COLLABORATIONS
BY ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG AND
JASPER JOHNS
WITH MERCE CUNNINGHAM AND
HIS DANCE COMPANY

Michelle Potter

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
of
The Australian National University

December 1993
I declare that this thesis is entirely my own, original work.

Michelle Patter
ABSTRACT

Between 1954 and 1978, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns undertook a number of theatrical commissions for the choreographer Merce Cunningham. These commissions are documented in detail in Appendix I and Appendix II of this thesis.

Rauschenberg and Johns made works for the Cunningham repertory that, despite the lack of in-depth critical attention that has so far been paid to them by art historians, were not marginal to their non-theatrical output. Their theatrical work displayed clear links with the various formal and conceptual issues with which they were involved outside the theatre, and was often also closely related to Cunningham's choreography.

Cunningham's approach to collaboration established a model in which process rather than product was emphasised, and in which collaboration was an inclusive act. It was inclusive in that Cunningham aimed to minimise the authorship of his work in order to establish an open system of collaboration. In such a system neither Cunningham's choreography, nor the contributions of his collaborators, was meant to be viewed as a dominant feature of the production, and
individual interpretations of the production, or of parts of the production, by the spectator as collaborator were considered possible.

In his Cunningham collaborations, Rauschenberg often produced art that was exclusive in that it did, at times, overtly declare its authorship, or display itself as a dominant presence in the collaboration. Johns, on the other hand, produced work for Cunningham that did not demand acknowledgment of its authorship. Its intrinsic qualities as a contribution to a specific collaboration were closer to the kind of inclusive environment sought and pursued by Cunningham.
CONTENTS
VOLUME ONE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS i

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS iii

INTRODUCTION 1

I. ARTISTS AND THEIR THEATRICAL COMMISSIONS 13
   1.1 The written tradition 16
   1.2 Some problems concerning performance and its documentation 35
   1.3 The artist's approach 50
   1.4 The scope of this study 62

II. THE CUNNINGHAM AESTHETIC AND ITS ORIGINS 66
   2.1 Cunningham and the notion of collaboration 68
   2.2 The importance of Black Mountain College 84
   2.3 Explorations in space and time 94
   2.4 The role of chance 107
   2.5 The Cunningham context 115

III. THE RAUSCHENBERG RESPONSE 119
   3.1 The functional costume? 124
   3.2 The articulation of space 141
   3.3 Setting the scene 155
   3.4 Rauschenberg's contribution 165
IV. THE JASPER JOHNS YEARS

4.1 Others and self 173
4.2 Defining the boundaries 186
4.3 Johns as collaborator 194

V. CONCLUSION 197

LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED

A note on the list of works consulted 207
Books and journal articles 208
Review articles in books and journals 231
Articles and reviews in newspapers, weekly magazines and miscellaneous publications 236
Exhibition catalogues 241
Unpublished dissertations and documents 243
Film, video and audio recordings 243/b
Miscellaneous 243/d
CONTENTS
VOLUME TWO

APPENDICES

A Note on the appendices 244

Appendix I: Works by Robert Rauschenberg for the Merce Cunningham Repertory 248

Minutiae 249
Springweather and People 253
Suite for Five in Space and Time 255
Nocturnes 258
Changeling 263
Labyrinthian Dances 265
Antic Meet 267
Summerspace 272
Night Wandering 276
From the Poems of White Stone 278
Gambit for Dancers and Orchestra 279
Rune 280
Crises 282
Hands Birds 285
Waka 286
Music Walk with Dancers 287
Aeon 288
Field Dances 292
Story 294
Paired 298
Winterbranch 299
Museum Event #1 301
Travelogue 303

Appendix II: Works by Jasper Johns and Colleagues for the Merce Cunningham Repertory 307

Scramble 308
RainForest 311
Walkaround Time 314
Canfield 318
Tread 322
Second Hand 324
Signals 326
Objects 328
Loops 331
Landrover 332
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TV Rerun</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Un Jour ou deux</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchange</td>
<td>336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appendix III:</strong> Michelle Potter, &quot;'A License to Do Anything': Robert Rauschenberg and the Merce Cunningham Dance Company,&quot; <em>Dance Chronicle</em>, 16, No. 1 (1993), 1-43.</td>
<td>337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appendix IV:</strong> Michelle Potter, &quot;Archiving the Evanescent: Dance Collections and Australia,&quot; <em>Voices</em>, 3, No. 3 (Spring 1993), 95-106</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appendix V:</strong> Michelle Potter, &quot;Merce Cunningham and the 'Specter of the Gesamtkunstwerk',&quot; Paper Read at the Symposium <em>Black Mountain College and Merce Cunningham in the Fifties: New Perspectives</em>, Russell Sage College, Troy, New York, 9-10 October, 1993</td>
<td>396</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ILLUSTRATIONS 411
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not exist without the generous support I received from David Vaughan, archivist for the Cunningham Dance Foundation Incorporated. Apart from allowing me access to his extremely comprehensive archives, and sharing with me his wide knowledge about all things Cunningham, David arranged for me to watch classes and rehearsals at Westbeth, the Cunningham studio in New York City, and smoothed the way for many other valuable connections to be made. I am also grateful for his meticulous reading of my work. He read, and made suggestions for, the draft of my article on the Rauschenberg years, published as "'A License to Do Anything': Robert Rauschenberg and the Merce Cunningham Dance Company" in Dance Chronicle, 16, No. 1 (1993), 1-43. He also very kindly read through a draft of the first two appendices to the thesis, those that document the Cunningham works to which Rauschenberg and Johns made contributions. In addition, he read my paper entitled "Merce Cunningham and the 'Specter of the Gesamtkunstwerk'" at the symposium Black Mountain College and Merce Cunningham in the Fifties: New Perspectives held in October 1993 at Russell Sage College, Troy, New York when I was unable to be present.

I am also indebted to Carolyn Brown who performed with the Cunningham company during almost the entire period covered in this thesis. Her recollections, especially of the early Cunningham pieces designed by Rauschenberg, many of which are poorly documented in traditional sources, were invaluable. Associate Professor George Dorris introduced me to Carolyn, and to him and to Jack
Anderson, co-editors of Dance Chronicle, I am grateful for support and advice on many matters.

To the entire staff of the Dance Collection, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts I express my enduring and deepest gratitude. They made my constant use of a wonderful resource over a three month period in 1991, and again during a brief visit in 1993, not only a stimulating and challenging experience, but a very happy one as well.

My friends and colleagues at the Australian National University in Canberra provided advice on a wide-ranging collection of matters both art historical and administrative. My supervisory panel consisted of Dr Erika Esau and Dr Sasha Grishin from the Department of Art History and, from the Department of Philosophy, Mr Paul Thom. For help in the final stages of the production of the thesis I would also like to thank my middle son, James, who diligently applied himself to the task of copy editing.

My research was supported by an Australian Postgraduate Research Award, and my initial field work in the United States in 1991 was funded by a generous grant from the Australian National University.
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Note: Where the source of an illustration is a published work, reference to the publication is in an abbreviated form. Full citations are given in the bibliography. Dimensions of the art works are those given in the source material; no attempt has been made to convert measurements which are, therefore, sometimes given in inches, other times in centimetres.

1: Robert Rauschenberg. Set (object) for Minutiae, 1954, oil and collage with cloth and objects, 84 1/2 x 81 x 30 1/2 in. Collection: The artist. Source: Kotz, p. 112.


Source: Healy and Lloyd, p. 53.

Source: Elderfield, pl. 10, p. 58.

10: Kasimir Malevich. Set design for act 2, scene 5 of *Victory over the Sun*, 1913, pencil on paper, 21 x 27 cm. Collection: Leningrad State Museum of Theatrical and Musical Arts.

11: Kasimir Malevich. Costume design for the Attentive Worker in *Victory Over the Sun*, 1913, pencil, brush and india ink, and gouache on paper, 27.2 x 21.2 cm. Collection: Leningrad State Museum of Theatrical and Musical Arts.

12: Léon Bakst. Costume design for two bacchantes in *Narcisse*, 1911, watercolour and pencil on paper, 66.6 x 48.2 cm. Collection: Dance Collection, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
Source: Bakst, pl. 31.

13: Merce Cunningham. Working diagram for *Summerspace* showing the derivation of the work's space structure, 1958.
Source: Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance*, fig. 6.

14: Mikhail Larionov. Costume designs for peasants in *Soleil de Nuit*, 1915.
Source: Souvenir program, *Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo (Col. W. de Basil's) Ltd, Australia and New Zealand Season 1936-7*, unpaginated, dimensions and media not given.

Source: Healy and Lloyd, p. 45.

Photo: Richard Rutledge, courtesy of the Dance Collection, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

18. Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Costume (worn by Merce Cunningham) for *Changeling*, 1957. Photo: [Richard Rutledge], courtesy of the Dance Collection, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.


20. Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Performance shot of *Antic Meet* showing Rauschenberg's parachute dresses (worn by [L-R] Barbara Dilley, Viola Farber, Shareen Blair, and Carolyn Brown) and Cunningham wearing his neckless sweater. Photo: Fannie Helen Melcer, courtesy of the Cunningham Dance Foundation Inc.


23. Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Performance shot of *Travelogue* showing Rauschenberg's dropcloth and "group" costume. Photo: Charles Atlas, courtesy of the Cunningham Dance Foundation Inc.


32. Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Performance shot of *Nocturnes* showing the final version of Rauschenberg's set. Photo: Oscar Bailey, courtesy of the Dance Collection, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.


35. Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Performance shot of Minutiae (with [L-R] Remy Charlip, Marianne Preger-Simon, Carolyn Brown, Viola Farber, and Karen Kanner) showing Cunningham's "found" movement poses. Photo: John G. Ross, courtesy of the Cunningham Dance Foundation Inc.


40. Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Performance shot of Scramble showing Stella's set and costumes. Image from Event for Television filmed in 1976 for the WNED series Dance in America, courtesy of the Cunningham Dance Foundation Inc.


44. Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Performance shot of *RainForest* (with [L-R] Alan Good, Robert Swinston and Helen Barrow) showing Warhol's *Silver Clouds* set and Johns's ragged costumes. Photo: Michael O'Neill, courtesy of the Cunningham Dance Foundation Inc.

45. Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Performance shot of *Walkaround Time* showing Johns's costumes and the setting after Duchamp's *The Large Glass*. Photo: James Klosty, courtesy of the Dance Collection, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

46. Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Performance shot of *Second Hand* showing Johns's costumes. Photo: James Klosty, courtesy of the Cunningham Dance Foundation Inc.


Source: *Jasper Johns: A Print Retrospective*, p. 93.

Source: Boudaille, pl. 9.
INTRODUCTION

In the history of twentieth century dance, Merce Cunningham (born 1919) occupies a seminal position having made major challenges to perceptions about the nature of that art form. Although Cunningham has said that he did not become a dancer but that he has always been dancing,¹ he began his formal training at an early age in his home town of Centralia in Washington State. Later he moved on to the Cornish School in Seattle and then to Mills College in Oakland, California. Before establishing his own company, he danced during the 1940s as a soloist with Martha Graham, whose company he joined in 1939.

Also during the 1940s, Cunningham began to choreograph works for himself, often using the compositions of his friend and associate John Cage (1912-1992). The connection with Cage, whom Cunningham first met at the Cornish School in the 1930s where Cage was an accompanist for dance classes, was critical. They worked together from the 1940s onwards, with Cage writing Credo in Us, his first piece to accompany a

Cunningham dance, in 1942. Cage was the Cunningham company's musical adviser for a number of decades and was often also its spokesperson. Former Cunningham dancer Carolyn Brown has indicated that, once the Cunningham company began operating as a performing group in the 1950s, it was often to Cage that the dancers turned for day-to-day information about the company's activities. Cage, Brown has suggested, was in fact the source of many of the company's public appearances, often insisting that Cunningham perform at engagements that Cage had initially secured for himself.²

Robert Rauschenberg (born 1925) first collaborated with Cunningham in 1952 at Black Mountain College in North Carolina when they both contributed to what has since been called the first "happening" in the United States, Cage's *Theatre Piece No. 1.*³ Rauschenberg was, in 1952, a student at Black Mountain at the College's regular summer session. Both Cunningham and Cage were performing and teaching that summer as members of the Black Mountain College faculty.

² Carolyn Brown, Personal interview with the author, 31 October 1991, New York City. As an example, Brown cited the tour to Stockholm made in 1958 by Cage, Cunningham, composer David Tudor, and Brown herself.

³ The influence of Black Mountain College, and especially of Cage's *Theatre Piece No. 1,* on the careers of Cage, Cunningham and Rauschenberg is discussed in Part II of this thesis.
The embryonic association made between Rauschenberg, Cunningham and Cage at Black Mountain in 1952 continued to develop in subsequent years. The Cunningham dance company, initially called Merce Cunningham and Dance Company, first came together as an entity the next year at the 1953 Black Mountain summer session, a special session focusing on music and dance. The following year, 1954, Rauschenberg made his first work specifically for the Cunningham company, the object that comprised the set for *Minutiae*. Over the next eleven years Rauschenberg acted variously as the company's scenic, costume, and lighting designer and as its stage manager, and between 1961 and 1964 travelled with the company on its tours both within the United States and overseas. Between 1954 and 1964 he contributed to over twenty of Cunningham's dance works. He left the company at the end of its 1964 world tour, but returned in 1977

---

4 The name of the company was eventually changed to, and remains as, the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. The change occurred because Cunningham wished to stress the non-hierarchical nature of his performing group - David Vaughan, "Retrospect and Prospect," *Performing Arts Journal* (Winter, 1979); rpt. in *Merce Cunningham: Dancing in Space and Time*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Pennington, N.J.: a capella books, 1992), p. 124. In a personal interview with the author on 10 October 1991, Vaughan also suggested that the change came about as the company grew larger, and as Cunningham began to perform himself with less and less frequency. The current name is used retro-actively throughout this thesis.

5 The Cunningham works to which Rauschenberg made contributions are catalogued in Appendix I.
to collaborate once more with Cunningham and Cage on a new piece, *Travelogue*.

Jasper Johns (born 1930) did not participate in any of the Black Mountain summer sessions. His first associations with Cunningham and his dancers came as a result of his friendship with Rauschenberg, whom he met in New York City in the early 1950s. Johns worked closely with Rauschenberg between 1954 and 1961, and this work included assisting Rauschenberg on a number of early Cunningham pieces. Johns has recorded, for example, that he helped Rauschenberg to steady the rather precarious-looking construction Rauschenberg had designed for his first Cunningham commission, and has said that he worked with Rauschenberg in that way up until Cunningham's 1960 production, *Crises*.

In 1967, Johns was appointed artistic adviser to the Cunningham company, a title which, in fact, was never

---


officially bestowed upon Rauschenberg who was always simply referred to as designer of scenery, costumes, lighting, or whatever was appropriate in each case. John's contributions to the repertory of the Cunningham company were most concentrated between 1967 and 1972 when he made himself, or commissioned others to make, more than ten works for the company. In 1973 he also collaborated with Cunningham and Cage on *Un jour ou deux*, a piece commissioned by the Paris International Dance Festival and the *Festival d'automne*, and made not for the dancers of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, but for the Paris Opera Ballet. His other major contribution to the Cunningham repertory came in 1978 when he designed *Exchange*, again for the Cunningham company. A new artistic adviser to the company, Mark Lancaster, was officially appointed in 1980 although Lancaster had effectively been resident designer since 1974.

The contributions made between 1954 and 1978 by Rauschenberg and Johns to the Cunningham repertory form part of a long and diverse, if often marginalised,

---


10 The works from the Cunningham repertory to which Johns contributed, either by commissioning others or by making items of visual art himself, are catalogued in Appendix II.

tradition in which artists who have not been specifically trained as stage designers have made works for use in theatrical productions of various kinds.\textsuperscript{12} Such contributions have included not only costumes and stage sets, including items of sculpture, but often lighting designs, make-up, and assorted properties. They have involved such artists with a diverse range of materials, spaces in which to show their works, and collaborative partners, and have, thus, expanded the range of creative possibilities available to them.

The tradition of artists working in the theatre is also one that raises a number of general issues that pertain to the interrelationship between the visual and the performing arts. Such issues concern, in particular, the nature of the aesthetic object produced in a theatrical context, and the problems associated with its documentation. General matters concerning the output of artists who work in the theatre are considered in Part I of this thesis, along with the manner in which such issues have been critically addressed by scholars.

Cunningham collaborations also belong to a more specific tradition in which artists have worked with dance

\textsuperscript{12} Some of the issues surrounding the perceived differences between artists who work in the theatre and artists specifically trained as stage designers are discussed in Part I of this thesis.
companies. Looking at dance from a scholarly perspective is beset by a number of problems that affect the way an artist's contribution is perceived by the wider academic community. Some of the issues concerning dance as an area of scholarly study, and how these issues affect an understanding of the output of an artist working in the theatre, are also examined in Part I.

Within this specific tradition, collaborating with Cunningham provided Rauschenberg and Johns with a unique set of working conditions. Cunningham's choreographic approach, which illustrates his seemingly simple statement "dancing is movement in time and space,"\(^\text{13}\) has always been one that questions the nature of dance and the danced performance. In particular, Cunningham has reconsidered historical perceptions of what constitutes the performing space, and has examined the interconnections between space and time. He has, along with Cage, also explored the role of chance and indeterminacy as a compositional tool. More recently he has experimented with videodance and with computer-generated procedures as an aid to choreography.

\(^\text{13}\) Merce Cunningham, Changes: Notes on Choreography, ed. Frances Starr (New York: Something Else Press, 1968), unpaginated [front end-paper]. My pagination of Cunningham's unpaginated Changes begins with the number 1 on the first recto page, excluding end-papers - in this case the copyright page.
In addition, Cunningham's approach to collaboration across the arts, in which he has always emphasised the separateness of the individual contributions to the whole, appears to run counter to the notion that collaboration produces a unified piece of "total" theatre. Cunningham has written:

What we have done in our work is to bring together three separate elements in time and space, the music, the dance and the decor, allowing each one to remain independent. The three arts don't come from a single idea which the dance demonstrates, the music supports and the decor illustrates, but rather they are three separate elements each central to itself.\textsuperscript{14}

The development by Cunningham of his individualistic aesthetic and approach to collaboration in the arts, and the multiple influences which have given rise to his aesthetic are discussed in Part II.

As a result of their early close association, the work and the working approaches of Rauschenberg and Johns have often been compared and contrasted. Initially, the differences in their respective approaches were highlighted,\textsuperscript{15} and those differences were thought to be reflected both in the formal manifestations of the work of each artist, as well as in their philosophical stances. Johns, for example, was always seen as more introspective than the extrovert, ebullient

\textsuperscript{14} Cunningham, \textit{The Dancer and the Dance}, p. 137.

\textsuperscript{15} See in particular Lawrence Alloway, \textit{American Pop Art} (New York: Macmillan, 1974), pp. 52-53.
Rauschenberg. Johns's painstakingly worked encaustic surfaces from the early part of his career, and his repetition of familiar images, such as his flags, targets and numbers, stand in contrast to Rauschenberg's flamboyantly collaged surfaces and his concern that he never repeat himself. Then, Johns's pursuit of an art that appears enigmatic and oblique, of which Robert Hughes has said: "It was all about indirection: the difficulty of seeing anything clearly, of naming anything right,"\textsuperscript{16} differs from Rauschenberg's confrontation with multiplicity, and his approach to both art and life described by Brian O'Doherty as: "- you live in it, but you don't have to understand it."\textsuperscript{17}

On the other hand, Calvin Tomkins has suggested that during the 1950s these two artists were engaged in a similar process: they were both creating a pathway out of Abstract Expressionism by pursuing an art beyond self-expression.\textsuperscript{18} Unlike the highly personalised, gestural paintings of the Abstract Expressionists, the


art-making of Rauschenberg and Johns was, Tomkins has suggested, one which in many of its characteristics "encompassed and reflected the real world."¹⁹ Johns, for example, is often credited, as a result of his series of target and flag paintings made from the mid 1950s onwards, with having reintroduced the representational image into painting.²⁰ Rauschenberg, by incorporating found objects and photographic transfers into his works, has been referred to as "an effaced artist in the tradition of Duchamp and his ready-mades."²¹

More recently, the connections between Rauschenberg and Johns have been examined from at least two different standpoints. Curators have linked the work of Rauschenberg and Johns not simply because it represented a way out of Abstract Expressionism. In a re-examination of the beginnings of Pop Art in America, the work of Rauschenberg and Johns, as a result of its combination of a number of the features of both Abstract Expressionism and Pop, has been characterised as representing a transitional period between those two

¹⁹ Tomkins, Post- to Neo-, p. 3.


movements.\textsuperscript{22} Then, the nature and implications of the early association between Rauschenberg and Johns have recently been re-examined in the context of gay culture.\textsuperscript{23} Jonathan Katz has suggested that the works made by Rauschenberg and Johns during the 1950s and up to 1961, the years that they were lovers, indicate that a creative interdependence developed between them that both complemented their personal relationship, and fostered the development of a new pictorial language for each artist.

Given the variety of ways in which the work of Rauschenberg and Johns has been linked, it is surprising that their collaborations for Cunningham and his company, which Rauschenberg began while he and Johns were a couple and with which Johns assisted from the very beginning, have never been examined in depth. These collaborations generate a number of questions concerning the theatrical output of the two artists. What, for example, is the relationship between their theatrical and non-theatrical work? And do the


similarities, differences and connections that have been highlighted in their work outside the theatre also surface in their theatrical output?

In addition, the Cunningham approach to collaboration, and the specific contributions of Rauschenberg and Johns to it, raise issues concerning the nature of the collaborative endeavour itself. How do the contributions of Rauschenberg and Johns relate to other aspects of the collaboration, and to theories of theatrical collaboration where dance companies are involved? What influence is wielded by the particular environment provided by Cunningham for his collaborators? The nature of the contributions of Rauschenberg and Johns to the Cunningham repertory, and their responses to the Cunningham environment, are examined in Parts III and IV, while Part V presents the conclusions reached as a result of this analysis.
In a catalogue essay written to accompany an exhibition of artists' sets and costumes shown at the Philadelphia College of Art in 1977, Janet Kardon referred both to the absence of a critical tradition surrounding an artist's theatrical commissions, and also to the difficulties of building such a tradition. Such problems, Kardon indicated, derive partly from the transient nature of the performance. She also suggested that they reflect a certain wariness by writers, who may not have seen a particular performance, to engage in a discourse based solely on residual data.¹ With regard to an artist's contributions to a particular production, the problems concern not so much the documentation of the artist's work, which can be an aspect of the performance that remains in some tangible form long after the performance itself has ceased to exist, but of the relationship of the artists' body of work to the performance and production themselves.

Despite the very real problems outlined by Kardon, and reiterated by others who have noted especially the lack of a "fundamental dialogue between the media," there does exist a body of written work that considers artists' theatrical commissions. The presence of this body of work, in the face of critical remarks from writers like Kardon and others, raises the question of the theoretical position of these existing studies. Is the published material unsatisfying, unscholarly, and without a critical discourse? If so, is the ephemerality of the performance the major reason for the absence of a tradition of critical writing?

In the following discussion of artists' theatrical commissions, and the written tradition surrounding those commissions, an artist's work includes all items created by the artist to be seen in the context of a specific production. The presence of a proscenium theatre for the display of these items is not a necessary factor. The existence, however, of a commission to an artist from a performing group or a performing artist, no matter how vaguely defined that patronage may be, is a necessary factor. Although issues relating to performance art impinge upon this thesis in a number of ways, and performance art and performance theory are

---

referred to at various points in the text, this thesis is concerned with dance works that, unlike performance art, are made to be part of an ongoing repertory, and with the visual materials produced by artists who are invited to contribute to those dance works. Even though a number of works from the early Cunningham repertory to which Rauschenberg and Johns contributed were given only a limited number of performances, they were not conceived of as pieces of performance art or some kind of happening. Even Cunningham's *Events* were made up of excerpts from existing repertory.¹

Specific examples used in Part I of the thesis are, in general, limited to those that concern collaborations between artists and dance companies, or at least to collaborations in which movement rather than words has been a dominant factor. This limitation is based on a need to exclude problems associated with the written text in performance. Issues surrounding the role of the written text are significant in a general theatrical context, and even in the context of later, postmodern dance when the issues of narrative and text become critical, but are less so in the specific context on which this thesis centres.

¹ *Events* are discussed in more detail on pp. 99-101 of this thesis.
1.1 The written tradition

Previously published materials that examine the theatrical commissions of visual artists fall into one of a number of categories. These categories, which at times overlap, include survey works such as histories of stage design, and histories of particular theatrical genres such as dance and drama; monographs on particular artists whose output has included some theatrical commissions; studies that focus on particular performing groups; exhibition catalogues with a substantial written component; and, rarely, in-depth examinations of a particular theatrical piece.

Surveys, often of monumental proportions, have particular problems associated with the scope of the work. They most often focus on a very wide range of artists and theatrical genres, and often also cover an extensive historical period, rarely treating any artist, genre or period in any satisfactory depth. Henning Rischbieter's *Art and the Stage in the 20th Century: Painters and Sculptors Work for the Theater,* for example, describes the theatrical commissions of many artists, including painters and sculptors, in Europe,

Britain, and America from Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec to Jim Dine. Along with this overview, Rischbieter also attempts to situate the artists' theatrical work in an historical framework but, ambitiously, he covers the period from the Renaissance to the 1950s. Similarly, the publication, *Die Maler und das Theater im 20. Jahrhundert*, produced to accompany a large survey exhibition of artists' theatrical work, ranges across a broad spectrum of companies and activities. Such all-encompassing works have general appeal, but usually have limited scholarly value beyond indicating starting points for future, in-depth research.

Monographs on individual artists often marginalise or ignore that artist's theatrical work. Where it is examined at all, the authors of such publications refer in chronologies to the existence of theatrical commissions and select a few for brief mention in the text. Mostly, an artist's theatrical work is seen merely as a trifling adjunct to his or her non-theatrical output, or, at best, as a direct outgrowth of non-theatrical ventures. In her monograph on Rauschenberg, Mary Lynn Kotz, for example, rightly highlights the relationship between Rauschenberg's object for *Minutiae* (illus. 1), his first Cunningham

---

commission made in 1954, and the red paintings he was making slightly earlier in 1953. The *Minutiae* object recalls *The Red Painting* (1953) (illus. 2) and *Yoicks* (1953) (illus. 3), both in the use of colour and the use of newspaper and cloth as collage items. Formally, it also is akin to his *Charlene* of 1954 (illus. 4). Both *Charlene* and the set for *Minutiae* rely on a strong vertical patterning of elements with a geometric arrangement within those verticals.

But the *Minutiae* construction also anticipates directions Rauschenberg would take in the future. Rauschenberg coined the word "combine" in the 1950s to describe the works he was producing in which he combined aspects of painting and sculpture in the one art work. His combines, such as his *Untitled* (1955), (illus. 5), are generally considered to have been executed between 1955 and 1962. But, with its found objects and images of various kinds juxtaposed against areas of painting, and with its three-dimensional, sculptural features including its found furniture legs used as a structural item, the *Minutiae* object was Rauschenberg's first combine. It paved the way for future developments from

---


1955 onwards. Although she acknowledges Rauschenberg's Cunningham collaborations as a "major involvement," Kotz analyses neither the extent nor the implications of that involvement, not even in a limited way by considering the simple possibility of there being a reciprocal, rather than one-way, influence between the outward manifestations of Rauschenberg's non-theatrical work and his collaborations with the Cunningham company. The significance of the Minutiae object in the development of Rauschenberg's oeuvre indicates that it is important to treat artists' theatrical commissions with the seriousness normally reserved only for their non-theatrical works.

