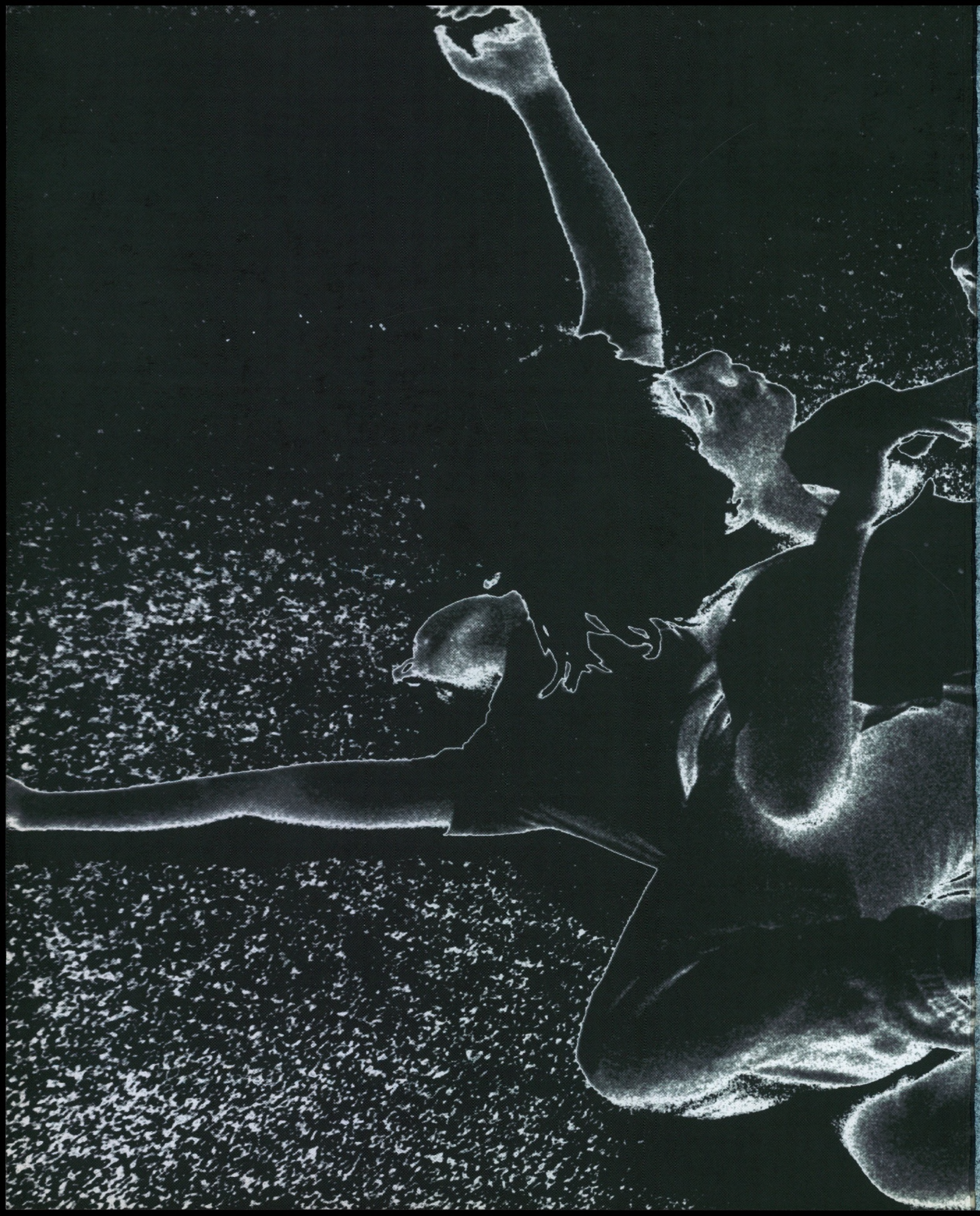
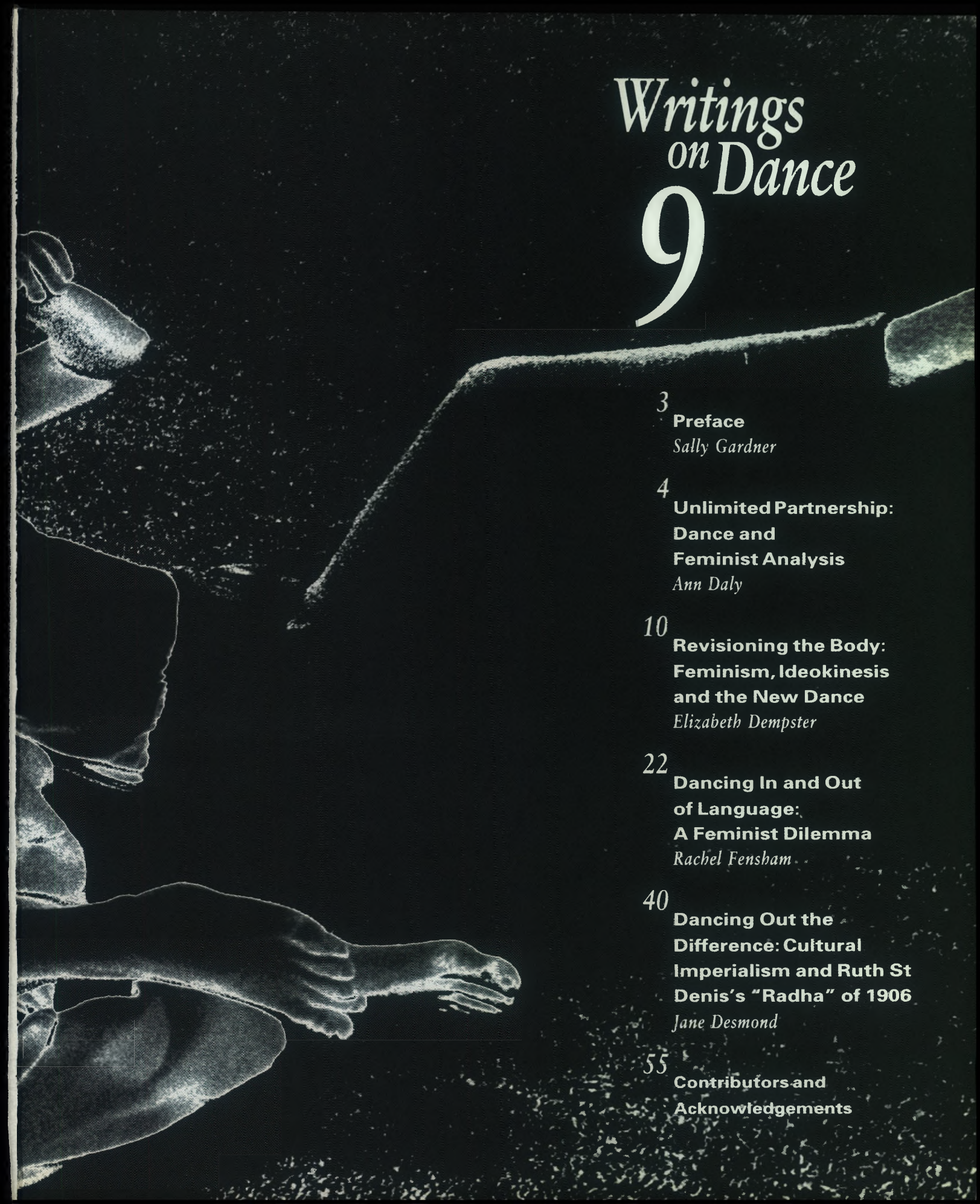


Autumn 1993

Writings on Dance

Thinking through Feminism





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THINKING THROUGH FEMINISM**

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Preface

by Sally Gardner

Modern dance and twentieth century feminism could be said to have developed side by side. Some dance artists have spoken of their practice in feminist terms: at the beginning of the century Isadora Duncan saw the dancer of the future dancing “the freedom of women”. Some commentators, too, have attempted to review and rewrite modern dance history as a (feminist) political trajectory. But these kinds of overt and self-conscious intersections between the two movements have been limited. Most cultural theorists, including feminist ones, have seen little dance and, it would seem, have seen little in the art form to arouse their critical interest.

The possible reasons for this curious lacuna – some of them explored here by Elizabeth Dempster – are themselves of great interest. They only add weight to our belief that it is vitally necessary to undertake a concerted analysis of historical and contemporary forms of dance practice from the perspectives offered by feminism. The possibility exists, as Ann Daly elaborates in her article, for an “unlimited partnership”.

Dance as a performance art is a unique site where key terms upon which feminist enquiry turns – women, women’s bodies, sexual difference, forms of embodiment and representation – are literally incorporated. A dialogue between dance practice and feminist theory will raise challenges to both. In such a dialogue crucial differences between dance forms and practices will have to be articulated, and new forms and practices will be suggested. New perspectives and new objects of inquiry will emerge for feminist theory. But surely the most important outcome of thinking dance through feminism must be the contribution it will make, in a wider context, to our imagining and articulation of alternative forms of embodiment, subjectivity and representation.

Unlimited Partner

Among all the arts in western culture, dance may have the most to gain from feminist analysis. Certainly the two are highly compatible. Dance is an art form of the body, and the body is where gender distinctions are generally understood to originate. The inquiries that feminist analysis makes into the ways that the body is shaped and comes to have meaning are directly and immediately applicable to the study of dance, which is, after all, a kind of living laboratory for the study of the body – its training, its stories, its way of being and being seen in the world. As a traditionally female-populated (but not necessarily female-dominated) field that perpetuates some of our culture's most potent symbols of femininity, western theatrical dance provides feminist analysis with its potentially richest material.

Dance and Feminist Analysis

ship

by Ann Daly

Like any kind of analysis, feminist analysis is a quest to determine how something is put together – how it works. Feminist analysis draws upon a variety of methodologies: newer ones such as semiotics (the study of symbolic systems) and deconstruction (loosely speaking, a kind of reading “against the grain” to unearth an underlying ideology), and more traditional ones such as ethnography and movement analysis. Rather than being defined by any particular methodology, feminist analysis is distinguished by its point of view.

Earlier in this century, when the social sciences were still identifying and defining themselves with the “hard” sciences in their bid for legitimacy, admitting a point of view was as good as confessing sin. But today that patina of objectivity has been tarnished. No analysis, no interpretation, no history, no criticism is ever disinterested. Every inquiry, inasmuch as it asks certain questions and not others, is governed by some point of view. Ideology exists everywhere, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged. The traditional social sciences, whose white, male, middle-class, high modern ideology has long passed for disinterested, has been invigorated in the past twenty years by a host of other points of view. These alternative perspectives – including those of feminists – have yielded a much richer understanding of history, anthropology, literature, and the arts.

The feminist point of view in the United States can be defined only broadly. Really, one cannot talk about *the* feminist point of view at all, for beyond the specific concern with women, feminism at this moment of entry into the '90s is a widely varying phenomenon.¹ The variety is part generational, part personal, and part theoretical.²

Late twentieth-century feminism burst onto the social and academic scenes in the late 1960s-early 1970s as “Women’s Lib”. At that point, generally speaking, feminism was concerned with ennobling the history, culture, and social reality of Woman. Literary scholars initiated a kind of analysis that focused on images of women, separating the regressive from the progressive. In the burgeoning genre of performance art, ritual enactments that reclaimed the archetypal Goddess helped to empower women on a personal as well as aesthetic level.

Today, a generation later, the context for feminist analysis is very different. The backlash against feminism is fierce and, if you can believe the “New Traditionalist” advertising campaign of *Good Housekeeping*, an overwhelming trend.³ The framework for feminist analysis of the arts has changed radically, too. With the introduction of semiotics and psychoanalysis into the feminist discourse by cinema studies in the '70s, the terms of analysis shifted from a social to a theoretical ground. Two key changes in

“The power of the spectator in constructing the repre-
As tiresome as this term has become to
that, in modern western culture, the one who
despite the actual

thinking occurred that underlie most of current American feminist analysis in the arts.

First, feminist scholars no longer accept blindly a category of Mankind known as Woman. Although the earlier generation of feminists embraced and found empowerment in the notion of their fundamental difference from men, an outspoken segment of the current generation of feminist scholars (along with postmodernists in all fields) has called into question the very concept of “difference”. For difference, Monique Wittig wrote in 1982, necessarily implies dominance. It separates the world into an “us” and a “them,” with the “us” always providing the measuring stick and the “them” inevitably failing to measure up. In modern western culture, Woman has always been the Other, defined according to the fantasies and power structures of men.

Second, the object of analysis has been shifted from just the image itself, in isolation, to the entire *process* of representation, which also encompasses the spectator and her/his process of interpretation. The power of the spectator in constructing the representation has been dubbed the “male gaze” (Mulvey 1975 and Kaplan 1983). As tiresome as this term has become to feminists and non-feminists alike, it remains a fundamental concept: that, in modern western culture, the one who sees and the one who is seen are gendered positions, despite the actual sex of the participants. The one who is looked at – the performer who puts her/himself on display for the spectator – is in a passive, traditionally female position. The spectator, again regardless of her/his actual sex, is the one who looks – who consumes, who possesses – the image on display. The spectator is in the position of power: a traditionally male position. Thus, the term the “male gaze”.⁴

As fragmented as the current intellectual climate seems – deconstruction, semiotics, postmodernism, ethnography, etc. – it all revolves around the issue of representation. How

is a representation created? Whose point of view does it embody? What role does it have in the spectator’s construction of everyday reality? Feminist scholars today are concerned with the schism between cultural or aesthetic representations of Woman and the lives of real women. How does our culture – a patriarchal one – construct representations of Woman that somehow come to determine our standards of femininity in everyday life, where women are not usually sylphs or pin-up girls? How can women represent themselves on stage without being co-opted by the conventions and expectations of the male gaze? Is it possible for women to reconstruct their own standards of beauty that need not depend on becoming the object of male desire?

The theory of the male gaze has obvious implications for dance, and dance has much to offer to the development of that theory. In film, where the concept of the male gaze originated, the performer is flat on a piece of celluloid: in dance, the performer is live. How does that affect the dynamics of the male gaze? Is the male gaze then more vulnerable to being dismantled when the performer is live? How can a dancer – who fundamentally displays her/his body for the viewer – avoid being objectified? Does some dance create a literal and metaphorical space in which spectator and performer can share the dance together, on equal terms, rather than the one serving her/himself up for the other? Are there dancers who have been able to achieve this?

At this time, most feminist dance analysis is brewing informally in discussion groups, individual exchanges, and classrooms, as well as at conferences.⁵ Some of this activity has made its way into print, taking a variety of forms: criticism⁶, history, biography, formal analysis, ethnography, interviews, and roundtable discussions.⁷ The subject matter ranges from nineteenth-century travesty dancing to the *pas de deux* and dance criticism, from George Balanchine to Pooh Kaye and Martha Graham.

Several years ago an entire issue of *Women & Performance:*

sentation has been dubbed the ‘male gaze.’ [...]
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sex of the participants.”

A Journal of Feminist Theory (Goldberg 1987/88) was devoted to dance. It was called “The Body as Discourse”. The variety of articles in this special issue indicates the range of content, methodology, and point of view in feminist dance scholarship. Issue editor Marianne Goldberg’s essay was a poetic text that probed the theoretical underpinnings and cultural connotations of the female body in dance. Carol Martin reflected on the complexity of analyzing gender across culture, pointing out both the imperialistic dangers of imposing one’s own agenda on another culture and the potential benefits of finding new ways of thinking about gender. Goldberg and Ann Cooper Albright held a roundtable discussion with postmodern choreographers Wendy Perron, Johanna Boyce, and Pooh Kaye, to record their perspectives on the problems and possibilities of being female on stage. My own essay attempted to deconstruct some of the critical rhetoric that has conspired to preserve the notion of difference and of male superiority in classical ballet. Two other authors focused on women artists who have been marginalized by mainstream history and criticism: Ann Gavere Kilkelly on tap dancer Brenda Bufalino and Lynn Garafola on choreographer Bronislava Nijinska, most often referred to as the sister of Vaslav Nijinsky.

Once you start thinking about the kinds of questions that might be prompted by feminist analysis, the list seems endless: Why was it almost exclusively women who invented modern dance? Is a dance of universal emotion possible, or is it always colored by gender expectations, based on the sex of the performer? What was Marie Salle’s theory and practice of the *ballet d’action*? Was Delsartism a liberating outlet for women’s creativity in the late nineteenth century, or was it a restrictive, sanctioned outlet for women’s potentially hysterical “emotionalism”? How did Isadora Duncan’s radical reconfiguration of the conventions of dance allow her to defuse the issue of “sex” in her

stage presentation? What is the relative importance of anatomy, training, and cultural conditioning in the construction of female and male body images in dance? How has the female and male body image of modern dance, or ballet, changed over the past hundred years, and what do those changes tell us about shifts in culture? What are the differences between dance forms that depend on the mirror in the training process and those that do not? What were the feminist implications of Yvonne Rainer’s “dances of denial”? How does the social hierarchy of the dance world embody sexist attitudes? Does Pina Bausch’s *tanztheater* effectively condemn or glorify gender warfare?

The value of feminist analysis to dance studies, however, is not just for feminists. It promises to contribute to the development of the field at large, in at least four ways. First, the emphasis on the process of representation is leading to new insights into the ways that dance produces meaning. Second, research about dance figures overlooked by the canon (the list of dances, choreographers, and dancers that our field generally agrees are the most important) is enriching and expanding our understanding of dance history. Third, the introduction of theories and ideas from other disciplines is a potential stimulant to dance scholars of all persuasions. And fourth, the broadened view of dance as a cultural practice, rather than as a purely aesthetic phenomenon, will lead dance into a more prominent place in the social sciences. In this sense, feminist analysis is part of a larger trend in our discipline toward an expanded concept of dance studies as a field of significant social, political, and cultural relevance.⁸

Notes

- 1 See Dolan 1988 for an explanation of three basic feminisms: liberal feminism, cultural (or radical) feminism, and materialist feminism.
- 2 I am concerned here with the issues of American feminist theory. French feminist theory has developed in a different way. Its preoccupations

Unlimited Partnership

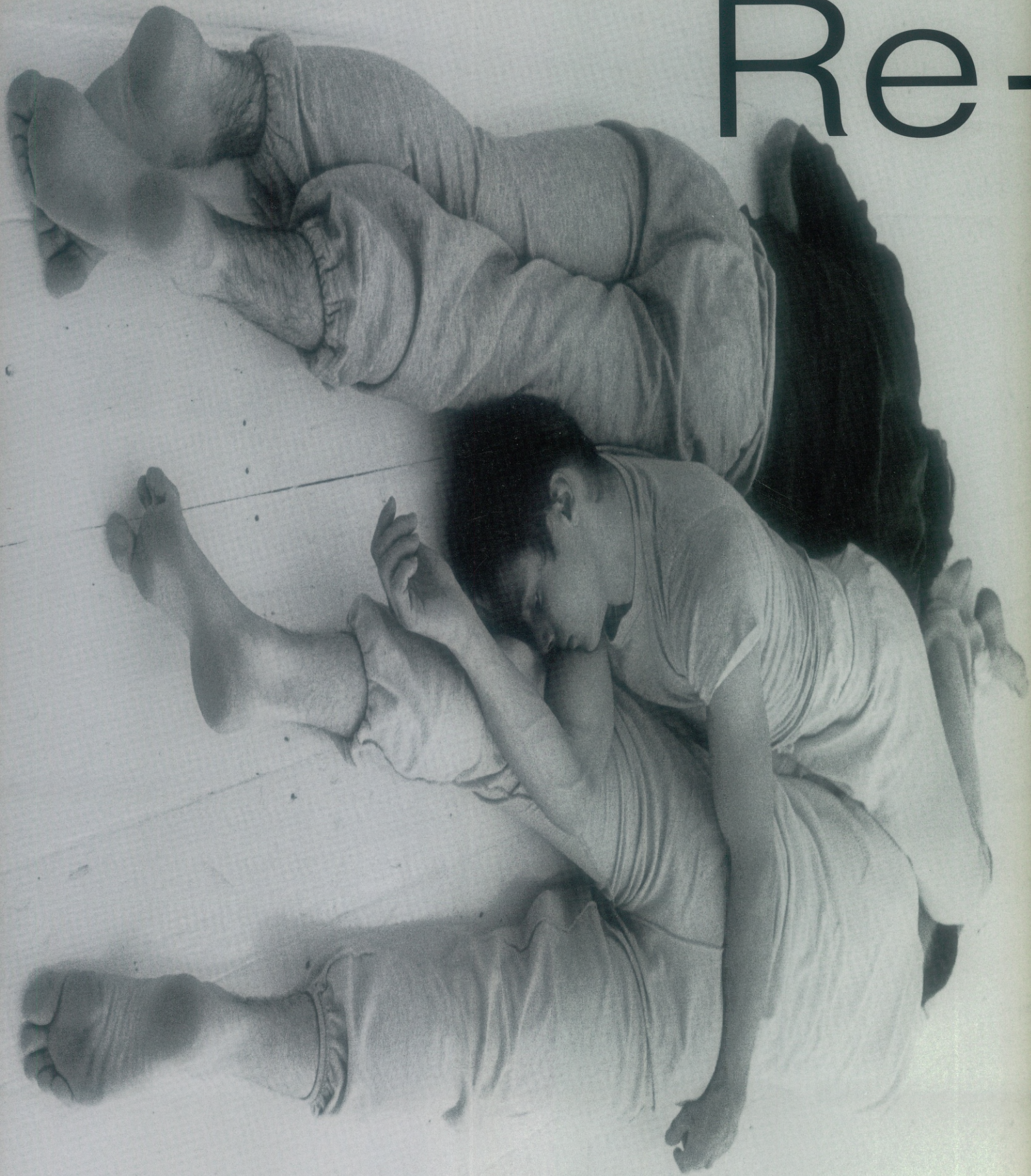
pation with the uniqueness of the female body – what has been dubbed “essentialism” on this side of the Atlantic – provides provocative reading for scholars in dance studies. For a comprehensive treatment of the concerns and development of both American and French feminist literary theory see Moi 1985.

