatly expanded and the importation of music, dance, and theater became “complex and multilayered, responding to all of the interrelations of worldwide cultural, economic, trade, development and social forces.”¹ There were many reasons why American festivals and art centers, large and small, broadened their interests. One was that institutions began to acknowledge that their communities had become very diverse and that the audience for the arts was not exclusively white and upper middle-class. **There was a recognition of how significantly the United States was changing in terms of its demographics and how our responsibilities as presenters involve not just bringing in something other but bringing in artists and art forms from afar that relate to the communities in which we live.** This also tied in to supporting residencies—a commitment, beyond merely staging work, to host global artists in our communities for longer periods of time, allowing deeper relationships and understanding to develop between artists and communities.

Today, the concept of global arts presenting continues to shift. An interest in investigating these issues and the potential for constructing new models was a primary motivation for our establishing a global advisory committee. What are your current thoughts about where our field is heading on these issues, and what impact has your participation on the committee had on your work?

Baraka Sele: Participating on the Walker’s global advisory committee caused me to start thinking about what globalism means. Obviously, that’s been at the core of so many of our conversations. How do I define global? What does global programming mean? No one I know has effectively defined globalism as it relates to aesthetics, culture, and artistic practice. So I said, “I’m going to have to define it for myself. What does global mean for me?” I’ve been working almost twenty-one years in this profession. From the beginning, I’ve been bringing in artists from around the world. In my opinion, that is international programming.

So then, **what does global programming mean? I decided that, for me, it means not only impacting my own**

¹ “International Presenting in the United States: A Field Assessment Report,” prepared for Pew Charitable Trusts by Gerald D. Yoshitomi, Japanese American Cultural and Community Center, Los Angeles, California, and William Keens and Laura Lewis Mandeles, Strategic Grantmaker Services, Cambridge, Massachusetts, September 30, 1996.

communities and the artists who are active where I live, but impacting the communities of the artists I am presenting. How do I impact Mozambique, how do I impact Brazil, how do I impact Japan if I am bringing artists from those countries? That has become my definition of global programming.

PB: How have you achieved that with Africa Exchange, a program you helped organize, and also with your current NJPAC Global Exchange project?

BS: Africa Exchange was created in 1995 at 651 ARTS Center in Brooklyn, thanks to a Ford Foundation grant.² Other institutions that received funding—working in other geographical regions such as Asia, Latin America, and South America—were focused primarily on doing the projects in their own institutions. We decided that we wanted to bring other organizations into the program, create a network, create an advisory committee, and hold convening sessions and conferences. We wanted to expand the number of institutions in our field working with African artists. During the first three years alone, we engaged more than fifty artists from the African continent, including composers, choreographers, theater directors, dancers, and musicians. They were in residence at sixteen different arts institutions throughout the United States. Works were commissioned, collaborations and residencies happened, and amazing products came out of that endeavor.

PB: Africa Exchange has sponsored a broad array of artistic exchanges and new collaborative projects between African and American artists. The program greatly increased the number of African artists who were seen in the U.S. and it developed deep ties between artists from different continents. What did you learn from that initiative, and what would you do differently?

BS: Ping Chong was on our initial advisory committee. When I began thinking about the design of Africa Exchange, I asked artists, “How should this program operate? How would it work for you?” Ping said, “American artists have frequently voiced concern that any exchange that does not provide funds for both African and American artists to visit each other’s countries and communities will put the artist who does not have such an opportunity at a psychological and cultural disadvantage, and will create an unequal partnership in the collaborative process.”

With the Global Exchange at NJPAC, I wanted to create a residency program that allows artists to travel both ways and that is not just performance-based. In other words, the process and the residency are the essence of the program itself, so the exchange isn’t necessarily predicated on an artist having to do a performance in my hall. What I really wanted to do was to facilitate relationships, artists meeting other artists.

A key element of Global Exchange came from the model set by the Walker’s global initiative. When I learned about your program taking at least three years, if not more, to develop the idea, to develop the plan, to develop partnerships, I said, “That’s what artists need.” In almost every residency that we did with Africa Exchange, the artists said that there was not enough time. So Global Exchange gives artists three to five years to work together.

