

Choice/Form in Trisha Brown's *Locus*: A View from Inside the Cube

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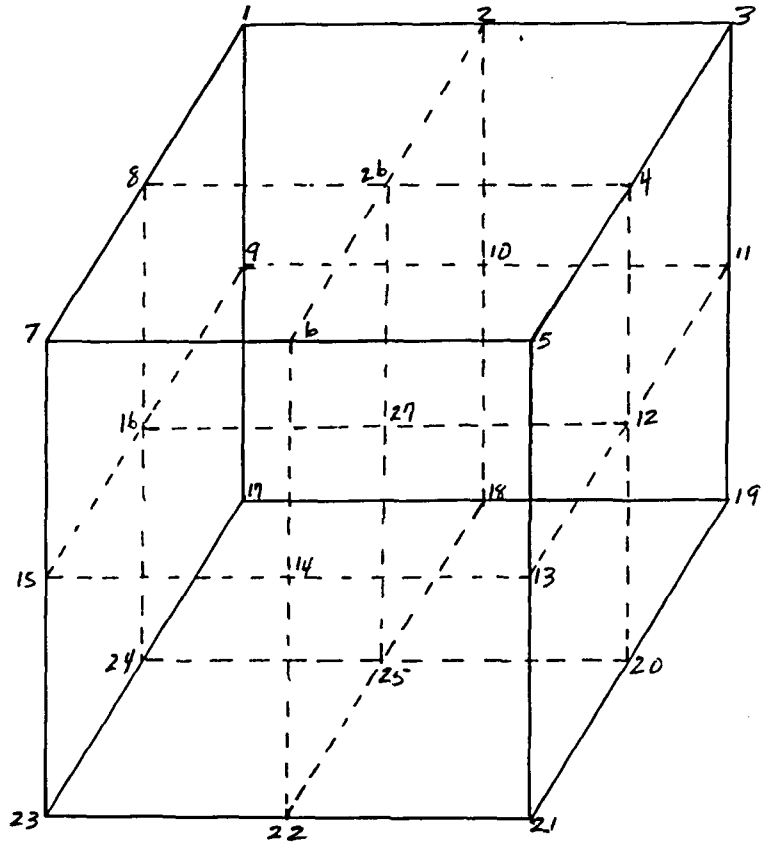
At the risk of appearing impudent, I am writing about a dance I have never seen performed. To impudent, add imprudent, for I am writing also about a dance in which I perform.

Since *Locus* was first presented in its final form in the summer of 1975, viewers and reviewers have reacted to its rigorous and complex structure in diverse ways. One critic, overwhelmed but apparently not very pleased, claimed that the piece is "so conceptually structured that it may be more interesting to talk about . . . than to watch."¹ The fact that the organizing principles of the piece cannot be immediately grasped by the viewer has not prevented other critics from responding more favorably to what they recognize to be layers of indecipherable, intricate ordering. Marcia Siegel, for example, has given a vivid account of watching this plexus in action:

At one point my eyes decided to go a bit out of focus, and instead of seeing individual configurations, I saw the design of the whole dancing space changing, like the stage in a big ballet ensemble. Maybe because of the movements Brown chose or because each dancer was working within an imaginary cube, they often seemed to be fortuitously arranging themselves into harmonious sets of diagonals or folded and unfolded body parts. Toward the end, they begin falling into and out of unison with one other person, and this added to my impression of formal choreography.²

Most reviews of *Locus* provide some information on the structure used for making and performing the piece. Trisha Brown's own description of the process has recently been published:

Locus is organized around 27 points located on an imaginary cube of space slightly larger than the standing figure in a stride position. The points were correlated to the alphabet and a written statement, 1 being A, 2, B. I made four sections each three minutes long that move through, touch, look at, jump over, or do something about each point in the series, either one point at a time or clustered. There is spatial repetition, but not gestural. The dance does not observe front; it revolves. The cube base is multiplied to form a grid of five units wide and four deep. There are opportunities to move from one cube to another without distorting the movement. By exercising these options, we travel. The choices of facing, placing, and section are made in performance by the four performers. This describes the structure of the dance—you have to fill it in with the kinds of movement. . . .³



The imaginary cube and its points of reference.

