

Sarah Michelson, *Shadowmann Part 2*  
P.S. 122, New York, NY, April 2003  
Pictured (left to right): Greg Zuccolo,  
Mike Iveson, Paige Martin  
Photo by Dona Ann McAdams



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## INTERVIEW WITH

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# SARAH MICHELSON

CRISTIANE BOUGER for RELÂCHE – CASA HOFFMANN e-MAGAZINE | JANUARY 2004

New York-based choreographer Sarah Michelson is associated curator of Performance at The Kitchen. Her work has been presented in the United States, Japan, Germany, England, Spain, Austria, Italy, and Switzerland. Michelson won the Bessie Award for *Group Experience* (2001) and *Shadowmann* (2003).

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**Relâche:** The work you carried out at Casa Hoffmann has caused a huge impact and a clear transformation in those who experienced your workshop. It seems to suggest a door not only into a deeper choreographic, aesthetic, and creative thought but also, to a great human

transformation. How do you perceive and relate yourself to that?

**Sarah Michelson:** I am moved and honored that you believe our workshop to be the catalyst for such transformation, but as I said while I was there, I think that you guys were and are so prepared for thought, perspective, and positive argument—physically, intellectually, and visually—that the transformation had happened before I got there and is derived from your own years of desire and argument as a community of artists in a specific geographical location simply meeting mine and my particular New York perspective.

In answer to your question, yes, I am not sure about words like “deeper” and “transformation”, but they really do seem to efficiently represent the drive of the thorough argument I have with anything that materializes as an idea or movement to be presented. What is possible? What is beautiful? What the fuck is this game?

**R:** The core of your questioning is focused on the validity of the performatic material without the performer’s presence... During the workshop we felt that the transformation of the choreographic material by another body reveals, in many cases, unexpected possibilities. At the same time this process made us face the ambiguity of the non-ideal body for the material we created or the frustration about creating an invalid material to the performer’s body we work with.

During the processes of your shows, how do you dialogue with a body that “rejects” your material? How are the agreements established between the performer technique and the ideal movement created by you?

**Sarah:** Is it? I think my central question is what the hell am I doing with these few hours I have on earth! I think you are right that that was something I was really, really excavating during our time together and during the workshop I structured a lot of the practices around that question. I am still very engrossed with this issue as an aspect of making work with people. More far reaching though, is, given that as far as we know, like hunger and thirst in the most basic ways the body is inescapable and, therefore, because we die, the body on stage brings with it all the basic romantic problems of loss.

So I suppose I struggle for the most perfect collision of tension moment by moment in relationship to having and having nothing, being alive or dead, being an artist or not... believing it is important and also entirely futile, etc.

To return to your question after all that drama, ideas of ideal movement must shift, be discarded or rigorously pursued with the sensitivity, intelligence, and largess of god. The performer and the material (including movement and non-movement), perfect or imperfect, are juggled towards your own question, your own tension, your own desire or argument and that is all. Aesthetic evolves from this. Understand your own drive by later analyzing what you did. Also, the workshop was not touchy feely, right? It was abstract, physical, and theoretical. But peo-

**“I suppose I struggle for the most perfect collision of tension moment by moment in relationship to having and having nothing, being alive or dead, being an artist or not... believing it is important and also entirely futile...”**

ple cried a lot... not because it was some kind of therapeutic environment, but something starker right... some real relationship to movement of intellect with body without the cushion of agreement necessarily? This is a relationship to foster towards work, and from this place one can consider an ideal movement or an ideal performer or the opposite—this is what I mean by “like god”.

This loss is central, I believe, to the way we experience everything. It is an old and dull idea (the blooming rose best right before the bloom fades; better to have loved and lost, etc.) in many ways, but I think at the root of living and, therefore, Art and shopping!

**R:** Your choreographies tend to be built from the architecture, normally in non-conventional spaces. Can you talk about this option? Does the architecture define the dramaturgic line of your work too?

**Sarah:** What is a non-conventional space? No. I have made works primarily in very typical NY theater spaces. The Kitchen and P.S. 122 were home to my last two major works. It’s funny though because a lot of people do describe me and what I do this way. The perspective is shifted, I suppose, significantly enough that something feels non-conventional about it? I do consider the theater itself a site.

Hmm...architecture and dramaturgy... Well, perhaps the piece is a construction created from the collision of view points, and in this way the construction is architecture (the “construction” here is the work itself and so includes the site and the action or non-action as one) and this architecture is also then the dramaturgy... they are each other.



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Pictured: Greg Zuccolo  
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**R:** May a piece as *Shadowmann* (presented in two parts, at The Kitchen and at P.S. 122, in NY) be adapted to other architectures and still be *Shadowmann*?

**Sarah:** I am in Germany now as I write, trying to figure out that very thing. In essence the answer is yes, but it takes a great deal of social excavation, the work being so contextually detailed—which means time and money, which may in the end make it impossible. Yes, *Shadowmann* could be *Shadowmann* in somewhere else... but not in a simple touring—i.e., replicated format. The work itself, the performers and the venues it visits must deeply adjust.

**R:** You see art as a revolutionary act. Your work seems quite subversive and in an article about *Shadowmann* to *The Village Voice* you state: “I’m interested in doing things you are not supposed to do”. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

**Sarah:** It is a revolutionary act because as I get older and

as I do this longer I see that nothing comes with this, but the excitement of rejecting answers (as per Deborah Hay). I am not pursuing rebellion or the disturbance of the *status quo*, that is not what I mean by this—that in fact, seems almost like a luxurious idea. I mean I am viscerally poor, I do not have many things that make life more comfortable, like a house or health insurance or good credit because I am an artist. I understand there is a lot of poverty in the world not induced by such a middle class decision, but the arrogance of my education allows me to know I have given something up in order to pursue the work I now pursue. Making this decision to observe the details of humanity as we do in such a concentrated and focused way seems like the act of a generous revolutionary when considered in the context of the world at large. But is it always the case? Is it a revolutionary act to be Britney Spears or Eminem? I don’t know... I think my statement contains some massive problems. Does fame play a role in considering this question?

