

SCORING DANCE

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It is often claimed that dance is a particularly ephemeral medium, more so than its neighbouring forms of music and theatre. For example, Marcia Siegel makes the oft-cited suggestion that “dance exists at a perpetual vanishing point.”¹ The claim for ephemerality is based upon dance’s seemingly loose relationship to scores and other physical objects involved in production. Whilst theatre is traditionally created through writing a script, and music composed on paper, dance is not seen to share this feature. Choreography occurs in numerous ways, and dance does not operate under a codified notational system. This means that dance works are widely considered to physically exist only in performance.² However, recent discourse and practice has revealed many ways that dance is created and preserved through tangible written or notated objects. Whilst the traditional view suggests that scores do not provide access to the work,³ I question this claim by examining the centrality of the score in the making and re-staging of Allan Kaprow’s *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (1959), and by assessing the relationship between digital score and performance work in the case of William Forsythe’s website *Synchronous Objects for One Flat Thing, reproduced* (2009). Further, I will examine each example in relation to Graham McFee’s ‘Thesis of Notationality’;⁴ in order to understand in

¹Siegel 1972.

²Carr 1987; McFee 1992; McFee 2011.

³Goodman 1968; Carr 1987; McFee 1992; McFee 2011.

⁴McFee 1992, p. 99.

more depth the role that notational forms play in current dance practice, to show that dance works are more than abstract structures of bodily movement, and that they may include notational objects as an integral aspect.

1 Notation and scores, works and performances: the traditional view

In *Languages of Art*, Nelson Goodman provides a detailed account of the role and function of artistic scores, as well as stringent requirements for notational systems. Goodman claims that in the case of performing arts such as music, a score is a tool for the performance of a work, and is “no more intrinsic to the work than the sculptor’s hammer or the painter’s easel.”⁵ However, he claims that scores have an important theoretical role, as they can be used to identify a work from performance to performance.⁶ Goodman views the relationship between score and performance as crucial for work-identity, going as far as to suggest that performances must fully comply with their relative scores, and that even one wrong note results in the performance failing to be an instance of the work.⁷ This is theoretically possible, as Goodman does not suggest a score should notate all of the features that must be present in a performance, but rather that the score records the essential features.

Goodman claims that, “the language in which a score is written must be notational,”⁸ by which he means that it must meet his five semantic and syntactic requirements. According to Goodman, scores, and therefore notation, differ from a “drawing, study or sketch on the one hand and from a verbal description, scenario or script on the other.”⁹ On Goodman’s view, notation uses inscribed characters to denote components, with each inscription standing for only one character, hence avoiding the ambiguity associated with words, drawings,

⁵Goodman 1968, p. 127.

⁶Ibid., p. 127.

⁷Ibid., p. 129.

⁸Ibid., p. 178.

⁹Ibid., p. 127.

or even descriptions, which have the potential for multiple interpretations. It is evident that the notational requirements suit musical practice, yet in the case of dance there are only a few systems that meet Goodman's criteria. He points out that the method of Labanotation passes the theoretical test for notation, as it allows for the essential features of a dance work to be recorded.¹⁰

Labanotation notates movement and is not specific to dance. It operates similarly to music notation, using symbols on a vertical staff to denote body parts as opposed to notes. It offers a highly detailed description of the movement of the body. Labanotation scores record the work as a structure of movement, rather than describing concepts or scenography, for example. In *Understanding Dance*, McFee stresses the potential that Labanotation holds for dance, believing it has a helpful role in identifying and preserving works.¹¹ Although not used extensively at the time in which he was writing, McFee envisaged an increase in the practice of notation.¹² Dance works are particularly fluid entities; revisions, re-stagings and re-workings are common practice, resulting in multiple versions of works, and subsequent work-identity questions. Furthermore, dance works are difficult to preserve. Although recording has aided preservation: a recorded performance depicts only one version of the work, hiding the essential feature of variability from sight. Labanotation seems to be a logical solution to these issues. However, for economic and practical reasons, use of Labanotation has not increased since 1992, and no single system has become universal. However, this does not mean that dance works are non-notational. It means, rather, that notation takes numerous forms.

McFee proposes a 'Thesis of Notationality', suggesting that:

Performance A and performance B were performances of the same work of art (in any performing art) just in that case where both satisfied or instantiated some particular 'text' in a notation agreed by the knowledgeable in the art

¹⁰Ibid., p. 127.

¹¹McFee 1992, p. 99.

