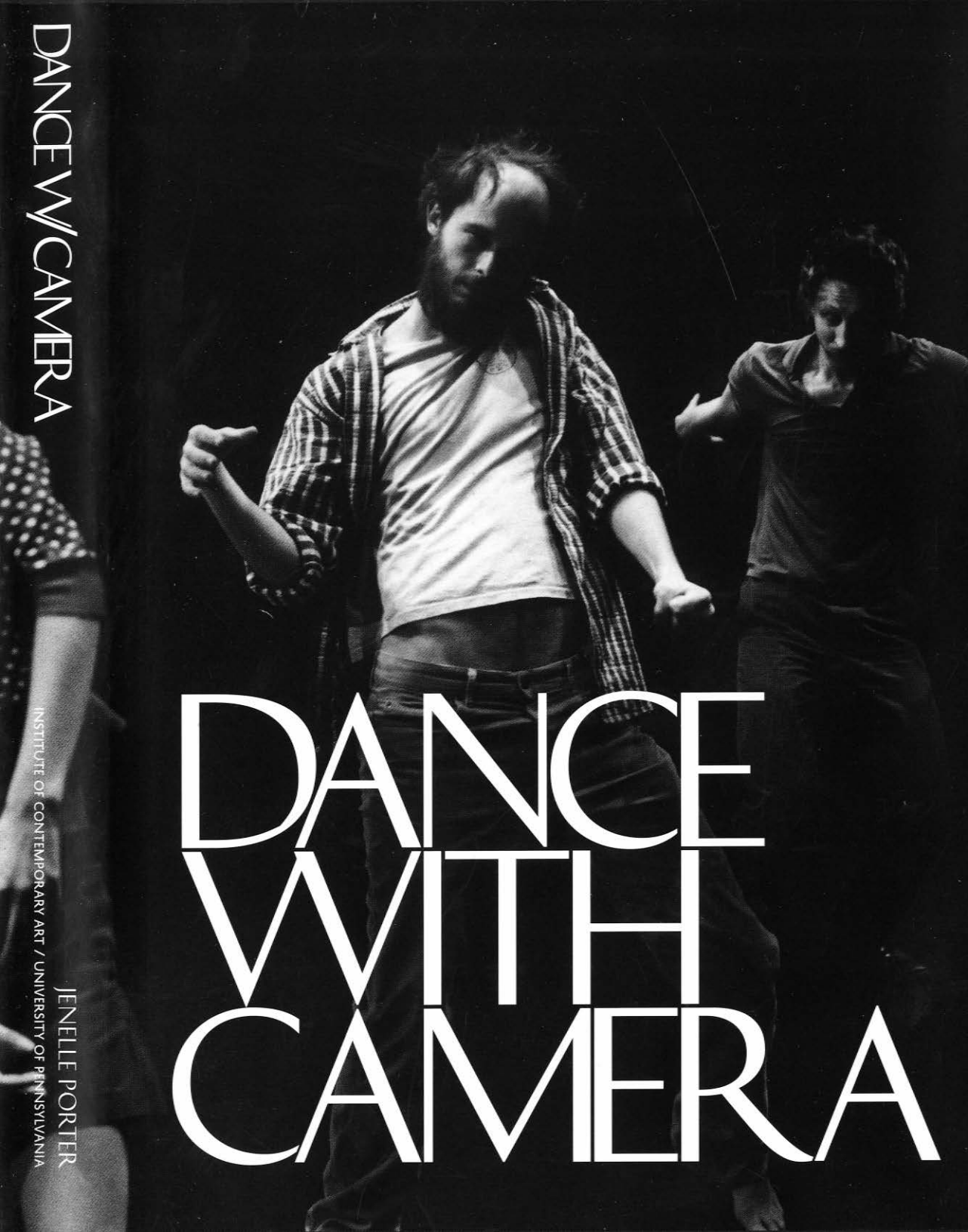
DANCE W/CAMERA
DANCE
WITH
CAMERA
JENELLE PORTER
INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART / UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

