

Susanne Langer agrees with Selma Jeanne Cohen about the ephemeral nature of dance and adds that there is confusion even over what dance *is*. This very confusion, however, has a unique philosophical significance. Langer builds her article on disproving some widely accepted ideas about dance. She analyzes and refutes the concept of dance as visualized music, animated design, or pantomime.

Dancers seem to be unanimous in claiming that dance is a means of self-expression (the emotions of the dancer given vent through movement). How, then, can dance be related to the theory of art as symbolic form? It can, if the reasons for this belief in self-expression are examined. First, the dance gesture is performed in two different senses, which are often confused. The actual gesture is usually employed to create a semblance of self-expression, which then is transformed into "virtual" (or symbolic) gesture. Second, the emotion itself is only imagined feeling, the conception (not the actual experiencing) of which moves the dancer's body to symbolize it.

What, then, is dance? Langer points out that, although dance draws on facets of various arts, it is an independent art. Body movement, the raw material of the dance, is transformed into gesture. However, as Cohen has also pointed out, natural gesture is not dance, it is "vital movement." "Virtual" gesture—that which is apart from the actual emotional situation—can become a dance gesture.

Langer cleverly dispels the notions of an overwhelming majority of theorists that dance somehow has a very special kinship to self-expression. She warns her readers to be wary when the term "self-expression" is used in connection with dance.

from "The Dance Experience"

VIRTUAL POWERS

SUSANNE K. LANGER

No art suffers more misunderstanding, sentimental judgment, and mystical interpretation than the art of dancing. Its critical literature, or worse yet its uncritical literature, pseudo-ethnological and pseudo-aesthetic, makes weary reading. Yet this very confusion as to what dancing is—what it expresses, what it creates, and how it is related to the other arts, to the artist, and to the actual world—has a philosophical significance of its own. It stems from two fundamental sources: the primary illusion, and the basic abstraction whereby the illusion is created and shaped. The intuitive appreciation of dance is just as direct and natural as the enjoyment of any other art, but to analyze the nature of its artistic effects is peculiarly difficult, for reasons that will soon be apparent; consequently there are numberless misleading theories about what dancers do and what the doing signifies, which turn the beholder away from simple intuitive understanding and either make him attentive to mechanics and acrobatics or to personal charms and erotic desires, or else make him look for pictures, stories, or music—anything to which his thinking can attach with confidence.

The most widely accepted view is that the essence of dance is musical: the dancer expresses in gesture what he feels as the emotional content of the music which is the efficient and supporting cause of his dance. He reacts as we all would if we were not inhibited; his dance is self-expression, and is beautiful because the stimulus is beautiful. He may really be said to be "dancing the music."

This view of dance as a gestural rendering of musical forms is not merely a popular one, but is held by a great many dancers, and a few—though, indeed, very few—musicians. The music critic who calls himself Jean D'Udine* has written, in his very provocative (not to

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say maddening) little book, *L'art et le geste*: "The expressive gesticulation of an orchestra conductor is simply a dance. . . . All music is dance—all melody just a series of attitudes, poses."¹ Jaques-Dalcroze, too, who was a musician and not a dancer by training, believed that dance could express in bodily movement the same motion-patterns that music creates for the ear.* But as a rule it is the dancer, choreographer, or dance critic rather than the musician who regards dance as a musical art.² On the assumption that all music could be thus "translated," Fokine undertook to dance Beethoven symphonies; Massine has done the same—both, apparently, with indifferent success.

Alexander Sakharoff, in his *Réflexions sur la musique et sur la danse*, carried the "musical" creed to its full length: "We—Clotilde Sakharoff and I—do not dance *to* music, or with musical accompaniment, we dance *the music*." He reiterates the point several times. The person who taught him to dance not *with* music, but to dance the music itself, he says, was Isadora Duncan.³ There can be no doubt that she regarded dance as the visible incarnation of music—that for her there was no "dance music," but only pure music rendered as dance. Sakharoff remarked that many critics maintained Isadora did not really understand the music she danced, that she misinterpreted and violated it; he, on the contrary, found that she understood it so perfectly that she could dare to make free interpretations of it.⁴ Now, paradoxically, I believe both Sakharoff and the critics were right. Isadora did not understand the music *musically*, but for her purposes she understood it perfectly; she knew what was balletic, † and that was all she knew about it. In fact, it was

