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Somaesthetic Practices –
Interviews with Artists and Somatic Practitioners

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Somaesthetics is a philosophical discipline that expands the concept of philosophy to include aesthetic practice. Practice here is understood as any activity that develops through the repetition of interconnected actions, requiring and refining distinct skills. A practice is a culturally significant activity that engages many people either collaboratively or in solitude. Examples include yoga, Tai Chi, various meditation and mindfulness rituals, social dance, all forms of art and their practices of creating and perceiving artworks, body-based design, experimental music, dance, and other body-centered disciplines.

This issue places special emphasis on interviews with artists and practitioners engaged in somatic work, including those in visual arts, experimental arts, music, dance, performance, and other embodied creative practices. These fields offer unique insights into how the human body-mind functions as a site of creation, expression, and transformation. Whether through the movements of dance, the precision of choreographed performance, the body techniques of actors, the improvisational nature of sound and movement, or the ways in which physical disciplines such as martial arts, somatic therapies, or ritual practices engage the body, this issue seeks to highlight the profound connections between somaesthetic practices and aesthetic experience. Similarly, artists working in visual and experimental arts explore embodiment through materiality, process, and interactive engagement, expanding the scope of somaesthetics in contemporary culture.

This collection of interviews brings together diverse practitioners, artists, philosophers, and educators whose work converges around a shared concern central to the *Journal of Somaesthetics*: how embodied experience functions as a site of knowledge, practice, and ethical orientation. While each dialogue addresses somaesthetics from a distinct disciplinary, cultural, and methodological position, taken together they articulate a coherent field of inquiry grounded in lived experience, cultivated perception, and the relational conditions of bodily awareness. These conversations collectively demonstrate how somaesthetics operates as a mode of inquiry that moves across art, philosophy, pedagogy, and design while remaining attentive to difference, context, and practice.

"The Ethics of Somaesthetics: Lex Shcherbakov's Inclusive Somatic Practices," conducted by Liza Futerman, situates somaesthetics within inclusive artistic and pedagogical practice. Shcherbakov's reflections emphasize somatic attention as a relational and ethical mode of

engagement, particularly within mixed-ability and community-based contexts. Embodiment appears here as a shared field of sensitivity through which expression, agency, and care are co-constituted. This dialogue foregrounds somaesthetics as a practice of attunement that resists normative hierarchies of ability, virtuosity, and authorship. Shcherbakov's account underscores the importance of continuity, repetition, and trust in cultivating somatic awareness over time. Somaesthetic practice is presented as an ongoing process that unfolds through sustained engagement with others, environments, and materials. The interview also highlights the pedagogical implications of such an approach, showing how somatic practices can foster forms of learning that are grounded in presence, responsiveness, and mutual recognition. In this sense, the dialogue contributes to a broader understanding of somaesthetics as inseparable from ethical relations and inclusive social practices.

"Moving Bodies, Concepts, and Understanding" is a dialogue between artist-researchers Ruth Anderwald, Leonhard Grond, and cognitive scientist Stefan Schneider, who approach these questions through the lenses of their respective practices in art, somatics, and research, probing scholarly, visual, performative, and conceptual vocabularies. This article asks the question, how do bodies, concepts and epistemologies move? And how might we articulate the transition between artistic and philosophical thought – and the practices that give them shape? Situated at the intersection of artistic research, somatic practice, and cognitive science, the conversation explores how bodies, concepts, and epistemologies co-emerge through movement, perception, and shared inquiry. The dialogue foregrounds practices such as walking, Feldenkrais training, experimental filmmaking, and performative research as sites where thought is generated, tested, and transformed.

Within a somaesthetic framework, this dialogue offers a model of inquiry in which artistic, somatic, and scientific practices remain distinct yet deeply intertwined. By attending to movement, dizziness, disorientation, and environmental attunement, the authors demonstrate how embodied practices generate forms of understanding that cannot be reduced to propositional knowledge alone. The piece thus contributes to ongoing discussions in somaesthetics concerning embodied cognition, practice-based research, and the conditions under which thought becomes possible, shareable, and ethically responsive.

"Unearthing AfrOist Body Governance (ABGs)", a conversation between yaTande Whitney V. Hunter and Orlando Zane Hunter-Valentine advances a culturally grounded and explicitly decolonial articulation of somatic practice. In contrast to dominant Western somatic frameworks, this conversation situates bodily awareness within African diasporic epistemologies that integrate breath, spirit, ancestry, and communal responsibility. Distinguishing wellness from healing and emphasizing culturally situated bodily governance, the interlocuters press somaesthetics to confront its own genealogies and exclusions, expanding the field toward plural and spiritually attuned modes of embodiment. The ABGs dialogue reframes somatic practice as inseparable from cosmology, history, and collective memory. Bodily awareness is treated as a culturally mediated orientation shaped by inherited practices and lived conditions. This perspective challenges somaesthetics to account for the ways in which bodies are governed, disciplined, and sustained within specific social worlds. By foregrounding African diasporic concepts of breath, balance, and relationality, the interview contributes a critical framework for understanding somaesthetics as both culturally situated and politically consequential.

