Landscape as dance partner: a somaesthetic exploration

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Abstract: *The study is based on an interview with the Prague-based dancer and choreographer Zden Brungot Svíteková on her artistic research during a 2024 residency in Ilulissat, Greenland, a site marked by ancient rock formations and extreme climatic conditions. Through Zden´s explorations of movements in dialogue with "rock bodies" we encounter the possibility of treating the landscape not as mere inspiration but as an active partner, akin to a dance partner. The article explores how somatic and improvisational practices with geological formations reframe, disrupt, and reconfigure habitual bodily patterns and perceptions as well as what insights and modes of world-making arise when choreography responds to the materiality of geological formations. The analysis focuses on three themes: somatic practice as relational engagement, expanded perception and the extended body, and world-making with its ontological implications. Zden´s engagement with rocks, terrain, air, and atmosphere exemplifies somatic practice as relational responsiveness, in which perception expands, and the body becomes extended into its environment.*

Keywords: *Dance, improvisation, geology, world-making, dwelling, intra-action, Arctic*

1. Introduction

Somaesthetics emphasizes both the experiential dimension of embodiment and the possibility of cultivating somatic awareness as a philosophical and artistic practice (Shusterman, 2012). Dancers are uniquely positioned to contribute to somaesthetic inquiry: they rely on the body as their primary artistic medium, engage in its continual cultivation, and often combine practical experimentation with theoretical reflection. In doing so, dancers offer particular insights into how bodily experience can be refined, transformed, and understood.

This article explores such insights through an interview with the Prague-based dancer and choreographer Zden Brungot Svíteková, whose practice exemplifies how somatic awareness and artistic exploration intersect. Trained in formal dance techniques, somatic approaches, improvisation, and contact improvisation, Zden is particularly interested in how geological formations and processes can inform movement. In the summer of 2024, she spent two months as an artist-in-residence in Ilulissat, Greenland, organized by the multidisciplinary platform for artistic research Arctic Culture Lab Greenland. Ilulissat, located at 69° North on Greenland's west coast, lies adjacent to Sermeq Kujalleq, the most productive glacier of the Northern Hemisphere. The area is characterized by dramatic geological features: exposed, approximately 1.7- billion-year-old Precambrian bedrock with striations from glacial erosion, moraine deposits and the Isfjeldbanken (iceberg bank) which is "the threshold across the mouth of the fjord where the

icebergs run aground. An unending drama of changing forms, colours and sounds is created as the icebergs melt, collapse and collide with each other." (GEUS, 2025a, 2025b). The rocks are pale grey, folded gneisses and granites, with bands and enclaves of mica schist and dark basic rocks. Since Ilulissat lies far above the Arctic Circle, temperatures rarely exceed 10°C even in summer, and the midnight sun sustains a heightened sense of temporality and light. From a dance-physiological perspective, it is a seemingly unfriendly environment for exploring (dance) movement; however, this stark, ancient environment provided Zden with a setting to explore improvisation, repetition, and bodily contact with rock surfaces.

My own perspective as the interviewer is also grounded in this place. As a dancer, choreographer, and philosopher living in Ilulissat, I am familiar with the landscapes Zden refers to. Also, I have myself examined the relationship between body and environment through dance film in the Arctic (Devonas Hoffmann, 2020a; Devonas Hoffmann, 2020b). Our dialogue is thus informed by shared interests in how bodies and landscapes interact, and by the recognition that in dance, the environment is never just a backdrop but a dynamic partner in movement.

There is a growing body of work examining how dance engages with natural landscapes. Screen dance often situates choreography outdoors in natural environments (Devonas Hoffmann, 2020; Kloetzel, 2015; McPherson, 2018; Vitaglione, 2016), while projects such as performative geological or archaeological walks (Brungot Svitéková, 2022; Hansegård, 2022) or teaching geological knowledge through creative dance (Matias et al., 2020)[1] demonstrate the pedagogical and artistic potential of such practices. Dance has even been employed therapeutically, for instance, to support trauma recovery after earthquakes (Egan & Quigley, 2015). These examples highlight the diverse ways in which dance and environment intersect. Yet, our experience of the body is always already integrated with atmosphere, terrain, and gravity (Colney, 2014)—so much so that distinctions between internal and external physical realities begin to blur. Despite this, little has been said about how embodied engagement with geological landscapes through dance might generate new modes of aesthetic experience and transform somatic practices.

