

## The power of inner poetics

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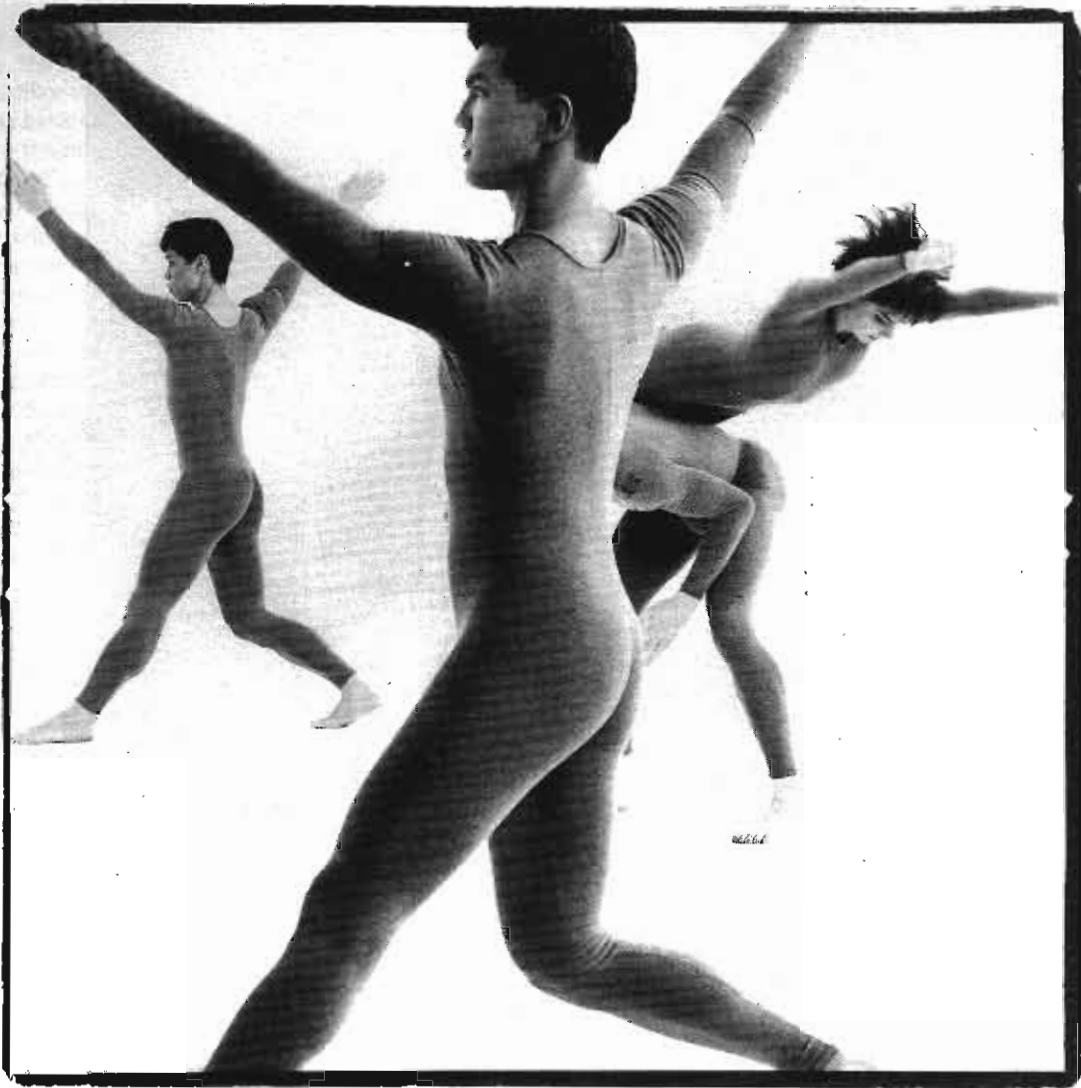
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**THE**  
**POWER**  
**OF INNER**  
**POETICS**

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# The Power of Inner Poetics

Isabelle Ginot on recent aesthetic transformations  
in the work of Trisha Brown



Trisha Brown in 'If you couldn't see me' (photograph by Joanne Savio)

Trisha Brown not only set the tempi of her dance as it has developed over decades of work independent of music against the metrical (and particularly authoritarian) tempi of Bach; she has also inadvertently given us a history lesson in the relationship between music and dance in which until now she has been prominent only in her absence.

The second part of the new cycle, 'Twelve Ton Rose' premiered at the retrospective at Brooklyn Academy of Music, continues this musical dialogue, this time with Anton Webern. The fact that the work was then taken to the Brussels opera house (Théâtre de la Monnaie) and then to the Arsenal in Metz (acting as co-producer and providing a chamber orchestra for both performances) should serve to make plain how much this project has been conceived as a challenge to the music as much as to the dance. From Bach to Webern, from the first musical experiences to its total pervasion of the experience, from one century to another, these two complex, intellectually rich works shed an illuminating light on each other.

