

## Vanishing: Dance Audiences in the Postmodern Age,

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### **Abstract:**

Focusing on declining attendance at dance concerts in the United States, this essay raises questions about how we, as artists, are thinking about what we are doing in contemporary concert dance, what we value, how we teach, and the place of dance in today's postmodern culture. The views of scholars, critics, and artists are considered in the course of this investigation.

**Keywords:** dance performance | dance concerts | postmodern culture | arts audiences | dance audiences | dance critics | dance scholars | contemporary dance

### **Article:**

This essay is intended to raise questions about how we think about what we are doing in contemporary dance in the United States today. Across the country, we feel a chill: the 2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, published by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), confirms what many of us have guessed: attendance at dance events is declining 1 even as the number of dancers has gone up over the same period. 2 From 1990 to 2005 the number of employed dancers rose from 21,771 to 25,651, while between 1992 and 2002 attendance at ballet events dropped from 4.7% of American adults to 3.9%, or from 8.7 million viewers to 8.0 million. For other dance forms (including modern, folk, and tap) attendance dropped from 7.1% of adults to 6.3% (from 13.2 million viewers to 12.1 million). Such a decline was not seen for the other performing arts. The audience for jazz music, for example, increased from 10.6% to 10.8% for the same period, and while opera and classical music both dropped in terms of percentages, the actual number of attendees increased. Theater, too—both musical and nonmusical—showed a drop in percentages but an increase in actual numbers. Dance is alone in demonstrating serious declines in both percentages and numbers. From my perspective, the situation for dance has not improved since 2002. As a choreographer, professor, teacher of choreography, and producer of a statewide dance festival that presents work by North Carolina dance artists, I see a great deal of dance and pay attention to audience trends.

Terry Teachout, writing in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2006, discussed figures from the study cited above, suggesting, as possible reasons for the decline in dance audiences, the lack of media coverage of contemporary dance and the significant falling off, in his estimation, of quality in new choreography. <sup>3</sup> He points to the fact that, compared to museums and symphony orchestras, many of which have been in business for over a century, dance and its institutions have not really become entrenched in our culture. Only three of this country's currently operating ballet companies, American Ballet Theatre, the New York City Ballet, and the San Francisco Ballet, were in business before 1950. Aside from *Swan Lake* and other classical ballet works, there is no recognized canon of “classical” choreography that is known and discussed. “Most of the greatest ballets and modern dances were made in the second half of the 20th century,” Teachout writes, “and none is known by name to more than a comparatively small number of committed dance buffs.”

The dance boom went bust, Teachout suggests, because the mass media stopped paying attention to high culture and a significant segment of the art-loving public is unaware of the existence of these masterpieces. Moreover, he continues, “Of the 120 American dance companies that received grants from the NEA in 1986, 50% are no longer in existence, among them such noted ensembles as Alwin Nikolais Dance Company, Chicago City Ballet, ... Dance Theater of Harlem,...and Twyla Tharp Dance.” The fact that modern dance choreographers commonly head their own companies no doubt contributes to this problem. As choreographers grow older, interests change and companies dissolve. Although this contrasts sharply with ballet and repertory companies, which often continue to flourish after their founding artists mature and leave, it appears that many ballet companies have dissolved as well. The solution Teachout proposes seems close to the crux of our problem: “Start by figuring out how to make large numbers of Americans want to see something about which they no longer know anything” beyond what they see on *So You Think You Can Dance* (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Kathryn McCormick (above) and Russell Ferguson (below) perform Mary Murphy's Top 10 dance pick, Hip Hop routine, on the 2009 season finale of *So You Think You Can Dance*. Courtesy of Fox Broadcasting Company.

As director of an artist-run nonprofit organization that provides opportunities for modern/contemporary choreographers to show their dances, I am always impressed by the number of artists with work to show. Lately, however, I have noticed that almost everyone present in a given audience is a friend or supporter of one or another of the performers. The general rule seems to be that the audience for modern dance is other dancers and their friends—and thus the more local dancers in a cast, the bigger the audience will be. There is lamentably little buzz, these days, about new work or new talent, and even other dancers and choreographers tend to stay away unless they have a friend involved in the production.

