

Merce Cunningham in Conversation with Neil Greenberg, 200-5-30

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GREENBERG: This particular project I'm working on is looking at, perhaps, how social and cultural factors may have some relationship with the way your work developed, may have been some factor in that development. For instance, the social climate at the time...especially at the onset of you doing work in New York at the beginning...the first years with Graham...when you came up with these innovations...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: ...one at a time or altogether... Kind of altogether, really, isn't it?

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG. A lot of things came together, the idea of the chance mechanisms...

CUNNINGHAM: Well, not quite together. I think the first thing was when we separated the music from the dance, and that came about because John Cage... He didn't like the idea of composing to sound [he means "to dance"?]. He felt as though the music was subservient. On the other hand, I didn't like the idea of always composing to a piece of music already done. So we tried this in the very first solos, where we arranged what he called at the time... I've forgotten the word for it... But, for example, say you use the number ten. One, two, three, four, five, six seven eight nine ten...and that would be the end of something. And then you have ten of those. It's like a structure. Then within that, you did whatever you wanted. It didn't have to relate. And in the music composition he did what *he* wanted. And it was very difficult, at first, because one was accustomed to the music's supporting, or in some way counting, or whatever. And just to do it—because you didn't have the music to fasten on, as a kind of clue—but you went ahead and did what you did. And we agreed...in those early things—the structures were different for each one—the idea that we could meet at the end of this, but then every once in a while we didn't have to do that...poetic license we could just go ahead. As I said, it was hard to keep one's mind on it, because one was so accustomed to that other way. But...I remember finally when we got together with one of these dances, and one sequence, I had made a very strong movement. And

his sound came just after it. And it was just by *chance*, because he hadn't seen the dance. And it struck me, the kind of *strength* of the two things separate that way was just remarkable.

GREENBERG: Yes, at the History Matters I heard you say that at that moment you got it.

CUNNINGHAM: Well, it didn't always last. But I could see...I had a much clearer sense of the value of this. So, I made solos, and then company pieces, and... When we first went touring, the few audiences we had, which were very small, anyway. And most of them left, and all that. But, it was very disturbing. But I thought about it one day, and I thought, "These ideas are so interesting that I would rather stay with them, than think that because people don't get it... But *I* still find it interesting, so I just continued.

GREENBERG: And they were very unconventional, these ways of working. I mean, *incredibly* unconventional.

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yes. And of course with some of those early solos Cage was using prepared piano, which was sound-wise strange to people not accustomed to that sort of thing. And then, the way we worked. Then eventually we began to work with

dancers, with more than just myself, and that was at Black Mountain, where we started. And I continued to make the pieces while we were there, they were all made through using the separation from the music. We had one dance called "Dime A Dance."

GREENBERG: Yes, I've read about that.

CUNNINGHAM: I made, I don't know, a dozen solos...not only...solos or trios or duets, of whatever. And David Tudor selected the music. And he selected nineteenth-century pieces. And they had no relationship to the dance, other than that they took place at the same time.

GREENBERG: So this was one of the first times for that co-existence in time and space...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes. Well, no. We did that with the solos, even. But this was with the company. Then the ideas about chance, using chance means to discover about things, was probably in some way in the air. This would have been the early fifties. One of the strongest influences was the publication of the Chinese Book of Changes, the *I Ching*. And it was published by Christian Wolff's father—I don't know what his first name is.

GREENBERG: I didn't realize that.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, well Christian was born, actually, when they were coming from Germany. They left, I guess, in the thirties, I don't know. But he was actually born in France, en route [laughs], and eventually they got here. And one of the things that Mr. Wolff did was organize Pantheon Books. And the *I Ching* was one of the first publications. And it's a very famous book because they asked Carl Jung to write a foreword, and he asked the *I Ching*—cast it—to see what the *I Ching* felt about being published in a strange language, and unfamiliar language. You have to read it, but the answer is remarkable. And this Jung had cast.

GREENBERG: So I will take a look at that.

CUNNINGHAM: And working with chance operations was even more difficult than working without having music. Because your whole mind was boggled by what you remembered, physically, your ways of moving. Everything went some other way [laughs]. And you could say, "I'm not going to do that." But I tried them all, if they were at all possible.

GREENBERG: What was the attraction, then, of working with the chance mechanisms?

CUNNINGHAM: Discovery.

GREENBERG: Discovery.

CUNNINGHAM: Discovery, being...doing... Like, for instance, I realize I always did that motion with my right foot, but the chance operations have come up I have to do it on the left. OK, rather than say, "I can only do it on the right," I'll try the left. And often I couldn't do it, but if I practiced, I found that it gave back something else I was not aware of. I think it was discovery, that using the chance operations... Still does, as far as that goes. And then, working more with company, it was very complicated, obviously. But often when you have, say, three dancers, and say you want to make something that amounts to a trio, or whatever. Well, are you going to have them do everything together? Or are you going to have them separate? And if separate, how? And are you having them go...These are all things you can ask...

GREENBERG: Right, right.

CUNNINGHAM: ...Are you going to go in the same space, or are you going in different spaces? And you can go on forever, asking questions...

GREENBERG: Which you have, actually, isn't it?

CUNNINGHAM: Well, you probably just decide, "I better try to get *this* organized before I ask any more questions." There are always more. There are always things... And I think that makes your mind more...far more open. So you don't, say, realize, "Well, I've been practicing this, doing this way, for about five years now. What about going *this* way while you're doing this." Then you have to *reset* your physical process. And it keeps on being that way. And, I think, from that point of view, it's just very valuable.

GREENBERG: And your work has proven that out. Look at how many different dances you've made...*different* dances, not remaking the same dance, which I've heard you talk about as a purpose of chance mechanisms.

CUNNINGHAM: Well, I think that's one of its strongest...

