

## **Form As Positive Space: Points, Lines, Shapes and Forms in Time**

Point, line, shape, and form. Each of these are terms dancers use comfortably. They are the building blocks for our visual lexicon. The grammar of our aesthetic.

- I. A point in geometry is a location. It has no size. No width, no depth, no height.

Let's consider the dancer in arabesque. The fingers of her forward hand and the toes of the lifted back leg are certainly in locations in space. Young dancers are taught that the location of the back toes should be directly behind the spine, high from the floor, and as far from the opposite fingers as possible.

- II. A line is defined as a line of points that extends infinitely in two directions. It has one dimension, length.

Ironically, it is not just the locations but also the actions of continuously reaching the toes and fingers in opposite directions that gives an arabesque any sense of stretch. We connect locations in order to imagine line in the body. We see not only the line between the fingers and toes but also how that line could extend infinitely into space. The spectator's eye travels the long distance from the center of the dancer and outward.

- III. A plane extends infinitely in two dimensions. It has no thickness.

This eternal horizon is offset by the shorter, albeit crucial line of the arabesque's supporting leg. It is also delineated by an ideal location of points. Dancers strive to keep the pelvis directly over the supporting foot and the crown of the head reaching toward the sky. Consequently a number of vertical lines are established too. The dancer is revealed as an inhabitant of a plane.

- IV. A space extends infinitely in all directions and is a set of all points in three dimensions. You can think of a space as the inside of a box.

Let's imagine the dancer now performs a promenade. Within an eighth of a turn the illusion she had created is diminishing. By a quarter turn we have lost the length of the primary horizontal line as the points of her fingers and toes line up square with our eyes. Something is gained too. We see that she has breadth. The line delineated by the points of her shoulders, which was

previously invisible is now on full display. She has a thickness. Or a depth. It depends on her orientation. Sadly, we can never see both in their fullness simultaneously.

- I. On a side note, how interesting that to imagine the limitless we must put a boundary around it.
- II. On another side note, the character dance I had to perform for my first RAD ballet exam involved me mime - hammering a box. The girls got to sew pillows. I was livid.

This increasingly complex spatial understanding of the body is rather familiar to the dancer. Years of training hone a deeply refined sense of their body in space. They balance themselves by aligning certain points of their bone structures. I often observe the students I teach not changing direction decisively enough and find myself saying in class “two eyes, two hips, two shoulders facing where you want to go!” It is a convenient way to imagine ourselves in space, but it’s just that. A sort of fantasy if you will. The reality of existing and moving in space is much more complex than our spatial lexicon insinuates.

Points are problematic. Anyone who has danced knows that true stillness is impossible. The locations which we attempt to keep in determined relationships are moving targets. They’re ballpark figures. To think of our joints in locations is shorthand for movers. A theoretical baseline that helps organize our unruly instruments. A point is a theoretical possibility while our bodies are nothing if not real. When we speak of body parts, or joints, as points we reduce their complexity to near uselessness.

Let’s go back to the arabesque for a moment. Recall the vertical line of the standing leg. The dancer aligns the pelvis over the supporting foot to create the desired point-to-point relationship, yes? But, which part of the pelvis? And over which point of the ankle? Joints are three dimensional structures, which themselves have height, thickness, and depth. This may sound like splitting hairs, but I think it’s a crucial distinction. Let’s say the dancer has been tasked with performing a double pirouette in arabesque. I know from experience that the difference between a sublime suspended whirl and a flat footed failure is a matter of millimeters. To understand your own structures in their three dimensionality and their function makes this task seem simultaneously miraculous and achievable.

To simply try to align points is not enough. At times, it feels as though everything is working against the dancer. Centripetal force, gravity, and the internal voice that demands results are some of the many forces that make even this one moment on stage incredibly dynamic. The dancer requires the muscular strength, the flexibility, and the presence of mind to overcome these influences (and often self-doubt) to create the crucial and fleeting “moment.”

- I. Fanatically watching different ballerinas perform the pas de deux from George Balanchine’s “Diamonds” and reveling in the moment when the ballerina pushes off of her kneeling cavalier’s hand and into a dramatic pirouette in arabesque. Nuñez, Smirnova, and of course, Farrell. Each reveals themselves in this distilled choreographic moment.