This article seeks to address that gap. By interviewing Zden on her improvisational practice with the barren rock formations of Ilulissat, I explore the following questions: In what ways do somatic and improvisational practices with geological formations reframe, disrupt, and reconfigure habitual bodily patterns and perceptions? What new aesthetic insights and modes of world-making arise when choreography responds to the materiality of geological formations? Through Zden´s explorations of movements in dialogue with "rock bodies" we encounter the possibility of treating the landscape not as mere inspiration but as an active partner, akin to a dance partner. This opens up ontological insights into how our embodied relations with the world actively create the world(s) we live in. The perspective developed here builds on somaesthetics but extends it in two directions. First, it emphasizes the co-constituting – and not just influencing force – of landscapes, rocks, surfaces and atmospheres. Second, it foregrounds ontology: specifically, how somatic practices with the landscape do not merely represent or reflect the world but actively participate in its making. This approach aligns with relational ontology, in which entities do not exist as independent, self-contained units but emerge and take shape through their relations and ongoing interactions with other beings, materials, and forces. Barad (2007) argues that entities do not pre-exist their relations; rather, they emerge through *intra-action*. Matter has agency, and humans and non-humans are entangled in dynamic processes that produce the world. Therefore, ontological primacy is assigned to the relations between

1 In the literature, it is distinguished between learning through, with, about and in the arts (Lindström, 2012). Dance has a large potential to provide learning through dance, for example in geometry, mathematics and physics (An et al., 2017; Hollett et al., 2022; Leandro et al., 2018; Solomon et al., 2022)

entities, not the entities themselves (Devonas Hoffmann, 2024).

2. Method

By examining embodied engagement with geological landscapes through dance, the study mainly contributes to analytic somaesthetics (Shusterman, 1999, 2012). Analytic somaesthetics investigates the role of perception, proprioception, and bodily awareness in the construction of reality. In this case, the analysis seeks to understand how the materiality of geological formations influences bodily habits, perceptual awareness, and modes of world-making. The integration of phenomenological analysis with somaesthetic concerns highlights how embodied practice can generate not only new aesthetic experiences but also ontological insights into the entanglement of human and non-human elements. The study also contributes to practical somaesthetics (Shusterman, 2019) as it draws on practical experimentation with contact improvisation and the way how improvisational practices can heighten embodied experiences and awareness.

This study employs a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology (Van Manen, 2014) to investigate how somatic practice in geological landscapes generates aesthetic experience and ontological insights. The aim is to describe and interpret the lived experience of dance in such environments "from the inside" by attending closely to the ways the world makes itself evident to embodied awareness.

I have conducted an in-person interview with Zden, carried out in two steps:

1. Walking interview: The first step consisted of a walking interview in which Zden was invited to revisit and articulate her experience of practicing movement outdoors. The questions aimed to uncover how the practice unfolded, how dwelling (Ingold, 2021) in the landscape can be understood as a somatic activity (Alison, 2023), how the repetition of movement phrases altered the perception of both space and body, and how these practices disrupted and reframed habitual bodily patterns (Höök, 2018). The walking format was chosen as walking through space activates embodied memories and allows for reflection in movement. This interview took about one hour.

2. Follow-up interview: The second step was an unstructured conversation, guided by visual material from the residency. Photographs of Zden´s practice served as input to reactivate embodied memories and to exemplify aesthetic and somatic insights. These visual cues functioned as mediators that support recollection and deepen the articulation of lived experience. This interview took about 30 minutes.

