Black Mountain College
MUSEUM + ARTS CENTER

The Time of Dance Ontology
Eric Mullis

Journal of Black Mountain College Studies
Volume 17: Time Cycles (Fall 2026)
Article URL: https://www.blackmountaincollege.org/journal/volume-17/mullis
Published online: November 2026

Published by:
Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center
Asheville, North Carolina
https://www.blackmountaincollege.org

Editor:
Thomas E. Frank, Wake Forest University

Guest Editor:
Jeff Arnal, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

Production Editor:
Kira Houston, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

Note:
The Journal of Black Mountain College Studies is a digital publication, intended to be experienced and referenced online. PDFs are made available for offline reading, but may have changes in layout or lack multimedia content (such as audio or video) as compared to the online article.

The Time of Dance Ontology

Eric Mullis

Dances are unusual kinds of things. They are ephemeral, leaving little or nothing behind when they conclude. Yet, they rest on some kind of firm ontological footing because they can be accurately performed again and again. Then there's the fact that, prior to its public debut, a dance's identity gradually emerges through a creative process filled with unexpected possibilities and developments. The choreographer draws on their dance knowledge while developing, sequencing, and directing movement, but can never fully predict what will be generated through interactions of the work's core elements. Taken together, the unknown-known and ephemeral-stable dynamics foreground the fact that dances are things that transcend those who create, perform, and appreciate them. This essay looks at two different ways of accounting for this, beginning with a brief foray into work of philosophers who conceive dances as instanceable types, and then articulating a choreographic process to foreground phenomenological experiences of dance transcendence. It is argued that a process ontology best accounts for how dances come into being and, in turn, are experienced by choreographers and dancers.

I. Dance Objects

Dance is a time-based art like music and film, but distinctive in that its medium is human movement. Choreographers craft action, aware that it remains potent with meaning. A reason is that movement is partly constitutive of subjective experience and, relatedly, based on habits that factor into personal identity. Another is that posture and gesture function communicatively, serving to foster and maintain interpersonal relationships. These kinds of observations are what led philosopher Susanne Langer to argue that dance characteristically clarifies and amplifies the body's "virtual powers."[1] In showing the many, perhaps infinite, ways movement can be creatively imbued with theatrical meaning, it reminds us that there is always something more to it than mere physical action.

[1] Langer, Susanne. "The dynamic image: Some philosophical reflections on dance." *Salmagundi* 33/34 (1976): 76-82.

Some artists and theorists have highlighted another transmundane aspect of dance, specifically, the way movement readily slips in and out of being.[2] During a long dance piece, for example, I may notice that virtual movement in the present eclipses that which came before. Then, while standing to applaud performers giving final bows, there's an awareness that the dance has vanished and become a matter of memory. Of course, the other performing arts are ephemeral too, but dance leaves little or nothing behind. In many dances, material things like costumes and props are ancillary to choreography.[3] To be sure, the dancer's body always remains, but it's characteristically protean (witness, for example, the way a dancer transforms after performing; relinquishing stage technique and going about the same quotidian tasks we all do). A great deal of effort has gone into developing dance notation systems that attempt to accurately document movement in the manner of music scores, but they end up reducing movement down to formal and spatiotemporal properties.[4]

I highlight virtuality and ephemerality because they are helpful in understanding dance transcendence. At a performance, something profound is revealed about the possibilities of human embodiment, but in such a fleeting way. With that said, the temptation to romanticize dance as purely transcendent (and perhaps spiritual[5]) should be resisted for, indeed, key moments from great dances do live on in memory. One reason is that choreographers are masters of structuring the experience of time. They establish rhythm, for example, by choreographing in musical meter, and create tempi by varying speed. Forms of repetition like seriality, retrograde, and accumulation can be used to reiterate movement, thereby solidifying it in the mind.[6] It also needs to be noted that dances live in memory because they are presented year after year by different dance companies. For example, the ballet company where I live staged Ohad Naharin's ensemble work *Kamuyot* (2003) during two consecutive seasons and, after seeing the piece several times, I readily connect specific movement sequences to previous

[2] Pouillaude, Frédéric. *Unworking choreography: The notion of the work in dance*. Oxford University Press, 2017.
[3] Mullis, Eric. *Instruments of embodiment: costuming in contemporary dance*. Taylor & Francis, 2022: 45-67.
[4] Franko, Mark. "Writing for the body: Notation, reconstruction, and reinvention in dance." *Common Knowledge* 17, no. 2 (2011): 321-334.
[5] Badiou, Alain. *Handbook of inaesthetics*. Stanford University Press, 2004.
[6] Callens, Johan. "The double recursiveness of postmodern dance." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 30, no. 3 (2008): 70-80.

viewings (e.g. “Oh right, this is the section where four men perform virtuosic solo phrases facing different cardinal directions”). A last point to make here is that some dances get associated with cultural calendars (e.g., *The Nutcracker* is performed during the Christmas Holidays) and come to function as instruments of personal and cultural memory.