Failure to align points in space has not only mechanical, but aesthetic consequences. Quite like the line itself is balanced by a forward and backward reaching energy in the fingers and toes, the arabesque is a balance of idealized form and personal function. Each dancer’s hips, spine, shoulder girdle, and legs are beautifully unique. With this knowledge comes the realization that one shape does not fit all. How might the dancer master it as a useful step in their arsenal and not a purely visual end unto itself? **(This needs work)**

- I. Mark Morris: When is an arabesque not an arabesque?  
Members of the Mark Morris Dance Group: ...  
Mark Morris: When the leg isn’t behind you.
- II. Preparing for a ballet exam by taking barre two feet from the mirror and practicing penches where my toe becomes visible by poking out from behind my head like a periscope. Or a unicorn horn. Hoping this work will earn me a good grade.

As points fall away from usefulness under scrutiny, so too does line. No part of the human form is truly flat. Even the long bones of the body, those which are so crucial to creating the exalted ideal of line, are curvilinear. As dancers we are often attempting to wrangle our volumetric instruments into arrangements that appear as shapes and lines.

- I. Mark Morris: When is an arabesque not an arabesque?  
Members of Mark Morris Dance Group: When the leg isn’t behind you!  
Mark Morris: When the leg is bent.

As you may have guessed, shape is also a fallacy. Many dancers are familiar with ballet’s obsession with a planar existence. Enthusiasts worship at the altar of “flat turn out.” I wonder how many knee and hip replacements have occurred due to this aesthetic pressure. Flatness is

key to the visual presentation of the legs, but is also prized in other locations of the professional ballet dancer's body. The absence of pronounced breasts and hips on female dancers, and stomach fat on male dancers seems to reinforce this trend.

- I. Marianne Starstadt in ballet class: "The knee is bumpy and ugly. It's the ugliest part of the body and that's why it must be hidden from the audience in arabesque."

Flat turn-out allows the kneecap in question (of the lifted leg) to revolve from a downward facing position to pointing directly at the audience. The leg now has lost some of its curvaceousness to the spectator's eye. It is now appropriately flat for presentation.

There is functional value added to a dancer's performance when they come to understand the complexity and limitations of their own pelvis and hip joints. To imagine that a *tendu a la seconde* really goes directly sideways from the body creates a chain reaction of instability and torque in each of the joints from the hip down to the standing foot. Aesthetic goals are achieved when students prioritize flatness, but at the cost of efficiency and eventually dancers' own health.

- I. Kant's notion that a beautiful thing serving a utilitarian purpose cheapens or reduces its purity.
- II. Jeannie Steel, in teaching the Cunningham technique, mentioning that students must "command" the shapes they make. Mentioning that a flatback arabesque is only truly achieved when one can do something from it. A utilitarian take on aesthetic goals to my mind.

It is this obsession with flatness that I think stops dancers from truly understanding their instrument and its limitations. The idea that limitation breeds creativity is a trope we hear all the time, and yet it seems it hasn't been applied thoroughly to the dancing form in a way that honors, informs, and inspires dancing artists.

- I. Positive space is the area or part of the composition that an object or subject occupies.

No dance environment I have ever been a part of uses the term "form" for the positive space which dancers inhabit. We get stuck at shape. But why? I suspect one reason might be that we are privileging the viewer's experience of dance by constantly talking about shape as opposed

to form. We're disempowering dancers by asking them to understand their instruments and the movements they make primarily in terms of how they appear to others.

- I. Teaching myself about shapes via Youtube and learning that they all fall into two categories: geometric and organic. Or some combination of the two.
- II. Remembering having a chalk rectangle drawn over my pudgy eight year old leotard-bedecked belly and torso in an attempt to visualize "squareness."

The human form's complexity means that it is only and always inhabiting positive space in three dimensions. As we dance the human form forms itself into forms. Our general misunderstandings of form begin to seem excusable when one realizes that dancers are simultaneously conceiving of one term in at least three separate ways in the previous sentence. While we may often be mislabeling our spatial vocabulary, we are fluent in its many lived expressions. The study of form, and particularly how form plays out in time, is where the dancer's expertise can be especially useful. What does inhabiting form feel like from inside the dancer? It is anything but flat. To create form in time is a living, throbbing experience.