- 3 The campaign took place in both print and broadcasting. One newspaper advertisement, on the back page of the *New York Times* Business section on 26 January 1989, pictured a neatly trimmed mother, with son in sneakers and daughter in full balletic regalia, stiffly attempting a *port de bras*. “She’s [the New Traditionalist mother] not following a trend”, the copy read, in part. “She is the trend, now being recognized as the most powerful social movement since the sixties.”
- 4 Feminist theorists are now trying to push further and deeper beyond the theory of the male gaze. Jessica Benjamin 1986, Teresa de Lauretis 1987, and Julia Kristeva 1978 and 1984 have proposed alternative or expanded concepts of representation that do allow a space for women. Kristeva’s ideas are especially suitable to the medium of dance, because they take into account the meaning that is generated by the body (see Daly forthcoming).
- 5 Feminist dance scholarship has become a regular feature of annual conferences of the Dance Critics Association, the Society of Dance History Scholars, the Congress on Research in Dance, and the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, whose Women and Theatre program holds its own pre-conference each year. Most of these organizations offer conference transcripts, proceedings, or audiotapes.
- 6 *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* publishes feminist dance criticism in each of its semi-annual volumes.
- 7 For a select list of published feminist dance scholarship, see the references listed below.
- 8 See Foster 1986, Garafola 1989, Jowitt 1988, and Novack 1990.

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—visioning the

Feminism, Ideokinesis
and the New Dance



PHOTOGRAPH: RUSSELL DUMAS

Body

by Elizabeth Dempster

How to sense and make sense of other cultures?

This is the central issue of *The Varieties of Sensory Experience* (1991), a diverse collection of essays brought together by anthropologist, David Howes. The book charts the emergence of a new field of study, the anthropology of the senses.

As described by Howes, this is a field and an approach which is concerned with the ways in which different societies use, combine, develop and value the senses. In this context the senses are regarded not as passive 'windows' on the world but as active shapers and bearers of culture.

Revising The Body

Howes introduces his book by noting Western societies' overwhelming dependence upon visual and verbal faculties for their experience of the world. He argues that 'it is only by developing a rigorous awareness of the visual and textual biases of the Western episteme that we can hope to make sense of how life is lived in other cultural settings' (Howes 1991:3). He also expresses the hope 'that the wisdom gained by plunging into the realm of the non-visual senses ... can help to liberate us from the hegemony which sight has for so long exercised over our own culture's social, intellectual and aesthetic life' (1991:4). How is this reevaluation of sensory modalities to be achieved? How might we 'make sense' of the other?

My interest in the present essay is not with that traditional object of anthropology, the 'other' culture, but with the otherness of a particular micro or sub-culture which I have dubbed, rather imprecisely, 'new dance'. One of the enduring legacies of the modern dance tradition and an important part of its continuing vitality is its commitment to a process of reevaluation and rebalancing of the sensory order of our own culture. Modern dance artists have systematically explored and re-evaluated the sensory modalities at work in dance and in so doing have contributed to a developing critique of the hegemony of vision in Western aesthetics and more broadly, in Western culture. Dance has played a significant, if under-recognised, part in what Martin Jay (1986:19) has termed the 'anti-visual' discourse of twentieth century thought. I cite Howes' book in this context because it, unlike any dance text that I am aware of, asserts the necessity of experimenting with other ways of sensing the world whilst acknowledging the difficulty of the undertaking. Perception is not value-neutral; the sensory order is bound up with the social and cultural order in ways which render it resistant to change. To represent the dancer's labour as merely a bio-mechanical achievement, a matter of muscular and nervous control, is to insist on a disjunction between the body, the self, the social and cultural. With this kind of representation, and it is common in the West, the significance of the dancer's labour, its particular contribution to culture, is denied.

Howes' introductory essay, *'To Summon all the Senses,'* begins with an incisive critique of the visual reductionism of Western canons of aesthetics. The origin of the hyper-visual aesthetic of contemporary Western cultures can be traced,

in Howes' view, to the invention of linear perspective by the fifteenth-century painter Leon Battista Alberti. A more detailed historical account of the privileged role of vision in the West would have to include consideration of such things as the rise of modern science and the Gutenberg revolution in printing. But suffice it to say that vision was given an especially powerful role in the modern era.¹ In this essay I will outline some of the effects of the dominance of visual paradigms as they are evidenced in dance aesthetics, contemporary theories of the subject and the politics of gender.

While cultures vary greatly in their exploitation of the senses, most manifest some bias, emphasizing certain sensory expression and excluding others. A particular sensory mode will be privileged; another will be suppressed. The privileged and powerful sense of sight is, in developmental terms, a second order sense, grounded in and dependent upon the primary, proximity senses of touch, taste, smell and kinaesthesia. The primacy of vision in the West is thus achieved via a kind of repression of the proximity senses, those senses most tied to and associated with the infant and maternal bodies. As we grow we are encouraged to turn aside from childish things. Thus dance ranks low in the Western aesthetic hierarchy; it is an art of children, of the 'primitive', of the other. And this is so, even if, as in its mainstream manifestations, dance seeks to conform to the dictates of a hyper-visual aesthetic.

However, the sensorium is not totalizing, nor is it fixed (Ong 1967).² It shifts, and there are usually exceptions to the dominant sensory model existing in a society at any given time. In our society alternatives to a visually dominated sensorium are present in the practices, methods and philosophies of a number of new dance forms. David Howes asks: What is the world like to a culture that takes actuality in less visual, more gustatory or tactile, auditory or olfactory terms than those to which we are accustomed? My question would be: What is the world like to an individual who takes actuality in more tactile and kinaesthetic terms than those to which we are accustomed? What is her or his experience of embodiment? How does she 'know' the world? The question of the alternative sensory models inherent in and developed by certain forms and styles of new dance practice will be taken up more fully later in the paper, but let's consider for a moment the

example of Contact Improvisation.

Contact Improvisation is a dance practice which at certain key moments suppresses visual perception as a primary source of information and orientation in the world in order to privilege the tactile and the kinaesthetic. In training, the Contact dancer works to reduce his reliance on vision so that he may develop more finely discriminated and powerful kinaesthetic awareness. The dancer learns to respond to kinaesthetic and tactile cues with great rapidity, ease and subtlety. In a Contact duet the dancer is reliant on a highly refined awareness of touch; in a very real sense he resides in his skin. Although the situation has changed somewhat today, it is interesting to note that Contact Improvisation developed in the United States during the 1960s and '70s essentially as a participant form, a dancing one did, not a dancing one watched. The place of the spectator was virtually eliminated.

Contact Improvisation has attempted to create and inhabit a world ordered by a sensory ratio unlike that of the dominant culture within which it has evolved. But the sensory is bound closely to the social and cultural and so it may be that the new sensory order which Contact has heralded may not be sustainable outside of those particular socio-political circumstances (of '60s and '70s counter-cultures) which supported its early development. In the 1980s a more presentational and performance oriented style of Contact Improvisation has emerged. In *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* Cynthia Novack traces the development of Contact, outlining the changes it has undergone in terms of a wider cultural movement. She summarizes Contact's contemporary significance as follows:

Contact improvisation as the embodiment of a political period, the '60s, reveals a certain legacy. It signifies the struggle throughout the '60s to create alternative organizations for dance, both social and artistically... The difficulties encountered attest to the power of social structures to limit cultural invention, but the experiences which were and are being created continue to hold forth other possibilities.

Contact improvisation constituted one part of a larger cultural preoccupation with the body emerging in the '60s... "Body" became something to be experienced "from the inside," seen to represent and create a sense of self that was sensual, physical, and physically intelligent. This body is now

a cultural concept manifest in many kinds of artistic, athletic, educational and therapeutic practices. These ideas existed before the '60s, and they have never achieved cultural hegemony. But this conception of the body on which they are based became a significant part of everyday practices in certain realms of the culture in the '60s and continues today. (1990:232)

A 'sense of self that (is) sensual, physical and physically intelligent' – how different from the Cartesian notion of the self as 'pilot of the (body) ship', or the self *theo-rized* as a place of seeing, as detached spectator of the world.

The spectator self

One of the many, far-reaching cultural repercussions of the new 'technologies of seeing' developed in the arts and sciences in the modern era was the emergence of a distinctive style of subjectivity, a distinctive way of apprehending the world. The modern era witnessed the emergence of the modern subject, both producer and product of an ocular and logocentric world view. In *Technology as Symptom and Dream*, Robert Romanshyn characterizes this modern subject as a 'spectator self'. He describes how,

within the landscape of linear perspective vision the self becomes a spectator ensconced behind his or her window on the world, how the body, now divorced from this self, becomes a specimen, and how the world, as a matter for this detached and observing eye, becomes a spectacle (1989:31).

The conceptualisation and construction of the self as spectator has impacted upon aesthetic theory, giving rise to notions of 'right spectatorship'. The concept of right spectatorship represents a model of aesthetic experience and also a principle or structure which legitimates and regulates access to particular subject positions. In *Staging the Gaze* Barbara Freedman draws upon Albrecht Dürer's famous woodcut of the draftsman at work, *Man Drawing Reclining Woman* (Figure 1), in her discussion of the notions of 'right and erring spectatorship'. As is depicted in Dürer's woodcut, the development of linear perspective initially required the support of a structure, a grid, which fixed the painter's eye upon its object. Freedman argues that the concept of right spectatorship underpinning Western aesthetics, and so lucidly represented by Dürer, authorizes particular subject positions in ways which are at least in part a function of gender ideology.

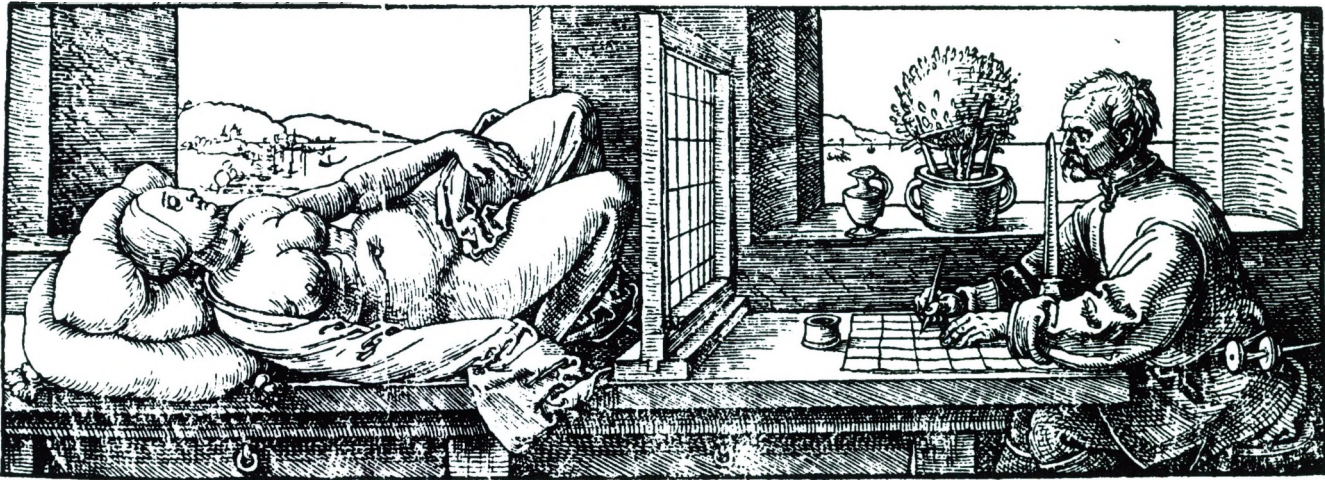


FIGURE 1: ALBRECHT DÜRER, WOODCUT FROM *DE SYMMETRIA PARTIUM HUMANORUM CORPORUM*, 1532

Since this famous woodcut documents the development of the painter's perspective, we usually identify with the artist's point of view. In the process however, we identify with the male as the appropriate bearer of the look, the female as the appropriate object of that look; we identify with reason against sexuality, activity over passivity, and seeing instead of showing... Visual cues facilitate our identification with the painter and encourage the equation of right spectatorship with a controlling patriarchal perspective (1991:2).

Freedman's point is, however, that Dürer's woodcut, read from another perspective, 'plays out, reverses, and ... complicates positions of right and erring spectatorship'.(1)

Once we adopt the woman's perspective, the picture neatly reverses itself. The woman lies comfortably relaxed; the artist sits upright, rigidly constrained by his fixed position. The woman knows that she is seen; the artist is blinded by his viewing apparatus, deluded by his fantasy of objectivity.(2)

The image is theatrical; it functions as 'an interactive trap or strategic decentering that breaks down distinctions between the observer and the observed'(1). The theatrical, Freedman argues, is that which renders a steady position of spectatorship impossible. It undermines and confounds the fantasy of a unified, fixed spectator self. Theatre, and theatricality 'evoke an uncanny sense that the given to be seen has the power both to position us and displace us'(1), and therein, Freedman asserts, lies its subversive force.

The exploration of the structure and nature of spectatorship is a fundamental ground of theatre and performance of all kinds and a subject of enduring interest to choreographic and theatre artists. The strategies explored

by the new dance artists of the 1960s and '70s in their search for alternatives to traditional audience-performer relations, involved the examination, unsettling and in some cases dismantling of the place of the spectator.³ Artists were involved in an exploration of the limits and possibilities of the 'theatrical' as they sought to re-negotiate the place and meanings of the body in the theatre frame. The proscenium stage as a site of performance was eschewed in favour of more ambiguous spaces; that is, spaces such as gymnasiums, galleries, loft studios, parks, rooftops, streets, where the boundary between the watcher and the watched, the dancer and the spectator was less assuredly demarcated. The contract, often breached, but conventionally governing relations between dancer and spectator, with each adhering to her or his 'proper' place and role, is supported architecturally in a proscenium-style theatre by a clear separation of house and stage. In the non-theatre spaces used by performing artists in the 1960s and '70s this 'contract' could not so readily be assumed or activated. The relation between performer and spectator was subject to revision. The inviolability (invisibility?) of the spectator self was threatened and undermined.

In psychoanalytic theory the genesis of the individual subject has also been conceptualized in overwhelmingly visual, specular terms. Jacques Lacan posits the 'mirror stage' as a crucial, if not the founding, moment of the formation of the ego. Speaking of this moment, Elizabeth Grosz observes that: 'The child sees an image of itself as an organized and integrated totality' (1990:38), however, this image of unity is 'in contrast to the turbulent movements

that the subject feels are animating him' (Lacan 1977:2). The infant exists in a state of physiological immaturity; he is immured in 'motor incapacity and nursing dependency' (Lacan 1977:2). His body is an unco-ordinated, fragmented aggregate, a *corps morcele*, a body-in-bits-and-pieces. Vision is the powerful tool by which the nascent ego self triumphs over the (immature and chaotic) body. The child pointing to its own image in the mirror cries out in delight: "That's me!" In this moment the power of the eye secures the 'I'. The mirror is the stage which sets in play the drama of 'I' and 'me'; it inaugurates the subject's containment within an irreducible dyad: 'I am a body. I have a body.' (see Merleau-Ponty 1962).

The primacy of the visual in this stage of subject formation is not surprising, Grosz argues, 'if we understand the genesis of the ego as a specifically social process, one that is culturally and historically variable in its structure.' Elaborating on the significance of vision in the genesis of the modern Western subject she notes:

Of all the senses, vision remains the one which most readily confirms the separation of subject from object. Vision performs a distancing function, leaving the onlooker unimplicated in or uncontaminated by its object... The child's recognition of its own image means that it has adopted the perspective of exteriority on itself (1990:38).

Grosz concedes that other kinds of perceptual identifications are possible but she states that 'only the simultaneity afforded by sight confirms the integrity of a cohesive self and body.' In her view 'none of the other senses have this ability to perceive 'synchronically', in a non-linear and non-temporal fashion' (39). But perhaps it is all a matter of practice.

Drew Leder, author of *The Absent Body*, a detailed and fascinating study of the structure and nature of embodiment, reminds us of the powerful interaction of cultural belief and social practice, of how they are mutually engendering structures. He cites this example:

Our cultural belief in the dissociation of mind from body leads to an increase of disassociative practices; we are encouraged to abandon sensorimotor awareness for abstracted mathematical or linguistic forms. This in turn intensifies the day-to-day experience of mind as disembodied, confirming the initial cultural premise (1990:152).

If we tacitly accept that the eye and the I are twinned,

that sight alone engenders a (mistaken) sense of a unified self and if we have no experience or practice which challenges sight's hegemony then it might seem nonsensical or mere whimsy to state as I have done above that a Contact dancer experiences himself in /on /as skin. But this identification of self and body is a result, an achievement, of practice. The whole of the dancer's skin surface is alive with sensation and his sense of self and his intelligence comfortably dwell there. He practices this awareness.

Howes has also posed the question of whether it is possible to think in touch. He observes that 'the idea of touch as a medium of intelligence seems foreign to us because of a long established Western bias in favour of sight' (1991:10). This visual bias is not a disembodied intellectual commitment. Our faith and belief in the power of vision as the most informative and trustworthy of the senses is practiced daily and woven tightly into the fabric of our lives. Tempering our notion of the natural and unquestionable superiority of sight, Helen Keller once noted: 'Touch brings the blind many sweet certainties which our more fortunate fellows miss, because their sense of touch is uncultivated. When they look at things they put their hands in their pockets. No doubt that is one reason why their knowledge is often so vague, inaccurate and useless' (1902:42).

