

# BEYOND THE VISIBLE

## The Legacies of Merce Cunningham and Pina Bausch

Emily Coates

I learned about Pina Bausch's death through an e-mail from a woman I hadn't heard from in years, an American filmmaker who had moved to Sweden to live in the home country of Ingmar Bergman, her greatest influence. It's a blow to the field, she empathized, adding that she mourned for months after Bergman died. Not much later, I was on tour with Yvonne Rainer in Brazil, where we learned via friends in New York that Merce Cunningham was on his deathbed. Days after we returned, Yvonne sent out an email, subject heading "Merce." The body of the message read simply, "died today."

Losing these two pioneers in one summer took its toll upon the global dance community on many levels. I am inclined to see the loss in human terms, in its impact on dancers and viewers. I feel most acutely for the former, and I feel the philosophical implications of the latter.

Last May, I attended one of the final performances of the Cunningham Company's two-year series of installations at DIA Beacon. Near the entry to the gallery, Merce Cunningham presided over the event from his wheelchair. Hunched slightly, his head dropping forward on his spine, he kept a calm, observant eye on his dancers. In 1998, in the interim between leaving New York City Ballet and joining White Oak Dance Project, I studied at the Cunningham Studio, including taking the Monday classes taught by Merce himself. I found myself trying to view the performance through his eyes.

Cunningham was not known as a "people person." In her brilliant memoir, *Chance and Circumstance: Thirty Years with Cage and Cunningham*, Carolyn Brown documents his cool reserve and infamous inability to communicate. Critics in turn emphasize the conceptual merits of his art: he pioneered chance processes, developed the choreographing computer program LifeForms, and exhibited a nearly inhuman level of technical virtuosity. While these accomplishments are undeniable, he possessed greater skill for seeing and cultivating the individual qualities of dancers than his usual praise reflects.

I am thinking of Andrea Weber's cool hips in the duet from *Squaregame*, which she performed with Rashaun Mitchell during the DIA performance. With her height and broad shoulders, Weber tends to dominate the stage simply by walking onto it. In one moment in the duet, she led a progression down the diagonal of the performance space with subtle movements of the knees and pelvis. Smaller-framed Mitchell followed behind. Because Weber led, what I saw from my perspective as they moved downstage were those voracious hips, gently scooping out space as if carving out a series of miniature banana split bowls. Supporting her prowess from the rear, Mitchell served merely as her wingman. Had their positions been reversed, the effect would have been different. The eroticism of this moment bordered on highly formalized pornography; we were so close to her, to him, to those hips. Cunningham could easily have cast Weber in enormous jumps, lunges, triplets that crossed the stage. Instead, he asked her to perform only a hip wiggle, and in doing so made that subtle movement not just visible, but all-consuming.

When I think of Bausch's attention to individual dancers, a larger-scale scenario comes to mind. In December 2008, I watched Pina Bausch's tribute to India, *Bamboo Blues*, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The section that stays with me is the series of lush solos that unfolded in seemingly unending layers. As one solo ended, a new dancer started; when that dancer finished, another began. Individual quirks came into relief—a shorter male dancer whipped around more vigorously than the statuesque brunette, who danced primarily with her upper body—while the solos maintained the flowing, effortless quality of the Bausch aesthetic. The relentless parade of individualism was hypnotic. Both celebrating and transcending her dancers' idiosyncrasies, the section amounted to a manifesto on the synergistic power of individual action. Nodding to the Indian culture that inspired *Bamboo Blues*, it was also a kinesthetic representation of veiling: we sensed deeper motivation underlying the movement, without knowing exactly what drove each dancer to dance.

This motivation is partly explained by what is publicly known of Bausch's process: she launched her dancers into motion by asking them to delve into past experiences and psychological states with their bodies. Using psychological prompts such as, "Show me in movement the memory of the first time you laughed very hard," she then crafted the resulting improvisation into choreography. With this method, she trained her dancers as researchers in a way that subverts conventional notions of research. Instead of flowing from experience into words, the words prompted an investigation that then veered far from verbal language. Her movement seems to radiate outward, supported by a deeper force that is impossible to identify and, in many ways, impossible to capture in words because it came into being at first from and then outside of language.

