

TRISHA BROWN: *DRAWING FOR PYRAMID AND UNTITLED* (1975)

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The innovative dancer and choreography Trisha Brown made *Drawing for Pyramid* and *Untitled*, two of the drawings included in *Art=Text=Art*. Some background information about Brown and her dance aesthetic will help us to understand these intriguing visual designs, both completed in 1975.

Born in Washington State, Brown moved to New York City in the mid-1960s after studying experimental dance with Anna Halprin in the San Francisco Bay Area. At the outset of her career, Brown, like other performing artists of her day, began to question the validity of following tradition and creating conventional story narratives in theater and dance. Responding to the drive for personal empowerment and liberation characterizing American society around 1970, Brown sought alternative ways to create dialogues and to engage audiences more actively with performance art. She wanted audiences to freely interpret new works in ways that were relevant to their current experiences, rather than to understand them only in the way dictated by the artist's intention.

Inspired by Eastern philosophy and aesthetics, Brown and others evolved a dance practice encouraging contemplation of "art in the first function." This perspective suggests that paint, sculptural materials such as wood or metal, and the body itself are sufficient tools for conveying meaning, without the need to add overlays of narrative or figural representation. Materials or the body's movements themselves are conduits for an audience's contemplation of meaning. Such artworks encourage an open-ended and active approach to interpretation by the viewer. To this end, even artworks that seemed

esoteric could encourage a form of democratic thinking and acting.

Brown was initially influenced by the Eastern aesthetic practiced in Robert Dunn's choreography workshops, which encouraged developing "scores" that focused on an open-ended construct using three basic aspects of choreography: *time*, *space*, and *movement*. Such a choreographic score might include general instructions for space—"Use the lowest level possible"—while also instructing dancers to use timing: "Stop twice, pause, and then repeat movement at twice the speed." Movement choices might include instructions like, "Notice three gestures from people on the street while arriving at the theater and use them in this dance." These dance scores were simple, but they generated elegantly beautiful and humanistic dance experiences for audiences. Viewers could recognize pedestrian movements that they themselves could perform. These open-ended experiences allowed viewers to interpret the works as they wished.

If you like, you can stop reading right now and perform for yourself a short Trisha Brown dance, based on a type of score she used in her 1976 work *Line Up*. Stand still. Close your eyes. Using your left and right hands simultaneously, bring each hand from your side and touch the top of your head. Now try this: while doing the movement with your left and right hands at the same time, use two different timing schemes. Your left hand moves like this: 1 count up, 1 count down; 2 counts up, 2 counts down; etc., until you reach 10 counts up, 10 counts down. At the same time, use your right hand—but use the reverse timing scheme: 10 counts up, 10 counts down; 9 counts up, 9 counts down; etc. That's pretty hard to do!

Whenever Brown created scores for her choreography, she regarded this work as an opportunity to generate intriguing arrangements of time, space, and movement, even if she used only ordinary means of bodily motion. Her scores often included complex instructions that challenged dancers to explore extreme forms of virtuosity, including physical challenges like retrograding movement, that is, performing a movement backwards in time, or other complex mind-games involving unusual coordination of the body—executed precisely to counted beats.

Let's look again at Brown's two ink drawings on graph paper, for which she employed strategies similar to her method of creating scores. Each drawing uses a mathematical numbering system. Like the two timing schemes in *Line Up*, in each two-dimensional drawing the zigzag network of lines creates at least two visual systems occurring at the same time in different spaces

of the paper. Each system allows for interesting interactions and overlapping of lines—referencing the way two dancers can dance independently, or repeat some of the same steps and paths across space, or move in synchrony with each other. While on one level these drawings are beautiful abstract images permitting viewer contemplation of linear movement, in a dancer's mind the lines describe movement in three-dimensional space.

Notice how people move naturally through built spaces and how some movements are like drawing lines through the air. Understand that these movements are the product of innate human choreographic systems operating simultaneously in a complex and intriguing fashion. Choreographers like Brown study these movement systems and recognize their extraordinary potential to inspire dance.

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