

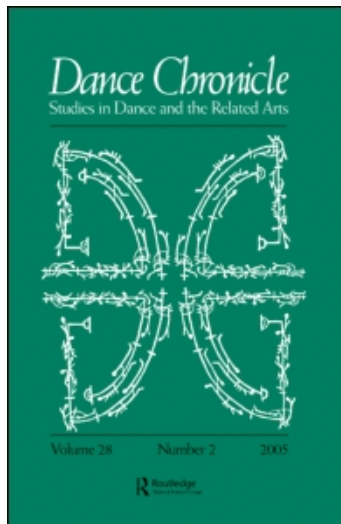
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Dance Chronicle

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713597243>

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To cite this Article Banes, Sally and Carroll, Noël(2006) 'Cunningham, Balanchine, and Postmodern Dance', Dance Chronicle, 29: 1, 49 – 68

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/01472520500538057

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01472520500538057>

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CUNNINGHAM, BALANCHINE, AND POSTMODERN DANCE

SALLY BANES AND NOËL CARROLL

“Painting relates to both art and life. I try to act in the gap between the two.”

—Robert Rauschenberg

After the publication of *Terpsichore in Sneakers* in 1980,¹ it was often asked why Merce Cunningham’s choreography was not included under the category of postmodern dance. After all, the movement emerged in 1961 in Cunningham’s own studio in the course of a composition workshop sponsored by Cunningham himself and led by Robert Dunn who, among other things, had studied music composition at the New School with John Cage, Cunningham’s most renowned collaborator. In addition, Cunningham not only sponsored the class formally; his artistic strategies were also an artistic inspiration for the class inasmuch as the students were exposed to the sort of chance techniques that are often regarded as the hallmark of the Cage-Cunningham collaboration. In a manner of speaking, the postmoderns were the grandchildren of Cage by way of Robert Dunn.

Furthermore, two of the postmodern choreographers-to-be—Steve Paxton and Judith Dunn, the wife of Robert Dunn—were Cunningham dancers and another student, David Gordon, was married to Valda Setterfield, who was also a member of the Cunningham Company. Thus, the Cunningham Company and the Judson Dance Theater were almost literally family.

And, of course, both Cunningham and the postmoderns were engaged in a studied rebellion against modern dance, as represented especially by Martha Graham, in whose company Cunningham danced from 1939 to 1945. The postmoderns, that is, not only came *after* modern dance, as the label “*postmodern*” implies; they were also “anti” modern dance.² They were, in other words, participants in an artistic revolution initiated by Merce Cunningham. For all these reasons, it seems plausible to speculate

that Cunningham belongs inside the category of the *postmodern* rather than outside it.

Moreover, if one thinks of postmodern choreography as an experimental reflection upon the nature and limits of dance, then why should Cunningham's work have any less claim to the title than that of Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, or David Gordon? Indeed, if such reflexivity concerning the nature of dance is a central feature of the postmodern agenda, then might not some of Balanchine's abstract ballets, like *Symphony in Three Movements* or *Tombeau de Couperin*, also belong to the category? If the notion of postmodern dance has genuine intellectual content and is not merely a fancy chronological marker for a generation of choreographers who became prominent precisely in the 1960s, then it needs to be explained why it is not arbitrary conceptually to draw a line between the choreography of the postmoderns, on the one hand, and that of Cunningham, and possibly even some of the work of Balanchine, on the other hand.

Our intention here is to stake out the pertinent distinctions in this neighborhood. We realize, of course, that some may suspect that this is nothing more than a sterile exercise in labeling. What's in a name, they might ask? Nevertheless, it is our conviction that one can learn a lot about the artistic phenomena in question by examining why some of it fits under one stylistic category and not under an alternative one. For, in order to answer such questions we need to look closely at the work at issue at the same time that we sharpen our understanding of the pertinent categories. That is, trying to answer the challenge of accounting for who is and is not postmodern can be informative—informative about the work under discussion and about the conceptual frameworks we bring to it.

One place to begin distinguishing between Cunningham and the postmoderns is to revisit one of the most compelling reasons for amalgamating them, what we might call the "Cage Connection." Cage supplied the postmoderns with a number of their animating ideas at the same time that he was making important contributions to Cunningham's approach to choreography. However, there is a real question here about whether what Cage meant to the postmoderns amounted to the same thing that he meant for Cunningham. Cage and his views about composition represent a fundamental tenet of postmodern dance; there is a direct line of descent from Cage to the postmoderns. However, it is not clear that

Cagean compositional strategies play the same role with respect to Cunningham's choreography that they do with respect to the postmoderns. Although one tends to think of the Cage-Cunningham collaboration as two sides of the same coin, they may not be. Rather they might just be two coins—in the same pocket. Moreover, we conjecture that where the two coins—the projects of Cage and Cunningham respectively—flip in different directions, there exactly is where the boundary emerges between Cunningham's choreography and postmodern dance.

It is easy to suppose that Cage and Cunningham are up to the same thing. Not only did they collaborate fruitfully; they are also part of roughly the same generation of avant-gardists. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to think of the twentieth-century avant-garde as one movement with a unified history, for there are at least two major avant-gardes in the twentieth century. It is our contention that Cage belonged to one of them and Cunningham to the other. Even though Cage and Cunningham were able amicably to meld together their different projects, for reasons we will discuss shortly each of them had very different artistic goals. Moreover, what postmodern choreographers ultimately derived from Cage was precisely a commitment to the avant-garde to which Cage, rather than Cunningham, pledged allegiance.