The visual bias of Freudian and Lacanian accounts of the subject also has implications for feminism and Grosz has identified this bias as a focus of feminist opposition to and critique of psychoanalytic theory. She writes:

Lacan's oclarcentrism – his vision-centredness- in complicity with Freud's, privileges the male body as a phallic, virile body and regards the female body as castrated... we should note here that the female can be construed as castrated, as lacking a sexual organ, only on the information provided by vision. The other sensori-perceptual organs would have confirmed the presence of a female organ instead of the absence of a male organ (1990:39).

From a phallogocentric perspective, women's bodies are judged to be lacking, incomplete, and this 'natural inferiority and inequality' has been used to explain and justify the unequal social status of women.

Because of the ways in which misogynist and patriarchal thinking has used fixed concepts of the body and notions of biological determinism to denigrate and restrict women,

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feminists have been wary of ascribing to women any special or distinctive relation to the body. Whilst I am aware of the dangers of essentializing women's experience, I want to suggest that women's active engagement in and cultivation of the body and the senses can be valued as a distinctive and creative tactical response to a body-denying patriarchal culture. In the field of modern dance, dancers and choreographers, predominately female, have been deeply engaged in the development and refinement of their bodies' potential for skilled movement, and they have pursued this development by focusing upon the socially devalued and denigrated senses of touch and kinaesthesia. A striking feature of the dance they have developed through this inquiry is the degree to which it is grounded in and expressive of these previously devalued senses, not to the exclusion of the visual, but in a revised relation to it. The place and role of vision is no longer dominant in this revised sensory ratio.

For the early modern dance choreographers the act of choreographing was a process of discovering or inventing movement. They did not begin, as the ballet choreographer does, with an already established technique and style of moving, but shaped the dancer's body and movement to the specific expressive needs of each new dance they made. In modern dance the processes of training the body and evolving a technical vocabulary for the purpose of training have been inextricably linked with the creative process of making dances. In the ballet the two activities – training, that is, mastering the established technique, and choreographing – have become functionally discrete. The ballet technique and vocabulary logically precedes the creative action of the choreographer. In modern dance the role of technique is somewhat differently conceived:

(Modern dance) concentrates – as a point of definition – on constantly rediscovering dance... As a consequence, there are modern dance techniques but not one modern dance technique. Because of this, modern dancers study the human body and its movement potential. In this process of scientific study and aesthetic experiment, they produce a view of dance (and dance technique) that has more to do with learning *how* to move than with unquestioned imitation of movement styles or the incorporation of a codified movement vocabulary...

Technique in modern dance is less a means for establishing a vocabulary of movement than a preparation of the alert, alive and responsive body (Fraleigh 1987:104-5).

Fraleigh's description of the role and place of technique in modern dance points to an important principle at the heart of the creative process in modern dance choreography. The 'discovery stance' which characterises modern dance began with the early pioneers of this tradition and their disposition to work from individual resources as opposed to established aesthetic models. The visions, insights and feelings they wished to communicate called for new, more individually defined modes of physical expression. They began with their own bodies.

The ballet tradition, in contrast to modern dance, is notable for its absence of female choreographers. I do not wish to suggest that this absence can be reduced to a single or simple cause; there are clearly many obstacles which stand between an aspiration towards and the assumption of the choreographic role. But, in my view, the absence of women choreographers in the ballet is consistent with and part of the logic of an aesthetic tradition which places a high value upon detached, that is, disembodied, contemplation and which claims these attributes as male. Significantly, the role of the choreographer, like that of the theatre director has often been conceptualized in specular terms (de Marinis 1985). The choreographer is represented as the ideal spectator of his choreographic creation; he is the point around and towards which the choreographic spectacle is organized. The choreographer-dancer, that is, the choreographer who is also principal dancer, is a hallmark of the modern dance tradition, but rare in the ballet. As choreographer, the modern dancer is inside the dance, animating the work from within. The ballet choreographer is located outside the work, as a privileged observer, identified with a detached and controlling spectatorial eye.⁴

One final note on the mirror stage. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine psychoanalytic accounts of the genesis and nature of the ego in any detail, but I am struck by Lacan's characterization of the immature, infant body as a *corps morcele*. This is an image of dismemberment, of a corpse and not a living body; it is an image which conflates flesh and death. This metaphor, of the body-in-bits-and-pieces, betrays not only an oculocentric bias, but also an allegiance to a medical discourse which is suspicious of the body's own claims and needs. Medical science is perhaps the most privileged site of bodily knowledge in the West but it knows the body as an object, pathologized and compartmentalized into parts, zones, sections.

Bodies of knowledge or animated corpses

The essential nature of everything is worthy of being known. It is said that the mind is knowledge (because knowledge is obtained through the mind). One should consider knowledge to be identical with the object of knowledge. There is no way other than that (to liberation). **Sri Guru Gita.**

These lines from the *Guru Gita* point to a profound distinction between Eastern and Western 'ways of knowing'. The Western epistemological tradition emphasises a radical discontinuity between the knower and the known, between the subject and object of knowledge. This epistemological paradigm might be graphically represented by that operation and inquiry which so decisively marked the rise of modern medical science, that is, the dissection. The dissection is the route to knowledge of the body; and knowledge is grounded in this radical separation of the body and consciousness. A disavowal and abandonment of the body becomes the ground and the condition of knowledge. This disavowal of the body as the subject of knowledge has had a broad and negative impact upon the reception and comprehension of dance and dancers. An illustration from Andre Levinson's *The Idea of the Dance: From Aristotle to Mallarme*: Levinson reflecting on Mallarme's 'Notes on the Ballet' writes:

the illiterate ballerina can be the unconscious revealer of something which she symbolises without understanding what it is. Only our poetic instinct can decipher her "writing of the body."... "The dancer who expresses herself by dance steps understands no other eloquence, even that of gesture." Her body, almost unclothed in its cloud of tulle, her legs in their silken sheaths, are no more than "the direct instruments of an idea." The dance becomes for the spectator with imagination the "mysterious and holy interpretation" of universal life and our inmost being (1927).

That a gendered ideology (and an ideology of gender) is at work here is very apparent. Levinson refuses to perceive the dancer as a knowing subject. He disassociates the subject and object of knowledge and by so doing identifies the masculine subject as the appropriate bearer of the look, the woman as the proper object of that look. The masculine subject is a privileged spectator, a man of culture, 'poetic instinct' and 'imagination'. The woman is an unknowing,

unthinking body. She is the *instrument*, the fleshy medium of an idea. But whose Idea is it? Not hers. She does not know, she cannot speak or "write" her own desire.

Another illustration: The late George Balanchine, choreographer and founding director of the New York City Ballet, once described the ballet as a woman, a garden of beautiful flowers. Tending this ballet/garden/woman is the gardener-choreographer. Balanchine represents the choreographer as a horticulturalist, a cultivator of disorganized, disorderly nature. The choreographer, a man of knowledge, shapes, directs and forms into meaningful patterns the unconscious flower-bodies of women.

These two men, balletomanes, lovers of Woman, speak through and across cadaverized female bodies, bodies emptied of consciousness. They assume that disembodied, detached style of language, *universal*, and can do so because they have disavowed their own embodiment. Referring to the work of Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz has succinctly described the means by which men assume and dominate the right to speak universally:

In explaining how this domination of the right to speak 'universally' has been appropriated by men, Irigaray discusses the procedures by which the male body is *evacuated* from and disavowed by the discourses affirming (male forms of) rationality, knowledge, writing, pleasure. As disembodied /abstracted, these specific attributes and interests are presented as universal. But to compensate for this absence of the male voice as *body*, women are conceptualised as the corporeal, bodily, material substratum supporting male intellect, concepts and immateriality' (1985:17).

As body, as matter, woman is marked by the sign of death; she is the destroyer of categories, the source of pollution. The ballets of the late nineteenth century, still enormously popular today, represent woman in precisely these terms. She is the unraveler of the social order, the unmaker of categories; she is the girl become madwoman, the human become swan; she is the seducer who draws man away from fulfillment of his social duties. The so-called 'romantic' ballets display a fascination with morbidity in their obsessive linking of the terms 'woman', sexuality and death.

A morbid view of the body is also reflected in nineteenth century medical discourse; Michel Foucault places the corpse, the (dead) body as revealer of truth at its centre. In *The Birth of the Clinic* Foucault gives an account of the rise of medical science and the role of visual domination in that development.

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Sight played an important, constitutive role in medical knowledge; and medical innovation emphasized 'the sovereign power of the empirical gaze' (1973:165) playing over the surfaces of the body. But, as Martin Jay observes 'the initial focus on visible surfaces and symptoms gave way... to a more penetrating gaze into the internal organic landscape (and) the unexpected result of the ever more curious visual penetration of the body (was) a focus not on the vitality of a patient, but rather his mortality' (1986:21). Foucault:

That which hides and envelops, the curtain of night over truth is, paradoxically, life; and death, on the contrary, opens up to the light of day the black coffer of the body: obscure life, limpid death, the oldest imaginary values of the Western world are crossed here in a strange misconstruction that is the very meaning of pathological anatomy... Nineteenth century medicine was haunted by that absolute eye that cadaverizes life and rediscovers in the corpse the frail, broken nervure of life (1973:166).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a dancer, Isadora Duncan, proclaimed that 'enlightenment' (knowledge) was not to be achieved by mortification of the body, nor by flight from it. She rejected what she perceived to be the morbidity and superficiality of the ballet and she proposed in its place an art founded upon a dedicated cultivation of the body; this cultivation was to be in harmony with the body's natural proclivities.

For Duncan the body was not a place of ignorance and dark chaos. She claimed that in dancing 'the body can ... be converted to a luminous fluid. The flesh becomes light and transparent' (quoted in Gilbert 1941). She was committed to an exploration of herself in the terms given by her own body, and she rejected existing forms of theatre dance as moribund, their training practices inappropriate for the 'new' or 'free' dance she envisaged. Duncan's approach towards dance and the training and preparation of the body set the tenor of the modern dance development that was to follow. Her valorisation of the (female) body as a privileged site and source of knowledge constituted modern dance as a practice and a philosophy of positive body awareness, with particular significance and interests for women. Dance, in Duncan's view, could play a significant role in the enhancement of physical and sensate experience; it could function as a countervailing force to negative cultural ideas about

the body, and this vision holds resonance for women, who have borne in unequal measure, the burden of culturally pervasive attitudes of aversion and distrust of the body.

In the closing chapter of *The Absent Body* Drew Leder identifies dance, along with Zen meditation, Hatha Yoga and martial arts, as an example of a practice which proceeds from and further develops awareness of the embodiedness of human intelligence. In Leder's view this kind of 'systematic enhancement of body experience (is) more characteristic of Eastern cultures' but he adds that 'equivalent practices are by no means totally lacking in the West' (1990:153). Intrinsic to these otherwise diverse practices is a recognition of the body as a crucial medium of self-development. Through a precise focus on body, breath and physical action 'a variety of positive states of relaxation, concentration, coordination, ecstasy' are actualized (153). The body is not an obstacle to knowledge, but is central to its realization.

In the late 20th century the new dancer's bodily knowledge is supported and supplemented by insights and methods drawn from a number of innovative body therapies, the most well known amongst them being the Alexander technique, Feldenkrais and Todd alignment or ideokinetic methods.⁵ These body disciplines harness neurophysiological energies in pragmatic but powerfully transforming ways. Common to all three is an emphasis upon the client's/student's subjective experience of movement. These disciplines do not propose an ideal body against which an individual measures and orders her appearance and actions. Emphasis is not placed upon the (static) look of the body, as that body is available to an observing eye, but on the person's co-ordination, fluency, efficiency, ease and enjoyment of movement. These methods have implication beyond their immediate therapeutic impact upon individuals. When transposed to the dance stage, the image and experience of embodiment cultivated through the practice of these techniques is a challenge to the classical aesthetic ideal which would represent the dancer's body as a perfected object. A dancer trained in these, what we might call 'internal' techniques brings to the stage a precisely tuned bodily knowledge and a set of values and interests which reflects a sensory organisation very different from that of the classically trained dancer.

The dance stage: Panopticon or haptic space

Visibility is a trap... The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen.

– Michel Foucault *Discipline and Punish*

Foucault's discussion of Jeremy Bentham's plan for a model prison, the Panopticon, details the disciplinary effects of a system of non-reciprocal observation. In this context, Foucault makes use of a theatrical image, likening the prisoner's cell to a stage: '(the cells) are like so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible' (1977: 22). But is the theatre a Panopticon? Must the dancer be constrained, fixed in place, by the spectator's gaze? Or might the theatre be, as it is for Barbara Freedman (1991), a dynamic, unstable zone which encourages the proliferation and exchange of 'looks'?

Feminist film theorists Mary Ann Doane and Patricia Mellencamp have commented upon Foucault's account of the Panopticon and the subjectivity it produces in this way:

The dissociation of the see/being seen dyad and the sense of permanent visibility seem to perfectly describe the condition not only of the inmate of the Panopticon but of the (modern) woman as well. For, defined in terms of visibility, she carries her own Panopticon wherever she goes, her self-image a function of her being for another (1984:14).

According to Doane and Mellencamp the subjectivity assigned to femininity within patriarchal social systems is 'bound up with the structure of the look and localization of the eye as authority' (14). The effects of this attribution of 'to-be-looked-at-ness' have been well defined and analyzed in the fields of cinema and the visual arts; in dance, less so. However, although debate and commentary is lacking in the dance field, I would argue that a critique of ocularcentrism has been occurring at a tactical, practical level in dance since the early 1900s and further that this critique has implications for feminism. In modern dance the question of possible resistance to the processes of visual objectification has been at issue since Duncan's early attacks upon 19th century ballet, with its emphasis upon spectacle and virtuosic display.

However, the dancer cannot deny the important role of visual perception in performance; nor can she disavow the specific impact and effects of the sight of her moving body.

Dance is an art of the visible and to dance, within the context of the Western theatre tradition, is to be seen as 'body'. The pertinent question is: What is the dancer's *active* response to seeing and being seen?

I have borrowed Doane's and Mellencamp's term 're-vision' to suggest that vision and visual representation cannot be abandoned by the dancer but must be reclaimed and redefined in ways other than that prescribed by previous structures of seeing. New dance strategies have been directed towards a disordering of the visually dominated sensorium so that other, culturally neglected senses, might be experienced more fully. For the new dancer the dance stage is not a Panopticon but can become an intimate, haptic space⁶ where the subtle nuance and fine detail of a body's movement can be experienced and made visible to others. It is a space of inclusion, inhabited by both watcher and watched. Here the oft stated proposition that dance is an experience of heightened kinaesthetic sensation is actualized, for the viewer as well as the performer.

Some dance artists have sought to heighten kinaesthetic sensibility by reductive means, that is, by eliminating all elements of visual spectacle and reducing dancerly steps and behaviours, so that attention might be focused on the aesthetic dimension and kinetic richness of ordinary, non-theatrical movements. Other artists, of which Twyla Tharp is perhaps the most well known, have embarked on projects of excess. Tharp's dances overflow the boundaries of the dance stage; hers is an aesthetic of abundance. Here there is not *too little* but rather *too much* movement; the eye cannot fix the dance, the spectator cannot get a fix on the dancer.

In dance, as in other arts fields, the question of vision goes beyond the issue of content to take in the parameters of visual experience. What is at stake is not merely the question of what is seen on the dance stage, but how we see and where we look from. Most importantly, dancers have brought new challenges to the perennial question of the nature of embodiment. In dancing they ask: What is it to be (a moving) 'body'? What is it that is being seen?

Dancing the Horizontal: Reclining Women

She is comfortably relaxed; she knows that she is seen.

– Barbara Freedman

If, as A.K. Volinsky (1983:255) asserts, classical ballet is

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the most perfect expression of the principle of verticality, modern dance could claim to be an art which redresses the imbalance by giving articulation to the (repressed) horizontal plane of existence.⁷ Lying down, the dancer subverts the perspectively organized spatial field of the traditional dance stage; she deconstructs the co-ordinates upon which perspective vision depends. But by lying down she risks, like Dürer's female model, identification with and reduction to the world of Nature, conceptualised as inchoate, unconscious, and uncontrollably fecund.

To occupy the horizontal is to invite a precise risk. Rotating the axis 'proper to man' the dancer invokes dangerously liminal corporeal states (see Krauss 1985). The horizontal is the plane of vulnerability and pleasure, of infancy and illness, sleep and sexuality. The reclining woman is associated with the sub-human, the animal and the corpse. A precise risk is entailed here. While David Howes expresses optimism concerning the salutary effects of 'a plunge into the non-visual senses' it is by no means certain that the dancer's research will be welcomed or even recognized by a wider community. The cultural significance of a dancer's aesthetic interventions and her challenge to the hegemony of vision may simply not be 'seen'. Furthermore, her active interest in and cultivation of her body may be read, from a patriarchal perspective, merely as an acting out of what is assumed to be the essential, narcissistic nature of woman. I should add at this juncture that I do not perceive any necessary or obvious relation between new dance and feminist politics. Whilst it is possible and, I believe, very productive to read certain dancers' aesthetic interventions as 'moves for feminism', few of the artists discussed here have identified their work in such terms. One of the objects of this paper has been to point to some of the feminist implications of new dance strategies, but the paper does not attempt to describe a feminist dance practice, if indeed such a thing exists today. Dance remains an art of ambiguous status and even more uncertain politics. A woman's or a girl's interest in dance is often powered by complex and contradictory impulses. She may be compliant, and in choosing dance be accepting of a socially normative identification; but she may also through dancing be seeking to actively formulate and live a very different relation to her body-self. She may be seeking, as I have done through dance, to become like that anonymous, luxuriantly reclining woman who, 'comfortably relaxed, knows that she is seen.'

Notes

- 1 It is worth noting here that the Western classical ballet tradition dates its origin to the early modern period (the 16th and 17th centuries) and today still bears the trace of that era's fascination with vision, reason and mathematical order. The ballet developed in the royal courts of Europe, most notably that of Louis XIV, and arose out of lavish theatrical spectacles which staged and celebrated sovereign power. The ballet de cour reflected a cultural fascination with power and vision, and the relationship of one to the other. In Western dance history the ballet de cour is unique in its particular constellation of power, (geometric) proportion and moving bodies. However, the aesthetic ideals embodied in the ballet de cour, the high premium placed upon visual experience – clarity of line, legibility, precision etc – are still very much the determining ideals of the ballet form today. Ballet instantiates and celebrates the power of the eye. It is a dance form which embodies and expresses the dominant values of an overwhelmingly visualist culture.
- 2 In Walter Ong's usage the sensorium is 'the entire sensory apparatus as an operational complex' (1967:28).
- 3 To name just a few of numerous examples: Trisha Brown's *Roof Piece* (1973), Twyla Tharp's *Dancing in the Streets of Paris and London, Continued in Stockholm and Sometimes Madrid* (1969) Simone Forti's events and happenings, eg *See Saw, Hangers, Huddle*, Steve Paxton's *Lecture on Performance* (1968); the improvisational work of The Grand Union.
- 4 Contrasting, if not opposed conceptualizations of the role and function of the choreographer are indicated here. The modern dance choreographer is implicated in the dance, identified with its 'flesh', to a degree and in a manner which some (ballet) commentators have found abhorrent (see Kirstein 1976). The ballet choreographer is valued as an artisan and seer (he possesses superior 'vision') and his role is often defined in managerial, directorial terms.
- 5 Ideokinesis is a postural realignment and movement training system developed from the research and writings of Mabel Ellsworth Todd. Taken up by dancers in the 1960s, ideokinesis, unlike traditional dance trainings, privileges tactility and proprioception as the primary means of learning. The ideokinetic method makes use of visual perception, but in a paradoxical way. The dancer utilizes her visual imagination as a route to and stimulus of kinaesthesia. The dancer meditates upon a visual image of her body or 'sees' herself in action in her mind's eye. She then allows the image to recede and dissolve into her flesh. The effectiveness of the technique is grounded in a neuro-physiological fact, namely, the ability of a mental image to generate motor response and concomitant kinaesthetic feedback.
- 6 James Gibson in *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* defines the haptic system as follows: 'The sensibility of the individual to the world adjacent to his body by the use of his body will here be called the haptic system. The word *haptic* comes from a Greek term meaning "able to lay hold of" (1966:97). The distinction made by Deleuze and

Guattari between *close vision-haptic space* and *long-distance vision - optical space* is also relevant here: 'The first aspect of the haptic, smooth space of close vision is that its orientations, landmarks, and linkages are in continuous variation; it operates step by step... Contrary to what is sometimes said, one never sees from a distance in a space of this kind, nor does one see it from a distance; one is never "in front of", any more than one is "in" (one is "on"...)' (1987:493)

7 I am reflecting here the characterization, widespread during the 1930s, of modern dance as an earthy, gravity-bound art. Also relevant in this context are a number of rare but notable instances of 'horizontal' choreography eg. Trisha Brown's *Primary Accumulation* (1972), and Eva Karczag's *Rolling Dance* (1976) and the use of the floor in the training process, eg. Graham's floor'barre' and the practice of constructive rest.

