PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY

ETHICS, STAGED

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In March 2016, I had the opportunity to attend three weeks of rehearsals for the reconstruction of one of Merce Cunningham's most controversial works, *Winterbranch*, at the Lyon Opera Ballet.[1] *Winterbranch* was choreographed for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company's first major tour and was first performed in New York, just before the tour began, in 1964. It is a work that fell out of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company's repertory fairly early, perhaps because it was too firmly connected not only to a particular phase in the development of Cunningham's aesthetic but also to the particular historical moment known as "the 60s" when the relation of art to context—especially political context—was on everyone's mind.[2] The Director of the Lyon Opera Ballet conceived of the Ballet's spring program as an homage to the experimental dance of the 1960s; he chose to pair *Winterbranch* with Lucinda Childs's *Dance*, a bright, brisk, almost antiseptic minimalist piece from 1979 that contrasts sharply with Cunningham's somber, eery, and in some ways more engaged minimalist work. Jennifer Goggans, a former Cunningham dancer and presently an active reconstructor of his works, arrived in Lyon in mid-March to begin training the dancers in Cunningham technique. From the first day of rehearsals I was able to watch her guide Lyon's balletically trained, exquisitely skilled dancers toward a performance of *Winterbranch* that, I believe, remained faithful to its rebarbative, even gritty nature, despite the unavoidable change in reception context.

As chance would have it—and when working on Cunningham one is always attentive to chance—while attending the rehearsals at the Lyon Opera I was also working on a paper for a conference on the ethics of gesture, organized by the editor of this volume, Lucia Ruprecht; a conference that would center on questions raised by Giorgio Agamben in his famous essay, "Notes on Gesture" (2000, 49–59; 1996, 45–53). Naturally, my two objects of study—*Winterbranch* and the ethics of gesture—began to enter into dialogue. The juxtaposition encouraged a comparison between Agamben's and Cunningham's respective approaches to the semiotics of dance, the way that dance

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can generate meaning but also evade meaning in a way that Agamben deems "proper" to the "ethical sphere" (2000, 56). For Agamben, dance is composed of what he calls "gestures" that have "nothing to express" other than expressivity itself as a "power" unique to humans who have language ("Languages and Peoples") (2000, 68). For Cunningham, dance is composed of what he calls "actions", or at other times "facts"—discrete and repeatable movements sketched in the air that reveal the "passion," the raw or naked "energy" of human expressivity before that energy has been directed toward a specific expressive project (1997, 86). I will look more closely at what Cunningham means by "actions," and to what extent they can be considered "gestures" in Agamben's terms; I will also explore the "ethical sphere" opened by the display of mediality, the "being-in-a-medium" of human beings ("The Face") (2000, 57). But for the moment I want simply to note that for both, dance involves the exposure on stage of an energy or, in Agamben's terms, a "power" (*potere*) ("The Face") (2000, 95), that derives from the fundamentally "communicative nature of human beings," their "*linguistic* nature" ("Languages and Peoples") (2000, 68).[3] In addition, the exposure of this communicative energy *as* energy has, for both, important emancipatory, even utopian implications. That said, the choreographer and philosopher understand the ethics of dance in slightly different terms. The following essay constitutes my effort to understand how these terms differ. I seek to clarify what Cunningham shares with Agamben's neo-phenomenological approach to gesture but also the nuance he brings to the philosophical table as a choreographer—that is, as someone who works through and with movement as a theoretical tool.

Few scholars have been attentive to Agamben's interest in dance per se. This may be because Agamben's interest in dance is motivated neither by a deep knowledge of dance history nor by a fascination with the work of a particular choreographer.[4] Rather, his interest stems from an intuition that danced gestures throw into relief what is *gestural* in the gesture, its "media character" (2000, 57)—and mediality, as we shall see, ensures the ethical, or relational sphere of the human. Likewise, in the parallel universe of dance studies, very little has been written on *Winterbranch* as a study of gesture, although it has been recognized that, perhaps more than most of Cunningham's dances, *Winterbranch* solicits on the part of the audience the act of interpretation, that is, its gestures appear to spectators as charged with specific meanings. Indeed, if there is a dance in Cunningham's repertory that conjures an ethical sphere, it is *Winterbranch*. Juxtaposing *Winterbranch* with Agamben's writings on gesture allows for an exploration of critical theory through a specific example of choreographic practice. Such a juxtaposition urges us to question precisely what a dance gesture is, and whether gesture is in essence an exposure of "communicability itself" (Agamben 2000, 83). What do dance gestures expose that ordinary gestures do not? Why would such an exposure be "ethical" in Agamben's terms? And why would (his notion of) the ethical rely on a stage?

Part I: Agamben on Gesture

The first thing one notes when approaching Agamben's "Notes on Gesture" is the fluidity or vagueness of the term "gesture." By "gesture" Agamben does not necessarily mean a

communicative gesture, such as a thumbs up or a hand extended. Nor is he talking about functional gestures à la Leroi-Gourhan—elements of a *chaîne opératoire* or a "habitus."[5] Instead, I think Agamben is getting at a larger category of gestures that, at least in their familiar, non-spectacular contexts, disclose a project or an intention (to use a Sartrean vocabulary), gestures that are part of an "intentional arc" (Merleau-Ponty's term), that "always refer beyond" themselves "to a whole" of which they are "a part" (Agamben 2000, 54).[6] This category includes locomotion, which is not traditionally understood by dancers as gestural. Rudolf Laban, for instance, considered "gestures" to be an affair of the upper body and separated them from "steps." "Steps," constitute a large group encompassing all one can do with the feet—advance, turn, hop, leap, and so on, whereas a "port-de-bras" and an "épaulement" are gestures in Laban's sense of the term (see Laban 1960).

In contrast, Agamben appears to believe that dance—in its totality—is the *ultimate* gesture. In "Notes on Gesture," he asserts that dance "exhibits" in exemplary fashion *what is gestural in the gesture*: "If dance is gesture, it is so, rather, because it is nothing more than the endurance and the exhibition of the media character of corporal movements" (57). "*The gesture*," he italicizes, "*is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such*" (57). Dance, it would appear, distills, in aestheticized, heightened form what the essence of gesture *is*, namely, a medium that exposes itself as such. But how does a medium expose itself as such? What is it in dance that allows it to be the site of such an exhibition?

To begin to answer this question, we need to refer to a lesser known essay that, to my knowledge, has only appeared in a French version, "Le Geste et la danse."[7] The essay reiterates certain passages found in "Notes on Gesture"—it was published the same year, 1992—while emphasizing different terms. Here, gesture appears as a kind of power (in French, "pouvoir" or "puissance"), a power of "expression." Linking the two essays, Agamben writes that the most precise definition he can give of the "pouvoir du geste"—or the power that *is* gesture—is the power to expose itself as "pure moyen" (pure means). "Ce qui dans chaque expression, reste sans expression," he underscores, "est geste" (That which in each act of expression remains unexpressed is gesture) (12). Another way to say this would be that gesture, in its ideal state (before being subordinated to what Agamben calls elsewhere "a paralyzing power") is the embodiment of a force or "*dynamis*" (2000, 55, 54). Gesture is the medium of movement; it is movement *as a medium*, a kind of kinetic surface of inscription, as opposed to other media or supports, such as the painted image or the written word. Gesture exhibits the movement that *is* mediality—crossing over, traversing space, connecting points, communicating.

Insofar as gestures move, are themselves movement, they represent for Agamben the very opposite of the static image. In *Means Without End*, the static image is associated with all that is "stiffened" or hardened—an "image" ("Notes on Gesture"), a "character" ("The Face"), or a "spectacle" as commodity ("Marginal Commentaries on *The Society of the Spectacle*") (2000). In contrast, gesture is associated with all that is dynamic, fluid—in short, *mediamnic*, understood as both support *and* in-between, intervalic.[8] In his essay "The Face," for instance, the "face" plays the same role as gesture; it is a "revelation of language itself." "Such a revelation," he proposes, "does

not have any real content and does not tell the truth about this or that state of being, about this or that aspect of human beings and of the world: it is only opening, only communicability. To walk in the light of the face means to *be* this opening—and to suffer it, and to endure it" (2000, 91). In contrast, a "character" is produced when the face "stiffens," when it must protect itself from the vulnerability, the openness and lack of finitude that is its nature (96). The "face" is thus like gesture, which also "suffers" and "endures," or which *is* the process of suffering or enduring one's medial character, one's existence as a surface or support of communication.

