

Dance among Friends

Robert Rauschenberg's Collaborations with Paul Taylor, Merce Cunningham, and Trisha Brown

by Jennifer Harris

Beginnings

Born in Port Arthur, Texas, in 1925, Robert Rauschenberg was raised in a family that belonged to the Church of Christ, an extremely rigid sect of Christian fundamentalism that denounced nearly all forms of pleasure. He had planned to become a pastor until he was 13, at which point his growing affinity for dance got in the way. "It was a sin to dance," he recalled. "And I was quite good at looking through the Bible and showing how many times they dance in the Bible."¹ Fittingly, dance would remain linked to ideas of restriction throughout his six-decade career, a productive tension he would revisit again and again.

While he was living in New York in the early 1950s, dance helped Rauschenberg forge a path beyond an insular community of abstract painters, bringing him into close contact with a circle of choreographers, composers, dancers, and musicians and inflecting his approach to materials with intermedia and cross-disciplinary concerns. Dance would continue to resonate as a way of bringing time and the concerns of a live audience into the realm of objects. Over extended and often overlapping periods, Rauschenberg's relationship to dance developed through collaborations with three icons of postwar American modern dance—Paul Taylor, Merce Cunningham, and Trisha Brown—with whom he would design sets, costumes, and lighting, compose music, and perform. Alongside these choreographers, Rauschenberg approached dance and its visual components as opportunities to challenge the restrictions of conventional theater. Each collaboration offered an expanded arena in which to dissolve the barrier between art and life, a distinction he challenged in dance, as in his painting and sculpture, through the introduction of quotidian materials and gestures.

Paul Taylor

Rauschenberg's first dance collaboration took place in 1954, when Paul Taylor invited him to make the set and costumes for *Jack and the Beanstalk*, Taylor's choreographic debut. The two had met in January or February of that year, when Taylor happened upon Rauschenberg's exhibition at the Stable Gallery. There, he found Rauschenberg sweeping up the remains of one of his Dirt Paintings (made by placing dirt in a wooden box that served as its frame), which had succumbed to gravity despite the artist's best efforts to

hang it on the wall. Taylor later recalled being particularly intrigued by Rauschenberg's Elemental Sculptures, small, interactive works made from materials scavenged from around Fulton Street, where he was living at the time: "To me these all seemed very beautiful, mysterious, darkly comical, and somehow atavistic."²

The meeting prompted an immediate exchange of work and ideas, each artist pulling the other into his orbit. That year, Taylor began working alongside Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns on window displays for Tiffany & Co. and the department store Bonwit Teller. "Bob and Jap often talked about art," he would recall. Noting in particular their use of non-art materials (dirt for the display of Tiffany diamonds) and commonplace objects ("Coke bottles, coat hangers, light bulbs, etc." embedded in artworks), Taylor reflected, "Much of what I absorbed from the two artists strongly affected my early dances."³ Around the same time, Taylor invited Rauschenberg to contribute the set and costumes for *Jack and the Beanstalk*, which premiered at the Henry Street Playhouse in May of 1954.

Both quite young at the time, Taylor and Rauschenberg gravitated to one another as they each sought to challenge the dominant styles in their respective fields. Born in 1930 in Pennsylvania and raised in Washington, DC, Taylor had spent the summer of 1953 dancing in Merce Cunningham's fledgling company at Black Mountain College. Though he would later join Martha Graham's dance company, Taylor, much like Cunningham, was eager to challenge Graham's narrative- and emotion-driven idiom, then a singularly prominent force in American modern dance. By 1954, however, he had left the Cunningham company, endeavoring with *Jack and the Beanstalk*—parts of which he had incubated in one of Cunningham's Black Mountain workshops—to articulate his own rebuttal of Graham's aesthetic.⁴ Though the dance was only performed once, and only photographs of Taylor in his costume remain, he later described it as a "nonnarrative fairy tale" in which discrete poses, derived from book illustrations and stripped of their narrative cohesion, served as stand-ins for the story. "Any hint of Jungian psychology as typified by Martha's interior landscapes was carefully avoided," he insisted, "as well as anything of a heroic or weighty nature."⁵



Fig. 1

While Taylor took aim at Graham's modern dance, Rauschenberg sought to make art beyond the shadow of Abstract Expressionism, which emphasized the primacy of painting as a site for the expression of an artist's emotions or mental state. In his *Elemental Sculptures*, which Taylor had admired at the Stable Gallery, he did so by incorporating the stuff of the world—items culled from the streets surrounding his Fulton Street studio and during outings to Staten Island. In his set designs for *Jack in the Beanstalk*, Rauschenberg translated these ideas to the stage, representing the beanstalk with a balloon on a string—a remarkably quotidian stand-in for the fantastical flora. The extent to which the attraction between these two young artists is legible in *Jack and the Beanstalk* is underscored by a story Taylor would later recount: "Taking the beanstalk and its balloons out into the alley behind the theater, we released them and watched them disappear into the sky. 'Isn't it just great, the way dances are so easy to erase?,' said Bob, and I wholeheartedly agreed."⁶

In his collaborations with Taylor, Rauschenberg found a partner and a platform to extend the aims of his work in painting and sculpture. Unlike Cunningham, who would often perform in makeshift and nontraditional spaces, Taylor consistently choreographed dances for the proscenium stage. In this context, Rauschenberg learned to work within the confines of theatrical convention while simultaneously challenging them through his sets and costumes. Infusing dance with everyday objects and gestures, Taylor and Rauschenberg presented a united front against prevailing traditions of modern dance. Over the course of the next eight years, they would continue to collaborate at a regular beat, together completing a total of 17 dances.

