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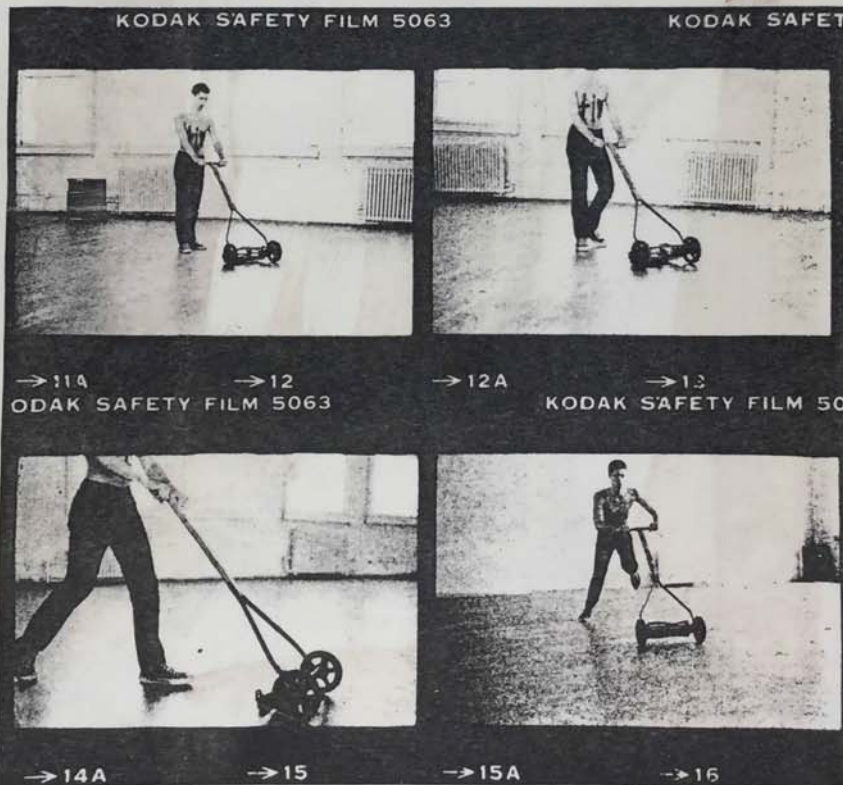
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SOHO ARTS

TALK'S BODY

BY ROBERT COE

The reason we're smart and use language is because we move on two feet. A recent discovery of 3.5-million-year-old footprints in Tanzania indicates that our ancestors were fully upright eons before their brains got big.



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In fact, bipedalism helped create natural selection for brain development: tool use and linguistics followed afoot. Paleontology has thus given a perfect rationale to people who imagine a more fundamental truth to be found in movement and distorted language as deceptive and baroque. On the other hand, we can learn to "read" the rhetoric of movement, too, opening a question as to which form of expression tells the more vivid — or excruciating — stories. "DanceText," a recent two-day festival of 18 choreographers at P.S. 1 in Queens, was a chance to look at the problems of associating words with bodies in space — and to experience at least a few temporary solutions.

Post-modern dance has always included the spoken word, but "DanceText" was a particularly timely event, given the resurgence of cultural interest in the expressivity and content of language, especially in the visual arts and music. In dance, words have appeared as the body's metaphysical supplement, spurred by the motive that has inspired most changes in urban art — boredom with genre — and a typically urban definition of human beings: "bodies that use language," as Kenneth Burke put it. Kenneth King is a major figure in all this, and he was in P.S. 1's cavernous third-floor gallery, a prancing sci-fi cartoon generating spontaneous thought balloons for his own kinesthetic philosophy.

But the more common strategy was one that is in some ways easier to handle: language (taped prose) as a parallel rhythmic event, suggesting both movement and meaning. Marjorie Gamsa and Scott Caywood's *Hotel Macbeth* celebrated dance's infatuation with the words of William Shakespeare — "Life's but a walking shadow," etc. — and Gamsa's own repetitive taped comments, on the same curiously Beckettian theme. Christina Swane danced a quiet elegy to the late Michael Bloomfield's taped rap about the Chicago music scene, and created her own kind of spacious, empty-headed blues.

Language often served as pure sound, an audio ambience for the audience's shifting attention. Nancy Topf's *One Day*, starring six delightfully rambunctious little girls, used a repetitive piano score by Topf and overlapping tapes of paratextual kids' stories: "and then... and then..." The texts in Wendy Perron's *A Story: Impossible to Tell* were also difficult to follow, but they were intelligent and direct and made you want to pay attention. Watching dancer Harry Sheppard — one of the best improvisers around — I completely lost the thread of Perron's videotaped narratives; in a linguistic culture, we may tend to shop for our primary meanings in words, but we also like to go with the most immediate thing happening.

Most of the work was abstract and non-representational, acknowledging "that when you say cart, a cart has already come through your mouth," as Zeno the Stoic had it. When you say cart and you bother to bring a cart onstage, you're probably doing theater. The best of the dance-theater hybrids was Blondell Cummings' *Chicken Soup* — *A Work-in-Progress Dedicated to the Families in Athens*, which found a vivid balance between abstract, emotional movement studies and common sense texts by Grace Paley. Pat Steir and *The Settlement Cookbook*. Cummings' work was politically ennobling, made me think of the main critique of language in the '60s theater, which wanted to abolish the word because of its function as an agent of social manipulation. Duncan's humorless vision of human cooperation involved 10 people quietly ordering

each other around — "Mindy, walk around the block. John, take a break." Just like Mooney day camp.

Most choreographers took a less positivist view of language's potential for instruction, and played with structural analogies: a weak example would be Carolyn Lord's cutesy low-budget comedy *May Day Group Images*, in which she balanced and said "budget," fell and said "wages," spiraled and said "prices." Repetition was another common device, often taken to excess. On the other hand, Jim Self used three repeated words to preface the three sections of *Vocabulary Lessons, Part II: Gossip on a Sidewalk*. The words were "hey," "one" and "poor."

American poets from Whitman to Williams and Olson and beyond have been predisposed to finding holistic connections between words and movement, but few people here seemed concerned with poetry, period. Charles Dennis struggled to maintain the self-image of a small-time Lower East Side hustler shifting in his "exercise mode"; Danny Lepoff literally lay on his back and said "ah" for most of his half hour. Kenneth King, in his improvised dancetalk, pointed out that language is a function of the left hemisphere of the brain, and visual-spatial concepts of the right.

The big problem I find with talking dancers is that it's often not clear either why they're talking or why they're dancing. Sign language is a formalist solution to the problem. Jane Comfort used a text as literal choreography, deaf-signing Gertrude Stein and the traditional hymn, "Amazing Grace." Wendy Perron invented her own signing system for two sections of *Story*, and they were as legible and beautiful as Comfort's codified vocabulary.

