

# Trisha Brown

## All of the Person's Person Arriving

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*An interview by Marianne Goldberg*

Trisha Brown's dancers no longer strap themselves into harnesses to walk down the sides of buildings, but in *Set and Reset* (1983) Diane Madden is held horizontally aloft so that she appears to walk across the back scrim. This image refers to Brown's early works in non-proscenium spaces and at the same time foregrounds the proscenium space itself, pointing out its "four walls" and its cubic dimensions. Near the beginning of *Lateral Pass* (1985), Randy Warshaw dances with a harness around his waist, connected to a rope suspended from above. Suddenly, the rope levers him off the floor in mid-step. Undaunted, Warshaw is an unlikely circus acrobat or Peter Pan or even a hero of baroque ballet assisted by flying machines. These preludes to Brown's most recent pieces reflect her ongoing dialog with the proscenium theater, its architecture, and its history of spectacle. Brown's *Walking on the Wall*, done at the Whitney Museum in 1971, changed people's perceptions of natural locomotion; her current work changes perceptions about the proscenium.

*Set and Reset* and *Lateral Pass* were part of Brown's 1985 City Center series, her first engagement at a major mainstream Manhattan theater. She opened one of the programs with her solo, *Accumulation With Talking Plus Watermotor*, in which she switches back and forth between two humorous stories about her experiences performing the dance. Meanwhile, she splices together an older, more methodical dance of the early '70s and a fast-wheeling, kinetically contradictory and complex dance called *Watermotor* (1978).

As she keeps two dances and two stories straight, she improvises comments—telling the spectators one night that she lost her audience halfway through the evening before. Then she playfully addressed an issue emphasized in the press—that she was performing her work for a larger, uninitiated audience. At a rhythmic shift in her movement, she said, "Therein lyeth the dilemma, my friends, of a serious artist meeting popular acceptance." She prodded the audience to stay with it, asking, "Remember this?" as she demonstrated a sequence of slippery moves that was particularly difficult to recall.

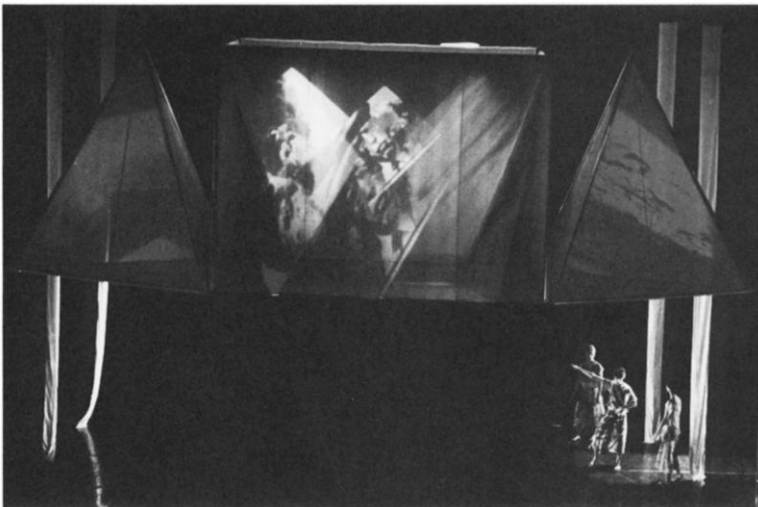
Although this was Brown's first season performing for uptown New York audiences, she has presented her work in proscenium theaters for ten years, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and in conventional theaters throughout Europe. Earlier in her career, Brown's choreography was shown in lofts, on Manhattan rooftops, and on rafts floating on a



*In the 1983 Set and Reset (below), Brown makes reference to the 1970 Man Walking Down the Side of a Building (above). (Photos by John Waite and Carol Godden)*

Minnesota lake. These environmental dances included the unpredictable actions of passersby or of wind that pushed the rafts around. A proscenium limits the spectators' focus, but Brown's addition of music and sets offers such an array of theatrical information that viewers can select what to pay attention to. In *Set and Reset*, Brown collaborates with Laurie Anderson (music) and Robert Rauschenberg (visual installation) and in *Later-al Pass* with Peter Zummo (music) and Nancy Graves (visual installation).

Brown's collaborations with visual artists often bring into the theater an illusion of the outdoors. Fujiko Nakaya's set for *Opal Loop* (1980) encases the dancers in fog. Donald Judd's backdrops for *Son of Gone Fishin'* (1981) evoke a rural, watery environment. They span the entire back wall, lowering or rising to reveal different proportions of deep green or blue in relation to the retrograde structure of Brown's choreography. Juxtaposed with the dancers' wash of gestures and shifts of weight in retrograde, the moving backdrops gave me the sensation that the horizon line was rocking, as if I were on a boat. In *Set and Reset*, Rauschenberg's



*Environments both natural and theatrical: Primary Accumulation (1974) on a Minnesota lagoon and Robert Rauschenberg's sculptural design for Set and Reset (1983). (Photos by Boyd Hagen and Beatriz Schiller)*

sculpture of a rectangle flanked by two pyramids rises to hang like a storm cloud above the dancers. Newsreels are projected onto the film-screen surfaces of the sculpture in a torrent of media information: multiple images of airplanes, cows, rushing water, or the National Guard in action.

