

Beauty Always Dies: The Philosophical Significance of Nonenduring Artworks

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Beauty plus pity: that is the closest we can get to a definition of art. Where there is beauty there is pity, for the simple reason that beauty must die: beauty always dies, the manner dies with the matter, the world dies with the individual. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*

In Plato's myth of Er, the man returned from the dead says that souls soon to be born must drink from the river Lethe, "whose waters no vessel can contain." What exactly are those waters? Perhaps they are life itself, for life is a thing no vessel can contain. Every body it inhabits will in time be broken. Lewis Hyde, *A Primer for Forgetting*

Although dance works are considerably less likely to contain dialogue, or any explicit words at all, than many other performable artworks, we nonetheless very often have the sense, as we do with any sort of art, that a dance work is "saying" something; indeed, asking what a given artwork is saying, or what it means, is a fairly common way of trying to think about and engage with art. Having opened with that rather mundane observation, I should immediately register a note of caution. People—particularly philosophers, perhaps, but not only philosophers—sometimes place an inordinate emphasis on the question of what works of art *mean*, focusing on it almost to the exclusion of other questions. This is unfortunate, not only because of how frequently anxiety about knowing what artworks mean, and about getting that meaning "wrong," dissuades people from seeking out encounters with art, but also because this narrow focus leads to a neglect of other important questions,

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such as what artworks can allow or enable us to *experience*. Besides, whatever it is that artworks mean, it is rare that we can capture the meaning of an interesting artwork in the form philosophers tend to regard as the paradigmatic vehicle for the expression of “meanings”: that is, sets of propositions. The primary value of an artwork, in terms of its meaning, is that it says something that cannot be paraphrased or said in some other manner; something that cannot be said, perhaps, independently of its particular form.

The plausibility and significance of this view, I take it, are by now widely recognized. At any rate, I take seriously the idea that there are things we can know that cannot be expressed in language or formulated in propositions—for instance, what the color blue looks like, or how it feels to lose someone you love. Along with this, I suspect that one of the most valuable functions of art is to articulate and communicate, to whatever degree might be possible, such nonpropositional knowledge. An artwork may perform its function, and succeed—and, in the sense that I intend here, say something—not by asserting a new, heretofore unrecognized proposition about, say, the human experience of mortality, grief, and so on (i.e., articulating some determinate piece of information about death or grief that we did not previously possess), but by prompting us to feel the sting of mortality or grief in a way that we are not ordinarily capable of. Again, I take seriously the idea that such an experience may sometimes provide a kind of knowledge—perhaps *understanding* would be better—not otherwise available, especially since, on my view, such emotional experiences as grief quite literally can embody a kind of knowledge or understanding, so that, without the emotional experience, it is impossible to have the knowledge.¹

I should be clear that I do not want to say that the only value of art is that it leads to knowledge; rather, art provides and provokes experiences, and while an experience can sometimes lead to knowledge, or even constitute knowledge in its own right, its relation to knowledge does not exhaust its significance. Conversely, I do not want to suggest that it is only through art that knowledge of the sort I have in mind can be obtained. In Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, there is a moment when, a year after the death of his grandmother, the narrator sits down in a room next to her old room, leans over to take off his boots, and is suddenly overcome with grief:

I was shaken with sobs, tears streamed from my eyes. ... It was only at that moment—more than a year after her burial, because of the anachronism which so often prevents the calendar of facts from corresponding to the calendar of feelings—that I became conscious that she was dead. ... I had only just discovered this because I had only just ... learned that I had lost her forever.²

1. For more on this view, see my “Meaningless Happiness and Meaningful Suffering,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 42:3 (2004), 333–47.

2. Marcel Proust, *Cities of the Plain*, combined volume with *The Guermantes Way*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin, and D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 1983), 783–87. I want to thank Rick Furtak for drawing my attention to this passage in this particular context.

Given the kinesthetic dimension of dance, it is perhaps significant that the narrator's realization seems prompted by a bodily movement. At any rate, this moment will serve as an example of the kind of knowledge I have in mind that can be (but need not be) prompted by an experience of art. The book's narrator has known for a year, *intellectually*, that his grandmother was dead. But on his own account, he does not really *know* it until this particular moment.

My main idea will be that dance works, by virtue of certain facts about their nature as artworks, are especially well suited to engage with certain themes and philosophical issues that matter greatly to us, but which are notoriously and persistently difficult to understand or to think about clearly or adequately. Dance works, by their nature, behave very differently than the objects many of us unreflectively take, and have been encouraged to take, as paradigmatic works of art: that is, such stable and persisting objects and paintings and sculptures.³ Unlike a painting or a sculpture, that is, a dance work tends to happen (i.e., to be performed), and then, once it is done being performed, to disappear. It may leave traces, of course: recordings, critical reviews and responses, memories, and sometimes even a notated score. But these traces—or so, at any rate, it seems to me—have less of a tendency than in the case of most other artistic performances to encourage in us the thought that the artwork has in some substantial sense survived; and this suggests that dance, as an art, can engage with issues of survival, temporality, finitude, impermanence, and related matters in a way that other arts are unlikely to be able to.

