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Aesthetics in Contemporary Art: Philosopher and Performer

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From the age of Plato and Aristotle in classical Greece to the present in western culture, the relation of philosophers and artists has remained an open, often controversial issue. Plato's skepticism concerning the role of the poets in his *Republic* is well known as he seeks to show that the poets represent a threat to the moral well being of citizens by modeling unsavory characters. In the *Ion* He finds the poets' reliance on non-rational, inspiration from the gods, instead of a *techne* with guidelines applicable to more than Homer or Hesiod, to be an insubstantial base for a genuine art. Plato is equally troubled in his *Republic* Book X over the level of knowledge offered by the painter's art. Here, Plato advances his view that truth lies in ideas or forms accessible to the philosopher, but not in the images of the painters whose understanding is limited to copying from the particulars such as a bed made by a carpenter instead of the actual form of a bed. Even so, both Plato and Aristotle take note of dance as a form of mimesis or imitative art whose aim is to contribute to both moral education and intellectual culture. For the purposes of our discussion here, I shall assume that the philosopher functions as a spokesperson for philosophy of art or aesthetics (used interchangeably here). Correspondingly, the artist, whether a dancer, poet, or painter, represents the alternate pole of artistic practitioner.

In the relationship of philosopher-aesthetician to artist set up in Plato's dialogues, and carried on through much of the development of western philosophical aesthetics in the writings of major authors such as Immanuel Kant and G.W. H. Hegel to the end of the nineteenth century, it was more or less taken for granted that the role of aesthetics was to assume a normative role with respect to the canons of the various art forms. For example, the role of the philosopher-aesthetician had been to identify the ends or norms for what artists ought to be aiming at: such as moral education, beauty, or understanding. Concurrently, philosopher-aestheticians proffered definitions

of art such as mimesis, aimed at distinguish art from what is not art. Today's philosopher-aestheticians continue to ponder questions that arise in reference to the arts. However, as many aestheticians seem driven more by philosophical concerns than attention to the relevance of their discourse to the arts, the gap widens between the two. This matter has driven some, especially on the side of the contemporary artists, to question the relevance of aesthetics to current art practices. In the discussion here, I will show the benefits for aesthetics of paying closer attention to, and being engaged substantially with developments in the arts. Similarly aesthetics benefits the arts by helping to show their relation to other forms of human knowledge and activities.

From the artists' perspectives, it is difficult to find cases where artists actually look to philosophers for guidance in the creation of their art. Indeed, one is more likely to find that the artists look to their own inner resources of thought, feeling, and imagination for inspiration and ideas. Or perhaps they may look to other artists for inspiration and ideas. For example, the dancer Isadora Duncan attributes her inspiration to a variety of artists working in poetry (Walt Whitman) and music (Beethoven and Wagner).¹ Still, it is not the case that artists entirely overlook philosophers in citing sources of their influences. Duncan also mentions the philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche among her sources of inspiration. But she does not indicate any direct influence of his theories on her art. How then are we to understand the relationship of aesthetics and art from the artist's perspective?

In keeping with the focus identified for the current volume, intended to examine the place of aesthetics in relation to current art practices in the visual arts, music, dance and related arts, I will address the question by examining the respective engagements of philosopher-aesthetician and performer in reference to the art of dance. The discussion begins with experiences that have contributed to my views on the subject. It then continues with a comparison of dancers' and philosopher's approaches to dance, and ends with a look at the views of philosophers Paul Valéry, Suzanne Langer, Nelson Goodman, and Noël Carroll on dance aesthetics. By examining the perspectives of dancer and aesthetician respectively, I hope to offer some understanding of the mutual benefits to both of engaging in dialogue concerning their respective approaches to dance.

¹ Isadora Duncan, Sheldon Cheney, (eds.), *The Art of Dance* (New York: Theater Arts Books, 1928), p.48.

1. My Experience in Exploring Dance

My own interest in exploring dance began with an invitation to participate as a critic fellow in a National Endowment for the Arts Dance Critic's workshop in 1971. Selma Jeanne Cohen, a pioneering force in dance aesthetics, organized the workshop. This experience provided opportunities to view and write about leading ballet (New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theater) and a number of contemporary dance companies of the time (Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, Anna Halprin, Jose Limon, and others.) At that time, principal writers on dance such as Marcia Siegel expressed skepticism over whether aesthetics had any relevance at all for understanding or writing about dance.² Their argument was that the aim of writing about dance should be focused on describing the dance movement, which presumably did not require any intervention from philosophical aesthetics. The emphasis in the context of this discussion was on writing dance criticism. Nevertheless, from a philosopher's view, writing about dance as a critic warranted the attention of aesthetics. Consequently I persisted in pursuit of a clearer understanding of meaningful connections between aesthetics and dance.

