The "Next" Thing

by Craig Bromberg

THINKING IN DECADES IS A DANGEROUS BUSINESS. After all, what is a decade if not a kind of chronological fib, a tiny sound-bite of human life that hides as much as it reveals? Open your mouth to extoll your glorious twenties, and before the words even tumble from your lips, you see yourself at 22, angst-ridden and waiting for answers to all the big questions. Wax nostalgic for the creative anarchy of the 60s, and another image, of social hypocrisy and racial division, springs to mind. Few self-respecting historians would deign to sink their teeth into the span of a decade, yet we think nothing of summing up our lives in ten year cycles. For the truly modern, it seems the decade is the only measure of time that really counts—unless, of course, your clock happens to be set to Andy Warhol's, tirelessly buzzing away at fifteen minute intervals.

Just a decade ago, the Brooklyn Academy of Music's NEXT WAVE Festival didn't exist. Not that BAM was ever a cultural backwater. Back in the days when Brooklyn was still Manhattan's closest cultural rival, the seasonal premieres of its opera and symphony were strictly white-tie affairs—a showcase for the likes of Mahler, Caruso, and Isadora Duncan—but when Brooklyn's middle class fled to the suburbs, the Academy slipped sideways into the still waters of classical culture. It wasn't until Harvey Lichtenstein became its President in 1967 that BAM became an innovator, co-producing four of Robert Wilson's early epics, and presenting seasons by the Living Theatre, Merce Cunningham, Laura Dean, Twyla Tharp, Peter Brook, and Lucinda Childs, among many others. Lichtenstein wasn't yet thinking of laying foundations for the NEXT WAVE; at the time, it was all he could do

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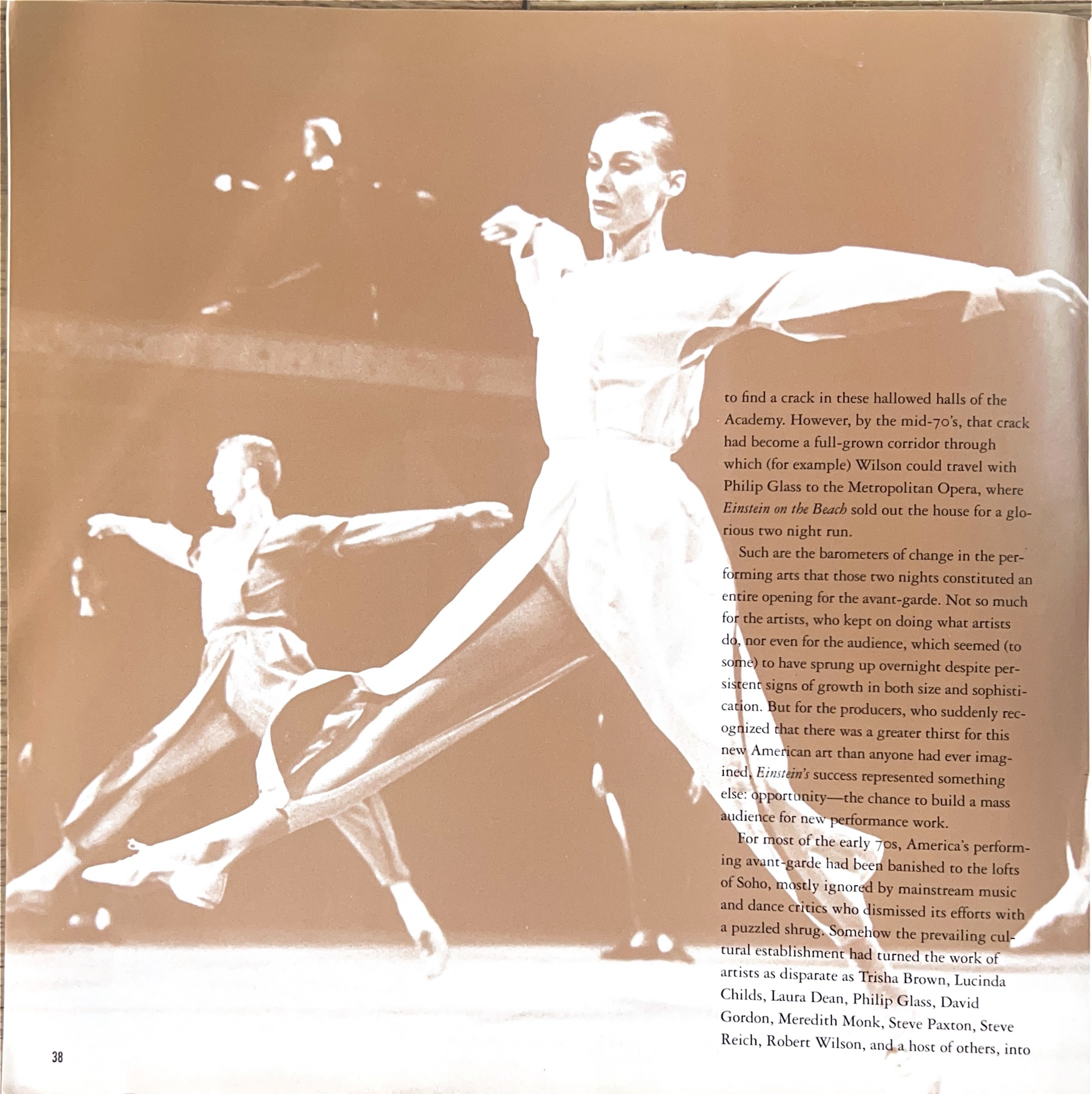
Craig Bromberg, left, and RoseLee Goldberg, NEXT WAVE Journal authors