As J.O. Urmson noted some time ago, the arts, for the most part—there were, he admitted, some problematic borderline cases—seem to fall into two groups: the temporal arts and the atemporal arts.⁴ “Temporal” and “atemporal,” here, do not refer to the conditions of creation, nor even, in the most straightforward sense, of experience: Obviously, it takes a certain amount of time both to create an artwork and to experience one. Rather, they follow from asking the question of whether a given artwork, so to speak, *contains* time—whether, to put it another way, the artwork as experienced is something that happens. A temporal artwork is one that includes events, or one whose happening is an event. Songs, symphonies, and other musical works are examples. “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” in its canonical Beatles-performed version, is a little under two and a half minutes long and consists of parts each of which bears some temporal relation (coming before or after, for instance) to each other part. Dance works, obviously, fall into this class: A dance, or a dance performance, is something that happens, which is to say that it takes

3. I mean, of course, paintings and sculptures as they have traditionally been conceived and created. In the past few decades, some artists—Andy Goldsworthy is a well-known example—have taken to creating ephemeral sculptural works that are designed and intended to fall apart.

4. J.O. Urmson, “The Performing Arts,” in J. Muirhead and H. D. Lewis, eds., *Contemporary British Philosophy, Personal Statements*, Fourth Series (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976), 239–52. See also Urmson, “Literature,” in George Dickie and R. J. Sclafani, eds. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), 334–41.

time to perform a dance; and there seems to be no way genuinely to encounter a given dance, other than by witnessing such a temporal event—that is, a performance of that dance.

By contrast, an atemporal artwork is one that does not happen in time in this sense. Again, this is not to say that experiencing such a work is not itself an event that takes place in time—it takes time, after all, to take even a quick glance at a painting. But a painting does not begin and end in the sense in which a dance or performance does. And with a painting or sculpture, it is up to the viewer how much time is spent looking at it, whereas the amount of time taken up by a given performance of a particular musical work depends in part on the work itself and in part on the conductor and/or performers. The audience, if it is to experience the work and not simply a piece of the work, must stay and listen until the performers are done.

What was most interesting about Urmson's account was his claim that temporal and atemporal arts tended to differ systematically in other ways as well. These differences are on the whole contingent rather than necessary, but they are fairly robust, at least relative to the cultural and artistic practices that have prevailed in the West. First, the temporal arts are *performing* arts, whereas nonperforming arts are also nontemporal arts. Because, in the performing arts, "the creator does not as such produce those things (sounds, movements) of which the witnessable work consists," the performing arts, as Urmson puts it, "require a distinction between performer and creator" (242–43).⁵ Supposing that we consider a performance itself as a kind of artwork, we can say that when one witnesses a dance, one in effect experiences two artworks: the dance "itself," which was created by a choreographer, and the particular performative interpretation of that dance which has been and is being created by the particular dancer one is watching. In nonperforming arts, by contrast—the paradigm cases being arts like painting and sculpture—the features seen and otherwise perceived by the audience are precisely those that were directly created by the original artist; there is no performer to mediate.

Second, Urmson claims, whereas the ontological nature of the artwork is quite straightforward with respect to the nonperforming arts, the identity of a work of performing art is "philosophically problematic" (243). With painting and sculpture, "the work can be unproblematically identified with some particular physical thing" (243). *Impression: Sunrise* is simply a particular physical object, located, in any given moment, at some particular place. If that particular physical object is reduced to ashes or shredded into particles, *Impression: Sunrise* no longer exists. But there is no such singular physical object in the case of the performing arts. So what is a performable artwork? Urmson's answer takes the form of what we can straightforwardly refer to

5. Of course, the claim is only that the witnessable features are not *as such* created by the creator, but rather by the performer. Obviously, there are cases in which the creator and the performer are the same individual. Indeed, this must be the case if there are such things as improvised works, which are after all created and performed in one and the same moment by one and the same person.

as the recipe view. “So, I suggest, what the composer of music, plays or dances produces is a recipe or set of instructions; the performer follows the recipe with more or less skill and greater or less aesthetic judgment and imagination.”⁶ “[T]he best account to give of the contribution of the creative artist in the case of [the performing arts] is that he provides a recipe or set of performing instructions for the executant artist.”⁷

It should immediately be said that it is not clear how many, if any, of the traditional ontological puzzles regarding the ontology of artworks are cleared up or avoided by adopting a recipe view. After all, the recipe view seems simply to push questions about ontology back one level. If we can ask what kind of thing an artwork is, we can also ask what kind of thing a recipe is. And since recipes would seem to be repeatable—it’s easy enough, particularly with contemporary technology, to make a copy of a musical score or dance notation—the view seems to inherit all of the problems that attached to the idea of repeatable artworks. Still, as far as performables go, the recipe view seems to capture an important truth. But what form will a recipe take?

Some performance arts are *notational*: The artworks tend to be associated with, and perhaps even defined by, a certain definite notation. Perhaps the most obvious example of a notational performing art, in the Western tradition, would be Western concert music. Here, the composition of the notation—the musical score—is often regarded as the creation of the musical work, and in general the question of whether a performance counts as a performance of that work is to be settled by considerations concerning how closely the performance adheres to, and how far it deviates from, the score. Another example would be theater, where, standardly, notations are referred to as plays; much like the case of music, the truth of the claim that a given theatrical performance is a performance of *King Lear*, and not of *Hamlet*, would generally be held to be established by such facts as the fact that the actors speak the dialogue found in the *King Lear* notation, and perform actions appropriately connected with that dialogue, and so on.

