Sally Gross, Suddenly

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The room is warm and silent in the afterglow of Robert Een's sexy "Il Pomodoro," a love song he plays on his cello and croons, in Italian, with Katie Geissinger. After the last mellow note, four women in pale pants and leotards enter and sit quietly on the floor in a row, stage right, facing the line of black-clothed musicians. (The dancers are Jamie Di Mare, Jesika Gastonguay, Mei Yin Ng, and Corinne Sarian; the musicians include Jeff Berman on vibraphone, along with Een and Geissinger.) Two sheer white screens flank the upstage corners, and four white wooden chairs are lined up stage left, parallel to the seated women across the floor. On each chair is a small construction, a little building, perhaps a house, made of bright wooden blocks.

Sally Gross, in drapey dark brown shirt and pants, walks into the performing space and softly flings herself into a solo. Her movements are familiar to those of us who have seen her work many times over the years: they are the basic actions of walking and running, changing directions, tracing patterns on the floor with feet and in the air with arms that extend and retract. This time Gross seems almost to be performing with two partners: the upstage wall and the audience. She falls into the wall, catching it with her outstretched hand, then rebounds, running toward the spectators and looking us in the eye, not quite dropping into our arms. Her almost-gray hair is a chic triangle above her chin, and her face is fierce and fragile.

Suddenly Then She . . . , a full-evening dance presented at New York City's Joyce SoHo in May 1998, continues choreographer Sally Gross's longtime tradition of annual concerts, each of them marked by her commitment to the plainest and most minimalist resolutions to the movement problems she sets up and to the assumption that those simple lines in time and space are charged with the lives of the movers who make them. This last part, admittedly, was not always part of the way she thinks about choreography. She conceives and speaks of her work in terms of movement. But even in the earliest of the many conversations we've held in the years since I began searching into the relationship between dance—especially dance with a formalist base—and self-representation, Gross framed her dances in terms of autobiography. "All of my dance is autobiographical," she once said, "I don't think I've left any of my history out."[1]

This statement is deceptively simple. While the surge of interest in autobiography continues unabated across the arts, much of the performance associated with autobiography is literary or verbal. But dance, the form integrally situated in the body, also offers possibilities of performing autobiography. In some instances, these possibilities lie in movement itself; in others, movement is mingled—in the act of performance, in its preparation, in its inspiration—with words.

Sally Gross began dancing in the 1950s and was active in the workshops and concerts of the Judson Dance Theater, the arena in which, from 1962 to 1964, postmodern dance came into being. The work that emerged from the Judson, at least its most conceptually adventurous and influential wing, was concerned with redefining dance through a range of strategies that focused on its fundamental formal properties: movement, time, and space. Other qualities associated with dance, such as "spectacle," "virtuosity," "glamor," and "seduction"—the catalogue of antagonisms named by Yvonne Rainer in her 1965 manifesto—were largely dispensed with. The Judson works placed the emerging ideas about dance and the choreographic acts that embodied them up front and center.

But these dances, and those made since by Gross and others who have continued their choreographic careers, have, or have accrued, another life. Dances not intentionally conceived of as autobiography in any documentary sense—what I call "explicit autobiography"—often nonetheless perform autobiography more obliquely or indirectly: "implicit autobiography." The dances made by Judson choreographers in the 1960s and in the years since have contributed to shaping contemporary choreographic and critical models of performing autobiography. In Gross's work, both explicit and implicit autobiography share the dances with lines and bodies and time and space; thirty years of choreography have created a kind of autobiography-by-accumulation in which particular themes peek through the structures and formulas.

Suddenly Then She . . . both extends Gross's performance of autobiography and, more broadly, demonstrates recurrent themes of her choreography. Perhaps more explicitly than other works, *Suddenly* embodies Gross's formalist/humanist weave of mathematics and the moving body: a kind of poetics of geometry. I offer here a history of Gross's work, especially regarding autobiography, then return to this dance.

■

Sally Gross is my friend, and our friendship colors my critical perspective just as her dance and mine have colored the friendship. In fact, my understanding of her choreography deepened when I danced with her some time ago. I took her classes, performed with her company (in the 1990 *Coram*), and co-choreographed a duet based on the movements from two earlier dances. I was interested in Gross's staging of gender: I knew that her work did not handily fit into any category, such as

feminist or essentialist, and I was drawn to the ways it slid around and through such categories for the choreographer, the dancer, and the spectators. Since then, I have become more broadly interested in the ways that the images Gross creates as part of the *mise en scène* and the experience of the dancers and the viewer overlap and coexist.

