

## Nancy Goldner

Susan Rethorst and Dancers  
The Kitchen (Dec. 18-21)

A wasp is an elegant creature. If you'll permit a lapse into anthropomorphism, the wasp's features are so severely yet delicately delineated that the insect commands one to examine its configurations. With tapering thorax and proverbial wasp-waist, the wasp looks like an Egyptian sculpture. When it alights on its object of desire the wings lift slightly, giving it a dainty demeanor. I think of a particular photograph of Fonteyn peering into a teacup. Stravinsky called the New York City Ballet girls "wasps."

The girls in Susan Rethorst's *The Life of the Wasp* are plain-Janes. Many of them might be handsome, but they fix their eyes into a pale gray dullness as if they didn't want us to look at them intently, or at all. I see them working at it; it's not easy, because the trick is not to adopt the mask of the pioneer modern dancers. Masks are too vivid, I think they want to look more like hospital walls. Their baggy pants and shirts, also pale gray, hide other of their features. They are not wasps.

# THE WIFE OF THE LASP

This is one reason why I was thrown by the title of Rethorst's dance. Another reason is that, although her title is an obvious reference to a Doris Humphrey dance called *The Life of the Bee*, the content of the two dances is not so decidedly linked. The Humphrey dance views social behavior from a Social Darwinian point of view: the queen is dead, long live the queen, and isn't it a cruel fact of life. Rethorst's dance is a big group work, very choric, hence societal. Yet because of certain qualities that may be too generic to have particular meaning but have impact nonetheless — the dance's slow, uniform rhythm and the dancers' meditative attack, *The Life of the Wasp* seems pacific.

Maybe Rethorst is arguing with Humphrey: insects are really very nice. Then again, one of the structural events in the wasp dance isn't so pacific. Very often, two or three women move against the will of the group: they become soloists.

perhaps queens. Then they fly away, or merge back into the group. So maybe *The Life of the Wasp* is about how social differentiations can be overcome, or absorbed.

This is pure fancy. Here are some of the things that happened in this dance. At the beginning, three dancers danced with three of the four pillars gracing the Kitchen's stage. I don't know why the fourth pillar wasn't used. Perhaps to create tension. The missing link. The incomplete society. Oh, there I go again. Anyway, then the chorus rushed on but you couldn't see what they did because they stood in back of the audience. One could see them rush off, however. Then they returned to their posts behind the audience. I was sitting in the last row so I could hear them whisper. I think one of them said, "Let's go." In any case, they went. Then they filed back into the center of the stage and did smooth, ambling

things while the women who had been dancing with the pillars moved among them with more energetic motion. This went on for some time. Then everybody filed off but four. One danced with a pillar; one danced alone; and one danced with another, who became a human pillar. They did the same things, however. Life goes on no matter what the circumstances?

The group came back and after a while a few began to move differently from the rest again, with more bite and angles. Slowly they migrated across the stage and when only a few were left they had a discussion. One of them said, "So go." They went. Now the group reappeared in skirts and sweaters and knocked about. More came on. Some of them dropped money on the floor. One could hear the splatter of the coins, could see bodies splatter too. The group kept migrating and recirculating, kept dropping bills and coins all over the floor, kept dropping to the floor themselves. Then they fixed themselves in a series of tableaux. At these frozen moments they seemed a tired herd, too close for comfort but somehow resigned to their fate. Well, maybe. Or maybe they didn't

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# THE KITCHEN

CENTER FOR  
VIDEO, MUSIC  
AND DANCE

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## Susan Rethorst's Life of the Wasp

**WIFE** *Continued from page 21*

give a damn. All that money dropping all over the floor, and nobody picking it up. When the group moved toward a corner of the stage, one of them fell down and couldn't get up. She tried to get up several times. She tried very hard. Finally she made it to her feet and left. The remaining bunch stood by with bowed heads. The lights went down.

When the lights went up the audience didn't know whether the dance was over. Some checked their watches. The concert had been only 40 minutes. A man with a broom came on. He told us that the dance was over, but not until he began sweeping up the crumpled bills and coins did the audience feel free to leave. Where there's no money there's no action. Is that what *The Life of the Wasp* is about?

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Chong constantly refers to "the luminosity of pre-existing materials."

If Chong's work sounds a bit like bricolage or found art, he assures us it is and professes a strong affinity to the boxed dreams of Joseph Cornell. In the same breath, though, he traces kinship to Carl Jung's theories of synchronicity, to his friend and collaborator Meredith Monk, and to the classic Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*. As well, he credits his parents and grandparents, all of whom worked extensively in Chinese opera. And he goes on, declaring his identity as a childhood moviegoer (slow-paced Chinese samurai pictures in New York's Chinatown), and now as a closet filmmaker. Finally, there is the contribution of his own "pre-existing materials" — from a journey through the Amazon and memory in the Obie-winning *Humboldt's Current*, to his oblique, chilling takeoff of Fritz Lang's *M*, *Fear and Loathing in Gotham*.

"It's all managed to pull together," he said of his influences and their effect on his work. He refuses to elaborate, for it is clear that while he believes in the enormous power of coincidence, he is not so sure of its purpose. Instead, he would rather refer us to scholar Leon Edel. Said Edel, "Some people meet, some people might have met, and some people never meet." Not surprisingly, you'll find this quote in the program notes to *Nuit Blanche*.

## DREAMS

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How then, does Chong conjure such authentic dream pieces as *White Night*, if not through his own inspired sleep? Having an uninhibited imagination helps, but more important is the artful way he makes his connections through multimedia — by far the most abused mode among modern artists. "Most multimediaists are concerned only with form — they want to dazzle the audience with their film dissolves and tape loops," Chong said after a recent rehearsal. "I try and limit the use of different media to only what will help my story. The point is not to disorient the audience, but to help it get from one time and place to another, totally different world." In *White Night*, for example, he shrewdly keeps his vignettes moving relentlessly forward by bridging them together with a soft electronic drone.

Chong is the first to admit that his other world, like the one we enter at night, is composed entirely of the junk of this world. "I get a lot of stuff from the *New York Times*," he said, and pointed to one AP story that touched off parts of *White Night*. The report recounts how Pol Pot's soldiers in Cambodia killed two of their own and wounded 85 after they began to fire tracer bullets into the nighttime sky: they were aiming for a dragonlike creature that lives in the moon. With stories like that to spark him it is little wonder that