GREENBERG: You don't keep making the same dance over and over.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, well it makes you think, "Well, I always did this *this* way. *Can* I do it that way?" So it can enlarge your—or I felt that—your physical awareness.

GREENBERG: And then, just...Specifically, for this project, I've been thinking that this idea of enlarging the realm of possibilities that chance provides, that there's something about disrupting conventions, choreographic conventions...

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yes.

GREENBERG: ...the received wisdom of what a dance is supposed to be, from Louis Horst, for example...

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yes [laughs].

GREENBERG: ...that this is the way a dance *is*, and it's the natural way for a dance to be...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, I have a story about that. John Cage and I were once at a small... doing a solo concert together, at a small school—a girl's school, I think—in Virginia. We had done our program, and we were asked to do a lecture/demonstration, and

Louis Horst was there. And I hadn't seen him in years. What we did... we didn't want to do a lecture/demonstration... what we did was to explain to the audience that we were going to make... John was going to write a piece, and I was going to make a dance... separate, using this scheme, a structure. And I think we chose something like eight by eight. And I explained to them we might get only part of it done, but we would stop at the end of each section so they could see that. Well, [laughs] we did it, and we got it all done...it wasn't that complicated, after all, but just the same... and we would stop after each section, and they'd applaud [laughs]... and then we'd do another section, two sections... and there were about eight. It ended up, he had made a piece, and I had made a short dance. And the school, they liked it. And, Louis... I spoke to him after... he said—he put his head down, I remember—he said, “Martha would never have been able to do that.” [laughs]

GREENBERG: She would never have been *able* to do it.

CUNNINGHAM: That's what he said.

GREENBERG: She would probably never have been *interested* in doing it.

CUNNINGHAM: [laughs] Well, I don't know about that.

GREENBERG: No?

CUNNINGHAM: No.

GREENBERG: To cut to the point... I've been thinking that there's something about defying conventions, just in its own sake, that might be attractive to you. Or is it just the possibilities it brings up?

CUNNINGHAM: It's the possibilities.

GREENBERG: It isn't so much challenging conventions, for it's own sake...?

CUNNINGHAM: No, no, not just for that reason. No. No, because it provides, or has provided, these possibilities, which can be utilized. And it can add... I really think that's what I *thought* I was doing. *Adding* things. Not just doing something because somebody else doesn't do it. But adding to the kind of possibilities...

GREENBERG: Right. Just doing something because somebody else doesn't do it doesn't necessarily have any aesthetic value...

CUNNINGHAM: No, no. It really is... And we live at a time when technology is just revolutionizing everything we do. Well you, you probably know about laptops...

GREENBERG: I do.

CUNNINGHAM: ...and I have one. And I fight with it. And I'm so envious of three-year-olds who can play games, and... their whole lives are arranged another way. And it's the way the world is now, so you have to try and catch up.

GREENBERG: Right. Let me just gather my thoughts one moment... The particular direction I've been looking at has been thinking about any possible relationship between artistic innovation, in general—with many different artists—and, then being outside the fray socially or culturally, like being somehow, in some way, non-normative according to the particular customs of the society.

CUNNINGHAM: Well... but...

GREENBERG: I was wondering about being a man in dance. Was that an unusual thing? It is for me. And was for me. Was it, as well, for you?

CUNNINGHAM: Yes... well... there weren't... Well, there are more men now, certainly.

GREENBERG: But there's still a stigma, even today, some stigma...

CUNNINGHAM: I think it's different now.

GREENBERG: Well, what was it like then?

CUNNINGHAM: Well, there, um... Most people didn't know what I was doing, naturally. If I said I was a dancer, and they had any knowledge, they would say, well, "Are you a ballet dancer?" And I'd say, "No, a modern dancer." And they had no awareness of this at all. But dance, now, is recognized, just I think by anybody, in a way it wasn't then, as something one *might* do.

GREENBERG: But still today, I think, more for a woman than for a man.

CUNNINGHAM: Oh yes...yes.

GREENBERG: I'm looking at the idea of a man, in dance, as being somehow outside convention. And therefore, maybe conventions... I'm thinking that maybe that could be part of how you thought in unconventional ways. That you were *already* outside convention, in that way, at least.

CUNNINGHAM: No, I don't think so.

GREENBERG: No?

CUNNINGHAM: I mean, it might have come up. But... but I didn't think about it. I really was interested in what it was that I was doing. And I happened to be a man doing it. I do think that... I agree that there aren't as many men as women, and all that. But I do think it's a very different situation for dancers than it was.

GREENBERG: Oh, now. Yes, I think it is somewhat different now. But for you, you must have... did you face... prejudice, actually?

CUNNINGHAM: Well, mostly... there were very few performances. You had to make them yourself, somewhat. But also, I was lucky enough to get involved with artists from painting, particularly,

and music, who were—not so much people in theater, like drama people, although some of those I even knew—who were also thinking in different ways. The whole abstract expressionist field, and then it led to pop art, and Jasper...

GREENBERG: And Rauschenberg?

CUNNINGHAM: ...and Rauschenberg, yes. And Andy, and all of that. I didn't so much talk with dancers, because they just didn't have any concept of what I was doing. And if they *did* ask, I would try to explain, but it meant *nothing* to them. Either ballet dancers or modern dancers.

GREENBERG: For instance, when you were with Graham, were you already dissatisfied with that way of working, do you think?

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, yes. I... around about the third year I was there, I began to think, "I don't think I want to do *this*." I don't know *what*... I certainly didn't, then, but...

GREENBERG: You didn't know what it was about it that was dissatisfying?

CUNNINGHAM: It was the... Well, there were a number of things... Well... Graham was very powerful in the theater, but... the kind of movement that she did was meant to *express* something. And somehow that... I don't know why, but it didn't agree with me.