Critics often rely on adjectives such as "guttural" and "visceral" to describe the impact of Bausch's dances on the viewer. Wholly inadequate, these words suggest notions of "primitive" humankind, as if Bausch has put on display our primal, beating selves, rather than capturing what is in essence the violence of the human body wrenching itself from its dependency on language, using language itself as a tool. In *Café*

*Muller*, one can see an early version of this violence in the actions of Bausch herself as she crashes into walls, chairs, and revolving doors—markers of human society. It is precisely through civilization, and not a turn to some idea of pre-civilization, that Bausch psychically escapes.

In writing Bausch's obituary in the *New York Times*, Alastair Macaulay dismissed her contributions to the art of dance in favor of her innovations of theatrical spectacle, writing, "There were good dance moments in her work, but they were usually of secondary interest and choreographically of no lasting import." Macaulay is applying a definition of choreography imported from classical ballet, which emphasizes classical notions of symmetry and form above all. More than a classicist, however, Bausch was a humanist who invested in a more expansive definition of choreography that takes into account the crafting of humanity into high art. Perhaps unrivalled by any other choreographer in recent memory, she took this humanity—the psychology, histories, and experiences of her dancers—as her starting point. This content dictated the form.

My examples come primarily from the performances I saw in 2008 and 2009, not only because these are freshest in my mind, but because they now hold what is in hindsight even deeper significance for being the final public presentation of work under the artists' direction, and the last group of dancers they shaped. Based on these works, Cunningham and Bausch incorporated the individual characteristics of their dancers into their choreography in indirect ways that defy simplistic articulation. They may appear to occupy opposite poles: Cunningham had the supposedly removed aesthetic, while Bausch was hands on, a psychoanalyst excavating the netherworld of her dancers' unconscious. Neither one occupied as extreme a pole as first glance suggests. Thinking about why particular dancers were cast in specific steps in Cunningham's work reveals the deeply precise attention he gave to the qualities of individual dancers. Out of Bausch's deeply personal process emerged dancers whose qualities, in her hands, became heroic archetypes of human society. In both cases, the dancer-interpreters possess enormous agency over the meanings generated by the choreographic ideas. While the choreographer is alive, we see on stage this delicate contract between choreographer and dancer in motion.

The interest and craft of developing dancers and transforming those individuals into art is a dying skill in the twenty-first century for reasons both economic and cultural. Both Cunningham and Bausch benefitted from the single-choreographer company model, which served as a firm foundation from which to offer dancers' steady employment, healthcare, regular studio space, and extensive touring. This model gave them the luxury of time with their dancers, which in turn allowed for the development of personal relationships, mutual trust, and a cohesive aesthetic. The company structure further positioned the choreographer in a godlike or parental role as the sole creator and provider. Fear, reverence, and mutual respect feed into the choreographer-dancer relationship in this scenario, which in turn affects the look of the dancers on stage.

The deaths of Cunningham and Bausch signal the beginning of the end of two of the last great single-choreographer companies, and the intense cultures they enabled. Today's economic demands necessitate that choreographers work project by project, with dancers that come and go. The myth of artistic genius-as-godliness vanishes; more of a peer than an artistic mentor, choreographers struggle to pay their rent like everyone else. While the democratizing of the creative space has certain benefits, it destroys the choreographer-muse relationship that has produced great dances, and dancers, for the past two centuries. Even if dancers still give themselves over to be shaped, creators seem to have much less interest, and hence ability, to develop performers in the systematic manner of Cunningham and Bausch. Personality gives way to technology; humanistic craft is replaced by superficial spectacle. The loss is not just that Cunningham and Bausch will never piece together steps again. The loss is that they will never again create scenarios that match dancers and steps to combustible effect.

The loss is that they will never again develop dancers, period.

