

Noa Eshkol did not herself dance in public after the performances in the 1950s of the first Chamber Dance Group (the name she gave to her experimental group). Anyone who saw Eshkol dancing will recall the grace and strength of her movements, light but strong, lending them an appearance of full engagement with the actions and complete detachment from any possible distractions of the environment. Attempts to describe qualities of movement inevitably lead to this kind of near self-contradiction. What do they really mean?

perfect his art could learn a lot from them'. Eshkol herself alluded occasionally to that essay, and whether deliberately or not she surely put into practice a conception of movement suggested in it. The kinds of movement that attracted her provide a clue. In 1950, her friend Dr Moshe Feldenkrais drew her attention to Judo, of which he was himself an accomplished exponent, and they attended a demonstration of the underlying principles, given at the Royal Albert Hall in London by G Koizumi. Later, she was equally fascinated by the movements of Tai Chi Chuan.

at the same time allow maximum utilization of the body's possibilities. Not many choreographers sought after such purity of movement and freedom of invention, but outstanding among those who did was Merce Cunningham. However, their developments followed very different paths, and it is instructive to compare them: two choreographers pursuing pure movement, greatly influenced by music but avoiding dependence on it, rejecting story-telling and added meaning, striving always for precision, looking for the untried, not tied to a theatrical setting.

Eshkol, Cunningham, Kleist



Noa Eshkol

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A hint of the image Eshkol might herself have had in mind can perhaps be found in the forms of movement that captured her admiration. Her teacher Tehilla Roessler told Eshkol that she should direct her attention to puppets. Was she perhaps thinking of Heinrich von Kleist's essay On the Marionette Theatre – in which the narrator reports a conversation with a friend: '...the mute gestures of these puppets gave him much satisfaction and [he] told me bluntly that any dancer who wished to

This was certainly not an attraction to fashionable activities: it was before these martial arts acquired the popularity they later gained in the West. It is more plausibly linked to the ideas raised in von Kleist's essay, of movement akin to the seemingly effortless swing of a pendulum.

Eshkol saw in music the prime example of an art that was pure and self-sufficient, and always strived for an equally pure art of movement, one that would

Yet – all this led them to such startlingly different courses and conclusions that one might even ask if they actually had anything in common. Let us look more closely at the way their thoughts were expressed in their deeds.

Cunningham did not reject musical and sound accompaniment. He worked together with musical composers, especially John Cage, but they worked as separate identities, not fitting movement to composed music, nor music

to the choreographed movements. He and Cage would agree on a 'rhythmic structure' of durations, and then compose completely separately, without reference to each other, bringing the two components together only when both had been completed. The resulting combination was unpredictable. Cunningham later described the effect of this approach as conferring a sense of freedom, while at the same time always enabling him to know with complete confidence what point he had reached in relation to the agreed rhythmic structure.

Cunningham's dancers had to be accustomed to performing their movements as the music was played, without being confused by it, as people might hold a conversation without being bothered by sounds of traffic passing nearby. The idea was to generate in this way new combinations of sound and movement which they might never have thought of through deliberate planning in direct cooperation. Cunningham's long association with John Cage involved the employment of chance procedures in both movement and music as well as in their combination. This led Cunningham to adopt the technique of 'chance operations' for the composition of combinations he would not otherwise have invented. He employed the Chinese classic I Ching (an ancient text of divination involving permutation and combination) and the application of random numbers, in establishing the order of phrases of movement, the placing of the dancers and other elements forming the basis of many of his compositions.

After her student days, Eshkol virtually never composed dances with musical accompaniments, which she saw as a distraction from the movement. For this reason, she removed the use of

music from the equation. However, her interest in and love of music was great, and she derived inspiration from the serial music which was still considered avant-garde in the mid-twentieth century. Furthermore, the model of music as a pure art, representing nothing but itself, and embodied in an objective notation, was the model for her endeavours. She aspired to a completely autonomic art of movement.

The parallel with music led Eshkol to the conclusion that dance would never be a fully fledged art until the composition of movement could be supported by a writing system that allowed the choreographer to think in objective terms about his/her material in the way a musical composer had been able to do for hundreds of years, and to record the results in a symbolic representation readable by others. Roessler told her that such a system existed, and advised her to go to England and study with Laban. But the approach to movement she encountered there was not to her taste, and she did not find in Labanotation a system suited to use as a compositional tool. Eventually she developed together with Avraham Wachman a quantified symbolic notation based on physically verifiable basic elements – Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation (EWMN).