I used an AI-generated transcription of the audio recording of the interviews and double-checked the transcription. Afterwards, I read and re-read the transcription to find out what the data wanted to tell me (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). Based on some initial codes, e.g., somatic dialogue with the environment, resistance of landscape, unchangeable nature, repetition and familiarity, enlarged perceptive awareness, and perceiving the given, I recognized some broad themes: somatic practice as relational engagement, expanded perception and the extended body, and world-making and ontological implications. I then began to analyse the interview material along those themes using hermeneutic phenomenological methods (Van Manen, 2014), focusing on uncovering the essential meaning structures of the dancer's lived experience. In keeping with Abram's (Abram, 1996) description of phenomenology as fidelity to "the way the world makes itself evident to awareness," the analysis aims to remain close to Zden´s descriptions while also interpreting their broader philosophical significance.

In the following, I present relevant excerpts from the interviews with Zden. Even though they are two interviews, I present them as one as the second deepens some topics of the first.

Some parts of the interviews are summarized for better readability, also, I removed linguistic fillers such as "yeah", "uhm", and "you know". Since I edited the interview, I sent the interview transcirps and the article to Zden for review to ensure descriptive and interpretative validity (Maxwell, 1992).

3. The interview (excerpt)

Flavia: You worked in Greenland, where the landscape is mainly bare rock. How did that affect your movement practice?

Zden: Greenland offered something I had never experienced before: constant access to barren rock. There was no soil covering it, no vegetation hiding it—just metamorphic rock, hard and abrasive. That surface doesn't let you slide, so it feels reliable, like a strong partner for walking up steep slopes or for full-body contact. Being surrounded by these massive rock bodies raised questions about my own capacities: balance, the ability to leap over cracks, how far I could reach, how I could pull myself up a slope. The rock offered questions in movement, and I was responding. It became a negotiation: Where can I take support? Where can I push? What risks am I willing to take? And then there was the sheer physical pleasure of it, an interest in listening to gravity on inclined slopes. The surface resists you; you don't slide easily, which makes it a very particular kind of ground to explore. It allowed me to study, or rather to listen to, the masses of my body and how it responded to gravity: what happens when I push into the rock, and what happens when I don't but simply let gravity take me? How much mass am I placing, how much is the rock pushing back? I was listening to the physics of mass and gravitational pull, noticing how the surface either retained me or released me. Sometimes I worked with that, making myself lighter so I could slide, or heavier so I would stay in place.

Because the terrain was unpredictable, I couldn't rehearse or train on it in a controlled way. I just did it, and that unpredictability brought surprises—sudden twists, shifts, or the body falling into strange, unexpected positions when a harder point of rock made everything swing around differently. It became a study of softness, elasticity, and plasticity in my own body, between these two bodies, the rock and the human. These terms also apply to the rocks themselves when under stress and strain: elasticity, the ability to return to the same position; plasticity, the state of being permanently altered.

Human body and rock body. Photo: Mário Olšavský

Flavia: A lot of dance happens in studios, on flat surfaces, sometimes even in black box

venues. How is it different for you to move in an open landscape or in a natural environment?

Zden: In a studio, the environment feels more sterile, so the focus is very much on the body itself. In improvisation there, movement often comes either directly from the body and its sensations, or from finding my way through space. Outdoors, it's different — there is air, sun, heat or cold, and first and foremost the materiality of the rocks around me. I'm in dialogue with that, and it informs me: where I'm standing, how my feet connect to the ground, how the environment speaks to me, and how I respond to it. Each surface is different, and that shapes the movement and movement ideas.

In the studio, because the space is more uniform, one relies more on imagination, on creating tasks, or on bringing in elements from outside that can shift the thinking in a certain direction. But outside, it's simply what it is — the environment itself provides those stimuli. At the same time, I'm not only responding physically; I'm also drawing on knowledge I've accumulated through reading and learning about the geology of the landscapes. So, moving outdoors means touching both the immediate, sensory dialogue with the environment and that broader knowledge I carry with me.

Flavia: A common practice in dance is to repeat movements until they become part of you. How did you work with that in the landscape? What work did the repetition do for you?

