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► **To cite this version:**

Julie Perrin. Choreography as seen through the lens of photography. Time in composition: Rainer, Paxton and Charmatz. 2019. hal-02293853

HAL Id: hal-02293853

<https://univ-paris8.hal.science/hal-02293853>

Submitted on 29 Oct 2019

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Translated by Patrica Chen from: « Le chorégraphique traversé par la photographie. A propos du temps dans la composition: Rainer, Paxton et Charmatz », *Ligeia*, dossier « Photographie et danse », Debat Michelle (dir.), n°113-114-115-116, Paris, éd. Ligeia, janvier-juin 2012, p. 74-83.

CHOREOGRAPHY AS SEEN THROUGH THE LENS OF PHOTOGRAPHY TIME IN COMPOSITION: RAINER, PAXTON AND CHARMATZ

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In this age of mechanical reproduction, live dance performance and photography have developed increasingly rich and diversified relationships with one another. Our goal here is not to review the long history of connections between photography and dance – a history founded for the most part on the search for a way to capture movement – a quest which has existed throughout the history of photography, beyond its relationship with dance, ever since Muybridge and Marey’s famous chronophotography broke animal and human movement down into a sequence of still frames. What the present article proposes is rather to start from the field of dance and to examine the influence of developments in the field of photography on the aesthetics of modern or contemporary dance. The dance historian, Laurence Louppe hypothesized, in a landmark article, that reality is permanently pervaded by a body, itself caught up in the construction of “images that reproduce its movement *ad infinitum*.” The body is incessantly involved in a back-and-forth with its representational doubles, in a sort of “contamination of the body by mode of iconographic representation.”¹ Laurence Louppe brings our attention to one of the modalities for construction of corporality and dance movement. From a slightly different angle, we will question another aspect of the influence that photography has had

¹ Laurence Louppe, « Le Corps visible. La Photographie comme source iconographique de l’histoire de la danse moderne et contemporaine. Supports, genres, usages », in : *L’Histoire de la danse, repères dans le cadre du diplôme d’Etat*, Centre national de la danse, « Cahiers de la pédagogie », 2001, p. 48 and 49.

on dance: that is, on the way that a reference to photography slips into the development of choreography. In other words, how does the photographic model intrude on the conception of composition? Hence, we follow the lead of Michelle Debat, photography researcher, who asks the question: "Where and how does a certain thinking about dance intersect with the same conceptual questions in photography, such as body and medium, instant and moment, image and way of seeing, space and time?"²

Amongst the different uses of photography for and by dance, what it is important to unravel each time is as much the (strategy of) capturing the body in motion through photography, as the way in which dance itself understands photography. The way in which it appropriates it, integrates it into its processes or else uses it for a specific outcome³ (artistic, documentary), but also very simply the way in which the dancers or choreographers conceive of it, grasp it. What do they mean by "photography?" What does the term "photography" cover in their discussions and what status do they give it in their choreographic practices? We shall see that what is involved is just as much the image (a concrete photographic image, the medium or subject of creation), as an idea about photography. The issue here is thus more like what Rosalind Krauss calls "the photographic"⁴ that is to say, photography as a theoretical subject, from which a new horizon of interrogation (aesthetic, historical, semiotic...) opens up.

When applied to the field of dance composition, "photography" thus becomes a pretext for a reflection on time. Indeed, the intrusion of photography and the photographic into the field of choreography results, in particular, in an investigation on the temporality of movement and its relationship to fluidity. Although photography is often thought of as freezing a movement, the instant a pose is suddenly stopped in time, it can also become a metaphor or model for exploring flow. Let us not forget that this term refers, according to Laban, to the quality of movement propagation in the body with, on the one hand, a flow free of muscular tension and on the other, a controlled or bound flow, conducive to the interruption of movement, to spurts. The photographic medium is a way to reflect on the nature of fluidity in dance: how is continuity, the progression of movement organized? These thoughts about photographic temporality need to be refined. But first, let us remark that what is brought to mind is, above all, the idea of instantaneity, of a flash.

The intrusion of the photographic element on dance also surely has to do with all the ways to stop movement. Long poses which make one aware of time passing are more about what will be called *tableaux vivants*. This residue of a practice going back to the 18th century combining theatre and painting creates an interruption that lasts over time. It is abundantly practiced in contemporary dance, as in Ivana Müller's *While we were holding it together* (2006) which immobilizes the dancers in tableaux that subsequent narratives reinterpret; or Herman Diephuis' *D'après J. C.* (2004), which is openly inspired by religious paintings of the Renaissance. When Laure Bonicel's dancers freeze in successive postures in *N°11: le Bleu est à la mode cette année* (2004), we are also reminded of *tableaux vivants* (monochromatic paintings), even though she is explicitly referring to commercial fashion photography. It's just that the history of iconography

² Michelle Debat, *L'impossible image. Photographie – Danse – Chorégraphie*, La lettre volée, « essais », 2009, p. 15.