What are these two avant-gardes? One, with respect to fine art, is best known through the influential writings of Clement Greenberg,³ and is probably the better understood of the two. We may label it, following Greenberg, as *modernism*.^{*} Comprising a historical trajectory from Manet, Cézanne, and Matisse through cubism and then onto the abstract expressionism of Pollock, the modernist enterprise is committed to purity. Under the modernist dispensation, each art form is beholden to its constitutive medium. It is the project of each art form to explore, foreground, and acknowledge its own nature. Since, according to Greenberg, the essence of painting is that it is a flat surface, the history of genuine painting in the twentieth century became the story of bringing this

^{*}Throughout this essay, we are using the concepts of *modernism* and *postmodernism* descriptively rather than evaluatively. It is not our intention to insinuate that one style is necessarily superior to the other. Specifically, we are not suggesting that Cunningham's work is somehow less for not being postmodern.

Furthermore, we are not advocating that choreographers today return to the concerns of the postmoderns. Indeed, we do not think this is remotely practicable. The

fundamental fact about painting to light. The cubists shattered the putative illusion of depth in realist pictures and called attention to the painted surface until, step by step, the surface of the canvas and the picture plane became as one, as in a paint-saturated *Unfurled* by Morris Lewis.

Modernism of this sort is a variety of formalism in that it presupposes that the subject of painting is painting as such, rather than the world, the flesh, and/or the devil as they exist off-canvas. The modernist is, by definition, a purist, since in his view authentic painting is about painting—about the nature of painting—and not about saints and sinners, gods and goddesses, or war and peace. Art is a realm autonomous unto itself with its own subject matter: painting with respect to painting, sculpture with respect to sculpture, and so forth. In short, in the modernist view the subject of art is itself.

In contrast to the purist avant-garde, whose marching orders Greenberg articulated so effectively, there is at least another major twentieth-century avant-garde. Since it has no preexisting label, we will call it the *integrationist* avant-garde.* Whereas the modernist advocates that art be about itself—that art is a practice that is separate from other social enterprises—the integrationist avant-garde agitates for blurring the boundary between art and life. The dadaist readymade is one gesture designed to complicate the

contemporary danceworld is far too money conscious to brook the kind of experimentation that occurred at Judson Church in the 1960s. The postmoderns had nothing to lose, so they could be as subversive as their imaginations permitted. They did not try to secure grants from agencies demanding to know that they were serving a public commensurate with the funds they were receiving. They had no Boards of Trustees to answer to. They had no payrolls to meet. They had enough money to get by and little ambition to make more. This gave them the freedom to be as wild as they wished to be.

There is probably an inverse ratio between professionalism and the risks a choreographer is willing to take. The danceworld has become highly professional since the days of Judson; fledgling companies are savvy about nonprofit status and funding. In fact, dancers on every stratum of the food chain seem obsessed with money; go to a dance festival and it is all folks talk about. But if money weighs so heavily on the minds of choreographers, they are scarcely likely to alienate potential audiences with material as “way out” as the postmoderns embraced.

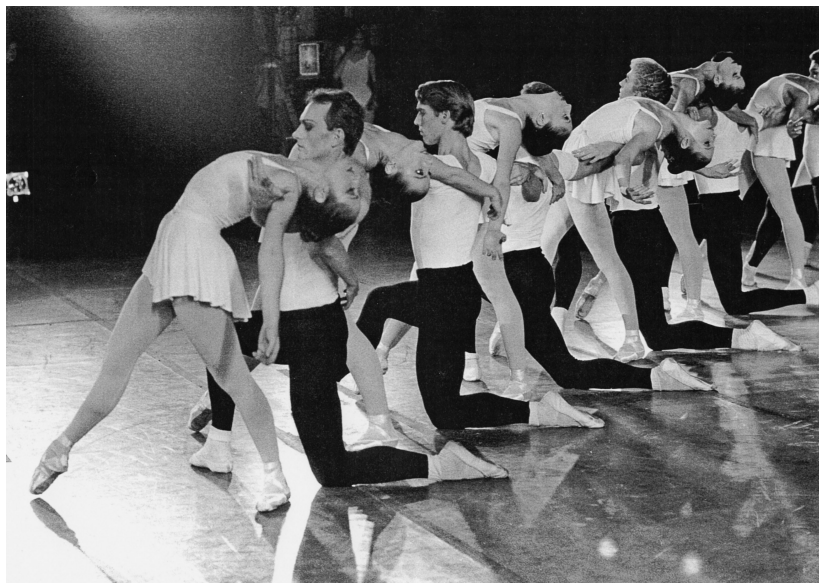
*Something like this avant-garde is also identified by Peter Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Bürger, however, seems to regard this as the only genuine avant-garde, whereas we regard it as but one variation. Ironically, just as Greenberg consigns the integrationist avant-garde to the pale of history, so Bürger, from the opposite direction, appears to demean the modernist (the autonomous) avant-garde.

alleged separation of art and everyday existence by ensconcing the ordinary in the artworld while Soviet constructivism presents another facet of the integrationist campaign by encouraging artists to use their skill in order to refashion as artworks the implements of daily living. Where the dadaists attempted to dissolve the boundary between art and life by bringing life—in the shape of ordinary, mass-produced urinals, combs, bottle-racks, and snow shovels—into the art world, the constructivists attacked the border from the opposite direction, attempting to bring art to life by fabricating everyday artifacts with a pronounced aesthetic dimension. In both instances the underlying goal of the avant-garde was to reintegrate art and life, a project diametrically opposed to that of the modernist avant-garde, whose aim was to isolate art from everything else in order to extract its essence and to acknowledge it.

