

# know your own bone

## non-canonical post-historicism

### With global warming, March is now officially the cruelest month

April 5, 2012 by [Chris Dohse](#)

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Over the course of three nights (March 13-15), I saw a lot of New Dance Alliance's 26<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Performance Mix Festival at Joyce Soho in Manhattan, twelve works in total. After hibernating from watching anything live for a long while, I feel like this festival has reminded me how much I love the underexposed laborers of New York's dance world. Under- or unpaid, working their bones to the bone.

The Performance Mix Festival is the brainchild of NDA's Director/Producer Karen Bernard. I trust Bernard's curatorial acumen. She gathers artists through personal invitation and an application process that is adjudicated in part by artists who have previously shown things in the festival. If there are rungs on an imaginary ladder of contemporary interdisciplinary and experimental performance with outrageous and inscrutable at the bottom and sublime at the top, Bernard and her team usually land somewhere in the middle: intellectual, engaging multihyphenate works that are up my alley. I know that in any Performance Mix showcase I won't see the banal, the saccharine, or the overtly accessible. Nor will I see anybody pull a yam out of their ass, shit in a bucket, or fuck a turtle.\*

\*For extra credit, please answer the following: which of these acts have actually been performed in New York as "body art"?

#### Night #1: The problem of the well-made dance

From my previous associations with her work, I've thought of Bernard as a diarist. Each of her solos documents life's milestones and miscellany in ways that might not always gel, but her assured stage presence always seals the deal. Hers is an unapologetic persona who appreciates having hips, ass, breasts, and maturity. A full-blooded woman with wisdom and stories to share from what Barbara Dillely calls the outside, inside, and secret bodies.

In Bernard's solo *OUETTE*, fragments from Francois Ozon's 2003 thriller *Swimming Pool* project on various walls, amplifying a noir-ish veneer. I love Charlotte Rampling

(the star of *Swimming Pool*) but I remember not really liking this film, and I'm not sure how the Rampling bone connects to the Soft Cell bone, when Bernard later shimmies and whispers along with the song *Tainted Love*.

These are two of many similarly far-flung details. If collage is a positive word for when a cohesive thing is made from fragments; does pastiche have a pejorative connotation for when parts don't cohere? Perhaps in *OUETTE* Bernard casts her net too deeply into her subconscious and by doing, leaves me out. A dreamlike, sinister aspect flows through her scenes, with interstitials during which she rearranges simple exoskeletal props of computer monitor, projector, and chair. In a final scene, Bernard sits in stark light, animatedly mouthing words without sound, as if relating an anecdote to an unseen confessor. If she's become guilty of something, I've missed it.

- Post script: The next night I ask Bernard about her title, after not finding it through Google or Babelfish. She says it is an invented word. I'm guessing that it is pronounced "Wet," which sheds some light on the recurring imagery of swimming pools.

How **Shannon Gillen**'s duet *BOTLEK* corresponds to the international shipping industry, as described in program notes, also escapes me. But it's an excerpt of a work-in-progress, so that context might come later. I dislike program notes for this reason and don't usually read them until I need to know how to spell words like "Dickhaus" (see below). I don't enjoy this work any less for its "meaning" not being clear. Maybe something my friend Nancy Havlik once said is true though, that abstract dances about concrete ideas rarely communicate. Gillen and her two dancers, Spencer Dickhaus and Kristin Swiat, share backgrounds from Juilliard, and the dancing is richly done, showcasing each dancer's strengths and energies. Swiat initially seems bound, cautious, while Dickhaus throws down and sprawls until they partner. I like the hesitations, cessations, and stutters of their initial standing weight exchanges more than a push-me-pull-you roly-poly section that looks generic. Usually I find myself more attendant to how dancers perform structures, who they are being within a work, rather than what the structures actually are. In this duet, intentions of maker, director, and performers simmer in a way that transcends structure and leaves me wanting more.