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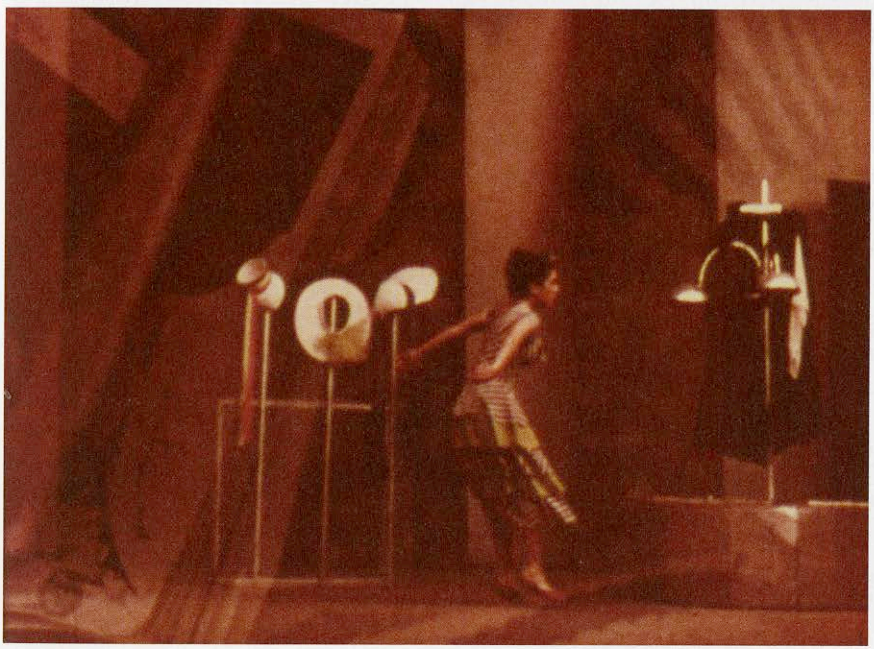
SPACE

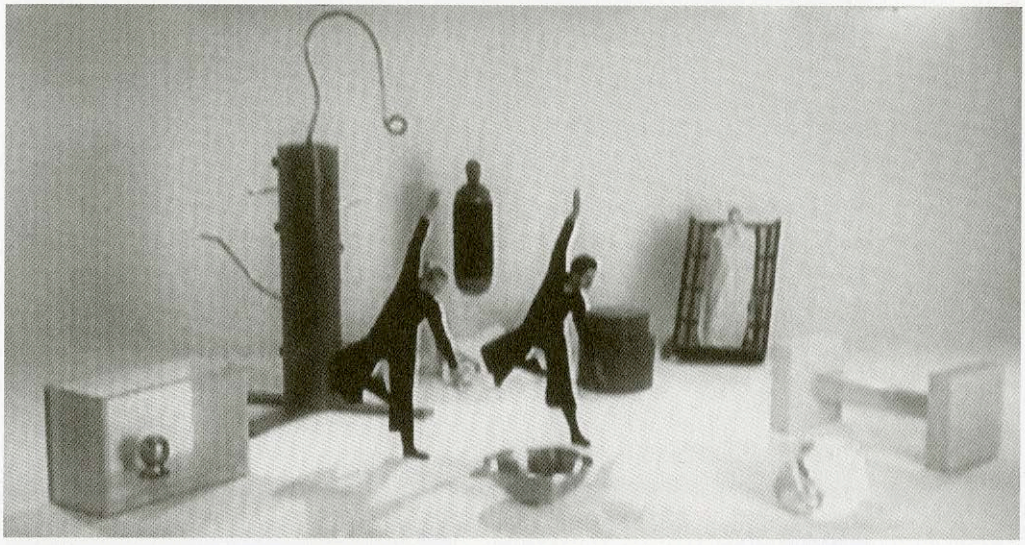


top and bottom: Sidney Peterson and Hy Hirsh, stills from *Clinic of Stumble*, 1947

Experimental filmmaker Sidney Peterson's first film, *Potted Psalm* (1947), made with James Broughton, unintentionally instigated the nation's first university filmmaking course, which Peterson was invited to teach at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute). The class was known as Workshop 20, and Peterson made films alongside his students. Like Maya Deren on the East Coast, Peterson was influenced by European surrealist films of the 1920s and 1930s. And like her, he was instrumental in developing an avant-garde cinema. His films portray dream states inflected by the psychological landscape of the postwar era. Though several of his films have remained influential touchstones, almost nothing has been written about *Clinic of Stumble* (1947), save for what Peterson himself has authored.[69] Even he is vague: "I am not sure how *Clinic of Stumble* was accomplished except that it began with a charming dance by Marian Van Tuyl and I shot it with Hy Hirsh and there were problems, as always, of translating the optic of theater into that of film. It is all too easy to lose a good dance in a bad film and have nothing. We took a chance with superimposition and were surprised by the resultant affirmation of a picture plane. Picture planes work in the flatland of the screen. If the dancer's conception of space is violated, so be it. A movie must be a movie, must be, must be. Its frame is not a proscenium."[70] *Clinic of Stumble* is a short color film composed entirely of layered images: three women dance, ride on old-fashioned children's scooters, and read magazines. The dreamlike spatial environment is achieved by the repetition of at least two superimposed frames, as well as through slow motion. The overall effect is hypnotic and evocative. Peterson made one other dance film with Van Tuyl called *Horror Dream* (1947), with a score by John Cage.

