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A Magazine

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Contents

Katherine McCord	1	Mirror
Stephen M. Dickey	2	You Meet No One
Denise Adamucci	3	Bruises
Carol Brown/ Alexandra Grilikhes	4	Shelf Life: An Interview
Robert Anderson	16	Death and the Maid
Esther Cameron	25	Waveson
H. E. Francis	26	The White Desert
Dennis Saleh	39	Delta Songs of the Harper
Gail Shepherd	43	Acts of Love
Jennifer Wallace	56	Soul Talks Back
Donna Wiegand	57	Mother's Suicide Attempt
Sandy Crimmins	58	Drunk
William Hewitt	62	Blue
Richard Kostelanetz	64	Sephardic Culture and Me
Ruth Rouff	68	Pagan Heaven
Gail Shepherd	69	Still Life With Silver Hand Mirror

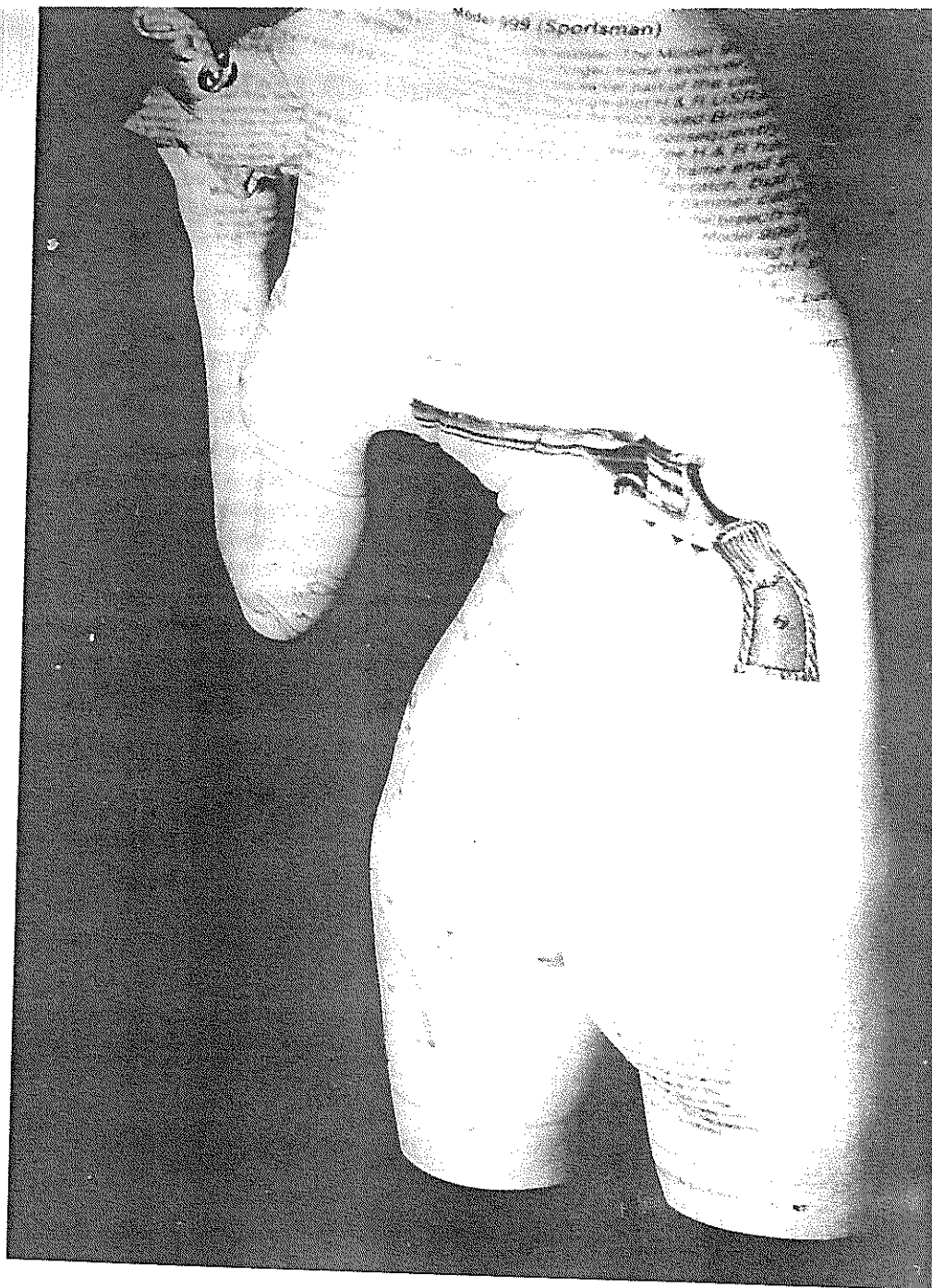


Photo: © Mattias Ek

Shelf Life; In Interview with Carol Brown

by Alexandra Grilikhes

AG: Your voice on tape, reciting the poem "Ocean Skin," opens your dance piece "Ocean Skin." How you see the place of text in your work?

