

From nothing to something:

Music in experimental dance from *Judson* to *Contraband*

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In 1980, dancer and choreographer Sara Shelton Mann moved to San Francisco to work with the pioneering Contact Improvisation group *Mangrove*. Her company *Contraband* became a deeply influential dance/theater ensemble, and is a convenient touchstone for an investigation into the changing role of music in postmodern dance. I am investigating recent dance history partly as a dancer and spectator, but largely as a musician curious about how the relationship of dance and music changed from early to later postmodern performance work, especially in the seeming disappearance and return of traditional musical concepts during that time. I am interested in the cultural shifts that have manifested in choreographers' changing preferences for music since 1960, and more generally in the layers of meaning that accrete in any superimposition of music and movement.

I trace a selective history of postmodern dance-based performance beginning with John Cage and Merce Cunningham's collaboration and vast influence, and look at two major lineages of performance: the *Judson Dance Theater*, and *Contraband* and its progeny in the Bay Area. I enter this investigation with the temporary thesis that there is a causal relationship between the Judson research in 1962-64, and the work that Mann and company would make in the 80's and 90's, and specifically that the reevaluation of possible content for performance that Cage and the early postmodernists developed leads directly into spiritual, political and spectacular content in *Contraband*, even though the surface styles are so radically different. As I proceed, the relationship reveals itself as less linear than I had anticipated, bringing to light connections in the realm of spirit and community more than in formal structure or aesthetics.

The relationship between music and dance

In classical Western art, as in much of the world, dance and music have been nearly inseparable, with the great ballets completely bound to the piece of music on which they were set, and ballet itself an assumed part of many early operas. By the mid-Twentieth century, dance and music had both entered modernist periods, with an increasing abstraction of forms and structures, both internally (in the technical details of movement or sound) and externally (in their relationship to each other and the larger cultural context). Music was shedding the bonds of traditional tonal, melodic, and

rhythmic forms; similarly, modern dance had loosened the formal gestures of ballet in favor of a more naturalistic language, and continued toward an independence from opera and other theater that had begun in the 18th century.

Still, a bond existed between the two arts, especially in dance, where pieces continued to be choreographed to specific pieces of music, commonly synchronizing gesture and musical beat, and consist of movement phrases performed largely in tandem with the musical structure. Mid-century choreographers like Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey tended to choose music that expressed a desired emotional tone, serving the purpose of the dance by amplifying its affective and communicative intent. Though sometimes the chosen music reflected the experimental music of the time, like the Asian-influenced percussion score of Mary Wigman's *Hexentanz*, and in the later work of Graham's protégé (and ex-partner) Erick Hawkins, who was known for championing new (and always live) music, the hierarchical relationship remained firm: music was there to support the dance.

This hierarchy can't be separated from the unequal relationship between visual and auditory perception in our culture, and that when presented with dynamic visuals (like a dance piece, as opposed to a live symphony concert) our visual sense naturally takes foreground. This is not to say that there aren't pieces where the visual/audio hierarchy is complex and often changing, and there are certainly scenarios where dance acts as support to music, as in the shows of Michael Jackson or Madonna, both excellent dancers who are presenting an event that centers on, and keeps the focus on, their songs. In concert dance before 1960, and through the early century as dance grew into an independent art form, the traditional role of music—as accompaniment—was largely unchallenged.

The word “accompaniment” may be too pejorative, conjuring an image of a pianist banging out Chopin for a class of young ballerinas, functioning as much like useful furniture as the *barre*, and creating the image of a strict hierarchy that isn't there. In classical ballet, that so many dance pieces simply received the same name as the piece of music they were set to indicates perhaps that the hierarchy is less clear than it seems. Given the naming convention, what if we envision these dances as just ornamentation placed around a self-sufficient piece of music—expressing the same emotions, revealing the same intentions and narrative? My sense of the music as “accompaniment” shifts, and reveals a dance that is more dependent on the music than the music on the dance. If this dependency reveals a position of strength on the part of the piece of music, the hierarchy may be reversed.

