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No Art, Yes Dance!

By June Julian



Anemone Dance Theatre. Photo: Sara Blasi

Aesthetics, a big lispig term for the branch of philosophy that examines the nature and meaning of art, nowadays is just another word for nothing left to lose. And, considering that the word *Art* itself is the root of words like *Artifice* and *Artificial*, well, no wonder some downtown dancers seem to be abandoning the whole lot, altogether. Instead, what is emerging is a sort of anti-aesthetics in the downtown dance world.

In Tim Binkley's essay, *Piece:Contra Aesthetics*, he takes the view that artworks can exist independently of aesthetics, without art, and yet, still be it. Like Shakespeare's rose, art by any other name such as piece, is alright in and of itself, but the argument is not about terminology but about meaning. Whatever you do call it, you won't call the real stuff phony, artificial, or pretentious. Let's look at some recent evidence.

Prefacing the Memorial Day weekend, Eiko and Koma, a Japanese dance couple, used the graveyard at St. Marks Church on 2nd Avenue as their set. As the audience began to straggle in under heavy skies

with a cold sea wind blowing, they were greeted by the two dancers lying motionless among the tombstones on the fresh damp earth. Clothed in short black fur tunics, their bare whitened arms and extended legs seemed silkily luminescent against the unforgiving dark soil.

In the Butoh tradition of excruciatingly slow movements, Eiko and Koma began to move a leg, then an arm, slowly, like mountains moving or the painfully slow accretion of wisdom. Their dance abandoned all of the usual expected dance conventions, and instead focused on deep primal motion.

Although Butoh is Japanese avant-garde movement, their piece, *Tree Song*, was universal. It celebrated the ancient, glacially slow churning of snails, one-celled organisms, and worms, repeated through time immemorial. Like moths tunneling out of a chrysalis, or maggots squirming in something fecundly fetid, these dancers showed the avant-garde to be the snake that bites its tail, bringing us full circle back to basic animal knowledge.

Ultimately, their infinitesimally slow movements pulled them upright on marble cold legs caked with dark scabs of dirt. We recognized the tree that they clung to for support as a kindred force, itself embodying similar struggles of twisting toward the light in imperceptibly slow time.

Frame this 50 minute piece, sponsored by DanceSpace and the Asia Society, with the scent of a flaming verdant pyre encircled with flickering hot wax tapers, and hauntingly beautiful background vocalizations by Sharon Dennis and piano music by Georgia Wyeth for a multisensory experience that tweaked ancient memories without contrivance.

Similarly inspired by Butoh, *Anemone Dance Theatre's* Sara Baird performed her languorously slow *Titlipur*, in mid-May at the Puffin Room. On her gorgeous costume were actual tree branches ingeniously attached to her back in a way that evoked Japanese kimono obis and archangel wing knots. Handsomely silhouetted against original video projections by Lee Whittier, they became believable wing veins of a dragonfly or of a prehistoric insect with that eternal turgid armature necessary for flight. With a pair of accelerometers attached to her hands, she manipulated composer Miriama Young's music with her own movements and danced to it at the same time.

Years ago at City Center, on an empty stage, wearing possibly only his gym shorts, Mikhail Baryshnikov danced to his own amplified heartbeat. The sparseness of his presentation lent more focus to the phenomenon of a dancer responding to self-generated audio stimuli. The difference between the two pieces is like a gift of a perfect flower or of a bouquet of them. Sara gives us the bouquet.

In her, *Lacuna*, giant plastic bags, designed like architecture to metamorphosize into various transparent enclosures for the slow moving dancers inside, are reminiscent of membranes, placentas, and suburban homes. Sealed tight inside our plastic nation is our raw human memory, resonating somewhere between the insects and the trees.