CB: I see my dances as writings on and through the body. The text of the poem you heard was the way into the performance. It serves two purposes; one is thematic in that it opens up space for a kind of poetic rendering of instructions to do with resuscitation. The instructions, which were from a 1907 First Aid Manual, seemed like instructions on how to love or be loved. And how to rescue in a very instructional way. Tasks and instructions have been something I've used periodically as a way into movement material.

The second way text works for me has to do with drawing your audience into the inner world you are writing through your moving body; with making a mark or entry point. Sometimes, speaking directly, can be more understandable or legible than moving straight into abstract movement. For the last five years I've used texts as a way to make my work more accessible as well as to make clear images. The text is a way to clarify the imagery because it immediately evokes a world view. Speaking, which is such a personal act, can take you directly into internal space.

I'm very much interested in the relationship between moving and speaking. What it means to be a moving body speaking. I never used to speak while performing till I found a piece of text from a previous performance that said, "I became a dancer so I wouldn't have to speak."

AG: That reminds me of the quote by Isadora Duncan, "If I could say it I wouldn't have to dance it. Earlier this evening you spoke of asking yourself the question, "What can movement bring to understanding that writing cannot?" Movement can say what writing cannot.

CB: Many people perceive dance as a form outside language. That dancing is something you do, not something you write or speak about. I'm trying to find a language through which to speak of physical experience, of the embodied experience, whether it comes out in words, articulated move-

ment, images or sound. I think there's a point at which you move past thinking "Is this a speaking moment or a moving moment?" When you have an idea, you use the right medium to express it. To have the power of speech and the power of movement at your disposal means you can move fluidly between the two. I'd like to erase the join and make speaking and moving part of the same experience. So much of dance has prided itself on being outside language; I'm interested both in bringing language into dance, and in how dance reshapes language.

AG: *How do you choose your texts?*

CB: From my experience. When I go out jogging or walking I take a notebook and write down phrases that come into my mind though the phrases may not emerge later in my work. I might be interested at that point in moving through my joints and finding the skeleton and doing an in-depth study of that, or I might be preoccupied with a certain memory. I often discover my texts through the coming to surface of memory.

AG: *Regarding your piece "Ocean Skin," you said the text came from an old manual about saving a drowning person, but that you also read it as a manual on how to love. You repeat the words "are you reading me -- are you reading?" Then you switch to "this is the story of a dead boy -- this is his autopsy." Then, "is he listening to me? is he listening?." Two threads; one about saving a drowned person, the other, thoughts which come into your mind about a relationship. Both became part of the same text and dance.*

CB: It's finding a poetics of movement. The "are you reading me?" or "are you listening to me?" is both listening to a moving body and reading movement. When you find yourself reading someone's gesture you think, "Am I getting it right or not?" You're not sure. I think the text contains the idea of loss and absence, the presence/absence continuum; the notion of someone slipping out of view. At the time I wrote and choreographed the piece I was interested in the history of space and the history of perspectival vision, and how the proscenium arch in theatre directs the gaze in a certain way towards vanishing points. Those points evoke the issue of disappearance. The notion of theater is based on the relationship between presence and absence. The horizon line that you see across the back of the stage is a limit; beyond that line is the falling off. What is beyond the vanishing point, if there is a beyond? This is the kind of questioning that goes on for me.

AG: *One could read all performance, certainly dance and theater, in terms of presence and absence. I think people do construct theater in terms of presence and absence, an issue that goes back to infancy.*

CB: What do you mean?

AG: *I think the issues of presence and absence have to do with the mother figure which is so important to us throughout life whether we're conscious of it or not.*

But to return to "Ocean Skin." After the text is finished, the soloist/narrator circles around the stage, running at top speed, which she does exactly ten times. The continual spinning is an important feature of ecstatic dance; I'm wondering about your interest in ecstatic dance.