But here we are immediately beset with complications. First, there can be multiple versions of a given notation, and deciding what counts as the “official” version—or what is to be done when it is not possible to designate one notation as the official version—is a complex matter. Even confining ourselves to the versions authored by Shakespeare himself, there are multiple extant versions of *King Lear*. Second, even where a single “definitive” version can be identified, theatrical practice permits, and to some degree encourages, a certain amount of deviation from the given notation. Performances of *Hamlet*, for instance, nearly always omit some of the dialogue of that play, and different passages may be chosen for omission in different productions. A given performance, then, need not match a given notation exactly in order to count as a performance of that work.

6. Urmson, “The Performing Arts,” 245.

7. Urmson, “Literature,” 336.

What's more, we can imagine two performances, neither of which deviate at all from a given notation, yet which differ from each other in significant ways, where, moreover, the differences are relevant to the artistic value of the performance and to the nature of the aesthetic experience provided by the performance. This gestures toward a familiar but significant distinction between differences in skill and differences in interpretation. Differences in skill are fairly straightforward. Their existence is suggested by the fact that it does not follow, from the supposition that A and B both perform the same part in the same piece of music and that neither makes a mistake (i.e., neither deviates from the notation, within acceptable limits), that their performances are equally good. For A might play more sensitively than B; her tone might be finer, more pleasing, or more consistent; her pacing might be more expressive; and so on. Playing well is not simply a matter of playing the right notes in the proper order. And the same, obviously enough, goes for acting in theatrical productions, and for other sorts of performances.

But there are also differences of interpretation. A and B might in fact play equally well, and deliver equally valuable performances of their parts, and yet play them quite differently. One performance of a given musical work might be more slowly paced than another. Different performances might accentuate certain instruments used in a given piece, or different themes, or moods. Moreover, to say that two distinct performances are equally valuable from a neutral point of view—or, what might perhaps be more common and at any rate will strike some as less objectionable, that it cannot be decided, from any neutral and objective point of view, which of two distinct performances is in fact superior—is not to say that there must be some flaw in preferring one to the other; that you and I differ in which interpretations we prefer does not imply that one of us must be wrong.

Differences of this sort are even easier to find in theatrical performances. It might take at least a certain level of sophisticated musical discrimination in order to hear the distinct personalities of two equally talented musicians, and to appreciate what makes them distinct. It takes very little training, on the other hand, to notice at least some of the differences when two different actors play the same role. Human individuals, after all, simply look different; when they speak they sound different; and ordinary human minds are very good indeed at detecting and registering these differences. Different people have different personalities, and we are all, simply as a matter of daily living, quite developed in our ability to “see” those personalities as instantiated and expressed in people's speech, gestures, and general behavior. Of course to some degree, the skill of an actor involves inhabiting a character so that it is the character's personality, and not one's own, that is manifested and expressed onstage. Nonetheless, a character is not so fully defined on the page that an actor's appearance and personality will or could be entirely subsumed: Philip Seymour Hoffman's Austin (from Sam Shepard's *True West*) will be different from John C. Reilly's Austin no matter how fully they inhabit the character, and the fact that this is so does not signal some sort of failure on the part of the actors.

To say that a character, on the pages of a play, is not so fully defined that the identity of the actor playing them would be rendered irrelevant is really just a way of saying that characters in plays are in a significant sense underdetermined. And indeed, all notations, no matter how fully and explicitly spelled out, are underdetermined in significant ways. A play does not ordinarily state how the stage should be lit; a musical score does not tell us precisely how loudly or aggressively a given note should be played. In general, then, it would be a mistake to think that the notation or score can include everything, or that it ought to do so. For the most part, however, this is not taken as an insuperable difficulty for the idea that performable artworks might be preserved via notation, for it is common with respect to some forms of art—again, Western concert music seems a core example—to think that everything *essential* to the artwork *is* given in the score and that what remains outside the score must be, in a substantial sense, incidental. This thought, indeed, encourages the view that musical works are *defined* by their scores and that the question of whether a given performance is a performance of a certain work must be answered in terms of that performance's fidelity to the score. Whether or not this is true with respect to concert music, however, it may well strike us as a considerably less plausible thought in connection with dance, where there may well be no score or notation at all, and where, even when there is, the notion of fidelity to a score seems to be a considerably more flexible, problematic, and perhaps elusive concept.

