

PHILADELPHIA

"Dance with Camera"

INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART

The etymology of *choreography* tells us that the word, at its most literal, means something like "writing dance" or "dance writing." Of course, the relation between inscription and dance is now so familiar that while we have come to recognize its mutability and variations (Judson Dance Theater's testing of the limits of choreography, for instance, so different from, say, classical ballet's stringent adherence to them), we don't often enough consider just to whom this "writing" is ultimately addressed. Indeed, if dance is de facto an embodied form, it is also nearly always directed (at least in part) toward other bodies, or perhaps better said, toward an audience who watches and then even "reads" as a given work unfolds.



Eleanor Antin, *Caught in the Act* (detail), 1973, nine black-and-white photographs, each 3 x 5".

In the ambitious group exhibition "Dance with Camera," which included more than thirty artists, curator Jenelle Porter opted to focus on one specific kind of choreographic address: dance (or, in some cases, movement that can be seen as in dialogue with dance) conceived to be caught on film. Highlighting the mediating mechanism rather than occluding or evading it, the artists here make the camera (still, film, or video) a kind of partner, one whose presence is fully accounted for within the work, even in some cases determining its very conception. Indeed, if so much of the discourse around performance and dance has until recently largely revolved around or debated terms including *ephemerality*, *presence*, and *immediacy*, Porter's show quite deliberately turned away from them. Instead, "Dance with Camera" followed another trajectory altogether, tracing out, over some six decades, a series of developments parallel to histories of performance we think we know. (If we are, in this regard, so often told, "You had to be there" to really have a grasp of a given piece, this exhibition insisted that one absolutely did *not*—at least for the works assembled within its framework.)

To this end, "Dance with Camera" took Maya Deren's 1945 *A Study in Choreography for Camera* as its jumping-off point (though the exhibition's film program and catalogue, in fact, went further back in time, casting an even wider historical net and considering the dance-camera embrace in its mass cultural incarnations and in other forms as well). Still surprising and strange even after so many years, Deren's work enumerates the ways in which film's basic abilities to condense and displace space and time can radically alter naturalized ideas and modes of representation, even a gesture as simple as elevating a leg. Along with canonical works such as Bruce Nauman's 1967–68 *Dance*

or *Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square*, in which the artist presents a kind of elegant endurance test; Eleanor Antin's photographs and video *Caught in the Act*, 1973, where she emulates the "look" of ballet; and Yvonne Rainer's radically reduced (and yet unbelievably affective) 1966 *Hand Movie*, Porter's show included lesser-known selections by well-known artists, such as Bruce Conner's 1966 *BREAKAWAY*, an amazing period piece featuring a young Toni Basil dancing while undressing to her own B-side song, then being "rewound" as the scene runs backward to the beginning.

Work by younger artists was more uneven, but interestingly so: The show served as a kind of test for how current practices might be considered alongside such formidable predecessors. Standouts, for me, included robbinschields + A. L. Steiner's *C.L.U.E. Part I*, 2007, a vivid journey that maps female bodies—and their conjoined movement—through various mental and spatial geographies; and Tacita Dean's affecting portrait of Merce Cunningham (*Merce [Manchester]*, 2007) as he enacts Cagean time. In the latter work, there is hardly movement at all—on the part of the dancer or the artist behind the camera. And yet this is choreography at its most rigorous: almost impossible to see yet written to be read well after its ostensible four minutes and thirty-three seconds have elapsed.

—Johanna Burton