Along with dada and constructivism, another example of the integrationist avant-garde was surrealism, insofar as its energies were devoted to affirming the quotidian reality of the unconscious, including the daily recurrence of dreams, by configuring an artistic portrait of the “psychopathology of everyday life.”

By the 1960s the integrationist avant-garde was flourishing. In New York and elsewhere, Fluxus was in full swing, while in Paris, there were the situationists. Pop art, influenced by both dada and surrealism, effaced the boundary between vernacular commercial art and high art, while “happenings” were invented by painters who, feeling the constraints of the modernist project, chose to relocate their artistic experiments off-canvas, plunging them into the flow of life. Moreover, it seems to us most likely that it is this integrationist avant-garde to which Cage and, later, the postmoderns belong.

The integrationist avant-garde, of course, was scarcely recognized by the modernist avant-garde. For someone like Greenberg, the aforesaid movements were what Arthur Danto calls “the pale of art history.”⁴ Indeed, the modernist wondered whether dada and its legateses were really art movements properly so called. Perhaps one reason that the integrationist avant-garde has no name is that for most of the twentieth century the most influential histories of the avant-garde have been written by modernists. History is generally written by the victors, and, until recently, the modernists were, so to speak, the winners. In any event, a fair accounting of the history of the avant-garde in the twentieth century will reveal



New York City Ballet dancers in George Balanchine's 1960 *Monumentum pro Gesualdo* (Stravinsky). Photograph by Costas, by courtesy of the photographer.

that there were these two avant-gardes: the modernists and the integrationists.

Even if there are these two avant-gardes, the question remains: What significance do these concepts have for dance history in general and for the question about Cunningham's relation to postmodernism in particular? Perhaps the first thing to note, as we begin to answer this question, is that the modernist camp has clear representatives among twentieth-century choreographers. Maybe the clearest examples of modernism are some of the abstract ballets of George Balanchine.

The argument for Balanchine's modernism is made most compellingly by David Michael Levin in his essay "Balanchine's Formalism." (It is interesting that Levin chooses to use "formalism" in his title in order to underscore the way in which this kind of avant-garde effort endeavors to bracket any ulterior human concerns.) According to Levin, the focus of certain abstract ballets by Balanchine—such as *Monumentum pro Gesualdo*, *Stravinsky Violin Concerto*, *Duo Concertant*, and *Symphony in Three Movements*—is the emphatic manifestation of the constitutive ingredients of classical ballet. This involves stripping the ballet down

to its basic elements—eschewing story, mime, drama, elaborate scenography, color, and costume—so that what there is to see is nothing other than the basic movement patterns or conventions, what Levin calls, somewhat metaphorically, the *syntax* of classical ballet. Nor are these basic structures offered merely as an alphabet from which to compose a wealth of potential movement patterns. They are put through their paces in a way that shows forth with blazing clarity the fundamental concern of classical ballet, which, according to Levin, is grace, understood as the simultaneous acknowledgment of the corporeal nature of the human body and its debt to gravity, on the one hand, and the virtual suspension of this condition, on the other hand. Commenting on the kind of choreographic possibilities that Balanchine discloses, Levin observes:

The dancer moves dramatically from second position *demi-plié* (a disposition of the body that forcefully reveals its weight, its objecthood) into a wondrous turn that seems to suspend this condition. . . . My [Levin's] contention is that by means of his choreography (quite subtle, yet daring innovations on the classical syntax), and no less by his choices in costumes and staging, Balanchine has revealed these possibilities in all their lucid beauty.⁵

By thus jettisoning most of the elaborate accoutrements of the classical ballet—by rendering the stage bare and presenting the dancers in austere, black and white, almost diagrammatic outfits—Balanchine enables us to see with uncluttered perspicuity the basic ingredients and concerns of this form of dance. With no story to encumber it, what underlies ballet bodies forth. In other words, the dance itself is constructed in such a way that it reveals or discloses its very own nature.

Many commentators find it more natural to associate Cunningham with Balanchine than to group him with his early employer, Martha Graham.* This seems right to us not only because

*Although Cunningham worked in Graham's company, he also was associated with Balanchine in a number of ways. Cunningham was one of six men in the corps of Balanchine's *Ballet Imperial* in its first New York showing—a five-day run starting on November 4, 1942, for the New Opera Company. Cunningham choreographed *The Seasons* for Ballet Society in 1947. Thus, it is not surprising that he sometimes sounds like Balanchine; see, for example, his denial that dance is abstract in *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, with Chronicle and Commentary by David Vaughan, ed. Melissa Harris (New York: Aperture, 1997), p. 44.

his choreographic idiom is comprised of relaxed, although still recognizable, balletic figures, but also because his deepest aesthetic commitments are to modernism. His is a modernist dance form, and not a modern dance form.⁶ As in the case in Balanchine's abstract ballets, Cunningham's dances, for example, forgo narrative and drama for the sake of drawing our attention to movement qualities.⁷

Arguably the object of Cunningham's reflective meta-choreography is broader than Balanchine's; it would appear to encompass an interrogation of the constituents of theatrical dance in general. And in this regard, a major recurring theme for Cunningham is that there is nothing natural about theatrical dance; it is composed through and through. Oftentimes parts of the individual dancers' bodies go in different directions, isolating as separate units the legs and arms from the head and thereby underscoring the fact that the figure is composed, assembled through the accumulation of discrete elements. Cunningham does not synthesize movement for us; he analyzes it. It comes to us already visually broken down into parts.

