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Camera as Body: An Interview with Charles Atlas, Rashaun Mitchell, and Silas Riener



Charles Atlas, Rashaun Mitchell, and Silas Riener, *Tesseract* (2015) production still; Curtis R. Priem Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC) at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York

Co-commissioned by the Walker and the Experimental and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC), *Tesseract* is the creative product of longtime Cunningham collaborator and visual/media artist [Charles Atlas](#) and former Merce Cunningham Dance Company dancers [Rashaun Mitchell](#) and [Silas Riener](#). A live dance-technology hybrid featuring seven dancers and 3-D video, *Tesseract*—performed March 16–18, 2017—weaves together dance, sci-fi narratives, and live film segments edited by Atlas in real time. Toggling between the corporeal and the digital, this revolutionary work disorients one's sense of space and time in playful and unpredictable ways. In a 2015 interview with curator [Victoria Brooks](#), first published in the [catalogue](#) for the Walker-organized exhibition *Merce Cunningham: Common Time*, the collaborators discuss the film that preceded the live version of *Tesseract*, creating work for cinematic, theatrical, and museum contexts, breaking the rules of 3-D filmmaking, and the legacy Cunningham left for the world of dance film.

Victoria Brooks: Can we begin by discussing the differences in approach between choreography to camera and choreography onstage for a live audience? Your new work, *Tesseract*, will incorporate both, and the conditions of production of each part will certainly be inscribed into how we'll experience the work in the end—not necessarily in an overt way, but in the

BY
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differences in the affective relationship of the dancers' bodies as they are mediated by the camera and presented to the audience live. Of course the influence of Merce Cunningham has been key for each of you in the development of your work—Rashaun and Silas as dancers with the Cunningham company, and Charlie through your extensive collaborations with Merce over several decades.

Charlie, if we could start with you, would you talk about the early years with Merce and how the two of you developed a new language that enhanced the relationship between the camera and the body beyond the technical?

Charles Atlas: In 1973 or 1974, Merce invited me to work with him after having seen some of my Super 8 films. We were going to make video, but he didn't know video and I didn't know video. So I learned it from a book—*Spaghetti City Video Manual*, actually. Then I taught it to him. Before we ever made our first piece, we spent practically a whole summer working every day with a camera and a student dancer, putting the camera at different levels and seeing what the camera did to the body. At that time, we were working with a three-camera setup with live switching. We started out with cameras on tripods, and in a way, that was a good place to start because it's easier to choreograph for. It's a fixed space, and you know where the cameras are. Once you start moving the cameras, it starts to be different. That really informed my way of approaching a collaboration. The project with Rashaun and Silas has followed a very similar process. And it just occurred to me that one thing that's similar to the way we are working and the way Merce worked is that it's completely natural to work without music.

Brooks: I suppose that's one of the central themes of the exhibition *Common Time*. Even the phrase "common time" suggests three separate tracks—the music is one track, the movement another, and the décor a third, and they move in tandem with one another. Maybe you could say something about whether or not that influences your approach here.

Rashaun Mitchell: I think working without music is kind of a given for us. It allows us to observe the rhythmic structures that emerge in the work we're making, and having that clarity is probably good for us in terms of figuring out how the camera will best capture the choreography, what strategies can best support the inherent choreographic structures.

Atlas: With Merce, I always worked without music, so I edited on the movement. Since then, I've worked with music, and music is so demanding on editing that you end up really editing on the music. Hopefully, it works on the dancing as well.

Mitchell: I think that having the experience through our work with Cunningham of coming onto the stage without ever having heard the sound or dealt with the elements of the production, and having to just go with that—I think we've digested that. It's in our bodies, it's in the way we work now. And I think it's allowed us to be pretty flexible about the filming process.

Atlas: One thing that's different is that there's a certain amount of indeterminacy in your work that was certainly never in Merce's work.

Silas Riener: We were actually really careful to try and protect that flexibility in *Tesseract*, especially because once you put a camera in a space, everything wants to become the same every time. The structure of a shoot, of communication between us, the dancers, and the crew, and the desire for identical takes and continuity—all of that doesn't leave much space for indeterminacy.

Atlas: The great thing about this project is that we had enough time to develop it and work on it. In the Cunningham way, we rehearsed with cameras for weeks. So the camera people really knew the dance even though the dance did change. But I think with more time rehearsing with the camera, you can go with the feeling of the piece—it doesn't have to be so fixed.

Riener: I was thinking about your earlier comment about our shared histories and individuated histories with Merce. There was always a lot of watching and spending time with the work, and that put a deep sense of shared space and shared time into the choreography and the collaborative model. There was always a central space where you watched the dances over and over and over again. That physical history of deep, repetitive practice is something that Rashaun and I take for granted, because we understand those working models. And we like to work!