“Sorry I can't come—I'd planned to, but other things have developed. I'm sorry. I want to support your work.” These were words a colleague sent to me when he was unable to attend one of my

shows. In my disappointment that he would not be seeing my newest work, I began pondering his words. His was a well-meant comment that seemed to reveal more than he may have intended. I have heard similar sentiments expressed again and again by dancers in regard to attending concerts: "I'll be going on Saturday. I want to support her work." I wonder at the fact that, as fellow artists, we are not saying, "I'm really interested in seeing her work." Or "I can't wait to see what she's done this time." Or "I want to better understand the work you do" or any number of expressions that might indicate real interest. Does this choice of words say more about us as a community (that we are so jaded as viewers that we don't enjoy watching dance) or about the work itself (perhaps we do not find it interesting)?

There are various opinions about why dance is losing its audience. Educators explain that without dance education in the schools, students grow up without exposure to dance, and thus dance cannot hope to compete with what is already familiar to them. An NEA study that supports this view shows that arts education is a powerful factor in predicting participation in the arts. 4 Specifically, taking into account gender, socioeconomic status, and overall educational level, those with more arts education are considerably more likely to attend arts performances than those who have little or none. Continued and expanded arts offerings within the schools are something we can all fight for.

On another front, dance writer Elizabeth Zimmer, who wrote dance criticism for the *Village Voice* for twenty years, suggests that dance events have notoriously inefficient publicity: the word simply does not get out. 5 She notes that although the dance community relies on the media, it does not seem to understand how it works. Often, dance presenters send out direct mailings and e-mails rather than advertising in print media to publicize concerts. But, she notes, "less advertising results in less editorial coverage. Less editorial coverage results in smaller audiences. Smaller audiences discourage funders." As presenters on a small budget, we may be doing what we consider most efficient, but as Zimmer observes, "People who work from their own lists are increasingly talking to themselves." Zimmer reminds us that newspapers and most media are not nonprofit organizations. "They're structured to reward investors; they rely on selling advertising ... to pay their overhead and make a profit. They want to fill their pages with editorial content that will appeal to the broadest spectrum of readers and advertisers." That is why so much arts space is devoted to popular music and film.

Even in New York, Zimmer notes, a large portion of the audience for dance seems to be other dancers and dance students, although everyone's future depends on enlarging the spectator base. She assigns much of the blame to the field itself, pointing out that we need to remember that we are, after all, "in the entertainment business ... competing with books, feature films, cable television ... for consumers' time, money and attention, not to mention the gym, fine wine, and destination restaurants." She questions today's programming. "Who are contemporary choreographers trying to reach?" she asks. "What are they trying to share with audiences?"

Demographers are generally in agreement with Zimmer about how busy people are these days: performing events have to compete with family activities and home entertainment centers just to get potential viewers out of the house. But since the decline in size of the audience for dance is steeper than that for the other performing arts, we need to think a little more deeply than other arts presenters about how to reverse this trend. The range of ideas about the cause of the problem is broad. Critic Anna Kisselgoff suggests that dance has shrunk into a holding pattern of recycled aesthetics. 6 Choreographers are searching for new movement, she says, and although some twenty-first century artists like Pascal Rioult and Stephen Petronio do indicate growing interest in expressiveness, after years of emphasis on pure movement, many who are active today do not seem to know how to express emotion in a nonlinear way. Kisselgoff characterizes the stories that are being told through choreography as often too oblique to be understood, due in part to the ubiquitous use of movement drawn from techniques meant for training: “contact improvisation and release technique, ways of partnering that, respectively, stress shifts of weight in mutual support and seemingly weightless lifts and leaps,” often rendered meaningless in their impersonality.