As Roger Copeland points out, Cunningham's movement is antithetical to the notion of an organic flow.⁸ It is disjunctive and, indeed, it has struck some unsympathetic commentators as mechanical. Copeland regards this as a gesture of defiance, a mark of resistance to the putatively *natural* movement of Graham. This seems right as a negative account of Cunningham's motivations. But we would also like to suggest that it has a positive dimension as well. It is one of the ways in which Cunningham communicates his reflexive conception of dance as utterly constructed.

Cunningham's dancers often turn and change directions in ways that are difficult to anticipate, insofar as there is no suggestion of any psychological motivation about why they should suddenly hop to the left or skitter mincingly sideways. This, too, emphasizes the way in which the movement is not "normal," but imposed/composed with its own internal rhythm rather than one derivable elsewhere (either musically, emotionally, or otherwise psychologically).

Exits and entrances in a Cunningham dance are also unpredictable, thus calling our attention to one of the rudimentary structures of theatre, one generally masked by the momentum of the drama. Analogous to the way in which Frank Stella prompted

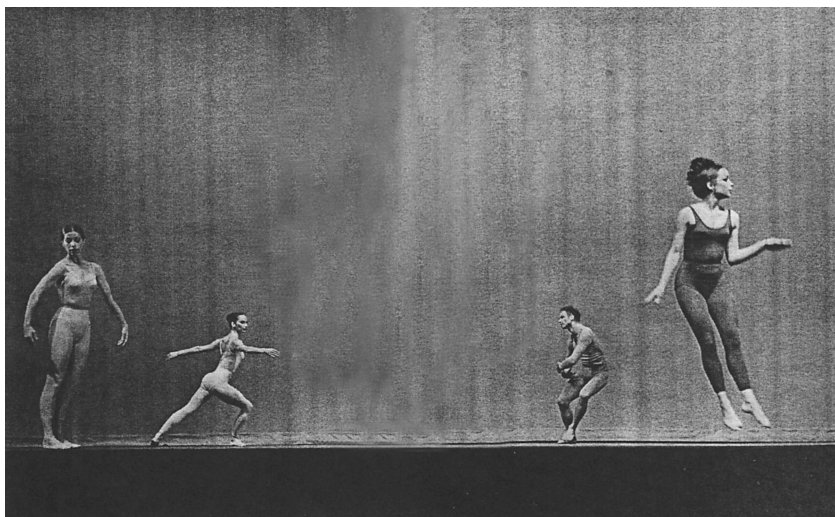
reflection on the frame in painting, Cunningham reminds us of a fact about theatre dance that we typically neither think about nor even notice, but take for granted.

In addition, as is often remarked, Cunningham's blocking is remarkable for how it decenters attention from its natural resting point downstage by dispersing synchronously occurring activities throughout the space in a way that draws the eye hither and yon. No place in the spectacle is privileged. By subverting customary choreographic procedure, this not only calls attention to the constructed nature of traditional compositional strategies, but also emphasizes the artifice of Cunningham's own movement designs. By developing simultaneous points of attention, Cunningham suddenly brings to the fore an explicit awareness of how our perception of dance is standardly orchestrated, instead of guiding our eyes so smoothly that we fail to take note of the artifice.

Like modernists in other artforms, Cunningham encourages us to become conscious of and to reflect on the basic structures and conventions that constitute the medium through which he practices his art. Furthermore, the movement that Cunningham characteristically assigns to his dancers is perceptibly *dance* movement. It is not the sort of movement, for example, that one would mistake for everyday movement. Rather, it is virtuosic, requiring special training to discharge. Indeed, it is by means of movements that perceptibly belong to the order of dance that Cunningham aspires to reveal the nature of dance *qua* dance.

With its upright posture, erect spine, fast, often intricate footwork, and emphasis on the legs, with its spry, albeit low-flying, jumps, leaps, and bounces and its overall lightness, it reminds one consistently of a casual or modified version of ballet—less vaulting perhaps, but nevertheless perceptually distinct from ordinary mundane movement. In fact, balletic terminology—for example, describing a Cunningham pose as a modified arabesque or *développé* or attitude—often provides the best way of characterizing much of Cunningham's choreography.

Thus, throughout his compositions, Cunningham, in the spirit of high modernism, unfailingly acknowledges his medium. It is pure dance and not something else: not a representation of romance, an expression of primal instincts, or a journey of self-discovery, but rather a sequence of steps, evolving their own intrinsic cadence, a cadence with a temporal pulse tangibly different



Viola Farber, Carolyn Brown, Merce Cunningham, and Barbara Lloyd in Cunningham's *Suite for Five* (1956). Photograph by Marvin Silver, by courtesy of the Merce Cunningham Dance Foundation.

from any other sort of movement. That is, by using movement that is unequivocally dancerly to the naked eye, Cunningham intends to show us the quiddity of pure dance.

