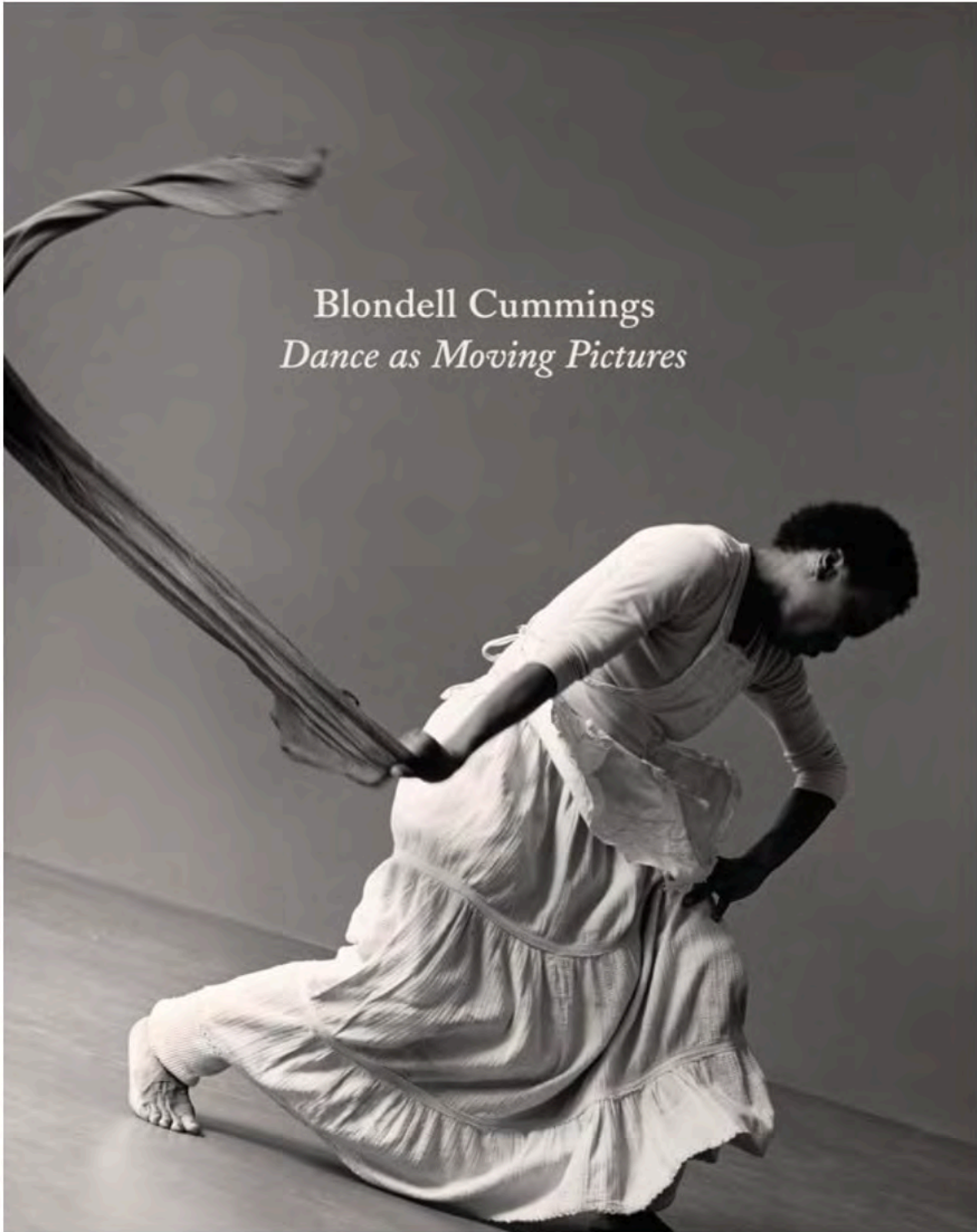


Blondell Cummings
Dance as Moving Pictures



Television

*MGZR

AUGUST 7-13



Church and Kitchen The choreographer Blondell Cummings performs "Commitment: Two Portraits" on "Alive From Off Center." The solo works, "Chicken Soup" and "Nun," depict her vision of two traditional roles of black women in America. **SUNDAY, 10:30 P.M. (13)**

Louise Oligny

Blondell Cummings: A Personal Postmodernism

Thomas F. DeFrantz

The luminous achievements of embodied artist Blondell Cummings (October 27, 1944–August 30, 2015) integrate the creative realms of dance, film, photography, textual invention, theater, and social anthropology. Cummings devised in each of these areas, working with a decidedly feminist attention to ensure the arrival of women’s stories—and especially Black women’s stories—at the center of expressive worldmaking based in relatable, everyday experiences. She explored a distinctively open process of artmaking, incorporating improvisation and direct address to the audience, that continues to reverberate as a standard of expert witnessing, arts advocacy, and astonishing physical performance in a series of works across a fifty-year career. Through her practice, Cummings moved away from a postmodernity of ironic self-reference and stylistic discontinuity toward new possibilities of collage, with intensely personal exploration amid Black social memory, defining a distinctive theatricality at once inclusive and defiantly accomplished.

Although she was among the tiny number of celebrated New York City–based dance artists of the 1980s and 1990s, the archive of Cummings’s career arrives fragmented and incomplete. In some ways, Cummings intentionally avoided being pegged into a singular identity as an artist. Over the years, she often changed the titles of works from one showing to the next; her open, fungible creative process meant that she seldom considered works to be “finished.” She spent large swaths of her career in mostly white circumstances, usually as the only Black femme presence among collaborators. She walked a creative line between the detached, conceptual terms of postmodern dance and accessible, family-centered experimental improvisations. She danced in majority-Black companies and created work for established ensembles of Black dance. Never married or publicly partnered, she must surely have been lonely at times. She was, indeed, fugitive as a creative artist, always searching for yet another way to transmit the information of a relationship-in-motion to a gathered audience.

The grand themes of her work remain clear throughout her oeuvre: questions of culture and community; human interaction



and relationships; the cultural life of food; the impact and processes of money. Through solo improvisations, exquisitely honed duets, unusual theatrical landscapes, filmed activities embedded in domestic spaces, and operatic, large-group choreographies, Cummings crafted an unusual assemblage of visionary time-based experiences. These performances incorporated dance; her own, invented gestures of sign language; and a unique technique of stop-motion movement that always intrigued audiences.

EARLY LIFE

Born in Effingham, South Carolina, Cummings was the eldest of three girls raised by her parents, Oralee Williams and Roscoe Cummings. Her two younger sisters, Hilda and Gaynell, began their lives in Harlem, where the Cummings family moved in early 1945¹ as part of the Great Migration of African Americans who sought opportunity in the industrialized North rather than the agrarian, deeply racialized and constrained rural South. Cummings's parents had been farmers; in New York her mother became a care worker, and her father, a cab driver. The Cummingses enjoyed a solid home foundation, entangled with the lives of their urban neighbors, a circumstance that reverberated throughout Cummings's extensive career as an artist.