to find a crack in these hallowed halls of the Academy. However, by the mid-70's, that crack had become a full-grown corridor through which (for example) Wilson could travel with Philip Glass to the Metropolitan Opera, where *Einstein on the Beach* sold out the house for a glorious two night run.

Such are the barometers of change in the performing arts that those two nights constituted an entire opening for the avant-garde. Not so much for the artists, who kept on doing what artists do, nor even for the audience, which seemed (to some) to have sprung up overnight despite persistent signs of growth in both size and sophistication. But for the producers, who suddenly recognized that there was a greater thirst for this new American art than anyone had ever imagined, *Einstein's* success represented something else: opportunity—the chance to build a mass audience for new performance work.

For most of the early 70s, America's performing avant-garde had been banished to the lofts of Soho, mostly ignored by mainstream music and dance critics who dismissed its efforts with a puzzled shrug. Somehow the prevailing cultural establishment had turned the work of artists as disparate as Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, Laura Dean, Philip Glass, David Gordon, Meredith Monk, Steve Paxton, Steve Reich, Robert Wilson, and a host of others, into

Lucinda Childs in *Available Light*. Photo by Elbers/Schiller.

a kind of regional art—the indigenous culture of New York's downtown art scene—ill-suited, at best, to the hinterlands of America, but tailor-made for Europe, where the governments of West Germany, France, and England accorded it all the pomp they could muster. By the end of the 70s, America had produced an entire class of frustrated alternative artists who could find neither venues nor financial support in their own country, but were superstars on the far side of the Atlantic. *Einstein's* triumph proved that the avant-garde really did have a place in America.

However, it wasn't just a parcel of glowing European press reports and the singular sensation of *Einstein on the Beach* that helped clear the way to bring these artists home. For the 70s was also the fount of another transformative moment in American culture that began in a grungy Bowery bar by the name of CBGB's. Punk wasn't just fast and furious rock'n'roll, but an entire subculture whose most important values were based on a transgressive relationship with popular culture. Paradoxically, if you were a punk, you didn't leave any quarter for rock'n'roll; rock was the enemy, and you did whatever you could to tear down the walls that kept the music from the audience. Of course, many of these punks would soon go on to sign their own major label record deals under the tidied-up banner of the New Wave, but by that time, many key elements of this fashionable fury had already travelled a few blocks south to the Kitchen, the alternative art center which had played a crucial role in cross-fertilizing many of the latest developments in new video, music, and dance ever since it had been founded in 1972.