As has been noted, Agamben's understanding of the ethical is very close to that of Emmanuel Levinas, whose chapter "Ethics and the Face" (1979) is clearly an important influence on many of the essays in *Means Without End*. Levinas maintains here that the ways in which human beings appear to one another (their "face," but also all signifying surfaces and supports) are necessarily flawed; they communicate a message about the person, but they also hide what cannot be communicated, what is not exhausted in the act of communication. The "face" both exposes and betrays; it is "proper" and "improper" (Agamben 2000, 96–7). The exposure of this insufficiency or impropriety in the signs that bear us is itself an ethical—even a "political"—act, for it implies that what is known of the human is never complete, that human mediality—our capacity to become sign—is endless: "The task of politics is to return appearance itself to appearance, to cause appearance itself to appear" ("The Face") (2000, 94). Agamben mirrors Levinas when he writes in "Kommerell, or On Gesture" that one gestures at the point where language appears "at a loss" (1999, 78). Other essays in *Means without End* make a similar point from a more politicized angle. For instance, in "Marginal Notes on commentaries on the *Society of the Spectacle*," Agamben is concerned with the means and relations of production that prevent such an exposure of "loss." He describes capitalist modes of spectacle that reduce gestures to flat, immobilized appearances severed from the unpredictable continuum of intentions that once animated them. Gestures, he claims, have become pure image; they appear on a screen, limitlessly appropriable, combinatorial. If "Marginal Notes" is concerned with the spectacularization of gestures, Agamben presents the opposite scenario in "The Face" and "What is a camp?" Here, in the fascist version of the same predicament, the human being is seized as raw life lacking the capacity to become image, to become something *legible in the currency of the other* (114–5). The human being is reduced to pure self-identity, incapable of circulating as a sign, and thus no longer a "being-in-a-medium"—no longer human—at all. Thus, if in "Marginal Notes," the danger is that human beings will be reduced to pure surface, "stiffened" into a circulating sign or commodity form, in "The Face" and "What is a camp?" the danger is that human beings will be robbed of that very surface-generating capacity: they will be seized as "nature" *tout court* and thus deprived of their "*linguistic* nature," their "mediality."

In this context we should recall that for Agamben gesture is always related not simply to the act of bearing but also, like the face, to the process of exposing, or exhibiting. The Italian terms Agamben employs are "esporre"—which means both "express" and "exhibit" and "esibizione," a "show," "display," or "performance" (1996, 52–3, 51). We can begin to understand why Agamben privileges gesture, and dance gesture in particular. As movement, gesture exceeds dynamically its signifying or operational functions. It is highly visible—kinetically and optically—and thus ideal for "making a

means visible as such." Agamben's examples of the gesture include ambulation (the gait), Warburg's *pathosformel* (or *dynamograms*) (1999, 89–103), the mime gestures of the Commedia del'Arte (1999, 77–85), "everyday gestures" (1999, 83), and of course dance gestures, or dance as a series of gestures. Speech, too, can be gestural, just as there is in gesture something of speech. As he insists, gesture "is not an absolutely non-linguistic element," it points to that "stratum of language *that is not exhausted in communication…*" (1999, 77; my emphasis). In all these cases, what makes gesture gesture is that it carries something forward that is not equivalent to, or reducible to, sense. As Agamben stresses, gesture "has precisely nothing to say" (2000, 58).[9] To expose this gestural quality of the act of communication—which is not exhausted by semantics—is to open the "ethical dimension" (2000, 57). The fact that many of his examples of gestures capable of opening that ethical dimension are those that occur on stage suggests the degree to which exposing relies on performing. Twice-behaved behavior, gestures on stage, exemplify the act—in both the practical and theatrical senses of the word—that "cause[s] appearance itself to appear" (2000, 94).

Part II: From the Ethics of Gesture to the Ethics of Dance

But why does dance embody that act of exposure par excellence? What are the ethics—or, in another version, the politics—of the gesture that is dance?[10] Let us recall that dance enters Agamben's account at precisely the moment when "human beings […] have lost every sense of naturalness," when they have "lost [their] gestures" (2000, 52). Despite the emerging domination of capitalist relations which "stiffen" gestures, dance remains an instrument of liberation, or at least a form of critical nostalgia for a time when gestures were both natural and under the subject's control. If, by the twentieth century, an entire generation has "lost its gestures," then how is it that the gestures of dancers have managed to escape this pathological condition?

A glance in the direction of Agamben's source for his understanding of dance (and its relation to historical periods) might help us answer this question. Agamben may very well have been influenced by the work of Susanne Langer, whose *Feeling and Form* of 1953 was one of the first important philosophical treatments of dance. Agamben seems to refer indirectly to Langer's book when he turns to dance in "Notes on Gesture":

> The dance of Isadora Duncan and Sergei Diaghilev, the novels of Proust, the great *Jugendstil* poetry from Pascoli to Rilke, and, finally and most exemplarily, the silent movie trace *the magic circle* in which humanity tried for the last time to evoke what was slipping through its fingers forever. (2000, 52–3; my emphasis)

The phrase "the magic circle" is one that Agamben might have borrowed from Langer, who in turn borrowed it from a text by Mary Wigman (Langer 1953, 188–207).[11] Langer in fact titles a chapter "The Magic Circle," referring to what Curt Sachs hypothesized was the oldest dance form, the circle dance (1953, 190). Within this circle, human beings first recognized the "terrible and fecund Powers that surround" them and that enter their very bodies, transforming them into a source of movement power (196). Basing much of her argument on Sachs, Langer describes the "magic circle" as implicit in all forms of dance, both "primitive" and contemporary. Today, secular or

ballroom dance, she states, "enthrall the dancer almost instantly in a romantic unrealism," whereas "primitive" dance achieves the ecstatic "by weaving the 'magic circle' around the altar of the deity, whereby every dancer is exalted at once to the status of a mystic" (196). What Langer calls "virtual gesture"—meaning gesture that has been lifted out of its "common usage" and placed on the stage—is "the appearance of Power" (52, 198). Dance exhibits the "magnetic forces that unite a group" when dancers exhibit this "Power" as such (202).

Agamben might have called on Langer's (and Sachs's) notion of the "magic circle" to evoke a break between a pre-modern and a modern relation to gesture. Like Agamben, Langer also maintains that a loss has occured. In modernity, although the "magic around the altar" has been broken, modern dance in particular is still animated with that "Power," it is still serving the same function (207). However, she qualifies, "we"—the moderns—"evoke [that same Power] with full knowledge of its imaginary status" (206). Langer's words help us understand why Agamben strings together turn-of-the-century dance (e.g., "Duncan and Diaghilev") with Proust and Rilke, for they share—at least according to Agamben—a nostalgia for an experience that has moved from the realm of ritual communion to the realm of the stage (an "imaginary status" [206]). However, Agamben departs from the type of primitivist rhetoric that Langer could be accused of perpetuating when he insists that gesture contains a linguistic element, that it is "closely tied to language," to "the stratum of language that is not exhausted in communication" (1999, 77).[12] Presumably, then, dance would not be any more primitive than language itself; and yet, as visibly and undeniably movement, it promises to expose more dramatically that which moves in language, the inexhaustible "stratum" that language is "at a loss" to convey. It is perhaps for this reason that in "Le Geste et la danse," instead of evoking what has been irrevocably lost, dance exemplifies what is *not* lost—at least not to dance—that which dance alone can continue to exhibit, namely, the human potential to be a "milieu pur" (2000, 57).[13] Agamben presents concert dance in particular as the last refuge of "communicability": "*Ce qui dans chaque expression, reste sans expression*, est geste. Mais ce qui, dans chaque expression, reste sans expression, c'est l'expression elle-même, le moyen expressif en tant que tel" (*That which in each act of expression remains without expression*, is gesture. But that which, in each expression, remains without expression, is expression itself, the means of expression as such). Dance gestures, it would appear, are a hypostatized form of gesture, or the gestural; they evoke that "Power" (Langer) to express a world, to have a world, the "Power" that is our "linguistic nature" and that holds us within the "magic circle" of the human. Sounding much like Langer, Agamben concludes "Le Geste et la danse" by affirming that "la danse des danseurs qui dansent ensemble sur une scène est l'accomplissement de leur habilité à la danse et de leur puissance de danser en tant que puissance" (the dance of dancers who dance together on a stage is the accomplishment of their skill in dancing and their power to dance *as power*) (12; my emphasis).

