

What Has Become of Postmodern Dance? Answers and Other Questions by Marcia B. Siegel, Anna Halprin, Janice Ross, Cynthia J. Novack, Deborah Hay, Sally Banes, Senta Driver, Roger Copeland, and Susan L. Foster

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What Has Become of Postmodern Dance?

Answers and Other Questions by
Marcia B. Siegel, Anna Halprin, Janice
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edited by Ann Daly

Ed. Note: In the 1960s, the emergence of postmodern dance triggered a whirlwind of questions, "But is it dance?" prominent among them. The new dance prevailed, however, and set the agenda for the '70s and early '80s. But at that point, tanztheater, Reagan, and megamarketing intervened, and dance in America underwent significant changes. The postmodern aesthetic was diffused and, in some cases, willfully transgressed. Some of the most satisfying dance today has more in common with Doris Humphrey than Yvonne Rainer. The "well-choreographed" dance and premeditated meaning has made a comeback. And at the other end of the spectrum, personal narrative and ritual are providing alternative bases for dance making.

What has become of postmodern dance?

We asked a variety of choreographers, critics, and historians to tackle the question. Their answers suggest that the discussion is still very much an open one, filled with caveats and parenthetical qualifications. Even the terminology is still being debated. The meaning of "postmodern" (and "modern," concomitantly) varies profoundly between and even within disciplines, denoting cultural, stylistic, or historical distinctions.

In dance studies, the term "postmodern" originated as an historical category. Decades later, much of the vigorousness of the discourse results from the effort to reconcile that use of the word with the very different paradigms informing the concept in art, architecture, and cultural theory. One of the reasons that this effort remains so problematic is the traditional model of dance *history*, rather than dance *studies*. Up until recently, the

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approach of dance scholarship has been primarily historical—what happened when?—and stylistic—what are the surface characteristics? The question of genre—and that is what the issue of postmodern dance has become—travels beyond these descriptive paradigms of inquiry. It requires analytic and interpretive consideration of cultural and subcultural ideology.

The scholar's task is all the more challenging because of the complexity of dance in the 1960s and '70s. Art cannot be mistaken for its tidy labels. And yet postmodern dance, despite the inevitable stylistic range that infuses any artistic movement, does seem to share an underlying ideology. I suspect that it has something to do with the counterculture's vision of the body as a generative process—as a source of social knowledge—and as a public tablet on which to inscribe and disseminate that knowledge. But there is much more to be explored on this subject.

It is a healthy sign that scholars have not written off the subject of postmodern dance as "done." Our persistent wrestling with the issue does, however, make it somewhat more difficult to articulate the issues of current dance without a clear picture of its predecessor. In the mid- to late '80s, the response of young choreographers to their immediate forebears may have been of primary significance, but in the early '90s it is the choreographers' response to the current social and political climate that is the more important axis. The following responses begin to explore those connections.

The essays suggest a host of new questions, too: Why are some postmodern choreographers so popular today? How has postmodern dance been commodified? Can we still say that people are making postmodern dance, or even modern dance, in the '90s? Was postmodern dance an elitist cultural practice? Is '90s new dance providing us with new ways of moving/building/seeing? Is postmodern dance an independent genre, or a development of modern dance? Is the staging of multiculturalism in fact a reversion to the modernist illusion of the "family of man" rather than a postmodern recognition of difference? What are the sources of today's ritual- and narrative-based dance?

Is It Still Postmodern? Do We Care?

Thirty years constitutes a cycle in the fast-moving flux of 20th-century art, or the youth-bounded life of a dancer. Postmodernism ought to be an antique by now, the way modern dance of the '30s was to the experimentalists of the '60s. Instead, argumentation about what postmodernism is, or *if* it is, continues to litter the pages of arts publications.

I think one reason we can't put postmodernism to rest is the curious nature of the term itself. It is singularly uninformative about whatever aesthetic widgets it's supposed to define. At least the terms cubism, impressionism, surrealism, dada suggest ways that artists might have viewed the world or manipulated the world to suit their view. Postmodernism does no such thing. Temporal and at the same time reflexive, it anchors itself to what never stays still, its own two parts locked in a slithery contradiction that prevents it from even being pinned down to a calendar date. If something is modern, it can't also belong to the past. And if something is *postmodern*, it comes after modern; it takes place in

the future; it actually hasn't taken place yet. If we decided to allow modern to stand for some historical period, then postmodern could come after modern—but *when*? Logically, postmodern dance should have arrived in about 1960, but if there is any today, it is neither a reflection of nor a reaction to the 1950s. And what is its relation to the dance we call modern dance in 1991?

This was all immensely simpler between about 1955 and 1965, when the historical (original) modern dance was running out of steam and a number of people—like Merce Cunningham, the Judson dancers, Anna Halprin—set out to distinguish their dance from modern dance in a number of emphatic ways. They were the first postmodern dancers, although their work was seldom called postmodern. Since then postmodernism has been redefined several times, both in terms of what postmodernism means and in relation to postmodernism's presumed historical precedents (see Banes 1987, 1989a, 1989b; Carroll 1981; Copeland 1986; Manning 1988). New dance now has inherited traits from all its postmodern predecessors: the objectivity, nonlinearity, and nonrepresentation of the '60s; the formalism and physicality of the '70s; the eclecticism and parody of the '80s. But '90s new dance already looks like something different from all of these. Is it still postmodern? Do we care?

I care about how devices and attitudes mutate. The labels for what's new quickly get obsolete, but the reasons for change slip away even faster. Anything discovered in dance percolates into the existing lexicon, and five minutes later no one remembers how it got there. For instance, blank-faced neutrality was chosen as a performing style by Yvonne Rainer for political reasons. Rainer didn't want to seduce the audience with conventional charms. (One could argue now that she seduced them anyhow, with other intriguing attributes, but that's another matter.) This impassivity immediately caught on, and was very well suited to the spare, structural dances of the early '70s. You could not see a downtown dancer peep at the audience or crack a smile for years afterward, until Senta Driver added laughing, crying, and other affects to the pool of technical skills. Ten years later, when dance got emotional again, we had Susan Marshall, Ralph Lemon, David Dorfman making highly charged and even semiotically readable dances about love, hate, competition, and despair for dancers wearing that same blank neutrality as their basic performing attitude.

