

Dancing across the frontiers

The Guardian, 12 July 1994

By Sophie Constanti, dance critic

What does it mean when a dance artist weeps into a brick and then bombards the audience with disturbing video images?

FRANÇOISE SERGY is a dancer, choreographer and photographer who creates intensely personalised performance essays. During the eighties she produced a body of solo work which dealt with a range of pertinent topics on the feminist agenda: violence against women; the beauty/slimming industry (long before Naomi Wolf's rehashed pronouncements on the subject); and the antagonistic relationship (at that time) between the pill-popping culture endorsed by orthodox medicine and the more holistic approach promoted by alternative therapies.

In another dance artist's hands such undisguised political material might well have served as a recipe for tediously dogmatic (probably unwatchable) agitprop; in Sergy's it was transformed into theatre which proved both entertaining and edifying, if not always bursting with choreographic invention.

In recent years, Sergy's skill as a photographer/installation artist has become increasingly apparent in her performance work. The adventurous and witty experiments in photo-therapy (based on the techniques devised by Rosy Martin and Jo Spence) which filled her early pieces have not been abandoned and, indeed, still offer plenty of mileage in her latest show, *Crumbled*, at the Chisenhale Dance Space. But in this new work - set to a collection of extracts from Bach Partitas for Solo Violin - Sergy achieves a more sophisticated amalgamation of elements.

Packed with visually arresting interactions between movement and projected slide images, and between performer and objects, *Crumbled* points at how solid, physical structures - in this case, Sergy's childhood home in Switzerland and her father's empty sawmill (both captured on slide), a clay figurine (placed downstage and featured on film), an arrangement of bricks and a window frame on wheels - evoke and activate personal memories, and how our attachment to the past can often prevent us from braving the future.

Sitting on a swing which cuts to and fro through curtains depicting the garden in which she perhaps played as a young girl, or impressing her body against the stretchy fabric which carries another image, and thus distorting its contours, Sergy not only inhabits but blends into her environment to often stunningly clever and touching effect.

Through changes to the natural order or juxtaposition of things, she plays trick after trick on the viewer's eye, compelling you to stare at familiar objects or details - the knot in a piece of wood, for instance - until you realise, once again, what they are or where they belong.

After bouts of fury and vulnerability - Sergy running riot with a hammer, or weeping into a brick - the work ends on an optimistic note as she flings open the fire exit doors and escapes, leaving us with the final bars of music and much to contemplate.

For the second part of the evening, the audience reassembled at the nearby photography gallery, Camerawork, to see the results of Sergy's dance/installation project, created during a two-week residency and involving 14 performers.

A claustrophobia-inducing arrangement of chairs placed us back to back in a centralised block contained within gauzy drapes. While slide projections and video images bombarded us from all sides, the performers embarked on a slow, circuitous trail between the street and the gallery, this orderly minimalism soon giving way to the kind of atmosphere which one might expect to encounter on a psychiatric ward - individuals chattering to themselves, riding bicycles, trying to climb the walls or smearing them with powder colour.

Unsurprisingly, these histrionics - visible to all on the east London's Roman Road - caught the attention of the crowd of bored, local youths who gathered outside to watch. Bemused, a little aggressive, but finally transfixed - if not exactly impressed - they inadvertently added much to our enjoyment of the proceedings.

As the gallery emptied, a bulldog-faced lad who had earlier yelled "they must have had too many funny fags", confronted us with that dreaded question: "What was it about then?" No one could offer an answer.