

THE NON-ART OF THE DANCE:¹ AN ESSAY²

In 1965 I defined dance in my master's thesis. This definition (included in the thesis publication in *CORD Research Annual VII*) incorporated the phrase "Dance is a transient art of expression" (1976a:25). Four years later I used the definition in an article with a single, significant revision. The phrase was changed to read "Dance is a transient mode of expression" (1970:28). The substitution of 'mode' for 'art' was not a result of gamesmanship, but a serious, and perhaps iconoclastic, reassessment on my part. The word 'art' was no longer acceptable for defining dance because it was appropriate only for some, but not all, dance.

Had I been questioned about the usage of the designator 'art' in the 1965 formulation, which I was not, I would likely have acknowledged that not all dance was Art (with an upper-case /A/) but that dance fit into that class of phenomena, along with painting, music and architecture, that was labelled 'art' in the language in which the definition was written. The passage of time, however, brought increasing uneasiness about the designator.

There are at least five basic usages of the word 'art', and none of them are consistently suitable for an objective definition of dance. Of these five, the first refers to a class of phenomena that is labelled 'expressive culture', that includes the 'phenomifacts' and 'ideofacts', in addition to artifacts, of a society that arouse the emotional feelings of members of a given society.

The second refers to a branch of academic learning, as in the phrase 'liberal arts', where it is meant to distinguish it from vocational training. The third refers to skills, not necessarily creative or innovative, that achieve a measure of proficiency. The fourth refers to creative and innovative works that are intended to be aesthetically pleasing, and are generally considered to be 'fine arts'. The fifth, more archaic, usage refers to behavior that is artful, artificial, and adroit. The latter is exemplified by the following famous dialogue between Arbeau and Capriol (1588):

CAPRIOL. I come to greet you, M. Arbeau. You do not remember me, for it is six or seven years since I departed...I am an old pupil of yours . . .

ARBEAU. Certainly at first sight I did not recognize you for you have grown vastly since then. I hope you have likewise broadened your mind and knowledge. What do you think of the study of law? . . .

CAPRIOL. I find that it is a beautiful art, and one very necessary to the ordering of public affairs, but I regret that when at Orleans I neglected to learn the art of good manners which so many scholars acquire at the same time as their serious studies; because, on my return, I found myself in a society in which I was forced to remain dumb, unable to speak or to move, and regarded as little more than a block of wood.

ARBEAU. But you derived consolation in that the learned doctors excused this failing while mindful of the learning you had acquired.

CAPRIOL. That is so, but I should have liked to acquire the art of dancing in the leisure hours between my studies; it is an accomplishment that would have made my company agreeable to everyone. (Arbeau, 1965:17)

Clearly this usage of the word 'art' does not connote 'fine art', but refers to the 'polish' a gentleman of that period was expected to acquire.

Although these five established meanings are forthright, the term 'art' has become increasingly elitist and submerged in mystique, so that today the term seems to require a selective critical value judgement. Thus the notion of art: a particular class of objects, behavior and phenomena, calls forth an immediate evaluation of an object, behavior, or phenomenon as being 'good' art or 'bad' art (cf. Maquet 1971:8). Speakers or writers do two things at once: they make an objective identification of something as belonging to an entire class of objects, behavior, or phenomena, while at the same time they make a subjective and ethnocentric critical judgement. The sub-class of behavior and phenomena that is labelled 'dance' is thus presumed to include an interface of 'art'. This presumption apparently includes a warrant to judge whether a given behavior or work is more or less successful, and therefore more or less worthy of the title of dance.

It seems fair to say that the phrase 'the art of dance' as used today has a connotation that differs considerably from that of earlier times. Today, the phrase often becomes precious, specious, and sentimental, and therefore increasingly unacceptable for a definition that is cross-culturally appropriate. The term is likewise unfitting intra-culturally, because the gloss 'dance' has to do duty for a variety of activities within heterogeneous societies such as our own.

A commitment to the concept of dance as art causes two contradictory conclusions. One excludes some forms as dance because they are not art by western elitist standards. The other includes some dance forms as art that otherwise have nothing to do with art. This leads to such opposing judgements as claims that "sports are not dancing" (de Mille 1963:9); or in contrast, that "Hopi dance is a great art". Actually in many parts of the world some dances and many sports are one. It is difficult (perhaps impossible) to distinguish between them, as for example, the dance competitions of Micronesia, and the step-dance competitions among the Scots. It is established fact that Hopi dance performers do not consider themselves to be artists. Because of this, their performances should not be called 'art'. Both kinds of confusion would be corrected if the dance was not always equated with art.

