

MARCIA B. SIEGEL

Dancing on the Outside

IN 1964 THE DANCER LUCINDA CHILDS made *Street Dance* for a choreography class given by Robert Dunn in downtown New York. The assignment was to make a piece exactly six minutes long. With an audience of fellow class-members and invited guests, the work was first performed as part of a group showing at Judith Dunn's loft in Chinatown. To begin, Childs turned on a tape recorder and headed downstairs in the elevator. Prerecorded instructions directed the audience to go to the windows and look down at a certain portion of the street below. A snapshot taken at the time reveals a row of shabby brownstones and loft buildings, with cluttered ground-floor storefronts, a fire escape, parked cars—the kind of scene New Yorkers pass through every day without a glance.¹ At precise intervals during the next six minutes a tape-recorded voice in the loft read a list of objects, spaces, and actions visible in that slice of the streetscape. Childs and another dancer, cued by the recorded instructions, motioned to objects or details on the list that the audience in the loft above might not have been able to see clearly. At other times the dancers blended in with the scene. An excerpt from the score went like this (numbers refer to minutes and seconds into the piece):

- 3:20 Dolls
- 3:22 Face each other
- 3:30
- 3:35 (Action of performers)
- 3:42 Gurbob
- 3:50 Fire escape

When the performance was over, the dancers returned upstairs and turned off the tape recorder. Robert Dunn later commented on the mysterious juxtaposition of Childs's soundless image in the faraway

¹ The photograph, published in a Childs souvenir book from 2000, shows the setting for a later performance that began in Robert Rauschenberg's loft on Broadway between 11th and 12th Streets. Since the instructions are so specific, Childs must have written and recorded a set for each performance. Such was the ephemerality and profusion of events during this period that the two *Street Dances* have become historicized into one. No published account gives the name of the other dancer.

street and the immediacy of her tape-recorded instructions right in the room with the audience.

Heightened perception was just one effect of Childs's seemingly simple composition. *Street Dance* could be thought of as conceptual art: once you'd read a description of it, you could imagine it or create your own street dance by making up your own score. But Childs and her colleagues were calling for a shift of expectations on many levels.

With its minimalistic scheme, its use of found materials, and its acceptance of unforeseen interventions, *Street Dance* exemplifies the early stage of the downtown revolution that came to be called postmodern dance. It could be a way of calling the spectator's attention to the neglected minutiae of everyday life. It could be thought of as a discipline for the dancers, who had to carry out their tasks unperturbed by the ongoing street life, or as an exercise for the audience in focusing attention, a meditation. But perhaps the most bizarre thing about it was that it introduced the techniques and objectives of art as a natural part of the mundane world, underscoring the messy order that defines city life itself.

Robert Dunn's 1964 class was the last in a series of methodical interrogations of dancemaking that sparked the rambunctious '60s avant-garde. After three years, during which products of the workshops had begun public showings under the rubric of Judson Dance Theater, Dunn felt that a certain redundancy had already crept into the avant-garde dance. Showings were sheltered affairs, given for a growing constituency of dancers, musicians, artists, filmmakers and eager friends. Participants worked in each other's pieces and often pursued similar gambits. For instance, both Trisha Brown and Simone Forti were interpreting objects found in the performing space as scores, beginning in 1961, and the idea of movement triggered off by the properties of a given environment fed Brown's imagination for years.

All the downtown dancers were determined not to look like dancers—neither formal dance technique, stagey attitudes, nor accepted artistic structures were to be used. Clothing, behavior, and the parameters of performance would be outwardly as close to civilian life as possible. Through a rejection of the rules of stage dancing, both the performers and the audience would gain new insight. Deborah Hay has described this process as “the execution of ordinary movement patterns performed under stressful conditions.” Steve Paxton produced several events to test whether you could preserve your ordinary demeanor while doing ordinary things (walking, sitting in a chair) in front of an audience. Most participants found they couldn't rid themselves of a certain self-consciousness in those circumstances, and the audience was offered a chance to study the differences among individual movers, without the distractions and excitements of splashy technique and personality.

When the Judson members began to split off on individual paths of performance-research, their presentations retained a somewhat secre-

tive aura. What distinguished Childs's *Street Dance* was the removal from loft or garden or Judson Church sanctuary to the unchoreographed arena of street life. People have always danced in the streets. Fairs, carnivals, rallies, religious processions, and parades, all may invite the public to participate in pre-arranged events. Street theater—clowning, commedia dell'arte, Dada outrages—leaves openings in prepared performances for the unexpected, the improvised, the found opportunity. During the 1960s, before there was a sanctioned category called site-specific performance, street dancing crossed these two big genres, combining the participatory with the premeditated.

