

Trisha Brown  
October 16, 2003

**NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART**

**The following excerpt is from a conversation conducted by Trevor Smith, Curator of the New Museum of Contemporary Art, with dancer, Trisha Brown that took place on October 16, 2003.**

**TREVOR SMITH:** We'll probably be talking a bit about not only the process of creation, but also the process of collaboration, and the give and take that goes on in the creation and production of work. It's quite interesting to begin to reflect on the way that the exhibition -- in fact, it signals it in the title -- is in itself a kind of collaboration or a dialogue or a conversation. The title that was given to the exhibition of course is "Trisha Brown: Dance and Art in Dialogue, 1961 - 2001." The conversations flowing between different disciplines or between adjacent disciplines, often there are similar concerns that dancers and choreographers are working through in music, and also that painters, video-makers, sculptors, or whoever are working through their own particular medium. Although at first glance they may appear to be quite separate things. Of course, they're informed by different potentials, possibilities, and resistances of the media. A body can only do so much and steel can only do certain things. There are these underlying structures and ideas, and issues that are informing the process. When I began to think about how we might install this exhibition here at the New Museum and make it particular to this place, I began to think more and more about Trisha's early work, both on her own as well as in collaboration, from a very early moment. I see it in terms of that moment or that period in art, and in particular art in this place, being downtown New York in Soho. This occurred when operating out of spaces that were not necessarily sanctioned, clinical high art type spaces, but rather kind of open loft-type environments, public spaces, beginning to break down not only the boundaries between the disciplines but between the artist and the audience.

If we think of the remarkable collaborations that Merce Cunningham has engineered that are being presented at BAM, the recreations of Bob Whitman's early performances at Dia or Liam Gillick's installation at MOMA, a crossing over art, design, and architecture. I think we're entering a moment when these kinds of intermediate discussions are once again becoming more important and livelier than they have been in a long time.

How does the process of collaboration begin, because of course you've done work both on your own and with others. What's the impetus to begin working with another person?

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**TRISHA BROWN:** Your words made me think of the various art forms that were active in this downtown area when I arrived here in the very early sixties, like '61. I was asked if I wanted to perform in a happening. I of course had to ask what is a happening. Bob Whitman was doing a piece across the Bowery in a very small tenement building, whose name I knew up until about a year ago, but finally left me. `

I was in the first artist's coop in Soho, 80 Wooster, and moved in there in 1967. There was the architect from Lithuania, George Machiunas, who organized most of the artists' coops in Soho for many years, until the Attorney General went after him for something dealing with commodities. He was a Fluxus member. Jonas Meikas was working in the ground floor film archives. Richard Foreman was doing theater work on the ground floor of that building. Although I don't remember all of their names, I remember the Fluxus people. On the elevator, big beaming faces, three big jugs of water, "What have you been up to today," I'd say. "We've got water from a river in that bottle, and from a lake in that bottle, and from the ocean in that bottle." That's kind of a wonderful thing to have on your elevator with you, isn't it? So many memories.

There was the collective of dancers. I was primarily here to work in a class in composition located in the Cunningham studio, taught by his accompanist Bob. Assignments from music that he had done with legendary classes at the New School over to this handful of dancers who were taking a composition class from him. That led to Judson Church Dance Theater, which was a collective first primarily of dancers, composers, Bob Rauschenberg, Bob Morris, Bobby Hewitt, and all the Bobs downtown came. There were various combinations and re-combinations of collaborative work that happened, but basically it was a collective based on dance, composition, and ideas transposed from Cage. The stimuli were just amazing. We were the world. That lasted about two years before people began to territorialize. "That's my idea that I gave you when I had you in my choreography, give it back."

People went on working more individually and more as individuals. You mentioned Bob Whitman. I did a collaboration with him. Actually I think I was in collaboration with myself, which was the filmed image that went out the back of a projector that's on my back. I was trying to stay in synch with myself in a kind of solipsistic field of pleasure, and Bob was a filmmaker that I knew. I had been in his happenings.

**TREVOR SMITH:** Certainly something that you notice straight away when you look at the video and film footage of that early work, and certainly Homemade in particular, is this incredible shift from what came before, in that the gestures and the movements still had that kind of "modernist purity" to them, but they came out

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of more ordinary, vernacular, or everyday kinds of experiences. In fact, the title of *Homemade* pretty overtly signals that.

**TRISHA BROWN:** I had a very young son, an infant, and this is before women's liberation. It was a big question whether I could continue as a professional or not. The question came not from me, but from society. I worked at home a lot, taking care of this wonderful child and did a lot of my work in the studio that I had.

