

## Article

# Trisha Brown: Between Abstraction and Representation (1966–1998)

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**Abstract:** Choreographer Trisha Brown (1936–2017) is renowned as one of the most influential abstract artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Emerging from Judson Dance Theater and the 1960s avant-garde, Brown invented what she termed her ‘pure movement’ abstract vocabulary in the 1970s, rejecting narrative, psychology and character as bases for dance-making. Yet Brown’s notion of abstraction, when examined across the long arc of her fifty-year career, is more complicated and elastic than previously known. This essay addresses selected choreographies dating from her first decade as a choreographer, the 1960s, to the production of her first opera *L’Orfeo* (1998), underscoring how memories, images, language and stories fueled a previously unexamined dynamic relationship between abstraction and representation that profoundly influenced her choreography’s development.

**Keywords:** Trisha Brown; abstraction; representation; Judson Dance Theater; opera

Choreographer Trisha Brown (1936–2017) is renowned as one of the most influential abstract artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Her rise to prominence within downtown New York’s art and dance communities in the 1960s–1970s coincided with the emergence of minimalism and conceptualism in visual art: these practices infiltrated her own, just as visual art venues—museums, art galleries and international exhibitions—provided her work its most important platforms. In the 1970s, Brown invented what she termed her ‘pure movement’ language, establishing her reputation as an abstract choreographer who rejected narrative, psychology and character as bases for dance-making, ideas summarized in her 1975 “Pure Movement” manifesto. For the most part, this understanding of Brown’s work and her contribution to contemporary dance has persisted over decades as the dances she made in the second half of her fifty-year career (i.e., after 1987) (Rosenberg 2017) have received scant attention, as have the processes informing her choreography’s making. Reexamination of selected choreographies by Trisha Brown, dating from the 1960s to the 1990s—along with consideration of Brown’s writings and statements by Brown and her critics—reveals that her notion of abstraction is more complicated and elastic than previously known. This essay focuses attention on disguised sources that inspired Brown’s creation of abstract movement to underscore how images and stories fueled a previously unexamined dynamic relationship between abstraction and representation that influenced her choreography’s evolution.

Brown’s vocabulary of abstract movement did not arrive *sui generis*, but initially emerged from a process of *abstracting from* concrete, and often, autobiographical, sources. In the 1960s and 1970s, Brown distinguished between the ‘private’ aspect of her movement—which drew on physical memories, responses to architecture and personal narratives—from her movements’ public impact: the fact that, (as she intended), it appeared abstract to her audiences. Brown’s notebooks of the 1970s indicate that even as she began to invent movement that had no references, she found new forms by reacting against an inventory of mimetic and connotative gestures that she cataloged. As her choreography’s abstraction reached its apex in *Newark (Niweweorce)* (1987)—created in collaboration with artist Donald Judd (1928–1994)—Brown was invited to contribute choreography for a production of Bizet’s *Carmen*,

directed by Lena Wertmuller (b. 1928) at the Teatro di San Carlo, in Naples, Italy. This required Brown's incorporation of character, story-telling and emotion into the opera's dances. Subsequently, in the early 1990s, she tentatively introduced protagonists, narratives and atmosphere to the choreographies, which she created for the stage. Although elusive and transitory, these new elements are visible in her work, were recognized by critics (and were discussed by Brown herself). Seen in retrospect, these experiments anticipated the most important development of her late career: her direction of opera, beginning with Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (1998), for which she invented a distinctive movement language, building on her past work, and extending her approach to conjoining the representational and the abstract in a fashion that contested traditional opera's reliance on literal acting and scenography.

