Dance has a long, if discontinuous, history at The Museum of Modern Art. It begins in 1939, ten years after the Museum’s founding, with a gift from patron Lincoln Kirstein of his personal archives of five thousand items relating to dance. With this collection from Kirstein (later a cofounder of the New York City Ballet) as its scholarly core, the Department of Dance and Theater Design was established in 1944, apparently the first such curatorial program in any museum; however, the department’s exhibition efforts, including a display in 1945 of Barbara Morgan’s photographs of modern dancers, were short-lived. The Museum, citing rising costs, disbanded the department in 1948 and transferred its archives to the MoMA Library. Despite the inclusive definition of modern art propounded by the Museum’s founding director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., it’s likely that, without any precedent, it proved too difficult to integrate dance and theater history into the galleries.

Dance did not disappear entirely with the closing of the early department, although presentations were usually billed as ancillary or special events. For example, while modern dance appears to be absent from the Museum’s programs in the 1950s, demonstrations by classical dancers from various countries accompanied international exhibitions such as 1955’s *Textiles and Ornamental Arts in India*. Occasional films on dance were screened in the 1960s, but the discipline was largely overshadowed by the excitement surrounding multimedia productions, a new, more synthetic form shaped by artists involved with Happenings, experimental music, and film, as well as theater directors and choreographers. Artists were invited to appear with some regularity in a variety of informal settings throughout the Museum, including the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden, where Jean Tinguely’s 1960 assemblage *Homage to New York* was designed, with the assistance of Bell Labs scientist Billy Klüver, to gyrate until it fell to pieces in an act of accelerated self-destruction. Another sort of history was made that evening when Klüver met Robert Rauschenberg. This introduction led him to work with the artist and many of his colleagues associated with New York’s Judson Dance Theater in the early 1960s as they radically transformed...
the definition of dance and foregrounded the natural alliance of artists across mediums. *Information*, MoMA’s prescient 1970 exhibition of Conceptual art, made visible the new priority and interplay of disciplines by including the choreographer Yvonne Rainer, who had participated in the first Judson presentation, in 1962. But her sole contribution was a short and despondent catalogue statement that began, “I am going thru hard times: In the shadow of real recent converging, passing, pressing, milling, swarming, pulsing, changing in this country; formalized choreographic gestures seem trivial,” and ended with “Maybe fuck it.”

Reflecting a similar spirit of protest, two unanticipated performance interventions had disrupted the calm of the Museum one year earlier: Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama captured the front page of the New York *Daily News* in August 25, 1969, by directing a group of naked performers, who briefly occupied the Sculpture Garden for her piece *Grand Orgy to Awaken the Dead* at MoMA. In November, four members of the Guerilla Art Action Group, protesting alleged profits by MoMA patrons relating to the Vietnam War, entered the Museum’s lobby and loudly began attacking each other, causing sacks of beef blood hidden under their clothes to spill. They then fell to the floor, as if the enemy had permanently silenced them.

In recognition of the aesthetic shifts that had become evident across disciplines, the four-part series Projects: Performance was programmed for the Sculpture Garden in August 1978. It focused on postmodern dance, music, and theater, including the work of playwright, filmmaker, and performance artist Stuart Sherman, who often displayed his silent choreography of objects on a card table furtively set up on the street. Choreographer Simone Forti began her long, if episodic, relationship with MoMA that summer. She would not appear again at the Museum until 2009, but, significantly, in 2015, after more than four years of conversations with the artist, MoMA acquired the rights to teach, perform, and reconstruct props for nine of her object-centered dances, likely the first such commitment made by a museum. This acquisition was championed by MoMA’s six-year-old Department of Media and Performance Art, which had come into existence in 2009 when the title of the Department of Media Art, itself founded only three years earlier, was augmented to suggest its broader mandate. With this, dance became an ongoing curatorial prerogative at MoMA. I had arrived a year before in the role of associate director of the Museum, having been director of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, where a department for performing arts was officially established in 1970. However, for most of my sixteen years at the Walker, the majority of live events commissioned or organized by curators took place in partnership with other venues around the city, making it extremely difficult to elaborate in the museum the ways in which the histories of performing and visual arts were intertwined, if not mutually dependent. In 2005, with the opening of the Walker’s expansion, designed by Herzog & de Meuron, a theater for 385 people with a stage the size normally found in a thousand-seat space became the primary place for the institution’s dance, music, and theater presentations. It is near to the galleries and the screening rooms. But my hope for a continuous beat of open rehearsals, encouraging the daily visitor to loop effortlessly between exhibitions and performances, proved impractical.

