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Susanne Langer's Expressive Meaning in Dance: A Critique

Introduction

In this text I present and defend a paradigm for understanding what it is to appreciate expressive bodily movements in dance as artful. My main claim is that in order to appreciate movements aesthetically, one must separate one's judgments about them from the goals that they satisfy. In order to explain what is minimally required for an aesthetic attitude towards a moving body, I draw on the reading of dance suggested by Susanne Langer. Langer adopts Friedrich Schiller's notion of aesthetically objective features. According to her, the objective forms of beauty in dance are symbols that are abstracted forms of gestures. Hence, according to Langer, the expressive meaning in dance depends on grasping the symbolic forms, which she calls *semblance*. I argue, however, that Langer is wrong to think that meaning in dance is primarily communicated through symbols. Expressive bodily movement is capable of being artful without symbolizing anything. For Langer, to make sense of dance is to be attentive to the symbols that can be understood on the linguistic model; for me, bodily expression can be meaningful without semblance. To support my view I draw on Immanuel Kant's notion of purposiveness without purpose; what is required to appreciate a dancing body as a work of art is a subjective relation to the art object, viewing it as 'purposiveness without purpose', *i.e.*, viewing art as meaningful without the attribution of determinate concepts.

(1.) Susanne Langer's Self-expression as Semblance in Dance

Susanne Langer discusses dance as an independent art form in *Feeling and Form*. She focuses on a problem that I will call *the beauty paradox*, which arises from reflection on differences in Kant and Schiller's aesthetic theories. The beauty paradox is this: For Immanuel Kant, the nature of aesthetic judgment is essentially *non-conceptual*, and the aesthetic dimension of judgments of taste depends on subjective aesthetic attitudes. However, for Schiller, these requirements taken alone appear to make judgements of taste arbitrary. If whether some object is beautiful depends on an individual's subjective response, then it would seem that anything could potentially be beautiful. But this kind of arbitrariness would make aesthetic judgments ultimately empty. For this reason, Schiller holds that

contrary to Kant, aesthetic judgment must articulate the objective features of beautiful objects. In this way, he undermines the idea of a *non-conceptual, aesthetic* dimension of judgments of taste central to Kant's theory¹. So the paradox, at least as stated from Schiller's point of view is that we can't have aesthetic judgments of taste that are *both* universally sharable *and* aesthetic.

Schiller clarifies the idea of objective aesthetic features by reference to different drives: those of sense, form, and play. He says,

The object of the sense drive, expressed in a general concept, we call life, in the widest sense of this term: a concept designating all material being and all that is immediately present to the senses. The object of the form-drive, expressed in a general concept, we call form, both in the figurative and literal sense of this word: a concept which includes all the formal qualities of things and all the relations of these to our thinking faculties. The objects of the play-drive, represented in a general schema, may therefore be called living form: a concept serving to designate all the aesthetic qualities of phenomena and, in a word, what is the widest sense of the term we call beauty².

For Schiller, man is never free as just sensuous being (although it is prior to the formal drive)³ or mindful being; play is what is required to engage these two drives in a way as to allow for the "contemplation of the beautiful"⁴. A play-drive contributes to the notion of an objective aesthetic feature by permitting only such reactions on our part that emphasize the objective features of our experience that can be expressed through general concepts.

(a.) Self-expression in dance

In order to give us an account of what gets expressed in a dance, Langer adopts Schiller's notion of aesthetic objective features. In Langer's view, for dance to be an autonomous art, it must, like in music, or any other art form, have its primary illusion. What this means is that it must have a symbolic element, be a kind of logical expression, through which the vital force of a living being, as a primary illusion, is expressed. Primary illusion is the basic abstraction by means of which the illusion is "created and shaped" that makes human endeavour art⁵. According to Langer, the objective forms of beauty in dance are symbols that are primary illusions abstracted forms of bodily gestures. Hence, the expressive meaning in dance, according to Langer, depends on grasping the order of the symbolic forms, which she calls *semblance*. The formation of symbolic semblance in dance is possible when it is founded on a translation of free bodily movement as belonging to living beings – or as Schiller calls it, *sense drive*⁶ – into meaningful self-expressive gestures. What we get by looking at dancing bodies is an illusion of their virtual gestures that express semblance of abstracted symbols. For her, virtual gestures as abstractions stand for symbols

1 And as Kant points out "There can be no objective rule of taste, no rule of taste that determines by concepts what is beautiful" (§17, 231).