- I. Talking to Adele and truly not being able to figure out if I am an object or subject while I dance.
- II. Maggie Nelson on Anne Carson's idea that we must "keep the center empty for God to rush in." How does the dancer do this when they are the mover and the space which moves?

I recently had the pleasure to perform 4'33 at the Merce Cunningham Trust's event "Night of 100 Solos." As a tribute to Cunningham's life partner and collaborator, John Cage, the dancers each picked three poses and then performed them. The "shapes" corresponded to the length of each of Cage's composition's three sections.

The event I took part in was an absolute feast of movement. Words literally will not describe the daring gorgeous acts I witnessed, but 4'33 was the most powerful moment by far. As we rehearsed in the days leading up to the show, Andrea Weber had assigned a dancer to be a sort of helper for the sections they weren't participating in. I just so happened to be in charge of the second section, which ended with 4'33. I would perform it in the show, but for the rehearsal I sat out.

Each of the twenty four dancers took three forms. Which meant that in the composition one saw seventy-two individual poses. They are held for a rather long time, and the second “shape” is especially enduring. I don’t know whether to call what happened in that moment complex, or impossibly plain. I just know it was one of the most powerful experiences I’ve ever witnessed.

We simply do not watch people in activated stillness. I find that we fuss, fidget, chatter, and generally fill our time with actions. Of course, channeling this penchant for movement is what makes dance sublime but to choose a configuration that you believe will mean something and then hold it for the better part of two minutes is a phenomenon that is best illustrated through the dancer’s complex experience of form.

The consequences of choosing a “shape” that was too complicated were entirely real. Try standing completely still in a form as simple as a *side tendu* for two minutes with the bodily energy you would like to emit on stage. It’s simply tiring. Your feet cramp, your smile cracks, and the sweat slowly beads and runs down your face. 4’33 was a lesson in the beauty and the usefulness of simplicity. It was a masterclass in time.

- I. Watching Justin Peck’s *Rodeo* online and realizing that instead of watching the two short men try to beat each other with ballet tricks, I am feverishly scanning the comparably still male dancers in the background. Watching their unguarded expressions as they watch dance. Forms watching moving forms.

From inside this held form, time plays tricks on you. It’s operating simultaneously in many different tempi even as you maintain stillness. Fastest (at least for me) is the glimmering half-thoughts that are at least quietened while performing, but never fully gone. I recently noticed that a hummingbird has to move incredibly quickly in order to give the breathtaking illusion of stillness in space. To be inside a form feels quite the same. Slower is the hammering heart of the performer. If only the audience could feel how quickly the heart beats in a freezing cold theatre while standing still and waiting for the curtain to rise. Slower still is the breath, often ragged and asymmetrical, but always in flux. It’s only once we acknowledge each of these inner layers of form that we can truly appreciate its outward expression.

This visible form, like an *arabesque tendu* for example, also has time playing on it in fascinating and myriad ways. Look to the seismograph-like waverings of the supporting foot. The dancer’s ankle constantly readjusting to the minute weight shifts that occur even in almost-stillness.

These weight shifts reverberate up and down the body and manifest in micromovements throughout the dancer's form. Not all forms are made equal, either. The lower back does not prefer to hyperextend for long. The effort that goes into holding the "ideal" *tendu derriere* for thirty seconds is not insignificant. It's downright difficult.

I. Arlene Croce: The arabesque is real. The leg is not.

Time works on the dancer's form in space in another, possibly cruel way. To create an idealized line with precision and reliability is work most easily done by a young, resilient dancer. Lines, shapes, forms, and actions which once seemed easily manageable to create and sustain are suddenly bedeviling as time wears on the dancing body. To create a *tendu derriere* twenty-seven years into your relationship with this particular form is not simply "assuming the position." It is more like taking stock of what the dancer has in them now as compared to hundreds of thousands of befores and reforming from this place. It is always a dynamic negotiation between fluid contents and idealized forms. This, in and of itself, is the dance.

