

AURORA FORUM AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY

The Artist as Researcher: An Evening with Ralph Lemon Art + Invention Speaker Series

Pigott Theater

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Jenny Bilfield: Good evening, everybody. I'm Jenny Bilfield, the director of Stanford Lively Arts. It's wonderful to have you here for our inaugural event in our Art and Invention Speaker Series. The series is part of a season-long, campus-wide look at the intersection of art and invention, with a special emphasis upon creative imaginers, if you will – artists who work across disciplines and harness a wide, expressive palette in their creative life. Commissioned work and collaborations involving faculty and students are at the center of this year's activity for Lively Arts, the Stanford Institute for Creativity in the Arts, and our campus arts colleagues. This evening is, in fact, such a collaboration between Lively Arts and SICA and also the wonderful Aurora Forum. The Forum and its founder, Mark Gonnerman, are campus treasures, and I'm happy to say that the Aurora Forum is now residing under the Lively Arts umbrella, so you will see more of our joint programs.

Mark Gonnerman is the host for each of our five events, and all of the featured artists from Ralph Lemon, Steve Reich, Beryl Korot, Laurie Anderson, Ann Carlson, and Mary Ellen Strom are visiting campus in the context of an academic or community residency and, in most cases, a performance.

Tonight's guest, Ralph Lemon, has been on campus for the fall quarter as a guest of IDA, the Institute for Diversity in the Arts, and the Stanford Dance Division and Department of Drama. This evening's talk, and a daylong event tomorrow entitled "A Creative Fabrication" at the D-school, are two of the public events that are being held during his visit.

Please join me in welcoming Ralph Lemon and Mark Gonnerman. [Applause]

Mark Gonnerman: Thank you, Jenny, and thanks to Lively Arts for providing a home for the Aurora Forum. We're grateful that everyone is here tonight for our first conversation in the series that Jenny just introduced, "The Artist as Researcher: An Evening with Ralph Lemon." The entire evening is an opportunity for me to introduce Ralph Lemon and for him to introduce, through this conversation, his marvelous, very engaging, very exciting and inspiring work. I will begin with a brief formal introduction that gives you some background, and then we'll move into that conversation, and eventually we'll open up the mikes so that you can join us with questions and comments about what you've seen and heard this evening.

Ralph Lemon was born in 1952 in Cincinnati, Ohio, and moved to Minneapolis at the age of eleven, where he went to school and then attended the University of Minnesota, where he was a student of literature and theater arts. He came to dance relatively late with Nancy Hauser in Minnesota and then Meredith Monk in New York. From 1985 to 1995, he directed his own dance company and dissolved it at what seemed to be the height of his career as a dancer and choreographer. He then set out on a ten-year journey of world- and self-exploration that created his best-known work, *The Geography Trilogy*, which we'll be talking about this evening.

Ralph is the recipient of a 2009 John Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship and a 2009 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship for Interdisciplinary Work. In 2006, he was one of fifty artists to receive the inaugural United States Artists' Fellowship. Currently he is the artistic director of Cross Performance, a company dedicated to the creation of cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary performance and presentation. He has enjoyed artist's residencies at Yale, Temple University, NYU, and now here at Stanford, where he is in residence with the Institute for Diversity in the Arts, where he teaches. He is also teaching a class on his own work with Janice Ross, who chairs the Dance Division in the Department of Drama. I've had the pleasure of sitting in on some of these class sessions, and I'm inspired by the way Ralph really cares about his students and the subject at hand. And it's great to have him here at the Aurora Forum, where we typically feature conversations with people who turn vision into action for positive social change. I was reading around and came across a recent interview where Ralph says,

I'm not someone doing something directly to help society. I don't believe art directly helps society. I'm not sure it helps society at all. I'm told that daily, but I'm not sure, as a practitioner. I do believe I have an audience, and because I have an audience, I'm absolutely obligated to share something with that audience. Today, what I'd like to share has to do with a certain kind of love and hope and hopefulness, however that's played out.

That's a really beautiful statement. The Aurora Forum is always working to inspire social hope, and I'd like to talk about that as we go into the evening.

So I'm pleased to introduce a multidisciplinary, multicultural, multitalented, multimedia artist whose work is equal parts art, anthropology, exploration, and inspiration on multiple, ever-exfoliating levels. So let's welcome again Ralph Lemon. [Applause]

First, I want us to have an opportunity to watch Ralph dance.

[PERFORMANCE VIDEO IS SHOWN.] [Applause]

Gonnerman: What was going through your mind as you were watching yourself dance?

Lemon: I haven't seen that for a while. Those were a series of exercises of ... it's a little complicated ... of my investigating the idea of the buck dance, which is a term for a dance done before there was videotape or any reliable kind of documentation, but a dance that was done primarily by black Americans during slavery or postslavery – a dance that sort of preceded hoofing and tap, but I think also a dance that wasn't directly prescribed just to African Americans. I suspect at that time it was a dance sourcing English step dancing and then perhaps kind of recalled dancing that maybe did come from Africa. The point being, it's a dance that no one really knows what it is. No one really knows what a buck dance is, and a lot of hoofers will tell you what they think it is, but it's more legendary than real. So for me, it was a way to kind of imagine resourcing a dance that existed that I'm not sure existed, and I'm absolutely not doing a buck dance there, but the play of wondering what it was and trying to kind of source that or resource the illusion of it in my body was a lovely kind of work.