One of postmodernism's most consistent projects, to subvert received ideas about society and art, seems frighteningly appropriate in a world that's no longer what we thought.

Does everybody get as disconcerted as I do seeing dancers madly embracing, violently hurling themselves around, or even just attempting to do something while someone physically impedes them, all with placid, vacant expressions on their faces? Fifteen minutes' soundless viewing of any made-for-TV drama will confirm that this is the preferred acting mode of our time. Except for the strategic use of the mouth, the eyes, the forehead, to enhance or contradict a physical effect, dancers remain alienated, disengaged, dissociated from the charged and even incendiary

events that they're setting in motion. We could read this message politically, but it means something very different from Rainer's revolutionary withholding of passion.

In the '80s there was a shortlived phase in postmodernism called the new vaudeville. In some ways a retreat from dance movement as a primary medium, the new vaudeville allowed dancers to embrace the whole range of performing skills: magic, acrobatics, singing, talking, tumbling, comedy, mime, and arcana like swimming, levitating, playing the saxophone. Once all this got absorbed, dancers found they could be entertainers, and they liked how the audience responded to being entertained. Now, with the puritans breathing down their necks, many find it safer and more financially secure to amuse than to provoke. When TV interviewer Celia Ipiotis gingerly asked David Parsons whether he didn't think, as a recipient of public funding, he ought to be a bit more challenging, he responded that to him, finding ways to make dance fun was a form of experimentation.

Tanztheater, with its combination of psycho-political theatrics and visceral but modish physicality, has been the Europeans' antidote to what they belatedly perceive as the dry amorality of postmodern dance. Contemporary American dancers have mostly resisted this sort of righteous revisionism. Their innate trust in movement has steered them around solutions that involve an explicit, literal response to the world and into some extreme realms of fantasy and playfulness. We were meant to see the dance of Lucinda Childs or Simone Forti as pragmatic, unadorned statements of what bodies can do when they function in a perfectly ordered or naturally harmonious universe. Now, in spite of having many more skills, dancers work as if there is no rationality at all, or at least no guarantee that their acts will have the consequences they intend. They hold dialogs where the partner not only doesn't respond but is carrying on a different conversation. They get transformed into creatures, they exchange lovers or genders. Nothing surprises them or deters them from carrying on. Displacement, disorientation, doesn't even evoke their curiosity. If anything, a world off-kilter permits them to be outrageous, to defy physical limits, to role-play.

One of postmodernism's most consistent projects, to subvert received ideas about society and art, seems frighteningly appropriate in a world that's no longer what we thought. Whatever we expected would save us—our bank account, the neighborhood, the water supply, arms control, sex—can no longer be counted on. So in the '90s it's hardly surprising to see dance that stands its own conventions on their head. The economics of dance may be no healthier than that of the rest of the country, but it seems to me on some levels dance is more popular than ever. The 1990/91 New York season brought us lots of glossy postmodern imports, a month of Pilobolus, and several incarnations of Mark Morris. Maybe dance is the diversion of choice for apocalypse-weary Americans, the way the movies were during the Depression. As it has often done in the past, postmodern dance will pave the way for the populists. Some of the most rigorous experimenters, like Trisha Brown, have already achieved popular success themselves. What could be more postmodern than that?

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What Else Is There?

JANICE ROSS: A lot of the early work you did in the 1960s helped to establish what we today call postmodern dance.

ANNA HALPRIN: Along with many other artists, musicians, painters, poets, and architects of that period (the mid-1950s), I was stimulated to redefine the boundaries of dance and the role of the dancer. Just as a musician would start with "found" sound, as John Cage did, I started with ordinary movement.

ROSS: Do you think that postmodern dance is essentially a stylistic, philosophical, or historical category?

HALPRIN: Wouldn't you say it is all those things? Isn't it historical in the sense that it came as a response to what was before? And it is philosophical because the dancers started to arrive at their dances from a different philosophy than what had existed before. We weren't necessarily trying to tell stories. Philosophy means having a point of view about what you want your dance to reflect, a view that reflects what you believe in life.

I was philosophically concerned with how to integrate real life issues, both personal and social, with the creative process, or "art." (In fact for a long time we never used the word "art." We were too afraid of its implications and requirements. We were also too preoccupied with breaking old barriers and artistic stereotypes.)

Philosophy and style were all wrapped up in the sheer excitement of all the new possibilities. Style was about having no recognizable style, that is unless you consider being totally "real" a style. That moment, when we had the luxury of making art for art's sake, is past.

Stylistically I think postmodern dance is now in a transition to something else. And I think that something else is “meaning and content,” things that make a real difference in people’s lives, in the life of the local and global community. I think that where postmodern dance is eventually going is to myth and ritual. There isn’t any other place to go. Where else can it go?

How can you do dances about being inventive and cute and funny when our planet is in such danger and eight- and nine-year-olds are being raised knowing sex has to do with AIDS?

Particularly with the world in the social, environmental, and political state it is in today, in such a state of ultimate crises, postmodern dance is going to have to change to deal with more realistic content. How can you do dances about being inventive and cute and funny when our planet is in such danger and eight- and nine-year-olds are being raised knowing sex has to do with AIDS?

We’re facing a world filled with challenges from every direction—war, poverty, homelessness, abuse, more war, starvation, pollution, cancer, AIDS—the very ground we stand on is shaking. It seems to me we have a wonderful opportunity to make dances that once again have the function to transform. Myth making and ritual seem like the next step. Ritual has got to be the next way, what else is there?

