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... As a Dynamic Result of Gesture

Charles Slatkin

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"... as a dynamic result of Gesture."

by

Charles H. Slatkin

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MFA PHOTOGRAPHY PROGRAM
SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTS AND SCIENCES
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

January 31, 1979

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Date ______________
"...as a dynamic result of gesture"*

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February 1, 1979
Owen Butler, Advisor and Chairperson

*excerpt from "The Futurist Manifesto" of Anton Guilio Bragaglia
Dedicated to the Jennifer Muller and the Works! Dance Company
whose patience, understanding and inspiration helped make this thesis
a reality.
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Title: "...as a dynamic result of gesture"

Purpose: To visually explore modern dance and the implications of rhythm, movement and emotion.

Scope of Thesis: Dance is unique in its ability to express concepts of space, time and energy. The fact that there has always been dance compels us to accept it as an old and deeply rooted human activity whose foundations reside in the nature of man.

As long as man is responsive to the forces of life and the universe, there will be dance.

Margaret N. H. Doubler

Dance exists as a living fleeting moment; and thus by its very nature it cannot be effectively preserved or recorded. This thesis seeks not to notate aspects of dance or freeze single moments in time, but rather to use the photographic process to elucidate the dynamic results of gesture and movement.

All arts are one: the expression of man's emotional experience transformed by thought and intentionally given form in some medium perceptible to the mind. My work will apply art to art to allow a fusion between the art of photography and the art of dance, resulting in a new and extended visualization of movement, light and emotion.

My work has its foundation and influences in the motion studies of Marey and Muybridge, "The Futurist Manifesto" of Anton Giulio Bragaglia, the work of Barbara Morgan, Edward Weston, and my friendship with dancers who helped me to see the art of dance.

Procedure: Over a four-month period I will work closely with the members of Jennifer Muller and the Works! Dance Company, based in New York City.

I will utilize techniques ranging from the formal to the experimental to explore those elements stated in my "Purpose". My thesis will contain no less than twenty images and will utilize formats from 8x10 to 35mm.
My involvement in photographing dance began, not as one might suspect, with a lifelong respect and appreciation of the art of movement, but rather through my friendship with a young, talented dancer, Carol Rae Kraus. Before meeting Rae, I knew virtually nothing about dance. (I am not trying to appear modest; I was unknowing.)

Dance was something I remember being dragged to as a child in the hope of being enriched. Except for some faint images of dainty dancers in frilly tutus and a fascination with the knowledge that each seat in City Center was equipped with a pair of binoculars which could be rented for 25¢, my early recollections are by no means significant.

Rae and I first talked during a long car ride from Rochester, New York, to Worcester, Massachusetts, in the Fall of 1975. We talked on through that long winter night, and a few words kept repeating themselves in our conversation: space, time, energy, movement and light. To me, these words belonged to the domain of painting, sculpture, and photography, surely not dance. As we talked on, however, it became clear that we were interested and involved in the same things. After dropping Rae off in North Adams, Massachusetts, where she was to rejoin her company, I spent the last few hours of my trip thinking about our conversation. Clearly, I needed to see more dance, specifically modern dance, which I would soon learn was something quite unlike classical dance.
During the following year in Rochester, I was able to watch Rae dance in performances sponsored by The Affiliate Artists. Because I was too intimidated by the hordes of anxious videographers and photographers who sought to document her every movement, I decided to begin, not by photographing her dance, but by shooting her portrait. It was a good portrait. Though she was clearly manipulative and conscious of her image, I believe the photograph shows evidence of her intense concentration and control. I have included it as part of the thesis (picture #26).

That Spring in New York City, Rae introduced me to the rest of her company, Jennifer Muller and The Works!. I watched an exhausting rehearsal and spent time talking with the dancers (always on my guard, expecting at any moment to be discovered as the novice that I was). But that moment never came, and I soon became relaxed enough to feel comfortable in the situation. I later came to realize that there were no rights and wrongs in viewing modern dance; if you felt something, responded, related, emoted, fantasized for even a brief moment, then the dance was successful. This I could understand; this realm was familiar.

