Reconstruction in Dance Somaesthetics

Eric Mullis

Abstract: *This essay examines the literature on contemporary concert dance and somaesthetics, with an eye on its relationship to dance studies. The role dance played in Richard Shusterman's disciplinary proposal for somaesthetics is discussed, as is more recent somaesthetics work on dance education, audience engagement, cross-cultural comparison, and practice-as-research. This supports an argument for a robustly interdisciplinary methodology which takes into account dance scholarship and the unique form of experimental inquiry movement-based artists practice to create theatrical performance. In the spirit of John Dewey's "Reconstruction in Philosophy," the essay concludes with several practical strategies that would render dance somaesthetics more conversant with contemporary dance practice and related scholarship.*

Keywords: *contemporary dance, dance studies, theatrical somaesthetics, practice-as-research.*

This essay considers the relationship between contemporary concert dance, somaesthetics and dance studies. It begins by discussing the original somaesthetics disciplinary proposal, focusing on how the methodology outlined therein pertains to work in dance studies. The second section briefly surveys existing literature on dance somaesthetics, and the third discusses two strategies that will help make such work more conversant with contemporary dance and related scholarship. Because many of the points made in the essay are based on personal experience as a scholar-artist, I should say that I am a mid-career dancer and choreographer who came to the art form after two decades studying Chinese martial arts and Chinese philosophy in America, Taiwan, and mainland China. I began regularly attending dance classes at the American Dance Festival and went on to complete an MFA in dance, and this introduced me to the field of dance studies and fueled a nascent approach to experimental choreography. Since then my work has become increasingly interdisciplinary, with forays into religious studies, costume studies, and the philosophy of technology.

1. Theatrical Somaesthetics and Dance Studies

Over twenty years ago, Richard Shusterman published "Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal," an essay which charted a course for research in somaesthetics (2000: 262-283). Since then, the discipline has grown significantly, with scholars from around the world considering how diverse modes of embodied experience can be practiced, analyzed, and enriched.

The proposal outlines three dimensions of somaesthetic inquiry: analytic somaesthetics (AS), pragmatic somaesthetics (PS), and practical somaesthetics (RS). AS is a theoretical

endeavor which takes the work of philosophers and scientists into account when considering the ontological, epistemological, ethical, or sociopolitical aspects of embodiment. It is useful, for example, to consider writings by Foucault (1995), Bordo (2023), or Moten (2017) when examining body practices, such as traditional ballet training (Ritenberg 2010), that entail subjugation. Similarly, work by enactivists which details the science around body-world transactions is useful when addressing implications of mind-body dualism (Gallagher 2017).

PS critically compares body techniques with an eye on whether and to what extent they enrich experience. Many advocates of body disciplines make claims about improved health and well-being, and Shusterman suggests that, in response, one should consider whether the practice focuses on a particular part of the body or on holistic experience, on external representation or inner experience, and on self or other (2000: 275-276). For the purposes of this essay, he also observes that the representational-experiential distinction is not exhaustive and that a category of performative somaesthetics "might be introduced for disciplines devoted primarily to bodily strength or health, perhaps, for example, to disciplines like the martial arts, athletics, gymnastics, and weightlifting" (ibid., 275). He also states that "to the extent that such performance-oriented practices aim either at the external exhibition of one's strength and health or alternatively at one's inner feelings of those powers, we might assimilate them to either the dominantly representational or experiential mode" (ibid., 275).

RS involves first-hand practice of a body discipline. It may mean leaving the home or office for the gym, dance studio, city street, indoor track, or hiking trail to develop and refine habits of bodily movement, perception, and affect. The inclusion of RS in the proposal is consistent with a central tenet of pragmatist philosophy which holds that theory and practice should inform each other.

