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Movement Research Performance Journal

Movement Research

Performance Journal 58/59

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Journal

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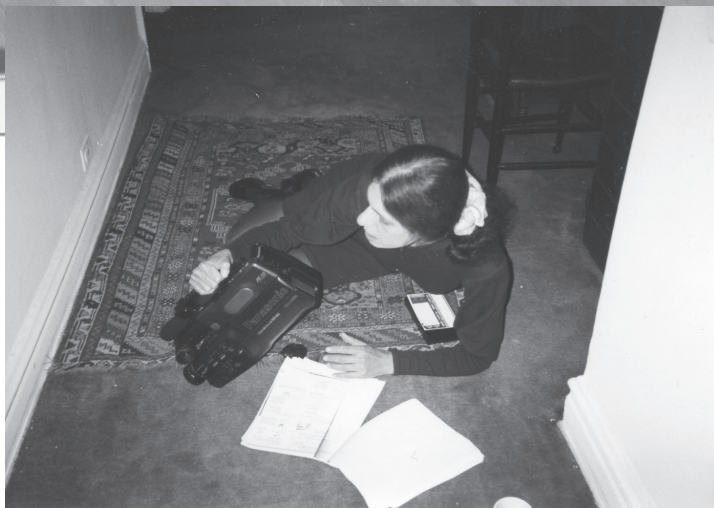
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Photos: Tom Brazil, 1978



Photos: Karen Robbins, ca. 1995/96



Marjorie Gamso: Absent Presence

Nicholas Gamso

Choreographer Marjorie Gamso (1944–2011) created dozens of dances throughout her life, as well as film and video pieces, published and unpublished essays, and poems. Her work was performed at PS1 (at the para-narrative “Dance/Text” festival in 1980), The Kitchen, the New Museum, and the Cunningham studio at Westbeth; she often performed at The Construction Company, a small dance theater on East 18th Street, between 1980 and her death.¹

Although she took ballet classes at the 92nd Street Y, and organized a single student performance at Skidmore College (before transferring to Columbia), Marjorie only began to produce dances in earnest after relocating to Los Angeles in 1968. She became active in happenings and group improvisations, appearing in two Steve Paxton pieces at Ace Gallery in Venice, while at the same time studying ballet with Carmelita Maracci. It was in LA, too, that she presented her first work of professional choreography: *Octopus City* (1970), at the University of Southern California, part of a festival sponsored by Experiments in Art and Technology. Eight dancers stood on individual plexiglass platforms, each over a bay of colored lights. As the lights switched on and off, the dancers executed specific movement combinations—a conceit that anticipated Marjorie’s future interests in chance and variability, in addition to her complicated production designs. When she returned to New York in 1971, she studied with James Waring and Merce Cunningham and in 1973 founded her own company, Marjorie Gamso and the Energy Crisis.

Marjorie’s choreography was inventive, difficult, and, above all, precise. But it sometimes had the illusion of disorganization. Her group dances were full of repeated gestures that moved at different speeds, falling out of sync and creating a sense of dissonance and plurality. She liked to inject chaotic elements—in *Fugitive Furniture* (1983), she threw wooden chairs from a balcony onto the stage, filling it with obstructions just before a dancer’s entrance. Bryan Hayes, who appeared in the piece, recalls Marjorie’s preference for a “choreography of indirection” in which “some element was left out of the equation that the dancer would have to resolve.”² Dancer and choreographer were conspiring, driving one another forward. Perhaps this approach explains the devotion she enjoyed among a small circle of collaborators—writing in *The New York Times*, critic Jennifer Dunning described Marjorie’s dancers moving about the stage with “dreamy reverence.”³

But it was never just dance. She used tape recorders, silent film reels, a polaroid camera, live video projection—components that weren’t always part of the performance, but enabled a kind of research into the moving body. In a study for her unfinished cycle *The Enlightenment* (1989–92), she made a video of herself dancing, scanned the tape with an optical printer, and replicated individual frames; she could examine her movements, learn them in reverse. The process would, in turn, distort the final product, giving the impression of faint “ghost images” haunting her figure.

