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the American Avant Garde

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ECLECTIC SHOCK: MODERNISM IN RIOT 40+ PAGE PORTFOLIO



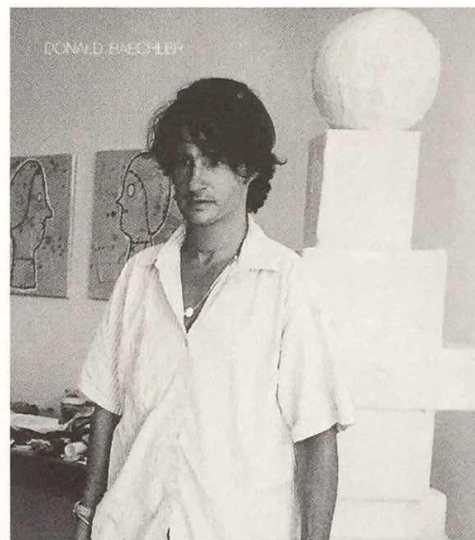
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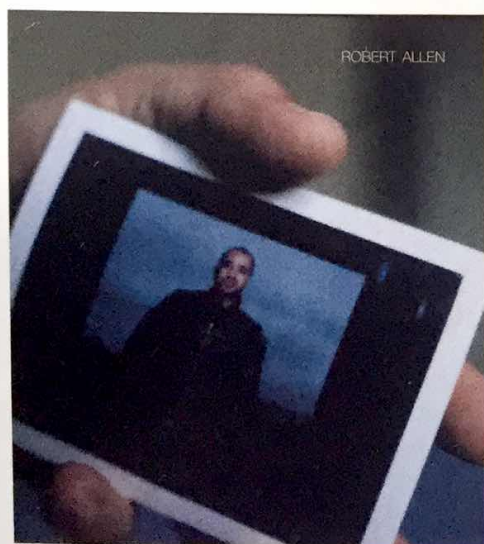
160 > When **surface* discovered that the newest designer dress to be blown up by explosive artist EV DAY was donated specially for the occasion by STEPHEN SPROUSE, it was clear what we had to do. We recruited a hand from Brooklyn-based artist and editor Charles Beyer, to get the two creative sparks to settle down with a tape recorder and talk about the project. Stephen Sprouse has previously collaborated with an impressive array of art and music stars, all part of his ongoing quest to create futuristic American rock and roll style. He is currently working on a NASA-sponsored 3-D painting of its proposed space station. Sprouse's 'bar code tartan' kilt worn by Axl Rose, along with a dress adorned by Debbie Harry, is currently on view at the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. His work is also featured in *The Warhol Look* traveling exhibit, set to land at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh in June 2000.

100 > Most of us want to understand dance more than we actually do. To interview Stephen Petronio, **surface* required the help of a creative mind who could relate to this dilemma. Someone who could translate the enigmatic art form into something tangible. Our editors turned to renowned visual artist DONALD BAECHLER. It was a commission from the Lyon Opera Ballet in France, to design sets for a series of new dances by American choreographers, that first led Baechler to Stephen Petronio, and then to their 1994 collaboration *Extravenous*. This was followed by *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the Festival di Maggio in Florence, Italy. The two are currently in talks for a production slated for 2001. For **surface*, Donald probed the nature of dance aesthetics, and the role of dance in an era oriented towards objects and the Internet. Baechler's paintings hang in the permanent collection of almost every one of the world's venerable "biggies": including New York's MoMA, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the New York Public Library, the Centre George Pompidou in Paris and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