Gonnerman: So that's the artist as researcher. You have a vague notion, you hear about something, you wonder what it is, and you go looking for it. What were the steps you were going through in coming up with eventually your expression of this buck dance?

Lemon: Well, maybe if you could go to the research and just show the beginning of [the video]: "Otha Turner." Otha Turner was ... I think at this time he was around 101 and a very famous fife player in Senatobia, Mississippi. I videotaped him doing this one little step here, and I slowed it down and I just studied that. I must have looked at that moment, that step, a hundred times because I thought, That may be the buck dance [Laughter] because Otha would be old enough to recall it. But of course it wasn't the buck; it was something else. But it was a dance that was very, very much about a black body in the South and all the history and culture that that holds doing this dance that he probably did a long, long time ago and that his body still remembers. So that was enough truth for me. It was really like this cat-and-mouse game about what might it be and where to go to find something like that. So I went down South and did a lot of research. And another thing I did was a series of dances called the living room dances, where I would go to the homes of relatives that were still alive of the old blues musicians from the twenties and thirties. It was a time I was listening to a lot of music from the twenties and thirties, and when I found a song that I felt was really compelling, that moved me, that would make me want to dance, then I would dance to it in my own little apartment in New York. I would research these musicians and I would research their families and try to get in touch with people who were still alive and might remember it. Then I would get in touch with them and talk to them about this person and this music and ask if I could come visit them and talk to them about the man or the woman. If they said yes, I'd get on an airplane and I'd go to Memphis, Tennessee, or Como, Mississippi, or wherever, and I'd rent a motel room and then we'd go and visit them. I would wait for an introduction like, "Well, who are you and what do you do?" and then if I got something like that, I would said, "Well, I dance, sort of, and I'd like to show you something." Then I'd go to the car and get a video camera and a boom box and a CD, and in their living room I would put the music on and I'd dance for them. And I would dance for them in what I thought was what I was gleaming from this idea of a buck dance, trying to kind of

manipulate or play this alchemic game with time – like bringing an old time to the present. And these experiences were – and I’ve said this many times – but they were the most fulfilling dance experiences of my life where I felt like I really understood why I was dancing and I really understood the audience, and there was a kind of complete agreement in the performance situation. It was very, very whole. And I think it was in part due to the conversation that was clear. We both knew this music. They knew it from an alive point of view because they were listening to the person play the music, by and large, and I was really feeling the music in my modern culture with a CD or whatever it was I was using. But we both had agreement on the music. And I was sharing this sort of movement reaction to this music two or three feet away from them. They really enjoyed the experience and I really enjoyed the experience, and they would talk to me while I was dancing. And the whole thing was just very complete.

So that was another part of the research of this mystery dance called the buck dance. We can show this. This is in Como, Mississippi. [VIDEO IS SHOWN.] So that was Mrs. Mitchell. She’s the cousin of the wife of the famous Mississippi blues musician, Mississippi Fred McDowell. And that was a song by Mississippi Fred McDowell.

So that was just more of the research of it, and it kind of continued into the work that I’m doing now. I guess I did that in 2002, so it’s been ongoing.

Gonnerman: So the Dylan dance that we saw was a way to learn from the living room dance, you said.

Lemon: Right. The first dances you saw were a compilation of an experiment with trying to transform the living room dances to a more informal public kind of arena. The living room dances were so whole and they felt so complete that I felt like, That’s it; it’s done. How do I share this with an audience beyond Mrs. Mitchell’s living room? I struggled with that. So as a kind of experiment, I did a series of dances in front of these college audiences. I think one was down at UCLA, one was at Princeton, one was in New York, and one was at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. It was my attempting to remember the feeling I had with the intimacy of the living room dances. Not that they weren’t successful, because I wasn’t judging them as such – I knew they would not be the same experience. But I guess the experience and the dances were about, Does this translate? And I’m not sure I have an answer. I know an audience saw something that maybe they appreciated or didn’t, but for me, it was like, How does my body translate what happened and the intimacy of those dances?

Gonnerman: That’s a really interesting comment – the way you just emphasized this question: How does my body translate this? I know that you don’t want to be introduced anymore as a dancer. You are a dancer, you are a choreographer, but your art has expanded in so many different ways. It’s occurred to me, though, that the question that always remains is about your body: your body in space and time, which is dance; understanding the body in space and time. But you’re constantly experimenting with your body, and you’ve developed a vocabulary about the body that I think is quite

interesting. We're sitting here right now in what you would call our chemical bodies. Is that right?

Lemon: Partly. [Laughs]

Gonnerman: Can you elaborate on this vocabulary of the body that you've developed through the course of these experiments?

Lemon: Well, I think it's because I've dealt with a certain element of identity confusion in that I am primarily known as a dancer-choreographer. But I travel, I write, I draw. I don't dance, I don't perform; I do perform, I do dance, I think. You know, there are all these other things that I do, and I don't really have a hierarchy of preference. It's sort of what's happening in my life at one time or another. But there's this tyranny from the outside, and I guess from my history of labeling – Ralph Lemon, the choreographer; Ralph Lemon, the dancer – which feels incomplete and somewhat limiting. However, I think what I do hold on and acknowledge, in a way, and I'm not sure if I can say it with some pride, is that I know my body really, really well because of my dance history, my movement research history. So everything that I do kind of comes from an embodied experience, it seems to me.

