

dance

Whose Space Is Whose?

A choreographer assaults the audience-performer divide

by Deborah Jowitz

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I'm sitting beside a friend on one of the carpeted risers that run around three sides of St. Mark's Church. We're leaning back against the eastern wall on the top level (only a handful of the people who've come to see Luciana Achugar's *Exhausting Love* at Danspace Project are in chairs). Suddenly, lighting designer Jonathan Belcher hoists an open-sided wooden box housing a spotlight and trains the spot on our area. None too soon. Hilary Clark scrambles up the two bottom steps, pushes between Carrie and me, and sits there, breathing rather hard and gazing raptly upward, as if being in a church has induced a minor ecstasy or an onset of recollection.



Always something interesting to look at

Photo by Briana Blasko

Luciana Achugar
Exhausting Love
Danspace Project at Saint Mark's Church
November 9-12

Achugar borrowed her title from an anthology by one dance scholar, Andre Lepecki, and drew her program note from a book by another, Mark Franko's *The Work of Dance/ Labor, Movement, and Identity* in the 1930s. The mission statement for her last piece, *A Super Natural Return to Love* (2004), reveals that the Urugayan-born choreographer is heavily into the tropes and language of postmodern scholarship. Central to *Exhausting Love* is the problem of "the gaze" that tends to objectify the performer and cast the spectator as voyeur.

It's not easy to break down the imagined fourth wall between audience and dancers, even in an intimate, non-proscenium space. I deliberately turn my head to examine Clark, pressed up against me. But I notice that during other forays into the audience by the performers, some people prefer to stare uneasily ahead, as if "front" is the legitimized direction for the spectator's gaze. As the work begins, the six women dancers form an aisle near the entrance and waft latecomers through. Some people try to go around them; others either get into the spirit of the event or slink past the welcomers.

Belcher's lighting design reinforces both Achugar's desire to erode the boundary between watchers and doers and another theme that interests her: dance as labor. His light cages (single cubes or three-tiered affairs) get moved around a lot, not just by him (essentially another performer) or, on occasion, by composer-singer Michael Mahalchick, but by the six dancers. You get used to hearing the clack of plugs and wires against

the floor as they disconnect and reconnect lamps.

This thought-provoking new work by Achugar relates to her 2004 one. The dancers wear the same dark blue maids' uniforms, lightly dusted with red glitter, that they did in *A Super Natural Return to Love*—sometimes with dark blue hoodies over them. As in that piece, their movement tasks range from the repetitive and workmanlike to the extravagantly dramatic, as if we're glimpsing clips from movies we'll never see in their entirety. They even reprise from the earlier work a motif of lying on the floor and scissoring their legs with absent-minded seductiveness.

There's always something interesting happening. Maybe it's Achugar sitting on the altar steps cradling the fallen Melanie Maar and singing in Spanish a song whose first line translates as "What do you want me to do with this sad life?" Or perhaps you'd rather focus on a simultaneous action: Jennifer Kjos, Beatrice Wong, and Clark clutching the church's pillars and hiding behind them or swaying dreamily.

Some of the movement is drastic: falling, crawling, and—in a passage at the end—running and tackling one another with a fervor that looks improvised. They have melodramatic fits. At one point, Kjos, Wong, and Clark mount the altar platform and pose languidly, their legs lifted high and braced against the wall; they look like demented ballet dancers. Achugar soothes the crazed Maar, while from the balcony, Mahalchick plays his guitar and sings over and over Spanish words that can be rendered as, "He arrived with three wounds;/ the one from love,/ the one from death,/ the one from life." (Clark is enraptured.)

In addition to lugging lights around, the powerful and expressive dancers labor in a repeated walking pattern that takes them around the perimeter of the church. Side, front, back, side, go their feet, in steps big or small enough to advance the procession. They might be working on an assembly line; the sequence is that numbing. In a later repeat of it, however, they add a jump and a rhythmic shift; finally they just jump until they collapse. We become more and more aware of their panting and the sheen of sweat on their faces.

We spectators are allowed to move, and some do walk to another seating area to get a different view. At times the performers force us to shift by shoving and nudging. One of the most arresting moments empowers the audience (or one member of it) rather than the performers and blows open the issue of objectification. It happens right at the end, when some of the dancers have fallen. A young woman emerges from the audience and starts gently rolling Kjos back and forth, getting lower to the ground herself as she persists. It makes no difference that she may have been primed to do this; by entering the domain of performance out of empathy, she shrinks the space between performer and watcher until it disappears entirely.

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