

# ART & PERFORMANCE NOTES



Video still from the opening sequence of *4 Nights at the Museum* featuring Hito Steyerl's *This is the Future* (2019) installed in *Hito Steyerl: I Will Survive*, a retrospective at K21 in Düsseldorf. Courtesy the artist and Esther Schipper Gallery.

# Inside Dancing, No Fixed Points

Johannes Birringer

*Cunningham*, a documentary film, directed by Alla Kovgan, 2019,  
Magnolia Pictures.

The last time I wrote about a dance documentary, I was aware that I had watched a passionate homage to a revolutionary and influential artist that I shared. *Pina: dance, otherwise we are lost*, released in 2011 by German filmmaker Wim Wenders, came across as a spellbound, yet nonetheless stunning tribute to the late choreographer who did not live to see this visually opulent 3D documentary of her work. In fact, Wenders called it a “film for Pina,” and besides showing some of the most well-known dance creations of Bausch’s early career (*Le Sacre du Printemps*, *Kontakthof*, and *Café Müller*), the filmmaker decided to shift attention away from the choreographer herself onto her dancers, turning Bausch’s famous method—asking questions or prompts during rehearsal—into the method for the film. This could have been illuminating, yet Wenders did not manage to elicit any insightful reflections. The younger generation of dancers overheard in the film seemed equally spellbound, even a little frightened, by the matriarch. Likewise, in *Cunningham*, someone asks the choreographer—who lived to be 90 and created a huge body of work with several generations of dancers—if he thought of himself as a patriarch. “More like a bystander,” was Cunningham’s understated reply.

Alla Kovgan is a filmmaker whose earlier dance videos, such as *Movement (R)evolution Africa* (2007) and the award-winning *Nora* (2009), featuring Zimbabwean dancer Nora Chipaumire, revealed a cinematic aesthetic that was rich with earthy tones and a keen eye for the poetics of landscape and cultural specificity (the film was shot in Africa). Her *Cunningham* documentary took nearly eight years to be completed (with multiple production partners involved, foremost among them, European television channels), reflecting her conceptual rigor and cool cinematic brilliance. She approaches the choreographer’s work with the scholarly precision of an archival researcher or *restorateur* of paintings. Yet the

restoration is beyond expectation, due to her sensual assemblage of old and new, see-sawing between original footage and astonishing site-specific restagings of selected works by members of the last generation of Cunningham dancers, now appearing on rooftops, in airports and tunnels, in forests and castle courtyards. It is more appropriate to think of the restagings as cinematic translations. Kovgan is not interested in the stage or the theatrical languages of dance, but in what her stereographic cameras can do.

Cunningham died in 2009, the same year as Pina Bausch. Unlike his female peer (or Martha Graham, for that matter), he decreed that his dance company would dissolve two years after his passing. For the shoot, Kovgan thus needed to reassemble an extensive cast and crew, and also prepare her 3D cinematography, meticulously manifested through highly complex and vivid camera angles, dolly shots, and lighting atmospheres. Costumes and props, like the fascinating silver pillows once created by Andy Warhol for *Rainforest*, needed to be rebuilt. Fourteen Cunningham dancers perform the restagings. Location scouting took her largely to Germany and France, so that the occasional soundscape from Manhattan (the familiar sirens) oddly converges with a harbor that looks like Hamburg's Elbe river. A curved Frankfurt airport terminal passage appears coldly futuristic, a white non-space that envelops the furtive jagged movements of the dancers in ways that make the viewer relish some of the echoes that haunt the ear in this film, such as Cage's brutally spare reduction of a piano score by Satie (*Socrate*), the dancers' bodies touching the floor or their feet rustling the leaves in the forest. The Stuttgart Schlossplatz is a massive baroque frame for a colorful dance that frolics in comedic abandon (*Somerset*, 1964), watched by curious bystanders as you might find them on a street corner following a clown or juggler. Since the Cunningham company went on their first world tour in 1964, performing in many locations in Europe (warmly welcomed in London, to Cunningham's surprise), these locations hardly seem out of place.

Kovgan uncovered a significant amount of archival footage and photography from Cunningham's early career, when he struggled through hard times. In an interview, he confesses there was no money, no rewards, only dedication to daily hard work: "I really am deeply fond of dancing," he says. And then: "I prefer to risk, I don't know what will happen." Kovgan makes a conscious decision to concentrate on the first thirty years of the choreographer's work (1944–1972). One can imagine why; the entire seventy-year career would have presented a monumental challenge, as the later work also became more media and technology-invested in its own right. He was one of the first major dance artists to work with computer software (*Lifeforms*) and motion capture technology, and had lasting relationships with filmmakers, software engineers, and visual artists throughout his life.