Gonnerman: And an awareness of how your body is always changing.

Lemon: Yeah, and also I've been really interested in the different textures of the architecture of the body. I say that generally (of course I mean my body), but I think it's all our bodies. There is the *chemical body*, where the body is a molecular, cellular system. It is primarily that. We are primarily that. And I think that there's something that goes on in the body on that level that is miraculous and beyond our thinking. And then there's our *thinking body* that tries to make sense of what the body is already doing and has done. I can give you a really simple example. If your body is not well, it's not well long before you know it's not well. So there's that. And then I think there's this *spiritual body* – the sort of body that kind of has no language. It sort of exists and feels these things that are sort of beyond words and beyond kind of cognitive experience, cognitive understanding. And then there's the *body that is dying*, the *body that is transcending*, the *body that is constantly evolving or being transformed*: the *body that's not static*. I'm now spending a lot of time just thinking about all the variations of me and how it's fantastic fodder for someone who spends a lot of his time with this body as an artistic material.

Gonnerman: There's also the corporate body, and for ten years you had your own eponymous dance company. Then you dissolved it and you became a traveling body. This was an extremely courageous thing to do. Do you look at it that way?

Lemon: No. And then there's the body that breaks down. And I think it wasn't a nervous breakdown but it was a breaking down of a kind of... I suspect I was working within a kind of linear progression of making modern dances. And I reached a point where I felt like I had gotten sort of too good at it, and what I mean by that is, I

understood it too well and it began to feel too sublime. I think modern dance has that attached to it; it is so wondrous when one is just working with this idea of the body and movement and composition and design and the collective of a company, and at the same time it becomes very limited because your world is very small. Your world often is that company and your world is these particular cities you're touring your work to. Then when you finish the tour, you go back to that small studio world and you make a new dance and it becomes kind of cyclical like that. People like Merce Cunningham love it, or loved it, in Merce's case. I grew not to love it so much.

So in 1995, I disbanded my company and just started collaborating with artists in different mediums as a way to just continue working. So I sort of dropped out, but I needed to keep working and accidentally happened upon the beginning of the *Geography Trilogy*. Someone at Yale University, Stan Wojewodski, who was the director of the Yale Repertory Theater, invited me up and said, "You want to come up here and work on a project?" And I thought, That's interesting. I said, "I'm not so sure I want to go back to the stage, but I'd love to come up and talk to you." So on the train ride home, I thought, Well, what's a dream project? I thought, Well, I've never been to Africa, and I don't have a company, so I could go. And I'm a dancer. I was a dancer; that's really what I know. So maybe I'll go there and find some young African performers and create some kind of collaboration. So I literally, in that two or three-hour train ride up to Yale, I wrote that on a piece of paper and met with him. And he said, "Great idea. Here's some money. Go travel." And that was interesting.

There were a lot of things that were profound about that collaboration with Yale, but one of the most profound parts was that I had never been given a travel grant before, which I think opened the door to this idea of research. So I went to Africa and it kind of changed my life. I didn't know what to make of it. Once I was there, I really didn't know why I was there. I think I went there because, as a black American, one should go to Africa. But I went to Africa and they called me a white man. Or I went to the west coast of Africa, the Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and they called me a white man. I was not African; that became really clear. So it was really sort of brilliantly confusing. But the people I met there were gracious and generous and inviting, and we found some kind of really workable agreement, and I was able to work with some young African performers and bring them back to Yale and we continued workshopping and we made this dance called *Geography*. From that one dance, then I thought, This is what I want to do for the rest of my life, so I stretched *Geography* for ten years, and I kept getting research/travel money. I got really good at language and being able to articulate that. And the pieces kept getting longer and longer. The first part of the *Trilogy* was a two-year project, the second part was a three-year project, and the fourth was a four-year project. As it evolved, I fell more and more in love with the traveling research part than the actual performance part. And what I was trying to do was just extend that. But of course the funding for these ... the reality was bringing it to a place where I was sharing some kind of result or artifact of what happened.

Gonnerman: Because you would be finding collaborators and you would bring them back to the stage and you would create a work together.

Lemon: Right. We would create a work together. I called them conversations. I didn't really want to call them performances or dances or choreography. These were conversations. It was very important. What was lovely about the whole *Trilogy* is I never, ever felt comfortable. That was conscious. After my ten-year work with the company where I felt like I kind of knew it too well (whether I did or not is, I think, beside the point), but going into this larger, more foreign landscape really kept me more vulnerable, and that seemed really useful.

Gonnerman: You write in this epigraph to the first book, "Returning from the strangeness of the soul school's language, I am in love more than ever."