Though concert dance takes the body as its medium and features traditions of body-based experimentalism, it is not mentioned in the proposal (Mullis: 2006). Likely because of an emphasis on widely-accessible practices, the performative was framed in terms of social performance and, more generally, as part of PS, the normative endeavor informed by the overarching principle of pragmatic meliorism. Of course, the aim of the proposal was to provide helpful concepts and guidelines, not to discuss every avenue of body-based scholarship. Further, Shusterman could not have fully anticipated the directions that somaesthetics would move in as it developed.

Indeed, roughly a decade after the publication of the proposal, he ventured into performance art. At the urging of experimental photographer Yann Toma, he initiated a site-specific, multi-year iterative project called *The Man in Gold* (Shusterman, 2012: 239-261). Also, beginning in the early 2000s, scholars such as myself began considering somaesthetics in light of studio and performance practices used in contemporary concert performance. Taken together, this body of work can be seen as constituting the category of theatrical somaesthetics (TS). Its distinctness becomes apparent if the three dimensions of somaesthetics outlined in the proposal are considered in lieu of dance studies scholarship that centers on practices used by performers in rehearsal studios and on concert stages.

Scholars in dance studies analyze dance history, choreographic and dramaturgical techniques, and dance criticism, often with the intent of delineating relationships between dance and broader society (Bales & Eliot 2012, Dodds 2019). Their work sits alongside scholarship in theater studies and costume studies and, with them, falls within the broader discipline of performance studies (Davis 2008, Mangan 2013, Pantouvaki & McNeil 2020). Historically, dance studies came into its own in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s with an emphasis on dance history and ethnography (Manning & Dodds 2019). Currently, a key element of its methodology is the artistic

and social contextualization of dance works. This facilitates understanding of the choreographic and dramaturgical techniques (as well as strategies of artistic production and promotion) necessary for their realization. The endeavor is often informed by theory and, when relevant, scientific research. Indeed, dance studies scholarship and work in theatrical somaesthetics may draw on concepts from the same theories: phenomenology, post-structuralism, deconstruction, new materialism, feminism, race theory, and so on. Also, when necessary, they may incorporate science regarding the movement senses or embodied cognition. Because of this commonality, it can be said that, *in terms of the analytic dimension, TS and dance studies are consistent.*

In terms of PS, dance studies like somaesthetics holds that there are many avenues for cultivating embodied experience. Dance styles such as classical ballet, Bharatanatyam, and Butoh are informed by distinctive artistic values which determine their approaches to organizing the body both internally (for example, by prioritizing certain parts or delineating a general approach to gravity) and externally in relation to the elements of theatrical performance (e.g., the stage space, costuming, scenography, props, sound, lighting, and so on) (Foster 1986). Also, because dance techniques are currently taught with pedagogies aimed at enhancing dancers' physical and performative abilities (and otherwise empowering them as people), they are consistent with the somaesthetic cultivation and creative self-fashioning presumed by PS (Arnold 2005). For example, Contact Improvisation training facilitates somaesthetic experience of cooperative touch and, in turn, an ethical disposition characterized by physical receptivity, vulnerability, and care (Mullis 2016). Further, the Contact Improvisation communities around the globe illustrate that many contemporary dancers are committed to lives of body-based experimentalism that are lived with others in dance companies, training intensives, and workshops. It can be said then, that they remain dedicated to communal, creative self-fashioning (Mullis 2021, Novack 1990, Rustad, 2017).

In other ways, however, dance is distinct from body practices discussed in the disciplinary proposal. The first difference concerns the means and ends of performance training. The conventions of theatrical performance necessitate that performers maintain a high degree of physical adaptability. For example, a dancer may be asked to embody a theatrical fiction that has little or no relationship to their personal life (e.g., a homosexual dancer may perform a heteronormative role in a romantic ballet). Or, in a different project, they may have to execute demanding medium-specific choreography (such as that of Merce Cunningham or William Forsythe) that is grounded in a rigorously formal approach to the possibilities of human movement (Copeland 2004, Huschka, 2010). Indeed, having to work within the frameworks of different dance styles (something that, for reasons of employability, is now quite common) necessitates a highly plastic mode of embodiment (Bales & Nettl-Foil 2018, Roche 2015). For this reason, dancer's uniquely foreground the body's nascent pluralism.

