

## Love the Daily Work: Merce Cunningham's video works 1965-2009

When talking about the work of Merce Cunningham, one imagines a body moving with analytic precision wearing a color unitard throughout an empty stage. The description might be blunt, but it captures the essentials of his choreographic thought. Actually, uniting choreography to thinking, was the most profound differential that Cunningham introduced to modern dance. In his 1955 text *The Impermanent Act* he wrote "I am no more philosophical than my legs," making evident how thinking is not secluded in the brain and how our limbs and movements are thoughts and reflections that can change our being in the world. His work is not that of an expressionistic virtuoso who seeks to impress us with emotions, theatrical effects, and climax moments of apotheosis, instead his approach is that of a researcher whose primary object of inquiry is the body.

Cunningham's work has been characterized by his refusal to dance as representation, typical of the previous generation of modern dance, and a deep search in the possibilities of the body that brought him to study George Balanchine's ballet. During more than sixty-five years of career, Cunningham developed a vision of dance that was "liberating" for himself, the dancer and the audience. Although the body of the dancer is heavily trained in his technique (still taught today around the world), his interest in daily movement, anatomy, and the duration of rhythms allowed for dancers to inhabit Cunningham's choreographies with the particularities of their own bodies. Together with John Cage, they developed an experimentation on composition, famous for its introduction of 'chance procedures' and 'indeterminacy' as principals that avoided a subjective display based on habits, intuitions, and feelings and allowed for a multiplicity of possibilities. An activation that mixed referents like the *I Ching*, together with the legacy of the European avant-garde, mostly Dada, present in New York through the figure of the witty and unpredictable Marcel Duchamp.

Their interest in composition meant a change in the organization of artistic reception, distinct from the prevalent abstract expressionism and modernist painting paradigm where the art work exists despite the viewer. Their intention was to open the work to the variabilities and differences of the elements, either by considering the score as an open field of combinations, or by allowing the public to critically appreciate the components partaking of the composition. The 'perceptual clarity' (a term identified by Roger Copeland) of Cunningham's work aimed to make the relation between music, movement and any other participating component, distinguishable and appreciated by its character. The compositional motivations, situated music and dance on equal footing, independently created, and later presented together. An artistic motivation that implied a search for a different relation with the viewer, who was now able to discern and critically approach what is being presented, as a selector and therefore producer of their own piece.

The inquiries of Cunningham in the field of choreography, his interest in technological advances, and collaborative work across mediums, naturally brought him to experiment with film, television, video, and computer programs as these became available throughout the second half of the twentieth century. With the aim to present

a diversity of Cunningham's video works, *Love the Daily Work*, brings together a selection of pieces that encompass his interests in video and the experimentations with this medium. The older piece presented here, *Variations V* (1965), was a happening that went beyond dance, to include *non-dance activities* prompted by objects and electronic devices specially designed by Robert Moog.

Gabriel Villota has elaborated an idea of Cunningham's videos as the emergence of the image-body as a hybrid of technology, human movement, and visual language, emancipated from the dancer. The exhibition also includes the recently recovered film *Assemblage* shot fifty years ago, in November 1968 in San Francisco in collaboration with poet and experimental filmmaker Richard O. Moore. In this film, we can appreciate how editing becomes another dimension of choreography and how visual resources affect the perceptual (in the time of psychedelics) and allow for understanding movement as an expanded rhythm through different bodies and spaces, underlining assemblage as a compositional tactic that condenses a collectivity.

From here, Cunningham's videos become another arm of his work, a research of the medium as well as a means for choreographing. *Westbeth* (1975) is the first film with Charles Atlas and presents a series of inquiries that will be a constant throughout their collaboration. These focused on the body of the dancer, the relation with space, the possibilities of editing and montage, and how video serves them to decentralize the frontal view of dance into an open field of continuous unfolding events. *Merce by Merce by Paik* (1978) was the result of an invitation of Nam June Paik to share a TV program and follows with this experimentation of layers using chromakey and other resources to, for example, multiply Cunningham's body into a collage. In *Locale* (1979) the camera moves around the space of the studio, giving the opportunity to dismantle the focal point and be another dancer that approaches and give us a sequence of movement, a playful exercise that will be also present in *Channels/Inserts* (1982). In this piece, the dancers enter and leave the eye of the camera giving us a sense of simultaneous dance events happening in different areas of Cunningham's studio. The use of the studio is a constant also in *Changing Steps* (1988), made with Elliot Caplan by collecting recordings from different locations and years, demonstrating how variation was also a video quality. Computer programs became key in Cunningham's work, as he composed with them generating movements in digital models that were later applied in actual bodies, *Views on Video* (2005) is an example of this process. The field opens even more with *Ocean* (2010), a project originated by John Cage that was performed in September 2008 in the middle of a quarry in Minnesota. The position of the public in between musicians and dancers, the use of *I Ching* as composition method and the technology-body hybridity presented in the video works, are a key example of the effort to expand and open choreography to unlimited possibilities, not only as performances but as daily actions.

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