CB: The ecstatic dance tradition I relate to is the one that happened in the 20s, especially in Central Europe. Many pioneers of expressionistic dance were interested in dance states that could be arrived at through repetitious movement done to simple music such as drumming rhythms. Inspired frequently by Eastern philosophy and mysticism, these dancers wanted to create a state which would transcend, in a sense, the limits of the body, and would create another field of energy which was not necessarily about lifting people off the ground but about somehow capturing a moment -- a heightened sensory state that breaks with the traditional containment of imagery.

I became very interested in spinning, because one of the things I learned as a young dancer was turns. We did endless turning, and used different turning forms. These were very different from the use of turns in classical ballet, where you avoid getting dizzy by spotting. In spotting you pivot around while keeping your eyes fixed on one point, a point-to-point-based negotiation of space in which you never disorient yourself. What you find with spinning -- and this is something Laura Dean did very much with her dances -- is that you get a different experience of space, you experience space in a less Pythagorean way. You feel disoriented and see bands of color rather than losing your focus. You're not relying on visual perception, you're relying on proprioception, your internal bearings in space. Your level meter tells you where you are when you don't know or can't see; proprioception guides you in space. You are activating deep-rooted sensory perceptions that aren't privileged in the visually dominated world. I think from an audience's point of view -- and certainly when I've done my spinning dances -- for this piece it was just a short time spinning, but I have done a piece of twenty minutes of spinning -- you find the audi-

ence is completely drawn into the visual spectacle of this turning to the point where they're literally almost turning themselves. A sort of giddiness overtakes the audience.

It's a powerful way for a dancer to create a locus of energy. Once you've done that, it's like you've gone somewhere else and taken your audience with you. You've created a point of communion with them.

AG: I felt drawn immediately into the intensity of your ecstatic spinning. I'd like to go back to the piece you did called "Flesh.text." It seems to refer to your point about how movement and text can work together and be the same, and yet not be the same.

CB: In "Flesh.text," I was not necessarily writing through the body because it was the writing that pre-exists on the body that interested me; the notion that somehow the woman's body is always already written upon. In that work, the diva, the dancer and the dog are three icons of femininity. Being female and being a dancer is somehow a stereotype of femininity. Being female and acting like a dog is perhaps another stereotype or type of femininity as in "she's a dog." Being female and being a diva is another icon of femininity because she is either seduced or killed off at the end of the operatic narrative. These sorts of fatally flawed feminine types are the subject matter of "Flesh.text." There's a phrase in the piece where the guy says "well you know, that's a flesh dress" and I say, "well, actually, it's a flesh text". The dress is a text in itself. So the piece was done in that semiotic fashion of reading everything as text. How the text can be played with and rearranged as parody or play.

AG: Is that kind of reversal or play, something you do a lot of in your work? If everything is text, isn't there always a way to rewrite it? Maybe that's your project as a dancer.

CB: As a performing artist I work with what's current. "Flesh.text." was made in 1998, and I've certainly moved on from there.

I don't know if I believe that everything is a text but I've been interested in that sort of theoretical investigation. In the past a lot of post-structuralists thought everything was language and the body is written upon. And I wondered, if the body is written upon by so many different texts, what chance do I have as a performer to move in the gap between those texts -- if there are any gaps?

AG: I think there are always gaps in the texts. It's fascinating to look at

the gaps.

In your talk you mentioned the effect on you of Gertrude Bodenweiser, a Viennese dancer of the 20s and 30s who moved to New Zealand, worked there for many years and headed a company for which your dance teacher was the principal dancer. You spoke in some depth about her influence but said that you moved away from her interest in social commentary and went towards your own interests and personal language. What did a personal language mean to you at the time that you veered from Bodenweiser's influence?

CB: There's a theory in dance history which holds that dance goes through evolution and revolution, that each generation revolts against the previous one. There's a sort of cyclical history that we have been witness to in the 20th century and now in the 21st. There's a tension between being part of a fragile legacy and the need to hold onto and continue to represent that legacy in the world. At the same time I want to be able to create a language of performance that speaks of my own experience; what it means to be alive at this historical moment; not to feel that I have to continue to reproduce the past just because it's fragile. For dance artists it's a dilemma because our knowledge is carried in our bodies. There's not a lot of writing or imagery or video or film of the now extinct dancers, so who is going to carry that knowledge on? Do I need to? Should I? These are the kinds of issues I wrestle with. In the meantime I'm getting on with what I feel is important in my own work.

AG: Your personal issues, and how they form the technique you use to express them. The videotape you showed of "Shelf Life" is a perfect example.

