ABSTRACT: In a series of recent papers, Professor Nick Zangwill has returned our attention to the merits of aesthetic formalism. In this paper, I seek to support formalism as an approach to understanding what counts as an aesthetic property by considering how this approach serves to illuminate identity conditions and critical assessment of a subset of allographic works of art I label “consumable”; these are works that exist as token art objects (as contrasted with art works) only within the temporal duration of their being reproduced and presented to their audiences. I look at three sorts of consumable art forms: food, theater plays, and dance.
to do with the artistic assessment and evaluation of particular reproductions of consumable works. The first project is not metaphysical but rather epistemological; I do not presume to set out identity conditions (let alone a complete theory) for reproductions of allographic art forms. Instead, I mean to address how appeal to the formal properties of some aesthetic objects may allow us to know what that object is. For the second project, I certainly do not intend to set out a complete theory of art criticism; I mean only to address how appeal to formal properties of some aesthetic objects allows us critical access to these objects. My claims in this paper will have to be as modest as appeal to example and intuitions about identity conditions and art criticism allow, but since I mean to offer merely necessary conditions and not sufficient ones, not setting out, or even relying on, complete theories seems excusable.

The conception of formalism that I am exploring, and for which I am providing added support, was initially developed by Nick Zangwill in a recent collection of papers. One—“Feasible Aesthetic Formalism”1—laid out his positive case for formalism, making use of the Kantian model of free and dependent beauty as a departure point. A second—“In Defence of Moderate Aesthetic Formalism”2—took on a major position in opposition to his own, that of Kendall Walton as expressed in “Categories of Art.”3 And a third—“Defusing Anti-Formalist Arguments”4—offered just what the title suggested. In this paper, I mean to work with Zangwill’s definition of aesthetic formalism. His definition of a formal aesthetic property begins with the intuitive idea that formal properties are those aesthetic properties that are directly perceivable or that are determined by properties that are directly perceivable.5

And he defines a formal property this way:

Formal properties are entirely determined by narrow nonaesthetic properties, whereas non-formal aesthetic properties are partly determined by broad nonaesthetic properties.6

And he defines a narrow nonaesthetic property as:

the word “narrow” includes both sensory properties, non-relational physical properties, and also any dispositions to provoke responses that might be thought of to be partly constitutive of aesthetic properties.7

In this same paper where he offers this definition, Zangwill writes:

Aesthetic Formalism has fallen on hard times. At best it receives unsympathetic discussion and swift rejection. At worse it is the object of abuse and derision.8

There are plenty of apparent problems with the adoption of formalism as an approach to circumscribing the set of all-and-only aesthetic properties.9 Here are four.

(1) Formalism does not seem to have a place for properties of a relational nature: if we believe that a case for the aesthetic merits of an object (art or otherwise) includes citation of properties that speak to the representational relation between that object and some other, formalism does not have a place for this. The same can be said
of historical relations. If we believe that the historical context of a work is relevant to a case for the aesthetic merit of that work, and aesthetic merit is evidenced on the presence of aesthetic properties, then one might claim that the aesthetic properties “possessed” by the object in question transcend those “directly perceivable or that are determined by properties that are directly perceivable.” (Zangwill addresses historical relations in “In Defence of Moderate Aesthetic Formalism.”)

(2) It is unclear that aesthetic formalism will adequately capture properties that are expressive in nature. Zangwill makes provision for this in his definition, but for other formalists, this problem is the same sort as with representational and historical considerations.

(3) Adoption of formalism must be motivated on some grounds other than those whose bedrock is aesthetic experience or those whose bedrock is common critical practice. If one takes aesthetic experience as basic to the circumscription of aesthetic properties—that aesthetic properties are dependent for their identification as aesthetic properties on an examination of actual experiences of those who identify their experiences as “aesthetic” (however the details of that account would proceed)—then the only means of identifying what counts as an aesthetic property has to be one whose methodology is inductive and particularist. The same kind of claim can be made on the basis of common critical practice. In offering cases of the aesthetic (aesthetic, not artistic) merits of a work of art, those cases frequently will include, or be evidenced upon, the citation of properties that go beyond those “directly perceivable or that are determined by properties that are directly perceivable.” If cases of aesthetic value are evidenced on the presence of aesthetic properties, and broadening the set of aesthetic properties beyond simply formal properties will lead to cases where the aesthetic worth of an object is greater, then the burden of proof is on the formalist for telling us why going in this value-enhancing direction is inappropriate.