### 1. Pedestrian Behavior

Brown's search for a model that would generate abstract movement is recognizable in one of her earliest dances, *Homemade* (1966), which premiered at Judson Church as part of the tripartite dance *A string: Homemade, Motor, Outside*. To make this work she sourced and enacted a succession of 'found' movements drawn from recalled actions dating to her upbringing in the Pacific Northwest and her experience as a young mother. These pedestrian movements of personal significance to the artist include drawing out a fishing line, fingering piano keys, jumping into a pair of slippers, digging for clams, looking into a mirror, blowing a kiss, nodding at a master and doing a short tap dance, among other movements. Executed without transitions between them, these actions are only intermittently perceptible—for example, blowing up a large balloon or looking at a watch on her wrist.<sup>1</sup> Most live on the knife's edge between movement that is representational or mimetic and movement that appears abstract. Indeed, in an undated (post-1980s) personal document wherein Brown compared *Homemade* to Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A*, (created the same year, 1966), she referred to her dance as "object-like, while retaining references", calling its movements "kinetic fictions",<sup>2</sup> a phrase suggesting Brown's intent that the artifice of her movements should take precedence over identification of their basis in representation. Taken together, the movements do not tell a story, so decoding their representational sources does not provide an interpretative pay-off. As contrasted with Rainer's ideal—a "neutral doer"<sup>3</sup>—Brown emphasized *Homemade*'s use of, but deliberate excision of, emotive content: she called it a dance that "performs highly loaded referential gestures impassively."<sup>4</sup>

Explaining the logic behind her choices Brown admitted, "[o]ne of the problems [she] discovered during Judson" was that [she] "had a hard time setting material: capturing movement, recalling it and doing it again" (Strauss 1975). What she could do, she said was "remember the *image* that caused [her] to do it [i.e., the movement]" (ibid.), a statement relevant to perceiving the inscrutably pantomimic quality of *Homemade*'s choreography. Discussing the dance in a 2004 interview with Klaus Kertess, Brown said that in 1966 she was "looking for vocabulary that was non-virtuosic, had significance, wanting to work abstractly, but putting in this search for new vocabulary" (Kertess 2004). Indeed she discovered a different strategy for producing what she aspired to in *Homemade*—the creation of "movement that was concretely specific to me, [but] abstract to the audience"<sup>5</sup>—in choreographing *Outside* (1966), the third dance in *A string*. Created according to the technique of 'structured improvisation', which Brown learned while working with Simone Forti in the years shortly after she moved to New York in winter

<sup>1</sup> The title of *Homemade* is related to a key element of this dance: that is performed with Brown sporting a movie projector on her back, which screens the same choreography that she is performing live—a kind of 'home movie' produced by artist Robert Whitman.

<sup>2</sup> Trisha Brown, undated note on graph paper (1980s), in Trisha Brown Personal Collection, Box 128, People, A-J, Marianne Goldberg file.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase appears in (Rainer 1968, p. 267).

<sup>4</sup> Trisha Brown, undated note on graph paper (1980s).

<sup>5</sup> The dance was documented on Brown's March 29 & March 30 program at Judson Church as one element of the tripartite work *A String: Homemade, Motor Outside*. However, when Brown discussed the dance and offered a simple score documenting its rectilinear structure in (Livet 1978, pp. 48, 49), she titled it *Inside* (1966). Presumably when she took *Inside* outside of the studio, and presented it as a public performance of it, she renamed it *Outside*.

1961, Brown generated *Outside's* movements by taking cues from everyday visual and sculptural aspects of the studio in which she was improvising.

"Visual information on the wall" determined "speed, shape, duration or quality of a move . . . [The result was] an odd distribution of actions and gestures [that] emanated from the architectural collection of alcove, door, peeling paint and pipes" (Livet 1978, p. 48). Bearing only a tenuous relationship to Brown's lived experience, *Outside*, (whose gestures have been lost to time), likely enabled Brown to go beyond *Homemade's* basis in pedestrian behavior, (a vestige of the Judson Dance Theater aesthetic), and produce abstract movements whose sources remained undetectable. Notably, the biographical impetus haunting *Homemade* would recur in *Water Motor* (1978), created after a period in which Brown rejected all representational sources to focus on producing truly abstract gesture and abstract dance, ideas codified in her 1975 "Pure Movement" manifesto.

## 2. Pure Movement

Following a brief period when Brown derived her choreographic scores from SoHo's building facades and rooftops—works known as the "Equipment Dances" (1969–1970)—she became interested in investigating abstract *gesture*. Informed by John Cage's notion of "non-intention" (Cage 1991) and devices of 'non-composition' (Singerman 2003, pp. 131–32), adopted to depersonalize artistic decision-making, (similar to minimalist artists' rejection of the subjectivity inherent to the art of the previous generation i.e., Abstract Expressionism), Brown—like artists such as Donald Judd—adopted a simple mathematical sequence as the choreographic structure for her solo, *Accumulation* (1971). In it, movements accrue according to the accumulating sequence 1, 1 + 2, 1 + 2 + 3, etc. With this choreographic structure in place, Brown devised movement according to her vision of the body as capable of only three movement possibilities: bend, stretch and rotate. Applying these bodily mechanics in a part-by-part animation and accrual of gestures made by the wrists, elbows, neck, head, hip, etc., she repeated each gesture five times before adding a new one to the sequence, allowing these unfamiliar gestures to linger in the audiences' memories, while also making the choreography's construction transparently visible.

