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Earthly Bodies: Judson Dance Theatre

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by Sally Banes

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Everything that has beauty has a body, and is a body;
everything that has being has being in the flesh;
and dreams are only drawn from the bodies that are.

--"Bodiless God"
D.H. Lawrence

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When Judson Dance Theatre began in 1962, dance of every sort was seizing the American imagination and the American body in a way that was unprecedented since the 1930s. Not only had classic modern dance and ballet gained a foothold in the American arts, but also social dancing and dance in movies, television, and popular entertainments were in the public eye. People were dancing, talking about dancing, and reading about dancing in the press. The Kennedys gave dance their imprimatur, entertaining foreign guests at the White House with ballet performances. U.S.-Soviet relations were warmed by reciprocal visits of ballet troupes. Rudolf Nureyev defected to the West in 1961, winning superstar status usually reserved for movie ^{idola} ~~stars~~. Public and private foundations began funding theatrical dancing on a massive scale, and in the universities dance departments expanded. West Side Story was

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one of the most popular films of the year. The Twist had moved from teenage parties to high society, and the Peppermint Lounge had become an internationally known social spot. Music clubs that had previously catered to stationary audiences suddenly had to build dance floors. Dancing in general had become a symbol and expression of a country in motion, newly infused with youthful vigor and abandon. For young artists working in various mediums in Greenwich Village in the early 60s, dance became an arena where artistic statements could be made in an ~~concrete~~ ^{authentic}, direct, and lively way. The primacy of the body gave the artist permission to act intelligently without the pedantry of intellectualism. Judson Dance Theatre was the result of an alliance between artists with shared concerns ~~but a variety of approaches~~ that had been brewing in several artistic networks in the Village since the late 50s.

The dance fever that infected American culture in the 1960s has not abated; on the contrary, it has soared in the 1970s and 80s. But the nature of that fever has changed over the last twenty years. We said something different through dance in the 60s than we say now. If the dancing of the 60s, from the stage to the screen to the clubs, spoke of freedom, spontaneity, directness, ~~scientific~~ experimentation, democratic participation, and the liberation of the body, dancing since the economic crisis of the mid-70s speaks of control, artifice, organization, technological refinement, specialization, and survival. As our cultural values ~~and conditions~~ change, so does our dancing. The kind of society America was in the 60s made possible not only a certain kind of dancing,

but also the particular social movement Judson Dance Theatre was:
 a venue where formal as well as social concerns could be played out in
 a ~~free~~ spirit of inclusiveness and permissiveness, run on a shoestring *budget*,
 by young artists ~~who~~ offered their works without charge to neighborhood
 audiences--a community that included avant-garde artists, intellectuals, *Memorial* *(?re)*
 and the members of Judson Church, a gathering place for political, social,
 and religious liberals. The emphasis of Judson Dance Theatre was not
 on consolidation ~~building and showing a repertory and technique,~~
~~establishing a company, but rather,~~ on opening up possibilities for
 dance--coming together to work seriously but freely on making dances,
 on questioning the very nature and limits of dance, and on underscoring
 the fleetingness of dance in one-night ~~stand~~ presentations.

Culture's Body

To say that dance is the art whose ~~prime~~ material is the human body
 is to restate the obvious. But it is also to reiterate dance's uniqueness
 and significance, and to understand why post-modern dance, which began
 with the Judson Dance Theatre and its sources, has radically affected
 dance theory, performance, and style. For, ironically, although "post-modern"
 refers to the mode of theatrical dancing that chronologically followed
 classic modern dance and departed from its aesthetic canons, post-modern
 dance is a "modernist" art, in that it acknowledges its materials and

reveals its own essential qualities as an art form. The Judson Dance Theatre was intensely engaged in an art-historical process that corresponded to modernist movements in the visual, literary, and musical arts; it was simultaneously engaged in a dance-historical process that sought to free dance from ^{its dependence on other arts} ~~incursions by the other arts, which had impeded~~ ~~dance's development as an independent art form.~~ It was, thirdly, an extension of a social-historical process that began around 1900, in which women staked out a terrain--modern dance choreography--in which they could operate as serious artists, using that medium traditionally disdained as a minor art and women's realm: the body. In making formal breaks from modern dance, post-modern dance raised certain questions about the body and the social relations expressed by the body that modern dance had generally approached indirectly through symbolic and dramatic deployment of dance materials. With post-modern dance, the subject of the artwork became the body and dancing itself.