In *Street Dance*, the people in the loft had the advantage of a guided tour, but the pedestrians down below simply encountered two ordinary-looking women doing slightly strange things. Tricked into awareness, the passersby might have wondered about the differences between everyday action and planned action, between public and private behavior, between "normal" and "different," between acting-out and acting. New York is full of oddball behavior and personal business on display, crazy people, students in extremist getups, and, in those days, hippies, protesters, and orators. The question for downtown dancing in the streets was how to exceed the ordinary just enough to get noticed, but not enough to get arrested.

It wasn't just the costumes or the demeanor that situated these performances on the borderline between theater and reality. Despite their ad hoc appearance, all the Judson dancemakers were actively seeking to replace conventional choreography with alternative compositional structures. During the 1950s, the West Coast dancer Anna Halprin had begun exploring two possibilities for discovering new movement: the use of elements in the environment as a "score" and the setting of a task or game. These solutions were widely adopted by the New York dancers, many of whom had studied with Halprin. While Halprin allowed for affect, and even encouraged the dancers to express their feelings while moving, the Judson aesthetic dictated neutrality; a performance consisted in the doing of the task, not a *way* of doing it.

Paxton's walking, sitting, turning people-pieces and Childs's dancers pointing out window placards in *Street Dance* were tasks on the most transparent level. Yvonne Rainer's *The Mind is a Muscle* (1966–68) compiled a whole series of tasks with inserted props, interactive signals, risky circumstances, and overlapping instructions. Despite these complications, or because of them, the performers had to preserve a workman-like demeanor while carrying out the tasks. These were considered structured improvisations; but unlike the open-ended use of improvisation to discover new movement possibilities, task structures and their fulfillment were an end in themselves; novel movement was deemed a byproduct.

Street Dance also contained the germ of spectacle: the dance consisted of the city itself, as reconfigured by the viewer. Childs didn't venture into the streets again, but beginning around 1970 Trisha Brown started

doing “equipment pieces,” meant to be performed indoors or out. They used special devices that allowed the performers to push ordinary tasks beyond ordinary physicality, or else they projected ordinary action into decidedly unconventional surroundings. Brown’s *Leaning Duets* and *Falling Duets* were as much about the body’s relationship to physics, gravity, and space as they were about movement per se. As exhaustive repetitions of the same task, they contributed to the burgeoning category of movement research that eventually encompassed such widespread practices as Release techniques for dancers and Contact Improvisation.

A film of *Leaning Duets* made in front of 80 Wooster Street in 1970 conveys the flavor of Brown’s work at the time—a disconcerting mixture of real and unreal, ordinary and extraordinary—and the amused, interested, or blasé reactions of New York pedestrians. Pairs of people tested their collaborative balance by bracing one foot against a partner’s foot, linking hands or grasping loops of rope, and trying to lean as far apart as possible. They could tell each other when they wanted to step in any direction, but the idea was to remain upright and cantilevered away from the partner. Curiously, the instructions did not allow the partners to lean *against* one another, and when one partner fell, the other was only allowed to give help by tugging at their mutual hand or rope connection.

Trisha Brown was by far the most daring of all the downtown innovators when it came to applying theory to a real environment, but even she placed her outdoor dances in semi-protected enclaves, the closed-off Wooster Street block in pre-boom Soho, for instance. Her most notorious adventure, *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* (1970), put together two perfectly reasonable components: the wall of a seven-story loft building and a mountain climber’s rappelling gear. The walker, Joseph Schlichter, was to proceed down from the roof as if he were strolling on the street. It took less than three minutes, and when he reached the ground the dance was over. According to Brown, “It had no rationale. It was completely art.”

A film made the same day as the *Leaning Duets* shows a small cluster of spectators gazing up as Schlichter made his way down the building, supported by a helper on the roof who played out the rope. It appears from the film that *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* didn’t take place in the street but in a less exposed alley or airshaft behind the building. The walker’s behaving as if he were on the ground while he was actually perpendicular to the wall created what Brown has called “the paradox of one action working against another.” Brown later expanded on the idea with *Walking on the Wall* (1971), a harness and pulley work for several people that was set up inside the Whitney Museum, and several other task pieces that played with notions of how we perceive verticality, everyday action, and spatial relations.

In May of 1971 she did the ingeniously conceived *Roof Piece*, which not only had a limited audience but couldn’t be seen in its entirety by anyone, not even the performers. After canvassing Soho, the dancers

took over the roofs of eight buildings stretching between Prince and White Streets, a distance of about half a mile. For fifteen minutes, a movement sequence was relayed from dancer to dancer across the roofs, then relayed back uptown for fifteen minutes in the other direction. Invited spectators were stationed on the roof of 420 West Broadway, where the dance started, and accidental viewers could glimpse parts of it from windows along the route.

