

ABOUT JILL SIGMAN:

Philosophy shows its Body.... The Body shows its Philosophy.

By Misko Suvakovic

Ballet, dance, philosophy and body

White ballet was a crisis in ideology and “mimesis” poetry. Strategies of presenting the human body with movement, music, and stage formation of the figure, are united through ideology and “mimesis” poetry. In European tradition, presenting through movement is based on stylized (aesthetic), suggestive (metaphoric), and codified (rhetoric) movement of the human body. Presenting the music in ballet, in the European tradition, is based on suggestive (music projects or, even, follows the movement of the body) expressive (music creates aural emotional atmosphere for the body or the context), and symbolic (using conventional symbolism music represents certain themes, thought, or emotions that are not musical). Stage formation is based on the ballet-constructed project of representing the “body” and its movement (position, gestures, and movements) with artificial and stylized abstract figures. Up to the 20th century, European ballet was a highly codified art form, meaning rhetorical executions of ideology and mimesis poetry.

Avant-garde “interruptions” happened on the level of ideology and mimesis poetry. Movement has been removed from aesthetic values with return to more natural, uninhibited movement (Isadora Duncan), looking to non-European systems or iconographies of movement and dance (Ruth St. Denis) or towards release of internal energy (Mary Wigman/ Merce Cunningham/ Trisha Brown), etc. Music has been opened towards “sound” (from silence through noise, in other words, from tonal to experimental sounds of New Music) or towards accumulated sound of the dancing body (Duncan, Cunningham, Rainer, Brown). The performing body has lost its artificial stylization and ‘reintroduced’ the human body (barefooted Duncan, naked Rainer, Sigman as a transvestite). The figure is no longer rhetorically codified, rather it is transformed through the possibilities of discovery or hiding of the actual body to the figure, from the figure to an object of impossible desire, and from a fetish through gender alteration to screen

strategies of presenting a body. Ballet became dance, dance became movement, and movement is seen as an expression of humanity and as a construction of the concept of dance as the art of the moving body. In this framework of transferring ballet as art form in to dance, into the body, which shows ideologies, concepts, meanings and life activities, experimental dance and theoretical work of Jill Sigman occurred. Sigman explains: “We live in a society, which does not trust the body. Our society doubts the connection of the body and mind. But how can we convince people that this connection exists? How can movement inspire thinking in people? How can dance inspire somebody to think? Dance can happen anywhere. Dance is not about a place or dependent on a place, rather it is about giving people what they need. Bearing this in mind, I want to give people dance which makes them think.” (Artistic Statement).

Who is Jill Sigman?

Jill Sigman grew up in New York, where she functions as a choreographer, performer, and an improvisational artist. She studied classical ballet at the Joffrey School and the Brooklyn Ballet Center in New York. She came into contact with modern studies at Princeton University. She is interested in eclectic realizations, analysis and merging of various corporeal strategies (working with the body, body presentation, body thought) in the creation of her idiosyncratic style. Her choreographic-performing concept and practice is named “Jill Sigman/thinkdance.” This is her motto, the name of her traveling company and the conceptual problem surrounding her work. She has performed in the USA and Europe (Belgium, Holland, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary). During one of her guest appearances in Ljubljana (Slovenia) at the fourteenth International Congress of Aesthetics (September 1998) I saw her feminist oriented performance “Oh! Rosaly.” At the same Congress I held a lecture about representations in philosophy and art intending to demonstrate relationships between “thinking” and the “body.” Jill Sigman improvised during my lecture confronting or reflecting my speech, so that my speech, divorced from opinions, was reflected in her body and movement, which thinks through dance. Body of speech and thought was encountered in movement, revealing “secret” connections between the body and mind in Western tradition. Just remember Wittgenstein’s philosophical body which turned to clear thought when in pain, which had to be spoken in order to be formed as a thought or Heidegger’s body which sang on Alpine roads during philosophical walks between sky and earth. Jill Sigman is not simply a ballerina, dancer or performer; she is also an educated

philosopher. She received a PhD from Princeton University with her dissertation titled: “Bodies, Souls, and Everyday People: Three Essays about Art and Interpretation.” Her work was based in Wittgenstein’s and Goodman’s analytical philosophical tradition, and she concentrated on the issues of the body and its representation in performance art, dance, and visual art in the arts. Her approach is analytical but unusual for the “normal (usual) academic aesthetics,” which means that she does not raise general questions about “beauty” or “art,” rather she deals with concrete works and roles (representations, presentations, showing, doing) of the human body in art. Particularly important is the section devoted to Yvonne Rainer’s experimental dance and the potent relationship regarding the difference between the natural speaking language and the meaning of body in dance.

Body in Dance and Thought: The Body Thinks

Jill Sigman’s dance performances are specific systems of realizations, improvisation, exercises or workshops in which the audiences are not passive watchers, rather audiences are expected to take part emotionally, viscerally and intellectually. Her performances are like an “open work.” Roland Barthes explains that every written work is completed by the reader, or the way Arthur Danto says that interpretation is an (imperative) element of each art work, hence Sigman’s work is completed by audiences. Due to this, Jill Sigman’s work raises the following issues:

- (i) **Dance situation status:** Turning away from the ballet aesthetic of passive perception in to active situation open to interpretation and choreographer-dancer/audience interaction
- (ii) **Body Status:** The body is not divorced from the mind, rather body and mind are transfigured in a particular space forming provocative happenings
- (iii) **Theory status:** Theory is not outside of dance or body, rather the body is in relation and within the theories (philosophy: thought, spirit and soul) in its transfigurative state
- (iv) **Mimesis Mimesis status:** Her works are created in relation to presentations, representations and transfigurations of other art works (written word, photography)
- (v) **Gender and Sex Status:** Her body is not an “ideal smooth body of a white ballerina” rather it is body that faces its sex and gender.

Jill Sigman began her works reforming experiments in ballet (body/reason in works “Theory of knowledge” or “Book of Words”) in order to reach works in which she deals with the idea of the “woman” (“Oh Rosaly” or an entirely different improvisation). She moves from the question of how the dancing body thinks to what kind of body is in its bodyfications (I guess this means physicalizing theories) – in one her letters, Jill Sigman wrote: “My work takes in to consideration the female – my experience as a woman, gender roles and stereotypes, woman as an icon and representative, and women’s societal roles. Many of my works deal with the problem of how a woman creates her identity.”

Dance/theory work of Jill Sigman is a complex “strategy” and “tactic” of transfiguration (moving transformations) not only of the human and female bodies, but of the entire discipline of ballet/dance within concrete cultures and culture of formed identities, roles and functions of the body. Her work, regardless whether it is written down as theory, is the essence of complex meeting of body and mind (body mind problem) through physical movement on stage and in non-proscenium spaces or offered as an improvised figure for recording (her photographic work). It deals with various representations of the woman, as a figure, spirit, mind, soul, erotic and political body, as reflections of other bodies, as mimesis of art and culture... There is no single Jill Sigman, rather there are a number of different figures who battle with the body, with the body that offers resistance in a way that Julia Kristeva describes as practice that transforms natural and societal resistance, limits and jams, which indicates material text and body’s dynamic interventions in its setting which it simultaneously structures and deconstructs. Sigman questions transformations, placement, ironic interrogation and multiplications of the iconic identity of the (female) body.