* The best known exponent of this view is, of course, Jaques-Dalcroze; but it has received far more systematic statement by L. Bourguès and A. Denéréaz, in *La musique et la vie intérieure* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1921), where we find: "Every musical piece establishes in the organism of the listener a dynamogenic global rhythm, every instant of which is a totality of all its dynamogenic factors, intensity, scope, duration, manner of production, timbres, combined into simultaneous effects and reacting upon the listener according to their succession." (p. 17.)

"If 'cenesthetics' is the soul of feeling, then kinesthetics is after all but the 'soul of gesture.'" (p. 20.)

† "Balletic" is used here in its general sense of *concerning dance*, and not with particular reference to the type of dance known as "ballet." There is no accepted English adjective from a word meaning "dance" that avoids false connotations; in Merle Armitage's admirable collection of essays, *Modern Dance* (New York: E. Weyhe, 1935), the German word "tänzerisch" is translated by "dancistic" (p. 9), but the word sounds unnatural.

so absolutely all she knew that she thought it was all there was to know, and that what she danced was really "the music." Her musical taste as such was undeveloped—not simply poor, but utterly unaccountable. She ranked Ethelbert Nevin's "Narcissus" with Beethoven's C# Minor Sonata, and Mendelssohn's "Spring Song" with some very good Chopin *Etudes* her mother played.

Isadora's lack of musical judgment is interesting in view of the alleged basic identity of music and dance (Sakharoff considers them "as closely related as poetry and prose"—that is, two major forms of one art). Most artists—as we had occasion to note before, in connection with the plastic arts—are competent judges of works in any form and even any mode of their own art: a painter usually has a true feeling for buildings and statues, a pianist for vocal music, from plain-song to opera, etc. But dancers are not particularly discerning critics of music, and musicians are very rarely even sympathetic to the dance. There are those, of course, who write for ballet and undoubtedly understand it; but among the hosts of musicians—composers and performers alike—the ones who have a natural proclivity for the dance are so few that it is hard to believe in the twinning of the two arts.

The existence of an intimate relation—identity or near-identity—has indeed been repudiated, vehemently denied, by some dancers and dance enthusiasts who maintain—quite properly—that theirs is an independent art; and those few defenders of the faith have even gone so far as to claim that the world-old union of music and dance is a pure accident or a matter of fashion. Frank Thiess, who has written a book of many remarkable insights and judgments, lets his conviction that dance is not a mode of musical art confuse him utterly about the balletic function of music, which he deprecates as a mere "acoustically ornamented rhythm" running parallel to the independent dance.⁵

There is another interpretation of dance, inspired by the classical ballet and therefore more generally accepted in the past than in our day, that dance is one of the plastic arts, a spectacle of shifting pictures, or animated design, or even statues in motion. Such was the opinion of the great choreographer Noverre who, of course, had never seen actual moving pictures or mobile sculpture.* since these

*See his *Lettres sur les arts imitateurs*, in *Collected Works* (St. Petersburg, 1803), reflections on the dance plots appended to Letter XXIV: "That which produces a picture in painting also produces a picture in the dance: the effect of these two arts is similar; they both have the same role to play, they must speak to the heart through the eyes . . . everything that is used in dance is capable of

media have come into existence, the difference between their products and dance is patent. Calder's balanced shapes, moved by the wind, define a truly sculptural volume which they fill with a free and fascinating motion (I am thinking, in particular, of his *Lobster Pot and Fishtail* in the stair well of the Museum of Modern Art in New York), but they certainly are not dancing. The moving picture has been seriously likened to the dance on the ground that both are "arts of movement,"* yet the hypnotic influence of motion is really all they have in common (unless the film happens to be of a dance performance), and a peculiar psychological effect is not the measure of an art form. A screenplay, a newsreel, a documentary film—all have no artistic similarity to any sort of dance.