It is not clear to me that in "Le Geste et la danse" Agamben has provided a convincing portrait of dance, or that he has revealed its nature as a gestural form "closely tied to language" (not "*not* linguistic") (1999, 77; my emphasis). In his treatment, dance retains too much of its relation to a primitive, pre-verbal world of ritual, even if only from the perspective of a modernist "imaginary." What is perhaps more useful for our purposes—especially as we move toward a reading of *Winterbranch*—is Agamben's account of *how* the gesturality of the gesture is exposed, that is, how

"le moyen expressif en tant que tel" (the means of expression as such) might be made to appear. Ironically, in "Notes on Gesture" he associates such an appearance or display with the act of *interruption*, not with the fluid movements of the dancer, bathing blissfully in the "milieu pur" of a "power to dance as power." To close this part of my argument, and to prepare for my reading of *Winterbranch*, let us return briefly to a passage in which Agamben takes up the example of the pornographic, the gestures of which can be suspended, he argues, to reveal their intrinsic and irreducible "mediality":

> *The gesture is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such* [original emphasis]. It allows the emergence of the being-in-a-medium of human beings and thus it opens the ethical dimension for them. But, just as in a pornographic film, people *caught in the act* of performing a gesture that is simply a means addressed to the end of giving pleasure to others (or to themselves) are kept *suspended* in and by their own mediality—for the only reason of being shot and exhibited in their mediality—and can become the medium of a new pleasure for the audience (a pleasure that would otherwise be incomprehensible) [my emphasis]… so what is relayed to human beings in gestures is not the sphere of an end in itself but rather the sphere of pure and endless mediality. (2000, 57–8)

I would like to keep in mind this scene as we move forward, one in which the ethical dimension appears to open within the pornographic, one in which something "pure" and without end is captured in a filmed act that obviously has a very concrete end. As opposed to his brief excursus on dance, which confuses dancing with an uninterrupted "magic circle," Agamben's comments on film (and the pornographic film in particular) allow us a firmer purchase on what dance, as a form of gesture, might be—and what it might be able to accomplish, or expose. Here, also, instead of indulging in the fantasy of the "en tant que tel" (as such), and the "moyen pur" (pure means), Agamben suggests, albeit obliquely, that a means is never pure, that it can in fact never be exposed as "an end in itself," and that the means is itself *mediated by what it bears*. That is, it is mediality only insofar as it is actively mediating.

In sum, what is interesting and revealing about this passage on the pornographic film is that, as in "The Face," Agamben opens the ethical dimension not at the point where communication is lost, but rather at the point where saying "something in common" (the clearly legible pornographic gesture) and saying "nothing" (the gesture interrupted, exposed as a gesture) occur simultaneously ("Form of Life") (2000, 9). He points us toward that ambiguous point where a narrative unfolds and yet that narrative is suspended, revealing a "stratum" "not exhausted" by a narrative (1999, 77), a point where the communication is interrupted, yet still "endured.".

I believe that it is in this type of suspension—understood as a medium—that Agamben's ethics of gesture resides. In the next section I will argue that it is in this type of suspension that we might discover Cunningham's ethics of gesture as well.

Part III. The Cunningham Gesture

As is well known, Cunningham often expressed his intention to create dances that would not impose a particular interpretation on his audience: "We don't attempt to make the individual spectator think a certain way," he stated in a 1979 interview: "I do think each spectator is individual, that it isn't *a public*. Each spectator as an individual can receive what we do in his own way and need not see the same thing, or hear the same thing, as the person next to him" (Cunningham and Lesschaeve 2009, 171–2). [14] Earlier, in 1968, Cunningham had already advanced a similar view: dance "can and does evoke all sorts of individual responses in the single spectator" (1968, n.p.). "Any idea as to mood, story, or expression entertained by the spectator is a product of his mind, his feelings" (1970, 175).

Fig. 1: Carolyn Brown in Merce Cunningham, Winterbranch *(1964), studio photograph by Jack Mitchell. Permissions to reproduce generously granted by Craig B. Highberger, Executive Director, Jack Mitchell Archives*

Cunningham's resistance to conventional plot-lines and psychological interpretations is well known. Influenced, as was John Cage, by the reception theory of Marcel Duchamp, Cunningham aimed to address—and thus create—a spectator who would "complete" the work (see Duchamp 1975). This was in large part a reaction against what he saw around him in the dance of the 1940s: "It was almost impossible," he wrote in 1968, "to see a movement in modern dance during that period not stiffened by literary or personal connection" (1968, n.p.; quoted in Vaughan 1997, 69). In an effort to avoid imposing literary or personal connections, Cunningham developed a set of procedures that would ensure, at least in principle, that his own intentions, his "personal connections," would not shape or "stiffen" the movement material. Since many compositional decisions would be taken out of his hands, he could with some justification insist that meanings generated by viewers were theirs alone. Some critics took this to mean that there was no expressive content to his dances.[15] John Martin wrote in a dismissive review of 1950 that there is "little in content and nothing of conspicuous formal value" in Cunningham's dances (1950, 69) while Doris Hering lamented in 1954 that his chance compositions were like "tired utterances suspended in an emotionless void" (1954, 69). And yet Cunningham was quite clear on this point: his goal was not to suppress the expressivity of his dancers but quite the opposite, to intensify that expressivity, to expose on stage not "anger" or "joy," but rather what he called the pure undifferentiated "source of energy out of which may be channelled the energy that goes into the various emotional behaviors" (1952; reprinted in Vaughan 1997, 86). "Dance is not emotion, passion for her, anger against him. [...] In its essence, in the

nakedness of its energy it is a source from which passion or anger may issue *in a particular form*" (86; my emphasis).

Here, Cunningham seems to anticipate Agamben, defining dance as a movement form that displays "the nakedness" of an "energy" drawn from "common pools of motor impulses" (in Vaughan 1997, 86), impulses presumably shared by human beings moving within the magic circle of communicability. But Cunningham also takes care to acknowledge the "particular form" in which that energy is exposed. For that reason, the "nakedness" to which he refers is not reducible to the purity evoked by the phrase "milieu pur" that Agamben borrows from Mallarmé.[16] There is in fact something almost pornographic about Cunningham's "nakedness," "that blatant exhibiting of this energy," as he puts it (in Vaughan 1997, 86). As I have argued elsewhere, Cunningham engages in an erotics of the not-quite-abstracted; he is keen to exhibit the dirt—*the literal dirt*, as we shall see in the case of *Winterbranch*—that clings to the movements of dancers like a semantic residue weighing them down (see Noland 2017). What makes *Winterbranch* a particularly interesting case to study in this regard is that the gestures the dancers perform are at once legible and inscrutable, related to specific operational and expressive tasks and yet disaggregated, distorted, interrupted. One could say that *Winterbranch* practices an ethics of gesture insofar as it suspends movement between an "impure" manifestation ("passion for her," "anger against him") and raw human kinesis imagined as a "pure" support. Put differently, the dance seems to play on the fine line between a "naked" and a "channelled" energy, between a "source" of emotion and emotion in a "particular form" (in Vaughan 1997, 86). While remaining mysterious and illegible, *Winterbranch* nonetheless inspires the act of interpretation, the search for meaning, and thus the attribution to movement of expressive content. During the 1960s and 1970s audience interpretations invariably indexed the sinister, even apocalyptic tone of the piece and the task-like nature of the movement content. But just what is this movement content and to what extent can it be considered gestural?

