

The Museum of Modern Art

AUDIO TOUR

Judson Dance Theater: The Work is Never Done

September 16, 2018–February 3, 2018

Second-floor Collection Galleries and The Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium

#JudsonDance

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Stop 280: INTRODUCTION

Atrium

THOMAS LAX: Welcome to *Judson Dance Theater: The Work is Never Done*. I'm Thomas Lax, Associate Curator in the Department of Media and Performance Art.

ANA JANEVSKI: And I'm Ana Janevski, Curator of the Department of Media and Performance Art. So, what was Judson? It was a place. It was a group of people. It was a movement.

THOMAS J. LAX: Judson was a group of emerging choreographers, visual artists, composers, and filmmakers. A new kind of avant-garde. They rehearsed, experimented, argued, collaborated, and in the process transformed the world of dance together. They took their name from the Judson Memorial Church, which was a space they were given free reign to develop and present their work.

ANA JANEVSKI: Many of the Judson artists continue to practice today, stretching the boundaries of visual arts and dance. You'll hear from several of them on this tour, including Yvonne Rainer:

YVONNE RAINER: *All kinds of people hung out, came just to watch. For me, it was a place to try out fragments that I was working toward. People would show things that never materialized, were never realized. It was wide open. And if you showed work in the workshop and wanted it to be on the program, you were.*

Stop 281: COSTUMES FOR STRELITZIA

Gallery 2 – Workshops

THOMAS J. LAX: Jimmy Waring created these costumes for a duet called *Strelitzia* by Aileen Passloff. Waring was one of the most eccentric figures in the Judson choreographers.

ANA JANEVSKI: He believed in drawing inspiration from every day life and experiences. He often collaged costumes together of random things he found in the street.

AILEEN PASSLOFF: *We weren't allowed to pass a garbage can without looking into it, anything that we had that [we] thought could be useful went to Jimmy.*

The costume itself came from a thrift shop. There was an evening gown and it was very cheap. Jimmy cut the skirt in half – that made it into two skirts, and the top was a sheet, and some old gloves, and tassels he found, and then a piece of fur, so that there was this variety of textures there. There was a piece of net around our heads. And wires that went over our heads so that when we moved, they quivered. And the dance had that quivering feeling, like antenna.

[SFX: Night music by Richard Maxfield slowly rises as she speaks]

AILEEN PASSLOFF: *The music was by Richard Maxfield. It was called Night Music. This music was like a place you walked into. You could feel the music bathe you, so that dance was coming into a place filled with, like, a rainforest you know, that maybe had mosquitoes or insects in it. But anything could happen there in that music.*

Stop 282: ANTIC MEET

Gallery 2 – Workshops

THOMAS J. LAX: This is *Antic Meet* by Merce Cunningham. Over the course of his career, Cunningham broke with modern dance tradition and pioneered a new style that incorporated randomness, chance, everyday objects and ordinary movements. He described *Antic Meet* as a series of absurd situations that have nothing to do with each other.

ANA JANEVSKI: One of Cunningham's innovations was to separate dance from music. Often the performers heard the music for the first time when they got on stage. Steve Paxton was one of the dancers in *Antic Meet*

STEVE PAXTON: *It's a wonderful dance comedy. It's satirical and political and very wry.*

My aesthetics at that point had probably been developed by Hollywood, television. I'd seen some ballets. Cunningham was not like that. I couldn't feel his work in the way that I expected art to be "feelable." Cunningham's steps were not the kind of stuff that ballet uses to tell you that you're watching a technical feat in the dancing. His didn't have that. And then the steps weren't tied to anything in particular like a story or relationship that you could count on.

Stop 283: LA MONTE YOUNG – Compositions

Gallery 2 – Workshops

THOMAS J LAX: These are scores that use words rather than musical notations. They were made by experimental composer LaMonte Young. His scores often asked people to *listen* to things they would usually look at, or to *look* at things they would typically listen to. Simone Forti:

SIMONE FORTI: *Composition 1960, Number 3. Announce to the audience when the piece will begin and if there is a limit on duration, it may be of any duration. Then announce that anyone may do whatever he wishes for the duration of the composition.*

ANA JANEVSKI: Young served as musical director in 1960 for the workshops that Anna Halprin led on her wooden deck. He investigated and played with natural sounds there, like setting butterflies loose. Anna Halprin remembers:

ANNA HALPRIN: *He was very experimental and tried all kinds of things. I mean, he would do things like rub his fingernails against the glass windows and make these terrible sounds. He wanted to experiment and work with dancers. So, we started working together.*

Stop 284: DOWNTOWN OVERVIEW

Gallery 3 – Downtown: Sites of Collaboration

THOMAS J. LAX: In the early 1960's, artists moved into abandoned industrial buildings in lower Manhattan and carved out new spaces where they could live and work. Performances took place in bars, art galleries, loft apartments, warehouses, churches, even in the streets.

