



Articles





The Specter of Interdisciplinarity

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Introduction

Theater dance is an interdisciplinary form, and some of the most interesting advances in progressive and experimental dance work in recent years have been interdisciplinary in nature. Where Anglo-American dance scholarship is concerned, however, a “theoretical turn” that has led some dance scholars to develop interdisciplinary methodologies has proved highly controversial. Interdisciplinarity is in danger of becoming a specter haunting dance scholarship.

Dance has not been alone in finding this transition difficult. As art historian and cultural theorist Mieke Bal has recently noted, one challenge facing the academy today is to find “a theoretical link between linguistic, visual and aural domains that blend so consistently in contemporary culture but remain so insistently separated as fields of study in the academy” (Bal 1999a, 10). Where dance is concerned, corporeality needs to be added to Bal’s list of domains. This essay explores some of the reasons underlying resistance among Anglo-American dance scholars to the use of interdisciplinary methodologies. By doing so it aims to give an account of the public space in which recent examples of theater dance from Europe and the United States map out complex webs of relationships between corporeal, linguistic, visual, and aural levels of signification.

A set of ideas about dance as an autonomous art form has led to the development of a canon (or canons) of choreographers whose work has been judged to be of significant aesthetic value. The methodologies used to critically evaluate whether the work of a particular choreographer should be included in the canon are medium-specific or intradisciplinary in so far as they are based on an evaluation of aesthetic qualities that are considered specific to dance as an art form. On the other hand, an account of dance as a historical field in which social and political interests are at work has led to a focus on questions about representation and the way dance embodies cultural values. *An investigation into the way dancing bodies mediate ideologies is interdisciplinary.* This is not because

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such research, which often takes a cultural studies approach, borrows methodologies from “outside” the discipline of dance studies but because such an approach challenges the basis on which disciplinary boundaries have been determined. As Mieke Bal notes, “cultural studies has evolved out of a polemic against the arbitrariness of disciplinary boundaries, the often exclusionary assumptions involved in the aesthetics on which much work by humanists is based, and the separations, first between aesthetics and ethics and then between art and social issues, which were relegated to the social sciences” (Bal 1999a, 6). By doing so, cultural studies raises questions about the way cultural “texts” both address and constitute a public.

My intention here is not to establish a binary distinction between interdisciplinary and medium-specific approaches to dance scholarship since any discussion of dance clearly needs to draw on both. It is necessary to be able to focus on the singularity of dance movement while not only being aware of the broader context in which such singularity is situated but also having some theoretical means for understanding the relation between singularity and context. This is to recognize that dance is art and thus aesthetic, while at the same time to acknowledge that dance performance is socially and culturally specific and exists within a public realm. The current strength and vitality of dance scholarship is, in part, a consequence of the development of medium-specific methodologies for identifying and analyzing particular properties and qualities that are specific to dance as an art form. Such methodologies are intradisciplinary because they proceed in a circular manner, focusing in on the medium-specific properties and qualities from which such properties and qualities derive. Many scholars will recognize the need to assert the importance of these properties when aspects of dance performance become the subject of investigation for scholars in other disciplines.

Dance is still a relatively new academic discipline. Knowing how hard it has been to gain recognition for dance within universities can lead to a certain understandable protectiveness about the specificity of dance. Janet Wolff (1997) has warned against a tendency within literary studies to use “the body” as an abstract concept rather than as a lived reality, while Susan Foster (1998) has raised doubts about the appropriateness for dance analysis of the concept of performativity as it has been developed by queer theorists. Both warn about the dangers of a tendency among some literary theorists to see “the body” as a supplement and excess in relation to verbal discourse; this view is incompatible with attempts to give an account of the way beholders use their embodied knowledge to process corporeal information as they watch dance. Rather than attempting to theorize the differences between verbal discourse and dance movement, much twentieth-century dance theory has taken the position that dance’s essential ontology is its nonverbal character and that any dependence within theater dance on actual verbal discourse is a supplementary irrelevance.

The émigré Russian dance critic and theorist André Levinson, in his 1927 essay “The Idea of Dance from Aristotle to Mallarmé,” argued that philosophers through the ages have been blind to the formal properties of dance: “It seems as though everyone had piled upon this art mistaken burdens in his effort to redeem—even if only in a small way—the actual movements of dance” (Levinson 1983, 48). Levinson was arguing against a mimetic

view of theater dance that had its origins in Greek philosophy. Aristotle's "fatal dictum" that dance imitates character, emotion, and action "assigns to the dance an aim outside of itself and creates confusion between saltatory motion and expressive or descriptive gesture, using dance as a substitute for words. The dance ceases to be a thing in itself" (Levinson 1983, 48). This belief about dance's specificity is widely held. It is not only those primarily concerned with a formal, aesthetic account of modernist dance who agree with Levinson; for although those who view dance as a signifying practice may speak of the language of dance, or see dances as cultural texts, "language" here is used metaphorically. The deep-rooted belief in the unassimilability of dance movement and verbal language is often taken to be axiomatic.

One key factor that contributes to this belief is the kind of temporality involved in cognition of dance and literature. It takes time to read a poem or the chapter of a book, but it is generally assumed that visual cognition is instantaneous, so that one should be able to take in a painting or sculpture at a glance, even if one may remain absorbed for a while in its contemplation. These kinds of ideas about spectatorship contribute to our understanding of the way we perceive dance. Thus, although dance is a time-based art, it is often assumed that choreography presents the spectator with a series of tableau-like moments that one takes in at a glance. In more formal, abstract terms, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, in her 1966 book *The Phenomenology of Dance* (reprint, 1979), also argued that cognition of dance is instantaneous. In her view, "the lived experience of dance is not reducible to verbal equivalents or verbal descriptions" (1979, 83). It is not, she argued, something that appears piecemeal, and to see it as such is to reduce "the meaning of any dance to a sum of particular and absolute meanings. On the contrary, because what is expressed is irreducible, the sheer form and its import are created, presented, and intuited instantaneously" (81). Because dance is taken to be a visually oriented art form, it is seen as a nonverbal one. But, rather than setting visuality against temporality, as Sheets-Johnstone and others have done, there is a need to find ways of recognizing and understanding complex interactions between the different levels of "discourse" on which dance performance may draw. This may necessitate cognition of corporeal, visual, literary, and musical information and thus requires the development of interdisciplinary methodologies.