For *Three Epitaphs* (1956) (fig. 1), one of only a handful of Taylor's early dances that continues to be performed today, he invited Rauschenberg to design the costumes. Rauschenberg outfitted its cast of five in hooded black bodysuits, attaching small mirrors to their heads and palms

Fig. 1 Paul Taylor. *Three Epitaphs*. 1956. With costumes by Rauschenberg. Performed at Master Institute Theater, New York, March 27, 1956. Photo: Johan Elbers



Fig. 2

so that they would reflect light throughout the space as they moved. In sharp contrast to the long and fabric-heavy skirts that were typical of Graham's costumes, Rauschenberg's bodysuits clung to the dancers' frames, presenting the body unadorned, rather than accentuating its movements to dramatic effect. Covering even their faces, the suits likewise stripped the dancers of any individuality or personality, so that they appeared disguised or alien, rather than conveying identifiable roles or characters.

As early as 1954, Rauschenberg had used mirrors in his paintings to kinetic effect "so that the room would become part of the painting," he would explain.⁷ In the case of *Three Epitaphs*, he transferred this idea from the space of the gallery or studio to that of the stage, creating an ever-changing relationship between art and its audience. In their size and shape, the mirrors also suggest an even earlier model: the totemic sculptures of Cy Twombly, which he made around 1953, using an assortment of found objects including wooden spoons, boxes, twigs, and round mirrors.⁸ After studying together at Black Mountain College, Twombly and Rauschenberg had travelled for eight months through Italy and North Africa. Upon their return to New York, Twombly often shared Rauschenberg's Fulton Street Studio. A series of photographs taken by Rauschenberg in 1953 document one such visit in which Twombly stands among several of his sculptures (fig. 2). Later, he would refer to the works as his "African Things,"⁹ a moniker that suggests that Rauschenberg's attraction to the mirrors was perhaps as much about their reflective properties as it was about their associative qualities. That Rauschenberg chose to cloak the dancers' bodies entirely in black would seem to reinforce his contemplation of Twombly's "African Things," an act of appropriation that would be echoed in Taylor's choreography.

Fig. 2 Cy Twombly with works of his in Rauschenberg's Fulton Street Studio, 1954. Works at left and center no longer extant. At right, an early state of *Untitled (Funerary Box for a Lime Green Python)*, 1954. Photo: Robert Rauschenberg. © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. Artworks © Cy Twombly Foundation

According to his own accounts Taylor's plans for the dance evolved—becoming considerably darker in look and tone—in response to Rauschenberg's designs. "When [the choreography] begins to look too pretty," he explained, "...I switch its Debussy music to some lugubrious Southern band pieces and change the lyrical movements to leaden ones."¹⁰ Facing forward, and moving with sluggish steps and pronounced shifts of weight from one leg to the other, the dancers repeatedly move their arms, frieze-like, from left to right, windmilling them at various speeds, as if to heighten the light effects of the mirrors embedded in their palms. At other moments, the dancers dart across the stage with lowered heads, as if guided by the flashing patch of mirrors atop them. Echoing Rauschenberg's use of found objects, Taylor drew on found sounds and movements, setting the piece to traditional New Orleans jazz and incorporating movements based on the cakewalk.

It is worth considering for a moment the political aspects of this appropriation. In part, Rauschenberg and Taylor's efforts propose a politics of form in which all movements and materials are considered worthy of art—a democratization of sources. Using African or African American subject matter may also have been a way of shifting agency—drawing on the potential power of found materials, rather than one's own psyche. Twombly's sculptures, as Kate Nesin has written, suggest "'primitive....concepts' more generally, here [through] the idea or possibility of an inanimate object that embodies and exerts power."¹¹ Together, these vernacular elements were strategies used to challenge a rigid, uniform idea of technical virtuosity (Graham technique) and the idea that choreography was an expressive vehicle for its creator's emotional state. The combined effect is one of bodies made anonymous and strange—a focused study of simple weighted gestures that could be (and invite us to consider) our own.

The following year, Rauschenberg and Taylor pushed their investigation into everyday gesture to new extremes in a series called *Seven New Dances*, performed at the 92nd Street YM-YWHA. The program opened with *Epic*, a solo in which Taylor performed ordinary movements—standing, squatting, stepping sideways, resting one foot on the opposite knee—while wearing a business suit chosen by Rauschenberg. The selection of street clothes, rather than a costume designed for dance, was echoed in Rauschenberg's suggestion for the score, a recording of repeating telephone signals that said simply, "At the tone the time will be..." while indicating the time again and again. "If dance could be broadened to include everyday moves," Taylor reflected, "so could its accompaniment" to include every sound, rather than simply classical music.¹²

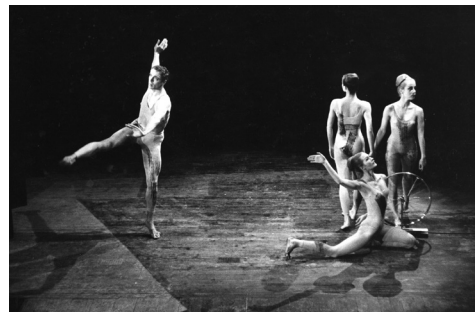


Fig. 3

In *Duet*, performed later in the same program, Taylor reappeared in his suit, accompanied by a woman wearing a cocktail dress. At the center of the stage, the two dancers sat and stood still for exactly four minutes, in a clear reference to Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* (1951)—canvases devoid of everything but white house paint applied with rollers—and John Cage's *4'33"* (1952)—in which he had instructed the virtuosic pianist David Tudor to sit at a piano without touching the keyboard for four minutes and 33 seconds. Drawing on these earlier works, *Seven New Dances* marked a moment of radical openness to the everyday and an extraordinarily early effort to incorporate quotidian movement into the language of modern dance.

