

Merce Cunningham: dancing with my ghosts

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Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center carries the heritage and spirits of art history that have had the most significant impact on my artistic life as a performer and choreographer. I use the word impact here in a multi-layered way, having spent as much time resisting as embracing these spirits.

As a young dancer from Wilmington, North Carolina, I moved to New York City directly after graduating from the University of North Carolina School of the Arts in Winston-Salem in 1987. At the time I had never seen a Merce Cunningham dance performed live and had never heard of Black Mountain College, but a friend brought me to the Cunningham studio, introducing me to the technique. It was a perfect fit, and six weeks later, when I was still just 21, Merce Cunningham asked me to join his dance company.

In the course of the nine years I spent in the Merce Cunningham Dance Company (1987-1996), I traveled the world with John Cage and David Tudor, attended receptions with Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, and in 1991 became one of a handful of MCDC dancers who experienced the profound transition Merce introduced that year. He began using technology as a choreographic companion when his aging body could no longer create movement material. As part of the first “computer generation,” we learned a new mode of communication through a program developed specifically for Merce called Life Forms. Instead of engaging the immediacy of physical communication through his real body, we entered an era of translating choreographic directions he read directly from a computer generated printout.

Alongside my incredibly rich dance career was the gift of engaging with these artists in a deeply human way. Some of my most resonant memories include massaging David Tudor’s swollen legs on tour; John Cage’s radiant smile and handshake greeting me backstage; drinking too much wine with Jasper Johns at a fancy dinner in London. And, most profoundly, I was one of the first dancers in the studio with Merce the day after John died. He never took a day off to mourn, and we never talked about his loss. I knew all I could do was dance for him.

The entire time I was in MCDC, I recognized that I was part of an incredibly powerful cadre of artists - all of whom populate BMC history - and art history itself. But in the actuality of those days, I was naive about who they were in the broader cultural and art historical landscape. They were my friends, my dinner mates - real people through whom I witnessed great art-making alongside human fragility.

This recognition of having worked with great artists made me confident that I would never choreograph my own work! What could my voice possibly add to what Merce and his collaborators had already put out there? In response, I left dance in 2000 and enrolled in graduate school, earning an MA in Art Criticism and 20th Century Visual Art History. I was hungry to understand the connection between artists, critics, and the particular moment in history during which an artist produced work. My studies plunged me into dense texts on critical theory and cultural criticism, with a particular focus on Post-Structuralist Feminist Theory. However, two-thirds of the way through my graduate program, I knew that while my mind had been radically opened, I was not a scholar. Right before graduating, I accepted my first invitation to choreograph. Culling from the feminist texts on language and body I had consumed, this first project was seeded from a question that would define my early choreographic works: what is inside my female body that the powerful male artists I spent my 20s with haven't gotten to yet?

In my nearly eighteen years of choreographic investigation since then, I have embraced my Cunningham history as well as radically revising it. My early projects rejected Merce's powerful impact on my female form, and included almost no formal vocabulary. At one point I was even referred to as a "non-dance" choreographer, a term connected to a choreographic movement, bred in France in the 1990s, for artists rejecting the use of traditional movement vocabulary and integrating other art forms into their work. Making a dance about dancing itself seemed a-historical and out of touch with what was happening in our world. Not knowing what to do with formal material in my new projects, I stripped my work of it, and looked to the inherent ephemerality of my art form. I researched ideas about the presence of performers as actual material, as well as inviting designers onstage to perform their craft as a dance in itself (an idea that was influenced by my time with Merce and John Cage).

I also made a conscious break from Merce's guiding philosophy that movement, music, and design were elements that should remain independent of one another, simply sharing a common space and time. In his radical notion of collaboration, all artistic partners worked independently of one another, bringing their work together only when it was finished and ready to premiere. We rehearsed in silence, hearing the music and encountering the set elements for the first time on opening night with the audience. As a performer, I absolutely loved not knowing what was going to happen at the performative moment when all the elements came together. It was never about success or failure, but the thrill of the experiment.

As a creator of my own work, I continue to uphold certain aesthetic notions that Merce and his collaborators embraced. But my process pushes beyond a faith in experimentation and engages with my historical moment, which is ripe with social and political discontent. I've reworked the notion of collaboration, undoing ideas about independence, and looking at ways

movement and design elements - in particular, light and sound - can be *so* deeply intertwined that none could exist without the other. I have also been dedicated to extensive research in how I can use form/movement material in my work, in a way that feels connected to our contemporary political reality.

In 2015, I reached back toward my Cunningham roots, re-embracing technically virtuosic, physically potent movement material (and working with Cunningham dancers!), but as a way to reflect on, even abstractly, contemporary social concerns. I needed the dancing form to be more than a shape moving in time and space. At that time, I was obsessed with the amount of violence - in particular, gun violence affecting children - that infused our culture, and recognized that if I was going to deal with issues around violence toward bodies, I needed bodies in motion as my main source material. Even though I do not consider myself a political artist, I recognized that if I was going to accept the privilege of receiving support for my work, I needed to engage with the world outside the studio. Since then, I have embarked on a multi-year path of intensive research, attempting to revisit and revise Merce's philosophies, many of which were developed at Black Mountain. I continue to work toward finding drama through taking form and bodies to a radical extreme.

In my current work, I carve out a space for criticism and compassion while tenderly and violently etching away at some deeply distressing threads of our society. I use the body—in all its physical and emotional extremes—inviting audiences to think, feel, and reflect on their place within their complicated existence. Recently my process has focused on rigorous physical research with virtuosic performers toward achieving intense energetic states. Pushed to an extreme, this results in a breaking down of form, leaving the body in a vulnerable, deeply human state. This play with power and vulnerability has become my process's core, and in all my dances, I need to see the person as well as the virtuosic performer. My hope is that the audience members can see and experience themselves through the body of the performer.

I will present my 2018 choreographic project, *I hunger for you*, at Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center in May 2020. For me to have this opportunity nearly seven decades after Merce Cunningham's time at BMC, is a joyous homecoming professionally and personally. North Carolina is home to my entire family, including four siblings, my father, my mother's spirit, and multiple nieces and nephews! Much of the originating concept for *I hunger for you* reflected my grappling with the fact that, since the 2016 Presidential election, my family suffers from harsh divisions in our social, political, and religious belief systems. As we have tried to navigate around these issues and keep our love intact, my choreographic work has become a safe space, where we can all engage with something for what it is and who we are as human beings beneath our ideologies.

*I hunger for you* is about faith, violence, life force, and compassion. It asks: if we live in a world where we cannot speak to someone who does not share our values—if language leads to violence—how can dance/art bridge that inability to communicate? How can my work get inside the body of the audience and open up the possibility for understanding?

These are the questions I will be bringing to audiences in Asheville. I believe they are pressing issues reflecting themes driving much of contemporary performance practice in the U.S, just as the questions Merce and his colleagues were asking many decades ago at BMC were driving their artistic era. What threads these histories together is dance itself, the particular potency of the body/person revealed through the power of physical communication. Or as Merce said: “that single fleeting moment when you feel alive.”