Interdisciplinarity and Dance Scholarship

Writing in 2006, Susan Manning argued that a "theoretical turn" in dance history has resulted in a shift in terminology so that the term "dance studies" has gradually replaced the term "dance history" as a way of designating the field. Starting around 2000, she suggests, "many commentators regularly opposed the 'old' dance history with the 'new' dance studies" (Manning 2006a, 2). In her view a split developed in the mid-1980s among U.S. dance scholars over the development by some scholars of "methods of cultural analysis derived from anthropology" (Manning 2006b, 1). The "theoretical turn" in dance scholarship during the late 1980s and 1990s was one that blurred the boundaries between aesthetics, sociology, and politics. As evidence of this "theoretical turn," she cited essays by Amy Koritz (1996) and Norman Bryson (1997), who advocated the adoption of inter-

disciplinary methodologies developing within the field of cultural studies, particularly where these touched on questions of gender and ethnicity. These essays appeared in two edited collections that exemplify the methodological changes taking place around that time: Gay Morris's 1996 *Moving Words* and Jane Desmond's 1997 *Meaning in Motion*. In her introduction to *Moving Words*, Morris noted the rapid changes occurring in dance scholarship, observing that "at the moment virtually every aspect of dance is being tested and debated" (1996, 1). While her own chapters in both collections demonstrate her commitment to new scholarly methodologies, some of her comments in her introduction reveal concern about "the fractiousness of current dance studies" (Morris 1996, 11). Amy Koritz's essay in Morris's collection, "Re/Moving Boundaries: From Dance History to Cultural Studies," as its title suggests, argued that dance scholarship could benefit from greater participation with interdisciplinary trends in the U.S. academy and indeed proposed that cultural studies would benefit from greater attention to non-text-based, embodied forms of cultural expression. Jane Desmond made a similar claim in her introduction to *Meaning in Motion*.

Norman Bryson's essay explicitly addressed the question of historical methodology. An art historian, Bryson explored correspondences between his field and dance history. His essay follows Desmond's in her collection *Meaning in Motion*, but it was initially delivered as a keynote address in February 1992 at the "Choreographing History" dance conference in Riverside, California. Far from advocating a move away from dance history toward dance studies, Bryson pointed to key methodological problems he felt were facing dance historians at that time. He pointed to the dangers of circularity within the way dance historians sometimes define the object of their investigations. His concern was that "the way dance historically came to frame itself in relation to its own audiences and its surrounding culture can come to be repeated in the ways the history of dance approaches its object" (Bryson 1997, 70). This, he pointed out, is "a methodological slippage whereby the terms proposed by the object are transferred to the mode of investigating that object" (70). The implication of this is to beware of an exclusive reliance on medium-specific methodologies.

Interdisciplinary approaches that have developed in the 1980s and 1990s have problematized normative assumptions about the way spectators perceive dance performances. The strongly interdisciplinary character of much experimental theater dance over the last fifty or so years has also disrupted ideas about spectatorship. Both performative and scholarly investigations of the structures through which dance performances situate spectators as embodied subjects have raised questions about the relation between dancing bodies and ideologies. The theoretical turn in dance studies, to which Manning refers, was largely brought about by scholars who wished to investigate the ways in which normative ideologies of gender and ethnicity could be reinforced through the conventions and traditions of mainstream cultural forms, including dance. Marking individuals according to a recognizable identity can reduce their interests to a particular identity politics. Individuals may, however, choose multiple and sometimes contradictory identifications. Within the singularities of these lies a potential for agency. A broadening focus in recent years has led scholars away from questions about identity toward

discussions about singularities. These discussions suggest richer, more complex ways of investigating the democratic nature of cultural politics. The problem is, however, that, in some ways, unresolved conflicts associated with the theoretical turn in Anglo-American dance studies have made it hard for dance scholars to adjust to these changes. The specter of interdisciplinarity hinders Anglo-American dance scholars from moving forward beyond identitarian issues.

In my opinion, controversy surrounding how to discuss the way ballet in the twentieth century has come to represent gender, “race,” and sexuality has led to polarization between the intradisciplinary, medium-specific methodologies of the so-called old dance history and the interdisciplinarity of the new dance studies. I suggest that what is at stake are not just identitarian issues but the problems that canons can cause. It is probably inevitable that some sort of canon or canons develops as dance history becomes entrenched within the academy. As Mark Franko has pointed out, however, one of the most important effects of the canon is an exclusionary process that establishes a socially specific cultural hegemony (Franko 2007). Norman Bryson points out that historical writing that focuses exclusively on the canon runs the danger of circularity. A way of dealing with this, he suggests, is to “put the canon and its values in brackets (which is not necessarily to discount or negate those values), and to ask why it was that particular historical societies ascribed value to certain distinct forms of movement, segregating such ‘high’ forms from other vernacular forms” (Bryson 1997, 68). A canon is, therefore, by implication a definition of who constitutes the public for dance, by which I mean who counts as a valid spectator that a dance work is meant to address.

Some feminist scholars in the late 1980s and 1990s drew a direct comparison between ballet and modern dance, arguing that whereas ballet reinforced oppressive representations of femininity, modern and postmodern dance was an area in which women choreographers had been able to create strong, positive representations (see, for example, Goldberg 1987/88, Dempster 1988, Albright 1997). To some extent this approach replicated the terms of earlier arguments between the supporters of U.S. modern dance and those supporting ballet. These can be traced, for example, in writings by John Martin (1939/1965) and Lincoln Kirstein (1935/1969) during the 1930s. The flash point at which new approaches to issues concerning gender and “race” have come into conflict with a canonical account of twentieth-century theater dance, however, has been around Ann Daly and Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s work about the ballets of George Balanchine. Daly and Gottschild were not, however, concerned with partisan questions about the relative merits of modern dance or African American dance in relation to ballet. Their identitarian investigations of the performance of gender and “race” raise questions about dance spectatorship as a whole. The implication is that we need to change the way we think about theater dance and re-evaluate the canon’s underlying principles. This need not mean abandoning the medium-specific methodologies that determine whether or not to include a work within the canon. We need, however, to recognize that the reasons why we value certain formal and aesthetic qualities may change. If dance works can sometimes help us reconcile cultural values with lived experience, this suggests that the canon could be a liberal rather than reactionary force.

