The ephemerality of dance

Abby Frances Johnson

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THE EPHEMERALITY OF DANCE

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Bachelor of Arts (Dance) Honours

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29th October 2010
ABSTRACT

“A dancer is bound to the given form of the human body” (Hämäläinen, 2009, p. 107). As an art form, dance relies on the movement of these bodies. Dance is not fixed but can leave a lasting impression on the viewer. As a performance art, dance is truly ephemeral – a term that has been defined as “lasting for only a short period of time and leaving no permanent trace” (Encarta®, 2009). As a dance performer and spectator, I am affected by this ephemerality on a daily basis.

Within this thesis, I initially outline what constitutes dance as ephemeral. I then form conclusions regarding the question of how the ephemerality of dance affects the dancer, the spectator and the art form in general. Within this I draw parallels and note contrasts between dance and other creative outlets such as music, acting, visual art and literature.

With the examination of many academic opinions and the writing of a purely theoretical thesis, I have furthered my knowledge within the field of dance and ultimately become a more knowledgeable and informed dance artist and spectator.
DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

I. incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education

II. Contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made to the text; or

III. Contain any defamatory material

Signed: Dated: 29/10/10
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Maggi Phillips for her generosity and guidance in the sharing of her wealth of knowledge.

Gratitude must also be extended to Gary and Carol Johnson who offer me constant support in all my endeavours as a dance artist.
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Introduction

“A dancer is bound to the given form of the human body” (Hämäläinen, 2009, p. 107). As an art form, dance relies on the movement of these bodies. Dance is not fixed but can leave a lasting impression on the viewer. As a performance art, dance is truly ephemeral – a term that has been defined as “lasting for only a short period of time and leaving no permanent trace” (Encarta®, 2009). As a dance performer and spectator, I am affected by this ephemerality on a daily basis.

Within this thesis, I initially outline what constitutes dance as ephemeral. I then form conclusions regarding the question of how the ephemerality of dance affects the dancer, the spectator and the art form in general. Within this I draw parallels and note contrasts between dance and other creative outlets such as music, acting, visual art and literature.

How do you legitimately record and reproduce an art form that is traceless in nature? Does this impermanence aid or hinder the dance industry within today’s society? Do the different methods of dance documentation effectively convey the experience of attending a live dance performance? How do dancers cope with the challenge that their bodies serve as both the ‘paintbrush and the canvas’ and with the reality that they have chosen an art form that produces no durable result? How do spectators evaluate and interpret a performance that immediately disappears before their eyes? The following paper deals with these concepts whilst addressing both the positive and negative aspects of the ephemerality of dance.
Dance as an Ephemeral Art Form

Dance as a performance art is presented to an audience or viewer in a live setting. Performance itself is instantaneous and this concept of immediacy is what establishes its existence (Phelan, 1993, p. 146). “Dance is always a temporary drawing; it disappears when the movement ends. So the drawing can be written over, or rewritten at any time. Each performance has to be drawn again the next evening” (Des Marais & Cardinal, 2010). An exact replication of a particular performance will never be repeated. As Peggy Phelan states, “It can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as different” (1993, p. 146). This is the main justification of what constitutes dance as ephemeral. “It derives from its vanishing” (Namerow, 2009). Dance is a fleeting art form that begins to fade seconds after it has formed (Lambert-Beatty, 2008, p. 1). “The moment of its performance is the moment of its disappearance” (National Library of Australia.). André Lepecki describes dance as an “art of self-erasure” and highlights the notion that the execution of movement becomes historical almost simultaneously with its initial presentation (2004, p. 125). “Dance is hardly fixable, since even as it is taken in, the performance is passing away: each gesture replaced by another” (Grove, 2005, p. 37). This momentary nature of dance has both positive and negative impacts and implications on performers, spectators and the success and longevity of the art form as a whole.

He travels along a road which he destroys in the very act of passing; he follows a mysterious thread that becomes invisible behind him, he will not be caught; we shall not be able to hold him fast and pin his arms to his sides, so as to survey him at leisure from head to foot. (Lepecki, 2004, p. 138)
The Ephemerality of Dance—its effect on dance as an art form

The transient nature of dance performance prevents the possibility of capturing the art form or presenting it in a durable material format. It can be described in words, recorded on film, depicted through a painting, or represented through a photograph but this is not dance performance in its true form (McKechnie & Stevens, 2009, p. 38). It is not a genuine representation. “The photograph offers one form of perception—it is motion captured. It allows time for contemplation; time to go away, and to return for future consideration” (Stevens, 2005, p. 196). Carrie Lambert-Beatty explains though that “images of dance never capture the energy, dynamism, or power of a live performance. They are pale representations at best, of an inherently ephemeral art” (2008, p. 132). Peggy Phelan strongly argues that the endeavour to reproduce dance goes against the inherent temporary nature of the art form (1993, p. 146). She explains that an attempt to save and “preserve” dance is in itself a practice that modifies the nature of its occurrence (Phelan, 1993, p. 148). Phelan also emphasises that performance is based on the principle that a certain amount of people (at a particular time and within a certain area) can witness something of worth which “leaves no visible trace afterward” (1993, p. 149). Recording this occurrence removes the “tracelessness” of performance (Phelan, 1993, p. 149). “Dance is a sublimely ephemeral art: it sublimates instantly and persists only in the memory of those who have experienced it” (Testa, 2004, p. 16). Brian S. Turner considers that art, in its intended location, possesses an “aura” and believes, like Phelan, that when art is reproduced this “aura” begins to diminish (2005, p. 1). Carrie Lambert-Beatty explains that the vanishing element “seems to be a basic requirement of theatrical dance: that it be ephemeral, that it glint in and out of visibility, that it sparkle” (2008, p. 61).

