

The way then in which debate about art tends to flow freely back and forth among specialists and non-specialists alike, indicates that the answer to the question 'What is art?' is, in some sense, already known. The question presupposes that examples of art have already been identified. Moreover, as will have been evident throughout this discussion, we are also able to take for granted a great deal about art in general – for instance, that it is a complex phenomenon, that its manifestations are amazingly diverse and that it constantly undergoes change.

It has also become clear that the status of artworks is determined by history. Nevertheless, as Diffey argues (1969: 147), there are occasions, especially in periods (such as our own) when the arts are subject to rapid change, when the question whether something is a work of art is not an idle one. For while this has *normally* been settled, it does not follow that the decision can *never* be contested, though neither does the successful contesting of a particular case mean that *nothing* is settled. There is thus every reason why philosophers should continue to pursue their enquiries into the question 'What is art?'

The concept of art would certainly seem to be a classic case of the sort known as 'essentially complex and essentially contested' – a concept, that is, lacking full elaboration, yet nevertheless in general use. It is one that does not *as it happens* occasion endless disputes, but is *in the nature of the case* contestable; and will, as a rule, actually be contested. Although not resolvable by argument, such concepts are sustained by argument; they are essentially *appraisive* concepts, involving some kind of valued achievement which always admits of variation and modification. They therefore benefit, rather than suffer, from the constant scrutiny to which they are subjected.

## A VULNERABLE GLANCE: SEEING DANCE THROUGH PHENOMENOLOGY

Sondra Fraleigh

When phenomenology is true to its intent, it never knows where it is going (Merleau-Ponty 1962: xxi). This is because it is present-centred in its descriptive aims, accounts for temporal change, and does not have appropriate and inappropriate topics. It might move from Zen to dance to baseball to washing dishes, and even isolate a purity of attention that under certain circumstances connects them all. Phenomenology develops unpredictably, according to the contents of consciousness. This is its first level of method. Its second level develops philosophical perspectives from the seed of consciousness. It holds that 'philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being' (ibid.). Here I will discuss phenomenology as a way of describing and defining dance, shifting between the experience of the dancer and that of the audience.

### Experiential truth

Phenomenology depends on immediate experience, but includes more. It hopes to arrive at meaning, perspectives on the phenomena of experience (dance in this case) which can be communicated. It is not devoid of past and future, since both are lived as part of the present. Present time takes its meaning in part from past and future. Heidegger (1962: 164) described time as belonging to the totality of being, as 'the horizon of being.' He chose the vulnerable image of *falling* to describe the lived dimension of present time. Falling is both a movement and a symbol of our existential mode of being-in-the-world.

Existence is not static. It moves always just beyond our grasp. It has no specific shape, no texture, no taste (because it is nowhere). Yet we assume it is something. We can't see it (because it is everywhere), and we feel its perpetual 'dance' inside us. It is of the essence of vulnerability. It surfaces to

attention through reflection in literature, history and philosophy, with the urgency of word and gesture, formulations of concrete materials, the actions and passions of drama and the infinite combinations of sound and bodily motion in the various arts. Here psychic life, visible form, and experiential truth merge; thought and feeling converge, and meaning arises. Art is an attempt to give substance to existence, that we may gain insight through distilling life's ongoing nature, repeating selected gestures, motions and sounds, moulding and maintaining certain shapes. Art in its various forms holds these before our senses. It allows us to absorb the textures, meanings and motions of a perishable bodily existence. Art and existence are both within the context or 'horizon' of time. Both are subject to the ways in which time is lived – compressed, elongated, endless, a long time, a short time, barely enough time, etc. Lived time does not refer to clock time, but to how time feels. Falling in love may take 'an instant', for example, and some chores may 'never' get done.

