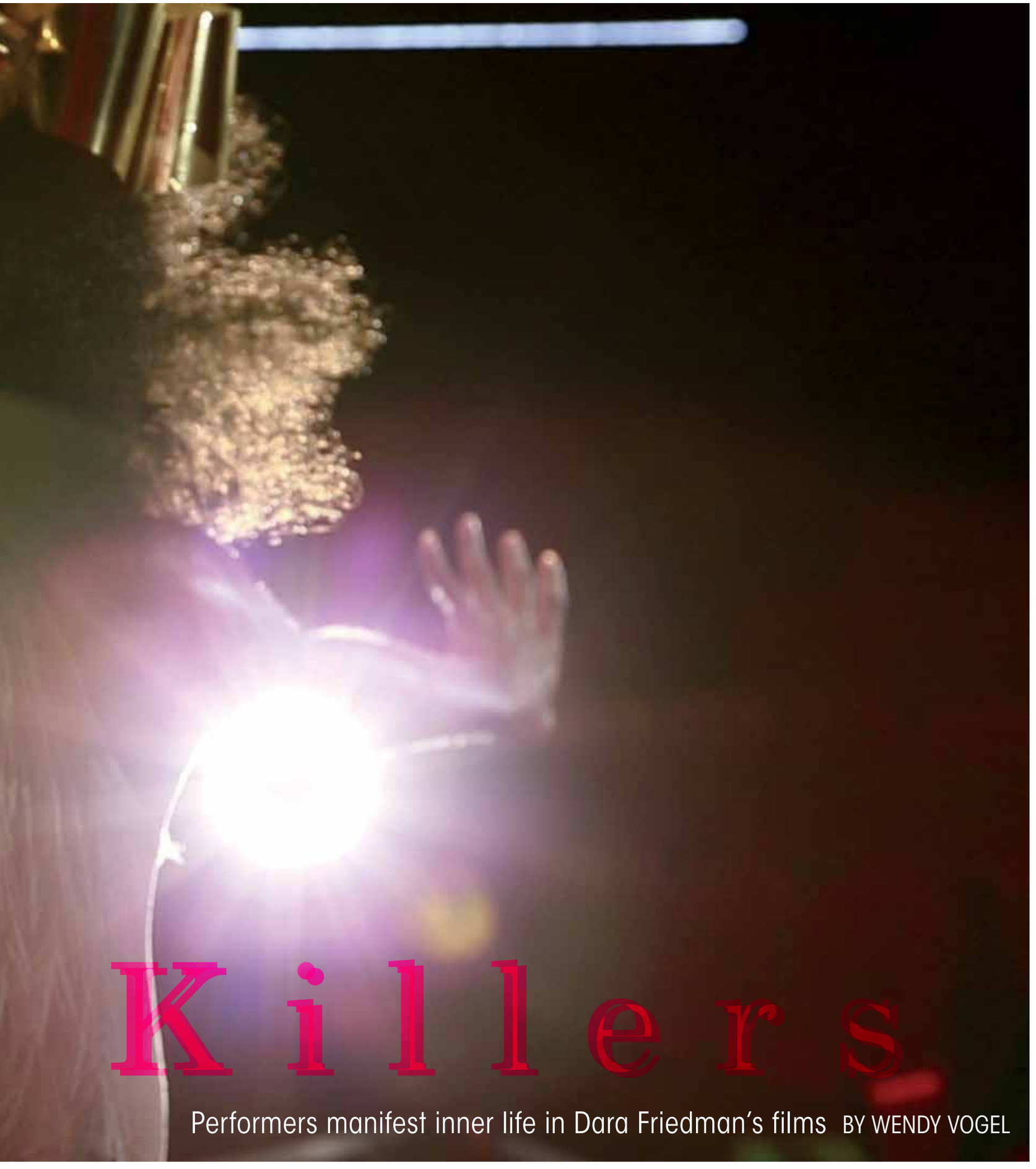

love



Killers

Performers manifest inner life in Dara Friedman's films BY WENDY VOGEL

"We're not going to kill anything. We're going to invite it in.

Stills from *Musical*, 2007–08. HD video, 48 min.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Constance Strickley in *Play (Part 2)*, 2013. Super 8 and HD video, 15 min.

We're going to be receptive to what's happening."

ALL IMAGES: DARA FRIEDMAN AND GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE, NEW YORK

"The camera is a pistol, but it's also an eye," explains Dara Friedman. Since 2007, the German-born, Miami-based artist has trained her lens on performing artists in a series of films. In her most intimate work to date, the two-part film *Play*, 2013, actors stage scenes of "candid nudity." But Friedman is quick to distance herself from the position of voyeur. "What I discuss with Richard"—Richard Needham, her cinematographer—"is that we're not going to shoot anyone." Likening the apparatus of film to a portal and a vagina in the same breath, she adds, "We're not going to kill anything. We're not going to 'get it.' We're going to invite it in. We're going to be receptive to what's happening."