Balanchine has achieved institutional status. His citation as one of the Dance Heritage Coalition's list of *America's Irreplaceable Dance Treasures: The First 100* states that he "was the foremost choreographer of the twentieth century and the architect of classical ballet in America" (DHC 2000). He was also, as I shall discuss shortly, central to a discourse about modernist choreography that emerged in the United States in the 1970s and early 1980s. Ann Daly and Brenda Dixon Gottschild's revisionist views of Balanchine therefore intervened within key areas of debate within dance scholarship. Writing in 1987 about one of the pas de deux in Balanchine's *The Four Temperaments* (1946), Daly pointed out that, while this duet might be an archetypal courtship, "the desire expressed by their relationship belongs only to the man. About her own desire, the compliant ballerina remains silent" (Daly 1987, 17). Female spectators, Daly argued, are excluded from the public that such work addresses. In a 1996 book Gottschild pointed out that, in a culture that considers classical ballet to be high culture but sees jazz dance as merely popular entertainment, "it will not suffice to say that jazz dance influenced Balanchine's work. That term [jazz] serves to misname the Africanist legacy that, buried under layers of deceit, has been invisibilized" (Gotschild 1996, 78). Claims, particularly in the United States, that theater dance is a serious art form (that can take its place alongside literature, music, and visual art) in effect depend upon an acknowledgement of the excellence of Balanchine's ballets. To have chosen work by Jerome Robbins (1918–1998) rather than Balanchine to mount a claim for recognition of the validity of African American or feminist spectatorship would have been less threatening, since Robbins is less central to the ballet canon and rarely figures in discussions about modernism and "pure" dance. To suggest that such a key figure as Balanchine failed to neutralize or resolve contradictions within historically specific ideologies of gender and "race" is to do more than just question his place in the canon. By demonstrating that women and African Americans might have difficulties in feeling included in the public that dance scholarship, in effect, defines through the way it builds the canon, Daly and Gottschild raise questions about the premises on which these canons are based.

The English art historian Adrian Rifkin, writing in the 1980s about the way the field of art history was coming to terms with the development of feminist theory, observed: "sometimes they will 'take on' the feminist argument: but taking on is, more often than not, an option. The masterpieces stay put" (Rifkin 1986, 162). Balanchine's masterpieces have undoubtedly stayed put. Most ballet scholars have closed ranks around Balanchine's pre-eminence rather than deal with the awkward issues that Daly and Gottschild have raised. From a ballet scholar's point of view, to suggest that Balanchine might have entertained racist or sexist attitudes is to completely misunderstand and misinterpret his achievements. The possibility of even asking questions about the way "race" or gender are represented in any theater dance has almost become taboo and, like a scapegoat, been banished into the wilderness. Where Balanchine is concerned, the dominant view is that one cannot combine medium-specific with interdisciplinary approaches and thus appreciate his work while, at the same time, evaluating the extent to which he was constrained by the social and historical situation in which he worked.

Gotschild's ideas have been influential in recent writing about African American dancers and choreographers, but hardly any white scholars have considered the implica-

tions of her work for the analysis of dance works by white choreographers. There seems to be an unspoken ban on the publication in the United States of any research into Balanchine's attraction to African American dance and dancers (see Genné and Hill 2005). When the canon becomes an object of debate, as it has in this case, any claims that it might make to universality begin to break down. *If it is a democratic project, it needs to be responsive to social particularity.* If it is not prepared to adapt and change as social and cultural conditions transform themselves, it will be in danger of imposing its exclusionary logic in an undemocratic manner.

Modernist Theory and the Canon

As I noted earlier, discussions of Balanchine's work have informed the development of a formalist, modernist account of choreography. David Michael Levin, writing in 1973, argued that Balanchine's aesthetic exemplified "a 'bare-bones' reduction of the ballet essence" (1983, 130). Balanchine achieved this by "refus[ing] the expressiveness of stage costumes and exclud[ing], too, all those resources of corporeal syntax that cannot achieve their expressiveness without the encumbrance of some mimetic or transcendent symbolism" (130). In this view, modernist choreographers like Balanchine acknowledge the specificity of their medium by stripping down dance movement to its essentials. By eliminating any supplementary representational or expressive elements that might encumber it, they were able to deal with "pure" dance alone. In other words, modernist choreography is choreography "purified" of any interdisciplinary elements.

This account of modernist dance can be traced in essays by Marshall Cohen (1981), Roger Copeland (1986), and Noël Carroll (1981, 2003) and forms the basis for Sally Banes's extremely influential account of postmodern dance (Banes 1987). Their accounts drew on critical writings by Clement Greenberg (1960–65/1982) and Michael Fried (1969) about modernist painting and sculpture in the United States. Greenberg proposed that painting and sculpture realized their essential, abstract nature by purifying themselves from any interdisciplinary contamination from the other arts. In his view, modernism is the use of theoretical procedures that derive from the eighteenth-century philosopher Kant, who Greenberg argues was the first modernist because he "used logic to establish the limits of logic, and while he withdrew much from its old jurisdiction, logic was left in all the more secure possession of what remained to it" (1982, 5).

