

*Stories Project. ACC 54.*

*Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.*

Jonah Bokaer is a dancer, choreographer, and visual artist. Joining the Merce Cunningham Dance Company at age 18, Bokaer was the youngest-ever dancer to be recruited. In 2002, Bokaer helped establish Chez Bushwick, an arts organization dedicated to supporting a new generation of dance artists, choreographers, and performers, as well as many other affordable art spaces and studios across Brooklyn, including CPR - Center for Performance Research. Since 2002, the Jonah Bokaer Arts Foundation has helped thousands of diverse artists in supporting their performing arts endeavors, and it continues to be a prominent force in arts education and urban revitalization.

Transcript of interview with Jonah Bokaer conducted by Julia Blaut, Senior Director of Curatorial Affairs from the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, in 2014. Interview finalized following Bokaer's Archives Research Residency at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation in April 2024, during which time Bokaer researched all aspects of *Story* (1963)—choreographed by Merce Cunningham with set, costumes, and lighting by Robert Rauschenberg—with a strong focus on its visual design elements, its media art elements, and the interpersonal relations amongst the artists and dancers during the Cunningham Company's pivotal world tour.

---

Jonah Bokaer: The first Rauschenberg production that I danced in was called *Interscape* in 2000. And the second was called *XOVER* (pronounced “crossover”), which premiered at Dartmouth [College, Hanover, New Hampshire] in October of 2007 at the Hopkins Center [for the Arts]. What I remember about the first collaboration was that it had the feeling of a reconciliation between Merce [Cunningham] and Bob [Robert Rauschenberg]. Venice [Italy] is a very important city in the history of their collaboration. I didn't comprehend it at the time, but the reason that Venice is an important city for them is because the Cunningham Company had embarked on a world tour in 1964, and Bob was very present on the tour. That was also the year when Bob was exhibiting in Venice at La Biennale di Venezia, and he won the Golden Lion. Depending on the source, some people cite that occasion as a moment of great success, but also a rupture between [John] Cage and Cunningham, with Rauschenberg. It was such a meteoric moment, a meteoric summer for that collaboration. And, I think Bob's award created friction as well.



Andrea Weber, Daniel Roberts, and Jonah Bokaer performing in Merce Cunningham Dance Company's *Interscape* (2000), with set and costume design by Robert Rauschenberg. Photo: Tony Dougherty

So, for these artists to premiere new work in Venice in 2000, then very late in their lives (Merce was eighty that year and Bob was seventy-five), for them to have a major new collaboration, and to have it be such a success in that city, it seemed very much like a reconciliation.

There was a celebratory atmosphere. Very celebratory. And, also, a very memorable party, at Harry's Bar for them. So, I think that it came full circle for them. My perspective as a young man—I didn't know much of the past at that time—was that it seemed clear that these artists were going to “bury the hatchet” over something. And that context was very much in the room and in the air. They were very friendly: laughing, joking, smiling, drinking red wine. Very jovial with each other and very happy.

But the administration and the managers were tense. Incredibly tense. In fact, the backstage was really kind of a pop-up theater, on the Tronchetto Island, called the “Pala-Fenice” (meaning “Tented” Fenice) because the original Teatro La Fenice had burned down previously. We had to travel there, via vaporetto. And once you were there, you were there. We would rehearse in the morning, but you couldn't just leave casually; it was too far to come and go. So, we had these pop-up dressing rooms, where we would nap in-between rehearsals. And we had rice cookers, where we would cook in-between the rehearsal and the performance. The walls were very thin, and so we would hear the administrators fighting and fighting in the adjacent rooms. You know, going through the lists, and the RSVPs, and the guests, and people hitting the roof: “What do you mean, there aren't tickets? What do you mean, this is sold out?” We had, who knows, maybe the de Menils coming, as well as trustees, and many dignitaries. It was really a lot of high-flying drama, and very tough on the administrative team.

Yet these artists were so happy, that was my sense. My overwhelming sense was: “Wow, look at these artists, so late in their lives, celebrating, and coming back together.” But then this atmosphere also felt like a rather titanic management scenario as well. So that was also in the air. It felt like high stakes at the time.



Robert Rauschenberg, Merce Cunningham, Ashley Chen, Cheryl Therrien, Matthew Mohr, Banu Ogan, curtain call for premiere of Merce Cunningham Dance Company's *Interscape* (2000), with set and costume design by Rauschenberg, Eisenhower Theater, John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C., 2000. Photo: Ed Chappell

I think there were some challenges with the music, too. It was the first time that the 108 musicians were playing together, for the John Cage score. It was the orchestra of the Teatro La Fenice and Arturo Tamayo was the conductor.