PB: My sense of the funding realities in America right now is that if a new work does emerge from a collaboration, it takes much longer these days to fully fund and develop a project. The timelines have stretched from a year and a half to three years or more to be able to realize a work.

BS: The collaboration we have developed through residency exchanges between the Urban Bush Women and the National Song and Dance Company of Mozambique has taken five years. Finally, in the 2002–2003 season, we will have a new work by the Urban Bush Women that received input from the National Song and Dance Company in Mozambique and we will have a new work by the National Song and Dance Company in Mozambique that received input from the Urban Bush Women. So I’ll finally present those two companies together.

PB: And the two works were influenced by each other?

² Africa Exchange was jointly conceived by Baraka Sele and Mikki Shepard (then at 651 ARTS Center in Brooklyn, New York), Stephanie Hughley (curator for theater and dance at the Cultural Olympiad in Atlanta, Georgia), and Laura Greer (Aaron Davis Hall in Harlem, New York).

BS: Yes. But, it took us five years to get to the final products. After three years, I sat down with David Abilio Mondlane [artistic director of the Mozambique company] and Jawole Jo Zollar [artistic director of the Urban Bush Women] and asked, “Where do you want to go from here?” One of the things that David said was, “We need technical support and expertise.” I was surprised. I said, “Do you know what? For the next two seasons, I’m not going to present you.” I felt this would diffuse the pressure to create a “final product” and allow them to focus on deepening the entire creative process. We wanted Global Exchange to include not only artists and artistic directors but also technical personnel. The idea was that if Jawole has a lighting designer, a tech designer, a costume designer with whom she’s working, they too could go to Mozambique to work with colleagues there, to train people there, so that the development process occurs on all levels.

PB: It seems like a next step in the evolution is the very issue that you’re tackling with the Global Exchange program, which is about reinvesting in communities afar. How do you respond to board or community resistance in the form of people saying, “Hey, we contributed this money to support the arts in Newark. We are concerned, but we really can’t separately support the artists of Mozambique, except through fees when they come here to perform”?

BS: First of all, NJPAC does understand, both at a staff and at a board level, the importance of having an international profile and recognition. They also want to be perceived as an innovator in the field. One of the conversations that’s occurring at the board level, even during this time of downturn in the economy when we’re all being very cautious because of the tragedy of September 11, is, “We don’t want our organization to become fearful and insular. We want the programming department and the curators to be forward-thinking, forward-looking, and talking about taking intelligent risks. After we, hopefully, get out of this belt-tightening mode, how will the curators think about expanding the program?” When I took on Global Exchange, knowing that it would be labor-intensive work, I did a strategic analysis of my World Festival series, taking a critical look at what I had done for the first two or three years, in order to decide how I wanted to move forward. I determined that I absolutely needed to cut back on main-stage programming. In the first two years of NJPAC World Festival, I presented between forty and fifty-five performances a season. I now do somewhere between eighteen and twenty-five, because we’re putting more emphasis on residencies, humanities, Global Exchange.

PB: You referred to the impact of September 11, on the world in general, of course. One of the things that I am particularly concerned about in our field is the impact of renewed nationalism on people’s interest in or ability to bring artists from abroad to the United States—the possible rejection of our role as world citizens and a reluctance, perhaps, to be as fully engaged as our field has been over the last ten years with arts from around the world. For me, this makes the Walker’s global initiative an incredibly important way to provide leadership, in attempting to expand our role globally while remaining very concerned about issues of equity. How has September 11 affected the nature of our field right now, four months after this tragedy?

BS: On September 11, I was in Amman, Jordan, as a guest of Arts International, based in New York, and the Middle East Center for Culture and Development, which is also based in New York but has an arm in Amman. It was interesting ... the initial reaction of the presenters who were there with me was to think, “Oh no, perhaps we’re not going to be able to present work from the Middle East any time soon.” But in all fairness, there was also the opposite reaction. We also thought this could be an opportune time to focus on the Middle East, even though some people felt this might be problematic in their communities, especially considering what we heard was happening in terms of violent reactions toward Arab-Americans in the United States. We were certainly conscious and even somewhat cautious about the vulnerability of our group while we were there, what could happen in response to this antagonism.