An example of a more open and exacerbated synergy was Tim Miller's *postwar*, which began with Miller, wordless and vulnerable, listening to a hilarious taped conversation he'd had with his mother that morning — Mother's Day. He then frantically passed out photocopies of



Jane Comfort transformed text to choreography, literally, using sign language: she presented *Sign Story* (seen here in rehearsal) and Marjorie Gamsa read the accompanying text.

his birth certificate; a taped voice announced "the end of the Second World War," and Miller spray-painted "Tim" on his chest. A second man entered with a lawn mower as Miller ran desperately around the space, explaining its possible organization as a performance arena.

Postwar worked. Yet oddly, the most successful performance was the most simple and conventional. Johanna Boyce, in *Only Connect*, balanced, rolled and

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY NATHANIEL TILESTON



"Life's but a walking shadow..." and other excerpts from Shakespeare provided the text for Scott Caywood (pictured) and Marjorie Gamsa's *Hotel Macbeth*.

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22 The Soho News May 20, 1981

After he announced the end of the Second World War, Tim Miller mowed the studio floor in a rehearsal of his postwar

In fact, bipedalism helped create natural selection for brain development: tool use and language followed about. Paleontology has thus given a more functional to people who imagine a more fundamental truth to be found in movement. On the other hand, we can learn to "read" the rhetoric of movement, too, by "reading" the more vivid — or expressing a question as to which form of representing — images. "Dance/Text," a re-creating — in 1980, was a chance to look at P.S. 1 in Queens, was a chance to look at the problems of associating words with bodies in space — and to experience at least a few temporary solutions.

Post-modern dance has always included the spoken word, but "Dance/Text" was a particularly timely event, given the larger re-examination of cultural interest in the expressive and content of language, especially in the visual arts and music. In dance, words have appeared as the body's metaphorical supplement, spurred by the notion that has inspired most changes in what art — beyond with genre — and a typically urban definition of "human" behavior. "Bodies that use language," as Kenneth Barla put it, Kenneth King is a major figure in all this, and he was in P.S. 1's cavernous third-floor gallery, a prancing so-far cartoon generating spontaneous thought balloons for his own kinetic philosophy.

But the more common strategy was one that is in some ways easier to handle: language (typed prose) as a parallel rhythm, even, suggesting both movement and meaning. Marjorie Gurno and Scott Caywood's *Hotel Marlowe* celebrated dance's ineffability using the words of William Shakespeare — "life's but a walking shadow," etc. — and Gurno's own repetitively Beckman theme. Christina Michael Blomfield's taped rap about the Chicago music scene, and created her own kind of spacious, empty-headed blues.

Language when served as pure sound, as audio ambience for the audience's shifting attention. Nancy Topf's *One Day*, wearing six delightfully rambunctious little girls, and a repetitive piano score by Topf and overlapping tapes of parastatic kids' voices, "and then and then." The texts in Wendy Perrot's *A Storyteller* follow, but they were intelligent and direct and made you want to pay attention. Watching dancer Henry Sheppard — one of the best improvisers around — I could hardly lose the thread of Perrot's voluminous narratives, in a linguistic culture, we may tend to sleep for our like to go with the most immediate thing happening.

Most of the work was abstract and non-representational, acknowledging that "when you say cart, a cart has already been had it. When you say cart and you begin doing theater. The best of the dance is failure." — A Work-in-Progress which found a vivid balance between abstract movement studies and the more representational work of Grace Paley. For me, the work was politically smothering, as on the floor of the 1960s, which wanted to abolish the word because of its function as an agent of social manipulation. Don't let us forget the power of human cooperation and the power of people quietly ordering

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Most of the work was abstract and non-representational, acknowledging that "when you say cart, a cart has already come through your mouth," as Zeno the Stoic had it. When you say cart and you bother to bring a cart onstage, you're probably doing theater. The best of the dance-theater hybrids was Blondell Cummings' *Chicken Soup — A Work-in-Progress Dedicated to the Families in Atlanta*, which found a vivid balance between abstract, emotional movement studies and common sense texts by Grace Paley, Pat Steir and *The Settlement Cookbook*. Cummings' work was politically enabling, made me think of the main critique of language in the '60s theater, which wanted to abolish the word because of its function as an agent of social manipulation. Duncan's humorless vision of human cooperation involved 10 people quietly ordering

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Most choreographers took a less positivist view of language's potential for instruction, and played with structural analogies: a weak example would be Carolyn Lord's cutesy low-budget comedy *May Day Group Images*, in which she balanced and said "bodies," fell and said "wages," spiraled and said "prices." Repetition was another common device, often taken to excess. On the other hand, Jim Self used three repeated words to preface the three sections of *Vocabulary Lessons, Part II: Goose on a Sidewalk*. The words were "hey," "one" and "goose."

American poets from Whitman to Williams and Olson and beyond have been predisposed to finding holistic connections between words and movement, but few people here seemed concerned with poetry, period. Charles Dennis struggled to maintain the self-image of a small-time Lower East Side hustler shifting in his "exercise mode"; Danny Lepkoff literally lay on his back and said "ah" for most of his half hour. Kenneth King, in his improvised dancetalk, pointed out that language is a function of the left hemisphere of the brain, and visual-spatial concepts of the right.

The big problem I find with talking dancers is that it's often not clear either why they're talking, or why they're dancing. Sign language is a formalist solution to the problem. Jane Comfort used a text as literal choreography, dead-signing Gertrude Stein and the traditional hymn, "Amazing Grace." Wendy Perron invented her own signing system for two sections of *Striography*, and they were as legible and beautiful as Comfort's codified vocabulary.

An example of a more open and ex-cerated synergy was Tim Miller's *Pizzurwar*, which began with Miller, wordless and vulnerable, listening to a hilarious taped conversation he'd had with his mother that morning — Mother's Day. He then frantically passed out photocopies of