So, in fact physical stillness is anything but static. In fact, it is for me, polyrhythmic in both its inward and outward expressions. Each of these time-bound processes produce their own barely visible effects on the dancer in space. True stillness is uncanny and impossible to achieve. Even the simplest pose, say lying down, could not be maintained indefinitely without the body's health eventually suffering.

I. Walking down the street in Crown Heights and seeing a small bird, on its feet, completely and utterly still. Stopping and waiting for it to hop, peck, or flap itself away. Continuing to wait for signs of life. Wondering if birds can die on their feet.

Movement is the language of life and it is fascinating to observe. Ben Shahn writes about Alexander Calder's sculptures and notes that they were the first to really introduce a time element into visual art. He explains why this was so compelling beautifully:

"Thus in stress and balance, in sequences of motion, in other basic and natural and probably common principles he saw tremendous aesthetic potentialities, and put them to work.

The result for us who watch the continuously interdependent movements, the varieties of form balanced daringly and with delicate precision, is to experience the perfect union of nature and art. Here is sculpture that creates endless patterns in space-time rhythms.”

He prefaces this description with the notion that Calder was unique in that he was the *only* of the modern artists to do so. Herein, for me, lies the issue. Calder is lauded for expressing that which dance artists have created for centuries. Granted, this book is predominantly about visual art, yes. However, why are the visual arts not communicating with dance about its comprehensive expression of form? In no way do I mean to devalue Calder’s work. I simply love his sculptures, but I also feel Calder’s examination of time is entry level when compared with how dance manipulates and capitalizes on time.

If a dancer in stillness is experiencing form-in-time in such a rich manner, why is their voice not the primary one we hear speaking about positive space? It seems to me that we are borrowing a simplified visual language from the art world possibly for the sake of convenience and translatability. But it also seems as though we, as dance artists, have the embodied knowledge to not just be borrowers. In fact, our language of form is an incredibly rich one so we’ve got capital to spare. We could, in fact, lead the conversation given that our instruments are the most fabulously sensitive form-makers.

I wonder also, if the trope of dancer-as object-is what keeps us locked in the two-dimensional shorthand of shape. Dancers are taught to be viewed. They strain their tendons, and bruise their bones in service of the pleasure of the other. How delicious to begin to inhabit your own form more richly, though. When one stops looking (or imagining being looked at constantly) as the primary source of feedback, a host of other sensations come to the surface. As I practice, I often find myself brought to laughter (tears too) by both the familiar and new physical experiences I undergo while dancing. The standing leg that never quite gets it right, the new-as-of-today knot in between the shoulder blades, the gorgeous melody the accompanist has selected vibrating through the eardrum and into the imagination.

- I. Teaching my morning Cunningham technique class without mirrors and telling the dancers that by not seeing themselves they can begin to construct an invisible and imaginary camera that exists outside of them through which they can observe their dancing.

- II. Looking back and wishing I had simply asked them to sense themselves in the absence of seeing.

But this can only happen once we give ourselves a proverbial pat on the back. Possibly we take this incredibly complex phenomenon of form-making as second nature, and we therefore think it doesn't merit examining or sharing. What would happen if we acknowledged the absolute symphony of processes, relationships, and memories that occur simply to be in embodied stillness? Imagine the richness available to us as artists (and teachers of future artists) if we were to point dancers' attention to all that they contain before they have even taken their first step.

- II. Looking at a picture of Wendy Whelan in an astonishing arabesque and feeling that even through the lens one can see her imagination (her spirit) arching and extending the form.
- III. Asking one of my students to reconstruct the adagio from yesterday's class and watching her begin by stating, "first, I imagine myself as a butterfly" before showing any movement whatsoever.

Just as the arabesque can be simplified to an intersection of lines, I find myself between crosshairs as an educator. I struggle to teach from a vantage point that satisfies both an aesthetic and an ethical imperative. I find it difficult to reconcile the strict forms-in-time that ballet has codified over centuries with the unbelievably diverse bodies, minds, and histories of the students I come across. I hear the rules and laws as laid down for me by my teachers. Each has its roots in an achievable visual product. They police the outward expression of the universalized forms in time and **(MORE)**

"Pas de chat always moves toward the back leg!"