Lemon: I was in love and it was killing my body. [Laughs] And not to romanticize it, but there was this sense of great, great discomfort. When we did the first *Geography* piece with the African performers, there was a sense that they brought to my performance world a kind of dance politic – a sort of performance dance culture that I didn't understand. And every time we performed the work, I felt like it was falling apart. The rules had shifted. There were times I would kind of turn my back to the performance. I couldn't watch it because I just didn't know what was going to happen. And it never completely fell apart, but there was just a sense of the energy and a sense of performance language that they knew that they brought to my world or that they translated from what I was directing that was truly unsettling. As painful as it was, or as uncomfortable as it was to be in, I loved it. That's that quote. I loved it because I knew this was exactly where I needed to be as an artist, and that's why I went to Africa. That's what I was searching for.

Gonnerman: And then you went to Asia.

Lemon: I think I went to Asia because of my attraction to the philosophy of Buddhism, and I thought from Africa to go to Asia would be perverse [Laughs], but to go from an idea of racist material to a place where I could maybe research or map the idea of spirituality as a material. And of course when I went to Africa, I didn't find what I was looking for or what I wrote down on that piece of paper. And when I went to Asia, or the parts that I visited, I didn't find what I was looking for. There was not a single collaborator that I worked with that was Buddhist. In fact, I ran into and met very few Buddhists in the parts of Asia that I visited. But what I did find was a sense of generosity that surprised me and a quiet that was wildly different from the remarkable noise that I got from Africa. What I mean by that quieting noise is this sense of a kind of cultural energy that I was feeding into.

Gonnerman: Let's look at some clips from the Africa and the Asia sections of the *Geography Trilogy*. You can comment on what's going on.

[VIDEO IS SHOWN.]

Lemon: This is a dance called *The Collage*. It was one of the first dances we made together and it was about the collage of our different cultures. What intrigued me about this particular kind of African dance was that it was very unusual. This was our attempt at again having a conversation about how they danced and how I danced. So the choreography was really this mix of their steps and my steps. What really intrigued me about this particular form of African dancing was that it was.... I guess this work sort of preceded my research into the buck dance. I recognized and did not recognize all these little small steps. It seemed to me like hoofing and tap as I knew it, and yet it was not. So again, it was an African style of dancing that was not familiar to me and was therefore mysterious.

I've talked a little bit about the end of this particular work – another sort of surprise and element I could not have calculated in the collaboration. The young performers, I think, had it in mind the whole time they were collaborating with me that this would be an opportunity to come to America. For me, it was the exciting idea of bringing these young African performers to the States and creating this collaboration and sharing that with the audience. I think their intention was that this was an opportunity to come here, get married, and not go back to Africa. Literally, when we finished the work and went to the airport, half of them didn't show up. Now, I think, of the group of six or seven of them, there is only one who went back home. What I heard later was their response to my surprise was, "You Americans are so naïve." [Laughs] My intention was maybe an artistic survival, and their intention in the process of the collaboration with me or the agreement was a kind of economical survival, or a cultural life survival. So there was a lot more at stake than I gathered, and that continued.

This next piece is called *Tree*. [VIDEO IS SHOWN] *Tree* was a work that combined performers from Taiwan, Beijing, China, a house dancer from Virginia, an African American dancer of Guinean lineage. Her parents (on your far left) are very famous Guinean dancers in L.A. The man in the back comes from a sort of postmodern American dance background. There was also a Japanese performer, two farmer musicians from Yunan, China, and two Odissi dance practitioners – one a musician and one a dancer. So it was a real wide range.

[VIDEO CONTINUES]

This is Mr. Wong. He's a farmer musician from China. He taught all of us this dance, and the only one who could do it was J.J., who was from the first *Geography*. He's one of the African dancers from Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. I thought that kind of said it all. [Laughs]

Tree was too big. It was too vast. There were too many.... I say this in retrospect, but there were too many cultural languages and bodies, even though it had this pretense of being an Asian journey. But to say "Asia": what does that mean? That's like saying "Africa," and maybe like saying "the United States." It's too big. What does that really say? But I think the chaos of it and the vastness of all the different cultural bodies and the crazy, crazy conversations that went on.... Literally in our rehearsal we would have four translators at a time. So half of our eight-hour days were spent translating to one

another, but that was also part of it. Again, for me, it was the conversation, and I think of none of the *Trilogy* pieces as great art. I think they're all really beautifully flawed because they had to be flawed.

Gonnerman: So this brought you back to the United States with a new awareness and a new set of interests, and you went to the South and you began researching. Well, you were interested in the civil rights movement. And you were interested in this research process. You went along the route of the Freedom Rides – the 1961 Freedom Rides. Why, at that time in your life, was this the most compelling thing you could do?

Lemon: Well, it was timing. At the end of the second part of the *Trilogy*, part three, it just seemed to be a no-brainer, unless I continued this for another ten, twenty years, that it should be about coming home. So after being away for five, six years, I think there was an aesthetic sense of needing to come home and then using that as material. But then thinking about how to keep that really charged, it seemed to me to be important to deal with this idea of home as memory, or home as remembering, because when you leave home ... returning is about what's not there anymore. So I really just sort of amplified that, and I took in my whole personal history as an African American and my more personal remembrance of the civil rights movement. It was a remarkably charged time for me growing up. So I just kind of used that as a map.

The second part of the *Trilogy* ended in 2000, and in 2001 was the fortieth anniversary of the Freedom Bus Rides. The Freedom Bus Rides were a kind of really remarkable protest journey through the South on Greyhound and Trailways buses by young college students, black and white, protesting segregation in the bus stations.

