

Somatic Composition and Embodied Filmmaking – a case study on practice and practitioners through the example of a Creative Lab

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Abstract: *This case study explores the Creative Lab Somatic Composition and Embodied Film , held in Tallinn in March 2024. The workshop applied somatic practices, specifically Body-Mind Centering® (BMC®), to inform both movement and filmmaking. Participants engaged with embodied film theories and explored their somatic selves to create experimental short films. The lab emphasized a low-tech filmmaking approach and provided a space for participants to reflect on their process and the moving image works produced. This study includes insights from both the facilitator and participants.*

Keywords: *body, body-mind centering, embodied film, film theory, somatic practice.*

1. Introduction

As a practice-based researcher engaged in artistic research on embodied filmmaking and somatic film, I cannot – and do not wish to – step away from the practice and experience of being an artist. Therefore, my research is a dialogue between somatic and artistic experimentation and its reflection, where experience not only stands on its own but also enters into dialogue with somatic and film theories. While contemporary film theories and scholarly discussions already address the body, the haptic, and visceral encounters with moving images, I find that definitions in this area remain quite malleable and flexible. Scholars and artists approach embodied filmmaking, somatic film, somatic cinema, embodied meaning, and related concepts from their specific backgrounds and interests. Their theories and questions sometimes overlap or remain distinct as they explore a range of media, from Hollywood films to experimental works. I situate myself among these artists and researchers, mapping the terrain in search of somatic directions and offering my experiences to the reader. These experiences are deeply tied to my background as a contemporary dancer and choreographer, a filmmaker specializing in experimental and "choreographic moving images" (Szűcs, 2016), and a somatic practitioner trained in Tai Chi, Qi Gong and Body-Mind Centering®. This paper does not aim to clarify terminology or provide definitions but rather contributes to the discourse with the example of a Creative Lab held in Tallinn, titled *Somatic Composition and Embodied Film – Workshop and Lab*.

As Luke Hockley emphasizes “how meaning [...] is not just an intellectual undertaking but is also felt and embodied” (Hockley, 2014, p.1), Anne Cranny-Francis argues that because “viewers

engage fully corporeally (not just conceptually) with film, [...] this corporeal engagement is an essential to the production of film narrative” (Cranny-Francis, 2009, p.9). In Hockley’s understanding, the psychological meaning of films necessarily involves somatic experience. Further, he argues that the “location of cinematic meaning is a development of the ‘third image,’ which [...] is akin to the intersubjective space in therapy between client and therapist” (Hockley, 2014, p.1). This third image resonates with the interaction between the client and therapist, where emotions and thoughts are exchanged in a shared, unconscious space. Hockley connects this idea to a broader therapeutic and psychological context, drawing from Jungian theory, which emphasizes the role of the unconscious in shaping personal and collective experiences. While Hockley acknowledges contemporary film theorists such as Elsaesser, Hagener, Sobchack, and Barker, he critiques them for not incorporating Jungian understandings of the unconscious in their exploration of the body and film. “What none of these authors account for”, he writes, “at least in any depth, is the presence of the unconscious. Not, more specifically, do they give a Jungian understanding of the unconscious.” (Hockley, 2014, p.6)

My relationship with the individual and collective unconscious developed as a dance performer and choreographer working with improvisation. Later, it was shaped by somatics, especially by the practice of Body-Mind Centering®, which became part of my research methodology and a source of inspiration. “The conscious and unconscious are a continuum of one mind,” writes Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. “One of the principal characteristics of my teaching is that I tend to teach both to the unconscious and to the conscious in the student.” (Bainbridge Cohen, 2012, p.13) Tuning into the unconscious, into space, and into the affective space-time of a (dance) event is a practice that dancers usually engage in, whether they name it or not. In other words, these skills of listening and connecting are used in improvisation, composition, and creative processes in performing arts, yet they are rarely discussed in the context of filmmaking. In Body-Mind Centering®, we also speak of ‘the mind of the room’ or ‘the mind of the tissue or body structure,’ which recognizes different qualities of unconsciousness, anchored in the body – or, from another perspective, acknowledges our cellular or bodily consciousness. But how can this manifest in a filmmaking approach?

2. The structure of the LAB

[The] point of view – that one might possibly formulate a perception “more objectively” by excluding from consideration the apparatus delivering the perception – is false. By comparison, it would be the same as regarding the colored edges which an old, nonachromatic lens allows to appear around all contours to be characteristic of the observed object and not characteristic of the lens of the telescope or microscope being used. (Konrad Lorenz, 1983, p.74)

The structure – or the frame – of the lab serves as the foundation for the experiment: it defines the parameters for the process, and while it opens space for experiences to unfold, it also imposes limitations. As with any other case, this one-week workshop and lab was shaped by the mixture of participants and their diverse backgrounds, as well as by the shared experiences and dialogue of the organizing team. It is important to acknowledge that my current insights – both into my research topic and Body-Mind Centering® – and the stage I was at in my own process at that time,

influenced how I framed the lab and what I could bring to the table. These factors also informed the group process and, consequently, the outcome. Last but not least, it's worth mentioning that the way I structured our shared time, both in the studio and beyond, also had an impact. The result can only be fully understood when considered in conjunction with these circumstances. This paper, therefore, begins with a description of the container, the frame – which might read like a report of an event – so that the content can be examined in relation to the context.