It was probably around this time that the idea of spending an extended period of time photographing the company occurred to me. Visions of Morgan's studies of Martha Graham and Steichen's photographs of Isadora Duncan played in my head: large format, studio strobe, 8x10, hundreds of beautifully printed silver prints, impeccably displayed.

Needless to say, after a few weeks of shooting, I almost threw the 8x10 through the window. During the beginning stages of the thesis, I was quite unclear as to what I was doing or what I wanted to do. Yet I told myself, "upward and onward", and just kept working. If hindsight is
accurate, I was groping then, without any real focus or purpose. The work was so very weak. I toyed with 4\(\times\)5 and 2\(\vert\)2\(\frac{1}{2}\) formats, with no success. Making the transition from large format to 35mm was a difficult one. Technology was getting in my way, and my frustration increased.

Nothing seemed to be working out. The light in the rehearsal studio was abominable: four 8-foot fluorescent tubes illuminated a twenty-foot by forth-foot area, there was minimal natural light and a dirty linoleum floor. Certainly these were not the romantic scenes of my fantasies. I pushed Tri-x and 2475 recording film to their limits, hoping to compensate for the poor light, but to little avail.

The company was then working on a piece called White, scheduled for performance the following Fall. During this time, I had intended to pursue a documentary approach until I had a clearer idea of my final goal, but even that wasn’t working out. The dancers wore tattered workshirts and sweat pants, and it seemed as though they were walking through their paces, not dancing.

Then, very slowly, almost imperceptibly, things began to change. In the studio, people came and went more frequently. Moods were more intense. Rehearsals were longer. Something was going on. Suddenly it was more than apparent: the performance date was approaching.

Soon I would learn that it was there—in the performance—in the opening curtain—in that first cautious step of a new dance—in the costumes, the lights, the synthesized musical score, the audience—that the energy lay. This was what I wanted to photograph.

But, as in all romantic ventures, it was not quite so easy. The
company's manager was very unorganized. (It's safe to say that, because he has since been replaced.) He reacted to photographers as one may react to black flies on a hot Maine afternoon. When I first questioned him about photographing the performance, his face turned red, he threw his hands up in the air, and exclaimed, "Well, nobody told me. You certainly can't photograph from the audience. I won't have photographers in the audience. And there's no room for you in the wings." He continued to seal my fate. "Could I photograph from the audience during the dress rehearsal?", I calmly inquired. "Dress rehearsal!", he screamed. "Dress rehearsal, who the hell has time for dress rehearsals? We're being screwed by this crummy theater." He continued his barrage, complaining about all and everyone. I left him to argue with one of the stagehands. In short, one uptight character can get in the way and make life miserable for everyone.

After much persuasion, compromising, and arguing, I was finally given permission to shoot from the wings during the first portion of the piece and from the lighting control booth (some 300 feet away) during the other two segments.

Tension was in the air. Tempers brewed just below the surface. Time was running out.

I carefully researched film stock and equipment, put my 2½x2½ and 4x5 into storage, bought new batteries for my meter, and finally begged, borrowed, and bartered for 135mm and 200mm Nikkor lenses. It was at this point that I began to take color seriously. Until then, my work had been flat and dull. Something was missing. I had seen the costumes which
would be worn during the performance: most of the company would wear orange hats, pants and shirts, while Jennifer Muller would wear a brilliant white dress. There would be one prop used in the piece, a fail of red dye used to simulate blood. Color film seemed very appropriate. I might emphasize that, except for a couple of "vacation" rolls, I had never worked seriously in color. Needless to say, this did not help my confidence at all. I brought along a few rolls of Tri-x for security, and waited those tense moments before the curtain would rise.

Then curtain--fade in music--fade up lights--and then that first step.

So this was performance. This was that moment when human energy focused on one point of space and time. I was so close to it, and the feeling was inescapable.

My heart started beating and my hands began to sweat. I was close to something very special that would exist only for a brief moment.