Gonnerman: And testing a Supreme Court decision [*Boynton v. Virginia*].

Lemon: Yes, protesting segregation in interstate travel, by and large. So these young white and black students would get on these buses and they would go to these bus waiting stations through the South, and the young white students would go into the colored-only areas, and the black students would go into the white-only parts of the station, and it got more and more violent, of course, the farther South that they got. So I kind of went on this journey with my daughter, by the way, as videographer, because I thought it was important to kind of bring a familial element to it and a generational, familial element to it because I could. So the two of us just kind of got on buses and went down South for a month and started in Richmond. We missed the first stop, which was Fredericksburg, Virginia. I didn't know that until the very end. Once we got to Birmingham, which was the last stop for them, I found out and I thought, Do we have to start this all over? [Laughs] But at each stop, I did a kind of performance, and the idea of the performance was not to be seen. I didn't want to disrupt the waiting ecology of these spaces. So we would just sort of set the camera down very inconspicuously, and I would just find these little movement marks to kind of mark the space. It was kind of interesting. It was sad to me because in the reality of the Freedom Bus Rides, these young students were really risking their lives. They were going to places where there was extreme violence, and a

lot of them were writing wills before they left. They had no idea that they were going to survive or come back and not be murdered.

So as a way to memorialize them, or counter-memorialize them, I found an art play, and that felt liberating but also saddening.

This [VIDEO] was done in the Richmond, Virginia, bus waiting station. What was interesting about this, for me, again, is I would go in as a choreographer and what I'm looking at is the architecture of space. No one really sort of migrated at all into the middle of the space. Everyone sort of stayed to the edges. But very few of these places that we visited were about the danger that the Freedom Bus Riders experienced forty years before.

Gonnerman: Let's talk about your hotel room installations. I want to show a couple of these. I think they're fascinating, and I want to know if you got the sought-after responses.

[VIDEO IS SHOWN]

Lemon: Well, again, I went South as an artist, and these motel installations were a way to kind of talk to myself via the housekeeping staff. I thought it would be really important to kind of explain what it was we were doing down South. So I left all these installations in the rooms after we would spend a week researching in one particular town or another. I would leave a note asking them to respond, and if they responded, I would send them some money just to let me know what they thought about this. Was it interesting? Was it not? And only one person responded out of all the cities we visited, and oddly enough, it was an Indian émigré from Gujarat, and it's because he and I would talk every day, so I felt like he knew me and he trusted me and I thought the rest of them just thought I was a complete weirdo, like you walk into a room and you see a thing that you don't recognize. I'm sure it drove them crazy, and they were like, "There's no way we're going to communicate with this person."

But I don't know if I really expected to get feedback. I thought ... and again, in retrospect, it was really just a way for me to kind of continue to try to have a conversation with the tension of bringing a kind of art practice to this kind of history, these kinds of memories, and to this kind of place. And I'm not sure this imposed anything. It seemed to have a kind of kindness. That was its intention. I was trying to be generous. I'm not sure what happened beyond that, but I feel like the audience ended up probably being quite invisible, because I'll never know.

Gonnerman: It is interesting that you would choose a postcard of Jean Toomer, who was in so many ways asking the same kinds of questions you were asking.

Lemon: Right, but it's also who we're asking these questions of, which I felt like why the living room dance was so successful because I felt like I was asking a question of a person who knew what I was talking about. [Laughs] And as much as I tried to really

articulate what it was I was doing in these instances.... I was using materials that they recognized; they were materials that I could buy in any sort of strip area gas station, like Crazy Glue or oil or fruit or a map – things that were very, very recognizable. It wasn't like I was bringing anything foreign in. But I think the whole idea and concept of creating something beyond their normal existence was foreign and probably a little too cryptic, but I had fun doing it.

Gonnerman: And still a real gift.

Lemon: Yeah, I suppose. But, I don't know: doesn't a gift have to be accepted?

Gonnerman: Perhaps.

Lemon: Perhaps. [Laughs]

Gonnerman: You also then went back north. Let's talk about going to Duluth at this lynching site counter-memorial.

Lemon: This was another research component of the last part of the *Trilogy*, which I called *Come Home, Charlie Patton*. Along with the living room dances, I did a series of lynching site counter-memorials. This is a lynching site counter-memorial, [VIDEO IS SHOWN] and what was interesting to me (I did a series of these) ... what was interesting to me about this one is it took place in Duluth, Minnesota, so it wasn't your typical kind of southern oak tree lynching. It happened in 1920, and this is the lynching that Bob Dylan wrote about in "Desolation Row."

Gonnerman: "They're selling postcards at the hanging"

Lemon: They're selling postcards. It was three young circus roustabouts who were accused of raping a white woman, and they dragged them from the jail, which is right down the street from this, and they hanged them on a street light that was where this street light exists. So I wanted to mark it, and when I got there, I didn't really know what to do. I didn't know what that meant. How does one mark something like this? I didn't want to do a conventional lighting a candle or getting on my knees and praying. I felt like, again, I'm coming here as an artist, a body artist. So what you're watching is me improvising not knowing what to do in this very charged space where something very horrible and real happened. There's the very famous postcard of these three bodies hanging from the street light here. I studied that, and that's what I was thinking about. And then at the end, I literalized. One of the bodies was cut down and was lying on the ground. And I felt like for me to do that at the end kind of was the one thing out of everything that I had been stumbling about doing that made sense.