Some of my dance students suggest that audiences may be intimidated by the notion that modern dance is supposed to have a meaning, yet neophyte dancegoers often find the work largely unintelligible. These students report talking after concerts with family members who complain about “not getting it.” Even some of the students themselves confess to making up stories as they watch dances unfolding, in an attempt to find a way in, a way to grasp what is being shown. Students in dance appreciation courses, generally novice viewers required to discuss their impressions of a concert, tend to describe the music and costumes, apparently at a loss to make meaning of the movement they have seen. A fellow artist speculates that perhaps, as artists, we have focused on abstraction to such an extent that we do not let our audiences into the work. 7

Zimmer points out that most dance artists have not had to deal directly with American culture for a long time: “For decades—perhaps since the beginning of the ‘60s dance boom, fueled by government funding and cheap real estate—dancers and choreographers have operated in a comfortable bubble, insulated from the realities of the marketplace, the realities of the media, and the realities of show business generally.” 8 Perhaps that cushion of funding has protected dancemakers from understanding that, as a rule, the under-thirty members of today's dance audiences are unwilling to “subject themselves to the sometimes taxing thought processes that go along with deciphering new dance.” A colleague has suggested that were it not for the protection afforded by its institutionalization as an academic field of study, modern or contemporary concert dance in the United States might have little viability within the wider culture, a point that bears investigation. 9 Historically, colleges have always provided an audience for modern dance and at present most contemporary dancers receive an important part of their training in academic dance programs.

Perhaps it is worth asking whether the form has a life outside the academic bubble. Aside from the major dance companies, does contemporary dance have any draw in general society beyond

the audience composed of fellow dancers, friends, supporters, and students coerced into attending by course requirements? It is certain that our comfortable connection with academe has enabled us to produce many young dance artists, all trained in thinking about their work, and in producing work intended to make audiences think. We have been given ample support for exploring and experimenting, for “pushing the envelope,” and, inside the academic bubble, we have not needed to consider communication with American culture in general. In our quest for the next new thing, we sometimes reach beyond the use of design, rhythm, and athleticism, which by themselves can engage an inexperienced eye, into a realm more concerned with process than product.

Have we moved our field into the ivory tower? Inclusion in the academic curriculum has brought pressure to develop the scholarly aspects of our field. Over the years, we have connected with areas of study that, while meaningful, have little bearing on the appeal of dancing per se. Perhaps we have allowed concerns other than the artistic merit of a work to entangle us in questions about the purpose of dancemaking, so that value has come to depend on the purpose served by the dance. For example, the emphasis on process—including, according to Larry Lavender, theories of choreography as an emancipatory practice that regard “the ‘work’ of art not as a fixed and determinate thing but as a socially fluid doing through which all involved may share both the pleasure and the responsibilities of collective creation”—seems to shift the purpose of the art work from communication with the viewer to exploration for the doer. <sup>10</sup> Expanding on this idea in conversation, Lavender has suggested that, to keep the field moving forward, it may be important for choreographers to make new and different kinds of dances, even at the risk of disappointing the expectations of the general art-consuming public. <sup>11</sup>

Maybe the appropriate question has become, which way is forward? Dance is increasingly involved with postmodernism, a complex and far-reaching phenomenon that theorists suggest has affected every area of contemporary cultural production. <sup>12</sup> These theorists argue that the shift away from modernism has led to the commodification of art, where involvement with image and selling dominate and depth has been replaced with such surface values as packaging and name-recognition. Additionally, this shift has introduced alternatives to the tradition of Aristotelian logic, precipitating a collapse of belief in the heretofore defining tradition of polar opposites such as good versus evil and us versus them. Without these clear distinctions, postmodern art relies on a kind of relativism where no point of view can be defined as absolutely superior to any other. Films such as *Blue Velvet* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* exemplify the lack of a logical progression produced by relativism. <sup>13</sup> Even when performing on a proscenium stage, choreographers blur the distinction between art and reality, removing theatrical magic by dressing dancers in street clothes, having them speak directly to viewers, and including stories of “real people” on tape or video as part of the sound track. Additionally, with the collapse of belief in polarities, the distinction between high and low culture is being slowly erased, as demonstrated by the public's appetite for cultural fusion, including the success of hip-hop dancing on the concert stage.

