

The invention of the space

Trisha Brown in conversation with Rossella Mazzaglia and Adriana Polveroni

1) Rossella Mazzaglia: *Of the most exciting pieces in the early years, a relevant place in everyone's recollection is taken by the equipment pieces, where dancers used harnesses to walk down walls or buildings, as if they were overcoming gravity. One is Man Walking Down the Side of a Building, which seems to challenge the usual idea we have about dance, but also the creative process, the choreographer's work. What do you recall of that experience?*

Trisha Brown: I'll just start with the building where *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* was performed, at 80 Wooster [Street], in SoHo, in downtown New York City.

I had this idea that I wanted to walk down the side of the building and that I would perform it, but then my back went out so I had to get a surrogate¹. One of the things you wrestle with as a choreographer, and this is probably true for every choreographer, is that you have to figure out where to start, how to get half the way through it, and then how to get all the way to the end. I wanted to make a very clear dance and it's a little drawing of that that I was doing in my mind. A lot of young choreographers don't know what they can do and should do. So that was my rationale.

The other thing was: I was on the roof, seven storeys up and I would go to the edge of the building and look down. I would be looking at the top of everyone's head down on the sidewalk. I liked to do that because it made the whole world so different. So, that was the beginning of my walking on walls, various walls.

2) R.M.: *Walking which does not evoke in any way the image of the genres of theater dance which were common at least until the late sixties, like modern dance or ballet.*

I don't know about ballet as much as I do about modern dance, but of course, it doesn't fit into anyone's idea of what modern dance or ballets are. That's why there was always confusion, a global confusion about my work, but I just kept going forward with what I was doing and, at some point, people knew they could expect that from me.

3) Adriana Polveroni: *The desire to create a "clear dance" evokes cultural and artistic trends, which were blossoming in New York in the early seventies. The clarity associated with your idea of dance, of a dance which was cleared, dried up, from many traditional canonical elements, and very close to research on abstract art and minimalism.*

Did I say clear dance? To me it was like a diagram of a choreography, based on three essential stations: beginning place, middle place and final place.

4) A.P.: *From your own experience as well as from the New York environment of those years, the hybridization among arts emerges. How was it possible that such a contamination among different art languages and collaboration among artists coming from different backgrounds developed just during that period? How much did that cultural environment allow you to create a totally new dance?*

That is totally the issue, because not everybody is a good choreographer, but we all speak the same language. At the base of that commonality is the opportunity to access unheard-of freedoms, twenty-four/seven. For instance, walking down the side of a building.... I rest my case. But, little by little those domineering pioneers, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Ruth St. Denis receded from attention. I would say, but maybe this sounds like bad apples, but I would say that a new strain of younger more powerful dancers who had good educations from across

¹ Joseph Schlichter, who was then married to Trisha Brown, performed it.

the country and were just looking for a place to lay down their chops took hold of the cultural environment.

5) A.P.: *The urban experience and the radical language were innovative elements for your dance, but also quite up-to-date with respect to artistic movements in New York in the early seventies. It would seem that the “displacement” with respect to dance was a fitting choice, necessary for you, in order to explore and face creative and life circumstances of the time in a concrete and personal way.*

Well, I think it was my job in those days... First of all, I and all my friends were young; second of all, we were highly competitive and overstimulated by art pouring out from windows and doors. New York was the Wild West and where I lived was the Wild West, we broke lines all the time. I wonder whether I should tell you that once Simone Forti and I climbed up the fire escape to a building and broke in the four-storey window and went in and worked from darkness until around eleven because we had no money to rent a studio. There was no place for me to perform, few places, my colleagues and I found a few places where we could perform but it was not ever a sure thing, something you could count on. Moreover, I had a little son and he wanted and needed to go out, so I was outdoors a lot of the time. So I was bored one way and overstimulated another way, because my mind kept going on and on about ideas, about what I could do with that same building I was living in². I even turned in a proposal for a grant, because I said “I’d like to walk down a 34-storey building...”. Fortunately, I didn’t get the grant, because it probably was not meant for me to do that.

6) R.M.: *Your link with the city emerges openly in the wall performances, but also in another experience, unique in your artistic approach, Roof Piece.*

Roof Piece was a beautiful piece. I was teaching in that time in my studio and I used to make up 15 assignments that I gave the dancers immediately as they came in the door. In there came the notion about passing movement over a long distance. So, I went up on the roof of my house, and dancers were spaced on every other building out. It was about 12 blocks or 15 blocks. When I got up there I thought that New York is overwhelming, so you might want to be free from time to time. And so we copied each other, I made dance gestures and the person on the next building was following right along. I had a big smile on my face because no one knew we were up there, no taxi drivers, no policemen, no anything. So that was a fabulous thing to have done for us.