The brevity of the dance owes to rigorous—but unspoken—aesthetic criteria, which Brown applied to the selection and creation of gesture, as is suggested by reflections on her earliest work as a choreographer: "When I first started choreographing in New York, I had the habit of paring down to the bare bone. The trouble with this is when I went into the studio to work I came out with less instead of more."<sup>6</sup> *Accumulation* lasts approximately five minutes. As Brown said, "Both the dance and its structure were visible and bare-bones simple" (Livet 1978, p. 45). Brown never shared the source of the dance's gestures. However, her notebooks of this period reveal what lay behind the very subtle abstract movements that comprise *Accumulation*: an inventory of simple connotative gestures—'shaking hands', 'sitting down', 'indicating no', 'huffing on your fingernails', 'nodding yes', 'jumping', 'falling', 'walking', 'scratching', 'waving', 'crossing legs' and 'hugging.'<sup>7</sup> These recognizable physical signs do not appear in *Accumulation* and likely functioned as negative examples against which she could ensure that her mechanically-based, non-mimetic gestures defied identification or interpretation. "None of the movements [in *Accumulation*] had any significance beyond what they were" (Livet 1978, p. 45), Brown explained.

It is noteworthy that the phrase 'pure movement' first appears on the same page in Brown's notebook, where she documented these simple communicative examples of 'body language', all rejected when she crafted her first abstract dance. Her use of this phrase evokes comparison to writings of America's foremost postwar art critic, Clement Greenberg, who in a 1961 essay, recommended

<sup>6</sup> Trisha Brown, notebook 1971–1973, undated entry, n.p., approximately December 1973, Trisha Brown Personal Collection, New York.

<sup>7</sup> Trisha Brown, notebook 1971–1973, written sometime shortly after 10 November 1972, p. 88. Trisha Brown Personal Collection, New York.

that American painters “search for what is unique and irreducible ... in each particular art ... by narrow(ing) its area of competence to that unique and proper area ... [so that] “each art [would] be rendered ‘pure’ and in its ‘purity’ find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence” (Greenberg 1992, p. 309). Whether or not Brown knew Greenberg’s text she certainly considered the search for “pure movement” to be a formalist pursuit, designed to challenge established definitions of dance, and to ensure her choreography’s independent artistic integrity by setting most of her dances of this period to silence. This vision remained the foundation for her choreography during the period between 1971 and 1975, when she premiered *Locus*, a work that expanded her movement palette into three dimensions, i.e., beyond the largely static *Accumulation*.

In *Locus*, Brown created a score that produced abstract movement: numbering a cube with 27 points, and writing out a biographical sentence (“Trisha Brown was born in Aberdeen Washington ...”) she ascribed to each letter its numerical place in the alphabet (with 27 as center). Here, autobiographical information functioned as an arbitrary reference for producing a sequence that determines movement through space by spelling out the sentences, with her body touching the corresponding numbered points on the cube. *Locus*’s score solved one of Brown’s most vexing (and longstanding) choreographic problems: “Traveling steps”, she said, “have always stymied me. Traveling steps are what dancers use to get from place A to place B on the stage. I have usually walked. It would embarrass me to hop over there” (Brown 1975, p. 31). In the course of enacting the *Locus* score’s geometric and spatial demands, discrepancies between the graphic and kinesthetic opened a productive gap, particularly since Brown did not pre-envision the fabric of transitions linking the actions made in moving from point to point. Thus, unexpected movement, or movements combining different parts of the body simultaneously—head and knee—and different levels of space, (above the head, at mid-level and on the floor), made in response to the score, resulted in a fluidity of passage through space. These new developments explain why Brown considered *Locus* to announce her return to an interest in “dance movement” (Haacke 1976). Her systematic transformation of a narrative into a numerical sequence that maps onto a geometric structure reveals the height of structuralism, seriality, conceptualism and minimalism in her work, catalyzing her writing the 1975 “Pure Movement” manifesto.<sup>8</sup>

