

16 Beauty in motion

Collective creativity in contemporary dance

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Recently I looked up a former classmate whom I had met during my fieldwork at a professional contemporary dance school in London. One of her social media posts caught my eye with its simple label: “Beauty . . .”. The post contained a video link to an excerpt from *Nowhere*, a theatre piece by Greek choreographer Dimitris Papaioannou created in 2009. The video clip featured the ‘body mechanic system’ of *Nowhere*’s ‘central scene’, in which approximately twenty performers lined up on either side of two dancers at centre stage to move as a single unit with a single purpose. Most of their bodies and dark clothing receded from view as their many arms aligned side-by-side to create a great snaking motion across the full length of the stage. The two-sided snake quietly rose and then plummeted as it/they slid the clothing off from the central figures, a woman and a man, with controlled grace and purpose. If we take ‘beauty’ to denote a pleasurable experience, something that engages the senses and that suggests creative excellence, then I concurred with my classmate’s appraisal of this performance.

Nowhere was performed to launch the new main stage of the Greek National Theatre, and it was described thus by the theatre’s website (Theatre Room Asia 2014):

Nowhere is a work about the physical space of the theatrical stage. Constantly changing and defined by the men and women that inhabit it, it can be countless different places while designed to be nowhere at all.

This idea of the theatre space as fluid and co-created resonated with my theoretical stance on human bodies as emergent, i.e. in a constant state of becoming (Potter 2015, 391). In the case of professional dancers, bodies come into being through ongoing sensory engagement with other dancing bodies in their social contexts; student dancers become professionals through a shared training process in which they walk, balance, stretch, fall, turn, leap, sweat, and share weight together on a daily basis. Thus dancing bodies are not simply *there* in the world, but are constantly made and re-made in a long series of moments involving collective attention to and with others (Csordas 1993). Prompted by my classmate’s post label, I wondered if we could think of ‘beauty’ in similar terms: as a configuration that comes into existence at particularly  moments, through the collective sensory

engagement of multiple bodies situated within particular environmental flows. This chapter is the result of that exploration.

Anthropological consideration of beauty has focused on the material products of creative effort, with notable attention to the presentation and/or modification of the human body (Strathern 1979; Turner 2012 [1980]; Ewart and O'Hanlon 2007). Beauty has been portrayed by anthropologists as a personal and national tool of identity politics, evident in social phenomena ranging from hair care (Caldwell 2003) to international beauty pageants (Cohen et al. 1996). With Wacquant's (1998, 334) ethnographic account of boxing a notable exception, descriptions of beauty tend to emphasize physical form (particularly of women) over the day-to-day actions of living persons. Even the growing literature on cosmetic surgery, which highlights the active body modification strategies that people might employ to their personal, economic, and/or social advantage (Edmonds 2008; Ackerman 2010), stems from a feminist critique of normative body image, framed in Foucauldian terms of discipline and surveillance (Foucault 1979). While informative, these analyses suggest that beauty is something fairly stable, an intrinsic property that is recognized and reinforced by dominant cultural consensus.

More recent anthropological discussions of creativity and skilled practice (e.g. Marchand 2010; Schneider and Wright 2013) allow for a shift from thinking about beauty as viewed (emanating from an object) to beauty as experienced (felt by actors engaged in creative processes). While an important shift to make given the historical bias of attention to the former at the expense of the latter, the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. Following Ingold (2000), I have argued previously (Potter 2008) that the senses must be understood as a total perceptory package that orientates one's entire body-self within its lifeworld, and not as discreet physiological pathways that give rise to separate experiences of sight, sound, etc. In earlier work I emphasized the felt dimensions of contemporary dance through descriptions of bodily heat and kinaesthesia, two senses that are collectively engaged through the dance training process but that have received little scholarly attention in comparison to the 'classic five' (sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch). While mindful of the importance of considering beauty from the dancers' perspective of felt experience, here I explore beauty as a collective process from an audience's point of view. From this perspective beauty is still experienced as total sensory engagement rather than merely viewed, but kinaesthetic and other felt sensory modes are less emphasized than they might have been from the performers' perspective.