³ Laurence Louppe began this reflection on photography as "an integral part of the choreographic process, of which it is both a component and an extension" using as examples: Catherine Contour or Benoît Lachambre, Saskia Hölbling, Xavier Le Roy's collaboration with the photographer Laurent Goldring. Laurence Louppe, « Danse-photographie. Pour une théorie des usages », *art press*, n° 281, July-August 2002, pp. 47-52.

⁴ Rosalind Krauss, *Le photographique. Pour une théorie des écarts*, translation by Marc Bloch and Jean Kempf, Macula, Paris, 1990.

(artistic or other) reflects the circulation between the arts and the media: the sc ne de genre composed of several characters playing well-defined roles, belongs just as much to painting and to photography (in particular the pictorialist movement) as to the stage. These are the effects of the transversality between painting, photography, theatre and dance. In the art of the *tableau vivant*, spatial arrangement is just as important as setting each performer's pose. The length of the scene results in the emphasis being placed on the structuring of the space, the framing, the sense of distance between the characters, etc. rather than on the fluidity of the movement being suddenly interrupted. Above all, the *tableau vivant* enables dance to renew its ties to pictorial⁵ modes, rather than to a photographic idea.

The photographic element – capturing the climax

“Much of the western dancing we are familiar with can be characterized by a particular distribution of energy: maximal output or “attack” at the beginning of a phrase... recovery at the end, with energy often arrested somewhere in the middle. This means that one part of the phrase – usually the part that is the most still – becomes the focus of attention, registering like a photograph or suspended moment of climax.”⁶ The choreographer Yvonne Rainer, in a now famous text generally referred to as “The Mind is a Muscle,” describes what is surely one of the most controversial issues around the photographic element in the field of dance. For Rainer, what is involved is qualifying the energy differentials in the execution of a dance which lead to moments of acceleration or slowing down, or even of suspension, or stopping. The danced phrase – in other words, the sequence of movements or even, as she points out, the whole of the choreography – traditionally answers to a law of composition that allows for high points connected through transitions. These high points are considered to be like photographic moments.

Whoever has experienced a “photo dress rehearsal” (rehearsal of a piece for professional photographers only) will have been struck by the simultaneous shutter clicks of the cameras: as if the choreography itself imposed which moments were for picture-taking. An observation such as this would mean taking away from the photographer any sort of intention (which is perhaps the case for certain press photos) and attributing the eruption of the photos to the subject of the photography itself, whose fleeting immobility provokes the instantaneous capture of the image. Dance is thus made of successive poses. This is exactly what Yvonne Rainer examines and wishes to deactivate.

With *Trio A* (1966), Yvonne Rainer attempts to choreograph according to another method which would flout the whole aspect of photographic peak moments and create a dance without climaxes. She tries to invent a phrase without tension, without crucial instants, and build a continuum of movement founded on a process of equalization and non-accentuation altogether unaccustomed on the choreographic scene.

⁵ We must remember the complicity that existed between painting and ballet; for example, pictorial references were omnipresent in the *Lettres sur la danse* by Noverre (1760) which argued that “ballets are *tableaux vivants*” (Lettres XIII) and states: “A ballet is a painting, the stage is the canvas, the mechanical movements of the corps de ballet are the colors, their physiognomy is, if I may say so, the brush, the ensemble, and the vivacity of the scenes, the choice of music, the decor and the costume make up the colors; finally, the composer is the painter.” (Lettre I).

⁶ Yvonne Rainer, *Work 1961-73*, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, New York University Press, New York, 1974, p. 65.

The idea is to defuse the pleasure principle,⁷ wherein the dancer exalts in channeling the attention of the viewing public, on both the stage and in the audience. Controlling the gaze of the audience by mastering an exuberant type of energy, fascinating viewers, and transporting them through the pleasure taken in exhibitionistic dance movement involves an aesthetic (doubtless contrary to a kind of ethic) which Yvonne Rainer intends to break free from. The "photograph" that Yvonne Rainer talks about is therefore this snapshot instant to be avoided at all costs. *Trio A* is an attempt at accomplishing this impossible goal: to become pure transition, anti-photography choreography. A dance that eludes the photographic system and even visibility itself: "Dance is hard to see. (...) [T]hat intrinsic difficulty must be emphasized to the point that it becomes almost impossible to see. (...) My *Trio A* dealt with the "seeing" difficulty by dint of its continual and unremitting revelation of gestural detail that did not repeat itself, thereby focusing on the fact that the material could not easily be encompassed."⁸ *Trio A* indeed breaks the coherency of the kind of movement, built in stages, that culminates in the emergence of a form. No design of the gestural material is discernible: "very discrete movements and sections created independently are added without any particular logic and are connected through a 'pedestrian dynamic' that would suffuse and connect the whole thing"⁹... and submerge the onlooker's attention.