One of the obstacles we face when moving from philosophy to choreography, from Agamben to Cunningham, is lexical in nature. Cunningham uses many terms to refer to what Agamben calls the "gestures" of dance: "actions," "facts," "movements," and "gestures." He often has recourse to the word "gesture" to refer to the "ordinary" gesture one finds in the street, task-related gestures (such as potting a plant),[17] and even "intimate gesture[s]" that convey a feeling (Cunningham and Lesschaeve 2009, 106). Speaking of *Signals* (1970), for instance, he notes that a movement of one of his dancers suddenly struck him as an "intimate gesture," although he had not intended it to be so (106). The particular combination of dancers and the particular place the movement appeared in the sequence made it look like a gesture of intimacy shared between partners: "you don't have to *decide* that this is an intimate gesture," Cunningham states, "but you do something, and it becomes so" (106; my emphasis). This tells us something about Cunningham as an *observer* (rather than a creator) of gestures: he is able to acknowledge the evocative—even conventionally expressive—quality of a danced gesture. Moreover, as the anecdote suggests, *he is interested in that evocative gesture*, especially if it suggests a relationship (and thus a scenario or drama). For him, a movement has the status of a gesture when it is eloquent of a relation (whether "found" or developed by the dancers), or when, alternatively, it mimes or actually completes a specific task. In sum, the word "gesture" in Cunningham's vocabulary references both a task-like, "ordinary"

movement *and* an expressive movement. Cunningham recognizes that gestures have a signifying dimension insofar as they are part of *a culturally legible situation*.

Yet "gestures" are simultaneously technical building blocks, movements to be placed in an array and thus removed from the contexts in which they either say something (in a system of meaning) or do something (in a *habitus*). The purpose of the grids, lists, and chance procedures that Cunningham developed over the course of his career was to reveal through recombination new local contexts in which decontextualized human actions might be viewed. Cunningham puts it this way in *Changes*: "you do not separate the human being from the actions he does, or the actions which surround him, *but you can see what it is like to break these actions up in different ways*" (1968, n.p.). To "break up" an action is to interrupt it. It is to expose the modality of movement, the tonus or type of effort supporting the intention. In short, to "break up" an action is to seek contact with the "nakedness" of an energy underlying "passion for her [...] anger against him" (1952; reprinted in Vaughan 1997, 86). It is to interrupt the flow of gestures, to expose the support that gesture is—in Agamben's terms—that gesture is *as such*. It is also, as Cunningham puts it, to take the ground away from beneath the feet of the spectators, to shift them toward an "abyss" where conventional associations no longer function:

> I think that dance at its best [...] produces an indefinable and unforgettable abyss in the spectator. It is only an instant, and immediately following that instant the mind is busy [...] the feelings are busy [...] But there is that instant, and it does renew us. (Cunningham in Dalva ed. 2007, n.p.)

The question remains, though, whether such suspension over an "abyss" opens the ethical dimension or whether instead that dimension opens as one *crosses* the abyss, in an interval that also promises connection. *Winterbranch* is a study of what happens when one "breaks up" an action—in this case, the action of falling. A fall can be broken, cinematically interrupted, but a falling body inevitably lands.

Part IV. Falling in *Winterbranch*

Winterbranch dates from a phase in Cunningham's career when he was less interested in incorporating "ordinary gestures" than in investigating what the fundamentals of a dance vocabulary might be.[18] In the early 1960s, he began to focus on what he called "facts in dancing": "I have a tendency to deal with what I call the facts in dancing," he explained to David Vaughan, his archivist (Vaughan 1997, 135).[19] Influenced, perhaps, by the Classical Hindu Rasa theory of the "eight permanent emotions," he sought to reduce his vocabulary to a set of eight essential movement varieties, without, however, attaching any particular emotive value to them. We find in the "Choreographic Records" for *Crises* (1960), for instance, the following list: "Bend /Rise /Extend /Turn /Glide /Dart /Jump /Fall" (box 3, box 11, Cunningham, n.d.). After identifying these eight "facts," the choreographer then declined them into sub-categories, thus exploring systematically the anatomical possibilities of the human body. Here, Cunningham exemplifies the "materialist" sensibility of John Cage and the composers of "la musique concrète" who maintained that the

materials of a craft could be enumerated in a non-hierarchical, a-semantic taxonomy with no reference to their value in a harmonic system. In Cunningham's "The Impermanent Art" we hear an echo of Cage's aesthetics as they are presented in "Lecture on Something" (1959). Cage: "each something is really what it is." Cunningham:

> A thing is just that thing [...]. In dance, it is the simple fact of a jump being a jump, and the further fact of *what shape the jump takes* [my emphasis]. This attention given the jump eliminates the necessity to feel that the meaning of dancing lies in everything but the dancing, and further eliminates cause-and-effect worry as to what movement should follow what movement, frees one's feelings about continuity, and makes it clear that each act of life can be its own history: past, present and future, and can be so regarded, which helps to break the chains that too often follow dancers' feet around." (Reprinted in Vaughan 1997, 86)

For *Winterbranch*, Cunningham chose to focus not on the "jump" but rather on the "Fall."[20] The dance is composed of eighteen sections, each of which centers on a different way of falling (*Winterbranch* "Choreographic Records," Cunningham, n.d.). However, when he writes in the passage above that the "simple fact of a jump" is complicated by a "further fact"—namely," "what shape the jump takes"—he departs from a strict Cagean materialism. That the first "fact" has to be accompanied by a "further fact" (a movement has to be realized by a particular person in a particular sequence) indicates that the categories of movement themselves are "facts" only in a virtual sense. That is, they exist as classes of physical action to be actualized in a particular phenomenalized "shape." Even in a classroom exercise,, "a "Bend," for instance, is contoured by the movement that comes before and the movement that follows; "a "pré-mouvement," as Hubert Godard terms it, anticipates and orients what will come next (Ginot and Marcel eds. 1998, 224–9). That is why the movement's place in a sequence is so vital to the manner in which it will be performed, and thus to the manner in which it will strike the eye. Just as the "fact" of extending a hand to the sternum of one's partner might, as in *Signals*, become "a "gesture" recognized as "intimate," so too a "Bend" "Twist," or "Fall" might be phenomenalized as a gesture resonant with expressive, dramatic, even semantic force when executed in a particular sequence by a particular dancer and under the unique conditions of a theatrical performance. As Jill Johnston wrote succinctly in 1963, in a Cunningham dance "the gesture is the performer; the performer is the gesture" (10).

Thus, what Cunningham calls "the attention given the jump" excludes neither his interest in nor his desire to solicit the input of the individual dancer. On the contrary, such attention (cultivated in the dancer as well) allows each one to discover and reveal his or her singularity: "from the beginning I tried to look at the people I had, and see what they did and could do... You can't expect this one to dance like the other one. You can give them the same movement and then see how each does it in relationship to himself, to his being, not as a dancer but as a person" (Cunningham and Lesschaeve 2009, 65).[21] Especially during the 1950s and 1960s, Cunningham was acutely attuned to the movement qualities as well as the personalities of his dancers. In fact, he often began the choreographic process by compiling "a "gamut" of movements—one gamut for each dancer—that

would serve as the fundamental movement vocabulary for the piece, thus taking full advantage of the unique "shapes" each dancer tended to make when actualizing the dancing "fact."

However, *Winterbranch* is concerned less with highlighting the qualities of a particular dancer than with the "Fall," one of the eight movement "facts" on Cunningham's list. Cunningham explained to Jacqueline Lesschaeve that he "wanted to make a dance about falling" (Cunningham and Lesschaeve 2009, 101). So, quite simply, he "worked on falls" (101). first alone in the studio and then with the dancers he had in the Company at the time: Carolyn Brown, Viola Farber, Barbara Lloyd, William Davis, and Steve Paxton. In his account of the work he insists repeatedly that his main interest was in "the idea of bodies falling," resisting the implication—made by Lesschaeve and others—that he had any other message in mind (Vaughan 1997, 137). While admitting that the dance caused "a "furor" whenever it was performed, he remains coy in the Lesschaeve interview, acknowledging but never validating the strong reactions to which it gave rise:

> In Sweden they said it was about race riots; in Germany they thought of concentration camps, in London they spoke of bombed cities; in Tokyo they said it was the atom bomb. A lady with us took care of the child [Benjamin Lloyd] who was on the trip. She was the wife of a sea captain and said it looked like a shipwreck to her [...]. Everybody was drawing on his own experience, whereas I had simply made a piece which was involved with *falls*, the idea of bodies falling. (Vaughan 1997, 135, 137)

Carolyn Brown, who danced in *Winterbranch* throughout the 1964 tour, writes in her autobiography *Chance and Circumstance* that "In Germany, interestingly, no one thought to liken *Winterbranch* to the Holocaust, although this happened regularly in other European countries" (2007, 389). Meanwhile, the reviewer for the *London Times* wrote that "*Winterbranch* is a disturbing work [...] The dancers, dressed in all-over black like wartime commandos, writhe and grope their way through gloom" (1964, 4). After a New York performance in 1967 Don McDonagh commented that *Winterbranch* had been "variously interpreted as a plea for civil rights and a shipwreck" (1976, 289). And Arlene Croce, reviewer for *Ballet Review*, wrote that "*Winterbranch* seems to me a pre-vision of hell" (1968, 25).[22] But whether critics identified *Winterbranch* with Auschwitz, the battlefield, or hell, they all remarked on what Brown calls "the *ethos* of *Winterbranch*; darkness, foreboding, terror, devastation, alienation, doom" (2007, 477).

