

Moved by the Music of Our Time: Merce Cunningham talks with Frank J. Oteri

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Filmed and Transcribed by Amanda MacBlane

1. The Meaning of Dance
2. Life Forms
3. Dance Independent From Music
4. Chance Operations
5. Training
6. Dance on Film and Motion Capture Computer Technology
7. Newness in Dance vs. Newness in Music
8. A Virtual Theater of Merce's Choreography
9. Music for Merce (An Exhaustive List)

1. The Meaning of Dance

FRANK J. OTERI: You have been a very significant figure in the history of American music, not only because of all of the composers you've worked with, but also because your ideas about dance have had a universal impact on all of the arts. But it is often difficult for non-dancers and for people who do not follow dance to fully understand what dance means.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Well, the meaning lies in the action and movement. You can describe things in it, particular things, but you usually have to form it in words to somebody beforehand or after you have referred to it. And as regards meaning, my meaning is in the actual movement. Not necessarily referring to something or being tied to something in any way, but simply by what it does on its own steam. In a sense that's the way I've worked for a lot of years.

FRANK J. OTERI: So in essence that's very similar to the way many composers refer to their music; it exists on its own terms.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: It exists as sound. A sound and many different kinds of sounds can be utilized and in that same sense many different kinds of movement could be utilized depending how you feel about them. But those are possibilities.

FRANK J. OTERI: Your career now spans over half a century, do you feel there's been a change in how audiences perceive things?

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Well, yes. Not necessarily huge but I think it's not just the way they've come to look at what we do, I think it's in the society itself. We perceive things differently, I think. There can be multiple connections, rather than single connections, that you can see. For us primarily audiences in Europe in the last 30 years have been—not particularly in France, it's quite remarkable in a way. In the beginning, they, in traditional French style, they threw things. As soon as the lights went down they all said wonderful things. [laughs] But we kept returning thanks to our presenter and liaison in Paris and we have played all over France, not simply Paris. Multiple cities. And I think in a sense that could be true any place. I don't mean just for us. With visual art, you see a painting and it doesn't strike you or you think it doesn't look like something or whatever, you know you have the chance to look at it for a long time and you may come back or you may just see it by chance. But with dance, you see it once and it passes in front of you and your impressions are made by what you remember about other dances and your impressions about dance anyway. And then if the dance is not in a familiar form and the music is not familiar and it's something outrageous, then it's different for a person to put all of that together himself or herself. But I think it's about looking: to look at the dance and to just keep looking, that's what it's about.

FRANK J. OTERI: In a way, dance is the most human of all art forms because it involves actual people.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: [laughs] Yes, it involves people moving around. You're quite right. I've never thought of it as not being human! I don't think of abstract things. I think movement is human behavior. It may be in an unfamiliar way, but it's still humans doing it.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well you once said something that I found quite remarkable. You said, "Life is basically movement."

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yes.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, if all life is movement and art is part of life, then all art—the painter's brushstroke, the writer writing a poem, someone bowing a violin, or playing a piano—that's all dance.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Well, it is movement, you're quite right, and it is movement that could be utilized as dance maybe. It could be movement not necessarily that is referring, but movement that a human can do, but then you've changed the rhythms so it wouldn't look like you were playing the violin. [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: So, does it become dance when it's conscious movement?

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Perhaps. One of the things you see in it too is that for no reason at all, all of a sudden, dancing, it's not formal dance but it has a kind of dance quality about it. And it's not to music necessarily. I get that it simply becomes through the way they do it as something you could perceive as dancing. So for me it broadens the kind of sense or range that one thinks of as dance.

FRANK J. OTERI: So, opposite kind of question: Is there any kind of movement that isn't dance?

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: You could say that. [laughs] It would be perfectly possible. If you could of course do it.

