

From: *Merce Cunningham*, curated by G. Celant, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 29 June - 10 September 2000), Edizioni Charta, Milano 2000, pp. 23-26.

Toward the Impossible: Merce Cunningham

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"Finding the limits of dance" has always been the impulse that has distinguished the work of Merce Cunningham. Since the '40s, while still very young, his research has centered around the questions: What are movements? What are time and space? What are the material and the reality of gesture? What am I? And his response, up to the present time, has sought to annul any hierarchy among the components that shape dance. This is an annulment of every tradition and every preconception, in favor of a rationality that can place movement and gestures above every other thing, to lead them to a point where dance is transformed into something impossible but real, rational but irrational, organized but chaotic.

In this sense Cunningham can be considered an *iconoclast* of choreographic figurations, since he can lay claim to a *pure* idea of dance, where every representation becomes inadequate. Since *The Seasons*, 1947, this has been the basis for his rejection of a normal relationship between music, dance and art. Indeed, along with Cage, he has renounced the necessity for a relationship between movement and sound that has always illuminated and revealed the destiny between these two languages, to create, instead, a *performance* based, not on reciprocal ties and limitations, but on *affinity*, on an *intimate* relationship where dance and music are free from mutual subordination and are able to produce something independent, but charged with syntonies and similarities. He has arrived at an affirmation of an absolute and radical subjectivity that rebels against the pretense of a compromise between the arts. With Cunningham, dance has the claim of being *other* than music, *other* than art, of representing a separate substance that can voyage independently from sound or visual image. The affirmation of a gesture or a movement that materializes in its originality lies in this search for identity and difference. It is neither artificial nor passive construction, but a prototype of a real existence, which one can *encounter* with other languages, which can accompany them, but in mutual respect and on parallel paths. It is through the exaggerated and extremist affirmation of a reality of dance as prototypical and original movement, without any reference to something that pre-exists, such as music or set design, that Cunningham's work begins to establish a premise and a guaranty of its identity. The positive consideration of movement as movement is a new perspective and implies the termination of a metaphysics of its being in favor of a complete acceptance of its presence.

In 1953, when Cunningham began to organize and define his movements *by chance*, and then, without any planning, began to bring together the languages of dance and music, set design and art, in such a way that they first encountered each other only on the day of a works première, he succeeded in asserting that all the arts were due the same *honor*, that is that each was endowed with its own autonomy and specificity. He breaks the relationship between movement and sound, movement and visual object, movement and costume, so that the worth of the individual signs no longer depends on an external dimension, but on their intrinsic, concrete and historical dimension, in the sense of their absolute presence. Adopting *chance* as a constituent condition of dance, he renounces the ideal affirmation of movements and gestures, sequences and rhythms, and transforms them into *indifferent*

objects, thus into elements that one can accept, select, desire, as any historical form, without attributing to them any absolute value. Tied to autonomous processes, they become interior experiences of an application of meaning that rejects aphysical solutions. Consequently it is possible to use any movement whatsoever, any sound, any image, any style. And over the course of fifty years, it has been this openmindedness that has led his dance to pass through all performance experiences, from vaudeville to ethnic and modern dance, from the dramatic to the narrative, from the gestural to the electronic, from sound to silence.

At times his work's value coincides with the affirmation of the value of others, from Erik Satie to John Cage, from David Tudor to Morton Feldman for music, from Robert Rauschenberg to Jasper Johns, from Bruce Nauman to Andy Warhol for art, from Viola Farber to Carolyn Brown, from Steve Paxton to Douglas Dunn for dance. With all these, the awareness of the independence of reciprocal expression is total; indeed, each art rejects outside origins to position itself as its own original.

This also occurs in Cunningham's choreography, in that the concept of language shifts into the application of an existence that runs parallel to the other languages, with the possibility of a reciprocal reflection. His research is one of *contemporaneity* between expressions of being where everything possible is accepted. The interweaving between dance, music and art exists in the reciprocal interstices, exists *in movement*, almost as if each were subjected to an *epileptic step* that incessantly drags it along from place to place, with neither crystallization nor congealment of processes. Within the dance performance, this dyslexia among parts gives rise to a movement that seems splintered at random, that returns to its point of departure or wanders off without conclusion, or without giving a response that seems logical or rational, unconscious or irrational.

Having developed an open praxis, every image, even remotely alluded to, is brutally annulled or at least called into question by its apposite. His entire repertoire, from *Minutiae*, 1954, to *Ocean*, 1994, is thus a search for the indefinable: the creation or performance of a work that doesn't exist and cannot exist because it is automatically destined to be negated by subsequent work. If for Cunningham, dance is the representation of what is entirely possible, it is also the representation of what is impossible, the attempt to do what cannot be done. If one interprets his process correctly, from the chance language of 1953 to the 1990 definition of a gesturalism that is impossible, because it is inspired by a computer logic that imposes solutions that are impossible for the human body, one can understand that, similar to Samuel Beckett, his way of working addresses the dimension of *failure*. In order to continue to exist, dance, like writing, must resolve to fail, it must come to a realization that is so extreme it cannot be achieved. The attainment of this goal, without hope, is a propensity to throw oneself into a *void*, as Cage threw himself into *silence*, in order to achieve the impossible. The hope is to be able to reveal a new dimension of movement that is free from time and space, and above all from the language of dance. The struggle and effort are directed toward its annihilation, which constitutes a continuous promise of rebirth of a new dimension of activity and existence. If one reads the text where Cunningham explicates *Four Events That Have Led To Large Discoveries*,¹ (the work's *transmutation* hinges upon the separation between music and dance, the use of the chance method, recourse to cinema and video, and finally to his latest experiments with the computer. This roaming within pure abstraction, that is within a dimension that does not pertain to dance and to its "realism," and that brings the dancer toward a disintegration of known lines, toward a *void* and an unknown *nothingness*, is the basic material for a dance that is prevented from understanding who and what it is. It is a dance fascinated by numbers and by chance, by mathematics and permutations, by recording as well as by impersonal navigations tied to a room and to a monitor, to a screen and to a window, which allows Cunningham to carry out a rational attack on the stronghold of the inconceivable and the infinite, the unknown and the impossible.