Before proceeding to a closer analysis of the movement content of *Winterbranch*, we need to recall both the artistic and the political contexts of the work. With respect to the artistic context, Cunningham was in the process of assimilating developments in the New York dance scene, developments that—at least for a short period—caused him to rethink his dance vocabulary. Members of the Judson Dance Group, including Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, and Trisha Brown, started incorporating everyday and task movement into their works as early as July 1962 (see Banes 1993). Simultaneously, the "Junk Art" and Fluxus movements of the 1960s encouraged the incorporation into performance and exhibition spaces of urban detritus and industrial waste.[23] *Winterbranch* reflects both these trends. Further, the directions that Cunningham gave to his Artistic Director of the time, Robert Rauschenberg, reveal the influence on his work of his own

personal experience. These directions are particularly precise, more detailed and explicit—and thus constraining—than Cunningham typically supplied. He even republished in *Changes: Notes on Choreography* elements of the letter he wrote to Rauschenberg in which he outlines his preferences for décor and lighting:

> The lighting is done freely each time, differently, so that the rhythms of the movements are differently accented and the shapes differently seen, partially or not at all. I asked robert rauschenberg [sic] to think of the light as though it were night instead of day. i don't mean night as referred to in romantic pieces, but night as it is in our time with automobiles on highways, and flashlights in faces, and the eyes being deceived about shapes by the way the light hits them. There is a streak of violence in me…I was interested in the possibility of having a person dragged out of the area while lying or sitting down. (Reprinted in Vaughan 1997, 135–7)

As Mark Franko has noted, the scene on the highway seems to be taken right out of Cunningham's personal experience while touring in the infamous VW van with Rauschenberg, Cage, and his Company members (1992, 146; also see Cunningham and Lesschaeve 2009, 106). Responding to Cunningham's directions, Rauschenberg invented a lighting arrangement that would approximate an experience of the highway at night he knew only too well, creating stark contrasts between total obscurity and blinding illumination by cueing the lightboard to follow an aleatory order of soft beams determined according to a chance algorithm that changed for each performance. For the music, Cunningham commissioned an original piece from La Monte Young, a composer who was very much in vogue at the time. Young offered *2 Sounds*, a minimalist composition that has become over the years the object of a lively polemic. *2 Sounds* juxtaposes a screechy tone, produced by dragging an ashtray against a mirror, with a more resonant low tone, produced by stroking a piece of wood across the surface of a Chinese gong. The first ten minutes of the dance are performed in absolute silence. Cunningham heightened the contrast between the silent beginning and the second half by amping up the volume of La Monte Young's score to a decibel level that most spectators (and dancers) found—and still find—intolerable. Finally, Rauschenberg added a piece of junk art to the scenography, a combine composed of whatever he could find around the set at the time. (Don McDonagh describes it as "a strange little machine with winking lights… a cartoon version of an official police car." [McDonagh 1976, 288–9]). Rauschenberg designed not only the sets and lighting but also the costumes; he chose to dress the dancers entirely in black with contrasting white sneakers on their feet. As for the make-up, Rauschenberg elaborated on the sneaker motif: he applied a black smudge under the eyes of each dancers, evoking in this way the protective stroke of black that football players apply when they have to play in a brightly-lit stadium. Significantly, during the rehearsals for the Opéra Ballet production in Lyon, Jennifer Goggans directed the dancers to scuff up and dirty the white sneakers as much as possible presumably to give the impression—as in the original production—of a grubby workspace, a stage graced only by the clutter of unused equipment in the back.

Goggans's explicit directive (to dirty the shoes) in the context of the 2016 reconstruction confirms that none of the directions Cunningham gave were indifferent or expendable. Clearly, he intended to create a frame for the movement, he wanted to conjure a very specific mood. Thus it was

misleading to state—as he did—that any association made by the spectators would be drawn "from individual experience" alone. The lighting, the grubby décor, the make-up, and the costumes all collude to render the "falls" of *Winterbranch* not simply "facts in dancing" but, more specifically, facts framed in a certain way. That frame—the menace of nighttime darkness—remains a constant throughout all performances of the piece. It is by no means insignificant that *Winterbranch*, when excerpted later on for an Event, was still performed in the original constumes and lighting; as dance critic Nancy Dalva notes perspicaciously in her 2005 review, of the Events at the Joyce Theater in New York, *Winterbranch* was

> presented in its own special outfits—namely black jumpsuits—and its own almost completely dark, glancing, harsh light. This was unusual for Events—I don't know of any other dance for which this is done—when the material is usually stripped of its usual presentation context. (Dalva 2005, 18)[24]

The question is, to what extent does the dance material for *Winterbranch* rely on this "presentation context"? Much of the choreography is period-specific; that is, we find in many of the dances of the 1960s dance figures that evoke the workings of machines—pulleys, pistons, and levers. A trio that occurs near the end of *Winterbranch* is only a slight modification of a trio found in *Crises* (1960); the turning figures in which one dancer rolls over another prefigure similar figures found in *Walkaround Time* (1968). At the same time, the "presentation context" of *Winterbranch* encourages us to look at these figures and the gestures they contain not only as mechanical but also as task-like, the variety of movement that would be accomplished under the flickering, irregular lighting of an apocalyptic landscape. At various points a dancer is dragged off the stage by means of a small square black rug; we witness the effort involved in tugging or carrying a body off stage and recognize the unmistakable silhouette of a still figure wrapped in a shroud and transported on a stretcher. The theme of the body as dead weight is thus impossible to miss, although this theme seems to be contrasted with another, that of the body as *eloquent* weight. It is as though Cunningham were exploring the difference between what Agamben calls "bare life" and "form-of-life," that is, between "naked life" and "a life that can never be separated from its form" (or "shape") (2000, 2–3). On the one hand, the associations the audience makes with these figures—victims of a holocaust, sinners writhing in hell—are overdetermined by the context in which they are presented; on the other, the gestures as performed arguably project meanings that the scenography merely underscores.

Consider, for instance, the opening of the dance. A male dancer—Cunningham, in the original production—traverses the stage from back stage left to back stage right lying on his back, wrapped tightly in a black tube that prevents him from using his arms. (During the rehearsals for the 2016 reconstruction, Goggans referred to the tube as a "body bag.")[25] In the original production, Cunningham held a flashlight so that while he slithered and writhed, the beam would light up different areas of the stage. The figure is thus at once a passive victim of the constraining bag and an active participant in setting the mood of the piece. Cunningham may have insisted that in choreographing *Winterbranch* he was merely interested in "the idea of falling," but the many props

of the dance suggest that "the idea of falling" was—even for him—by no means denuded of symbolic implications.

The following sections of the dance also emphasize the weight of the body, both as a thing to be manipulated and as a force to be countered or taken into account. Soon after the opening solo, a man and woman enter into a duet that resembles the awkward manoeuvres of a mechanical pulley: one serves as a counterweight to the other. The man holds the arm of the woman, who, to begin with, is lying on her side on the floor facing the audience. Little by little he succeeds in lifting her torso, head, and hips off the ground by leaning his feet against hers and pulling her toward him with all his force. As soon as the woman is upright, she begins to descend toward the other side, supported only by the counterweight of the man (see fig. 2). A few minutes later, the two dancers form a figure that resembles a rotating ball inside a socket (see fig. 3).

