

# What If the Package Betrays Its Contents?

By Deborah Jowitt

**NEW DANCE USA.** Festival organized by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (October 3 to 11).

*New Dance USA*, the ambitious eight-day festival organized by the blessedly venturesome Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, raised almost as many issues about the packaging of art as it did about the differing concerns of the rich array of choreographers represented. Of these—Maria Cheng, Sage Cowles, and Linda Shapiro of Minneapolis; Margaret Fisher and Margaret Jenkins of San Francisco; Deborah Hay and Dee McCandless of Austin; Karole Armitage, Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, Laura Dean, Andrew de Groat, Senta Driver, Douglas Dunn, Eiko and Koma, Molissa Fenley, David Gordon, Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane, Kenneth King, Charles Moulton, Rosalind Newman, Dana Reitz, Jim Self, Kei Takei, Nina Wiener more or less of New York—only Childs had a program to herself. The juxtaposition of works and the editing some choreographers had apparently been willing to do created audience responses few could have predicted.

By the time I arrived in Minneapolis, many of the performances, lecture-demonstrations, lectures, and panel discussions had already happened. In corridors and Chinese restaurants and in the pages of Minneapolis newspapers, I learned that people had been thrilled by the witty opening-night combo of Brown, Gordon, and Moulton and—heady with the new discovery that “new” choreographers aren’t always the sobersides they’re reputed to be—had their chuckles at the ready for Kei Takei, and only realized after a while that there’s nothing funny about watching a person having rocks thrown at her feet. (Yet the awkward strutting, the futile bravado of Takei in her *Light Part X* could have been utilized by another sort of choreographer for comic effect.) If Karole Armitage was booed by some, is it because she ill-advisedly presented only half her *Drastic Classicism* and with four dancers instead of six, or because the Minneapolis dance audience saw it more as a trashing of Merce Cunningham than a coherent statement? If Dana Reitz was cheered, was it in part because she had already done a residency in town and was known, or simply that she had made a very beautiful piece (all I talked to told me this) and was getting the response she deserved?

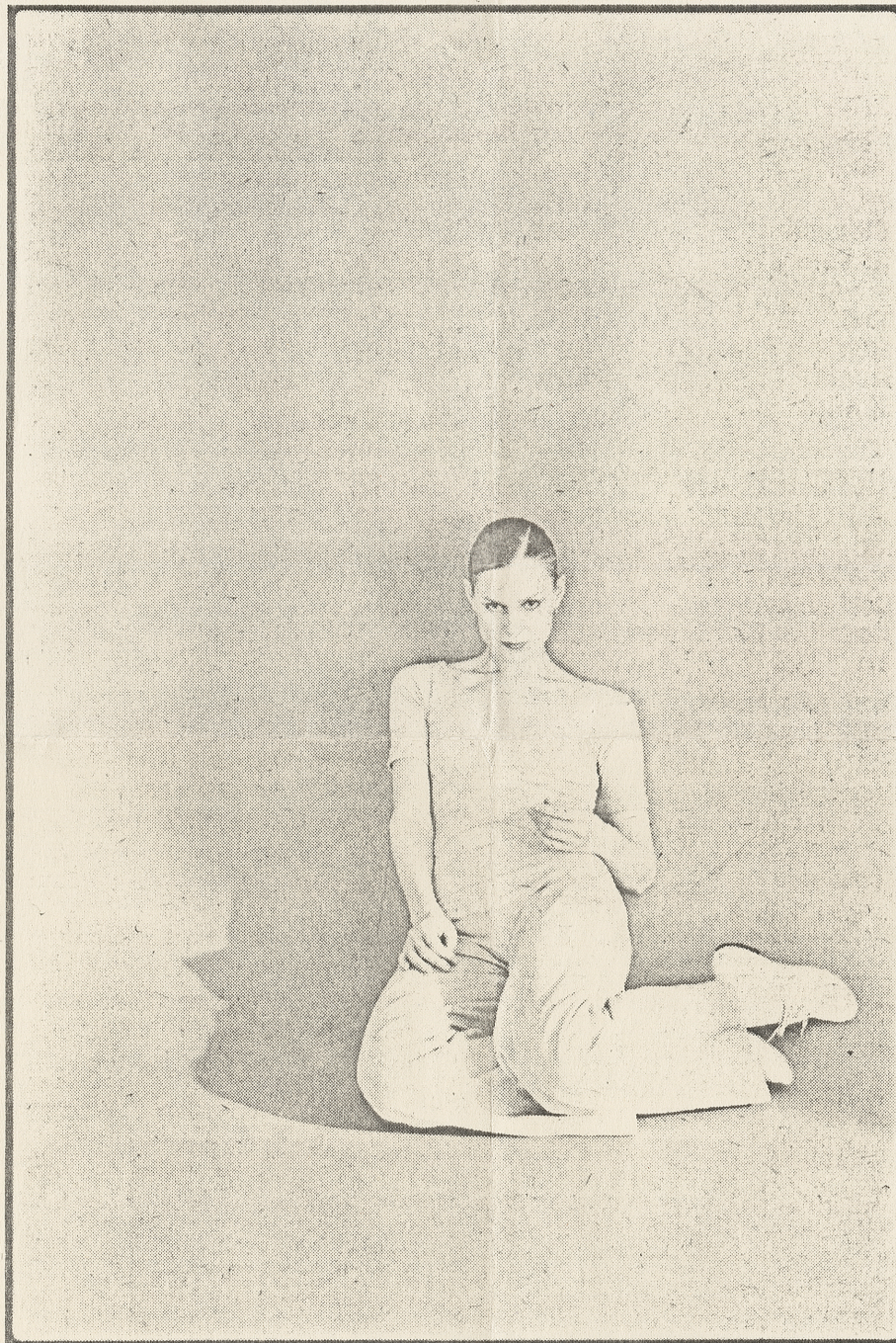
Performance artist Margaret Fisher presented a version of her *The True and False Occult* slightly different from the solo presentation of it she gave here on DTW’s summer series, but again the work seemed to end abruptly as if abridged from something longer, and although the sight of projected shapes darting and sentences creeping up a white pyramid was lovely, you couldn’t read the words unless you were sitting very close. Nor did Fisher’s telegraphy of small isolated gestures of toes-mouth-shoulders-knees-hands carry far into the Anawin Middle School auditorium. Yet Eiko and Koma’s *White Dance*, which I would have thought a gallery or loft piece for sure, seemed to magnetize the audience—perhaps because the performers immediately prepare you for extreme slowness and decondition you for “dancing” and because their intensity is so great. Even someone with poor eyesight could remark on Eiko’s toes, separating uncannily into five tendrils as she sat delicately climbing the air with her feet and hands like a wounded insect.

