ALL TOGETHER

A dynamic presentation of Merce Cunningham’s archives reveals how the seminal modernist choreographer fostered collaboration across disciplines.

by Corinne Granof

"ONE THING I can tell you about this dance is it has no center." That’s how Merce Cunningham described his choreography for Summerspace (1958) to Robert Rauschenberg, who designed the set and costumes for the performances. The displacement of fixed centers and rigid boundaries is a consistent theme in "Merce Cunningham: Common Time," an exhibition on view concurrently this spring at two museums: the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, where the major portion remains until July 30, and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

The shared presentation, organized by the Walker’s Fernanda Meirelles and Philip Bither with Joan Rothfus and Mary Coyne, mimicked the collaborative artistic practices represented in the galleries. Drawing from the archives of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company (MCDC), which the Walker acquired in 2011 following Cunningham’s death in 2009, the show features films and videos of Cunningham’s performances, costumes, and sets, along with ephemera related to the company’s activities. What emerges was—yet is—less a retrospective of a single choreographer than a representation of a diffuse network of like-minded artists who redefined American culture in the mid-twentieth century.

Printed on a wall near the entrance to the MCA presentation were the names of the many artists—poets, composers, musicians, and filmmakers with whom Cunningham worked over his sixty-year career. The constellation of names amounted to a pantheon of American modernist art. Composers David Ballemann, Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, Gordon Mumma, Pauline Oliveros, and Christian Wolff joined artists Robert Morris, Andy Warhol, Bruce Nauman, Moosj Grants, and Enrico Nero alongside designers Rei Kawakubo and James Turrell.

The Walker exhibition begins with a display focused on a representative collaboration. Viewers encounter a bright-red wool overcoat designed by Rauschenberg and worn by Cunningham in..."
Even the most minimal sound pieces could join with stripped-down movements to produce an effect of nearly overwhelming complexity.

CHOREOGRAPHIC MERCE CUNNINGHAM
Musical Advisor JOHN CAGE

the original performance of Changing (1957). The costume hangs on a mannequin in a small enclosure lit by a series of fluorescent lights. The construction panels, a series of squares and rectangles, seem to float in the air. The display lends the colorful costume a powerful, artistic presence. Yet the static, relatable image of the costume is contrasted by a black-and-white film projected in front of the costume, showing it in use during a performance. The photograph described as part of an exploration of "the possibility of containment and explosion being instantaneous." Cunningham alternates between precisely controlled gestures and unpredictable movement, as if he were choreographing a dance improvisation.

CUNNINGHAM developed his distinctive aesthetic and working process at Black Mountain College in Asheville, North Carolina. He first visited the school in 1947 and eventually founded the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in 1953. Black Mountain College was a site for experimentation, open-ended exploration, and cross-disciplinary thinking. As Merce Cunningham's dance company's first artistic director, Cunningham's instructions to the artists were vague; he requested a set that could be transported.
easily on the roof of the company’s Volkswagen tour bus. This resulted in what is arguably Rauschenberg’s first Combine—a collapsible plywood structure adorned with a mix of oil paint, paper, fabric, newspaper, wood, metal, and a rotating mirror. During the performance, dancers moved through and around the diminutive set, one panel of which protrudes a few feet in front of the others to establish a basic sense of architectural space.

In both exhibition venues, Cunningham’s collaborations were examined through displays focused on key individual projects. At the Walker, for example, a gallery is devoted to the Brancusi cast, a work created during the MCD’s residency at the American Dance Festival in 1958 or Connecticut College in New London. According to Cunningham, the energetic piece is about “people and motion.” Rauschenberg painted707 fences and tights with colorful dots in a pattern that suggests a close-up view of a pointillist painting. These garments hang on a clothing rack positioned in front of an expansive mural featuring the same dot pattern spreading from corner to corner.

