

Assemblage (1968) as Strategy:
Collaborative Production and Collective Reception at the Origins of Artists' Television

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Merce Cunningham is surely one of the greatest names in the history of 20th century choreography. His decades-long collaboration with John Cage—that unambiguous lodestone for postwar experimental music—would seem the quintessential example of an *oeuvre* whose basic contours have long since been established, one which confines the art historian's labor to the realm of exegesis. Yet within this wide-ranging literature, the Cunningham Company's investigation of "dance for camera" has been invariably dated to the mid-1970s, when Charles Atlas was established as the company's first filmmaker-in-residence. [1] Yet as significant as this collaboration would be, Cunningham's groundbreaking work within the field of post-cinematic choreography had actually begun nearly half a decade before, when he was invited by the legendary San Francisco Bay Area public radio and television pioneer Richard O. Moore to produce what would be the company's first work for broadcast television. The resulting production—lost and forgotten for nearly four decades—not only presaged Cunningham's future investigations into moving image choreography, but leveraged an unprecedented affiliation with broadcast television to stage and to consider the changing nature of public space and public art within a newly televisual public sphere.

Assemblage as Intermedia

The work's title, *Assemblage* (1968), succinctly focuses attention to concerns both formal and theoretical that had long grounded the company's aesthetic direction. [2] Developing throughout the 1950s from the more commonplace idea of collage, the rhetoric of assemblage was firmly established within the critical vernacular with William Seitz's 1961 exhibition "The Art of Assemblage" for the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In his ambitious catalog essay for that exhibition, Seitz sought to establish a deep history for the term by ranging widely across late 19th and early 20th century modernist aesthetics. Moving beyond the familiar idea of collage as the incorporation of heterogeneous material within the pictorial frame of the canvas, Seitz signaled a more encompassing concern with the work's situation both within and against its physical environment. Specifically, he argued that the principle of radical juxtaposition could not be understood simply as a formal combination internal to a given structure or field, but must rather be envisioned as a kind of bridge between the inner and outer space of the aesthetic frame, even a point of interface or translation between different representational traditions.

In his 1966 book *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings*, Allan Kaprow sought to advance upon Seitz's genealogy through what he considered a more fundamental transformation in the relationship between modern art and its architecture. [3] Claiming that the foundational condition for the modern tradition of painting and sculpture has been its institutional setting within the rectilinear confines of the museum space, he pointed to the storm of criticism that erupted from artists and critics when works were first installed within the curved walls of Frank Lloyd Wright's spiraling Guggenheim building. For Kaprow, Wright's building not only served as a harrowing disruption of this ossified rectilinear tradition, but seemed to represent something of a limit-point for a field that had failed to keep pace with the rival arts. Museum and gallery architecture, he claimed, had become an "old container" within which contemporary artists increasingly felt constrained. The new art had become forced to

abandon the museum space entirely or else to purposefully undertake its radical reconstruction.

As time went on, Kaprow himself seemed to align himself with the first alternative, increasingly seeking to divorce his Happenings not only from the context of the art museum but from all contexts associated with any of the established arts. Eliminating the audience entirely, they would involve all participants directly in the chosen situation, creating a specific, unique and unrepeatable context with each individual action. [4] The later alternative—an active reconstruction of the institutions of contemporary art—would find greater appeal within the writing of Michael Kirby. A performance historian whose 1965 *Happenings: An Illustrated Anthology* would constitute the first published survey of the movement, Kirby was similarly invested in exploring art's exhibitionary situation. But where Kaprow's model of Happenings sought an unfettered engagement with "life itself" that had no place for traditional art institutions or practices, Kirby's interest in what he termed "The New Theatre" of the 1960s lay in the way in which it created aesthetic, discursive, and institutional spaces within which the previously segregated worlds of painting and sculpture, music, dance, and cinema could increasingly come to overlap and coalesce. Rather than a forced choice between "art" and "life," Kirby understood this new "Combine Generation" was making work that lay between and across distinct institutional contexts, each of which contained particular modalities of production, exhibition, and spectatorship that had been naturalized within it. Within this broad range of practice, the idea of assemblage was no longer confined to the grouping of heterogeneous elements within an aesthetic frame, but had become something more like the purposeful juxtaposition of aesthetic frames themselves: a kind of institutional cross-fertilization within which established traditions of theater, dance, painting, sculpture, poetry, music, and cinema would all be set into collision. [5]