A journalist was on that trip with us, and she called me several weeks later to ask, “What art will you be bringing from Jordan or the Middle East?” First of all, we were there for only three and a half days. We saw very little work. We saw work that was out of context. I said, “I don’t really know what I saw in Jordan so I can’t say that I’m going to bring artists from that country or even from other parts of the Middle East. I’m going to have to study more. I’m going to have to learn more. I don’t know if I will be able to return to that part of the world any time soon because we don’t know what’s going to happen, especially if a war in Afghanistan breaks out. But I’m absolutely committed to working with artists in that part of the world. That’s why I traveled there in the first place.”

Obviously, when I do present the work, there will be a great need for contextualization. How will I prepare my audiences? How will I contextualize the work? How will we talk about the representation of Arabs, Muslims, the Middle Eastern world in our art facilities? There is a whole new layer of concerns, other than just bringing artists from another part of the world. How do I now deal with them in the atmosphere of fear and, perhaps, ignorance?

PB: It seems like there's an opportunity here to potentially battle that ignorance by offering responsible, well-considered presentations of Islamic-based cultures.

BS: Yes, but I think it will take me longer now to understand the complexities.

PB: Because it requires a longer time frame to be able to build that contextualization and understanding?

BS: Exactly.

PB: It speaks to this question of traveling to places you've never been to before. In the last year, my travel life, due to opportunities related to this initiative, has exploded. And I've been learning a great deal about what I don't know. For instance, in traveling to Brazil or even to South Africa, I didn't expect the artistic communities to be so immersed in and knowledgeable about global contemporary work, to have such rapidly evolving yet underfunded systems for developing new work. There was a high level of intellectual discourse around contemporary practice, not just their own but that of artists from all over the world. Of course I knew there were important contemporary artists from both of those countries, but I underestimated the level of the discourse. I knew that the financial base for contemporary art was not equal to what we have here in the States, and certainly not equal to what's available in Europe. Yet it became clear that finances don't necessarily define the vitality of a cultural scene.

Often in our field, we travel internationally when a foundation or a foreign government invites a group of curators to go and experience a range of work together. There are great benefits in traveling as part of a group. But on recent trips, I've traveled solo. I was forced to do my own research, to not depend on anyone else to create the map for me. Often, the trips did not even coincide with festivals, so I invested a lot of time and energy in researching who is doing what in Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, or Johannesburg. That meant not only connecting with artists and administrators in those countries and cities but finding everyone I could within the U.S., and elsewhere, many of whom I didn't have previous relationships with, who were experts on contemporary Brazilian music or dance. Suddenly, there were new relationships that developed which I'm benefiting from today.

When I traveled alone, I found myself in corners of those cities, in people's homes and studios, in very underground performance venues—places where no governmentally organized or foundation-based trip would have taken me. That was a valuable experience. The work felt rawer, more rooted, less packaged, and certainly more connected to its place than work seen on more "guided" trips or at international art festivals and showcases. It was both awe-inspiring and discouraging; artists were persevering in the midst of very difficult economic circumstances. Communities of artists, and young audiences, seemed to support one another's work, as they do here as well, in instrumental ways.

BS: This is so important, Philip. Traveling solo is absolutely my preference. It gives you a much deeper sense of the country and its culture, as well as of the art being produced.

I remember the first time I went to Japan and, of course, the people there were trying to direct me, wanting to show me their "best." I said, "No, I don't want you to show me your best. I want to see your entire cultural landscape. I want to see as much as possible. I want you to show me the things that you think I shouldn't see." Again, I aspire to be open to a wide range of aesthetic ideas and artistic practices that I may not understand intellectually. Sometimes people are resistant to or even fearful of the unknown. Instead, I simply try to empty myself during my travels so that I can take in and fully experience where I am.

PB: That approach to traveling is also connected to the emotional experience of performance, of seeing live artists performing in the same space in real time. We often talk about the essential need for contextualization, but there is something about being in the moment of a live performance, an appreciation for the work that transcends all the historical background, all the critical performance theory that you might gather. In fact, you appreciate it on a completely different level. That may be something that differentiates our work, perhaps, from the visual arts. There is that fine line between contextualizing and overpreparing an audience.

BS: It's completely experiential. Sometimes I love just experiencing the work and not having the burden of trying to tell someone what it means.

PB: Or why they should like it.

BS: What does it mean? Where does it come from? What is its history?