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Dancing in and out Langue a Feminist Dilemma

Simone: At one time I asked the I Ching, "Tell me about the female principle ..."

Yvonne: There is no female principle. That's a myth and a fantasy also.

There are no principles. These principles are created in society. We aren't born feminine and masculine, we're born with different things between our legs and different endocrine systems. And the whole principle thing is something laid on us by patriarchy. These particular distinctions that are used to perpetuate certain interests. You're not listening.

Simone: Ummm! I'm listening. I'm listening ...

(Simone Forti & Yvonne Rainer, 1990)

of age

A consideration of
“new dance” in response
to the writings of
Luce Irigaray

by Rachel Fensham

Simone Forti and Yvonne Rainer were two leading figures of the “new dance” which emerged in the early 1960s in the U.S.¹ They are now in their fifties and ‘old friends’. In 1987 they sat down to a staged conversation which was later written up with the title “Tea for Two”. Much of the conversation focused on questions of sexual difference, language – verbal and danced, and the possibilities which emerge from their different positions in relation to these questions.

I found the conversation entertaining, disturbing and stimulating. Where have thirty years of feminism and research in the arts left these two women? Their contradictory positions are, at one and the same time, constructed inside and outside of language. They speak but do not understand each other. One is always asking the other to

clarify what she is saying. The dialogue’s subtext seems to be: ‘How can I hear you when you don’t speak my language/our language? We were both dancers but now language divides us.’

Rainer, who had been an experimental dancer in the early 1960s, chose to stop dancing in order to say more with her art.² She decided to challenge patriarchy with the tools of theory and technology (film) in order to disrupt representations of “women”, as a social collectivity, and in order to find other ways of placing the figure of “woman”, as a site of subjectivity, in space. Forti, on the other hand, an equally significant experimental performer of the period, continued to investigate sources of expression through movement. She worked at her art in order to be a woman in a world/space experienced through the body and informed

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by the patterns of geometry, oracles, infants and animals.

Their positions, revealed in this conversation, resemble those of feminists undertaking different work, different investigations in recent theoretical debates. These differences have evolved around the question of “woman”, the female body and its place within psychoanalytic discourse.³ Unlike earlier socio-political feminism, this is an uncertain feminism engaged in philosophical and linguistic deconstruction of the phallogocentric structure of language and therefore of subjectivity. It is a feminism which has “an increasing inflation of quotation marks around the word ‘woman’,... placed in the position of wondering whether it is a question of women or woman, their written *bodies* or their *written bodies*” (Jardine, 1985:37). I would like to argue that this feminist, and sometimes anti-feminist, theoretical “position of wondering whether...” has also been occupied by dancers, mainly women, who have sought a new body for themselves.

To write of dancers, however, is to risk the impossible, to attempt placing in words that which might never be inscribed, or through inscription to limit a condition of possibilities which this active making of bodies in space might be suggesting. To leave Rainer, for the moment, with her technos and her words, it is dancers and their bodies who, for the last thirty years, have traversed those dark, illimitable spaces of self and representation, in search of new vocabularies of movement and other languages. A period in which dance, (for some), has been cast adrift from the limitations of narrative and even performance, as public event. Concurrently, French theorist Luce Irigaray has placed her own writing of “difference” in the realm of the body:⁴

an active creative coding or inscription, a positive marking of women’s bodies, which may produce a female body whose sexuality is lived in other, different terms than the limiting possibilities available to women in patriarchy. (Grosz, 1989:117)

To cast an eye over, to feel out, to re-read certain dancers through Irigaray is not an arbitrary endeavour, for it is just this sort of cross-reading which reflects an the inescapable fact of modernity – the collapsing of the boundaries between disciplines. This project is not merely intended as another exercise in relativism, but as a consideration leading to a feminist reading of the problem of the

body that “new dancers”, and “New French Feminisms”⁵ might have created (1965–1985) at this critical point in history.

Deconstructing the body of ...

Susan Foster, an American dance theorist, is one of the first to propose seriously that dance can be “read” as other artforms have been in the light of structuralist and post-structuralist theories. She acknowledges that in order to write about dance and to free it from the voiceless mystique of the “natural” body engaged in “naturally expressive creative processes” she must decipher and read the codes and conventions that lie at the heart of any dance form. Her mode of linguistic analysis opens up theoretical space but leaves untouched some of the particular problems of theorising dance. As Elizabeth Dempster, a Melbourne dancer/writer, argues, the association of dance in aesthetic literature with woman as “body, mater, matter” must be questioned by feminists. She also suggests that dance, because it is ephemeral, fluid and inarticulate is always subversive in its resistance to theory.

The body, not disciplined to the enunciation of a singular discourse, is a multi-vocal and potentially disruptive force which undermines the unity of phallogocentric discourse (Dempster, 1988:13).

Despite these difficulties, I will not apologise for im/proper behaviour when proposing that dance, an art-form, a considered cultural production of historic and social specificity, may make a contribution to other discursive practices. After all, dance from the modern era forward has been engaged in a series of strategic and political exercises which have repositioned and reshaped the body, not for performance alone, but as intervention into limiting and defining artistic, social and political conventions.⁶

Foster argues that the dancer as body and subject is constructed through the social and historical forces at work in the three occasions of class, rehearsal and performance (1988:237). In particular, it is the choreographer’s attitude to these processes which defines how the dancing subject is conceived and ultimately how s/he is seen in performance. However the avant-garde tendency of “new dance” replaced the external choreographer’s role with a more self-determining relationship to the choreographic process: the body/self

was to be investigated in each of the occasions of its production. Thus some dancers began to experiment with, and reject, previous choreographic conventions:

The development of what might be termed the post-modern body is in some senses a deconstructive process, involving a period of de-training of the dancer's habitual structures and patterns of movement (Dempster, 1988:21).

In de-training themselves, and others, dancers use various strategies, most requiring close attention to the internal workings of the body, time and patience.

They have returned within themselves... Within themselves means within the intimacy of that silent, multiple, diffuse touch. And if you ask them insistently what they are thinking about, they can only reply: Nothing. Everything. (Irigaray, 1985b:29)

These operations "within themselves" require an instructional language which operates not simply to deconstruct, that is, to undo habit, rigidity and expectation but serves also as a re-finding, a re-placing, a re-ordering of a (new) body. This is a language which is non-directive, which does not externalise commands to the body on the basis of what is visible. Instead it provides images, which set up imaginary pictures that take effect internally through the individual's mind and her own movement. What is heard is an "Imaginary" language which "entail(s) a different relation to unity, to identity with self..." (Irigaray, 1985b:154).

It is in the use of images, metaphors or metonymic suggestions, that the work of Irigaray and the dancers echo each other. How has their work through language, without language, led to shifts which create other theoretical possibilities, and limitations, for the female body/subject made manifest in performance? Does a writer such as Irigaray provide another perspective upon the work of new dancers? Intrigued by these questions, I want to consider the research methods of three particular dancer/choreographers, Simone Forti, Eva Karczag, Deborah Hay,⁷ through the lens of a language in which a feminine syntax might "best be deciphered in the gestural code of women's bodies" (Irigaray, 1985b:134).

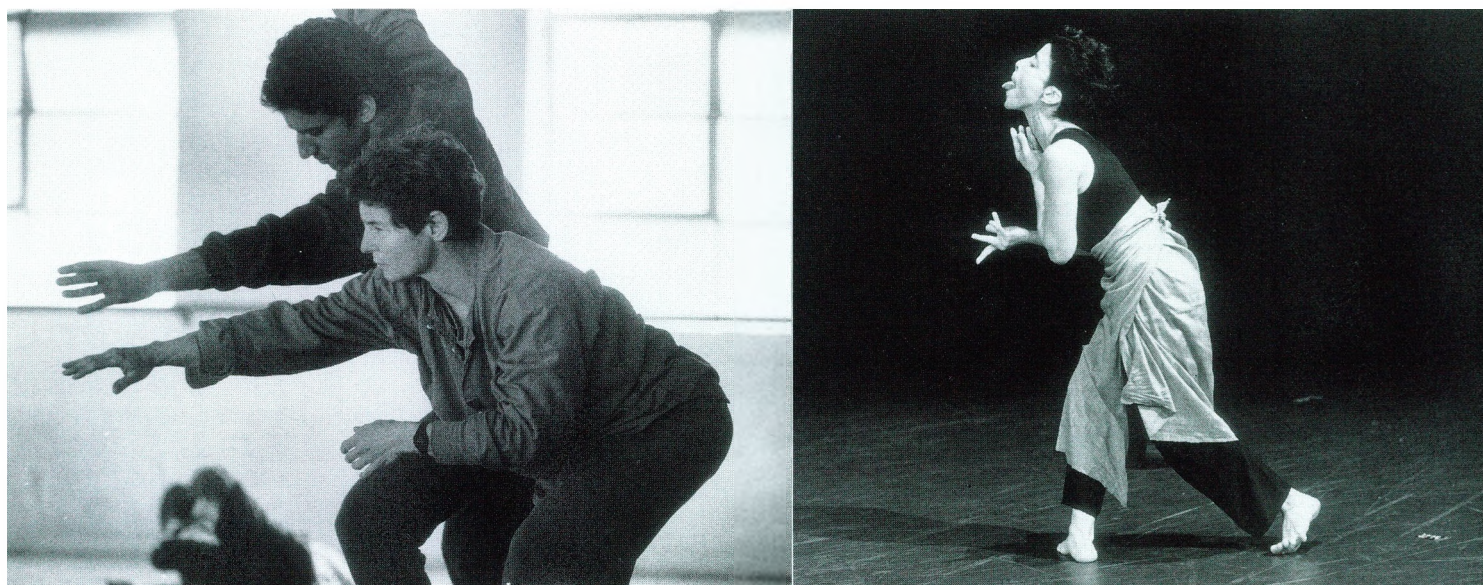
Irigaray is a contemporary psychoanalyst, philosopher and writer, in that field of French feminism which has investigated the concept of sexual difference. Her first book, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, works through the texts of Freud, Plato, and other male philosophers revealing their incapacity to hear or see "woman". Her second book, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, from which most of my quotations are drawn, is less formal in its structure and includes a question and answer section, more polemical essays and provocative prose-poems. It has the form of a workbook, a collection of practices or exploratory researches which provide the schema for further investigation.

For Irigaray, as for many contemporary theorists, feminists in particular, the body, with its physical, material existence is suggestive terrain for critical work. How does Irigaray conceive of its actual or imagined usefulness to her project? With the body, and its misdemeanours, providing the foundation of psychoanalytic discourse, Irigaray interrogates the derivatives of that discourse, such as the theory of the speaking subject, with questions of the feminine – who is woman? What else might her body provide through representation, in language?

Through a deconstructive methodology, Irigaray is trying to wriggle out of the position in which Freud and, more recently, Lacan have placed woman. A position in which, to put it crudely, the female lacks the phallus of male subjectivity, a lack which establishes sexual difference physically and psychologically but also constitutes woman as outside the Symbolic order, thereby foreclosing her status in language. Irigaray applies herself to re-reading the Symbolic that has so inscribed the female body, and through a double inversion, to reading and writing the female body in such a way as to find or construct other possibilities in the psychology and language of woman.

This other body, the body of her writing, avoids social definitions, but is a body that is apparently based in the female anatomy. Her writing is thick with bodily metaphors. These metaphors, descriptive of bodily parts and functions, are intended, so we are told, to do no more than suggest states of mind or relations to language of, or between, the sexes. The body Irigaray proposes for "woman" is hotly debated, for it draws on universal notions of the female as physical opposite of the male – all curves, earthiness and spaces.

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ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT:
SIMONE FORTI CONDUCTING A WORKSHOP, 1985.
(PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY THE AGE).
DEBORAH HAY IN PERFORMANCE, 1986. (PHOTOGRAPH JEFF BUSBY).
EVA KARCZAG IN PERFORMANCE, 1992. (PHOTOGRAPH HELLEN SKY).

To her critics, she rides close to reducing woman to an essentialist position, that of “the natural woman”. For Toril Moi, “Irigaray’s theory of woman takes as its starting point a basic assumption of analogy between woman’s psychology and her morphology” (1985:143). But is it the real, the organic female body with vagina, clitoris and two vulval lips that Irigaray intends to construct and reposition as female subject – woman? Or is it a linguistic, principally discursive mode (Grosz, 1989:111) that she is proposing of “not one”-ness, a body that is not anatomical so much as about style and form as well as deeper structure? Moi’s abrupt dismissal contradicts Irigaray’s own qualified statements: “We must go back to the question not of the anatomy but of the morphology of the female sex” (quoted in Grosz, 1989:111). Moi, in her critique of Irigaray, also refuses the body of discourse which derives from psychoanalysis and which takes “as its starting point a basic assumption of analogy between ... psychology and ... morphology” (Moi, 1985:143). Irigaray herself, acknowl-

edges the likelihood of repeating or constructing more of the Same in her writing of “woman” when she echoes, or responds to, phallogentric discourse with its penis and solid matters by proposing the use of multiple female organs and fluids.

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it (Irigaray, 1985b:76)

It is in order “to play” that Irigaray writes. If women are ever to speak “our body’s language” we must listen in a new way and spend time away from the world of men speaking amongst ourselves. “Let our imperatives be only appeals to move, to be moved together” (Irigaray, 1985b:217). It is for this purpose that dancers have undertaken years of research, thinking, reading and studying the impulses “to move and to be moved” and “to play” with them. This work, whether undertaken by men or women, has occurred away from the institutional discourses of dance and the academy. I assume that Irigaray does not have direct access to these dancers’ knowledge, nor they to hers, but there is a congruence in the seriousness with which



they have attempted to speak differently through their bodies.

For many feminists, theoretical discourse inevitably acts as “a violent appropriation by masculine representational and libidinal economies” (Grosz, 1989:130) of the possibility of heterogeneity. Irigaray argues that there can only ever be an approximation of a feminist discourse since an embodied language will produce writing which is convoluted and contradictory. It will be a language riddled with metaphors, unfinished sentences and the constant asking of questions; but more importantly for Irigaray, this writing will be the deliberate practice of a language which cannot act as metatheory or be metatheorised. Therefore, women will speak and write differently.

Women will write without “fetish words, proper terms, well-constructed forms. This style which does not privilege sight,” is a style which resists form, which explodes established ideas, figures or concepts and which cannot be upheld as the object of a position. This writing will not be circular or centring in its discourse, preferring to rebound without possibility of interruption. It will be based on a proximity which will confound appropriation. Thus Irigaray would have the horizontality and verticality of language disrupted and the specularisation of meaning discarded (Irigaray, 1985b:79).

surrender of: focalisation
form
“I am”
personal experience
light
will
stature

(Hay, “Excerpts from the Grand Dance” cited in Banes, 1980:128) .

Into this language comes the dancing figure of a woman wearing loose clothing, her body flicking and turning in unpredictable patterns of movement which shift from leg to arm from head to knee. She does not acknowledge her audience but is intent on the way her body moves, awake to its own new directions.

The movement of metaphor

How does a bodily metaphor in writing have its counterpart in representations of the physical body? What does it leave out? What does it limit? Irigaray uses body images to suggest possibilities for the representation of the feminine, whereas dancers use images to suggest new ways of moving and inscribing the female body in space:

the impetus is from a range of anatomical images that have been synthesised from a whole barrage of scientific information about the body... it aims at a body neutrality. Each person can receive information and respond with the body with maximum ease. The image is internalised. The dance is therefore made directly from the image and not a given vocabulary (Hassall, 1976:14).

In a perversely literal set of manoeuvres I will read these images as a set of signifying practices which produce the bodies and texts of Karczag, Forti and Hay through and against the texts and bodies of Irigaray.

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One of the bodies that Irigaray proposes is multiple: “woman has sex organs everywhere” (Irigaray, 1985b:28). This body exists in the constant touching of its surfaces. It is fluid, it is sexually female in the existence of its vaginal lips, its breasts, its lips, its many surfaces which are, and express, their continuous sense of woman:

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I dance by feeling the movement of space simultaneously all over my body so that it is like bringing my sensitivity to the very edges of my being, from my head to my toe, so that I can feel the movement of the air around me (Hay, 1977:21).

This body is not conceived of as “lack”, lack of the penis; the “little man”, the “castrated” subject; nor as a “hole” waiting to sheath the penis, nor as “mystery”, that which can never be known. This body exists through its own materiality, its “morphology” of “this sex which is not one.”

Irigaray’s prose poems of bodily love, of female love, of love mother-to-daughter, daughter-to-mother, of woman-to-woman are dedicated to a nearness, a “nearly rubbing” a “loss of boundaries”, a blurring of you/I distinctions: “woman derives pleasure from what is so near that she cannot have it, nor have herself” (Irigaray, 1985b:31). A body that relinquishes its separateness, in order to dwell in, share in the other, a world where “difference” exists non-hierarchically.

... it mixes with bodies of a like state, sometimes dilutes itself in them in an almost homogeneous state, which makes the distinction between the one and the other problematical; and furthermore that it is already diffuse in itself which disconcerts any attempt at static identification... (Irigaray, 1985b:111)

the kind of work I’ve been drawn to has been boundary-less, very much a state of being evenly suspended in no time, no place, open-ended, light and floating (Karczag, 1985:33).

Eva Karczag, Australian-born dancer, now teaching in Holland, was a significant figure in a group called Dance Exchange which worked in Melbourne during 1976/77. Watching her slight body one was struck by an extraordinary mellowness and lightness of dance quality matched by an uncommon endurance. Through workshops she allowed other people, including non-dancers, access to her body wisdom. She would talk of “The Thinking Body”⁸, a body which contained within its muscles, nerves and organ systems a knowledge which could be used to relearn and rethink fundamental aspects of one’s self/construction.

In the physical economy of the individual the many systems should be working in balance and unison and thinking is a very part of their activity ...function preceded structure; doing was experienced before the thing done (Todd, 1937:3).

To Karczag the body was a series of labile joints and connections, most of which relied not on strength and rigidity for their mechanical support but on an increased capacity for ease and efficiency of movement. This body was not constructed in order to control and repress its internal drives in response to external pressures but was to examine where a dynamic balance might exist between one force and another.⁹

This body was always indeterminate, adjusting to the realisation of newly discovered internal spaces, hollows and weights that opened up sensations, shifts and choices for movement.

