

Dialogues





Photo 1. Yoko Ando in Human Writes. Photo: Dominik Mentzos.

Dialogues: Genesis and Concept of *Human Writes*

Transcribed by EmmaGrace Skove-Epes

The following is a transcription of the presentation by Kendall Thomas, co-creator with William Forsythe of the performance installation *Human Writes*, followed by a discussion with Thomas Keenan and Mark Franko. Kendall Thomas's talk was given simultaneously with a screening of a silent video documentation of the work. (The reader can find moving images of *Human Writes* at http://www.art-tv.ch/human_writes.html).¹ The panel "Rights to Move: Choreographing the Human Rights Struggle," of which this discussion was a part, also included the participation of Leah Cox, dancer of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company. The event was curated and moderated by Mark Franko and produced by Alan Pally, and it took place at the Bruno Walter Auditorium of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Lincoln Center, on October 12, 2009.

Mark Franko: I just want to mention before we start that Naomi Jackson, who could not be with us today, has co-edited (with Toni Shapiro-Phim) a collection called *Dance, Human Rights, and Social Justice* in 2008. It is one of the first anthologies, to my knowledge, to consider the relationship of dance to human rights issues.² I regret that Naomi couldn't be here with us today.

It might be useful to mention, however, that in her introduction she outlines four areas in which one could think of dance in relation to human rights. They are

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Thomas Keenan teaches media theory, literature, and human rights at Bard College, where he is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature and director of the Human Rights Project. He is the author of *Fables of Responsibility: Aberrations and Predicaments in Ethics and Politics* (1997) and co-edited *The End(s) of the Museum* (1996) and *New Media, Old Media* (2005). He has also written on the wartime journalism of Paul de Man. He is finishing a book on media and conflict called *Live Feed: Crisis, Intervention, Media*.

Mark Franko is the editor of *Dance Research Journal*.

Regulation and exploitation of dance activity and dancers by governments and other groups with authority, as well as abusive treatment of dancers within the dance profession; 2) choreography involving human rights as a central theme; 3) the engagement of dance as means of healing victims of trauma, societal exclusion, and human rights abuses; 4) broad-scale social/political movements and smaller-scale local practices in which dance plays a powerful role in providing people agency in fighting oppression. (2008, xxii)

The film documentation of Human Writes begins

Kendall Thomas: Good afternoon everyone. I'd like to thank Mark Franko for organizing this event and for inviting me to be a part of it. What you're watching are images from the debut performances of *Human Writes*, which William Forsythe and I called a performance installation for reasons, which I think will become apparent as you continue watching the documentation of the piece. You're going to be seeing clips from rehearsals as well as clips of performances. I'll tell you when we've switched over from rehearsal clips to performance clips.

The original idea for this collaboration came from Dr. Gary Smith, who is the executive director of American Academy in Berlin, Germany, an institution with which both Forsythe and I have fairly longstanding connections. Bill Forsythe and I met first in Berlin and then over the course of a couple of years in lots of other different places: my apartment, various restaurants in New York, but also at Sadler's Wells in London; in Berlin, where I saw the work of the company, which I had seen, but didn't know as well as I wanted to. During the course of these discussions we talked about our interests, and I told Bill about some of the work that I do in law. I suppose the best way to describe what my intellectual vocation as a law professor has been, is that I'm interested in the cultural study of law. I'm interested in law as a cultural form, not just as an institution or a social practice for regulating human behavior, but as a social practice that generates meanings; as a cultural form that is not merely about resolving disputes or regulating conduct, but about generating (as I said earlier) meaning for individuals alone and in relationship with one another. So this discussion, this series of discussions that I had with Forsythe, focused not just on human rights as a body of law, but on human rights as what might be called a *discourse* on human rights as a *language*, human rights as a *social practice* of which law is a part, but which is broader than law. We talked about some ideas that had emerged for me from watching Forsythe's work. His work, for those of you who know it, I think is really at the very cutting edge of modern choreographic practice.