In this chapter I will argue that beauty is not a reified quality, but rather an emergent phenomenon that serves to orientate collective sensory engagement across space and time. Beauty comes and goes in moments, as a result of constantly shifting relationships between persons, ideas, and things. It is recognized, acknowledged – indeed collectively created – by embodied persons moving within their environmental webs. Because its existence hinges on configurations of multiple persons who share (at least to some extent) in their perception of pleasurable objects or events, beauty is a social occurrence. It is one means amongst many of

achieving shared experience, of feeling as though we are swimming in the same cultural sea.

In order to make this argument I will draw on ethnographic observations that I initially made more than ten years ago, when immersed in my fieldwork amongst professional dancers-in-training. For ten months across 2003–04 I was a daily participant in intensive full-time training at a well-known contemporary dance school in London (henceforth ‘the School’). As a registered student on the course I took two daily dance technique classes as well as weekly or bi-weekly courses in improvisation, choreography, performance, and other supporting studies such as anatomy, body conditioning, choreology, and dance history. During this time my research was also informed by my regular attendance at professional dance performances, auditions, and social events alongside fellow students. I spent most of my time with the dancers and teachers connected to the School’s one-year course (approximately thirty students, ranging in age from 18 to 32 years old), but I also observed and got to know some of the approximately 150 dancers on the School’s three-year BA course, particularly first-year students who shared some classes with the one-year students. I followed up with some of these students during the next academic year (by taking open professional classes at the School and meeting with continuing full-time students during their breaks) and again around the time of their graduation from the School in 2006. I have also had opportunities for in-person contact with individual dancers after they made the transition to professionals – notably in 2011, after a performance in which one of my former classmates danced the female role in *Pave Up Paradise*, described later in the chapter.

While I did not frame my explorations of the professional contemporary dance community in terms of ‘beauty’ at the time, one of my initial research questions centred on whether or not this community had implicit body standards for professional success. Below I take as my point of departure a consideration of the *form* of dancers’ bodies as beautiful, in order to expose the analytical limits of discourse surrounding “the body beautiful” (Reischer and Koo 2004). From there I move to a broader consideration of beauty as an ephemeral configuration that prompts collective sensory orientation, through description of a celebrated contemporary dance piece that I argue enabled beauty to emerge through its coming-together of the theatre space, soundscape, material objects, and human bodies in motion.

Beautiful bodies

As the curtain rose, a solitary figure began to undulate within the confines of a box of light. For the duration of the piece, a single body contracted and expanded, displaying her chiselled musculature as shoulders rolled, arms cut through the space at lightning speed, and legs occasionally gestured directly upwards towards the light source that bounded the dancer’s movements.

The dancer was Sylvie Guillem, a ballerina of the British Royal Ballet who in more recent years expanded her repertoire to include contemporary dance works such as the solo that I witnessed in late 2004. She is regarded by many as the best dancer of her generation, praised for her expressive performance and solid yet

fluid technical abilities. But she also has a decided advantage over other dancers in terms of eye-catching attributes: her famous legs. They are long, lean, and limber, easily stretching apart past 180°. They were used as a visual image during a ballet class at the School, with our teacher instructing us to “pretend you have Sylvie Guillem’s legs” so that we might toss our own legs into the air with utmost confidence and ease. Guillem’s physical body has been scrutinized, celebrated, and potentially envied over the course of her successful career, as this excerpt from a *Guardian* article (written as she approached retirement) suggests:

Her long, lean, flexible body threw off technical challenges with an almost insolent ease. As she balanced, supremely, on one super-strong pointe and lifted one delicate, steely leg to graze her ear, Guillem was to some of her public the most glamorous dancer of the age – and to others, the most arrogant.
(Mackrell 2014)

Beauty standards amongst classical ballet artists and audiences favour long limbs, a relatively shorter torso, slimness, and articulate feet; these collective preferences are well established and openly discussed (Nolan 2011). The contemporary dance community, in contrast, is less direct in expressing its aesthetic preferences. The bodies of full-time contemporary dance students are continually presented for examination by assessors, auditioning choreographers, and audiences (including peers) alike, but in comparison to their ballet counterparts they are given relatively little guidance as to what sort of body they should aim to become. This lack of explicit discourse begs the question of whether or not an aesthetic ideal exists amongst contemporary dancers and their audiences. The presence of such an ideal could profoundly influence shared experiences of beauty, which in turn could orientate the contemporary dance community towards selected practices for training, company selection, and professional recognition.