In this text, Brown rejects the connotative, pantomimic movements of *Homemade*, and the functional movements that characterize her “Equipment Dances” (such as *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building*, 1970). She begins, “Pure Movement is movement that has no other connotations. It is not functional or pantomimic” (Livet 1978, p. 54). Her next sentence directly relates to *Accumulation*, (including by referencing the fact that all of the accumulating works that she created were presented in ‘neutral’ art world settings): “Mechanical body actions like bending, straightening or rotating would qualify as pure movement providing the context was neutral. I use pure movement a kind of breakdown of the body’s capabilities” (ibid.). With few exceptions Brown’s dances of this period were performed in silence, in the ‘neutral space’ of the white cube of art galleries and museums; even her costume choices—white long-sleeved tee-shirts and white sweat pants were—as she said—“based on wanting neutrality” (Yee 2010, p. 75). When Brown writes, “I also use quirky; personal gestures, things that have specific meaning to me, but probably appear abstract to others” (Livet 1978, p. 54), we hear her repeating one of the key processes by which she generated abstract dance in *Homemade* and *Outside*, i.e., by *abstracting from* another movement source, including (as she wrote in the manifesto) by performing “an everyday gesture so that the audience does not know whether I have stopped dancing or not” (ibid.).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The “Pure Movement” manifesto was first published in one paragraph of Brown’s text (Livet 1978, p. 54). Subsequently Brown had an independent reprint of the text published for distribution at her concerts. (By that time Brown had also executed several drawings in which this text figures). This text was also published under the title *Locus* in (Teicher 2002, p. 87).

<sup>9</sup> Here Brown explicitly points to a gesture in her in her supine *Group Primary Accumulation*, 1973, when dancers appear to be using their right hand to tuck their hair behind their ear.

### 3. Memory as Score

If *Locus* epitomizes the abstract ‘pure movement’ vocabulary common to Brown’s dances from 1971 to 1977, in *Water Motor* (1978) she abruptly revised her creative process to arrive at what she considered “dancing” (as opposed to “dance movement.” Revisiting the use of autobiography and physical memory as the basis for a movement score—but now working with a solid basis in an abstract vocabulary of her invention—the outcome was far from pedestrian: instead *Water Motor* announced the highly personal idiosyncratic, physical intelligence that became Brown’s signature movement style throughout the 1980s. Paradoxically, Brown claimed her new dance was borne solely from experimentation with movement: created through improvisation, edited and finalized as choreography. Yet her insistence that this dance (*Water Motor*) had no score—and thereby marked a major shift in light of her extensive use of scores based on architecture, geometry, mathematics and alpha-numeric permutational sequences throughout the 1970s—is belied by public statements, as well as writings in the notebook that she kept during the period of the dance’s making.

In a 1979 interview with Yvonne Rainer, in which *Water Motor* was a focus, Brown explained that “Sometimes my dancing is metaphoric, using memory as a resource ... what may have been traumatic in, say, 1941, makes hardly a ripple today when it is put through the mind and out the of the body ... ” (Brown and Rainer 1979, p. 30). This reference to 1941 evokes an incident from Brown’s childhood, which she typed out as a narrative and pasted into her notebook: the story describes playing outdoors at her family’s summer home and falling on a croquet stick, undergoing an appendectomy, hospitalization, and the requirement that she remain bedridden for months, “kept out of first grade because [she] had an illness” (Massaglia 2009). This was especially traumatic given that two of her cousins had “died from peritonitis” (Mortenson 2005, p. 3). As she recalled, “The family gathered, because it looked like I was next on the list. That was very, very frightening because I was that close” (ibid.). In contrast to *Homemade*, in *Water Motor* Brown did not physicalize memories, but relied on her abstracted version of a traumatic narrative and its associated imagery, smells, architecture and atmosphere.

Her choreographic process was similar to ancient rhetoricians’ ‘memory palaces’: a technique for recalling speeches by imagining oneself walking through rooms, looking at architecture, furniture, books, and objects to both trigger, and give order to one’s thoughts.<sup>10</sup> A journal entry dating to her first work on the dance, in 1976, describes a “Puget Sound phrase”, which begins “There were four houses”, and is directly followed by written notations in Brown’s shorthand, indicating that these movements derived from the memory image: “R leg up over joints down right, left arm soft reach over top of shoulder ... ”<sup>11</sup> None of *Water Motor*’s movements is representational; the dance does not tell a story; yet as Brown said, “... memory gives a phrase a reality for me and modulates its body and texture” (Brown and Rainer 1979, p. 31). Brown’s gorgeously fluid, whiplash fast, silky dancing of *Water Motor* is buttressed by vivid memories of nature, space and physical pain, which also informed the dance’s spatial patterns and tempo.