The emotion of dance and the often-charged spaces in which it is set are critical to several works in the exhibition. Part of a large interactive sculpture installation called *Test Room Containing Multiple Stimuli Known to Elicit Curiosity and Manipulatory Responses* (1999), Mike Kelley's *A Dance Incorporating Movements Derived from Experiments by Harry F. Harlow and Choreographed in the Manner of Martha Graham* is the last sequence of an hour-long video made using the props installed in the "test room." Kelley used black-and-white film for this final section to reference dancer-choreographer Martha Graham's gorgeously filmed dance works of the late 1950s and early 1960s: *Night Journey* (1961), directed by Alexander Hammid, and *Appalachian Spring* (1958), directed by Peter Glushanok. Made for television, the two films were enormously influential, largely because of their high-quality presentation and the rigor with which Graham's live performances were committed to film. Kelley was also drawn to the way a seamless backdrop scrim was used in these films to transform the stage into a depthless space.

A Dancer's World (1957), the most influential of Glushanok's films, is a sort of tutorial with Graham as grande dame. The film opens with dancers warming up amid camera lights and cables. It cuts to a dressing room, where Graham prepares



Mike Kelley, still from *A Dance Incorporating Movements Derived from Experiments by Harry F. Harlow and Choreographed in the Manner of Martha Graham*, 1999

for her role as Jocasta in *Night Journey*. While she attaches an enormous Noguchi-designed ornament to her equally enormous chignon, she elucidates to the camera what dance is, what theater is, and what it means to be a performer: "Either the foot is pointed or it is not. No amount of dreaming will point it for you." Graham was one of the most important choreographers of the twentieth century. Her signature movement is defined by dramatic expansions and contractions of the body, feet that grip the floor, and high (Greek) mythological dramas.

The dancers in Kelley's film perform Graham-style movement. Two dancers, a man and a woman, dressed head to toe in black, enter left. The camera position is that of a surveillance camera, above and distant. The film is silent, which further enhances the faraway feeling of the activity occurring in the room, as if viewed through two-way glass. A seamless white backdrop evokes a sense of an endless room bounded only by the frame of the lens. It is a theater, but it is not a stage. The dancers move around the strange objects in the room for a few minutes before taking turns physically engaging them: various objects linked in their formal and conceptual existence to sculptor Isamu Noguchi's legendary set and prop designs for Graham. She used Noguchi's abstract sculpture props as

still from *Night Journey*, 1961 (dir. Alexander Hammid)

objects that could be picked up, moved about, even worn on the body. They did not illustrate the story so much as heighten the unconscious experience of the mind. As Noguchi said, "I believe we had to find a dance theater with an *emotionally charged* space, which, of course, is sculpture. It is the sculpture of space."[71]

Kelley's other titular reference is to Harry Harlow, known for his primate experiments of the 1950s and 1960s in which the nurturing response was linked to the mother's warm body, rather than to her ability to give nourishment, as previously thought. For Kelley, the most memorable aspect of these experiments was the image of the strange surrogate monkey mama that Harlow used, which resembled 1940s modernist sculpture more than anything monkeylike. For Kelley, such psychological testing said more about human behavior than that of animals. "Looking at Harlow's work as a kind of highly melodramatic and psychological theater—as lurid as any Tennessee Williams play—it is not such a great leap to Martha Graham's dance theater work."[72] And the work of both was focused on eliciting involuntary responses, Graham through the emotion of dance, and Harlow through the study of primates.

Like Kelley's video, Luis Jacob's *A Dance for Those of Us Whose Hearts Have Turned to Ice, Based on the Choreography of Françoise Sullivan and the Sculpture of Barbara Hepworth* (2007) draws from two disparate sources, folding each into an intricately layered and evocative dance film. The descriptive title references Jacob's desire "to use dance-language as a way to summon an internationally recognized or 'universal' abstract artist like Barbara Hepworth, and a regionally recognized or 'marginal' dance artist like Françoise Sullivan (who, as a Canadian and French-Canadian artist is underappreciated even locally, at home)."[73] Jacob's work is an homage to the social liberation philosophies of these two contemporaries from the mid-twentieth century. Sullivan's *Danse dans la neige* inspired Jacob's snowy setting. This touchstone work was performed for the camera in the winter of 1948. For it, Sullivan traveled to Quebec's snowy countryside with a photographer and a filmmaker. The film was lost, but photographs survive of a performance that Sullivan described as "just dancing with my feeling of the landscape. I let the rhythms flow. I perceived the space of the day—cut it and shaped it."[74] Also inspirational to Jacob was Sullivan's text "Dance and Hope," her signatory contribution to *Le Refus Global* (*Total Refusal*), an antiestablishment manifesto released in 1948 by a group led by Paul-Émile Borduas. Sullivan's text contains such nuggets as: "Dance is a reflex,

