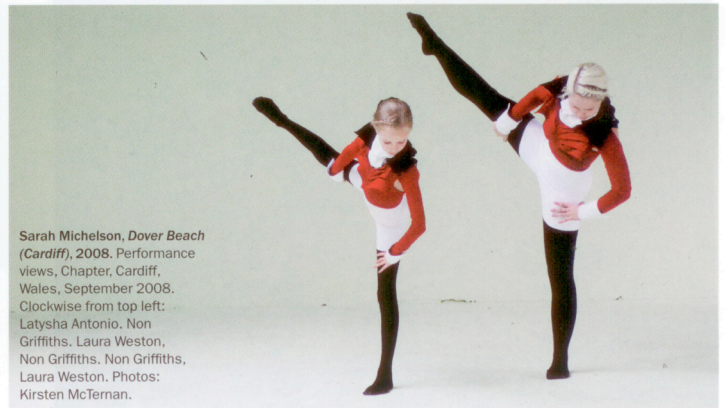


ARTFORUM

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

May 2009



Sarah Michelson, *Dover Beach* (Cardiff), 2008. Performance views, Chapter, Cardiff, Wales, September 2008. Clockwise from top left: Latysha Antonio. Non Griffiths. Laura Weston. Non Griffiths. Non Griffiths, Laura Weston. Photos: Kirsten McTernan.

ARTFORUM

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

May 2009

WHAT BECOMES A GIMMICK MOST? For that matter, what becomes a gimmick? This is the sort of question that vexes the choreographer Sarah Michelson. Was it a gimmick to serve rotisserie chicken during intermission in *Dogs*, 2006? To include the white limousine “getaway car” at the end of *Shadowmann: Part 1*, 2003? What about her persistent use of little girls? Or the cheap, cartoonish horse-head masks in her latest dance, *Dover Beach*, an early version of which debuted last September at Chapter in Cardiff, Wales, and which will have its stateside premiere this June at the Kitchen? (Speaking to this last example, Michelson offers that at least the horse heads are “gimmicky.”)

It may or may not have been a gimmick for Michelson to commission for her 2005 piece *Daylight (for Minneapolis)* at the Walker Art Center fifty painted portraits of her curator, Philip Bither, one of each of her dancers, and one each, too, of Kathy Halbreich and Richard Flood, then director and deputy director of the institution. And it may have been a joke on the ritual mythologization of the performer or a fetishistic homage to it (the difference is not always clear) when Michelson installed these portraits as set pieces throughout the museum and its theater for the dance. That this cocksure act shadowed a concurrent Chuck Close exhibition in the Walker’s galleries did not go unnoticed by Michelson, who ate up the irony of such a juxtaposition. “A gimmick is anything that’s in there that I enjoy a little too much,” she admits.

“Attitude sells,” Joan Acocella wrote of such provocations in 2005, capping off a cranky (if generally positive), now-notorious *New Yorker* piece on four darlings of Manhattan’s “downtown” dance scene. The august balletomane was referring specifically to Michelson, who was then becoming something of a cause célèbre in the dance world and beyond for her unusual style, transformative sets,

and tendency to talk to the press about rent trouble and personal injuries. In the same article, Acocella glibly dubbed Michelson and the others (Tere O’Connor, Christopher Williams, and Lucy Guerin) “surrealists” for their “irrational,” anti-narrative impulses and ambiguous sound tracks and gestures.