But these environments do not become landscapes in the conventional sense. Judd's panels assert themselves as huge two-dimensional canvases as much as they evoke expanses of grass, sky, or water. Rauschenberg's storm cloud is also a geometric structure with flickering light, revealing its own technology by leaving the film projectors visible. *Set and Reset* calls attention to the conventions of the proscenium staging. Brown's runaway dancing, full of handstands and loping traveling steps, is truncated by the edge of the stage. The dancers remain visible as they careen offstage, because Rauschenberg installed see-through curtains. The dancing continues beyond the borders of the stage, questioning the proscenium's framing function. Brown had foregrounded the edge of the stage previously in *Glacial Decoy* (1979), when one dancer would slip beyond the frame out of view just as another appeared on the other side of the stage doing the same movement: the proscenium seemed unable to contain the dancing.

If *Set and Reset* plays with the stage architecture, *Lateral Pass* is about theatricality itself. Brown's solo opens the piece. She swerves out of the wings like a magician with a trick up her sleeve, touting a sequined cape which is bright pink on the outside and deep green on the inside. As her path takes her downstage center, the curtain begins to close on her, but she makes it through in the nick of time. In front of the curtain, she goes through the paces of her rapidly shifting gestures in a matter-of-fact style, but the cape adds a spectacular twist. It momentarily transforms Brown's arms into airplane wings or a fluted spectacle of color. The curtain opens for her, and she shoots back into the interior of the stage and then out to the wings. Overhead we see the looped edge of the rope which will suspend Warshaw.

In dance, spectacle and trickery have manipulated spectators' perceptions of gravity, particularly through the ethereal elevation of the ballerina supported by her male partner. Warshaw's suspension by harness makes a joke on such conventions while achieving a gravity-defying illusion of its own. Showing us the harness, Brown reveals the mechanics of the trick. Warshaw, a man with a particularly solid sense of his own weight, dances this role, creating a tension and an analogy between the partnered ballerina and the mechanically elevated Warshaw. As Warshaw skirts the heads of the other dancers, he picks up one dancer and partners her for a moment in the air before he rejoins the group on terra firma. At times, the whole dance appears to be floating slightly above ground.

There are other references to balletic spectacle in *Lateral Pass*. At one point, Vicky Shick strikes a conventional balletic "attitude," tilts slightly forward, and with determination curves her arms in the academic line that is so foreign to Brown's efficient mechanics. Designer Nancy Graves picks up the reference in a gauzy, tutu-like piece of fabric that is first seen on Madden's waist. Dancers also wear tubing that echoes Warshaw's rope or oblong appendages attached to their upper arms. These objects are in the tradition of Merce Cunningham's collaborations with artists like Rauschenberg, who placed them on the body as elements of collage. Madden in her tutu rebounds off the floor into Stephen Petronio's arms





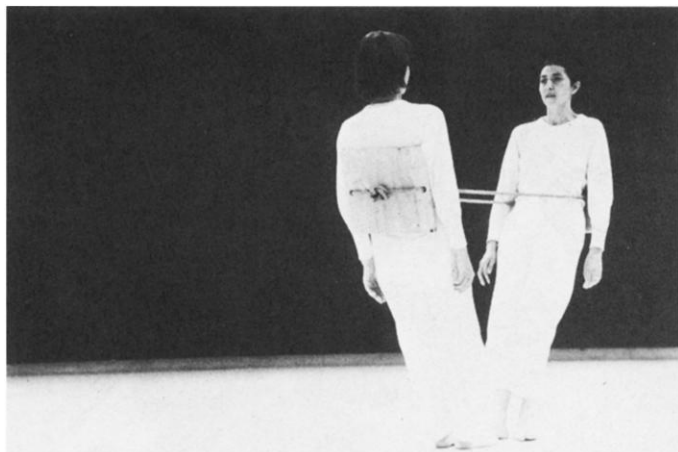
*In Lateral Pass (1985), Diane Madden (left) wears a "tutu" around her waist and strikes a swan-like pose. (Photo by Babette Mangolte)*

in a swan-like pose with her chest thrust forward and legs and arms extended backward across the support of Petronio's torso.

Madden reappears later with the tutu around her neck, and it takes on the connotations of a clown's collar, contributing to the circus ambience that Warshaw's aerial forays inspire. Lighting designer Beverly Emmons underscores the effect by projecting bright pink and green circles across the stage floor. Graves also adds to the play on spectacle by overloading the stage with layer after layer of huge, colorful chunks of sculpture descending from above, sometimes forcing the dancers to dodge around them or dance behind them. Brown is commenting on the mechanics of entertainment, while she and the audience thoroughly enjoy all the fuss.

Then there is the virtuosic dancing itself. In Brown's dances of the '60s and early '70s, she developed a style consistent with the dance aesthetics of the Judson Church Dance Theater: straightforward and functional, based on the mechanics of the body. Although her current squiggles and exuberant surges of energy seem the antithesis of these purist roots, her complex style was in many ways formed by those early experiments. Through explorations with equipment and conceptual scores, she laid the foundation for the invention of her current movement language.

Brown no longer creates movement sequences through simple tasks such as instructing dancers who are connected by ropes and wooden boards strapped across their backs to adjust their weight as they fall toward or away from each other (*Leaning Duets*, 1971). But the weight of the body and how it falls is still a primary source for both the timing and interactions of the dancers. Nor does Brown any longer create dances with movements that accumulate serially one after another. Easeful joint articulations—a rotating head, a leg levering to hip level, a shoulder piv-



*Weight is used as a primary source of movement in both the 1971 Leaning Duets (left) and the 1985 Lateral Pass (right). (Photos by Boyd Hagen and Johann Elbers)*

oting to raise an arm overhead—form the basis for her current style. Dancers often initiate several distinct actions at once, the limbs functioning as independent time elements in an intricate rhythmic play.