TRISHA BROWN WAS BORN
20 18 9 19 8 1 27 2 18 15 23 14 27 23 1 19 27 2 15 18 14

IN ABERDEEN WASHINGTON
27 9 14 27 1 2 5 18 4 5 5 14 27 23 1 19 8 9 14 7 20 15 14

IN 1936 SHE RECEIVED
27 9 14 27 1 9 3 6 27 19 8 5 27 18 5 3 5 9 22 5 4 27

HER B.A. IN DANCE FROM
8 5 18 27 2 1 27 9 14 27 4 1 14 3 5 27 6 18 15 13 27

MILLS COLLEGE AND LATER
13 9 12 12 19 27 3 15 12 12 5 7 5 27 1 14 4 27 12 1 20 5 18

TAUGHT THERE SHE HAS
27 20 1 21 7 8 20 27 20 8 5 18 5 27 19 8 5 27 8 1 19 27

ALSO TAUGHT AT REED
1 12 19 15 27 20 1 21 7 8 20 27 1 20 27 18 5 5 4 27

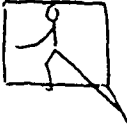
COLLEGE IN PORTLAND
3 15 12 12 5 7 5 27 9 14 27 16 15 18 20 12 1 14 4

The simple statement of biographical data from which a sequence of numbers is derived which establishes the order of the movement.

20 18 9 | ~~3~~

start on 25 facing 18. Extend L. hand to 9, R hand toward 18 and R foot to 20 making a row of those 3 parts. R. shoulder up.

The opening of Part 1 of *Locus* as charted in Trisha Brown's notebooks. (The numeral 3 was an initial error in place of the 19 in the statement.)



20 18 9 19

start on 25 facing 18. step R. foot onto 18 making 1/4 turn L. Place R hand towards 9 with top of L in step on line between 19 and 20. step L Back to 19, Take weight + lift R knee up thru 10 + Trace foot down along standing leg - continue foot along floor to 18

The opening of Part 2 of *Locus* as charted in Trisha Brown's notebooks.

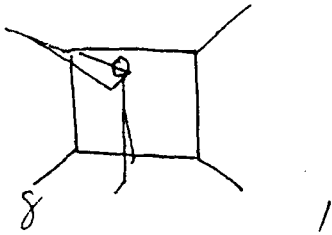


27

R. arm straight across body to 1, drop it. L. hand curls around 8 - shorten arm to fit inside point 8

drop arms + plie.

The opening of Part 1 continued.



27

turn foot left and step 25. (upper body rotated R) R. arm point to 1 and L. arm to 8.

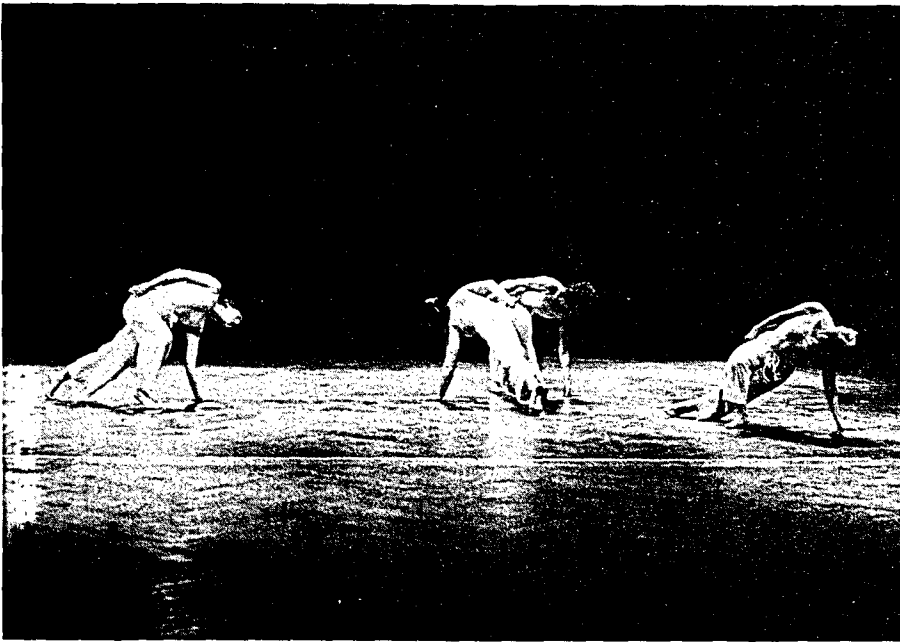
Passed thru 27 on "25" ←

The opening of Part 2 continued.