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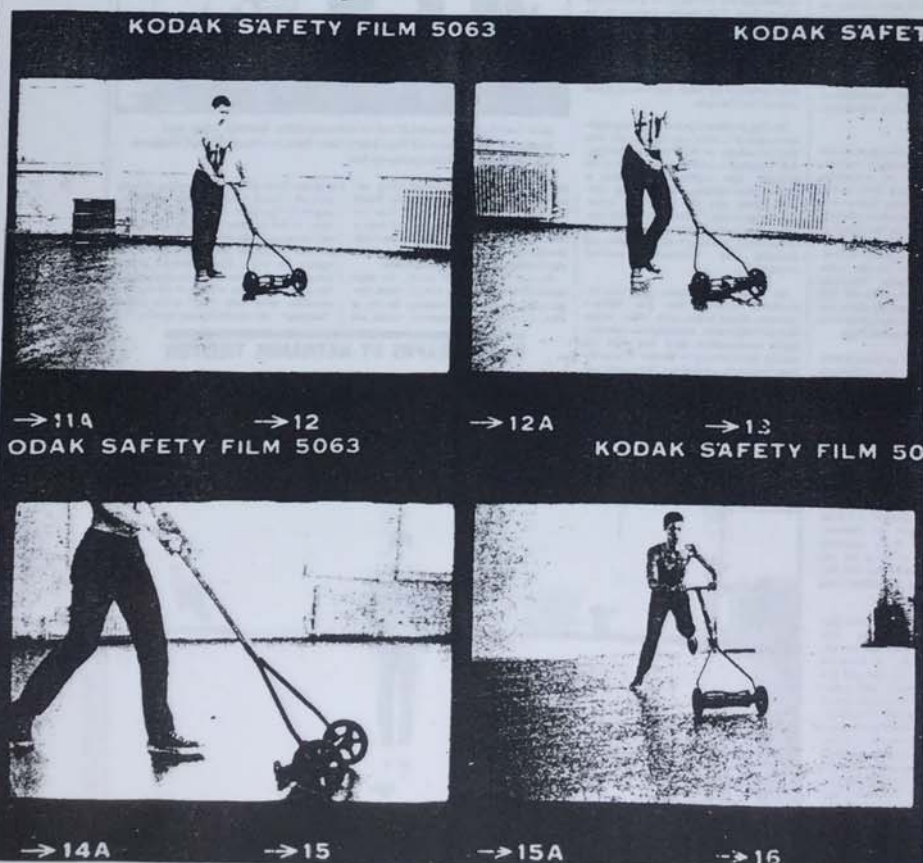
"Life's but a walking shadow . . ." and other excerpts from Shakespeare provided the text for Scott Caywood (pictured) and Marjorie Gamsio's *Hotel Macbeth*

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BY ROBERT COE

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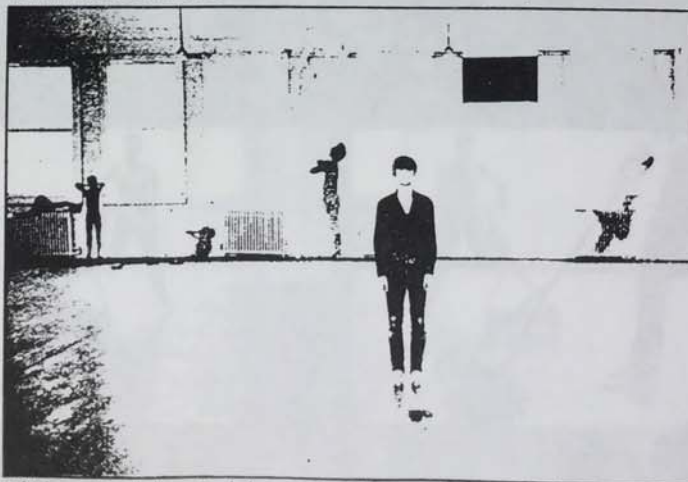


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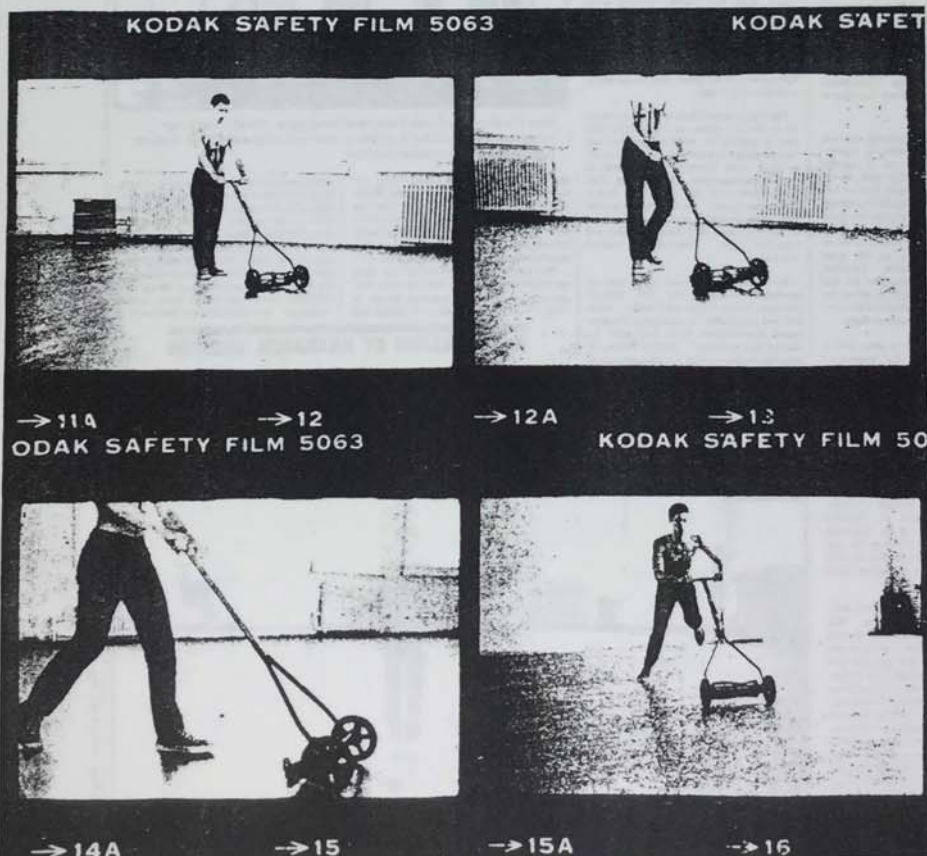
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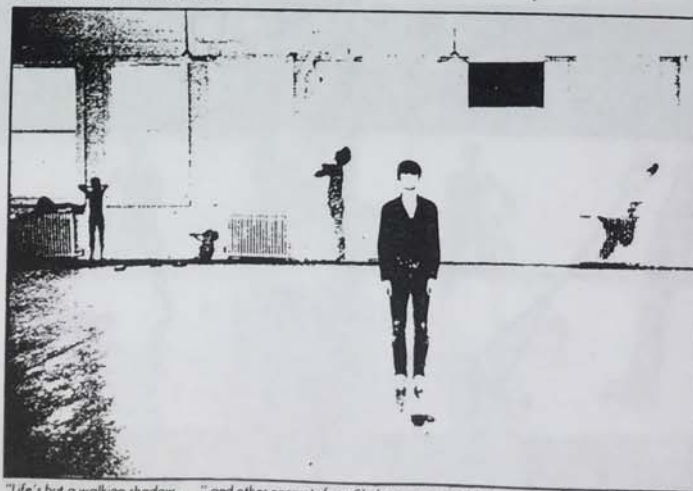
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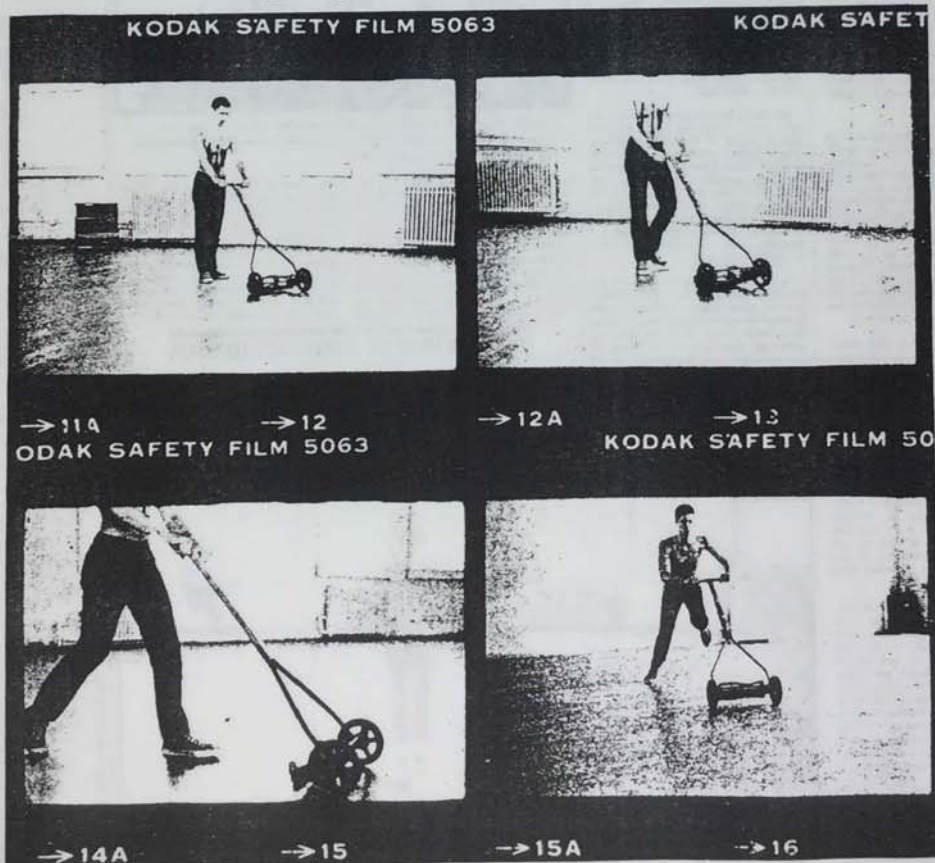
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TALK'S BODY

