

# critical correspondence

September 22, 2011

## Wally Cardona and Jennifer Lacey in Conversation with Dillon de Give



*Critical Correspondence* asked artist and dance outsider [Dillon de Give](#) (Brooklyn) to interview choreographers [Wally Cardona](#) (Brooklyn) & [Jennifer Lacey](#) (Paris) about their new collaborative creation *TOOL IS LOOT* premiering September 22-October 1 at [The Kitchen](#). They discuss “the culmination of a year-long process of aesthetic disorientation” where each artist solicited week-long encounters with non-dance experts: an astrophysicist, a sommelier, a visual artist, an architect, a film editor, a medical supply salesman, a kinetic sculptor, a baroque opera singer, an art critic, a group of acousticians and a social activist.

Thumbnail Artwork by Adam Shecter

Interview date: September 18, 2011

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Dillon de Give: I want to say that I’m excited about doing this interview because, while I don’t feel like I have a kind of official relationship to the dance world per se, I do feel like I have a relationship to this piece. I guess the reason I say that, probably reflects why you sought out an interviewer who was from outside the dance world.

Has your relationship to the outsider changed through this process?

Jennifer Lacey: I don’t know. There’s something delicate about the original project that we both did, which can seem...idealizing in a way. It could be somebody whose not a part of the insular dance world – and I like the insular dance world – but it didn’t turn out to be like I expected. Also, the way that we were delivering ourselves that situation was very particular. It was not as if some people who didn’t know anything about dance were coming to our rehearsals where we already had an agenda of what we were trying to do and what we wanted to do. What could have been outside, or what is described in all of the literature, the promotional materials for these things, it was very much inside the process. That was the process. Outside of the initial, or even continuing amusement at the things that we were disturbed or shocked by aesthetically, it never seemed to me to be particularly outside because that was the project. So it’s a little bit weird.

The whole discourse around the communication of this project talks about outside. If I really think about it, it didn’t feel like that. These people were very much integrated into the project, and they were, the project, my relationship with them and my dialogue with them. They were the project. It didn’t end up feeling that much outside at all. There was no assumed shared language most of the time. That was the thing that was exciting and different.

As we said when we came into rehearsal here, when we had Phyllis Lamhut and David Gordon, who could not be more inside the dance world. What was amazing to us in the beginning, was “Wow. They know how to talk about dance.” We were talking about how we moved, the nuances of performance, a very sophisticated way of looking, and a very sophisticated way of saying what they were seeing. We hadn’t been used to that. We had been used to another communication. That was different. If I think about how I really feel about it, it’s like outside, inside whatever. Ultimately, my fantasies about what that meant were not at all realized and something else happened. I was disrupted in a different way, and not in my thoughts about dance. I was disrupted in my thoughts about art, in my thoughts about myself...

Wally Cardona: Something that you said, which I never really thought about it in that way, is that those people coming in did get me again and again outside of myself in some way. Sometimes that needed to happen just to get some kind of dialogue going. Lots of times it was just out of the construct of the project that within the project I had committed myself to trying to fulfill their needs, wants, desires, opinions. I would respond the best I could to that.

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That would take me outside of all the things that I normally do. I feel like it's a little existential when I begin to talk about it or even think about it.

We have said this too, to each other. Over and over again when someone would be making a request which seemed to go against all of our own likes or aesthetic stances, at that moment, it would be taking the outside of my usual likes or ways of dealing with things. But at the moment where I would actually get up and have to do something and deal with it, it was like, "Crap. I'm stuck with the same old stuff." The only constant here was me in reaction to whatever they were wanting. Over and over again, I felt like I was up against very familiar terrain.

Dillon: When I saw the rehearsal the other evening, to me there are – and this is not necessarily exclusive to your piece – but, there's a kind of vocabulary of performed movements and then there are these kind of quotidian movements like walking around the stage. Did you find yourself getting into a mode of operation that was a way of thinking that changed, or is it like you just were saying, that it kind of fit into your general [practice]?

Jennifer: For me, doing the project was extremely performative from the very beginning, and even in the process, because I had to perform the person who invited them and was sure that the situation was something that should be done because these people were coming into a situation where they, by definition, had no coping mechanisms. They didn't really know what they were supposed to do and I couldn't tell them either. I did not tell them what to do, but I tried to perform as the person who knows how to establish a rehearsal schedule, knows how to establish a dialogue, knows how to pose questions about performance spaces, basically a hostess in some very particular way. What was the question?

Dillon: What I was wondering is, because this process, and even to the point of–

Wally: –our way of working.

Dillon: Yeah.

