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Tropics of Minimalism

REAL MINIMALISM wasn't an idea that dancers played around with for very-long. Yvonne Rainer's famous manifesto, printed in *Tulane Drama Review* in 1965, scraped away all the accretions of theatricality, egotism, and sentiment that she felt had been smothering the dance art. "NO to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe," said Rainer, and no to a lot more. Minimal dance as practiced by Rainer, Deborah Hay and others had a dry, boring clarity. You knew nobody was trying to seduce you or con you or mystify you. The point was small but unmistakable.

In dance, minimalism worked as a corrective measure rather than an art form. By the time its principles had been enunciated, everyone who had started out to work with plain, non-narrative, non-manipulative movement was expanding out into wider realms of mysticism, mixed media, complex structures or games. By 1971 Rainer herself began using stories, and two years later she made her last dance-theater-film work, *This is the Story of a Woman Who . . .*, and segued into filmmaking.

For an idea that lasted such a relatively short time in its crystal form, minimalism has had a powerful effect on our dance frame of reference. This spring, almost by accident, I found myself showing two dance films to a San Francisco audience—Twyla Tharp's *Sue's Leg* and a new movie of Rainer performing her 1966 cornerstone piece, *Trio A*. This seven-minute dance is a concise statement of minimalist theory. Wearing a dark T-shirt and sweat pants, Rainer works close to one spot. Her movement consists mostly of folding and unfolding the body in different ways, some fairly intricate but none requiring the specialized apparatus of a trained dancer. Nothing is repeated; the progression is nonstop, there are no transitions or adjustments between the large units of movement, and the dynamics are very even; there's no compositional complexity—only one thing is going on at a time; Rainer's focus and performing attitude are deliberately neutral, aimed straight into the space where she's going. When I realized I would somehow have to relate this plainspoken, radically severe work to Tharp's glamorous Fats Waller dance of 1975, I was a bit worried.

But when I saw the two films together, Rainer looked much less strange to me than she did 15 years ago. The attitudes of minimalism have filtered into some of our most popular theater dance forms, and none shows them more clearly than Tharp. A primary goal of minimalism was to draw attention to the body as a nonvirtuosic movement source—to show that any movement is worth looking at, not just tricks or exaggerated gestures; and a primary characteristic of the Tharpian dancer is his or her familiarity. Tharp attains this look by the use of minimal devices. The clothes are based on streetwear, not dance costume; the dancer's body is

easy, sometimes even slouchy, not pulled up and distorted into dancery grandeur; the focus is inward and the projection modest; the movement flows continuously, not stopping to pose or emphasize, and the dancer is responsive to his or her body weight instead of resisting it. All this makes a Tharp dancer look natural, and Tharp dancing look like anybody could do it. We couldn't, of course, but the ordinariness provides us with a bridge to Tharp's choreographic labyrinths.

Perhaps because people branched out from it so quickly, minimalism in dance has never become codified. It can mean many things, and choreographers who aren't minimal at all, like Tharp, have incorporated aspects of it. Some minimalist concerns that have appeared in post-minimal work include the use of low or no dynamics (Robert Wilson), the use of nontechnical movement such as walking (Lucinda Childs), and the avoidance of predictable or manipulative choreographic forms (improvisational ensembles like Rainer's Grand Union and the second-generation Contact Improvisation groups). In recent months several post-minimalists have shown their work in New York, demonstrating ways that relatively simple movement has become only one element in a much larger complex of ideas, images and philosophies.

Andy deGroat, who made the spinning dances for many of Robert Wilson's theater epics, has been working independently for a couple of years. Using simple steps of walking, running, leaping, turning, and more decorative but sketchily executed arm movements, he's made open-space pieces that are like big ballets without their corsets. The expansiveness of deGroat's movement, the amount of space the dancers cover, the buildups and fadeouts of intensity, all suggest a more formal, conventionalized but not necessarily more meaningful sequence of events than what we're looking at. *Red Notes*, deGroat's new work, was performed by nine dancers at the Lepercq Space of Brooklyn Academy. His movement language hasn't changed much, but this time the piece is not about movement. The movement is a vehicle for something else.