For one thing, whereas in music (or the recitation of a poem, etc.) it is possible to specify a performer's goals in terms of a product (a sound) that is distinct from the action she performs, this is impossible in dance. That is, one can tell a clarinetist to play a certain note for a certain period of time, and leave it up to her (in principle) just how she is to manipulate her body and her instrument in order to accomplish that. The performed artistic work—the concerto, the poem, or what have you—exists as a to-be-experienced thing that, while produced by her actions, is not strictly identical to her actions. And this degree of independence seems to make it possible to describe such works in more “objective” terms than a dance work can be described, for in dance it is the movements of the body themselves, and not what they bring about, that constitute the performed work. Practically speaking, of course, one needs a working voice box and a certain amount of breath to recite a poem, but one need not refer to the voice box, or any of the anatomical or acoustical properties of one's various body parts, within the text of the poem itself. (And one could conceivably bring about the reading of a poem in other ways—by using text-to-speech software, for instance, or teaching it to one's parrot.) The text of the poem can remain pure and independent of the bodily motions that constitute the performance of that text (and of such matters as the precise intonation, pitch, volume, etc.) in a way that is not possible in the case of dance. In the latter case, as Adina Armelagos and Mary Sirridge have noted, subtle differences in movement can be highly significant, not only to how a sequence of dance movements is experienced, but to the question of whether a given sequence has been performed—or at any rate, whether it has been *correctly* performed:

[S]equences in dance have an element which seems likely to resist notation. With great care and extreme disregard for economy, most spatial vocabularies could be captured by [a notational system]. But choreographers also deal in kinesthetic motivation.

A sequence of positions may be “letter perfect.” Still, if there is not in addition the correct kinesthetic motivation, the sequence is quite literally wrong. Kinesthetic motivation ... has to do with the way sequences of movement are organized. It may be taught by example, explained in terms of where the impulse starts and how it develops, or elucidated by images, e.g., “hinge the arms out like a fan.” Slight differences in kinesthetic motivation make a great difference in the quality of movement produced. Movement wrongly motivated will be and look wrong, i.e., inaccurate.⁸

“Given the nature of choreography as we have sketched it,” Armelagos and Sirridge write, “it is not surprising that theorists and artists view the notion of an adequate notation for dance with suspicion. Under the best of circumstances, there is a good deal of information to be encoded, information which is usually carried in visual or kinesthetic memory precisely because it has to do with vocabulary and motivation.”⁹

These points are closely related to what Julie van Camp has referred to as “the special status of a dancer’s body as his instrument—a body that is especially prone to all sorts of alterations affecting performance.”¹⁰ Because the instrument of dance is the human body, and because different human bodies differ from one another much more radically than different clarinets or violins do, there is no standardization of instruments possible in dance that is comparable to that which generally obtains in music, and performances of the same dance work by different bodies can be expected to vary to a much greater degree than will performances of the same musical work by different musicians.¹¹ A human body, too, will tend to perform at least somewhat differently on different occasions and will change over time in ways that a clarinet or violin will not; thus, distinct performances of the same work by the same body, and in particular performances separated by substantial intervals of time, will tend to exhibit visible and indeed substantial differences of a sort we would not expect other sorts of instruments to display. The choreographer Paul Taylor has written, of his experience working with dancers,

8. Adina Armelagos and Mary Sirridge, “The Identity Crisis in Dance,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 37:2: 129–39 (1978), 134.

9. Armelagos and Sirridge, 134.

10. Julie van Camp, “Anti-Geneticism and Critical Practice in Dance,” *Dance Research Journal* 13:1 (Autumn 1980), 29–35, 31.

11. Unless, of course, we are talking about singing. Here, the situation that obtains with respect to music is very similar to that which obtains with respect to dance.

More often than not, the kind of dance we work on together turns out to be dependent on those different dancers as individuals. ... These eight dancers are not exactly like tubes of paint with which to cover the canvas of space. Not exactly. They have character and personality which they *assert*. They have individual traits, and just when you think you know how to handle them, they *change*.¹²

Thus, while there is always a significant gap between a notation and an actual performance, the fact that many pertinent particularities and peculiarities of the particular human body cannot be notated implies that the separation seems deeper in the case of dance than with respect to many other sorts of performable art; and the idea that a notation can fully capture or represent the work—or, for that matter, everything that is essential to the work—seems less plausible when applied to dance than when applied to other kinds of art.¹³

It is largely for such reasons that the practice of relying heavily on notations tends to be the norm with respect to some forms of art and not others. As we might now expect, it turns out not to be a universal norm with respect to dance. As Armelagos and Sirridge write,

if there is no significant and generally applicable consensus about what is and is not incidental, then an art form just is not amenable to notation, which presupposes such a distinction.

And dance, they argue, is in precisely this position:

It is in fact the uniquely recordative function of the [musical] score which makes it an adequate criterion of identity for the work. The problem is that there is in most cases no analogous production score for dance. ... Sometimes the choreographer does a great deal more than draw up a definitive plan of movement—and sometimes a good deal less.¹⁴

This makes dance unlike concert music (but *not* unlike a great deal of jazz and folk music, which is transmitted via a kind of oral community tradition) and unlike literature in its familiar text-based contemporary forms (but *not* unlike Homeric epic poetry or other works existing in oral poetic traditions—indeed, as Anna Christina Soy Ribeiro points out in her useful paper on the topic, “the vast majority of poems throughout history have no fixed texts. Their works are linguistically fluid, changing from performance to

12. Paul Taylor, “Down with Choreography,” in S. J., Cohen, ed., *The Modern Dance: Seven Statements of Belief* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1965), 9192; quoted in Armelagos and Sirridge, 133.

13. This is not to say that all philosophers of dance agree that dance cannot be notated. See, for example, Graham McFee, *The Philosophical Aesthetics of Dance: Identity, Performance, and Understanding* (Binsted, UK: Dance Books, 2011). I briefly return to McFee’s position at the end of the article.

