

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Michael Bartmann

Through the Café Glass: Leah Stein's Portal

by Lynn Matluck Brooks

Looking out the glass doorway and wide front windows of [Frieda's Café](#), I spotted dancers performing unison phrases around the door-frames of the historic buildings across Walnut Street as a U.S. Park Service Ranger calmly checked the locks to those same old buildings. Bicyclists scooted by on the street, dog-walkers strolled with their pups (who were more curious than their owners about the performative doings around them), and cars struggled to park and discharge their harried passengers while performers, singly and in groups, ran or danced through my view.

Leah Stein's wonderful troupe—David Konyk, Andrew Mars, Megan Wilson Stern, and Michele Tantoco—climbed up the door jambs, hung from the lintel, contact-improv-ed with other performers, sang, crawled, scooched, and hovered through the 50-minute show. Their grounded, focused performances in words, song, and movement created the continuity that held this partly improvised performance together. Stein's four company members were joined by a crew of eight community performers of various ages and movement backgrounds, an appropriate choice in a café “whose goal is to (re)connect people across generations.” Some of these folks were more comfortable performing than others—those whose shy, excited smiles and moments of awkward pause revealed the novelty of their situation—but the rich layering of performance capacity matched the layers of movement space that Stein's *Portal* attended to.

All the performers passed through Frieda's double doorways at times, penetrating the thin layer between the audience and the outer world. Some of us experienced this passage while sipping coffee at Frieda's tables; others sat in rows of seats facing the modernist glass doors, which butted up against the peeling, unfinished walls of Frieda's interior—another set of layers. At the same time, the audience could see the performers running and dancing across the sidewalk in front of the café, and those across the street, nicely set off by the railing that fronted the building they danced along there. And the passersby were the ultimate layer, the sometimes puzzled, sometimes bemused, sometimes indifferent, sometimes enthusiastic, and unwitting participants in the work.

At one point, Frauke Regan read a poem she had written, starting with the words, “You are a thought...” Watching, I thought up many story bits that the layers of space, time, age, chance, structure, and distance stimulated, as the people of the show—performers, passersby, baristas, and audience members—created an ongoing, ever-melting flux of invention and aspiration.

[Portal](#), Leah Stein Dance Company, Frieda’s Café, Sept. 15, 17, 21, 22, 24.

By Lynn Matluck Brooks

September 16, 2016