Gonnerman: Let's talk about your current work with Walter Carter, which is an extension also of the *Geography Trilogy*, I do believe. You've got this great footage here of Walter Carter. [VIDEO IS SHOWN]. One hundred years old. Yazoo, Mississippi. Dancing. Who is Walter Carter?

Lemon: I met Walter in 2002 during one of the lynching site counter-memorials, one of the research trips. Someone asked if I wanted to meet the oldest man in Yazoo City, Mississippi, and I said, “Of course.” They introduced me to this gentleman, and I fell in love and have gone down to his hometown twice a year and we do stuff together. He’s now 103 and he’s fearless and his body holds, I feel, everything I need to know and want to know. He’s willing to do all this weird, abstract stuff with me. So I would say, along with the living room dances, my work with Walter is another really perfect existence because we don’t talk about what the word means. He doesn’t care. He likes the company. And what you’re probably watching now is the buck dance. [Laughs] That may be the buck dance. He would tell me. “Walter, what did you do when you were seventeen, eighteen years old?” and this is what he was doing. Walter would go to the juke joints and he’d walk. This was before.... This is a very, very, alive man – extremely alive. He doesn’t eat, his internal organs probably don’t function so well anymore. So I feel like he’s existing on air – air and a kind of happiness. And yet he grew up as this black man in a small town in Mississippi, which is where he’s lived all his life so he has seen horrific horror: lived through Jim Crow and extreme racism, and yet he has ... he holds a place for me that’s kind of complete in this past, present, future tense. And I feel like my work with him is really about watching the transcending body, which, to me, is everything.

So Walter is a miracle in my life, and I feel like I’m so privileged and blessed to have this working relationship with him. Literally, I go down twice a year and we just do stuff. No one sees, and it’s beautiful because I can bring a videotape back, but I can’t bring an audience there and he’s too old to travel. So it’s very, very elegantly particular in where it exists, and it’s very clear that that’s where it is. It kind of can’t happen anywhere else. It’s his backyard, or that was a particular stage in the small town that he lives in. Also, the more I go down, the less and less he’s able to do stuff like this, so I’m also watching the kind of perfect disintegration of the body. And again, as someone who has studied the body for a long, long time, I can’t think of anything more complete to sort of be present with. And he’s sharing it with me. He gets paid, so when we work, when we talk, he gets paid daily, so that’s also part of it, I have to mention. [Laughs] And he’s seen this work.

Now we’re working on a project about Tarkovsky. Andrei Tarkovsky is the famous Russian filmmaker. His film called *Solaris* – I don’t know if any of you have seen it – and Godard’s *Alphaville*: we’re actually working on a project now where we’re sourcing those two films. Now, imagine showing Walter *Alphaville* and *Solaris*, these movies that...who has seen them? Raise your hand. [Laughs] Not many people. But they’re beautiful movies about the future and love. And I think that Walter holds all of that. So he and his wife (his wife Edna, who is eighty) ... so the two of them are enacting some of the scenes from those two movies in a very, very remarkable way.

Gonnerman: Well, we’ll circle back and talk about some of your other current work, but surely there are questions from audience members. If you have a question, raise your hand and we have a microphone for you.

Question from the Audience: It wasn't clear to me what kind of installations you left in the motels that you wanted the housekeeping staff to respond to.

Lemon: Well, very pedestrian. I would go to one of those gas station marts that you find on a lot of the strip roads through most of America, and I would just buy articles. Sometimes they would be maps, toys, foodstuffs. And then I would just rearrange them in ways, like on a side table, just kind of trying to create some kind of formality with everyday objects that they would recognize. And then I would leave a note about what happened in this particular town historically that may have had something to do with the civil rights movement and how this particular arrangement of things might or might not relate to that. They were really just sort of like personal queries. Why am I here? Is there a way to rationalize this research in a way that may create some kind of social discussion? It was interesting. My target was the housekeeping staff because I felt like these were people who were absolutely out of my life – who would not go to a museum, who probably had never seen a modern dance. We may have shared a kind of race. There were people I never actually saw except for the young Indian man. So it was also kind of about an invisibility. But again, to answer your question, the installations themselves were just very simple rearrangements of these everyday, pedestrian articles that I would find in gas station shopping marts.

Gonnerman: I actually can't wait for my next road trip [Laughter] and the opportunity to do this.

Lemon: Oh, there's the best stuff.

Question from the Audience: In the best of all possible worlds, what response to these installations would have been the best?

Lemon: Oh, great question. Oh, someone really like: "Well, I don't get it." I think that would have been the best response. "I don't get it, and tell me more." Like something to really start a conversation. That would have been the best. Or even like, "I don't like it." "This scares me." "Who are you?" I think maybe anything that asked a question would be a great response.

Gonnerman: And you're really into being with the question. That seems to be the place where your research takes you – to living with the questions.