A few publications, such as Douglas Cooper's Picasso Theatre, and Martin Friedman's Hockney Paints the Stage, are devoted exclusively to the theatrical

---

8 Katz has failed to note this in his discussion of the development of the combine, which he suggests was one of the innovations Rauschenberg developed as a result of the supportive environment, conducive to risk-taking, that Rauschenberg and Johns had established as a gay couple between 1954 and 1961. Katz, pp. 198-99. While he almost certainly discussed the Minutiae object with Johns who helped him make it, Rauschenberg developed the structure in response to a specific request from Cunningham for an item that dancers could move through (see pp. 143-44 of this thesis).

9 Kotz, p. 115.


11 Martin Friedman, Hockney Paints the Stage (New York: Abeville Press, 1983).
commissions of individual artists. In such publications, often a long-term outcome of an exhibition of an artist's sets, costumes and associated works on paper, the authors are concerned to establish a complete and accurate record of that artist's theatrical output. By comparison with more general works, in these specialised studies theatrical commissions are usually discussed in greater depth, and the notion of reciprocal influences between the artist's non-theatrical output and his stage works is usually addressed. The focus is, however, most often predominantly on the visual aspects of these influences to the exclusion of any major consideration of the function the art work may have within the broader context of the production for which it was created.

Cooper's study, for example, investigates not simply Picasso's stage designs, but, as well, theatrical subjects in Picasso's painting. Cooper essentially examines the relationship, in Picasso's work, between painting and theatre for the way in which Picasso used the theatre and theatrical subjects to inject new form and content into his painting. He suggests, for example, that, after collaborating with Erik Satie, Jean Cocteau and Léonide Massine on Serge Diaghilev's 1917 production of Parade for his Ballets Russes company, Picasso developed a new attitude to the body and its plasticity, one that allowed him to develop his "innate
plastic sense of grouping."\(^{12}\) The scholarly rigour of Cooper's study has been questioned, however, by Melissa McQuillan who has noted that Cooper fails to do justice to the specifically theatrical solutions of Picasso's commissions. McQuillan maintains that, by examining Picasso's scenic designs as if they were paintings, Cooper has failed to demonstrate the interaction between theatre and the history of art.\(^{13}\)

Friedman, in his account of David Hockney's theatrical works for the Glyndebourne Festival Opera and for the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City, concentrates on establishing an iconography in Hockney's work and on demonstrating the existence of iconographic links between his theatrical and non-theatrical work. Friedman carefully addresses what he sees as the close interrelationship between Hockney's views on stage design and on painting. But, as with Cooper's examination of Picasso's theatrical work, other than the suggestion that Hockney was a contributor to successful syntheses, there is no close attention to the function of his art works within a broader, production oriented context.

\(^{12}\) Cooper, p. 30.

While works such as those by Friedman and Cooper in no way marginalise the artist's theatrical output, an approach in which theatrical commissions are examined purely as art objects does not address a very basic concept: work produced to accompany a theatrical production has not usually been made simply as an art object, a notion amply demonstrated by specific studies of particular productions such as Richard Axsom's examination of *Parade*.\(^1\) In looking at *Parade*, Axsom has concluded not only that the art objects Picasso produced have a complexity unrecognised in previous examinations of the work,\(^2\) but that participation by Picasso went far beyond the production of decor and costumes for the work.\(^3\) Axsom's contention is well supported by the more recent analysis of *Parade* made by Deborah Menaker Rothschild in conjunction with an exhibition of drawings and other visual material relating to the production. Rothschild highlighted the way in which Picasso altered a number of Cocteau's ideas for the staging of the piece, especially with regard to the role of the three Managers, French, American and


\(^2\) Axsom, p. 209.

\(^3\) Axsom, p. 175.
Equestrian, for whom Picasso made Cubist-inspired constructions rather than more traditional costumes.\footnote{17}

Other written material focuses on specific companies with a tradition of commissioning designs from artists whose training has not been specifically in scenic design. Companies such as the Ballets Russes, for example, extensively documented and with a world-wide reputation, and the lesser known, Paris-based Ballets Suédois were responsible, in the early decades of the twentieth century, for major collaborative works involving artists without specific training in scenic design. That they commissioned such artists, rather than those trained specifically in stage design, which, during the nineteenth century, was often based on long established and critically unquestioned formulae, has often been seen as a partial explanation for the innovative image such companies enjoy today. John Bowlt has written, for example, of the artists who worked for the Ballets Russes:

But their initial training as studio artists contributed to their stylistic vitality and facilitated their automatic suspension of belief each time they were confronted with a new design commission. Undoubtedly, this spontaneity and

freshness added much to the distinctive collective psychology of the Ballets Russes.¹⁸

Often, however, works that deal with specific companies take on the form of a kind of commemorative volume concerned with lauding the singular contribution made by each of the collaborators to each of the repertory pieces. Bengt Häger's publication, *Ballets Suédois*,¹⁹ is in this vein, being more of a hagiography in praise of the company's choreographer Jean Börlin and its director Rolf de Maré, than a serious analysis of the company and its repertory. As David Vaughan has pointed out in his review of Häger's work, the Ballets Suédois commissioned works from artists Diaghilev did not use including Pierre Bonnard, Fernand Léger, and Francis Picabia,²⁰ and, in these circumstances, an uncritical and largely descriptive approach to the work of the company is as regrettable for the art historian as it is for the dance historian. The main value of Häger's work is as an illustrative source especially of the work of


Léger and Picabia, and as a listing, hitherto not easily available, of the company's repertory, along with an extensive collection of contemporary reviews of that repertory.\textsuperscript{21}

With a decidedly stronger theoretical base, Robley Hood's dissertation on the Ballets Suédois\textsuperscript{22} examines not so much the singular character of the artists' contributions to the company, but the success or failure of the repertory, with emphasis on four individual pieces - \textit{L'Homme et son désir}, \textit{Création du monde}, \textit{Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel}, and \textit{Relâche} -, in achieving an artistic synthesis of art and dance in the theatre. Hood's thesis rests, however, on a crucial distinction between what he calls "iconic" works, successful in achieving a synthesis, and "iconoclastic" works, "the least painterly, the least balletic, and ultimately the least convincing works of dance theatre produced by the Ballets Suédois."\textsuperscript{23} His exposition relies on the unacceptable assumption that successful collaborations between art and dance only take place if a synthesis of

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{21} Håger's book is also inaccurate on a number of counts. Some of its inaccuracies are discussed by George Dorris in his book review "Diaghilev and de Maré in Paris," \textit{Dance Chronicle}, 15, No. 1 (1992), 106-113.
\item\textsuperscript{22} Robley Munger Hood, "The Ballets Suédois: Modernism and the Painterly Stage," PhD dissertation, University of Denver, 1986.
\item\textsuperscript{23} Hood, p. 110.
\end{itemize}
all the contributing elements occurs, and that this happens when the dance is "balletic" and when the art that accompanies it is "painterly." It is not even entirely clear whether the kind of synthesis put forward by Hood was even an aim of the Ballets Suédois. Hood's work demonstrates a major inadequacy of much of the written tradition that deals with artists' theatrical work: an inability to look beyond previously established definitions and understandings in an attempt to achieve a fit between the work under discussion and existing categories, not only in art history, but also in dance history.

Another genre of writing in which an artists' theatrical commissions are considered is the exhibition catalogue generated by specific exhibitions of artists' sets, costumes, and works on paper. Many publications associated with such exhibitions are scarcely more than listings of works in the exhibition, sometimes accompanied by collections of stories and anecdotes. Such is the case with the National Gallery of Australia's souvenir booklet *From Studio to Stage: Costumes and Designs from the Russian Ballet in the Australian National Gallery* produced to accompany a major exhibition of sets, costumes and works on paper.
relating to Diaghilev's Ballets Russes productions.\textsuperscript{24} The text of \textit{From Studio to Stage} mostly ignores the dialogue that exists between, for example, costume and choreography, preferring instead emotional stories about the wearers of the costumes. The section devoted to \textit{Le Dieu Bleu}, for instance, states that Vaslav Nijinsky, for whom the dance was created, did very little dancing and that, although his performance "consisted mainly of striking poses inspired by Hindu sculpture," he, nevertheless, "managed to look particularly beautiful and in this role became a favourite subject for artists."\textsuperscript{25} Such gratuitous remarks do little to advance an understanding of the context in which \textit{Le Dieu Bleu} was made and, while publications like \textit{From Studio to Stage} have enormous popular appeal and value as exhibition records, they offer little of immediate scholarly interest.

Some recent exhibition catalogues with an extensive written component have, however, focused on a specific issue and have addressed matters largely ignored by authors of monographs, surveys, works directed at specific performing groups, and souvenir exhibition


\textsuperscript{25} Healy and Lloyd, p. 24.
records. In *The Art of Enchantment: Diaghilev's Ballets Russes 1909-1929*, for example, aspects of the Ballets Russes collaborations are re-examined from a variety of cross-disciplinary points of view; that is, in terms of the contributions made by artists to those collaborations, those contributions are considered not merely as art objects but as items in a production involving more than one artistic discipline.

Nicoletta Misler's article "Siamese Dancing and the Ballets Russes," for example, provides important source material for a consideration of oriental influences on the Ballets Russes designs of Léon Bakst and the choreography of Michel Fokine, including their collaboration on *Le Dieu Bleu*, thus suggesting that the production of *Le Dieu Bleu* was more than a series of colourful Hindu poses.

Cross-disciplinary examinations may, of course, also involve the consideration of the social context

---


*27* Throughout this thesis, the term 'cross-disciplinary' is used in this way, that is to refer to the fact that art objects made for a theatrical production need always to be considered in the context of more than one artistic discipline; in the case of this thesis in both an art and dance context.

surrounding theatrical productions. Rothschild's examination of the Picasso/Satie/Massine/Cocteau collaboration on *Parade*, mentioned earlier, locates *Parade* firmly within a social context of popular theatre of the early twentieth century. Rothschild demonstrates the connection between *Parade* and *le théâtre forain*, a kind of travelling street fair whose popularity in France can be dated back to the late seventeenth century.²⁹ Within their stated limits, which generally do not include the development of a body of theory, catalogues like those compiled and coordinated by Baer and Rothschild often make significant contributions to an understanding of the cross-disciplinary nature of performance.

Two major, related, and problematic issues emerge from a consideration of the written tradition surrounding the work of artists who accept theatrical commissions. First, most art historians examining such commissions, where the examination has been more than cursory, have focused their attention on them in a formalist way, and have looked at them only as a collection of art objects. Both McQuillan and Axsom have highlighted the inadequacies of a formalist approach. McQuillan in particular has argued strongly against such a method.

²⁹ Rothschild, especially Chapter 5: From the Street to the Elite: The Characters and Scene of *Parade*, pp. 73-85.
She maintains that what she calls the "modernist framework" analyses the art object in terms either of its relationship to a particular movement in art history or as part of a monograph. For works of art made for the theatre, such an approach, according to McQuillan, is inadequate on the one hand, and inappropriate on the other. She suggests that the approach demanded by the "modernist framework" has, in fact, been responsible for the scant attention that has been given to art made for a theatrical context during the post-World War I period. McQuillan notes the need for a more comprehensive approach, one that encompasses into its dialectic "the multitude of theoretical, social, political, psychological, and of course visual pressures exerted upon the artist and his conception of art." Axsom, although writing on a less theoretical level, has approached his specific study from a standpoint similar to that of McQuillan. He has highlighted the need to consider a cross-disciplinary context, as well as the need to engage in a formal analysis. This dual approach has provided his point of entry for his challenging analysis of Parade.

Secondly, as indicated again by both McQuillan and Axsom, along with the dominance of a formalist approach

---

30 McQuillan, p. 20.
31 McQuillan, p. 19.
to an artist's theatrical commissions, there has been a related lack of critical attention to the wider production context for which the art works were made. Referring specifically to Rauschenberg's work for the Cunningham piece *Travelogue*, Kardon has pondered whether an artist's contributions to a theatrical collaboration belong to the history of art or the history of stage design.\(^3\) In fact, they belong to both. But just as importantly, artists' theatrical commissions also belong to the history of the particular performing art with which they are associated. The art objects have been produced as part of a collaborative, cross-disciplinary endeavour, and need to be examined as such.

Some of the more recent written material that does consider an artist's theatrical commissions within a collaborative context often ignores not so much the fact of its cross-disciplinary context, as the catalogues of Baer and Rothschild amply demonstrate, but the wider, theoretical context surrounding collaboration. The issues that emerged with the publication of Michael Fried's article "Art and Objecthood"\(^3\) in 1967, for example, have scarcely been addressed in studies of

\(^3\) Kardon, p. 2.

artists' theatrical commissions. Fried argued that authentic works of art are those that are not theatrical, that is those that do not assume the presence of a beholder and whose authenticity resides within the object itself. Following the approach of his mentor, the influential critic and historian Clement Greenberg, Fried advocated art that was true to its medium, and that, unlike theatre, did not borrow from other media. His assertion that "theatre is now the negation of art"34 was followed up by the suggestion that what he referred to as the "contemporary modernist arts"35 which, in addition to painting and sculpture included music and poetry, were in fact faced with "the need to defeat theatre."36

Those who have critically considered the debate predicated by the writings of Fried as it might affect art made in a theatrical context have pointed out that Fried, the formalist critic, both privileges the art object, and perpetuates the myth of the creative genius working in isolation. David Shapiro, for example, stresses the extreme position of Fried who, Shapiro suggests, is unable to contemplate whole areas of art history because his aesthetic lacks the notion of

collaboration, a notion that "has functioned though sometimes repressed, as a central mode of aesthetic production."37 Similarly, Henry Sayre, in his The Object of Performance,38 also takes Fried's anti-theatrical stance as a starting point for an examination of aspects of American art and performance in the seventies. Sayre focuses strongly on the idea that art forms of the seventies were both performance oriented and anti-establishment and had their origins in a heritage that did not privilege the art object. Then, Rosalind Krauss has looked at specific items of sculpture made for performance in order to suggest that Fried's very understanding of the nature of the art object was insufficient and based on what Krauss refers to as "an idealist myth".39

Much of the published material dealing with artists' theatrical commissions is unsatisfying and without a strong analytical framework. In part, this situation

---


reflects the legacy of the modernist, formalist tradition of art history that not only envisages hybrid art forms as some kind of impure manifestation of an ideal, but that also fails to recognise that those hybrid forms are, in fact, also capable of being analysed in a formal manner. The historical outcome of this situation is that there rarely exists any large corpus of empirical data concerning artists' theatrical commissions from which an analysis of the collaborative mode might proceed. The work of art historians like Krauss, Sayre and Shapiro, however, in which collaboration is envisaged as a form of artistic expression that militates against the romanticised view of the artist as a solitary genius, and against "the connoisseurship of masterpieces"40 favoured by art historians such as Fried and Greenberg, presumes a broader understanding and definition of the aesthetic object. It allows for cross-disciplinary experimentation, and opens the way for a re-examination of art produced in a theatrical context.

40 Shapiro, "Art as Collaboration," p. 46.
1.2 Some problems concerning performance and its documentation

If the strength of formalism as a critical tool provides some explanation for published work that ignores the question of the interrelationships and cross-influences that are an inherent part of any theatrical commission, it provides only a partial explanation for the way in which such commissions are often marginalised. That much written material is anecdotal, even patronisingly emotional, reflects a number of perceptions, preconceptions and misconceptions about performance, in particular about the danced performance, and its documentation.

It is undeniable that the theatrical performance is, as Gay McAuley notes, "essentially unrecordable." Not only is each performance a unique event existing in a

---

41 The term 'performance' is used in this section to refer to individual performances of works that are meant to be re-performed, not to performances of one-off events, happenings or performance art. Some of the issues raised in this section are also explored in an Australian context in my article "Archiving the Evanescent: Dance Collections and Australia," *Voices*, 3, No. 3 (Spring 1993), 95-106. See Appendix IV.

particular space at a particular time and involving a specific connection with a particular audience, but methods of recording performance, whether in written form, on film or video, photographically, or in some other manner or in some combination of methods, create a plethora of problems associated with interpretation, objectivity, and the reality of the performance. Film and video recordings, for example, although they seem to offer a solution to the problems associated with ephemerality, in fact generate their own problems. Camera editing processes, for example, cause the loss of much of what is theatrical in a performance, while a fixed camera results in a single viewpoint rather than the multiple possibilities offered in the live situation. There is also the tendency for film and video recordings to be considered as either the definitive interpretation or an autonomous work.43 Neither tendency deals with the problems of the live performance in a satisfactory manner, and the situation is perhaps best summed up by Patrice Pavis who has said

43 A number of scholars have addressed the issues involved in recording performances on film and video. Some of the published work that has been generated by them is listed in the bibliography. As one example, Marco de Marinis, following in the footsteps of Michel Foucault and others, discusses the notion of videorecording as a "dishonest" document. Marco de Marinis, "'A Faithful Betrayal of Performance': Notes on the Use of Video in Theatre," New Theatre Quarterly, 1, No. 4 (November 1985), pp. 383-89.
"...nothing final can ever be said about a performance, nor in any definitive way."\textsuperscript{44}

As far as the output of the artist is concerned, the notion that the performance is ephemeral and therefore unable to be documented, or at least unsuitable for documentation, creates major problems associated with the survival and preservation of that output. The perception that an artist's works for the theatre, especially the realised items used in performance, are not worth preserving has been noted by Kardon who has remarked:

\begin{quote}
Preservation of costumes and sets presumes a recognition of their value, as well as storage space and curatorial concern.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

Such recognition has rarely been accorded, even though the output of the artist can be one of the very few tangible elements of documentation remaining from the performance, providing important material for use with other secondary sources such as photographs, reviews, programs, scrapbooks, and clippings. Even the often quite spectacular collections of costumes and scenery dating from the period of the Ballets Russes are a

\textsuperscript{44} Patrice Pavis, "Theatre Analysis: Some Questions and a Questionnaire," \textit{New Theatre Quarterly}, 1, No. 2 (May 1985), 212. In any case, very few of the Cunningham works to which Rauschenberg and Johns contributed have been filmed or videoed, a fact which is elaborated upon in relation to semiology. See Footnote 96, p. 64.

\textsuperscript{45} Kardon, p. 2.
reflection of Diaghilev's financial problems rather than a contemporary concern with the preservation of the sets and costumes he commissioned. They survive almost by chance having been impounded, after Diaghilev's death, by the French Government for unpaid storage charges. They were later bought by an assortment of people who hoped a new company based on the Diaghilev repertory might be formed.  

Works on paper, such as preliminary sketches and designs, are more akin to traditional (non-ephemeral) works of art and are more likely to be deemed worthy of preservation and, hence, to survive. Such works, however, generate their own problems associated with the relationship between the art works and the final production. Rouben Ter-Arutunian, the Russian-born stage designer whose work was largely been made in America and frequently for dance companies, has suggested that finished costumes and settings may be quite different from the works on paper and may contain perhaps only 50% of the designer's ideas. On the other hand, Australian designer Kristian Fredrikson has


intimated that this issue concerns, to a large extent, the amount of control the designer exercises over the translation of his work from initial design on paper to finished item of costume or setting. Fredrikson has suggested that where the designer is actively engaged with the execution, either himself or supervising others, the finished items embody a percentage closer to 100% of the designer's ideas.\footnote{Kristian Fredrikson, Oral history interview with the author, Sydney, 17 January 1993, Oral History Interview TRC 2899, National Library of Australia, Canberra.} Although works on paper may have a chance of survival, rarely have the issues associated with the relationship between the ideas embodied in the preserved designs and the realised items used in performance been addressed.

The documentation of the theatrical commissions of artists who work with dance companies is also beset by problems not confined to ephemerality and preservation, but peculiar to dance as a performing art. The critical literature relating to dance has always been sparse. Although dance is essentially a non-verbal art without a widely understood system of notation taught as an adjunct to training,\footnote{For a brief historical overview of dance notation, which also includes reference to the major forms in use today, and which includes a bibliography, see Jill Beck, "Systems of Dance/Movement Notation," in Theatrical Movement: A Bibliographical Anthology, ed. Bob Fleshman (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press,} the paucity of critical writing
surrounding the art form compared with that existing for
the visual arts, and even for other forms of the
performing arts, is not entirely due to the fact that
dance is non-verbal. As Francis Sparshott has
persistently pointed out, dance has, historically, been
omitted from the canon of the arts and has, as a result,
been largely neglected by philosophers of the arts.\textsuperscript{50}
Dance has been given a place in some philosophical
writings, notably in the works of Susanne Langer.\textsuperscript{51}
But, where it has been accorded a role in a
philosophical system, it has not been in one of the
widely accepted and historically preferred systems, such
as that of Aristotle or Hegel whose assumptions,
according to Sparshott, are influential "in shaping the
ways we still frame our questions."\textsuperscript{52}


\textsuperscript{50} Francis Sparshott, \textit{Off the Ground: First Steps
to a Philosophical Consideration of the Dance}
See especially Chapter 1. Why the Aesthetics of Dance
Has Been Neglected, pp. 3-82.

\textsuperscript{51} See in particular Susanne K. Langer, "The
Dynamic Image: Some Philosophical Reflections on Dance,"
\textit{Dance Observer} (July 1956); rpt. in her \textit{Problems of Art:
Ten Philosophical Lectures} (New York: Charles Scribner's
Sons, 1957), pp. 1-12; and "Virtual Powers" and "The
Magic Circle" in her \textit{Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art
Developed from 'Philosophy in a New Key'} (New York:

\textsuperscript{52} Francis Sparshott, "Why Philosophy Neglects the
and Criticism}, eds Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen,
Moreover, despite the fact that some of the twentieth century's leading choreographers have used dance to address a variety of issues both of form and content, and in doing so have often revealed themselves in the forefront of contemporary thought, dance is often still regarded as frivolous, merely an entertainment. In the popular mind, dance is burdened with a legacy of triviality, partly associated with ballet as a specific genre of dance, and with what McQuillan has referred to as the decline of ballet as an art form in the late nineteenth century and its connections with the music hall in the early twentieth.53 Unlike other art forms, dance is often defined by its most escapist and populist manifestations.

Dance is also frequently regarded only as something one does rather than as something one may also look at, contemplate, and analyse in writing. In 1923 Havelock Ellis described dance in largely emotional terms saying:

The significance of dancing, in the wide sense, thus lies in the fact that it is simply an intimate concrete appeal of a general rhythm, that general rhythm which marks, not life only, but the universe, if one may still be allowed so to name the sum of the cosmic influences that reach us.54

Although Ellis' position has been largely discredited as

53 McQuillan, p. xi.

a serious and scholarly approach to dance, the perception of dance as only some kind of emotional, pre-literate form of expression, catharsis, or ritual is still widespread. It is, moreover, an attitude that extends at times into the dance community itself. Claudia Roth Pierpont has suggested that, although there are signs of a gradual change, dancing "boasts an ageless tradition of undermining the intellect," and that dancers and choreographers have looked at words with suspicion. Dance clearly uses the body, not words, as a means of communication, but a refusal to acknowledge that dance can be discussed and written about is a substantial barrier to its acceptance as a valid intellectual discipline in a society that privileges the written text.

Despite problems associated with ephemerality and preservation, and despite the particular difficulties associated with dance as an art form, artists continue to accept theatrical commissions, and continue to work with dance companies. They often take delight in the challenges provided by such commissions, and accept them for the very reasons that they are deemed by scholars to

---


be problematical. Among Cunningham's collaborators, Rauschenberg, for example, has remarked on numerous occasions on his interest in working in a theatrical context for the demands it puts upon him. He has said:

I've always been interested [in the theatre] even back in high school. I like the liveness of it - that awful feeling of being on the spot, having to assume the responsibility for the moment, for those actions that happen at that particular time.57

Both Rauschenberg and Johns, whether by design or necessity, frequently approached their Cunningham commissions with an immediacy akin to that of a performance. Only rarely did they make accompanying works on paper, frequently painting directly onto costumes and backcloths or, at times, recreating sets anew from performance to performance. Rauschenberg especially liked to work in this way, creating his pieces on the spot: "I usually don't have an idea until absolutely the last minute."58 At times, as with the costumes for the 1958 piece Summerspace, he painted directly onto the dancers' leotards and tights just before the first performance.59 Commissions were usually discussed verbally rather than through


correspondence, especially from 1961 onwards when Rauschenberg worked in very close association with the Cunningham company, travelling constantly with them on their various tours. Only the 1957 piece *Labyrinthian Dances* (illus. 6) and his last Cunningham collaboration, *Travelogue* (illus. 7), appear to have been designed, at least in part, on paper.

Johns frequently assisted Rauschenberg in these on-the-spot activities and, during his own period as artistic adviser to the company, often worked in a similar fashion. Johns's costumes for the 1968 piece *RainForest*, for example, had final cuts made to them immediately prior to the performance.60 Johns, too, appears to have made very few preliminary designs for his Cunningham commissions, the sole recorded case being a design for his 1970 piece *Second Hand*. In this instance, Johns made a chain of paper dolls, no longer extant,61 to demonstrate the colours of the costumes and the way in which Johns envisaged their presentation at the end of the dance. The *Second Hand* costumes were dyed in the colours of the spectrum with individual

---

60 Johns is seen making these last minute additions (or subtractions) to his work on the film *RainForest*, produced by David Oppenheim, Public Broadcasting Laboratory of National Educational Television, 1968, Film and Video Lending Collection, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

costumes shaded with their neighbouring spectral colours. The spectrum of colours was displayed only at the end of the piece when the dancers lined up to take their final bows.

Moreover, in the case of Rauschenberg, there are few of his theatrical activities that have not involved dance in some way, and Rauschenberg has suggested that he will "spend the rest of [his] life working with dancers." He has often expressed admiration, tinged with envy, of dancers and the dance. He admires the way in which, in dance, the human body is the medium allowing elements of the unpredictable and the uncontrollable to surface:

You know, everything shows - your body itself in a specific time and space, whatever it's thinking and whatever it's feeling. It's all right there. I'm definitely envious.

Painting, no matter what your concept is, remains static. Even if you make a painting that moves. It's predictable after a point.

