10-12-2021

Reflections on "Catching the Ghost: House Dance and Improvisational Mastery"

Renee Conroy
Purdue University Northwest, rconroy@pnw.edu

Home

The Journal

About CA

Submissions

Ethics Statement

Contact CA

Editorial Board

Subscribe

Browse Archive

Donate to CA

Search ...

Search

Search Archive

Search

Reflections on "Catching the Ghost: House Dance and Improvisational Mastery"*

Renee Conroy

Abstract

This essay is a constructive response to Christian Kronsted's "Catching the Ghost: House Dance and Improvisational Mastery," in which he develops three topics introduced in his novel treatment of this club dance form. First, I consider the nature of the relationship between house dancing and house music. Second, I address the significance of "the vibe" in house culture. Third, I apply these reflections to Kronsted's three puzzles of improvisational agency to demonstrate that an apt, aesthetic analysis of house dance is possible without depending on 4E assumptions about the nature of mind.

Key Words

4E cognition; dance improvisation; house dance; house music; jazz; somaesthetics

1. Dancing in new directions

It is always exciting to grapple with a fresh topic in aesthetics. It is a rare treat when an author initiates reflection on an unexamined artistic form by employing tools forged in other philosophical domains. Christian Kronsted's article, "Catching the Ghost: House Dance and Improvisational Mastery," is rewarding in both respects. It introduces the unexplored subject of house dance to the field of dance philosophy and illustrates how popular theses in philosophy of mind can be applied to the improvisational arts. In response to his stimulating project, I explore one of the ways Kronsted's treatment might be

amplified to cultivate the new directions he proposes for contemporary aesthetics.

Kronsted deploys the methodology recommended by Dominic McIver Lopes in *Beyond Art* (2014).[1] He seeks a reflective equilibrium between bottom-up and top-down approaches to a particular artistic practice.[2] Thus, his interviews with expert house dancers provide empirical data against which to test theories about this social dance form and serve as a mechanism for identifying philosophical problems that require theory for resolution.

My aim is not to criticize but to demonstrate that Kronsted has entered an intriguing conceptual territory by focusing on house dance. One might presume that any philosophical issues raised by this kind of free-form community dancemaking will be of a piece with those that attend other genres of communal improvisatory dancing, such as contact improvisation or rhythm tap. House conventions, however, generate complications that do not apply to these improvisational dance forms; herein, I consider several related to house music.

Two caveats are in order. First, there are many sub-genres of house music, including "acid house, deep house, progressive house, gabberhouse, happy house, epic house, hard bag, techno acid beats, nuhouse, there is no end to it."[3] Each has a unique cultural history and generates a distinctive style of dancing. A robust analysis of house dance would consider these variants and their relationships with care. In a preliminary response to Kronsted's ideas, I treat house as a homogeneous dance phenomenon, acknowledging that this strategy might produce distortions troubling to practitioners.[4]

Second, I set aside examination of the various "tribes" important to so-called "househeads," and do not address questions about whether house dance, as practiced internationally in the twenty-first century, is sufficiently authentic to respect its roots in the Chicago and New York club scenes of the early 1980's.[5] Instead, I focus narrowly on the relationship between the dancing and the music and the significance of the aesthetic object that emerges from their communion: the vibe.

2. House dance and house music

Every historical treatment confirms that the emergence of house music drove the development of its associated dance styles, though the forms matured through mutual influence. Collective awareness of this genealogy might be one reason today's house dancers regard the music as kinetically essential, but a more significant part of the explanation is purely

somaesthetic. It is grounded in the sonic structures crafted by house DJs, who aim to sustain long periods of social dancing by mixing repetitive, bass-heavy tracks that encourage dancers to ride the rhythmic wave for hours on end.

Although music played in social dance contexts, from Savoy-style swing to Irish reels, is characteristically created for dancers, the central features of house music are unique. First, it exemplifies uncommon rhythmic regularity, trading in relentless pulse repetition while avoiding sonic repetitiveness. An insistent beat is maintained throughout every lengthy house set to drive dancers' continual movements, while melodic variations and new aural textures are introduced at regular intervals to continually reignite the dancers' interest in moving.[6]

Second, house music is obdurately unsyncopated; it keeps an unflinching 4/4 time. It is also played slightly slower than some other club forms, typically between 115 and 130 beats per minute, to facilitate more complex, less frenetic bodily explorations. Third, this kind of social dance music is designed to be experienced somatically, as Kronsted's interviewees attest. Dance studies scholar Sally Sommer explains, "The sound has been *engineered* ('equalized') so that some of the deep bass lines are *not heard but felt* as vibrations in the sternum, so that the dancer literally embodies the music."[7] Cultural theorist Hillegonda C. Rietveld concurs, describing house music in a club setting as a "tactile entity."[8]

In addition, house music uses lyrics sparingly and in a distinctive way. Unlike other forms of popular music that might be spun in a communal dance space, the content of house songs is typically unimportant, as words are intended to go unnoticed by dancers, except to the extent that they are evocative as bare sounds or repeated invocations to embrace a norm of the community, such as, "Once you enter into my house then it becomes our house and our house music. Can-you-feel-it?"[9] As a result, when this style of music includes lyrics, they are generally simple, repetitive, and self-referential, reaffirming the importance of the dance.