When Jasper Johns sued Rauschenberg as artistic advisor in 1965, he frequently commissioned other artists to design sets. For Swooshes (1967), Frank Stella designed six canvas banners, each a different color, that the dancers reconfigured throughout the performance. Andy Warhol’s floating Mylar clouds became interactive decor for Rainforest (1968). And after having seen Bruce Nauman’s Performance Corridor (1969) at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, Johns invited him to design the set for Threat (1979). Nauman positioned six industrial fans to blow out toward the audience, partially obscuring the view of the dancers. Johns himself designed the set for Walkaround Time (1968). The playful title comes from the early days of computers, when users had time to go for a stroll as the machines processed information. (Cunningham was an early adopter of computer technology, using animation software to score dances.) Johns borrowed imagery from Marcel Duchamp’s The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass), 1915–23, creating large transparent vinyl boxes printed with graphic elements from the French artist’s iconic artwork—a diagrammatic representation of mechanical sexuality. David Behrman created music for the piece by manipulating tapes of recorded sound: a Volkswagen Beetle starting up, his own footsteps around Niagara Falls, and voices of the dancers reading text by Duchamp.

Artists such as Susan Van DerBeek and Nonie Moon Pulk worked with Cunningham on dances meant to be presented as films and videos. Pulk’s Monos by Moon by Pulk (1970) is a video collage featuring footage of Cunningham performing dances specifically conceived for video. Most of the footage, which Pulk manipulated with early digital editing tools, was shot by Charles Atlas, the MCD’s resident videographer starting in 1974. Atlas’s stunning MCG (2012) was included at both venues in two variations. The monumental nine-channel video installation, with screens oriented at different angles throughout cavernous galleries, is a profound tribute to Cunningham. Rather than simply documenting Cunningham’s performances and rehearsals, Atlas used footage of them as the basis for new artworks enacted to the medium. The immersive installations reflect the core principles of Cunningham’s choreography. The scattered screens emphasize decentralization and simultaneity, each clip competing for the viewer’s attention.

‘COMMON TIME’ can be viewed in relation to other recent exhibitions that have examined artists working in collaborative, cross-disciplinary modes. ‘Leap Before You Look: Black Moun-
tain College, 1935-1957,’ 2015, traveling exhibition organized by Helen Molesworth for the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, surveyed the cultural innovation fostered at the school. ‘Expatriates in Envi-
ronment: The Hirling Workshops, 1966-1977’ (2015), organized by the Graham Foundation in Chicago in collaboration with the Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania, focused on the workshops held in Northern California in the early 1960s and early 1970s by painter Arts Hirling and his husband, architect Lawrence Halprin, participants—dramers, architects, and performance artists—addressed broad questions about move-
ment and space.

I was on the curatorial team for ‘A Feast of Animaleste: Charlotte Moorman and the Avant-Garde, 1960s-1980s’ (2016), at Northwestern University’s Block Museum of Art in Evanston, Illinois. ‘Common Time’ and ‘A Feast of Animaleste’ focused on a single figure who united huge casts of ‘supporting characters.’ Charlotte Moorman brought together diverse groups of musicians, artists, and filmmakers in her performances and installations. These events, like Cunningham’s performances, are crucial to understanding the development of twentieth-century American art. But any museum exhibition that aims to represent such ephemeral activities produced by a dispersed community of artists is going to face basic questions. How can curators present performances in ways that allow the viewer to visualize past events and bring to life the specific context that fos-
tered them? What objects and documentation enable a meaningful representation of performance works?

Of course, film and video projection throughout the Walker’s exhibitions enfolds the static costumes n17 sets, but it still takes an imagination leap by the viewer to put these components together and walk away with a sense of what is left in the image.

In addition to costumes, decor, documentation, and ephemera, both the Walker Art Center and the MCA also included objects from their collections—paintings, sculptures, and videos—by the artists who worked with Cunningham. These objects reinforce the connections between performance and permanent artworks to suggest conversations between practices.

Cunningham once said, ‘You have to lose dancing to stick with it. It gives you nothing back, no manuscripts to store away, no paintings to show on walls or maybe hang in museums, no points to be printed and sold, nothing but that single fleeting moment when you feel alive.’ ‘Common Time’ thoughtfully deft Cunningham’s claim in a striking way. The show feels alive precisely because it upends museum convention, transforming the stuff of chides into a dynamic experience true to Cunningham’s collaborative ethos.

2. Cunningham, written by David Vaughn, ‘Merce Cunningham: Dance Capades,’ 3.
5. Ibid.