Just as Yvonne Rainer believes in the ability of dance to annul the principle of grasping the visible, she also works toward neutralizing the emotive power – that which is carried by the performer and is likely to infect the audience. Neutralizing the emotional disposition of the audience means deactivating the (photographic) snapshot that can occur in the onlooker's mind when he/she has a gripping experience. If the drama disappears, if the performer camouflages all emotional involvement, a more distant relationship can be established with the audience which, removed from all complicity, will perhaps also achieve this form of neutrality. At least this is the choreographer's working hypothesis.

In this way, Yvonne Rainer attacks the photographic tendency from all sides: on the side of "the target," we have seen, what Barthes calls "le Spectrum de la photographie," that is to say, "he or she who is photographed;"¹⁰ as well as from the side of the *Spectator* who, in the present case, is just as much an imaginary, metaphorical photographer (*Operator*). Whereas the viewer, like the Barthesian photographer "is essentially a witness to his own subjectivity, that is to say of the way he places himself in the role of subject facing an object,"¹¹ when faced with *Trio A* he is thrown up against the impossibility of a stable positioning, confronted with the impossibility of identifying the contours of the object. Moreover, the rejection of pathos and complicity on both sides ultimately amounts to attempting to avoid the effects of affect so

⁷ This is a pleasure principle that Steve Paxton, Yvonne Rainer and the critic Jill Johnston qualify as orgasmic. Cf. Jill Johnston, "Tornado in a teacup," *Marmalade me*, Wesleyan University Press / University Press of New England, Hanover & London, revised and expanded edition 1998 (1st ed. 1971), p. 204-208 . Cf Julie Perrin, « L'obsc nit  chor graphique », in *Obsc ne, Obsc nit s, proceedings of a conference organized by the CREM of the Universit  Paul Verlaine in Metz in 2006*, (Steven Bernas, Jamil Dakhli, dir.), L'Harmattan, « champs visuels », 2008, pp. 73-82. Also available on: <http://www.danse.univ-paris8.fr>.

⁸ Yvonne Rainer, *Work 1961-73, op. cit.*, p. 68.

⁹ Yvonne Rainer, "Profile: Interview by Lyn Blumenthal" (1984), *A Woman Who... Essays, Interviews, Scripts*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, "Art + Performance," Baltimore (Maryland), 1999, p. 62 and 64.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *La Chambre Claire* (1980), *Œuvres compl tes V*, Seuil, Paris, 2002, p. 795.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, « Sur la photographie » (February 1980), *Œuvres compl tes V*, Seuil, Paris, 2002, p. 933.

dear to Barthes in his last definition of photography,¹² in which the viewer, in a highly emotional state, is revealed through the photography that brings him to life, stinging him: this is the famous *punctum*. Rainer therefore vows in a way, to limit herself to *studium*, this "very wide field of nonchalant desire,"¹³ the occasion for a docile contract between creator and spectator. In this agreement anticipated by Rainer, the discomfort produced by the unusual and elusive nature of the dance nevertheless causes the spectator as subject to emerge: a viewer who doesn't cancel him/herself out through absorption in the object of contemplation, but rather is called upon to reflect on his/her own activity.