Lemon: Well, I feel like all we really have is questions. I was telling Mark that I've worked with a dramaturge [Katherine Profeta], and she said, "It seems to me our work is really about how well we articulate the questions, and that's really as good as it gets." I think for me as an artist, it's important to think of it that way because the question really creates an open space and only leads to another question. So then I have this kind of eternal, infinite space to create. And it's uncomfortable, certainly, because there's never really a place to land. But then I think for me the process has been most useful when I don't have a place to land. I mean, I have an apartment so there's an architectural home,

and I have my parents, who are not artists and they call me every week. So I have these things that are very, very grounded in my life that allow me to indulge in a life that's about questions.

Question from the Audience: Actually, I'm curious why Godard's *Alphaville* and why Tarkovsky's *Solaris*? The other question, which is not really related to that, is what did you learn about your blackness in Africa and also in the South? What did you learn about yourself in those environments? The obvious thing, of course, is always like, "Oh, you go to Africa..." But what did you get from that and what are you getting in a continuous way from being in the South in the kind of environments you're in? Because it's not just about race in this case; it's also about class, it would seem to me, but I could be wrong, and power. So I'm just curious about that. And then I'm also curious about the choice of those two films.

Lemon: Well, I can't answer all those questions. That would take all night. [Laughs] But I love the race questions. I don't know if I've thought about that in a long time. Would that interest you?

Question from the Audience (continued): Yes.

Lemon: Because I could talk about Tarkovsky and *Solaris* and *Alphaville*, too.

It's been interesting. Before I went to Africa and I had a dance company (it's not a confession; that was my reality) ... but my dance company for that ten-year period of time when I had a more traditional modern dance company – the performers were primarily white, which was not uncommon in the experimental dance scene in New York. There were very few black performers working downtown, as they say, for complicated reasons. I also grew up in Minnesota, so I think that had a lot to do with a lot of faux color blindness. But when I went to Africa, I felt like.... I didn't grow up naïve about race. Again, the civil rights movement was very, very affecting. I knew my blackness, as it was. I grew up in Minnesota, and then when I moved to New York, not being so concerned with my blackness. And when I went to Africa, it was blackness as theater, almost. What I mean by that is I was in this giant continent where everybody is black, and they're not black like me, and they're telling me that. So it was theatrical, so it still kind of didn't mean anything. And J.J., one of the performers I've continued to work with, told me only a few years ago, "God, I wasn't black until I came to the States." So it's been playful to me most of my life, and I don't mean that flippantly, but it's just that there's been a kind of playfulness to it. It's not something that I wear with weight. My parents wear it with weight. Their parents wore it with more weight. So it's generational.

When I went South with the whole back home journey and going down South and researching the whole civil rights movement forty years after the fact, it was moving. It was very emotional, and I suspect part of that was a kind of heated, vital romanticism of it, but also the weight that lynchings did happen, that people died for me to be playful with race, was compelling. And yet it made me no less playful. It didn't change my

blackness. I'm not even sure it gave my blackness more weight, but it did make me feel something that I continue to feel. But my work now, again, is more about all of our bodies, and I don't think it's a denial of anything; it's just, What's a body? What's love? And what's mortality? So it's been progressive, and I still know that I'm black and I know that I get forward with my blackness and I'm held back because of my blackness. But what interests me more now is my work with Walter. He's absolutely black, but that's not why I'm working with him. I'm working with him because I feel this love and it's a transcending body. So I absolutely wouldn't say this is about transcending race, but it's almost like an inversion of it or something. It's cellular to me. It's just a place that I feel like I need to go.

Question from the Audience: You were saying initially that you went to Asia because you were looking for sources of spiritual components, but in here it almost sounds like you derived this spiritual energy from your work in the South. The work you did there ... you went with this concept of, OK, I'll find some Buddhist energy, or whatever. But then when you came back to the U.S., when you were working especially with Walter, it sounds like the love and the energy that you're getting from that.... So I'm just curious if you have thought about that in that sense – that sort of coming back home and the fact that you felt like that enriched you spiritually more so than what you went over for.

Lemon: Well, again, as I said before, I had a plan for what I thought each of the touristic visits would bring me, and of course I didn't get that in any of those places. I wasn't sure what home was going to bring me other than the idea of home. But I would say in each place I found a kind of spirituality and a love. I don't know if I could have said that while I was in the midst of those different environments. So I'm not so sure the journey was so linear. I think it was a sort of spiral that was kind of happening the whole time. In essence, maybe they were all the same thing, or they were all really the same place with different kinds of resonances. I thought that I was going to Asia – to the parts that I visited – on a spiritual trek, and what I found was a particular kind of home. Performers I worked with, once we came back to the States (the farmer musicians in particular), when we'd stay at a hotel or motel or wherever we were, would get up at seven o'clock in the morning and knock on everyone's door. It was time for tea and breakfast. For me, it was really uncomfortable because I work with you and then, when the day is over, I have to go back to my room. For them, there were no doors. You work and then you eat together. So beautiful, but so haunting. So it was forcing me to open myself up to that. What is that? It sounds like home and love to me. This idea of spirit in a particular religion or Buddhism: that wasn't the point. The point was about the collective. And with the African performers, it was a similar kind of experience. It was mostly them and me only, so when they were done rehearsing, they would just go out and dance the rest of the night. And they were always in one or someone else's room all together – just dancing and eating all night, and they would come to rehearsal the next day.

Gonnerman: In the spiral that is the trajectory of your research and exploration, how have you come to work on the intoxicated body?

