

## SOME RANDOM RUMINATIONS ON VALUE

Recently I heard a dancer friend say, "I had no idea back then that what I was doing was important!" (How did *I* know, "back then," that what she was doing was important?) How did she find out? What incidents, responses, or writings changed her consciousness of the value of her labors? Seeing her influence on others? Reviews? More remuneration?

It is not difficult to distinguish monetary value from values such as tonalities of light, color, and sound. But when value stands next to importance, the dollar sign comes alive to vie with all the art critics who ever lived.

When I first came to New York in 1956, barely into my 20s, my favorite painting in the MoMA collection was *The Sleeping Gypsy*. Can the painterly/aesthetic/cultural values in Henri Rousseau's painting be applied to our aging dancers' bodies when one of us lies inert beneath it? Is the monetary value of such a body comparable to that of the *The Sleeping Gypsy*?

At a time when the daily news is accepted as a standard of reality, the actuality (in this place) of a sleeping body tips willy-nilly into the self-conscious artifice of "performance."

Are we performers the gypsies (taking a leaf from Broadway musical lingo) and *you* the lions? If a dancing body in the museum context becomes an object, what are we to make of the painted gypsy? Which is worth more? Who values which? Who values which more? And what about the handlers who watch over the iconic object? Do *they* have comparable value?

I used to think that the museum surround ensures that aesthetic illusion, by refocusing the spectator's gaze, packs the most powerful punch. But in this age of chronically frustrated desires do we want to see more than a painting of a sleeping gypsy? Do you want to see more than the body of a sleeping dancer? Do you want to touch her? Do you want to test her, feel her? Who upstages whom?

Does the institution's survival depend on accommodating such an appetite? Must it now provide sensation at the expense of reflection? Spectacle at the expense of ideas? Voyeurism at the expense of contemplation? Should we call this phenomenon a new form of "co-optation" of or by the artist? Must the dancer or performance artist cooperate, collude, or resist? In reply, I find myself posing yet more questions: Why should the museum function as it has in the past, as a venerable repository for things? Or, as in the present instance, is it already a venerable, if ephemeral, repository for *living* "things?"

Meanwhile, value, now more than ever, remains elusive.

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