When I use the term phenomenology I mean existential phenomenology, the development of Edmund Husserl's phenomenological philosophy by later twentieth-century existentialist philosophers: Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, Paul Ricoeur, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gabriel Marcel. The common concern of these philosophers was to describe existence from the 'horizon' (Husserl's term for the 'context' in which experiences arise) of being-in-the-world. Existential philosophy originated primarily in the thinking of men – with the exception of feminist Simone de Beauvoir. As a revolt against traditional Western philosophy, it developed several concerns consistent with feminists (see Addendum on Phenomenology and Feminism p. 142). Of particular interest is that the body (mythically associated with woman and the mystery of birth) has been ignored and denied by traditional philosophy, but is important in phenomenology, and is a central theme in existential phenomenology.

Existential phenomenology is vulnerable because it rests on experiential descriptions of the lived world; more precisely, human experiences arising always in particular contexts of being-in-the-world. While much of male-dominated philosophy has striven for invulnerability through logic and reason, phenomenology took up the risky position of experiential description. But phenomenology does not rely primarily on the uniqueness of experience. Overall, it is propelled by a universalizing impulse, since it hopes to arrive at shared meaning, recognizing that this world is indeed 'our world', that our being-in-the-world is conditioned by the existence of others. Self and other are terms that take on meaning in relation to each other. Individual subjectivity is therefore understood in view of its intersection with a surrounding world, constituted by other objects, natural phenomena and other human beings.

If there is a single guiding principle behind phenomenology, it derives from Husserl's repeated assertion that 'consciousness is always conscious-

ness of something'. Consciousness, he held, was the necessary condition for experience, or experience is presupposed by consciousness (Husserl 1931). Experience has both immanent and transcendent levels. Immanence is that which is held within consciousness, a memory in a stream of experience, for instance. Transcendence is not a mystical term here, nor does it necessarily mean an ecstatic level of consciousness. Transcendent consciousness is active since it unifies impressions, grasping phenomena in their entirety. (A phenomenon is anything that appears to consciousness.) Consciousness is transcendent because it refers beyond itself, attesting to a world of objects and the reality of others. It is the ground or possibility of our recognition of a world outside ourselves.

Central to phenomenology is the understanding that we never perceive a phenomenon in static unchanging perspectives, but rather as existing through time. Time and motion are ever-present conditions influencing attention and perspective. Nevertheless, consciousness can unify experience. For example, when one considers a particular phenomenon such as a dance, one not only has changing sense impressions of the dance as it flows through time, but also insight into the essence of the dance. By essence here I mean that something is discerned which characterizes or typifies the dance, so that it is recognized as itself and not some other dance. The dance then becomes more than sense impressions of motion. The essence of the dance is not identical with its motion. It arises in consciousness as the motion reveals the intent of the whole and its parts. Consciousness transcends separate acts of perception to unify our experience of phenomena.

### Essence: identity

When I look at a dance I perceive something of the work's identity, its individuality. Not only do I perceive it – I consciously construct it. That is, I imbue the work with the meaning I find there as a viewer (or critic). This requires both my perceptual grasp and conscious integration of the work.

For example, it is obvious that Cunningham's work *Eleven* takes its title from the eleven performers in the dance. It is also strongly identified with the mantra-like word/sound score. In the following description, part of the work's identity emerges for me:

The text is sparse, with sound and silence coming at intervals and chanted in monotone, returning over and over, lending to the meditative quality of the whole. Duets, solos, trios and other groups collect and disperse without emotional impetus, like a hand plays easily with an intricate design when the design begins to lead the hand unconsciously into the next figure. However, the exact movement, its energies and space/time configuration, is unique to *Eleven*. At one point, there is a long stalking sequence with body leans and

leg extensions. It finally develops into a reaching walk with the body twisting and turning on one foot, ending with the torso bending over the leg, and an arm dangling, the hand tracing a circle, actually outlining it on the floor.