Dance is culture, but in a very particular way. It is culture's body. On the one hand, it reflects culture, conveying--through the ~~powerfully~~ multi-layered, nonverbal symbolism of gesture and posture, dynamism and stillness--our ideas about physical beauty, pleasure, health, work, sexuality, and the body's role in perception and in mental and spiritual life. On the other hand, through dance we produce culture, articulating and comprehending our experiences in somatic terms, creating an impact both ^{immediate} ~~concrete~~ and fleeting. The early 60s, when Judson Dance Theatre was at its peak, witnessed a loosening of

cultural constraints on the body, in events and trends as diverse as the 1960 Supreme Court decision on censorship that gave the writings of D.H. Lawrence and Henry Miller notoriety and availability in America; the growing civil rights movement that protested discrimination based on physical traits; the spread of oral contraceptives, which heralded the "sexual revolution" of the 60s; an expanding sports industry that encouraged ^m amateur participation; clothing fashions that revealed more of the body and encouraged individual expression through clothing; a rise in scientific attitudes and methods that fostered a new objectivity in discussing the body; a spate of sexually explicit films.¹ SP

The result in dance was a new ^{directness} ~~factuality~~ that cut through physical illusion in a number of related, sometimes contradictory motifs: the "hot" materiality of the body itself, the excitement of raw physicality; the "cool" demystification of the body, the objectification of physical processes and perception; the anti-intellectual use of the body as an instrument of unmediated feeling and social interaction; the intelligence of the whole body-person standing in defiance of Western notions about the duality of mind/body. The title of Yvonne Rainer's dance The Mind is a Muscle ⁽¹⁹⁶⁸⁾ exemplifies the synthesis of two separate concerns of post-modern dance: an affirmation of the rational, intelligent possibilities for using the human form, and a smashing of the hegemony of mind over flesh.

The handling of the body in the Judson dances ^{had} ~~has~~ two major sources: the technique of Merce Cunningham and the improvisation of Anna Halprin.

Cunningham had already performed the historic task of abstracting dance, wresting movement free from the dramatic connotations it bore in classic modern dance. His use of chance and collage in choreography not only subverted symbolic meaning, but also asserted a new freedom ~~in terms~~ of movement syntax. Any combination of body parts and any combination of movements ~~at a given moment~~ became possible--a challenge both to the skill of the dancer and the perception of the spectator. The separation of the dance from the music was another factor that subverted expressivity. Cunningham's technical innovations depended on a particular body carriage--the upright, open, turned-out stance, based on an academic ballet posture but susceptible to ^{fine} ~~small~~ articulations throughout the limbs and torso. The dancer's body was turned into an alert instrument capable of multiple, contradictory actions, and the actions ^{these} ~~such~~ dancers could perform literalized an idea of freedom through readiness and discipline. The isolation and autonomy not only of body parts, but also of dancers in Cunningham's work betokened ~~not only~~ independence and freedom, ^{yet} ~~but~~ also a sense of alienation. With its speed, discreteness, unexpectedness, verticality; its over-all, equalizing designs of space, time, and the human figure; and its ~~extreme~~ demands on the spectator's intellectual capacity to synthesize many disparate experiences, Cunningham's

for another idea of freedom: freedom from structure, ~~and rules~~ ^{and techniques}

The Judson choreographers, many of whom had been students of Cunningham and/or Halprin, borrowed aspects of both practices and extended them with ideas from John Cage and Robert Dunn, who were interested in ^{closing} erasing the gap between art and life and in interanimating the arts. Creating a situation where the ~~prime~~ ^{conditions} for making ^{choreography} dances, ~~consciously set forth in a program that was artistic rather than explicitly political,~~ were freedom of exploration and ~~democratic~~ ^{equal} responsibility for participation, the Judson group made dances that spoke ~~directly~~ of the workings of the body, its contradictory status as a natural object and a cultural subject, its inevitable expressivity, its strengths, powers, flaws, limitations, awkwardness, and beauty. Although the expressiveness of the ~~dances~~ dances was a by-product of an aesthetic process that ~~primarily~~ aimed at formal innovations, and although their expressiveness was not one of emotion states, the dances did express ideas, attitudes, and values, ~~concerning the body~~. The dances --in a variety of styles, modes, and forms, it must be stressed--were as an ensemble about the use and role of the body in an art that was democratic, accessible, down-to-earth, both pleasurable and intelligent.