I have described one moment in my experience watching the Cunningham Company *Beacon Event* at DIA Beacon. With three stages spread out across one large gallery, someone else would no doubt have seen a different dance that day, and even had they watched that moment in the dance, had a different experience or seen it from a different angle. In Cunningham's Events and other work, he had an unparalleled ability to craft an egalitarian experience for the audience without being gimmicky: we don't have to get up and walk into an adjoining theatre, carry our chairs around, or see the same dance flipped around and projected onto video. Instead, we choose the dance we see in the most pedestrian, democratic way possible, by walking around the gallery. For the July DIA 2008 Beacon performance, installed around an exhibition of Richard Serra's massive steel spirals, Merce placed the musicians inside the spirals. The friend who accompanied me, a balletomane new to the Cunningham aesthetic, found it so challenging to digest the dancing, and so compelling to watch the DJs spinning live, that she spent the majority of the performance inside a steel spiral. I found her there, joyfully studying the DJs as they swapped disks, their hands flickering over the turntables. Here was a detail about the dance that had nothing to do with dance, but in Merce's worldview, my friend had a right to her chosen experience, to observe the musicians' movement as dance.

While exploring democratized perspective and freedom of audience choice preoccupied many dance artists of the 1960s, Cunningham is one of the few who continued exploring their possibilities into the twenty-first century. Even when Cunningham worked within the proscenium format, he continued to explore the notion of viewer choice. In *EyeSpace*, performed at the Joyce Theater in 2006, viewers observed the dance through iPod headphones, shuffling through multiple tracks of music at their will. Rather than an authoritarian management of the viewers' experience, Cunningham created situations that allowed for multiple perspectives. He then conceived of dances holistically strong enough to support the wandering. With no dark corners of the dance, no weak quartet, or sloppy transition, his invitation

to wander through its structure was bolstered by the thought put into every nook and cranny. Few choreographers today manage to build such strong choreographic structures that can withstand this kind of poking around on the part of the audience. Cunningham's was so simple a strategy, and yet philosophically it has greater breathing room, blossoming the meanings of a dance exponentially.

Pina Bausch also opened up new spaces in our viewing experience, allowing us to wander through the invisible scaffolding supporting the movement, which she built up from the many emotional landscapes her performers have passed through as individuals and artists. A common critical stance is that she had little talent for choreographic structure; her dances, however, never aimed to be the pristine houses that Cunningham created. Instead, structure for Bausch consisted in an often incoherent collapsing of psychic layers: sexuality, violence, erotic fantasies about characters of inflated, exaggerated gender, and mundane, everyday life. Such a structure allows for multiple, fractured meanings to emerge from single details. I am thinking especially of the women's long locks, the mark of every female Bausch dancer. Straight, dark, nearly waist-length hair is the most common, with the occasional blond, auburn-haired or kinky-curled dancer. It is impossible to miss the many various ways the women's hair contributes to the choreography, evoking mournfulness or passion or levity, or creating a disturbing doll-like effect. Depending on the piece, the dancer's locks may drape dramatically over the arms of her male partner, emphasizing a heated clutch or violent whip. When dancing solo, their hair swirls around their faces in extension of their movement. In *Vollmond*, their wet locks are functional and aesthetic, as they sweep through and scatter the pool of water. A woman in *Masurca Fogo* lies on her partner, who props her up to a standing position; with her head bowed, face covered by her brunette locks, she seems passive, acquiescing, but the firmness of her body, which we focus on because her face is obscured, sends a contradictory message of resistance.

Strongly influenced by the gender-neutral American postmodernists, I watch Bausch's dances with awe at the hyper-femininity exploding from her women. Most often they wear evening dresses—long, formal, silky gowns, often strapless—either barefoot or in high heels, hair swishing over their bare shoulders. I understand the critical concern over Bausch's ambiguous representation of women, having felt uncomfortable during the more violent choreography, and when witnessing certain moments of unsettling female anonymity. I do not fully understand the conflict inside her mind that led her both to worship and violate women in her art. But, with Bausch, one must take into account the multi-dimensionality of the work. Bausch turned her women into superwomen. The women may appear desperate, but rarely passive; they always seem to me to be participating in their own demise. Weaving through the complexities of this representation demands that the viewer think hard, with no small amount of discomfort and self-examination, about the dance. In a different way than Cunningham, Bausch, too, created art that allows for fractured meanings and multiple points-of-view.

