

# ON SUSAN SGORBATI by Audrey Kindred

Susan Sgorbati is a site dance artist—the first site dance artist that I ever knew. Interviews with her and several of her former students from Bennington College offer a glimpse into her dances and their makings. At Bennington College in the mid-1980s, where she was studying for a master's degree, and then a member of the dance department faculty, she was my teacher. As her student, I came to understand choosing sites for performance as a profound choreographic decision. Fundamental to my understanding of dance is the consideration of environment in relation to a dance's creation. In the wake of the postmodern dance movement, my generation understands no space to be neutral; no house for a dance not to thoroughly affect and contextualize the dance itself. Living in NYC in the early 1990s, I see that many choreographers are taking their work in a "site-specific" direction. In a telephone interview, I asked Susan Sgorbati if she had ever seen a "site dance" before she made one. She said no.

As more artists begin to find inspiration in built and natural environments, I am reminded that when Susan began working outside of the formal theater, she made site dances without cultural permission. Framed by her own specific placement in history's passage, Susan followed her inklings and imagination into site-dance pioneering. She is an innovator of processes that form the assumptions of my generation's creative quests. Her self-guided, improvisational processes endure.

The stage was a place where Susan, studying and performing dance as a child, experienced access to a sense of depth and discovery—a sense of revelation. It was her sacred space. "I didn't feel compromised yet by the limitations of its environment," she explained. When she returned to Vermont to live at the age of twenty-six, nature moved her and its spaces inspired her. "Those spaces became framed for me," she says. A site—the intersection of time, space and context—redefined her idea of sacred space.

Her experience as a student of improvisation at Bennington College, with Judith Dunn and Bill Dixon, laid seeds that shaped her approach to working in sites. Improvisation emphasizes a value of one-time experience. It nurtures a sensual orientation, a recognition of a moment's life as a whole and substantial event, a shapely convergence of deliberate, circumstantial, and accidental elements. Her move from stage to site echoes a shift of focus from the reproductive aspects of performance to the experiential. She is secure with sites, and with their unpredictability, and relies on them to house her dances generously and reveal them clearly. Likewise, her dances hold no pretense of upstaging nature. Guided by Susan's improvisational sensibilities, the site dances are not threatened by the unexpected and powerful nature of sites. She does not bring her dances into a space to disrupt or redefine it, but to pay it homage.

*Frozen lake or abandoned factory, she arrives at a site and seems to inhabit it, or to have always been there, to belong there. She is not a visitor, not a tourist.*

—Chivas Sandage

**Susan remains simple** and humanly proportioned about her site dance endeavors. She brings something to be held by a site and embraced by its frame. She doesn't get tricky or opportunistic with a space.

*An environment or space would inspire her, but the environment would not be her sole collaborator. She liked concepts. And other artists and their concepts.*

—Hope Clark

Susan trusts the autonomy, strength, and beauty of her collaborators, be they sculptural, musical, or natural. Her work does not emphasize "becoming one" with the elements of nature. Within performance the autonomy of the elements perseveres.

Susan's magnetism toward particular sites occurs intuitively. A dream or vision gives her a sense of solidarity with a site that she has perhaps happened upon while hiking, or one she sees everyday, or one to which a colleague has guided her. This primary image provides a substantial inspirational base from which she builds a dance. She sits still in the space for many hours to let her mind wander within its frame. "I improvise that space," she says. "And from that I develop movement phrases for the dance." She enters the history of a com-



KATE AICHEL

munity and, with her presence, creates a unique meeting between imagination and livelihood. She makes dances for "unlikely" environments, staging the meeting between planned and unknowable elements.

*The thing about site specific dances is that the space is not controlled and refined for the dance's purpose, like the dance you bring to the space, is. It is challenging to meet the elements.*

—Colleen Blair

**Susan has created dances** for sites such as: the surface of a frozen lake; a field at dawn/green lawn at noon/ brick patio at midnight; a neglected Lower East Side park in New York City; racquetball courts viewed from above; and a gravel lot at night lit by car headlights. A broad anonymity characterizes the site performances, welcoming passersby to look closer. Some dances, set in less pedestrian sites, require eventful pursuit. A dance in a Vermont marble quarry, for example, required its audience to hike two miles up a mountain. Recently her attention to community politics has broadened her concept of site, leading her to make dances for contexts. Her *Dance for a Farm* was performed at two farms in Vermont; her factory dance at five locations ranging from operating factories to converted or abandoned ones. Her dances address the communities that "live" the sites of her work—factory workers, farm families, homeless park dwellers.