But what is the nature of the relationship between the music and the activities of those who crowd the house floor? Nick Wiltsher's philosophical treatment of electronic music is a useful starting place. He begins by arguing that club music is made *for* dancing, asserting, "The main test of a record is whether it works on the dancefloor; the main aim of a DJ is to move a crowd."[10] Sommer's analysis of house dance, which, like Kronsted's, is based on interviews with insiders, reaffirms Wiltsher's

generalization: "House music has been specifically created as *dance* music – nonstop music drives nonstop dancing."[11]

In house culture, this claim is both descriptive and normative. It is a basic tenet of the practice that the DJ generates musical mixes for the primary purpose of stimulating and supporting the activities of the dancers, though he or she might have additional aims. But it is also the case that, à la Count Basie, who admonished his jazz peers, "If you play a tune and a person don't tap their feet, don't play the tune," a track is regarded as *good* house music only if it inspires people to get up and dance or at least feel the rhythmic pull from the sidelines. As Rietveld attests, house music's "basic effect is to 'pump' a desire into human bodies to move, to dance and 'let go.'"[12] Hence, from the perspective of house culture, a song that fails to generate a yen for bodily motion, to that extent, is artistically flawed, just as is a horror film that inspires giggles instead of gasps, according to Berys Gaut's well-known "merited-response argument."[13]

Wiltsher makes two other observations about electronic music that readily apply to house culture. First, drawing on Tiger Roholt's theory of groove, he maintains that to properly appreciate house music one *must* dance, warning would-be club-goers, "you're not getting its groove if you're not moving to it."[14] This appreciative orientation is also expressed in the lyrics of some house songs, such as, "You see, house is a feeling no-one can understand really *unless their feet moved* onto the sound of our house."[15] Insiders even admonish, "it is a *mistake* to 'listen to' House because it is not set apart from its social and cultural context . . . Wallflowers beware: *you have to move to understand* the power of house."[16]

Second, Wiltsher contends that some ways of taking the floor will reveal a dancer's failure to grasp the aesthetic contours of the music, cautioning "muggles" or "civilians" (house dance neophytes), "You can dance inappropriately; you can misunderstand the music."[17] Wiltsher's generalization is again borne out by the testimony of house insiders. For instance, one early house dancer featured in Sommer's documentary, *Check Your Body at the Door* (2011), maintains that responding to house tracks with the aggressive, hard-hitting physicality typical of hip-hop is a failure to grasp the sensual, modulated qualities of the music, although it is appropriate to modify the style of traditional hip-hop moves to generate similar bodily patterns that exemplify fluidity and ease, rather than force and flair.[18]

These basic commitments on the part of househeads illustrate why it is theoretically important to treat this kind of dance as distinct from communal forms of improvisation mentioned most

frequently by dance philosophers: contact improvisation and rhythm tap. The former is typically performed without sonic accompaniment because it emphasizes organically developing rhythms of a human duo in moment-to-moment physical negotiation with one another. And in social forms of the latter, in contrast to cases in which rhythm tap is utilized choreographically as part of a repeatable production, such as Savion Glover's *Improvography* (2000), the dancers often constitute "the music of the dance" entirely with their own feet. In archetypical instances of contact improvisation and non-theatrical rhythm tap, music is neither made for the dance nor do dancers regard it as a requisite kinetic engine.

Thus, the closest cases for comparison might be those associated with early jazz music, given that tune forms like the jitterbug and the Charleston were designed for dancing, could be danced to in ways that indicated a failure to understand their musical complexities, and were sometimes thought to be most thoroughly appreciated by those who cut a rug to them.[19] These similarities notwithstanding, a picture unique to house emerges from two additional remarks made by Sommer that reflect its distinctive culture. The first is, "*To be fully realized, house music must be danced to . . .*"[20] The second is that the fundamental aesthetic unit of house is not the groove of the music but the vibe of the club.[21

3. Realizing differences

What should we make of Sommer's "realization claim?" It could mean that a house set is metaphysically incomplete until a sweaty swarm has danced to it, or it might entail only that house music requires audience engagement to achieve its full appreciative potential. While the latter assertion is plausible, the former is troubling. It implies that house music — a creation in a sonic medium — requires dancing — a creation in a bodily medium — to be "realized" *qua music*. But, as dance philosopher Julie Van Camp notes, music and movement are fundamentally different in kind. One is essentially spatial and the other not.[22] Hence, it is difficult to see how either could complete the other ontologically, though it is obvious that music and movement often complement one another in intentional, aesthetically significant ways, as in works of theater dance, like George Balanchine's *Stravinsky Violin Concerto* (1972) and Mark Morris's *Mozart Dances* (2006).[23]