14. Armelagos and Sirridge, 133. Later on, they write that “The fact that scores often do precede performance and are sometimes used to preserve the intricacies of movement for future dancers ... leads to the infelicitous tendency to overstate the parallel between the scores of music or drama and those of dance” (137).

performance”¹⁵). And it helps us to understand comments such as the following, by dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham:

Notation—all of those systems based as they are on symbols which are translated by the dancer are out of whack. The element of them that has always troubled me was the translating act. The notator looks at a step, translates it into a symbol, writes it down, then sometime later, the dancer looks at the symbol, translates it back into a step, and then does it. But this is not the way a dancer acts. In his class and in rehearsing, he looks directly at the step, or someone doing a movement, and recognizes that immediately into his own body. It is more direct than the symbol syndrome. ... I say the symbol is an unnecessary hang-up with the past.¹⁶

The idea that translation into enduring symbols represents an “unnecessary hang-up with the past” expresses something important in the way many people think about dance. (It is important to remember here that a dance is less likely to incorporate particular *words*, which are themselves a kind of abstract and enduring symbol, than most other performed artworks. Instrumental musical works also do not incorporate words, but as we have observed, such works are themselves linguistic in the significant sense of being translatable into musical notation, which serves in this context as a kind of language.) Related attitudes are sometimes held regarding the possibility of preserving dances through recording technology—often by dancers themselves. Thus in an essay on her video work, *Otake Eiko*, of the well-known dance duo *Eiko & Koma*, expresses numerous reservations about the adequacy of recordings as substitutes for or representations of dances:

Koma and I had rarely been interested in looking at ourselves on video—until 1983, when we started producing our own “media dance.” Through actual hands-on involvement, we each have developed taste and gained knowledge while still holding on to our reservations about “preserving” dance. We make media work not to record, but to investigate.

When video recording first became widely available in the dance field, Koma and I were, at best, indifferent to the medium. Although various performing venues have recorded our performances for their archives, we rarely looked at them, and then only if we felt it might be useful to make notes for ourselves.

We do not care to see our performance footage; it depresses us. Recorded on video, our dance generally looks dull because it is so slow. What happens on stage is only half of what happens in a theater: audiences complete the work by receiving and reacting to it, and that relationship is impossible to record on videotape. In addition, the stage lighting, which

15. Anna Christina Soy Ribeiro, “The Spoken and the Written: An Ontology of Poems,” in John Gibson, ed., *The Philosophy of Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 127–48, 136.

16. Merce Cunningham, *Changes: Notes on Choreography* (New York, 1965), quoted in Armelagos and Sirridge, 134.

is an important part of our work, does not translate onto video. A camera cannot see what a human can see.¹⁷

As with the resistance to notation, there are multiple issues with recording. One is that recording leaves out highly significant dimensions of dance performances—the liveness, the sense of physical presence, the sense of open possibility, the audience response, the lighting. Another, also significant, is the lurking idea that even should a recording technology that somehow managed to capture all of these aspects somehow become available, it would nonetheless be an error to use such a technology to fix in time an artform that by its nature ought to remain unfixed, changeable, and in some important matter indeterminate—that the urge to make dance more like painting or sculpture by transforming a live performance into a fixed, embalmed object would simply represent a different kind of “unnecessary hang-up with the past.”

Such issues are far from being matters of idle philosophical speculation. They are, in fact, deeply implicated in practical questions faced by choreographers, curators, archivists, and others. In a book on Eiko & Koma that attempts to survey their oeuvre, the book’s editor, Joan Rothfuss, notes that

Performance is an inherently variable medium that in some way resists cataloguing efforts such as this one. Changes in venue, audience, weather, resources, and the performer’s body ensure that no two presentations of any given work are exactly alike.¹⁸

To the extent that our ways of thinking about art have been shaped by the assumption that art works, paradigmatically, are enduring and relatively stable physical objects like paintings and sculptures that can be encountered and engaged with on multiple occasions under more or less uniform conditions—and that the whole class of performable artworks, therefore, must be regarded to a certain degree as a deviant category—these difficulties of cataloguing, archiving, and preservation will tend to strike us as unfortunate and as obstacles. From a different perspective they might instead seem to generate a kind of opportunity. The fact that dance is by nature an ephemeral art form, one whose instances cannot be preserved but are fated to evaporate as soon as the performance is complete, is precisely what makes dance so well suited to address issues of temporality, mortality, impermanence, and the vulnerability to time and circumstance of human happiness and the human body.

Thus, the focus, in dance, on the body of the dancer—a body that is not only placed on display but that is often pushed to its limits on the dance stage, a body whose inherent fragility is, through the movements of dance, rendered explicit and highly visible—can offer the audience a direct and powerful experience of the vulnerability of human lives and bodies in general (and, by extension, of their own lives and bodies). This is something we are

17. Eiko Otake, “A Dancer Behind the Lens,” in J. Mitoma, E. Zimmer, and D. A. Steiber, eds., *Envisioning Dance on Film and Video* (Routledge, 2002), 82–88, 82.

