

ENLIGHTENED VISIONS OF THE
IMAGINATIVE FORM:
A Comparative Analysis of Modern Dance
and the Independent Cinema of Maya Deren

by

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Above all, I sense myself upon the mere threshold of an indefinitely large, if not infinite, range of potentialities...

-Maya Deren

C O N T E N T S

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INTRODUCTION

As I attempt to properly introduce this thesis, I am reminded that our lives have a rather brilliant way of continuously leading us back to our origins. The place we reach at the end of an endeavor is, so often, the exact spot from which we began. The place has changed because we have changed, and our senses no longer respond to stimuli as they once did. This, I believe, is what is so extraordinary about the experience of journeying back to our beginnings. Indeed, recognizing a transformation in the quality of our perception is a most glorious education! For, it reveals an illuminated world, a world in which we, ourselves, are illuminated. Two and a half years ago, I encountered Maya Deren for the first time through the sound of her voice. Unbeknownst to me, this enchanting meeting was the beginning of a remarkable exploration, an exploration more personal than any I have ever experienced. While I am certainly far from the first of Deren's admirers, I did recognize, almost immediately, an affinity with the way in which she used the medium of film as a means of asking questions that sought to uncover truths. The more familiar I became with her life and work, the more I experienced a parallel synthesis of our creative processes. Studying Deren's films and film theory led me to confront my own artistic ideologies and engendered a deeply rich understanding of why I address them through the medium of dance. The gift of this research has been the development of a keen self-knowledge and empowerment through self-definition as a woman who is an artist. It is with great excitement that, now, as I arrive at the end, I find myself returning to the point from which I began, for it is Deren's voice that continues to enrapture me. The words that drew me towards her are those that

drew me into myself and, subsequently, allowed me to create from a more conscious and a more honest place. Thus, I think it is only appropriate to introduce this thesis by telling my life's story of those words.

In the fall of 2008, as I sat in the booth of Wesleyan University's Patricelli '92 Theater, waiting to begin my duties as the soundboard operator for the Fall Faculty Dance Concert featuring Rachel Boggia, I felt a mounting dissatisfaction with the impossibility of seeing any of the movement that would be happening in response to the music cues. Engulfed in the darkness of that little room, I realized how difficult it is for me to be barred from seeing dance, particularly, when it's not by my own volition. However, as I pressed play on the track for the first piece, "In the Very Eye of the Night", the recorded voice that began consuming the theater instantly consumed me. At the time, I had no idea that the voice belonged to Maya Deren, and even if I had, her name was not one that I would have recognized. Nevertheless, the gentle power with which she spoke about her art was like nothing I had ever heard. Isolated with her words in the darkness of the theater, it was not merely what she said, but also the way in which she said it that I found so resonant, so necessary in its truth.

What I do in my films is very, oh I think very distinctively, I think they are the films of a woman and I think that their characteristic *time* quality is the time quality of a woman. I think that the strength of men is their *great* sense of immediacy. They are a *now* creature and a woman has strength to wait because she's *had* to wait. She has to wait nine months for the concept of a child. Time is built into her body in the sense of becomingness and she sees everything in terms of

it being in the *stage* of becoming. She raises a child knowing not what it is at any moment, but seeing always the person that it will become.

Her whole life from her very beginning—it's *built* into her—is the sense of becoming. Now, in any time form, this is a very important sense. I think that my films, putting as much stress as they do upon the *constant metamorphosis*—one image is always becoming another—that is, it is what is happening that is important in my films not what is at any moment. *This* is a woman's time sense and I think it happens more in my films than in almost anyone else's.

(Kulturaadmin)

Upon hearing these words, I realized that I had never before felt so compelled to consciously think about the unique capabilities that I had authority over as a woman artist. And the idea of using those in the creation of my art—of communicating through them as an aesthetic choice—was incredibly stimulating.

Tragically, just about ten minutes before the house was to open on the first night of the concert, a knee injury that had progressed throughout the week caused Rachel's premiere Wesleyan performance to be suddenly cancelled. As everyone involved dissipated back into normal life, the week that we spent together faded into a distant blur. As I reflect upon it now, I'm not sure why I never discovered whose voice it was that I had been in charge of projecting into the theater, but as the weeks progressed, my hopes of locating the woman behind the voice dwindled and her place in my life did not extend beyond the memory of that brief recording.

It wasn't until one year later, as a student in Rachel's Dance and Technology class, that I encountered Deren again, this time, assuredly, more knowingly. As the class entered into the process of creating video dances, Rachel showed Deren's first film, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, made in 1943. While I have since developed a deeper relationship with the film, following this first viewing, I was struck by its honesty, by the absolute necessity of its production. It was as if, almost seventy years after it was made, I could still sense the inner compulsion from which it was conceived. The clarity of the shots and the seamlessness of the editing were so pure, yet the complexity of the subject matter was revealed with outstanding power. It was the first time I had seen a film that communicated so many facets of the subconscious, yet within such simplicity. As the independent filmmaker Stan Brakhage wrote,

Perhaps the most startling thing about this film is the naturalness and ease with which it presents certain psychological symbology [sic]...All of Maya's symbolism was very simple. Maya had the capacity to speak more directly about what everyone else was being very pompous about—that is, symbolism, particularly psychological symbolism...(Brakhage 93-94)

Following the in-class showing of Deren's 1945 film, *A Study in Choreography for Camera*, I began to acknowledge the way in which artists' personal transformations can be made manifest through their work. In fact, I believe that creation necessitates it in order to transmit meaning effectively. As I watched Deren's films, I was able to trace her evolution as an artist because she continuously used the film medium as a

vehicle through which to present challenges to herself and to the world. And through that same medium, she enacted the simultaneous journey of meeting them.

Around the time that my class was introduced to Deren's work, the 2009 Fall Faculty Dance Concert came about and Rachel was scheduled to perform the solos that she was unable to the previous year, including "In the Very Eye of the Night." Having individually sought out Deren's other films that weren't shown in class, I learned that Rachel's piece was named after that last film that Deren ever made, *In the Very Eye of Night*. However, it wasn't until I was in the theater, once more surrounded by darkness and enveloped by the woman's voice that I realized the words that opened the piece were Deren's. Although, when I heard them this time, I was standing backstage waiting to perform. The knee injury of the previous year again prevented Rachel from dancing in the capacity required for the concert. During our class time on Thursday, the day before opening night, Rachel announced that I would be performing a solo called "Visitor," choreographed by Vanessa Justice.

The forty-eight hours in which I both learned "Visitor" and performed it for the last time felt like a whirlwind and remain in my memory that way. Never in my life had I performed a ten-minute modern dance solo, let alone one that required wearing a wig, a long trench coat, and tall black boots, while dancing with an umbrella against a backdrop of blowing fans. I felt very ugly, in a way, hidden under all of those layers that were so foreign to me. I remember acknowledging that nothing of that piece was mine; it was thrown onto me. However, I was possessed by the very real sense of responsibility to perform with the power and the sincerity that Rachel would have. I wanted to make her feel as if nothing had been lost from the

piece by my dancing, but rather, imbue her with the revelation of something new, equally effective and equally communicative. In this way, I knew that I must allow the piece, which was originally made for Rachel, to become mine. Emerging from the costume and reaching through its layers necessitated an intimacy of embodiment. These ideas and the way in which I understood them led me to realize that the moment called for a level of maturity and vulnerability that I had not yet known. On opening night, as I waited behind the curtain, Deren's words were absorbed into my system and directed me towards an entirely new comprehension of how to live through the solo. Although Deren was speaking about film, there was no question in my mind about the resonance of her words in a dance context. For, dance existed as a time form before film and it, too, yearns for a sense of becoming. As I applied Deren's words to the experience I was preparing to encounter, the authority I had in shaping the nature of my art through the very structure of my being, suddenly, became very clear. Thus, Deren's voice served as the impetus through which I delved so far inside of myself that I hardly had any idea of where I was or what I was doing. I transcended the self, and that, I have learned, is the creation of art. For as dance theorist, John Martin, asserts:

When the word 'art' is used it may be taken to mean the process whereby one individual conveys from his consciousness to that of another individual a concept which transcends his powers of rational statement. (*The Modern Dance* 35)

The intent of my research is to explore the relationship that binds the artist to his medium and to illuminate the contribution of that relationship to human progress

and ethical development. I believe, absolutely, that human life depends upon art, not merely as an aesthetic and pleasurable diversion, but as a means through which we can perceive, more fully, the world that we inhabit. While this is a belief that I have carried with me for a long time, upon encountering the writings of the scholars discussed in this thesis, I was inspired to give personal establishment to my convictions. I wanted to re-introduce, on my own terms, the ideas that I found so vital, such as those proposed by Martin who wrote:

The order of human progress has always been in this manner. First the artist senses something unknown and unknowable and expresses it irrationally; then through the continued contact with this expression, he or others begin to attach a certain tangibility to the idea, and eventually the scientific mind can see it clearly enough to rationalise [*sic*] it. In this way, art cannot stand still; when it has made certain images common it must move on to others. (*The Modern Dance* 10-11)

My hope is that through a comparative study of the independent cinema of Maya Deren and modern dance, this thesis will shed light upon the necessity of artistic creativity and empower artists to fulfill, with fervor and with courage, the responsibility of artistic production.

The importance of telling the story of my encounter with Maya Deren in the introductory presentation of this work is that the development of the research has been shaped by the development of her significance in my life: from the discovery of

the connections between Deren's work and my own, to the understanding of my self-actualization through dance, and finally, to the belief in the notion of transcendence through the artistic form. In Chapter One, I will introduce the forms of modern dance and independent film through the writings of Maya Deren and of various dance artists. In the alignment of these texts and the works that they describe, I will establish a framework which discusses the theoretical ideas fundamental to both mediums. The textual alignment reveals that these arts were based upon the creator's everlasting responsibility to represent the moral consciousness of his time (Limón, "An American Accent" 24) and that artistic progression depends upon the rigorous search for new forms (Sokolow, "The Rebel" 33). As independent film and modern dance began to emerge, this persistence was fortified by the reactions of artists in both fields against commercial production and the valorization of the artistic canon. While the modern dance artists referenced in my research pointed to the expressive limitations of ballet, Deren testified to the inadequacies of Hollywood cinema. At the basis of these reactions was the critical question of form, specifically, in terms of the necessity, implicit to both dance and film, of simultaneously dealing with space and time. The concept of form gained vitality in artistic dialogue as artists began communicating its profound importance in the transference of meaning. For, as will be made evident, their common objective was "to express only what is in and of one's own experience, transformed and lifted out of the commonplace and the personal by the very process of artistic creation, of *aesthetic [sic] form*" (emphasis added, Maritn, *The Modern Dance* 30).

As Deren and a number of modern dance choreographers endeavored to express the inner experiences of the human being through aesthetic form, their resulting creations eluded the traditional arc of narrative drama. These artists did not necessarily strive to avoid the possibility of creating work that could be described in verbal terms. However, because they were engaged in the process of engendering new, imaginative realities, the experience of the art, resultantly, transcended language. Deren's description of her own work addresses the way in which the outcome of her artistic energy could not be expressed in a verbal capacity: "Well, there is no literary story. You see, I believe that cinema, being a visual medium should discover its own, visual integrity—in cinematic terms" (Deren, "Magic" 198).

As Deren's films and modern dance began infiltrating the public sphere, audience members were forced to abandon the role of passive spectator in order to confront a logic which surpassed the narrative form. What became quite clear, based upon many of the reactions made in opposition to these works, was that the pervading culture established a powerful dependence upon the verbal transmission of meaning, which oriented the notion of understanding with explanation (Deren, "New Directions" 212). In order to broaden the public reception of their art, Deren and various modern dance theorists illuminated the ways in which literary and scientific thought processes molded the prevailing notions of perception. In their writings, they asserted that in order to properly experience the art of independent cinema and modern dance, audiences would have to relinquish "the perceptual habits and attitudes" built upon the Western conceptualization of the human condition (Dell 20).

Their writings also noted the obligation of the artist to aid in this relinquishment by fully exploring the expressive potential of the medium in which he works. As stated in the essay “The Rebel and the Bourgeois,” written by modern dance artist Anna Sokolow, “The important thing is to stretch the personal vocabulary so that it does not remain static” (34). In direct communication with this statement, Deren asserted that there can be no hope for the development of a form if the artist fails to appreciate the versatility of his instrument and, consequently, never strives to expand its capabilities (“Magic” 201).

In Chapter Two, I will follow this trajectory by presenting the individual propositions made by modern dance theorists and Deren for how an exploration of the medium’s capabilities may be approached. By citing examples of the artistic and written work of these artists, I will demonstrate the prominent similarities that exist among them and illustrate the common aims of both forms. A counter examination of their divergences will reveal the specificity and the necessity of the relationship between an artist and his medium. Central to this discussion is the reciprocal bond that they have with one another, which allows the nature of the medium to inform the nature of the artist, and vice versa. The primary intent of the second chapter is to convey the idea that the art form is much more than an expressive outlet; rather, the artist cannot fully exist without it, for his medium provides both the journey towards and the discovery of his most sincere expression of life (Sokolow, “The Rebel” 30). By studying the testimonies made by Deren and artists within the field of modern dance, it may be seen that their essential beliefs about the truth of humanity could only be found, in their most complete form, through an intensive engagement with

their art. Such an understanding solidifies the notion that the artist's belief in the singular capabilities of his medium is, indeed, a belief in the self.

By examining the capacity of the imaginative form to engender new experiences through the artist's creation of new realities, I hope to express what I believe to be at the heart of my research, which is the possibility of transcendence through art. It is important to note that when I speak of transcendence in this thesis, I am not, necessarily, referencing a godly or religious experience. Rather, as the artist reveals to the viewer that which was previously unknown, a truth of human existence emerges, stripped of its materiality and experienced in its essence. The escape into truth through the artistic creation is the notion of transcendence that I am promoting. The necessity of this discussion is that the impermanent forms of dance and film acquire permanence through the transcendent experience. For, as the viewer is freed from his current reality, he enters into a realm of being and knowing that changes him indefinitely.

I believe that the cultivation of the viewer's transcendent experience demands that the artist, himself, also achieve transcendence. Essentially, the truth revealed by the artistic creation can only be communicated to the viewer if the artist embeds it so deeply within himself that it is transmitted through his being and, consequently, through the medium. By looking at the work of Deren as well as a number of choreographers and dancers, I will investigate the discipline of self-absorption that is crucial to the artist's work and its communicative power. Indeed, the artist must be completely uncompromising in his preoccupation with himself, "for he knows that only in this way can he give his fellowman the vision of humanity which nothing else

can give” (Limón, “The Universities” 26). Thus, only through an unapologetic inward focus and attention may the artist fulfill his most vital role, which is that of a giver.

In the third and final chapter, I will discuss the integration of my textual studies with my choreographic approach. As I developed the written research of this thesis, I was, simultaneously, engaged in the process of choreographing two ten-minute dances. The first piece, “Solo for Two Dancers” (Fall 2010), in which I performed, became a means through which I was able to establish a very personal relationship with Deren’s work and with Deren as an individual. In the creation of this piece, I was inspired by the idea of beginning with a close study of Deren’s entry into filmmaking, through the lens of her first two films, *Meshes of the Afternoon* and *At Land*. Specifically because Deren acted as the female protagonist in both of these films, I looked to them as powerful representations of the ways in which she was in constant confrontation with herself through her art. At the beginning of my creative work, I felt very strongly that I, too, must confront myself through an engagement with my artistic medium. The process resulted in a dance structured by the pairing of Deren’s aesthetic ideals with my own.

By the time that I began choreographing the second piece, “Chamber Dance” (Spring 2011), I had developed a much keener sense of how I could use the theoretical ideas presented by Deren and modern dance theorists to shape my own creative vision. Researching the work produced in the fields of independent cinema and modern dance in conjunction with one another provided a very strong foundation from which I could establish an awareness of my personal artistic philosophy. It has

consequently become evident to me that the written portion of my thesis and my second choreographic endeavor have been driven by the same intention: to illuminate the power of the artist in activating the potential of the artistic creation; to affect the “free and generous spirit” (Peacham 103); and to offer an open door.

CHAPTER ONE

Promoting Creative Consciousness

LOOKING BACK

“for to arrive at principles requires comparative analysis...”

(Deren, “Anagram” 37)

As Maya Deren and theorists within the field of modern dance strove to establish independent cinema and modern dance as not merely legitimate, but also necessary art forms, they set forth upon an endeavor to reveal, through both their written and artistic works, the inadequacies of the prevailing and “unquestioned premises of creative action” (Deren, “Anagram” 37). In crafting their arguments, they looked towards the nature of artistic production in “primitive” and ancient societies. Their frequent references to the merits of the artistry of such societies underlined a central belief that the aesthetic characteristics of an artistic creation must be developed in order to project meaning and to serve a vital function. The responsibility of the artist, therefore, was to refrain from squandering his efforts with frivolous matters and, rather, apply them to that which would most effectively bring the “functional activities into proper relationship” (qtd. in Martin, *The Modern Dance* 38). Only in this way may the art transcend the realm of ornamentation and become a living and essential force.