Longtime Spelman College professor and dance historian Veta Goler's excellent 1994 dissertation offers cogent details from Cummings's early life. Cummings recalls her childhood as a blend of "strictness and whimsy," with corporal punishment and frequent neighbor intervention in child-rearing as the norm.² Cummings listened to her father describe his interest in far-off places, sparking her burgeoning interest in travel. She attended Baptist church services with her family. Roscoe Cummings sang well, and music was shared freely among the extended Cummings family. Blondell studied the clarinet and played in the high school orchestra. The arts-forward family moved to Queens in the 1950s, and Blondell undertook organized dance study with a public school faculty that included luminaries Mary Hinkson and Eleo Pomare. She even studied labanotation, an advanced system of writing down dance movement, while a student in high school.

Cummings can trace her experimentation in performance to her early music and dance studies, and also to her interest in alternative ways to be in the world. At age twelve, she attempted to convert to Catholicism, later noting her admiration for its structure and uses of ritual, as well as female saints that spoke

to her desire to align with prominent women.³ Her parents prevented the conversion, but the family otherwise encouraged her interest in physical imagination. Cummings enrolled as a first-generation college student at New York University. She began as a Physical Education major, and eventually switched to a Dance major. She continued on to graduate work in Media Education at Lehman College, where she studied processes of video, photography, and film production.

During these formative times, Cummings spent at least a year abroad, studying in Japan. She traveled extensively, including to the African continent. Realizing for herself the expeditions that she and her father had often imagined, Cummings embraced travel throughout her life, seeking experiences and understanding about how people form community and family throughout the world. This interest—in how people live and how they make the choices that allow life to cohere—prevails in her creative work.



PROFESSIONAL EMERGENCE

Cummings came to the attention of the general public as a professional performer and choreographer in the 1970s. Her studies at NYU prepared her well. In 1968 the *New York Times* reported that she performed in a concert of the New York Chamber Dance Group as part of the end-of-term recital directed by avant-garde process-choreographer and faculty member Richard Bull.⁴ Cummings danced a duet, *Chiaroscuro*, with Bull, demonstrating her striking ability to claim presence alongside experienced artists.⁵ A 1971 review of a Saturday afternoon concert at The New School in New York notes her choreographic offering *Point of Reference* to single out the “particular promise” of her creative approach in a work that makes a direct statement about minority background and “the honesty of the movement.” In this early duet, Cummings and dance partner Anya Allister related stories about their histories, and then danced to the recording of their narrations.⁶

Like other dancers of the time, Cummings continued serious dance study around New York in a variety of studios, including two years at the school of pioneering modern dancer Martha Graham, as well as study at the schools of modern artist José Limón and visionary Black Dance choreographer Alvin Ailey. She began performing as often as possible, as a cast member for impressionist Japanese dancemaker Kei Takei, and African American dance innovator Rod Rodgers. Later in her life, Cummings was affiliated with the studios of Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, Talley Beatty, Merce Cunningham, Erick Hawkins, and Maggie Black.



Peter Moore. Photo of Meredith Monk's *Juice: a theatre cantata in three installments*, Part I, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, November 1969.

In 1969 Cummings became an original member of Meredith Monk's company The House, where critics identified her virtuosic ability to project character through gestures and sounds. Cummings performed in each of The House productions for the stage and on film across ten years, including creating roles in *Juice* (1969), *Needle-Brain Lloyd and the Systems Kid: a live movie* (1970), *Vessel: An Opera Epic* (1971), *Education of the Girlchild* (1973), *Chacon* (1974), *Quarry* (1976), *Venice/Milan* (1976), and the films *Quarry* (1978) and *Ellis Island* (1981). *Girlchild* was an important success in the world of avant-garde dance from its first performances at the Common Ground Theatre in Manhattan. The experimental theatrical dance was revived in 1979 for an unprecedented three-weekend run in the Lepercq Space at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Monk's innovative dance-music inventions feature physical tableaux, ritual objects deployed in a mysterious and focused manner, and the symbolic placement of costumed people in space, creating theatrical landscapes ripe for audience interpretation. Monk's work used simple gestures that "confidently blended a wide variety of design, movement and musical elements."⁷ Monk's process spoke to Cummings's interests, as it aligned biographical information assembled from the cast with the crafting of a theatrical moment by the lead artist/director. Monk did not train dancers in a particular mode of practice; rather, she expected her collaborators to fill in necessary information to perform with rich clarity. Monk's creations often seemed to float in space and time, and Cummings surely repurposed some aspects of this method and its rendering of a "shrewd illogic" of performance time.⁸ In their works, Monk and Cummings each stretched and refracted time into unexpected theatrical renderings of gesture and event. But where Monk typically planned each event of her choreographic offerings, Cummings improvised carefully, often sharing the management of stage time with her audience. Talking directly to the spectators, Cummings expected vocal participation and response from the gathered witnesses to give shape and purpose to the encounter.

The House toured the US and Europe; these tours offered Cummings an important window onto theatrical developments beyond New York. Cummings also performed in Yvonne Rainer's now-classic experimental feminist film *Kristina Talking Pictures* (1976), as one of the ensemble cast. As was often the case in The House, Cummings offered the only Black presence in the collage-like essay-film.

In some ways, Cummings's willingness to participate in other people's work spoke to her desire to make space for unusual



explorations of craft, and to support experimental artistic processes. Her reputation as an arts advocate stems from the work that she took on for others. In the late 1960s, Cummings founded the Dance Channel as a production company that documented dance works; that project soon became the Video Exchange, a nonprofit housed in a large theater space at the Westbeth complex in Greenwich Village. Working briefly with David Schiller and Michael Temmer, as well as with Jeff Bush and Richard Lorber of Arts Resources in Collaboration (ARC), Cummings participated in the creation of infrastructure that led to the first dance video festivals in the US. All of this activity of the early 1970s came as dance documentation was just finding its way into common practice for theatrical dance artists. Cummings continued to advocate on behalf of other dance artists for years, working as an administrator behind the scenes for the New York dance field.⁹



EMERGING AS AN ARTMAKER

By the late 1970s, Cummings had become a fixture of the downtown avant-garde arts circuit, as someone whose presence was always noted in other people's projects. Remembering this era, Cummings once told a journalist, "If anyone said, 'Do you want to perform?' I was always there!"¹⁰ Her friendly, open energy and compact, powerful physicality attracted others, as did her willingness to work in diverse creative idioms. She performed with "striking" effect as an "enduring earth mother type" in Erin Martin's *Small House* in February 1974.¹¹ With Jane Comfort, she

gesticulated in sign language to words about identity read from a text by Gertrude Stein in *Duet for Four Hands* in December 1980.¹² Neither of these works spoke to or from Cummings's presence in them as an emotionally mature Black woman artist. As if in response to this omission, Cummings began making her own work.

