HAL
archives-ouvertes.fr

The Cunningham costume: the unitard in-between sculpture and painting

Julie Perrin

▶ **To cite this version:**

Julie Perrin. The Cunningham costume: the unitard in-between sculpture and painting. 2019. hal-02293712

HAL Id: hal-02293712

https://hal-univ-paris8.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-02293712

Submitted on 31 Oct 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

THE CUNNINGHAM COSTUME: THE UNITARD IN-BETWEEN SCULPTURE AND PAINTING

Julie PERRIN

Translated by Jacqueline Cousineau from: Julie Perrin, « Le costume Cunningham : l'académique pris entre sculpture et peinture », *Repères. Cahier de danse*, « Costumes de danse », Biennale nationale de danse du Val-de-Marne, n° 27, avril 2011, p. 22-25.

THE CUNNINGHAM COSTUME : THE UNITARD IN-BETWEEN SCULPTURE AND PAINTING

Julie PERRIN

Translated by Jacqueline Cousineau from: Julie Perrin, « Le costume Cunningham : l'académique pris entre sculpture et peinture », *Repères. Cahier de danse*, « Costumes de danse », Biennale nationale de danse du Val-de-Marne, n° 27, avril 2011, p. 22-25.

"Merce has never cared very much about costumes (...). Rarely did the dance steps get made with any thought about what the costumes might be. Anyone designing costumes for Merce had to work within very strict limitations; the nearly inflexible rule was: body unencumbered, body visible."[1] Carolyn Brown, dancer for Cunningham from 1952 to 72, underlines here a fundamental element of the choreographer's esthetic: his pieces rest first of all on physical exploration and his number one concern is to make the moving body visible. However, what does it mean to make the body visible? If all the dynamic, visual, plastic, and sound elements of a choreographic work align to facilitate the apparition of the dancing subject, and if Cunningham had particularly oriented his research towards the invention of a technique leading to clarity of gesture, what role does the costume have to play in that construction? Is it so negligible that Cunningham did not care, as Carolyn Brown suggests?

There is always one piece among the many created by Cunningham to contradict all affirmations concerning it. Because no dogmatism underlies his work, all synthesis of said work is set for failure. Therefore, the successive list of costume designers – Remy Charlip, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Mark Lancaster, Dove Bradshaw, William Anastasi, Susanne Gallo[2] - did not seem to be held to the strict limits defined by the aforementioned rules. Otherwise said, there are several ways to respond to the quest for visibility.

One of them, and the most persistent throughout the years of Cunningham's creations, is without a doubt the tights and leotard that would soon become the privileged "stage uniform."[3] This costume showed

[1] C. Brown, *Chance and circumstance. Twenty years with Cage and Cunningham*, New York, Knopf, 2007, p. 147.
[2] To name only the principal ones that were also, with the exception of Charlip and Gallo, directors or artistic advisers for the company: Rauschenberg from 1954 to 64, Johns from 1967 to 80, Lancaster from 1980 to 84, Bradshaw from 1984 to 91, Anastasi from 1984 to 90. Their activity as costume designers and scenographers are not limited to these dates.
[3] C. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 146-147.

clarity of lines. Like a second skin, it operated as a sort of extreme exposure, as Valda Setterfield emphasized when she described it as "honest, naked, [and] unadorned."[4] There was at first the tights and leotard (that the English language has so named to pay homage to the gymnast Jules Leotard), then later in the seventies the version of this in one piece: the unitard, encasing the body. Over the years, the unitard hugged the body's form in a progressively more precise manner thanks to textile inventions that provided more elasticity: in elasticated wool or cotton with a discrete belt or a strip of elastic to highlight the waist, like we see in the films of the pieces in the sixties. Later they used nylon, but especially elastane (more commonly known as Lycra or spandex). Tights or body suit, generic terms to describe these clothes that mold to the body, are dominate and characteristic of the costume on the Cunningham stage, confirming the shift in the 20th century of undergarments becoming work clothes, and work clothes finding their way on stage. In effect, the unitard, now emblematic of dance, was rarely worn onstage before the 1950s without ornament… with the notorious exception of the unseemly Faun of Nijinski.

Visibility and remodeling the body

"For the women," continued Carolyn Brown, "Merce wanted something as classical as the short classical ballet tutu, which he claimed was ideal for revealing the whole body, yet still covering that troublesome area – the female derrière. He never found a consistently satisfactory solution to that problem, although both Remy [Charlip] and Bob [Rauschenberg] tried. Eventually, I think Merce gave up seeing it as a problem. In any case, clothed so often in unisex outfits, we began to exercise and diet and dance away our 'unsightly' bottoms."[5] Otherwise said, the leotard reveals the body, but in return demands that the body remodels itself – aiming to unify under the fabric. To Cunningham, it has less to do with revealing the personality of the dancer than showing form and cut outs in space. In other words, the point is to show clearly drawn figures without trouble or affect. The searched for visibility concerns more the movement in its singularity than the body in its particularities. Nevertheless, this desire did not lead to the abstract forms that Alwin Nikolais played with at the same moment in the 1950s, camouflaging dancers behind costumes and sophisticated accessories – extensions, prosthetics, masks, headdresses . . . With Cunningham, the dancer is never abstract[6] and the costume never takes away one's human appearance. The unitard allows for a sort of surface neutrality. Most often smooth (except when it is cut up and ripped by Jasper Johns for *Rainforest*, 1968), it keeps the eye from useless details and does not divert from the movement.

