

Marginal Evidence: the art of dance

By Martha Ullman West

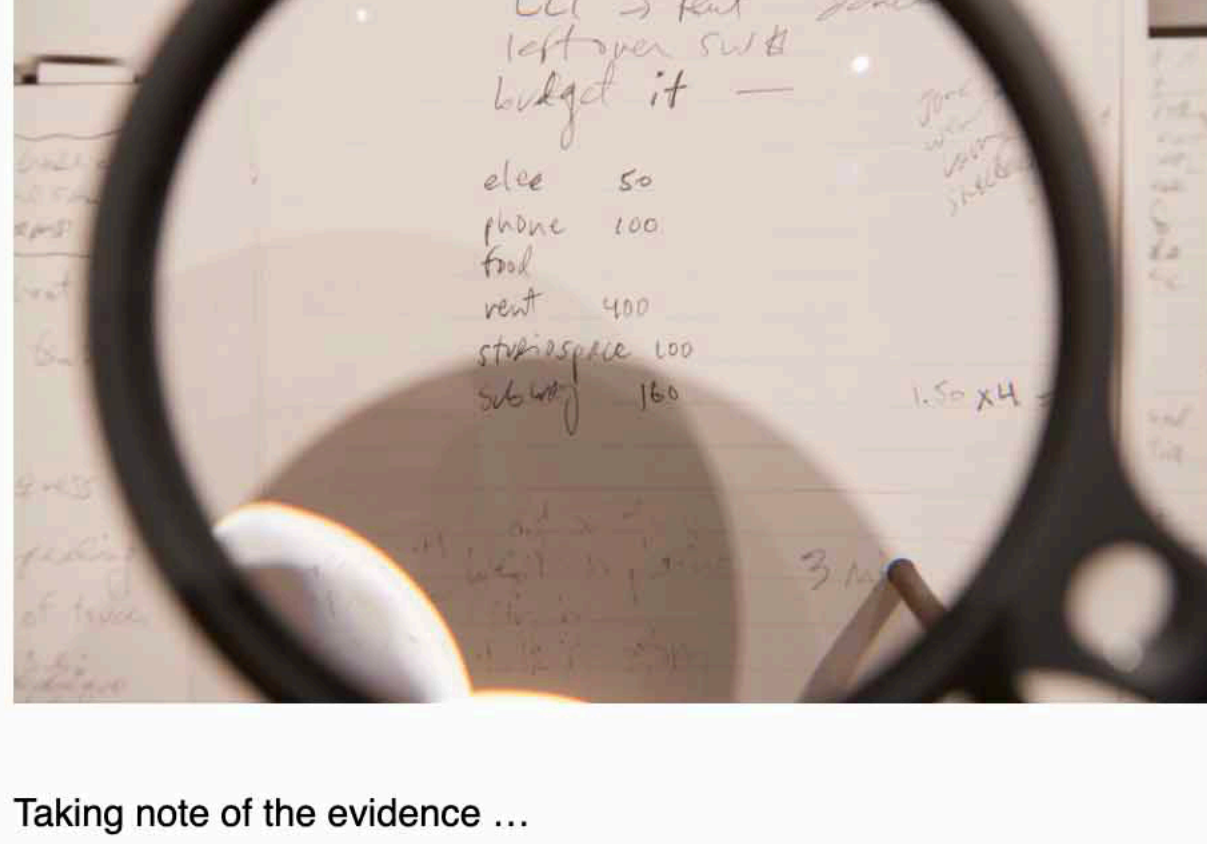
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Dance, Visual Art



Marginal Evidence, an installation at [White Box Gallery](#) created by choreographer [Katherine Longstreth](#), is just as engaging as her work for the stage.

Which surprised the hell out of me. The work is billed as “an interactive experience of dance-making” and “an excavation of process.” Fortunately, since I’m not much interested in process, and I’m not all that keen on audience participation, either, *Marginal Evidence* turned out to be much more about Longstreth herself, what she was thinking and making at the start of her life as an artist, wife and mother, in New York City, in the mid-1990s.