The 5-day workshop and lab took place in Tallinn, Estonia, at the beginning of March 2024. It was preceded by two days of on-site preparation and concluded with a public screening and discussion on the 6th day. These preparation days not only provided the opportunity to meet and talk with my colleagues in person, helping us to connect with each other and the work, but also allowed me to arrive, settle into a new city, and get familiar with my temporary living space. This helped me feel grounded and safe, which provided a solid foundation for starting the week. It was essential to have Joanna Kalm (Doctoral Student at the Estonian Academy of Arts) and Mari Mägi (Body-Mind Centering® teacher, director of Somaatikum) as locals on the organizing team. The participants in the workshop and lab came from diverse fields, including visual arts, media studies, dance, philosophy, anthropology, dance filmmaking, somatics, and dance and movement therapy.

We spent 5 hours together each day, from 10:00 to 15:00, primarily in a dance studio at TantsuRUUM and its surroundings. Each day began with a 90-minute somatic class based on the Body-Mind Centering® approach, which was open to additional participants. In the afternoon, we shifted to a more laboratory-like filmmaking session with the core group of participants. Mari and I alternated leading the morning classes: Mari led 3 of the classes, and I led 2, while I guided the afternoon process. This allowed both of us to experience being 'only' participants, which was very nourishing. It is customary in TantsuRUUM for artists in residence to give open classes on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, and we stepped into this tradition. Therefore, the morning classes on these two days were open to an even larger public. The presence of these additional participants enriched the bodily experiences and it also helped us not to shorten the somatic practice for the sake of the filmmaking process. The afternoons followed a thread: mapping the territory of embodied film, finding a shared ground for the week's work, experimenting with the camera, and practicing presence on both sides of the lens. In the final 2-3 afternoons, we filmed and edited – within and beyond our given frames – and on the 6th day, we shared our 'pearls,' the completed projects in a public screening. On Friday evening and Saturday morning, I made myself available for any individual or group who needed extra time to complete their work. Some took advantage of this opportunity. I also valued our daily conversations within the organizing team, primarily to structure and plan for the following day, but also because it provided additional time and space – outside the 5-hour daily frame – for reflection on what had transpired and what it had brought up.

3. The somatic morning classes // Body-Mind Centering®, as the start of the day

I really appreciate the morning practices we did. I think I haven't done systematic movement for such a... no, actually I have. But it's not like an everyday thing that I would be doing some movement every morning and then continue with something else. And I feel like it was a really important part of this workshop and gave a lot of ideas of how to work in general. (Mona; participant of the Lab)

Doing body-based or movement work as a way to start the day is not a commonly practiced routine, at least not in the West. It is particularly uncommon as a collective experience for a group of people working together throughout the day, especially when it is integrated as a core part of the workday itself. In 2022, at the PAE 30 – The Promise of Pragmatist Aesthetics conference at MOME – Moholy-Nagy University of Art & Design in Budapest, Kristina Höök shared their practice of the Soma Design process. For me, the key element of this process was a daily somatic practice with the designers, which in this case involved the Feldenkrais method, as the opening of the day. As Höök wrote in the abstract of her keynote lecture,

First, a Soma Design process foregrounds the lived body of the designer, seeking to develop extensive bodily experience through personal practice. Second, through engaging somatically with the digital materials, their somaesthetic potential is revealed and can be shaped into felt, orchestrated experiences relevant to the design aims. The design aim, ultimately, is to design interactions that lets our users to deepen their aesthetic appreciation and meaning-making from a position as sentient, subjective selves. (Höök, 2022)

Very similarly, almost word-for-word the same goals can be formulated in a somatic filmmaking (or to say: Soma Film) process, with the aim of having the bodily experience of the film crew interact with the audience to deepen their *aesthetic appreciation and meaning-making from a position as sentient, subjective selves*. In her lecture, Höök pointed out that the somatic or body-awareness practice should be short enough to engage with frequently, but long enough to allow for bodily understanding, or simply to be present with. I would also add that doing it as a team is important because, in that way, we (the group of designers in that case, or the group of film crew in our case) become one body, and through the common practice, we can feel together.

This example of a workflow was one of my inspirations for the structure of the Lab. Although our daily BMC® practice took up nearly a third of the day, so it wasn't short at all, I valued the *being with the body* aspect of this time more. In other words, instead of prioritizing productivity or any standardized result or outcome, I focused on the process itself. For the classes, Mari Mägi and I both selected materials from the BMC® pool as subjects, with two main ideas guiding our choices. First: what was available for us to share, and what our intuition told us would be easy to transmit or guide participants through. Second: considering that these classes would feed into somatic filmmaking or become a source of inspiration. So, we chose materials that could support either connecting us to our interoception and somatic selves (our body-minds) and the space around us, or fostering communication through the senses.