Jennifer: Honestly, I don't know. I think it's something like Wally said. I think that something definitely has changed. It was changing anyway for me. Whether it changed exclusively because of this project, I do not know. I imagined this project. It didn't come out of a cereal box or something. Obviously, the imagination of that project was something that I needed to do, or really wanted to do. So that might indicate that change was happening anyway. As Wally said, absolutely deep profound change, and no change at all.

Wally: Right. Over and over again, this was a pattern for me. When things were at their most interesting, they were usually at their most challenging. Someone would be asking you to do something. I would find it completely horrifying, but I would consider it my responsibility to try to give them what they want. That simple. I would be bumping up against this for the longest time, and then there would be something that felt like a breakthrough. Usually at that moment... I was relinquishing something. I was letting go pretty fucking deeply of something that I had been holding onto that was not allowing me to actually go to where they wanted me to go.

That was a way of working that was present in each one as well as within each encounter. There ended up being a way of working exclusive to that encounter. Partially, when I think of, being a host as Jennifer said, I'd be a host, but with that person it would become a certain type of party. That would be the way of working with them, because that person would not say a word unless I initiated something. Compared to another week, you would have a person who'd come in with a game plan; they had it all planned out, what they wanted to do with you that week. Each one had their own way of working.

Jennifer: Now that I'm thinking about it and listening to you talk, one of the things that it affirmed for me, which I think had been changing, is something basic about some sort of dynamic around attachment, generosity and calmness. As nervous as I might be or Wally might be to be confronted with a situation, like "Oh I'm going to have to perform this," or "My new boyfriend who has never seen any of my work, is going to see *this* as the first thing." You know those kind of neurotic relationships to your own work. They really softened up a lot because it wouldn't be possible to make a nice experience for myself and for the person I had invited if I didn't push that really consciously to the side, or just out, because it didn't have a place. Although I might have feelings about it, I didn't value them. Those feelings that could be broaching neurotic about the work or about art were useful feelings that can be a part of a useful creative process, but I'm more and more doubting it. This kind of confirmed it to me. Those are not really useful thoughts. They might inform other thoughts that are useful, but those are not useful. They're not where the work should be. And

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it was especially clear in this situation, that is not where the work is. There's no question about it. That was the setup. It was clear that that was not a part of it.

Dillon: Yeah. There's something kind of Zen about that, like a detachment from the self or acknowledging that.

Jennifer: My relationship to criticism has changed a lot. That was nice. I think it was something I was pursuing anyway, the best that I could over a long period of time. It might have solidified itself. Without that edge, though, I wonder would anything ever get done? I'm kind of willing to try, because it doesn't seem like it helps me, and it certainly doesn't help the kind of work I'm interested in, which is definitely creating processes that are risky and that you don't really know how they should turn out. In order to actually do that, you have to be pretty chill about it and observe what's happening.

Dillon: Let me ask you guys about chairs, or have you talked about chairs too much?

Jennifer: I'd be happy to talk about chairs.

Dillon: With my other question, the whole way of working also seemed to seep into a way of thinking. The chairs made me think of somebody whose job it is to think, which is a philosopher, but that's a different type of chair. It's like an armchair. Obviously you guys have a varied relationship with chairs in this thing, and everybody has a relationship with chairs.



Artwork: Adam Shecter

Wally: Everyone has a relationship to chairs but I think the dance world has a whole other relationship to chairs that needs to be acknowledged.

Jennifer: The chair has been like this ubiquitous prop for quite awhile through modernism and even a little bit of postmodernism. I was talking a little bit to Gia [Kourlas], that they kind of disappeared. The fact that the chair was there, we didn't decide at the beginning. It just didn't go away. At a certain point, we were faced with "We're doing a dance with the chair." Which is a perfect example of this thing that's kind of like a fashion thing where it's a little too early to start wearing that retro fashion. It's not going to read as cool and referential. It's just kind of embarrassing potentially or an extremely peculiar choice. It doesn't situate itself easily in reference, in the contemporary art and dance world as we know it right now. We do know a lot about that. We're not going to pretend to be naive about it.

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We know that it's an odd choice, or potentially a really bad choice. I'm always interested in those choices that are potentially disastrous. Not for irony's sake or the sake of kitsch, but because if we've ended up there, we have to figure out what's right about the decision, what's necessary about the decision outside of the fact that it seems to be a really bad choice.

Wally: I think they are the perfect – I don't want to say representation, but it's not like this final thing that we've made is supposed to represent our encounters that we had, or be the cumulative [product]. It's absolutely not that. We did that thing. It's very much a separate thing, but we both went through it. I feel like the presence of the chairs, those chairs are what brings the aroma (both laugh) of what really happened during those encounters. It actually is there. You're getting a whiff of it onstage.

Jennifer: We did not bring all of our material with us from our other work at all, but the chair, for me, was there. I also had a really involved text.