I began my work. Even though I had seen this dance rehearsed thirty or forty times, what was transpiring on stage was very different and surprisingly unfamiliar. Then, panic: I had pre-planned many of the shots I wanted to take, but they were all from the audience's viewpoint, and here I was in the wings, looking sideways. I lost track of the dance, of who went where, and what came next. In retrospect, this turned out to be a blessing in disguise, for it made me improvise and experiment. Since I had lost my focus (so to speak), I was free to explore the many possibilities of composition, exposure, and shutter speed.
More than anything else, I would like to stress how physically close I was to the performance: my viewpoint was radically different from that of the person in Row L of the balcony. The dancers were sometimes as close as ten feet away. As they performed, I was spattered by their sweat, blasted by the music, and occasionally rammed and stepped on as they entered and exited. All this to say that I felt involved; the audience was far away, and I was so very close.

I shot as fast as my fingers allowed me, and I cursed the high price of Nikon motor drives and an extra body. In what seemed both a lifetime and a moment, it was over. The curtain fell and the dancers sprinted to the dressing room to change for the next piece.

Perhaps this is a good point at which to talk about the dancers themselves. Never before had I witnessed so much human energy expended. Their effort was total. Whatever misgivings they might have had about themselves, their work, or the company, none were apparent in the performance. Every ounce of strength and concentration went into the dance. There was no holding back. One cannot emerge from such an experience without being changed. Often when I'm tired and feeling the need to rest, I think about these dancers; it's both sobering and energizing.

As the company changed costumes, I dashed to the control booth in the back of the theater. I readied myself for the next piece, Winter. Armed with my 200mm lens, I waited once more. Again the music faded up, the curtain was raised, and again that first cautious step. As first I was quite depressed, being so far away from the stage and feeling awkward with the long lens. But, as the dance progressed, it became
clear that the performance was also oriented toward the booth. Shapes and visual patterns became obvious from this viewpoint. I soon became more comfortable with the long lens, and much of my panic subsided. Photographs #9 and #16 demonstrate some of the shots taken from this viewpoint.

Thus, almost as quickly as it began, that first evening came to an end. I had sweated through my shirt, and had shot ten rolls of film—two black and white, and eight color.

After the mandatory two or three days passed, my slides arrived from Kodak. Into the projector they went. There were plenty of underexposures and overexposures (I had bracketed madly to cover all bets), and a few crisp, frozen moments, but my real pleasure came from viewing what the company has affectionately come to call the "blurs". I had expected all my long exposures to be virtually useless, but there were a few slides, #14 and #13, which were special. Action was not frozen, fluid colors flowed, and specific personalities were obscured. These pictures seemed more in tune with the dance than were my well-exposed frozen and static shots.

A general technique soon evolved: using a tripod for general support, without locking up any of the pan or tilt knobs so as to be able to move quickly and freely; lenses of 50mm, 135mm, and occasionally, 200mm focal length; High Speed Ektachrome (tungsten illumination) pushed to ASA 320; apertures from f1.8 to f8, shutter speed ranging from 2 sec. to 1/60 sec.; and slight underexposure.

Panning during long exposures helped create what I perceive to be some of my most exciting pictures. The results, however, were unpredictable, unreliable, and difficult to recreate (see photographs #8, #5, and #12).
A motor drive, I'm sure, would have been most helpful in such a situation.

I photographed the company in a variety of situations--including rehearsals, performances, and in their dressing room--periodically during the next year and a half (1975-1977), accompanying the dancers to numerous college campuses and theaters throughout New York, New Jersey, and Rhode Island. During this period, I accumulated a number of images with which I was pleased. Now I needed to figure out what to do with them. In graduate school, I had finally felt competent in large format black and white photography, but had never done any work in color. Enter the Cibachrome System. I had heard a little about Cibachrome and seen a few prints, but no one I knew had worked extensively with it.

Also, at this point in time, a great piece of luck befell me: a trustee at the university where I was teaching donated his own color darkroom, a beautiful vintage Super-Chromega color enlarger, temperature-controlled sink, voltage stabilizer, etc. It proved to be one of the best darkrooms in which I had ever worked.

I purchased the basic Ciba system: 8x10 processing drum, ciba chemistry and paper, color thermometer, and the Ciba manual. I must take a few moments here in praise of this instructional manual. It is without a doubt the most well-put-together, easy-to-learn, well-illustrated, and innovative how-to book I've ever read. It responds to a visual culture visually, and it works.