GREENBERG: I know when I first came to this studio, it was 1978, it was such a relief to me to be directed to dance. Period...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: And not to play a role, not to have to play a role, or evoke an emotion other than what I might actually be experiencing at the time. To do the movement...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: And, as I've been telling this to my students over the years, I've related it to... in some way, that the particular roles that I was always asked to play—not only am I not an actor, but the roles that I was asked to play were always so different than me. It was always about the young heterosexual lover, with a woman. And I was a young gay man. So it was so great to come here, and... you don't have to pretend to be something very different than who you are.

CUNNINGHAM: Well... yes... I think that, anyway, is different now, too. That, in the ballet... it's based upon the idea of the prince and the princess, and the prince supports the princess, in some way.

GREENBERG: Yes, exactly.

CUNNINGHAM: But now, women want to be like men. And men want to be like...more like... They share things, I think, more than they used to. I think it's... there are tons of reasons. In the war, so many women worked, here, taking over men's jobs...

GREENBERG: World War II.

CUNNINGHAM: So when they came out to be told they had to go back to having babies, and that was it, they said, "Well, no. No, we can do all kinds of..." And that I think is part of us, now. I don't mean we're all becoming women, or men. But we're sharing roles in ways that before we didn't.

GREENBERG: Well, part of what I've been working on is this idea of social construction...that a lot of things that we're taught are natural, or the right way to be, are really constructed by a

particular culture. The idea that women are supposed to be princesses and men are supposed to be princes is *constructed*, by a culture. And I've thought, for instance, that chance mechanisms is a wonderful...chance procedures are a wonderful way to get past...

CUNNINGHAM: To break that. Sure.

GREENBERG: ...to break through some of the assumptions that we might not even know are acting on us.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG. You know, the things we've been taught...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, yes.

GREENBERG: ...that we haven't unlearned yet.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: And I've been thinking that that's one of the strengths of it, in your work, is that possibilities come up...not

just the socially received possibility of the prince and the princess, for instance.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, yes.

GREENBERG: And you, too, think that's a strength of the chance procedures?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, I... Chance can operate [chuckles] in many different ways. The way I do it is one way. But it can operate socially, or all kinds of ways... One just has to be willing to accept it. I think.

GREENBERG: Well, actually, this all came from... You were telling me about the dissatisfaction with Graham. Which is something I'm interested in because somehow that led to the work as we know it today. Your work.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes. I was there about... At that time there was very little dance, really. Graham showed two or three times a year. And the other modern dance companies... and the ballet... The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, I think, when I first came... and it played two weeks at the Opera, at the Metropolitan... and the rest

of the time it toured the country. But now we have dancing every day...

GREENBERG: And too much of it.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes! But we don't just have ballet companies. We have modern companies. We have the Joyce Theater going on day after day, and the DTW. In other words, those things have *changed* the dance society. There is this public... We even have shows here every week, and there is a small public, but it is a place to go to. And that didn't exist.

I remember when... well... The first one that Cage and I gave was a joint program on 16th Street at the Weidman, the Humphrey-Weidman Studio, which was a very... it was their studio, but also they performed there. And I thought it was great. Now it would seem small. But it was adequate, then.

GREENBERG: And that was while you were still dancing with Graham, I believe.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes. It was before I decided there was something else I wanted to do... continually [laughs].

GREENBERG: Were you... I mean, I keep going back to it... It's not so much that I'm interested in looking at Graham's work, but I'm interested in the seeds of the innovations that you brought to dance...

CUNNINGHAM: Well, first of all, I thought there had to be training. And I didn't want to use the Graham Technique.

GREENBERG: Because it was already, quote unquote, *expressive*?

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: It was trying to *express* as its basic premise?

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, yes. With her... that's what she wanted.

GREENBERG: And you were dissatisfied with *expressing*?

CUNNINGHAM: And I felt there were other ways of moving.

GREENBERG: Oh, it was too limiting for movement...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, yes.

GREENBERG: ...it didn't give you enough... possibilities. I see that.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes. And also, I had, very infrequently, been going to the American Ballet Society, which was on 59th and Madison, then [laughs]...

GREENBERG: Oh really. East side. I didn't realize that.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, that was the first school, I think, that Kirstein established. I had absolutely no awareness of ballet. But there I was, in the school, and there were these...some of these dancers... I remember Danilova in class. I was absolutely *struck* by the way... She was so beautiful on stage, something about her... the life was so... so vibrant. And even in class you could see... And I remember the day...there was a class, I was watching it, and she was one of the students. And she was doing everything like everybody else. And she apparently had to leave early, probably rehearsal or whatever. And she went up to the teacher, who was one of those old Russian teachers, and did a curtsy, and said something to him, and he said something back. And she left the room. All this was done with this kind of formality. It was extraordinary to see.

GREENBERG: Talk about conventions.

CUNNINGHAM: Well, then I...I quit all of that, and tried to... you weren't going to go giving programs and making money, but you had to have some way to eat. So I began to teach, renting studios by the hour and all that. And I had very few students. And it was very difficult to ask them for money. But one of the students was one who wasn't a student, but...Marianne Preger, she worked with me. She said she would take that over. And I said I'd be delighted with that.

GREENBERG: Oh, she did the asking for money.

CUNNINGHAM: She kept bringing me, like, two dollars. I could have dinner. I said, "Marianne, how do you do this?" She said, "Well, I ask them for money, and if they look pained, I look away. But I don't take my hand away." [laughs]

GREENBERG: Very well said.

I keep going back [looks at notes].

Just because I haven't quite asked this question yet... Were there particular roles you were dancing with Graham...were those roles you were dissatisfied with? Did you not like the

particular things that you were doing? I think I've read something about that...

CUNNINGHAM: No, no.

GREENBERG: Not so much?