As the artist perhaps most closely identified with the development of the assemblage form, Robert Rauschenberg is here a case in point. The radicality of the artist's early assemblages or "combines" arose not simply from their refusal of the Greenbergian injunction of medium-specificity through the improper conjunction of the painterly and the sculptural, but more crucially from the exhibition of everyday, "non-art" elements: as he would famously state, "Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)" [6]

If this idea would come to return referentiality to postwar American painting within the aesthetics of Pop, it was also what, more proximately, would lead critics to see a mere resuscitation of the anti-aesthetic of Marcel Duchamp, and thus provoke the dismissive designation of "neo-dada." But Kirby was less interested in relitigating the art/non-art debate than in exploring the way that a work like Rauschenberg's *Minutiae* (1954)—the artist's first combine—shifted the terms of the discussion by means of its change of venue: existing somewhere between painting, sculpture, and architecture, this free-standing, seven-foot tall assemblage of planes, cloth, paint, newspaper clippings and photographic imagery was created for the stage rather than the gallery, where it would function as a curiously active presence in relation to Cunningham's dancers.

Writing a decade after *Minutiae*, Kirby's attention was drawn to a growing body of intermedia performance driven to novel modes of exhibition and spectatorship through institutional dislocation—musical performance dislocated from the traditional concert hall, dance and theatrical performance dislocated from the traditional proscenium stage, film projection dislocated from the traditional cinematic theater. These displacements stemmed from a growing awareness of the institutional conditions through which art's exhibition was structured, and a concomitant belief that any rejuvenation of the avant-garde project would stem not from the formal innovations within a given field of aesthetic practice, but from breaking open established frames of reference through a juxtaposition of those aesthetic institutions within which given fields of aesthetic practice had become naturalized.

This model of what we might call "intermedia assemblage" was one which implied—almost

necessitated—newly collaborative models of production and exhibition which exchanged the traditional model of the individual authorial voice for the plurality and heterogeneity of an occasionally cacophonous collective. It was a model that had become increasingly widespread by the mid-‘60s when Kaprow and Kirby were writing, but one which had effectively governed the interdisciplinary practice of the Cunningham company since its inception over a decade before.

Variations V (1965) and the Movement of the Moving Image

While the association between Cunningham, Cage and Rauschenberg throughout the 1950s and early 60s had generated a productive tension between the plastic and the performing arts, as well as between theater and modern music, the company’s first serious attempt to wrestle with moving image media took place during the French-American Festival at New York’s Lincoln Center in 1965, when experimental filmmaker Stan VanDerBeek was invited to take Robert Rauschenberg’s place as the company’s resident visual artist and set designer for the production of *Variations V*. The work would mark a substantive transformation for the company not only for its complex integration of diverse new media technologies, but also for the undergirding model of aesthetic collaboration it fostered between the many diverse contributors.

For the previous decade, Cage’s musical composition and Cunningham’s choreography had been understood as autonomous and independent from one another, and they went so far as to prepare the two parts separately and in isolation so as to preserve the energy of their often startling juxtapositions during the live performance. *Variations V* exchanged their established model of autonomy and independence for a new model of relative interdependence, using custom sensor technologies designed by Max Matthews and Robert Moog to incorporate the company’s dancers into the production of the work’s soundscape.

During the live performance, photosensors on the floor and proximity sensors on antennae would repeatedly be triggered by the dancers’ movements. The resulting signaleptic events would travel to a mixing console manned by Cage and Tudor, itself connected to a dozen tape recorders containing all manner of prerecorded sounds. Yet the dancers’ movements did not directly or invariably precipitate acoustic phenomena, because the signaleptic events they produced were still subject to the mediation of Cage and Tudor as they worked the control board. As a result, the soundscape was collectively produced, with no one individual directly or solely responsible for the creation of any given sequence. Sound and movement were no longer simply autonomous, but neither were they directly bound together—rather, they were placed in a relationship of relative autonomy and collaborative interdependence. This new model of relative autonomy, mediation and interdependence would also govern the company’s first use of moving image technology within VanDerBeek’s *Movie-Mural*.

A fixture in New York’s dynamic experimental film scene, VanDerBeek had become something of a spokesperson for the “underground film” by the late 1950s, but had increasingly come to work collaboratively with dancers and other live performers to elaborate a vision of what he called “expanded cinema” in the early to mid-60s. Standing in for Rauschenberg within *Variations V*, VanDerBeek produced not a painted backdrop, but an immense “Movie-Mural”: a moving backdrop for the dancers composed from the live manipulation of projected slides and 16mm film from a dozen projectors around the space.