In Deren’s promotion of this belief she spoke with a profound reverence for the artistic works of primitive cultures which were able to “comprehend and realize a whole system of ideas within their forms (Deren, “Anagram” 52). She insisted that

no matter the degree of complexity of the idea, their art never bordered on the extravagant. On the contrary, in its refinement, it carried the incredible force of its meaning and destiny. To achieve such ends, the creator's engagement with the artistic medium was not directed by personal, decorative, or casual aims, but by a deep understanding of his creation's potential for super-natural power (52). Deren cited the shield as exemplary in this regard. For, while the shield was originally designed as a material and magical form of protection, in modern times, the determination of its value became its aesthetic quality, its beauty. Such a comparison yields powerful evidence that the primitive artist's creation was a coalescence of all functions: mythological, physical, and aesthetic (52).

Similarly, in his book *The Modern Dance*, John Martin, America's first major dance critic, utilized I.K. Pond's description of Greek architecture to valorize the artistic approach of ancient cultures. Speaking of the Greek artist, Pond wrote: "When he encountered that which was pregnant with the possibilities of ugliness, he opposed a resistance which seemed inevitably to express itself in a line of beauty, a line which imparted a feeling of serenity and poise and emotional restraint that was an inspiration to the beholder" (qtd. 38). Thus, it was the artist's effort to create a structure that could meet the obstacle at hand which resulted in the creation's ultimate beauty. Not, as it were, the demands of luxury or the desires for decadence (38).

Martin and Deren did not only intend to laud the craftsmanship of these societies, they, additionally, sought to advocate the ways in which art was conceived of as a means of confronting and better understanding nature's mysteries. As Deren described in her chapbook, "An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film," the artist

of a primitive society could not exist in isolation. Because the role bestowed upon him was to relay the tenets of the “highest moral, political and practical authorities—both human and divine,” he must be deeply informed (50) and aware of his surrounding conditions. Moreover, as he created garments, masks, chants, and dances for his community, he achieved equal placement in both the temporal and the spiritual worlds, for his duty was to give real forms super-natural powers (50-51). By considering these ideas and appreciating the fact that the realm of knowledge in primitive societies consisted primarily of mythical knowledge, it may be understood that the art was “an art of knowledge” (51).

Accordingly, man depended upon art to cope with the world that he inhabited and the infiniteness of its unknown. This conflict with nature’s uncertainties determined the form of his artistic creation. Primitive man’s two-dimensional creations and those shaped by similar conventions of abstraction and simplification, therefore, were not the result of his inability to create and perceive three-dimensionally. Rather, as T.E. Hulme theorized, when man was faced with the threatening and uncontrollable mysteries of nature, his endeavor to establish order and logic was made, indirectly, through his art. Conversely, when man’s relationship with nature was agreeable and assured, he would find satisfaction in merely repeating its more “sympathetic forms” (51).

In *The Modern Dance*, Martin asserted this very same argument, yet narrowed its scope to primitive man’s artistic use of the body. His claim was that early man had no need to marvel at the simple elements of life which could be apprehended by his limited reason. If he did choose to reflect upon such things, he would have been

able to communicate his thoughts rationally through verbal expression. However, when man was confronted with the aspects of his existence that greatly moved him—those which “transcended reason” and elicited both his fear and his worship—he could not rationalize about them, for his grasp of language was incapable of expressing feelings that fell outside the range of his comprehension. And so, for this reason, he danced (9). Most importantly, his dance expressed a feeling which was not unique to his singular human experience, but one that was shared by all of his companions. Consequently, when one man began dancing, those around him could easily follow his intention, and if they so desired, they, too could dance. Despite this rapport, it would have been impossible for these individuals to provide a verbal explanation for why the man moved the way he did or to describe the meaning of his dance (9). Nevertheless, because these dances were so essential to the development of man’s relationship with nature, they became embedded in cultural tradition over time and developed into rituals which, as Martin contended, hold the “record of man’s discovery of nature” (9-10).

The notion of ritual was of profound importance to Deren and greatly informed her artistic ideologies, not only because of her deep fascination and personal engagement with Haitian Voudoun culture, but also because she believed that the origination of all art forms was in ritual practice (Deren, “Anagram” 57). Thus, Deren’s analysis of the ritualistic art form, simultaneously, functions as a testament to her conviction that a re-integration of its ideals into artistic practice would tremendously enrich contemporary art. In corroboration of Martin’s description of the primitive dance and expanding upon it, Deren affirmed, “the ritualistic form is not

the expression of the individual nature of the artist; it is the result of the application of his individual talent to the moral problems which have been the concern of man's relationship with deity, and the evidence of that privileged communication" (58). Such an understanding led to Deren's repeated declaration that the goal of the artist must be selfless, so that the resulting creation is the depersonalized art object whose primary aesthetic function is to serve its ethical function. The intent is to produce a form that engenders an enlivened understanding of one's current social conditions (Jackson 49-50). A denial of this responsibility would be the ritualistic artist's illumination of a reality that, even with the aid of divine all-knowing and all-seeing powers, man could never know (Deren, "Anagram" 58).

What this discussion has arrived at is a critical study of Deren's and Martin's parallel demands that art should, necessarily, function with a keen regard to the conscience of its time. Ironically, both Deren and Martin, who were absolutely pivotal to the artistic development of independent cinema and modern dance, looked towards the artistry of primitive cultures in order to advance the notion that the progression of modern culture depended upon art and that art should, accordingly, answer the calls of man. With the dawn of the twentieth century, civilization began exploring vast regions of unfamiliar thought which could not be reduced to rational terms (Martin, *The Modern Dance* 10). In the face of these "grasped but intangible emotional and mental experiences" (10) people were in need of artistic forms which presented new logics and new methods of reasoning. Exceedingly capable of meeting this summoning were the rapidly developing forms of modern dance and independent film.

COMING TO TERMS WITH TIME

“From the source of power must emanate also the morals and the mercies. And so, ready or not, willing or not, we must come to comprehend, with full responsibility, the world which we have now created.”

(Deren, “Anagram” 109)

Of primary influence on the nature of the work produced in the fields of modern dance and independent film during the twentieth century was the central doctrine, of both forms, that the responsibility of the artist is to demonstrate an acute perceptiveness of his contemporary social conditions and to, subsequently, interpret those conditions through the application of his artistry (Jackson 55). As expressed by modern dance artist Anna Sokolow, an artistic viewpoint that is irresponsive to the life surrounding it will not only be limited by the past, but will hinder forward progression (“The Rebel” 33). To forgo the impact of the stimuli of the contemporary era would be a gross negation of the fact that the citizen of the new age handled moral and metaphysical ideas much differently than that of the nineteenth century (34).

Maya Deren made extensive use of this concept in her efforts to promote the great importance of independent cinema in the modern era. She argued that the predominant development of the twentieth century which most radically transformed human perception was Einstein’s theory of relativity. In order for society to sufficiently account for such change, she declared, “There is not an object which does not require relocation in terms of this new frame of reference, and not least among these is the individual” (“Cinema as an Art Form” 30). To Deren’s mind, the effects

of this theory were so dramatic that there should be no question of its integration into the creative practice. She asserted that the singular capabilities of cinema distinguished it as the art form which could most adeptly express the range of relativity's influence upon humanity.

In her essay entitled "Cinema as an Art Form," Deren referred to the developments of the airplane and the radio as concomitant with the theory of relativity, in that they contributed to the creation of a "relativistic reality of time and space" (30). Deren meant that these inventions were responsible for the emergence of a new dimension into the human reality; a dimension not defined by an added spatial location, but by an altered relationship of time and space which, thereby, concerned all other dimensions. The overwhelming significance of this dimension to human thought was that it caused the once distinct spatial notions of "*here* and *there*" to become, in essence, identical (30). Additionally, the temporal principles of past, present, and future could no longer be regarded as independent concepts. The very "acceleration of historical processes" required that the present moment be treated as an extension of the past advancing into the future (30-31).

Existing in the world of these establishments, the individual was compelled to make a new order of his existence. The absolutisms which once defined the framework of his life and directed his conscience had been nullified. His survival depended upon the relocation of an integrity that was both "constant enough to constitute an identity, and adjustable enough to relate to an apparently anarchic universe" whose fundamental actions operated in accordance with an unknown

system of logic (31) and with a “paradoxically intangible reality” (Deren, “Cinematography” 127).

It was Deren’s belief that the contemporaneousness of these circumstances with the invention of the motion-picture camera was not accidental, specifically because the camera was the instrument that led to the development of the time-space art form of cinema. As the airplane had done in transportation, “the radio in communication, the theory of relativity in physics, and as the growing awareness of relativisms [had done] in geography, sociology, ethics, etc.,” cinema, too, could manipulate temporal and spatial relationships (“Cinema as an Independent Art Form” 246). It was for this reason that Deren looked to the cinematic art form as that which was uniquely appropriate to the current period of cultural development. Consequently, an engagement in the expansion of the art form through an exploration of filmic intelligence was essential (246). In fact, to refrain from an exploration of the cinematic medium and to reject the implications of the camera’s simultaneous emergence with the radio, the airplane, and the theory of relativity, would be indicative of more than a failure to comprehend the extent of such an occurrence’s contribution to civilization; it would signify a failure to realize the relationship of “human ideology to material development” (“Cinema as an Art Form” 30).

John Martin referenced the synchronicity of these developments to solidify his belief that changes in the frame of human perception must, inevitably, lead to change in the external universe’s visible forms. Therefore, as a creator of visible forms, the artist must understand the consequence of his work and, accordingly, endeavor to realize its fundamental purpose: “the increase of accurate vision” (*The Modern Dance*

80). What Martin sought to imply was that the artist must recognize the extent of his influence and his crucial position in the course of human progress. José Limón gave similar credence to this necessity in his essay “An American Accent,” and spoke specifically of its application to modern dance: “...if by ‘modern dance’ one means a state of mind, a cognizance of the necessity of the art of the dance to come to terms with our time, then that art cannot be relegated to the position of a merely transitory influence” (20).

While it is important to acknowledge that the objective of the declarations made by various modern dance theorists and Maya Deren was to promote the validity of their creative mediums, they also spoke to what these individuals believed art was responsible for communicating and how that communication was currently lacking in the established artistic forms. Thus, an analysis of what these theorists considered to be the shortcomings of society’s prevalent artistic ideologies provides a comprehensive look at what they believed to be the true province of creative production.

IN DEFENSE OF HUMAN INTELLIGENCE

“We are not representational; we are imaginative.”

(Sokolow, “The Rebel” 34)

In their attempts to foster both a wider appreciation and a greater understanding of their creative fields, Maya Deren and modern dance theorists began applying the accepted aesthetic theories of the current era to the artistic mediums in which they worked. By taking these theories into consideration and analyzing the

nature of their relationship to the new forms of modern dance and independent film, the written and artistic work that these theorists produced demonstrated a reexamination and a reevaluation of the principles which had become the undisputed basis of creative praxis (Deren, "Anagram" 36-37). At the heart of this reevaluation was a sincere dissatisfaction with the quality of representation which had become a prevalent feature of the major artistic idioms. The premise of this dissatisfaction was that any art object which had been created to replicate, exactly, either nature or a feeling, an experience, a symbol, etc., was, in fact, displaying a dishonest relationship of man to the conditions of life. For, as clarified by Deren, "...art is not intended as a document of natural reality. Art is an artificial construct, created by man's intelligence as a comment upon the meaning and values of reality" ("Of Critics" 238). Deren's greatest fear of representation lay, perhaps, in her belief that at the height of an artistic exaltation of nature, "the ecstasies of surrealism" would emerge. To Deren's mind, the proliferation of surrealist art would result in a sure eradication of the functions of man's intelligence ("Anagram" 39), for there existed no artistic form as horrifyingly devoted to the tumultuous compulsions of the unconscious (Jackson 54).

To fortify her belief that "art must at least comprehend the large facts of its culture, and, at best extend them imaginatively" ("Anagram" 53), Deren turned, again, to the example of the ritualistic art form. She posited that the art of ritual practice endeavored to elucidate the human condition by abstracting an idea from actuality and integrating it into an imaginatively created experience, whose emergent logic was relevant to all time and place because it did not reference any specific

temporal or spatial location (58). To Deren's mind, the very idea of representation had no place in artistic practice because it failed to make use of the powers of human creativity. Deren's admiration for the ritualistic artist's use of the imagination, undoubtedly, directed her conceptualization of the basic principles of artistic creation. Evidence of this notion may be found in her statement concerning the defining characteristics of art:

Art is the dynamic result of the relationship of three elements: the reality to which a man has access—directly and through the researches of all other men; the crucible of his own imagination and intellect; and the art instrument by which he realizes, through skillful exercise and control, his imaginative manipulations. To limit, deliberately or through neglect, any of these functions, is to limit the potential of the work of art itself. (54)

As will be revealed, this was the tenet that Deren strove to uphold throughout the course of her artistic life.

John Martin, similarly, aspired to encourage the artistic requisite of imaginative manipulation and fortified his efforts by turning to a definition of "idealism" found in Webster's Dictionary. Martin specifically emphasized the dictionary's definition of idealism as a literary and artistic theory which,

...affirms the pre-eminent value of imagination as compared with faithful copying of nature;--opposed to realism. In critical discussion idealism is generally thought of as laying stress on imagination as the

shaping or selective faculty by which the confusion and the multiplicity of detail in nature and human life is ordered by the artist according to a preconceived type, or moral or æsthetic [*sic*] ideal. (qtd. in *The Modern Dance* 45)

Thus, when utilized in artistic practice, idealism calls for the manipulation of reality in the interest of illuminating the ideal or of advancing its essence. Martin expands upon this definition to indicate that idealization is a deviation from the facts of nature and may, consequently, be understood as a mode of “distortion” (45); a term which occupied a prominent role in Martin’s advocacy of the values of modern dance. In his writing, he explains that the distortion of movements in modern dance serves as a departure from “representationalism” in order to amplify their function and impact. In its best sense, dance abstracts movement so that it may constitute the essence of experience and, thereby, stimulate the viewer’s memory (*America Dancing* 114).

As far as Martin was concerned, an artistic creation should communicate the artist’s intention in terms of the viewer’s “easily awakened memory of [an] experience” (*The Modern Dance* 70). To achieve these ends, the artist must organize the elements of his intention so that the creation is suggestive of the viewer’s experience of reality, but not, as it were, naturalistically representative (70-71); so that it is “at once knowable and untranslatable” (La Rocco, “New Ideas”). Martin considered naturalism to be inadmissible in art because it would act as a significant hindrance to the artist’s power of communication. He believed that the detriment of naturalism to the artist’s purpose was twofold. If the artist replicates the details of reality so that they are identical to his subjective experience, it becomes exceedingly

difficult for the viewer to personally identify himself with what he sees. However, if the details happen to be acutely similar to the viewer's own experience, his memory will operate at a quicker pace than the artistic creation and his attention will be lost¹ (72-73).

Deren's own artistic ideologies were also shaped by her strong faith in the effectiveness of distorting reality for the purpose of arriving at its essence. In describing the inadequacies of certain psychological novels, she signaled the contradiction of this basic principle as the source of the novels' failure. The task of the author, and by implication the artist, is to make "a certain conclusion inevitable to the reader" ("Anagram" 73). If the author imparts a statement of his own conclusion in the text, there is nothing left for the reader to understand and he is, consequently, deprived of the "stimulating privilege" that is enlightenment (73).

Deren made extended use of this idea and of the artistic manipulation of reality in her attestation that "the distilled, experimental emotion of an incident is more universal than the incident itself" ("Cinema as an Art Form 23). What's more, she claimed that if it had been ubiquitously accepted that the natural condition should, merely, be exalted and extended—as had been among the romantics and the realists—

¹ Of course, Martin is speaking of an artistic ideal; an ideal which modern dance artists may, too, fail to achieve, perhaps, to an even greater extent than the artists of the other, more representational, forms that he bemoans. Such a notion was recently indicated by the *New York Times* dance critic Claudia La Rocco in her review of a new premiere by modern dance choreographer Doug Varone, as she wrote, "‘Chapters From a Broken Novel’ keeps going and going, leaving no room for audience members to exercise their intellects or their imaginations. We are meant to be passive, and we are. The result is a very long evening, with stilted entertainment standing in for art."

science, philosophy, and art would fail to exist. Because man had never found fulfillment in the practice of simply comprehending the forces of reality, whose existence may continue independently and without regard to his analysis, he ventured into the practice of violating natural integrity (“Anagram” 51). The emergence of philosophy, science, and art was the very result of man’s devotion to the task of interfering with nature, so that he may deconstruct the untouched whole, free the essential element from its natural context, and “manipulate it in the creation of a new contextual whole” (51).