2. Life Forms

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: One of the things that I now have, and a number of other dancers too, is a computer [program] called Life Forms, devised at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia. It's a joint enterprise between the dance department and the science department. They're still working together as far as I can tell. I was introduced to it, oh, way over 10 years ago. They asked me if I wanted to see something about it and it looked so interesting, I said yes. So they sent me a video of the way it works and I was struck immediately because of the technology, for one thing. It was in a computer which was visual and there was dancing which was visual, so I thought, "Well, they go together!" [laughs] So I said I was interested and they arranged for me to have a computer here, and then someone from the university came to help me. And she would sit with me and say, well, now you do this and this and then I would do it and it would all fall apart and she'd say, "No, that's alright, we'll get it all back again!" [laughs] And gradually simply through pursuing, because I knew absolutely nothing about computers in any way, I've learned to use it and I use it now in all the works, not entirely, but in a great portion to amass great amounts of material, visual material. Because what you see is this single figure, which you can manipulate in any way and you can put it into a shape and then you move on the computer what's called a timeline, where it's now a different time so you can put another movement. So you can put another one—I'm doing this very simply, but that's basically what it is. Then the computer will go from this movement very directly to this movement. In the most direct possible way you see the body do this and then become this. Well, I thought looking at this, well, what if you put something else in the window! [laughs] So I would try that out and of course I crashed everything! But I didn't mind because I figured, I didn't know anything so it wasn't a mistake, and I'd just go on. And with practice and use and periodic help, I've worked on it a great deal. It has limits naturally because like anything technological, in the beginning there are awkwardnesses. We don't see them that way perhaps, how long something takes for example, but we see how quickly it removes several of the steps if you do the same thing with Life Forms. Something that used to take, say, five operations now can be done with one so that there is a certain speed. You can only put in one figure at a time, but you can amass a great amount of material that way and then put the material on different smaller figures, on what they call the stage space. It's like a checkerboard. And there you can bring up smaller figures each of—they can all do the same thing or you can bring up different things. So there's this complexity possible which you can examine. Now, I can work with those figures for hours. They don't get tired! But it's very difficult with dancers because it's hard and they have to stop every once in a while. And it also gives me a way of working when the company is on a break.

FRANK J. OTERI: To take this back to a composer's perspective, I started using a very sophisticated music notation program last year and I found that I began to understand the orchestra better and how instruments interact together better than I ever could working this out on paper. I can actually hear combinations and make changes.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: That's right.

FRANK J. OTERI: A lot of composers today struggle when they first start working with an orchestra because orchestras don't commission a lot of new works. It's not like when Mahler had the Vienna Philharmonic at his disposal. He knew what those sounds were by living with them.

We always think of composing as a very solitary act: you should be able to have those sounds in your head. You should be able to write a symphony out on paper and know what it sounds like full form. But for choreography, it's never been that way. It's always been about working with other people.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Well, seeing it.

FRANK J. OTERI: And seeing it and interacting.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Visual, visual.

FRANK J. OTERI: But it's never been about writing something out in your head in Benesh notation or Labanotation and then saying, "Ok, here's my choreography. Go do it."

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: I don't... This, of course, can also be used just to record and very accurately. You have to do it. You have to put it in clearly, but once it's there it's very useful that way. I know that many people now in various schools use it and I think from that point of view it's good. You can put a ballet combination in very clearly and the student can see this and then the teacher can slow it down so you can see exactly how it operates. Even if when the dancer does it he or she cannot do it that slow, they can see what makes it up, the kind of digestive parts! [laughs] And I have books with some of our exercises in them. But principally, I like it because, first of all, I can make things up and second of all I can see.

FRANK J. OTERI: But of course, there's probably not been a dance that you have completed using this program without testing it on people and then changing it.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Well, O.K., you're quite right. You have all of this in the computer and I take it to the studio and to the dancers. If it's something unfamiliar, I usually put it in the classroom exercise just simply to see if we can do it. But if I see one student get it then I know—once somebody has done it, then other people would say, well, we can do it too. So, you can see it that way and then go back and if it needs to be changed for physical reasons, we can put that in the computer so what we have now is what the dancer can do.

3. Dance Independent From Music

FRANK J. OTERI: In an essay you wrote about a decade ago you listed four things that were life-changing to you in terms of your creative work, the Life Forms program being the fourth of those things. I want to take a few steps backward and talk a bit about the other three, starting with the first, which is the notion of rhythmic structure: music and dance sharing the same space and time but not necessarily being related to each other.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