7) R.M.: *If this performance was somewhat a way to dominate the overwhelming city of New York, at least for a time, perhaps it is also true that it was also the expression of a complicity with SoHo and the community living there at the time.*

I didn’t tell you everything, I didn’t tell you about I did get permission to go on those roofs. I went out after dark and I looked up and saw which buildings had lights on the top floors and I knew an artist was up there. So I captured all those addresses and then I went back the following day, not probably a very smart thing for me to do because these buildings were semi-abandoned or semi-unused, so I would walk up the stairs and I was very, very careful. Nothing did happen to me, but I can just see me going up the stairs, turning the corner and watching my backside and getting up to the top of the building, knocking on the door “Hello my name is Trisha Brown, I’m a choreographer and I would like to make a choreography on the roof of your house, could that be possible?”. Yes or no, but most were yeses, mainly because I don’t think they knew what I was going to do, but anyway, it was very tiring to track up six/five floors in SoHo up until they changed the laws in height.

I ended up at Lucy Lippard’s loft and I said “Ah, Lucy, she’ll let me do this”. I didn’t have to trek up. She came down and she said “Trisha” and I said “Oh, Lucy, I’m so glad to see you. I’m doing this project and it is about getting up onto roofs and doing passing on movement

² The building of the performance *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* is the same where Trisha Brown used to live then. At first industrial building, it was turned into a dwelling space.

signals across 12-15 block distance and I just wondered if I can use your building as a starting place". She said "I have to call our insurance adjuster" and I thought "SoHo is over".

8) R.M.: *The "death of SoHo" did not erode the lasting traces of an experimentation which erased dancers' virtuosity and specialization, by proposing an "ordinary body" which imposed a rethinking of the inner physical perception of dance, thus blurring – and dramatically - the boundaries between art and life. Which elements have contributed to your personal experience of the moving body?*

Getting back to the ordinary body, can I just go forward from there? Because I had, from a very young age, climbed very tall trees in the Olympic National Park of the State of Washington and my sister generally was the one who came out and found out what tree I was in and she said "Mum wants you for lunch!" and I would come down. But there were a pair of trees and they were above a three storey building and I was right over there, and let me explain one little thing. I was kept out of school for the first grade because I had an illness. So, that gave me time with young children who were not yet in school. In the trees there was ivy weaving its way above and below the branches, making a firm vegetative floor. We would jump into it to see if the tendrils would support us.

9) A.P.: *I think that in your dance, you have used the body also as a "carrier of meaning in space". But I have never thought that at the origin of this grammar there could be a special disposition to move in nature, although climbing a tree could also mean experimenting a new vantage point from which the world could be seen. R.M.:* *Your recollections, telling us about the physicalness of tree climbing, the leaping and the weight of a body in a free fall, lead us back to a body which, away from the dance codes, seems to penetrate metamorphically into space.*

I left out my continuous dream. Every night I imagined myself as a jellyfish. It was in the dream. I was going like a jellyfish goes, propelling myself somewhere. I was going up with my back, my legs out behind me, and I would go, go up...And after about I don't know how long, in the dream I said "I can't wait to show everybody". Isn't that funny?

Even running through the forest as a child. I was five then, and I had to be very careful where I put my feet because in a rain forest there was mud, swamp, creeks, all of that, so you can just run down the hill or you've got to negotiate all of that.

10): R.M.: *How did you translate these personal experiences into improvisations and choreographies? What were the principles on which the dance equivalent of such "natural" body was based in your work?*

I once was asked "How did I go so far in dance so fast?". I hesitated giving the answer that was on the tip of my tongue, because I didn't want to sound haughty. What I said was, "I was born with this amazing body" and half the audience laughed including Bob Rauschenberg. Those gestures that people refer to, that they found so poetic, can be seen in the movement of most members of my family.

For example, when my son Adam was really young, maybe six, he was using a log to get across a small stream. I was watching him carefully and he was taking very small steps, going out towards the center of the stream. And when the log started to tip he moved quickly backward to rebalance the log. I would guess such uncanny maneuvers, in a very young person, simply came up in balance, climbing, placing of weight, etc. through the years.

11) A.P.: *Were we to merge together your creations with your memories, we could extrapolate three key words: roof, therefore a non canonical place for dance, which, like the tree, points at a very daring exploration of space, and then flying, the desire to fly meaning the breaking of rules which have been given to us humans with the law of gravity. In reality, not so much these three words, but rather these three ideas, these three openings from the early childhood urges linked to play, and along with the building of personality, we may see them as an open challenge against the canonical notion of space, or space itself. A wrestling with*

space, which is what contemporary visual artists were doing at the time, when they started working and exploring new spatial languages and grammars.

Oh, that was just brilliant! The run through space that you made there... I have always been a dynamic mover and I popped over meters on the street and things like that. I was a log roller in a river, a kind of thing where you keep your feet going and you don't fall in the water, odd things, I would have never connected. I remember a horse ran away with me, I had bare feet, I was this big, the horse got spooked, my feet were not in the stirrups and this horse took off down the beach and his pleasure was to try to knock me off by getting up close to the branches that were coming down. I don't know how I survived that. I think I've always been a little bit haunted by this... the danger of these things.

