

LOIS GREENFIELD

LIBERATING THE DANCER FROM THE DANCE

by William A Ewing

At a gala performance in September 1992, celebrating Lois Greenfield's retrospective exhibition at New York's International Center of Photography, David Parsons electrified the audience with his solo, *Caught*, in which he dances in darkness, lit at rapid intervals with a strobe triggered by the dancer himself, but only when he is in the air. The effect is breathtaking, as if Parsons is in continual flight, soaring, gliding, hovering over the heads of the audience. And because the strobe is so fast (measured in thousandths of a second), the effect is one of seeing a rapid succession of still – *absolutely* still – images, like an animated Muybridge.

I had asked for *Caught* to be performed on this occasion as the *pièce de résistance* in an evening of dance by Parsons, Daniel Ezralow, Ashley Roland, Bill T Jones, Elizabeth Streb, and others who had worked with Greenfield over the years. The choice of *Caught* was not only a matter of a dance that looked like dance photography – by implication, Greenfield's photography – but a dance that had been wholly inspired by dance photography again, Greenfield's. For the first time, I believe, the traditional roles of dance and photography had been inverted. No longer was dance the uncontested leader, photography the follower; no longer was photography merely the handmaiden of the dance, there to perform the functions of documentation and/or idealisation. The partnership of dance and photography was finally placed on an equal footing. As such, *Caught* was the perfect tribute to Greenfield's art, which has always insisted on her medium being accorded equal respect with its subject matter.

While Greenfield professes great respect for the dance, and is immensely knowledgeable in the modern and post-modern area (having been the *Village Voice* dance photographer for 20 years), her loyalty is first and foremost to the photographic image. Since the 19th century much wishful thinking has been voiced about

dance photography's ability to capture' the dance, but Greenfield recognised from the outset that this was fundamentally impossible. The image does not, cannot, simulate the dance; it has no music, no ambient sounds of footwork, no peripheral vision, and most significantly, no movement – only fractured time and fragmented space. It can represent the dance, or evoke it, but it cannot preserve it. The split-second image is a universe unto itself, standing or falling according to its own dynamics- pictorial dynamics, not dance dynamics. Early on, Greenfield understood that a great dance or a great dancer does not automatically translate into a great photographic image; conversely, a skilful photographer can make a spectacular photograph with a mediocre dance. The photograph is not a slice of reality – it is an illusion. The general audience for dance photographs is, of course, obsessed with celebrity, and virtually any image reasonably in focus of, say, a Baryshnikov or Nureyev, will become an object of veneration, even a fetish. Lucrative careers have been built on this premise, but at a price: few dance photographers have been acknowledged as important photographers per se, and justifiably included in histories of fine art photography. Greenfield's allegiance to the photographic image qualifies her as an exception to this historically lacklustre state of affairs.

This does not mean that an uncompromising photographer cannot be of service to the dance. Think in terms of two 'Lois Greenfields': first, a professional dance photographer who does provide dance companies, dancers and choreographers with iconic images – sometimes depicting/interpreting specific dances or dancers, at other times providing 'generic' imagery of choreography (for example, a Merce Cunningham image she made in 1992 was used as a company 'logo' throughout the following season). This was the Greenfield who had gravitated to the dance in the early 1970s as a consequence of her photo-journalism, and recognised a market and a livelihood. The dance world has long admired and respected this competent and creative interpreter, whose vision has become a feature of the New York dance scene through company brochures, posters, and most importantly, the pages of New York's *Village Voice*, where week after week her images comple-

ment critic Deborah Jowitt's reports. What is not adequately appreciated, however, is the degree of creative involvement in the process, for what is seen on the printed page often exists only in the form of a photographic image. The specific movements and gestures, choreographed by the photographer for the camera, are not present in the staged performance; they have their counterparts in performance, but they are unique to the photograph. That the dancers and choreographers are satisfied, often delighted, with the results testifies to her grasp of the spirit of a particular dance, even while she takes extensive liberties with 'the letter'.