What defines the photographic aspect in Yvonne Rainer's thinking is a distrust that other choreographers were able to share, but which produces here an extreme position that the choreographer will be unable to maintain except in the context of this manifest work. In the beginnings of modern dance, which were so inclined to photography, we were able to witness Mary Wigman's concern that the photographer put too much of himself into the result, but also to rejoice in the fact that Charlotte Rudolph, who was to become her favorite photographer, knew how to grasp the meaning of her dances.¹⁴ It is perhaps precisely because the photographer developed a reflection on flow, pauses, and high points that she managed to satisfy the choreographer. Charlotte Rudolph indeed strives to "be entirely aligned with the rhythm," to develop "a sense of the dance," in order to "capture the right moment."¹⁵ Above all, her practice of photography is based on an analysis of dance which divides it into high points and moments of transition. So here we again see the analysis of flow or of phrasing that haunts the relationship between dance and photography. "By important moment," explains Charlotte Rudolph, "I mean, for example: a moment of extreme tension, a moment of extreme relaxation, a moment of suspense. By moment of transition, I mean, for example, a moment when one passes from one movement to another, a moment chosen randomly during the execution of a movement, an extracted moment of a brief duration. In comparison, strong moments are easier to photograph, except for jumps, turns and other movements of this type. Moments of transition require even more synchrony."¹⁶ But contrary to the definition of the photographic element that we have come to identify with Yvonne Rainer, the photographer Charlotte Rudolph tries to capture dance in its moments of transition, as this is where the "personal touch"¹⁷ of the dancer (especially those gifted with lyricism) is revealed. Photography in this case, therefore, is not interested in movement climaxes. From her point of view as a choreographer, Odile Duboc in her own way also favors fluidity, continuity, progression, all the while according the viewer the freedom of a photographic instantaneity. This mental snapshot does not necessarily coincide with the suspension and breath-taking moments dear to Dubocian musicality, but it is born from the viewer's emotion. Just as photographic as choreographic, the snapshot is not imposed by the dance. "Can't the viewer herself catch and fix in her memory these instants of emotion? When

¹² In *La chambre claire*, *op. cit.* For an analysis of the evolution of the conceptions of photography according to Barthes, see Bernard Comment, *Roland Barthes, vers le neutre*, Christian Bourgois, Paris, 1991.

¹³ Roland Barthes, *La Chambre Claire*, *op. cit.*, p. 810.

¹⁴ See Hedwig M ller, « L'expression Mary Wigman », in *Photographies*, n  7, May 1985, pp. 64-69.

¹⁵ Charlotte Rudolf, « La photographie de danse » (1929), original translation by Axelle Locatelli of « Tanzphotographie », in *Schrifttanz*, Deutschen Gesellschaft f r Schrifttanz, May 1929.

¹⁶ *Idem*

¹⁷ *Idem*

dance exists without imposing itself, the viewer, if the choreographer allows him to, will be aware of taking on a new active role: that of the photographer of the snapshot."¹⁸ But not all photographers (far from it) support the position of Charlotte Rudolph. Certain of them prefer to make the danced climax coincide with the photographic instant, such as Barbara Morgan, Martha Graham's loyal photographer: "Every dance has peaks of emotional intensity; moments when the dance "speaks" to the audience. These are moments when the form of the dance is in closest unison with the original compulsion which gave it birth. (...) Dance photography deals with definite moments of expressive action."¹⁹ It is these moments, according to Barbara Morgan, that retain the memory in the space-time continuum. These moments that photography should therefore memorize and transmit.

Climax, memory and history

In reality, the question of memory is central to this debate on composition being connected to photographic thinking, and in particular to the idea of instantaneity. *Trio A*, by refusing to interrupt flow, excludes the possibility of the spectator's focus being momentarily broken. Carried along by the flow, the viewer's attention never has the opportunity to pause long enough to memorize what has just happened. Without a lull, the dance imposes its tranquil, nonchalant rhythm at the risk of resulting in its own erasure. In the end, what remains, writes Sally Banes, is in fact a "braid" (a string of multiple simultaneous movements) "...so tightly secured by the monotone rhythm that it forms itself in the spectator's vision and memory as a single, long, indivisible figure."²⁰ The thing is that *Trio A* also refuses to use repetition, which is another possible form that gives a retrospective view on what has just happened, another way of retaining an image of it.

How then can *Trio A* be photographed? What a dream it would be to see how Charlotte Rudolph (1896-1983) or Barbara Morgan (1900-1992) would have seen this dance: how one would have followed its quality of transition (though devoid of lyricism); the other would have been confronted with the absence of climaxes, drama, emotional intensity: what could she have grasped? What movements would have remained "vividly fixed in (her) memory and come to symbolize the whole dance?"²¹ However, neither one nor the other ever aimed her lens at this dance. The temptation is therefore great to take a look at the photos that do exist of *Trio A*. Carrie Lambert-Beatty does just this in one of the most remarkable books on this choreography: *Being Watched. Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s*.²² In the book, the author examines what she sees as a stupefying paradox: photographs of *Trio A* show a spectacular dance of a physical expansiveness akin to the dramatic and athletic display which are therefore absolutely contrary to the intentions of the dance.²³

¹⁸ Odile Duboc, « L'instantan  chor graphique », in Lorina Niclas (dir.), *La danse, naissance d'un mouvement de pens e ou Le complexe de Cunningham*, Armand Colin, Biennale Nationale de danse du Val-de-Marne, Paris, 1989, p. 175.