He has also expressed admiration for the active relationship dancers are able to establish with the audience:

I learned that a work of art - say, a painting or a piece of sculpture, is an elusive quantity - that

---


is, the fact that it's concrete makes it elusive. The dance, on the other hand - and the fluid relationship between dancer and audience - is really concrete, not elusive at all."64

Given the commitment of artists to working in a theatrical context, the difficulties associated with the documentation of performance, and the danced performance in particular, cannot be excuses for ignoring or marginalising their theatrical commissions. While McAuley and her colleagues have rightly argued that "the theatrical event as a totality is unrecordable,"65 they have also argued that it is necessary to accept the fact that there is "no such thing as neutral or purely objective performance documentation."66 McAuley maintains that, in spite of the difficulties, it is desirable to pursue efforts to establish ways of achieving some kind of performance record, and has made a clear distinction between recording, notation and documentation, defining the field of documentation as


65 McAuley, p. 4.

66 McAuley, p. 3. The impossibility of neutrality is also a notion that has permeated much recent art historical writing. See, for example, Sayre's The Object of Performance, especially the chapter "Critical Performance: The Example of Roland Barthes." In this chapter, Sayre analyses the context surrounding Barthes' distinction between writer and author, and considers Barthes' contention that subjectivity is necessarily brought to the reception of any art work. Sayre, pp. 246-64.
encompassing "all the material which may be used to preserve and/or reconstruct a given production."67

McAuley has also suggested that a fruitful and valid line of investigation in considering performance as an area of study is not necessarily, or only, the performance itself, "the physical experience, nightly renewed,"68 but the performance's mise en scène, translated by Pavis as "production, staging, direction."69 Although by his own admission, Pavis' individual approach is basically a logocentric one - he says "we see the world through the framework of language" -70 his methodology, which is semiologically based, encompasses all the various methods of stage expression and their arrangement and elaboration and does not exclude what he refers to as "avant-garde kind

67 McAuley, p. 4.
68 McAuley, p. 23 (n.9).
69 Patrice Pavis, Dictionnaire du Théâtre (Paris: Messidor, 1987), p. 244. In this publication Pavis also discusses the evolution of the mise en scène (pp. 244-48). Pavis also devotes considerable space to a discussion of the mise en scène in his collection of essays Languages of the Stage: Essays in the Semiology of the Theatre (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982) especially in the essay entitled "Towards a Semiology of the Mise en Scène?" (pp. 131-61).
70 Pavis, Languages of the Stage, p. 201.
of theatre consisting only of gesture or lighting or space effects."\(^{71}\)

The approach of McAuley and Pavis is one that acknowledges the intrinsic nature of performance, including its ephemerality, and in the case of dance its lack of a written text, but that refuses either to mystify these inherent features, or to be overwhelmed by them. From the standpoint of this thesis, the significance of this kind of approach is the implication not only that performance documentation is possible and worthwhile, but that the various contributions to performance are part of a system that is capable of analysis. An approach that considers the output of the artist as part of the mise en scène, rather than as a collection of items divorced from it, minimises the problems outlined by Rischbieter when he suggests that the preservation of artists' sets and costumes tends to reduce the performance to "a library of texts and a museum of illustration,"\(^{72}\) and the even more disparaging remarks of Ulrich Tegeder who has asserted that the only value of some items of visual art

\(^{71}\) Pavis, *Languages of the Stage*, p. 199.

\(^{72}\) Rischbieter, p. 7. Rischbieter, while appearing to decry the incompleteness of studies that ignore the dynamic elements of performance, offers his work as just such a study. He says: "This book too is first and foremost a little museum of the contribution of the plastic arts to the theater, together with a brief library of texts." (p. 7).
associated with theatrical performance, including costume, is as devotional items.\textsuperscript{73} It is, furthermore, an approach not restricted to any particular genre of theatrical performance allowing the danced performance, including not only its choreography but also its accompanying art and music, to be examined as something other than a pre-literate form of ritual.

\textsuperscript{73} Ulrich Tegeder, "Video and Dance: Some Thoughts on a Topical Subject," \textit{Ballett International}, 7, No. 12 (December 1984), 20.
1.3 The artist's approach

Artists have been working on theatrical commissions at least since the Renaissance. Staged spectacles and religious and political processions in particular have played a major role in providing artists with such commissions. These activities perhaps reached an apogee with the work of Jacques-Louis David in the years following the French Revolution when David acted as pageant-master for a series of major collaborative endeavours, the revolutionary festivals, involving mass participation and coordination of the various arts.74

Specialisation as a stage designer was not common until the nineteenth century and, to a large extent, was the outcome of an approach to theatre in which scenery was painted following established formulae and was recycled from production to production, often between completely different works. Alexander Schouvaloff has described the state of stage design at the end of the nineteenth century in the following terms:

---

By the end of the nineteenth century theatre design had degenerated into a mediocre craft. Someone ordered a sky, a forest or a castle. Scene painters were paid by the square metre. Sky was the cheapest, architecture the most expensive. The same sky, the same forest, the same castle would be used again and again.75

In contrast to earlier, and later, periods, during the nineteenth century the stage designer was a scene painter rather than a contributor of unique items to a theatrical collaboration.

Currently, and perhaps as a legacy from the nineteenth century, a conceptual distinction is often drawn between the stage designer, whose training has been specifically oriented towards making works for use in theatrical performance, and artist without such formal training who accepts theatrical commissions. Writing on the working methods of the trained scenic designer, Ter-Arutunian has identified three stages through which a designer passes in the process of realising a theatrical commission.76 The first is "the time of creation" in which, in consultation with the director or the choreographer, the designer establishes the nature of the theatrical piece and the style, or "look," his designs will take. The second is a period of


76 Ter-Arutunian, pp. 1-2.
consolidation, which most often results in the creation of works on paper or working models whose function is similar, according to Ter-Arutunian, to that of architectural drawings and models in a housing project. The final stage is the execution of the decor, which is most often contracted out to other professionals such as scene painters, carpenters, machinists and milliners, and which is supervised by the designer rather than being executed by him.

The methods set down by Ter-Arutunian are, however, often also followed by artists not trained specifically as designers who make works for the theatre. Picasso's work for Parade, for example, in which he made many meticulous preliminary drawings and models for this work, largely followed the process outlined by Ter-Arutunian. Picasso made over forty works on paper for the Managers in Parade, and the designs for these characters evolved from drawings of simple stick figures wearing sandwich boards to complex Cubist drawings.  

The approach of Rauschenberg and Johns to their Cunningham commissions, in which they only infrequently worked in the way described by Ter-Arutunian, reflects not so much an aspect of earlier training, but the idiosyncrasies of the Cunningham approach to

77 This evolution through design is documented in Rothschild, pp. 135-67.
collaboration across the arts, and the personal working methods of Rauschenberg and Johns. The distinction between artist and designer is, especially in the twentieth century, an arbitrary one, favoured more by designers who often are of the opinion that artists without scenic training are unable to make successful contributions to theatrical collaborations. The American designer Ming Cho Lee has suggested, for example, that only the trained stage designer has the necessary understanding to make a visual statement that is in keeping with the wider theatrical context of a work of performance. Those without specific training, he asserts, have little conception of the relationship between the elements of visual art and the rest of the performance, and much of the work produced by them is either decorative or superfluous.

Focusing on the distinction between artist and designer, and on the nature of the training of each, adds little, however, to an understanding of the contribution of artist to the production, and even obscures other fruitful avenues of investigation. One major approach, rather than technique, used by artists working in the

---

78 The Cunningham approach to collaboration is examined in detail in Part II, especially sections 2.1 and 2.2.

theatre warrants particular investigation: their use of the theatre, whether consciously, or by chance, or even by commission, as an experimental arena in which to expand the boundaries of their non-theatrical art-making. RoseLee Goldberg, in her historical overview of performance art, has suggested that it was frequently the case that the early exponents of what are now considered identifiable movements in the visual arts tested their ideas in performance before expressing them as more enduring art objects. The concept of the artist using the performance context as an experimental arena is not, as Goldberg illustrates, confined to the creation of performance art. It can also fruitfully be applied to a consideration of artists' theatrical commissions.

On a formal level, often new and long-lasting features of an artist's oeuvre may grow as a result of his theatrical commissions. The development of Matisse's technique of paper cut-outs has, for example, been traced to his work for Diaghilev's 1920 production of Le Chant du Rossignol. Matisse was commissioned in 1919 to design sets, costumes and accessories, and a drop curtain for a ballet based on the Hans Christian Andersen fairytale, The Nightingale. The Russian scene

---

painter, Vladimir Polunin, who executed the sets to Matisse's designs, has recalled that on a number of occasions Matisse had made no preliminary sketches but began work by cutting out paper shapes and piecing and repiecing them together to make a model of the stage setting.\textsuperscript{81}

Matisse has himself recalled working with the costumier Poiret on the Emperor's robe for \textit{Le Chant du Rossignol} using a similar technique for the gold dragons that decorated the cloak.\textsuperscript{82} His costumes for the mourners (illus. 8) in \textit{Le Chant du Rossignol}, with their dark blue velvet triangles and chevron stripes applied as appliqués, also illustrate the cut-out technique experimented with in 1919, but not used intensively as a technique in his non-theatrical art making until the 1940s and 1950s (illus. 9).

Similarly, in Kasimir Malevich's work for the Futurist opera \textit{Victory over the Sun}, premiered in St Petersburg in 1913, a design on paper for the set for act 2 scene 5 shows an abstracted image consisting of a square within a square with the inner square divided diagonally into


\textsuperscript{82} Pierre Schneider, \textit{Matisse} (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), p. 625.
one dark and one light triangle (illus. 10). For the most part, Malevich's designs for *Victory over the Sun* exhibit the characteristic features of Cubo-Futurism seen, for example, in the geometric shapes of his costume design for the Attentive Worker (illus. 11), realised in production as a volumetric cardboard construction. The design for the act 2, scene 5 set, however, shows the beginnings of a formal vocabulary that Malevich would use from circa 1915 onwards in his Suprematist works, including his iconic *Black Square*. Although Malevich maintained that the first Suprematist works of visual art were exhibited at Petrograd in 1915, he also indicated that the origin of Suprematism was to be found in Moscow in 1913,\(^3\) and, elsewhere, he has remarked that Suprematism was in evidence in 1913 in the production of *Victory over the Sun*.\(^4\) In her essay on the relationship between movement and design in Russian avant-garde theatre in the catalogue *Theatre in Revolution: Russian Avant Garde Stage Design 1913-1935*, Nancy van Norman Baer has suggested that not only was the act 2 scene 5 set design the earliest visual

---


manifestation of Malevich's Suprematist theory, but that Malevich moved into abstraction via this theatrical production.

On a less formal level, artists have often also maximised the cross-disciplinary nature of their theatrical commissions by experimenting with the way in which their art can be expanded by, and altered in, the performance context. Although Léon Bakst's sets for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes productions have been constantly lauded for their originality in the use of colour and pattern, and for the way in which they support the exotic themes of the early Diaghilev ballets, they were, nevertheless, essentially over-sized easel paintings. His costumes, however, both in the form of designs on paper and as realised costumes, indicated a whole new range of interests. Chief among these was an interest in developing a dynamic relationship between the body in movement and what clothed it. Although there are signs that this interest

---


began at least as early as 1902 with his work for three
classical dramas *Hyppolytus*, *Oedipus Rex*, and
*Antigone*, it was with the three Ballets Russes
productions between 1909 and 1911 - *Cléopâtre* (1909),
*Schéhérazade* (1910), and *Narcisse* (1911) - that Bakst
began to use the stage as an experimental arena for
cross-disciplinary experiments, producing works that
maximised the potential of costume to extend the range
of the body in movement. His costume sketches for these
three productions, as well as revealing the body,
sometimes salaciously, beneath transparent and low cut
garments, are almost always drawn with both the figure
and the costume shown in movement rather than in a
static pose. His costumes are adorned with accessories
such as scarves, feathers, tassels and jewellery, also
drawn in movement, revealing his growing interest in
developing the costume as a functional item in dance, an
item capable of extending the range of the body's
movement in space.

Bakst's costume design for two bacchantes in *Narcisse*,
for example, shows both bodies drawn in movement (illus.

---

87 John E. Bowlt, *The Silver Age: Russian Art of
the Early Twentieth Century and the "World of Art" Group*
(Newtonville, Mass.: Oriental Research Partners, 1979),
pp. 226-7.

88 For a further discussion of this point see my
article "Designed for Dance: The Costumes of Léon Bakst
and the Art of Isadora Duncan," *Dance Chronicle*, 13, No.
2, (1990), 154-169.
The nature of the costumes contributes to the sense of bodily freedom. They are loose-fitting and can either fly away or cling to the body emphasising both its shape and its potential for movement. This is especially true of the costume for the figure at the back of the drawing. For this dancer, the sleeves and lower part of the tunic are cut to allow maximum movement. Both costumes are enhanced by scarves and other accessories drawn to emphasise their potential in the dance.

Occasionally experimentation of a cross-disciplinary kind has led the artist to use his commission to engage in activities not normally associated with the visual arts. In the case of commissions from dance companies, this has included his transformation into choreographer, or at least choreographic adviser. The choreographer Léonide Massine has, for example, recorded in his biography that Mikhail Larionov not only designed sets and costumes for Massine's *Soleil de Nuit*, premiered by the Ballets Russes in 1915, but also supervised Massine's choreography.\textsuperscript{89} Earlier in the same year, Larionov had worked in a similar way with Massine on the choreography for *Liturgie*, an unrealised production with designs by Natalia Goncharova.\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{89} Massine, pp. 74-75.

\textsuperscript{90} Massine, p. 73.
But in the case of Larionov his most startling contribution to the Ballets Russes beyond making art works was his contribution to *Chout*, premiered in 1921. For *Chout* Larionov was not only commissioned to make sets and costumes, but he had also signed a contract to work on the ballet as its artistic director. In 1921 wrote the following to Diaghilev:

I've studied *Chout* and learned it by heart. I've bought a big new notebook and am busy working out entrances and dance figures. The whole of *Chout* is in my head, ready to be staged. It's exhausting to keep it there!91

Larionov's expanded commission was reported to the London press by Diaghilev who said:

The scenery and costumes have been designed by M. Larionov, and the choreography is by a young dancer, Slavinsky, after indications by Larionov. In fact, a new principle has here been introduced, that of giving to the decorative artist the direction of the plastic movement, and having a dancer simply to give it choreographic form.92

Although one contemporary review suggested that the piece was like "a loosely-improvised charade,"93 the empowerment of Larionov by Diaghilev as artistic and choreographic adviser, particularly for the production of *Chout*, was a significant addition to Larionov's role as artist to the Ballets Russes.


93 Cited in Buckle, p. 385.
Artists have rarely approached their theatrical commissions simply as a means of producing art objects. The significance of much of their theatrical work becomes clear only when seen as a means by which they have sought to use their commissions to expand the boundaries of their art-making. Although in the course of working in the theatre formal innovations in their work may have emerged, the expansion of the boundaries often extends well beyond such innovations. Not only does the work of the artist frequently indicate a interest in the intrinsic qualities of other contributions to the production, particularly in the quality movement can bring to their art, the activities of the artist working in a theatrical context may also transgress boundaries otherwise, or earlier, clearly defined such as that of choreographer. In such circumstances, the marginalisation of an artist's theatrical commissions, or the analysis of these commissions in purely formal terms, is both to ignore the importance such items may assume in the artists' career, and to misunderstand the nature of the aesthetic object produced.
1.4 The scope of this study

Much of the existing literature that considers an artist's theatrical output is without any critical discourse that might both locate this output within the framework of the theatrical production for which it was created, and that might also recognise the possibility of a reciprocal relationship between a visual artist's theatrical and non-theatrical work. This situation, in which cross-disciplinary experimentation and production context are largely ignored, reflects, on the one hand, the commonly held assumption that, because the theatrical performance is an evanescent event, that performance, and anything associated with it, either cannot be documented, or is patently unsuitable for documentation.

But on the other hand, while it is true that the transient nature of performance has militated against the establishment of a critical tradition, transience is not the sole reason for this situation. Where artists have worked with dance companies, misconceptions and entrenched notions about dance as a performing art have also played a role. In addition, the strength of formal analysis as a critical tool of art history has led to a neglect by a number of mainstream art historians of collaborative ventures. Art made for theatrical
enterprises clearly defies categorisation as art contained by, and pure to, its medium.

Looking specifically at the work of Rauschenberg and Johns for the Cunningham and his dancers, the focus of this study is on two related ideas that have emerged from a consideration of the written tradition and its associated problems. First, taking up the arguments of art historians like Shapiro and Sayre, this thesis explores the essentially cross-disciplinary nature of theatrical collaborations by considering as significant, rather than as marginal, art created for such collaborations.

Secondly, expanding upon the work of McAuley and her colleagues, the commissions of Rauschenberg and Johns for Cunningham and his dancers are examined not within the context of individual performances, but within that of a Cunningham production. Although the work of McAuley and Pavis has provided a certain methodological inspiration for this study, no attempt is made to conduct a semiological analysis, in the style of Pavis, of individual mises en scène.94 Theatre semiology, Pavis has made a number of semiological analyses of specific performances. See, for example, his "Notes Toward a Semiotic Analysis (Concerning Disparitions)." The Drama Review, 23, No. 4 (December 1979), 93-104. In this article Pavis gives a semiological analysis of Richard Demarcy's Disparitions as produced and performed in Paris between March and April 1979.
which borrows a number of key concepts, including the notion of systems and codes, from linguistic studies, analyses individual theatrical performances in terms of these key concepts, and involves "a complex dialectic of code-observing, code-making and code-breaking."

Such an approach requires that the works to be analysed also be available for viewing in their entirety. Where works are out of the repertory, or have never been recorded in their entirety on film or video, as is the case with almost all the Cunningham productions for which Rauschenberg and Johns made commissioned contributions, theatre semiology is an inadequate, or at least an inappropriate, methodology. The useful concept of the mise en scène as defined by those working in the field of theatre semiology is, however, retained in this thesis and used as a general framework for

constructed a questionnaire that he suggests theatre semiologists might use in conducting an analysis. This questionnaire is reproduced in Pavis, "Theatre Analysis," p. 209.


Film and videorecordings of the Cunningham works to which Rauschenberg and Johns contributed are documented in Appendices I and II. Of the thirty-six works documented in these appendices, only three, Story, RainForest and Walkaround Time, have ever been recorded as complete performances. In addition, most of the few works that do remain in the repertory are no longer performed intact with Rauschenberg's and Johns' costumes, sets and lighting. A number have been redesigned, and others have been retained by Cunningham's Repertory Understudy Group (RUG) for their choreographic example rather than for the contributions made to them by Rauschenberg and Johns.
analysis, as a device that encourages a production oriented, rather than an individual performance oriented, approach.

In order to suggest some answers to the questions raised in the introduction, this thesis has two major aims. The first is to assemble a corpus of data about the Cunningham commissions of Rauschenberg and Johns that will provide the foundation for an analysis of their theatrical work. For the reasons already spelled out, artists' theatrical commissions have never found a secure niche in art historical studies. Nor have they really found a niche anywhere else since their cross-disciplinary nature denies them a place in any single category of study. The historical outcome of this inability to fit the visual artist's theatrical output into any convenient category is that there simply does not exist any large corpus of data concerning that output. The second aim is to locate this data in its contextual setting in order to illuminate the nature of a specific collaborative endeavour and of the artists' contributions to it.
PART II:
THE CUNNINGHAM AESTHETIC AND ITS ORIGINS

Cunningham has often avoided articulating what he considers to be the stylistic features of his work. In an interview with John Gruen in 1980, for example, he remarked:

I haven't the vaguest idea what the so-called Cunningham style might be. I couldn't put my finger on it. I don't try for style. What I try for is to make things clear.²

Artists who accept a commission to work with the Cunningham company do, however, interact in a collaborative context with distinctive features, at least two of which have major implications for their work. Crucial to the reception of the artist's contribution is an approach to collaboration across the arts in which Cunningham maintains that the various

¹ Cunningham's life and work have been the subject of many articles and some books. Nevertheless, as Kostelanetz points out, there still does not exist a critical monograph and/or biography of Cunningham that situates his contribution to the contemporary arts within a wider historical context, or that even gives an in-depth chronological account of that contribution. Kostelanetz, Merce Cunningham, p. xiii.

elements of the collaboration are independent, rather than interdependent, components. Critical, too, is Cunningham's individualistic approach to dance and dance-making. In his striving for clarity in dance, Cunningham has been especially absorbed by two concepts: time and space. Along with his particular approach to collaboration, Cunningham's explorations of the boundaries and the interconnectedness of time and space, and his experiments with the role of chance procedures in these explorations, have led to an aesthetic that concerns process and the expansion of possibilities.

Seminal to the development of this working environment was Cunningham's long-term association with John Cage. In particular, a period spent, mostly in association with Cage, at Black Mountain College, North Carolina during the late 1940s and early 1950s provided the seeds not only for the formation of the Cunningham company, but also for the flowering of Cunningham's distinctive approach to collaboration across the arts. Important, too, were Cunningham's interests in, and familiarity with, developments in the visual arts during the 1940s and 1950s in New York City, in particular his familiarity with certain features of an emerging Abstract Expressionist movement.³

³ A critical appraisal and record of the development of Abstract Expressionism is given in Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record, [eds] David
2.1 Cunningham and the notion of collaboration

Cunningham has referred to his early professional associations with artists, including his work with sculptor Isamu Noguchi on *The Seasons* for the Ballet Society in New York City in 1947, as "not collaborations so much as designs after the fact of the dance." His mature attitude to working across the arts is quite different. Its hallmark is usually regarded as the idea, reiterated frequently by Cunningham himself, that each of the elements in the collaboration exists independently of the other, each remaining "central to itself."

The notion of the separation and independence of elements is a beguiling one. It seems to run counter to the entrenched belief, strengthened where dance is concerned by the approach of the all-powerful figure of

---


* Parts of this and the following section were read at the symposium *Black Mountain College and Merce Cunningham in the Fifties: New Perspectives* held at Russell Sage College, Troy, New York, 9-10 October 1993. My paper for that symposium is reproduced as Appendix V.

* Cunningham, *Changes*, unpaginated [p. 107].

* Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance*, p. 137.
Diaghilev, that theatrical collaborations involve a Wagnerian-inspired synthesis of the arts; that is that they exhibit the characteristics of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Diaghilev's consuming interest in Wagner, and in the use of the principles of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in his Ballets Russes productions in the early decades of the twentieth century has often been documented.⑦ Diaghilev took Wagner's notion of a unified system of the arts, or actually a reunified system since it looked back for its inspiration to the model of ancient Greek drama,⑧ as a model for his own ventures in which all the collaborative elements, at least in theory, had the similar, single aim of expressing a unified view of the mood, the theme, the plot of an individual work.

In the Cunningham situation, the most perceptive historians and critics of Cunningham's work have always stressed that the notion of separation and independence of elements is not a simplistic idea that can merely be juxtaposed against the contrasting notion of the arts in unity. Yet most have, nevertheless, sought to shed


light on the intrinsic nature of the Cunningham approach by comparing or contrasting that approach with some variation of a Wagnerian model. They have, in fact, succumbed to what Annette Michelson, writing on the role of Andy Warhol in the development of American independent cinema, has called "the specter of the Gesamtkunstwerk." Michelson has written:

A specter haunts the theory and practice of the arts throughout our century: the specter of the Gesamtkunstwerk, a notion born of late romanticism, nurtured and matured within the modernist moment, and never wholly exorcised in the era of postmodernism and of electronic reproduction.⁹

Cunningham's collaborative ventures have frequently been linked, for example, to the collaborations masterminded by Diaghilev, the very ventures from which they appear to differ so markedly. A link between Diaghilev and Cunningham appears to have been first brought to public attention by dance historian Alexander Bland in 1964 when he remarked that Diaghilev "would have loved Cunningham."¹⁰ Bland saw similarities of intention in the way in which Cunningham, like Diaghilev, sought an expanded range of possibilities for dance bringing it "right up in line with the front-rank experimenters in


the other arts." Bland used the connection he had made to point both to characteristics of Cunningham's inventive choreography, and to the collaborations in which he engaged with artists and composers whose work was provocative, or which existed on the margins of established practice. The artists who worked with Cunningham included not only Rauschenberg and Johns but, in the 1960s and 1970s, Andy Warhol, Frank Stella, Bruce Naumann, Neil Jenney, and Robert Morris. As far as composers are concerned, in addition to the contributions made by Cage, Cunningham used scores, often specially commissioned, by Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, Gordon Mumma, David Tudor, Christian Wolff, and LaMonte Young.

The Diaghilev connection has subsequently been exploited to highlight the differences between Diaghilev's and Cunningham's attitudes to collaboration, especially to emphasise the fact that Cunningham collaborations exhibit a separation of the collaborative elements whereas those of Diaghilev highlight their synthesis. The exploration of the Diaghilev/Cunningham connection through an exhibition of sets, costumes and other items at the Emily Lowe Gallery, Hofstra University, Long Island, New York in 1974, for example, stressed the fact that a Cunningham collaboration highlighted separateness.

11 Bland, p. 20.
and independence and was, in fact, a "disintegrated spectacle."\textsuperscript{12}

Then, Peter Brinson, in an article that considered and compared Cunningham's London seasons of 1964 and 1987, perceptively remarked that, with a Cunningham collaboration, "sound, design and dance, ear and eye, provide separate experiences synthesised within each member of the audience."\textsuperscript{13} Brinson developed this point, however, by remarking that this approach was "the ultimate and logical conclusion of Diaghilev's argument for the equality of collaborators in classical ballet."\textsuperscript{14} For Brinson, the Cunningham collaborations seem to be an adaptation or extension of Wagner's notion, as perpetuated by Diaghilev, of the arts in fusion.

Cunningham's stress on the separation and independence of contributing elements has also led Roger Copeland to consider the idea that Cunningham collaborations approach the anti-Wagnerian model proposed by Bertolt Brecht and developed by Brecht out of his distaste for

\textsuperscript{12} David Vaughan, "Diaghilev/Cunningham" \textit{Art Journal}, 34, No. 2 (Winter 1974/5), 138. This article is a reprint of the catalogue essay that accompanied the 1974 Diaghilev/Cunningham exhibition.

\textsuperscript{13} Peter Brinson, "Thinking About Merce," \textit{Dance and Dancers}, No. 452 (October 1987), p. 11.

\textsuperscript{14} Brinson, "Thinking About Merce," p. 11.
what he considered to be the privileged position of Wagner in the cultural life of Nazi Germany.\textsuperscript{15} Copeland noted that Brecht, violently opposed to the mesmerising effects of mass spectacle, maintained that theatre was a medium that relied on collaboration, but one in which each of the collaborative media should retain its independence. In his Notes on the Opera that accompanied the publication, in 1930, of the text to his opera Mahagonny, Brecht stated:

So long as the expression 'Gesamtkunstwerk' (or 'integrated work of art') means that the integration is a muddle, so long as the arts are supposed to be 'fused' together, the various elements will all be equally degraded, and each will act as a mere 'feed' to the rest. The process of fusion extends to the spectator, who gets thrown into the melting pot too and becomes a passive (suffering) part of the total work of art. Witchcraft of this sort must of course be fought against...Words, music and setting must become more independent of one another.\textsuperscript{16}

Emphasising that, in the case of Cunningham, any relationship to the Brechtian model is more complicated


than is immediately apparent,17 Copeland suggested that similarities between the Brechtian collaborative model and that of Cunningham arose not only because each appeared to favour independence rather than synthesis, but also because both Brecht and Cunningham had a similar intention in relation to the role they wish the audience to play in their works: both aimed for the development of a "politics of perception" that would allow the audience the freedom to perceive each of the elements in the collaboration in his own way and on his own terms.18 Brecht's desire to separate the elements in a collaboration was, according to Copeland, meant to ensure that the audience did not absorb unthinkingly the actions and ideas that were presented during a theatrical performance.19 Similarly, and as Copeland has stressed, Cunningham has always assigned a critical role to the spectator. Cunningham remarked once, for example, that he thought of an audience as a number of separate individuals, and that separateness and openness in collaboration allowed for an ambiguity of meaning


which, in turn, allowed each spectator to develop his own opinion about any piece.²⁰

The "specter" identified by Michelson is, however, also a powerful presence in Copeland's work. Copeland aligns Cunningham's attitude to spectator freedom with Brecht's anti-Wagnerian desire to separate the elements in a collaboration, despite the fact that by Copeland's own acknowledgment he cannot prove that it was Brecht who inspired Cunningham.²¹ In addition, when Brecht's theoretical stance is translated into theatrical practice there is little that is similar to the Cunningham approach. Brecht's collaborators, his scenic designers for example, produced items that were meant to function, according to John Willett, "as an independent interpretation of the play's story."²² In relation to the first production of his play Die Mutter, Brecht himself expressed the situation as follows:

the stage wasn't supposed to represent any real locality: it as it were took up an attitude to the incidents shown; it quoted, narrated, prepared and recalled.²³

²⁰ Merce Cunningham speaking on the videorecording A Video Event with Merce Cunningham, producer Merrill Brockway, CBS Camera Three, New York, 1974).


