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Review: 'The Philosophical Aesthetics of Dance: Identity, Performance, and Understanding'

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The Philosophical Aesthetics of Dance: Identity, Performance, and Understanding by Graham McFee. 2011. Binsted, Hampshire: Dance Books Ltd. xvii + 342 pp., appendix, bibliography, notes, index. \$ 34.95 paper.

Graham McFee is one of the few philosophers who can be credited with helping to pioneer and forge a path for dance as a fine art in the field of analytic aesthetics.¹ His 1992 book, *Understanding Dance*, following Francis Sparshott's 1988 book, *Off the Ground: First Steps to a Philosophical Consideration of the Dance*, was a significant introductory step towards situating dance in a field that has traditionally focused primarily and nearly exclusively on painting, sculpture, literature and (more recently) music.² In general dance has not been taken seriously as a legitimate art form by the philosophic Academy; indeed, it was originally excluded from Hegel's system of the fine arts (see Sparshott 1983). Analytic aesthetics has yet to fully recover from this historical exclusion. The articles and books on dance in the field have been sporadic, often *ad hoc*, and dance has yet to attract enough scholars of analytic aesthetics to sustain a robust dialogue on what counts (or should count) as the key features of dance as art.

In light of this background it comes as no surprise that *The Philosophical Aesthetics of Dance*, McFee's follow-up to and extension of *Understanding Dance*, draws heavily on the larger body of rigorous literature that exists in the analytic aesthetics of both the concept of art in general and on music, the art that is perhaps closest to dance given its performative, non-clearly-text-based, and often abstract nature. Although he avoids one traditional focus of analytic aesthetics by refusing to provide a definition of dance as art, eschewing the philosophical practice of constructing definitions that require

dance to be defined in terms of its necessary and sufficient conditions (those conditions without which dance could not be what it is and that distinguish dance from all other forms of art) his book does cover a large portion of the other categories under which art is discussed analytically (see 270). Its strengths for analytic aesthetics lie in his detailed and in-depth discussions of what should count as a dance “work” of art (what McFee calls a “dancework”) for purposes of numerical identification, appreciation and historical preservation. Particularly helpful is his discussion of how a dancework should be construed as: 1) neither “autographic” nor “allographic” under Nelson Goodman’s categories in *Languages of Art* but a performable and re-performable artwork with a certain history of production (see Part One); 2) an abstract, structural “type” for which subsequent performances are “tokens” (see Part One, Part Four, and Appendix); 3) an authored work created by a choreographer that has a historical identity, meaning and continuity that should depend in part (although not exclusively) upon what the choreographer intended (see Part Two and Part Four); 4) a work whose performances are performed and interpreted by (but not created by) dancers (see Part Three); 5) an object with perceptual artistic properties that is to be understood appreciatively and conceptually (see xii, 150, and Part Four); 6) an intentional object that exists in a broadly institutional context under a concept of art (see xiv, 150-152, 167-168, 272-278); and 7) an object that can be reconstructed and re-performed under certain conditions (see Part Four).

Despite this heroic attempt, one might wonder whether an analytic philosophy of dance as fine art construed under the traditional categories of analytic aesthetics (constructed primarily with the creation of enduring entities such as paintings, sculptures

and poems in mind) are adequate to tell us something important, even *metaphysically* important, about dance *qua* dance, an art form that McFee would undoubtedly admit is as much characterized as being an ephemeral art as it is by the history of its enduring works (see 96). Further, it could be suggested that it is precisely this ephemerality that provides an exciting, immediate, have-to-be-there temporality to dance as art, and that it is this, perhaps, rather than the enduring works, that accounts for dance's unique character (see Conroy 2012). McFee's book, in contrast, suggests that ephemerality in dance is primarily a problem responsible for causing works to vanish from the repertoire and that this problem ought to be corrected through broader adaptation and use of dance notation. Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that dance would benefit from teaching all its dancers and choreographers to learn and use dance notation in their dance-making and learning practices; the score could then, McFee posits, be treated as a normative recipe that provides constraints on which performances (and features of performances) count as tokens of the type (see 97, 101-105, and 160-163).

Notwithstanding the very real preservation problem involved in dance's ephemerality one might question here whether this enhanced focus on work identity and history is something that serves the categorizing interests of analytic aesthetics more than it serves the interests of dance as it is actually practiced and enjoyed. Perhaps there is something to be celebrated in the personal, communal and tribal practices of dances being taught and conveyed person-to-person in a way that is admittedly often messy, disorganized and performer-influenced. And perhaps just as much is gained as lost when translations and retellings are not duplicated exactly but embellished, tweaked and changed with each new version of a dance that emerges.

Another possible problem is that even if one accepts the confines of the analytic aesthetics terms of this discourse it is not clear that McFee is correct to hold that dance as a fine art produces only works that are created to be performed and re-performed (160-163). One might hold, as David Davies does, that a one-time improvised dance performance, or part of a performance, even though it was not conceived in advance as performable, or recorded later to be re-performed (what Davies calls a “work-performance”), can still be what he calls a “performance-work” of art rather than a non-art “happening,” as McFee characterizes it (see Davies 2011, 18-19 and 137-143 and McFee’s *The Philosophical Aesthetics of Dance* at 160). If so, then there may be a repertoire of truly ephemeral danceworks or parts of danceworks that were intended to vanish as soon as they were performed that McFee’s theory does not address. One can only presume here that he would find these works to be even more problematic than those that were intended to be re-performed and were lost to dance and art history. Again there is missing a sense of any possible artistic and aesthetic virtue that might attend these even-more-deeply ephemeral features of some dance performances.³

