

Creativity as Collaborative Endeavor with Social Vision: Postmodern Dance, the Creative Body, and Electronically Networked Performance Spaces in the 1960s

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Abstract

This article revisits examples from U.S. postmodern dance in the 1960s to explore the emergence of collaborative aesthetics as a matrix for new developments in the performance arts. In this context, creativity is defined as collective effort and achievement; postmodern dance is interpreted as a laboratory for redefining community and rethinking the relationship between the human, the social, and technology. The article argues that postmodern dance can serve as a blueprint for an artistic vision of new forms of social bonding.

Keywords: collaborative creativity, postmodern dance, networks, technology, social vision

Introduction and Context

In the turbulent 1960s, artistic networks like Fluxus, EAT, Black Mountain College, Black Arts Repertory Theatre, Sun Ra's Solar Arkestra, Teatro Campesino, Cunningham Dance Theater, and Judson Dance Theater produced performances in which artistic expression and social impetus were strongly embedded in collaborative art projects. Networking, collaboration, and exchange brought forth a vanguard understanding of art as group expression with the objective of social construction and change. These networks interpreted creativity as collaborative social action across disciplinary boundaries. Their practices challenged the idea of a lone artistic genius by emphasizing that creativity is a result of group collaboration and art thoroughly embedded in processes of larger social networking.

Artists looked intensively for collaboration with technology and engineers who were developing and using technology. This resulted in close collaborations such as those between Robert Rauschenberg with the electrical engineer Billy Klüver, who partnered in EAT (Experiments in Art and Technology). Other groups, such as USCO, were made up of engineers, filmmakers, painters,

and poets. Influenced by Marshall McLuhan and Buckminster Fuller, they saw in technology a creative potential that was indispensable for the future development of art and society. According to Douglas Davis, they cherished "technology as a means of bringing people together in a new and sophisticated tribalism. In pursuit of that ideal, they lived, worked, and created together in virtual anonymity" (67). As the objectives of these groups illustrate, an industrial cooperation between art and technology was to develop new interaction models for society as a whole. [1]

Their creative collaborations attest that "technologies and human lives are mutually embedded, enabling, and determining" (Schatzki 91). Playfully, their projects merged archaic ritual performance patterns with seemingly ever-progressing technology; they did so in a dialogical fashion in which humans moved machines and machines moved humans in an attempt to create new visions of community and coexistence. The turn to technology as means of creative and communal expression, in spite of unequal access to new media and computer technology, was in no way limited to groups of hegemonic white artists. Sun Ra's Solar Arkestra expressed his vision of black galaxy in futurist group sound collectives and Motown records;

“turning the recording studio into a creative instrument” produced collective soundscapes emerging from the dynamic interplay of individual and background voice arrangements, thus developing African American technologies in the creation of new communal expressions (Weheliye 1; Rausser, ‘*What’s Going On*’ 210-15).

Marshall McLuhan’s concept of the global village as media-centered utopia opened new horizons for a globally connected world (McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message* 8; *The Gutenberg Galaxy* 3), but this utopianism was tempered by awareness of technology’s destructive power. The arms race and the race to the moon between the USA and Russia showcased technology as an expression of power during the Cold War. Experiments in biological warfare took place behind the backs of the American population and turned poor neighborhoods in cities like St. Louis into the scene of biological experiments on humans. Operations such as ‘Operation LAC’ sprayed bacteria over populated areas in the USA and Canada in the 1950s and 60s to measure their spread and applicability in the event of war (Schreyer 38-39). Finally, the use of napalm bombs in the Vietnam War sadly refreshed public awareness of the devastating potential of technological renewal and showed how technology, while “embedded in global societal exchange relations” (Hornborg 117), was also central to U.S. imperialist warfare in Asia.

