

How TRADITION PARALYSES AMERICAN DANCE

Caught in the Timetrapp

My coming to New York in 1992 was accompanied by unanimous statements from locals declaring that New York was the place to be if I wanted to study and write about dance. I thought they were right. I had already been captivated by the incredible technique and presence of American dancers when I was in Europe in the late 1980s. This was a time when companies like Trisha Brown's and Merce Cunningham's appeared in European dance festivals alongside a younger generation of choreographers including Steven Petronio, Bebe Miller, and Douglas Dunn. The work and aesthetic of each generation of American choreographers gave European audiences quite extraordinary insights into an energetic dancing body both preoccupied with and fully able to expand its own limits of expression. The energy those works manifested was just incredible, the dancing precise, rigorous, self-involved.

However, this dancing also seemed to be disturbingly fixated on concerns and problems that had less to do with the world at large than with the act of dancing itself. It was almost as if those young Americans in the 1980s were still bound to the modernist concern of basing their creations on autonomy and self-referentiality. Although their dances sparkled with energy they failed to illuminate. Soon the sparkles burnt out. In the early 1990s I met Meg Stuart and followed her trio 'Disfigure Study' throughout several presentations. Her work introduced a totally different American dance form to European audiences. Along with Stuart, a younger generation of New York City based choreographers could also be seen in Europe.

Their work seemed to be proposing a totally new direction for the choreographic imagination, in a radical departure from the tradition represented by the bigger companies. Choreographers such as Margarita Güergue, Donna Uchizono, Jennifer Lacey, John Jasperse and Dennis O'Connor were particularly intriguing at the time, for they all seemed to be staging and exploring a new form for American dance, albeit in different manners. This was a form preoccupied with dismantling and considering compositional and movement traditions based solely on fixed techniques, solely concerned with movement exploration and virtuoso moves. I came to New York in the early 1990s trusting I would be in the city just in time to witness first-hand the change announced by Stuart and her contemporaries, a change that promised to be as radical as the experiments at Judson Church had been in the 1960s. My contemporaries, I was sure, would consolidate a new way of making dance, a new way of thinking about dance and the relationship between dance and the body, dance and stage, dance and expression. Their work had the potential to open up new ways of teaching and writing about dance. My first essay for this magazine reflected my optimism regarding what I thought was an irreversible progress towards a dance of intelligence in late 20th century America. Now that the

decade is coming to an end, it is clear to me that the promises contemporary American dance offered in the early nineties still lie dormant as unfulfilled potential. The slumbering of the choreographic imagination on this side of the Atlantic confirms to what an extent tradition is a powerful cultural controller. It also confirms the slow but sure widening of an unprecedented gap between the ways dance making and performing is done in Europe and in America. I see the following factors as crucial in the systemic unravelling and stagnation of the contemporary American choreographic imagination: the historical fixation on modernist values and practices; the academicisation of dance creation, presentation and criticism; the isolation of dance from the rest of the American art-world and the world at large; the emphasis on technique rather than performance; and last but not least, the collapse of federal funding for the arts in the early 1990s. Let me start with modernism. An insightful critique on the historical dynamics of recent American dance can be found in Susan Manning's review of Sally Banes' classic book 'Terpsichore in Sneakers.' Banes' book traces the genesis and development of the work of choreographers Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer, David Gordon, and collectives such as *The Grand Union*, who radically reclaimed and re-invented dance as a democratic enterprise in 1960s New York. Banes' book coined the term by which these choreographers have been known since: "Post-Modern." Susan Manning's critique of Banes is as simple as it is illuminating. Manning disputes the use of the term "post-modern" to describe the practices of the choreographers studied by Banes. Manning convincingly argues that the practices of the "post-moderns" were actually no more than a re-staging of early modernist concerns. Manning writes: "*Judson Dance Theater* occupied one of the last outposts of modernism, for it focused on the reflexive rationalisation of movement and upheld the distinction between modern dance and ballet." Manning identifies not only modernism in dance as lasting till the late 1970s, but post-modernism in American dance as starting in the early 1980s, when choreographers started moving away from two defining attitudes of modernist dance – 1) reflexive movement rationalisation and 2) opposition to ballet. It was a short-lived post-modernist moment.