FRANK J. OTERI: And how that enabled you to think of dance independently.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Well, that was working with John Cage, of course... You see he had composed a number of pieces prior to this for modern dance soloists. And he also knew that there was some conventional way of taking a piece of music and then putting a dance to it. He didn't like either one. He said that way one dominated the other. So I thought, well, that's a very nice idea, that they should somehow be made independent. So he had devised this rhythm structure, which was the square root system, numbers say, whatever number, the first sequence in the first however many, 10 seconds they would count, then the whole thing would be 100, 10 times 10. And the first solos I remember when we worked this, we had figured out a given path of a given soloist, what the structure would be and then he went away to the piano and I was in the studio and began to work and this was very peculiar because I had no support in that conventional sense. I had to depend on myself and in that way I also got to know exactly what I was doing! So at some point, and it was difficult, very difficult to work at those early pieces, but at some point in one of the dances, one of the songs, we came together, I wasn't finished nor was he, but he had composed a certain part of it and I had enough of a dance so we could try this out. It was difficult because, there was nothing to count against eventually... but there was one remarkable thing that happened for me. It was so-to-speak a dramatic dance and there was this one point where I made a very large strong movement and there was total silence and a fraction of a second later came this sound and I thought, "Oh, I get it. I get how it could work." Because they each relied on themselves they didn't rely on each other.

FRANK J. OTERI: But by that same token, would you say that seeing something, in terms of an aesthetic, watching it happen on stage and hearing it, would you say, "Well, gee, those two things just don't work together?"

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Well, yeah. Because they're not together! But if you think that that is a possibility then you also can see that there's no reason why they need to be together so that they could happen independently.

FRANK J. OTERI: So, using that same notion, is music necessary for dance?

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Yes. And, no, not necessary. I don't know if that's the proper word, but life is full of sound and do you want to be without it? Since it's there?

FRANK J. OTERI: The very first silent films had no music to them and very soon music became a convention.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: That's true, that's true.

FRANK J. OTERI: And it sort of morphed into this sort of ambient role with the talking pictures. It was still there but not throughout. I've seen dance performances where there's no music and it's disconcerting. It doesn't feel right.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Well, there really is sound all the time as John said so often, and if you think it's silent, then...

FRANK J. OTERI: Like all the planes going overhead right now!

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Yeah! So what are you going to do, say, "Go away?" No, sound exists, but I don't think the question is about doing it without sound, I think it really was the idea that they could really be independent. Each could have an identity that when put together could do something that neither one of us could have written, could have thought of previously. And in the same sense, with the visual, with the artist the same principle was used although there often the artist wants to do something. I have no objection to it. I just say, would you be interested in working this way, and then what would you do.

FRANK J. OTERI: But what is so interesting, of course, in how music is used in our society is that music written for dance will exist independently. You can buy a recording of *The Rite of Spring*, which was created for dance, and listen to this music and have no idea what the dance was and it exists separately. But the dance doesn't exist separately; the dance always has the music with it.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: You're right. But I think there's a very curious thing that happens on the television now where they run a series of short clips of things they're going to show—something out of a movie, something out of a play, something out of music, with an orchestra—that are all five seconds long. They can't change the music because each segment is too short and they put a single work underneath. So it fits everything. But they're going on to all these—you see somebody you saw in a film where the person you see is Fred Astaire dancing, where the music was something out of Gershwin, but the music that they're using for this segment is something else.

FRANK J. OTERI: So in that sense the dance is existing separate from the music that it was written for.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Yes, yes. And I also think having sound in particular be on the radio, that tells you it's there. [laughs] Otherwise, you wouldn't know.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, one of the things I always find an interesting trick with whether it's dance or music videos, when I'm watching on television or a video tape, is to turn the sound off. And, once again, it's very, very disconcerting.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, yeah. Well, I like old movies, so sometimes, not frequently, they have silent films, but then now I think they have music to them, something so this kind of vacuum is filled. I suppose on the radio when it's on you have to have sound. Well, in the sense with the television, it's not so much sound but with the television you have to change your vision to see it. So you produce that.

FRANK J. OTERI: So then, do you listen to music independently of working with it?

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yes. Not often, in fact, not often enough. I like to listen but there's always so much to do. I don't have time to listen to music, but yes I have a tape machine, you know, to play things on, you know, things I've heard before. Things that people send me. Oh, yes. Not as often as I would like to...

FRANK J. OTERI: What do you enjoy listening to in particular?

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: If I can make a blanket statement in that way, I like contemporary music. That is music that may tell me something about the time I live in that I didn't know about before. I get very tired with the 19th-century forms. I find that they seem to work very poorly. They're not for me. [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: Now when you hear music, whichever music it is that you hear, since for you music and dance share the time-space but they exist independently, do you envision dances?