In terms of stature, the School did not seem to promote the notion of an ideal type. Images of students’ bodies were projected throughout the School, usually in the form of promotional posters for upcoming student performances or colourful leaflets for courses on offer.¹ The bodies on show were highly varied: a short, limber girl executing a technically strong leap; a skinny male balancing in hand-stand position; a tall, lean female in a pedestrian stance looking intensely at the camera; a short, stockier female in an inverted yoga position; a muscular, average-height male standing powerfully on one leg; a short, muscular female fully supporting a tall, leaner male on her shoulder; and a tall, medium-build woman mid-spin with hair flying, amongst others. Rather than volunteering, students were approached to be photographed, and I inferred that the School’s staff purposefully chose a cross-section of students to reflect a variety of people doing a variety of movements. I judged these images to be fairly representative of the student body: roughly twice as many women as men, the occasional non-white student, and bodies that ranged from very tall to very short with varying degrees of leanness and musculature.

When beginning my fieldwork I did not judge my own body to be ideal for dance; I am not naturally limber, and my exceptionally short torso does not easily

lend itself to the images of length encouraged in both ballet and contemporary dance. I was surprised upon arriving at the School to meet widely varying heights and body shapes (including a woman in my class of thirty students who was taller than all three male students in the group). The form of some students was described as ‘balletic’ (e.g. slim, small hips, small chest, and proportionally long limbs), but others were dubbed more ‘earthy’ (average or below-average height with a muscular build) or ‘normal’ (resembling the pedestrians on the London streets) with equal enthusiasm. As one of the more ‘earthy’ types, I struggled to resolve my own body image with my preconceived notion of a beautiful dancer.

The School’s staff consistently presented a ‘come as you are’ attitude, encouraging students to find “a way [of training] that works for you, for *your* body”. The institutional discourse took a personalized tone, particularly when teachers or the resident physiotherapist spoke to students about how they might change their individual practice to enhance their performance or to avoid future injuries. These expressions placed value on uniqueness and individual control of one’s own capacity to move – which is perhaps not surprising given contemporary dance’s historical roots in movement styles that were developed by individuals (e.g. Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham) to suit their own physicalities. Staff members at the School seemed to take pride in purporting a sense of openness and acceptance with regard to body types. The School’s physiotherapist, herself a former dancer, bluntly conveyed her views on the way in which attitudes to different bodily shapes had changed over time: “we used to be told early on that if we didn’t have ‘the look’ to be a dancer then we would have to quit at some point. The dance world is much more accepting now”. This ethos of personalisation and acceptance was reinforced during my first one-on-one tutorial of the year, when a ballet teacher (the same one who had instructed us to visualize Guillem’s legs) encouraged me to consider professional performance. I expressed reservations about my physical characteristics including my limited flexibility, but she instead emphasized my ability to dance rhythmically and my ‘natural’ capacity to perform. Similar messages were conveyed by other teachers throughout the year: the ‘quality’ of one’s movement and one’s capacity for creative expression overrode physical form.²