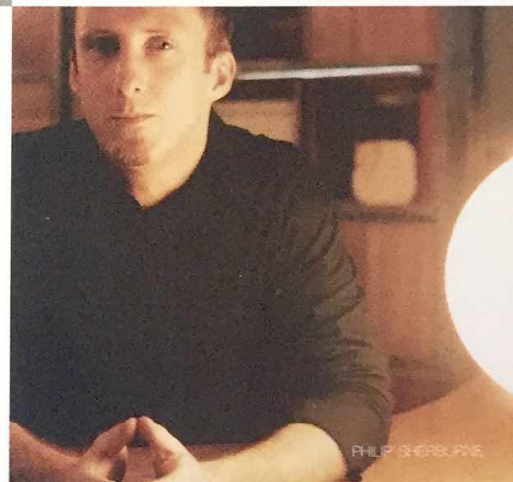
164 > When **surface* was first introduced to contributing editor PHILIP SHERBURNE, he was mastering something esoteric at Brown University. A couple years later, Philip calls himself a



100 > When **surface* paired photographer Christian Witkin and dancer Stephen Petronio for our pages, we predicted an exchange of mutual respect, but had no idea the two were already good friends. Christian has previously photographed Lenny Kravitz, Geoffrey Beene and Sandra Bernhard for **surface*. Based in New York, Christian also shoots for *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vanity Fair* and the *New York Times Magazine*. Witkin has shot campaigns for Nike, Levi's, Esprit, Microsoft, Philips and IBM. His first book, *India: Street Mythology*, is slated for publication in Winter 2000.



"reformed graduate student, one-time espresso puller, former record-store clerk, current dot-commer, free agent and drawing-room DJ—a product of my era." Philip has penned several deep **surface* essays about electronic music's newest generation—including Funkstörung, Chris Cunningham, Andrea Parker, Rainer Trüby and Iara Lee. For this issue, Philip sat with one of the medium's original innovators, Morton Subotnick, to discuss Subotnick's ongoing intent to bring e-music to the masses via Internet. Now based in San Francisco, Philip edits the forward music website urbansounds.com and writes about electronic music and culture for publications including *The Wire*, *XLR8R* and *Alternative Press*.



88 > **surface* does its best to stay true to the American Avant Garde, but it's hard to overlook London's luminaries. Fashion and portrait photographer ROBERT ALLEN has joined in a quest to single out some of the more vanguard creative talents in Britain. The result has been a striking series of portraits published in these pages, including St. Etienne, Andrea Parker, David Toop and Chris Cunningham. In this issue, Robert met with electronic music pioneer Delia Derbyshire, renowned filmmaker Mike Figgis and upcoming pop band Birdie. Robert's work has also appeared in *British Vogue*, *i-D* and *Citizen K*.

STEPHEN PERKINS



interview Donald Baechler **images** Christian Witkin

Stephen Petronio usually can't sit still. But now the rascally choreographer has a broken bone in his foot. Impatient and fiery, he's been walking the streets of Manhattan at the slow pace of pedestrians that he used to knock over. But Petronio's other valuable tool, his mind, is in good health today—doing a backflip here and there just to show off. He's an intuitive artist who translates abstract visual language into choreographed movement. Most of us watch elusive art of dance and struggle to figure out a narrative. But Stephen Petronio isn't telling a story like *Swan Lake*. He's more likely to be cutting a geometric Mondrian edge, or slithering through the cracks of a Henry Moore sculpture in his mind. On stage, he refreshes avant garde dance with pop appeal, through collaborations with everyone from Yoko Ono to Cindy Sherman, Diamanda Galas to the Beastie Boys. He's currently staging a production in London with renowned sculptor Anish Kapoor and Mo'Wax wunderkind James Levalle. **surface* staged an improvisation between Petronio and esteemed collaborator Donald Baechler. The eager choreographer, whose voice peaks and plunges like that of an excitable kid, settled down to be quizzed in the calm painter's static studio. Only Petronio seems to think of it as a rehearsal hall—revealing how for him, the stimulus of space and proportion translate to rhythm and motion.