In August 1978, Cummings offered a solo iteration of *Cycle* at the Warren Street Performance Loft. Created with texts from writer Madeline Keller, this was the first of a series of events and performances exploring menstruation and repetition through the creation of time-based art. Cummings also created experimental film material that extended the performance; this documentation conveys hallmarks of her outstanding practice. The film depicts a woman moving uncomfortably through her own apartment, clearly encumbered by aches, pains, distractions, and feelings of instability. Cummings seems to deliberately underplay her role, moving casually through the apartment setting and engaging in activities that anyone might: regarding herself in the mirror, checking the electrical outlet, changing clothes with a desultory resignation. In some of the filmed material, Cummings lies under a sheer canopy, rolling about in physical distress, unable to find comfort even on a plush-seeming bed. She stands on the bed and stretches, rolling her body upward and down again, seeking solace. In another sequence, she dances about a bit, hopping and grooving, strutting with joy and a generous swing of the hips. In yet another sequence, she takes an ashen souvenir mask from the wall of the apartment and dons it as a talisman, apparently seeking some spiritual release. Masked, she allows herself to explore a "magical power" through stylized gestures that reveal the possibility of a "collective female identity."¹³ Cummings explained to a journalist that she enjoyed experimenting with "the ways in which the mask both covers and uncovers" aspects of personality.¹⁴

Cycle demonstrates the naturalistic concern for people and their reactions to life situations that guided Cummings throughout her creative career. As if in answer to Bruce Nauman's various "walking around the studio" films, Cummings imbues the category of "artist" with her own experiences as a Black American woman. As if in answer to the intentionally obscure narratives of Rainer's *Kristina Talking Pictures*, Cummings openly explores the concerns of a Black woman during menstruation. *Cycle* wonders at the artistic capacity of everyday activities, if they might be recognized within familiar circumstances as mediated by theater and film. In this, Cummings moves Black presence toward the urgent spaces of experimental artistry, asking and answering a question of Black femme possibility in an intimate, private sharing of temporary discomfort, discovery, exploration, and joy.



Cummings achieved success in her own projects, in works that endure into the twenty-first-century imagination. A complete rendering of the titles of her projects and their dates of premiere would be difficult to produce, as she performed frequently and often adjusted the titles of her works between showings. She survived without dedicated administrative support for herself as an artist. Shifting the particularities of a work according to the engagement at hand allowed a flexibility that confirmed process to be more important than product. In 1978, Cummings created an umbrella organization for her creative work and social witnessing, the Cycle Arts Foundation, a discussion/performance workshop focused on familial issues including menopause, the bonding and sharing rituals of lifestyle, and artmaking. This effort underscored Cummings's commitment to relating the arts to everyday life, and to "creat[ing] a new ritual of empowerment to uplift the family."¹⁵



While traveling in Hong Kong in 1979, Cummings set in motion the work that became *The Ladies and Me*, shown in New York at the tiny Warren Street Performance Loft in May 1980. This thirty-minute work showcased Cummings's remarkable ability to transform herself instantaneously from one energetic persona to another, in order to tell embodied stories about experiencing and responding to the music of historically significant, enormously talented Black American women singers. The work was subtitled *A Visual Diary: A Collaboration*, realized as an improvisation set to selections of music by Ma Rainey, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Billie Holiday, Mary Lou Williams, Ella Fitzgerald, Dinah Washington, Odetta, Nina Simone, and Mahalia Jackson.¹⁶

At the same May 1980 concert that premiered *The Ladies and Me* to New Yorkers, Cummings also showed *A Friend, Part I*, a small group work that recurred in various iterations for decades. *A Friend*, set to music by George Lewis, asked one dancer to instruct another “to think about the ordinary.”¹⁷ The multimedia work moved through ideas of friendship with photographic slides, recorded interviews, and a live reading of a list of unusual friends (and rivals), including Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, Winnie the Pooh and Piglet, Eleanor Duse and Isadora Duncan, and Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr.

The Ladies and Me attracted attention from the beginning for its “gawky innocence and gaiety and ugly pain,” in what one critic called a “labor of love” tour de force of solo performance.¹⁸ The work approaches the “essence of the feelings in the songs that express so well the experiences of so many.”¹⁹ As Meredith Monk had done in *Girlchild*, Cummings transformed from one character to the next, chameleon-like, able to add or subtract years in her stage persona “by subtly changing only her facial expression and posture.”²⁰

The Ladies and Me arrived as an incredibly theatrical work that mixes forms. In an undated film version of the work, Cummings brings a whole apartment set onto the stage and plays in the space, moving through characters and gestural lives. Cummings appears in costume and in character, but, true to postmodern ethos, not as only one character, but as several simultaneously, as if in collage. She changes like quicksilver while being carefully intentional throughout the work; fugitive and multiple at once. The work allows Cummings to demonstrate an exquisite ability to mete out the performance through unexpected shifts that fracture normative notions of time. Built as a suite, the solo allows Cummings to respond energetically to the changes in the musical selections. Sometimes there are props, such as a letter from an absent lover that is torn into bits. She moves in impeccably honed stop-motion between songs, as if trapped in a silent movie.²¹ Images from Allon Schoener’s *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900–1968* are projected onto the backdrop as Cummings strikes stop-motion poses, presented with no obvious correlations between the embodied performance and the photographic objects. The work revels in revealing different approaches to different selections of music and sound, including a recording of an oral-history interview conducted by Cummings alongside the projected images of a ninety-two-year-old woman. The collage-like exploration ends with Cummings standing at the stage window, rocking gently as the audience hears Mahalia Jackson hum Duke Ellington’s “Come Sunday.”





For Cummings, improvisation was an urgent challenge that allowed her to draw inspiration from the shifting elements of each theatrical moment, an activity very different from performing predetermined choreography. She spoke to researcher Brenda Dixon-Stowell about the “energy debt of improvisation” that has to do with engaging each moment of performance with the full, unexpected force of energetic discovery that inevitably affects timing. When improvising, Cummings said, “timing can go off simply because of fatigue.”²² Cummings worked with a staggering assemblage of gestural methods in each performance, revealing something beyond physical acting or mime or even dance method in its execution. Her work was distinctive, fresh, and clearly experimental, with a focus on the terms of Black life. In the repeated performances of excerpts of *The Ladies and Me* throughout the early 1980s, Cummings places Black women and herself as a Black femme artist at the center of a conversation about contemporary performance.

Sometime in the fall of 1981, Cummings premiered her most enduring work, *Chicken Soup*. The fifteen-minute assemblage piece portrays a woman involved in domestic tasks, with audio and visual elements including recited poems by Grace Paley, the reading of a section of “Kitchens 1970” by Pat Steir, a rendition of a recipe from *The Settlement Cook Book*, and music by Brian Eno, Meredith Monk, and Collin Walcott. A program note for an early version of the work indicates: “The scene takes place in the character’s home.” Beginning in darkness, the audience hears a woman describing the contents of a refrigerator, enumerated when she returns from the funeral of a best friend who has died at the age of forty-three. The details of these contents, and the unexpected specificity of the preceding event—the funeral—creates a powerful sense of worlds already in motion. As the stage lights come up, they reveal Cummings in a white skirt, white sweater, and white apron, reaching for a paper shopping bag, moving mysteriously through tiny vignettes of life, inexplicable and compelling. After two forays of indeterminate gesture, the lights rise and remain, as a small musical score rings out, composed of tonal but open chords that sound like accompaniment to a ritual.

