Performance Art and the American Post-Modern Dance of the Judson Dance Theater

MICHELLE MOURA

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At 'Perform: a workshop on body and action', by André Lepecki and Eleonora Fabião, performance art was experienced as a present happening, the here and now, by touching the limits between art and real life.

"This is not the place for rehearsals or classes. This is a place for experiments and performance." This statement was repeated several times by Eleonora and André, and was the propeller of a series of experimentation tasks, in which there was definitely no space for elaborating or rehearsing. The 'schedules', or so the instructors called these experiments, sometimes were very much alike cathartic meditations. One of those schedules included an 1-hour walk around Curitiba City, not a minute more or less. Another task was to spend a whole day in the company of a fellow workshoper, and during lunch participants should feed each other, prepare his/her dish, and take the food to the partner's mouth.

During a whole week we made experiments that connected us to daily life, and it was inevitable to absolutely invest oneself into the present. Attention, thoroughness and flexibility were the main points, in keeping with the concept of performance itself. According to COHEN (1989), performance is a way to face art—live art, art at live, and also living art. This approach, which pursues a direct contact with life, foments spontaneous, natural actions instead of more elaborated or rehearsed ones.

In the beginning, people who performed and/or organized performances and happenings—artistic manifestation which was named after Allan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, in 1959—were plastic artists, such as Kaprow, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Whitman, Jim Dene, and musicians, as John Cage, or dancers, as Merce Cunningham, among others. There were also "poets (…) filmmakers, playwrights, and thinkers, who were seeking the re-study of art's goals" (GLUSBERG, 1987, p.27).

Performance art proliferated in the 1960s. For many artists, it had as the main purpose establishing a more organic and vigorous relationship between their work and their lives. The Fluxus movement,[1] for instance, emphasized the motto 'life above art': "they wanted to suppress the idea that art has special qualities. Art should match life, and life should match art, for the most fascinating and interesting things are into life" (SMITH, 1991, p.55). Some North American choreographers at that time were also dealing with the same question: how to bring art closer to their lives.

Based on this concept of bringing art and daily life together, I made use of the introduction of Eleonora and André's workshop about performance and live art as a hint. So, I decided to write about the Judson Dance Theater, an important group of artists from the 1960s which was responsible for the creation of the so-called American post-modern dance, by bringing about new and revolutionary notions on choreographic structures and postures. Those artists shared the same aesthetic, political, and ideological interests as the ones who produced performances, happenings, body art, and conceptual art. These latter, in their turn, were involved in artistic manifestations which were similar to dance. For instance, they would use the human body as a support for the plastic arts. Besides, the Judson Dance Theater appeared in an historical moment when the limits amongst art forms were vanishing, or at least becoming interpenetrative. So that everything that could be used as art by this generation was a possible source material for the new choreographers to mold into dance.

Henceforth, Judson's dancers inspired the performances and happenings' first explorations, and incorporated similar experiments as well as the idea of keeping art and daily life together—an instigating concept which originated new forms of thinking and producing dance.

One can verify this connection between art and life in Judson Dance Theater's work by observing three of the essential points of their practice and thought formation:

1. The use of gestures captured from daily life as choreographic motifs;

2. The use of alternative places—such as churches, parks, galleries—but rarely an Italian stage;

[1] Fluxus was a loosely organized group of artists, founded by George Maciunas, who envisioned an art that was accessible to all.

3. The inclusion of dancers and non-dancers in the choreographies.

New methods, concepts and choreographic esthetics brought about new uses for space, for time and also for the human body. The new generation of choreographers not only rejected modernity, with its myths, music, meanings and atmosphere, but they also rejected the elegance of *ballet*.

The origin of the Judson Dance Theater

The Judson Dance Theater was a choreographer's collective institution, freely organized, which included not only dance students or professional dancers, but also plastic artists, musicians, poets and filmmakers. The troupe was named after Judson Memorial Church, where they performed for the first time at July 6, 1962. This performance started as a simple "end of the class recital" (BANES, 1993, p.66). Although only one performance was scheduled, this show was so successful among critics and audience that the choreographers started to consider possible future shows.