One of my favorite ballets of Forsythe's is *One Flat Thing Reproduced*, a work which involved the use of several very light aluminum tables. I first saw the work at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where the company is actually performing this weekend. The company calls it "A Table Dance." It's this short, explosive dance that involves movement on, under, around, and with these tables, which are placed in various configurations on the stage. Bill's idea was somehow to figure out how to use those tables as the site for the practice of writing. Because, one of the conversations we had very early on was about the ways

in which one could think of law generally, and of human rights law in particular, in its discursive dimension, as a kind of writing.

One of the images that I remember quite clearly talking about in our early conversations is an image which those of you who are readers of Franz Kafka will know from *The Penal Colony*. Kafka describes this instrument in which the sentences that have been imposed on criminals are literally written, inscribed on their bodies. So these conversations about writing produced the basic generative idea of *Human Writes*—W-R-I-T-E-S—namely, that the dancers would be charged to engage in writing of words, passages of, and indeed, entire articles from the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. That document has thirty articles which protect a variety of rights, among which are the right to freedom of opinion and expression; [the right] to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers (that's Article 19); the right to rest and exercise (that's Article 24); the right to an education that is directed to "the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms" (that's Article 26); the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts, and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits (that's Article 27).

So we met with the company, which had a two-week run at the time in Zurich (this was in October of 2005), and we talked about the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, we talked about the idea of human rights, and we held a kind of mini-seminar for a couple of days. We watched a couple of films, one of which was an extraordinary film called *The Specialist, Portrait of a Modern Criminal* by Eyal Sivan and Rony Brauman, which uses some of the archival footage from the 1963 trial in Jerusalem of Adolph Eichmann and re-inscribes and reconfigures that footage in very interesting and provocative ways that force the viewer to think about memory, about history, and about the role of the law and of the trial. In the course of conversations with the dancers, several very interesting facts emerged about their own lives and about their personal histories with human rights. At the time, one of the dancers in the company from China talked about his experience of being literally kidnapped from his family and placed in a state-run school for dancers, where he was taught folkloric dance performance. Other of the dancers from Spain talked about living in the Basque region of Spain, and about the very particular relationship that that cultural identity entailed for them to the idea of human rights. So, through the dialogue and colloquy with the dancers emerged a set of understandings that many of the dancers had not had before, because they actually had never really talked about what human rights meant in their lives, and for them as individuals and artists. So that became really the shared "mini-life/world," if you will, out of which *Human Writes* was born.

The dancers were each given a table with white contact paper. They were given a variety of materials: carbon, graphite, pencil, rope. They were given copies of the *Universal Declaration* in several different languages, and they were charged to select an article or a passage of an article that they were, over the course of three or four hours, going to attempt to write on this white contact paper, which had been taped to the aluminum tables I mentioned. However, for every effort, for every action, for every gesture in which they tried to write a passage from the article, they had to come up with a parallel inhibition, obstacle, or impediment. This was supposed to be hard work, work that I wouldn't say

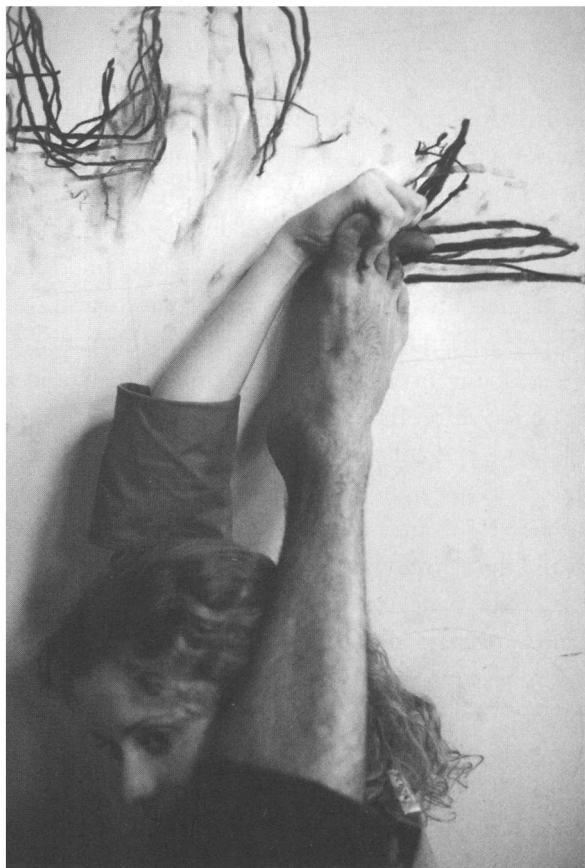
represented, but which attempted at some level to enact the difficulty of inscribing human rights, and particularly the difficulty of creating a culture of human rights.