The film ends in the moment when the dancers of the first generation that had worked with Cunningham left or retired. It feels like a caesura, even as his body of work continued to grow to nearly two-hundred compositions. And even in old age, Cunningham would still be seen on stage, somewhere to the side, as theatre director Tadeusz Kantor used to, or supporting a younger dancer, hovering there like a benevolent shaman. But as his dancers relate, he was a stern teacher, a silent and withdrawn personality who rarely spoke in rehearsals. We see him make corrections or show Gus Solomon Jr. (the only black dancer in the group) and Carolyn Brown how he wished them to turn or hold each other. In very few moments do the dancers say much. Cunningham, of course, was never known to care for emotions either; his style transmits a highly rigorous, abstract, ice-cold pure movement vocabulary.

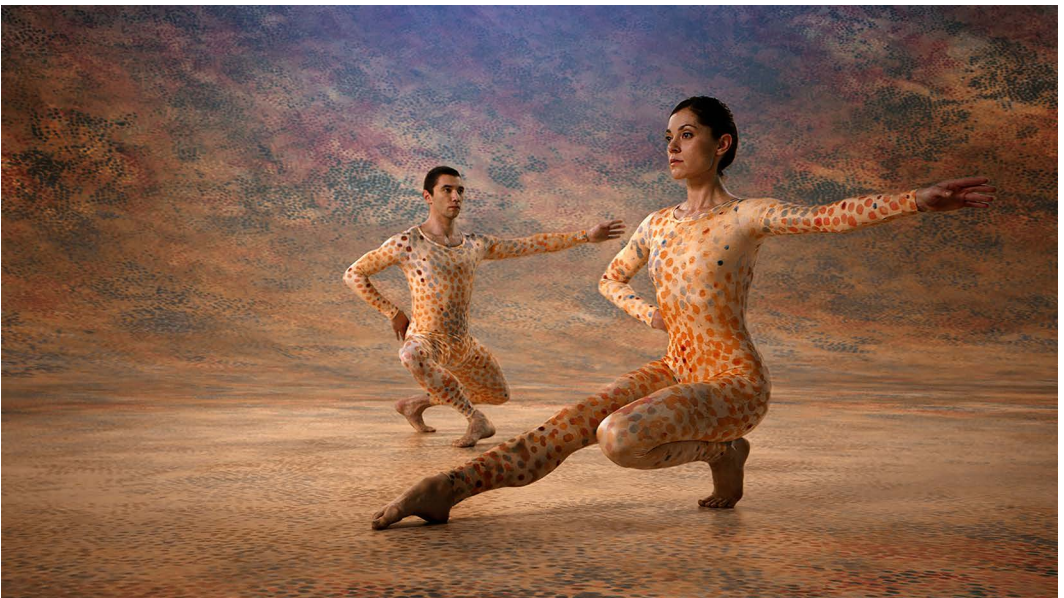
What I notice in Cunningham's early solo work is a quirky, Buster Keaton-esque personality—a man with animal alertness. There is hidden vaudeville humor, noticeable in a lovely duet (a younger dancer recreates Cunningham's original part with a chair tied to the back, while simultaneously there appears the archival footage of *Antic Meet*, 1958). There is a doorframe, standing alone in the empty space. The impression of the chair-man vanishes, as quickly as it appeared, behind this door. There is Cunningham in the mid-1940s again, hopping around on his knees, while John Cage, somberly dressed in black suit and tie, carries a bucket around the stage, walking under a ladder and then bending over some strange electronic contraption that emits screeching noise sound. There are photos of the three future stars, young men looking sexy and confident: Cunningham, Cage, Rauschenberg. What an amazing trio.

Yet the melancholic moment of the dancers' departure is foreshadowed, too. Rauschenberg, who was set designer and artistic director in 1953, when the newly founded Cunningham Dance Company started touring in an old Volkswagen camper van, left in 1964 after having won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennial. Cage and Cunningham were lovers and they had forged a bond that held for the longest time. Kovgan uses an intimate "writing" technique with her 3D technology: in the background, photographs, sometimes in color, and a smaller film-screen frame, left or right, hover in the foreground to show the old archival dance footage. On top of these layers, cursive letters scroll out, citing correspondence between Cunningham and Cage, highlighting their love for each other, or comments drawn from Cunningham's published writings and drawings, such as *Changes: Notes on Choreography* and *Other Animals*.

The film does not speculate on this, though it would be interesting to learn how Cage's Zen studies or writings, particularly in *Silence*, influenced his compositional



*Cunningham*, a film by Alla Kovgan, featuring a scene from *RainForest*, 2019. Photo: Courtesy Barbican Centre.



A scene from *Summerspace*, 2019. Photo: Courtesy Barbican Centre.

method and how this, in turn, affected Cunningham's choreography, algorithmic sensibility, and strict separation between dance, music, and scenography. The separation is important to mention; as Cunningham notes, it is one of the key ideas for the dancers to internalize. Their movements are not set to any music and are rehearsed in silence. The perplexed faces of the early dancers reflect their wonderment at what they were doing, toiling along.