Day 1: Mari chose *Skin* for her first class on Monday: embodying our skin as a sensory organ and as a surface of meeting – a permeable boundary. She also included information about the embryology of the skin and its relationship to the nervous system. This class could support us in connecting our large surface senses with the focused senses, the frontal action, and the peripheral.

Day 2: The next day, referring back to the skin, I led a process that turned our attention inside and outside of the "skin bag," as well as to the space between us. My topic for Tuesday's class was *Fascia*: fascia as fluid, fascia as spatiality (3D), fascia and adaptability, gravity and suspension. This embodiment can support the sense of space, somatic-spatial communication, and organic decision-making within the group as a network.

Day 3: On Wednesday, Mari led us in exploring the Tonic Labyrinthine Reflex and the

*Yield and Push, Reach and Pull patterns.*¹ We played with switching off or quieting one of the four patterns and tried throwing and catching balls with only three patterns active. Then we experimented with the Yield & Push, Reach & Pull patterns on the senses and did an exercise with our vision going through these patterns. This embodiment challenged our traditional interpretation of vision, and later this score directly turned into a filmic experiment.

Day 4: On Thursday, Mari guided us in an exploration of our *Blood*, bringing a time aspect into focus. Starting with very active and spatially large, dynamic movements, we eventually landed on cellular holding, all together, sitting in a big circle.² Embodying different aspects of time can clearly feed into a somatic filmmaking process.

Day 5: For Friday, I decided to shift our attention towards *Ligaments* and addressed the “mind of the ligaments,” to offer additional support in editing. According to my experience, working with this body structure can help us move from global to specific, choose with ease, and be clear, to the point, and directional – qualities that are supportive in finalizing our drafts for screening.

The topics of the morning classes were pre-planned, but we left space for change or adjustment as needed. In our daily conversation and check-in with the team, we not only reflected on what had happened, but it also helped us prepare for the next day. My interest in inner and outer spaces and fascia work was clearly evident from the very beginning, and Mari was interested in the connection and communication of the senses, as well as the interplay between the skin and the nervous system. She also wished to introduce and work with the Basic Neurocellular Patterns in relation to the senses, especially vision. It's no surprise that during the filmmaking process, Mari was part of the group making *Calibration* and *of(f)* focus, the two films that emerged from exploring the Yield & Push, Reach & Pull patterns in connection with vision. She also made a short clip, *To Laila*, where performers were asked to connect with their sense of touch and slowly comb their hair with their fingers (see: skin as a sensory organ). My creative process manifested in the film *Wood Ball Floor Woman*, which explores gravity, space, fascia, weight and lightness, as well as our relationship to each other and to the Earth—qualities and topics that were explored in the classes I guided.

1 In Body-Mind Centering, the “Basic Neurocellular Patterns (BNP) are a series of automatic movement sequences that normally emerge and ideally integrate through infancy. [...] The BNP have a global influence on our functioning – they establish a foundation on which we build our movement, physical, perceptual, emotional and cognitive processes. They guide our interactions with gravity and space, and underlie the discovery of our sense of self and our relationship to others and environment.” (Bainbridge Cohen, 2018, p.1) BNP work is part of the Embodied Developmental Movement studies, and divided into two groups: pre-vertebrate patterns and vertebrate patterns. Yield & Push, Reach & Pull are part of the vertebrate patterns.

2 The arterial and venous blood are both expressed in movements as time: the arterial blood through its repetitive pulse rhythm, is a *constantly changing* now, while the venous blood is a *wavelike swing rhythm, in a continuous cyclical time*. (The School for Body-Mind Centering®, 1992) “Characteristic qualities of blood are earthiness, feeling, heart-felt, full and weighted, having substance and life in the body, relating to earth, energizing and communicative.” (Bainbridge Cohen, 1991, p.72) The qualities of blood relate to the earth as it is expressed in movement and actions, and as such it is part of our *doing self*. Cells, cellular fluid, and cellular touch have also a lot to do with gravity and earth, but in a settled, quiet, arrived quality. Cells are connected to our *being self*. In cellular touch and also in cellular holding – which is a large surface contact, with a sense of retention – our focus is to be with the cellular breathing, this ongoing fluid expanding and condensing. Very local, very settled: cells are meeting cells through the touch, nothing else to do. During the class we had a journey from *doing* towards *being*; and at the last part of the class, we sat with the resonance of the previous actions, meanwhile settling in our cells with the help of mutual touch along the circle.