BY ROBERT COE

The reason we're smart and use language is because we move on two feet. A recent discovery of 3.5-million-year-old footprints in Tanzania indicates that our ancestors were fully upright eons before their brains got big.



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In fact, bipedalism helped create natural selection for brain development: tool use and linguistics followed afoot. Paleanthropology has thus given a perfect rationale to people who imagine a more fundamental truth to be found in movement and distrust language as deceptive and baroque. On the other hand, we can learn to "read" the rhetoric of movement, too, opening a question as to which form of expression tells the more vivid — or ex-cruciating — stories. "Dance/Text," a recent two-day festival of 18 choreographers at P.S. 1 in Queens, was a chance to look at the problems of associating words with bodies in space — and to experience at least a few temporary solutions.

Post-modern dance has always included the spoken word, but "Dance/Text" was a particularly timely event, given the larger resurgence of cultural interest in the expressivity and content of language, especially in the visual arts and music. In dance, words have appeared as the body's metaphysical supplement, spurred by the motive that has inspired most changes in urban art — boredom with genre — and a typically urban definition of human beings: "bodies that use language," as Kenneth Burke put it. Kenneth King is a major figure in all this, and he was in P.S. 1's cavernous third-floor gallery, a prancing sociocultural cartoon generating spontaneous thought balloons for his own kinespheric philosophy.

But the more common strategy was one that is in some ways easier to handle: language (taped prose) as a parallel rhythmic event, suggesting both movement and meaning. Marjorie Gamsio and Scott Caywood's *Hotel Macbeth* celebrated dance's ineffability using the words of William Shakespeare — "life's but a walking shadow," etc. — and Gamsio's own repetitive taped comments, on the same curiously Beckettian theme. Christina Svane danced a quiet eulogy to the late Michael Bloomfield's taped rap about the Chicago music scene, and created her own kind of spacious, empty-hearted blues.

Language often served as pure sound, an audio ambience for the audience's shifting attention: Nancy Topf's *One Day*, starring six delightfully rambunctious little girls, used a repetitive piano score by Topf and overlapping tapes of paratactic kids' stories: "and then... and then...". The texts in Wendy Perron's *A Sisstory: Impossible to Tell* were also difficult to follow, but they were intelligent and direct and made you want to pay attention. Watching dancer Harry Sheppard — one of the best improvisers around — I completely lost the thread of Perron's videotaped narratives, in a linguistic culture, we may tend to shop for our primary meanings in words, but we also like to go with the most immediate thing happening.

Most of the work was abstract and non-representational, acknowledging that "when you say cart, a cart has already come through your mouth," as Zeno the Stoic had it. When you say cart and you bother to bring a cart onstage, you're probably doing theater. The best of the dance/theater hybrids was Blondell Cummings' *Chicken Soup — A Work-in-Progress Dedicated to the Families in Atlanta*, which found a vivid balance between abstract, emotional movement studies and common sense texts by Grace Paley, Pat Steir and *The Settlement Cookbook*. Cummings' work was politically ennobling made me think of the main critique of language in the '60s theater, which wanted to abolish the word because of its function as an agent of social manipulation. Duncan's humorless vision of human cooperation involved 10 people quietly ordering

each other around — "Mandy, walk around the block. John, take a break." Just like Moonee day camp.

Most choreographers took a less postmodernist view of language's potential for instruction, and played with structural analogies: a weak example would be Carolyn Lord's cutesy low-budget comedy *May Day Group Images*, in which she balanced and said "budget," fell and said "wages," spiraled and said "prices." Repetition was another common device, often taken to excess. On the other hand, Jim Sell used three repeated words to preface the three sections of *Vivubulary Lessons, Part II: Goose on a Sidewalk*. The words were "hey," "one," and "goose."

American poets from Whitman to Williams and Olson and beyond have been predisposed to finding holistic connections between words and movement, but few people here seemed concerned with poetry. period. Charles Dennis struggled to maintain the self-image of a small-time Lower East Side hustler shifting in his "exercise mode"; Danny Lepkoff literally lay on his back and said "ah" for most of his half hour. Kenneth King, in his improvised dance/talk, pointed out that language is a function of the left hemisphere of the brain, and visual-spatial concepts of the right.

The big problem I find with talking dancers is that it's often not clear either why they're talking or why they're dancing. Sign language is a formalist solution to the problem. Jane Comfort used a text as literal choreography: deal-signing. Gertrude Stein and the traditional hymn, "Amazing Grace." Wendy Perron invented her own signing system for two sections of *Sisstory*; and they were as legible and beautiful as Comfort's codified vocabulary.