A particular genre of cinema that Deren believed, tragically, submitted to the realist ideal was that of documentary film. She abhorred the fact that it was commonly regarded as the ultimate achievement of cinema, for she felt that such a congratulatory tendency, unjustly, placed the documentary in the category of art. Her distress in this matter was amplified by the fact that the documentaries which were most highly esteemed were those that drew upon qualities of artistic forms, such as lyricism and drama. To her mind, this signified a lapse in the films’ maintenance of the fundamental documentary function, which was the “objective, impartial rendition of an otherwise obscure and remote reality” (79). If such praise were to continue, the documentary filmmaker would be compelled to abandon the province of his genre and concede to the principles of the artistic form, which seeks to create an idea by sacrificing the factual content upon which the idea was originally formed, and “*involves a conscious manipulation of its material from an intensely motivated point of view*” (79).

However, Deren argued, the creative limitations of the documentary technique would never allow for its effective integration into the realm of art, primarily because the documentary filmmaker was unable to make use of the artist's indispensable tools: a full employment of emotional freedom and an exploration of the instrument's functional range. The documentary film's theoretical discouragement of the subjective was a forcible deterrent to the filmmaker's proper discovery of his personal fascination with the subject matter, consequently resulting in the cessation of his inspired engagement with the work. Additionally, the conventional techniques of the documentary were modeled after the methods of scientific film, which dictate that filming must occur "on the scene," despite all external circumstances that may negatively disrupt the filmmaker's use of the camera. As such, it is possible that the filmmaker would be forced to base his work on the "accessible, rather than the significant fact" (80-81). Deren offered her consideration of these limitations in order to justify her belief that as the documentary filmmaker attempted to garner the public's enthusiasm for his work, he involved himself in the task of satisfying two separate and incompatible ideological demands. As a result, the product of his efforts would fail to sufficiently satisfy either one or the other (81).

In notable comparison to Deren's definition of art, Martin wrote, "The modern dance is not a system; it is a point of view" (*The Modern Dance* 20), thereby, advancing his belief that the obligation of the modern dance artist was to maintain a conscious engagement with the form by refraining from representation. Likewise, Martin's discussion of the expressive restrictions of classical dance follows a framework close to that of Deren's discourse on documentary film. For, he, too,

examined the inability of a form to utilize the breadth of human emotion or to explore the medium's potential. Martin was adamant in his belief that any individual who endeavored to express a dramatic idea or personal experience within the confines of a codified technique would find it utterly impossible. As he described, the balletic form, which established a set vocabulary of movement to be perfectly executed by the dancer, was completely dismissive of the "natural tendencies of the body" or of any sincere relation to human experience (4). Martin viewed the prospect of conveying an emotional experience while standing with the feet in the balletic fifth position and moving the arms "in arbitrary arcs" as utterly preposterous (17). To his mind, ballet employed a system of stereotyped movements which were only capable of expressing stereotyped concepts of emotion. As the ballerina ventured to expand the range of the technique's expressive potential by moving from an inner compulsion to reveal a personal quality, the classical perfection would be lost and her movement would simply become "bad dancing" (17). Thus, such an undertaking would be a failure in two regards: the emotional integrity would be impaired in order to adhere to an "arbitrary code" and the maintenance of this code would be disrupted by the efforts to portray an emotional truth (17-18). By functioning, primarily, in the interest of design, classical ballet sacrificed the artistic potential of conveying an authentic reality of the human condition and, in consequence, of having any profound impact on the viewer.

Acknowledgment of ballet's emphasis on visual appeal and its ensuing relinquishment of the artist who communicates from an inner motivation can still be found in artistic discourse. In an interview given on National Public Radio's *Fresh*

Air in December of 2010, Jennifer Homans, a former ballerina and the author of *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet*, was asked by Terry Gross about the state of ballet in the contemporary era. In her response, Homans expressed, "The new work, it seems to me, to be very, very overwhelmed with steps, with a kind of athleticism and bravura that doesn't move people, particularly" ("The Tutu's Tale"). The way in which modern dance artists strove to move people could not surrender to the calls of technical theatricality. They were determined to reveal the true nature of man, which not only consisted of purity and light, but also of terror, hostility, envy. The entire range of the human condition merited a place in artistic creation because even in the depths of despair it was possible to find beauty, for there was truth, and those depths "made man's achievement of love more difficult, more significant, more—miraculous" (Cohen, Introduction 7).

Thus, as Deren opposed the conventions and representational qualities of documentary films, modern dance artists were, correspondingly, engaged in a resistance to the dictates established by the dance forms that fell within the artistic canon. As indicated by Martin, the canonical form that the originators of modern dance reacted to most directly was ballet. In ballet's frequent presentation of works based upon literary narratives, in its fixation upon the dancer's perfect execution of an existent, codified technique, in its employment of spectacle, and in its notion of the ideal body, the practitioners of modern dance found the creative and expressive deficiencies of a form, which, to their understanding, was centered around representation. Martha Graham testified to this conviction as she stated,

I do not want to be a tree, a flower, or a wave. In a dancer's body, we as audience must see ourselves; not the imitated behavior of everyday actions, not the phenomena of nature, not exotic creatures from another planet, but something of the miracle that is a human being, motivated, disciplined, concentrated. (qtd. in Cohen, Introduction 6)

In *Movable Pillars: Organizing Dance, 1956-1978*, Katja Kolcio mentioned the similar aims of modern dance choreographers Merce Cunningham and Alwin Nikolais who sought to “trouble the notion of a positivist reality that representational choreography implied” (32).

As expressed by dance historian Selma Jeanne Cohen, a central cause of modern dance's opposition to ballet was that modern dance sought to employ the “unaccepted symbol” and rouse awareness, while the balletic form deliberately used conventional symbols to depict a standardized ideology (Introduction 13-14). Deren recognized a similar reliance upon accepted symbols, or what she termed “a visual shorthand of clichés,” in Hollywood cinema (“Anagram” 90). She felt that upon viewing a certain gesture or facial expression in a Hollywood film, the viewer's ‘understanding’ of its meaning or his emotional identification with the action would not be brought about by the visual integrity of the symbol, but by the verbal complex that it represented. Hence, the emotional impact of the image was the result of the viewer's relationship to the literary term from which it was derived, not of any sincere relationship to the experience of an actual visual reality (91). Deren proposed that Hollywood's continual application of superficial mannerisms to comply with a literary form, as opposed to the creation of meaning through the conscious

development of a visual experience would, inevitably, result in its perpetual failure to produce work of any lasting or emotional significance (91-92). She declared that the only means of preventing the proliferation of uninspiring and superficial cinema would be the general recognition that the impressions, for example, of 'love' made by commercial films had, in fact, nothing to do with the profound experience that love is known to be, and to which true artists had tirelessly labored to give proper form (85).

In the eyes of Deren and many modern dance artists, the current tragedy of art resided not only in the propensity for representation, but also in the common belief that art was essentially an outlet for self-expression. In rejection of this notion, Deren elucidated the idea that because society had grown so accustomed to understanding a work of art as the artist's 'expression,' it had become almost inconceivable to imagine that it might serve any other purpose. To disrupt the current pattern of belief and reorient society towards a recognition of the fact that the artist's intention is to create beyond the scope of his personal and spontaneous compulsions, Deren insisted that man reflect upon his cultural history. In the recall of this memory, he would behold "a process of indistinct figures wearing the masks of Africa, or the Orient, the hoods of the chorus, or the innocence of the child-virgin...the faces always concealed or veiled by stylization—moving in formal patterns of ritual and destiny" ("Anagram" 55). He would, thereby, understand that from its very origination, art was meant to serve a greater function than to appease the narcissistic desires of its creator.

Martin was also adamant in his disdain for the contemporary artist's proclivity to be self-expressive. He avowed that while the artist should be concerned with expressing what is true to his experience of life, he should never avail the immensely

different practice of self-expression, which could only result in mere exhibitionism or emotional corruption. The truly fine artist, Martin affirmed, was imbued with the understanding that he, more than anything else, was an instrument for the expression of a reality which would otherwise be inappreciable. And the more transparently he presented himself, the more clearly his image of truth would be projected (*The Modern Dance* 30-31).

Yvonne Rainer, a modern dancer and choreographer who began making work in the 1960s, directed her artistry towards finding ways of transcending the narcissism that is embedded in human nature and of coming to terms with her own exhibitionist tendencies. In speaking of self-expression, Rainer explained, “People go into dancing and performing for this very reason. It has to do with the immediate confrontation with the adoring gaze of the spectator and living in the moment” (qtd. in Hecht 21). In order to minimize the seductive prospect of dancing as an exhibitionist, Rainer imbued her choreography with the principles of minimal art, which valued unity, wholeness, and sparseness over decoration and extravagant displays of virtuosity. The result of this minimalist influence was the creation of dances fundamentally concerned with gesture and task, or task-like activity. By focusing her movement upon the completion of a task, Rainer was able to engender “a more concrete, autonomous looking life on stage that was not constantly projected out at the audience” (Rainer qtd. in Hecht 21). It was in this way that she found it possible to forgo the self-reflexive presentation of her skills and, instead, reveal an honest and thorough involvement with the form (21).

As I bring this section to a close, it is my profound belief that the criticisms made by Maya Deren and various modern dance theorists about representational, surrealist, and self-expressionist art were not intended to promote the superiority of their creative forms over any other. Rather, they strove to inspire creative action that would illuminate the profundity of the human condition and the ever-evolving nature of humankind. In the articulation of her personal philosophy regarding this matter, modern dance artist Pauline Koner wrote,

While we look at some kinds of dancing for the sheer display of pyrotechnics, we watch others in order to have a deep, emotional experience. Neither should eliminate the other. The complete human being needs both. We like to see a decorative ballet, and if getting up on the toes helps the decoration, makes the girl look more ethereal, and gives the body and the leg a more beautiful line, and it seems incredible to perform—that's fine. On the other hand, I don't see the need to use that technique for saying something pertinent to today.

(83)

Upon encountering the theoretical writings of artists like Koner and Deren, what I have found most significant are not their critiques, but their yearnings for the re-discovery of the human imagination and a call for creative consciousness. In the minds of these theorists, a thoughtful and motivated engagement with artistic practice would serve as the most powerful antidote to the prevailing “atrophy of consciousness” (Michelson 29). Deren feared that if the present debauchery of man's intelligence continued among artists, they would all be at great risk of succumbing to

the debased lowlifes who were currently running Hollywood. Her terror of such a possibility echoed in a rather degrading description she gave to the *Village Voice* in August of 1960:

That the vast majority of individuals who make up the Hollywood industry are not involved in a deliberate criminal conspiracy to corrupt artistic standards but are, at worst, a colony of unbelievably primitive cultural heathens who, so help me, do not know artistic right from wrong, and that a major strength of the industry lies in the genuine and innocent integrity with which these individuals consistently and logically act upon the ideological premises which they sincerely believe to be both good and true. (242)

To evade the destructive potentialities of such a fate, Deren stressed, would require a dutiful acknowledgement of the fact that the human mind and human consciousness were the most glorious of nature's triumphs ("Anagram" 42). Arising from eons of evolutionary processes, infinite mutations, and severe eliminations, the mind was the artist's most powerful instrument, for only through the application of his intelligence would man arrive at the creation of new and vital forms.

THE CRITICAL FUNCTION OF FORM

“L’idée n’existe qu’en vertu de sa forme².”
-Gustave Flaubert

An emphasis upon form gained the utmost importance within the fields of independent cinema and modern dance as the creative minds of both idioms began acknowledging that the aesthetic value of form was its power of expression. Maya Deren and modern dance artists made it their fervent belief that form would serve the most integral role in distinguishing independent cinema and modern dance as artistic fields which possessed distinct and fundamental capabilities. Now that they had indicated the deficiencies of the established artistic idioms, their endeavors to amend such shortcomings necessitated the abandonment of all that had come before and the emergence of unexplored realms of creation (Martin, *The Modern Dance* 6). For these artists, the only way in which new realms could be discovered was through the development of new artistic forms. However, when these artists advocated for this development, they did not mean to imply that one new form would suffice for the entire field, but, instead, that each film and each dance must be conceived by a new principle which created its own form (33).

In *The Modern Dance*, John Martin posed the hypothetical question, “Why of form?” in order to provide the specific rationale behind its expressive power. He

² An idea exists by virtue of its form (qtd. in Deren, “Anagram” 65).

indicated that without form³, the artistic creation would undoubtedly fail to inspire the viewer's aesthetic response, because it is through form that the artist takes the elements of actuality and manipulates them, so that they may constitute a new experience (68-69). Thus, the formal function of casting "the imaginative experience into reality" is that which identifies art as a distinct human activity and mode of expression (Deren, "Cinema as an Art Form" 25). As described by Deren, in order for form to arrive at this function it must be defined by two imperative qualities: "first, that it incorporates, in itself, the philosophy and emotions which relate to the experience which is being projected; and second, that it derives from the instrument by which that projection is accomplished" (25). What Deren seeks to clarify is that the experience the work produces and its emotional weight are not only dependent upon the subject matter, but perhaps more importantly, upon the artist's use of the creative instrument, which in cinema, comprises both the camera and the film editing ("Magic" 200). In order to properly comprehend that content is brought into reality through an engagement with the creative instrument, the artist must acknowledge the indisputable fact that a poem and a painting about love are not differentiated because of their thematic material, but because they are formed by different instruments. As such, art cannot be created by the artist alone; its production necessitates the collaboration of the artist with his instrument (Deren, "New Directions" 212-213).

As she spoke directly about her own films, Deren often used the term "classicism," to highlight their restraint, their clarity of expression, and their

³ According to Martin, dance's chief elements of form are accent, repetition, and contrast (*The Modern Dance* 43).

commitment to form. Deren felt that classicism provided the most apt description of her work, because the term bears no reference to the elements of content,⁴ but, rather, to a concept of method; a method characterized by the conscious manipulation of elements into a form which will “transcend and so transfigure them” (“Film in the Classicist Tradition” 249-250). It was through the application of this method that Deren was able to bestow a ritual dimension upon functional motion in her films (Deren, “Art” 255).

The term “classicism” was also used by the Judson Church’s 1962 Associate Minister, Al Carmines, as he described his personal impressions of the Judson Dance Theater⁵. In speaking of their performances, he reflected, “the primary movements of living and the primary sounds of life seemed to be used in all their ‘ordinariness’ to create a powerful aesthetic experience” which conferred a nobility upon those movements and sounds (26). He went on to describe how the “simple facts of moving, standing, kneeling, crouching, lying down, listening, seeing, smelling, touching, not-touching” (26) became classicist in their quality because they were revealed through a “serene, powerful attention to the movement” (26). Specifically referencing Yvonne Rainer, Carmines expressed the way in which the clarity of her work allowed each gesture, no matter its size, to be refined to its fundamental nature. As she dismissed extraneousness, moving with a complete economy of form, she

⁴ Deren described that the elements of content are “factual, fictional, abstract or psychological” (“Film in the Classicist Tradition” 249-250).

⁵ The Judson Dance Theater was an informal group of dancers that performed at the Judson Memorial Church in New York City between 1962 and 1964. The artists that comprised the group are widely considered to be the founders of postmodern dance (“Judson Dance Theater”).

imbued her dancing with an immense feeling of presence, “with no fat—all sinew and richness” (29). To his eyes, it was evident that the technique was utilized with a respect and an acceptance of its inherent power, so that each movement could become an end to its own means (29).

At the heart of Carmines description was the idea that the artists’ commitment to form led to the revelation of essence. In a *New York Times* review of Martha Graham, Martin, similarly, lauded her ability to distill movement so that its most quintessential quality may appear before the viewer:

Miss Graham leads more and more to essences. She boils down her moods and her movements until they are devoid of all extraneous substances and are concentrated to the highest degree. She gives less and less to the full dimensions of her meanings; she indicates, she suggests, she leads you on with her. And because she is so sparing it is not difficult to follow along; there are no sidetracks and byways.
 (“The Dance”)

While Martin’s description of Graham’s work references the capabilities inherent to modern dance, it also speaks to why Deren so passionately insisted that an emphasis upon form was crucial to artistic creation. For she believed that the distinguishing characteristic of art was that it was neither an expression nor an impression of an emotion, but rather, a form which creates emotion (“Anagram” 54); an ideal which is synonymous with the belief that form is necessary for the artistic creation to arrive at essence.

A Moral Aesthetic

Embedded in the ideology that a commitment to form was of outstanding importance to artistic practice was an appreciation of the idea that the form of a creation was inhabited by its moral function. The affirmation of this concept was strongly encouraged by Deren and modern dance theorists. Specifically because they were interested in changing the generally accepted theory that the artist's task of transfiguring the natural coherency of an existent reality was, merely, a conscious avoidance of the arduous search required by the illumination of truth (Deren, "Anagram" 64). Quite alternatively, such a task placed upon the artist the responsibility of engendering a logic which was as active, unified, and credible as one that had been structured by nature itself (64). Thus, the hope was to advance the message that, "to create a form of life is, in the final analysis, much more demanding than to render one which is ready-made" (64). What Deren sought to establish with this advocacy was an understanding of the fact that the great artists of human history had always considered their moral and aesthetic problems to be one and the same (64); that the form of the creation was, in effect, the "physical manifestation of an abstract moral structure" ("Films in the Classicist Tradition" 250).