(4) The aesthetic formalist does not seem capable of capturing the phenomenon of individual taste. Alan Goldman writes:

Another and far more obvious reason for the absence of principles with which to support aesthetic evaluation lies in irreconcilable differences in taste. It is an old cliché that what appeals to one person in art will not appeal to another. But if true, this in itself might block principles that would link nonevaluative to evaluative properties of works.\footnote{In the exercise of individual taste, the subject contributes to the strength and to the relevancy of which nonaesthetic properties are focal in her description of the aesthetic properties of the object under consideration. Since the subject’s taste changes the aesthetic evaluation of the object, it not only results, as Goldman says, in a rejection of aesthetic realism, it also results in a rejection of formalism.}

On the other hand, I think there are at least three good reasons for why one would want to be an aesthetic formalist.

(1) Aesthetic formalism provides for the possibility of offering a stable account for aesthetic realism perhaps better than any other approach. This was the original
motivation, I imagine, behind the objectivist, formula-focused accounts of aesthetic worth and of beauty that populated aesthetic discourse before the eighteen century. It was the stated motivation of Lord Shaftesbury. If an object possesses the directly perceivable properties—properties that one could observe in the exercise of taste through the adoption of a disinterested attitude—that one would identify, taken together, as constitutive of “unity in multiplicity,” then that object was beautiful. Given that the logical arrow points in both directions, we end up with a rock-solid aesthetic realist account.

(2) Some aesthetic formalists employed formalism as a defense against critical treatments of works of art that focused, in their view improperly, on external social, political, or moral matters and that failed to focus on what they took as the aesthetic aspects of the objects in question. How many of us, in classes of students with little exposure to modern art, adopt a formalist approach in attempting to get students to consider, with an open and investing mind, the value in photographs by Serrano, Mapplethorpe, Sturges, and Mann? In doing this, we are in the company of aestheticists like Wilde.

(3) Finally, some aesthetic formalists, and I think Zangwill falls into this category, wish to delineate boundaries for aesthetic discourse that seek to capture just what we mean to be talking about when we are talking about the aesthetic character of an object or event. The centrality of focus on those properties that can most easily be said to be possessed by the object, and that can be accessed by direct perception of the object (the object’s base nonaesthetic properties that, through the exercise of taste, we believe determine the object’s aesthetic features), is key to basic aesthetic appreciation of that object—and also key to developing a case for the aesthetic merits of that object. When talking about the aesthetic nature of an object, my descriptions will first and foremost involve the object’s formal aesthetic properties. Whether this is the whole story is a different matter.

I. FOOD

There are at least five central complaints for why food cannot be art or, perhaps more precisely, an art form. Objections include (1) that taste and smell are lesser senses than sight and hearing, capable of less discrimination;11 (2) that food cannot achieve the levels of complexity or structuring that fine art forms can;12 (3) that food cannot have “meaning” like other art forms can (along with the notion that it cannot have the emotional content or impact “real” art can);13 (4) that food is essentially functional, and art is essentially appreciated in the absence of regard for any instrumental purpose it might serve,14 and (5) that food is essentially temporal, that once consumed, the food instance no longer exists.

I want to focus, of course, on the fifth complaint, but before that, I would like to say something about the fourth. Certainly food is nourishing, and certainly we eat food to stay alive. But these facts have little to do with the gustatory experience, with tasting food, and apart from an ancillary consideration of the visual aspects of the appreciation of food,15 it is the gustatory on which aesthetic
attention should be focused. When we talk about the aesthetic character of food, it is only the rare theorist\textsuperscript{16} who attempts to connect the nutritional value of food to an aesthetic characterization of it. Generally, we save talk about the aesthetic nature of food for the events that are located in our mouths; once the food is swallowed, it is not really a matter of sensation, and so aesthetic descriptions of it from that point on generally are not forthcoming. The aesthetic character of food has to do with taste, and taste has little to do with nutrition, as anyone who sits at a gourmet meal counting calories and vitamins may easily attest. As the nutritional function has little or nothing to do with an aesthetic characterization of food, to say that food-as-art is primarily or essentially functional in respect of nutrition is to say something probably wrong.