CUNNINGHAM: No, it wasn't the particular...I don't... I would do what she *asked*.

GREENBERG: Right.

CUNNINGHAM: No, it was something about the whole...thing about expression... [inaudible word] that way. I had really decided...

GREENBERG: You may find nothing in this theory of mine. But I do have this theory that there is something about being outside of the norm... And here is where I may be treading on private matters, and I don't want to pry into anything that you consider private. But for me, for example, being a gay man, I consider being outside the norm of the culture... Something that I already feel *outside*, about. And for me I think that was part of the attraction, for instance, in *your* work, in that I didn't have to play a role.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes. I didn't object to the roles.

GREENBERG: It wasn't playing a role...?

CUNNINGHAM: I was, what, in five or six works in all.

GREENBERG: That's all... about five or six?

CUNNINGHAM: Well, I don't remember. But something like that.

GREENBERG: It isn't so much that the roles didn't fit you? It isn't a repeat of my experience, of expressing...

CUNNINGHAM: No, no, no. No, I don't think that at all. It was something about the atmosphere...

GREENBERG: The *effect* of what you've done is that you *have* created something... whether it was the initiation or not?...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes...

GREENBERG: The effect, for me, is that it allows anyone to come and just be themselves, as they are, dancing.

CUNNINGHAM: . Oh, yes. Yes. That I think... In my teaching... although I think you have to learn how to do things...

GREENBERG: You still have to do the choreography...

CUNNINGHAM: Well, not only that, but you have to learn how to bend your knees *correctly*, because if you don't you're going to have physical troubles. You do anyway...

GREENBERG: And you won't be able to do the jumping, for example, either.

CUNNINGHAM: Exactly. That part, that's one thing in my technical thing I've tried to keep. But also to enlarge it. To find other kinds of movement.

GREENBERG: Including how the individual dancer effects the movement.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, yes. And also, yes, I think that when you dance, anybody, if they have a gift for it, and you do it correctly—by correctly I mean in a sense of *physically*—that way it can have...be powerful. I think, otherwise, when you see someone doing movement which you know could be stronger, and

clearer, and all that, you know... Well, I always get sad. I'm sorry that this person hasn't found more in the movement itself. And I do think that here, although they do what I give them or what the teachers give them, I hope that each person will find what that is for himself or herself.

GREENBERG: It's interesting. I'm hearing something slightly different today—which is great—than I've heard in the past about the not representing, the not expressing something in particular with the choreography... It sounds like that's...that one of effects of that is that it enlarges the possibilities of movement.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: That as long as you stay expressing you're going to keep the range within a certain realm...

CUNNINGHAM: Because you want to get at a particular thing. I think...well, in technique one is getting at a way to move, but to make that movement for the particular person doing it as strong and as whatever as that person can do, and not put something in the way of that. At the same time, to enlarge movement possibilities.

GREENBERG: Right, right. Absolutely. And then it becomes a big part of the work, that it's not...this idea...that's another one of the innovations that's spoken about... is *not* tying the movement to expression or representation...

CUNNINGHAM: No, no.

GREENBERG: No, that's a huge change from the conventions.

CUNNINGHAM: [laughs] Yes.

GREENBERG: Huge. Major.

CUNNINGHAM: [laughs]

GREENBERG: And I'll add, that I still think, today... I wish more people were paying attention to this in the dance world. I do think there's almost a backwards thing going on, where people aren't paying attention to that anymore.

CUNNINGHAM: Well, *I* like movement. But also, to find ways to *do* the movement as fully as possible...

GREENBERG: Make it as much as it can be, without making it something else...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: Yes, I remember well. That, and another thing I remember hearing you say—I think it was in a workshop—was “walking a tightrope.”

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: Is that something that you say often? And on one side of the tightrope is the step, and on the other side is who the dancer is...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: and the dancer can't fall on either side. [CUNNINGHAM chuckles.] Not do the step so much that they aren't themselves, and not be themselves so much that they aren't doing the step.

CUNNINGHAM: You have to do the step fully, in the way you would do it. But, “fully” means arriving at some idea about the physicality of the motion.

GREENBERG: And "the way you would do it"...expressing something or playing a role could get in the way of that?

CUNNINGHAM: Well, yes it does. I think I felt that very strongly.

GREENBERG: Ah ha. That a part of you as a dancer was not getting out there while you were asked to *express*. [CUNNINGHAM chuckles.] "Express" with a capital "E."

CUNNINGHAM: Well, it can get in the way. But most people probably feel, that... I don't know, really, through my own work... [CUNNINGHAM becomes distracted by dancers who have entered the studio.]

GREENBERG: I see that people are starting to rehearse. It's ok? For us?

CUNNINGHAM: Well, go ahead.

GREENBERG: I think I have the answer to this, but... I keep going back to this initial seed, *why* you left the Graham company, and it was to create your own work, basically. Yes?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yes.

GREENBERG: And a dissatisfaction with what was going on there?

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: Definitely, as well.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, it was... Well, I think, also, I felt there was a basic excitement in movement itself that has always stayed with me. Just to do it...not to do it to express something, but to do it as fully...however *small*...

GREENBERG: Right, right, small can be full. Well, stillness can be full, as we've seen in your work.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes. And I think, without... without... without having to, in a sense, code it with expression...

GREENBERG: Yes, code it. I understand.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes. It was something like that. And also, as I began to have connections with visual artists and contemporary

composers who were thinking in such different ways. The musicians were really thinking about sound, and then when electronic possibilities came in, it was clearly that it wasn't about *expression*, but it was about the sound itself, and what could be done with these new kinds of possibilities.

GREENBERG: And if somebody reads something in it, or has a reaction, that's *their* reaction...

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yes, yes.

GREENBERG: ...and it's not trying to keep people away from having reactions. The audience still has reactions. Very much so.