2 Schiller, *Fifteenth Letter*, p. 101.

3 Schiller, *Twentieth Letter*, p. 139.

4 Schiller, *Fifteenth Letter*, p. 105.

5 Langer, S., *Feeling and Form*, p. 169.

6 In Langer's account Schiller's sense drive (life) is translated by her as 'vital forces', and his notion 'formal drive' (mind) is the 'logical expression' (for example, musical notation is a logical expression).

that give us an illusion in the same way that viewing Magritte's paintings does. One cannot appreciate his paintings without knowing what particular objects in his paintings symbolize.

The 'powers' (*i.e.*, centers of vital force [living beings]) in dance are created being – created by the semblance of gesture⁷.

Self-expression on a fundamental level in dance is gesture. For Langer, every bodily motion is gesture, but not all gesture is dance. On a very basic level, all gestures, to use Langer's description, express vital force. In order for the expression of vital force to become an aesthetic gesture, or basic abstraction of gesture, it must be organized in a specific sequence of symbolic meaning and performed in a controlled way. The way to control the artistic articulation of gestures is to transform them into a sequence of symbols. Only in this way can a gesture become a symbolic form. Gestures as symbolic forms are the logical expression of a work of art. There is a grammar to what our gestures mean on stage. For instance, a collapsing torso could mean submission or sorrow; an expended chest, pride, a readiness to attack, or anger. But communicating the grammar is not what makes dance art in Langer's view. Dance is art because, through combining vital forces (life) and logical expression (symbol), it can make self-expression (virtual power) possible. In this way, dance, for her, is a symbolic form that uses art symbols that express not "the world," but the *feeling* of a world⁸.

This is the primary illusion of dance, in which the play of Powers is made visible. It establishes dance as a "complete and autonomous art, the creation and organization of a realm of virtual Powers"⁹.

The communication between the dancer's body and the spectator happens through the 'virtual space' by use of symbols organized in a semblance of a meaningful sequence, which Langer describes as an intangible image, the primary illusion of plastic art. In dance,

[J]ust establish one line in virtual space, and at once we are in the realm of symbolic forms. The mental shift is as definite as that which we make from hearing a sound of tapping, squeaking, or buzzing to hearing speech, when suddenly in midst of the little noises surrounding us we make out a single word. The whole character of hearing is transformed¹⁰.

With this analogy to sound, Langer draws a parallel to a similar experience in seeing dance, where seeing in a different way orients our dynamic entwinement¹¹ within the performance space. A great piece of choreography takes place when a spectator, even without prior knowledge of the plot, be it a myth, legend or a story, is capable of grasping the meaning of the body in movement or simply being touched by it in a meaningful way. Just as great cinematographic images

7 Langer, S., *Feeling and Form*, p. 175.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 187.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

11 Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, in *The Corporeal Turn*, calls this capability a *kinetic bodily logos*, a capability of attunement to an evolving dynamic situation, similarly to Merleau-Ponty's notion of chiasm.

need not bring any words to mind, the aesthetic experience of dance need not bring words to mind.

(b.) Semblance as an objective standard of beauty in dance

How is it possible that meaning can be carried in an embodied way? How can any embodied art be a symbol? Langer's notion of semblance, which would also be endorsed by Schiller, is intended to point out that there are objective features of the aesthetic object – in this case, a dancing body – that lure us to it. Only when the work of art is independent from one's mere "aesthetic attitude"¹² can it be free, in Schiller's terms, to *appear* as free of rules: self-determining that the cause of determination is within, demanding no explanation, or explaining itself without a concept. These requirements applied to a dancing body would mean for Langer that the body in dance can be a work of art only when the lived dancing body creates a semblance, and this semblance as art is grasped in an immediate way that requires no explanation.