Martin's faith in the moral dimension of form shaped his opposition to those artists that deemed form unnecessary. He signaled that the rationale of such artists was their belief that the art impulse, produced from within the creator, should be allowed to emerge freely and without external tampering. According to Martin, this methodology was appropriate *if* the artist's aim was to design the effect of the

experience only for himself⁶; however, there could be no place for it in artistic practice if the artist ever hoped to reach the viewer (*The Modern Dance* 41).

Choreographer Anna Halprin also spoke along these lines, as she expressed that because the artistic creation is based upon the creator's personal experience, it will, undoubtedly, have therapeutic value for him and result in his personal growth.

Although, if the artist's intention is directed only towards how it may be therapeutically self-beneficial, he is denying the province of his role which is "to be a vehicle for other people" (14). Hence, the essential principle was that form allowed the artist to structure an idea so that it may transcend his individual psyche and appear in a relatable, but stimulating arrangement before the viewer. In a recent review of Trisha Brown's new piece "Foray Forêt," Roslyn Sulcas provides exemplary evidence of how an artist's commitment to form and to the understanding that he is responsible for fostering the viewer's revelation results in a profoundly impacting work of art: "[Her work] is unexpected, virtuosic, funny, arbitrary, subtle, detailed, poetic. It shows how movement uninflected by personal drama or emotional content can resonate with both of those by virtue of juxtaposition and association."

Time and Space

As Deren and modern dance artists began approaching the concept of form, their primary engagement with the exploration of its potential became the simultaneous manipulation of time and space. The clear necessity of this was

⁶ "According to the definition of art which we have chosen to abide by for the time being, such expressions are not to be included at all as works of art" (Martin, *The Modern Dance* 41).

determined by the fact that both dance and film are naturally built in time and space and their resultant patterns require a structure formed by such dimensions (Martin, *The Modern Dance* 52-56). Deren cited her own work as she suggested that one artistic method of manipulation could be the super-natural extension of a leap into the air by filming it at three different angles in three different shots and, subsequently, editing them together. In the sustainment of the action beyond its natural duration, the movement would instill a feeling of tension as the viewer agonizingly awaited the dancer's return to the earth ("Cinematography" 124). The critical importance of time manifested itself in Yvonne Rainer's dancing through her sense of phrasing. Her very approach to time led to a re-conceptualization of the way in which energy may be distributed throughout the body in the execution of a movement. As she imparted a sense of "unhurried control" upon each gesture, she preserved its factual quality, rather than submitting it to imitation (Hecht 22). In the words of Rainer herself, "...the demands made on the body's actual energy resources appear to be commensurate with the task...getting up from the floor, raising the arm, tilting the pelvis, etc," (qtd. in Hecht 22). A considerate and directed use of timing, consequently, resulted in Rainer's realization of her artistic intention, which was to purify movement, so that it may be transmitted on a human scale.

Another way in which Deren and modern dance artists utilized the distortion of time and space was to create a relationship between separate entities, such as distant places, distant times, or distant bodies. To elucidate this concept Deren frequently referred to her cinematic technique of organizing the film so that a shot of an individual beginning a movement in one setting was immediately followed by his

completion of that movement in another distant location. This approach was, thereby, capable of not only relating seemingly separate places, but also of fusing them into a continuous entity; a result which allowed the entire world to become the dancer's stage, as in Deren's *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (126). She also encouraged the method of filming various people as they performed identical gestures or movements, yet within different spatial and temporal locations. By carefully compiling such shots, the artist could successfully preserve the continuity of the movement in such a way that "the action itself [might become] the dominant dynamic which unifies all separateness" (125-126). In a 2008 review, Alastair Macaulay also described the ability of movement to join separate entities through the artist's manipulation of time and space, as demonstrated by the work of Merce Cunningham. He defined the brilliancy of Cunningham's composition as his capacity to give meaning to space, for as the dancers moved in solitude through the expanse of the Dia:Beacon museum, the room was enlivened by the distance that formed between them. Evidence of the communicative power of this application of form is offered by Macaulay's admiration for Cunningham's ability "to show a male-female scene as two solitudes; to make us wonder whether this man and woman are addressing each other or are conducting twin soliloquies; to show us how even in moments of intimate contact one or both partners may also be eluding the other. Or to astonish us by showing us two people, who seem to have been entirely unaware of each other, suddenly coming together as coolly and undramatically [*sic*] as a long-term married couple."

Based upon these accounts, it is possible to discern that dance and film make their statements of meaning in terms of movement in time and space. Thus, the emphasis of these mediums is not upon a single instant, but rather, upon the occurrence of change between instants (Deren, “Adventures” 177). Deren used the term “metamorphosis” to describe the constant transformation of one moment into the next through the movement of cinematic frames (“Creating” 132). As such, the viewer’s experience of the work is determined by the way in which things are continuously changing, as opposed to the way things are at a moment in time (Deren, “New Directions” 214). It is possible to apply the term “metamorphic” to dance with equal authority as one considers that a dance is the physical unfolding of movement through the relationship of bodies existing in time and space⁷. Indeed, for both the filmmaker and the choreographer, the creative concern must be geared towards how a sense of becoming is made manifest through the work, as it is this sense that touches the human spirit and answers to the calls of human yearning.

The Emergent Whole

Perhaps, most important to the discussions of form advanced by Deren and modern dance theorists was the idea that the form of the artistic creation brought its various elements into relation with one another so that they may constitute a whole which was more profound than their sum total. Deren harkened back to man’s early

⁷ Implicit to this unfolding is the fact that when bodies occupy time and cover space, they are driven by a motivation, which requires the exertion of energy (Martin, *The Modern Dance* 52). As the dancer exerts energy, he moves with a varying sense of force, weight, and momentum. The coexistence of these dynamic elements, paired with the three-dimensionality of the dancer’s figure, allow “his movements [to] have not only length and breadth but depth and thickness as well” (53).

yearnings of violating the natural integrity in order to elucidate his subsequent dream of creating a whole “whose character [was] far more mysterious and miraculous” than the existent relationships produced by natural phenomena (“Anagram” 46-47). To corroborate this theory, she referenced the Greek drama, which employed the elements of its content in such a way as to extract them from any recognizable context. The work was, thereby, capable of establishing the value of its elements upon the integrated whole that they comprised. The intertwining of elements produced an entity that had previously been unknown to human perception. As this whole entered into one’s purview, it was capable of revealing, in detail, an idea or emotion essential to humanity that would, otherwise, be overwhelmed by the superabundance of reality (64-65). Deren referred to such an occurrence as the “emergent whole⁸,” for she believed that the idea established by a work of art was dependent upon the function of its total relationships (65). She also believed that the use of form towards the development of the “emergent whole” was the only way in which the artistic creation, like the Greek drama, could successfully overcome the incessant profusions of reality and arrive at the illumination of essence:

The lavish fecundity of nature, without which it could not survive all material disasters, gives way, in art, to a concept of economy. Out of the wealth of remembered experience, the elements are selected with discrimination, according to their compatibility with the other elements of the intended whole. (65)

⁸ Deren indicated that she borrowed this term from Gestalt psychology (“Anagram” 65).

Martin gave expression to the notion of the emergent whole in his definition of form as the unification of various elements, which collectively produce an aesthetic vitality that may only be achieved by their association (*The Modern Dance* 35). Because Martin believed that the resultant whole of an artistic creation was greater than the sum of its parts, he, too, advocated for the attainment of form through the development of the “emergent whole;” however, as opposed to Deren, he used the term “composition” to describe the unifying process (35). Anna Sokolow, correspondingly, declared that, for a choreographer, the mere idea of a dance was not enough; his creation must materialize through the application of both form and concept, or as she described them, “what you feel and how you express it” (“The Rebel and the Bourgeois” 33). According to Sokolow’s depiction, the compositional process is set into motion when the choreographer spontaneously envisions an idea in terms of movement. Because it is spurred by impulse, the choreographer’s visualization of movement is not intellectually manufactured, but evoked by emotional imagery. The intellect is, then, employed by the compositional effort so that the spontaneously imagined movement may be placed into a form which exists as a whole (33). Thus, in modern dance ideology, the dance cannot be defined by a connection of postures, but rather, by the interlacing relationships which connect those postures (Martin, *The Modern Dance* 31).

As such, the very act of unweaving the component elements of the artistic creation would result in a “qualitative distortion” (Jackson 62) of the artist’s intention, because once the parts are integrated into the whole, they can only be

understood by their functional roles within that new entity. In her essay “Cinema as an Art Form,” Deren elaborates upon this idea with the following description,

...validity is no longer a function of the object itself. It has become instead, a function of the position of that object in the constellation of which it is a part. The concept of absolute, intrinsic values, whose stability must be maintained, gives way to the concept of relationships which ceaselessly are created, dissolved and recreated and which bestow value upon the part according to its functional relation to the whole. (31)

In the application of this theory to the art of cinema, the individual images of a film cannot be regarded as the bearers of meaning, but rather, as elemental components utilized to serve a function within the greater whole. Indeed, it is the film editing which brings the images into relationship with one another by establishing a sequence, a sequence from which the images derive their significance. The individuals who act in a film must also be considered components of a greater entity whose entire meaning and impact are derived from their position within that complete structure (Deren, “Planning” 160). As Alwin Nikolais described the role of the performers in modern dance, he arrived at a conclusion which was fundamentally identical to that proposed by Deren:

The new dance figure is significant more in its instrumental sensitivity and capacity to speak directly in terms of motion, shape, time, and space. It is the poetry of these elements, speaking directly out of

themselves and their interrelationships rather than through a dominant character. The character may be present, but if it is, it is in equilibrium with the aggregate of all the elements in operation. (“No Man From Mars” 64)

In light of these theorizations, it is evident that the objective of both the dancer and the actor in an artistic work must abandon all inclinations of self-discovery. The intent was to serve a larger purpose, to transcend the matters of psychological drama, and to help engender the emergence of a reality much more universal and profound.

As Maya Deren and modern dance theorists tirelessly promoted a commitment to form and advanced their beliefs in its capacity to establish meaning, they were, simultaneously, encouraging a realm of knowledge that was not established by verbal logic. In order for independent cinema and modern dance to exist as compelling artistic mediums, they would have to relinquish all subservience to literary and scientific thought processes and find faith in the new integrity of the emergent whole.

ABANDONING VERBAL LOGIC

“One of the most exciting freedoms of the new art is freedom from the literal and peripheral self of man. The artist need no longer channel his subject through a finite scene, nor need he distort, enlarge, reduce, or eliminate part of it to release its inner content. What is more, he is free of the subject-vehicle demanded by fixation and reference to the literal scene.”

(Nikolais, “No Man From Mars” 63-64)

In the efforts to foster an innovative expansion of their creative fields, Maya Deren and modern dance theorists analyzed the effects of the pervading scientific and

literary-based methods of attaining knowledge. Their specific purpose in addressing this prevalence was to signal its role in perpetuating the general notion that understanding relied upon explanation. Indeed, the application of a literary or scientific logic to the artistic idioms of cinema and modern dance would be a gross misinterpretation of their communicative nature. Meaning is conveyed in independent cinema through visual terms and in modern dance through kinesthetic terms, which, inevitably, necessitate visual and kinesthetic logics. Additionally, it was believed by Deren and modern dance artists that an endeavor to conform the inner experiences of the human being to a verbal context would result in a creation of drastic misconceptions, because the process of transcription could never suffice in placing that which is, by nature, nonverbal into a verbal form. John Martin even went as far to assert that if the possibility arose of translating an artistic medium into words, that medium could no longer exist as an art form because it had ceased to maintain the distinction of art as a unique means of expression. His ardent belief in this idea led him to indicate the irrelevance of the question, “What does it mean?” frequently posed by the “layman” in reference to modern dance. Martin declared that the only apt way for a choreographer to respond to such a question was by stating that, if it were feasible to voice the meaning of his work, there would be no need for it to be danced (*The Modern Dance* 11). In similar fashion, Deren felt that if the artist had gone through the extensive labors of conveying an idea through a particular medium, he must have the utmost belief in that form’s singular capacity to communicate an idea with greater proficiency than any other form (“New Directions”

218). Thus, an attempt to transcribe an artistic creation to another idiom could only result in an ineffectual manifestation of a misinterpreted idea.

Deren looked towards the common practice of converting visual forms to the unfit parameters of a verbal structure and the corollary of cinema's stilted development as the results of the "emphatic literacy" of the current era ("Cinema as an Art Form" 27). She believed that because society had become so attuned to basing reason upon the continuity-logic of literature that the cinematic art form had yielded to the dominating influence of descriptive narrative, as opposed to devising its own form of reason (27). Alternatively, Deren strove to discover a filmic logic, according to the terms of cinema and determined by an emphasis upon visual form. She suspected that the cultural predominance of verbalism had convinced people that the inability to adequately articulate an experience or coherently give words to a feeling indicated a misunderstanding of that particular experience or emotion. To counter this generalized assumption, Deren referenced the way in which it is often impossible to explain one's response to a painting or sculpture, yet that does not imply that the work has been misunderstood. Speaking from her own experience, Deren stated, "...in reference to visual forms and music, with people who imagine that they did not understand and ask questions; if you press them a bit and they dig out a little inarticulately, you find they have understood it but not expressed it totally" ("New Directions" 212). Martin applied a corresponding idea to the context of dance when he mentioned that just as the common man may be unable to express why he is so affected by the sight of a contortionist, another individual might experience the same difficulties in communicating the immensely profound impact of a modern dance.

Thus, the truth that Martin hoped to convey was that the effect of an experience is, in no way, determined by an absolute comprehension of its meaning (*The Modern Dance* 12-13).

Perhaps, that which most forcibly drove Deren to oppose the artistic practice of submitting to verbal logic was her belief that such compliance hindered the artist's ability to create a truly cinematic form by exploring the capacities of the film medium. To Deren's mind, the failure of cinematic creation within a verbal structure arose from the fact that the strengths of film and the strengths of literature were very different. She clarified that the unique characteristic of literature was its ability to navigate through the interior emotions and ideas of a character in order to examine his unseen reflections, hidden conflicts, and private monologues. Conversely, the visual arts, such as film, had the power to deal, exclusively, with visible states of being or action. Thus, if the filmmaker endeavored to give cinematic form to a character whose nature had been determined by the development of his interior emotions and ideas, the artist would find that there existed no way in which to express *visibly* the character's invisible feelings. In confronting the difficulty of conveying feeling through the sequential structuring of images, Deren believed that filmmakers too frequently resorted to the use of what she referred to as "symptom-action clichés," or superficial enactments of complex, inner emotions, such as fear and love ("Anagram" 90). To challenge this discouraging trend, Deren referenced the moment when she, herself, appreciated the importance of establishing a commitment to visual detail. Her moment of realization occurred when she understood that film relies entirely

upon the visual image to impart meaning and progression, rather than upon an underlying plot (“Magic” 204). In her essay “Magic is New,” Deren writes,

I came to understand the difference between contriving an image to illustrate a verbal idea and starting with an image which contains within itself such a complex of ideas that hundreds of words would be required to describe it. This is the central problem of thinking in cinematic terms, for our tendency is to think in verbal terms. One writes: ‘She felt frightened and alone.’ But the impact of this statement lies in the word-idea of “fright” and “alone” and the image contrived to express that would always be less satisfactory than the verbal statement. (204-205)

Therefore, to convey the character’s experience of a feeling such as loneliness, the filmmaker must create a *sense* of loneliness in visual terms. One manner of doing so would be to show a diminutive figure set against a vast, vacant horizon and, then, to time the shot so that the character’s isolation is allowed to extend infinitely (“Planning” 159). Deren’s primary aim in elucidating such techniques was to underline the notion that the abundant potentialities of cinema had been tragically disregarded. In her own efforts to break all ties with a verbal structure and discover the singular capabilities of cinema, Deren had found film’s capacity to relate two separate geographies through the continuous unity of a movement that began in one location and ended in another; to simultaneously portray events that were distanced by time; and to reveal the dynamic intricacy of the most casual incident with slow motion and the anguish of its analysis (“Cinema as an Art Form” 32). Of course, the

power of these filmic discoveries was that no verbal description could convey their visual impact.

