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## A Wish to Fly: Trisha Brown's Dancing Life\*

*Since Trisha Brown's passing in March 2017, artists, institutions and scholars have celebrated her life and achievements in art to honor her memory. This paper, which was first presented as a lecture at Barnard College (New York) in 2012, is similarly published to commemorate her pivotal role in dance. Far from the modernist idea of encoding the body within a structured language, Trisha Brown conceived choreographic cycles that generated a responsive body negotiating private and public spheres, abstraction and complexity within dance. She also applied conceptual art to choreography showing how to make a postmodern dance in relation to space, music and narration. Thus, the mind in her own body and her compositional approach go beyond her aesthetics and time, leaving a seed for future exploration together with her choreographic works. In this paper, we go through her artistic path from its beginnings in the Sixties New York scene and identify the principles that thoroughly defined it.*

*Dopo la scomparsa nel marzo 2017, artisti, studiosi e istituzioni di tutto il mondo hanno ricordato la vita e i meriti artistici di Trisha Brown. Questo articolo, che ripropone una conferenza presentata al Barnard College (New York) nel 2012, si colloca su questa scia commemorativa per onorarne ancora la memoria. Lontana dall'idea modernista di codificazione linguistica della danza, Trisha Brown ha dato vita a un corpo danzante capace di reagire al succedersi di cicli coreografici differenti, coniugando sfera pubblica e privata, astrazione e complessità. Ha applicato l'arte concettuale alla coreografia, mostrando come creare una danza postmoderna in relazione allo spazio, alla musica e alla narrazione. Il pensiero nel suo corpo di danzatrice e il suo approccio compositivo vanno, pertanto, oltre l'estetica e il periodo storico di riferimento. Rappresentano un lascito assieme alla sua opera coreografica. Ne ricostruiamo di seguito l'evolvere a partire dal contesto newyorchese dei primi anni Sessanta, identificando i principi che ne hanno informato il percorso.*

As a dancer and choreographer, Trisha Brown came of age at a time when traditional theatrical genres and the barriers between the arts were blurring. John Cage's statement

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\*First presented as a lecture at Barnard College, New York (Nov. 15th 2012), the text was very slightly revised from its original form for publication in «Danza e Ricerca. Laboratorio di studi, scritture, visioni», anno IX, numero 9, 2017. For inviting me to speak at her University and for her insightful comments, I would like to thank prof. Lynn Garafola.

that “everything is possible” found concrete realization in New York’s experimental art scene. But his statement also describes her development as a choreographer in the years that followed. Brown, in fact, belongs to the generation that contributed to breaking boundaries between disciplinary genres, while keeping an open mind during the whole of her career. On the one hand, she expanded her field of interest and investigation to embrace opera and the visual arts, while continuing to focus on dancing and choreography. On the other, she combined different means of artistic expression within her works: there is dance in her drawings and a sense of space and duration, closer to the visual and plastic arts, in her choreography. The element that joins these different approaches is the body.

In this regard, I’d like to recount a brief but telling anecdote. During a friendly exchange of personal recollections following the exhibition of her *Early Works* at the Collezione Maramotti in Reggio Emilia in 2009, Brown mentioned a fleeting visit to Sicily years before and the strong impression that the roundness of the urns in a museum had made on her and how she had tried to preserve that impression on paper, when she had returned to her hotel. While talking, she was now trying to visualize them again for me, bringing them back to life with a neat hand gesture that traced an invisible figure of eight in the air. She told me that her designer’s body held what was in her dancer’s body: the curve.

In this way Brown summarized the physicality of her art, its balance between personal experience and abstraction, while making use of a geometrical figure that theatre anthropologists have associated with the dynamics of tension and opposition in the dancer’s and actor’s body, to the S or double curve suggested by the posture of Greek statues and defined as the line of beauty by William Hogarth in the eighteenth century. I’d like to use this example, which is both intuitive and complex, to free our thought from a priori art and dance categories, so as to follow Brown’s intimate research of a poetic gesture. This did not abide by pre-determined ideas of what dance should be, but kept such daring freedom for its developments. Discarding codified movements with her initial use of improvisation, game structures, and direct functional actions, she dismembered dance tradition, working in a personal way along the lines of the Judson Dance Theater, following the mastery of Anna Halprin and, in certain respects, of Merce Cunningham.

