

# Lois Greenfield Dance Photographs



Bill T. Jones and  
Arnie Zane Dance Company  
1983

Exhibition organized by The Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery  
The University of the Arts Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
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Daniel Ezralow  
*left*, Ashely  
Roland *right*,  
1986

Lois Greenfield's photographs of the dance are exceptional in many ways. The first is certainly their direct, powerful appeal to viewers. As organizer of this exhibition, I have witnessed a consistent reaction to these images—identical to my own first exposure to the work which is an instant gut reply to their high energy. The subsequent response is always a fascination with their orchestration of body, space, and time in such a precise, elegant, and inventive way.

The strength and importance of these photographs, though, is not limited to their immediate accessibility or their balance of a kind of “dionysian-apolonian” visual language. In the eyes of dancers, who might be counted among the ultimate critics of the work, for example, Greenfield's photographs are what plans and elevations can be to architects: documents full of information related to both the technical and aesthetic aspects of their art. Colleagues in The University of the Arts' School of Dance repeatedly use the word “kinesthetic” whenever they discuss the significance of Greenfield's photographs for them.

Movement is, in fact, central to Lois Greenfield's concerns as a photographer. The 47 images in this exhibition, including both commissioned and free work produced in Greenfield's studio, are the result of collaboration between the photographer and the photographed. By her own admission, Greenfield does not study a company's choreography or the professional work of any one dancer; neither is she particularly interested in persona (photographs with strong facial expressions are usually rejected). The primary objective, for her, is to make a good photograph.

Dancers are invited to Greenfield's downtown Manhattan studio where, either individually, in pairs, or in groups, they improvise for the shoot. This format is rather unorthodox in its risky reconstitutions of the conventions of dance photography. It is a marriage of skill, experience, selectivity, and chance in the highest degree. And yet, the result is dance photography in perhaps the finest sense of the term.

Without knowing what came before or after the pictured moment, without hearing music, seeing dramatic gesture or costume, or being aware of style, narrative, and content—things which accompany and shape our experience of dance—we still find these to be unmistakable images of the dance. They describe what actually happens in the process of this most disciplined and elevated form of human movement. Visually, they are what Rudolf von Laban refers to in his well-known text, *Principles of Dance and Movement Notation* (London, 1956) as “choreutics,” which is an analysis and synthesis of movement. And, ironically, though Greenfield may not rely on knowledge of any specific choreography, she is, in her own way, creating it with her symbolic photographic notations of dance in its pure form.

As photographs, this body of work can be termed “straight.” Greenfield photographs what is there before the camera, though this often seems hard to credit. Throughout, as with the image of Daniel Ezralow and Ashley Roland (page 2), there is a bewildering and at the same time convincing blend of the real and unreal, movement and stasis, mystery and self-invention that lends these photographs the quality of dreams. Like other masters of the medium who variously concerned themselves with the study of motion such as Eadweard Muybridge, Harold Edgerton, and Ben Rose, Greenfield reveals, through her photographs, in measure what is present but “unseen.”

Lois Greenfield's accomplishment has been termed a redefinition of the genre of dance photography. Her vision, in which photography is not simply a documentary servant to the dance nor graphic art made entirely for its own end, is a vanguard blend of the visual and performing arts. Each inspires the other. As such, this vision creates a fitting and stimulating presentation for The University of the Arts.