An example of a more open and exacerbated synergy was Tim Miller's *Postwar*, which began with Miller, wordless and vulnerable, listening to a hilarious taped conversation he'd had with his mother that morning — Mother's Day. He then frantically passed out photocopies of



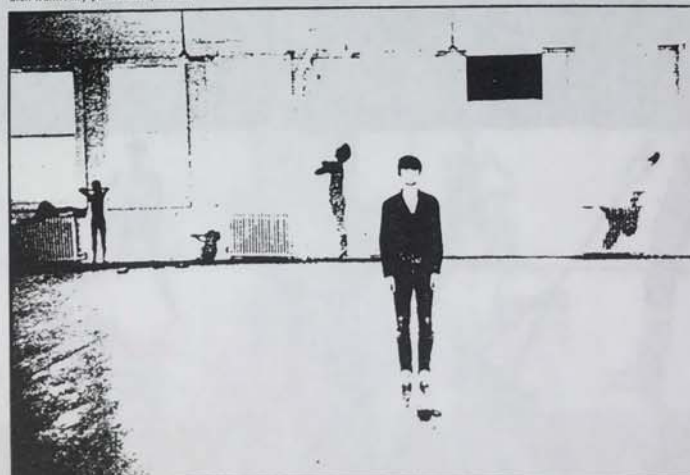
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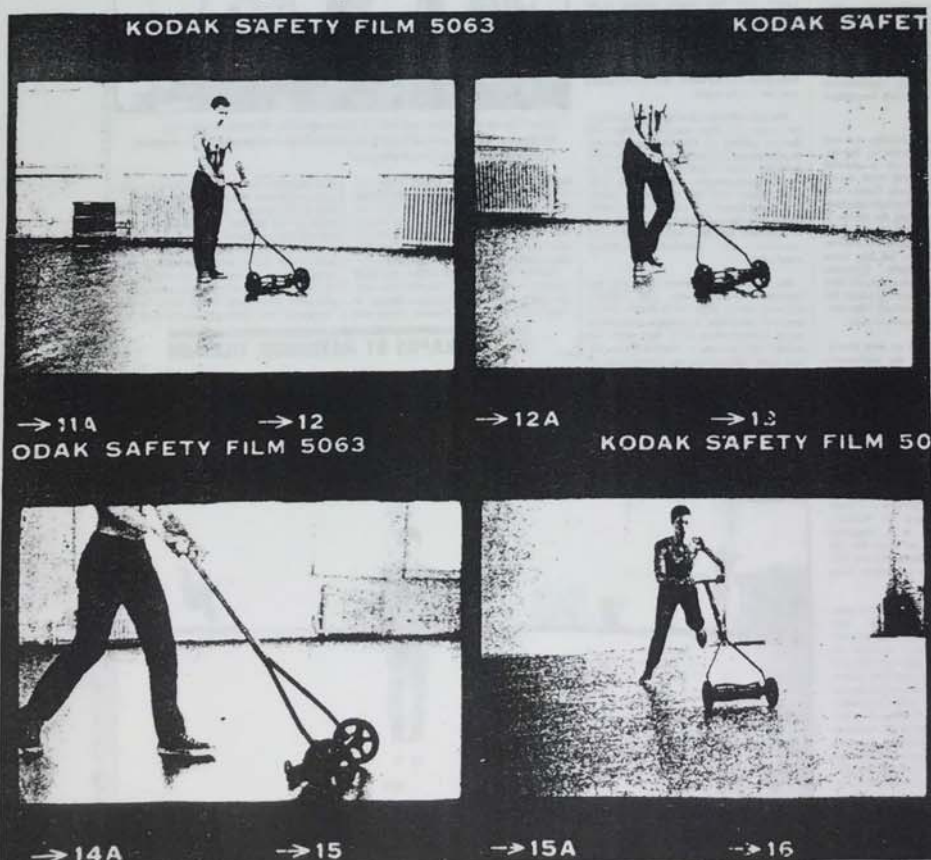
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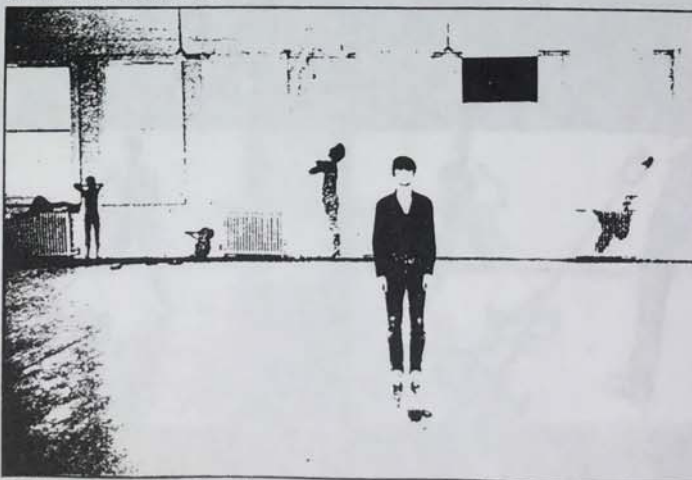
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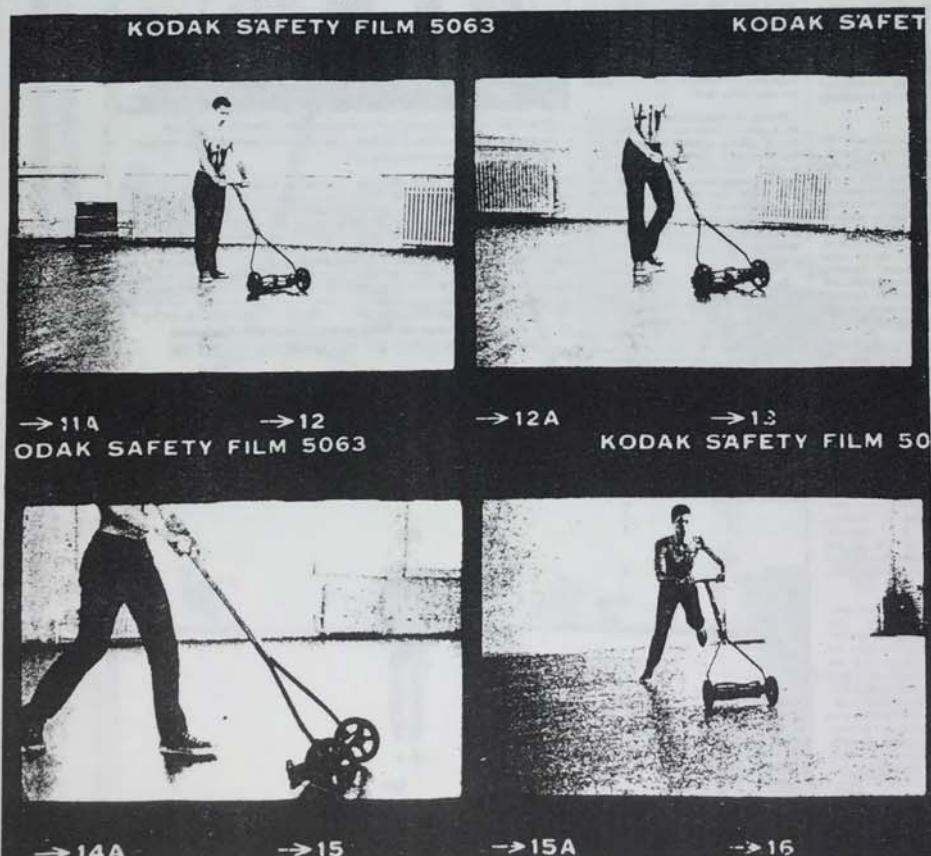
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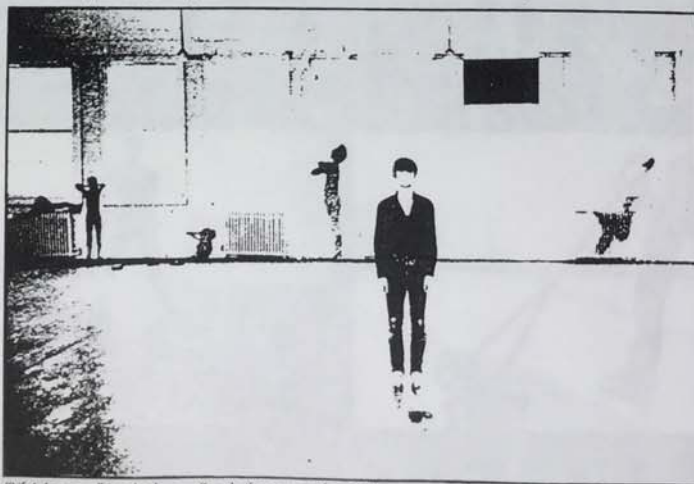


