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Figures in Space

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"There are no first figures."
Roland Barthes [1]

In writing we confront various manifestations of time. There is the "real time" of the writing itself, the slippery succession of nows during which we compose. There is the phenomenological duration of the text, the time of its silent reading or oral delivery. Enfolded in the text is a labyrinth of tenses designating past, present and projected future action, a metaphoric representation of being-in-time. In a poem of course the various measures, lines, stress groupings and stanzas, articulate the smaller and larger periods of the piece and define its particular tempo. If the work is sooner or later accepted as significant, it will alter perceptions of previous works and will continue to acquire its audience into the future. Amid diverse perceptions it will exist across time.

Space is perhaps initially the page standing for the silence within which writing is enfolded. Space also designates the interior silences of a text, the junctures between stanzas, lines, words, even letters. Space in this respect is a function of time, marking levels of duration, allowing the text to breathe. One can speak too of the undisclosed space in which one works as affecting the character of things: cork-lined room, airplane, prison, terrace above the sea. I know one famous French writer who composed the better part of a book in the Metro on his way to work. Its form: fragments of anecdote, voices rapidly succeeding one another, questions hanging in the air.

In dance, movement articulates space even as it is in turn being fashioned by it. You and the dancers make a dance in a rehearsal space but you must project it into a variety of possible performance spaces—proscenium theaters, lofts, gymnasiums, parks, et al. In the composition of most dance, unlike most poetry, you have a deadline. The work is announced for such and such a date, the audience (you hope) will be there and the work had better be there as well. This fixed time of composition profoundly affects how you work. You must attend to the calendar and ultimately submit to it, even as the work must submit, in some sense, to the dimensions and conditions of the place of performance, "real space." "Real space" is both a limit and an initiator of movement and sound. It defines the event as surely as temporal periods define the poem. When the particular dance event ends it is gone. There are no pages to turn back, and it has vanished into a space now empty and darkened. This ephemerality, the experience of evanescent durations, is essential to its nature. Performance draws its quite desperate meaning from it.

I have worked since 1974 with Margaret Jenkins and her company of highly trained dancers on a great many collaborative projects. The one rule established at the beginning, was that each collaboration should take a different form. At times I have worked with Margy in the studio on the structure of a piece, at times I have worked alone on a tape to accompany the work, and at times

we have collaborated on movement and sound in such a way that it was impossible afterwards to figure out who was to blame for what. We have made live sound scores and scores that counterpoint live and taped voices or live voices and electronic sound. The third crucial element of the collaboration has always been the company of dancers whom Margy has chosen for their ability to generate and extend movement on their own. Trained dancers, they also function in this process as "untrained" speakers moving through space. Words or verbal signs acquire a gestural character in this space, even as gestures (the raising of an arm) acquire often mysterious semiotic weight. Thus in a sense language becomes movement and movement language where the two meet.

Margy and I began to sketch plans for our most recent collaboration during the summer of 1983, exchanging quite general ideas about what we felt we needed to do, as well as the possible textures and length of the work and procedural models. We asked Barbara Stauffacher Solomon to conceive a set and the musician-composer J. A. (Dino) Deane to work with me to construct a text-sound score. In the Fall, as Margy began to work with the dancers in the studio, Dino and I selected texts and fragments of texts from the manuscript of my book FIRST FIGURE (North Point Press, October 1984). In addition I wrote three new texts while studying videotapes of the rehearsals. We then gave this word information to Margy who

1, 2, 3 **"First Figure" 1984.**
Choreography: Margaret Jenkins
Photographs by Bonnie Kamin,
courtesy of Margaret Jenkins.

4 **"Tree Columns for First Figure."**
Drawing by Barbara Stauffacher Solomon.
Drawing photograph courtesy Philippe
Bonnafont Gallery, San Francisco, CA.

chose several pieces to use as "instructions" for the dancers to proceed by. Within a few weeks of similar exchanges Margy gave us a videotape of the two-thirds completed dance to take into the recording studio. Dino and I would construct the score to this tape and Margy would complete the dance using the information provided by the score. The process was thus designed to emphasize the mutual informing of score and choreography. At different stages each would shape and modify the other. Each would, in effect, emerge from the other.

