

# New Ideas of Environmental Dance Choreography under the Mode of Aesthetic Engagement

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## ABSTRACT

Environmental dance, as an important part of the current performing arts, has attracted more and more attention by public. The appearance of the environmental aesthetic not only poses new challenges to the aesthetics and choreography of dance in a specific environment, but also brings new ideas. This paper starts with the aesthetic engagement model proposed by Arnold Berlant, an environmental aesthetician, and combines it with the particularity of dance in the expression of body and space to discuss about environmental dance. It finally refines the new ideas of environmental dance from four aspects: reconstructing environmental space, excavating environmental connotation, multiple body intervention and audience participation in works.

**Keywords:** *Aesthetic engagement mode, Environmental dance, Choreography.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the past century, great changes have taken place in art forms. Painting, music, dance, drama and etc. not only inherit the traditional mode, but also constantly step forward to new forms. Interdisciplinary art and interactive art, as a new trend, has expanded to a broader environment in different ways: natural environment, urban environment and cultural environment. Since the 1960s, dance is no longer fixed on the body and theater, but seeks the possibility of cross-border and non-theater. Across the Pacific Ocean in the United States, postmodern dance and avant-garde dance choreographers have sparked an alternative dance experiment with the key words of 'cross-border, deconstruction and reconstruction', bringing the dance from traditional theaters into art galleries, museums, and even specific living spaces such as parks, playgrounds and balconies. Since then, eastern and western artists started to explore and enrich the content and form of 'environmental dance', promoting the development of dance art to a more diversified direction. This study sets out to examine the development of environmental dance, and uses engagement mode of environmental aesthetics to illustrate how to choreograph environmental dance.

## 2. DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT OF ENVIRONMENTAL DANCE

Environmental dance is a distinctive dance form, which places the dancers in the real scene for performance. It is separated from the traditional theater that fully considers performance environment, audience participation and dancers themselves. In this stance, the framed stage space has been completely broken. The audience and dancers are no longer the separate relationship between 'seeing' and 'being seen', that is, dancers can freely create the performance, also, the audience can intervene to complete it together with the dancers.

Environmental dance has brought new ideas to dance choreography. In the 1960s, pioneer dance artists began to try environmental dance. In the United States, in 1962, film actor and dancer Yvonne Rainer and musician Robert Dunn led a group of dancers to publish their works based on an abandoned church called Judson Memorial Church in New York, so they were later called Judson Dance Theatre. In 1964, Robert Dunn performed a work called Street Dance in Chinatown, the U.S. In this work, he moved the stage of the performance to the street, and the audience sat in the classroom and watched through the window to feel the beauty of dance closely in the real scene. In the early 1970s, American postmodern dancer Trisha Brown moved the dance into the art

museum for the first time and completed a work called *Walking on the Wall*. Brown placed the stage on the outer wall of Whitney Art Museum. With the help of rope, roller skating, track and other instruments, the dancers hung upside down on the outer wall of the art museum with a calm posture, so that the audience could watch the dancers in an unusual visual way. Then, she explored some other outdoor environments such as parks, playgrounds and balconies. In the work of *Roof Piece*, Brown selected 12 roofs in Soho District of New York as specific environments, which expanded the possibility of creation.

Around 2010, a trend of ‘Dancing to Art Galleries’ rose around the world. From Pompidou Art Center in Paris to Hayward Art Center in London, from the Museum of Modern Art in New York to the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern Art Museum in London, and the newly expanded South Wing Museum..., modern dance swept the ‘white box’ and became a new hot spot to ‘activate’ contemporary art. As Jian Dai, a former dancer of American Trisha Brown Dance Troupe, said, “After Brown, it’s not uncommon for dancers to perform in museums. Sasha, Waltz, Sidi Larbi and Wei Shen all have similar experiences. Her creative concept and structural way of placing her body in the environment has continuously affected the artistic creation of subsequent Chinese and Western contemporary dancers” [1].

In recent years, the practice of environmental dance in China has gradually increased. How to maintain the subjectivity of dance in different environments and highlight it in the ‘cross-border’ cooperation with different art forms, rather than become the background, has become the key to dance creation.

### **3. AESTHETIC MODE: FROM SEPARATION TO ENGAGEMENT**

Since the establishment of modern aesthetics in the 18th century, we have formed our understanding of the so-called ‘Art of Beauty’, which requires us to appreciate art with a specific non-utilitarian and quiet attitude, and then enter the world of painting, sculpture, music, drama, dance and literature. Art galleries, museums, concert halls, theaters and libraries provide specific places to appreciate various forms of arts. In these places, we go out of the daily route of experience and accept an attitude for art only [2]. This is the separation mode of aesthetics, expressed by Kant, the founder of modern aesthetic theory, which does not involve any utilitarianism, the concept and purpose of the artwork, but only the pure form of it. More specifically, it is the harmonious cooperation between imagination and understanding caused by the pure form of the object [3].