ANA JANEVSKI: They collaborated, competed, argued, and inspired each other. Here's Yvonne Rainer:

YVONNE RAINER: *What is interesting about that period, which preceded Judson, is the fact that the art community, which included dancers and sculptors and painters and musicians, was much smaller than it is now. And you went to events. You went to Cage concerts. You went to the Reuben Gallery. You went to James Waring concerts and Merce's concerts, and so there was this constant interchange and interaction.*

Stop 285: SEE SAW

Gallery 3 – Downtown: Sites of Collaboration

ANA JANEVSKI: Simone Forti began making what she called “Dance Constructions” in 1960 by combining ordinary movement, like walking, sliding, and climbing, with everyday objects like ropes and plywood boards. In the original version of Seesaw, Yvonne Rainer and Robert Morris moved up and down a long plank, balancing their bodies in relation to one another. Simone Forti:

SIMONE FORTI: At the ends of the plank that sits on the sawhorse, there were elastics going from the end of the plank to the lateral walls, so that as the Seesaw seesawed there would be this zigzag of elastics and plank. I like that the Seesaw works as a balancing tool for two people, but that this zigzag is also happening on its own.

ANA JANEVSKI: In those days of experimentation, even the artists sometimes struggled to find the right words to describe what they were doing. Yvonne Rainer:

YVONNE RAINER: It was called anti-dance a lot of what we did. Simone did all kinds of things but dance-wise, I wouldn't call this a dance. I don't know whether you'd call it a happening or a piece or, yeah, it was a piece.

Stop 286: SLANT BOARD/HUDDLE

Gallery 3 – Downtown: Sites of Collaboration

YVONNE RAINER: *In the spring of '61, Simone Forti had a whole evening at Yoko Ono's Loft. And Robert Morris had made all these things for her: A slanted platform, and a box under which you could disappear, a hanging rope.*

SIMONE FORTI: *We didn't know move by move what we were going to do, but we knew, for instance, in Slant Board that we were going to be on this inclined plane and that holding these ropes would help us stay on it. And I was interested in, in the beauty of people doing this and how they'd shift their weight and grab hold and see what the next move might be. By the time I was invited to Yoko's loft, I was thinking more like sculptures and space. I think that's the first time we did a Huddle. About seven people stand close together and form a structure together for about 10 minutes as different individuals climb over the top and join it again never really breaking away from the form. It's a physical action and it's a sculpture.*

Stop 287: SANCTUARY OVERVIEW

Gallery 4 – Sanctuary: Judson Dance Theater

THOMAS J. LAX: Judson Dance Theater concerts took place all over the church, from the basement to the altar. In the sanctuary, pews would be cleared out after Sunday services to make way for the dancers. Choreographer David Gordon:

DAVID GORDON: *When the performances first happened, everybody showed right in front of the altar which was a raised place with a huge cross. Some people did it up there. Some people did it on the ground below.*

THOMAS J. LAX: Choreographer Aileen Passloff:

AILEEN PASSLOFF: *Judson is Open Arms, Judson is Big Momma. Judson is come in whatever you need we're gonna try to give it to you. You will need a shower, come here. There's a shower, there's a toilet, there's a place to eat your lunch. You want to practice, there's a place to practice. You know the thing about those guys is, well, they believed in us, and they believed in the world.*

Stop 288: PELICAN

Gallery 4 – Sanctuary: Judson Dance Theater

ANA JANEVSKI: Judson embraced untrained dancers, giving visual artists like Robert Rauschenberg the opportunity to create and perform his own dances. *Pelican* was his first piece of choreography.