Charles Atlas, Rashaun Mitchell, and Silas Riener, *Tesseract* (2015) production still

Mitchell: Also, that daily work toward specificity allows for a greater flexibility in the end. For this project, it was really important that we work with dancers we knew, for the most part—people that we could rely on and know that when we threw things at them they were going to absorb them quickly and respond accordingly. If I needed to say, “OK, the camera has moved over here so now you have to reorient your ‘front,’” that would be understood and easily executed.

Brooks: Certainly the production conditions of this project—the long period of development but very limited time with the dancers in front of the full 3-D rig and with the film crew—has meant that everyone has had to be very flexible with changes once we started filming. The constant calculation of convergence adds another layer. In 3-D, it's the angle from the eye of the viewer to the object on-screen that the camera is focused on, and that needs to be checked for each shot. This added a significant amount of shoot time. Plus, we only had one rig, so you couldn't get multiple angles at the same time.

Atlas: If you have multiple cameras, you're not repeating. The dancers don't have to do it over and over.

Mitchell: That helps with creating one condition that is really essential when you're dancing—to be able to feel a sense of time and progression, and to be able to respond to that. With the 3-D process it's been the opposite. You go out there and do a thirty-second take and you barely experience doing that thing before it's over.

thing before it's over.

Atlas: In the Cunningham films I did, the sequences were long, and the dancers did get to dance.

Brooks: So the process is really constrained by film time. And of course, you're not only dealing with the bodies of the dancers but also those of the production team as well as the equipment itself. All the time it takes to rebalance the two cameras, change the lenses, rehearse the dolly moves, or choreograph the movement of the Steadicam operator—it's an intensive work flow.

Riener: A Steadicam is a mobile camera rig whose weight is distributed through the operator's vest. Because the apparatus is able to move smoothly with the operator, it behaves much more like a dancer.

Brooks: The first scene that you shot in the summer (which for our work flow purposes is titled "Fog") was with a Steadicam. However, we had a seventy-five-pound, dual-camera 3-D rig, so the Steadicam operator had to carry a huge amount of weight and learn the choreography of the dancers and be directed to precisely move around them. He had to keep the camera in a dynamic relationship with the two dancers for a seven-minute straight take, but of course there were limits to his strength. This heavy rig would keep moving even when he had stopped. Charlie, did you find the limitations in this balance between the dancers' bodies, the technician's body, and the massive apparatus to be challenging?

Atlas: I have to say I never took that into consideration conceptually. I just thought, "It has to be possible to do this." At a certain point, I did think of wanting to have a crane. But if you use a crane, a shot takes forever to do because you have to rehearse the boom and the crane and the dolly—it's like three people.

Mitchell: A crane would have given us the possibility of viewing the floor from above, and other unusual perspectives, and we did discuss it, but in the end we decided against it, for time and budgetary reasons but also because using a crane would have created an artificial relationship to the choreography. One of Charlie's main goals was to create camera movements that were propelled by choreographic or energetic surges. The camera is a dancer rather than a distant observer.

Riener: But the reliance on a body to be able to guide the camera rig brings in the vulnerability that I think is a big part of dancing. I don't mind that.

Mitchell: It was really confusing for me once we started with the Steadicam. I felt like I had just wrapped my mind around the idea that when you make dance for camera, the dance is seen from a fixed position. You only get to look at what the frame is telling you to look at, and the dance somehow orients itself around that. When we started working with the Steadicam I felt like it completely changed that because everything could move in relation to everything else. It was like there were these two planetary bodies rotating around each other.

Brooks: I think what's beautiful about the footage you got from that shoot is that you *feel* the body because the camera *is* a body. It's a completely different experience from watching a film shot from a fixed viewpoint, where you're constantly thinking about what is off-screen. With this situation, you are much closer to being there.

Atlas: Looking at the footage of "Fog" in both in 2-D and 3-D, I feel like it only works in 2-D. In 2-D I feel as though I want it to go faster because it doesn't

...and I think I feel as though I want it to go faster because it doesn't have the added spatial quality, so you have to substitute something for that.

Riener: It's good to hear that from you, Charlie, because the spatialization of things is something we think about all the time. I think of space as an agent in the dance. You can create something completely different depending on whether you impose distance between two actions or close in on one of them. Space is a sort of meaning buffer that generates its own layer on top of the movement. But this is all skewed by the camera because the way the eye of the camera looks at bodies and the space in between them is completely different from how the human eye sees them.



Charles Atlas, Rashaun Mitchell, and Silas Riener, *Tesseract* (2015) production still

Mitchell: That kind of intrusion into the choreography is what is most exciting to me—having something that changes a thing that you think you know already. It's a duet, but now it's a trio. That kind of transformation of the choreography is what most excited me about working with you, Charlie—being able to see how what we had made could grow or take on a new life.