¹⁹ Barbara Morgan, *Martha Graham: sixteen dances in photographs*, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, New York, 1941, p. 149.

²⁰ Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1980, p. 51.

²¹ Barbara Morgan, *op. cit.*: "What are the significant moments for the photographer, and how are they to be chosen? I make my selection by watching a great many performances and rehearsals - noticing especially what is discarded. After absorbing as much as possible, I find that certain gestures remain vividly fixed in my memory, and come to symbolize the whole dance." pp. 149-150.

²² Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched. Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s*, MIT Press, coll. October Book, Cambridge, London, 2008.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 127, then 132 and sq.

These observations surely err in their lack of more meticulous attention to the movement represented, which would allow an analysis not only of the kinematics of the movement (its form, its geometry) but also of its dynamics, which characterize the dancer's investment in terms of energy. By associating kinematics with dynamics, what can be interpreted is what is happening and no longer just what is frozen in the photographic image. Nonetheless, Carrie Lambert-Beatty does not come to the conclusion that there exists a fundamental incompatibility between this dance and its photographic capture.²⁴ In a more interesting way, from this, she deduces the paradoxical flow of *Trio A*: its nature, as we have seen, at once segmented (short sections put end to end) and unified. As if photography were able to reveal the secret side of *Trio A*, the part hidden under the continuum of pedestrian dynamics. "Trio A's paradoxical continuity also incorporates a quasi-photographic stoppage, so, performing traces of previous dance."²⁵ As Sally Banes had already observed, Yvonne Rainer does indeed play with the history of dance, in particular, that of classical ballet, introducing citations that the continuum and nonchalant execution erase at the same time. Arabesque à la Martha Graham, classical port de bras and turnout, the figure of the noble dancer, a reference to kathakali, a Nijinsky faun perhaps.²⁶ Therefore, the project walks a fine line between, on the one hand, the desire to neutralize all possibility of anticipating the movement to come, or memorizing what has just been done, and, on the other hand, the intrusion of hidden citations, liable to focus the attention for an instant. By soliciting dance images and memory, Yvonne Rainer takes the risk of failing to fulfil her project of radical continuum, but at the same time reaffirms her attempt to erase history.²⁷ *Tabula rasa*? Not exactly. Instead, reintegrating history while cancelling its impact, its power: that is the effect of this paradoxical flow.

Photography as a reservoir of movements

Hence, Yvonne Rainer's refusal of the photographic adapts at the same time to different photographs that come from dance history. Indeed, the choreographer admits to having devoured books of dance images at the time and assiduously patronized the photography collection of the New York Public Library.²⁸ Using a procedure often practiced by the Judson Dance Theater, Rainer borrows and adopts movements found in photographs.

Steve Paxton used this composition method several times during the Judson days. For *Proxy* (1961), two movement scores taken from photographs make up the central parts of this trio in four sections. The photographs show people walking or doing sports, as well as images from cartoons and travel advertisements. Paxton glued them onto a big piece of paper in the wings so that the dancers could refer to them during

²⁴ Unfortunately, the author comes to the conclusion that because "...it is all transition – but this is to say, it is also all climax... Trio A might now be understood as one continuous photogenic moment..." (*Ibid.*, p. 164) Herein lies a prickly reversal in her analysis of the movement – its flow, its dynamic – as well as a reductive definition of dance photography (cf supra).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

²⁶ Yvonne Rainer only revealed this aspect of *Trio A* later (and in a vague way). Her text "The mind is a muscle" makes no mention of it.

²⁷ In a similar way, Bernard Comment underlines how Barthes' attempt to achieve "Neutrality," refusing pathos and emphasis, has something to do with the form of historical malaise that he feels. *Op. cit.* p. 9.

²⁸ According to a comment recorded by Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

the execution of their dance.²⁹ Steve Paxton used this principle again in 1963 for *English*, performed in the fourth dance concert at Judson Church. This piece for eleven dancers is principally based on the group quietly walking and a few phrases miming everyday actions, while various others act out the indications taken from photographs of groups of athletes: game plays, athletic jumps. The performers move from one position to another, progressively reconfiguring the group.³⁰ Photography is therefore used in this case as a base for creating gestures. Paxton's drawing on subjects in movement is part of the implementation of a gestural vocabulary detached from the choreographer's production. Essentially, one of the aspects of this procedure is political: the idea is to get free of the traditional hierarchical relation between dancer and choreographer, teacher and student. In these two pieces, Steve Paxton actually gives the dancers the freedom to come up with transitions between two poses, concentrating only on a precise analysis of the pose in the photograph. In a way, he is a choreographer through procuration – thus the title *Proxy* – all the more so as the performer is invited to choose when to start his/her phrase in the loop of the posted photographs. The only question raised, he states,³¹ is that of the way to perform the photographic transmission of the movement: should we consider photography to be a mirror (like when the dance teacher faces his students) and so to coordinate the left leg of the subject represented in the photo with the right leg of the dancer? Or, on the contrary, reproduce the same movement? This is then a technical question which poses the problem of interpreting the photo when it constitutes a program of actions.