Yet as artists have moved into a postmodern world, have the audiences followed? Ever since the Enlightenment, art making has been associated with the concept of an individual identity that could produce original, essential ideas. Frederic Jameson links this so-called modernist idea to the concept of a distinctive character and a unique self that could be expected to generate its own unique vision and forge an unmistakable style, 14 as exemplified by the work of artists as modern as Martha Graham and Pablo Picasso, or as classical as Ludwig von Beethoven. With the advent of postmodern thought, what Jameson calls the “death of the subject,” or the end of individualism, has occurred. He holds that postmodernism has done away with the unified self and the pace of change in the current era has contributed to “psychic fragmentation” of the individual. 15 As a result, postmodern art is characterized by two main tendencies at the level of form and technique: formal fragmentation and, through the use of pastiche, reference to styles of earlier works or artists. As we enter the “late” stage of capitalism, evident in the growing hegemony of consumer capitalism and the rapid rate of cultural change, individuals cannot maintain a genuine sense of historic continuity, Jameson believes, and this results in contemporary artists’ tendency to regard past styles as a menu from which they can pick and choose without regard for the historical context in which those styles arose. 16 In other words, because of the present state of culture, we function as though absolute meaning no longer exists and everything created is meaningful only in relation to something else; artists themselves lack the psychological unity to develop their own new and individual points of view.

The effect of postmodernism on choreography has not been monolithic. Sally Banes describes the work that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s as revealing a broad variety of concerns and methods. She lists the “choreographic relativity” of the Grand Union, which allowed performers to play with time and space during performance; Laura Dean and Lucinda Childs, who traced clear designs in a well-controlled space. She also describes Steve Paxton's contact improvisation and Deborah Hay's circle dances, in which the primary focus is “the dancer's physical sensation and awareness, a focus that threatens to remove the work from the realm of art altogether, by making the spectator obsolete.” 17 What united these artists, according to Banes, was the widespread sense of pluralism, their acceptance of a range of strategies and outcomes, the notion that rules can be useful or unnecessary, and the establishment of an order that tolerates invention and invites change.

The impact of this generation of artists persists as audience expectations are challenged in more ways than it is possible to describe: performers comment on dances as they progress, and dances are created for the pleasure of the dancer, whether or not the work is accessible to a viewer. Underlying choreographic structure is made visible, and real time is employed, with the effect of flattening dynamics and vitiating any sense of suspense that might result from shaping temporal structure dramatically. Moreover, the shift away from modernism continues to open up new areas for experimentation, and according to Carla Peterson, artistic director of Dance Theater Workshop in New York City, our gradual immersion in postmodern ideas is showing up more and more in today's choreography: “We're seeing surfacing in American contemporary dance

work in recent years the deliberate use of strategies that have long been common artistic practice in other art forms.” 18

The theory of psychic fragmentation allows insight into the dramatically altered concept of artistic practice and explains some of the strategies Peterson refers to above. She identifies these as “appropriation, sampling, referencing, and dialoguing with other artists’ works, notions of authorship, dissolving of genres, the rethinking of dance’s relationship with movement, and with audiences, etc.” Lacking the belief that stylistic innovation is possible and that “truth” exists, the postmodern artist is seen as orchestrating preexisting “texts,” drawing freely from throughout the culture, and interweaving them into a collection of citations to create something new. In this kind of intertextuality, every text (dance) is seen as related to every other text, and thus, to an intertext. 19 If we acknowledge that there is no original thought, no absolute, we accept instead that all ideas are adapted, referenced, or in some way translated from something that has come before, and that all thinking is relational. In this way, texts generate other texts in an unending series of transformations, creating the intertext from which we all draw.

This concept lacks the clarity of direct sources in the old philological sense, referring instead to a pervasive cultural energy, the surrounding ethos in which we exist serving as a source and resource. As Robert Stam says, “Any text that has slept with another text...has necessarily slept with all the texts the other text has slept with.” 20 However, for the orchestration of texts to have meaning, viewers must generally be familiar with the references, or the work’s appeal quickly becomes limited to an audience of insiders, leaving the average audience member at a loss to find meaning in what he or she is seeing.

Increasingly, today’s artists rely on ideas about process to inform their work, although approaches differ widely. The common choreographic procedure of sharing authorship by inviting one’s dancers to create and/or develop movement material along with the choreographer can be viewed as illustrating Jameson’s theory of “psychic fragmentation.” 21 Especially familiar in academic settings these days and promoted as a means of removing hierarchy, democratizing rehearsals, and giving performers more of a stake in the outcome, this process also tends to broaden the pool from which movement ideas are drawn for any given piece. Along with original and positive additions, the practice can lead to a varied assortment of styles and an increased risk of including classroom material and phrases from other choreographers, and as a result, a work’s coherence can be more difficult to achieve and to perceive.

