



Neil Greenberg *Not-About-AIDS-Dance*

photo: Johan Elbers

MOVEMENT RESEARCH

performance journal #10

performance/protest/resistance/activism

winter/spring
1995

Unbearable and Inescapable

by Neil Greenberg

I have been asked to write something about protest as it relates to dance, to art. It's strange for me, this. I have never seen my work to be especially political, a concept I immediately, though perhaps inappropriately, associate with protest. Yet my most recent work, *Not-About-AIDS-Dance*, has been cited as having political content, making it, perhaps, useful as a tool of protest.

Not-About-AIDS-Dance, more than any work I have ever created, was made out of my personal need. My brother Jon Greenberg died of AIDS on July 12, 1993. I was among a group of his friends who were with him when he died. I had never before been with someone at the time of their death. Within two months after Jon died five other men who were important to me died of AIDS. Add to all of this that I am HIV+, currently asymptomatic—this is what I brought into the first rehearsal toward the making of what eventually became *Not-About-AIDS-Dance*. I remember I told the dancers (Ellen Barnaby, Christopher Batenhorst, Justine Lynch, and Jo McKendry) at that rehearsal that I didn't know if I would be able to go on to make a dance or if this would be the only rehearsal. I didn't know if it would feel right to be working. It did feel right. It turned out to be a very beneficial process for me.

At one point in the dance I imitate what my brother Jon looked like in his coma. I think this has come to be the center of the dance for me. I can see the whole dance as an expression of my need to find a context for this moment. Art, I learned in a very real way this past year, does have a function. I have worked for years developing a way of expressing myself artistically and then, at a time of intensely great need, my developed skills served me and have helped me to live my life.

This dance was made more out of personal need than any I have made before; but every one of my dances has been made out of this need to process my experience in a way that only the act of making art can give me. I also think I am a "consumer," if you will, of art out of a need to experience what other people have made out of their deep personal and particular need. Over ten years ago I tried to define this. I wrote:

This is what an artist does.

He looks at that which he wants least to see, and tries to find some way to express it, to record what he is seeing, and begins to find a way, and begins to pursue this way of recording what he sees, what is most horrific in his consciousness, and he is terrified of what he sees, and he drops his thought, tries to drop his thought and move on to something innocuous, to sleep, but he has not only seen what is so terrible in his awareness but also searched for a way to record this sight, and he is now even more tempted by it, and when next he dares again to look at it he is frightened away less quickly, and he eventually does record what he has seen, what horrible thing he has found in his awareness of his life, and then he shows what he has recorded to someone else, to others.

Reading this now I am struck by the fact that I was still doing drugs at the time I wrote it. But I am also struck by the truth in this early and overly polemical manifesto. And here I come to protest. I think that one can say there is an element of protest in art. Protest, in this sense, not of a specifically political nature, but of an ontological nature. Protest of something in our experience that we find nearly unbearable, but something that is inescapably a part of life.

I received a rather unusual, but as it turns out, apt, Christmas gift last year while I was making *Not-About-AIDS-Dance*—the book *Denial of Death* by Ernest Becker. The book became a kind of bible for

me as I continued to work on the dance. It gives expression to so much of my experience. I couldn't begin to sum up here all I got from the book. Suffice it to say that Becker's major point, as I read it, and extremely simplified, is that we humans have a challenge, a problem, unique in the animal kingdom: we have knowledge of our own mortality. And this knowledge is, literally, too much for us, so we find ways to deny it and to otherwise limit our experience of life. We all do this and must do this to survive, though in varying ways and to varying degrees at different times in our lives.

Some attendant discussions in the book concern art (in these and much of the rest of the work Becker cites Otto Rank's *Art and Artist* as an important influence). One point about art is made in a discussion about neurosis. One type of neurotic is seen as having "difficulty fetishizing and narrowing-down; he has a vivid imagination, takes in too much experience, too large a chunk of the world." Becker goes on to say the artist, like this type of neurotic, "takes in the world, but instead of being oppressed by it he reworks it in his own personality and recreates it in the work of art.... We might say that both the artist and the neurotic bite off more than they can chew, but the artist spews it back out again and chews it over in an objectified way, as an external, active, work project.... From this point of view the difference between the artist and the neurotic seems to boil down largely to a question of talent."

I'm going into these quotes from *Denial of Death* because they quite accurately describe both my experience of life, along with the elements of denial in my life, and my experience of making art.

I think that, like a clinically diagnosed neurotic, my systems of denial are not quite complete enough to prevent me from sometimes taking in more of life than I can chew. I think a big and quite indigestible piece of life (perhaps *the* big and quite indigestible piece of life) came rushing at me in my brother's room at St. Vincent's Hospital: that there is death in life. And loss. Seemingly unbearable loss. And, very vividly for me at this time, there is AIDS. And I think that my work as an artist, the work I am truly blessed to be able to do (because it saves me from clinical neurosis), was a form of protest of these things that I found nearly unbearable, death and illness and loss, but which are finally a part, and thank goodness only a part, of life. And AIDS is very much and inescapably a part of life for me, for us, at this time.

This is the element of protest in art that most interests me. The "existential" protest, I suppose. This can be protest of death and loss, as I now find in many of what I have always felt to be great works of art. Or self-hatred (as I think was clearly the case in my dance *I Am A Miserable And Selfish Person (Kick Me Dance)*, perhaps along with protest of the elusive nature of happiness). Or it can be protest of some of the seemingly more pleasurable but at times equally difficult to bear mag-

nificent experiences of life: the awesome. The mysterious. Whatever the art is protesting, it is protesting an aspect of our experience that we usually have need to deny, but that we still sense is there, and which some part of us needs to acknowledge or we'd go insane. My point here is that however a work of art may speak to me consciously, I think that the primary value of art is in how it speaks to some part of my unconscious, a place I can't quite get to through any other means.

I am interested in this explanation of art because it explains what gives art its uniquely important value. Art is useful. It helps me, both in creating it myself and experiencing the work of other artists, to live my life (and avoid institutionalization to the greatest extent possible). Art doesn't have to try to be useful, and here I come to my knee-jerk understanding of protest as it connects to the political as it connects to the propagandistic. This kind of protest in a work of art, this "trying very hard to be useful," rarely speaks to me very strongly. I often find it reduces the uniquely important value of the art for me in that, by trying so hard to speak to my conscious self, and from the artist's conscious self, the work is not quite so able to speak to my unconscious self.

It's interesting that *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* is seen as having political use. Discussions of the personal being political may be in order here. Of honesty being political by itself. I'm glad if the work does have some political use. I am HIV+ and gay. My brother and other friends who died last year died of AIDS and were gay. There is political work to be done around AIDS and HIV due to homophobia, racism, and other issues. I'm glad if that moment in the dance when I imitate Jon in his final coma "humanizes a plague and a political issue" (from *The New York Times*). It would be coy of me to claim that I had no conscious political motives. It was important to me to "come out" as being gay and being HIV+ in the text that is a part of the work, and to make clear that the deaths of my friends mentioned in the piece were from AIDS. There is political motive there. But more than political motive, there was personal need. I think I included my HIV+ status in the piece, for example, because I felt the need to break my own denial of it, a much stronger need than any desire I had to politicize the issue.

Watching Jon die, and die of AIDS, was for me like watching myself die, and die from AIDS. The experience brought me closer to conceptualizing my own death than I had ever come before, and perhaps ever will again. The experience brought me to great grief and despair. Nearly unbearable for me, yet inescapable. So I did what I have always done—I made a dance.

Neil Greenberg lives in New York City where he dances, choreographs, and teaches. He is also the new dance curator at the Kitchen.