Letting Go

A number of related themes surface in the Judson dances from the time of the first concert on July 6, 1962, and continuing throughout the two years of the ^{weekly} Judson workshop and the ~~several years of~~ dance productions

at the church for the next several years. The ^{strongest} ~~largest~~ of these was the notion of "letting go," a physical statement of the fundamental formal concerns that united this pluralistic group--the radical and enormous urge to break free from all of dance's conventions. Casting aside technique was one tactic; others included the use of children's games, play and sports, images of nature and daily life, and ~~extemporaneous action~~ ^{improvisation}.

For some choreographers, raw bursts of ~~pure~~ ⁹ energy shattered the pulled-up, stretched, balanced, controlled armor of dance technique. Unlike the stylized, psychological storms of classic modern dance choreographers such as Martha Graham and Mary Wigman, these were direct, nonrepresentational releases of dynamism, symbolizing nothing more than the galvanic power of the human body, uninhibitedly surrendering itself to primal impulses. ⁽¹⁹⁶²⁾ 32.16 Feet per Second Squared, by Laura de Freitas, June Ekman, and Sally Gross, was a dance that consisted only of unpremeditated falling. ⁽¹⁹⁶²⁾ Trisha Brown's solo Trillium and duet Lightfall ⁽¹⁹⁶³⁾ were full of wild, aerial movements, jostlings and perchings; Lightfall grew out of ¹¹ ~~Violent Contact~~ improvisations. Brown had worked on with Simone Forti and Dick Levine, pre-Judson. In War, Robert Morris and Robert ⁽¹⁹⁶³⁾ ~~Hunt~~, dressed in outlandish armor made of found objects, screamed and whacked at each other with wooden swords. Yvonne Rainer's early work was studded with ~~nonspecific~~ "tantrums," for example the section of Three Seascapes ^{that} ~~which~~ consisted of a screaming fit in a pile

of white ^{tulle} ~~gauze~~ and a black ~~overcoat~~. The apotheosis of the tendency toward pure energy was Concert #13, the evening-long collaboration by the entire Judson group with the sculptor Charles Ross, who had created an environment of playground-like structures, chairs, and other objects that invited all sorts of free play and acrobatic adventures, from Ruth Emerson's gymnastic Sense, to Rainer and Ross' Room Service--an open-ended game of follow-the-leader--to Carolee Schneemann's Lateral Splay--in which the dancers ran as hard and fast as they could until they collided with some obstacle.²

But the opposite side of breaking with technique was the suppression of energy, a relaxation of the body that negated the physical tension ~~essential to theatrical legibility in both ballet and modern dance.~~ Steve Paxton presented movement that ranged from classical ballet to pedestrian action to "marked" dance phrases ~~(i.e., stripped of dancerly tension)~~ in Transit. Fred Herko's Once or Twice a Week I Put On Sneakers to Go Uptown, one of many early Judson dances choreographed to music by Erik Satie (resulting from an assignment in Robert Dunn's choreography class), was a "lazy" Suzie-Q step that snaked around the room with no climax and little inflection of phrasing. In Mannequin Dance, David Gordon slowly lay down while singing. Paxton used unembellished, everyday walking in various dances, beginning with Proxy; Rainer juxtaposed a mundane group run with magnificent music by Berlioz in We Shall Run. As early as Dance for 3 People and 6 Arms, Rainer began to use limpness as a key stylistic device.

The two most extreme ~~social~~ forms of letting go were to dance in

the nude and to use sexual imagery. Nudity was a logical extension of the modern dancer's uniform--~~the~~ leotard and tights--but was especially shocking in the context of the church as a performing space. Paxton and Rainer danced a chaste but unclothed duet in Word Words, complying with New York State ^{laws} forbidding nudity while in motion by wearing g-strings and (for Rainer) pasties. Later, when Rainer and Morris walked across the stage in a tight, oily, nude embrace, in Morris' ⁽¹⁹⁶⁵⁾ Waterman Switch, the church became embroiled in a scandal and was nearly ousted from the American Baptist Conference. Rainer's Terrain included ~~sections of play~~, but also a deadpan erotic duet based on poses from Kama Kala sculpture. Schneemann's Meat Joy ⁽¹⁹⁶⁴⁾ ~~used~~ ^{combined} nudity with orgiastic action and the sensual shapes and textures of raw fish, sausages, chicken, and wet paint.