²³ Brecht, quoted by Willett, p. 138.
Such an attitude is clearly antithetical to that pursued by Cunningham who does not require his collaborators to contribute works that consciously bear such a relationship to the final product.

More recently Sayre has taken up Copeland's argument and has pursued the idea that Cunningham collaborations are political endeavours because they engage the audience. Sayre, following in the footsteps of Shapiro, quite rightly adds dance to opera, film, and architecture signalled out by Shapiro as forms of artistic expression that:

> generate an aesthetic that is properly multiple, discontinuous, collaborative, oriented more to the idea of a system of group dynamics than to the expression of the individual.  

Sayre goes on to examine the similarities between Cunningham's approach to dance-making, and that of Cage to music and Rauschenberg to art. He concludes that their work together for the Cunningham company provided a new model of collaboration. It was a model that tolerated, respected, and even emphasised difference, and one that, thus, established a new kind of connection between the individual elements. The development of this new model Sayre likens to the flourishing of feminist movement in the 1970s when, as a reaction against a totalitarian basis of society, women demanded

---

that society and culture respect their difference.\textsuperscript{25}

But despite his perceptive analysis of the nature of Cunningham collaborations and of their seminal role in the development of the contemporary arts in America, nor can Sayre divorce his analysis from the pervasive presence of the Gesamtkunstwerk. He has written:

\begin{quote}
...the feminist movement and the Rauschenberg/Cage/Cunningham collaboration stand equally behind the new Gesamtkunstwerk of the seventies and eighties, a Gesamtkunstwerk in which the arts coexist in the same time and space independent of one another... The new Gesamtkunstwerk is above all an arena of difference."\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

Looking at theatrical models proposed by Wagner, perpetuated by Diaghilev, and demolished by Brecht in order to illuminate the Cunningham approach to collaboration is beset by problems. First, the use of these non-contemporary theatrical models as a catalyst for an explanation of Cunningham's approach exploits popular and superficially understood aspects of Wagner and Brecht. Stein has, for example, demonstrated that Wagner's ideas on a synthesis of the arts have often been simplified, and that the notion of the Gesamtkunstwerk had a varied history in Wagner's own thinking and writing. Wagner, Stein suggests, worked throughout his career to reconcile his theory of unified system of the arts with the writing of Schopenhauer.

\textsuperscript{25} Sayre, p. 109.

\textsuperscript{26} Sayre, p. 109.
Stein notes that Schopenhauer's theories, especially his thoughts on the superiority of music over the other arts, wielded considerable influence on Wagner's thinking, yet were incompatible with Wagner's original notion of synthesis.27 Similarly, concerning Brecht, Hilda Meldrum Brown has pointed out that his theoretical writings were neither coherent, consistent, nor systematic on a number of issues, including his discussion of collaboration across the arts.28

Secondly, looking more specifically at the nature of Cunningham collaboration, comparisons between it and non-contemporary theatrical models over-emphasise the notion of separateness and independence in a Cunningham collaboration. One of the characteristics that sets the Cunningham approach apart as a distinctive model of collaboration is the inherent possibility of accidental alteration, a variation on the operation of chance, to any one of the independently created elements. It is this capacity for alteration at the moment of performance, with its profound implications for the final outcome of the piece that gives it a distinctive aura of process rather than product, and that make comparisons with Wagner, Diaghilev, and Brecht specious.

27 Stein, pp. 113-17.

From the very beginning of his collaborative work it was common for the separate elements of a Cunningham production to come together only at the final rehearsal, or even the first performance, and Carolyn Brown has remarked on the dichotomy which she sees existing between Cunningham's meticulously detailed approach both to making and rehearsing his choreography, and his willingness to allow its reception to be altered by the work produced, in separation, by the other collaborators. Speaking of musical collaboration she has written:

and yet [Cunningham] then allows a composer to compose what he will, the result often jarring, disruptive, and having the effect of altering what one sees because of what one hears.29

And speaking of the visual collaboration with the lighting designer she has said:

[Cunningham] allows a lighting designer to plunge the work in murky darkness obscuring spatial relationships, cutting down the visual space, adding "atmosphere," altering what one might have seen by coloring it both literally and figuratively in any number of ways.30

The 1964 piece Winterbranch, for which Rauschenberg designed a lighting plot, created anew each night according to chance procedures, is a clear example of the situation described by Brown. Rauschenberg's lighting plot for Winterbranch often plunged the

29 Carolyn Brown, in Klosty, p. 28.
30 Carolyn Brown, in Klosty, p. 28.
performing space into complete darkness.\textsuperscript{31} Other chance associations that developed as a result of working in such a manner were less disruptive and intrusive, although they still highlighted the process of alteration. With \textit{Summerspace}, for example, Cunningham's choreographic explorations of a space without a clearly defined center came together with a spatially ambiguous backcloth and costumes that were visual extensions of the cloth. What emerged was not so much the accidental chaos that characterised \textit{Winterbranch} as accidental harmony.\textsuperscript{32} Brown has also discussed the dancers' role in a Cunningham production, suggesting that confusion often developed as a result of Cunningham's approach. Referring specifically to the 1966 piece \textit{Place} she suggested that, when only the choreography was known and when Cunningham's own role in the piece had not been decided, it seemed to be an entirely different work from that which emerged when Gordon Mumma's score and Beverly Emmons' lighting were added, and when Cunningham added choreography for himself.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Winterbranch} is discussed in more detail in Part III, especially pp. 147-49.

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Summerspace} is discussed in more detail in Part II, pp. 94-96, and in Part III, pp. 128-30 and pp. 145-46.

Brown attributes this capacity for alteration at the moment of performance, inherent in Cunningham's approach, partly to what she calls "Cage's notions of anarchy and of coexistence as practiced by Cunningham."\(^{34}\) She has also referred to the influence on the final outcome of the piece of Cunningham's working methods which, she has said, are characterised by a certain secretiveness: "Merce works secretively; the dancers in his company 'discover' the set...in the final rehearsal,"\(^{35}\) and to Cunningham's personality which, Brown has intimated, is antithetical to the notion of collaboration:

＞The truth is, Merce is no collaborator. He is a loner. He does not work with the lighting designer, set designer, costume designer, or composer.\(^{36}\)

Thirdly, as the remarks of Carolyn Brown indicate, comparisons with Wagner, Diaghilev and Brecht diminish the major influence of Cage in an evaluation of Cunningham's approach to collaboration. Cage reiterated his thoughts on the issues of separation and synthesis throughout the 1950s. They are summed up in an address Emmons during the interregnum between Rauschenberg's term as company designer and Johns's appointment as artistic adviser. As such it does not appear in the appendices to this thesis.

\(^{34}\) Carolyn Brown, in Klosty, p. 28.

\(^{35}\) Carolyn Brown, in Klosty, p. 28.

\(^{36}\) Carolyn Brown, in Klosty, p. 27-28.
on experimental music made in 1957 at the convention of
the Music Teachers' National Association in Chicago:

For this music is not concerned with harmoniousness
as generally understood, where the quality of
harmony results from a blending of several
elements. Here we are concerned with the
coexistence of dissimilars, and the central points
where fusion occurs are many: the ears of the
listeners wherever they are.37

Then, writing about the relationship between music and
dance in his and Cunningham's work Cage said:

The two arts take place in a common rhythmic
structure, but each art expresses this structure in
its own way. The result is an activity of
interpenetrations in time and space, not
counterpoints, or controlled relationships, but
flexibilities as are known from the mobiles of
Alexander Calder.38

Michael Snell has suggested that the notion of
separateness is a feature of the Cunningham aesthetic
whose singularity has clouded the judgment of
critics.39 This situation has arisen in part because
critics and historians have been unable to exorcise "the

37 John Cage, "Experimental Music," 1957; rpt. in
Silence: Lectures and Writings (London: Calder and

38 John Cage, "A movement, a sound, a change of
light," Typescript, unpaginated, undated [1956?],
Clippings file, "Merce Cunningham 1950-56," Dance
Collection, the New York Public Library for the
Performing Arts. This short essay later appeared, with
some minor alterations, as program notes for various
Cunningham productions, and in the booklet Merce
Cunningham and Dance Company, ed. David Vaughan (New
York: Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts),
1963.

39 Michael Snell (pseudonym), "Cunningham and the
specter of the Gesamtkunstwerk to their thinking. By focusing on non-contemporary theatrical models, especially those that relate to the Gesamtkunstwerk, to illuminate Cunningham's notion of collaboration, Cunningham's approach is seen as a kind of product that reveals some greater or lesser degree of unity or disunity between the contributing elements. But, the Cunningham approach to working across the arts has always been concerned not so much with the creation of a distinctive theatrical model of collaboration as with a process in the arts and its implications, a process whose origins were not with Wagner, Diaghilev or Brecht.

\[^{40}\text{Michelson, p. 43.}\]
Among the formative influences on the development of Cunningham's approach to collaboration across the arts were his experiences in the late 1940s and early 1950s, usually in association with Cage, as a faculty member of Black Mountain College, North Carolina. Very early after its establishment in 1933 by John Andrew Rice and his associates, Black Mountain College clarified its focused, yet eclectic, approach to education and to the role of the arts in it. In the first College catalogue, for example, issued in the winter of 1933, the following statement appeared:

Dramatics, Music, and the Fine Arts, which often exist precariously on the fringes of the curriculum, are regarded as an integral part of the life of the College and of importance equal to that of the subjects that usually occupy the center of the curriculum.

In a situation where all the arts were given strong

---

41 The influence of Black Mountain College on the development of Cunningham's aesthetic, and on Rauschenberg's contributions to that aesthetic, is also examined in my article "'A License to Do Anything': Robert Rauschenberg and the Merce Cunningham Dance Company," *Dance Chronicle*, 16, No. 1 (1993) 1-43. See Appendix III.

42 The history of Black Mountain College and the nature of its activities are discussed by Martin Duberman in *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (New York: Dutton, 1972), and by Mary Emma Harris in *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1987).

43 Mary Emma Harris, p. 16.
priority in the curriculum, there was an accompanying emphasis on experimentation and spontaneity, and on the sharing of ideas across the art forms. Mary Emma Harris has written that one of Black Mountain's greatest strengths was "its ability to let things happen - not to overprogram and in so doing limit the chances for spontaneous creative events." Both Cunningham himself and Carolyn Brown, who was with Cunningham at Black Mountain in 1953, have suggested that this cross-art form experimentation in a free environment was an important and influential aspect of life at the College. Cage has, similarly, referred to the creative environment established at Black Mountain, remarking especially on the importance to that environment of Josef Albers, the College's Professor of Art from 1933 to 1949, and Albers' "ability to inspire people with the possibility of their own individual freedom."

It was at Black Mountain during the 1953 summer session, a special session focusing on music and dance, and the last of the Black Mountain summer sessions, that

44 Mary Emma Harris, p. 244.
46 Cage, quoted in Duberman, p. 288.
Cunningham's company came together as an entity for the first time. The existence of an embryonic company allowed Cunningham the luxury of choreographing group pieces rather than the solos that had been the major feature of his choreographic output during the 1940s. During the 1953 session, Cunningham devised two programs of dances, in addition to giving his regular classes.\(^47\)

Cunningham's first connection with the College, however, was in the spring of 1948 when he and Cage had secured an engagement to perform there. Cage presented his pieces for prepared piano, *Sonatas and Interludes*, and Cunningham danced. The success of these performances resulted in an invitation for Cunningham and Cage to return, as faculty members, for the 1948 summer session. Cunningham gave dance technique classes\(^48\) and presented a program of dances that included both solos and works for himself and his students. Cage presented

\(^47\) The items Cunningham produced at the 1953 session included several new pieces - *Banjo, Dime a Dance, Septet*, and *Untitled Solo* - as well as some of his earlier pieces and three student works. They are listed and discussed by Mary Emma Harris, pp. 234-38.

\(^48\) There is evidence to suggest that Black Mountain was critical in the development of Cunningham's teaching strategies. Mary Emma Harris quotes an article written by a student who worked with Cunningham in 1948 that indicates that Cunningham and Cage were working both separately and together and developing a structure that "permits freedom of invention equally, within known limits, and prevents the conventional synchronization of gesture and tone." Mary Emma Harris, p. 156.
a series of concerts and lectures on the music of Erik Satie in which, at one stage, he proclaimed the superiority of Satie's music, structured around the time length rather than harmony, over the more traditionally structured music of Beethoven. Together Cage and Cunningham appeared in, and collaborated on, a production of Satie's *The Ruse of the Medusa*, for which Elaine and Willem de Kooning designed the decor, and which was the culmination of Cage's series of lectures on Satie. It was a production in which, in the spirit of experimentation espoused by the College, the boundaries of Satie's text were expanded upon with the addition of some improvised material, particularly to the role of Baron Medusa, played by Buckminster Fuller. On the whole, however, and unlike the performance that marked Cage's and Cunningham's next engagement at Black Mountain, the performance of *The Ruse of the Medusa* seems to have been a "distinctly directed, controlled" one.

Both Cage and Cunningham returned to the College, again as faculty members, for the 1952 summer session. At

---

49 The reactions of the Black Mountain faculty to Cage's Satie festival are discussed by Duberman pp. 288-89.

50 Mary Emma Harris, pp. 154-56; Duberman, pp. 289-92.

51 Arthur Penn, quoted in Duberman, p. 290.
this session, Cage presented his momentous Theatre Piece No. 1, as it was later called. It was an event which has achieved something of a legendary status as the first "happening" in the United States, and appears to have been planned, and executed within a few hours, by Cage following a conversation with composer David Tudor. Cage devised the program as a number of time slots which he invited various members of the Black Mountain community to fill. Chance procedures determined the order of the contributions. There were no rehearsals, and each of the performers carried out his or her task independently of the others. Cage also arranged the performance space, the College dining hall, so that the audience was seated in the centre of the space, facing each other but separated by diagonals into four sections.

Although, as with all happenings, most of the details of the event are remembered imperfectly and accounts of what actually happened vary somewhat, it is generally agreed that Cage read from a text, Tudor played the piano, Cunningham danced, pursued at times in a wonderfully unplanned manner by a dog, M. C. Richards and Charles Olson read their poetry, Rauschenberg exhibited his work - some of his white paintings made in the early 1950s - and played records on an old gramophone, and visual projections of some kind were
shown. Members of the audience were required to deal not only with the fact that the performance was taking place all around them and not just in front of them, but with cups that they found placed on their chairs when they entered the performing space, and that were filled with coffee at the end of the performance.\textsuperscript{52}

Largely master-minded by Cage (although Cage would probably have preferred "no-minded" by Cage),\textsuperscript{53} 

Theatre Piece No. 1 was a manifestation of some of the new developments that Cage's work was undergoing in the early 1950s, developments that he and Cunningham would pursue over the next several decades. Prior to Theatre Piece No. 1, Cunningham and Cage had been working together on the idea that music and dance were autonomous, agreeing that their separate contributions to a collaboration would simply occupy a certain time structure. Already in 1952 Cunningham had written:

A use of time-structure also frees the music into space, making the connection between the dance and the music one of individual autonomy connected at

\textsuperscript{52} Mary Emma Harris and Duberman both give descriptions of the event based on accounts of those who were present. Mary Emma Harris, pp. 226-28; Duberman, pp. 351-58.

\textsuperscript{53} Cage has referred to collaboration as being "no-minded" in the sense that each contributor works separately simply observing the fact that they have collaborated. John Cage, "On Collaboration in Art: A Conversation with David Shapiro," \textit{Res}, No. 10 (Autumn 1985), p. 107.
structural points. The result is the dance is free to act as it chooses, as is the music.\textsuperscript{54}

Theatre Piece No. 1, however, established an important precedent. It brought together a whole range of disparate elements in a collaborative endeavour. It established a process in which not only music and dance were created independently, but which also paved the way for the Cunningham company to present performances in which all the elements of the production, not just music and dance, were conceived of as independent elements.

In addition, the Black Mountain happening foreshadowed two more of the distinctive features of Cunningham's approach to collaboration. On the one hand, Theatre Piece No. 1 brought all the contributing elements together only at the moment of performance. In this way it both highlighted the notion of process rather than product and established the potential for accidental alteration to the contributions to that process. It is clear, too, that Cage recognised the implications of bringing together all the separate elements at the final moment and, in fact, consciously pursued the idea of accidental alteration in Theatre Piece No. 1. He has described the piece as:

...purposeless purposefulness: it was purposeful in that we knew what we were going to do, but it was

\textsuperscript{54} Merce Cunningham, "space, time and dance," \textit{trans/formation}, 1, No. 3 (1952), 151.
purposeless in that we didn't know what was going to happen in the total.\textsuperscript{55}

On the other hand, by confronting the spectators with a non-traditional performing space — "Where's the best seat?" one spectator is reputed to have asked —\textsuperscript{56} and by placing cups on the spectators' seats, \textit{Theatre Piece No. 1} consciously involved the audience in decision making.

The Black Mountain summer sessions also marked the beginnings of Rauschenberg's collaboration with Cunningham since Rauschenberg, too, was involved with \textit{Theatre Piece No. 1}, although this first collaboration with Cunningham was preceded by a rather more tangential exposure to Cunningham's developing dance aesthetic. While a student of Josef and Anni Albers at Black Mountain during the 1948-49 academic year, Rauschenberg also took dance classes with Elizabeth Jennerjahn,\textsuperscript{57} who had herself taken classes with Cunningham during the 1948 summer session.\textsuperscript{58} Kotz has remarked that these classes "encouraged free movement."\textsuperscript{59} Jennerjahn's

\textsuperscript{55} Duberman, p. 350.
\textsuperscript{56} Duberman, p. 351.
\textsuperscript{57} Kotz, p. 67.
\textsuperscript{58} A photograph taken during the 1948 summer session shows Jennerjahn taking Cunningham's class. See Mary Emma Harris, p. 157.
\textsuperscript{59} Kotz, p. 67.
classes, however, were not constructed around free-movement, but were based on her own technical background, which included both Graham and Cunningham techniques. She maintains that Rauschenberg spoke of her classes as "liberating" in a sense that extended beyond a liberation of the body through dance technique, although she stresses that this also occurred. She maintains that she spent considerable time working with him, and that this time helped prepare him for his future collaborations with Cunningham. Jennerjahn's classes provided Rauschenberg with an early taste of the Cunningham approach to dance, which, along with his exposure to the artistic eclecticism of Black Mountain and his contributions to *Theatre Piece No. 1*, provided a catalyst for his future Cunningham collaborations.

Black Mountain was critical in the unfolding of the Cunningham aesthetic. Not only did it provide the occasion for the beginnings of the Cunningham company, and for the emergence of the collaborative relationship between Cunningham and Rauschenberg, but with the performance of *Theatre Piece No. 1* it also provided the seeds for the development of Cunningham's approach to working across the arts. In it Cage presented, perhaps

---

for the first time, a number of concepts that would become standard features of Cunningham's approach. In particular, he brought a visual component to the collaborations between music and dance that he and Cunningham had begun to explore, and he introduced the idea that all the elements should come together only at the final moment. As well, he experimented with the spatial arrangement of the performing space giving, at the same time, an active role to the audience. Cage's *Theatre Piece No. 1*, and the role of Black Mountain of fostering an environment in which it was able to take place, were germane to the development of the Cunningham aesthetic.
2.3 Explorations in space and time

Cunningham's choreography is, in essence, an examination of space and time and the interrelationships between them. Early in his choreographic career, for example, Cunningham rejected views of the performing space, traditional to both classical and much modern dance, in which centre-stage was treated by the choreographer as the visually dominant position, in which the movement was designed to be seen frontally, and in which the audience was expected for the most part to concentrate its attention on one spatial area (and activity in that space) at a time. Cunningham chose to consider a wider range of possibilities in which every point in the performing space could be equally important and interesting, and in which a number of activities could be happening simultaneously. For Cunningham, the performing space became a de-focused arena, and, reflecting on his approach to space, he said:

... I decided to open up the space to consider it equal, and any place, occupied or not, just as important as any other.61

His spatial explorations are clearly demonstrated in Summerspace made at Connecticut College, New London,

---

61 Cunningham, The Dancer and the Dance, p. 18.
Connecticut while the Cunningham company was in residence there during the summer of 1958. Of Summerspace Cunningham has written:

The space is a field (it was originally conceived in the round), without a center-of-interest point, all points being of equal usage, and one point does not lead to any particular other. The eye is not guided but allowed to jump throughout the space.62

As indicated by his notations for the piece (illus. 13),63 Cunningham began choreographing Summerspace by numbering six entrance/exit spaces and linking each by all possible trajectories. Then, using chance procedures, he devised a range of movement possibilities linking particular movements with each of the twenty-one space possibilities he had established.64 From this range of possibilities Cunningham selected, again using chance procedures, the actual movements and directional patterns which eventually constituted the dance. The resulting composition lacked a central focus suggesting instead that the audience was seeing a section from a


63 Cunningham's choreographic notations for, and his remarks on the creation of, Summerspace appear in his "Summerspace Story: How a Dance Came to Be," Dance Magazine, 40, No. 6 (June 1966), pp. 52-54, in his Changes, unpaginated [pp. 65-72], and in his conversation with Jacqueline Lesschaeve The Dancer and the Dance, pp. 96-98 and figs. 6, 7, 9, 14, 15.

64 Cunningham's choreographic notes indicate which specific movements relate to which trajectory. A selection of these notes has been published in his Changes, unpaginated [especially pp. 66-68].
much larger canvas of movement that continued outside of the performing space. Carolyn Brown has said of it:

The focus is full circle, including within its radius the other dancers and the audience.  

While Cunningham's interest in unconventional spatial arrangements reflects the example of *Theatre Piece No. 1* in which there was little that was conventional, either in physical location, or in arrangement of audience and performer within that location, it also has much in common with developments in the visual arts that preceded the Black Mountain happening. With regard to *Summerspace*, Cunningham has indicated that when performing in *Summerspace* he always felt that he was continuing the dance even when he was off-stage, and his attitude clearly recalls that of Jackson Pollock who is quoted in *The New Yorker* in 1950 expressing his delight that a critic had referred to his paintings as having neither a beginning or an end. In the same article, Lee Krasner has referred to Pollock's work as "unframed space." In addition, most Cunningham

---

65 Carolyn Brown, "Essays, Stories and Remarks about Merce Cunningham," *Dance Perspectives*, 34, (Summer 1968), 34.

66 Merce Cunningham in general discussion following a rehearsal of *Summerspace* by his Repertory Understudy Group (RUG), 11 October 1991, Westbeth Studio, New York City.

dances, including the "originally conceived in-the-round" Summerspace, are made to be seen from any position,68 even if circumstances decree that they are most often seen frontally. His 1956 work Suite for Five in Space and Time, was, for example, expressly choreographed to be shown with the audience on four sides and Cunningham has stated that it was performed in that way whenever possible,69 thus ensuring that there was not an ideal (frontal) position from which to view the work.

Then, in "space, time and dance" Cunningham wrote:

A prevalent feeling among many painters that lets them make a space in which anything can happen is a feeling dancers may have too.70

Elsewhere he has remarked that in developing his approach to space in his choreography he was influenced by "many modern paintings" in which the centre of the painting was not necessarily its centre of interest.71 Although Cunningham does not refer to specific artists or to specific works of visual art, artists whose work


69 Cunningham, Changes, unpaginated [p. 60].

70 Cunningham, "space, time and dance," p. 150.

71 Cunningham, The Dancer and the Dance, p. 17.
was later labelled as belonging to the New York School, Abstract Expressionism and/or Action Painting were part of Cunningham's and Cage's early audience,\(^{72}\) and both Cunningham and Cage are known to have frequented the favourite New York City haunts of those artists including The Cedar Bar and the Artists' Club on Eighth Avenue.\(^{73}\) Cage was also on the editorial board of the short-lived journal *Possibilities* whose editors also included Robert Motherwell and Harold Rosenberg.\(^{74}\) *Possibilities* published, in its single issue in 1947-48, Jackson Pollock's statement in which he discussed his method of working on an unstretched canvas tacked to the floor in order to be *"in my painting."*\(^{75}\) In 1950 and 1952 Cage also lectured at the sessions organised by the visual artists who belonged to Studio 35 and The Club in New York where the cultural milieu in which Abstract Expressionism prospered was discussed and analysed.\(^{76}\)

---


\(^{73}\) David Vaughan, Letter to the author, 29 January 1993.

\(^{74}\) Ross, p. 140.


Just as Cunningham was engaged in reconsidering the role of the performing space in choreographic design, so were artists of the New York School re-examining how they might utilise the space of their canvases. Of these investigations by visual artists Harold Rosenberg has written:

> At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act - rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze, or "express" an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.77

Then, beginning in the 1960s with his Museum Event #1, Cunningham began, perhaps accidentally, to develop a formula which took advantage of this in-the-round, unframed approach to making and viewing choreography. It was a formula which also brought into focus the close connection in Cunningham's work between space and time. Museum Event #1, which took place in 1964 in Vienna in the Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts, and which was commissioned by the Museum, was performed in a space that was theatrically unconventional with the audience seated on three sides and with the musicians seated separately from each other in the corners of the

---

space. For the occasion Cunningham felt that a conventional presentation of a selection of separate dance items from the repertory would be inappropriate for the unconventional space offered to him. His solution, and that of Cage who was responsible for the music, was to fill a given time length with music and dance. The dance consisted of continuous, and at times simultaneous, excerpts from the repertory rather than individual items set apart from each other by a time break.

*Museum Event #1* was the first in a long series of pieces that eventually took on the generic name *Events.* Performances took place in a variety of indoor and outdoor spaces, although, paradoxically, *Events* became such an expected feature of Cunningham programming that they were sometimes presented in conventional theatre spaces. In such cases, it was the time element, the notion of presenting excerpts from the repertory continuously and simultaneously, rather than the space element, the possibility of performing outside the

---


79 *Events* were numbered until they reached about 200 when Cunningham dispensed with the numbering system. For Cunningham's discussion of *Events* see his *The Dancer and the Dance,* pp. 174-77.
confines of the proscenium theatre, that was emphasised. *Events* continue to be part of the Cunningham repertory although now, with their being described by one critic as "one-and-a-half-hour repertory anthologies,"⁸⁰ they appear less and less to be perceived of, as they were originally, as explorations of a relationship between the performing space and time.

In exploring the range of possibilities for using space, Cunningham has also frequently employed stillness as a choreographic device, using it, as he does movement, as a way in which the body can occupy space. Tomkins has suggested that Cunningham uses stillness not simply as a pause between one movement and the next, but as an expressive force whose power he likens to the negative volumes of a Henry Moore sculpture.⁸¹ Cunningham's use of stillness is, however, more akin to John Cage's use of silence. For Cage silence is not the time which elapses between sounds, but the ambient sounds which are only called silence because they are not conventionally regarded as part of musical intention. According to Cage the listener must hear these ambient sounds as sounds and not as phenomena approximating a preconceived

---


notion."\textsuperscript{82} Cage has written: "The material of music is sound and silence. Integrating these is composing."\textsuperscript{83} Similarly, for Cunningham stillness is not so much an expressive force as a material of choreography and a statement about movement. Cunningham could equally have written that the material of dance is movement and stillness and that the integration of them is choreography.