At the Kitchen, one could find the conflation of all these alternative worlds: once-angry punks like David Byrne, Richard Hell, and Lydia Lunch; new music composers like Rhys Chatham, Steve Reich, Butch Morris and Philip Glass; performance artists like Laurie Anderson, Eric Bogosian and Ann Magnuson; young visual artists such as Troy Brauntuch, Robert Longo, Cindy Sherman and Laurie Simmons; and an entire crop of under-30s dancers such as Molissa Fenley, Dana Reitz, Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane, as well as many of the pioneers of post-modern dance—Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, Simone Forti and Laura Dean. To anyone who had watched punk permutate into the New Wave, becoming a kind of training ground for the next generation of rock stars, it was becoming increasingly evident that the work you could see nearly any weekend at the Kitchen or its sister spaces, the Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church, Dance Theater Workshop, or P.S. 122, now had a parallel opportunity to win acceptance and visibility in the mainstream—to become truly popular arts on the level of (how ironic) rock'n'roll. By the end of the decade, it seemed only a matter of time before someone would come along to give this alternative world a new stage from which it could launch its work to the rest of America.

ONCE YOU BEGIN THINKING IN DECADES, it becomes hard to stop. Clearly, many of the foundations for the NEXT WAVE were laid, by both artists and producers, during the mid-to-late 1970s, yet for many of the artists who would later perform at BAM, these were years of intense frustration. For now that they had achieved new levels of attention and critical esteem, this new avant-garde was also being asked to demonstrate that the market for its work was at least as grand as the vision behind it. This was a new word—market—and many artists (certainly not all) resented its implications. Wasn't it enough that the work was acclaimed, that it explored new ways of seeing and thinking, hearing and moving? Just a few years earlier, this might have seemed a legitimate question, but something was changing, not only in the art world, but in the world at

Laurie Anderson. Photo by Johan Elbers.

large: Before the 70s were even over, the 80s had begun, and although it is now fashionable to castigate that decade as one of ostentatious consumption and unrivalled greed, that time was as Janus-faced as any other.

For the start of 80s wasn't only a time when artistic egos danced to the heartbeat of an aerobically excited economy. This was a moment of intense artistic vitality: the genesis of a postmodernist art-making that critiqued (and sometimes inadvertently celebrated) the rapturous images of advertising, cinema, and television, photography and art history; the rise of a new breed of pop-minded "artrepreneurs" intent on disseminating this new art to the widest possible audience; a revolution of digital random access technology made possible by the introduction of cheap personal computers; and the ascent of a younger generation of consumers who had discovered purchase-power as a means of self-expression, and were only too glad to take their art wherever it could be found. The Kitchen now took a road show of its greatest hits to museums and alternative art galleries across the country; Laurie Anderson performed her epic *United States* at the East Village's Orpheum Theater, then signed a six-record contract with Warner Brothers; art rockers crossed over into nightclubs like Hurrah, the Mudd Club, Tier 3, and Danceteria; and the circle was completed by museum exhibitions such as P.S. 122's *New York, New Wave* and the BAM production of Philip Glass's epic opera *Satyagraha.* Within a few years, there would be nearly eighty galleries in the East Village, as well as a slew of performance art nightspots like the Pyramid Club, the Limbo Lounge and 8BC.