Despite this dystopian element of technology, or arguably precisely for this reason, artists in the 1960s turned to technology while searching for artistic and social visions of coexistence. Theatre, performance art, music, and dance took to the streets to occupy public sites such as street corners, plazas, and parks to perform community building, to express individual and collective dissent, to support individual political causes and social movements, and to liberate public space from military control, police surveillance, state control, and mob violence. Bodies functioned as acting collectives in performances in public sites and served as media for rethinking social relations. Artists joined in collaborative projects whose fusion of the everyday, art, and media voiced posthumanist thinking and embraced

technology “as central to and intertwined with the human, and deeply political” (Ferrando 42). At the same time, the beatnik collective around poets like Allen Ginsberg developed spiritual visions for coexistence on earth, rejecting technocratic control systems while embracing technology as communicative medium (Roszak 124-31; Goffman and Joy 10-12, 279-80). Through performances in streets, parks, and plazas, these collectives took on a central role in reinventing the social and public space in relation to cultural and political discourses such as: the utopian vision of a global village; anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, and anti-racist struggles in the U.S., Latin America, Asia, and Africa; and the iron curtain separating communist and capitalist world orders (Rausser, ¿*Hasta dónde llega la calle?* 116).

Pragmatist Aesthetics and Collaborative Creativity

Creativity as collaborative endeavor within U.S. based artistic developments in the 1960s could draw upon John Dewey’s pragmatist aesthetics, developed in the 1920 and 30s. Dewey’s processual vision of existence and creativity, I argue, functioned as a spearhead for artistic collaboration in the 1960s. Fundamental to Dewey’s thinking was his notion of existence as continuum. His conception of processual development, which includes nature, culture, and technology, gives art an overriding role in the transfer of experience that is consequently also valid for an increasingly technological world. Pragmatist aesthetics, in Dewey’s reflections on experience and creativity, replaced the autonomy of art with an instrumental function for art, expressed in the creation of new experience (Schneider 219-20). Behind the instrumental conception of art lies a philosophy of experience that lends new expression to the belief in the newness of an “[American] way of life” and a belief in the continuum of progressive renewal in aesthetics that is always embedded in social and natural context. “The first great consideration,” says Dewey, “is that life goes on in an environment, not merely in it, but because of it, through interaction with it” (535). Art and culture do not arise in an autonomous space but

as a result of the interaction of individuals with their environment and their social circle.

Likewise, Dewey sees experience as always involving a larger social context: “Experience in the degree in which it is experience is heightened vitality ... at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events” (540). Dewey repeatedly emphasizes that communication by active participants embodies the highest levels of aesthetic perception and social behavior. For him, “[e]xperience is the result ... of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication” (543). The basis for his work on aesthetics is his notion of the inherently aesthetic character of every event. In everyday activities lies the basis for the consideration of aesthetically complex forms, like what arises from art, music, and literature. [2] This basic aesthetic component of human existence can be experienced anytime, anywhere, regardless of social and cultural conditions. Since Dewey sees in each everyday experience an aesthetic experience, he rejects the idea of a separation between life and art. Like life, art only gains in significance when it is linked to a social environment (technology included). While Dewey’s thinking bears important meaning for artistic practice in the 1960s, it equally holds significance for current discourses on the role of creativity.

In recent years, scholarly networks have emerged that reassess the power of creativity. [3] With a nod to these recent developments, creativity is best defined as “a form of action in and on the world, performed in relation to others, and leading to continuous renewal of culture” (Glăveanu 84). This implies meaningful novelty in thought and action. Cultural creation is seen as a social act taking place in a specific time and context; it is understood as responsive, situational, and relational. The process of creation –be it individual or collective– is always related to community(ies) (Waldenfels 408). The actors are understood as “*homo respondens*” (Waldenfels 16), meaning that the human is perceived as “interbeing,” creating relations as well as bridges and responding to the world around, be it simply different or oppositional.

Basically, there are two sides to culture: creativity and tradition, revolution and conservatism (Buber 383-86).