Fig. 2: Adrien Délépine and Kristina Bentz during a rehearsal of Winterbranch *at the Opéra de Lyon, March 2017, photograph by Monick Dimonte. Permission to reproduce granted by photographer.*

In both cases (the pulley and the ball-and-socket), the falls are carefully controlled; we observe a calculated and steady displacement of weight as the woman holds herself rigid, manipulated (but also protected) by the motions of the man. In the second phrase, however, which Cunningham referred to in his notes as the "twine roll," the woman makes herself completely vulnerable, rolling over the back of the man, her back arched, exhibiting her pubis, stomach, chest and throat to the audience. Meanwhile, the man transforms himself into a support for her weight, bearing his burden (the woman) as he shifts her toward the ground (see fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Noëllie Conjeaud and Raúl Serrano Nuñez performing "Twine Roll" in Merce Cunningham's Winterbranch *(screenshot from performance video attributed to Lyon Opera Ballet, 2016)]*

The duet seems to juxtapose contrasting tonalities: we witness industry qualified by empathy, a task is executed with exquisite care. The slowness of the first apparition of the "twine-roll" (it will

be repeated twice) invites the specator to contemplate the skill of the dancers who are performing it. At one point during the rehearsals I asked one of the women who performed the "twine-roll," Chaery Moon, what she thought the gestures meant, what she was imagining as she executed the phrase. Her answer was that she had no time to think about what her gestures might mean because the balancing operation was so difficult to execute. The challenge, she said, was to remain conscious of what her partner was doing at every moment, to adjust *her* movements to the micro-adjustments of *his* back muscles, to attend to the slow but inexorable shifts of *his* weight beneath *her* prone frame. In order to avoid falling and injuring herself, she had to remain riveted on the incremental displacements of his weight, displacements that were always in response to her own redistributions of weight.

On the one hand, Moon's account implies that the relationship between the dancers was *nothing more than a relation of weight*. Of course, to some extent, this relation characterizes all dance duets (especially ones in which there are lifts), but this dancing "fact" is usually disguised by mannerisms or narrative contexts. During the rehearsals for the reconstruction, Goggans was careful to foreground this relation of weight. Presumably channelling Cunningham, she explicitly instructed the two dancers to avoid suggesting an amorous relation while performing the "twine-roll." At one point, the male and female dancers (Mario Menendez and Chaery Moon) clasped hands as a way of maintaining their balance. Goggans swooped down to correct them, insisting that if they needed to hold hands to prevent themselves from falling they could do so *but only if their gesture remained invisible to the audience*. 'Do it in such a way that no one sees you're touching each other,' she advised. To her mind, at least, any rapport between dancers that might emerge over the course of the rehearsals had to be muted; any plot that could be projected had to be suppressed.

The "twine-roll" appears twice more in the course of *Winterbranch*. The second time we encounter this phrase it is executed by three couples simultaneously at a brisker pace. The third and last time the "twine-roll" appears in the dance it is performed at a much faster pace. As a result, the woman in each couple is destabilized, caught off balance. Unable to calibrate her movements to those of the man beneath her, she comes crashing down to the floor. Each appearance of the "twine-roll" is thus distorted either by slow motion or acceleration, indicating that Cunningham was indeed interested in seeing how a "fact in dancing" could appear each time in a different "shape." Throughout the 1950s and 60s, deceleration and acceleration were among the means Cunningham used to detach a potentially signifying gesture from a particular context. Cunningham had other means at his disposal as well, such as the breaking up or disaggregation of gestural continuities. We can see how this disaggregating technique functions in another duet, one that I will refer to, for lack of a better title, as "leaning towards." The "leaning towards" phrase is revelatory, for it contains gestures that we recognize as meaningful (part of a legible vocabulary of "intimate" human gestures) but that suddenly become deprived of their context, shifting us into that "abyss" toward which Cunningham directs his viewers. In "leaning towards," a man and a woman lean toward each other until they balance precariously only a mere centimeter apart. Poised in relevé, they execute a hinge in parallel, back to back. The male dancer twists his upper body to the side, keeping his hips straight ahead, then he extends his arms in the direction of the woman. Balanced

also in a hinge, she leans closer to him; he leans closer to her. But they never touch. It is as though the man were reaching out to catch the woman in her fall, a fall that never comes.

In the context of the phrase, his gesture could easily be read as a gesture of protection. The moment is rich with longing and frustration, proximity and distance, all the ingredients of a romantic duet. An instant later, the woman abruptly stands up straight and the man repeats the same protective gesture—as if to catch her—but at a speed that the eye can barely register. This time, the gesture we registered earlier as protective, takes on a mechanical quality; it is detached from anything the other dancer is doing, emptied of affect and integrated into what seems to be an arbitrary sequence of rapid, interrupted, almost spasmodic gestures that bring the man to the floor. We understand at this juncture that the gesture which seemed a moment ago to be a gesture saturated with meaning, a "protective" gesture, has been abstracted from its earlier function—as were the accelerated gestures of the "twine roll." Momentarily, we glimpse something close—but not identical—to a "fact in dancing," an element in a taxonomy of such "facts," part of an alphabet or gamut of possible moves. Isolated and abstracted, "to lean toward" seems to mean little more than "to lean toward."

But a question remains: Can a gesture be entirely liberated from a context to reveal itself as "fact"? To answer that question we need to consider the "shape" of the "fact" and how that shape comes to appear. On one level, we might define the shape that phenomenalizes the fact as the peculiar orientation the fall takes when inserted into a continuity—here, when the hinge appears first as part of a flowing protective gesture, then suddenly abruptly as part of a chain of broken-up gestural bits. This orientation can be considered the first order of shaping, the degree zero of choreography as a time-based art. But this shape, inflected to be sure by its place in a continuity, does not actually exist until it has been executed by an individual dancer. That dancer also contributes to "the further fact" that modifies—and in modifying actualizes—the "fact in dancing." The dancer, that is, brings to the now oriented fact-shape not simply a momentum and a rhythm but also an emotional color or mood. Finally, in addition to the shape the "fact" takes within the continuity and the singular dancer's performance of it, there is the scenography, the "presentation context" that ineluctably influences the way the oriented, performed fact-shape will be perceived.

Given that for *Winterbranch* Cunningham opted for such a highly charged presentation context, it is highly unlikely that he believed the dance was just about "falling" or that ultimately he wanted it to be interpreted as such. His careful directions to Rauschenberg and his attempt to preserve the original scenographic details of the work during Events indicate that an interpretative frame for the movement mattered to him a good deal. The historical context of *Winterbranch* helps explain why this might have been so. The period of the 1960s was one in which dance works addressed in increasingly explicit ways contemporary political events. By 1964, spectators would have been particularly alert to allusions in modern dance to scenes of violence: The United States had just entered into the war in Vietnam in 1961, and 1964 in particular was a year of escalating violence, both in the air and on the ground. (The Gulf of Tonkin attack was conducted on August 2, 1964.) If Cunningham wanted at that very moment to display the simplicity of "facts in dancing," he made very little effort to guarantee that simplicity in *Winterbranch*. Far from attempting to suppress

associations with recent and current events, he allowed them to multiply. The black costumes, the rugs that serve as stretchers, the lighting evocative of surveillance strobes—all these elements converge to amplify the mood of menacing violence that the public couldn't but apprehend. Even at the level of the danced gestures themselves, which accelerate over the course of the dance until they are performed at a frenetic, break-neck speed, Cunningham seems to have been working with far more than "the idea of bodies falling" (Vaughan 1997, 137).

In addition, there is much evidence to suggest that "falling" carried many personal and literary associations that Cunningham continued to explore throughout his career. His "Choreographic Notes" are full of allusions to H. C. Earwicker (Here Comes Everybody), the hero of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* who, let us recall, dies of a fall. There is no reason to exclude the possibility that Cunningham associated the "fact" of falling with literary figures, historical events, religious symbols, and personal preoccupations, and that all of these associations are present in the piece.. In any case, the cultural associations of the act of falling are never far from the surface of *Winterbranch*. And how could it be otherwise? Falling is without doubt the most symbolically weighted physical action that exists.[26] It is by no means clear, then, that the "fall," as a gesture, could be revealed, or even approached, as just a "fact."