The dancing vocabulary was as if there was an aesthetic at Judson that one would not show off, that one would not embellish. One would not be virtuosi, decorative or frivolous. I think one of the main forms that was acceptable to all of us came from Anna Halprin through Simone Forti to me, being working on improvisation, and that flowed into everyone.

I met Simone and Yvonne Rainer and others at Anna Halprin's summer session in 1958. They urged me to come to this composition class, but Anna had identified a normal task as a form for performing. Her work is primarily improvisational. Nevertheless, a task was something quite ordinary, like sweep the floor, stack cardboard boxes, or dress and undress. That notion was like a found form, and it came into New York through this class.

Back to your question, being what kind of movement that you see in the film of *Homemade*. It's a person exploring movement, which is not any of those other things, which we didn't like. It makes a small field in a field of choice, and one in which one never is certain. I was doing things like vignettes. I liked stories you tell that are about your identity, like about the time I fell on a croquet stick and ruptured my appendix when I was five years old. Those kinds of stories are life transforming, like never walk on croquet balls again. I just acted that out while I was dancing, and it's hugely important to me. I go up and have my elbow here, and I jump. I leap up and I arch over and I go BAM into this stop position. No one else knew literally what was in that story. It was just a dynamic story. These things were done without any kind of pneumatic support for the audience, and they were put together first one, and then the other, and then the next, and then the next. There wasn't any kind of finessing or transition.

**TREVOR SMITH:** It wasn't precisely speaking a kind of narrative. Neither was it the kind of pure abstraction. That story that's in the catalog of your choice of sweeping the stage as your daily task, and the certain epiphany that happened after a time, you began to kind of push and you'd levitate yourself off the broom handle. Coming from the visual arts I don't necessarily have access to the dancer's process, but stories like that that begin to give me a clue to the way an artist might think, or the way that you come to make your work.

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I began to observe that there seemed to be this thing throughout your work that had to do with repetition, and you'd be repeating and repaying and repeating until a variation came out. All the accumulation pieces are a good example of that. I wonder if you could just talk about those accumulation pieces a bit for us.

**TRISHA BROWN:** They were done in the late sixties, early seventies. I was looking for pure movement. It's a difficult thing to do with the human body, because each of us has his or her own idiosyncratic shapes and functionings of our joints. We're not robots, and we can't make those clean lines, or I could not, and neither could the people that I was working with. It was a beautiful performance and learning experience for me.

I was really asking myself what was an acceptable movement to do as far as I was working with the bending of the arms, the space involved, and the rotating of limbs, and that was my palette. I started to rotate my arms and I asked myself, "Is this all right to do?"

I thought it was great. I made a right angle with the arms and a single rotation. (showing the movements.) It's just fascinating because there's nothing to hide behind; there's just this simple stuff. It's difficult to remember it, which is why I maintained mesmerized by the process. Of course it's live performance. I used to bring lights up in the audience so then I could see people, and I could see them sulk out. I learned so much about it, because it was about rigor, about retention, about intention, about form, about taking all your projects and all of that.

**TREVOR SMITH:** Does that kind of daily movement still play a major role in your process when you are beginning to work through something?

**TRISHA BROWN:** What remains from this period of time, I won't demonstrate, but it's very similar. When I was trying to chart my dance vocabulary, which in the immediate vicinity around me I created a piece called "Locus," which would fit. You see it has a sister, what I just did has a big sister.

The demeanor is what continues. In the making of a phrase, the gestures come together. Like I tell my dancers, "Do it and then move on." There's a way of just finishing but then going on. I don't hyperbolize a gesture. I don't have an embellished breastbone telling you that I'm a grande dancer. I have just a plain body using only the amount of energy and muscle that it takes to do something very clearly, cleanly, and get off of it on to the next thing. That's my overall performance style.

**TREVOR SMITH:** One of the things that's quite interesting about this show, or that the show begins to tease out, is that process of collaboration. Something that I think strikes everybody when they come to the show is this incredible range of

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people that you've worked with. It's very difficult except in the most banal terms to run a red thread through the names.

One could say there's an interest in abstraction, or you could say, with maybe one exception, that there is a very strong interest in the everyday or the vernacular. There's a huge leap from Donald Judd to Terry Winters, or from Rauschenberg to Judd. I suppose you begin at some point of this journey by going, "Well, am I going to ask this person or that person." What goes through your mind at that point? I mean, what sort of questions do you ask yourself when you're going through that?