Cunningham's uses of stillness, and his juxtaposition of stillness against movement also reflect the close connections in Cunningham's work between space and time, and concern what Marilyn Hunt has called the "mutability of time."\textsuperscript{84} Hunt suggests that the held poses of the 1959 piece \textit{Rune} and the long slow walk in \textit{Night Wandering} dating from 1958 suggest that the pieces take place "in a drawn-out time."\textsuperscript{85} The idea of the mutability of time reaches its quintessential expression in Cunningham's recent piece \textit{Beach Birds}, commissioned by the City of Zurich and made in 1991. In its opening sequence, the dancers hold their initial, motionless


\textsuperscript{83} John Cage, "Forerunners of Modern Music," \textit{The Tiger's Eye} (March 1949); rpt. in \textit{Silence}, p. 62.

\textsuperscript{84} Marilyn Hunt, "Review of Merce Cunningham Dance Company," \textit{Dance Magazine}, 54, No. 6 (June 1980), 38.

\textsuperscript{85} Hunt, p. 38.
poses for an extended period of time and make the transition from stillness to movement initially so imperceptible that stillness and movement are no longer opposites, but aspects of the one phenomenon.

Cunningham has also remarked that "Every dance tries to define its own time," and his choreography has also consistently explored the notion of duration, or the space of time a dance occupies, and the related idea of indeterminacy. As with his explorations into the limits of space, many of his works also consider the idea that there is no fixed beginning and end in time for a piece and that the order in which sequences are performed, and thus the internal time frame of the piece, can vary. He has said:

Many of my dances are conceived or composed so that they can be done all or in part. They do not have to be thought of as a complete thing which begins at a certain point and ends at a certain point." His 1963 piece Story, for example, was made to be danced by any number of dancers and had a component of choreographic indeterminacy, the variables at each performance being the length of the piece, the length of

86 498, 3rd Avenue, Film produced by Hans Jörg Pauli, Norddeutscher Rundfunk, Hamburg, 1967, Dance Collection, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

87 Merce Cunningham, Taped interview with Merce Cunningham by Marian Horosko for the series World of Dance, Radio WNYC, New York, 1965, Dance Collection, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
individual sections and the internal arrangement of the sections.⁸⁸

Furthermore, Hunt has described Cunningham's choreography as movement that "springs from motor impulses rather than a regular beat or the accompanying sound score,"⁹⁰ and Cunningham's explorations of time and its duration have also included the development of the notion of "body time," that is the time the body takes to perform a dance, or a movement within a dance. Cunningham has always worked with a stop-watch and his dancers are asked to learn to take a specific amount of time to perform a certain movement. Their check on the overall time taken is Cunningham's stop-watch, their check on the individual movements which make up the entire piece is their own sense of internal time.

Cunningham's interest in the body and the space and time it occupies has usually been seen as a kind of reaction to the expressive, emotional and shaped "in her own image"⁹⁰ choreography of the American pioneer dance-

⁸⁸ Story also had a score and lighting design that were indeterminate, and its set and costumes also varied from performance to performance. The piece is considered in greater detail in Part III of this thesis.

⁹⁰ Hunt, p. 38.

⁹⁰ Peter Brinson, "Martha and Agnes," Rev. of Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham by Agnes de Mille, Dance Magazine, 66, No. 2 (February 1992), p. 66.
maker Martha Graham whose company he left in the 1940s. It is illuminating of Cunningham's approach, however, also to consider this aspect of his dance-making as a reflection of trends that developed contemporaneously in the visual arts. As his explorations of spatial boundaries connect with similar explorations by visual artists, so too does his examination of the body in space and time. In his 1939 analysis of the avant-garde in art, which has been seen in retrospect as part of a manifesto of Abstract Expressionism,\textsuperscript{91} Clement Greenberg wrote:

> In turning his attention away from subject matter of common experience, the poet or artist turns it in upon the medium of his own craft.\textsuperscript{92}

This movement away from representational art towards non-objective art in which an artist's medium of expression became his subject matter is paralleled by Cunningham's consistent interest in extracting the materials of dance-making as his subject.

Just as major distinguishing features of Cunningham's collaborative approach developed out of a liberal and experimental arts environment rather than from any

\textsuperscript{91} David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro, "Introduction: A Brief History," in Abstract Expressionism, [eds] David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro, p. 16.

specific non-contemporary theatrical model, his explorations of time and space have connections with the non-theatrical arts. In particular, Cunningham's choreographic approach exhibits similarities to the idea prominent in the visual arts that space is an arena in which to act, and to the notion that the artist is concerned with the materials of his craft rather than with expression and representation. Cunningham's experiences at Black Mountain were seminal in the development of his aesthetic, but so too were influences absorbed as a result of his and Cage's exposure to the activities of visual artists working in New York in the 1940s and 1950s.
2.4 The role of chance

In addition to, or in relation to, his concerns with time and space and their interconnections, Cunningham has explored the role of chance as a process in dance-making. Once again, such explorations do not exhibit parallels with contemporary or non-contemporary movements in dance. It is tempting to suggest that these explorations have, instead, parallels with Dada-inspired activities since the admiration of both Cunningham and Cage for Marcel Duchamp is well documented. But Cunningham's use of chance developed alongside a similar use by Cage that was inspired not so much by Dada as by Cage's rediscovery in 1950 of the I Ching, newly translated and introduced to him by composer Christian Wolff, and its method of tossing three coins six times to produce a series of hexagrams to be read in conjunction with a chart, traditionally arranged, of the numbers 1 to 64.


The discovery of the *I Ching (Book of Changes)*, a collection of signs used by the Chinese since mythical antiquity both for obtaining oracles and as a book of wisdom, was a watershed in Cage's career, and it marked the beginning of his life-long devotion to using chance procedures in the preparation of his compositions. Cage has recorded that the first pieces he made with the assistance of the *I Ching* were *Music of Changes* and *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, both completed in 1951.\(^95\) With those and subsequent pieces, he used the method of the *I Ching* to determine the duration, tempi, sounds, dynamics and other elements of his compositions. Shortly after his discovery of the *I Ching*, he began to introduce other chance procedures as aids to composition. With his *Music for Piano 21-52* (1955), for example, the sounds were selected by marking the imperfections on a piece of paper and noting where these fell in relation to staves ruled on the paper.\(^96\)

In a similar fashion, Cunningham has used a variety of chance procedures in his work, including throwing dice, dealing playing cards, and tossing coins, sometimes in conjunction with consulting the *I Ching*, and has

\(^95\) John Cage, "To Describe the Process of Composition Used in *Music of Changes* and *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*," 1952; rpt. in *Silence*, p. 57.

\(^96\) Cage, "To Describe the Process of Composition Used in *Music for Piano 21-52*," 1957; rpt. in *Silence*, p. 60.
regarded the use of such procedures as a working method, or series of methods, that determine how the continuity of the piece may go. Cunningham's use of chance as a compositional principle first became evident in the 1950s when he made a piece called *16 Dances for Soloist and Company of Three*, premiered in January 1951.

Shortly after that he made *Suite by Chance*, first performed in March 1953, in which the entire structure of the dance was built up according to chance:

...I subjected every single thing to chance. I made a series of charts of everything: space, time, positions, and the dance was built for four dancers going from one of these lists to the other.

Then, like Cage's *Music for Piano 21-52*, Cunningham's 1956 piece *Suite for Five* was made partly by numbering the chance imperfections found on a piece of paper. Cunningham used the numbering system obtained by this method to determine the spatial arrangement of the dancers in the performing space, and the time lengths of the dance phrases. Once set, Cunningham's choreographic sequences are not, or very rarely, subject to improvisational techniques by the dancers.

---


98 Merce Cunningham, "Two Questions and Five Dances," *Dance Perspectives*, 34, (Summer 1968), 49.


Also in the 1950s, Cage began to make pieces which were not only derived from chance procedures of one kind or another, but in which indeterminacy played a role, that is in which aspects of the production were subject to change during the performance. For example, Cage has indicated that with *Music for Piano 21-52* the two groups of pieces which make up the whole piece could be played alone or together, with or without *Music for Piano 4-19* (1953), that the length of time was free, that there might or might not be silence between them, and that they might be overlapped.\(^{101}\) Around the same time, Cunningham also began experimenting with indeterminacy as a compositional principle: "I had become interested in not having a fixed order to a piece."\(^{102}\) In his 1959 piece *Rune*, for example, the five sections of the piece were performed in three different arrangements during its performance history.\(^{103}\) Then, his 1963 work *Field Dances*, was created for any number of dancers and could be performed anywhere and for any duration of time. Cunningham has specifically referred to it as "an indeterminate dance."\(^{104}\)

---

\(^{101}\) Cage, "To Describe the Process of Composition Used in *Music for Piano 21-52*," p. 61.

\(^{102}\) Cunningham, *Changes*, unpaginated [p. 108].

\(^{103}\) Cunningham, *Changes*, unpaginated [p. 108].

\(^{104}\) Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance*, p. 100.
On the one hand, for both Cunningham and Cage the use of chance was a deliberate compositional tool that opened up an expanded range of possibilities. But, on the other, the use of chance procedures was an aid by which they attempted to produce work from which traces of their preferences for particular sounds or movements had been removed. Cunningham has spoken of removing his "psychological preferences,"\textsuperscript{105} from his work, and Cage has written:

Those involved with the composition of experimental music find ways and means to remove themselves from the activities of the sounds they make.\textsuperscript{106}

The successes or failures of both Cage's and Cunningham's efforts to remove their personal preferences from their work continue to engage critics and historians. One of Cage's teachers, Henry Cowell, has said:

...in spite of his best efforts to the contrary, Cage has not succeeded in eliminating his highly refined and individual taste from the music derived from the \textit{I Ching}. Unfortunately,...no order of tossings can give anything more than a variety of arrangements of elements subjectively chosen to operate upon.\textsuperscript{107}

Moreover, although Cage has consistently denied any interest in making value judgments, Kostelanetz has

\textsuperscript{105} Cunningham, "Music and Dance and Chance Operations," audiotape.

\textsuperscript{106} Cage, "Experimental Music," p. 10.

remarked that he does make such judgments himself:

...he prefers art that is formally variable and open, rather than constant and fixed, and as discontinuously complex as life itself. For instance, he esthetically objects to nearly all contemporary music...because the results are fixed objects for contemplation rather than processes that expose us to life.\textsuperscript{108}

For Cunningham the situation is similar, although ignorance about his work was widespread during the early years of his company's existence, and the reception of that work by the media was frequently characterised by bewilderment and plain misunderstanding. The critic P. W. Manchester, for example, wrote the following about Cunningham's preference for dance that eschewed a single, central focus, and that offered the audience, instead, a multiplicity of possible viewpoints:

Here the often beautiful and intricate movements were blurred because when six dancers are on stage together all performing completely different steps in six different directions, there is no focus of attention and the audience ends by giving up even trying to decide what is the most important thing to watch at any given moment.\textsuperscript{109}

Then, Walter Terry has written of Cunningham's use of chance as if it were a totally ad hoc principle:


Cunningham has explored dance-by-chance methods, that is, not making designs and sequences deliberately but, instead, duplicating the patterns formed by Chinese sticks which have been tossed into the air and landed at random.\textsuperscript{110}

The use of chance was, like the emphasis on the body and the time and space it occupies as the essential and basic material of dance, a crucial factor in Cunningham's development of a non-narrative and non-expressive dance form. It was a further measure of the extent to which, with his choreography, he sought to move in a different direction from his predecessors in the modern dance world. In addition, it was a procedure by which Cunningham and Cage sought to establish their work as "theatrical" in the sense later expounded upon by Fried in relation to minimalist art.\textsuperscript{111} Unlike Fried, for whom the presence of a beholder meant the presence of work that could not be characterised as authentic art, Cage and Cunningham consciously pursued the idea that the spectator (Fried's beholder) was a crucial element in art-making. Through the use of chance procedures, Cunningham and Cage sought to establish their work as inclusive rather than exclusive. That is, they aimed to minimise their authorship of their work in order to establish an open system of

\textsuperscript{110} Walter Terry, cited in Snell, p. 38.

\textsuperscript{111} Fried, "Art and Objecthood," p. 125.
collaboration in which the work of none of the collaborators dominated the production, and in which individual interpretations of production, or parts of it, by the spectator as a collaborator were possible, even if, in practice, much of the early audience was confused. By contrast, an exclusive act precludes a variety of individual interpretations when the author of the work, or a collaborator in it, imposes a structure that suggests, or even demands, a prescribed interpretation.
2.5 The Cunningham context

Cunningham's approach to dance-making has never been a static one. Central to his explorations into the interrelationships between time and space, and to his use of chance procedures, is his concern with expanding the range of possibilities available not just to the choreographer but also to those who work with him, a kind of curiosity that, as Cage has remarked, is the "proper business" of those engaged in the creative arts.\textsuperscript{112}

Expanding the range of possibilities has included, in recent years, an examination by Cunningham of the latest technological advances available to him. He has, for example, worked extensively with video. Since the 1970s he has pursued the notion of videodance, that is choreography made especially for the medium of video, for the expanded possibilities it allows for the manipulation of space and time.\textsuperscript{113} His Blue Studio:

\textsuperscript{112} Cage, quoted in Kostelanetz, The Theatre of Mixed Means, p. 57.

\textsuperscript{113} For a more detailed discussion of videodance as opposed to the videotaping of a stage performance, and of Cunningham's experiments with videodance, see Richard Lorber, "Experiments in Videodance," Dance Scope, 12, No. 1 (Fall/Winter 1977/78), 7-16. Lorber also discusses the notion of videodance in his "Toward an Aesthetics of Videodance," Arts in Society, 13, No. 2 (Summer/Fall 1976), 242-253.
Five Segments,¹¹⁴ for example, made in 1976 with film-maker Charles Atlas, indicates the particular extent to which Cunningham is prepared to pursue the possibilities of the medium in which he is working. Blue Studio is a solo piece for Cunningham in which he performs in a kind of synthetic space, his range of movements, often of the everyday kind, taking place against an ever changing, constantly moving background of landscapes, people and animals. Blue Studio uses the technique of chroma-keying by which imagery can be superimposed onto the blue area of a video image, a technique which also allows for experimentation with time. In one section, Cunningham dances amongst images of himself and, at the end, various of his images dance at the same time until one image signals the end and all images walk off together.¹¹⁵

More recently Cunningham has begun to explore the possibilities of choreography by computer using a three-dimensional human animation program called COMPOSE. Described by one of its designers as a program that "looks at movement neutrally, using a spatial view and a

¹¹⁴ Blue Studio: Five Segments, videorecording, directed by Charles Atlas, WNET New York, 1976, Dance Collection, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

time-line view,"¹¹⁶ it was originally designed as an aid to dance notation but was further developed as an aid to creativity using "on-screen images of flexible figure-symbols on a stage to allow a choreographer to plan and block a work."¹¹⁷ Cunningham has used the program to help create sections of a number of his newest pieces including Trackers (1991), Beach Birds (1991), and Enter (1993), and his use of it as a compositional tool has allowed him to develop further his interest in removing his personal preferences from the creative process.

Similarly, in providing a collaborative context for artists who work with him, Cunningham encourages flexibility, allows alteration, and stresses active participation. That collaborative context did not develop in support of, or in opposition to, any non-contemporary theatrical model, nor even as a reaction against earlier approaches to dance as a performing art. Many of the intrinsic features of Cunningham's choreography, and the major distinguishing characteristics of his approach to collaboration, align more closely with the aesthetic of Cage and with contemporaneous experiments the visual arts, both as a


¹¹⁷ Wyman, p. 13.
result of the connection with Black Mountain College and through a shared sensibility with some aspects of the work of Abstract Expressionist artists. Furthermore, from the point of view of his collaborators, the critical feature of Cunningham's approach to collaboration is not the existence of a collaborative context in which independence and separation of the contributing elements are highlighted. It is, rather, the development of an approach that requires an inclusive, rather than exclusive, process of art-making.
Since the Black Mountain *Theatre Piece No. 1*, which probably marked the beginning of his mature engagement with the theatre, Rauschenberg has pursued an eclectic range of theatrical interests. Those that have received most attention from art historians have been his performance pieces, beginning with his joint venture, *Homage to David Tudor* (1961), a collaboration made in Paris with Niki de Saint-Phalle, Jean Tinguely, and David Tudor, and followed by another collaborative venture *The Construction of Boston* (1962), made in New York also with de Saint-Phalle and Tinguely. Throughout the 1960s, Rauschenberg continued to make a range of joint and individual performances pieces including one, *Open Score*, made for Billy Klüver's *Nine Evenings: Theater and Engineering* in 1966.²

Both Rauschenberg's performance art and his commissioned theatrical work have almost always been connected in some way with dance and dancers. After *Homage to David Tudor* and *The Construction of Boston*, most of his pieces of performance art involved dancers as co-performers, including *Pelican* (1963), the well-known piece he made in which he appeared on roller skates, and in which he performed with Per Olof Ultveldt and Carolyn Brown, and *Spring Training* (1965) in which he and his son Christopher performed with Trisha Brown, Viola Farber, Deborah Hay, Barbara Dilley, and Steve Paxton. Throughout the 1960s he worked frequently with dancers at the Judson Memorial Church in New York City. He was involved with the Judson Dance Theater, a seminal group in the development of a postmodern aesthetic in the arts, from the earliest days of its existence, attending workshop sessions and acting in a variety of roles including those of performer, choreographer, and visual artist. Then, in addition to working with Cunningham, Rauschenberg has also been commissioned by two other major American choreographers. In the 1950s and 1960s he made costumes and sets for a number of pieces for the Paul Taylor Dance Company. Currently he collaborates

---

with Trisha Brown with whom he has worked periodically since the 1960s, both as a co-performer at Judson, and as a visual artist making sets and costumes for the Trisha Brown Dance Company.  

To date, however, the most prolific of his dance connections is still his association with Cunningham. Initially, Rauschenberg executed sets and/or costumes for the company. Later, he expanded his activities to include lighting designs, although he had never studied lighting in any formal course. He simply began to experiment when it became clear to him:

that the lighting and the whole staging were just as essential to the way a piece looked as what the dancers were wearing.

Rauschenberg also devised properties and make-up for a number of pieces.

Both Rauschenberg and members of the Cunningham company have often remarked on the strength of the influence each has had on the other. Carolyn Brown, whose career with Cunningham spanned the entire Rauschenberg period,

---


has emphasised the importance of Rauschenberg's contribution to the development of the company, and his commitment to it, which she maintains was absolute:

He understood what was needed because more important to him than his own ideas was his absolute devotion to Merce's dances, his respect for the intrinsic worth of the choreography itself.\(^5\)

Brown has also referred to Rauschenberg's departure from the company at the end of the 1964 world tour in terms that reflect the strength of his influence: "No loss to the company was greater than Rauschenberg's departure from it."\(^6\)

Rauschenberg himself reflects on his time with the Cunningham company with nostalgia, and has suggested that working with Cunningham gave him "licence to do anything."\(^7\) Although Katz has suggested it was as a result of a nexus of support and understanding, which grew out of his gay relationship with Johns, that allowed Rauschenberg's art to develop in radical new directions,\(^8\) the Cunningham company also provided a

\(^5\) Carolyn Brown, in Klosty, p. 29.

\(^6\) Carolyn Brown, in Klosty, p. 29.

\(^7\) Robert Rauschenberg in conversation with John Cage, Merce Cunningham and David Vaughan on the videorecording The Collaborators: Cage, Cunningham, Rauschenberg, KETC Public Television, St. Louis, 1987, Dance Collection, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

\(^8\) Katz, pp. 198-99.
supportive environment for Rauschenberg's experiments. The Cunningham context nurtured Rauschenberg's interest in what he has called the "liveness" of theatrical endeavours, and allowed him to explore and expand both the role of art and that of the artist in the theatre. While working with Cunningham, he developed an approach to costuming that manipulated the notion of the functional costume. He also investigated a number of approaches to using space, and, towards the end of his major association with the company, he pushed his licence to its limits with his explorations into setting the scene for Cunningham productions.

3.1 The functional costume?

It is a commonplace to suggest that dance costumes must be functional in the sense that they must serve the needs of the body in motion. Dancers have always been quick to complain, perhaps with some justification, when costumes do not fulfil this requirement and are heavy and cumbersome. They did so, for example, when confronted by Larionov's costumes for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes production of *Soleil de Nuit* (illus. 14). One of the dancers who performed during that work's first season has remarked in her memoirs:

> Although the costumes were vivid in colour and wonderful to look at, they were appallingly uncomfortable. All our abandon and zest for dancing was nipped in the bud. We had horrible thick pads tied around our waists, then there were tight heavy costumes on top of them. The tall, mitre-shaped Russian head-dresses, once they had slipped slightly to one side, just refused to stand up straight again...\(^\text{10}\)

Even greater problems surfaced with Larionov's costumes for *Chout*; many of them were constructions in which cloth was attached to a cane frame (illus. 15). From a dancer's point of view they were exceptionally unwieldy, and Diaghilev was forced to threaten the dancers in *Chout* with fines to persuade them to perform in costumes "that were so heavy and cumbersome that they interfered with the movements of the dance."\(^\text{11}\)

\(^{10}\) Lydia Sokolova, quoted in Buckle, p. 296.

\(^{11}\) Kochno, p. 160.
At the other end of the spectrum, Matisse's costume for the nightingale in the 1925 revival of Diaghilev's production of *Le Chant du Rossignol* was a close-fitting top and leggings in which the body was freed of any encumbrance, and in which the body as medium was clearly articulated. The arguments about it revolved not around its wearability, but around who would pay for the ospreys that Matisse wanted as decoration for the headdress, and the arbitrary white colour that upset the fourteen year old star of the production, Alicia Markova.

In the Cunningham context, it would seem essential to provide functional costumes in order not to conceal the role of the body as a basic material of dance, and, at first glance, the question of functionality in dance costumes seems to be an ever-present notion in Rauschenberg's work for the Cunningham company. When asked why he did not incorporate into his costumes the kind of items he regularly incorporated into his paintings, he suggested that there was no need saying:

---

12 Buckle, p. 455.

"The dancers and their movements are so beautiful, what else could I do?"\(^{14}\)

Apart from the 1964 piece *Winterbranch*, in which Rauschenberg clothed the dancers in black sweat pants and tops, there is no Cunningham piece in which Rauschenberg totally dispensed with a basic body-hugging costume of leotard and tights, or tights worn with a close fitting top of some kind. In a number of his early commissions for the Cunningham company, such as *Suite for Five* (1956), *Labyrinthian Dances* (1957), *Summerspace* (1958), *Rune* (1959) and *Crises* (1960), he clothed the dancers solely in such a basic outfit, which he simply dyed or painted (illus. 6; illus. 16).

Rauschenberg has also been praised by others for making items that do not intrude upon the dance. In reviewing a number of Cunningham pieces to which Rauschenberg contributed costumes, Peter Yates, for example, suggested that Rauschenberg's costumes exhibited a certain simplicity in which small additions, in the form of a sleeve or legging, to a basic dancers' outfit of leotard and tights avoided "any virtuosity of costume

design.\footnote{15}{Peter Yates, "Merce Cunningham Restores the Dance to Dance," \textit{Impulse: Annual of Contemporary Dance}, (1965), p. 17.} Yates suggested that, by working in this way, Rauschenberg allowed the dance to maintain its integrity in the collaboration. He concluded by remarking:

I compliment Robert Rauschenberg most highly by saying that one is never aware of his presence by any virtuosity of costume design or lighting imposed on the dance.\footnote{16}{Yates, p. 17.}

Yet, despite his own remarks about the self-sufficiency of dance and the need not to burden it with unnecessary paraphernalia, and the praise of others for doing just that, Rauschenberg appeared to oscillate in his costume-making between a recognition of the need to make functional items, and the pursuit of a more individualistic approach in which the items of costuming he produced had a meaning greater than their potential wearability. Even his most deceptively simple costumes for Cunningham often look far beyond the notion that functional costumes simply allow the integrity of the dance to shine through, and they often bear a complex relationship to the aesthetic of the dance they accompany.
Rauschenberg's costumes for *Summerspace*, for example, consisted of tights and leotards for both the four women and the two men on whom the piece was made. These basic outfits were spray-painted in a "pointillist" manner with an all-over design of tiny dots in shades of brown, yellow, orange and green (illus. 16). Formally, the *Summerspace* costumes were similar to Rauschenberg's backcloth for the same piece, which was also spray-painted with an all-over pattern of dots (illus. 16; illus. 28). The costumes for *Summerspace* were, in fact, an extension of this backcloth.¹⁷

Previous writing on *Summerspace* has suggested that treating the costumes in this way meant that whenever a dancer paused, and, as mentioned earlier, Cunningham has always employed stillness as a choreographic device, he or she merged into the background somewhat like a camouflaged animal.¹⁸ It is more likely in Rauschenberg's case, however, that treating the costumes as an extension of the backcloth grew out of his interest in surface. This interest dates at least back to his white paintings of the 1950s when Rauschenberg etched a series of numbers into the paint in his The

¹⁷ The backcloth for *Summerspace* is also discussed in section 3.2. See pp. 145-46.

Lily White (1950) (illus. 17), later remarking that they were there as "the device to activate the surface."\textsuperscript{19}

In reference to Rauschenberg's white paintings, Walter Hopps has also remarked that, despite the fact that Cage responded to them by developing an interest in silence and ambient sound,\textsuperscript{20} Rauschenberg was concerned with "the palpable nature of white as an assertive presence rather than a declared absence."\textsuperscript{21} Rauschenberg has also spoken of his general interest in making "a surface which invited a constant change of focus and an examination of detail."\textsuperscript{22} In Summerspace, whenever the dancers moved their costumes set the backcloth in motion, whenever the dancers paused the movement of the backcloth was arrested. For Rauschenberg, his costumes for Summerspace were a contribution to his explorations of an articulate and fluid surface.

\textsuperscript{19} Kotz, p. 71.

\textsuperscript{20} Cage has suggested that Rauschenberg's white paintings inspired him to create his 4'33", a piece that is performed in what is conventionally regarded as silence - John Cage, speaking on the videorecording The Collaborators, 1987. Cage also wrote: "To Whom It May Concern: The white paintings came first; my silent piece came later." - John Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work," Metro, 2, (1961); rpt in Silence, p. 98.


\textsuperscript{22} Rauschenberg, in G. R. Swenson, "Rauschenberg Paints a Picture," ARTnews, 62, No. 2 (April 1963), 45.
Rauschenberg's work on *Summerspace* also added an extra dimension to Cunningham's expressed choreographic intention for the piece, which was to make a work that would reflect his belief that any area of the stage space, not just centre-stage, was as important as any other, and in which the dance appeared to be continuing beyond the prescribed stage space. Carolyn Brown, who performed in early seasons of *Summerspace*, has written of it:

*Summerspace*, in particular of all Merce's works, is antithetical to center stage; the center of interest is everywhere, including the illusion that the dance continues off-stage as well.\(^{23}\)

Rauschenberg's costumes (along with the related backcloth), with their "pointillist" design and consequent lack of a clearly defined centre, reflected a similar interest by Cunningham. They highlighted in particular Cunningham's explorations into the ambiguity of space, as well as his interest in the importance of centre (or non-centre).