Amongst students, the results of an end-of-year questionnaire that I administered revealed little evidence for the notion of an ideal body aesthetic in terms of physical stature. When students were asked to rate the importance of particular characteristics for professional contemporary dancers, they consistently rated physical descriptors such as ‘short’, ‘tall’, ‘curvy’, ‘skinny’, and ‘long/lean’ with the lowest rating, corresponding to ‘doesn’t matter/no opinion’. In contrast, words that I considered more personal, quality-of-movement characteristics, such as ‘grounded’, ‘strong’, ‘creative’, ‘expressive’, and ‘fast’, were consistently labelled with the highest rating and its corresponding descriptor of: ‘Ideal. Every contemporary dancer should strive for this’. Even physical characteristics that I would have considered ideal, such as ‘highly muscular’ and ‘highly flexible’, typically received either a medium (‘not required, but desirable’) rating, if not the lowest rating. These results surprised me, perhaps reflecting my own lengthy background

in ballet, which clearly values particular physical traits. The majority of students, however, seemed to accept the School's projected claim that any student could become a professional dancer, regardless of physical stature, if s/he demonstrated an accepted level of bodily skill and displayed a captivating performance presence. One student epitomized this view by stating: "I don't think there's a physical ideal anymore . . . I'm more interested in *how* someone dances and performs".

More strongly than the questionnaire results, my opinion as to what makes a beautiful contemporary dancer was informed by the informal consensus that seemed to emerge amongst my classmates and teachers regarding which dancers within our cohort showed the most professional promise. By the end of our one-year course certain dancers seemed to garner relatively more positive attention than others from both peers and established professionals; these dancers were praised by classmates, had already been selected for performance projects outside of the School, and/or were given featured roles in the School's end-of-year graduation performances. One such dancer was the classmate who made the social media post on 'Beauty', who has had consistent success as a performer since leaving the School. Although she was one of the younger members of our cohort, through her strong yet feminine physique she conveyed an on-stage presence of a savvy, assertive woman who was not to be trifled with. The movement qualities that I associated with her by the end of our training were intensity and power. During classes she was more likely to apply too much force to a movement (at the risk of overbalancing or falling) than to approach a new movement sequence gently. Her movements seemed to project beyond the physical limits of her body; one could sense the air around her displaced as she sent her arm slicing through the space at great speed before arresting the movement in an instant. Other dancers within the School who were collectively identified as talented exhibited a similar 'commitment' in their quality of movement, and this seemed to be the basis of their beauty as dancers rather than their physical form (which varied widely between them).

If beauty in contemporary dance is not the dancer's body per se, then what is it? Towards what are our collective aesthetic sensibilities directed? In the remainder of this chapter I move beyond the consideration of beauty as an intrinsic property of bodies, towards beauty as a processual configuration of social flows. In order to pursue this line of argument my analytical lens will expand beyond dancers' bodies (and their associated qualities of movement) to include the wider context in which those bodies are aesthetically appreciated: the spaces and moments of performance.

Beautiful work

The creative co-product of dancers, choreographers, and other artists is often referred to as either a 'piece' or a 'work'. The former term suggests an art object that maintains a similar ontological position to other Western fine art forms: a 'piece' is a discrete thing, something to be viewed and appreciated in a context that is removed, at least to some extent, from the everyday flow of life. A contemporary dance piece is performed in a designated space: often on a stage, but even in more

mundane settings of ‘site-specific choreography’ (which have included roof tops, museums, airport terminals, and public streets) there is a sense that the space has been temporarily marked for something out-of-the-ordinary. It is also typically time-bounded, from the beginning of a piece when bodies/lights/sounds begin to move in relation to each other and the end when those purposeful relationships are stopped abruptly or fade away. All aspects of a piece – the setting as well as the music, costumes, lighting, props, spoken text, and of course the movements executed through the choreography – coalesce in space and time to form an emergent object of sensory engagement. The alternative term, ‘work’ – favoured by many at my field site – is suggestive of the effort and background processes that underlie each performance. The art form of contemporary dance is thus ephemeral and contingent on relational flows, even as it can be perceived as a thing with distinct boundaries of time and space.

In an attempt to move beyond the scholarship on “the body beautiful” (Reischer and Koo 2004), which is largely confined to the representation and agency of (mainly women’s) bodies through body modification practices, I will now describe a celebrated contemporary dance piece/work as a beautiful object worthy of anthropological enquiry. In understanding beauty as an emergent capacity for inviting collective attention and pleasure, I have focused on a widely praised piece of choreography that originated at my field site.

