

Quartet

Claudia La Rocco

“It just takes time”/But who has time?

—Sam Miller

Life gets complicated!

—Douglas Crimp

It’s nice that people do things.

—Bill Berkson

It all turned out nicely didn’t it!

—Kevin Killian

Dictation, December 21, 2019:

In the dream it's a ballet festival or a symposium. I have very fragmented memories but—there were lots of pieces that we saw, I think premieres and, I was at a bar or somewhere with, like, [crow calling], one of those restaurants that isn't very satisfying where you end up between performances. Even now I might be editorializing. But. I do remember very clearly that Christopher ... Wheeldon was [crow] I almost called him Christopher Walken [slight laughter] I was eating with Christopher and Douglas Crimp was at a nearby table and I just remember, "Oh, Douglas can, Douglas saw it, Douglas can explain it to me or he can explain myself to me if I am writing something [crow] doesn't make sense that I need help with." I woke up missing him terribly. He's not somebody I was good friends with but that sort of intimacy that develops when you go to see the same type of [sand crunching] over and over again, year after year, and you see the same people in the audience, and often they're not the people that you, you know, are closest to in the world, your partners, your best friends, your relatives. They're the people who also love this thing that you love. So, it is this sort of parallel intimacy and closeness, because you also can't sometimes share these things fully with the people you are intimate with in other ways. If you're lucky you can. Or maybe not if you're lucky, maybe you don't want to, maybe it's delicious to have this other world and place. And anyway. Yeah ... Douglas and Bill and Sam. Well, Douglas and Sam were that. Bill and Kevin were something else [wind] don't know, is there any frame for these four men, except that they all died in the span of three years? That I knew them and regarded them as sort of ... ancestors, or heroes, or elders,

and miss them, although not in the way you miss the people that, you know, really hold you up in [sand], the people you have that day-after-day intimacy with. What am I saying? I remember once an old, eminent critic told me that I would never really be serious as a dance critic unless I knew mime, was, was literal ... uh, was fluent in mime, ballet mime. I remember another, older eminent critic telling me—yes, yes, they were both old white men, they were chief critics—telling me that I would have to find a way to get over to see the European festivals if I were going to be serious as a dance critic. And I suppose in a way they're both right, I mean they're right for certain types of criticism, and I don't—But I think maybe what I find, uh, not even irksome, just limiting about those statements is that they pres[inaudible] that there is only one way to be a [crow], or one important type of [crow], and I think what I love about these four men is that, they were each [crow] in such different [wind] don't think that they expected anyone to be [crow] although they believed absolutely in what they were doing. Um. One of them didn't even publish but was, to my mind, one of the finest poet critics I've known. So. It's the shortest day of the year. I'm collecting glass on the shore of Jones Bay for my mother for [muffled sound]. There are little birds in all the trees. They look like juncos; they fly like juncos and have the coloring of juncos. My eyes are not as good as they used to be.

Bill Berkson, Douglas Crimp, Kevin Killian, and Sam Miller were born within thirteen years of each other, beginning with Bill in 1939, Douglas in 1944, and Sam and Kevin little more than a month apart in 1952. The four men died in a three-year span, also beginning with Bill.

I had seen him just the night before, June 15, 2016, at the 500 Club in San Francisco. A buzzing crowd was celebrating the new catalogue for a David Ireland show at the San Francisco Art Institute, co-curated by Constance Lewallen, Bill's wife; I remember Connie twirling in the middle of the action. My last glimpse of Bill, he was sandwiched between Bob Glück and Norma Cole, looking relaxed and debonair as always. Grinning that marvelous grin.

In fact, the last times (or for that matter, almost all of the times) I saw Douglas, Kevin, and Sam, the occasions involved art. Not surprising; this was the ground of our friendships. More to the point: art was life's work for each of them. As I experienced these men, all of whom I knew only in the final years of their lives, art *was* life, in an everyday sort of way: no less special for being matter of fact. In the last email I received from Kevin, a group message sent to those of us who had performed his play *Box of Rain*, which Maxe Crandall directed at The Stud, he wrote, "What an extravaganza, a golden bowl, the beginning and end of civilization..."

The beginning and end. Kevin would be gone in a little more than two weeks, on June 15, 2019, the proximity to

the anniversary of Bill's death like some hideous joke. A bookend of loss in San Francisco.

Bill, along with Connie, and Kevin, along with Dodie Bellamy, hold for me the enchantment of larger than life literary and artistic traditions: Bill with his starry trajectory from New York School poets and painters to the romance of a Bolinas scene in which he and Joanne Kyger were neighbors. And Kevin, a pivotal figure in the New Narrative movement and San Francisco Poets Theater, keeper of Bay Area histories and mythologies flowing from the Berkeley Renaissance. Poets among artists, Kevin and Bill were in all the right rooms.

Douglas and Sam, meanwhile, are inextricably bound up in my New York—where I spent the first fifteen years of the millennium embedded in the downtown dance world. How many times did I sit in darkened theaters with one or both of them? How many pre- and after-show hangs, planned and happenstance? Years of casual encounters as a young, know-it-all writer before I began to understand the extent to which each laid the foundations for how I receive and understand dance and visual art; so much of it comes from movements and systems these men helped to shape, or wrote about, or both. To quote Dodie and Kevin in their introduction to *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative 1977-1997*, “In time we were to see that indeed these people's lives were more interesting than ours, but self-preservation wisely hides this disparity from the young, in the name of self-esteem.”