Phelan states that performance possesses “an independence from mass reproduction, technologically, economically, and linguistically” (1993, p. 149). She goes on to explain that when placed in the context of modern society where capital gain and replication are highly valued, performance art forms begin to depreciate this freedom (Phelan, 1993, p. 149). Where a piece of literature can be identically reprinted numerous times, a dancer cannot perfectly replicate the same performance exactly night after night. This is not physically possible. “Dancing is a sentient activity, not a mechanical one” (Crampton, 2005, p. 192). Phelan believes though, that this defiance to meld into the schools of thought of today is essentially the power of performance (1993, p. 149). “Performance’s potency comes from
its temporariness, its ‘one time only’ life” (Phelan, 1993, p. 178). Brian S. Turner describes this immunity to “mechanical reproducibility” as the reason that the “auratic qualities” of dance “appear to survive in secular modernity” (2005, p. 2). Literature is becoming heavily effected by technology with more and more books being scanned and made available online rather than circulated in hard copy distributions (Kelly, 2006, p. 43). The live aspect of dance performance can never be reproduced in such a way within modern society. The atmosphere of the performance cannot be recreated with technology.

Although Phelan and Turner focus on the positive outcomes of the non-reproductive nature of dance, there are several other implications for the art form logistically and economically. The reality, observes Mary Lewis Shaw is that “dance requires not only a text form ... but three-dimensional space within which to unfold” (1988, p. 5). The presentation of dance is restricted by the boundaries of the performance space and the amount of seating available within that venue (Zolberg, 1980, p. 225). This ultimately affects the accessibility of the art form and emphasises the constant struggle which the performing arts have to accept as opposed to those art forms that possess more permanent outcomes. Live dance performance is limited in its presentation due to the availability of dancers, the accessibility of the performance space and ultimately its non-permanent nature. Unlike a piece of sculpture that can be displayed within a gallery for years or a piece of literature that can be read centuries after its creation, a particular dance performance can only be viewed in its true form, once. Zolberg explains that within live art it is “not the work but the performance which is purchased” (1980, p. 224). She states “painting and sculpture represent concrete commodities or ‘goods’ while music is essentially a service” (Zolberg, 1980, p. 224). In this case, Zolberg is making reference to live music which can be likened to dance as both are performance arts with transient outcomes. Turner concurs with Zolberg by explaining that “[v]isual culture – such as a Baroque painting – or literacy culture – such as a Shakespearian sonnet – have more cultural capital than a dance” (2005, p. 4).

Catherine Stevens further articulates this point by stating that “[l]ike architecture and sculpture, [dance] manipulates volumes of space for aesthetic and expressive purposes, but unlike architecture and sculpture its product does not stand frozen in time” (2005, p. 156). Dance is impermanent and traceless. Zolberg elaborates that “music depends on time, visual art on space; while music is ephemeral, painting and sculpture consist of concrete objects (art objects have permanence)” (1980, p. 228). She goes on to explain that “these
structural differences have implications for the organizations’ costs, expectations of growth and patronage sources. The visual arts must be displayed, music must be performed; visual art is concrete, music is ephemeral (Zolberg, 1980, p. 220). Although she is again discussing live music as opposed to dance, the challenges she has listed are equally relevant to dance.

Dance is created and performed on a “Living Canvas” (Keitch, 2010). “Unlike all other art forms ... dance is literally embodied in the moving human form” (Stevens, 2005, p. 157). Human bodies are required for both the development and final execution of choreographed dance movement. Although beautiful and unique to the performing arts, this practical requirement for the art form produces costs that do not carry across to other artistic endeavours. If a choreographer wishes to work with a dancer that does not live in the same city or state that they reside in, they are required to pay for the individual’s airfares to travel to the chosen location for choreographic development, supply the employee with a daily “living away allowance” that covers meals and incidentals and also provide accommodation (Alliance, 2010). A visual artist for example, is not required to pay his canvas or paint brush a daily allowance nor is a musician required to pay his instrument similar fees. These extra costs are also applicable when dance is toured. The employer is again required to pay his/her dancers “living away allowances” while they are travelling for performances (Alliance, 2010).

Doris Humphrey sums up the implications of the ephemeral nature of dance as being due to the “realism of now” (1959, p. 28). Unlike a visual artist or writer who can “wait hopefully for posthumous appreciation”, it is very unlikely for a choreographer’s work, that is not appreciated after its first appearance, to be given the opportunity to resurface (Humphrey, 1959, p. 28). “The advanced piece of choreography which might be acceptable ten years hence, but which fails to draw an audience now, will never have another chance; it vanishes” (Humphrey, 1959, p. 172). Claudia La Rocco details “the fragility of choreography and the lack of a definitive record to follow make for a hit-or-miss state of affairs” (2007). The requirement for the art form to be instantly appreciated governs the freedom of dance creators (Humphrey, 1959, p. 172). “Choreographers would be more daring and original if they could, but without audiences this is impossible. The spectre of
the box office is an inescapable menace and the power of good and evil is in the people” (Humphrey, 1959, p. 175). Again, dance is at a disadvantage because of its impermanence when it comes to reproductions. A visual artist can display their artwork years after it was created and if it has been preserved correctly, will look the same as it did when first presented to the public. “Sculptures and paintings have been preserved over centuries” (Healey, 2005, p. 78). A choreographer cannot replicate a performance of their choreography years after its first staging. Even if he/she were able to gather the same dancers who first performed the work, these artists would inevitably be in a different physical condition to the state in which they first presented the piece. It is not humanly possible to exactly recreate a moment in time (i.e. the original performance). “The choreographer is chained to his own day” (Humphrey, 1959, p. 172).

