Co-Authorship & the Ontology of Dance Artworks

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As Julie Van Camp has explained, the “division of labor” between dancers & choreographers in determining what movements appear in performance is neither clear-cut in the practice of dance-making, nor readily apparent in the final product.

It’s difficult for viewers to decipher “exactly which movements in a performance are the design of the choreographer and which are strictly the interpretation of a particular rehearsal director, ballet master, or dancer” (1980: 29).

- e.g. the solo originally performed by Mikhail Baryshnikov in Twyla Tharp’s *Push Comes to Shove*
Excerpted from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_aEbEqpLdc:
Great Performances: Dance in America - Baryshnikov by Tharp
However intertwined dancers’ & choreographers’ contributions seem to viewers, Graham McFee urges that dancers logically cannot be co-authors of dance artworks they perform, since, on his view, dancers do not create artworks (as choreographers do) -- they merely instantiate performances of extant works.

I will demonstrate how McFee’s argument against co-authorship of dance artworks by dancers assumes a questionable ontology of dance artworks as abstract types.

- I will argue that:
  - a) An abstract-type ontology of dance artworks is in tension with danceworld emphasis on aesthetic properties belonging to individual performances rather than to enduring works.
  - b) A perdurantist ontology, compatible with institutional facts of dance practice & appreciation, logically permits co-authorship by dancers.
McFee’s ontological argument against co-authorship:

Dance artworks are “performables”:
choreographed structures with the potential to be manifested at various times & places by various casts of performers.

This performability can be given an **ontological backing** with a **type/token framework**:

A dance artwork is an abstract **type** of which **individual performances are tokens**.

According to McFee,

A **choreographer creates an abstract type** upon designing a sequence of movements essential to that work’s identity;

By carrying out that movement sequence, **dancers instantiate tokens of the type**, which vary in incidental features
On McFee’s view, then, the division of labor between dancers & choreographers is clear-cut – and only the choreographer’s role qualifies as authorship.

(Reconstruction of his)

**Ontological Argument against Co-Authorship:**

1) Authors are makers of artworks.

2) Dance artworks are abstract types created by choreographers.

3) Dancers instantiate performances, which are tokens of dance artwork types.

4) As tokens, **performances are not artworks in themselves** (but merely vehicles for dance artworks).

5) Therefore **dancers do not make artworks by instantiating performances.**

6) Therefore **dancers are not co-authors of dance artworks.**
He reinforces this argument with a reductio ad absurdum:

“…the fact that most dances can be performed with different casts highlights an absurdity in assigning authorial responsibility to dancers in such cases:

for then, having a different cast would make each performance a different artwork.

But that is just to reject the idea of a performing art, as multiple, or re-performable,

on which the very same work can, in principle, be performed on other occasions, at other times, in other places, with other casts.” (2013: 29)

In short:

if dancers are co-authors of the performances they instantiate, then performances of Swan Lake by different co-authors would be different artworks – but that can’t be the case, since performances of Swan Lake must be instances of the same artwork.
Objections to the Ontological Argument

Contra

As tokens, **performances are not artworks in themselves** (but merely vehicles for dance artworks),

1. **The danceworld regards individual performances as de facto artworks in themselves**, while also recognizing them as instances of / vehicles for the appreciation of another dance artwork.

2. **Performances can be artworks in themselves even if they are neither re-performable nor re-encounterable.**
1. The danceworld regards individual performances as *de facto* artworks in themselves, while also recognizing them as instances of vehicles for the appreciation of another dance artwork.

Noël Carroll’s “two-tiered” model of the performing arts captures this facet of dance by allowing that performing artforms are “comprised of two kinds of artworks”: *creations* & *performances* (2010: 450).

Carroll adopts a type/token ontological framework, but allows that a *token of a dance artwork type* (artwork *qua* creation) is itself a dance artwork *qua* performance, because the production of a performance token requires *interpretation of the creation by performers*, which *demands inventions* that extrapolate beyond the composition – generating a novel artwork with idiosyncratic features. Hence, *performance tokens typically diverge enough from their artwork type to license their regard as artworks in themselves.*
An addendum:

Not all artistic features of particular performances can be said to arise through *interpretation* of pre-set movement structures.

Dancers also make artworks by *creating* performance content through *improvisational* choices.