Let’s turn to the fifth complaint. The complaint that food cannot be art due to its temporal or ephemeral nature is short-sighted. All the performing arts are temporal in similar ways. As (single instance) art objects, they occupy the stage for a few hours, and then they are over. They can exist again, but only in separate instantiations and only through the forbearance by audiences of some variation, instantiation to instantiation. In terms of their exact identities, they can never exist again. A performance is a one-time event, and, like food, it is “consumed”—as the presented content of an experience—by its audience in the short time it exists.\textsuperscript{17}

As we have musical scores so that performed musical artworks can be repeated, we have recipes that are designed to recreate (single instance) “food objects.” Of course the recreated food object will not be exactly the same as before, but this is in close parallel to the performing arts. As different orchestra members and conductors perform a musical work differently, so different chefs will create different food objects, even when following the same recipe. What connects the identity of one musical performance to another musical performance, when both performances share the same name and are attributed to the same composer, is a score. Recipes are like scores. They certainly permit minor variation, but so long as the chef is following a recipe for, say, carbonnade à la flamande, then his or her creation will be an instance of carbonnade à la flamande. Even in those cases where the chef is following not a precise recipe but rather a “virtual recipe” will this be the case. By a “virtual recipe,” I mean the general principles of a “food work,” or dish. Coq au vin can be made many different ways, and most chefs with French training in their backgrounds probably do not use a written recipe to make it. Yet so long as the basic principles of making coq au vin are followed—I am no chef, but I would imagine these principles would include braising chicken with red wine, onions, mushrooms and bacon of some sort—then the result is an instance of coq au vin. The same is true for an instance of carbonnade à la flamande. So long as the chef is braising beef with onions and beer, then regardless of whether she follows a recipe for carbonnade à la flamande, the result would still be an instance of carbonnade à la flamande.

As a score provides a means of understanding two musical performances to be of the same musical work, so a recipe provides a means of understanding two
“food objects” as instances of the same “food work,” as two instances of the same dish kind. What allows for this provision, in the case of a recipe, are instructions for pattern recreation. These instructions are directions for the inclusion—and implicit exclusion—of certain objective elements. If one wishes to understand if a “food object” is indeed an instance of carbonnade à la fl amande, one is going to look for beef, for the cooking method of braising, for beer, and for onions.\textsuperscript{18} These items are not matters of context; they are objective matters. Beef, beer, and onions do not meet the conditions of being formal aesthetic properties, of course, but on Zangwill’s account they seem to be the exact sort of narrow nonaesthetic properties which in turn are responsible for the existence of formal aesthetic properties. All is objective, and all is accessible through the senses. So it seems entirely fair to say that the way we know that two food objects are instances of the same food kind is through the presence of certain narrow nonaesthetic properties which, given their combination in the right ways, give rise to certain formal gustatory properties.

This is not the whole story, though. Part of what allows us to recognize an instance of carbonnade à la fl amande as an instance of the kind carbonnade à la fl amande is a connection to what Zangwill refers to as a “history of production.” Carbonnade à la fl amande is a Belgian dish, and a provenancial connection back to its Belgian origins may be important. Here we see the importance of a contextual approach to recognizing conditions for food identities, but the more basic point is that such identity cannot be reduced to contextual considerations. There are formal considerations—connected to and dependent on nonaesthetic, objective considerations—which principally ground food identity. Someone may make a grilled cheese sandwich and call it carbonnade à la fl amande—going so far as to trace the lineage of this particular grilled cheese sandwich through a series of evolutions at the hands of creative chefs back to its Belgian origins—but a grilled cheese sandwich is not acceptable as an instance of carbonnade à la fl amande. There are essential narrow nonaesthetic properties which must be present for something to be an instance of carbonnade à la fl amande. Absent those, and so absent the formal gustatory properties they give rise to, there is no carbonnade à la fl amande. What the history of production offers us is a way of identifying those essential narrow nonaesthetic properties. We may not have access to the original recipe of carbonnade à la fl amande, but there is enough of a tradition and history—known, accepted, and informing the practice of expert chefs—to establish some properties as essential to certain food kinds. As Danto’s artworld may judge what is properly labeled art, so the foodworld may judge what is properly labeled carbonnade à la fl amande. A grilled cheese sandwich will not cut it because it does not have the narrow nonaesthetic properties that the foodworld accepts as essential in all instances of carbonnade à la fl amande.