Psychologists in the context of attachment theory also recognize and use the ‘being self’ and ‘doing self’. Liza Lukács in her book *Hogyan szeretsz? – Kötődési sebeink gyógyítása* [How do you love? - Healing our attachment wounds] writes that we get our sense of *being* from the primary relationship, which in most cases is the early relationship with the mother (through lots of holding and touch, and *being with*), and later, with a sense of self-awareness, we can move towards the wider world. This is the time of *doing*, in which the father can play a major role (and this *doing*, which starts with crawling, running, climbing, etc. is very much related to the blood), while the role of the primary relationship of emotional security remains essential for us. (Lukács, 2020, p.143)

4. Professional questions, basic considerations

Authors and filmmakers have long been curious about and conscious of how cinematic works can move the visceral registers beyond the conscious (narrative) level, speak emotionally to the viewer, or, as Cranny-Francic (2009) puts it, how “using the mechanism of synergistic tactility, the viewer deploys the haptic senses in order to participate in the narrative,” resulting in a heightened state of sensory involvement. The body—especially the moving body—has often been the focus of interest in moving image works. My specific field of research, when examining the somatic qualities of this medium, lies in the area of independent and experimental films, as well as dance films, or more precisely, in the realm of choreographic moving images (Szűcs, 2016). Réka Szűcs coined this term not only to describe the phenomenon or film genre we call dance film (cinedance, screendance, or dance on screen) but also to articulate the choreography or *choreographicness* of any moving image. In her understanding, the choreography of a moving image extends beyond the choreography of the action (dance scene) itself, encompassing a broader concept of composed movement that affects the viewer. However, not every film with (moving) bodies or composed movements on screen feels somatic. This observation (thesis) was also refined and summarized from the discussions with participants during the Lab. So, what makes me feel that a film has somatic qualities? What makes a film and the filmmaking process embodied?

The widespread interpretation of filmmaking (and text-based theatre) is that it tells a story, making it a narrative genre. Even if the *how-to* of telling that story makes the piece or the film a unique artifact in its own right, the focus remains on storytelling. However, dance, in contrast to this tradition, often aims to appeal directly to emotions and bodily empathy, as the affect of bodies moving in space-time has this potential. In the case of choreographic moving images, the visceral and kinaesthetic effect is usually in the foreground; therefore, storytelling—if there is any—becomes more of an excuse, something to build the choreography around. Often, filmmakers and choreographers start with something other than a narrative: it could be a bodily state, a rhythm, an emotion, etc. Films carry a sense of elusiveness, as Bálint Veres highlighted during our discourse about the relationship between dance films and music videos. According to Veres, music videos represent the essence of films. In this context, where everything seems to have already been decided a long time ago – in the twenties, a hundred years ago – he believes this genre [the music video] is able to expose the elusiveness of motion pictures as such. He asks,

what is it exactly: a kind of theatre? Is it the continuation of literature with different devices? Is it the act of making photography move? Is it actually music? Can you interpret the temporality of music in a visual dimension?

As a matter of fact, this is the dilemma: is it temporal art or spatial art – just to mention some classic aesthetic paradigms. And music videos stir up this topic, exposing the ambiguity of it. Placing a moving human body in it won't determine the questions, but it will beautifully articulate the controversy.”³

3 The documentation of the roundtable discussion is available here: https://onopordum.hu/portfolio-item/mke_kdp_kerekasztal-2-hu/

My interest is in investigating moving images – mainly with, but also without, the screened body – that transmit the quality of the felt sense of the filmmaker(s) addressing the viewer bodily. My personal questions concerning somatic films, are:

How do we film from the body, and how do we embody (moving) images? How do we film, when we invite a somatic approach into filmmaking? How do we exist and act while experiencing the continuously unfolding present tense of space (Morris, 1995)⁴, body awareness, and kinaesthetic affect?

What do we film, when we film? Is it possible to be objective? Do we need to be? Are we focusing on a certain object(s) in our field of vision or the spacetime which speaks to us, or are we focusing on the affect itself through the moving body? What do we film when we film bodies in motion or stillness? How can we transmit the quality of space around and within the body?

These questions stayed with us throughout the Lab. I'm coming to some conclusions that embodied filmmaking, as such, shares many similarities with documentary filmmaking, or perhaps even more so with the anthropological approach. (Although the latter observes, while somatics assumes, desires, establishes a relationship, and actively participates.) This conclusion may be questioned or disproven, yet it holds true in the sense that, according to a possible understanding of somatic/embodied filmmaking, one key characteristic is that we deal with what is present and attempt to capture the quality of time and space. It is worth comparing this idea with Szűcs' analysis of Eric Pauwels' "half-films," in which she concludes: "On the one hand, the recording camera records and preserves something of what has happened in front of it, as it happened, from an ethnographic point of view. On the other hand, he rewrites, transcribes, captures, condenses, and highlights. He aims to capture the presence, essence, and intensity of what has been experienced through what has happened; therefore, he approaches it from a creative perspective" (Szűcs, 2016, p. 187). So, instead of precisely staged scenes, a shot list, or a scripted filmmaking style, in somatic or embodied filmmaking, there is most often a kind of joint presence of the participants on different sides of the camera during the process. In some ways, this presence is also extended into the editing and post-production phases.⁵

I have to say, though, that it is also possible to make a somatic film or material that feels embodied by shooting according to the classic film workflow. This presupposes, in addition to (or perhaps because of) the professionalism of the performers and photographers, the ability to easily and quickly reconnect with each other throughout the process, scene by scene, in between all the "action"s and "cut"s. This reconnection happens both within the subjective and felt body of each individual and in the interpersonal space. So, it is essential to have everyone connected to their own body, and through that, connected to the shared space, while also possessing the ability to modulate across a wide range according to the situation and the collective.

