Intellectual Underpinnings

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A few family snapshots:

> 1. One day, my father and I stood, chatting, in a bank lobby. "I just don't get it," he said. "You've got more brains in your head than you have in your feet."
>
> 2. My husband sings in an *a cappella* chorus, and for one Mother's Day concert we all wore necklaces emblazoned with words our mothers had never said. "Choreography and dance," mine proclaimed. "What a wonderful career choice!"
>
> 3. After watching me perform some years ago, one of my children offered the following critical *précis:* "Your bra was sticking out."

I could go on with tales of familial, as well as fraternal and collegial, disinterest and disappointment, not to mention resentment and the occasional *frisson* linked to artist children and parents, associated with a career that seemingly joins the extremes of narcissism, the temporal and physical limitations mandated by the life cycle of the human body, and the apparent separation from the left-brain activities supported by other fields and disciplines. Common Western wisdom has it that dancers are dumb, in both senses: the silent wordlessness of traditional concert dance, and the absence of intellect long associated with the profession. Dancing is viewed as an articulation-in-motion of the Cartesian split, its thoughtless activator lulled by the gentle tapping of computer keys coming from the other, smarter side of the room. As far as family goes, I'm mostly over it. And I've sounded off on this before, complaining, for one, about a brilliant theorist who refused, at a workshop, to remove her socks—to engage her material body when her discursive body, however contingent, was so comfortable.

Aren't we past this tired rift? Yes, I think, and no. Like others of us who are both dancers and scholars, I live on both sides of the room; exploring the mind/body relationship is central to my dance practice, my teaching, and my writing. It is precisely that interaction of the experiential and the intellectual that draws me now to the studio, now to the computer, imbuing one temporary situation with the implications of the other. I—we—revel in both our material and our discursive bodies.

In the dance world there is a long history of intellectual inspiration and involvement, however suppressed in the discourse. Ideas and language, spoken and written, have a prominent presence in the dances themselves, among dance practitioners, between dancers/choreographers and critics/ scholars. Yvonne Rainer's twin sentiments—"the mind is a muscle" and "my body remains the enduring reality"—continue to function as skeletons, as it were, for continuing discussions and debates about what it means to see dance, to do it, to get it.

But even in much of academia, dance remains suspect as a field for research and as an epistemological source for that research. We encounter the perplexing aesthetic and intellectual conservatism of college dance students who talk the talk but are proudly antagonistic to postmodern dance, historical or current, often without having actually seen any of it. And in the studio we pine for, or insist on, or maybe *have* bodily experience that transcends or bypasses cognition.

What I focus on here is an uplifting observation from the contemporary dance world. (I'm talking about the "downtown dance" world of New York City, not the

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world at large.) This is the resurgence of interest, especially among younger choreographers, in the explicit interplay of ideas and dance-making that resonates in their dances; that embodies their knowledge of their experimental choreographic and artistic forebears—not only the Judson Dance Theater but adherents of a range of improvisational, theatrical, and performative practices; and/or that recalls the intellectual excitement underlying earlier avant-garde choreographic movements. There is much to say about these performances and the ideas that inform them. In this panel, though, the topic is dance and writing, and so for the moment I am keeping my eye on the discourse: how we talk and write about dance.

There are many reasons for the resurgence of public thoughtfulness, primary among them our extraordinary access, via the Internet, to information and communication. Clearly, technology has changed our beliefs about and practices of developing and sharing ideas, not to mention developing and sharing dances themselves, in effect redefining choreographic and critical (and pedagogical) practice and radically extending the possibilities for improvisatory and scripted conversation. This immersion in communication is playing out in dances that articulate their makers' informed ideas about dance and movement, their relationships to dance-historical ideas that have been passed on to them and/or reverberate through the Zeitgeist, and their assumption that it is important to know about how their choices are representationally charged: how dance makes meaning.