A chance meeting with the dance photographer Barbara Morgan, known for her photographs of the dances of Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, and other major American choreographers, led to many discussions on the relation of aesthetics to dance as seen thru dance photography. Morgan's views on dance photography revealed a strong link between aesthetics and dance as well as photography.³

The next opportunity for a first hand engagement with the task of exploring the relation of aesthetics to dance occurred when I was invited to travel with a ballet company and interpret for audiences and the dance company members the relevance of aesthetics as a humanities discipline to understanding the art of dance.⁴ The project called for two weeks road travel with

² Marcia Siegel, *At the Vanishing Point: A Critic's Look at Dance* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972, Dutton, 1985).

³ Curtis L. Carter, *Faces of Modern Dance: Barbara Morgan Photographs*, Exhibition Catalogue, Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, 2004. Barbara Morgan, "Dance Photography," in *The Complete Photographer*, March 10, 1942.

⁴ "The Contemporary Choreographer: Response in the Arts to Aesthetic and Moral Values in Modern Society," Symposia and Performance, Four Cities, Sponsor, 98

the company requiring rehearsals with the dancers, participation in the performances, and seminars with artists, teachers and scholars from various academic disciplines including philosophy, literature, and sociology. Community audiences also took part in the seminars concerning the relation of dance to humanities studies. My lectures in the symposia provided discussion of the concept of dance, choreography, and aesthetic value illustrated with images from various styles of dance performances.

At the opening of each performance, I appeared on the stage with the dancers to comment on the performances, linking actual dance movements to concepts from aesthetics such as form and expression. While the spoken presentation was taking place, the dancers performed their choreography moving in relation to my commentary on the movements. This part of the project was the most challenging and the most interesting. Our aim was to make the aesthetics conversation as much a part of the performance as possible.

How would the dancers who had come to dance, and the audiences who came to see dancing feel about the intervention of a philosopher into their space? The choreographer had agreed to this arrangement, and choreographed my role into the opening performance piece. Together, choreographer, dancers, musicians and I worked together in rehearsals to make the presentation as seamless as possible. The dancers responded with alert sensitivity translating their own understanding of the aesthetic concepts introduced in the commentary. At the end of the tour, the two soloists ballerina Ann Marie De Angelo and principal dancer John Meehan proposed that we work together to produce a book on philosophy of the dance. The result was monthly meetings for two or three days each month during the year following the performances. Our discussions focused on the efforts to understand the differences between a philosophers' and a dancer's understanding of dance.⁵

2. Philosopher's and Dancer's Approaches to Dance

National Endowment for the Humanities, 1980. The Des Moines Ballet with guest artists Ann Marie De Angelo (Joffrey Ballet) and John Meehan (American Ballet Theater).

⁵ The result of these discussions with the ballet dancers Ann Marie De Angelo and John Meehan was a series of tapes later translated into text resulting in follow-up papers but have not been published as a book.

Not unexpectedly, the discussions with the two dancers focused first on the basis for possible differences in the approaches of dancer and philosopher aesthetician to dance. Initially, a matter of great interest to the dancers was the roles of mind and body in the respective activities of a dancer versus a philosopher. It was agreed that a dancer's concern with mind and body arises out of very practical and artistic considerations relating to how this issue affects their understanding of creating and performing dances. The dancers understood that mind and body act in concert so as to enable the choreographer's ideas and the dancer's movements to come together in shaping a performance. The dancer's problem is to find the appropriate body-mind training to make the two work together to produce the desired artistic results. The problem begins with finding talented individuals with the necessary mind-body requisites to learn and execute complex body training with an aim toward producing artistic results. Then, as I observed in the rehearsals, and pre-performance preparations undertaken by the dancers, comes rigorous practice and psychic gearing up to project the dance through performance to the audience in concert with music, stage set, costumes, lighting, and the artistic direction necessary to coordinate all these elements.

Alternatively, a philosopher-aesthetician is concerned with developing concepts that contribute to understanding dance and expressing these in words. Concerning the philosopher's tasks, the question is, how to account for the relationship existing between mind and body in conceiving and writing as these actions pertain to the creation and performance of a dance. The dancers were particularly curious to learn about and compare how a philosopher's engages mind and body in these practices with their own experiences in creating a dance performance.