It is also important to point out that dance techniques are informed by formal spaces of art performance. Beyond the fact that, from a proscenium stage, the spatial, temporal, and qualitative aspects of movement must be legible from a significant distance, the apparatus of the theater distinguishes actions performed within it from those of everyday life (Sofer 2013, Pouillaude 2017). The postmodern task dances of the Judson Church era, for example, presented cool, pedestrian choreography in artificial theatrical contexts in order to, among other things, spotlight the functional beauty of quotidian movement (Carroll & Banes 1982, Mullis 2014). The critical distance affected by the theater apparatus is also key for contemporary dance that critiques or models alternatives to oppressive social norms (Martin 1998). Demerson (2020) has recently discussed how some contemporary African concert dance advances a decolonial

aesthetic, and I examine how the anarchist aesthetic developed by Merce Cunningham, John Cage, and Robert Rauschenberg queered gender norms of mid-century dance modernism (2022: 45-67). In sum, because it is removed from conventions of social performance, dance can offer audiences opportunities to reconsider taken-for-granted aspects of embodiment and to reflect on sociopolitical realities that shape embodied experience (Kowal et al. 2017).

Taken together, these two points show that dance techniques cannot be critically compared in the way body practices such as *taijiquan*, postural yoga, studio aerobics, or the Feldenkrais Method can. On one hand, dance techniques are equally valuable in terms of realizing artistic aims, whether that mean embodying fictions, advancing formal investigations of movement, highlighting overlooked aspects of embodied experience, or critiquing sociopolitical realities. On the other hand, because dance technique presumes a break with the means and ends of daily life, it may diverge from the meliorism principle that critical comparison presumes. To this point, after the publication of *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, Martin Jay (2002) and I (2006a) discussed body-based meliorism in lieu of body art centered on experiences of fragmentation, physical discomfort, pain, exhaustion, and abjection. In this context it is also worth noting that, aside from the aims of particular performance works, most dance techniques will degrade the dancers' body over time. Indeed, because classical ballet legwork is bad for ankles and the wrenching spirals of Graham technique are tough on lower backs, contemporary dancers often supplement their training with somatic disciplines like postural yoga, *qigong*, or Pilates (Henn et al. 2020, Ritter & Moore 2008). Further, later in life, the physically demanding techniques of youth are often abandoned and the practice and teaching of healing movement methods taken up (Fortin et al. 2002).

It is beyond the scope of this essay to fully address the relationship between meliorism and dance training because it would require a discussion of pleasant and unpleasant aesthetic experience, relevant research in sports science, and interviews with dance artists about their personal motivations. It can be noted, however, that dance, like some competitive sports, entails trade-offs. That is, the risk of physical injury and long-term consequences of intense physical training are weighed against the goods of heightened perceptual and motor skills, increased self-confidence, intensely rewarding experiences, and a sense of shared community. Relatedly, barring any external constraint on individual autonomy, a dancer's commitment to their craft is part and parcel of a second-order desire to contribute to meaningful works of art that transcend them as individuals. Given these points, it can be said that the performance that highlights uncomfortable truths of embodied experience and the performance techniques that are necessary for their disclosure are worthy endeavors, even if they do not directly contribute to improved somatic functioning. In any case, these points show that to critically compare dance styles or to compare a dance style to a widely-practiced non-artistic body discipline misses the point. This is due to the fact that dance is first and foremost an endotelic practice which lies at a remove from everyday life. For this reason, *TS does not emphasize the PS dimension*. This conclusion is consistent with dance studies which acknowledges relationships between dance, physical health, and well-being, but views research on those topics as constituting a distinct field of study with its own publications (e.g., the *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices and the American Journal of Dance Therapy*).

This brings us to RS. Beginning in the 1980s, work in dance studies increasingly employed autoethnographic accounts of studio and performance practices. A precedent for this was set in the 1970s with dance phenomenology, a methodology that presumes a wealth of first-hand experience with dance practice (Sheets-Johnstone 1966, Fraleigh et al. 2018, Stewart 2023).

