

At a factory in transition, a new dance is born

BY ROBERT JOHNSON
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Choreographer Joshua Bisset doesn't wear a skull-cap and he can't spin upside-down, twisting on his head and shoulders. Yet Bisset and his contemporary dance company, Shua Group, may still become urban dance legends.

When these avant-garde artists from Jersey City unveil "Public Acts," an installation including a dance called "Soft Wall," on Saturday at the Canco Lofts, they will add a postscript to the history of urban dance. Canco Lofts, a former can factory that Coalco

Corp. of Manhattan is converting into luxury condominiums, is an example of real estate development that recognizes the ability of artists to transform a neighborhood and make it trendy.

Bisset and his collaborators, dancer Laura Quattrocchi and installation artist Sylvestre Gobart, have no illusions about the process.

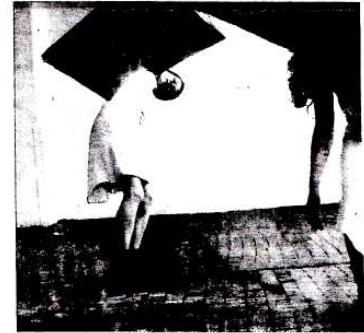
"We wouldn't be here unless it was good for business," Bisset concedes, meaning the business of selling condominiums.

Yet Bisset and Quattrocchi, who inhabit another part of downtown Jersey City (where, he says, rents have doubled in the last five

years), have their own reasons for creating a performance installation and an exhibition on the former site of the American Can Co. So does Gobart, a member of the team whose studio and home base are in Bayonne, France, where "Soft Wall" had its premiere in October 2005.

Their reasons have less to do with money than with their aesthetic interests, although Coalco has made in-kind contributions to encourage their work. The developer installed electricity and built Sheetrock walls in the unfinished portions of the factory where the

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Danica Holoviak, left, and Laura Quattrocchi of the Shua Group rehearse a performance of Joshua Bisset's

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performance and a monthlong exhibition documenting the artists' past collaborations will take place. They have allowed the artists access to the space nearly around the clock. The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation picked up half of the project's \$10,000 cost, and the Jersey City Museum is presenting "Public Acts," with the exhibition scheduled to open March 1 and continue through the end of the month.

The Saturday night performance by the seven-year-old company will take place in a work zone eventually destined to become the condominiums' above-ground parking garage. According to the advertising brochure for Canco Lofts, the space will be climate-controlled and cozy someday, when BMWs nestle there. In the meantime, the stark chambers with wood-block floors are empty and freezing.

As a train whistles somewhere close by, Gobart smokes a hand-rolled cigarette to keep warm and Quattrocchi stands muffled in woolens. Bisset, a slender young man of 34 who has expended hours of personal BTUs dancing here, shivers as he explains his motivations. What choreographers need today, he suggests, are power tools.

Speaking of "Soft Wall," he says, "This particular work has a big build-in component, and we have to drill into the floor. We have to drill into the ceiling. We have to basically make a big mess. No theater will permit something like that, and many galleries also will not permit that kind of destructive behavior.

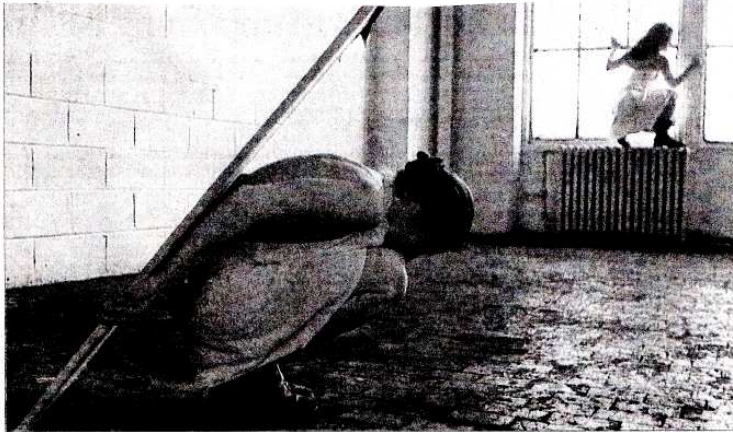
"Our work deals with sheet rock, metal studs and tools," he continues. "There's definitely no other place in Jersey City where we could realize this work in this way."

There's more to the crafty "Soft Wall" than the hardware, however.

"A lot of our recent work has had to do with interacting with the audience, and putting decisions in the hands of the audience," Bisset says, clarifying his intentions.

Yet he resists full disclosure. The dance's essence will reveal itself in a moment when the dancers confront the audience with a task. "The action of the viewers completes the performance," Bisset says. Exactly how the viewers will complete "Soft Wall" must remain a mystery for now.

(Hint: Last year, in a dance called "Full," the audience had to remove the cardboard boxes filling the studio before they could watch the show. "They cleaned the whole place of every shred of cardboard," Bisset says, a note of pride in his



Above, Danica Holoviak, left, and Laura Quattrocchi rehearse "Soft Wall." Below, Quattrocchi, left, and Holoviak in their Jersey City rehearsal space.

PHOTOS BY MA SONG/THE STAR-LEDGER

DANCE

Shua Group

What: "Public Acts"

Where: Canco Lofts, 50 Dey St., Jersey City

When: 7 p.m. Saturday

How much: Free. A Canco Lofts shuttle runs between the Journal Square PATH station and the site. Visit shuagroup.org.

voice. A videotape of "Full" will be on display as part of the upcoming exhibition.)

Audience participation in a dance performance is hardly something new. Companies from the popular De La Guardia to the edgy John Jasperse Company, with Bat-sheva Dance Company of Israel somewhere in between, all have taken measures to shake off the passivity inculcated in theatergoers by the habit of watching TV.

"Little by little they become aware of something, and they change. It's like a transformation," Bisset says of audience reactions to his work.

He says that he is less interested in the audience's experience, however, than he is in balancing spontaneity and freedom with choreographic structure. When viewers enter the space, they will find Quattrocchi dancing with a piece of Sheetrock. She will have to adapt her solo depending on where the visitors choose to stand.

Subsequent ensemble sections for 12 dancers will generate various relationships between their bodies and the space in which they move, and different perspectives for the viewers.



From left, "Public Acts" collaborators Joshua Bisset, Quattrocchi and Sylvestre Gobart.

"The movements are very simple," Bisset says. "They are not based in modern dance or ballet technique. They will be pedestrian movements, but seen in a tremendous focus, with a lot of stillness and a variety of perspectives. So you're looking at a scene that you as a viewer can identify with per-

sonally, but it's in a very abstracted frame.

"I know that I can create an image of choreography, and I can execute it," he says. "I was tired of knowing exactly what was going to happen."

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