Gross's dance studies have been diverse; much of her training, though, has been based on improvisation. Beginning in 1951 and continuing through the 1950s, she studied with Alwin Nikolais. Years of classes in improvisation, technique, and composition with Nikolais and his partner Murray Louis taught her most crucially that each dancer has her own "voice." Gross spent a year (1958) studying movement experimentation with Anna Halprin in California. There, she recalls, she learned about the vital importance of time as a choreographic element. There, too, she met people whose work stimulated her own ideas, such as Alan Watts and Simone Forti. Classes with Merle Marsicano taught her that work could grow from a personal impulse, that it could be intimate, that it could call on what Marsicano saw as female movement. Classes with Drid Williams taught her about alignment and inner impulse. Ballet classes with James Waring, in addition to developing her technical prowess, contributed to her ongoing attention to the smallest details of a movement.

Gross was a participant in the work of the Judson Dance Theater from its early days.[2] She appeared in the first "Concert of Dance" in Elaine Summers's *The Daily Wake* (later known as *Newspaper Dance*) and in later Judson concerts in pieces by Yvonne Rainer, Lucinda Childs, and Ruth Emerson as well as other works by Summers. She performed a number of her own works in Judson concerts as well.[3] Most of these pieces were structured improvisations centered on a specific movement problem or set of rules. They contained the seeds of the choreographic concerns and choices that have prevailed in her work over the years.

Gross did not actually join Robert Dunn's workshop until he revived it in the summer of 1964 "at the suggestion of Waring, who felt that things were sagging a bit again."[4] What she remembers most about Dunn (who died in 1996) is that he encouraged her to experiment. While her performance experience at the Judson brought her "variety and freedom," in Dunn's classes she "found new devices for choreographing," she wrote in her notes. "Bob asked you to think and take risks; he respected your choices," she recalls.

For all of her choreographic life, Gross has been engrossed in the work of painters and sculptors. Like other Judson participants, of course, she was regularly engaged with the work of the many visual artists who contributed to the group's dances. Additionally, she shared the art world for many years with her long-time companion, Richard Bellamy, the noted art dealer who died only weeks before the presentation of *Suddenly Then She . . .* Gross's dances consistently reflect her painterly eye. She has called on artists for inspiration (for instance, her 1991 *Giacometti Falls* recalls the sculptor's clarity of line, and her 1996 *Ziggurat* repeats,

Sally Gross in *An Incredibly Foreign Language* (1989). Photo: Courtesy Tom Brazil.

she says, the motion of a Mondrian) and collaboration (partners include Richard Nonas, Joan Kurahara, and Patsy Norvell). She has been particularly drawn to minimalism, the prevailing aesthetic grounding her choreography. While artists and critics alike have typically associated minimalism with both a male-centered art world and its correspondingly masculinist cultural values, Gross's work has moved in another direction altogether.

A November 1996 concert celebrating Gross's twenty-fifth year as a dance company director included several new works that demonstrated both her adherence to a minimalist aesthetic and a willingness to open up her strategies and imagery. In *Interlude*, five women stood on a window sill of New York City's spacious Cunningham Studio, hidden behind a large sheet of white paper. Cutting out tiny squares of the paper in a random pattern, they revealed increasing bits of bright color. After they finally materialized from behind the "painting," they walked together in their colorful costumes to a far corner of the stage, and the dance was over. (The dancers then began *Ziggurat*, costumed in Mondrian-like red, yellow, and blue.) In *A Place*, Gross, in a snappy geometric haircut and tailored pants, was accompanied by the rich voice of popular singer Tracy Chapman. She alternated between deliberately marking her small rectangle of performance space with leaves she plucked from a bowl, and performing athletic high-energy jumps, turns, and level changes within that enclosure. In these pieces, the minimalist nature of the work leads the viewer not only to the formal elements of the dance, but to the atmosphere that has been allowed to emerge from them.

That atmosphere is extended by the environments in which Gross stages her choreography. With the exception of one season at New York City's Joyce Theater, a proscenium-stage performance venue generally associated with fairly high-profile choreographers, Gross has typically performed her work at lofts, studios, and similar low-tech spaces in yearly seasons lasting a single weekend.[5] Her concerts are carefully produced, their technical features thought through and well executed. But the dances remain distinctly within the "downtown" aesthetic and production framework in which they originated. In 1993 Gross toured with Meredith Monk, portraying the Older Alexandra in Monk's *Atlas* in Houston and Paris. Most of the time, though, she is at home in New York, teaching movement and Tai Chi-Chuan at various colleges and at her studio, practicing bodywork with individual clients, and nurturing her dances.