Another question of interest to the dancers in our conversations was the role of thinking and feeling in performing a dance. Again, the dancers were not primarily concerned with the distinctions surrounding one or another existing philosophical theory regarding these matters. Rather, they were concerned with exploring how to integrate the intentional aspects of being, including ideas, feelings, choices, with the extensional or bodily and spatial aspects of dance movements.

As our discussions continued, the conversations led to a closer examination of commonly held assumptions concerning the differences between a dancer's and a philosopher's views on dance. One of these assumptions concerned the association of dance with the body's physical movement and

philosophy with the mind. It soon became apparent in our discussions that the relations of mind and body in dance, and in philosophy required further clarification.

It was agreed straight away that a dancer spends her/his life developing the body into a refined medium based in movement, in contrast to a philosopher who works at refining mental skills of verbal conceptualizing, critical analysis, and communicating the results through writing or speaking. Despite the prominence of the body in dancing and of the mind in philosophy, any attempt to distinguish the dancer's and the philosopher's approaches to dance solely on such differences alone would be sophistic. Dancing is not merely a physical activity, as mind has a prominent role in dancing as well as in philosophy. Mind is at work in all aspects of performance: in acquiring a technique in a dance style and in the preparation and execution of a particular work of choreography. In our conversations, the dancers expressed their viewpoint on the role of mind in dancing in these words: "Mind is the controlling center. It enables us to be in control of our bodies, to be concentrated, to bring clarity, and to acquire the right feeling that a movement in a performance needs. And then it has to let feeling take over."⁶

3. Kinesthetic Intelligence and a Dancer's Perspective

What, then is it that might distinguish a performer's understanding of dance? To be sure, the mental and physical skills required for executing the philosopher's and the dancer's respective actions differ with respect to the role of kinesthetic or psychomotor intelligence. Kinesthetic intelligence, understood as the indigenous body process that governs all bodily movement and orients the moving body in space, offers one possibility that might account for some of the differences between the dancer's and the philosopher's understanding of dance. Kinesthetic intelligence as discussed by Howard Gardner and others refers to muscular actions that control bodily motion in dancing, acting, athletic performance, and other forms of bodily movement.⁷ Dance theorist Margaret H'Doubler explains kinesthetic learning as "the human body's ability to express itself through movement and dance."⁸

⁶ Curtis L. Carter, Taped interview with Ann Marie DE Angelo, New York, November 8, 1980.

⁷ Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Idea of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

⁸ Margaret H'Doubler, *Dance: A Creative Art Experience* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1940).

Psychologists apply the term kinesthesia to “the sense, which enables the determination of the position of body segments, as well as their rate, extent and duration of movement, the position of the entire body, as well as characteristics of total body movement.”⁹

According to accounts gathered from my conversations with various performers, a well-developed sense of kinesthetic intelligence enables the dancer to perform without conscious mental recollection of the movements or expressive elements of the choreography. In this phase of performing, each part of the dance movement becomes a stimulus to bring the next part into play. A dancer described this process “as an intelligent force, developed from repetition and muscle memory, that governs the flow of movement.”¹⁰

For the dancers this neuro-muscular based kinesthetic intelligence is developed into an art form through extensive training in classical ballet technique or another form of dance performance. It involves much more than the physical execution of the movement patterns. The ballet dancer’s expressive movements as guided by a sense of style (Baroque, Romantic, Jazz) and the choreographer’s direction exemplify concretely the feelings and ideas embedded in the dancer’s body and mind, giving them shape and form. On such occasions the mind unites the forces of a classically trained body, the choreography, and the dancer’s creative insights.¹¹ To these factors is the additional requirement that the dancer must be acutely aware of the qualities of a particular dance style. A rise in a Baroque dance, for example, is to be executed smoothly as a part of a continuing phrase; this is in contrast to the late nineteenth century ballet, which emphasizes relevé (a rise to the toes from the flat foot in ballet dancing). The ballerina rises on full pointe with a sharp accent in the late nineteenth century ballet, as compared to the Baroque dancer’s smooth unaccented rise as the culmination of a movement phrase.

In their writings on dance, Rudolf Arnheim and Raynor Heppenstall support the dancers’ reports on the role of kinesthetic intelligence in creating dances. Arnheim explains that a dancer creates mainly in the medium of kinesthetic

⁹ See M. Go Scott, “Measurement of Kinesthesia,” *Research Quarterly*, vol. 26, (1955), pp. 324-341.

¹⁰ Curtis L. Carter, Taped discussion with John Meehan, New York, January 18, 1980.