Theorists and dance practitioners, however, seem committed to the idea that a metaphysical sense of realization is operative in house contexts. Hence, we might pursue deeper understanding by considering more familiar cases. After all, in some artforms

live performance is required for a creator's work to be fully realized, that is, presented in a manner that exemplifies its fundamental properties and renders it appreciable *as* an artistic creation. Traditional plays and poetry designed for recitation are obvious examples. In both cases, a writer may pen a script or set of verses where essential narrative, emotive, or rhythmic features become manifest only when someone voices them appropriately. Thus, it could be argued that the poem on the page or the lines in the folio do not embody the author's artistic product on their own but that the maker's creation is *fully realized* only when the inscribed texts are interpreted through nuanced vocalization. One might urge that just as the writer's bare words are metaphysically incomplete qua theatrical plays or recitative poems, the DJ's relentless beats and shifting sonic textures require interpretative dance performances to become full-blown house music.

Two key differences undermine this analogy. First, playwrights and authors of spoken word poetry craft *scripts for* performance; their creative efforts consist in drafting a blueprint for how to manifest their works. By contrast, the person who composes or mixes a house song creates something for others to perform *to*, as Sommer emphasizes. It is uncontroversial that DJ's creations are designed to encourage house dancers to move; they are made to serve as both impetus for and accompaniment to the dancing. But these musical products do not rely on the activities of the dancers for their aural-cum-tactile properties to be fully realized, since their rhythms and rhymes can be heard and felt before anyone takes to the dance floor. Indeed, for house music to motivate club-goers not to be wallflowers, the music as played must exemplify its essential, somatically infectious features before any dancing occurs.

The second difference is that while words are the fundamental units of both a play script and an actor's performative interpretation of it, the basic constituents of house music and dance differ ontologically, the former being (roughly) tones in time and the latter (roughly) human movements in space-time. In the case of a traditional play or recitative poem, a performance interpretation realizes the writer's creation through *instantiation*: the actor or presenter literally gives voice to the author's words, thereby exemplifying their semantic content and artistic characteristics via inflection, intonation, rhythm, and tempo. But the house dancer cannot instantiate the complex musical composition created by the DJ purely by moving. The only way to realize the properties and values of a sonic medium in a physical one is by reflecting them. Thus, a dancer might mirror the music's rhythmic structure, match its

qualitative intensity, parallel its dynamics, mimic its harmonies, or follow its phrasing. These are powerful aesthetic counterpart relations that call for appreciative attention. But insofar as all are forms of isomorphism, all presuppose an ongoing ontological distinctness between the music and the dance rather than a metaphysical merging or creative completion.

If the claim that "to be fully realized, house music must be danced to" does not imply a relation like instantiation, how should we interpret it to honor the idea that it has a metaphysical and also an appreciative dimension? Ethnomusicologist Kai Fikentscher suggests one possibility, defending a "principle of synchronicity," according to which there is "a dynamic relationship between music and dance [that] cannot be explained solely by their simultaneous occurrence."[24] He argues, "Interactive performance is an analytic concept applicable to *the mutual dependency* of two forms of musicking in the context of UDM [underground dance music]: deejaying and dancing. It implies that without the presence of dancing, spinning records *loses its meaning and vice versa*."[25]

This suggestion is intuitively plausible, as it allows that a DJ can spin an ontically complete house set when no one is on the dance floor and that Kronsted can practice a genuine bit of house dance in the lobby of his dentist's office. There is, however, something admittedly hollow about these scenarios. An empty club floor that pulses only with blaring bass is aesthetically bereft as it is one-dimensional. Relentless sonic repetition does not sustain aural interest for long; this is why insiders caution that house music is not to be simply listened to on pain of finding it dull, trite, or tiring, thereby misapprehending its nature as a catalyst for creating kinetic energy.[26]

Similarly, although a practitioner might break into an impressive house riff almost anywhere, outside the context of the club step sequences are leeched of potential artistic properties, even if they exemplify aesthetic properties such as gracefulness or complexity.[27] This is because the artistic character of house is rooted in various kinds of call and response and in shifting seamlessly between leading, following, and adumbrating. Thus, the artistry of the dance is not reducible to the artful display of athleticism or the aesthetic qualities of a complex movement phrase. It consists, instead, in things such as playful parody, as when one dancer effectively imitates the "stock moves" of another in a cypher (dance circle), or the creation of subtle counterpoint, as when a dancer jacks in a way that deliberately

juxtaposes the pulse of the music, thereby creating a new rhythmic structure that has both physical and aural elements.