Loose money and a firm grasp on the wheels of the publicity machine undoubtedly played their parts in boosting this scene, but its eventual implosion into the NEXT WAVE wasn't only prompted by the illusion of a neverending supply of instant liquidity. Once you peeled away the glitz, you could see that this new avant-garde had discovered a different role for itself, one which drew without regret on the fortuitous collision of money and energy that so characterized the early 80s. Suddenly, scale and polish, fashion and popular appeal, were no longer dirty words, but tools of *empowerment,* ways of bringing all that had previously been consigned to the margins of high culture—not just new performance, music, and dance, but the performing art of gays, African-Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics—to the mainstream. Going big no longer meant selling out but marketing one's way in, and oddly enough (at least from the perspective of 1992), the Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts and key corporate sponsors seemed to agree, and threw their support behind the new art. Virtually overnight, the garret and the loft were supplanted by the majesty and power of the proscenium arch.

To Lichtenstein and other impressarios, it seemed that the moment had at last arrived—artistically, socially, financially—to open wide the opera house doors, not only to champion those artists on whose behalf BAM had already toiled, but also to help produce the artists the general public had yet to see. Not only to show the art of the now and the new, but also—with a touch of marketing bravado—to create a venue for the art of the next. It had finally become time for the NEXT WAVE.

NO MATTER WHAT TIME THE MODERN clock tells, its hands are always stuck at now. Set the clock five minutes ahead—or five minutes back—and the time will still be the same. To the modern clock, there's no time other than the present, seized in all its immediacy and transience. What then could possibly be *next?*

With the conclusion of this season, we will now have had the chance to see a complete decade of the NEXT WAVE, ten years of new performance, music, dance, and theater—almost 150 new works in all.

Some of this work has sought the outer edge of contemporary taste, challenging audiences in

an experimentalist crucible that has sometimes seemed aimed at stunning with single-minded obsessiveness. Think of the dancers in Pina Bausch's *Bluebeard,* pulled one-by-one across a bed of dead leaves strewn over the opera house stage; the blasting psychedelic funk of the Butthole Surfers or the psycho-acoustic racket of Rhys Chatham's ensemble; the campy anarchy of the Michael Clark ballet *No Fire Escape In Hell,* the riotous populism of Tim Miller's *Democracy in America,* the corporeal abandon of Wim Vandekeybus and DV8 Physical Theatre, or the cool, mathematical doublings of Lucinda Child's dancers, skipping across Frank Gehry's two-tier set in *Available Light.* To some, these uncompromising visions are the very essence of what the NEXT WAVE should be—a platform for artistic risk-taking, for pushing the envelope of our experience as artistic consumers ever wider so that those who have never been downtown to see (for example) the work of a Susan Marshall or a Bebe Miller, are finally exposed to the process of contemporary artistic discovery.

However, challenge is not all the NEXT WAVE is about. Some artists, perhaps preferring to alienate the avant-garde instead of disenfranchising the popular audience, have used the Next Wave as an opportunity to capture the limelight with luscious toe-tapping spectacles that verge on the turf of Broadway. Think of the Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane extravaganza *Secret Pastures,* with sets and costumes by Keith Haring and music by Peter Gordon's Love of Life Orchestra; the joyous gospel shout of Lee Breuer and Bob Telson's *The Gospel at Colonus* and *The Warrior Ant;* the acrobatic mysticism of Michael Moschen and the Alchemedians; the brooding, electric tone poems of Lou Reed and John Cale in *Songs for 'Drella,* their tribute to Andy Warhol. These too are keys to the next, as is an entire range of work that has transported us to foreign lands—from Brooklyn, a vista to Argentina *(Tango Varsoviana),* Japan *(Ninagawa Macbeth),* Iran (Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan), Brazil *(Carmen Miranda),* and India (the *Mahabarata* by way of Peter Brook)—or introduced us to the

Arnie Zane and Bill T. Jones in *Secret Pastures,* a collaborative work with choreography by Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane, music by Peter Gordon, sets by Keith Haring, and costumes by Willi Smith, in its world premiere in the BAM NEXT WAVE Festival, 1984. Photo by Tom Caravaglia.

neglected cultures of our own country, as seen in the dances of Urban Bush Women, the jazz jamming of M-Base, or the *gringostroika* of Guillermo Gómez-Peña.

