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Production Meeting: JILL SIGMAN

The story of what I do as an artist is an overlay of superimposed narratives, sometimes comfortable, sometimes ill-fitting. I am intrigued by how these linguistic reflections of my experience do and don't connect; how they together present a fractured picture of my artistic self, not unlike the fractured quality of my work.

In February 2007, I will premiere *RUPTURE*, a full evening multi-media dance, at Danspace Project. *RUPTURE* is a piece about things breaking, an effort to connect the dots between the very personal sense of breaking I had when I was injured before my last show, the physical breaking of large structures like the Trade Center and the Berlin Wall, and a more abstract sense of political and social shattering. I recently presented a work-in-progress version in Osijek, Croatia.

In a search to find language about my work and its process, I initiated a number of dialogues. I spoke with Laurie Uprichard [Danspace Project] who will present the new work; Carla Peterson [Movement Research/as of Sept. 25 DTW] who has spoken with me during my time as an MR Artist in Residence; dance critic Eva Yaa Asantewaa [*Gay City News*] who has reviewed my work; and composer Kristin Norderval who has collaborated with me since 2003. Beforehand, I sent each of them a list of things I am thinking about; predictably, the conversations led in different directions.

I met with Laurie Uprichard and Carla Peterson on August 16 at Peter McManus Cafe in New York City.

JS: So the thing I'm thinking about now, after the performance in Croatia, is whether making work that helps itself to these theatrical things like video or text or a set, is somehow in tension with allowing the movement to be what creates the meaning in the work. Does it sort of set people up to look for meaning at a different level or in a different way? And the same goes for this durational stuff— like I walk on the eggshells for a long time. I walk into the wall and I keep coming back out and walking into the wall again and I do that for a really long time. And you know, in Croatia it was easy to do because they are sort of brought up on this stuff, like there's this legacy of Marina [Abramović] and all these concept artists in the '70s and people feel very comfortable with it. So, it doesn't interrupt their viewing in any way. But here I feel like it creates a discontinuity in how the work gets viewed and what mode of meaning you are using, and I wonder, can I just mix and match?

LU: Well, I think it depends on who you're thinking your audience is. There's no right or wrong answer, because...essentially I believe if you are an artist you're trying to communicate, and you can communicate with a whole lot of people or you can

communicate with fewer people... But I do think it gets more complicated when you switch modes. It just gets more complicated.

JS: Because you have led them to expect one way?

LU: Yes, you kind of have to start from the very beginning and say—

JS: Yes, but how do you do that? Do you do that in the context of the work?

LU: I think you do it in the work, but I don't know how... I just think you don't lead them down a false path. You don't say here's a dance and here's a movie—I think you have to start from the beginning, not put it off until 5 minutes into the piece...

JS: You mean warn them there is going to be this discontinuity?

CP: You know, I'm just thinking... about that whole kind of subliminal message thing, like when you're watching one thing, but something else is coming through at you. I mean, to employ that as a device—so if you are doing this quick switch kind of thing, but something somewhere, somehow, is also being thrown at the audience simultaneously that is kind of subverting what it is that you're presenting to them... Don't relax.

LU: Exactly. Don't relax. So they know that they have to sit a little bit on the edge of their seats...



CP: I think movement is a tool *for you*... I think of some artists who employ movement-based vocabularies as very much a sub-lingual language, and that is where they live; that is where they communicate. I don't think of you—I never *have* thought of you—as an artist who works in that way. I think of you as a little bit more of a—and this is sort of an easy characterization to make especially after seeing *Pulling the Wool*—I think of you as more of a ringmaster, where you are kind of working with multiple disciplines and pulling them together. I see you a little bit on top of things—on top of disciplines and yoking them in to your will—more than I see you living a kind of subterranean relationship with a particular vocabulary.

JS: I guess I'm wondering more and more if what I'm after is this kind of shared experience creation. I have all these experiences on the street all the time that I think are kind of amazing and charged and I'm just like, 'that's why I do what I do' and I want to take them and put a frame around them and give them to people. But then there's this question of how do you flag that so that people can see what is there and not get distracted by looking for something else like the movement? I wonder, is it a matter of slowly educating the public so that they just start to recognize that that's what you're about?

LU: I just don't think it is your job as an artist to slowly educate the public. I just don't.