Finally, from the start, after his beginnings with Martha Graham, he has *repudiated* the existence of dance. Allying himself with Cage and then with Rauschenberg, he has succeeded in creating an anti-dance, based on the nullity of an image, a body, a sound. There is void and silence, erasure (Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953, comes to mind) and non-gesture, which can lead only to the creation of enigmas, such as the music-painting-dance *combines*, which function to distance the music, art and dance from the boundaries of a reality, to approach a *nothingness*, or better a zero setting of languages, which cannot be expressed. Together, they sought to say that which cannot be said: Rauschenberg's void versus solid (his *White Paintings* from the early '50s), John Cages *silence* versus sound, and Merce Cunningham's investigation of the impossibility versus the reality of dance.

Even his perspective with regard to the body is unusual. For Cunningham, its function is that of an object, more than a subject. This allows him, more than anyone else, to advance the study of the deconstruction of gestures and movements, almost as if the dancer could become a *third person*, malleable and transparent, able to be subjected to any technique whatsoever. His *impersonal* technique concerns the attempt to resolve the conflict between awareness of the impossibility and the possible concrete extension in time and space. This awareness is unsuited for defining the absolute, a situation that Cunningham seeks to overcome by bringing it, through chance and the computer, beyond its possibilities for comprehension and feasibility: to a place where the body has no true reality, other than in a utopian sense. Here, then, is the strong dialectic between an awareness of being imprisoned in time and space, on the stage and within the perimeters of the flesh, and the desire to escape these limitations to go beyond time and space, where there is only the unknown, where the body is nothing and thus can be everything.

This rebellion against the intolerable prison of the body, accompanied by the rejection of the idea of its sensate and reasoned limitations, marks Cunninghams entire adventure, from *Idyllic Song*, 1944, to *Hand-drawn Spaces*, 1998, and is a pilgrimage in search of the meaning of dance. He is constantly on the move, guided by that obscure impulse that all creators experience and pursue, but that none knows how to explain. In basic terms, the reasoning might be as follows: the human body that separates dance from being is a *continuum* without form, typical of the universe. The first characteristic of a dancer is to *identify* this language, which is not made of distinct elements, but is a becoming toward nothingness that is cosmic, in that it contains all possibilities and the impossibilities of movement. One cannot know anything about this other than what is tested and tried out, so that Cunningham continues his research, or better his knowledge, of movements related to the phenomena of dance with which he has already experimented. He knows he must continue to move on, in order to find other gestures and other images. This is why, in recent years, he has approached the computer. Over the decades, having identified a structure of movements and having found an infinite articulation to express that structure, he is now seeking to entrust to memory all possible electronic combinations, so that these unpredictable combinations might result in other gestures and movements, beyond dance. Nothing is mysterious or hostile to him, neither age nor technology; he is afraid of nothing, when there are possibilities of movement to "explain" a further expansion of the universe of dance. For Cunningham, individual gestures or movements, sequences or choreography have no absolute value. The last ones are more comforting, but the new ones are equally so, so what is right? One is as valid as the other and all are equally arbitrary, every combination as valid as another. There are scores of explanations, but the only way out is to give them all, or to imply their infinitude, bearing in mind that one is possible, but the other impossible ones are equally valid. This is how Cunningham has used the computer since 1990, through LifeForms, and with which he has found expressions, from *Trackers*, 1991, to *Ocean*, 1994, having it fulfill the function of a memory of all the gestures and movements that he has created. There are interminable lists that can give combinations - simple and inexorable, grotesque and laborious, where the body does not avail itself of concrete and real possibilities, because

the movements become a sort of absurd and inconceivable logic. Nevertheless he continues and is drawn to the search for a situation that is the uncontrollable and imponderable language of dance, because until now he has succeeded in giving it an exorcising explanation, in order to move beyond the barrier of language: "My work has always been in process. Finishing a dance has left me with the idea, often slim in the beginning, for the next one. In that way, I do not think of each dance as an object, rather a short stop on the way"ⁱⁱ. The voyage still continues today, in 1999: toward the impossible.

New York, January 1999

ⁱ Merce Cunningham, "Four Events That Have Led To Large Discoveries (19 September 1994)", *Merce Cunningham, Fifty Years* (New York: Aperture, 1997): 276.

ⁱⁱ Merce Cunningham, *op. cit.*: 276.