Whether perceived as positive or negative, dance cannot be replicated or translated in a way that will perfectly duplicate the original. “Most dance has a short life and little prospect of immortality” (Healey, 2005, p. 78). Zolberg explains that recordings of live performance are equivalent to visual art reproductions (1980, p. 226). Over time, choreography has evolved as a system to assist in the replication of dance movement (Turner, 2005, p. 6). Turner explains though, that “[choreography] is not a perfect science of movement” (2005, p. 6). Deliberations have occurred discussing if it is possible to exactly recreate dance movement from written records of choreography and if this method is indeed “artistically desirable” (Turner, 2005, p. 6). An exact duplication of any given piece would seem impossible as any new representation would be executed at a different time and in different circumstances to the original. This difference in time automatically erases the possibility of a perfect recreation. It must be considered as a reworking or as a new version of the original choreography. Particular dance works throughout history have stood the test of time and have been constantly reproduced (Au, 2002, p. 62). Ballet productions such as The Sleeping Beauty and Swan Lake were first performed in the late 1800's and are still being adapted by ballet companies today (Au, 2002, p. 64). Certain works resonate with audiences for varying conceptual and emotional reasons ultimately determining which particular dance pieces endure. The choreography of these works creates a record of the movement that ensures that reworkings can occur. Therefore it can be said that choreography and the theory of the movement is durable but the execution and performance of this material is ephemeral.
Dance notation structures have been present for many years with Spanish documents dated as far back as the 15th century (Davies, 2006, p. 6). As modern dance progressed at the beginning of the 20th century, it became necessary to develop a method of documenting “fluid movement” (Davies, 2006, p. 6). Between 1900 and 1928, Rudolf Laban developed a dance notation system that eventually became known as Labanotation (Davies, 2006, p. 7). Other notational structures have since been developed but “Labanotation has been the most enduring and most generally used” (Davies, 2006, p. 7). It is “analogous to music notation” (Carman, 2007, p. 88). Although such systems have assisted in the documentation of dance, Turner explains that “Labanotation will never capture the entire quality of a dance performance” (2005, p. 6). Helen Thomas reiterates the point that “[f]ixing the dance in the score seems to run counter to the evanescent character of the dance in performance” (2003, p. 131). Other art forms such as theatre and live music face similar challenges. The content of a play is recorded within the script and the musical form within the score but like dance notation, these recorded guides are open to interpretation and do not alone evoke the emotion and intent required by the artists (Humphrey, 1959, p. 172). Some dance works may in fact profit from the exploration of different interpretations and be further developed during a reworking period. Although beneficial for the progression of choreographic ideas, this does not solve the challenge that is recording the original performance of a work and all related elements in their true form. Other methods of documentation such as film and photography have given people greater access to dance but Turner believes that “the experience of a live performance cannot be captured by such mechanical means” (2005, p. 6). He again makes reference to the “aura of dance” and the “aura of a moving body” and claims that dance “can never be fully subordinated to modern techniques of reproduction – film on the one hand and computerized choreography on the other” (Turner, 2005, p. 15).

Although dance recorded on film broadens the accessibility of the art form, it cannot provide spectators with the same experience as a live performance. Audience members can be seated close enough to the stage to see the sweat, hear the breathing of the performers and experience the smells and atmosphere of the venue. The sounds of the dancers moving across the floor can be recorded but will only be a representation when on film, creating a less rich and comprehensive experience for the viewer. The mood created by the staging and lighting or the live performance of the accompanying music or soundscape also affects
the spectator’s senses and cannot effectively be re-created when recorded. The recording is often ‘clean’ or sanitised with mistakes and errors removed or disguised. Ultimately, film is also two dimensional and live performance is three dimensional. Even as technology develops and society is given the option to view dance in ‘3D’, this can never replace performance in its true form as film is not ephemeral in nature. The film’s viewer experiences an edited and fixed version of dance that possesses no variables. It may appear through illusion that the dancer is executing movement in close proximity to the viewer but the fact remains that the performance is ultimately a recording and therefore contrary to everything that constitutes the momentary nature of dance. A film is exactly the same every time it is presented; a live dance presentation is not.

Marcia Siegel states that “[dance] doesn’t stay around long enough to become respectable or respected. Its ephemerality is mistaken for triviality” (1979, p. xv). Often the live and instantaneous nature of dance leads to problems in regard to the legitimisation of the art form. The ephemerality and challenge of recording dance lowers its credibility amongst communities and especially within universities who “cling to the printed word” (Phillips, Stock, & Vincs, 2009). There are often “difficulties of embedding enquiry through dance practice within an academic structure that is dominated by textual language” (Phillips, Stock, & Vincs, 2008). Hilary Crampton explains that in order for something to be considered legitimate, it must be able to be examined closely (2005, p. 188). She goes on to say that “dance is an art form that struggles to be taken seriously. Its non-verbal and transient nature makes it seem impossibly ephemeral and difficult to position as an object of scrutiny” (Crampton, 2005, p. 188). Crampton bases most of these claims on the reality that dance is difficult to record and addresses the opinion of some by stating that “[t]he values and benefits are presumed to be uncertain, impossible to substantiate and consequently unverifiable” (2005, p. 188). These challenges relating to the worth of the art form seem likely to effect factors such as funding and spectator appreciation. If dance in general is not appreciated, it is unlikely to receive the financial support required to gain large audiences and therefore will not be able to break this ‘non-legitimate’ identity. This is another challenge faced by dance communities daily and is again indirectly due to the ephemeral nature of the art form.
André Lepecki states, “dance vanishes; it does not ‘stay around’ (for such is the unfortunate condition of its materiality) ... documentation ... gives the dance the defence it needs against the accusation of never sticking around, of being too trivial, of constantly losing itself, of being loose” (2004, p. 130). Paul O’Sullivan further develops this point by explaining that society desires to legitimise dance, a “silent” art form, through words (2007, p. ii). He goes on to say however, “we struggle to do the experience justice, even when we are inspired and skilfully craft a response” (O’Sullivan, 2007, p. 84). Words cannot accurately represent an ephemeral art form. They can describe dance but will never replace the experience of viewing the dance. “Sentences can speak about facts, but the preposition, ‘about’, already admits that words go round the experience, leaving its reality more or less untouched” (Grove, 2005, p. 39). Turner reiterates this point by explaining that dance is a prime example of the notion that it is not possible to fully interpret performance through text (2005, p. 7). “Dance as a performing art is mute. It’s all in the body; words are superfluous and often downright useless ... Everything is already expressed by the dance itself and the performers’ bodies” (Testa, 2004, p. 16). This justifies why dance reviews and photographs, although creating a representation of a performance, can never correctly convey the experience of witnessing dance in the moment of presentation. Alan Knowles explains: “[pictures] seldom evoke the poetry of dance; and pictures grabbed by busy press photographers may miss the humour, exuberance, pathos or aching beauty of a performance” (2010). Just as someone can record a written version of their experiences in day to day life, another individual will never be able to exactly experience the same feelings from simply reading the account of the happenings (Grove, 2005, p. 39). Similarly, witnessing a live dance performance is an occurrence that can be only superficially re-evoked through words. “To feel in oneself the unfolding of a piece of movement while watching some dance-work are experiences that language through its symbolic marks and sounds may point towards, but cannot in the end convey” (Grove, 2005, p. 39). Dance historian, Mark Franko, does not challenge the notion that dance is not permanent (cited in Lepecki, 2004, p. 130). In contrast, he objects to the idea that the ephemerality of dance is a flaw that can be repaired via attempts to “fix” the art form (Franko cited in Lepecki, 2004, p. 130). In fact, both dance and music have been described as “communicative in ways that are often far more direct than words” (Malloch, 2005, p. 14). Phelan and Franko focus on the temporal nature of dance as integral to the existence of the art form and “remove presence as prerequisite for knowledge” (Lepecki, 2004, p. 132).
we arrive, to an understanding of dance as elusive presence, dance as the fleeting trace of an always irretrievable, never translatable motion: neither into notation, nor into writing. (Lepecki, 2004, p. 125)
The Ephemerality of Dance—its effect on the dancer

