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## Trisha Brown, choreographer – obituary

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Trisha Brown Credit: Getty Images

Trisha Brown, the choreographer, who has died in Texas aged 80, was a dance experimentalist of world impact whose gift for theatrical surprise made many of her more extreme inventions both groundbreaking and yet unusually lovable.

She made her name as a young dance iconoclast in the Judson Church group of radical choreographers who in 1962 New York declared war on all rules about technique, theatre and expressiveness in dance – the “postmodernism” revolution would be a development as catalytic in updating dance as Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes had been in the 1910s.

She ended as the longest-running and most eclectic of her peers, with an oeuvre of more than 100 dance-works spanning 50 years and several genres, from spectacular happenings involving walking vertically down walls and leaping over Manhattan rooftops, to choreographing Bach and Schubert masterpieces.

Despite her radicalism, Trisha Brown had little truck with heavy theorising: she deprecatingly described the lack of effort visible in her choreography as “the line of least resistance” and explained that she stopped choreographing in silence and took up music because “I got fed up with listening to all the goddam coughing.”



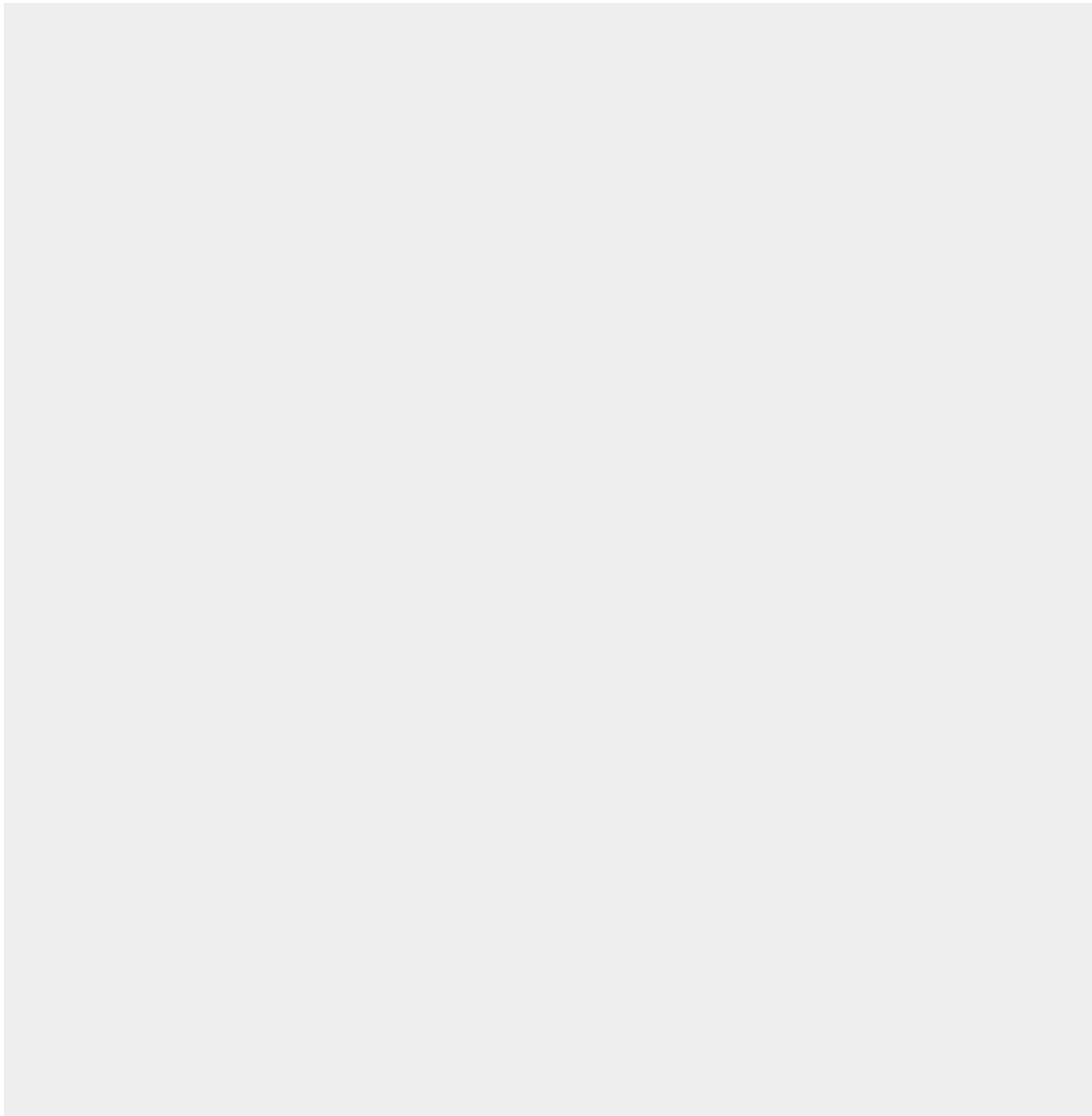


Trisha Brown's Man Walking Down the side of a Building Credit: Carol Goodden

Her work at its best had an appealing light-footedness, derived from her own remarkably lissom dancing, and a palpable sense of outdoors, sensed even in small theatres.

It was not difficult to imagine a childhood spent in treehouses when considering Brown's gravity-defying works such as *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* (1970) where a man in a harness walked down the side of a building on Wooster Street, Manhattan, and 1983's *Set and Reset*, in which a dancer walked up the theatre wall, this time supported by other dancers.

Horizontalism fascinated her, and in many of her works dancers were held as if floating – a motif that recalled her bedridden early years.



Trisha Brown in 1976 Credit: Jack Mitchell/Getty Images

Patricia Ann Brown was born on November 25 1936 in the rural town of Aberdeen, in the Olympic National Forest in Washington state, the youngest of three children of a salesman, Martell Brown, and his English teacher wife, Dorothy (née Abel).

Owing to a kidney ailment she spent her first six years isolated from her siblings, and developed a strong imaginative life playing and drawing on her own. She later said that “the rainforest was my first art class.”

