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Improvisation

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Trisha Brown: Dance within Art

Trisha Brown proved to the world that the art of dance movement in the choreographic process travels far beyond the limits of the stage setting, possessing the capability to be transformed into physical, tangible art, such as what you would see in an art gallery or exhibit. Brown broke boundaries and made her work known by separating herself from the normal standards of her day. Standards that had been prevalent at the time and for centuries prior include the presentation of dance in a production format or as a concert work, viewable to a live audience. Drawings would not normally be considered a form of dancing however, Brown ended that misconception and decided to break the mold by not simply just plugging herself and her work into the formula of what was defined as dance.

Trisha Brown was an influential avant-garde and post-modern choreographer of the late 20th and early 21st century who greatly had an impact on the art and dance environments. Brown was born in 1936 in Aberdeen, Washington and later studied at and graduated from the Dance Department at Mills College in Oakland, California in 1958. Shortly thereafter, Brown arrived in New York City in 1961, to continue her training in pursuit of starting her career within the dance field. Here, she became a founding member of the Judson Dance Theater and a founding member of the Grand Union, which was just the beginning of her lengthy career and professional work. Brown gained new opportunities and experiences and studied under renowned dance choreographers throughout her lifetime including, Louis Horst, Merce Cunningham, Anna Halprin, Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, visual artist, Robert Morris, and many others. Much of the stylistic and choreographic motives and aesthetics that are present in Brown’s work is thanks to the training that she gained and the individuals’ who shaped both her choreographic and artistic journeys. Through her studies, Brown expanded her reputation as a choreographer and founded her choreographic style, motive, and aesthetic on the basis of Minimalism. Working in this aesthetic allowed Brown to incorporate the exploration of everyday movement, natural movement, and improvisation into her choreography and works. Brown’s work in the dance field ranged over fifty years, starting in 1960 and concluding with her final dance that she had created in 2011. Brown created “over 100 choreographies and six operas” in her lifetime and is known for being “a graphic artist, whose drawings have earned recognition in numerous museum exhibitions and collections.” (Trisha Brown Dance Company para. 2) Within that time, the Trisha Brown Dance Company was founded in 1970, truly marking the beginning of her fifty years’ worth of artistic dedication, experimentation, and investigation into the crafts of art and dance.

Throughout the course of her career as a post-modern choreographer, Brown did not simply limit herself to the confined areas of a studio or stage. From sending “bodies down building facades or striding along the length of a wall,” Brown was consistent in her methods of finding new means in which to integrate dance. (Sack para. 2) The relationship between movement and its representation through illustrations was rooted at the core of Brown’s works for a vast majority of the fifty years that she spent choreographing as a visual artist and dancer. Brown explored many areas of artistry, in the forms of both dance and drawing. Brown created artwork in a different way than most choreographers. In addition to choreographing dances and working within the realm of improvisation, much of her work was carried out by presenting dance on a physical paper surface such as a canvas. Everything about this concept goes against the common notion of what dance is perceived to be. Upon initial thought, dance is immediately tied to the connection of a piece that is being performed in the “stage-theater” setting where an audience has the advantage of being able to view movement happening in the moment, in live time.

Brown found herself and her company in Geneva, Switzerland, a year following a personal accident that had resulted in an injury to the wrist. As a performance of *Twelve Ton Rose* was happening, Brown was in her dressing room, which was located directly below the stage. Because of the location of the dressing room in proximity to the stage, Brown could hear the sounds of the performers falling to the floor, keeping her mentally engaged and connected to the performance that her drawing was based upon. The process of how her *Geneva Handfall* drawings were created was explained by Brown, herself:

The system was to take my contorted hand, palm-rotating, fingers splayed, with space like a grotto beneath. I drew as fast as I could go because the hand was falling onto its side, or turning with the thumb as an axis – a probing pen chasing the hand into and out of a stream of awkward positions. Again and again these strange creatures collapsed their way across the page from splat to splat. (Brown 53)

What Brown would draw would often spark inspiration for movement that she would take into consideration and make use of in later choreographed works. Her artwork greatly resembled ideas that she wanted to explore while making movement. Brown was versatile as both a choreographer and visual artist, for she understood how to combine multiple art forms and translate ideas from drawing to movement and vice versa.

In addition to an exhibition of her drawings, Brown performed an improvisational solo on paper at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota in April of 2008. According to the Walker Arts Center, the piece that she created was entitled *It’s a Draw – For Robert Rauschenberg*, which was created using a method of combining movement of the body and art mediums to form physical, tangible art. With the implementation of differing art mediums, such as charcoal or paint, Brown would lay that down as a foundation in a way that she found fitting and dance in varying ways on top of it, creating patterns within artwork. Not only did Brown’s practice of gaining inspiration from the combination of movement and drawing have an impact on her, but it also left and still leaves viewers of her work with the freedom to imagine and interpret ideas for themselves and match actions with image. Drawings on paper can arguably be considered a form of dance because any individual viewing Brown’s drawing at any given time will formulate their own ideas of what her art encompasses ideas from. Nearly fifteen years after the creation of this piece, the movement that is captured in the essence of this artwork signifies the identical characteristics that make art and dance one.

While the actual dancing that Brown had done while creating her artwork cannot physically be seen in the present day, it is through certain elements and principles that essentially equivalate illustration as a form of dance. In the examination of Brown’s *Geneva Handfall* drawings and her improvisational performance, dancing on paper, at the Walker Art Center, the drawings that she had created in her lifetime display the same embodied aspects and living presence that dance also captures. The connection between elements of art and dance are intertwined, complementary of one another in their individual forms. Aspects that define the art of dance range from movement and interpretation to rhythm and line.

Forms, lines, and patterns within artwork can all display the characteristic of movement. As certain aspects of a drawing catch the attention of the eye, this draws focus in a handful of different ways. Shapes, such as circles, capture a circular, flowing motion, while patterns and forms can cause the eye to jump from place to place. This is identical to the way in which a piece is structured. Whether it is intentional or not, focus plays a prominent role when piecing together a choreographic work. Certain moments in a dance will draw audience attention, thus representing this idea of movement and focus being present within both visual arts and dance. Brown additionally incorporated the same aspects that can be found within her pieces into her choreographic concepts as well. According to Sack, “many of Brown’s works from the early 1970s, including Sticks (1973), Scallops (1973), and Locus Solo (1975), placed a clear emphasis on line and choreographic structure, but never at the performer’s expense.” (Goldman 20) Brown successfully merged artistic principles and elements, proving that visual arts and dance are harmonious and can stand as one.

Dance is the body’s way of telling a story through movement. Every line created tells a story. The same can also be said when applied to visual arts. The similarities shared between the aspects of these two art forms is strong in both connection and in presence, making them one in the same. Brown was a creator that reformed the defining image of dance. She was an artist who set herself apart from the crowd. Versatility and uniqueness live within her choreographic works and drawings that appear in museums, art galleries, and international exhibits. To this day, Brown’s choreographic and artistic legacies live on.

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