Some artists are impatient with the notion of originality. “It’s something that holds dance back actually,” says choreographer Chase Granoff. 22 His work *Thank you boredom* encourages viewers to interact with the cast during the performance while offering a history lesson through its reenactment of performances by artists like John Cage and Yvonne Rainer. Historical appropriation, according to Granoff, points to “a certain kind of value system where you start to not always be about producing something new—you look sideways and backwards.”

Figure 2 Rahel Vonmoos and Wally Cardona in Cardona's *A Light Conversation*. Photograph courtesy of Christian Glaus.

Wally Cardona's virtuosic duet, *A Light Conversation* (2008), performed to a taped discussion about Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's ideas, draws no easy connection between the dancing and the words. (See Figure 2.) Making the dance was often informed as much by the experience of the two performers in life and onstage as with the anticipated viewing experience of the audience. Cardona describes the process of his work with Rahel Vonmoos, referring to the two dancers' identities and their experience while working together:

We're two people who think abstractly and who love to move. The work would play itself out through movement; us meeting each other, and the conditions we were working under, would generate the material. The initial motivation was to encounter each other's experience and create something "real." When we were asked to do that horrible thing of "please describe the piece" before it even exists, we said, "Imagine a live documentary that exists of video footage, live as well as recorded telephone interviews, discussions, scrapbooks and the two of us dancing. Now condense all of that stuff into just the two of us dancing alone onstage." 23

In discussing his 2009 group piece, *Really Real*, Cardona says his goals here were also about experience: just as the dancers were asked to "entertain the question of what is that step into a phenomenological state?"—that is, to explore what it means to step into that state of mind in which one creates a work—he says he was "asking the same thing of the audience, ... to project themselves as viewers beyond what I would call a natural attitude, beyond where they are when they're out there in the world." 24 The evening-long piece is performed to more than one music selection as well as to a reading of biographical details of Kierkegaard's life. At one point, Cardona refers to another of his own works, *Everywhere*, by filling the *Really Real* stage with still, evenly spaced, black-clad dancers, replicating his use of 300 posts in the earlier dance. Critic Gia Kourlas noted the challenge of making sense of seemingly unrelated elements, stating that, "*Really Real*, while ambitious, is a confluence of ideas that in the end never completely untangle." 25

Postmodern dance artists' intertextual referencing is frequently shaped by an interest in cultural fusion, in blending ideas, movement, and music from disparate areas of the world. Important connections are being made, for example, between African dance and contemporary choreography, with rhythms and the warmth and energy of the performers often earning a positive audience response. Brooklyn-based choreographer Reggie Wilson (see Figure 3) describes what he does as an exploration of movement languages from Africa and its diaspora through a postmodern lens. He calls his form "Post African/New Hoodoo Modern Dance," and focuses on questions of maintaining history and culture, using his own background as a



springboard: “There's something so human and basic about relating to that core essence of yourself,” he says. 26 “I studied Graham, Cunningham, Pilates. You think you've got it covered, how the body moves. But you go to an African village, and all the old women can raise one eyebrow and switch it to the other side, and move one ear around their heads twice. The body can't do that, you think, but they can do it. There's a genius within Africa for creating movement and structures to give it meaning.” 27 That's what Wilson says he is after, although critics differ in interpreting the effect of his work. Writing in 2007, Claudia La Rocco wondered that “Mr. Wilson is not as well known as one might expect given his skill and experience; the multiple resonances in his work, from slave spirituals to postmodern task-based choreography, create dizzying, nonlinear performances that are as smart as they are sensual.” 28 On the other hand, Michael Simpson, writing after a different 2007 performance, characterized Wilson's choreography as conceptual and went on to say that it had been “an evening where theory and representation were explored more than movement. Wilson is interested in context and meaning much more than he appears to care about dancing per se.” 29

