

## A Conversation about *Glacial Decoy*\*

TRISHA BROWN and YVONNE RAINER

*Rainer:* Considering how long it took you to make *Watermotor*, *Glacial Decoy* seems to have been made in a surprisingly short time.

*Brown:* *Watermotor* was an exploration of new territory, so hesitation was built into it. I knew more of what my material was in *Glacial Decoy*. And I have been frustrated for years about how slowly my work proceeds. I decided to hammer this one out and to push myself as hard as I could. Actually, I started the movement a very long time ago—August 1st [1978]. I set up a regime and a pace that was unstoppable. I think that I choreographed every day for eight or nine months.

*Rainer:* Was the dance made in the same sequence in which we saw it?

*Brown:* No. The opening section presents the outside edges of the so-called dance; the middle, the center of the phrases, is missing. The most recent thing we worked on was a slow duet and trio. Out of that, when the dust settled, the duet which is the core of the dance emerged. And that is one continuous phrase of about seven minutes length . . . I complain that I don't want to talk about structure, but here I go.

*Rainer:* Why?

*Brown:* Because it obscures the movement. Few people who write about dance discuss movement. I eventually stopped telling people what the structures were, so that they were left with their own perceptions. In the last few articles, some kind of language about movement is finally beginning to develop.

*Rainer:* Still, when you read about how *Locus*, for example, was made, what the invisible spatial considerations were, the work *is* illuminated to some extent. It

\* *Glacial Decoy*, choreography by Trisha Brown, set and costumes by Robert Rauschenberg. First performed at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, on May 7, 1979, and subsequently in New York City at Marymount Manhattan College on June 20, on a program which also included *Accumulation* (1971) with *Talking* (1973) *Plus Water Motor* (1978), *Planes* (1968), and *Line-Up* (1977). This conversation took place at the time of the first New York performance.

probably isn't necessary to know this explicitly, but I am curious about the structure of *Glacial Decoy*.

*Brown:* First you get the outside edges of the phrase; next you get the core of the dance. This second section is never seen again, except . . . every time I talk about dance, I think I'm lying. It's too complex, but I'll simplify. The second section is never seen again. The third section is a duet which gives you the center of the dance, and in the final section, all the parts appear at once.

What I'm doing in an individual movement is reflected in the phrases I use and in the entire piece—which is to interrupt. The dance is permeated with sliding movements, interruptions of movement, place, and direction. It's always going in an unexpected direction. My dancing is always unpredictable, unlikely, continuous. Phrases are minutes long without stopping or even slowing down. In this context, a four-count phrase becomes a climax.

My work is about change—of direction, shape, velocity, mood, state. There are total, instantaneous shifts from one physical state to another. This is tumultuous to perform, but if the momentum is just right, there is an ease.

There's more to say about the making of the piece. That core duet was taken apart and dancers would learn movement of the same genre at the instant that I would—we call it “throwing.” I would improvise and each would take from it what she saw. Each sees differently. I don't know if you recognize them in the piece, but that's what I was working with in choreographing the main phrase: without thinking, to cast the body into space. . . . This material was then set and incorporated.

*Rainer:* Using movement that had already been learned?

*Brown:* No. That was my reference in making *Watermotor*: the intelligence of the unknown, of the body moving in an unknown place. Not only place, but also shape.

*Rainer:* So that in rehearsal you would do that kind of movement, and they would do versions of it at the same time. But they're different.

*Brown:* They're different, and they're brief, and they appear within the overall phrase in such a way that non sequitur slips into logic and back, with no clue as to which is which.

*Rainer:* In your dancing, the energy for the beginning of an impulse occurs so suddenly that one thinks that maybe it is *about* the impulse at the beginning of a phrase, but that isn't right. Rather, the impulse constantly arises from different rhythms and therefore it's unpredictable. Much of the movement concerns the weight at the end of the previous movement, the transitions. The impulse comes from either flinging or dropping a limb.

*Brown:* From falling, and its opposite, and all the in-betweens. Tilting and rising and the like are a logical order of movement which often functions as the motivation.

*Rainer:* And that impulse is constantly moving all over the body.

*Brown:* There is a kind of democratic distribution throughout the body. I'm always looking for what we've left out—the backside of the knees, for example. There is an inevitability at work; I set up a tilt and all of the instinctive moves that follow in an improvisational choreographic process give you the base for a phrase which can then be amplified and altered. That's one of my basic tools. I'm constantly altering the meaning of move *a* by the introduction of move *b* . . .

*Rainer:* . . . while *a* is still going on . . .

*Brown:* . . . which sets up something that will occur in move *f*.