This idea of creating a culture of human rights emerged particularly in the 1990s, in the aftermath of such events as the hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as a way of thinking about making human rights ideas real in civil society. What does it mean to create a culture of human rights? And what does it mean to use the arts as both a tool and an arena for creating a culture of human rights? And what does it mean, moreover, to use the arts as a tool for human rights education? Is it enough for answers to do their work of choreographing movement on a proscenium stage to an audience which is separated by the fourth wall from the dancers, to an audience that merely observes that work? Or can we think more creatively and more “challengingly,” if I can use that word, about bringing the audience—the public—into the shared process or project of exploring the uses of choreography, of dance movement, as a vehicle—as an arena—for thinking and talking about and indeed enacting human rights?

That was a challenge of *Human Writes*. What we strived for as a kind of regulative ideal was the practice of what we started calling “a participatory human rights education.” The piece was created in an old shipbuilding hall, the Schiffbauhalle, which is just huge, with fifty-four of these tables. There was no seating, and the audience was invited to roam freely through the space. As you passed a dancer, the dancer might say, “Help me.” The dancer might ask you to hold a rope that was tied to her arm and tell you, “Every time I reach for the contact paper with my piece of carbon, I want you to pull on the rope.” Or: “I want you to write a letter on my back, and I will try to recreate that letter on the contact paper.” Each movement by the dancer, each movement by the audience member, was accompanied by a parallel obstacle, inhibition, difficulty, resistance, as a way of trying concretely to enact the difficulty, the obstacles, the resistances to the creation of a human rights culture.

We performed the work after Zurich in Brussels, in Frank-

Photo 2. Anna Tenta in Human Writes. Photo: Dominik Mentzos.



furt, in Dresden, and most recently at the International Theater Festival in Istanbul, where I'm proud to say *Human Writes* provided the theme for a two-week festival that was on human rights.³ We are hoping to bring the piece sometime in the not-too-distant future to the United States; if we are fortunate, to New York. Which, although the home of the United Nations—the institution which gave us the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*—is also, I believe, a place which could very much use this kind of collaborative work between artists and those who love art in exploring what it means for us, at this time and in this place, to create a culture of human rights.

I hope you have some sense as you've been watching these images of the material work entailed in the project and the ways in which this work was not just enacted, but quite literally embodied. This is writing which took place, as I said earlier, not just on the contact paper, but also with, by, through, and eventually *on* the bodies of the dancers themselves. At the end of each evening, the dancers and sometimes members of the audience were just covered in this dark, dark, dark, coal-like substance. But human rights is dirty work.

Mark Franko: So we'll just open it up to discussion amongst the panelists.

Thomas Keenan: Thanks, Mark, for organizing this. Kendall, tell me how you feel about this. I was struck, watching this and other parts of the DVD earlier, by the insistence on, and the importance that you all attributed to, the motif of constraint and regulation, the binding, the sometimes even violent things that the dancers do, or that's done to the dancers. This seemed significant, at least for me, who knows nothing about dance at all, because one might have expected that the connection between dance and human rights would be primarily around some idea of freedom, emancipation, liberation of the body, free movement in space, and so on. Seeing the dance, and hearing you speak about it, this now seems a little bit naïve or utopian. Likewise, there's another, for lack of a better word, "negative," dimension that emerges here. The dance underlines not simply the constraints placed on the performers, and the way that those binds can enable sometimes certain kinds of movements—which would still amount to a rather classical battle between the movement of the dancer and the things that are holding him or her back—but it also reminds us that there are truly negative movements in dance as well. Movements of the body aren't only about struggles for freedom or resistance—they can also be in the service of totalitarianism or fascism or other kinds of repressive politics. You only need to think about *Triumph of the Will* for an example of large choreographed works that are not exactly on the human rights team. I wonder whether there was a way in which, as you were producing this, *that* question entered in, the question of negativity, of this extreme form of negativity in relation to the dancing.

