

POINTS IN SPACE

I arrived in New York on a fall evening of 1989. The next morning I walked straight towards the Hudson River looking for the Westbeth studio. The elevator took me up to the eleventh floor and straight into a sky-scraping attic studio with a 360-degree view of Manhattan, where I was to spend the next two years of my life. The technique I had come to study across the Atlantic provided refuge from Graham's anguished falls and pelvic contractions that I had struggled to keep up with the previous year in London. After a year spent grinding my knees and seat bones against a cold morning floor and bouncing my contracted back forward, the cool, straight-forward, and detached sensibility of Cunningham's classes gave me a sense of freedom. Although the Cunningham technique was as highly formalized and as rigorous as the Graham technique, its focus on movement devoid of superimposed emotional interpretations provided a neutral ground through which I could explore my body's possibilities. Through its constant practice I was to learn the mechanics that would enable my body to defy space and time and to glide out into the metropolitan future of the city.

Cunningham's movements extended outward in clear and straightforward paths emphasizing the vastness and emptiness of space. Potentially free to choose fronts and directions, Cunningham's dancing bodies seemed to own space. The technique's emphasis on the technical body seizing space converged with the spatial configuration of Cunningham's Studio. In fact, up in his studio, the miniaturizing and totalizing panoptical vision of Manhattan froze the agitation of the city *down below* and endowed the bodies dancing *up above* the primacy of movement. Stretching in infinite extensions and racing through ceaseless legwork, dancer's bodies pierced the space of the studio, and symbolically that of the city, in a kinetic and spatial apotheosis. Escaping the grasp of the city, to put it in Michel de Certeau's terms, the body in the high-up studio was like "an Icarus flying above" ignoring "the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below" (de Certeau 1984, 92)

The uprightness of the bodies of Cunningham's company populating the class mirrored the vertical dominance of the studio over the city. With their long limbs stretching in endless extensions and their legs stepping rapidly along the floor in unexpected directions, these tall American bodies appeared as androgynous figures moving straightforwardly across space. Their matter-of-fact movements seemed in a symbiotic relationship with the vertical architectonic motion of the city and its forward-looking urban thrust. Propelled upward and forward in multiple directions, these architectural and corporeal bodies projected into the future. Embodying a fundamental aspect of the American dream, the technique and the location of the studio both offered a sense of mobility and of one's own ability to pursue new directions. Together, technique and studio further delivered dance's premise and promise to enable bodies to move beyond their physical and geographical limits. This sense of one's individual possibilities soon permeated me. City and technique provided me with a sense of freedom and agency.

Two years after landing in New York and my first class at the Cunningham Studio, a choreographer asked me to slowly walk to a point of the room and stand still. I was auditioning for her independent company. In discomfort I walked and stopped. I felt naked. There were no complex steps to cover myself with. As I stood in an apparent stillness, I stared at the faint blue paint chips coming off the wall of the old elementary school classroom we were auditioning in. Had I covered so much ground just to stand still? In spite of my reticence in the choreographic assignment, my body stood up on its two feet looking through the crack in the wall. The lure of technique and its narrative of mastering bodies and space through movement had chipped away. The beams holding up the discourse that bound together space with movement and freedom came tumbling down and the bodies of Merce Cunningham's dancers *ceaselessly coming and going, assembling and dispersing*, remained just *points in space*, as the title of one of his performances suggested. When the kinetic and spatial euphoria I had initially experienced at the Studio dissipated, my body took the elevator down from the eleventh floor one last time, leaving the panoptical view of the studio behind. Shadowing de Certeau's descent from the 110 stories of the World Trade Center, my body abandoned spatial and corporeal conquest and its fiction of freedom to descend down below and explore different corporeal practices and spatial approaches.