Her mother gave the child a love of words. “So we had to spell the word at the breakfast table: pass the T-O-A-S-T,” she told a Daily Telegraph interviewer in 2003. “My mother and I played a word game all our lives, which was how I was able to find she had a weakness of the mind coming on, when she gave me such a stupid word one day. A kind of dementia set in and she died.” Unhappily Brown herself was to develop vascular dementia in the last years of her life.

Her dancers often prompted timeless associations with childhood freedom in their clothing or in their irreverence. In *Glacial Decoy* (1979) the four women wore stiff, transparent white nightgowns, and in 2010, when she came to Britain to create an “action art” piece in the Tate Modern, dancers did a gleeful conga headlong into a wall by a morose Joseph Beuys installation.


The Telegraph attempted to capture the allure of her best work in 1996: “About as ordinary and everyday as you could see, but every mild, unemphatic step is precisely honed into a delighting stream of dance.” However, her deliberate avoidance of any technical style meant a high hit-and-miss factor, and seven years later The Telegraph found “the artlessness of Brown’s style is only a gnat’s sneeze away from banality, and in her latest work the gnat has sneezed.”

Trisha Brown’s first dance training came at the all-women Mills College in California (where her future collaborator, the composer Laurie Anderson, would also study). Inspired by the radical John Cage she moved to New York aged 25, and formed a creative group with other young experimentalists, Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, David Gordon and Lucinda Childs, incubated at the large, often vacant Judson Church in downtown New York.

The group's ideas differed from those of the older experimentalist Merce Cunningham in that they broke with physical technique and theatrical venues, restricting steps to what untrained people could do in public spaces. Trisha Brown soon identified herself by her adventurous imagination.

With the wallwalks of her spectacular "equipment" pieces she forced watchers to reorientate their sense of space and gravity. She then moved on to an "Accumulations" series choreographing mathematical sequences and layering multiple strands of activity.

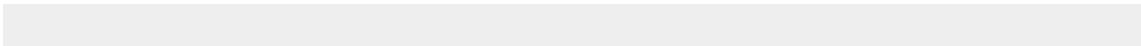
This was followed by a golden period of "memorised improvisation", in which Trisha Brown learned to invest ordinary moves for her female company with an elusive but unmistakable grace.



