

# When Dance Became Movement (and Movement Became Material)

*Eva Karczag*

The *English Oxford Dictionary* gives the following definition for *dance*: ‘move rhythmically to music, typically following a set sequence of steps’. In contrast, definitions for *movement* include: ‘an act of changing physical location or position or of having this changed’ and ‘the general activity or bustle of people or things in a particular place’.

During the 1960s, dance underwent a radical transformation. A small group of innovative dancers and dance makers acknowledged that *any and all movement* is dance. The understanding that *all* movement can be used as material when composing for dance, propelled the art form into entirely new expressive dimensions.

Two key catalysts in this redefinition were workshops on the west and east coasts of the United States.

During the summer of 1959, the innovative and influential dance experimentalist Anna Halprin led a three-week long summer workshop. It took place on her outdoor dance deck, in Marin County, California, and was attended by Simone Forti, Trisha Brown and Yvonne Rainer.

Around the same time in New York, composer Robert Dunn was teaching an experimental composition workshop at Merce Cunningham’s studio. His classes were made up of musicians, visual artists, writers, filmmakers and dancers. Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown, who were all by then in New York, participated in the group that included Judith Dunn, Steve Paxton, Alex Hay, Deborah Hay and Elaine Summers. This workshop sparked the formation of the Judson Dance Theater.

Halprin had shifted away from modern dance techniques. She found the training that modern dancers received was limiting, as they were merely taught to copy a choreographer’s style. In developing her own methodology, she drew on her training with the pioneering dance educator, Margaret H’Doubler, as well as from the principles and practices devised by Mabel Elsworth Todd. H’Doubler had developed a philosophy of dance education based on scientific principles and the belief that creativity lies in all of us. Todd’s work centered on the interconnectedness of mind and body. Her teachings later became known as Ideokinesis.

Halprin believed that dancers should be guided to explore their own bodies and interests, and be honed in skills that would enable them to develop a distinctive, unconventional movement vocabulary. She believed this would empower dancers to create their own movement styles. ‘... if you are aware of the feelings and sensations and images in that

movement it will become dance’<sup>1</sup> Halprin explained. She understood that when improvisation can be experienced as a process of exploration, the dancer’s moving comes from a *felt, internal* place, and has a deeper personal resonance.

Halprin’s approach was also inspired by one of the aims of the Bauhaus workshop: the unification of art, craft, and technology. Dancers, actors, visual artists, and musicians were drawn to her classes, creating a rich cross-fertilization between these different disciplines. Boundaries were expanded as dancers were able to think beyond the usual strictures that defined what dance could be. They could explore space, sound, objects, and their own bodies in new and unusual ways.

Halprin’s work and teaching focused on structured improvisation. This became a prominent choreographic tool also used by the Judson group. During morning sessions, students were encouraged to explore movement from an anatomical viewpoint. In the afternoons, they often observed and abstracted movement qualities from the natural environment that surrounded them. As Simone Forti recalls, ‘the crinkliness of bark or how a leaf fell’. She also notes, ‘We always had a very specific intention of what we were exploring.’<sup>2</sup>

In *Returning to Health: With Dance, Movement & Imagery*, Halprin writes,

Dance can be approached as a direct and natural way to move without any personalized aesthetics imposed from an outside authority. Dance is not necessarily graceful, pretty, or spectacular. Dance can be grotesque, ugly, clumsy, funny, frightening, and confused. It can stomp, fall, attack, clutch and reach.<sup>3</sup>

Halprin encouraged freedom of exploration and expression, coupled with a rigorous, disciplined approach to creating.

Robert Dunn applied many of composer John Cage’s principles to his movement classes. He agreed with Cage’s proposition that all sound can be heard as music, and embraced the view that every movement can be viewed as dance. Dunn offered new ways of composing movement, replacing conventional modern dance choreographic forms with

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<sup>1</sup> Libby Worth and Helen Poynor, (eds) *Anna Halprin*, (Routledge Performance Practitioners, NY 2004) (p. 54)

<sup>2</sup> Leslie Holleran, *Judson Dance Theater*, (Dance Teacher Magazine, 2012)  
<http://www.dance-teacher.com/2012/11/judson-dance-theater-2/>

<sup>3</sup> Anna Halprin, *Returning to Health: With Dance, Movement & Imagery*, (LifeRhythm 2002) (p. 23)

novel structures and considerations that emerged from his students' interests and explorations.