Brown's *Locus* (1975) generated her switch to this more complex style through the use of what she calls a movement "score." As far back as her *Trillium* (1963), Brown was developing scores or rules that she formulated to create movement. Brown says her creative process occurs at the interface between the movement score and the immediate physical response of the dancers to it. *Primary Accumulation* (1972) is based on a mathematical score which dictated that the dancers articulate the first movement, the second, then back to the first, second, and then a third, and so on: a list constantly retracing itself to go forward.

In Brown's earlier work, the audience's job seems to be to decipher the rules of the score. In her later work, the scores are so complex they are almost impossible to discern. For example, *Set and Reset* is based on a rectangular progression that presses forward along the borders of the stage, but it is interrupted by duets and trios in the interior of the space that conceal the game plan. *Lateral Pass* is a departure for Brown in that it was created without a score and based instead on what she calls "eccentric criteria," or ideas about movement, such as pulling Warshaw out of the context of the rest of the dance.

The score for *Trillium* involves one section in which Brown limited herself to standing, lying, or sitting down. Even then she pushed the dance to the limit, working imaginatively with the instructions until "lying down" was attempted in the air. Although there is no film of this dance, perhaps the result was similar to the moment that photographer Jack Mitchell caught in *Set and Reset* when Brown, supported by Stephen Petronio, is suspended horizontally in mid-air.

In *Locus*, Brown developed a spatial score based on a set of instructions for the dancer moving within her own kinesphere, the immediate space surrounding the dancer's body. Brown imagined the kinesphere as a cube defined by 27 points distributed along its sides. The dancer related to a sequence of points with modular gestures, each with its specific spatial obligation. Through this method, Brown began to perform clusters of separate gestures that were articulated simultaneously. This system gave Brown the means to three-dimensionally graph erratic, multi-directional

movements. She was familiar with this kind of dancing from years of improvisation, but *Locus* allowed her to memorize and set phrases of this complex movement. Yet *Locus*' movement still looks methodical in comparison to her *Watermotor* (1978), in which she successfully reversed the process, improvising first and then setting the dance.

After *Watermotor*, Brown was able to teach this complex, spontaneous-looking movement to her dancers in *Glacial Decoy* (1979). She broke from her early emphasis on stability; now she began to allow the body to play with unpredictable, off-balance traveling moves that catapulted the dancers across the space. She also began to cancel out a movement in one direction with a gesture in another, deflecting the viewer's focus with sequences of movements that ricocheted before ever having been firmly established. This continual "sleight of hand" in Brown's recent work has become a virtuosic form.

Brown has made a spectacular form out of the physical illusions created by an often contradictory play of weight and directional thrust. If her body seems to be going right, it may actually be going to the left. If she seems to be settling into a comfortable position, she may actually be completely unstable. Physical illusion is nothing new in Brown's work. If she had let the dancers who walked on walls move naturally, their bodies

*Brown "lying down in the air" in Set and Reset (1983). (Photo by Jack Mitchell)*









*Set and Reset (1983):  
dancers constantly wavering  
and shifting. (Photo by Lois  
Greenfield)*

would have sagged into gravity. Their “pedestrian” walking was actually an artifice established in the most taxing of circumstances, dictated by the practicalities of adjusting to equipment.

As Brown’s choreography became more difficult, her dancers became more “superhuman,” no longer the human scale performers of the Judson Church Theater. Part of Brown’s early interests were in the everyday dynamics of untrained dancers. Much of the Judson work was based on movement-as-task, with the dancer a “neutral doer” rather than an expressive vehicle for virtuosic action. The vestiges of task-like performing remain in the way Brown’s dancers today toss off complex movement without showing off or displaying emotional expressions. Unlike those “neutral doers,” the dancers in *Lateral Pass* are often spatially oriented toward the audience, and they communicate changing movement qualities, if not specific feelings.

Before *Lateral Pass*, Brown had focused on the pure articulation of the body within the architecture of the performing space. The inexorably repeated sequences in Brown’s early work were grounded and predictable to the point of making the dancers seem almost like solid objects. In recent years, Brown’s dancers have appeared instead to be suspended in an ongoing field of activity, constantly wavering and shifting in sensuous motion that keeps renewing itself—the purist sensibility informing this sometimes airy and silky, sometimes bounding and raucous portrayal of the human body in motion.

*Lateral Pass* sends Brown’s choreography in new directions. For many years, Brown adhered to the Judson proposal of uninflected dance that refuses the psychologically charged rise and fall of traditional modern

*Watermotor (1978):  
Brown’s body flying in  
several directions at once.  
(Photo by R. Alexander)*



Group Primary  
Accumulation (1973)  
(Photo by Babette  
Mangolte)

dance phrasing: attack, stasis, and dramatic resolution. Yvonne Rainer's 1966 manifesto called for a new kind of sequencing that presented the dancer constantly engaged in an uninflected series of transitions, delivered in a banal, matter-of-fact style. Rainer's *Trio A* (1966) is an exemplary work in this style.