Kendall Thomas: One of the things that I think it's very important to understand about law generally, and about human rights law in particular, is that like all law, the writing, interpretation, and application of human rights law takes place, as the late Robert Cover once put it, "in a field of pain and death." Law, human rights law, the human rights system, as we sometimes call it, does not stand above the facts of violence, battered bod-

ies, conflict, violent conflict, war, and the like. It's not a neutral arbiter of some violence that takes place before the law or outside the law. The law itself, in a very real sense, is a structure of violence. You realize that, for example, when we talk about the human rights implications, say, of the death penalty. We can also understand the way in which law is itself about the practice of violence, when we look at our prison industrial complex and the fact that, among the so-called advanced democracies, the United States has a larger percentage of its citizenry imprisoned than any other so-called developed country. So, it's crucial I think to understand the ways in which law is not just a response to violence, or even in the sense that Max Weber described it, about the state's monopoly over violence to prevent violence elsewhere. Violence is part of the *modus vivendi* of the law. If we think of some of the forms of humanitarian intervention that we've seen in recent years, where, in the name of human rights, organized, brutal, bloody acts of violence are committed against some human beings to protect other human beings, we can see how important it is to remain mindful of the extent to which violence is not merely—or only, or primarily—that which human rights law sets itself against, but that violence is always already implicated in the very idea and thus in the practice, interpretation, propagation, *writing* of law. The piece tries to capture that. This is not a beautiful piece, and it was intentionally so. So I think, in fact, that there is space in the piece for a meditation on the violent character of the law, and of human rights law as such. It's not as though the piece is trying to avoid these questions of violence, or to specifically avoid the question of the relationship between human rights and violence, political or otherwise.

Mark Franko: I'm really struck—looking at *Human Writes* as a choreographer and a dancer—by how it affects our way of actually looking at the body. Kendall, you said that the piece itself enacts resistance to the creation of human rights culture, among other things. It also enacts, possibly, an attempt to bring human rights into existence despite these impediments. It's a particularly interesting attempt to me—I don't know if you saw it the way I did—that there are times when the body itself appears so vulnerable in the very act of doing what is really this rather absurd thing—of holding a chalk in its mouth and trying to write. How do we take this in? We're not really thinking that this body or this person would be writing if the chalk were not in their mouth; it is also suggested that they themselves might be being tortured.

At the same time we're also getting the idea that they are trying to bring this thing into existence, as you said. But it seems to me that in that paradox—that very paradox, which at that moment of impediment is telescoped into the body itself—we see them as extraordinarily vulnerable, and in need of protection. And I think it's so interesting to see the dancer as a vulnerable body in need of protection without any narrative, without any other thematization: just through this simple act. *That*, to me, is amazing in this piece, and really worth thinking more about. Why? Because it begins to address how movement *itself* can speak for human rights: movement *itself*, almost in an absolutely aesthetic, but not liberatory, sense. In other words, the instructions, the impediments, the requests made of the audience, the instruments given to the dancer—the rope, the chalk, etc.—all this is set up here to create the tasks, but is also setting up the body to have these multiple readings. Per-

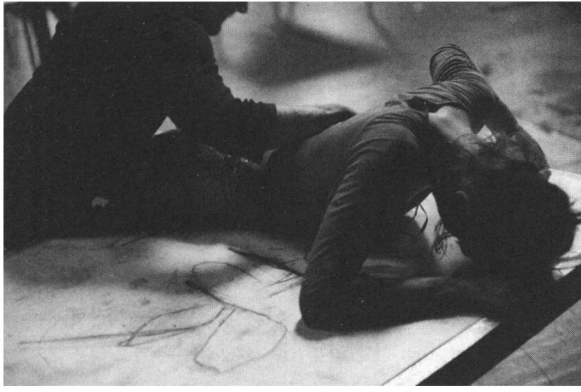


Photo 3. Cyril Baldy and Jone San Martin in *Human Writes*. Photo: Dominik Mentzos.

haps this addresses what Tom was speaking about a moment ago. There is constraint, but that constraint is not violence per se. There is freedom to replicate a text, but that freedom is in a certain sense itself under erasure. And, so, one can ask, What is being created? There are these “art works” that result from this activity. What happens to them? As we watch this video we’ll see toward the end that something is being created here, on each table.

