

Intimate Revolutions The Choreography of Anne Bluethenthal

By Keith Hennessy

Persistently, Anne Bluethenthal (pronounced Bleedenthal) has been making dances in San Francisco for 24 years. In a series of email exchanges and telephone conversations I tried to excavate the evolving principles, intentions, and practice within her work.

"We need the truth—the difficult truth. And we need the grief. If we could only grieve deeply and continually over the horrible suffering of beings (and ourselves) and the planet, we may walk more honestly and wakefully on the planet, with compassion and humanity." —Anne Bluethenthal

As a choreographer Anne investigates and embodies the feminist idea that the personal is political, and the political is personal. It is easy to recognize in her gently activist dances the feminist and lesbian politics of inclusiveness, of embodiment, of recognizing the ways that political violence marks the personal body. Her work attempts to articulate how political resistance advances in direct relationship to the raising of personal and collective consciousness.

In the 1970's 'raising consciousness' was a slogan for expanding one's awareness, intelligence and compassion. Often it involved an integration of feminist and Marxist (class, materialist) analysis of one's personal history. Engaging a collective and non-hierarchical learning practice, social analysis was personalized while personal desire and suffering was recognized in a broader social context. No area of contemporary thought and culture was untouched by these developments; and thus the world was changed.

For dancers who came of feminist age during the 1960's and 70's raising consciousness was a project of embodiment. Within a larger movement that rejected hierarchy, violence and tightly constructed gender and sex roles, dancers critiqued the harmful, competitive, virtuosic and gendered tendencies in Ballet and Modern dance. A myriad of influences including somatic health, Contact Improvisation, a return to 'nature', self-determination, rape prevention, martial arts, unisex clothing, hippy and youth culture, and new Third World identities met with developments in contemporary art and performance. With t-shirts and posters quoting Emma Goldman (*If I can't dance I don't want to be in your revolution*) and an African proverb (*If you can walk you can dance*) dance became part of the revolution.

Recognizing the role of women in social justice as a constant muse in Anne's art, I asked her how we can make the world better by making dances.

Anne: I don't know how to make the world better any more. I know something about not being co-opted by the violence of the world. So I work on evolving a dance technique that, while training in a rigorous 'physical' discipline, is much more importantly about awakening to ourselves, to embodying nonviolence and being consciously guided through our lives.

Anne continued this response by trying to articulate a vision that many of us might recognize, spinning a tale of building momentum through community and art... but then she caught herself drifting and offered:

Anne: Really I just abhor any pretension, so I'm questioning all of this and I'm thinking that I just want to minimize my own suffering. I want to create a better world so I do it in the studio and on stage and hope it has some small impact. I look around the globe and my heart breaks and I have no choice but to make another dance that gives voice to my own grief and attempts to understand the madness. I try to offer some simple truth or reminder about our collective humanity. All my work through all these years just points to that same thing—our collective beingness.

I appreciate Anne's articulation of her artistic practice. She passionately distinguishes her teaching and choreography from those who don't have a philosophical source or more likely, don't recognize the ideological assumptions that their dancing reveals. In trying to understand the roots of non-violence in her dance practice I asked Anne about the influence of Judaism on her physical and spiritual inquiries. Her response illustrates the complex and organic connections that shape her identity and work.

Anne: *I grew up in Greensboro North Carolina in the Civil Rights period. My parents participated in the first sit-ins. My mother was instrumental in desegregating the public school system—one of the first and least violent of the school systems to do so. In my little world, Jews and African Americans were always allies and this was formative for me. Judaism was for me less a spiritual tradition (at that time) than a tradition of moral action, social justice. In a public high school of 1,800, I was one of five Jews, surrounded by born again Christians and evangelicals and often ostracized. I grew to feel at home as the outcast long before realizing I was a lesbian.*

I discovered feminism in Junior High and was convinced there was no one else in Greensboro who knew about it. Wimmin's libbers is what they called these people I was so excited to discover. By the time I had graduated college, I was working internally on how to create a technique that would embody the feminist principles I was now devoted to. The Alexander work was a means to this end. I found myself with a dance company because no one else seemed to be investigating in this way and I needed a laboratory to experiment with training in a new way.

Many years into my career as a choreographer and Alexander teacher, my best friend was diagnosed with breast cancer, which would eventually take her life. This catapulted me into an investigation in which I realized that I had already been deeply engaged in a spiritual practice. That the Alexander Technique and the dance making were in fact my spiritual practice, my worship, and my political activism.

Bluethenthal's newest work, "*Cariño: Economy of the Heart*," will premiere at Project Artaud Theatre, March 21-29, 2008. "*Cariño*" proposes an alternate value system; valuing the tree while it is still rooted in the ground, valuing the work done by women especially as caregivers, artists, and healers. Cariño—love, affection, tenderness, endearment. After three year's of artistic immersion in the violence of Darfur and Rwanda (*Unsing the Song: Reflections on Genocide*, 2006) Anne decided to re-focus on healing, and more simply, on caring.

Anne: "*Cariño*" is a deep consideration of what we care about, who we care for, who cares for us and what it would be to live in a world where women's ways of knowing, working, and being were of fundamental value.

This new work furthers the philosophy and ethics that Bluethenthal has been researching and practicing for over 25 years. There are three interlocking trajectories that guide the making of "*Cariño*": the body as microcosm of the world, the value of caring (who cares?), and women's victories around the world. The goal is to inspire a process for both performers and audience that will be both deeply personal and expansively global. Diverse casting and collaboration, another principle grounded in both feminist and civil rights organizing, is a hallmark of Bluethenthal's work. In "*Cariño*," Anne's artistic team includes composer Ajayi Lumumba, vocalists Melanie DeMore and Mama CoAtl, poet Judy Grahn, muralist Nadine Gay and her ensemble of dancers.

"Cariño" will celebrate and honor the aesthetic of caring, unabashedly reclaiming as essential that which seems trivial, clichéd, or embarrassing: acts of love. The women-centered ensemble embodies grace and fury, solidarity and individuality, rendering even the most difficult subjects with haunting beauty.

While reviewing performance texts and descriptions from her previous work, Anne and I enjoyed a spirited and all too rare exchange. Challenges led to debate, which led to further articulation. Disagreements gently became insight. I was continuously impressed with Anne's commitment to embody, research, and manifest radical (deeply rooted) ideas in performance. She intentionally creates an inclusive yet homosocial world of women in the studio, on stage and in the audience, as three circles of action that she hopes will continue to ripple out, nurturing women's community en route to a solidarity with women everywhere and then with people everywhere.

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