*Rainer:* So that it has the look of improvisation in the very free use of body weight to generate movement, but then there are incredibly virtuosic details that show the total control which informs every part of it. Nothing is really left to fall where it may, even though the look is supple, soft, relaxed. That's very amazing and new to behold. You're actually making a new dance grammar.

*Brown:* Since *Watermotor*, I have not been coining phrases as I go along. The movement comes from an intuitive physical base. It's like Steve Paxton, after completing one of those miraculous concerts of his, saying that he doesn't know what he did. I work in a similar way, but I also try to know what I'm doing. In setting my material, I lose some things, but gain others. I lose those moments of extraordinary good luck, the gorgeous coincidences. I've caught a few, though, and the ones I catch I get to keep.

*Rainer:* Yet Steve certainly gives the impression of a kind of spontaneous "knowing." I mean the fact that you see him making decisions on the spot, which is a characteristic of improvisation. His method has very much to do with references to modes of dancing and moving. Maybe references is not the right word, because he actually *does* those things—fragments of tumbling, T'ai Chi, Cunningham, Akido, et cetera. Whereas the references in your work—and I think your work is chock-full of them—occur more as a consequence or by-product of a way of working than as primary meaning. They occur within the flow. This is especially evident in *Glacial Decoy*.

*Brown:* Sometimes my dancing is metaphoric, using memory as a resource. Yet what may have been traumatic in, say, 1941 makes hardly a ripple today when it is put through the mind and out the body. Still, memory gives a phrase a reality for me and modulates its quality and texture.

However the image, the memory, must occur in performance at precisely the same moment as the action derived from it. Without thinking, there are just physical feats. I also distinguish between public and private gestures. I perform both, but you are not supposed to see the private ones. I am telling you this because it accounts for coloration or nuance and the appearance of universal eccentricity.

*Rainer:* The jokes which occur in your work—are they public or private?

*Brown:* I have in the last two years excluded jokes from my work. Walking like a duck used to be fair game, but no longer. Jokes come to mind so easily that there must be something wrong with them. There are ducks in *Decoy*, beyond the title, but they are performed so quickly that the humor is perceived subliminally, if at all.

What did you think of the costumes in *Glacial Decoy*?

*Rainer:* The costumes bring in another dimension . . . of, not exactly a persona, but an association with personae created elsewhere and earlier, somewhere between *Les Sylphides* and *Primitive Mysteries*, maybe even *Antic Meet*, which has that take-off on *Primitive Mysteries*. And it is the dress that produces this association. There's a recurring, fleeting transformation from a body moving to a flickering female image. I think that because the dress stands away from the body—Bob [Rauschenberg]'s design kept it sculptural—the image is never totally integrated or unified. So one goes back and forth in seeing movement-as-movement, body-inside-dress, dress-outside-body, and image-of-woman/dancer. Which is not the same thing as seeing, or not seeing, your work in terms of your being a woman. Femaleness in *Glacial Decoy* is both a given, as in your previous work, and a superimposition.

The translucency of the costumes at first seemed somewhat lascivious, but then I thought, "It works because the dancing doesn't display the body statically and there are no moments of exhibitionist posturing." On anyone else the dresses might be "effeminate" in an idealized way. But that's where Bob's gift is so evident, his wit in putting a version of ballet tulle on *your* movement. The unique personal style you've always had, when caught in photographs, sometimes comes close to classical dancing—one-legged, perfectly balanced. The primary difference, of course, is that some area of your body is always in motion. There are none of those recognizable freeze-frames that ballet and Cunningham aspire to, none of that holding with incredible tension and strength and that undercurrent of willful determination.

You used to say that you did not make movements that cover space. I don't know how your dancers get around, but they do. The only word I can think of is *skitter*. They skitter around. I don't know what the steps are, or how, in *Glacial Decoy*, the dancers cover the entire stage at one point or another.

*Brown:* There are only so many traveling steps: walk, run, hop, skip, jump, slide, gallop. I try to combine all of them in varying tempos, speeds, and qualities.

*Rainer:* Perhaps I have lost my capacity for taking in movement—my kinetic memory. I become so absorbed in looking at the shifting relations of body parts that I don't see how the traveling happens.

*Brown:* But I'm always trying to deflect your focus. When 99% of the body is moving to the right, I will stick something out to the left to balance or to deflect it, or to set up some sort of reverberation between the two. Another way to effect change is through cancellation. The cancellation of a thrust generates a small explosion of possibilities. To determine what comes next, I study two poles—the easiest way out, which is the logical progression or instinctive recovery, and the hardest, which is usually another cancellation, which creates its own subsidiary fireworks. By understanding the extremes, the entire field in which my choices lie is spread out before me.

