

A Note on Mr. Margolis and the Definition of Dance

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ABSTRACT | I demur to Margolis' insistence that we form a generalized concept of art before the formation of a definition of specific art forms. I consider the elements proposed for a definition of "dance" by Margolis, including "dance notation, dance style, and dance as the expression of a contingent culture." I note the problems with the third element, especially the blind spot shared by many of us to anything other than Western culture.

KEYWORDS | Dance; Dance Notation; Dance Style; Definition of Dance

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Joseph Margolis' early landmark article "Mr. Weitz and the Definition of Art" (Margolis 1958) set the stage for decades of dialogue on how we might define art in general, as well as individual artforms. Just as his thinking about art evolved over his long career, so has the thinking of those of us focusing on individual artforms, in my case, dance.

Margolis' insistence that we need a generalized concept of art before we can have a specific definition challenges us in all the artforms, including dance. I confess that I have never settled on a generalized concept of art overall that I would defend now. As with many scholars of philosophy and dance, I have struggled instead with how to define "dance" (Bresnahan 2020).

I have resisted necessary and sufficient conditions, yet think some elements are essential, most notably, human movement. The notion of "open texture" that we inherited from Wittgenstein has been appealing to Margolis (89) and to many of us today. It seems to be an attractive escape clause to get us out of tangles specifying just what the necessary and sufficient conditions would be. The comfortable metaphors of "strands of similarity" and "family resemblances," which Margolis (89, 92) also finds attractive, are easy to understand and apply to numerous examples of any artform. But all of these alternatives do seem, as Margolis suggests, too-easy compromises.

In critiquing Francis Sparshott's work on dance, Margolis thinks that to distinguish it from other artforms we need to recognize the roles of "dance notation, dance style, and dance as the expression of a contingent culture" (Margolis 1997, 46). The first two on his list (dance notation and dance style) are dissected mercilessly in his "The Autographic Nature of the Dance" (Margolis 1981), which critiques Nelson Goodman's proposals for dance in (Goodman 1968), *Languages of Art*, but does not propose a definition *per se* of "dance."

The third element, "the expression of a contingent culture," plays an increasingly important role in Margolis' later observations on the arts, while not focusing specifically on dance. Margolis' notion of works of art as "physically embodied and culturally emergent entities" (the title of another seminal article by Margolis (1974)) sweeps in many things not encompassed in our concept of art, a problem for those determined to define "art."

But despite Margolis' focus on emergent cultural entities, it was his perceived blind spot toward truly universal cultural understanding of dance that was the focus of a blistering critique by anthropologist Drid Williams (1928-2018) (1982). She is appalled that Margolis (as well as a few other writers of that era) suffers from "intellectual provincialism" (54), and does not seem even "... to be acquainted, if not with some of the developments outside of their specialization, at least with international scholarship within their discipline." I am unaware of any formal re-

sponse by Margolis to this critique.

Williams puts a glaring spotlight on a problem for so many of us working on these issues, viz., our preoccupation with the varieties of western theater dance and failure to even attempt to recognize international dance and scholarship on that dance. Although belatedly, most of us working in aesthetics now are recognizing our lack of attention to the arts outside of western culture. So, while we scramble to catch up with our own shortcomings, we also are cautious about taking concepts and frameworks that have been workable in our concentration on western art and using them as a starting point for our remedial work on non-western art in general and dance in particular.

Thus arises the irony of Margolis' insights on art as culturally emergent and physically embodied. With too-recent awareness of our impoverished recognition of non-western art and scholarship, we shy away from trying to embellish on any of these insights on the arts that we once confidently believed were fair and accurate. We worry that our western "frame" for understanding the arts might itself be a limitation. We wonder what it would mean to be sufficiently well-versed in those other artforms to speak confidently, whether to identify necessary and sufficient conditions or family resemblances or strands of similarities. So, for now, we cautiously try to expand our horizons and continue to explore our understanding of the arts in general and dance in particular. If that means declining, for the time being, to propose sweeping definitions of "art" or particular artforms, so be it.

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