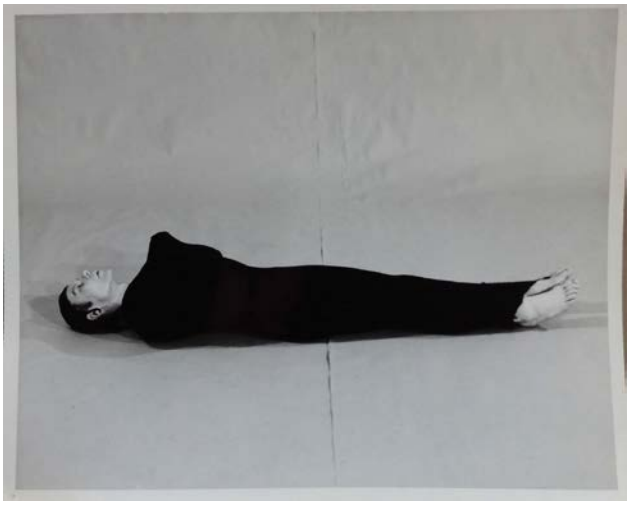

Fig. 4: Merce Cunningham, Winterbranch*, photograph by Robert Propper (c. 1964–1970)]*

As if to bring the point home, Cunningham produced with the photographer Robert Propper a series of studio stills of *Winterbranch* in the late 1960s that underscore the mortuary, religious, and even pornographic implications of falling. Studio shots are in general an untapped but important source of information about Cunningham's dances, for they indicate how he wanted the dance to be publicized, emblematized, and recalled. Those taken by Propper are particularly eloquent. In figure 4 we see Cunningham lying prone in his black tube, a flashlight protruding strangely from the wrap, thus suggesting a curious displacement—yet lingering presence—of the erotic drive.

Fig. 5: Julia Carnicer dragged off by Marco Merenda in Merce Cunningham's Winterbranch *(screenshot from video of 2016 performance attributed to Lyon Opera Ballet).*

At no point in the dance does the male dancer lie in the position Cunningham assumes for Propper's photograph. However, near the middle of the piece, a

woman, lying still and prone on her back, is indeed wrapped in one of the black carpets and dragged offstage by a male partner (see fig. 5).

The studio still thus captures something central to the piece, not "falling," but rather the state of "having fallen," the weight of the stilled body as a material object that, when presented on the stage, implies a narrative, a dramatic past ("having fallen"). The question is, then, whether the ethics of Cunningham's dance should be located in what he consistently represented as his refusal of symbolism, a resistance to culturally over-determined meanings, or whether instead his ethics inhere in both the movement *and* the presentation context, a set of choreographic and staging decisions that at once confirm those cultural meanings and put them to the test?

Part V. Conclusion: *Winterbranch* and the Ethics of Gesture

As in the example Agamben provides of the pornographic gesture suddenly interrupted to expose its mediality, so too the gestures in *Winterbranch* expose their mediality, their quality as movement support, while nonetheless retaining their connection to a frame, a context, that suggests a way to interpret them. At times, Cunningham seems to want to leave that frame behind, to remind us that the frame *is* a frame (not the "thing" itself), and even to claim that it is ethical—or at least emancipatory—to do so. And yet, I doubt Cunningham ultimately believed that it is either ethical or emancipatory to seek to leave all frames behind, to suppress all "particular forms" or "shapes," to expose the dancing "fact" as such. That would mean neglecting to make a new continuity of the fragmented, disaggregated gestures with which he worked (and he always emphasized with his dancers the need to discover, in their own bodies, that new continuity); it would mean suppressing the independence of the individual dancer who provides the dynamic, the "shape," the emotional color; it would mean removing all scenographic choices and rejecting all studio stills in an effort to keep the movement clean of context. If Cunningham sometimes leaned in that direction, *Winterbranch* is clearly not an example of that tendency.

Carolyn Brown hits the mark when she refers, in the passage quoted earlier, to "the ethos of *Winterbranch*: darkness, foreboding, terror, devastation, alienation, doom" (2007, 477). Cunningham must have intuited that in 1964 it was time to produce a more topical piece, to expose the fact that falling bodies are eloquent, they are not just "facts" to be manipulated or carted away. *Winterbranch* suggests that because we are human, even simple shifts in weight can speak, can have something to say—even if it is simply that the body is in danger of being hurt. In that sense, *Winterbranch* is from beginning to end a meditation on the body as a sensate, living organism subject to injury. The pulley- and piston-like figures underscore the fragility of the dancers as they lift and set one another down. The make-up Rauschenberg devised for the dance points to the element of risk: the black smudges under the eyes of the dancers at once protect them, literally, from the blinding lights and suggest that vulnerability; the black smudges recall to spectators the fact that the dancers, as sensate beings, require protection. And this sense that dancers require protection characterizes Cunningham's approach to dance in general. He is known to have adjusted his choreography—even if chance derived and supposedly fixed—to prevent one dancer from colliding with another, or to better control a lift. Choreography was always, for him, a

manifestation of care as well as an unfolding of the seemingly impossible permutations suggested by chance. Thus it is not surprising that elements of care are built into his technique. When I spoke to two of the dancers cast to perform the phrase "leaning towards," Chiara Paperini and Tylor Galster, I learned that they were both experiencing pain in their lower backs while performing the hinge.[27] Trained largely as classical ballet dancers, they were not used to executing the kind of off-center hinges that are a primary building block of Cunningham's technique and choreographic vocabulary. During the rehearsals Goggans, a seasoned Cunnngham teacher as well as dancer, advised Paperini and Galster to make use of the muscles of the abdomen to support the lower back in the hinge (as all Cunningham-trained dancers learn in technique class). The care the dancers had to exercise to protect their backs while performing the hinge must be considered a significant part of the actualization of the dancing "fact," a component of its "shape" as performed. It is precisely this aspect of the actualization that constitutes what is gestural in the gesture: a sensitivity to the body as a support, as a *lived* support. If Agamben and Cunningham share an interest in the suspension of "communication" in favor of "communicability," if both view that suspension as opening the ethical dimension, Cunningham adds a further element to which he, as a choreographer and dancer, is acutely sensitive. That element is the dancer's own experience—as a medium, a support for meaning, but also as a person living and shaping that support-ness, that "media character," on a stage.

The gesture in "leaning toward" that I interpreted as protective demands focused concentration on the part of the dancer: she must tighten the muscles of the abdomen, straighten the lower back, and draw the sacrum in. To some extent, this skillful use of the muscles becomes automatic over time; yet the effort involved always leaves a trace in performance, what I have called elsewhere "the affect of skill" (see Noland 2002, 120–35). This primary affect already directs the gesture toward the pole of expression and meaning; it gives the gesture its first shape, its first frame. Agamben shows some sensitivity to this layer of lived experience when he writes in "Le Geste et la danse" of "the dance of dancers who dance on stage, *the accomplishment of their skill as dancers* and their power to dance as power" (12; my emphasis). What Agamben refers to as the dancers's "skill as dancers" is not "nakedness"; there is nothing pre-cultural or natural about it (Cunningham in Vaughan 1997, 86). In fact, as an example of technique it can be traced back to a very precise historical moment. Dance technique, or skill, is a language; it is *acquired*, an "accomplishment" that might, at times, afford an experience of the "abyss." It is the "linguistic" element in gesture, a manifestation of our "linguistic nature," or, more precisely, of our natural disposition to be acculturated, to acquire languages and skills, to become a vocal or gestural support for signs. To stage this skill in its clearest form was always one of Cunningham's cherished goals—one could even say one of his ethical goals. But skill is not the same thing as mediality "as such," or "expression as such," or "communicability" as "milieu pur." Skill is dirty and sweaty; it bears the marks not only of the person who attains it but also of a specific training developed at a specific point in time. As *Winterbranch* seems to insist, skill as exercised by a dancer on stage is an invitation to a reading, an invitation to interpretation, that, at certain historical junctures, it might be unethical to ignore.