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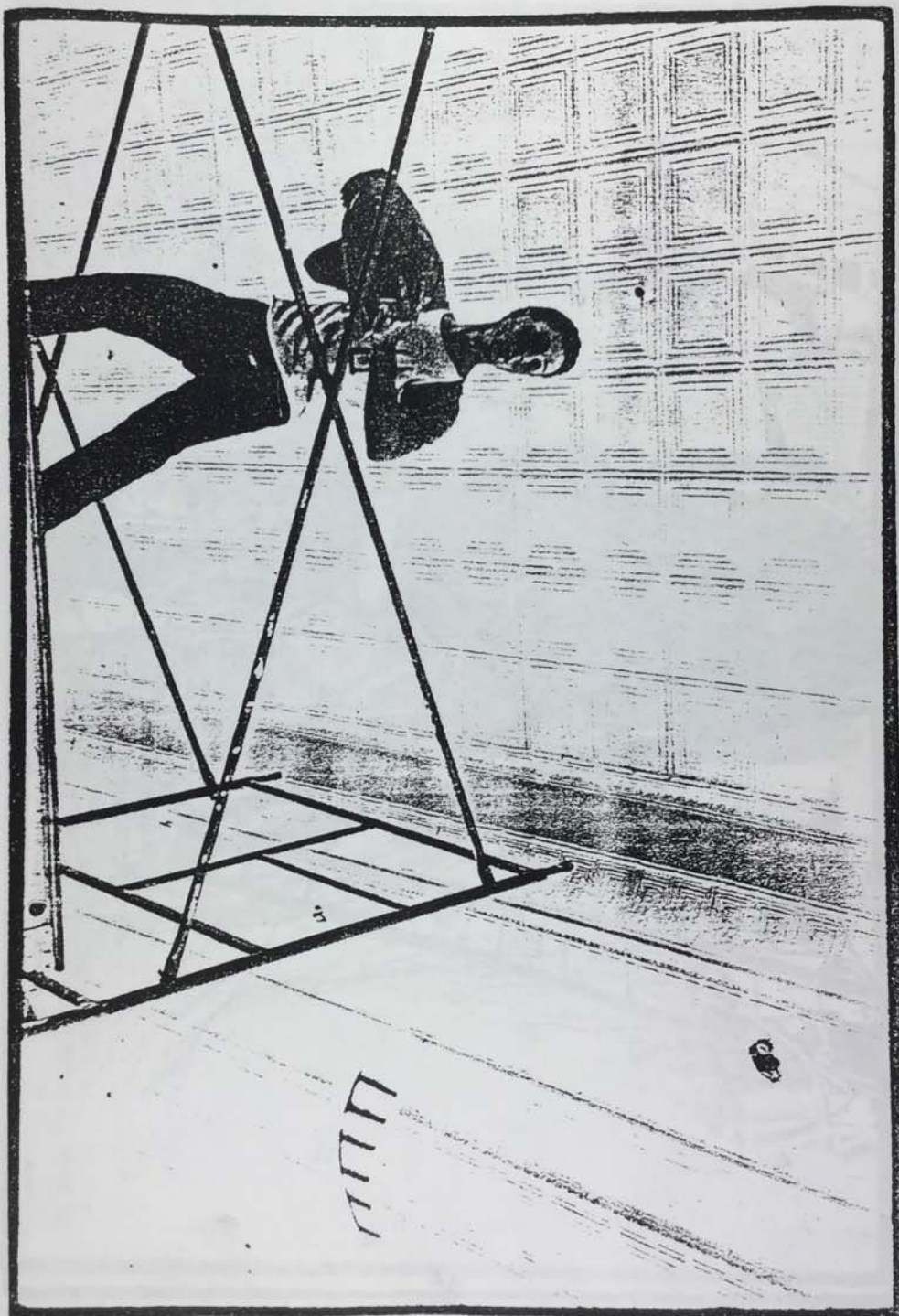