Viewed dispassionately, the loaded phrase 'art of the dance' reveals six ethnocentric evaluations that do not hold up under objective anthropological scrutiny: the first forces dance forms into western models. 'Art' dance has been the primary concern of dance scholars from the western world, but such studies implicitly exclude those societies that do not have art dances and dance artists. They explicitly exclude

non-art forms in heterogeneous societies. "Because these scholars have not recognized the fact that all affective culture is not necessarily art, the tendency is to do one of two things: dismiss a large body of material through ethnocentric judgements on the basis that the dance or dancers are not good;" or force dance to fit an unsuitable dance model, and likewise, 'dancer', to fit an unsuitable dancer model (Kealiinohomoku 1976b:122).

A second ethnocentric bias is the automatic association of the word 'art' with the concept of 'aesthetic'. This reflects the speaker's own aesthetic judgement and does not refer to the values of the performers. In other words, to say that sports are not dance, really means that sports do not meet the dance aesthetic criteria of the speaker. Likewise, to label Hopi dance as 'art', really means that Hopi dance does measure up to the dance aesthetic criteria of the speaker. In short, to label something as a dance-art or not a dance-art, tells us more about the speaker than it does about the phenomenon and performers in question.

The persistent belief that dance is the 'oldest' art is the third ethnocentricity. De Mille claims that the dance is the 'oldest art'. She contends that dance "is the mother or germinal form. Music came as an accompaniment to dance, and song as punctuation and comment" (1963:7). This statement seems to satisfy the western dancer-scholar because it provides antiquity and eminent lineage to justify their perhaps unconscious elitist views. One must note, however, that this conclusion resulted from arm-chair speculation. How can de Mille say that dance is the oldest anything, let alone art? What does she mean by art? Did those early men and women conceive of their behavior as being artistic? How can she presume that whatever they did was art by any standard? How can she claim that music and song came later to accompany and punctuate rather than the other way around? After all, traditional Hawaiian dance both accompanies and illustrates the chant texts rather than vice versa. (For fuller discussion see the writings of Kealiinohomoku and Kaeppler).

From another source, Haskell writes that "dancing may well be the oldest of all the arts...Music came later" (1960:9). One must question how Haskell can seriously suggest this except through sentimental wishful thinking. He claims that "...dance, music, all arts depend on rhythms, as the earliest artists realized" (1960:9). Can we concede that earliest men, untutored and unrefined, were artists? More important, can we even begin to suggest that they consciously perceived a concept of art when they had scarcely crossed over the threshold of human-ness? It seems inconceivable to credit those early people with abstract, cogitative, reflective thoughts about dance when it is absent from many peoples living today.

A contemporary example is relevant: when a Washo Indian girl reaches puberty, her kin and friends celebrate by dancing as a group in a circle dance for a whole night. It is unlikely that those persons think "now we are artists, employing rhythms effectively to produce a work of art"! Such ritual dance behaviour is meaningful to that community, it is part of an anthropological domain of study, but surely no one is justified in labeling it 'art'.

The fourth ethnocentric bias results from confounding the cultural intent of performers with presumably 'universal' dance goals. For example, after de Mille establishes that a real dancer is an artist, she claims that the artist tries to "dominate and reveal" (1963:17). Are we to believe that Washo ritual dancers are trying to 'dominate' or 'reveal'? The statement and question seem ridiculous because they are not appropriate to the Washo context. It is not appropriate to call Washo dances 'art', nor the performers' performance 'good' or 'bad' art, despite the assumed linkage of dance and art. The problem caused by the pre-supposition of an automatic linkage surely becomes clear.

The related concepts of art and dance present a fifth ethnocentricity, and that is the built-in uni-linear evolutionary premise that underlies the double concept. H'Doubler illustrates this premise in her article on dance for the Encyclopedia of the Arts. She writes that:

dance, as an art form, is a medium that has always reflected man's mental evolution. His artistic evaluations are reaching higher and higher...

Thus during the march of the ages man's expressive movements have become modified by his growing realization of the effect of his own actions, until at last these actions have been consciously and intentionally used as expressive tools. It was when thus modified that expressive movement became art dance -- a form consciously pursued for its art values. (1946:274).

