

CHAPTER 3

Time

IN THE LATE SIXTIES AND EARLY SEVENTIES TIME BECAME A MAJOR element of an artistic and social revolution. Out the window went traditional performance/entertainment time and in came experiments with duration, repetition, non-accentuated beats and pedestrian-paced performance in music, dance, theater, sculpture, and the visual arts.

When I moved to SoHo I found myself at the core of a new use of Time both as a performer and as a spectator. I was astonished that I felt I had come home. It was as though the silence and rhythms of nature and emptiness of Montana had been transferred to SoHo. One of my favorite childhood occupations was watching, over many years, a pile of discarded two-by-fours slowly melt back into the earth. This fierce new art world was conducting Time experiments based in stillness and emptiness. Richard Nonas's sculptures had a deep connection to duration using his archaeological background and the ancient wood he worked with; the non-accented beats of text delivery by the Wooster Group's Ron Vawter; the pedestrian-paced dance of the Grand Union influenced by Yvonne Rainer; the endless repetition of musical chords by Philip Glass and Terry Riley; endless repetition of physical movements by Lucinda Childs and Dana Ritz; the dictates of time derived from the pendulum action of swinging motions as discovered by Trisha Brown and continued by Stephen Petronio; the nonlinear and unexcitable

plays of Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson, and in his own way, Lee Breuer of Mabou Mines; and Judy Padow's choreographies based in walking patterns. All these experiments thereby delineating another approach to Time. You might call this approach Natural Cognitive Time. Or, as Barbara Dilley calls it, "The Elegant Pedestrian."

These experiments appeared to me to be artistic responses, set in motion by a slightly earlier call to the "tune in, turn on, and drop out" philosophy of the acid generation of Ken Kesey. As this artistic movement liberated itself from European conventions, Time found its own ground in an almost childlike simplicity and drifted toward Eastern contemplative philosophy. Although these experimental works appeared simple in form compared to traditional music and dance, they nonetheless evolved through, and require, arduous training and practice. A vital component of this experimentation was the retraining of the dancer, actor and musician to develop and maintain their own perception of Time without relying on the underlying beat (which traditionally would have been the narrative and lines of a play) or the dictates of a kinesthetic time signature through music. For me, this training began as a meditation. I added the practice of accepting walking (the organic pedestrian pace) as dancing. Paying a great deal of attention to walking, as though it were a long string of anatomical operations, allowed me to begin to inhabit Time as a free and exclusive material, separate from the other SSTEMS.

In many ways it can be argued that this specific interrogation of Time was one of the primary, embodied cores of the radical shifts taking place in the art movement of that era. In my lectures on the structure of the Six Viewpoints I express this shift, this emphasis on a contemplative Time, a natural Time, with a symbolic gesture: hand held out, palm cupped to receive while saying, "You see this, this is the Viewpoints, at any given time art will arrive on its own if you train yourself in observation and patience." This view of the practice of art embodies both a more conceptual and a more physical approach to Time. In order to bring about a perception of this type of Time, I retooled the practice of Walk and Stop (normally employed as an introduction to Space). Walk and Stop as a Time practice concentrates awareness on the length of time the practitioner stands, the length of time others stand and

the length of time used to move from one place to another. I feel that, as the class practices Walk and Stop in Time, the whole classroom shifts location and we are in Montana with Time lapping at our feet as we walk up into the mountains and look across the plains.

In the patient lingering required in this version of Walk and Stop, you do not want to allow learned temporal habits to force a change of position. Hidden in this practice lurks an all-out attack on the overbearing rhythms that dominate music, traditional dance and drama, and socialized conversation. There is simply a time for standing and a time for walking. The objective of Walk and Stop in Time is to pull up and discard these roots of habitual social and artistic agreement. As you work in this practice, Time becomes a living, breathing, ephemeral material that unfolds itself so that you can physically inhabit it.