Several institutions have long played a key role in guiding the advancement of contemporary dance. Movement Research (MR), Dance Theater Workshop (DTW), and Danspace Project, in their programming of dance performances, including works-in-progress (such as DTW's Studio Series, MR's Judson Church and Open Performance Series, and Danspace's DraftWork Series); workshops on choreography, video, grant writing, management, and many other topics; MR's Studies Project; presentations and panel discussions on a range of areas of concern to dancers; publications—especially *Movement Research Performance Journal*—in which writing by and about members of the dance community addresses significant issues, often experimenting with the form as well as the content of its writing; and other programs and strategies contribute both to building the dance community and to fostering the integration of the artistic and intellectual concerns of its members. And now, critically, newer experimental laboratories like Chez Bushwick and the Center for Performance Research extend the facilitation offered by these more established institutions and by other arenas for dancers to rethink their way through the form, in words and actions.

Two circumstances, one fairly recent, one ongoing, strike me as notable in this regard. The first is the Nothing Festival, conceived by choreographer Tere O'Connor and presented at Dance Theater Workshop in the spring of 2007. The second is Critical Correspondence, an online program on the Movement Research Web site for discussion of contemporary dance-world practice.

The Nothing Festival was set up as a way for choreographers to bypass the usual routes to production, in particular the grant system—which requires that we describe a dance that doesn't yet exist, or identify a theme or subject for that dance—or the marketing system, which, similarly, urges artists to discuss (in a commercially effica-

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cious way) what may only be a sensation, an impulse, an image. Moreover, when O'Connor got funding for the project itself and offered eight choreographers the opportunity to make a dance, skipping those systems, he also asked them to include "nothing" as a choreographic point of departure: no predetermined music, collaborators, ideas, etc. This last aspect was confounding to numerous viewers, who pointed out that in some ways, every artistic project starts with nothing—the proverbial blank page—and at the same time is loaded with the artist's aesthetic history. Jennifer Dunning (2007), of the *New York Times,* reminded us that the grant and marketing system is beside the point for most unfunded or underfunded dance-makers anyway. And Deborah Jowitt (2007) began her supportive review in the *Village Voice* with the admission that she had forgotten O'Connor's suggestion that critics, too, start with nothing and take no notes.

Whatever the complaints and disagreements, the festival itself was *hot.* The dances themselves were, in most people's view, a mixed bag insofar as how, or for that matter whether, the choreographers incorporated the creative directive—and if the dances worked, or were good, according to whatever evaluative criteria viewers had. What especially engaged me was the discussion, in person, in print, and online, that accompanied the performances. There were panel discussions with all the choreographers from each of the two programs after the performances, and on one weekend afternoon, there was a well-attended three-hour-long open discussion for O'Connor, the choreographers, and the community. It was not entirely easygoing—there was some dissension over what that community was, especially with regard to the presence of critics—but there was a spirited, stimulating conversation in which a wide range of dancers and viewers considered what they had seen in terms of aesthetics, philosophy, theory, history, criticism, pedagogy, pleasure, and practicality. And the discussion continued not only into the street outside DTW but, later, into the pages of blogs and essays and into the next semester's classrooms and studios.

Critical Correspondence "aims to activate discourse on dance and movement-based performance work."[10] It offers an open forum for dancers and choreographers to publish their own statements and interview each other about choreography, dance, and curating. There are discussions by choreographers and dancers of specific works and personal and professional circumstances; individual essays and recurring blogs; formal one-on-ones and casual roundtables; plugs for shows; thoughts on writing, funding, and presentational strategies for dance, and how these elements are linked to political and aesthetic frameworks. Critical Correspondence, whose very name and Movement Research address position language and dance as parallel structures of signification, exemplifies postmodern dancers' critical, analytical approaches to making and reflecting on dance as a cultural practice, an individual and collective effort, and an opportunity for subverting conventions in and out of the dance world.

A few excerpts suggest the span of concerns, ideas, and modes of writing:

Choreographer Clarinda Mac Low, in a June 2008 blog, writes on the language we use to interact with dance:

> Is there a way to talk and write
> about performance that mirrors
> the experience of the experience?
> Rather than a value judgment or

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> a critical analysis, can we share a sense of our inner reaction?... A non-verbal performance form leaves a poetic trace that is difficult to represent in narrative language. Maybe the most appropriate review of many dance works is actually a poem rather than a description of events of [*sic*] a series of critical thoughts.