In this paper, I will mainly focus on Trisha Brown’s early works, which are the ones she made in the 1960s and 1970s, before the creation of *Glacial Decoy* in 1979. I will then give a general outline of her later development, looking at the choreographic process as a way to access her final works and her aesthetics. In order to give a portrait of her as

an artist, I will not discuss every piece she made, but choose, instead, among the most relevant, according to the particular phase of her career I will be discussing.

A recollection of Trisha Brown's art must first take into consideration her artistic and life history in relation to the culture that nurtured her. She grew up in Oregon, the Evergreen State, near Olympic National Park and the Pacific Ocean. She thus approached the study of dance with the agility of a body prepared since childhood to deal with the natural environment. She recalls a pair of towering trees with ivy around the boughs and a firm leafy "floor" underneath. Like the other children, she would climb the trees and jump down to see if the leafy tendrils would support her.

All of her personal search as a dancer and as a choreographer seems to move between such suspension of uncertainty and the headiness of surprise. What would feel while flying?

In that forest she also learned how to challenge water and heights, discovering the unexpected leaps of a spontaneous movement, which she would later find in the practice of improvisation that she pursued beginning in the 1950s.

In 1960 Brown participated in a summer workshop held by Anna Halprin in California, where she experienced an alternative to the codified systems of movement that she had previously studied. Halprin's work was direct and stark, based on the performance of simple and functional tasks. But it was in New York that the possibility of a different kind of dance became evident to her, along with the awareness that a lifestyle different from the one she knew growing up was possible. In 1986, in an interview with Marianne Goldberg, Brown said that her «impulses were freed up in New York» and that she «chose to make a complete break from [her] family, from [her] training, from the class [she] had been.» «I didn't want their values,» she told Goldberg, «and yet I hadn't developed me. So I was no place. Yet I felt a fierce independence. I remember walking on the streets of New York with the exhilaration of knowing that I wouldn't leave. It was a clean start»<sup>1</sup>.

In New York Brown encountered an arts community that was not only daring but also in continuous social and artistic interchange. In the art critic Stanley Amos' place around the corner from Judson Church, Andy Warhol recalled, «there were always playwrights scribbling in a corner and Judson dancers rehearsing and people sewing their costumes up»<sup>2</sup>. And Washington Square was certainly in the middle of this bohemian

1. Trisha Brown, quoted in Goldberg, Marianne, *Reconstructing Trisha Brown: Dances and Performance Pieces 1960-1975*, PhD thesis, New York University, 1990, pp. 34-35.

2. Warhol, Andy - Hackett, Pat, *POPism: The Warhol Sixties*, San Diego – New York – London, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1980, p. 54.

cultural flux.

Brown continued to take dance classes. But once she got to New York, she began to improvise in makeshift spaces with friends such as Simone Forti and Dick Levine equally unsatisfied with traditional methods. Together they learned how to structure improvisation and how to depersonalize it by means of shared rules.

In a 1975 essay Brown explained how «structured improvisation» works:

If in the beginning you set a structure and decide to deal with X, Y and Z materials in a certain way, nail it down even further and say you can only walk forward, you cannot use your voice or you have to do 195 gestures before you hit the wall at the other end of the room that is an improvisation within set boundaries. That is the principle, for example, behind jazz. The musicians may improvise but they have a limitation in the structure just as improvisation in dance does<sup>3</sup>.

Brown's first performances in New York were not in dance but in happenings. In 1961 she participated in a happening by Robert Whitman, called *Mouth*, and in 1963, she appeared in *Flower*, another happening by the same artist, in which she fought against a man.