Some viewers have enjoyed learning about the conceptual structure of *Locus* after they have seen the piece, and still others have remarked that informal explanation (or a lecture-demonstration) would have helped or did in fact enhance their appreciation. Sometimes we hear people expressing the need to see the piece again. Knowledge of how *Locus* works is not a requisite for enthusiastic response to the piece, but familiarity with the movement and some understanding of how the piece was made are almost always sought afterwards by the more captivated viewers. No written or oral explanation, however, has ever been comprehensive or detailed enough to suggest the combination of constraint and freedom in both the creation and performance of the piece. In addition, the question of whether the structure of *Locus* is too complex or elusive, meant to be decipherable or not, has perhaps been overemphasized and has diverted attention from more substantial subject matter, such as Brown's selection and use of a specific form and the nature of that form itself.

The seminal structure of *Locus* is the cube. One of its properties, in the context of the piece, is the view it affords me, from within, of the vast, expanded structure of the entire dance. All around me plain and obstinate order overflows with boundless and startling possibilities.

If you refer back to Brown's description of her process in making *Locus* you will find that for her score she took a very ordinary, neutral bit of writing ("TRISHA BROWN WAS BORN IN..."), broke it down into letters, and changed the letters to numbers by ascribing to each letter its alphabetical number. Next she proceeded to make movement by assigning these numbers to specific points on an imaginary cube, following the order of these numbers, and in some way (from within the imaginary cube) responding by touch, gesture, or simple indication to the twenty-seven points in the cube. (One of the points, by the way, represents the space between words.) By remaining within the imaginary cube, adhering to the sequence of numbers (which once were letters and words), and using only one or several of the twenty-seven points as her sources for a given movement, Brown had immersed herself in self-imposed restrictions. Yet at the same time she had at her fingertips all she needed to invent a new language and explore its infinite possibilities.



Left to right: Elizabeth Garren, Judith Ragir, Trisha Brown, and Mona Sulzman performing the fourth section of *Locus*, in unison, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, 1976. (Photo courtesy of Babette Mangolte.)

Since this process of following the score was repeated four times to make four sections, each of which have different movements, Brown's task grew increasingly challenging. By the fourth round, she not only had to come up with movement to satisfy the score and, I might add, her own aesthetic, but she also had to solve this problem for a fourth time without resorting to her three previous solutions. Anyone who tries this or some similar activity becomes overwhelmed by both the constraint of repetition and order and the limitless potential of the creative medium involved. (Approximately eight out of roughly four hundred movements in *Locus* might be seen in some more conventional dance, and two of these are standing and taking three or four steps.) Thus, the rigorous structure of *Locus* mines and expands the creative resources and, in the process, opens and liberates the imposed structure. For although the cube confines the movement of *Locus*, its structure opens up the

dance by suggesting the possibility of multiple facings, a dance that revolves, since any of the four surfaces (but not the floor or overhead surface) may be considered the front. And because the form of the cube is easily imagined and reproduced, and because cubes fit perfectly within cubes and neatly adjacent to other cubes, a grid of cubes, whose bases are indicated with tape on the floor, can be suggested as covering the entire performance area. Consequently, the dancers can move from one cube to another, or change facings, without altering the movement or its precise location within the cube.

On one level, then, I inhabit a cube, dance the movement, proceed on my own as though enclosed and involved in a private world. On another level I shift facings, move from one cube to another, make countless, split-second choices, and dance as one among four. On this level I have access to and participate in the total structure (which includes the unknown) of the piece. This second situation is a crystallization of the first, just as the form of the single cube gives rise to the full structure of the piece: four dancers; four possible fronts or facings; mobility without distortion of either the movement or its location within any of the cubes; and, finally, the enormous range of potential interaction to which the dancers have access both by choice and by chance.

Brown instinctively chose a form with rich potential, and from that form and her score developed an elaborate, open system. But the selection and expansion of the structure are only one part of the choreographic process for *Locus* and Brown's other works. Just as she demanded more from the movement than its adherence to the score, and so labored painstakingly for movement that she also *liked*, she selected and arranged certain possibilities that emerged from the structural field. Rather than set all the design and interaction, or leave them entirely to chance, she sought a satisfying balance between order and chaos, formal choreography and structured improvisation, predetermined movement and indeterminate forms, in order to incorporate as much material as possible in what she saw to be the clearest mode of presentation. Among the results of this refinement are (1) the division of *Locus* into three parts, and (2) the special demands and manner of performing the piece.