Cultural creativity, accordingly, takes place in oppositional realms and can be seen as a process of continuous interaction full of tension and reciprocity. For humanist thinkers like Buber, it functions as the backbone of a vital and dynamic society and culture. Creative action, like social development and change, is always intersubjective and communal (Buber 99). Creativity gains meaning in social structures and shapes these structures at the same time. As Jonathan Friedman puts it, “[t]he understanding of creativity must pass through the social and existential conditions that are its foundation” (49). In particular, creativity unfolds in open spaces, gaps, and interstitial zones (Lavie et al. 2) and can be characterized as a phenomenon of cultural contact (Lieb 7). Acts of cultural creativity include technological inventions, artistic creations, the creation of ideas for social enhancement, concepts for communal living, creation in everyday life, new directions in education, and environmental interaction in response to social conditions. Creative action is conducted by individuals as well as groups, but its meaning multiplies in intersubjective social contexts.

Calling for new directions in studying cultural creativity as a socio-cultural phenomenon, contemporary scholars in the field of creativity studies point out that “creativity will become a necessity for the dignity and survival of the human species” (Glăveanu et al. 742). As the manifesto highlights, “creativity takes the form of action or activity” and occurs “in a given symbolic, social-institutional, and material context” (ibid. 743). This assumption rings true for communities in the past as well as the present.

Postmodern Dance: Examples of Collaborative Creativity

Postmodern dance in the U.S. in the 1960s produced striking examples for investigating artistic collaborative experiments with a claim to aesthetic innovation and social change. The artistic collaborations of artists like Merce Cunningham, Deborah Hay, and Yvonne Rainer

showed dance embracing everyday activities as well as visionary moves in which the human, the social, and the technological were seen as interconnected and interdependent. Exemplary for a collaborative approach were the projects of the Judson Dance Theater, a collective of dancers, composers, and visual and media artists who performed at the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village, New York City, from 1962 until 1964 (Banes 3-10). The collective was a creative space for collaboration between artists in fields such as dance, writing, film, music and multi-media. Judson Dance Theater merged body movement, group constellation, and human-technological fusion as a way out of classical modern dance toward postmodern expression.



Judson Dance Theater (1964). Copyright Rainer.

The break from traditional dance, with its representations of physicality and hierarchical relationships, expressed both criticism and the pursuit of new relationalities and forms of community. Thus, in Deborah Hay's *Ten* (1963), repeatedly shifting group images were formed that consisted of two, three, or more male and female dancers, creating new visual expressions of community. Dance approached the expressive quality of the visual arts, especially when static bodies directed the eye of the beholder to the correlations of the dancers. [4]

Technology functioned as site of spatial anchoring. Horizontal and vertical bars installed in the church space were used as holding and orientation points for the artists. These bars served as spatial extension of human bodies, deepening the connection between body and environment. In some performances, the bars were connected to networked light and sound systems responding to human touch, embedding the dance movements in a multi-media environment.

Another example of the collective's aesthetics was Yvonne Rainer's dance, *We Shall Run* (1963). The performers—both dancers and non-dancers—dance and move in work clothes while forming different group images to the recorded music of Berlioz. Phases of dynamic movement alternated with short-lived static images of the main and secondary groups reconnecting continuously. The dance repeatedly performed the inclusion of marginal groups within the largest group of actors. Rainer's choreography was designed so that the front dancers of the group change constantly, with both men and women taking directional functions for certain time segments. The ideas of horizontal community embodied by the dancers underwent constant transformation. Through the continuous integration of marginal groups, the performance appeared as a mobile collective; as the different groupings and their resolution blended harmoniously into each other, the performance derived its dynamics from change rather than conceivable tension. Constantly crossing the boundaries of dance by inserting acrobatic moves and fast-walking, *We Shall Run* unfolded as an integrationist process of continually changing group formation.