Technical experiments like these were often alibis for more philosophical explorations. Marjorie was fascinated by the discourse of self and other and, in later pieces, cast fellow performers to play her double—including a cousin, Sophia Orlow, in her final dance *After You* (2011). As the dancer and writer Kenneth King remarked in a tribute to Marjorie published in *Dance Magazine*, “[h]er dance always confronted and celebrated otherness.”⁴ She had, in fact, studied anthropology in college (reputedly soliciting a graduate school recommendation from Margaret Mead) and was versed in critical theory, psychoanalysis, and modern literature, which she read for hours each day, cigarette in hand. Her eccentric tastes and preoccupations had a way of appearing in her performance work, sometimes as a kind of veiled self-portraiture. She identified strongly with Lucia Joyce, for example, channeling the famous dancer and schizophrenic during a segment of *After You*. Later she conceived a piece around the life and death of Charlotte Temple, the doomed protagonist of Susanna Rowson’s so-titled 1791 novel—part of an unfinished collaboration with Andrew Gurian. These few examples (of many) evince an aestheticism that was everywhere in her work, and which set it apart from the more austere style associated with live art since the 1960s.

“In the Continuous Present . . .” is one of several unpublished writings recovered from Marjorie’s files after her death, and since collected by the New York Public Library’s Jerome Robbins Dance Division. The essay is characteristically Marjorie: deliberate; referential; drawing from personal history (disclosing a “mad love” for a “genuine madman”); reflexive (alluding to her own “skewed romanticism”); dosed with portentous imagery (a hunter wearing the pelts of his prey) and confrontations with popular culture (experiencing her first period as she prepared to star in Sandy Wilson’s *The Boyfriend* at summer camp). The piece also mentions her short and unhappy marriage to a theater director and writer, Jerry Benjamin—an experience that is not addressed in any of Marjorie’s other work.

In the Continuous Present . . .
Marjorie Gamso

1. A Party Dress. It is pink, of course, and it is organdy. It itches and makes me feel special, desirable. No subsequent garment has ever produced such sensations. Yet sometimes, when I dress up for a performance (a ritual dressing up always precedes the act of performing), I am reminded of the garment that had the power to transform the one it clothed, and I feel special and desirable. I wonder how hunters feel when they put on the skins of animals they have killed.

2. The Poor Little Match Girl. Every telling of this story moves me to tears. I learn that the tears produced by tear-jerkers are permissible tears while those produced by mishaps and misbehavior are mere self-indulgences. Later, when I learn to read for myself, I read everything as a tear-jerker. Like Don Quixote and Madame Bovary, I have learned to misread. An eternal curse on Hans Christian Anderson who deceived me for so long! When there are tears in your eyes, you are apt to miss the tears in things -- yes, “the tears in things.”

3. A Secret Club. There are three of us. We collect colored pencils (actually, we steal them from 5¢ stores) and sharpen them down to nothing, saving the sacred shavings and glueing them on to cigar boxes. Sometimes, we paint and shellac the fetish objects we have created; other times, we leave them raw, unfinished; ultimately, it is their fate to be destroyed. We are, after all, a secret club, a band of robbers; we have to erase our tracks. Is it an accident that the career I eventually choose, dancing, consists of tracing gestures in time and space and erasing them? No, it isn’t an accident: I still love the forbiddenness of the activity, the sense of adventure into a realm both sacred and profane. I admit, however, that the impermanence of the work troubles and saddens me with increasing frequency.

4. The Grey Goose. I play the role of the grey goose in an enactment of the folk song that begins, “O my daddy went a-hunting, lord, lord, lord. . .” I do not realize, at the time, that this inconsequential grade school sketch marks the beginning of my life as a dancer and of the skewed romanticism that will come to characterize my subsequent work in dance -- a dying goose as opposed to a swan.

5. The Boy Friend. All in one summer, I get to play Polly Brown in “The Boy Friend,” have my first menstrual period and my first adolescent romance. I’m at a summer camp where boys and girls are separated except for 15 minute meetings after dinner and closely chaperoned “socials” on Friday nights. My boy friend only does the “slow dances,” so at the socials we sit primly on the sidelines, looking on a bit disdainfully at the awkward lindy-hopping of our peers. It is cool to disdain rock ‘n roll, it is cool to disdain adolescence, it is cool to disdain. . . .