The style of interpretation of Cage on that scale can often be controversial. (Eleven years later, in my career as a choreographer, I worked with that particular score, during the Cage Centennial.) One has so much freedom in the score, with the timings, and dynamics. I think there also may have been some controversy about the Italian musicians. The orchestra produced a very boisterous interpretation, a very “bravado” interpretation. Perhaps—although, I don't really have a say or a stake in it—perhaps it was a non-Cagean interpretation? It sounded as though they were going for broke, those 108 musicians, and I think it dwarfed the cellist, Loren Kiyoshi Dempster, who was the actual authority on Cage's music, and interestingly was to become my New York City roommate shortly after the tour. The music on that scale premiered in Venice and was performed in Montpellier years later, by a youth orchestra, that also took liberties with the score.

So, there was also that going on. And a large number of special events surrounding the opening of *Interscape*. There was a lot of European publicity at the time as well.

Those are some of my memories, of that particular premiere. There was also a very influential review, published by Alastair Macaulay, who at the time, was the chief theater critic of the *Financial Times* [“Masters of Colourful Illusion,” *Financial Times* (London),

Oct. 7–8, 2000]. He also wrote about the Roy Lichtenstein production, *Pond Way*, and he wrote extensively about *Interscape*. I think he was the first one to really comprehend what a massive work it was. He wrote about what a tough piece of work it was—really, for the heavy-weight viewers, who can comprehend where those artists have been, and what their aesthetic history together has included. Alastair’s reviews were being published as we were on the road. So that was also quite exciting.

Julia Blaut: Did you have a sense of how the collaboration between Bob and Merce worked? I mean, how much information each had given the other?

Bokaer: I was told Merce said to Bob that he was thinking about “between.” I heard it was about *between* and ways of going *in-between*. If you think about the word *Interscape*—by the way, they tended to invent words for the titles of these pieces—it’s almost a verbalization of “space between paths,” or a middle ground, or between-way.

The production starts like this: for the scenography, there is a black-and-white scrim (a backdrop) at the lip of the stage, a collage of brilliant images from throughout the ages of art history. The scenic elements in front of the stage were visible as the public entered the theatre: the curtain was open at the start of the performance. So, the public sees a black-and-white transparent scrim in front. For the first two minutes of the dance, there is a “staged” warm-up scene in which five dancers are warming up for a performance, behind the scrim, yet visible. A little bit of downlight came on and these five dancers were there, warming up, in-between the scrim and the stage space. And then, backlight comes in: the viewer experiences a “reveal” and realizes that there is a brilliant color version of the scenography—a replica, in color, upstage. And then the black-and-white scrim is flown away into the rafters. So, there was a brilliant theatrical “reveal” that happened in-between downstage and upstage. I think that perhaps this prompt to Bob from Merce—“in-between”—eventuated a use of the downstage drop and the upstage drop as a kind of a channel, or literally, Bob using the extreme up and extreme down stage spaces to frame the dance from the front and from behind.

Beyond that, I’m not entirely sure what words the two men might have exchanged in their collaboration. However, I know that Merce would usually give a “poetic riddle” to his collaborators—a prompt—and then, just determine the length of time of his new dance. So for *Interscape*, “between” or “in-between” was that prompt. Trios were very prominent in the choreography. The *Interscape* production was primarily governed by trios. It’s almost entirely structured in threes: including a very virtuosic passage in the middle involving extremely fast trios, in which someone jumps in and someone else jumps out. Nearly the entire company cycled through these trios, literally passing off trio-to-trio, from leader to follower. Then a counterpoint to that section was a very slow—a

supernaturally slow—trio. Very epic. Very difficult, punishingly slow, for the public, or in fact, even for us in the wings, to endure the temporality of the final trio. Certain interpreters of the supernaturally slow trio would also “milk” the performance and indulge the timing further.

The final resolution of the piece, involved a fourth person entering the stage, standing still. And so, the piece evolves from three to four as a resolution.

Beyond that, I’m not sure what kinds of collaborative information Merce and Bob might have exchanged. I know that Bob, or I should say, I was told that Bob became very upset in Washington D.C., to the point of tears, due to the lighting of *Interscape*. He apparently—I believe an administrator with Merce’s company once told me that Bob cried, because the lighting was so dark. He said, “I just want to see the dancers. I just feel bad for the dancers. I just wish there was more light.” And I think that someone might have had to whisper to the lighting designer and say: “Look, this is too dark!” So, there were these little dramas flaring up, here and there.

Blaut: Well, and of course Rauschenberg used to do the lighting [for the early Cunningham Company performances].

Bokaer: Exactly.

Blaut: Did you have any personal connection with Rauschenberg at that point when you were so young and new to the company?

