

Lively Doing; What the Body Does

Linda Karshan's "Walked Drawings," the Judson Dance Theatre, and the Poetics of the Unadorned Movement

by Mara Gerety

*"It was looking at **what the body does** without trying to trot it up into dance or art or whatever. We call it "quotidian movement" but they are ancient forms, and they're very complex." – Steve Paxton*

"Dance was to be a lively doing, with minimal self-regard." – Merce Cunningham

"The truth of the universe is inscribed into our very bones. The human skeleton is itself a hieroglyph." – Saul Bellow

"Man marks himself vertically – it is the earth that turns." – Linda Karshan

Every space has its own voice.

Sound waves move through and interact with each environment in a unique way, so much so that a violinist can feel a change in the vibrations of the strings under his bow or a singer can find herself breathing differently.

In Linda Karshan's "Walked Drawings," the artist uses the sound and rhythm of her own footsteps to create auditory portraits of several spaces. Following the patterns of her breath and her intuitive "inner choreography", Karshan walks through each room in precise patterns of straight lines that recall her drawings on paper, sometimes stopping to embellish a particular point with a few steps of dancelike footwork.

As she moves through each space, Karshan's footsteps resound off the walls and floors in an interplay of echoes and rhythms. The great astronomer Carl Sagan often referred to human beings as "how the Cosmos becomes aware of itself" – in these performance pieces, Karshan's body becomes a living conduit giving voice to a small piece of the universe.

Earlier this summer, Karshan attended a panel discussion held at Judson Memorial Church entitled "Whither the Village?" focused on the present and future of Greenwich Village. Once the bohemian heart of experimental, artistic and alternative New York, today the neighborhood risks losing its countercultural identity to the interests of big real estate developers, multinational corporations, and the seemingly unstoppable tide of hyper-gentrification. Lofts and studios in which to think, to experiment, to live and to *be* are being pushed aside in favor of money-making enterprises, leaving no more room – either physical or psychological - for the stretches of idleness punctuated by epiphanies that are the seed of the creative process.

The architecture of Judson Memorial immediately struck Karshan – she was delighted by its *"Italianate style and proportions, the dance-floor-ness of the whole place."* She then recalled that in 2001, Frances Carey had likened her use of straightforward everyday movements to the way the Judson Dance Theater had identified themselves – and the idea of creating a Walked Drawing inside the church to explore and honor that connection was born.

The Judson Dance Theater was an early-1960s collective of experimental dancers, choreographers and composers that found a home base (and a name) in the radically progressive and inclusive Judson Memorial Church. Their work frequently saw ordinary movements (walking, running, sweeping the stage with a broom, eating a sandwich) used as the building blocks of their style. The structures of their works were based on games, folk and social dances, and the matters of everyday life. They asked the question: What separates an ordinary quotidian movement from an element of dance? Is it technical skill that distinguishes art from the everyday? Is it its emotional impact on a spectator, or the presence of a recognizable message?

What makes two feet proceeding en pointe an element of classical dance, and **two feet walking** across a dance floor a radical act?

A crucial influence on the Judson's approach was the work of avant-garde composer John Cage, who developed a creative philosophy deeply rooted in his studies of Indian classical music and philosophy and Zen Buddhist thought. For Cage, chance and circumstance were as important as any conscious creation on the part of the artist. As he wrote in his 1990 Autobiographical Statement: *"I determined to give up composition unless I could find a better reason for doing it than communication. I found this answer from Gira Sarabhai, an Indian singer and tabla player: The purpose of music is to sober and quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences...In the late forties I found out by experiment...that silence is not acoustic. It is a change of mind, a turning around. I devoted my music to it."*

In Cage's most famous (and infamous) work, *4'33"*, performers sit silently on stage for four minutes, thirty-three seconds. Any sound that occurs in the auditorium – a rustle of pages, a siren outside, a sneeze – is considered part of the performance. The work is deliberately provocative, but suggests a new answer to the question of what exactly *art* is: rather than being defined solely by its impact on the spectator, art can be defined and delineated by the intention of the artist. Cage **puts a frame around silence itself**, and any rustle or cough or gust of wind that Nature provides in those four and a half minutes is interpreted through Cage's philosophy, itself built on a lifetime of individual experience, thought and inquiry.

When applied to dance, this appreciation for chance and reinterpretation of the relationship between art and artist meant that any movement, even the most ordinary, could be choreographic material if used in a deliberate way. As Steve Paxton described the Judson's radically unadorned dance: *"It was looking at **what the body does** without trying to trot it up into dance or art or whatever. We call it "quotidian movement" but they are ancient forms, and they're very complex."*

Linda Karshan's work is also "radically unadorned," and has developed in deep symbiosis with the workings of her body and mind. Early in her career, her drawings tended more towards abstract expressionism. But beginning in 1994, with a drawing called *Self-Portrait* that is now in the British Museum, she began to discover and develop her distinctive individual approach. She has created a practice that both emerges from and is shaped by the physical motions of her body as she makes her marks on paper. Art critic Lynn MacRitchie has described it as *"embodying the struggle of her conscious and unconscious mind to make the "right" mark on the paper before her."* Over the years, as she explored and refined her drawing practice, her

body increasingly began to move in an almost ritualistic **choreography**. To reach the state of “Self-Unconsciousness” or “Exceptional Presence” in which her creative process occurs, she focuses her attention on her breath, the rhythm of her heartbeat and the balance her body finds as the force of gravity acts upon it. In creating her drawings on paper she leans forward against her desk, her weight resting on one leg and one hand, holding the pencil out in front of her body and boldly tracing the line that expresses the state of balance her body finds itself in in that moment.