This sequence contributes to the individuality of *Eleven* for me. Others may pay attention in a different manner, thus consciously constructing aspects I don't see. When I reflect back and relate this work to other Cunningham dances, I understand that their lack of overt expressiveness focuses my attention on intricate tangles of sound, movement, colour, lines of energy, shape and design. Thus, I see them as abstract and formal, or form become content. I further notice that my attention becomes cleared and concentrated toward the end of his dances, like the concentrated attention of the dancers.

The phenomenologist approaches the task of defining or describing a phenomenon (a dance or a dance experience, for instance) as though seeing it fresh for the first time. Of course this is not possible since we do have conceptions, attitudes and assumptions which colour understanding. Phenomenology is at best an effort to remove bias and preconception from consciousness. It aims to describe through some direct route, not to analyse and theorize (at least not in the beginning), but first to describe the immediate contents of consciousness.

Phenomenology strives to capture pre-reflective experience, the immediacy of being-in-the-world. I think of this initial impulse of phenomenology as poetic and subliminal, containing moments of insight into an experience when the details of 'being there' are vivid in feeling, but have not had time to focus in thought. The subsequent descriptive process may also be similar to the poetic: both are grounded in experience and require reflection, or a looking back on the experience to bring it to language. It is further significant that both poetry and phenomenological reduction seek the essence of experience, a re-creation in words of the living of the experience, as the most salient features arise in consciousness and others drop away. In this, the phenomenologist knows that finally she cannot strip away her own consciousness, nor would she want to however much she may rid herself of baggage in terms of previous knowledge or attitudes. Consciousness and, moreover, her particular consciousness, will be a part of the experience and its description. (See Addendum on Phenomenology and Ethnography p. 143.)

### Meaning

Let's take an example again from Cunningham: I notice in general that his dances use the geometrically clean lines of ballet, even though they are overlaid with radical departures from typical ballet geometry, and that the performer is cool and detached (as others have also noticed). The male dancer is

not simply a prop for the female as in ballet stereotypes since much of their dancing together develops unison and equality, but the partnering per se continues the classical/Romantic dependence of the female as she leans on or is held and lifted (however dispassionately) by the male. With comparisons to ballet, I am, of course bringing to consciousness my background in dance, and I move from the purely descriptive to the comparative and analytical. This comes about naturally as a result of first recognizing attenuated lines and geometric forms. However, I would miss what seems a major point of Cunningham's works if I let them rest with balletic influence. In *Doubles*, for instance, dancers are seen in problem-solving modes, and the balletic movement serves more as a background for this to occur, as my attempt to describe a part of the dance indicates:

One movement motif develops out of a small leap stubbornly turned to the back at the landing, then stopped in a balanced position on one leg [. . .] An incomplete stop-action fall is the most memorable of the work's challenges to the dancer's skill and the choreographer's inventiveness. The dancer falls sideways without warning or preparation in a sudden drop to his hands. He recovers from the fall but not completely, getting up only halfway, reaching that difficult to control mid-zone between standing and falling, only to fall again and again from an incomplete recovery. The dancer's repetition of this series draws upon my body's memory, touching those murky moments in experience where something is about to happen, but never quite breaks through.

The foregoing is an example of my consciousness of one aspect of *Doubles*. It is true for me, it contains both descriptive, interpretive and evaluative elements. One of the major purposes of phenomenological description is to build towards meaning. Then others may be able to see what you see, or at least understand what you see. The truths of dance are not scientific or irrefutable. They are of another order, created by the choreographer, the dancer, the audience and the critic. Good critics do phenomenology naturally, describing without prejudging and then drawing forth the meaning they find. They exercise their consciousness of the dance in writing about it, finally delineating its values (and disvalues) for them. Critics, like phenomenologists, try to speak the truth of their own experience clearly so that others may find meaning in it.