Kendall Thomas: At the end of each evening’s performance, Mr. Forsythe selected twenty or so of the completed inscriptions, and they were archived. Some of the work has been purchased, and the proceeds will be donated for various human rights projects. Some of the sheets—the “completed” sheets, if that’s the right word—were extraordinarily beautiful, even though the process of their making was not. Others of them remain very hard for me to look at, particularly when I consider how they were made. One member of the company decided that in Zurich, he would work over the course of the entire three days that the company was doing the piece on one sheet of contact paper. It’s hard for me to actually recount this because the memory of watching him do this is still very vivid. With the shavings of the charcoal stick and with his fingernails, he wrote twenty-six of the thirty articles. You can imagine how his hands looked at the end of the three days. Some of the dancers, particularly some of the more risk-taking dancers in the company, actually ended up injuring themselves. One member of the audience—a woman in a wheelchair—complained about the human rights of the dancers as being violated. The team always travels with at least one professional body worker who administers massages and the like to dancers during the course of the run. But there was this sense in which what was being enacted was the vulnerability of the embodied being of the dancer.

Mark Franko: I also wanted to mention what I think pertains to Tom’s work on *Fables of Responsibility* (1997). I think *Human Writes* belongs in some sense with your [Tom’s] thinking at least at the time that you wrote that. I was wondering if you’d want to say anything about the idea of rights and responsibilities as being a fundamentally rhetorical act, or an act of reading, or an act that is captured in the text but is not automatically transferred into consciousness; that is, as kind of an empty space that demands interpretation. I feel as though the way *Human Writes* plays with the act of writing and with the translation or transliteration of certain texts into physical motion—their being inscribed on a surface, which is also a surface of pain—is suggestive to me of the way I read your work.

Thomas Keenan: I agree. Often when we talk about human rights and law, we tend to

think of it simply as a matter of accomplishments, and struggles which have produced accomplishments, triumphs which are then written down and relied upon, taken for granted. We have this body of established law—whether it’s the *Bill of Rights* or the *Universal Declaration*—and we can count on it. It seems to me that this [*Human Writes*] emphasizes the labor that goes into writing it, the practice and the struggle of writing it, and hence its susceptibility to undoing or erasure as well. Which is something that is often the most difficult thing to accept in the world of human rights: the potential *undoing* of those accomplishments. Since we’ve been talking about and looking at a kind of torture here, we can certainly think about what fifteen years ago, when I started teaching human rights, seemed like the one decisive accomplishment of the human rights movement in the twentieth century: the more or less universal consensus against torture. In the last fifteen years we’ve seen this come undone in a rather remarkable way. So that sense not only of the vulnerability of the bodies, but the vulnerability of the accomplishments, seems very strikingly presented here.

Mark Franko: Since the Forsythe Ballet is in town this week, I’ll mention that I heard Forsythe talk the other day about his interest in choreography as “an undoing; an unfixing rather than a fixing.” In other words, choreography not as something that organizes, but as something that actually disorganizes. And I think that in this case, there’s a lot of resonance with what we’ve been talking about. Thank you, Kendall and Tom, for being here today and sharing these thoughts.

Notes

1. For additional description of *Human Writes*, see Sabine Huschka (2010).
2. This anthology was preceded by another, also edited by Jackson (2004), devoted primarily to Canadian issues.
3. There were also dancers in each instance who participated who were not members of the company but who were residents of whatever city we were in. In Dresden, there was a wonderful group of younger dancers who were going through a program of internship with several different choreographers.

Works Cited

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