In relation to the question of whether music or movement is perceived as foreground, and therefore carrying more narrative or perceptual weight, a famous example may contain clues to the relationship. The Stravinsky/Nijinsky/Diaghilev ballet *Le Sacre du Printemps* was premiered in Paris in 1913 to a now legendary uproar. The received story is that the audience at the premiere began to riot almost immediately upon hearing the opening bassoon line, with the riot continuing through the piece. The story is that it was the music, with its dissonance and rhythmic intensity, that precipitated the riot, and if so we might infer that music was foreground in the audience's minds at the time, rather than the dance. Of course the tale of the event from multiple witnesses is more complex, and Stravinsky scholar Richard Taruskin challenges the standard myth, especially in terms of the focus on the music as the cause of the unrest. His reading of the reviews—that hardly mention the music—and accounts of the premiere other than Stravinsky's later self-promoting narrative, suggest that Nijinsky's choreography may have been what was perceived as scandalous, and the cause of the riot, rather than Stravinsky's music.¹ In such a reading, the hierarchical relationship is affirmed, that of the music as support for the dance, and the dance carrying the primary narrative.

John and Merce clear the slate

The bond between a dance piece and the music to which it was set began to loosen with the pioneering collaboration of dancer-choreographer Merce Cunningham and composer John Cage, which began in 1942 and continued until Cage's death in 1992. Cage/Cunningham's innovation, which now seems almost too easy (don't they all, in hindsight?), was to superimpose in performance music and dance that had been created separately (often using chance methods to determine sounds, gestures, and rhythm). This method attempted to shift the relationship of dance and music to one of equals, as well as removing the composer and choreographer's ego and personality from the creation process. As a performative act, it dramatically removes a central mechanism with which the dancer communicates with the audience: the telegraphing of inner movement (emotion, thought, intent) through musical cues. Along with their use of chance procedures to determine many aspects of the creation process, the uncoupling of music from movement would be a distinct step toward a movement vocabulary that could exist on its own—presented without reliance on “external” content (sets, music, costumes). Some pieces moving toward this independence would reduce the narrative weight of external content by making it neutral, “pedestrian”, or determined by chance, and though

¹ Richard Taruskin, "A Myth of the Twentieth Century: The Rite of Spring, the Tradition of the New, and 'The Music Itself,'" *Modernism/Modernity* 2.1 (1995): 16.

each of those choices still carries content, it would make space for the movement to be seen as independently as possible.

Through the 50's and 60's, Cage and Cunningham undertook a great re-visioning of what was possible in live theater, stripping each element of sensory content down to its barest essentials. In Cage's piece *Rozart Mix* (1965), only instructions for cutting and preparing magnetic tape exist as an organizing principle, with all other elements (like what is actually ON the tape, and how long the piece lasts) left open. In his infamous *4'33"* (1952), only a set of 3 unequal durations remains, and the piece becomes a lens through which an otherwise unmodified ambient soundscape (or anything else that pulls your attention during the performance) may be experienced. Cage was influenced by Zen Buddhist philosophy, and heard lectures by the great Zen missionary, D. T. Suzuki absorbing the Zen teachings, with their emphasis on emptiness—an assertion of the ultimate independence, impermanence, and meaning-neutrality of all signs and forms.² He spoke about the work of contemporary art as a manifestation of the teaching on emptiness.

“When going from nothing towards something, we have all the European history of music and art we remember and there we can see that this is well done but the other is not. ...But now we are going from something towards nothing, and there is no way of saying success or failure since all things have equally their Buddha nature.”³

Cage's work would have a profound impact on postmodern dance, especially its earliest forms. By the early 60's, *FLUXUS* and “happenings” (both outgrowths of Cage's work and teaching), and other experiments in non-narrative theater were dispensing with the traditional relationship of music and movement, as well as bringing in the full range of possible sound sources—from traditional instruments and music to found and ambient sounds. Cage's work with sound and text immediately prefigured the movement research that would become postmodern dance.

Cage and Cunningham's influence on a generation of artists working to clear European art from their perceptions was profound. The emptiness of Cage's work acts like a palate cleanser between the dense serial music coming out of postwar Europe and the bright American pop and minimalism that appeared in the 60's and 70's to such success. Cage directly influenced the dancers in New York in the

² D. T. Suzuki taught at Columbia University from 1952-57, and gave a series of widely attended open lectures.