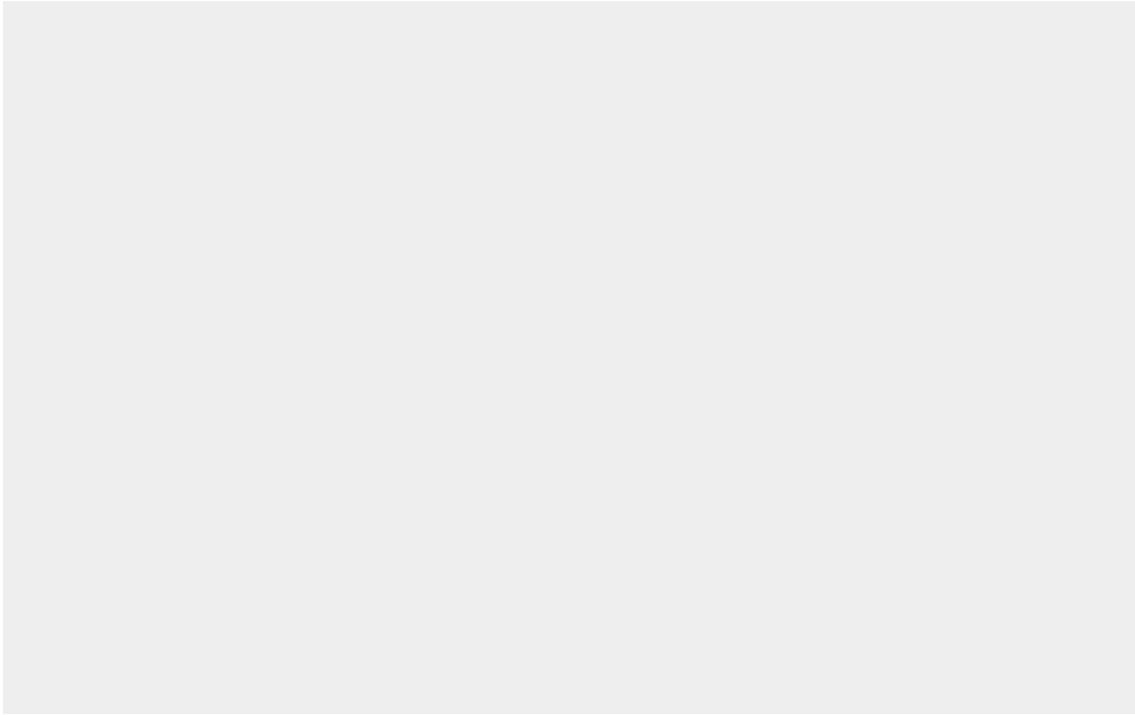
With what one critic called "Brownian motion" now defined, she then placed it in the traditional theatre stage, inviting collaborators such as Robert Rauschenberg, Donald Judd and Laurie Anderson, resulting in such globally popular works as *Glacial Decoy* and *Set and Reset*, set regularly as a study text on French dance syllabuses.

After the improvisatory "Unstable Molecular Cycle" of works and strenuously athletic "Valiant Cycle", Trisha Brown's "Back to Zero Cycle" investigated "unconscious" movement and themes of visibility and invisibility.

This brought her another global hit, a 1994 solo for herself, *If You Couldn't See Me*, in which the audience saw only her back, which a year later she reshaped as a duet with the celebrated former ballet star Mikhail Baryshnikov, *You Can See Us*.



By then she was as influential as Merce Cunningham on younger modern choreographers such as Mark Morris and Stephen Petronio, and had regular British and French tours.



Trisha Brown at the Pioneers of the Downtown Scene exhibition at the Barbican Hall in 2011 Credit: Marilyn Kingwill / ArenaPAL

Perhaps her most surprising step was her subsequent decision to work with classical music, an art form unfamiliar to her but with which her affinity quickly emerged.

Trisha Brown choreographed six operas, notably Monteverdi's Orfeo for La Monnaie opera, Brussels (1998) and two Rameau operas for William Christie's Les Arts Florissants – Hippolyte et Aracie and Pygmalion – as well as Bach's Musical Offering and, in 2002, a staging of Schubert's desolate song cycle Winterreise for the British baritone Simon Keenlyside to dance as well as sing (Keenlyside's then girlfriend was a dancer in Trisha Brown's

company).

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A well-regarded graphic artist, Trisha Brown had many exhibitions of her drawings, including shows at London's White Box Gallery and the Venice Biennale. The elusiveness and changeability of her methods meant that her danceworks are by their essence unlikely to survive on stage, but there are many films and last year the art historian Susan Rosenberg published *Trisha Brown: Choreography as Visual Art*.

Among her numerous US honours were the MacArthur Genius Grant (1991), which Trisha Brown was the first woman to receive, the National Medal of Arts (2003), and New York's Bessie Lifetime Achievement Award (2011). She was also awarded several ranks up to Commandeur (2004) in the French Ordre des Arts et Lettres.

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Trisha Brown's husband, the video artist Burt Barr, died last November aged 78. She is survived by their son Adam.

**Trisha Brown, born November 25 1936, died March 18 2017**

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