In both Brown's early methodical sequences and her recent complex ones, she maintains a consistent pulse—a motor that lends a tone of sameness to her choreography, equally emphasizing each gesture. In *Lateral Pass*, Brown instead develops sections of changing dynamic quality. There were intimations of this in the duet and trio sections of *Set and Reset*, but they were so condensed in time that they were enveloped within the monotone of passing activity.

In *Lateral Pass*, Brown presents extended sections with distinct textural differences in time, space, and body tension. A clumsy sequence of weighted moves and jerky pauses, for instance, might follow a lyrical, sustained passage. Each sequence has a distinctly individual identity. The overall structure of *Lateral Pass* is built up of a random collage of idiosyncratic solos, duets, and group sequences that occur together onstage, although often spatially isolated. A duet, more often than not, will involve two incongruous partners.

This diversity gives spectators a radically different perception of time. Whether in *Primary Accumulation*, *Locus*, or *Set and Reset*, time was measured by the continual reiteration of the present moment rather than through contrasting activities. Essentially one overall idea permeated each work—determined repetition in *Primary Accumulation*, wafting and rip-

pling in *Son of Gone Fishin'* and *Set and Reset's* exuberant edging forward in space.

In *Lateral Pass*, as one chunk of distinctive material follows another, the piece begins to progress linearly—an episodic travelogue, perhaps, with the dancers passing through a changing kinetic landscape. Graves' sculptures resemble topographical maps. When the sculptures reflect a neon glow from Emmons' dramatic shifts of light, they call to mind the kind of scene you might encounter when you approach a city coming off a highway at night. Peter Zummo's music, with its circular melodic themes that complete themselves at odd rhythmic intervals sometimes takes on a surreal, sci-fi quality. The shifts of movement, light, set, and music are coordinated (rather than juxtaposed) so that at times they coalesce in this central illusion of a travelogue across time and space. This kind of theatricality that comes from an accumulation of contrasting imagery is new to Brown's work.

*Lateral Pass* also fragments the viewer's focus far less than Brown's other work, so the emerging images are not easily eradicated. The set, music, and dance function in coordination. The movement is less fractured, revealing the simpler lines of the body working as a cohesive whole rather than predominately as a sum of independent parts. The group sequences become easier to perceive when one group of dancers performs the same movements in counterpoint to another group rather than splintering the material in all different directions. Brown no longer splits the focus of the dance between activity happening in the interior of the space and movement that accentuates the edges of the stage. Instead the dance is contained within the proscenium frame. Rather than fragmenting the work, the collage sequencing and random spatial structure serve to unify it in a similar way to how Cunningham's dances communicate unity-in-disunity.

The lessening of fragmentation, along with changing dynamics, coordinated theatrical elements, and frontal orientation trigger associations with more overtly expressive dances. These oblique references to familiar structures in modern dance as well as the more flippant references to balletic spectacle give *Lateral Pass* the sense of being in conversation with various components of Western dance theatricality. *Lateral Pass* asks interesting questions about the relation between established theatrical conventions and purist formality: when Diane Madden bends her knees, then her elbows, and then her torso, progressing slowly from a standing position to all fours to supine, do we see her joints as hinges closing toward the floor, or do we see someone peacefully sinking into the earth to rest for a while? When a performer defies gravity, do we perceive mechanics or illusion, and do we perceive it differently if the performer is a ballerina on stage rather than a man walking down the side of a Soho building? Twenty years after Judson, as '60s formalism is increasingly combined with expressive theatrical conventions, are we now facing a glued-together hybrid or something entirely new?

Throughout *Lateral Pass*, Brown sporadically jogs our memory back to *Warshaw's* harness suspension and through him to those *Walking on the Wall* events in which Brown placed dancing out of the proscenium context and out of the syntax of traditional dance. *Lateral Pass* communicates a tension between dance nested within the theater and dance wrenched out of it. The piece both exploits and estranges the elements of proscenium dance theatricality and spectacle. Characteristically, Brown turns the familiar conventions of the stage askew and sets them loose within the more slippery possibilities of the imagination.

INTERVIEWS WITH TRISHA BROWN:  
*August 1983–October 1985*

GOLDBERG: Do you see your role as an artist differently now than you did in the years of your early dances?

BROWN: The early years were a time of incredible purity. The wide world is in no way interested in the completion of those kinds of perfectly simple ideas. The performance of those pieces was difficult and if your audience is not with you, it is doubly difficult. It was a very clear, complete, stimulating, and meaningful working time for me. Those early dances—*Locus*, the accumulation and wall pieces—were such radical acts in the development of dance that there was both the up side of that—the stimulation of being radical in a very conventional world—and the down side, constantly having to argue a position. I am very involved in community, both locally and worldwide, and in political issues. I wanted to have a larger, more effective voice through dance. Those early dances were removed from the kind of large audience that I am in front of now. In the theater, I am in the house of entertainment. The early works dealt with challenge and stimulation, not entertainment. I have something to tell a large audience about art, about life, and they won't listen if I do the earlier work.

GOLDBERG: What is it about your recent work that is easier for audiences to relate to?

BROWN: The dancing is much more kinesthetic, outgoing, and flamboyant. One of the reasons that I often put my solo *Accumulation With Talking Plus Watermotor* first on the program is to let the audience know that I am alive and awake, I can see them, they can hear my breathing—just to let them know I am a human, feeling being. I am trying to maintain my artistic rigor and at the same time express the side of me that is witty and caring and fast as a whip. Those are qualities that people relate to. In the early dances, when I subjected myself to a formal structure what one saw was the dance and not the dancer.