The Demystification of the Body

An attentiveness to bodily processes and functions, in a spirit of scientific method harnessed to art (culminating in 1966 in ~~the~~ ^{the} Nine Evenings: Theatre and Engineering, using many of the Judson personnel and produced by Experiments in Art and Technology, led by Billy Klüver) characterized the Judson work, but in a dialectic that ^{demystified} ~~viewed~~ the body ^{in this way} from two opposite angles. ^{was that} On the one hand, the body was dehumanized, compared to an inanimate object or shown as a bundle of insensible chemical and biological products. ^{The other was an} On the other hand, the insistent,

gutsy vitality of pure corporeality ^{that} signalled a new humanism rooted
 in physical realities that repudiated both the bloodless abstraction
 of Cunningham's dances and of ballet and the literary abstractions of
 classic modern dance. In the first category were dances such as
 Lucinda Childs' Carnation ⁽¹⁹⁶⁴⁾, involving the manipulation of a blue plastic
 bag, a sheet, two socks, sponges, plastic curlers, and a colander. The
 image was of a body spitting forth a stream of objects. Alex Hay's
Leadville and David Gordon's Silver Pieces ⁽¹⁹⁶⁴⁾, in their different ways,
 both turned the ~~dancer's~~ ^{performer's} body into a glittering technological entity.
 Robert Rauschenberg's Pelican ⁽¹⁹⁶³⁾ contrasted the equally dehumanized bodies
 of a ballet dancer on pointe and two men using wheeled carts and roller
 skates as means of locomotion. James Waring's Imperceptible Elongation ⁽¹⁹⁶³⁾ virtually
 dispensed with human presence ~~altogether~~; its dynamism derived from
 the motion of confetti and balls thrown through a paper wall. Robert
 Morris' Arizona ⁽¹⁹⁶³⁾ and 21.3 ⁽¹⁹⁶⁴⁾ (the latter a Surplus, not a Judson, event) reduced
 the action of the dancer to almost total stillness, pushing dance into
 the realm of sculpture. But his Site ⁽¹⁹⁶⁴⁾, on the other hand, brought
 Manet's painting Olympia to life, setting a live woman, posed nude, in
 a frame of motion generated by his own strenuous handling of plywood sheets.
 Through images of work and life, Morris demystified the visual artist's
 process of freezing, thus deadening, the world of the quick. Through
 the involvement of artists in other ~~media~~ ^{mediums}--not only painters and sculptors,
 but also musicians, writers, filmmakers--all sorts of translations and
 embodiments were possible. Composers Malcolm Goldstein, Philip Corner,
 and James Tenney made ~~pieces of~~ music that called attention to the

workings of the musician's body as he/she produced sound. Corner's ⁽¹⁹⁶³⁾ Certain Distilling Processes set up a three-fold translation of concept into performance, passing shapes and textures from a written score (using drawings and collage, rather than conventional musical notation), through dancers' bodies (as they interpreted this score in movement) to musicians who used the dance as a musical score.

The interest on the part of choreographers in using written and pictorial scores ~~paradoxically~~ pulled the dances in two directions. On one side was the depersonalizing ^{zation} of the ^{choreographic material by the distance} relationship between choreographer and dancer. Through the mediation of written scores, ~~the body-to-body~~ ^(heretic) contact that has characterized the "oral tradition" of dance instruction ^{the personal presence of the teacher is no longer paramount the performance style} was bypassed. On the other side was a new, highly personalized freedom for the dancer to make the impersonal score his/her own. The scores for Steve Paxton's Proxy and Elaine Summers' The Daily Wake, combining images from sports, cartoons, social dancing, and news events, provided movement material that did not bear the personal stamp of a choreographer's body and technique, and that could be revitalized by the dancer in the context of performance. The cut-up Labanotation scores for Carol Scothorn's ⁽¹⁹⁶²⁾ Isolations and Ruth Emerson's Shoulder r provided abstract instructions for nearly impossible movements, but transposed to the dancer's body, these alogical combinations took on a muscular inevitability.

Finally, in dances such as Paxton's Music for Word Words, in which he deflated a plastic costume from room-size to body-size, creating a second skin, and in Paxton's other dances using inflated plastic tunnels that were reminiscent of digestive tracts, in dances such as Rainer's

Notes

A Cultural History of the Human Body

¹For a consideration of the progressive liberation of the body in Western culture since the Victorian era, see Stephen Kern, Anatomy and Destiny (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975).

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²I have documented in detail the Judson Dance Theatre concerts from 1962-64 in Sally Banes, Judson Dance Theatre: Democracy's Body, 1962-64. (New York: New York University, unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1980). For descriptions of the dances mentioned here the reader is referred to that work and to Sally Banes, Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980); Jill Johnston, Marmalade Me (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1971); Yvonne Rainer, Work 1961-1973 (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design; New York: New York University Press, 1974); and to Jill Johnston's reviews in the Village Voice.