Zden: Repetition had a strong effect. Walking the same paths again and again gave me familiarity—not only with the terrain but also with my own bodily capacities. At first, the distances felt overwhelming, but with repetition, the walking became easier and faster. More importantly, I started to feel at home in the landscape. There was one moment, after returning to the same site several times, when I suddenly felt a horizontality of relations. None of us—neither humans nor rocks nor air masses—was more important than the other. That realization struck me deeply. It wasn't about conquering the landscape, but about being alongside it.

Horizontal relations. Photo: Zden Brungot Svíteková

Zden: Maybe it's about connection—partly connection, and partly an ethical stance: who am I in this world, and how do I choose to interact within it? By repeating the same path, something becomes known, and that familiarity opens space for new, more refined perceptions. If every

walk were completely different, it might feel like just another journey, but through repetition new inputs could emerge.

There were moments when I became acutely aware of the masses of air around me. The environment is constantly changing, and one time I felt it very strongly—as if I entered a capsule of warmer air mass, and then suddenly, it shifted and the temperature changed completely. With that experience I wondered: how could this become a score? Could I create a situation out of it? Because I was constantly thinking about how to communicate these explorations to others—how simply listening to, or being attentive to, these shifting masses of air while moving through them might become a shared practice.

Expanded awareness. Photo: Zden Brungot Svíteková

Flavia: So, you would say that in some somatic practices, you focus more on the inside. How is the body feeling right now and how do I transform energy within my body? How do I make movement as effective as possible, that is, without wasting energy? But could it be that you expanded your body into the whole atmosphere around you?

Zden: Yes, yes, thank you.

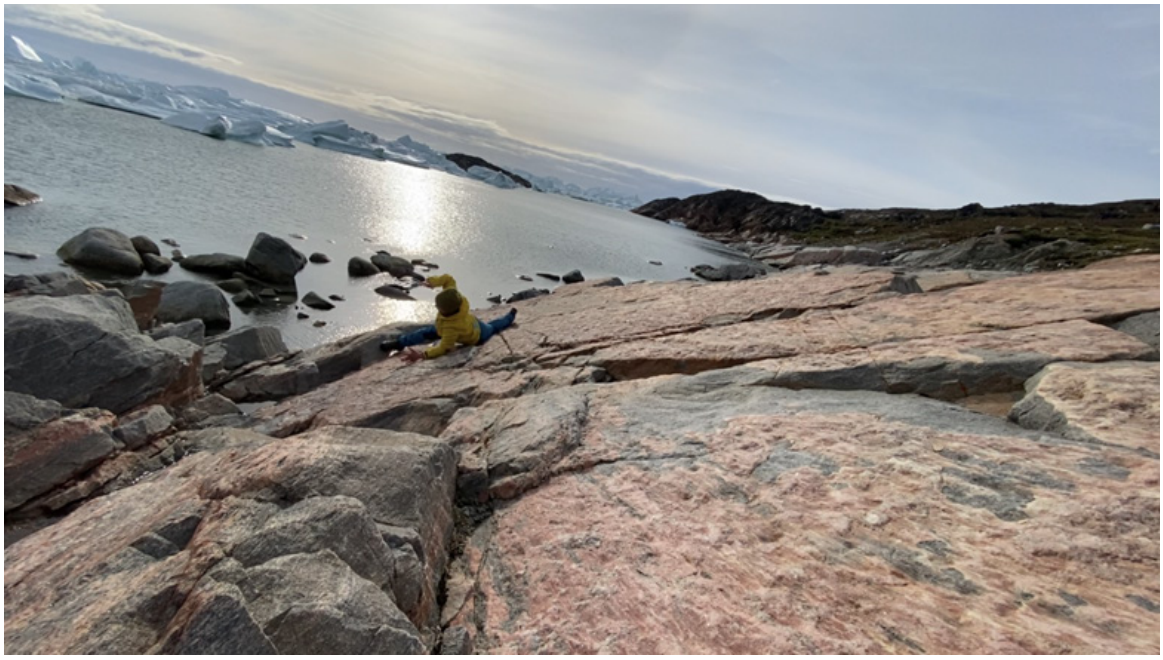
Flavia: And your body got wider and wider, actually becoming a part of the landscape?