Bokaer: I was eighteen and so I didn’t have a lot of contact on that level. I was still a little freaked out, a little spooked! As an example: I actually made an incorrect entrance in Venice and I messed up onstage. There were these very difficult male jumps in *Interscape* and I think that physically I was overwhelmed. Very overwhelmed, to the point of panic. The Venice performances were also on a raked stage and Merce’s work is already omni-directional, making this performance particularly hard for the company. So, there was a lot of “swirling” going on.

But yes, I had a few interactions with Bob. I remember powerful eye contact that spoke of mutual magnetism, which I could pick up on as an acute observer of who was watching me—which Bob always did—and it was through our eyes that we would communicate, if at all. He was very . . . he was so open, so jovial. He learned that it was my birthday, in Venice. I was born October 1 and he also had an October birthday. There was something about birthdays, which I remember. He said, “Happy Birthday!” to me

one day onstage, while I was warming up. In general, he was very warm, and very generous.

That was the atmosphere: very warm, generous, and jovial. Yes, he seemed very much “inside” the art. Not at all concerned about the logistics. Entirely inside the aesthetic world.

Blaut: Did you have an awareness then or at any point along the way of all the philanthropy that Bob was involved in and activism on behalf of artists? I’m interested because I know that you share that and also have an interest in it, which I don’t think is universal—that artists will really have a real interest in what other artists are doing.

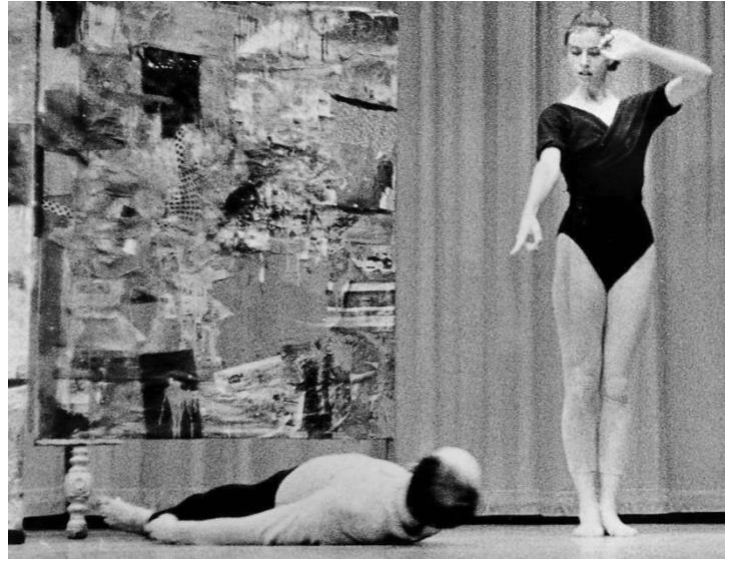
Bokaer: Right, that’s a great question. Um . . . .

Later in the game, 2006, 2007, after the 50th Anniversary, the Cunningham Company was in trouble: it was in fiscal trouble and Trevor Carlson stewarded a gift of, I believe, \$200,000 from Bob to Merce’s company. So, a major gift of \$200,000. And, so hearing that, hearing how that worked was—I think it was very interesting, and intriguing, and a little confusing. And hearing about that from all sides—some people felt very proud about that, some people were very touched. Others were thinking, “This company is fifty years old. Why can’t they get the cash-flows together?” But there was a very generous gift from Bob to Merce, even later in their lives. The news made its way upstairs (to the company rehearsal room) and that was the kind of awareness that I had. For example, I was also informed of the sale of [the Rauschenberg Combine used as a stage prop] *Minutiae* (1954) or I should say the re-sale of *Minutiae*, at the price of \$1,000,000 at that time. There was, actually, very frank financial discussion in the Cunningham atmosphere. So that was—

Blaut: I don’t remember—*Minutiae* was part of the stage set and belonged to the company, is that right? [Note: *Minutiae* is the name of the dance choreographed by Cunningham and also of the Combine Rauschenberg originally created as a stage prop for the performance.]



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Minutiae*, 1954  
Combine: oil, paper, fabric, newsprint,  
wood, metal, and plastic with mirror on  
braided wire on wood structure.  
84 1/2 x 81 x 30 1/2 inches  
(214.6 x 205.7 x 77.5 cm)  
RRF 54.004



Stage set by Robert Rauschenberg for Merce Cunningham  
Dance Company's *Minutiae* (1954); the Combine/stage prop  
of the same title, *Minutiae*, pictured with dancers Remy  
Charlip and Anita Dencks during rehearsal, ca. 1954. Photo:  
Louis Stevenson

Bokaer: I believe, yes. Yes.

Blaut: And then there was a replica made [of the Combine *Minutiae*].

Bokaer: Yes, that's right, that's right. There had been a replica as well.