"I don't want to see what you ate for lunch."

"One toe, two heels in sussous!"

When the dancer begins to understand their unique instrument's form-making abilities they come into dialogue with ballet's idealized poses. Their body becomes an I can imagine questions like:

"Given what I have, how much of this can I reasonably do?"

"What must happen in my particular body to achieve the illusion of this shape?"

"How does this particular configuration echo not just outward to a viewer, but also inward?"

If this is not the case, forms will continue to be foisted upon the dancer who then becomes, yet again, the silent receptacle for others' ideas.

As I study form more, I realize that is an inherently dynamic entity. Often we think of it, as Plato would have us do, as a removed idea or a fixed entity unchanged by time. Until more dance practitioners begin to dialogue with form in a personal way I believe it will remain a cold and purely cerebral idea. To physicalize form for the individual is to acknowledge both the aesthetic demands of ballet's visual presentation and a healthful and useful approach to creating forms in space that can be sustained over the course of a career if not a lifetime.

To acknowledge that the importance of making forms in time is not only to be judged by visual product is to say the internal processes that must occur to embody a particular configuration matter too. It means, to me, that anyone who can come into a good dialogue with forms can be speaking the language of ballet. It simply may not look exactly like what we're accustomed to.

It's my belief that, as ballet dancers and teachers, we should each have the autonomy to choose our own starting point. We can begin with the body's design, or its invisible and sacred contents as we begin to practice and teach this movement language. But we must remember that form and contents are not one another's opposites. Each affects the other and no approach is complete without a recognition that **(Some ending quote by Shahn, methinks. Poetic and one that acknowledges form's and content's interrelatedness.)**

More Kant stuff:

Marceline on Teaching: For me, improvisation is the most familiar of all dance forms. It is like running free in a meadow with many colored flowers to choose from. I want my dancers to experience the same sense of boundlessness. (Kant and the Sublime)

Science may be there to explain the world, but we still need to contemplate it. (Viewing in stillness.)

Disinterested attitude: The Eakins!

Utility cheapens beauty: art for art's sake. The message of the flower is the flower.

Re Maggie Nelson: How do we leave the center empty if we are the positive space/ the subject of the work?

\*As dancers we create form in four dimensions. Points to lines, lines to shapes, shapes to forms, forms to moving forms in time. Form is positive space. Positive space is subject. We are subject.

The first thing I think about when I hear positive space is the actual feeling I want to create in an empty studio. How shall we choose to fill these ninety minutes we have together? What choices will we make and how much will we enjoy them? This may sound corny, but it seems to me that positivity and enjoyment are a crucial ingredient in the somewhat unforgiving study of form.

I teach the Cunningham technique currently. So often this work is thought of as ultra-formed. Indeed it is heavily reliant on specific shapes that the body makes in space. For me, it is impossible to imagine approaching this without a sense of humor, levity, and self-compassion. Creating a positive space paves the way for studying positive space.

I was training this weekend to learn how better to teach Merce's technique and Jen Goggans casually threw something out that piqued my interest. She said that the shapes in Cunningham's world are as full of negative space as is possible. We as dancers are the subject of the dance onstage. Shall we start there? A positive space approach? Or shall we look to abundant swathes of negative space to embrace and enfold. How do we wish to occupy space? How

much is each of us allowed? Why does it feel so good to be in the largest shape you can possibly make?

To study form is to ask our body to take new shape. To bend our mind around a concept and will the bones into a new configuration thus imagined. Cunningham himself burst the lexicon of shape wide open several times over in his career. The possibilities of positive space that the human body could create (and where!) were made manifold.

And so, the shapes that I am then tasked with asking my students to recreate are complex difficult to sustain and sometimes only theoretically possible. How does one really put one's leg to the side? Nothing about our body is truly flat. No surface is purely planar. What act of imagination must occur for us to even attempt to move this way? When we speak of line, we reduce ourselves by at least two dimensions.

So why are we so interested in line? Do lines really add up to shape? In a sense, yes, but only if we imagine ourselves as Hangmen and women. Shape, to me, feels like much more than this. It is a living, throbbing, experience.