

ARTFORUM

SUMMER 1997 \$7.00



Jennifer Monson, *Sender*, 1997. Performance view. Photo: Carolina Kroon.

JENNIFER MONSON THE KITCHEN

As a dance form, contact improvisation has always been something of a cult. Since its inception in the mid '60s, its followers—performers and audiences alike—have remained a tight-knit group who understand its basic purpose as a research tool for discovering new, untutored movements. “Falling,” “releasing,” “trusting,” “touching”—words strung together like worry beads—represent the core vocabulary as well as the spirit of the beliefs on which these collaborative performances have always been based. Like improvisation in jazz, the thrill of shaping the unexpected has always driven contact-improvisation performances. Viewers can take pleasure in concentrated watching; they can see dancers thinking as they move and can wonder whether a particular combination is something freshly made before their eyes or one recalled from a previous afternoon’s run-through. Tacitly understood is the fact that movements will often be flatfooted, or even intentionally clumsy, and that virtuosity will, at all costs, be hidden or disguised.

Seen in this context, Jennifer Monson’s *Sender*, 1997, springs brilliantly to life. Her work shows that even a discipline that has long eschewed sophistication can be sophisticated, that a commitment to avoiding technique can produce a highly articulated one, and that improvisation, under the artful play of alert dancers (Eduardo Alegria, Heather Cunningham,

D. D. Dorvillier, Christine Pichini, and Daniela Pinto), can achieve wonderful harmonies as well as intricate choreographic shapes and textures. The brute-force physicality of these dancers adds a late-'90s edginess to the kinder, gentler contact work of previous decades; the result is a blend of tenderness and aggression, humor and seriousness, banality and beauty, as in the sequence in which dancers rush arm-in-arm at the back wall, determined to crash, but suddenly one lifts the other to climb it and supports her again as she falls away. Another sequence lines the dancers in a diagonal, wrists firmly linked, and has each climb in turn across the other’s thighs and shoulders as though across a wall. In addition, the music that accompanies *Sender*, scored by Zeena Parkins, provides its own marker of avant-garde traditions; a brief overture of found sounds—keys banged in a metal bowl, a huge metal chain struck against a cooking pot—nods to John Cage, but quickly takes off with a bass line and scratching noise that brings it into the flow of rap.

Like the improvised ensemble acting in Mike Leigh’s films, contact improvisation advances the proposition that truth telling makes a unique sense of intimacy possible for performers and viewers alike. *Sender* joins the emotional and visceral experience of such intimacy with a choreographic language of pure physicality.

—RoseLee Goldberg