Riener: That ties us back to Merce. Charlie can see the phrase points and changes in a dance because he has that education through watching Merce's phrase-driven world—a meticulously organized segment-by-segment view of the world through his dances. I think about Merce's way of constructing dances all the time, and it has primed me for thinking about how events follow each other. Charlie and Rashaun and I deeply understand the way a dance can be structured from studying and performing in or filming Merce's dances.

Atlas: I really remember the third piece Merce and I did in 1976, *Squaregame Video*. Merce sat with me in the back, where I was editing, and we went over every take because I couldn't tell what a good performance was. Dancers see things in a completely different way. They see technical things, or things they know are really hard to do but look easy.

Mitchell: But it's interesting for us to see it through your eyes, because I think you see energy, and you see an expression of space and time.

Atlas: Over the years I think I internalized Merce.

Riener: In this film, there is also a choreographic connection to Merce's work that is more apparent than in some of the other things we've done recently.

We've been working in more intimate spaces with improvisation and indeterminate ideas, structures, and movements, some of which we felt wouldn't show up as well on film. I think the camera wants an energetic scale that approaches a kind of virtuosity that we sometimes want to shy away from in our work, or that we're critical of. But it was pretty clear from the beginning that everything needed to be more amped up, more exacting.

Mitchell: There's a linearity to the movement that I think we've avoided in the past, just because we associate it with Merce's physical choices.

Atlas: You mean shape?

Mitchell: We actually had 3-D geometric shapes built for one of the sets because, as we became more sensitive to the demands of the camera, we found ourselves having to deal with shape in a more direct way than with other works we've made. It was a kind of surrender.

Riener: And as soon as you start making shapes, you're in a territory that's already been well traversed by others. I felt like Merce was really in the room for those times. But we also went toward it because it's what the camera wanted.

Mitchell: We really tried to create as wide a spectrum of movement in this piece as we could, but those "Merce-y" moments are definitely in there.

Atlas: It also helped that the concept of this piece was that each of the six chapters was conceived as a different world, because then we could make different rules for each world.

Brooks: Maybe you could just explain those different worlds—what your approach was when you first started collaborating, and how this is being structured as you're going on.

Mitchell: When we first started talking, I said I wanted this new piece to be about what I was already working on. At the time, I was making a piece dealing with science fictional elements concerning space travel and time travel and evolution, and that led us toward creating a series of different worlds or settings.

We don't really work with narratives so much, but there are lots of mini-narratives in our work, which get so overlaid that they become diffused and abstracted. With the film process, we didn't have time to think about that sort of thing, so our process became more of an investigation of form, structure, time, and space as they relate to 3-D technology. So we decided to construct different worlds with really distinct visual elements and different rules in terms of the vocabulary of movement. For example, one scene deals with slow time; others are concerned with circularity, symmetry, disorientation, and so on.





Charles Atlas, Rashaun Mitchell, and Silas Riener, *Tesseract* (2015) production still

Riener: In our approach to making a film for the first time, I think we created what I like to think of as versions of camera fantasies. What would it be to make a 3-D film? What's the craziest thing you could do, or what's the most beautiful thing you could do, and how can you make the entire space express this body that is moving inside of that?

Brooks: We've all been watching a lot of 3-D Hollywood blockbuster movies, which for the most part are big-budget action or fantasy. The differences in the filmmakers' use of convergence and parallax in these movies has been an ongoing conversation throughout this production—how 3-D effects appear to have shifted from a focus on the spectacle of everything flying out of the screen at you (negative parallax) to a beautiful depth that creates a window behind the screen plane (positive parallax), as in the most recent film we watched together, *Mad Max Fury Road*. How have these cinematic experiences influenced you?

Atlas: Well, I've been watching films forever. I never went to film school, so watching movies was my education. I had always wanted to make a 3-D film, but it always seemed like a fantasy. When I realized I was actually going to do a 3-D project, I started watching 3-D films in a different way, and I was surprised at how much they broke all the rules that I thought were supposed to be the rules.

Brooks: Can you talk more about these rules of filmmaking? Was there a particular set of parameters you followed in this project?

Atlas: I think it just comes down to camera space, really. If I was being really strict, we wouldn't have done a lot of the things we did, so I think their [Silas and Rashaun's] intuition about what would work for 3-D was right on. A lot of exploitation of deep space, and lots of layers of space, both in the sets and the movement.