GOLDBERG: Within your new flamboyant style, are you still developing the concept of “pure dance” that stems from the early period?

BROWN: My movement is still physical and abstract, based on the mechanical use of the body. It has no emotional base or content. Although there may be asymmetrical relationships to metered time, or surges of energy, they are about physical energy. Surges, splashes, silences—all of those things are emotive, depending on the response system of the viewer, but I do not set out and say, “How do I feel about such and such?” I feel through my psycho-kinesthetic system. The work is very human, very physical, very sensuous. I tried to make the body be a stick figure in the early '70s, but it's impossible. I accept the inevitability of connotational spill-off. But I do not set up connotations. My orientation is very formal.

GOLDBERG: How do you and your dancers train?

BROWN: The way I can move the best had no chance in the system of modern dance training I had. My modern dance training was in service to modern dance conventional choreography. I wasn't wanting to dance that way. But departing from that training, you're in no-man's-land. I strug-

Trisha Brown. (Photo by  
Ken Probst)





gled valiantly in composition class at Mills College, with earnest questions, not with belligerence. If you have this other song and the notes for it aren't in the dance classes that are around, you have to try to develop your own work. At that time, the revolution with non-abusive movement was beginning to take place. I learned a lot from Elaine Summers and from Alexander technique. Now I do basic modern dance movements and calisthenics to strengthen my body. I change what I do according to need and temperament. I make up exercises working with postural ideas and alignment. Beyond that—openness in my joints.

GOLDBERG: Has this way of way of working determined your movement style?

BROWN: I think so. I have less tolerance for pain. I work with a pure idea of how the body is structured, lining things up really smoothly. I work with simple actions. I move into and out of things in an animal way. My leg goes as high, my torso will tilt as radically right as it can within a supple and animalistic image. The movement has to function within the natural pathways of the body. It disturbs me greatly that dancers have such injuries. I'm trying to outsmart it.

GOLDBERG: How have you trained your dancers?

BROWN: In my early work, I used the instructions to the dancers as a device to find my movement language. I would tell them, "Start moving right and jump underneath yourself." Everyone would do that in an entirely different way. But that idea of isolating one action from another, of juxtaposing two disparate actions simultaneously, was built into the instruction. It was a way of defining what my movement language was, of transferring my dreams over to "foreigners." One of the ways I train my dancers how to make choices that I like is to start them out handling a small unit of material. The difference between what a new dancer is making now compared to 1975 is unrecognizable as being the same style of dance. 1975 was plain, simple, straightforward, large, utilitarian. Now I look for the more chaotic and imaginative solution rather than the most simple or economical. Over the years, I have developed a more complex field of choices.

GOLDBERG: How do you collaborate with the dancers in making a new work?

BROWN: In *Set and Reset* and pieces preceding it, I taught movement to the company and then we worked together to develop it further. The actual movement phrase becomes a ground base that is transformed. The collision of purposes among the dancers in working together creates an outcome of movement other than the original.

GOLDBERG: What about in *Lateral Pass*?

BROWN: *Lateral Pass* was a departure from this previous way of working. Instead of choreographing movement and teaching it to the dancers, I extemporized movement on the spot and the dancers "read" my body like a score. I worked with the dancers one-on-one using this process. If I had an idea about the possibility of how the body could go, I would present it to the dancer as an architectural image and then say yes or no to the result. I did that if I thought that my trying to render the image first would limit the possibility. There is a place where Diane Madden has her knees bent with her right arm folded at shoulder level and I suggested



Set and Reset (1983).  
(Photo by Jack Mitchell)

that she jump and swing her body backward as one piece and then come back down to center. It is a very strenuous yet subtle action.

GOLDBERG: In recent years you have collaborated with visual artists and composers. Why did you choose Laurie Anderson and Robert Rauschenberg to work with you on *Set and Reset*?

BROWN: I've known the work of both for years, and I know them to be independent and irreverent. I felt a connection with Laurie because I have worked with words. I like her music very much. People in the audience hear it differently, which is a clue to its range of expression. Most

sequences of words have more than one meaning, and Laurie can suggest more routes out from the initial meaning of a sentence than most. I can roll with the reverberations for some time except that she goes on and there is more coming.

GOLDBERG: How did you work with her on the music?

BROWN: I had hoped to have the music up front and choreograph to it in the old-fashioned sense, because I had never done that. But that was not possible given our different schedules. So we worked with a system of videotape—I would send a tape to Laurie every three or four days when we completed a section of the dance. She would put it on her monitor in her sound studio and watch it while she worked with different mixes. She wrote the music with a very tight fit to the detail of the dance, down to a gesture of the wrist, a hand flipping over, a subtlety of a larger movement. There are certain basic things that we agreed upon—that the music does not have to underwrite the dance. If you see it you don't have to hear it too. But there are marked changes within the dance, and the music accommodates and acknowledges those differences.