Some of that proselytizing fervor, however, found an elastic container in MoMA’s Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium. A big volume of space that is a point both of transit and of gathering, it has been appropriately criticized as aggressively reverberant and impossible to adapt for proper theatrical lighting. Yet the Marron Atrium has been molded by artists into a strangely compelling place to experience dances, such as those created by choreographer Ralph Lemon or presented by him as part of the 2012 curatorial commission Some sweet day. Lemon recently wrote that the questions that shaped this effort were, “What is a good or a bad dance? What was the significance of the timing of the events, fifty years after the founding of Judson Dance Theater? What is the broader significance of the blues, black music, and race to contemporary dance? Which choreographers win in the tyranny of this anti-theatrical space? And, of course, which ones lose?” This three-week series coincided with Hurricane Sandy, which essentially closed Lower Manhattan and cut it off from Brooklyn, making most of the performers’ commutes arduous; however, due to the extraordinary commitment of artists, curators, and administrators, not one of the cross-generational presentations—dances choreographed by Jérôme Bel, Deborah Hay, Faustin Linyekula, Dean Moss (with artist Laylah Ali), Sarah Michelson, and Steve Paxton, along with a two-day performance by artist Kevin Beasley—was canceled. All played to large, appreciative audiences that seemed to have flocked to the Museum as much for a sense of collective well-being as for the art. The work they saw wasn’t easy. When inviting the choreographers to participate, Lemon had directed each to explore ideas around black music; this prompt was never publicized, and the relationship between music and movement was more or less explicit, depending upon the artist. For instance, Paxton, believing the intellectual construct had little to do with his work, initially declined to participate, while Beasley attacked the problem with a vehemence that suggested his life depended upon finding answers. His thunderous sampling of slowed-down recordings of deceased rappers rumbled through the Museum at a decibel level so great that windows rattled and viewers described feeling the vibrations in their bodies. The Museum’s usual canon was momentarily displaced, and blackness became the dominant, unavoidable aesthetic.

Histories of all sorts echo through the building when choreographers are in residence. In composing dances for presentation at MoMA, some have used the Museum’s past and present practice as elements as decisive as the architecture. For example, in Michelson’s *Devotion Study #3*, of 2012, choreographed for Lemon’s series, she highlighted both the Museum’s security staff, the majority of whom are people of color, and the pervasive impact of black artistic achievements on
this nation’s culture, making visible the dominant whiteness of MoMA’s collection, architecture, and staff. Michelson cast two guards, Tyrese Kirkland and Gary Levy, who raced up the lobby stairs, protecting her petite, auburn-haired dancer as if she were a celebrity. The trio was greeted in the Atrium by the choreographer, who began to DJ a score composed of songs on the Tamla Motown label, soul music produced by Motown Records in Detroit but sold primarily outside the United States. Between 1960 and 1969, seventy-nine of the one hundred top-selling records in the United States were produced by Motown, precipitating a convergence of black and white popular culture just as unusual then as it is in most museums today.

When theatrical purity is knowingly sacrificed, other compelling characteristics assert themselves, and performers often discover an engagement with their audience they haven’t experienced before. Paradoxically, the collision of the Atrium’s spectacular scale and the flexibility of its usually unregulated and unorthodox seating plan can result in increased intimacy. In 2011, Okwui Okpokwasili and Lemon, performing in the Atrium as part of the exhibition On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century, pushed themselves to near-exhaustion in a dance that had been previously presented only once before, in the modestly scaled sanctuary of New York’s St. Mark’s Church. Despite the cavernous size of the Atrium, Lemon was startled to feel the audience’s breath on his body as it scaled sanctuary of New York’s St. Mark’s Church. Despite the cavernous size of the Atrium, Lemon was startled to feel the audience’s breath on his body as it gathered around him. He described this exposure as “changing everything for me. An Armageddon.”

Performances in this nontheatrical setting often upset the authority of an institution best known for its singular permanent collection; they also suggest why the proscenium stage, with its restricted focus, no longer serves the immersive needs of some choreographers working today. For example, Boris Charmatz, choreographer and director of the Musée de la danse, in Rennes, France, explained the significance of seeing dance within the context of a museum: “We are at a time in history where a museum can modify BOTH preconceived ideas about museums AND one’s ideas about dance. . . . In order to do so, we must first of all forget the image of a traditional museum, because our space is firstly a mental one.” Musée de la danse: Three Collective Gestures, a three-week, tripartite residency at MoMA in 2013, was Charmatz’s attempt to demonstrate his institutional aspirations by juxtaposing the enduring qualities of objects in the Museum’s collection with the ephemeral nature of dance and dancers’ bodies. For one component of this program, twenty dancers of all ages and several cultural backgrounds colonized the Museum’s public spaces and galleries, where they greeted surprised visitors and, after a short explanation, began to perform their adaptations of solo works created throughout the twentieth century. For example, in the gallery housing Richard Serra’s massive sculpture Delimitor, of 1974–75, a senior member of the Trisha Brown Dance Company invited the public to join her in replicating a sequence of Brown’s most characteristic movements. In another gallery, actor Jim Fletcher reenacted Vito Acconci’s 1970 performance Trademarks while sprawled naked next to the painting Self-Portrait with Palette, of 1924, by Lovis Corinth, an artist deemed degenerate by the Nazis. Together the twenty differently trained performers created a living archive of both well-known and forgotten compositions, surrounded by works from MoMA’s collection. Consequently, it was possible in a single visit to experience many art histories. By placing them in such close proximity, Charmatz and his team created, at least for a few days, a temporary institution that, in its inclusivity and exuberance, redeemed the equality of the thought, the thing, and the movement in the museum setting.

