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Dance

Untitled Corner

Daniel Arsham, Jonah Bokaer and Judith Sanchez Ruiz present a new site-specific piece at One Chase Manhattan Plaza. By Gia Kourlas



THE GREAT OUTDOORS *Untitled Corner* was recently performed in Spain. Photograph: Beatriz Minguez de Molina

Untitled Corner, a new collaboration for two choreographers and a visual artist, promises to be anything but the usual outdoor dance experience: There won't, for instance, be any vague noodling around on the stairs of the Federal Hall or desperate attempts to attract the attention of pedestrian bystanders with goofy antics. In the 50-minute work that places Jonah Bokaer and Judith Sanchez Ruiz within and around a white corner structure designed by Daniel Arsham, the artists probe ideas about visibility, spatial confines and movement textures. In other words, they're not fooling around.

Bokaer, who danced with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company for seven years, met Ruiz in a 2003 Deborah Hay workshop and Arsham in 2006, when the artist designed the set for Cunningham's *eyeSpace*. "It was an experience where I had to completely educate myself, not only with dance, but the stage," Arsham recalls at his Greenpoint studio, where the three gathered recently for an interview. "I was very much interested in all of the illusions possible."

For Bokaer, who invited the pair to cocreate the new site-specific production, Arsham's earliest observations about stagecraft struck him: "I remember that Daniel said, 'With stage space, there's a box, a rectangle; why is it only four sides? Why can't there be six?'" In *Untitled Corners*, which was recently performed in Valencia, Spain, Arsham has created a set with exits and entry points. The eight-foot structure is constructed from dense foam pieces, normally used for rendering fake architectural details.

"During the performance, I open up aperture erosions into the cube and Jonah and Judith move through them," Arsham says. "On a proscenium stage, the audience accepts that the wings are invisible netherworlds, the space beyond view. Here, the apertures in the cube act as this black hole that the dancers can use to enter and disappear. At certain points, they appear as if they're one person and then separate into two people moving through the hole."

In exploring concepts about visibility and invisibility, Bokaer and Ruiz worked from improvisational scores with the intention of building a structure based on Arsham's architectural ideas. "Daniel was preoccupied with breaking a wall," says Ruiz, who is also a member of the Trisha Brown Dance Company. "I thought, How can we use that in movement? For us, the first process was just improvising textures—different qualities of movement, which could be very metallic or very soft and smooth. We are working with a structure that is very linear and clean...."

"Rigid," interjects Arsham.

"Yes—so the question was how can we do that with our bodies?" Ruiz adds. "Can we do exactly what the wall is doing?" In the work, Bokaer and Ruiz, wearing black pantsuits, navigate a slippery place between appearing both as bodies and objects. As Arsham gradually destroys the foam structure, which is initially plastered to appear solid, the effect is slow and methodical. "It's almost the opposite of a violent destruction," says Arsham.

The work marks Arsham's first time performing, though that isn't the only unusual aspect about *Untitled Corner*. Arsham regularly attends rehearsals and was responsible for bringing the composer Alexis Georgopoulos of Arp into the process. "Instead of collaboration happening in a vacuum, there has been a lot of dialogue and exchange," Bokaer says. "We spoke a lot about how we would approach the project. Daniel's ideas have given us a lot of rich material for positive and negative space, and it's led to a lot of thoughts about how we both move. In a way, he is providing the inverse of a sightline. Instead of a vanishing point, he's providing a corner."

In turn, Bokaer has provided something for Arsham: a weekly private dance class (it was the artist's idea). "You don't realize what it takes until you try and rub your stomach and pat your head with larger movements," Arsham says. "It's been enlightening for me to do these short classes with him just to see what it takes to get to these places." He laughs. "When I make a suggestion about something in the choreography, hopefully it can be more meaningful if I actually know what I'm talking about."

Untitled Corner is at Mon 6, Wed 8, and July 10, 13, 15 and 17.

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