In each case, the director plays a significant role in framing the process and helping the team stay in tune with themselves and with each other, in order to navigate an embodied process. In

4 Referring to the publication by Robert Morris, titled *The Present Tense of Space, in Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (The MIT Press, 1995), I am not only pointing to Morris' text but also to the thinking about the embodiment process of space, which I have elaborated on in more detail in my own publication entitled *Embodying Space: The Inside and the Outside of Soma in a Creative Process*. (2024). *Papers in Arts and Humanities*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.52885/kcbpef02>

5 Not in this paper, but it is also worth comparing the aforementioned idea with IMPRINT Documentary Collective's embodied approach to documentary filmmaking, which represents a contemporary trend, as well as with the fiction documentaries of the Budapest School, developed in the mid-seventies. The method that grew out of the documentary film school at the Béla Balázs Studio became the original, specialized direction of the era – an approach that earned the distinguished name of the Budapest School, given to it by foreign critics. For further reading on the Budapest School, see: <https://www.iskolakultura.hu/index.php/iskolakultura/article/view/19536/19326>

our conversations within the Lab, we consistently returned to themes of honesty, connection, relationship, and acknowledging what is present in the moment, what is willing to manifest through us. But this *beyond human*, this *something larger* than us that seeks to manifest, is present in every process of inspired art-making. The question for the artist is: how can I give space for that to happen? It may seem that we are no closer to defining embodied filmmaking – if that were the goal. As I write this, the difference between art and industry comes to mind: art, as the process of understanding the world, and industry, as craftsmanship (in the best sense) aimed at entertainment and profitability. Maybe that's one point, but by saying so, I should also clarify that inspired creation and channelling something beyond human can and do happen within the frame of the industry too.

5. The process, as our shared ground

The workshop and lab were proposed as a research-oriented platform. I wrote in the description: "Along the questions and encounters, I aim to guide you through an experience that manifests in moving images." Yes... an experience that manifests in moving images. My intention was to explore connections and gateways from the pure (non-applied) somatic work – in this case, Body-Mind Centering® – towards creation and composition with the body and the camera through space and time. I also promised in the workshop call, "These experiences of the morning classes will be transcribed in composition." However, rather than providing a ready-made recipe or a manual on how to do that 'transcription,' I showed examples of a couple of moving image works with the intention to open up a discussion. I also created space for experimentation, encouraging different solutions, while I too was trying things out. Starting from the not-knowing was one of the strategies I followed.

Through this 90-minute daily somatic practice, we were able to dive into the filmmaking part of the laboratory in such a way that our body-minds (or somatic selves) were informed by the practice, enabling us to make decisions from that place. In this way, participants – including myself – discovered personal approaches for integrating somatics into filmmaking. As I attempt to grasp and clarify these options of *how*, I am working from the position of the researcher, analysing the *data* – the details of the process, the thoughts we discussed, and the films we made – from the experiment.

Filming and editing were done using accessible, low-budget technology, such as smartphones (including the iPhone 15 Pro) or digital cameras provided by the participants. We were also able to borrow a few Panasonic Lumix MILC (Mirrorless Interchangeable Lens Camera) cameras from TantsuRUUM. For digital editing, we used DaVinci Resolve, which is one of the most commonly used professional software nowadays, yet it's still available.

Teaming up, creating together, and *using* each other's body-minds in the creative process and production were encouraged and supported, while individual creation was also possible. In most of the works, a small collective developed the film from idea to realization together. In some cases, the artistic vision of a single director manifested with the help of other bodies.

To wrap up the process, on the last evening, we organized a public screening of the freshly made video works, followed by an open discussion to share relevant questions, issues, and experiences from the process. In this way, a creative dialogue was established between practitioners⁶ in the fields of dance, somatics, and film. This dialogue was extended not only

6 When I say practitioner, here I mean all individuals and groups who have practiced (and practicing) this way of listening to the body, and acting from within. In the context of Body-Mind Centering® education, the somatic approach developed by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen

to the participants of the workshop but also to other filmmakers, movers, and members of the audience.

6. The process as decision

We did an exercise: all of us were in the space, but half of the group had cameras in their hands. We moved together, but some had more of the role of the mover (performer), and some had more of the role of the observer or the person behind the camera (photographer). The honesty and authenticity of presence, both in front of the camera and behind it, was one of the observations that kept coming up in our dialogues. Through this exercise, we practiced shared presence, the soft gaze through the camera, and the simplicity of letting myself be watched – which is not simple at all.



Figure 1 Moments of the group exercise. // a) in the process; b) through the lens

Besides the very concrete (mundane) practice of how to operate the camera technically and bodily to get the image I want, and also the above-mentioned practice of presence, this exercise provided an opportunity to practice decision-making in the situation of instant composition. Decisions about what we focus on, what we cut out of the frame, and how we film (rhythm, motion or stillness of the camera, zooming in or out, etc.). But on a more global level, each individual approach to filmmaking in our shared time and space is a decision. Consciously deciding or intuitively (unconsciously) navigating with an instinct somewhere in the background, each of us gave our individual answer to the questions: With how many people, or exactly with whom do I want to work? And: What can I do within these 5 days?

