

HYPERALLERGIC

Minimalist Duets in Sculpture and Dance

by Jason Andrew on October 20, 2015



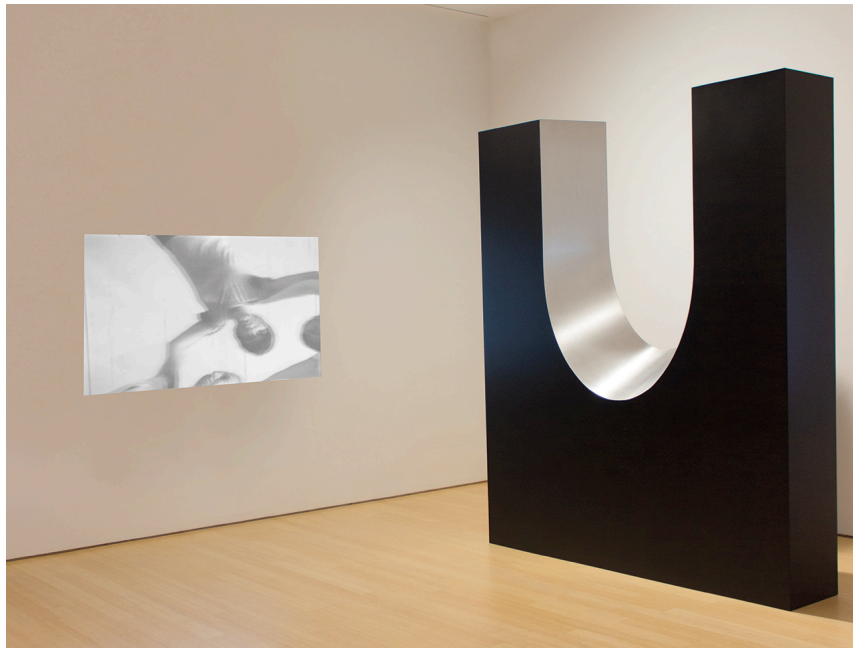
Lucinda Childs's 'Dance' (1979) and Sol LeWitt's "Serial Project ABCD 5" installed at Loretta Howard Gallery (all images courtesy Loretta Howard Gallery unless otherwise noted)

During the summer of 1960, dance artists Simone Forti, Nancy Meehan, and Yvonne Rainer rented rehearsal space at Dance Players on Sixth Avenue so they could improvise together. Sitting in on a rehearsal, the-soon-to-be-sculptor Robert Morris — who was married to Forti at the time — [commented](#) that the best moments were when they weren't dancing.



So began the conversations among a historic group of dance makers that would grow to include Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, Deborah and Alex Hay, and others, all of whom would make up the [Judson Dance Theater](#). Their work broke with tradition and embraced movement based on process, improvisation, and causality. It represented not a single prevailing aesthetic but rather an effort to “preserve an ambiance of diversity and freedom,” wrote dance historian Sally Banes.

Seemingly simultaneously, sculptors like Morris, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, George Sugarman, Tony Smith, and Anne Truitt also moved away from tradition in their field, abandoning the practice of modeling and carving and embracing a new kind of artistic autonomy — one which emphasized the clarity of the constructed object as well as the space created by it. Their manufactured and fabricated work came to be called minimalism.



Yvonne Rainer's 'Connecticut Rehearsal' (1969) and Ronald Bladen's "Cosmic Seed" (1977)

[Where Sculpture and Dance Meet: Minimalism from 1961 to 1979](#) is an exhibition at the Loretta Howard Gallery that explores this overlap. Curated by dancer–turned–dance critic Wendy Perron in collaboration with historian Julie Martin, the show pairs videos of historic performances of dances by



Merce Cunningham, Lucinda Childs, Trisha Brown, Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer, and (surprisingly) Robert Morris, with sculptures by Ronald Bladen, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Morris, and Andy Warhol, exploring the dialogue surrounding concurrent ideas of minimalism in dance, performance, and art. “The label minimalist is a handy way of calling attention to a basic approach to composition,” wrote dance critic Jack Anderson [in 1987 in the *New York Times*](#). I imagine the curators of the exhibition had Anderson’s handy approach in mind as they set about juxtaposing dance makers and sculptors from this historic period in American art.