PB: There are times when too much information undercuts the power of the live theatrical experience. There's a balance that curators need to strike in terms of when the information is best delivered and in what format.

BS: And when that contextual information weighs the performance down.

PB: Sometimes we choose not to have anything happen in the performance space itself right after the event. There's a magic, a sacredness to that space, which the didacticism of a quick informational exchange or a question-and-answer session immediately following a performance can sometimes destroy.

BS: We often talk about the afterlife of a performance. How can it live on and not become ephemeral? In my opinion, that is more of a concern from the visual arts perspective; I don't have a problem with the performing arts being ephemeral art forms.

PB: It lives in the spirit and in memory.

BS: In the here and now. There is an appropriate time for archiving and documentation, or seeing that the work tours and has an ongoing life. But nothing compares to being in the moment; it's like meditation.

PB: It's perhaps part of what drove avant-garde visual artists to start performative practice in the first place. There was such a focus on the object and, often, the commercial value of the object. The Dada and Fluxus movements, Joseph Beuys and the tradition that he spawned, Happenings, and many other early performance art practices were attempting, in part, to create the spontaneous moment, were realizing that art didn't need to have permanence. It could be of the moment and about our lives and our everyday ephemeral existence. But it's still challenging for institutions that have been, for much of their histories, built around the collection of objects and the permanence of those objects. There certainly are some interesting ways to combine the practices—creating art exhibitions out of the sets, scores, videos, costumes, writings, and sound of time-based performances.³ Also, digital documentation and performing arts projects translated onto the Web offer new bridges between worlds.

The Walker's framework for presenting work is quite specific. It's about contemporary and experimental work, work that in some way is challenging the norm. How you define those terms becomes very complex when you are operating in a global context. What is the avant-garde? Is there an avant-garde? What are the distinctly different forms of modernism? As we have discussed many times during this initiative, there is not just one story of modernism.

BS: And sometimes, modernism is not even the story at all.

³ For example, the Walker presented in 1998 the exhibition *Art Performs Life: Merce Cunningham, Bill T. Jones, and Meredith Monk*, co-curated by Philippe Vergne, Siri Engberg, and Kellie Jones.

What really concerns me about using those terms when we work with other cultures is that it's our language, not theirs. I remember the first time I mentioned "multiculturalism" to an Africa Exchange artist. He said, "That is not our term. We do not subscribe to American or European intellectual, aesthetic terminologies, or to your curatorial philosophies. We're doing something else over here." That was a revelation to me. I began to realize that I couldn't go to Africa or other places and use a word like avant-garde because people said to me, "That applies specifically to a European or American aesthetic and has nothing to do with what we're doing."

Most of us in the presenting and producing field don't know the terminologies used in other countries, don't know the aesthetic histories of those countries. So we come with preconceived notions about what contemporary work is. So many times when I thought I was looking at traditional work in Africa, people told me that I was looking at contemporary work. Irène Tassebedo, a choreographer from Burkina Faso, said to us, "You don't even know what traditional work is because Americans have never seen it. Traditional work is sacred. It is a sacred ritual and if I were to put it on a stage, I would drop dead, and you would drop dead from seeing it." She also said, "You don't know what our contemporary practice is. You are still trying to keep us in the eighteenth or nineteenth century and, yes, we treasure that tradition, we build upon that tradition, but we are doing something else now. Our work is informed by contemporary practice and training. I have been trained in all the same modern techniques that American and European artists have been trained in, but that doesn't mean we throw out all the tradition that came before us. It is now something new and different. It is not traditional. But we would also not call it totally contemporary." So we have to start learning what that work is. If we haven't actually seen traditional African work, according to this choreographer, what are we comparing it to? What are we talking about? How do we put some label on this?

PB: Those are key issues that we deal with continually. When we bring an artist to the U.S for the first time, the temptation is, of course, to prefer the prestige of bringing them exclusively to your own city. But don't we have a responsibility to spread the wealth of knowledge, the privilege of access, to our colleagues? Gerald Yoshitomi noted in 1995, "The only way that things will move forward is if these nodes of expertise can be encouraged or even funded to support the spread of that knowledge and the building of those networks around the country."⁴ How can we become those "nodes of information," rather than having our programs benefit only the Walker or NJPAC?