“*Every dancer necessarily ‘creates’ when he adds details not designed in advance by the choreographer.*

If the choreographer does not indicate placement of the head or the fingers, for example, the dancer must choose their placement consciously or unreflectively.”  (Van Camp 1980: 30)

“*…dance performers always make improvisational contributions to a dance through all the activities required of live performers who must think-while-doing in a non-static context.*”  (Bresnahan 2014: 87)
2. Performances can be artworks in themselves even if they are neither re-performable nor re-encounterable.

McFee denies that dance performances are artworks in themselves because they lack “performability” – a putative hallmark of performing artworks.

Moreover, performances are ephemeral & variant, containing incidental features not necessarily repeated in subsequent performances, whereas performing artworks are thought to be persisting, stable objects, whose features are always repeatable & re-encounterable.

- However, the ephemerality of performances is not an impediment to treating performances as artworks in practice.

Instead, ephemerality is key to dance appreciation.

In fact, ephemerality motivates some theorists to claim that “in dance, it is the performance which is the primary work” for evaluative, critical, & appreciative purposes.

(Armelagos and Sirridge 1978: 137, my italics)
A putative merit of an abstract-type ontology of dance artworks is the ability to explain how such works persist while they aren’t being performed, such that they are ready to be re-encountered in future performances.

But the notion that dance artworks are re-encounterable across performances is not a pretheoretical, bedrock principle an ontology can take for granted.

Mark Franko suggests that theorists ascribe repeatability to performing artworks to imbue them with the semblance of stability & permanence, bringing them in line with a concept of artworks as stable objects. (1989: 72-3)

Renee Conroy corroborates this assertion that the persistence of dance artworks is a theoretical attribution, rather than an institutional fact:

"The idea of the dancework as a stable, enduring art object is a distinctly 20th-century notion, ...plausibly the product of analogizing dance to other art forms in an attempt to improve its artistic status." (2012: 162)
An **abstract-type ontology** of dance artworks **locates dance artistry primarily in the composition of choreographic structures** that remain consistent across performances,

- **but what the danceworld values** in the art form **is located in its ephemeral & evolving elements** (such as performers’ “presence” & improvisational ingenuity) as much as in what persists without change.

In virtue of dancers’ creative contributions to unrepeatable performances,

- “…properties that we want to call ‘artistic’… do not [always] belong to the underlying structure of the performance that continues in subsequent performances.”
  
  (Bresnahan 2013: 144)

**Ideally, then, an ontology of dance artworks would include impermanent elements within the scope of such works,** instead of excluding such elements as irrelevant to the continuity of choreographic structures.
Let’s revisit McFee’s Ontological Argument against Co-Authorship:

1) Authors are makers of artworks.
2) Dance artworks are abstract types created by choreographers.
3) Dancers instantiate performances, which are tokens of dance artwork types.
4) As tokens, performances are not artworks in themselves (but merely vehicles for dance artworks).
5) Therefore dancers do not make artworks by instantiating performances.
6) Therefore dancers are not co-authors of dance artworks.

I’ve responded that even if performances are tokens of dance artwork types, performances can (logically speaking) be artworks in themselves, and they are typically treated as such in practice.
Now I will demonstrate how a materialist ontology of dance artworks, namely, dance perdurantism,

a) might achieve a better descriptive fit with dance practices & values

b) allows dancers’ actions in manifesting performances to qualify as creating the content of dance artworks, qua performances but also qua continuants.

Materialist ontologies of performing artworks identify such works with concrete objects ("atoms") rather than abstracta.

E.g., in musical materialism, candidate concreta include “copies of the score, musical performances, recordings of musical performances, playings of recordings…, certain mental events,” etc. (Tillman 2011: 15)

I’ll take performances (which can be artworks in themselves) to be the most plausible atoms of continuant dance artworks.
Dance perdurantism would characterize a continuant dance artwork as a four-dimensional object ("the material content of a filled region of spacetime"; Heller 1999: 10-11) constituted by a fusion of performances, each of which is a spatiotemporal part (or "subregion") of the whole object.
On a perdurantist view, some continuity relationship (such as “structural similarity or causal connections”) must hold between performances to make them parts of the same continuant artwork. (Caplan and Matheson 2006: 62)

(In contrast, the abstract type approach requires that performances of the same work instantiate a set of essential features.)