There is indeed a dreamlike logic to Michelson’s dances, if also a peculiarly dialectical one that hovers between the deliberate and the arbitrary, between the recondite and the free-associative. Each element is finely tuned to a specific, sophisticated audience; she prefers the elaborate logic of the inside joke to the banal logic of spectacle, often demanding more of her spectators than they can possibly give. Michelson is an unusual figure, one who finds affinities with both Christopher Wheeldon and Yvonne Meier, both Twyla Tharp and (early) Yvonne Rainer; she is outside, but not necessarily antagonistic to, the generic lineages of ballet, modern, and “postmodern” dance, and in this way she is representative of a field of contemporary choreographers whose activity has most densely accumulated around small, vanguard New York institutions. Her movements can evoke different styles, but she fervently repudiates pastiche. She nests old dances within new dances like *matryoshka* dolls, employs unusual repetitions, and designs gestures whose principal aim is to make the dancer *work*. Actions become contagious: A man on a balcony scooping with his arm can infect a mass of dancers below, who will anxiously repeat the motion before collapsing or breaking into sprints. Does all this make her a surrealist? Maybe it does, maybe it doesn’t. Either way, such an appellation surely obscures as much as it reveals. With Michelson, it might be more legitimate to say that attitude doesn’t simply sell—it becomes form.

—DAVID VELASCO

1000 WORDS

Sarah Michelson

TALKS ABOUT *DOVER BEACH*, 2009

IN 2006, JAMES TYSON, the theater programmer at Chapter in Cardiff, Wales, invited me to make a piece there. I hadn’t been back to the UK in a while, and I wanted to be nearer to my granny; he said I could do anything, so I agreed to it. I arrived in January of 2007, a month and a half after I’d had hip surgery. I was on crutches; it was pouring down rain; I was staying in a bed-and-breakfast and didn’t know anybody. There were no plans at all, not for dinner, not even to show me around—which was very James. Turns out he really did mean, “Oh, you’ll come to Wales and do whatever you want.”

I found this little ballet class and decided to watch. The teacher’s mother had been a professional dancer

and had taught the class before her. Her mother was still helping out, and her three daughters were in the class. There were three generations of these Welsh women in this tiny, freezing schoolroom studying this archetypal form—pirouette, relevé. I stayed and watched four hours of classes. I kept thinking, What are they hoping for, these girls? It was very Billy Elliot—you know, the fat girl who couldn’t get her leotard on. Most of them were not naturals, to say the least, but they were very serious. I could have watched it forever, these little girls throwing themselves up against this archetype in the middle of nowhere, for nobody.

I thought, OK, this is what I’m interested in here;

I’m going to make a piece with them. I was curious to know whether it would look like a Sarah Michelson dance, whatever that is. Would they look like me? It would have been easy to do a different dance, to take my regular group—Parker Lutz, with whom I make all the visual design, Mike Iveson, Greg Zuccolo—and just make something. But separating myself from the dancers I knew was a way of allowing myself to work more concretely with movements themselves—to not rely on the “known” performance history or cachet of the performers. For these new dancers, I’ve been creating extreme, task-based series of movements that are not allowed to connect. For my own choreographic control, I’m struggling to eliminate a

ARTFORUM

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

May 2009

We've rejected ballet once, and now we're doing whatever it is we're doing. Do we have to keep on rejecting it? To be truly modern (lowercase *m*), do you have to reject something that's come before you? It's not allowed to be middle-class when you're a dance maker—not in the realm I'm interested in, anyway.

certain history of the dancer's body, the part that comes through rhythm or a performer's interpretation of how you get from one thing to the next. In this dance, I'm trying to create performers from scratch; I'm attempting to own and objectify them.

For the premiere at the Kitchen in June, we're flying in two of the girls from Wales. I couldn't do the piece without Non, the younger one. She's eleven going on twelve. Her inability/naïveté is as interesting to me as her ability. Her ability is phenomenal—it's very detailed. But it's a certain kind of virtuosity; it's not a physical ease, it's a performance ease. And for me, she could only do the part "correctly" for a brief window of time before she's too old, before she becomes a teenager. I keep calling her parents and asking, "Has she grown?"

During the making of *Dogs*, which showed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, I recall having said, "I wonder if it's possible to get away with reciting a poem during a dance—without being cheeseball." So that was in the back of my mind: How could I make a dance that would support the structure of a poem? I began reading nineteenth-century English poetry and came across [Matthew Arnold's] "Dover Beach." Of course I found it stupidly romantic, but I was also moved by that potentially Mills & Boon, trite, overindulgent sentimentality. At the same time, I felt it had a real relationship to place and time and a feeling about a country (one that I'm from, at that), and I was interested in this sense of *Britishness*. The poem's form engenders feeling. Now that I've made a dance that includes a poem, I wonder if people will think I'm simply being clever. When I hear the poem recited, I think, Is it for real, or am I kidding?