But lumping a group of artists together as “minimalists” ignores how different they are from one another and simplifies the intentions behind their art. Dance makers during this time may have used movement sparingly and without embellishment, but that doesn’t mean they shared the same severity as, say, Donald Judd (and we know how much he rejected the minimalist label). Both Judd and Morris denied that their objects related to architecture, technology, or mathematics; instead, they emphasized their occupation with formal problems, with the “autonomous and literal nature of sculpture,” as Morris put it. Aptly for this show, their approach can be summed up by a statement from Yvonne Rainer: “In the studio, I work with aesthetics like a shoemaker works with leather.”



Merce Cunningham’s ‘Rainforest’ (1968) installed with Andy Warhol’s ‘Silver Clouds’

Despite its shaky premise, *Where Sculpture and Dance Meet* is an immersive and ambitious exhibition. It begins with original footage of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company's first performance of *Rainforest* (1968), a complex dance for six; as you watch it at the gallery, Andy Warhol's floating Mylar pillows softly bounce up against your toes. At the time, having seen Warhol's *Silver Clouds* installation at Leo Castelli Gallery, Cunningham asked Jasper Johns if he thought Warhol would let him use them as a set; Warhol agreed. Cunningham's work is a bit out of context for this exhibition — it's complex and multifaceted, not exactly hallmark traits of minimalism. But I think its crossdisciplinary collaboration of choreography, set, and sound (by David Tudor) — which was the bedrock of the Cunningham Company — is remarkably relevant and very much missing from today's grand spectacles.

Ronald Bladen's monolithic "Cosmic Seed" (1977) dominates the main gallery, where it stands in stark contrast to the film of Yvonne Rainer's messy *Connecticut Rehearsal* (1969). Rainer knew Bladen back in the '50s, when he was a painter, and they remained friends for life. The film immerses the viewer in Rainer's task-based work, structured as improvisation. Sweaty dancers interact with cardboard boxes and pillows that are strewn around the gym in order to impede or generate the performers' movement. Rainer's concept may be minimal, but it is not minimalism. The work is playful, organic, physical, and dry. "You must love the daily work," Cunningham once advised Rainer. It shows.

In May 1961 the composer La Monte Young invited Simone Forti to present a program as part of his series of interdisciplinary performances at Yoko Ono's fifth-floor loft on Chambers Street. She called her evening "Five Dance Constructions and Other Pieces" and built large objects for her performers to negotiate, making them rehearse with taxing "rule games." *Slant Board* was part of this radical program. On view in the exhibition is a 2004 restaging of the original. Using ropes, four dancers climb hand over hand, up and down a 45-degree wedge-like structure. The work reinforces Forti's affinity for ordinary movement and, like Rainer's *Connecticut Rehearsal*, articulates a simple statement about how objects activate movement and space.





Simone Forti's 'Slant Board' (1961) and Robert Morris's "Corner Beam" (1964)

Matched up with Forti's film is Morris's "Corner Beam" (1964), one of a series of large-scale geometric forms originally created for a solo show at the Green Gallery, in which the artist focused on delineating the gallery space. Reinstalled here, the work is just as successful as must have been then, redefining and reactivating the physical space. Stripped of distractions, details, or metaphorical references — even of surface inflection — its severity assimilates so perfectly to the white box that viewers might miss it entirely. Its bold simplicity is a foil to Forti's athletic *Slant Board*.

One of the most recognizable names in American dance, Trisha Brown created *Accumulations* in 1971; it became a signature solo piece for her. In *Group Primary Accumulation* (1973), on view in the exhibition, Brown revamped her solo as a dance for four people. The work is built one movement at a time, performed as a simple accumulating sequence (A, A+B, A+B+C, etc). This logic parallels her friend Donald Judd's affinity for arbitrary, non-related modular systems he called "specific objects." Next to Brown's film hangs a pair of Judd's wall-mounted, hollow, rectangular aluminum boxes, both "Untitled." *These* are minimalism. They are prime examples of Judd's intention to create material work



that would assume a physical presence without recourse to grand philosophical statements. Brown's *Accumulation* may take on a more rational impression when viewed next to Dudd's boxes, but the performance evidences an organic spontaneity beyond the minimalist label. Brown and Judd did appreciate each other's aesthetic pursuits; she later asked him to collaborate on sets and costumes.