18. Joan Rothfuss, ed., *Eiko & Koma: Time Is Not Even, Space Is Not Empty* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2011), 83.

all aware of intellectually, of course, but the consciousness of one's own fragility as an embodied being is frequently pushed beneath the surface for purposes of daily living. To know and acknowledge it is one thing, but to *feel* it, emotionally and viscerally, is something else. We might well be struck, while reading Hubert Dreyfus, by the power of his observation that

when we are in the real world, not just as minds but as embodied vulnerable human beings, we must constantly be ready for dangerous surprises. Perhaps, when this sense of vulnerability is absent, our whole experience is sensed as unreal.¹⁹

But this remark is likely to mean that much more to us if we happen to have just witnessed a performance of Eiko & Koma's 1993 work, *Wind*:

In the opening scene of *Wind*, Koma shot an arrow into the empty space as feathers drifted down from the ceiling toward a thin pool of water on the stage. A breeze from offstage set them swirling—an evocation of wind. In this otherworldly scene, Eiko & Koma and their son Yuta danced a series of solos and duets that explored the ethereal power of air, the passage of time, and the inevitable passage of lives. The performers always entered from stage right and exited stage left, with one exception: a scene in which the child entered from the left, as if he were a visitor from another world.²⁰

Moreover, the experience of actually being present at such a performance—as opposed to hearing it described, or watching a recording of the event on video—may help awaken precisely the sense of human life and presence-in-the-world as *real* that Dreyfus's observation alludes to—very much in the way that, in the Proust passage mentioned above, the narrator's physical action of removing his boots allows him to experience as real, for the first time, the fact of his grandmother's death.

In Joan Rothfuss's book, the description I quoted above of *Wind* is accompanied by an explicatory comment from the dancers themselves, who write that "A child could easily die before parents. Our assumed order is fragile."²¹ Of course, artworks of other sorts could incorporate or explore this idea in their own way. One could certainly take it as the theme of a meditative essay, for example. But it is important to be sensitive to the ways in which the very form of an essay, and its material and metaphysical conditions, might to some degree undermine any sense of fragility or impermanence that might otherwise be provoked by the subject matter. For an essay is not fragile, vulnerable, or finite in the way that a performing human body is. Because it can preserve its identity through replication, an essay, like any literary work, at least stands a chance of surviving for hundreds, even thousands of years. And I personally can return to read an essay again and again, as much as I choose to, knowing that it will not have changed in the interim.

19. Hubert Dreyfus, *On the Internet* (2nd ed., New York: Routledge, 2002), 54.

20. Rothfuss, *Eiko & Koma*, 175.

21. Eiko & Koma, e-mail message to Rothfuss, Feb 2, 2011; quoted on Rothfuss, 175.

A dance performance, by contrast, is something whose beginning and end take place before our eyes. Once over, it is over, and rarely can it be revisited; all we have are our memories of it. And particularly where a dance work is so closely identified with its originators and original performers that we recognize a sense in which *that particular dance work* could not be performed by anyone other than those particular individuals (as is certainly the case with the works of Eiko & Koma), our experience of a dance is conditioned by our knowledge that what we are seeing is not something others in the distant future will be able to see. All of this allows dance to speak to issues of time, experience, impermanence, and fragility in a way that is not at all available to traditional paintings and sculptures, and at least somewhat inaccessible to a good number of performable arts.

One of the risks of focusing on or overly emphasizing such “permanent” arts as painting and sculpture, then—I mean, of course, *relatively* permanent, as all art, regardless of its material basis, eventually decays and disintegrates—is that allowing such art to dominate our attention might encourage a falsely reassuring and consoling view of human life, prompting us to place our hopes in an underlying stability that simply is not there, and thus encouraging certain unrealistic fantasies about human life. To my mind, the most profound awareness of this risk in Western literature appears in the poems of Keats, and his awareness of it, and of the tension between the apparent permanence of art and the ephemerality of the life that art depicts, is precisely what drives many of his greatest works. I am thinking, in particular, of “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” The second stanza makes the tension explicit:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
 Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
 Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
 Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
 Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
 Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
 Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
 She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

We aspire to the eternal, the perfect, the unlimited. Being human, how could we do otherwise? We imagine works of art that transcend the limitations of the material, artworks that provoke ecstatic experiences that are unmitigated by the conditions of human consciousness and perception, and whose ecstasies do not fade with time; and—or so Keats feared—every experience of actual art, actual beauty, or actual life, is tinged with regret rooted in our feeling

that all such experiences fall short of this posited ideal. But of course, the very idea of “unheard” melodies, of “ditties of no tone” is a contradiction in terms; to choose to live in such a world, if such a choice were somehow available to us, would be to choose not to live, for life itself is movement. The cost of keeping one’s love alive forever—preserving her in amber, as it were—would be that it would become impossible to kiss her, to make love to her, to love her. One loves a living body, and a living body is a thing that moves.²² The profound irony that is implicit here—the process by which the longing for love tempts us toward a longing to preserve life, which in turn threatens to lead us into a longing for a stasis that is indistinguishable from death—appears in another form in Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” in which the poet’s longing to escape from his anxieties about mortality by becoming like a bird (an animal he imagines as having no consciousness of death), signaled by the line “Now more than ever seems it rich to die,” gives way to the sudden realization that his death would not in fact represent the attainment of his desire to unite with the bird and its beautiful song, but rather the extinction of any ability to hear that song or appreciate its beauty: “Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—/ To thy high requiem become a sod.” Other core poets of the Western tradition, both before and after Keats, have also turned their attention to these themes. We might think, for instance, of Shakespeare’s famous Sonnet 18, or of Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium,” which seems intended as an elaboration of, or a response to, “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”