Brown’s mode of creating abstract dancing through improvisations based on imagined architecture, objects and space, looks back to *Outside* (1966), and to an element in her previous dance, *Line Up* (1977). Its performance initially included a live improvisation, (later removed), which Brown referred to as ‘Mother’s Living Room’, because she instructed her three company members to structure an improvisation based on individual memories of their mothers’ living rooms. The resulting personal scores generated different abstract movements, but shared a common concept. *Water Motor*’s loosely textual score is likewise emotion-laden, drawn from biographical memories and intuitive; her emphasis on the importance of the image, as mobilized in creating *Homemade*, recurs in her discussions of *Water Motor*: “... the image, the memory, must occur in performance at precisely the same moment as the

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of mnemonic devices used in ancient rhetoric, see (Yates 1984).

<sup>11</sup> Trisha notebook, 1976–1979, entry dated 30 December 1976, n.p. Trisha Brown Personal Collection, New York.



action derived from it" (ibid., p. 32). Brown told Yvonne Rainer that she "distinguish[ed] between public and private gestures. I perform both, but you are not supposed to see the private ones. I'm telling you this because", she said, (in reference to *Water Motor*), "it accounts for coloration or nuance and the appearance of universal eccentricity" (ibid., p. 32). Here we see Brown—now working with a more sophisticated movement palette—adopting the mode of generating abstraction heralded by her work as far back as 1966: she characterized *Water Motor*'s polyrhythmic, poly-directional movement as "representational movement to me [but] ... appear[ing] abstract to everyone else" (Brown 1978), precisely how she had earlier described *Homemade* and *Outside* (1966).

Compared to abstract choreographies, such as *Accumulation* (1971), in which she made her dances' structures visible to her audiences, *Water Motor* marked what she described as an inversion of this process: "structure has always been in my work in a way that I used to foreground; then I turned it around and put it behind the walls like in an architecture, and I rarely talk about it actually" (Myers 1997). Or, as Deborah Jowitt (2002, p. 260) put it, "Gradually the structures became secret agents." However, *Water Motor*'s disguised imagery and foundation in narrative led Brown to question the tenets of her "Pure Movement" manifesto.

#### 4. Towards Representation

In her next work, *Glacial Decoy*, her goal was to devise what she called 'impure movement' so as "to find out what kind of gesture was decorative ... what was the difference between, if you weren't going to be just plain Jane like we were at Judson, what's the boundary for being too decorative in gesture?" (Tomkins 2005). Although *Glacial Decoy* started out with phrase material suggestive of her *Water Motor*-style of dancing, its abstraction was conspicuously altered through the insertion of movement based on "fugitive personal imagery",<sup>12</sup> a quirkiness that gave the dance its distinct flavor (and its distinct role in Brown's repertory).

Among the phrase-images filtered through the choreography are: 'bee sting', 'Japanese fishermen', 'polar bear', 'fix your waistband', 'Charlie Chaplin', 'flopping rag dolls', 'hair cut'<sup>13</sup>—all found movements woven into a fabric of traveling steps that propel dancers through space: "walk, run, hop, skip, jump, slide, gallop."<sup>14</sup> Brown said, "There are ducks in *Decoy*, beyond the title but they are performed so quickly that the humor is perceived subliminally" (Brown and Rainer 1979, p. 32). Manifested in changing dynamics, these incidents of movement based in words suggest representational actions that are unreadable but experienced at a visceral level. Combining abstract movement with "idiosyncratic maneuvers" (Protzman 1973), she characterized its vocabulary as "seemingly irrational, mercurial, inundated with subtleties",<sup>15</sup> and punctuated by miniature, specific gestures, "fetishistic little things" (Brunel 1987, p. 64), that demonstrated (she said), "the insufficiency of language when applied to the physical imagery"<sup>16</sup>—another example of Brown's vision for producing abstract dance that is undergirded by undetectable representational elements.