“Dance is vividly present as long as dancers dance with or in their bodies” (Hämäläinen, 2009, p. 107). “The body is simultaneously both the subject of the dance, the product of the experiential dimension of dance and the object of observation” (Hämäläinen, 2002, p. 36). For Turner, it is a combination of the two elements (the choreography and the dancer performing this choreography) that essentially creates what we know as dance performance (2005, p. 6). “It is precisely the gap between choreographic text and the object or performance that constitutes the authenticity of the dance” (Turner, 2005, p. 6). These opinions provide an explanation as to how the ephemerality of dance strongly impacts the dancer as a performer. Soili Hämäläinen explains that it is never possible for a dancer to witness his/her performance in an identical manner to that of the viewer (2002, p. 36). This poses challenges for dancers in the attempt to evaluate their own work. They will never be able to watch their execution of dance movement in the same context that an audience member views their performance. A solution to this negative outcome of the ephemerality of dance is the use of video recording. For over thirty years, dance companies and dance educators have been using videotapes to view performances and give feedback to their dancers (Carman, 2007, p. 88). Teachers can show their students dance company works that are no longer being performed and therefore track the history and development of movement. Dancers themselves can watch and critique their technique and performance skills and analyse the areas of their work they believe to be satisfactory or in need of improvement. Video recordings can also give dancers an overall impression of the work in which they are performing and clarify their role within the piece that is being presented to the audience. Although useful, this does not recreate the atmosphere of the performance within in a live space and therefore the dancer still cannot gain the same experience of the performance as the viewer.

Dance video recordings are also in popular use to teach past choreography that is being revisited or movement that has been created in a different location to that of the performer (West, 2006). Although this procedure seems highly practical and time efficient, objections have been raised regarding the process: “because of the camera’s fixed position and its tendency to foreshorten, the video and film of the dance lack the precision that live teaching can impart and reveal only the merest indications of pattern and directions” (Rainer cited in West, 2006). In learning directly from another dancer, the student will
receive a far more detailed description of not only the movement they are attempting to learn but also the choreographic intent and purpose (West, 2006). “There is no more viable way to transmit it [vocabulary of a work] than dancer to dancer” (West, 2006). Video recordings of performances have been presented to communities when funding is not available to tour a dance work to these locations (Parrott cited in McKechnie, 2005). Chrissie Parrott explains that in order to boost the knowledge of her company, she transferred her choreography onto film and sent it to areas of Western Australia in which she could not afford to tour (Ibid). “So I thought, well, if we can get this put into an electronic sensibility I can send that film up there, get the people interested, and then follow up by bringing the company on tour the following year” (Ibid). Bentley explains that “Videotape, while technically useful, is a distorted, backward, two-dimensional, miniature rendition of a dance that inevitably erases complexity from any performance. It records, at best, steps, but never depth” (2005). Ultimately, the recording remains the same every time it is viewed and therefore is in direct contrast to the ephemerality of the documented live performance. Bentley describes the impermanent nature of dance as “haunting” and clearly articulates the frustrations that are faced by dancers in attempting to witness and review performances that are ultimately evanescent in nature (2005).

Rudolf Arnheim explains that, in the art form of dance and theatre, the artist’s “tool and work” are “fused into one physical thing: the human body” (1974, p. 393). A painter is given the opportunity to view their “canvas” from the same position as the “spectator” (Arnheim, 1974, p. 393), unlike dancers who cannot view themselves from a spectator’s position. “[Dancers] are the phenomenon of self creation twice over, being both the artist and the work of art. They are performers on and of themselves” (Grove, 2005, p. 44). Mirrors are often used within rehearsal processes which provide an indication as to the pictures the dancer is creating (Arnheim, 1974, p. 393). This two dimensional image, however, only provides a hazy representation for the performer. The lack of concrete form in live arts (Zolberg, 1980, p. 220) disadvantages dancers in relation to studying choreography or particular techniques (Turner, 2005, p. 6). Turner makes the comparison that “[d]ancers unlike musicians, cannot take their scores home to learn” (2005, p. 6).
The performative nature of dance not only poses problems in regards to the evaluation of the practice but also, in the practical sense, the human body has certain inbuilt limitations in terms of movement, abstraction and personal boundaries (Humphrey, 1959, p. 20). “The dancer’s medium is the body, which is an extremely practical and tangible piece of goods, much more so than words, musical notes or paint” (Humphrey, 1959, p. 20). Art forms such as visual art and creative writing, generate their product with external mediums (paint and words for example) where dance is created on live figures that have “a definite shape and [are] equipped with a highly complex system of levers, limbs, nerves and muscles, plus a lived-in personality with entrenched ways of its own” (Humphrey, 1959, p. 20).

Unfortunately a choreographer cannot manoeuvre the human form to the same extent that an artist can manipulate his/her artwork so that it no longer resembles a living object. “The body can never look like an abstraction. Painters can make non-objective shapes and lines, dancers cannot. They only succeed in looking like human beings abdicating their right to be people and pretending to be objects in space” (Humphrey, 1959, p. 171). This restriction has psychological ramifications. Dancers constantly struggle with corrections and requests concerning the movement of their bodies. They must try to consider their physical structures as inanimate objects (such as an artist’s canvas) and realise that the criticism they are receiving is not an attack on their personality or worth as a human being. Attempting to create this separation is a major challenge as dance is reliant on the movement of bodies that are, in fact, highly personal and sacred to each individual. The physical aspect of the art form can prove to be both liberating and frustrating for a dance performer depending on the nature of the project on which they are working. The fusion of the producer of the movement and the medium in which the movement is produced (the human body) creates a strong connection for the performer to their art form as the product they are creating is ephemeral but this connection is lasting. This relationship is just another challenge faced by dance participants as it can cause a dancer to lose perspective or the ability to see their work from a distance.