One problem with Langer's approach is that its explanatory scope seems limited. Her account makes good sense of how we may experience the beauty of works of classical ballet, which as an art form relies on symbols and semblance of story-telling. By contrast, however, it is hard to see how Langer's approach may be used to explain contemporary dance as art. In this dance-genre, there are no objective symbols by means of which a dancer's body expresses the art of her dance. Dance movements exhibit a *sui generis* and non-categorizable intelligibility.

My own account is based on addressing this limitation in Langer's account. In my view, appreciating the body in an aesthetic way requires a minimum of an aesthetic attitude of disinterestedness for seeing the movement in a non-symbolic or instrumental way, and in particular, as purposive without purpose. In my account the importance of the determination of what is beautiful in the moving body in dance is already assumed by the attitude in which we are viewing the body. When the features of my experience of objects and people strike me as beautiful or ugly, I am attuned to them in an aesthetic way. It is not the beautiful object, in this case a moving body, that gives us pleasure but attentiveness to the form of the particular movement itself.

(2.) Defending Kant from Schiller and Langer

On my reading, Langer and Schiller's account of an objective standard of beauty as a form of logical semblance can be reconciled with Kant's account of disinterest and purposiveness without purpose. Kant holds that aesthetic judgments of taste express a 'disinterested liking.' The judgment is 'disinterested' in that it is free of any particular subjective inclinations or interested liking. Kant further argues that beautiful objects appear to be as 'purposiveness without purpose'. His idea here is that the beauty of an object can be understood by

¹² Langer, S., *Feeling and Form*, p. 45.

reference to its form or coherent organization. For Kant, to judge an object as having a purpose involves understanding what that object is *for*. However, if there is no concept available to apply to the purposiveness of the object's form, and yet it strikes us as purposive, we judge it to be beautiful; it is 'purposive without purpose' Schiller wrongly views both requirements of disinterest and purposiveness without purpose as merely subjective requirements for an aesthetic attitude in appreciating beauty. My defence of these Kantian notions as objective requirements is that, in order to view something as purposive without purpose, one must herself already be a self-determining being, who has a capacity to appear as free under constraint, which is *de facto* the guarantee of the objectivity of art. This self-determination in one's aesthetic judging is what everyone experiences when confronted with beauty. For Kant, freedom is not a result of oneself being confronted with a beautiful object; being already a free person, acting freely under constraint, makes the experience of freedom possible. In Schiller's account of the beautiful, the distinction of the standard of beauty as requiring something about our experience and the features of the aesthetic object to evoke this experience are only aesthetic insofar as they are expressed through our appreciations. This suggests that our appreciation has better chances of being universally valid because we are expressive beings, and according to Schiller, this expressivity is essentially what makes us human. Schiller is right to point out that our aesthetic experience is the experience of human freedom. What is expressed through our aesthetic attitude is not just about the form of the beautiful or the experience of the living being, but a living form, which is the way we synthesize experience. Kant doesn't think that we all must agree, but he does hold that each aesthetic judge can make a demand that everyone should appreciate something the judge deems beautiful. In this way, Kant does not demand a justification of which specific features must go into a work of art and make it art; all he asks for is a kind of attitude one assumes in judging beauty. Schiller has a good point that it is difficult to make sense of the idea of a universally sharable aesthetic judgment independently of there being a feature of beauty for the judgment to be based on. But even if we have an objective principle of beauty, as he suggests, it will be hard to convince me that I must appreciate certain works of art. In his discussion of Kant's subjective-rational aesthetic, Schiller fortuitously points out that there seems to be a kind of isomorphism between a subject's faculty of aesthetic judging and the formal features of the beautiful object. In this way, Kant's subjective-rational aesthetics is reconcilable with Schiller's sensuous-objective: the conditions that apply to the aesthetic attitude also apply to Schiller's objective standards of beauty.