So, in a way, yes, I had become aware of some of Bob's philanthropy, how generous he was as a human being, and as a man. Then later on I learned that he sat on Trisha Brown's [Trisha Brown Dance Company] board of directors. And at one point he stood up on the table at a board meeting and pledged a big number or something, to Trisha, right there in the board room. These were in the realm of legends, yet I do trust and rely on these dance world legends, in the same way that I trust many kinds and types of oral history as a record.

But I think that generation was on the "inventing" end of how artists could support each other. And then, of course, there is The Foundation for Contemporary Arts, which was co-founded by that generation [co-founders: Jasper Johns and John Cage; founding

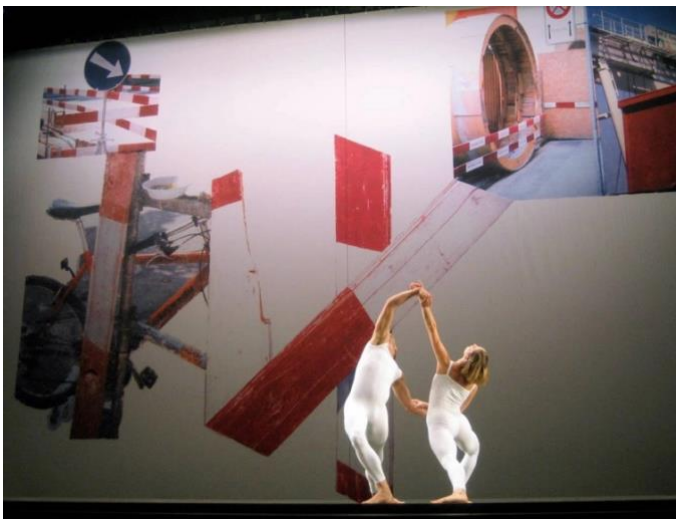


directors: Elaine de Kooning, Alfred Geller, David Hayes, and Lewis Lloyd] in 1963 (pre-dating the National Endowment for the Arts) and with a charter to help the performing arts, via the philanthropic sale of visual artworks. That atmosphere seemed very connected to these artists' legacy of working together.

Blaut: Do you want to talk about *XOVER* (2007)?

Bokaer: Sure, sure, sure. I was receiving my own choreographic commissions, and tours, as of about 2002. Then in 2006, I gave the Cunningham Company my notice and helped the Company find a replacement for me, which took time. I continued to perform and tour throughout 2007.

The last creation that I took part in was called *XOVER*; Jeff James had commissioned it. Jeffery James had been the Executive Director of the Cunningham Company during the 50th anniversary. He was the best that Merce ever had, in my opinion.



Andrea Weber and Daniel Squire rehearsing the night before the first performance of Merce Cunningham Dance Company's *XOVER* (2007) with music by John Cage, set and costume design by Robert Rauschenberg, and lighting by Josh Johnson, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, Oct. 5, 2007. © Anna Finke; courtesy of the Merce Cunningham Trust/Backdrop © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

Following that, he moved to New Hampshire and he brilliantly assumed the leadership at The Hopkins Center at Dartmouth College. One of his first actions was to commission Cunningham, and I think with the intention of commissioning both Cunningham and Rauschenberg, though I would need to verify that. That commission was Jeff's initiative, actually. He still remains there at Dartmouth, and we maintain contact [Jeffery James was the Director of the Hopkins Center at the time of this interview; he retired in 2015].

So during that commission, I had already given notice. Yet I was taking part in the creation, in Merce's new work. I was still *there*, still invested, but it was a very



interesting process. I had already given notice, so I was a part of a creation that we all knew I wouldn't perform in perpetuity. We knew that I would perform it only once, at Dartmouth, and then hand over the role to my successor.

It sort of felt as though Merce designed my role. . . . Cunningham designed my role knowing that someone else would inherit it. So, to me, it was a very interesting "passage piece."

The scenography surprised me. It really surprised me. It involved very white, *white* costumes, very spare imagery: orange and red, but primarily a lot of blank space. A lot of negative space, both in the costumes and the décor. I remember the *New York Times* came to Dartmouth to cover it, to review it so that was on—

Blaut: That was Alastair Macaulay also ["By Twos," *New York Times*, Oct. 8, 2007].

Bokaer: Yes, exactly, that was also Alastair. The choreography was a lot about changing sides and crossing over, using the stage space to literally "cross over." Joan La Barbara interpreted the Cage score—the vocal score—for the music.

And Rauschenberg attended. Yes, he attended the premiere of the inaugural festivities. My replacement dancer also came up at that time and watched the concert as a viewer. He stayed over and so it was an interesting show. A lot of leaping and jumping in that piece. There was a very central duet for two British performers in the work.

I think that was Merce and Bob's last creation together.

Blaut: I think that's right.