

STRAIGHT TALK

with Jody Oberfelder

Jody Oberfelder is a New-York based modern dancer that brings dance to the next level through the use of film, incorporation of detailed sets, and interaction with her audience members. As the artistic director of Jody Oberfelder Projects, Oberfelder has created works seen all over the world from the United States to Korea, France, and Serbia, and has been a teaching artist at the Lincoln Center Institute for the past 15 years. Oberfelder's work is supported by numerous foundations and organizations including the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, the Department of Cultural Affairs, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts, and others.



Jody Oberfelder portrait by Vivian Selbo.

By Danielle McCloskey
Contributor

DM: *Tell us about yourself and Jody Oberfelder Projects.*

JO: What a simple question, and yet I really have to think about this answer... I was the kind of child who couldn't sit still, had a rambunctious tomboy energy, and liked to perform, making up little dances in my living room, and acting out stories in the vacant lot next to our home in Detroit, Michigan. We pretended to be horses, and created jumps out of sticks, nuzzled, etc. It was very real and physical. I went to college for liberal arts and majored in art history and philosophy before walking into a dance class. That was it. A dancer with Alwin Nikolais—Emery Hermanns—came to our college and taught improvisation and composition. More than learning someone else's movement, I loved to improvise, make things up. This was the beginning.

It takes a while to find your voice, and to not be imitative of the techniques 'of the moment'. There is the scribble and doodle technique of creating—just get in a room and move and hopefully you'll be brilliant—or the more focused creation behind the moves. My methodology shifts for each piece.

I find dancers who have the right 'colors' for each piece. Think of a palette. You need the right mix. It's incredible how dancer-specific each creation is. After all, you are making live art with people in the room. I look for dancers with body intelligence. I don't want 'off the

rack' dancers, but rather those who glow from the inside out with sensorial instinctual connections. This inner body encased by skin becomes artfully porous and is readable, thus communicating outwardly with an audience. I don't believe in an us/them performer to audience relationship. Here's my manifesto:

I want the audience to experience dance as a language that goes directly into the brain, like smell, activated by visual, physical, and motional cues—mirror neurons connecting, reflecting striations of performing human brains, bodies, and souls.

I want the audience to be entertained by their own biology—their own moving minds—as they perceive, intellectually and sensorially, time, color, movement, and sound.

I want the audience to experience dancers as dimensional—to mark and empathize with choreographic data, as touching places in their own selves, minds, and hearts.

The ephemerality of life—finite and infinite—experienced in the theater should be a model of the 'theater' in each audience member's own mind, the dance of neurons going on all the time amid the ever shifting presence of informational flow.

I want the audience to experience and gain insight



Performance of The Brain Piece. Jody Oberfelder Projects. Photo credit: Kevin Konnyu.

into their present perceptions. The dance, and time in the theater, is the interstice between what came before and what comes after when they leave, and frames their experience.

I want the audience to wonder.

I want the audience to experience a time-based collection of material—dance film, music, voice—that stimulates new neuronal pathways and connections. I want the audience to feel bright, note the obvious, and decode the cryptic, and to participate in tracking and personal coding while making new memories.

I want the audience to be in relation to what we offer, to have an internal experience of what they didn't see or notice before, to experience the brain in the body, working and playing.

I want audiences to connect the dots of experience and connect the experience of the dots.

I want the audience to connect to their own minds' fullness.

DM: *Back in 2014, a writer from SciArt in America was*

an active audience member in your piece, 4Chambers. Engaging the audience is a big part of your projects—something you explicitly state in your mission statement. What element does an 'inexperienced' engager bring to your performances?

JO: I truly think that those innocent engagers are primed already. In fact, they are the least cynical and most open 'engager'—not knowing what to expect. *4Chambers* was particular. We led audience members through a four-chambered house to give each person a personalized experience of his or her own heart. It helped to have a one-to-one relationship with your 'docent'.

DM: *Your current project in development, The Brain Piece, is a multi-faceted performance/installation about the "dance that continuously takes place in each of our heads...the inner life of the Brain," in which you have collaborated and consulted with numerous neuroscientists. Not only is this a live performance, but The Brain Piece also includes two films (Dance of the Neurons and Clock), a lecture event, and a workshop. Can you tell our readers a little more about The Brain Piece and how it is evolving in development?*



The Brain Piece. Photo credit: Eric Siegel.

JO: *The Brain Piece* is a new direction. What I learned from *4Chambers* is that the brain is in the heart, and we have our personal connections. *4Chambers* created this intimate experience. The brain is more complex. I'm creating an environment for the audience to go inside the dome of their skulls and 'see' their brains thinking, imagine neurons firing. There's humor in this mind-watching, as well as a slight melancholy that we cannot really pin down scientifically everything that makes us human. The dancers are the moving mind and embody the connections between internal and external. I am the head docent, guiding the audience.

Weiji Ma has been my main neuroscience collaborator, stoking my imagination, and also being my fact checker. My visual collaborator Eric Siegel is instrumental in helping me to realize these visions—neurons being born and forming cell families, and firing—in film. The newest films play with perception and will be a big part of the whole piece.