Cunningham's purism also extends to the way in which he collaborates with set designers, costumers, and especially composers. As is well known, Cunningham typically develops his choreography independent of the sound scores that he has commissioned composers to prepare in order to accompany his dances. His dancers, for example, often report that they first heard the music for the piece on opening night. Similar stories are also told of the scenography and the costumes. This tendency on Cunningham's part to nonchalantly juxtapose the various elements of the theatrical spectacle with an almost studied indifference, rather than to coordinate them, has been analogized to collage.

However, by the same token we believe that it is further evidence of Cunningham's purism. For, rather than have the music appear to propel the dance or to leave the impression that the dance is there simply to illustrate the music, Cunningham asserts the autonomy of dance by presenting each part of the spectacle in

a way that underlines that they *are* separate—separate and equal artforms. Thus, Cunningham's refusal to integrate the dance seamlessly with the music is another symptom of his modernist commitments. Dance is presented as its own realm quite literally independent from the music.

Nevertheless, even though the case for Cunningham's modernism is compelling, it is unlikely that the same story can be told of his best-known collaborator, John Cage. This is nowhere more evident than in Cage's ambition to dissolve or to deconstruct the distinction between music and ordinary noise.⁹ In Cage's legendary 1952 piece *4'33"*, the performer enters, sits at a piano, opens a score, but does not touch a single key for four minutes and thirty-three seconds, leaving the audience with nothing else to hear except whatever ambient sounds invade the concert space from the outside and/or erupt inside. So, an evening's performance might mix coughs from the audience with snatches of music blaring from outside on the boombox of a passerby, followed by tires screeching to a halt. In effect, Cage uses the silence of the performer as a notational device for framing whatever noises happen to intrude upon the listener and virtually forcing her to attend to them.

Cage's point in exercises like this one is to cultivate our perception of the generally unheeded sonic qualities that surround us on a daily basis. He is motivated here by an extreme form of aesthetic egalitarianism, convinced as he is that attention to everyday sounds can be as rich and rewarding as listening to formal music. Indeed, he seems at times to regard the contrast between music, on the one hand, and sound or noise, on the other, as invidious. It is another index of the attempt to separate art from the life of the rest of the world. For him, the ordinary sounds of ordinary life can be as beautiful as the most exalted symphony by Mahler. *4'33"* is predicated upon giving us an object lesson in this most leveling of doctrines.

Thus, when Cage collaborates with Cunningham, he does not do so as a fellow modernist, eager to preserve the autonomy of music. He lets his notes and his sounds fall where they may with respect to Cunningham's movement because that is how sound chimes in randomly in daily life. For Cage the concert-cum-dance is an aesthetic training ground wherein the spectator is encouraged to savor the aleatoric conjunctions (and disjunctions) of sight and sound, in preparation for perceiving afresh the world outside the

performance. For, in terms of our earlier distinction, Cage is an integrationist who, by way of dadaism laced by Zen, wields the found sound like an *objet trouvé*.

Turning from Cunningham and Cage to the postmoderns, it is obvious that ordinary movement is one of the most notable, consistently recurring features in their choreography. Although prior to the influence of the radical innovations at Judson Church (from 1962 to 1964), pedestrian movement occurred in Cunningham's choreography (see *Field Dances*, for example), such a piece strikes us as more of the nature of a one-off experiment.* That is, even though Cunningham tried out ordinary movement before the onset of the postmoderns, it was not an essential, repeating fixture of his art; whereas a veritable obsession with pedestrian movement is a central, recurrent, even defining theme of the postmoderns.

This is not to say that postmodern dance always contains ordinary movement or that the only movement in a piece of choreography by a postmodern is everyday movement. Nevertheless, ordinary movement reappears so often in postmodern dance that it signals some of the deepest commitments of these choreographers, among them that a dance can be composed of any kind of movement; that there is no perceptible property that marks a movement to be, by its intrinsic nature, dance; and that there is no visually discernible boundary between so-called dance movement and any other kind of movement, including the movements of everyday life. Thus, postmodern dance not only rejects modern dance; it also rejects modernist dance of the sort that we have identified with some of Balanchine's work and most of Cunningham's.

In order to appreciate the singular importance of ordinary movement for postmodern dance, let us briefly review the extent to which it was mobilized by the Judson choreographers, in terms of the four categories:¹⁰

1. Dances that are comprised entirely of ordinary movements and/or activities, including tasks.
2. Dances that incorporate ordinary movement and/or activities along with perceptibly dancerly movement.

*Perhaps a similar experiment occurs in Balanchine's *Monumentum pro Gesualdo* when, after the pas de deux, the dancers walk off stage in a perfectly ordinary manner.

3. Dances that employ movement that is neither straightforwardly ordinary nor dancerly, notably dances with gamelike structures.
4. Dances whose movement is so category-defying that the only way to describe it is as movement *simpliciter*.