A ‘de-training’ session would be based on close attention to a particular anatomical part, such as the shoulder girdle, and the range and limits of the structure, with the suggestion that the socket be given ‘more space’ to move. Eva provided visual images with words, pictures and demonstrations. Her workshops might include the following:

Running – “imagine as your toe lands on the ground that the floor is coming up to meet you and pushes you upward.”

Walking and slowly stopping.

Standing – until there was no external movement just the small constant dance of your spine over the point of balance between your feet.

Dropping down through your spine – lowered by the weight of your head, its heavy mass relegated to being the ball on the end of a strong chain.

Curving your knees under and rolling – on to the floor, rolling and rolling so that the floor ceases to be hard and your body to be soft, one surface meeting another only to provide mutual support and leverage.¹⁰

What kind of a body is that? A body that is open to suggestion obviously, but a body that ceases to be determinate in its sense of boundaries, its singular potency as solid form, a body that is no greater or less force than the floor or its own weight. One of the techniques was aptly named Release Technique, and Eva often began a workshop with a position called “constructive rest”. This involved lying on your back on the floor, knees bent up, arms loosely by your sides and allowing the weight of the body to inform internal

relationships. Thus a body composed of structures, could be flexibly re-coded for different experiential states.

Imagine you are a suit of clothes emptying out, with every breath you take the clothes which are filled with sand, split and spill out across the floor. The seams of the garment are tearing open and sand pours out and into the floor. Your body becomes heavy and you become wider as you sink into the warm sand beneath you.¹¹

But we must go on questioning words as the wrappings with which the 'subject', modestly clothes the 'female'. Stifled beneath all those eulogistic or denigratory metaphors she is unable to unpick the seams of her disguise... Stifled under all those airs. She has yet to ... reveal her nakedness, her destitution in language, explode in the face of them, all words too.

(Irigaray, 1985a, 142-143)

The words of Irigaray, speaking metaphorically of the female as clothed body, resonate with the physical suggestion of the "release process" which however splits the concept of clothing, of containment, without the negatives of being 'naked', or 'destitute' or 'exploding'. Eva was splitting the body in order to use air and weight to reformulate a body with a different density. In Irigaray's free play with the body, or its "morphology", as her siting of the inarticulate female subject, has she not placed the body of woman somewhere that it might be difficult to return from? If there is to be no social/historical woman for Irigaray, does she have any substance at all?

For the dancer, the de-constructive process has led to "constructive rest" where the body is left neutral, flat and corpse-like, on the ground, immobile. How does this body, incapable of anything other than sheer contemplation of its own relationship to gravity, begin to move again? It is re-inhabited through a resolute recognition of

the anatomy and physiology of the body, a skeleton which provides an organising principle for movement with ease, sustained by a greater awareness of the spaces between the joints or the liquidity of its fluid centres. A body that is re-organised according to a hierarchy of function and not of sexual difference, and activated by an inner listening to the body where there is always movement.

Karczag also worked with a dance form known as Contact Dance which

was a study of the way communication was possible through touch; a non-rationalised intuitive movement leading to unforeseen phrasing, positions and gambits (Paxton, 1981:47).

A slow continuous rolling of bodies could form a Contact duet which could also have been a playful rough and tumble or melancholic moving of two bodies from front to back, floor to upright. For an observer, this is a viewing experience not unlike Irigaray's only imagined "phagocytosis" of speaking bodies:

one has never seen a body roll itself up around the body of the Other so completely as to include and incorporate it by phagocytosis ... the enjoying of a body... (Irigaray, 1985b:92).

Through this "dancing" both men and women could discover and redefine boundaries without fear.

EVA KARCZAG IN PERFORMANCE, 1992. (PHOTOGRAPH HELLEN SKY).



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From this perspective, basing movement upon intimate communication, rather than aesthetic dictates, was appealing. It spoke to my body which had been in isolation for many years (Paxton, 1981:48).

In this instance, it was a man admitting the loneliness of his place within a hierarchised dance code. For Karczag, Contact dance was not external and on the surface of things, because she placed the movement, “following one’s inner flow,” (Karczag, 1985:35) alongside a fluidity internal to herself.

..it is continuous, compressible, dilatable, viscous, conductible, diffusable,... that it is unending, potent and impotent owing to its resistance to the countable; – dynamics of the near and not of the proper... (Irigaray, 1985b:111)

Irigaray’s body does not seek to be heard or understood in this state for the subject would only congeal, freeze in its categories until it paralyses the voice in its flow (Irigaray, 1985b:112). Contact dance, with its continuous nearness of moving, has also suffered a paralysis: “I get worried about teaching Contact Improvisation ... it could be described as a technique but I feel that what is happening is beneath/above techniques” (Paxton, 1981:47). In being taught and in the establishment of physical properties and rules, Contact has suffered a strange loss, “the Other” has become unattainable again. For Eva, Contact was not in itself, “a way”, a formulation to be used in making a new body but only a moment of exchange, a speaking you/I /you which she might enjoy.

Like Irigaray’s writing, Karczag’s dance was there like an inducement to be a different kind of woman, a different self. As teacher she was there to suggest that any body would have its own way of moving.

My search has been for a kind of dancing that would allow me to be unique and individual, to fit into a situation that was not hierarchical, where I could do my own thinking and not have other people doing my thinking for me (Karczag, 1985:37).

However this self is constructed from a position of privilege, of birthright, of love, of knowledge, if not of money. Dancers renounce the material world and its constraints in order to withdraw to the workshop or the studio into a place of re-becoming, of re-discovering her/their pleasure in her/their own body/ies. A place for “women-among-themselves” to seek the possibility of a nonhierarchical articulation of “difference” in movement without language. However in doing so, she, the dancer might also renounce the question of oppression, an oppression governed by institutions and institutions governed by men. Refusing to speak with the hierarchical structures, preferring instead to articulate the gaps, the spaces and the silences within male discourse, the dancer might find herself, somewhat naively, believing that people will see what she herself sees when she comes to perform, that is, to speak:

People have always looked when I’ve danced. I don’t know why that’s so. I’ve always felt a passion for it, ever since I can remember. I feel that the spirit has always been there... So maybe they weren’t looking at the external form as much as what was moving inside (Karczag, 1985:33).

Karczag’s audiences may also be privileged enough to have developed new ways of listening, which she has invited and taught through her workshops and her showings. “One would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing an “other meaning” always in the process of weaving itself” (Irigaray, 1985b:29): a way of listening sited within feminist work on language where nothing can be articulated without a questioning of the Symbolic itself. Eva sites herself in that feminine locus, the very state of questioning, which draws its power, its passion from the uncertainty of the Imaginary, of the questions and the choices that unstable world throws up.

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Another of Irigaray’s bodily metaphors is that of fluids. If male discourse has developed through its sciences theories about solids, there is little to speak for fluids. Solids are those things, objects which are discernable to the eye, subject to quantification, subject to possession; whereas fluid slips away, does not stay still, is threatening, elusive. Thus, maternal milk, menstrual blood, organic secretions have not been theorised. They are denied a place in the male order of discourse. Irigaray argues that fluids cannot provide

a model for theory since they resist being fixed or contained. And she sees desire transformed by male discourse from fluid to solid, subordinated and idealised, in the triumph of rationality.

The fluids are a counterbalance to the perceptions of the nervous system. If the perceptual system is always initiating or being the mover, then the fluids are always having to be the support. There becomes a time when you want to reverse that balance... let the fluids be the mover (Bainbridge Cohen, 1981:3).

Where to begin?

How is this to be done?... Turn everything upside down, inside out, back to front (Irigaray, 1985a:142).

She gave us such problems as running while moving the spine through any possible positions (Forti, 1974:29).

Simone Forti, is an experimental performer and dancer, who taught in Australia in 1985. During the late 1950s in the USA Forti worked with Ann Halprin and others on improvisatory research. They developed techniques for exploring all kinds of movement relationships. As Forti explains “the main thing she (Ann) taught me was how to learn from my own body intelligence” (Forti, 1974:29). In this exploratory period Forti felt she so disrupted her conscious mind, the ordering principle of self, that she wrote,

improvisation was really beginning to pain me. I can remember saying that my inner ear could no longer take those limitless seas. There just seemed to be all this turmoil and turning of image upon image (Forti, 1974:32).

Subsequently in New York she worked collaboratively on the creation of Happenings, and devised events such as *Huddle*, *See-saw*, *Banking* and *Slant-board* which were presented at the Judson Church. These works were often based on game-like instructions in which non-trained performers had to persist with the execution of movement or sound based rules.

Later, her dance work was influenced by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen whose research on infants proposed a deep layering of neuro-muscular movement patterns, evolving from the prone, neo-natal state to the upright, walking human being. Forti concentrated for many years on this body-centred learning and performed dances such as *Crawling*.



SIMONE FORTI IN NEWS ANIMATIONS, FESTIVAL OF WOMEN IMPROVISORS, NEW YORK, 1987. (PHOTOGRAPH REPRINTED FROM CONTACT QUARTERLY).

My father said he had enjoyed it very much, but said maybe I should think about standing up now. It must have been a strange thing to say to a forty year-old daughter (The Age, 17/8/1985:11).

Cohen’s investigations into the structuring of movement patterns has extended beyond the skeletal and muscular to include the organ systems. She has researched the links between the senses and the origins of movement. The baby, new-born, can turn its supported head from side to side in response to the smell of milk or the sound of the mother’s voice and only later, to vision. The first patterns of movement to emerge are the spinal push “initiated from the head pushing into the tail”, homologous push, homolateral push, spinal reach and pull, homologous reach and pull and the contralateral reach and pull. Navel radiation and breathing underlie and support the development of other patterns. “All previous patterns underlie and support each successive pattern” (Bainbridge Cohen, 1984:9-13).

Here there is not the simply organised phallic body, defined and co-ordinated through one organ – a body which is represented as in control of itself from the head. Not a body ordered by the male in which:

*the maturation of his power (is) given
... in an exteriority in which this form
... fixes it and in a symmetry that*

inverts it, in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him. (Irigaray, 1985b:116)

But nor is it an unsystematised, fluid, pressured organism lacking “any definite identification” (Irigaray, 1985b:117). Beginning with radial ebb and flow, this sequence raises the spectre of symmetry in the uni-dimensional drive for forward/back, up/down, but the “homo” of these first movements is superseded by the final pattern of contralateral reach and pull.

What is “contralateral reach and pull” in language, in representation? It is a movement operating at the level of the forebrain, the forebrain being that part of the brain which most distinguishes the modern human. The contralateral is a language in which left arm and right leg move together. There is no way forward without this one side, other side; upper, lower; brain, gonads; one sex, other sex, co-ordination. Both must be co-ordinated in extension and contraction, reach and pull. This superior pattern of movement rests on the achievements of previous co-ordination and the underlying circular, in-out, of primitive organisms. This is a sophisticated picture of the body; one which does not separate knowledge from being.

Forti used this work extensively in her long-term study of sources of/for movement. She asked where in the body does the impulse to move locate itself? What is its dynamic? Based on her observations of zoo animals, infants, or other organic forms she would improvise the movement quality – its weight and its strength, its shifts – rather than describing or copying it. In order to dance with another, “it was a matter of finding the right point of leverage and letting the momentums radiate and interface” (Forti, 1974:89). Therefore, her dancing became the embodiment of actions deriving from a mind state with an inner and outer focus. Irigaray’s search, in a different voice, for the origins of a female desire led her to “kinesis,” that which moves. The language of her essay “Our Lips Speak Together” derives from a body state which is both inner and outer, un-nameable and naming.

Through her workshops, Forti was trying to teach, show, observe this place from where the impulse to move comes, a location which seemed to pre-exist language. Her body was weighted and considered. One watched a slow, sensing

mass of movement shifts – visible and disguised, witnessed and unavailable.

Insist also and deliberately upon those blanks in discourse which recall the places of her exclusion and which, by their silent plasticity, ensure the cohesion, the articulation, the coherent expansion of established forms. (Irigaray, 1985a:142)

At this time, in 1985, Forti’s desire to move had become stuck in a place of exclusion which left her, as subject, with nothing to perform. “I’m a little puzzled”, admitted Forti when asked about her current work. She was more at home in the process itself; the researching was “clear and palatable like a conversation” (The Age 17/8/85) but she, as woman, did not want to speak.

Forti has learnt to talk again in a recent phase of her work. She reads the newspapers as if the words, the characters, the institutions, the headlines, the photos are spatial forms which can be read with her body. Her feeling body senses the weight, dimensions and dynamics of movement that each word-shape suggests as she creates a poetry which is disruptive and fluid; her body is re-animated (Forti, 1990). She reads this political material through the inner journey of her silence. Why did she begin to read the news when her father died, conscious that no-one else in the family would unless she did? Perhaps she, woman, no longer needed to crawl in her self re-presentation, as the absence of her father finally gave her the space to be other/wise. Maybe in her discomfort with language, Forti knows a lot more about Freud than she would let Rainer know.

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Another of Irigaray’s moves is to take the body beyond its dis-integration in a multiplicity of sensing/feeling or fluid inner/outer exchanges towards a body that is transformed by attaining a state of mystical embrace.

All surfaces and spatial constructions also collapse in a conflagration that

pushes further and further back the depths of a gulf where now everything is burning. (Irigaray, 1985a:142)

Remaining positionless dance the length of the space with burning, burning bones (Hay, notes from choreographic workshop, Melbourne, 1988).

Deborah Hay is another dancer whose experimentation with choreographic methods began in 1960s New York. Her extensive and ongoing research has been on the development of attentive and meditative qualities for the body, a body connected with its environment. For Hay, life is not separate from dance, it is “a daily practice of being ecstatic”. Susan Foster attempts to define Hay’s work by calling it “transformative dance”, a practice intended to establish communion with its audience and to represent harmony with the world (Foster, 1983:5-14).

Hay visited Australia in 1987 at the invitation of local dancers. She performed some solo pieces, ran an intensive two week workshop for many participants and choreographed a piece for ‘independent’ dancers. Her workshops were designed to introduce the dancer to the technique of “cellular consciousness”:

I focus my attention on every atom in my body so that I can simultaneously experience the movement of every cell from the very inside, moving. I call this cellular consciousness. No one part of me moves without the conscious awareness of what every other part of me is doing. I am speaking of the infinitely small intelligences called cells. It is as if identity falls out of focus and is replaced by attention (Hay, 1982:40).

The walls of her prison are broken, the distinction between inside/outside transgressed. In such ex-stasies, she risks losing herself or at least seeing the assurance of her self-identity-as-same fade away. (Irigaray, 1985a:192)

In Hay’s choreography the dancer is asked to ‘dissolve’ as the dance progresses in order to become the very movements being performed. The subject, the performer, ceases to be an aggregator of bodily co-ordination and action. Instead the body of re-presentation is made multiple; it exists beyond the limits of objective comprehension, every cell dancing the given images of movement.

One of her workshops might include the dance of “ceaselessness and homecoming”, “gentleness breaks up all things”, “the push is the pull”, “the will is the destiny”, “healing with modest disturbance”, “the dance of not being anywhere.” The instructions, as poetic metaphors, are



DEBORAH HAY, TEXAS, 1990. (PHOTOGRAPH HELLEN SKY).

composed of opposing tendencies, reconcilable in neither one state nor another and Hay asks that they be interpreted at the cellular level. The dancer is not meant to picture how to do a particular image but to let each part, each cell, solve the perceptual problem of movement. These bodies are simultaneously making an image and unmaking it. In a large group of dancers they fade in and out of focus; someone might be dancing, someone might not.

The title of her choreographed work, “Milk of the Cipher”, illustrates her feminist project; milk, the fluid as nourishing substance being given/ being taken; and the

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cipher, a symbol of nothing, no quantity or magnitude, a non-entity. It was “the untranslatable truth”.

In this vision of performance, the dancer/woman is transcendent and the role of the spectator is no longer relevant.

I hope that these dances will evolve to a place where I can suspend the moment for myself and for you the whole time we are together. So the dance is my being here in this space, totally and preparation for this performance is my entire life and nothing more, or less (Hay, 1982:40).

This body is like the formlessness of matter where there can be no knowing or primacy of one body over another at the cellular level. It is a body under instructions to return to the state of total immersion in the pre- or extra-conscious state. Hay would have the body dismantle the ordering of opposites, the sequence of making statements, of being subject to a higher order of magnitude – a position with which Irigaray would empathise. Hay shares this state of “unknowing” with her dancers who are to exist in an ideal of no fixed hierarchy. However through the movements of her/this dance some are closer to the flames or the heart of the riddle than others. This is woman absorbed by mysticism.

Hay herself no longer speaks in performance and little in life, “Words begin to fail her... All the words are weak, worn out, unfit to translate anything sensibly” (Irigaray, 1985a:193). She is renouncing them and representation in the pursuit of “the holy” or “la mysterique”. It is this kind of movement of Hay’s and Irigaray’s which leaves woman on the far side of the moon, almost mute, at best able to “utter only a sound so inarticulate that it barely forms a song” (Irigaray, 1985a:193).

But Irigaray does not take herself as seriously as Hay. For her, woman will also continue to struggle with those representations of unity which claim and contain her. She can know the “Good” but also want to hear, argue and even try to talk with that other, that “confessor”, that “psychoanalyst”, that male logic which is happy to leave her in the position of the unrepresentable.

Are our feet on the ground?

My placement of Karczag, Hay, Forti and Irigaray in this, my writing, casts them, at least partially, in a language constructed of images. Irigaray has problematised the terms produced through metaphor:

... metaphor will continue to work as violation and separation, except if empty of all meaning that is already appropriate(d)... (Irigaray, 1985a:231)

No metaphor completes her. Never is she this, then that, this and that...

(Irigaray, 1985a:229)

And in Irigaray’s writing, one term, one image, undoes the other. New dancers have also refused to be cast by any “appropriate(d)” meaning:

it is an ordinary body of bone and flesh... there is... no image of perfection or unity, no hierarchy and no failure (Dempster, 1988:22).

However I have not selected images and texts in order to be definitive or comprehensive but to speculate upon the critical potentiality of metaphoric language for the reconstruction, or re-presentation, of the female. Metaphor, being the form of language which can never imply coherence between one part and another has produced bodies, written and danced, which constantly change the relationships between things. In a feminist writing which is an improvisation, metaphor ceases to be a closed concept and “woman” is never the object of a position.¹²

Irigaray is wedded to discourse, although she says she is not a “philosopher’s wife”, and even though seduced by her father (Freud/Lacan).¹³ But despite the obligations to the father, she has put “woman” in the territory of the body which, for the feminist/dancer, is primary “mater/ matter” for research. These three different dancers, three women, have based their efforts at re-writing the body on a non-verbal/non-positioning/non-gendering of the body in space. They may not nominate their projects feminist, but their working methods and their inherited and ongoing theoretical questions make this work, like Irigaray’s, difficult for feminists to ignore despite its many contradictions.

Witnessing or being in the dance state is to be in a state of enchantment. “It can be very simple movement, but it always comes with a sense of wonder, and as one of life’s more delicious moments...” (Forti, 1974:109). So we become, not before or after, but now, ourselves. To do so we step outside time, outside history, outside language, outside institutional discourse. To dance can be a renuncia-

tion every bit as absolute in its poverty, chastity and charity as the nunnery with its offer of spiritual transcendence.

In performance the dancer's research on the body is made visible. Here she (woman) becomes an item for exchange, within an economy of representation. Within that economy, and regardless of the nature of her dancing on stage, a woman has a special status as the representation of a desired beautiful object. Many dancers have preferred to define their performance work less as an intentional communication and more as a time and space which offers multiple choices of movement and perception.