³ “Lecture on Something” from *Silence*, p. 143. John Cage, Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1961. [Cage's unique spacing as a performance/rhythm notation omitted.]

early 60's who similarly tried to clear the perceptual slate from the influence of both ballet and modern dance. In 1965, Yvonne Rainer, a member of the *Judson Dance Theater* wrote her famous "NO Manifesto", offering what seems like a set of rules for ideological and intellectual purity in works of postmodern dance and performance art.

"No to spectacle. No to virtuosity.
No to transformations and magic and make-believe.
No to the glamour and transcendency of the star image.
No to the heroic. No to the anti-heroic.
No to trash imagery.
No to involvement of performer or spectator.
No to style. No to camp.
No to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer.
No to eccentricity. No to moving or being moved."⁴

The manifesto in its repetitive "NO" sounds a reactive aversion toward everything perceived to be inauthentic—by implication, the classical and modern art that has come before. Read as a performance, however, the text reveals a rhythm, inner organization, and drama that itself is spectacular, virtuosic, glamorous, involving, eccentric, and moving. The text itself creates a contradiction, as the artists who claim such ideological purity themselves become the heroes that they rail against. Rainer and her peers have become superstars, and their improvisations legendary, adding a layer of romantic ascension to their story, and affirming a narrative that they intended to counteract.

Though Cage and Rainer's intentions may have been to liberate movement and music from received—and therefore confining—meaning, their work didn't lead to a long-term shift in cultural tastes. Or did it? Academic musical taste remained attached to serial (12-tone) organization and complexity, while public taste [in art music and performance] moved more and more toward pop, camp, and minimalism. As postmodern performance developed through the 70's and 80's, all of Rainer's negations were undone, and the whole manifesto can be inverted to become a list of qualities that define performance art since the mid-70's. One strong influence in that undoing was the integration by the mainstream performance art community of queer and feminist discourse, which invites personal history back to the stage, as well as camp, trash, spectacle, glamour, eccentricity, involvement, and seduction—basically Rainer's entire list of prohibited elements.

⁴ The "NO Manifesto", Yvonne Rainer, 1965. [via wikipedia]

Another way of reading the “NO Manifesto”, as well as Cage’s chance work, is as a repudiation of the uniqueness, or heterogeneity, of a performer’s identity. Stripping the performance down to the bare bones that are left if a performer were to completely observe her list leaves few outlets for the expression of personality, and thus suppresses social and political identities, queerness and other forms of marginalized discourse. As such, the manifesto can also be read as an expression of colonial or dominant power.

As is the case with many (all?) manifestos, it reads as a purer document than any possible realization of it could be, or as we have seen, than the text itself is. An attempt to create a piece that observed all of Ranier’s prohibitions would still be colored by the undeniable uniqueness of the performers, their races, genders, and perceivable social class, as well as the context of the venue, price, audience composition and arrangement, and relationships between all the people present. The text then can serve as an artifact of a single moment’s attempt at a *tabula rasa* for performance—a clearing of the accumulated *karma*, or conditioned habits, of a thousand years of aesthetic development, claiming the possibility of starting over. Following this *tabula rasa*, like a clear-cut in the forest, the development of a content-rich performance art can be seen as the natural revival of an ecosystem of commonly understood performance language, more free to create its own context while still undeniably affected by what was there before. In the 45 years since Ranier wrote the manifesto, we’ve seen the reappearance of all the classical (and classist) forms that she was rebelling against, in both ironic and sincere versions (neo-romanticism, contemporary ballet, neo-classicism, etc.), as well as distortions and mash-ups of all of them.

In music, romantic and heroic narrative tropes continued to dominate popular musical taste through the height of experimental work in the 60’s, and even “art” composers would soon begin rebuilding contemporary music as a commonly understood communicative language. By the 80’s a full reversal of the early postmodern ideology had developed, particularly in the minimalist composers and artists crossing into pop. As in dance, composers began to rebuild the form, and what came out of that rebuild wasn’t the abstractions of sound and time that are implied by an ego-effacing sonic and gestural method, but a return to the basics of traditional musical structure: pulse, predictability (a neurologically necessary ingredient for memory, fondness, and emotional communication), and the most basic tonal/modal harmonies of Western music, in other words, the collection of meaning-laden tropes that had been the communicative currency of Western music for centuries.