Open-ended, process-based pronouncements like these are key to understanding Friedman's oeuvre. She studied with the Austrian structuralist filmmaker Peter Kubelka in Frankfurt in the early 1990s, and admits that the midcentury experimental film movement's impulse to interrogate the most basic elements of cinema informs her work to this day. Within minutes of inviting me into her home studio on a balmy February day to sip homemade carrot juice while glancing at the sun glinting off the surface of her pool, she points to a notebook where she transcribed notes from Kubelka's class. She describes his fundamental approach: "He emphasized that in film, sound and picture are separate. That seems really banal, but it's not." Friedman soon realized that image and sound could be controlled separately because "they work independently and they're not married to reality." For the young filmmaker, this radical decoupling of the senses expanded cinema's role beyond narrative verisimilitude.

Friedman fuses the analytic aspect of structuralist filmmaking with an earnest exploration of life's emotional highs and lows. *Bim Bam*, 1999, a two-channel 16 mm film, shows the artist repeatedly slamming a door under eerie light, the violent noise resounding moments after the image. The effect recalls the Freudian construct of trauma, where a negative memory is experienced over and over—often in slow motion. In another early film titled *Romance*, 2001, Friedman spies couples kissing in a park in Rome. Though Andy Warhol took on the same subject with *Kiss* in 1963, Friedman's work is not about a cinematic motif being restaged for the camera. Rather, it documents chance moments and renders them cinematic through a tender, sympathetic eye. In the two-channel *Sunset Island*, 2005, a man and a woman recite the same clichéd script about a relationship. We understand them to be speaking to each other, though they each face the camera alone. In just a few minutes the fractured narrative accelerates from initiating the first kiss to romantic frustration: "Are you happy?" "What do you want from me?" The film implies that all human interactions come from a common wellspring of emotional grammar.

"Grammar is the structure. It's the spine. It's the thing that lets ordinary words become magical incantations," Friedman insists. "It's everything." And yet her films are grounded in deeply human terms—a sentiment that comes across in her almost mystical way of speaking about connection and communication. "When I first started making films, I was looking at Maya Deren and Jack Smith," she says, admiring the "real looseness" of Smith's lush, improvisatory works. "If you start with really pure intentions, everything else is secondary. So fuck continuity and fuck technical prowess, it's secondary to the aim of your arrow."

Lately, Friedman's arrow has aimed at collaborations with singers, dancers, and actors. In these recent works, the Surrealist Deren's influence is writ large—particularly her brief but stunning *A Study in Choreography for Camera*, 1945, in which precise edits made dancer Talley Beatty appear to glide effortlessly from a forest to a lavishly furnished interior and back. Deren's film

forges an equivalence between subject and camera, both of which respond to each other with agility. Friedman's work with performers follows a similar tack: Rather than tightly controlling their actions, she begins with loose, trust-building exercises, and leaves herself open to chance.

The series began with a major Public Art Fund commission in New York City in 2007 called *Musical*. After posting ads on Craigslist and *Backstage*, Friedman cast several dozen singers to perform show tunes and love ballads around midtown Manhattan for three weeks. The resulting 48-minute video could not have been better scripted for Broadway: A soldier belts out "On the Street Where You Live" from *My Fair Lady* amid rushing passersby on an avenue; an alabaster beauty warbles Edith Piaf's "La Vie en Rose" in Central Park as a man looks on. At times Friedman overlays multiple vocal tracks, creating an aural atmosphere that feels haunted.

A personal memory sparked the idea for the work. Years ago, Friedman witnessed a "wretch of an old woman" walk slowly to the center of Grand Central Station, lift her head up, and sing "Amazing Grace" so that her voice filled the dome. The artist was shaken to the core but claims that no one else appeared to notice the fleeting moment (a common-enough story about jaded New Yorkers). "*Musical* came out of that experience of thinking, well, if this can happen once, I'll take it. You can have this manifestation of inner life, and it's not a performance—it just happens." Accordingly, each participant in *Musical* sang only once; their performance times were not announced to the public, and documentation was simple and covert: Friedman and Needham each manned small video cameras. They taped lavalier microphones to the singers' throats for recording accuracy. Though Friedman was concerned about making a spectacle of the event, she says the midtown crowds barely noticed the cameras or the crooners. "After a while I told the singers, 'The one thing you can be absolutely sure of is that nothing will happen.'"

Following *Musical* and a subsequent film called *Frankfurt Song*, 2010, in which street musicians played versions of the Rolling Stones's "You Can't Always Get What You Want," the Pérez Art Museum Miami commissioned *Dancer*. The joyous Super 16 mm black-and-white film captures dancers of all genres—from tap to modern to pole—performing in the city's public spaces. Solicited via another open call, the subjects skateboard down Miami Beach's streets, bellydance on its sands, and, in the film's opening sequence, execute balletic leaps on a rooftop. The latter scene recalls Trisha Brown's famous *Roof Piece* of 1971, but Friedman does not cite the dance films of the 1970s—or the art world's voguish rediscovery of them—as direct influences. Rather, she emphasizes Deren's choreographies, adding that *Dancer* is dedicated in part to her aunt, who studied with Pina Bausch, the German enfant terrible of dance theater.

