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| **Cunningham, Merce (1919 – 2009)** |
| Cunningham, Mercier Philip |
| One of the twentieth century’s most influential dancers and choreographers, Merce Cunningham re-defined the genre of modern dance. He began his professional career as a member of the Martha Graham Company in 1939. However, by 1953, when he founded his own company, he had repudiated many of the prevailing beliefs and practices of previous modern dance pioneers. Prior to Cunningham, most modern dance choreographers (including Graham) vehemently rejected the fundamentals of classical ballet. Cunningham, by contrast, re-incorporated ballet’s emphasis on classical shape, line, elevation and intricate footwork. He offset these balletic elements with eccentric tilts and twists of the torso, back and arms. In the early 1950s, in collaboration with the composer John Cage, Cunningham also pioneered the use of ‘chance methodologies’ as a choreographic tool. Together, Cunningham and Cage fundamentally re-conceived the relationship between movement and music which had characterised virtually all earlier genres of choreography. In Cunningham’s dances, movement, sound and décor all remained independent of one another. Yet the underlying concept of collaboration remained fundamental to Cunningham’s dances, with celebrated composers and visual artists creating sound scores and designs for the company. Over the course of a career that spanned more than sixty years, Cunningham choreographed over 200 dances including *Root of an Unfocus* (1944), *Sixteen Dances For Soloist and Company of Three* (1951) *Septet* (1953), *Suite for Five in Space and Time* (1956), *Summerspace (*1958) *Rune* (1959), *Winterbranch* (1964), *Variations V* (1965) *Walkaround Time* (1968), *Rainforest* (1968), *Sounddance* (1975), *Torse* (1976), *Quartet* (1982), *Fabrications* (1987), *CRWDSPCR* (l993) and *BIPED* (1999). |
| Fig. Merce Cunningham.jpeg  Figure 1 Merce Cunningham (Annie Liebovitz)  Source:  <http://www.mercecunningham.org/merce-cunningham/>  One of the twentieth century’s most influential dancers and choreographers, Merce Cunningham re-defined the genre of modern dance. He began his professional career as a member of the Martha Graham Company in 1939. However, by 1953, when he founded his own company, he had repudiated many of the prevailing beliefs and practices of previous modern dance pioneers. Prior to Cunningham, most modern dance choreographers (including Graham) vehemently rejected the fundamentals of classical ballet. Cunningham, by contrast, re-incorporated ballet’s emphasis on classical shape, line, elevation and intricate footwork. He offset these balletic elements with eccentric tilts and twists of the torso, back and arms. In the early 1950s, in collaboration with the composer John Cage, Cunningham also pioneered the use of ‘chance methodologies’ as a choreographic tool. 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Cunningham’s life-long friendship (and eventual partnership) with Cage began later that year. Under the tutelage of Bird and Cage, Cunningham began to choreograph short solos, duets and trios as classroom exercises. During the summer of 1939, Cunningham served as Bird’s teaching assistant at Mills College in Oakland, California. Many of the principal pioneers of modern dance in America – Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman and José Limón – were in residence at Mills that summer. After seeing Cunningham perform in a number of works, Graham was so impressed that she immediately asked him to join her company.  Cunningham eagerly accepted her invitation. He re-located to New York City in the fall of 1939 and performed as a featured dancer with Graham until 1945. Over the course of those six years, Cunningham originated a number of seminal roles in the Graham repertoire, including the acrobat in *Every Soul is a Circus*, (1939), the Christ figure in *El Penitente*, March in *Letter to the World* (both 1940), the Poetic Beloved in *Deaths and Entrances* (1943) and the Revivalist in *Appalachian Spring* (1944).  During his final two years with Graham, Cunningham, in collaboration with Cage, began to choreograph (and publicly perform) his own dances. Cunningham and Cage’s first joint concert took place in New York City in April 1944. The programme included six solos Cunningham had choreographed for himself (all accompanied by Cage’s music), interspersed with three additional musical works by Cage. One of Cunningham’s solos, *Root of an Unfocus*, was structured entirely in terms of what Cage described as ‘time-length’. It was divided into three sections of varying duration. The only intentional connection between the music and the movement was a pre-determined ‘point’ of correspondence at the beginning and end of each section. Cage later observed: ‘[W]e were getting free of this business of fitting one thing to another. I had long had that idea of letting the two arts collaborate without following one another, but it was with *Root of an Unfocus* that we finally made some kind of progress’.