Judson to Contraband

Postmodern dance is often said to have originated in an experimental movement class taught by Robert Ellis Dunn that culminated in a performance at the Judson Church in New York City in 1962. Dunn was a musician by training who had been playing piano for Cunningham's dance classes and studying music with Cage. By the early 60's, *FLUXUS* and "happenings" (both outgrowths of Cage's work and teaching), and other experiments in non-narrative theater were dispensing with the traditional relationship of music and movement, as well as bringing in the full range of possible sound sources—from traditional instruments and music to found and ambient sounds. Dunn and dancers like Steve Paxton, Simone Forti, and Yvonne Rainier began making work that similarly set aside the preferences and assumptions of modern dance in favor of democratic and improvisational methods, including "pedestrian" (as opposed to formal dance) movement, and a rejection of traditional narrative structures. The dancers involved in these early experiments formed the *Judson Dance Theater* (1962-64) and later *Grand Union* (1970-76), both ensembles playing a formative role in the development of contemporary dance performance and improvisation.

While Cunningham used chance procedures extensively in his composition process, initially using the *I Ching* to determine the order and superimposition of gestures, he did not work extensively with improvisation as a performance modality. The adoption of improvisation by the Judson dancers can be seen as both an act of liberation from the choreographic tradition and a reassertion of individual autonomy. From the personality-erasing procedures that Cunningham established, the new practice of improvisation in performance arose, democratizing the creation process as well as reintroducing preference, intuition, and personal taste. Rather than using extrinsic processes (like chance) to challenge the dancer's tendency toward known gestures, as Cunningham did, in improvisation the same challenge must arise from the intrinsic strength of the dancer's intention and discipline. Yvonne Rainier's *Continuous Project—Altered Daily* morphed into the group *Grand Union* in 1970, which became devoted to improvisation in performance, so much so that they intentionally never rehearsed, meeting at the performance site "cold"⁵. With freedom of choice came all the personality and unique story of each mover, and improvisation brought the moisture of the dancer's body, heart, desires and sensitivities back into a form that had consciously set them aside a decade earlier, along with politics, sex, class, meaning—and all the resultant multiplicity and uncertainty. In contrast to the restrained formality of the Judson experiments, *Grand Union* was messy, abundant, chaotic, and freewheeling,

⁵ "Spontaneous Combustion", Sally Banes, in *Taken by Surprise: a dance improvisation reader*, Wesleyan Univ. Press, 2003.

mixing pop and art culture content with abandon, and emphasizing a dancing body that was free to express a full range of feelings and curiosities.

The inclusion of pop and found image sources in dance had its roots in the pedestrian gestures used in the early Judson experiments, as well as in the visual art of Robert Rauschenberg, who worked with found objects and collage, and was listed on many *Judson* programs as an “adviser”, as well as John Cage’s infinitely inclusive attitude toward content. As dance grew into a rich dialogue with the performance art and visual art worlds, choreographers began to re-vision their use of music and sound scores, using found sound, collage, and music of many genres not as arbitrary sonic material (as in *Rozart Mix*) but as intentional meaning-filled content intended to support the goals of the piece. If early postmodern dance was substantially formalistic in its stripped-down gestures and experiments with temporal and spatial organization, by the 70’s many performers and groups like *Grand Union* were bringing in the chaotic multiplicity of styles, references and influences that characterized the visual art world of the time. Pop and classical references appear alongside each other, and spectacle—famously discarded by the Judson choreographers, had returned in full force.

By the time *Contraband* is formed in 1979, the field of possible materials for a piece of “dance” is a very expansive place, but is also rebounding toward traditional purposes and means: a dance once again is communicating something specific, music is chosen to support this specific message, the virtuosity of the performers is used to accomplish the desired transmission, and the venues and act of the dance itself is less often undermined by self-reflexive behavior. Like in the music world, where space that Cage opened up was soon filling with a much more Romantic aesthetic, postmodern dance-based performers absorbed a freedom and unencumbered attitude from the early experiments, but went on to make messy, political, personal work. Postmodernism was queered.