But since the early last century, artists have begun to challenge habits. They used unconventional materials and technologies to break through the traditional

separation aesthetic model. Modern art brings us back to experience with its uniqueness, imbalance and transience. The expansion of it leads us to go beyond the broad scope of objects, thus becoming things and situations that cannot be easily defined and divided [2]. Modern aesthetics are committed to pursuing various cross-border interests with the focus of environment. In particular, the development of interactive art makes us go out of the art itself and enter the environment, therefore, engagement becomes inevitable. In the engagement mode, the audience work with artists and sometimes ‘become’ artists. Moreover, art is no longer satisfied with its specific space and scattered form, but integrates into different environments, such as architectural walls, subway stations, and urban streets. As Arnold Berleant, an environmental aesthetician, said, “As an active participant in both art and environment, we are no longer separated from it, but integrated into it [2].

According to him, the engagement mode of environmental aesthetic can primarily be achieved through three aspects: first, knowledge intervention, including understanding of art history, art theory, art criticism and environmental background; second, physical intervention, that is, personal sensory experience and action participation; third, spatial intervention, that is, changing the appearance of the environment through devices or other means. Here, environmental experience becomes extremely important, visual, hearing, olfactory, even gustation, touch and motion perception are awakened. Through the mutual penetration of the body and the current space, we become a part of the environment. Therefore, it is essential to apply engagement mode into environmental dance.

### **4. NEW IDEAS OF ENVIRONMENTAL DANCE CHOREOGRAPHY**

For environmental aesthetics, Berleant adhered to this logic: aesthetics can be the pure appreciation of artwork, but as environmental aesthetics, we always exist in the environment. In other words, if we adopt the separation mode to appreciate a painting, we can not use it to appreciate the surrounding, which forces us to find a suitable aesthetic mode for the environment. In Berleant’s view, as ‘engagement’ mode is opposite to the separation mode, it can fully engage in all aspects of the surrounding and maintain the closest relationship with it [3]. The body is the primary carrier for dancers to engage in the environment. The moving body and the environment permeate each other and jointly build a special action language. This artistic language is the integration of the dancer’s body and mind with here and now, and finally reaches a new art form-- environmental dance.

Based on the understanding of aesthetic engagement mode and the characteristics of environmental dance choreography, this part introduces new ideas from four

aspects: environmental space, environmental connotation, body intervention and audience participation.

#### **4.1. Reconstructing environment space**

Dance is the art of space. When dancers enter the non-theater environment, they will guide the audience to break the usual concept of space and change the conventional viewing line. For example, art museum is usually a rectangular space with various art works. The audience is not allowed to touch them, and they should keep a distance from the artwork. Moreover, the visiting route is set in advance. The more experienced the visitors are, the more they abide by this way of body flow—solemnity, line up, head up, keep a distance from other audiences, not staying too long and not going back [4]. In the aesthetic engagement mode, choreographers can re-examine the space, challenge this visual experience and reconstruct the environmental space in an intervention way. For example, the American choreographer William Forsythe completed a project called *Scattered Crowd* in 2002. In this work, he let thousands of helium balloons float in the art museum's air, and the viewers stopped or walked, clapt and beat.. The sound, action, distance and relationship completely changed the familiar space in the past and formed a floating world. In this way, William reconstructed the specific environment of the museum, so that the traditional closed art museum presented different spatial features.

#### **4.2. Mining environmental connotation**

Environmental choreographers often choose a special space for choreography. When choosing a space, they need to fully consider its historical background, architectural style, social environment and other factors, as these will become a part of the work and contribute to the expression of the dance theme [4]. Choreographers can investigate the background of the selected location in advance. What happened here in history? What is its special impact in the current society? What are the customs here? Do you want to comply with these views? How will your work affect the local inherent history and culture? These questions will contribute to creating the artwork and expressing its theme. At the same time, the choreographer should also think: Who is the audience? Which group do they come from? Where and how will they view this work? Will they be ignored during the performance? How to encourage them to participate in the performance? In 2019, in the third high furnace building of Shougang Park (located in Beijing, China), the performance work *Alive*, jointly created by Beijing Dance Academy and MINZU University of China, compared the furnace to the womb, which implied 'a new birth' in social context. Dancers worn wire ropes to fly between pipes and chimneys, crawled around the furnace to express fierce emotions, danced on the flat ground to

express the process of self-awakening... With the help of specific environment, we could mine the environmental connotation, so that the theme of the work can be expressed more incisively and vividly.