Bentley describes dance as “perhaps the bravest of the arts, the one whose practitioners—dancers—risk all for mere transitory moments of beauty that may or may not be observed by others” (2005). Why then are particular individuals attracted to an art form that has no permanent result? It is perhaps the power and impact on the performer of these fleeting moments that leave dancers truly satisfied yet also craving more. The thrill is addictive and
as Merce Cunningham explains, “you have to love dancing to stick to it. It gives little back, except for that single fleeting moment when you feel alive” (cited in A&M, 2009). The impact of the ephemerality of this art form on the dancer is clear when one considers that a true representation of their performance can only exist for both the participant and viewer in their mind (Bentley, 2005). “[Dancers] are ... in a way the noblest and most fragile of artists, knowing as they do that their work will not only not outlive them, but will not even outlive that performance, on that evening, in that theatre, in that city. At best their work exists as a memory” (Bentley, 2005).
The Ephemerality of Dance—its effect on the spectator

Peggy Phelan explains that within viewing performance “there is an element of consumption: there are no left-overs, the gazing spectator must try to take everything in” (1993, p. 178). This provides a challenge for both spectators and critics in terms of evaluating a performance they have witnessed. One must attempt to draw conclusions immediately. Hämäläinen reiterates this challenge by stating “[t]he ephemeral character of dance ... makes it difficult to evaluate compositions” (2009, p. 106).

All dance spectatorship relies on memory: not only the educated viewer’s memory of previous versions of a work, or of the related dances to which a choreographer refers, but at a more basic level any spectator’s ability to hold the just-past in mind long enough to make connections across the ephemeral art form’s temporal unfurling. (Lambert-Beatty, 2008, p. 56)

The ephemeral nature of dance also impacts upon the presentation of the art form within limited capacity venues and to varying audiences (Zolberg, 1980, p. 225).

A museum is capable of exhibiting simultaneously a variety of works representing various styles, media, periods of history and taste. Despite occasional crowding, it is possible for a variety of publics to be accommodated, with visitors free to select for their attention works of schools of art, spending as much or as little time on each as they like, without necessarily infringing upon the access of others. (Zolberg, 1980, p. 225)

Unlike museum visitors, dance spectators, in a traditional theatre setting are not given the option to nominate what they wish to view within a performance and are not able to choose for how long they observe a particular segment of the presentation. This again is due to the transient, non-permanent nature of the performing arts.

I remember thinking that dance was at a disadvantage in relation to sculpture in that the spectator could spend as much time as he required to examine a sculpture, walk around it, etc., but a dance movement – because it happened in time – vanished as soon as it was executed. (Rainer cited in Lambert-Beatty, 2008, p. 57)
“A site-specific dance choreographer is inspired by a place and creates a dance based on the site and its context to be performed in that particular space; the audience members are often participant-observers” (Engh, 2007). Similarly, dance ‘installation’ works are often performed at sites such as art galleries which attempt to combine elements of live performance and stationary positions (Coulter-Smith, 2006, p. 10). Both site-specific dance works and installation pieces give audience members more freedom as to what they view and for what duration of time they spend observing the performers. This is often due to the “multi-staging” element of these types of works where spectators are given the opportunity to move around the different areas of the ‘site’ (Smith, 2006). It seems that this freedom would give audience members the ability to decide for themselves how long they need to view a particular segment of the performance in order to interpret the dance movement. Although this presents a solution to the fugacious nature of dance, it does not solve the problems faced within a traditional theatre setting where the spectator is expected to remain seated for the entirety of the performance.

Paul O’Sullivan elaborates on the challenges of deciphering meaning within a dance performance. He explains that dancers are rarely stationary and the “image changes both figuratively and physically” (2007, p. 12). A dance audience may only be able to develop an understanding of the content and subject of the work after multiple viewings, which is often not practical nor possible for the spectator (O’Sullivan, 2007, p. 12). O’Sullivan also explains that the audience are “seeing and comprehending (or not) ‘the language’ [dance movement] for the first time. The context and body language may give clues as to what they (in performance the dancers) are talking about but the actual conversation is largely unintelligible” (2007, p. 45). These opinions clearly articulate how the ephemerality of dance performance has a major impact on the interpretation of the art form as spectators are given a hard task in drawing conclusions on what has just disappeared before their eyes. The sporting industry on the other hand has developed strategies over the years when faced with similar challenges (O’Sullivan, 2007, p. 77). “At a ‘live performance’ of a sport ... there is enough information contextually, in many forms (umpiring decisions, commentary over the PA, written information in the program, comments from other spectators) to explain what is happening” (O’Sullivan, 2007, p. 77). Dance audiences are left to their own devices to interpret the performance they are viewing. Program notes are often supplied as a guide although commentary (in the sporting sense) of the dancers’
movements is never featured unless included artistically as an element of the work. If commentary were present within a dance performance, the beauty and mystery of the performers would diminish. The power of the separation between the audience and the dancers would be truly damaged (O’Sullivan, 2007, p. 77). This in itself explains why dance spectators must interpret performances themselves and reiterates the richness of the performing arts but also the challenges relating to attempts to evaluate something that is impermanent.

