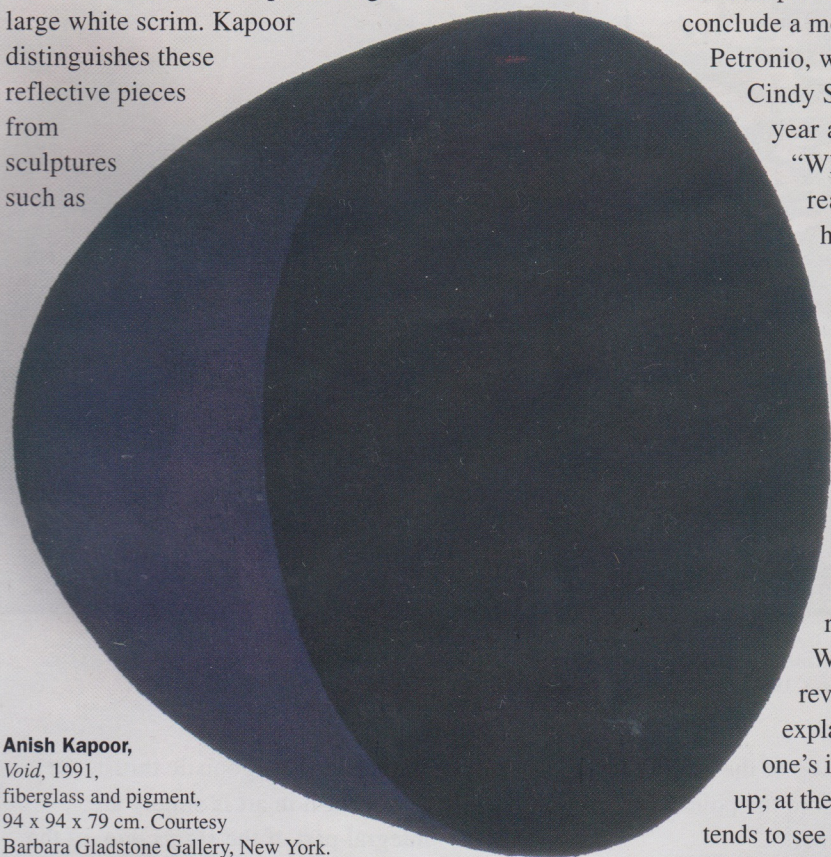


cheryl kaplan

strange attractors: kapoor/petronio

Two large wooden crates arrive in New York. It is Friday, several days before the world premiere of *Strange Attractors 2*, a collaboration between American choreographer Stephen Petronio and British sculptor Anish Kapoor. The dancers scatter about the stage as the concave reflective dishes are finally hoisted out of their containers and suspended against a large white scrim. Kapoor distinguishes these reflective pieces from sculptures such as



Anish Kapoor,
Void, 1991,
fiberglass and pigment,
94 x 94 x 79 cm. Courtesy
Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.
Photo by Attilio Maranzano.

Turning the world upside down (1995) and *Turning the world inside out II* (1995), noting that “the two mirrors are not an independent work; they can’t function alone. They only become a work on that stage with those dancers.” As in *Descent into Limbo*, an installation done for Documenta in 1992 that featured a six-meter room with a two-meter deep blue pigment hole in the floor, the viewer of the stage work is forced into physical uncertainty and displacement. Kapoor’s surfaces make use of elusiveness to redirect the audience’s point of entry into the dance. If the pigment

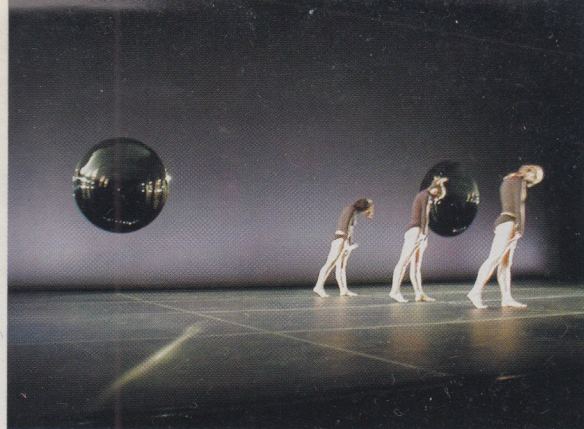
pieces encourage a purposeful disappearance of the viewer, and a physical desire to enter the work as if through a tunnel, what happens on stage is a simultaneous sensation of revelation and obscurity. The sets operate on a highly optical level, offering a constantly repealed promise. Dance and set participate in a mutual act of confounding that remains powerfully determined as the audience struggles to conclude a moment that cannot be concluded.

