

FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

The Phenomenology of
Dance

Foreword by
MERCÉ CUNNINGHAM

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone

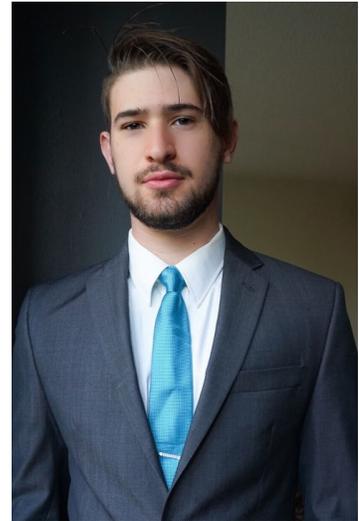
*“The Phenomenology of Dance is a pioneering work;
half a century later, it remains ever new.”*

—NEIL BALDWIN, PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE AND DANCE,
COLLEGE OF THE ARTS, MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

The Phenomenology of Dance: Fiftieth Anniversary Edition

Written by: Maxine Sheets-Johnstone

Reviewed by: Michael Fiorini



The Phenomenology of Dance, originally written in 1966 by dance and movement philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone as her doctoral dissertation, is a foundational work on the experiential consideration of movement. In the fifty years since it was first written and published, the book's pioneering ideas about movement and the existential experience of dance have become immensely influential for dancers, therapists, and patients. The book goes into extensive detail about what it's like to dance and express oneself through movement. It details movement both within the individual and, as an audience, observing it in others. The book characterizes movement as a fundamental aspect of expression, as well as being tied intrinsically to underlying experience and the roots of intention in dance. Although the book speaks of movement through dance, its principle ideas can easily be applied more generally. Therapists will find the book illuminating particularly because it illustrates, in many ways, aspects of the mindset and perspective now shared by contemporary somatic psychologists. It offers forth a philosophical perspective applicable for some professional readers in their considerations of movement in the therapeutic setting. The 50th anniversary edition offers a new forward that brings into consideration new findings in neuroscience related to movement and makes some slight updates on definitions, though it largely remains an unedited work.

From the outset, readers will find that, speaking to its origins as the author's dance philosophy dissertation, the language used in the book is quite academic and, often-times, resembles a college lecture. On the one hand, the fine degree of detail included here is compelling and specific in its use of descriptive language and the outlining of potential relationships between types of movement and experience. On the other hand, the book, though not particularly lengthy, is nonetheless exceptionally dense and warrants a close-read to fully benefit from its presented concepts. A late night coffee-table book this is not. After the updated forward and an older preface to the second edition, the book details the perspectives of dancers and observers being affected differently in their experience of dance. It then goes on to bridge dance into a phenomenological narrative while also detailing the components of force. Abstraction, expression, dynamic line, rhythm, the imaginative space of dance, and the educational implications of dance composition and dance as an art form flesh out the author's perspective on the embodied experience of movement. An extensive section of notes and a bibliography included in the end of the book might also be useful for research applications if looking into the influences on the original work.

To say that *The Phenomenology of Dance* is an important entry in the broader scope of detailing body awareness, movement, and somatic experience is an understatement. Before this book, there was little to no conceptualization of movement from a serious philosophical standpoint. As a driving influence of further work in phenomenology, its contributions to practice in somatic psychology in particular is

invaluable. For those practitioners of body and somatic psychotherapy unacquainted with the work, *The Phenomenology of Dance* is highly important as an early touchstone for thinking about what it's like to experience movement and also what the basic elements of movement and dance are. In coming to a greater understanding of movement, *Phenomenology* continues to give readers a working framework for understanding the nature of movement. Although the book is by no means an easy read nor necessarily transparent even for those immediately acquainted with somatic psychology, readers will find in the book a wealth of enriching perspective on the most basic elements of movement, both as a dancer and as an observer of others. It discusses movement in a way closely resembling the ways somatic psychotherapists might analyze and interpret, for example, Reichian conceptions of character armor. Its applications and influence are quite relevant today, and as a call towards a less structured interpretation of movement in how it relates to the human experience might, for many readers, resonate deeply with their practice and clinical methodology.

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, PhD, is an independent scholar and courtesy professor of philosophy at the University of Oregon. Before completing her doctorate, she worked as a dancer and choreographer. In addition to authoring articles in over seventy art, humanities, and science journals, she has authored nine books, including *The Roots of Thinking*, *The Primacy of Movement*, and *The Corporeal Turn*. She has lectured around the world about dance, movement, and on how to consider them philosophically.

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