BS: One way is by taking on this new role of being in direct relationship with the artist, even though when there is no middleman for me, my work becomes more labor-intensive. I now have to figure out transportation, touring, funding, visas. There's a whole new set of tasks and responsibilities when you function as a producer and not just as a presenter.

PB: It's a huge, huge undertaking. In the past few years we've done it for the God Squad from Berlin and dumb type from Japan, among others. It requires, I would estimate, five times more effort than being part of an existing tour or engaging a project that comes to a single city.

For good or ill, the box office drives so much of our field at large and keeps it, in some ways, susceptible to its worst tendencies. The market does drive certain ways that we position events. There tends to be a sense of selling the exotic, especially when dealing with cultures that are interestingly alien or different from what one's own population knows about. How do you address that issue?

BS: I'm glad you brought this up, because I was hoping we would eventually get to this notion of the exotic. Someone once said to me, "Let's be clear. As soon as you take something out of its home, out of the context in which it was created, you are exoticizing it." To be quite honest, I agree. I know that I am exoticizing almost everything I do because I am in no way presenting it in its original cultural, political, and geographical context. What I hope I'm not doing is exploiting the artists and their work.

PB: What's the line between the two?

⁴ "International Presenting in the United States," Pew Charitable Trusts.

BS: Let me give you a recent example. I was working on a collaborative project with another institution. I wish I could say this was twenty years ago, but it was only last year. This major institution developed a budget in which the African artists were getting paid less than the American artists. I called the institution and said, "I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt, but what's happening here?" They replied, "Well, these artists aren't used to making this kind of money. If they receive the same amount of money as the American dancers, won't that have a negative impact on their community because they'll be taking back home all this money that will create an imbalance?" I couldn't believe it. I said, "If we are not paying all the artists the same amount, I'm out of the project." I believe in cultural and international equity. Anything else is exploitation.

PB: Going back to how we can be "nodes of information," we talk at the Walker about "sculpting a season." Part of the curatorial role is to determine what your community is ready for, to shape your programming in a way that builds a base of knowledge, to create—as much as possible within the uncontrollable aspects of touring and availability—a logical sequence for the season that can be almost like a curriculum, that can build upon what you've done in the past and be intelligible for the audience. In addition, at the Walker we have the rather rare opportunity to establish links between the disciplines, to place artists' work in an artistic continuum that stretches far beyond the specific performance form and into visual arts, literature, film and video, new media.

BS: I have to go back to the Houston International Festival, which taught me so much. One of the things we were trying to do was to give our audiences in Houston a more in-depth framework for looking at culture. It wasn't meaningful to just bring artists to perform on a stage. That's what I try to do wherever I go, which is why I present both contemporary and traditional art forms. I'm, once again, using the term traditional in the very generalized, superficial way that we use it.

PB: You feel that the traditional provides a base for people to understand the contemporary?

BS: Absolutely. I want people to know that the performing arts of Africa are not just one thing. It's not just people beating on drums. It's so much more rich and complex. When I brought six different dance companies from Taiwan in one season, I wanted people to see the many variations of form and style. I wanted to convey the range and depth of work.

PB: All the different threads of artistic directions. Do you also concentrate on a certain part of the world in a given season?

BS: I have been doing that. I'm doing less of that now. I'm actually focusing more on form and discipline and bringing folks together from different parts of the world who are connected to a form. For instance, I am producing an international festival on hip-hop culture for November 2002. We started off by having a large meeting. I just put out the word via e-mail, whatever networks I could find, asking young people in our community to come and talk about their ideas of what this conference should be. One of the first issues that came up was globalization.

PB: In what respect?

BS: They feel like we're talking about globalization as a negative thing, especially from an economic point of view—how the multinational corporations are taking over the world, how McDonald's is in every country, every nook and cranny of every continent.

PB: And cultural specificity is being lost.

BS: Cultural specificity is being lost, but they have a different take on this phenomenon. This is the first time they have had their own cultural phenomenon, hip hop, which is being exported all over the world, and they can point to it and say, "We created that. It started in our community. Now the world has caught on to it and wants it." It has empowered them. They have their own record producers. They have their own recording studios. They are making money. Young people are developing into entrepreneurs and creating multinational corporations that export American pop culture. Now we are saying that this is a bad thing.