I asked J. A. Deane to work with us after hearing a score he had made for Colleen Mulvihill in New York. Dino had worked with Rhythm and Blues as well as New Wave bands and was a fluent improviser on several instruments. He had designed sound environments for plays by Sam Shepard and others, and was extremely knowledgeable about multi-track recording techniques. Being at home with complex technology, he would in the end play the larger role in determining the score's spatial configuration.
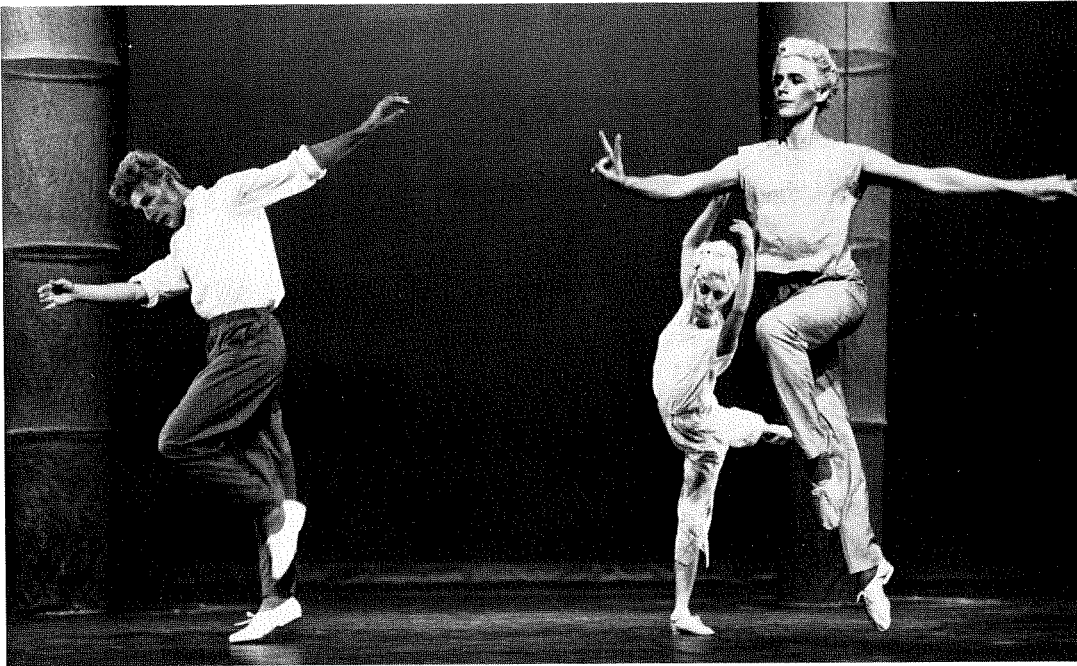
We decided to construct "First Figure" as a sequence of imaginary landscapes, each with a particular atmosphere and spatial configuration. For the "live" version Dino would manipulate one monaural and two stereophonic sets of word-sound information. These would be balanced according to the demands of each performance space. A slightly different version of the score would be heard at each theater, though timings for each section would remain constant. We spent roughly 300 hours in an eight-track studio in the hills of Belmont generating a thirty-minute score. O-Lan Shepard and I recorded the texts. These were then modified with delays, sound traps, tape loops and other devices and situated in the work.
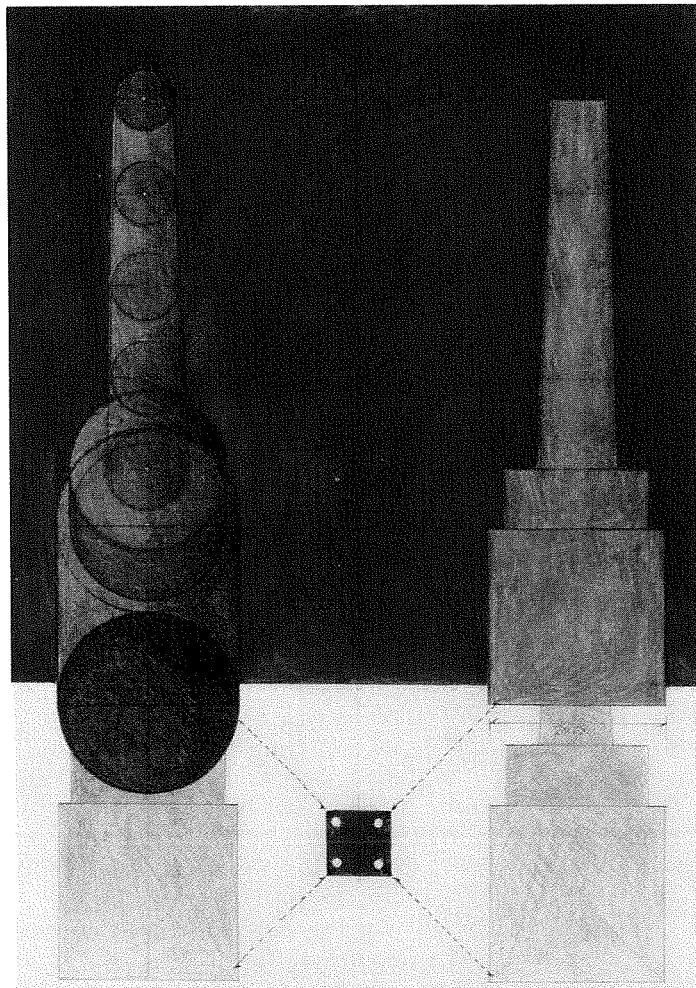
Following, from *First Figure* (North Point Press, 1984), are a few of the selections we used:

We welcomed the breeze
could not escape it

* * *

Sound decays
and then there is the story

and then the features are erased

* * *

         He told
how gazing at a mountain pool

had once induced a kind of
  waking sleep
which led to other things

* * *

All those words we once used for things but have now discarded in order to come to know things. There in the mountains I discovered the last tree or the letter A. What it said to me was brief, "I am surrounded by the uselessness of blue falling away on all sides into fields of bitter wormwood, all-heal and centaury. If you crush one of these herbs between your fingers the scent will cling to your hand but its particles will be quite invisible. This is a language you cannot understand." Dismantling the beams of the letter tree I carried them one by one down the slope to our house and added them to the fire. Later over the coals we grilled red mullets flavored with oil, pepper, salt and wild oregano.

* * *

Once in the park I broke in half

and lost one half
which half I don't remember

* * *

We drank wine, smoked

opium through a glass pipe
and climbed to a place on the ridge
a field of nettles and anise

where the remains of the city
  could be seen

In response to the concept of landscapes and their accompanying narrative fragments, Barbara Stauffacher Solomon designed an extraordinarily evocative set consisting of four very tall green fabric columns which tapered toward the base. These would both frame the movement and allow the dancers to disappear and reappear within the dance space itself. They would create a spatial field that lent architectural definition to the piece. The set helped to unify sound and movement by foregrounding the idea of an atemporal narrative space in constant tension with the actual, bounded space of performance. The former represents the territory of imaginary events (realised endlessly in their own time), the latter the theatrical circumscription with its absolute limits. "Boundary" in such a context becomes charged periphery (Heidegger's *peras*), rather than a simple limit to movement. In this respect "First Figure" extended our previous work with field activity and non-hierarchical composition. In response, the viewer must become an active participant in the work, scanning a range of events and making numerous decisions about points of focus.

"First Figure" was given its premiere at the Stanford Auditorium and was subsequently presented at the Walker Arts Institute in Minneapolis, the Joyce Theater in New York and the Zellerbach Playhouse in Berkeley. At each performance different levels of text emerged in relation to the electronic sound and the movement. Certain performances had an almost apocalyptic feel according to critics and members of the audience, though we had not aimed for such a specific emotional tenor. Other performances were described as more lyrical. We realized that we had in effect set up a polysemous field susceptible of multiple interpretations. On different occasions various "figures" might unexpectedly appear to modify the experience for audience and performers alike.

NOTES
1 Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, translated by Richard Howard (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 8.

Poems and fragments of poems excerpted from *First Figure*, North Point Press, copyright © 1984 by Michael Palmer.