

## ***WORKSession in Four Walls***

**Four interdisciplinary artists showcase the moving body in a salon-like setting.**

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By *Karen Hildebrand*



Karen Bernard, *Device Not Detected*. Photo: © Julie Lemberger.

## Chashama Gallery, 1 Brooklyn Bridge Park

*WORKSession in Four Walls*

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Inside a storefront gallery that faces the East River at Brooklyn Bridge park, four discrete performance spaces are mapped out on the concrete floor. Audience members grab spots on a bench at the center of the room where they can shift around as lights go up on each makeshift stage in turn. It's an intimate performance. The seventy-four year-old Karen Bernard confronts the fear of aging by dropping unceremoniously to the floor and getting back up; Rachel Thorne Germond looks back on a life in dance by sharing from her personal journals; filmmaker Jil Guyon embodies grief as a moving human sculpture; and Lisa Parra sings an opera composed of cocktail party chatter. Interdisciplinary artists all, for *WORKSession in Four Walls* they showcase their common language of the dancing body, beautifully depicted in four unique ways.



Jil Guyon, *WIDOW*. Photo: © Julie Lemberger.

*WORKSession* is a project of New Dance Alliance, founded by Bernard, and supported by ChaShaMa, an organization that partners with property owners to make unused real estate available to artists. Bernard opens the evening with her work, *Device Not Detected*, by explaining that after she made a piece about falling, her back went out. "I'm pretty obsessed with death, dying, and old age," says her character while crouched on the floor. "But now I just want to get down to the floor and back up." She gives us three rounds of this revolutionary act. I could have watched many more. She defies convention in other ways as well. Peeling down to a sparkly sequined top, with shorts and socks that reveal her well-used knees, she stands before a wall of hot pink light and gets down to a disco beat with an abandon straight out of the 1980s.

Meanwhile, Jil Guyon has been standing motionless between a heating riser and ventilation duct. The space she creates reminds me of the alcoves that display statues of saints in cathedrals. She's wearing nothing but a black push-up bra, briefs, high heels, and a slash of red lipstick. A black spandex band drapes from her waist and bunches in a pile at the floor, ultimately connecting to a spider web-like sculpture of twisted black tulle hung on the wall. The light above dims when the show begins, but Guyon remains in place throughout. *WIDOW* is visual art to be viewed both before and after the other performances.

In the most arresting work of the show, Lisa Parra vocalizes along with an audio recording of a crowd of people talking. Standing over her laptop computer, back to the audience, she quietly parrots words that rise from the chatter, like "Hi!," "Oh my goodness!" "Oh my god!" When she turns around, she stretches her arms into a generous port de bras, head tilted, mouth open wide, and recruits her entire body into the project of raising her voice. It's a startling thing to watch, every minute move exaggerated and slowed down in the effort to say, "Hi!" with the exact intonation as in the recording. Her neck juts, then recedes with a jerk. We are able to see how her jaw and ribcage distort and distend—it's as if her body has become a pixelated digital image. Yet these movements are subtle enough you might miss them if presented on a larger, more distant stage.



Lisa Parra, *Family Reunion\_side2*. Photo: © Julie Lemberger.

While Parra's *Family Reunion\_side2* excited me with its singularity and polish in the moment, it's Germond's *Memoir/Dance/Art* that won't leave me alone in retrospect. Germond takes on an ambitious mix of narrative, projected image, recorded text, props, and movement as she looks back at her NYC dance life from the distance of her parent's home in New Hampshire, where she spent the pandemic lockdown. Things get a little cluttered. Her set resembles a campsite with a halfway constructed tent. Her physical presence is her strongest asset. She plays both a Marilyn Monroe character in a black sheath dress and pink high heels, and a version of herself in rain jacket and sensible shoes. She does a charming, brief dance in the rain jacket. One small scene captures an appealing quirky essence: Marilyn raises a pink conch shell to her ear and listens, then finds her way into the tent where she can barely stand upright and pokes an arm through the metal supports to check for rain. It looks like she's wearing the tent as a hat. At the end, Germond repeats the sequence, this time raising one of Marilyn's pink heels to her ear as if the past is phoning in.



Rachel Thorne Germond, *Memoir/Dance/Art*. Photo: © Julie Lemberger.

To end the show, the light again goes up on *WIDOW*, with Guyon in her alcove beginning to move ever so slowly, turning to one side and arching her back into the shape of a figurehead on the prow of a ship. Guyon has previously used her widow character as the subject of several films. Six black-and-white images of other iterations of this persona hang on the adjacent wall: one shows Guyon in a black sheath dress climbing a broad staircase with the black fabric band trailing behind her, a rivulet of grief. For *WORKSession*, Guyon's tulle spider web sculpture effectively renders her as a black widow spider. By the time I left, she had dropped to a crouch with her back to the viewers.

## Contributor

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