CB: In "Shelf Life" I gave myself the challenge of setting really confined limits on what a dancing body could do. The dance happens on a shelf of completely transparent glass two meters above the ground. It's one meter high by three meters wide; a very tight space. The dance happens over the course of four hours. "Shelf Life" is a completely improvised performance event where I interact with a series of digital animations of a moving body -- a shadow life -- . The sound comes up from underneath the shelf and surrounding space. The vocabulary of the piece is arrived at through pushing the limits of what you can do in such a space. I've performed the piece sixteen times. You'd be surprised at how much movement can come out of such confinement. Strict limits allow for an incredible discovery of things you wouldn't normally find; they push you to work at a boundary. I'm on the edge with this piece; it's almost beyond consciousness. You're holding

on to being on that shelf four hours straight and you get too physically tired to think of new movement. You move differently. That's a setting up of conditions where something different from what you know might emerge. Which refers to your question about moving beyond what you know. That's what interests me.

AG: *Isn't "on the shelf" slang for "put away?"*

CB: "Shelf Life" has a number of connotations. One is the notion of a woman who's on the shelf, a spinster. It kind of relates to the idea, in a sort of patriarchal narrative, that she's not been taken. The other notion is of the shelf life of a product, something that has a date beyond which it shouldn't be sold, it's no longer merchandise or a commodity. In a peculiar way, shelf life gave me extraordinary freedom to explore things I wouldn't otherwise have explored. So maybe there are benefits to being on the shelf.

AG: *Perhaps colonized groups find hidden benefits outsiders can't see. Confinement forces the body and mind into new territories. As you said, you're on the edge. As a dancer, to always put yourself on the edge is the challenge.*

CB: The phrase that comes to mind is that of the limits of materiality. The notion held by many contemporary dance artists and choreographers is that the body is their medium, their tool and their writing instrument; subject and object. To my mind the body is the subject of the work as well as a subject in the piece. These days it can be difficult to find where the edges are because much of the dance world has become so institutionalized -- a condition which makes artists' lives too comfortable. Creating a situation of discomfort either through the kinds of movement I explore or where I site the work poses new challenges. I guess I see that as a way to keep myself alert and alive.

AG: *Where there is process there is life. Speaking of challenging yourself, you showed a videotape of your piece "Like a House on Fire" which uses the music of Petula Clark's song "Downtown." In that piece you invoked the opposite kind of movement from your usual fluidity.*

CB: I'm not sure what you mean.

AG: *Most of your dance work uses release energy, free flow, the lyrical. Your challenge was to go to the opposite pole; tension.*

CB: In "Like a House on Fire" one section in particular deals with tension which refers back to my interest in performance work from the 20's. There was a whole category of dance called "Grotesque Dance," that became a dance-genre the early expressionist choreographers were very much interested in -- both parodic dance and grotesque dance. There is, in fact, a spate of works called "grotesque dances" which were predominantly performed by women who, in a sense, were creating a grimace with their whole bodies.

I've seen very early film footage of some of these dancers. They are incredibly powerful in the way they transgress, compared with our current sort of notion that anything goes. To see one of those dancers, like Bodenweiser in her early pieces, was to see a woman working herself into an intensely, strained, awkward, angular tensile kind of movement form that was irregular in shape.

AG: *A kind of clenching of the body?*

CB: An excess, really. Taking it to exaggeration. Dancers are physically trained to do things untrained bodies won't or don't do. In fact I've asked myself, how dancers use their training, and I have to say that sometimes we use it in the service of reproducing sameness. But I want to use it to say something different. For instance, take three women dancers. Put them in certain dresses. Let them behave like three sisters together at home. Then they go and do a strange straining dance full of tension and muscularity and awkwardness, almost like giving birth to themselves. But somehow differently.

AG: *I can see that image. And, speaking of reproducing sameness, earlier you mentioned something about changing the usual take on the prone female body. Isn't that in the same piece?*

CB: That was an earlier piece I did called "The Mechanics of Fluids" which was based on writing by the French feminist writer Luce Irigaray. The challenge was to address the lineage of the female nude in Western art history. The most direct way, if you're dealing with issues surrounding the body, and the female body in performance, is to look at some of the narratives of the objectification of the female body. In 1994 I wanted to explore what it would mean for myself to position my own body as prone and naked on a horizontal surface for a period of ten or fifteen minutes. To make a kind of resistant physicality. What it would mean to be an object

gone hard in a sense, a kind of hardening instead of the submissive passivity of the body. A lot of nudes from the 18th and 19th century tradition of figurative painting -- Renoir for instance -- his beautifully plump ample women -- have a fleshiness about them. But dancers' bodies, typically, are lean and muscular, especially as they grow older, which creates a certain androgynous look. There's an opportunity to provide a different set of references around a female body. I try positioning the body in the way that some of the Renoir nudes were positioned and then do something different. There's a sort of vibrational excess in the piece I'm describing. Twist the body, contort it, hold it, let it become really tense until it's almost vibrating. When you hold a position long enough and things start to vibrate, it's the opposite of passive. That was my intention, but I'm not sure how the audience perceived it.

