

How Merce Cunningham Danced Art History in a New Direction

The legendary dancer's rigor opened up a space for experiments well beyond dance.

Ben Davis, April 17, 2017



Thomas Caley, Lisa Boudreau and Glen Rumsey in Merce Cunningham's *Scenario*, Palais Garnier, January 1998. Photo courtesy of Jacques Moatti.

The influence of the dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham (1919–2009) looms so large that the current tribute to him spans not just multiple departments of one museum, but two entire museums in two different cities: the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. In February, these two institutions simultaneously opened retrospectives honoring Cunningham, both entitled “Common Time.”

I only saw the Walker show, not the MCA's, but even in that one exhibition I encountered so much that summing it all up is a challenge: costumes, props, and posters; recordings of scores; photos and videos of Cunningham's most

celebrated dance pieces. Plus, there's a full accompanying program of new dance.

So I'll just make two points about his significance for art.

Cunningham has a strange status. A dancer's dancer and a choreographer's choreographer, he had a magnetic presence onstage and was uncompromisingly experimental in his technical explorations of movement. He danced with Martha Graham's company from 1939 to 1945—the ultimate modern dancer—but then broke free to found the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in 1953, pioneering his own, unnerving but rigorously dancerly style of movement, at once balletic and machinic.



Installation view of "Merce Cunningham: Common Time" at the Walker Arts Center. Image: Ben Davis.

At the same time, few figures from the field of modern dance have achieved anything like Cunningham's cachet beyond the field, a fact testified to by the very fact of this museum exhibition, which contains many rambling galleries dedicated to his collaborations with the celebrated artists, filmmakers, and composers he worked with, including major pieces by Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Frank Stella, Nam June Paik, and others.

At one point at the Walker, you find a room turned over to Andy Warhol's *Silver Clouds* (1968), the lovable Mylar balloons that were drafted into service as props for Cunningham's dance *RainForest*. These are placed opposite a gallery dedicated to a groovy slideshow environment by Stan VanDerBeek, the new media pioneer whose frenzied projections were incorporated into the “collaborative, interactive multi-media event” *Variations V* (1965). This gives a sense of how wide-ranging Cunningham's alliances were in the experimental '60s.



Video environment by Stan VanDerBeek in “Merce Cunningham: Common Time.” Photo by Gene Pittman, courtesy Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

Such juxtapositions give a potent sense of the fertile atmosphere of freewheeling but exacting collaboration around Cunningham and his dancers. “In some ways, they were precursors to what we see now, where there is just much more unquestioned fluidity between genres,” Philip Bither, the Walker's performance curator, told me.

Yet there is a very important point to make about what makes Cunningham's method still unique.

In the late 1950s, when Cunningham was pioneering his experimental style, performance was very much becoming part of visual art. Allan Kaprow—an artist often grouped, at the time, as a “Neo-Dadaist” alongside Robert

Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns—coined the term “Happenings” for a kind of multi-sensory theatrical *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Some of Cunningham’s experiments, going back to 1948 when he accompanied the composer John Cage to work at the freewheeling Black Mountain College, were very much in this vein. Indeed, the Cage-orchestrated *Theater Piece #1 (Black Mountain Piece)* of 1953 is sometimes called the “first happening,” featuring Cage lecturing about Buddhism, Robert Rauschenberg playing records, M.C. Richards and Charles Olson reading poems from atop ladders, and Cunningham dancing while pursued by a dog (among other things).

In the end, however, Cunningham’s model of collaboration is significant exactly in that it points in a different, and more exacting, direction than the Happening.

Rauschenberg’s very first combine paintings—his signature contributions to art history—were stage props for Cunningham, folding screens designed to be packed up into a VW bus and transported with the company. His mixed-media art was inspired by the melding of media around Cunningham.



A dancer performs a work by Maria Hassabi in the Walker gallery (at left) near a stage set, originally designed by Robert Rauschenberg. Image: Ben Davis.

