

Notes on Dance

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# Notes on Dance

ROBERT MORRIS

My involvement in theatre has been with the body in motion. However changed or reduced the motion might have been or however elaborate the means used might have been, the focus was this movement. In retrospect this seems a constant value which was preserved. From the beginning I wanted to avoid the pulled-up, turned-out, anti-gravitational qualities that not only give a body definition and role as “dancer” but qualify and delimit the movement available to it. The challenge was to find alternative movement.

I was not the first to attempt such alternatives. Simone Whitman, together with others, had already explored the possibilities inherent in a situation of “rules” or game-like structures which required the performer to respond to cues which might, for example, indicate changes in height or spatial position. A fair degree of complexity of these rules and cues effectively blocked the dancer’s performing “set” and reduced him to frantically attempting to respond to cues—reduced him from performance to action. In 1961 Simone Whitman held a concert in a loft in New York. This concert involved the use of such devices as a 45° inclined plane about eight feet square with several ropes coming from the top of it. Performers were allowed to climb up the plane, pass between each other and rest when tired—all by means of the ropes. Here the rules were simple and did not constitute a game situation but rather indicated a task while the device, the inclined plane, structured the actions. (This single example does not do justice to the implications this seemingly simple concert held.) Here focused clearly for the first time were two distinct means by which new actions could be implemented: rules or tasks and devices (she termed them “constructions”) or objects.

While possibilities for generating movement by task situations or

devices had become clearly established, it was essentially an indirect method in both cases. Movement had not been approached directly but had resulted, willy-nilly, from going about getting this or that task accomplished—moving over a dominating eccentric surface, etc.

By the uses of objects which could be manipulated I found a situation which did not dominate my actions nor subvert my performance. In fact the decision to employ objects came out of considerations of specific problems involving space and time. For me, the focus of a set of specific problems involving time, space, alternate forms of a unit, etc., provided the necessary structure.<sup>1</sup> While dance technique and chance methods were both irrelevant to me I would never have denied the value, necessity even, of perpetuating structural systems. But for my purposes the need for such systems was for syntactical rather than methodological bases. My efforts were bound up with the didactic and demonstrative and were not concerned with the establishment of a set of tools by which works could be generated.

The objects I used held no inherent interest for me but were means for dealing with specific problems. For example the establishment of an inverse ratio between movement, space, and duration was implemented by the use of a "T"-like form which I could adjust and move away from, adjust again and move away from, and so on until the sequence of movements according to the ratio had been completed. Or again, the establishment of a focus shifting between the egocentric and the exocentric could be accomplished by swinging overhead in a fully lighted room a small light at the end of a cord. The lights in the room fade as