Lemon: Well, I was thinking about that and I think Walter has led me to the intoxicated body because Walter has this elegant, organic body that is transcendent, clearly, to me. So what I'm trying to source is not "How do I be that?" but "How do I source that in this body?" So some of the silly ways I'm trying to do that is I'm working with performers a little younger than I am but the same general background and generational level, and I get them drunk or stoned, within a very structured context. We ritualize it so we had a day where, "This is a piece of choreography we're going to work on." [VIDEO IS SHOWN] And the question is, What happens if you try to maintain a sense of known composition, rigor, when the body is under the influence? And of course the whole thing just fell apart. But it's like watching this earnest body attempt to stay present. And they're very good dancers, by the way. They're all professionals and they're all in their forties, so they're not kids. I'm not abusing them. They bring their own liquor and pot. The actual choreography is really sort of spectacular. But this is what became of it. That's Darrell. He's really like a superman, and he's the only one left standing, and the rest have just ... you know. But once we did this, it became clear to me that it was an interesting exercise but a failure because there's no mystery in the intoxicated body. It's drunk so it's out of control. So now I'm kind of taking a few steps back to find what is that in-between place. What is that in-between place about sort of giving in to something – having a sense of being lost without being intoxicated, without any kind of substance? I'm not sure. What is the modern or postmodern Western version of trance and possession where there's no real hand of God involved? Maybe it's like a really silly comparison, but when I go back to Walter's body (obviously his age, being 103, and being so vital ... perhaps there is no comparison to that, and there's maybe no real point to a body like this thinking about a body like that), but I'm not so sure.

Gonnerman: How long are you going to keep conducting this experiment?

Lemon: [Laughs] Oh, well, I'm going to keep trying some things. I heard that there's a drug, and maybe some kids on campus know about it, that is not Ecstasy, but it's a drug that really allows and kind of creates some kind of collective experience. It's very, very much about the group and the need for the group. It kind of energizes that experience. I don't know. I doubt if I would experiment with anything like that, but what interests me these days is less about structure and composition and more about what's possible on a really profound, sublime, human level for the body to do, and then not die or not break and maybe be able to come back and forth. I think what I'm talking about is how to materialize a reliable kind of shamanism. That's what I'm talking about. I feel the best artists are ... they're shamans and they bring information to us from very vast, profound places.

Gonnerman: One of your spirit guides is James Baldwin, an alter ego, who often in your drawings of him wears lemon-colored clothes. [VIDEO IS SHOWN] We have a sketch here, a cartoon you've drawn, and a quotation:

The presence of Africa, even though it's a very unreadable presence, it's a real one – real in a way it was not for me when I was young or even as it was not real, let's say, fifteen or twenty

years ago. Something is happening in the Western world. Everybody, one way or another, feels this. In short, the center – what is presumed to be the center – of the earth has shifted, and the definition of man has shifted with it.

Lemon: Well, yes. The center of existence has shifted, too, I would add.

Gonnerman: From what to what?

Lemon: I don't know. I don't think James knew either. [Laughs] So I think it's like wait and see now.

Gonnerman: I think you have some ideas about that, though.

Lemon: No, I don't. [Laughs] I just know there's no center now, at least it feels that way to me. Geographically, absolutely, or geopolitically, absolutely. America is not the center anymore. We may have lost that center a long time ago. That's what I'm more interested in: How long have we not been the center? And I think the center is kind of like trying to figure out where it is.

Gonnerman: Don't you suppose we're better off without a center?

Lemon: Yeah, much. That's what my life feels like.

Gonnerman: Thanks for sharing so much of your life and work with us tonight. Thank you very much for being here, and we look forward to further conversations.
[Applause]

* * *

Ralph Lemon, an artist who defies categorization, is Artistic Director of Cross Performance, a company dedicated to the creation of cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary performance and presentation. Lemon's projects expand the definition of choreography by crossing and stretching the boundaries between Western, post-modern dance and other art forms and cultures. For each project, Lemon builds a team of collaborating artists—from diverse cultural backgrounds, countries and artistic disciplines—who bring their own history and aesthetic voice to the work. Projects develop organically, over a period of years, with frequent public sharings of work-in-progress, and the culminating artworks derive from the artistic, cultural, historic and emotional material uncovered in this rigorous creative research process.

In 2005, Lemon concluded *The Geography Trilogy*, a decade-long international research and performance project that spanned three continents as it explored race, history and memory. The project featured three evening-length dance/theater performances: *Geography* (1997); *Tree* (2000); and *Come home Charley Patton* (2004); two Internet art projects; the publication of two books by Wesleyan University Press; and several gallery exhibitions. Other recent projects include the three-DVD set of *The Geography Trilogy*; *Konbit*, a video collage about Miami's Haitian community; *Three*, a dance/film created with choreographer Bebe Miller and filmmaker Isaac Julien; and *Persephone*, a book with Philip Trager's photographs of Lemon's choreographic work, with text by Lemon and Andrew Szegedy-Maszak, and poems by Rita Dove and Eavan Boland.

Mark Gonnerman is founding director of the Aurora Forum.

Comments?

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Aurora Forum at Stanford University
537 Lomita Mall, MC 2250
Stanford, CA 94305-2250

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