Happenings were animated by the same impulse to eliminate narrative and characterization as the Judson dancers, along with a similar emphasis on the performative moment. They were chiefly made by visual artists, such as Allan Kaprow and Klaus Oldenburg, who used them to incorporate live experience. In these performances, Brown discovered a way of setting the imagination free. Jokingly she said that, in happenings, if you wanted a forest but didn't have it, you could use broccoli, and if the stalks weren't big enough, a photograph of the forest would do.<sup>4</sup> Even though specific works did not particularly influence her personal exploration of movement, the overall approach of happenings was as liberating as the dance activities in which she was involved. The same was true of the Fluxus performances that grew out of her improvisations with Simone Forti, who was well-connected with the Fluxus scene. Brown replaced her at the 1963 Yam Festival in a piece entitled *Nuclei for Simone Forti*. On this occasion she improvised on a set of "dance instruction poems" by Jackson MacLow, who had prepared 60 cards with highly enigmatic instructions such as "seeming to be generally like clocks are" or "saying things as an engine would". He would randomly choose the card and she would improvise.

The use of instructions remained a constant in Trisha Brown's work, whether they were used during the compositional process, as a stimulus to improvisation, or in per-

3. Trisha Brown in Livet, Anne (ed.), *Contemporary Dance*, New York, Abbeville Press, 1978, p. 44.

4. Trisha Brown, quoted in *Limitations et exposition. Conversations avec Trisha Brown*, in Brunel, Lise - Delahaye, Guy - Mangolte, Babette, *Trisha Brown*, Paris, Editions Boug , 1987, p. 73.

formance. In 1976, for instance, in the piece *Solo Olos*, first conceived as a solo and afterward changed into a group dance, a dancer called out by name the other dancers and told them to reverse, spill, or branch, meaning they were either to reverse the dance phrase or abruptly add the variations that went with the words “spill” and “branch”.

*Nuclei for Simone Forti* was not Brown's only participation in Fluxus events. In 1961 Brown had taken part in structured improvisations with Simone Forti and Dick Levine (*Structured Improvisation with Simone Forti and Dick Levine*) and, two years later, with Yvonne Rainer (*Improvisation on a Chicken Coop Roof*). In 1963 she presented a three-minute solo, *Chanteuse Excentrique Americaine*, in which she fell forward from a fourth position saying “oh no”.

Along with irony and a general looseness of form, one discerns in all these pieces the coexistence of freedom and boundaries through the use of improvisation and instructions, verbal as well as written, that framed the action. This recalls the compositional ideas of George Maciunas, who founded the Fluxus movement. Discussing indeterminate compositions in a manifesto of the early 1960s, he writes:

Requires the composition to provide a kind of framework, an “automatic machine” within which or by which, nature (either in the form of an independent performer or indeterminate-chance compositional methods) can complete the art-form, effectively and independently of the artist-composer. Thus the primary contribution of a truly concrete artist consists in creating a concept or a method by which form can be created independently of him, rather than the form or structure. Like a mathematical solution such a composition contains a beauty in the method<sup>5</sup>.

Here several ideas seem to resonate from one art expression to the other. We find a combination of chance and structure and an emphasis on means and on process made visible to the observer. Thus, Trisha Brown's participation in the now legendary composition workshop that evolved into the Judson Dance Theater came at a time when the arts were ripe for change and when dance, like the other arts, would move forward by taking part in a general redefining of the relationship between art and life.

So, in 1961, Trisha Brown joined the composition workshop conducted by the musician Robert Dunn at the Merce Cunningham dance studio. Here she encountered John Cage's theories on art and the use of aleatory procedures and techniques. She joined the workshop in its second year. This was not her first encounter with his ideas. She had already heard him lecture on indeterminacy at Connecticut College in the 1950s. In this

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5. Maciunas, George, *Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art*, in Jenkins, Janet (ed.), *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, catalogue of the exhibition held in Minneapolis feb-june 1993, Minneapolis, Walker Art Center, 1993, p. 157.

lecture Cage had a stop watch and read a series of texts of different lengths, drawing out the shorter ones to a minute and rushing through the longer ones to finish in the same amount of time. Brown later said that observing this made her understand Cage's idea of the relationship between form and content, which he analyzes in *Silence*, the seminal book he published in 1961.