A moment whose sparkle and potential I saw flickering on the European stages in the mid to late 1980s with Petronio, Miller and their contemporaries. Their moving away from strictly modernist concerns was brief, sketchy, and soon dead. A moment that I saw fully sketched out in the works of the younger generation of Stuart's contemporaries, whose pieces hit the European stages with a powerful force, but seemed to make no impact at all back in New York. Mostly because these works were caught up in a historical process that undermined it from the start, and by a political, critical, and pedagogical environment that did not

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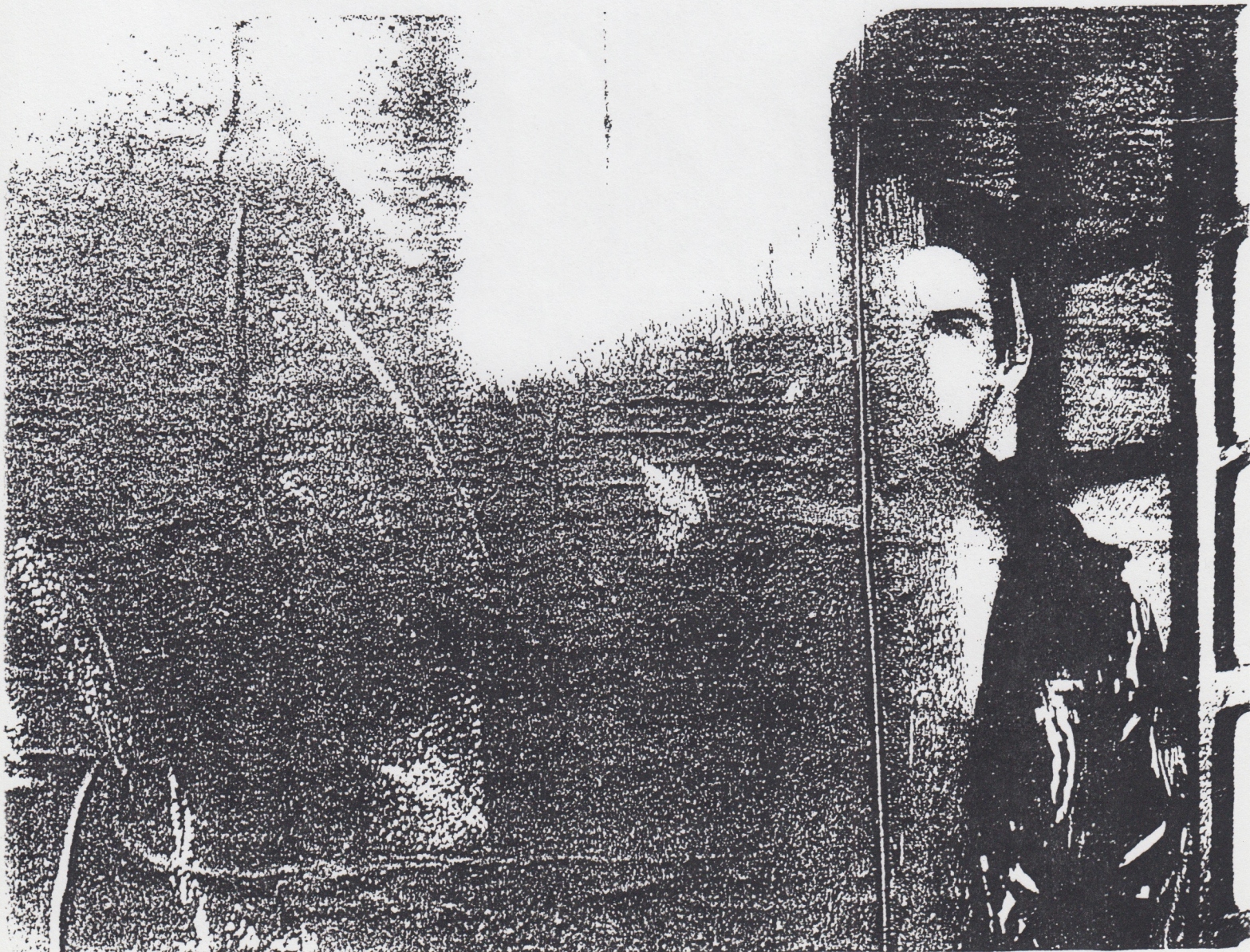
fully endorse the aesthetic changes that these post-"post-moderns" seemed, at least for a moment, to promise. The historical dynamics that kept modernist practices central in the American choreographic imagination (practices identified by Manning as "reflexive movement rationalisation" and opposition to ballet) were already in place in the American dance scene by the 1950s. Those practices crystallised quickly and powerfully as tradition, actually defining the very essence and identity of American dance. This identity shaped not only dances but an entire cultural system beyond the proscenium stage; the black box; the rehearsal studios, including dance teachers, critics, designers, dance schools, and techniques.