Mitchell: I think for us, a lot more happens in much less time in these scenes than we are normally used to in our work—that kind of camera time is a really different experience than choreographic time. The camera doesn't really want you to see change that happens over time. But in terms of space, I think there are lots of rules. If I'm choreographing for live performance, a lot of what I am interested in is seeing the space around the thing that's happening. I think that gets lost with the camera. In yesterday's shoot I was really interested in the floor space and how much of a problem it was for Charlie that the screen wasn't filled up with bodies. I kept thinking, "But I love space! I want to see space!" And yet that space seems to deaden the energy. I think when you're in live performance there's something about the visceral liveness of it that creates the energy around the space.

Atlas: I think a good solo performer onstage commands the whole space. You feel the person alone in that space.

Mitchell: And you feel your own breath and the person next to you.

Atlas: And that doesn't translate on camera.

Mitchell: So trying to figure out how to create that same level of energy within the confines of camera space was a big challenge.

Atlas: One of the big problems of filming dance is that when you watch a great dance performance you really have a kinesthetic feeling in your body, and when you translate that into 2-D you have to add something to replace that energy. The goal is still to give the audiences that kinesthetic response, but there's a different way of doing it.

Brooks: To bring you back around to the accompanying live piece, which you will be working on throughout 2016 and 2017, how do you feel that your approaches are going to shift from the camera to the stage? As the 3-D film and the performance are related and will be presented together, what do you see as the friction between those two parts?



Charles Atlas on the set of *Tesseract*

Atlas: I think it's an open question. We know we're doing a piece that's going to be on the same program as the film, but it can be as different as we want, or related in some way, or in no way. But we do know this: none of the things we made for the camera are going to be OK for the stage.

Riener: We are definitely interested in departing from that kind of framed idea, but a lot of the physical explorations we've begun will probably continue to evolve for the stage performance.

Mitchell: It's going to feel completely different, hopefully.

Riener: I have an instinct for it to be a little more cohesive or concentrated, as a counterpoint to the multiplicity of ideas and visual images in the film.

Mitchell: There's also a question about how the performers should relate to the live cameras on stage versus to the live audience. I'm not sure how to deal with that yet. That's going to be the next big challenge.

Riener: I think we understand how to make live dance, but what are these other bodies [the cameras and their operators] in the space going to be doing, and how are they going to render the choreography, and how is that going to be mixed in relation to what we're doing without them?

Mitchell: I'm also worried about the scale of things. When you're looking at a

giant screen and something is popping out at you in 3-D, and then the next thing you see is a small body in the back of the space, what is that effect?

Atlas: That's something we really have to look at, and that's one of the reasons to put up a scrim, at least for part of it. If we have the scrim in the front of the stage so that we can project images onto it, then we can play with the scale of what is projected in relation to the dancers live onstage.

Brooks: All of you have worked within a cinematic context, a theatrical context, and a museum context. This new project seems to address all of these conditions of viewing. At the premiere, the two parts (the 3-D video and the live performance with 2-D cameras) will be presented together as an evening work. Later, you plan to edit the 3-D materials for the cinema, on one hand, and for the museum on the other. But in a museum, viewers experience moving images in a completely different way than in a cinematic or theatrical presentation. They might enter the work in the middle of a scene, or only stay with it for a few minutes, or watch it multiple times.

Riener: Rashaun and I are always responding or reacting to the kind of opportunity and, particularly, the kind of space and time that a project presents. So we packed it all in for the film component. Certainly any eventual theatrical performance or museum performance is going to take its sensibility from how and where the viewer will experience it.

Mitchell: When we were working with Merce, we mostly performed in giant proscenium spaces where you would look out and not see another body. You were performing to a sort of vacuum, or to an idea about an audience. And then the same work would be seen in a museum setting for an Event. It didn't feel right to perform it in the same way. You had to think about scale. You might actually make eye contact with the audience because they were right next to you, so you wouldn't want to project far out into the rafters in the same way.

Atlas: I remember when the company moved to Westbeth and they started having studio performances. It was so weird for the dancers. They didn't know where to look.

Mitchell: We did so many of those at Dia: Beacon. We had a really small stage and people would be two feet away from us. And yet we were clothed in the same performative material. I think Merce's material works on both scales. But we as individuals, as performers, had really different challenges.

Brooks: Maybe we can circle back around to sound, which I know is a very open question at the moment. Will you proceed in the way Merce worked—the music or sound and the choreography are produced separately from each other, without necessary coordination?

Atlas: For the film, I think the sound is going to have to really relate directly to the picture. Either someone agrees to make sound that I can manipulate, or someone scores sound for the film.

Riener: There are so many different rhythms that the camera and the cutting will provide, and there are a lot of different kinds of rhythms in the dancing as well. I imagine that the sound will have to be somewhat fuller for the film than it would need to be for live performance.

Atlas: These decisions are very intuitive. But we don't know much yet.

Mitchell: We really don't. We're starting at the beginning.