The circular, intradisciplinary character of this formalist account of abstract, modernist choreography is exemplified by Sally Banes's explanation of modernist reflexivity in her response to criticisms made by Susan Manning during the 1988–89 "Terpsichore in Combat Boots" debate. Banes wrote:

Interest in movement design for its own sake is different from being reflexive in the sense relevant to modernism. Reflexivity requires something more—namely, that the formal elements so foregrounded be seen as revealing essential characteristics of the medium. Historically, this required an added semantic dimension—that the work not merely be itself but that it be about being the kind of thing it is. (1989, 14)

Banes thus places particular value on work that is “about being the kind of thing it is.” This quality of presence and ontological certainty is achieved through choreography that enacts a self-critical, metaphysical critique. Manning, however, argued that this inward-looking, formalist focus runs the danger of “deflecting attention away from the sociological and ideological dimensions of modernism” (1988, 37) and to the way that choreographers have often “responded in midcourse to subtle yet profound shifts in their working environment—and in our culture” (38). Norman Bryson has made a similar point, suggesting that a formalist account of dance movement “can impose itself as authoritative in the literal sense that the nature of the object authorizes what criticism does with it” (1997, 70). This is, however, a situation in which “the eyes need never lift from the object or wander from the central quadrature of the stage into other areas of social formation to which dance might be related—or reduced” (70). In order to avoid reducing a performance to no more than a reflection of its social and political context, it is necessary to find a balance between interdisciplinary and medium-specific approaches.

Bryson points out that one major limitation when the “abstraction” of dance movement is taken as criticism’s internal horizon is that “[A]bstraction becomes the end-point of the historical process” (Bryson 1997, 70). Noël Carroll’s essay “Art History, Dance, and the 1960s” (2003) does exactly what Bryson warned against. It aligns a modernist view of dance history as an evolutionary progression toward the putative goal of abstract “pure” dance with Arthur Danto’s argument about the end of art (1997). Where Danto has argued that Andy Warhol’s 1964 sculpture *Brillo Box* represents the end of art, Carroll suggests that contemporary works by members of Judson Dance Theater constitute the end of modernist dance. In his view, works like Yvonne Rainer’s *Trio A* (1966) represent the conclusion of an evolutionary process whereby a representational theory of dance collapses in favor of an expressionist and a formalist theory, which in turn are superseded by a modernist project. Rainer and her colleagues have, according to Carroll, “demonstrated that anything could become dance no matter how it looked . . . they have extended the range of possibilities for contemporary dance momentarily. They have opened a new world of dance: not an end to dance, but perhaps a new beginning” (Carroll 2003, 96).

This approach to the modernist canon is nevertheless one that uses knowledge of dance in the 1960s to set limits on our understanding of its meaning for later dancers and dance audiences. Carroll’s essay was developed from a talk he gave in 1996 at the festival Talking Dancing at the House of Dance in Stockholm, where Quatuor Albrecht Knust¹ were also performing their “re-readings” of Steve Paxton’s *Satisfyin’ Lover* (1967) and Rainer’s *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (1969). The interest in the work of Judson Dance Theater on the part of European dance artists like Jérôme Bel, Boris Charmatz, and Xavier Le Roy in the 1990s—an interest initiated in part by the Quatuor Albrecht Knust—might appear, from Carroll’s point of view, to be essentially passive and imitative. There is, however, another, less exclusionary way of accounting for historical reference that has recently emerged. Art historian Thomas Crow has proposed that citation has become a key strategy for contemporary artists: “Almost every work of serious contemporary art recapitulates, on some explicit or implicit level, the historical sequence of objects to which it belongs. Consciousness of precedent has become very

nearly the condition and definition of major artistic ambition. For that reason artists have become avid, if unpredictable, consumers of art history” (Crow 1996, 212). It is this avid but unpredictable interest in dance history that Quattuor Albrecht Knust’s projects exemplify. Dance history can indicate aspects of the past that later dance artists need to go through and beyond in order to discover the singularity of their own time. Rather than seeing the history of dance modernism as a linear canon that predetermines future developments, it is more useful to think of it as a decentralized field of possibilities within which individuals and groups can identify the areas where the kinds of ideas and events that seem most relevant to them have accumulated.

“Theatricality” and Interdisciplinarity

Like Greenberg and Fried’s account of modernist painting, the particular account of modernist theater dance that scholars like Banes, Carroll, and Levin developed is one that has its roots in accounts of the differences between visually oriented and discursively oriented art forms. As I noted earlier, at stake in such accounts are questions about the time it takes the beholder to apprehend the art work. One of the striking things about Banes’s assertion that a modernist work should not merely be itself but should “be about being the kind of thing it is” (1987, 14) is the way this evaluative judgment seems to be a moral one. If there is a rightness about seriously being the thing that it is, there is concomitantly something wrong with alternative ontologies of dance that might, in some way or other, deviate from the kind of purity and certainty that Banes seems to value. A similar, moralistic opposition between good art and inadequate, failing art can be found in an often-cited assertion by Michael Fried that “The success, even the survival, of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theatre” (Fried 1969, 139). The particular context of this quotation was an essay entitled “Art and Objecthood,” in which Fried argued that the object-like qualities of minimalist sculptures were theatrical in the way they made the spectator aware of their embodied relation to the sculptural object. By doing so, Fried believed, they broke with the modernist tradition.

Fried elaborated in his 1980 book *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* on what he meant by theatricality.² He located its origins in eighteenth-century philosophy, demonstrating that Diderot and his circle valued paintings that unified dramatic action in such a way that all the figures in a tableau seemed to be entirely absorbed in what was taking place. For Diderot, the figures in a painting, like actors on a stage, should be oblivious of the beholder, as if a wall separated the beholder from the action. Fried pointed out that, in his writings on painting, Diderot used the term “theatrical, implying consciousness of being beheld, as synonymous with falseness” (1980, 100). Diderot considered theatricality to be “an artificial construction in which persuasiveness was sacrificed and dramatic illusion vitiated in the attempt to impress the beholder and solicit his applause” (100). In his earlier discussion of minimalist sculpture (Fried 1969), Fried criticized works by Robert Morris and Donald Judd, which, he argued, required beholders to be aware of their embodied relation to the sculptural object. This direct address to the beholder was, in Fried’s terms, theatrical. I have argued

elsewhere that the work made in the 1960s and 1970s by dancers associated with Judson Dance Theater drew the spectator's attention to the object-like, embodied materiality of their dancing in ways that, in this sense, were also theatrical (Burt 2006, 52–87).