For Langer, the purpose of having an objective standard of beauty is to be able to give reasons for our aesthetic judgment. This reason involves two major features: features of our subjective experience and features of the object of our aesthetic judgment. In the case of dance, I identify distinct standards of aesthetic attitude as an experience of disinterestedness and purposiveness without purpose; however, there seems to be a paradox regarding the features of the aesthetic object itself. As noted by Langer in her analysis of gestures

in *Feeling and Form*, the same gesture can appear to me as ordinary or as beautiful. A waving gesture can appear ordinary when a friend uses it to say goodbye, and it can also appear to me as aesthetically pleasing when I view it as an organized symbolic gesture. The fact that the very same gesture can have such different meanings suggests to me that something other than the gesture itself is at stake in its being judged beautiful. I think that one must first adopt an appropriate attitude to view a particular gesture in an aesthetic way.

(3.) Kant and Viewing Contemporary Dance

Kant addresses the problem of arbitrary subjective aesthetic judgments in his consideration of the nature of judgments of taste. According to him, there are the four principles that make our judgment aesthetic: disinterest, singularity with a universal scope, purposiveness without purpose, and necessity. Kant's aesthetic theory, which is primarily concerned with natural beauty, may not do so well in its consideration of aesthetic objects that we find in contemporary dance. However, at least Kant gives us a solid foundation for describing the requirement of the subjective aesthetic judgment.

The characteristic feature of the four moments discussed above is that they require that our aesthetic attitude in the appreciation of the beautiful involve a distinctive non-conceptual way of relating to the world. Kant argues that our faculty of judgment enables us to feel pleasure elicited by something judged to be beautiful, which cannot be communicated by conceptual means, and as such makes aesthetic judgments distinct in kind from cognitive judgments. This suggests that the judgements that we make about the beautiful do not presuppose a purpose that the beautiful object is supposed satisfy. In my account Kant's notion of 'purposiveness without purpose' allows us to grasp the purposiveness of bodily movement that is appreciated without any attribution of purpose. We appreciate the expressivity of the body in dance, which moves in a non-goal-oriented way, we appreciate the performance of the movement itself and not the symbols it is successful in communicating.

My account of how to view a bodily movement in aesthetic way is founded on Kant's notion of purposiveness without purpose. I endorse Kant's subjective-rational approach to an aesthetic attitude of the subject as minimally requiring viewing the body in a disinterested way and considering its movement in a non-goal oriented way. My interest in considering Schiller's critique of Kant was to point out that there is a beauty paradox in emphasizing the need for determining the objective qualities of a moving body. *Prima facie*, I can conclude that a bodily movement, even when it is an ordinary movement such as waving to a friend, mowing a lawn, or throwing garbage away, can be viewed as aesthetic because the movement – even though under constraint (there is a purpose: having to trim the lawn) – can appear as free, effortless, and in this way complies with Schiller's standards of objective features of beauty: it must

be rule-governed but *appear as free of rules, demand no explanation, and be able to explain itself without concept.*

The only worry that Schiller or Langer might be justified in holding is that there is no motivation to make Kant's aesthetic singular subjective judgments universally valid or shareable. But I am not persuaded that determining the objective form of the beautiful is going to help us conform to others' aesthetic praise. The objectively beautiful features can be obscured by their context (e.g. mowing the lawn), but are nonetheless *there*, anyway. And that is the achievement of dance – it provides an aesthetic, *i.e.*, non-instrumental context for seeing the beauty of ordinary movement by extracting it from instrumental surroundings.