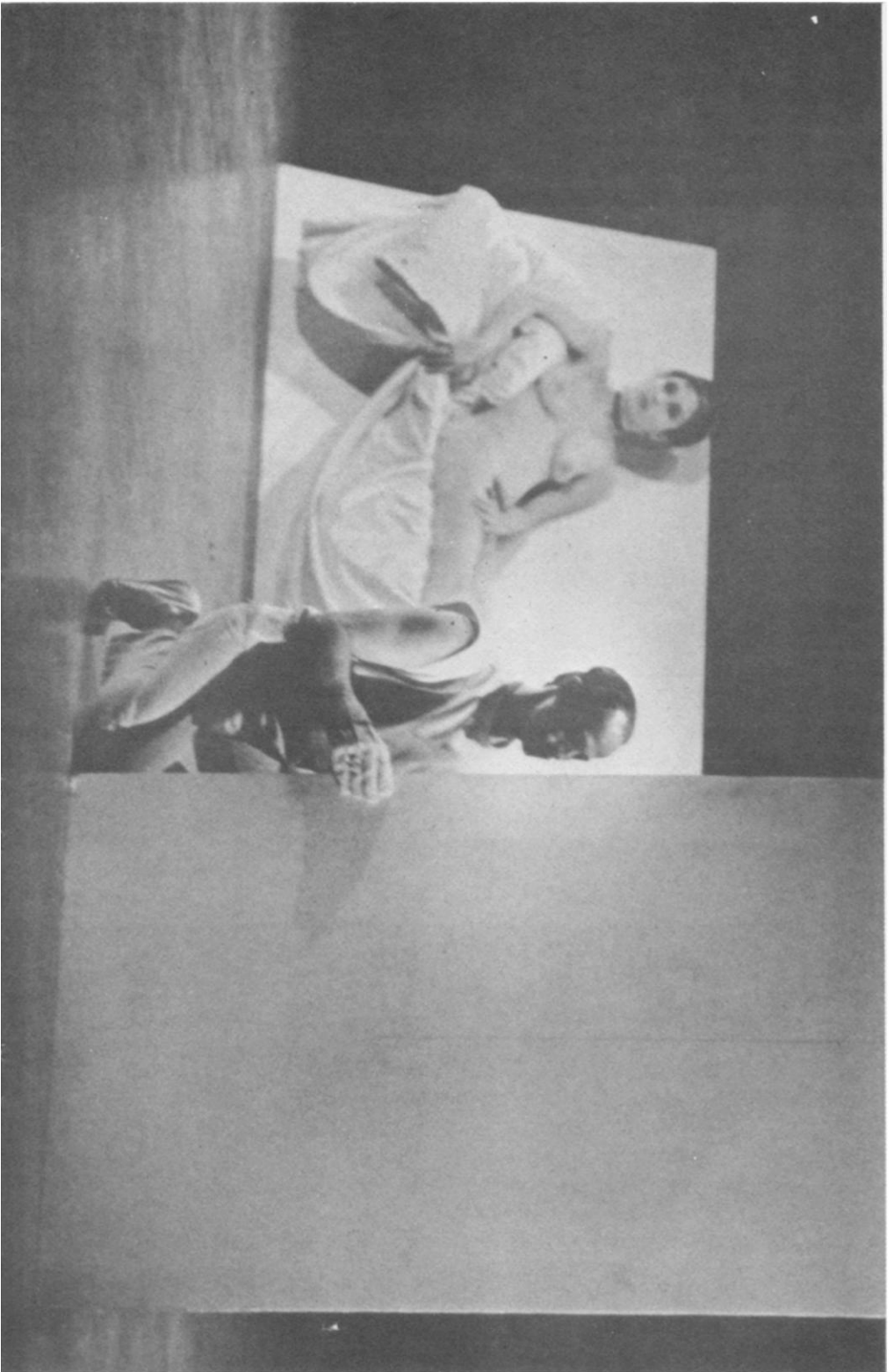
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<sup>1</sup> Quite a lot has been written lately about the so-called "new dance." Some of it is good, most is bad. But there is undeniably a need for a criticism devoted to focusing the problematic and the viable in the recent dance activity. Such writing would require the development of a vocabulary which could articulate the constructs of a functioning group. It might be possible to proceed by locating what a given group regards as its necessary questions together with its replies: its concrete actions. Only by the articulation of this dialogue can any coherent tradition be traced; even a recent tradition. And it would be revealed, I am sure, just as it has been revealed in the other arts when carefully observed, that dance like the other disciplines is no less involved in a dialogue of self-criticism.

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SITE at TV studio on May 5-7, 1965, the First New York Theatre Rally.

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the cord is slowly let out until finally in total darkness only the moving point of light is visible as it revolves in the large space above the heads of the audience. Both of the above instances occurred in *Arizona*, the first dance I made.

An element of the work as persistent as the use of objects is the coexistence of the static and the mobile—e.g. a sequence of ten Muybridge slides of a nude man lifting a stone followed by a similar movement by a nude male performer executed in the same space and illuminated by the beam of the slide projector (*Waterman Switch*); or the rotation of the upper torso through 90° over a five minute period—the movement itself being imperceptible—accompanied by a taped description of strenuous movements (*Arizona*); or a taped verbal description of actions which occur at a remove in time (*Waterman Switch*); or the illumination of a runner with stroboscopic-type light which, because of the briefness of the illumination, gives a static image (*Check*). In one form or another the static coexisting with the mobile occurs in every work.

Time, insofar as considerations of length are concerned, has seemed irrelevant. Since the movement situations were primarily those of either demonstration or exposition, time was not an element of usage but a necessary condition; less a focus than a context. Only at those points where there was no movement did time function as an isolated, observable focus—i.e. durations of stillness were not used as punctuations for the movement but in the attempt to make duration itself palpable.

Space, like time, was reduced to context, necessity; at most a way of anchoring the work, riveting it to a maximum frontality. In *Site* a triangular spatial situation occurs with an immobile female nude reclining against a white rectangle upstage, right of center, a white box downstage right (a visible source for a sound which varies hardly more than the nude), and a performer downstage left manipulating a white rectangular board and moving within an area of a few square feet. The extreme slow motion element in *Arizona* came from experiencing the dancer's movements being soaked up, dissipated, in a concert given