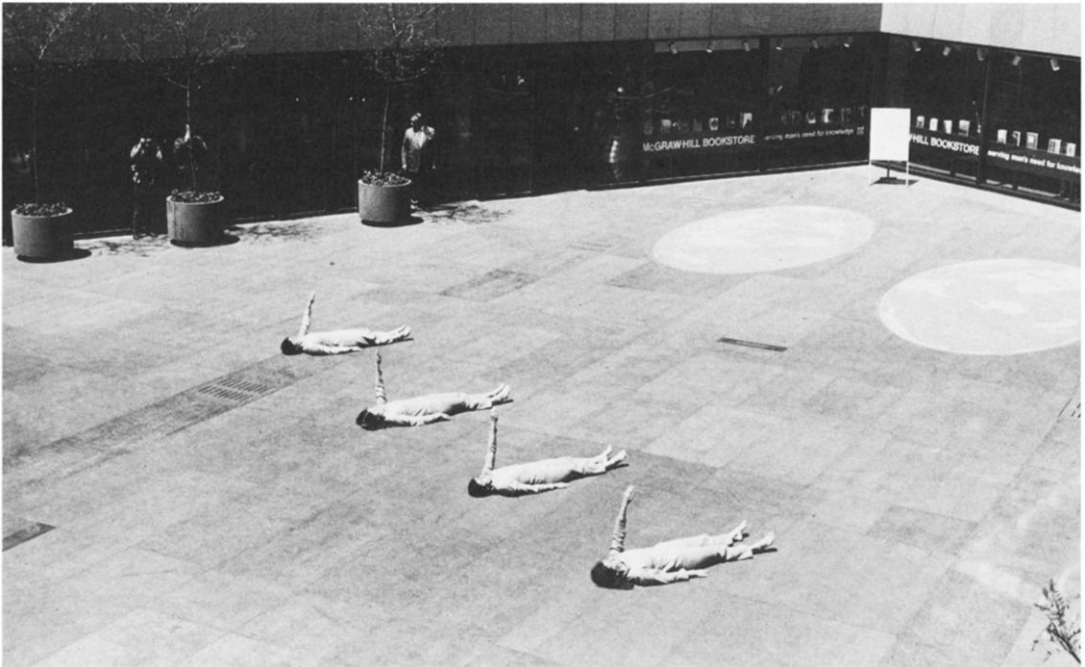
GOLDBERG: Some of these changes in *Set and Reset* have to do with variations in dynamics and in styles and qualities of movement. Do you think your recent movement maintains a relation to the concept of non-climactic, ongoing phrasing that was developed at Judson?

BROWN: In *Set and Reset* there is a motor going all the time. That basic eastern, seamless, ongoing momentum is still there. There are some pep-pery places, but for the most part it is on an even keel. It is possible to be rhythmically complex within that ground base, using the different body parts as independent time elements. There are many disruptions of rhythmic expectation—the evenness is not reliable. A full range of dynamics is active, but I don't think, "Now we're going to pour on the energy and drive toward the ecstatic moment." The ecstasy is possible at any moment, rather than building toward a cathartic jubilation. But I also am not trying to keep the climaxes out. In *Lateral Pass*, the ongoing motor dropped dead. It stopped and it said, "I'm standing here." It didn't even look around. I tried to stop in *Set and Reset*, and I managed it for a few seconds. In *Lateral Pass* I was going for extremes—taking two figures down to the floor and just leaving them there while one figure articulates a solo. I hadn't had anyone on the floor that long since *Primary Accumulation*. The two figures on the floor came into the material because they functioned as landscape. I left them there, these hunks of people that relate to the set.

GOLDBERG: There seem to be more recurring visual elements to hold onto in *Set and Reset* and *Lateral Pass*. Are you still composing serially, or are you also now using a form of theme and variation?

BROWN: During rehearsals for *Set and Reset*, the dancers were directed to "act on impulse" with the phrase material that I gave them. They were supposed to use that material conservatively, because it is easy to just chew through 10,000 yards of movement in a second and then have nothing to do for the next 20 minutes. But if a dancer had an impulse—just by encounter, accident, thought, happenstance, whatever—to do an intact sequence from one section at a different point, they could and then that movement would recur. You might see it only on a single person at one point and on everybody somewhere else. But I really don't think





Group Primary  
Accumulation (1973).  
(Photo by Babette  
Mangolte)

about working with theme and variation, in terms of recycling phrases. It is rather that all that material is out there on the field of observation and possibility and I feel free to draw on something that has happened before. I may place the same material in a different context, or I may retrograde or invert it. In *Lateral Pass*, the repetitions occur when I split up a duet into its component parts and presented one of the figures separately at a different point in the piece.

GOLDBERG: Is there a reason why you wouldn't use theme and variation?

BROWN: Probably because I did it as part of my formal training in college and I just don't want to go back to that. I would also not do *Locus* again. It is more interesting to think of other forms, other reasons for dancing.

GOLDBERG: Do you feel that your experiments with equipment influenced your current movement style, in your use of weight, for example?

BROWN: I learned a lot about counterweight and ballast from the equipment pieces. When you walk on a wall, if you actually were to just relax, everything would hang down. You don't have all the signals you get when you are upright about where your arm or head should be, so you have to invent that. I learned how to make myself look like I'm doing something which in fact I'm not, which I think has informed the degree of conviction in my movement. I am willing to make a move which is off-center as if I am softly setting myself down, when in fact I'm in trouble.

GOLDBERG: So you're creating an illusion.

BROWN: Yes, physical illusions. I am able to subject myself to an idea in order to get an image across. That was learned walking on the wall.

