

The New York Times

ARTS & LEISURE
SUNDAY, OCT. 2, 2016

A Choreographer's Loft, Where 'There's History in the Walls'

By SIOBHAN BURKE



The choreographer and video artist Cathy Weis, who holds free weekly cultural salons in her large SoHo loft.
Credit: Krista Schlueter for The New York Times

The easiest way to find Cathy Weis's loft, on Broadway between Prince and Spring Streets, is to use retail as your compass: Locate the signs for Guess and Lucky Brand Jeans. Tucked between those stores — on the same block as Lacoste, Hugo Boss, Uniqlo, Club Monaco and Sephora — is the much less conspicuous door to 537 Broadway.

Since 2005, Ms. Weis, a choreographer and video artist, has lived and worked in that 148-year-old building, a former garment factory that became an artists' cooperative in the 1970s. Walking up the creaky stairs and into her expansive studio, where she began rehearsing in the '90s, can feel like slipping back in time to a less densely commercial period of SoHo's evolution, closer to the one Ms. Weis encountered when she moved to New York in 1983.

“There’s history in the walls,” she said recently at the loft, looking glamorous for a Monday morning with glitter-dusted eyebrows (from an appearance with Circus Amok! the night before). “It’s like they’re giving you ideas from the past.”

Ms. Weis was discussing the coming season of her free weekly salon, Sundays on Broadway, which resumes Sunday, Oct. 2. The series, in its third year, is a grab bag of performances, film screenings, discussions and other events that reflect her desire to let artists (herself included) “try things out” in a low-stakes setting. New York has other such opportunities for dance makers — like Movement Research at Judson Church and gatherings hosted by the groups Aunts and Catch — but none that combine intimacy and formality, and being attuned to the present and the past, quite like Sundays on Broadway.

Ms. Weis’s programming has featured everything from a Skype chat with the postmodern dance pioneer Steve Paxton to works in progress from a younger generation of innovators, like Jon Kinzel, Jodi Melnick and Yasuko Yokoshi. The place was packed — not an empty chair, rug or throw pillow in the house — for a conversation last fall between the modern-dance luminaries Sara Rudner and Carolyn Brown. This season brings a lecture by the ever rebellious Yvonne Rainer; a presentation about Robert Rauschenberg performances by the filmmaker Julie Martin; and a duet by the look-alike dancers Vicky Shick and Eva Karczag.

Then there’s Ms. Weis’s work, which the choreographer Lisa Nelson, one of her longtime collaborators, aptly describes as both sober and carnivalesque. Ms. Weis learned she had multiple sclerosis in 1989, and since then she has been exploring relationships between technology and the body, how each can extend the other. She includes some of her own investigations in each season’s lineup.

“This very wide stretch of current work next to more historical works,” Ms. Nelson said in a phone interview, “it’s a very special meal she can prepare.”

Ms. Weis has developed a loyal audience of old friends and new faces, mostly artists and writers, large enough to make her 1,500-square-foot studio, known as WeisAcres, feel full on a regular basis. A welcoming but not effusive host, she introduces most evenings with a short history of 537 Broadway, which stands on the site of P.T. Barnum’s second American Museum. The current building went up after the museum burned down in 1868.

In the late 1960s and early ’70s, George Maciunas, the founder of the neo-Dada artists’ collective Fluxus, converted 16 of the neighborhood’s neglected industrial buildings into artist co-ops, or Fluxhouses. Among these were 537 Broadway and the adjacent 541, both of which had unusually wide dimensions and no pillars: ideal for dancing. Thus emerged an enclave of choreographers’ lofts, occupied by experimentalists like Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, Douglas Dunn, and David Gordon (at 541) and Frances Alenikoff, Elaine Summers and Simone Forti (at 537). It was Ms. Forti’s loft that Ms. Weis bought in 2005.

Many of those artists were part of Judson Dance Theater, the 1960s collective that imbued dance with a radically democratic ethos, breaking with the modern-dance establishment. By their rules, or lack thereof, any space could be a stage and any movement could be dance, like the game of gestural telephone staged by Ms. Brown in “Roof Piece” (1971), which unfurled across a smattering of SoHo rooftops.

“The history of this building is the history of the city and the history of the country,” Ms. Weis said. “It’s good to know what your bones are made of.”

Dance carries on at 537-541 Broadway beyond WeisAcres, at the studio Eden's Expressway and at Mr. Dunn's loft, where he hosts his own more intermittent salons. Mr. Dunn said he appreciated Ms. Weis's spirited, multigenerational audience and the casual tone she cultivates, which is similar to the atmosphere at his place.

"It's like the old days more," he said, "where people just sat in the loft and watched what was there, and there's no attempt to make things fancy or theatrical."

Yet he's wary of romanticizing that era. "It's not a nostalgia trip that she and I are involved in," he added. "These are our present lives, and we want to be as vital, even though we're tired, as we were when we were younger."

Lately the building itself has become a character in Ms. Weis's multimedia installations. In "Time Travel With Madame Xenogamy" last spring, she led visitors through the rooms of her home, projecting footage from her vast video archive of New York's 1980s downtown dance scene. Inside a white tent, audience members could peer into a crystal ball and learn about the future by way of dance's past.

Ms. Weis's interest in architecture goes way back, according to Ms. Nelson, who recalled their days as students at Bennington College in Vermont. "It must have been '68 or '69 when Cathy, with a visual artist, transformed the bowels of an ancient Victorian stone mansion into the insides of a human body and had the audience roam freely through this crazy mix of events and visual experiences."

Over three Sundays in November and December, Ms. Weis will offer "The Walls Began to Weep," which takes place on multiple levels of her building.

"In this one, I think of the building as the star," she said, "and the audience is like the blood, flowing from floor to floor."