Will the account work in the other direction? Is the historical context necessary for the creation of an instance of carbonnade à la fl amande? The answer is a qualified no. It is possible, indeed likely, that there were food objects created before the
official advent of carbonnade à la flamande (christened with that particular name) that involved braising beef and onions in beer. While historical considerations may be important to appropriately applying the name “carbonnade à la flamande,” the application of the name to instances of braising beef and onions in beer before the name was invented are still recognized as continuous with the carbonnade à la flamande of today. This can only be the case if the formal aesthetic properties, dependent on objective properties, are central to its identity.

Beyond the importance of the formalist approach to account for food identity conditions, the formalist approach is also important if we mean to develop any sort of principled way of assessing the artistic merit of a food object (single instance) or a food work (kind). While there may be instances where a given reproduction of an artwork is considered on its own and without relation to anything else, including any other reproductions or instantiations of the artwork, this is certainly not the rule. Comparison among reproductions is the norm. In order to accomplish this, identity conditions must be in place, so that one is comparing apples with apples. But we can say more. When a critic is comparing two instances of a consumable artwork, she will look to those elements of each work which (1) are essential to making that object an instance of whatever work it is, and (2) are essentially the same in each object. This is step one. Step two is to consider how the variation employed by a particular chef, in the case of food, enhances or decreases the value of the particular object, but the first step is always the first. The reason for this rests on the characterization of the criticism as “principled.” If I focus my criticism of an instance of carbonnade à la flamande on whether mushrooms were introduced, I open myself up to the complaint that I am allowing my own subjective tastes to enter into my criticism. Perhaps no art criticism is immune from that charge, but I will be on much more solid critical ground if I first focus my assessment on those elements which, as I said above, are essential to the dish and are essentially the same in each dish. These are the narrow nonaesthetic properties that constitute the work’s aesthetic properties that are “directly perceivable or that are determined by properties that are directly perceivable.”

A classic test of how good a chef may be is to have that chef make an omelette. The simpler the omelette, the better. This is a test of technique and knowledge, and it is much easier to compare one omelette with another if the omelettes are reduced to their simplest form. This is a good model for the principled food critic. She is on more solid ground if she can show that her judgments are focused on the basics first, and on the creativity and variations in interpretation second. At heart, the advice to the principled food critic is to focus first on the formal elements of this instance of carbonnade à la flamande, on its formal gustatory properties as dependent on those objective narrow nonaesthetic properties which make it an instance of carbonnade à la flamande. Criticism here may be focused on those aesthetic qualities that are dependent on the quality of the braising, on the choice of beef, on the choice of beer, and on the choice and handling of the onions. This is a formal analysis of the food object.
II. THEATER PLAYS

Variation in terms of staging plays (in the culturally western text-based theater tradition) is even more familiar than variation in musical performance. I have seen many versions of Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, MacBeth, and Othello. I wager most people reading this have. The variations employed by the directors and producers of different productions at times have been stark. I once saw a version of MacBeth set in Africa, a version of Othello with only four players and lots of colored lights,19 a version of Richard III set in a mythical fascist London of the 1930s (Richard Loncraine’s 1995 film version), and a version of Romeo and Juliet set in present day “Verona Beach” where Romeo and Mercutio carry guns (the 1996 film version by Baz Luhrmann20). But no matter the stylistic variation and no matter the editing, all versions of, say, Romeo and Juliet are instances of Romeo and Juliet if they follow—again, no matter minor editing, blocking, or setting—the script that William Shakespeare wrote.21 The words on the script constitute the narrow nonaesthetic properties that give rise to a production’s formal aesthetic properties, properties that all instances of Romeo and Juliet must possess to be properly identified as instances of Romeo and Juliet.22