Gross's concerts have included dances incorporating explicitly autobiographical material. For instance, in her 1992 *Recuerda*, she told little stories or "souvenirs" corresponding to specific years of her life. Much of the piece was performed in relative stillness. Its central movement motif was a *slow* circling of her arms from down at her sides until her hands met overhead, fingers snapping all the while. In one sense, it was a pared-down flamenco. In another, it was a minimalist metaphoric march of time. In the 1994 *Present*, Gross danced three solos, each performed with, or in, a different pair of shoes. "Suralah," she called out in the darkness at the outset of the first piece.[6] Answering the call to the Yiddish name of her childhood, Gross,

who grew up speaking Yiddish, responded, "Ich bin du"—"here I am." Each of the solos developed from a similar small dialogue of name and the assertion of Gross's presence. The last one eased, most memorably, into a tap dance executed in Gross's well-worn clogs.

Not all of Gross's work includes personal material. Both the explicitly and the implicitly autobiographical are built into her dancing. Pieces like *Present* and *Recuerda* contain elements that have been significant in Gross's choreography throughout her career. Using a carefully evolved movement style and lexicon; focusing on the formal possibilities of dance but remaining open to the development of a dance's subtext; allowing humor, mystery, and unpredictability to penetrate the clarity of her formulas, Gross has developed a performance of autobiography that resists too-simple categorization. She would say, I think, that she is not afraid of simplicity, that she courts its underpinnings.

Gross is in her mid-sixties, a bit taller than average, small-boned and wiry, sinewy, strong. Her graying hair and gamine but grown-up face belie her age, but she moves with the softness, control, and fullness that I assume have always been integral to her movement style. She wraps space around her body. Even when she dances in a large kinesphere, she wraps that space around her, makes it all the space there is. After enveloping herself in a cocoon of space, she presses through air and opens the space up, drawing the spectators in to focus on her and then freeing their gaze. Her movement is weighted through the pelvis, soft and spiraling, and makes use of successive movements that flow through one or more parts of the body. The movement is often very slow, taking as long a time as the dancer needs to do something, to feel it fully. Sometimes it repeats, over and over, or stops altogether, giving the dancer and the viewer ample time to savor it. She sees her movements, her way of moving, as directly related to "real life."

> I'm still repeating movement because I think life is repetitious. I'm not afraid to do it, I don't care how long it takes me. If I don't bore myself, I don't bore the audience. I need time, I don't dance like everybody else, I don't move like everybody else.

Repetition functions, in performance, as an opportunity for the viewer to become familiar with a movement. Here Gross explicitly links that function to her *own* experience of engagement with the action. Moreover, her words refer directly to repetition as an act of autobiography, to her embodiment of a primary trope of the genre. Repetition as an autobiographical act typically suggests both returning and continuation. Gross, a practicing Buddhist, has been deeply influenced by Buddhist philosophy. She speaks often of the need to live in the present, to let go of what is no longer meaningful, to accept what is there recurringly or in a single moment. "Everything changes," she often says; the present is in motion. Repetition for her is a logical outgrowth of a natural process, a microcosm of life's larger pattern.

The repetition in her dances is not always about the same motion done over and over, though that is often the case. In many instances, it is manifested in the use of a sustained level of energy. Other properties intrinsic to Gross's work are a careful, attentive, and sometimes seemingly internal performance presence, and a clear sensitivity of the dancers to each other. Though they are difficult to execute, the dances are not conventionally virtuosic or athletic.

The distinct movement vocabulary Gross has developed is drawn from her dance training, her study of anatomy, and other long-term investigations into the body and spirit, including the study and practice of Buddhism, Tai Chi, and bodywork forms such as Kinetic Awareness, a movement and alignment technique. Gross's study of Tai Chi with Franklin Kwong from 1975 to 1986 has been particularly valuable, allowing her to develop what she calls in her own teaching the "three Cs": asking that students be "concentrated, calm, and collected."