Maurice Perron, Françoise Sullivan in *Danse dans la neige*, 1948

top and bottom: Luis Jacob, stills from *A Dance for Those of Us Whose Hearts Have Turned to Ice, Based on the Choreography of Françoise Sullivan and the Sculpture of Barbara Hepworth*, 2007

a spontaneous expression of strongly felt emotions. Man has found in dance a way of satisfying his desire for harmony with the universe. Assimilating himself with the movement, he becomes the toy of the four dimensions."[75]

In Jacob's silent dance film, Keith Cole delivers an emotionally wrought performance.[76] The experience of watching his awkward but sincere dance heightens our empathic reaction, and perhaps empathy will carry us past particularities: why is this ungainly, naked guy dancing in the snow? The environment is hostile, and Cole's movement is charged, but there is also humor in the absurdity of what he is doing. At one point, he lies on the ground, legs up, enacting a birth. The camera

angle is not flattering. He then grabs two T-shirts hanging from a tree and dances with them, an effect somewhere between a strange trio and Loie Fuller's skirt dances (Fuller was notably one of the first dancers to take advantage of the then new film technology). For Jacob, the T-shirts are also proxies for Hepworth and Sullivan.

From snow-covered hills to school hallways, *Dance with Camera* includes works in which dance is a tool to inhabit space. In 1997, composer and filmmaker Thierry de Mey collaborated with choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker to make the dance film *Rosas danst Rosas*.[77] The film transfers the original dance from the space of the stage to an institutional space, the RITO school in Leuven, Belgium, a building famously designed by Henry van de Velde. The building's clean lines and huge, glass-paned windows and walls generate a unique echo to De Keersmaeker's minimal, repetitive dance phrases. Patterns and lines in the dance repeat patterns and lines of the architecture. The camera captures the military precision of the movements, sometimes moving close to catch facial gestures. Additional performers sometimes join the four women (in fact, the joiners are the four original performers of the stage version) as they move about rooms, hallways, and courtyards. *Rosas danst Rosas* is divided into four sections—Floor, Chairs, Building, Inner Court—in which the four identically dressed performers often move in unison, or at times, perform the same movements in staggered phrases. The machinelike percussive music and the sounds of the dancers' breathing, footfalls, and contacts with objects all evoke

Thierry de Mey, stills from *Rosas danst Rosas*, 1997

Valda Satterfield in Yvonne Rainer's film *Lives of Performers*, 1972

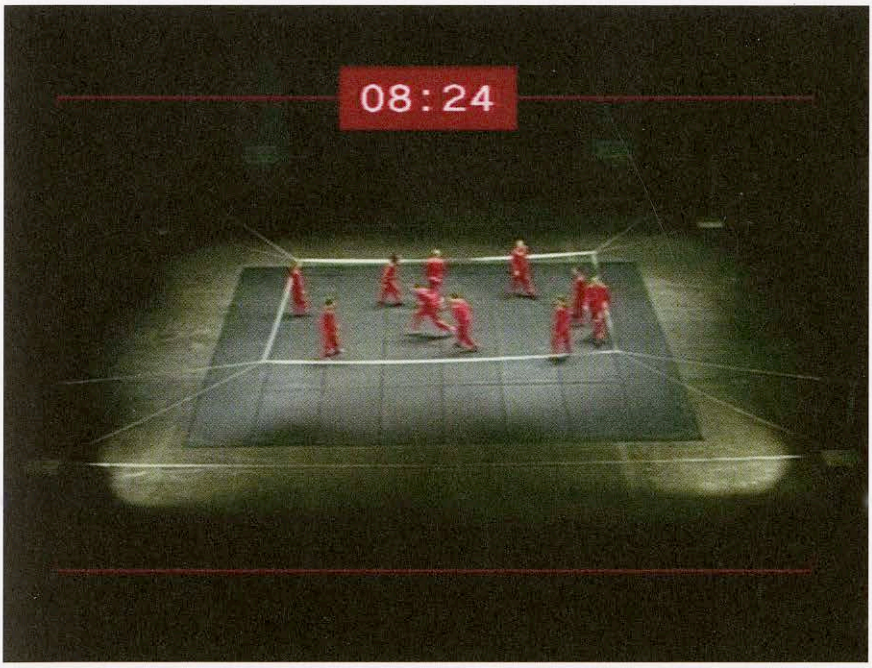
a heightened drama that offers a counterpoint to the minimal gestures.