Scripts can be authoritative in ways that recipes usually are not.23 Scripts, by and large, are directions for reproducing art objects (instances of allographic artworks) that are, as scripts, fairly permanent and fairly stable. This immediately puts critical assessment on ground more solid than we find in the cases of food or dance, and it has the added bonus that stage play critics can be freer in what they choose to focus on. Stage plays are consumable artworks, but the directions for reproducing them are more like non-consumable allographic arts such as literature and prints. The epistemological conditions for identifying one instance of a play, as an instance of a particular play kind, warrant more discussion, but in terms of the work that a reliance on formal properties for making these sorts of identifications may accomplish, the more interesting problems, I find, concern food and dance. This is because theater plays—traditionally, in the western tradition—have and rely on scripts in more secure and stable ways than do food and dance.24

III. DANCE IDENTITY

Of all the performing arts, dance comes with the least stable means of generating directions for reproduction. Unlike plays and symphonies, dance is more like the creation of food from “virtual recipes” than it is like following a score, a script, or even a written recipe. In dance, things like scores are very rare. And even where they do exist, they are oddities that are very infrequently put to their purposed use. Notational systems in dance—like Laban notation—are sometimes employed as an exercise in scoring a dance. Toni Bentley, the writer who was once a member of the corps de ballet of the New York City Ballet in the time of George Balanchine, reports that Balanchine once allowed a Laban notation scribe to attempt to score Stars and Stripes. The process took six months, and the resulting score was praised
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and then put aside. No one except the scribe could read it. Unlike in the case of food, there is no recipe for the choreographer who seeks to make an instance of a dance originally choreographed by someone else, especially when the original choreographer may have been dead for some time, and more especially when there is not a clear line of dancers and dance teachers extending from the original choreographer to the present one. When Don Quixote, Sleeping Beauty, or Swan Lake are staged, they frequently follow the choreography of Marius Petipa. But Petipa lived in Europe and died in 1910. How is it that his choreography is credited in so many productions? Petipa’s choreography has been passed down, student-turned-teacher to student-turned-teacher, until we reach the present. This means that the authenticity of a performance based on Petipa’s choreography depends almost entirely on the memory of a present day choreographer who was a student of a teacher who had to rely on her memory of her teacher’s version of the choreography, and so forth and so on. This provides very little cause for optimism that today’s version of, say, Petipa’s Swan Lake is choreographically identical to Petipa’s original staging. Variation creeps in. Teachers along the line introduce slight variations for aesthetic reasons and for practical ones—adapting to a particular dancer’s strengths or the size of a stage, say—but perhaps most of all through slight lapses of memory of what they were originally taught.

Musical performances can be recorded, and so some believe that the original choreography of a dance can be preserved through the creation of a video recording. Unfortunately, when it comes to video recording dance, there are at least two problems that are hard to overcome. First, the person making and the person editing the video recording have total control over the focus. This is not the way dance is commonly seen. Many times the stage is occupied by several potential sites that would reward attention. Balanchine at times used to keep his principle dancers still while the corps danced behind or around them. In watching a dance performance, the audience member is in control of her attention and her focus. In a video recording, that control is surrendered. Where video recording of dance works is generally thought successful—as in cases connected to the work of Fred Astair, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Busby Berkeley, and Jerome Robbins—it is common to find (1) choreographic isolation of the aesthetic focus, that the choreographer provides only one field or area of focus, and (2) a single camera focused widely on a full stage area, or at the least on the full dancing figure, mimicking the way that an audience member in a good seat might see the performance.

Secondly, if the video camera captures too little of the dance performance, it also captures too much. There was a uniformity in style among the dancers in Balanchine’s New York City Ballet, and this was due in largest measure to the fact that NYCB had a school from which it took its dancers and that enrolled potential dancers at a young age. Balanchine’s NYCB “grew” its dancers, and so they were taught to perform certain movements all the same. But Miami City Ballet, a successor to the NYCB, directed by former NYCB principal Edward Villela, does not have a school, and Villela finds his dancers, especially his principals, from all
over the world. A movement bearing a single name—say something as simple as
a plie—might be done slightly differently by different dancers in the Miami City
Ballet. This is perfectly acceptable, given the sort of company MCB is. But were
one to video record a particular Balanchine-choreographed dance, one would most
likely wish to record NYCB dancing it and, moreover, to record it in the time of
Balanchine rather than in this later time of current NYCB artistic director Peter
Martins. The reason for this is probably obvious: the more distance, temporal and
instructional, from the original, the more slight variation, as a matter of fact, will
creep in. As such inevitable variations appear and are captured by the video tape,
so future dancers may well believe that some variation was a part of the original.
Future dancers might mistake a variation in style or training—or even choices made
because of time constraints or stage size—for a part of the original choreographer’s
original vision.