**R:** You won the 2002 Bessie Award for *Group Experience*, the 2003 Bessie Award for *Shadowmann*, and the Der Foerder Prize for *The Experts*. Do you feel these awards changed in anyway the experimental dance scene?

**Sarah:** I think they said yes to something.

**R:** Do you feel you can be creating trends?

**Sarah:** I am part of an amazing group of artists in New York (including Rosane and Andrea). I am part of trends happening where I live.

**R:** For Sarah Michelson, what’s the threshold between collage and the simple plagiarism?

**Sarah:** I do steal, but I am too vain not to hide it... is that what you mean?

**R:** Talking about movement... The body patterns are the reflection of cultural and intellectual models. During the workshop these patterns were explicit in the stereotyped Latin-American women image, for example. What do you think about the break of these cultural-movement archetypes? Is the search for this break relevant, since every culture tends to talk about itself?

**Sarah:** This is a tricky one. I am not from your culture, but we saw that together in the workshop... I think the key is not to break the archetype, but to have knowledge



Sarah Michelson, *Shadowmann Part 1*, The Kitchen, New York, NY, April 2003  
Pictured (left to right): Emily Turco, Lucy Watson, Greta Quin-Feit, Adrienne Swan, Mike Iveson, Dylan Page  
Photo by Dona Ann McAdams

“The performer and the material (including movement and non movement), perfect or imperfect are juggled towards your own question, your own tension, your own desire or argument and that is all. Aesthetic evolves from this. Understand your own drive by later analyzing what you did.” — Sarah Michelson

of it outside any immediate identification with it. I try to do that about Manchester... own it like it is mine, place it like it is not. And so... understanding your identification with it. Question your own romance in order to be a good lover.

**R:** The exhaustive repetition of certain movements could be a way to reach a “functional” presence during the performance, destroying the superficial interpretation (“bad acting”) of the movement? Is this a possible way to break stereotyped movements? In your shows do you choose the non-representation?

**Sarah:** Yes, it is one way. I have practiced it a great deal in my work, as did the artists of the 1960s and 1970s in New York. In our workshop we used it to isolate performer and material, which worked well, I thought. I am not concerned about stereotyped movement; I am concerned (today at least) about thoughtless vocabulary.

**R:** You don't have a dance company. What is the relationship with your work group like and how is it to work with their commitment without the supposed security of an established company?

**Sarah:** It's hard but the company brings a hierarchy that doesn't suit the nature of my collaborations. I am the author and the director, but my collaborators very much work with me and not under me, they are of course the work itself.

**R:** You have been the biggest influence in the creation of *Ciclo de Ações Performáticas* [Performance Act Series], idealized by some artists who experienced your workshop and who are now the curators of this event. As an associated curator from Performance at The Kitchen, how do you see the responsibility of the curator about the inclusion of experimental art into spaces of visibility? Is this an important issue in NYC?

**Sarah:** Thank you. What makes something experimental? Include intelligence in your programming and real query outside of your aesthetic agenda, if that is possible.

**R:** Talking about inclusion and about the importance of the curator's task, we can also think about the important role of the dance critic and the dance history scholar. However, the relationship between artists and critics always seems to be very delicate. In your opinion, what is indispensable to a good dance critic?

**Sarah:** Considering their job to be the very reason for their literacy.

**R:** New York is a city that has a historical artistic community. What do you comprehend as cultural and politically important to the existence of a strong community?

**Sarah:** Bravery.

**R:** How do you self-define Sarah Michelson?

**Sarah:** Come on, you guys!!! A nice lady.

**R:** In an interview you did with the critic Deborah Jowitt (*Village Voice*), you talked about your disagreement with the current use of outdated dance terminology, more specifically about the term “modern-dance”. Have you found an accurate or possible terminology to define your work?

**Sarah:** It's art mate!

**R:** Do you plan to bring a piece to Brazil?

**Sarah:** Do you? ♦



Sarah Michelson, *Shadowmann*  
857 5th Avenue, New York, NY, February 2003  
Pictured (left to right): Sarah Michelson, Greg Zuccolo  
Photos by Paula Court

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Sarah Michelson led a workshop at Casa Hoffmann – Centro de Estudos do Movimento in Curitiba, Brazil, June 27–July 12, 2003.

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New York based choreographer Sarah Michelson is associated curator of Performance at the Kitchen. She was editor of the Movement Research Performance Journal from 1999–2002. She worked with Sarah East Johnson's Lava, Chamecki/Lerner and Yoshiko Chuma and the School of Hard Knocks. She won the Der Foerder Zurich prize for *The Experts*, a choreography developed for the White Oak Dance Project, of Mikhail Barishnikov. Her work has been presented in the United States, Japan, Germany, England, Spain, Austria, Italy, and Switzerland. Michelson won the Bessie-Award for *Group Experience* (2001) and *Shadowmann* (2003).



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Pictured (left to right): Dylan Page, Parker Lutz, Mike Iveson, and Sarah Michelson  
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Sarah Michelson, *Shadowmann Part 1*, The Kitchen, New York, NY, April 2003

Pictured (left to right): Greta Quin-Feit and Adrienne Swan

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# Relâche

Relâche – Casa Hoffmann e-Magazine  
Curitiba/Brazil, 2004.

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Relâche e-magazine was made possible with funds by Fundação Cultural de Curitiba – FCC and Prefeitura Municipal de Curitiba.