Jiyun Bae's "Life-Size Dance: Improvisation, Somaesthetics, and the Practice of Toru Iwashita," presents Toru Iwashita's explorative work with (Butoh) dance improvisation as a form of empathetic communication—with oneself, others, and the world. His "life-size" dance is based on everyday movements rooted in his own experience of overcoming a mental health

crisis by reconnecting with his body.

Xueting Luo's contribution "Body Rhythm and Martial Roots: A Somaesthetic Return in Chinese Classical Dance" presents a comparative interview study with Xin Li, a leading educator in Chinese Classical Dance at the Beijing Dance Academy, and Wenlong Li, a martial arts practitioner in the Tai Chi and Bajiquan lineages. Through their reflections, it explores how principles of Shenyun (Body Rhythm) and martial practice illuminate the linkage bewteen inner awareness and outward expression and how this should not only be understood as aesthetic training but also contributes to resilience, presence, and well-being in contemporary life.

"Personalized Somaesthetics: An Actress' Explorations for the Stage and Life" is an interview with actress Roberta Carreri conducted by Falk Heinrich. It explores the interplay between professional actor training and personal life. Carreri reflects on the transformative power of physical training, intercultural techniques, and lifelong artistic discipline—framing them as both professional necessity and a form of self-cultivation. Her experiences reveal how somatic practices shape identity, resilience, and a philosophy of living.

In "Landscape as dance partner: a somaesthetic exploration," Flavia Devonas Hoffmann interviews the Prague-based dancer and choreographer Zden Brungot Svíteková on her artistic research during a 2024 residency in Ilulissat, Greenland. Through Svíteková´s explorations of movements in dialogue with "rock bodies," she encounters the landscape 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. Svíteková ´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.

"*Mētis* and Somaesthetics in Polish Craft Practice: The NÓW Initiative" by Monika Favara-Kurkowski and Mateusz Salwa examines, through a phenomenological interview, the ceramic practice of Olga Milczyńska, a member of NÓW—a Polish initiative dedicated to revitalizing traditional artisanal techniques through contemporary methods. Milczyńska's practice exemplifies this orientation through attentiveness to material behaviour and manual engagement resulting in a situated, corporeal mode of knowledge. The article argues that this form of bodily intelligence aligns with the notion of *mētis* (Klekot 2018). By establishing a conceptual link between *mētis* and somaesthetic theory, the article challenges the dominant framing of craft as primarily technical and rule-governed (*technē*).

"Artroversion: Crafting Rest Through Creation" is an analysis of an interview with Alexander Clinthorne by Kei Graves. Clinthorne is a ceramic sculptor and community college faculty who introduces the notion of *artroversion*, a somatic practice of rejuvenation cultivated through meaningful creation. Clinthorne explains how working with clay fosters somatic intimacy, patience, focus, and tactile engagement, enabling embodied ways of knowing through the creative process.

Continuing the theme of artists discussing somaesthetics, the conversation between Stelarc and Richard Shusterman offers a sustained philosophical and performative interrogation of the body as an unstable and technologically entangled construct. Their exchange examines embodiment through performance art, prosthetics, persona, and technological mediation, while maintaining a shared rejection of Cartesian dualism. Stelarc's conception of the body as historically and materially reconfigured intersects productively with Shusterman's notion of the soma as embodied subjectivity that is both lived and cultivated. Discomfort, vulnerability, and ambivalence emerge here as epistemically productive conditions, linking somaesthetics

to questions of agency, mortality, and the limits of enhancement. Stelarc and Shusterman probe the tension between autonomy and dependency that arises in technologically mediated embodiment. Through discussions of avatars, performative personae, and bodily extensions, the conversation reveals how agency is distributed across bodies, technologies, and collaborators. This challenges simplistic narratives of enhancement or control, emphasizing instead the fragility and contingency of embodied action. Within a somaesthetic framework, these reflections underscore the importance of attending to limits, risk, and discomfort as conditions through which new forms of perception and understanding can emerge.

"A Conversation with Rachel Gadsden" extends the journal's engagement with somaesthetics by foregrounding embodiment as lived vulnerability, environmental attunement, and collective survival. Drawing on her background in theatre, visual and performance art, and her lifelong experience of chronic illness and progressive sight loss, Gadsden articulates a somaesthetic practice rooted in phenomenological immediacy, visceral sensation, and ethical responsiveness. Her reflections complicate any separation between body as subject and body as object, emphasizing instead their inseparability within artistic creation, performative presence, and everyday survival. Central to the dialogue is her sustained attention to atmosphere, psychogeography, and site-specific practice, where buildings, landscapes, and communities function as living, breathing participants in embodied meaning-making. Through her discussion of body mapping, community-based work in South Africa, and the aesthetics of accessibility, Gadsden challenges individualistic interpretations of somatic practice and reframes somaesthetics as a relational, communal, and environmentally embedded mode of inquiry. The interview thus contributes a critical perspective on disability, care, and interdependence, demonstrating how somaesthetic reflection can draw audiences into difficult narratives of pain, fragility, and survival without alienation, cultivating attentiveness, shared responsibility, and renewed awareness of the precarity and value of embodied life