According to Cage, form was not unrelated to content. Artists should not simply choose a story and frame it in some kind of artistic format but let the materials and the means of their art guide their exploration. Brown once said that from Cage she «received the baton to go forward» and that the material of her dancing became «more like an object that one could play with in endless research and in new relationships»<sup>6</sup>.

This was something that Brown would explore both within the Judson and on her own. In Dunn's class and at Judson, she interacted with dancers interested in breaking away from the narrative and expressive forms of American modern dance and working side by side with visual artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Alex Hay, and Robert Morris. Performance experience erased the separation of the arts within the Judson group, as it did within other experimental groups of Manhattan's "downtown". Only the background training of the main figures of each movement and their critical stand against their former disciplines, as well as the context in which they performed, allowed for a distinction between dance, theatre, and happening.

As a matter of fact, archival documents reveal the use of different terms to describe the same events – sometimes calling them happenings, sometimes dance concerts. This means that those taking part in the performances or attending them did not necessarily see them as distinct. More specifically, Judson productions tended to emphasize knowledge of the ordinary body and present disconcerting images of dance, no longer imbued with virtuosity and technical specialization, although a certain heterogeneity was evident among its participants. I won't go into this division now, but rather relate Brown's work to a more general Judson idea, that of the "neutral body".

Brown created three works for the Judson Dance Theater. The first, *Trillium*, was a structured improvisation of very energetic movements that she danced as a solo in 1962. The second, *Lightfall*, was an improvised duet with Steve Paxton, made in 1963. *Rulegame 5*, the third, was a structured group improvisation that she had first choreographed as a student at Mills College and recreated in 1964 for a Judson concert. These works moved

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6. Brown, Trisha - Teicher, Heicher, *Danse et Dessin (un entretien)*, in Brown, Trisha, *Trisha Brown: danse, précis de liberté. Catalogue de l'exposition du 20 juillet au 27 septembre 1998, Centre de la Vieille Charité, Marseille*, Musées de Marseille, Réunion des musées nationaux, Diffusion, Marseille, Seuil, 1998, p. 14.

in the same direction she was exploring privately with the dancers she had met at Judson, but here they were shown in a context that was self-legitimizing. At “Judson”, Brown later recalled, «the performers looked at each other and the audience, [...] breathed audibly, ran out of breath, sweated, talked things over [...] behaving more like human beings, revealing what was thought of as deficiencies as well as their skills»<sup>7</sup>. This change in the dancer's presence was totally new in dance of the time and was something that would stay with her and her peers.

Brown has always acknowledged her debt to these early years of experimentation, although with the passing of time she moved away from these early experiences to find her own movement language, for which she was already searching when she crossed the Judson threshold. And yet, those years established her basic attitude and reconfirmed the idea that she could be a choreographer, not just a teacher, wife, and mother.

The need to find herself, which she had felt in coming to New York, was certainly there. Brown was never a committed feminist, but she never denied that being a woman had made a difference in her career, in becoming an artist, and in her question for economic self-sufficiency.

The works she made in the 1960s convey both a personal and an aesthetic exploration that cannot really be separated at this stage of her artistic development.

The transition to a personal stylistic approach took place in the second half of the 1960s with performances that evoked fragments of the past. This was how she would exorcise memories of childhood while also challenging fears of the present in order to mature as an artist. In *Shunk Cabbage, Salt Grass, and Waders*, created in 1967, she performed powerful movements over a soundtrack of childhood recollections of hunting parties with her father and their attendant violence. In *The Dance with the Duck's Head* (1969) she returned to the issue of violence, by making powerful movements in a costume of constricting shapes and fabrics, while a predetermined fight took place between two people in the audience. In *Yellowbelly* (1969) she danced to instructions from the spectators, who yelled at her to move when she stopped, so as to dissipate the dancer's fear of making mistakes or forgetting the steps on stage.