In terms of this second question, if we have such limited time to start from zero and aim to share the results at the end, there are several personal and professional choices to make in order to honestly stand behind the work.

1. One decision or choice could be to treat it as an experiment or research, focusing on the process and seeing where it leads. What comes out is a secondary thing; it's a result, not the goal – an imprint. Therefore, you might have unfinished, unpolished material that opens a window to the process. Accepting the vulnerability of this approach requires courage, but this is the basic attitude for practice-based research or art as research, I believe.

2. Another choice is to use this opportunity to create drafts and experiment for a future film – like making sketches.⁷

and her students, 'Practitioner' is a certification level. Other certification levels include SME (Somatic Movement Educator), IDME (Infant Developmental Movement Education), Yoga Immersion Series, etc

7 For me, shooting as I wish and editing only a draft for the sharing falls into this category. The raw material is there, and you can come back to it later when the experience of shooting has already been digested, and we have some distance and an overview of the project. This helps

3. And of course, you can also choose to complete a short film, knowing your capacities and abilities, and understanding what you can realistically accomplish in five days. Let's say: bite off as much as you can digest. It is possible to figure out, shoot, and edit something ready and final, provided you know your capabilities (both superpowers and weaknesses) and synchronize the planned project with the given timeframe.

There were examples of all these choices within the group. There were also examples of collaborative filmmaking and individual artistic visions realized with the help of other bodies. These small groups and crews also formed very organically; it almost felt like we simply fell into our places.

7. Yield & Push, Reach & Pull with vision

A possible direction or entry point was to directly transcribe and apply BMC® principles and/or exercises into a moving image work; and in the case of the films *Calibration* and *of(f) focus*, that's exactly what happened. In both films, the creators worked with the Yield and Push, Reach and Pull principles of the Basic Neurocellular Patterns, which are part of the developmental movement exploration studies of Body-Mind Centering®. Yield, Push, Reach, and Pull are part of the Vertebrate Patterns, and Yield – being strongly connected to postural tone – also underlies every muscle action. As mentioned in the book *Basic Neurocellular Patterns: Exploring Developmental Movements*:

Yielding is the process of actively responding to gravity and the supporting surface to engage the underlying postural tone of the whole body. It is also the process of feeling this changing tone as we alter our position to gravity and space. [...] Active yielding – instead of a collapse, when we passively respond to gravity – offers us both the choice to rest and the choice to move. Through yielding, we perceive the rebounding force of gravity and the resulting grounding strength and buoyant lightness. (Bainbridge Cohen, 2018, p165)

Integration of active yielding into our movement pattern gives us the foundation to push away, to push from the grounding surface, and also to have “strength and connectivity” (Bainbridge Cohen, 2018, p. 169) in our push, while maintaining our integrity and relationship with ourselves. Yield and Push (Y&P) are condensing movement patterns, while Reach and Pull (R&P) are elongating ones, “which develop lightness in the spine through a relationship with space” (Bainbridge Cohen, 2018, p. 193). Reaching into space, taking hold of something, and pulling in might be either an action of locomotion or an action of gathering an object – both are active interactions with our environment.

Y&P and R&P patterns integrated in a cycle underlie many successful actions, from baby crawling to complex dance movements. In a broader sense, this is also about yielding into the new and settling into each move until we reach our goal and arrive. Or, in other words, it is about digesting what we've consumed in order to truly nourish ourselves. And by digesting, I mean taking in all kinds of experience or information – harvesting and resting until spring comes. For example, staying in Reach without Pull (and then an arrival through yield), or keep Pushing without the integrity of Yield can easily lead to burnout..

Working with these movement patterns in the realm of sensing and perception shifts our

us to see the image itself – the reality of the footage – without the interference of our knowledge of the “behind the scenes” and out-of-frame information. Further reading on this can be found in the book *In the Blink of an Eye* by Walter Murch.

understanding of the movement possibilities and activity of each sense organ, greatly enriching how we can work with our senses. Experimenting with Y&P and R&P in vision was used as a movement score and performed in front of the camera in the film *Calibration* and also in *of(f) focus*, as possible applications. A similar exercise with a partner was guided by Mari during a morning class, where we worked with Y&P and R&P with the eyes in front of a partner as an observer. Performing and filming such a tiny shift in movement—while a whole journey happens in the mind—carries a certain risk, but it's a risk worth taking.



Figure 2 Still images from the films *Calibration* and *of(f) focus* a) *Calibration* [7:19]; team: Mari Mägi (dir.), Ann Mirjam Vaikla, Mona Tärk, Triin Kauber b) *of(f) focus* [5:22]; team: Ann Mirjam Vaikla (dir.), Triin Kauber, Mari Mägi, Mona Tärk

After the screening, perhaps the most specific and extensive feedback was given on these short experimental films. One of the viewers expressed a deep emotional reaction and shared that these works reminded her of Marina Abramović's art. Referring to the tiny, almost imperceptible movements of the three women in *Calibration*, she expressed⁸:

I don't know, it happened in my eyes, or they somehow came closer and closer. And the one girl, ... the smile was in her eyes. And she somehow went further. And this is quite impressive.