Finally, "*Reflections on the Somatic Core of Ideation*," a dialogue among Veronika Mayerböck, Kristina Höök, and Alé Duarte, brings somaesthetics into direct conversation with design education, interaction design, and trauma-informed pedagogy. This exchange foregrounds the role of bodily awareness in ideation, learning, and sense-making across age groups and professional contexts. Practices of defamiliarization, play, witnessing, and social resonance are shown to support creative ownership and ethical engagement. The dialogue demonstrates how somaesthetic cultivation underpins design processes that seek to balance technological mediation with bodily sensitivity and human values. The conversation articulates ideation as a fundamentally embodied and relational process rather than a purely cognitive act. By tracing how ideas emerge through movement, sensation, social feedback, and reflection, the interview situates creativity within cycles of bodily readiness, experimentation, and integration. The participants also highlight the pedagogical significance of articulation and shared reflection, showing how somaesthetic practices enable individuals to recognize, claim, and develop their ideas responsibly. They offer a model for somaesthetics as a foundational resource for education, design, and creative practice.

Read together, these interviews reveal somaesthetics as a plural, evolving field shaped by diverse practices, cultural contexts, and ethical commitments. Across differences in emphasis and approach, each dialogue affirms embodiment as a condition of inquiry rather than an object of analysis alone. By placing these conversations in relation, this issue underscores the *Journal of Somaesthetics*' commitment to fostering dialogue across disciplines and traditions while maintaining a shared focus on the lived, cultivated, and relational dimensions of bodily experience.

The Ethics of Somaesthetics: Lex Shcherbakov's Inclusive Somatic Practices:
An Interview with Liza Futerman

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Introduction:

This interview with Lex Shcherbakov contributes to ongoing explorations in somaesthetics by highlighting how inclusive artistic practices transform not only individual lives but also cultural perceptions of embodiment, agency, and creativity. As Richard Shusterman has argued, somaesthetics expands philosophy into lived, embodied practice, foregrounding the body not merely as an object of analysis but as a medium of experience, cultivation, and expression (1999). In this sense, the dialogue with Shcherbakov situates itself within a growing field of inquiry into how somatic work functions simultaneously as a philosophical practice and as a mode of social transformation.

The interview was conducted in Russian and translated to English by the interviewer, Liza Futerman. This is a semi-structured format, allowing for an open exchange that moves between biography, practice, and philosophy. Shcherbakov, a Russian-born psychologist, physical theatre director, and inclusive arts educator, brings over two decades of experience across Europe and, more recently, in Israel, working at the intersection of psychology, somatic movement, and inclusive performance. His hybrid practice includes creative-somatic training, mixed-ability pedagogy, and community-based performance-making, all of which emphasise embodied sensitivity as both an artistic and ethical stance.

This project emerges from a deep personal and professional investment in somaesthetic inquiry. As a Mixed-Abilities Contact Improvisation practitioner, somatic educator, and researcher, my work has consistently examined the intersections of Contact Improvisation, somatic pedagogy, and mixed-abilities practice. My research and professional engagement in the fields of dementia, mental health, and end-of-life care, together with my involvement in inclusive performance practices and my lived experience as a person with an invisible disability, are grounded in a sustained commitment to perceiving human presence beyond dominant biomedical, functional, or socially marginalizing frameworks of illness and disability.This background informs the approach to interviewing Shcherbakov, situating the dialogue within a shared ethos of embodied attentiveness and transformative inclusion.

As I write this introduction, I am reminded of Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998), starring Jim Carrey. The film offers a vivid example of how individual choice and agency can be systematically denied. Truman Burbank's life unfolds as an elaborate spectacle in which his most intimate experiences are exposed for public consumption, stripped of privacy, and orchestrated

without his knowledge or consent. The film raises unsettling questions about cultural norms concerning agency, spectatorship, and the ethics of treating human life as a social experiment. This critique resonates with contemporary debates about how disability is observed and represented: too often, individuals with disabilities are positioned as objects of scrutiny rather than as subjects of agency. By contrast, somatic practices invite us to shift attention away from what is merely visible towards what is sensed, felt, and relationally co-created. Such reorientation fosters not only aesthetic enrichment but also ethical responsiveness. It is precisely for this reason that I chose to reach out to my colleague and friend, Lex Shcherbakov, whose artistic and pedagogical endeavours explore these themes by cultivating somatic sensitivity, inclusive authorship, and embodied forms of recognition.

The relevance of this interview lies, therefore, in its capacity to illuminate how somaesthetic practices are lived and theorised in contexts of inclusion, creativity, transformation, and care. By attending to Shcherbakov's reflections on practice, values, and somatic sensitivity, the discussion foregrounds the ethical and aesthetic stakes of embodiment in contemporary culture.