*Shunk Cabbage, Salt Grass, and Waders*, Trisha Brown has said, was like an exorcism of her background, in an effort to get in sync with the urban sensibility. She dunked herself in a tub full of water, then lay on the tub as if she were an oversize bird in a nest, wetting the floor as she moved around the space. By presenting a double perception of

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7. Trisha Brown in Livet, Anne (ed.), *Contemporary Dance*, cit., p. 48.

her body and her self through a voiceover recounting the experiences of hunting and the body dancing, she reproduced a duality already present in *Homemade*, choreographed in 1966. Here she danced with a projector strapped to her back that projected her image all over the space. She danced with her memory as a score, but the memories here were not told, but rather used as an intimate score.

*Floor of the Forest* was a work conceived in 1970 as a physical challenge. A related piece, choreographed in 1971 as *Rummage Sale and Floor of the Forest*, showed the same combination of aesthetic and personal research. In this unique event, the net grid that served as a floor for the dance was raised in order to organize a sale of second-hand clothes underneath: while the choreographer-interpreter put on and took off the garments supporting her in the air, she could watch the spectators trying on the old garments she was discarding as traces of her past.

In 1972 Brown talked to the critic Sally Sommer about the memories embedded in the piece:

The whole evening was a rummage sale – she said - I was getting rid of my hardware pieces. I don't do works like that any more. [...] I really knew that I was getting rid of everything. I still see people in the clothes. For them it's a piece of clothing that they liked, a bargain; for me those clothes are symbols of history<sup>8</sup>.

In these works, personal memories were never represented realistically. Instead they were “lived” or worked in the dancer’s mind as she danced, playing on the ambivalence between public and private, as well as on the unstable compromise between the dancer’s perception and the spectator’s understanding.

*Floor of the Forest* was one of the three pieces presented on April 18<sup>th</sup> 1970. It was preceded by *Man Walking Down of the Side of a Building* and followed by *Leaning Duets*, a work consisting of balancing with ropes between dancers. These works belong to the *Equipment Series* that Brown started choreographing in 1968 with *Planes* and that ended in 1971, when she created her first *Accumulation Pieces*.

In her equipment works, Brown used both indoor and outdoor spaces to generate a subjective and cultural experience of space, not limited to mere physical solidity and ordinary gesture. Among her indoor works, *Walking on the Wall*, presented at the Whitney Museum in 1971, was certainly the most outstanding. Brown conceived the series walking around Soho, the neighborhood where she lived. In this familiar environment, she looked for a partner of her creative imagination in an attempt to rediscover the potential of

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8. Sommer, Sally, *Equipment Dances: Trisha Brown*, in «The Drama Review», vol. 16, sept. 1972, n. 3, p. 140.

the dancing body that she had instinctively experienced in childhood and that now was faced with an urban environment that had slowly come to represent her new “home”. In the 1950s the beat poet Allen Ginsberg had compared Manhattan with its «robot apartments» and «invisible suburbs» to Moloch, «whose soul is electricity and banks», crying out against those who «broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven! Pavements, trees, radios, tons!»<sup>9</sup>. We don't get the same feeling of alienation in the making of the counterculture of the 1960s, though many artists were now abandoning the city to live in communes and in the countryside.

What about Trisha Brown?

When Brown first arrived in New York, she thought of filling her apartment floor with leaves, which she never did. Now she was using the urban scenery as a source of inspiration. A change had clearly occurred in her, a change consistent with that feeling of freedom she had initially experienced. Now, with her need to redefine her identity as a person and as an artist.

However, New York could still be overwhelming. In *Roof Piece*, which she created in 1971, Brown and her dancers were stationed on separate roofs and communicated to each other with simple semaphore-like gestures, while people on distant roofs watched. Nobody on the ground knew or even imagined what was happening up on the rooftops. Dancers and observers were suspended in relation to the crowded and continuous flow of the city life. Even so, she was not escaping life but rather finding a way to cope with it through her art.