During a conference panel discussion in 1987, Fried explicitly acknowledged that theatricality was, in his view, a consequence of a kind of interdisciplinary approach to art that had subsequently been developed further by postmodern artists:

Boy, was I right about art moving towards theater! There's a sense in which everything new in art since then [the 1960s] has happened in the space between the arts, the space I characterized as theater. In fact, the whole area of theatricality has been explicitly colonized in ways that are very diverse, often very interesting, in many cases powerful; so that the opposition between good art and theatrical art and the meeting of specific arts in the theatrical space between the arts has been enormously complicated by practice. (qtd. in Foster 1987, 84).

The art critic Craig Owens, although arguing from a very different theoretical position, also proposed that the emergence of minimalist and conceptual art in the 1960s overthrew the division of the arts into discrete disciplinary categories. Owens pointed out that Fried had diagnosed a break in the modernist tradition through the invasion of sculpture by duration. In Owens's view, the eruption of language into visually oriented artistic practice was "coincident with, if not the definitive index of, the emergence of postmodernism" (Owens 1992, 45). This claim comes in a review of the collected writings of Robert Smithson, a sculptor best known for environmental works such as his 1970 *Spiral Jetty*. Owens identifies an approach to theory in Smithson's writings that, he says, can also be found in writing by sculptors Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, and Robert Morris and choreographer Yvonne Rainer. The monthly magazine *Artforum* was founded in the 1960s as a publication in which artists themselves could write about contemporary work. In the emergent field of theater and performance, the *Drama Review* provided a similar forum for progressive theater directors, choreographers, and artists involved with happenings and Fluxus. By publishing critical writing, these artists were not only usurping the critic's role and defining for themselves the theoretical context spectators needed to understand in order to appreciate their concerns—that is, they were not only building a public for their work. They were also, to some extent, using the practice of writing rather than the experience of working with sculptural material or dance movement to develop and progress as artists.

Yvonne Rainer's 1965 essay in the *Drama Review* on her 1965 work *Parts of Some Sextets*³ exemplifies the way she uses the process of writing to reflect on her choreographic practice. Her essay is probably best known for the polemic statement "NO to spectacle," which comes in a postscript at the end. The way Rainer introduces this suggests that her purpose is as much to explain her work to herself as it is to enlighten her readers. It describes, she says, "an area of concern as yet not fully clarified for me in relation to dance, but existing as a very large NO to many facts in the theater today. This is not to say that I personally do not enjoy many forms of theater. It is only to define more stringently the rules and boundaries of my own artistic game at the moment" (Rainer 1974, 51). Self-reflective writing, backed

up with knowledge of theoretical debates, particularly in the visual arts, helped Rainer to make decisions about choreographic processes that had a conceptual basis. As her friend and colleague Simone Forti pointed out, when working in a conceptual way, “You don’t start by experiencing the movement and evolving the movement, but you start from an idea that already has the movement pretty well prescribed” (1993, 11).

Reflexivity, Antitheatricality, and the Public

In Sally Banes’s terms, the result of these conceptual processes was that the choreography was pared down in such a way that it was not merely about itself but was about the kind of thing it was, and as such could be called reflexive. My point is, however, that its reflexivity was not attained by eliminating the effects of the other arts and eschewing what Fried called “theatricality.” There are, admittedly, ways in which Rainer’s work was radically antitheatrical. Where Diderot condemned any attempt by the actor on stage or a figure in a painting to impress beholders or solicit their applause, Rainer said “No to seduction of the spectator by the wiles of the performer” (1974, 51) and, in her *Trio A*, choreographed the dancer’s gaze so that it could never meet that of the spectator. Rainer’s practice, however, exemplifies a disruption of the supposedly instantaneous cognition of theater dance by foregrounding durational qualities; furthermore, its conceptual basis is evidence of the eruption of language into the process of making choreography. It is, therefore, an instance where experimental dance practice was progressing toward rather than away from the interdisciplinary spaces between the arts, just as Fried observed was happening in 1987 in the field of visual art.

This reframing of reflexivity and antitheatricality in interdisciplinary rather than medium-specific terms, and as avant-garde rather than formalist modernist practices, may seem to depend on abstrusely academic distinctions. The point is, however, that these somewhat esoteric issues have become caught up in a struggle between competing ideas about art and its social and aesthetic function. Resolution of these issues, therefore, has significant implications for our understanding of the relationship between the tradition of experimental dance during the last fifty years and its changing social and political contexts. As Bryson (1997) has suggested, it is useful to consider why some scholarly commentators feel the need to ascribe moral value to their aesthetic judgments about “good” art. This too finds a precedent in critical discourse about French painting during the eighteenth century, when the decline of royal and aristocratic patronage and the secularization of discourse about the arts led to the idea of a public for whom artistic seriousness could be equated with public purpose.

Like Fried, the art historian Thomas Crow has also suggested drawing on the history of the critical reception of Rococo in order to understand visual art practice in the late twentieth century. However, where Fried points out that Diderot’s critique of theatricality in painting was aimed at the lack of seriousness within paintings that had a Rococo sensibility, Crow focuses on the social and political positions of the groups of nobles and financiers who patronized the Rococo and the way in which this informed their aesthetic preferences. The public space in which discussions about French painting took

place was not an all-inclusive one. As Crow points out, “The issue was never whether that problematic entity, the public, should be consulted in artistic matters, but who could be legitimately included in it, who spoke for its interests, and which or how many of the contending directions in artistic practice could claim its support” (Crow 1985, 5). This view of the public sphere as one in which different social groups disagree about the nature of art has led Crow to read the art of the 1960s in a very different way than Fried and Greenberg.