Zden: Yes — maybe it's that feeling of familiarity where the border between my skin and the skin of the other begins to dissolve. I become just one element among everything around me, and my sense of self expands. The word "consciousness" comes to mind, or more precisely, "awareness" — an expansion of the body. There are layers in space that aren't mine physically, and yet they become mine because I'm in contact with them. There is always this constant contact.

Flavia: Terms like "listening to the body, how it transforms" or "finding a solution to move" are very specific. For somebody not into dance, it could be difficult to understand. And sometimes, I wonder, what does it mean? Like "my body finds a solution". What does it mean? What would you say?

Zden: It was about letting the body find its own way, its own strategy. And in that moment, it struck me how different this is from mental deliberation—figuring something out in the mind, thinking mentally, which is what I often do, and what many of us do in our everyday

way of living. But here, it was really the body that figured it out: Where to put the leg? Where to find support? How to push? It was entirely physical. That's maybe the closest I can bring it to someone's understanding. And in the dancer's world, I think it becomes even more refined, because we have so much experience working with the materiality of the body—what it does, how it does it—while also cultivating the senses, the awareness of perception, the nuances, and the motor skills that grow out of that.



The body finds its way. Photo: Zden Brungot Svíteková

Flavia: We are all trained into some kind of habits of moving, and maybe particularly as dancers. How do you think the landscape challenged your habits of moving?

Zden: Definitely, it did. Good question. When I first heard it, my mind went straight to those challenging movement situations where you need to get from one place to another. And suddenly you realize "I'm not brave enough to make the leap". Or—what exactly is the fear? That was a very interesting moment, because it taught me something about projection.

If I placed my attention on the other side, then I could jump. But if I focused on the width of the gap, I would never do it. Such a simple, elemental thing—and yet in the landscape it became very present, much more than it ever would in the studio. Out there, it was the landscape itself teaching me about movement. So yes, it does affect movement habits—or maybe more precisely, the mental habits that shape how I move.

Flavia: You brought a choreographic phrase with you and repeated it in different places. How did the landscape affect it?

Zden: Bringing the phrase into Greenland turned it into a dialogue with the environment. The rocks and slopes reshaped the movement ideas. If I was sliding, the incline oriented the direction; if I was balancing, the cracks showed me how to adapt. Sometimes it was also about safety—you don't want to end up in the icefjord. The environment was never neutral; it altered the choreography and even suggested new elements. Some movements, such as sliding or tracing the striation, were inspired by the traces of glaciers. They emerged directly from being in contact with the terrain.

Listening to the gravity on incline slopes. Photo: Zden Brungot Svíteková

Flavia: Did this lead to new aesthetic insights?

Zden: Yes. Being with the landscape taught me to become more aware of everything around me. In one location, I remember feeling a great extension toward the horizon while still being grounded. At the same time, I noticed the ravens flying, the shifting light, the texture of the rocks. My movement wasn't more important than any of those elements—everything was present at once. That was a powerful experience: realizing that dance was not separate, but part of a larger composition with non-human partners.

Flavia: In somaesthetics, there is the idea that the way of seeing is a way of world-making. Do you recognize that in your work?

Zden: Yes, I do. Geology taught me that you can train your eye and your mind to notice things you couldn't see before. I believe moving and dancing with landscapes works in a similar way. How do I see? How do I train my gaze? That shapes the world I create. And it's not just about seeing—it involves all the senses. The environment itself trains them. Without sharply trained senses and language, we might not even recognize certain distinctions. For example, some cultures or communities have many words for subtle environmental differences, allowing them to perceive nuances that others might overlook. In Greenland, I felt the landscape was shaping my perception in that same way.

4. Discussion

In the following, I discuss aspects of the interview along the three themes identified in the analysis: Somatic practice as relational engagement, expanded perception and the extended body as well as world-making and ontological implications.