Included in the first category is Judith Dunn's *Acapulco*, in which she brushed her hair in slow motion, played cards, and ironed a dress. In Robert Dunn's choreography class, Steve Paxton presented an untitled piece in which he ate a sandwich, and he also made a number of dances comprised of ordinary walking, including *Satisfyin' Lover*, *State*, and *Flat*.^{*} Indeed, Yvonne Rainer once noted that critics said of her, "She walks as though she's in the street!" What they failed to grasp was that this was her point.¹¹

In Robert Dunn's third class, Lucinda Childs presented *Street Dance*, in which she and Tony Holder went outside while a tape recording instructed the other students to go to the window and notice Childs and Davis pointing out architectural details and other aspects of everyday life.[†] The ordinary behavior of talking was also employed in Steve Paxton's *Intravenous Lecture*, a work whose title pretty much explains its content: as Paxton spoke of patrons and censorship, he was actually hooked up to an IV. Even if the latter is not an everyday experience, it nevertheless is an activity

^{*}*Satisfyin' Lover* involves a crowd of ordinary people crossing the performing space, walking as they might on any public thoroughfare. And with ordinary movement came ordinary bodies, bodies not tempered by dance class. That is, this use of vernacular movement heralded the advent of everyday bodies in the dance world including children (and even infants), the elderly, the heavyset, and eventually even the disabled. The postmodern celebration of ordinary bodies, then, paved the way for the influx of all sorts of *different* bodies onto the dance stage, making possible the intergenerational mixes in much community dance and also the Dancibility movement.

In this way, postmodern dance has contributed concretely to the progress of emancipation by erasing the choreographic stigma that previously attached to nondancerly bodies. That is, postmodern dance was not only a symbol of egalitarian freedom, but also an instrument toward its achievement on the contemporary dance stage. For a discussion of postmodern dance and the themes of egalitarianism and freedom, see Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993).

[†]This piece, like other works performed at Judson and subsequent performances by The Grand Union, employs talking, thereby incorporating ordinary behavior into dance. The introduction of talking into the very design of the dance would be of great importance, especially from the 1980s onward, since talking is an almost indispensable element in dances concerned with identity and other sorts of politics.

that characteristically appears to belong more to “reality” than to the airy realm of theatrical dance. Douglas Dunn composed an untitled chair piece that involved nothing more than sitting down and standing up, albeit very deliberately. In Rainer’s *We Shall Run*, twelve dancers jogged for seven minutes. In Paxton’s *Smiling*, two people smiled for five minutes.

For the postmoderns, ordinary movement functions as the readymade did for Duchamp and the found sound did for Cage; their invocation of the everyday heralds their alignment with the integrationist wing of the avant-garde. By radically reframing everyday objects, sounds, and movements, the integrationist redirects our attention to neglected aspects of the quotidian and thereby attempts to fill the gap between art and life. In the case of postmodern dance, ignored movements were made the focus singled out in a way that their mechanics were set forth to be scrutinized for their own sake. Thus, although allied with Cunningham in his rejection of modern dance, the postmoderns were simultaneously at odds with his modernism. It was the Cage half—the integrationist or impurist half—of the Cage-Cunningham collaboration that fired the postmodern imagination.

Among the found movements enlisted by the postmoderns were everyday tasks. In *Room Service*, Rainer had her performers move a mattress through space. By reframing such mundane activity in a danceworld context, she contrived the situation in such a way that one began to appreciate, perhaps for the first time, the tacit intelligence exhibited by the human body as it acquires the engineering “feats” of everyday existence.

Other postmodern task dances include Deborah Hay’s *Would They, or Wouldn’t They?* and Simone Forti’s *Slant Board* and *Rollers*. In exercises of this sort, it is not what is being done that is important, but how it is done. We attend to the way in which the body negotiates its tasks, directing our attention to the energies and qualities so engaged by the performer-workers. By recruiting the danceworld frame—an optic strategy that categorically showcases movement as worthy of attention for its own sake—the postmodern choreographer invites us to nurture a fascination for the kind of movement that surrounds us every day.