Neither musical rhythm nor physical movement is enough to engender a dance. We speak of gnats "dancing" in the air, or balls "dancing" on a fountain that tosses them; but in reality all such patterned motions are *dance motifs*, not dances.

The same thing may be said of a third medium that has sometimes been regarded as the basic element in dance: pantomime. According to the protagonists of this view, dancing is a dramatic art. And of course they have a widely accepted theory, namely, that Greek drama arose from choric dance, to justify their approach. But if one looks candidly at the most elaborate pantomimic dance, it does not appear at all like the action of true drama;† one is far more tempted

forming pictures, and anything that can produce a pictorial effect in painting may serve as a model for the dance, as also everything that is rejected by the painter, must be likewise rejected by the ballet master." Compare also his *Lettres sur la danse, et sur les ballets* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1966), Letter XIV: "Pantomime is a bolt which the great passions discharge; it is a multitude of lightning strokes which succeed each other with rapidity; the scenes which result are their play, they last but a moment and immediately give place to others."

*Cf. Borodin, *This Thing Called Ballet* (London: MacDonald & Co., 1945), p. 56: "The basic materials of both the ballet and the film are similar. Both depend upon the presentation of a picture in motion . . . Like the ballet, the film is pattern in movement, a sequence of pictures constantly changing but presented according to an artistic plan—at least in its higher forms. So, too, the ballet. It is, in fact, only that the idiom, the turn of phrase, is different. The difference between ballet and film is very similar to that between two languages having a common origin—as, for example, Italian and Spanish, or Dutch and English. The foundations are almost the same in both cases but the development has in each proceeded along different lines."

†Noverre, accused by certain critics of having violated the dramatic unities of Greek themes in his dances, replied: "But suffice it to say that ballet is not drama, that a production of this kind cannot be subjected to strict Aristotelian

to doubt the venerable origins of acting than to believe in the dramatic ideal of dance motions. For dance that begins in pantomime, as many religious dances do, tends in the course of its subsequent history to become more balletic, not more dramatic.* Pantomime, like pure motion patterns, plastic images, and musical forms, is dance material, something that may become a balletic element, but the dance itself is something else.

The true relationship is well stated by Thiess, who regards pantomime itself as "a bastard of two different arts," namely dance and comedy,† but observes: "To conclude from this fact that it [pantomime] is therefore condemned to eternal sterility, is to misapprehend the nature of some highly important formative processes in art . . . A true dance pantomime may indeed be evolved, purely within the proper confines of the dance . . . a pantomime that is based entirely, from the first measure to the last, on the intrinsic law of the dance: the law of rhythmic motion." As the first master of such truly balletic miming he names Rudolf Laban. "In his work," he says, "as in pure music, the content of an event disappears entirely behind its choreographic form . . . Everything becomes expression, gesture, thrill and liberation of bodies. And by the skillful use of space and color, the balletic pantomime has been evolved, which may underlie the ensemble dance of the future."⁶

What, then, is dance? If it be an independent art, as indeed it seems to be, it must have its own "primary illusion." Rhythmic

rules . . . These are the rules of my art; those of the drama are full of shackles; far from conforming to them, I should avoid knowing anything about them, and place myself above these laws that were never made for the dance." (*Lettres sur les arts imitateurs*, Reflection XXIV on the dance plots, pp. 334-36.)

*Evidence for this contention may be found in Curt Sachs, *World History of the Dance* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1937), despite the fact that the author himself believes drama to have arisen from dance that was built on a mythical or historical theme (see pp. 226, 227). In discussing the evolution of animal dances, he says: "From these examples we may see that it has been the fate of the animal dance to grow continually away from nature. The urge to compose the movements into a stylized dance, therefore to make them less real, has taken more and more of the natural from the steps and gestures." (p. 84.)

†Compare Isadora Duncan's comment: "Pantomime to me has never seemed an art. Movement is lyrical and emotional expression, which can have nothing to do with words and in pantomime, people substitute gestures for words, so that it is neither the art of the dancer nor that of the actor, but falls between the two in hopeless sterility." (*My Life* [New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927], p. 33.)