How then do these women, with their deconstructive reworking of the body, place themselves on the stage – which is after all “to be seen”? The dancer is no longer simply a site of production but also one of consumption and reflection for the assembled spectators. The spectator cannot have a fixed relationship to the dance because the constant shifting of the dancer has the potential to be disruptive of the audience's vision.¹⁴ Each dancer's body can be the sketch of a position within feminism, the recognition of a difference in what might be shown. Each body appears as a force which has been written and unwritten in the workshop and rehearsal phase. From this other time and space, these bodies can be seen working themselves out of the biological determinism of a psychoanalysis in which woman is bound to reproduce herself in images.

From Karczag's intensive study of Alexander Technique and skeletal alignment, she lived and perceived the dancer through the anatomical body. When she became pregnant, her comments were straight-forward, “there's an idea that a pregnant woman is not a functioning woman. So I found it very exciting to work right through and to see how light I could be with this big belly...” (Karczag, 1988). In spite of the social or historical biases of the spectator, seeing and reading their/his theory of the dance, Eva saw “woman” as strong *and* weak, heavy *and* light. Maleness or femaleness were qualities that might be seen in the curve of a hip or the transitions the body must make – menstruation, pregnancy, old age; and what they bring to movement was secondary to the movement itself. Confident of its knowing, Karczag's body desired to become transparent, invisible, living to make “visible the flow of energy that is the dance” (Karczag, 1985:38).

Hay's dancer was the high priestess, present to “invite

watching” and no longer enquiring of woman where she might be found. Her body was brittle and almost hysterical. The act of cellular consciousness was subject to her will, a will that forces its own meaning and excludes interpretation. Transformation had become a law. As woman she became man with a hieroglyphic staging of the world – the narcissus looking at her own image.

Forti's “woman” had taken a long journey from childhood to adulthood, leaving and finding language in her own terms. The body was uncompromising, committed to its knowledge coming in stages, never fully realised, and grounded by its “essentialness”. Perhaps for her, there is now a voice, more human and less animal, that can offer other, and always physically grounded, responses to oppressive as well as generative forces.

Irigaray is wary of losing the ‘power’ of language and has insisted on speaking, to the point of verbosity, irritation, or the ludicrous. In contemporary performance the dancer, traditionally cast on stage as mute, has assumed a voice. Language has been given a place in the performance space, as taped text, projected image, broken or improvised monologue against which dance might be read. Karczag, Hay (now less so), Forti (now more so) have tried to do with language what they have done with movement. This has not been an easy or complete insertion, “stumbling, stuttering and other disorders” are what it sounds like to one dancer/speaker (Dempster, 1988:13). Irigaray, working through Freud's representations, writes of the “hysteric,” the “frigid” woman, as she who does not repress her desire to be, and to feel herself to be, other than male.¹⁵ Irigaray turns to the non-discursive space of the “hysteric” as the place where woman might find herself. But the problem of speaking as woman becomes even more difficult for it is “precisely that of finding a possible continuity between that gestural expression or that speech of desire in the language, bodily and verbal, of the hysteric” (Grosz, 1989:132), which will not place woman once again within male codes. The dancer, wise to the difficulty of speaking, often chooses to name herself “hysteric”, and occupy that position from which women might be heard, sometimes.

The “new dancer” displaying her body in non-gendered clothing and movement, and asserting an intelligence of the body, has refused to allow the viewer, or the male theorist, to posit her as organic, romantic or ideal. But their lack of

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“difference” makes the movement of these dancers unattractive to an audience fond of narrative and sexual display. For such an audience one might say, there is “nothing to be seen.”

There are dangers in the rejection of masculine/feminine in favour of the non-gendered with its “lack of position, its uneven, unlocalisable oscillation” (Jardine, 1985:113). Alice Jardine argues that a ‘neutered’ space has been traditionally gendered masculine. In addition “this first neuter phase may also be as interminable as are the texts of metaphysics” (1985:113) in its absence from history, producing texts/dances which are as timeless as the Tao.¹⁶ Jardine cautions against too much ambiguity in language: “the feminist reader... may begin to wonder about the lack of gender ... in this splendid and neuter anonymity of the text and the world. For parallel to the valorisation of a neuter-in-language without subject there has been a regenderisation of the space where alterity is to be re-explored in language” (1985:114). “New dancers” investigating the shapes and orientations of a neutral body might find themselves once again relegated to a space which time and philosophy will always cast as feminine.

In the 1990s the “new” dancer has been superseded by a newly fashioned “post-modern” dancer. The “post-modern” dancer has sought a return to physical effort with its external control and command, and often, taking on the vagaries and blind alleys of language, in particular the epic or theoretical discourse itself, has risked losing herself in the convolutions of his naming, of his thought, again.¹⁷ Some of these dancers attain greater status in his economy of art, which still marginalises dancing, by flirting with his systems of representation and by performing his desire. And the “new dancers”, the silent ones still disclosing the body, have removed themselves from the stage (not entirely of their own volition). Dancers like Karczag, Hay and Forti, have become teachers of body awareness techniques (Alexander, Feldenkrais) and they are no longer so visible in the public arena of performance. Instead, the position of freedom through movement, which their dancing/body research makes possible, begins in a world apart, a private sphere of feminine exchange. And their writing of the body occurs in a space which is less open to public sense-making.

There is a terrifying gulf of economy in movement, which has no exchange value, and Lacan’s “no sexual

relation”, with its double meaning of relation between the sexes and relations of economic/social value, seems inevitable. Through kinesis, which Irigaray renames desire, these dancers are engaged in the desiring of their own bodies, the “not-one” and the discoveries of their own pleasures. Irigaray foretells that man will never hear this woman speaking of her own desire. Hay, Forti and Karczag however always informed their audience about this place of their silence as an invitation to travel there awhile. In performance this might be called their “integrity”, an integrity of approach consisting not of morphology/form or meaning, but of an access to the de-constructing and re-ordering of body paradigms for the viewer who might wish to undertake his/her own work of displacement.

Irigaray is not a woman of “integrity”, nor has she made herself so, for we cannot know the physical presence and play of her body, except in her own writing. But I read her metalanguage, a term she would deny, as a morphology of herself as woman speaking as you/I/us. Perhaps the problem of Irigaray is that she doesn’t play enough or that the body is not material enough. Her body is only seen (thought about) in relation (as sexual other) to the phallus-brain organisation. Her metaphors of resistance, “of rubbing”, come from those very opposites she wishes to debunk – matter/curved mirror/fluids etc. and in doing so leaves the language and the body in an idealised state of “not-knowing.”

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In textualising all forms of knowledge, deconstruction theory often, in its very unmasking of rhetorical strategies, itself lays claim to the status of ‘theoretical knowledge’. Most postmodern theory, however, realises this paradox or contradiction (Hutcheon, 1988:13).

Thus I think of the problem of writing as woman and not writing as woman and of Irigaray doing so from within psychoanalysis. Her work, like that of the dancer, cannot be reduced to one of the many contradictory exercises of postmodernism, for it is the playing out of this dilemma which makes her work most challenging, suggestive and possibly most useful. In the writing out of the position of “woman” from within psychoanalysis and for the provocative body which she produces in her writing/thinking,

Irigaray is worth “a good read” and not simply for the cleverness of her strategy.

Likewise the new dancers’ approach to the body has been rigorous; involving consistent interrogation, observation, trial and error, response, imagination, proposal of conceptual frameworks. Eva Karczag with an anatomy book, Simone Forti and ethology, or Deborah Hay working on cellular consciousness, are involved in painstaking if not illuminating and liberating work on the sources of movement. If their choreographic method demands of the viewer a receptivity and a willingness to understand their endeavours, that should not undo the work itself. It sits (if it sits at all) in the space where the human being might first be seen, not as a milk-sucking or mirror-staring infant but as an upright animal with extraordinary conceptual powers vested not in the genitals (or in the brain deformed by the genitals) but in every part of the body with its unique capacity to provide information and to organise its own movement. This power of the “thinking body” is a power which the dancer may contribute to those theoretical debates that often mask and confuse material (biological) realities.

Individuals with control not just of their own bodies, but the bodies of others, wield the most power in society. That power can be defined as the power of the choreographer, to control not just the co-ordinates – the time, the space, the structure of the space – but also to determine the body construction of any oppressed or repressed individual or performer. These “new” dancers have established a special domain, not so subject to specularisation, where their dance, the specific question and answer of their improvising and research, is providing them with the opportunity to be themselves as “an/other woman”, transparent, as if we could really see through the speculum to a place where she, woman, might be dancing.¹⁸

In the best writings of the French feminists there is “an implicit double program ... against sexism where women unite as a biologically oppressed class; and for feminism, where human beings train to prepare for a transformation of consciousness.” (Spivak, 1987:144). The “new” dancer, in these terms, like Irigaray, has made moves “for feminism”. However, and this is the dilemma, their work has its place within a marginal, and sometimes elite, area of cultural production and their line of enquiry risks casting

woman forever into a space without words. In exploring the im/possibility of speaking and being represented through the body perhaps we must also reconsider the im/possibility of changing logos, narrative and power relations from or within/out the state of dancing.

Must these questions leave the sound of women talking like this?

“You’re not listening.” “Ummm! I’m listening. I’m listening...”

Notes

- 1 In this paper I am making a distinction between “new dance” and “post-modern dance” although I am aware that there is a lot of slippage in these terms. Dancers of the period, 1960-1970, did not initially call their work “post-modern”. Yvonne Rainer, for instance, proposed “a new dance that would recognise the objective presence of things, including movements and the human body” (Banes, 1980:43) much as the “new novel” and “new music” were being presented. In their aesthetic concerns these dancers demonstrated characteristics closer to an era, one might describe as “late modern” in painting or music i.e. field-painting or minimalism. The label “postmodern” later came to be applied by dance critics, particularly in the United States, and diffused the differences between the politics and methodologies of particular dancers. Much of this essay is based on the “new dance” which emerged from the group of dancers associated with presenting their work at the Judson Church, New York in the early 1960s. For a detailed history refer to Banes, S., *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1980; Banes, S., *Democracy’s Body: Judson Dance Theatre, 1962-1964*, Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1983 and Johnston, J., *Marmalade Me*, N.Y., E.P. Dutton, 1971, and the magazine *Contact Quarterly*, U.S. These dancers were not simply choreographers of bricolage and self-conscious cultural referencing as many subsequent “post-modern” dancers are.
- 2 “I grew impatient with the limitations of the body’s expressivity. That is why I no longer involve myself in the kind of ‘physical research’ I had done through my body.” Rainer quoted in a discussion with Geeta Kapur and Laleen Jayamanne, *Art and Text*, 1986, 23:4, 41 – 51.
- 3 In particular stimulated by the writings of French theorists, Irigaray, Kristeva, Le Doeuff, Cixous etc. and debated by writers such as Moi, Jardine, Gallop, Morris and Grosz etc. See bibliography for full references.
- 4 Kristeva and Irigaray are often referred to as “feminists of sexual difference”, since it is the process of sexual differentiation and its relationship with language which is the concern of these writers. Elizabeth Grosz argues that this concept should not blur the distinctions between them. (1989:100)
- 5 I am punning here on the repetition of the word “new” which occurs in the title of a well-known collection – Marks, Elaine and de Courtivron,

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- Isabelle (eds) *New French Feminisms*. Brighton: Harvester, 1980. For many English-speaking readers this book provided the first encounter with writers such as Irigaray.
- 6 Kendall, E., *Where She Danced*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1979; Copeland, Roger, "Towards a Sexual Politics of Dance", *Contact Quarterly*, (1982) Vol.Vii No. 3/4: 45-50; McDonagh, D., *The Rise and Fall and Rise of Modern Dance*, New York: Mentor Books, 1970; and Banes, S., *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980. Discussion of Merce Cunningham's work is available in *Changes; Notes on Choreography*, N. Y. Something Else Press, 1968 and *The Dancer and the Dance*, N.Y. 1985.
 - 7 Forti and Hay were dancers who presented works at Judson Church and went on to further develop their own choreographic approaches. Karczag studied with many of the Judson dancers and later became a member of Trisha Brown's company. My choice of these three dancers enables me to add some personal experience as workshop participant or audience member to the often unsatisfactory derivation of action from page.
 - 8 This is the title of a book by Mabel Todd which first introduced principles of alignment to the study of anatomy and physiology: New York, *Dance Horizons*, 1937.
 - 9 "The meaning of any structure is to be found by inquiring what the forces are and the structure evolves as the forces are balancing" (Todd, 1937:3).
 - 10 This is my reconstruction of the instructions although the sequence of images is now available on tapes and in books dealing with alignment principles.
 - 11 My reconstruction of an image from Karczag's workshop.
 - 12 This is a repeated theme of Irigaray's *This Sex...* especially in the section, "Questions":119-169.
 - 13 Here I am turning two metaphors against themselves. Jane Gallop's *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: the Daughter's Seduction*, London:Macmillan, 1982. suggests the seduction of French feminists by Lacan and Freud whilst Irigaray herself refutes that woman should accept the position of "philosopher's wife" (1985b:151).
 - 14 The analysis of scopophilia which informs film theory (Mulvey, 1975) seems too limited to define the intersubjectivity of the live performance relationship but there is still no adequate theorisation of the psychology of the live performer/audience relationship with which to replace it.
 - 15 This argument is well-developed in Grosz, 1989:132-139.
 - 16 Books, like the *I Ching*, have been inspiration to these dancers.
 - 17 Foster describes the work of Twyla Tharp, another 'new' dancer, who plays with recognisable dance conventions and appears to invite the audience to re-consider them. Foster argues that the technical virtuosity of the dancers and the complexity of referencing within the dance structure only serve to mask, and to render inaccessible to the viewer, the conventions with which the choreographer is playing. She calls this reactionary postmodernism. (Foster, 1986:260)

- 18 "... women who have 'gone further' by stepping back with their lone dance, or who are today inventing sexual idioms at a distance from the main forum of feminist activity." Derrida, J and McDonald, C. "Choreographies", *Diacritics* 12, Summer, 1982:33. Even male philosophers wax poetical about the possibilities which arise from woman dancing, which may of course be "not to be seen."

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Dancing out the *Diffé*

Introduction

An analysis of the mechanisms through which meaning is generated is central to any re-evaluation of dance history and its canon. I will be arguing in this article for the application of poststructuralist theory to the writing of dance history and also for the wider opening of feminist scholarship to considerations of live performance.¹ Women's studies, although it has generated a great deal of scholarly writing on the social

by Jane Desmond

construction of gender and the visual and verbal representation of women in literature, visual arts, and the mass media, has yet to engage fully with the specific richness of performance. Study of performance can include not only historical analysis of visual representations, their construction and reception, but also consideration of the special case of construction of meaning through display of the body – a body that is at once “real” and “representational” as it exists in performance. If “the feminine” itself can be conceived of as a socially constituted masquerade, as Mary Ann Doane and others have noted, then an analysis of performance has wide potential application for work in feminist studies.²

Cultural Imperialism and Ruth St. Denis's "Radha" of 1906

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Dance Spectacle

Although dance scholarship has expanded dramatically in the last fifteen years or so, it remains far behind related fields of arts criticism both in the amount of work and in the level of analysis. Within the bounds of traditional history and criticism, several excellent scholars have emerged in the last two decades,³ but the discipline as a whole is still waging a battle for acceptance within the academy and remains relatively closed to current work in related fields such as literary theory. There are many reasons for this: as the most ephemeral of all the arts, dance leaves the fewest traces (most dances have not been recorded in any way), making historical reconstruction and analysis exceedingly difficult. And, because it deals most directly with the mute (and most often female) body, dance remains suspect in institutions of higher learning.

Most dance writing is still concerned with technical and artistic judgment, historical reconstruction, reportage, and description, or even social history; but deeper analyses of the ideological functions of dances as works of art are still relatively rare. Only in the last few years have dance critics and historians begun to consider issues that have engaged literary critics and feminist scholars for much more than a decade. Gender, while it may be noted, is rarely analyzed as a constitutive factor.⁴

Furthermore, we are still in the early stages of developing theoretical tools suitable for our object of investigation: the human body, most often the female body, moving in performance. I want to show how theoretical tools drawn from other disciplines can be adapted to dance criticism, as well as how any investigation of gender in dance must be linked to concurrent analysis of other markers of cultural otherness, such as race and class. I hope that in return the particular structure of dance as live performance will open new avenues of theoretical investigation, furthering development of current theories about perception, pleasure, and the mapping of meaning onto the gendered body.

Ruth St. Denis

My object of analysis is an important 1906 piece, "Radha," choreographed and performed by Ruth St. Denis. St. Denis is usually presented as one of the major figures in the history of American dance, and she is always cited, along with Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan, as one of the three "mothers" of modern dance. Any re-evaluation of the dance history canon must consider St. Denis's work.

With her husband, Ted Shawn, she started the Denishawn school of dance, one of the first professional schools of "aesthetic" dancing, in 1915, and toured

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throughout the country in the early decades of this century. Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and Martha Graham, the leading choreographers of the next generation, all served an apprenticeship with Denishawn. St. Denis's work was seen on the vaudeville circuit (often the first professional aesthetic dancing that many Americans encountered) and was performed in elite theaters as well. The bulk of her repertoire, which she continued to perform well into the 1960s, consisted of dances inspired by ethnic styles ranging from American Indian to Japanese. The scale of the works varied from solo pieces to large spectacles. Denishawn dancers even appeared in D. W. Griffith's 1916 film, *Intolerance*. In the 1920s St. Denis's company toured Asia, presenting its orientalia to enthusiastic crowds. Although St. Denis's aesthetic was largely rejected as too decorative by Humphrey and Graham, and her works are not regularly performed today, her contribution to the rise of modern dance in America cannot be denied.

Most dance histories discuss St. Denis's "showmanship" and refer to her dances as part of the turn-of-the-century American passion for exotica.⁵ But such observations do not take us deeply into the ideological structure and function of the work itself. While we can never imagine with certainty the meaning of an art work for a particular audience, we can venture an analysis of its structures of meaning. I will argue that by adapting contemporary insights drawn from literary criticism, film theory, and work on race and colonialism, we can come closer to understanding not only what "Radha" means, but how its range of meanings may be produced. I will argue that "Radha" presents a hyperbolization of categories of otherness, mapping markers of race, orientalism, and sexuality onto the white middle-class female body. Thus, "Radha" can be said to function as a site of condensation and displacement of desire.

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"Radha"

Spectacle

The dance opens and closes with visions of the Hindu goddess Radha posed in spiritual contemplation, partially hidden by a screen. The longest portion of the dance, however, consists of five variations celebrating the pleasures

of the senses, and a whirling "delirium of the senses" episode that plunges the dancer into postorgasmic darkness. In both its theatrical structure and its visual arrangement on the stage, "Radha" is a spectacle displaying the female body.

It is spectacular first in the sense of not being narrative. Although there is a thin story line to the dance, and it fits the barest requirements of narrative—stasis, disruption, stasis – the majority of stage time is devoted to the display of the body in a way that does not drive a narrative forward by providing new information or character development.⁶ Second, the spectacular aspects of the dance are enhanced by an emphasis on surface decoration. The stage is set with soft amber lighting, wisps of incense, and an ornate backdrop (or – in a later version – a stage set) representing a Jain temple. St. Denis's costume, a short jacket and gauzy skirt, is accented with "jewels" and trimmed with shiny material. Flowers adorn her hair and jewellery her ankles and arms. Midriff and feet are bare. That a critic for *Variety* referred to the "semi-nudity of the woman" tells us how this costuming was perceived at the time.⁷

The choreography itself reiterated the decorative aspect of the design. As Suzanne Shelton notes, St. Denis believed that "each gesture and pose should objectify an inner emotional state," and "Radha" was conceived as "an elaborate network of spatial and gestural symbols" connoting such feeling states as rapture, despair, or inspiration.⁸ Authorial intent aside, "Radha" – having been blocked out with saltcellars on the kitchen table – was a series of simple circular or square spatial patterns composed of relatively simple movements.

