thINKingDANCE
Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

Care in Conversation

by Emilee Lord

As I write this it has been roughly one year since *Sitting On A Man's Head*, directed by Okwui Okpokwasili and Peter Born, took place at Danspace Project. It was unthinkable then how meaningful breathing in a space with other humans would feel, or how the repetition of "give me breath" would resonate with us. The breath of others was not yet terrifying; though, to be sure, the oppressive structures of this country that led to the death of George Floyd and the BLM protests of 2020 were already in place. In *Slow Down and Walk: A Conversation*, professor, author, and artist Nadine George-Graves and choreographer and performer Okwui Okpokwasili work to unpack our new relationship to breath and more as part of Ugly Duckling Presse's 2020 *Pamphlet Series*.

The Zoom interview from which the pamphlet is adapted took place in August as part of 50WomenAtYale150. I am drawn in by the direct transcription from video conversation to print; the transcript of the live talk reads with the same ease as listening. That the two artists are old friends lends a sense of intimacy as they speak with one another about radical forgiveness, non-transactional art making, risk-taking, collaboration, and making space for marginalized voices. There were technical difficulties during the Zoom interview that are noted in the text. This transcript will, I am sure, stand out as one of those that exposed and also forgave the difficulty of interaction during this time.

We are brought into George-Graves and Okpokwasili's world of making as they reminisce about their time as students at Yale. With these memories come thoughts about what risk-taking as an artist meant then and continues to mean for them now. Specifically, the ways they were able to make at the time were less limited by preconceived notions of what is or is not permissible. They didn't then know or agree with transactional standards within the field. They talk about how free they felt to make, creating wherever and whenever it felt real to do so. This leads them to discuss what virtuosity means, and how art making can be more about the sheer will to do something together than a set of requirements around excellence, acceptability, or achievement. This discussion left me with the physical room to consider movement without the proscriptive term "dance" attached to it. What if we could all make again from that young place where we didn't yet know what we weren't allowed to get away with?

In addition to reflecting on the past, Okpokwasili also sheds light on her more recent projects, such as her involvement in the curation of the Platform 2020 series. As she reflects on the structuring of *Sitting on a Man's Head*, we learn about breath in the work and the timing or slowness of the simple walking movement. The physical closeness of the piece, and the overall process of making and performing it, reminds me of my own body's need for closeness: the current lack of it is a reminder of how much has truly changed in just one year. Okpokwasili describes how close people were to each other while breathing and sounding, and recalls the repetition of "give me breath" in the piece. We learn that in the work it was important that performers and participants found ways to be with, breathe with, and walk with others. She goes on to speak about wanting the lines between artist and audience to blur, allowing for each to be active members in the performance space. Collaboration is key to Okpokwasili's practice, and she delved into how and why that is fruitful.

The two women are clear in their intention to create space for marginalized voices and to acknowledge female leadership. This aspect of the transcript is particularly powerful to parse through. George-Graves talks about the significance of making "space in a room, especially for people, for whom space and voice is a battle in other rooms, or who don't exist in other spaces." They are talking about Blackness in performance and in this country, and they speak to womanhood and motherhood. In unyielding and candid moments throughout the text they assert that these are not things to apologize for or set aside as the dance world's white/euro-centered discourse so often demands. Okpokwasili goes further to say, "we haven't even talked yet about the significance of women, right? … the

collaborative work women are doing to bring healing and safety to communities is a freaking model."

Taking on the role of moderator, George-Graves asks Okpokwasili questions posed by attendees within the chat. These questions address a range of topics, from art making and collaboration, to traveling as an artist of color. This closes out by touching on what it takes to survive this moment and find community within it. Thus, the end of the conversation returns to how it began: talking about breath and trauma. Both artists suggest that it is okay not to have an answer for how to navigate this dark time. Instead, we should"acknowledge the trauma" of not only this pandemic moment but the traumatic legacies of those oppressed by the very foundation of this country. This suggestion is marked with self love. I am left thinking about how community can make space for healing and how collaboration might allow us to really see each other. And I wonder what exactly forgiveness, acceptance, and community look like in the body. *Sitting On a Man's Head* asked it's viewers and performers to share space, to share stories, and to witness one another. This conversation did much the same. The text does seem like a quick read at first, but, as the title suggests, I recommend slowing down through these words, allowing every piece of experience expressed in them to be fodder for radical care and communion.

Okwui Okpokwasili and Nadine George Graves, Slow Down and Walk: A Conversation. New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2020. 36pp.

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