> I want to talk about your relationship with visual art, the nature of collaboration. Before I could dance, I could look at things. For me, visual art and video were the most exciting things in my life. Dance was a foreign object. **Dance was a foreign object?** Yeah, I didn't know anything about it and I didn't really see it until I was 18 or 19. When I started seeing it, I saw it in context with [Petronio's first choreographer] Trisha Brown and her collaborations with visual artists, and to me that was the most natural thing. That was my training ground. **It is one of the great**

20th century traditions. It is. Duchamp and Cunningham, Cage and Rauschenberg... That's not a big departure for me. That's what I was fed. It seems ridiculous *not* to combine things together. The dance that I did see outside of that world seemed backwards and uninteresting. When I see something in two dimensions, it gets me very excited. When I see something in three dimensions, it is more mysterious to me. I can look at one of your paintings, and something happens that makes more sense to me than a dance, really. **Really?** Yeah, I don't know what you see when you look at your own work, but for me, it's rhythm. I see rhythm and space. The relationship

"If art
can fall
into that
commercial
thing—Then
people are
interested in it"

between things. And that's very easy to translate into dance for me. **Your earliest performances with [dancer] Michael Clark took place in galleries. Did you consider those to be dances, or performance art...** No, I considered them... **That was a sex performance, wasn't it?** It was our

relationship. Both of us had this reputation that was ridiculous, about provocation... And basically, we were living a very lofty and removed life. We were always messed up and having sex. That was what we were rehearsing. So I thought it would be really stupid and dishonest to perform anything else. **Now you're working with Anish Kapoor.** He is going to do the contact lens disks he does, reflective. Which I am sure it is going to be a nightmare to transport. **You've worked with a lot of eccentric fashion designers. Do you have the same problems?** It is the same problems, because the first thing I say is, "I want your work, but can you make it as transportable and cheap as possible?" Those are two really big limitations.

Are you tempted just to work without the art? Or without the costumes?

Well, yeah. Now I am working with Ghost, from London. The stuff is so light, and it is washable. The first thing I say to a costume designer is, "You can do whatever you want... except, could make it machine washable? Can you iron it?" Just really stupid questions. With Ghost, the stuff doesn't look like anything on the hanger, but once you put it on the body, it really moves and it is really fluid. It looks like mercury. [Ghost designer Tanya Sarne] is really well known for making and developing her own fabric. It is kind of like a washable satin. You can wash it and throw it in the dryer, you steam it. People ask me all

S. PETRONIO > *(continued from page 103)*

prescription drug interest in the dance world, because there's pain. **I can't imagine getting on stage being anything less than one hundred percent.** Well, if you do you are a loser. It shows. **What have you been reading?** I read a lot of Kabbalah stuff. **You do? Are you Jewish?** No, I'm a Catholic boy. It's very scandalous text—I get a lot of energy from it. I can't read the Hebrew. I look at these things and it has some kind of vibration on it and you absorb it. The first time I ever looked at a Hebrew text, I got totally high. I had that classic experience of 'elevation.' I got a complete head to toe buzz. **That's fascinating.** The theory, since I have learned about it more, is that there is a spiritual vibration around the text and when we look at it, it gets somehow unleashed. **It's not important to know what it says?** Some people think that it is. But for me, because the first experience was like [slaps his hands loudly], I like not knowing what it is, because I relate to it on an intuitive level. **I never knew that it was such a visual thing.** Well, something visual becomes a physical experience for me. **So do you think your dance is communicating to people the way the Kabbalah communicates to you? Because to me you are describing the ideal aesthetic experience—a visceral reaction to something that is purely visual.** Not rational. That is why I'm attracted to your work. It's not because of this technique or that theme; it speaks to me on some basic punch-in-the-head. **That's what art should do, I guess, practice Kabbalah philosophy.** You know, for me, my work is not... I don't give the 'ideal' experience. A lot of times I don't really understand what I am doing when I am making a dance... **That's good. It's healthy.** I would imagine that it is healthy. I think people who need to know what they are doing all the time are probably not interested in what I do on stage. [Pauses, becomes quiet, looks at his foot.] Anyway, this is killing me. I need to go put ice on it. *