The admission of the primacy of consciousness is central to existential phenomenology, distinguishing it from scientific phenomenology, claims to distil (reduce) phenomena to pure essences of ideas (*eidōs*) through 'eidetic reduction'. A phenomenology which takes for granted our being-in-the world owes more to insight than to an objective scientific stance. Existential phenomenology is vulnerable because it admits this level of subjectivity. It

allows for irrationality and accident as human concerns. It is also paradoxical. While it seeks to describe the essence of things, it acknowledges the impossibility of knowing things purely as objects, since objects are relative to our perception of them. It celebrates subjectivity without surrendering to a view of a privatized or narcissistic world where individual consciousness is isolated, understanding and community an impossibility. It is the desire to reach beyond the boundaries of one's own consciousness to understand how consciousness is human, which in fact motivates existential phenomenology.

### Definition

Merleau-Ponty (1962) held that phenomenology united the poles of subjectivism and objectivism in its philosophical approach. We know that it was also an attempt, in its formulation of the existential concept of 'the lived body', to mend the subject/object (mind/body) split in Western attitudes toward the body (see Fraleigh 1987). When I turn to phenomenology, I am aware of a non-dualistic way of using language and seek modes of expression that will most closely appropriate the experience I wish to describe. Out of the descriptive process, I understand that I will be defining dance while drawing my readers into the process with me. In its own way, a description is a definition.

My process of phenomenological writing develops definitional anchors and experiential description toward an overview. Otherwise, I would lose my reader in a stream of consciousness which, however meaningful to me, may seem pointless and rambling to the reader. My philosophical obligation is to extract the meaningful essentials, to communicate to the reader well founded points of reference. These often come through questioning, even through questioning the questions.

For instance, instead of asking the typical question *What is dance*, I might get a fresh approach to my subject by asking another definitional question, such as *When is dance happening*. If I can answer the second question I will be answering the first and from a perspective that will not allow me to revert to assumed definitions. I examine this question descriptively from the dancer's experiential perspective:

When I dance, I am subtly attuned to my body and my motion in a totally different way than I ordinarily am in my everyday actions. That is, I seldom take notice of my ordinary comings and goings [ . . . ] But, when I dance, I am acutely aware of my movement. I study it, try out new moves, study and perfect them, until I eventually turn my attention to their subtleties of feeling and meaning. Finally, I feel free in them. In other words, I embody the motion [ . . . ] And in this, I experience what I would like to call 'pure presence,' a

radiant power of feeling completely present to myself and connected to the world [ . . . ] These are those moments when our intentions toward the dance are realized.<sup>1</sup>

Further questions crop up immediately. What kinds of intentions are these? Is my intentionality in dance different from my intentionality in other kinds of movement? The subject of 'the aesthetic' as it applies to performance would then become important, since one apparent distinction between dance movement and everyday actions is that dance is 'performed' with qualitative attention toward the movement. Or we could say the movement is intentionally designed and performed, not merely habitual and functional nor purely accidental. My description obligates me to look into these aesthetic distinctions and whether they might hold for all forms and cultures. It is also apparent from the description that the movement is not only intentionally performed, but it is also performed for itself, for the experience of moving this way. And there may be purposes beyond this intrinsic one that appear in dance according to cultural contexts. Most of our movement accomplishes some objective; it gets us some place or accomplishes a task. Generally dance movement does not, especially theatre dance. Rather its values are not utilitarian or practical; they are affective or aesthetic. In terms of human movement, aesthetic intent implicates intrinsic values which inhere in actions, be they appreciated for their beauty or for some other affective quality. (My brief description included affective aspects of freedom.)

### Imagination

Still another aspect of aesthetic intent is involved. The dancer deals not just with movement but with the motivational source, idea, or metaphor behind the movement, that which the movement will bring to mind. Even if the dance is stylistically abstract, it will draw our attention to its unique unfolding of movement patterns in space-time. Movement patterns are also images, and they impress the imagination, as the word 'image' implies.