In addition, house is a conversational form of collective improvisation in which expert dancers often take turns. In contrast to contact improvisation, where the dancers shift between leading and following while constantly moving together, house dancers sometimes pause or repeat a basic holding pattern, such as the two-step or cross-step, to watch their "interlocutors" so they can respond appropriately.[28] Kronsted's analysis emphasizes this aspect of what happens between people on the dancefloor, but pays less attention to the bigger picture implicated by Fikentscher's principle of synchronicity. After all, the DJ is in constant conversation with all persons in the club at all times, and the DJ's choices acquire artistic value from his or her ability to read the dancers aptly.

Thus, while the music and movement remain metaphysically distinct — the dancers do not give life to a house track by interpreting it, but by synchronizing their outputs with those of the DJ — their artistic significance is established through interaction. They are mutually inflected aspects of a nonverbal colloquy between the person in the booth and those on the floor. And when things go well, a bit of metaphysical magic occurs. The music and movement coalesce to create an emergent aesthetic object that plays a central role in house culture: the vibe.

4. Valuing the vibe

Suppose we regard dancing and deejaying as interwoven aspects of a multi-media artistic form, like classical ballet or opera, in which the primary appreciative object is the product of their communion. Thus, the focus of aesthetic attention is not house music and simultaneously improvised dancing. It is synchronous improvisational house-music-and-dance. Ongoing commerce between dancers and DJs can generate an emergent ephemeral entity called "the vibe," and its felt presence is a crucial aspect of Catching the Ghost.

Although difficult to define, as described by house insiders the vibe has several salient features: it is environmental, interactive, fleeting, and somaesthetic. While the DJ provides the groove that motivates and supports dancing, the vibe is "the *energy exchange between* the booth and the floor, [thus] the maintenance of a vibe, cannot be explained convincingly in terms of musical performance only."[29] Fikentscher illustrates the nature of this transaction by offering an analogy to jazz:

Indeed, the interdependence of a rhythm section and soloist in a jazz ensemble is comparable to that of DJ and dancers. The rhythm section shares with the DJ a focus on pulse and structure (harmonic and/or rhythmic), providing a foundation on which the soloist can "dance." Similarly, both the jazz rhythm section and the jazz soloist are relatively autonomous in their domains, as they are expected to make their own choices in terms of timbre, pitch, volume, phrasing, and execution, in relation to the performances of each member of the ensemble. [30]

While imperfect, this analogy usefully highlights the degree to which the DJ is also an improviser, although one who works with pre-recorded tracks. For this reason, DJs can be regarded as more or less masterful at the "art of spinning" — or, in the digital age, remixing, producing, or curating mediated music. This skill depends on the presence of dancing because it is exemplified in the music maker's responsiveness to the movers' ever-changing needs: altering the tempo to give dancers a breather after a particularly energetic song, sampling a lyric repeatedly to augment excitement or encourage a feeling of community, or playing with the equalization of the bassline to amplify the somatic experience of the music as a shared external heartbeat.

Fikentscher's illustrative comparison also adds nuance to Kronsted's claim that dancers regard the music "as a person-like entity," since elements of a house set, including those that involve mixing, sampling, and equalizing, are crafted by the DJ on-the-spot in reaction to what he or she observes on the dance floor. The person in the booth assesses the overall movement quality emanating from the throng below and creates an immersive sound-cum-lightscape to enhance or modulate this collective energy, while apprehending it from a fixed distance.

Of course, the perceived aesthetic character of the dancing group might differ substantially from that of any particular dancer's movements or cypher's exchanges. Some might emphasize lofting (floorwork featuring acrobatic elements that prizes grace and control over "tricks"), some might highlight jacking (complex torso undulations that are the foundation of house technique), and others foreground fast footwork (lower limb movements that borrow from rhythm tap and breakdancing). Each improvisatory exploration will pick out and build upon features of the music in a unique way. While the DJ may attend to these performances individually, it is the complex energy of the whole that takes appreciative precedence. And it is this global kinetic quality to which the music maker responds by determining how best to maintain, develop, or modify *it* to

generate a gratifying multi-dimensional dancescape for everyone, that is, to shape and sustain the vibe of the club.

Furthermore, as Sommer argues, "Of all the formal qualities that constitute the essentials of House, nothing could be more ephemeral or more powerful than the vibe, the *defining building-block* of the Underground-House scene."[31] She also notes that the "vibe is constructive" and resonant with the sense that "a good party is in the making." [32] This suggests that it is both an emergent aesthetic entity that can be appreciated (and manipulated) and an achievement concept. Hence, the relevant normative distinction in the house community is typically between having a vibe and having none, rather than between having a good vibe and a bad one.