Cummings moves to sit in a chair in the space, and engages a sequence of stop-motion posing. She conducts a conversation with others we cannot see, in the way that children talk to imaginary friends. The detail and expertise of her gestures and the controlled pop and roll of the body, even in small swaying motions, create an illusion of multiplicity that provides a sense of character and unexpected contrast even amid the ongoing conversation. A mix of abstract and literal images, mimetic



devices and movements, entice the audience to wonder who this person might be. She transforms; she is this, and not this. She is she, and not she. Cummings moves decisively and gently at once, alongside the text and music that come and go in waves of sound, moody and expansive, lulling us with complex possibilities.

She scrubs the floor realistically, repeatedly, slightly sadly, and moves into a fantasy of dancing expressively with a green cloth. This dancing is the movement of the orishas; the dancing of air and water. But even this forceful swirl of movement is undercut when she appears to melt to the ground in an expression of rage or sorrow. And then she moves back to the scrubbing. While the audience hears a recipe for chicken soup, she moves through different idioms and gestures of storytelling. At one point she shakes all over, performing a trembling dance from West African repertoires, a movement seldom seen in experimental dance spaces.

Theatrically, the work wears its heart on its sleeve: it is a love letter to this character and her labor in a domestic environment. We see various props in the stage space from the beginning, and we know that they will be used in the context of this dance. She plays with weight and gravity, bouncing through the space and threading her legs one through the other. She whoops as she works, seeming happy at times, scooting on her knees and shaking a frying pan as if in surrender to a communal ritual of worship. Bouncing into a funky jig and a brief gospel dance, she shakes the heavy metal prop repeatedly, as if something is cooking that needs relentless assistance. Attention must be paid to this stirring, which continues as Cummings moves on her knees, spins, poses, and struts, as she pantomimes tasting its contents. And then suddenly it is over.

Chicken Soup quickly became a signature work for Cummings, and she performed portions of it for the next decade at festivals and as part of her own concert dance evenings. A filmed version of the work aired on television. Cummings did make other work in 1982, including the solo performance film project *In Night Stir* (1982–1983). Shot from several angles, this exquisite, rarely screened moving-image object shows Cummings writhing about on a bed with satin sheets, moving uncomfortably to a reading of the poem “Moonlight for Joy” by Patricia Jones. Produced and edited by DeKart Video, the fragments offer visions of the private underbelly of urban life; the person captured by the camera is living, loving, and falling out of love alone on a sleepless night, even as immeasurable human activity continues outside the containing walls of her apartment. This film includes a few minutes of accomplished modern dance movement, set to

an invented radio jingle composed by Dianaruthe Wharton, a member of noted Black women's musical ensemble, Sweet Honey in the Rock. Cummings also worked in larger-scale operatic format in July 1982, when she premiered a "one-time only" group work, *He Searched Wall to Wall*, at the Battery Park City landfill. It was advertised that the show would include a dirt bike and performance by a live horse.

Live performances by Cummings confirmed her stature among experimental artists of the day. Her inclusion in the October 1982 series *Parallels* at Danspace, St. Mark's Church, curated by Ishmael Houston-Jones, marked an important achievement. The *Parallels* series assembled a group of Black choreographers who were "working outside the Mainstream of Modern Dance."²⁴ Among a stellar line-up of experimental work, *Chicken Soup* became the hit of the series. Critics noted its "brilliance" and the ways that Cummings could "compress a series of cumulative fragmented images, poses and movements into a final portrait that is layered with meanings."²⁵ The work offered "the visualization and caress of a memory."²⁶ Critics repeatedly noted the clever placement of the work in the kitchen, as the place where things get worked out, including artmaking. The work was received as "sparse, cryptic, personal, and not intentionally cultural"²⁷ by one writer, demonstrating how its contents became available to diverse audiences, even as its roots were surely in Cummings's experiences as a Black woman. In honor of its enduring special impact for Black artists, *Chicken Soup* was re-performed in May 2007 by the Urban Bush Women, under the direction of Jawole Willa Jo Zollar. By then, the work had been named an "American Masterpiece" by the National Endowment for the Arts.²⁸

After her success in the *Parallels* series, Cummings kept moving at high pitch. She presented her work at solo events, and in November 1982 she participated in a "three-week live collaboration" with artist Senga Nengudi and musician Yasunao Tone at the White Dog Performance Studio in New York, commissioned by the Just Above Midtown/Downtown Gallery. In February 1983 she offered up an evening-length suite of works that encompassed *Chicken Soup*. *Food Suite*, presented at Dance Theater Workshop, included the *Meat and Potatoes* music collage by Linda Fisher with words from Greg Tate. In this work, Cummings portrays a construction worker, pantomiming an indeterminate building operation, and then taking a break to eat lunch. Cummings was again noted for her "extraordinary performing" and facility with pantomime and incredibly fast arm gestures.²⁹ As something of an extension of *Chicken Soup*, the work creates an evocative,



character-driven world through a combination of gestures that merge everyday and dance movements, connected by Cummings's acting abilities.

Perusing a film version of *Meat and Potatoes*, we can begin to understand how Cummings impressed her audiences. Cummings registers as an incredibly strong performer, and someone who can play butch well. Dressed in coveralls suitable for a hard-hat construction site, we feel her rise up into physical power, pulling the air with forceful velocity, and then suddenly in slow motion, moving between powerful dance movements and more naturalistic gestural vocabularies. She sits in a chair, legs spread wide; she eats and drinks in pantomime; she waves to others passing by; and she returns to work with uncanny and accurate physical gestures of hard labor. The sounds of construction continue as Cummings "works"; her gestures never match the sounds heard by the audience, but rather create a tension between audio and visual to elaborate a mood. She changes clothes as she jogs and becomes a different character, again accompanied by a long green strand of fabric that she manipulates as she moves. Playful, a bit like Snoopy imagining flight, Cummings enacts the fantasy of another life entangled with this one.



After this interlude of play, she changes hats and goes back to work. Astonished at the complexity of layered physical imagining, we realize that the gestures of pantomime are like scat singing: fragments of gesture, like fragments of words, that suggest actions, activity, and worlds of meaning. We watch Cummings work through whatever she needs to do. She wants us to watch her, and we comply. Picking up a drink, she moves in stop-motion gestures,

popping her body with multiple tiny ticking movements. Then she lets loose with a super-fast, full-bodied improvisation performed in rhythmic accord to the recorded poetry. It's as though she spits a rhyme with her body, moving through a range of inferred meanings in the casual and studied manner of Greg Tate's spoken-word artistry.