The Judson Dance Theater started from a class of musical composition for dance taught by Robert Dunn—a musician who was one of John Cage's students—at Merce Cunningham's Dance Studio. In the first year (1960–1961), the students were Paul Berenson, Simone Forti, Marnie Mahaffey, Steve Paxton and Yvonne Rainer, and later, Ruth Allphon, Judith Dunn, and Ruth Emerson. In the second year, the classes began in the autumn of 1961, with new students, including Trisha Brown, David Gordon, Alex and Deborah Hay, and Elaine Summers.

Dunn directed the collective sessions to organize their first performance in 1962, which was a 4-hour marathon at the major chapel of the church. The 14 choreographers shared all the tasks, from the advertising to lighting. The performance was for free, and almost 300 people showed up.

The *Concert of Dance #1* was forward-looking in its cooperative production as much as in its choreographic methods. The dramatic narratives of modern dance were replaced by simplicity, so that one could recognize the elaboration process, as well as the used method, as an object in itself. The focus on process instead of the results, and the use of objects, improvisations, spontaneous situations, tasks and games are methods to bring dance and daily life together, emphasizing common things and natural movements instead of virtuosity and technique. This causes a transformation: new meanings are given to an ordinary movement by including it into the context of dance:

> "The press release for the program emphasized that it included dances made by chance techniques, indeterminacy, rule-games, tasks, improvisation, spontaneous determination, and other methods (like scores and cut-ups), all of which deliberately undercut the standard modern-dance narrative or emotional meanings" (BANES, 1993, p. 67).

The *Concert of Dance #1* was opened with the projection of a movie edition followed by 22 dance performances, some in silence, some at the sound of Erik Satie or John Cage's compositions, and one of them was a performance by Fred Herko (dancer) together with the jazz pianist Cecil Taylor. The movements approached various forms from daily gestures to the "Cunninghamesque movement to quotations of ballet" (BANES, 1993, p.67).

From the first performance, the troupe counted on musicians, painters, and other artists working as choreographers. Among the ones who were professional dancers—and have already worked with Cunningham and Passloff, for instance—there were many dancers who had never choreographed before. The flexibility and the informality of the workshop permitted non-dancers to take part in dance performances, and also to work as choreographers.

Some of those choreographers used non-dancers and a minimalist vocabulary, suggesting the continuity of art and life and trying to make dance more accessible to the audience, and to suppress the idea that art requires rigid emotional and physical discipline—an elitist common concept in ballet tradition, expressionist modern dance, and even in some of Cunningham's works.

The Judson Dance Theater became a cooperative in April 1963. They had weekly meetings, first at Rainer, Waring & Passlof's studio, and then in a gym at the Judson's church basement.

In January 1963, the troupe made two other concerts in the gym. In April, the troupe was responsible for an evening-length choreography, *Terrain* by Rainer, in the major chapel, where other concerts followed. In April 1964,

the troupe made their 16th concert, which was also the last. At that time, they had already performed about 200 dances, at the church as well as other places, such as the Gramercy Arts Theater, an ice rink in Washington D.C., and a forest in New Jersey. All of those concerts were collectively produced, including the ones performed by one single person.

The heads of the movement were Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, Lucinda Childs, Deborah Hay, and David Gordon, choreographers with different styles and methods. However, they had in common the idea of suppressing orthodox conventions, the code of symbolism, and elaborated structures of the modern dance paradigm, which they claimed to obstruct the fluency of pure movement (RODRIGUES, 2000, p.98).

From 1962 to 1964, the Judson Dance Theater produced 20 public concerts, 16 group programs, and four nights of solo performances.