Over time, the notion of the scholar-artist became common as dancers, choreographers, and dramaturgs theorized their work and, relatedly, as undergraduate and graduate programs in contemporary performance began requiring theory courses in their curricula. For these and other reasons, it is now standard for dance analysis to be grounded in personal practice (Foster 2002, Kozel 2008).

This approach has been formalized as "practice-as-research" (PaR), the systematic, reflective, and theory-informed approach to experimenting with movement in a studio setting, often with the aim of creating public performance (Midgelow 2023, Pakes 2017). A PaR project begins by framing creative research in terms of guiding questions such as: "What occurs subjectively when an ecstatic experience is undergone?" or "How can an unconventional costume destabilize one's sense of self?" or "What are the sociopolitical implications of the codes of human touch?" In turn, a studio practice is devised and implemented to generate embodied knowledge helpful in answering the research question.

As a whole, the process is informed by theory. For example, someone interested in investigating embodiment and physical aging may draw on post-structuralism or aging studies while formulating their question and reflecting on the experiences that accrue from their movement research (for case studies see Mullis 2015a, 2016a). Hence, PaR aligns with RS since it presumes the intertwining of practice and theory (Midgelow 2019: 117). However, it remains distinct because it is ultimately a kind of artistic research. To make this clear, consider that if someone develops a scholarly interest in postural yoga, RS will involve regularly attending classes and workshops, savoring somaesthetic experiences, and reflecting on the embodied knowledge that develops (Korpelainen 2019, Mullis 2015). It will not mean developing a theory-informed research question, devising a studio practice, and then critically assessing outcomes. Most important, the physical practice will not be engaged with the intent of creating theatrical meaning for a public audience. For this reason, the *practical dimension of TS remains distinct from RS.*

To summarize the points made in this section, TS and dance studies converge on the analytic dimension; however, because dance is an endotelic, artistic practice, pragmatic and practical somaesthetics do not have direct bearing on TS. These conclusions are informed by considerations of dance studies methodologies, specifically, dance work analysis and PaR.

2. Trends in Theatrical Somaesthetics

The TS literature published after the disciplinary proposal centers on four content areas: education, cross-cultural comparison, audience appreciation, and PaR.

Arnold (2005) argues that dance is an excellent form of somaesthetic education in that it teaches formal principles of movement and provides opportunities for creative composition and cultivation of expressive embodiment. Ginot (2010) takes a more critical approach, examining ways embodied knowledge generated through popular somatic practices is commonly framed by instructors (for example, in terms of a personal "proof by experience" narratives). More recently, Loots (2020) outlines a critical dance pedagogy that avoids the norm of universalization inherent to many western dance techniques.

Other work in the field advances cross-cultural comparisons. Shusterman's first foray into TS is an analysis of a mode of self-awareness used in classical Nō theater (2012: 197-215). Another case of east-west comparative somaesthetics is my discussion of the somaesthetic properties martial artists experience when performing choreographed sequences for observing audiences

(Mullis 2013). Also, Botha's edited volume on African somaesthetics includes essays which, among other things, foster cross-cultural considerations of performance practices. Beyond Demerson's contribution on decolonial aesthetics, Bailey's essay considers the experience of female South African breakdancers, focusing on challenges they face regarding cultivating embodied self-knowledge (2020: 120-141).

A third area of interest is audience appreciation. Curtis Carter (2015) outlines key elements of dance appreciation and argues that they should factor into AS. More recently, Fiala and Banerjee (2020) examine two site-specific dances which foreground embodied placemaking for the performing dancers and their audiences. Also, my essay on martial arts outlines somaesthetic properties appreciated by observers of martial arts movement and examines connections with sports aesthetics.