(4.) The Case of Dance: Trisha Brown

In this last section I would like to turn to an example of contemporary dance. It is very often the case that the body in contemporary dance exemplifies a purposive bodily movement without purpose. For Langer, in order for dance to be independent art, its meaning must be expressed as an organized semblance of symbols that create an illusion. In this sense the 'meaningful gestures' of dancers that can qualify to be art are only those that successfully satisfy the purpose of expressing organized logical symbols. Langer's model of meaning suggests that dance as art is successfully communicated if the semblance of symbols is organized in a way as to satisfy objective criteria of what counts as a successfully performed action. My model thereby presents a challenge to this symbolic explanation of bodily movement, because it demands that the meaningfulness of the body be given an account independently of a goal-oriented action. Instead I suggest focusing on the expressivity of bodily movement itself, without regard to what it may symbolize or represent. Kant's discussion of the appreciation of art as purposive without a purpose is a helpful way to understand this kind of bodily movement. I call this approach the *aesthetic model of bodily intentionality*. According to this model, bodily movement is capable of being artful, of serving no instrumental purpose, yet communicating sense. I argue that the body in dance is a *sui generis* manifestation of such non-categorizable intelligibility. To develop this idea, I turn to contemporary dance choreography, which treats non-goal bodily movement as an inexhaustible source of meaning. The main question is: If no semblance is created by the dancer, how does the viewer of dance appreciate her movement as meaningful?

The meaning in dance is revealed through the expressivity of the movements of the dancer's body as it is received by the audience. Let me anticipate a possible worry about focusing on dance as a kind of non-goal-oriented movement. Art dance, like any other discipline, requires training. It takes years of training the body to produce artful performance. And surely this training and its product, the art, are guided by definite goals. My account concedes this. My point is that, as an art form, dance also exhibits purposiveness without a purpose, and that appreciating it as artful requires seeing the movements in a non-instrumental way. Even though trained for a number of years, the body in performance escapes

the type of the determination that we assign to a goal-oriented movement. Here I am especially interested in examining how is it that, even when we are presented with an unfamiliar movement of the body in dance, it still presents itself as meaningful and meaningful in a way that is different from the meaning attributed to everyday movement. As a result, I will focus on choreography that takes this non-goal-oriented bodily movement as a source of inspiration, because in capturing this movement, dancers' performance confronts us with new meaning.

Let's consider an excerpt of the 2011 piece by contemporary choreographer Trisha Brown, *I'm going to toss my arms—if you catch them they're yours*.

Set to original music by Alvin Curran ("Toss and Find"), four women and four men are diagonally moving in front of large fans placed on the right side of the stage. The performers' bodies, dressed in loose costumes, are blown into motion independently of the music score. One might expect that the bodies blown by these powerful fans would result in chaotic movements, especially when the dancers move as if they were unaware of the other dancers on stage. Their eyes rarely meet, and yet their bodies know precisely when to catch one another, preventing each other from falling. Even without communicating through glances, their bodies evolve into a well-coordinated assembly, their limbs having a life of their own. In their individual rhythms, they put each other's limbs in motion, they line up through the space on stage. The bodies form momentary shapes and relationships with other bodies, and then vanish into another form.

The beauty of this work is in its transient dynamism. By moving in a seemingly non-goal-oriented way, it makes ordinary movements, like walking and waving hands, visible. Taking away the goal-orientedness of the bodily movement aestheticizes the body in motion in the same way that Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades exhibited in art museums make ordinary objects artful. By removing the purposiveness implicit in the ordinary way we move towards things, we evoke aesthetic responses. In this sense, I claim that contemporary dance shows that we can't begin to reflect on the body as the expressive medium unless we free it from understanding and organizing its movement in categories of goal-oriented activities. The point of aesthetic bodily intentionality is that it we can appreciate the moving body as a work of art without having to consider the results of the goals for performance. The dancing body in movement is a work of art rather than merely an exhibition of expert performance.

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Ekspresyjne znaczenie w tańcu Susanne Langer. Ujęcie krytyczne

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Słowa kluczowe: Susanne Langer, Fryderyk Schiller, Immanuel Kant, Trisha Brown, ekspresyjne znaczenie tańca, estetyczny ruch ciała, estetyczny model intencjonalności ciała

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