1

6. Bridge. I pick up this compulsive card game at HUNTER COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL. There are enough of us who have learned the basic rules of the game that a foursome can usually be found in any given class at any given hour. Sometimes, it is even possible to play during class -- during those classes in which the teacher looks at her lesson plan instead of the students in the room. I am the only one of the bridge players who isn’t clever enough to do well at schoolwork without paying attention to it, but I absolutely refuse to degrade myself by giving my attention to the kind of education being offered in school. School -- a place where the (supposedly) knowing pass on the (supposedly) known to the unknowing -- seems to me to have very little to do with learning. It still seems to me (5/28/86) that what’s interesting to learn about is what’s unknown, and that only when teacher and student, master and apprentice, adept and beginner grope towards it, together, unknowing, does significant learning take place.

7. Class Consciousness. During orientation, they give out maps of the town where the college is located and warn you about the streets you must avoid. It’s a “town and gown” town, they say. Help! I’m a prisoner in an ivy tower. I read the daily newspaper assiduously as if the smell of ink could somehow put me in touch with the reality from which I am so far removed.

8. L’Année Dernière à Marienbad. I’m enthralled. Nothing is predictable and everything is inevitable. The characters (including that central character, the camera) glide back and forth between the present tense and the past one with such slippery grace -- experience I’ve been writing for. After *Marienbad*, it recurs with other works of art that I encounter. One day it occurs with a man in whom nothing is predictable and everything is inevitable, a genuine madman.

9. Mad Love. The encounter with the man becomes an affair, later a marriage; still later, a memory -- no, a whole memory theatre filled with images of pain, grief, anger, pity, love and delirium. (On memory theatre, see Frances Yates’ *The Art of Memory*.)

10. California. I hitchhike every day to ballet lessons, to rehearsals, to workshops in invisible theatre, to the university where I’m enrolled as a graduate student in a department of anthropology (my feelings about school remaining unchanged, I finally do quit). I make close friends, friends who risk poverty and danger in order to dance. I’ve never known such close friendships before: we go late at night to brightly lit delis where the waiters and waitresses have been trained to refill coffee cups every quarter hour; we talk faster and faster as the clock ticks on, switching back and forth between standard English and hip-talk, never quite finding the words for what we have to say to each other. The whole State of California is laid back except us; we’re energized, we love to dance.

2

11. The Work. I am invited to make a piece for an "Experiments in Art and Technology" festival. I think about nothing else but the piece 24 hours a day for days and days. I am both thrilled and disappointed with the resulting work, but I realize that the work itself has become more important than the friendly milieu in which it takes place. To develop the work, I return to New York. I sublet a filmmaker's loft on Chambers Street. I am practicing hard and studying hard and going to office jobs (best of all are the ones that are totally routine, where I can daydream and contemplate The Work while typing, etc.). I am always working when I am awake and always I am awake until exhaustion overcomes me late at night. I am now the opposite of the sluggard I was at HUNTER COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL.

12. Ambition. Now that I am always working, I find myself wanting recognition. How to get myself recognized as a choreographer? Well, there is one older and respected choreographer who believes in what I do and tries to help. He dies prematurely. I miss his sage sad eyes and his mordant wit and his good intentions for me. Curiously, however, within weeks following his death, opportunities begin to come my way: a teaching gig in England, a sizable grant from the government. Strange to feel that Jimmy's death was somehow connected to my sudden good fortune; sobering to realize how short-lived good fortune can be. No invitations to appear at important European festivals following my trip to England, no big grants the following season – only a few invitations to work as artist-in-residence at a few unexceptional colleges with, by and large, unexceptional student bodies. I accept the invitations. I continue working and wanting the recognition that one is always wanting.

13. Ennobling Blood. Every month now, I bleed excessively and undergo severe bouts of nausea and fatigue, violent upheavals of the digestive system. No doctor that I consult has any miracle cure to offer. Will I at least be ennobled by suffering? Will it make me wiser? A better artist? Will it prepare me for sainthood?