Using a similar principle, Boris Charmatz undertakes, in 2009, a pedagogical project with the students of the H z Tanz in Berlin called *All Cunningham*, which will be repeated in other contexts,³² eventually becoming a piece for the stage called *Flip book*, performed by professional dancers, then a piece for former dancers of the Merce Cunningham company, entitled *50 years of dance*.³³ Boris Charmatz chooses as a basis for this project the monograph by David Vaughan,³⁴ or to be more precise, the series of photographs that it presents. What can be seen in these photographs is essentially images from the numerous pieces by the choreographer, as well as photographs documenting his childhood (family photos) and his early career (in pieces by Martha Graham, for example) or portraits (of the choreographer, collaborators, or the company). Assorted themes, therefore, but always providing a human subject that the dancer can grasp as a pretext for movement or reason for successive poses. Boris Charmatz seems to go back to the composition methods developed by Judson, to which Robert Ellis Dunn had given access. In Dunn's workshop, the goal was, in fact, to reject an organic composition method whose model, with regard to strong perceptive impression, remains that of growth and of nature. The dancers experimented, in this context, with chance operations, collages (and Dadaist citations), structures borrowed from contemporary music scores (according to Cage's principles), explorations of action programs or scores like those Anna Halprin had also practiced... Although it is tempting to compare *Proxy* and *English* with *50 ans de danse*, the issues raised by Boris Charmatz's piece are perhaps slightly different.

²⁹ A detailed description of this dance can be found in Sally Banes' *Democracy's Body. Judson Dance Theater, 1962-1964*, Duke University Press, Durham London 1995 (1st ed. UMI Research Press, Michigan, 1980), pp. 58-60.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97-98.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

³² In particular with the students of the University of Rennes, the same town in which Boris Charmatz directs the Mus e de la danse, and of the dance department of the University of Paris 8: the project was called *Tout Cunningham* or *Roman photo*.

³³ For this analysis, we are essentially referring to *50 ans de danse*, 2009.

³⁴ David Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty years*, Ed. Aperture, 1997.

As in the work of Steve Paxton, it appears at first glance to be about taking photographs, shifting the purely documentary and descriptive use of them, and extracting the performative dimension from them. But in Boris Charmatz's work, in addition to this, there is a historical preoccupation missing in the work of Steve Paxton. Paxton is not at all trying to reconstruct an event (a game, for example) nor is he interested in creating an overriding theme for a project (sports? but just as easily everyday movement). The documentary or memory aspect of photography is not very pertinent. For Boris Charmatz, it's the subject of the photograph that is important and which, moreover, gives the piece its successive titles. On the one hand, the choreographer denies having an interest in the historical element³⁵ and so seems to avoid a documentary use of the photographs; whereas, on the other, he claims to find, through this project, a kinship with the choreographer: in the composition methods used, ("The sequence of images were reminiscent of the composition processes of Cunningham's pieces"),³⁶ in the similar look achieved ("choreography that follows the thread of these photos would surely also look like Cunningham").³⁷ In other words, the connection with the photographic referent is not purely kinetic; the issue is surely to build a whole for which the ultimate referent - Cunningham - is primordial. The evolution of the titles reflects this indecision: from *Tout Cunningham*, which fantasizes being an exhaustive account of the work (and of the man?) it becomes Roman photo which admits to having a fictional aspect, and finally *Flip book* or *50 years of dance* which refers to Vaughan's book in a very specific way. We've gone from the monument (Cunningham), to documents (the photographs in the book). One question remains: what status is given to photography in the use and discourse of the choreographer?

Photography: index or historical fiction?