Though the austerity of everyday elements was employed to counter the drama and emotion of Graham's modern dance, for Taylor, quotidian gestures also came with unexpected dramatic potential. "Undisguised, our individual traits are laid bare, and our shapes, spacings, and timings are establishing definite emotional climates in all that we do," he reflected. "In context, what was meant to be 'scientific' has turned out to be dramatic."¹³ By the 1960s Taylor would lose interest in using pedestrian movements alone, instead incorporating them alongside more technically grounded steps toward increasingly expressive ends. Works like *Tracer* (1962) (fig. 3), his final collaboration with Rauschenberg, reflect this shift. Set to music by James Tenney, *Tracer* featured the elevated balletic movements and fluid musicality for which Taylor would soon be celebrated. Indicative of his growing investment in technology, and perhaps drawing upon its use in the score for *Epic*, Rauschenberg provided a set comprised of a remote control-operated, upended bicycle wheel atop a wooden base that spun intermittently throughout the dance—an emblem of rote and mechanized movement. The object no doubt intentionally referenced Marcel Duchamp's infamous *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) (fig. 4), the first of his assisted Readymades and a key touchstone for Rauschenberg's own work with found and everyday

Fig. 3 Paul Taylor. *Tracer*. 1962. With set and costumes by Rauschenberg. Performed at Théâtre des Nations, Paris, April 11, 1962. Photo: Martha Swope



Fig. 4

objects.¹⁴ Transported to the stage, Rauschenberg's wheel brings to mind Duchamp's oft-quoted remark about watching his own bicycle wheel spin: "I enjoyed looking at it, just as I enjoy looking at flames dancing in a fireplace."¹⁵ With his mechanized reiteration of Duchamp's wheel, Rauschenberg amplified its spontaneous and self-perpetuating potential, meanwhile inviting the added comparison to the dancers' movements.

In this case, Taylor recalls, "Bob created the 'Tracer' designs first and presented them to me.... I did the dance around them."¹⁶ If Rauschenberg intended his set to prompt similarly detached or unfeeling choreography, the effect was otherwise: Taylor's dance, with its expressive musicality, revealed the degree to which their interests in the quotidian were diverging. Years later, Rauschenberg would reflect, "By that time Paul simply had become less visual than he was in 1954...more concerned with rhythm and music."¹⁷ Taylor would continue to incorporate pedestrian movements into his dances, often blending them with balletic movements, lyric qualities, and the classical music he had momentarily expunged. The combination would become the basis for a choreography that was non-narrative and covertly expressive, while also reflective of the contemporary world. "Taylor's greatest works put the primal forces—fear, joy, procreation—on a pedestal," one critic wrote, "but you never see them coming. He lulls you with the common human movement swirled into exquisite patterns, entrances you with reassuring displays of form and order, and then oh! A flash of love. Sex. Life. The door flies open on the human heart."¹⁸ Meanwhile, Rauschenberg would continue to push his investigation of everyday objects deeper into the realm of choreography and his object making.

Merce Cunningham

In December of 1954, six months after the premiere of Taylor's *Jack and the Beanstalk*, Merce Cunningham invited Rauschenberg to collaborate on the sets and costumes for one of his own dances. They had both attended the 1952 summer session at Black Mountain College, where they participated in *Theater Piece No. 1*, an experimental concert orchestrated by John Cage, Cunningham's lifelong partner and collaborator. Cage instructed the participants to perform various discrete (at times overlapping) activities during designated blocks of time. The idea of separate actions occupying the same time and space would become the guiding principle of Cunningham's collaborations following the formation of his company the following summer. For Rauschenberg, *Theater Piece No. 1* proposed a temporal parallel to collage and, by 1954, to his Combines—hybrid works combining painting and sculpture—suggesting the possibility of pairing heterogeneous activities in the space of performance.¹⁹

That fall, with the preparations for Cunningham's first season underway, Rauschenberg began attending the group's rehearsals, taking photographs that would later be used in the company's advertisements.²⁰ "Bob captured the ephemeral virginality with his camera and preserved it on film," Carolyn Brown, one of Cunningham's dancers, recalled. "Somewhere in the process I think he fell in love with the company."²¹ Throughout his life, Rauschenberg would continue to be drawn to working with communities—dance companies, print shops, and, through the activities of the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI), artists of other cultures.²² Concentrated in the decade between 1954 and 1964, and continuing up to 2007, Cunningham and Rauschenberg would collaborate on 23 dances. Within Cunningham's collaborative framework, Rauschenberg's sets and costumes became increasingly interactive, proscribing movements and taking on choreographic properties themselves.

In November of 1957, just over a month after the premiere of Taylor's *Seven New Dances*, Cunningham debuted *Changeling*, a solo to music by Christian Wolff, a composer associated with Cage and the New York School and a pioneer of methods involving indeterminacy. Rauschenberg provided the costume. Among their earliest collaborations, the dance exhibits Cunningham's radical reimagining of the theatrical experience. In a reversal of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a model in which set, costumes, music, and dance are integrated, Cunningham separated movement from music and "décor"—his term for the contributions of set, costumes, and lighting of visual artists—inviting each to coexist independently in time and space.

Fig. 4 Marcel Duchamp. *Bicycle Wheel*. New York, 1951 (third version, after lost original of 1913). Metal wheel mounted on painted wood stool, 51 × 25 × 16 ½" (129.5 × 63.5 × 41.9 cm). The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection. © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/Estate of Marcel Duchamp



Fig. 5

Far from the austere simplicity of Taylor's *Epic* and *Duet* (made in the same year), *Changeling* was a virtuosic and technically complex dance full of fitful and at times jarring movements derived through chance methods. To make it, Cunningham isolated different parts of his body—head, arms, feet, torso—and listed all of their possible movements. He then tossed a coin to determine how the movements were strung together—a way of removing his own instinct or habit from the creative process. The effects are visible in the opening movements of *Changeling*, in which Cunningham stands with one foot raised, twitching and tapping the opposite ankle repeatedly for about 15 seconds until cutting off the movement abruptly with a sharp upward slashing gesture of his arm. In these fast-paced juxtapositions of disjointed movements, Cunningham appeared at once “enigmatic, elfin, [and] evil,”²³ or, as Carolyn Brown has written, “more ‘creature’ than human being.”²⁴

Though he never employed chance methods, Rauschenberg's approach to materials was similarly designed to remove himself—his own ego and taste—from the creative process. “I’m opposed to the whole idea of conception-execution—of getting an idea for a picture and then carrying it out,” he explained. “I’ve always felt as though, whatever I’ve used and whatever I’ve done, the method was always closer to collaboration with materials than any kind of conscious manipulation and control.”²⁵ In his paintings, as in his Combines of these years, Rauschenberg substituted existing objects and materials—printed paper, fabric, T-shirts—for

Fig. 5 Merce Cunningham dancing in Rauschenberg's costume for *Changeling* (1957), 1958. Photo: Richard Rutledge. Courtesy of the Merce Cunningham Trust



Fig. 6

the emotionally charged strokes of gestural painting, a way of circumventing his own impulses akin to Cunningham's strategies of chance. In *Changeling* he applied these ideas to Cunningham's dance.