If video taping dance is not a realistic option either for dance instruction or
capturing a dance performance as an art object, it is just as useless an option for
accounting for dance identity. If Laban notation and video recording are out, how
do we account for two dance performances (instances) being performances of the
same dance (kind)? We do this in the same way as we handle food and theater plays:
we look to the objective properties of the productions. We look for the repetition
of key objective features which we expect to find in two productions that share a
common name.

Perhaps the most popular ballet in America today is the \textit{Nutcracker}. Based on
the music of Peter Tchaikovsky and on the choreography of Petipa and Lev Ivanov,
it premiered in Russia in 1892 and was introduced to the United States in 1940.
Virtually every major American ballet company launches a run of performances
every winter, virtually every child who takes ballet classes has one of his or her
earliest stage appearances in a performance of this ballet, and virtually everyone
associates Tchaikovsky’s music with the ballet. What makes two instances of the
\textit{Nutcracker} legitimate bearers of the name? Certainly there is a contextual story
to be told, but (1) there are certain narrow nonaesthetic properties which must be
present, and (2) there are certain objective thematic properties that are essential.
Thematically, the ballet must include a young girl who receives from a mysterious
uncle a magical Christmas present in the shape of a nut-cracking toy soldier; there
must be a fight between the soldier and mice; there must be a journey, a series of
fantastical visits, and a return home. The number of visits is not crucial, whether
the soldier fights alone or with others is not crucial, but the aforementioned themes
are. These themes, like all formal aesthetic properties described on Zangwill’s
account, rely on certain narrow nonaesthetic properties. Different narrow nonaes-
thetic properties may be employed to bring about these thematic elements, but not
too wide a variation can be tolerated. In addition, there are certain other objective
features that are essential. The presence of a Christmas tree is necessary; some sort
of growth or shrinking during Clara’s dream is necessary; the inclusion of some
sort of magical conveyance for her visits is necessary. (The precise offering of an
authoritative set of the essential features of a dance work can only be judged by dance experts on a case by case basis for each dance kind.)

Formalist elements of dance, the repetition of patterns of movement and of theme, contribute to dance identity in an inescapable manner. Just as a grilled cheese sandwich is not an instance of carbonnade à la fl amande, some dance production, which does not have recognizable, sensible—“sense-able”—patterns of movement sufficiently like what one believes Petipa’s original choreography for Swan Lake included, where all variations on one’s current ideal of Petipa’s version are all well motivated and justified, will fail to be acceptable as a work of Petipa’s Swan Lake.

IV. DANCE CRITICISM

Let’s now turn to dance criticism, and to one of the most famous dance critics: former New Yorker critic, Arlene Croce. Croce is a formalist. Nothing demonstrated this better than the mid 1990s controversy she created by refusing to critically review a dance she referred to as “victim art.”

In 1994, Bill T. Jones, an influential and respected choreographer and dancer, and his company, the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, premiered Still/Here at the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Next Wave Festival. Still/Here is a set of two dances connected by a common theme and incorporating spoken narrative alongside dance movement. The common theme is death and dying, and the spoken narratives were delivered by people who were in fact suffering from life-threatening conditions. Jones’s partner, Zane, had died from AIDS in 1988, and Still/Here was, along with a set of other dances and a set of workshops he conducted, in part a manifestation of how Jones was dealing with death. Still/Here actually came out of the workshops Jones conducted.