Even the dance that is considered to mark the apex of Brown's abstract movement and choreography—*Newark (Niweveorce)* (1987), a collaboration with artist Donald Judd—contains subtle, intimate (and hard to spot) gestures of pathos, isolation and interiority. Punctuating its defining aesthetic, "the making of hard, harsh, sharp-lined geometric movement" (Morgenroth 2004, p. 61), a dancer beats her chest or quietly, but dramatically, drops her head. As distinguished from the work's

<sup>12</sup> Trisha Brown Dance Company National Endowment for the Arts Dance Program application for January 1979 to June 1979. Trisha Brown Dance Company Archive, New York.

<sup>13</sup> Lisa Kraus, interview with the author, 22 January 2012, New York.

<sup>14</sup> The list of possible traveling steps dates appears in Trisha Brown notebook 1976–1979, undated, n.p., Trisha Brown Personal Collection, New York.

<sup>15</sup> Trisha Brown National Endowment for the Arts Application Category A for period 1 July 1978 to 30 June 1979. Trisha Brown Dance Company Archive, New York.

<sup>16</sup> Trisha Brown Dance Company National Endowment for the Arts Dance Program application for period January 1979 to June 1979. Trisha Brown Dance Company Archive, New York.

stringently geometric and diagrammatic character these subtle incursions of emotionally resonant actions reflect the impact of Brown's contemporaneous experience choreographing for, and performing in, a production in Bizet's *Carmen*, directed by Lina Wertmüller for the Teatro di San Carlo in Naples in 1986.<sup>17</sup> Her experimentation with narrative and emotion while playing the "Maga" sorceress brought to *Newark* a "consideration of character, gender and the play between meaning and non-meaning in abstraction"<sup>18</sup> Brown also introduced phrase material from the all-female quartet, *Glacial Decoy* to establish a contrast with her exploration of 'male movement' in *Newark* (*Niweveorce*), a decision that informed two works from Brown's "Back to Zero" cycle: *Foray Forêt* (1990) and *For M.G.: The Movie* (1991). In both, she deliberately broke with her vision of the body as an instrument for producing solely non-objective, abstract movement.

In *Foray Forêt*, she "developed a vocabulary of subconscious moves through initiating gestures "before the mind is engaged. [She] called them delicate aberrations."<sup>19</sup> She imbued the dance with layered emotional textures through its musical concept: in each city where the work is performed, the Trisha Brown Dance Company hires a marching band, for which Brown choreographed a pattern of movement that occurs *outside* and around the theater, occasionally making skirmishes into its lobby. The musical accompaniment catches audiences by surprise in that they do not connect these sounds to the dance, but instead hear a band, and think it to be real, a random occurrence and an unbidden disruption to the performance. These musical effects—inspired by Brown's childhood memories of small-town marching parades at fairs and 4 July celebrations—functioned as "an aural cliché [that] could trigger images, memories, [to] make what was in [the audience's] minds overt for them" (Sommer 1993, p. 7). Not only is there a "juxtaposition of the bombastic music with the slowed and delicate movement" (ibid., p. 7). The dance's vernacular music produces emotive responses: memories surface and nostalgia for an era when live marching bands were a shared American cultural experience become part of the dance's content (a word that one might not necessarily use to describe Brown's previous choreographies in which the visual impact of abstraction reigned).

In *For M.G.: The Movie* (1991) critics noticed mimetic elements and recognized loosely narrative aspects of the choreography. Douglas Crimp wrote, "The solo . . . is full of Brown's characteristic odd gestural movements . . . things that seem to be representational but aren't, or at least aren't in ways we can read;" he also reported that Brown had said that the dance "involves gestures that have private meanings that aren't intended to be legible to an audience" (Crimp 2011, p. 158),<sup>20</sup> an explanation through which Brown had long illuminated the relationship of representation to abstraction in her creative process. However, the effect of this approach produced different outcomes in each dance. Brown's former choreographic assistant, Carolyn Lucas (now Associate Director of the Trisha Brown Dance Company), summarized Brown's choreographic procedures, given the artist's signature refusal to codify her movement language: "[The technique] is all living within her repertory. Her vocabulary is the technique . . . She toiled away every day at discovering every single movement that became a phrase, that became a form, that become a choreography" (Kourlas 2017).