The current generation of choreographers and dancers are finally discovering that they don’t have to be afraid of emotions, although it’s been slow in coming. They are beginning to say it’s okay to have a feeling. But they have to take it a little further. The postmodern dancers have to understand the connection between movement and feeling and the difference between indulgence and the true connections between the heart and the body. Once you connect with your humanness it allows you to have a much larger audience, a larger nondance audience, one that is pluralistic rather than elitist.

ROSS: It is interesting that the aspects of postmodern dance you see as having endured are the things that can now be incorporated into ritual.

HALPRIN: Yes. For me personally, the whole postmodern period was about developing tools, resources, and ground rules, about setting all that in place for what can happen now. We’re again facing a crucial period ahead when the very core of our lives together will depend largely on how we can impact in new creative ways. Can we begin to turn these destructive forces in the world around through dance? I identify with Guillermo Gómez-Peña, who said only acts of ritual can help relieve the pain we live with in contemporary society.

ROSS: What is your definition of postmodern dance?

HALPRIN: Oh God, who cares? . . . It’s a freeing of the stylized movement inherited from those three early modern dancers, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Hanya Holm. It’s a movement that is using new procedures in the development of choreography.

ROSS: Have the changes that postmodern dance has brought about been for the better or worse?

HALPRIN: I can't judge in those terms. I can only speak for myself. I did what I had to do when I did it. In retrospect, perhaps we were clearing the way for today. And for today and the future my vision would be for people to rediscover their ability to create meaningful myths and rituals that can in themselves not only have power but evoke a higher power, an after-postmodern dance that can speak to and for us today. Something that can speak of our humanness, our caring for each other and the earth.

I recall a wonderful incident that happened during the Gulf War. A missile alarm went off during a symphony performance in Jerusalem. Isaac Stern was playing the violin. The symphony players left the stage and the audience reached under their seats to put on gas masks. Isaac Stern stood solid and started to play Bach's Violin Concerto in D minor. Afterward, when asked about the incident, he said, "This was the first time I ever felt I was really needed and that music was truly useful." That's what I'm talking about. That's where I'd like to see postmodern dance go.

January and May 1991

*Anna Halprin
Tamalpa Institute*

*Interviewed by Janice Ross
Stanford University*

Old Forms, New Meanings?

While classificatory terms such as modern and postmodern dance seem initially useful, they also eventually create as much confusion as they dispel. I think this results from the necessary reductiveness of artistic labels, which seek to associate and generalize about many different artists' work over time. Confusion also rises because a term like "postmodernism" has been variously applied to indicate kinds of dances, a school of theoretical thought, an analysis of contemporary society, and a particular group of artists.

Dance critics and historians described changes they observed in modern dance in the late '50s and through the '60s as postmodern, and, once the term caught on, some choreographers and dancers characterized their own work this way. Some theorists tried to link postmodernism in dance to postmodernism in art, to critical theory, or to postindustrial capitalism. Others focused almost exclusively on the style and techniques of what was also called *avantgarde* or experimental dance in the '60s, and on the continuations and developments of these characteristics in ensuing years. Artists associated with the innovations of the '60s also became known as the postmoderns, engendering debate when their work changed in some respects but not others.

Whatever the specific applications of the term "postmodern," the initial differentiation of postmodern dance from modern dance lay not only in

particular techniques associated with the new dance—self-reflexiveness, for instance, or the employment of pedestrian and athletic movement vocabularies—but also in the changed political and social context in which performers and spectators lived. The techniques of postmodernism were in themselves changes in social practice, articulating newly emerging senses of self and community, of experimentation, and of political dissent among urban, middle-class, college-educated artists and intellectuals.

Thus while postmodernism could be delineated by formal and stylistic concerns, its “techniques” carried historical associations and meanings (just as did the techniques of the early modern dancers). Racial and ethnic distinctions implicit in categorizations of dance in the ’60s illustrate this point. Postmodernism was the province of “Whites,” although some “Black” or “Hispanic” or “Asian” Americans used techniques associated with postmodernism. In contrast, the flourishing of Black dance as a concert form in the ’60s was associated with a different set of stylistic features than those associated with postmodernism—more explicit social and political protest and dramatization, for example, and an expansion of the dance vocabulary to include more African-based movement. Obviously, the differentiation of postmodern dance and Black dance was never a merely formal distinction. It resulted from both a heritage of social segregation, and a Black liberation struggle that was seeking a separate, independent identity.

For a time, separate classifications of postmodern (“White”) and Black (“Black”) dance were generally accepted, sometimes under protest; the political implications of technique and style were generally assumed. But the fissures in those general assumptions have developed into major chasms now. While many aesthetic concerns and ideas of postmodernism

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continue to exist, they do so in the context of changed economic and social circumstances in artists’ lives, in the production of dance, and in social and political relationships in the U.S. Though the continued presence of formal features may justify continued use of the term “postmodernism,” we must now qualify and explain the new meanings and the impact of these techniques in changed contexts.

The ’60s, the decade when postmodernism emerged, saw a boom in private and public funding for the arts. Over the last 20 years, and through two serious recessions, this wellspring of financial support has to a degree dried up. Particularly in the ’80s and into the ’90s, competition among performers for space, publicity, and money escalated, while possibilities for managing on little income declined. In particular, financial exigencies have required the marketing of dance on a relatively larger scale. Thus postmodernism has become a commodity, shifting its context from the marginal to the mainstream. The increased marketing of dance to larger audiences has also shifted the quest of the early modernists for

innovative, contemporary expression which still marks the ideology of many American dancers. Our new, improved dance products become enticements for new consumers of art; the atmosphere of aesthetic consumption generated by publicity and discourse casts a trivializing atmosphere over performance which seeks to be taken seriously, or even worse, comes to dominate the attitudes and ideas of the performers. Can postmodern styles of dance making connote the same meanings in this context as they did 25 years ago?