I bring up memory and restaging to qualify dance ephemerality and to point out that they have led some scholars to construe dance identity in essentialist terms, with dances conceived as codified programs of action that can be realized in different times and places.[7] Charles Sanders Peirce’s type-token distinction is deployed to help clarify this position. A “token,” is a concrete, spatiotemporal instance of an abstract universal “type.”[8] The car you own is an instance of a type (e.g., the make and model), as is the style of your favorite shirt. As well, the pop song stuck in your mind has been tokened many times, both on-air and in live performances. The type-token distinction helps account for the fact that works like *Kamuyot* and the *The Nutcracker* can be staged many times by the same dance company and, indeed, by different companies on the exact same night. It also foregrounds the normative standards restaging presumes. Dancers must have years of professional training to contribute the physical and theatrical skills *Kamuyot* requires and, as well, be guided by an expert stager (or *regisseur*) who is intimately familiar with the choreographic details of the original work. If training is insufficient, key choreographic details ignored, or creative liberties while re-setting the work, the performance will not instantiate the type.

I originally found this approach to dance ontology quite appealing but, after spending a few years making and presenting dances, I came to see that framing transcendence in terms of the type-token distinction entails focusing on just one phase in the life of a dance, specifically, when the creative process is done and the piece is ready to be seen by a critical audience. Before supplementing this with a consideration of transcendence in the creative process, it is worth pointing out that aspects of dance history trouble the essentialist view.

---

[7] McFee, Graham. *Understanding dance*. Routledge, 2003 and Pakes, Anna. *Choreography invisible: the disappearing work of dance*. Oxford University Press, 2020.
[8] Hilpinen, Risto. "Types and tokens: On the identity and meaning of names and other words." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 48, no. 3 (2012): 259-284.

Some dance artists eschew the reification of dances into types. One thinks here of purely improvised works like Bill T. Jones' *Floating The Tongue* (1978) or Steve Paxton's *Material for the Spine* (1986) as well as Merce Cunningham's pieces that used chance procedures in performance—*Dime a Dance* (1953)*, Story* (1963), and *Canfield* (1969). Any of those works could be restaged by experts working from high-quality video recordings of live performances but, because they are indeterminate by design, doing so would miss the point. Like a young jazz musician who "improvises" live by playing a Charlie Parker saxophone solo note for note, to stage outcomes of intentionally indeterminate processes shifts away from artistic experimentation toward education and, relatedly, the idea of the living archive.

Second, choreographers like Jones, Paxton, and Cunningham choose to avoid precisely repeatable choreography because they value the sense of liveness that accrues from open-ended creative processes. In the context of live performance, chance procedures and improvisation scores afford opportunities for quick (and at times risky) decision-making that helps keep the work from becoming a tight script. They allow performance to generate moments of surprise which harken back to the original creative process.[9] Process-based methods necessitate an ontology which centers how dances originally develop, instead of how they are accurately restaged after the creative work is over. This requires a shift away from the proscenium stage to the dance studio where works evolve their identities. That means foregrounding the phenomenological experience of choreographers and dancers who first witness the work become a thing that, in time, will be shared with a viewing audience. The next section considers a few key moments from such a process.