As outlined earlier, dance performance “leaves no visible trace” after its presentation (Phelan, 1993, p. 149). I recently viewed a performance of Dunas that was choreographed and performed by Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and also featured Mariá Pagés. Cherkaoui states that dance is “a temporary sketch of reality ... the drawing disappears when the movement ends” (cited in Des Marais & Cardinal, 2010). Mid-way through Dunas, Cherkaoui began to draw shapes in a pile of sand and his actions were filmed during the process. This allowed the images he was creating in the sand to be viewed simultaneously (live) as they were projected on a screen at the back of the stage. Mariá Pagés began to dance in front of this screen and her movements were in direct correlation to the shapes and lines that Cherkaoui was creating in his artwork. Pagés would move her arm for example, at the same time, speed and with the same dynamic that Cherkaoui drew a line in his artwork. The segment was carefully staged in that Pagés knew exactly where to stand in front of the screen in order for her movement to be executed with the correct relationship to the projected images of Cherkaoui’s drawing. To the spectator, it was almost as if Pagés were creating the drawing with her body but even as her movement ended, the images on the screen remained. This gave the audience a visual representation of where and how Pagés had moved within the space and aided my interpretation, as a spectator, of her movement. I was given a ‘permanent’ representation of her ‘non-permanent’ actions. It seems to me that, in this way, Cherkaoui attempted to create a solution to the challenge of dance’s tracelessness.

Yvonne Rainer is considered an “avant-garde icon” and has been described as the “incubator of post-modern dance” (Perron, 2006, p. 14). During the 1960s, she was heavily involved in the success of the Judson Dance Theatre, New York, and within this time “the
site of Rainer's most crucial interventions ... was not, in the end, the body of the performer. It was the eye of the viewer” (Lambert-Beatty, 2008, p. 4). Judson Dance Theatre experimented with repetition, slow motion and stillness as “techniques that help[ed] viewers to apprehend dance, to hold a picture of movement in the mind’s eye, negotiate between a physical epistemology and a visual one: between a performer’s and a spectator’s way of knowing movement” (Lambert-Beatty, 2008, p. 66). Rainer claims that “[d]ance is hard to see” and believes that “dance resists vision” (cited in Lambert-Beatty, 2008, p. 1). Over time, Rainer developed two solutions to these challenges, the first being an attempt to create dance works that are “less ephemeral” and the second option to “exaggerate the problem of dance’s disappearance” (Lambert-Beatty, 2008, p. 1). Her work during the 1960s “registered the basic, even obvious fact of performance’s ephemerality as an artistic problem: something an artist had to work with, work around, work through” (Lambert-Beatty, 2008, p. 1). Lambert-Beatty describes Rainer as a “sculptor of spectatorship” (2008, p. 9).

In 1961, Rainer attempted to create The Bells in a manner that would make the dance movement more durable and less vanishing (Lambert-Beatty, 2008, p. 1). An eight minute movement phrase was choreographed that consisted of the repetition of a few single actions (Lambert-Beatty, 2008, p. 58). Rainer repeated the phrase in multiple parts of the performance area whilst also fronting in varying directions within the space (Lambert-Beatty, 2008, p. 58). This strategy “systematically present[ed] the same movements to the audience from different points of view and repeating them until they might stick for the viewer (or at least begin to ‘ring a bell’)” (Ibid). Rainer herself believed that this gave the spectator the opportunity to “walk around” the movement, “like an object” and hopefully simplified the challenging process of remembering and interpreting the live performance (cited in Lambert-Beatty, 2008, p. 1).

Rainer’s Terrain, choreographed in 1963, dealt further with the concept of how bodily movement could be manipulated and “made more object-like” (Copeland, 2009). It was a additional attempt to create an atmosphere for the audience that closely represented that of a museum rather than a dance performance (Copeland, 2009). Rainer’s choreography was inspired by the “static, inanimate objects” that one is faced with in a gallery (Copeland,
The dancers were required to block their consciousness of the audience in order to become completely “self-absorbed ... and more like an inanimate object” (Copeland, 2009).

Rainer claims that “Repetition can serve to enforce the discreetness of a movement, objectify it, make it more object-like” (cited in Copeland, 2009). In Parts of Some Sextets, choreographed by Rainer in 1965, repetition is revisited as a tool to focus on specific movements within the choreography as is the concept of interruption (Spivey, 2003, p. 120).

Both factors were to produce a ‘chunky’ continuity, repetition making the eye jump back and forth in time and possibly establishing more strongly the differences in the movement material ... Interruption would also function to disrupt the continuity and prevent prolonged involvement with any one image (Rainer cited in Spivey, 2003, p. 120).

It seems that Rainer was trying to make dance less subtle and circumspect for the spectator by presenting opportunities for them to clearly process the unconnected movement thereby resulting in a more distinct visual memory.

Trio A, choreographed by Rainer and first performed in 1966, was created as a further attempt to emphasise the ephemerality of dance (Lambert-Beatty, 2008, p. 1). It continually presented gestural movement that “did not repeat itself, thereby focusing on the fact that the material could not easily be encompassed” (Rainer, 1974, p. 16). The movement has been described as “unpredictable” and “deliberately opposing familiar dance patterns of development and climax” (MoMA, 2009). Within the work Rainer organised the choreography in a monotonous structure, emphasising the effort involved for the dancers to execute each separate movement (Spivey, 2003, p. 122). This resulted in focusing the attention of the viewer on each action rather than on an overall picture of bodies in motion and “challenged the appearance of dance as effortless and transcendent” (Spivey, 2003, p. 122). Susan Leigh Foster explains that in order to interpret a dance performance, the spectator ought to be given the opportunity to distinguish sections and “focus on the structural organization of the dance, first by deducting its basic moves and then by learning how these moves are put together” (1986, p. 89). Doris Humphrey reiterates this point by explaining that “the onlooker [of dance] enjoys it much more if it is
shaped according to the familiar pattern of effort and rest ... people are happier when a maze of sensation can be sorted out into some kind of order” (1959, p. 68). “The viewer of dance instinctively wants to understand the order of it, and the phrase-pattern is one thing which he can perceive” (Humphrey, 1959, p. 68). In Trio A, it is not easy to distinguish “basic moves” and Lambert-Beatty likens this to “eliminating the pauses between words” within spoken language (2008, p. 133).

In dance, suddenly accelerating a limb, breaking off a movement ... or introducing a new element in a sequence of recurring movements, will draw the observer’s attention and raise overall awareness by differing from the anticipated continuation as built up by preceding movements (Hagendoorn, 2005, p. 141).