The adherence of the costume to the body favors the legibility of several characteristics of the dance. First of all, the relationship to the clarity of line and positions: the trajectories of gesture seem to cut the space with sharpness, affirming curved and angular lines marked out by the spinal column and limbs. The challenge defined by the choreographer is going from one position to the other preserving clarity without

[4] In Merce Cunningham Dance Company, *Mondays with Merce : Keeping it real with Valda Setterfield*, episode 011, 2010, www.merce.org

[5] C. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

[6] "In this sense I do not understand how a human can do something that is abstract. Everything a human does is expressive in some way of that human.", in "Excerpts from lecture-demonstration given at Ann Halprin's dance deck (13 July 1957), in Vaughan David, *Merce Cunningham. Fifty Years*, Aperture, 1997, p. 100.

neglecting rhythm and energy.[7] In addition, it is important that the costume does not blur anything – there should be no folds in the fabric or excess information. The movement should be bounded by the dancing figure. The impact of the gesture should not be followed by a train of fabric. Similarly, a ponytail or swaying braided hair was banned until *Crises* in 1960.[8] All this because the choreographer insists on the serenity of his dance, on an immobility that is already movement. The unitard allows one to see the vibrations in the immobility of a body searching for tranquil balance.

Variations on the unitard

In reality, the leotard is not exactly unisex in Cunningham's universe. We note that most often the women wear their leotard over their tights, showing the V-line of the groin area, whereas the men's tights, placed over their tunic, highlight their waist. Moreover, the masculine tunic is often decorated with a collar; this is almost always the case with Cunningham who likes to distinguish himself from among the dancers (he wears a tunic like this starting in 1953 in *Untitled solo* and we see it again in 1991 for *Loosestrife*). Question of detail? Yes. When we are confined to the unitard, the margin for variation is subtle: the neckline, the cut at the hip, the length of sleeves and pants length, material... The unitard cuts out the body, leaving the feet and hands bare (except for *Beach Birds*, 1991, where the hands are in the same black stripe that covers the shoulder girdle and arms, outlining the wings of those white birds). The head is uncovered with the exception of *Changeling* (1956) and *Winterbranch* (1964) where Cunningham wears a delicate cap that outlines his cranium with the exception of his exposed ears that keep the fabric in place. We should also not forget the wild white tulle headdresses conceived by Rauschenberg for the white ballet *Nocturnes* (1956).

It is principally with the unitard's color that the costume creators are able to surpass themselves. They quickly become experts in dyeing. Rauschenberg played with this during a performance of *Story* (1963) at Sadler's Wells in London, where, assisted by Alex Hay, he successively plunged white linen in vats of bright colors before hanging them on a line upstage in the background. We also have the image in our memory of those uniform unitards in electric colors: blue, violet, orange, yellow, green... or the metallic ones in *Fluid canvas* (2002), or the phosphorescent gray ones of *Canfield* (1969) conceived by Jasper Johns. Johns celebrated the colors of the prism in *Second Hand* (1970) – the moment of the bow allowed one to see the degradation of color that flowed from one costume to the other. The costume designers, who were also scenographers and in the case of Rauschenberg, lighting designers (starting in 1961), were painters before everything else. Independent artists, it is not surprising that they imprinted their style on the costumes, borrowing sometimes other methods than the unitard to make the movement visible.

[7] See for example M. Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance. Interview with Jacqueline Lesschaeve*, M. Boyars, 1985, p. 123 and following.
[8] With the exception of *Banjo* in 1953 and *Collage III* in 1958.

Avoiding the unitard: the costume as assemblage and referent

The costume is like the decor and music: a form of autonomy between collaborators established on the basis of stated or tacit rules and a shared esthetic. “Usually our costumes were designed and constructed after the choreography was completed (or almost) [...]. We never rehearsed in them unless the lighting designer requested it.”[9] If the unitard persisted with successive costume designers, it also left space for other get-ups, whether the creators departed from the “nearly inflexible rule,” or that Cunningham himself desired it, according to a more classical mode of collaboration. There are tracksuits and sneakers protecting the body from violent falls in *Winterbranch* (1964), long strands of elastic strips binding the limbs and torso of dancers in sweat suits in *Signals* (1970), and especially the costumes that serve as the reference themselves for the dance – not to mention for the whole of performance history in vaudeville and modern dance – like in *Antic Meet* (1958). Cunningham describes the scenario: “I have chair strapped on back, which is like a large mosquito that won’t go away [...], this is the sweater act with four sleeves, and 4 girls like bacchantes and lamenting in long dresses, maybe transparent with the tights embroidered in large leaves.”[10] Rauschenberg would overlook the leaves but the exaggerated parachute canvas dresses were worthy of a Balenciaga creation.[11] The Bacchants, in a parody of Martha Graham, would menacingly advance towards Cunningham imprisoned in his sweater of four sleeves and no head, designed and knitted (in part) by himself with the help of Valda Setterfield and several members of the company.[12]

