

Editor's Note: What Is Dead and What Is Alive in Dance Phenomenology?

“Phenomenological reduction is a scene, a theater stage.”

—Jacques Derrida *Speech and Phenomena*, 86

Whether one critiques, advocates for, or merely nods to phenomenological methodology, it is with the awareness of a long, seamless analytic fit with Western theatrical dance, as the above quote of Jacques Derrida from his 1967 discussion of Edmund Husserl—the founder of phenomenology—indicates (Derrida 1973). The very operations of reduction and bracketing could be those of the proscenium stage itself. Concert dance is in this sense always already “phenomenal” in its very apparition. And dance phenomenology assumes that the analysis of what happens when dancing occurs is inseparable from the possibility of the adequate description of that dancing. “It is only through an analysis of the visible in dance,” wrote Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, “that one might begin to fathom and describe the essential nature of that experience” (1984, 132). Sheets-Johnstone raised not only the primacy of description but, most provocatively, the notion of re-languaging in the phenomenological analysis of movement, thus underlining that, in the words of Anna Pakes in this issue, “Phenomenology is an essentially descriptive philosophy”.¹ Dance phenomenology is the encounter of “this original, pristine body, the preobjective or preobjectivized body” (Sheets-Johnstone 1984, 133) with language.

In the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, vision became a carnal relation with the world (1968, 83–84). Phenomenological description of dance relied not only on the visual, but also on what would come to be known in dance as both proprioception and kinesthetic relation. What I would like to call the kinesthetic-visual pact of phenomenological description when applied to dance facilitated the integration of the performer’s discourse of sensation with the spectator’s discourse of visual reception: an anthropology with an aesthetics. This determines its lasting hold on dance writing. A call for papers in this theme issue of *DRJ*—“Dance and Phenomenality: Critical Reappraisals”—takes the temperature of a moment in which the kinesthetic-visual pact of phenomenological description is under considerable pressure from new concepts of the subject, new theories of cognition, and new technologies in the performance field that alter the terms of the observer’s perception of movement.

Ann Cooper Albright’s autobiographical narrative of engagement with phenomenology as both dancer and scholar, “Situated Dancing: Notes from Three Decades with Phenomenology,” offers personal insight into how she understands situatedness within phenomenology, and how she perceives its political instrumentality. Indeed, Cooper Albright’s attention to the feminist turn with respect to Merleau-Ponty, in particular, is an important part of the dance-phenomenology relation in the twentieth century. Her *Bildungsroman* of the 1980s and its compelling references to Virginia Woolf feel as pertinent today as they were in previous decades.

It is no secret that phenomenology has exerted a preponderant influence on dance writing at least since the 1930s, when John Martin unveiled the idea of metakinesis in his critical account of what

onlookers perceived to be the nonrepresentational aspects of dance modernism. From the 1960s through the 1980s, Sheets-Johnstone and Sondra Horton Fraleigh also dealt influentially with the phenomenological lens on dance in their philosophically oriented writings. In 1965, Merce Cunningham wrote a foreword to Sheets-Johnstone's *The Phenomenology of Dance*, in which he said:

The continuing aliveness of dance in any situation lies in the individual dancer's solution to the persistent and elusive daily quest for its instant-by-instant behavior, and Mrs. Sheets is pointing out that to look directly at this is a way for the dance in the academic situation to further its already strong and historical achievement. (Cunningham 1966, n.p.)

Despite the significant evolution within modernism between the 1930s and the 1960s, it is remarkable that the kinesthetic-visual pact of phenomenological description in no way diminished in strength or pertinence (see Jonathan Owen Clark's remarks on Cunningham's *Events* in this issue). Nor has the pact between dance practice and academic inquiry diminished in the years since—a pact that Cunningham perceived as the gift of phenomenology to dance in the midst of the dance boom.

Between Martin and dance phenomenologists of the 1960s through the 1980s, we had come to know Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre, whose work gained intellectual prominence in the wake of World War II by placing lived experience at the center of existential philosophy. Perception could no longer be detached from a particular situation of embodiment. Although neither philosopher addressed dance, Merleau-Ponty wrote about painting and Sartre wrote about literature. Yet, it is the very qualities of phenomenological description that had rendered it so attractive to critical dance writing over those fifty years and beyond—the “denial of science” in the description of “only what is given” (Lyotard 1991a, 33), the first person versus the third person account, and the promise of a new language “faithful” to perception that might “re-language” lived experience—that are presently subject to question. Phenomenology's first-person perspective was accused of placing a unitary subject at the center of all perception and possible description; cognition studies have located the brain rather than the body at the core of aesthetic reception; and innovations in new media and digital performance have destabilized the primacy of the lived body itself in dance performance. In motion capture, the body's movements can be rendered without sweat or apparent expenditure of energy, which stands as a strange analogue to the possibility of thought without a body (Lyotard 1991b). And, last but not least, the accusation that phenomenology is a humanism purveying universalizing values—or, what Jean-François Lyotard has referred to as “the ahistorical pretention in phenomenology” (1991a, 32)—is another point of contention. Since the late 1960s, Michel Foucault's concept of post-humanism has worked against the phenomenological model for dance scholars influenced by his analyses of power, history, and the vicissitudes of subjectivity. Foucault, although himself no dance theorist, is often considered a pivotal figure in the transition from traditional dance history to dance studies that transpired in the 1980s.