In 'The Shapes of Change', Marcia Siegel makes a critical attempt to characterise what is truly American in American dance. In a chapter appropriately titled "Crystallization I", Siegel describes an important element in understanding the dynamics of dance creation in the US. According to Siegel, both "training patterns" as well as "basic lines for creative development" had been well established by the 1950s, "with modern dance securely functioning within universities as well as in individual studios, and moving in summer to programmes based on the Bennington School of Dance." Such a dynamic of institutionalisation and academicisation increased in the following years and continued to do so ever since. As it elevated dance to an art-form deserving inclusion and recognition in university curricula, it also reified

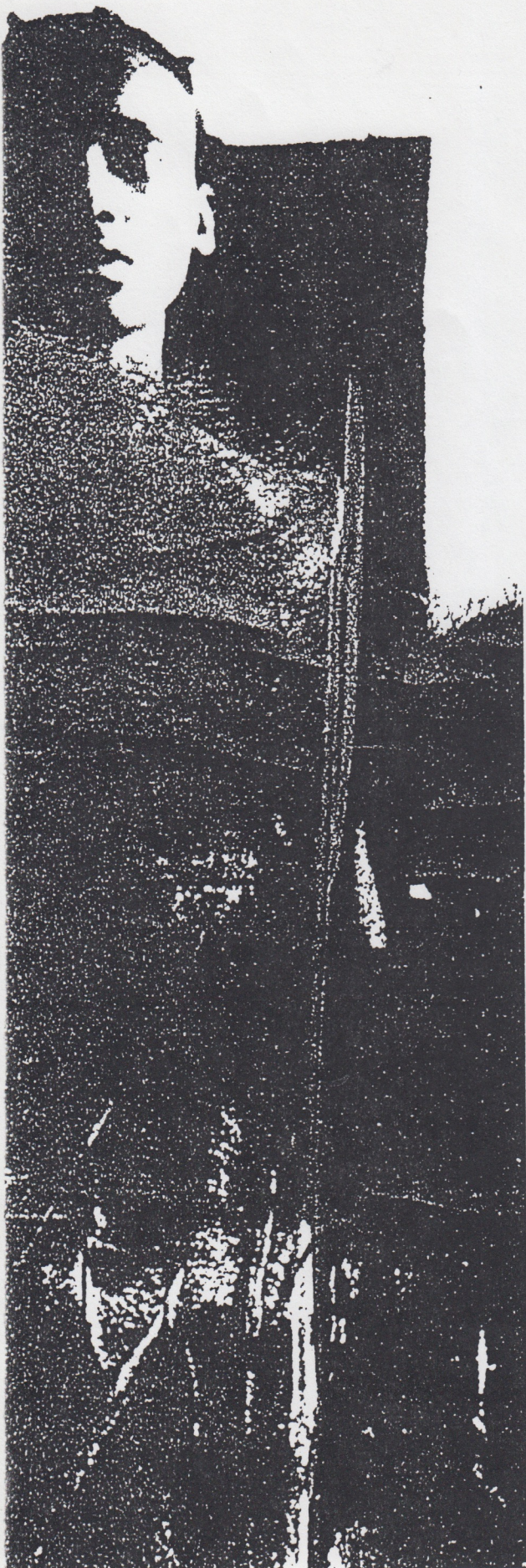
one of the fundamental requirements for it to remain in academic curricula: dance became identified and isomorphic with teachable techniques. A dance crystallised around that of a technique evokes the very core of modernist ideology. Remember how Nijinsky dismissed Isadora Duncan: "Her performance is spontaneous and is not based on any school of dancing and so cannot be taught ... it is not art." The fact that Nijinsky was wrong is unimportant; his perception is telling: artistic expression in dance must always be attached to schooling, to a fixed technique. Dance must be bound to reproduction. The decades of crystallisation of the American dance scene around academic programmes and schools led to further complications after a more recent development: the crisis in federal funding for the arts, promoted by conservatives in the US Congress in the late 1980s.