Later, speaking about *of(f) focus*, she shared: "a lot happens inside of me watching the eyes. [...] It sounds like a joke, but this was really touching. So, thank you!"

One of the performers explained her personal point of view during the performance to give an inside perspective on the same works. Mirjam:

I had this tiny experience working with my gaze because I was curious about how micro-embodied movements would read in the cinematic material. It was different from just doing somatic exercises for myself – it felt like performing this journey of yield, push, pull, and reach, using very small muscles. While looking at the lens, I shifted between being in my body and focusing on the lens and going beyond it. My imagination took me to Ülemiste Pond... [laughter]. And then the journey of coming back from that pond and feeling the texture of the ice with my imagination and my gaze and then flying into the building and into the camera. That moment of bringing my gaze back inside was really powerful – thinking about the texture of my eyes, how the gaze moves in, and then releasing it. It was different from the typical "who can stare longest" exercise we might remember from acting school. I wanted to explore working somatically in front of the camera because it's difficult for me to be there, and

8 The following dialogue was modified for better clarity and readability. The full roundtable discussion is available online: <https://onopordum.hu/en/portfolio-item/somatic-composition-and-embodied-filmmaking-lab-tallinn-2024-en/>

this experience gave me a new way to connect with that.

The audience member commented on seeing her own story in everyone's eyes, which felt so present yet so different. In response to the viewer's remark that, although one could sense the exercise behind it, she tried not to acknowledge it, Mirjam replied: "It's not an exercise, it was a journey."

Later she also said: "It's so crazy... Let's say you reach the point where, in front of the camera, you're doing the somatic work, the person behind the camera is doing it somatically, and the editor is as well. But then, it's the viewer who brings their own references, and it ends up feeling like Marina Abramović's work. [laughter] Yes... 20th century."

8. The embodied performer, the embodied photographer, and all in between

To share further examples of approaches, another group created video works inspired by the frustration of how pebbles stuck in the soles of their boots squeaked on the pavement. Their starting point was this physical and sonic phenomenon and the mind-body response to it. Through filming, they experimented with this phenomenon, using the camera as both a research and artistic tool to further develop the topic. This approach expands the understanding of the potential role of sound in embodied filmmaking practice, extending the dual spatiality of sonic tactility (Cranny-Francis, 2009, p. 4-5) and positioning a sonic event – more specifically, the body's response to it – as the central subject of the film.



Figure 3 Still images from a) *Let's rock* – working title and b) *Looking 4 somatic directions*; Team: Triin Kauber, Karolin Poska and Jaana Persidski

In the case of the film *Landscape*, the artist's goal – her decision in the process – was to complete a short film within the 5-day period. Pakalne was focused on capturing skin, texture, and touch through extreme close-ups, and she built her visual material around this concept. The sound layer, which she was very conscious of, also features a close-up of the body (recorded with a sensitive mic, originally intended for another project, and thus outside the frame of the lab). Both the visual and sound elements capture the body in a way that makes it recognizable as a body, while also abstracting it. She envisioned working with at least two performers, each with different skin textures, to record their touching skins, the small movements, and the distortions of the surfaces, while keeping the identities of the individuals hidden. Although the idea for this film was conceived prior to the lab, the framework of the lab, along with somatic classes like the one on skin, provided the momentum, as well as the time and space, to manifest it in this possible form.

The gaze is a peekaboo game in which both sides imagine to discover something about each other that is otherwise impossible, impossible within the Symbolic order.



Figure 3 *Landscapes* [4:51;]Team: Rūta Ronja Pakalne (dir.), Bernadett Jobbágy, Helina Karvak a) Still image from the film, and b) behind-the-scenes photo from the shoot, showing the positions of both the performers and the camera / person behind the camera

What does it mean to be embodied as a performer, as the person behind the camera, and as the editor of the films? In our discussions with the participants, honesty and authenticity repeatedly emerged as key themes, alongside the importance of presence and shared presence, regardless of role. The movement or stillness of the camera, and the presence of the recording gaze also emerged as themes. One straightforward way to reveal or emphasize the presence of the camera (and even more so, the person behind the lens) is by moving the camera. However, I would caution against overusing this tool. A handheld camera or steadicam, when used unnecessarily or excessively, can induce dizziness in the viewer, break their immersion, or convey a sense of amateurism. On the other hand, when integrated thoughtfully into the texture and dramaturgy of the film, it can help immerse us in a character's point of view or underscore emotions like harassment, persecution, or disturbance. What else fosters a sense of connection between the people in front of and behind the camera? In many cases, a static, fixed camera can create a deeper connection with the image. Therefore, I would recommend planning the camera movement in line with the desired atmosphere and meaning of the shot, while also exploring other ways of creating presence and connectedness.

In somatic filmmaking, there is a quality of listening—rather than doing, performing, or acting—that underlies every action. This quality of listening allows us to remain in the present moment, grounding each action in awareness. The physical and mental state of each participant plays a crucial role and directly influences the outcome. Synchronizing our nervous systems, along with other bodily systems, helps us attune to a shared presence and connect with a collective intuitive field.