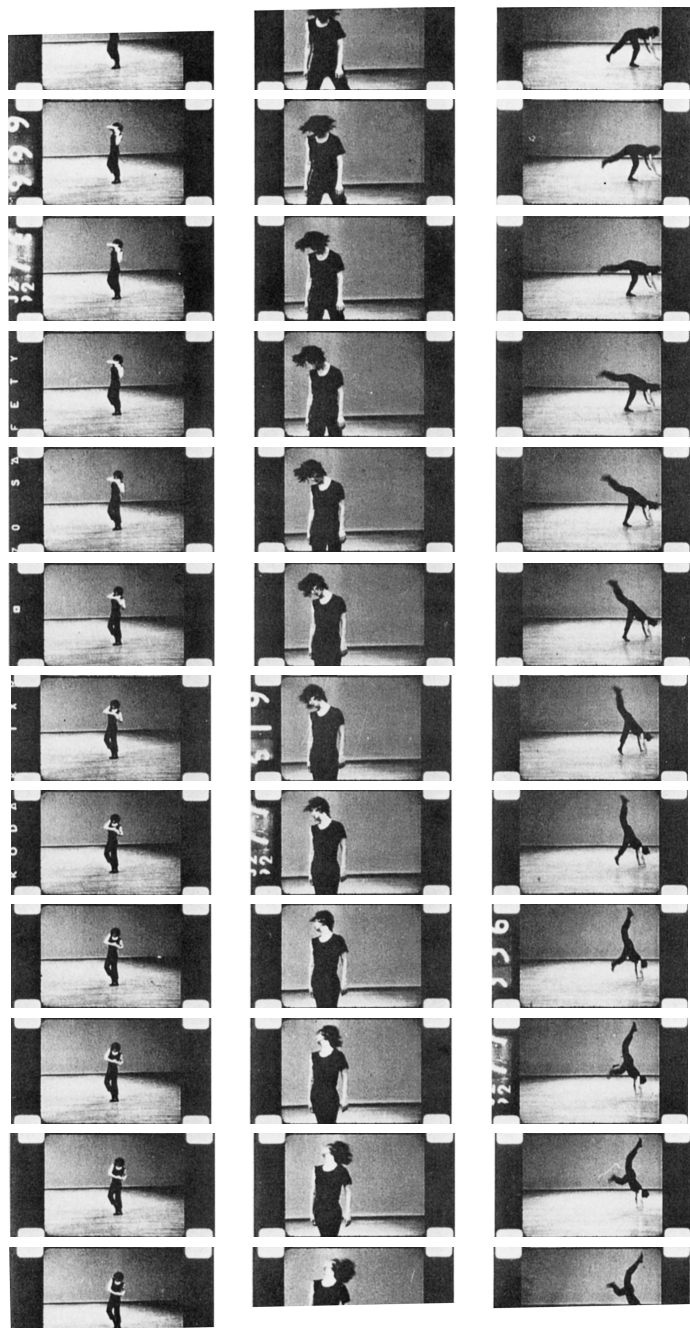
Often the tasks essayed in postmodern dances were invented, rather than vernacular activities. In Robert Morris’ *Waterman’s Switch*, he and Rainer give themselves the assignment of walking—

stark naked—across a log while facing each other and embracing. This use of ordinary movement paralleled the use of ordinary materials in minimalist sculptures, while the clearly discernible goal of the piece—crossing the log—gave it a temporal structure. Trisha Brown's Equipment Pieces involved showcasing the body at work as she employed cables, ropes, and pulleys to negotiate walking on walls, suggesting simultaneously mountain climbing and engineering.

A number of postmodern dances mix ordinary movement and dancerly movement for the purpose of suggesting that they are on a par. In Concert #1 at Judson, Rainer presented *Dance for Three People and Six Arms*, a piece she had previously offered on a program by members of James Waring's company at the Maidman Playhouse. Featuring Bill Davis, Trisha Brown, and Rainer, it was a montage of ballet movements and plain gestures, including the performers walking in circles while their arms "swam" and drooped. The strong implication was that any movement, including ones as distant from ballet as a hand gliding upside a dancer's nose, could be dragooned by Terpsichore.¹²

In *Terrain*, Rainer's choreography includes such ordinary movements as flicking one's hair, opening the mouth, touching toes, creeping, stretching, lying as if resting, and sitting up. Other postmodern dances that mix everyday and traditional dance movement include Ruth Emerson's *Cerebris* and Rainer's *Grand Union Dreams*.

One sort of movement that lies between dance and quotidian movement is that of play. Ludic rather than prototypically ordinary, but still everyday phenomena, play movements supplied the basis for several postmodern dances. In Simone Forti's *See-Saw*, Morris and Rainer were ranged on opposite sides of a teeter-totter, exchanging weights at a steady pace, while in *Huddle* Forti invented a game like king-of-the-mountain, in which participants piled up on one another in an effort to climb to the top of a hill of flesh. The goal structure in this work made it very analogous to a task dance, and, like a task dance, *Huddle* provided an opportunity for onlookers to study the microphysics of movement. Moreover, the use of games for the purpose of avant-garde dancemaking continues into the present with respect to contact improvisation, whose iconography recalls wrestling and whose theme is physical interaction.



Yvonne Rainer in *Trio A* (*The Mind Is a Muscle, Part 1*): three strips from Robert Alexander's film. From Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (Houghton Mifflin, 1980).

Rainer's *Trio A*, first performed as part of *The Mind Is a Muscle*, is her attempt to incorporate all the movement possibilities she could imagine, including dancery, nondancery, and other. Much of the piece is of hard-to-categorize movement: movement that looks ordinary, especially in terms of the level of energy it requires, but that is not recognizable as any particular everyday gesture. When taxed to label them, about the best one can do is to call Rainer's behaviors "movement" and leave it at that, thereby underscoring the postmodern conviction that dance is just *movement* under the broadest understanding of that concept.

Similarly, in *Work*, David Gordon employed what looked like ordinary work movement but of a nonspecific variety. He raised and lowered his arms from his hips to his shoulders as he monotonously intoned the word "work," thus implying that *work*-as-labor could be a *work* of art. In the 1950s Robert Rauschenberg had created combines like *Monogram*, whose incongruous inclusion of things as different as a goat and a tire, forces one to say that "object" is about the only word that fits it, thereby suggesting that an artwork is an object pure and simple. Similarly, the postmoderns experimented with movement that could not be readily classed in a definite category for a congruent purpose. Like Rauschenberg, they intended to make the gap between art and life problematic.

Of course, Rauschenberg, along with Cage, was one of Cunningham's most important collaborators. But whereas Cunningham is a modernist, Rauschenberg, like Cage, is an integrationist.¹³ Thus, in a manner of speaking, the postmoderns are descended from Cunningham's collaborations, but not by way of Cunningham. With their preoccupation with ordinary movement—a preoccupation not shared by Cunningham himself*—the postmoderns led dance into the integrationist avant-garde.