Dunn also acknowledged Cage's non-judgmental approach to teaching. Rather than focusing on praise or criticism of a work, Dunn taught his students to analyze structure, form, method, and materials; and urged them to experiment with phrasing, musicality, and logic. He also encouraged his students to document their processes in ways that defined the parameters of the particular dance they were creating. Improvisation was practiced widely, and scores and variables were used that could transform movement, often in unexpected ways.

As with Halprin's workshops, Dunn's classes were a place for collaboration between artists of varying disciplines. Within this atmosphere of diversity and freedom, the collaborative process set in motion by Dunn allowed for constant redefinition of aims and parameters.

### ***Judson and the concept of all movement as dance***

In July 1962, work that had been generated in Dunn's class was presented in a public concert at Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village, New York. What the audience witnessed was a new *kind* of dance. This performance, entitled *A Concert of Dance*, is widely considered to be the beginning of a new era in dance, one based on non-traditional methods of approaching choreography and performance. The dancing looked different – unconventional methods had been used in the making; the dances were stripped of drama and theatricality, incorporated pedestrian, everyday movement, objects, games, and simple tasks. Although most of the artists were trained dancers, the proposal that any movement was dance, and any person was a dancer, (whether they had dance training or not), allowed pieces to be interdisciplinary. Dancers, painters, poets and musicians participated as both performers and choreographers.

These novel methods of dance composition and performance challenged what audiences knew and accepted as dance. Called Postmodern Dance, it was a reaction to the compositional and presentational constraints of ballet and modern dance (Graham, Cunningham, etc.).

New York dance critic Jack Anderson, in his article *How The Judson Theater Changed American Dance*, wrote

... the influence of Judson continues to this day, for the Judson choreographers were not merely colorful eccentrics, but esthetic adventurers who made sometimes gleeful, sometimes messy, but always fundamentally serious

investigations into the nature and structure of dance movement. Yvonne Rainer has said, “There was new ground to be broken and we were standing on it”.<sup>4</sup>

The emphasis was now on human physicality, everyday movements without ornamentation and the reality of the present moment. Jack Anderson continues:

... if one believes that any movement can serve as a dance movement then, at least theoretically, the most flamboyant movement can be as valid as the most commonplace and all kinds of movement can be mixed together.<sup>5</sup>

### ***The Mind/Body connection – West and East***

The early 1900's was a period of creativity and innovation in dance, as well as in physical education and body culture. Francois Delsarte, F. M. Alexander, Rudolf Laban, and Mabel Elsworth Todd were some of the pioneers who were looking at movement as a complex phenomenon. Their work questioned the Cartesian conception of mind/body separation.

Dancers like Eric Hawkins and Joan Skinner began to explore these techniques, often because of injury, and began to bring them into their teaching, choreographing and performance practices.

Pamela Matt, one of the main figures in the development and documentation of Ideokinesis, says that Hawkins ‘felt that well before the study of a particular style of dancing was undertaken, students needed a more generic and basic approach to cultivating the mind/body's fundamental sensitivities and powers’<sup>6</sup>.

Hawkins had come to dance late, in his mid-twenties. Due to serious injuries in his late thirties, he turned to the work of Mabel Todd, and began a rigorous anatomical and experiential exploration of his body. He realised that when he moved with less muscular tension, he could dance without injuring himself. Hawkins questioned existing training methods that encouraged dancers to force their bodies beyond their physical potential,

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<sup>4</sup> Jack Anderson, *How The Judson Theater Changed American Dance*, (New York Times, 1982) <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/01/31/arts/how-the-judson-theater-changed-american-dance.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>5</sup> Jack Anderson, *How The Judson Theater Changed American Dance*, (New York Times, 1982) <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/01/31/arts/how-the-judson-theater-changed-american-dance.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>6</sup> Pamela Matt, *Eric Hawkins*, <http://www.ideokinesis.com/dancegen/hawkins/hawkins.htm>

and this investigation led him to develop his own technique. He stressed the importance of returning to basic, anatomically sound movement forms that allow each individual to understand and recognise their own distinctive physical patterns.

Hawkins realized that through greater kinaesthetic awareness and neuromuscular reeducation, a dancer can experience a more centred and integrated physique, thus creating a firmer foundation from which to move.