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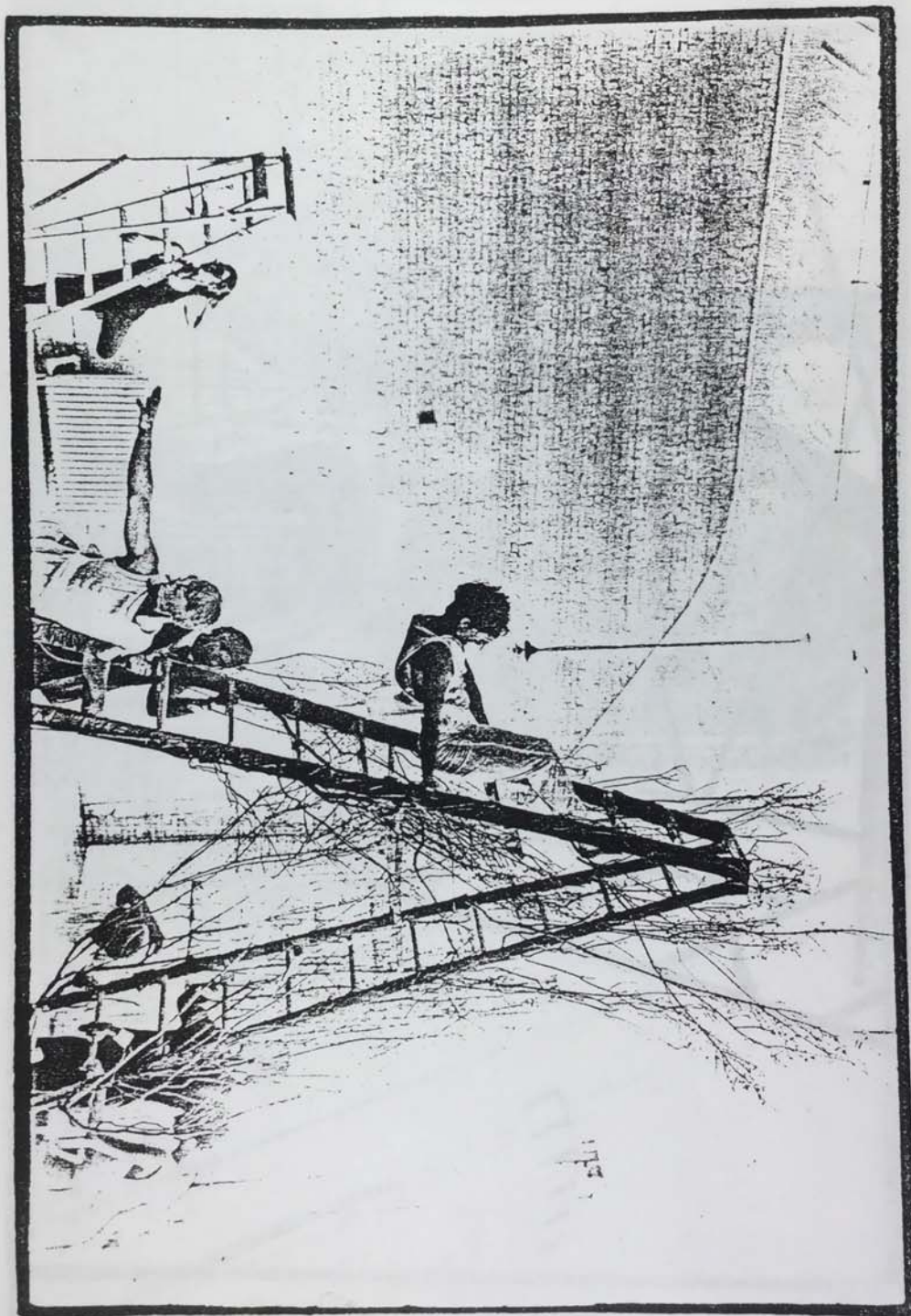
Tim Miller '82



