PREFACE

I remember being completely baffled the first time I saw the Merce Cunningham Dance Company: painfully bright lights, ear-piercing sounds, dancers walking matter-of-factly to random locations on the stage, beginning phraseless sequences of movement that paused in strange positions at unpredictable moments, exiting abruptly and reentering midsequence, and then John Cage stealing the show with his champagne drinking and tart anecdotes.[1]

What were they doing? What was the dance about?

It was the summer of 1967 at the American Dance Festival. I was a midwestern teenager, who had given up ballet after ten years of intensive training to study modern dance. I wanted to be a choreographer, and at the time I thought modern dance offered far more opportunities than ballet for making and presenting original work. But Cunningham. His dances didn't mean anything. Even two years later—when the company was in Paris and I witnessed a deeply moving performance of *Field Dances* (1963)—I rushed backstage to thank Cunningham for such a profound image of how the world should be, only to have him explain that the dance was divided into sections that were repeated in a different order for each performance, as determined by chance procedures.

Was there no meaning to his dances at all?

Over the years I came to love Merce Cunningham's dances, to appreciate his extraordinary arrangements of human bodies moving in space and time. But it was only once I began making dances of my own and studying dance history that I came to value Cunningham's dances not only for themselves but also for what they allow us to understand about dance in general. In 1953 Cunningham premiered his *Suite by Chance*, a dance that decisively broke with contemporary choreographic methods by using chance procedures to compose and then sequence dance movement.[2] And this extraordinary gesture of ordering movement randomly was only part of his choreographic agenda. Cunningham intended to call into question and even to sever the intimate relationship that then existed between music, human feeling, and movement. All three, he asserted, could and should be seen as separate realms of events, whose correspondences were haphazard at best. By disassociating dance movement from its musical and emotional sources, Cunningham gave it a new independence as the material, tangible substance out of which the dance could be constructed as an entirely autonomous event. This objectification of dance movement contravened prevailing assumptions about dance composition not only because it acknowledged no "natural" connection between movement and feeling but also because it suggested that the dance could simply be about human bodies moving and nothing more.

The quest for a natural way of moving, a natural body, and a natural, organic choreographic process dominated American concert dance in the early part of this century, and it continues today.[3] Typically, those engaged in this quest accord dance a role as the most appropriate medium of expression for primal, emotional, and libidinal dimensions of human experience. Dance is seen as an outlet for intuitive or unconscious feelings inaccessible to verbal (intellectual) expression. Based on this model, dancers often cultivate a sanctimonious mutism, denying what is verbal, logical, and discursive in order to champion the physical and the sensate. At the same time, they are oppressed by the inferior status of their accomplishments within a society that esteems the verbal or the mathematical over all other forms of discourse. Nonetheless, this role for dance—as the spontaneous, graceful, erotic, and, above all, fervent use of the body—offers dance a clear place and function in society.

As long as dance participates in the pursuit of the "natural," however, little can be said about the art of choreography. The "natural" creative process, an intensely private search for inspiration and appropriate expression, cannot be learned but only assimilated by rehearsing and performing in a choreographer's dances. One of the major theoretical works on dance composition of the last fifty years, Doris Humphrey's *The Art of Making Dances*, testifies to the unwillingness of choreographers to articulate compositional methods. In her final chapter, Humphrey summarizes her advice to the novice dance maker as follows:

> Symmetry is lifeless
> Two-dimensional design is lifeless
> The eye is faster than the ear
> Movement looks slower and weaker on stage
> All dances are too long
> A good ending is forty percent of the dance
> Monotony is fatal; look for contrasts
> Don't be a slave to, or mutilator of, the music
> Listen to qualified advice; don't be arrogant
> Don't intellectualize; motivate the movement
> Don't leave the ending to the end.[4]

This impoverished set of instructions for making good dances could never result in the complex manipulation of thematic material, the eloquent spatial organization, and the powerful, symbolic bodily shapes that are the hallmarks of Humphrey's dances.