In *For M.G.: The Movie* Brown dispensed with 'pure movement' and veered into territory that is mysterious, even metaphysical, effects also conjured through the lighting, devised by Spencer Brown in collaboration with Trisha Brown (no relation), and in Alvin Curran's discordant musical score, a combination of recorded found sounds—crashing, howling, breaking glass and live piano accompaniment. The audience experiences Brown's "guiding principle about enigma", in which dancers' actions both suggest and elude interpretation" (Rainer 1993). The movement vocabulary

<sup>17</sup> These are the last two works by Brown discussed in my book *Trisha Brown: Choreography as Visual Art* (Rosenberg 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Trisha Brown, typescript for lecture "Looking and Learning", undated, n.p., Trisha Brown Personal Collection, New York.

<sup>19</sup> Trisha Brown quoted in entry on *Foray Forêt* (1990) in (Teicher 2002, p. 166). (Citation, note 39, as from an interview conducted by Marianne Goldberg in 30 July 1987 is incorrect, as Brown did not create *Foray Forêt* until 1991).

<sup>20</sup> It is remarkable how many times, over so many years, that Brown articulated this idea, and how focus on it complicates understanding of the role of abstraction in her work.

exists on “an edge to it where it’s really interesting—to trigger a recognizable gesture and then mediate it immediately with something else” (ibid.). As one critic reported, “Although it takes place on a stage, it can still be called “a movie” [since] Ms. Brown contrasts choreographic moving pictures with poses that make the performers resemble figures in still photographs” (Anderson 1993).

In this work, Brown brings suggestions of character and narrative to choreography that encircles and interacts with a lone dancer who stands with his back to the audience for the entirety of the production. A longtime observer of Brown’s work remarked, (in a review entitled “Erased Plots”), “The dance, so thoroughly present and so insistently nothing but what it is, nevertheless evokes other narratives far more mysterious and intense” (Siegel 1998). Brown explained the title as a “clue for the audience that [she] was working with the idea of trying to make a figure materialize on the stage, whole, without your seeing the mechanics of getting there . . . The movie part of it has to do with making a figure materialize in the space the way you can when you edit a film” (Rainer 1993). In both *Foray Forêt* and *For M.G.: The Movie* Brown relinquished her signature approach to structuring her dances in relation to the theater’s architecture and geometric character. In 1991, she began to treat theatrical space as a fluctuating atmosphere enveloping the dancing. When Brown undertook the choreographing of her first dance accompanied by classical music, *M.O.* (1995)—named in homage to the chosen music, Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Musical Offering*—she explicitly described it as preparation to direct her first opera, including because (as we have seen) since 1987 she had “grown more and more engaged with the presence of character, the effect of abstraction within a narrative frame, and the possibilities of meaning making from a place neither abstract nor narrative.”<sup>21</sup> These were tactics that entered into *M.O.*’s otherwise wholly abstract choreography.

Brown confessed “I was a little tired of the stigma of abstract art”, she said and, “I began to think about character, the differences between men and women, and to choreograph gender-specific roles” (Sulcas 1998)—an investigation initiated in *Newark* (Niweeworce). She also became interested in gesture that is ostensibly neutral, but nonetheless holds meaning, and the way in which people read gesture, whether consciously or not” (ibid.). At the invitation of Bernard Foccroulle of the Théâtre de la Monnaie, Brussels, she undertook the direction of Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo* in 1998, telling an interviewer, “I’m actually planning to develop the vocabulary from emotional sources—joy, pain, whatever—and I’ll see how I can develop a form that I can accept. I hope I can develop a vocabulary that can withstand the power of the singers” (Boxberger 1997, p. 25). In the course of this process, she re-examined the abstract movement of her 1994 solo *If you couldn’t see me* (in which she danced with her back to the audience), considering how this experience physicalized Orfeo’s plight: “what it must be like for Orpheus to have to keep his back turned to the woman he loves” (Phillips 1998). With a vision of her own abstract dance as open to impregnation by connotation, Brown enlisted Baroque music specialist Guillaume Bernardi to assist her in unpacking Alessandro Striggio’s libretto and in analyzing the opera’s musical structure.