To separate my performing self from my offstage-onstage persona, I wore a wig. Creating that separation is important. If you choose, you can quite consciously make yourself into an object. A lot of women present their bodies in a very object-like way at certain points in their lives. As a performer, you often deal with the self-objectification of your performing body. Many radical performing artists, Stelarc is one example, have been doing this for a long time in their art. His body is the material of his performance, literally, and he does whatever is necessary to show this. Ron Athey, another radical performance artist, cuts and pierces his body and bleeds on stage. Traditionally, dance hasn't been involved in those kinds of debates or discourses, partly because dance has been about the reinforcement of life rather than an art form that critically analyzes or deconstructs certain norms. Currently, many dancers still make celebratory dances which are uplifting in feeling. If that's all dance can be, no wonder it's a sort of poor relation as an art form.

AG: I'd like to refer to something you said in your talk; that the prone female body invites colonization and the hard vibrating female body discourages it. One of the things I want to ask you is about different voices in the body -- something you yourself said earlier; you made a piece in a bar, and pieces in different settings and ecologies. I'm talking about the different voices that can be "forced out of the body." That was your phrase.

CB: The issue about public space is interesting because there's some level at which theaters are not necessarily safe spaces, just very controlled environments. When you compare them with non-theatrical spaces there are certain risks and challenges, ways that use more direct intervention and

open other possibilities, other voices as you said. I've recently been involved in making work for a hairdressing salon where people were getting their hair cut while a performance was happening. I did a piece in a quite notorious area of London at a bar called Stripper Stories which was based on the lives of strippers in London. Many of the strippers came from Eastern Europe and were former ballet dancers. I was very much interested in the shift from being a classical ballet dancer into being a table or lap dancer. I've already described "Shelf Life" which was a gallery-installation performance not done in a theatre. Currently I'm working with an architect to create a performance-installation which can be sited in different locations. We haven't yet found the spaces in which to create this urban wave form, a kind of concentration of the energy of the city. We're looking for uneven surfaces to perform on because in controlled theater situations dancers always perform on flat surfaces. Finding different surfaces to dance on is challenging in terms of getting yourself to move differently.

AG: It's certainly different from dancing on the usually desirable sprung wood floor of a stage. You've mentioned that you were introduced to the writing of Mary Daly, the radical feminist philosopher, in a dance studio when you were thirteen.

CB: The dance studio and company where I learned to dance was led by a group of women who were politically active radical lesbian feminists. I come from a rather conservative Catholic family and was introduced to Mary Daly's ideas in her book, "Beyond God the Father" by my dance teacher, which was something of a subversive act!

AG: How did Daly's ideas influence you?

CB: Those ideas permeated my artistic and intellectual life. I became interested in feminist thinking and activism and particularly in writings by women about female experience. I've been participating in radical actions and protest culture, since the late 70s or early 80s. It was the norm for me. Other writers I read with interest were Germaine Greer, Nancy Friday and later, more theoretical writings by people like Sheila Robotham on feminist history. The second wave feminists. Simone de Beauvoir of course, "The Second Sex." I was introduced to continental French feminist thought in my early twenties; Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Irigaray.

AG: Your early introduction to this body of thought seemed accidental, yet it took root and you followed it into graduate school and a doctoral

program. It's come out in your choreography in specific and striking ways. When we talk about your influences, along with Gertrude Bodenweiser and the Continental and ecstatic roots of her dancing, we also have to talk about your feminist political influences which might be every bit as important.

CB: It's true. And I've become interested in the visual arts. I read a lot of writing about London-based artists like Tracy Emin and Gillian Wearing. I've been seriously influenced by the writer Deborah Levy a dramaturg who worked with me, who was also my mentor.

Finding voices that chime with my voice is very important to me. When I entered that dance studio and found, by chance, a group of radical women, in so completely different a juxtaposition to the world I came from, it was absolutely key to my development as an artist.



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