Photography is above all a reservoir of movements. The project is done over an average of five days, a rapidity which obviously renders deciphering in detail the approximately three hundred photos impossible. What is extracted, then, is essentially kinetic information that represents a technical challenge for the dancer (how to do this or that pose). Precision will not always be a priority of course: it's more a question of quickly producing a movement, and letting the photographic aesthetics (the retouching of the image, the photographer's point of view, the style) take a back seat. The photo cancels itself out as a medium. The referent (the reality represented in the photo) attempts to adhere to the present. Nevertheless, the photograph persists as a frozen image, making composition challenging. Boris Charmatz insists less than Steve Paxton on the transitions and interprets the photograph in its fixed dimension: it's not about recreating the flow of a dance, but rather, making images visible one by one. Finally, although Charmatz recognizes that he is producing "fake Cunningham," he is not able to abandon a belief in resemblances: the photograph, as clue, as trace...in index mode, is brought back to being an object of truth. Charmatz's discourse oscillates between truth and fiction: "I think that if we do it right, it will really be a Cunningham piece, a meta-Cunningham *event* giving us a glance into his whole life and the entire body of his work."³⁸ In this

³⁵ Mentioned several times in the Interview with Gilles Amalvi, Program of the fall festival, June 2009.

³⁶ *Idem*

³⁷ *Idem*

³⁸ Text excerpted from the program of *Flip book*, 2009. On the relationship between document and fiction, see Jean-Claude Moineau, « De la photographie comme op rateur critique   la photographie comme op rateur d'art », *Ligeia*, n  49-50-51-52, January-June 2004.

way, not only has the image become the work, but the interpretation or performance of the image can also harken back to the original work.

In total opposition to Rainer, who masks the historical reference, this project reels off images that the audience is likely to recognize. What we have is two forms of desire and loss. With a nod to Barthes' idea of the romantic metaphor: what has happened to the "this was"³⁹ aspect of dance photography? For Barthes, the referenced photo will evoke not only the reality of the dance; it will remind us just as much that the moment belongs irremediably to the past. Rainer redoubles the death intrinsic in the photograph by subtly erasing its impact (and the grief due to its disappearance). As for Boris Charmatz, he very joyfully highlights the "this was" aspect without nostalgia. But he doesn't stop at that; he also undertakes, paradoxically, a project of (Proustian) remembrance, though without really trying to. Isn't this "All Cunningham" a matter of ignoring the "this was" while reconstructing what has been abolished? But still, he carries out a killing despite himself...through historical insufficiency, as well as through shortcomings in his interpretations of the photos.

Although collage was one of his modes of composition, Cunningham never, as far as we know, used photographs. Above all, his use of chance operations is methodical, according to Cage's definition of them, and never the least bit uncontrolled, "savage"⁴⁰ or even collective. Though poses can be seen in numerous pieces, Cunningham is particularly sensitive to the balance that is achieved between flow and positions: the challenge is to preserve the clarity of the positions, yes, but from within the flow; if the rhythm, the energy are lost, "You end up in decoration,"⁴¹ he says. Boris Charmatz undermines the Cunningham flow with accents, accelerations, etc. and ignores this particular quality of tranquility, putting his performers in a "state of emergency" which leads them in a race from pose to pose using an "explosive energy."⁴² He never achieves the vibration of stillness of the body which seeks a poised balance, at the same time so visible in the photographs. And the negative space between dancers, so dear to the choreographer when there is suspension in the movement (as in *Pictures*, 1984), is not given the opportunity to become apparent in Charmatz's piece. It is therefore not only a question of temporality, but also of space. Interestingly enough, the work using photography as a source gives a frontal, centered occupation of the stage, as though suddenly the photographic frame and point of view took precedence over the conventional space of the stage. Furthermore, the choice of placement on the page of the book orients choices.⁴³ Also, as there are rarely overlapping photographs, the attention is focused on a single point on the stage, instead of the dispersion of attention so characteristic of Cunningham's work. Finally, the reason this piece will never look like a piece by Merce Cunningham, is the motivation for their dance: what can be explicitly discerned is an organization of the one with respect to the other, the moment of suspense before joining another in

³⁹ Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire*, op. cit., p. 851.

⁴⁰ Interview with Gilles Amalvi, art. cit.: "chance being an integral part of the process, particularly in that we stand in front of the images and choose them in a pretty "savage" way." (« l'al atoire fait partie int grante de la d marche, particuli rement en ceci : nous nous mettons devant les images, et choisissons de mani re assez "sauvage" »). *Idem*

⁴¹ Merce Cunningham, *Le Danseur et la danse. Interviews with Jacqueline Lesschaeve*, Pierre Belfond, « Entretien » 1988 (1st ed. 1980), p. 126.

⁴² According to Anne-Karine Lescop, in « Des photographies comme partition. Entretien avec Anne-Karine Lescop autour d'*All Cunningham* », in *Rep res. Cahier de danse*, Biennale nationale de danse du Val-de-Marne, n  23, avril 2009, p. 28.