**TRISHA BROWN:** I should say that the first collaborator was with Bob Rauschenberg, because I had been dancing on opera house stages in Europe, but I was using repertory that came from galleries and museums here in New York. It wasn't quite an appropriate fit. I decided to make a choreography that was appropriate to the proscenium arch, and with that comes a lot of questions from the people around you, because the stage is actually an illusion. It's just a black place, and it doesn't have walls. It's not tacked on the way a room or a museum is. There's black velours hanging there that everybody fusses about. You must not touch them. It looks drab, until they bring in light. One must also get a lighting designer.

The first thing the lighting designers asked was, "What are you wearing?" Then comes in costume and background or surround or sets. Bob was a close friend. I met him as a scholarship student at the Cunningham studio. He used to call me with a message for Merce or John. We would have these hilarious conversations, because he's just really smart and he's really funny and very intuitive, and I was fairly shy. This is when I first got to New York. He was my best friend, I didn't know what he did. I asked, "Who is this guy?"

I finally saw his work at an exquisite show he had up at the Jewish Museum. For the first time in my life I understood why someone might go into visual art instead of dance. I knew he had traveled around the world with the Cunningham Company. He had done work with Paul Taylor, Viola Farber, and he was at Judson. He did all of our technical work at Judson. He would turn the switch and the lights went on. We had no technical work there.

Anyway, as he does in everything, he begins to imagine himself a choreographer because he's working with choreographers. That makes him a choreographer. He began making pieces, et cetera. A very rich exchange occurred from that. He agreed to design for me. I wanted it called a visual presentation, not a set. He didn't like the idea of decor whatsoever, but did the lighting. It was a simpler thing when he had done it with the Cunningham Company.

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I wasn't using music at that time, working in silence. The set is very well represented in this exhibit. It's the four large slides in black and white that are at the end of the room, "Glacial Decoy" (he gave me the title also). "I am just going on the proscenium stage, and I am very involved with the frame."

I'd get four dancers. You have two hands, Trevor, put one over here. The dancer is going towards you. Da-da that one went off, and this one is on. Da-da-da-da-da. So the dance slides back and forth behind the proscenium arch, and a fifth enters towards the end, which suggests that infinity is back there.

Bob wants to play; he wants to be a part of everything. He doesn't want to be static and on the wall. He has a very great envy about dance, because we make it by doing it, and then we go away and it doesn't exist. That was a romance of his. He put a moving set. It's these four slides of half-stage height proportion that just keep moving at a slow pace, and very elegantly across the back of the stage, until the very end which is of a railroad crossing sign. You get right to the end and it says, "RR," on this one, and he signs it.

The slides are of objects and our costumes are made. That is another piece. Our costumes are made from silkscreen fabric, and they're pleated. The pleats are sewed, so they really hold their shape. When we bend and make actions like this, the fabric has a crease in it, and makes sharp glacial edges and angles.

**TREVOR SMITH:** It is just strictly white costumes, so you get this kind of play of the dancer all in white against these black and white slides that move from one side to the other. Sometimes there's an abstract relationship between the images. Other times they are repeated, and they slide across, as you were just describing. There is an incredible kind of mood in that piece, as if Rauschenberg kind of drove around his neighborhood or places that he knew well, and just picked up details, like the train that runs through, the calla lily in bloom, and the brick wall around the corner. It has this sense almost of a dying way of life, like this simple almost agrarian culture which in fact is in counter-distinction to the next piece you made with him, which is the "Set and Reset," having much more of a kind of urban imagery. We're back in the city.

**TRISHA BROWN:** I will describe "Set and Reset" because it describes my relationship to Bob, which is kind of telepathic. When I started on that piece, I felt that I shouldn't always use Bob, that I should change to another artist, because his fame was so great, it looked like I was a tag-on. I'm an independent spirit, and I felt that I should change and do something else. I had started on the piece. I asked Laurie Anderson to do the music. I like to use a man and then a woman. I like to get both genders represented in my collaborations, and I can through the composition extension and painters. I had thought I did a lot of work

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on sides of buildings, and walls, and interior spaces, through track systems, and little trolleys.

**TREVOR SMITH:** This is like the walking on the Wall piece.

**TRISHA BROWN:** Walking on the wall or walking down the side of a building. I was going to make the set. I thought I'd use my background as the background in a stage. That is, walking on the wall at the Whitney Museum was lateral. The body is perpendicular out from the wall, the top of the head to the audience, so that the audience thought they were looking down something in the street from the top of a building.

I thought we'd do a hand-held one. I asked the stagehands to handhold a dancer walking across the back of the stage. Then she walks around the first leg, and then back in. Then she sat down, and the dance begins. Bob was president of my board at that time, and I was giving my artistic report, and I described this, and Bob said, "Who is doing the set?"