Thus there is a kind of conscientious fragmentation, a delicate balance between chaos and order. If fragmentation is too consistent, it becomes regularized. One solution is to overlay one dance with another, which produces a density of action and detail. In the end, it looks like one dance has been poured into every crack of another one. In the standing *Accumulation*, I talk. The rigor of the accumulation is juxtaposed with the telling of stories in a conversational way, which are interrupted by attention having to go back to the movement. And now I have spliced in the completely different movement quality of *Watermotor*, which breaks it up more. Something happens between all of these elements. I'm working with a lot in that piece—timing, meaning, and stillness.

*Rainer:* I accept the idea of tinkering with one's own work, especially if it's something that you've been performing for a long time and is very exquisite and complete. Certainly I have done a lot of that. But when I see it, it seems that you're trying to destroy those exquisite pieces.

*Brown:* I'm not tinkering and I'm not destroying. I'm making something new every time I add new material. I'm both a choreographer and a performer. And the standing *Accumulation* is a performer's tour de force. If it goes flat, I can't keep doing it. I'm not that kind of artist. I can't achieve an exquisite piece and just crank it out every time. I have to keep doing something which has meaning for me. So I add. When it goes flat, I add.

*Rainer:* Or you make it more difficult.

*Brown:* It *is* more difficult . . . but every step has been more difficult. Earlier, talking while doing that dance was monumentally difficult. Now I'm glib. What's

difficult today will be easy tomorrow.

The standing *Accumulation* is the most meaningful piece for me, it has so . . . I can't really talk about it; I'll have to write about it at some point and get everything down. It feels like I'm holding reins to about six horses, that they are going out from my body in a 360-degree angle on all sides, so I can't really see what I'm holding. It's wonderful to have all these materials at my fingertips, and know that I have them, but not know how they're going to come out, how I'm going to deal them in.

*Rainer:* It really does go beyond patting your head and rubbing your belly.

*Brown:* That was one thing I said last night in performance. I mentioned that some people compared it to patting my head and rubbing my belly, but that in fact it's more like driving my grain harvester while reciting my French.

I try to go for fifteen minutes, to establish the beginning of the piece, how it evolved, and then I move into all of the elements that I am using now. I say I tell two stories at once; I don't say I'm doing two dances at once. There's a whole litany of humorous stories, and the new section about my father's death, which comes up naturally in talking about the evolution of the piece. The first time I talked while doing the accumulation I said, "My father died in between the making of this move and this move." Which knocked me out. I was amazed that my body had stored this memory in the movement pattern.

*Rainer:* This came out in performance?

*Brown:* In performance. I became silent and composed myself. I was devastated that I had said that.

*Rainer:* Do you rehearse with the speaking?

*Brown:* I don't rehearse it at all. Who can do that to themselves? I do however start talking to my audience the afternoon before a performance. I've been known to be quite eloquent at four.

*Rainer:* Were the problems of teaching the movement in *Glacial Decoy* different from those of previous dances?

*Brown:* I taught the dancers as I went along. That's been a very big issue: how to teach this movement. I really did teach it and they really did learn it.

*Rainer:* That's the most amazing thing. I was impressed early on, in *Locus*, by how people seemed to be doing your movement, how the kind of virtuosity that was visible years ago, your ability to do utterly unexpected things like standing on your hands and drawing up your legs as if you were sitting in a chair upside down

and then instantly getting out of it and into something else. One almost doesn't believe what one has seen; it isn't like a circus trick where there's a build-up and then a climax and there the person is, in an impossible situation. You're always on to something else. It seemed impossible that anyone else could do that, but you've found dancers who . . .

*Brown:* I've become more articulate, and they trust me when I tell them to do those things. Some people might say, "I can't do that," or "That simply can't be done."

*Rainer:* And it can't be slowed down, or it becomes something else. They have to catch the speed that's part of it. I've never been to rehearsal, so I've no idea what your teaching process is like. It must involve constant analysis.

*Brown:* Every dance is different. *Locus* was really like a work table: we all had hammers and nails and fine glasses on. We talked about every aspect of the movement, broke it down . . .

*Rainer:* But wasn't it much simpler?

*Brown:* It was, but at the time it was very complex. I was determined that I was going to go all the way in teaching this movement, which I had never done before. I would sit in my chair and say, "Well, are you going to tell them or not?"

*Rainer:* Was it a matter of telling them, or of finding a language in which to tell them?

*Brown:* Of telling them this way and that way and another way. What you have is a constant flow of energy with precise multiple maneuvers along the way, and they're just so, and they're right here, and they're not somewhere else. That took a long time. But once I taught that, we had a language, we had built up a rapport that really broke new ground.