Social configurations have also changed, within the dance world as elsewhere: the divisions of "White," "Black," "Asian," "Hispanic," have shifted. Many performers and writers have sought to break the automatic attachment of aesthetic preferences to skin color and ethnicity. While discrimination has not ended, artists of color have been more generally recognized as pursuing a variety of aesthetic practices, and the list of dancers using postmodern techniques in the '80s, for example, includes African American, Asian American, and Latino choreographers. Artists not of color have changed as well; former "postmoderns" incorporate narrative, spectacle, and explicit social commentary into their works—some of the qualities attributed to Black dance in the '60s (although, it must be remembered, artists do not tend to fit these categories neatly to begin with).

Finally, divisions between "art" dance and "ethnic" dance continue to erode as awareness of the intercultural nature of contemporary society increases and as the political status quo reinforced by such categories becomes clearer. Over 20 years have passed since Joann Kealiinohomoku first suggested that ballet is as much an ethnic dance form as any other. Many dancers and choreographers with similar perspectives are now asserting a right to delineate their own dance and their own aesthetic-ethnic-social identity.

Where the shifting boundaries of concert performance will lead remains to be seen, however, for "ethnic" dancers turned "artists" contend with the same marketplace and structures of production that have affected dancers formerly classified as modern, postmodern, and Black. What's more, we all exist in a political atmosphere of cynicism and confusion, in which dissent remains fragmented, often inarticulate. Without romanticizing the political movements of the '60s, the optimism of that peculiar period which infused people's lives and dances is absent today. Maybe that moment in which palpable change seemed evident to so many people is one reason the label of postmodernism caught on—it seemed clear that a qualitative change had occurred and that something new needed to be acknowledged. I'm not at all certain that we're at another such crystallizing point.

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Wavelengths or Telephone Wires?

Dream: Looking up into a fleece of jet black clouds I watch a thin ribbon of light come streaming toward me from no apparent source in the sky. I sense this luminance is formed atmospherically and stand mar-

veling at its quiet undulations. I run to a nearby house calling friends outside to witness it. The feathery light begins to intermingle with the telephone lines. I alert the others to the subtle difference between the cosmically formed wavelength and the telephone wires. As the dream ends, we are looking up, trying to distinguish one from the other.

The culture of postmodern dance was/is Pop, pragmatic, conceptual, gregarious, flagrant. That is my thesis, based solely on my experiences during the '60s beginning in composition classes with Robert Dunn, continuing through the Judson Dance Theater performances and concluding when I left New York to live on a farm in Vermont in 1970. In my group dances choreographed in the mid- to late '60s, I was fascinated with presenting the frightened and precarious lack of performance skills of the nondancer in charged theatrical settings. Man/woman visible under constraint. Dislocated, pained, dumb, funny, ordinary, vulnerable, precious. This culturally perpetrated image of alienation and isolation soon became limiting and too familiar. By 1970 my physically bound vision of dance movement was without swell.

The culture of postmodern dance was/is Pop, pragmatic, conceptual, gregarious, flagrant.

In the late '60s and early '70s the availability of psychedelics, the proliferation of Chinese and Japanese martial art forms, the abundance of readable material on quantum physics, spiritual/medicinal living, Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, the I Ching combined to support new movement inquiry and perceptual challenge.

The electricity of the imagination sent currents of understanding to the furthest regions of my body. The sacred, raw, animal, mineral, ecstatic here and now came bubbling into use. The dance developing from these old truths is different than the actively aggressive vibrancy of postmodern dance.

This significant, remembered complement to the physically bound dancer/choreographer produced a qualitative and quantitative shift for the movement artist. Some performers began to develop a relationship to what was not seen, namely action based on faith in esteemed human attributes and the power of the imagination. (Personally, I grew to realize that faith does not get easier. For some reason not consciously conceived, I assumed that faith, like being around people or working on my computer, would get easier. It is not that it gets harder. It simply never stops requiring full attention when surrendering to its use.)

In an essay on the Balinese theatre, Artaud states that "We are watching a mental alchemy which makes a gesture of a state of mind—the dry, naked linear gesture all our acts could have if they sought the absolute" (1958:66). The "mental alchemy" Artaud discusses is not the object of logical thinking. He is describing intelligent action free of thought and bearing visible evidence. These compounded levels of consciousness demand deepening levels of attention for the movement artist.

Along with the wealth of movement unlocked through the imagination (the remembrance of sacred and mundane ritual and the admittance of

multilevels of consciousness held simultaneously), dance has moved on to greater and subtler realms of perception for performer and audience alike.

Deborah Hay
Deborah Hay Dance Company

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Is It All Postmodern?

The term "postmodern" is not an evaluative one, but a descriptive, historical one. In dance, the term came into use in the early 1960s, when Yvonne Rainer and other emerging choreographers used it to differentiate their work from that of the preceding generation—modern dance. By the mid-'70s, it had become a critical term to label a movement. By the late 1980s and early '90s, when the term has been theorized not only in the arts, but in cultural criticism generally, "postmodern" has come to mean something quite different for dance—though clearly our current usage is an evolution from those original ruptures with the dance academy in the '60s.

In the late 20th century, we are everywhere enmeshed in "the postmodern condition" (Lyotard 1984). In one sense, *everything* about our current first-world, post-industrial, mass-media culture is postmodern. If this is the age of postmodernism, can we talk about current dance without considering all of it postmodern? It seems to me we can, because postmodernism, it should be remembered, has had specific, though disparate, meanings in the various spheres of culture, meanings that are tied to the particular history and practice of each discipline.