II. Dance Processes

Drawing on past choreography experience, it is possible to conceive a dance largely in the mind and teach it to dancers with the requisite training. This approach is common in commercial dance (e.g., in Broadway musicals, music videos, sports halftime shows, and the like) where choreography is driven by popular music and, more generally, the

[9] Banes, Sally. *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962-1964*. Duke University Press, 1993.

goal of entertaining.[10] Many contemporary concert dance choreographers elect not to work this way because they are critical of economic practices characteristic of commercialization (e.g., inequitable pay practices, problematic claims of authorship, etc.) and, relatedly, value the way choreographic structure and dramaturgical meaning can emerge through relatively open-ended creative processes. They may also be driven by ethical considerations; preferring to relate to dancers as creative partners instead of laborers whose chief job is to physicalize predetermined choreography.[11]

As I've detailed elsewhere, an open-ended, collaborative approach can be understood, in pragmatist terms, as a form of experimental inquiry guided by a specific research question.[12] Such a question helps frame embodied investigation of phenomena such as group dynamics, somatic implications of technology use or, à la Paxton's *Material for the Spine*, a particular aspect of embodied experience. It can also frame explorations of formal properties (e.g., space, time, or effort) or, in a self-reflexive manner, the conventions of theatrical performance. In any case, understanding the creative process as a form of inquiry means that the work will not be fully planned out before entering the studio. It also means that its distinctive identity will develop as the participants collaboratively experiment with movement, observe results, and choose to direct findings toward emergent ends. To illustrate this, I share an illustrative example from my recent work.

Because partnering is a key aspect of concert dance technique, dancers train to cultivate perceptual and kinetic habits that facilitate diverse experiences of cooperative touch. With that in mind, I found myself keen on exploring how the dancer's specialized receptivity to physical contact can highlight that, outside the studio, caring touch is highly codified. With this in mind, myself and the two dancers (Luke Csordas and Taylor Railton) began working with an improvisation score in which one partner, called "the giver," gently manipulates parts of "the receiver's" body. For example, in a standing position, the giver can use the palm of their left hand to touch the back of the receiver's head and then carefully push it forwards and down. The receiver senses the direction

[10] For more on this see Dunagan, Colleen. *Consuming dance: Choreography and advertising*. Oxford: Oxford, 2018.
[11] Foster, Susan Leigh. *Valuing dance: Commodities and gifts in motion*. Oxford University Press, 2019.
[12] Mullis, Eric. *Pragmatist Philosophy and Dance*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019: 33-58.

and energy of the push and responds accordingly; allowing the downward tilt of the head to move their upper spine and, if necessary, to drive a step forward that helps regain a balanced position. Once the co-operative exchange is complete, the giver gently displaces another part of the body, for example, using the outside of their right knee to nudge the receiver's left hip to the right.

The three of us spent a number of hours working with the simple improvisation score, exploring variations in direction, duration, and speed. We took turns practicing with each other and periodically took short breaks to reflect on affects the task produced (e.g., calmness, openness, etc.). We also experimented with a version in which, after guiding the receiver for a few minutes, the giver steps away and leaves them to respond to imaginary cues. The receiver can recall and sequence specific directives or imagine some that are not physically possible—for example, the giver, magically floating in space above, pushes the crown of their head downwards toward the floor. Group reflections about this version highlighted that affects can arise without the giver actually manipulating the receiver.

During this first phase, we had no intention to set choreography, but we noted short improvised sequences that deviated from our usual ways of moving. Continuing to practice the score over the course of several days, we made it a point to document such sequences. Acting as an outside observer, I would at times ask the dancers to pause and repeat a novel sequence and then, at the conclusion of the practice, video record it. At one point, we put all the fragments together, using the improvisation score to generate movements that bridged them. This produced longer sequences that were eventually combined into sections.

A first point to make here regarding ontology is that the choice to move from exploratory improvisation to repeatable choreography is necessary for the work to begin to develop an identity. Excitement about the potential artistic significance of the work is tempered by awareness that possible avenues of exploration get closed off. Another key moment pertains to theatricalizing the theme of the piece. Since caring touch is generally used to heal or express feelings of sympathy, solidarity and intimacy, the improvised movements could be seen as indicative of a particular interpersonal relationship. To that end, western concert dance has a long tradition of romantic,

heteronormative partnering that Luke and Taylor have a good deal of experience with and, due to this, they at times unintentionally theatricalized moments of caring touch in a gendered manner.[13] We elected to cultivate a more egalitarian approach by periodically switching the giver and receiver roles. In this first round of dramaturgical thinking, we developed the aim of subverting a conventional norm, an aim which remained forefront in our minds as choreographic sequences were developed, assembled, and refined.