JS: Who's job *is* it? [laughter]

LU: I think it's a lot of people's job. You can't do it on your own. It should fall to presenters, critics, academic programs...

CP: I want to flip it though. Because I think you are asking the question with such intensity that it's really important to you... Generally speaking, I would say that it's not the artist's responsibility, it rests on this whole, for better or worse, the God damned lack of machinery we have in this country to help sort of elevate it and make some kind of marriage between the artist and the audience. But how many artists throughout history who have made important work that has impacted the arts have been unsung during their lifetime?

JS: Yeah, but I don't know that I can wait for the rest of the infrastructure to educate on my behalf. I feel like I'm out there on stage and I have a really limited life span and I want to have a performance experience that's as rich and realized as possible while I'm still having it... On some level, my relation to the people watching feels so crucial to me— it just feels like such a defining part of the experience. I don't know that I want to keep doing it if I don't have a relationship with an audience that feels genuine.



LU: Every Friday and Saturday night where I grew up in Ohio, we either went dancing or ice skating to rock music... You know, maybe not everybody danced, but for me it was sort of a social part of my life—and it wasn't just because I took ballet when I was four...

CP: It probably had nothing to do with ballet.

JS: It was just what people do.

LU: Yeah, like going to clubs, which I did for a while when I was in my 20s.

JS: Since I got better from my injury, I just want to go out dancing. Like, I found this new sense of—I just want to move, like it doesn't always have to have meaning. And I was going to this Bulgarian Bar all the time, but it closed because they're building this Ramada Inn...

CP and LU: Oh no!

JS: I feel like, if we don't have this sense of dance as an experience that is common in our culture, then getting to the point of having people bubble up who actually use it to make some sort of artistic or intellectual statement is even further from possibility.

LU: If we didn't have Playdough, we wouldn't have sculpture! [laughter]

CP: And that sums it up!

I spoke with Kristin Norderval on September 2 in Oslo, in an apartment located between a mosque and a prison. We spoke about *Pulling the Wool* [which we performed in 2004] before we turned to *RUPTURE*.

KN: When I was talking to these other Norwegian artists about your work, I was trying to describe *Pulling the Wool*. And I said it had a kind of carnival atmosphere and it had all these booths and there were these many different elements. There was video that you had done and the instructions that you'd made to people, and all the dancers that you had trained as fake newscasters, and you on crutches, and the element in the middle with the surgery stuff... And I think it opened up the possibility of, 'yes, you can put a lot of different things here'—but there's still one kind of thread of thinking about the problem you've taken on, whether you are dancing with trauma or taking it on in the way that you've set up the "Hope Booth" or the "Eggshell Booth"...

JS: But for me the concern with that was—I hope I'm not just putting all of these elements together in the attic, like this is storage for a little bit of this and a little bit of that.

KN: Well, what if you are? I mean if you're putting things together in the attic, the attic is your concept, it's your head, it's your way of looking at the world.

JS: Right, but I feel like at this point in my choreographic process, I want more than that. And what I hope I was doing in that piece was working each bit of it enough that it wasn't just a found object—I wasn't just telling the dancers, 'OK, do whatever; be a newscaster, pretend you are a newscaster' so it's just the symbol of newscasterness. I worked for six months on getting them to be able to sit a certain way, and to be able to speak with no volume coming out in a certain way, and then to be able to do that in fast forward, and you know, these really, really fine grained things that I was very, very demanding about.

KN: Which gave it a really creepy feel, that kind of virtuosity in their faces, in their bodies.

JS: And I feel like that's what matters—that precision and that subtlety of it is important to me in terms of making a much more specific or more powerful symbol that I can then put into a larger whole. And it wouldn't have been the same for me to just kind of throw these things together without doing so many exercises that we didn't use in any obvious way in the piece...



JS: What—if anything—do you find exciting about *RUPTURE*? About either what we've made, or what we are making, or anything.

KN: I think the most exciting parts are the parts where you're willing to go to a very intense level of distress.

JS: That sounds very melodramatic! [laughter]

KN: It *does* sound melodramatic. And it might be—it might look melodramatic if it wasn't so actually—well, it *is* a little distressing. I mean, when you are doing the section walking into the wall, there is a part of me that says, 'stop, don't do that!'. It's not comfortable to watch. But that is also the part that catches the emotional response, that says, this is taking on a theme that is pretty intense and we don't have a way to stop all of these ruptures that are going on around the world—I don't know, I mean maybe we do and we just haven't figured it out. But it is that level of distress. Or the wailing, or the very long long long walk... There is something in the willingness to take a particular thing to the limit—yeah, willingness to go to that extreme emotional place.