The fourth area of interest is distinct from the previous three in that the focus is on first-hand dance experience. Heinrich (2023), for example, draws on extensive personal practice of Argentinian Tango (and other ballroom styles) while developing an account of performative beauty. Ölme (2018) outlines a multi-year PaR project informed by the theory of new materialism which investigates the play of the material and immaterial aspects of dance embodiment. My book on experimental dance costuming is an example of PaR which, like Ölme's, weaves together theory and practice and culminates in public performances (Mullis 2022).

Shusterman's *Man in Gold* project has by far had the most impact on the field, eliciting multiple reviews, response essays, and interviews (Abrams 2022). However, because the performances are affairs of impromptu spontaneity and are not based in a theory-informed research program, the project is not methodologically consistent with PaR. Indeed, for several reasons, the project is difficult to nail down. The one-off, pop-up performances are not open to public, theater-going audiences, some of Shusterman's writings on it are quasi-fictional in nature, and the analytic writings do not contextualize the project in terms of contemporary performance or relevant work in performance studies (Shusterman 2016, 2012: 239-261). As I have argued elsewhere, the *Man in Gold* is clearly innovative and important but, along with the secondary literature that surrounds it, the primary focus is on expanding philosophy, not on interdisciplinary engagement with the performing arts (Mullis 2020).

This brief survey of the TS literature highlights the importance of this special issue. Though dance is a paradigmatic body-based artform and somaesthetics was founded decades ago, work in dance somaesthetics, and theatrical somaesthetics more broadly, remains insubstantial. At the time of writing, there are only a handful of essays and full-length manuscripts dedicated to the topics of dance education, dance appreciation, cross-cultural comparison, and creative practice. With this and personal experience in the performing arts in mind, the final section of this essay speculates about how TS may develop in coming years.

3. Reconstruction: Interdisciplinarity and Collaboration

The title for this essay is taken from John Dewey's book, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. There, Dewey observes that since Anglo-American philosophy of the time was narrowly focused on the pursuit of absolute truth, it was unhelpful in terms of addressing pressing social problems (1920/2008). He then argues for a pragmatically-oriented methodology that would render philosophy instrumental for understanding and generating solutions to the novel ethical, social, and political problems of the inter-war period. Without a doubt, somaesthetics was formulated in the spirit of reconstruction because Shusterman identified and outlined alternatives to certain

presumptions in the analytic philosophy of art. With that said–and given the points made in the previous two sections–it is worth considering what reconstruction in dance somaesthetics could entail. Two strategies are discussed here: increased interdisciplinarity and, in the spirit of a collaborative art form, writing techniques that de-center the scholar-artist. Before considering these, it is worth addressing three possible rejoinders to the idea of increased exchange between somaesthetics and dance studies.

First, it could be noted that somaesthetics scholars capitalize on an outsider status when identifying and providing alternatives to the taken-for-granted assumptions of a discipline. This could be the case, for example, with aspects of design culture that give insufficient attention to enhancing embodied experience (Hook 2018). To be sure, somaesthetics can play a key meliorative role in assessing cultural practices that presume mind-body dualism but this is not the case with dance studies which, as early as the 1970s, brought artistic body-based experimentalism to the forefront. For this reason, the outsider status argument fails.

Second, in response to Carter's (2015) suggestion that somaesthetics should take work in dance studies fully into account, Shusterman, among other things, noted a personal preference for popular dance forms over concert dance (2015: 186-188). However, after dance postmodernism undermined the traditional distinction between the culturally high and low (Banes 1987), dance studies went on to explore the many ways concert dance techniques and aesthetics have influenced popular dance forms and vice-versa (for examples see Croft 2017, Shay 2002, Weisbrod 2020). The wonderfully blurry border between social and theater dance forms problematizes any prioritization of one practice over the other.