This is exactly what Rainer set out not to do in Trio A as she was attempting to emphasise the transient nature of dance by deliberately creating a work that would be challenging to interpret. Rainer also decided to instruct the dancers in Trio A to constantly avert their eye focus from turning to the spectators (Lambert-Beatty, 2008, p. 13). In doing this, Rainer “hoped to break the circuit of seduction and admiration built into the performer-viewer relationship” (Lambert-Beatty, 2008, p. 13). Rainer may have attempted to focus the attention on the movement rather than the dancer as a human being but Morris explains that this “disrupted the usual dynamics of desire ... in dance performance” (1996, p. 122). This approach revisits Rainer’s treatment of the body as an object which “allowed the dancer to reject the projection of a persona and act simply as a neutral purveyor of information” (Spivey, 2003, p. 119). It seems that her instructions would have emphasised the evanescent nature of dance and resulted in the audience’s loss of a connection to the ephemeral art form through an emotional link with the performer.

Don Herbison-Evans has recently explained that dance viewers process the temporary nature of the art form in a variety of manners (2010). I believe that the ideas he expresses have direct correlation with the philosophies of the Judson Dance Theatre during the 1960s. Herbison-Evans claims that “spatial form as in the visual arts, temporal repetition and form as in music, and communication of meaning as in the literacy arts” must be considered when choreographing a dance piece in order to “maximise impact on the audience” (2010). He considers the use of stillness during dance performance is linked directly to “drawing, painting, photography, and sculpture” where motionless artworks are
most often created (Herbison-Evans, 2010). Stillness, it seems, aids the audience’s ability to absorb the information (dance movement). Judson Dance Theatre often experimented with the use of stillness within their works, as did Rainer in her attempts to make dance more “object-like” (Lambert-Beatty, 2008, p. 1). Herbison-Evans goes on to explain that within the instant when a performer “changes from rising to falling, from compressing to expanding, from reaching to contracting”, there is a “moment of zero velocity with a non-zero acceleration” (2010). Supposedly, within this moment, the dancer appears to be moving and motionless simultaneously (Herbison-Evans, 2010). Similarly, a body dancing at a consistent speed or turning in a consecutive manner can apparently “be viewed in its own inertial frame as being at rest” (Ibid). These techniques, when used within dance choreography again give the audience time to process the different elements of the performance. Judson Dance Theatre and Rainer heavily focused on the use of repetition and its importance when creating dance works (Spivey, 2003, p. 120) which is justified by Herbison-Evans’ views that “the power of temporal repetition is that it engrains the movements into the mind so they can be thought about. An observer can capture the ‘fleeting moment’ by observing its repeat” (2010). The final tactic outlined by Herbison-Evans for effective audience communication is that of creating choreography with emotional intent (2010). “Psychological studies have shown that cognitive retention is increased when a perception is meaningful, so that meaning assists observers to capture the fleeting moment. This happens when ... the movement has an association in the observer’s memory with something else” (Herbison-Evans, 2010). These ideas regarding the most effective ways to impact upon an audience have been in discussion since the time of the Judson Dance Theatre and are clearly still relevant today. The mere fact that the tactics have been used for over forty years seems to justify their effectiveness. The tools have been used in an attempt to solve some of the problems faced by dance audiences due to the elusiveness of the art form.

Herbison-Evans outlined the importance of creating dance movement that would trigger an audience member’s memory to recall something from the past, therefore presenting them with an affecting performance (2010). “Kinaesthetic empathy” is another way for viewers to comprehend dance performances and is defined as the “combination of emotional sympathy and inner mimicry” and is “the common term used to discuss how audiences receive dance communication” (Krasnow, 1994). Every spectator possesses a memory of
“motional sensation” and this can assist in their appreciation of a dance performance that most likely heavily features movement of the human body (Krasnow, 1994). “Spectators can participate in the reception of dance through their own physicality, through their sensing and observing bodies” (Hämäläinen, 2009, p. 106). Rudolf Arnheim has explained that the “dynamic nature of kinaesthetic experience is the key to the surprising correspondence between what the dancer creates by his muscular sensations and the image of his body seen by the audience” (1974, p. 407). This kinaesthetic factor is what fuses the relationship between the dancer and the spectator (Arnheim, 1974, p. 407).

“When the dancer lifts his arm, he primarily experiences the tension of raising. A similar tension is visually conveyed to the spectator through the image of the dancer’s arm” (Ibid). This assists in spectators’ engagement and allows them to empathize with the dancer. It would seem that the greater the connection between performer and audience, the easier it would be for the spectator to interpret the dance work.

Scientific research has discovered “neurons that fire not only when we activate our own muscles, but even when similar actions are seen being performed by another” (Grove, 2005, p. 48). Psychologists also claim that “observing an action involves the same repertoire of motor representations as is used to produce the action” (Stevens, 2005, p. 162). Dance audiences subconsciously draw on their understanding of bodies moving through space and allow this knowledge to aid them in their analysis of what is being presented (Krasnow, 1994). “They do not mean that the audience is experiencing movement at that instant in time, but rather that memory traces of previous motional events are called up and contribute to the total understanding of the dance” (Krasnow, 1994). Doris Humphrey gives the example that lengthy sequences of dance movement leave spectators feeling fatigued due to “the kinaesthetic association of our bodies with the dancer” (1959, p. 67) and our knowledge of the feelings associated with continuous physical exertion. Unlike other forms of creative expression such as visual art, dance spectators can observe the performers and “acknowledge their mutual existence in real space and time” (Spivey, 2003, p. 125). This human connection should prove to assist in the interpretation of the art form. Renee Glass explains that a dance spectator can convert the moving pictures in front of their eyes into “kinaesthetic and visual images of himself or herself performing the movement” (2005, p. 111). Stevens, Malloch and McKechnie elaborate on this point by explaining that when we view dance, we are able to appreciate
the emotion that is being presented to us by the performers but considering the concept of kinaesthetic empathy we can also feel the emotional effects of the actual movement within our own bodies (cited in Grove, 2005, p. 48). “The stimulation of both visual and kinaesthetic response means that the observer can experience and ‘feel’ the dancer’s actions, and can empathetically experience affect” (Glass, 2005, p. 111). Stephen Malloch presents a slightly different angle on the topic of kinaesthetic empathy in his claims that our desire to interpret and value dance is based on the human need for companionship (2005, p. 23). “Our capacity to create and appreciate dance and music is based in our drive to reach out to others in contingent interaction through time; we wish to participate in the gestures of co-ordinated companionship” (Malloch, 2005, p. 23).