CROSSING AMONG: DANCE BLACK AMERICA

By the 1980s, postmodernism had moved toward a second-wave indeterminacy. Judson Dance Theater, the organization that many credited with giving rise to the idiom of dancemaking, had only lasted in its initial form from 1962 to 1964. Two decades later, a segregation of Black from white experimental artists persisted. The impact of a seemingly coherent group of white Judsonites and their followers continued, however, and some critics wondered if Black experimental artistry was irrelevant to second-wave postmodernism. Some white artists "assumed it was a matter of aesthetic values" that kept Black artists out of their circuits of experimental, Judson-like dancemaking.³⁰ At the same time, some Black artists "did not always feel welcome in the downtown scene," where, socially, white artists "seemed a very conservative, closed society."³¹

In retrospect, Cummings partly led the "turn in 1980s postmodern dance toward a new expressionism, which implicitly and explicitly drew on autobiographical material (e.g., gender, sexuality, culture)."³² Her complete involvement in telling stories of people that extended beyond the boundaries of difference, and toward the discoveries of presence, positioned her within a tradition of African American experimental artists who seemed unconcerned with finding or creating large Black audiences in the ways that Dance Theater of Harlem or the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater did. These independent Black artists of the 1980s seemed more concerned with staking a place in systems of largely white downtown New York dancemaking. And yet, Cummings was able to bridge the growing divide between Black experimental artistry and a potentially large audience of Black theatergoers who had not yet witnessed that sort of work—in large part because they had never been made welcome in the spaces where experimental art was typically shown.

When the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) announced the Dance Black America festival, staged April 21–24, 1983, Cummings was mentioned as an exemplar of the "recent" Black



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CONCERT DANCE

Harold Pierson, Artistic Director

The Opera House

PROGRAM A

Thursday, April 21, 8 pm

Friday, April 22, 8 pm

Works Of

Alvin Ailey
Talley Beatty
Asadata Dafora
Garth Fagan
Eleo Pomare

Performed By

Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble
Members of the Alvin Ailey
American Dance Theatre
Bucket Dance Company
Charles Moore Dance Theatre
Eleo Pomare Dance Company

PROGRAM B

Saturday, April 23, 8 pm

Sunday, April 24, 2 pm

Works Of

Blondell Cummings
Katherine Dunham
Louis Johnson
Dianne McIntyre
Rod Rodgers

Performances By

Chicago's Muntu Dance Theatre
Blondell Cummings
Charles Moore Dance Theatre
Philadelphia Dance Company
Rod Rodgers Dance Company
Sounds In Motion

STREET & SOCIAL DANCE

Lenwood Sloan, Artistic Director

The Playhouse

PROGRAM C

Friday, April 22, 8 pm

Saturday, April 23, 8 pm

Performed By

Arthur Hall's Afro-American Ensemble
Brooklyn's BISS Harmonizers
Chuck Davis Dance Company
The Jazzy Double Dutch Jumpers
The Copasetics
Mama Lu Parks' Lindy Dancers
The Rock Steady Crew
Roxy's Solar Roller Skaters with
The Olympia Brass Band of New Orleans



creative artist.³³ Dance Black America brought together dozens of artists from a variety of genres in a landmark event that referenced three hundred years of Black dance creativity in the Americas. Cummings offered *Chicken Soup*. This performance affected Cummings deeply, as she related in a film interview: “To do non-traditional dance and have Black people say, ‘I truly understand’ was wonderful.”³⁴ Surely some of the critical rhetoric of the era positioned Black audiences as an undifferentiated mass, potentially unwilling to witness then-contemporary creativity. Nevertheless, *Chicken Soup* was again celebrated as an outstanding offering among the rich diversity of excellent dance performed at the festival.

In October 1983, Cummings returned to BAM to perform in the Philip Glass work *The Photographer: Far from the Truth*. This inaugural work in the Next Wave Festival placed Cummings in collaboration with choreographer David Gordon, another Judson Dance Theater veteran, and director JoAnne Akalaitis, as a Black cast member of a large operatic work performed for a predominantly white audience. Indeed, Cummings was one of the few Black artists who successfully worked in Black performance contexts as well as white ones. She continued to show *Chicken Soup* in concerts controlled by Black audience interests, including at the Theatre of the Riverside Church in November 1983,³⁵ and as part of the Dancemobile, a project by the Harlem Cultural Council, in February 1984.



Later in 1984, Cummings enjoyed an appointment as an artist-in-residence at the famed Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in western Massachusetts. The Jacob's Pillow festival offered a



decidedly “conventional” context for Cummings’s improvisational experiments; the festival was not known as a site of experimental performance or unexpected dance theater. The House wouldn’t visit the Pillow until the late 1990s; Cummings’s residency spoke to the more conventional and accessible aspects of her creative portfolio. On August 14, 1984, Cummings presented a remarkable informal performance on an outdoor stage at Jacob’s Pillow. The film of this performance, titled *An Evening With Blondell Cummings*, offers a rare window on the artist’s creative process and emerging strategies.

The performance is a smart mix of casual explanation and organized improvisational élan. Cummings points out that the three sources of her working process are gesture, or sign language; physical improvisation; and visual imagery that she creates or recalls as she works. Throughout the performance, she demonstrates a clarity of physical stance and maturity of expressive nuance.

Speaking of an excerpt from *The Ladies and Me*, Cummings explains that “the ladies” are “Black women vocalists from the 1930s to the 1970s.” Watching the film from 1984, we might understand that she is likely the first Black woman artist to talk about other Black women artists within the context of Jacob’s Pillow. She tells stories about her process and the challenges that she confronts as an artist, and offers a demonstration of her “moving pictures” technique, the moving with articulated ticks of the body that looks something like popping. She tells an anecdote about her current haircut, and simultaneously performs a physical narrative that aligns with and diverges from her story. Then she asks for a series of unrelated words from the audience and crafts a short sequence of movements that suggest how she thinks through and responds to concepts. “Toes” and “aerobics” arise from the audience, confirming that the event is a sharing of time and experience, rather than the performance of a finished product.

To introduce an excerpt from *Chicken Soup*, Cummings reminds the audience of how our refrigerators reveal aspects of our personalities. She notes that she has been called a postmodernist, even if that term doesn’t appeal to her personally. She talks about working with five-year-olds, and affirms that there is no one way to do anything. She brings a collaborator to the stage—an artist working on a new project in development—and they play a hand-slap game, screaming and calling out words to each other as they explore. She asks the audience “what they got” from witnessing the game playing, and then she responds thoughtfully to the feedback. Following the eventful hour-long sharing of process, a critic at the Pillow described Cummings as “an intelligent and charismatic lecturer.”³⁶



BLONDELL CUMMINGS

January - June 1986

December 31 First Night, Boston
February 1-8 Strand Theater, Boston
February 10 Northshore Community College, Berverly, MA
February 14 Catamount Arts Center, St. Johnsbury, VT
February 16 Department of Public Parks, Rhode Island
February 20 Harlem Cultural Council at Symphony Space
February 25 & 26 London, Great Britain
March 12, 13 & 14 Council on the Arts, Plattsburg, NY
March 16 Jam, New York City
April 1-5 Painted Bride, Philadelphia, PA
April 16, 17, 18 & 19 Clemens Center, Elmira, N.Y.
April 20 - May 7 Cornell
May 9 & 10 Theater 3, Port Jefferson, N.Y.
*May 14 Whitney Museum, Standford, CT (alternative date May 2
May 15, 16, & 17 Chitaqua Arts Council, Jamestown, N.Y.
May 19-24 Affiliate Artists tour
May 30 YWCA, Kansas City, MO

* Ms. Cindy Roznoy of the Whitney suggests to perform "An Evening with Blondell Cummings" at 7:00pm so you can get back to NY at the latest by 10 pm. Fly to Buffalo the next morning where someone from the Chitaqua arts council will pick you up. Tell me if you find this schedule impossible. Here alternative date is May 28 but was not too happy because it's a wednesday and she does not get good crowds and the exhibit is down.

with Kit-Yin Snyder in the atrium at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. A list of tour engagements from January through June 1986 reveals a series of one-night engagements, some weekend bookings, a quick trip to the UK, and a two-week residency at Cornell University. In all, the schedule seems grueling for an independent artist, even as it might have allowed for a sense of sustained creative practice.