Wally: We should clarify. We didn't bring any of the materials to this piece. I think some people get confused about that. But we did bring the source of that material, like the dialogue that happened.

Jennifer: The requests.

Wally: There were requests that happened from the person. When Jennifer and I then came together, we would share with each other what the most terrifying things were.

Jennifer: When the body feels an emotional truth. That was said. Or, "Can you do a dance with the chair as a character?" "I would like you to dance to poetry." All of these requests, and we didn't bring in our responses to them, but we did bring in the things that we thought were the most charged, which were the things that stayed in our heads. Stuff just went away or integrated itself. Things that basically were so difficult for us that they remained un-assimilable. We could not assimilate them. They remain that thing. The text that I had written was about the identity of objects on stage. It was a funny text. There's always a folding chair hanging about in every studio you ever go into. The thing is always there. We very rarely had to look for them. There's something I like about it. There's a lot of things that I like about it. I definitely like the fact that I was like "Oh my god, this is really difficult." It's gotten much easier. Feels almost natural now.

Dillon: I remember reading something maybe a year ago or so. It was [Henri] Bergson, and he was saying that things appear humorous when there is an unclear moment of a person that appears to be a machine. I'm trying to recall an exact example, but in the beginning of the piece I had this confusion about which is the object and which is the person kind of thing.

Jennifer: It couldn't be clearer. The proposal of that confusion could not be clearer. If we wrote that sentence on the back of the backdrop, it would be the only way to make it more clear.

Dillon: I guess I was thinking, is it possible to think of people as non-objects? I think in one sense you have a relationship to people outside that we've been talking about, outside of the discipline, and in another sense, the relationship with inanimate objects is this other step outside. I almost see it on the same spectrum.

Jennifer: It depends on how much of a sociopath that you are.

Dillon: Yeah. (Both laugh)

Jennifer: What do you mean by non-object?

Dillon: Well, I guess, in a sense, people all are objects because we're made of matter. I guess, given that there's this kind of confusion that's being thrown out there, did you arrive at some different definition of object, or a different definition of person?

Wally: I would say, no. In response to land, I don't think there was any landing.

Jennifer: No, but I do think of myself as a performative object. In this particular piece, I feel much more at ease with it. I don't feel like I need to underline it or undercut it because of the discourse in the piece. I wasn't intending to do that, but that's my experience.

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Wally: It makes me think: Did this pattern that emerges, meeting these people, that they could talk about the paper that I had there, or the tape that I had there, or the table that I was standing on, and whether or not I should stand in front or on top of the table. They would talk about the table, but they had a very hard time talking about me and what I had just done. They would even begin to talk about the title of the table and they would have an opinion about it, "What if you used this table and not that table?" because that read to them as some different thing. Then you would try to have a conversation about how I am up on that table, they would either be unable to talk about it, or their common response was "That I can't really talk about because that's you. That's your business." That was quite amazing. I found that really frustrating sometimes because I was like "Oh, but I want to talk about that."

You brought this up the other day, and I thought it was really true. There was something very lovely about the fact that people considered it to be something that was mine. Sometimes I got that it was because they thought I just know more than they do about that so they can't talk about it. Other times it was about whatever that is is what I have to figure out. I have to exercise that. I have to be in response to, and they can't do that for me.

Dillon: Your body.

Wally: Yes. Yes, meaning my thoughts about the whole thing, everything. Yeah.

Jennifer: The thinking and the deciding, the exercising of dance technique, whatever that may be. I had a very similar experience.

Wally: That is kind of the same as it always has been for me. The questioning of myself as an object, as same as any other object, something to be considered with equal weight, as well as then the fact that because I am that object myself. Yes, therefore, it is going to be a different conversation.

Jennifer: It's onstage. It's very much onstage even although it's not full theater trappings. It's for sure onstage. What happens to objects onstage is very curious, and what happens to people onstage is very curious. The bulk of my work as a dance artist has been to try to do some weird magic with that transformation so that it doesn't happen all the way, or in a particular way. It doesn't get undone all the time. This one just seems like the balance between our presence and the presence of the whatever objects (chairs are not the only objects there) allows for a certain kind of acceptance of that kind of transformation without undercutting it or overplaying it, but to actually accept what happens to a lady or a man of a certain age doing their thing onstage. It doesn't sound so interesting when I talk about it, but there is something quite interesting about that for me. It's particularly strange for me that you can control that transformation and it's not trying to undercut it. It's just sort of letting it have its effect on everything that's going on in that particular place.

Wally: I haven't thought of it that way, but I do sometimes, when I get into a little place where I'm like "What the fuck?" At that moment it's important that I put my object to use. My object does have a function. It can be very complicated because it can do a lot of different things, but what's most important is that I put it to use.