¹¹ Curtis L. Carter, Taped discussion with Ann Marie De Angelo and John Meehan, New York, January 18, 1980.

sensations in the muscles, tendons, and joints. He notes, for instance, that the dancer builds her/his performance from the feelings of tension and relaxation and the sense of balance that distinguishes the proud stability of the vertical from the risky adventures of thrusting and falling. According to Arnheim, the dynamic nature of kinesthetic experience is the key to the surprising correspondence between what the dancer creates by muscular sensations and the image of the body as experienced by the audience.¹² Heppenstall makes a similar point, saying that dance for the dancer consists of pure nervous and muscular activity instead of the fusion of visual, auditory, and representational elements that confront the philosophers and other spectators.¹³

As well, the philosopher has access to kinesthetic experiences because her/his own movement experiences whether in walking, running, or actually dancing, offer experiences of kinesthetic sensations that may be useful in understanding the dancer's movements. Moreover, seeing dance as a spectator entails responding to kinesthetic patterns as expressed in the moving bodies of the dancers. It is also likely that the actions taking place while conceiving and writing, or speaking as undertaken by philosophers also involve some degree of kinesthetic activity. Gerald Grow has argued for example, that the keen sense of logical organization, development of preciseness in writing, clear transitions, and well focused exposition necessary to perform the tasks of a philosopher represent a manifestation of kinesthetic intelligence.¹⁴

A dancer's knowledge and use of kinesthetic intelligence, however, differs both qualitatively and quantitatively from that of the philosopher. Without a highly developed kinesthetic sense, a dancer would be unable to transform bodily movements into the desired expressive forms called for in ballet and other styles of artistic dance. Kinesthetic motor learning for the dancer may begin as a conscious cognitive activity, as it is capable of being motivated, for example, by seeing the movements performed by another dancer, hearing the music, or response to a choreographer's direction. The process culminates in an autonomous stage, as the internalized movement patterns con-

¹² Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception* (Berkeley and Los Angeles; University of California Press, 1974), p.407.

¹³ Raynor Heppenstall, *Apology for Dancing* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936), p.142.

¹⁴ Gerald Grow, "Writing and Multiple Intelligences," Working Paper, <http://www.longleaf.neg/grow>, Internet access November 30, 2013.

tributing to the performance appear to operate more or less independently of external cognitive input.

There are thus evidently important differences between the functions of kinesthetic intelligence required of a dancer to perform, and the kind of abstract reasoning processes necessary to the work of a philosopher. It would appear, for example, that conscious reflection on matters extraneous to a performance might actually interfere with the flow of movement necessary to successful artistic performances. The ballet dancer Ann Marie De Angelo, refers to this difference when she observes that, "Thinking gets in the way of producing the flow of movement necessary to performance."¹⁵ Another ballet dancer, Suzanne Farrell, reports that the tensions between abstract reasoning and kinesthetic forces actually interfered with her ability to perform. "I got all twitchy and neurotic in my performance because I knew facts and theories which had no counterpart or direct realization in movement."¹⁶

At first glance, it might appear that kinesthetic activity has little counterpart in a philosopher's activity when performing as a philosopher. Our discussion between a philosopher and dancers suggests, not unexpectedly, that the dancer draws upon physical and mental skills not regularly used in a philosopher's work. A dancer has direct access to information about the creative and interpretive processes that the philosopher does not normally encounter, unless the philosopher is also a dancer. However, after describing to each other and comparing our respective working processes of philosopher and dancers, we found greater than expected similarities in our joint understanding of the mind-body processes necessary for creating and writing a well formed philosophical essay and preparing a dance performance. Of course, the philosopher does not engage in the kinds of movement training, and bodily execution required for a performance. However, the philosopher draws upon comparable training and practice skills with words, concepts, reasoning and writing in order to "perform" as a philosopher.

4. Philosophers Look at Dance

¹⁵ Curtis L. Carter, Taped discussion with Ann Marie De Angelo. January 18, 1980, New York.

¹⁶ David Daniel, "A Conversation with Suzanne Farrell," *Ballet Review*, vol. VII, No. 1 (1978-79), pp.1-15.