The imaginative, or meaningful, level of the dance may be the focus of phenomenological description. Clearly there would be many ways into this, and the description would be influenced by the full intent of the dance – theatrical, ritual, social, etc. In the following description based on phrases of original choreography, I carry through my consciousness of freedom as a compelling experience in dance and discover that dance is less ephemeral than I have supposed:

My dance contains an original structure all its own, however related or unrelated to the world from whence it springs. As I move up, down, or spin around, I feel the purity of these directions. As

movements, they take on specific identity. My own identity merges with the movement I experience. And I can repeat it. To a great extent, my dance is repeatable; it has permanence, but my life moves always into the future. I cannot relive it, nor any part of it, as I can my dance [ . . . ] There are certain dance phrases I like to do again and again. They strike my imagination. In one there is an upward reach that seems to pull down the stars. I can depend on this happening. It is there when I do it. It fills me with wonder, and I feel free in it. In another more complex phrase, I also feel free, but it is more precarious [ . . . ] This phrase always evokes feelings of tenderness and devotion in me [ . . . ] When I do it well, I feel peaceful, serene and free.

Since phenomenology seeks to get at the core of things (phenomena), it aims for simplicity in the initial descriptive process. For me it often comes to rest on a single word, such as 'freedom', as has come up thematically in the foregoing description, but much depends on where I begin, the point of entry into my own consciousness of a particular dance experience, and whether I am conscious of my own dancing or paying attention to the dances of others. I am also aware that what I already know experientially and theoretically eventually enters the picture, but it is questioned, expanded, reinforced or discarded in the process of extracting core values. Contrary to what might be expected, it is not easy to see (and give word to) the most basic constitutive elements of phenomena without the support of common assumptions and dualistic habits of thought which favour the objective status of phenomena apart from their manifestations in subjective life.

As a philosophical school, existential phenomenology returns to the traditional tasks of philosophy. Plato stated that 'philosophy begins in wonder', and indeed this is the point of beginning for the phenomenologist. As I step back from my own processes to better understand them, I confess to giving myself up to a quest and questioning with a kind of blind faith that something in me already knows the answers, if I can somehow get out of my own way (remove my conditioning) long enough to glance them.

#### Addendum on phenomenology and feminism

While I don't identify existential phenomenology directly with feminism, I am aware that the anti-philosophers at the foundation of existentialism, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and the later twentieth-century philosophers who extend that foundation with phenomenology, are in revolt against the traditions – especially the logic, essentialism and idealism – of Western philosophy. They admit concerns into philosophy which are also important to feminists: the importance of individual consciousness, freedom and choice. They are against determinism, and against the Western body/mind

dualism propagating the body as inferior that also concerns feminists. Indeterminacy, expressed by Sartre's familiar 'existence precedes essence', is at the root of existential self-responsibility and the existentially feminist assertion that biology is not destiny, as first taken up in the existentialist movement by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. Existential phenomenologists, like feminists, are deconstructing a Western hierarchy.

#### Addendum on phenomenology and ethnography

Culture develops as people relate to each other and build common understandings and traditions. The phenomenologist's admission of the subjective level of awareness is not clearly focused on the accumulated cultural knowledge that interests the ethnographer. Phenomenology aims first to describe immediately perceived features of anything, admitting the subjective character of perception. Cultural context inevitably arises in phenomenology in terms of 'the other', or the ever present understanding that subjectivity is conditioned by our relation to others – intersubjectivity. The very notion of a self depends on the notion of an other (or others) separate and distinct from the self. The concept of culture further assumes that distinct individuals can build relationships and share meaning. A general task of phenomenology would be to expose these notions and the constructs of culture as elements of human consciousness – or perspectives that we take on life as we literally 'make meaning' out of it.

#### NOTE

- 1 Sondra Fraleigh, 'Good Intentions and Dancing Moments: Agency, Freedom and Self Knowledge in Dance'. Emery Cognition Project with the Mellon Foundation, Colloquium on the Self, Emery University, Atlanta, Georgia, 5 May 1989.