

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Daniel Madoff

Of an Era, Of a Moment, Of a Lifetime

by Emilee Lord

In May 2020, seventy former [Merce Cunningham Company](#) members joined forces to create a virtual work celebrating Jasper Johns' ninetieth birthday. It nodded back to the original work, *Event for Jasper Johns*, performed at the Merce Cunningham Studio at Westbeth on the occasion of the opening of his 1996 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. The result was at once profound, intimate, and universal.

Event² for Jasper Johns consisted of 140 short video dances, compiled from the solo videos of each dancer performing excerpts of 38 dances from the Cunningham repertoire along with exercises from the Cunningham Technique. The film was directed and edited by Daniel Madoff. As the film moved from vignette to vignette, the views shifted from close-ups to stunning landscapes, from quiet exercises at home to intimate and playful moments in a park. Throughout the film, individual pieces were cobbled together in a mosaic that demonstrated the reach of the project through time and space. In other moments, the whole frame rested on a single scene. The overall shift from macro to micro worked to shape the grandeur of such an endeavor while reminding me that each dancer was themselves alone.

One of the things I love about Cunningham movement is the sense of timing built into the choreography itself. There was proof of this in the way that the ensemble worked well together even though the dancers were performing separately. The sound, though accentuated by music written specifically for Johns' birthday celebration, was made up of ambient noise from the dancers' personal footage. You hear floorboards, traffic, wind, water, breath, and children. The way the sound, mosaic tiles, and single frames were pieced together lent a sense of continuity to the overall work.

Event² feels both timeless and of a time. Throughout his seven decades of making work, Cunningham interacted with visual artists in powerful ways. Cunningham's choreography strikes me as exacting and linear, yet the work remains playful, finding shapes, balances,

stillness. It engages patterns, repetition, soft punctuations, and is highly visual. [Merce Cunningham, John Cage, and Jasper Johns](#) famously collaborated to meld visual performance space, movement, painterly scenes, and [chance operations](#), creating as yet unseen works of total experience. With *Event^2* we peek into an era, not only as we watch decades of this company's repertoire unfold but as we watch dancers from different generations perform the same rigorous practice. The dancers were often the original cast members, evident in the sensory ways they re-embodied this movement, so familiar to them at one time. There are so many layers of time and space to delve into.

Event^2 is also very much of now and encapsulates the way 2020 changed, continues to change, how we make and view performance. I have never spent so much screen time watching dance, and honestly I've enjoyed a majority of it. This one left me feeling blessed, engaged, within the canon.

With so many different bodies from so many different moments in Cunningham Dance Company history, each of them experiencing and expressing themselves through the repertoire, it was a true and gorgeous example of the new [alone-together](#) normal.

[Event^2 for Jasper Johns](#), Merce Cunningham Company, Philadelphia Museum of Art, and Whitney Museum of American Art, released on the Whitney YouTube Channel, Sept. 29 – Oct. 6.

By Emilee Lord
October 20, 2020