Charles Jencks, the architect and critic, popularized the term (which was first advanced as early as the 1930s, and then entered literary-critical discourse in the early 1960s) for his own field, beginning in 1975. In his recent book *What Is Post-Modernism?*, Jencks reiterates his definition: that postmodern architecture involves "double coding," in two senses. Deliberately hybrid, it appeals to two separate audiences; it both continues and transcends modernism by mixing it with classicism—combining old and new styles, materials, and techniques—in order to engage both the general public and the experts. For Jencks, this eclecticism has a moral and political, as well as aesthetic mission. It is entertaining, decorative, and symbolic, reanchoring architecture in the public service; at the same time, its playfulness is professionally informed, reinstalling the art in the depth and breadth of its historical tradition. But Jencks is adamant about protecting his category from what he considers easy elisions with postindustrial culture generally (Jencks 1986).

In literature, John Barth and Umberto Eco, among others, have used the term “postmodern” to refer to the ironic use of traditional forms, again doubly coded in that postmodern literature will be enjoyed by broader audiences (more so, say, than Beckett) yet still intrigue the literary expert. Fredric Jameson has theorized postmodernism as pastiche, signaling cultural schizophrenia. Charles Newman sees it as an expression of inflationary culture. In the practice and criticism of the visual arts, the term refers to appropriation from mass culture, the “death of the subject,” a Lyotardian “loss of master narratives.” In theatre, “postmodern” has been used to mean the death of character (see Barth 1980; Eco 1984; Newman 1985; Jameson 1984; Foster 1983; and Fuchs 1983. See Carroll 1987 for criticisms of some of these positions).

But this jumble of meanings should not paralyze us in looking at dance history. Jencks disagrees with the way the term is used in literature and the visual arts because his definers for architecture are not necessarily applicable across the arts. Since modernism dictated that each art specialize in its own unique essence, it is not surprising that postmodernism has taken different directions in each art. And yet a fundamental part of postmodernism—or postmodernity—is the antimodernist, interdisciplinary mingling of these previously separate spheres.

In dance the term “postmodern” also has had a specific meaning—as in the other arts, a meaning particular to the discipline, though that meaning has changed over the last three decades. Nevertheless, it is certainly not accidental that its use in critical discourse about dance began to spread first in the mid-’70s in order to track developments, dating from the early ’60s, parallel to those in the other arts.

In one sense, *everything* about our current first-world, post-industrial, mass-media culture is postmodern.

The meaning of the term “postmodern” in dance is partly historical and descriptive, as I have suggested. It began as a choreographer’s term to call attention to an emergent generation of new dance artists. Those choreographers—many, but not all of whom were connected with the Judson Dance Theater—were not necessarily united stylistically. Their methods ranged from chance procedures to improvisation to picture-scores to rule-game and tasks, and from a minimalist interest in sustaining “one thing” to a welter of multimedia. Their vocabulary, too, partook of a uniquely early-’60s spirit of democratic pluralism, embracing unstylized ordinary activities—child’s play, social dancing, daily tasks—as well as the more specialized actions of athletics, ballet, and modern dance techniques. Although these choreographers in no way represented stylistic homogeneity, they were, however, united in their anti-modern dance project—that is, their desire to make dances that departed from the values and practices of the modern dance of Mary Wigman, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, José Limon, and followers. Since the modern dance of the historical era was never modernist (in the sense that visual art,

architecture, literature, and music were), to incorporate modernist notions in dance was actually to rebel against historical modern dance.

By the late '60s and early '70s, as members of this generation increasingly allied themselves with the gallery art world, a more unified style emerged—what I have called “analytic postmodern dance” (Banes 1987). This is the style that in 1975 Michael Kirby pinpointed as postmodern dance (Kirby 1975). Its practitioners included Yvonne Rainer (until, by 1973, she was working exclusively as a film director), Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, David Gordon, Lucinda Childs, and the group Grand Union. Conceptually (rather than musically or literarily) based, analytic postmodern dance was reflexive—not only abstract and shorn of excess theatrical trappings, but also framing these features as revealing the essential characteristics of the medium of dance. It was, that is, *modernist* according to the criteria set down by the art critic Clement Greenberg (1961), and it shared methods and goals with the high modernist project of minimalism, which dominated visual art in the '70s. In postmodern dance, too, the analytic style prevailed, and yet simultaneously another strand of choreographers (such as Meredith Monk, Kenneth King, and Laura Dean), working in a more overtly theatrical vein, pursued in the '70s what I have called “metaphoric postmodern dance” (Banes 1987).

But by the '80s and '90s, a second generation of what could by then only be called postmodern choreographers—many of them students and followers of the first generation—as well as various formations of postmodern movements abroad (such as *butoh* in Japan, *tanztheater* in Germany, new dance in England, *danse actuelle* in Montreal and Paris) had joined the first generation. And, as well, a range of institutions, networks, and festivals had been developed for producing and distributing postmodern dance. Once again, stylistic diversity prevailed, though certain traits recurred—notably, an alliance with the avant/pop music world (and its logical outcome: increased popularity) and an interest in both narrative and the traditions of dance history. As well, the expression of political identity moves a new generation of choreographers to use postmodern strategies to disrupt both the ideology and the discursive practices of mainstream culture, including dance.

Thus recent work by the avantgardists of the '60s and '70s and their progeny joins forces with the historically dissimilar projects of choreographers like Twyla Tharp and Mark Morris. Its references to classicism and to other dance cultures, its plenitude of theatrical means, and its increased accessibility makes this latest chapter of postmodern dance more like what Jencks narrowly admits to the canon of postmodernism than the analytic postmodern dance of the '70s had been. And even though recently postmodern dancers have occasionally entered the mainstream—as in crossover ballets—they can still be characterized as taking a critical or dialectical approach to dance traditions.