Considering all views on the subject, it seems that kinaesthetic empathy is one solution to the challenges faced by spectators of temporal art forms such as dance. It would seem that the process of interpretation and remembrance of a work would be enhanced and simplified if an audience member had experienced these feelings of ‘sympathy’ and ‘empathy’ towards the performers. “Whether it is the dancer’s kinaesthetic sense, or the audience’s kinaesthetic empathy, it is the perception of that motion – its form, its qualities, its expression, its intent – that communicates the essence of the work of art to the viewer” (Krasnow, 1994).

Soili Hämäläinen describes dance as experiential and “never the same as it is moved, as it is visual” (2009, p. 107). This presents an “abyss in a dancer’s experience of movement” (Hämäläinen, 2009, p. 107). The author believes that dancers must investigate this “abyss” if they wish to portray “meaning through movements” effectively to their audience (Hämäläinen, 2009, p. 107). This gap in the relationship between the dancer and the audience has also been described as a “performer-spectator, doing-watching divide” (Lambert-Beatty, 2008, p. 262). Within live art, the struggle for the performer to close this gap, is a continuing challenge that is again a result of the ephemeral nature of performance. It is hoped that through the concept of kinaesthetic empathy and effective emotional communication with audiences, this gap can close. For Ann Cooper Albright, “[p]erceiving dance means more than a flat visual gaze, it also means attending to kinaesthetic, aural, somatic, and spatial sensations” (1997, p. xix). “Because of the inherent
contagion of bodily movement, which makes the onlooker feel sympathetically in his own musculature the exertions he sees in somebody else's musculature, the dancer is able to convey through movement the most intangible emotional experience” (Martin, 1983, p. 22).

Despite these forms of spectator engagement and the attempts by choreographers such as Rainer to deal with the ephemerality of dance, dance audiences will forever be faced with the challenge of attempting to interpret a disappearing art.

Not only is the dance fleeting in eternal deferral but the observer is always in difference with his/her own presence. That is to say, it is not only the object (the dance) that is in motion; the writer, the viewer, the spectator, is never, ever fixed as well. (Lepecki, 2004, p. 134)
Conclusion

Dance is performance art in its purest form. It consists of moments that often last for only split seconds and will never be repeated in the exact same way. The term ephemeral defines dance. This thesis outlines the effects of the impermanence of the art form. Although invariably encapsulating both positive and negative implications, I ultimately feel that the ephemeral nature of dance creates the beauty and distinct traits that distinguish this form of creative expression from other mediums. It is my hope that technology will never be able to completely conquer the difficulties involved in emulating the performing arts. As long as humans live they should be able to perform for each other. Robots may eventually be created that can dance for audiences but the mere fact that they are non-human beings defies the passion and beauty that comes from the soul of a performer and inspires the delivery of their art to others.

It is not possible to exactly recreate the occurrence of a particular dance performance. Recordings serve to preserve certain elements of the initial presentation but cannot encapsulate all aspects of the traceless art form. Some believe this non-recordable aspect of dance to be a hindrance in a world that constantly demands product. Others regard this trait to be the element that gives dance an edge and an individual place within modern society. Despite advances in technology, no dance documentation will ever completely capture the experience that is live theatre. Dancers constantly struggle with the reality that they can never view their art form from the same position or under the same conditions as their audience. This challenge is similarly faced by all performance art participants. Ultimately, those individuals who have chosen dance as their career possess a strong connection with the beauty of movement inherent in their art form. Their drive and inspiration would seem to stem from the creation of a non-durable, almost intangible product. Spectators attempt to interpret dance movement that disappears within seconds. Choreographers constantly experiment with techniques that may assist in audiences' evaluation of dance performance. The concept of kinaesthetic empathy and emotional connection to performers may also aid spectators in their understanding of the work although ironically audiences invariably attempt to deconstruct an art that is designed to appear and disappear simultaneously.
Every dance performance is different for both the performer and the spectator. A dancer will never perform a certain movement in the exact manner as he/she has done previously. It is perhaps this ephemeral notion that appeals to audiences. Spectators attend a performance with the knowledge that no one has ever witnessed this precise presentation in the past and that it will never be exactly replicated in the future. Along with the other audience members, they are the only privileged individuals who will ever witness this particular occurrence. The performance is live and a wide range of variables are at play. This concept makes the art form both interesting and exciting for the artists and audience. A dancer may become frustrated that they cannot execute certain sequences as well as they have done in previous performances or rehearsals but it is most often this notion of imperfection (and the associated striving for perfection by the performers) that appeals to audiences as they relate to the struggle being played out before their eyes by fellow human beings.

This thesis is confined to ideas circulating in written discourse and does not contain any practical elements or experiments. I have researched the opinions of many academics and theorists in an attempt to gain possible answers to my research questions. These sources span many years in order to indicate how ideas and theories have changed or developed over time. The sources cover the opinions of individuals within the field of dance and also those concerned with other artistic endeavours. This has given me the opportunity to draw conclusions on the effects of the ephemerality of dance not only in relation to the art form itself but to also make comparisons on its characteristics and potency with visual arts, acting, literature and music.

As a dance performer and spectator, I am regularly faced with the traceless nature of dance. This study has enabled me to widen my understanding of different approaches towards conquering those challenges. I will continue to document my observations and experiences in relation to the effect of the transient nature of dance. Through my research and interpretation of sources, I now have a broader knowledge of the effect of this ephemerality on dance as a performing art and how I can use this awareness to assist in the sustainability of the art form.
It can be concluded that the ephemerality of dance has both positive and negative impacts economically, logistically and artistically on the dancer, the spectator and the art form in general. If dance were not ephemeral, it would not be dance in its true form. We would not be able to approach and appreciate the art form in the manner in which we do. The implications of the transient nature of dance are necessary for it to exist in its current form. It is my opinion that the positive effects of this evanescence far outweigh the negative aspects and it is the ephemeral nature of dance that creates the beauty, speciality and power of the art form as a non-reproducible and therefore a unique means of creative expression.
Bibliography


