
**So that we can dance: community,
collaboration and worldbuilding in
the work of Alvin Ailey and Charles
Atlas**

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About the author(s)

is an assistant professor of modern and contemporary art at Kennesaw State University. She is currently working on two book projects. The first addresses feminist video art and activism in the 1970s and the second tackles questions around landscape ideologies and ecological crisis in early video and computer art. Her writing has been published in *Feminist Media Histories*, *Camera Obscura*, *Art Journal* and the *Brooklyn Rail*, among others.

Cover image:

So that we can dance: community, collaboration and worldbuilding in the work of Alvin Ailey and Charles Atlas

by Helena Shaskevich • 12.03.2025

In 2019 the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performed the work of Merce Cunningham (1919–2009) for the first time, marking the one-hundredth anniversary of the choreographer's birth. Comprising a series of solos arranged into a continuous sequence, the performances brought the virtuoso athleticism of Ailey's dancers into dialogue with the utilitarian gestures of Cunningham's repertoire. This conceptual meeting between Alvin Ailey (1931–89) and Cunningham, two masters at the forefront of modern dance, took place long after each had died. In that sense, the performances engaged with the idea of being 'out of time' – not only as a space outside of a linear timeframe, but also as a feeling of fragmentation and incompleteness, and a lingering sense of what might have been. Yet, in creating an encounter between Ailey's and Cunningham's artistic legacies, the performances also returned to post-1960s New York, when dance was a discipline rife with the promise of multidisciplinary collaboration and the possibilities of community building.

Two recent exhibitions have also called attention to this historic period. *Edges of Ailey* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, is the first large-scale museum presentation dedicated to the life, dances and legacy of Ailey. Adopting a multimodal form, it features rarely seen archival material, works by more than eighty artists, a suite of performances from the Ailey repertoire and a series of new commissions by leading choreographers. With Ailey's practice at its centre, the exhibition is divided into 'constellations' of works by other artists that reflect, magnify and unfurl thematic facets of his oeuvre. In coalescing a complex set of references, histories and mediums, the curator Adrienne Edwards has staged a compelling argument for an avant-garde cosmos of Black experiences, rewriting historic trajectories of modern art and dance in the process. Similarly, *About Time* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (ICA), is the first museum survey of the artist, film-maker and 'media-dance' pioneer Charles Atlas (b.1949) in the United States. Restaging his work as an immersive environment, the exhibition includes the artist's early single-channel videos – which he has reconfigured into a series of 'exploded' views presented on multiple suspended screens and monitors – alongside several recent video installations.



Fig. 1 Still from *Hail the New Puritan*, by Charles Atlas. 1986. 16mm film transferred to video, duration 84 minutes 54 seconds. (© Charles Atlas; courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York).

Atlas's and Ailey's practices do not intuitively cohere. As Edwards highlights in the catalogue that accompanies *Edges of Ailey*, canonical histories distinguish between two distinct trajectories of modern dance.¹ The first, more traditional lineage descends from the work of Lincoln Kirstein (1907–96) and George Balanchine (1904–83), who founded the New York City Ballet. The second stems from the avant-garde performances of Cunningham and the Judson Dance Theater, which included such pioneering figures as Trisha Brown (1936–2017), Yvonne Rainer (b.1934) and Ralph Lemon (b.1952). Atlas is intimately tied to the second: in 1970 he was hired as an assistant stage manager for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, and by 1974 he had become its filmmaker-in-residence. In this role he developed the novel 'media-dance' form, integrating camera and editing techniques into the performance itself. Ailey, on the other hand, does not fit neatly into either lineage. Although classical ballet was part of his training, he engaged with populist art forms and configured a style of dance with broad appeal. Edwards speculates that, in addition to his race, Ailey's interest in vernacular forms may have contributed to his lack of institutional recognition compared to peers such as Cunningham.

Regardless of these differences, the contemporaneous staging of these exhibitions affords viewers an opportunity to consider the implications of their works alongside one another. Doing so raises questions about the politics of presence and the technological mediation of performance. As the scholar Peggy Phelan argued in 1993, 'performance's only life is in the present [...] it cannot be

saved, recorded, documented or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations: once it does so it becomes something other than performance'.² Although Phelan's claim continues to be debated, it nevertheless exposes the enduring tension between ephemerality and the archive that haunts the categorical boundaries of performance as an art form. The apparatus of moving image technologies teases out these tensions and serves a vital role in both exhibitions. Despite the artists' differing engagements with video – it is at the core of Atlas's practice but remains on the periphery of Ailey's – the medium plays a pivotal role in building and sustaining community through their work.



Fig. 2 *The Years*, by Charles Atlas. 2018. Six-channel silent video installation, duration 16 minutes 55 seconds. (Courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York; photograph Mel Taing; exh. Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston).