### **Daniel Linehan, *Way Past Tense***

I feel tongue-tied by this solo. How to approach a thing so skillfully realized. In a flawlessly delivered stream-of-consciousness monologue, the words of which appear projected on the back wall simultaneously with his delivery of them (including each falter, swallow, and awkward pause), Linehan basically shoots the shit about whatever's on his mind: *2066*, a novel by Chilean writer Roberto Bolano, Hitchcock's film

*Spellbound*, and the LP *Sister* by Sonic Youth. Parallels are drawn between these referents, concentrating specifically on their endings.

Gobsmacked seems the word for it. Linehan doesn't seem to be working hard at all, which is infuriating; his performance is as rosy-cheeked as a 10-pound baby (and he doesn't break a sweat or get out of breath). Maybe I'm just jealous and grumpy. Are critics allowed to admit that some dancers and dances make us feel this way?

The way Linehan's keen intellect jumps around from book to movie to music (with a little Kafka thrown in) feels like the way my mind jumps around when I watch dances. Being more interested in the process of observing than the object that is observed, I often feel the purported content of a dance bounce off the books, movies, music, and other image and memory junk floating in my head. For instance, I've been trying to wade through a slim volume on Henri Bergson, and something about the way highbrow culture ingredients slide around in *Way Past Tense* brings Bergson to mind. I'm remembering Bergson's major contribution to philosophical discourse as a distinction between "life" vs mind vs perception—here's a typically circuitous statement from the book I'm reading: "The key to the explanation of the problem of reality and knowledge does not lie within us in the mind, as the idealist contends, nor without us in the world of things in space, as the realist contends, but in life."<sup>1</sup>

### **Dana Michel, 1976**

Here the program notes, specifically the work's title, suggest some context for a powerful, disturbing, but somewhat opaque work that seems to present a female shaman conjuring and channeling an ethnology of self full of personal totems and symbology. The year of the American bicentennial might comment on what William S Burroughs has called "the last and greatest betrayal of the last and greatest of human dreams." Then again, it could be the year of Michel's birth. She's Canadian; why would she want to make a dance about our failed North American melting pot?

Gillen's and Linehan's educational credentials stamp their works as Tisch-y and P.A.R.T.S.-ish, respectively (Gillen is currently enrolled in graduate studies at NYU Tisch; Linehan has completed the Research Cycle at the Performing Arts Research and Training Studios in Brussels). Makes me wonder if earning a degree in choreography—studying the art of the "well-made" dance—hones the innate craft of already gifted dancemakers or somehow trepans it. With this talented quartet (Gillen, Dickhaus, Swiat, and Linehan), you know you'll be getting something ingenious, something with a beginning, middle, and end (even when meant to surprise, like Linehan's), something with theme and variation or some other recognizably "good" craftsmanship. Yes, this is satisfying. How delicious it is to see, in *BOTLEK*, two dancers at the top of their game in white hazmat suits fill Joyce Soho's traditional black box space with Gillen's "well-made" phrases. How bewildering, in a "how does he do that?" way, to see Linehan's seemingly effortless talking/dancing, a combination that isn't easy.

But Bernard's and Michel's pieces, on the other hand, generate something like anxiety. A wee bit of danger. Like it's probable something will happen onstage that wasn't rehearsed and that the performer will experience just as baldly as the watcher. Maybe something will get really screwed up. Maybe we'll share something that wasn't planned. I like this quality; it sort of makes my hair stand on end. I feel like I'm rooting for an underdog.

I've just read an interview with a Jesuit who works with gang members in LA, Father Gregory Boyle, who distinguishes between the REAL world and the Kingdom of God. He says that, unlike the Darwinism of the REAL world, in the Kingdom of God it's about the survival of the Unfittest! I like this metaphor for the dance world.

Playwright Rob Erickson captured this idea brilliantly in an interview in *PAJ* 98. "I try to expose effort. I try to give an audience an opportunity to root for me.... I want my work to be sick, like symptomatic; I want it to feel weak at the knees, to feel like it needs to be helped across the street.... I want an audience to worry, at first, that I not be able to continue or to finish ...."<sup>2</sup>

So. About the training of dancers: as Bernard projects on the screen at the end of *OUETTE*, perhaps "you're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't."

## **Night #2: Too much information**

Three solos dominate the programming of Night #2, fitting into a sort of pocket in my head with Sigman's solo from earlier in the month and Bernard's and Michel's solos from Night #1.