*I look at dancing with Susan as a time to gather myself, work honestly, not commercially.*

—Hope Clark

**At a time when the dance field** is being revitalized by a sense of reconnection with our environments, many of Susan Sgorbati's dances go a step further by expressing direct concern, offering care where she sees its need.

*In her classes, she discussed constantly what's happening with society, she'd identify a desperation of everything and how to bring some kind of light to that through art. That was a tingling motive to dance. Everything was a revolution. You're making a dance, it's a revolution.*

—Hope Clark

**Specific dances such as** the dances for the farms and a dance in the Lower East Side/Bowery focused on recognizing and revitalizing environments and communities that were being ignored or oppressed. "The dances relate directly to the community that they're in. [They are implicitly] political because they come out honest regard for environment and community," says Susan.

Something is shifting for Susan Sgorbati now. Recently she has taken on administrative responsibility as the Dean of Faculty at Bennington College. Her pursuit of mediation endeavors seems aligned with a new creative trajectory. As Susan puts it, "I've made farm dances for the farm community, and factory dances for the factory workers. Now, I need to bring the farm dance to the factory community."

Next summer she will be working with Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival to create a site piece for the Housatonic River near the Pillow. She has travelled the river to site-see, and has found along its banks, not one, but several spaces calling her imagination their way. It was in her early imaginative process for this new piece that she identified a shift in her thought processes, the seeds for a potential change of structure. Inclined to hold on to her old ways of working, she finds the river coaxing her to let go, and listen to what it, as a unique and unharnessed site requires and suggests. ■

Audrey Kindred is a choreographer and improviser, and newly a part of the Movement Research staff.

## Anatomy of a Dance

Susan Sgorbati created a dance for the Sara Delano Roosevelt Park in the Bowery in New York City in the spring of 1987. Jack Moore, then also teaching dance at Bennington College, had once brought her to sit at this site. Homeless people, avenues of traffic, and strong smells of fish markets colored this environment. They sat together in that sad, deserted park for an afternoon, talking sparsely. Later, she dreamt of a huge origami bird in the park. Having learned of the park's heyday in the early 1800's, she wanted to bring back a sense of that time, its liveliness and character. Danny Michaelson, a frequent collaborator in her work, constructed a likeness to the bird in her dream, with a thick, 10-square-foot piece of paper. Susan choreographed the folding of the bird for five dancers, based on origami folding patterns. Dancers raised the bird and ran with it at the end of the piece, leaving "the disposable bird" (Jonathon Kirzel) in the nearby playground to be further explored.

*It rained the day we did a dance in the New York park, but we did it, and a man who saw the dance from his window came down and brought Susan a perfect purple iris, wanting to give back some of the beauty she had brought to the park. It didn't matter that it had rained, this meant everything to her. He'd just seen it from his window, and was moved and brought her down a flower. She said, okay, that was worth it. It was the smaller personal experiences with her collaborators and with whomever happened to be in the environment she was working that meant enough to her.*

—Hope Clark

compiled by Mark Sussman and Jenny Romaine

What do you think?

- A. I always vote.
- B. I think security is more important than access to information.
- C. I hate my boss.
- D. My top concern is choice.
- E. The benefits outweigh the disadvantages.
- F. He makes me uncomfortable.
- G. I would be likely to change my mind if there were a real alternative.
- H. It's time to take matters into our own hands.
- I. I think the time for mediation is over.
- J. I put my family before all else.
- K. It's too early too tell.



RONALD T. SIMON

**Men in the News in the ground** (Meredith Holch, Todd Grahme, Mark Sussman) and **Women in Polyester** (Jenny Romaine, Esther Kaplan, Maria Schumann) from **Public Secret**, performed August 1991, Bread and Puppet Farm, Glover, Vermont. Texts, exhibits, dances, and songs by those pictured and David Thorne.