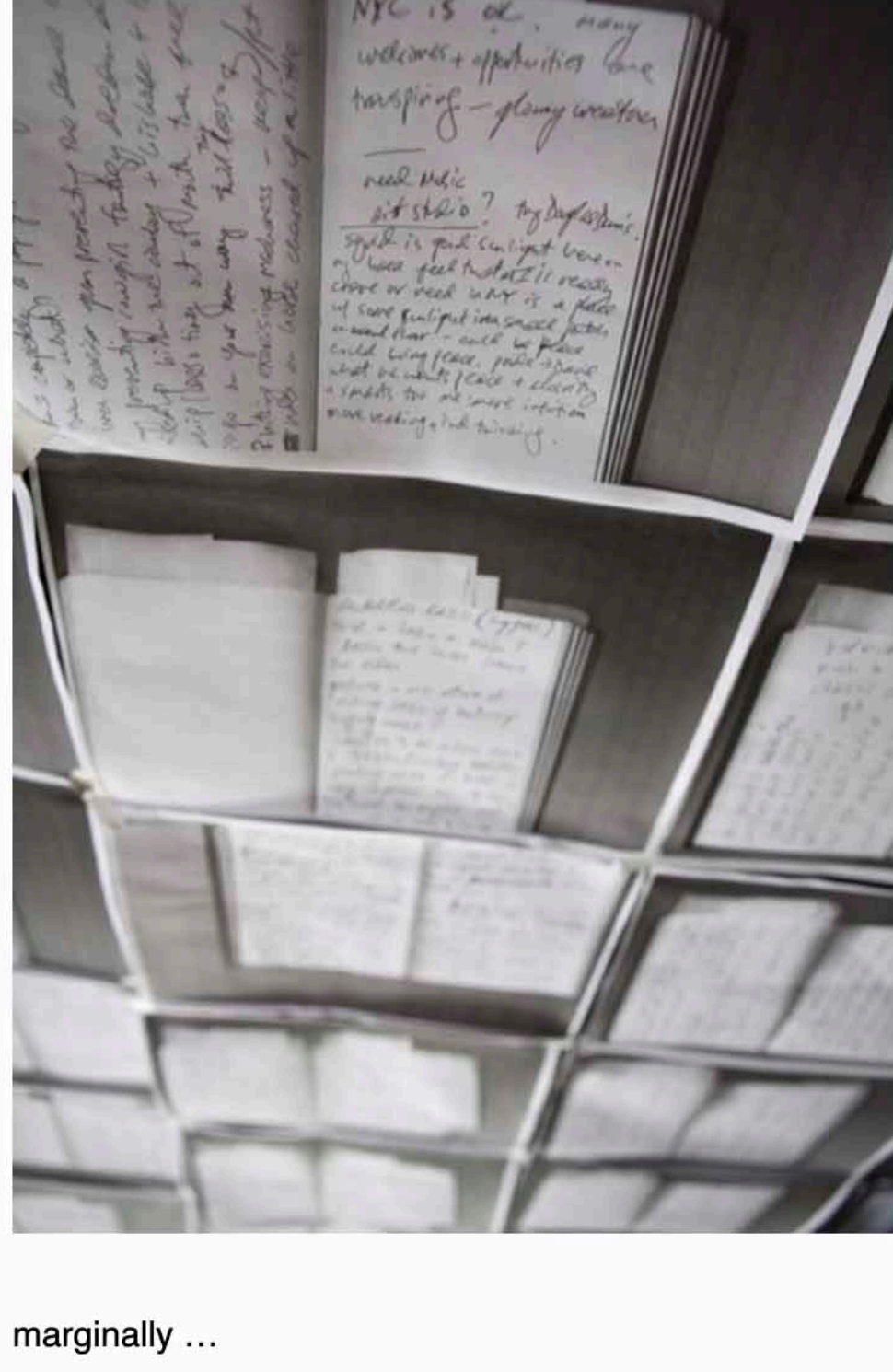


Taking note of the evidence ...

I accepted Longstreth’s invitation to tour the three rooms of the show last week, but not her offer to guide me through it. She was available to answer questions, which I certainly had, and to make sure that I saw everything there was to see, and literally and figuratively pushed every button. I was pretty obedient, though I did decline to get down on my hands and knees and crawl into a little play tent replica of her New York kitchen to watch video of her then three-year-old daughter dancing around and performing her mother’s characteristic arm movements. The music was, of all things, from *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker*. I could see the video perfectly well from a standing position, and I’m bound to say I was charmed by it.

Visitors to *Marginal Evidence* are handed a map of the space when they enter. You start by looking at an arrangement of digitized pages from Longstreth’s notebooks on the wall to the left of the entry to the first room. The information they contain—Longstreth’s notes for a piece titled *Slipknot* has been quantified, lists of words (cowboy, fantasy, home, hat and the like) counted and assessed according to something called the Gunning Fog Index. That, it turns out, measures the readability of English writing (think one-syllable words rather than three) and is likely in part responsible for the decline of decent style in such newspapers as the New York Times, never mind.

