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Gallery chronicle

by *James Panero*

On “In the Use of Others for the Change: A Program of New Ballets by Julia K. Gleich” at the Center for Performance Research, Brooklyn; “Kenneth Noland: Paintings 1958–1968” at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York; and “Structured Color” at D. Wigmore Fine Art, New York.

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IN THE USE OF OTHERS ,
DANIEL G. HILL, COURTESY
NORTE MAAR

I know next to nothing about ballet, but that did not stop me from attending the first full-fledged ballet of Bushwick, the alternative arts neighborhood of Brooklyn, in mid-April. I am not ashamed to admit it: New York offers much of which I am ignorant. Fortunately, even if knowledge deepens one's appreciation of art, good art of any kind does not require an advanced degree to enjoy. I have a rule of thumb I use to evaluate all forms of art I see for the first time. Simply put, if my mind can wander free of my next dental exam or that email I was supposed to send, I consider the art a success.

I did a lot of happy wandering on the night I saw "In the Use of Others for the Change," the collaborative ballet of Bushwick artists and composers working with the choreographer Julia K. Gleich. [I] One thought was that I was seeing the reincarnation of Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Maybe that idea won't excite everyone as much as it excited me. For a while I have harbored a belief that the groves of Bushwick grow the same special fruit and enjoy the same artistic climate that gave rise to Montparnasse a century ago. The reappearance of the ballet troupe of the Parisian avant-garde would seem to support my theory. And Gleich, as it happens, is only a generation removed from them. One of her teachers was Alexandra Danilova, a star of Diaghilev's stage.

It is also worth noting that most of Paris in May 1917 did not make it to the opening of "Parade," one of the most significant artistic collaborations put on by the Ballets Russes, written by Jean Cocteau with sets and costumes by Pablo Picasso, music by Erik Satie, and choreography by Léonide Massine. Likewise, it is safe to say that most of New York did not make it into the fifty-seat auditorium at the Center for Performance Research to see "In the Use of Others" over its three-night run either. Let's hope this ballet can return for a much longer stay quite soon.

The title of the composition comes from a text by John C. Lilly, a new-ager best known for his development of the deprivation tank, which he used in conjunction with hallucinogenics, and his theories of inter-species communication between humans and dolphins. I often wonder where great art would be without the pseudo-scientists that inspire it. Charlatans either empty one's wallets or leave one's underwear atop one's head. Yet the alchemy of crackpots and cranks, misused in the science of life, often gives life to art. One reason could be that art delivers on what the gurus can only promise: it unmask and enlivens the senses.

Lilly's text, from something called "Beliefs Unlimited Exercise," is as turgid on paper as one might expect. It would be a bad overture if you were looking to kick off inter-species communication with good cocktail conversation and announce: "In the province of the mind, what one believes to be true either is true or becomes true within certain limits, to be found experientially and experimentally. These limits are beliefs to be transcended. Hidden from one's self is a covert set of beliefs that control one's thinking, one's actions, and one's feelings." And so forth. If I went up to a dolphin and said that, I doubt that dolphin would want to talk, and I wouldn't blame the dolphin.

But art is art. As a thematic centerpiece to this collaborative ballet, the text worked quite well. The aesthetics of Bushwick may be do-it-yourself, but I doubt much would get done without “the use of others” to support this self-sustaining, blissed-out artistic neighborhood, where artists regularly show one another’s work in their studios and galleries.

The ballet’s impresario, the curator and gallery owner Jason Andrew, is a dancer himself who has enjoyed a long professional collaboration with Gleich, his former teacher. At this performance, the two danced an opening piece, “Ghost (For Martin),” created a decade ago but now a requiem to Gleich’s brother, who died the weekend of its premiere. The other dances of the evening grew out of a retreat last summer called Camp Pocket U(topia) in Rouses Point, New York. Gleich came with her dancers Claire McKeveny and Mary Jane Ward, who developed the second piece of the evening, “Summer in RP,” a work that focused on the classical range of the troupe.

After intermission came “In the Use of Others,” a ballet in three movements. Austin Thomas along with the artists Kevin Regan and Andrew Hurst each supplied designs, and Audra Wolowiec added sound to Thomas’s program. Collaborations work when artists wander together, taken in by each other’s art. Perhaps Bushwick has a particular sensibility that tends to be less armored, less ironic than other scenes, and therefore more willing to give over one’s work to a collaborative end. For “Parade,” Cocteau said that his “dream was to hear the music of Picasso’s guitars.” Here, through the addition of each artist’s work, in the form of projections, readings, and mechanical and recorded sounds, the dancers became the art, with images projected on them and their silhouettes carved out of the projections on the back wall.

The collaborations exposed new depths of each of the artists’ practices: angular dances accentuated the “vectors” of Thomas’s stenciled works; dancers gradually entered the stage as Kevin Regan read, repeated, and echoed Lilly’s text in the mantra-like use of mirroring and repetition; dancers whipped up a frenzy for the cyclone of debris in Hurst’s collages and assemblages. For the culmination, or “decumulation” as it was called, Hurst himself performed a harmonica blues riff as he entered and exited the stage, with a lone dancer snapping alongside him.