Without an understanding of postmodernism, viewers can be left with no ground to stand on as they confront artists' questioning of traditional aesthetic standards. 30 Choreographer and theorist Beth Soll adds that, in her view, the journalistic appeal of many postmodern ideas has served to distort the perception and reputation of some of the choreographic work. 31 Thus, the intellectual appeal of postmodern ideas is often more stimulating to dance writers and choreographers than is the actual choreography that emerges from these ideas, which has led to a somewhat surprising success for some very experimental work. Moreover, when discourse and writing about choreography become as important and interesting, or more so, than the choreography, a phenomenon of media celebrity is created, divorced from the experience of the dance work itself. Over time, postmodernism has developed its own brand of media-conscious, nonconformist or nonmainstream, but no longer radical work, as in the case of David Gordon and Twyla Tharp in the 1970s, and more recently, William Forsythe. It seems important, in light of this phenomenon, to distinguish between what a viewer sees in a work and the conceptual underpinnings of the choreography. A purely conceptual understanding of a work falls far short of the full artistic, sensory experience.

Dance writer Bruce Fleming describes his perception of how making dances has evolved in recent years. In modernism, he writes, half a century ago, choreography was “quintessentially about closed forms, the primacy of the artwork.” 32 Mid-twentieth century dances by artists like José Limón and Graham were often associated with formalism: pattern after pattern was constructed for the viewer, who dared not look away for fear of missing a relevant fragment. (See Figure 4.) The world offstage was irrelevant; and as viewers, we knew that nothing relevant to our viewing experience was taking place in the wings. The work fulfilled the Aristotelian sense of beginning-middle-end, an ideal most of us continue to demand from our movies and stories and much of our music, although we now often let it go in our dances. In contrast, Fleming notes, many postmodern dances are made in an open form associated with naturalism.

The works acknowledge that what is happening onstage is not reality, that we are just watching a dance that may seem visually accidental, cut off by the edges of the proscenium as if by chance. The dancing could possibly continue into the wings where we cannot see it. The structure is one idea followed by another and another, with some looping back; if the viewer stops looking for a minute or two and then comes back in, he or she has not really missed anything relevant, since nothing much is learned from the repetition of the same motifs three or four times, and the dance's development is not cumulatively dramatic, narrative, or formal.

Figure 3 Reggie Wilson. Photograph by Antoine Tempé. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 4 Martin Lofsnes and Katherine Crockett in Martha Graham's *Diversion of Angels*. Photograph by John Deane. Copyright John Deane.

An open-ended form puts the emphasis on the movement itself, which is often stripped of meaning, as in Cardona's *A Light Conversation*. We are looking at people who dance, who happen to be moving for us on a stage. Gestures may carry meaning in brief situations that dissolve one into the next, building small hillocks as it were, rather than the major development and resolution common in modernist work. Often, the dancers go on as long as the soundtrack does, and then the dance is over. It is an aesthetic of the momentary, a reflection of our reduced attention span, perhaps—and completely contemporary, although for Fleming, apparently without purpose. “A *quoi bon*,” he asks, “other than filling an evening or giving the dancers work?” Or perhaps, as Jameson says, without the ideology of the unique self that informed modernism, today's choreography can seem purposeless since “it is no longer clear what the artists ... of the present period are supposed to be doing.”<sup>33</sup> Fleming seems to agree that intentional integrity of form has become less important—perhaps less possible—for artists today, reminding us that while modernism was about “the primacy of the artwork,” postmodernism “insists on the contingency of the world, on accident, on the subjectivity of the viewer.”<sup>34</sup>

Although most theories suggest that postmodernism is a far-reaching phenomenon that has an impact on all aspects of contemporary cultural production, there are still those who think about dance in entirely different terms. Without worrying whether we have fragmented psyches or not, dance writer Joan Acocella argues that the “truth” of a dance is not found in the intellectual processes that have to do with what the artist is or is not trying to do.<sup>35</sup> Dance, she says, is best seen as an orchestration of energies. As viewers, we seek patterns and their fulfillment, and wait for the work to resolve itself. Nothing in a dance need actually represent anything else, she notes, but when the choreography itself can draw on patterns of energy we associate with certain habits of being, it will communicate some kind of meaning. If, as Acocella claims, the imaginative

process by which a dance is made has a strong biological basis, there are patterns of flow that we respond to in our very bones. For example, when a single dancer is suddenly replaced onstage by a large group rushing in behind him, this “reflects all experience that our brains know and love, the experience of being overwhelmed by a huge rush of something.” 36