*Rainer:* Does *Line-Up* keep changing? Do you insert and edit?

*Brown:* No. Only one thing comes and goes—the building section, which is a segment of process.

*Rainer:* Why do you take it out?

*Brown:* This time I used the excuse that the program was too long. But it's very difficult to do, and I don't think we do it well. What we do in the studio when we're working together is too fragile to take out and set under lights and pretend that this is what we do. This is not what we do. We don't go around with four hundred eyes glued on us. So in fact we're faking it. What's the point? We all know what

process is, we all know that people have used rehearsal behavior, choreographic behavior, et cetera.

*Rainer:* I used to find *Line-Up* very fragmentary. Now one thing seems to flow out of another.

*Brown:* Pieces homogenize. *Line-Up* has other, formalized dances inserted into it. The transition between the two has always been a question: does one really amplify the other? When I put *Spanish Dance* in there, I held my breath. We are lying on the floor, we look at each other and then get up and do this . . .

*Rainer:* . . .specialty dance . . .

*Brown:* . . . which always brings down the house. Then we return to our original positions, look where we were looking and at each other, and then we go on. I wish I had not inserted those formal dances. I wish I had had time to make an unending shifting of people.

*Rainer:* But now that I finally begin to accept the episodic quality of *Line-Up*, it doesn't seem so episodic.

*Brown:* This has been the case with my work for a long time. It takes about three years for people to say . . .

*Rainer:* . . . "That's whole." A very good friend of mine, who has come very late to the dancing that came out of the sixties, attended your concerts both last year and this year. Last year she couldn't get over the look of the bodies; she couldn't see past a body that she had never associated with dancing before: the lack of the taut, delineated look in the hips and buttocks that modern dancers used to have. This time I asked her whether she had become accustomed to the bodies, and she said, "Oh yes!" The relaxation of the body makes it look as if it can't do those things, especially if you haven't seen that kind of movement and physical presence before.

I remember getting that in the sixties: slack, it was called. A Boston newspaper reviewer referred to our "slack bodies," which at the time was a very pejorative thing to say.

*Brown:* That puzzles me. If I go to a concert and see someone beating his body or blasting it against the floor, I'm horrified, aesthetically and physically. I can't believe that people still do that sort of thing and that other people sit and watch them. But I'm aware that that's still 80% of dance. I do not participate in that. I do have very sharp, dynamic movement in my dances, but it doesn't come from that look like you're going to explode.

But I'm encouraged to hear that it only takes a year to turn someone around. The walking, running, sitting, standing movement vocabulary of *Line-Up* feels dated, because of the articulation of the movement I'm doing now. I enjoy it for



that reason. It's like bringing my own history with me. You see the seed of *Watermotor* in a section of *Solo Olos*.

*Rainer:* I would miss *Line-Up* if it were not on the program, because it really functions as you say as the seed of a whole range of things. You don't simply sit, walk, run, lie. It's very nice to see the way that you go down to the floor, the fluidity that informs all of your movement, brought to bear on everyday action.

*Brown:* It would be interesting to do another *Line-Up* with the knowledge of what's come since and the days of building yet to come. The section which we call "Humming"—the delicate part near the end in which we simply touch each other—is quite complex but executed so delicately that you hardly know it's happened. That would have been a good starting point for the making of *Line-Up*. It only came about because we had worked in that vocabulary for so many months.

*Rainer:* Trisha, what are you going to do with those two men?\*

*Brown:* I'm going to dance with them. My company is now filled with wonderful dancers. Some of them are men and some of them are women. I was working on *Glacial Decoy* when I held the first men's audition, and it affected me. A couple of moves felt a little girlish. Instead of mediating them with a stereotyped infusion of how a man moves I took them out altogether, because I had already begun to think of a different kind of line, a different weight, a different size. I look forward to working with them.

*Rainer:* I'd hate to see you censor a certain part of yourself because of the men.

*Brown:* I hope that I'll be able to make a distinction between one dancer and another regardless of sex. They all have different qualities that I hope I can put my finger on. Next year we begin making a new piece.

*Rainer:* Would you ever collaborate with a designer again?

*Brown:* I am, with Fujiko Nakaya. She makes fog sculpture, cloud sculpture. She works with steam, which is very much in keeping with the evanescence of dance.

*Rainer:* And the quality of your movement.

*Brown:* And my having grown up in a rainforest. I think her environment will be special, that it won't interfere with but will augment what I do. And I'm looking for music. I think that the rhythmic structure of my dancing can hold its own now.

\* Daniel Lepkoff and Terry O'Reilly, who appeared as guest performers with the company in the spring 1979 performances.

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