In *About Time* video not only documents the effervescent and visionary characters in Atlas's artistic circles, from Cunningham to Rainer, Michael Clark (b.1962) **FIG.1** and Leigh Bowery (1961–94), it also serves as a form for manifesting their shared philosophical and aesthetic inquiries. The exhibition opens with *The Years* **FIG.2**, a 'self-reflexive sculptural video installation' (p.21) composed of four tombstone-like monitors featuring excerpts of Atlas's earlier work.³ Each also bears the numerals of a single year – 1981, 1993, 2005 and 2017 – which slowly elongate, pushing the archive of clips, videos of Atlas's friends and colleagues, upwards and out of the frame, until the declaration of time is all that is left. The monitors are set against an image of four young children, which is projected onto the back wall. Floating amid the flickering expanse of a night sky, they appear like omniscient beings, watching and guarding over the videos. An achingly tender monument, *The Years* ruminates on the passing of time, a theme that pervades Atlas's

archive.



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Charles Atlas: About Time* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 2024–25, showing *MC9*, by Charles Atlas. 2012. Nine-channel video installation, duration 18 minutes. (Courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York; photograph Mel Taing).

Many of Atlas's videos are marked by grief, loss and the devastating rupture of the AIDS crisis, and yet their presentation often invites participation, eliciting new moments of attachment and community. His 'exploded view' installations, for example, expand his media-dance genre by approximating the fluid on-screen performances. As viewers weave through *MC9* **FIG.3** **FIG.4** – an installation of screens hung at multiple heights across the gallery that feature footage of Atlas's collaborations with Cunningham – their bodies bend, sway and twist alongside those of the performers on screen. A similar invitation occurs in *A Prune Twin* **FIG.5**, a multi-channel installation of Atlas's collaborations with Clark. Among the psychedelic colours and sensual, baroque interiors, viewers are swept into the gender-bending seductions and playful gyrations of 1980s London.



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Charles Atlas: About Time* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 2024–25, showing *MC9*, by Charles Atlas. 2012. Nine-channel video installation, duration 18 minutes. (Courtesy the artist and Luhning Augustine, New York; photograph Mel Taing).

By contrast, video was almost entirely absent from *Edges of Ailey* **FIG.6**. The choreographer's engagement with the medium was limited to recording rehearsals with performers and occasionally revising his dances for television, an endeavour that the curators link to Ailey's political commitment to broadening audience access. Enveloping the fifth-floor galleries, however, was a newly created surround of eighteen screens **FIG.7**, which showcased archival footage as well as performances from Ailey's repertory. Coupled with the open floorplan of the exhibition, the videos roused connection and communion, manifesting the 'edges' referenced in the title. The curvatures of Ailey's nimble dancers echoed the folds of Joe Overstreet's sculptural canvases **FIG.8**; the physical tension and internalised focus of Richmond Barthé's *African Dancer* (1933) were mirrored in the muscular contours and suspenseful poses of the performers. As these multi-disciplinary relations unspooled across the gallery, they animated the constellations of works, much like a dancer in one of Ailey's choreographies.



Fig. 5 *A Prune Twin*, by Charles Atlas. 2020. Eight-channel video installation, duration 20 minutes. (© Charles Atlas; courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York; exh. Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston).

The soulful overtures of Ailey's 'edges' could not be more distinct from the technophilic camp and riotous raves of Atlas's exploded screens. And yet, both exhibitions evoke the worldbuilding possibilities of performance. Collaboration and community come together amid the screens and dances, spilling joy and an insurrectionary will to survive into the galleries.



Fig. 6 Installation view of *Edges of Ailey* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2024–25. (Courtesy the Whitney Museum of American Art; photograph Ron Amstutz).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Edges of Ailey* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2024-25. (Courtesy the Whitney Museum of American Art; photograph Ron Amstutz).



Fig. 8 Installation view of *Edges of Ailey* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2024-25. (Courtesy the Whitney Museum of American Art; photograph Ron Amstutz).

Exhibition details

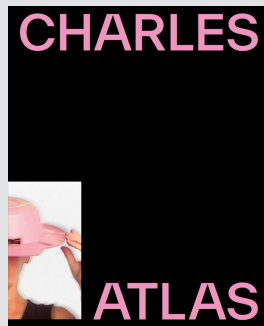
Charles Atlas: About Time

Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston
10th October 2024–16th March 2025

Edges of Ailey

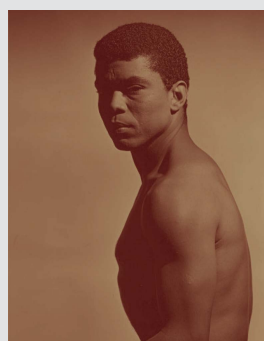
Whitney Museum of American Art, New
York
25th September 2024–9th February
2025

About these books



Charles Atlas: About Time

Edited by Jeffrey De Blois
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DelMonico Books, New York, 2024
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Edges of Ailey

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Footnotes

- 1** Catalogue: *Edges of Ailey*. Edited by Adrienne Edwards. 388 pp. incl. 259 col. + 167 b. & w. ills. (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and Yale University Press, New Haven, 2024), £40. ISBN 978-0-300-27884-2.
- 2** P. Phelan: *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, New York and London 1993, p.146.

- 3** Catalogue: *Charles Atlas: About Time*. Edited by Jeffrey De Blois. 172 pp. incl. numerous col. ills (Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, and DelMonico Books, New York, 2024), \$50. ISBN 978-1-63681-144-4.

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