While researching the poem, I came across these odd communities of online "readers." I found two on YouTube whom I liked; they had these long, public conversations about how much they enjoyed each other's versions. At a certain point, my favorite

one, this guy from Manchester who spoke in my original accent, had removed his profile. So I ended up going with a recording of my second choice, an older, middle-class Englishman. When I watched the whole performance in Cardiff, I decided I had to own up to it. It's not that I *want* to make this kind of work—I'm *disgusted* by this kind of work, this weird modern dance where things look pristine and emotional and people are "expressing" themselves; therefore I'm going to present it to myself.

At Chapter, we'd used this large George Stubbs hunting landscape as part of the set. (I would love to paint a giant version for the Kitchen, but I don't think we'll be able to afford it.) I've been accused of making sets that are worthy of being called visual art, so this use of scenic painting was a bit of a joke. There's something about what's "not allowed" that I'm attracted to, whatever that might be. It's allowed to take your pants off—that's *really* allowed. What's not allowed is to do ballet movements with a hunting scene. I don't know what we're afraid of. We've rejected ballet once, and now we're doing whatever it is we're doing. Do we have to keep on rejecting it? To be truly modern (lowercase *m*), do you have to reject something that's come before you? It's not allowed to be middle-class when you're a dance maker—not in the realm I'm interested in, anyway. It's absolutely allowed in other realms—it *is* that other realm. On a proscenium stage at Lincoln Center, say—as opposed to its intended downtown venue, the Kitchen—parts of *Dover Beach* would simply look like that *thing*. Which of course could be interesting, too.

I'm also interested in modularity—or juxtaposition, though I think that's an overused word. When I made *Daylight (for Minneapolis)*, it was as part of a commission by Philip Bither for the opening of Herzog & de Meuron's McGuire Theater at the Walker Art Center. The piece had its first presentation in New York at P.S. 122, and in the set design