But dance theory, according to this model, can do no better. In the twentieth century, the most influential theories of dance composition have been formulated by philosopher Suzanne Langer, critic John Martin, and ethnologist Curt Sachs.[5] All three locate the origins of dance in early human gestural attempts at communication. They oppose these primal yearnings to express human feeling to the subsequent artificiality of civilized movement, and they look to dance as a medium that can return us to a vital energy and an unalienated sense of wholeness. For all three, as for the majority of early twentieth-century choreographers,[6] the body serves as a physical instrument for an interior subjectivity, and the dance functions as a luminous symbol of unspeakable human truths, which, because they are unspeakable, leave us little to say about the dance's organization.[7] Thus the dance remains an ephemeral event whose immediate appeal can never be captured in words. At best, criticism is able to provide a historical perspective or an aesthetic judgment for what is otherwise too fragile and fleeting for comment.

How to get at the workings of a dance. Admittedly, it is difficult for choreographers, dancers, and viewers alike to apprehend choreographic structure. Dancers undergo years of training to translate the proprioceptive sensations of movement into hypothesized images of how that movement looks and feels to another. The talent for remembering movement is difficult to cultivate and certainly not rewarded by this society. Choreographers contend with cumbersome notation systems or pale video reflections as the only documentation of the dance they have conceived and executed. And the literature describing dance historically and cross-culturally is relatively inaccessible.

Because of the fleeting nature of the medium as well as their own aesthetic concerns, twentieth-century choreographers have, in general, preferred not to talk about their dances. Even Cunningham, who rejected the choreographic methods of his contemporaries, has refrained for most of his artistic life from talking about his work.[8] Like them, he wants the dance to speak for itself in a language all its own. Yet because his dances have presented movement ranging from the balletic to the pedestrian, ordered through a variety of procedures including the aleatory, and have thereby offered up the activity of moving as their meaning, they allow us to address the question of dance composition anew. They shatter the silent organic unity of the "natural" body and of a naturally expressive creative process so that instead of grasping the choreographer's intended meaning by intuiting the body's intrinsic message, we can decipher a dance's codes and structures. We can look, on the one hand, at the choice of movement and the principles for ordering that movement and, on the other, at the procedures for referring to or representing worldly events in danced form. That is to say, we can begin to ask *how* any dance means what it does.

"Reading dancing" is the name I have given to this active and interactive interpretation of dance as a system of meaning. In the study of contemporary American concert dance that follows, I propose a set of choreographic conventions that create and convey what a dance is about. I examine these choreographic conventions first in terms of the artistic practice of the choreographer, surveying four current approaches to dance composition represented in the works of Deborah Hay, George Balanchine, Martha Graham, and Merce Cunningham. To trace the development of choreographic meaning from class and rehearsal to the dance performance itself, I compare these choreographers' views on the creative process, dance technique, and the expressive act, as well as their implicit assumptions about the role of the body and the expressive subject in their dances. At the same time, in much the same way that Cunningham's dances challenged our expectations when they were first presented, I hope to call into question our familiar beliefs about how a dance is made. All too often we attend a dance concert with unquestioned assumptions concerning the kind of body we will see or the kind of message we will receive. But choreographers do not necessarily share those assumptions, as we will see. The four choreographers examined in this study describe their approaches to composition in radically contrasting terms; they disagree about standards of technical competence; and they profess entirely different ideas about what the body is and does. And yet how each choreographer cultivates the body remains remarkably congruent with his or her overall aesthetic. As a result, the comparison of these four choreographic approaches can expand and also organize our expectations about the dancing body and the dance.

If chapter 1 disengages the dance from our familiar associations by presenting an array of contrasting ideas about the creative process, chapter 2 looks specifically at the craft of dance composition. Once the body, the subject, and the expressive act have been "de-naturalized," then the dance can be examined explicitly as a system of codes and conventions that support its meaning. Chapter 2 considers five such conventions: (1) the dance's frame—how it separates itself from the rest of the world; (2) its modes of representation—how through *resemblance*, *imitation*, *replication*, or *reflection* the dance refers to the world; (3) its style—how it creates a personal signature for itself; (4) its vocabulary—the individual movements of which dance is composed; and (5) its syntax—the principles governing the selection and combination of movements. The first three conventions allow the dance to refer to events in the world, and the last two, vocabulary and syntax, lend to dance its internal coherence and structure. The dance's meaning is, in part, a product of the tensions created between these two kinds of conventions—between the references that the dance makes to the world and to its own organization.