These movements were the turns and flourishes of the skirt dancer's repertoire mixed with a smattering of balletish steps and Delsartean limb movements. Never having studied Indian dance, St. Denis drew on the images of India available to her in books and punctuated her simple phrases with poses that recalled oriental icons and "popular images of the late Victorian era," such as the *femme fatale*.⁹ Many of these poses were performed in profile, enhancing the two-dimensional quality of the figure-ground relationship. Radha, brought out of her ornate enclosure like a precious jewel, becomes a moving ornament against an elaborately decorated backdrop until, after displaying her valuable beauty, she is enclosed again,

still tantalizingly visible but unattainable, within the carved fretwork of her diadem. Every aspect of staging can be seen as contributing to this fetishistic display. A closer look at the choreography will clarify the presentation.

Description and close analysis¹⁰

The curtain rises to reveal the goddess Radha sitting in the lotus position on a pedestal. (In later versions she is partially hidden from view behind an ornately carved screen, which will be opened by the head priest.) A procession of Brahman priests enters, carrying sacrificial offerings. (The priests were performed by Indian sailors and clerks rounded up for the purpose.)¹¹ When the priests are seated in a semicircle, framing a space for Radha to enter, she comes to life. Watched by her priests, she enters the sacred space to begin the dance of the five senses. In a progression from the senses of far distance to the more intimate ones (taste and touch), Radha dances to music from Delibes's orientalist opera, *Lakme*.

In the opening dance of sight, Radha holds a strand of pearls in each hand as she revolves in place. Then, in small steps phrased to the music, she moves from side to side in front of her watching priests, posing occasionally with one leg gently lifted to the front. Exchanging the pearls for bells, she begins the playful, rhythmic dance of hearing during which she surrounds her body with a cascade of sounds. Throbbing music initiates the dance of smell as Radha manipulates a garland of marigolds in a series of simple waltzing steps and poses. At the close of the section she arches back, trailing the blossoms along the front of her body, one hand crushing the flowers to her face. So far we have seen the dancer's body in association with nature and signs of luxurious ornamentation.

Things heat up for the dance of taste, which follows. Drinking deeply from a simple clay bowl, she whirls with abandon, ending in the seductive vulnerability of a deep back bend before she falls to the ground. Kneeling, with her skirt spread around her, she starts the dance of touch by caressing one hand with the other. Languorous music accompanies her movements as she slides her hands voluptuously over her body, ending with fingertips to her lips.

After the "foreplay" of the preceding episodes, the "delirium of the senses" section unfolds, the music quickening to a frenzied tempo. Spinning, possessed, Radha whirls

with her skirts swishing wildly until she suddenly falls to the ground, and "writhes and trembles to a climax, then lies supine as darkness descends."¹² The lights come up on a chastened Radha, lifting her arms in supplication. After tracing the petals of a lotus blossom on the floor, she withdraws to her shrine. The final image shows her sitting on her pedestal, transformed by *samadhi*, self-realization.

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Aesthetic Dancing

St. Denis's aesthetic dancing arose during a time of complex social change in America. At the turn of the twentieth century, changing gender roles joined with racial and ethnic differences and class antagonisms to create a volatile social mixture.¹³ To contextualize St. Denis's work, I will consider two aspects of turn-of-the-century culture: changing social attitudes toward the body, and popularization of the "exotic" in cultural forms.

American Delsarte Movement

In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, a growing emphasis on "physical culture" was allied with a number of reform and educational movements, such as women's dress reform and physical education.¹⁴ Prominent among these physical training regimes was the American Delsarte movement, based on the teachings of French music and drama teacher Francois Delsarte (1811–71). Seeking to analyze and classify human expression, he developed a technical training system based on "an elaborate and mystical science of aesthetics deriving from his personal interpretation of the Christian Trinity."¹⁵ In the Delsarte system, the codification of gesture was linked to "a spiritual labeling of every part of the body according to certain zones – Head, Heart, and Lower Limbs, which corresponded to Mind, Soul, Life."¹⁶

Although intended for the elocutionary training of professional speakers and actors in the 1870s, the expressive principles of Delsarte's aesthetic theory were being practiced throughout the United States by the late 1880s, especially by women, in the drawing rooms of middle and upper-class households. American proponents of Delsartism stressed relaxation techniques, "energizing" exercises, rhythmic gymnastics, "natural" movement based on



OPPOSITE: RUTH ST. DENIS IN "RADHA," 1906.
(PHOTO REPRINTED BY PERMISSION OF PERFORMING ARTS RESEARCH CENTER,
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY AT LINCOLN CENTER, NEW YORK.)

spiralling curves, statue-posing, and pantomime. Statue-posing and pantomime were deemed "the ultimate in refinement and gentility" and helped open a "wedge for the entrance of respectable women into the field of theatrical dance" at a time when the theater was regarded in the United States as morally suspect.¹⁷

Through Delsarte, movement was analyzed and linked to meaning and morality. "Natural" movement was thought to provide authenticity of expression. The body became a signifier of Truth. Writing in 1954 about the Delsarte system, Ted Shawn, St. Denis's lifelong partner, states, "The spontaneous movements of the body cannot lie ... all human beings move under the government of universal laws, and gesture is the universal language by which we can speak to each other with immediacy, clarity, and truth, and which no barrier of race, nationality, language, religion or political belief can diminish in communicative power."¹⁸

The changes in American society at the turn of the century coincided with massive colonial expansion in which Europe consolidated control of most of what is now known as the Third World. During this time, a popular and elite fascination with non-European cultures coincided with a rise in such "sciences" of codification as ethnography. The "exotic" was extremely fashionable in scholarly endeavors as well as "high" art and "low" art forms.

In some high art contexts, the exotic was cast as a utopian vision of the past glories of classical civilizations. The past seemed to offer an antidote to the chaotic urban conditions that threatened the middle and upper classes. At the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition, the monumental White City, built in neoclassical style, typified this urge in elite cultural production.¹⁹ Popular images of the exotic, however, were less utopian and were perceived by the cultural elite as merely gratifying the senses rather than providing spiritual uplift. For example, historian John Kasson describes the exposition's Midway as "exuberant chaos," and a "hurlyburly of exotic attractions: mosques and pagodas, Viennese streets and Turkish bazaars, South Sea Island huts, Irish and German castles, and Indian tepees."²⁰ A prime attraction was the Persian Palace of Eros where Little Egypt and her cohorts danced the hootchy-

kootchy. Described at the time as a "suggestively lascivious contorting of the abdominal muscles" that was "almost shockingly disgusting," this attraction proved immensely popular.²¹

Exotic popular amusements like the Midway and Luna Park on Coney Island, which attracted both middle- and working-class patrons, supplied an ornate aesthetic that Kasson has termed the "oriental orgasmic." The essentialist strains of Delsartism and orientalism mixed well. St. Denis's achievement in "Radha" was to combine the oriental orgasmic with Delsartism's transcendent spirituality into a spectacular form that could play successfully not only on the vaudeville circuit but also at the garden parties of the elite and in the art theaters of America and Europe.

Ruth St. Denis and "Radha"

The multiple strains of orientalism, popular culture, and artistic spiritualism that are found in St. Denis's work have their beginnings in her childhood. The daughter of a well-educated progressive mother, she was drilled in Delsarte exercises and exposed to Eastern spiritualism through theosophy and through the orientalist performance of leading American Delsarte exponent Genevieve Stebbins. As a young adult, St. Denis became a believer in Christian Science, and throughout her career she combined the spirituality of the Delsarte system with her own adaptations of Christian Science teachings, which emphasized that "spirit is the immortal truth; matter is mortal error."²²

Some scholars have seen a feminist dimension in Christian Science, founded by Mary Baker Eddy, because it asserts the androgynous nature of God. In the social sphere, this concept means that in order to be complete persons, both men and women had to have "a harmonious balance of masculine and feminine traits."²³ But equally important to Christian Science were notions of morality that promoted "purity" and chastity.²⁴ Inheriting the traditional Christian dualism between the spiritual and material realms, Christian Science did away with the hierarchy of that dualism by denying the material world altogether, subsuming it into a monism of Spirit. As Susan Hill Lindley has argued, the feminism of Christian Science was "ambiguous," and Eddy's resolution of this dualism that traditionally denigrated both women and the material "was no real solution to the tension, for it denied rather than redeemed the 'lost half.'"²⁵

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But, the spiritualism of Christian Science combined with the Delsarte system, which allowed women a new freedom of expression through movement, may have provided St. Denis a way “around” the strictures associated with the body’s materiality and sensuality. While building a career on her own physical display, she steadfastly asserted her identity as a mystic and her dancing as spiritual uplift. In a poem titled “White Jade” describing an early dance of the same name, St. Denis writes, “My own body is the living Temple of all Gods. The God of Truth is in my upright spine. The God of Love is in the Heart’s rhythmic beating. The God of Wisdom lives in my conceiving mind The God of Beauty is revealed in my harmonious body.”²⁶ In this rhetorical fiat, the material body is not so much denied as transposed into the figuration of transcendental values.

Through her dance, St. Denis declared that she was presenting the mystic’s experience of unity with God. In preparation for each performance of “Radha,” St. Denis writes, she would meditate for half an hour to “realize my contact with the one Mind,” so that by the time she stepped onstage, she felt she “was truly the priestess in the temple.”²⁷

Just as in Christian Science the body was subsumed into Spirit, St. Denis subsumed the sensual aspects of her dancing into a vaunted mysticism framed both as religion and as art. In doing so she, like her contemporary Isadora Duncan, was able to extend the bounds of propriety in the public display of the partially clothed female body. At a time when bare feet were cause for shock, St. Denis in her revealing costume earned reviews declaring, “Every lascivious thought flees shy into the farthest corner [She has] freed our souls from the clutches of everyday life.”²⁸

St. Denis’s dancing was not always so uplifting. With the support of her mother, who accompanied her to New York, she got her start at the age of fifteen as a skirt dancer in a dime museum variety show. Surrounded by specimens like triple-headed calves, she danced six shows a day, punctuating her routines with acrobatic roll-overs and her specialty, the slow-splits. On the bill with St. Denis one week in 1894 were an albino musician and Lillie the Trick Dog. This may not seem an auspicious start for a dancer who was later to be hailed as the solution to “the world’s enigma,” but it provided the basis for an artistic savvy that “aspired to the loftier echelons of fine art” while never losing the “genius

of lowbrow.”²⁹

The myth surrounding St. Denis’s first moment of choreographic revelation combines mass consumer culture with the spiritual aspirations assigned to high art. In 1904, while on tour in a David Belasco production of *DuBarry*, St. Denis was struck by a drugstore poster advertising Egyptian Deities cigarettes: the bare-breasted goddess Isis sat surrounded by huge columns and flowering lotus. An inscription carved in stone above her head assured the buyer that “No Better Turkish Cigarette Can Be Made.” St. Denis later wrote, “My destiny as a dancer had sprung alive in that moment. I would become a rhythmic and impersonal instrument of spiritual revelation.... I have never before known such an inward shock of rapture.”³⁰

In dance histories, this incident is usually repeated and valorized as a moment of artistic inspiration. What should be noted, however, is how it reveals the forces of commodification, appropriation of the exotic, rapturous denial of the physical in favor of the spiritual, and display of the female body as a site of revelation that were to mark St. Denis’s work throughout her career. All of these are exemplified in “Radha.”

The dance (“Egypta”) that the poster inspired was not completed until several years later, but the idea of an Eastern goddess was transposed into an Indian setting for “Radha,” which catapulted St. Denis into the artistic circles of the cultural elite. First publicly performed in 1906, “Radha” played in New York at Proctor’s vaudeville house on Twenty-third Street,³¹ with St. Denis appearing between acts by a pugilist and a group of trained monkeys.³² Soon, however, a New York socialite and oriental enthusiast, Mrs. Orland Rowland, took an interest in St. Denis’s work and arranged a private matinee for her society friends. “Radha” became a hit. Newspaper notices assured her success with headlines such as “Yes, Society Did Gasp When Radha in Incense-Laden Air ‘Threw Off the Bondage of the Earthly Senses,’” and hundreds of eager spectators were turned away from subsequent performances.³³ St. Denis was launched on the high art circuit and soon found an influential supporter in Stanford White, but her work never lost its cross-class appeal. Lean times periodically sent her back to vaudeville to finance her work.

By thus contextualizing “Radha” in terms of the popularity of exotica at the turn of the century, the rise of

“barefoot dancing,” and various strains of spiritualism, I have touched on issues of gender, orientalism, and changing representations of women. Many dance historians stop their analysis at this point. But I still want to consider in detail the ideologies of these various discourses and their mode of activation in the construction of “Radha.”

“Orientalism”

Edward Said defines “orientalism” as “a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’).”³⁴ Through an act of “imaginative geography,”³⁵ it both created and then served the maintenance of the two worlds. It articulates a “relationship of power, of domination, and of varying degrees of cultural hegemony.”³⁶ “Orientalism” in Said’s usage refers not only to the changing political-historical relations between Europe and Asia but also to the discovery and study of various oriental cultures by Westerners and to a body of assumptions, images, and fantasies held by Westerners about the Orient.³⁷ It is this latter category that is my concern here. Although Said traces historical changes in the specific constitution of these images and fantasies, he maintains that a pervasive “latent Orientalism,” circulating both inside and outside of scholarly disciplines, has remained remarkably consistent for several hundred years.³⁸

Above all, the Orient is conceived of as unchanging and eternal. Occasionally these characteristics are valorized as “seminal” and “profound,” as in reference to “the wisdom of the East.”³⁹ Yet, most of the attributes assigned to the Orient are opposite to those valorized in the West. The East is primitive, childlike, and backward; it is eccentric, irrational, chaotic, and mysterious; it is sensual, sexual, fecund, and despotic. Most important, the Orient is deemed incapable of speaking for itself. It is not Europe’s “interlocutor, but its silent Other.”⁴⁰ The Western orientalist, as artist or scholar, “makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West.”⁴¹

By the end of the nineteenth century, the East was clearly constructed as a site requiring explication, investigation, illustration, discipline, reconstruction, or redemption.⁴² The East’s otherness offended European standards of sexual propriety, threatened domestic seamliness, and “wore away Eastern discreteness and rationality of time, space, and

personal identity. In the Orient, one was suddenly confronted with unimaginable antiquity, inhuman beauty, boundless distance.”⁴³

By the last decades of the nineteenth century, the “unchanging” nature of the East was seen as a source of regeneration for a Western world caught in an unsettling rise of industrialism and materialism.⁴⁴ Said has characterized this idea of regeneration as a secular post-Enlightenment myth based on Christian imagery of death and rebirth through salvation.⁴⁵ In “Radha,” St. Denis acts out a similar scenario of redemption within the imaginative geography of the Orient.

Following Said, we could thus look at “Radha,” with its cresting tide of physical excitement overcome by spiritual purification, as illustrating the threatening chaotic sensuality of the East and its ultimate discipline and redemption through the triumph of spirituality or the law of ultimate truth. From this point of view, “Radha” projects a vision of the East as a site of imaginary pilgrimage both for sensual indulgence and physical awakening (the same notion later popularized in E. M. Forster’s *Passage to India*, e.g.) and for spiritual rejuvenation of an America in the throes of change.

But if “Radha” is “about” the East, it is even more about the West. As James Clifford has noted in his criticism of Said’s book, Said’s argument at times suffers too much from the dichotomy we/they he attempts to describe.⁴⁶ In fact, Western discourse about “the East” reflects a continually changing historical process of self-definition by “the West.” We can see “Radha” as a portrayal of Western desires and ambivalences displaced onto an orientalized, gendered body. The association between the cultural otherness of the Orient and the construction of gender in the West is the key to this linkage.

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Orientalism and the otherness of gender and race

As a site of unlimited desire and deep generative energies, the Orient is figured as female.⁴⁷ Trinh T. Minh-ha describes the construction of the feminine in Western culture in practically the same language Said uses in depicting the Orient. “Woman,” she says, “can never be defined.... She

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wallows in night, disorder, immanence, and is at the same time the 'disturbing factor (between men)' and the key to the beyond."⁴⁸

Both "woman" and "the East" are constructed by Western patriarchy as "natural" categories of difference requiring explication, investigation, illustration, discipline, reconstruction, or redemption. Knowledge of both is eroticized as a stripping bare, an exposing of hidden meaning. The vocabulary itself reveals a scopical economy of difference in which the act of seeing is equated with mastery. As Said notes, a recurrent motif in nineteenth-century writing is the "vision of the Orient as spectacle, or tableau vivant."⁴⁹ That both the Orient and woman are cast as speechless renders self-narrative and history impossible and creates the necessary conditions for visual spectacle as site or source of knowledge. These double specular economies of difference come together in St. Denis's performance of "Radha." Here the mute colonized female body represents the sensuality of both the "female" and the Orient. Similarly, the higher spirituality attached to the "wisdom of the East" meets current notions of the women's sphere as the province of moral guardianship.

"Radha" is thus doubly sexualized and doubly chaste. The tensions between these seemingly incommensurable attributes—goddess/whore, Eastern/Western, and sexual/chaste—are all articulated across the material presence of the female body. The dance signals the underlying dialectical relation of opposites in any binary construction. It also points to the changing dimensions of women's roles at the turn of the century and the reconstruction of female physicality as it was reflected in the health reform movement.

Freud's description of woman's sexuality as the dark continent reminds us of the intimate relationship among orientalism, gender, and a third register of otherness: race. In discussing this phrase, Sander Gilman asserts that Freud "ties the image of female sexuality to the image of the colonial black and to the perceived relationship between the female's ascribed sexuality and the Other's exoticism and pathology."⁵⁰ The reason Freud's statement was legible to his contemporaries is that, like female sexuality and the imaginative geography of colonialism, the "dark races" were represented as objects to be illuminated, mapped, and controlled.

Early nineteenth-century race theory⁵¹ joined with social Darwinism in the latter half of the century to provide intellectual currency for white ideas about the biological basis of racial inequality.⁵² Like gender, the concept of race entailed notions of difference that were seen as irreducibly linked to the body and, therefore, as "natural." Both women and non-whites were thus consigned to the "lower" realm of nature. The same dynamic of dominance based on natural difference that was exemplified in white colonialism also undergirds patriarchy.

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Reading "Radha"

In "Radha" I find a construction of meaning that depends on manipulating these codes of difference into an overlapping structure. Race, gender, and cultural otherness double one another, with each register reinforcing the next to produce a hyperbole of "Otherness." Dancing, as a nonverbal display of the body—most often the female body—provides an especially rich mode of articulation for this process.

As I have noted in the preceding discussion, orientalist thought has constructed the East as feminine. Racial thinking has similarly tied otherness to the body. Display of the "colored" Eastern female body then carries with it a surplus of signifiers of difference. The litany of difference can be summarized as sexual (i.e., desirable yet terrifying), mute, natural, essential, universal, unchanging, and visually knowable. The female body is the nodal point that interpolates racial and cultural difference in "Radha." Its investigation is also the main content of the dance and the vehicle for spectacle.

Mechanisms of meaning

The structure of this dance reveals the spectacle of a woman lost in a rising tide of self-pleasure, a goddess delirious with her own sexuality. It shows a woman renouncing, of her own accord, the powerful pleasure of her own body for a chaste spiritual union with the transcendent. It shows the careful marking out and celebration of each aspect of a woman's physicality, her five senses explored one by one moving in sequence, so that the spectator is drawn into an ever more intimate relationship with her body. This



POSTER FOR RUTH ST DENIS AND TED SHAWN, CIRCA 1920.

