



Memoria Saltationis: The Memory of Dance - 5 June 2020

Forgetting, loss and destruction: Ontological reflections on dance disappearance

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What is it for a dance to be lost? One answer might be that all past dances are lost because their medium is inherently ephemeral: in Marcia Siegel's well-worn claim, dances disappear "in the very act of materializing" (1973, 1). But that seems true only of performance events, not of the dances they enact. Even if those dances are often also forgotten, some are remembered, not all are lost. What, then, are the conditions under which dances do disappear, and how might a clearer understanding of those conditions inform approaches to archiving, remembering and re-enactment?

The presentation explores three key conditions of dance loss or disappearance: (1) a hiatus in performance or performance tradition; (2) a lack of documentation (whether notational, textual, audio-visual, pictorial); and (3) disintegration of the background practice in which a dance is embedded. I argue for the significance of the third condition in particular. Both reperformance of a dance and the interpretation of its archival records depend upon the survival of its background practice in some way: it is this that enables archival materials to be understood *as* records or traces, rather than mere materials - marks on paper, strings of code, or reels of celluloid – for example.

I also examine the role these various factors play in determining whether loss is temporary or permanent. Can loss be so drastic that it amounts to a form of destruction? If it is possible for dances to be destroyed, what does that say about the kinds of things they are and about how they can be remembered? What values attach to the survival or loss of dances in different genres, cultures and historical contexts? In addressing these questions, the presentation attempts to map key metaphysical and ethical issues arising from conference theme.