What I'm attempting to do is create one giant brain, with spheres of interaction that include the audience.

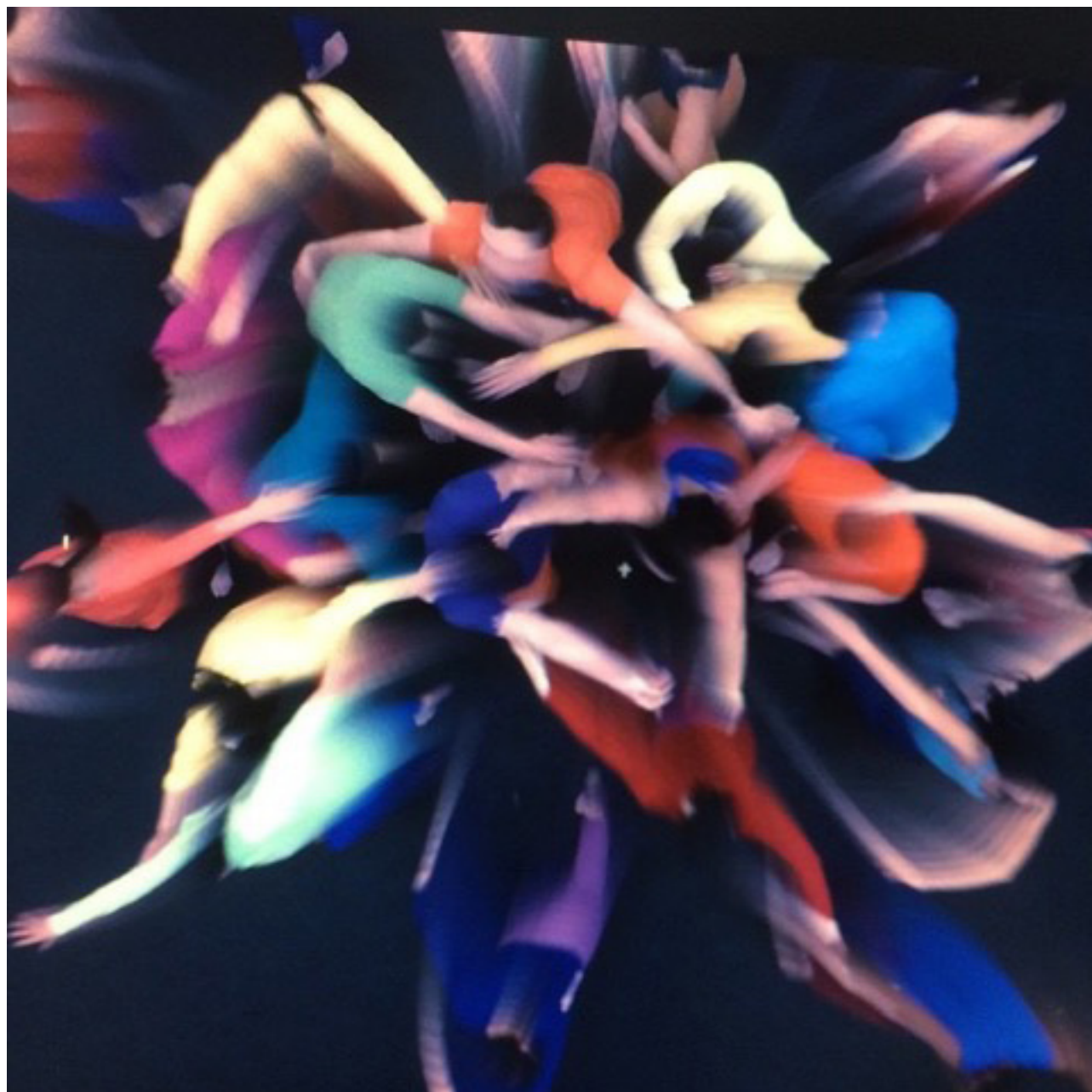
DM: *You have a collection of award-winning and internationally screened films spanning two decades. For you, how is utilizing recorded media different than live performances/engagement?*

JO: Easy answer: films last, and as opposed to live performance, you don't have to warm up. People respond to films differently. It's not a passive experience. Theoretically, films are like cave drawings. They exist in time, and the audience comes upon them and responds when they see them. They have a personal relationship, and make up their own stories around the etchings. Good films have the capacity to elicit a kinetic and emotional response. One becomes moved by a moving image. I recommend an outstanding book: *The Neuro Image* by Patricia Pisters.

DM: *As stated before, you offer lectures and a wide range of workshops that range from improv and idea compiling to partnering and choreography. What have you gotten out of your experiences in communicating with audiences that way?*

JO: As I was inspired by improvisation, I want to give people an opportunity to connect with their own moving minds through their body. Partnering is about communication, touch, somatic relations to self and others.

I'm incredibly excited to premiere *The Brain Piece* in Washington D.C. at Dance Place, April 16-17. Our NYC premiere is TBA.



*Still from the film Dance of the Neurons.
Image courtesy of the artist.*