Occasions when Rauschenberg used only a body-hugging outfit of leotard and tights as he did in *Summerspace* were, however, rare. One of his favourite techniques in dressing Cunningham dance was, if not to incorporate, to add removable items to a basic, functional costume of leotard and tights. Sometimes these additions were

\(^{23}\) Carolyn Brown, "Essays, Stories and Remarks about Merce Cunningham," p. 34.
seemingly unobtrusive in terms of their relationship to the body in movement, although almost always they were startling in their juxtapositions of colour and texture, or in the manner in which they were attached to the basic outfit.

For Cunningham's solo dance *Changeling* (1957), for example, Rauschenberg explored the use of contrasting textures by adding to a basic costume of red leotard and chartreuse yellow tights a red wool sweater with many holes and one sleeve, red wool leg warmers and tight-fitting, red skull cap (illus. 18). Then, among his contributions to *Aeon* (1961) were detachable items to be worn in particular sections of the dance. To the women's leotards and tights, dyed in shades of blue and grey, he added detachable sleeves in thin grey cotton (illus. 19), and a skirt also in filmy cotton with a ten foot long train shading through blue, yellow, green, pink, violet, orange and yellow; to the men's costumes he added feathered pants. His costumes for a new 1957 production of *Springweather and People* (1955) were enhanced by the addition to the usual costume of leotard and tights of a tail-like, half-circle skirt, a design he repeated in 1960 for *Hands Birds*, a solo dance choreographed for Carolyn Brown. For *Springweather and People* each half-circle skirt was made of nylon, in one of four colours: yellow, green, red, and shocking pink.
The skirt was attached not simply to the leotard, which was dyed half pink and half blue, but to the blue tights as well. The center of the diameter of the skirt was attached to the back of the leotard just below the waist, and the radii along the seams of the tights. The result was an unusual skirt, difficult to get into although easy to dance in, whose shape altered according to whatever movements were made with the legs. Despite some unusual features, costumes of this kind do largely reflect the view of Yates, or that of Vaughan who has described Rauschenberg's contributions to the Cunningham repertory as:

> almost never self-assertive, but designed to give the dancers as much freedom as possible, whether from cumbersome costumes (nearly all his costumes are variations on basic leotard and tights) or from obstacles in the performing area.  

Frequently, however, Rauschenberg's technique of addition resulted in costumes that were not simply startling in appearance due to unusual fabric, colour or cut. Like *Summerspace*, many of them bore a complex relationship to his non-theatrical output and to Cunningham's intentions for individual pieces. But as well, they highlighted the manner in which

---


Rauschenberg's approach to dance costumes fluctuated between making items that served the needs of the body in motion, and dressing the dance in ways that looked beyond functionality. In 1958, for example, Rauschenberg made costumes for a Cunningham piece called *Antic Meet*. In a letter to Rauschenberg, one of the few between Cunningham and his collaborators, Cunningham described *Antic Meet* as "like a series of vaudeville scenes which overlap."\(^{26}\) His outline of the piece also included some suggestions for the costumes and properties although, as Vaughan has remarked, Rauschenberg interpreted Cunningham's suggestions quite freely.\(^{27}\) Cunningham's "long dresses, maybe transparent with the tights embroidered in large leaves"\(^{28}\) became dresses made from government surplus parachutes with braid attached in a manner that gave the dresses a ruched effect (illus. 20), while the suggestion that a dancer might be "loaded down with bundles"\(^{29}\) was translated into an umbrella fitted on the inside with Christmas lights. Rauschenberg's solution to Cunningham's commission was, in fact, to concoct a bizarre collection of items whose

\(^{26}\) Cunningham, *Changes*, unpaginated [p. 174].


\(^{28}\) Cunningham, *Changes*, unpaginated [pp. 174–75].

\(^{29}\) Cunningham, *Changes*, unpaginated [p. 174].
capriciousness was equal to that of Cunningham's "series of absurd situations."\textsuperscript{30}

All the items for \textit{Antic Meet} were to be worn as additions over a basic costume of black leotard and tights. For the two men who appeared in the piece these additions included a large raccoon coat, a black corduroy cape with pink cotton lining, a pair of white overalls worn with a white pleated front shirt and black tie, white jazz shoes and white socks, and four flesh-coloured tank tops onto which Rauschenberg painted tattoo designs in blue, red, green and purple ink.

Additions to the costumes for the four women performers included, in addition to the parachute dresses, a white cotton sleeveless Victorian nightgown with lace-trimmed ruffles and pocket and with tiny buttons down the front (illus. 21), two chemise-style, off-white ballet dresses with a straight sleeveless top of silk and a short skirt of lace, burlap sacks, and long black tank tops made out of a stretch material to which Rauschenberg added plastic hoops at the hem-line.

While the costumes for \textit{Antic Meet} were within the fantastic spirit of the piece, Rauschenberg's technique of addition was both distinctive and defiant of traditional dance precedent. Much of the material

\textsuperscript{30} Cunningham, \textit{The Dancer and the Dance}, p. 94.
Rauschenberg collected to use for his *Antic Meet* costumes, including the nightdress and the raccoon coat, came from thrift shops, a strategy that was inspired by economics in the first instance since the Cunningham company at this stage in its existence was an impecunious one. But it was also a strategy that suited Cunningham's and Rauschenberg's aesthetic of employing found items and found movements in their work.\(^{31}\) The unexpectedness of Rauschenberg's thrift shop items used as dance costumes was not unlike that of the combines he was developing at about the same time, and the black leotards and tights were a plain surface, although a living moving one, that Rauschenberg could transform into an art object.

This transformation of dancer into live art reached an apogee in Rauschenberg's most recent commission for the Cunningham company, the 1977 piece *Travelogue*.\(^{32}\) For *Travelogue*, Rauschenberg once again began by dressing the dancers in a costume of body-hugging leotard and tights; this time in an assortment of bright colours. To this basic outfit Rauschenberg added a variety of other items. In one section of the dance, he provided

---

\(^{31}\) Rauschenberg and Cunningham worked with found items and found movement from their first collaboration, *Minutiae*. See p. 156 of this thesis.

the dancers with additions to their costumes in the form of large, brightly-coloured, folding fans made of sectioned fabric that, when fully opened, were like life-size colour-wheels (illus. 22). Images of colour-wheels, or flattened umbrellas whose sectioning recalls that of a colour-wheel, are recurring ones throughout Rauschenberg's oeuvre beginning perhaps with Charlene (illus. 4) in 1954. The Travelogue fans were extensions of these images that were not just able to be moved, but to be opened and closed as well. They also became more than simply extensions of an image previously employed in a static way. Manipulated by the dancers from between their legs, the fans also became manipulative. When fully opened the Travelogue fans bisected the dancers, dwarfing the body and transforming the dancers into moving art objects.

In another section of Travelogue, Rauschenberg had the dancers perform with two long strips of translucent fabric that functioned as a group costume (illus. 23). Held by eight dancers at their sides as they processed across the stage, these two strips of fabric were folded up as the dancers pressed together concertina-style, and were held aloft as the procession broke apart. The strips reflected the movement of the group rather than of the individual, and clothed the space between bodies rather than simply around them. With his folding fans
and his strips of cloth Rauschenberg was not so much dressing the dance as creating live art, just as in *Summerspace* he was creating a moving surface rather than camouflaging bodies.

Rauschenberg also used his technique of addition in 1963 in devising costumes for Cunningham's *Story*. With *Story*, however, Rauschenberg used the technique not only to manipulate the notion of the functional costume, but also to inject his own presence into the piece. *Story* was an indeterminate work in which, choreographically, the variables at each performance were the length of the piece, the length of individual sections, and the internal arrangement of the sections. Cunningham also gave a certain freedom to the dancers who, within specified limits, were able to make choices from a range of set movements, and at times to invent their own movement phrases.  

As Cunningham had introduced an element of indeterminacy in the choreographic structure of *Story*, so too did Rauschenberg bring indeterminacy to the costumes. Following Cunningham's idea that the costumes "be picked

---

33 The dance structure of *Story* is documented in detail by Sally Banes in her paper "Merce Cunningham's 'Story'," *Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Conference of the Society of Dance History Scholars*, Arizona State University, 17-19 February 1989, pp. 97-100. Cunningham's own discussion of it appears in his *Changes*, unpaginated [pp. 142-45; 170-73].
up or found in the particular playing situation we were in," Rauschenberg devised a basic outfit of yellow leotard and tights to which the dancers were free, during specific segments of the piece, to add items of clothing and assorted accessories. These items, collected by Rauschenberg and placed in bags, usually positioned in the wings, included, in addition to dresses, trousers, shirts and other items of clothing from second-hand and Army-Navy disposal stores, a footballer's shoulder padding, a pair of longjohns, and a gas mask. Each of the dancers could decide which, and how many, of the items he or she would wear at any point. Furthermore, the items that made up the costumes for Story could change from performance to performance and, although Rauschenberg has recorded that the collection remained largely the same throughout the performance history of the piece, he has also indicated that he would remove an article of clothing from the collection if he felt a dancer was using that item too often.

Rauschenberg's involvement with Story was critical and was probably a major factor in bringing about his

34 Cunningham, Changes, unpaginated [p. 142].
35 Banes, "Merce Cunningham's 'Story'," p. 100.
departure from the Cunningham company at the end of its 1964 world tour. Although the difficulties that arose as a result of his involvement with Story are associated more with his "invention" of the live set during a 1964 performance of the piece at the Dartington College of Arts in Devon, England, than with his costumes, the costumes were, nevertheless, a contribution in which he pushed his role as visual designer to exceptional limits. Like those for Antic Meet, they were largely found items added to a basic costume, although the most revealing aspect of Rauschenberg's approach to the Story costumes was the fact that he, at times, made extemporaneous decisions about them. By doing this, he injected an autobiographical element into the piece, as he had done in a number of his non-theatrical works such as his early combine Bed (illus. 24) in which he painted himself into the work by basing the piece on an item with a significant personal history: a patchwork quilt that had been given to him by a friend and that he used to cover his station wagon.

By constantly using a basic outfit of leotard and tights in dressing Cunningham dance, Rauschenberg never

---

Rauschenberg's introduction of the live set into Story, and its long term outcome, is highlighted by Banes in "Merce Cunningham's 'Story'," pp. 101-07. The issue is also discussed in more detail in section 3.3 of this thesis. See pp. 159-64.
entirely dispensed with the need for functionality. He did, however, manipulate the concept of the functional costume in a variety of ways. At times, by making items of visual art that transformed the body into a moving art object, Rauschenberg erased the legibility of the body as a material of dance, a basic principle of the Cunningham aesthetic. At times his costumes appeared to dominate the production. Travelogue, for example, did not receive unqualified acclaim. The production was criticised for the "clutter of design tricks" that detracted from the choreography, and elsewhere the suggestion was made that the visual elements overwhelmed the production.

Yet with his contributions, Rauschenberg produced costumes whose outstanding feature, like the approaches of Cage and Cunningham to their respective art-making, was a concern with the expansion of possibilities. Significantly, however, the freedom provided in the Cunningham context allowed Rauschenberg to inject his own presence into certain productions to the extent that, at times, the existence of a personal signature was overwhelming.

---


40 Arlene Croce, "Dancing: Notes on a Natural Man," The New Yorker, 7 February 1977, p. 94.
3.2 The articulation of space

Like Cunningham, Rauschenberg has always displayed an interest in space, especially in the spatial boundaries of a work of art. With regard to his non-theatrical output, for example, objects in his combine paintings, such as those in his 1961 piece *First Landing Jump* (illus. 25), constantly spill out of the picture frame. Some works, such as *Pilgrim* made in 1960, with its chair placed on the floor in front of the work, clearly invite the viewer's participation in the space. Works like *First Landing Jump* and *Pilgrim* are also part of a process noticeable from the 1960s onwards in which Rauschenberg frequently produced works that examined the notion of fluidity between artwork and viewer. In 1961, for example, he executed *Black Market* (illus. 26), a combine painting centring on a briefcase containing a number of objects and a clipboard. Viewers were asked to replace an object in the briefcase with one of their own, and to sketch their object on the clipboard. Then, in 1965 he completed *Oracle* (illus. 27), a sound-

Pilgrim and *First Landing Jump* also reinforce the connections between Rauschenberg's theatrical and non-theatrical work. *Pilgrim* recalls Cunningham's 1958 *Antic Meet* in one section of which Cunningham performed with a chair strapped to his back, occasionally letting his partner in the piece rest on it. *First Landing Jump* was executed by Rauschenberg during the first performance piece with which he was connected, *Homage to David Tudor.*
activated construction which he conceived as a "painting as an orchestra"\textsuperscript{42} with the viewer as conductor.

In his work for Cunningham, his approach to articulating the usually large volume of space available to him has exhibited a range of characteristics. For some works he simply seemed concerned with making items that occupied or traversed the performing space; the object he created for \textit{Minutiae}; a "door" for \textit{Antic Meet}, initially consisting of large frame on wheels with two off white lace curtains attached, from behind which Carolyn Brown appeared in one section of the piece; a machine created from various found objects that was flown across the stage space in \textit{Aeon}; an object made anew each night that was pulled across the stage in \textit{Winterbranch}; a train-like sculpture of chairs and bicycle wheels that was pulled from the wings into its position on stage in \textit{Travelogue}. His approach in these cases recalls remarks he made about his theatre pieces to Richard Kostelanetz:

\begin{quote}
I think I make theatre pieces very much the way I make a painting, which is that I simply have to put something into the space.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

Putting objects in the space is hardly a new venture in theatre, and on an obvious level it results in a simple,

\textsuperscript{42} Rauschenberg, quoted in Kotz, p. 135.

\textsuperscript{43} Rauschenberg, quoted in Kostelanetz, \textit{The Theatre of Mixed Means}, p. 84.
or complex, interaction between the art work, the performer, and the space each occupies. In line with his stated, and reiterated, attitude that the various contributions to his collaborative endeavours are independent of each other, Cunningham has suggested that the object Rauschenberg made to accompany *Minutiae* (illus. 1), for example, made "no visible derangement [to the scene] other than that of any object being where it is."44 The object for *Minutiae* was made in response to Cunningham's request for something the dancers "could move through."45 Rauschenberg at first produced an object designed to be suspended above the performing space, but Cunningham deemed it unsuitable for the spaces the company was to use, which rarely had the technical apparatus for hanging the kind of structure Rauschenberg had devised. Rauschenberg then created the brilliantly coloured, free-standing *Minutiae* construction consisting of two panels of different sizes joined at the top by three thin strips of wood forming an archway. The panels were made up of collage elements such as cloth, lace, newspaper (predominantly comic strips), and objects, including a shaving mirror which was set spinning before the curtain rose on the performance, and which was also set in motion by the movements of the dancers as they passed by it. Strips

---

44 Cunningham, *Changes*, unpaginated [p. 96].

of scarf-like cloth provided a curtained entrance or exit on one side of the larger panel. With its archway, its curtained entrance/exit, and its almost centre-stage position during performance, the construction established an interplay between it and the dancers. Excerpts from revivals of *Minutiae* show the dancers moving, as Cunningham had intended, through and around the structure, activating with their movements the shaving mirror and the long scarf-like curtains which Rauschenberg incorporated into the structure.\(^46\)

Cunningham has used the expression "visual action"\(^47\) when referring to the movement created by the mirror which one critic likened to a kaleidoscope.\(^48\) It was action which was largely created by the interplay between the object and the performers, both occupying a particular space on stage.

On the other hand, many of Rauschenberg's contributions exhibit a more complex approach to articulating space and, in particular, show an interest in spatial boundaries that both parallels a similar interest by

---

\(^46\) Excerpts from *Minutiae* appear on the videorecording *Event for Television*, directed by Merrill Brockway, Dance in America series, WNET, New York 1977, Dance Collection, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

\(^47\) Cunningham, *Changes*, unpaginated [p. 96].

Cunningham, and mirrors Rauschenberg's non-theatrical explorations. Rauschenberg's backcloth for *Summerspace* with its closely related costumes explored the notion, as did Cunningham's choreography for that piece, that space continued beyond the immediately apparent stage space. The cloth was made in response to a letter from Cunningham in which he spelt out his intentions for the dance saying:

I have the feeling it's like looking at part of an enormous landscape and you can only see the action in this particular portion of it.49

Rauschenberg's response to this letter, was to create a cloth, executed with the assistance of Jasper Johns, which was covered with small dots of paint in shades of brown, yellow, orange, pink, blue, and green (illus. 28). As discussed earlier, Rauschenberg treated this oversized canvas as a surface to be enlivened, and in part he achieved this through the "pointillist" technique he employed. With the dots of colour, he established both a luminosity akin to that of a Seurat canvas, and, when the dots were enhanced by theatrical lighting, a shimmering movement. But the pointillist technique also allowed him to develop a sense of spatial ambiguity. The cloth had no clearly defined centre or side boundaries. As Cunningham aimed to give the impression that the dance continued off-stage, Rauschenberg's cloth appeared to continue beyond the

---

49 Cunningham, *Changes*, unpaginated [p. 174].
immediate stage space, and the over-riding impression it gave was one of vastness.50

Others of his works for Cunningham contain strategies for articulating space in ways that challenge the audience's perceptions of space rather than simply their view of it. In his collaborations with Cunningham, Rauschenberg often, for example, made use of scrims - gauze cloths which when lit from the front cause the action behind them to be seen through a soft haze. His earliest use of a scrim was in Nocturnes (1956) which Cunningham has described as "a white ballet" with a "white decor."51 In addition to the white costumes he made for Nocturnes with their elaborate head-dresses and veils (illus. 29), Rauschenberg made a structure which, on the one hand, was like an object which was simply put into the space, dividing the stage into distinct areas.

50 Summerspace, with the Rauschenberg decor, was part of the Cunningham repertory brought to Australia in 1976 and was seen by the author during that season. Excerpts from the first performance were also filmed by Helen Priest Rogers - Summerspace, New London, Connecticut, 1958, Dance Collection, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

51 Cunningham, The Dancer and the Dance, p. 92. The "white ballet" is a balletic tradition, perhaps epitomised by Michel Fokine's Les Sylphides, in which the notions of the ethereal and the ephemeral are projected through various aspects of the production usually including the use of the long, white tutu commonly worn by dancers in the Romantic period of ballet. It is unusual for Cunningham to categorise his works at all let alone in such a traditional way. His use of such traditional terminology is an indication of the mood he aimed to establish with Nocturnes.
This structure initially consisted of a tall narrow box-like construction forming a pillar to which a framed, scrim curtain was attached, and which occupied an upstage area of the performing space (illus. 30). A second version of the structure was improvised for a performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York City when fire inspectors condemned the original structure as hazardous. This second version consisted of a wire frame to which Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns attached leafy branches (illus. 31). The white gauze curtain was attached, as before, to the frame of the structure. This leafy construction was not used after the Brooklyn Academy of Music performance when a ruched, white satin, collapsible flat (illus. 32), more suitable for touring, replaced the original box construction and its leafy successor. Whatever support was used, the white scrim curtain remained.

Part of Cunningham's choreography took place behind this frame and its attached scrim, although the structure

\[52\] Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, p. 106; Merce Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance*, pp. 92-93; Rauschenberg speaking on the videorecording *The Collaborators*, 1987. Tomkins, Cunningham and Rauschenberg all state the boughs were from real trees and that they were removed from a nearby park. This has been questioned by one of the dancers who performed in the piece. She has suggested they were artificial (fire-proofed) boughs to which Rauschenberg would have had access as a result of the work he was doing at the time decorating the shop-windows of large stores in New York like those of Bonwit Teller. Carolyn Brown, Personal interview with the author, 31 October 1991, New York City.
Rauschenberg devised was more than simply an object with which the dancers interacted. It created three zones affecting the audience's perception of Cunningham's choreography and of the space the dancers occupied when performing it. In discussing *Nocturnes*, Cunningham has noted that he told Rauschenberg at one stage that:

I was going to have something taking place in the back, at what should seem to be a great distance from whatever else was going on.53

The solution Rauschenberg devised provided areas of different focus. The clear, unobstructed view of movement performed in the space in front of the scrim contrasted with a second vision of the dance seen, as if at a distance, from behind it, and with a third view, or non-view, from behind the solid part of Rauschenberg's structure whether pillar, collection of boughs, or sheet of white satin. Rauschenberg's use of the scrim was a strategy for revealing and concealing space. He created a changing perception of the stage space as the dancers became alternately clearly visible and in sharp focus, partially visible and in soft focus, or invisible.

A few performances of *Story* were also given using a scrim curtain to divide the stage space,54 and Carolyn Brown has recalled that a scrim backcloth was used in *Aeon* so that the dancers' cross-overs were visible to

54 Banes, "Merce Cunningham's 'Story'," p. 102.
Rauschenberg's scrim in *Aeon* had the effect of revealing a space which was normally meant to be concealed, and he re-cycled this idea in 1983 in *Set and Reset* made for the Trisha Brown Dance Company when he made transparent "legs" revealing a part of the stage space not normally visible to the audience.\(^{55}\)

Rauschenberg's work on *Aeon* also highlights his use of theatrical lighting to reveal and conceal the performing space and its occupants in ways which were rarely akin to traditional stage practices of using focused, coloured light to highlight the performers and the performing space. In *Aeon*, Rauschenberg devised flashlights that were attached to the dancers' wrists and that were activated by the dancers at assigned moments. He also used flashpowder that, if circumstances permitted its use, set off a series of flashes at the beginning of the piece that "both blinded

\(^{55}\) Carolyn Brown, Personal interview with the author, 31 October 1991, New York City. The term cross-over refers to occasions when performers need to make an entrance from the side of the stage opposite to the one from which they last exited, crossing behind the usually opaque backcloth to do so. Cross-overs are not normally visible to the audience.

\(^{56}\) Trisha Brown, "Exterior Space," in *Space: A Conference*, reel five of an audio recording of the proceedings of the Dance Critics Association Conference, 16-18 June 1988, New York City, Dance Collection, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. The term "legs" refers to the cloths or flats used to conceal the off-stage space known as the wings.
and illuminated" the dancers. His *Aeon* machine
(illus. 33), consisting of an assortment of found
objects attached to a frame of metal poles, was flown
across the stage, while the dancers lay in darkness,
emitting an eerie light and smoke from dry ice concealed
in a battered aluminium jug. Much of Rauschenberg's
work in *Aeon* explored the notion of revealing the stage
space instantaneously rather than gradually, and
investigated the effects of irregular rather than
regular lighting.

Rauschenberg also pursued his explorations with lighting
as a means of revealing and concealing space in *Story*.
In this piece, Rauschenberg says he worked without cues
of any sort and, as in most of his other theatrical
collaborations, "played the lightboard" creating a
new and different set of circumstances each night. This
set of circumstances often included arranging lighting
instruments on-stage as part of the set. In *Story*,
too, space was revealed by chance, concealed by chance.

The controversial nature of Rauschenberg's interest in
articulating space through theatrical lighting is,

---

57 Carolyn Brown, in Klosty, p. 29.


however, exemplified by his work for *Winterbranch*. Cunningham wanted the piece to look as though it was taking place at night - not in a romanticised light, but in a stark and confronting light similar to that produced by car headlights.\textsuperscript{60} Rauschenberg chose not to use proscenium lighting but instead directed searchlights from positions in the wings and from stage rear according to a plot arrived at by chance procedures. The resulting distribution of glaring non-coloured light varied from performance to performance and only illuminated the dancers by chance. Much of the performance proceeded in darkness.

*Winterbranch* was rarely popular with critics and audiences who were affronted both by the music which consisted of two electronic tapes each producing a different sound, one high and one low, and by the lighting, which often harshly illuminated them rather than the stage space. It was a lighting scheme that one critic has described as "methods of torture" for the audience,\textsuperscript{61} and, according to the composer Gordon Mumma, "Cumulatively, more than half of *Winterbranch* was often in total darkness."\textsuperscript{62} With his lighting plot,

\textsuperscript{60} Cunningham, *Changes*, unpaginated [p. 52].


\textsuperscript{62} Gordon Mumma, in Klosty, p. 67.
which departed in such an unprecedented way from traditional theatrical practice, rather than merely revealing or concealing space Rauschenberg effectively challenged the viewer's, and the dancer's, perceptions of the stage space by eliminating it. He also successfully challenged the notion that stage space is active, audience space is passive by transforming, if against the audience's will, their normally passive space into active space. At times in Winterbranch the only active space seemed to be that occupied by the audience.

Rauschenberg also created costumes and properties for Winterbranch: utilitarian, dark sweat pants and tops to suit the needs of the choreography, which was based on the action of falling; pieces of old canvas to protect the dancers when they fell and were dragged off stage; and a "monster," made anew each night from objects found around the theatre, that was pulled across the stage on a rope during the performance, casting random shadows as it moved. He also contributed a make-up design to the production of Winterbranch. The dancers wore a streak of black make-up under each eye similar to that worn by footballers and skiers as glare protection. Since the lights used in Winterbranch were ungelled, the make-up,
like the costumes, may well have been devised as a practical necessity. 

Close to the premiere performance of *Winterbranch* in March 1964, Rauschenberg was also experimenting with light in his own pieces of performance art. In *Shotput*, first performed in February 1964, he attached a flashlight to his foot and drew with the light in a darkened space. In *Spring Training* first performed in May 1964 he released onto the stage thirty turtles with flashlights strapped to their backs. The *Winterbranch* lighting stands in dramatic contrast to these seemingly gentle experiments in the relationship between light and movement. *Winterbranch* was a piece in which Rauschenberg created chaos with a variety of manoeuvres for using light to confront and to challenge, and especially to eliminate notions of what constituted not just the stage space, but the entire production arena.

Rauschenberg's work for Cunningham exhibits a multi-faceted connection to the space in which it was made to be seen. His strategies for articulating space range

---

63 David Vaughan, Letter to Deborah Gans, 23 January 1978, Cunningham Dance Foundation Archives, New York City. Theatrical lighting is often created using colour filters which were originally made of gelatin, now plastic. Ungelled lights are much harsher since the beam is not softened by colour.
from simply putting something in the space to using a variety of means of altering the viewer's perceptions of that space. A number of his approaches highlight his interest in darkness, an interest that he discussed with Gruen in 1966 saying:

I want to work in the dark. I feel that darkness is uncharted territory...There are nuances in darkness that interest me enormously.\(^6^4\)

This interest goes back at least to his series of textured black paintings made in the 1950s, such as The Black Painting (1951-52) (illus. 34) in which Rauschenberg has said he was interested in "creating complexity - without the pictures revealing too much."\(^6^5\) Other approaches illustrate his concern to establish a fluid relationship between viewer and art work, recalling a similar concern in both Rauschenberg's non-theatrical work, and in Cunningham's and Cage's approach to the creative process.

\(^6^4\) Rauschenberg, quoted in Gruen, "Painter Dancing in the Dark," p. 22.

\(^6^5\) Kotz, p. 76.
3.3 Setting the scene

In the early years of the Cunningham company's existence, the years when Rauschenberg made most of his work for it, the company regularly performed in a variety of non-standard theatrical locations such as college auditoriums and gymnasiums. This situation, coupled with the fact that the company's scattered engagements required constant travelling, meant that Rauschenberg rarely made items that might be regarded as a set in the commonly understood sense of "any 'set' of pieces arranged to make a stage scene." Often, as with Antic Meet, the dance was accompanied by an assortment of properties, and Rauschenberg only once made what might be called a standard theatrical backcloth: the cloth for Summerspace (illus. 16; illus. 28), already discussed. The solutions he devised to set the scene for Cunningham productions, however, often bore a close connection to both Rauschenberg's non-theatrical output, and to Cunningham's choreographic intentions. In addition, in one particular case they provided a catalyst for Rauschenberg's pursuit of his own performance pieces in the mid 1960s, as well as highlighting the extent to which Rauschenberg was prepared to inject a personal presence into his work.