Over the course of ten days in August, I had an e-mail dialogue with Eva Yaa Asantewaa; some excerpts follow. She began by responding to a long list of ideas I had sent her, which included "shamanism."

From: Eva Yaa Asantewaa 8/16/2006 10:02 AM

Jill, since shamanism was one of the items on your list, I noticed a few other items relevant to a shamanistic approach to dance making:

- > importance of shared live experience
- > using training to be different from a pedestrian mover, even if virtuosity not recognizable
- > performance exists to put a frame around things in the world, to recreate experiences
- > the dualism of performance-- simultaneously pretend and real, not hermetically sealed
- > the membrane of the artistic process is permeable-- rehearsing 2 blks from Ground Zero

You mentioned "shared, live experience." That sounds like the foundation of what you're doing. "Virtuosity...not recognizable." I associate that with the shaman's expertise and discipline which is often masked by appearance and behaviors that can seem undisciplined and even chaotic because they are outside of the norms of society. "Putting a frame around things in the world." Selecting things to perceive and work on. I work with Tarot, and this reminds me of selecting one Tarot card, which frames the object of your focus, your question. "Pretend/Real time." That's very shamanic—that duality, that paradox. In shamanism or any magickal practice, the issue is not whether something is "real" or not. It's all real. "Permeable membrane" indeed.

From: Jill Sigman

8/21/2006 1:56 AM

I was struck by your comment about the Tarot and framing... When I work on a piece I do this very small esoteric work that is about finding my way into different "bodies" (for lack of a better word). It can start with some improvisation focusing on the sternum and how the sternum is held and then how the rest of the body is realigned in response-- at least that is how I talk the dancers through it. For myself it is much more ad hoc and alchemical; at some point something happens and I find something that feels right. At any rate, for every piece I build up a kind of palette of "bodies" and I always think of them as my "Tarot deck". What will the Tarot deck be for each piece? Right now for RUPTURE, I am working with the soldier, the hijra, Queen Elizabeth, and the drunken nightclub singer... It is a physical question; I don't approach it the way a theater person might by looking at what symbols the piece needs to articulate its meaning. That is why-- no matter how theatrical my work gets-- I still always think of myself as a choreographer.

From: Eva Yaa Asantewaa

8/21/2006 3:29 PM

What you might have to do is create a process for audiences, create a lab in which a volunteer audience is nurtured and developed as an experiment, because audiences don't have the context that's found in shamanic cultures, and your audiences will have to start from scratch and have this context built up. But it will have to be an experiment with people who are willing to make a commitment to a different relationship with dance and an interest in asking something different from dance.

Before I go, I have to tell you what happened to me when I saw the premiere of Mark Morris's "Mozart Dances" because I think it's relevant. I was prepared to love it, but I left during the second intermission because I wasn't feeling it. I had this unusual reaction and insight that I did not need what Morris was offering. I think that piece reassures some people and fulfills a need they believe they have, but not the need I have. Simple as that: It was a dance for other people. I also did not sense the artist deeply in it--but it worked, did its expected job and got its expected anointing from *The New York Times*.

Okay, what does this have to do with you? Well, I think you're talking about moving towards work that some of us will discover we need.

From: Jill Sigman

8/24/2006 10:57 PM

This dialogue is giving me a lot to think about. And making me realize how pulled in multiple directions I feel. On one hand, there is this sense of trying to play by different rules, and realizing I need to help people to see what those are. On the other hand, I am distracted by what is around, what is in the air, what icons and manifestations of society I see and am fascinated by (for example, since I have brought the dancers into my process recently all this very "cartoony" stuff is coming up, very different from what I have been working on alone...). And that is not shamanistic; it is about fishing icons out of our subconscious and holding them up for people to mull on. For ex, what happens when you put Abu Ghraib together with Saturday morning cartoons??!

From: Eva Yaa Asantewaa

8/25/2006 9:03 AM

But of course there will be new archetypes, reflective of contemporary experiences. That *is* the new shamanism.