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yes, absolutely. And not only that, they're all different [laughs].

GREENBERG: Right, they're all different.

Another issue I did want to ask about—and I remember this being asked of you on tour at a question and answer period, sometime—something about the male/female duets that are in your work. Because in addition to everything else that's in your work, there are a great number of male/female duets. It's somehow attractive...

CUNNINGHAM: A man and a woman dancing together.

GREENBERG: Sorry?

CUNNINGHAM: A man and a woman dancing together.

GREENBERG: A man and a woman dancing together. You wouldn't even call them "duets," necessarily?

CUNNINGHAM: No—there would be two people, so then it could be a "duet."

GREENBERG: Ok, ok.

CUNNINGHAM: Or if it's a trio, then it's a trio.

GREENBERG: Then it's a trio. And just the attraction of having a man and a woman...

CUNNINGHAM: Well yes, it's one of the possibilities. You can use it, if you want, for expressive purposes. But you also can simply use it as two human beings...

GREENBERG: Right...

CUNNINGHAM: ...moving together.

GREENBERG: And there does seem to be a higher incidence of a man and a woman dancing together in your work than two men or two women...

CUNNINGHAM: Well, because men were often not available [laughs].

GREENBERG: That's one reason, yes, that's true. Right, right. But I remember your answer at the time had something to do with the physical possibilities, the possibilities for partnering that exist then, that do not exist, for you, as much for people of the same gender.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: Right. So that's the attraction to you?

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, yes. The physical possibilities.

GREENBERG: And yet... so when people read into this some kind of romantic, or...

CUNNINGHAM: That's all right. I don't mind.

GREENBERG: You don't mind. But...

CUNNINGHAM: No, no. That's what they see...[inaudible]... It's not what [laughs]...

GREENBERG: It *isn't* what you...how you see it.

CUNNINGHAM: No, no. There are two people... what it is, there are two people dancing together. You watch it, and you think it's about this... They come up with some idea, whatever it is, and expect you to say it. I always say, "Well, that's ok if that's what you see."

GREENBERG: "That's ok if that's what you see..."

CUNNINGHAM: All right, yes. I just see it as two people moving together. And usually the male is stronger, just physically stronger, so there are things you could do that otherwise you just couldn't do. If you have two men dancing together there's a kind of parallel strength, almost equal, it *could* be. With

women, it's different. Although the women are much stronger now than they used to be [laughs].

GREENBERG: Yes. Although I've thought of this as, perhaps, one of the conventions that was attractive to you, that you didn't challenge. You know, it is a convention in ballet, for instance. And it seems like this is one that you didn't subvert...

CUNNINGHAM: No.

GREENBERG: You wanted to keep this one, this convention.

CUNNINGHAM: At the same time, you can give women things now which they didn't used to do years ago. First of all, they're stronger, I think, in general.

GREENBERG: And maybe other reasons as well?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yes. There are all kinds of... I suppose, *moral* reasons.

GREENBERG: Right, right.

CUNNINGHAM: But they don't concern me [chuckles].

GREENBERG: Although, I wonder if many years ago, even without realizing it, it was just easier to just not challenge those reasons, for the audiences.

CUNNINGHAM: Well, we performed so rarely, that...and even then, it was so *curious*...

GREENBERG: Right. For so many reasons.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes [laughs]. But... I had two women in the beginning, Viola Farber and Carolyn, who were almost opposite each other as beings, and as dancers—Carolyn was, in a sense, a classically trained dancer, and Viola was trained another way, I think mostly trained through me. But they were so interesting as dancers. OK, their physical behaviors were female. But they were so interesting to give movement to, and see how it came out, knowing that it was going to be different between the two of them.

GREENBERG: Yes, absolutely.

CUNNINGHAM: Well, it's true of anyone, but...

GREENBERG: These two, in particular, were very...

CUNNINGHAM: Oh yes. And strong, very strong.

GREENBERG: And strong performers. Something really came out of them.

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yes.

GREENBERG: Right. So, that is definitely one of the ways that I've seen... That in general, any movement a man does, a woman would do in your work as well. And any movement a woman does, a man might do, as well. They would just do it in their own ways, with their own bodies.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, with their own strength.

GREENBERG: Which is also very different from the conventions—that there are certain things men don't do...fouetté turns. And there are certain things women don't do, like big jumps...

CUNNINGHAM: Although I think that is so changed, now.

GREENBERG: Well, I think you're one of the people who changed it.

CUNNINGHAM: Well, OK. But... One sees it in many things, but I saw it through the arts, via the association with electronic music. Which was again something totally different than had been around before as a possibility...to make electronic sound [inaudible] as a musical component. But you couldn't count the electronic...because it's not on the pulse. It's more on the nerves.

GREENBERG: That's well said. It's more the nervous system than the circulatory system.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, yes. I mean, you can put pulse in it. Yes, of course. But because it was so fast, you couldn't possibly count. So you have to think... You could think, "I don't want to have anything to do with that." But on the other hand, I could see that it was something that was part of our world, and I wanted to see if I could deal with it [chuckles]. And the same thing about visual artists... The friends I mostly had were painters. And their world was totally changing. It used to be European paintings. But it was clearly transferring—this would be in the fifties, really, after the war—it was clearly transferring what

painting was to the United States. I went to see their shows. I talked to them, which...they didn't like to talk very much, except if I could get them to talk about dancing, because they're visually-minded, they would say quite astonishing things. Not like anybody else would say about dancing, but they see. And Jasper or Bob... or Andy [laughs], when you heard them say something about something visual...

GREENBERG: They had something to say.

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yes. It was always fascinating. And it was totally different from all my experience with Graham or with the ballet companies. These were not people who knew about dance terms, or what this meant or didn't mean. But they could describe something about what they saw.