In the words of German critic and author Matthias Bärmann, describing Karshan’s practice: *“It is a process of great discipline and complexity. Control of the body, of the breath, mental concentration and presence, linked by rhythmic patterns. Utmost discipline merges into entire detachedness and self-forgetfulness. The world descends – and emerges again on the paper’s surface in form of geometrical patterns. Turning pattern into being. Rhythmic impulses and marks intertwine to figures, which emerge like sequences from an open and unpredictable process. They are archetypal patterns, formally reduced right up to anonymity, but realized in the freely drawn line, vibrantly individual and, thus, human.”*

The result is free-hand geometric drawings of extraordinary precision, at once radiating the perfect stillness of the columns of the Parthenon and seemingly alive with movement and pulse, just under the surface, just out of sight.

Merce Cunningham said that *“Choreography cannot be abstract because it is conceived and performed by a human being; dance is an action and a thing.”* Karshan’s drawings are nothing if not figurative. As she draws on paper or in space she thinks that this is what Man must have always done. On a recent visit to the British Museum, looking at the ancient clay tablets recovered from the great Library of King Ashurbanipal of Assyria, she was struck by the similarity of the inscribed lines of cuneiform writing to her own drawings. *“Man marks himself vertically,”* she recalls. *“It is the earth that turns.”* Her deeply personal inner choreography has led her to the same figure discovered by that most ancient of civilizations to affix their spoken language in time: a simple, unadorned straight line, in all its permutations.

As her inner choreography continued to influence the development of her drawing style, so too did her drawing practice influence the development of her choreography. In the words of Italian critic and curator Roberta Semeraro: *“For Karshan, who finds inspiration in Greek philosophy, the intellectual and spiritual dimensions are one and the same, where the Forms become the archetypes of a universal language and the fluid passage of time reveals immobile Eternity. The integrity of form and content that characterizes all of her art has recently led Karshan to performative works, where she moves rhythmically following her breath, in search of points of balance in space, as if she were measuring the space with her physical presence, tracing invisible drawings in the air.”*

The creation of the Walked Drawings was the logical next step in the development of her art. Her drawings on paper are already a prime example of the **work of art** - that is, the artwork as the visual result and integral part of a complete physical, philosophical and intellectual practice – and in the Walked Drawings, she closes a circle: the inner choreography and bodily movements she learned through her drawing practice are brought back to the outside world, in some sense transformed by their semi-theatrical settings and yet all of a piece. If she *practiced* measuring time and space on paper, in the Walked Drawings she turns that knowledge back on the three-

dimensional world, moving through each space in both physical and spiritual-intellectual dialogue with her surroundings, marking out Plato's perfect numerical ordering of the universe.

In her studio, leaning against her drawing desk with her torso and legs at an angle, her figure echoes Giacometti's famous sculpture of a walking man – solidity and motion coexisting. And like Giacometti's piece, her body forms the Greek letter Lambda: used in scientific notation to indicate wavelength, including that of waves of sound. Sound too is crucial to the Walked Drawings. In the first of the series, *Linda's Room/A Moth Can Turn The Balance*, Karshan walks through a sunlit, empty room at the Abbey of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, Italy. The echoes of her footsteps seem to change shape and texture coming from different parts of the room, an interplay with the vanishing-point perspective of the checkerboard tiles on the floor. The sounds themselves are resonant and solemn, an ascetic and monastic antiphony, like the clear harmonies of religious plainchant reaching up and out to the heavens.

Karshan now proposes bringing her practice into another great church, the Judson Memorial, as an active homage to Judson Dance Theater's work – as a *preservation through lively doing*.

In paying tribute to great works of the past, it is a mistake to put them in a frame, in a little glass box, high up on a shelf to be admired from a distance in their unchanging beauty. This divorces them from all context, from all human interaction, and from the living process involved in their creation. Homage should be neither imitation nor reenactment but, as Karshan proposes, an active exploration of underlying and animating concepts. The radicalism and liveliness of past masterpieces is best honored by this sort of dialogue and the unexpected connections, contrasts and new inspiration that can arise from it.

As we have seen, a work of art – even a temporally-fixed one like a drawing on paper – is a *work* of art, not a finished product but the expression of an ongoing process and, in Karshan's case, a unified philosophy and *choreography of motion and thought*. In Karshan's work, everything is based on rigorous technique and a vast body of knowledge, but there is always room for *chance and circumstance* to creatively intrude.

Karshan often quotes C.S. Peirce's "On The Doctrine of Necessity Re-Examined": – “*by supposing the rigid exactitude of causation to yield, I care not how little — be it but by a strictly infinitesimal amount — we gain room to insert mind into our scheme, and to put it into the place where it is needed, into the position which, as the sole self-intelligible thing, it is entitled to occupy, that of the fountain of existence; and in so doing we resolve the problem of the connection of soul and body.*”

Karshan's work, like Cunningham's and Cage's, builds an unshakeable foundation of practice, knowledge and technique and then deliberately leaves the door open, eagerly awaiting the arrival of the unexpected. In bringing her creative process to Judson Memorial Church, Karshan will both honor the long and storied history of the space and allow it to advocate for itself in its own individual voice.