The slashing of funds and the re-structuring of the National Endowment for the Arts resulted in the fact that the major promoters, producers and presenters of dance in the US are currently the universities and colleges. This is the last step in crystallisation: from hosts of techniques to teachers of dancers, from producers to presenters of dances, from trainers of dancers to dance critics, academic self-containment, first just a mirror of the modernist trope, soon becomes the systematic, economic, and pedagogical loop trapping dance within tradition. Moreover, the seclusion characteristic of this circuit further isolates ▶

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► dance from the world of arts, preventing it from becoming something other than what it already has been and transcending the boundaries of "reflexive rationalisation of movement." As for Manning's second definition of modernist dance – its opposition to ballet: it is certainly true that we have seen a move towards theatricalisation in the US, mostly in the work of Bill T. Jones and David Rousseev. However, these experiments remain strangely naive in their structure and dramaturgy, ending up reinforcing in their actual staging the very distinction they try to erase. In American dance-theatre, dance always remains a foreign body within the piece, untouched by the rest of the piece's elements. These pieces invariably contain "dance scenes" followed by "theatre scenes" and sometimes "songs," all in a mode quite reminiscent of balletic narrative or musical theatre. There is always a libretto somewhere. Instead of experimentation, we have tradition.

Dancers from Europe who come to New York usually voice the following belief: "It is a great place for classes, to increase the awareness of your body. It is a horrible place to see interesting dance, to increase your abilities as performer and as artist." They are right, mostly. Moreover, I do not see how the current scene will change, given the systematic constraints I have outlined so far. It is at this point that I foresee the formation of an unprecedented schism between the practice of seeing and making dance, and of reviewing dance on both sides of the Atlantic. Demands on the dancer's creativity and skills are increasingly diverging on both sides of the Atlantic in an unprecedented manner. This split marks a truly profound secession within contemporary choreographic practices. In the US, dance remains a matter of anatomical self-experimentation; deeply bound up with Kleistian paradigms (or its structural opposite as proposed by contact improvisation), with its emphasis on lightness, fluidity and grace; deeply bound up with techniques that crystallised decades ago (Graham, Cunningham); incapable of thinking itself interdisciplinary if not by the means of the libretto. Contemporary choreographic practices in Europe are rapidly surpassing the Bauschian "tanztheater" paradigm, with Stuart, Jérôme Bel, Charmatz and other choreographers plunging more and more deeply into the logic of performance. Such a logic profoundly implicates presence and thus establishes a totally different relationship between dancer and choreographer. The dancer must also be an artist, a co-creator, a collaborator, capable of inventing steps as well as styles or even techniques. The choreographer must relinquish his investment in reproduction – in contrast to Nijinsky's desires, the choreographer's art no longer requires teachability. Rather, it requires an ever renewed plunge into the logic of each piece, into the specificities of the physical body of each different dancer. Finally, if we agree that seeing is a matter of technique and a learning process, then the contemporary European dance audience is currently undergoing an important sensorial process of transforming its means of perceiving dance as it watches the pieces of choreographers verging on performance. A new configuration for the audience's eye is being shaped, a new writing on dance is being proposed, and a new definition of dancing is required in every new work. The consequences of these changes in perception and creation are definitely establishing Europe as the current stage for dance experimentalism and innovation, after the overwhelming domination of the US throughout most of this century.

The American dance referred to in Sally Banes' 'Terpsichore Sneakers' as "postmodern" is still just modern

In July, André Lepecki will continue this discussion in 'Dance Theatre Journal,' C