Interview:

Can you describe your artistic practice?

My artistic practice consists of several strands. Until recently, these strands existed somewhat separately. For more than twenty years, I have recognised myself in three roles: psychologist, physical theatre director, and educator involved in inclusive practices. For a long time, these areas developed in parallel: I worked in organisations and led projects related to inclusion, participated in theatrical productions as director, choreographer, and performer, and taught psychology and related disciplines at academic institutions.

Although I sensed there was an inherent connection between these strands, for a long time I did not have a project that would bring these together. Still, I noticed that in working with professional actors I intuitively incorporated elements of self-reflection, internal sensation, and sensory-system awareness into training and staging (even before I had the words to reflect on these practices as such). I immersed actors in somatic practices without yet having the terminology for what I was doing; I simply realised that this kind of practice helped them become more focused, expressive, and confident.

Gradually, I recognised that this direction was particularly compelling for me in performative contexts. At a certain point, I began to lose interest in conventional theatre where serving the text and projecting one's ego on stage are paramount. Instead, I increasingly turned towards communication practices within the group, caring about participants' personal stories, their mental and emotional states, and how their bodies interacted in the process of preparing a performance or other artistic forms.

This shift marked the beginning of a new artistic quest, which altered both the content of my work and its aesthetic framework. Now I define this as artistic-somatic or creative-somatic practice. At the same time, the inclusive component remains vital: I continue working with neurodivergent and disabled individuals. This is no longer a separate strand in my work but a necessary component of what I wish to achieve as an artist, thinker, and individual. I regard inclusivity in the arts as a distinct domain, one that does not necessarily require staged expression.

I believe there are practices that do not require to culminate in a performance. My aim is to create a sustainable process in which people with mental differences begin to sense their bodily presence and social inclusion, perceiving shared sessions as part of their lives and routines. Such work develops their communicative and bodily skills while broadening their expressive

repertoire. Although distinct from conventional stage practice, the exercises and scores I use with such groups often prove equally relevant to participants who see themselves as performers.

The dynamics and timing of these tasks may differ, but from my perspective a universal quality emerges. The understanding of tasks remains lively, flexible, and evolving. It is difficult for me to say that my approach is fully developed, but I feel it is becoming increasingly integrated — both in work with people with disabilities and with those oriented towards performing arts.

What first led you to pursue this field of practice and research?

My first encounter with an inclusive project happened during adolescence in Moscow. I joined an organization known then as a sociocultural rehabilitation center working with children and young people with intellectual disabilities. I became involved as a volunteer, initially taking on a tutor-like role: helping to organize sessions as well as create and hold spaces where participants could better orient themselves within rules and goals.

It was incredibly engaging, not at all tied to altruism, my motivation was more exploratory and deeply internal: I was genuinely curious. We, as teenagers, were engaged in many activities—from folk and theatre games to craft workshops. Particularly impactful were moments of living a shared rhythm: for example, establishing and sustaining a daily cycle together with individuals with evident mental differences. It felt like immersing myself in an entirely different world.

I am deeply grateful to the individuals, especially Natalia Timofeevna Popova, who created that environment and gave us, as adolescents, the opportunity to be a part of such a rich world of possibilities. This experience shaped me personally and later, professionally. It gave me an understanding of how an inclusive society might feel like, how one might interact within it, and what genuine togetherness means. I realised that mutual understanding is also an artistic form—one that can be explored, developed, and supported. It was a whole cosmos of impressions and experiences. I would not be exaggerating if I said that it enabled me to build my identity, to recognize myself and my place within the community and in the world at large.

This practice gradually shaped what I do today. As an adult, I also came to be interested in the performative field. After completing a master's degree in psychology, I went on to study directing. This strand initially developed separately, with the same passion and enthusiasm as with inclusive practices. I eagerly explored theatre and choreography.

Over time, all these separate elements merged through embodiment. It became foundational. Through contact improvisation, Feldenkrais practices, and other somatic approaches, I delved deeper into the field of bodily presence and expressivity. That's how I arrived at what I now call my artistic and research terrain: a place where inclusion, somatics, performativity and pedagogy come together.

In what ways does your teaching practice engage somaesthetic principles?

My teaching experience encompasses a variety of courses and workplaces. I have taught psychology and pedagogy at academic institutions in Europe, at a music and dance academy in the Czech Republic, and at a faculty of art therapy, also in the Czech Republic. In addition, I have conducted numerous courses and trainings for diverse groups of performers, psychologists, psychiatrists, communities brought together by a shared idea or task, adolescent refugees from Ukraine, and many others.

For the purposes of our conversation, I wish to highlight my work with art therapy students, where the task was to expand their bodily expressive capacities. In the course of such trainings the theme of interpretation inevitably arises because basic bodily practices in and of themselves

are not always rich enough for expression purposes. I was aiming for devising tasks that could both develop motor skills and engage the whole personality, involve work with one's presence, and connect metaphorically with each participant's experience and background.