I also consider pantomime not a kind of art at all—but, rather, like myth and fairy tale, a proto-artistic phenomenon that may serve as motif in many different arts—painting, sculpture, drama, dance, film, etc.

motion? That is its actual process, not an illusion. The "primary illusion" of an art is something created, and created at the first touch—in this case, with the first motion, performed or even implied. The motion itself, as a physical reality and therefore "material" in the art, must suffer transformation. Into what?—Thiess, in the passage just quoted, has given the answer: "Everything becomes expression, *gesture* . . ."

All dance motion is gesture, or an element in the exhibition of gesture—perhaps its mechanical contrast and foil, but always motivated by the semblance of an expressive movement. Mary Wigman has said, somewhere: "A meaningless gesture is abhorrent to me." Now a "meaningless gesture" is really a contradiction in terms; but to the great dancer all movement in dance was gesture—that was the only word; a mistake was a "meaningless gesture." The interesting point is that the statement itself might just as well have been made by Isadora Duncan, by Laban, or by Noverre. For, oddly enough, artists who hold the most fantastically diverse theories as to what dancing is—a visible music, a succession of pictures, an unspoken play—all recognize its gestic character. *Gesture* is the basic abstraction whereby the dance illusion is made and organized.

Gesture is vital movement; to the one who performs it, it is known very precisely as a kinetic experience, i.e., as action, and somewhat more vaguely by sight, as an effect. To others it appears as a visible motion, but not a motion of things, sliding or waving or rolling around—it is *seen and understood* as vital movement. So it is always at once subjective and objective, personal and public, willed (or evoked) and perceived.

In actual life, gestures function as signals or symptoms of our desires, intentions, expectations, demands, and feelings. Because they can be consciously controlled, they may also be elaborated, just like vocal sounds, into a system of assigned and combinable *symbols*, a genuine discursive language. People who do not understand each other's speech always resort to this simpler form of discourse to express propositions, questions, judgments. But whether a gesture has linguistic meaning or not, it is always spontaneously expressive, too, by virtue of its form: it is free and big, or nervous and tight, quick or leisurely, etc., according to the psychological condition of the person who makes it. This self-expressive aspect is akin to the tone of voice in speech.

Gesticulation, as part of our actual behavior, is not art. It is simply vital movement. A squirrel, startled, sitting up with its paw against its heart, makes a gesture, and a very expressive one at that. But there is no art in its behavior. It is not dancing. Only when the movement

that was a genuine gesture in the squirrel is *imagined*, so it may be performed apart from the squirrel's momentary situation and mentality, does it become an artistic element, a possible dance gesture. Then it becomes a free symbolic form, which may be used to convey *ideas* of emotion, of awareness and premonition, or may be combined with or incorporated in other virtual gestures, to express other physical and mental tensions.

Every being that makes natural gestures is a center of vital force, and its expressive movements are seen by others as signals of its will. But virtual gestures are not signals, they are symbols of will. The spontaneously gestic character of dance motions is illusory, and the vital force they express is illusory; the "powers" (i.e., centers of vital force) in dance are created beings—created by the semblance of gesture.

The primary illusion of dance is a virtual realm of Power—not actual, physically exerted power, but appearances of influence and agency created by virtual gesture.

In watching a collective dance—say, an artistically successful ballet—one does not see *people running around*; one sees the dance driving this way, drawn that way, gathering here, spreading there—fleeing, resting, rising, and so forth; and all the motion seems to spring from powers beyond the performers.* In a *pas de deux* the two dancers appear to magnetize each other; the relation between them is more than a spatial one, it is a relation of forces; but the forces they exercise, that seem to be as physical as those which orient the compass needle toward its pole, really do not exist physically at all. They are dance forces, virtual powers.

The prototype of these purely apparent energies is not the "field of forces" known to physics, but the subjective experience of volition and free agency, and of reluctance to alien, compelling wills. The consciousness of life, the sense of vital power, even of the power to receive impressions, apprehend the environment, and meet changes, is our most immediate self-consciousness. This is the feeling of power; and the play of such "felt" energies is as different from any system of physical forces as psychological time is from clock-time, and psychological space from the space of geometry.

