

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Johanna Austin

A Different Kind of Viewing: Susan Rethorst's "Day of Dance"

by Carolyn Merritt

208 East Broadway

The women inhabit the space much like the furniture, unmoved and unmoving. KC Chun-Manning lounges across the table, propped on elbow, Megan Bridge to her side in an easy chair. Elisabete Finger rests on the futon, Michelle Stortz hidden from sight beside her. Jungeun Kim sits under the lamp. None registers our entry. We begin to forget them, caught up as we are in conversations, finding seats, scanning the audience, browsing programs. Still, I look up from time to time—to double-check, catch those tiny gestures of life. A hand sweeping away specks of dust, a breath's puff and retreat. We never enter their line of sight. This indifference feels casual and calculated.

They trace objects—tables, lamps, wooden futon slats, cushions—and one another with hands and feet. Taking measure, marking their place in this landscape of things that shifts each time the lights flicker and they reposition the objects, turning our view clockwise. Two stuff pillows up their shirts, others caress the wooden slats, another flips the futon on its side. As the wood pieces tumble, I am reminded that little is forever fixed, even these solid-looking things. The action is neither slow nor fast. Deliberate, contained, collected. They simply respond, yield.

It takes a while before I realize the film behind them is moving; or rather, the cars on the street below, out the window and beneath the trees. (The view from 208 East Broadway?) We see different scenes on a basketball court, until the camera pans out and now they are simultaneous. After the show, someone calls this moment, the pullback and reframing of our perception, "amazing."

Nina Simone sings *Ne me quitte pas*. On repeat, it sounds sadder each time. Kim and Stortz traipse on demi-pointe, elbows bent, limp wrists held close, covering the stage again and again. Listless robots. Stortz breaks character and is suddenly all expression— toothy,

fawning, giggling, grandly gesturing like a Hollywood dame. It is embarrassing, all this feigned emotion. Of course, this is everywhere. But when do we ever ponder one another so carefully, like the women do with each tracing?

I think of *Rocky and the Moth*, Rethorst's story of her cat's "reliving and remembering [via] sense memory" an encounter with a moth. This makes me think of the depression, imperceptible now, of an animal's favorite spot, and I consider curling up in it later. I think of all the places I have lived, of the people, things, spaces, that somehow became home. Do I ever fully take stock, record to memory, carry their traces and leave mine behind? And then, of course, how to keep moving?

208 East Broadway was Rethorst's home/studio in New York. Now she belongs to Philly. Indeed, Philadelphia has embraced her warmly. This performance is part of a "Day of Dance" that includes videos, installations and performances of Rethorst's work, a dinner, and two iterations of John Cage's performative lecture, [How to Get Started](#). Within a week of activities at Bryn Mawr College, the "Day of Dance" is the culmination of *Susan Rethorst: Inquiring Mind/ Choreographic Mind*, Bryn Mawr's Dance Advance-funded project designed to introduce Rethorst to the community. Stretching from December to March, it included public "wreckings" of Rethorst's work-in-progress, a website documenting rehearsals and workshops, and a beautiful program book of musings from the choreographer and an esteemed cast of writers and curators. This, in turn, is part of *Susan Rethorst/ Moving in Philadelphia 2013-14*, encompassing Group Motion and Philadelphia Dance Projects' work with Rethorst in another project funded by Dance Advance beginning next summer.

So I wonder at all the measuring in the piece, whether Rethorst is turning the tables, acknowledging what she must feel too. The curiosity. Eagerness, even. To evaluate, to size her up. Reactions run the gamut after the show, but "a different kind of viewing" (gracias, Elba) sticks with me.

Behold Bold Sam Dog

Sunday afternoon, the thINKingDANCE writers gather to workshop with [Claudia La Rocco](#) to discuss dance and writing, Susan Rethorst, and more. In her written response to the second performance, *Behold Bold Sam Dog*, Lisa Bardarson references Jackson Pollock, likening Rethorst's stage to a canvas: "Wham! Here's a beautifully crafted unison section. Splat! It's the repeating duet motif again." The idea of the sounds jolts me, makes the connections more visceral. I think first of Claudia's [How to Get Started](#), her thoughts on being wrong and failing, how she suggested Pollock wasn't done when he died, he was just figuring out how to begin again. Then I think of Pollock. But not the real Pollock, the one played so convincingly by Ed Harris. And when I think of Harris/Pollock, I don't only envision those ferocious bursts of creation, but all that preparation. I see decisions in the moment, in the physicality of making. I see works that are the product of a mind fully embodied.

And this I see in *Behold Bold Sam Dog*. Movement at once deliberate and inevitable. Explorations that take their time and resolve in endpoints both logical and surprising. Like when fifth position arms show off opposable thumbs. That delight all the more for their meandering progressions through the fanciful once, the mundane next. Like Bronwen MacArthur and Eun Jung Choi's linked-arm verandah-strolling. Or when the dancers assemble before us and stand stock still, as if in a chorus line, only to play again at measuring and approaching one another: tracing a shoulder's dip into neck, reaching under an arm to caress a waist, illuminating the bodies' limits and the energy between by outlining at a tiny distance. I see the power of "repetition with revision," "beautifully crafted" * phrases knit together with moments of contact, disconnect, nearness, reconsidering, recognition. These interruptions feel much like real life.

It is impossible to imagine *Behold Bold Sam Dog* without the music—we hear excerpts from Shostakovich's *Jazz Suite*, *Waltz 2* and The Beatles' *Come Together* throughout—even if so much takes place in silence. More unthinkable is to imagine it without Jodi Melnick. Lisa Kraus, TD Director and Coordinator of Bryn Mawr's Rethorst project calls Melnick's solo to the single full playing of *Come Together* "the summit." A blur of fiery red locks, deceptively floppy limbs, boozy spins, she shocks with each cool resolution, each sudden re-command of body and situation.

At the workshop, animals appear in many writers' responses. Some raise objections, but I don't mind. True, blaming infidelity on evolutionary drives is lazy. And calling your ballerinas "thoroughbreds" when you advise them against reading, unforgivable. But we *are*

animals. That Meg Foley's perfectly replicated, softly trudging jetés through the black space conjure a deer in the snow, beautiful silence floating on white air, seems only right. A testament to the deer and to Foley.

Getting Started

Staring at the screen, I think about how I get started. How there's something to the physical act, the touch and sound of the keys, that both generates and reveals what comes next. There's an element of mystery, sure, but the work doesn't arrive through me, it *is* me.

This too I see in Rethorst's work. And I think how brave she is, to reveal so much.

208 East Broadway and Behold Bold Sam Dog (in *Day of Dance*), Susan Rethorst. Bryn Mawr College, Goodhart Hall. February 23, 2013.

**In Yoruba Ritual (Indiana University Press, 1992) Margaret Drewal draws on Henry Louis Gates's idea of "repetition with revision" to describe the unique power of ritual, which is rooted in tradition yet open to change and thus relevant with the passage of time.*

**See Lisa Bardarson in previous paragraph ("beautifully crafted" phrases)*

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