Many students observed that through movement they were able to transform their understanding of verbal therapy. They recognised that when we discuss a situation in words and search for solutions, the so-called problem remains confined to the verbal domain. However, when we act and move, it becomes apparent that the solutions reached intellectually often diverge from the actions taken physically. These levels – the verbal and the physical – can be profoundly divided within a single person: the bodily aspect of the personality may not correspond to the verbal one. In some cases, a person feels confident and competent, while in others they lose confidence and regress to a level resembling childhood. This opens up a vast space for creative methods in the context of therapy. Students, equipped with a broad theoretical foundation, can apply it to emerging bodily experience, which constitutes a great richness. I am convinced that every psychologist and every therapist should have experience of somatic bodily practices, as these broaden the professional foundation and enhance the quality of care, making it more sustainable and effective.

When it comes to teaching psychologists or social workers, one of the topics I address is the expansion of the concept of the 'cultural form.' This concept is closely connected to inclusive practices, because situations often arise in which we do not know how to organise activities, largely because many of our routines are based on structures that either do not require – or are unwilling to consider – individual needs. When working with people with intellectual disabilities, we must reorganise our priorities and reframe what we understand about culture and form.Such work may influence additional domains of care and education practices and support a shift from system-oriented models toward person-centered care and education.

I understand cultural form as any form of organising activity or social experience. This is not a scientific but a practical understanding: a cultural form can be a café, a workshop, a festival, a theatre studio, and many other examples. All social phenomena can be considered through the lens of cultural form. A cultural form has specific qualities, and we can approach it as a platform to engage with. For instance, a café can exist in different modes, but it is important to understand how to make this form as inclusive as possible. What conditions are necessary for people with intellectual differences to participate? The same applies to theatre and other forms: it is crucial to account for the individual characteristics of participants rather than grouping all people with intellectual disabilities as having the same particularities.

To make it happen, we must identify the basic aspects required for this cultural form to exist. During the course, we analyzed various cultural forms from the perspective of inclusivity. At the end of the course, students developed their own inclusive models, where the key element was the student's personal interest in a particular cultural form: ceramics, music, theatre, cooking, sewing, or any other activity. Students identified the inclusive aspects of this socio-physical activity and shaped them into a cultural form accessible to people with intellectual differences.

Thus, one of the most important aspects in the learning process is the student's subjective involvement in the activity. This enables each student to expand their understanding of the activity itself and transform the experience into an inclusive space.

How does somatics influence your practice?

Somatic disciplines, or somatics in general, have become the primary focus of my attention—both in daily practice and theoretical interest. I draw inspiration from reading articles, observing

new directions, reflecting, and communicating with colleagues. The field of somatics today is remarkably vibrant and dynamic—it's developing, expanding, and is enriched with new meanings and discoveries. It's not merely a subject of study—it's already part of my everyday practice, part of my way of life.

On one level, somatics is a tool I use to address concrete tasks in my work. On another, it's a living presence with which I interact. Somatics for me is simultaneously object and subject. It plays an increasingly central role in both inclusive and performative contexts.This becomes especially evident when working with people who come to performative practices as adults without professional theatre experience. We inevitably enter somatic territory: through attention to sensory systems, slowing down, engaging with internal sensations. We learn to notice subtle bodily signals, to make them conscious and meaningful, and to see how they affect movement expressivity, presence, and contact. Without this approach, contemporary performative work is unthinkable to me.

When working with people with disabilities—especially those who are non verbal—embodiment becomes the main, if not the only, channel of interaction. We work with movement, while physically engaging with objects, space, and the group members. Sometimes this isn't strictly somatics in the narrow sense—but it still involves movement as a way of knowing, awareness, and expanding capacities. Through physical action arises understanding of a situation—and with it growth, communication, and transformation.

What are you working on these days?

I am currently working on several projects, all of which are inclusive and engage with somatics to enhance the socio-physical understanding of the body in space and time. In Jaffa, at the Mendel Cultural Centre, I lead a social group for parents and children with special needs. The group is divided into two subgroups: children and adolescents. We engage in physio-social practices through simple movement tasks and interactions with parents and volunteers, we create a shared space where movement and bodily interaction form the basis for spending time together.The project has now been running for a year and has already developed into a warm community. Beyond bodily practices, the social aspects are becoming increasingly important: meetings and celebrations, such as birthdays and holiday gatherings. Community formation, in my view, is not of lesser importance but rather the ultimate goal. The physical practice here is a means to an end. A somatic community is a space where parents of children with special needs can share difficulties, worries, discoveries, and achievements. This is evolving into a self-sustaining group of openness and trust.

In the future, the project is expected to grow into a social space where somatic practices will take place, and where professionals and people interested in inclusive activities and research will meet. It will also offer space for siblings of neurodivergent individuals to come together and participate in creative and artistic projects that will help family members process their lived experience through somatic–artistic engagement. I feel inspired and motivated in working towards this goal.