It took place in an abandoned roller skating rink. Rauschenberg and other dancers wheeled around the rink on bicycles and roller skates wearing large parachutes. Judson dancer Alex Hay:

ALEX HAY: *I hadn't skated in years and years and years, but you don't forget it, and I guess Bob was the same way. It was sort of like a scary piece to do because we had these big cargo chutes that were extended on steel rods, and we had backpacks. The problem was when we had to circle around Carolyn Brown and not engage these two cargo chutes. But we managed quite well. We didn't collide or fall down - I guess that was good.*

ANA JANEVSKI: The piece was performed to a soundtrack that Rauschenberg made of found sounds, like telephones ringing, cars honking, and bits of old time music.

Stop 289: MEAT JOY

Gallery 4 – Sanctuary: Judson Dance Theater

THOMAS J. LAX: In 1962, Carolee Schneemann began her performances at Judson Dance Theater.

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: *I thought of Meat Joy as an erotic ritual for my starved culture, with the body extended into raw fish and chickens and sausages and layers of paper and plastic and paint. I wanted things to really break at the edges and to merge and be wet where they had been dry and on top of each other where they had been separated.*

The culture was starved in terms of sensuousness because sensuality was always confused with pornography. The old patriarchal morality of proper behavior and improper behavior had no threshold for the pleasures of physical contact that were not explicitly about sex but related to something more ancient—the worship of nature, worship of the body, a pleasure in sensuousness.

It was performed in the center of the church and of course, the incredible aroma never left of the raw mackerel the old chickens and the old sausages. Howard Moody accepted that and did his sermons in regard to the smells, sermons on the loaves and the fishes. It was wonderful.

Stop 290: RANDOM BREAKFAST

Gallery 4 – Sanctuary: Judson Dance Theater

ANA JANEVSKI: *Random Breakfast* was a five-part dance that unfolded as a series of comic scenarios performed by choreographer David Gordon and dancer Valda Setterfield. The performance involved multiple costume changes, with Setterfield performing a striptease, and Gordon, in drag, reenacting a TV appearance by comedian Milton Berle.

DAVID GORDON: *There were all those Upper East Side thrift shops. and I came home to Valda and I said look at this, this is a 1930s dress and hat—you wanna' wear this and take it all off? And here's a black velvet skating costume with a white fur trim. We'll make a skating section.*

VALDA SETTERFIELD: *I had come to America to find out what this great dance scene was. And so suddenly I was being asked to do things like putting a pie in my face and saying shit and fuck. I had been to the theater a lot. I had been to English Music Halls. I'd never been to a strip tease or anything like that. But it never occurred to me not to do them. So, I said, yes, yes, of course.*

DAVID GORDON: *The most important thing about that piece is it isn't a duet. There are two solos because I don't know how to make a duet. I have no idea. So I make what she's going to do and I make what I'm going to do and then I say, you know, you could do that at the same time as I'm doing this.*

I am not inventing circumstances out of nowhere. At this point the thing I know most in the world is television. I have never been in a museum. I have never been in a theater. I know nothing except what I know, and that's what I use in Random Breakfast.

Stop 291: CARNATION

Gallery 4 – Sanctuary: Judson Dance Theater

THOMAS J. LAX: In *Carnation*, Lucinda Childs uses domestic objects like a colander, kitchen sponges, and hair rollers in absurd and comic ways.

LUCINDA CHILDS: *They're objects that don't have anything to do with each other. The sponges and the colander and the sheet and so forth. The point was to find a relationship with these objects that generated movement ideas.*

THOMAS J. LAX: [PICKUP] Childs began performing with the Judson group in 1963:

LUCINDA CHILDS: *I was tremendously fortunate because I had just graduated from college, and here was this place where I felt, very soon after, showing my first piece, I felt that I belonged there, and I became a member, and I started performing in other people's works, Steve's works and Yvonne's works and Robert Morris, and so forth. It was a very unusual kind of atmosphere. And perfect, really, for me.*

Stop 292: TERRAIN

Gallery 4 – Sanctuary: Judson Dance Theater

ANA JANEVSKI: These images are from *Terrain*, a dance made by Yvonne Rainer. It was the first time the Judson group presented an entire evening of just one choreographer. *Terrain* contained five different sections. One was called *Diagonal*:

YVONNE RAINER: *Diagonal* consists of six people moving back and forth on diagonals in the space, and when someone calls a number, it applies to a particular traveling movement and everyone performs that action across the space. Part of it was follow the leader but it was a ragbag of possibilities – where these teams would intersect or what obstacles they would have to contend with. It was pretty wild.