Music in Contraband and later groups

San Francisco-based postmodern dance companies and collectives in the Seventies put the focus squarely on gender, politics, and personal process, with groups like *Mangrove* (a Contact Improvisation-based men’s collective) influenced by the *Judson Dance Theater* in New York but manifesting a queer identity and narrative within and around the *Judson* movement vocabulary. *The Wallflower Order* (feminist political dance collective—the precursor to Krissy Keefer’s *Dance Brigade*), challenged the traditional dance and theater forms, including venue, gestural style, linear narrative,

the solidity of the “fourth wall”, and the social contract between audience and performers, not through severity or formalism, but by appropriating some of the signs of classical dance (pointed toes and some of the gestural language of ballet) and reinterpreting others (e.g. in place of the traditional extended fingers, fists raised in the gesture of protest and solidarity). Choreographer Anna Halprin was deepening her work in nature and developing her “life/art” process, making large-scale public-participation movement rituals that addressed both individual and community healing process. By the late 70’s in San Francisco, a vibrant performance art community had developed around feminist artists and collectives working with movement to express the individual struggle for justice, human rights, and fulfillment as communal and political.

Several threads of radical art making came together in *Contraband*, which fused dance, text, original music, political voice (anarchist/activist), improvisation, and community ritual into pieces of influential hybrid theater. Their integrative approach was radical at the time, and though aspects of their style (like dancers speaking and singing, fully integrated live music, and a collaborative creation process) have since become common in Bay Area dance, they are still hardly the norm in the wider dance world. *Contraband* emerged out of the lineage of both modern (Mann was a protégé of Alwin Nicolais and Murray Louis, and studied with the great dance innovators Erick Hawkins and Merce Cunningham) and postmodern dance, with a strong foundation in Contact Improvisation—the most widely used practice to come out of the *Judson* stable.

By 1979, in addition to sounds of all kinds—including music of any genre, as well as silence—appearing in dance pieces, the traditionally discreet roles of “dancer” and “musician” had softened, and dancers were speaking, singing, and playing instruments in performance. This merge followed a decade of liberalizing the admittance to an artistic field that again can trace back to Cage and *Judson*. Once pedestrian movement and “non-dancers” became acceptable in a concert dance context, and artists of one genre could cross into the territory of another (as when Robert Rauschenberg choreographed a piece, “Pelican” and performed it on roller skates with painter Per Olof Ultvedt and Carolyn Brown from the Cunningham company),⁶ the door was open for dancers to make music in performance.

What are the direct lines of influence from the radical emptiness created by Cage, Cunningham, and the *Judson Dance Theater* to the profusion of content and layers in work like *Contraband*’s? Are there direct lines? Certainly the earlier groups opened the gates of possibility that the later walked

⁶ Robert Rauschenberg, “Pelican”. *Judson Dance Theater at America on Wheels*, Pop Art festival, Wash. D. C., 1963.

through, but that is almost always true in art history, where the tendency in music and performance both has been always toward increasing tolerance of dissonance and diversity of content source. Doesn't every generation do something ("Make it new!") that the previous considered beyond the pale? Looking at the European postwar fetish for serial music, and the adoption of dissonant complexity as the *de rigueur* sound of art music in the 40's and 50's, the subsequent rise of tonal, steady pulse-based, structurally and harmonically simple music makes sense, as does the return of programmatic content, emotionally charged gesture, and narrative in dance. Once the art culture has reached the most permissive state possible, one in which any piece of content is permissible in the piece (again, as in *Rozart Mix*, or a *Grand Union* performance), the direction of newness must be backward looking, in the sense of reviving aspects of content (like tonal triads or "seduction of the spectator by the wiles of the performer") that had been previously thought exhausted. What remained, as compelling theatrical gestures, after everything was possible?

One place that an easy connection may be drawn is in this issue of artists taking up the activities of a different art. The rise of pop art made a lot of space for crossover activity because pop itself contains ample permission for amateur performance, even lionizing the untrained artist. It is not surprising that when dancers begin to sing in performance they imitate not classical singers but the technically simplistic phrases and naïve aesthetic of pop and folk music. The "No to virtuosity" ethos of the mid-60's postmodernists made entry to the group easier than if it required years of technical training. However, by 1980 aesthetics and ethos had changed, and pieces were no longer governed by the "NO Manifesto" (if they ever were). Dancers were again cultivating virtuosity and seduction.

