

# Questioning Perception

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## **"(in)Visible"**

**Jess Curtis/Gravity**

**CounterPulse**

**San Francisco, CA**

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**By Rita Felciano**

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Even in an area as rich in experimental dance as this one, choreographers can still surprise us with one more question asked. If the inquiries don't always convince, if cogently asked, they at least resonate a little on the way out of the theater. Jess Curtis/Gravity's "(in)Visible," developed in Berlin and receiving its local premiere at CounterPulse, did much more than that. At seventy-minutes "(in)Visible," made its point ad absurdum, but still this was a fascinating and worthwhile look at the nature of perception.

The idea, Curtis has said, is to question the "centrality of vision" in experience, that of dance included. I happen to think that perception through sound is more fundamental than what we take in through our eyes. We have control over what we see/look but not over what we hear. Tap, for instance is an art form that most of us could absorb more deeply, if not for the "distraction" of seeing the dancer's working body.

Performed by six artists, at least one of visually impaired, "(in)Visible" took over a stage shaped by a group of suspended Mylar curtains, the audience seated along the periphery or in a donut shape center space. With the lights off, I felt like sitting in an ancient underground cave. (We had been given an emergency light stick in case of an incipient panic attack). You saw nothing but you became, possibly, aware of your seat neighbor's fidgeting or the swooshing sound of someone passing in the dark. These were sensations heard but not seen. While moving around, sometimes clapping, the dancers in a variety of shoes — stilettos, slippers and walking boots -- created sonic patterns. Some of those were call and response, others more disconnected. The activated Mylar created its own aural color. Whispering about their actions in total darkness, these people seemed to be connected. Or where they? Gradually, the work's vibrating energy suggested a growing almost tactile space, much bigger than that we knew it was.

As the light slowly returned, we could see the performers going through their paces, telling each other what they were doing even though we could see it: I am running around the periphery, I am touching someone's head, I am taking off an audience member's shoe. The

gestural actions stayed quite small but they accumulated and recalled what we had heard but not seen. I kept wondering whether their size was related to them having been first performed in darkness. Seeing the dancers' so very different kinetic identities — such as that of Gabriel Christian and Tiffany Taylor — added complexity and relationships, but to speak truthfully, the first section of "(in/Visible" — sound only — felt richer.