thINKingDANCE
Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

A Letter from Steve Paxton

Hi Lisa,

Thanks for the review. I can expand on why 'about' is lame. You mention that the dancer in 'Bound' is performing different roles. But you did not mention the disparity of the images he sets up. He dances, he sits, he works, he plays, he considers. He is sent on his way into the further reaches of his life. These images are not posed to confirm meaning, but to mix images. From that view, the military is mixed with the architectural, religious and silly.

A life is not only one thing. Even a military experience may be later modified. The images, the elements of the dance, are not only a wide difference of type, there is the question of how they happen in time.

Nothing suggests that time is sequential or even linear. This ambiguity may be only available to those of us who have seen it many times; first time viewers are too busy trying to encompass the elements as they are reeled out (because solo dance), to be able to play conceptual games with the images which I have, for the past few years, been afforded the chance to see (because Jurij), and study. It is fun and sobering to confront my younger mind.

One thing I should tell you is that every blue moon, I made a work which reflected current events, from Section of a New, Unfinished Work, in the late 60s to Beautiful Lecture in '68 to Intravenous Lecture in the early 70s and so forth to Bound in '81. So 'Bound' was not a unique venture into signifiers and symbols.

I feel that images in Bound represent a collection of fragments (like select memories) from, maybe, many years. If the camouflage signals 'military' (even if the dancer is wearing a camouflage box), then what does the lumber mean? Why is an edge painted? How the Pozzo 'Assumption of St Ignatious' painting figure in, and why does it fade slowly to white? Why is the tune 'Napoli' used? Why the mechanism of the cord walk, so obvious

So, from the outside now, I can ask these kinds of questions. But I don't question myself what it is 'about'. I do think the camouflage indicates something military, but I have no Viet Nam experience of my own. My experience of Viet Nam and that war is opposing it, being heart broken about 52,000 troops being killed there, the Cambodian Bombing cover-up, the Viet Nam Vets Against the War, and their shabby treatment by this country. That is to say, such an image does not constitute an 'about' so much as a reference. Much the same for the rest of the images. They are broad indications of some sort of reference; not direct experiences of the character. Since the movements change with every performance, the narrative changes (as in story telling narratives are apt to do)and the various stable elements change weight with each showing.

As to your question, how does this square with the Judson ethos that you mention, I reply, how does it not square?

I never heard this ethos mentioned ever at Judson - that any materials may be used in any way at all - but my experience suggests that if it were a starting point, by the time an audience saw work, it was full of very deliberate choices and a lot of refinement. That you announce this as the 'Judson Ethos' will have the same result as Yvonne Rainer's 'No'manifesto. She wrote it, signing herself only as author. Soon critics were expecting all Judson work to adhere to the manifesto's austere standards. But it wasn't my manifesto, and this ethos isn't my ethos. You use the word 'ethos' twice in the review. The second time, you might as well have used 'about' as in 'Judson was about any materials being used in any way at all'. this seems to me to be journalistic generality, and because you write on a blog, I wonder why you bother with this kind of economy.

In this review you encapsulate Judson, you short shrift MFS, and the images dancers take away are pre-digested for readers. ThINKingDANCE isn't an academic site, I know, but your review is so generous and long that I have to wonder at these particular characterizations. The Judson Ethos especially is a comic set up, Lisa. If it were the rule, any material in any way at all, how could it not be always accomplished? In what way does it not express artistic freedoms in general? And who could make work without in some way paring it down to some particular material in some particular way? Haha.

Steve

The author responds:

Hi Steve,

Thank you for writing. Your letter fleshed out your history and thinking and brought out a set of new and thorny questions.

First off, I am very sorry for what you see as mischaracterizations, reductions or untruths. The reason I began writing about dance at all was that I was aware of so much writing guilty of those things, and thought I might be able to avoid those traps as an "insider." Or at least be reasonably responsible to the artists and work I was writing about. So getting it wrong has me squirming.

What is wrong, exactly? Yes, it's a big statement to label something an "ethos" and perhaps that word choice, if understood as " guiding beliefs or ideals that characterize a community," falls rather short. What you see as not representative of Judson—" that any materials might be used in any way at all"—in my mind was just *one* aspect of work of that era that strikes me as highly important. To clarify, I never meant that the ability to engage any materials at all in any relationship implied that there was not careful choice, or deliberate development and shaping of those materials. I was just talking about the moment of opening the door into a bigger space in terms of possible content. Then, once in that space, with its freedoms, you go about figuring out what matters to you and make choices that you stand by. Trisha said something like "I make choices as if my life depended on them." I don't doubt that this could be said of more of your cohort perhaps including yourself.

This raises the issue of how clearly a writer can see or represent a movement when they have some personal stake in it. I was a 13-year old and had trained exclusively in Graham technique when James Waring handed me a white-painted watering can filled with milk along with a white bucket. My job in his performance at Judson was to pour the milk from can to bucket, as text was read and an assortment of other unrelated activity unfolded. I realize that he was not formally a Judson artist, but he was part of the family and espoused chance process, etc. Wrapping my young brain around all that was quite something, and the hugeness of having permission to take any object/sound/action in any relationship has struck me as remarkable ever since.

A problem you pointed to in my writing beyond word choice and ensuing mischaracterization, was incompleteness. Here we get into a sticky wicket which is actually one germane to the whole thINKingDANCE "ethos." We are not academic, and neither are we meant for popular consumption in the way that short punchy articles are written in the print newspapers. I've written my share of those, and very much appreciate the ability to stretch out, meander and focus on what interests me most. It is often discussed among TD writers that a blow-by-blow account, including each and every image, is not so useful or engaging. We want to know why it matters, what it communicates to the viewer.

If I leave out detail, it's in the interest of being able to zoom out wide and then zoom in, balancing in this piece some history, some personal association, some specific telling of what happened, some observations about repercussions and larger movements. This is an intentional choice, recognizing the benefit of economy. A two line sketch of a figure, like a poem, can be sublime if it nails essence. But if it misses the mark, or feels reductivist to the point of not doing justice at all, it's definitely a problem.

Of course *Material for the Spine* is deserving of more thoughtful and fuller commentary than I gave it. It could easily be the subject of a book! But if I am interested in my writing being able to be read by all kinds of folk, and my own bent is impressionistic anchored in a few salient details that give some sense of why I come to a particular point of view, how can I be assured of choosing the right details: the ones the artist feels best represent his/her intent or perception of what the work is doing?

I guess there are no guarantees in that regard and writing at all requires a certain level of willingness to get it wrong.

I can't claim to be the most perceptive viewer. I'm often slow to comprehend things that others grasp quickly. The questions I pose in the piece that attempt to reconcile your statements about "about" with what I saw reflect that. In your response, you clarify how content with implied meanings can be used in the same disengaged way as any other material, held up to see how it reacts, how the bits

resonate. I’m still new at understanding this, something which causes me to revise my own concept of history; a good and necessary thing.

It’s funny that our writing *about* the writing is now just about as long as the initial piece itself. It was in part your own leading of a writing workshop in Arnhem that led me to think that writing was something I might be able to do. I certainly have no desire to short shrift any of your work and am extremely grateful that you took the opportunity to point to the areas where you feel a keener eye or more thorough regard would do your work more justice.

Yours,

Lisa

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