Pave Up Paradise was created by Ben Duke and Raquel Mesequer when both were undergraduate students at the School. In a 2008 interview for *londondance.com*, Duke reflected on his and Mesequer’s motivations for creating it:

The movement and text was very much us, based on our experiences . . . and also a reaction against a training that . . . was focused on turning us into the kind of dancers we had no interest, and no prospect, of becoming . . . I was really driven by my limitations as a dancer.

After Duke and Mesequer first performed the piece in a termly student choreography show, staff at the School selected *Pave Up Paradise* along with a handful of other student choreography pieces for the end-of-year graduation performances. The graduation performances are an annual event at The Place, one of the main contemporary dance venues in London, and the student pieces were showcased alongside longer works set by established choreographers. Darshan Singh Bhuller, himself a graduate of the School and artistic director at the time of Phoenix Dance Theatre in Leeds, UK, came to the performance in July 2004 and afterwards bought the piece for the company’s repertoire. Around the same time the piece won prizes at two different international choreography competitions. Phoenix toured the piece as part of the company’s twenty-fifth anniversary gala, and it was well received by critics:

It [*Pave Up Paradise*] is a fast, funny relationship piece danced to live music . . . Suffice to say that it was magnificent in every way, danced outstandingly by Tanya Richam-Odoi and Kevin Turner as our modern-day Romeo & Juliet.

(Graham Watts writing for *Ballet.co.uk* Magazine, March 2006)

The positive reception of the piece by the wider dance world mirrored the enthusiasm of its first audience, largely composed of School students including myself. It was the piece that everyone was talking about, with a reference to it even making its way into an end-of-term School pantomime. Within a dance genre that encompasses a wide range of technical and performance styles – not all to everyone’s liking – *Pave Up Paradise* captured our collective attention and seemed to foster widespread pleasure amongst its audiences. By these criteria it was undoubtedly beautiful. When Phoenix Dance Theatre toured the piece again as part of its *Reflected* programme in 2011, I eagerly bought my ticket – particularly as the female dance role was being performed by a former classmate of mine from the School. At the end of that performance she spoke to me about the significance for her of dancing in the piece, given its connection to her early training.

The promotional material for *Pave Up Paradise* describes it as a witty, tongue-in-cheek presentation of the biblical Adam and Eve story. Co-creator Raquel Mesequer describes the concept of the piece as a ‘set-up’ in which Eve is doomed to fail and to be unfairly blamed for the fall of man (Phoenix Dance Theatre 2011). We in the first audience had no promotional material to guide us, but instead encountered the piece through its initial scene: a woman wearing a white button-down shirt and black suit stands behind a silver bucket in the upstage left corner, facing the audience and immobile. A man similarly dressed stands in front of a second bucket in the opposite corner (downstage right), his back to the audience and his hands resting near his abdomen, out of view. A musician occupies the upstage right corner, seated casually and holding a guitar under a subtle pool of light. The first movement on stage is barely perceptible; the first moment of which the audience is aware is the sight and sound of a stream of liquid falling from the man into his bucket, which generates laughter.

The man then turns to address the audience, the source of the liquid (a beer bottle with attached spout) now visible. He speaks: “And the Lord God said . . .”, followed by a list of instructions that include “do not drink too much” and “do not get distracted by the naked woman”. The man admits to the audience that “I forgot them all”, but then launches the stage into motion with his comment “I think it’s her fault”: a first sharp strum of the guitar coincides with the woman’s sharp look in his direction. The dancers immediately spring into motion towards one another with intensity. The musician plays the first of three tracks (‘Last Night’ by The Strokes) while the dancers engage in an energetic, contact-based duet at centre stage (Figure 16.1). Bodies spin, jackets are grabbed and tugged, the pair rotate around a central point of connection even as they make rapid direction changes or execute a perfectly timed lift. Many of the qualities of movement valued by School students in the end-of-year questionnaire were perceptible to the audience: ‘grounded’, ‘strong’, ‘expressive’, ‘fast’, etc. The pattern and dynamics of the movement suggest at once both a struggle and an unbreakable relationship – as if the two characters would have fought many times before but would have always come back to each other. The woman gets her own poignant/comic moment during this flowing yet agitated sequence by pointing out that the man forgot all of God’s instructions and then asking aloud, “How is that my fault?”