They are *Life of a Mosquito*, created and performed by Kiyoko Kashiwagi with Shu Nakamura (so technically not a solo, but Nakamura provides a live soundtrack on guitar—only Kashiwagi dances); *White*, created and performed by Florentina Holzinger and Marta Ziolk (again, technically not a solo, but Ziolk was denied a visa from Poland and only appears via Skype); and *Crete for C*, created and performed by Karol Tyminski, another ex-patriated Pole.

**Kashiwagi**, born in Japan, is among the most dancier of performers so far in the festival, with clear technical achievement, extended line, lovely feet, and gamine charm. Her memorial to the Japanese earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear emergency of 2011 is heartfelt.

I might give **Holzinger's** solo *White* a subtitle: *What would Carolee Schneeman do?* The centerpiece of the work, like a dance within a dance, is a fairly squicky moment when the droll Holzinger, naked from the waist down, spreads her legs to pull a length of blue twine from her pussy, while simultaneously sucking an identical length of twine into her mouth. I wonder if she is familiar with Schneeman's 1975 *Interior Scroll*. Well who cares really. Taylor Mac has said that comparison is violence, that critics who compare a thing

seen to something else seen at some other time need to invest in thesauruses. In his monolog, *The Bob Hope of Drag*, Mac says, “Comparisons are for people who don’t have enough adjectives in their vocabulary.”<sup>3</sup> I don’t agree with him of course. “Compare and contrast” is an important function of art historical writing and nothing happens in a vacuum. Something about Holzinger’s commitment and authenticity transcends any question that this has been done before. She seems to be having a lot more fun than Schneeman did at any rate. I’d say Holzinger’s tongue was in her cheek if it wasn’t so busy already.

**Tyminski:** lugubrious, stoic, and gnomish, delivers his internalized form of sign language, repetition, and retrograded phrases from left to right as the watcher’s eye follows, like type across the page, in a reductive virtuosity of endurance.

Six of the soloists seen so far (Bernard, Michel, Kashiwagi, Holzinger, Tyminski) all begin from an improvisational enquiry into off-balance, limited-range gestural material. They seem to listen carefully to their internal impulses and rhythms, allowing each impulse to build and propel them into the next, possibly unknown thing. I find myself sorting through my memory of their pieces by differentiating their qualities as people rather than as dancemakers:

1. The performer—do I find the person charming, quirky, obstinate, petulant, pretty, sexy?
2. Do their images resonate with my experience and worldview or challenge same?
3. Does their gender and/or ethnicity and/or projected sexual identity attract me, include me, distance me?

*Is there a German portmanteau word that means nostalgia combined with regret and covetousness? Below, some of the elements found in or emotions elicited by these solos are listed alphabetically. All of these thoughts really went through my head. If you’d like to participate in this review and have seen any of these solos, please check all that apply and feel free to submit to [knowyourownbone.wordpress.com](http://knowyourownbone.wordpress.com) as a comment.*

- Did it create a sacred space?
- Did it fill you with longing?
- Did it include drooling, fake masturbation, or screaming?
- Did it leave you with a sense of an abject body before its God?
- Did it manipulate costumes?
- Did it overshare?
- Did it project or refer to or talk about film?

- Did it rely on props?
- Did it reveal a “sexy ghost, a performer, a demon, a gadfly”<sup>4</sup>
- Did it use a laptop?
- Did it use an iPhone?
- Did the soloist scare you or seem to need his or her head examined?
- Was it “beautiful”?
- Was it “unsatisfied—dancing on nails!”<sup>4</sup>
- Was it funny, deep, sad, pornographic, or spiritual?
- Was it self-indulgent?
- Was the soloist deadpan or ironic or earnest?
- Were you torn between wanting to be the soloist and wanting to bone the soloist?