All three (or more) of these chapters are part of the story of postmodern dance. This is partly because at various points its practices have meshed with aspects of postmodernism in the other arts. But more importantly, it is because practices that are (compared to the visual arts, for instance) both *modernist* and *postmodernist* have already both been subsumed under the rubric “postmodern dance.” Historically—no matter what its twists, turns, digressions, and alliances along the way—the movement has called itself postmodern, and many of its practitioners still use that title. There is no turning back the clock, in this particular case, even if to do so would

provide the relief of categorical neatness. In a sense, postmodern dance began as a *postmodernist* movement, underwent a *modernist* interlude, and has now embarked on a second *postmodernist* project.¹

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Note

1. Parts of this essay appeared in German in Banes (1989).

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Did We Need a New Name?

I'm too old to be postmodern. It's too hard to be so ironic. I guess avantgarde is about the best I can manage.

—Bob Elliott, of the comedy team “Bob and Ray” on a recent Garrison Keillor radio program

I should have known we were in trouble by 1981. I should have known when Camille Hardy, covering the New Dance Festival in Minneapolis, disclosed that the artists she talked to blamed “limited vocabulary” for impeding their work—and it turned out they didn’t mean movement vocabulary. They seemed to think that they most needed a new name, better language in which to be discussed. Well, they got their language, but I think it did us precious little good. I don’t see more illuminating assessment going on these days, nor much in the way of precise distinctions and insight into what is up there onstage.

“Postmodern” seemed to me a term tried out by writers that showed promise but eventually failed to earn its keep. As an observer, I thought for a while the term was going to be useful. I tended to give it to the laid-back, ordinary-movement movement of the ’70s, those dancers in painters’ coveralls and street clothes playing with structure. There seemed to be an aesthetic emerging from the Judson artists’ work with a profile and valuable new proposals to offer; what has always attracted me about dance is new points of view and ways of moving/building/seeing. I lost interest in the term when the artists used it to attack their predecessors with contemptuous dismissals of “modern dance” concerns. Ignorance of history has never appealed to me. I don’t include the Yvonne Rainer manifesto “No to Virtuosity,” which had its own specific purpose and integrity; that led her to something authentic. I have in mind other, lesser arguments. There was a postmodern claim to have advanced beyond the callow efforts of the ’30s, to have reached new and superior levels of form and sophistication. This position soon showed its hollow core, its void where wisdom might be. It became typical of a kind of softened thinking that has disheartened me in both choreographers and in the writers who articulate and present dance to history.

Some people seemed to think postmodern could mean a “look,” combining loose and colloquial clothing—just a touch of fashiony glitter—and an easygoing movement wordlist from eclectic sources—your Cunningham base, with regular quotes from ballet to demonstrate real technical prowess, and your obligatory devices for amplifying material, and of course your curtsy to the catechism of structure. Some choreographers seemed to appreciate also, in the name, their sense of a point of view they could borrow, and an aesthetic they could latch onto for a free ride into significance. David Gordon has spoken of students from a university approaching him for business advice on how to set up and run a “postmodern dance company.” He had some difficulty, it seems, getting them to discuss what actual work they might want to make on such an entity.

“Postmodernism’s” only values that I could see were negative ones: down with the old goals, the silly passions of the ’30s. There wasn’t anything to the concept except the “post” part. It was unequal to the

variety of genuine advances that we have now seen, say, in the work of Twyla Tharp, Garth Fagan, and William Forsythe. Or Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, or Ann Carlson, or Stephen Koplowitz. It couldn't deal with their strengths or articulate their differences. The term was not, after all, a body of thought. It was only a simplistic notion of time, a hope that *post hoc* can be counted on to support *ergo*, *better than hoc*.

I lost interest in the term when the artists used it to attack their predecessors with contemptuous dismissals of "modern dance" concerns. Ignorance of history has never appealed to me.

The problem may have arisen when people in dance questioned the separation of work into two categories known only to Western theatre dance, "classical" and "modern." This separation is arguably a false one if you consider the acceptance of Nijinsky's work as ballet (his critics did not say it wasn't ballet, they just said it was awful ballet). But it does have some solid premises behind it. The artists working in what they called modern dance believed in the necessity for whole new movement languages, and though fiercely committed to their own, they did understand the role of others alongside. They did more than address new topics and find new dynamics to fit their surrounding environment; this has been done effectively within the classical tradition. They did more than introduce new visual styles in costuming and decor, a leadership which ballet shares. They approached the body and its range of actions in a way that was different, and they implied that differences, in the plural, are of extraordinary value. The dance in bare feet of the '30s began a new opinion about the role of the individual choreographer in making lasting changes of the art form. Our current sense of the choreographer's primacy in a piece, very different from the practice of the ballet companies before 1935 or so, comes strongly from the set of convictions that got named modern dance. Many of these principles are powerful today in the work of our best artists. The name may not matter so much, although I think it is still useful to reserve a special term for work made within a schooled tradition and for the pointe shoe. But I don't see that anything coming after 1960 or any other year proposes enough of a direction, in defiance of possibilities implied by the "modern dance" revolution, to require some new name. It may well happen, but it hasn't yet.

I never wanted the thing stuck on my work, and indeed no one ever did so. If it was a question of declaring obsolete the original values of modern dance, I vote rather for honoring those values, reinstating them, extending them in new directions. I relished weight, force, intensity. In the beginning I was isolated for this, until running and physical fitness became common general interests, at which point my work seemed to become legible to people. I pursued a different kind of beauty. I looked for a new role for emotional expressiveness. I looked for a grammar and vocabulary of movement that used the body in a different and, I hope, truthful way. I looked in movement for information—and finally for hope.

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Is It Post-Postmodern?

Let's begin with a convenient (if not concise) illustration of The Problem: that terminological quagmire we need to try and extricate ourselves from before we can even address, let alone answer, the question, "What's become of postmodern dance?" In 1980, Michael Blackwood produced and directed a well-known documentary film called *Making Dances*. Subtitled "Seven Post-Modern Choreographers," the film examined the work of several founding members of the Judson Dance Theatre—including Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, and David Gordon.

