

Flood Light

Flood Light was a dance that I started making in the summer of 2002, a movement/light collaboration with designer Severn Clay. But it was equally an effort to aesthetically navigate the socio-economic circumstances surrounding the making of my work. It was a big artistic experiment. And for all our use of light bulbs, I suppose it was also something of a search for illumination.

Severn and I came to this experiment from different places. He is a theatrical lighting designer who works in a wide range of venues but has spent a lot of time lighting dance performances in small black box theaters. I am a choreographer and solo performer who founded my company **jill sigman/thinkdance** in 1998. I have experienced the gamut of "downtown" venues, which are not necessarily downtown but range from the 92nd Street Y to Brooklyn and Queens.

From the most prestigious to the most seat-of-the-pants of the downtown "showcase" performances, I have noticed a pervasive mentality characterized by the idea that a dance is a dance and once you have one it can be plunked down anywhere, with mercifully little time for adaptation and technical rehearsal. Severn, for his part, realized that he was lighting performances that appeared to be made for spaces with imaginary balconies and wings; it seemed that more and more people weren't acknowledging the realities of the spaces they were in.

Further, both of us had formative experiences with site-specific work: work made for spaces that don't conventionally host performance. From site-work I had learned how theater can give viewers a total, transformative experience. I had made dances for such places as a dilapidated Socialist printing house in Ghent, Belgium, a medieval Croatian hill village, the gardens at Wave Hill in the Bronx, and a chain link fence on Brooklyn's Gowanus Canal. I learned firsthand that the most effective site-work doesn't just relocate a dance to a park or public square; it lets the work acknowledge the space so that the environment is *part of* the work. Rather than competing with it or merely providing a decorative frame, the environment is swallowed up by the work.

For example, when military helicopters *en route* to West Point flew overhead during my solo *GUN SHY* at Wave Hill, I shot at them with my fluorescent waterguns. When audience members craned and peered into a shower to see me during one scene of *Fragile*, their efforts and partial views reflected in the bathroom tiles became part of the piece. When viewers floated down the Gowanus Canal on an eco-pontoon boat in the rain, the smell of the polluted water became part of my exploration of the toxicity of the site and its history of Mob activity. And when a real life "entrepreneur" in a black Mercedes drove up to the site during one performance, that too became part of the piece. In good site-work the edges blur.

I had started to carry this mentality into traditional theaters. Why pretend a space is something that it's not? The most effective work acknowledges its surroundings, stops asking the audience to put blinders on, and allows the fact that the space is hot or buggy or filled with "Exit" signs to be part of a viewer's experience. In *Flood Light* I wanted to

take that approach even further, letting the piece be different in each of the spaces in which it would be performed.

I was also consumed by larger, quasi-political concerns. Unlike our European counterparts, avant-garde performing artists in New York City are completely nomadic. We don't have host theaters, receive government subsidy between engagements, or enjoy extended performance runs. Most independent choreographers work one or more "day jobs" to make ends meet, double as their own administrators, pay an average of \$12/hour for rehearsal space, and typically can't store props or equipment in studios where they rehearse. I live with these facts in my face. Last season I rehearsed in six different studios and carried props, boom boxes, and lighting and video equipment daily. I desperately wanted to find a way to stop feeling disenfranchised by the practices of my own art world and the larger society that contains it. I wanted to claim my lifestyle in some robust way-- for although I have chosen my life as an artist I often feel like an exile in my own city.

I set out to embrace my nomadism as an aesthetic choice. Severn and I began experimenting with portable light sources. I improvised in a darkened room as he manipulated small, differently shaped fluorescent bulbs, strands of Christmas lights, and the ballet barres that happened to be in the studio, and we watched their effects on my movement. The exploration was fun-- how often does one get to wear a mantle of light? It was practical-- because in various venues we would be faced with a minimal theatrical light grid (or none at all) and little or no time to actually rehearse with the grid if we had one. And it was obliquely political-- a way of making the current "state of the art" a part of the work rather than an extra-aesthetic concern.

Artistically, we were both interested in the idea of revealing the "technical skeleton" of a dance; it had come up in our previous collaborative work. In fact, I had been trying to put the "backstage" onstage since my site-specific solo performance at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in 2001. There, I had been offered the chance to do anything in any part of the museum complex so long as I required no technical support. So I became a watergun-toting guerrilla girl with an army backpack and a boom box playing *Stranger in Paradise*, a character whose "only what you can carry on your body" ideology was both real-life necessity and aesthetic choice. I had no desire to deconstruct the magic of performance, or to revisit the theater history of the 1960s. I wanted the magic to co-exist with the machinery so that both were visible simultaneously.

The idea of revealing our light sources to the audience instead of hiding them more conventionally above the theatrical space was therefore appealing. I was tired of pretending the light came from some divine source. As *Flood Light* evolved, we collected some hundred 40-watt incandescent bulbs, four 4-foot fluorescents, a round pinkish fluorescent bulb, a mercury vapor lamp on a metal tripod, and *lots* of cable. Severn was onstage throughout, interacting with me in earlier versions and eventually just manipulating the equipment. We began to think of the piece as a "performance tool box", something that could be completely portable, needing only electricity and a floor, and adaptable to different venues in response to the features of the space.

A more primary text of movement and words grew up as well, one that was far more evident to viewers who didn't follow the changes in the piece from space to space. Almost despite myself, despite my abstract concerns and austere light improvisations, I found myself stumbling into characters and energies that surprised even me. A southern belle appeared (I am from Brooklyn). And a modern day Jonah who sells his soul for lower gasoline prices. And a preacher. And a deep visceral shaking that was painful to do, and felt as if the ground under me wouldn't stop moving. I wouldn't say I *created* any of it; it's perhaps more accurate to say I *fell into* a number of puddles in a loony, ominous swamp of a world, and couldn't get out.