Figure 16.1 High-energy opening duet from *Pave Up Paradise*, performed in 2011 by Phoenix Dance Theatre

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Sudden moments of stillness coupled with silence create transition points that could be experienced as beauty: as an audience member I could feel a connection between the pair as they spun towards the floor before freezing to look at each other. The tempo and quality of the movements gradually soften towards more supportive weight-sharing and mutual acknowledgement of the other as the critical part of a bigger whole; the musician meanwhile performs ‘*Lover, You Should’ve Come Over*’ by Jeff Buckley. We see that the man does indeed get distracted by the naked woman – another comedy moment as she calmly and purposely removes her shirt, which sends him into a frantic rush, shirt ripped off and flying, to join her. The proverbial apple eventually emerges in the woman’s teeth from within one of the buckets, and both dancers proceed to bite it simultaneously. “Whose fault was that?” the man asks her. The piece moves towards a close in a tender sequence that coincides with the musician’s third track, ‘*Tijuana Lady*’ by Gomez (Figure 16.2). In the quiet that surrounds the final moments, the man’s splayed hands move from opposite directions towards his upper and lower torso; just as he says, “It is not good that man should be alone”, the woman’s hands appear from behind him on either side, mirroring and merging with his hands as the lights fade.

To what extent can we consider this celebrated co-creation of movement, light, sound, and material things an experience of beauty? Certainly the piece instilled pleasure in myself and other audience members, from the moments of unexpected



Figure 16.2 Tender closing duet from *Pave Up Paradise*, performed in 2011 by Phoenix Dance Theatre

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laughter to the poignant moments of palpable connection. Grounded in the movement style of contact improvisation (Novack 1990), the piece captivated its audiences through the sharing (sometimes throwing) of body weight and the sense of connection enacted by the dancers. The final image of the joining hands especially moved me, linking this out-of-the-ordinary spectacle within a theatre space to my idealized notion of human love and unfailing commitment. Although impossible to fully perceive other audience members' responses to the piece, I sensed a shared attention to, and appreciation for, our collective encounter with this work. This encounter involved felt dimensions of emotional reaction and shared energy; through total sensory orientation of our body-selves towards the stage, we did not merely view a beautiful object but rather experienced beauty as a collective process that was generated in the shared space and time between performers and audience members. Beauty was an emergent rather than intrinsic property of the piece, a point that I elaborate further next.

Beauty-in-the-making

In the context of an ephemeral art form such as contemporary dance, the relevant question to ask may be not what beauty *is* (its form and properties), but rather what beauty *does* (its social consequences) and how it emerges as a capacity for shared,

pleasurable experience in particular moments. The beauty of *Pave Up Paradise* served as a sensory anchor point around which multiple somatic modes of attention (Csordas 1993) were collectively directed. In prompting bodily attention from multiple persons, beauty can give rise to shared experience. Ingold reminds us that far from a default position to be taken for granted, “Sharing is an achievement, not a state of affairs that is given a priori. It is something we have to work at. Specifically, it is an achievement of joint practical activity, of moving and perceiving together with others in the setting of that activity” (Ingold 2011, 324). Beauty prompts us to perceive together, to witness life in concert with others. We collectively turn towards it, sensing that it is something to be appreciated by all. Of course something does not have to be beautiful to prompt collective attention; the recent tenth anniversary coverage of the London 07/07 bombings (one of which occurred close to my field site) reminded me that horror can be just as socially compelling as beauty, if not more so. People ran towards or away from the destruction and orientated themselves around televisions, computer screens, and radios as the news came in, resulting in both collective action and society-wide reflection on British identity. Beauty perhaps prompts different forms of coming-together, but the parallels are instructive. Works of art, Gell reminds us, have ‘anthropological implications’ by prompting “innumerable shades of social/emotional responses to artefacts (of terror, desire, awe, fascination, etc.) in the unfolding pattern of social life” (Gell 1998, 6).