Winterbranch can be said, then, to occupy one pole on a large spectrum of works in Cunningham's repertory, none of which—I maintain against the grain—ever achieves, or could achieve, a display

of energy in its "naked" form. *Winterbranch* incessantly, even doggedly, drags its gestures toward legibility, toward communication and message, even as they are interrupted, suspended, exposed as the instances of technique they also are. As in Agamben's account, the two orders—or extreme poles of the spectrum—co-exist: the gesture is a sign ("communication") and the gesture is a support, a medium ("communicability"). The ethical dimension is not opened, then, by seeking to suspend, to remain in an "abyss" of endless mediality understood as a thing in itself ("as such"). The ethical dimension is opened by recalling that *suspension is itself suspended*, that we are "condemned to meaning," as Merleau-Ponty put it, and that communication is a betrayal but also a chance. If at certain moments in history it might be more ethical to press for the suspension of semantics, even of expression, at others it might be more ethical to emphasize the semantic and expressive weight a gesture can support. There is ultimately no one way for art to be ethical, nor one way for it to be political.[28] It is impossible to ensure that a communication will be successful, just as it is impossible to ensure that "nothing" will be communicated at all. If the stage can display anything, it is that fact.

Notes

[1] That *Winterbranch* was indeed a controversial work is confirmed by the reviewers who saw it and the dancers who danced in it. See, for instance, Arlene Croce (1968): audiences of *Winterbranch* "got restless, laughed, hissed, yelled" (25); Don McDonagh (1970): "He shocked a dance audience with his first solo recital in New York in 1944, then later with 'Sixteen Dances for Soloist and Company of Three' in 1951, and over a decade later in 1964 with 'Winterbranch'" (33). See also Carolyn Brown (2007): "Without question Merce's work was the most controversial of the season" (59).

[2] David Vaughan indicates that the last full performance of *Winterbranch* was in 1974 (see 1997, 293).

[3] Agamben (1999), thinking of Aristotle, calls this "linguistic nature" our "*factum loquendi*."

[4] As far as I know, Agamben has published only one essay (1997) on a particular choreographer: Hervé Diasnas.

[5] See Noland (2009) for a discussion of André Leroi-Gourhan's *Gesture and Speech* and Marcel Mauss's "Techniques of the Body."

[6] Gesture is thus to be understood as the alternative to an "image," a "reification and obliteration of a gesture". See Lucia Ruprecht's brilliant consideration of gesture as continuum versus gesture as arrest (2015), with which the present essay is in dialogue.

[7] All translations are my own. It was thus published the same year as the Italian version of "Notes on Gesture" as "Note sul gesto," in *Trafic*, 1992.

[8] See "Notes on Gesture" where Agamben describes how a gesture is "stiffened and turned into a destiny" (53), or where he speaks of the "mythical rigidity of the image" (54).

[9] The passage reads: "It has precisely nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality" (Agamben 2000, 58); or elsewhere: "gesture, having to express Being in language itself, strictly speaking has nothing to express and nothing to say other than what is said in language—gesture is always the gesture of being at a loss in language" (Agamben 1999, 78).

[10] That "ethics," "politics," and "gesture" all share a common semantic and philosophical space in Agamben's writing is verified by a quick glance at "Notes on Politics," which ends with an italicized sentence we have already read in "Notes on Gesture" (57); Agamben just replaces the word "gesture" with the word "politics": "*Politics is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the act of making a means visible as such*" (2000, 115–116); original emphasis. Agamben is drawing from Walter Benjamin's notion of politics, presented in "What is Epic Theater?" (first version), as the act of making appearance appear.

[11] *Feeling and Form* was translated into Italian in 1956 and 1970. Langer quotes Mary Wigman's "The New German Dance": "The shape of the individual's inner experience [...] will also have the unique, magnetic power of transmission which makes it possible to draw other persons, the participating spectators, into *the magic circle* of creation" (1953, 23). Another possible source is Walter Benjamin's *Notes aux Tableaux Parisiens*, which Agamben cites in "Pour une éthique du cinéma" (1992).

[12] Agamben's understanding of the relation between gesture and verbal language could be fruitfully compared to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's comments on the "geste linguistique" (1945, 216–7).

[13] Agamben is alluding to Stéphane Mallarmé's "Mimique": "un milieu, pur, de fiction" [a milieu, pure, of fiction] (2003, 179). Citing loosely, Agamben removes the comma between "milieu" and "pur."

[14] Cunningham makes some of his clearest statements about audience reception in these interviews, which were first published in France in 1980 and thus were probably recorded around 1979. "I don't think what I do is non-expressive," he states, "it's just that I don't try to inflict it on anybody, so each person may think in whatever way his feelings and experience take him" (Cunningham and Lesschaeve 2009, 106).

[15] Jill Johnston wrote in 1963, for instance, that "Cunningham's dances are still beyond the general public because he doesn't give the public anything literal to hold onto. His dances are all about movement, and what you see in them that relates to your common experience is your own business and not his" (1963, 10). Likewise, Marcia Siegel wrote in 1971 that Cunningham "refuses to assume a metaphorical or illusionary intent. In other words, his dancing is not about something else" (1971, 471). Siegel's approach changed over time, but her early appraisals were shared by many, including Roger Copeland who wrote 1979 that Cunningham's work is "virtually devoid of 'expressive' or symbolic elements" (1979, 26); see also Susan Leigh Foster (1986). For a subtle approach to expression in Cunningham, see Mark Franko (1992).

[16] On Stéphane Mallarmé's "milieu pur" as a problematic notion for dance, see Frédéric Pouillaude (2014, 118–21).

[17] *Variations V* (1965). For *Collage* (1952), working with untrained performers, Cunningham made a gamut of simple task gestures.

[18] Cunningham began working on *Winterbranch* in 1963. The dance constitutes the final chapter in a four-part series on the seasons that he began almost a decade earlier: *Springweather & People* (1955); *Summerspace* (1958); *Rune* (the original title of which was *Autumn Rune*) (1959); and *Winterbranch* (1964). For a more detailed account of how the dance was made, see Noland (forthcoming).

[19] See also "Choreography and the Dance": "I am more interested in the *facts* of moving rather than my feelings about them" (Cunningham 1970, 181).

[20] Other dances of the 1960s were studies in one of the eight "facts in dancing": *Summerspace* (1958), for instance, is based on an exploration of the "Turn."

[21] Speaking of *RainForest* Cunningham affirms: "Yes, it's a character dance and since such a dance is made specifically on a given body, its flavor changes sharply when some other dancer takes over the part" (Cunningham and Lesschaeve 2009, 113).

[22] A reviewer of Benjamin Millepied's 2013 reconstruction of *Winterbranch* remarks on the "urban" noise and the "headlights" that sweep the stage but does not mention disasters or holocausts (2013). Audience members I interviewed at the March 2016 performance in Lyon compared *Winterbranch* to a scene of post-nuclear disaster.

[23] Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns were both present at Allan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* in 1966; even earlier they kept abreast of works by Jean Tinguely, George Maciunus, and others (see Lussac 2004).

[24] *Winterbranch* was performed in a few other Events without the original scenography (1974; 1978); however, the fact that Cunningham later made the choice to retain it indicates his awareness of a possibility that extends to all his works—their integrity as performances, as statements or mood pieces.

[25] The crawling, wriggling figure returns at the end of the dance; a group of five dancers simultaneously fall to the

ground then leave the stage crawling on their back without the use of their hands, their bodies covered almost entirely by one of the black rugs.

[26] The history of dance offers ample evidence that the fall has played a primary role in the development of several modern dance techniques: Doris Humphrey based much of her choreographic practice on two central actions, "fall and recovery"; Laban was fascinated by the body's weight; and Graham explored the effects of gravity on movement. Given the importance of the fall in the history of dance, it is not surprising that Cunningham would eventually take it up as a theme.

[27] A "hinge" requires a dancer to balance on the balls of feet, heels held off the floor, while bending at the knee and keeping the back in line with the hips and shoulders. A twisted hinge, à la Cunningham, requires the dancer to simultaneously twist the upper torso toward the side while maintaining the hips straight in relation to the knees.

[28] See Rancière (2009) for a pertinent reflection on the politics of meaning in art.

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Biography

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