## **Eleni Cocordas**

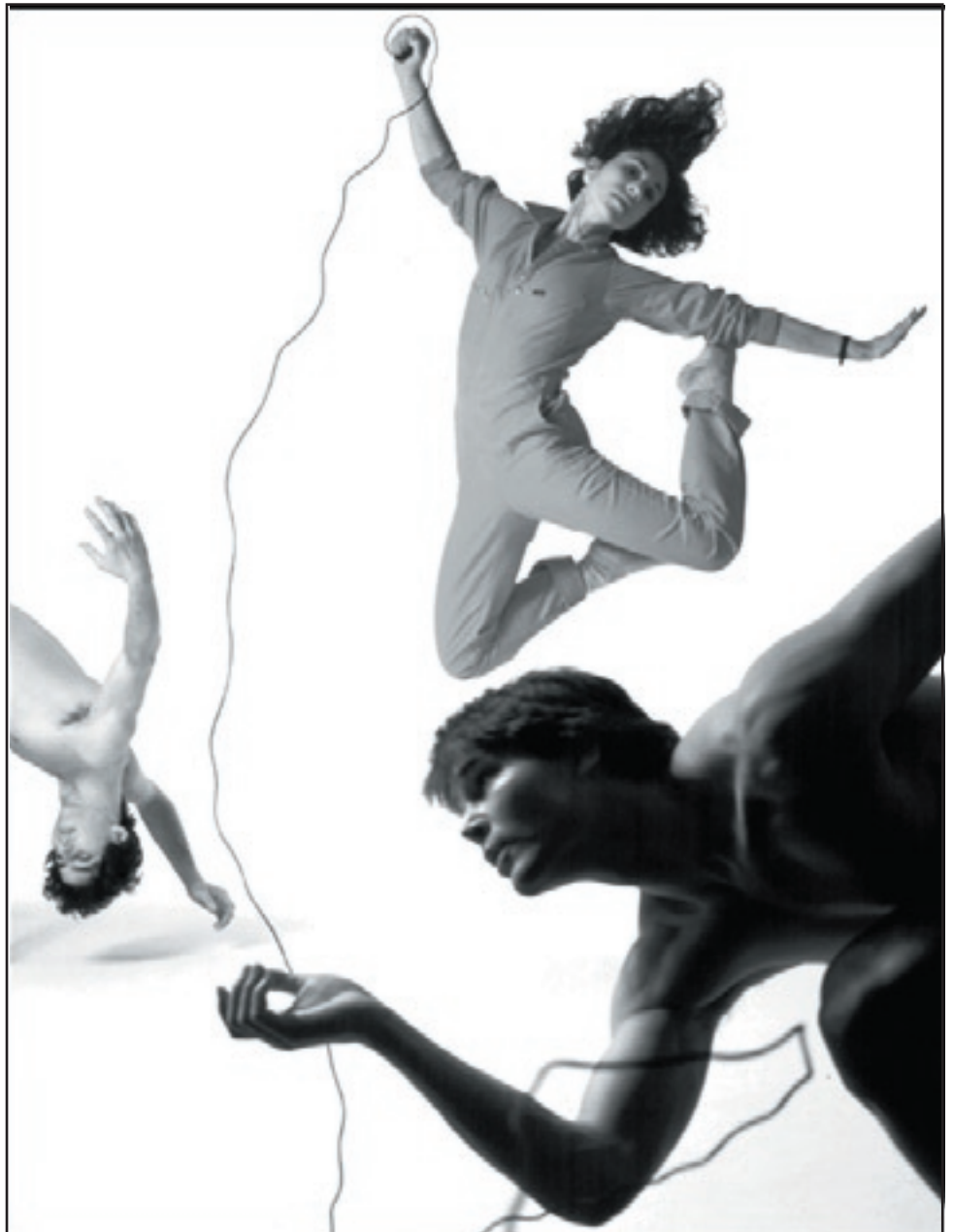
Director of Exhibitions

## Acknowledgments

Lois Greenfield Dance Photographs is a three-part project involving an exhibition, this accompanying catalog, and a day-long symposium on dance photography led by the artist.

True to its subject, this project is the result of collaborations between many talented individuals, as well as important arts organizations. At The University of the Arts, thanks are due to the following persons for their major contributions: Susan Glazer, director, Stella Moore, chairman of the Visiting Committee, and Naomi Mindlin, instructor, School of Dance; Alida Fish, chairman, Photography/Film/Animation Department; Joseph Rapone, director of Publications Design; Kirby F Smith, associate director of External Affairs, and Anita M. Mastroieni, public relations associate; and Karen L. Cronin, assistant to the director, Exhibitions Program.

The Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, which has generously supported this project, also



Self-Portrait  
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made it possible for The University of the Arts and The Photo Review to work together as copublishers of his catalog, which features insightful essays by Stephen Perloff and Deborah Jowitt.

Chris Karitevlis and Jack Deaso, assistants to Lois Greenfield, responded expertly and efficiently to the organizational needs of this project.

Lois Greenfield, at the center of all this activity, has generously shared her time and has been a pleasure to work with. Our deepest gratitude is extended to her for an admirable body of work which inspired us throughout the process of this undertaking, and which will, doubtlessly, enrich all who are exposed to its results.