Cunningham's semi-improvisatory dance *Story* involved sequences of movement that could be reshuffled and remixed by his dancers. It featured music by Toshi Ichijanagi and sets by Rauschenberg, the latter constructed of whatever he found in the theater wherever the company was performing. On its 1964 European tour, in Devon, when Rauschenberg couldn't find any props, he simply stood at the back of the stage during the dance, ironing shirts. In London, he took this further, and his 'set' for the dance was himself, standing with his back to the audience, painting.

Such elements would have given the spectacle the classic Happenings vibe. It is all the more significant, then, that Cunningham decided to eliminate Rauschenberg's antics from the stage, feeling that they distracted from the dance.

"The truth is, Merce is no collaborator," Carolyn Brown, formerly one of the Cunningham Dance Company's key dancers, would later remember. "He is a loner."

The name of the Walker/MCA retrospective is "Common Time," which was the name Cunningham gave to the finicky model of collaboration that he worked out. The idea, in essence, was that the elements of a Merce Cunningham Dance Company performance would share a "common time"—but nothing else. Different elements would be conceived completely separately, a theory that Cunningham took so far that his dancers, famously, often had neither heard the music that would be accompanying their performance, nor seen the props with which they would be dancing.

"It was the most excruciating collaboration," Rauschenberg said later of his work with Cunningham, "but it was the most exciting and most real, because nobody knew what anybody else was doing until it was too late."

If Cunningham's example offers a lesson to the present, then, it is not just as a role model for "collaboration" in general, but as a reminder that there are actually different models of collaboration, and that it matters how you do it.

In general, contemporary art tends to be "post-disciplinary"—think the whole Performa-style, 'let's-get-a-painter-to-do-a-performance-and-see-what-happens' kind of thing. "Interdisciplinary art," on the other hand, is something else. The concept of "interdisciplinarity" technically involves not one artist dabbling in another field, but the collaboration between two or more experts

from different fields. It depends on the synergies of prior expertise, not the collapse of expertise.



Installation view of “Merce Cunningham: Common Time” at the Walker Art Center. Photo by Gene Pittman, courtesy Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

And Cunningham’s “common time” model of non-collaborative collaboration is an almost willfully obtuse way of reasserting a kind of medium-specificity at the very moment that the various arts were fusing together in the expanded world of post-war, multimedia experimentation around him.

That’s the first point. The second is what this show says about the historical importance of Merce’s method.

Cunningham’s innovations in dance are often understood as part of an art-historical bloc with Rauschenberg and Johns in visual arts and Cage in music (sometimes, unflatteringly, called the “Aesthetics of Indifference.”) Johns replaced Rauschenberg as artistic director of Merce Cunningham Dance Company in 1967, and is responsible for commissioning many of the artist-designed props on view in “Common Time.” Cage was Cunningham’s most enduring creative collaborator (and romantic partner—though that fact was only revealed, discreetly, in 1989, and the Walker largely respects their

circumspection).



Jasper Johns, *Set Elements for Walkaround Time*, 1968. Collection Walker Art Center, T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2000.

All of these men were early disciples of Marcel Duchamp. As a unit, they were key to popularizing a cool new brainy style of art in the wake of the chest-beating machismo of Abstract Expressionism—a fact exemplified by the sets for *Walkaround Time*, giant plastic boxes featuring images culled from Duchamp's famous painting *The Large Glass*, made by Johns with Duchamp's blessing for a 1968 Cunningham performance, shortly before the Frenchman's death.

Yet Cunningham also stands out from this constellation in an important way. His partnership with Cage itself—which arguably set the model for all the other

creative collaborations, since they worked out the “common time” model together—illustrates the choreographer’s special art-historical role.

“Although one tends to think of the Cage-Cunningham collaboration as two sides of the same coin, they may not be,” Sally Banes and Noël Carroll argue in a paper for *Dance Chronicle*. “Rather they might just be two coins—in the same pocket.”