*Compare Cyril W. Beaumont's account of a rehearsal of the Alhambra Ballet: "The pianist renders the theme of the movement . . . while the dancers perform evolution after evolution which Nijinska controls and directs with dramatic gestures of her arms. The dancers swirl into long, sinuous lines, melt into one throbbing mass, divide, form circles, revolve and then dash from sight." (Published in *Fanfare*, 1921, and quoted in the same author's *A Miscellany for Dancers* [London: The author, 1934], p. 167.)

The widely popular doctrine that every work of art takes rise from an emotion which agitates the artist, and which is directly "expressed" in the work, may be found in the literature of every art. That is why scholars delve into each famous artist's life history, to learn by discursive study what emotions he must have had while making this or that piece, so that they may "understand" the message of the work.* But there are usually a few philosophical critics—sometimes artists themselves—who realize that the feeling in a work of art is something the artist *conceived* as he created the symbolic form to present it, rather than something he was undergoing and involuntarily venting in an artistic process. There is a Wordsworth who finds that poetry is not a symptom of emotional stress, but an image of it—"emotion recollected in tranquillity"; there is a Riemann who recognizes that music *resembles* feeling, and is its objective symbol rather than its physiological effect;⁷ a Mozart who knows from experience that emotional disturbance merely interferes with artistic conception.† Only in the literature of the dance, the claim to direct self-expression is very nearly unanimous. Not only the sentimental Isadora, but such eminent theorists as Merle Armitage and Rudolf Laban, and scholars like Curt Sachs, besides countless dancers judging introspectively, accept the naturalistic doctrine that dance is a free discharge either of surplus energy or of emotional excitement.

Confronted with such evidence, one naturally is led to reconsider the whole theory of art as symbolic form. Is dance an exception? Good theories may have special cases, but not exceptions. Does the whole philosophy break down? Does it simply not "work" in the case of dance, and thereby reveal a fundamental weakness that was merely obscurable in other contexts? Surely no one would have the temerity to claim that *all* the experts on a subject are wrong!

Now there is one curious circumstance, which points the way out of this quandary: namely, that the really great experts—choreographers, dancers, aestheticians and historians—although explicitly they assert the emotive-symptom thesis, implicitly contradict it when they talk about any particular

*Margaret H'Doubler says explicitly: "The only true way of appreciating works of art is by becoming familiar with the conditions and causes which produce them." (*Dance: A Creative Art Experience* [New York: F.S. Crofts, 1940], p. 54.)

†In a letter to his father (dated at Vienna, June 9, 1781), Mozart wrote: "I, who must always be composing, need a clear mind and a quiet heart." And on another occasion (July 27, 1782): "My heart is restless, my mind confused, how can one think and work intelligently in such a state?"

dance or any specified process. No one, to my knowledge, has ever maintained that Pavlova's rendering of slowly ebbing life in *The Dying Swan* was most successful when she actually felt faint and sick, or proposed to put Mary Wigman into the proper mood for her tragic *Evening Dances* by giving her a piece of terrible news a few minutes before she entered on the stage. A good ballet master, wanting a ballerina to register dismay, might say: "Imagine that your boyfriend has just eloped with your most trusted chum!" But he would not say, with apparent seriousness, "Your boyfriend told me to tell you goodbye from him, he's not coming to see you any more." Or he might suggest to a sylph rehearsing a "dance of joy" that she should fancy herself on a vacation in California, amid palms and orange groves, but he probably would not remind her of an exciting engagement after the rehearsal, because that would distract her from the dance, perhaps even to the point of inducing false motions.

It is *imagined feeling* that governs the dance, not real emotional conditions. If one passes over the spontaneous emotion theory with which almost every modern book on the dance begins, one quickly comes to the evidence for this contention. Dance gesture is not real gesture, but virtual. The bodily movement, of course, is real enough; but *what makes it emotive gesture*, i.e., its spontaneous origin in what Laban calls a "feeling-thought-motion,"* is illusory, so the movement is "gesture" only within the dance. It is *actual movement*, but *virtual self-expression*.