In “Foucault's Turn from Phenomenology: Implications for Dance Studies,” Sally Ann Ness tackles Foucault's influence on dance studies in the light of his rejection of Jean-Paul Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. “Either the cat,” wrote Foucault in a 1970 review of two books by Gilles Deleuze, “whose good sense precedes the smile or the common sense of the smile that anticipates the cat. Either Sartre or Merleau-Ponty” (1998, 351). Perhaps what attracted dance scholars to Foucault was his attention to “the body” as material, and its relation to invisible powers exerted upon it. But, Ness points out the disadvantages implicit in adopting Foucault's view of power with respect to human motility. She does emphasize that there is more than one Foucault.

Although Ness's text may not in itself constitute a "turn from Foucault," it should inspire lively debate about the way terms that Foucault popularized—discipline, inscription, and control—have been, and continue to be, mobilized by dance studies, sometimes in predictable ways.

Rather than interrogate what might constitute the unwitting foreclosure of phenomenology, Anna Pakes looks to the origins of phenomenological inquiry in the work of Edmund Husserl, and asks why he has received short shrift in dance studies. With Pakes's rereading of Husserl, we enter a world unfamiliar to the humanist orientation of mid-century phenomenology in the French tradition. Using Maguy Marin's *Umwelt* as a test case, Pakes probes what in Husserl allows us to re-establish the phenomenological relation between viewer and work from a fresh perspective. Her access to an enlarged corpus of Husserl's writings that have recently become available changes the standard picture of the philosopher's work, and hence, argues Pakes, of his applicability to dance studies. The texts by Ness and Pakes frame the subject in a historical sense, as pre- and post- with respect to the phenomenological adventure. It should be stressed, however, that neither pre- nor post- is in any way absolute or binding, but instead ripe for critical reappraisal.

Jonathan Clark in "Dance and Subtraction: Notes on Alain Badiou's *Inaesthetics*," examines the resolutely anti-phenomenological thinking of French philosopher Alain Badiou, whose vision of dance is derived through a set of exclusions. By following the trajectory of Clark's analysis of Badiou's thought of the event as determinant for dance, such as Badiou would ideally define it, we back into phenomenology as a condition of impossibility of this event in choreographic terms. Hence, Clark provides us with a perspicacious reading of a post-Foucauldian theorist whose turn away from phenomenology leads us back to it. This is not at all to assert the inevitability of phenomenological precepts, but simply to note that phenomenology rarely if ever absents itself from the terms of dance analysis, despite the attempt to subtract it. In this case, it should be noted, there is no return to subjectivism per se in Clark's objections to Badiou, but instead a certain potential for synthesis. Most specifically, Clark returns to a phenomenologically informed position in the wake of his critique of Badiou from a psychoanalytic perspective. Hence, the "points of stability" (*points de capiton*) suggested in Lacan's metaphor of the upholstery buttons or "points" paradoxically return as place holders for a phenomenological coherency based on the irreducibility of desire in spectatorship. This article leads us afield in the philosophy of Badiou, but the returns are substantial.

If Clark ends with the question of phenomenology in/as embodied cognition, this is exactly where Edward C. Warburton picks up. His article "Of Meanings and Movements: Re-Languaging Embodiment in Dance Phenomenology and Cognition" appropriates the charge of phenomenology to re-language experience in order to re-language the overused and problematic term embodiment itself. Beginning by mapping psychology past and present onto the contemporary divide between phenomenology and cognition studies of various stripes, Warburton proceeds to an explication of dance psychology under the aegis of "enaction" with the particularly insightful example of dancers' marking. The upsurge of interest in the topic of kinesthetic empathy is reframing perspectives on phenomenological inquiry (see the Manchester Conference Report in this issue), and Warburton places enaction in a dynamic relationship to a carefully delimited array of empathies.

In the broad view, judging from the articles assembled here, dance phenomenology must be judged as vital, although it is not the same phenomenology of the 1930s and the 1960s, in that we see a bridge between the early twentieth century (Husserl) and the early twenty-first century (embodied cognition). But, this is the temperature of a particular exercise, a call for papers that, like a performance, takes place in a discrete time and space. The subject is vast, and it is hoped that the dialogue initiated here will continue into future issues of *DRJ*. Special thanks are due to James Klosty for permission to use the cover image, from Merce Cunningham's *Walkaround Time*;

to Wendy Shuster for permission to reproduce her artwork²; and to the Merce Cunningham Dance Foundation and David Vaughan for permission to use images of Cunningham's *Events* in this issue.

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Notes

1. "To arrive at essential descriptions one needs to transcend habitual formulations of the object or phenomenon; one must come to grips linguistically with the phenomenon as it gives itself in experience" (Sheets-Johnstone 1984, 135).

2. Wendy Shuster/Shuster Studio; Web site: shusterstudio.blogspot.com.

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