In 1988, Blackwood produced a sequel called *Retracing Steps: American Dance Since Postmodernism*. The "since" seemed to imply that postmodernism (at least in dance) is now behind us, and that we've entered some brave new *post-postmodern* world. The film began with a few paragraphs of printed commentary which attempted to distinguish between then and now:

The 1960s and '70s saw an analytic exploration of pure dance by the first generation of postmodern choreographers, such as Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, David Gordon, and Lucinda Childs. In the 1980s, a new choreographic impulse burst through that formal austerity. Dancers began to wrestle and juggle, dance to pop music and poetry, tell stories, play characters, wear elegant or outrageous costumes, make political statements and embark on open-ended collaborations with artists in other media. The new dance is characterized by a sense of irony and play [. . . and] it views history, genre, and style as rich storehouses of material to rediscover and combine. (1988)

Of course, much of what is here being attributed to the '80s was readily observable in the '60s. (Judson was by no means synonymous with the reductivism of Rainer's legendary "No to this. No to that" manifesto. In fact, in a letter a few years ago, Rainer pointed out:

all those discrepancies—at least in *my* '60s and early '70s output—between theory and practice. The theory may have cleared baby and bathwater off the decks, but even "The Mind Is a Muscle" included a professional juggler and music from the popular idiom: Dimitri Tiomkin, Jefferson Airplane, Frank Sinatra et al! All this in 1968 at the height of the minimalist canon. (1987)

Clearly, it's important—for the sake of historical accuracy—that we not view the '60s and early '70s in monolithic terms. Indeed, Meredith Monk was one of Blackwood's "seven postmodern choreographers" profiled in the earlier film. Monk may work on a shoestring, but she's always been an apostle of intermedia and dance theatre, not of minimalist self-purification. She rarely if ever confines herself to the resources of a single medium.

Still, one can argue (and indeed, I *would* argue) that the most *distinctive* legacy of the Judson era (broadly construed) was the impulse to pare down, to strip away everything deemed extraneous to the underlying nature of the dance medium. Farewell in other words to music, decor, and

theatrical embellishment. (Even Balanchine, after all, had never dispensed with the music.) Exemplary instances of this tendency include many of Brown's *Accumulation* pieces, Rainer's various versions of *Trio A*, and Lucinda Childs' *Calico Mingling*. So yes. . . it oversimplifies matters to equate the '60s with stripped-down purism and the '80s with eclectic, mix-and-match, crazy-quilt collage. But as a generalization about the most significant practices of both decades, such characterizations seem to me perfectly defensible (if not entirely correct). The real problem begins when we invoke that quarrelsome term, "postmodern." What would someone from the world of architecture, music, or painting make of the claim that American dance *since* postmodernism has been characterized by a rejection of minimalist purity, a blurring of the boundaries between high and low culture, and a willed historical eclecticism? In every other art, those are the very tendencies that characterize the postmodern movement (e.g., the architecture of Robert A.M. Stern, the paintings of David Salle, the music of John Zorn). Indeed, here's the way Stern defines postmodernism in architecture:

This condition, frequently labelled as post-modernist, seeks to recuperate traditional form in order to go beyond the impasse of late Modernization with its belligerently anti-symbolic stance, extreme abstraction, and reductionism. (1977:86)

Thus, to an architect, the term postmodern connotes a rejection of the very austerity and reductivism that characterized so many early postmodern dances. In fact, Yvonne Rainer's manifesto of renunciation ("No to spectacle no to virtuosity no to. . . magic and make-believe. . . No to moving or being moved," etc.) sounds very much like the holier-than-thou puritanism of the orthodox modern architects (against whom the postmodern architects rebelled).

For example, one of the rallying cries of modernist architecture was the phrase "form follows function"; it's an injunction against ornamentation and symbolism, an insistence that the appearance of a building be a direct result of the function it performs. Think how similar that sounds to the situation we encounter in Judson-era postmodern "task" dances, where the choreography consists of whatever movements are needed to accomplish the particular task assigned to the performer.

Another phrase that has assumed legendary significance in the lexicon of modernist architecture is "honesty of materials"—in other words, the building materials should be revealed for what they are (surfaces should

If by "postmodern dance" you mean Judson pedestrianism, then (ironically!) the answer is that it's been replaced by choreography that architects, visual artists, and composers would readily recognize as postmodern.

remain unpainted, structural supports should be exposed rather than concealed). Here, the closest choreographic analogy is probably the antiillusionistic proclamations of postmodern dancers like Yvonne Rainer and

Trisha Brown. When Brown posed for herself the problem of “walking on the wall” (her piece with that title was performed at The Whitney Museum in 1971), she made no attempt to conceal her means of structural support.

Which is not to say that it made no sense (within the parochial parameters of dance-world discourse) to refer to Judson-era dance as postmodern. Most, if not all of the dances in question *did* break decisively with the tradition of modern dance that culminated in the work of Martha Graham. And it’s essential to remember that modernism in dance meant the “hot,” expressive, deeply personal work of choreographers like Graham, not the icy, impersonal, geometric purity that one associates with a modernist architect like Mies van der Rohe.¹ Thus the host of problems that arise the moment one attempts to find family resemblances between postmodern dance and postmodern architecture (and clearly, it’s architecture, more than any other art, that provides the model for what people in the culture-at-large mean when they speak of postmodernism).

So let’s return to TDR’s \$64,000 question: “What’s become of postmodern dance?” If by “postmodern dance” you mean Judson-era pedestrianism, then (ironically!) the answer is that it’s been replaced by choreography that architects, visual artists, and composers would readily recognize as postmodern. The choreographers whom Blackwood chose to represent the 1980s in *Retracing Steps: American Dance Since Postmodernism* make no secret of their eagerness to repudiate Judson—or at least the stereotype of those years that Steve Reich had in mind when he declared that: “For a long time during the 1960s one would go to the dance concert where no one danced, followed by the party where everyone danced” (Reich 1973:336). In the film’s first interview, Jim Self informs us that he “felt like saying ‘yes’” to all those things that Rainer dismissed in her manifesto of negativity. Similarly, Molissa Fenley declares, “I dissociated myself from the idea that postmodern dance wasn’t dancey.”