This imagery was originally projected on an immense white backdrop at the rear of the stage where the dancers performed. In later performances, a series of projection screens were scattered across the rear and/or sides of the stage. In either case, the light from the projection beams cut across the path of

the dancers in motion, inscribing their shadows into the imagery at the rear, and forging a direct relationship between foreground and background. Furthermore, VanDerBeek employed motion picture sequences from the dancers in rehearsal, sped up or slowed down, so that the audience saw the movements of the bodies on stage multiplied by virtue of these virtual shadows being projected alongside. VanDerBeek deliberately projected both moving and still images in such a way that the images “break the frames” of the screens expected to contain them. This powerful visual metaphor for the interrelation of live and recorded movement was then carried over by the shadows cast on blank walls and screens, and by the silhouettes “carved out” on already existing projected imagery—fracturing the sense of time of the live performance on stage.

While no film or video recordings of the company’s live performances of *Variations V* have been discovered, a studio performance was shot during the 1966 European tour that provides an idea of how the movement of VanDerBeek’s still and moving image projections related to the movement of the dancers on stage. In the first image, we see four dancers on stage, along with a half dozen rectangular frames set against the outer walls. While difficult to discern at this distance, three of these rectangles are physical objects—movie projection screens, whose white ground sets them off from the dark walls of the studio resting behind. The other three rectangles are immaterial—created purely from the light of slide and film projectors distributed throughout the space. The projection at right shows a close-up of a dancer’s two feet, thrown by a projector being operated on stage (second image) out of frame at left. The feet form an arrow pointing in the direction of the dancers at right, with each toe approximately the size of the live dancer’s head. Two silhouettes emerge against the light rectangles at left that can be seen to correspond to the dancers at center stage. The man with outstretched hands is projected against the bare wall, while the woman with arms at her side appears on the physical screen beside. While the one on the wall is easily recognizable as a shadow, the one beside it reads somewhat differently because it appears framed by a traditional projection screen. In the third image, we see a single dancer on stage whose pose seems precisely mirrored by the shadow projected on the rear wall. Yet here, the projection is not a shadow, but a recorded film of this same dancer making this same movement at a previous point in time. In the fourth image, the same screen contains both forms of projection—the live shadow of the dancer on stage and a prerecorded image. And in the fifth image, we see both a dancer and his shadow on the rear screen, yet here without any live dancer in the foreground—here both dancer and shadow were previously recorded, and both are being played back, live, by the projectionist on stage. Finally, the sixth image reveals a shadow of an off-stage performer—that of VanDerBeek himself—whose physical movements serve to animate both the live and prerecorded images we are given to view on this complex spatiotemporal stage.

Assemblage would involve many of the same individuals as *Variations V*, and it would similarly seek to extend the formal possibilities of dance by means of a cinematographic model. Yet there were a number of significant differences. *Variations V* had been a massively physical endeavor—its two separate trips across Europe and twenty-nine performances across the United States and Canada had necessitated the transport of thousands of pounds of electronics by countless trucks and planes. They were constantly being packed and unpacked, and were forever in danger of breaking down immediately prior to the next performance. The audiovisual collage VanDerBeek produced was one that was projected in the same space as the dancers, so that the movement of the projectors and the movement of the imagery corresponded in physical space to the movement of the dancers. His projectors were dancers in their own right—his interventions part of the idiosyncratic nature of each evening’s live performance. By contrast, *Assemblage* would not feature live dancers on ever new and different stages, would never travel as a traditional, embodied performance. Rather, it would be specifically planned and shot for film,

and then edited and mixed, before finally being broadcast, free of charge, to the viewers of KQED San Francisco Bay Area Public Television.

And while a version of *Variations V* was indeed documented on film and broadcast over German television, *Assemblage* was planned from the beginning as a work for television—a cine-dance or dance-for-camera, in which everything from the locations and the framing to the choreography and the soundtrack would be elaborated with this specific end in mind. [7] As the first full-length work of modern dance produced for broadcast television, *Assemblage* was a decisive intervention into this youthful movement and constituted a turning point for its future development. Its innovative editing and compositing techniques set a new bar for the formal possibilities of filmed dance choreography. Yet just as importantly, the work would intervene in what was then a pivotal and far-reaching debate about the changing nature of public space and urban community at what was widely beginning to be perceived as the end of the industrial age and the beginnings of the information era. *Assemblage* was concerned with the public spaces that manifested themselves materially within specific areas of a rapidly changing post-industrial urban landscape. But additionally, it was concerned with the new forms of public space that had only recently arisen on select frequencies of the electromagnetic spectrum, as innovative forms of non-commercial broadcast emerged in opposition to the stranglehold of commercialized media. This new focus was largely attributable to a new collaborator: the visionary San Francisco public radio and television producer Richard O. Moore.