Contraband was a fully multidisciplinary performance tribe—an ensemble of dancers who all cultivated musical skills, particularly singing and drumming. Group song and infectious pop rhythm were integral to their aesthetic, and formed the basis of the music made by the primary "musicians" in the group: Jules Beckman and Norman Rutherford. Beckman, a gifted dancer and percussionist, became a captivating one-man band, simultaneously playing guitar, drums, and singing. Rutherford played bass, as well as being a sound engineer and multi-instrumentalist. With these two as the musical backbone, the dance ensemble manifested a rich musical texture, "playing" the rhythm of feet moving and stomping, speaking, singing, and other instruments as needed.

One of their trademark sounds was a full choral ensemble voice, with the dancers singing in two to three-part harmony. The harmonic language tended toward simple modal sequences and drones,

influenced by folk and pop styles, especially modern pagan chant/song. Also, all of the performers would drum and use objects and bodies to make rhythm, creating a percussion ensemble. These two manifestations (singing and drumming) of dancers becoming musicians would become standard in many of the San Francisco companies that emerged as descendents of *Contraband*, including its direct progeny: *Core*, *Epiphany Productions*, *Cahin-Caha*, *Circo Zero*, *Motion Lab*, and *Jess Curtis/Gravity*, as well as groups both contemporary and which followed soon after: *High Risk Group*, *Dandelion Dance Theater*, *Kunst-stoff*, and many others (including my own company, *Rujeko*).

In making music, the dancers in *Contraband* (most of whom had minimal formal musical training) worked with a necessary technical simplicity. They were a garage band, and like their counterparts in punk music, authenticity, not virtuosity, was a primary goal. The songs from the 1990-94 *Contraband* productions *Mira (Cycles I, II, & III)* are catchy, simple, and compelling, becoming a clear utopian voice in an overtly political company.⁷ The simplicity and clarity of the songs became such a focal point of *Contraband's* work that at one point they tried to make a full “musical”, hiring a composer to write songs and music for the company to perform. The effort failed because the dancers were unable to learn the more complex music the composer had written. Their musical voice was formed, and then confined, by the amateur skills of the dancers as musicians.⁸

One iconic song in the *Mira Cycle* has the ensemble moving in unison through easy large arm gestures, all facing front. It is the climax of a section, and the previous full (and virtuosic) dancing is distilled down to simple standing shapes, while the song supplies the emotional and narrative content. “Mira walks down by the river. She moves mountains by breathing.”

The lines are repeated, mostly chanted on a single chord, until they become a mantra for the audience as well as the company. The simple invocation of the words is mirrored in the iconic unison gestures that lead into them: hands cup groin, heart, cover mouth, and reach up to full extension. The fullness and momentum of the preceding dance section, which is all big lines, joyful reach, and satisfying rhythm, brings the energy up and unifies the group for the prayer that follows. The simpler gestures bring the attention back to the dancers as individuals—their identities as sexual, emotional, vulnerable people, and in the persistent unison, their tribal affiliation. It is not so much a story being told but a club you want to belong to. When the dancers cup groin, heart, and mouth, they announce

⁷ The songs are collected on the recordings *Mira I* (1992) and *Songs From the Mira Cycles* (1994).

⁸ Personal communication with company member Keith Hennessy.

a political stance that is pro-body, sexuality, free speech, and visible expression of intimacy. The gestures become a protest against denial and repression, both external and internal, and a signal of the erotic vitality of the group. Performed in unison, the intimate gestures become a semaphore of both personal revelation and communal membership. The ensemble is a beautiful freak tribe, with their process out in the open, and their intimacy and prayer likewise visible and communal. In this way, the invocation becomes less devotion—to some external divine force/saint—than an affirmation. “Mira” is not a historical spiritual figure, but a way to name the energy that enlivens the one body called *Contraband*, and the larger body of the audience as we join the company in their praise. The spiritual heart of the piece is not only announced but made real as the company invokes—and becomes—the titular saint.⁹ *Contraband* moves mountains by breathing.

At a reunion/benefit show almost a decade later, this song was the clearest piece the ensemble could remember to revive and perform, and the singing unified the group together much more than the big dancing they tried to recreate, as well as providing an emotional touchstone for the audience, many of whom had seen the original performances. It is the song, rather than the movement, that brings it all together (and to a froth), and which most clearly enunciates the social message. The song is simple, tonal, consonant, and rhythmic, and in the return to this traditional musical vocabulary affirms a utopian message in a way that dissonance, collage, and rhythmic abstraction would not, for this company and audience.