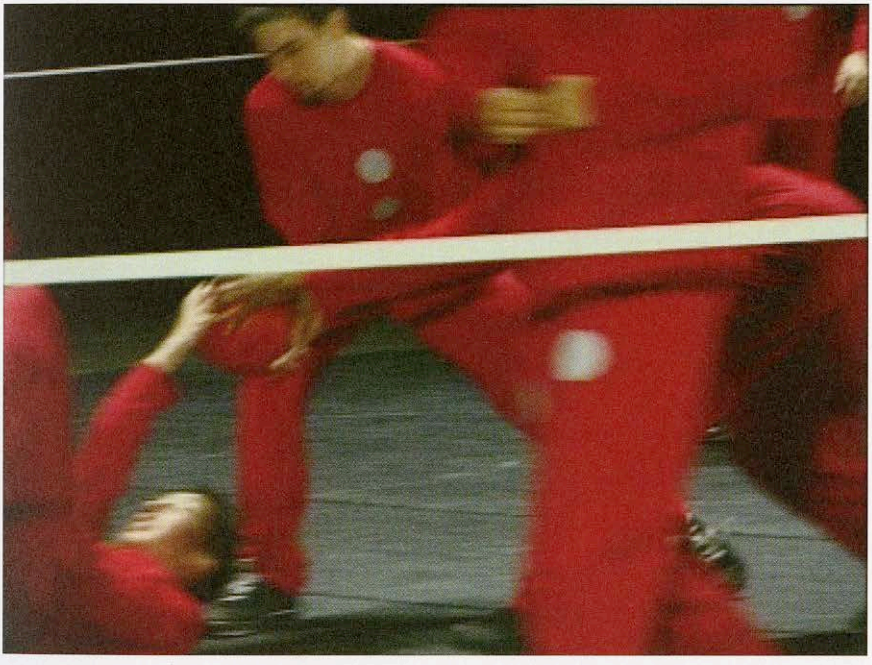
Sharon Lockhart's *Goshogaoka* (1998) is set in a multipurpose school gym/theater/assembly hall, tracing a line straight back to the Judson Dance Theater, though Lockhart's gym is in Japan, where she was working on a grant-funded artist residency. "Its dual purpose seemed perfect for the kind of film I wanted to make. Essentially, the proscenium defines the movement of the girls; it announces the film as a fiction, as staging, as theater."[78] *Goshogaoka* "studies" the practice drills of a teenage girls basketball team. Twenty-four girls go about various warm-ups, skill exhibitions, and cooldowns in what appears to be a typical practice session. But no baskets are attempted, no scrimmages played. After some time, one recognizes, albeit in a vague way, that the drills are stylized, and in fact dancer Stephen Galloway choreographed them based on the girls' movements during their practices. This procedure, like the setting, again evokes the kind of dependence on, and elevation of, pedestrian movement characteristic of Judson choreographers. Here, everyday movement—a basketball practice—becomes dancerly. Furthermore, Judson influences can be found in one particular sequence in which the girls perform ball tricks, a direct reference to Valda Satterfield's fixation on the ball in her hand in Yvonne Rainer's seminal film *Lives of Performers* of 1972.[79]

Goshogaoka unfolds in six, ten-minute sequences, the length of a 16mm film reel. The six sections, or acts, as Lockhart has called them, feature different kinds of movements, all of which define the frame of the camera. The film is extremely structured, not only by the precision drills, but by the static camera situated at a considerable distance from a proscenium stage at the back of the gym, creating an intense depth of field. The camera frame is centered left to right. The bottom edge of the stage it faces is centered horizontally, bisecting the image, with shiny gym floor at bottom, red-curtained stage at top. But for all *Goshogaoka*'s structuralist leanings, there are moments of awkward grace and chance. Rigid formations fall away as personalities come through.

The first section opens in the empty gym. There is a low, tonal sound. After a few minutes a fast blur of bodies crosses very close to the camera from left to right. This line of girls now enters right to left far from the camera, near the stage, causing the curtain to flutter. They circle the perimeter again, mostly off camera, but when they reach the center of the stage they turn and come toward the camera, lining up in a grid. The strict formations of nearly identical girls recall Busby Berkeley's patterns

top and bottom: Sharon Lockhart, stills from *Goshogaoka*, 1998





top and bottom: Uri Tzaig, stills from ∞, 1998

of bodies in motion. The second section features the girls moving in pairs. They perform variations of movements as they head toward the camera and away again. In the third act, we get to know the individual girls. Donning red or blue tops, like those used to differentiate teams during a practice, they perform ball tricks. Solo and in duos, they pass the ball around their heads or legs. They fumble, they giggle a little. They then perform a number of passing drills, using the entire space described by the camera frame (and off camera). The end of this section is the midway point for the film, and is the most choreographed of the film. The girls huddle, and then do a very short sort of scrimmage dance. In act four, one girl stands still in the middle of the gym. Girls behind her toss balls aloft, moving closer to her. In act five, the girls are dressed in forest green warm-up pants and jackets. The scene opens with all standing close to and facing the stage in a line. They leave one by one and walk toward the camera, find a place on the floor, take off their shoes, and massage each other's legs and feet. In the final section, the girls walk along the painted lines on the floor, recalling Nauman's "exercise" on the perimeter lines of a square.