GREENBERG: Which is valuable... I suppose that was valuable because they hadn't been enculturated with the supposedly right way to do things...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: a la Louis Horst, and Graham...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: ...and Doris Humphrey, etcetera. The "right" way. Supposedly.

CUNNINGHAM: And then also, I think... Not only... Mostly with the dancing that I was connected with, it had some *meaning* about some particular thing, and I just kept thinking that dance by itself is so *interesting*...or was, [inaudible] remains that way... Why can't you just have that. And then how do you go about putting that together. And all of these things contributed...chance, and not working with the music in a conventional sense. And then eventually working with film. Because you just see everything differently with the camera. And the space is different. And the time is different. Everything about it is different.

GREENBERG: And then, so many of these artists that you just mentioned, and the composers—although maybe to a lesser extent—but so many of these artists, as I understand it, were gay men. That's where I have my...

CUNNINGHAM: Well I don't think all the painters were...

GREENBERG: Well, I'm not sure...

CUNNINGHAM: It was part of their lives, though...

GREENBERG: Right. So this idea of... That's this particular bent I have about somehow being outside of the culture's... What the culture says is the right way to be, they weren't.

CUNNINGHAM: But... I don't... The world I lived in...I think...

GREENBERG: Did you not even know that about them?

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, you're quite right.

GREENBERG: You didn't? You didn't know?

CUNNINGHAM: Well, eventually I did, of course. No, but what I'm saying is that these were people... in particularly the visual world, whose work was beginning to take...to be noted.

GREENBERG: Right.

CUNNINGHAM: And people didn't care if they were gay or not.

These were painters who were doing things which had never been

done before. And there was like a whole new... Abstract expressionists, all the way to Bob and Jap...

GREENBERG: No, I'm not claiming that their work expresses something about homosexuality, or anything like that. I'm just thinking that there is something about being outside of the norm that helps you to think outside the box, so to speak.

CUNNINGHAM: Well, perhaps. I don't know. But I know that... It really wasn't... It was a question of the way they were *thinking* that was interesting. Whether they were homosexual or not...

GREENBERG: ...or not. Who cares.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes. The way they were thinking, clearly thinking in some way which had never been thought that way before—certainly, not to me, anyway—and *that* was what was fascinating.

GREENBERG: Yes, yes. I mean, it's the ideas. In looking at an artist's life, their biography... I mean, sometimes it's interesting as a good story. But otherwise it's only useful if it helps you appreciate their work. And the kind of information that doesn't help you appreciate it, is almost just like a... it's gossip, or a story, or...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: ...or what have you. Do you think that issues like being gay, or—specifically, obviously, that's my bent, here—are relevant in looking at an artist's life? You know, other artists...

CUNNINGHAM: Not to me.

GREENBERG: Not to you. You don't think it's relevant.

CUNNINGHAM: I don't care whether they're gay or not gay. If the work is interesting, that's the first thing I see.

GREENBERG: Right. Although, one of the artists that I've been looking at is Gertrude Stein...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: ...throughout all of this. And somehow, for me, knowing some biographical information *does* help me to read her work. It helps it to be richer for me. But that might be that particular artist for this particular reader.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: You don't think it's *always* irrelevant. Or do you?

CUNNINGHAM: No, it becomes part of...if you know something like that then it becomes part of your history with this person.

GREENBERG: Right.

CUNNINGHAM: But I don't think it... It really is what they *do*...

GREENBERG: Well, yes. That's what I'm interested in, too. I mean, with you, it's your dances that are so awe-inspiring. That's what's got me hooked...you know, it really got me dancing...I think it really kept me dancing. But I *am* curious about these... Because they're such *big* innovations, sometimes the biography... For instance, when I read about you and Maud Barrett? One of the stories I've read...

CUNNINGHAM: Mrs. Barrett

GREENBERG: ...Mrs. Barrett. About how she tied the...what is this story?...how she tied the rubber band around her skirt, the

first time you saw her perform, and then she walked on her hands...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: ...and I guess that was so the skirt wouldn't fall over her head?

CUNNINGHAM: She stood up on her hands and walked. Yes.

GREENBERG: And when I read that, in the interview with Jacquie Lesschaeve...Jacqueline Lesschaeve, is that right?

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: Whom I remember around the studio, when I was around. I thought that seeing that as a kid—I made up a story about it—that for you, seeing that, it must have been so liberating. That someone...that dance is a place where you can do all sorts of things that people wouldn't ordinarily do. Like it opens up possibilities.

CUNNINGHAM: I think...you're probably right. Certainly it left an impression that I never forgot.

GREENBERG: Right. To this day.

CUNNINGHAM: Oh yes.

GREENBERG: Somehow that... Women didn't usually walk on their hands across the stage, women were more proper at that time...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: ...even vaudevillian women were more proper...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: ...So, if that was one of your first exposures, I just thought how that might have...it might have been attractive to you, this idea that no matter who you are, you can go beyond society's conventions when you're performing, when you're dancing. You get to do whatever's possible.

CUNNINGHAM: I think...the idea of being in the theater...yes. It crystallized [chuckles] for me...

GREENBERG: By seeing Mrs. Barrett do that.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: And that's one of those biographical details that add something for me when I think about your dances.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: When I think, "Another possibility..."

CUNNINGHAM: Well, I think I always thought there are possibilities, there always are possibilities. I mean, I'm looking at movement. I know that movement is limited to us, and the human frame, so there are certain ways of moving... But the variety, within that, is just endless.

GREENBERG: As you have shown us. And continue to show us.

CUNNINGHAM: Well, I mean that, really... It depends on how you keep your mind open. And using...I've used chance operations, but there are many other ways. If you think, first of all, that isn't any limit...

GREENBERG: Right—if you imagine, "What if there is no limit."