Just as Deren believed that the meaning of a film was established by the sequence of visual images, Martin asserted that the central idea of the modern dance was relayed through the embodied execution of a series of movements. Thus, in the context of dance, choreographers withdrew themselves from any sense of obligation to a verbal form by directing their focus towards the development of movement. In *The Modern Dance*, Martin explained his rationale through the notion of “kinesthetic sympathy” (*The Modern Dance* 12). To Martin’s understanding, when dancing consisted of representational movement, the viewer would have no trouble in following its meaning because he, himself, would recall the memory of performing those actions or would be able to envision himself doing them. At the exact instant that the movement entered into the viewer’s perception, his “sympathetic muscular memory” would allow the performed action to be associated with its purpose (11-12). When confronted with the non-representational movement of modern dance, Martin believed that the viewer would still experience a response of personal and physical identification. As the dancer’s impulse expressed itself through the performed sequence of movements, the viewer’s kinesthetic sympathy would be stimulated and evoke within him a resonating effect. *Movement*, then, was responsible for forming the bond between the dancer’s intention and the viewer’s perception of that intention (12).

In an interview with Alwin Nikolais, Roger Copeland shed light upon the various interpretations of kinesthesia that modern dance choreographers integrated

into their creative practice. Because Nikolais' work was often accused of being "dehumanized," in the sociological sense, which implied "alienation and anomie" (41), his interview with Copeland provided exemplary evidence of quite the opposite conclusion. As Copeland spoke of Nikolais' work, he utilized the *aesthetic* definition of "dehumanization" established by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset in *The Dehumanization of Art*. His definition argued that the term referred to a method of "exploring those realms of the imagination which are in fact 'more than human' rather than less...thereby transcending any mimetic concern with human beings in a particular social context, especially verbal contexts in which the visual imagination is circumscribed by language" (41). Copeland demonstrated the application of this theory to Nikolais' work as he specifically referenced dances, such as "Noumenon," which created worlds that existed outside the reaches of common sense (43). Nikolais confirmed Copeland's remarks by referring to his artistic objective of straying from the verbal form. In fact, as he spoke of his latest work, Nikolais stressed that the primary aim was to elude the conveyance of emotion through narrative story telling, and rather, to deal with emotion as a form of action, translating emotion into motion (43).

As such, the modern dance choreographer, like Deren, hoped to abandon the use of the "symptom-action cliché" and to utilize his medium so that it may reach an undeveloped realm of human perception. Implicit to these artists' work was the desire to change the patterns of receptivity that had become culturally pervasive and to unearth new ways of seeing and experiencing. As Al Carmines reflected upon the influence of the Judson Dance Theater among the members of his congregation, he

not only expressed the crux of what Deren and modern dance artists hoped to achieve, but he, simultaneously, indicated its possibility:

The Judson Dance Theatre [*sic*] gave us an experience where our verbal facility was left stumbling—where our penchant to conceptualize about meanings and philosophies was muted. It was good for us. It opened again for us the springs of revelation muddied by rational, verbal comforts. It took us in many ways beyond our depth, both religiously and aesthetically... (30)

ALTERING THE RECEPTIVE PATTERN

“Think of any noted dignitary you can and then imagine him playing with his toes. That approximates the difficulty of being receptive to the avant-garde.”

(Dell 21)

As the artistic works of Maya Deren and modern dance choreographers began infiltrating the public sphere, it became immediately evident that the “acquired patterns of perception and interpretation” frequently elicited expressions of distaste from viewers and, in many cases, prevented people from even seeing independent films or modern dance (Deren and McPherson, Preface 11). Thus, while these artists advocated for the recognition of their creative mediums as distinct and vital forms, they, concomitantly, directed their labors towards a change in the way that society approached the experience of art. Referring again to the twentieth century inventions of the radio, the airplane, and the motion-picture camera, Deren proclaimed that the simultaneous development of these instruments must not be regarded as mere

coincidence, but as irrefutable proof that man had achieved a new way of thought and a new way of life, “in which an appreciation of time, movement, energy, and dynamics [was] more immediately meaningful than the familiar concept of matter as a static solid anchored to a stable cosmos” (“Cinematography” 127). The very survival of independent cinema and modern dance, which were built upon this new conception of life, necessitated that society uproot its generalized idea of what the art experience should be, or better yet, of what it *could* be.

From John Martin’s point of view, the misapprehension of creative works produced in the fields of modern dance and independent film stemmed from a conservative application of the basic essentials of art, such as form, rhythm, and beauty. He believed that the aesthetic sensibilities of the general public had been slighted by a narrow receptivity towards anything that attempted to defy the supposedly natural laws established by positivist ideals. The repercussions of these ill-conceived aesthetic principles led society to expect that the work of art should either present an “intellectual rationalism in literary allusions” or superficially indulge a sensual desire. However, as Martin proclaimed, neither requisite had “anything to do with the functions of art” (*The Modern Dance* 36). Nevertheless, the resounding influence of the Westernized notion of humanity shaped the development of a rigid system of perceptual habits and attitudes that inhibited the public’s receptivity to new art forms (Dell 20). Thus, as Deren and modern dance artists pushed the boundaries of what it meant to be human, they did much more than provoke the public’s indifferent responses; they roused their hostility, which bore evidence to the fact that these artists were not only changing the artistic practice, they were reaching far into

the depths of consciousness (20), and demanding that humankind begin an extensive reevaluation of its thinking (21).

In *The Modern Dance*, Martin asserted that conforming one's reception of art to the dictates of the intellect was an incredible error. Based upon his theorization, the intellect was not meant to receive that which fell outside the realms of rational statement, because such territories necessitated irrational modes of perception. Correspondingly, while science may be comprehended through quantitative analysis and intellectual activity, art required a completely alternative means of cognition. Martin believed that proper artistic reception must be channeled entirely through the senses, for the senses were the passageways through which man established contact with his world (37). If the viewer began employing his intellect to how he perceived an artistic creation, the interpretative powers of his senses would be curbed by expectation and assumption, thereby, bastardizing his contact with that which was before him. To elucidate this argument, Martin referenced the poetry of William Blake, who wrote, "We are led to believe a lie, / When we see with, not through, the eye" (qtd. 37). By citing this passage, Martin strove to undermine the tendency of perceiving "beauty, art, rhythm, [and] form" with the receptive instruments of the eye and the ear. In place of this tendency, he hoped to instill the idea that the true function of the eye and the ear was to *channel* beauty, art, rhythm, and form, so that they may be transmitted to the viewer's perception (37). It is possible to recognize Martin's application of this theory in his review of Martha Graham, as he stated,

She does the unforgivable thing for a dancer to do—she makes you think; yet it is a thinking of a peculiar character, for it is less of the

brain than of some organ absent from anatomical charts that reacts to aesthetic stimuli. She leaves you upheaved [*sic*] and disquieted and furnishes afterthoughts not calculated to soothe such a condition (Martin, "The Dance: One Artist").

According to Martin, the intellect's interference with the senses' receptive powers was at the heart of each misunderstanding and condemnation generated against art. To his mind, there could be no greater means of ensuring the proper appreciation of art and its consequent development, than through the upheaval of the established receptive practice (37).

Deren also believed in the necessity of a general reconfiguration of society's accepted habits of perception. Similar to Martin, she advocated for the integration of a "purer" approach to the artistic experience, so that the creation may be properly received. Just as Martin asserted that the intellect blocked the human capacity to receive an experience in its essence, Deren pointed to the tumultuous effects of the human ego, which develops with age and imparts biases upon the way in which one views the world. To Deren's understanding, when a child looked outward, the world before him passed through eyes which were completely clear, truly perceiving the space and time that he inhabited. However, soon enough, the child would mature into an individual who constantly sought justification for a personal history whose growth was simultaneous with his own. As the result of this process, the clarity of vision that he once had would be marred; the window that before was his to look through would thicken until, at last, it became a mirror, revealing nothing but himself, the indefinite affirmation of his being ("New Directions" 211). Deren expressed that the tragedy of

this occurrence was that it marked the end of the individual's ability to learn, for he could see only himself and he knew it. In order to diminish the effects of this destructive inevitability, Deren suggested the following:

For any human being it is important to try to keep as many holes in that mirror as possible. This is necessary in works of art because the experience of art is essentially an autocratic one; a work of art demands the temporary surrender of any personal system. The person who surrenders then possesses new experience. That is growth. It is the growth of traveling into another mind and knowing it. This requires the surrender of history, an innocence of past...(211)

The ideal, therefore, was to restrain one's personal preferences and determinations from weakening the value of an experience that was qualitatively different than those which were naturally aligned with the individual's pre-dispositions ("Cinema as an Art Form" 28). Deren proposed that the only way in which this restraint could be achieved was by returning to the clarity of vision characteristic of childhood, by assuming an attitude, which she referred to as "innocent receptivity" (23). Thus, it was Deren's belief that the audiences which were not able to appreciate the realities created by the new, experimental art forms, was not caused by their ignorance nor their analytical abilities, but rather, by a deficiency of this receptive quality. In fact, as testified by Deren, the general unwillingness to yield one's own reality to the dominance of another, stemmed from the influence of a prevailing social condition; a condition "for which the artist [was] not responsible" (24). To the average social being, the act of submitting the authority of his "self-righteous convictions" to the

creative reality of the artistic form could, in effect, dismount the certainties upon which society was built, and to this possibility, he was “instinctively, and traditionally opposed” (24).

Deren’s central concern in promoting society’s adjustment to the interpretative practice of innocent receptivity was to prevent the “dismemberment” of the artistic creation. Deren felt that stripping the integrated elements of the artist’s work—the emergent whole—would not only induce the viewer’s obstructed aesthetic experience, it would, consequently, hinder the conveyance of the artist’s intention (Jackson 63). In “An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film,” Deren explained that because the components of contemporary art were derived from reality, the common trend among audience members was to approach the work as if it were one of nature’s randomly occurring phenomena. Deren believed that there existed two ways in which this detrimental assumption manifested itself among viewers. She felt that in certain instances, it would lead the viewer to extract the artistic elements which he found most poignant and to formulate his understanding of them based upon their personal resonance within his own lived experience (66). The error of imparting one’s individualism upon the artistic creation in such a way was that it signified an utter disregard for the artist’s intentional design of a specific context, which was responsible for bestowing meaning upon the elements within it.

The other manifestation of approaching the art object as if it were a construct of nature arose from the influence of scientific analysis. According to Deren, scientific practice promulgated the notion that, typically, things were not what they seemed to be and that appearances must be deconstructed in order to arrive at their true

meaning. To exemplify the application of this theory, Deren illustrated the common method of examining the natural phenomenon of the shell. In order to understand the structure of the shell, the animal, and the process of its creation, one must, essentially, deny the beauty of its structure and look beyond the quality of its appearance (“New Directions” 208-209). However, in the visual arts, the image always possesses the greatest depth of meaning, even greater than any symbol that one might draw from it (210). As such, the significance of the work of art depends upon its aspect and any attempt to penetrate it would simply dissemble its intended essence (“New Directions” 208-2). Thus, as Deren concluded, if a legitimate reason for the artist’s deliberate positioning of one thing in place of another did not exist, the viewer should have no reservations about believing that the thing which was seen or read was exactly that which the artist intended (209).

From Deren’s perspective, the most horrifying result of these misguided approaches to the art experience was, perhaps, the ensuing remark, often intended as a compliment, “Oh, you mean everyone can think what they want?” (210). Whether the viewer imparts his individualism upon art or studies it with a scientific mode of dissection, he is overlooking the fact that the work is an intended creation. The labors of the artist are devoted to confining the necessary elements and bringing them into relationship with one another, so that the viewer cannot take the artistic product and dismantle it as he pleases (210-211). To use the words of Deren herself,

A work of art is an emotional and intellectual complex whose logic is its whole form. Just as the separate actions of a man in love will be misunderstood, or even thought “insane,” from the logic of non-love,

so the parts of a work of art lose their true meaning when removed from their context and evaluated by some alien logical system. And just as an analysis of the reasons for love may follow upon the experience, but do not explain or induce it, so a dissectional [*sic*] analysis of a work of art fails, in the act of dismemberment, to comprehend the very interactive dynamics which give it life. Such an analysis cannot substitute, and may even inhibit, the experience itself, which only an unprejudiced receptivity, free of personal requirements and preconceptions, can invite. (“Anagram” 66-67)

As made evident by this passage, the emergence of film and modern dance did not only place the burden upon the artists to discover the aesthetic principles of these new creative mediums; audiences were made equally responsible for developing receptive attitudes that were shaped according to the terms of cinema and modern dance, completely uninfluenced by the critical standards traditionally applied to older art forms (95).

While artists like Maya Deren and those within the field of modern dance struggled to establish the creative potential of their artistic mediums, they were, simultaneously, involved in promoting change and encouraging society to reevaluate the interpretative strategies which it had attached itself to for centuries. Through the creation of artistic works, they hoped to unearth the potential of man and open the doors of perception. Humankind depended upon the creative form to confront the changing face of the world that it inhabited. In order for society to recognize the futility of its stagnant receptive patterns, artists would have to believe, absolutely, in

the singularity of their artistic mediums and, thereby, approach the exploration of their range with the utmost motivation.

CHAPTER TWO

Expanding the Vocabulary

THE SINGULARITY OF THE MEDIUM

"But precisely because film, like language, serves a wide variety of needs, the triumphs which it achieves in one capacity must not be permitted to obscure its failures in another."

(Deren, "Anagram" 78)

Despite the incredible contribution made by the written establishment of the aesthetic principles of their artistic forms, Maya Deren and modern dance artists understood that this was not enough. In order for independent cinema and modern dance to truly enter into artistic discourse as creative mediums uniquely pertinent to the ever-evolving human condition, working artists would have to engage in a comprehensive exploration of their medium's potential. More than anything, this would require the artist's unshakable belief in the singular capabilities of his creative form and its distinct capacity to speak to the conscience of his time. Thus, as Deren and modern dance artists aspired to communicate the theoretical foundations of their artistic fields, they hoped that their discussions would encourage artists to apply the written concepts to their own creative praxis, and, thereby, expand them.

With regard to cinema, Deren felt that one of the greatest hindrances to the creative expansion of the form was caused by the general ineptitude among filmmakers to take advantage of its vastly unexplored regions of possibility. In her essay entitled "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality," Deren posited her

observation that cinema's abundance of potentialities overwhelmed the film artist into a state of confusion, causing him to disregard the great majority of the medium's capabilities and to structure his films upon the mere use of just one or two of them (113). In an attempt to counter this trend, Deren asserted that if an artist has determined that the boundaries of a form's expressive capacity are delineated by a few basic techniques, then, his mastery over them should not merit a feeling of satisfaction. Alternatively, the artist should courageously confront the form's profusion of possibilities and direct his labors towards resolving its overwhelming plenitude into clarity and economy (113). In both her written and filmic endeavors, Deren was driven by the objective of drawing an awareness to the "creative elements which [were] unique to the motion-picture camera," so that the instrument may cease to be thought of as simply a recording device and, rather, allow the artist to stray from the imitation of forms devised by other mediums ("Creating" 137). She hoped to enliven the cinematic technique and promote the forgotten understanding that the filmmaker did not have to restrict himself to capturing reality as it occurred, but could, instead, experiment with the exciting possibility of translating the "magic of thoughts and dreams to film" (137).

Deren believed that when it came to broadening the medium's potential beyond the methods of conventional idioms, the creative freedom which stemmed from engaging in a new artistic form was the filmmaker's greatest asset. She encouraged the film artist to find inspiration in both his autonomy from the demands of commercial production and in his resultant ability to abstain from relinquishing the visual integrity of his work ("Amateur" 17). As he created artistic patterns that

occurred equally in time and space, the filmmaker, like the photographer, could dedicate himself “to capturing the poetry and beauty of places and events” (17). Yet, because the filmmaker worked with the *motion*-picture camera, he had the added power of discovering the world through the splendor of movement: “instead of trying to invent a plot that moves, [he could] use the movement of wind, or water, children, people elevators, balls, etc., as a poem might celebrate these” (17-18). To Deren’s understanding, film’s aptitude for recording nature, reality, and even other art forms, led to a great deficiency of creative energy invested in the origination of the form specific to film; that is, of producing an artistic work which could only come into existence by means of the artist’s collaboration with the film medium (“Adventures” 164-165). Thus, as Deren promoted the exploration of the cinematic art form, her intention was to stimulate an exploration of the creative possibilities possessed by no other medium (166).

As he wrote the essay “Pure Poetry,” modern dancer and choreographer Erick Hawkins also strove to foster a creative commitment to the development of his medium through the recognition of its unique expressive capacity. In fact, he argued that the premise upon which modern dance was built was shaped by this very aim. It was his belief that modern dance was defined by two primary goals, both which necessitated the efforts of creative exploration within the form. The first objective was to “develop a larger and more comprehensive technique” that could train the body to fulfill the evolving conceptualization of movement in the contemporary era (43). The second was to use this incredibly trained “instrument,” so that the art form may begin reaching the untouched realms of human intelligence (43). Absolutely

counterproductive to this endeavor would be the unification of modern dance's achievements into a codified technique—as had been done with ballet—and the subsequent formation of a company whose main objective was, simply, to perform the established repertoire of modern dance (45). From Hawkins' perspective, "to jeopardize the glorious, unparalleled vitality in the diversity of modern dance choreography" by the pursuit of such a consolidation would signify a complete denial of the form's "glorious reason for coming into existence in the first place" (45). He, in particular, felt that if modern dance artists retracted from the charge of constantly changing and broadening the expressive capacity of the human being through movement, their art form would fall apart.

