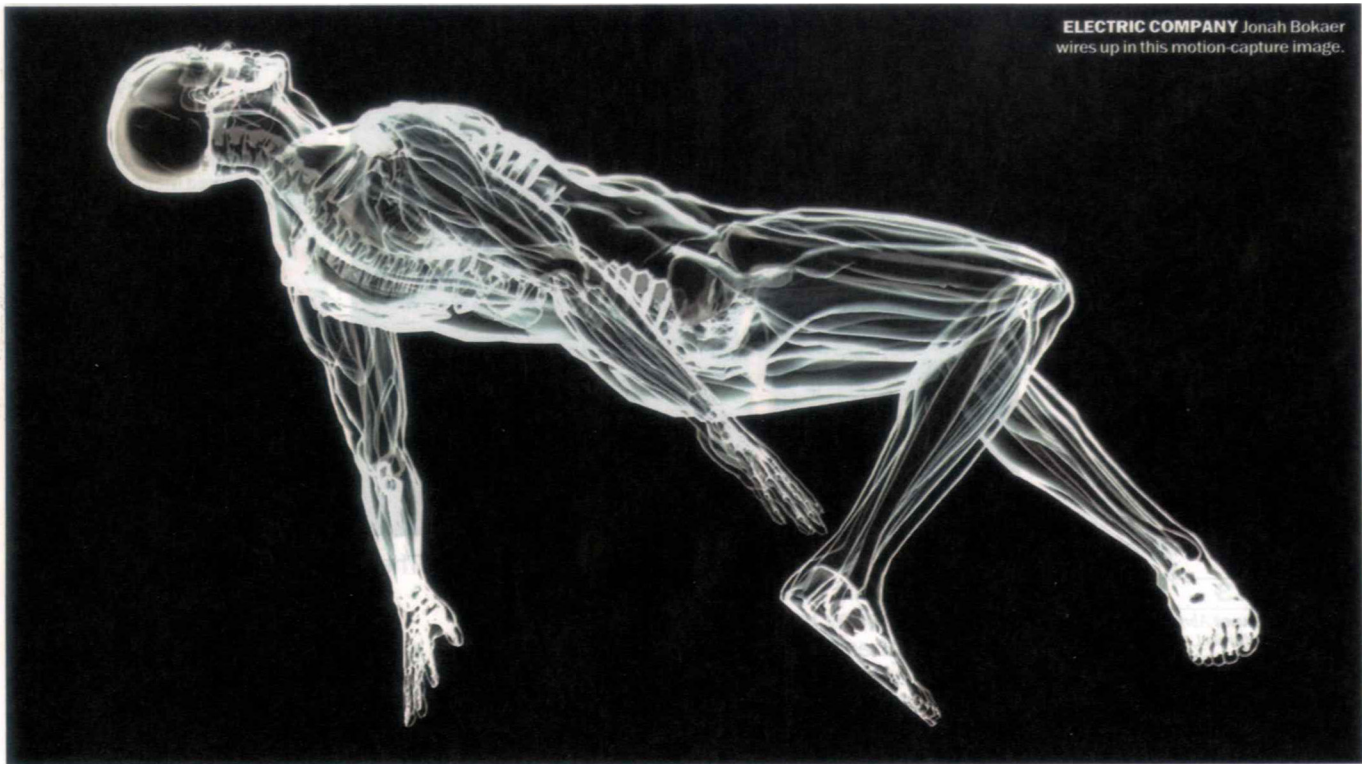


# Dance



**ELECTRIC COMPANY** Jonah Bokaer wires up in this motion-capture image.

Dance

## Virtual bodies

Jonah Bokaer uses technology to expand the definition of dance.

By **Gia Kourlas**

All choreographers are busy, but it's hard to imagine what Jonah Bokaer's chaotic life must be like: He is the director of *Chez Bushwick*; a cofounder, along with John Jasperse, of the new Center for Performance Research in Williamsburg; and a choreographer currently collaborating with Robert Wilson on the new five-act opera *Faust*. This week, Bokaer, 26, unveils two of his own dances at the Abrons Arts Center. The pressure! It's no wonder that in November, he retired from the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, which he had joined in 2000. "There were activities that needed my full attention," he says, laughing. "And I kind of cracked up. I have nothing but good feelings for that company and for the people there. It's a wonderful family. But I wanted to do my own work."

Perhaps the most pressing of Bokaer's activities is his new evening of multimedia work including *False*

*Start*, a solo inspired by Jasper Johns's 1959 painting (now on display at the Met) that plays with ideas of presence and absence. "In that work, he paints words like *gray* on the color red—the image and the sign are not the same thing," Bokaer explains. "I wanted to find a way for the body and its image to slip, or not to be the same. So I've created 3-D animation of a digital body. What I'm trying to do structurally and thematically is to create a false start."

Bokaer continues along a similar theme in *The Invention of Minus One*, a trio for Holley Farmer, Rashaun Mitchell and Banu Ogan (former and present members of the Cunningham company) with music by Christian Marclay and interchangeable costumes by Isaac Mizrahi. The most integral collaborator, however, is likely Michael Cole, a visual artist and animator (and another Cunningham alum). "When Jonah said, 'I want to make a proposal for a live dance that would involve motion capture,' of course the biggest example of that in my head was *Biped*," says Cole, referring to Cunningham's groundbreaking 1999 collaboration with motion-capture artists Paul

Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar. "I told him, 'Okay, if we're going to do this I don't want it to look like that.' And quite honestly, I don't think it does, and I'm really quite proud of that."

**"I see dance and media as being far more related than just decor."**

Bokaer, who completed a degree in media and visual studies at the New School while performing with the Cunningham company, has long been interested in motion capture. "I also see dance and media as being far more related than just for the purposes of decor," he says. The choreography incorporates themes of subtraction and erasure; the color palette is black and white and according to Cole, the piece is "about photography in a weird way." The set, for instance, resembles the remnants of a shoot, complete with umbrellas and reflector discs.

"We've been replicating the image of the body in this piece, but I also

wanted to go the other direction: If you have many images of the body, what does it mean if you reduce them down to zero?" Bokaer asks. "What if you go even further below zero? How do you create absence? Dramatically, we tried to come up with situations that had to do with loss or absence or a dejected body or someone disappearing, and at the end of the production one of the dancers is removed."

Bokaer and Cole have been hashing out the project over the past two years; the dancers, whose schedules have been particularly challenging, have worked with Bokaer over the last 12 months. But until the artists move into the theater and are able to see the film with the choreography, it's all a bit of a mystery. "We've devoted a certain amount of conversation to the elements we haven't quite seen," Farmer says. "Once Jonah sees it all up there, is it going to be what he was going for? So far, I can see structure in what he's doing and where he goes to some places that are unfamiliar and exciting. I can see the rigor of his years with Merce. I'm curious. And that's the bottom line."

*Jonah Bokaer is at Abrons Arts Center through Sun 16.*