¹²McFee 2011, p. 71.

form to be an adequate notation for that form.¹³

He further develops this thesis in *The Philosophical Aesthetics of Dance*, reiterating his claim that notation can offer a way of resolving work-identity questions for dance, despite Labanotation not having become commonplace in dance practice.¹⁴ It is important to note that although McFee's thesis does not require a specific form, like Goodman, he does require a notational language—as opposed to a written account.

Dance scores are created before, during, or after the work, McFee explains, and therefore are intended as either records or 'recipes'—although scores created as records can also be used as a recipe to re-instantiate the work.¹⁵ Whilst it is theoretically possible to compose a dance by writing a Labanotation score, this is unusual; the score is usually created alongside or after the work, by a trained professional—usually someone other than the choreographer. Therefore a degree of interpretation is involved, and the score generally records the work, as opposed to being a direct outcome of the creative process. This gives a Labanotation score a different status to a musical score or the script of a play, both of which are traditionally instructions for the first performance.

Following Goodman, McFee believes that, regardless of the way in which the score is created, it does not provide access to the work.¹⁶ This is what I refer to as the 'traditional view', that is, that a dance work is an abstract object only accessible through performance. This is a view shared by David Carr, who suggests in 'Thought and Action in the Art of Dance' that whilst we can experience features of a play through reading the script, "Choreography just is the making of dances (not the mere 'writing' of them)."¹⁷ Following the model whereby a score is used to record an existing dance, this claim seems logical, however Carr's suggestion does not allow for the many ways in which choreography can occur, which may include writing. Choreography is often

¹³McFee 1992, p. 97-98.

¹⁴McFee 2011.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Goodman 1968, p. 127; McFee 1992, p. 88.

¹⁷Carr 1987, p. 352.

created on the page, albeit not through codified notational methods. In fact, the word ‘choreography’ derives from the Greek words ‘*chor-ia*’, meaning ‘dance’, and ‘*graphein*’, meaning ‘to write’. Dance has a long tradition of being planned, composed, and written prior to being embodied, and this practice goes as far back as the seventeenth century, when some of the first ballets were choreographed at a desk.¹⁸

The planning, sketching, and writing of dance often takes linguistic or idiosyncratic forms. These methods are often seen in current dance research and practice. In the UK, over the past decade, choreographic processes have increasingly been shared in various contexts and forms.¹⁹ In the introduction to a recent issue of *The International Journal of Performance Art and Digital Media*, Johannes Birringer suggests that “we live in a changing world of dance, and the level of discourse regarding dance and choreographic practice has been raised considerably compared to the mid or late 20th century.”²⁰ There are many possible reasons for this rise, including the development of practice-as-research, which involves artistic practice as a method of academic enquiry, and subsequently acknowledges choreography as an epistemologically valuable activity. One of the outcomes of this is that we are now privy to many of the notes, sketches, diagrams, and lists that are the products of choreography. As a choreographical term, ‘score’ has become so broad that Birringer suggests that “there is always a score, in all artistic practices and in all contexts where art is exhibited/performed.”²¹ Here Birringer is referring to a score as a set of structures that determines how an artwork is performed or displayed. This is in direct contradiction to Goodman, who claims that permanent physical objects, such as paintings do not require scores.²² The vast expansion of the concept of the score results in its referring to objects that do not inherit the ontological clarity of Labanotation. Developed with varied intentions, the status and function of these scores is

¹⁸Laurenti 1994, p. 86.

¹⁹See Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker and Bojana Cvejić’s *A Choreographer’s Score* (2012) and William Forsythe’s *Motion Bank* (2010-2014).

²⁰Birringer 2013, p. 8.

²¹Ibid., p. 10.

²²Goodman 1968, p. 127.

harder to define and their relationship to the work difficult to establish.

2 *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*

I want to give two examples of recent scoring practices, both of which reveal the nature of dance notation and shed light on the traditional view of dance works. The first is Alan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*. Kaprow developed the work by writing a detailed score, consisting of diagrams, sketches, and lists of instructions.²³ *18 Happenings* was not initially created to be a dance; it was a performative event that took place on 4th October 1959 at the Rueben Gallery in New York. Jeff Kelley describes coloured lights, recorded sounds, odours, speech, and routine-like actions.²⁴

The event did not fit neatly into any existing category of performing or visual arts. According to Kelley, it became the first 'happening'. Responsible for the coining of the term, it came to mark the subsequent development of a new class of performance.²⁵ Happenings are considered dependent upon their one-off nature, excluding them from the category of 'performables', which are defined by their potential for repetition.²⁶ This leaves happenings and dance works ontologically distinct. However, it is recent re-stagings of the work that are of interest here. Re-performances of *18 Happenings* have demonstrated the work to be both performable and a dance work. The work was first re-staged in 2006 by dance theorist and curator Andre Lepecki, at Munich's Haus de Kunst. In 2010 UK choreographer Rosemary Butcher also re-staged *18 Happenings* at the Haywood Gallery in London. Significantly, these re-stagings, and subsequent accounts of the process, reveal the centrality of the score to the work as well as its ontological instability.