As part of its mission to democratize society through revolutionizing dance, the collective at Judson Church also reached out to larger audiences by performing open air at Washington Square and other public sites in Manhattan. [5] Utopia expressed through physical relationality became a central theme of postmodern dance and a concrete alliance between dance and political movements took place alongside aesthetically realized models of equality (Sorell 408). [6]

Another outstanding example of collective creativity was present in the performances of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Arguably the most influential postmodern dancer and choreographer, Cunningham embraced an expanded possibility of dance, music, and visual arts that reads like a blueprint of how to push the boundaries of collaboration and culture for subsequent generations. *Variations V*, a sophisticated multi-media dance performance and collage of dance, music, and film (1965) exemplifies how collaborative creativity works at the intersection of ritual and technology.



Image *Variations 5* (1966). Copyright Cunningham.

It integrated a variety of acoustic possibilities through the presence of sound bands, radio programs, antennas, photocells, and oscillators: depending on the arrangement of the technical media and movement of the dancers, the sound image of the performance changed. Visual materials formed further components of a border-crossing artistic process. The idea of collage was central to *Variations V* and its montage was multi-layered as the visual materials represented 'assemblage' in themselves. Commercials,

animation films, feature film scenes, and documentary footage were projected onto the horizon by means of film and slide projections, detaching from and overlapping each other.

A further level of fragmentation occurred through distortion of the images by the use of templates that partially concealed the visual material. On another level, images were projected one on top of the other, so that the different components appeared spatially offset but simultaneously present. In the performance,



Image: Yvonne Rainer and Merce Cunningham in *Variations V* (1966). Copyright Cunningham.

the aesthetic idea of an expanded space of complex interaction was also implemented in the physical movement. Daily routines, ritualized body movements, gymnastics, and acrobatics, as well as dance movements and phases of physical stillness in fixed positions, were mutually interrelated. Ritual became dance and dance turned into ritual.

Cunningham developed his notion of dance as social vision through the movements of the performers continuously creating new alliances. Changing collectives on stage interacted with each other and shaped the progression of visual and sound effects during the performances. The idea of an extended community was integrated into the stage set-up, including work by such different artists as Nam Jun Paik, John Cage, and Gus Solomons Jr., and was further expanded by embedding the dancing into a network of technology. In *Variations V*, almost the entire performance space, as well as the props used, were electronically networked. Through contact microphones, a plant, a table, chairs and cushions were connected to an electronic sound system so that different sounds and sound sequences were caused by the touch or movement of the dancers. The bicycle that Cunningham rode through the room also triggered sounds via electronic connections. The dance and movement produced tones and reversed the traditional dependence of the dancer on the music. The movement of the body did not take place according to a rhythm prescribed by the music but according to the structure provided by choreography. The dancer's body became the central propelling force of performance and interaction. [7] Cunningham's vision and practice embraced a heightened level of intersubjectivity in which the relations among and between the dancers determined the integration of everyday ritual, ritualistic patterns, electronically networked stages, and choreographic structures in an experimental process that expanded dance into a social, aesthetic, and technological event.

Concluding Reflections

The above examples illustrate that many of the dance art practices of the 1960s raised awareness of the need to establish collaborative creativity

in the art world. Many of these collaborations made it equally clear that technology could help fuse art practices with everyday practices and thus meld artistic creativity with social principles. Dance and performance could move beyond the realm of aesthetics and leisure to function as a corrective to a world that had slipped out of balance, to long established power hierarchies in colonial and neocolonial worlds, and to blind and passive submission to technology.

Although the utopian concept of the Saint Simonists explained technology and art as elementary components of progress, the relationship between art and technology has not always been a harmonious one. Artists, like John Ruskin, from countries where the industrial revolution began, categorically rejected the mechanical production of art and craft. However, around the turn of the 20th century, the machine became the central concern and symbol of aesthetic creation within art. Different vanguard groups formulated designs for an aesthetic of the machine that made technology, although in very different ways, the central aspect of artistic design and manufacture. The futurists glorified and idealized machines in visual apotheoses, the surrealists associated it with the powers of the unconscious, the Dadaists faced it with irony, and the Bauhaus artists strove for a compromise between aesthetic and mechanical production. Finally, Alexander Calder's experiments in kinetic art showed the aesthetic importance of technological renewal for vanguard art projects that expressed a mobility-oriented development of cultures, collectives, and communities. [8]

