

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Tobin Rothlein

A Dark, Dismembered Happening

By Jonathan Stein

The ghosts of an earlier generation's Happenings were awakened by a new work, *Still Life*, by the renamed Miller Rothlein company (formerly MIRO Dance Theater). It was not just the loft-space setting of the Vox Populi art gallery, nor its subtitle, "Just under 42 very small performances and installations." Perhaps it was more the mad-cap stew of dancers partnering with props, and the surround of small, wall-mounted videos of performers. As in Happenings of old, the audience derived mixed pleasures; episodic delights awaited those who lowered their critical gaze.

Still Life bears the artistic vision of Tobin Rothlein, who in MIRO's raunchy, raucous *Punch* last year, memorably presented dancers carrying hand-held miniature video frames. Pre-recorded images of menacing, staring faces and lascivious, open mouths were digital doppelgangers of each dancer. In *Still Life*, Rothlein somewhat surprisingly eschews the interaction of video with performer, choosing small scale video fields that sit back passively on the gallery walls, largely disassociated from the action within the gallery. Most viewers likely missed seeing one video projected high on the wall of an entrance hallway.

The installed videos did share some thematic threads with the performance, but stood too aloof from it. They succeeded best in the largest video installation, *Breathe* (2010). Two striking images of the throat and frontal neck of Amanda Miller and Paul Struck "faced" each other on opposite walls at the rear of the gallery. These images were joined across the wide space by a web of intersecting translucent threads nailed to the walls, and by implication, attached to the dancers' projected bodies. The silent cross-communication of skin and muscle activated by breath was both eerie and touchingly beautiful.

In the course of 70 minutes, the company of five dancers each pursued one or two primary actions that they repeated with variations, engaging with such props as teetering towers of egg cartons, a patch of Astroturf, mirrors, and two enormous, old-fashioned

loudspeakers. They rarely interacted but rather created a collage of “parallel play” that heightened the feeling of anomie and alienation of what became a dark, dismembered Happening. The audience, too, kept their distance, sticking to the gallery’s walls.

The brilliantly versatile Paul Struck constructed the most engaging task-based actions with his dozens of grey egg cartons, balancing stacks of them as he methodically lined them up in paths on the floor, only to crunch them into submission with his feet. It was hard to take your eyes off Struck as he morphed from a Shiva-like creator and destroyer into an acrobat with suspenseful transitions. In one highlight, he went from architect to architecture, structurally merging with his blocks of cartons in the manner of a Greek caryatid statue or Atlas figure, standing perched on a three-foot high stack while bearing another load upon his neck and shoulder plane. Struck realized the potential of applying his strength, balance and agility to the potentially rich, minimalist objects. It was no surprise that, at the conclusion, the cast gathered to encase a supine Struck in a body-frame of egg cartons, allowing his departure to leave a residue of his corporeal negative space nestled next to the empty cartons.

In other striking passages, Beau Hancock and Miller each inhabited the two large insides of the public loudspeakers. As they bent their upper torsos down into them, or elevated them onto their heads, they created hybrid forms that were part body, part object, adding a surrealist, Boschian note to the evening. In one of their sequences, they mumbled inaudible words inside the speakers, conjuring warped confessionals or prankish subversions of the stentorian role of the public loudspeaker. Miller and Hancock also arbitrarily slapped, pinched and vocalized into each other’s bodies in duets titled *Intimacy* that skirted the adjoining edges of pain and pleasure, love and aggression.

Two other soloists offered less sustained visual interest. A scantily-dressed Dana Dlugosz handsomely performed her assignment to gaze like Narcissus into a mirror either below or in front of her. And Buffy Miller entered and exited with her square of artificial grass on which she quivered anxiously when she was not standing still.

Visual artists may well have been the past progenitors of performance art as they pushed the boundaries of their inheritance. It will be interesting to see what further performance art dancers create as they extend their own inherited boundaries as Rothlein Miller is doing.

Still Life, Miller Rothlein, AUX Performance Space at Vox Populi, March 29—April 1. No further performances.

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