Petronio, who has worked with visual artists such as Cindy Sherman and Yoko Ono, approached Kapoor a year ago while he was performing in London.

“What I love about Anish’s work is that you can’t really pin it down, it keeps changing and that’s how I think about my dance. It’s always been the heart of what I want to see on stage.”

While Kapoor has followed Petronio since the ’80s, this is their first project together. The sculptor has begun a series of works with choreographers. His “fascination with the unreality of the proscenium and the way it frames and removes things” becomes clear in this project. Kapoor understands how the stage enables “everything from death to sublime love” and how it can “be absolutely real and completely unreal.”

While dance is usually a frontal experience, the set reverses how movement is viewed. Kapoor explains: “Concave mirrors have a focal length—if one’s inside the focal length the image is the right way up; at the focal length the viewer looking from a distance tends to see no image. Beyond the focal length everything will be upside down. It depends where the dancers are on stage—the viewer will see these three things occurring.” Playing to a packed house at the Joyce Theater in New York, the Stephen Petronio Company celebrates its fifteenth anniversary with the grand debut of *Strange Attractors* in its entirety. The *Prelude* for nine dancers, including Petronio, reveals an anxious configuration of co-dependent slips that move in a futile effort to break apart. *Part I* debuted in 1999, featuring the music of English composer Michael Nyman, and is a lyrical, romantic piece, exposing an aggressive irreverence that explodes in *Strange Attractors 2*. Taking its title from chaos theory, Petronio’s work shows a process of unending transformations and



erasures anchored against a diminishing center line, recalling Rauschenberg's *Erased Drawing of De Kooning* where a previous image is still present despite its cancellation. Chaos theory looks at how apparently random behavior can occur in a world organized by deterministic laws. In this case, a strange attractor is defined as a moving and magnetic focal point in a seemingly chaotic field. Petronio intrinsically understands defiance and breakage. Interruption is the grammar of *Strange Attractors* as it moves from grand movements to a persistent doubling back that pleases and undermines at the same time. Both the dance and the sets offer information that constantly corrodes the surface view. The complexity of Petronio's work can probably be traced back to the start of his career in the '70s. He went on to become the only male dancer in Trisha Brown's company before forming his own. *Strange Attractors 2* is pumped up by James Lavelle's tough urban music. It is a twitchy dance that punches out a continuous code of stubborn digressions. The scene opens against a steel-grey blue backdrop and quickly changes to an intense blue, then red, and finally cadmium orange while maintaining monochromatic intensity. The attention shifts back and forth from the mirrored dishes to the dancers in a tense debate. Tiny trails of light swerve in and out of these reflective shields like small, condensed electronic signals detached from their point of origin. The dancers escape just as the mirrors detect them, their images hurl to the audience. It is this process of reverie that Kapoor refers to as "the modern sublime which is the notion of the gaze returned." *Strange Attractors* displays a rare elegance that is street smart and incredibly abstract, punctuating the desire to repel and the compulsion to possess. The audience is propelled into a tremendously seductive moment between doubt and decision. In talking about the relationship of abstraction to dance, Petronio agrees that the dance world has been a lot slower to accept abstraction than the visual world. "This is the twenty-first century and I'm still explaining abstraction. *Strange Attractors* exists in the context of a scientific principle, so people seem to accept the abstraction as narrative. Cunningham gave the biggest break to abstraction in the mid-twentieth century and we've been cleaning up ever since."

Anish Kapoor was born in 1954 in Bombay. He lives and works in London.
Stephen Petronio was born in 1956 in Newark. He lives and works in New York.



In *Strange Attractors 2* performed: Michael Badger, Ana Gonzalez, Gino Grenek, Kristina Isabelle, Ashleigh Leite, Malcolm Low, Gabrielle Malone, and Jimena Paz, with the contribution of Stephen Petronio in the *Prelude*. Photo by Cheryl Kaplan.