In 1995, in an article in the New Yorker, Croce wrote about Still/Here. More precisely, Croce wrote about writing about Still/Here. She said she could not do it. She could not review the work, because the work was, in her view, “victim art,” and she felt uncomfortable putting herself in the position of writing critical words in part about participants in Still/Here who were, in fact, facing life-threatening conditions. In her article, “Discussing the Undiscussable,” Croce examines her decision not to review Still/Here.28 She writes:

I have not seen Bill T. Jones’s Still/Here and have no plans to review it. In this piece, which was given locally at the Brooklyn Academy, Jones presents people (as he has in the past) who are terminally ill and talk about it. I understand that there is dancing going on during the talking, but of course no one goes to Still/Here for the dancing. . . . If I understand Still/Here correctly . . . it is a kind of messianic traveling medicine show.

She says that as a critic, she has four options. First, she can see the work and review it. Second, she can see it but choose not to review it. Third, she can choose not to see it.
A fourth option—to write about what one has not seen—becomes possible on strange occasions like Still/Here, from which one feels excluded by reason of its express intentions, which are unintelligible as theatre. I don’t deny that Still/Here may be of value in some wholly other sphere of action, but it is as theatre, dance theatre, that I would approach it. And my approach has been cut off. By working dying people into his act, Jones is putting himself beyond the reach of criticism. I think of him as literally undiscussable—the most extreme case among the distressingly many now representing themselves to the public not as artists but as victims and martyrs.

Part of Croce’s case for not being able to review Still/Here rested on the need she perceived for maintaining an emotional detachment. She said that she “can’t review someone I feel sorry for or hopeless about.” She related how she has avoided dancers whose physical states impede her ability to be candid in her evaluation of their dancing, dancers who are overweight, old, or dancers with physical deformities “who appear nightly in roles requiring beauty of line.” Croce writes:

In quite another category of undiscussability are those dancers I’m forced to feel sorry for because of the way they present themselves: as dised blacks, abused women or disenfranchised homosexuals—as performers, in short, who make out of victimhood victim art. I can live with the flabby, the feeble, the scoliotic. But with the righteous I cannot function at all.

What Croce calls “victim art” is one species of art that she sees as being cut off from a pure formalist assessment.

When is a dance not a dance? Croce’s answer seems to be this: when it does not present its audience with the formal features necessary—and only those formal features—to take it, on its own and distinct from external considerations, as a basis for pure and disinterested aesthetic contemplation. Is Still/Here a work of dance? I am not referring here to whether the spoken narratives were more central to the work as art than was the movement. I take Jones and the director of the Brooklyn Academy’s word for it that the work, if it was art, was dance. But I also take Croce at her word when she says that she will review, or at least see, any dance performance. An implication of Croce’s position, which I would characterize as strongly formalist, is that if there is no means by which to attend to an object with emotional detachment, there is no way to approach it critically. If it cannot be criticized, then it lacks one condition—namely, formal properties that are accessible by the disinterested viewer—that render it capable of producing an aesthetic experience, and for formalists like Croce, the object’s inaccessibility as an aesthetic object results in its also not being an art object. If a formalist critical treatment requires accessibility to formal properties for an object to be an aesthetic object, and Still/Here does not, because of its content, permit this, then it cannot, for the formalist, constitute a work of art. If this is right, then Croce’s claim could have been more powerful. It is not that Still/Here is a work of “victim art.” It is that Still/Here is not a work of art at all. And, as such, Croce was not in the least obliged to review it.
To ask “when is a dance not a dance?” is to raise a question deeper than any explored in this paper, and I do not propose beginning a discussion here. Rather, the point of introducing this question in the context of Croce’s rejection of the critical accessibility of Still/Here is to illustrate merely the art-critical point. Absent certain formal features that would constitute the basis of critical accessibility, Croce’s work as a dance critic could not proceed. It was stymied. Would it be possible for a principled formalist dance critic to separate out the formal elements of Still/Here from the more contextual elements, and focus his criticism just on those elements? I imagine so; after all, there were, I believe, a run of performances of Still/Here at the Brooklyn Academy, and it would be strange indeed not to find certain nonaesthetic properties that every performance shared with every other one. A formalist dance critic might identity those nonaesthetic properties that underwrote only purely formal aesthetic properties, and concentrate his critical focus there. This is certainly a live possibility. Perhaps for some formalist critic, but not for Croce. Croce took all the elements of Still/Here as a single amalgam, and as a unified whole, she believed her critical access was blocked.