I'm not at all sure what the something else is, but it appears to have something to do with perception. The floor space is marked off with tape in perspective lines converging away from the audience. At intervals, various numbers of dancers walk straight along these lines, getting closer together—and apparently smaller and higher—as they approach the vanishing point, larger and more formidable as they fan out coming towards us.

For the first time deGroat is using bizarre, Wilson-like objects and events. A plexiglass table with a pitcher and water glasses on it is placed far away, just where the perspective lines meet, and separated at first from the audience by a scrim. A man shrouded in what might be a blanket, and a woman carrying a lighted lamp cross slowly behind the scrim. Shoes are thrown from offstage into the performing area, and one dancer gathers them up clumsily in her arms, runs with them. Later the scrim goes up and people pause in their dancing rounds to take drinks of water at the plexiglass table. Through loudspeakers a man reads Gertrude Stein

very didactically and insistently; then a fast, propulsive portion of Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* is played.

These things all are presented with some urgency or drama. More than merely coexisting with the red-clad dancers who are almost always moving through the foreground space, they interact with and sometimes override the dancers. It might be that the whole dance has to do with the figure-ground duality, the idea that any number of things in our attention field could become a subject, depending on how we focus.

David Gordon's imagination seems to be essentially a linguistic one. Like deGroat he's interested in the blurry borderline between performing and being natural. His movement, like deGroat's, is large and non-technical, but more formal, shaped into quasi-calisthenic units that repeat, run into one another, team up, split apart, but always maintain the same configuration. He rules out succession or development or forced dynamics so that he can orchestrate these units in almost infinite ways.

In the first part of *An Audience with the Pope*, the voice of David Vaughan reads a through-the-looking-glass history of papal audience as performance, that in a zany, convoluted way manages to explain, among other things, how the pope's dance became pop dance, and what is the origin of the term "the pope's nose." Larger than lifesize slides of Vaughan in papal vestments are projected on the wall of Gordon's Soho loft. He appears to be gazing down at the space below, where Gordon is performing a nonstop sequence of walks, hitch steps, slides, pivots, and drop-rollover-squats. The sequence seems very long, and the activity has such similarity in tone that I can't remember which set follows which. Gordon is joined by Valda Setterfield, and they go through the sequence in unison, except that Setterfield is musing aloud to herself about the pope as private person and performer—"Maybe there are vestments he could wear for tennis, but skiing . . ."

The whole thing begins again three more times, once as a trio for women in unison, once for two couples, and once for seven dancers. By the time the quartet begins, I still haven't learned the sequence, but it's clear that each couple begins in a different part of it, since they're in counterpoint, and at startling moments they fall into unison, acquire a different partner, and continue the counterpoint, without interruption. In the final septet the structure breaks apart even more, into a seven-part canon with individual variations in timing, direction, number of steps repeated; until, at the end, a short period when the dancers just indicate the movements, doing them almost conversationally, the way Setterfield has been murmuring her soliloquy all along.

Gordon seems to make dances as a form of problem solving. He doesn't appear to regard his works as entities that have their own shape and must always be performed in that shape. He adapts, cuts, splices together material for use in different situations, and his New York concerts often seem to be continuous discourses on single ideas even though they may include excerpted or revised versions of older pieces. This spring's program began with a 1972 piece, *One Part of the Matter*, in which Valda Setterfield, in an old-fashioned wool bathing costume, took a series of poses copied from the body motion studies of photographer Eadweard Muybridge,

while on tape Gordon's voice directed her in a not-necessarily-corresponding series of poses. After *Pope*, the dancers went without a break into a condensed version of last year's *What Happened*, a fragmented word-movement narrative that must have led to Gordon's development of the pope piece. All three works on this program were concerned with information conveyed in small segments that insist you deal with movement, spacing and sounds even while you're struggling to put together a shattered continuity.

