

Susan Rethorst

RETRO- (*intro*) SPECTIVE

DANSPACE PROJECT PLATFORM 2011

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1. AN INTRODUCTION

Intuition is a word that has pushed to the surface in the conversations surrounding this Platform. We all know what it means, a feeling, a hunch, good instincts. As I like to do, I looked up the etymology, hoping to gain some further insight. The following is from the Cambridge Etymological Dictionary: intuition late 15c., from M.Fr. intuition, from L.L. intuitionem (nom. intuitio) «a looking at, consideration,» from L. intuitus, pp. of intueri «look at, consider,» from in- «at, on» + tueri «to look at, watch over.»

Intuition is hard to talk about. But something about close observation seems important. Poets and painters taught me that if you observe something long enough “it” will start to reveal information.

Susan Rethorst is a dedicated observer. She says of her choreographic process, “Your state of mind is heightened, alert, watchful, respectful, sitting on the edge of its seat.” Robert Rauschenberg said it this way, “My work is about just paying attention.” Intuitus, indeed.

Curator Melinda Ring has carefully considered every aspect of this Platform. She says some of it has been intuitive. The connections she has drawn between Susan’s work and the work of other artists, including visual artist, Dawn Clements and director, Chantal Akerman,

have provided considerable depth to this process and brought to light many nuances in Susan’s work.

Melinda had never met Dawn before she approached her and introduced her to Susan. An exciting and tangible result has been Dawn’s drawing, which strangely merges Susan’s 208 *East Broadway* living room with the sanctuary of St. Mark’s Church. (We will install the original work in the Church as part of Susan’s installation on June 18th.) Dawn mentioned to me the other day that she was amazed by how much Susan’s choreography had changed the way she watched people move. “I’ve learned so much about gesture.”

Melinda also noticed connections between Chantal Akerman’s seminal film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) and Susan’s quotidian approach to choreography. In a 2010 interview about *Jeanne Dielman*, Akerman remarked, “That film was about gesture. And choreography, in order to give you the feeling that it’s real time. It’s not [real time], it’s totally choreographed.

It’s a very specific film in those terms.” In this film Akerman takes a choreographic approach to the quotidian. Only after we decided to show the film during the Platform did we discover that Babette Mangolte was the cinematographer for Jeanne Dielman. Babette’s connections to New York dance run deep and her film credits include *Roof* and *Fire Piece* and *Water Motor* with choreography by Trisha Brown as well as director of photography for Yvonne Rainer’s *A Film About a Woman Who...* Melinda has invited Babette to be part of the Platform’s Living Room Conversations on June 7th.

Dailiness and nothing. These too are critical to this choreographer’s work. Susan often cites John Cage as a major influence. Cage once said “I have nothing to say, I am saying it, and that is poetry.” To this Susan might reply “I have nothing to do, I am doing it, and that is dance.”

Judy Hussie-Taylor
Executive Director, Danspace Project
Artistic Director,
Danspace Project Platform Series

2. We carry our homes within us, which enables us to *fly*.

—John Cage

3. CURATOR’S NOTE: HOW THIS PLATFORM CAME TO BE

At the beginning I had a long list. I didn’t know then that I would end up choosing only one choreographer. When I started this project I didn’t know Susan, though she was always on my list of potential participants. I knew something of her work; I saw it for the first time in 1989. Because I lived in California it wasn’t until 1998, while I was a graduate student at Bennington College, that I saw her work again. Both times I was intrigued, but somewhat unsettled. There was something about it that I didn’t quite understand. When I get that feeling—the feeling that something is strong but there’s something going on that I don’t quite get—then I’m hooked.

I had been intrigued by Susan’s work before, but when I saw 208 *East Broadway*,

at *Dance Theater Workshop* (DTW) in 2007, I was impressed by the rigor of the action of rehearsing in a particular space, her living room, and the bringing of that space into the theater. It reminded me of a sculpture by my mentor Paul McCarthy, *The Box* (2001), in which he built a free standing room with the exact dimensions



and characteristics of his home studio, and furnished it with the complete studio contents, but turned it on its side. I found the simplicity and thoroughness of both these gestures thrilling.

Early on in the planning process, maybe at our second meeting in 2008, Judy Hussie-Taylor gave me a comprehensive etymology of the word curate. I was especially interested in its connection to the word “cure.” I believed that she had



selected me as a curator for a number of reasons, one of them being my knowledge of visual art. I wanted to bring something from that world into my Platform, but it soon became clear to me that the parameters of Danspace Project, its funding, the limitations of its main venue at St. Mark’s Church, and the expectation of the dance

community could be stretched only so far.

From 2006 to 2008 I was involved in my friend’s (sculptor Martin Kersels) mid-career survey show. I realized that choreographers in the US have no equivalent. The main venues in New York City that present experimental dance have a somewhat rigid structure of programming—group shows, split bills, an evening of one’s own over a weekend, or two if you can sell out the house. A serious artist creating consistently interesting, risky work might never get more attention or support in mid- or late-career than they received early in their career. The mid-career survey, I decided, was what I could bring to the dance world from the visual art world.

When the idea came to me to give all the resources of a programming month, space, staff, and money to one artist, I got really excited. As an artist, I’ve been given some amazingly generous opportunities and I saw this as a chance to do that for someone else. This choice also suited my temperament. I loved the idea of being able to get to know someone really well, of being able to work closely with them, rather than splitting my attention among several different people.