These themes, central to Western thinking, haunt not just poetry, but art and philosophy as well. Part of what grips Keats in his odes is the recognition that Western aesthetics has always valorized fixed, enduring art, largely because it has associated beauty with the eternal, even though thinking about beauty in this way—as something that must be permanent or eternal, and hence stand outside of time—is in direct conflict with many of our experiences of beauty, which center on fleeting images and passing phenomena: sunrises and sunsets, a particular cloudscape at a particular moment, a blossoming flower, fireworks, a flash of green briefly visible in a collapsing ocean wave, a lovely smile in a passing face, a human body at the height of its attractiveness. This last example is directly engaged with in Plato’s *Symposium*, a foundational text that clearly privileges the abstract and the eternal over and above finite concrete particulars; indeed the latter are seen at best as pale reflections or imitations of timeless things, and at worst as unreal. We may begin by loving particulars, but as we ascend the ladder of intellectual sophistication we soon find ourselves losing interest the things of this world and transferring our desire to the constituents of the postulated ideal realm. It is indeed partly due to the influence of Plato

22. Lewis Hyde’s recent book offers a lovely statement of the idea: “if forgetting is a fall into birth and time, then a pure, triumphant memory will mean an end to emerging life and a fixing of time, everything stuck just where it is (stuck, we might say, in those eternal, unchanging forms). . . . True, when time flows, we are in the world of sickness, old age, and death, but we are also in the world of fertility, new life, and fresh action, and it is these that call for an allowed forgetting.” (Hyde, *A Primer for Forgetting* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2019), 73-74.

that our thinking has such a difficult time detaching itself from the thought that a genuine work of art must in some way be permanent—a thought which once again reflects the preeminence and assumed paradigmatic status of relatively stable art forms such as painting and sculpture. Of course, the matter is complex: Paintings and sculptures are concrete particulars, after all, so they too possess little value in a strictly Platonic metaphysical scheme. But few of us are strict Platonists; and at any rate, while they are not literally immortal or timeless, enduring physical objects like Keats’s urn do nevertheless suggest a kind of illusory immortality, while performed artworks, if they are to be recognized as bearers of Platonic value, would need to be identified with something timeless, immaterial, and abstract—some kind of idealized notation, perhaps. But it is precisely this sort of identification, as we have noted, that is resisted by dance works; instead they tend to emphasize their ephemeral dimension, and it is very hard to see how, on a Platonic view, a genuinely ephemeral experience could have much if any real value at all.

This Platonic metaphysics is to some degree taken up by and incorporated into Christian worldviews, so that it is perhaps not surprising that in recent philosophy claims about the value (or lack thereof) of what is ephemeral or finite are particularly salient in discussions regarding the meaning of life. Some Christian writers have used the assumption that life must be utterly devoid of value if it does not last forever to argue that there must be an afterlife and, hence, that God must exist—or, if not that, then at least that we must believe that this is so if we are not to give in to nihilism and despair. Tolstoy, in his widely read piece “My Confession,” rejects for precisely this reason the idea that a life that does not last forever might nonetheless have value:

Sooner or later there would come diseases and death (they had come already) to my dear ones and to me, and there would be nothing left but stench and worms. All my affairs, no matter what they might be, would sooner or later be forgotten, and I myself should not exist. So why should I worry about all these things?²³

The assumption that seems to lie behind this—that the fact that a life, or actions within a life, might make a *temporary* difference cannot ground value or meaning if that difference turns out to be *merely* temporary—is made explicit in William Lane Craig’s “The Absurdity of Life Without God”:

The contributions of the scientist to the advance of human knowledge, the researches of the doctor to alleviate pain and suffering, the efforts of the diplomat to secure peace in the world, the sacrifices of good men everywhere to better the lot of the human race—all these come to nothing [on the atheistic view]. In the end they don’t make one bit of difference, not one bit. Each person’s life is therefore without ultimate significance. And because our lives are ultimately meaningless, the

23. Leo Tolstoy, “My Confession,” in E. D. Klemke, ed., *The Meaning of Life*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 11–20, 13.

activities we fill our lives with are also meaningless. The long hours spent in study at the university, our jobs, our interests, our friendships—all these are, in the final analysis, utterly meaningless. This is the horror of modern man: because he ends in nothing, he is nothing.²⁴

The view is not confined to religious believers, of course. As Robert Nozick notes in *Philosophical Explanations*,

People do seem to think it important to continue to be around somehow. ... [On this view,] a significant life is, in some sense, permanent; it makes a permanent difference to the world—it leaves traces. To be wiped out completely, traces and all, goes a long way toward destroying the meaning of one's life.²⁵

“People,” of course, does not mean “everyone”—many, including Nozick, are skeptical of the intuition—but it does no doubt express a fairly widespread view, and is probably assumed implicitly by a significant number of people who have not gone through the trouble of explicitly formulating it to themselves, or considering its merits.