I propose that continuity between dance performances is achieved when practitioners use a prior performance as a model from which to direct the manifestation of a structurally similar performance.

➢ This requires using either memory or a recording as a guide.

Accordingly, continuant dance artworks tend to disappear from the repertoire when there no longer exists:

a) any person with adequate memory of the prior performance in a position to use such memory to restage the work in a future performance, or

b) any scores, choreographer’s/directors’ notes, video recordings, etc. on which to model a future performance
Dance perdurantism can recognize performances as artworks in themselves and as vehicles for appreciation of persisting artworks.

➤ Let’s revisit McFee’s *reductio ad absurdum* against co-authorship:

“…having a different cast would make each performance a different artwork. But that is just to reject the idea of a performing art, as multiple, or re-performable, . . . .” (2013: 29)

➤ The conflict identified here only arises if one assumes that a persisting artwork & its performances should share essential features (given a type/token relation), and thereby should be indistinguishable in features that establish artwork identity (including their authorship).

➤ But if a performance is a part (rather than a token) of a continuant artwork, a persisting artwork & its performances will not share essential features, allowing that individual performances can differ in authorship.
According to perdurantism,

dance artworks can persist over time (qua continuants) – but only by existing at each spacetime region at which a performance occurs.

This entails that

a dance artwork does not exist while it is not currently being performed:

E.g., George Balanchine’s version of The Nutcracker, a staple of many ballet company repertoires each December, does not exist for roughly eleven months of each year.

It may seem weird that, on this view, continuant works pop in & out of existence, but this consequence is consistent with danceworld ideology.

The Nutcracker is not subject to evaluation, criticism, & appreciation in June; It is only present for all practical purposes when we experience it in a particular performance.
The features of a fusion of performances are the sum of the features of its parts, so the unique, unrepeatable qualities of individual performances become cumulative features of the continuant work, and the dancers responsible for creating those unique features count among the co-authors responsible for creating the continuant.

One may object that on this view, the number of co-authors for works like Swan Lake becomes astronomical, if every performer of every performance in Swan Lake’s history qualifies as a co-author (in virtue of creating the content of its parts).

This is an untidy answer to the question, “Who is the author of Swan Lake?” -- but an untidy answer is wholly appropriate in the philosophy of a complex & highly collaborative art form.


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Clarifications:

• **My position is not that a type/token ontology is flawed because it denies co-authorship, but rather that it is flawed because it represents dance artworks as fixed and isolated from the causal influence of what occurs during performances.**
  
  – This view also *happens to be* unfriendly to co-authorship
  – and I wanted to highlight that the plausibility of co-authorship may depend upon the ontology of dance artworks we assume.

• **I’m sympathetic, but not committed, to a perdurantist ontology of dance artworks.**
  
  – Conroy is right to point out that such an ontology has quite a few counterintuitive consequences beyond those I have written off as non-problems.

  • **I outline a perdurantist ontology just as a proof of principle**
    that whether or not we think co-authorship is logically possible may hinge upon the ontology we assume.

  • (Also, I thought it worthwhile to articulate dance perdurantism just to start mapping all the possibilities for dance ontologies in the same way others have done for music.)
Clarifications:

- In defending the possibility of co-authorship, I don’t mean to say that dancers and choreographers play exactly the same role in the determination of dance artwork content.
  - The choreographer still retains a greater degree of influence, especially if they remain actively involved in the rehearsal process for subsequent performances.
  - Also, some dancers have greater influence than others on the development of dance artworks across their performance histories.
  - Failed performances will tend not to influence further performances because they will not be used as models for staging.
Clarifications:

- Neither “what the danceworld values” nor “danceworld ideology” is as monolithic as my paper suggests.
  - My account of “what the danceworld values” is biased towards a viewpoint espoused in my dance training, which emphasizes the agential role of the performer as neither a mere executor nor just an interpreter, but as a creator.
  - Conroy is totally correct to emphasize some danceworld beliefs/values/phenomena that run counter to those I have highlighted,
    - including the “special accomplishment” of dancers “performing a poor work well”, which depends upon an impression of the work as a choreographic structure isolatable from performances.
  - A future iteration of this paper will make it much clearer than there are competing intuitions and commitments within the danceworld, which favor a plurality of positions regarding both co-authorship and ontology.