Both technological and utopian elements as they appear in art practices in the 1960s in the U.S. are largely free of historical reference. Still, a special feature is the combination of technology and ritual, which creates a bridge between archetypal phenomena and modern technical developments. Many artists embraced logical models as a welcome link between the technological world and tribal culture. The combination of ritual and technique appears as a critique of a purely technologically-oriented social order, because through the interaction of ritual and technology, the latter is integrated into a social process with new social and aesthetic significance. In the works of artists

like John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Carolee Schneeman, Deborah Hay, Nam June Paik, Sun Ra, Yvonne Rainer, Robert Rauschenberg, Yoko Ono, and Weng Ying Tsai, ritual and technology are playfully integrated into artistic and social action.

Ritual patterns of action often formed the basic framework of processual art development through arts media renewal, extending Dewey's vision of creativity into a new epoch of technological revolution. In the sixties, the structuralist ethnological view of cultural processes was the matrix by which many artists in the U.S. oriented themselves to the ritualistic requirements of "primitive" cultural circles. Claude Levi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), *La pensée sauvage* (1962), and *Le cru et le cuit* (1964) provided a structuralist view of cultures and found wide circulation in American artists' circles; they became central texts for the redefinition of culture. As Varnedoe explains, "[t]hese writings were influential in both style and substance. They framed a strongly felt critique of the pretensions of modern technological society, and a countervailing appreciation of primitive life and thought, in a tone of intellectual rigor free from sentiment or taint or romance" (662). Lévi-Strauss's vision is far from linking the "primitive" with elements of magic and hallucination, such as appear in Surrealism. Rather, he emphasizes the presence of structures within so-called "primitive forms" of culture that differ from their scientific-technological counterpart in western cultures, but nonetheless are logically constructed according to the ideas of their cultural circle. These alternative structures served also as guidance for logically-based models and choreography linking the technological world and tribal culture in postmodern dance.

What distinguishes the experiments of postmodern dance in the 1960s from earlier artistic fascinations with technology is what I call a distinct dimension of intersubjectivity, a mutual relationality of bodies, which includes the handling and integration of technologies in the performative process. It is the element of intersubjective connectivity that accompanies the interaction with technologies and guides and controls the processes of technologizing dance. In Cunningham's choreographic approach, the

dancing body is the mobile center for interaction with the world and others. As a mobile, relational, and kinetic expression, the dancing body gains agency that, according to Cunningham's choreography, becomes a leading component in the design of new aesthetic and social orders. Thus, on an arguably utopian level, he designs the idea of a collective of individuals. [9]

In his reflection on the dance performance *Crisis* (1960), Cunningham emphasizes that the group performance is based on a dialogic and dialectic process of bonding and liberating the dancing bodies:

An adventure in togetherness ... I decided to allow for the dancers (there were five, four girls and one man) contacting each other, not only through holding and being held, but also by outside means. I used elastic bands around a wrist, an arm, a waist, or a leg. By one dancer inserting a hand under the band on another they were attached but also at the same time instant free. Where these contacts came in the continuity, or where they were broken, was left to chance in the composition and not to personal psychology or physical pressure... From this I made the action. The gamuts of movement for each dancer were individualized to a great degree. ("Merce Cunningham," 122)

In Cunningham's choreography, the dancing body becomes *homo respondens*, creating intersubjective relations and relations to environment. By means of performing positions and movements, the dancers shape the environment, giving impulse to human constellation, light, sound, and music within an electronically networked space of interaction. [10]

Cunningham and his dancers develop a spectrum of almost unlimited movement possibilities within the dance performance. As he emphasizes the body as human technological force, the spine forms the mobile core of a polycentric understanding of motion and action:

The possibilities of movement are enormous and limitless, obviously, but the understanding of organization of

movement is the high point of the dancer's craft. If the spine is taken as the center of radius, much as the animal makes it his physical conscience, then the action proceeds from the center outwards, and also can reverse the process and proceed from outward back to the center ("The Function of a Technique").