The early twentieth century dancer-choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky's perspective on the philosophy of dance offers a point of transition to the views of a selection of twentieth century philosophers' understanding of dance. Nijinsky immediately polarizes the two viewpoints of philosopher and dancer when he writes in his diary: "I am a philosopher who does not reason--a philosopher who feels."¹⁷ Nijinsky's remark suggests a radical divergence of points of view from what is customarily thought of as the task of a philosopher. Nothing is less hospitable to a philosopher's way of working than a rejection of his primary tool, reasoning. Philosophers from Plato to the present, moreover, have often viewed feeling unregulated by reason, with suspicion. Nevertheless, speaking as a dancer Nijinsky asserts the priority of feeling over reason. Is his claim to be dismissed as the ramblings of an incoherent mind? Or has he in fact identified a primary constituent of a dancer's approach to dance? Dancers' statements in other contexts offer support for Nijinsky's assertion. Ballet dancers with whom I have explored this topic have affirmed the priority of feeling in dance with such statements as the following: "Ballet is an emotional art." and "Feeling provides the energy that comes across to people and inspires them."¹⁸ Hence, from a dancer's perspective, the dance communicates through feeling before it communicates through reason. It is as if we instinctively understand it and then say what it is about.¹⁹ While there is little doubt that feeling is one component of most forms of artistic dance, it is unlikely that a satisfactory account of dance for either the dancer or the philosopher will find feeling alone a satisfactory understanding of dance.

Having considered the dancer's and the philosopher's views on dance from a more or less anecdotal perspective in the previous sections, based on my own engagement with dancers, it is necessary to take a closer look at how a selection of philosophers of recent times have understood the relation of philosophy to dance. Questions giving rise to speculation about the nature of dance parallel those resulting in philosophical discussions of the related arts such as music, poetry, painting and sculpture. Hence, the philosophy of dance shares the task of inquiry into the systems of thought that surround the creation and appreciation of dance. The aim of philosophy of dance is

¹⁷ Waslaw Nijinsky, *The Diary of Waslaw Nijinsky* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1937, 1963), pp. 11, 8.

¹⁸ Curtis L. Carter, Interview with Ann Marie De Angelo. Taped session November 11, 1980, New York.

¹⁹ Curtis L. Carter, Interview with John Meehan, New York, November 8, 1980, New York.

thus to develop concepts and theories in response to the art of dancing, and to reflect critically on the concepts and theories previously generated by philosophers and other thinkers. The purpose of such concepts and theories is to provide an understanding of dance itself, and its relation to other arts and human activities. My own approach has been to gain as much understanding of dance as possible from direct engagement with dancers and observing dance performances, while also examining the writings of philosophers, critics, and dance theorists.

As a means of introducing other philosophers' approaches to dance, I will consider briefly the views of Paul Valéry, Suzanne Langer, Nelson Goodman, and Noël Carroll on the subject of dance. These writers, along with analytic philosophers Monroe Beardsley, and Francis Sparshott are among recent philosophers who have shown a particular interest in philosophizing about dance while approaching it from different philosophical frameworks.²⁰

Paul Valéry

Valéry is especially interested in distinguish philosophers' and dancers' points of view. According to Valéry, a philosopher's task is to communicate through "a dance of living words" an abstract idea of the experience provided by watching a dancer's movements.²¹ A philosopher's first step, according to Valéry, must be the honest question, "What is the dance?," which he ask without foreseeing the result. A philosopher's method for developing an answer combines observation and concepts such as movement, time, and expression. The answer consists of abstract ideas that replace the immediate

²⁰ See for example, Francis Sparshott, "On the Question of Why do Philosophers Neglect the Aesthetics of Dance?," *Dance Research Journal*, 15:1 (Fall, 1982), pp. 5-30. Also Francis Sparshott, *Off the Ground: First Steps to a Philosopher's Consideration of the Dance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). Francis Sparshott, *A Measured Pace Toward Philosophical Understanding of the Dance* (Toronto University Press, 1995). Also of note are essays by Monroe Beardsley, "What is Going on in a Dance?," *Dance Research Journal*, 15:1 (Fall, 1982), pp. 31-36. And David Michael Levin, "Philosophy and the Dance," *Ballet Review* 6 (1977-1978), pp.71-78.

²¹ Paul Valéry, *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, ed. by Jackson Mathews, vol. 13, "Aesthetics," tr. Ralph Manheim, (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1964), pp. 201, 203-207. Also, Paul Valéry, *Dance and the Soul*, translation of. *L'Ame ET la danse*, Dorothy Pury (London: J. Lehmann, 1957), and "Philosophy of the Dance," *Salamagundi*, Nos. 33,34 (Spring-Summer 1976).

impressions of the dancer's movements with words. These formulations enable the philosopher to convey the hows and whys of dancing in philosophical language. For example, as Valéry explains, dance is the creation of a special experience consisting of sensations of time and energy that enables the dancer and the spectator to share in the same experience through the performance. Such philosophical statements represent a combination of abstract thinking and observation.