Some of the formal links between Rauschenberg's work outside the theatre and his first commission from Cunningham, the object for *Minutiae*, have already been discussed. The object Rauschenberg made as the set for *Minutiae* also highlights Rauschenberg's predilection for using the debris of living as materials for his art-making. In executing the *Minutiae* object Rauschenberg made use of old newspapers, found objects, scraps of cloth, items that Cunningham says were "picked up off the street." The set for *Minutiae* was not only Rauschenberg's earliest combine, it was also a work in which Rauschenberg accelerated his use of found objects and the debris of living, paving the way for what would become a major feature of his work during the later 1950s and 1960s. The use of found materials in *Minutiae* also reflected the minutiae of movement Cunningham used as the basis of his choreography for the piece. *Minutiae* consisted of a number of movements described in program notes as "small, short, abrupt" and as having been inspired by "an observation over a period of time of people walking in the street." They included hopping, crawling, walking, running, kneeling (illus. 35).

---


68 Program notes are reproduced in a number of publications including Merce Cunningham's *Changes*, and David Vaughan's chronology of the Cunningham repertory published in *Dance Perspectives*, 34, (Summer 1968), 54-67.
Strong links also exist between the spectacular, sail-like, patchwork drop cloths Rauschenberg designed for *Travelogue* in 1977 (illus. 22; illus. 23) and the works on cloth made outside the theatre during the 1970s, in particular his *Hoarfrost* series made in the early 1970s and his *Jammers* made between 1975 and 1979. Rauschenberg's interest in the relationship between movement and soft, translucent fabrics had begun to develop in the 1950s and 1960s with his costumes for Cunningham works such as *Springweather and People, Aeon*, and *Field Dances* when he explored the effects of adding such fabric to a basic outfit of leotard and tights. His *Hoarfrost* series (illus. 36), in which he printed images onto unstretched cloth, hanging the items from their top edge so that they wafted gently in the breeze, expand upon these experiments with costume. He employed a similar concept in his *Jammers* (illus. 37), although with these works he stripped the cloth of imagery and concentrated on the property of the cloth which, as with the *Hoarfrosts*, waved gently in whatever breeze happened to develop around it. *Travelogue* was created during the period that Rauschenberg was making the *Jammers*, and the irregularly-shaped dropcloths which he made to be lowered during *Travelogue* are examples of the *Jammers* made larger than would normally be possible had they been made for exhibition in a gallery or museum.
With regard to *Summerspace*, connections between Cunningham's choreographic intention and Rauschenberg's stage-setting have already been discussed. In this work, links between Rauschenberg's contributions and specific details of Cunningham's choreography are also apparent. In addition to exploring a kind of space-play using movements that traverse the space, Cunningham's choreography for *Summerspace* contains a number of small movements in which the hands and feet appear to flutter and shimmer. While the backcloth's spatial ambiguity reflects Cunningham's overall concept, the shimmering luminosity Rauschenberg achieved with his "pointillist" decor reflects these choreographic details.

Rauschenberg's dropcloths for *Travelogue*, his object for *Minutiae*, and his backcloth for *Summerspace* indicate that the relationship between an artist's theatrical and non-theatrical output is a complex one, and highlight the importance of considering the theatrical as an arena for experimentation by visual artists. In particular, the *Summerspace* decor, with its closely linked backcloth and costumes, deserves greater analytical attention than it has so far attracted, and certainly more than Kotz's "essentially traditional, though imaginative." 69

69 Kotz, p. 115.
With his work for Cunningham's indeterminate piece *Story*, however, Rauschenberg's contributions to setting the stage moved in a different direction, one that had major implications for both the future of the Cunningham company, and for the future directions of Rauschenberg's career. Just as his costumes for *Story* manipulated the idea of functionality, and just as his lighting plots for the piece involved expanding the audience's perception of spatial boundaries, his contributions to the stage setting of *Story* defied and transgressed conventional boundaries. This was especially true of one particular performance of *Story* in 1964 when Rauschenberg claimed to have invented the "live set."\(^7^0\) Probably growing out of his early performance pieces - at least *Homage to David Tudor*, *The Construction of Boston*, and *Pelican* had been given before the crucial performance of *Story* -, the live set was a phenomenon in which the demarcation not just between the standard theatrical categories of set, costume and property, but also between set and performer, all but disappeared.

In an approach similar to that associated with the *Story* costumes, Cunningham has recalled that his idea regarding the set was that it should be "devised from

\(^7^0\) Sears, p. 51.
the existing circumstances and environment at the time of performance."71 Initially, in creating the set according to Cunningham's instructions, Rauschenberg made use of the backstage environment (illus. 38). He frequently removed existing backcloths revealing the backstage area with its technical equipment, opened backstage doorways to reveal the spaces beyond, or used technical devices, such as moving platforms, which happened to be part of a particular theatre's permanent apparatus. Into the spaces he created in these ways he put an assortment of objects found in and around the theatre, including ladders, fire equipment, musical instruments, bicycles and chairs.72 Story was toured by the Cunningham company on its 1964 world tour and the frequent changes of theatre - often only one performance was given in any one theatre - provided Rauschenberg with a constantly changing set of circumstances in which to invent new sets. He maintains he never repeated the set,73 and his varied solutions questioned traditional views of what constituted the performing area just as Cunningham had maintained that any space in the performing arena was as important as any other.
The development of this situation into one in which live performers were used as sets occurred, according to Rauschenberg, during a performance at the Dartington College of Arts in Devon while the company was on its world tour. Rauschenberg claims he could find nothing backstage to use as a set so he and his assistant, Alex Hay, set up ironing boards in an area of the stage that the dancers were unable to use because of the existence of track lighting in that part of the space. When the performance began, Rauschenberg and Hay proceeded to iron their shirts. They also made use of the existing lighting by placing the ironing boards over the track.\textsuperscript{74}

Then, shortly after the performance in Devon the company gave, uncharacteristically, a series of performances in the same London theatre. Facing the difficulty of devising something entirely new for the same space each night, Rauschenberg resorted to a technique he had used in 1961 during \textit{Homage to David Tudor},\textsuperscript{75} he appeared on the stage himself in the act of executing a painting. The work he began in London on the opening night of that season of \textit{Story} was completed during the final

\textsuperscript{74} Kostelanetz, \textit{The Theatre of Mixed Means}, p. 81.

\textsuperscript{75} Kotz, pp. 118. The work produced during \textit{Homage to David Tudor} was \textit{First Landing Jump} (illus. 25).
performance (illus. 39). As Rauschenberg worked on his painting, Alex Hay occupied himself with some activity relating to an object which he would remove from a trunk brought on to the stage at the beginning of the performance.\footnote{76}{76 Banes, "Merce Cunningham's 'Story',' p. 103.}

After Story, Rauschenberg pursued the notion of the visual artist as performer throughout the 1960s. While completing the world tour with the Cunningham company he made his solo performance piece Elgin Tie, which he showed in Stockholm during the company's engagement there. Spring Training and Map Room I and Map Room II followed in quick succession 1965. Rauschenberg has claimed that the initial live set he devised at Dartington was made quite innocently, and that it did not occur to him at the time that "it might have been difficult to tell whether we were choreography or set."\footnote{77}{77 Rauschenberg, quoted in Kostelanetz, The Theatre of Mixed Means, p. 82.} Elsewhere, however, Rauschenberg has indicated that Cunningham was annoyed at, and irritated by, his activities on stage\footnote{78}{78 Rauschenberg, cited in Sears, p. 51; and Banes, "Merce Cunningham's 'Story',' p. 103.} and, in retrospect, Rauschenberg's so-called invention of the live set has been seen as a major contributing factor to his leaving
the Cunningham company at the conclusion of the 1964 tour.79

Banes has remarked that "the decision to perform in the piece [Story] himself heightened Rauschenberg's feeling of empowerment as a performing artist and a choreographer."80 Although Rauschenberg had made performance pieces before the advent of the live set at Dartington in 1964, and had been involved with the activities of the Judson group since 1962, his experiences with Story, including Cunningham's dislike of Rauschenberg's activities, or at least Rauschenberg's perception of Cunningham's feelings, provided a catalyst for the development of his own performance pieces. In addition, Rauschenberg's work on Story reflects an approach to setting the scene for Cunningham dance in which Rauschenberg was unable, as he was also unable in much of his costume-making, to remove himself or his personal preferences from his Cunningham collaborations. While much of his work in setting the scene for Cunningham dance demonstrates his ability to make items of visual art in keeping with the Cunningham aesthetic and its collaborative context, aspects of his work for

79 Banes, "Merce Cunningham's 'Story'." p. 103. Tomkins also discusses Rauschenberg's departure from the Cunningham company in Off the Wall, pp. 228-33.

80 Banes, "Merce Cunningham's 'Story'," p. 103.
Story indicate that Rauschenberg was sometimes unable to espouse the most critical aspect of the Cunningham collaborative context. By being unable to remove himself from the process of set-making, and thus fusing the set with the performer and confounding the difference between visual art and choreography, he was unable to create work that could stand clearly in a process of collaboration that was meant to be inclusive.
3.4 Rauschenberg's contribution

 Appearing to use the word 'decorative' in its pejorative sense of mere embellishment or ornamentation, Don McDonagh has written: "Rauschenberg's efforts in the theater continued to be decorative for several years." 81 It is not entirely clear to which years McDonagh is referring, but his position is clearly at odds with what emerges from an analysis of Rauschenberg's "efforts." When seen alongside more traditional approaches to making art for the theatre, the solutions Rauschenberg devised for his Cunningham commissions were usually theatrically iconoclastic rather than ornamental. Rauschenberg mounted challenges to the perception of what constituted design for the theatre by blurring, and at times removing, the traditional demarcations between sets, costumes, and properties. At the same time, he challenged the role of the artist in the theatre by becoming a performer in the guise of a set. He explored notions of what constituted the performing space and how it is perceived. At times he seemed to create theatrical chaos as in his lighting.

 81 Don McDonagh, The Rise and Fall of Modern Dance, rev. ed. (Pennington, N.J.: a capella books, 1990), p. 181. It appears that McDonagh places little store on the role of the visual artist anyway since his chronological listing of Cunningham works, published in the first edition of his book but omitted in the second, does not include the designers of those works, although their composers are mentioned.
for Winterbranch, and much of his work cannot be separated from his wish to be involved with the activity of the theatre and to establish a living relationship between viewer and art work.

Rauschenberg's theatrical commissions for Cunningham also demonstrate major reciprocal links, both formal and conceptual, with Rauschenberg's non-theatrical work, and highlight a number of common areas of interest between artist and choreographer. Both Cunningham and Rauschenberg explored, for example, issues concerned with the manipulation of space, with the use of found items (or movements in the case of Cunningham), and with establishing an active relationship between work of art and spectator. There are many areas in which Rauschenberg's visual contributions operate on a conceptual level that is similar to the choreography, and the fact that his theatrical commissions provided an experimental arena that carried over into his non-theatrical work indicates that those commissions cannot be disregarded or marginalised in any consideration of his total output.

A number of Rauschenberg's contributions to Cunningham productions, especially for works like Winterbranch, Story, and the more recent Travelogue, also display the artist in a dominant role in the production. Writing
about Rauschenberg's contributions to the first London season given by Cunningham and his dancers in 1964, Brinson has remarked:

He seemed not to design for dance at all but used dance/dancers as material for his own stage pictures. Thus the painter was shown to have a dominant position in dance theatre.82

Brinson has further suggested that by assuming this dominant position Rauschenberg demonstrated an important aspect of the Cunningham philosophy, that of the separateness of the individual collaborative elements:

It was the first, most visible, manifestation we had of an important part of the Cunningham philosophy. Sound, design, and dance can go separate ways in a piece of dance theatre, yet all contribute equally within the same timeframe.83

What is most striking, however, about these particular contributions by Rauschenberg is not, as Brinson suggests, that they demonstrate the implications of the Cunningham notion of the independence of the collaborative elements. It is the extent to which they fail to demonstrate, without necessarily being failures as individual works, what is inherently characteristic about the Cunningham approach to collaboration. That they do highlight the individual contribution is their failure in the Cunningham collaborative context since, by exhibiting their dominance, they become part of an exclusive rather than inclusive act of collaboration.

82 Peter Brinson, "Thinking about Merce," *Dance and Dancers*, No. 452 (October 1987), p. 11.

83 Brinson, "Thinking about Merce," p. 11.
PART IV: 
THE JASPER JOHNS YEARS

Between 1964, when Rauschenberg severed his connections with the Cunningham company, and 1967 the company had no resident designer,¹ a fact that perhaps reflects the bitterness and acrimony that surrounded Rauschenberg's departure. Two of the new works that Cunningham choreographed immediately after Rauschenberg's departure, Variations V (1965) and How to Pass, Kick, Fall and Run (1965), were danced in costumes that the dancers bought for themselves, while another, Place (1966), had designs by Beverly Emmons who was also the lighting designer for the piece. The lack of a resident designer, however, was both an unpractical solution and a less than ideal one for a company whose status had grown partly in response to its engagement with developments in the contemporary visual arts. In 1967 Cunningham eventually made the decision to invite Johns to take on the role of artistic adviser to the company.

Johns had worked around the Cunningham company, usually assisting Rauschenberg, from the 1950s onwards, and had already been involved in 1961 with decor for Suite de

danses, a Canadian television production featuring the Cunningham company. When he did become the company's artistic adviser, however, it was clear from the outset that he was engaged in a very different pattern of collaboration from the one followed by Rauschenberg. On the one hand, Johns's involvement with the day to day execution of the visual aspects of Cunningham pieces was often as vigorous as Rauschenberg's had been. In 1968, for example, he screen-printed the inflatable cubes that made up the set for Walkaround Time, and in 1969 sprayed costumes for Canfield. On the other hand, what initially distinguished Johns's approach as artistic adviser was that he commissioned other artists to make work for Cunningham, rather than executing work to his own designs. Although he made the costumes for the 1968 piece Walkaround Time, and supervised its setting after Marcel Duchamp's The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass) (1915-1923), it was not until 1970, with the work Second Hand, that the visual concept and presentation of a Cunningham piece could be attributed entirely to Johns. Even after Second Hand he continued to alternate between commissioning others and making works himself, and he ultimately created and commissioned fewer works

---

than Rauschenberg over what was roughly a similar time span.³

Klosty has remarked that Johns's position as artistic adviser was "intentionally less active than Rauschenberg's, for Johns's personal inclinations were not the same as his predecessor's."⁴ Unlike Rauschenberg who relished working in a theatrical environment, Johns did not. Johns has said:

I don't like the deadlines, the putting up and taking down, the success and failure, the moving about from place to place, the wear and tear and repair, the community of personalities with its and their aches and pains and religions and diets, etc...⁵

He has also remarked that he was, in fact, reluctant to take on the position of artistic adviser to the Cunningham company. He eventually did so for what he calls an "arrogant" reason: he felt that were he to go to a Cunningham performance he would be less offended by his own contributions than by those of whomever else might take on the job.⁶

³ Johns may well have had, of course, less reason to create new works since the Cunningham company already had an extensive repertory by the time Johns was appointed artistic adviser.

⁴ Klosty, p. 15.

⁵ Johns, in Klosty, p. 85.

But as well as a personal unease about, and disinclination for, working in the theatre, Johns's perception of his role with the Cunningham company was entirely different from that of Rauschenberg. Whereas Rauschenberg saw his position as encompassing "licence to do anything,"7 Johns was concerned with efficiency, and with the potential theatrical acumen of the artist who took on theatrical commissions. When asked how he chose the artists to collaborate on a Cunningham production he replied:

I have suggested artists for whose work I have a high regard, who could understand a difference between theater and studio, or gallery scale and space, (sometimes) who could work quickly.8

With his own work, he felt the necessity for only minimal decor:

I don't see the necessity for objects on the stage during a dance...I have always felt that each dance should have its own distinctive costumes. A sort of visual novelty is provided which helps make it clear that one dance is not another dance. But I'm beginning to wonder if this is necessary.9

While collaborating with Cunningham, however, Johns used the theatrical environment afforded him to pursue a number of interests that he had developed in his non-theatrical work. His collaborative endeavours

8 Johns, in Klosty, p. 85.
9 Johns, in Klosty, p. 85.
indicated, for example, a shared sensibility with the aesthetic of Marcel Duchamp, and were also a further demonstration of his ongoing quest to define the boundaries of art.
4.1 Others and self

Following his appointment as artistic adviser, the first Cunningham piece with which Johns was involved was *Scramble*, premiered in 1967. For this piece Frank Stella was commissioned to make a set and costumes, although Johns has recorded that Stella initially approached him with a request to work on a Cunningham production.\(^\text{10}\) *Scramble* was followed the next year by *RainForest* with a set by Andy Warhol and costumes by Johns. *Scramble* and *RainForest*, with their decor commissioned from outside the immediate Cunningham stable, epitomise major features of the pattern of collaboration that developed, at least initially, under Johns.

Although *Scramble* was Stella's first commission for the theatre, it was not his first theatrical venture. He had participated with Rauschenberg in the performance piece *The Construction of Boston* in 1962, and had then appeared in Rauschenberg's *Open Score* in 1966. His work on *Scramble* was an active involvement both in the sense that his contributions bore a close relationship to the work he was making at the same time outside the theatre, and in terms of his wish to place his work within the context of a Cunningham production. For *Scramble*,

\(^{10}\) Johns, "The Fabric of Friendship," p. 140.
Stella executed a set (illus. 40) that consisted of six separate constructions, each a strip of coloured canvas eighteen inches wide stretched horizontally between two vertical supports of polished aluminium, and fastened to them with strips of Velcro. The bands - red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple - ranged in length from four feet (red) to twenty-four feet (purple), and the aluminium frames that supported them ranged in height from slightly higher than floor level (purple) to eighteen feet high (red). The frames were mounted on castors allowing each to be moved about the performing space.\[^{11}\] Their positions were determined by Cunningham according to the space available at any particular performance, originally from a series of charts drawn up the night before the first performance. Sometimes, if the performing space was small, Cunningham would group the six constructions together like a backdrop. In larger spaces, and Cunningham has suggested that the piece works well in gymnasiums,\[^{12}\] the constructions could be moved around more freely. Stella also designed costumes for *Scramble*: V-necked, long-sleeved, flared jumpsuits for the men and tights and V-necked, long-sleeved leotards for the women. The costumes were dyed to match the coloured banners with the addition of a

\[^{11}\] Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, pp. 279-81; 287.

black costume for Cunningham and a white one for Carolyn Brown.

Stella's set was an expansion of his interest in what Michael Fried has referred to as "shape as form." Fried has argued that Stella's "new" paintings in which he superimposed different shapes upon each other, such as his *Moultonboro III* of 1966 (illus. 41), set up a different relationship between shape and support from that established in his earlier stripe paintings (illus. 42). Rather than emphasising the physical limits of the painting's shape as he did with his stripes, with his new paintings Stella was concerned to give every shape an equal weight and to have none rely on a "single master shape, the support seen as single entity." Fried maintains that such an approach to shape could only be achieved by avoiding geometrically regular shapes, such as the stripe, in order that the eye did not "instantly [perceive] the shape of the support as a single entity."

---


14 Fried, "Shape as Form," p. 417.

15 Fried, "Shape as Form," p. 418.
With the *Scramble* set, however, Stella achieved exactly what Fried suggested was not possible with the stripe, and Stella's work for *Scramble* suggests, as Rauschenberg's Cunningham commissions did, that an artist's theatrical commissions often reveal hitherto unacknowledged aspects of that artist's output. When the set for *Scramble* is considered within the overall production, the edges of its stripes were only ever a single entity when Cunningham placed them together as a stationary backdrop. Individual stripes were, in fact, most often in a state of constant flux, not only because each section was movable, but also because the shaped canvases were perceived as being in a constantly changing relationship with the dancers. Stella had audited a number of rehearsals for *Scramble* before designing his decor, and has recorded that he envisaged the dancers in just this kind of relationship with his constructions. He said he conceived of his setting as a horizontal contrast to the choreography, and envisaged the dancers moving between the frames, which would sometimes conceal, or be concealed by, parts of the dancers' bodies (illus. 43).16

*RainForest*, produced the next year had a set (illus. 44) by Andy Warhol, adapted from his installation *Silver*.

---

Clouds first shown at the Castelli Gallery, New York City in 1966. The installation consisted of a collection of helium-filled, floating, silver pillows approximately three by four feet in size and made from aluminised plastic film, folded and heat sealed into a rectangular shape.¹⁷ Like the installation, the silver pillows that made up the RainForest set were susceptible to air currents, changes in temperature and static electricity, as well as to the movements of the dancers whose accidental contact with them sent them moving in new directions. The pillows at the back of the stage space were held to the floor with a weight attached to fishing wire so that they did not float away into the flies. Those that did roam the space were half-filled with helium so that they would not disappear entirely.¹⁸

Unlike Stella's work with Scramble, Warhol's involvement with RainForest was not an active one. His silver pillows were already created, and were taken into the production as finished items. "Oh just take a lot of those pillows," he is reputed to have said.¹⁹ Nor was he inclined to design costumes for the piece: "Andy had


¹⁸ Cunningham, The Dancer and the Dance, p. 113.

no idea except nudity," Cunningham has remarked.\textsuperscript{20}

Such a situation, unlike \textit{Scramble}, required some intervention by Johns. For \textit{RainForest}, Johns created costumes that consisted of flesh-coloured tights and leotards for both men and women, cut with jagged holes to give, following Cunningham's direction, the impression of torn skin.\textsuperscript{21} These costumes were decided upon after Cunningham, having rejected Warhol's notion of nudity, produced a torn item of practice clothing in which he had tied knots at the tears.

In a simplistic sense, this approach, in which Johns commissioned artists at the forefront of contemporary practice to make art for Cunningham, recalls the suggestions, discussed earlier, that the Cunningham collaborative context has similarities with that established by Diaghilev. After \textit{Scramble} and \textit{RainForest}, a number of other works followed during the 1960s and 1970s in which Johns pursued a similar approach to commissioning others. \textit{Canfield}, for example, had a setting and costumes made in 1969 by sculptor Robert Morris, while \textit{Tread}, first performed in 1970, had costumes by Cunningham and a setting by Bruce Naumann. All these commissions produced items of art with a strong visual presence. Naumann, for example,

\textsuperscript{20} Cunningham, \textit{The Dancer and the Dance}, p. 113

\textsuperscript{21} Cunningham, \textit{The Dancer and the Dance}, p. 113.
placed a row of ten large electric pedestal fans of the industrial variety across the edge of the stage. Five fans oscillated throughout the piece, the other five, placed alternately remained still. Morris created a light object: a tall, steel girder fitted with aircraft landing lights that moved horizontally back and forth across the stage that directed strong ungelled light onto the dancers and the backcloth.

As far as his own position in relation to these commissions was concerned, however, Johns assumed a role that was to a large degree a self-effacing and detached one. His was an attitude that emphasised his role as adviser to the company, rather than necessarily its visual artist, and he certainly did not assume the role of entrepreneur as Diaghilev had done in similar circumstances. Johns intervened with the process of design and its production only when absolutely necessary. Rather than acting to perpetuate a view of the company as one that worked in a collaborative manner similar to that of Diaghilev, Johns's approach might well be seen as an indication that he favoured the notion that each of the various contributions to a collaboration should be created and exist independently of the other. His own remarks that he disliked the involvement of the theatre suggest a predilection for, and a disposition towards, just such an approach.
Yet, Johns's assumption of a detached role has wider implications. It suggests, for example, a commitment to, and, with that commitment, a shared sensibility with, the work of Marcel Duchamp. Johns has frequently expressed his admiration for the work of Duchamp,22 and, during his term as artistic adviser to the company, he proposed a very specific connection between the Cunningham company and Duchamp.23 The result was the 1968 piece Walkaround Time, whose title from computer jargon refers to the time that elapses while information is digested by the computer during which time the programmer can "walk around." Cunningham made Walkaround Time as a homage to Duchamp,24 and for it Johns designed costumes - tights and leotard dyed in a different colour for each dancer - and, with Duchamp's permission and approval, supervised a setting after Duchamp's iconic work The Large Glass.

Johns's set consisted of seven inflated rectangular prisms made from clear plastic onto which Johns double screen-printed images from The Large Glass (illus. 45). One printing was in outline, the second in colour, and


24 Vaughan, "'Then I Thought about Marcel...',' p. 88.
the images chosen by Johns to be used on the inflatables included the Chocolate Grinder, the Oculist Witnesses, the Sieves or Parasols, the Nine Malic Moulds, the Top Inscription or Milky Way, and the Bride. Two of these inflatables were suspended from the flies during the piece, the others were positioned on the stage floor. Duchamp's only stipulation was that at some stage in the piece all the inflatables be assembled to look as much like the original art work as possible. This occurred at the end of the piece when the prisms were moved by the dancers into a position in which the arrangement of the images approximated that in *The Large Glass*. The dancers then "walked around" behind the assemblage.

Beyond the obvious use of *The Large Glass* as initial inspiration for the piece, *Walkaround Time* contained a number of specific references to Duchamp and his work, which Noël Carroll and Sally Banes have convincingly suggested fall into two categories: direct allusions, and translation of Duchampian ideas into the medium of dance. Direct allusions include a solo by

---


26 Noël Carroll and Sally Banes, "Cunningham and Duchamp," *Ballet Review*, 11, No. 2 (Summer 1983), 78. The connections between *Walkaround Time* and the work of Duchamp are also discussed, as are the circumstances in
Cunningham that refers to Duchamp's 1912 painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*, allusions to Duchamp's ready-mades, and a reference to *Entr'acte*, a film episode in which Duchamp appeared and that was part of the ballet *Relâche* created by the Ballets Suédois in 1924.

Cunningham's solo opens the second section of *Walkaround Time*. In it Cunningham, while running on the spot, removes one set of tights and top and replaces it with another. The readymades are alluded to on a number of occasions, but especially in the opening sequence of the piece. In that sequence, a series of movements that are part of the warm-up exercises of a Cunningham daily technique class are transferred to the stage, becoming a choreographic readymade. The allusion to *Entr'acte* occurs during the break between the two sections of *Walkaround Time*. During this intermission, the houselights are brought up to half the usual intensity for an interval, and the dancers carry out on stage the normal activities they would carry out backstage during an intermission. That the intermission takes place in full view of the audience also clearly recalls Duchamp's frequently expressed aesthetic that art and life cannot which *Walkaround Time* was conceived, by Vaughan in "'Then I Thought about Marcel...'", pp. 88-94.

be separated. Other references to Duchamp arise in relation to the accompanying score – David Behrman's *...for nearly an hour...*, supplemented with variable music played during the intermission. The title *...for nearly an hour...* refers to the time length of the dance work, approximately 49 minutes, and to Duchamp's 1918 piece *To be looked at (from the other side of the glass) with one eye, close to, for nearly an hour*.