I was thinking about ways to be unpredictable. There's a duet performed by Trisha Brown and me in black tights and push-up bras. Trisha is doing burlesque bumps and grinds. And I'm doing a ballet adagio I had learned in ballet class.

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: *Everything Yvonne did was incredibly powerful and fierce.*

ANA JANEVSKI: Carolee Schneemann —

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: *I loved everything she did, whatever it was, if she just stood still, it was full of some kind of haunting contradiction between pleasure and anguish, but all very mentally calibrated.*

Stop 293: CONCERT OF DANCE #3

Gallery 4 – Sanctuary: Judson Dance Theater

ANA JANEVSKI: *Concert of Dance #3* took place in the basement gym of Judson Church. The performers used the basketball court as their stage, and the audience sat around the edges, watching. These images capture the nine dances presented that night.

YVONNE RAINER: *We were interested in introducing everyday actions and movements to the formal theatrical space. I like to call it opening up the palace gates of high art, which had previously been closed.*

ANA JANEVSKI: The evening began with a group of dancers performing *We Shall Run* by Yvonne Rainer:

YVONNE RAINER: *I always wanted to have my cake and eat it, too. So I had pedestrian movement on the one hand, and on the other, they had this glorious inflated grandiose music, that originally was for 300 voices and cannon going off. So I had this contrast with the orchestral bombast, you might say, and what you were actually seeing. Ordinary people, it was a mix of people, some dancers, some not, running around, doing this totally ordinary movement.*

ANA JANEVSKI: Steve Paxton and Yvonne Rainer later performed a quiet duet called *Word Words*:

STEVE PAXTON: *We did it as nude as we could be. Yvonne wore pasties and a g-string and I wore a g-string. I think it's a sign of something if you start questioning the conventions that you're part of, and I had never been nude in front of an audience before. In the section where I wasn't dancing, I felt it incredibly. I had never felt so exposed. I think it broke me of my stage fright.*

THOMAS J. LAX: The evening ended with a collage of bodies, improvised movement, and newspapers created by Carolee Schneeman:

CAROLEE SCHNEEMAN: *For Newspaper Event, I wanted each participant to have a separate score of actions that they would undertake with a newspaper. Either building with it, shredding it, combining it with their bodies. Oddly enough, there was a newspaper strike in New York, and there was suddenly no newspaper around. You had to find eccentric people who had saved some in their basement or in the attic and it was quite an ordeal.*

CAROLEE SCHNEEMAN: *We were all sharing this sense that the culture had to be changed and we could do it.*

Stop 294: CONCERT OF DANCE #13

Gallery 4 – Sanctuary: Judson Dance Theater

THOMAS J. LAX: Each of Judson's Concerts had a different feeling and structure. For *Concert #13*, sculptor Charles Ross filled the sanctuary with two large structures for the dancers to respond to.

YVONNE RAINER: *One was a kind of trapezoidal contraption made of aluminum pipes and the other was a wooden platform about eight, nine feet above the ground.*

THOMAS J. LAX: Yvonne Rainer has never forgotten a piece by Alex Hay called *Prairie*.

Yvonne Rainer: *He tied a couple of pillows with ropes around his waist. He clambered up to the top of the trapezoid. And it was as though he would try to go to sleep on the top bar with these pillows, and he would fall down and get suspended on the ropes. He'd clamber back up and it went on like that. It was hilarious.*

THOMAS J. LAX: Carla Blank's piece *Turnover* also used the trapezoidal structure:

YVONNE RAINER: *It was like eight women. Half of us would start lifting one of the bars from the ground and the others on the other side would be pulling it over. And we, who had started the lift, would get lifted up and suspended there until it was rolled around the room. I mean, it's a very unwieldy kind of thing.*

You know, what's this—1963? So organized feminism was quite a way off. It felt very dangerous and unusual for a group of that many women to be collaborating on this very heavy risky enterprise. That was a memorable piece.

THOMAS J. LAX: There were also sections during the concert where dancers were free to play and improvise. Towards the end of the evening, Charles Ross and Felix Aeppli assembled a towering mountain of chairs. Carolee Schneeman remembers its impact:

CAROLEE SCHNEEMAN: *Chuck Ross, the sculptor completely reconfigured our intentions. How are we going to move around a thousand pounds of chairs with the Judson Arena itself completely changed. And it was a welcome challenge.*

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