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yes. Sometimes. You see, I used to be a tap dancer when I was an adolescent, that was my beginning and I learned the waltz clog and the time step and I noticed lately I couldn't remember them, so whenever I hear something on the television that maybe was comparable to the three for the waltz clog, I'm trying to learn them back. But I suppose that's the extent.

4. Chance Operations

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, the second area, the second big discovery, chance operations, indeterminacy.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Yes, uh, yes. I think there were many reasons for that with me. One of the things I think that impressed certainly John Cage and other people at that time, it was the early '50s, there was a publication of the *I Ching*, the Chinese Book of Changes where you cast your fortune, but whatever you got was for that moment and for that space and the next second there could be a completely different one. In other words, it was that morning which you had cast for. So the next moment—it wasn't like it led from one thing to the other, so we began to think about using chance because of the possibility of making continuity. The effort to do it in the beginning was just astonishing because using chance operations, say one had taken a series of separate movements and then used chance operations to make the order, what came up was something that was totally different from one's physical memory. And first of all simply to learn one step and then remember what the next one was and learn that and then go back and see if you're memory knows that, because the memory had been trained in another way. Sometimes in a linear way and this isn't linear at all. The best story I have about that is at Black Mountain College the summer that we were there. It was the beginning of the company and John Cage was there and David Tudor was there too—he was rehearsing for a program of contemporary music that he would play later in the summer, but he was also the player for us and I didn't want to ask him to come to rehearsal because of his own work, but I was getting so desperate for this dance that finally I asked him if he would come one day. I had not made the dance to the music but I had in a sense made it with the music because of the timing. It was a piano piece by Christian Wolff. And so David came and we started and he would start to play and I would start and in about 20 seconds, I sat down in despair and David stopped, the way he would, and I would get up and we would try it again. I couldn't remember physically, the whole memory system was discombobulated! [laughs] So we kept on and each time we would get a little further and after about the fourth time, we sat down in despair and David Tudor came around the piano, looked at me and said, "Well, this is clearly impossible but we're going right ahead and doing it anyway!" We just kept on going.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now you were saying for you the 19th-century forms are just not interesting and this whole notion of indeterminacy and chance in a way is about breaking out of this whole notion of linearity and climax because life doesn't really work that way. Life is something here, something there, something there.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: I think more so than ever now because we're not just living in a single place and operating only with those things in a sense in a linear fashion but we operate with a multiplicity of things and not just in a single space. When you can see on the television something that's going on in China, something telling you about the stock market at the bottom, something along the top view telling me about the weather, describing the weather in Minnesota. There are three different things going on and nobody has any trouble with that. Now, if you do that in the theater they're just harassed. But they see it on the television everyday! [laughs] Now they have four of these lines or something coming in with all of this!

FRANK J. OTERI: It's very strange but I would definitely say, I would say that it's influenced by work of you and Cage and Christian Wolff...

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Well, that's very possible but I mostly think that we were just a part of it.

FRANK J. OTERI: Although initially many of the transitions from movement to movement determined by chance operations might have been unnatural, are there any of these sequences of movements that have become transitions that you think of as natural?

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Oh, absolutely. I was in Russia once for a week and we showed our videos in Moscow. There were some dancers there and there was a translator and one of the questions was from a man who was a ballet dancer from the Bolshoi, and he said in Russian, "The movement doesn't look natural." And the woman who translated, a wondrous lady, translated to me and I said back to her, "If you do something often enough, it becomes natural." She said, "That's great!" and then went back into Russian. [laughs] Because it's true. We all thought that about the typewriter. What are you going to do with an automobile when you're riding with a horse on it? And the computer is the most conventional instrument, but look at the complications of doing that and it itself has changed too. I think that many of the movements that were devised that we had trouble with in the beginning the dancers now handle in an amazing way. I've added complexities in arms, which when we began took a very long time, understandably so, for the dancer to understand that he or she was in what's called first position in a relevé. One arm was like this and one arm was like this and the torso was turned and your head was turned this way. And all that had to be done, piecemeal, so that one thing linked to the other. Then you go to another movement where once again each thing had to be turned the other way. Now with some, they get it so fast, it's amazing, sort of because I know the history. It wouldn't seem that way to someone who was watching. But for me I can see the quickness with which their eyes pick up these ideas.