In 1998, Uri Tzaig created a work titled ∞, a video of a game he created in conjunction with dancers from the Montpellier City Center for Dance in France. Two teams of five players each, a mix of men and women, wear identical red uniforms consisting of long pants and long-sleeved T-shirts. Each player has four white round stickers attached to his or her clothing, and these are moved about the player's body as a means of keeping "score" of the action. What transpires is one of the most elegant games ever played. The one-ball game takes place on a flat court measuring 40 by 53 feet. As the game unfolds, the boundary ropes fluctuate at a consistent rate, contracting during the first half, and expanding during the second. The shifting boundaries force the players/dancers to constantly reevaluate the playing field and their movements within it. During the two fifteen-minute halves, the ball must remain in constant motion and must be prevented from landing in the hands of the opposing team. ∞ is essentially an extravagant game of "keep away," an endless game hinted at by the title's symbol. But as the game progresses, certain formalities of improvised dance movement are dispensed with as the players become more spontaneous and competitive.

The video of the dance/game utilizes two different views: an overhead surveying shot and a close-range one in which the camera follows the ball's movement as it passes from hand to hand. The two parts are edited together, one after another, in fifteen-second intervals. The overhead shot is displayed in fast motion with a timer centered at the top of the frame. We can see the general action of the dance/game itself, but the grace of movement is erased by the acceleration. The other sequence uses two angles within it: one eye-level and one tight shot from above. This sequence exists to highlight details of the game, mostly in slow motion (though sometimes in real time or played in reverse), creating a dazzling red blur of activity. Tzaig mixes a cold, scientific sequence with a warm, passionate one. The soundtrack

captures the dancers' breathing and foot sounds as rubber-soled shoes squeak across the floor—an aural document of motion. Projected billboard-size in the exhibition space, ∞ is a stunning, kinetic experience.[80]

Color in space is used to great effect in *C.L.U.E., Part 1* (2007), a video by dance duo robbinschilds and photographer A. L. Steiner. It begins with two dancers dressed in blue (Layla Childs and Sonya Robbins) falling to the ground face down, then sweeping the sandy surface with their hair. They are breathing in this space, taking it up into their movement systems, and often tripping themselves up with the overwhelmingness of it all. Long phrases of dance alternate with quick edits that move us around the color spectrum and to different locations. There is a lot of downward vertical motion that sinks the body into the earth: splashing (aqua) into a pool, falling (red) in front of a minimart, rolling (green) off a bed in a mattress store, sliding (green) down a sand pile. There is also emerging, from the ocean (purple) like mermaids, or just-born (nude) from the inside of a hollowed-out fallen redwood. There is jumping with coffee cups in hand (blue), signaling with scarves at a radio tower (white), distributing "memos" among the yucca (blue), and running topless from massive office towers. There is a disembodied hand movement floating above an ocean valley, and a duet (white) in a parking lot.

C.L.U.E. is a dance video cum road trip, a site-specific dance with countless locations, from the man-made (parking lots, auto junkyards, abandoned buildings) to the natural (salt flats, ocean shores, high desert). All are explored through

A.L. Steiner + robbinschilds, still from *C.L.U.E., Part 1*, 2007

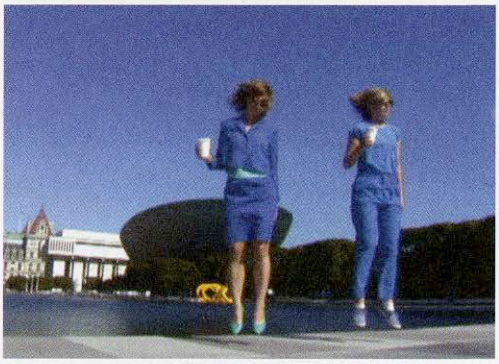
A.L. Steiner + robbinschilds, still from *C.L.U.E., Part 1*, 2007

movement by the monochromatically clad duo. Their outfits are recognizable as fashionless thrift-store assemblages complete with beaded necklaces and handbags used as props. The choreography is characterized by touch, connection: they hold hands, stand together, lean into each other. Movement is choreographed for the landscape, as in Jacob's work, and the only way for others to witness the performance is to see it through the camera device. Steiner's dazzling camera work and editing truly capture the road-trip dance experience. But this work cannot be broken down into an analysis of who performed which task (camera, editing, dancing, driving, music) because the collaboration is utterly seamless, so much so that it sings. Other collaborators include the Seattle-based rock band Kinski, whose songs were used to dance to on location and in the final edited video, and AJ Blandford, who also provided camera work. Even the costumes and the locations that provided inspiration for the costume changes and choreography can be seen as collaborators in the video.