Public Art in the Televisual Age

Moore was invariably drawn to Cunningham's company because he had begun his adult life as both a poet and as a dancer. He studied philosophy and poetry at UC Berkeley (before being expelled), and was one of the original circle of San Francisco Renaissance poets gathered by Kenneth Rexroth's "Anarchist-Libertarian" literary salons. He also entertained a brief position as a dancer in the company of Mexican-born modernist choreographer José Limón. At the time of his draft, these decidedly "unmanly" interests in poetry and dance, together with his generally anarchistic tendency towards insubordination, were apparently sufficient to garner him a deferment from military service with a 4-F medical classification as a "psychotic neurotic."

Scornful of the naked angst and confessional self-disclosure then gaining ground within American verse, Moore's own writing would tend rather towards an "open, spare verse that foregrounds philosophical inquiry." [8] A deeply private man—seemingly uninterested in attention, much less celebrity—Moore would write much but publish little. His interests increasingly turned away from the elaboration of an idiosyncratic artistic vision, towards the ways in which an entirely new model might be elaborated for the collective communication of contemporary art, culture, philosophy and politics. This vision led, in 1949, to the founding of KPFA Public Radio in Berkeley, and in 1954, to the founding of KQED Public Television in San Francisco.

Together with Lewis Hill and Eleanor McKinney, Richard O. Moore created KPFA as a vital new paradigm for the communication of radical art, culture and politics: a broadcast media station that was listener-supported, non-commercial, and public. And it is through Moore—who would not only commission, but would help produce and direct *Assemblage* in collaboration with the Cunningham Dance Company in 1968—that we can best situate that work's fascinating conjunction of experimental music, experimental choreography, experimental film and experimental forms of exhibition.

KPFA was actually the first listener-supported non-commercial radio station in the United States. It grew from the vision of Lewis Hill, an ardent pacifist and progressive, who sought to foster a public

space for creative expression and dissent: an alternative to the commercialism of mainstream radio and television, but one which did not succumb to the aesthetic and philosophical conservatism which he felt characterized then-existing “educational” radio and television. [9] Moore would have concurred with Robert Maynard Hutchins that,

A country that is chiefly interested in turning out consumers and producers is not likely to be much concerned with setting minds free, for the connection between selling, manufacturing and free minds cannot be established. Such a country will transform new opportunities for education into means of turning out producers and consumers. This has been the fate of television in the United States. [10]

Through grant funding from the Ford Foundation, KPFA pioneered a range of innovative cultural and political programming over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, introducing their Bay Area listenership to the controversial poetry of the Beats in 1955 with on-air readings by Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and others (for which the station would be accused of “indecentcy” and attract the attention of the House Un-American Activities Committee). By the late 1950s, KPFA had begun featuring a four-hour long “morning concert” every day to present an incredibly broad spectrum of music from around the world, from avant-garde experimental composition to contemporary performances of diverse cultural traditions. Composer and SFTMC-veteran Pauline Oliveros has described these concerts as playing a crucial role in her own musical education, as well as providing “an invaluable service to the local and national community” in the cultural dissemination of postwar experimental music. [11]

Over the course of the next few years, KPFA and KQED would come to provide an influential forum for free speech and the political agitation for social justice, helping to establish and enliven the media public sphere through a diverse yet considered exhibition of philosophy, literature and the performing arts from around the world. Industry executives ridiculed the “esoteric” programming of the new station, and indeed, many of Moore’s programming ideas would have never even been considered for commercial radio or television broadcast. Yet Moore proved prescient in his ability to tap into a public desire for the new and the unconventional. In 1959, he solicited Alan Watts to produce the influential programs, “Way Beyond the West” for radio, and “Eastern Wisdom and Modern Life” for television. These programs would not only prove wildly popular in the Bay Area, but would be picked up and distributed by public radio and television stations around the nation, introducing an unprecedented number of Americans to both Eastern and Western philosophy.

Moving outside the studio, Moore would work with a small, inadequately financed, but diligent film crew to eventually produce over one hundred documentary features for KQED in little over a decade on an incredibly diverse range of topics in politics, philosophy and the arts. Many of the topics he chose to cover had never before been shown or discussed on television. Politically, programs covered the gamut from civil rights organizing in the South and housing and employment discrimination in the Bay Area, to life under Communist rule in Poland and Cuba and the escalating military conflict in Vietnam. Philosophically, they ranged from Mortimer Adler’s series on the “Great Ideas” and Watt’s series on comparative topics in Eastern and Western Philosophy, to a series of conversations with the militant longshoreman, philosopher and social psychologist Eric Hoffer on the nature of mass movements.