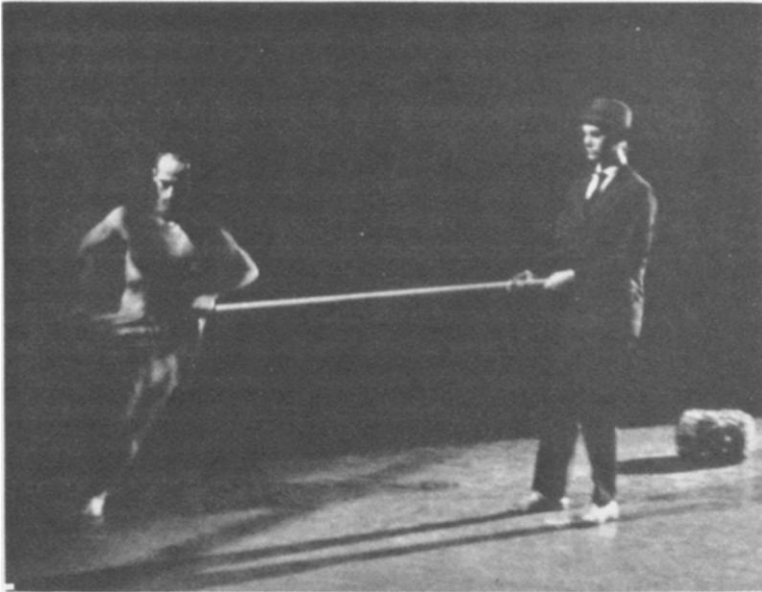
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CHECK at Judson Memorial Church, March 24, 1965. Performers are circling behind two leaders who carry flags.

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WATERMAN SWITCH at Judson Memorial Church, March 25, 1965.

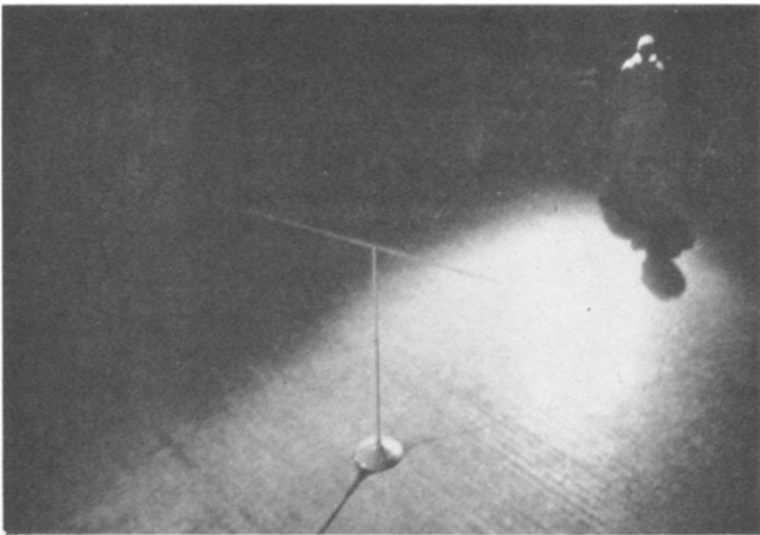
in an enormous skating rink in Washington, D.C. It was apparent that only the smallest movements kept their weight or mass in such a large, nonrectangular space. A consideration in *Arizona* was to make movements which would keep their focus in any space—a case of spatial opposition rather than cooperation or exploration. In *Check* space was used centrifugally, the movement occurring largely at the periphery of the audience. For all its apparent scale, *Check* made use primarily of the factors of distance and interruption; the space remained relatively unpunctured.

*Check* bears further elaboration for in several ways, other than the inside-out spatial situation, it was purposely antithetical to my previous works. It had no central focus, climax, dramatic intensity, continuity of action; it did not involve skill in performance, nor did it even demand continuous attention from an audience. In a room some 100 by 300 feet (the central gallery at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm) seven to eight hundred chairs were placed at random in the center area leaving aisles around the perimeter. Various actions by individual

performers occurred in these aisles. Forty other performers, men, women, and children, “wandered” through the entire space; totally at random and as individuals. Upon a signal the forty assembled into two respective groups for simple, simultaneous actions. They again dispersed upon a signal to resume wandering, talking, observing as a kind of proto-audience: i.e. they occupied a zone somewhere between performers and audience. The 700 in the audience were free to sit or stand as they chose. Due to the space and numbers of people no performed action was visible to the entire audience. (This work was later performed in a space approximately one-third of the size of the Moderna Museet and failed totally as the actions did not have a chance to “disappear.”) The actions occurred cyclically with the exception of one which endured throughout.

I have made a total of five dances: *Arizona*, a solo of 20 minutes; *21.3*, a solo of 10 minutes; *Site*, a duet of 17 minutes; *Waterman Switch*, a trio of 20 minutes; and *Check* for over 40 performers which lasted 30 minutes. Each work attempted to solve what was at the time

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*ARIZONA* at Judson Memorial Church, New York City, June 23, 1963  
 “A T-like form which I could adjust and move away from . . .”



seen as a problem or set of problems. To qualify and clarify “problem solving” as a process of thought appropriate to making dances would require elaborations beyond the scope of this article. Rather an attempt has been made to indicate how the problematic has served as syntax. It seems irrelevant that what was seen as a particular problem often remains a distant and unimmediate element in a performance; the structure of some musical scores is unapparent in performance. Much about the work has not been dealt with: the quality of performers’ actions, uses of sound, certain persistent imagery. These considerations also lie beyond the scope of this article. I have only attempted to touch on what seemed the foremost concerns that underlay whatever imagery, objects, etc., were employed.