Part of what emerges as I tell the story is a sense of parallel threads of influence. First, I read a formal progression of compositional ideas from the clean slate of Cage, Cunningham, and Ranier to the multi-layered personal content of Mann, Hennessy, and their peers. This imagined narrative describes an accumulation score that starts with the surrender of the composer’s ego in favor of processes that reveal content and juxtapositions that s/he could never consciously choose; continues with the abandoning of predetermination entirely (because whether arrived at by ego or chance, the score/choreography is still an arbitrary compositional constriction) and embrace of improvisation; and proceeds to fill the permissive space that has now opened up with all the multivalent content of the individuals involved. This accumulation mirrors the thousand-year progression of harmonic/auditory complexity in Western music from plainchant to Cage. Each generation adds a piece to what is considered acceptable sounds, until with 4’33” the last possible sound to be considered—ambience, or the permission to perceive and include everything—is included. Cage is

⁹ Mirabai (1498-1547), ecstatic Rajasthani poet/singer and *gopi* (devotee of Krishna).

both the apotheosis of the classical project and the blank slate that would make space for the cycle to begin again.

In addition to the structural progression, and more like “water flowing underground”, the path from Cage/Judson to *Contraband* can be seen as a spiritual lineage. They shared a basic attitude of open, communal receptivity that is central to contemplative practice, and a fundamental repudiation of the solitary, brilliant auteur model that was a Romantic invention but persisted in the great modernists (Schiele, Rothko, Pollock, Fellini, Stockhausen, Scelsi, Graham, and so many others). Cage’s study of Zen gives a relaxed presence to his work that, combined with his famous congeniality, establishes him not just as an artistic progenitor, but a wise sage (even when he was young). 4’33” IS Zen meditation. Steve Paxton reflected that congeniality in his preference for relaxation and ease in dancers:

“I like it when bodies are free and when the emotional state is open and accepting and sensitive. When the psychology isn’t hassled or political or tied in knots.”¹⁰

With a focus on openness, accepting, and sensitivity, the Judson lineage naturally lent itself to friendly and intimate ensembles. The dance company, through improvisation, receptivity, and congeniality, and with a lineage of undermining the ego of the creator behind them, finds a new form as democratic tribe. An ethos of collective composition had developed, arising partly from the utopian social ideas of the 60’s and certainly influenced by the spread of improvisation as a compositional and performance modality. *Grand Union* started as Rainer’s project, but upon taking on improvisation and inviting company members to make their own material it slipped from her grasp and became a collective.¹¹ Though *Contraband* had Mann as director, all of the company members created material and approved the final product, with each member having full veto power.¹² In their process as tribes, the groups manifested an idealism and good-natured attitude that traces a direct line back to Cage. When Mann and company sing to Mira, they announce the performance ensemble as “spiritual work group”—Mann’s own description of her initial inspiration for *Contraband*.¹³ The company becomes a spiritual community, and John Cage’s austere Zen practice has turned into a pagan gospel chorus.

¹⁰ Steve Paxton, quoted in Sally Banes, “Spontaneous Combustion: Notes on dance improvisation from the Sixties to the Nineties” in *Taken by Surprise a dance improvisation reader*. Wesleyan, 2003, p. 78.

¹¹ Rainer, Yvonne. *Feelings are Facts*, Chapter 14. [via wikipedia]

¹² They referred to the process of editing content that members had created as “killing babies”—honoring that each person might be deeply invested in the content they had created, but which might not work in the final piece. The standing rule was that unanimous consensus was needed to keep any piece of content. Everyone needed to be connected to something or it couldn’t happen. [Personal communication with Keith Hennessy.]

¹³ [Personal communication.]