Obviously, people are likely to have strong feelings of one sort or another about these claims. My goal, of course, is not to try to settle this issue in what small space I have remaining in this article.²⁶ My point, rather, is that dance, as the most ephemeral of art forms, and the one that is thus implicitly the most committed to existing almost completely in the present moment—that is, the moment of performance—is thus in a very real sense committed in its very nature to enacting and engaging with these fundamental philosophical ideas and disagreements, whether or not its audience (or, for that matter, its creators or performers) are consciously aware of those ideas with respect to any particular work or performance. Again, as stated previously, we need not take this to mean that dance pieces are putting forward or contesting propositional claims related to these debates, or that the “meaning” of a particular dance work can ever be isolated and paraphrased in such terms. The contribution of dance works to our philosophical thinking in this area, like the contributions of the various arts, tends to take a quite different form; but it is very real nonetheless. The lyricist Yip Harburg once said, “Words make you think a thought. Music makes you feel a feeling. A song makes you feel a thought.” This is a bit oversimple, perhaps, but it is helpful. It is oversimple in part because words—the words of a poem, for instance—can also make one feel a feeling. And—more to the point for the present article—I would argue that an artwork of any form, when successful, can make one feel a thought. *Wind*, for instance, can help its

24. William Lane Craig, “The Absurdity of Life Without God,” in Klemke, 40–56, 42.

25. Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 582.

26. A useful place to begin, for those interested in diving more deeply into the matter, would be Skott Brill, “Does It Matter that Nothing We Do Will Matter in a Million Years?” *Dialogue* 46:1 (December 2007), 3–25.

audience feel thoughts like “Human existence is fragile” and “human bodies are vulnerable.” These are, perhaps, quite banal thoughts when so baldly stated; but then, so is a thought like *my grandmother is dead*. And that is just the point: We may need *Wind*—or some other work of art—to truly see that such thoughts are *not* banal. We often need the assistance of art to *feel* their truth, and thus grasp them in a genuine way.

A closing note. Some dance theorists would perhaps resist many of the claims I have made about dance. Some, for instance, seem much less skeptical than I am about the prospect of an adequate notational system for dance works. Graham McFee notes that Nelson Goodman rejects, in *Languages of Art*, the argument that dance “is far too complicated to be captured by any notation”; and McFee himself seems to be at least largely in Goodman’s camp here, in as much as he seems to hold (in *The Philosophical Aesthetics of Dance*) that we can be confident that the attributes omitted by an (adequate) notation will always be incidental to the identity of the dance work:

[I]f one can re-perform *any* dancework ... then a particular work can be *repeated*. Commonsense tells us that the “repeat” is quite likely *not* to be qualitatively indistinguishable from the previous performance—but any serious thinking about performing arts must *begin* from the fact that performances with significantly different properties can nevertheless be performances of the very same works of art.²⁷

I am willing to accept much of this, and so it is not clear to me whether I in fact have a substantial disagreement with McFee or not. At any rate I have been discussing tendencies and generalities, and am not interested in defending the universal claim that dance works can *never* be repeated or even, perhaps, that they *always* resist being notated. But this leaves it an open question—and I am not sure that McFee regards it as open, which is presumably the source of my suspicion that there is a disagreement lurking here—whether *all* dance works can be repeated; and if so, just when and what determines that they can be. It seems to me, for instance, that some dance works are so closely identified with particular creators and performers that the most straightforward answer to the question “Could these works be repeated in the future with different performers?” would have to be no. Again, I need not deny that there is *some* sense in which a version of *Wind* might be put on, two centuries from now, by people who have studied Eiko & Koma’s work. But in this case, the sense in which this could not, in fact, happen, seems to me more significant and straightforward, and indeed to more nearly capture the literal meaning of the question. At any rate, I do not think that the most interesting questions here—questions of just what *is* lost when a work is performed by different individuals, or when other variables are varied, alongside questions of how much, and in what way, these

27. McFee, *The Philosophical Aesthetics of Dance*, 106. The Goodman quotation is from *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), 212; quoted in McFee, 105.

lost elements matter—are to be settled by common sense or common practice, any more than interesting questions about personal identity are to be settled by observing that for legal purposes, I am indeed the individual who borrowed two hundred dollars six months ago, and am therefore obligated to pay it back.

All that is really required, along these lines, is that it be reasonable to think that dance is more resistant to being preserved than most other arts—that it is, by its nature, ephemeral and nonrepeatable in a way, or at any rate to a degree, that does not apply to other kinds of art. And this will almost certainly be true even if, ultimately, we decide to agree with Goodman and McFee that dance works can sometimes, perhaps even frequently, be repeated, preserved, and/or notated in some substantial sense. That is, it is almost certainly true that *more* is left uncaptured when dance works are notated, recorded, re-performed, or otherwise preserved than when most other kinds of performable works are put through similar processes, and that what is left uncaptured retains a greater degree of value and interest. To note that this is a general issue regarding performable arts, but one whose application will vary with respect to different forms of art and also with respect to different particular works, is really just to return to a version of Urmson's claim, noted earlier, that the ontology of performable artworks generates problems of a sort that do not arise at all in connection with paintings, sculptures, or other enduring art objects. It is precisely for such reasons that performable works, and in particular, works that by their nature tend to resist being preserved or adequately translated into other forms, may be philosophically useful for thinking about and engaging with certain questions, and may be able to embody and enact certain forms of understanding that are, with respect to other arts, considerably more elusive.