Herein, I think, lies the source of that peculiar contradiction which haunts the theory of balletic art—the ideal of a behavior at once spontaneous and planned, an activity springing from personal passion but somehow taking the form of a consummate artistic work, spontaneous, emotional, but capable of repetition upon request. Merle Armitage, for instance, says: "... Modern dance is a point of view, not a system ... The principle underlying this point of view is that emotional experience can express itself directly through movement. And as emotional experience varies in each individual, so will the outer expression vary. *But form, complete and adequate, must be the starting point if the modern dance as an art-form is to live.*"⁸ How form can be the starting point of a direct emotional

*Rudolf Laban, who constantly insists that gesture springs from *actual* feeling, understands nonetheless that dance begins in a *conception* of feeling, an apprehension of joy or sorrow and its expressive forms: "At a stroke, like lightning, understanding becomes plastic. Suddenly, from some single point, the germ of sorrow or joy unfolds in a person. Conception is everything. All things evolve from the power of gesture, and find their resolution in it." (*Die Welt des Tänzers: Fünf Gedankenreigen* [Stuttgart: W. Seifert, 1922] p. 14.)

reaction remains his secret. George Borodin defines ballet as "the spontaneous expression of emotion through movement, refined and lifted to the highest plane."⁹ But he does not explain what lifts it, and why.

The antinomy is most striking in the excellent work of Curt Sachs, *A World History of the Dance*, because the author understands, as few theorists have done, the nature of the dance illusion—the illusion of Powers, human, daemonic or impersonally magical, in a non-physical but symbolically convincing "world"; indeed, he calls dancing "the vivid representation of a world seen and imagined." Yet when he considers the origins of the dance, he admits without hesitation that the erotic displays of birds and the "spinning games" and vaguely rhythmic group antics of apes (reported by Wolfgang Köhler with great reserve as to their interpretation) are genuine dances; and having been led so easily to this premise, he passes to an equally ready conclusion: "The dance of the animals, especially that of the anthropoid apes, proves that the dance of men is in its beginnings a pleasurable motor reaction, a game forcing excess energy into a rhythmic pattern."

The "proof" is, of course, no proof at all, but a mere suggestion; it is at best a corroboration of the general principle discussed in *Philosophy in a New Key*, that the first ingredients of art are usually accidental forms found in the cultural environment, which appeal to the imagination as usable artistic elements.¹⁰ The sportive movements that are purely casual among apes, the instinctive, but highly articulated and characteristic display-gestures of birds, are obvious *models* for the dancer's art. So are the developed and recognized "correct" postures and gestures of many practical skills—shooting, spear-throwing, wrestling, paddling, lassoing—and of games and gymnastics. Professor Sachs is aware of a connection between such phenomena and genuine art forms, but does not seem to realize—or at least, does not express—the momentousness of the step from one to the other. Like John Dewey, he attributes the serious performance of these play-gestures as dance, to the wish for a serious purpose, a conscientious excuse for expending energy and skill. . . . As soon as a characteristic gesture is strikingly exhibited to someone who is not completely absorbed in its practical purpose—e.g., the gestures of play and free exercise, that have none—it becomes a gestic *form*, and like all articulate forms it tends to assume symbolic functions. But a symbol-seeking mind (rather than a purposive, practical one) must seize upon it.

The reason why the belief in the genuinely self-expressive nature of dance gestures is so widely, if not universally, held is twofold: in

the first place, any movement the dancer performs is "gesture" in two different senses, which are systematically confused, and secondly, *feeling* is variously involved in the several sorts of gesture, and its distinct functions are not kept apart. The relationships among actual gestures and virtual ones are really very complex, but perhaps a little patient analysis will make them clear.

"Gesture" is defined in the dictionary as "expressive movement." But "expressive" has two alternative meanings (not to mention minor specializations): it means either "self-expressive," i.e., symptomatic of existing subjective conditions, or "logically expressive," i.e., symbolic of a concept, that may or may not refer to factually given conditions. A sign often functions in both capacities, as symptom and symbol; spoken *words* are quite normally "expressive" in both ways. They convey something the speaker is thinking about, and also betray *that* he is (or sometimes, that he is not!) entertaining the ideas in question, and to some extent his further psycho-physical state.