The work of Ivar Hagendoorn strongly supports this argument. 37 Citing the neural mechanisms involved in the elicitation, undermining, and fulfillment of expectations, he suggests that, as we watch dance, our brains make an internal prediction of motion trajectory and dynamics. Simply put, attention is dependent on our degree of certainty: if the predicted path of a sequence of movement corresponds to the actual path, the orbitofrontal cortex of the brain awards a positive tag, and if it deviates, a negative tag is given and as a result, the brain puts a premium on getting it right next time by focusing attention on processing the motion stimuli. In this way, dance offers a double route to pleasure, both through the increase in attention brought about by uncertainty and by the general state of arousal promoted by the effort to predict a movement's path. If the movements are too predictable, attention wanes; if they are too erratic and unpredictable, there is no positive reinforcement and attention wanes as well. Hagendoorn notes that philosopher Immanuel Kant draws a distinction between beauty and the sublime that parallels these neural responses. According to Kant, beauty is what we experience when we encounter a harmonious order that appeals to the mind's own drive to create order, and the sublime is that feeling of intense awareness that accompanies a resolution of disorder and internal conflict. Putting this into his own terms, Hagendoorn identifies these as the feelings that “characterize the thrill of watching dance.” 38 An experience of the sublime is triggered by the failure of the brain to correctly predict the unfolding of a movement sequence, which results in an experience of delighted surprise at the unexpected outcome; that experience is maintained by the mental effort to keep up with the ongoing surprise of the unfolding movement. Following the same logic, beauty can be defined as the feeling that arises when a predicted movement trajectory coincides with the actual perceived movement as it unfolds in front of our eyes.

Acocella's thinking, discussed above, is also similar to that of earlier theorists. In 1960, Suzanne K. Langer referred to the pleasure of art in terms of sensory response, writing that perfection of form is “what every artist knows as the real problem.” 39 What makes the work “significant,” she states, is form, which allows a deep gratification of the senses, allowing us to find meaning in what she called the “sensuous construct,” which lets us know that “this alone is beautiful, and contains all that contributes to its beauty.” Langer and Acocella suggest that, to fully respond as viewers, we must go beyond looking for meaning and allow the work to reach some organic force within us. A dance that can do this genuinely belongs to us all, yet much of the dance we see today lacks this kind of choreographic awareness; Acocella calls such works “untrue dances ... full of clichés, and ballast and nonsense.” 40 The logic of dance is not discursive but lyric, she writes. Like music, it is a force field, and that is the only way to understand the form, although, in fact, the objective is not to try to understand, but rather to accept that the truths of a dance are in its very bones, “which our bones know how to read if we let them.”

Rudolf Arnheim, the art and film theorist, also wrote about a deep sensory response to art, and his perception of the danger of drowning art by talk. 41 Currently, “The state of affairs seems unsatisfactory to almost everyone,” he wrote, “but if we seek its causes with some care, we find we are heirs to a cultural situation that is both unsuited to the creation of art and likely to encourage the wrong kind of thinking about it. Our common experiences and ideas tend to be common but not deep, or deep but not common. We have neglected the gift of comprehending things through our senses. Concept is divorced from percept.” 42 While Acocella, Hagendoorn, and Langer suggest an innate response to dance, Arnheim has written about the same effect achieved through culturally instilled responses that are so deep as to seem natural. 43 He put forward the idea that we perceive and respond according to laws such as rising and falling, dominance and submission, approach and recession, harmony and discord, all learned motifs that we have internalized to the point that they underlie our very existence, our understandings, our relationships, and our views of nature. According to supporters of this point of view, because we know these motifs deeply, we have already developed ideas about their meanings when we find them in art. Arnheim argued that art is the organization not of a specific field of data, but of a general pattern applicable beyond itself. In his view, the artist's concern becomes not so much his or her subject matter as the pattern created with that subject matter. Arnheim held that perception and art are both based on the organizational proclivities of the mind supported by a world that apparently lends itself to certain kinds of organization. Since we respond to what we see based on these culturally produced but deeply embedded patterns, when the patterns drawn by the artist have what Acocella calls “a strong biological basis,” we, as viewers, respond. Perception and expression become spiritually fulfilling when we experience in them more than a resonance of our own feelings and are allowed the realization that forces within us are the same as those acting throughout the universe. 44