I learn from this that Longstreth is an unusually verbally oriented choreographer, who writes reams about what she plans to do in the studio, and more reams after she does it. “You have to get up to make a dance,” she tells herself in one of the notes, and wonders why she rents studio space when she spends so much time writing. For *Slipknot* she wrote 13,348 words. That’s interesting: as a writer I count words, too, but I’m itching to get into the second room, where video of her working alone in a small studio with a splintery floor is projected on all four walls, because what I really want is to see Longstreth move her long, lean body in a dance.



marginally ...

But first, because Longstreth wants me to see the video at the beginning of the loop, and it’s not there yet, she shows me a sonogram, a device she used in *Narrative Medicine*, part of a concert she gave jointly with her graduate school friend Christy Funsch in 2013 at Zoomtopia; and, on the floor of this first room, a small square of black marley. The non-slip flooring, borrowed from Oregon Ballet Theatre, bears footprints made by Longstreth, dancing a phrase that’s in the video, made twenty years ago. The footprints are marked with crime scene labels that spell out five, six, seven, *eight* in Roman numerals, one of many examples of Longstreth’s sly wit in this installation as well as her choreography. This is forensic evidence of a dance being done, and possibly a comment on Puritanical attitudes toward the art form itself.

And finally we’re standing in the middle of the room with the video, taken with a camera given Longstreth by her father in 1995. *Slipknot* did get made, and was performed in Toronto among other places, and is a “western” dance that pays homage to her time as a graduate student at Arizona State University, and, subconsciously at least, to Daniel Nagrin, who was one of her teachers. Nagrin’s strong, fluid, elegant movement style is recognizable in the work of Bonnie Merrill and to some degree in Gregg Bielemeier’s, although Bielemeier never studied with him directly. At any rate, I love watching this primitive video, which is accompanied by music composed for this installation by Loren Chasse, best known in Portland for his work with Jim McGinn’s Top Shake Dance.

The video is definitely about process, as Longstreth tries out a floor roll, stands up, thinks about it, tries it again, looks at times frustrated and bored, then tries it again and gets it right. It’s lonely work, and she conveys that with her body language as well as the dancing. I realize that it’s the nonverbal process that interests me — show me, don’t tell me — and I want to watch this again, but it’s time to move on.

We return to the first room, where real as opposed to digitized pages from her notebooks are mounted on the wall, with magnifying glasses strategically placed to make them easier to read. An invitation to her wedding is up there too, because she got married while she was making *Slipknot* and there are cancelled checks that show how much rent she paid for the studio (not much, in today’s terms). Notes to herself read, “Invite Marcia Siegel,” one of New York’s prominent, highly respected critics in 1996, who now writes from her home outside Boston, and “sew costume.” This is the kind of material dance historians (another hat I wear) would kill for, and it both informs and amuses me.

In the third room, I look at what appear to be holographic photos of Longstreth (actually called lenticulars) that switch back and forth between an image of her moving and one of a fish hook, which is the shape of movement she wants, and one of her in advanced pregnancy that switches between an image of her uncovered abdomen and a second, in which she’s wearing a hoopskirt. This reminds me of a dance performed by Nancy Matschek at Portland State years ago, who was also pregnant and wearing, moreover, a hoopskirt.



that creates the dance.

All of Longstreth’s dances, she tells me, are primarily image-based; the idea and the image come first, and then she looks for music to support the dance, which, she says, “scaffolds the imagery.” This is a little like Balanchine’s statement that “music is the floor we dance on,” but for him the music always came first. And then, Longstreth forces me to look through a viewmaster at her friend dancing a bit of a solo that’s not *Slipknot*, which I hate doing even more than I loathe seeing dance on YouTube (it’s a useful reference tool, but it’s not live performance), and that is exactly the point Longstreth is making. “My secret desire,” she tells me, “is to whet the appetite for live dance.”

In that we are in perfect agreement. *Marginal Evidence* turns out to be an interesting, aesthetically pleasing experience on many levels, and I recommend it. But what gave me delight was Longstreth’s promise to dance again soon.

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- *Marginal Evidence* continues noon to 6 pm Tuesdays-Saturdays through November 14 at White Box, at the University of Oregon in Portland’s School of Architecture and Allied Arts, 24 N.W. First Avenue.
- A panel discussion moderated by White Box director Criss Moss that includes paleontologist Theodore Fremd; artist Sara Huston; and Mark Johnson, a Crimeanalyst with the Portland Police Bureau; will be at 3 p.m. Saturday, November 7.
- Plans are in the works for a panel discussion by dance artists on Saturday, November 14, personnel and time tbd.

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