Cummings also continued to participate in explicitly Black performance opportunities, as in February 1986 when she offered work at The Albany, in London, as part of the Black Dance Circuit. This particular engagement, titled *Dancing in the Dark*, allowed Cummings to revisit material from the films of *Cycle* and *In Night Stir*, in “an exploration of night things and thoughts that many women, especially, would identify with—undressing, crying in the dark, the loveliness of the moon, loving, laughing.”⁴³ During the performance, Cummings said to her audience: “At 3 a.m. in the morning I make major changes in my life.”⁴⁴

Cummings traveled with the *Parallels in Black* tour in February 1987, performing *Chicken Soup* in Paris and again in London alongside other Black artists who loosely constituted a New York Black avant-garde in dance. Publicity materials for the tour pointed up different points of view for artists of color at the time, with choreographer Ralph Lemon calling himself “colorless” in interviews, while Cummings described herself as a “child of history, a part of history, trying to figure out what’s going to happen.”⁴⁵ A reorientation toward questions of intimacy and relationship continued work from *A Friend* in a series of dances titled *Relationships* with different subtitles, including *Good and Not So Good* (1989), *Intimate and Not So Intimate* (1991), and *Beginnings and Endings* (1987). This latter title arrived when Cummings worked with the rhythm improviser Keith Terry for a premiere at the Charlotte York Irey Theatre at University of Colorado Boulder. Terry and Cummings told stories about themselves in live monologue and prerecorded media, offering physical jokes and intimate revelations, trading rhythmic beats in a winning, charismatic duet.

Throughout 1986 and 1987, Cummings created iterations of *Basic Strategies*, a container for five distinctive pieces that explored people’s relationships to work and money. *Basic Strategies I-III* were created for college residencies, while *Basic Strategies IV* was commissioned by Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble, and enjoyed a March 1987 showing at the New York Theatre of the Riverside Church. These pieces proceeded through Cummings’s preferred collage format, revealing an inevitable “dramatic tension” when working through questions of labor, culture, and money.⁴⁶





Creating at full-tilt, Cummings experimented extravagantly. For a concert at the Triplex Theater at Borough of Manhattan Community College in April 1987, she showed *Excerpts from Excerpts*, an exploration of fragmentation and segmented sequencing that included a solo “performed literally in the dark to a text about darkness.”⁴⁷ *Basic Strategies V* (1986) was shown at least once as a group work with an embedded solo by Cummings, constructed as a collaboration with a text by celebrated Antiguan-American writer Jamaica Kincaid and music by Michael Riesman. *Basic Strategies V* included a full stage setting of furniture and a series of mirrors that revealed and contained Cummings in a glamorous evening gown. Sudden shifts to gestures of begging and rageful indictment distinguish this work, arriving as a fugitive dance of transformations. Placing Cummings’s movements into a world of Black life, Kincaid’s text includes the opening salvo, “My history before it was interrupted does not include cathedrals. ... The cathedral is now a part of my history. ... The cathedral is now mine.”⁴⁸

Cummings appeared as a subject in the documentary film *Retracing Steps: American Dance Since Postmodernism* (released 1988). The film chronicles the ideological foundations of nine artists based in New York; Cummings is, of course, the only Black woman in the ninety-minute documentary. We see her rehearsing and stretching outdoors, along the East River, and narrating her desire to move toward something “different from what I already knew.”⁴⁹ The filmed performance of *Basic Strategies V* included by director Michael Blackwood here demonstrates Cummings’s complete physical control and unparalleled ability to compel as an embodied artist. But the documentary also depicts an incredibly sad sense of isolation, and an unflagging desire to endure within artistic communities that are inevitably temporary structures, often bound by race.

Cummings landed on the cover of the *New York Times* Television Listings for August 7–13, 1988, in a preview of the *Alive from Off Center* program *Commitment: Two Portraits*. This formidable film document includes performances of *Chicken Soup*, presented in black and white, as well as the “A Nun’s Story” episode from the *Art of War*. By 1989, Cummings received support from the National Endowment for the Arts as part of that year’s “On Tour” cohort for the creation of a new work (*For J.B.*, \$12,000) and general artist support (\$7,000).

At the end of the 1980s, Cummings turned her attention directly to racialized attitudes and the separating mechanisms that distinguish Black life from systems of white privilege. In October 1989, she traveled to San Antonio, Texas, to work with artists of



Jump-Start Performance Company and explore "racial attitudes and the unthinking racism common to all. ... We all have racial attitudes, and there are some things we do that we don't realize have racial connotations."⁵⁰ The workshop became the structuring logic for the next iteration of *Relationships*, subtitled *Good and Not So Good* for a premiere in New York, in a series dedicated to AIDS Awareness Day at The Kitchen, Nov. 30–Dec. 3, 1989. Again, critics noted how Cummings managed to create "meaningful dances out of the minutiae of human behavior."⁵¹

Relationships: Good and Not So Good (excerpts) allowed the audience to "see individuals conceived under Ms. Cummings' personal inner-built microscope. She misses nothing."⁵² The work included a cheeky test of racialized assumptions, as when the audience was instructed to match objects with the appropriate ethnic group represented by three dancers standing onstage in spotlights. The Kitchen concert also included a first draft of a portion of *For J.B. (Josephine Baker)*, a large work that would occupy Cummings's imagination for the next several years. *3B49* was a character-driven duet for Cummings and Tom Thayer, who offered a "splendid match for Cummings in the fullness of his energy, the precision of his timing and control, and the clarity of his intention."⁵³ Thayer, a white man, stayed entangled with Cummings through several iterations of duet performance that told stories of Black/white partnerships and divergences, including the hour-long duet program *Relationships: Intimate and Not So Intimate* that premiered in 1991. In these works, Cummings continued to develop her process-based practice of telling stories through the layering of gesture, music, and mixed media, to depict the "vivid lives in the enclosed and isolated little worlds"⁵⁴ of intimate encounters among people emerging into temporary relationship.

THE 1990S: FULL VOICE

By the 1990s, in interviews and press releases, Cummings often described her work as multidisciplinary, community-focused, and process-oriented artmaking. Dance critics attended everything she offered up in New York; she was now well established as a mid-career artist, able to reliably generate an evening's concert with a mixture of old and new material. A repertory menu for potential presenters from this era proclaims that "A program is generally entitled 'An Evening with Blondell Cummings' and includes works that are in ongoing evolution and development." The list includes prominent collaborators for the works, and places Cummings as a center of a shifting and fugitive creative

community. An undated sheet, probably from the late 1980s, calls for small fee structures for Cummings's performances; of special note is the slight additional fee request of \$750 for three dancers (\$3,250 total) over the \$2,500 fee for Cummings's solo performance. Also note that the solo performance calls for "no lighting designer" and "no set up time." With her full creative voice, Cummings could bring her artistry into almost any environment and engage an audience without the special conditions required by most forms of experimental theatrical performance.