The three consecutive parts (not to be confused with the four



Left to right: Trisha Brown, Elizabeth Garren, Mona Sulzman, and Judith Ragir performing a free section of *Locus* in Trisha Brown's loft, 1975. (Photo courtesy of Babette Mangolte.)

sections of sequential movement) highlight the relationship between seminal form and extended structure and offer the viewer a sampling of the material and its possibilities. In the first part (lasting about ten minutes), we all dance the entire sequence of movements (sections one through four) in unison, and have the option of changing cubes and facings at any time. Toward the very end of the fourth section we travel into cubes that will eventually place us in a line in four adjacent cubes, facing the audience in time to begin the second part of the piece.

In the second part (which is about three minutes long and which overlaps part three), we do not change cubes or facings and we are no longer dancing in unison. In our line, in our respective adjacent cubes, and at the same time, we each do one of the four movement sequences. The ordering scheme here, aside from the fact that the four of us are doing four distinctly different, predetermined

sets of movement, derives from the common source of the four sections, the process based on the score; for we all activate the same points in space in the same order, but with different movement. Since the timing for each of these four sections is slightly different, the spatial correspondences do not always occur at exactly the same time, and we do not finish our respective sequences together. When a dancer completes her section, she enters the third part of the piece.

Unlike the second part, which never varies, this final part (three minutes long—it ends when the stage manager yells “time”) allows for so much freedom that it cannot possibly be repeated in the same form. In this “free” section we may change cubes and facings as we did in the first part, but here we have the additional option of selecting segments from the entire movement sequence. Thus, the four-section phrase that was danced in unison from beginning to end in the first part, and that was presented in four separate but simultaneous parts in the second part, now becomes an open system.

As in the first part of the piece, we act here before choice registers mentally and base our split-second changes on what our predominantly peripheral vision and our ears (attentive to foot-floor contact, breathing, and silences) bring in. These stimulate our sense of design and our impulse for interaction. The improvisational quality of this process emerges most clearly when we choose to dance a segment of movement that one, two, or three others are doing. By using the openness of the structure to re-establish and re-create order, we form duets, trios, and quartets (as well as solos) that come and go and last anywhere from a few seconds to a few minutes.

Subtler connections are made when we “join” someone by doing movements that correspond to the same places in our cube as her movements. As in part two, common points are activated, but with movement from two different sections. Although these correspondences do not always furnish the viewer with blocks of visual order (except perhaps in some indirect and unexplored way), they are very tight and exciting moments for the dancers. They connect and surprise us with a force that enables us to expand our capacity for the quick choices that may result in more visible moments of order.

In the final part of *Locus*, during this efflorescence in which everything within the structure is possible, “dancing/dancing



Left to right: Mona Sulzman, Judith Ragir, Trisha Brown, and Elizabeth Garren performing a free section of *Locus* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, 1976. (Photo courtesy of Babette Mangolte.)

together” becomes an intensely complicated and highly stimulating activity. At the very moment I form a duet with Judith Ragir, for instance, it vanishes, as she has just decided to create one with Trisha. And so I continue alone the movement sequence that Judith was doing. The instant before I am about to break out of this to join Judith and Trisha for a trio, I sense Elizabeth Garren, who is as far away from me on the grid as possible, in unison with me. I stay with the movement and Elizabeth. Spatially, I take this movement from cube to cube, right between Judith and Trisha, and move closer to Elizabeth, who soon joins Trisha, who has left Judith who has—oh, she’s dancing with me!