In *The Kinaesthetic Imagination: an interview with Joan Skinner* by Bettina Neuhaus, Skinner speaks about the process of integrating her early dancing experiences with later studies of the Alexander Technique into her teaching:

One of the first influences was my childhood dance teacher Cora Belle Hunter, a student of Mabel Ellsworth Todd, author of *The Thinking Body*. Miss Hunter had a very organic approach to movement; she brought images for children to class and even had a skeleton in the classroom. I guess that it was her influence that prompted me later to question the techniques I was training in.<sup>7</sup>

Skinner began to take Alexander Technique lessons after a severe back injury prevented her from dancing. One new and critical insight these lessons gave her, was the possibility that ‘no one part of the body compresses against another part of the body’<sup>8</sup>. Her Alexander experiences inspired a search for more organic ways of moving and training, and this proved vital in the development of her own technique, Skinner Releasing. She also found that while lying on the floor, resting in a state of active receptivity, images that clearly affected her physically and creatively began to form in her mind. She incorporated this, too, into Skinner Releasing.

Dancers were also looking towards the East. Forms like Yoga, Aikido and Taiji (T’ai Chi) were becoming part of a dancer’s lexicon. In contrast to the way traditional dance was taught at the time, these techniques call for an especially heightened internal focus. When an individual is focused internally, they are observing inner movement, sensation, and the workings of their body/mind.

As dancers began to work in this more self-reflective manner, and began to seriously consider the feedback their own body was offering them, an immense shift in consciousness happened. Instead of learning from the outside in, dancers began to understand the value of techniques that allowed them to work from the inside out. They

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<sup>7</sup> Bettina Neuhaus, *The Kinaesthetic Imagination: an interview with Joan Skinner*, <https://contactquarterly.com/cq/unbound/index.php#view=skinner>

<sup>8</sup> Bettina Neuhaus, *The Kinaesthetic Imagination: an interview with Joan Skinner*, <https://contactquarterly.com/cq/unbound/index.php#view=skinner>

began to search for, employ, and develop these newly embraced forms, that came to be known as Somatic Techniques, in their training.

My own initial encounters with Taiji, the Alexander Technique, and later, Ideokinesis with Andre Bernard, opened vast new worlds for me as a dancer. These forms awakened growing respect for my body, and unfolded an organic, easeful way of moving. With the teachings of Mary O'Donnell Fulkerson and Nancy Topf, I was introduced to Release Technique. In addition to presenting anatomically accurate physical concepts that lead to foundational and efficient movement skills, the Release/Releasing class model contains a focus on improvisation, choice making and compositional consideration. It revealed to me the possibility of *dancer as maker*.

In these techniques importance is placed on process, the means as well as the end result. Present awareness is refined. Receptivity and responsiveness are cultivated. A student learns to 'embody' images, and since these are experienced in an individualized way, each student becomes their own source of both technical and creative potential.

My long term immersion in these approaches to moving and making propelled me into dancing and thinking differently. By observing my body with an internal focus, and listening to the feedback it gives me at all times, I am able to understand and guide my own moving. In fact, my body is one of my most important teachers. This knowledge is empowering.

Dancers need a good dose of being horizontal, in order to balance the vertical of their uprightness. A passerby, looking in on a Release/Releasing class, would, from time to time, see everyone lying down, often with eyes closed, resting; looking as if they were doing nothing. Actually, a lot is going on.

In my own *undoing journey* (the undoing of my traditional dance training), I spent endless hours lying on my back. Here, observing my breath, weight and sensations, along with guiding imagery, I arrive at states of physical and imaginative readiness to move. I am honing my ability to stop and listen more closely, through all of my senses, to all that lies within me.

The movement of breathing is always happening. I often begin by spending some time noticing my breath. This is a time where I simply observe what is, opening myself to become present and available.

Travelling from detail to totality and from totality to detail, I can tune my listening and heighten my sensing. There are many possible routes:

*The wave-like action of my breath  
I become the ocean*

*the movement of my diaphragm,  
like a jellyfish*

*the weight of my body pouring,  
like sand,  
into the floor,  
taking tension with it*

*the whole of my back spreading,  
opening wide*

*the back of my skull falling,  
coming to rest more fully on the floor*

*allowing my head to become  
light as a balloon flying,*

*my spine lengthening,  
as my head leads it out of compression*

*my ribs  
forming a 3-dimensional container*

*heart, lungs, kidneys;  
all of my organs settling*

*the space between my pelvis and shoulder blades  
expanding*

*my pelvic wings,  
opening like butterflies*

*my hip sockets  
softening, deepening*

*my knees and lower legs  
hanging like washing on a line*

*my feet and hands  
fanning open*

*Into the stillness of my resting,  
I begin to invite movement.*

*If I have no specific aim in mind,  
the desire to move can rise  
anywhere in my body.*