During a discussion about the re-staging, Lepecki explains that Kaprow created multiple scores, as well as over 400 pages of notes

²³Lepecki 2012.

²⁴Kelley 2012, p. 22.

²⁵Ibid., p. 22.

²⁶McFee 2011, p. 160.

and instructions.²⁷ Lepecki suggests that he was initially reluctant to undertake the project due to the perceived singularity of happenings; however, consulting Kaprow's score encouraged him to take the project on.²⁸ The restaging of *18 Happenings* has a number of potential outcomes for its status as a happening. Perhaps it suggests that, despite the work's name and its impact at the time of the first performance, the work was in fact a performable all along, and therefore is not a happening. It is plausible that the re-performance of the work reveals a feature (i.e., its performability), that was previously unrecognised.

An alternative outcome would be to suggest that the work remains a happening, but that happenings are in fact repeatable. This is contentious, as it challenges the defining feature of this type of performance. So what is the difference between *18 Happenings*, and subsequent, legitimate happenings? The answer to this question lies in the score. Were it not for the existence of the score, and Lepecki's subsequent ability to access the work through this score, the re-staging would not have occurred, and *18 Happenings* would have remained a happening, with the potential for re-performance greatly diminished. Lepecki claims that consulting the score demonstrated the performable nature of the work, and revealed Kaprow's intention for the work to be repeatable. He outlines a crucial sentence in Kaprow's notes, where Kaprow suggests that, "Each of these parts may be arranged indefinitely."²⁹ This clearly confirms the work's status as an ongoing, repeatable entity, reiterating both the fundamental role of the score in the work's ontology as well as the work's performability.

Indeed Kaprow agreed for a restaging to take place in 2006.³⁰ This suggests that *18 Happenings* was always intended to be a performable, a feature revealed through the re-staging, and enabled by the score. Nevertheless, it was not always a dance work. Re-stagings of *18 Happenings* by dance professionals has re-situated the work. Distinctions

²⁷Lepecki 2012.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Meyer-Hermann, Rosenthal, and Lepecki 2007, p. 45.

³⁰Lepecki 2012.

between forms have become increasingly fluid, and it is accepted that performance works in particular might belong to multiple categories. The work of physical theatre company DV8 provides a well-known example of this fluidity. Furthermore, conceptual choreographic practices, such as those of choreographer La Ribot, can be seen as belonging equally to dance, performance art, and theatre. These ascriptions to categories are not based on content or style, but rather on who created the work, as well as where, when, and why the work was created. To put it another way, the lack of defining features, whether perceptible or intrinsic, of performing art forms means that we increasingly rely upon context to categorise or define a work. This accounts for the way in which the appropriation of *18 Happenings* by dance professionals was enough to justify its status as a dance work.

Accepting *18 Happenings* as a dance work implies that the re-staging can tell us something about choreographic practice. Lepecki points out that Kaprow had a 'deep investment in scripts', and that working on paper allowed him to find a way to organise movement.³¹ This reiterates the textual nature of choreography; it also reiterates the ontological importance of the score. Such is the importance of the score of *18 Happenings* that Lepecki makes a significant claim regarding its role. Suggesting the work was created on paper, he claims that the creation of the work was not dependent upon embodiment, even if the performative execution of this piece did exhibit this dependency.³² This demonstrates how the act of choreography can occur without the body, challenging Carr's claim about its essentially embodied nature. Whilst it seems safe to claim that dance scores are composed in reference to the body, as is the case with Kaprow's choreography for *18 Happenings*, the act of choreography sits apart from the act of dancing. Choreography can (and does) take place without dancing. This position does not represent all choreographic practices, some of which are heavily dependent upon improvisation, for example, but it demonstrates that choreography in itself does not necessarily require a present, dancing body. This implication is that in cases where the

³¹Lepecki 2012.

³²Ibid.

work is created through writing a score, the work exists on the page prior to instantiation, shifting dance ontology closer to theatre and music and highlighting the ontological centrality of the score. As Carr suggests in relation to theatre, we are able to access some of the features of *18 Happenings* through consulting the score; hence Lepecki's ability to re-stage the piece.