In this early collaboration, Rauschenberg's costume design (fig. 5) was physically unobtrusive. He outfitted Cunningham in a long-sleeved red leotard covered with a matching set of woolen leggings, a tattered and cut-up sweater, and a skullcap. Much like the bodysuits of *Three Epitaphs*, the costume clung to the contours of Cunningham's body, magnifying the subtleties of his chance-derived movements. The color had been a defining feature of Rauschenberg's Red Paintings of 1953 and '54 (fig. 6). These works, which Rauschenberg later referred to as comprising his “pedestrian color” period, were the first in which he pressed objects directly into the surface of his canvases. As Helen Molesworth put it, Rauschenberg “saturated the pictures and these objects in red paint, absorbing individual incidents into a monochromatic field that was haptic and viscous, and that, while undoubtedly ‘red,’ was also an embodiment of his almost neologistic phrase ‘pedestrian color.’”²⁶ In *Changeling*, Rauschenberg transposed this use of color to dance, coating Cunningham's chance-derived movements in red as he had the paper, fabric, and objects of his paintings, and thereby equating their functions.

As in Rauschenberg's Combines of the late 1950s, objects would increasingly find their way into his costume designs

Fig. 6 Robert Rauschenberg. *Untitled (Red Painting)*. 1954. Oil, newspaper, crocheted curtain, and other fabrics on canvas, 70 ¾ × 38" (179.7 × 121.9 cm). The Eli and Edythe L. Broad Collection, Los Angeles. © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation



Fig. 7

for Cunningham's dances in these years, perhaps most notably in *Antic Meet* (fig. 7), which debuted in August of 1958 at the American Dance Festival at Connecticut College. Set to a version of John Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*, the dance consisted of 10 vignettes—"a series of absurd situations, one after the other"²⁷—in which Cunningham interspersed vaudeville elements and a classical dance vocabulary to comedic effect. On July 12, while the company was in residence at the college, Cunningham wrote to Rauschenberg with an unusually descriptive outline of the dance, explaining that in one scene he would appear with a chair on his back. "Okay," Rauschenberg responded; then, as if baited by the question, he followed, "Well, if you have a chair, can I have a door?"²⁸ In "Room for Two," the duet that followed, Cunningham emerged from the wings with the chair strapped to his back. Seconds later, a seemingly self-propelled door glided onto the stage, scooting forward and backward until Cunningham opened it, revealing Carolyn Brown, who stepped through it. In what would soon become a recurring theme for Rauschenberg, the objects in *Antic Meet* often functioned as a form of resistance, inconvenience, or other impediment to movement. "The objects not only suggest new possibilities, things I would never have thought of if I'd stayed in the studio—they also set up resistances that I

find very useful."²⁹ Cunningham, for his part, likened the chair in "Room for Two" to a "leech" or "a large mosquito that won't go away."³⁰ In another sequence, titled "Bacchus and Cohorts," he parodied Martha Graham by wearing a knit sweater with four sleeves and no opening for his head. As with previous costumes, the misshapen sweater challenged the conventions of Graham's movement-enhancing garments, proposing instead a trap or impediment. In the same vignette, Rauschenberg outfitted the four female dancers in dresses made of surplus silk parachutes that, as Brown reported, "weighed a ton."³¹ Rather than highlighting the dancers' small torsos or long legs, as would a leotard or traditional costume, these leaden garments instead obscured much of the dancers' bodies while also creating counter-movements of their own; as the dancers lifted a leg behind them in arabesque (their hands cupped to their foreheads in reference to one of Graham's signature gestures), the draped fabric swung forward, scale-like, registering the shift of weight.

While Rauschenberg's contributions to *Antic Meet* were in part an extension of his interest in incorporating found materials, they also encouraged him to challenge the distinction between the studio and stage, pushing his Combines in new and increasingly time-based and

Fig. 7 Merce Cunningham. *Antic Meet*. 1958. With costumes by Rauschenberg. Performed in 1963. Pictured, left to right: Carolyn Brown, Merce Cunningham, Shareen Blair, Viola Farber, and Barbara Lloyd Dille (partially visible). Photo: Marvin Silver © Marvin Silver/Merce Cunningham Trust

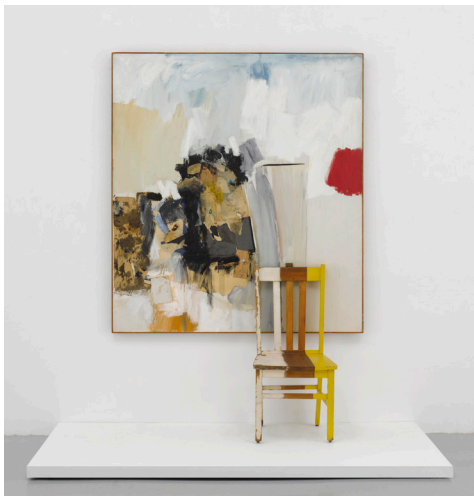


Fig. 8

performative directions. Many of the works that followed—including *First Time Painting* (1961), *Gold Standard* (1964), and *Story* (1964)—came about during live performances. Others, like *Black Market* (1961), in which Rauschenberg intended viewers to take and leave objects, or *Broadcast* (1959), in which viewers could turn the knobs of a concealed radio unit, invited viewers to interact with (or perform) them. Two years after *Antic Meet*'s premiere, he made *Pilgrim* (1961) (fig. 8), in which a chair doubles as an implement for painting—seemingly responsible for the downward stroke of paint above it—and an invitation to sit in the painting. As the art historian Leo Steinberg would argue, this was a radical reimagining of the idea of painting in which the works “kept referring back to the horizontals on which we walk and sit, work and sleep,”³² thereby equating the space of art and that of its viewer.