*If I have approached the work session  
with a particular focus, I can guide my mind  
to search for movement  
where my interest lies.*

*Whatever way movement begins,  
it often rises into my consciousness like a seed;  
a small seed of movement desire  
that I can begin to nourish  
with my attention.*

*Attention can become part of the  
emerging and evolving moving.*

*Moving generates moving,  
energy sparks energy,  
momentum gives rise  
to more momentum,  
and the desire to move grows.*

*As I continue to nourish my moving  
with my awareness  
Attention can become part of the  
emerging and evolving moving.*

In Marianne Goldberg's interview *Trisha Brown: All of the Person's Person Arriving*, Trisha says:

... simplicity is very hard to perform. You have to have the courage to be there when you are not concealed by a flurry of gorgeous actions. That kind of "being there" makes my heart beat double just talking about it. . . . what makes performing rewarding is when all of the person's person has arrived at the same moment. Feeling is present, physical skill, luck. It evinces a very special kind of humanity in the dancers. They inhabit themselves and the dancing very fully, with all of the levels of their person brought into play. Being in performance is existing in the paradoxical state of diabolic concentration and a feeling a outgoingness. You screw something down so tight that when it's locked into position and the stage manager says go, everything is solid and tight and gleaming like metal. From that moment on it's breath and corpuscles and instinct.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Marianne Goldberg, *Trisha Brown: All of the Person's Person Arriving*, (The Drama



We are looking for a place where all of who we are has arrived. Present physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, imaginatively ... Present in all levels of our being.

### ***Movement as Material***

Somatic practices of undoing and relearning educate us in methods that promote release of excess tensions fostering efficiency of movement, articulateness, and 360-degree availability. A body that is unobstructed and responsive becomes a 'democratic' body, one where body parts can move at any time in any direction.

When movement is seen as material, dance makers can better observe and shape; form and transform; direct and manipulate; distort and disturb. The expressive potentials of the human body are expanded and revitalized.

To make use of this democratically available body, Trisha Brown developed scores that would provoke her to move in ways that she might never have imagined, challenging her audiences to look at dance in an entirely new way. Susan Rosenberg reflects on Trisha's 'longstanding application of rigorous structure and self-imposed limitation as a means of unleashing choreographic invention.'<sup>10</sup>

While dancing Trisha's dances in her company, my body discovered efficient, fluid and integrated ease. New pathways and possibilities embedded themselves. These continue to transform and evolve within my ongoing physical and creative practice.

Again, Marianne Goldberg, in her essay *Composing Structure from Dance and Art in Dialogue 1961-2001, U.S. Dance & Visual Arts*;

[Brown] shed the stylized use of her muscles and the tensile alertness through the spine and skin. Focusing instead on subtleties of elegant, relaxed alignment of her spine and limbs, she moved with ease and a spatial clarity that stemmed from innovative inner imagery.

Brown looks at home physically in these moves, and a different virtuosity and creativity emerged, grounded in anatomically clear and efficient action. New sensations, perceptions, and energy developed within her body and between body, space, time, and geometry. These changes became a technical breakthrough for dance in America. <sup>11</sup>

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Review: TDR Vol. 30, No. 1 Spring, 1986)

<sup>10</sup> Susan Rosenberg, *If You Couldn't See Me*,  
[http://www.kulturkurier.de/veranstaltung\\_139693.html](http://www.kulturkurier.de/veranstaltung_139693.html)

<sup>11</sup> Marianne Goldberg, 'Composing Structure', *Trisha Brown: Dance and Art in Dialogue 1961-2001*, (ed) Hendel Teicher (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002) (p. 29-44)

And, I would suggest, for dance worldwide.

We, who are the inheritors of this revolution continue to explore and deepen our understanding of movement and material. Using methods such as feedback and reflection, we can take the next leap, and conceivably, open up a further (r)evolution in how we perceive dance and performance.

*Are there political implications for dance as movement?*

Working creatively with body and psyche in present moment practices has implications beyond our private worlds. When we learn to become more embodied in our lives, we can also encounter social and political dimensions. By becoming more sensitive to our bodies and surroundings; by learning to listen and touch; by opening ourselves to be receptive and responsive; by resolving to reflect and question, we can grow more responsible for ourselves, for others and for the environment that surrounds us. Through our deepened participation with life, we are made aware of the reciprocity between microcosm and macrocosm. We have opportunities to extract information and inspiration from our environment and integrate it into our work. The potential also exists that we carry insights embodied in studio and performance out into the world around us.

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