Although I worked with Time in its "natural" form, as duration, through six years of improvisation and five years of choreography, I began to realize, much to my annoyance, I still had not grasped the nature of this material. Although I knew the ecstasy of dancing without music, and then later experimented with using a magnificent classical score by making my choreography lay beside it in independent time signatures, I knew that Time itself seemed to be only defined by an outward activity. The questions kept hovering around me; there seemed to me a more basic level of Time that was eluding me. What was the inner connection, past activities, that thing that lies waiting for you on the stage even before you enter? This interrogation plagued me for years. I kept seeing a ghost tap dancer at the edge of my consciousness taunting me, hands on hips, staring at me, tap tap, tap

I knew that the question was still: how to go about apprehending Time? This idea of Time in the Viewpoints approach actually means entering into Time and developing a dialogue that can unlock all that might lend itself to performance. I found that I was still grappling with the most difficult road block, the calibration of Time in representational codes that break it into seconds, minutes, hours, dates, watches, calendars, metronomes, music scores. My recognition of duration had not been sufficient to remove the barrier that these systems created between me and Time.

The momentous occasion in which Time appeared to me came in October 1988, in Denmark, in the driveway of a house that was just outside the small village of calendars, metronomes, music scores. My recognition of duration had not been sufficient to remove the barrier that these systems created between me and Time.

The momentous occasion in which Time appeared to me came in October 1988, in Denmark, in the driveway of a house that was just outside the small village of Espergærde. I was taking the trash out. It was the day after I had gotten married. After planning a wedding while on tour the entire year, I was taking on a new partner, a new life and a new country. I thought I was fine. The wedding had been so much fun and so beautiful, people seemed happy.

Suddenly I found myself standing at the edge of the yard, trash strewn over the lawn. My clothes were dirty. I was totally lucid and calm, but then realized that I was a bit confused. There seemed to be a blank in my Time continuum. "Open the door, garbage in hand. Now standing, garbage all over the lawn?" I realized that "I" had been missing for some time. As I shook my head I began to realize that I had been on the ground, contorted in strange positions, catapulting through unplanned Space. I found that I was unhurt. It seems that I had been a puppy at play—they never get hurt as they jump and roll on their backs and slide and fall and fall and slide. Cool! Fast! I was moving so fast, so loose, so sure, that I did not think. I just was.

This phenomenon occurred several times over a period of two weeks, and I began to understand that I was experiencing fits of hysteria. In my hysterical fits, I was moving directly from my nervous system, without the filter of intentional, mental predetermination. Time was ripping through me, vibrating, a living entity, performing in the now! I discovered a kind of speed that fascinated me and I was suddenly aware that the measured and controlled time I normally lived in was a broken body-mind connection. I had exited a sluggish and indeterminate state of Time and had entered into an animal-like, immediate, accurate and vital Time that reached to my very core.

I spent the next two years working with hysteria-based speed in dance after dance. I learned how to train dancers to move into Time via their nervous system by

extrapolating a practice from Bonnie Cohen's Body-Mind Centering (BMC) work: we develop our brain through movement patterns in a sequence that progresses from lower brain to midbrain to upper cortex. I have the students lie on the floor with back to the ground and suggest they attempt to move before thinking. This will result in rapid uncontrolled jerking of the body as the lower brain functions connect directly with the central nervous system to produce movement that is unfiltered by the higher cognitive functions of the mid- and forebrain. It is like jumpstarting a car—you are rerouting the habitual pathways or circuitry systems of the brain synapses. As the connection is made a rapid release of movements come coursing through the body, causing spurts of jerking, throwing and jumping that are both surprising and deeply satisfying, like touching something that has not been touched and wants to be used. I came to call this practice Automatic Movement. In it, you pass through borders of conventional acting and dancing Time and arrive at your own relationship to Time. As Automatic Movement is practiced it results in narrowing the synapses between body and mind, integrating the actor and dancer with Time. When you resume standing, your breathing is different. It is as though you are breathing directly into your nervous system instead of controlling the breath to fit a measured rhythm.