GOLDBERG: What about the influence of the environmental pieces? The drifting on the rafts in Minnesota reminds me of the way you have the dancers drift from place to place in *Son of Gone Fishin'*. All of a sudden there are three duets which have become two trios in different spatial relation to each other, and the spectator doesn't see how it happened. This also seems similar to the device that you used in *Drift*, in 1974, when you had a group of dancers slowly progress forward, unnoticeably stepping slightly to the side. When they end up all the way stage right, the audience didn't know how it happened.

BROWN: I would never have made those connections. I could say that I make dance machines that take care of certain aspects of dance-making. In the raft piece, the lake, the current, and the wind were all a machine for selecting where we were in space.

GOLDBERG: Have these "dance machines," or scores, from previous works affected your current approach to making dances?

BROWN: Each new formal structure, whether a score or some other set of rules, gives us a tool. Over the years, the company has developed the information and skills that come with those formal structures. Although each of my new pieces is particular and distinct, all of the previous information is naturally brought into play. For instance, the dance-making process in *Locus* sounds very cerebral, but it went into the body, as all dance training goes into the body.

GOLDBERG: Could you describe the formal structure for *Set and Reset*?

*Son of Gone Fishin'*  
(1981). (Photo by Lois  
Greenfield)



BROWN: This structure has a very good balance between giving the creator the sense that there is something solid to lean on and specific to be done and, at the same time, not completely interfering with inspiration. There was the structure of the rectangular dance that progressed around the borders of the space, as well as the sub-motifs of the interior dances that occurred within the rectangle. There are adhering visual principles in the construction of the movement and its direction, which created a strong base from which we could take off into bursts of exuberant behavior. It is those collisions of purpose between the formal structure and the dancing that intrigue me. I think that *Set and Reset* does not necessarily look rigorous. Would you agree?

GOLDBERG: To me the structure is not immediately discernible. The rectangular score is disguised by tangents that deflect your eye and interrupt the continuity of the progression. Were there moments in *Set and Reset* when you broke the structure?

BROWN: When we began rehearsals for *Set and Reset*, on my first entrance onto the stage, I walked up, doubled over, and fell down on the floor. I broke the rules by the third beat. That kind of contrast to the given material was established right off the bat. A question from people working with me might be, "How far can I go with this?" I let them know immediately. We took the simple instructions to their limit. Actually, that way of working was the singular distinctive difference between Bob Dunn's class that preceded Judson and every other class I've been in in my life. Everyone, given the most simple assignment, took it to the brink of the moon.

GOLDBERG: Do you think you could ever give up a score and function purely on physical inspiration?

BROWN: In *Watermotor* I did not give myself any spatial restraints. I was following the logic of the body's mechanical systems. In portions of *Set and Reset* I followed what the dance itself suggested, letting the movement happen and hovering there to snap it up. If it didn't happen beautifully then I imposed a direction.

GOLDBERG: Is there a score for *Lateral Pass*?

BROWN: No. In *Lateral Pass* I was working in a more extemporaneous manner and therefore relying on instinctual choice, which I trusted. I chose not to modify and refine to a point of eloquent subtlety, as I had in *Set and Reset*. If ordinarily I use a structure as a springboard, there have always been tangents that grow out of that structured material. *Lateral Pass* is made up of tangents that are trying to structure themselves. It is held together by, let's say, "eccentric criteria."

GOLDBERG: Could you explain a few of those?

BROWN: One of the ideas is taking things out of context—which is commonly thought of as collage. Randomness is inherent in a collage system, so I find it less formal, less logical than my previous way of working. I re-mixed everything from its original context and identity—which gave it another life. I would take a figure out of a duet and put her in juxtaposition with another solo that initially had no intention of sharing the audience's focus, forming a duet out of two really irrelevant pieces of material and working to get their differences to buck off each other. Another way of taking things out of context is to have the dance



Opal Loop/Cloud  
Installation #72503  
(1980). (Photo by Nat  
Tileston)

be slightly out of sync with the dancer. Randy flying is a good example. I wanted to pull him slightly out of the context of the picture, take him out of friction with the floor and objectify him or establish him as a prop.

GOLDBERG: Did you work individually with the dancers to accentuate the differences in their movement styles?

BROWN: Yes, and I worked over a very long period of time without continuity, because of touring. I had to punch things out whenever we got off the airplane. There was an aggressiveness to the process. I have always had time to refine things and to mull them over. The touring imposed a new working schedule that resulted in a dance that was a real departure.

GOLDBERG: Has working in the proscenium brought other changes?

BROWN: For the first ten years of my dance career I was not in a traditional theater, so I could decentralize my use of space. In the theater, the only time that you can really be seen by everyone is when you are center-stage. If you are upstage left you are not seen in half the houses in the world. We lay down the sight lines and adjust them in each theater. Also, I geometrize my body in relation to the architecture of the three-dimensional stage space—the 45, 90, and 180 degree angles are active in my body and on the stage floor. It's my surrogate classicism. You can think about the dance that keeps reestablishing itself in center as a narcissistic act, but it is also essential to visibility, if you are being generous to everybody in the house and not just to the king and queen.

GOLDBERG: Do you think that your attitude toward the proscenium is essentially different from working in environmental spaces?



BROWN: I absolutely never thought I would say this, but I think there are opportunities for magic in a theater that there are not in other spaces. I find myself thinking, "Who is this person who makes these moves in a dance?" She is a suspended person. I don't have to tell you who I am in a theater—I am whoever I want to be. With that distance and isolation, I can think of doing things I would not dare to do in bright light with people close at hand. The work that was done in a loft was more utilitarian. The theater makes it possible to think in terms of an imagery which could be any century. A white room is 20th century, you can see who I am, I can't trick you. Now I see the stage as "anyplace"—a place of suspended possibilities.