For another example, Joanna is the choreographer and director of environmental dance in San Francisco. In her work *Invisible Wings* in 1998, her creative interest focused deeply on the legacy of race, and used a part of the Massachusetts subway as her arts scene. Walking on this dark and narrow railway, dancers groped along the dilapidated walls to move forward. Sometimes they fell to the ground and twitching movements implied the fragility of life, but this would not affect their firm steps. They continued to move towards the end of the dark channel, listened and understood each other with their own actions, showing the escape for freedom in the 19th century. The acts in environmental dance mainly reflects the dancer's inner needs and emotional impulses. The stimulation of the current environment is linked with the experience stored in memory, triggering the desire and trend of acts, and its meaning can be connected with the specific environment. The two performance constitute the epochal and immediacy characteristic of environmental dance, and have the irreplaceable significance at present.

#### **4.3. Intervening multiple aspect of body**

Body intervention refers to both the dancer's body and the audience's body. It involves gender, body appearance, sensory experience and other factors, which is extremely complex. As Berleant said: "Feeling is not only a physiological state, but also contains the influence of culture. As a social existence, we perceive through the form of our culture. Feeling and culture are completely inseparable, which is a complex empirical continuum" [2]. Therefore, the body intervention inevitably involves culture, including structure, relationship, ethnic group, identity, memory, history, etc. [5]. In 2000, William Forsyth created the work *City of Abstracts*. He designed a huge screen in the middle of the art museum. When the audience passed by, they would find themselves sucked into it. Their movements were integrated into the screen, forming a dance state of stretching and spinning, which made people laugh and dance involuntarily. The audience's body intervention breaks the original 'watching' behavior and adds it to 'being watched'. In 2014, two robots arms were joined in William's work *Black Flags*, waving huge black flags and making mechanical noise, which shocked audience when they heard them. It can concluded that the diversified body intervention not only enrich the expressiveness of the work, but also expand a new creative direction for environmental dance.

#### **4.4. Encouraging audience participation in creation**

At the Venice Biennale in 2009, William Forsyth won the 'Golden Lion Lifetime Achievement Award'. The award speech said that "He reborned the classical dance language, reconstructed and deconstructed the dance form, and innovated the dance world." He has a famous saying that "The audience must act, otherwise the work cannot speak." As early as 1997, the work *White Bouncy Castle* completed in London, was William's earliest large-scale creation and may also be the largest 'trampoline' in history. Inspired by music, men, women, young and old, once they entered the castle, they fall into an unbalanced state. Some were at a loss, and some knew how to dance. Everyone who entered the performance environment had become a part of the performance. It can be say that every audience has 'involved' and 'participated' in the creation. They are viewers, creators and performers. They 'share' the environmental dance works with the dancers.

For another example, Hong Kong choreographer and director Chunjiang Yang borrowed Yau Ma Tei, an environment with Hong Kong's special cultural connotation, to direct an environmental dance work *Desire West Kowloon* in 2013. Dancers firstly performed in a corner of a small urban park, and there were adults, children and the elderly in the audience. Some of them stopped to enjoy, some took pictures, and some just waited and saw from a distance and left in a hurry. With the change of the performance scene, the audience changed the direction of walking. Different voices, laughter, playing or humming came from various directions. The 'viewing' space was fragmented, incoherent and had to be patched up by audience themselves. However, the surrounding outside the park was still as usual, the shops were busy doing business, and sometimes the people in the upstairs house looked down occasionally to view the performance. The 'viewing' behavior of the audience constitutes another kind of 'being seen' and indirectly becomes the second performer of the work.

Choreographers need to consider how to effectively attract the audience to participate in performances. This requires the reconstruction and understanding of 'self and other'. According to Lacan's Mirror Image theory, the identities of the viewer and the performer always coexist in one subject at the same time. There is no absolute audience and no absolute performance. The key lies in the confirmation or switch of the 'presence' or 'absence' status of their own consciousness. Therefore, in the environmental dance, dancers should establish 'interaction' with an inclusive heart, guide the audience into their performance, establish relations with people in different ways and complete their works together.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Environmental dance urges people to re-examine the natural environment and historical background. It is a dance form that breaks the traditional separated aesthetic mode, requiring people to participate actively in the way of intervention. Through which, people's aesthetic experience will be expanded, and their understanding of dance will be enriched. The process of participation and interaction is also a kind of social participation, by which people will become active actors and make the performance more vivid. In short, the creation under the aesthetic engagement mode will bring new possibilities for environmental dance. At present, environmental dance is very popular in China, and through the efforts of choreographers, the practice and development of environmental dance in China will also head into a unique road.

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