Brown’s direction of *L’Orfeo* was striking for its full integration of singers, chorus members and her dance company into choreography that lasts for the duration of the production. The set design by Roland Aeschlimann divided the stage with a vertical wall whose placing signaled where the action was taking place: the world (at left in light) or the underworld (at right, in darkness) or both. This abstract tool vividly portrayed the story’s progression. The opera started with a lit round orb, and Trisha Brown dancer Diane Madden, performing in the opera’s prologue as “Musica”—flying through space while suspended from harnesses that allowed her to tumble in circles and abruptly drop downward. Brown personified music based on her vision that music knows no boundaries, can pass through walls and travel through the air. The imagery evoked rococo ceiling paintings by eighteenth-century Venetian painter Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696–1770), while also referencing

<sup>21</sup> Trisha Brown, “Statement from the Artistic Director”, (typescript crossed out on the back of a file noting the addition of new TBDC board member, Douglas Baxter dated 16 March 1998). Trisha Brown Personal Collection, Box 128, People, A-J, Douglas Baxter File. It is not clear whether this statement was actually delivered to the board.



early works by Brown that similarly used rigging, such as *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building*, 1970. The principal singers were taught movement that Brown created using her own body and that of selected company members, while the chorus participated in workshops, which introduced them to the fundamentals Brown's abstract movement language. The chorus mingled with Brown's company members to perform varied walking patterns, echoing or supporting the singers whose movement was "purely abstract...subtly modulated to support the meaning of the text" (Bernardi 2008, p. 290). Brown sought to "give the singers a presence of dignity on the stage instead of doing mannered gestures that are clichéd or things that have no relevance to what they're singing" (Monteverdi et al. 2006).

In one of the opera's most famous arias, "Possenti Spirito", when Orpheus attempts to persuade Charon to allow him to pass into Hades to rescue his wife Euridice from death, Brown choreographed movement showing the protagonist's clasped hands slowly rising from his chest to cover his eyes, a gesture of "power and protection" (ibid.). This is just one example of what collaborator Guillaume Bernardi described when he said Brown had "neither produced a choreographed version of the opera, amplified by singing, nor echoed the sung narrative in analogous dances" (Sulcas 1998). Rather, the choreography alternately amplifies the libretto with intermittently recognizable gestures, and also takes cues from the music, "function[ing] by associations, as a metaphoric system rather than a mimetic one" (Bernardi 2002, p. 253), with "abstraction conferr[ing] on the design an autonomy from the outside world and from the original text of the operas" (ibid.). Her *L'Orfeo* was a resounding success, although critical skepticism coincided with positive reviews: "62-year-old Brown is just about the last choreographer you would have expected to turn her hand to opera" (Phillips 1998), Ian Phillips wrote in *The Independent*, London—a statement indicative of just how profoundly Brown's approach to opera contradicted her longstanding reputation as an abstract choreographer.

As *L'Orfeo* came to fruition Brown conceded, "In all my years as a choreographer ... I've tried to insist that the body is objective pure material for dance. But now I have to pass on that one; nowadays I have to conclude that that isn't so. The construction of the human body is not the best design for objectivity" (Boxberger 1997, p. 25). Referencing the premises of dances, such as *Accumulation* (1971) and *Locus* (1975), the statement is indicative of how far Brown had traveled from these rigorously abstract choreographies of the 1970s and from the tenets of her "Pure Movement" manifesto. Her statement shows a revised vision of how her stripped-down abstract vocabulary could flourish and expand its meanings, through the sourcing of movement from biographical, emotional and narrative sources, a practice that had informed selected works of the 1960s and 1970s, but which became more explicit in her 1990s dances. Brown's suggestions of emotion, plot and meaning in her work (particularly in the 1990s), stemmed from the choreography she had contributed to Lina Wertmüller's direction of Bizet's *Carmen* (1986) and resumed when she turned her focus to directing operas—contributions to a genre of performance that would have been unimaginable in the 1970s when Brown's work was defined by its association with minimalism and conceptualism in visual art. Whereas disguised 'private' representational or mimetic sources had catalyzed movement that appeared abstract to the public in selected dances of the 1960s and 1970s, what had once been subtextual emerged to the forefront in works from the 1990s, particularly in the movement language she brought to her operas, which she considered to exist somewhere between acting and abstraction. Trisha Brown's experience as an abstract choreographer inspired her eschewal of opera's longstanding conventions of representational performance, paving the way to her success in piercing opera's 400-year-old dramaturgical traditions through the development of a distinctive abstract-representational movement language built in consort with the singers and choruses, and first launched with her 1998 production of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> This was the first of five operas and a single song cycle that Brown directed between 1998 and 2010.

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