Similarly, Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, writing in 1975, argued that the elements of art are arranged not to tell us something, not to be pondered or worked out, but rather to combine into a coherent whole to which we are called to respond. Since, they declare, “visionary” art is expression that cannot be articulated in prose, an “overintellectual approach” does not help in finding meaning. 45 Art is a creative representation of artificial patterns, and it is these patterns that separate works of art from the flow of existence. Accordingly, meaning is created by grasping the whole, the total structure of a work, in a powerful act of imagination, much as the artist grasped it in the act of creation. In Polanyi and Prosch's conception, art is something detached from other aspects of reality, often portable, reproducible, and, potentially, deathless. As with science, which brings together scattered pieces of evidence to form a new discovery, art creates metaphors: the purpose of drawing disparate elements together is to create a new meaning, and the more seemingly incompatible the elements, the more novel and moving the work.

Can we make sense of these ideas in today's world? While to some they seem obvious, they also appear romantic and outdated now, when performers like Mark Dendy and Liz Lerman are

telling us stories while performing movement many viewers perceive as lacking meaning. With declining audiences and a culture that thinks of dance in terms of favorite television shows, we might well look carefully at contemporary choreographic work. Today's artists, questioning traditional aesthetic standards, ask that we put aside accepted ideas and pay attention to what they are doing in new ways. Is it possible for audiences to do this?

Polanyi and Prosch suggest that art has no tests of value external to itself, at least in the sense that science establishes its own tests of validity and reliability. Since the public can be persuaded by the media to appreciate a new idea, viewers must learn criteria for evaluation from the artist, and not vice versa.<sup>46</sup> Artists tend to work with self-set standards, developed in interaction with tradition and public taste. They may be the first to recognize and value a particular way of working, which then appears as a kind of discovery. Although artistic standards may be set forth as ultimate, they may also be contested by other artists and even prove fallible, in the same way that the statistical explanation of quantum theory was contested by other scientists. Eventually, they may be abandoned for a different process or another set of values. On the other hand, when a set of standards is broadly adopted by other artists, it becomes accepted as a framework for evaluation—and a valid basis for widespread use by peer panels in adjudicating festival applications and grant proposals.

Who, then, is setting today's standards—those widely watched television dancers or the independent concert artists struggling to find an audience? Do numbers count? Do the standards set by what the public watches weekly serve as an entrée to the less commercial work being produced off-Broadway? If not, where is the disjuncture? Why is it there? And can it be breached? On the other hand, if the culture is postmodern and contemporary, and artists reflect this culture, why are the audiences dwindling? A century ago, the impressionists struggled to find recognition for their radical shift in artistic expression and, although it came slowly, acceptance eventually arrived. Dance, unfortunately, cannot afford to wait. Work in an ephemeral form evaporates with the end of its creator's career. Does this mean we should pay more attention to the audience we are trying to draw? Or are we, in Western culture, more interested in making art than in watching it? With our love of the cutting edge have we intellectualized our physical art beyond where the general audience is willing to go? “We love to see small things cut through big things,” Acocella reminds us, “the bicyclist cut through the tangle of traffic, a sharp argument cut through a lot of nonsense.”<sup>47</sup> She adds, “I would bet there is a biochemical basis for this pattern. In any case, it is a pattern that repeats and repeats itself in our thoughts and our art.”

I wonder if, in the effort to avoid what we think of as pandering, we have thrown out the very values to which audiences respond. What are we doing when we make dances, and what do we hold important? Why do we show our work? What is the place of dance in today's culture? Are we teaching our art into a corner, or opening it to the world? How does what we teach matter? These are critical questions for us, as artists and teachers. Support from one another is important for growth, necessary to survival, and much appreciated by those of us who make dances. But if

support given dutifully, without real curiosity, is all we have, we need to consider why this is the case. If, in the long run, we decide we want to make a stronger connection with the culture around us, it may be wise to open up to our audience's experience, to start asking questions of ourselves, to bear in mind the reasons we make dances, and, perhaps, to rethink the art that we create.

## Notes

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