The ideals of art and daily life in the Judson Dance Theater

By excluding dramatic contents from their compositions —an anti-modernist aspect—and due to their interest in pure movement, the actions and gestures of daily life became source materials for the Judson Dance Theater's choreographers. Every movement made, at the streets or even a football game, could be explored and transformed into dance. The Judson Dance Theater has put into practice in an extreme way the ideals of John Cage, who believed an incidental noise could be transformed into a musical composition. Their intent was to define dance not for its contents but for its context—or so to say moving becomes dancing simply because some movements are organized as dance.

They explored space in several forms. The choreographies were not only presented at Judson Church, but also in art galleries, lofts, ice rinks, small farms, and even (as done by the choreographer Trisha Brown) over buildings, walls, and trees.

The human body was not only an instrument for expressing something anymore, and became the main object of dance. This approach stressed relaxation, as in daily activities, in opposition to the high tension level used by classical dance, for instance. The search for a 'natural' body required the inclusion of non-dancers.

Due to the political context of those years, the use of elements from daily life intended to accomplish a more accessible and more equalitarian form of making art, to artists and to audience. Artistic creation was somehow amplified, and any person was able to produce art. Accepting common things was a form to appreciate the simple ephemeral aspects of life, to expand perception towards the facts of life, and to face them as art.

That's why the Judson Dance Theater proclaimed daily practice, so that everyone was able to produce art, and art couldn't be separated from life. To conceive art as a specialized activity was an elitist concept, which was repudiated by the artists of this generation.

So, those artists were common people and everyone could understand their work. They assumed that the most important artistic subject was to observe people walking, eating, sleeping, making love, telling stories, and also to pay attention to objects, such as food, clothes, furniture. Due to their own banality, such activities and objects are full of meaning.

Some of Judson's works were so close to real life that the audience would come back to their daily activities with an altered vision of the commonest things.

Judith Dunn's choreography *Acapulco*, was a collage of common activities: a woman ironing the dress she wore, two other women playing cards, and another woman having her hair combed saying "ouch" from time to time. Slow movements were used in some parts, in order to transform those banal activities into dance (BANES, 1993, p.123).

The appreciation of everyday life also expressed a criticism of the modern art's pedantry. Some of Judson's works tested the limits of art, including so much real life contents that the difference between art and life disappeared (FOSTER, 1986, p.171). In *Satisfying Lover* (1967), Steve Paxton selected exclusively non-dancers, dressed in common clothes. The choreography was to walk from one side to another, in an apparently random formation. In *Room Service* (1963) by Yvonne Rainer, performers transported a matress, in order to demonstrate how the human body reacts in a functional action. The point, according to Rainer, was to transform a common movement into art, and to focus automatic actions that are normally

ignored, as a compliment to the body's intelligence. In both works, Paxton's and Rainer's, actions such as walking around or carrying things are not represented. These are the real actions, performed as they would be in real life.

Final Remarks

After the 1960s, dance followed a new path. I believe this is a consequence of the freedom inspired by the statement 'Make dance about nothing special' (BANES, 1980, p.07), something Robert Dunn used to say to his students at the choreographic composition class, where the Judson Dance Theater started.

Freedom, democracy, and equality are the words in the American political discourse in the 1960s. The fight for equal rights for women and black people calls for equality, not separation. There was a fusion of (or at least an attempt to merge) social classes, races, and sexes. Among art forms something similar happened: the barriers which used to separate artistic manifestations were falling. This scene brought about new aesthetic and production methods in theater, visual arts, movies, literature to overcome.

There was a wish to accomplish both social and artistic equality, often leading to discussions, even nowadays: Is this dance? Performance art? Visual arts? The wish for equality requires a more accessible art, so the objects are necessarily common and simple.

Concerning the continuum between art and daily life, similar questions occur: "Carrying a mattress could possibly be dance" or "If this is dance, why all the people walking in the streets are not dancers at all? Are they part of an immense random choreography?". Body and movement are part of us and of daily life as well. To name it dance depends on the context, on the desire someone has of calling it that way, or yet it depends on how we see it.