After a 10-year hiatus between 1964 and 1977, Rauschenberg and Cunningham reunited for the production of *Travelogue*, a dance that resembled *Antic Meet* in its choreography, décor, and the relationship between them. By this time, Cunningham's company had found wide recognition and enough stability to secure seasons in traditional theaters. In *Travelogue*, which premiered at New York's Minskoff Theatre, Rauschenberg merged a set that reflects the lessons of the theater and proscenium stage learned through his collaborations with Taylor with costumes that were interdependent with choreography. The set consisted of a row of alternating chairs and upended bicycle wheels (à la *Tracer*), and swaths of colorful silk hanging from the theater's flies. The fabric elements resembled his freestanding Jammers, made in 1975 and '76—sculptural

works consisting of silk, rattan poles, and, in some cases, objects such as pillows and cans. As in *Antic Meet*, the dance was broken up into distinct vignettes that were stitched together. In several, Rauschenberg affixed fabric and other objects to the performers' leotards and tights, including fan-like appendages that they opened and closed, and waistbands adorned with tin cans that rattled as they leapt and spun. As in his collaborations with Taylor, Rauschenberg's collaborations with Cunningham would challenge the conventions of modern dance through the integration of everyday objects. With Cunningham, Rauschenberg's objects became increasingly cumbersome and interactive, almost equal in their commanding presence to that of the steps themselves, a development that was quickened by his engagement with a younger generation of experimental choreographers.

Trisha Brown

In the early 1960s, Rauschenberg's experiments with objects and movement expanded beyond his collaborations with Cunningham, into activities centered at the Judson Memorial Church. These, too, emerged from Cunningham's studio, where Robert Dunn, a composer and the accompanist for Cunningham's classes, began leading a choreography workshop for trained and untrained dancers—Rauschenberg at times among them—in the fall of 1960.

It was at Cunningham's studio that Rauschenberg first met Trisha Brown, who, born in Aberdeen, Washington, in 1936, had arrived in New York in 1961. “I was a work study student,” she often recalled. “He would call and engage me in the most hilarious conversations.”³³ The following year Brown, along with others who had taken Dunn's workshop, founded the Judson Dance Theater, an experimental group whose works incorporated found, pedestrian, and task-based movement, improvisation, and spoken word in an effort to strip from choreography the traditional conventions of the proscenium stage. Steve Paxton—a dancer in Cunningham's company, one of Judson's founding members, and Rauschenberg's romantic partner at the time—would recall, “The Judson meant that we could all do choreography, which was simply unheard of. In the tight little world of modern dance most people have no chance to develop their own ideas. It took at least six weeks to make a dance, and maybe a thousand dollars to get it performed—the restrictions were just prohibitive. We began with this idea of Bob [Rauschenberg]'s that you work with what's available, and that way the restrictions aren't limitations, they're just what you happen to be working with.”³⁴ Drawing from the lessons of the Judson Dance Theater, Rauschenberg and Brown would create dances in which choreography and

Fig. 8 Robert Rauschenberg. *Pilgrim*. 1960. Oil, graphite, paper, printed paper, and fabric on canvas with painted wood chair, 6' 7 1/4" × 53 7/8" × 18 5/8" (201.3 × 136.8 × 47.3 cm). Private collection. © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation



Fig. 9

visual elements were fully integrated, paired not through collisions of chance, but by design.

While central to Judson's founding ethos, Rauschenberg was also an active participant in its activities. He would present his own performance works there, while also performing in those by Brown and her Judson cohort, including Judith Dunn, Alex Hay, Deborah Hay, Paxton, Yvonne Rainer, and others. *Pelican*, performed in Judson's fifth Concert of Dance, was the first of nine performance works Rauschenberg would make between 1963 and 1967 (fig. 9). Taking the concert's venue—an abandoned roller-skating rink—as a prompt, he integrated roller-skating into the choreography, later characterizing the decision as a way of using “the limitations of the materials as a freedom that would eventually establish the form.”³⁵ In one instance, the dancers knelt on makeshift vehicles made of a pole and two bicycle wheels, propelling themselves forward, wheelbarrow style, or in what one critic called “a sort of locomotive human combine.”³⁶ In *Pelican* the collision of bodies and objects, and the ensuing limitations these pairings imposed, became the impetus for new forms of movement. Later, reflecting on the profound impact of these ideas, Brown recalled, “Conversations, what I saw and what Bob saw of my work, were important. I remember the exchange when Bob made *Pelican* with the parachute and the roller skates. I titled that piece, actually, and was very aware of the elements of that dance and how they developed. Arriving for dinner, you might be met by Bob on roller skates and wheeling through the space.”³⁷

Two years later, both Brown and Rauschenberg appeared in one another's contributions to the First New York Theater Rally, a series of performances produced by Paxton and the curator Alan Solomon, which took place in a former CBS Television Studio. Brown performed in Rauschenberg's *Spring Training* (1965), in which he walked on stilts while negotiating a minefield of small roving turtles with flashlights

Fig. 9 Robert Rauschenberg. *Pelican*. 1963. Performed in a former CBS television studio, New York, during the First New York Theater Rally, May 1965. Pictured: Rauschenberg. Photo: Elisabeth Novick



Fig. 10

strapped to their shells. Rauschenberg had frequently worked with animals, incorporating taxidermy into his Combines of the 1950s. Brought to live performance, the turtles became both a practical element (lighting designers), and a means of sharing creative agency. Rauschenberg likewise performed in Brown's *Rulegame 5* (1964), a piece for trained and untrained dancers in which structure and movement patterns were determined by a complex set of rules and games. These parallel investigations into choreography driven by restrictions, limitations, obstacles, and rules laid the foundation for Brown's and Rauschenberg's collaborations in years to come.