Yet Moore’s vision was also solidly directed towards a wide-ranging artistic and cultural avant-garde of his time. At a time in which Jazz was still routinely disparaged within the academic music establishment, he produced a range of broadcasts devoted to important group festivals and solo concerts (he filmed the only televised appearance of John Coltrane), as well as biopics on seminal figures such as

Duke Ellington. He depicted a range of famous writers reading from their work in productions such as *Writers in America* and *Poetry USA*, and the series *Photography/The Inclusive Art* showed Ansel Adams at work in Yosemite National Park. But Moore's background as a dancer had already inclined him to produce shows featuring local companies, and he was fully prepared when, in 1967, the Ford Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts awarded him a grant to produce a film on perhaps the most influential group in postwar dance, the Merce Cunningham Company.

Assemblage was really two projects in one—or rather, two ideas which, through a quirk of fate, became fruitfully conjoined. The first project was to be a documentary feature on the new Ghirardelli Square: an “urban renewal” program which would become commonplace in future years, in which an old, disused factory of the former industrial era was retooled as a shopping plaza for the new post-industrial economy. The second project was to be a loose biopic on the Cunningham Dance Company. As so often in art, necessity became the mother of invention, as KQED—invariably long on imagination but short on funds—decided to conjoin the two, inviting the Cunningham Company to create a new work specifically for broadcast television that would take Ghirardelli Square as its stage, with all the complexity of history and address that that would entail.

The Ghirardelli Chocolate Factory had been a legendary San Francisco institution—a business that traced its roots back a hundred years to the gold rush upon which the modern city itself had been built. But like so many factories in cities across America, the Ghirardelli Factory was abandoned in the early 1960s when the family business was sold and the new owners moved it across the Bay to the much less expensive town of San Leandro. Fearing that these historic buildings would simply be razed by new construction, a private group purchased the property and “preserved” the space by turning it into a mixture of public plaza and shopping mall: “combining the latest in retailing and fine cuisine with the flavor of old San Francisco” according to its current website. [12]

On the one hand, the new site, which opened to the public in 1964, was emblematic of a desire to preserve something of the city's architectural heritage while simultaneously fostering new forms of public space. On the other hand, the model of “public space” on offer was now one thoroughly imbricated with private, commercial interests. As someone deeply committed to the idea of open, free and egalitarian public resources, but deeply suspicious of the corrosive effects of commercialism on the spheres of art, culture and politics, Moore likely considered the new Ghirardelli Square area a fascinating and ambivalent conundrum into which his own vision of local, public television could intervene.

Movement Modules in Fractured Space

Cunningham initially surveyed the site in February of 1968, and returned for a three-week residency in late October and early November with his company: dancers Carolyn Brown, Sandra Neels, Valda Setterfield, Meg Harper, Susana Hayman-Chaffey, Jeff Slayton, Chase Robinson and Mel Wong, alongside composers Cage, David Tudor and Gordon Mumma. Carolyn Brown describes the excitement of the time:

A residency in weather-perfect, sunny San Francisco in October versus a February residency in snow-blanketed, wind-buffed, seven-degrees-below-zero Buffalo is guaranteed to produce a very happy company. Prancing around Ghirardelli Square like giddy grade-school kids let loose in a playground, we were euphoric. [13]

Cunningham had devised what he described as “movement modules” for the company to follow, but a significant amount of improvisational freedom was afforded to the dancers. As for the space itself, it was about as far removed from the traditional flat performance stage as could be imagined. Lizzie Feidelson described it as “a maze of danceable spaces: corridors, ladders and open patios.” [14] As Brown recalls the production, however, the square seems to have been as much an *enabler* of vision as its focus. Recollecting the architecture of the square, she recalls, “a dazzling world was spread out before our eyes”:

San Francisco Bay, the Golden Gate Bridge, the hills of Marin County, Alcatraz, and, just below the square, the Hyde Street Wharf and Marina, with boats bobbing up and down on their moorings or scooting madly around the bay. Off the beach, hardy souls could be seen swimming in the frigid waters. Everywhere shops, restaurants, and cafés tempted tourists and locals to wander, spend money, and just hang out, and those same people became not only our ever-present live audience but an unwitting part of the film as well. [15]