Both Margaret Jenkins and Molissa Fenley received enthusiastic ovations for the first of two works each presented, less for a second. Was it because the second dances were intrinsically less engaging than the first? Or because one dance gave you all you needed, for the time being, of

these artists’ singleminded aesthetics. That Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane’s collaborative *Valley Cottage* would be greatly liked was almost a foregone conclusion: they are powerful performers, have an interesting slant on performance, can be funny, and Jones has worked recently in Minneapolis. Dee McCandless came off poorly. What Sally Banes put so positively in her article for the highbrow souvenir program (“These choreographers of the ’80s . . . are distinguishing themselves from their predecessors, not by shifting the focus of dance to new issues, but by developing alternative aspects of earlier issues”) was here redefined by spectators as derivativeness. Put on a program with Laura Dean, whose work is known and deeply appreciated in town, McCandless’s clever patterns struck many primarily as trivialized, “cute” Dean.

scudding across a filmed floor or dancing with large pale twins.

But Childs wasn’t far through her first solo—brisk, repetitive permutations of a phrase around a complicated geometric pattern—when an insistent hissing began in the house, and as she finished, boos and bravos competed briefly (Minneapolitans are pretty polite). From then on through the rest of the piece’s three sections, people gathered coats and family and trickled out. Many, of course, stayed to applaud enthusiastically. Interesting. I love looking at the three ensemble sections of *Dance*, particularly the first in which Childs’s skimming patterns, LeWitt’s overlay of images, Glass’s sweetness of tone, the springy simplicity of the nine dancers make you think of a horde of angels, cool but active, flying eternally on mysterious but orderly errands. Childs herself, how-



Lucinda Childs: booed and braved by Minneapolitans

Lucinda Childs’s company performed *Dance*, the 1979 Childs-Philip Glass-Sol LeWitt collaboration, in the huge clattery space of Northrop Auditorium, keyed into the festival, but also as part of a series of imported attractions that features Paul Taylor and Pilobolus. ABT is playing Northrop too. Nothing in the program prepared the audience for an hour-and-45-minute, intermissionless ocean of dancing. At first, spectators seemed engrossed by the waves of skipping, turning white-clad dancers crossing the stage from right to left, from left to right, the variety of rhythms that floated into prominence on the steady, sonorous tide of Glass’s music. You could hear little gasps of surprise and pleasure when LeWitt’s films were projected on a scrim in front of the performers and suddenly live dancers were

ever, is an austere performer. If you sit close to her in a small theater or a loft, you can get interested in the small changes in her patterns or let your gaze shift to different parts of her body, but from a distance she’s forbiddingly mechanical and you might well begin to think you’ll go berserk if she doesn’t stop.