Gross develops her movement material and her choreographic structures based on formal elements and explorations of the body. Dances revolve around movement problems to be resolved, movement ideas to be enlarged upon, relationships among dancing bodies and the space within which they move or remain still. Gross has long developed the practice of improvisation as both a choreographic and performative method. Additionally, she has used both chance operations and indeterminate structures as ways of generating material. A former math major, she remains attached to formulas as a way of structuring material, but certain imagery "lurks" behind the diagrams. Formal properties and the imagery and iconography with which they intersect are never perceived apart from each other. Perhaps we can even say that the formal elements never escape their surroundings. Allan Kaprow argues in *Essays on the Blurring of Life and Art* that within formalist concerns lies a wealth of complexity, noting, at the same time, the depth of belief in the significance of a way of working and seeing:

> Clarity, essentiality, measurability, control, unity, and often a taste for some kind of geometry prevail; but at the same time there is always a mystery and a paradox; there lurks a pervasive faith that such a way of making art is a truer, deeper revelation of reality than other ways that are only apparently true.

A primary contention within Gross's belief is that what you see is what you get, or that dance is about movement, period. Echoing Merce Cunningham, whose work exemplifies the ways even the "purest" movement embodies multiple levels of meaning, Gross does not seek to manipulate a viewer's response to imagery. When pressed about some of the abundantly suggestive imagery in her dances, she says that it is fine with her for people to see whatever they want. She tells me that one dance is "about rolling" (*Friends*, 1973); one is "about walking" (*Coram*, 1990); and another is "about a group moving in unison" (*Queue*, 1988).[7] But other material interferes. The imagery and the iconography of the dances move beyond the formal properties of the improvisations that Gross devised.

This is particularly interesting in terms of the female and domestic imagery that pervades Gross's performance of autobiography. Gross has always drawn material from what was there, and who was there—"there" often referring to her home and her family. She has always liked materials, liked to use objects that she happens to find in her studio. She has not sought to transcend the objects, but to maintain their homely qualities. She has built structures and filled them with furniture, and she has used the colors and textures of fabric and light to build miniature spacescapes. Moreover, her dances are nearly always performed by an all-woman company, a factor Gross once attributed to mere expedience. This longtime all-women scenario impresses itself on the viewer and prompts particular readings of the choreography. Some of these readings arise from familial relationships, actual and implied, and from the multiple possible meanings attached to a community of women.

Contributing to Gross's domestic imagery is the fact that for over twenty years, most of the dancers in her "community of women" have been significantly younger than she. Additionally, several of them, notably Jamie Di Mare and Gabriela Simon, have worked with her for close to ten years. Viewers who follow Gross's work see the evolution of the group of dancers who have collectively made the pieces. The dancers are metaphorically Gross's daughters, growing individually over the years. This is especially meaningful in a piece such as *Letter to Esther* (1989), which Di Mare performed while clearly pregnant. Her pregnancy, which was not revealed to the audience until halfway through the piece, reframed the dance and the dancer. The piece's curves and arches were transformed by its autobiographical implications.

Indeed, Gross often dances with her real-life daughter, Sidonia Gross, which adds singular resonance to the dances.[8] In duets such as *Rope* (1972), *Going Someplace Slow* (1983), *Petit Air* (1983), and *Domain* (1986), the familial framework may be the product of convenience or happenstance. But whether or not Gross conceptualizes a dance as simply a piece for two women, it *is* a dance for a mother and a daughter. Their relationship constitutes a new layer of metacommentary which renarrativizes the piece: accidental autobiography, as it were. This mother/daughter pairing is tricky, though, since its onstage position transforms it into metaphor, representation, and cultural ideal. What is depicted onstage, then, might be at once the "real" story of the choreographer, a consciously created manipulation of the spectator's response, or merely a cultural artifact. It resists the "autobiographical pact" of "identicalness" binding the teller and the text (Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 1989).

The probing of dance values by the Judson dancers and those contemporary dancers who have continued their investigations has included questioning the need to adhere to such a pact in their work. Gross was bemused by viewers who interpreted *Rope*, a dance for herself, Sidonia Gross, and a rope, as being about their umbilical attachment. In any case, particularly in the context of other duets the two have performed, the dance's depiction of trust has been understood through the frame of the dancers' actual relationship. Sidonia and Sally walk briskly around the periphery of the performance space. Each holds an end of a piece of rope. The rope's length,

and thus the space between the dancers, is altered as the rope is allowed to be more and less slack. The dancers start out quite close to each other, but as Sally, who holds the bulk of the rope, doles it out, both dancers must cleanly adjust their spacing and timing in order to sustain the clarity of their path. Throughout, they play the harmonicas stuck in their mouths, two notes over and over. After reeling each other in, there is a brief tug of war. The lights go down as the two are frozen, pulling away from each other but still attached by the rope and still playing their theme song.