A second round of dramaturgical thinking focused on who the dancers represented. Was their relatively symmetrical relationship familial, platonic, or romantic? That question could not be answered until what emerged theatrically through the set choreographic sequences was carefully observed. Imagining I was an audience member seeing the duet for the first time, I watched Luke and Taylor perform a significant amount of set material and then considered who they could represent.[14] Consistent with the aim of subverting conventional heteronormativity, we made the decision to keep the work relatively open to interpretation by not explicitly theatricalizing care, vulnerability, and trust in conventional ways. We used a postdramatic approach—pioneered by Merce Cunningham and developed by dance artists affiliated with Judson Church—in which performers do not represent fictional characters.[15] In performance, Taylor and Luke are simply being themselves executing challenging movements generated through an experimental improvisation score premised on the dynamics of caring touch. Practically, this means no added affectation and, more generally, a cool distance from the affects that arise while performing.

The two decisions regarding the “aboutness” of the work shaped how, later in the process, movement was developed and crafted. This is because human movement is always overflowing with significance. When it is presented on stage, it has to be informed by dramaturgical decision-making that fixes and articulates meaning for audiences. With this in mind, though it may be tempting to conceive a dance as the sum total of repeatable choreographic sequences (e.g., as a type), it should be remembered that the movement remains at the service of chosen theatrical ends. A dance type is

[13] Banes, Sally. *Dancing women: Female bodies on stage*. Psychology Press, 1998.
[14] Cvejic, Bojana. "The ignorant dramaturg." *Maska: Practical Dramaturgy* 131 (2010): 132.
[15] Copeland, Roger. *Merce Cunningham: the modernizing of modern dance*. Psychology Press, 2004.

more than a program of codified action because it serves to generate meaning for the performers and audiences. More will be said about the interplay of choreographic means and ends in the next section.

This brings me to a last key moment from the creative process. There comes a point when the choreography is complete and the dancers perform the work from beginning to end for the first time. In some cases, that first full run produces the clear and distinct sense that the dance is complete and, because it can be repeatedly performed and taught to other dancers, that it transcends those who developed it. However, in most cases, the first run through surfaces problems like breaks in kinetic logic, incomplete thoughts (e.g., Luke's solo moment needs to be longer), and dramaturgical inconsistencies (the section with partnering lifts oddly gives a ballet *pas de deux* vibe). Those issues make it clear that a good deal of problem solving remains to be done if the work is to fully attain its identity.

III. Dance Phenomenology

Surprising developments during the creative process can elicit the sense of wonder or awe. Through the play of the known and the unknown, the collaborators become aware of an epistemological horizon. However, what emerges is not altogether foreign because the contributors understand that movement is always virtual and therefore readily amplified by choreographic logic and dramaturgical technique. In response to the unexpected, the team can harness the emergent by homing in on craft, or choose to bracket practicalities and just attune for a time to the sublimity of human movement. In the latter case, dancing bodies stand out as infinitely generative "saturated phenomena" evincing the dynamic unfolding of being.[16]

A process-based approach supports a de-centered understanding of authorship. The choreographer doesn't simply go about sequencing familiar, codified movements and setting them on receptive dancers. Instead, they facilitate an open-ended, collaborative endeavor where emergent phenomena are crafted, phenomena that provoke ontological reflections on the nature of bodily becoming. Consequently, the process-based choreographer has difficulty taking sole credit for the work. Their labor is

[16] Marion, Jean-Luc. I*n excess: Studies of saturated phenomena*. Fordham University Press, 2002.

crucial, of course but, because the process is a shared endeavor that generates emergent phenomena, the piece cannot be attributed to one person. Indeed, after the creative process is over the dancers are reminded of shared authorship when, in performance, they experience the purposiveness of the work and, relatedly, the particular somaesthetic states it elicits. There's also the fact that dance's significance for viewing audiences cannot be fully anticipated. Let's look at these points in turn, before concluding.

A key aspect of the dancer's task is enacting procedural knowledge of choreographed sequences.[17] Informed by embodied memory of movement patterns and theatrical direction, they experience dance sequences as flowing from those that came before and, simultaneously, as setting up those to come. Movement's temporal embeddedness highlights that dances are causal systems capable of generating propulsive force. The work's theatrical means–the choreographic patterns, other dancers, music, costumes, set pieces, lighting, and so on–drive the dancer toward specific theatrical ends that inform them. This becomes especially apparent when the work's momentum is abruptly thwarted by unexpected interruptions like accidents, injuries, missed cues, or technological problems.