This time Brown was not using everyday movement but a sort of semaphore gesturing that could be read by the relayers, who were attempting to imitate what they received exactly. Spectators could see the phrases deteriorate as they passed from one performer to the next. *Roof Piece* subtly shifted Brown's choreographic orientation from the exoticizing of the environment to the de-exoticizing of premeditated movement.

Although they weren't trying to dramatize their moves, the dancers in *Roof Piece* and other Brown works of the early '70s produced a side-effect of empathy. The audience could see how hard they were working to carry out a manifestly impossible task. In her *Accumulation* pieces, which began with several repetitions of one gesture, then added a move and another and another to a lengthening chain of action, she tested not only the performers' concentration but their ability to maintain an outward but uninflected focus. Brown established this performance mode in her solo *Accumulation* pieces, beginning in 1971, calmly and conversationally gesturing with no other intention than to execute the sequence. Brown's dancers never quite reached the level of virtuosity she herself achieved in the solo *Accumulation with Talking plus Watermotor* (1979), where she performed the movement sequence while telling two stories in alternating segments. But they learned to perform the thirty *Accumulation* phrases while lying on the ground in a park, floating on rafts in a lake, and being carried from one place to another by helpers.

Notwithstanding the idealistic tone of this work, its determination to democratize and de-aestheticize the whole enterprise of dancing and choreography, street dancing always has some element of spectacle. While Childs's *Street Dance* and the quasi-folk dances of Deborah Hay trod a fine line between visibility and invisibility, Brown's ordinariness called attention to itself in the landscape. By the mid-1970s Brown was moving back into the dance business, gradually abandoning the props and equipment, digging more into movement, and finally developing a dance company and a more conventionally choreographed repertory.

Other dancers took grander ideas to the streets. Twyla Tharp did several ambitious pieces in parks, for large groups of dancers dancing. Rudy Perez choreographed squads of dancers, motorcycles and cars. Meredith Monk staged one section of her three-part epic about Joan of Arc, *Vessel*, in a parking lot. Marilyn Wood arranged cinematic scenes in the windows of skyscrapers. It became harder to use the streets and public spaces for these expansive projects without special permission and planning. Once the performance was scheduled and situated, some

of its intrusiveness and strangeness became diluted. As the Counterculture worked its changes, physicality became less threatening. Everyone in the city got used to seeing joggers and tai chi classes and dancers in the parks.

The perceptual breakthroughs had been made; now it was all theater again. Street dancing, when it wasn't conventional dancing translated to an outdoor stage, reverted to modern forms of pageantry. Ann Carlson and Liz Lerman have prepared engaging and often elaborate community celebrations and re-creations of historical events, with citizens enlisted and rehearsed to play specific roles, and voluntary but not mandatory audience-participation. Min Tanaka and Eiko and Koma could be found, naked, struggling to stand up in frigid winds or slithering through leaves and mud. The Finnish environmental dancer Reijo Kela lived in a transparent room for a week in a Helsinki square. Philippe Petit walked on a rope from one World Trade tower to the other. And dancers from one end of the country to the other choreographed themselves into elegant estates and beaches and outdoor backdrops, with official sponsorship.

I thought the real challenges of outdoor dancing had been met. Then I encountered a baffling and mind-blowing piece called *Cell*, produced by Headlong Dance Theater during the Philadelphia Live Arts/Fringe Festival last fall. *Cell* was planned as a completely individual experience. Each participant/observer was given an appointment time. When you showed up at the festival office, they handed you a cell phone and a card directing you to walk out into the street in Old Town Philadelphia, proceed to the center of the Market Street overpass, and wait for a call. When it came, a voice, not a recorded voice, not a friendly voice, but a blandly affable voice that called you Buzz and wanted the right responses from you, instructed you where to walk and what to look for, then signed off with professional cheeriness until the next call. If you decided to play, you were taken on an enigmatic journey through streets, parks, alleys, and buildings. You started out playing the role of a typical goal-directed, cell-phone using pedestrian, and were led deep into a looking-glass of surreal encounters until you became a dancer. The voice on the phone always knew where you were and whether you were following orders. You were supposed to feel mellow and responsive. A willing player, you were a prisoner in plain sight. At the end you were invited to a party and given an address on the Internet where you could register your comments.

The beginning of the piece felt like a throwback. Since the eye-opening, touchy-feely, be-in-the-moment exhortations of the '60s I've been a people-watcher and a dedicated observer of the urban scene. I've also learned to suppress my native resistance to the coercive aspects of "audience participation" for the sake of performance research. I would go along with my telephonic guide's instructions, even though before I got off the bridge I became aware that someone with a video camera was coming toward me and maybe filming me.