⁴³ *Idem*. An image at the bottom of the page invites the reader to place him/herself downstage center, for example.

order to complete the image. The motivation is evident and contrary to the extremely strong independence within the group in most of Cunningham's work.

In other words, the gamble of using photography as it was used in *50 ans de danse* resulted at best in evoking a reminiscence for the image in the viewer who is already familiar with Vaughan's book. It is indeed the photographic image that can be remembered much more than the dances themselves and even less the integrality of Cunningham's WORK (which was doomed from the beginning when one considers the evolution of his work and technique). Admittedly, one can recognize a duet from *Rainforest* thanks to a few well-worked transitions, a slow crossing of successive arabesques from *Walkaround time* and a gigue step from *Roaratorio*, but what dawns on the audience is above all a kind of irony totally absent from the photographs: the irony of certain exaggerated steps or heavily executed lunges, the excessively frenetic gesticulation that makes vague reference to that terribly particular rhythm of Cunningham performers, and finally, the parody of brightly-colored, sequined leotards so different from the costumes created through research by artist/costume designers.⁴⁴ Does this correspond to the conscious choice to create a poetic remake using humorous and joyful detachment? And finally, in its very method, the supposed freedom of the creator thanks to the use of photography is almost in contradiction with the presence of Boris Charmatz, in the orchestra pit, clearly visible, turning the pages of Vaughan's book, as if the process is not independently understandable. Boris Charmatz, much like Cunningham, by the way, doesn't follow all the way through on the political challenge of a re-interrogation of the roles within a company. Essentially, the project, it seems, has a hard time defining itself. Because, although the use of photography as a generator of movements is crystal clear and efficient (and very rich in a pedagogical context), the question of flow doesn't seem to be resolved, especially since the relationship of photography to memory or history results in a series of contradictions in practice as well as discourse.

Time, image and perception

The photographic model thus infiltrates the conception of dance composition in a multitude of ways, revealing uses which are specific each time and conceptions of photography that are not always explained by the artists, but which observation of their practices reveals. As we have seen, the use of photography is the occasion for an interrogation on the climax, a reflection on time and flow. As for the photograph, the image, it becomes a method for inventing movement and composing new dances, as well as a way to rethink the choreographic gesture and the position of the creator. In the final analysis, it is a way to reflect on history.

A reflection on photography gives rise to the opening up of possible interpretations of choreography in its temporal dimension. It would also enable us (but this is the subject of another discussion) to deepen the spatial understanding of dance composition: in what way does dance draw on the culture of the image to guide its choices of organization in space? We would see to what extent the framing of the stage often seems to coincide with a photographic framing. Or to what extent dance can hobnob with image production

⁴⁴ Cf. Julie Perrin, « Le costume Cunningham : l'acad mique pris entre sculpture et peinture », *Rep res. Cahier de danse*, Biennale nationale de danse du Val-de-Marne, n  27, avril 2011, p. 22-25. The English translation by Jacqueline Cousineau "The Cunningham costume: the unitard in-between sculpture and painting" can be found at <http://www.danse.univ-paris8.fr>.

– the construction of spatial plans, points of view, and “off-camera” situations, through the arrangement of color and contrast. More surprisingly, dance has also given rise to a reexamination of the photographic model based not on its outcomes, but its processes. Vincent Thomasset stages the *Operator*, meaning he who operates – the photographer— the one who Barthes never talks about since he has no experience of photographing. In his workshops initiated in 2009 entitled, “No camera” or “How to take photos without a camera,” the choreographer works on the actions of the photographer him/herself: body tensed in concentration, looking through the lens, halting suddenly in front of the subject of an imaginary photo, bent over looking at a detail to exploit, wandering in search of a subject to capture. Here again, there are pauses, whose length is exacerbated, held much longer than the time necessary for an imaginary shutter click. Pauses that highlight the notion that this is choreography based on looking.

The text was translated by Patricia Chen thanks to support from Institut Universitaire de France.

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To quote from this article : Julie Perrin, « Choreography as seen through the lens of photography. Time in composition: Rainer, Paxton, Charmatz », [On line], Paris 8 Danse, www.danse.univ-paris8.fr, 2019 [2012]. Translated by Patricia Chen from: « Le chorégraphique traversé par la photographie. A propos du temps dans la composition: Rainer, Paxton et Charmatz », *Ligeia*, dossier « Photographie et danse », Debat Michelle (dir.), n°113-114-115-116, Paris, éd. Ligeia, janvier-juin 2012, p. 74-83.