Valéry is aware that there are important differences between the dancer's performance and his own abstract philosophical account. For example, he refers to the dancer as:

“...This being who, from her very depths, brings forth these
Beautiful transformations of her form in space; who now
Moves, but without really going anywhere; now metamorphoses
Herself on the spot, displaying herself in every aspect;
Who sometimes skillfully modulates successive appearances?
As though in controlled phases; sometimes changes herself
Brusquely into a whirlwind, spinning faster and faster,
Then suddenly stops' crystallized into a statue, adorned
With an alien smile.”²²

Valéry contrasts the world of the philosopher, limited to descriptive words and concepts to address questions concerning the nature of dance, with the dancer's understanding of dance as a form of expressive poetic action, opposing it to ordinary useful actions. His philosophical observations about dance, however, are presented without any effort to examine the elements of time, motion, and energy that constitute a dance. Valéry prefers to keep the discussion on a more general level.

Langer

Writing a few decades later in mid-twentieth century, Langer again takes up the question of a philosopher's approach to dance. She emphasizes that philosophical questions concerning dance represent a demand for meaning as opposed to mere questions of factual description. A philosopher's concern is the significance of the dance itself and in relation to other important human activities. The answers to such questions, says Langer, are estab-

²² Paul Valéry, p.207.

ished by thoughtful reflection. Philosophical reflection is first of all analytical examination of the concepts we use to discuss a given topic. It includes for Langer clarification of the meanings of such terms as “art,” “expression,” and “dance.” Analysis may show that our concepts are unclear, or that our fuzzy concepts are contradictory or senseless. In such cases, analysis is insufficient and must be augmented with “logical construction.” Logical construction is a creative aspect of philosophy wherein a philosopher establishes the fundamental concepts necessary to discuss her subject and sets forth their meanings.²³

Langer’s principal contribution to dance aesthetics is her attempt to clarify the nature of a dance. The dance, she argues, springs from the physical actions that the dancers perform, but it is not these physical actions that comprise the dance. The dance is a set of virtual forces that are created for, and exist only for, our perception. The dance is “real” in the sense that a rainbow is real, but it is not real in the same sense that a physical thing is real, that is in the sense of having ordinary properties of a physical thing. The dance, as Langer views it, is rather an apparition of the active powers of perception, a dynamic image whose purpose is to present the nature and patterns of sensitive emotional life. The feelings presented in a dance image are, similarly, imagined feelings expressed symbolically through the dance, rather than “real” feelings of the artist.

Langer’s theory of dance has attracted widespread interest among dancers, in part because it has been one of the few theories readily accessible to them. Her theory has been criticized by philosophers, justifiably it seems, for suggesting that a dance can consist wholly in an apparition or perceptual image. Her theory reduces the physical forms made by the human body to mere means for producing the perceptual image, and leaves ambiguous the ontological state of the dance. Her virtual entities are ambiguous with respect to the nature of the precise mental states that constitute the dances, for instance, whether they are merely visual sensory patterns or ideas, and with respect to whether they are in some sense objective, that is the same for all similar viewers, or are individually relative to each particular viewer.

Nelson Goodman

²³ Suzanne Langer, “The Dynamic Image: Some Philosophical Reflections on Dance,” *Problems of Art* (New York: Scribner’s & Sons, 1957), pp.76-78. Suzanne Langer, “What is Dance?,” *Feeling and Form* (New York: Scribners, 1953).

Nelson Goodman provides another philosopher's approach to dance based on his theory of artistic symbols presented in his *book Languages of Art*.²⁴ Unlike Valery and Langer, who comment in some detail upon the subject of the philosopher's approach to dance, Nelson Goodman has little to say on the subject. Instead, he illustrates the process of philosophizing about dance without providing an extensive commentary on how it is to be done. He does offer one brief statement, however, which reveals his aims as a philosopher of the dance: "I am not attempting to instruct choreographers or performers or dance critics, but to provide a framework for a philosophical account of what they do, and relate that to what goes on in the other arts, in the sciences, and in all our activities of making and remaking our worlds."²⁵

Goodman's approach to a philosophy of dance takes place in the context of a systematic inquiry into the varieties and functions of human symbols, including representation, exemplification, and expression. Goodman's approach to dance is illustrated in the following comments: "Some elements of the dance are primarily denotative, versions of the descriptive gestures of daily life, (e.g. bowings, beckoning's,) or of ritual (e.g., signs of benediction, Hindu hand postures). But other movements, especially in the modern dance, primarily exemplify rather than denote. What they exemplify, however, are not standard or familiar activities, but rather rhythms and dynamic shapes. The exemplified patterns and properties may reorganize experience, relating actions not usually associated or distinguishing others not usually differentiated thus illuminating allusion or sharpening discrimination."²⁶ These remarks found in *Languages of Art*, indicate Goodman's overall approach to dance as a form of symbolism.