Several lessons can be drawn from this conceptual outline. First, appealing to the vibe can make sense of the claim that "to be fully realized, house music must be danced to." After all, the appreciative aim of house music is not simply to motivate people to dance but *to cultivate their movement choices* and generate enthusiastic exploration of new physical possibilities, as Kronsted's treatment indicates. This can happen only if the DJ's selections support multiple kinds of dancerly freeplay by being neither too fast nor too slow, encourage new movement thoughts by being diverse in melody or sonic texture, and allow elaboration of a novel idea or exchange by repeating a hook enough times for it to be "played with" by the dancers. Of course, if there is no one on the floor, then the DJ *cannot realize* these artistic aims; as a result, the music cannot be appreciated appropriately as being made *for* dancing.

Second, a multi-layered ontology is needed to articulate the appreciative structure of house dance. At the most basic level, we confront the music and the dancing, which are metaphysically distinct though, optimally, each reflects the other's formal properties and is responsive to its aesthetic contours. When circumstances are congenial, these independent creative outputs coalesce to generate the "defining building-block" of house – the vibe – an emergent entity whose qualitative character is not reducible to any single contribution or improvisatory exchange and supervenes on all of them.

The DJ, however, has greater influence over this interdependent environmental creation than do the dancers, because the house music maker sets the initial sonic parameters and controls the vibe's modulation throughout the night by reading the entire room with care. As Fikentscher argues, "Programming is understood as an art that puts the DJ in the position of authority. The success of the ongoing interaction with the dance

floor is his or her responsibility, the programming of sound and lights helping to create the vibe, which in turn *determines the quality* of a particular club experience."[33] This does not entail that artistic influence is not bidirectional between the floor and the booth, but it does mean that the DJ's contributions are more significant in establishing the character of the vibe than are those of any single dancer. It also acknowledges that the music maker can manipulate the emergent aesthetic object to a greater degree than any other individual in the club. As a result, the DJ's praiseworthy achievement is in facilitating dancers' experiences of Catching the Ghost, which is a way of actively appreciating the vibe by partially constituting it through physical movement.

5. Kronsted's puzzles of agency

Could we appeal to the concept of the vibe to shed light on Kronsted's puzzles of agency? In summary, they are: how should philosophers make sense of dancers' repeated claims that they are both in and out of control when they have "caught the ghost" on the club floor? How can we regard a person who seeks surprise at his or her own physical abilities as a master of a dance form? And on what grounds can we credit house dancers artistically for their improvisational accomplishments?

First, once we recognize the centrality of the vibe to house culture, we might find that Kronsted's testimonies simply require rational reconstruction. It is common for theorists who write about house dance or underground dance music to take insiders at their word and to take these words literally. Kronsted's analysis follows this model; hence, he finds it necessary to appeal to commitments from 4E theory to make sense of his interviewee's claims. But philosophical aesthetics typically resists the idea that we must take practitioners at their word. Indeed, it is common to embrace David Davies' "pragmatic constraint," according to which our best theories are responsive to features of the relevant artistic practice and elucidate what its participants *do* but are not be beholden to what insiders *say*, especially when their reports are internally incoherent, mutually inconsistent, or have puzzling conceptual implications.[34]

Second, one need not subscribe to the view that the mind is extended, embedded, or enacted to acknowledge the centrality of the environment to house dance, to emphasize the significance of interpersonal interaction in all areas of the club, or to honor the importance of shared somatic experiences facilitated by the music's pounding bass. Indeed, we can remain agnostic about the nature of mind and still offer an illustrative

aesthetic analysis of house dance as an appreciatively complex, multi-modal and multi-layered improvisatory artistic practice. This approach is desirable given that 4E theses remain controversial in the philosophy of mind, despite their increased popularity in recent years.

Thus, we can begin to address Kronsted's puzzles by noting that while dancers do not control the vibe, they do exhibit individual agency in their contributions to it. A member of a jazz ensemble is not artistically responsible for the output of the group and is held accountable only for giving his or her best performance of the limited sonic ingredients he or she supplies. In the same sense that the saxophonist controls his or her performance but not the band's, the house dancer manages a contribution to the vibe while being at its mercy. The house dancer has no authority over it qua emergent entity and cannot single-handedly alter its qualitative character. Nonetheless, the dancer must train his or her attentions on it to ensure improvisational responses are appropriate, thereby becoming its appreciator *par excellence*.

With this in mind, we might recast Kronsted's testimonies by suggesting that Catching the Ghost just *is* appreciatively mirroring the fleeting vibe, thereby strengthening it. When there is no vibe to speak of, there is no "ghost" to be "caught," though dancers can attempt, in their small ways, to generate one by moving in ways responsive to the music. If this reinterpretation is apt, then Kronsted's primary puzzle can be dissolved. The dancer is in control of his or her movement performances but not of Catching the Ghost because he or she is not in control of the vibe whose presence makes this kind of free dance experience possible.