This view overlooks the cultural history of many societies which have not developed a 'dance art'. All peoples everywhere have long histories, and anthropological studies make it clear that there is no group of people that lives in some 'euphoric childhood'. Each society has developed along those lines that are most fitting to their own cultural values, which may not include the development of a dance art.

The sixth misconception stems from the assumption that dance is motivated by the expressions of emotions and feelings. This is best exemplified by the claim that "as with any art, the true purpose of dancing must always remain the expression of human feeling:" (de Mille, 1963:17). This hoary old chestnut of a sentimental approach to dance has been identified (and faulted) by Langer (1970:25-26) among others. It is strange to assume that the dance always grows from the well-springs of human emotion and acknowledge that it can be the antithesis of personal expression when it becomes 'art'. In a real sense all of the non-affective everyday forms of human behavior are more truly expressive of emotions and feelings than art forms. Ordinary communication that requires the generation of ideas and that elicits responses from others is both creative and innovative. This is especially true when communication is not aided by restrictive formulae.

Anthropologists study dance as 'non-art' because the discipline of anthropology is committed to the principle of cultural relativity. Those not trained in anthropology apparently find it difficult to give serious attention to the non-art of dance because dance-as-art is persistent

in their culture, their language and consequently in their world view. In contrast to dance scholars, anthropologists are more cautious in applying the concept of 'art' to dance, because they usually distinguish between 'etic' and 'emic' categories.

It seems evident that only some dance is art, and only some dancers are artists, and if art is part of the dance equation then probably three quarters of the world's dances are going to be eliminated from serious study. Dance scholars have tended to write about 'the art of the dance', not about the non-art of the dance. For an anthropological study of dance, the subject must include all dance (Kealiinohomoku, 1976b:119-120).

In conclusion, I recommend that persons who are committed to scholarly research of dance divorce the concept of dance from the concept of art as somehow intrinsically 'in tandem'. Art need not necessarily be an interface to dance. In fact, more often art is NOT an interface to dance.

As a final thought, there can be powerful and dissonant side-effects from the insistence of including art as an interface to dance. The manipulative attitudes of super-ordinate peoples can force adaptation by subordinate peoples that is not the same as an internally developed evolution. We may, for example, eventually force the Hopi kachinas onto the proscenium stage and Hopi dance may BECOME an art. If this happens, the world will lose at least as much as it gains.

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FOOTNOTES

1. The topic of this paper, "The Non-Art of the Dance," is covered in depth in my Ph.D. dissertation, Theory and Methods for an Anthropological Study of Dance (1976:119-137). When I first planned to present this topic for the 1976 meetings of CORD, I intended to read portions of the appropriate chapter from that dissertation, but in fact, this is an entirely new paper.
2. This paper was presented orally at the fifth CORD Conference, held in Philadelphia, November 11-14, 1976. It was not included in the published collection of selected papers from that conference. The anonymous jury judged that the paper was "not acceptable" because it did not "contribute to knowledge or understanding" and it was not "dependable in method and data".

Nevertheless, I feel the paper has meritorious ideas. I cite three other persons who apparently agree. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone wrote to me March 7, 1979 "I did utilize it as a source for a paper I wrote on the nature of theories of dance." Adrienne L. Kaepler thought my view of non-art of the dance was of sufficient importance

to refer to it in her article "Dance in Anthropological Perspective" in the 1978 Annual Review of Anthropology (47). In personal correspondence Alan P. Merriam wrote on December 8, 1976 "I enjoyed that paper... 'Hooray' -- although you are not saying it in exactly the same way, of course, you are saying things I have been trying to say for years and years -- let us hope you are saying them better!" And on September 14, 1977 he wrote after I told him that CORD had rejected the paper for publication, "I have the MS. before me at this moment, and as a matter of fact, have just re-read it...I really don't understand why CORD turned it down -- you must have stepped pretty hard on the reader's toes."

Along with the rejection for inclusion in the CORD Proceedings of the Conference, the coordinator Dianne Woodruff wrote to me on June 10, 1977 that the paper was "not recommended" but she hoped "the comments will be useful to you in your pursuit of this material". The suggestions made by the readers seem irrelevant to the purpose of the paper, however, which is conceived as an essay rather than a research paper. To make this clear, I have added the sub-title "An Essay". Other changes in the paper are primarily stylistic.

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We note with sadness the untimely death of Alan P. Merriam in the recent air disaster in Poland. He was a kind friend and consistent advocate of scholarly studies of the dance, and we are grateful to Kealiinohomoku for sharing some of her dialogue with him with reference to the above article.