From its roots in the industrial manufacture and the transport of material goods, Ghirardelli Square was being reconstructed along a burgeoning new axis of labor—specifically, the immaterial, informational labor of visibility—of seeing and being seen. *Assemblage* might be understood as an attempt to speak to this new economy, just then coming into being, in its use of the square as both stage and screen. Wandering around and amongst the dancers, spectators and disinterested passers-by, Moore’s camera selectively framed the collective ensemble into moving juxtapositions. During a contemporary interview with Robert Commanday, music critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Cunningham explained that “the finished film will deal not so much with dance in the narrow sense, but with various motions—boats moving, people walking, and, of course, groups dancing.” [16]

Assemblage is fundamentally about a site in the midst of displacement: an urban renewal project which had displaced the industrial and mercantile chocolate factory that had anchored the area virtually since territory itself had been ceded from Mexico and the city first incorporated. But massive changes were underway, and these changes—not away from commerce, per se, but away from its historical form in the industrial production of material goods—were in line with the broader transformation of the postwar American economy under the influence of information technologies. Specifically, its uncanny ability to suture far-flung regions of the world through quasi-immaterial networks of communications media.

As if to highlight the representational instability of this space, the film begins not in Ghirardelli Square, but rather with a kind of placelessness. Three dancers in leotards, a man and two women, face us from within an empty white field. They appear to stand on nothing, and nothing can be seen behind or beside them. Nothing like the emptiness of the ordinary unadorned stage, this is rather a strange, otherworldly space in which the dancers’ movements become isolated and magnified as if under a microscope. For forty seconds, they remain fixed in place, while hands and torsos arc and bend. The title *Assemblage* is then briefly superimposed, and immediately seems to describe the interlocking movements we have seen of these three dancers in close proximity, acting as a single, compound form for the following twenty seconds.

But suddenly, everything changes and we are made to consider the title in a completely new light. From the blank white background to which we have now become accustomed, we are bombarded—assaulted—with a concatenation of imagery, constantly changing. Flickering pinks, abstract fields of green, and then architecture—white steel steps, red brick buildings, zooming in and out. A stone plaza, a bronze fountain, green foliage, spraying water... hundreds of individual images, close-ups and pans and

zooms, all crushed together in a frenzied temporality, often passing by too quickly to even discern, much less contemplate.

And in fact, not everything has changed: the three dancers have remained where they were, and have continued in their movements. It is just now that they have become black silhouettes against this colorful background, they are much harder to discern. Their movements—individual and collective—are no match for the perceptual cacophony exploding all around them. A reversal of figure and ground—the dancers have become difficult to see, having previously been impossible not to see. To view them, we must now focus and concentrate on the space they extract from the imagery around them, this negative space they carve out from the stage of Ghirardelli Square.

With the overlay of a title—the first intrusion of the broadcast studio and evidence of media juxtaposition—the trio of bodies remains the only constant in a dizzying array of swiftly changing locales. Some situate the dancers in places where those bodies might be recognizably located, on “solid ground,” as it were. Others create situations which approximate real situations while failing to completely cohere—a beach scene in which the dancers surround a woman thrown all out of proportion by the juxtaposition, or just inches below the edge of a balcony where the dancers are now seen to be floating in space. Finally, we are given scenes in which no attempt whatsoever is made to place the bodies in a coherent spatial situation—against a pink textile whole greatly magnified loops suffuse the background or floating against a solitary hand, individual digits the size of torsos. In this first sequence, dancers appear as silhouettes, revealed only by the absence their form cuts out of a surrounding field. But shortly, dancers’ silhouettes will themselves be filled with the image of other places, and these places themselves sometimes filled with other bodies. The solidity of the individual body withdraws in these instances to become a conjunction or interface between two disjunctive locales.

The film’s extraordinary credit sequence only serves to multiply the number of perspectives still further, until they begin to resemble reflections in the shards of a broken mirror. Out of pure black field, a small frame of a moving image of a dancer opens in the small square in the center. Immediately a second frame opens up at bottom, and then a third at left. Little by little, additional moving images appear like projections onto different parts of an inchoate architectural form.

Eventually, these projections reveal the outlines of seven rectilinear blocks, each of which presents us with three faces. Together, these blocks form a kind of building complex analogous with the complex stage Ghirardelli Square created for the company. At its climax, every one of these twenty-one faces will be filled by either a title credit, or an individual motion picture of dancers on the square. What is created thereby is a singular, moving image of fractured cinematic space—a perspective that is impossible to inhabit. Twenty-one irregularly shaped quadrilaterals. Without titles or images, they project a three-dimensional space, each face a plane that describes a distinct volumetric space in front of which a viewer could ideally be located. Yet all of the moving images and titles are oriented towards the *viewer*, rather than these imaginary spaces within the frame, thus negating the very three-dimensionality their frames work to construct. As with so many aspects of *Assemblage*, an impossible dual perspective is created by means of a formal juxtaposition: an experience resembling a perceptual encounter in real physical space is placed over and against an experience only possible by virtue of a cinematic construction.