Later, in 1981, Goodman illustrated the application of his dance aesthetics by creating a multi-media dance work, "Hockey Seen: A Nightmare in Three Periods and Sudden Death."²⁷ His intention was to show how the

²⁴ Nelson Goodman, "Dance," *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis, New York: Bobbs Merrill Co., 1968), pp.211-218.

²⁵ Nelson Goodman, "The Role of Notations" and "What Is Dance?," in *What is Dance? Readings in theory and Criticism*, eds. Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983), pp. 399-410.

²⁶ Nelson Goodman, "Dance," *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis, New York: Bobbs Merrill Co., 1968), pp.64, 65.

²⁷ Goodman collaborated with the choreographer Martha Armstrong Gray, dancers, composer John Adams, visual artist Catherine Sturgis, and media artist Gerd Stern to create this work. It was performed at Harvard University and Knoke-le Zoute,

various forms of symbolism (denotation, exemplification, expression) take place in the context of a dance performance based on movements common to an actual hockey game. For example the dance movements of players and referee in the performance refer to the physical and emotional actions taking place in an actual hockey game. Exemplification is also taking place in the relationship between the dancer's performance and the actual hockey game, that is when the reference runs in the opposite direction from the actual game to the dance. Expression, Goodman's third form of symbol activity takes place when the dance expresses various aspects of competition, frustration, and struggle in a metaphorical rather than a literal sense.²⁸

Goodman's theory has been criticized by philosophers who question various technical aspects of his theory, for example the attempt to limit artistic expression to metaphorical possession of certain properties. A critical examination of such issues is beyond our purposes here. It is important to note, however, that Goodman limits his inquiry into dance quite specifically to characterizing the types of symbols and symbolic processes that are operative in dance. He does not purport to give a theory of all other important questions concerning the creation of dance and the responses of spectators, critics, and theorists.

Noel Carroll

Noel Carroll's understanding of the perspectives of philosopher and dancer are distilled from his experiences as a philosopher actively engaged, and writing as a critic and dance theorist during the transitions of dance taking place in New York through the 1970 and 1980s and beyond. As a citizen of the avant-garde art world of the time, Carroll was bent on exploring every new development in dance available in the east side art world of New York. The art practices taking place were informed by developing art theories and vice-versa.

Belgium and later on Belgian National television. The documents including Goodman's script for the performance, correspondence with the participating artists, Catherine Sturgis's drawings of hockey scenes based on viewing live hockey games on TV, and Goodman's detailed production notes, and correspondence between the artists, and the original video production tapes are located in the archives of the Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin USA.

²⁸ Curtis L. Carter, "Nelson Goodman's Hockey Seen: A Philosopher's Approach to Performance," *Congress Book II, Selected Papers XVII International congress of Aesthetics*, ed. Jale Erzen, SANART, 2009, pp.57-67.

Carroll's views on dance focus mainly on events taking place in the New York art world during a time of transition from modernism to post-modernism and beyond. His book, *Living in an Art World* (2012) includes essays and reviews on dance performance, theater, and visual arts documenting his critical and philosophical essays on the dance of this period.²⁹ Abstracting from his theoretical and critical writings of this era, Carroll's approach to the philosopher's role of this era was to experience dance first hand and develop his philosophy of dance from intense engagement with the changes taking place in the actual performances of New York dance and the aesthetic theories emerging in relation to the performances.

Among these developments were minimalism, anti-theatricalism, anti illusionism, and postmodernism. Many of the dancers of the 1960s and 1970s were drawn to anti-theatrical, anti-illusionist dance. They also acknowledged dance as an independent art. Proponents of anti-theatrical dance who gathered at the Judson Church in lower Manhattan during the 1960s and Yvonne Rainer in the 1970s accepted any form of movement into dance. Concurrently they rejected expressive, theatrical virtuosity and narrative spectacle. For formalists such as George Balanchine and Merce Cunningham, abstract movement became the main focus in their approaches to dance.

