

The Impermanent Art (1952)

There has been a shift of emphasis in the practice of the arts of painting, music and dancing during the last few years. There are no labels yet but there are ideas. These ideas seem primarily concerned with something being exactly what it is in its time and place, and not in its having actual or symbolic reference to other things. A thing is just that thing. It is good that each thing be accorded this recognition and this love. Of course, the world being what it is – or the way we are coming to understand it now – we know that each thing is also very other thing, either actually or potentially. So we don't, it seems to me, have to worry ourselves about providing relationships and continuities and orders and structures – they cannot be avoided. They are the nature of things. They are ourselves and our materials and our environment. If a dancer dances – which is not the same as having theories about dancing or wishing to dance or trying to dance or remembering in his body someone else's dance – but if the dancer *dances*, everything is there. The meaning is there, if that's what you want. It's like this apartment where I live – I look around in the morning and ask myself, what does it all mean? It means: this is where I live. When I dance, it means: this is what I am doing. A thing is just that thing. In painting, now, we are beginning to see the painting, and not the painter nor the painted. We are beginning to see how a painted space is. In music, we are beginning to hear free of our well-tempered ears.

In dance, it is the simple fact of a jump being a jump, and the further fact of what shape the jump takes. This attention given to the jump eliminates the necessity to feel that the meaning of dancing lies in everything but the dancing, and further eliminates cause-and-effect worry as to what movement should follow what movement, frees one's feelings about continuity, and makes it clear that each act of life can be its own history: past, present and future, and can be so regarded, which helps to break the chains that too often follow dancers' feet around.

There doesn't seem to me the need to expound any longer on the idea that dance is as much a part of life as anything else. Since it takes place in one form or another almost constantly, that is evidence enough. The play of bodies in space – and time. When I choreograph a piece by tossing pennies – by chance, that is – I am finding my resources in that play, which is not the product of *my* will, but which is an energy and a law which I too obey. Some people seem to think that it is inhuman and mechanistic to toss pennies in creating a dance instead of chewing the nails or beating the head against a wall or thumbing through old notebooks for ideas. But the feeling I have when I compose in this way is that I am in touch with a natural resource far greater than my own personal inventiveness could ever be, much more universally human than the particular habits of my own practice, and organically rising out of common pools of motor impulses.

Since dance as a part of life seems self-evident enough – a few words about what dance is not. “Not this, not that.” Dance is not social relationships. Though it may

influence them. Dance is not emoting, passion for her, anger against him. I think dance is more primal than that. In its essence, in the nakedness of its energy it is a source from which passion or anger may issue in a particular form, the source of energy out of which may be channeled the energy that goes into the various emotional behaviors. It is that blatant exhibiting of this energy, i.e., of energy geared to an intensity high enough to melt steel in some dancers, that gives the great excitement. This is not feeling about something, this is a whipping of the mind and body into an action that is so intense, that for the brief moment involved, the mind and body are one. The dancer knows how solidly he must be aware of this centering when he dances. And it is just this very fusion at a white heat that gives the look of objectivity and serenity that a fine dancer has.

Our ecstasy in dance comes from the possible gift of freedom, the exhilarating moment that this exposing of the bare energy can give us. What is meant is not license, but freedom, that is, a complete awareness of the world and at the same time a detachment from it.

In thinking about contemporary dance, I am concerned here with the concert dance, I find that it is the connection with the immediacy of the action, the single instant, that gives the feeling of man's freedom. The body shooting into space is not an idea of man's freedom, but is the body shooting into space. And that very action is all other actions, and is man's freedom, and at the same instant his non-freedom. You see how it is no trouble at all to get profound about dance. It seems to be a natural double for metaphysical paradox.

In reference to the current idea that dance must be expressive of something and that it must be involved with the images deep within our conscious and unconscious, it is my impression that there is no need to push for them. If these primordial, pagan or otherwise archetypal images lie deep within us, they will appear, regardless of our likes and dislikes, once the way is open. It is simply a matter of allowing it to happen. The dancer's discipline, his daily rite, can be looked at in this way: to make it possible for the spirit to move through his limbs and to extend its manifestations into space, with all its freedom and necessity. I am no more philosophical than my legs, but from them I sense this fact: that they are infused with energy that can be released in movement (to appear to be motionless is its own kind of intoxicating movement) – that the shape the movement takes is beyond the fathoming of my mind's analysis but clear to my eyes and rich to my imagination. In other words, a man is a two-legged creature – more basically and more intimately that he is anything else. And his legs speak more than they “know” – and so does all nature. So if you really dance – your body, that is, and not your mind's enforcement – the manifestations of the spirit through your torso and your limbs will inevitably take on the shape of life. We give ourselves away at every moment. We do not, therefore, have to *try* to do it. Our racial memory, our ids and egos, whatever it is, is there. If it is there, it is there; we do not need to pretend that we have to put it there. In one of my most recent solo works, called “Untitled Solo,” I choreographed the pieces with the use of “chance” methods. However, the dance as performed seems to have an unmistakable

dramatic intensity in its bones, so to speak. It seems to me that it was simply a question of “allowing” this quality to happen rather than of “forcing” it. It is this “tranquility” of the actor or dancer which seems to me essential. A tranquility which allows him to detach himself and thereby *to present* freely and liberally. Making of himself such a kind of nature puppet that he is as if dancing on a string which is like an umbilical cord: mother-nature and father-spirit moving his limbs, without thought.