3

The origin of the text remains a mystery. Many of her essays and commentaries began as grant applications, for example her unfinished "Proposal for a Seminar on Chance," dated 2004, which relates the experience of undergoing an MRI. Other writings, like a twelve-page single-spaced letter to the audience of her *Enlightenment* cycle, were written to "supplement" her dances. "In the Continuous Present..." is more autobiographical than either of these, and considerably shorter—thirteen vignettes, written as a list, perhaps with a larger project in mind. Clearly it was worked, edited; in the archive, there is a copy with some hand-written corrections (the list numbered, as it is here). I think of the text as an accidental counterpoint to Marjorie's essay "Apartment" (1999), which accompanied a video piece of the same name, reflecting on what she saw as a cloistered childhood—growing up on West 93rd Street in Manhattan—and a difficult relationship with her mother: "It was for that brief period after my mother's death my privilege (indeed, it was my duty as 'executor' of her 'will') to transgress the law to which I was subject as a child ... 'DO NOT TOUCH,' and all the variants."⁵

Reading "In the Continuous Present ...," I find a whole "memory theater" (Marjorie's phrase, borrowed from the historian Frances Yates) of the artist in her youth. There are early encounters with stage and screen, adolescent embarrassments, intellectual rites of passage. She is bored with LA, uninterested in the "friendly milieu" of artists she meets. She's captivated by her own mind and hungry for rigorous, meaningful work ("I am now the opposite of the sluggard I was at Hunter College High School"). Signs of distress are there, too. She admits to "wanting the recognition one is always wanting" and betrays specific disappointments: "No invitations to appear at important European festivals following my trip to England, no big grants the following season." There are other, more personal hardships. The essay is dated, parenthetically, May 28, 1986; within a few months, she would visit my family in Lubbock, Texas to undergo a hysterectomy—she suffered horribly from endometriosis—traveling 2,000 miles from New York to spare herself the stress of convalescing on 93rd Street. The last lines of the text refer to her illness and intimate a succession of crises to come.

Marjorie's essay is noteworthy for another reason. The Jimmy she references is James Waring, the celebrated avant-garde choreographer with whom Marjorie studied some time after her return to New York in 1971 and before Waring's death, from cancer in 1975, at the age of 53. Marjorie shared Jimmy's idiosyncrasies, his sense of humor, his radical commitments.⁶ The two seemed to move in similar circles, even before she became his student. (He almost certainly knew her husband, who reviewed one of Jimmy's productions in the *Floating Bear*, in 1962.) But the substance of their friendship remains unknowable to outsiders, and was, in any case, cut short by fate. "Strange to feel that Jimmy's death was somehow connected to my sudden good fortune," she writes, describing a grant she received shortly after he died, "sobering to realize how short-lived good fortune can be."

- 1 Thanks to Sally Bowden, Andrew Gurian, Leslie Satin, Elena Alexander, Kenneth King, Ellen Kastel, Philip Beitchman, and especially Jeff Gamso for help in researching this. Much of the information came from Marjorie Gamso's performance chronology, assembled by Bowden and Gurian, for the NYPL's Jerome Robbins Dance Division. Thanks also to Ammiel Alcalay and Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Documentation Initiative for supporting my inquiry into Marjorie's unpublished writings several years ago. Special thanks to Karen Robbins and Tim Armstrong, partner of the late Tom Brazil, for providing photographs of Marjorie.
- 2 Bryan Hayes, "Marjorie (His One Thousand and One Memories)," unpublished manuscript, 2012.
- 3 Jennifer Dunning, "Dance: Marjorie Gamso," *The New York Times*, March 6, 1979.
- 4 Kenneth King, "Marjorie Gamso: Dancing the Enigma," *Dance Magazine*, January 12, 2012.
- 5 Marjorie Gamso, "Apartment," *Women & Performance* 10 (1999), nos. 1–2 ("Performing Autobiography," ed. Leslie Satin), 59–68.
- 6 For more on Waring's work and teaching, see Leslie Satin, "The Philosophy of Art History, Dance, and the Sixties," in *Reinventing Dance in the 1960s: Everything Was Possible*, eds. by Sally Banes and Andrea Harris (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).