Kronsted might object that this re-reading fails to engage his core worry. He could agree that appeal to the vibe helps make sense of the claim that the music is fully realized only when danced to, but maintain that this tactic cannot address the paradoxical character of dancers' reports that they are in control of their *bodies* but not in control of *the movements* they execute when Catching the Ghost. Furthermore, he might argue that because this experience of being at a mental remove from one's physical performance gives rise to the phenomenon of "self-surprise" and signals artistic mastery in this improvisational dance form, reference to the vibe cannot resolve the other puzzles he considers either.

Here it is useful to recall that Cody Coflo's description of Catching the Ghost and Kronsted's analysis of improvisational mastery both turn on the idea of being hyper-attuned to the environment, that is, being acutely aware of the overall vibe

while responding to its constituent elements. To offer a homely analogy, this is akin to navigating rush hour traffic. One's mastery of driving a car in difficult circumstances consists of being able to control one's bodily motions — to brake, use the blinker, change lanes, and so on — without attending to them *explicitly*. To the extent that the relevant skills have been practiced sufficiently and the car is familiar, these basic abilities are "grooved in," so to speak.[35] This is precisely what it means to be an expert in a physical domain, namely, one can rely on bodily abilities as second nature while directing attention to unanticipated details of the immediate situation, controlling action consciously only when necessary.[36]

Furthermore, when a person does not notice that he or she is governing bodily movements because focus is fixed on the environment and hyper-attuned to its details, a person can find that the circumstances generate unexpected opportunities to display acumen at *naturally* avoiding fender benders or performing a stellar loft. On reflection, one might be pleasantly surprised to have shown prowess, given the unanticipated affordances provided by the situation. But this is not to say that a person is surprised to *possess* the bodily skills developed through endless hours of practice. It is, instead, to recognize that one might be reasonably delighted by his or her demonstrated level of expertise, which might have flown beneath the radar of conscious awareness had this specific situation – whether it be last Friday afternoon's gridlock or tonight's unique club vibe – not presented itself.

Hence, we might re-read Kronsted's testimonies as expressions of personal pride in one's preparations and technical skills rather than as declarations of shock to discover "my body is able to do things . . . I didn't know I was capable of doing" (Coflo, interviewed by Kronsted, 08/13/19). This approach does not reject Kronsted's references to couplings and dynamic systems, but it does suggest that a consistent aesthetic story about Catching the Ghost can be told without having to posit that mental states are partially constituted by the environment. We need only acknowledge that they are often *shaped and revealed* in our confrontations with it, sometimes in unexpectedly gratifying ways.

What of improvisational artistry as exemplified by the dancers on the house floor? Kronsted argues that artistic credit can be attributed to the house dance improviser as a result of "dynamically coupling to the environment in varied ways and maintaining those couplings [which is] a skillful, complicated, and intentional achievement."[37] But is this an artistic

accomplishment or an appreciative one? On my proposed reinterpretation of Catching the Ghost it is the latter, though sometimes this form of appreciation has artistic elements.

When I hit the club floor in pursuit of the elusive "ghost" — my perceived connection to the vibe in which I implicitly recognize myself as an integral part of it — I attend to the work of the DJ qua interactive improviser while taking up the more physically direct invitations offered by other dancers. Hence, *seeking* the ghost is a form of participatory appreciation in which various artistic talents, such as the ability to make playful commentaries on others' performances or mimic a pop culture icon effectively, may be brought to bear, though one need not deploy such skills to demonstrate expertise in house dance. Catching the Ghost can also be punctuated by accomplishments for which one deserves artistic credit, but it need not be.

Indeed, wholly unselfconscious house dancing will most often be characterized by the kind of movement performance that warrants plaudits only for its aesthetic qualities, such as grace, control, precision, complexity, vivacity, and so on, rather than for any artistic features, like interpretive acumen, creative derivation, or symbolic content. Were we to give *artistic* credit simply on the grounds that a person creates a novel movement sequence in real time, we would be forced to countenance everyone who jostles effectively through a crowded subway station as a potential recipient of this brand of recognition. Hence, what deserves artistic regard is not the mere fact that expert house dancers generate new physical patterns as they loft, jack, and freestyle in ways that respond appropriately to their immediate environment, as Kronsted's treatment suggests. Rather, this form of acknowledgement is justified only when, to borrow from Arthur Danto, the dancers move in ways that embody publicly accessible *meanings* or generate the possibility of the temporary vibe becoming artistically *meaningful to* others in the house, including other expert dancers, civilians, appreciative on-lookers, and, of course, the DJ.[38]

How is such meaning-making pursued and achieved? This is a complex topic that invites further reflection on Kronsted's engaging introduction to the aesthetically rich world of house dance.