GOLDBERG: I know you were able to spend a month in the Hamline University Theatre in Minneapolis while choreographing *Lateral Pass*. How did creating the piece in the theater, with the set available, affect it?

BROWN: I think it is one of the reasons that the piece is as different as it is. I could not have achieved such a level of integration between Nancy Graves' set and the dance without having those 30 days. I wanted the set to be present in relation to what is going on in the dance. There is a stripe of friction between the set and the dancers. I worked in a range all the way from "get that stuff out of here," because one section of the dance was very big, to "bring it all down in" at the lowest possible trim. Doing this might make visual sense, but the set was then definitely in our danger zone. There was that range from total clearance to high density and trying to do it in a way that was visually rhythmic and still maintain the integrity of the two separate media.

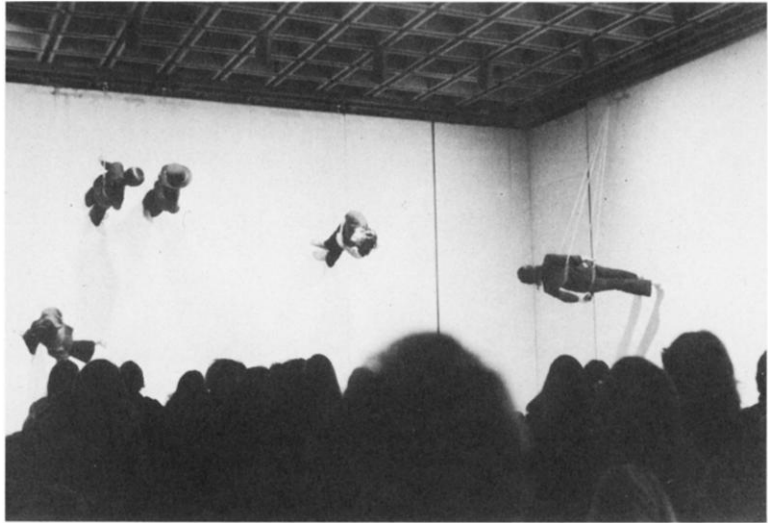
GOLDBERG: How did Peter Zummo's music relate to the dancing and the set?

BROWN: It was truly live music. The musicians were improvising to a set of instructions applied to specific melodic material in relation to each other, to us, and to the set. They tempered their musical response to what they saw by what they would have played anyway. Their instructions allowed them to vary the timing from performance to performance to intersect with the dancers' rhythm, as determined by the real effects of gravity on the weight of the body. The dance and the music were two strong separate entities, but I also felt like I could play with the music in a palpable way, lean around in it a bit. We were co-responsive.

GOLDBERG: You seem to be at home in the theater, creating large-scale pieces in collaboration with major artists. Could you talk about how economics affected your choice to continue working in the proscenium?

BROWN: I think it would be really beautiful if the world could let artists follow their instincts in developing work and not make them conform to funding cycles and historical expectations. That is too idealistic. It is not possible, especially in dance. Dance depends on an audience, and you have to suffer the response of that audience. There is a system, a network, a language for the touring and support of dance in the world. This network operates in proscenium stages. If you choose to work outside of that, you have built into it a problem of communication with the sponsor and with the uninitiated audience. In the Judson days there was no National Endowment for the Arts or corporate support, so that wasn't an issue. I stopped walking on the walls and doing those site-specific pieces that involved equipment because there was no support for it, and I couldn't afford it. For economic reasons, I redirected the thrust of my

*Walking on the Wall*  
(1971). (Photo by Carol  
Godden)



career. Someone has to change, either the system or the artist. Eating and renting are accepted modes of behavior—one can't change that.

GOLDBERG: What is the difference between “a change of direction for economic purposes” and selling out?

BROWN: If one goes into the proscenium stage, is that by nature selling out? I changed medium. I didn't change integrity. For the wall pieces, I scouted around for just the right place to do what I needed to do. Now I am taking possession of the stage so that it becomes my world, and I can scout around within it for what I need. It still irritates me that the cameras always snap when I'm jumping. I do understand why they snap at the “pretty” moments, the ones that say, “This is a great dancer.” It is all part of projecting acceptability. This thinking permeates the system—the sponsor is going to compare my glossy to someone else's. My hope is that within these circumstances I can continue to have the courage to work from and into an unknown place and not allow the environment to de-radicalize the movement.

GOLDBERG: Is performing your proscenium dances much different for you than performing the early work?

BROWN: Simplicity is very hard to perform. You have to have the courage to be there when you are not concealed by a flurry of gorgeous actions. That kind of “being there” makes my heart beat double just talking about it. In some ways, you don't have to know you're there when you're sashaying around. But even in my new work, what makes performing rewarding is when all of the person's person has arrived at the same moment. Feeling is present, physical skill, luck. It evinces a very special kind of humanity in the dancers. They inhabit themselves and the dancing very fully, with all the levels of their person brought into play. Being in performance is existing in the paradoxical state of diabolic concentration and a feeling of outgoingness. You screw something down so tight that when it's locked into position and the stage manager says go, everything is solid and tight and gleaming like metal. From that moment on it's breath and corpuscles and instinct.