C.L.U.E.'s end title reads "Color Location Ultimate Experience," then "Part 1" (a sequel is coming, perhaps?), then "A Motion Picture by..." reminding us that this is a picture of motion, a picture in motion, a picture that moves. *C.L.U.E.* is an exuberant dance video, and it is a long music video. In the slow moments, it is languorous and hypnotic; in the fast ones, you'll want to jump around the room. Go ahead. *C.L.U.E.* is influenced by and exploits music video's mediums: music, editing, dancing, seductive locations. Of course, it's not a music video (nor just a

video with a killer soundtrack), but rather a magnificent video of a dance.

Video dance is a specialized genre that crisscrosses dance with visual art, video art, film, performance art, and theater. In video dance (called variously dance for camera, choreocinema, screen dance, film dance, or cinedance), choreography is made specifically for the moving-picture medium, whether film or video. I'll use the term as a catchall phrase, since most works now use video technology. Video dance is distinguished by several characteristics. Such works are typically initiated by dancers/choreographers who either double as director or collaborate with a director to record their own choreography for the lens. The genre explores the relationship between dance and video, and specifically, a recording medium's ability to present dance—but these are not record films. Video dance works often adapt theatrical aspects of live dance performance: a translation of stage-based choreographies, an audience-positioned camera, and a skew toward narrative. There are also plenty of examples that smash these conventions. Though there are several outstanding self-identified filmmakers in the field, most works are produced by dancers interested in exploring a new presentation platform. Films and videos are shown publicly at numerous international screening events such as the annual "Dance on Camera Festival" in New York, which began in 1971, sometimes on television, and increasingly on the Internet.



top and bottom: A.L. Steiner + robbinschilds, stills from *C.L.U.E., Part 1*, 2007

Amy Greenfield was one of the pioneers in the field of video dance. She trained as a dancer, but early on turned to film as the sole stage on which to present choreography. She has created numerous works in both video and film, and in 1983, organized an important festival of screenings called "Filmdance" on the subject of dance for the camera. In her essay for the festival catalogue, Greenfield summarized what such work was about: "A filmdance is the opposite of the documentation of live dance. It is a film in which the filmmaker/choreographer transforms the 'ground rules' of dance time and space through the kinetic use of camera lens, camera angles, camera motion, light, optical techniques, and 'montage' or film editing. Through such filmic transformations of the human body in motion, the collaboration between film and dance creates a *third* experience, a new kind of dance often totally unrelated

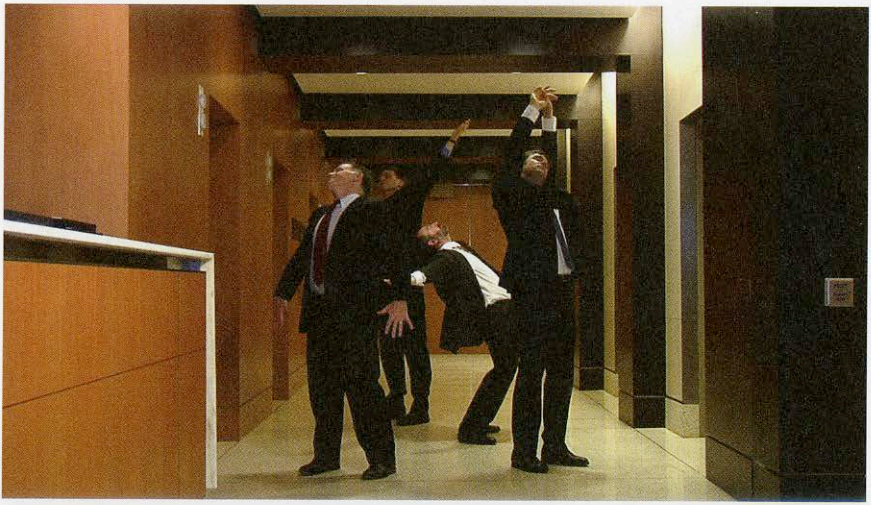
top and bottom: Amy Greenfield, stills from *Transport*, 1971