The most extravagant, facetious, and sometimes everyday (often bargained for at flea markets) costumes own therefore just as much to the choreographer as to the findings of the costume designers. Charlip, from 1951 to 57, adapting to the company’s budget,[13] drew from second-hand clothing, constructing improbable concoctions that would highlight the sculptural work of the costume. This can be seen in *Galaxy* (1956): red buttons are sewn onto the stomach area of a leotard, sleeves of Indian embroidery are encrusted with mirrors, the arms and bust are covered in elastic mesh tights with blue feathers . . .

Making visible?

It was with Rauschenberg, artistic director from 1954 to 64,[14] that two contrasting tendencies seem to appear. On one hand, these hybrid get-ups that reveal the art of the *Combines* that the sculptor was developing during the same period: an assemblage of diverse elements taken from daily life and mixed with paintings. We have some magnificent examples in *Story* where the dancers draw from a big bag of costumes when it suits them or in *Travelogue* (1977) where a garland of tin cans is attached to the legs of a dancer. The tranquility of the dancer crossing the space therefore appears to be the antithesis to these extravagant costumes.

[9] Carolyn Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 147
[10] In David Vaughan, *op. cit.*, p. 105
[11] According to Carolyn Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 215
[12] Cunningham had already knitted the costume for his solo *Lavish Escapade* (1956): a knit bodysuit with large stripes and a woolen headband: a seventies look before its time.
[13] In this respect, the unitard reconciles economic savings, uncomplicated transport, and easy upkeep.
[14] After his departure from the company in 1964, he came back for three creations in 1977, 2000, and 2007.

On the other hand, the logic of painting can in some cases prevail over that of sculpture. This line of reasoning opens up the relationship between the figure and the background: if the body can detach itself from the background by contrasting color and light, insisting on the cutout of a form (*Pictures*, 1984, or *Beach Birds*), then fusion with the painted backdrop, like Rauschenberg explores, is also possible. The unitard is therefore imprinted on the same way as the backdrop. This process was in fact begun by Charlip, by making the costumes for *Minutiae* (1954) in the image of the set, the first directed by Rauschenberg.[15] It was with *Summerspace* (1958) that this principle was solidified: the pointillism overruns the scenic backdrop as well as the costumes. In this way, the figure plays with appearing and disappearing and the movement is solely responsible for its visibility. Also, in *Interscape* (2000), Rauschenberg's serigraphy printed in shades of black and white on a transparent curtain downstage finds itself in color on the backdrop as well as on the dancers' costumes. It is a game between flat and deep, figure and background. The subsequent costume-scenography designers would sometimes[16] reapply this motif of costume and backdrop, but more timidly, playing less with the risk of the figure's disappearance.

We perhaps have to wait until *Scenario* (1997) to see the dance play again with the danger of the dancing figure's disappearance. This piece is the only collaboration of Cunningham's with haute-couture.[17] Rei Kawakubo (of the label Comme des Garçons) works with protuberance, deforming the silhouette. The dance therefore has to compose with a sculpture that is directly against the body and distorts without fail the outline of gesture by its clear bulging contours. The swelling that the clothing provides leads to the destructuration of the usual Cunningham figure precisely during a period when his gestural style has become recognizable. The costume provides another way to challenge audiences now familiar with the technique that previously had disturbed the habitual spatial body organizations and coordination.

Translated by Jacqueline Cousineau
This text was commissioned by the revue *Repères. Cahier de danse*, published by the Centre de Développement Chorégraphique du Val-de-Marne, in volume 27 (April 2011). It was translated thanks to support from université Paris 8 Saint-Denis.

Julie PERRIN

MUSIDANSE (E.A. 1572)
Équipe « Danse, geste et corporéité »
Université Paris 8 Saint-Denis

To quote from this article : Julie Perrin, « The Cunningham costume: the unitard in-between sculpture and painting ». [On line], Paris 8 Danse. www.danse.univ-paris8.fr, 2019 [2011]. Translated by Jacqueline Cousineau from: Julie Perrin, « Le costume Cunningham : l'académique pris entre sculpture et peinture », *Repères. Cahier de danse*, « Costumes de danse », Biennale nationale de danse du Val-de-Marne, n° 27, avril 2011, p. 22-25.

[15] It was not a backdrop, but one of Rauschenberg's first free-standing "Combines" paintings comprised of vertical panels.

[16] Mark Lancaster for *Neighbors* (1991), Susanne Gallo for *Windows* (1995), for example.

[17] He however liked to recall Morton Feldman's words, humorously summarizing how collaboration worked in the company : "Suppose your daughter's getting married, and suppose I tell you her wedding dress won't be ready until the morning of the wedding but that it's by [Christian] Dior... " in Merce Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 97