This Automatic Movement practice clears the pathway of body-mind communication and brings on a totally new way of feeling Time connected to the body. This "weird" experiment reveals Time in what I think of as a raw state. Picture the movement of your hand when you have touched red hot iron on a stove: that is the lower brain in action, jerking your hand away before you can "think" in normal Time. This awareness is a wonderful tool for a performer. In joining Time as heightened consciousness of existing in the moment, you will find an incomparable courage. A true dialogue with Time develops a sense of total independence, even from your own body. In front of an audience, facing Time, you are performing a deeply emotional and courageous act of surrender and integration with a natural force that is both inside and outside your own existence. In his recently published autobiography, Stephen Petronio writes of struggling to achieve a performance level with a new solo that Trisha Brown had just made for him:

"My experience has proven that often when a new work has its first showing for a live audience, it's only then that it rises up to become its full self . . . I hear my introductory notes played live for the first time, I see the spiky top of Laurie Anderson's complex and beckoning head and the bow of her violin arc up in motion with a piercing sound . . . The music, the moment and the movement call me into the space I've not yet occupied and I go forth with more power than I possess. The thirty-eight seconds of motion stretch out like a bird lifting off in flight and expand to a solo of immense proportion. When I come off stage I know something has happened to me and I was prepared, lucky enough to be there and hungry enough to accept its challenge."

STEPHEN PETRONIO, Choreographer NYC

Confessions of a Motion Addict

From the Viewpoints perspective, Trisha Brown's choreography compresses Space, Shape and Time, melting one into the other. To achieve her technique one must fully embrace a fiercely articulate, fiercely kinetic movement technique.

My curiosity about Time had been fulfilled at last. Once I had experienced and experimented and established direct access to Time, I was able to be with Time through a direct connection, on my own terms. I began to understand how important it is to allow Time to be experienced, rather than counted or directed from an outside guide, even more so than the other materials of the SYSTEMS. From that epiphany I found that Time and transformation are interlinked. That if we only experience numerical Time, we are prone to being frightened of and reactionary around shifts in structure. Without a true connection to Time we are much less open to possibilities. If I may say so, being in the flow of Time as it lives through your spine and connects your synapses is a much more evolved and advanced stance to inhabit in life and in art. Time, as it runs through the nervous system, is like bells ringing every moment to awaken you to a beautiful day, a beautiful life on the planet. I am wary of people with stiff spines.

In a practical application of working with Time I like to deploy a very formal Viewpoints practice. The "Viewpoints Haiku" form was invented by Wendell Beavers, a former member of my dance company, a longtime teacher at Experimental

Theatre Wing, where he taught the Viewpoints for many years, and more recently the director of the theater department at Naropa College. This form, as I use it, involves setting up a rectangle by placing shoes to mark the corners of a space approximately 9 feet by 12 feet. A group of four performers begins the form by standing in a place of their choosing on the outer edge of the rectangle. On the count of one they will all enter the space with a motion that reflects a focus on the material of Time. On the count of two they will simultaneously perform the second motion application of Time and on the count of three they will finish the haiku with a last Time-derived motion. With this, the team stops in the rectangle and then exits to restart another haiku from the periphery. The form is an interrogation instrumented by brevity, simultaneity and independence. It imparts a John Cage-like, chance operation, allowing the articulation of the material to surface with a minimum of manipulation on the part of the performer. This haiku practice is another iteration of the gesture of my hand outstretched, palm up to receive.

Using a haiku Time practice, it is immediately and thrillingly evident to observers that Time can be present in a raw form, and that Time creates fascinating performances. Just as obvious, the unilateral use of a single time signature by all performers is often boring and not necessary for building unity. Outside of traditional usage and governance, Time has the capacity to be a cohesive substance within which a fluid plethora of variations of its languages and textures can exist simultaneously.

My own dedication to the material of Time has been a bulwark of my artistic career. Underneath the minimalistic, contemplative tone of my choreography is my love for the material of Time, and the courage that this material has given me. Laurie Anderson credited me in a note on the back of her album *Big Science* with teaching her the concept of slow—a wisdom I seemingly imparted to her while collaborating on a music score for my choreography *Hero*. On this album she took seeds from her score for *Hero* and produced *Born Never Asked*.

I believe that being in contact with raw Time in as many ways as you can arrange imparts the courage to make great art. For that reason Time is also utterly present in my style of teaching. I obstinately insist on starting my classes in my own version of an American Indian type of "Gathering Time." I provide ample space for my

students to arrive, and a casual conversational beginning that is designed to allow them to become present and hungry to begin work. I speak in a manner that allows thinking to occur. I wait for students to gather their thoughts. I give them more time than they need to communicate. I want them to be engaged as deeply as possible in their own reflections and responses as though they are alone in a studio working on their own ideas, in their own Time.

Standing in Space

The Six Viewpoints Theory & Practice

Mary Overlie