The same is true of gesture: it may be either self-expressive, or logically expressive, or both. It may indicate demands and intentions, as when people signal to each other, or it may be conventionally symbolic, like the deaf-mute language, but at the same time the *manner* in which a gesture is performed usually indicates the performer's state of mind; it is nervous or calm, violent or gentle, etc. Or it may be purely self-expressive, as speech may be pure exclamation.

Language is primarily symbolic and incidentally symptomatic; exclamation is relatively rare. Gesture, on the contrary, is far more important as an avenue of self-expression than as "word." An expressive word is one that formulates an idea clearly and aptly, but a highly expressive gesture is usually taken to be one that reveals feeling or emotion. It is *spontaneous* movement.

In the dance, the actual and virtual aspects of gesture are mingled in complex ways. The movements, of course, are actual; they spring from an intention, and are in this sense actual gestures; but they are not the gestures they seem to be, because they seem to spring from feeling, as indeed they do not. The dancer's actual gestures are used, to create a semblance of self-expression, and are thereby transformed into virtual spontaneous movement, or virtual gesture. The emotion in which such gesture begins is virtual, a dance element, that turns the whole movement into dance gesture.

But what controls the performance of the actual movement? An actual body feeling, akin to that which controls the production of tones in musical performance—the final articulation of *imagined*

feeling in its appropriate physical form. The conception of a feeling disposes the dancer's body to symbolize it.

Virtual gesture may create the semblance of self-expression without anchoring it in the actual personality, which, as the source only of the actual (non-spontaneous) gestures, disappears as they do in the dance. In its place is the created personality, a dance element which figures simply as a psychical, human or superhuman Being. It is this that is expressing itself.

In the so-called modern dance the dancer seems to present his own emotions, i.e., the dance is a self-portrait of the artist. The created personality is given his name. But self-portraiture is a motif, and though it is the most popular motif of solo dancers today, and has become the foundation of a whole school, it is no more indispensable to "creative dancing" than any other motif. Quite as great dance may be achieved by other devices, for instance by simulating necessary connection of movements, i.e., mechanical unity of functions, as in *Petrushka*, or by creating the semblance of alien control, the "marionette" motif in all its varieties and derivatives. This latter device has had at least as great a career as the semblance of personal feeling which is the guiding principle of so-called modern dance. For the appearance of movement as gesture requires only its (apparent) emanation from a center of living force; strangely enough, a mechanism "come to life" intensifies this impression, perhaps by the internal contrast it presents. Similarly, the mystic force that works by remote control, establishing its own subsidiary centers in the bodies of the dancers, is even more effectively *visible power* than the naturalistic appearance of self-expression on the stage.

To keep virtual elements and actual materials separate is not easy for anyone without philosophical training, and is hardest, perhaps, for artists, to whom the created world is more immediately real and important than the factual world. It takes precision of thought not to confuse an imagined feeling, or a precisely conceived emotion that is formulated in a perceptible symbol, with a feeling or emotion actually experienced in response to real events. Indeed, the very notion of feelings and emotions not really felt, but only imagined, is strange to most people.

Yet there are such imaginary effects—in fact, there are several kinds: those which we imagine as our own; those which we impute to actual people on the stage in drama or dance; those which are imputed to fictitious characters in literature, or seem to characterize the beings portrayed in a picture or in sculpture, and are therefore part and parcel of an illusory scene or an illusory self. And all these emotive contents are different from the feelings, moods, or

emotions, which are expressed in the work of art as such, and constitute its "vital import"; for the import of a symbol is not something illusory, but something actual that is revealed, articulated, made manifest by the symbol. Everything illusory, and every imagined factor (such as a feeling we imagine ourselves to have) which supports the illusion, belongs to the symbolic form; the feeling of the whole work is the "meaning" of the symbol, the reality which the artist has found in the world and of which he wants to give his fellow men a clear conception.