The dance is as minimal as possible in its use of dance's formal properties, and focuses the viewer's attention on the piece's game structure. But there are tensions under the plain actions: it is not always evident who is pulling whom. Sometimes the dancers register as partners who are active and, if not passive, responsive, especially because Sally usually determines the rope's length and Sidonia keeps up. Different partners initiate the tug of war or allow it to die down; sometimes that ending is unusually vigorous. However clear the game structure and the articulation of spatial dynamics, *Rope* is a story of a mother and daughter, coming together and moving apart.

In *Going Someplace Slow*, each of four sections begins with Sidonia sitting on the floor holding Sally's ankles as she (Sally) leans forward to touch the wall. Each time, the sitter is further away from the wall and the other's tilt is correspondingly precarious. In *Petit Air*, Sidonia sits on a high stool; Sally stands behind her, dressing Sidonia's hair. After a blackout, Sidonia lies on the floor. Sally lifts her and helps her down again, they crawl and walk together, and one sits and rocks. Always the stool is visible upstage, and at the end, they approach it together, hands joined overhead. In *Domain*, they dance with two high-backed narrow chairs, designed by Richard Nonas, and with bundles of nine-foot-long black poles that they shoulder mutually and alone. When they tie the bundles together near one end, the poles open like bunches of flowers and become tepees. The performers dance among the houses they've built, climb on each other's backs, watch each other dance, dismantle the tepees, and walk offstage with the poles, leaving behind the two chairs mounted on each other and a single bunch of poles leaning like memories against the wall.

Gross's 1983 Yiddish-language text and movement improvisation, *One and Another,* was made after the death of her mother; it actually combines autobiography and the avoidance of it. The spoken text is an elusive offering, a "secret autobiography" for most spectators. Gross, who spoke no English until she reached school age, remains a person who began her life ensconced in another culture, or a culture-within-a-culture. She chose not to speak the text in English because she "didn't want to be responsible for how [she] felt in Yiddish, or how [she] related to certain concepts in Yiddish."

One and Another's monologue is a kind of testimony within the frame of more aesthetically oriented autobiographical performance.[9] In testimony, a speaker might hide a fragment of history, personal or collective, under the wing of the first language: the language of intimacy and cultural knowledge that cannot or will not

Mei Yin Ng, Corinne Sarian, Jesika Gastonguay, Sally Gross, Jamie Di Mare in *Suddenly Then She . . .* (1998). Photo: Courtesy Peter Bellamy.

Corinne Sarian, Jesika Gastonguay, Sally Gross (standing), Mei Ying Ng (kneeling), and Jamie Di Mare in *Suddenly Then She . . .* (1998). Photo: Courtesy Peter Bellamy.

be expressed in another language. Gross's text tells the story of Yiddish in Gross's own American life. By extension, it tells, too, of the lives of other children of Eastern European emigrées. More immediately, it is a tribute to Gross's mother, a performance of autobiography in which there are two speaking voices and in which Gross's urges to recollect and to situate herself and her absent mother in the present are carried forward through the repetition of words, phrases, and movements. The piece is like a long maternal lecture on how to live one's life, delivered in the knowing, ever-practical, ironic voice of Jewish philosophy and humor, in which every seemingly simple anecdote or warning has greater implications, and it is a giant *double entendre* whose instructions tell us how to make a dance, how to move, how to be still.

Maternal imagery—no matter how "neutrally" presented, how disguised by layers of metaphor and non-specificity—is still sanctioned by the culture at large and considered suspect as a pleasurable theme of feminist art. (Recall Luce Irigaray's dark meditation of 1981 on the mother/daughter relationship, "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other," in which the separate identities are painfully entwined and confused.) Gross's duets (which can be seen from a perspective quite removed from Irigaray's) embody, instead, Jessica Benjamin's notion of intersubjectivity—"what happens between individuals, and within the individual-with-others." Benjamin's model articulates the relationship between individuals that evolves from their sharing a space with acknowledgment of the other but without necessarily enacting with the other; it "assumes the paradox that in being with the other, I may experience the most profound sense of self."[10] In addition to suggesting a model for the performer/spectator relationship, it is a tool for analyzing the relationships of the dancers and for seeing the work as a kind of collective autobiography of space and action. Gross's dancers communicate the inwardness of the choreographer's focus on the body as space, and the relationship to the air that touches it, the body in space. And when another person, another's body, shares the space with her, whatever space comes between them joins them as much as it separates them, and each is freed to listen to the private instincts and urgings of her own body.