Renee Conroy
rconroy@pnw.edu

Renee Conroy is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Purdue University Northwest and a Fulbright Scholar. Her research work is focused on issues in philosophy of dance and environmental aesthetics. She has published in multiple anthologies and journals, including *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, and *Ethics, Place and Environment* (now *Ethics, Policy and Environment*).

Endnotes

* Contemporary Aesthetics recommends first reading Christian Kronsted's article, "Catching the Ghost: House Dance and Improvisational Mastery," appearing immediately before this article.

[1] Dominic McIver Lopes, *Beyond Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[2] One might contend that social dance forms should not be regarded as artistic practices because they are not directly associated with the formal structures of the artworld. I employ a liberal concept of "artistic practice," according to which it is a recognized culture in which *artistic properties* play a significant role in creative makings and appreciatings, and in which participants typically aim at some kind of artistic accomplishment. That is, I mark a distinction between an *art* practice and an *artistic* practice, according to which all art practices are artistic practices but some artistic practices are not art practices. Herein, I assume that house dance falls in the latter category and refer to it as an "artistic practice" or "artistic form."

[3] Hillegonda C. Rietveld, *This is Our House: House Music, Cultural Spaces and Technologies* (London: Routledge reissue, 2018), pp. 212-213.

[4] By "house dance," I refer to what dance scholar Sally Sommer calls "Underground-House," which is both aesthetically and historically rooted in the underground activities of early house dance, as it developed in Chicago and New York in the late 1970's and was practiced through the late 1980's. This is contrasted with mainstream forms that are now practiced

"above ground" and which insiders regard as "tourist" house. Given Kronsted's emphasis on experts, it is most appropriate to attend to the fundamental norms of the Underground-House community, which includes original practitioners and those who embody their values and goals today. Following Kronsted, I do not consider competitive contexts or the use of house techniques in a choreographic mode, that is, house dance as performed in music videos or professional performance venues.

[5] For a discussion of issues surrounding authenticity, see Nick Wiltsher, "The Aesthetics of Electronic Dance Music, Part I: History, Genre, Scenes, Identity, Blackness," *Philosophy Compass*, 11,8 (2016a), 415-425.

[6] For an extended discussion, see *Do You Remember House? Chicago's Queer of Color* by Micah E. Salkind (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 69-83.

[7] Sally R. Sommer, "C'mon to my house: Underground-House Dancing," *Dance Research Journal*, 33,2 (2001), 72-86; ref. on 73-74, emphasis mine.

[8] Rietveld, p. 10.

[9] Lyrics by Heard and Roberts (1988), quoted in Rietveld, p. 213.

[10] Nick Wiltsher, "The Aesthetics of Electronic Dance Music, Part II: Dancers, DJs, Ontology and Aesthetics," *Philosophy Compass*, 11,8 (2016b),426-436; ref. on 426.

[11] Sommer (2001), p. 74.

[12] Rietveld, p. 209.

[13] Berys Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 182-203.

[14] Wiltsher 2016b, p. 427. See also Tiger Roholt, *Groove: A Phenomenology of Rhythmic Nuance* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

[15] Lyrics by Heard and Roberts (1988), quoted in Rietveld, p. 5, emphasis mine.

[16] Quoted in Rietveld, p. 149, emphasis mine.

[17] Wiltsher 2016b, p. 427.

[18] Sally Sommer, *Check Your Body at the Door* (documentary film) (TenduTV, Inc.: 2011).

[19] For philosophical discussion of these issues, see Lee B. Brown, David Goldblatt, and Theodore Gracyk, *Jazz and the Philosophy of Art* (New York: Routledge, 2018), especially pp. 9-38.

[20] Sommer (2001), p. 74, first emphasis mine.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 73.

[22] Julie Van Camp, *Philosophical Problems of Dance Criticism* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 1981/2014). Of interest is her discussion of theater dance as a mixed media artform in Chapter Three (pp. 71-99), in which she considers a variety of possible relationships between dance and music. Although her analysis does not address the point made here about the fundamental *ontological* difference between music and dance, it includes the following suggestive remark: "It is not clear how music could change to be *like* dance, since music already has rhythm, mood, tempo, etc. independently" (p. 80).

[23] For discussion of Mark Morris's unique choreographic relationship to music, see Julie Van Camp, "What is Mark Morris' 'Choreomusicality'? Illuminate the Music, Dignify the Dance," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Dance and Philosophy*, eds. Rebecca Farinas and Julie Van Camp (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), pp. 52-59.

[24] Kai Fikentscher, *"You Better Work!" Underground Dance Music in New York City* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), p. 80. He argues that there are four kinds of synchronization to be considered, but that all are fundamentally related to rhythm.