It is possible, however, that Kaprow's score is not a score after all. Lepecki refers to it as both score and script, and draws a distinction between the score and other notes and instructions for the work.³³ The score does not take the form of a codified notational system; it consists of instructions, drawn figures, often with arrows denoting movement, and many written notes.³⁴ The form certainly does not meet Goodman's strict requirements for being a notational system. Neither does it offer a detailed account of the body, like Labanotation might. But we might justify its status as a score simply by taking references to the work in discourse, where it is considered to be a score, seriously. Furthermore, although the language of the piece does not meet Goodman's requirements for a notational system, it does meet McFee's Thesis of Notationality: the form it is written in is accepted and understood by dance practitioners. Furthermore, two separate performances, each following the score, will both be instances of *18 Happenings*, demonstrated by the re-staging of the work. The form of the score is important: it differs from usual Labanotation scores in three key ways. First, it does not focus on the details of bodily movement; second, it was created prior to the work; and third, it was created by the author of the work.

Significantly, these features are made possible by the non-codified form of the notation. It is unusual for choreographers to also be professional notators, and as such authorship of the score is usually distinct from authorship of the work. This could be a key reason for the use of idiosyncratic forms of notation in dance. Scoring is used by choreographers to make sense of ideas, and to plan works, as opposed to being used to record the details of specific movements. This allows

³³Ibid.

³⁴Meyer-Hermann, Rosenthal, and Lepecki 2007, pp. 1-7.

for choreography to occur on the page, for scores to exist prior to performance, and therefore for features of works to be accessed through the score.

3 *Synchronous Objects*

American choreographer William Forsythe is one of a growing number of artists turning their attention to the relationship between inscription, process, performance, and technology. In his essay ‘Choreographic Objects’, Forsythe distinguishes between choreography and dance, asking, “is it possible for choreography to generate autonomous expressions of its principles, a choreographic object, without the body?”³⁵ One of the first outcomes of Forsythe’s exploration of this question was the website *Synchronous Objects* (SO), created in 2009 in collaboration with Maria Palazzi and Norah Zuniga Shaw. The site aims to examine the choreographic structures and systems of his dance work *One Flat Thing, reproduced* (OFTR) (2000).

This exploration focuses on a filmed version of OFTR made in 2006. SO entails twenty ‘choreographic objects’, comprising visualisations, graphs, and diagrams, which demonstrate the structure and operating systems of OFTR. The objects examine components such as dynamics, counterpoint, cues, sound, architecture, and so on. One example is the ‘Cue Score’, which explains through graphs and diagrams the cueing system that triggers the performance activity. Other tools include the ‘Alignment Annotator’, which visualises the relationship between the dancers through coloured shapes and lines, and the ‘Counterpoint Tool’, which uses a pattern-generating algorithm to allow users to control performing ‘widgets’, in order to experiment with the possibilities of counterpoint.³⁶

Drawing a distinction between choreography and instances of embodiment is not entirely new. It refers back to the traditional view of dance works as abstract objects distinct from physical performances. Although articulated differently, Forsythe’s unfastening of dancing

³⁵Forsythe 2008.

³⁶Documentation of these tools can be found on the SO website: <http://synchronousobjects.osu.edu>

and choreography can be seen to follow a similar line of reasoning as the philosophers we have examined, McFee and Goodman, who claim that dance works are essentially abstract movement structures. However, it is important to acknowledge that SO demonstrates the notationality of structures other than movement.

Some of the tools on SO appear to adopt codified notational languages, using symbols to denote components. However, the diagrams do not describe the movement of body parts, as is the case with Labanotation. Rather, the focus is on describing non-visual, relational features, such as cueing, dynamics and counterpoint. Furthermore, SO was not generated as a record or a recipe; it was developed to enhance our understanding of the work, and to examine the complexities of choreographic structure.³⁷ How, then, does it relate to the concept of a score, in either notational or non-notational form?

Unfortunately I do not have space here to analyse all of the tools on SO against Goodman's five requirements for notation. Suffice it to say that some tools would be closer to meeting the requirements than others, which are perhaps better explained through Goodman's discussions of diagrams and models.³⁸ Importantly, however, SO does seem to fulfil the requirements of the Thesis of Notationality. Although not intended to function as a recipe, interpreting the 'text' would arguably result in a performance of OFTR. It is important to remember that McFee requires only that the notation be "agreed by the knowledgeable in the art form to be an adequate notation for that form."³⁹ It may seem that SO does not meet this condition; it uses languages from various disciplines, which need to be decoded through written explanation. However, although McFee's thesis calls for a notational language that is distinct from writing, surely any non-universal system would need some further linguistic explanation or translation. As such, there is no reason to suppose that these forms are not a legitimate way of notating choreography, despite not notating the body.

Claiming that the dynamic archive of the website is a choreo-

³⁷Forsythe 2009.