When I think of Douglas and Sam, I think of Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church; where I saw them so many times, where they were memorialized. Bill and Kevin were also honored at St. Mark's, in celebrations hosted by the Poetry Project (though I attended their San Francisco memorials, at the Art Institute and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art).

Certain buildings form cities within cities. People who don't know each other, are not part of the same group or are adversaries even, are nonetheless united by these edifices, their ever-accumulating densities through time. It's one of the things that's impoverishing and freeing about moving to a new place, particularly when you are no longer young: the site-specific ghosts don't follow you.

Douglas' memorial was the most recent, everyone crowded into uneven rows of chairs, a temporary organism held within the sanctuary's beautiful, spare bones. He once told Danspace director Judy Hussie-Taylor that the theater was "the closest place he had to a sacred space." My mind's eye conjures the severe geometries of Emily Coates dancing Yvonne Rainer; Morgan Bassichis singing, coaxing the audience into song.

All these people in all these rooms, gathering to honor lives well lived. Public and private joined at last, however tenuously.

And all the rooms one never enters. All the people one never lets in.

The city that does not see beyond itself and its mythologies.



I had the idea to read each of their last books, sparked by an offhand comment from Cedar Sigo about following the books where they take you; his faith in the bread crumbs to get you through the forest stuck with me, forming a trail in and of itself.

There's an aliveness in the fragmentary, unfinished nature of these final publications (final for now; it seems impossible, for example, that Kevin's complete Amazon reviews and Douglas' Moroccan cookbook will not eventually see the light of day). They move fiercely, fitfully in the present. Bill's notebook on Frank O'Hara, published posthumously by Connie in facsimile form, the sometimes-indecipherable flow of the handwriting in keeping with the immediacy of thought. A small volume of Kevin's weekly exchanges with Dodie offered at his memorial, a joint, interrupted diary shimmering with the possibility of artifice ("...being writers, we faked the conversation," Dodie writes during the first exchange, "Origins," referring to an earlier collaboration of theirs). Douglas' not-yet-out collection of writings on dance and dance film sits in its pale blue folder on my desktop, some of the files still containing his notes, as if the author might return at any moment to make improvements. And then there is Sam's "book," which exists only in my mind, a collage of various poems he sent to me and a serial work composed as Danspace Project's writer in residence during the 2016 platform *A Body in Places*, dedicated to Eiko Otake's solo performances.

Something about the partial, arranged views offered through these windows feels right. The books are beautiful in their incompleteness. They are enough.



Dictation, July 19, 2020:

The way they were in the world or the way their writing is in the world [sigh] have to pee I'm looking at the olive tree outside listening to the dull roar of the freeway. I keep not making this final recording because I don't know what the thing is that I want to say, I'm just worrying at the sentences and circling [banging] a freedom ... the cat is racing back and forth galloping through the apartment [breath] uh-hh [breath] fuh—nm-mm I don't wanna swear [banging] a way of moving through language and experience [long pause] some permission given, understood through reading them—even just an idea of reading them—more than any conversations [banging] of course the dumb cliché it's only when you can't ask anymore that you're astonished by all the things you never asked. The cat is using the litterbox and the windchimes are going and a dog is barking [N.B.: no evidence of any of this in the recording] and everything outside is still and moving and this recording doesn't have any magic in it. Maybe that's the right way. [stuffy inhale] I keep thinking of something M. said about a pamphlet being what you can write now but isn't that what every piece of writing is? You can only do what you can do now. [cat scratching in litterbox] Pathos. Somebody's using a power saw [N.B.: silence]. Good for them.

Sam was firmly of the “no conflict, no interest” school. As the revered creator and steward of various influential cultural organizations, he was the architect of numerous local, regional, and national networks underpinning the fragile ecosystem that is contemporary dance in the United States. If it’s a support structure involving dance and an acronym, chances are he had a hand in it. Yet his motivations were intensely personal: as he explained it, he’d built his career around figuring out what Ralph Lemon needed, then devising a mechanism to fulfill that need. I would add a few other artists to that list of one, including Okwui Okpokwasili and Eiko—but always returning to Ralph. If you were paying attention, Sam’s loves were easy to see. And if you were lucky enough to be the recipient of the achingly romantic, often elegiac poetry he wrote in and around performances, jotting words down on notecards kept in a breast pocket, these intimates surfaced again and again.

Sitting behind R observing J—watching someone you love
watching someone they love

The J here is Jimena Paz, and R can only be Ralph. The line comes from the poem-notebook Sam kept during *A Body in Places*; to my knowledge, this is his only published dance criticism. I’m not sure he even would have called it criticism.

Whether something was good or bad, whether it *worked*, is not an overriding concern in his writing. Rather, he seeks anowness, an intensity, an attunement to the present moment. And a communion with those who shared those

moments; the subject of many of the poems I received, typically after an evening out together, is some variation on “While X was ...”

He was famous for nodding off during shows—only to wake up and tell you what happened. Am I remembering or inventing that he told me once that napping through dance was not only appropriate, but called for, given how dance works on the psyche? That indeed he learned this lesson early on by attending a Merce Cunningham performance? He wouldn’t describe, exactly, but he would tell you what had transpired.

The hour is very late in the Danspace writings, the fragments wreathed by what is no longer, by what could never be. Against and with these losses stands art’s live, recurring moment, in which performance is forever, fleetingly, “time’s rebuttal”:

Catastrophe of meaning

Always hurtling toward catastrophe

Catastrophe practice

Time stops

Time must have stop

Time curved so that looking forward you can see the back of
your own head

Capital acceleration

The autonomy of Eiko time

Mutated declensions

Singular/plural

Past/future

Timeways that send us sideways into that future