First of all there's the aesthetic challenge – Trisha Brown speaks of an aesthetic dialogue with Bach; there are the compositional experiments – what is a 'choreographic theme,' actually, when multiple harmony and counterpoint enter a fugue of theme and countertheme ...?; finally there's the analysis of the score. However, this dialogue between Brown and Bach may have worked out precisely, the result constitutes a fundamental

shift in her approach: a subdivision of time occurs. Thus in 'M.O.' one comes across a segmented structuring of the movements: the incessant wavelike and spiral flow that is Trisha Brown's signature, this possessed unattachedness which seems to pursue no fixed aim at all, neither within the body nor the space nor in time – is abruptly confronted with fragmentariness. It emerges initially in the bodies whose limbs take on an unfamiliar autonomy in relation to the body's centre. To do justice to the compositional demands, the handicaps and game rules that the choreographer has imposed upon herself, certain movement sequences (or themes?) are apportioned to certain parts of the body. It was thus necessary to part company with the notion of 'the body as a whole' and to treat it as an object made up of components (which could then be dismantled). In the light of these detached and relatively unequivocal signifiers – especially the leg positions and port de bras – and particularly, also, in the light of a new centredness and stability in the Brownian visualisation of the body, one is led to believe that what we have here is an unexpected return to academic movement; would it not be fitting to see a dialogue with classical music as naturally academic? 'M.O.' demands a curiously more complex reading than other works and will undoubtedly be easier to understand when viewed from the second part of the cycle.

The provisional segmentation of the body seems to me the end result of a paradox that has

been at work in Trisha Brown's oeuvre for years: the dialogue between flow and caesura, between fusion and division. This paradox first became apparent in the movement, most strongly since 'Newark' (1987), where Brown's liquifacted and ungraspable dance figures rub up against alien, sketchy, restrained bodies at intersections of both time and space. The choreographer is questioning, more than the 'difference of the sexes', the differences between the bodies themselves: the weight, mass and strength of the masculine force themselves into the movement flow where they draw the first demarcation line. This boundary, with which movement, space and time is cut off (and not so much the male or female role descriptions: these two different qualities of movement are circulated equally among men and women dancers) throws the question of differences onto the fundamental level of gesture and not, repeat not, initially onto the level of discourse. These two forms of being present, flow and mass, however, did not yet in 'Newark,' call into question the homogeneity of the body, a body "that is capable of preserving its form, that rests on its own two feet. The inorganic body. The body as object." (2) Brown was here presenting an encounter between the flow of time, the dizzying utopia of the infinite, and the measurable duration of a sequentially-organised time sequence. In 'M.O.' dance finds itself confronted with the virtuosity of dismemberment: what is the beat of classical music but a system of basic divisions of tone and rhy-

them that can be infinitely reassembled? The time signature imposes a time structure that is otherwise possessed by gesture. The choreography borrows from the music the artifice of composing the flow of movement on the basis of distinct units. In this light one must see the ongoing dialogue which holds the 'spatial flood' constructed by the group with its angularity, its leaps and interruptions that segment each individual body: bodies parcelled out by the music and hurled into another temporality, namely that of speech – the body as subject. And now a narrative gradually emerges that in the grandiose, monumental edifice of 'M.O.' will persist as a moment of unforgettable intimacy: Diane Madden lost and forlorn in the midst of an implacable mechanically-pacing group. This moment, which speaks of the predicament of a choreographer adrift in an unknown musical universe, deals concurrently with another story of time: Diane Madden, Brown's companion since the heroic seventies, is the only member of the company to have lived through all the phases of Brown's œuvre; her history as an interpreter is indivisible from the history of the movement flow and thoughts of the global body that have accompanied Trisha Brown on her dance odyssey. Is there a *cæsura* here too, a radical break between two epochs? Has this perfectly-equipped dancing body in the temporality of the infinite been led astray by classical metricality to be driven awry by the bar lines cutting across her own flow in a hall of mirrors?

Where 'M.O.' marked a breaking away in 1995 'Twelve Ton Rose' signifies a reintegration in the time circle, as a reconciliation of the differing timescales of the body and the space. The choreography bends to the divisions within the material of a series of shorter pieces by Webern. Nevertheless each sequence unfolds the entire spectrum of Trisha Brown's movement history: with wavelike motions and flowing currents, with falling and daring surges, with powerful placement, the inexhaustible variety of movement quality and form is laid out while the overall composition, the alternation between ensemble sections and solo/duet, the dynamism of the apportionment of space never lets up.

It's clear that Brown feels bound to Webern with a comradesly intimacy – to such an extent that the feeling grows that the music was composed to the dance in the way both of them show the same instinct in the phrasing for the flow, the volume, and the movement. "Anton Webern concerned himself with the resolution of a paradox between the most extreme stringencies of counterpoint and the fundamentals of serial music. Taking up Schönberg's mantle he created a tension between genuine western musical forms and research mainly spurred by reference to a tonic vocabulary or a specified style. In Webern's œuvre one encounters primarily a forceful desire to run through an unbroken movement that leads from the essence to the full existence of a piece of music." (3) One could find no better expression of this attachment,

this paradoxical anchoring in history, this dynamic dialogue of the organic and the formal. In 'Twelve Ton Rose,' named after the Schönberg-Webern twelve-tone system, the bodies transcend time – in its duration but also in its density. They have reconstructed it in the integration of two temporal forms and two historicisms, that of Trisha Brown's dance and of dance itself. 'Twelve Ton Rose' tells of just this "unbroken movement from essence to existence" ... of dance. The joy is articulated in the structure, and the thought in the pleasure of it all. □

(1) From 'Un mystère concret', Bulletin du CNDC, January 1990.

(2) *ibid.*

(3) Jean-Yves Bosscur, Encyclopédie Universelle.

Trisha Brown Company in 'Twelve Ton Rose' (photograph by Tom Brazil)

