

Merce Cunningham & Dance Company, Event # 55. March 22 1973. BAM.

Their movements are sudden, but their bodies move smooth as cream: the sudden movements whether of body-neck-head sideways ~~relative~~ parallel to the floor or of the arm or arms relative to the body etc. insert themselves as the scratches that make shading into that smooth flow of the bending body. Except for the primo ballerino Douglas Dunn & the maestro himself, they all move like automatons, electronically controlled ~~as~~ as the beepy music suggests. The dancers move across the vast floor in the random rearrangements of electrically charged particles (except Dunn who moves on his own random impulses). They obey ~~electronic~~ electronic impulses from without to break them out of their stances into movement or other stances, now they stand in this configuration, now, suddenly, there, in that ~~stance~~. ~~Old M.C.~~ Old M.C. moves on no impulses but on his own awry circuitry. Dunn moves on the muscles of a tough guy (his face sometimes scared like a tough guy's), M.C. kinda moves on a series of whims getting his arm or whatever from one end to the other of a path pre-traced in & pre-empted for it in the air. He had a superb solo, Loops - maybe I am wrong in naming it this - he comes out & seats himself down in a chair really comfortable like one leg in just that relaxed position too, but in the air. He goes on like this on the chair, just a series of really ~~really~~ comfortable positions, pensive etc., except that one limb or something is always off in an impossible place, tho' in the right easy stance. Then the same on the floor. Humor, a gentlemanly irony of self-deprecation, - a Harvardian air (the "sort of thing" they can't manage at Yale or Princeton), - is the larger note of these elegant entertainments, a note last struck, if my memory does not

fail me, in ~~xxx~~ Arts, by Henry James, but a bit more strenuously. M.C. allowing himself the privilege of being human on stage, strikes that note for the company: Dunne, the other individual, is a proletarian like the 1950s crop of great English actors, a sullen note ~~almost~~ in that context of extreme, almost decadent, lightness. But this whole note of easy formality - a formalism of ease - New England conscience with a Paris touch - is at variance with the almost sinister clockwork-figure jumpiness of the COMPANY: it's like a command menuett where heads will be chopped off if the sweat shines. [To me, attending these performances once a year for quite some years now, it's always like entering some particular wing of the palace in Thebes or Memphis, where in that whole hot, hardworking mud-between-deserts land, you suddenly find an item that, after all, had to be there somewhere, given the rich yield of the alluvial soil & the tight control of the surplus, viz. Civilisation, a company of ironic learned clerks, probably all holding some high priestly office on the side, with ease pursuing not only some accounting functions ~~xxxxx~~ ~~xx~~ based on some high development of Hellenic science & presupposing fingertip-knowledge of a vast hieroglyphic system, but composing little poems as well. The modernity of it has lasted: there are still customers leaving the performance during the course of it because they can't for the life of them see the point, they are not amused. That the Company are slaves really jibes with this. [Another feeling I have is that in some distant past - which however I still witnessed, given my own advanced age: some years ago, - there was a primitive ~~xxxx~~ form of this in which a younger Cunningham had acutely decomposed body movements & developed a whole new dance language by attenuating the elements resulting from his analysis: a comment on ordinary walking. Or perhaps

only on how one finds a chair, sits down, sits & maybe gets
up. A return to & redeparture from the natural, anatomic, a fresh
exploitation of the possibilities of the body, dance as its
development not as its responses to music, i.e. to an external
ordering of motion, with the guiding aim not transcendence of
physical limitations, e.g. gravity, - illusion of transcen-
dence, approach to it, - but exploitation of potentials; with
demonstrative use made of muscular sub-structures -sub-systems- :
not the working anatomy glossed over; with not prettiness or
phantasy-form the aim, ~~but~~ but redemption of how we are (made)
in dignity & elegance, an elevation of the body positively
considered; not the promotion of the body as sex object under the
guise of promotion of the individual as ideal of romantic love,
~~but~~ but the offer (to viewers) of the sharing of enjoyment - or of
& attitude
the form/of enjoyment - of the body as mobile social self; no
fables, but at most evocation of the psychologies of bodies mobile
in the same spaces. I may here be overshooting the mark of charac-
terising original or earlier Cunninghamian objectives as I seem to
recall being struck by them 6,7 or 10 years ago, & may instead by
making a catalogue of deviations of modern approaches to dance
from the approach that to me seems ascribable to classic (& to
semi-classic, i.e. half-arse) ballet, but in fact (in that case)
Cunningham seemed to me to be working in all these directions or
under the guidance ^{of} ~~by~~ all these principles.

The man was so succesful - he achieved the only classic form of
modern dance (that I know of), .the only one with authority, the
only one that could create out of its own rightness, - that his
new body-language became self-supporting, like a beautiful new
written language turning into an art of calligraphy. The humanist

stance was, indeed, not lost, but the dual comment - what the talk was about in that language - ~~ON THE ANATOMY OF MOVEMENT &~~ on ordinary movement & on its anatomy has been lost (except in M.C.'s own dancing). Instead the reference is now to the language itself, how to execute movements within its idiom & the further elaboration of it has become the point. The essence of this matter seems to me to be the smoothness & the suddenness of the movements: they do not develop, they are series, continuous or discontinuous, of positions: we see the spatial body (with energy) moving rather than the material body. This is to my mind a pity: the healthy excitement has gone out of this dance, with only a (great) pleasure remaining, spiced by an excitement which though not unhealthy has nothing to do with health, our's or the dancers', but with surprise. It's a (perfect) dead language. M.C. himself still delivers statements in it as though it were a conversational tool, - but they are mere anecdotes (like Cage's little zen stories) about the body's ordinary movement & the anatomy thereof. He is there on stage to remind us of what the language is about.

Cunningham's dance-form insofar as it is a way for the individual dancer to move his body seems to me to center on the mystery of the arms & on the contingency of balance on where the center of gravity is (how not to fall). As regards this latter matter: many of the movements are tests of balance, displacements skirting the line of points at which the dancer would fall to the floor or passages through a near disequilibrium. The constant ~~movement~~ ^{delimitation} of movement ~~with~~ ^{by} the ~~tumbling~~ twisting, tumbling ~~and~~ power of gravity, the ingenuity of its alternative coils about our center of mass, ~~the~~ ^{its paths} possible without its disintegration into collapse emerge in recurrent solo-flashes.