In the example of *Pave Up Paradise*, there was a literal coming-together of bodies within the theatre, and their shared orientation towards the piece as it unfolded on stage. Motivations for attendance no doubt differed amongst audience members, but we gathered there for broadly the same purpose: to experience the show. The outbursts of laughter, the thick stillness as hands intertwined and lights faded, the enthusiastic cheers that followed – in these moments beauty was enacted amongst the performers and audience members. It was perceptible and then dissipated, albeit leaving threads in the spaces of memories. If we take the phenomenological perspective of Merleau-Ponty (1962), we cannot think of beauty as simply *there*, existing as a pre-defined set of qualities that is waiting to be stumbled upon. Instead beauty is actively *made* in the moment of its perception: through the dancer’s projection through space, the painter’s brushstrokes, the child’s presence, the earth’s rotation. The recognition of beauty requires encounters: at the theatre, in the art gallery, at the playground, with the landscape at the moment of sunset. In its capacity to draw our collective attention, beauty emerges as processes unfold, calling out to be noticed and appreciated amidst the tangle of life in which we find ourselves. Works of beauty give us pause, suspending our usual rhythms in acknowledgement of their excellence.

Beauty thus emerges in relational configurations and flows. This is not to say that those flows are entirely random. As Bourdieu (1984) reminds us in his oft-cited *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*, aesthetic sensibilities are enacted by people living within a world already ordered (e.g. along lines of social class). The young French bourgeois who confidently extols the virtues of a particular painting does so not only to express any feelings of pleasure that the painting might have evoked in him, but also to mark his place within society

amongst the educated elite. Beauty-making is thus a personal as well as social endeavour. In creating *Pave Up Paradise*, the choreographers explored and amalgamated movements, music, and spoken text that they found compelling – yet through these creative acts they also spoke out against dance training practices that they found too restrictive, tested the boundaries of the contemporary dance world, and raised their own profiles as dance artists. Those of us who gathered to witness the early performances did so because of our attachment to the School, reflecting our prior familiarization with and appreciation for the setting, form, and content of the piece. As audience members and fellow dancers who moved and perceived together, we also played our (albeit more distant) part in co-creating *Pave Up Paradise* as a thing of beauty to be collectively admired within our shared institutional setting (Ingold 2011, 324).

In this chapter I have moved beyond ‘the body beautiful’ to consider contemporary dance performance as a collective experience of beauty. From this analysis I have argued that beauty is more process than property, echoing John Blacking’s description of music as a collective route to the ‘other self’ capable of experiencing a “greater intensity of living” beyond the mundane (Blacking 1995, 34). Understanding beauty as emergent rather than intrinsic allows for shifts in aesthetic preferences over time, thereby highlighting the potential for beauty as a force for social change. *Pave Up Paradise* would likely not have been considered beautiful had it been performed a century earlier. The athletic, daring bodies of the dancers – particularly the woman – were beautiful by my contemporary standards but may have been seen as grotesque at a time when Isadora Duncan’s bare feet and soft curves were the most acceptable challenge to the conventions of classical ballet. Beauty is thus not fixed but must be continually re-enacted. Through our ongoing processes of beauty-making we realize our potential as creative beings: to collectively comment on, challenge, and change our ever-flowing world.

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Notes

- 1 During my fieldwork most of the dancers photographed were full-time (day) students between the ages of 18 and 25, but occasionally older students of the ‘evening school’ were also photographed.

- 2 However I also perceived a certain contradiction within this discourse: in contrast to the varied bodies of the students, greater uniformity of build could be found among teachers' bodies. This observation might indicate a shift in attitudes about bodily physique over time – or alternatively that in spite of a deeply ingrained dialogue of individualism, in practice certain physical characteristics (e.g. slim build, hypermobility, and obvious muscularity) are more consistently found amongst those who ultimately 'make it' as professional performers than among the wider pool of dance students.

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