I said, "You are," being the smart girl I am, and off we went. His first choice description to me was a living set. That's the kind of combination that kept coming up in "Set and Reset." I said, "Well, I can't carry those extra dancers to do the living set," and then pragmatics always move in. I said I really wasn't interested. I get in and we miss our airplane. We got in really late. I've got to train some people in that town to do that. It was more than I wanted to handle. I just want to have it fixed, you know, I just want to know what I'm doing. I want it with me when I get there. So he came up with many other proposals, but I had started on the choreography.

It's not a good idea if you have a rectangle stage like this, to go around the outside edge of it, because when you come up this wall, people sitting here can't see you. People here see you, and there. When you come across the top of the stage people can see you. I came across the front first, where everybody could see you. Came up the wall, and then you have the opposite problem you had on the other side. Everyone knows to go to the center. That's the powerful spot. It is a cone shape, like that.

I had this idea of a conveyer belt, like a phrase that would deliver duets, trios and solos into the middle of the space. I was working on my first wall I came halfway across and some rebellion came up in me, I just didn't want to go that way anymore. I wanted to dance around somewhere else. So I was stuck there. I was trying to get over dancer's block. I said, "Just relax, you can just kind of rock back." I had worked with momentum a lot in those days. I continued, "Just rock back and forth here, it will break, and you'll go on."

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I had dinner with Bob that night and he said, "I thought of a design for you." I said, "Great, what is it?" He said, "Well, you're dancing around at the edge of the space." I swear I never told him what I was doing. "Then you just get stuck there for some reason, and you're kind of sloshing back and forth. I'll put phosphorescence around the outside edge and I'll light you from the waist up. There will be sparks coming from your feet." Is that beautiful? It wasn't. I guess he couldn't find any phosphorescent. I don't know what happened to it, but we didn't do it. Idea after idea like that was just amazing. That gives you the idea of how close our thinking was, and how extraordinary that was.

**TREVOR SMITH:** Speaking of sparks from your feet which is a lovely image, there's a couple of works in the exhibition here that haven't been on tour, which are the "It's a Draw" pieces. In a way these are works where Trisha's activity as a dancer and choreographer, and her activity as an image-maker kind of collapse on to another, or they meld or they fuse.

There are very large drawings. They are about eight and a half by ten and a half feet, and they are made by Trisha dancing over the paper, holding the charcoal in her feet and in her hands. I found these drawings quite remarkable, because in a sense on the one hand it takes us back to Trisha's early work, and kind of working through in that solipsistic self-referential way, on the one hand. Then on the other, it's almost like a summation of this collaboration. This time it's not about a collaboration between two people, but between these two disciplines. In spite of your comment earlier about not understanding why anybody would want to be a visual artist as opposed to a dancer, which I can kind of perfectly well understand, it belies that statement, this desire to make images.

In fact, when you go through the exhibition and you see those performances that are excerpts from the different choreographies, you see this incredible quality of the image-maker coming through in Trisha's movement. It is seen in the way she holds the plane or in her case, the stage, these arrangements of densities or speeds or asymmetries. Unlike, these drawings that are in this exhibition are really fascinating, because they do that but not through time. It's this frozen thing, this record, of a dance or a set of movement. How did you come to that idea of making drawings as you dance?

**TRISHA BROWN:** It was an effort to integrate the voices that had gotten activated fairly recently in opera, narrative, music, and text. I had been drawing for many, many years but always quietly. I liked to do it when I was on tour, just to do something creative.

**TREVOR SMITH:** How long have you been drawing?



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TRISHA BROWN: Since about '65, '68. I don't really remember. I was doing a prodigious amount of research in music and in literature for these operas. I had so many languages going in me. I couldn't get to everything that I usually did in a day. I was fragmented. So I thought of a piece in which I would try to do what I do when I work in process, when I'm making something, which is to try things. I have a notebook for ideas, drawings and descriptions of things I might take to my dancers. Music is on and I might turn the music off, "Can you play song such and such?" to my assistant, Carolyn Lukas, or just trying things in the space.

I wanted this piece to look like the drawing board in the back of my inside the back of my skull. I wanted to try to be able to do that in front of other people, like the down time of that in front of people. That's how I thought of the gestures of dancing being the same as the gestures of drawing can be, but maybe aren't. I could take charcoal and pastel, as I started with it in my hands, big sheets of paper taped down on the floor, and just kind of dive in. I'd just use the instinctive actions and reactions that go on in your mind and body when you're dancing and let them play out on the paper.

I thought it would be tracks. I didn't think that it made good drawings, which was really a surprise to me. It did combine a few of those voices. As one does in process, you go on experimenting with the materials based on what you see of what you have done, either if it is written on a dance and you are showing it to me, or it's on paper.