[25] Fikentscher, p. 79, emphasis mine.

[26] See Wiltsher 2016b for more on this point about "static" listening and discussion of the aesthetic importance of the repetitive character of electronic club music, especially pp. 432-433.

[27] I appeal to a popular distinction between artistic properties and aesthetic properties, without articulating its fine contours. Very roughly, the former depend on the intentions of the maker (for example, being satirical) or on locating a creative product within a system of artistic traditions (such as being derivative). Thus, to be apprehended as artistic properties requires, as Stephen Davies puts it, some "knowledge of matters external to the object of appreciation" (Davies, 2006, p. 53). By contrast, aesthetic properties are purely perceptual (for example, being vivid or delicate) and can be grasped without any background knowledge about the object of attention. For a helpful overview

of this basic distinction, see Stephen Davies, *The Philosophy of Art* (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 53-58. See also, Graham McFee *Artistic Judgement: A Framework for Philosophical Aesthetics* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), pp. 1-28 for a discussion of the differences between artistic and aesthetic judgement.

[28] To this extent, house dance is more like social forms of rhythm tap than contact improvisation; this is not surprising since both have cultural roots in Afro-American dance traditions.

[29] Fikentscher, p. 80, emphasis mine.

[30] Fikentscher, p. 91.

[31] Sommer (2001), p. 73, emphasis mine. She continues, "The vibe is an active communal force, a feeling, a rhythm that is created by the mix of dancers, the balance of loud music, the effects of darkness and light, the energy. . . Central to the dancing and the vibe are the improvisational exchanges between DJ and dancer, and between dancer and dancer – the playfulness, the fast-moving exchanges and game structures, the imaginative sonic and physical dialogues – all realized through the activity of hard dancing."

[32] Sommer (2001), p. 73.

[33] Fikentscher, p. 91, emphasis mine. As Fikentscher also points out, "At underground dance venues, the dynamic level of the music establishes the latter's absolute priority over other acoustic phenomena: conversation, handclapping, footstomping, yelling, whistling. All these are overshadowed by the volume of the music. The authority of the DJ is thus confirmed acoustically" (p. 85).

[34] David Davies, "The Primacy of Practice in the Ontology of Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 67, 2 (2009), 159-171. Davies' focus is debates in ontology, but what he says in describing the methodological orientation of the pragmatic constraint can be applied more broadly: "PC [the pragmatic constraint] has a normative dimension, in that it does not require that ontology conform to our practices per se, but to those features of our practice that we deem acceptable on reflection. In so reflecting on our practice, we must take account of the goals it is reasonable to ascribe to that practice, the values reasonably posited as sought within it, and the values reasonably ascribable to the works that enter into it" (p. 162). Davies also demonstrates how this methodology can be applied to epistemological issues in aesthetics, in "Dancing Around the Issues: Prospects for an Empirically Grounded Philosophy of

Dance," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 71, 2 (2013), 195-202. Central works in contemporary philosophy of dance, such as Graham McFee's *Dance and the Philosophy of Action: A Framework for the Aesthetics of Dance* (Hampshire: Dance Books Ltd., 2018) and Anna Pakes' *Choreography Invisible: The Disappearing Work of Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), exemplify other ways to honor the spirit of Davies' pragmatic constraint in their treatment and analysis of insider testimonies and dance art practices.

[35] For further elaboration of ideas in this vein as applied to dance, see Graham McFee, *The Philosophical Aesthetics of Dance: Identity, Performance and Understanding* (Hampshire: Dance Books Ltd., 2011), especially pp. 200-204, in which the concept of a "reflective practitioner" is developed. See also, McFee 2018, pp. 14-17 for treatment of the concept of an "automatic action" and pp. 122-124 for discussion of the importance of "craft-mastery" in dance. Although house dance is not an art in the formal sense, it is an artistic form (see endnote 2), which means, in part, that concepts such as these apply to it.

[36] This description is not inconsistent with Barbara Montero's account of expertise, as developed in *Thought in Action: Expertise and the Conscious Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) to which Kronsted appeals. It does, however, emphasize an element of automaticity that Montero resists as adequate to define expertise and tracks more closely her remark that ". . . experts have conceptualized their skills, and this enables reflection and action to occur simultaneously" (p. 52).

[37] Christian Kronsted, "Catching the Ghost: House Dance and Improvisational Mastery," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol. 19 (2021), Sec. 6.

[38] See, for example, Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) in which he argues that "[t]o be a work of art is to be (i) *about* something and (ii) to *embody its meaning*" (p. 195). Again, although vernacular house dance is not an art form per se, insofar as it is an artistic practice, its *artistic* properties and achievements should be regarded as grounded in the intentional pursuit of meaning-making rather than in the (merely) aesthetic pursuit of pleasing or skilled dancing.