PB: It seems that the hip-hop movement might offer some examples and even some inspiration in terms of how these artists think and work globally. I'm thinking specifically of the form's DIY aesthetic, its natural cross-disciplinary hybridity (mixing movement, music, text), and how the meaning and relevance of an essentially local/regional phenomenon has been effectively rearticulated through the cultural perspectives of artists around the globe. Are there other ways that you see hip hop pointing to new alternatives?

BS: First of all, I'm not in a position to speak for hip hop. That question needs to be addressed to folks who are immersed in the culture, such as Danny Hoch or Will Power or Kevin Powell. What I can speak about is this notion of hybridity, which is a word I don't really care for but I can't come up with a better one. Hybridity, cross-culturalization, transmutation ... these are all words I have heard applied to art forms that bring together various aesthetics, media, cultures. A few decades ago we called it fusion and performance art. Whether it was Miles Davis, Pat Matheny, Ntozake Shange, or Karen Finley, we all thought it was pretty radical and revolutionary stuff, just as we think hip hop is today. A few centuries ago, people considered opera a radical hybrid form. The difference with the current generation is that they have managed to create a global culture and community within the span of twenty years. Hip hop has been embraced not only locally and nationally but globally.

The origin of hip hop has little or nothing to do with aesthetics or art forms as we use those terms in the performing arts world. It was about creating something out of nothing. When you have nothing (no instruments, no after-school music programs, no dance classes), you create with what you have. You use your body on a cement sidewalk (breakdancing). You make rhythms with your mouth (beatboxing). When you don't have a canvas or paints, you create with some spray paint and a brick wall (graffiti). When you can't get your poetry published or a reading at Barnes and Noble (or aren't interested in going that route), you become an MC, a rapper, or a spoken-word artist. Transferring hip-hop culture from the street and the underground to the performing arts stage is a relatively new phenomenon. Actually, some of the hip-hop heads I've been working with in Newark are worried that hip hop is becoming "bohemian" rather than "keepin' it real." Some of them are suspicious of NJPAC and artists who want to "perform" here. They regard the hybridity or fusion of street and formal art structures with skepticism. I can appreciate their concern. I don't know if this is all good. During the past year, amidst the craziness of pulling together [Planet Hip Hop](#), I have at times thought to myself or wanted to say to these young artists, "Turn back, it's a trap!"

PB: This is somewhat connected: How do you relate the work you bring in to local communities of color, local immigrant communities? How important is it for you to program work that is directly connected to people who share a heritage in, say, the Newark greater metro area? How does that relate to your general sense of global programming?

BS: Throughout my professional career I've been in major urban centers. The premise for creating the World Festival at NJPAC was that Newark is a microcosm of the world. What's interesting is that many people in Newark don't realize it. Just two months ago at my hip-hop advisory committee meeting, I tried to tell young hip-hop artists from Newark that their city was an international city and they exclaimed, "No, it's not!" Then I started naming all the populations that had attended events at NJPAC and all the artists that I had brought from other countries who connected to various local communities. Oftentimes, those communities found us. I remember the first time I presented Milton Nascimento at the Houston International Festival and I'm ashamed to say I didn't even know there was a local Brazilian community. Imagine my surprise when almost 5,000 Brazilians attended a free outdoor concert.

PB: Do you find there's a learning experience between the audiences who have a cultural tie to an artist from a different part of the world and those who are simply curious about that part of the world or about that particular artistic form? Do you do things to provide a larger cultural context, especially for the non-connected audience?

BS: We usually do that via the residency program, which then draws people into the main-stage presentation. To give you an example, we just completed a humanities program called "When Newark Had a Chinatown." I met a woman who ran a small community-based arts organization in Newark. She is part African American

and part Chinese-American. She had researched her own family history and family tree and found out that there was a time when Newark, New Jersey, had a larger Chinatown than New York City. We decided to create a humanities project around her discovery. We gave her financial support to do research, work with the library, dig in archives, do oral histories. Then when we finally did the formal presentation of it at the Newark Public Library, approximately two hundred people came. Half of that audience consisted of former residents of that Chinatown which had been destroyed. The other half were white people and African Americans who were just curious about the project. So these communities came together and connected.