[1] Cunningham would subsequently note: ‘I date my beginning from this concert’.[2]  **Major Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**  The relative ‘autonomy’ of movement and sound in this early Cunningham/Cage collaboration is especially revealing when examined in historical context. A few months later, in October 1944, Cunningham appeared in the premiere of Graham’s *Appalachian Spring*, a work that has come to exemplify the tight ‘fit’ between collaborative elements that Cunningham and Cage had already renounced. Indeed, the seamless way in which Graham’s choreography, Aaron Copland’s music and Isamu Noguchi’s setting blended into a singular artistic whole has become a legendary example of what most choreographers mean when they speak of ‘collaboration’.  By 1953, the year that Cunningham (again, in collaboration with Cage) founded his own dance company, he had radically re-defined what it means for choreographers, composers and designers to ‘collaborate’ with one another. The movement choreographed by Cunningham, the sound scores composed by Cage and the décor designed by visual artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Andy Warhol were all conceived and executed in mutual isolation. They ‘encountered’ one another for the very first time at dress rehearsal or on opening night. Not since the Diaghilev era had so many renowned composers and visual artists created work for a dance company. However, unlike the early collaborations encouraged by Diaghilev (which often aspired to the Wagnerian goal of *Gesamtkunstwerk* or artistic synthesis), Cunningham and Cage’s works had antecedents in Dadaist and Surrealist performance of the 1920s, an era that both artists claimed as part of their modernist heritage. The composer Erik Satie (whose 'Trois Morceaux en Forme de Poire' was used in *Septet* ) belonged to that pantheon as did the visual artist Marcel Duchamp. Indeed, the movable plastic boxes designed by Jasper Johns for *Walkaround Time* (1968), paid tribute to Duchamp and his seminal work ‘The Large Glass’.  In contrast to the hot, supercharged emotions of Graham’s dances in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the basic look and feel of Cunningham’s choreography was cool, reserved and elegantly detached, closer in fact to the style associated with George Balanchine. Its lightning-fast footwork, balletic uprightness and classically articulated shape placed a higher premium on the visual pleasures of formal complexity than on the kinetic, dramatic or expressive power of convulsive muscular contractions. In Graham’s dances, Cunningham had always portrayed a character (e.g. the Revivalist in *Appalachian Spring*). But in his own choreography, Cunningham never conceived of himself – or any of his dancers – as ‘characters’ possessing behavioural histories or psychological motivations. Their presence on stage only signified the non-fictional reality of a body moving in space and time.  Before Cunningham, modern dance was virtually synonymous with choreographic self-expression. Indeed, the high premium placed on personal expressiveness was widely regarded as the essential distinction between modern dance and its presumed historical adversary: classical ballet. Cunningham, by contrast, openly admired the purely formal and sculptural beauty of ballet. Even while performing with the Graham company, he regularly took class at the School of American Ballet, the training ground for George Balanchine’s dancers. In seminal works such as *Septet* (1953), *Suite for Five in Space and Time* (1956), *Summerspace* (1958) and *Rune* (1959), Cunningham became the first modern dance choreographer to combine the upright carriage, elegant line and razor sharp footwork of ballet with the curvaceous flexibility of back, torso and pelvis associated with modern dance – elements that formed the basis of what is now known as Cunningham technique. He was also attracted to ballet’s relative impersonality: the fact that ballet choreographers begin the dance-making process with a lexicon of existing steps and postures, which, by definition, are *not* unique to their own bodies or idiosyncratic ways of moving.  