A third rejoinder concerns accessibility. Because professional dance artists have highly specialized skills, it is arguably warranted to focus on ways everyday people dance to bring meaning into their lives. Here too, though, compartmentalization is not justified. To make an analogy with sports, amateur athletes around the world celebrate and physically emulate professionals who perform at the highest levels. Likewise, the hobbyist Irish step dancer can learn from and be inspired by the professional who performs onstage with an international touring company. One can enrich one's own practice by studying how the very best train and perform. Further, it is important for TS scholars to study body-based practices of dancers and actors because the specialized artistic contexts afford opportunities to cultivate unique embodied knowledge. Contact Improvisation can again be cited here because it reveals distinctive forms of cooperative touch which differ from those used in popular dance forms (like in ballet or Tango partnering) and in the course of everyday life (e.g., shaking hands, embracing, etc.). Such knowledge is in principle important to study because it reveals possibilities of embodied experience which in turn can fuel reconsiderations of what is familiar.

Increased interdisciplinarity is warranted for the sake of accuracy and, relatedly, increased audience reach. To the first point, it can be noted that a key metric for a submission to an academic journal such as this one is whether and to what extent it engages relevant literature. If a submission does not reference and dialogue with pertinent work in somaesthetics, then it is less likely to be published. This helps ensure that authors capitalize on insights of their peers and, more generally, that the field continues to advance. With that said, existing TS work, generally speaking, does not reference or engage relevant work in performance studies. Though Carter pointed this out almost a decade ago now, there is still little or no dialogue between somaesthetics and dance studies and, for that reason, a dance scholar or scholar-artist is likely to find TS work as uninformed, underdeveloped, and therefore as inconsequential.

A robust interdisciplinary approach that avoids these issues involves three strategies that

can be illustrated with a hypothetical research project on hip-hop dance, the form of street dance that developed in New York City in the 1970s and 80s and that since has become a global phenomenon (McCarren 2013).

If you will, imagine that, after reading Shusterman's work on hip-hop music (2000: 201-235), a somaesthetics scholar wanted to investigate the kind of dancing that often accompanies it. Because hip-hop dance is a complex cultural category, the project would need to be framed in terms of a case study, say, a piece choreographed by contemporary breakdancer Ephrat Asherie for the concert stage. For AS, the researcher would need to include material on the piece's historical context, how it inflects recent issues in the form (e.g, globalization, commercialization, or appropriation), and salient theorization. In terms of history, the research would draw on work in African American studies, dance studies, and Hip-Hop Studies (Aldridge & Stewart 2005, Roberts 2021, Fogarty & 2022). In terms of theorization, it could engage work on the cultivation of hip-hop body power or enacting sociopolitical resistance (DeFrantz 2004, Bragin 2015). Engaging this diverse scholarship is necessary for a disciplinary border crossing.

In terms of practical research, one would attend hip-hop classes at a local dance studio or in a university dance department (or, given the economic realities of concert dance, it is likely that Asherie and her dancers teach open public classes that could be attended). Doing so would ground first-hand knowledge of ways hip-hop movement, through its characteristic approach to space, physical effort, rhythm, and performativity, affects embodied experience. Also, consistently practicing with others would disclose the distinctive communal ethos commonly associated with the form (Gupta-Carlson 2010). If, for whatever reason, attending class proves impractical, the researcher could visit Asherie's rehearsals and conduct interviews with her and her dancers about their experiences creating the piece. Work by artist-scholars who have written about their practice of the form could also be engaged (for example, Dodds 2018).

There are a few things to note about this research program. First, interdisciplinary work that dialogues with existing scholarship for the sake of contextualization and theorization and that involves taking studio classes and/or conducting dancer interviews requires a substantial time commitment, much more than that required for a disciplinary project.

Second, the research process is likely to elicit subjective experiences in which it is unclear, at any given moment, what kind of work is being undergone. While practicing in the studio it will at times be difficult to distinguish whether one is researching dance history, theorizing, or developing ideas for a performance. As I have detailed elsewhere, this blurring is a key component of the praxis Dewey dubbed experimental inquiry (Mullis 2019, Sorrell 2013).