Sometimes I wondered how I could perform this stuff. With what permission could I slosh through these phenomenological puddles with innocent bystanders in tow? While I was working on *Flood Light* I realized that an artist is a kind of tour guide. Like a tour guide, I lead viewers to new places, translate their experience into the language of those places, and point out things they wouldn't notice if they were traveling on their own. I used to lead architectural tours in Belgium, and I realized that performing has very much the same risks, successes, and responsibilities. Some people don't like to travel at all. Some people go and don't see anything. Some have culture shock or food poisoning. But for others, some sort of light goes on.

We performed the first version of *Flood Light* at Dixon Place, then on East 26th Street, in a tiny black space like a murky fishbowl with a steeply raked audience on two sides. We performed it again at the Brooklyn Museum in a vast white auditorium with a horizontal stage and huge pillars, and at HERE Arts Center in Soho in a dark basement with a small raised stage framed by columns. As *Flood Light* developed further, we performed it in the cavernous white Judson Church on Washington Square with audience on three sides, and later against the funereal teal drapes and mirrored walls of the 92nd Street Y. In each space it was a different piece. We set up the incandescent bulbs and long fluorescents somewhat differently, my entrance took a different route, and in the earliest versions we wrapped different parts of the venue's architecture in Saran wrap. There were various pitfalls: bad acoustics, overcrowded stages, broken panels, and sensitive electrical wiring. And there were serendipities: balconies and columns that helped us configure the piece in new and interesting ways, and the beautiful mirrors at the Y in which our moving lights were reflected over and over *ad infinitum*.

I guess in some sense we succeeded. We created a piece that was different with every space, that used only primitive, portable light sources, and that we could pull off with the barest of technical rehearsals, as we saw when we once had only twenty minutes to set up before the audience began to enter. [An average dance concert is in technical rehearsal for at least four nights before its opening.] And we could make it all happen with the help of just two handcars. But most importantly, we created magic. The theater was completely dark until Severn screwed in the first bulb and with that first light each space was transformed.

But through embracing portability we had accentuated all of the usual problems. There were 100 pounds more to be carried around the city, more equipment that couldn't be left

overnight in the theater, more stuff to plug in and set up. We found ourselves illegally sneaking into spaces to make maps of the electrical sockets; we got bent out of shape trying to adapt our tool kit to a new space in the allotted half hour tech time. I never felt that the adaptations were as extreme or inventive as I would have liked because we spent most of our rehearsal time in a new space surveying sockets. True, it could all be done that way, but to make better art even portability needed time --time to assess the environment and what it needed-- and space --a place to store the equipment and be able to rehearse with it. Ironically, by choosing portability we had reinvented the need for stability. To my dismay, I found myself at square one: art needs a home.

With every departure from convention I have come to understand more deeply why the conventions exist. By making work in diffuse outdoor settings I realized why we wear stage make-up and use theatrical lighting. By making work for an audience that circulates freely I realized why we set an audience in seats facing a stage. By working with primitive light sources on the ground I realized why there are overhead light grids and dimmer switches. That is not to say that one shouldn't depart from convention; some of the most fascinating things happen by doing so. But the artistic challenges that result are the perfect recipe for understanding why the conventions developed in the first place.

With this effort to embrace nomadism it was no different. I realized why we all pretend not to be nomadic. I realized why we need time and space in which work can grow and be shown. I realized why big opera houses with their stages, rehearsal studios, storage, and design shops, came into existence. There are producers who hallow the seat-of-the-pants approach but only because it costs them less. It is a way for them to feel like they are serving more artists with less money. There are artists who advocate the seat-of-the-pants approach, but what kind of work are they making? With its extreme constraints, the system is homogenizing work, self-selecting dances that fit into the shoeboxes it has to offer, and letting interesting work with greater demands fall prey to aesthetic Darwinism.

So, why do this work at all? When even an attempt to be self-sufficient and portable leaves one troubleshooting and schlepping far more than creating and performing, why bother? Why try to do the impossible? I ask myself this question a lot. As our political landscape and consumerist *zeitgeist* leave no room for the existence of art, as institutional funding decreases and is predicted to continue its decline, as presenters struggle to make their own ends meet and seem less able to help artists realize their visions, and as I get caught in the rain with more props than I can carry, I ask myself *why*.

Less than one week after September 11th, I flew to Yugoslavia to perform and speak. I decided to add my solo *Embers* to my program. *Embers* was originally made in New York during the time of civil wars in the Balkans and Rwanda. It is a short, sparse, solo about witnessing devastation, and it begins with a barely perceptible tremor of the head. I performed it a lot, in traditional theaters and also outdoors as a protest of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia and the US bombing of Afghanistan. At Belgrade's National Theatre, I explained to the audience that it seemed only fitting to perform it in Belgrade while my own city was in chaos since I had performed it at home when Belgrade was under attack. At the end of the piece, the lights went down and people sat together in total

silence. I have come to recognize that silence. It is not the silence of boredom-- in fact, when people are bored they are not silent-- but a silence of shared ineffable experience.

My work is a route to crawling beneath the skin of a quotidian world. To saying the unspeakable. To transforming both a space and myself, and perhaps as a result, transforming my viewers in some small way. This is idealistic, stupid. In this socio-economic climate it seems neither valuable nor viable-- as much folly as screwing in light bulbs in the dark. But I imagine a world without it, and in the end I have no choice. Without it, all would be lost.

Jill Sigman
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