

II

SALLY BANES

Dance is culture — a reflection of the times. Every society is partly preoccupied with the tensions and harmonies between the individual and the group. Dancing creates an arena in which the dynamic of those tensions and harmonies can be played out or portrayed in high relief.

In Europe and the United States, from the nineteenth century onward (a period crucial to the formation of theatrical dance as we know it today), the tension between acquisitive "individualism" on the one hand and "cooperative" collectivism on the other has molded our social thought. Solo and group dancing map onto this dichotomy, but not always in simple or predictable ways. For instance, Isadora Duncan's modernism lay partly in her solo presentation of dance. Yet she sensed in this a moral dilemma, a kind of selfishness that might undermine the expression of an entire nation's aspirations toward physical as well as spiritual liberation. She seems defensive when she writes that she never danced alone, but always portrayed a chorus. Still, for Duncan, Lole Fuller, Ruth St. Denis, as well as for modernists working within ballet, to focus on a single person was to provide both new form and new content in dance. In the 1960s, in contrast, postmodernist choreographers rejected the cult of personality solo dancing seemed to create, opting instead for large group works that affirmed collectivity in a new vision of democracy.

Although aspects of Susan Rethorst's style and presentation place her squarely in the camp of American postmodernism, the way she handles her group of sixteen women and the punning title of her *Life of the Wasp* also places her in a direct line of descent from Doris Humphrey. Like Humphrey, Rethorst is interested in both the biological and social metaphors implicit in formal compositional tensions. *The Life of the Wasp*, which was presented at The Kitchen December 18-21, is ambitious in many ways. It pits varying small groups of soloists (two, three, or four) against the larger backdrop of the chorus of women who thread through the space, dividing it in half like a cell formation, or snaking behind the audience, muttering quietly. It contrasts the formalism of movements exploring space and body configurations with the highly connotative gestures of characterization.

Wearing T-shirts and sweatpants that have been dyed greenish grey and slightly draped, Rethorst's dancers project a demeanor somewhere between casualness and classicism. When three dancers perform the same repetitive solo, two of them using a pole for support and the third at some distance from her pole, rubbing and turning along the floor, leaning and arching against the pole, there is a double-edged quality of sensuality and concentration, of effort and inevitability. The silence, the intensity, and the vulnerability of the supine bodies create an atmosphere of vegetative sexuality. When suddenly the space is filled with lines of women gesticulating in unison and forming geometric patterns, lending support to the four soloists in their center, images of insect life crowd in. Finally, the women reenter in Katharine Hepburn-esque clothing, 1940s WASPs (in the social sense), shedding ten and twenty-dollar bills, clutching their bellies and grimacing.

Rethorst's dance imagery is multivocal, full of rich and intriguing ambiguities. *The Life of the Wasp* suggests, among many other things, the contrasts between individuals nurtured by a collective and lonely individuals in a classy crowd.