

Art in America

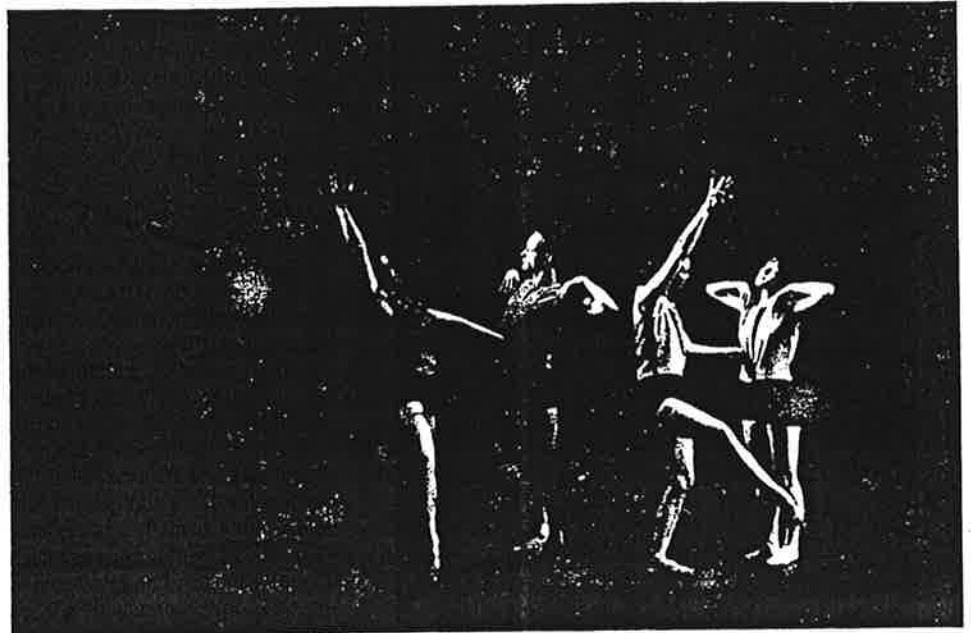
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In the work of Tere O'Connor what we see is more like a state of emergency, but one wholly absorbed into dancing. For while Kelly is a mixed-media practitioner, a collector of images, O'Connor is a plain choreographer. This is not to say that his work doesn't refer to anything outside itself—it clearly does—but much of its power lies in the fact that we don't know *what* it refers to.

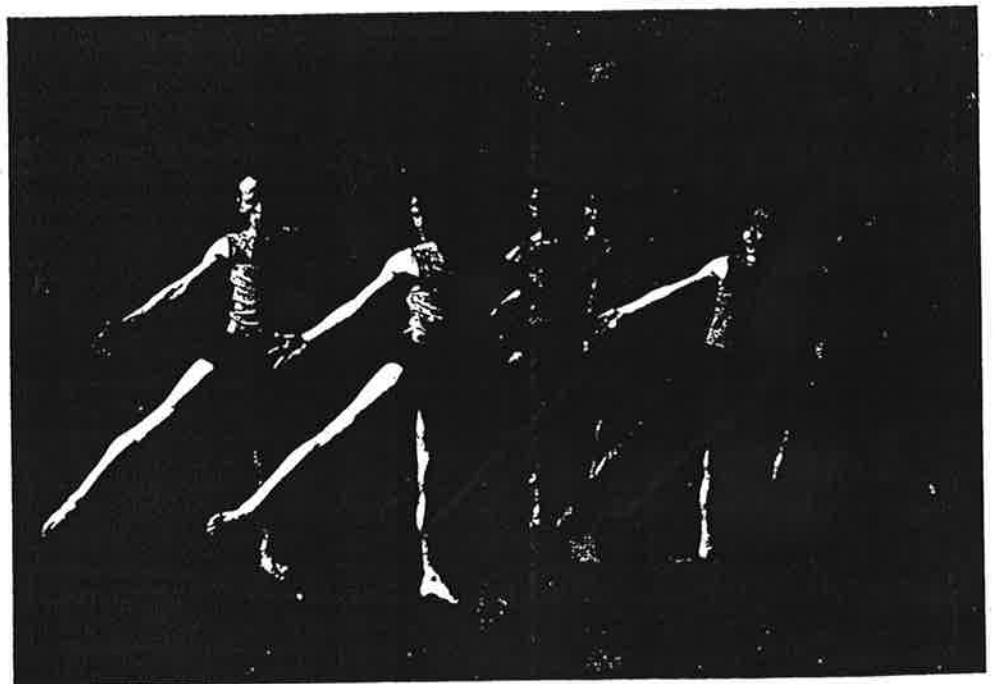
Typical is his new *Nursing the Newborn Pig*, shown at the Kitchen soon after Kelly's season. In this piece, as in many of O'Connor's works, the dancers are all dressed alike, in little unisex outfits that look like children's gym uniforms. The sound score, created by O'Connor, is also full of references to childhood: a baby's babbling, snatches of Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* (Songs of the Death of Children). Above all, the dancing looks like children's games, full of ritual and intensity. The six dancers pair off, march toward one another, make signs to one another. One does something, and the other sees and responds and does something else. All is understood. Not by us, though. The dancers' actions are almost completely opaque. Sometimes they seem to be swimming; sometimes they lurch around, shaken by terrible palsies; sometimes they seem to eat things off each other's chests, a sinister image. At one point a man grinds the crown of his head into a woman's solar plexus. Once that's over, she and another woman lower him carefully to the floor by his elbows. Everything is done methodically, as if that's what you do in that situation, and it is done with the utmost concentration. The dancers' eyes bug out; sweat streams off their bodies. Whatever it is they're up to, their lives depend on it.

Some people—and some critics—find this combination of intensity and obscurity in O'Connor's work simply maddening. But the work is read-

able. While you don't know what's going on, at the same time, obliquely, you do. When, as in one eerie moment, four of the dancers lie still on the floor while a woman bends over them, sweeping something with her hands, and a man has a quiet fit on the other side of the stage, you seem to see something like the forms, if not the content, of human action. That these forms are filled with fury and mystery is then not confusing. If anything, it makes us think about the degree of fury and mystery in our own lives. And again, as in Kelly's work, the very search for an expressive language is moving. In Kelly's work, though, you are moved to elegiac woe; in O'Connor's work, you feel something more like fear, as if you were being told a secret so terrible that there are no words for it.



Above and below, dancers from Tere O'Connor's *Nursing the Newborn Pig*; performed at the Kitchen, March 1991. Photos Paula Court.



BY JOAN ACOCELLA