Dillon: I also wanted to ask about, the relationship to objects, but also then there's that you are the people onstage and you're not interacting that much, at least in an obvious way that I could tell. To me it felt very significant that at the end where you make eye contact. I know that it's not the only moment that you interacted because there was the little sequence before that, but to me it was like "Woah, that happened." Maybe you could tell me something about that moment.

Wally: Well, I think we have acknowledged through time, and certainly when that section near the end began to appear, there was a clear understanding on some level that we have gotten to this place. These things have happened before that. We have not been together in a way that most people see us being together and we have absolutely no problem with that at all. We don't seem to have the same kind of need that many people have when maybe they know that it's going to be two people in a piece or they create an image in their head that those two people will always be together. I feel very together with you. We're not stupid. We did see that this has happened. This has happened for the last 50 minutes and now we are at this point and now we are both going to walk over here.

Jennifer: I didn't make a big deal about that eye contact. It was either going to happen or not, and having it not happen felt kind of weird to me. We don't make it happen. I don't even know really what you saw. In a way it's really important for me that that moment stay light. I try to actually see something. If I see it, I see it. If I don't see it, I don't

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see it. I don't want to get into what could be like the heavy symbolic moment. If it has that kind of impact that's fine with me, but I'm not interested in creating it or denying it.

Dillon: This is another sense when I was participating in that moment because I was looking for that. I was wondering about it.

Wally: What's interesting to me about that is that if people hadn't already begun wondering about it, I believe that they would begin to wonder about it at that point in time because of the construct of the piece at that moment, and what is being given to that at that point. We are both there in the same space.

Jennifer: And we kind of glance at each other. It's not a big [thing].

Wally: Right. So the possibility for that is what is really presenting itself for that moment anyways. Whether or not we were to look at each other, I think it would still be in the air in a way.

Jennifer: In my mind I'm not going to think about that moment very much, but it reminds me of [when] I did a staging of an opera of Orpheus and Eurydice – one of the weird things that happens to you in your life. Of course the big question is how to make that really important look, actually something. Like how can you really do that? Especially working in the realm of things that I like, which wouldn't be two people at opposite ends of the stage hootsing each other obviously before. It was an interesting puzzle to work out. Actually, you saying that to us, that's the answer. You just have to have them do that piece and then the whatever kind of look is really significant. You know what I mean, like it's just the "Is your shirt falling off or not?" look.

Dillon: ...Maybe after that moment then the music and lighting takes center stage. I was wondering if maybe you could say something about working with Jonathan Bepler.

Jennifer: I think that there were many reasons why we ended up pursuing that. I think the initial impulse was something we turned out to be wrong about, which was that we weren't able to work with Jonathan in the very beginning and we actually got really far really fast with this piece. There was a lot of text and there was a lot of sound. Even we had made a little song and we thought, "How are we going to work with him? We've invited this great composer in, and also this great artist, this person I would really like to collaborate with" and believe me, this is not the first time I've had this problem with Jon. It's like "I'm sorry. There's a lot of stuff in the piece already." So at a moment we thought, "What if that musical language had its place after? That way he can compose a string quartet and we can make a place for it after so that he's addressing a certain idea of narrative." It all sounds very flat or tacit the way I'm saying it. We thought "Oh, maybe that could work." Then it wasn't just a question of what shall we do with the composer. It really seemed to be that that would be great if we weren't responsible for generating something with our bodies and with our "do-it-i-ness." That didn't seem to be appropriate or possible in this particular thing. I remember that as the genesis of that idea. Now, of course, it's become more complicated. Obviously, the role of music and sound in the piece is not just that last moment. Things have really developed.

Wally: I also think that something was already in place there just waiting to come up in lots of different ways of our interest in someone putting someone else's interpretation, someone else's reading of the thing. In an extreme way, I think we were both very game for whatever, anything. When we talked to him about music, we also said, "Think big. Think small. Think anything. It could be grand. It could be operatic."

Jennifer: We talked a lot about symphonics and modernism, a certain kind of modernism, values of tone and instruments in relationship to objects and symphony, a certain kind of development. There were lots of reasons why that seemed to be something that would work or that we would need, or that was appropriate for this piece.

Wally: And then also at that point in time, right before we started with Jonathan, we had found that something had been made that was quite substantial. Like "Wow, this is kind of done." It had a lot of text and so we said to him "We think we have a libretto, so we'll be sending you a libretto. You can musicalize it." That has been done in some part, but I think it also started creating this language for us too. We started to use the word opera or operatic. It opened up the way for this whole ending happening. It was not something that in the grand scheme of things, that we were planning on it from the beginning for sure.

Jennifer: It changed our relationship to the text as well.