Third, because the project entails breaking with the familiar and taking on the role of a novice learner, it is likely to foster a deep sense of humility. Dance is a specialized practice, and the beginner must embrace a state of not-knowing and, relatedly, the possibility of looking silly or foolish. Gaining dance knowledge requires working with others, such as Asherie, who excel at dancing, performing, and teaching. Speaking personally, I have found that, whether world-class ballet performers or teachers leading classes at local studios, dance artists welcome anyone who takes a serious interest in their craft. This is because there is a commonly-held belief that dance is a fundamental human good and a right. The goodwill and generosity these beliefs fuel helps mitigate discomfort associated with being a novice learner.

Fourth, written and performative outcomes should meet the standards of dance studies scholars and scholar-artists. The work should be presentable at disciplinary conferences and, on principle, publishable in journals such as *Dance Research, Dance Chronicle,* or *Dance Research*

Journal. Similarly, PaR projects ought to be able to find a home in journals like *Choreographic Practices, Performance Research, Performance Philosophy,* or *the Journal for Artistic Research.* In terms of performative output (whether participatory workshop, lecture-demonstration, installation, or proscenium performance), relevant experimental movement-based work that self-reflectively blends theory and practice needs to be considered. Such work shows choreographic and dramaturgical strategies aimed at critical audiences that can be learned from, experimented with, and developed (Cvejic 2016, Lepecki 2006, Siegmund 2017).

The preceding shows that the reconstruction strategy of cultivating interdisciplinarity entails increased intellectual and practical labor, subjective experiences of disciplinary ambiguity, a palpable sense of risk and humility, and an accounting for intellectual and artistic standards of the related discipline. The second strategy concerns collaborative authorship.

As part of a multi-year project on ecstatic embodiment that culminated in a book and an iterative experimental dance theater piece, I collaborated with a dancer and two physical theater actors (Mullis 2019). A key research question for the project was: "Can ecstatic experience occur in a theatrical performance, outside of the social contexts in which it nomally occurs?" To answer this, a movement improvisation framework that facilitated brief dissociative states was developed. Because the framework was relatively loose, each performer had freedom to experiment with auto-affective techniques such as manipulating breathing patterns, quivering, shaking, stomping, spinning, abruptly performing large disorienting movements, repeatedly performing small articulate gestures, or vocalizing. After each session, we cooled down and shared our findings. Over time, it became apparent that we used different techniques and had very different kinds of experiences. We practiced for two hours weekly for a year before performing states of ecstatic embodiment in front of a live audience. That amount of time was necessary for finding techniques that reliably worked and for developing the sense of ensemble required for taking physical risks together.

When later writing about the collaborative process, it became clear that it would not do to summarize the others' accounts of undergoing dissociative states in performance. The ethical thing, it seemed, was for them to contribute first-person accounts to the book. Because their uniquely personal experiences were just one way they contributed to the project, including their voices better reflected the fact that the project was collaborative in nature.

I share this because, for several reasons, it has become common in PaR to subvert the idea that the lead artist is responsible for every aspect of the creative process. One is that the performing arts are fundamentally collaborative enterprises. Though, in a self-choreographed dance solo, just one artist takes the stage, the piece requires creative input from costume, sound, and lighting designers, from individuals who have dedicated their lives to their craft. This also pertains to performances that employ other dancers. Let's say that a choreographer creates movement on herself and then teaches it to a dancer in her company. Because the dancer is a unique person with a distinctive way of moving (i.e., they have a unique "movement signature"), they will inevitably change the movement in ways the choreographer cannot fully anticipate. It could be a subtle stylistic difference (for example, the way a movement is energetically attacked) or, at any given performance, a different kind of performativity (increased coolness or exuberance, etc.). Unlike times past when some dance styles were premised on presenting carbon-copy dancers–for instance, the corps de ballet of *Swan Lake* or the Tiller Girls (Mattingly & Young 2020, Reilly 2013)–contemporary choreographers are, generally speaking, keen to have dancers bring movement to life through personalization (Arnold 2000, Kloppenberg 2010). This may mean promoting variations of set choreographic material or, as in the case of my project,

developing improvisatory structures that frame the performers as co-creators. On one hand, this kind of approach is artistically valuable because it encourages the choreographer to take new ways of moving and performing into account and, on the other, it is more truthful to the way choreography gets embodied.