12)A.P.: *Therefore a challenge which, starting from childhood experiences, would focus mainly on your body. As for minimalist or conceptual artists, but also Land Art artists, in your work space is no longer a backdrop against which the piece takes place or the dancer's body moves, but rather an essential element of your art. Dance and drawing which are made while one lies on the floor, give structure – before our eyes – to a new, different spatial grammar, unknown to us before, preferring transversality over canonical verticalness. R.M.:* *It seems to me that, if looking specifically into the merging of these two art forms in your personal experience, we come back again to the centrality of space, which becomes the connection key. Both the stage or street scenes, and the page are in fact inhabited and come to life through the artist's hand or moving body.*

Perhaps all my dance career was preparing me to be a visual artist. Actually, when I started making drawings three years ago on very large pieces of paper, ten feet wide and eight feet high, I recognized that what I asked myself was the question “what's the difference between gesture and dance and the gestures on a piece of paper”. So, I approached it as an improvising dancer by walking up on the paper and my heart beating, I actually was more frightened there than I was in these other escapades. I sank down to my knees and had charcoal in this hand and in this hand, I went down onto my knees, I went from there... I asked myself “How much wire do I have here? Will someone reel me out if I don't have enough?”. I remember I came down to the floor and I used my hands as natural hands, sliding, and then I would take all the charcoals and I would experiment with making marks on the paper. My face was often so close from the floor so I couldn't see what I was doing so I was, in a certain sense, quite impaired. On the other hand, the first drawing I made was so beautiful and it's going to be used as a backdrop in my new Rameau opera³. So, I've been swept up into that from that first drop, which went into storage, and just came out a few weeks ago. So, there you are.

13)R.M.: *The almost extenuating relation with space, and therefore, the very idea of a negotiation with space, measured through physical exertion and a "compromised" visual or physical perception, could be found already in your Early Works.*

You're going to have *Floor of the Forest* here very soon. That is an aerial piece; I made it safe. I could not hold the two ropes that I was crawling on, I've never strengthened my arms to hold it like this, so I sat back and thought some more about it – and then I thought “Well I'll thread ropes on in the opposite direction creating a grid”. This time it is like 16/18 feet long and 10/12 wide, and I dressed the grid, I dressed clothes onto the grid by running ropes, these very ropes, up through the arm of the two sides of the body, so those pant legs, they were taking ropes, and they come out here or there can be a sleeve over here and they are completely suspended like a hammock. I made it safe for them; two women did it, myself and another woman. It's arduous so when you are beginning to feel the strength going out of your arms or of any other part of your body you have the right, you have the choice to rest, get down underneath the grid, which has appeared by now, and just rest there until your strength does return.

³ Choreographic project, based on *Pygmalion* by Jean-Philippe Rameau; its premiere is set for summer 2010 in Amsterdam.

14)R.M.: *Floor of the Forest has been staged in very different contexts, raised so people could see it from below, or at eye level in order to have a side view, so that performers' bodies might seem closer. How did you imagine a person's viewing that, in the first place?*

I just told myself "I don't want to have people come in and sit on chairs". We were up there, looking hard, crawling through the grid. So I hung this 18-by-whatever object at a proximate common eye level. So people didn't know where to go, where to sit, what to do. Children came in with them and got underneath the grid and the fathers and mothers tried to see underneath the grid because the dancers had gone below. So there was this beautiful reciprocity and exchange of reliance, this is possibly the right word, and well, it's still alive today and you will be seeing it.

15)A.P.: *You have talked to us of the audience's gaze on your work, but Trisha's gaze, the dancer, with respect to the audience, which is one of the fundamental components of improvising, is also important. When mentioning your famous performance, Yellowbelly, you have said that it was a way to challenge the performers with respect to their fears, as well as a challenge to the audience with respect to their expectations and inhibitions, as they were asked to react to your provocation, and seemed not very willing to do so. Well, this is another element for which we may define Trisha Brown as a visual artist: the role of improvisation in your choreographic work, this is not solely for your audience, but also confronting the dancers with themselves. What do you have to say about that?*

T.B.: It stimulates me to hear you say that. I'm naturally interested in understanding what people think. When some people talk to me about my activities and we move from a choreography to visual art, I get the impression that their eyes glaze over or something. I know they can't tolerate it, I don't correct them and if they don't know that I'm a visual artist, I don't tell them that I am.

In *Yellowbelly*, I was the performer so it was a way to challenge me to dance harder. I would say, "I'm not going to dance unless you call me names," (Because, I was always afraid that someone would call me names while performing on stage). I recall that I always performed this solo, and I did not move until they (the audience) did indeed start yelling at me. So, I killed the dragon in a sense and I didn't have to worry about it anymore.

I fought back through slinging a bunch of indecipherable gestures at them.

Question from the audience:

I would like to know when and why you decided to go back to the usual space of theater. You left the streets, you left the roofs and went back to the stage. Which kind of evolution was it in your work? Why did you do it?

Because that's where the support for dance is, it's in the traditional order of things in dance, which is to form a company, to take good care of them, to teach them choreography and send them out on the road to earn money for the company. That's what we do. And then, I think that I hungered to do new things, I think I have it in my DNA. I did make a film and I do things in other genres that keep piling up, but I don't have to make a career out of everyone of them. I can just make a film and enjoy it, have a good conversation with people in the audience and go home and not have to make another film or I can make another one in seven years. You know, it's like... those same freedoms I'm giving myself for the future...