Although Croce received a great deal of criticism for her decision (and much probably warranted), to the extent that Croce may have conceived of herself as a champion of principled dance criticism, the position she took concerning reviewing Jones’s work was understandable. What seems clear is that Still/Here did not provide her with the formal features, and only the formal features, to constitute it a work of dance given her formalist perspective. If she assesses a dance on the basis of an art theory that is inherently expressive, mimetic, or otherwise contextualist, she endangers her craft by necessarily including in her assessment items which she, subjectively, judges to be relevant. The safer ground by far for one who, like Croce, pioneers the construction of the professional dance critic is the generally objective ground of criticism rendered only on those public aspects of the object: the formal properties of the aesthetic object and the public information that obviously concerns the object’s existence as art, e.g., genetic, historical, and object-relational information. Croce’s formalism is not only understandable, it was probably necessary in the promotion of dance criticism as a form of criticism that could be seen to be as principled as criticism associated with autographic and non-consumable allographic art forms.29

ENDNOTES

6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 610.
9. One interesting problem is that if an autographic work of art were only understood as a work of art in terms of its formal aesthetic properties—a position I feel sure very few people have ever held—then an exact copy of that autographic work would have the exact same value and identity as the original.
11. This complaint goes as far back as Hegel.
14. This is the focus of Marianne Quinet’s “Food as Art: The Problem of Function,” British Journal of Aesthetics 21 (Spring 1981), 159–171.
15. Aestheticians have pointed out that we are not on stable ground if we reduce the aesthetic appreciation of food to its visual appeal; if food is to be an art form, we need to concentrate on food as food, on the gustatory as primary and the visual (etc.) as secondary.
17. For a full treatment of the temporal arts, see Jerrold Levinson and Philip Alperson, “What is a Temporary Art?” Midwest Studies in Philosophy XVI (1991), 439–450. Consumable artforms, as I use the term here, are a species of temporal artforms. Levinson and Alperson write: “Our primary access to the object (e.g. musical composition) is through an instance produced by living performers then and then, as we experience it.”
18. The necessary or essential features of a given food kind must be judged by food experts—chefs, food critics, food anthropologists—and judged on a case by case basis for each food kind. A formula for how they go about determining this is impossible to offer. If such a formula were possible, there would be no reason to offer a paper defending the employment of a formalist approach.
19. These last two I saw at the 1983 Edinburgh Festival.
20. I grant that, as a film, this is not precisely relevant to this paper; films are not consumable art forms. But one could easily imagine this sort of production on a stage.
21. I recognize there is probably no such thing as “Shakespeare’s script,” as Shakespearean scholarship would remind us. Hard dividing lines are not available in these cases, and some gray area exists in which reside objects whose identity will remain controversial. Perhaps a fundamentalist expert about Shakespearean plays would say that there are no Shakespearean plays per se but rather only plays that instantiate particular Shakespearean folios.
22. Is a production of *Romeo and Juliet* in French a performance of *Romeo and Juliet*? It is if, to follow Davidson, whatever any character holds true when speaking French is held true by that same character when speaking English. (My thanks to James Hamilton for this solution.)

23. Noël Carroll thinks of a “play-type” as a recipe, one that is filled out by artists like directors, actors, set designers and the like: Noël Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 213. Understanding the filling in of the “recipe” as “interpretation” led to a discussion in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, in 2001, among David Saltz, James Hamilton, and Carroll. Carroll’s original view and the discussion it motivates focus on the ontology of allographic artforms, and so while enlightening, they surpass the scope of my epistemological project.

24. James Hamilton believes that a text-bound focus on theater practice is a mistake. For more on this, see James R. Hamilton, “Theatrical Performance and Interpretation,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59:3 (Summer 2001), 307–312.

25. Generally, we think that if a variation is introduced, it must be “motivated.” There must be a reason, a justification, for its inclusion. But this, of course, only covers purposed variation.


27. The problem with focus in dance is also a problem in theater; this is but one reason why consideration of theater plays most likely warrants more discussion than it receives here.


29. I thank my colleague, Kenton Harris, for help with this paper. And special thanks go to James Hamilton, whose insights benefitted this paper tremendously.