4.1. Somatic Practice as Relational Engagement

Zden's somatic practice in geological landscapes exemplifies an approach to embodiment that

situates the body within dynamic and relational contexts. In her work, the Greenlandic rocks are not a neutral backdrop or aesthetic resource; rather, they function as active participants in improvisational exploration. Their uneven surfaces and textures, as well as their resistance, provoke responses from the body that are both reactive and generative. This mirrors contact improvisation techniques, yet it extends them by incorporating non-human agents as improvisation partners. The practice emphasizes that movement is not authored by the dancer alone but emerges through the negotiation of bodily effort and environmental response.

Tim Ingold's (2000, 2011) *dwelling perspective* provides a conceptual lens to understand this mode of practice. Ingold suggests that beings do not confront the world as external observers but are immersed in it, weaving their lives through lines of movement and correspondence. The body is always already entangled in a *meshwork* of relations—paths of wind, gravity, surfaces, and other living beings—that co-shape experience. Zden's engagement with Greenlandic rock surfaces enacts this principle: her movements are not imposed on a passive landscape but are co-created with the material and atmospheric forces of the site. When she describes rocks as "reliable partners" or as surfaces that provoke trust, resistance, or hesitation, she echoes Ingold's view that dwelling involves responding to what materials ask of us. The improvisation becomes an embodied dialogue with the environment, a way of moving-*with* rather than moving-*upon*.

Such a relational perspective suggests that bodies and environments do not precede their encounters but emerge through them. Zden´s negotiation with the rocks shows precisely this: her bodily possibilities—how far she can leap, where she can find balance—are enacted in relation to the landscape's resistance and support. The engagement with rocks, terrain, and atmospheric conditions thus exemplifies a relational ontology in which the body is shaped by the world even as it shapes the world through action.

From a somaesthetic perspective, such relational engagement demonstrates that bodily cultivation include attunement to external forces and materialities. Training perception in these contexts means developing a refined sensitivity to the world's resistances and affordances, and thereby cultivating response-ability: the ability to respond through a responsiveness that is based on the awareness of the other (Barad & Kleinmann, 2012) – in this case, the terrain. Zden´s willingness to adapt her weight, balance, and gestures to the contingencies of the terrain reveals that somatic practice is never simply self-referential but oriented toward negotiation with alterity. In this sense, embodiment is not an isolated, internalized phenomenon but an ongoing practice of relational responsiveness.

4.2. Expanded Perception and the Extended Body

Central to Zden´s work is the expansion of perception beyond the confines of the immediate body. The perception at stake here is neither proprioception nor exteroception. Rather, through sustained attention and iterative engagement, the boundaries between the "given self" (the bodily interior) and the "extended self" (the body's relational integration with the environment) become increasingly permeable. She describes experiences in which the body extends into air, terrain, and the horizon, challenging the assumption that perception stops at the skin.

This expansion can be understood phenomenologically as an intensification of *being-in-the-world*. The lived body is the very condition of perception, a medium through which the world is disclosed (Merleau-Ponty & Landes, 2012). In Zden´s account, bodily awareness does not merely register external stimuli but enters into contact with layers of atmosphere, gravitational pulls, and distant horizons. Perception is an active movement of the body toward the world, through which the world is *made* (see below).

Pragmatist aesthetics adds another dimension: aesthetic experience is continuous with the organism's engagement with its environment (Dewey, 2005). Zden's iterative repetitions in the landscape exemplify this continuity. By walking the same paths and repeating movement phrases, her body develops a heightened familiarity that blurs the distinction between the self and the surrounding. What might appear as routine repetition becomes, in fact, a way of deepening attunement, cultivating a sensitivity to subtle shifts in air, temperature, or balance. The familiar becomes strange again, as attention expands to include aspects of the environment previously unnoticed.

From a somaesthetic standpoint, this cultivation of perceptual awareness is both epistemic and ethical. Epistemically, it trains the body to sense relations that are not readily captured by analytical thought—such as the density of air, the grain of stone, or the pull of an incline. Ethically, it fosters a recognition of one's embeddedness in ecological systems. If taken seriously, this has a societal dimension, as we need to rethink the illusion of human superiority. When Zden speaks of a "horizontality of relations," in which her movements are no more or less significant than those of ravens, winds, or rocks, she articulates an experiential insight into ecological equality.

