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Introduction

Feminist Modernist Dance

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This is the first of two special issues of *Feminist Modernist Studies* dedicated to feminist modernist dance (the second will be Summer, 2022). We have wrestled in our joint editorial work here, as well as in our own work, over the disjunctions embodied in these three terms conjoined. Though feminist scholars have been doing important work in modernist studies for half a century, the term modernism remains mired in gatekeeping canon formations that center white male artists, primarily writers, with few exceptions. The continued need to specify “feminist modernism” signals an exasperating truism that modernism persists in its reliable male-orientation. At the same time, feminist modernist studies struggles with its own rigid canon, rooted in literature despite attempts to be interdisciplinary, and forged around a handful of authors. Dance, an art form in which women dominate, similarly shares a fraught relationship with the term modernism. Dance played a critical role in defining and disseminating modernist aesthetics, occupying center stage for some of our most retold stories about modernism’s rocky relationship with a resistant public, as in the legendarily tumultuous 1913 premiere of the Ballet Russes’ *Sacre du Printemps*. But as Carrie Preston points out in her introduction to *Modernist Cultures*’ 2014 special issue on dance, even in this instance where dance provides the occasion for interdisciplinary modernist artistic innovation, the embodied art of the dancers themselves is neglected in critical discussions in favor of attention to the score, the set, and even the

impresario. Dance lies at the center of mythologies of modernism and its aesthetics, and yet it is under-acknowledged in contemporary modernist studies.

Among the early twentieth century avant-garde artists central to our contemporary understanding of modernism, however, the significance of dance to a revolutionary artistic ethos was a given. For example, T. S. Eliot's 1925 review of Cecil J. Sharpe's *The Dance: An Historical Survey of Dancing in Europe* disparages the historian's myopic account of an art Eliot considers worthy of anthropological, philosophical, and scientific exploration.¹ His dismissal of Sharpe's study as having "a somewhat smug, Margaret Morris, Chelsea-cum-Golders Green flavour," baffles today, without the social memory attached to dancer and choreographer Morris and the vibrant arts scene based in the London boroughs Eliot references, where she and canonical modernist figures like Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, and, even, Eliot shared and studied art. Our vision in planning these issues has been to foreground histories and theories of dance as integral to modernism, as well as explore the ways that dance exists in a broader cultural context than the problematic and delimiting term "modernism" allows. A more comprehensive understanding of dance's pioneering artists, critics, and movements, and its social and political responsiveness eludes modernist studies, and the relationship between dance scholars and scholars of literary and visual modernisms remains uneasy.

At the time of this writing in fall of 2021, the Newberry Library is hosting an exhibit titled: "Chicago Avant-Garde: Five Women Ahead of Their Time," which includes two Chicago-based dancer/choreographers, Katherine Dunham and Ruth Page, alongside surrealist artist Gertrude Abercrombie, poet Gwendolyn Brooks, and gallerist and curator Katharine Kuh.² Curated by Liesl Olson, the exhibition focuses on the subversive power of these women's groundbreaking artistic work and the ways they elevated the status of Chicago as a center for

artistic experimentation between the 1930s and 1950s. But as Olson reminds us in the exhibition catalog, they did so in a world that did not always welcome their perspectives, nor offer them the artistic freedoms their male counterparts enjoyed, or for Brooks and Dunham, those enjoyed by white artists. Dunham and Page most explicitly illustrate the risks associated with creating avant-garde art, Olson writes, since “[i]n dance ideas are never abstract, they are action,” and there is no disassociating provocative art from the body that makes it. “Their bodies were at the center of the stage, in performances that were not about the societally defined ‘innate’ or ‘natural’ qualities of being a woman; rather, they demonstrated an art of utter physical and mental control.”³ As the importance of Dunham and Page to the Newberry’s exhibit demonstrates, dance studies have moved beyond the peripheries of modernist studies to claim fuller consideration. Centered on witnessing embodied action, dance studies demands that we consider art and the moment of artistic production together, as a shared moment of cultural memory making. In Diana Taylor’s words, “[p]erformance [. . .] functions as an episteme, a way of knowing, not simply an object of analysis.”⁴

While we must acknowledge the Western-centric focus of this first issue in its geography and racial and ethnic composition, the organization of these six, loosely chronological essays reveals several interrelated themes taken up from a variety of temporal, geographic, and political perspectives. Geographically, our contributors discuss performances from Paris, England, Ireland, and the United States, as well as those that circulated globally via newspaper articles and cigarette cards. This issue also moves us from the proscenium stage—so often the acknowledged site of modernism—to less visible and recognized modes of modernism, including the picket line and public spaces. Finally, this collection asks us to challenge the lenses through which we encounter and understand modernism, whether through reception, the ways women adopted the

“folk” in service to a modernist aesthetic, the framing of a modern dance icon as “popular,” the activist potential of dance within the built environment, or the political projects of dancers themselves.

Anna Paliy begins this issue from the point of view of the audience in “If Napkins Could Talk: Women’s Action Sketching at the Ballets Russes,” which considers dance sketches by artists Laura Knight and Valentine Hugo in the 1910s as important vehicles for both capturing the ephemerality of the live dance performance and the ways in which women artists engage with dance through their own medium. Their sketches offer an unmediated experience of dance and recognize the important work of witnessing performance. She draws attention to the interpretative work of these sketches, arguing that they actively contest stereotypes about how male and female dancers move, as well as confounding dancers’ self-cultivated personas by insisting on the primacy of the audience members’ experience and understanding of the performer and the performance.