Crow argues that high modernist art criticism during the 1960s brought in “a surplus of moral commitment that was a relic of an earlier dream of art as the focus of an ideal public sphere” (Crow 1987, 7). A perhaps unintended consequence of this surplus was awareness of the way discourses about the arts had the potential to create a public. This, Crow argues, led to the idea that alternative, experimental art practices that opposed modernist, mainstream orthodoxies could promote a socially progressive politics. As Crow observes: “Conceptual, performance, installation and site-specific art were avenues that proved to be most open to counterhegemonic voices and movements towards alternative political communities: women’s politics and the critique of the art commodity generated out of New Left culture found space there” (Crow 1987, 1). Rather than seeing Judson Dance Theater as the culmination of a modernist tradition that believed seriousness of artistic purpose benefited society, Rainer and her peers attacked modernist ideas about the autonomy of dance as art. The avant-garde strategies they adopted enabled these dancers to find an alternative basis for thinking about the artist’s relation to the public realm. It would be a mistake to consider that the interdisciplinary basis of these strategies merely constituted a repudiation of modernist orthodoxies or a nihilistic attack on ideas about universality. Exploring the tension between verbal discourse and dance movement opened up new possibilities for dance that had been foreclosed by dominant ideas about the moral necessity of avoiding theatricality in dance.

Overwriting Choreography

To demonstrate that experimental dance has continued progressing toward rather than away from interdisciplinary spaces between the arts, I shall conclude with brief discussions of two examples of dances that explore the productive tension between dance movement and verbal language. These are Bill T. Jones’s 1985 piece *Holzer Duet . . . Truisms* and Jérôme Bel’s 2004 piece *Véronique Doisneau*.

Holzer Duet . . . Truisms was a duet Jones performed with Lawrence Goldhuber, a large man who was a core member of the Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane Dance Company from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. The title refers to *Truisms*, a text written by the visual artist Jenny Holzer. Partly spoken by Goldhuber and partly heard on a pre-recorded tape, this spoken text formed the “music” around which the piece was choreographed. *Truisms* consists of a series of striking but unconnected and sometimes contradictory aphorisms that Holzer assembled between 1977 and 1979 and published in alphabetical order. For example:

AT TIMES INACTIVITY IS PREFERABLE TO MINDLESS
FUNCTIONING

AT TIMES YOUR UNCONSCIOUS IS TRUER THAN YOUR
CONSCIOUS MIND

AUTOMATION IS DEADLY

AWFUL PUNISHMENT AWAITS REALLY BAD PEOPLE

BAD INTENTIONS CAN YIELD GOOD RESULTS

BEING ALONE WITH YOURSELF IS INCREASINGLY UNPOPULAR

(Holzer 1998, 116)

It is more or less in this alphabetical order that Jones used them. Holzer herself used single statements or extracts from the whole list for a variety of projects and installations throughout the 1980s in museums and public places. They have, for example, been displayed on electronic signs in Time Square, New York, and in Piccadilly Circus in London. They have flashed across LED signs exhibited in galleries and museums, have appeared on T-shirts and baseball caps, and have been engraved by funerary masons on polished marble benches.

In *Holzer Duet . . . Truisms* Holzer's aphorisms were spoken or heard one at a time with regular pauses that created a rhythm within which simple, often everyday rather than dance-like movements were choreographed. The effect was not unlike a series of tableaux in which discrete actions seemed to be associated with individual aphorisms without necessarily having any obvious connection to them at the level of meaning. As Goldhuber recited "ABSTRACTION IS A TYPE OF DECADENCE," Jones jumped up to perch temporarily on his left shoulder. While Goldhuber supported Jones by holding his legs, he recited "ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SURPRISE." There was no obvious reason for this particular combination of poses and words, though one could try to figure one out. Discussing Holzer's work, David Joselit has suggested that the *Truisms* combine the explanatory function of captions with the prescriptive certainty of manifestos. On the one hand they seem "neutral, factual, and anonymous" while at the same time being "partisan, often blatantly implausible, and deeply rooted in the voice of [the manifesto's] author" (1998, 44). Much of *Truisms'* force, Joselit suggests, "lies in Holzer's explosive combinations of contradictory rhetorics" (44).

Like Holzer's work, Jones's choreography, particularly during the late 1970s and 1980s, explored collisions between similarly contradictory material. His decision to perform a duet with Goldhuber exemplifies this. As a trained actor, Goldhuber had the ability to project his voice and deliver text with an effectiveness that few dancers can achieve. In a white shirt, black tie, and trousers, he brought an unusual gravitas to this male-male duet, although a short tap dancing sequence that he performed at the end somewhat contradicted this. Not only was he not a trained dancer, but his figure contradicted all normal Western expectations about the appearance of professional dancers; his stomach projecting far enough to necessitate wearing suspenders to keep his trousers up. In complete

contrast with this, Jones wore shiny black, skin-tight shorts that revealed his seductively bare legs and torso in a way that deliberately played up fantasies about handsome, black, male dancers.

Jones and his partner Arnie Zane first gained recognition with a series of duets, including *Monkey Run Road* (1979), *Blauvelt Mountain* (1980), and *Valley Cottage* (1981). Whereas these explored the nature of relationships—their potential for intimacy and for conflict—Jones's onstage partnership with Goldhuber was less interactive and more pragmatic and co-operative. In both cases, however, they made odd couples. As Jones told Ann Daly in 1998, the contradictions in his work at that time were entirely deliberate:

there was always an ambiguity in the search for the truth. My truth was not everyone's truth, witnessed by the way I looked, the way they looked, the way Arnie looked. I thought that the truth was in the ambiguity. Therefore, pile on more and more logs, more and more contradictions, more and more painful references that are unresolved and *cannot* be resolved in dance. (Daly 1998, 119, emphasis in original)

This insistence on fragmentation, and this deliberate refusal to supply conventional aesthetic closure, was present at a number of levels in *Holzer Duet . . . Truisms*. It was a product of casting Goldhuber and Jones together; it was evident in the wildly disjunctive combinations of movement material and in Holzer's contradictory series of aphorisms; and it was generated by the seemingly random match and mismatch between words and dancing.