Another aspect of minimalism concerns pure structure. Having accepted movement in its most basic locomotor forms, people like Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs and Laura Dean could concentrate on the sequence and floor pattern, and later, on embellishing the movement itself in various minimal ways. Repetition has been a key instrument for these choreographers. Not only is it the simplest way of structuring movement, it provides an analog to contemporary rhythms and processes, externalizing our unconscious response to computers and automation. Grethe Holby and Kathy Duncan, veterans of the spinning, stamping marathons of Laura Dean, are both continuing to work with repetition, and in their spring concerts, especially Holby's, I found an even closer relationship to everyday life. With their sleek, shiny drop-dead dance-wear, pink and amber floor lighting, and occasionally earsplitting music (one dance was accompanied by Lou Reed's catastrophic "Metal Machine Music"), Holby's dancers brought punk to loft dancing. Indeed, it's not much of a jump from minimal dance to the semi-hypnotic, pulsing vacuities of disco, or the hyped-up self-destructiveness of punk.

All repetition-minimal dancing has a tendency toward self-punishment. Just setting yourself the task of repeating a step or a sequence of movements for a very long time has the same goal-oriented, endurance-testing competitiveness as our current national pastimes of jogging and calisthenics. Sometimes exhaustion is the point of the dance. Kathy Duncan used to do a piece called *Running Out of Breath*, in which she did just that, sprinting around the space and at the same time explaining to the audience what she was doing and how it felt. Grethe Holby's new works, *Ode* and *String Out*, shown at the Kitchen, seemed constructed so that the dancers would be driven beyond the limits of their strength. As they fought to go on, their movement became distorted in different ways. Some lost their line, sketched in arm gestures, traveled less far, jumped less high. Some seemed to become semi-conscious, losing their focus and occasionally their place in the sequence. Because the movement didn't change, you could see the unplanned stresses the dancers put into it as their stamina gave out.

Holby's movement vocabulary is far from everyday—she uses many of the basic classroom steps of ballet, even though some of her six dancers are not exemplary ballet technicians. She considers it a matter of individualism, not a defect, that some dancers are less skilled or less ideally beautiful than others. What she's done to these steps is first to use only a limited number of them, then to present them at steady tempos, mostly quite fast, in successive units, uninflected and without any pauses or transitions

OVER

between them. Holby also avoids dynamic buildups and stressed phrasing. This was particularly apparent in the year-old *Steady State Turning Cycles*, which had a score of pulsing synthesizer chords by Richard Peaslee. Circling with large sliding steps and little leg gestures from ballet, the dancers covered a lot of ground in formations of three and four, but though they kept in time with the music, they held back from the thrusting-subsiding momentum it suggested. And in the Lou Reed piece, *β HookUp*, they threw themselves to the ground, rolled over, sprang up again, as if violence was as commonplace to them as entrechats.

Kathy Duncan strikes me as one of the few dancers who hasn't diverted minimalism or absorbed it into work that has other concerns. If anything, Duncan seems to be cutting out some of the more interesting maximalisms that may have inadvertently crept into her work over the years. Her new dance, *An Hour for Piano and Dancers* (Tom Johnson), was given at American Theater Lab by Duncan and five other women, with Yee-Ping Wu as pianist. Like the music, the dance is an uninterrupted sequence made of a very few basic motifs that keep combining and recombining to create different atmospheres. Duncan's entire preoccupation now seems to be with balance and unbalance as produced within a walking pattern. The dancer throws her body forward or teeters back, then makes a business of recovering without allowing herself to be pulled into any new movement designs or directions. The speed of the original step, the force of the impulse by which she disturbs her balance, and the upward or downward tendency of the step at the moment of deviation all determine how far and how drastically the dancer oscillates before returning to stability. Both the walking and the falling occur in all kinds of spatial groupings and at different speeds.

I think it's Duncan's single-mindedness that impresses me most in this dance. It colors the dance unmistakably with intensity and contrast. The dancers focus in front of themselves, seldom acknowledging each other directly though they often work in close unison. They move in straight lines, keep a contained, unaccented flow of energy going. Those moments when they pitch forward or stagger back seem either highly dramatic or highly arbitrary. After a while you realize that the fall is not going to be really dangerous—the body always catches itself before going very far out of control, sometimes the flailing-up arms or the shoved-forward pelvis don't actually displace the center of gravity. But the walking suggests a constancy, uprightness and control that the falling always contradicts, and there's one section where the impulse escalates into lurching, convulsing violence. The women at various times looked to me like lost little girls, like comrades in some faintly unpleasant, demanding but virtuous enterprise, like neurotics whose survival depended on deliberately destroying order and proving they could get it back.