Carroll observes that following these anti-theatrical developments, again, "changes are occurring in many different directions."³⁰ Among these changes is a new form of theatricalism. As a result, minimalist anti-theatrical and formalist dance are being displaced in the front line by dance featuring representation, expression, and narrative content. Examples of this new dance are cited in the works of Trisha Brown, Pina Bausch, and Twyla Tharp among others. Carroll denies that this new theatricalism in dance is simply recycling prior endorsements of mimesis. Rather, he argues that the theatricality of contemporary dance invokes a new paradigm that under-

²⁹ Noel Carroll's *Living in an Art World* consists of reviews and essays on dance, performance, theater, and visual fine arts taking place during the 1970s and 1980s. The book is organized into three main sections. Dance is the subject of the first section, followed by sections devoted to performance and theater, and fine arts. Each section and a coda with essays on postmodernism and globalization of art address important theoretical issues raised by the changes in the arts during the second half of the twentieth century.

³⁰ Noel Carroll, *Living in an Art World*, p.126.

stands art pluralistically and as anti-essentialist, one in which dance stands in tandem with the reigning conceptions of the arts alongside performance, theater and gallery arts.

Among the theoretical concerns addressed is the rejection of mimesis in favor of anti-illusionism in the postmodern choreography of the 1960s and 1970s. At the center of the debate among competing twentieth century approaches to dance was the question of theatrical versus anti-theatrical approaches to dance. Related to this issue was a disagreement over whether dance should be considered an independent art, or simply a variant of theater.

Taking the philosophical discussion to a larger plane, Carroll argues that changing practices in the art of dance throughout history tend to reflect successively the prevailing art theories of their time. Prior to the twentieth century existing mimetic theories (the view that art imitates or copies and thus produces illusions) supported a theatrical approach to dance. Yvonne Rainer's anti-theatrical postmodern dance is in part informed by the modernist art theory of Clement Greenberg. Carroll cites the influence of Greenberg's view that "art was a form of critique and that integral to critique was anti-illusionism" on Rainer's approach to dance.³¹ However, the match is not seamless as Rainer's extension of dance to include every day movements independent of any formal system of movement does not fit well with Greenberg's formalism. Perhaps one of the most controversial issues raised by the new developments was the acceptance of any movement into dance as practiced by Rainer and others.

Taking note of the importance of Carroll's writings for understanding the downtown art scene in New York, Arthur Danto remarked in an introduction to the collection: "His collected essays constitute a museum of the unmuseumable."³² Carroll's writings on dance position the discussion of our central issue here concerning the philosophers' and the dancers' approaches dance at the center of key issues of all of the arts in the contemporary art world and aesthetics. His narrative of the developments and cyclical changes in the theories and corresponding shifts of dance practices offers fruitful grounds for reflection on the respective approaches of philosophers and dancers concerning their art. The theoretical support for

³¹ Ibid., p.35.

³² Noel Carroll, *Living in an Art World*, p.12.

his claim that the practices of dance performances tend to reflect the prevailing art theories of the time, though a useful suggestion, calls for further development. It is not yet clear whether art theories emerge out of practice or are conceived independently and then inform the dancers' practices. A further question concerns the relation of art theories to philosophical aesthetics. That is, if contemporary pluralism in the arts embraces all of these different theories: anti-illusionism and illusionism, formalism and expressionism, theatricality and anti-theatricality, as well as narrative art practices as assumed in Carroll's approach to the evolving state of dance, what is the role of philosophical aesthetics in reference to these developments of art practice and art theory? Also missing in this discussion is clarification of the origins of the concepts or theories of art, i.e. whether they emerge independently, or from the practices of the dancers and other artists. This issue is in need of further consideration that would take us beyond the scope of the present subject.

5. Conclusion

What then are the prospects for aesthetics in reference to the evolving art practices of today? First, it seems clear that a knowledge of the arts as they are practiced in some medium such as dance, music, visual arts or other new media arts is essential to generating relevant concepts and theories useful for identifying and interpreting the arts and assessing their place in past and contemporary human experience and cultures. Our discussion here suggests that there are important differences in the approaches of a philosopher-aesthetician and a dancer, based on the type of body/mind activities that each must master and on their aims. For the dancer the aim is using the body/mind resources in conjunction with choreography, music, stage design, and lighting, for example, to produce a performance that will engage the audience with a particular type of experience not accessible in any other form of human communication. For the philosopher, the task is to grasp and articulate the meaning of such activities in a larger conceptual framework of related human activities. The philosopher's contribution may not be of immediate use to the dancer in creating such performances. However, the philosopher's concepts and theories may be invaluable to convey the place and significance of the dancer's actions in the wider context of human knowledge and experience. Hence the relationship of philosopher-aesthetician and dancer is one of reciprocal benefits to themselves and to the greater sphere of human understanding.