CUNNINGHAM: Yes. And I absolutely, firmly believe that within the way we have to move, the varieties of movement are endless.

GREENBERG: Are limitless. Right.

And I've read some people writing about your work, where they equate that to a broad field of possibilities, instead of a narrow conscription of possibilities. And they've drawn broader implications, like even about...social and cultural implications. That it's not just the way the culture teaches you are supposed to be. There are so many possibilities...

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yes.

GREENBERG: ...beyond how people are *taught*.

CUNNINGHAM: Particularly if you [inaudible] the idea, strongly enough, that with the physical movement you're limited to the two legs, and two arms, and ok... But, within that...the way people move all over the world, you realize the variety is endless. So one of the things that I do, and came to look for... If I think of something I see, on the street even, the way somebody does a movement, and think, "I've never tried that..." But even something as small as that, just so you don't fix your taste

about the way something should go, but realize there are other ways.

GREENBERG: Right, right. I mean, does that... To me that also has... When I see the dances, my mind starts thinking of things other than just the movement. I become fascinated in the movement, and it starts to open up other possibilities for me, in my thinking.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: That's one of the theatrical *powers* of your work, to me, and I start to think that more things are possible than I had thought...

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yes.

GREENBERG: ...not just about movement, but about...everything.

CUNNINGHAM: Oh yes, yes. No...exactly...exactly.

GREENBERG: And that's what you aim to do, in some way...

CUNNINGHAM: Well, I don't know about *aim*...

GREENBERG: No?

CUNNINGHAM: ...but I do it within the movement scale. I certainly *intend* that. When you come across something, Neil, however small, it's somehow delightful [laughs]. It's about not pinning your mind down to how things should go. It's very easy to do that... I mean, you get used to, say, physical... Well... Years ago, when I first came here, in New York, I used to love to walk in the city. And I began to watch people when they were stepping on or off the curb—it was mostly about seeing whether they were going to jaywalk...

GREENBERG: Yes. Or get hit by a car, or whatever.

CUNNINGHAM: [chuckles.] I began to realize that almost everybody stepped on or off with their right leg. So I checked myself... So I learned to step with the left. In order to not, in a sense, always follow your own *taste*. But add something to it, as simple as that.

GREENBERG: And *tastes*... I've heard you talk...I've heard some of this before...and this idea of *taste*... It's not just my own taste... my taste was taught to me, by my culture...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: ...and I have to get beyond what my culture has enforced on me...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, yes.

GREENBERG: ...in order to see a broader range of possibilities. It does, or it could have *political* ramifications. This idea of just what the culture says, it's not necessarily the only way to be.

CUNNINGHAM: No. If people were a little more aware of that [chuckles]. That just because you do it, doesn't mean that somebody else has to do it [chuckles].

GREENBERG: Right, right. I mean, some of the underpinning philosophies behind some of your very practical working methods.

CUNNINGHAM: Well, I've tried very hard in class... There are certain things...how do you start a class? I start in the same way, partly it's just to get started, and I think, physically that dancing is not an easy art, so if you have some way you can

begin... But... I tried years ago changing it, constantly, the beginning. But I could see it wasn't working...

GREENBERG: Right. Wasn't helping the dancers.

CUNNINGHAM: No, it wasn't. So I went back to what I think would give them... When, say, the warm-up, the barre-work is done, to the point where they can move in multiple directions, then I tried to change things...different every day. Not radically different, but different—so that they had to not only...they had to *look*—and now it's very difficult, because I can't show things—but they had to *look* again. I used to try that in the beginning, but I could see they weren't getting warmed up.

GREENBERG: So, not in the beginning anymore, but eventually... I see what you're saying, I think. That there's an implication, even there, of opening up to other possibilities.

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yes.

GREENBERG: It's like retraining the mind, in a specific way, about a very broad way of being in the world.

CUNNINGHAM: And also, it's about people *looking*.

GREENBERG: Yes. Looking.

CUNNINGHAM: Instead of accepting, "Oh yes, they're doing this thing, now."

GREENBERG: Or expecting.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, yes.

GREENBERG: I just have one more area... how did I put it here [looks at notes]? Within the particular area that I've been looking at so much, which a lot has to do with non-normative stuff, I wondered if, in your relationship with John, if you and John felt you sometimes had to conceal—for the survival of the company...

CUNNINGHAM: I don't think we ever did.

GREENBERG: No? Not really?

CUNNINGHAM: I don't think we ever did.

GREENBERG: You did not have to conceal the nature of your relationship.

CUNNINGHAM: No, I don't think we... I think particularly in New York...

GREENBERG: Oh, right...

CUNNINGHAM: ...the society we...we, really...were the *art* world.

GREENBERG: Right. And all these painters, and musicians...

CUNNINGHAM: And musicians. Yes. And there they don't think that...if somebody's gay or isn't gay...but it didn't bother them. Because they were really interested in the work, in the *ideas*. And John was so full of ideas [laughs]. It was *that* they wanted to hear about...and come and hear them in the music, and so forth.

GREENBERG: But maybe outside of New York?

CUNNINGHAM: I'm sure. But we just went...we didn't have that much touring then, anyway...but we went places... We usually were brought by the local college, in the women's department there'd be somebody...

GREENBERG: Right. Physical education, right, at the beginning?

CUNNINGHAM: Yes. I don't think... There may have been something I didn't notice...

GREENBERG: Well, I certainly don't know [laughs]. I wasn't there. If you say you don't have a sense of concealing...

CUNNINGHAM: No.

GREENBERG: ...the nature of your relationship...

CUNNINGHAM: No, no. We were so involved with...with the *art*...with the arts, that way, that that's the society we were generally—certainly, here...

GREENBERG: In New York, in your social circle or artistic circle there wouldn't have been a stigma about being...different, non-normative, but in the world at large, I'm sure...