My use of chance methods in finding continuity for dances is not a position which I wish to establish and die defending. It is a present mode of freeing my imagination from its own clichés and it is a marvelous adventure in attention. Our attention is, normally, highly selective and highly editorial. But try looking at events another way and the whole world of gesture, the whole physical world in fact, is as if jabbed by an electric current.

It has been a growing interest in “each thing-ness” that has led me to the use of chance methods in finding dance continuity. In my case, and for one particular work, this involved an elaborate use of charts from which came the particular movements, the rhythm (that is, the division and the duration of the time they were done in), and the space they appear in and how they divide it. There were separate charts for each of the three elements – movement, time, and space. Then I tossed pennies to select a movement from the movement chart, and this was followed by tossing pennies to find the duration of that particular movement, and following that the space and direction of the movement were tossed for. This method might lead one to suspect the result as being possibly geometric and “abstract,” unreal and non-human. On the contrary, it is no more geometric than the lines of a mountain are, seen from an airplane; it is no more abstract than any human being is, and as for reality, it is just that, it is not abstracted from something else, but is the thing itself, and moreover allows each dancer to be just as human as he is.

One of the things that has interested me for a long time, is how our balance works, not the fact that we can balance in many different ways and so find out how many ways, but just that we do balance at all, and how. On two legs or one. Dancing has two things in it: balance of the weight, and shift of that weight in space and time, that is, in greater or smaller areas, and over longer or shorter lengths of time. It depends upon the flexibility of the architecture of the body. The variety of that flexibility is limited only by the imagination of the dancer and you can see where that has brought us already. I suppose there are actually relatively few movements that we do, and it’s probably most pleasant for the dancer in his searching for movement if he lights upon one of these in a straightforward simple way. Lack of fullness in a particular movement, or exaggeration of a movement outside the particular limits of its own shape and rhythm produces mannerisms, I should think. And, equally so, the fullest possible doing of a particular movement with the minimum necessity of visible energy and the clearest precision in each element of that movement might possibly produce style. But when this is allowed to go out the window for further effect, prolongation of pose for bravura or other such delights of the performer’s

ego, then the first thing lost is serenity, and in the rush to catch up, the dancer stumbles, expressively if not physically.

Buckminster Fuller, the architect, once spoke of his feeling that man had migrated around the globe via two means: with the wind, that is under sail and perhaps eastward generally; and against the wind, that is across the land. This image of movement and resistance somehow makes me think of how an idea of mobile and static could be witnessed in the ways a dancer can be trained. The prime motivation can either be made a static one, that is by letting the position of the torso come first within the possibilities of its flexibility, and then to that adding the activity of the legs, or the prime motivation can be put in the legs, making a mobile situation upon which the back and upper limbs rest. This all presumes that a relationship runs up and down the spine into the arms and legs, to begin with, and that the base of the torso where the legs join the back both stops the action of the limbs and allows it to continue. And the wondrousness of being free and clear with both of these bodily components at the same time!

But the pleasure of dance does not lie in its analysis, though one might sometimes be led to think otherwise. Dancing is a lively human activity which by its very nature is part of all of us, spectators and performers alike. It's not the discussion, it's the doing and seeing – of whatever kind. As an adolescent I took lessons in various forms of American popular stage dancing including tap and a kind of exhibition ballroom. But my teacher insisted there was not such a thing as just “tap,” there was “the waltz clog,” “the southern soft shoe,” “the buck and wing,” and all were different, and she would proceed to show us how they were different. The rhythm in each case was the inflecting force that gave each particular dance its style and color. The tempo for a slower dance, for instance, allowed for a certain weight and swing and stopping of the arms that wasn't indicated in a faster dance. These lessons eventually led to performances in various halls as the entertainers for local events and finally a short and intoxicating “vaudeville tour.” I remember one of these situations when we (there were four of us) stood huddled and cold in a sort of closet that was the lone dressing room, behind the tiny platform that was the stage this time, and our teacher was in the front of the hall making last minute preparations. Finally she hurried back, took one look at the four of us, and smiled and said, “All right, kids, we haven't any make-up, so bite your lips and pinch your cheeks, and you're on.” It was a kind of theatre energy and devotion she radiated. This was a devotion to dancing as an instantaneous and agreeable act of life. All my subsequent involvements with dancers who were concerned with dance as a conveyor of social message or to be used as a testing ground for psychological types have not succeeded in destroying that feeling Mrs. Barrett gave me that dance is most deeply concerned with each single instant as it comes along, and its life and vigor and attraction lie in just that singleness. It is as accurate and impermanent as breathing.

– Merce Cunningham