The two scenes just described together account for barely four minutes of an hour-long film whose formal complexity demands careful study. Over the course of the work, the visual pace will occasionally become less frenetic, more stately, yet hardly a minute will pass without some startling shift in perceptual register, as the movements of dancers and non-dancers in the nowhere of film-space are constantly being imbricated by the movements of dancers and non-dancers within the specific architectural space of the square. Moore worked with film editor Bill Arhus to create these sequences

using a wide range of complex compositing and rear-projection techniques, hand-cutting and splicing, split-screen mattes and overlays. Through them, time is compressed and expanded. Size and scale, figure and ground are constantly being reversed before our eyes.

This dizzying array of visual material is undergirded by the sounds of Cage, Tudor and Mumma. While the rest of the company spent their days in the open air, Brown describes this trio as spending their time “behind blue paper-covered windows of an unused store . . . at long tables littered with tape machines and electronic paraphernalia, juggling a plethora of sound sources recorded mostly around San Francisco by Gordon—filtering, transforming, modulating, and editing.” [17] While not always unaggressive, the chaotic sound mix is nevertheless relatively subdued in comparison to the formal pyrotechnics of the imagery. The sound of local radio broadcasts, trolley cars, human and animal life—scores of individual sounds that make up the normalized cacophony of urban life were fed through Tudor’s “Rainforest” equipment—a process in which the sound signals were modulated by their passage through a range of disparate materials such as wood or metal. Loud ringing in an early passage is balanced by three full minutes of silence in one towards the end. We drop in and out of personal conversations and radio broadcasts, registering only isolated fragments from the cacophony of a clamouring city.

In his seminal essay “Other Criteria”—delivered in preliminary form in New York’s MoMA as *Assemblage* was being shot on the opposite coast—Leo Steinberg would describe Rauschenberg’s work as helping to shift the “axis of imaginative confrontation” within late modern art definitively away from the age-old metaphor of the “picture window”—vertical, upright with respect to the human eye to which it was fundamentally aligned—towards a new model of the “flatbed picture plan”—a horizontal surface unconditioned by gravity, a dumping ground for all manner of heterogeneous information. Rauschenberg’s longstanding participation with the company had come to an end, but Steinberg’s conception of modern man, ineluctably cast into a disorientating sea of information, no longer guided by the familiar lodestones of phenomenology or hermeneutics, would here find a compelling analogy in Cunningham and Moore’s spatial deconstruction of the new urbanism.

The work’s title then speaks not only to the aesthetic procedures by which the work was constructed, but the cultural processes independently underway at its historic site of performance. A dance for the end of the industrial era, or at least for the end of a certain familiar kind of local heavy industry, *Assemblage* would showcase the displacement of bodies and labor through new communications technologies, and the radical disruptions thus rent into the familiar fabric of space and time. But it would also reveal the productive capacities of new forms of labor—specifically, forms of vision and visuality created by these newly possible conjunctions or juxtapositions or assemblages of media space and time.

Assemblage was a dance for not the stage, but for the camera. Yet in treating the televisual screen as stage, it aspired to stage a doubly emergent public space: fractured, heterogeneous, and transformative. Changes to both the economy of labor and communications had transformed San Francisco waterfront from a factory for the production of obdurate materials into a place to see and be seen—and this at a moment in which conditions of visibility were increasingly bound up with the production and regulation of subjectivities. What did it mean to engage with such a space at such a historical moment? What did it mean to treat the specificity of such a space without the co-presence of a live audience, knowing that—unlike every other production of the company to date—one’s spectator would not be physically or temporally co-present with the act of performance, but would receive the performance as itself an image, arriving over the electromagnetic spectrum at some future date to greet them in the familiarity of their home? Would such a mediation - indeed, such an individuation and even privatization—imply an abdication of the very idea of public space? Or might it somehow gesture towards a new model of public

space, public art, even a public sphere, by means of this very act of mediation?