One can comprehend Cunningham's artistic bravado best when looking carefully at the black-and-white 8mm or 16mm film clips, photos, and brief interviews that track this tall, thin choreographer's beginnings: his love of dancing and his stubborn pride in experimenting with "movement possibilities," including a singular purposefulness that invited others to perform, at the same time, independently with him. The use of the stopwatch (for precision in timing) is left unclear, why would it matter unless the counting itself matters (we hear him count to twenty-four at one point). He is pleased when a piece the dancers had not done in a while lasts exactly the same number of minutes. This does not imply that changes are not allowed; the dancers' decision-making is encouraged. Cunningham's early movement is freer and quite weird, more surprising than the cold measured geometries we tend to know from his later company work.

Not strictly speaking a biographical documentary, Kovgan's film pursues a complex dialogue with the artist's work. She feels her way into his aesthetic ideas from her own self-conscious cinematic position, almost as if the cinematographer were probing her medium as a transparent palimpsest, excavating underlying layers and frames of kinetic motion photography and thought. Her film tries to mirror the dance choreography, get inside it; the sparsely used voice recording sometimes gets under the skin. She adheres to a sense of chronology for the fourteen works chosen, moving from Cunningham's solos to his duets, then on to larger ensemble choreographies. Her film slowly expands outwards to a group ethic, a social ethic, except that there never is any mention of the social or political contexts, of the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, the sexual revolution, Woodstock.

Kovgan opens with a prologue that is equally abstracted from the world of early Cunningham in downtown New York or Black Mountain College: fragments of a helicopter shot of the Manhattan skyline at night, and a company of dancers in the far distance, poised and nearly still in their colorful leotards on a rooftop adjacent to a river, then the small figure of a single dancer in the distance, dancing on a single track inside an underground tunnel. The camera very slowly tracks forward and the 3D film eventually moves the dancer right in front of our eyes, as if we could touch his body. Slightly asymmetric motions of the upper body,

arms angled. We hear Cunningham's voice: "I was never interested in dance that expressed the music. It is what it is, it's the whole visual experience," he says in a bemused tone. In later phases of the film, this warm Cunningham voice returns, on occasion, heard through old archival clips. He sounds determined, idealistic yet pedantic, bothered. Not all of it is interesting, and not all of the rehearsal scenes are helpful.

But overall, Kovgan's film gains its texture and intensity through the remarkable dense soundtrack (mixing silence, foley sound of the dancers, with film sound by Volker Bertelmann, and excerpts from original music by Cage, Satie, Feldman, and Wolff) accompanying the sequences of the see-saw and her layered visual portfolio. The archival footage is interrupted by the contemporary restagings on location: there is an outdoor scene in a forest that is breathtaking (*Rune*, 1959), but the most sensational recreations are in fact indoors: *Summerspace* (1958) and *RainForest* (1968), and perhaps to a lesser extent the dark, ominous staging of *Winterbranch* (1964), which is most remarkable for its intricate lighting in a room that resembled a maze-like monastery, the rays of light coming in as if through the lattice work of a confessional booth.

*Summerspace* takes the 3D film technology to its supreme heights, and limitations. Wearing our glasses, we are drawn inside an immersive seamless pointillist landscape, both the setting and the dancers' costumes (created by Rauschenberg) merging into one overall motion picture. It is a feast for the eyes, remaining memorable since the choreography blends so immaculately with the visual design. What is also noticeable, from the earliest 3D scene in this film, is the distortion of perspective that slowly and inevitably began to bother me when watching the film. While the three-dimensional camera rendering of the wandering subjective focus allows for an intensive feeling of immersion, moving us close to the dancers and inside the space, it also distances and repels us, in a way, since we become aware of scaling and proportion problems, and the absent vanishing point.

In *Summerspace* and *Winterbranch* we are too close to the dancers: they look too small, and appear almost animated, avatar-like, not real. They begin to look artificial in their forced geometric, doll-like motions, expressionless faces, angular arms and torque. I felt alienated from them, and this is my greatest regret after watching the beautiful film by Kovgan, especially her evocative restaging of *RainForest*, where dancers seem to blow the helium-filled silver pillows, cloudlike wanderers searching for a home. Her cinematography enmeshes me in a sanguine narrative about a choreographer's artistic vision, his unmistakable desire to discover new and unusually complex, arched "movement solutions" (as they call it in Cunningham technique class), putting the dancers on the brink of failure, on a plane

where in fact the movement may not resonate with a body. I leave the screening with a strange sensation, melancholy on the one hand, relief on the other.

---

JOHANNES BIRRINGER is a contributing editor to *PAJ* and a choreographer/co-director of the Design and Performance Lab. DAP-Lab's multimedia dance *Mourning for a dead moon* premiered in December 2019; the short film *Gravel Maraboutage* was released in November 2020. His new book *Kinetic Atmospheres: Performance and Immersion* (Routledge) is forthcoming.