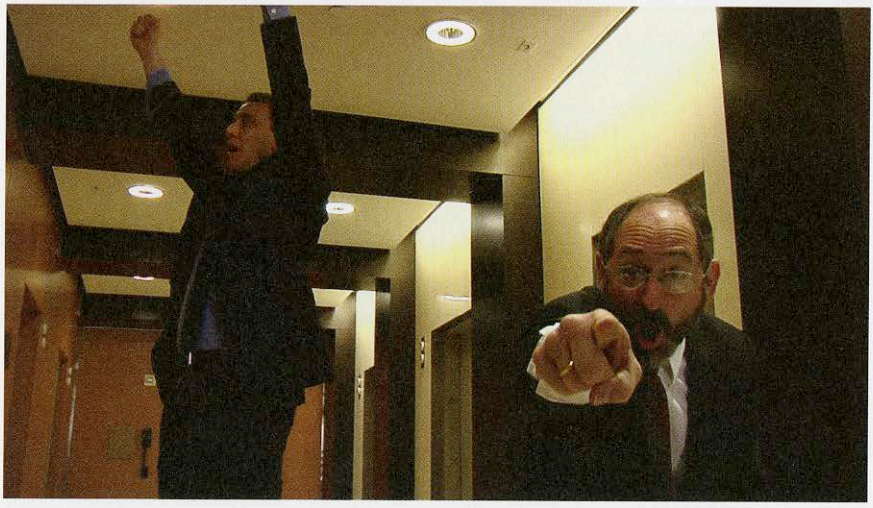
to live dance."[81] Greenfield's early film *Transport* (1971) offers a glimpse of what that era of the dance-for-camera genre looked like. At the time of its making, there had been very few camera dances, besides those by Maya Deren and Shirley Clarke, and almost none made by dancers themselves. Merce Cunningham did not begin making video dances until 1974, and then in collaboration with filmmaker Charles Atlas.[82] Like Clarke, Greenfield was a dancer who picked up the camera, but unlike Clarke, she was also a performer in her own works.

Transport's content and aesthetic were influenced by the visual vocabulary of the day. In this short color film, limp bodies are constantly hoisted into the air, creating a rhythm of dead weight and buoyancy. The camera moves under and over the lifted body. Here, Greenfield transforms into dance movement the most prevalent imagery of the time: news footage of the Vietnam War; protesters going limp while being arrested; and America's then recent moon landings and expanded space travel. There are other remarkable parallels with land art and film. Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) film and Michelangelo Antonioni's famous desert orgy scene in *Zabriskie Point* (1970) come to mind. Working as a filmmaker does—shooting over many days, transforming nonlinear takes into a linear film in the editing suite—Greenfield used all of this visual input to craft a kinetic exploration of the body in space and time. Aside from Greenfield, the performers were not trained dancers, for she wanted the dance film to be very raw. The dirt mounds and bareness of the location amplify this sensation, as does the minimal soundtrack. Created by recording the sound of the film's projection on a screen using an optical sound synthesizer, the monotonous, high-pitched tones build to a spacey quality, like a radio transmission from the moon.

Ann Carlson and Mary Ellen Strom's collaborative video *Sloss, Kerr, Rosenberg & Moore* (2007) examines the body in an interior space. Four men stand four-square between elevator banks in a lobby. They are dressed in business suits and ties, and the video bears their names in conventional law-firm style. The formal composition echoes the extreme symmetry of the architectural setting, a kind of "hall of power" lobby. The men begin a series of intricate movements, virtually the same but tailored to their individual bodies and movement styles. Frontal views alternate with 45-degree-angle match cuts and close-ups, creating spatial patterning and rhythm. While dancing, the men create a vocal score from chants and outbursts, slaps, laughing, mouth sounds, and breathing. At one point, they pretend to fly; at another, they call a dog in four different ways. One shouts, "Who trained this dog?!"

Sloss, Kerr, Rosenberg & Moore was created in collaboration with the four men on-screen. They *are* lawyers, litigators to be exact. The stylized dance is based on their workaday activities, including the speech and movement found in courtrooms and boardrooms. It is a performance that began a number of years ago, choreographed by Carlson, and over the years it has become something of a contemporary folk dance: the men have performed it at family functions, a sociofamilial ritual for our times, brought out especially to celebrate moments of social change such as weddings, brisses, graduations, and the like. As well, it puts the men's daily lives on display: the emotions, the struggles, the dramas, and the absurdities of working within the juridical system. The dance allows a moment of play. The fact of four lawyers dancing in a lobby runs counter to conventions of expected behavior, and their freedom in dancing creates a kind of giddiness in us, the spectators. *Sloss, Kerr, Rosenberg & Moore* is a portrait of male subjectivity and masculinity; of work and





top and bottom: Ann Carlson and Mary Ellen Strom, stills from *Sloss, Kerr, Rosenberg & Moore*, 2007

its physical manifestation on the body. It transforms everyday people into dancers. And it is a comedic dance for the camera along the lines of Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton, in whose films movement was funny because of its utter authenticity.