Fourteen years after the First New York Theater Rally performances, Brown began *Glacial Decoy* (1979) (fig. 10)—her first formal collaboration with Rauschenberg—by confronting her longest-held restriction, that of not choreographing for the proscenium stage. Throughout the 1960s and '70s, Brown's dances were imagined for alternative, often site-specific spaces—her studio, outdoor spaces, museums, the gymnasium in the basement of the Judson Church—as a means of dismantling conventions of the stage and theater, and primarily the hierarchical distinction between the space of performers and that of the audience. Her motivations were also in part financial. “Dance depends on an audience,” she would explain in an application to the National Endowment for the Arts. “There is a system, a network, a language for the tour and support of dance.... This network operates on the proscenium stage.”³⁸

The opportunity to move beyond the Judson-era restrictions of performance space came when she was awarded a grant and a two-week residency by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, during which she considered the stage's structure as the basis for a new dance. She began by “foregrounding the issue,” conceptualizing the space as “two rectangles: one on the vertical—the proscenium stage—and the other on the floor.”³⁹ In a letter to Rauschenberg in

Fig. 10 Trisha Brown. *Glacial Decoy*. 1979. With costumes, set, and lighting by Rauschenberg (with Beverly Emmons). Performed at the Marymount Manhattan College Theater, New York, June 20–24, 1979. From left: Brown, Nina Lundborg, and Lisa Kraus. Photo: Babette Mangolte. © 1979 Babette Mangolte (all rights of reproduction reserved)

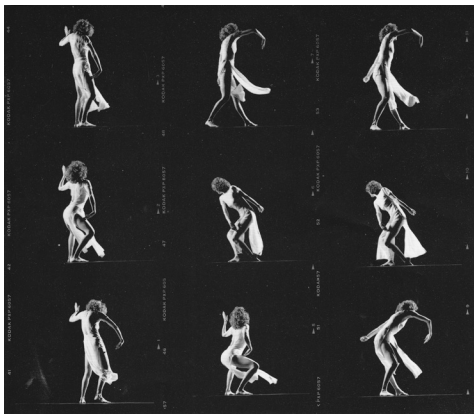


Fig. 11

January of 1979, Brown explained that the dance would feature four dancers who bounded “freely throughout the stage area often shifting from the far right to the far left.”⁴⁰ Using the theater’s wings, she created a kind of optical “ploy” in which dancers appeared and disappeared simultaneously on either side, suggesting “an infinite number of dancers offstage.”⁴¹ The critic Deborah Jowett captured Brown’s intended effect when she wrote, “When I first saw this dance, I thought only that the dance was too big for the stage frame and that parts of it kept disappearing into the wings.”⁴²

Responsible for the first time in her career with realizing sets and costumes on a grand scale, Brown turned to Rauschenberg for help with *Glacial Decoy*’s “visual presentation,” the term she used for the effects of set, costumes, and lighting. Not wishing to “get caught with a static set,”⁴³ Rauschenberg devised a slide show comprised of 620 photographs of sites in Fort Myers, Florida, a town near Captiva, where he lived at the time. Featuring quotidian, often overlooked subjects including mailboxes, oil canisters, fences, and cows, these images were projected on four screens and shifted from left to right (from one position to the next) across the back of the stage. In an operation he later described as “a lot more complicated than it looked,”⁴⁴ Rauschenberg programmed the sequence so that the images in each position faded in and out simultaneously, echoing the spectral continuum of the dancers’ entrances and exits. His costumes—translucent white dresses—accentuate the effect. Though their white fabric perhaps brings to mind such restrictive garments as a traditional tutu, crinoline, or even the weighted parachute dresses of *Antic Meet*, instead they appear diaphanous and liberated. Pleated so that they hang away from, rather than cling to, the dancers’ bodies, they create a shadowy, flickering image of the body in constant motion. “The image is never

Fig. 11 Trisha Brown. *If you couldn’t see me*. 1994. With costume by Rauschenberg. Pictured: Brown. Photograph: Joanne Savio. Photograph Collection, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York



Fig. 12

totally integrated or unified,” Rainer observed. “So one goes back and forth in seeing movement-as-movement, body-inside-dress, dress-outside-body, and image-of woman/dancer.”⁴⁵ What began for Brown as an investigation into the restrictions of the stage space had opened up a recurring motif for both Brown and Rauschenberg: that of the tension between visibility and invisibility, present throughout *Glacial Decoy*’s many components.

Bookending a 16-year period of collaboration, Brown and Rauschenberg would push their investigation into the limits and possibilities of visibility imposed by the stage to its furthest point in *If you couldn’t see me* (1994), a dance prompted by Rauschenberg’s suggestion that Brown perform with her back to the audience throughout (fig. 11). “He had a Yamaha keyboard and he was making music with it,” Brown recounted. “When he did that, my back was to him, and so he pictured me in that piece with my back to the audience.”⁴⁶ The seeds of this idea can also be found in an earlier Rauschenberg work, *First Time Painting*, which he made during *Hommage to David Tudor*, a group of performances by Jasper Johns, Nikki de Saint Phalle, Rauschenberg, Jean Tinguely, and Tudor himself that took place at the Theater of the American Embassy in Paris in June 1961 (fig. 12). Producing the painting on stage, Rauschenberg faced its back to the audience, embedded an alarm clock in its surface, and attached contact microphones so that the audience could hear the sounds of him at work. When the alarm clock rang, he carried the painting off the stage, not revealing the front until he exhibited it in a nearby gallery the following day.