The concept of the extended body thus highlights how perception itself is transformed through somatic practice. The body is not merely extended metaphorically but materially, as breath, balance, and gesture expand into the atmospheric and geological conditions of the site. This expanded perception reminds us that every act of sensing is simultaneously an act of participating in a shared world.

This notion also resonates with Colney's (2014) argument that terrain, gravity, and atmosphere are integral components of embodied experience. In Zden's practice, bodily awareness is inseparable from the environment in which it is performed: the body and landscape are mutually constitutive, and somatic techniques serve as tools for perceiving, responding to, and co-creating the relational dynamics of the material world. This perspective challenges dualistic frameworks that separate mind from body, culture from nature, or subject from object, advocating instead for an ontological model in which human experience is always embedded within broader ecological and material systems.

4.3. World-Making and Ontological Implications

Zden's practice illustrates the world-making dimension of somatic engagement. Perception and action are not merely responses to an already-constituted environment but are constitutive of the relational world in which the body dwells. By attuning movement to rocks, air, the horizon, and atmospheric conditions, the dancer participates in configuring new relational realities.

Karen Barad's (2007) theory of *agential realism* sharpens this ontological claim. For Barad, entities do not pre-exist their relations but emerge through *intra-actions*. A dancer and a rock are not independent objects that later interact; they become what they are through their entangled engagement. For Barad, matter is vibrant, responsive, and agentive. The rock contributes to the encounter: it affords or resists movement, shapes bodily possibilities, sets limits, and opens potentials. This undermines any claim that the dancer "comes first" and the rock is merely encountered afterward (or vice versa). Instead, the rock participates in constituting the dancer's movement, balance, and form, and the dancer participates in constituting the rock's meaning, status, and function in that moment. In this light, Zden's practice does not simply involve "using" the landscape for movement but enacts phenomena in which body, stone, air, and horizon materialize together. The extended step across a crack, the decision to trust a rock's surface for balance, or the adjustment of breath to air pressure are moments in which the world itself is

reconfigured.

What is at stake here is an understanding of somatic practice as an onto-epistemological method. Movement is not merely expressive but investigative—it generates knowledge by revealing entanglements otherwise concealed by representational accounts. When Zden perceives the air as masses that press against her, she is not merely describing a subjective impression but enacting a new way of sensing the material world, one that redefines both "air" and "body" as phenomena.

Somaesthetics deepens this interpretation by stressing the ethical dimension of cultivating bodily awareness. Awareness of the rock as a partner or of the raven as a co-participant is not only an aesthetic insight but an ethical orientation toward interdependence. In this sense, Zden's practice shows how somatic cultivation contributes to ecological sensibilities and to more careful, responsive ways of inhabiting the world. Movement is not merely expressive or performative; it is world-making in Barad's sense, and dwelling-in-the-world in Ingold's sense. By attending to bodily responses to non-human agents, practitioners gain insight into the inseparability of human and material worlds. This aligns with somaesthetic concerns regarding the cultivation of perception as a means of ethical and practical engagement with the world: heightened somatic awareness fosters attentiveness to environmental constraints, potentials, and interdependencies.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Zden´s somatic practice demonstrates the potential for embodiment to operate as a form of world-making. By situating the body within geological and atmospheric landscapes, her work illustrates relational ontology, human–non-human entanglement, and the constitutive role of perception and action. It also extends the concerns of somaesthetics beyond studio-based techniques, showing that somatic cultivation is both a perceptual and ethical practice that shapes how humans inhabit, respond to, and co-create the world. By integrating relational ontology, her practice provides a model for understanding embodiment as an ongoing, relational process of world-making in which the human body is inseparable from the material and ecological worlds it inhabits.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Zden Brungot Svíteková for participating in the interview, providing photographs for the article, and reviewing the article for descriptive and interpretative validity. However, all shortcomings are solely my responsibility.

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