5. Training

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, is there a timeline in terms of training dancers? How long does it take somebody who doesn't know this stuff to get it?

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Well, they have to come, if it deals with our work, first of all, we have to have trained dancers and many of them have come from ballet training and that's useful for us because they have strong legs. Then with us they need to learn things about the torso and these additions and the arms, and that takes a while. But if they do it and they work at it can work. It's just a question of realizing what it is and that you have to learn it like you learned it with the technique of your legs. You have to learn how to use your body.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's interesting because sometimes training can prepare you, but sometimes training can get in the way.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Well, I think style is important, I always thought that. I think that when one equates technique with style, then that gets into trouble. I think there's no question that what I do comes from me, but it wasn't to make a style. I've tried to keep it as open as I could in terms of physical behavior because I can't imagine, seeing it on a computer and then trying to get it across to a dancer.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now certainly it's said with music, and this is an old cliché which isn't always true but is true in some cases, but it's very difficult for many conservatory-trained musicians who play the classical repertoire to relax and engage in improvisation. Now would be there parallel to that for a ballet dancer coming to you?

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Well, I think dancers in general probably, are given to improvising on the ballroom floor, and most of them can do that kind of thing and enjoy it, as I do to with my computer.

6. Dance on Film and Motion Capture Computer Technology

FRANK J. OTERI: The third discovery you came to was working with seeing dance on film, capturing dance on video and seeing details that would otherwise be invisible to an audience. What kinds of aesthetic decisions did you end up making based on this?

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Here, it must have been, at that time it was the '70s, and Charles Atlas was our stage manager and he also was a film and video person. And he kept talking about it and I had never...and he brought his camera in and he said you have to go through it, so he put it up and I, well, I had often talked with dancers who had worked in television, and most of them, at the time, said they didn't like it. And when I asked why, they said, "Well, it doesn't work" or "It doesn't look like I thought it would," or something like that. And I looked through this, like she is [indicates camera person] and I thought, "Oh! It's totally different from the stage. You can do something different. You don't have to do that." That was the first thing that struck me right away. Instead of thinking it isn't what I know. I began with something I didn't know about so I could approach it from somewhere else. At least that's how it started. And then working with Charles Atlas, we made several dance films here. Dances made specifically for the camera. And I, people often say, some dancers, the camera doesn't interest them. They're all saying that it doesn't look like dance and it looks better on the stage and I always say, well, there's Fred Astaire. We all saw him in the movies and you didn't see him on the stage, or I didn't see him on the stage. And yet the dancing that comes through is so remarkable. So the whole thing about it not working on film was blown to pieces, I'm sure for everybody. [laughs] And so working with Charlie and with that thinking, I found it absolutely fascinating and terribly difficult. Hard if you want to maneuver and see it from different angles. You see, if you see something on stage, you're sitting here and it's going on there and you have the frame in which the movement can go, say, relating to the frame. But with the camera, you see it here because maybe there was a camera here so the frame was different and the look of the dancers different. That I liked. I thought it was interesting. Something that might make me uncomfortable which is simply another way. And several things with it, for example, repetition content. I quickly realized that if you start to repeat a lot, people are going to turn the channel because they know you're repeating. On the stage repetition can have a kind of power, but in camera you get this idea that you want to do something else. But if you saw it from different angles, that was one way. Then the other thing I noticed was how small steps, I'm talking dance steps, a slight change would make a difference that it wouldn't on the stage. If the dancers are facing this way on the stage and do that [indicates small movement], you would barely see it at all, but you'd see it on the camera. The first time I noticed that was when we were working on a sequence and I kept seeing them, when the sequence worked, then I saw them off the camera, and then on the camera something was wrong. I couldn't figure it out and finally I realized that it was one of the five women, one of the women when she turned, instead of ending this way, ended that way. That was the difference, but once I spotted it I thought, well, you have to learn how to do the small things quick. So I began to add things in the technique classes, which involved rapid movement, not necessarily large because then soon you'd be off camera, but how to maneuver here and make the movements clear and the steps sharp that you can actually see with the camera. It brought a lot of things. How to work things in a small space, for example. That and the repetition and also I like very much the shifting angles where you can see something from a different point of view, because I think it opens your eyes about that stuff.