The second Greenfield is, in a sense, not a dance photographer at all, but an image maker obsessed with the human body in motion, much as Eadweard Muybridge was 100 years ago. For this Lois Greenfield, dancers are important, first, because their movements can be controlled with great precision (so that she can ask Dancer X to land on one precise point while Dancer Y lands on another); second, because the dancers' abilities to jump, twist, re-form themselves, and so on, are far greater than those of ordinary mortals. But if Greenfield relies on the active, enthusiastic collaboration of her dancers, she never relinquishes her direction and control. This is the meaning behind Greenfield's enigmatic statement, 'I tell the dancers to leave their choreography at the door.' While depending upon their exceptional skills and talents, she dispenses with their preconceived ideas about how they are expected to perform. Instead, emphasis is placed on the element of play and free association. Consequently, the sessions are often exhilarating for the dancers. Says Greenfield, quite justifiably, 'I liberate the dancer from the dance.'

The results of her freewheeling approach speak for themselves. Often the process yields the unexpected - a chance convergence of limbs, for example, or an illusion of utter stillness where there had been violent motion. While fun for both dancer and photographer on one level, the process is demanding - physically and intellectually. Movements are repeated over and over with minor variations, until something begins to emerge. Inprocess Polaroids (ie, instant photographs) are studied by both parties, suggestions are made and then explored, until Greenfield

is satisfied that she has broken through to the heart of the matter. All of this activity transpires in a surprisingly small space, some 12 feet wide by 15 feet deep, the width dictated by the maximum dimensions of photographic background paper. To the bystander the process appears as absolute chaos, too fast for any or pattern to be discerned. What appears in the final image as, say, a serene and effortless flight is in fact a physically violent act, with the dancer crashing to the ground or hurtling off the set into a wall; only their training and peak conditions prevent injury. The bystander may also be astonished to learn that the photographer not only sees the scene in the viewfinder upside down, but left to right, so that a dancer hurtling across the stage from one direction appears in the viewfinder to be coming from the other. Choosing the right moment ('moment' being a misnomer, if ever there was one, as the image is made in a fraction of a second) presupposes anticipating it, as to wait for it would be to miss it.

Greenfield liberates her dancers from more than the dance - she trees them from the constraints of time and space as well, even in a sense from their own bodies. As Parsons hung and hovered in *Caught*, he and his friends soar, plummet, float and bounce in the camera's eye, oblivious to the constraints of gravity and the supposed limitations of their own anatomy. Greenfield's square frame, or framed box', is a magical place where childhood fantasies can be recovered and indulged. In fact, the black bars which enclose a Greenfield image delineate the limits of the negative, but they function on a literal level as well, constraining and compressing the dancers while hinting at the world beyond.

But this box, this cage, is not without means of escape; the dancers may play within the cage, seemingly hang on the 'bars' or career off them, but they may also slip between them and escape... In the series of images which gave the name to Greenfield's new book, *Breaking Bounds*, this idea was explored in a series of images in which Parsons danced around and through a wood frame which Greenfield had had constructed - the figurative frame of the negative border made real. For anyone familiar with the choreography of Elizabeth Streb, with whom Greenfield feels a strong affinity, this series may

be recognised as an analogue; Streb has had her dancers physically constrained in just such a real box.

Sometimes the Greenfield frame feels confining, but at other times the space inside seems unspeakably vast. It's the way in which the figures are juxtaposed, or placed on different planes, or the ways in which they are made to connect, that determines this scale. Less remarked upon by her critics, but no less effective, is Greenfield's use of negative space. It is more of an ether than a void, a magical element unique to a Greenfield image. Of late she has had her imitators but this particular element has exceeded their reach.

It is tension, or rather tensions, between various opposing forces which empower a Greenfield image; between the force of gravity and weightlessness; between the linear and the curvilinear; between attraction and repulsion; between vertical, diagonal, and horizontal vectors; between serenity of expression and taxing physical activity; between balance and imbalance; between freedom and constraint; between connection and disconnection; between figuration and abstraction; and between order and chaos.

But ultimately, what fascinates and confounds Greenfield's viewer is the paradox: the illusion of movement in a still image. The paradox, of course, is as old as photography itself, but never before has it been so artfully resolved. Greenfield has located a territory of her own, the fine line between the body at rest and the body in motion.

Original article from *ART & Design* MAGAZINE
© 1993 Academy Group Ltd.

For more information about Lois, please visit the link below.

<http://www.loisgreenfield.com/about>