PB: Let's talk a little bit about the different traditions that exist in visual art and performing art curating, about the appropriateness of the very concept of curating the performing arts. **The title of "curator" stems from a need to move away from the concept that one is merely booking artists, a need to understand programming with the same level of seriousness and historical context that has defined curatorial practice in the visual arts.**

What our field hasn't caught up with is the depth of academic experience. There are only a handful of master's programs in arts administration, and those tend to be focused primarily on logistical and financial aspects. They're often part of MBA programs. There certainly are performance study concentrations and there are post-graduate programs in theater, music, dance, but there is little academic focus on multidisciplinary practice. People in our field have tended to come from a variety of backgrounds and they've learned as they've gone along. Perhaps another thing that, in some way, differentiates our practice from the visual arts is that all the performing art curators I have ever known are also producers. What this means is that you have to be knowledgeable about and adept at budgeting, fundraising, marketing, working the press, handling audiences, and constantly working directly with living artists to support and nurture their work, even sometimes producing the work by bringing the right forces together. There is little time to ponder the historical underpinnings that inform your practice.

BS: Not only is our field lacking in the very areas that you described but, at some point, we are going to have to—and this always scares people—start doing some codifying, create some sort of academic discipline to deal with this vacuum. Booking, presenting, programming, and curating are now four totally distinct areas of our field, and I continue to wear all four hats.

PB: As much as we both can rightfully critique our field, **there is something honest about having to face your own audience night in and night out.** It's not to say that you mold your programming to follow your audiences' interests. But perhaps a danger of functioning strictly as a curator is the possibility of becoming disengaged from the living population in your own community. One might end up curating more for the scholars or for fellow curators. **When you position yourself as the fulcrum between artist and audience, you move beyond theory and focus on connecting the work back to the living, breathing audience members, the local communities, and the local artists who are essential to the relevancy of our institutions.**

I sometimes joke that the badge of "curator" comes from a certain amount of agonizing over the choices. That's partly why I lie awake at night before I announce a season or a program. You are in the position, especially when you're working globally, of choosing one out of thousands. How do you define those choices? How do you set the criteria? How can you defend them? How do you understand the work well enough to be able to engage with it beyond personal, subjective taste?

BS: That's actually something I wanted to ask you.

PB: I think it requires understanding as much as we possibly can the traditions that have led to an artist's work, certainly taking into account a broad critical perspective, but not being driven exclusively by it. I look at a variety of criteria: the work having some connection to tradition, even the avant-garde traditions, or working against those traditions in an interesting way; artists who are able to articulate where they stand with their work and why they're doing what they're doing, even if it's provocative and sometimes outrageous; a personal passion about what they're doing. Some people will say to us, "You can't just program what you like, you have a responsibility to your whole community, for taking all the other interests into account," but I don't fully buy that. If I'm not excited about an artist, if the work doesn't move me or make me think differently or wake me up to

new possibilities, then I can't do an adequate job of building interest and advocating for that artist's role when they come to my institution.

BS: I'm so happy to hear you say that. Now, especially at this point in my life and my career, there are times I just unabashedly and proudly say, "I'm booking what I like."

PB: What do you think are some of the key ways in which performing artists are being affected by and, in turn, affecting globalization? What are you seeing in the form and/or content of works by young artists who are operating in the global arena?

BS: I almost feel as if I'm being obvious or trite ... It's certainly not news that artists have been historically at the forefront of not only cultural but also social and political action and activism, including globalization. Also, long before foundations or corporate sponsors or other formal structures started funding international cultural exchange, artists were working in collaboration with their counterparts and peers in diverse communities where they lived or in other parts of the world. Again, this is nothing new. We just keep trying to give the same phenomena new hype, new names, new marketing strategies, etc. Like its predecessors, this new, or rather younger, generation of artists is not content to remain underground and unrecognized. Though these artists are not necessarily seeking to be accepted, discovered, produced, or presented. Like the Amiri Barakas or the Berry Gordys or the Haki Madhubutis of the world, they are able, eager, and ready to produce their own theater, press their own records, and publish their own literature. And I can only say, as my generation said, "More power to ya!" Or, to quote James Brown, "I don't want you to give me nothin'/Open up the door and I'll get it myself." And what they are getting, or taking, is in fact the world by storm.