Let us assume that creativity is essential for humanity in the confrontation with crises like global warming, famine, pandemics, sexism, and racism. Let us further project that, while the creativity of each individual is important, social change is ultimately achieved through collaborative creativity. Looking at the examples from postmodern dance, we can see how important the fields of artistic creativity are for the design of new visions and models of social interaction beyond the arts' role in entertainment and leisure. Art in its aesthetic and performative quality is an irreplaceable laboratory for social interaction. Art, dance, literature, and music should receive far greater attention in research and social discourse about social crisis and redemption. Postmodern dance as an intersubjective link, as a meeting place of people and technology, and as a bridge between aesthetics and social interaction may well serve as a blueprint for creating new models of collaborative creativity with pragmatic ends.

Endnotes

[1] In an interview with Douglas Davis, Billy Klüver says the following about his relation to technology, art, and the world: "Duchamp's commitment to reality is now becoming accepted. The Bauhaus and the Futurists were, I think, involved with the process of seeing and with preserving certain idealistic notions about the world. The function of technology as a material is not to put previous esthetic concepts into new forms but to provide the basis for a new esthetic, one that has an organic relationship with the contemporary world" (qtd. in Davis 138).

[2] For Dewey, the everyday event is the beginning of any aesthetic experience and subsequent systematics. He emphasizes: "In order to understand the esthetic in its ultimate and approved forms, one must begin with it in the raw; in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens: the sights that hold the crowd—the fire engine rushing by; the machines excavating enormous holes in the earth, the human fly climbing the steeple-side; the men perched high in the air on girders,

throwing and catching red hot bolts. The sources of art in human experience will be learned by him who sees how the tense grace of the ball player infects the onlooking crowd; who notes the delight of the housewife in tending her plants, and the intent interest of her goodman in tending the patch of green in front of the house" (Dewey 527-28).

[3] See Glăveanu 2019.

[4] The body also repeatedly takes on the form of a sculpture during solo dances as in, for example, Aileen Passloff's *Structures* (1960).

[5] In this respect, Anna Halprin's experimental dance works were direction-oriented from the mid-1950s onwards, and the choreographers were repeatedly encouraged to dance in public. See also Vásárhelyi and Sunberg 1992, 67-74.

[6] In a sign of social and cultural protest, a large number of African American dance groups emerged during the Civil Rights Movement.

[7] See also Kostelanetz 1983, 107-108. Kostelanetz sees Cunningham's avant-garde elements as the third step from innovation within the Modern Dance tradition. At the beginning, Isadora deviates from stylistic means of classical ballet through the introduction of free-form gestures and a new foot technique that allowed the dancers to lay their feet flatly, which in turn triggered the development of a choreography that set themselves apart from all other forms of dance. The second stage was developed primarily by Martha Graham, who created theories of dance movement in components as contraction and release. Both Duncan and Graham, however, adhered to conventional tonal music, and primarily the rhythm of the dance movement. Cunningham broke with the musical as well as dance rhythmic tradition.

[8] See also Popper 1975, 28.

[9] See also Richard Kostelanetz 1983, 111. Kostelanetz mentions that Cunningham's dancers rarely look the same and differentiate themselves strongly by different clothes. Both the outward appearance and various activities act as a sign of individuality.

[10] In this analysis, I refer to video recordings of *Variations V* (1965) that I have acquired from the *Merce Cunningham Dance Company* in New York. The film version was completed in 1966 under the direction of Arne Amborn and close cooperation with the Norddeutschen Rundfunk in Hamburg and the Sveriges Radio/TV from Sweden. Introduction written by Hansjörg Pauli.

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