9. Wood Ball Floor Women – a dancefilm beyond my regular path

The development of language brings the possibility to name and create a mutual experience of meaning. It also allows one to distance oneself from the direct experience. “Language causes a split in the experience of the self” (Stern 1985), as language moves the relatedness into the impersonal. This can be different when one is speaking directly out of the movement experience, because the direct experience is still resonating in the language. (Heike Kuhlmann, 2023)

The film *Wood Ball Floor Women* [working title] was shot on the last day of the workshop. This work emerged from the convergence of two inspirations: my attention was drawn by the wooden floor and the place where it lay. I wished to capture the soft crackles of the floor as bodies shift

and transfer weight. I also wanted to sensorially explore the touch of the wood and the encounter between hard and soft as bodies meet the floor and each other. This interest coincided with one of the performers' curiosity: Helina felt for working with a hand-crafted wooden ball created by the artist Viljar Talimaa. She was curious to incorporate the ball into the space and interact with it—exploring the textures of the ball and the floor, and how both respond to the moving bodies. In this process, I filmed their interactions with the floor and the ball, exploring touch, gravity, and the weight of the wooden ball.

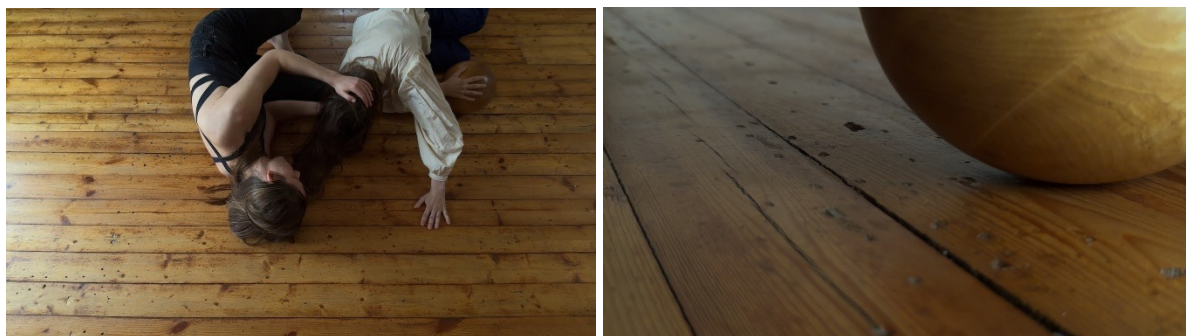


Figure 5 Still images of *Wood Ball Floor Woman* – working title; Team: Bernadett Jobbágy, Helina Karvak and Mona Tärk

I did not plan to make a "talking dance film." Most of the time, when dancers speak in a soft voice about certain issues or reflect verbally on themselves, and this voiceover is added on top of the material, I don't feel it's organically connected. Very often, it disrupts my experience as an audience member. But in this case, when we finished shooting, Mona casually uttered a sentence with a pleasant exhalation, as a contented sigh: "Ohh, I feel so good in my body after all of this!"

This sentence felt so anchored in the bodily experience; it sounded so honest and authentic, that I grabbed the voice recorder and asked her if she could repeat what she had just said. Of course, she couldn't replicate it as genuinely as she did initially, but a conversation unfolded organically as a continuation (an integral part) of the movement process that had lasted almost an hour. The movement experience was directly resonating in the language, as their dialogue was rooted in the experience, kinaesthetic memory, and embodied associations, all emerging from the body. For the first time in my practice, I felt like using this text as a layer woven into the texture of the moving image.

10. Conclusion

In somatic filmmaking, there is a quality of listening – rather than doing, performing, etc. – behind every action. Listening to space, body, touch, and the present moment. During the *Somatic Composition and Embodied Film Workshop and Lab*, with this quality of listening, we maintained a balance between pre-planned and spontaneous actions, allowing things to emerge along the way. Each morning, we dived into our felt sense with the help of daily Body-Mind Centering® practice, which also established our connection to our cellular consciousness. I prioritized the process through which we shared experiences and questions, rather than pushing for any particular outcome. We followed both the schedule and what felt right in the moment, while paying attention to each other and ourselves. This kind of care is still revolutionary, especially in such an expensive, teamworking art form as filmmaking. The courage of not knowing – or the spirit of the *happy amateur*, as Mari expressed – was welcomed, and from there, we could explore and experiment. Intuition, or inviting the unconscious; listening; action; rest; another

try. While respecting and valuing human needs and connectedness, participants were able to try out somatic viewpoints and BMC®-inspired scores in filmmaking.

Bodily awareness and somatic practice affect our lives, decisions, and ways of being, influencing us as a whole. Therefore, for a filmmaker, this will shape the way they create films, as it already impacts how they perceive the world and connect with people. While this may lead to broader implications, somatic work can be seen as a way of living, rather than merely a movement exercise or body training. Staying grounded in my text, further investigation could explore the connections between choreographic moving images and somatic film, as well as the role of the camera (filmmaking) as both an artistic and research tool. This exploration might also extend to the intersections between documentary filmmaking and somatic filmmaking, as well as between anthropological films and somatic film.

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