As I round the corner my guide—I'll call him Control—recommends I take some time to look around. Then he suggests I watch a certain couple without being noticed. OK, I know how to do this, it's a finely honed skill practiced by New Yorkers. But something about the cell phone, the enforced observation, the programmed surveillance, makes me slightly paranoid. Are all the people on the street part of the piece? Are they all looking at me? Which one of them is Control?

Directed across the street to a park, I refuse to sit on a designated bench. A man, possibly a homeless man, is stretched out on it, apparently asleep. I tell Control I don't mess with street people and he allows me to sit somewhere else. A woman comes and squats next to me on the curb—too close. I don't flinch. She has to be part of the plan. She urges me to relax and look around. She thinks I need special encouragement to enjoy being in the park. She tells me to close my eyes. She's probably disappointed when I do this without hesitation and allow her to walk around me and to sing, right behind my back.

Pressed on by Control, I go into a bookstore. People at a bin in the front look at me curiously, and I explain that I'm part of a performance. They send me upstairs. Children's books about bees are strewn on a couch; but before I have time to look at them, a woman starts asking me pointless questions. She leads me to a window overlooking the park. The singing woman is there, ministering to another participant/observer. The woman in the store tells me disappointedly that I've missed out on some of the piece in the park by not cooperating. They've had to adjust their plan. She urges me to take risks, experience everything.

Now I'm feeling I've misbehaved, by being overconfident, thinking I was an old pro at improvising with strangers. I hate being criticized for carrying out orders in my own way. I'm wishing I hadn't gotten involved with these condescending and disapproving people, but I decide to put up with them and go through with whatever they've planned. Now I'm supposed to find a woman in a white hat.

In the street I catch sight of her, slipping around a corner. I hurry after her, but I don't run. I don't want to let them think I've been duped into chasing after a phantom on a busy street. She ducks into a record store and disappears up some stairs at the back. I go up the stairs, all the way, even though there's some kind of barrier warning you not to. I find myself in an empty attic. It's starting to get scary. The woman in the white hat is way at the end, sitting on the floor next to a computer. She talks to me in rapid Spanish. I don't speak Spanish but she seems to be asking me some urgent question. I try to answer, but she isn't satisfied. Whatever is on the computer screen doesn't make sense either. She finally shows me down to the back door of the store.

I open the door and two men, one young, one fiftyish, are standing right in front of me. Without talking they get on either side of me and take me through the alley. For a while we play follow the leader, improv stuff, shoulder-to-shoulder, arm-in-arm, twirling, skipping, crossing streets, looking in windows. Now I'm determined to get a response out of these guides. I try announcing their steps—attitude, arabesque. I'm a

dance critic, I say. They snicker. We're out on a wide street with parking meters and a cop on foot patrol. What do Philadelphia cops think about clumsily dancing trios in broad daylight?

Suddenly my partners turn and run off. Just then Control calls again. How you doing, Buzz? Fine, I say. You see that alley? Turn in there and right opposite you is a building . . . I go into an empty warehouse space. A man sits at a desk, explains to me that this is the "hive" and I'm almost there. I start to head toward a door, but he insists I stop and watch three girls who are wafting around on a sort of stage with a few chairs next to it. They seem to want me to join them but their dance doesn't seem interesting. I go through another door to another man at a desk in a windowless office. He gives me another encouraging prepared speech. I go through some more doors, and then I'm in a studio.

Three dancers lie on the floor head to head. They don't move. They're waiting for me to move. I walk around them, checking them out. Slowly I start to dance, and they follow me. We dance together for a few minutes, smiling a little. Then someone comes and tells me I have to leave. The video woman I saw on the bridge is filming me as I'm ushered outside. A man tells me how to get back to the starting place. He encourages me to post my feedback on the website. I tell him I'll probably publish it somewhere.

On the way back, I sit in the park and make notes. A man comes by whom I recognize as one of the guides. Was he my Control? He sits down, and we talk about the performance, almost normally. Before we can have any real conversation, he hurries away.

Cell reopened some of the questions that had been so provocative to dancers and artists decades ago. The world is more compliant now, less adventurous. The piece suggested it was time again to look at issues like the separation between audience and actors, the limits of dissident behavior, the richness of everyday life. Maybe we need to re-institute sensitivity and awareness training for this generation. But *Cell* proposed a bigger idea than self-realization or enrichment. It projected the participants into a much bigger framework, a global universe in fact, one that's highly ambiguous in its demands. In an hour's journey, you confronted the shifting definitions of observing and snooping, spying and being spied upon, playing a part and pretending to be normal, being manipulated and being a good citizen, the pleasure of learning and the peril of indoctrination. Free will became clouded by caution and a reluctance to stand out in a crowd. You placed yourself under an invisible system that rebuffed your attempts to communicate but nevertheless was conveying information to you and registering your feedback. Finally, you became complicit in your own kidnapping. The Judson utopians could never have imagined it.