**EC**



In one of the earliest photographs ever made, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre pointed his camera towards a bustling Parisian boulevard in the middle of the day. The resulting plate depicted a ghost town save for one solitary individual, a man who stood on the street corner having his shoes shined. The exposure time of twenty to thirty minutes precluded the capture of the images of all the people, horses, carriages and carts that had passed along the street.

It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that photography could capture motion with any regularity. Thus the first dance photographs are rather stiff portraits of the stars of the day, or set pieces in costume recreating scenes from well-known dances. Some of these could be quite evocative, as

Baron de Meyer's pictures of Nijinsky and the Ballet Russe, but still, the inability to capture the motion of the dance limited what could be conveyed about it in still images.

As photographic technology improved, new styles and methods of making pictures followed. In the 1930s, Henri Cartier Bresson helped to develop a new style of photography based upon the portability of the small, hand-held camera and its ability to capture motion. And he defined the operative concept of that style: "the Decisive Moment." For Cartier-Bresson, the decisive moment was that instant when the evocative geometry of the forms within the picture frame, the choreography of the subjects, and the emotional content of the picture combined to represent the essence of a situation. "To me," he wrote, "photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression." <sup>1</sup>

It seems that this idea of the decisive moment should be an important one in dance photography. What instant captures the full measure of a dance, or best conveys its essence?

When Barbara Morgan made her famous series of photographs of Martha Graham, she would observe the dance and then allow two or three weeks for the most powerful images from it to emerge. Then she would photograph those images of Graham and her dancers, but often changing the original stage lighting and framing to make a more evocative picture. This was one way of capturing a decisive mo-



Daniel Ezralow *left*  
David Parsons *right*  
1982

ment, although in a controlled way, not just plucking it out of the flow of life as Cartier-Bresson did.

It is in the work of Lois Greenfield that this idea of the decisive moment is most clearly applied to dance photography. Perhaps more than any other dance photographer, Greenfield stresses the independence of the photograph from the dance. For her, the importance of the photograph is paramount. She has said, “There is no correlation between a good dance and a good photograph. A good photograph might only mean that the dance was photogenic . . . . The photographer has to be careful to concentrate only on what the picture looks like exclusive of its meaning in the performance.” As she points out, the viewer of the photograph does not hear the music or know what went before or after that moment in the dance. She even suggests that a “great dance moment” does not necessarily make a great photograph. Indeed, like Morgan, she will reorient and change the movement of a piece for the sake of the photograph.<sup>2</sup>

Just as many of Barbara Morgan’s best photographs of the dance sprang from her collaboration with Martha Graham, so do many of Lois Greenfield’s come from her collaboration with David Parsons and Daniel Ezralow. Rather than the long contemplation of a dance, Greenfield works spontaneously with the dancers in her studio. While Greenfield has also photographed moments from complete dances, especially in her journalistic work, she has also created a unique body of dance photographs that represent only isolated moments, improvised by dancers in her studio.

These images are “decisive moments” that are unique in dance photography. They represent the purest form of collaboration between performer and image-maker. For what is represented is an evocation of that one moment and no other. Bodies fly through the air, twist and turn, balance precariously, and are suspended incongruously between rising and falling.

In one well-known image, David Parsons, decked out modishly in sports jacket, tie, scarf, hat, and sun glasses, floats perilously close to the ground with his torso horizontal, his arms spread wide, and his feet kicked up far above his head. It’s hard to say if he’s still taking off or about to crash unceremoniously, but we certainly admire his incredible act of levitation.



David Parsons  
1983

In another picture of the Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane Dance



Bill T. Jones and  
Arnie Zane Dance Company  
1983

Company, two figures, one male and one female, sweep from left to right, each in a magnificent arc, while another man, closer to the camera and clipped by the edges of the frame, sails in from the left and a headless woman soars out of the frame to the right. The dynamism of motion suspended and balanced so precariously is breathtaking.

There is a joy to this kind of risk-taking, a joy that celebrates both photography and the dance.

## **Stephen Perloff**

### Notes

1. Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1952), reproduced in Nathan Lyons, *Photographers on Photography*, (Engle-wood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966). p.51.
2. "More Than Just the Dance," *Dance Life*, edited by David Lindner, Vol. 4, 1979, pp. 21-23.

It must have been during the fall of 1973 that Lois Greenfield called me on the telephone for the first time. She'd recently moved to New York from Boston, she said, was a photographer, liked taking pictures of dancing. The Village Voice—gradually altering its original no-frills format—had begun to allow a photograph to accompany my weekly dance column every now and then. This Greenfield woman had a proposition: if she called me once a week, would I mind telling her what I planned to review? She'd try to photograph the dance event and get a shot to the Voice, shelling out for film and developing costs just on the chance that the editors might feel like printing it.