In the early 1970s the Soho community was different from the one she had known in Greenwich Village in the early 1960s. New York had changed, along with the general perception of life in the city. Soho had the look of a neighborhood that was gradually becoming de-industrialized, but it was also undergoing a continuous renovation. At the same time, emerging from the social movements of the 1960s and their relative failure, was the perception that change had to be readjusted to a more individual scale: if artists could not change the world, at least they could effect change in the environment and in their own personal selves. This perception was shared by the visual artist Gordon Matta-Clark, who returned to New York in 1969 and collaborated with the 112 Workshop based at 112 Green Street, where performers, dancers, architects, and visual artists could practice and show their works. In the 1970s Matta-Clark created what he called “building

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9. Ginsberg, Allen, *Howl* (1956), in Id., *Urlo & Kaddish*, translation with original text in English, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 2010, pp. 44-46.

cuts” by removing a section of a wall in buildings about to be demolished: as the title of his 1975 work *Conical Intersect* implies, these works were framing a part of the city, while emphasizing the ambivalence between interior and exterior space. His works seemed to ask: is there an objective space out of the subjective space framed by my eyes and actions? In fact, these works, often intended to last for the time allowed before the demolition of the buildings, suggested a functionality of art linked to direct experience and short-lived perception.

Matta-Clark’s “Conical Intersect” actions can be viewed as equivalent to what Brown was doing at a time of recession, high unemployment, and growing crime. Her personal search thus coincided with the response of downtown artists to social and economic circumstances. Although she ventured alone in the dance field, she belonged to a community that was building its own sense of personal and shared space.

She thus continued to pursue the direction begun at Judson but readapted now to changed artistic circumstances. In Dunn’s class she had learned to think of dance in terms of ideas, and she was now pursuing this approach, following the same line as conceptual artists. She was interested not only in constructing dance, but also in “constructing the environment” and building a particular relationship to the audience. In fact, she described *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* as a «natural activity under the stress of an unnatural setting». It was a task with a «clear order. You start at the top, walk straight down, stop at the bottom»<sup>10</sup>. Like a machine, the body had to act or react to an external element.

«The structure, the set-up, made the choices»<sup>11</sup>, she wrote in the mid-1970s, emphasizing the connection between her recent work and her early structured improvisations. *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* explored gravity more as a scientist would, by measuring it through the body and finding the responses to it in a direct and efficient way. This was an anti-illusionistic approach that recalled her appreciation of the dancers’ presence at Judson Dance Theater: here, as in *Leaning Duets*, the audience could see how much time it took for the weight to move the body to stand, lean, or advance until the task was completed.

This same approach returned when Brown began working with pure movement through accumulative structures in 1972. At the same time, she continued making works called “Structured Pieces,” which are only a few minutes long and convey a single, simple

10. Trisha Brown in Livet, Anne (ed.), *Contemporary Dance*, cit., p. 51.

11. Trisha Brown, in Stephano, Effie, *Moving Structures*, in «Art and Artists», January 1974, p. 17.

image. *The Leaning Duets* are structured pieces, for instance. And yet, the accumulation pieces are certainly the most appealing works of this period. They follow a simple rule of de-personalizing and objectifying the dance. The accumulation process is an additive one: the dancers perform movements 1, then 1 and 2, then 1, 2, and 3, and so forth, until the dance ends. The first version of the dance was a solo, *Accumulation*, lasting 4 minutes. Then, Brown created a group version, *Primary Accumulation*, which was presented in different settings. In both the solo and group accumulations the dance is always stationary and almost sculptural: the dancer explores the possibilities of the body, while passing through arm, leg, and torso alignments. The approach emerged from Brown's study of body kinetics with Elaine Summers and from her overall conception of choreography now approached in an almost mathematical way, through addition. When danced on the floor, the piece also allows the body to discover what it can do when the legs are free of weight, extending the exploration further.

As we have seen, the accumulation process is clearly recognizable. It is even clearer in a 1973 version, in which Brown described the dance as she performed it, thus using a process of "double exposure". This version is called *Accumulation plus Talking* and comes between the 1971 *Accumulation* and another solo, made in 1978, called *Accumulation with Talking Plus Watermotor*.