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Mayorie Samos '82



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Joe Comfort 182

John Rand



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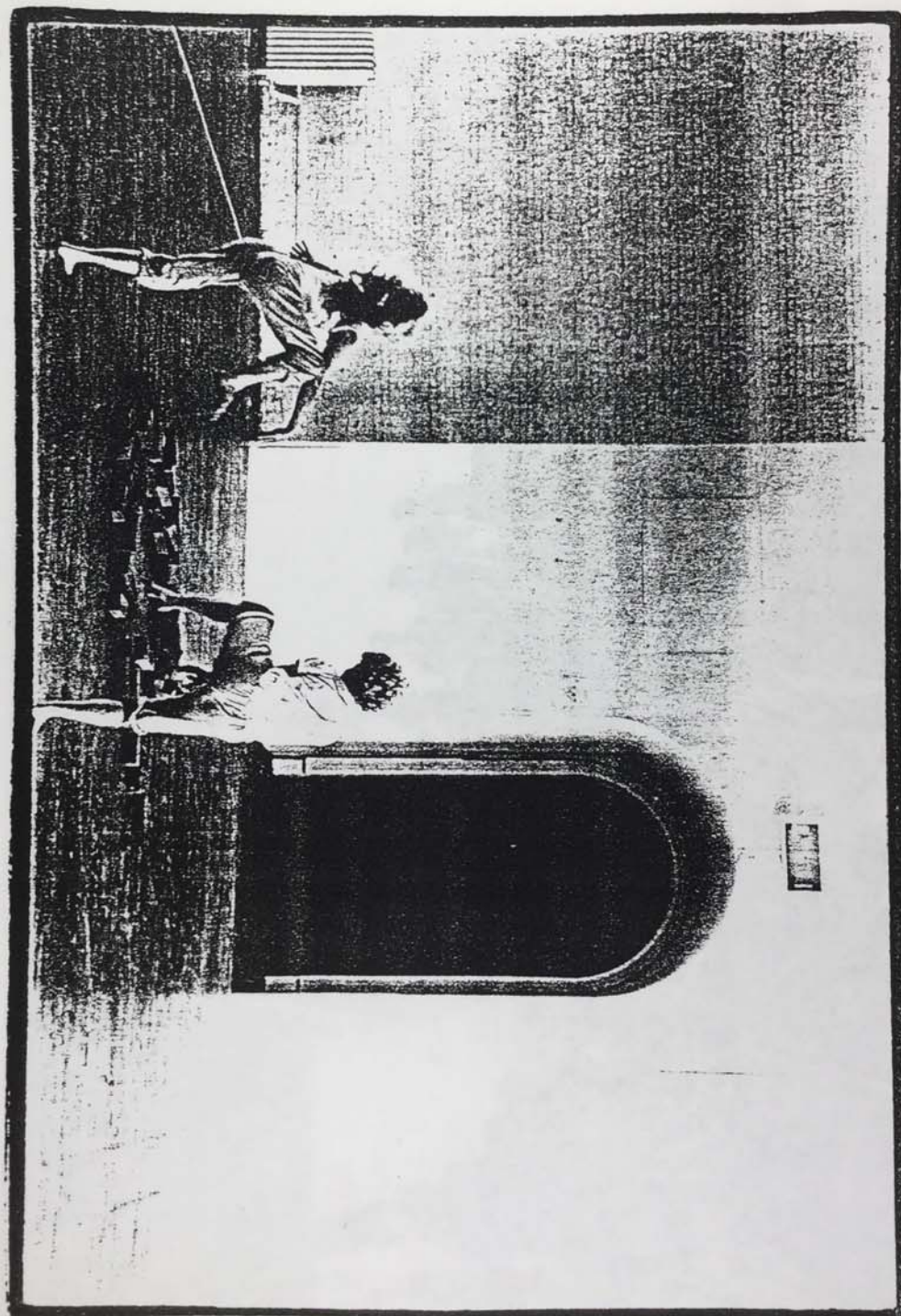
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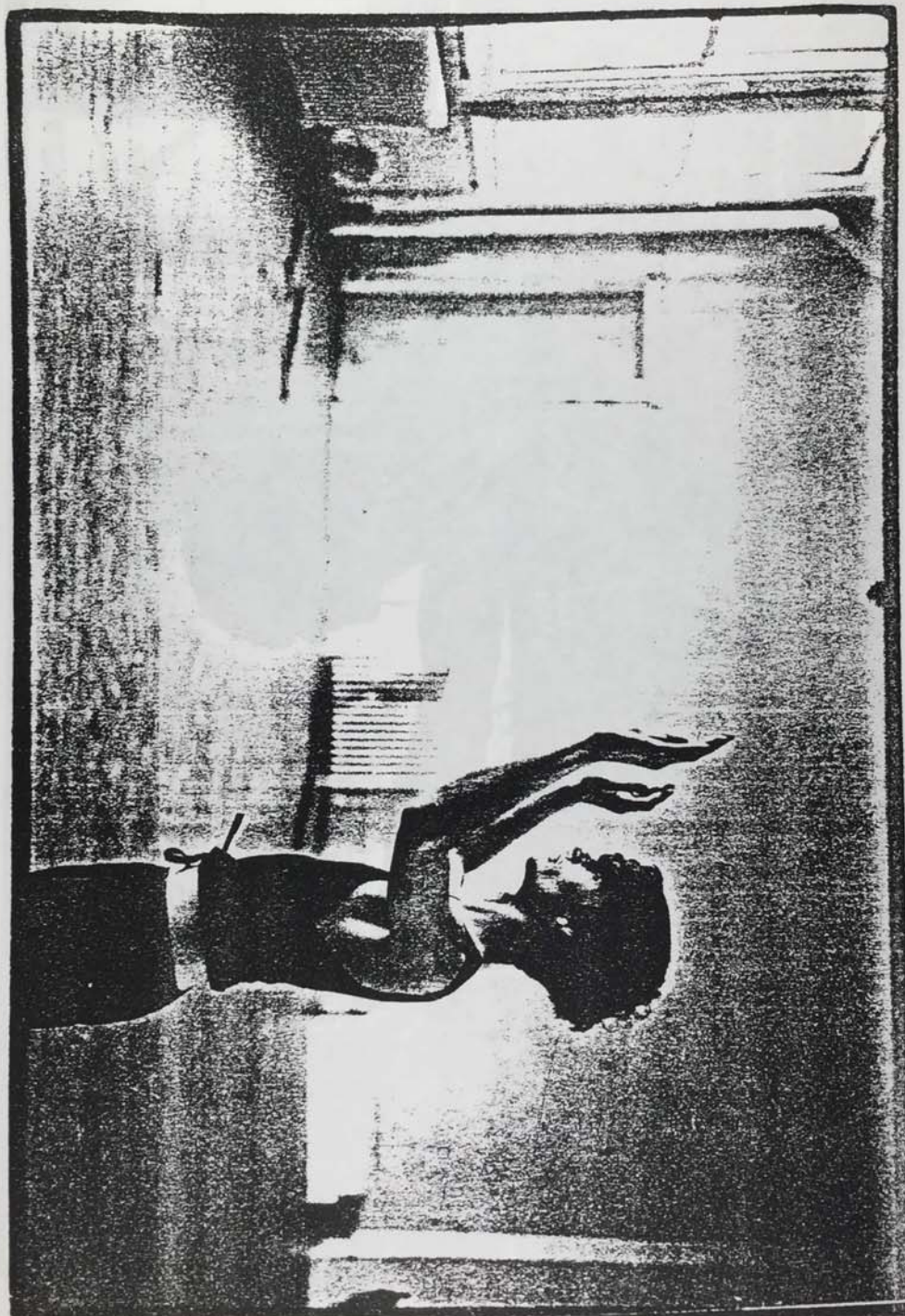
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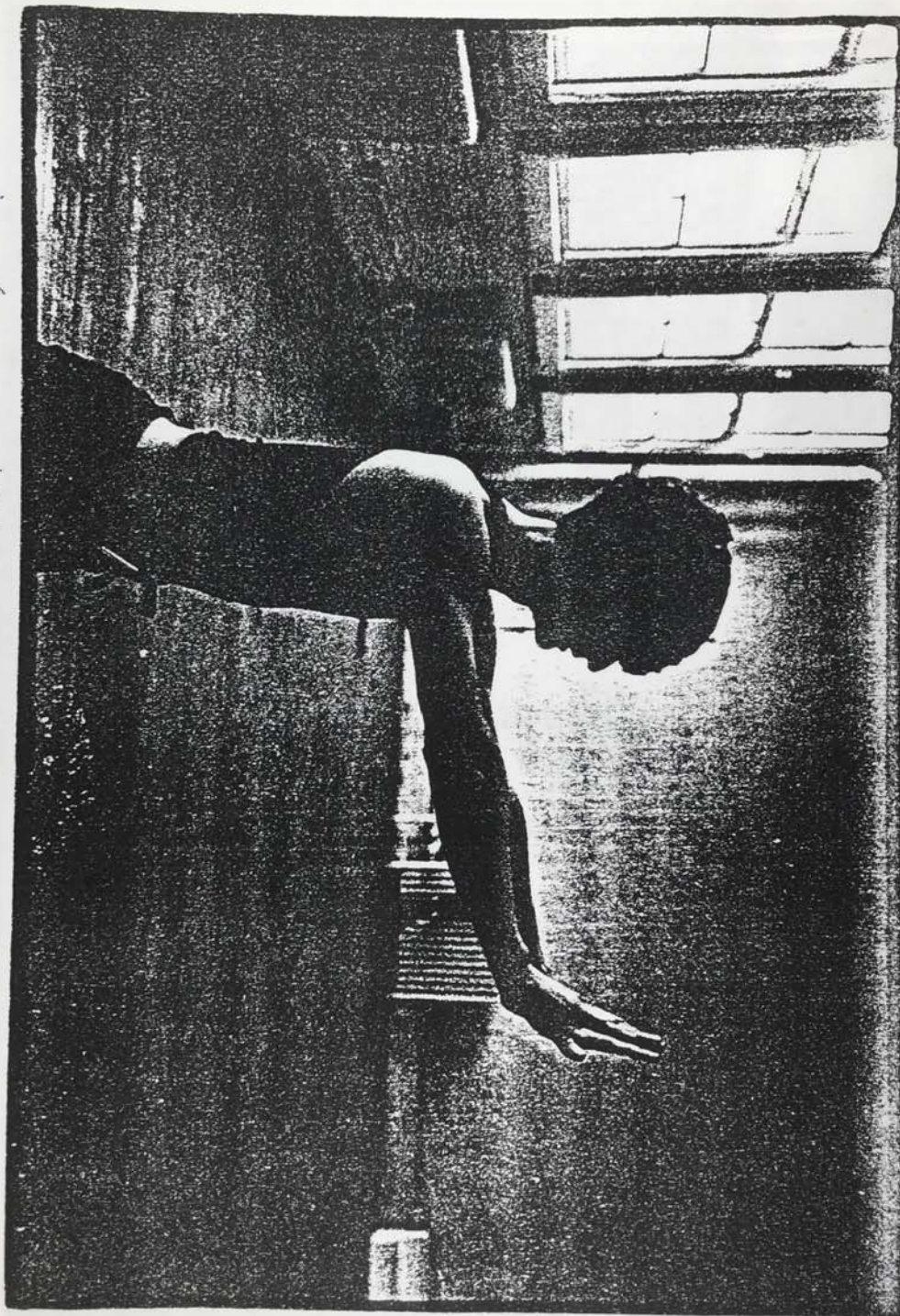
Mayorie Samoo '81



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