FRANK J. OTERI: And the most recent discovery that you've been working with, which [your Director of Communications] Trevor Carlson was telling me about, is motion capture computer technology.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Yes, that's used in *Biped* with the scrim in front of the old David Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar projections. The principle and simple difference between my awareness of working—of both these just to explain—is that in Life Forms I put the movement in on a figure through the computer and move along with the dancer, so there it is. With motion capture, the way we have worked so far, is that they would shoot a dancer doing a short sequence of movement from *Biped*, but the shooting is different. The dancer's in a space which is, in a sense, circular and the cameras can move all the way around, so when you make it, you don't have to worry about which way it's going, because they can change it after they get it in the camera. Now for the dancer that is participating, he or she is wearing black and a black hood on which these knobs, which are the size of small ping pong balls, are placed around the joints. So then it's shot with all these cameras and what you see of these things, sort of movements through the joints, they can take them, having all this material, they can change it in an absolute multiplicity of ways. The movements were basically short simply because it was all so new to me, and to them as to how to get this take from me to them! I didn't do anything on the computer—it was much more complicated than my work with Life Forms—but they would come every other week and show me and then they'd make suggestions and it's in its way a *mélange* of how you can make not just clear images that are clearly the figure moving but to change those images to become more fluid hand-drawn figures that you can draw on the computer itself and change. This is all what one has the opportunity to work with now, that's what interests me. Not simply thinking in terms of old-fashioned scenes, but with what kind of things can be done now. And I've been very fortunate with the visual artists with whom I've work, I think in general. They don't all use computers... *Rainforest*, for example, with Andy's pillows, which are like moving scenery. They're not fixed in anyway and sometimes they bound off the stage and move with it... I saw them in a small exhibit, the first one he'd ever had, and he was sitting in the corner, and I was walking with Jasper Johns and I could see him and I said, "Oh, Jasper, those are Andy's pillows!" And he said, "Yes." I said, "They'd be marvelous on the stage. Do you think we can ask him?" And Jasper said, "Well, should we ask him?" And Andy said, "Oh, yes." So, we had a décor!

7. Newness in Dance vs. Newness in Music

FRANK J. OTERI: Now this raises the whole question of possibility and what's possible and this goes back to the thing you were saying at the very beginning of this conversation—the 19th-century linear versus now and this multiplicity of events. It's very interesting to me that the audience for serious dance seems to be much more willing and open to new ideas than the audience for serious music. Why is that?

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: I can't give you any real reason, but my feeling is the multiplicity of the television in the last four years; it's grown more complex. People's eyes now accept something out of television, so that that can be transferred to seeing something in the theater. But mostly it's quite true, most of the time in the theater they go back because the theater itself is framed, but we have done so many of our things, these events in unconventional circumstances. We'll do two next month in France which will be a round stage with the audience around it. And I've found always with those the public. They may be puzzled because it took them long to begin to see what's going on and to make some decision about it. But I think very strongly that we live in a really visual atmosphere; we have to take in so many different things at once. No, I don't think it's a question of like or dislike, but I do think—and of course I'm thinking of New York, of course, primarily—but the dancers, one of the whole things in contemporary dance is the variety: the kinds of things they use, the kinds of steps or whatever you want to call it they use for dance, and it isn't limited to a form we already know, or even a technique we know. We can devise another one and all of that, I think, is part of the heart of the minute changes in the visual atmosphere.

FRANK J. OTERI: You, more than anyone in our history have been responsible for more pieces of new music for dance.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Yes, we've commissioned... (laughs) Well, I go back to the same thing. I like to work with contemporary visual artists, same thing with composers, because they are a part of the world we live in. They are thinking, however they are, in the ways that are related in some way to the way that contemporary life is and it's—whether it's a good or a bad idea, I don't care—it's only because it's what is interesting. What am I making in this kind of dance? What kind of music does this composer do? Our most recent piece was, it's a dance called *Loose Time* which we did at Berkeley and it has music by Christian Wolff and fortunately he's going to be with us when we do it at Lincoln Center on that 50th anniversary...

FRANK J. OTERI: I want to ask you a question that you might not want to answer, but I'm going to ask you anyway: Has there ever been any music that you have used in a dance that you actually didn't like?

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: There have been some things—very few actually—where I realized what the composer was doing and I liked it in itself, but for various reasons I don't think it would work with any kind of dance. Well, that's just an impression of mine. But the music itself—I won't say what it was...