The mid-1960s was truly a watershed moment for the intersection of film and dance in American art. Cage and Cunningham's collaboration with VanDerBeek on *Variations V* in 1965 was only one of a number of works in which the worlds of dance and experimental film collided in a radical new vision of expanded cinema. Whitman and Forti's *Prune.Flat.* (1965), Trisha Brown's *Homemade* (1966), and Elaine Summers' collaboration with VanDerBeek on *Spherical Space* (1966), were just a few of the many groundbreaking works within this nascent field of aesthetic practice. Yet even within this time of innovation, *Assemblage* was formally and conceptually unprecedented. Not simply for the extraordinary range of special effects created by Moore and Yahraus—though these were admittedly groundbreaking at the time. Nor merely for the inspired vision of dance-for-camera, even though it would probably stand as the most significant advance since Maya Deren had initiated the field some twenty years before. Over and above its formal pyrotechnics, the most significant contribution of *Assemblage* would be to raise the question of the changing meaning of public space at the dawn of the information era. Linking the city's past and present with the new and still unchastened possibilities of public broadcast, Moore and Cunningham helped to birth a new vision of public art for the televisual age.

Footnotes

[1] Atlas's influence on the company would indeed be profound: it resulted in the creation of ten major video works between 1974 and 1983, and marked an irrevocable transformation in Cunningham's thinking about the possibilities of choreographic space and movement.

[2] Performance historian Roger Copeland describes the choreographer as “the earliest-and arguably, still most influential-practitioner of collage in performance,” claiming that “almost every aspect of Cunningham's work is informed in some way by the collage aesthetic.” Roger Copeland, *Merce Cunningham: The Modernizing of Modern Dance*, New York, Routledge, New York 2004, p. 167. On the principle of collage or assemblage in Cage and Cunningham, see Copeland, *op. cit.*, pp. 145-182.

[3] Allan Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings*, New York, H.N. Abrams, New York 1966.

[4] For a succinct statement of Kaprow's views in this period, see the interview, “What is a Museum? A Dialogue between Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson,” *Arts Yearbook* n° 9 (1967), p. 94-101 and more generally, Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003. The most detailed historical account is Judith Rodenbeck, *Radical Prototypes: Allan Kaprow and the Invention of Happenings*, Cambridge, MIT Press, Cambridge 2014.

[5] See Michael Kirby, *Happenings, An Illustrated Anthology*, New York, E.P. Dutton, New York 1965; Michael Kirby, *The Art of Time: Essays on the Avant-Garde*, New York, E.P. Dutton, New York 1969; Richard Kostelanetz, *The Theatre of Mixed-Means*, New York, Dial Press, 1968.

[6] Robert Rauschenberg, statement for Dorothy C. Miller (ed.), *16 Americans*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, New York 1959, unpaginated.

[7] The German/Swedish co-production of *Variations V* was shot for European television on a soundstage in 1966 during the Company's European tour. It survives as a remarkable document of a performance for which substantive documentation is sparse, yet ultimately stands as a separate and distinct work than *Variations V*—one crafted by director Arne Arnbom and others, albeit with substantive input from Stan VanDerBeek.

[8] Richard O. Moore, Brenda Hillman and Paul Ebenkamp, *Writing the Silences*, Berkeley, University of California Press, Berkeley 2010, p. XIII.

[9] Lewis Hill writes, “the people in charge of educational stations are tied either to state legislatures or to boards of trustees which inevitably represent tendencies close to the commercial and conservative part of the community”, as cited in Jeff Land,

Active Radio: Pacifica's Brash Experiment, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1999, p. 64. For additional material on the early history of KPFA and KQED, see Ralph Engelman, *Public Radio and Television in America: A Political History*, New York, Sage Publications, New York 1996; David C. Stewart, *The PBS Companion*, New York, TV Books, New York 1999; Matthew Lasar, *Pacifica Radio: The Rise of an Alternative Network*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 2000.

[10] Robert M. Hutchins, *The Learning Society*, New York, Praeger, New York 1968.

[11] Pauline Oliveros, "Memoir of a Community Enterprise," in David Bernstein (ed.), *The San Francisco Tape Music Center: 1960s Counterculture and the Avant-Garde*, Berkeley, University of California Press, Berkeley 2008, p. 81-82.

[12] See <http://www.ghirardellisq.com/explore/history/>, accessed March 27, 2015.

[13] Carolyn Brown, *Change and Circumstance: Twenty Years with Cage and Cunningham*, New York, Knopf, New York 2009.

[14] Lizzie Feidelson, "Lost and Found: Newly Recovered Merce Cunningham Film to Screen at EAI," *Art in America*, January 2014, available at <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/previews/lost-and-found-newly-recovered-merce-cunningham-film-to-screen-at-eai/>.

[15] Brown, *op. cit.*

[16] Robert Commanday, "Composing with the Camera," *This World/San Francisco Chronicle*, November 10, 1968.

[17] Brown, *op. cit.*