Now, it’s true: the film also features the work of Johanna Boyce whose work so often recalls the Judson years (and one could cite Pooh Kaye, Yoshiko Chuma, and perhaps even Stephanie Skura as present-day choreographers who often evoke the raw, clunky, pedestrianism of Judson). But just as clearly, they’re the exceptions to the dominant direction of the 1980s and early 1990s, an era characterized by a renewed emphasis on virtuosity, an exploration of the representational and expressive capabilities of the medium, and on collaborations between choreographers, composers, and visual artists. Karole Armitage’s *Go Go Ballerina* (1988) was a collaboration with both David Salle and Jeff Poons. It attempted to synthesize the bump and grind gyrations of go-go dancing with the rather more chaste vocabulary of classical ballet.

This willed “impurity” is precisely what people in arts other than dance have in mind when they invoke the phrase “postmodern.” The backlash against Balanchine, the passion for “dance theatre,” the full-fledged retreat from the values of formalism and “pure dance,” the pervasive influence of Pina Bausch and various practitioners of butoh (with its resulting passion for gestures rather than steps) are all part and parcel of postmodern impurity. Then too, one could cite the current vogue for the “multi-cultural.” Every other day, a press release arrives in the mail announcing some new amalgam of tap and kathakali, of break dancing and butoh. This is the blurring of boundaries (national and otherwise) that Jean-Francois Lyotard describes as the “postmodern condition”:

One listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong. (1984:76)

Yes, it sounds terribly fashionable, and at the moment at least, it is. I've run out of space; but if the truth be told, I miss the '60s.

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Note

1. Ah, but what about Merce Cunningham, you may be wondering? For an examination of the problematic relationship between his work and the terms "modern" and "postmodern," see Copeland (1983).

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Postbody, Multibodies?

From the vantage point of Southern California—claimed as home to the most Thais living outside of Thailand, Burmese outside Burma, Vietnamese outside Vietnam, Mexicans outside Mexico, Japanese outside Japan, Chinese outside China..., location of a heterodox population of descendants of immigrants from these cultures, residence for large communities of gays and lesbians, and site of the 1990 Los Angeles-Pacific Rim Arts Festival—viewed from this stage, postmodernism has become a backdrop for the performance of multiculturalism.

Over the past 30 years approaches to art making typically labeled postmodern have challenged the distinctions between high and low art, between professional and amateur, and between art and life itself. They

have contested the genius theory of artist as extrasensitive communicator of archetypal human experience as well as the relationship of viewer to event based on empathic accord. They have experimented with eclectic vocabularies, contrasting styles, and disruptive syntaxes that encourage viewers to participate in a free play of meaning. The best of this art has provided an enabling critique of the classical conventions of Western art; the worst has ripped off titillating images of cultural otherness and pastiched them as a flippant gesture of yuppie malaise.

In the wake of this riotous play of heterogeneous forms and formats, bodies—other than those of white, bourgeois, heterosexuals—have begun to articulate their identities and concerns. Like the postmodern condition which spawned them, these bodies are composites—strange blends of cultural affiliations. Yet, increasingly, they have been given the opportunity to stage their concerns based on their credibility as genuine representatives of distinct and coherent social groups. Thus, even as their performances have enriched the social space with powerful enunciations of bodily expressivity, the marketing of their statements of alterity has tinged them, infected them, with an aura of authenticity.

Asked by the occasion of art and its producers to speak from the center of their communities rather than from the margins, these artists often serve as emblems rather than critics of alternative ways of life. Viewers who are nonmembers of the artist's community, even as they are illumined by this expression of otherness, remain appreciative but unquestioning. The performers' authenticity rebuffs critical inquiry into the

In this we-are-the-world scheduling of art, the viewer finds no exit from the shopping mall of cultural exotica.

nature or depth of difference. The sacral space of art does not permit a geographical or historical locating of the artists' work. (The performance is *not* a lecture-demonstration.) The fact of artistic performance itself—an event deemed both self-explanatory and inexplicable—is seen as an opportunity for the transcendence of the very cultural differences attested to in the presentation. And of all the arts, dance, because of its intrinsic muteness, is perhaps most burdened with the responsibility of converting physical discreteness into spiritual oneness.

Capitulation on the part of producers, viewers, and even the artists themselves to this longing for a traditional otherness with its concomitant potential for union is disturbing for two reasons: First, the production of multicultural performances not only demands sincere expression from each event, but it often programs events alongside one another so as to create spectacles of social difference. In this we-are-the-world scheduling of art, the viewer finds no exit from the shopping mall of cultural exotica. Each performance, as it insists on its uniqueness, competes with the others, rendering them all equivalent. Second, the emphasis on roots, on coherent communities, on authenticity, and on dichotomization and transcendence so far characteristic of multicultural presentations is strongly reminiscent of a modernist approach.

Modernism, which accorded the artist a mystical status, which required the viewer to experience transcendence or fail, and which fed on the alleged antagonism between individual and society, left little opportunity

for the construction of collectivities based upon the mutual acknowledgment of difference. Postmodern strategies of composition that were used to critique Western classicism opened the way for such reflexive coalition building, just as those used to titillate viewers encouraged a superficial good time. As the world borrows from these strategies in order to stage itself, will it only succeed in constructing a postcultural marketplace of multimodernisms?

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TDReading

Of the many *TDR* articles concerning postmodern dance, see the "Post-Modern Dance" issue, vol. 19, no. 1 (T65), Spring 1975; and the "Dance/Movement" issue, vol. 24, no. 4 (T88), Winter 1980.