Interviewed about the duet in Michael Blackwood's 1988 documentary film *Retracing Steps: American Dance Since Postmodernism*, Jones says that Holzer's texts are political statements from left, right, and center. What I think is political about them, however, is not so much what they mean but the fact that they refer to and try to build a public space for their recognition. Placing art work into a public arena, as artists like Holzer have done, does not necessarily reach a wider public than it would have done when exhibited in a gallery or museum. What it can suggest, however, is that the audience who looks at it consider its implications in a public context. Jones has often included spoken words in his dance concerts in order to refer to matters of concern and thus to create a public context for his dancing. By doing so, he disrupts notions about disciplinarity. By asking questions about the universality of truth and of aesthetic judgment, as he did in the interview with Ann Daly, Jones was not making a nihilistic attack on the basis of Western civilization but trying to reframe ideas about the public that are a legacy from Diderot's day.

Much of Jones's work in the late 1970s and 1980s reconfigured what could go together with what; it channeled a carefree and insolent anger toward dehierarchizing high and urban street culture. By doing so, it sought to make a space for representing experiences of those excluded from the public for mainstream art. By overwriting dance movement with spoken text, Jones was, of course, opening up the kind of interdisciplinary space between the arts that Michael Fried characterized as theater. Mieke Bal has used the term "overwriting" to characterize the work of U.S. painters Ken Aptekar and Dotty Attie, who have reappropriated and recontextualized imagery from European art history. Aptekar,

for example, has superimposed printed text that narrates autobiographical childhood experiences over pastiche quotations from old master paintings. Bal proposes that

In overwriting their paintings, they make the point that, in addition to visually “being there,” images also “speak”; at the same time, the discrepancies between the words and images emphasize the irreducible gap between the two media. But this gap does not entail separation; rather it compels us to process the complementarity and conflict between the two in an assessment of integrative cultural agency. (Bal 1999b, 5)

Much of what Bal says here about the discrepancy between painting and words can be applied to the tension between dance and words. Each demands a different kind of attention, but combining speaking and dancing reminds us that the body produces the voice and that dance movements can flesh out meanings. By foregrounding the two, *Holzer Duet . . . Truisms* reveals some of the painful truths about who can and cannot be expected to be represented in public discourse.

In Jérôme Bel’s 2004 piece *Véronique Doisneau*, dance movement is overwritten with spoken words in a very different way. Ostensibly it takes the form of a lecture demonstration in which the ballet dancer Véronique Doisneau introduces a few of her favorite extracts from the repertoire of the Ballet of the Paris Opéra, including *Giselle*, *La Bayadère*, *Swan Lake*, and Cunningham’s *Points in Space*. In the process, however, the piece engages in a critical reflection on the nature of performance and its institutional context. By performing these extracts, Bel was, in Thomas Crow’s terms, ambitiously recapitulating the sequence of works to which his piece belonged. Doisneau was not one of the *étoiles* (principal soloists) at the Paris Opéra but a *sujet* who, as she explains, dances in the corps de ballet but sometimes performs minor roles. The piece was made just before she retired from the company. Audiences never hear a ballet dancer speak on stage during a ballet performance; off-stage it is only ever the best-known and most popular ballerinas who are interviewed, never middle-ranking dancers like Doisneau. When performed at the Paris Opéra, Bel’s piece gave Doisneau an opportunity to be heard by an audience most of whom had perhaps not noticed her until then.

In a matter of fact way, Doisneau described her work as anyone might talk about their job. Wearing practice clothes, with a small radio microphone by her mouth and carrying a plastic bottle of mineral water, she told the audience how old she was, about her children, the amount she was paid each month, and how long she had been in the company. She also mentioned a severe injury that may have stopped her progressing beyond *sujet* but then went on to say how inspiring she had found it working for Rudolf Nureyev. To demonstrate this, she danced on her own part of a *pas de trois* from Nureyev’s restaging of *La Bayadère*. As she did so she made her own musical accompaniment out of a series of “tum-ti-tums,” like someone rehearsing dancers in a studio. A strain in her voice betrayed which movements were the most demanding, and one could hear her becoming increasingly out of breath as the extract progressed. At the end, she took her time to get her breath back, sipping water, her heavy breathing broadcast throughout the auditorium, destroying the illusion of effortlessness that ballet dancers normally strive to create.

The spoken element of Bel's piece together with the sounds of breathlessness overwrote the choreography in a way that foregrounded the actual work involved in ballet performance, thus eliminating its usual magic and metaphysics. Doisneau's performance was entirely lacking in the customary deferential formality that characterizes presentation within large institutionalized ballet companies, although everything she said and did was carefully calculated and by no means casual. Toward the end, having expressed her admiration for her fellow *sujet* Céline Talon, Doisneau sat at the front of the stage, her back to the audience, and watched Talon dance one of Giselle's solos from Mats Ek's modern version. Following this, carefully ensuring that her own clapping outlasted the audience's applause, Doisneau turned and explained to them some home truths about dancing in the corps de ballet. Some of the most beautiful moments to watch, she said, are horrible to perform. The thirty-two swans in *Swan Lake* have long, still moments when, as Doisneau put it, they become human decor to make the stars seem special (*à fin de mettre en valeur les étoiles*). Doisneau confessed that moments like these made her want to howl or leave the stage. Then, putting on a practice tutu and asking the sound technician to switch on the recording of her music, Doisneau performed her part of the corps's material from the second act of *Swan Lake* with all its excruciatingly held poses.

Véronique Doisneau was a reflexive piece in the sense that Sally Banes used the term: it was not merely about unadorned movement for its own sake but was about the kind of thing that it was. Part of its fascination, however, was that it worked simultaneously on two very different levels. On the one hand, a ballet connoisseur might enjoy the solo because he or she loves the works that Doisneau danced. On another level, however, Bel's piece fulfilled many of the conditions scholars have laid down for a modernist work. A pas de deux from the nineteenth-century version of *Giselle*, which Doisneau performed on her own while singing her own basic accompaniment, stripped ballet movement of its expressive and narrative properties. The extracts were, therefore, not presented as interesting movement design for its own sake but, because Doisneau performed one role from a duet or group dance in isolation, were reduced by default to movement itself.