Certainly there were shortcomings. Thomas had an idea to feature two of the dancers stenciling their own work at the corners of the stage, but this couldn’t be easily seen by the audience, and the activity was not very interesting to observe anyway. Hurst’s third of the ballet also took up two-thirds of the time. With five middle parts in his second of four parts, it grew long in the tooth. Still, for all of the rigor and labor and unrealized ideas packed into “In the Use of Others,” Hurst’s soulful harmonica finale was a favorite—a perfect unwinding and an open ending. He directed this sendoff at his colleagues on stage as well as to the audience, offering a sweet bridge to the next collaboration.

I found the lengthy catalogue essay to “Kenneth Noland: Paintings 1958–1968,” written by Paul Hayes Tucker, to be particularly illuminating.^[2] Tucker occupies the Paul Hayes Tucker Distinguished Professor of Art chair at the University of Massachusetts Boston, and he credits a team of eight researchers in contributing to his twenty-four-page essay. Their singular aim, it seemed, was to

liberate Noland from his close association with the critic Clement Greenberg: “Greenberg’s influence—as a brilliant but ultimately limiting formalist—is only one of many reasons why Noland’s art looked the way it did and why it assumed its deserved place at the forefront of America’s contemporary art production.”

I compliment Tucker for striving to uncover every possible alternative influence to Noland’s bull’s-eye confections: the military insignias Noland observed as a glider pilot training for combat in World War II; Sputnik and the space race and the threat of nuclear war; the circular shapes found in the work of Robert Delaunay, Marsden Hartley, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Arthur Dove; the branding of Tide detergent; and the logo of Black Mountain College. Tucker also suggests that Noland’s famous visit to see Helen Frankenthaler’s stain painting “Mountain and Sea,” facilitated through Greenberg, may have been less significant than we believe because he and his fellow artist Morris Louis did not immediately take up the technique themselves.

Perhaps the art market demands the exorcism of Clem, but I still find his singular influence to be an argument in support of Noland’s place in art history. Is it possible to think of Noland without recalling that iconic photograph of Greenberg observing one of the artist’s circles, with Greenberg’s head and torso cocked to the side as if being spun around by the design?

The other problem with removing Greenberg is that this elevates Noland’s other big influence, Wilhelm Reich. An Austrian protégé of Sigmund Freud, Reich believed in the unseen universal forces of “Orgones,” libidinal energies named after the orgasm that could be harnessed through “Orgone Boxes” and used to control the weather. Noland, who like many artists was in Reichian therapy for years, said he became “immersed in it” in 1958 and had Orgone Boxes built at his homes in suburban Washington and later in Vermont. Since Reich eventually was shut down by the government for operating a sex-based fraud, it says something about Greenberg’s current status that one’s association with a quack is better than being connected with modernism’s greatest American critic.

Greenberg was on to something with Noland. At Mitchell-Innes & Nash, the paintings remained inexplicable, delicate, glowing creations, deceptively simple. I found them to be especially intriguing large and up close, bending around the corners of the eye. The diamond-shaped striped painting *Orange and Blue* (circa 1966) seemed to compress like a spring when I walked around it. In its texture and detail, *Earthen Bound* (1960) demonstrated Noland’s singular command of the staining technique, cooler and more unreal than what Frankenthaler or Louis would do. Today Noland’s ethereal orbs would probably have little effect on the weather, but I bet they convey a lot more energy than anything Reich ever dreamed up, and Clement Greenberg deserves much of the credit for their creation.

Last month D. Wigmore Fine Art, the smart gallery located on 57th Street, offered up a survey of American Op Art that seemed to tie in to much of what is happening in contemporary Chelsea.^[3] I have a feeling that art is getting more optical again, with work that is allowed to stimulate the eye rather than merely tickle the irony receptors. I am still waiting for the artist Lori Ellison to be given a big show of her obsessive little patterned drawings. The Pace Gallery has just featured its second exhibition of the wonderfully precise work of James Siena, now a fastidious family man, but one who came

to Op through psychedelica, grotesque doodling, and the 1980s alternative art scene.

The artists at Wigmore meanwhile, those original Op technicians who mainly came through Josef Albers and the color theories of the Bauhaus, might have always been known to initiates, but they feel ready for a general rediscovery. This time around, Julian Stanczak and Richard Anuszkiewicz, the unpronounceable masters of the flickering color line, might take a cue from Tadasuke Kuwayama, which the artist simplified to Tadasky, and come up with better names. Is “Gilbert and George” taken? And Tadasky himself, who is still working at his own remarkable circular patterns, provides a counterpoint to the circles of Noland. Tadaskys are Nolands minus Orgones. Stripped bare of mid-century hocus-pocus, Tadasky’s circles seem more present, more current, than Noland’s epic creations half a century ago.

[1] “In the Use of Others for the Change: A Program of New Ballets by Julia K. Gleich” was on view at the Center for Performance Research, Brooklyn, from April 14 through April 16, 2011.

[2] “Kenneth Noland: Paintings 1958–1968” was on view at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, from March 17 through April 30, 2011

[3] “Structured Color” was on view at D. Wigmore Fine Art, New York, from February 8 through April 22, 2011.

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