This intersubjectivity embodies themes common not only to Gross's dances but to conventions of female communities and behavior. In 1987, Sidonie Smith asked, "Is female preoccupation with the other an essential dynamic of female psychobiography or a culturally conditioned manifestation of the ideology of gender that associates female difference with attentiveness to the other? Or does all autobiographical practice proceed by means of a self/other intersubjectivity and intertextuality?"[11] Gross's cumulative performance of autobiography emphasizes the physical, psychological, and spiritual interactions of its participants, the "self/other intersubjectivity" to which Smith refers, and it frequently presents these actions within gendered frames: the domestic, the erotic.

Over time, these frames shift. Gross has come to see aging as a part of dancing. She has stated her desire to experience, through her body, her dancing self as the middle-aged woman who is also her younger self. Her words draw the imagery, the echos,

and the philosophy of the dance together with its strategies, its tools, the matter-of-fact nature of its history.

> I think I'm seducing myself into this time of my life. . . . Something in our culture sets older women apart from younger women. I think younger women should have their time. . . . My issue is to move. . . . There's an absolute body memory of moving in a certain way that I hadn't used in a long time and I needed to move like that.

Gross's words express considerable pleasure in the experience of aging. She simultaneously observes the cultural impositions upon women and acknowledges the inevitable changes in the ways she moves and the ways she is positioned. Her moving body is a trustworthy vehicle toward earlier sensations. She finds humor and lightness in the acceptance of change, and finds a place for acceptance and desire to cohabit.

In *Suddenly Then She . . .* , Gross is once again both with the other dancers and separate from them. (When I asked Gross to comment on her separateness, she claimed that she didn't know why she had set it up; "I didn't mean to," she said.) In another reenactment of a family-like structure, she is set apart by her age (the dancers are considerably younger than she), by the different costumes, and by her role in the piece. Of the fourteen sections, she dances three solos and one duet, and only briefly moves with the group; otherwise (though she is, literally, visible at the side of the performing space when she is not onstage), her presence is established through her speaking voice—heard on three occasions during the piece—which frames dancers' actions or directs them. Each of the other dancers has a distinct movement style, and even moments of choreographic unison allow for some variation in detail, but the four women function essentially as a group, a community; when they pair up or when one slips away, we know that they will return to their collective configuration—their collective identity.

The piece is composed of fourteen sections, corresponding to the number of lines in a sonnet. This structure originally came into being because Gross, who is drawn to formulas and plans, "needed a form" on which to hang her dance. She conceived the idea and the basic choreographic scheme for each of the individual sections, then created improvisations for the dancers within those parameters and had the dancers create much of the actual movement. The interaction of dance and music also grew from improvisation. Een, the composer, watched videotapes of the dancers in rehearsal and was impressed by the "circular aspect of the work," both literal and figurative. He initially improvised with the dancers with cello and vocals. Most of the choices were left to him except for two sections Gross designated as silent.

The sections of the piece are quite discrete, though some of them begin or end with more abruptness than others, which fade from one to the next, fluidly guided by lighting designer Blu's subtly glowing washes of illumination. Following Gross's opening solo, the four women, who have been sitting on the floor, slowly sink and

slither, lying on their backs or sides, across the space, each on her own time and each turning to change her facing as she reaches the halfway point. finally reaching the lineup of chairs at the other end of the space, they sit facing the chairs and remove the building-block structures sitting atop them, re-placing them beneath the seats. The little constructions spark the space with its only color. At once, they evoke a host of associations: in their suggestions of houses and children's games (perhaps they belong to Gross's grandchildren), they are signs of generic and specific domesticity; more darkly, they are like small gravestones; conversely, the puzzlelike block structures point to the fundamental structures of the dance itself. They started out as personal altars, consisting simply of the contents of the dancers' purses; through serendipity and aesthetic choice, they evolved into art objects. As Gross explains it, they reflect her conception of time—real (life) time, the autobiographical "story" of an(y) actual day: the blocks are the morning of the dance, and the words Gross speaks at the dance's end, as the four women rest on chairs with their eyes closed, are the bedtime story.

As each dancer completes her tableau, she rises, crosses on the diagonal and goes behind the stage right screen. Each emerges into the next section, a walking part in which the four women, moving at a medium clip, break into shifting groupings: three and one, two and two, singles. Sometimes they disappear for a second behind a screen. Briefly their walks become turns. The plainness of the walks directs our attention to the simple beauty of walking, the way each woman's walk is her own. Like *Rope,* the dance is a ceremony of simple lines, the human geometry of spatial negotiation.

