

## About Merce Cunningham

Merce Cunningham (1919-2009) is widely considered to be one of the most important choreographers of all time. His approach to performance was groundbreaking in its ideological simplicity and physical complexity: he applied the idea that “a thing is just that thing” to choreography, embracing the notion that “if the dancer dances, everything is there.” He also once said, “Dance is most deeply concerned with each single instant as it comes along, and its life and vigor and attraction lie in just that singleness. It is as accurate and impermanent as breathing.”

Born in Centralia, Washington on April 16, 1919, Cunningham began dancing at a young age. At the Cornish School he first encountered the work of Martha Graham, who would later invite him to join her company in New York; Cunningham had a six-year tenure as a soloist with the Martha Graham Dance Company. It was also at Cornish that Cunningham first met John Cage, who would become the greatest influence on his practice, his closest collaborator, and his life partner until Cage’s death in 1992. The first show that included only Cunningham dances, a series of six solos with music by Cage, took place in 1944. Four years later, Cunningham and Cage began a relationship with the famed experimental institution Black Mountain College, where, in 1952, Cunningham, along with Robert Rauschenberg, David Tudor, M.C. Richards, and Charles Olson, joined Cage in creating what is often considered the first “Happening.” Also at Black Mountain, in 1953, Cunningham first formed a dance company to explore his convention-breaking ideas. The Merce Cunningham Dance Company (originally called Merce Cunningham and Dance Company) would remain in continuous operation until 2011, with Cunningham as Artistic Director until his death in 2009. In 1971, Cunningham and his company became original tenants in Westbeth Artist Housing, remaining in residence there, along with his studio and school, until the company’s dissolution. Over the course of his career, Cunningham choreographed 190 dances and over 700 “Events.”

Cunningham once wrote, “My work has always been in process. I do not think of each dance as an object, rather a short stop on the way.” He has described four seminal events that led to large discoveries, the first two of which came from his work with John Cage. Starting with their early collaborations in the 1940s, Cage and Cunningham began to propose a number of radical innovations, the first being the controversial idea that dance and music can occur in the same time and space but be created independently of one another. This separation gave Cunningham “a feeling of freedom for the dance, not a dependence upon the note-by-note procedure.” A second leap for Cunningham and Cage was the use of chance operations, a revolutionary form of decision-making in choreography (and, in the case of Cage, music) where Cunningham applied chance operations to determine elements of the choreography such as the continuity, rhythm, timing, number of dancers, and use of space. The use of chance operations led to new discoveries, “presenting almost constantly situations in which the imagination is challenged.”

Cunningham’s lifelong passion for exploration and innovation made him a leader in applying new technologies to the arts. He credited his work in film in the 1970s as another key inflection point: tapping into the potentials provided by the mobility of the camera, the ability to cut and thereby alter size and rhythm, and the highlighting of specific body parts otherwise far less obvious given the distance of the viewer to the stage. In his 70s, Cunningham continued to experiment, using the computer software DanceForms to explore movement possibilities before setting them on dancers. He continued to find ways to integrate technology and dance: he explored motion-capture technology to create décor for *Hand Drawn Spaces* (1998), *BIPED* (1999), *Loops* (2000), and *Fluid Canvas* (2002). His interest in new media led to the creation of *Mondays with Merce*, the webcast series that

provides a behind-the-scenes look at Cunningham's and his company's teaching and rehearsal process.

With long-term collaborations with artists like Robert Rauschenberg (who contributed various design elements to over 20 of Cunningham's dances—sometimes even creating his work onstage in “real-time” during the dance), Jasper Johns, Charles Atlas, and Elliot Caplan (rethinking the way choreography and dancing bodies could be captured on film), Cunningham's sphere of influence extended deep into the visual arts world. In 2017, the Walker Art Center retrospective *Merce Cunningham: Common Time*, (also at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago), investigated the unique working methods, profound relationships, and influence of Cunningham, featuring works from artists like Tacita Dean, Morris Graves, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Isamu Noguchi, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, Carolee Schneemann, Frank Stella, Stan VanDerBeek, and Andy Warhol.

An active choreographer and mentor to the arts world until his death at the age of 90, Cunningham earned some of the highest honors bestowed in the arts. Among his many awards are the National Medal of Arts (1990) and the MacArthur Fellowship (1985). He also received the Jacob's Pillow Dance Award in 2009, Japan's Praemium Imperiale in 2005, the British Laurence Olivier Award in 1985, and he was named Officier of the Legion d'Honneur in France in 2004. Cunningham's life and artistic vision have been the subject of several books and numerous major exhibitions, and his dances have been performed by groups including the Paris Opera Ballet, New York City Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, White Oak Dance Project, the Lyon Opera Ballet, Ballett am Rhein, and London's Rambert, to name a few.

Cunningham died in his New York City home on July 26, 2009. Always forward-thinking, he oversaw the development of a precedent-setting Legacy Plan prior to his death, to guide his Company and ensure the preservation of his artistic legacy. Through the Merce Cunningham Trust, his vision continues to live on, regenerated time and time again through new bodies and minds.