Prophetically, in 1944 Cage published a short essay about the state of contemporary dance in America. In it, he argued that  Personality is such a flimsy thing on which to build an art...And the ballet is obviously not built on such an ephemeron, for, if it were, it would not at present thrive as it does...That the ballet has something seems reasonable to assume. That what it has is what the modern dance needs is here expressed as an opinion.[3]  The principal problem with modern dance, suggests Cage, is that it  was not impersonal , but was intimately connected with and ultimately dependent on the personalities and even the actual physical bodies of the individuals who imparted it.[4]  Cage and Cunningham’s campaign on behalf of greater ‘impersonality’ in dance was part and parcel of their growing interest in Zen Buddhism, which they discovered in the late 1940s. Zen asks its practitioners to transcend (or at least de-emphasise) their personal desires, their innate likes and dislikes, including their most deeply held aesthetic preferences. For Cage, chance methodologies – rolling dice, tossing coins, picking cards at random or consulting the *I Ching*) – became the most practical way of achieving this goal. Cunningham followed suit, and beginning with *Sixteen Dances* (1951), he began to employ ‘chance operations’ as a means of making choreographic decisions about the order in which steps were combined into phrases, the tempo at which they were performed, the number of dancers performing each phrase, the on-stage location of each dancer, etc. This quest for greater ‘impersonality’ became central to Cunningham’s choreography. ‘If one's concern is self-expression,’ he once remarked, ‘then the proper area is psychoanalysis’.[5] In other words, artists should reserve their most intimate confessions for the analyst’s couch.  Like modernists of the 1920s, who incorporated new industrial materials and technologies such as film into ballet performances, Cunningham enthusiastically embraced advanced technologies including electronic tape splicing, video synthesizers, FM telemetry, radar and ultrasound as well as digital processes such as motion capture. As early as 1965, for a dance titled *Variations V*, Cunningham and Cage commissioned Robert Moog to design a set of twelve antennas, each of which generated an electromagnetic field with a radius of four feet. Whenever a dancer traversed one of these fields, his or her movement triggered the sounds that constituted the work’s musical score. In addition, the pioneering video artist Nam June Paik and the experimental filmmaker Stan Vanderbeek both created streams of moving imagery for *Variations V* that often turned the dancers’ unitards into projection screens. Moreover, beginning in the 1970s, Cunningham frequently collaborated with prominent videographers and filmmakers. Over the course of the next three decades, Cunningham, James Atlas and Elliot Caplan created many pioneering works of ‘dance for screen’:  *Fractions* (1977), *Points in Space* (1987) and *Beach Birds For Camera* (1991). Finally, in 1989, at the age of seventy, Cunningham began experimenting with LifeForms (subsequently re-named DanceForms) a digital animation programme which represents the dancer’s body as a series of concentric circles. Seated at a computer, Cunningham was able to both dictate and notate a wide variety of choreographic variables. Beginning with *Trackers* (l991), Cunningham became the first major choreographer routinely to utilise the computer as a choreographic tool.  Cunningham’s emergence as an influential choreographer in the 1950s and 1960s coincided almost exactly with the formulation of one of the twentieth century’s most influential conceptions of aesthetic modernism: art critic Clement Greenberg’s theory of modernist purity, which received its definitive formulation in his 1965 essay ‘Modernist Painting’. For Greenberg, all genuinely modernist art is only about itself, its true ‘subject’ being the underlying nature of the medium in which it was created. His theory, a refinement of older conceptions of ‘art for art’s sake’ and aesthetic formalism, both of which emphasized abstract purity of form over representational content, sat easily with Cunningham, who did not attempt to represent anything beyond the medium of the dancer’s body.  Cunningham is thus unique among modern dance choreographers in the extent to which he divested human movement of its potential for representing character, conveying psychological motivation or telling stories. This is yet another consequence of the chance-dictated processes that Cage first referred to as ‘getting rid of the glue’. In a 1954 essay published in *Dance Observer*, Cunningham wrote about ‘the use of chance as a method of finding continuity, that is, continuity thought of as being the continuum of one thing after another, rather than being related by psychological or thematic or other cause-and-effect devices’.