Thus, of critical importance to both the artist's belief in the singular capabilities of his medium and to his resultant exploration of those capabilities was the implementation of an entirely new approach to the creative process which did not mimic that of any other form. Just as Hawkins discouraged the modern dance artist from falling into the conventional patterns structured by ballet, Deren hoped to direct filmmakers away from the techniques utilized by the still photographer. While a few technical elements, such as proper exposure, as well as the use of the lens and sensitive film, were common to both forms, Deren's writing dissuaded the filmmaker from believing that his art was nothing more than an extension of the still photograph ("Creating" 131). Deren asserted that because the imaginative method of still photography was so divergent to that of the motion picture, the employment of

photographic routines to cinematic production could be incredibly detrimental to film⁹.

As Renata Jackson wrote about Deren's film theory, she mentioned that because Deren so strongly advocated the notion of medium-specificity, her written work fell under the classification of modernist film theory. When Jackson used the term medium-specificity, she meant that Deren's text displayed a strong dedication to the dual belief that "art forms differentiated from one another by virtue of their distinctive formal or structural capabilities and that there is a direct connection between these structural characteristics and each art form's 'proper' expressive realm" (47). Upon examining the published works of theorists within the field of modern dance, it becomes evident that they also fostered the development of their art form by drawing attention to its unique capabilities. According to John Martin, the singular power of modern dance was its absolute commitment to the discovery of movement, "the most elementary experience of human life" (*The Modern Dance* 7-8). To clarify this notion, Martin explained that movement was not only made essential to human survival by allowing the pulse to travel throughout the body, but it was also the first natural means through which the human expressed his emotional and mental experiences. This latter function was that which concerned the modern dancer and

⁹ Because this research has been guided by my engagement with the comparative analysis of independent cinema and modern dance, I feel that it is particularly important to emphasize, or, to indicate the significance of Deren's statement that the most beneficial study for the filmmaker was in the art forms which were concerned with time and movement, and she felt that dance was specifically exemplary in this regard (131).

strengthened his art form because it meant that by communicating through the body, he was involved in the direct conveyance of human thought and feeling (8). As such, modern dance artists, like Deren, perpetually immersed themselves in the quest for the totality of their medium's dynamics and expressive potentials, so that they could reach their primary goal of creating the most accurate metaphor for the intended meaning (Deren, "Art" 255).

Above all things, Deren and modern dance theorists strove to instill a profound respect among artists for their individual creative fields, which would impel both their humility and their ambitions towards the expansion of the artistic medium. From Deren's perspective, the absence of these essential attributes in the artistic practice would result in "nothing less than a profanity in a profoundly moral sense" ("Anagram" 86). Because Deren and modern dance artists so fervently believed in the gravity of their creative pursuits, they felt that each engagement with the artistic medium must be crafted as a vital exploration, necessary to human progression. The widespread cognizance of this fact would foster a greater awareness of their work's standing at the forefront of growth and development. In her writing, Deren declared that filmmakers held in their hands "the point of departure for an exciting adventure," and no matter their level of pursuit, there could be no question of its reward if they approached it as an exploration ("Adventures" 165). Hawkins made a similar claim in reference to modern dance as he wrote, "We are lucky to be modern dancers. We have ahead of us one of the most exciting paths given to human beings in their eternally challenging excitement of being alive. All we have to do is take it" (45). Thus, the key to unearthing the specific capabilities of the artistic form was the

conviction that searching for them was one of the most valiant undertakings of the modern age. Indeed, as the artist embarked upon this adventure, his greatest tool would be his creative instrument.

DISCOVERY AND CREATION

“The failure of film has been a failure of omission—a neglect of the many more miraculous potentials of the art instrument.”

(Deren, “Anagram” 96)

Central to the belief in the necessity of the creative expansion of independent cinema and modern dance was the common understanding that the contributive potential of the art instrument had been disastrously devalued and must, instead, be conceived of as a powerfully active force. As Maya Deren and modern dance artists conducted their own medium-specific explorations, they were compelled by their conviction that a genuine collaboration with the instrument was the only way in which to discover and create new artistic forms. When Deren spoke of the instrument of film, she referred to both the camera and the film editing. Alternatively, modern dance artists considered their instrument to be the dancer, in combination with the nature of his interactions with others (“The Grand Union” 31). Despite these differences, the aim of artists in both mediums was the coalescence of their “subjective and moral intelligence” with the unique character of the instrument (Deren and McPherson, Preface 10). The artist made this his goal because the synthesis of his creative powers with those of the instrument engendered an experience, which was inseparable from its means and, consequently, unique to reality (Deren, “Cinematography” 128).

As Maya Deren and John Martin wrote about the singularity of their creative mediums, they not only emphasized the special qualities of the artistic instrument specific to each form, but additionally, commented upon how those qualities should be approached. In a promotional flyer entitled “Films in the Classicist Tradition” Deren indicated that, perhaps, the most unique attribute of the camera was that it automatically stood between the artist and reality. Because of this orientation and because of the motion-picture camera’s functional abilities, the cinematic instrument, unlike that of any other art form, could “render real objects and persons in their own terms, directly” (249). It was this direct rendering which allowed the film artist to impart a new experience upon reality. For, the intent of his work was not only to use the camera to capture images of natural life, but also, to employ the film instrument in the transformation of those images through the manipulation of time, space, and movement. Most importantly, this transformation created a vessel that allowed the viewer to share in the knowledge of something new to the world: “an aesthetic object whose spatial and temporal dimensions could exist only in filmic representation” (Jackson 55).

In *The Modern Dance*, Martin indicated that the specificity of the dance instrument was determined by the fact that the artist was charged with the necessity of perpetually involving himself in the development of its technique. To clarify this notion, Martin explained that even if the violinist needed to beg, borrow, or steal to obtain a violin, the instrument that became his would arrive as a completely developed entity that, most likely, was manufactured by someone other than himself. Because the medium of dance was the body, the artist was responsible for taking the

“raw materials” of his physical structure, which were more or less like those of everyone else, and honing them so that the body could become an instrument capable of producing the substance of dance (88). Martin deemed the technical training of the dancer’s body as absolutely essential to choreographic composition because without it, the artist would confront the impossibility of accurately conveying meaning through movement. Expressed in his own terms, Martin wrote, “A dancer may have a magnificent concept of significant form, may know fine movement when he sees it, and may have vital things to express; but if he has no muscular control, no strength, no elasticity, no breath, he is absolutely helpless. You cannot play on an instrument which you have not got” (88).

Although Deren and Martin spoke of distinct artistic instruments, their notions about how those instruments should be utilized were essentially identical. In both mediums, the artist must do more than perpetually reuse the uninspired functions of the instrument that existed independently of his creative imagination. If the filmmaker did not dedicate himself to investigating the complexities of the motion-picture camera and film editing, his art would merely project the images of a known reality, as opposed to illuminating that which was unknown. Similarly, if the dancer did not transcend the boundaries of pedestrian movement, modern dance would limit itself to the continuous rearrangement of trite movement patterns that failed to expose the communicative dimensions of human physicality. In her efforts to prevent the predominance of these stagnating habits, Deren declared that the process of artistic creation was comprised of two necessary elements. The first was the artist’s individual experience of reality and the second was his corollary manipulation of that

experience into an “art reality” (“Anagram” 68). Based upon this theorization, the artist, himself, would become an instrument of discovery and the tool that he utilized in his artistic practice would become an instrument of invention (68). As a witness to the development of contemporary art, Deren perceived a general attitude that glorified the artist’s role as an instrument of discovery. The result was a dismissal of the value of the art instrument and its subsequent transformation into a tool used merely to convey the artist’s discoveries. “In other words, the emphasis [was] upon reality as it exists, obvious or obscured, simple or complex” (68), not upon the revelation of unexplored truths.

To illustrate this idea in relation to the actual functional characteristics of the motion-picture camera, Deren spoke specifically of its motor. Because the motor made the camera equally capable of recording nature and of configuring its recordings into images that would otherwise be unknown to human existence, it became an instrument of both discovery and of invention. To defend this claim, she asserted that if the lens of the camera were thought of as a microscope and/or telescope which revealed the composition of matter, then the motor may be regarded as that which revealed the composition of movement, or what she referred to as “the projection of matter in time” (“Adeventures” 178). The moment of discovery would occur as the human eye was confronted with this projection and observed the nature of movement in all of its intelligence and integrity. In the fulfillment of its function as an instrument of creation, the motor also allowed the camera to record in slow motion, which would make visible the “hitherto unseen sequence of the million separate strains and efforts which compound” movement (179). To describe the

powerful capacity of slow motion, Deren compared it to the way in which magnification could transform a smooth surface into a rugged landscape. Similarly, slow-motion film allowed the viewer to apprehend the various “hesitations, hostilities and hopes” intrinsic to that which normally appeared to be the most casual of conversations (178-179). In her own filmic work, Deren believed that this understanding of slow motion defined her exploration of the more profound dimensions of meaning which resided beneath the surface of action (179).

Perhaps, the most reliable means of assuring the artist’s belief in the seemingly infinite number of potentialities of his creative instrument was through the understanding that the instrument was not a passive entity, but rather, an active and contributing artistic force. Deren encouraged film artists to reconsider the nature of the film instrument and to consciously develop a relationship with it that differed from those common to other artistic forms. For example, as opposed to the painter’s brush, which may be thought of as a “refined extension of the hand,” the motion-picture camera and film editing comprised an instrument whose functional capabilities were qualitatively different than those of human activity (“Cinema as an Independent Art Form” 246). The mechanical complexity of the camera gave the instrument an almost living intelligence that allowed the filmmaker to make use of its dual function of exploration and creation (“Anagram” 102). For, as has been previously determined, the film instrument was simultaneously capable of conveying the artist’s vision and of contributing a new vision of the world “created by the intelligence inherent in its own mechanism” (“Cinema as an Independent Art Form” 246). To Deren’s mind, it was this possibility of formulating an entirely new

dimension of projection that made the cinematic medium so exciting. She felt that by abandoning an element of control and conferring some of the formal decisions upon the motion-picture camera, the filmmaker would be able to truly actualize the province of his artistic form (“Cinema as an Art Form” 25-26).

Deren often referred to her films as “choreographies for the camera” because she derived so much inspiration from her exploration of the cinematic instrument’s power in crafting the art experience. Deren asserted that before the invention of film, the dancer’s movement was limited to the field, the ritual temple, or the stage, and its “physical patterns of emotions and ideas” were based upon the capacities and the limitations of the dancer’s physical structure (“Chamber Films” 251). However, the development of the cinematic art form led to the development of a new order of space and a new dimension of time whose combined forces allowed the body to perform movement that had previously been humanly impossible. Because Deren imbued her work with this awareness, her films were not the mere recordings of already existent dances, but, in fact, “dances choreographed for and performed by the camera and by human beings together” (251). For example, in *A Study in Choreography for Camera*, the acceleration of the camera allowed the dancer to pirouette at a speed unknown to the human experience. Consequently, the dynamic element of the film was not the dancer’s movement, transcending space, time and matter, but rather, the camera itself, which was the creator of his movement (“A Letter” 193).

In the art of dance, the choreographer did not work with an instrument that “almost” had a living intelligence; he worked with the human being, who, of course, was not only a live, physical entity, but equally comprised of a mind and a spirit. Just

as it would be a gross disservice to the film medium to disregard the contributive attributes of the motion-picture camera that were qualitatively different than those of the human, the choreographer would severely limit his work by ignoring each dancer's unique creative engagement with the form. Dancers should not merely be treated as physical structures whose essential purpose was to uniformly execute movement, devoid of any personal motivation. They must be allowed to bring the context of their entire lives into the dance and to imbue it with their complexity and diversity. By understanding this premise, the choreographer would draw upon the creative instrument's greatest number of potentialities. An exploration of the medium's capacity could be most fully achieved if the choreographer fostered the development of each dancer's individual embodiment of the movement vocabulary, and carried into his work those interpretations that were qualitatively different than his own. In the essay "Down With Choreography," Paul Taylor specifically described his choreography as "dances we work on together" (91), indicating the fact that the artistic creation was not his, alone, but dependent upon the individual contributions made by each dancer towards his choreographic vision. Moreover, he felt that the dancers' limitations were often as interesting, if not more so, than their capabilities (91). Taylor believed that no matter how extensive the dancer's training, the possibility of erasing the many facets of his character could never exist, and the choreographic attempt to do so would simply become a frivolous endeavor.

A dancer is involved in learning to execute a dance movement precisely in shape and time. A dancer is occupied with placement, stage spacing, the quality of a leap, the softness of a foot—whether a

movement goes out to the audience or spirals inward upon itself. These are some of the things a dancer is concerned with, but actually what we see is more than a foot or a curved back. We see an individual, and we see what that individual is. All this exact training and dance stylization cannot abstract a body into a nonentity. A person is going to be revealed. Vanity, generosity, insecurity, warmth are some traits that have a way of coming into view. This is especially true of that kind of dance that, instead of representing specific characters, features dancing itself. (91-92)

A great majority of the excitement that Taylor derived from the choreographic process was from the inescapability of the individual human presence. Dancers actively asserted their unique personalities and because those personalities were subject to change, it would be entirely unbeneficial to determine a constant and prescribed manner in which to utilize them. Unlike the painter's canvas that remained stretched once and for all, the human dancer could develop feelings of inadequacy, the physical structure of his body could change, and even the passing of his birthday could provoke a transformation of character. However, it was indispensable to understand that the dancer was equally capable of acquiring "surprising and unexpected resources" within his range (92). Consequently, an essential element of the choreographer's creative work was to discover the most effective way in which to cultivate his dancers' most dynamic qualities and, subsequently, activate their expansion (93).

The critical importance of applying oneself to the comprehensive use of the artistic instrument was that it was the only means through which modern dance and independent cinema could contribute to the “immeasurably rich territory” of movement (“Anagram” 103). By using the motion-picture camera to create a new dimension of movement and by drawing upon the profundity of the living, intelligent human to expose the breadth of physical possibility, these art forms revealed the power of creativity in animating those areas of the world not yet explored.

CREATIVE APPLICATION

“They are not about experiments. They are themselves experiments—experiments with the form of film itself.”

(Deren, “Magic” 197)

Having developed a keen sense of the distinct functional characteristics of their creative mediums, Maya Deren and modern dance artists involved themselves in artistic practices that celebrated those possibilities by experimenting with them. Each individual vision was driven by the common faith that the resiliency of the modern idioms depended upon the ambition to continuously challenge established boundaries. As they applied the specific capabilities of their creative instruments to their expressive realms, Deren and modern dance artists illustrated the incredible impact of taking creative risks and embarking upon nonconventional courses of artistic action. By believing in and acknowledging the power of experimentation, these artists were able to apply a comprehensive range of their mediums’ potentialities to their creative works. As these capabilities were made physically manifest in the forms of dance

and film, they not only encouraged the development of new ideas, but also broadened the general conceptualization of the communicative power of the art object.

In the analysis of Deren's writing about her films, it becomes evident that her approach to the cinematic medium was crafted as an exploration of form, which served as a means of investigating her aesthetic and moral curiosities. As she spoke about the creation of *A Study in Choreography for Camera*, she mentioned that it was primarily inspired by her artistic interest in liberating the camera from theatrical traditions and the conventional spatial interpretations of "here and there" ("Choreography" 221). She endeavored to create a realm of imagination through which the dancer could seamlessly move between distant places without the need to travel from one to the next. The technical establishment of this idea was achieved by, first, filming a shot of the dancer beginning to lower his leg in a forest. This was followed by a close-up shot of the dancer completing the gesture in the interior space of an apartment. By editing these two shots together, it appeared as if the dancer stepped, without pause, from the forest into the apartment. The intent was to make the entire world the dancer's stage, engendering new relationships between the self and space (221). As such, the film did not merely exhibit the movement of a solo dancer, but became a duet between the dancer and the space, "which was [also] made to dance by means of the camera and cutting" ("Ritual" 225).

After using the camera to create movement that could surpass the spatial limitations of geography, in the creation of *Meditation on Violence*, Deren strove to transform the camera into a tool that, like the mind, could reflect inwardly upon the idea of movement. Instead of the action taking place anywhere and everywhere, it

occurred nowhere or, “as it were, in the very center of space” (“Chamber” 252). Within this realm, the eye was capable of exploring, at its leisure, the vastness of space and the infiniteness of its possibilities and perspectives. As it obtained this capability, the eye became a center of meditation, continuously reconsidering and reimagining space, just as the mind was able to do with images and ideas (252).