Admiring her dedication, envying her chutzpah, awed by her planning ability, cornered by her determination, I said O.K.

Over the nearly fourteen years that have elapsed since that conversation, one of Lois Greenfield's remarkable photographs has accompanied almost every one of the 600-odd articles that I've written for The Village Voice. (Only when her now-crowded schedule busies her elsewhere, or a company has its own photographer, does the Voice publish someone else's work.) And one of the things that I look forward to each week when I open the paper is seeing the image that she has captured.

I use the word "capture" advisedly. What she does entails snatching the image out of a field of motion. From the beginning, Lois and I have shared a love of the challenge that movement presents—my job being to suggest it through words, hers to stop it without stopping the illusion of it. For a photographer, this involves superb timing and coordination—a simulation, in miniature, of the dancers' own skills.

Those who photographed dancing early in the century rarely tried to shoot dancers in action. Public taste, taste in photography, and the nature of the equipment and techniques available tended to produce pictures of dancers as



Elizabeth Streb Dance Company  
1985



costumed personalities or other-worldly beings in soft focus. In the 1930s and 1940s, photographers like Barbara Morgan and Thomas Bouchard began to focus on the impetus of dance. Morgan was after the suspended peak, the essence of a gesture, while Bouchard, it seems to me, often went for the less refined transitional moments.

Greenfield is adept at either approach, depending on the subject and the light (she can make handsome portraits as well). Although she might disagree, I think that the demands of the weekly Voice picture

have trained her to a flexibility that she might not otherwise have come by. Quite a few other dance photographers have specialized in a particular dance style or kind of image. Max Waldman, for instance, liked sculptural shapes, texture, stillness, and emphasized those qualities in the dancers he chose to photograph. Morgan and Bouchard shot modern dance; George Platt Lynes preferred to shoot ballet. Some, like Martha Swope, the official photographer of the New York City Ballet, rarely work the downtown scene; others, like Peter Moore, who documented the goings-on at Judson Church during the 1960s, concentrate on it.

But Greenfield's assignments for the Voice, sandwiched between her many other projects and jobs, have taken her to dress rehearsals of new ballets one week, to downtown lofts the next, to Asia Society the next. And journalistic morality in some unspoken way decrees that she bring out what is there rather than imposing a photographic style that might misrepresent the event. Sometimes she knows a choreographer's work; at other times, a dancer or two arrive at her studio with a costume or two, preceded by a word or two from me, and she has to pick up the essence of whatever-it-is cold.

Amazingly often, she gets that essence. Shooting Eiko and Koma, she may come in close, emphasizing



Meuna Tseng  
1986

the tormented sculptural configurations of their slow dances. She snaps Baryshnikov (dancing Eliot Feld's Santa Fe Saga) in midair, not quite at that moment of rest at the peak of a jump, but still moving upward, still striving, and thus defines him in his role as the character dancer he can be instead of the classical prince he often is in other ballets. A picture of Lisa Bush reaching back to tug Erica Bornstein along reveals the vulnerability, the absence of polish that choreographer Wendy Perron favors, while a portrait of Maria-Theresa Duncan at 80 or so shows the fierce rapture that still invades this protégée of Isadora every time she lifts her arms to the sky.



Merce Cunningham  
in rehearsal,  
1986

Greenfield prefers shooting in her studio and doing so gives her a control that has led to some extraordinarily accomplished work, like her ebullient series of photographs of David Parsons and Daniel Ezralow. In these, dancers and photographers seem to be striking sparks off each other's imaginations. But I love, too, the unpredictable edge that awkward space or available light in theater or dance studio can give her work. High contrast dramatic lighting underscores the boldness of a virtuosic dance, while sunlight from a studio window brings out the mildness, the dailiness of another piece. Merce Cunningham, situated at the end of his long Westbeth studio, behind the foregrounded backs of his dancers, is a tiny distant figure, but also, subtly, the apex of the picture.

The owner of that nervous, yet assured voice on the telephone years ago thought she might want to be a dance photographer. She has become one of the dance photographers.

## **Deborah Jowitz**

To read more articles on Lois, click below to go to her website:  
<http://www.loisgreenfield.com/about>