My first Cibachrome print was a disaster. But the situation soon improved, and the prints quickly became better and better. I then
purchased a motorized drum agitator, a set of Kodak viewing filters, and an 11x14 drum. During my second thesis board meeting, Owen Butler had suggested I print my work as large as possible; 11x14 was the largest paper size I could afford. At this time, I decided to include in the thesis large color contact sheets of some of my performance transparencies to give the viewer some idea of how the work developed.

Cibachrome is expensive and thus makes demands on the user to work slowly, carefully, and meticulously. I began printing my thesis on March 10 for a showing on April 17 in the MFA gallery. Under the pressure of deadlines, the work proceeded smoothly.

In retrospect, I now see many technical faults in some of the thesis prints. It does seem to take some time to get one's eyes to see and understand color. I am currently in the process of reprinting the thesis to get it as close to the original transparencies as possible.

Completion of this thesis work proved to be a turning point in my career. I had never before placed myself in the position of completing a coherent body of work. It was much more difficult than I had imagined, but through it I learned to discipline myself in ways to which I was not accustomed. Working out "the problems" has increased my confidence and allowed me to look ahead to more ambitious projects. During this period, I gained a better perspective on my own work, and I now feel I have made progress in developing my own style, rather than in mimicking the masters whom I respect.

This thesis will be displayed at the Festival St. Denis in Paris, France, May 9-28, 1978. I am also in the process of making arrangements to photograph the Nickolais Dance in New York City.
Photodynamism 1911
translated by Caroline Tisdall

The Futurist Manifesto
of Anton Giulio Bragaglia

chronophotography. We are not interested in the precise reconstruction of movement, which has already been broken up and analysed.

We are concerned only with the area of movement which produces sensation, the memory of which still palpitates in our awareness.

We despise precise, mechanical and glacial reproduction of reality, and take the utmost care to avoid it. For us it is a harmful and negative element, whilst for cinematography and chronophotography it is the very essence. They in their turn overlook the trajectory which for us is the most essential value.

The question of cinematography in our case, is absolutely idiotic, and can only be raised by a superficial and imbecillic mentality motivated by the most crass ignorance in our argument.

Cinematography does not trace the shape of movement but subdivides it, without rules, with mechanical arbitrariness, disintegrating...
and shattering it, without any kind of aesthetic concern for rhythm. It is not within its coldly mechanical power to satisfy such concerns.

Besides which cinematography never analyses movement. It shatters it in the frames of the film strip, quite unlike the action of photodynamism which analyses movement precisely and contemporaneously. And cinematography never synthesises movement either. It merely reconstructs fragments of reality already coldly broken up, in the same way as the hand of a chronometer deals with time, even though this flows in a continuous and constant stream.

Photography too, is a distinct area—useful in the perfect anatomical reproduction of reality but necessary and precious, therefore, for aims that are absolutely contrary to ours, which are artistic in themselves, or are scientific in their aspect of research, which nevertheless is always directed towards art. And so both photography and photodynamism possess their own singular qualities, clearly divided, and have very different importance, usefulness and aims.

Marey's chronophotography, too, being a form of cinematography carried out on an ordinary plate or on continuous film, even if it does not use frames to divide movement, which is already divided and broken up into instantaneous shots, still shatters the action. Each instantaneous image is certainly more autonomous and rarified than those of cinematography and this removes it further from the action so that this too is not analysis.

In actual fact Marey's system is, for example, used in the teaching of gymnastics. And out of the hundred images that trace a man's jump, the few that are registered are sufficient to describe and teach the young the principal styles of a jump.

But if this is all very well for the old Marey system, for gymnastics and for other applications, it does not follow that we, with those five extremely rigid instantaneous shots, can obtain even the reconstruction of movement, let alone the sensation.

Given that chronophotography certainly does not reconstruct movement or give the sensation of it, any further discussion of it would be idle, except to insist emphatically on this point, since there are those who, with a certain degree of elegant malice, would identify photodynamism with chronophotography, just as others insisted on confusing it with cinematography.