Packaging. *Dance* is a spectacle, designed for a proscenium stage, but Childs herself seems profoundly, dedicatedly untheatrical. Choreographers are competing in the marketplace these days—after all, who wants to starve forever? But it strikes me that much “new” dance needs new modes of presentation to make its proper effect. And to assume that someone who loves Paul Taylor will at least like Lucinda Childs is to court disaster. Nothing is gained by not taking risks, but I dislike

actively hostile audiences as much as I dislike mindless approval for anything that moves, and I always wonder whether the fault lies with the audience, the work, the presenting organization, the climate, or all of these.

Of the few dances I hadn’t already seen, one was by Linda Shapiro of Minneapolis. *Pulse*, it’s called, and now I see in the program that the accompanying sound is a realization (by Willie Ruff and John Rodgers) of data from Johannes Kepler’s *Harmonices Mundi*. Which I didn’t know when I saw the dance. I identified the sound simply as the clanging of a huge metronome which gradually dissolved into a powerful throbbing hum. The dance is modest, nicely made, and also resonant, unisistently offering things to think about and to feel for those inclined to do so. The four performers—Diane Aldis, Leigh Dillard, Catherine Gasiowicz, Wendy Morris—start simply walking on the beat. Oh, you think, one of those pieces: neat floor patterns, repetition, brisk but pedestrian foot activity. And, yes, all that’s true. But Shapiro is more intrepid both with rhythm and weight than many choreographers who work in this vein choose to be. Stillnesses punctuate the progress; rapid steps spatter against the even beat and then settle docilely back into it. The dancers may suspend for an instant or drop to the ground with a lush acknowledgment of the weight of their bodies which has nothing metrical about it. Still, in this first part, even when the dancers advance toward the audience with a soft, shuffling step, you pay attention to rhythm and pattern and dancerly spunk. But when they begin the dance again to the throbbing sound, everything they do looks dramatic. They don’t alter their performing, but the sound builds a landscape on which their rhythmic footwork traces paths.

Margaret Jenkins has been collaborating with writer Michael Palmer for some time now. Their use of words—spoken by the dancers or on tape—has always puzzled me. I seldom find links between the structure of the words and the structure of the dances, even though both dances and words have a linguistic rather than a narrative air: one of Palmer’s dialogues for *Straight Words* involves a series of mild variations (paraphrase: “I am going out”; “I am going to the store”) of the sort dancers improvising might make on each other’s material. Perhaps the words only serve to increase density. Watching *Versions by Turn* (1980) though, I suddenly felt that what the words really do is make the dancers look as if they own the movement. Palmer’s deliberately banal monologues (paraphrase: “1 a), I woke up when the alarm went off; 1 b), From my window I could see the rain striking the pavement; 1 c), I . . .”) which stud the piece form a circle so that the last one is the same as the first. But despite this, and despite the fact that a different person recites this first-last monologue, the illusion created by the spoken “I” is a persistent and powerful one and infuses all the dancers’ movements with a semblance of individual decision making.

Jenkins’s dances arise from improvisation by the dancers on which she and Palmer impose structure and permanence, but the dancers must all improvise in the same style, because no strong differences arise. All of them make use of highly defined leg gestures, a lexicon of torso twists, bends, etc., and, often, small hand gestures. They tend to travel a lot in space and to relish time as a highly changeable element—following, say, a smooth slow gesture with a rapid sputter of steps. The movement, the infrequent encounters between dancers are often beautiful and occasionally unusual. For me, the flaw in Jenkins’s dances is that in them you usually see nine people spreading dancing over the stage for a period of time. Individuals’ speed and slowness blend in an overall texture that is slow-fast all the time. You may at times see individuals meet and part; you never feel the whole stage expand, contract, move in a single direction. Often you see a highly skilled milling around instead of the complexity I think Jenkins is fascinated by.