Echoing the parameters of *First Time Painting* 33 years later, *If you couldn’t see me* defied one of the most fundamental conventions of theatrical performance. At first, Brown “began [with the] idea to make the best dance I could facing in front [with the] plan to turn it around.”⁴⁷ Soon, however,

Fig. 12 Robert Rauschenberg creating *First Time Painting* during *Hommage à David Tudor* (*Hommage to David Tudor*) at the Theater of the American Embassy, Paris, June 20, 1961. Other works visible include Jasper Johns’s *15’ Entr’acte* (1961) and Nikki de Saint Phalle’s *Shooting Painting American Embassy*. Photo: Shunk-Kender. © J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles

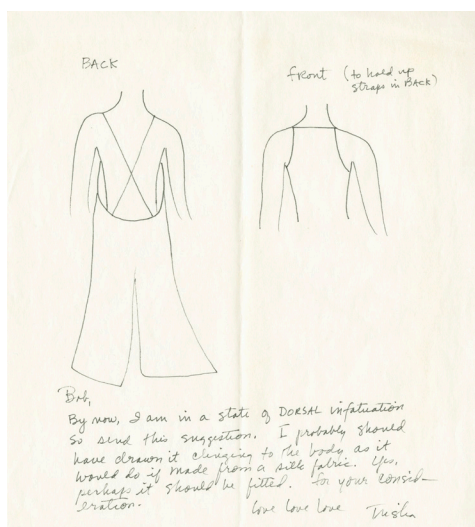


Fig. 13

she discovered that this wouldn't work. The back, she explained was "an attic [where] you can put things away...for safekeeping."⁴⁸ In order to invert the dance, she had to invert the process too. Once she had "accepted the dilemma,"⁴⁹ Brown worked with Carolyn Lucas, her choreographic assistant at the time, developing a process in which they recorded Brown's movements in the studio; then, upon reviewing the recordings, Brown reworked the dance. The end result constitutes an extensive back and forth between these two processes. Spanning a 180-degree field of vision, many of the resulting steps move laterally—in Brown's words, "a splaying of features to the side of the body"⁵⁰—appearing almost two-dimensional.

Though Rauschenberg initially hoped Brown, then 58 years old, would perform the dance naked, they ultimately worked together on the design of a costume.⁵¹ In a letter likely written in 1994, Brown offered a sketch of a bodice with thin spaghetti straps that crossed low in the back (fig. 13). "I'm in a state of DORSAL infatuation," she wrote, "so send this suggestion."⁵² The final design retains the original open back devised to feature Brown's spinal musculature unadorned, but with simple short sleeves, rather than straps, and a flowing silken skirt, slit on either side such that her legs appear to overtake the fabric at every move. True to the dance's origin story, Rauschenberg composed its score on his electronic keyboard. The composition, which he based on the rolling fog outside his studio in Captiva, features layers of synthesized sound—sonically translating the shifting image of his own quotidian landscape.

The afterlife of *If you couldn't see me* befits its collaborative origins. A year after its premiere, when the choreographer Bill T. Jones invited Brown to make a dance for him, she suggested instead that he learn the solo. Retitling the dance *If you could see us*, she then performed it as a duet in which she remained facing backwards while Jones faced forward. "I liked the balance in all the opposites," she noted. "Front/back, man/woman, gay/straight, young/not so young, black/white, etc."⁵³ And in 1996, Mikhail Baryshnikov reprised Jones's role, his ballet-trained body contrasting her loose but stylized movements, adding fuel to the collaborative fire. Fourteen years later, in honor of their 47 years of friendship and collaboration, Brown reprised the dance in 2008 during the memorial service held in Rauschenberg's honor at The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Temple of Dendur. "The dance," she reflected, "is finally a communication between Bob and me."⁵⁴

Constructive Collaboration

The core of Rauschenberg's engagement with dance lay in the tension between its inherent restrictions and possibilities. Beginning with the introduction of everyday objects and gestures into the space of theater, Rauschenberg soon pushed these experiments further, exploring the potential for movement in the limitations posed by the collision of objects and bodies. This dogged investigation of theatrical convention led him ultimately to the restrictions of the proscenium stage itself, and the denial of one of its most basic tenets. That in restriction—of materials and space—Rauschenberg found freedom was in keeping with his earliest understanding of dance as both a forbidden sin and a ready subject for biblical games.

Collaboration—inherent to the theater's combination of dance, sound, and visual elements—provided a similarly fertile framework. "I think collaboration is a prescription or device that keeps one from getting hung up on a strong single intention that blinds," Rauschenberg reflected in 1987. "Every individual that you add to a project will result in ten times as many new possibilities."⁵⁵ Through each of his collaborators, as through materials, Rauschenberg found a primary means of sharing agency—a way of escaping the blind spots he believed were inherent to individual pursuit. This structure, both in dance and in other mediums, provided a platform for the democratization of art—a broadening of its possible sources, materials, and makers—an alternative path based on communal, rather than individual, vision.

Fig. 13 Letter from Trisha Brown to Robert Rauschenberg concerning *If you couldn't see me*, c. 1994. Robert Rauschenberg papers, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.