I had drawn my left hand with my right hand and my right with my left. I had made feet drawings, my right foot with pencil and pen, doing it big toe and then the next toe. I'd drawn my left foot with my right foot and my right foot with the left foot. They are wonderful to me because I can't control the drawing instrument. So they wander off in interesting ways, better than if I were a fine draftsman, or even something of a draftsman. I thought, "I wonder what it would look like if I just put the charcoal between my toes and stood up, and ran, if you couldn't see me." That was really a scrambled egg. It left just the lightest of marks on the paper, because of funny things. Like if my ankle is flexed in the dance, I couldn't hang on to the chalk. I haven't had very much time to become proficient. Then the chalk, the drawing instrument, rises up because I make one touch, and then it moves up. You have to keep pushing them down. It always makes me forget where I am in the dance.

What you get is this wafty sort of half marks. Since then, I've gone into it deeply. It's one of the things I do. It's not in this show, but I really load up my toes a lot, and I get down on the paper.

**TREVOR SMITH:** One of the privileges one has when you work on these shows is that you get to see a lot of stuff that you as the audience don't get to see. I looked through images of about two or three years of these drawings that in fact there was a real evolution in the mark-making, and you begin to see the kind of dynamics come into play, the sort of density of a mark against the lightness of a mark. I kind of assume that as you

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are dancing, there is a kind of play between what your body is suggesting and what your eyes are suggesting. Do you look at them like that?

**TRISHA BROWN:** When I'm down on the paper, my head is practically touching the paper. I have no perspective whatsoever, so I don't use it. I just use best guesses, hunches and intuition in that case. If I'm standing and I get too involved, I can't control it well enough. I don't have a good way of describing what happens to me. I love these marks. If I turn with a big piece of black pastel between my toes, it makes the darkest circular scrib-scrib, and then it goes off into some kind of smudge, into smoke, something like that. They fascinate me, and I can't quite control them.

**TREVOR SMITH:** I think this might be a good moment to open it up to any questions that anyone might have.

**MAN:** What happened in the past when you add all these ornamentations and they come down and down.

**TRISHA BROWN:** That's a set by Nancy Graves. In my selection process up until Terry Winters, I always used a sculptor to design because I thought that they knew something about volume and space that I needed for them to know. I wanted them to be literate on that subject.

Nancy had made a series of drawings. There's two on the wall next to her, in the videotape of that piece. One is pink primarily, and the other has a black background. The one with the black background is very clear. There is a lot of scribble, spaghetti incidences. But there are also these forms which were created then for the stage. She chose that as her template for filling that whole big space at the back of the stage. We call them "land forms," and they are made for the stage.

Her sculptures are made out of bronze, but on the stage we use lighter materials to make these forms. They come down in pipes. There's pipes overhead in the stage, so you choose where you put them. They come down in three or four corridors. It's been out of the repertory for awhile. The dancers actually do interact with them. When the drops come down, we know where they are coming, and the dancer knows the spacing that they must have. Then when they lift out, they can move through.

That was her proposal to me, and I thought it was interesting. She started with really radical ideas for the stage. She wanted to have a welder up on a platform welding, and talk about sparks, have them flying off of this raised structure, but that's anathema in the theater unless you are in a fixed theater where fire-retardant can be applied everywhere. For a touring dance, that was not a good idea, but I loved it. She wanted us to wear lights. She was working a lot with light in the beginning.

**TREVOR SMITH:** What are you working on now?

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**TRISHA BROWN:** I'm working on a new choreography. It has a premier in Cannes, France, December 1<sup>st</sup> with the sonatas and interludes by John Cage, and set and costumes by Elizabeth Murray. I got such a flutter when I realized I was going to say that. I'm trying to work with aerial interactions between my dancers, but not like in a normal way, but with washes of six dancers coming across the space with other dancers. They're not little, they're the bigger dancers, tucked into it like a cloud of people coming across the space, linked fortuitously to the music through improvisation. "Merce," I said, "Now, you can't really be doing aleatoric systems all the time because your dancers would fall off the front of the stage." He said, "Well, I'll work on it." So I work on my improvised clouds of people.

**WOMAN:** What about choosing your dancers? What do you look for in them?

**TRISHA BROWN:** I look for all the standard necessary things: alignment, articulation of gesture, simplicity of movement, economical simplicity of movement, a certain appetite for being off balance and looking like you're not, musicality, strength, partnering skills, taking care of others around you, an ability to work in geometric gesture forms and in organic, and to splice back and forth between those two. Also, something in their temperament I pick up on, because they are similar people. However, they are every size you have ever witnessed before in your life. Great big tall ones, and not so tall.