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spectacle is displayed in front of a semicircle of male viewers on stage and equally directed outward to the audience.

When it is described in this way, the scopophilic aspects of the piece become apparent. Drawing on psychoanalytic film theories of spectatorship and voyeurism, I maintain that the woman's body is fragmented and fetishized, not only visually but conceptually, into each of the five senses – the woman is the five senses, each displayed separately for investigation by the viewer.⁵³ The woman, observed “unawares” by the audience in the darkened theater, is caught in a vortex of pleasure. She is further situated as object of the male gaze through the relayed looks of the priests on stage. Their presence also signals the religiosity of the act. (Being priests, they provide no competition for a white heterosexual male viewer in the audience but do provide adequate gender identification.)

At first glance, it appears that any displeasure that may be aroused in a male viewer by the woman's ability to sexually satisfy herself is soon banished by the reassurance that she rejects her own pleasure/power for spiritual fulfilment. The potential terror of female sexuality would thus be constrained by the patriarchal law of the Father in the form of religion, which would demonstrate the control that orientals, women, and all people of color were seen as requiring. However, the dance also unites the goddess/whore duality within the figure of one woman, thus allowing for several possible readings. One reading reassures the male viewer that even “asexual” women are really “women,” that is, defined by and reducible to their bodies. Other readings might hold that women themselves are repositories of both relationships to sexuality, indulgence, and control; or that woman's pleasure in her own body is so seductive as to involve a constant struggle between expression and renunciation; or even that the pleasure of the senses is itself a transcendent spiritual experience. That is, the recuperative effect of the religious framing remains ambiguous, allowing for multiple responses.

Scopophilic pleasures of this sort are allowed in high art under certain conditions. St. Denis's contemporary, the Austrian writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal, characterized this requirement when he stated that, although “Radha” “borders on voluptuousness, ... it is chaste.”⁵⁴ The mechanism that allows this audience/performer link can be

described as what Michel Foucault calls the “confessional” mode.

The pleasures of the confessional mode

One way of looking at the dynamics of meaning in “Radha,” with its religious discourse, is in the form of a Christian confessional. The confessional structure is a ritual expression, a truthful telling of forbidden behaviour, especially—as Foucault emphasizes in *The History of Sexuality*—sexual behaviour. It requires a speaker and listener (performer and audience).⁵⁵ The act of telling “exonerates, redeems, and purifies” the confessor, and promises him or her salvation.⁵⁶ Its redemptive promise simultaneously allows, while disavowing, the illicit pleasures of prurient interest on the part of the audience.

Foucault indicates how the range of the confessional form expanded after the Reformation. By the end of the nineteenth century this range extended into a series of relationships, including those between psychiatrists and patients and delinquents and experts, and it also took several rhetorical forms such as autobiographical narratives and published letters.⁵⁷ I would add to this list the relationship between Radha and her audience as it functioned in performance. It was the supposed moral superiority of the viewing audience that was being played to and reinforced in Radha's display and renunciation of the pleasures of her own body. Linda Nochlin has, in her discussion of orientalist painting, called this type of viewing experience a “tongue-clicking and lip-smacking response”.⁵⁸

The confessional mode interlocked with St. Denis's own way of conceiving of her work. St. Denis's belief in the Delsartean meaningfulness of movement, and her conviction that her dancing demonstrated the unity of the individual spirit with god (formulated in Christian Science as androgynous, or beyond sexuality), framed her work in moral justification. The confessional mode, as a way of structuring a relationship between performer and spectator, framed sexuality as art and art as moral uplift. Given St. Denis's position as a woman choreographer, then a rarity, I believe that her utilization of these discourses of morality enabled her to subvert the contemporary standards for “respectable” women's display of their own sexuality. In doing so, however, she also reproduced traditional patriarchal designations of that sexuality.

The tensions between the sexuality of the work and its artistic and spiritual framing are reflected in the contemporary critical response. Von Hofmannsthal captured the crux of the dance: "It is consecrated to the senses, but it is higher." Similarly, a British critic called "Radha" athletic in its actuality and ascetic in its refinement. The reviewer for the *Boston Herald* could not help noting that St. Denis's "body is that of a woman divinely planned" but insisted that "there is no atmosphere of sex about her."⁵⁹

Foucault's work can take us farther in a consideration of sexuality and spectatorship. Foucault points out the similarity between two modes of production of truth, the confessional and the scientific discourse.⁶⁰ Both were utilized in the expanding nineteenth-century discourses of sexuality, and both implied a will to knowledge that reflected a socially inscribed power to investigate, to judge, and ultimately to reform or punish. In "Radha," both of these discourses come together. The ethnographic urge to represent the other for the pleasure and uses of the representer⁶¹ combines with the display of sexuality sanctified by the confessional code. The result for the audience is a doubly inscribed "right to look," further enhanced by racial ideologies.⁶²

In white Western discourse, both non-whites and non-Westerners are coded as extremely or excessively sexual. The dark (St. Denis used dark body paint in the first versions) goddess from the erotic East, then, implies a surfeit of sexuality. Even when St. Denis switched to a body suit of her own flesh color in later versions, either for reasons of propriety or merely for convenience, she was still perceived as a Hindu goddess, and we know that at that time in North America, Hindus were perceived as black. In one of the first performances, when a Hindu first entered carrying a tray of incense, an audience member jeered in black dialect, "Who wants de Waitah?"⁶³ The racial implication was so clear that the company did not tour south of the Mason-Dixon line because of the Jim Crow laws.

St. Denis was, of course, known by her audience to be white. Her portrayal of a woman of color had the effect of sexualizing her in the audience's mind. This is similar to the device used in nineteenth-century odalisque paintings where the association of black women with whites served as a clue to the sexual knowledge or availability of the white

women.⁶⁴ Similarly, while St. Denis is Western, she is here linked to the sensuous, eternal feminine represented by the East.

These several dynamics function to enhance the audience's right to look sexually at the respectable white middle-class woman on the stage.⁶⁵ The racial and cultural displacement of "Radha" is precisely what enhances the success of the confessional mode in the context of art. It is this hyperbole of otherness and its reinforcing linkages between ideological notions of race, gender, and non-Westernness that, I suspect, was the key to this dance's popularity.

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Conclusions

But if we leave the analysis at that, we fail to consider fully the dynamics of live performance. After all, the representation of Radha is not a story, where the priestess Radha might be imagined, or a painting, where she might be displayed and observed, but a live performance. As I have already mentioned, the middle-class white woman's body is central to the production of pleasure in the relationship of these three markers of otherness as discussed above. But it is also the factor that ultimately confounds binary constructions of meaning. In the ludic or dreamlike space of performance, the performer is both white and nonwhite, Western and Eastern, and female while usurping the male role of choreographer. (Remember that at that time, although most dancers were female, very few dances were choreographed by women.)

What issues of spectatorship and the production of meaning do these complications raise? At the very least, they unsettle the binarisms of the ideologies that undergird racism, sexism, and orientalism. The element of mastery, however, implied by the right to represent the "other," remains.

But if we look at the choreography, with its combination of skirt-dancing turns, ballet steps, and "Indian" gestures, something else becomes apparent. The dance itself serves as a sign of the cultural process of "othering" through representation—an ongoing process of construction that is always self-reflexive with regard to the culture that produces it. The representative codes of vaudeville skirt-dancing collide with iconic signs of Indianness, mixing with and overlaying one another as a sign of cultural interaction and continually renegotiated meaning.⁶⁶

Dancing out the Difference

Although there is no Brechtian self-reflexivity built into the theatrical structure of “Radha,” implicit in every performance is the spectator’s awareness of the construction of an illusion.⁶⁷ Because of its existence as a temporal art—and a three-dimensional one that is dependent on the physical presence of the performer in the same space as the audience (i.e., not sculpture, not film, not literature)—live performance must produce a convincing linkage of similarity and difference.⁶⁸ The performer is both himself or herself and the character who is portrayed. Performance presents this as a dialectical relationship, always in negotiation.

Drawing on psychoanalytic film theories of spectatorship, I could argue that St. Denis as a white Westerner provides an avenue of psychological identification for her white Western audience. Framed by the essentialist, transcendent spirituality of the piece, the audience is brought into ego identification with the white as nonwhite and the Western as Eastern. At the same time, the voyeuristic and fetishistic aspects of the dance (enhanced by its construction as spectacle) objectify it as separate from the observer. A “colored” white woman (since this is not caricature of the minstrel-show variety) also evokes an ambiguous response. While “mixing” sexualizes the white woman, it simultaneously indicates a potential mixing of the races, legally proscribed at the time. If ideologies are based on binary constructions of difference necessary to the maintenance of hegemony, performance thus indicates the ambiguity of such binary constructions and their true dialectical function in the production of meaning.

Certainly St. Denis’s rise to fame and her ability to present herself in respectable theaters as a woman alone on the stage is emblematic of the social changes in the women’s sphere at the turn of the century. Still, her work remains conservative in its assertion of spirituality as the realm of woman and also in its presentation of woman’s body as sexualized. One of St. Denis’s achievements was to unite these supposed opposites.

Some critics have begun to pose questions theorizing the body in performance.⁶⁹ Questions of the power of representation become more complex when acted out on and through a material body. Is the female appropriation of sexual display in live performance, even within patriarchal norms, an act that in some way threatens the hegemony of patriarchy? That so much of the sexual pleasure in

“Radha” is danced as self-pleasure (especially Radha’s self-caressing) on the one hand asserts a new self-empowerment for woman and on the other belongs to traditional structures of pornographic viewing.⁷⁰

In any performance, the venue and the particularities of audience are essential to the generation of meaning. Certainly the meanings activated by the first performance, for spectators who had just watched boxing and were soon to see trained monkeys, were somewhat different from those generated by the same piece in a “respectable” theater, framed as “art.” Different still is the reception of “Radha” by our students today who dutifully sit through St. Denis films in dance history seminars.

What the investigation of a piece like “Radha” can provide is an example of the necessity of unraveling the multiple strains of ideological meaning that are present in any work of performance and that are variously activated in specific viewing situations. For instance, similar doublings of race, exotica, and sexuality are played out in Josephine Baker’s famous “banana dance.” As a black woman, however, her construction as “exotic” never played as successfully in North America as in Europe.

As we reconsider the canon of dance history and integrate it with gender studies, it is not enough to ask how St. Denis conceived of her work, or how it relates to the dance history that precedes and follows it. Nor it is enough to ask how St. Denis’s work reflected the changing roles of women in her day, or to note stylistic similarities between dance and other types of artistic products in the same historical period. All of these investigations produce valuable information and should not be ignored. But as scholars we must also look more deeply at the mechanisms of meaning on which the performance hinges and investigate the role of live display of the female body in activating those mechanisms, as I have attempted to do in this article. Only by more fully comprehending the production of ideology in every sphere of social construction, including the female body in performance, can we begin to sever the invisible links that bind racism, sexism, and cultural imperialism so tightly together.

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Notes

- 1 Susan Leigh Foster's excellent *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986) is, as of this writing, the only extended treatment of dance history to draw on theories of semiotics and on the historiographic work of Hayden White to construct a new model for a poetics of dance. This work focuses on developing paradigms for approaching various types of choreography but does not make race, gender, or class central components of its analysis.
- 2 See Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," *Screen* 23, nos. 3-4 (September/October 1982): 74-89, for a discussion of related concerns and references to relevant articles.
- 3 See, e.g., work by Marcia Siegel and Sally Banes such as Sally Banes, *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theatre, 1962-1964* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983) and Marcia Siegel, *The Shapes of Change: Images of American Dance* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979).
- 4 In the last few years, some exceptions have begun to appear. See Ann Daly's interesting work on gender and ballet in her "Classical Ballet: A Discourse of Difference," *Women and Performance* 3, no. 2, issue 6 (1987-88): 57-66; and Marianne Goldberg's discussion of gender in Martha Graham's work, "She Who Is Possessed No Longer Exists Outside," *Women and Performance* 3, no. 1, issue 5 (1986): 17-27. Suzanne Shelton's meticulously researched biography of Ruth St. Denis, *Divine Dancer* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), on which I will draw throughout this article, discusses sexuality as a factor in St. Denis's work but does not analyze it in detail. Neither does Foster's consideration of St. Denis, although gender is noted.
- 5 For the works that discuss "Radha" as part of the general passion for the exotic at the turn of the century, see Elizabeth Kendall, *Where She Danced: The Birth of American Art Dance* (1979; reprint, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984); Nancy Lee Chalfer Ruyter, *Reformers and Visionaries: The Americanization of the Art of Dance* (New York: Dance Horizons Press, 1979); Christina L. Schlundt, "Into the Mystic and Miss Ruth," *Dance Perspectives*, no. 46, (Summer 1971). Foster and Shelton also situate the work in terms of exotica.
- 6 For a discussion of the relation of narrative and spectacle, see Laura Mulvey's breakthrough article, originally published in 1975, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," reprinted in her *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 14-28.
- 7 Quoted in Shelton, 54.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 62.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 I rely on my viewing of a 1941 filmed version of St. Denis performing "Radha," a print of which is housed in the Dance Collection of the Lincoln Center Library, New York. I draw also on Shelton's verbal reconstruction of the dance, based on her viewing of the same film and supplemented by her review of St. Denis's papers housed at Lincoln Center.
- 11 Kendall, 51.
- 12 Shelton (no. 4 above), 61.
- 13 See John Higham, "The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890's," in his *Writing American History: Essays on Modern Scholarship* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 73-102.
- 14 Kendall (n. 5 above), 22.
- 15 Ruyter (n. 5 above), 17.
- 16 Kendall, 24.
- 17 Ruyter, 29.
- 18 Ted Shawn, *Every Little Movement: A Book about Francois Delsarte* (New York: Dance Horizons Press, 1963), 90.
- 19 John Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), 17.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 24.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 22 Mary Baker Eddy, quoted in Shelton (n. 4 above), 47.
- 23 Margery Fox, "Protest in Piety: Christian Science Revisited," *International Journal of Womens Studies* 1, no. 4 (July/August 1978):411
- 24 Susan Hill Lindley, "The Ambiguous Feminism of Mary Baker Eddy," *Journal of Religion* 64, no. 3 (July 1954): 326.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 331.
- 26 St. Denis quoted in Schlundt (n. 5 above), 24.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 Shelton, 67, 21.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 46
- 31 Vaudeville at this time reflected both its "coarser" origins in variety shows for male audiences and its newer respectability as it targeted a growing middle-class (male and female) audience. St. Denis's work, a respectable presentation of sexuality, fit well with changing codes of performance. Shelton (n. 4 above) notes: "As ladies began to patronize high-class variety, the atmosphere of the theater became even more self-conscious, with elaborate rationales required to justify the display of female bodies. Scantly clad women appeared as 'living statues' or in tableaux that duplicated famous paintings or biblical episodes" (25).
- 32 *Ibid.*, 54.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 58.
- 34 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House 1978) 43.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 90
- 36 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 90.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 206.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 208.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 93.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 206.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 40, 206
- 43 *Ibid.*, 167.

- 44 Notions of regeneration were not limited to the West. Said notes that in view of the conditions under colonialism, the Western "Orientalist found it his duty to rescue some portion of a lost, past classical Oriental grandeur" (ibid., 29) in order to ameliorate conditions in the present. In other words, the Westerner could now represent the Orient as it was, is, or should be, not only to himself but also to the Orientals, restoring to them glimpses of their past glories. St. Denis participated in this process when she toured the Orient in 1925-26. Her dances, constructed primarily from library research and from inspiring pictures, were warmly received in India, Japan, and other countries. In India, her respectability may have contributed to a renewal of prestige for traditional classical dancing. However, as one critic noted (see Shelton [n. 4 above], 199), there may have been some irony in the situation for the Indian audiences as they watched a white woman dance a temple dance that was, at the time, usually performed by prostitutes.
- 45 Said (n. 34 above), 115.
- 46 James Clifford, "On Orientalism," in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, ed. James Clifford (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 255-76.
- 47 Said, 188.
- 48 Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Difference: 'A Special Third World Women Issue,'" *Discourse* 8 (Fall-Winter 1986-87): 30.
- 49 Said, 158.
- 50 Sander Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," in "*Race, Writing, and Difference*," ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 257.
- 51 Race theories proposed a division of races into advanced (white) and backward (non-white) categories, just as orientalist thought divided the world into the strong, progressive, advanced West and the weak, primitive, degenerate East. Colonial expansion was seen as proof of the triumph of the fittest.
- 52 Said, 206.
- 53 Laura Mulvey's article (n. 6 above), remains a cornerstone for psychoanalytic critical theories of spectatorship in film. She draws on Lacan's extension of Freud's work on ego formation and the construction of sexual subjectivity to develop a theory of visual pleasure based on voyeurism and fetishism. Her work opposes notions of the social construction of the female as spectacle, i.e., "to-be-looked-at," to that of the male as active narrative agent. These ideas have important implications for developing a related theory of spectatorship for live performance. Following Mulvey, I believe that staging "Radha" as a spectacle (see "Spectacle" section under "Radha," above) enhances the voyeuristic and fetishistic production of pleasure.
- 54 Quoted in Shelton (n. 4 above), 47.
- 55 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1987), 61.
- 56 Ibid., 62.
- 57 Ibid., 63.
- 58 Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient," *Art in America* 71, no. 5 (May 1983): 125.
- 59 Quotes from Shelton, 64. Note also that Shelton, who calls "Radha" a "ritual orgasm", acknowledges the mixed message in the piece and its oriental eroticism. But in her discussion of these qualities she merely states, "This mixed message stemmed from St. Denis' own stage personality and, by extension from the quality of the gestures," which reflected her background as an unassuming New Jersey farm girl (64-65). The intricate dialectic between East and West remains submerged in a discussion of individual artistry.
- 60 Foucault, 64.
- 61 Houston A. Baker, Jr., "Caliban's Triple Play," in Gates, ed. (n. 50 above), 386.
- 62 I am using the term "right to look" as it is developed by Jane Gaines in her "White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory," *Cultural Critique* 4 (Fall 1986): 59-79. She refers to culturally proscribed economies of vision as they are delineated along lines of race, gender, and class.
- 63 Quoted in Shelton, 54.
- 64 Gilman (n. 50 above), 240.
- 65 The class alignment or consignment of successful performers during that time was complex. "Respectable" artists often socialized with the elite, yet remained a class apart, somewhat beyond the pale. In terms of her class origins, St. Denis came from a family relatively poor in economic capital, but rich in educational capital (to use Bourdieu's distinction). Her mother was trained as a doctor, although she did not practice, and her father was an inventor. Certainly, St. Denis's self-presentation in her adult life ("respectably" married to her partner Ted Shawn, e.g.) indicated an alignment with the middle class.
- 66 For a consideration of issues of negotiation in colonialism, see Homi Bhabha's "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October*, no. 28 (Spring 1984), 125-33.
- 67 Brecht's theories of theater emphasized the notion of distanciation, or the "alienation effect." By means of such devices as self-reflexivity his plays keep spectators aware that they are participating in the construction of a fiction; thus they avoid the conventions of realism that serve to naturalize ideology. See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964).
- 68 The situation is somewhat different with film. While the image composed of reflected light is less material than a play in performance, the evidentiary nature of the photographic image carries with it a strong coding of realism. In some ways, film can allow for a stronger identification (and temporary loss of the sense of self as separate from the fiction) than live performance. The complexities of this relationship between film and live performance will have to be considered as film theory is adapted to performance analysis.
- 69 For interesting discussions of related concerns, see Elinor Fuchs, "Staging the Obscene," *Drama Review* 33, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 33-57; and Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: U.M.I. Research Press, 1988).
- 70 For an analysis of the visual structures of pornographic viewing, see Annette Kuhn, "Lawless Seeing," in her *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 19-47. ■

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