The almost universal confusion of self-expression with dance expression, personal emotion with balletic emotion, is easy enough to understand if one considers the involved relations that dance really has to feeling and its bodily symptoms. It is, furthermore, not only induced by the popular conception of art as emotional catharsis, but is aggravated by another, equally serious and respected doctrine (which is, I think, untenable on many counts, though it is the theory held by Croce and Bergson), namely, that an artist gives us insight into actualities, that he penetrates to the nature of individual things, and shows us the unique character of such completely individual objects or persons. In so-called modern dance the usual motif is a person expressing her or his feelings. The absolutely individual essence to be revealed would, then, be a human soul. The traditional doctrine of the soul as a true substance, entirely unique, or individual, meets this theory of art more than halfway; and if the person whose joys and pains the dance represents is none other than the dancer, the confusions between feeling *shown* and feeling *represented*, symptom and symbol, motif and created image, are just about inescapable.

The recognition of a true artistic illusion, a realm of "Powers," wherein purely imaginary beings from whom the vital force emanates shape a whole world of dynamic forms by their magnet-like, psycho-physical actions, lifts the concept of Dance out of all its theoretical entanglements with music, painting, comedy and carnival or serious drama, and lets one ask *what belongs to dancing*, and what does not. It determines, furthermore, exactly how other arts are related to the ancient balletic art, and explains why it is so ancient, why it has periods of degeneration, why it is so closely linked with amusement, dressing-up, frivolity, on the one hand and with religion, terror, mysticism and madness on the other. Above all, it upholds the insight that dance, no matter how diverse its phases and how multifarious, perhaps even undignified its uses, is unmistakably and essentially art, and performs the functions of art in worship as in play.

The most important result, however, of recognizing the primary illusion of dance and the basic abstraction—virtual spontaneous gesture—that creates and fills and organizes it, is the new light this recognition sheds on the status, the uses, and the history of dancing. All sorts of puzzling dance forms and practices, origins, connections with other arts, and relations to religion and magic, become clear as soon as one conceives the dance to be neither plastic art nor music, nor a presentation of story, but a play of Powers made visible. From this standpoint one can understand the ecstatic dance and the animal dance, the sentimental waltz and the classical ballet, the mask and the mime and the orgiastic carnival, as well as the solemn funeral round or the tragic dance of a Greek chorus.

4

PHENOMENOLOGY: AN APPROACH TO DANCE

Maxine Sheets looks at dance as a phenomenologist—that is, she employs a philosophical method somewhat akin to “existential” analysis.

Phenomenology is a way of describing an experience—in this case, dance. The phenomenologist looks at dance in a pre-reflective manner, relying on direct intuition of the phenomenon. Thus, he describes dance in terms of a “lived experience.” The kinesthetic nature of dance led Sheets to describe closely the two structures that exist in any kinetic phenomenon: time and space.

This look at dance rejects the empirical definition that dance is a force in time and space, for that is not descriptive of the “lived experience” of dance. Dance, as Sheets so simply explains, is a phenomenon that is created. It “does not exist prior to its creation.” Note the description of dance as never being but, rather, constantly becoming.

The value of the phenomenological approach to “educational dance” may be that dance can at last be valued for what it is, instead of being prostituted as “an artistic means to a non-artistic end.”

PHENOMENOLOGY: AN APPROACH TO DANCE

MAXINE SHEETS

Phenomenology has to do with descriptions of man and the world, not as objectively constituted, not as given structures which we seek to know through controlled studies or experiments, through observable and recordable patterns of behavior, nor yet through a logical analysis or synthesis of known elements. It has to do rather with descriptions of man and the world as man lives in-the-midst-of-the-world, as he experiences himself and the world, keenly and acutely, before any kind of reflection whatsoever takes place. Its concern is with “foundations,” as Husserl, the first to propound the method, described this pre-reflective, pre-objective encounter. Instead of reflecting upon experience as the objective relationship of man to the world, the phenomenologist seeks the heart of the experience itself: the immediate and direct consciousness of man in the face of the world. Instead of taking man and the world for granted, each of which is constituted apart from a

From Maxine Sheets, *The Phenomenology of Dance* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press; © 1967 by the Regents of the University of Wisconsin), pp. 10-31.