FRANK J. OTERI: Oh, no. That's fine.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: But I think it's really been and I must say I was fortunate with Cage because of his, not only his own music, but his perception about what contemporary music can be in many ways, not simply from his own point of view. We're presenting, on Thursday, a piece back from 1960 with music from Conlon Nancarrow and at that time nobody in the United States knew who Conlon Nancarrow was. Well, John happened to hear tapes of his music through someone at the New York Music Library and he thought it would work well for a dance, so I listened. I thought it was wonderful. So we were among the first people to play that here. And now, of course, Conlon's music is known by many people.

FRANK J. OTERI: So, what prompted the decisions to structure the events that you put together for the upcoming 50th Anniversary Festival at Lincoln Center?

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Nigel Redden spoke of, "Well, it's your 50th anniversary, it's about history." And I ordinarily am prone to do new pieces, of course, and ones that are closer to around now, so to speak. But he said, no, he'd like something about history. So we thought about it. We decided, talking to everyone about it, that we would try to use something from various times. So the dances don't come in this order on the program, but the oldest one is *Suite for Five* from 1956, which has music by John, music for piano and the original costumes were by Robert Rauschenberg. Then the next one is 1965, called *How to Pass, Kick, Fall, and Run*. It comes from a different time; it's a different kind of dance and the music is, was John Cage and David Vaughan reading stories from *Indeterminacy* and now it will be David Vaughan and myself reading. And that's a different kind of dance. It comes from a different period. Then the next one is *Pictures* which I think was late '84 and that has music by David Behrman and the costumes and set were by Mark Lancaster. And then one other one is *Loose Time*, well, *Loose Time* you know, but the other one is *Fabrications* from the late '80s with music by Emanuel Dimas de Melo Pimenta and costumes by Dove Bradshaw. In other words, they tried to bring something from each period and [dancer] Robert Swinston, who's done an enormous amount of work to bring them back...

FRANK J. OTERI: How did you reconstruct the older pieces? This is before you used Life Forms...

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: ...Before video even!

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Well, we have one misty tape of *Suite*. [laughs] And then the help of the mind memory and then I had some notes which I can't find and Caroline Brown, who was in it, is helping us greatly with a lot of her memory. We're getting it. Not entirely but we'll have a piece. It's a suite for dance. *Pictures* we have tapes and we remember, it's closer than some people even realize. And so it works that way, but the worst thing is, you know, if you don't have some misty video, which is the only thing you have, and some of my hastily written notes, which are impossible to decipher and then dancers' memories, which they think are accurate, but they're often not—but together all those, looking at photographs, you put it together and I think that between what Robert is doing and the rest, we're getting them back the way they were. Now, they're not the same because those are not the same dancers, but these dancers are doing those

dances, these dances in the way they would do them now. Not that we've changed anything, but they are different dancers. That's part of life, anyway... It almost amazes me with *Swan Lake*, they say this is a revival and this is exactly what it was, but the costumes are not, the décor doesn't come from 1870.

FRANK J. OTERI: I guess that's ultimately what makes dance always the most open to the new: the fact that it is about the people that are doing it at the time.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: That's right, and the way they do it, the way that each person does it. Yes.

FRANK J. OTERI: This has been a wonderful afternoon, it feels like it's July even though it's April.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Yes, but we can see the river from here!

FRANK J. OTERI: I always think there's something about the space you're in that contributes to the creative act and there seems to be something really special about this space...

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Well, it's a building, which was, of course, the Bell Telephone Laboratories, and then they moved, I guess just after the war, they moved to New Jersey and so the building was left. And so, what do you do with it? Somebody decided that it could be housing for artists. David Vaughan read about it and said maybe there would be a space we could claim, because we had to move from where we were. We came over here and I think the elevator went to the tenth floor and then we had to put on hard hats and come up here and they were constructing. But I saw immediately it could work. So we did what we had to do to change it and moved in, and we've been here ever since.

FRANK J. OTERI: Wow! Over 20 years?

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Yes, I think we came in the '70s. It was when all of this was being changed. That took years, of course, going through government officials.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's a really unique spot, there's a great view of the Hudson...

MERCE CUNNINGHAM: Oh, that part is wonderful. It's changed, of course, even these buildings weren't there so the view of downtown was really quite extraordinary with the Statue of Liberty. If you go out further you can still see it.

FRANK J. OTERI: This will be put on the Web in July, so it's somehow appropriate.