For a moment, all four advance downstage (echoing Gross's earlier action), and soon the scene has changed. "Suddenly . . . then . . . she . . . ," chants Gross, fracturing the words so we hear them one at a time, accumulated, or repeated. "Suddenly . . . then . . . she . . . worked." (These words, and the others spoken in the dance, were written before the choreography was created. The Beckett- and Buddhist-derived text is spare and impressionistic; typically, Gross worried that it was too elaborate.) As she speaks, the dancers move quickly, executing four individual patterns in a line across the space, their fragmented movements parallel to the text. The "she" whose action the text recalls is complex and elusive, the subject/object positions multiply played out in action (of the dancers) and enunciation (of the writer/speaker/director).

Slowing down, the dance becomes a tight weave of walks, the four women touching each other's palms as they loop through a small patch of space upstage right. Gradually they spread across the upstage space into a long line, dancing a speedy reel in golden light. Their arms stretch horizontally toward the others' fleeting fingers; the places where the dancers *were* a fraction of a second ago echo with their traces as bodies disappear behind a screen or flash before it.

Suddenly Then . . . smack! the dancers are lined up across the rear wall, flattened against it, facing the audience in white light. As Katie Geissinger's melodic swells of

wordless song melt across the plucked and plinking undercurrents of cello and vibraphone, the women are quite still. Slowly, slowly they turn, bent at the waist and the knees, until their heads touch the wall and their faces and rear ends turn to us. One unfolds (in the momentary silence) and advances, then retreats. All four lower themselves, becoming a pack of baby animals who crawl toward the audience and stop in a clump to rest.

Gross enters and begins the dance's central section. "This is the story about a square," she announces, then launches into a paean to geometry. The spoken part of the "story" doesn't have much of a narrative line; it's really a poem, a series of observations and questions about lines and shapes and their metamorphoses into each other. "Can a square become a diamond and then a straight line?" she asks. As she speaks, she performs a high-energy solo whose own geometric configurations of gesture and spatial pattern line up and overlap in loose correspondence to the words. "Inside every square there is a diamond," she declares, "and inside every diamond there is a straight line." Gross loves these forms, I think. They are the raw material of her work, of course, the blueprints for human action, just as they are intrinsic to the work of those painters she admires. On one hand they offer simplicity and solidity, on the other, elasticity and fluidity. In the way that a person's movement is just a curve, a swoop, or a stretch, and is also the signature of the movement maker, carrying his or her life in the "mind [and] the muscle," the shapes are just themselves and something more, too, inherently mysterious spaces of potential, like a person or an artwork in process.

Gross exits rapidly and the four other women rush to the rear wall. They take turns now: two move, extending the whoosh of energy, and two, across the space, are still; they switch roles, this time the movers slow and sustained. After all four fly for a moment, three snuggle into a group spoon, and one, sitting apart, comes to lie at the feet of the others. One at a time, they rise to sitting or kneeling poses, then enact a sequence of sculpting, deliberately arranging their bodies around and through each other, draping themselves—or parts of themselves—across limbs and torsos, leaning or seeming to, so small is the distance from skin to skin. Gross runs to them, and they all become playful little animals again, feinting and swerving, edging sideways upstage and down, recalling the pattern of the opening solo. finally against the wall, facing forward, they look down, ahead, and (another repeat) lean forward, twist and bend. They exit and advance, a bit menacingly; four lie down, one apart from the others, Gross exits, returning as a voice.

"There was a picture," she intones. "I put it on the wall. Every day I looked at the picture. Has the picture changed? Or have I changed?" This spare poem is another little window into Gross's ideas about herself and her dance. If, as the Buddhist says, "everything always changes," what remains? What is stable? What is the image and what, or whom, is beneath it? (Does she see her own changing reflection? Does she see her only-just-gone companion?) And what is around it?—the "picture on the wall" recalls the shapes of the earlier poem, now the rectilinear baseline of art objects and the walls they hang on, the frames through which we see the image. Gross,

abstracting her words as she moves, repeats her text in pieces, her movements picked up loosely by the other dancers. When she leaves, the women try on the text, each one in turn speaking all or part of it while leading the others in an improvised near-unison combination, ending in a spoken command ("quarter," "half") that directs the others to turn in space and designates the next speaker. Some get more than one turn; sometimes a dancer throws herself into the role with vigor, other times a dancer is more tentative, especially speaking. Again, the dancers are at once themselves and echos of Gross, like children trying on adult roles. All the while, Een and Geissinger's song repeats a phrase that I don't quite understand but is resonant either way: "this side of you" or "the sight of you." As the music becomes more upbeat and folky, its Italian lyrics (recalling both the opening music and Gross's other "secret" texts) beyond me, the dancers' actions become livelier; breaking into a run, the women disappear behind the upstage left screen and only Di Mare returns. Gross walks in from the other side and they meet downstage left.