Cage, they argue, really did dissolve orchestral composition into propositions of found sound and chance operations, motivated by “an extreme form of aesthetic egalitarianism,” and an ambition “to dissolve and deconstruct the distinction between music and ordinary noise.” He was, thereby, a big influence on Fluxus, which created an art of pseudo-musical “scores” and everyday acts of play, music blurring into visual art into experimental theater.

In the dance world, Banes and Carroll point out there were choreographers who went in a similar direction, specifically those associated with the Judson Dance Company (Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, et al), for whom “ordinary movement function[ed] as the readymade did for Duchamp and the found sound did for Cage.” But Cunningham, despite his important experiments with everyday movement and chance operations, was unfailingly more “virtuosic,” they write; “the movement that Cunningham characteristically assigns to his dancers is perceptibly *dance* movement.” His art specifically did not collapse into the everyday.

This difference is key to what made the Cage/Cunningham partnership work so well. They didn’t just inspire one another but also complemented one another.



Installation view of the galleries dedicated to musical collaboration in “Merce Cunningham: Common Time” at the Walker Art Center. Photo by Gene Pittman, courtesy Walker Art Center.

A wonderfully awkward clip, included in one of the Walker’s galleries dedicated to Cunningham’s musical collaborators, shows Cage on a 1960 TV episode of *I’ve Got a Secret*, in which he plays his composition *Water Walk*, written for instruments including a bathtub, electric mixer, and rubber duck. You can see how the mainstream audience treats Cage on his own, as a novelty act.

“Inevitably Mr. Cage, these are nice people, but some of them are going to laugh,” the host says.

“I prefer laughter to tears,” Cage replies. And the audience does, indeed, laugh.

Cage’s experimental aesthetic was famously inspired by Zen, pushing art to the edge where it was almost beyond conscious control or personal expression, seeing what opened up at that frontier where you let go of the self.

In contrast, from one end of “Common Time” to the other, you cannot escape Cunningham’s image, and what shines out is his burning *personality* as a performer, the sense you get of him as a radiant, centering artistic force.

You can introduce people to a lot of otherwise diffuse and inscrutable stuff if you have a force this powerful at its center. “It’s entirely because of my close connection through my life with dancers that my music has been used in society,” Cage famously admitted when interviewed about his creative partnership with Cunningham, in 1981.



Merce Cunningham in *Changeling* (1960). Image courtesy Walker Arts Center.

The topmost gallery at the Walker ties a neat bow on this lesson. There, you find video artist Tacita Dean’s 2007 collaboration with Cunningham, placed at the end of the show as if to suggest the moral of the story.

The film features a version of John Cage’s most celebrated, most scandalously conceptual composition, *4’33’’*, originally performed in Woodstock in August of 1952 by pianist David Tudor, who simply sat at the keys not playing for the titular length of time, throwing into relief the ambient noise.

In Dean's film, the silence of 4'33'' is filled in by Cunningham's presence as he sits there, in silence.

This act, on one level, realizes the idea of Cage's work in the choreographer's appropriate medium—an artless stillness being the embodied correlate of artless silence, held together by their “common time.”



Tacita Dean, *Merce Cunningham performs STILLNESS (in three movements)* to John Cage's composition 4'33" with Trevor Carlson, New York City, 28 April 2007 (six performances; six films) (2008). Image courtesy Walker Arts Center.

But it is also the opposite. Instead of being about the absence of something, it becomes about the dancer's effortlessly commanding, deftly theatrical presence—as if to make the point that Cunningham's magnetism, and his unrelenting, late-modern commitment to the problem of bodies in space, has been the steady force that has animated so much of the boundary-busting, media-blurring experimentation of the recent past.

"Merce Cunningham: Common Time" is on view at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis through July 30, 2017, and at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, through April 30, 2017.