From the vantage point of John Dewey's aesthetic theory, the blurring of choreographic means and ends is experienced in terms of a pervasive aesthetic quality, specifically, the feeling of inevitability.[18] This translates into the sense that the dance is a thing that "wants" or "needs" to be realized in being. That awareness of alterity is supported by a tacit understanding that the dance reliably produces specific forms of somaesthetic experience. Because postures and movements factor into embodied states, a dance propels dancers both physically and affectively. Speaking personally, I know a solo I made on the subject of ecstatic experience will generate kinesthetic sensations and affects that facilitate an experiential understanding of states of religious ecstasy. As well, Taylor and Luke know that our duet fuels feelings of care and trust and, more generally, a state of calm, physical receptivity. Also, because the piece is

[17] Pakes, Anna. "Knowing through dance-making: Choreography, practical knowledge and practice-as-research." In *Contemporary choreography.* Routledge, 2017: 11-24.
[18] Dewey, Jonn. *Art as Experience*. Tarcher, 2005: 55-82.

premised on egalitarian gender roles, they are aware that, to some extent, their subjective experiences of the cooperative partnering will to some extent align.

With regard to the audience, Dewey detailed an account of aesthetic experience that de-emphasizes art objects and institutions that tend to sacralize them. He conceived of works of art as stimuli for aesthetic experiences which challenge habits of perception, provoke thought, and enrich life.[19] Works with artistic merit, on this account, do not railroad experience to predetermined ends in the way, for example, didactic political art does. They continue to generate diverse forms of experience that cannot be fully anticipated by their creators.[20] This point dovetails with the one made a moment ago regarding distributed authorship. A choreographer cannot take sole credit for the work because they cannot predict the outcomes of an experimental collaborative process nor the sensations, affects, and thoughts it will generate for viewers.

To be sure, each point in this section warrants more discussion, but what has been said regarding choreographic momentum, somaesthetic experience, and audience engagement supports an understanding of dances as things that transcend their participants. From the viewpoint of traditional western metaphysics, it is tempting to see this in a Platonic way, with dances as abstract types standing ready to be tokened in different times and places.[21] Akin to mathematical formulas or logical proofs, dances are potent programs of action informed by general aesthetic ideals like beauty, harmony, and grace. This is not the place to wade into debates regarding the relative merits of essentialist or process-based metaphysics but it can be seen that, in emphasizing stability, essentialism glosses over the uncertainty that is part and parcel of generativity. At minimum, a process-based approach complements essentialism by providing a more comprehensive account of dance identity and transcendence. Future work on this may advance the argument that dances should be thought of, not as things, but as purely immanent functions of choreographic thought, trained dancers, and attuned audiences.

---

[19] Alexander, Thomas M. *John Dewey's theory of art, experience, and nature: The horizons of feeling*. SUNY press, 1987.
[20] Mullis, Eric. "The violent aesthetic: A reconsideration of transgressive body art." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 20, no. 2 (2006): 85-92.
[21] Pakes, Anna. "The plausibility of a Platonist ontology of dance." Thinking Through Dance: The Philosophy of Dance Performance and Practices (2013): 84-101.

IV. Coda

I mentioned earlier that some postmodern dance artists actively avoided creating works that could be reified into well-defined dance objects. Cunningham resisted exacting restaged performances throughout his long career and, to this end, insisted that his company be disbanded after he died.[22] Like his life partner and artistic collaborator, John Cage, he was a life-long experimenter relatively uninterested in historical preservation. This is because, among other things, he practiced a form of philosophical anarchism that resisted social institutions and personal dispositions which tend to railroad experience towards pre-determined ends. Cunningham saw dancemaking as a liberatory practice focused on live possibilities in the present and future, not on allegiance to the past. To that end, he developed and refined various compositional techniques—including non-hierarchical collaboration, chance procedures, collage, and the use of computer programs–to challenge his own choreographic thinking. Given what has been said above, these kinds of techniques not only served to disrupt artistic conventions, they allowed Cunningham and his dancers to cultivate a deep focus on the time of the present where the givenness of the generative dancing body resides.

[22] Noland, Carrie. "Inheriting the Avant-Garde: Merce Cunningham, Marcel Duchamp, and the “Legacy Plan”." *Dance Research Journal* 45, no. 2 (2013): 85-121.