Another major project these days—as a newcomer to Israel—is my integration into Israel's cultural environment. I'm going through this process slowly while fostering my local artistic and professional community. I recently completed a residency at the Kelim Choreography Center under the supervision of Natalie Zuckerman, which has helped me develop my artistic practice and meet other artists who are passionately involved in the local inclusive artistic creative scene.

This has been a wonderful experience and has provided a fruitful platform for me to keep

developing the performative piece, called *Café ULYSSES*, I've started working on during the residency. This work draws inspiration from James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a novel that has left a profound and lasting impression on me. An initial twenty-minute pilot performance was presented at the Tzomet Festival (*Crossroads*), a platform dedicated to independent choreographers in Israel. The presentation of the pilot generated significant public interest in the theme. Following this, a grant proposal was submitted and successfully awarded, enabling us to proceed.

Currently *Café ULYSSES* brings together disabled dancers as well as dancers from Galit Liss's company—female performers aged 60 and above—together with contemporary dancers from Israel. The project engages with the mythic trajectory of the Odyssey while simultaneously referencing Joyce's reworking in *Ulysses*. It seeks to investigate the intersections between the domestic and the mundane on the one hand, and spaces of deep transformation on the other. In doing so, it addresses how everyday routines—sometimes monotonous, at times destructive—intersect with essential, inner, and potentially spiritual dimensions of lived experience.

Additionally, I lead several groups for adults who have no professional theatre backgrounds. Participants come to discover embodiment as a potential resource and a field of curiosity. It allows them to see new pathways of development within an established self, to uncover unexpected horizons, and perhaps gradually form a lasting interest in physical theatre that includes somatics.

Recently, I came up with a practice I like to call 'Ball Contact', a training using large fitness balls aimed at developing technical contact-improv skills especially for people who are new to Contact and for Contact Improvisation instructors who work with individuals who have little to no experience in Contact Improvisation. This practice helps to develop sensitivity to weight sensing, to embody support, balance and other skills essential in contact improvisation but that come only with practice. This is not a random set of exercises, but a meticulously assembled somatic routine, almost like a step-by-step manual that enables deeper understanding and technique. I personally enjoy Contact Improvisation jams, yet I feel that for me to interact freely and deeply in a jam space, it's important to undergo embodied development and expand understanding of the language of Contact Improvisation. That's precisely why I chose to develop this particular practice: in order to expand the palette of movement possibilities.

Finally, there are the collaborative projects with you, Liza. One of our endeavours is entitled *Embodying Identities in Space and Time* and it explores contact improvisation as a practice that develops physical, communicative, performative, and social skills. Our primary focus is the inner world of the practitioner: exploring how embodiment connects to psychological content of the personality, and how somatic practice can access deep layers of experience and nurture a collective group space. This work is anchored in Contact Improvisation and somatics. In these workshops, we explore identity through the lens proposed by Contact Improvisation scholar, instructor, and practitioner Nita Little, who defines identity in Contact Improvisation as the generosity of weight-giving from one body to another (Little 2014).

I've also joyfully joined the preparation for Liza's MDance recital performance at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance under the artistic supervision of Iris Erez. This performance entitled *When Things Fall Apart Together* explores the function of touch in contact improvisation as a healing apparatus for traumatized bodies. The exploration of agency and choice through active and passive touch in contact improvisation practice materialises through the moving and speaking body as it explores its identity by interacting with another body, with objects and with gravity. Through this work, we also examine modes of non-hierarchical leadership, as well as the political and educational applications of contact improvisation. The piece premiered at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance on December 3, 2025, marking the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. Following the premiere, we were invited

to showcase the work at a special learning summit at Vertigo Eco Art Village for Feldenkrais teachers involved in a project teaching mathematics in elementary schools. The presentation and subsequent discussion aimed to support educators in fostering a growth mindset through process-oriented learning.

Liza and I have different biographies—I've been in Israel just one year; Liza has lived here most of her adult life. We both speak Russian, but her Russian is in a "dormant" state—she speaks Hebrew and English fluently, whereas for me Russian remains my primary language, English and Hebrew secondary.These differences, much like the gender difference, become a point of intersection from which a new way of communication is born. Although communication between us is fractured, it is rich with meaning and overlaps that make this work interesting since we constantly find ourselves lost and found in translation. This work weaves together Contact Improvisation, spatial awareness, internal sensitivity, text, and multilingual layering. In this inter-linguistic, inter-embodied space, we observe and become aware of our identities, allowing them to manifest and interact in a performative form.

Recently, fate has unexpectedly brought me the opportunity to work with students at an arts high school in collaboration with disabled dancers from Vertigo's *Power of Balance*. I'm co-facilitating this group together with Liza. The goal of this project is to explore the possibilities of mixed-abilities Contact Improvisation annual workshop that is transformed into a 7-minute performance. But more importantly, as I see it, the goal is to foster a meaningful encounter between two diverse groups.