The fact is that there are few common critical threads running through this first decade of the NEXT WAVE, although nearly every critic has tried to find them. Indeed, for most of the time, writers have been sent groping for new vocabularies with which to describe this vast pluralism. One key critical theme has been BAM's role in fostering collaborative enterprise. The NEXT WAVE's debut performance was *The Photographer: Far From the Truth,* a music-theater biography of Eadweard Muybridge by Philip Glass, JoAnne Akalaitis, David Gordon, and Robert Coe, and ever since, BAM has tried to convince likely combinations of artists to join together to find what lays in-between. Trisha Brown, Robert Rauschenberg, and Laurie Anderson collaborated on *Set and Reset,* and came up with a visual puzzle of movement, film, and sound that has become a NEXT WAVE signature; John Adams, Alice Goodman, and Peter Sellars waded into the collaborative waters to stunning results with *Nixon in China;* Richard Foreman, David Salle, Peter Gordon, and Kathy Acker tried their hand with *Death of the Poet;* Garth Fagan, Wynton Marsalis, and Martin Puryear explored the rich roots of African-American vitality in last year's *Griot New York;* even Merce Cunningham and John Cage, veritable patriarchs of the collaborative process, have worked together on behalf of the NEXT WAVE.

As critical themes go, however, collaboration has its limits, not least of which is that collaborative works have occupied only the smallest part of the NEXT WAVE's first decade. Other critical themes have been trotted out from time to time. Para-narrative, the philosophy of postmodern performative theater, multiculturalism, the rise of the dandy in the opera house: All have had their moment, none has stuck. These performances were, after all, things we had not seen before, and indeed, could not have, for what has become clear in the decade is that the NEXT WAVE has quite literally changed the *way* we see. Suddenly we found embedded within us expectations of theatrical grandeur and excitement so unlike anything else in our experience of the contemporary performing arts that we were either thrown back to the days of Diaghelev for suitable historical metaphors or pushed into a place where the only useful critical concepts became those of the *erotics* of performance: how it smelled and sounded, tasted and *felt.* Indeed, somewhere along the way, it no longer made sense to say we were going to see a "dance," for even where dance was the primary element in a NEXT WAVE production, what one ultimately saw was something in which dance was merely a constituent (albeit a key constituent) in a much larger production, the entire *mise en scène* of the

stage. In this way, choreography has given way to theatrical direction, music to opera, and the dancer and composer have become *auteurs.* At this all-too-general level of description, it seems we are again thrown back to the past for a metaphor—to the Wagnerian *gesamstkusntwerk,* perhaps—but that too seems wrong when one thinks about Molissa Fenley or Mark Morris or Eiko & Koma, choreographers all, but all also aiming for a much broader context in which their work could become an explanation of the next as well as an exploration of the past.

Perhaps then, this next is not representative of a desire for the future—that is, the successive term in the series we call the history of performance—but a desire to move *beyond* the modern clock, to glimpse the time Octavio Paz calls "time without measure…a conjunction of times and spaces, of synchronicity and confluence. It recognizes death, which the modern cult of the future denied, but also embraces the intensity of life. In the moment, the dark and luminous sides of human nature are reconciled." These are the hours beyond the clock, beyond the minute span of the decade, beyond the catechisms of the market or the fantasies of bohemian purity. They are the hours apprehended through the hovering spacecraft of *Einstein on the Beach,* the tremulously repetitive choreography of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, the technological paradoxes of Laurie Anderson's *United States,* the revitalized classicism of Mark Morris's dances *O Rangasayee* and *New Love Song Waltzes,* and the eerie earth time of Eiko & Koma's ascetic movement sculpture, *Land.* They are the hours of the next, an art that is laying the cornerstone of the future independent of cheap nostalgia or glossy futurism, but is nonetheless riding the currents of the NEXT WAVE.