In my research of the notions of embodiment explored by the modern dance artists Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey, I have come to believe that their differing physical conceptions of the body’s relationship to space mirror the two areas of investigation that Deren journeyed through in *A Study in Choreography for Camera* and *Meditation on Violence*. Martha Graham approached movement through the act of breath, which may be considered the beginning of life itself (Cohen, Introduction 8). Flowing throughout the body, the breath’s natural tendencies were used as a means of directing the dancer’s movement, specifically in their effect upon the shape of the torso that contracted and expanded as the body inhaled and exhaled. The dynamic range of possibilities offered by the contraction was, then, expanded, so that the gesture may become the impulse that sent the body into a turn, a fall, or any other necessary motion. This “primitive use of energy,” which presented an entirely new way of initiating dance movement, allowed the performer to simultaneously access a dramatic and natural means of portraying man’s inner conflicts (8).

In contrast to Graham’s choreographic approach, which revealed man’s fears, miseries, and ecstasies by turning to movement generated from within the body, Doris Humphrey viewed the body in relation to space and was “concerned with the conflict of man with his environment” (8). As *A Study in Choreography for Camera* ventured

to emancipate the dancer from the spatial restrictions of the stage, Humphrey conceptualized movement as the human attempt to resist the pulls of gravity, which she deemed symbolic of the forces that jeopardize human stability and security. As such, the dual quality defining Humphrey's choreography was not contraction and expansion, but rather, fall and recovery (8).

Alwin Nikolais was also inspired by the prospect of challenging the laws of nature through the creative practice and imbued his choreographic work with his belief that "freedom from the domination of the concrete is a logical manifestation of our times" (Nikolais 63). His prevailing interest was the attempt to free man from all social and physical boundaries, so that he may transcend the repressive contexts of human existence. He structured his path to meet these ends by objectifying the human figure. As he repeatedly obscured the body with props and costumes, the human form became an entity that was no longer differentiated from his environment. The blending of the dancers and the set was, thereby, intended to represent the oneness of man and nature (Dell 21). In Cecily Dell's interpretation of Nikolais' work, she described that the impact of this objectivity was exactly the opposite of what many feared to be a threat of dehumanization. The unification of man with his environment did not evoke the sense that the performers became less human, but rather, illuminated "the uniqueness added to nature by humanity" (21).

By experimenting with the various functional capabilities of their mediums, Deren and modern dance artists were able to experiment with the laws established by human existence. Their curiosities and intrigues directed the shape of their creative paths and revealed the diversity of possibility in the artistic approach. Because the

act of creation became a means of reaching into the untouched realms of humanity and of illuminating its darkened corners, the artist depended upon it to unearth the answers to his individual questions of life. The exploration of the distinct potentialities of his artistic form was, thus, imperative to the realization of his own human potential.

INSEPARABLE ENTITIES

“I am driven by that which motivates any artist or writer—the conviction that his medium has infinite potentialities for conveying his particular perceptions of life.”

(Deren, “Magic” 202).

Perhaps most important to the artist’s creative devotion to a specific medium, is his firm belief in the power of that medium, when explored to its fullest capacity, in communicating the essential truths of human existence. Based upon this understanding, the artist’s medium can be removed from the notion of choice, and paired, rather, with that of necessity. One’s inclination to channel creative expression through a particular art form is, at its root, the result of an encounter between two like forces. Within the singular capabilities of the medium, the artist finds the form through which his singular perceptions may emerge. Thus, the artistic creation does not only lead the viewer towards perceptual discovery, but also reveals the inseparability of the nature of the medium and the nature of the artist.

In my research of Maya Deren and various modern dance artists, I have encountered numerous accounts of the artistic practice that exemplify the unity of the creator with the creative medium. Particularly instrumental in the vocalization of this

concept was Anna Halprin, who indicated that her constant aim was to avoid the separation of dance and the experiences of life. The essential nature of this purpose was shaped by her conviction that the act of artistic creation required the constant confrontation with one's own experiences (13). If the choreographer remained true to this notion of creation, the dancers' physical embodiment of lived realities would offer audience members a means of identifying themselves with the performed movement. In her essay entitled "The Process is the Purpose," Halprin wrote, "Everything we do in dance somehow or other usually relates to who you are as a person and this affects how you see things and feel things and relate to people. Again, it's the nonseparation [*sic*] of life and art, so that somehow or other it becomes a heightening process" (13). By regarding his artistic growth as concomitant and dependent upon his personal growth (and vice versa), the artist would not only achieve artistic maturity, but additionally, he would bring the viewer in communion with that development (13). Halprin's advancement of these artistic ideas indicates that the very foundation of her existence relied upon embodied creativity and human interaction on the imaginative level (18). Because she believed that creativity was essential to human life and that its awakening depended upon the stimulation of the sense organs, dance proffered the gateway through which she could truly achieve self-realization, both inwardly and in the formation of her relationships with others (18).

In all of the theoretical texts I have come across which discuss the relationship that is formed between the artist and his medium, I have found that there is no artist who speaks to this matter as articulately or comprehensively as Maya Deren.

Specifically because my point of reference in formulating this opinion is not from the perspective of a filmmaker, but rather, from that of a dancer, I feel that it would be possible for any artist to recognize within his own work the resonance of Deren's personal reflections. As she wrote about her creative history, Deren mentioned that before discovering film, she endeavored to establish herself as a poet. However, she considered herself to be a very poor poet because her mind thought in images instead of words. Consequently, all of her attempts to be verbally descriptive resulted in ineffectual translations of what were, essentially, visual ideas ("A Letter" 190). As such, she depicted the experience of her encounter with cinema not as the discovery of a new medium, but rather, as the feeling of "finally coming home into a world whose vocabulary, syntax, grammar, was [her] mother tongue; which [she] understood, and thought in, but, like a mute, had never spoken in" (191).

The particularly illuminating nature of Deren's writing was that it went beyond the charge of typifying her belief that the techniques of film were more capable than those of any other medium in creating accurate metaphors for the specific ideas and emotions that she was interested in exploring. It also revealed her cognizance of the fact that the creative facility she derived from the film medium surpassed that of any other form ("The Very Eye of Night" 231). Yet, to my mind, it's most important contribution was its elucidation of the notion that the artist enacted his personal transformation through the creative form. Even though the essential question investigated in Deren's work remained constant throughout her artistic career, the direction from which she approached it and its point of emphasis

changed with each film¹⁰. Every re-articulation signified a development of consciousness, of perception, of curiosity, all together intensifying the impact of the art experience. Because each new film necessitated the development of new conclusions, as opposed to merely corroborating old ones, neither Deren's career nor her existence could move forward without the act of creative production ("Anagram" 35-36).

In a letter written to James Card¹¹, Deren described her artistic journey as well as the series of creative doorways offered by her collection of films. The letter's description begins with the illustration of a specific scene from *Meshes of the Afternoon*, in which three images of the female protagonist are sitting around a table, picking up a single key until it becomes a knife (191). As the "girl" holding the knife begins approaching another image of herself sleeping in a chair, the camera zooms in, capturing her strides. The first step is in sand ("with the suggestion of sea behind"), the second is in grass, the third is on pavement, and the fourth is on the rug of the room (191). These steps are immediately followed by a shot of the walking figure's face and the descent of her knife towards the sleeping girl (191-192). The artistic intention of this series of images was to reveal that one must come a long way—"from the very beginning of time"—in order to kill oneself (192). Deren had imagined that each stride would represent a life, with the first emerging from the primeval waters. As such, the sequence of the four steps was meant to represent the

¹⁰ "...perhaps, I have not so much traveled off in a direction as moved in a slow spiral around some central essence, seeing it first from below, and now, finally, from above" (Deren, "A Letter" 196).

¹¹ This correspondence was later printed in the *Film Culture* journal as an essay entitled "A Letter."

expanse of time (192). In her letter's reflection, Deren indicated that while the sequence did not achieve its intended aim, each re-watching of this moment stimulated the occurrence of something more important and more profound.

It was like a crack letting the lights of another world gleam through. I kept saying to myself, "The walls of this room are solid except right there. That leads to something. There's a door there leading to something. I've got to get it open because through there I can go through to someplace instead of leaving here by the same way I came in"...And so I did, prying at it until my fingers were bleeding. (192)

By traversing this opening, she was able to enter a realm in which the identity of movement consumed all time and all space while, concurrently, transcending those dimensions (192). Only by the means of this passage was Deren able to create her second film, *At Land*, which portrayed the continuous identity of the protagonist transcending all other identities (192). From the juncture of this creative endeavor, Deren arrived at the philosophy that nothing was more powerful than the dynamic of movement. She became compelled by the conviction that movement and energy were much stronger elements than space and matter. Indeed, she asserted, movement was the force that created matter (192). She was so overwhelmed by the discovery of this idea that she needed to celebrate it, to further illuminate its wonder, and she did so in *A Study in Choreography for Camera*. As the turn of the dancer's foot united distant places, this film revealed the power of movement to create geographies that had not yet existed (192).

Comparably, Paul Taylor expressed the need to continuously undergo the process of his personal transformation through the creative form as he indicated his inability to be satisfied by an artistic engagement with ballet (Rosen 88). Because each of his dances was imbued with a different set of questions, ballet's codified technique failed to offer a means of properly addressing them. As stated by Taylor, "In one piece, line may be uppermost; in another, the idea isn't linear at all" (qtd. in Rosen 88). Rather than the creation of dances from a set of established steps, Taylor's evolving curiosities depended upon the invention of new movement with each choreographic work. He believed that if the development of his imagination was not utilized by the choreographic process, his full development as an individual would be incomplete. Modern dance's freedom of the torso was, for Taylor, not simply a different use of the body; it was emblematic of the artistic freedom to honor the entirety of the human character (88). Taylor's ideologies regarding dance and the individual were identical in that he felt that neither should be reduced to the confines of an unchanging ideal. He even mentioned that the established movement philosophies of "rise and fall, contraction and release"¹² were unnecessary strictures that inhibited the artist's creative faculties (qtd. 88). More importantly, he felt that human complexity could never be contained by such simplistic demands. I have no doubt that Taylor's artistic involvement with dance was built upon his unyielding faith that it served as an extension of the human. By bestowing this title upon the form, he placed the obligation on the choreographer to make art reflect all of the possibilities and intricacies that existed within the human entity (88).

¹² As has been previously discussed, these were developed by Doris Humphrey and Martha Graham.

In the final reflection of his work during an interview with Lillie Rosen, Taylor remarked, “And as much as I hope to continue to please audiences, keep them coming back, really it’s myself I must satisfy, my own soul which must be at peace with what I’ve done” (92). As I further develop this research, it is my intent to advance the notion that while Taylor’s aim may appear to be a self-serving precept, it is, in fact, the only way for an artist to truly reach his audience. The artist’s comprehensive awareness of his creative intent and his absolute devotion to its realization are the primary requisites of his imaginative ability to impart a new experience upon the world and, thereby, enrich it.

CHAPTER THREE

A Synthesis of Creative Processes

SOLO FOR TWO DANCERS

“The world is given to me from my unique place in Being, as a world that is concrete and unique...I come upon this world, inasmuch as I come forth or issue from within myself in my performed act or deed of seeing, of thinking, of practical doing.”

(Bakhtin, Holquist and Liapunov 57)

In the fall of 2010, I officially embarked upon my creative research through the choreographic process. By creating a duet for a female partner and myself, I established a necessary point of departure from which all of my subsequent explorations gained vitality. While I feel that I have come a very long way since the creation of this first piece and have developed a much greater awareness of myself as an artist, I am in no way ashamed of “Solo for Two Dancers.” I certainly believe that it formed the rich foundation of my research and offered a powerful means of directly investigating the artistic endeavor. Additionally, because I am convinced that true enlightenment can only occur when we become our sensations, I have found that there is no method of attaining knowledge that surpasses the embodied experience. In order to speak of the relationship between the artist and his creative medium, I was compelled by the necessity of consciously examining my own opinions, as both a dancer and a choreographer. Consequently, I feel that the most profound achievement of “Solo for Two Dancers” was not, necessarily, its composition, but rather, its honesty.

While there are several reasons for the piece's significance as a duet, I believe that it is important to begin by briefly explaining why I never considered choreographing a solo for one dancer. Concomitant with the decision to dance in my thesis as a means of confronting myself through the artistic form, was the determination that this must be done by establishing a relationship to another; a conviction inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin. In the spring of my sophomore year, when I was introduced to Bakhtin for the first time, I was so affected by his dialogic principle that it still continues to inform my life and creative work. Particularly influential to my personal and artistic development has been the following passage:

I am conscious of myself and become myself while revealing myself to another, through another, and with the help of another. The most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined by a relationship to another consciousness...I cannot manage without another, I cannot become myself without another; I must find myself in another my finding another in myself (in mutual reflection and mutual acceptance.) (Bakhtin and Emerson 287-288).

Therefore, I felt that the creation of my first piece required the collaboration with an artist whose opinion I trusted and respected. Based upon this consideration, I chose to work with my companion and fellow dance major, Sarah Ashkin. I was confident that with her presence in both my creative process and its resultant product, the clarity with which I would come to know and see myself would be much more comprehensive than that which I could have achieved alone.

As I began working with Sarah, my primary concern became the integration of our very prominent and divergent performance qualities. I quickly determined that, perhaps, the most interesting aspect of our dichotomy was our differing physical conceptions of internality and externality. Sarah has a way soaking herself in the air around her, moving through space as if she were immersed in honey. Seeming to derive energy from her very own skin, her use of the body has a strong internal sensibility and she keeps her physical experiences very close to her. However, her sense of awareness is projected outward and her face expresses a conception of self that seeks confrontation with the viewer.

In diametric opposition to Sarah, my movement is controlled by the desire to consume space and time, so that I may be imbued with these dimensions and, thereby, become an entity of their joined forces. I let myself play with the outer world by initiating movement from the core, which hurtles my pelvis forward and into the ground. The physical sensation is as if streams of electricity are emanating from the center of my being and activating my extremities, allowing them to coalesce with the forces of gravity. Although my physicality exerts itself upon space and time, it is produced from a powerful internal source that, seemingly, acts independently of the viewer's gaze. Thus, in direct contrast to Sarah, my very physical externality is paired with an internally determined sense of self.

In light of these realizations, I was able to draw a connection between Sarah and myself and Maya Deren's first two films, *Meshes of the Afternoon* and *At Land*. My motivation for using these films to direct my choreographic approach was formed by their treatment of various internal and external realms, such as the conscious and

subconscious, the dream and reality, and the seen and unseen. Because of their continuous interplay between the human being's inner and outer worlds, I felt that the films would provide an interesting doorway through which Sarah's individual movement style and my own could powerfully emerge. I was, additionally, inspired by each film's simultaneous projection of multiple images of the female protagonist, which in both cases was played by Deren. The effect of this cinematic technique was the sense that multiple manifestations of the self were existing at once in physical form. Consequently, I decided to craft the dance as an exploration of the many facets that comprise the individual. Rather than imaging Sarah and myself as two separate women, we became the physical representations of the complexities and inner dichotomies inherent to one woman.

To achieve these ends, I felt that it was essential for Sarah and I to use the choreographic process as a means of developing a deep awareness of ourselves and of each other. Existing in the piece as one being would require a powerful comprehension of the qualities that we were individually involved in representing. However, we would have to attain an equally strong understanding of the qualities represented by one another and of those represented by our unity. Indispensable to the development of this awareness was the practice of Authentic Movement. Originally established by Mary Starks Whitehouse, Authentic Movement is a form of improvisation that allows the body to move in direct association with its impulses. The mover begins with his eyes closed and allows the body's awakened stimuli to move him through space, completely uninhibited by expectation. The principal objective is to liberate the mover, so that he may "explore psychological processes as

they arise into kinesthetic responses of movement or sound” (“Authentic Movement”). As the mover follows the course of his sensations, a witness contains the experience by observing his movement without judgment or interpretation. In my personal history with Authentic Movement, I have always found that it blurs the lines between imagination and reality. For, each time the witness tells the mover to bring his improvisation to a close, he, naturally, does so in a whisper, as if he were waking the mover from a dream. By engaging in this practice as both the mover and the witness, Sarah and I not only became attuned to our own inherent tendencies, but we also developed a rich familiarity with each other’s. During one rehearsal’s session of Authentic Movement, I told Sarah that while we were witnessing, I wanted us to record the moments of the mover’s improvisation that we found particularly salient. At the end of the improvisation, the witness would recall those moments for the mover and articulate the experience of watching them occur. From this discourse and from her own memory, the mover would then construct a solo phrase. The intent was to create from a place of apprehension that had been bolstered by the practice of Authentic Movement as well as the added perspective of the witness. The solos that Sarah and I resultantly generated came to define both the nature of our individual presences in the work, and our relationship with one another.