Chapter 3 uses the poetics of dance established in chapter 2 and the four contemporary approaches to choreography developed in chapter 1 to construct a history for contemporary concert dance. Beginning with the European court spectacles of the late Renaissance and moving through eighteenth-century neoclassicism to early twentieth-century expressionism and finally to the outgrowth of the Cunningham revolution of the 1950s, I argue that the principal method for composing dances in each of these historical periods resembles one of the four contemporary models. Thus the works of Hay, Balanchine, Graham, and Cunningham provide familiar ground on which to organize the available artifacts of dances from these four key periods in the history of Western dance. At the same time, the comparison of past and present uses of similar sets of choreographic conventions points up the historical specificity of those conventions. Such a comparison allows us to see the extent to which meaning for any given choreographic structure is to be found embedded in its social and historical setting.

Chapters 1 through 3 examine dance as a product of the choreographer's creative process, of the conventions that compose it, and of its historical situation, respectively. The fourth chapter completes this analysis by considering the experience of the dance's viewers.[9] Each of the four choreographic models outlined in chapter 1 gives viewers specific responsibilities and a unique involvement in the dance, almost as if they participated in the same cultivation of body and subject undertaken by the choreographer and dancers as a result of their "reading" of the dance. Chapter 4 reflects back on these different experiences for dance viewers by proposing a fifth model for the choreographic process, one that actually includes viewers in the making of the dance. Performances by companies like the Grand Union, Meredith Monk and the House, and Twyla Tharp Dance Company incorporate a variety of tactics for exposing and commenting on their own use of choreographic conventions. Dances created by the Grand Union and Meredith Monk, in particular, feature the conventions by which they are made. In so doing, they engage the viewer in a relationship that extends beyond the active participation of reading the dance. I have called this open-ended, playful, yet self-critical, interaction between viewer and dance "writing dancing."

My choice of "reading" and "writing" as metaphors for interpreting dance draws upon contemporary discussions of these terms in literary and cultural criticism. In particular, the works of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Hayden White support the argument that reading and writing are forms of (bodily) inscription. All three of these theorists have witnessed and written about epistemological ruptures in their respective disciplines equivalent to the impact of Cunningham's dances on the concert dance tradition. All three have attempted to rethink the issue of representation, and in doing so they have called into question the nature of the subject (and the body) who engages in the act of representation. Although my analysis is in no way intended to introduce or critique their work, it does translate many of their ideas in order to arrive at a theory of representation in dance; I have pointed to some of the correspondences in the notes.

But if *Reading Dancing* is inspired by recent cultural criticism, it is equally influenced by the work of contemporary choreographers. In the same way that Langer, Martin, or Sachs share with the choreographers of their period assumptions about the artistic process, *Reading Dancing* is a product of contemporary attitudes toward dance composition. One feature of the contemporary American concert dance tradition is its unparalleled diversity of choreographic methods; in *Reading Dancing*, I have tried to support and encourage an acceptance of these different approaches to dance making. Unlike some critics who would argue that ballet is the only enduring Western concert dance form and who see modern dance as a moment of rebellious experimentation lacking in consequence because of its failure to produce a lexicon,[10] I see the tradition's strength and vitality in its eclectic range of styles, vocabularies, and syntaxes.

Yet in addition to its pluralistic constituency, the contemporary American dance world possesses a second and equally important feature—the capacity to reflect critically on its various enterprises and to choreograph commentary about its own artistic process. And it is this reflexive impulse, initiated by Cunningham and elaborated by choreographers Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Douglas Dunn, David Gordon, Meredith Monk, and others, that inspires a book about dance composition such as this. Like Foucault and Barthes, these choreographers challenge traditional distinctions between thought and action, subject and object, artist and critic, thereby suggesting the possibility of writing about dance in a way that does not, on the one hand, reductively explain it or, on the other, despair of ever re-creating its transient meaning. *Reading Dancing*, then, gestures toward an interdisciplinary domain where writing and dancing sign in the direction of one another.[11]

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