

the village

## VOICE

## Watching watchers watch dancers up close and personal

JOHN JASPERSE COMPANY

The Kitchen  
512 West 19th Street  
212-255-5793  
Through SaturdayTHREE  
PERSPECTIVES

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

I'm lying on a clear plastic inflatable mattress, gazing up at a ceiling of Mylar panels that waveringly reflect the scene below: six rows of four beds just like mine. We pod people are one of three groups that populate John Jasperse's stunningly provocative *Prone*. More than 24 spectators sit on chairs facing one another across the Kitchen. In the aisles between the mattresses, Luciana Achugar, Levi Gonzalez, and Eleanor Hullihan dance, making bridges over us occupants. We don't reach up to touch the foot passing six inches from our face, or flinch when one of the three lies close to us. We know our role. The others are either performers or spectators; we are spectator-performers, sedate but kinesthetically aroused, crucial to the picture observed by the sitters. Midway through the event, those on mattresses will be gently escorted to chairs, and vice versa.

In his 2003 *Just Two*, a duet with Juliette Mapp, Jasperse set several small performance platforms among the Dance Theater Workshop audience, handing out mirrors that enabled us to choose our perspective. *Prone* goes even further—not just giving those lying on the floor the option of watching the action live or reflected in the overhead mirrors, but inviting the audience to consider issues of distance and proximity and to ponder the performer-spectator relationship.

Not even those sitting on chairs are exempt from moments that breach the “fourth wall.” Occasionally a dancer leans very close to a spectator, his or her face inches away, as if probing a puzzling life form. But those in the gleaming dormitory (beautifully lit by Jasperse and Joe Levasseur) have more choices and sensations than other viewers. When the dancers lie down in an aisle and execute a clever twist-and-drop sequence with their raised hands, the live action, from my perspective, resembles a kooky dance of animated flowers; if I look up, I see the three sardined together with something going on in the vicinity of their chests. I watch them fall and slide into a pile, but only by looking up can I see exactly

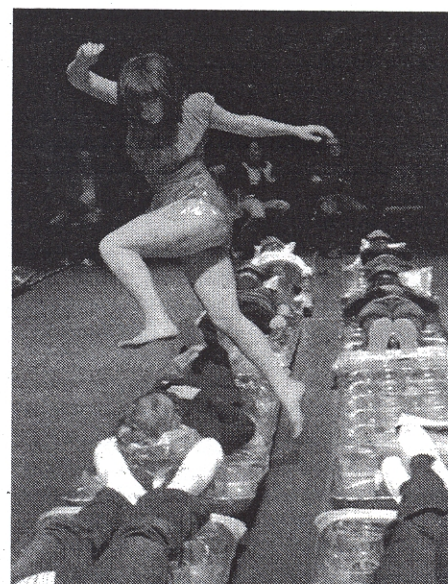
how the pile disassembles. At the beginning of *Prone*, when the performers bat clear air-filled plastic bags from aisle to aisle and into a heap against a wall, I'm enraptured by the objects' resemblance to glowing tumbleweeds, air-dwelling jellyfish; then one lands on my face. When in an adagio passage Hullihan stretches a long curved leg close to me, I can both admire the leg as leg and wonder where exactly she plans to put it down. After I become a seated watcher, I laugh with those around me when plastic protuberances inflate between the legs of the folks lying down (more like a crop to be harvested than like penises); the mattress people possibly focus more on the curious sensation.

Jasperse's choreography is often arduous; Zeena Parkins, playing her composition live and on tape through a surround of speakers, reflects this and goads it on. She's a visual delight herself, especially when she stands—a sorceress weaver—on the Kitchen's bleachers drawing a thin string across her electric harp, or makes the instrument scream like a woman in pain. The dancers build complicated structures, climbing on each other, morphing one achievement into another, repeating these in different locations. When lying in their zone, we're privy to their sweat, their hard breathing. As they lunge across our bodies or come very close, gazing at us, we can wonder what *they're* thinking (“Almost kicked that guy” or “This one smells good”?).

The interplay between comfort and risk is heady—most vivid in those few minutes when we inhale the soothing fragrance of lavender from black pads pressed over our eyes but hear racing, stomping feet moving among us, making the floor shake. The sensation of watching—or being—an alien form of life is intensified by the performers' focus. Intermittently, they appear to wonder about us, but much of the time we're objects; they're careful of us the way you'd try not to scratch good furniture. That in itself induces musings about the apparent passivity of the spectator's role.

I left the theater refreshed and stimulated. How often does that happen?

Read Jowitt on Sasha Waltz and Monica Bill Barnes at [villagevoice.com/dance](http://villagevoice.com/dance).



Photograph by Julieta Cervantes

Luciana Achugar leaps over a supine onlooker in Jasperse's *Prone*.