The project's title is "*From Workshop to Stage*" and it fully aligns with my approach to building stage materials: material emerges from the laboratory process, from exercises and real interactions among participants, and then gradually takes shape into a performative work. I am deeply grateful that this is happening here in Israel. It enables me to integrate into the country's creative landscape and to continue working in a familiar format, where my personal experience and professional skills can develop further and find meaningful applications. Special thanks go to you, Liza, to Tali Wertheim, the manager of the Power of Balance Integrated Dance Center within Vertigo's dance company, and to the arts high school for making me part of this project and for trusting my professional and artistic interests as well as for recognizing the meaning and value of this collaboration.

What do you hope to achieve?

My current aim is to deeply immerse myself in the Israeli environment, both within the somatic community and the theatre-dance field. Simultaneously, I dream of creating a space where these practices can organically co-exist and become an integral part of life. Life practices in the sense that they contribute to personality formation and horizon expansion.

To deepen my practice and expand my network and reach I've joined Vertigo's Power of Balance mixed abilities Contact Improvisation teachers' training certificate program—a wonderful community and brilliantly organized model. Their approach and internal structure align closely with what I seek as a foundation for my own practice and future development.

Furthermore, building interdisciplinary connections is essential to me. I find inspiration in collaborating with medical professionals: psychiatrists, physiotherapists, movement researchers, artists, and, of course, people with differences. I see my role as creating a space that functions as a resource: a milieu where these specialists can meet, enrich one another, initiate new projects, and support each other through dynamic professional and human interaction that will help foster inclusive and supportive models of being together.

The more comprehensive dream I have is *MAKOM* which in Hebrew means both "place" and "space," a dual meaning that precisely reflects the idea I seek to manifest.

The vision of MAKOM is to create a shared environment where diverse social worlds intersect. Where people with pronounced intellectual disabilities, people without disabilities, artists from different disciplines, and professionals engaged with the themes of embodiment, cognition, and consciousness can come together and co-create. Some steps in this direction have already been taken. I have formed groups engaged in social gymnastics, object-based practices, and communication in the absence of verbal means. Gradually, I intend to establish a permanent venue, a cultural venue where people with intellectual disabilities can be present together with those open to interaction.

Direct contact with people with significant intellectual differences is not always simple. For such encounters to occur, one must undergo a certain process of *attunement*. This begins with attention to oneself—one's sensations, needs, and limitations. Somatic, bodily, and theatrical practices foster this attention. By cultivating them, participants find it easier to enter a dialogue, even where no shared spoken language exists. It is precisely such an environment of acceptance that MAKOM seeks to create.

The center is gradually taking form: we are opening additional groups, accessible to anyone who wishes to join. Many volunteers come to try it out; some stay, while others leave once they realise that ongoing participation requires time and energy. And this, in fact, is one of the key conditions for development: only through continuity can a unique language of interaction be formed. Communication here is not built on formal language but on the creation of sustainable modes of contact.

It is essential that we don't see this environment as an altruistic project. Rather, it is enriched with meanings and resources that nurture all participants: the development of bodily and communicative skills, the broadening of personal experience, and the discovery of new forms of interaction. Engagement with people with cognitive, sensory, or physical differences becomes a resource for everyone, provided it is approached as an opportunity and not merely as a social obligation.

At present, the center's work unfolds along several directions:

1. Work with Parents.

Parents are among the key participants in the project. They possess unique experiential knowledge of living and interacting with their children, often reorganizing their entire lives around this constant presence. This knowledge is invaluable: parents can share it with others—especially those with younger children—as well as with volunteers and the broader community of the center. At the same time, parents themselves need emotional and psychological support. Their perspectives, developed under challenging conditions, are deeply meaningful for the centre's work.

2. *The Special Gaze* Project.

This year we plan to launch a new strand of our activity, inviting specialists from diverse disciplines to observe and participate in the social gymnastics groups. Each professional brings a particular perspective on the body and human subjectivity. Their insights will help us identify new areas for future development. *The Special Gaze* will serve as a mentoring and facilitative addition to our own practices, broadening the horizons of the center.

3. Social Gymnastics

Social Gymnastics is a strand in which we employ basic exercises of interaction and contact. These are usually performed in pairs, and sometimes in groups.

The aims are twofold:on the one hand, to explore and highlight the capacities of participants

with intellectual disabilities. On the other, to develop bodily skills among participants without disabilities, preparing them for inclusive interaction.

At a certain level, the bodily tasks of both groups converge. The exercises function as a kind of proto-language: while they do not yet create fully developed verbal exchange, they establish points of contact and interaction. Attention is given to bodily reactions including vocalisation, muscular states, and other aspects of physical engagement. This allows participants to collectively sense the direction of movement and co-create within space, establishing direct bodily contact that is free of abstract verbal mediation yet rich in sensory and practical experience.

4. Work with Materials

Here, participants engage with diverse tactile substances such as clay, sand, flour, coffee, beans, and more.

The aims are to:

- develop participants' sensory capacities.
- create processual objects that reflect movement and interaction with the material.