The work also takes the self-reflexivity of structural

filmmaking into account. In one sequence, Friedman is spotted in the glass of a storefront, shooting with her vintage Bolex camera. Explaining her choice of obsolescent equipment, she says, "I really wanted to create electricity with that piece. You can film for only 20 seconds with each crank of the Bolex, and these explosions happen. Each camera load has only three minutes in it. It's kind of matched to what you can physically do as a dancer." There's a limit to even professionals' stamina. "You can't go for hours and hours. You need to have breaks. You dance kind of in reps. The camera mirrors that." So, too, does the soundtrack, with the sound of breathing alternating with upbeat dance music.

Her latest works with performers have shifted from the public sphere to more private spaces. For *Play* and *Play (Part 2)*, which grew out of a 2012 residency at UCLA's Hammer Museum, the filmmaker collaborated with actors to create love scenes for the camera. The two films, both shot in Super 8 mm and HD video in a Wallace Berman–inspired hippie shack in Topanga Canyon, include 17 vignettes of intimate encounters. Two are solo dances by powerful female performers. Both heterosexual and queer duos—5 are real-life partners, and 12 were cast—perform scenarios ranging from standard erotic tropes (a beautifully filmed burlesque fantasy between two young women) to bizarre fairy tale (a presumably "undead" man in a wolf mask, reciting avant-garde poetry, makes love to a voluptuous, giggling young woman, whom he then douses with wine). In one scene, a man chases a terrified-looking woman, both of them nude, through a theater. Friedman interrupts the action with the words "eye contact," her camera visible against a pane of glass. Another episode restages the theater games Friedman played with the actors during casting—exercises she feels are "increasingly important" to her process. We ran through the sequence together in her studio, which included mutual seeing, hearing, smelling, and weight bearing. Friedman describes all the movements as ways of "getting rid of years" of trying to know someone.

The filmmaker's process places no small degree of burden on post-production. "It took me a long time to edit because I don't do clappers or anything like that. Anything that would disturb the flow doesn't happen," Friedman says. "I lip-synch everything so there's no interruptions. In German we say *Liebstöde*—there are no love-killers."

"It was very important for something to be alive. Otherwise,

Stills from *Dancer,* 2011. Super 16 mm film transferred to HD video, 25 min.

OPPOSITE:
Jacob Loeb and Chelsey Holland in *Play,* 2013. Super 8 and HD video, 30 min.

you're making a music video."

"Grammar is the structure. It's the spine. It's the thing that

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE:
Stills from *Rite,* 2014.
HD composite video, stereo sound,
4 min. 10 sec.

lets ordinary words become magical incantations."

Each of *Play*'s brief, semi-improvised clips has an extensive backstory, but it's not necessary to know them to enjoy the charming work. The film, for all its forward thinking, possesses a kind of nostalgia for a bygone era of sexual liberation. This past winter the films played well against two midcentury artists: At Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York, they were shown alongside life-size figurative cutouts by proto-Pop artist Alex Katz; at Los Angeles's Kayne Griffin Corcoran, they screened near Robert Graham's funky sexual dioramas of the '60s. Appropriately, Friedman laments the ebbing of FKK—*Freikörperkultur*, or free body culture, which sprang from an early-modernist back-to-nature movement—in her native Germany and seeks to restore a "balance" with her non-pornographic nudity. "It's also a truth to materials," she affirms. "This is the plank of wood. This is the body. This is where we can start."

Although *Musical*, *Dancer*, and *Play* have been dubbed a trilogy and will screen as a complete exhibition opening at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit this month, Friedman's inquiry into the body and cinema is far from complete. Over a few weeks in January, she completed a new two-channel film based on Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* starring Constance Strickley, a dancer featured in *Play*, and Ana Mendez. *Rite* is on view through May 11 at the Migros Museum in Zurich for "Sacré 101—An Exhibition Based on *The Rite of Spring*." In this short work, Friedman boils down the sacrificial dance from the avant-garde production to a "pop-song length." The explosive movements of Ana and Constance, spot-lit in a dance studio and followed closely by Needham's camera, come from a mutual understanding between Friedman and the dancers about Stravinsky's score. Rather than portraying females as victims—in the Ballets Russes version of the tale, a virgin is sacrificed to the spring—these women express adamant refusal. "It's an absolute over-my-dead-body protest—I don't think that story is in the music at all," Friedman declares. *Rite*'s choreography pays homage to Pina Bausch's interpretation of the score. Like *Dancer*, *Rite*'s soundtrack includes breath, which Friedman sees as a way to avoid objectification of the subjects. "It was very important for something to be alive. Otherwise, you're making a music video."

Film's ingredients—light, breath, and grammar—are Friedman's constants. At the end of my visit, she returns to Kubelka's notes. Rather than imparting industry tips, the cinema guru pursued an education philosophy similar to that in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. "There are not definitions here as much as a breakdown of what there is and trying to lay hold. It's almost like taking apart the mechanics of the car." She pauses and rephrases the analogy in terms of emotional (and domestic) alchemy. "You put together your hot cocktail and you can go anywhere. It's just things that you have in the kitchen, but you can get off on it." MP