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DANCE REVIEW

Club Echoes, in Sounds and Moves



Alex Mugler and Cecilia Bengolea performing at the Kitchen. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

By **Brian Seibert**

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When the doors opened at the Kitchen on Saturday night, the party had already started. Off to one side of the stage, the London D.J.s Elijah and Skilliam were in the midst of spinning what would turn out to be a fabulous, fierce set of Grime music — intriguingly unstable beats with enough bass to make your seat shake whether you wanted it to or not.

Five dancers onstage were also spinning, rotating on their own as they all orbited in a wide circle, extending and retracting their arms from the elbow. Since the show was a high-culture dance performance, part of [Danse: A French-American Festival of Performance and Ideas](#), this prolonged spinning might have portended a minimalist exercise, relentless in its rigor. The dancers' imprecision ruled that out, but their

outrageous costumes and soft smiles hinted at something rarer in contemporary performance: dance as enjoyment.

The work's creators, Cecilia Bengolea and François Chaignaud, have previously brought to New York provocative pieces, in which performers were vacuum-sealed in body bags or penetrated by dildos. Saturday's offering was "altered natives' Say Yes to Another Excess — Twerk," which derives its title from the names of a D.J., a song and a move, and derives much of its vocabulary from research in dance clubs. This time, the provocation is to mix the supposedly marginalized club moves with culturally endorsed steps from ballet and modern dance.

Treating these sources equally is broad minded. On Saturday, however, that admirable leveling of status came with an unfortunate leveling of quality and energy. There was some novelty in the juxtaposition of finger sucking and crotch grabbing with heroic balances that you might see at an Alvin Ailey performance, but I kept wishing that the dancers were better at any one of the elements.

There were highlights. When Mr. Chaignaud, with his eyeliner-streaked face framed by a wild mane of curls, made harpylike expressions as he borrowed from the Los Angeles street style of krumping, it was like watching late-period Joan Crawford hold her own in a ghetto battle. The Brazilian dancer Ana Pi, and Alex Mugler, a voguer from New York, also had moments of individual brilliance.

But these moments were fitful, and the interactions, trying for playfulness, often took on the character of an unfunny clown routine. Sucking on red, white and blue Popsicles, or flatly reciting lyrics of sexually explicit bragging as they spun without music, the dancers were cute, having fun at their dress-up party. Aiming their backsides at the audience, they flexed and jiggled them with some skill. But the dance as a whole needed more work — and, in the lingo of the lyrics, more werk.

Danse: A French-American Festival of Performance and Ideas runs through May 18 at various New York locations; frenchculture.org.