While there is a core group of aficionados who attend every performance at MoMA, the majority of visitors come to dance by chance. Once, while I was waiting on a balcony for Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker to begin a section of her 1982 dance work Fase: Four Movements to the Music of Steve Reich, part of On Line, a visitor squeezed in beside me and asked, “What’s going on?” I paused in my conversation with an actor from the Wooster Group (a staple of New York downtown theater), who had come especially to see this performance, but the action below began before I could answer. All three of us were silent and still for sixteen minutes, while De Keersmaeker’s slow, circular, and repetitive movements etched a drawing in the sand spread on the Atrium floor; as the performance ended, the visitor said, “I never knew such a thing existed, and I am thrilled to have seen it.” Certainly, some impatiently turned away, but for this visitor the unanticipated encounter had a special persuasive, focused power.

The opportunity to connect a dance to a work of art in the collection amplifies a historical moment in ways that usually are truer to the artistic process and period than viewing the disciplines separately. Annette Michelson wrote in her influential Artforum essay in 1974 that “the New Dance . . . set out in much the same manner as the new sculpture of the 1960s to contest, point for point, esthetic conventions which had acquired an ontological status, by rehabilitating, installing within the dance fabric, the task, the movement whose quality is determined by its specifically operational character.” For example, when given the assignment by his teacher Robert Ellis Dunn to make a one-minute dance, Paxton “simply” sat on a bench and ate a sandwich. In 2012, Paxton—a choreographer who, Rainer jokes, invented walking—restaged his Satisfyin Lover, of 1967, with a customary mix of both trained and amateur performers, each of whom ambled undramatically across the Atrium. This framing of the repetition of unspectacular, pedestrian motion reminded everyone—performer and viewer alike—what every child learns and adults necessarily forget in order to move forward: these quotidian actions are complicated and require great physical erudition. Despite the affectless quality of the movement, one couldn’t help but notice the infinite individual quirks that gave shape to the group. There was an obvious continuity of concerns between Paxton’s desires and the cool, non-illusionistic
sculptures of Minimalists such as Robert Morris, who also made performances and occasionally danced with Rainer; however, there was an even greater resonance with the irreverent and humorous ways Rauschenberg, in abjuring the heroics of Abstract Expressionism, minimized the distinctions between the artist and the audience, treasure and trash. In fact, there are myriad connections between Rauschenberg and Paxton, who danced for Merce Cunningham's company at the same time the artist served as its stage manager. Besides sharing a loft, they participated in many of the same productions at Judson Memorial Church. And, despite his sensational success—at the Venice Biennale in 1964, Rauschenberg was the first American to win the grand prize in painting—he understood what could be learned from his less well-known friend, remarking once how much he “admired and envied the situation of the Cunningham dancers . . . because for them there never was a definitive way of doing things.”

It isn’t difficult to imagine, then, how aware Paxton must have been in October 2012 of occupying for the first time the same institution where his colleague's paintings had hung for many years. But, in mining further the history of these two experimental giants, it appears that neither artist nor choreographer was fully accepted by MoMA until recently. For example, two of Rauschenberg's greatest paintings—Rebus, 1955, and Canyon, 1959—were passed up for purchase by Barr when he was director; happily, both were acquired by the Museum over the past decade. Only by layering the narratives of these two innovators is it possible to truly chronicle their individual trajectories, the cross-disciplinary thinking that has shaped so much of the art made in New York, and MoMA’s own curatorial proclivities over the last sixty years. It's a history, made of zigzags and circuits, that has yet to be fully documented. It certainly sets in motion an alternative to the progressive linearity of the modern canon as it has come to be inscribed by this museum.

As I write this, MoMA is planning an expansion. One of the spaces, tentatively identified as “The Studio,” will be fully outfitted for all sorts of performances. Perhaps most importantly, this intimate but technologically and acoustically sophisticated space will be located in the middle of a sequence of galleries containing contemporary painting, sculpture, works on paper, photography, design, architecture, video, and film. The history of modern dance, music, and theater will be intimately and routinely connected to that of other art forms. Curators will rehearse a more complex drama of objects, moving pictures, and live performers that together portray the wildness of the questions that shaped the twentieth century as well as those that unsettle the status quo today. While still using the Atrium and other spaces when appropriate, performers at the Museum will finally take their bows on a stage that properly embodies the capacious revolutions of modernism. And, in the future, it may be possible to register a continuous history of dance at MoMA, with Kirstein’s archives once again providing an invaluable public resource. This book, the first in MoMA’s Modern Dance series on practicing choreographers, is just a beginning.

NOTES
I am extremely grateful to past and present curators at MoMA who believed in a museum of many moving parts and to director Glenn D. Lowry for realizing it. We all would be far more reticent to reconsider the Museum’s own history were it not for the daring of the artists whom we learn from every day.

8. The first painting by Robert Rauschenberg to enter MoMA’s collection was First Landing Jump, of 1961. It was acquired eleven years after it was made, following the purchase of groups of prints and drawings in the early 1960s.