Audience members experience of avant-garde dance, or rather one theater manager’s anxieties about audience members’ experience of avant-garde dance inform Anne Witchard’s essay “The Ancient East in the West End: Margaret Morris and *Angkor* (1917) at the London Coliseum.” As Eliot’s casually derisive mention of Morris noted above suggests, she was well-known among her contemporaries as a progenitor of “little theatres” in London and host of the Margaret Morris Club. In fact, Morris was so successful that by 1917, at only twenty-six, she already had her own theatrical company and theater. But as Witchard shows, the short-lived production of her experimental ballet *Angkor*, based on Indian and Cambodian sculptures at the Trocadero Museum in Paris, tested the limits of West End music hall audiences’ patience with adaptations of Asian art that were not mocking or trivializing. This issues’ cover image from a

poster advertising the ballet, with its Cubist renderings of the dancers' bodies, suggests the work's intellectual and aesthetic challenge.

In "Redefining Twentieth Century Ideals of Irish Womanhood: Dorothy Tyrconnell Forrest, Erina Brady, and Early Irish Modern Dance," Kathryn Holt explores how two Irish choreographers similarly manage anxieties around modernism and "improper" embodiment to create their own iterations of modern dance. The project of Irish nationalism is a frequent concern of modernist art, but as Holt explains, modern dance in newly independent Ireland came under particular scrutiny as its celebration of women's bodies conflicted with conservative Irish ideals of chastity and purity from the corrupting influences of Europe. Holt traces the controversies that marked the careers of Forrest and Brady, who used dance, "an accepted means of shaping and performing Irish women's identities," to subvert those identities, "creat[ing] alternative forms of Irish womanhood that gave them more agency than they had in dominant discourses."

Colleen Hooper's essay "Edith Segal in Detroit: On Stage and On the Picket Line" shifts the discussion of dancer and choreographers' political projects to the United States. Hooper offers a sustained examination of Segal's time in Detroit, Michigan, where she worked for the Federal Theatre Project, describing it as a turning point in the New York City-based choreographer's career. Not only did her time in the Midwest help Segal merge her leftist politics with her high modernist dance training, but it shaped her investment in crafting modern dance technique that both reflected the concerns of the working class and took them seriously as potential audiences. Hooper's analysis of Segal relies on archival materials, arguing for a reading of her based not as much on critical reception of her work, as on the choreographer/activist's own perceptions of her influence and career.

In “Cultural Modernity, the Wigman School, and the Modern Girl,” Tresa Randall uses archival materials to explore the surprising mass culture presence in the United States of German expressionist choreographer Mary Wigman and her influential Wigman School. An icon of modern dance, Wigman is usually associated with radical formalist innovation—she studied with Rudolf Laban and is considered the most important figure in European modern dance next to Dalcroze. Randall’s essay, however, considers her from a material culture perspective, looking at mass produced photographs and texts circulating in early twentieth century America to chart the profound influence the Wigman School’s deployment of the Modern Girl trope had in American popular dance, and more broadly, in American conceptions of modern womanhood. “Wigman and her dancers extended beyond rarefied arts locations into commodity culture,” Randall argues, “in such unexpected places as travel guides, fashion magazines, and cigarette advertisements [. . .] [to] become a recognizable, consumable, and mobile cultural trope in transnational circulation.” Randall also, importantly, uses the influence of the Wigman School as an example of the limitations of the inclusivity of many modernists, particularly the ways that primitivism provided a foil for white women’s modernity.

“Grid Variations: Lucinda Childs Dance Company on Robert Moses Plaza,” by Amanda Graham and Lauren DiGiulio, closes the issue by looking at how one modern choreographer contends with the masculinity of urban architectural and city planning. In their essay, Graham and DiGiulio situate Lucinda Child’s 1973 piece *Calico Mingling*—first performed by trespassing on Fordham University’s Robert Moses Plaza on the Lincoln Center campus—within larger discussions of class, privilege and who has the right to occupy urban space. Childs created *Calico Mingling*, they explain, as an embodied inscription intended to challenge the modernist grid laid out across Manhattan by architect Robert Moses that demolished communities in the

name of progress and displaced a quarter of a million laborers, immigrants, and people of color from their homes.

We chose this essay to conclude with not only because it comes last chronologically, but because it takes readers into a specific moment of feminist modernist dance as it unfolded. Childs' performance resonates today because it "establishe[s] dance [as] a means of appropriating and activating sociocultural space." The movements of the dancers in *Calico Mingling* replicate how pedestrians navigate the streets of New York City: separately, but in unison, "travel[ing] along their choreographed contiguous paths while retaining their personal space." The dance resists city planning that prioritized standardization and efficiency over community by trespassing on what had recently been public space. It refutes the moralizing of city planners who justified displacing residents in order to save them from a "dreary, dismal neighborhood with no future."⁵ This, to us, encapsulates modernism at its best. What, after all, is more modernist than rejecting institutional authority through formalist artistic experimentation? Writing this introduction in what we hope will prove the waning days of isolation and grief caused by the global Covid-19 pandemic, we find comfort in Childs' belief in dance as political action, as her dancers simultaneously mourn a lost world and stage their resistance to that loss quietly and somberly, with precise, tightly choreographed steps.

Notes

¹ Eliot, 50.

² Rishona Zimring contributed an essay on dancer/choreographer/anthropologist Dunham to the debut issue of this journal, "Katherine Dunham's Chicago stage: crossing to Caribbean négritude." *Feminist Modernist Studies*, Vol. 1 (2018), 52-73.

³ Olson, 50.

⁴ Taylor, XVI.

⁵ “The West Side’s Turn.” *The New York Times*. April 25, 1955. Graham and DiGiulio take this quote from Hillary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson. *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York*. New York: Norton, 2007: 280.

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