The loss of Cunningham and Bausch's talent for creating multi-dimensional choreography further impacts the field of dance studies. By foraging at the intersection of psychology, philosophy, and Eastern religion, among other fields, by translating their modes of expression through movement, and famously mistrusting words to describe their art—these artists made dances that were seriously difficult to capture in language. Bausch and Cunningham pushed dance criticism as much as they pushed the dancers who worked with them. by necessitating that writers create language and theory where none had been before. In one recent effort, scholar Valerie Briginshaw presses together the philosopher Giorgio Agamben's notion of the "irreparable," coined to illuminate the relationship between essence and existence, with the complex physicality of Bausch's choreography. Referring to the artist's frequent declarations about operating in a realm outside of words, Briginshaw hopes to come "sufficiently close to this 'other language' that Bausch mentions . . ." through her project.<sup>1</sup> Building a convincing case for Bausch-as-philosopher, Briginshaw's effort takes us steps closer toward developing ways to think about and describe theoretical inquiries carried out through the medium of human movement. Still, there is the sense that Briginshaw is shoulder-to-the-wall in a perennially frustrated endeavor, from the other side of which wave Cunningham and Bausch.

It would be misguided of me to say that no one today makes critically challenging, multi-dimensional dances on the level of these two geniuses. In a reflection of our time, the concerns have changed. Coming of age mid-twentieth century, Bausch and Cunningham scratched the surface of dance and technology, a generative frontier for innumerable artists, and a field documented and disseminated on Websites such as the impressive Dance-Tech.Net. Dancemakers such as Akram Khan and Rachid Ouramdane capture and exemplify the increasingly global exchange and hybridization of cultures. The rise of contemporary African dance artists, including Opiyo Okach, Andreyra Ouamba, and Nora Chipaumire, highlights the complex question of innovation's debt to tradition, a timely issue that rightly applies to every culture. As new dance continues to evolve, it would behoove young choreographers to take heed of their predecessors' attention to ideas—the dimensions beyond what is visible—or else risk limiting their choreography to the realm of the merely pretty.

Two additional dimensions come to mind in relation to the loss of Bausch and Cunningham: the space created by their innovative ideas, and the space created by their absence. The latter cannot be filled; that the repertory that served as the laboratory for their ideas disintegrates the first day they are no longer present is a fact of the form. It is not to deny or resist, but to accept. The former, however, expresses the durability of their ideas that remain in different forms: in the muscle memory of their dancers, and in the methods and concepts they used to push the field of dance forward—one material, the other metaphysical. Still here with us, the legacy of their ideas is graspable, waiting to be expanded upon.

As frightening as it may feel for a community to lose two of its greatest leaders of the twentieth century in one summer, the coincidence sends a synergistic call to its members to step forward and continue dialogue where they left off. It now falls to us

to build new kinds of institutions and opportunities for choreographers and dancers, to increase the presence of dance within universities, to contribute to scholarship and criticism, and to spend time in the studio making dances. Our contributions will inevitably take different forms than those of Cunningham and Bausch, but they will be ones that reflect the realities of our own culture and time.

In a melancholic excerpt of a film titled *Coffee with Pina*, found on YouTube, the filmmaker Lee Yanor traces the source of Bausch's gestural choreography in her physical mannerisms. This kind of genealogical digging is invaluable. The film starts with a close-up on Pina's hands in subtle motion, moves to her in conversation in a Parisian café, and then to one of her dancers performing a solo during a performance. In every scene, the gestures share a similar quality: delicate fingers and palms fluttering like bird's wings, expanding and contracting space. Essentially, speaking.

This is the form of the ideas—let's run with them.

## NOTES

1. Valerie A. Briginshaw and Ramsay Burt, *Writing Dancing Together*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, 113.

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