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Transforming City Spaces and Subjects

Introduction

During the nineties the city as a paradigm example of postmodern construction became the focus of considerable attention (see for example Clarke, 1997; Lefebvre, 1996; Pile, 1996; Watson and Gibson, 1995). The use of cities as settings for postmodern dance, in live site specific performances and in dance films and videos, was prevalent in the late eighties and early nineties.1 This chapter examines one European and one British postmodern dance video; Muurwerk (1987), choreographed and performed by Roxanne Huilmand and directed by Wolfgang Kolb; and Step in Time Girls (1988) choreographed by Yolande Snaith and directed by Terry Braun. Both use the city as a setting for female solos. Following the French post-Marxist theorist Henri Lefebvre, who proposes, ‘each living body is space and has space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space’ (1991: 170), I examine how the city spaces and the dancing bodies mutually construct each other and the role gender plays. The city is a particular kind of constructed space and its construction is inextricably bound up with constructions of subjectivity. ‘To the extent that the inhabitant of the (post)modern city is no longer a subject apart from his or her performances, the border between self and city has become fluid’ (Patton in Watson and Gibson, 1995: 117–18). In the analysis of Muurwerk and Step in Time Girls particular attention is paid to the ways in which the dancers’ interactions with the urban environments, with the fluid borders between themselves and the city, contribute to the construction of spaces and subjects.

Earlier instances of dances located in city spaces evident in avant-garde performances of the sixties provide key precedents for this work.
The conceptual focuses of sixties artists on the avant garde use of site specific performance spaces which stretched audience perception, on a particular urban sensibility and on blurring boundaries, such as inside/outside, private/public and art/everyday life, paved the way for what was to follow. Examples of this work by American choreographers, Lucinda Childs, Meredith Monk, Twyla Tharp and Trisha Brown provide an historical context for the later works.

**Sixties precedents**

In New York in the sixties dances were often set in city spaces such as streets, museums, lofts and parking lots. The significance of using such spaces had been proposed by artists such as Allan Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg when they began to stage ‘Happenings’. Kaprow, who wanted to blur the boundaries between ‘art’ and ‘life’, wrote, ‘we must become preoccupied with . . . the space and objects of our everyday life . . . our bodies, clothes, rooms . . . Forty-Second Street . . . happenings and events, found in garbage cans, police files, hotel lobbies; seen in store windows and on the streets’ (in Artnews in 1958 quoted in Crow, 1996: 33). Oldenburg used the Judson Memorial Church gallery space in Washington Square, New York, which he and friends had established in 1959, for his installation *The Street* in 1960. It consisted of ‘crudely fashioned props and figures . . . intended to evoke the . . . life of the poor neighbourhoods . . . where he . . . lived and worked’ (Crow, 1996: 34). In *The Street* he staged a Happening entitled *Snapshots from the City* – 32 tableaux each appearing briefly before being blacked out. Oldenburg stated he was coming to grips ‘with the landscape of the city, with the dirt of the city, and the accidental possibilities of the city’ (ibid: 34). A similar urban sensibility informed certain dance performances in sixties New York, and infuses the recent fascination with the city evident in the two dance videos examined later.

In 1964 Lucinda Childs, one of the dancers from the Judson Dance Theater, named because of their performances in the eponymous church, created *Street Dance*. She and another dancer performed in the street four or five floors below the Cunningham dancer, Judith Dunn’s studio, where a tape instructed the spectators to watch from the window. Childs said, ‘The dance was entirely based on its found surroundings . . . we were engaged in pointing out . . . details and/or irregularities in the façades of the buildings: lettering and labels, the . . . displays in the store fronts. . . . While the spectators were not able to see in . . . detail . . . what it was we were pointing to, they could hear the