From left to right: Trisha Brown, 'Group Primary Accumulation' (1973); Donald Judd, *Menziken boxes "Untitled"* (1988) and "Untitled" (1991); Lucinda Childs, 'Dance' (1979); Sol LeWitt, "Serial Project ABCD 5" (image courtesy Loretta Howard Gallery)

The most relevant juxtaposition of sculpture and dance in the show is actually within one work: a 1979 piece by Lucinda Childs called *Dance*. A musical score by Philip Glass formed the framework for Childs's choreography, while artist Sol LeWitt designed a gridded set as well as a film of the dancers performing, which was projected on a translucent scrim, adding dimensions and layers to Childs's repetitive choreography.

In a *Washington Post* review of *Dance*, Alan M. Kriegsman wrote, "A few times, at most, in the course of a decade a work of art comes along that makes a genuine breakthrough, defining for us new modes of perception and feeling and clearly belonging as much to the future as to the present. Such a work is *Dance*."



Seeing *Dance* is refreshing. At a time when the majority of performance and visual art is steeped in satire, irony, and a pervasive cult of personalities, this work reminds us of the beauty to be found in layers of unemotional movement, sound, and set. And like Cunningham's *Rainforest*, it reminds us of the potential brilliance that can arise through collaboration.

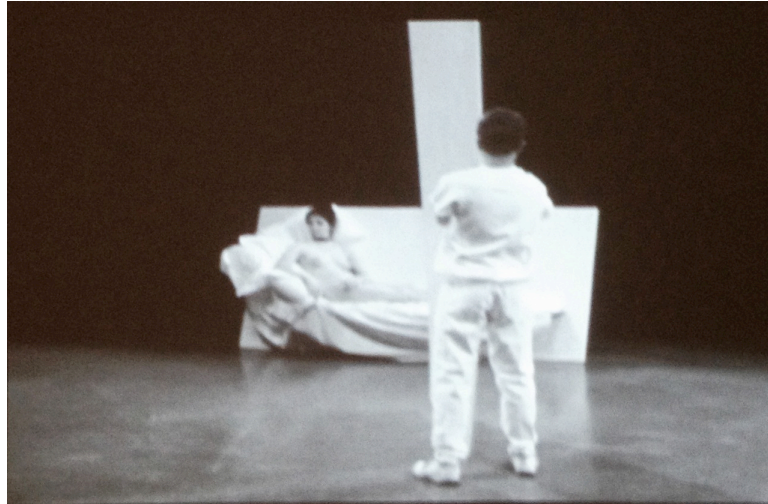


From left to right: Robert Morris, "Corner Beam" (1964); Ronald Bladen, "Cosmic Seed" (1977); Donald Judd, "Untitled (Menziken boxes)" (1988)

Installed on the floor in front of the projection of Childs's *Dance* is LeWitt's "Serial Project ABCD 5" (1968). Methodical and intricate, LeWitt presents a combination and recombination of open and closed squares, cubes, and repetitions of these shapes, all laid out in a measured field. The piece is emblematic of the artist's use of the grid to explore ideas surrounding the variation of units, and its inclusion here enhances the physicality of these elements in the film.

The final film, projected in the back room on its own, is *Site* (1993), a re-creation of a 1964 collaboration between Robert Morris and Carolee Schneemann. Directed by Morris, the film features unidentified dancers reenacting the original performance. The man, who wears work gloves and a mask made by Jasper Johns, lifts and carries sheets of plywood over his head. He removes the sheets one by one from their horizontal stack. He tilts and turns each large, flat shape, articulating its position in an interplay of gravity and space, all the while slowly revealing the woman, who reclines

nude like Manet's Olympia, behind the stack. I had never seen this performance but can understand how it set the stage for Morris's ongoing engagement with the spatial and temporal properties of sculpture, which paved the way for artists like Richard Serra.



Still from Robert Morris's 'Site' (1993) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Since the exhibition makes of point of drawing sight lines between a small group of closely knit colleagues, an appropriate pairing with Morris's *Site* would have been Charles Atlas's black-and-white film *Nevada* (1974). For the piece, dancer/choreographer Douglas Dunn spent a single afternoon performing with a trapezoidal-shaped piece of found wood. Dunn, who still performs with his own company, was a former Cunningham dancer and appears in Rainer's *Connecticut Rehearsal*.

Where this exhibition excels is not in the attempt to consolidate the intentions of a historic group of artists under the umbrella of minimalism, but in the presentation of their diverse ideas that offered new and adventurous approaches to dance, performance, and art.

[Where Sculpture and Dance Meet: Minimalism from 1961 to 1979](#) continues at Loretta Howard Gallery (525 W 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through October 31.