*Watermotor*, also made in 1978, reveals a different attitude toward movement, one that Brown had considered exploring at the start of the accumulation series but then put aside. This new approach consisted of a free exploration of the body's capacities within an imaginary sphere around the body that can be compared to Rudolf Laban's kinesphere. Brown said she considered it her «duty to fill every portion of the interior of that sphere with randomly explosive parts of [her] anatomy» in a way that was unpredictable to herself, though not without control<sup>12</sup>. This use of the body was clearly related to her practice of improvisation; it was personal and would surface in her solos, but it was not a type of movement she could really pass on to her dancers.

*Accumulation with Talking Plus Watermotor* seems to combine all these elements, while striking a continuous balance between freedom and control in the moment. The most unpredictable part of the piece is *Watermotor*, which looks as if it were improvised but was instead completely choreographed. Compositionally, it uses changes in direction, speed, and timing. In an interview with Yvonne Rainer, Brown mentioned her efforts to deflect the spectator's focus by using asymmetrical body movements (for instance,

12. Brown, Trisha, *Three Pieces*, in «The Drama Review», vol. 19, marzo 1975, n. 1, p. 28.

moving the body almost totally in one direction, then balancing it with an arm or a leg in another) or by “cancel[ing]” a thrust generating several possibilities within the body, creating a balance between order and chaos.

There are other works of this period that exemplify this search such as *Line up*, a group work, in which several of her compositional concerns become clear. Before continuing this overview, I would like to pause for a moment to consider the elements that, in different ways, seem already to be consistent in her work:

1. There is a clear idea, from which the choreography results (even improvisation is set within the boundaries of that idea);
2. Movement is partially derived from an external stimulus, whether the environment or the compositional method;
3. There is always a balance between chaos and order, particularly by balancing a structure with multiple variations;
4. There is an unusual relationship to space;
5. The dance reveals its process.

This last element seems to diminish in Brown’s later work, whereas the other elements recur in different ways. In particular, the shift from one compositional approach to another, as in the passage from the equipment to the accumulation pieces, changed the dances completely, without betraying her creative principles.

In 2002, at a time when her choreographic life had reached full maturity after more than forty years of activity, Brown discussed her method, explaining that in making dances she worked in cycles, that each cycle lasted for two or three years, and that this had been her habit from Judson on. She went on to differentiate the “Equipment Pieces” from what she called her “Mathematic” series, based on accumulation of gestures, deaccumulation, and reaccumulation. Then she started working with an improvisational system of capturing and repeating what she had improvised with a group of people: this she called “Unstable Molecular Structure,” with *Set and Reset* (1983) being the most important example of this. In the 1980s Brown moved on to the “Valiant cycle,” in which she added a different kind of physicality to her natural way of moving, using harsh, sharp-edged movements, while working with duets and trios and intersecting these units. Then, since these cycles were all very hard on the dancers, she complied with their request to do something simpler and developed the “Back to Zero” cycle, creating choreographies more spontaneously and without the complex coordination of the previous cycles.

After choreographing dances for the production of *Carmen* directed by Lina Wertmüller in 1986, Brown focused on musical structures and created works to Bach, Webern, and Monteverdi, before going on to direct opera<sup>13</sup>. In 1998 she directed *Orfeo* at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Bruxelles.

This overview reveals how her development as a choreographer was a continuous work in progress, in which her natural physical qualities were refined in a recognizable language and in an attitude that remained the same while the methods changed. She distanced herself from the Judson, as her contribution to opera makes clear, but she maintained Judson's revolutionary conception of dance in comparison to the past, that is, a dance that does not arise from a codified technique but is a response to choreographic instructions. *The body is therefore a responsive body in a process that has inverted its usual way of working in dance.*

Her creative development may have been continuous, but her recognition as an artist had its ups and downs. She was first admired by large audiences outside the United States, then at home. In a 1985 interview with Camille Hardy, Brown recalled the difficulty of «transfer[ring] the principles of good work and hard work, so easily understood in the visual art world, to the performance arena». The «most difficult thing about doing something as extraordinary as *Walking Down the Side of a Building* (1970)», she added, «was that [it] did not belong to anyone. No one could buy [her] work in the art world, and the dance world said it wasn't dance»<sup>14</sup>.