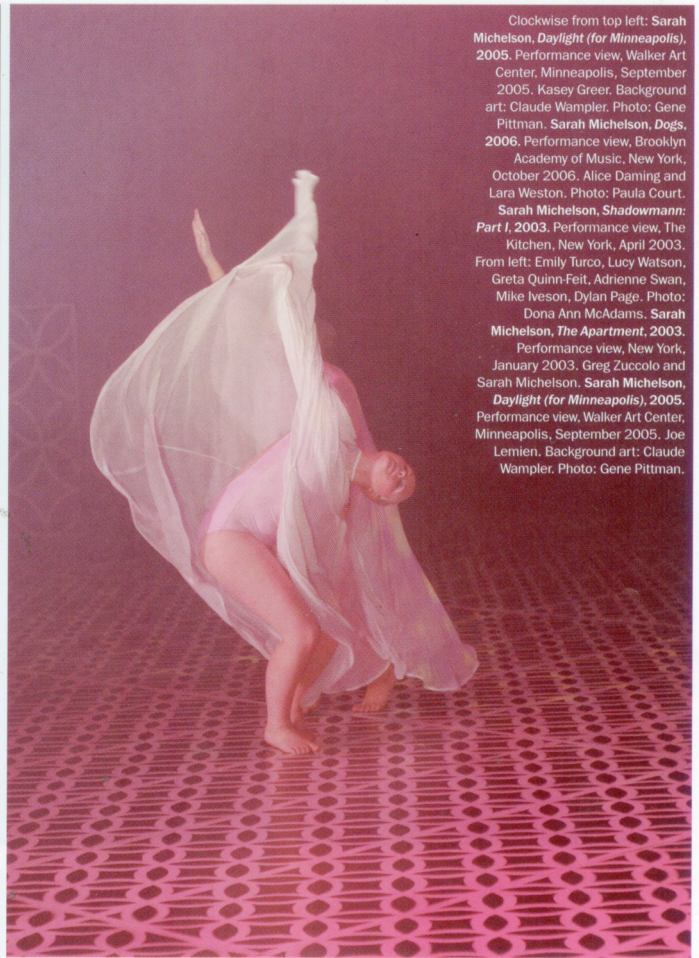
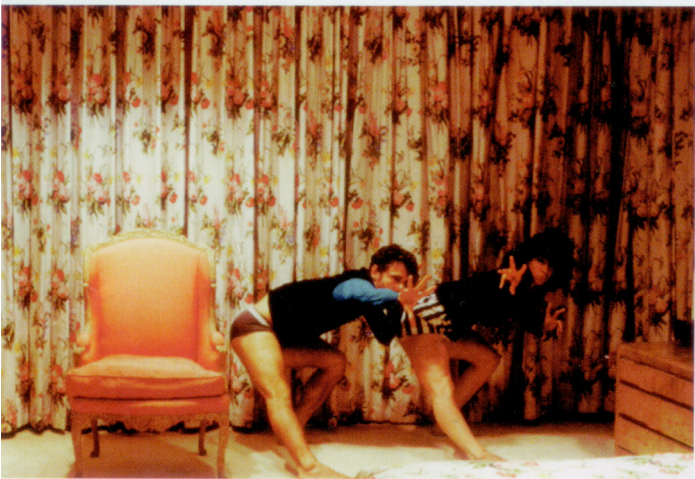
we used certain elements that we knew were going to be used at the McGuire: There were decorative stencils of lace employed by the architects there (theater is all "hide and reveal," they had noted), which we installed in the P.S. 122 lobby windows, and we put the same fabric used on the McGuire's seats underneath the risers. When we remade the piece in Minneapolis, we moved the whole set from New York and placed it in the middle of the McGuire's stage. The idea was that my "downtown," cheap, P.S. 122 version, built according to our interpretation of details from Herzog & de Meuron's PowerPoint presentation of their building, would go and sit inside this grand space.

The same thinking often inflects the dances themselves. In the first part of *Shadowmann*, at the Kitchen, there were five very young girls in the stage-left wing doing a dance, *Grivdon at the Grivdon Concrete*, that I'd made previously for the same venue; in *Daylight (for Minneapolis)*, at the Walker, we had fifty girls—the youngest was six, the oldest fifteen—performing a dance I had made for the Lyon Opera Ballet. These embedded dances are a response to the question of whether my work could exist in repertory. My works are not reproducible in any practical way—each piece is made for a very specific context and includes a very specific group of people. They even take into account a specific group of peers—the audience at the Kitchen, dancers within the European festival touring circuit—and each dance is related to the dances that preceded it. I don't expect anyone else to give a fuck about this, but if anyone *does* care about me as an artist, then you have to know that context is crucial. My process thus far has been subtractive: Of course I'm going to make a dance featuring a limousine, but I don't have to do that again, and now I've taken that away from myself. And now what's left? Take away the limousine, and you get middle-class hunting scenes. □

ARTFORUM

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

May 2009



Clockwise from top left: Sarah Michelson, *Daylight (for Minneapolis)*, 2005. Performance view, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, September 2005. Kasey Greer. Background art: Claude Wampler. Photo: Gene Pittman. Sarah Michelson, *Dogs*, 2006. Performance view, Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York, October 2006. Alice Daming and Lara Weston. Photo: Paula Court. Sarah Michelson, *Shadowmann: Part I*, 2003. Performance view, The Kitchen, New York, April 2003. From left: Emily Turco, Lucy Watson, Greta Quinn-Feit, Adrienne Swan, Mike Iveson, Dylan Page. Photo: Dona Ann McAdams. Sarah Michelson, *The Apartment*, 2003. Performance view, New York, January 2003. Greg Zuccolo and Sarah Michelson. Sarah Michelson, *Daylight (for Minneapolis)*, 2005. Performance view, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, September 2005. Joe Lemien. Background art: Claude Wampler. Photo: Gene Pittman.