These two have danced together many times, and this duet stands almost apart from the rest of the piece. Gross and Di Mare move in utter comfort with each other, their pleasure in slow maneuvering or quirky partnering palpable. (Some of the choreography accommodated Gross's broken right arm, which was completely healed by the time of the performance.) Now in silence, they look at each other, mirror and echo, manipulate and respond—nothing for too long, nothing rushed. Gross rests her strong hands on Di Mare's shoulders, Di Mare supports Gross in a slow fall, they sink as a unit to the floor and then Gross slides off stage and Di Mare rejoins her group.

Gross arranges and rearranges the chairs in an open square and eventually the four dancers find places and sculpted shapes for themselves. Again, Gross's voice organizes the onstage image as she moves back and forth from instruction to description in words about stillness and movement. "Turn the head ninety degrees." "Eyes open and close and open all in one movement." "Sitting still." "Facing south, something moves." "The arms descend." The dancers more or less comply with what they hear, creating a raggedly lovely dreamy moving tableau, softly lit, accompanied by rolling soaring vocal lines over waves of quiet string and percussion. "Head in hands, slowly release the contact with the head and listen." The dancers rest their heads and breathe quietly. The light fades to black. (Not "suddenly" at all, this dance has slowed to inhalation and exhalation, the fundamental rhythms of the body. Like the basic shapes bearing within them the mysteries of transformation, and like the picture that is at once image, mirror, and cover, the drawing in and releasing of air are the story of a day, a life, human being in the world.)

NOTES

1. This discussion of Sally Gross's dance as autobiography emerges from earlier articles, both published in *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*. See "One and Another: Dancing with Sally Gross" (*W & P*, 5.2 #10, 1992) and a review of her work (*W & P*, 5.1 #9, 1990). Some of the text appeared in "Going Someplace Slow," a presentation given by Gross and myself at the Performance Studies International conference at New York

University's Tisch School of the Arts, October 6, 1990, and in a paper, "One and Another," presented at the International Narrative Conference hosted by Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, April 1993. Unless otherwise specified, any unattributed quotations other than excerpts from performance texts are Gross's words, taken from interviews and many less formal conversations.

2. Before that, in the 1950s, Gross appeared in Nikolais's Children's Repertory Company. Beginning in the 1960s, she went on to perform with Marsicano, Phyllis Lamhut, Beverly Schmidt Blossom, and Judith Dunn.

3. The dances Gross choreographed and performed included *32.16 Feet per Second Squared* (1962), a collaborative improvisational trio for herself, June Ekman, and Laura de Freitas; *Back Country* (1963), a solo for Gross; *Untitled Duet* (1964) and *Pearls Down Pat* (1964), both improvisations for Gross and Carla Blank; *Conjunctions* (1964), a large group improvisation; and *In Their Own Time* (1964), also a group improvisation.

4. Among the other new members of the group at that time were Meredith Monk, Lucinda Childs, Phoebe Neville, and Robert Morris (Dunn 1989, 11).

5. Gross has performed elsewhere, too, including the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris and Equitable Center, Central Park's Summerstage, and Lincoln Center Out-of-Doors. She has also on occasion brought her work to colleges and other venues outside New York's downtown circuit.

6. The name would be more accurately spelled "Surele." I spell it phonetically to indicate the sound of Gross's call.

7. In *Friends*, Gross rolled twice, first holding a doll and then holding a male partner, Richard Bellamy. *Coram* contains long sections of simple walking accompanied by gestures of the arms and hands. *Queue* is a quartet for women moving together with chairs.

8. Sidonia Gross began working as her mother's primary dance partner and long-time company member at age fourteen. Sally Gross's daughter Rachel has also performed with her, in the 1976 *One of Us, Two of Us, and Maybe the Three of Us*.

9. Gross has used Yiddish in this simultaneously performative and protective way in other dances. One example is her 1988 *The Other Side*, in which she initially approaches the audience with only her back. Slapping her face and turning her head from side to side while muttering "yes, no" in Yiddish, she offers an image-bite of ambiguity.

10. I have applied Benjamin's theory to Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A* (1988), and others have also linked Benjamin's essay to performance; see Ann Cooper Albright's "Mining the Dancefield: Spectacle, Moving Objects, and Feminist Theory."

11. Smith refers to Domna Stanton's "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?" for a discussion of this issue.

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