Marey's system then, seizes and halts the action in its principal stages; those which best serve its purpose. It thus describes a theory that could be equally deduced from a series of instantaneous photographs. They could equally be said to belong to different subjects since, if a fraction of the step is linked and unifies the various images, precisely contemporaneous photographs and in appearance belonging to more subjects.

We could vulgarly compare chronophotography with a clock on whose face only the quarters of the hour are marked; cinematography to one on which the minutes too are indicated; and photodynamism to a third on which are marked not only the seconds but also the intermomental times existing in the passages between seconds. This is almost an infinitesimal calculation of movement.

In fact it is only by our researches that it is possible to obtain visions proportionate in the force of their image to their very life span and, moreover, to the speed with which they live in space and in us.

The greater the speed of an action the less broad and intense will be the trace registered with photodynamism. It follows that the slower it moves, the less it will be dematerialised and deformed. But the more it is deformed, the less it will be real; the more ideal, the very more extracted from its own personality, the closer to type, with the same evolutionary effect of deformation followed by the Greeks to find their type of beauty.

The difference between the photographic mechanicality of chronophotography—embrionic and rudimentary cinematography—and the tendency of photodynamism away from mechanicality, is that it is following its own ideal, completely opposed to the aims of all that went before, in spite of the scientific researches into movement that we propose to undertake.

Photodynamism, then, analyses and synthesises movement at will, and with great efficiency. This is because it does not have to resort to disintegration for observation, but possesses the power to record the continuity of an action in space, to trace in a face not only the expression of the passing of states of mind, for example, as photography and cinematography have never been able to, but also the immediate shifting of volumes for the immediate transformation of expression.

A shout, a tragic pause, a gesture of terror: in one single work the entire scene, the complete exterior unfolding of the intimate drama can be expressed. And this not only in the point of departure or that of arrival—or in an intermediary stage as in chronophotography but continually, from beginning to end, because this, as we have already said, can provoke the intermomental states of a movement as well.

In fact where scientific research into the evolution and modelling of movement are concerned we declare photodynamism exhaustive and necessary, given that no precise means of analysing a movement exists. We have after all examined in part the rudimentary work of chronophotography.

And so—just as the study of anatomy has until today been essential for an artist—now a knowledge of the paths traced by bodies in action and of their transportation in motion will be indispensable for the painter of movement.

In the composition of a painting the optical effects observed by the artist are not sufficient. A precise analytical knowledge of the essential properties, of the effect, and of its causes, are essential. The artist may know how to synthesise such analyses, but within such a synthesis the skeleton, the precise and almost invisible analytical element must exist. Only the scientific aspects of photodynamism can render these visible.

In fact every vibration is the rhythm of infinite minor variations, given that every rhythm is built up of an infinite quantity of vibrations. If until today human knowledge conceived and considered movement in its general rhythm, it fabricated, so to speak, an algebra of movement. This was considered simple and finite (cf. Spencer: First principles—The Rhythm of Motion). But photodynamism has revealed and represented it as complex, raising it to the level of an infinitesimal calculation of movement (cf. our latest works: The Carpenter, The Bow, Changing Position etc.).

Indeed, we represent the movement of a pendulum, for example, by relating its speed and its tempo to two orthogonal axes. We will obtain a continuous and infinite sinusoidal curve.

But this applies to a theoretical pendulum, a material one. The representation we will obtain from a material pendulum, will differ from the theoretical one in that, practically, after a period at greater or lesser, but always finite, brevity it will stop.

It must be clear that in both cases the lines representing such movement are continuous and do not represent the phenomenon. In fact, in reality, those lines should be composed of an infinite number of minor vibrations introduced by the resistance of the point of union. This does not move with smooth continuity but in jerks, since it is caused by infinite coefficients.

Now since a synthetic representation is more effective—and its essence enveloping, however, an analytically divisionist value—rather than analytically impressionist (the divisionism of impressing in the philosophical sense), so in the same way the representation of realistic movement will be much more effective in synthesis containing in its essence an analytical divisionist value (e.g. The Woodcutter, The Bow etc.)—than in analysis especially when this is merely superficial. That is, when it is not minutely interstatic but expresses itself only in successive static states (e.g. The Typist).