Beyond my interest in developing a conscious understanding of Sarah’s movement habits, I believed in the importance of coming as close as I could to feeling how she felt, of knowing her movement through its physical sensation in my own body. And so, I brought into our rehearsals a movement exercise that simply required embodying each other’s improvisation. The first day that I integrated this practice

into the choreographic process was during a rehearsal on a particularly bright morning at the Indian Hill Cemetery in Middletown, Connecticut. After leading Sarah in a warm-up of stretching and core strengthening, I instructed her to move through the surrounding environment in whatever way she chose. I informed her that while she danced, I would strive to imitate her, replicating, exactly, her focus, her points of initiation, and her use of weight. After Sarah and I both took turns in the role of the imitator, it was apparent that the exercise had brought us deeply into each other's kinesthetic worlds. Sharing in each other's sensations was profoundly illuminating, but it also created a sense of unity between us that before had been absent. As we reflected upon the exercise, we agreed that the act of emulating each other's improvisation and, thereby, accessing realms of physical exploration unknown to our bodies, had made movement a completely new experience.

Having developed a much keener sense of ourselves, both as individuals and as creative partners, I, at last, felt prepared to begin choreographing. In order to find the structural and emotional qualities of Deren's work that I was interested in translating to a dance context, I began closely examining *Meshes of the Afternoon* and *At Land*. Particularly inspiring to me were their differing interpretations of the external world and its relationship to the individual:

Meshes is, one might say, almost expressionist; it externalizes an inner world to the point where it is confounded with the external world. *At Land* has little to do with the inner world of the protagonist; it externalizes the hidden dynamic of the external world, and here the drama results from the activity of the external world. It is as if I had

moved from a concern with the life of a fish, to a concern with the sea which accounts for the character of the fish and its life. (Deren, “A Letter” 194)

As I reflect upon “Solo for Two Dancers,” I must state that it was not shaped by the objective of reflecting more prominently or purposefully one interpretation over the other. Because my fascination with both films so profoundly suffused my choreographic approach, I feel that the viewer was given the freedom to arrive at his own conclusion. Thus, to determine that the piece externalized the inner dynamics of the individual or those of the world was a matter of one’s own perspective. Above all, I believe that “Solo for Two Dancers” represented a journey; a journey that not only shaped the choreographic structure of the piece, but also conveyed its meaning and impact. Through a discussion of the dance’s arc, I will be able to adequately communicate my intent as well as the creative influence of Deren’s first two films.

“Solo for Two Dancers” began with Sarah and I sitting in a beam of light on the stage, quietly conversing as we ate take-out Chinese food against the soundscape of leaves blowing in the wind. This moment lasted only long enough for it to be registered by the viewer’s eye and ended with Sarah and I looking out into the audience as if we had just then noticed its presence. The purpose of placing this casual occurrence on stage was to establish the frame of the outside world. As she wrote about *Meshes of the Afternoon*, Deren indicated that the film aspired to examine the inner realities of the individual “and the way in which the subconscious will develop, interpret and elaborate” a simple event until it becomes a profound emotional experience (“Magic” 204). By beginning the piece with such a quiet,

ordinary moment and immediately following it with an eruption of movement, I hoped to communicate the subconscious transformation of reality that Deren had described.

A blackout signified the immediate transition from the commonplace into the volatile, as I emerged from the darkness into light, moving as if I were swept up by a maelstrom of time and space. This section of the piece was primarily inspired by Deren's depiction of *At Land*, which described the female protagonist in confrontation with an unstable universe that had seized the authority of human will. As she was thrust into a world of "relentless metamorphosis," her only means of finding constancy resided within her own enduring identity ("Cinematography" 126). My choreographic intent was to leave it unclear as to whether the volatility that I was consumed by came from within an outer or an inner universe.

As I developed this first solo, I imagined myself not only as the protagonist, but also as the embodiment of the movement in Deren's film. Deren classified *At Land* as an "inverted Odyssey," in which the movement confronted the protagonist with an unremitting turbulence, towards which she helplessly strove to relate herself ("Three" 248). Acting as the female protagonist, Sarah stepped into the space partway through my solo, surveying me with her gaze. She then manipulated my body by spinning me around and changing my direction. Immediately following this dislocation, I, in turn, picked up Sarah and placed her in a new position. Only by these dual acts of manipulation were we able to enter into simultaneously occurring movement phrases, alternating our orientation, so that we faced either towards or

away from one another. Sarah's attempts to join me in movement were, thus, meant to signify her efforts to relate to the unpredictable fluidity of the universe.

Sarah and I then engaged in a rapidly paced section of movement, in which we continuously moved in and out of unison phrases only to separate and then find each other again. Leaping and hurling ourselves forward through the space, my artistic aim was to portray a violent world that had usurped the individual's control. At last, after a final outburst of erratic movement, I collapsed to the floor, unmoving, as if asleep. At this moment, the feeling of the dance changed entirely and was carried forward by the sound of my breath piercing through the silence. After I spun into an uncontrollable frenzy until falling at the point of exhaustion, the dance became a dream (or perhaps, a different dream). Having watched my collapse, Sarah began a physical exploration within the new, imaginative realm. I also conceived of Sarah's emergence in this section to be the embodiment of another layer of the individual consciousness, seeking to find its identity.

During this second section of the piece, Sarah and I formed a fluid relationship of support and dependence, releasing our weight into one another and also catching each other's weight as it fell into us. I endeavored to choreograph moments in which either Sarah or myself embodied the hidden meaning that lay beneath the other's action. Engaging in moments of contact improvisation and weight sharing, Sarah and I enacted, what I believed to be, the physical synthesis of the multiple facets of the self. The section ended with Sarah and I facing each other, as if we were looking at reflections of ourselves. We perfectly mirrored one

another's movement, simultaneously absorbing and projecting ourselves onto our own image.

The very last section of the dance was, thus, crafted to portray the final unity of the individual. As such, it was the piece's only moment of extended unison, in which our differences coalesced and, thereby, disappeared into the complete entity of the human. The final phrase became my favorite of the entire work and I believe that it was the most successful portrayal of its intended idea. I have no doubt that the reason for its success was due to the fact that its creation mirrored its meaning. To choreograph this phrase, Sarah and I accumulated movements by sharing the role of creator. After Sarah choreographed the first movement, I used her creation as an impulse to come up with the second. Having combined these elements, we again switched roles, and Sarah created the third movement of the sequence. Thus, the series of movements was imbued with the power of our combined entities. At the end of the extended unison phrase, Sarah and I ran away from one another, collided, and, at last, separated again, to arrive at stillness, facing in opposite directions. The final intent was to encourage the viewer to ponder the individual's strength in maintaining the perfect synthesis of his divergent inner selves.

As the lights faded to black, the piece's original soundscape permeated the space once more, and the image of leaves blowing in the wind appeared on the black curtain at the back of the stage. Sarah and I walked towards the image and stood in front of it, side-by-side with the leaves tattooing our skin. Just as the individual does not consist of one, but of many truths, I believe that "Solo for Two Dancers" also conveys a complexity of meaning. Perhaps, as in *Meshes of the Afternoon*, the

imagined world of the individual achieved such force that it became reality (“Magic” 204). Or maybe, the protagonist finally found her strength of self, despite the chaos of the outside world. I do not feel that it is my duty to decide which conclusion is appropriate to each viewer’s unique perception of life, “for we act and suffer and love according to what we imagine to be true, whether it is really true or not” (Deren, “Magic” 202).

CHAMBER DANCE

“Of all types of instrumental music. I have always been able to follow these best. You listen to four sensible persons conversing, you profit from their discourse, and you get to know the individual character of the instruments.”

-Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (qtd. in Keller vii)

“Each film was built as a chamber and became a corridor...”

(Deren, “A Letter” 195)

During a conversation with someone about my most recent work, I caught myself both realizing and stating for the first time, “It took me two years to make that dance.” Upon further reflection of this comment, I determined that it was absolutely true; “Chamber Dance” was the piece I had imagined myself choreographing in the spring of my sophomore year, but had been entirely unprepared to make.

Researching the life and work of Maya Deren has not only provided the doorway through which I have reached a greater understanding of modern dance, but it has allowed me to formulate a profound awareness of my own artistic ideologies.

Because of my creative development over the course of this endeavor, I feel that this piece has been my most successful attempt at giving form to my imagined ideas.

Most importantly, the yearlong journey has allowed me to hone my ability to speak to my dancers about their individual and collective roles in the artistic creation. As I have come to understand the province of the creative act, I have, simultaneously, instilled in my dancers an appreciation of their communicative power. I could not be more grateful for the willingness of Iman, James, Nik, and Sophie to come with me on this adventure and to be so fearlessly engaged in this discourse. “Chamber Dance” became the creative manifestation of my morals, my beliefs, my aesthetic ideals, and my outstanding faith in the remarkable capabilities of this art form because my dancers allowed me to affect them. They allowed me to pull at all of the wonder that was waiting within them, yearning to emerge.

My initial inspiration in the concept of the chamber ensemble was precipitated by Maya Deren’s praise for the qualities inherent to chamber music:

Chamber music is more than a form; it is a concept of artistic values and methods: it is lyric in character; it is abstract, rather than narrative, in structure; it is devoted to economy rather than to elaboration; and it is dependent upon a meticulous exploitation of the virtuosity of the selected instrument. A work concerned with war and peace would require an elaborate, even massive orchestration, but a work concerned with life and death would deliberately choose the austerity and economy which would bring such themes into pristine focus.

(“Chamber Films” 250-251)

I can recall the great sense of excitement that rose within me as I came upon this passage because the ideas that I had already begun formulating about my second semester piece complied with this very notion. I was uninterested in creating a work like “Solo for Two Dancers” that was overwhelmed with content and the efforts to apply the creative vision of another artist to my own. Rather, I yearned to create a dance that remained absolutely faithful to the precept which regarded movement as the sole bearer of meaning.

Having progressed in my research, I looked beyond the scope of Deren’s films and began appreciating the countless parallels that existed between independent cinema and modern dance. I also moved from a focus on Deren’s filmic work to her written artistic theory, which resonated much more powerfully with my own sense of creativity. As I approached the beginning of my second choreographic process, I wanted to expand the vocabulary of the dance medium; to comprehensively utilize its formal qualities to convey meaning; and to re-introduce the complexities and the possibilities of this art form. To my mind, these objectives could only be realized if I allowed my dancers to access the full range of their capacity. I refused to create work that did not challenge the individual on some level, whether mental, physical, or emotional.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the creative use of the instrument is the artist’s greatest asset in exploring the potentialities of his medium. I believe, wholeheartedly, that if the choreographer intends to expand the audience’s perception, he must first do so with his instrument. My goal was to stretch the limits of my choreographic mind and to include my dancers in that process, so that, together, we could engender a new

experience. Through the composition of complicated spatial patterns, the conscious creation of movement to a musical score, and the development of intricate steps and complex uses of the body, I wanted my dancers to move beyond their current realities and enter into the reality of art. The only way in which the viewer may achieve the transcendent experience is if he feels that he is in communion with the artist's transcendence. Thus, the primary goal of my choreographic endeavor became the cultivation of the transcendent experience. I didn't realize it at the time, but upon returning to Deren's writing, I found that her central aim in making *Ritual in Transfigured Time* was, essentially, identical to my own artistic pursuit. In this film, Deren's hope was "that the consistency of the total movement pattern transcended the variety of the individuals involved" ("Creative Cutting" 146).

After first recognizing the use of the term "transcendence" in Deren's writing, I seemed to come across it almost everywhere I looked. Numerous artists within the field of modern dance, like Deren, believed in man's ability to surpass the confines of the material world and to enter into a realm of being that opened up the doors of perception, of understanding, of truth. From the perspective of Alwin Nikolais, the very definition of art depended upon the idea of transcendence. In fact, it was the quality that he sought above all others in his dancers, so that they may be liberated from their identities and free to become whatever they wanted to be. For, he felt that art was nothing if it wasn't about exploring freedom (qtd. in Copeland 44). Pauline Koner also believed that the artist's function was actualized by his transcendence, because only through the attainment of this quality would he be able to communicate beyond the boundaries of stage and skin. She asserted that the aim of the artist must

be “to reach men’s hearts, to reveal to them that they are more than they think they are, to strip away the layers of veneer so they can look at themselves and say: ‘This is how I feel, this is how I think’” (79). As such, if the artist failed to attain transcendence, he would be incapable of transmitting his being to that of another (79).

In the creation of “Chamber Dance” I was determined to foster my own notion of transcendence through the development of a strong group mentality, the discipline of the body, and the physical surrender to gravity and momentum. I dove into this endeavor with full force, improvising for my dancers and asking them to follow along to the best of their abilities. Although I first noticed some resistance to my thrusting of movement upon them, I was certain that, with time, they would begin absorbing sensation in new ways. I wanted them to experience the act of flight, to feel their bodies cutting through space and time, so that they could begin giving meaning to these dimensions.

The compositional aspects of the work came together relatively easily. I, typically, would begin a section with a single phrase that I first taught to the dancers and then deconstructed. I re-ordered its elements, I added movement, I changed the spatial orientation and timing, I gave different dancers divergent structural tasks. To be honest, each time I utilized this method I did so without any sense of logic or planning. Yet, I found that the more I played, the more synchronicities would occur. Additionally, I used the music of J.C. Bach and Mozart as a way of juxtaposing formalism with gesture and idiosyncratic phrasing. I was so enlivened and inspired by my group of dancers that moving with them drew out of me a vocabulary that felt like new and unexplored territory. I entered each rehearsal excited to continue

investigating and tugging at my dancers' remarkable capabilities. In their presence, movement creation and compositional ideas seemed to flow into my body and mind quite effortlessly.

Although my ensemble of dancers was comprised of four remarkably different individuals with immensely diverse movement histories, I did not regard their physical capacities any differently. It is certainly true that as I crafted movement for a specific individual, I would incorporate qualities that I felt would highlight his or her individuality, but, nevertheless, I demanded the same level of physical and mental engagement from everyone. Each dancer must be conscious of his or her sensations, develop a clarity of focus, emit energy outwards, and fully connect each movement to time and space. The central reason for this was that I viewed the piece as an "emergent whole," greater than the sum total of its parts. Although I depended upon each dancer's individuality, I was primarily interested in his or her contribution to the strength of the ensemble. Similar to Deren's *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, "the elements of the whole would derive their meaning from a pattern which they did not themselves consciously create; just as ritual... fuses all individual elements into a transcendent tribal power towards the achievement of some extraordinary grace" ("Chamber Films" 252).

Nik represented the power of fluidity, moving through his pelvis, dropping his weight into the floor, continuously creating sequences throughout the body. Iman was the figure of grace and purity, cutting lines through the air and transporting her limbs into the earth's upper stratospheres. Sophie emitted an animalistic sensuality, giving shape to time and space through resiliency and resistance. James gnawed on

gravity, speaking a thousand words through the mere curve of his spine and the undulation of his torso, imbuing the space around him with meaning.

I was unbelievably fortunate to work with these amazing individuals, but even greater than my belief in their unique capabilities was my faith in their collective power. I wanted to use their communal strength to craft for them a journey of movement, sound, silence, gesture, and shared growth. Their experiences were not mutually exclusive; what occurred within one was profoundly felt among all. By the end of the piece, when they mouthed the words of Teresa Stich-Randall's aria, they became space, time, each other, and the beauty of her voice, and they allowed the audience to enter into that becoming. I find that there is no better way of describing this moment than through the words of Maya Deren, who wrote, "Such communal efforts are usually reserved for the accomplishment of some critical metamorphosis, and, above all, for some inversion towards life" ("Ritual" 227). As my dancers finally stepped off of the stage and into the audience, they stepped into life, ready to enrich that which was now before them, and leaving illuminated that which was behind.

CONCLUSION

*“If philosophy is concerned with understanding the meaning of reality, then poetry—
and art in general—is a celebration, a singing of values and meanings.”*

(Deren, “Art” 255)

As I bring this endeavor to a temporary close, I hope that my findings have been able to shed some light upon the incredible gift of creativity and the power of its intelligent usage. I entered into this research completely unaware of the commonalities that existed between modern dance and independent cinema, but what I have since come to find is overwhelming. Indeed, the process of uncovering their similarities has been incredibly humbling. I feel that there is something quite amazing about the common thread that exists between imaginative forms, and I believe that the general recognition of their parallels could only serve to strengthen the artistic practice. Above all, I have been inspired by art’s celebration of the faculties that exist within every human to ponder, to question, to invent, and to imagine. How lucky we are to make use of our creative minds and to stretch their imaginative capacities. Let us keep reaching forward into the untouched realms of humanity, imagining through the creative form, enlightening unknown truths, and seeking transcendence.

“In the transported exaltation of this moment, I wanted to run out into the streets and shout out to everyone that death was not true! that they must not listen to the doom singers and the bell ringers! that life was more true! I had always believed and felt this, but never had I known how right I was. And I asked myself, why, then, did I not celebrate it in my art. And then I had a sudden image: a dog lying somewhere very still, and a child, first looking at it, and then, compulsively nudging it. Why? to see whether it was alive; because if it moves, if it can move, it lives. This most primitive, this most instinctive of all gestures: to make it move to make it live. So I had always been doing with my camera...nudging an ever-increasing area of the world, making it move, animating it, making it live.”

-Maya Deren

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