

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Scott Whitman

Authoritative Bodies in Mascher's Microfestival

by Megan Bridge

*We can talk about what's no longer here because by virtue of having described its not having happened yet it's already been remembered, the thought making a bank on which to sit...**

What's no longer here is that moment in a chilly hallway watching presence explode and get sucked up again while I rub elbows with the guy sitting cross-legged next to me. What's no longer here is that moment when full consciousness slips away, my body lulled by a waterfall of unfolding movements: sequential, saturated with blue light.

What is here, sitting on my desk next to me, are the program notes and essays I collected at Mascher Space Co-op's *a microfestival of stubborn occasions*.

The program states: "Cooperatively conceived, developed and run, Mascher is a home for new dance in Philadelphia." The artists who run Mascher were tired of the traditional "mixed bill" platform (this festival replaced Mascher's mixed bill "Fresh Juice" of years past). Inspired by a workshop with artist/philosopher Erin Manning, they decided to choreograph the whole event, giving attention to the overarching experience of an audience's interface with work by three very different artists.

They started out by creating a microfestival, rather than a mixed bill—many repeated performances (eleven) of three different works over the course of three days. Then they commissioned a writer, Laura Neuman (a founding member of thINKing Dance who currently lives in Seattle) to title the festival and contribute a program essay. Laura's magical text telescopes out to look at time and how memory is written, then pulls the reader in tight to behold sensory experience in the written word.

You can smell the garlic burning behind you on the table, since that is the ritual, soaking into your pores, can smell it across the year. We can hold a festival of almost events, inside the crackling leaves.

Fall. Festivals. Crackling leaves. Eventtime. Experience. Mascher's *microfestival*. The evening began with Marcel W. Foster's *#JaneGoodallDrama*, a performance-lecture with Marcel in drag as primatologist Jane Goodall who confronts her postcolonial critics. The work is funny, interactive, and text-heavy. At the end, "Marcel" finally appears to confront "Jane," and it's Marcel's butt. Yes, an actual face painted on Marcel's backside, representing all those who disprove Jane's theories about the biological imperative.

Knowledge is representational. Different forms of knowledge compete for authority. "It's impossible to defend science as an 'objective' practice." I read this in the *#JaneGoodallDrama* program essay (more informational and academic, less poetic than Neuman's *microfestival* essay) and I feel it immediately present in the performance. We "know" that the authority of Goodall's scientific research is tainted by the colonizing gaze, because the authority of postcolonial theorists tell us it is so.

There is so much dense, interesting content in this work. But what shimmers forth most clearly is the proposition that performance is a form of knowledge equally authoritative as science (as well as primatology and post-colonial theory for that matter). *#JaneGoodallDrama* points to the body as another form of authority. Greg Holt's and Christina Gesualdi's works make good on the proposition.

Greg's solo, *Centurion, 1-1000*, slipped into my consciousness, and kept slipping out and back in again over the next forty minutes. Again: a zoom in and out. Greg's gorgeously graceful moving body pulls the viewer into a meditation. It is simultaneously epic and mundane. It is exact, and exactly what it needs to be. In a casual post-show conversation with Meg Foley, process contributor for the work, she called *Centurion* a dance that erases itself as it goes along.

In Christina's duet with Alice Yorke, *our nebulous motor*, time is looped. As Christina described in her pre-show introduction, time is chopped up like a celery stalk. Time folds in on itself, ridged and melting like a once-frozen bag of crinkle-cut carrots. Christina and Alice slowly, slowly advance and retract along a narrow corridor (the work takes place in the fire escape hallway)... portrait, still life, landscape. When they are close, their faces are so precious, so clean, so open, so patient. Everything pours in and out. Loop. They regroup. Tiny figures, far away. Dolls. Zoom in: a perfectly illuminated hand, above and to my left, wields a knife and saws a thin rope. A sequined bag falls, narrowly missing the dancers. I am so drawn in, mesmerized by these hugely embodied subjects. They palpate, they jump off the page to me even now as I write about them. It's intimidating and inviting in a cosmic, beautiful way. My engagement is broken only twice by the repeated appearance of a laptop which the dancers stare at, seemingly imitating an unseen image (an infomercial perhaps?). A looming illuminated apple on the back of the screen momentarily trips up my trip.

On the cusp of the wet season, we lean forward over the bank, and we clasp...

After an hour, the computerized meditation timer chimes. The performance ends. Suddenly we are all ourselves again, casual, but more. We have banks on which to sit.

Marcel's work authoritatively creates a space to see dance and performance as philosophic inquiry. Greg's and Christina's works are subtly but deftly exploring concepts that run through contemporary theory, questions of time's slipperiness, of presence and absence, of visibility and invisibility. Framing these works in a festival format helps me to relate the inquiries of these artists to contemporary research across multiple fields. *a microfestival of stubborn occasions*. I hope this is a fall tradition that sticks.

*Italicized text is quoted from Laura Neuman's program essay, *some acts toward spectatorship and shine*, for a *microfestival of stubborn occasions*.

a microfestival of stubborn occasions, The Mascher Space Co-op, November 15-17, 2013.

By Megan Bridge

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