This relativity is one of the reasons why non-dancers took part of Judson's choreographies. What mattered most at that time was the human body, its anatomy and its functions, and this could be dance.

I believe that the renewal brought about by the Judson Dance Theater is easily recognized by its potentials, or so to say: any person is potentially a dancer/choreographer, and any common movement is potentially dance. ◆

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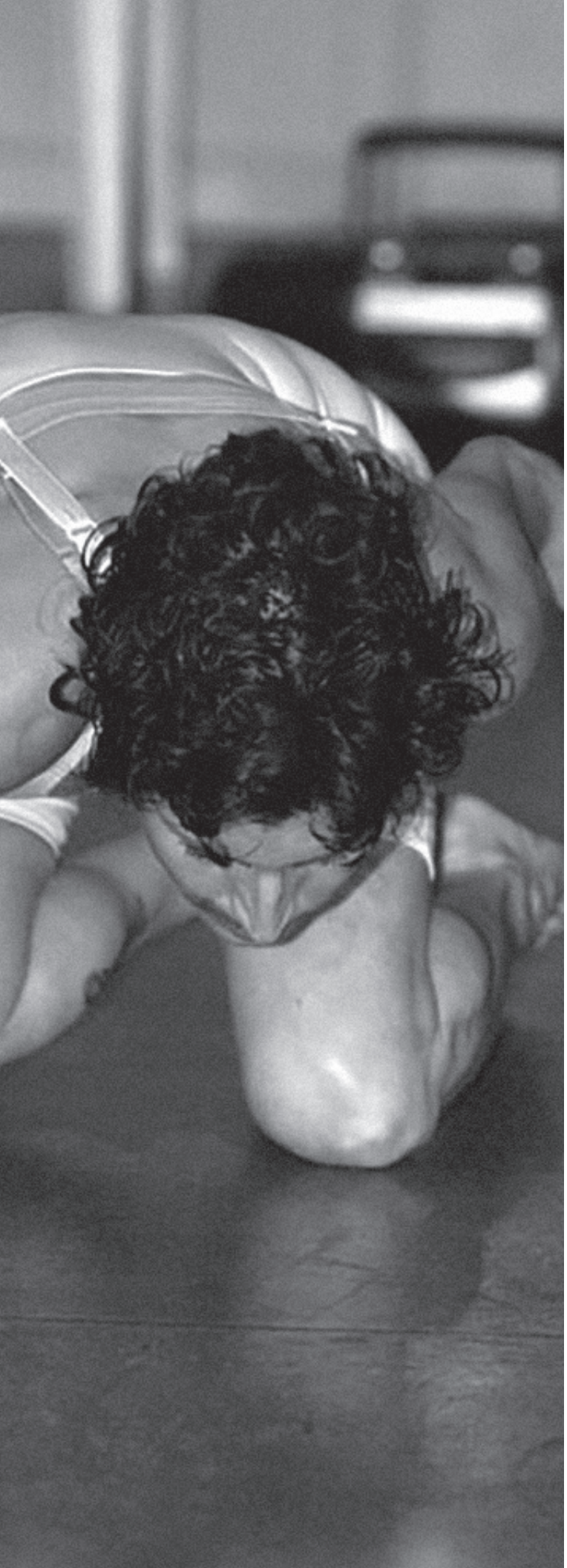
Michelle Moura graduated in Dance from the College of Arts of Paraná (Curitiba) and has a Specialization Degree in Contemporary Dance Studies from the Federal University of Bahia, Salvador. She has been an active creator and dancer. She did the research about day to day art and the Judson Dance Theater in 2003, as part of her Specialization Paper. Thus she fell in love with conceptual arte and pursues as much as she can regarding this form of non-art. She was a Casa Hoffmannn Fellow in 2003 and a curator , with Cristiane Bouger, of the event Da Casa, part of the Performance Act Series – Casa Hoffmann. She currently works as an actress, too.



(untitled), Lucianne Figueiredo
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Collaborators
Cristiane Bouger
Dayana Zdebsky de Cordova
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