[6] By severing the underlying relationships between cause and effect, Cunningham eliminated the psychological foundation upon which choreographers like Graham had constructed both character and narrative in their dances. Indeed, this new emphasis on each and every movement as a self-contained entity (what Cunningham called ‘each single instant as it comes along’) precluded the narrative trajectory of exposition, rising action, climax and denouement which were clearly visible in Graham’s best known dances. As André Malraux once wrote, ‘The distinguishing feature of modern art is that it never tells a story’.[7] But in response to the accusation that his non-narrative choreography fails to imbue movement with meaning, Cunningham made the following statement in his own defence: ‘If one thinks of dance as an errand to accomplish, as a message to be sent, then one misses the spring along the way’.[8]  **Legacy**  By rejecting the anti-ballet bias (as well as the emphasis on self-expression and representation) which had dominated American modern dance from the time of Isadora Duncan through the heyday of Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham radically altered the course of modern dance in the second half of the twentieth century. Along with Paul Taylor, he pioneered the rapprochement between ballet and modern that characterizes so much of today’s contemporary dance. His radical ideas about the autonomy of movement and music proved equally influential, helping to establish new models for the collaboration of choreographers, composers and visual artists. Similarly, Cunningham and Cage’s ideas about chance as a compositional tool has radically affected the way choreography is both practised and taught. Finally, Cunningham developed a highly respected technique.  Cunningham, with Cage, was the single most important influence on the next generation of choreographic innovators, especially those associated with the Judson Dance Theatre. Many had performed in his company, and their work frequently incorporated chance operations, the dissociation of movement and sound as well as a ‘factual’ (emotionally neutral) style of performance, all closely associated with Cunningham. However, notable differences exist between mentor and progeny. Cunningham rarely embraced pedestrian movement and never utilized untrained performers in his work. Like Graham and Balanchine, he remained faithful to a dance lexicon and their implicit belief in the value of virtuosic, corporeal skill. Spoken text figured only occasionally in his works. And despite his commitment to chance operations as a choreographic tool, there was little or no improvisation in the resulting performances. Another key difference between Cunningham and many of his postmodern followers is that his treatment of gender, as evidenced in his partnering, remained relatively conventional. Finally, he never abjured the idea of dance as a difficult and demanding form of ‘high art’.  **List of Works**  The Merce Cunningham Trust maintains the most comprehensive listing to date of Cunningham’s dances. The list is organised chronologically, beginning with the earliest dances known to have been choreographed by Cunningham and continuing through his final work created just a few months before his death. This catalogue of titles can be accessed on-line at <http://www.mercecunningham.org/choreography>  YouTube offers easy-to-locate excerpts of the Cunningham Company performing key dances such as *BIPED*, *Changing Steps*, *Second Hand*, *Beach Birds*, *Roaratorio*, *Variations V*, and *Split Sides*. Many of these excerpts were filmed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and appear on line courtesy of BAM and the Merce Cunningham Trust. |
| Further reading:  **References and Further Reading**  (Brown)  (Cage)  (Cage, Silence/Lectures and Writings)  (Copeland)  (Cohen)  (Croce)  (Croce, Going to the Dance)  (Croce, Sight Lines)  (Cunningham)  (Cunningham, The Dancer and the Dance/Conversations with Jacqueline Lesschaeve)  (Denby)  (Duberman)  (Johnston)  (Jowitt)  (Jowitt, The Dance in Mind)  (Jowitt, Time and the Dancing Image)  (Kostelanetz)  (Kostelanetz)\*\* check  (Siegel)  (Tomkins)  (Vaughan)  **Moving Image Material**  (Merce Cunningham Trust)  (Dalva)  **Photographs**  (Merce Cunningham Trust)  **Paratextual Material**  (Liebovitz)  **Endnotes**  1. (Vaughan 30-31)  2. (M. Cunningham, Changes/Notes on Choreography n.p.)  3. (Cage, Silence/Lectures and Writings 90)  4. (Cage, Silence/Lectures and Writings 91)  5. (M. Cunningham, Dance Magazine 22)  6. (M. Cunningham 107)  7. (Roud)  8. (M. Cunningham, Dance Magazine 22) |