I definitely had in mind my recent experience at *The Box*, Mara McCarthy’s Los Angeles gallery. In 2008,

I was invited to collaborate on a show there with the artist Jennifer Nelson. After a year-long, long distance correspondence, we proposed an installation called *for the birds* where, for 21 days, we would live in the gallery with, and literally make art for, 21 live pigeons. I was astounded by Mara's easy acceptance and encouragement of our quixotic plan.

But the idea to program only Susan really clicked for me the morning of June 3, 2009, when I opened the *New York Times* art section and read an article about Ragnar Kjartansson living and working in a 14th century palazzo for the duration of the Venice Biennale. The accompanying photo was of the artist painting from the model in a space cluttered with an accumulation of paintings and beer bottles.

Susan had mentioned to me that she wanted to have an extended residency at Danspace Project in order to continue working on the *208 East Broadway* series and to further what she described as a collaboration between the space of her apartment and the space of the Church. I thought within this project she might take possession of the Church, and, of course, in a sense she would be moving in.

The choice to work with Susan satisfied many of my original curatorial goals:

From my original notes...

I'm looking for choreographers working

with radical ideas about making and presenting dance, who will welcome the opportunity to take a risk and experiment with their season at Danspace Project. The choreographers will be free to present anything that it's possible to present within the constraints of presenting at the Church. I want the Platform to be about HOW THINGS ARE FRAMED. Why we do what we do in the ways that we do it. Life's intrusion—daily routine—integration of everyday actions/life/thoughts that are then called "art." The things around us that we're trying to understand as a person—doing that through the body. Exploring how the body functions to translate experience. Dance conceived in and outside the studio/theater. Why does dance have to be about anything besides dance? Intuition as a value... I'd like to create an environment to coexist, interact, or disagree—not neatly wrapped-up with one answer.

A *Choreographic Mind* is the title of Susan's soon to be published book. That's also a phrase that came up several times in my original notes, especially in relationship to Jennifer Nelson. A former dancer/choreographer, Jennifer had told me that as a visual artist she felt that she was still working with a choreographic mind. I thought that I might include visual artists in my platform, especially artists who think through their work like

choreographers.

It would be a lonely world without friends, peers, and collaborators. One of my goals has always been to find ways for, as Susan would call them, Other Minds to enter this Platform. One of these most organic and gratifying connections has been with Dawn Clements, who made the drawing on the other side of this paper. I thank Ian Berry, a curator at the Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College, for introducing me to Dawn's work. Also, I want to thank Dawn for her generosity of ideas and deeds. Dawn definitely has a choreographic mind: she describes her work as time-based; she can continue to work on a drawing for a very long time, adding more paper as she needs. In an email discussing deadlines she wrote, "Whatever time I have I'll use and that will affect the drawing. If it's due next Friday, the drawing will be one thing, if it's due later, it will be something else." Like Susan, she's deeply interested in the quotidian, the idea of daily gesture in relationship to process and activity.

There are many experimental choreographers working in New York City who deserve a mid-career survey. My hope is that Susan will be the first to have one—but not the last.

Melinda Ring,
Curator

4. REALITY INTRUDES: AN ESSAY BY SUSAN RETHORST

A retrospective makes visible what a body of work reveals both in continuities and departures; that is part of its point. I see now that it does the same for the artist. This project has revealed to me aspects of my work and relations of those aspects in new ways. I am taken back to when I was about 35 or 36 and decided to begin to talk about my work. Up to then, I had not only not felt the need for a cognitive understanding of my work, I shied at the thought. So I reviewed video for weeks and made notes of things I saw recurring, laying ground for the ability to articulate the knowledge that I had made use of before without language.

That was the first backward glance. The second came when I lived in Europe and hit a wall of aesthetic difference that rocked my assumptions and sent me looking back to where I had come from, what values I had inherited from my era and culture. The result of that inquiry is a book called *A Choreographic Mind*;



Autobodygraphical Writings.

Now comes this opportunity. When Dawn Clements began drawing in my apartment, when Melinda came over to take photographs of the spoons, when I related the issues of dailiness

in my "Dailiness" essay (www.du.ahk.nl/people/susan05/dailiness.html) to domesticity and women's traditional lives, when Melinda asked me what I read—I began to look back on my work and see some things I hadn't before connected. I see what working at home (as I did for the 22 years I had a loft) brought in to my work: Interior life, domestic life, how life asks you to deal, to accept things and not fight with them.

The *208 East Broadway* series is a result of a radical acceptance of circumstances, of allowing reality to intrude on desire, and how—for me—being at home invited an ease that allowed me to do things not exactly 'serious'. In making *Beau Regard*, I asked Susan Welti and Vicky Shick to do a repetitive gesture that my grandfather (a furniture maker) used to do when sitting—tapping the tips of his fingers together in a meditative way. As they tapped, I, as is my wont, said nothing while I wandered and roamed through possible uses for this, possible continuations, etc. After enough of this silence on my part, they began to talk. I said yes, that's what you do—you talk. In this allowance I was 'at home' with my time and choices because I was at home.

Going out to a studio, on the other hand, for me brings with it a slight formality, a slight veering into a myth of making that has to do with old ideas of rigor, of leaving the rest of the world outside those studio doors and working up a sweat—none of this goofing, none of this happening upon a found image. That lazy roaming I rediscovered in the 208 series, and I can see it now for what it is and value it the more. And apparently this allowance is more important to me than the kind of work I make. Better a crowded room where movement has to be confined but where I have 'at-homeness', than a spacious studio without it.

I still think of that loft every day, but I have these discoveries and new directions of work as my consolation prize. At the time of the original 208, I didn't even see it as a comment on the real estate scene and its effect on this marginal dance community. But of course it is, of course