In his recent, penetrating study of Cunningham, Roger Copeland, perhaps recalling Walter Benjamin's take on film, speculates that Cunningham's movement vocabulary—with its speed, unexpected reversals of movements, agility, and unpredictable

*Nor was the exemplification of ordinary or pedestrian movement a preoccupation of Balanchine's, which is the reason why, despite the reflexivity of some of his abstract ballets, Balanchine is not feasibly construed to be a postmodern. He is a modernist rather than an integrationist in these cases and, therefore, neither a postmodern nor a postmodernist.

exits and entrances—functions symbolically as something rather like an abstract representation or distillation of many of the movement qualities that dominate life in the modern urban environment.¹⁴ Yet, even if this interpretation is persuasive, it does not forge a genuine link with the postmodern preoccupation with pedestrian movement. For the postmoderns did not intend to be offering highly stylized representations of ordinary movement on stage, but rather, *samples* of it, that is, actual ordinary movement that, in turn, exemplifies the walking, running, and working that comprise everyday life.¹⁵

Although Cunningham's choreography, and some of Balanchine's, is unquestionably avant-garde, for all their reflexivity they are not postmodern; they are affiliated with an avant-garde different from the postmoderns. They are modernists rather than integrationists, whereas the aspiration to breach the barrier between art and everyday life is an identifying commitment of postmodern choreography. Like Cunningham, the postmoderns part company with modern dance. But, at the same time, they are categorically distinct from modernist dance, that is, they were not only postmodern, but also postmodernist.*

This paper was delivered as a talk at the annual conference of the Society of Dance History Scholars at Northwestern University on June 11, 2005.

The authors would like to take this opportunity to thank Joan Acocella, George Dorris, Wendy Perron, Lynn Garafola, Douglas Rosenberg, Li Chiao-Ping, and the audience at our session at the 2005 meetings of SDHS for their probing questions and assistance in the preparation of this paper, although they, of course, are not responsible for any of the remaining imperfections herein. We would also like to thank Yvonne Rainer for reading the paper.

Notes

1. Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1980).
2. See Noël Carroll, "The Concept of Postmodernism from a Philosophical Point of View," in *International Postmodernism*, ed. Douwe Foukema and Hans Bertens (Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1997).

*This conclusion represents a modification and refinement of previous views of the authors, who in the past tended to associate the postmoderns with Greenbergian modernism.

3. Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1961).
4. Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
5. David Michael Levin, "Balanchine's Formalism," in *What Is Dance?* ed. Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 138.
6. Noël Carroll, "The Philosophy of Art History, Dance, and the 1960s," in *Reinventing Dance in the 1960s: Everything Was Possible*, ed. by Sally Banes (with Andrea Harris) (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), pp. 95–6.
7. Our discussion of Cunningham in this essay, including our description of his movement, has been deeply influenced by Roger Copeland's excellent book *Merce Cunningham: The Modernizing of Modern Dance* (London: Routledge, 2004).
8. Copeland, pp. 39–43.
9. Noël Carroll, "Cage and Philosophy," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (Winter 1994), pp. 93–8.
10. For further descriptions of postmodern dances, see Sally Banes, *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater 1962–64* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993).
11. Quoted in *Beyond the Mainstream*, directed by Merrill Brockway and produced by Merrill Brockway and Carl Carlson for *Dance in America*, WNET-TV, New York, May 21, 1980. Moreover, walking continued to be a constant in postmodern choreography into the 1970s, notably in some of the work of Lucinda Childs.
12. On the significance of ordinary movement for Rainer, see Noël Carroll, "Yvonne Rainer and the Recuperation of Everyday Life," in *Yvonne Rainer: Radical Juxtapositions 1961–2002*, ed. by Sid Sachs (Philadelphia: University of the Arts, 2002), pp. 65–85.
13. Rauschenberg said, "A pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting than wood, nails, turpentine, oil, and fabric." Quoted in *Unnatural Wonders: Essays from the Gap between Art and Life* by Arthur Danto (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), p. ix.
14. Roger Copeland, *Merce Cunningham: The Modernizing of Modern Dance* (London: Routledge, 2004). Although our treatment of Cunningham's work is indebted throughout to this admirable book, there is one point where we do strongly disagree with Professor Copeland's views. In a provocative homologue, he associates Graham with abstract expressionism and Cunningham with the aesthetics of Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. We think there are several errors here. If Cunningham's endeavor is distinct from that of abstract expressionism as characterized by Harold Rosenberg, his modernism is in sync with Pollock's as described by Clement Greenberg. Copeland associates Graham with abstract expressionism, but this also seems wrong. Insofar as Graham remains involved with stories about human characters, her dances are expressionist, maybe, but not *abstract*. Finally, Rauschenberg and Johns are integrationists by our lights. They do not belong to the same artistic camp as Cunningham does. Their contributions in

their collaborations with Cunningham coexist with his, rather than reinforcing them, in a way parallel to Cage's contributions (as discussed above). Thus, we want to challenge Copeland's assimilation of Cunningham to Rauschenberg's project and, instead, align him with the modernist wing of abstract expressionism.

15. For the distinction between representation and exemplification as contrasting symbolic modes, see Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis, Ind: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968).