Therefore, just as the essential question of chromatic divisionism (synthesis of effect and analysis of means) was raised in Seurat's painting by the scientific probing of Rood, so nowadays in painting and movement the need for movemental divisionism, that is, synthesis of effect and analysis of means, is raised by photodynamism. But—and this should be carefully noted—this analysis is intimate, profound and sensitive rather than easily perceptible.

This question has already been raised by demonstrating that just as anatomy
essential in static representation, so the
anatomy of an action—intimate analysis—is indispensable, in the representation of
movement. This will not resort to 30 images of the same image to represent an object in
movement, but will render it infinitely multiplied and extended, whilst its present
remains will be diminished.

Photodynamism then can establish this from positive data in the construction of moving
reality in the same way as photography obtains its own results which are positive in
the sphere and static reality.

The artist seeking for the forms and contributions that characterise whatever state of
reality interests him, can by means ofphotodynamism establish a foundation of experience which will facilitate his researches and
his intuition in the dynamic representation of reality. After all, the firm and essential
relationships which link the development of any real action with artistic conception are indisputable, and are affirmed independently of formal parameters of reality itself.

Once this essential fraternity has been

established not only between artistic conception and the representation of reality, but also between this and artistic application, it can easily be realised how much information dynamic representation can give to the artist, if he seeks it profoundly.

In this way light and movement in general, light acting on movement and movement and light are re-united in photodynamism and—given the transcendentalism of the phenomenon of movement—it is only with photodynamism that the painter can know what happens in the general intermomental states, and will become acquainted with the volumes of single motions. He will be able to analyse these in complete detail and will come to know the increased aesthetic value of a flying figure, or the diminution of this relative to light and to the consequences of dematerialisation of the motion. Only with photodynamism can the artist possess the necessary elements for the construction of a work of art with the desired synthesis.

The sculptor Roberto Melli wrote to me on this matter, saying how it seems to him that photodynamism 'must', in the course of these new researches into movement which are
beginning, make a lively impression on the artist's consciousness, take the place that has
until now been occupied by drawing, physical and mechanical phenomenon, as different
from the physical transcendentalism of photodynamism as is drawing to the new aesthetics
currently are to the art in the past.

For James movement was 'The act of occupying a series of successive points in space, corresponding to a series of successive moments in time'.

He does not, however, observe the way in which one moves from one point to another
during these moments. And such intermomental styles, materialised by pure trajectory,
are the exponentials of the passage from one point to another, just as from one moment to another, since time is translated into space.

Thus the most distant image existing in space will be much fainter and more nebulous than are those at present, and the slower the action the more realistic will it be.

There will be salient and decided iconographic
themes moving ever closer to the instant of existence of the latest image in motion and we will incorporate time in a decided way as a fourth dimension in space. It will come to be a notable element in capturing the sensation of action, and in achieving works that will be much more chronographic than Marey's system which was labelled chronographic only because it seized exceptional moments, that is, some states of a movement.

At this point it would be as well to return briefly to Marey. If one examines chronophotography as a scientific means directed to the study of movement, it becomes apparent that in such a study minute analysis is essential. Chronophotography does not give this because it jumps from one point in movement to another very distant one. It fails to grasp those existing and intangible entities that photodynamics perceives and which we refer to as the interstatic states and the intermovemental and intermomental stages of an action. Chronophotography does not even succeed in recognising all the essential static states which compose what one could call the most material parts of an action.

In this way while photodynamics denies the instantaneous and the old values of line and colour (seeking) new rhythmic sensations; chronophotography uses the instantaneous as its absolute basis and maintains these old values of line and colour.

Photodynamics seeks to render the dynamic result of a gesture, in other words the trajectory synthesis, but can also analyse minutely every movement of the body in motion and demarcate the action in time. It can also seize that which occurs in the intervals, placing together each tiny trajectoryal value and extracting the figures in a state of dematerialisation which our eyes see and our senses correspondingly enjoy. Chronophotography, on the other hand, does not analyse the images.
APPENDIX

as the dynamic result of gesture
...as the dynamic result of gesture
Installation Shots
April, 1977

MFA GALLERY
R.I.T.

"...as the dynamic result of gesture"