Endnotes

- ¹ <http://www.texasmonthly.com/articles/the-return-of-the-native/>
- ² Paul Taylor, *Private Domain* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 197), p. 52.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- ⁴ Taylor would join Martha Graham's company the following year and remain until 1962, the same year he and Rauschenberg would collaborate on their last dance.
- ⁵ Taylor, *Private Domain*, p. 54.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 54–5.
- ⁷ Barbara Rose, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Vintage, 1987), p. 56.
- ⁸ Kate Nesin, "'Miniature Monument': Travel and Work in Italy and North Africa," in *Robert Rauschenberg*, eds. Leah Dickerman and Achim Borchardt-Hume (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2016), p. 67.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- ¹⁰ Taylor, *Private Domain*, p. 75.
- ¹¹ Kate Nesin, *Cy Twombly's Things* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 117.
- ¹² Taylor, *Private Domain*, p. 77.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- ¹⁴ Works by the two artists had been united in 1959, in an exhibition called *Art and the Found Object* held at the Time-Life Reception Center, where Rauschenberg would purchase Duchamp's *Bottle Rack* (1960, after lost 1914 original) for \$3. The following year, while Duchamp was visiting his studio, Rauschenberg asked him to sign the work. Later, the younger artist remarked, "it became one of the most important works in my collection."
- ¹⁵ Marcel Duchamp quoted in an interview with Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1970), p. 588.
- ¹⁶ Michael J. Solender, "How Do You Reconstruct Lost Choreography?," *The New York Times*, August 26, 2016.
- ¹⁷ Mark Steinbrink, "Why Artists Design for Paul Taylor," *The New York Times*, April 3, 1983.
- ¹⁸ Sarah Kaufman, "A Singular Vision: Nearly 80, Paul Taylor Is as Moving a Dance Figure as Ever," *The Washington Post*, July 18, 2010.
- ¹⁹ "Rauschenberg's core conceptual innovation can be said to lie in grasping the complementarity between the two systems: the layering of collage's material combinations and Cage's temporal ones—of thing and event—would undergird his career, allowing for an expansive framework for encounters among objects, images, and actions from very different domains." Leah Dickerman, "Robert Rauschenberg: Five Propositions," in *Robert Rauschenberg*, p. 400.
- ²⁰ Cage had also invited Rauschenberg to design the program for the evening, but Rauschenberg's proposal was so complex and illegible, it had to be scrapped and replaced. See Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time*, 1980 (rev. ed. New York: Picador, 1980).
- ²¹ Carolyn Brown, *Chance and Circumstance: Twenty Years with Cage and Cunningham* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), p. 83.
- ²² Between 1984 and 1990, under the auspices of ROCI, Rauschenberg traveled to 10 countries where freedom of expression and movement were limited. His impressions and the materials he gathered there became the basis for new works.
- ²³ Edmund C. Wilkes, "Merce Cunningham," *The Yomiuri*, November 19, 1964.
- ²⁴ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, p. 190.
- ²⁵ Robert Rauschenberg quoted in Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors* (New York: Viking, 1965), p. 204.
- ²⁶ Helen Molesworth, "Pedestrian Color: The Red Paintings," in *Robert Rauschenberg*, eds. Leah Dickerman and Achim Borchardt-Hume (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2016), p. 121.
- ²⁷ Merce Cunningham, quoted in *The Dancer and the Dance* (London: Marion Boyars, 1999), p. 94.
- ²⁸ Rauschenberg quoted by Cunningham in *The Dancer and the Dance*, p. 95.
- ²⁹ Rauschenberg, quoted in notes in Calvin Tomkins Papers II.B.4, The Museum of Modern Art Archives.
- ³⁰ Cunningham, quoted in Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, p. 214.
- ³¹ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, p. 215.
- ³² Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, 1972 (repr. ed. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 87.
- ³³ Trisha Brown, quoted in "Material Witness: A Tribute to Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008)," *Artforum*, September 2008, p. 431.
- ³⁴ Robert Rauschenberg quoted in Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1980), p. 226.
- ³⁵ Robert Rauschenberg, quoted in *Robert Rauschenberg* exh. cat. (Washington: The Smithsonian Institution, 1977), p. 184.
- ³⁶ Robert Rauschenberg, quoted in Don Shewey, "We Collaborated by Postcards: An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg," *Theater Crafts* (New York) 18, no. 4 (April 1984), p. 78.
- ³⁷ Trisha Brown, quoted in David Sears, "A Trisha Brown – Robert Rauschenberg Collage," *Ballet Review* 10 no. 3 (Fall 1982), pp. 47–51.
- ³⁸ National Endowment for the Arts Dance Program application for January 1979 to June 1979, Trisha Brown Dance Company Archive, New York. Quoted in Susan Rosenberg, *Trisha Brown: Choreography as Visual Art* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2017), p. 230.
- ³⁹ Trisha Brown, quoted in "In Conversation: Trisha Brown with Vanessa Manko," *Brooklyn Rail*, May 2005, <http://brooklynrail.org/2005/05/dance/trisha-brown> (accessed August 9, 2017).
- ⁴⁰ Trisha Brown letter in Brown archives, quoted in Rosenberg, *Trisha Brown*, p. 231.
- ⁴¹ Trisha Brown, "Collaboration: Life and Death in the Aesthetic Zone," in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, exh. cat., eds. Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1997), p. 269.
- ⁴² Deborah Jowett, *The Dance in Mind: Profiles and Reviews 1977–93* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1985), p. 74.
- ⁴³ Rauschenberg, quoted in "We Collaborated by Postcards: An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg," http://www.donshewey.com/arts_articles/rauschenberg.html
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ Yvonne Rainer, quoted in Trisha Brown and Yvonne Rainer, "A Conversation about 'Glacial Decoy,'" *October* 10 (Autumn, 1979), p. 32.
- ⁴⁶ Trisha Brown, quoted in "In Conversation: Trisha Brown with Vanessa Manko," n.p.
- ⁴⁷ Trisha Brown, quoted in Rosenberg, *Trisha Brown*, p. 318.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ Trisha Brown, quoted in *Trisha Brown: Dance Art in Dialogue, 1961–2001*, eds. Hendel Teicher and Maurice Berger (Andover, Mass: Addison Gallery of American Art, 2002), p. 190.
- ⁵¹ Trisha Brown, quoted in "Material Witness: A Tribute to Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008)," *Artforum*, September 2008, p. 431.
- ⁵² Letter from Trisha Brown to Robert Rauschenberg with Brown's preliminary sketch of the costume for *If you couldn't see me* (1994), Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.
- ⁵³ Trisha Brown, quoted in *Trisha Brown: Dance Art in Dialogue, 1961–2001*, p. 190.
- ⁵⁴ Trisha Brown, quoted in Robert Mattison, *Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking Boundaries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 218.
- ⁵⁵ Rose, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg*, p. 85.