The translation of Duchampian ideas into the medium of dance can be seen, according to Carroll and Banes, in the mechanical nature of much of the choreography, reflecting Duchamp's interest in the dynamics of machinery emphasised especially in *The Large Glass*. As well, Carroll and Banes identify a number of movements in which body contact suggests sexual contact. Such movements, they maintain, allude to the sexual nature of the machine represented by *The Large Glass*, which they describe as "a mechanism for effecting sex through a series of convoluted, alchemical operations."28

The connection with Duchamp is immediately and overtly obvious. But in the face of Johns's disinclination to work in the theatre, that the Duchampian connection realised in *Walkaround Time* was proposed by Johns, and that the visual elements were executed by him given his

28 Carroll and Banes, p. 79.
preferred attitude of detachment from theatrical ventures, makes Johns's work on *Walkaround Time* more than simply a homage to Duchamp realised in a specific dance production. Of Duchamp's readymades Octavio Paz has written: "...the practice of the 'ready-made' demands an absolute disinterest." Duchamp himself has discussed his espousal of the idea of indifference in his creation of the readymades as follows:

> A point which I very much want to establish is that the choice of these "readymades" was never dictated by esthetic delectation.

> This choice was based on a reaction of visual indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste...in fact a complete anesthesia.

Johns's work on *Walkaround Time* suggests a homage to the kind of detachment and anonymity that marked much of the work of Duchamp.

In his work for the Cunningham repertory Johns in no way exhibited the kind of visual indifference that marked Duchamp's creation of the readymades. In fact, Johns has remarked that the way an art object looks is critical, and that it is impossible to avoid the fact

---


that ideas are conveyed through the way the object looks.\textsuperscript{31} In his approach, however, he exhibited a detachment that recalled the aesthetic of Duchamp. For Johns the commissioning of others was as much a Duchampian negation of the self, and of personal aesthetic choices, as it was a disinclination to make art for the theatre. The decision to work on \textit{Walkaround Time} highlighted his involvement with the Duchampian aesthetic.

\textsuperscript{31} Walter Hopps, "An Interview with Jasper Johns." \textit{Artforum}, 3, No. 6 (March 1965), 35.
4.2 Defining the boundaries

Beginning with *Second Hand* in 1970, Johns departed from his earlier approach of commissioning others, and did begin to make a number of his own designs for use in the Cunningham repertory. When he did design a work alone, however, his contributions rarely deviated from an apparently simple formula. His costumes almost always consisted of a body-hugging outfit of leotard and tights, but without the additions that were characteristic of Rauschenberg's approach to costume-making. His sets were never intrusive and rarely comprised anything more than a simple backcloth for which he would specify a particular lighting plot.

His costumes for *Second Hand*, for example, consisted of a scooped-necked, long-sleeved leotard and tights for the female dancers, and for the men a shirt with a collar and tights (illus. 46). The setting consisted simply of a scrim backcloth. Even when he did occasionally digress from following this simple approach, he had second thoughts about actually using the more complex items in the production. He once, for example, made a special costume to be worn by Cunningham in the 1978 piece *Exchange*. It differed from those made for the rest of the dancers, who simply wore grey practice clothes, in that it consisted of a dark grey
sweatshirt and pants covered in black nylon pockets with small pieces of bright blue yarn sewn on each pocket. The costume was never worn because Johns decided it was unnecessarily decorative.

Johns's contributions are, however, deceptive in their simplicity, and they embody concepts with which he had been experimenting contemporaneously in his non-theatrical work. In particular, his investigations into the nature of colour and its perception in painting are paralleled in his work for Cunningham. During the 1960s, for example, Johns began making a number of detailed investigations into the colours of the spectrum and the manner in which they progressed. Explaining the relationship between his lithographic series *Fragments According to What*, made in 1971, and his 1964 piece *According to What* (illus. 47), and speaking especially of the vertical strip of coloured circles in squares that occupies the centre of that particular work, Johns said:

They are just circles in squares. The squares are treated as value, a kind of progression from white to black; the colors are a spectrum progression - yellow to orange, then it skips. To explain that: yellow, green, blue, violet, red, orange are right out of the spectrum, but adding and subtracting - yellow plus blue equals green; minus yellow equals blue; plus red equals violet; minus blue equals red; plus yellow equals orange; plus black equals brown; minus orange equals black; plus white equals gray; minus black equals white. The only place where there is any disturbance in the order is with the brown, which always seems to me to be a separate color. Then the value scale went from
white through gray to black, and then from dark to light again by adding a violet.\textsuperscript{32}

In addition to \textit{According to What}, a number of other pieces made in the early to mid-sixties explored similar notions, including the 1962 \textit{Diver} (illus. 48) in which the targets that had been the focus of much of his work in the 1950s metamorphosed into spectral circles. In other works, including \textit{Diver}, he frequently painted into the piece a vertical strip representing colour gradations or scales. Steinberg has also remarked upon Johns's interest, which spans the entire period of his work with Cunningham since it is epitomised in works like his 1964-65 work \textit{Untitled} and in his 1974 \textit{Target} (illus. 49), in:

\begin{quote}
a schematic abstract of the whole spectrum: Red, Yellow, Blue; or, for greater richness and with a slight turn of the wheel, the intermediate complementaries: Orange, Green, Purple.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

Even before the development of this interest in the progression of colours in the spectrum, however, Johns had been interested in making chromatic investigations. In 1955, in his work \textit{Green Target} (illus. 50), for example, he explored the luminosity of green by fixing


green pigment, in an uneven encaustic application, over acid yellow onto a surface of newspaper. Subtle colour differences are perceptible as a result of the juxtaposition of green against specks of yellow pigment, and against the grey of newsprint just visible under the surface, and as a result of the differing thicknesses of the green pigment. He has also often painted monochromatically, investigating the various modulations of a single colour. His *Tango* (illus. 51), for example, also painted in 1955, examined the nuances of a particular shade of blue. Others of his works, including the 1962 *Alphabets* (illus. 52), are grisaille paintings.

In spite of its apparent simplicity, Johns's work on *Second Hand* recalls these complex, non-theatrical investigations into the progression of the colours of the spectrum. His costumes for *Second Hand* were dyed in a predominant colour with the addition of a second colour on the edges of the costume. The second colour was the predominant colour of another dancer's costume with the colour combinations being magenta/red, red/orange, orange/yellow, yellow/green, green/blue, blue/violet, violet/magenta. The succession of colours of the spectrum became apparent only at the end of the piece when the dancers lined up to take their bows, and the concept of addition and subtraction of colours that
he outlined when speaking of *According to What* was given a physical, moving manifestation throughout the piece. Similarly, with his costumes for the 1973 Cunningham piece *Un Jour ou deux*, in which Johns dressed each of the dancers in a leotard and tights in gradations, moving from the bottom of the costume upwards, of grey to white, he used the theatrical environment to expand upon his explorations into monochromatic painting.

Apart from his explorations into the progression of colours, seen in both his theatrical and his non-theatrical output, Johns has also deliberated upon the limits of art, an aspect of his work that especially reflects his interest in Duchampian ideas of the relationship between art, thought and language. In discussing his admiration for Duchamp, Johns has particularly mentioned the influential effect upon his own thinking of Duchamp's expansion of the boundaries of art, past the retinal ones explored by, for example, Impressionist artists, and "into a field where language, thought and vision act upon one another." In his non-theatrical output, Johns has dwelt on the words red,

---

*34 Un jour ou deux* was not made on Cunningham company dancers but on classically trained dancers of the Paris Opera Ballet. It was commissioned by the *Festival d'automne* and the Paris International Dance Festival.

yellow, and blue, as well as on their representation in colour, and has used these words in his paintings as stencilled letters and as three dimensional, hinged object-letters. In a number of his paintings made in the early 1960s, *Field Painting* (illus. 53), for example, he used mirror-images of words for various colours and also displayed these words three-dimensionally. Then, with *Bent "Blue"* (illus. 54), an item in his lithographic series *Fragments - According to What*, Johns shows the word "blue" mirrored and bent, although the colour blue is a concept that, rationally, cannot be bent.\(^{36}\) Others of his works examine the nature of the painted surface and the boundaries of the canvas. By painting over objects attached to his works, such as occurred in his *Drawer* of 1957 (illus. 55), he treated those objects as if they were part of the surface, thus calling into question the nature of that surface.

His work for Cunningham often displays a similar interest in how art is perceived, without the links to verbal language, but using the space of the stage to highlight the possibility of altered states of perception. His setting for *Un Jour ou deux*, for example, consisted of two grey scrim cloths, one across

\(^{36}\) Michael Crichton elaborates on this point in relation to *According to What*. Crichton, p. 53.
the front of the stage, the other about halfway back. Both scrims could be either transparent or opaque, depending on the way in which they were lit. The front cloth changed from opaque to transparent early in the dance while the cloth towards the back changed from opaque to transparent and back to opaque during the piece.\textsuperscript{37} In an approach that recalls his much earlier piece \textit{Nocturnes}, Cunningham has recorded that he aimed with \textit{Un Jour ou deux} to create a shifting relationship between the dance and the two spaces created by Johns out of the very large performing arena of the Paris Opera stage where the piece was performed.\textsuperscript{38} Johns's setting established a series of volumes as well as blocks of light and colour. Within these areas of space, light and colour the dancers' bodies and the backstage architecture were perceived by the audience as being in a constantly shifting relationship.

Johns's own contributions to the Cunningham repertory were not items that might be labelled experimental in the way that Rauschenberg's might, or visually startling as were some of the items Johns commissioned from others. Yet behind his own preference for an apparently traditional and, by comparison, a seemingly non-

\textsuperscript{37} Cunningham, \textit{The Dancer and the Dance}, p. 182.

\textsuperscript{38} Cunningham, \textit{The Dancer and the Dance}, p. 182.
momentous approach to making art in a theatrical environment, lies a complex attitude. In examining Johns's non-theatrical explorations of the boundaries of art, Crichton has written:

But with Johns, the issues of perception - of what you see, and why, and how you decide what you are looking at - are not merely questions to be decided in order to produce some final effect. They are, instead, the focus of the work itself. There is no final effect beyond these issues. There are only the issues, made concrete in one form or another.  

Such intellectual deliberations into art, its perception, and its boundaries are also explored in Johns's theatrical commissions, making his contributions to the Cunningham repertory more than specific items of visual art for individual dance pieces. His theatrical commissions, too, are concerned with defining the boundaries and understanding the nature of his medium, and it is in this respect that his aesthetic closely resembles that of Cunningham. Where Johns used his medium, paint, to question the nature of art, Cunningham used his medium, the human body in motion, to question basic assumptions about dance. Neither used their medium as one of transformation with which to create illusion.

\[39\] Crichton, p. 25.
4.3 Johns as collaborator

Both in establishing what seemed to be a different pattern of collaboration, and in creating his own works for Cunningham productions, Johns pursued a detached role as a collaborator. In part his detachment, or at least the possibility of remaining detached, reflects the changed circumstances of the Cunningham company. Johns's contributions to the Cunningham repertory came at a time when the company had become better established, had a larger repertory, and was more geographically settled. The famous tours made by the company in the early days of its existence in the VW bus bought by Cage with prize money won on an Italian quiz show were no longer a feature of the company's schedule. During Rauschenberg's period of active involvement with the company, working in conditions of close proximity was not only a personal preference, but a matter of necessity. In changed circumstances, Johns was able to distance himself from the pieces to which he contributed in a way that Rauschenberg could not.

Johns's attitude of detachment, with its clearly expressed and shared sensibility with the ideas of Duchamp, sits easily within the approach to

40 These tours are discussed briefly by Carolyn Brown in Klosty, pp. 28-29.
collaboration developed by Cage and Cunningham beginning at Black Mountain in 1952. John Tanock has suggested that a number of Duchamp's ideas on a wide range of issues corresponded with those of Cage who had arrived at them from a different starting point, and Johns's collaborative stance, in fact, raises issues constantly addressed by both Duchamp and Cage. In particular, Johns as collaborator addresses issues that concern the removal of personal aesthetic preferences from the creation of the work of art. In so doing he allows the work to remain unencumbered and open for interpretation by the viewer.

Furthermore, if the essential feature of the Cunningham collaborative context is seen not as the arts in separation, but as the establishment of a context that is an inclusive rather than an exclusive one, Johns's collaborative approach is enormously successful. Johns's own contributions to the repertory, unlike those of Rauschenberg, never appeared to be iconoclastic, and the remarks made about Rauschenberg - that, for example, his work for Cunningham was rarely intrusive - apply more strictly to Johns. Johns's sets were never confronting, and his costumes, with their intrinsic simplicity, always allowed the body to be legible, never

---

transforming the dancers into objects of moving art. Epitomised by his attitude of detachment, and receiving its ultimate expression in his own contributions, Johns's collaborative approach allowed both Cunningham's underlying belief in non-expressive dance that occupies time and space, and his own approach to visual art as an exploration of nature of art and its perception, to occupy a similar time frame without either dominating. His work is inclusive rather than exclusive in a way that was alien to Rauschenberg's frequent concern with the authorship of his works.
PART V:
CONCLUSION

This thesis began with a challenge to the commonly held notion that artists who work in the theatre, especially those who collaborate with dance companies, produce work that is marginal to their apparently more serious non-theatrical work. This notion is rarely explicitly stated, but is implied by a continuing lack of critical attention by art historians not just to the art works themselves, but also to the collaborative environment which such work is produced.

The findings that have emerged from this thesis suggest that an artist's theatrical work is unlikely to be marginal within his or her overall output, and in fact is most likely to give fresh insight into the non-theatrical aspects of that artist's work. In the case of Rauschenberg, for example, his Cunningham commissions resulted in his earliest combine, some of the earliest examples of his use of found objects and the detritus of living as the materials of his art-making, and many examples of extraordinary diversity of his interest in establishing a fluid relationship between art work and
viewer. As Banes has pointed out\(^1\), the Cunningham commissions also led to Rauschenberg's empowerment as a performer and choreographer, a significant and momentous development in his career that in turn led him to an accelerated pursuit of his own performance pieces. In fact, despite the bitterness that surrounded Rauschenberg's departure from the Cunningham company in 1964, Rauschenberg's career was nurtured by his commissions from Cunningham. The company provided him with an environment at least as conducive to risk-taking as that outlined by Katz in his analysis of the importance of gay culture in Rauschenberg's life.\(^2\)

With Johns, who created fewer of his own works for the company, the links with his work outside the theatre are less wide-ranging. Nevertheless, Johns's Cunningham commissions establish further links with the work and aesthetic of Duchamp, and with Johns's explorations into the boundaries of art and its perception.

The theatrical work made by Rauschenberg and Johns for the Cunningham repertory also appears to confirm the differences that have so frequently been emphasised in examinations of their non-theatrical work. Rauschenberg's contributions, often confronting,

\(^1\) Banes, "Merce Cunningham's 'Story'," p. 103.
\(^2\) Katz, pp. 197-206.
obtrusive, invasive, appear to stand at one end of a continuum. On the other hand, where Johns devised items of visual art after his own designs, his contributions of minimal close-fitting costumes and either no sets or items, such as scrim backcloths, that are scarcely confronting are located at the other extreme. Often in the theatrical context, in fact, the differences in their approaches have seemed so startling that the idea of an evolutionary development has surfaced, and the Cunningham commissions of Rauschenberg and Johns have been seen as part of a linear, historical development of Cunningham design. Deborah Jowitt, for example, has suggested that the kind of decor devised by Rauschenberg was gradually being phased out towards the end of Johns's period as artistic adviser, and that it disappeared entirely after Mark Lancaster took on that role. This change in the appearance of the Cunningham stage, which took the form of a movement away from the often design-encumbered spaces and costumes created by Rauschenberg towards the more minimal look favoured by Johns when he contributed his own work, begs the question of whether Cunningham himself set out to modify his collaborative aesthetic or whether he was encouraged to do so by Johns. That the departure of Rauschenberg

---

from the company in 1964 occurred in unpleasant circumstances, and that Cunningham is known to have been irritated by the effect of Rauschenberg's contributions to *Story*, suggests that Cunningham may well have looked to Johns precisely for the qualities Johns's detachment would bring to the collaborative mode.

The existence of attitudinal and formal differences between the work of two artists is, however, hardly surprising, and the emphasis that has so often been given to such differences between Rauschenberg and Johns does not in itself generate any remarkable insight into their art and art-making. More challenging is the notion advanced by Tomkins that the two artists were both engaged in a similar pursuit with their art-making - that of creating a pathway out of Abstract Expressionism. In the case of Johns, his detached approach to his theatrical activities, whether expressed through the commissioning of others or through his own solutions to the theatrical problems presented to him by Cunningham, scarcely looks back to Abstract Expressionism. It does, in fact, indicate an eschewal of many of the features that characterised the work of the Abstract Expressionists, in particular their involvement with the act of painting, and the self-

* Tomkins, *Post- to Neo-*, p. 3.
expression of their personalised, gestural brush strokes.

The situation, however, is not quite so clear-cut with Rauschenberg. Some aspects of his work, his contributions to *Antic Meet* and *Minutiae* for example with their emphasis on found items from the real world, clearly fall outside the spirit of Abstract Expressionism with its emphasis on dispensing with such recognisable images. With these works, Rauschenberg appeared to be moving along the pathway described by Tomkins. Much of Rauschenberg's work for the Cunningham repertory, however, overtly declared both its authorship and Rauschenberg's inclination to be involved both in the materials of art-making and in the act of creating art. In this respect, his solutions were often ones that firmly demonstrated his inclination to work in a mode that recalled that of the Abstract Expressionists. His involvement with pieces like *Story*, *Winterbranch*, and *Travelogue* is a reflection of the extent to which Rauschenberg might be identified not so much as an artist engaged in creating a pathway out of that movement, but as an artist who, in fact, is "most intelligible within the context of abstract expressionism." Such an attitude on the part of Rauschenberg calls into question the notion that

---

*R* Robert Rauschenberg and Barbara Rose, p. 6.
Rauschenberg was engaged in the pursuit of a pathway out of Abstract Expressionism, and suggests instead that with his theatrical commissions Rauschenberg did indeed provide part of "the connective tissue"6 between the eras of Abstract Expressionism and Pop.

As examples of art made in a theatrical context, the contributions made by Rauschenberg and Johns for the Cunningham repertory disclose the complex nature of the visual artist's theatrical output. They highlight the importance of the theatrical commission in providing visual artists with an experimental arena that expands the possibilities of art-making, and also the role of those commissions in furthering an understanding of the artist's non-theatrical work. Their commissions for Cunningham manifestly provide proof that an artist's theatrical work ought not to be considered a marginal activity, and provide justification for further critical and cross-disciplinary investigations into artists' theatrical commissions. With specific reference to the work of Rauschenberg and Johns, further work is warranted to uncover the complexities of the dialogue between them and other visual artists, performance artists and performers working in New York from the fifties onwards.

6 Schimmel, p. 61.
Beyond the question of marginalisation, the development of this thesis has focused on the nature of a specific collaborative environment and the role of the artist within it. The findings that have emerged from the focus on the Cunningham environment indicate the existence of a collaborative context whose antecedents are not to be found in historically dominant models of cross-art form collaboration.

Earlier models of theatrical collaboration highlight the final product and the manner in which the various elements of the collaboration contribute to that product by creating either a system whose purpose is to fuse the arts, or one whose aim is to separate them. By contrast the Cunningham collaborative context is one whose characteristics concern process rather than product (although a product is ultimately an outcome of the process). It establishes collaboration as an inclusive rather than exclusive act, and is a mode of collaboration that is open rather than closed in the sense that it aims to move the value of the work away from the authors of the contributing elements, and to place it instead on the interpretation given to the work by the spectators. Such a characteristic, again, is unlike any feature of other historically dominant models of theatrical collaboration, and it indicates the extent
to which the philosophy underpinning the Cunningham collaborative mode was that of Cage.

Concerning the work of Rauschenberg and Johns within this collaborative environment, the conclusions reached relate to the extent to which that work does or does not demonstrate a responsiveness to the collaborative context of a Cunningham production. At first glance the old, familiar differences between the work of Rauschenberg and Johns appear to surface. Johns's own work for Cunningham has those qualities of indirection on which Robert Hughes commented when writing of the characteristics of his art.\(^7\) As a result, it also appears to be somewhat less than innovative as theatrical design. On the other hand, Rauschenberg's work displays his characteristic flamboyance and fits, with consummate ease, into that view of the Cunningham environment as one in which there are fewer constraints on the various collaborators than in more traditional models of theatrical collaboration. Yet when seen in the light of the fact that the Cunningham collaborative context is not about the product but the process, and is about the establishment of an inclusive rather than exclusive act, and about an open rather than closed relationship between the viewer and the product, the findings are unexpected. As a Cunningham collaborator

\(^7\) Hughes, p. 63.
Johns co-existed rather than dominated. Rauschenberg, by demanding that much of the art that he produced be acknowledged as his, even if it did advance many of the formal issues with which Cunningham was concerned, displayed himself as a lesser collaborator in the Cunningham sense of that concept.

As a study of a specific model of collaboration, this thesis is an argument for other such studies in which the nature of the collaborative endeavour might be further revealed. The dominance of the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* has, to date, militated against any real development of contemporary theories of theatrical collaboration and of the role of artists within the collaborative endeavour. This is especially the case where collaborations have involved dance companies since the presence of Diaghilev continues to loom powerfully in the background. The Cunningham environment, with its enormous scope for interdisciplinary exploration, suggests a new starting point for the development of such theories.
LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED
A note on the list of works consulted

The works consulted during the preparation of this thesis belong to a diverse range of research media. Those media include published and non published material and a wide range of non written sources. For convenience and ease of usage, books, journal articles, and articles in monthly magazines have been set apart from reviews, both of books and performances, and from reviews and shorter communications in newspapers, weekly magazines and miscellaneous publications. Exhibition catalogues have also been given a separate listing. All unpublished but written items have been isolated, while non written sources such as film, video and audio materials are grouped together in a separate category.

Even so, a number of difficulties arose in compiling the list in this fashion. A category labelled miscellaneous, for example, seemed undesirable but eventually inevitable in order to accommodate, among other things, various clippings files consulted both in Australia and the United States. In many cases these files were enormous and it was clearly not possible, nor even desirable, to list every item separately.

Then, in most cases, recent exhibition catalogues turned out to be considerably more than an accompanying check list of items in the exhibition. They were often, quite rightly, attributed to an author (or several), rather than simply bearing the title of the exhibition. Where the text accompanying a catalogue was substantial and was used heavily as source material, the publication has a double entry, and appears both as a catalogue and under the author's name in the section that lists books and journal articles.
Books and journal articles


---------. "Nijinsky/Nijinska Revivals: The Rite Stuff." Art in America, 79, No. 10 (October 1991), 128-37; 167; 169; 171.


Best, David N. "Some Problems in the Aesthetics of Dance." The Journal of Aesthetic Education, 9, No. 3 (July 1975), 105-111.


"Cunningham and his Dancers." *Ballet Review,* 15, No. 3 (Fall 1987), 19-40.


---------. "To Describe the Process of Composition Used in Music of Changes and Imaginary Landscape No. 4." *trans/formation*, 1, No. 3 (1952); rpt. in *Silence: Lectures and Writings*. London: Calder and Boyars, 1968, pp. 57-59.

---------. "In This Day..." 1956; rpt. in *Silence: Lectures and Writings*. London: Calder and Boyars, 1968, pp. 94-95.


Clarke, Mary. "Creative Cunningham." The Dancing Times, 63, No. 746 (November 1972), 70-71.


---------. "Merce ... Mao ... and More in Buffalo." Dance Magazine, 42, No. 5 (May 1968), 45-48.


Colpitt, Frances. "Rauschenberg: In the Beginning." Art in America, 80, No. 4 (April 1992), 126-29.


---------. "Art Against Art." American Theatre, 6, No. 4-5 (July/August 1989), 12-18; 57.


---------. "space, time and dance." trans/formation, 1, No. 3 (1952), 150-51.


---------. "Summerspace Story: How a Dance Came to Be." Dance Magazine, 40, No. 6 (June 1966), 52-54.


---------. "Two Questions and Five Dances." Dance Perspectives, No. 34 (Summer 1968), pp. 46-53.


---------. "Center is Everywhere: Interview with Merce Cunningham by Eva-Elisabeth Fischer." Ballett International, 7, No. 6-7 (June/July 1984), 28-32.


Dell, Cecily. "Winterbranch ... and Hundreds of Years." Dance Scope, 1, No. 2 (Spring 1965), 19-21.


Fuller, Peter. "Jasper Johns Interviewed I." *Art Monthly,* No. 18 (July/August 1978), pp. 6-12.

---------. "Jasper Johns Interviewed II." *Art Monthly,* No. 19 (September 1978), pp. 5-7.


Harris, Dale. "Freedom from Formula." Ballet News, 1, No. 8 (January/February 1980), 14-16.


----------. "Jigs, Japes and Joyce." *Art in America*, 75, No. 1 (January 1987), 102-05.


----------. "Freedom from the Music: Cage, Cunningham and Collaborations." *Contact*, No. 20 (Autumn 1979), pp. 16-19.


"Experiments in Videodance." *Dance Scope*, 12, No. 1 (Fall/Winter 1977-78), 7-16.


McDonagh, Don. "Unexpected Assemblage." *Dance Magazine*, 39, No. 6 (June 1965), 42-45; 78.


Mazo, Joseph H. "Cunningham Comes to City Center." *Dance Magazine*, 66, No. 3 (March 1992), 12.


"Rauschenberg and the Vernacular Glance." *Art in America,* 61, No. 5 (September/October 1973), 82-87.


"Notes Toward a Semiotic Analysis (Concerning Disparitions)." *The Drama Review,* 23, No. 4 (December 1979), 93-104.


Rauschenberg, Robert. "Is Today's Artist with or against the Past?: Rauschenberg." ARTnews 57, No. 4 (Summer 1958), 46; 56.


Stuckey, Charles F. "Reading Rauschenberg." Art in America, 65, No. 2 (March/April 1977), 74-84.


Tomkins, Calvin. Introductory text in A Portfolio of Seven Prints Recording Collaborations with Merce Cunningham and Dance Company. [New York]: Multiples Inc. and Castelli Graphics, [1975].


--------. "A Chronology." Dance Perspectives, 34, (Summer 1968), 54-67.


--------. "Diaghilev and After: Twentieth-Century Collaborations." On the Next Wave, 1, No. 2 (October 1983), 17-22.


Review articles in books and journals


----------. "Merce Cunningham and Dance Company at Brooklyn Academy: Three Creations." *Dance and Dancers*, 23, No. 6 (June 1972), 49-51.


---------. "American Dance Festival: #1, Connecticut College, August 14-17." Dance Magazine, 32, No. 10 (October 1958), 33-35; 64; 73-74.


Articles and reviews in newspapers, weekly magazines and miscellaneous publications


"Dance Journal: To Whom It May Concern." The Village Voice, 30 May 1968.


"Unframed Space." The New Yorker, 5 August 1950.


Exhibition catalogues


Collaborations. Evanston: Mary and Leigh Block Gallery, Northwestern University, 1980.


Unpublished dissertations
and documents


Vaughan, David. Letters to Michelle Potter:
15 July 1992
3 August 1992
4 August 1992
5 August 1992
17 August 1992
7 December 1992
10 December 1992
29 January 1993.

Jennerjahn, Elizabeth. Letter to Michelle Potter:
3 March 1993.
Film, video and audio recordings


Miscellaneous

A Portfolio of Seven Prints Recording Collaborations with Merce Cunningham and Dance Company. Introductory text by Calvin Tomkins. [New York]: Multiples Inc. & Castelli Graphics, [1975].

Clippings files, Dance collection, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts:
Merce Cunningham
Merce Cunningham Dance Company
Jasper Johns
Robert Rauschenberg
Individual dance works as listed in the appendices.

Biographical files, the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra:
Jasper Johns
Robert Rauschenberg


Personal interview with Carolyn Brown, New York City, 31 October 1991

Personal interview with Kristian Fredrikson, Sydney, 17 January 1993