³⁸Goodman 1968, p. 170ff.

³⁹McFee 1992, p. 97-98.

graphic score decentralises movement as the primary feature of choreography, due to the fact that the specific behaviour of individual body parts is simply not notated. Were the whole site to function as a recipe for performance, in terms of movement dancers would simply have to copy the recording. This would not meet the requirements of McFee's thesis, as a recording is not a notational language. An alternative approach would be to use only the notational forms as a recipe, which would result in an alternative expression of the choreographic principles of the work, thus highlighting a key feature of the project by responding to the primary research question: "What else might physical thinking look like?"⁴⁰

It is unclear how SO relates to OFTR. The website annotates a recorded version of the work. Significantly, it is not a recording of a live performance. McFee suggests that, as with scores, we cannot access dance works through recordings,⁴¹ but we can question this in relation to dance performances made especially for film, as is the case here. The question of SO's ontological status is made more difficult by the complex nature of dance on film.⁴² Philip Auslander and Noel Carroll both provide arguments for the performative ontology of film.⁴³ Like performances, films are enacted temporarily. Furthermore, it is possible to see digital information as ontologically similar to traditional performances—for example SO is not permanently physically present, rather it is enacted by the user. For example, the appearance and performance of the 'widget' is dependent upon user-activation. Leaving aside the metaphysics of source codes, it would be fair to say that the site exists in tangible form only temporarily. When activated, the performances and structures on the site unfold in relation to time. Although we can stop and replay, these subsequent actions are similarly played out in the passing of time. The point is that, like a dance work, SO is abstract until made concrete, for a limited time; its physical manifestation is merely temporal, while the score performs.

⁴⁰Forsythe 2009.

⁴¹McFee 1992, p. 88.

⁴²See Blades 2011.

⁴³Auslander 1999; Carroll 2005.

The parallel between performance and recording suffers from the determined nature of recording. No matter how willing and able we are to suspend our belief, the fact remains that the performance on film has already been resolved. The dancers know how the performance ended, even if we, as spectators, do not. But while the film of OFTR possesses this determined nature, SO does not. The interactive nature of some of the tools, such as the Counterpoint Tool, offers potentially infinite outcomes. The tool provides a framework through which users can experiment with counterpoint, creating individual choreographic expressions. This reflects some of the features of a notated score. One of the reasons that McFee privileges notation over recordings, for recording and preserving dance, is that notation allows the key ontological feature of variability to remain intact. A notated score will inevitably involve interpretation, and allow for individual expression. This feature is similarly present in the interactive tools offered on SO. Like a score, the site operates within a constrained form whilst allowing for potentially infinite outcomes.

Perhaps we have reached a conclusion that SO is an interactive, performative score. However, the website is not primarily intended to function as a tool for re-instancing OFTR. SO provides information about OFTR; it enhances our understanding and appreciation of the work. If this is correct, is it possible to claim that the site does not provide access to the work? Here we are again faced with a problem surrounding the nature of recording. We are able to gain knowledge about a work through pausing, rewinding, and replaying films. But if this is not experiencing the work, then what does dance spectatorship entail? While this question demonstrates the austere and potentially problematic claim that we do not at all have access to OFTR through SO, unfortunately I do not have space to go into the question here. But this type of score provides us with much more than a solution to work-identity questions; it enhances our knowledge both of the work and of the complexities of choreographic structures.

4 Conclusion

18 Happenings and *Synchronous Objects* offer very different examples of dance scores. Kaprow's score demonstrates the way that choreography can follow a similar model to theatre, using language and drawing to instigate a performance. This challenges the traditional view by suggesting that a score can provide access to specific features of the work; a claim that is demonstrated through Lepecki's re-staging of *18 Happenings*. It is possible to see that ontological revelations facilitated by the re-staging are dependent upon the score, and therefore to attribute the score a central role in the nature of the work. SO, on the other hand, has a more complex relationship to the work it illustrates, and fulfils the requirements of a score possibly accidentally. Neither score follows a formal notational method for dance, and both use written language to explain certain features.

Nonetheless, both examples fulfil McFee's Thesis of Notationality, and furthermore demonstrate an expansion of this thesis. Scores are not only created for preservation, nor are they simply useful for work-identity; they also demonstrate choreography through forms other than performance, revealing the multi-faceted nature of dance, and its potential to exist in various ways. The way in which both examples demonstrate the notationality of choreography, whilst avoiding notating details of specific movements, decentralises the dancing body in such works. This outcome suggests that dance works are more than structures of movement. Rather, they consist of multiple conceptual, relational, and organisational features that can be described in linguistic, performative, and visual notations, as well as in traditional forms.

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