Even as Cummings established her viability as a soloist, she continued to craft grand theatrical works that involved complex settings, carefully rehearsed movements, and shifting rosters of collaborating artists. *Relationships: Intimate and Not So Intimate* took form as a long duet, *Omadele* and *Guiseppa*, created with Tom Thayer with a score by Lawrence Butch Morris and John Cage. Cummings developed the work across a year of touring before a December 5, 1991, New York premiere at Danspace, St. Mark's Church. This iteration of the questions of cultural clashes in intimate relationships between a Black woman and a white man included the suggestion that everything might ideally, as in a dream, be "colored blue, including the two of them." The work expressed a "wish to solve their problems by being the same color, any color" that could become imbricated into the ordinary routines of life.⁵⁵ *Relationships* began with Cummings and Thayer lounging, entwined on the floor as if in a bed, sharing a dance of their hands intertwined amid caresses of intimacy. A little house at the front of the stage suggested a mythic home where this mixed-race couple could live. Later the work shocked some in the audience with projections and voiceovers that asked, "Have you ever used the word *nigger*?" and "Have you ever been unfaithful?" The work included projected images of families of different races, and the performers' remarkable rendering of the aging process through shifting physicalities and evocative gestures. At one point, Cummings mimed doing agrarian fieldwork bare-breasted, prompting some to wonder at unresolved stereotypes presented on the experimental stages of Danspace.⁵⁶

Throughout the 1990s, Cummings continued to receive grants from the NEA for both new projects and those already in motion. *For J.B.* gained the more formal subtitle *Part 1* in 1991, performed as a character-driven solo by Cummings amid a naturalistic array of props, including clothes that she washed onstage. In 1992, *Part 2* premiered with a large ensemble, extravagant costumes, and live band accompaniment in a commission for George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. In 1993, Cummings spent time in



PROPOSED PROGRAMS

BLONDELL CUMMINGS

Group Work (3 dancers + 1 stage mgr/lighting designer)
set up time required: 1 day before performance

\$3,250 + travel 1 evening
\$2,000 each additional evening

Food For Thought - solo work + lighting designer
set up time: 1 day before performance

\$2,500 + travel 1 evening
\$1,250 each additional evening

An evening with Blondell Cummings - solo work: dance/dialogue
no set up time required
no lighting designer

Blondell can also teach a master class:

1 ½ hour for 20-30 people \$200
2 hours for 30 or more (less than 60) \$300
(this class requires an assistant)

Residencies are also possible and the fee will vary according to what it is expected of Blondell.

Technical requirements vary from almost none (An Evening with Blondell Cummings) to relatively complicated for the group work. In all cases a stage area of minimum 30' x 24' of well sprung wooden floor with a smooth surface is required. If the floor is imperfect, a marley floor must be provided. Generally a good sound system and a minimum of 30-50 lights are required for the shows involving a set up and technician.

Durham, North Carolina, to create *Like Family* in a commission for Duke University. These process-based explorations of family relationships included artists Cummings recruited from the Durham area. Drawing from experiences related by her cast members, and from interviews she conducted to prepare for the event, Cummings wove "real-life experiences into her choreography."⁵⁷ The complex work featured films of recently recorded interviews with diverse families, old and young; grand theatrical set pieces, including a person-sized wedding cake platform; unexpected gestures of staged violence that set one group of the large cast against another; an invented folk dance ritual; and a chilling dream sequence, seemingly set in the cancer ward of a busy hospital. The work included a section titled "I'm Sorry" in which performers chanted "I'm sorry I broke your necklace. I'm sorry I have a big butt. I'm sorry I have HIV. I'm sorry I love someone else."⁵⁸ The thirty-five-minute performance ended with each cast member telling a story of being born, and in the process revealing something about their diversity in assembly on stage.



In 1994, Cummings continued the *Cycle* series exploring menstruation with a new iteration concerned with menopause, titled: *Flashdance: My Redhead Aunt from Redbank Is Missing*. In September 1995, she premiered the original collaborative piece *Women in the Dunes* at the Japan Society with artist Junko Kikuchi, featuring a set by Takeshi Miyakawa; sculpture by Anneli Arms; and live music composed and led by Diedre L. Murray. Inspired by the novel by Kobo Abe, the seventy-five-minute

work encompassed incredibly strong performances. A compelling physical environment surrounded this duet of cultural alignment and differentiation that "demands—and repays—unwavering attention."⁵⁹

By 1998, Cummings performed a bit less, and enjoyed her work as a teacher and mentor to younger artists. In a relatively large commission for a modern dance company, she created *100 Percent Cotton Natural Fiber* for Philadanco in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Performed with projected fragments of poetry by Niamini Mutima, and accompanied by a soundscape crafted by Oumou Sangaré, the work explored cotton as a "metaphor for human durability" crafted to suggest a "filmic sweep of history"⁶⁰ associating Black people with the plant. Working with imagery received as "breathtaking in its simple directness and stunning originality,"⁶¹ this tripartite work afforded abundant acting and gestural opportunities for its performers, revealing an accomplished and confident sense of timing and theatrical effect. Realized as a visual poem, the work teems with an operatic ambition to tell stories of movement across generations and through time. With sections titled "Passing on a Tradition," "Fu Fu," and "Taishi-Evelyn," the work proposes an entirely mythical African community in motion, with men and women washing clothes and taking care of one another even as they dance. A child appears in one section, adding to the sense of the importance of reproductive and mentoring work engaged in community. As a whole, the work is remarkably optimistic and gentle, crafted as if Cummings intended to expand herself into a holistic collage of a dancing family, comfortable and questioning in their Blackness onstage.

The turn to the twenty-first century saw Cummings increase her teaching and mentoring activities as a respected elder among younger experimental dancemakers, and especially Black dancemakers. She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1999. In 2001, her work was included in the extensive PBS documentary series *Free to Dance*. That same year she offered an original improvisational solo titled *Just A Coupla Boomers Sittin Around Chillin* for The Kitchen's *Talking Dance* series. This performance included prerecorded interviews with women talking about aging, as Cummings moved through states of being onstage in a long black dress, interrupted by unexpected film footage of belly dancing. Yet again, Cummings's collage-like method of layering characters revealed in movement, sound, and visual imagery confounded some journalists, even as they recognized "the performer's deeply affecting presence" that "far outweighed the words we heard."⁶²

In 2002 Cummings created an unusual platform work for the Bronx Museum of the Arts as part of its Conversations series, adding her own poetic word labels to be displayed near works hanging in the gallery. The project, *Rhythms and Rituals that Feed My Spirit*, opened in November 2002. The next month, she performed in the New York Dance Divas program at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. Again, as always, her performance was noted for its “fluent grace and ferocious passion.”⁶³ She taught at Hunter College in 2004 and staged excerpts of *100 Percent Cotton Fiber* with the talented students of the dance program there. In February 2012, she performed in *Black Jam* at Danspace, at the invitation of Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, improvising alongside Ishmael Houston-Jones, Cynthia Oliver, Bebe Miller, and younger artists from the Urban Bush Women company.