A related criticism of McFee’s account of dance as fine art is that perhaps there is *art* in the performance of dance, even in those cases where there is an underlying and continuing structure that can be properly credited to the choreographer as author. Here I am envisioning the case where there is such a degree of expressive or stylistic features that are imputed to a performance by a particular dancer that we may want to consider that contribution to be creative, imaginative, thoughtful and originitive in the way we construe art-making to be, rather than merely the skilled application of dance as technical craft. Indeed, in many cases there are features of danceworks that are appreciated by

dance critics, in practice, as relevant to understanding a dance as a form of art that are not attributable to either “creation” by the choreographer or “interpretation” by the performer but that can instead be viewed as a sort of artistic *making* by the performer. As Julie Van Camp has pointed out:

Dance has no standard "division of labor." The choreographer can provide more or less of the design details through individual coaching. Every dancer necessarily "creates" when he [or she] adds details not designed in advance by the choreographer. If the choreographer does not indicate placement of the head or the fingers, for example, the dancer must choose their placement consciously or unreflectively. When a dancer substitutes his [or her] own complete movement design for a certain passage instead of just adding details to the choreographer's design, the dancer is even more clearly acting as the creator of the movement, though this still misleadingly might be considered interpretation (Van Camp 1980, 30).

In this case, it might be that much of what we care about in a dance, and focus on for purposes of artistic judgment and appreciation, is part of either a one-time performance of a dance, or of the *way* that a dance performer conveys the piece, that may not be merely an interpretation of what the choreographer has envisioned but something creatively new that the dancer has added.

In short, it may be the case that a distinction can and should be drawn (and indeed is drawn in critical and appreciative practice) between artistic contribution for purposes of assignment of authorship to a work and artistic contribution as a matter of attributing credit to who has contributed what to any given performance. It is by no means clear that the division McFee attempts to draw between artistic (“creative”) and non-artistic (“interpretive”) practices must line up with which features numerically identify a dancework according to its essential, rather than manifest, properties (see Van Camp 1980, 30). “Art” may lie in whatever activity creates properties in the work that can be

critically appreciated as artistically relevant (e.g., expressive, stylistic features). In this way a dancework may contain properties that we want to call “artistic” in order to identify them as creative rather than interpretive that do not belong to the underlying structure of the performance that continues in subsequent performances.

The final issue to be raised here by the approach taken by McFee in *The Philosophical Aesthetics of Dance* is whether dance (even as a fine art) is best understood through the heavily cognitive and conceptual sort of appreciation that McFee prescribes (see 238-241). McFee dismisses all other ways of accessing dance, for example, eschewing “subjective,” experiential, bodily and kinaesthetic methods as either “destructive” or not relevant to the philosophic understanding of dance as fine art (183-187). If phenomenological approaches are not relevant to dance, if attempts to use research from cognitive science in efforts to characterize the experience of dance are not relevant either (see McFee’s dismissal of attempts to incorporate proprioception, the mirror reflex and mirror neurons into our appreciation of dance at 188-205), then the approach that McFee suggests seems narrow indeed. Even in the analytic aesthetics of literature and music there is work being done to recognize the ways that the arts affect us in emotional and in non-purely rational ways (see, e.g., Robinson 2007). Here someone who is interested in dance in cognitive, appreciative *and* experiential ways (from both the “studio point of view” and the audience point of view) might ask whether the benefits of viewing dance in McFee’s way outweigh the cost of giving up focus on emotional responses, visceral reactions and a full understanding of what is *felt* as well as cognitively apprehended in our encounters with dance.⁴

Notwithstanding the criticisms above, *The Philosophical Aesthetics of Dance* can still be viewed as successful when **understood** on its own terms and for what it tries to do, which is to show how dance can be **construed** in a coherent and well-supported way that fits the fine art model as it has been conceived by analytic aesthetics. Even if one chooses to approach dance in another way, it is certainly of some value to consider how dance might belong not just in our social lives, our tribes, our temples, and our communities, but as a fine art of the eighteenth-century, Western European sort. There should be room in dance theory for an analysis like this of dance as part of high culture that can be analyzed in cognitive, abstract, and intellectual ways as well as felt and experienced in our blood, bones, sinews, nerves and hearts.

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NOTES

¹ By “analytic aesthetics” I mean the methodological tradition that is practiced in Western philosophy departments that focuses on dividing broad areas of inquiry into discrete categories that allow for focused, specific and in-depth analysis within and between these categories. Others who can be credited with bringing a discussion of dance to the notice of analytic aesthetics include (and this list is by no means exhaustive) Susanne K. Langer, Monroe C. Beardsley, Nelson Goodman, Adina Armelagos with Mary Sirridge, Joseph Margolis, Francis Sparshott, Arnold Berleant, David Best, David Carr, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, Noël Carroll, Julie Van Camp, Renee Conroy, David Davies and Anna Pakes. Other dance philosophers, historians and anthropologists, most notably Selma Jean Cohen, Sondra Horton Fraleigh, Alfred Gell, Judith Hanna, Sally Banes and Susan Leigh Foster, have also influenced how analytic aesthetics views dance, as have many prominent dance critics.

² Francis Sparshott followed this with an extensive and comprehensive attempt to exhaust the field of analytic dance aesthetics in his giant tome, *A Measured Pace*, **published in 1995**, No similar attempts have been made since then to provide a dance text for use by analytic aestheticians.

³ McFee does not address Davies’ account here, but he is not to be faulted for that given that Davies’ book was published in the same year as *The Philosophical Aesthetics of Dance* (2011) and we cannot presume that McFee had access to his argument.

⁴ The “studio point of view” is the term used by Susanne Langer in Chapter 2 of *Feeling and Form* (see page 15) to characterize the point of view of the artist making the artwork, a view that is often opposed to or in conflict with the critic’s point of view.

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