The amount and combinations of unison vary a great deal from performance to performance. Sometimes this section is studded with duets. At other times four “solos” predominate. Once in a while quartets miraculously occur. Spatial maneuvering—in addition to and

simultaneous with our weaving in and out of unison—brings its own bounty of performance goals and tonics. Rob Baker observed that we “move in perfect self-containment (each in her own present-tense private world), not relating except to sort of bump off of each other like those funny little wind-up dolls and cars that kids used to have.”⁴ From my view within the cube, yes, I am self-contained and absorbed in maintaining and/or creating facets of order. But at the same time, the imaginary cube that defines and confines my space has an integral place within the grid of cubes. All the movements I do belong, fortuitously and intentionally, to the total network of forms, patterns, and choices that act upon one another. Self-containment in *Locus* does not preclude a kinesthetic oneness among the four dancers, even if we do not look like we are relating to one another. In fact, a large part of the fascination and difficulty in performing this dance springs from the peculiar state of split concentration that is as much a part of the piece as is the movement.

In most dances, of course, dancers have the sense that they are dancing both independently and interdependently. But in *Locus* we reach extreme levels of both qualities, and without ever fully letting go of either. We switch constantly and spontaneously from one state to another. When, for example, I focus my concentration on remaining in unison with Trisha, who cannot see me and whom I can see only out of the corner of my eye, I may simultaneously shift my facings to relate spatially to Judith, who is adjacent to me and doing a different movement phrase. I may also glimpse Elizabeth, right behind me, and realize that my next movement might collide with hers. At any given moment, I must be prepared to relinquish this quick and intense type of participation and redirect my focus, for I may suddenly discover that Judith and Elizabeth are on either side of me and in strong unison with each other, while Trisha is switching cubes and phrases at unprecedented velocity. To hold my ground in the midst of the action surrounding me requires another kind of concentration.

Self-containment derives from the relationship between myself and the cube, and since the cube, except for its base, is imaginary, only my presence and movements within it animate and give it the form that contains me. Although most of my attention is engaged in inhabiting the cube, some part of my concentration receives

information from the surrounding activity and connects me to it. Throughout the piece the “cube inhabitant” and “structure participant” proportions of my concentration must be ready to change, and either aspect of focus must be prepared to take over. The balance may shift slightly or radically. I could ease my way into unison and/or to a different part of the grid; or, depending on my sources of motivation, abandon my cube, my ballast position, and start juggling connections with three people at the same time.

If I were truly self-contained, if my concentration were totally inner-directed, and if inhabiting a cube and participating in the extended structure were not contingent upon each other, I would never anticipate and receive the stimuli for shifting gears. But because we are four, and because each of us is involved in this same process, the quality and degree of an individual’s self-containment often depend on what, where, and how the others are dancing. By sensing when to be more absorbed within the cube or more actively absorbed outside the cube, we balance each other as we go along.

Sometimes our fingertips touch at an imaginary edge shared by adjacent cubes and we notice each other, savoring the moment. It is contact, but not simply with another’s fingertips, for these instances occur when we are most sharply in contact with the imaginary points within our individual cubes, when, in that self-contained way, we focus on the clarity and precise loci of each movement. At the same time—and it is this simultaneity that brings us pleasure—our concentration extends outside the cube and allows us to share the magic of the very structure that has brought about this particular formal and kinesthetic relationship.

One day while I was dancing *Locus* I turned around and for a second found myself in a very satisfying and distinct formal relationship with someone else who could not see me and who was diagonally across the grid from me. At this distance, and for a flash, I experienced much of what I would have if our fingertips had been touching and the moment had been longer. The fact that this situation evoked the thoughts and sensations of a moment of closer, less subtle contact informed me of my view from within the cube. The strength of this connection, which spanned the entire grid, lasting so little time and happening by chance, struck me with an awareness of how the piece worked in all its simplicity and intricacy.

I realized that the points, even from afar, were our contacts for contact, and that we were giving them this power by maintaining the integrity of our individual cubes. The way in which form yields both uniformity and transformation overwhelmed me. But because I had glimpsed the amplitude of the structure at a moment when I was relatively self-contained, isolated, and in contact for so brief a time, I discovered from my view within the cube that from my view within the cube, you *can* see the forest for the trees.

NOTES

1. Anna Kisselgoff, "Wall-Dancer Adds a New Dimension," *New York Times*, January 8, 1976.
2. "Brown Studies," *Soho Weekly News*, January 15, 1976.
3. "Trisha Brown/A Profile," a pamphlet privately printed by L&S Graphics, and excerpted from the forthcoming *On Contemporary Dance*, ed. Ann Livet, Fort Worth Art Museum and Texas Christian University Press.
4. "Trisha Brown Retrospective, Present Tense," *Soho Weekly News*, July 24, 1976.