Bel deconstructed the material he cited in a way that resembles the flattened and decontextualized uses of task-based and everyday movement in the work of Judson Dance Theater. Doisneau's revelation about how unpleasant it can be to perform some of the more static material created for the corps in canonical nineteenth-century ballets amounts to a way of saying "no to spectacle." *Véronique Doisneau* was, nevertheless, ironic in the literal sense of stating one thing in a rhetorical way so as to imply another meaning that is often the opposite. Thus, Bel wittily used the most traditional kind of ballet movement in order to make an up-to-date conceptual intervention in the idea of ambitious modernist dance and did so entirely through explicit quotations from existing works. But, by doing so, he disrupted conventional ideas about authorship on which the canon depends: insofar as the piece consisted of borrowed choreography from works created by others, it did not include movement that could be seen as uniquely exemplifying Bel's unique choreographic sensibility. Furthermore, in its direct address to the audience and in its combination of spoken words and dance movement, *Véronique Doisneau* was theatrical in the interdisciplinary way that Fried denounced.

The Specter of Interdisciplinarity and the Public

As interdisciplinary pieces, *Holzer Duet . . . Truisms* and *Véronique Doisneau* betrayed the serious ideals that Fried valued in the modernist tradition through the way they appealed to and sought to involve their audiences; but, by doing so, they tried to bring about a very different kind of public. As I noted earlier, the public in this context refers to who counts as a valid spectator that a dance work is meant to address. Underlying Fried's denunciation of theatricality is fear of losing the idea that the public is united through the universality of aesthetic judgment. The question of whether or not something is beautiful, as Kant argued in his *Critique of Judgment*, is one that everyone will necessarily agree upon as long as it is answered in a dispassionate and disinterested way. Theatrical art, for Fried and, before him, for Diderot, is art that makes a claim on the beholder, thus interfering with their attention in a way that makes it impossible to maintain a disinterested point of view. Such work thus threatens what they believed held the public together. *The specter of interdisciplinarity is the ghost of all those aspects of the arts that need to be repressed in order to preserve the idea of a disinterested public.* At the same time, however, interdisciplinary methodologies offer a different way of understanding how dance works address the beholder.

A problem with Kant's account of aesthetic judgment is that it does not allow for the fact that judgments about works of art always, to some extent, depend upon knowledge of artistic traditions and conventions. These circulate within critical discourse. Thomas Crow's discussion about who could be legitimately included in the public for eighteenth-century French art, who spoke for its interests, and who could claim its support are pertinent for scholars analyzing recent ambitious dance practice. As Daly infers, there is a problem about the way that women are supposedly included in the public for dance but partially excluded when concerns about the way femininity is represented in ballet are ruled out of order. Similarly, can peoples of African descent be included if, as Gottschild argues, their contributions to the development of modernism in dance and ballet are "invisibilized"? If this means that neither women nor black people are wholly included in the public for theater dance, this further complicates the question about the basis from which it is possible to speak for the interests of the public. Furthermore, in whose interests are dance scholars from one country speaking when their theoretical proposals in effect exclude the work of choreographers from another country from canonical accounts of dance?

Finally, there is the question about which contending directions in artistic practice can claim public support. When, in the 1960s, visual artists like Robert Rauschenberg and choreographers like Yvonne Rainer started to use publication to make claims for their particular directions in artistic practice as a way of building an informed public for their work, they were intervening directly in the field of public discourse. I have suggested that a similar claim for public support underlies more recent works where spoken words have overwritten choreographed movement. It is through this kind of overwriting in *Holzer Duet . . . Truisms* that Bill T. Jones encouraged his audience to consider a wider and more inclusive public context for experimental dance. When the audience at the Paris Opera applauded at the end of *Véronique Doisneau*, they were acknowledging the

fact that Bel's piece had given them an opportunity to notice someone of whose existence they had previously been unaware. This applause seems to demonstrate public support for a deconstructive approach that reveals the limitations of the kind of values normally sanctioned by hierarchical institutions.

To conclude, I have argued that it is necessary to use both interdisciplinary and medium-specific methodologies within dance scholarship. I have used a brief discussion of aspects of eighteenth-century French art theory to suggest that some of the problems I have identified in recent dance scholarship can be resolved differently. Aesthetic judgments about dance performance, I have shown, are always caught up in questions about social and cultural aspects of the performance through the way the latter are the subject of public discussions in which dance scholarship plays a significant role. I have focused, in particular, on an interdisciplinary overwriting of dance and language, which, I have argued, characterizes much late twentieth- and twenty-first-century dance practice. This reveals the public nature of dance in a particularly useful way. In order to understand how this recent work engages in a critical but imaginative way with the institutional nature of theater dance, dance scholars need to develop ways of analyzing the specificity of choreographed movement that are informed by methods of investigating the social particularity of the kind of public that the movement itself seeks to address.

Notes

1. In 1994 the French-based group Quatuor Albrecht Knust performed forgotten pieces by Humphrey and Jooss reconstructed from labanotation. In 1996 they performed "re-readings" of Steve Paxton's *Satisfyin' Lover* (1967) and Yvonne Rainer's *Continuous Process Altered Daily* (1970) at festivals in Avignon, Montreal, and Stockholm. In 2000 they used Ann Hutchinson Guest's labanotation version of Nijinsky's score to remember three historical versions of *L'Après midi d'un faune* in a piece titled . . . *d'un Faune (éclats)*.

2. Fried was already thinking about Diderot's ideas when he wrote "Art and Objecthood." He notes that he first taught a seminar on Diderot's theory and criticism in 1966. See Fried (1987, 57).

3. The full title of Rainer's essay is "Some Retrospective Notes on a Dance for 10 People and 12 Mattresses Called *Parts of Some Sextets*, Performed at the Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford Connecticut, and Judson Memorial Church, New York, in March 1965."

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