The shift to choreographing for the proscenium stage was thus particularly significant as it revealed how her aesthetic could be adapted and extended to fields she had previously rejected (such as music and later text) and to a wider public, while remaining faithful to her artistic identity as an abstract experimental artist.

*Glacial Decoy* (1979), her first work for the proscenium stage, made her immediately aware that there were new contexts to be taken into account, both because the space was different and because the audience had different expectations. Her response was to make her movement more elusive, polykinesthetic, and polyrhythmic, and to collaborate with other artists. Robert Rauschenberg designed the costumes and scenery for *Glacial Decoy*, yet her use of the stage remained just as unorthodox as her “use” of the side of a building before. She considered it just as normal to use the edge of the stage as its center. One

13. Trisha Brown, in Morgenroth, Joyce (ed.), *Speaking of Dance. Twelve Contemporary Choreographers on Their Craft*, New York – London, Routledge, 2004, pp. 56-69.

14. Trisha Brown, quoted in Hardy, Camille, *Trisha Brown. Pushing Post-Modern Art into the Orbit*, in «Dance Magazine», march 1985, p. 65.

could even say that her first dance for a proscenium stage was a dance about the stage frame, since she had the dancers move along the edges as if attracted by magnets beyond the wings. As Craig Owens wrote in a 1981 article, *The Pro-scenic Event*:

By incorporating the proscenium in this way, Brown has successfully subverted its pictorializing function – its tendency to present what it frames as integral, complete, self-sufficient, but only by delimiting, restricting, confining it. Because the contours of the dance do not appear to coincide with those imposed by the proscenium or, rather, because the frame defines the dance only by truncating it, Brown has exposed the limitation implicit in any act of framing<sup>15</sup>.

Moreover, the collaboration between scenery and dance, as later the collaboration of dance with music and text, is not aimed at a fusion or at semantic coherence, as in the modern dance tradition. Rather, as in the Cunningham tradition, each element works on parallel lines and is only combined in the observer's eye. This is a typical postmodern approach, which is based not on the purity of each medium but on equivalent logical operations and structures. So, in *Glacial Decoy*, the continuous transition and diversion were the guiding principles that both Brown and Rauschenberg elaborated in their own field. It is useful to quote Brown herself in this regard:

Bob (Rauschenberg) titled the dance *Glacial Decoy*, and it was relevant to the dance. The decoy idea is of deflection. It's something I work with in my dancing. I make moves that deflect your eyes all the time. Here it was amplified. There were slides to deflect from the dance, as well as multiple imagery to keep you moving all the time<sup>16</sup>.

In the end, the outcome is a layered dramaturgy, in which every layer reverberates with the other. In fact, later Brown works moved toward a higher stylistic essentialness, if compared to her early ones, without denying the layering both of meaning (between private and public perception) and of visual, sound and kinesthetic messages, amplified by the addition of music and narration in her later opera work. As her work expanded to include music, text, and story, it did not lose its original aesthetic impulse and human complexity. As she explained – and on this note I would like to end this memento of her life:

My sensibility, my gaze on human beings, that extends to the world community, is evident in my work. It's in my vocabulary, and in the relationship between the dancers and in the resolution of chaos within a phrase. I think of the game between disgregation, disillusion, cancellation, fragmentation and of their resolution as a way to negotiate peace<sup>17</sup>.

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15. Owens, Craig, *The Pro-Scenic Event*, in «Art in America», dec. 1981, p. 128.

16. Trisha Brown, in Sears, David, *A Trisha Brown-Robert Rauschenberg Collage*, in «Ballet Review», vol. 10, n. 3, Fall 1982, pp. 49-50.

17. Trisha Brown in Pratl, Carol, *Trisha Brown*, in «Dance Europe», june-july 1997, p. 44.