On March 27, 2015, Cummings curated the *Points of Reference* event at the 92nd Street Y. The performance and roundtable discussion explored how audiences and artists experience dance variously. Cummings included the experimental choreographer Edisa Weeks as a presenter, who offered up *Manufacturing Consent*, a work drawing on sources such as the writings of Noam Chomsky and Yvonne Rainer’s 1962 dance *Three Seascapes*. After the performance, Cummings led a discussion that explored the ways personal history shapes perception. Panelists included lawyer Tracy Austin, historian Victoria Phillips, journalist Eyal Press, and educator Vanessa McKnight.⁶⁴ The discussion was lively and emotional, as most everyone in the room understood the event to be a return to the ideas that Cummings had addressed in her first choreography from 1971, similarly titled *Point of Reference*. Cummings asked the audience to “bring their cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, professional and personal experiences” to bear, in order to reflect on the communal experience of witnessing art. She ended the hour-long event with a screening of an excerpt from *Chicken Soup*. As a culminating public appearance, the event brought together the casual rigor and everyday curiosity that distinguished Cummings’s career, acting as a bridging experience, designed to challenge all in attendance to learn by proximity and curiosity.



BELONGING IN COMMUNITY

Deeply interested in relationships and communication, in 1989 Cummings paused teaching dance classes and began to craft *Like Family*, a series of workshops/performances that invited

community involvement into processes of artmaking.⁶⁵ These sessions, made available to any who would attend, confirmed her belief that art should be accessible to all, and that “choreography is always the act of sharing.”⁶⁶

As an embodied artist compelled to research through activities far removed from theaters and dance studios, Cummings explored difference as a necessary aspect of human existence. Her research probed simple and urgent themes with great care and concern—money, intimacy, menstruation, aging, clashes between cultures. Her work always felt like a sharing circle, or a place to express, in nonlinear terms, how we feel among one another. She encouraged people to think together, in the unusual assemblies of our differences. She deployed her tender voice and embodied charisma with expertise, guiding difficult conversations about racism with wit and sincerity, toward a goal that we all might learn to *do better*. As she told a reporter in 1985, “I’m still concerned with issues of caring for yourself and people close to you, to show that you’re living a life that’s worth having no matter if you’re an executive or simply scrubbing a floor.”⁶⁷

Cummings resisted any impulse to maintain a “company” of performers, and she worked most often as a soloist. Solo artistry was inevitably a bit lonely, even if the solo event allowed her “a welcome respite from creating from the outside in, on a group.”⁶⁸ In one interview, Cummings commented that we are “born alone” and “die alone,” and that her performances intend to speak “for that part of each of us that is always alone.”⁶⁹ In the contradiction that is being “alone” performing in front of a large group of strangers, her work thrived in the juxtaposition of ideas that create the space of a theatrical moment in process.

In 1993, reflecting on why she had become an artist, she told a reporter: “You can take liberties in art, open up some possibilities not there before. ... You are never really stuck.”⁷⁰ Indeed, she moved between being an artist and facilitator throughout her life, using her work to reveal the person slightly hidden behind the performer. We might note with interest that several times she disrobed to strip herself bare—or at least topless—in an effort to bring her audience even closer to herself. She wanted us to better see the Black femme crafting space and time in her creations; stripping to the waist, in films and onstage, she compelled her audiences to look. She demonstrated how autobiography could be an act of community.⁷¹ She was, as she explained once, a solo performer but not a solo artist.⁷² She toured widely, often on her own, and she taught regularly—at the Lincoln Center Institute, City College of New York, New York University, Cornell University, Williams College, and, of course, many other places whose names escape the limitations of an incomplete and fragmentary archive.

Cummings worked to bring people toward each other, even when that work was exceedingly difficult. In an interview about the making of *Girlchild* in 1973, she related that she “tried to find a way of representing an archetypal figure that I would understand from a deep, personal, subconscious point of view that at the same time would be strong enough to overlap several [B]lack cultures.”⁷³ Clearly, she achieved that nearly impossible task, and continued to incorporate her own sorrows into her creative work. Her father’s murder at the hand of a taxi passenger in 1985, and her mother’s mastectomy in 1993, each wound their way into her theatrical dance visions.

By the time Cummings died in 2015, dance writers and younger artists remembered her with increasing respect and admiration. Her *New York Times* obituary noted her “sinuous dynamism” and her achievement as a “compact rather than willowy” movement artist.⁷⁴ An emotional tribute from dance luminaries on October 4, 2015, at New York Live Arts confirmed how Cummings had moved among worlds—not between them, but among them. In a 1995 interview with Goler, she opined: “As we move into the twenty-first century, our sense of community will be greater than we could possibly imagine, and our ability to grasp that, and rise to that, will directly affect how we connect our past and future.”⁷⁵ Cummings’s version of postmodern assemblage pointed directly at the shared roots of personal participation in larger narratives of community.

The magic of Cummings’s performances arrives in her commitment to movement as a register of character, as well as her accuracy as an embodied artist; her willingness as an improviser to do one thing again and again and again until it is time to do something else. And of course, her well-honed ability to know when to change into the next thing, and when to revisit an idea for emphasis. Her process included conducting oral histories and asking questions; she was always concerned with “sharing with people from many different backgrounds and cultures.”⁷⁶ She considered family as a “recurring point of reference—but family in the broad sense, not just your brother. Family ... where one learns to share a sense of identity; a sense of relating to other things; a sense of interpretation of information.”⁷⁷ In 1993 she told an interviewer, “I once thought I’d have my own family: a husband, children, house, two cars. It just hasn’t happened.”⁷⁸ And so, she crafted the worlds she needed in these performances and works of art. She made works to be accepted and paid attention to, even amid the discords of difference. Crafting gestures that matter, each and every one. Sitting at the table, eating, sharing the newspaper and a disagreement. Dancing. Living. With others.



CODA

In 1994, I was lucky enough to interview Blondell Cummings at her home on First Avenue. I knew her—through films and archival documents available at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts—as someone vivacious and bold, as someone concerned with the responsibilities of presence and transmission, of being and sharing with others. Generous and gracious, she encouraged me to continue my own work toward advanced study, and to teach. “You are a living part of history,” she told me.

“Artists have a responsibility to teaching. Believe your vision.”

We watched videos of dances from the 1970s and chatted about her presence in those mostly white avant-garde works. We looked at photographs of dances I had heard of but never seen. Most of the images looked mysterious and sad; Cummings and other dancers appear in postures that seemed enervated and appropriately postmodern. Indicating one of the pieces, I asked her, a bit shyly, “What role did you play?” She looked askance, and sighed. “The Black girl. Everybody had one.” We laughed together as new friends do, and I felt embraced by the warmth of other suns that called her toward an amazing life as a Black woman artist and a very personal postmodernist.

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