Like Eshkol, Cunningham always avoided the conventional, habitual and outworn, and looked for the new. When he was made aware of the computer software originally called LifeForms (and later renamed DanceForms), he adopted it as a tool for exploration and composition, again using chance operations to create and order phrases, now with the computer, with the purpose of discovering new and untried passages of movement. He would design positions, and allow the

program to join them in a sequence, revealing things that he had been unaware of previously. This increased the complexity of his work, but fulfilled his aim of free exploration and innovation together with as much precision as possible. He did not demonstrate the results to his dancers by means of the computer display with its moving figures, but learned the new phrases he had generated with the help of the software and conveyed them 'live' to the dancers in the studio. This approach was a way of pushing the possibilities of the body; there would always be something else it could do. The problem was how to reach it. He did not think the possibilities could be codified, except according to the body itself. He did not, however, undertake a radical analysis of those possibilities as did Noa Eshkol. She regarded the use of chance as an abdication of the artist's ability to choose, and adopted a thoroughgoing reductive method. The analysis embedded in EWMN was based on a reduction to fundamental quantified components of human movement that could be integrated in endless ways. It enabled her to employ methods such as serialism in the systematic exploration and composition of the movement material.

Cunningham did not use a fully fledged notation system, although he made stick-figure 'notations' of sequences, sometimes with emotive cues – but only for his own eyes. He did not reject symbolic notations out of hand, but favoured a more directly visual approach. He considered that both together would be 'enlivening'. He evidently did not experiment with composition using a symbolic notation. An attempt to document some of his work in Labanotation was defeated by the difficulty of rendering the complexity and sudden changes, although according to Cun-

ningham these drawbacks in Labanotation were later addressed.

Eshkol's interest was less in semantic associations and much more in movement 'for its own sake', devoid of theatrical effects of any kind. 'Chamber Dance does not portray a literary plot, or interpret music, and does not rely upon additional evocative media such as scenery and costume, and in this it differs from theatrical dance. This renunciation of theatrical elements... is undertaken with the intention of confronting ourselves with the material, and obliging us to deal with its organization... to compose dances in ways which emerge from the nature of the material itself.' (From the programme notes for performances at universities in the U.S.A. and at The Place in London, 1969.)

When asked if any of his pieces had a story or a meaning, Cunningham replied with an unequivocal 'No!' As he explained, movement alone has such life, that while it can be combined with other elements, it does not need anything else.

Semantics: stories, meaning – were seen by Cunningham to be unnecessary, and by Eshkol – an actual distraction, although she did give titles to her dances that often indicated literary or musical references. While Cunningham used music and sound (albeit in an unconventional way), as well as designed costumes and sets including projected decor, Eshkol ruled out the use of any of these elements.

Neither he nor Eshkol confined their performances to the stages of theatres. It so happened that Eshkol's first public performance with her Chamber Dance Group in the early 1950s was on a temporary stage in a dining hall

under construction in kibbutz Deganya B, and Cunningham's first performance in the late 1950s, together with John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg and others, was an event that also took place in a dining hall – that of Black Mountain College in North Carolina.

Cunningham's use of technology, and of the random juxtaposition of artistic components, made possible the exploration of sometimes unexpected combinations of phrases. This he referred to as 'a form of anarchy'. But it did not lead to a systematic radical analysis of human movement. This is probably the crux of the matter: both Cunningham and Eshkol were looking for the new and untried in movement, but their methods of searching for it were completely different. Cunningham employed chance methods not arising directly or necessarily from movement, procedures which would lead to hopefully new combinations.

Eshkol regarded improvisation as the abdication of the choreographer's power to choose, and having arrived at a reductive view of human movement, was able to employ modes of composition such as serialism borrowed from music, in order to explore the possibilities through the manipulation of different structures and ordering, the searches always being monitored, as an explorer would use a map, and notated.

Cunningham always maintained a welcoming attitude to the new and the open-ended, the perception that there must always be something else. Eshkol sought knowledge so that the intuitive grace of harmonious movement could be deliberately achieved through a complete knowledge of the objectively recognized components of bodily movement. Kleist maintained

that the only hope for humans was to go forward to total knowledge. Eshkol's work continued always to be free of the false emotion condemned by Kleist, and anything that contaminated pure movement, always seeking new understanding of its nature and possibilities. This tireless adherence to intricately thought out structures built up from precise elements led to the creation of unique innovative blossomings of movement in which – to quote the companion of Kleist's narrator – 'Grace itself returns when knowledge has as it were gone through an infinity.'

Notes

References to Merce Cunningham's views on dance composition are based on interviews and conversations recorded at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis in 1981 and 2009.

References to Noa Eshkol's views are based on comments in her published books and on many personal conversations with her.

The 1810 essay by Heinrich von Kleist, On the Marionette Theatre, translated by Idris Parry, can be found on [www.http://southerncrossreview.org/9/kleist.htm](http://southerncrossreview.org/9/kleist.htm)

John Harries met Noa Eshkol in 1948 and became a partner for discussion, her earliest student, and colleague, collaborating on the first book on Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation, and on the texts and graphics of most publications on the subject. He was a member of Eshkol's first Chamber Dance Group. In the 1960s he began to apply EW notation in visual art including video. He continues with this work, about which he has written books and articles.