John and Merce are dead

Supplementing ensemble song in the dance pieces of *Contraband* was a return to music as accompaniment, and preferences in many dance companies continued to swing toward easy rhythm and tonal harmony. By 90's, the stark aesthetic of the Cage/Cunningham collaboration and the Judson groups had given way to a resurgent populist tone strongly influenced by pop music and movie soundtracks. Emotional manipulation was back. In *Contraband*, Beckman and Rutherford created textural soundscapes that borrowed heavily from electronic and ambient music, as well as organic sound sources like long horns, found objects, and strings, especially Rutherford's double bass. Timbre became a substantial compositional parameter, with drones or very basic tonal progressions making up much of the harmonic texture, often with simple minimalist melodies and a strong, steady pulse. The style was consistent with contemporary electronic and pop music in its drone-based and tonal pitch language, emphasis on steady pulse, and gritty textures. In addition to pop influence, free jazz and noise music enter the instrumental vocabulary, often as a telegraph of emotional intensity.¹⁴

After *Contraband* disbanded in 1995, its members formed several other ensembles, including *Core*, *Cahin-Caha*, *Jess Curtis/Gravity*, and *Circo Zero*. A wonderful example of percussion ensemble work appears in the *Cahin-Caha* hybrid circus piece "raWdoG" (1999)¹⁵ where a shell game with tin cans on a large table becomes a complex five-person rhythmic canon. Sometimes the ensemble becomes a fully realized musical entity, as in the middle of "Entertainment for the Apocalypse" (*Core*, 1994-98), when the ensemble members all pick up instruments (guitar, bass, drums, mic) and become a pretty good rock band.¹⁶ Pop has fully supplanted experimental art music to become the normative genre for a company that wants to communicate directly with their audience in the vernacular.

These pieces began to define a new hybrid genre: something like an avant-garde Broadway musical, but with the balance of power shifted from music to movement. The dance was still primary, but song and rhythm began to serve as a fully functioning locus of content, often providing the clearest

¹⁴Interestingly, as both styles are mostly used in sections of high volume and emotional intensity, the dissonant harmony and melody serves its classical purpose: to intensify tension. In this and other ways that music returns to emotional support status in modern and postmodern dance, it becomes ironic, bringing back the technology of romantic, modernist and expressionist art while retaining the self-consciousness of the postmodern. In recent years, this traditional use of music in dance, which I'll call emotionally congruent accompaniment, has become so common that it has lost its ironic edge, and become a new unconsidered norm. As such, a dance piece may cease to be culturally postmodern (even as everything now is chronologically postmodern), as it is no longer "drawing attention to conventions" (OED definition of postmodern), and no longer aware of its own subjectivity.

¹⁵ Created by a French-American company that included *Contraband* veterans Keith Hennessy, Jess Curtis and Jules Beckman.

¹⁶ Also Hennessy, Curtis and Beckman, along with Stanya Kahn and Stephanie Maher.

narrative information in pieces dominated by semi-abstract movement—as was true in the *Mira Cycles*. More recently, Joe Goode has created several pieces that inhabit a narrative-theatrical variant this new hybrid form, adding character and storyline and moving toward a dance-based musical theater.

Contraband and the groups that followed it cut a wide swath through the Bay Area dance and performance art communities, influencing everything that was made in the 90's and 00's, including my own life as a musician who dances. Now that it's common for dancers to sing, (and musicians to dance, as I do, and as my friend and colleague Albert Mathias does in his work with choreographers Kathleen Hermsdorff and Bebe Miller), some are doing so very skillfully. The enthusiastic pagan-style folk chant that grounded *Contraband* has become a sharp and ironic pop language, echoing the crossover of artists like Laurie Anderson a generation earlier, and turning some dancers into virtual singer-songwriters. One example is Sara Kraft, a contemporary artist who straddles the dance, music and performance art worlds, making deeply personal pieces that use technology—especially live-feed video and projection—to reveal a dreamscape of the inner life. She sings simple, revealing, autobiographical songs that would be at home on a fine post-folk album.

The foundation is laid for the development of a music-dance hybrid theater that uses the full means of both traditions to their potential, neither allowing music to slip into an unconsidered accompaniment role, nor the dance to be chained to the music as emotional compass. The liberative wisdom of the *Judson* elders and the heart-centered enthusiasm of the *Contraband* lineage both have a place in such a hybrid theater, which could remain aware of its structures and assumptions even as it uses them at will for expressive purpose. Such a theater queers Cage's *Zen* by including the full, messy life of the heart, but grounds the many-layered narrative not in romantic fantasy and heroic myth but in real personal connection and community.

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