CUNNINGHAM: Well, we were touring around *America*.

GREENBERG: ...yes, in *America*.

CUNNINGHAM: I think that that's changed, too, though.

GREENBERG: Somewhat, yes, somewhat. But for you there was a great deal of that, yes?

CUNNINGHAM: No, we didn't... We would just go and do our shows, and do whatever they asked, and answer questions, and all of that. Never...oh...there was one time, in Berkeley, I think...

GREENBERG: I think I've heard this story, perhaps.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes. And John's reply was extraordinary.

GREENBERG: "He does...I do the cooking and..."

CUNNINGHAM: "Merce does the dishes...and I...I do the cooking," something like that.

GREENBERG: Right. But that was...as it's been told to me, the guy asking the question was a gay rights activist...

CUNNINGHAM: Oh yes, oh yes. We knew that.

GREENBERG: ...he wasn't somebody who was *anti-gay*.

CUNNINGHAM: No, no. He wanted to know about the social life
[laughs].

GREENBERG: Right. Which you don't...generally don't talk about. Do
you feel that's private? Or do you talk about it? Or...

CUNNINGHAM: No, no, I don't [inaudible utterance].

GREENBERG: Sorry?

CUNNINGHAM: I don't do *anything* about it.

GREENBERG: You just leave it alone.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes. I don't... I think it's different now, anyway. I
think there is a difference in the way the gay world is more *out*
than it used to be.

GREENBERG: Right. I mean, I came to New York in the
post-Stonewall years...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, yes.

GREENBERG: ...so it was very different for me than it would have been for...a gay man in the fifties.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, yes. And that parade that's [laughing] every year. Which I can see out my window.

GREENBERG: On Sixth Avenue or here?

CUNNINGHAM: No, no. On Sixth Avenue. But you know that parade started here. It was—way back, way back—it was here...*children*...it was a parade, and they walked from here, Westbeth, to Washington Square.

GREENBERG: Do you mean the Halloween parade?

CUNNINGHAM: It started with the *children*, in their masks, and all that...and each year it got bigger, and started to include other *elements* of the society. And then the children had to give up because [laugh] it got so complicated. It's so long now. When it happens it takes about four hours to pass my house.

GREENBERG: Yes, it's a different animal now, isn't it?

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: But that's the Halloween parade.

What *do* you think of the whole gay liberation movement...the way people self-identify now as gay or lesbian. Do you have any thoughts, or not?

CUNNINGHAM: I don't have any thoughts about it, no. I'm glad that it's not as difficult for gay people to *exist* in this society.

GREENBERG: Because that's a possibility that is just another possibility...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, yes.

GREENBERG: Right?

CUNNINGHAM: And also that so many of them are so bright. Not all of them...

GREENBERG: No, no. Certainly not all.

CUNNINGHAM: But some of them are really bright people, so that the idea of not talking to them, if you get a chance, just because they're gay is ridiculous. Because, it's marvelous to converse...

GREENBERG: Right. And that would have been the case... I mean, in America, in *your* youth, that *would* have been the case, that people would not have talked to someone—some people—would not have wanted to talk to someone for that very reason...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

GREENBERG: For that very reason, because they were gay.

CUNNINGHAM: [pause] I don't really know. I just know that different people...

GREENBERG: You never came up against that or felt you did?

CUNNINGHAM: No. [pause.] No, because here I was, in that sense, fortunate, I was in...in...in the art section...

GREENBERG: Yes, the art clique.

CUNNINGHAM: ...of composers, and painters and all that. And it was what they were *doing* that was so interesting. Not necessarily their private lives. OK, so they're gay or not gay. But it was their *work*. You wanted to see what they were *doing*. I was very lucky to have been there.

GREENBERG: Right. Actually... I mean, that would be a good reason to have come to New York...

CUNNINGHAM: Yes [laughs].

GREENBERG: ...because that world existed here.

CUNNINGHAM: Well, when I came to New York I didn't know it existed. The only thing I knew was that Martha Graham had said, "If you come to New York I'll put you in a piece." I said, "I'll come" [laughs].

GREENBERG: You weren't particularly attracted to New York, other than that?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, I always wanted to come to New York.

GREENBERG: You did.

CUNNINGHAM: Just the city... The first time I stepped, at the bottom of the island, at Battery Park...

GREENBERG: Yes?

CUNNINGHAM: I thought, "This is home."

GREENBERG: Uh-huh. David Vaughan told me that you traveled to New York when you were in Washington, at George Washington University, with your brother? You took a little trip here?

CUNNINGHAM: Yes. A weekend.

GREENBERG: And is that when...like you just felt the electricity of the city? Or...

CUNNINGHAM: I remember thinking... We were here for two days, and they went to Yankee Stadium and to a prize fight, and I just wanted to walk around the city. I went to over where all the Broadway theaters were, because I never realized they were *off* Broadway.

GREENBERG: I thought that, too, of course, coming to New York. I thought they were actually on Broadway.

CUNNINGHAM: [laughs] And... I just knew I was going to be here, somehow. There you are.

GREENBERG: Well, when you talk about possibilities, lots of possibilities, New York has more possibilities than other cities in America. It seems.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes. I think that there are more possibilities *out of* New York, not necessarily more than New York, but more possibilities in other cities, now, than there used to be.

GREENBERG: Than there used to be. Right. So, for instance, me moving to L.A. is not such a bad thing. I hope [laughs].

CUNNINGHAM: Well, no.

GREENBERG: But at that time, the time *you* came, New York was really the place for...well, different kinds of things. Different races, different nationalities...

CUNNINGHAM: I just wanted to be...I wanted to be in the theater.

GREENBERG: Right. Got it.

Well, I thank you so much. I've taken much more of your time than I thought you could give. So I'm very grateful. Thank you.

CUNNINGHAM: You're welcome.