Also on the program of Night #2 are two non-solos. *Two*, choreographed by **Johanna S. Meyer**, is danced by three: the choreographer, Alexandra Hartmann, and Maja Rajenovich. Audrey Kindred, who is also in the audience, asks me after the show if I could tell which one of the three was the choreographer. I wasn't certain, but I guessed correctly. When the maker of the thing is also in the company of performers, I feel like you can see the maker monitoring her own, and everyone else's, performances with a different attentiveness. Hopefully it isn't sexist of me to think of this dance as domestic, as in “homely.” There is a simplicity and humility to the flinging and scooting, and something ordinary, organic, like a trip to the food co-op. Mexican serapes are manipulated, made into swaddlings. A docent leads us through the scuff marks of a dance finished, evaporated.

### **Wax Factory, 416 Minutes**

This film excerpt reminds me of the smeared-mascara histrionics and shadow mysteries of David Lynch's *Inland Empire*—if it was populated by the slags and brutes and insider movie-within-a-movie machinations of Fassbinder's *Beware of a Holy Whore*. There, an entire paragraph of comparison. Was that violent?

### **Night #3: “Bit my pretty red heart in two”<sup>5</sup>**

Oh no. Three more solos. I begin to fear I won't be able to remember who did what, so I scramble to document every thought and feeling and probably miss what a journalist would give you: who did what when where how. Well that's somebody else's project. I'm not here to document what happened as much as to document the experience I had while it was happening. My project is subjective criticism performatively written, in case you were wondering.

***Think Not*, Choreographed by Deborah Hay, performed by Nicole Bindler**

I've seen a lot of people perform the solos that are created during Deborah Hay's Solo Performance Commissioning Project in Scotland. Hay requires that each participant raise the money to pay for the residency from their community, then take the solo back to that community as a gift. I've seen some people use Hay as an excuse to indulge their already ripe egos; I've seen others rip her off entirely. Hay's principle instruction to all participants is to "invite being seen." Bindler gets this. In *Think Not*, even her eyeballs don't mind being looked into. She touches Hay's invitation to idiosyncrasy lightly, deepening the already powerful yet humble presence I've seen in one other piece of hers. Dressed in a Smith or Vassar girl's skirt and sweater, something Candice Bergen might have worn in *Carnal Knowledge*, she offers casual mudras, becoming a Shiva cooing nonsense sing-song.

***Edith & Me*, created and performed by Krista DeNio**

Since Piaf's relentless nasal trill works my nerves after about a minute and since I'm currently not feeling empathy for junkies, poor DeNio is doomed if she wants to win me over. Even though her performance is accomplished, a strong physical and theatrical presence with a *Totentanz* vibe, I can't connect Piaf's mad rambling heroin-inspired melancholy with any relevance on this particular evening. I hope to see DeNio again, in something that doesn't make me need to look away.

***on est déshabillé, a comedy about death*, written, created, and performed by Eliza Ladd**

Ladd, who channels a galumphing woman carrying a big stick, draped in tragic Frederick's of Hollywood bargain bin and knee pads down to high-heeled slippers with marabou poofs, steals my heart. She looks, as Mrs Daigle from *The Bad Seed* might say, a bit sick and sloppy, or like Gena Rowlands in *A Woman Under the Influence*. She paddles a sinking boatload of characters who all seem obsessed with human frailty, disease, sickness, and death. This is my bailiwick! Surrounded by dead rats, pustulent toes, and

dead hair, Ladd seems to realize there's nothing more worth doing than to become a lounge chanteuse who croons to the cosmos.

I like dances like these that force me to query my beliefs or that confirm my worldview. That bump into and slide off the stuff I know already or wonder about. I root for them. I'm glad to have spent time in the unreal worlds of these unfittest artists. This is a place where I am happy to punch the clock, to hang my hat.

## Endnotes

1. H Wildon Carr, *Henri Bergson: The Philosophy of Change*, TC & EC Jack, London, 1912.
2. Joyce Cho in conversation with Visnja Rogosic. "Burning the Rules," *PAJ* 98, no. 2 (2011): 72-79.
3. Taylor Mac. "The Bob Hope of Drag" *The Be(a)st of Taylor Mac*, Ethyl Crisp Productions, 2009.
4. Anne Waldman. "Sleeping with the Hungry Ghost," *Tricycle* 20, no. 4 (2011): 76-77.
5. Sylvia Plath. "Daddy," *Ariel*, Harper & Row, New York, 1961.