Another reason for decentering the choreographer concerns the way meaning emerges in an experimental, process-based project. Certainly, there are product-oriented approaches (common, for example, in Broadway musicals) in which choreographers are tasked with creating dances that advance pre-existing narratives. In such cases, the dance's meaning is defined before the choreographer is even hired. By contrast, in PaR, one begins with a relatively open-ended question and then generates movement through a process of self-reflective experimentation. In turn, choreographic and dramaturgical meanings emerge which are then collectively assessed and either intentionally developed or dropped.

It is important here to highlight an epistemological issue regarding emergent meaning. By way of analogy, a scholar, deep in research, may not see key opportunities for development nor problems that need to be addressed. Aware of such blindspots, they may request feedback from someone who is impartial and knowledgeable about the subject. Because dance is endotelic, the epistemological issue is more pronounced. That is, unmoored from practical and social conventions, possibilities of meaning-making quickly become overwhelming. It is for this reason that dramaturgs (i.e. individuals versed in performance history, theory, and criticism) are employed to ask clarifying questions about the intentions for a creative process and to make neutral observations about its outcomes (Hansen & Callison 2015, Profeta 2015). The dramaturg is a key voice in the collaborative creative process.

There is more to say about these points, but what has been said suffices to show that if the inherently collaborative nature of dancemaking and the emergent nature of dance meaning are embraced, then the choreographer's role becomes that of a facilitator, not a sole author. Put differently, because the resulting work is a matter of collective ownership (or, depending on one's ontological commitments, of no ownership at all), the facilitator will feel uncomfortable with the idea of taking sole credit for it.

What bearing does this have on reconstruction in dance somaesthetics? In terms of PaR, it means avoiding a scholarly tendency in which one person alone frames, summarizes, and theorizes a collaborative research process. De-centering the author is essential because performance making is never an individual enterprise. As in my case, this may mean supplementing autobiographical material with written contributions from key collaborators. It may also involve using dialogic techniques such as interviews with collaborators that surface collective insights about specific aspects of the work. One may also consider using experimental modes of writing like a round-robin technique in which a passage written by one individual functions as a springboard for the next person's writing. Or one could ask performers to contribute non-discursive materials such as sketches, photographs, or collages, made during the process or in response to it. These kinds of techniques express the fact that the work is a matter of exchange, emergence, and collective ownership. More generally, they spotlight that the collaborative creative process presents a unique opportunity to collectively embrace the unknown and to practice meaning-making. This is a distinctive contribution that TS makes to somaesthetics as a discipline.

4. Conclusion

Before closing, I would like to reiterate that the last point about collaboration is informed by

personal experience researching, making, and producing a piece with three other people. Similarly, the discussion about increasing interdisciplinarity is rooted in personal experience. Early in my academic career, I had only a basic understanding of dance and theater practices, made no effort to directly engage theater directors, actors, choreographers, dancers, or dramaturgs, and yet wrote about those art forms through the lens of somaesthetics. Though I was unaware of it, that work was weakly interdisciplinary.

The change was fueled by advice from a dance mentor, Simone Ferro. Upon learning of my interest in performative ecstatic states, she encouraged me to go beyond the bounds of my research program by developing an experimental studio practice and attending services of religious sects that practice charismatic embodiment. In addition, because the project involved making a dance theater piece, there was also a need to study dance history, specifically the works of acclaimed choreographers that took ecstatic embodiment as their theme. Daunted both by the workload and the experientially unknown, I originally dismissed her suggestions. However, as disciplinary and geographical boundary crossings accrued over time, I came to see that she was right. A diverse research program is the only way to do justice, artistically and intellectually, to the complex cultural phenomena such as ecstatic embodiment.

It is my hope that sharing lessons learned about interdisciplinary research and artistic collaboration will be useful to somaesthetics scholars, present and future.

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