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Inscrutable iterations: *a quartet* at The Kitchen



By Ivan Talijancic,

This week, the New York premiere of a new evening-length work, choreographed by Heather Kravas, was presented at The Kitchen as part of the COIL 2014 festival, which is organized by the intrepid, risk-embracing downtown presenting organization endearingly called PS122 (aka Performance Space 122.) More an installation than a performance, it is, in a way, a fitting choice to present *a quartet* at the Kitchen's upstairs gallery – a space that is typically dedicated to visual arts exhibitions – rather than the venue's ground floor theatre.



Featuring – as the title suggests – four performers, the work is also divided into four parts, and, technically speaking, negotiates in performative strategies of endurance, exhaustion and duration, capturing the zeitgeist owed much to the current resurgence of durational performance that has heavily propagated across the US in recent years thanks to the large museums and, well, Marina Abramović.

In the opening section, the performers enter the empty stage floor, sandwiched between two single rows of audience seating placed close (but not quite) against the opposite walls of the gallery. Dressed in street clothing, they form a single line, reiterating a highly contained vocabulary of hand gestures. There is something both primal and primary about this act – it is very one-track-minded, coital in its hip thrusts and tireless uttering of a single word (“want”). Even though no music is used to score this part, it feels musical in its canon-like structure – alternating patterns of repetition, overlapping, and unison –

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both in movement and sound.

In the second section, I suddenly become aware of a guitar soloist wearing the poker face of a bona fide hipster – as she builds upon a deliciously distorted guitar riff, the performers disrobe one by one and slowly, deliberately create a series of tableaux of reclining nudes. In this section, as before – and, as it will turn out, for the duration of the piece – they barely relate to each other. Their presence is visual and spacial at best, and automaton-like at the more reductive end of the spectrum. For whatever that is worth, they are presented on the stage as sculptural entities rather than human presences or characters. What seem like basic geometrical shapes turn out to be letters they are forming with their bodies, I discover a few minutes into part two – a few minutes too late to figure out whether it was a word, what word, and whether it was important for me to know what they were spelling to begin with.

The third segment of *a quartet* was also the work's most exacting. I would refer to it as the "ballet section" – two women changed into tutus, accompanied by another couple in outfits that seemed to visually reference the realm of the competition dancing. Besides being the longest part of the evening, it was also the one in which live human presence was dehumanized the most. While the ballerinas joylessly executed one balletic turn after next (and on like that several hundred times), the other couple expressionlessly marched to a deafening beat worthy of something out of an early Einsturzende Neubauten album. The topography of this section was a system, crafted with mathematical exactitude. Yet, I can't say that its length was warranted:



while it was certainly an endurance test for performers and audiences alike, the pro advocate in me wants to say it wanted to be durational, but the con weighs in (and wins), concerned that the work simply doesn't have dramaturgical, narrative, character or choreographic heft to sustain interest – in a performance context, that is (within a work that is packaged in a theatrical/presentational style to a seated audience for a determined period of time.) The experience of it was akin to watching a master craftsman execute an elaborate filigree – it is meticulously crafted, but to what end?

By the time the fourth, final section came along, the work felt completely pedestrian – the

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performers repeating a mind-numbing mantra of a grocery list and wandering aimlessly around and outside the gallery, making noise with cow bells.

I would argue that the music (performed live by Dana Wachs, who goes by the moniker Vorhees) was the strongest element of the show. The musician had the coolest toys in the sandbox, and made some sonic gold that I found myself lost in when the show couldn't sustain my attention.

Indeed, *a quartet* remained rather inscrutable through much of its 90 intermission-less minutes. The only connection that came to mind was that it was attempting to comment on the punishing nature of dance as a profession – where one's body ends up being used (and abused) and pushed to the limits by anyone from the choreographer up to the corporate client, on the commercial end of the hiring spectrum. But, based on reading the press release, I suspect Kravas did not intend for my (or anyone else's) mind to wander in that direction. I found myself yearning for some humanity, for some flesh and blood. I imagine someone into systems analysis could derive some geeky pleasure out of the experience in the same way in which (s)he might get hot under the collar by examining the Fibonacci sequence. But for those of us interested in a human experience in a performance context (which is one of the few domains in the arts where human connection and communal sharing experience is still valuable), it left us strangely starved.