In a 2006 interview choreographer Levi Gonzalez talks about curating and the critical aesthetics of AUNTS, the experimental performance model. "There's a little bit of a D.I.Y. [Do-it-Yourself] aesthetic," he says, "and I totally see rock show . . . and that it's a very social environment." He reads from a "manifesto":

> AUNTS is about . . . [t]he dance . . . that is known and expected and unknown and unexpected. . . . that seeps into the cracks of street lights, subway commotion . . . drunk nights. . . . AUNTS constantly tests a model of producing dance/performance/parties[,] that supports the development of . . . contemporary dancing[,] that expects to be adopted, adapted, replicated, and perpetuated by any person who would like to use it. Where performing can last five seconds or five hours; never a "work in progress." Where the work . . . defies the regulation of institution, capitalism, and consumerism.

In 2007 French choreographer Jérôme Bel, talking to Becky Hilton, explained his evolving belief, buoyed by philosophy and everyday screw-ups, in talking as dance performance. He describes Véronique Doisneau talking, in their dance, about her life in the Paris Opera ballet, and says that his duet with Pichet Klunchun was supposed to be the same but

> about the Thai traditional dance called Khon. [Then] I couldn't reach him in Bangkok because I missed many rehearsals because I didn't hear the clock because I was jetlagged . . . blahblahblah. I didn't have time to make the solo for him so I was forced to perform the meeting onstage.

Finally, in a 2006 interview, dancer Carolyn Hall describes her decision to leave dance for a career in environmental biology. "It's just this other part of me that needed to speak up again," she says. "It's time." Describing her difficult decision, and her intentionally packed schedule of last-time dancing, she says, "It's not that I wanted to leave *dance,* it's just that I wanted to do this other thing."

There are many other sites, online and in cafés, living rooms, classes, studios, and conference rooms, offering opportunities for excited conversation about dance. It is enormously important to keep talking and writing, in and out of the studio and performance space. Some truths prevail: bones are bones, muscles are muscles, and, as Merce Cunningham once said, the only thing you can do with your leg is bend it or straighten it. At the same time, everything changes: bodies, ideas, and how we understand them. Dancers recognize how lucky we are—it's why I'm still in this game—to do work that offers the potential, even the likelihood, for daily revelation. Sometimes that happens at what I think we experience at the body level. Sometimes it takes place in some conscious scholarly effort, or

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in a left/right-brain merging of everything we know from our first semiotic stirrings to our latest grapplings with Kristeva or Beckett or Rainer or Thich Nhat Hanh. When it comes to dance, as practitioners and as viewers, all we have to do is show up, fully, fortified by knowledge but unbound by expectations.

Notes

1. Although my classes generally contain a majority of women, they do often contain men as well. For the sake of this essay, and for simplicity of style, however, I will use "she" when referring to my students.

2. These two excerpts are from the essays "*Still/Here*: A Choreographic Enlightenment," and "No Fear of Flying" written by student Jessica Weiss in my spring 2003 seminar Writing About Performance, Gallatin School of Individualized Study, New York University.

3. These career choices apply to the range of degrees, from undergraduate to Ph.D., though at the doctoral level most have embarked on a career.

4. While I believe passionately that it is necessary for our art form to underline the importance of graduates who enjoy reading and are able to write well, it is also necessary to recognize that students nowadays graduate in dance with many different kinds of intelligence—often going beyond their actual dance studies to show a striking visual awareness, or an ability to deal with complex developments in technology.

5. I would like to pay tribute to Deborah Jowitt, with whom I was privileged to study in two short, intensive dance writing courses that she taught in London in the 1980s. Her teaching opened out ideas that still inspire me today.

6. See Denby (1986) and Berger (1972).

7. In *The Modern Dance* (Princeton: Princeton Book Company, 1989), John Martin (1989) introduced the term "metakinesis" to identify the physical/psychical connection experienced in watching dance. It was, he said, one of four main substances, or basic characteristics, attached to modern dance.

8. The idea for this is taken from a regular feature in Britain's *Sunday Times*.

9. This was advice, of course, that they were hardly yet in a position to deliver from personal experience.

10. See <http://www.movementresearch.org>.

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