In the process, participants shape the movements of the hand, arm, and other parts of the body, and then observe the *trace* of their interaction with the material. Even in cases of difficulty or limitation, participants create tangible objects, which enhance their reflection and awareness of their own movement and physical presence in space.

By the end of the course, parents and children create together objects out of these materials, drawing on the skills acquired throughout the process. The goal is not technical mastery, but rather the discovery and reinforcement of the unique possibilities and modes of relating that emerge from the interaction with persons with intellectual disabilities. Parents adjust themselves to these specificities, thus producing a shared outcome.

The central idea here is that the language of interaction is already embedded in the participant's particular capacities. Our task is to perceive it, render it visible, and make it intelligible both to the child and to the parents.

5. Work with Volunteers

Another important activity the center advances is training volunteers. The aim is to cultivate bodily sensitivity, awareness of one's own body, movement, and spatial orientation.This preparation is crucial for the subsequent involvement of the volunteers in work with people with intellectual disabilities and in other inclusive projects. Without awareness of one's own body and movement, it is impossible to attend to the nuances of interaction with others—especially with those who have special needs.

What inspires you?

It's difficult to pinpoint exactly what inspires my work. Perhaps the word "inspiration" doesn't fully capture my internal process. Rather, it's *motivation*: a deep inner imperative combining feelings, desires, and the necessity to be involved and act.

The main source of that motivation for me is interaction with people. I am deeply moved by how we can find common language, how we can hear and understand one another, even with individuals for whom communication through conventional channels (verbal or intellectual) is impossible. A sense of understanding arises through somatic practices, movement, play and shared presence. This multi-layered interaction is probably my chief source of inspiration.

I care deeply about creating sociocultural forms that function as spaces of encounter, where practices bringing together diverse lived experiences can emerge and evolve. I believe these forms are especially effective for engaging with difference, otherness, conflict, and the multiplicity of

human experience. Participation in such practices is always a choice—to be present, to approach the other, and to remain open. Within that choice lies a significant resource: it reveals who we are and affirms our capacity to connect, to be understood, and to understand others.

I increasingly believe we are deeply interconnected—and that interconnectedness imbues life with meaning. The practice of communication and shared experience allows society to become less divided and closed. My dream is to expand community boundaries, making them more permeable, flexible, and alive. I believe each person holds inner resources capable of including diverse people with various abilities into shared spaces—and perhaps there lies the very essence of my personal meaning of inspiration.

How does somatics influence your everyday life?

How somatics influences my everyday life is indeed an important question. First and foremost, it is a matter of sensitivity—more precisely, developing hypersensitivity: to my inner state and the external aspects that affect it. I've become much more selective—both in daily activities and in what I allow into my sensory system.

This touches everything: content (literature, music, films), social forms, and relationships. I've become more attuned to what drains me or compromises my functionality—and accordingly I've started rejecting those sources. This shift has also affected interpersonal relationships: being more sensitive to others' expressions while also striving to be careful and considerate in interaction.

This sensitivity emerges from long-term somatic practice. At the same time, it is important not to overlook the theoretical dimension: what I read, how I absorb information, and how these processes shape my thinking and decision-making have also changed. I increasingly attune to elements in my environment that are meaningful to me and carry value. Even everyday routines begin to shift, becoming more "somatic"—that is, more oriented toward bodily sensation, attention, and spatial engagement.

My practice is grounded in working with people from diverse professional backgrounds, including both trained performers and participants with no prior experience in theatre or physical performance. This work takes place within social and creative projects in which the shared task is to develop a performance or staged action, even though participants bring markedly different levels of preparation and experience.

The approach I have developed renders the staging process substantive by grounding it in somatic practices. Rather than emerging solely from the choreographer's or director's initial concept, the work is co-created with the participants of the laboratory. One example of this process comes from my work in Chemnitz, Germany, at the Komplex theatre space. The group consisted of Ukrainian refugees, people with developmental differences, German citizens, and migrants from Middle Eastern countries, forming a highly heterogeneous collective.

Our primary task was to establish a trusting environment in which each person's specificities were acknowledged and accepted. Within this environment, participants were able to openly share their experiences, hopes, fears, and the meanings that mattered to them.The basis of the work was a series of simple improvisational physical exercises that gave participants a sense of comfort and confidence in their own abilities. From this foundation, conversations arose about the challenges of adaptation, the reasons for leaving one's homeland, and other pressing concerns. As a result, the group created several performances of high artistic quality that were presented on different stages. At the beginning, participants could not even imagine performing in front of an audience. Later, however, one of the shows attracted around 400 spectators —

a significant number for a non-professional ensemble. The participants received meaningful feedback from their interaction with the audience, and in many ways responded as professional performers would.The group continues to exist and to develop, even though I have since moved from Germany to Israel. We stay in touch, and I follow their progress.

As I reflect on this experience, it is clear to me that this group also carried profound personal meaning. I myself left Russia because of the war, and working with this diverse collective became a way to live through and process the trauma of the rupture between our two peoples, while contributing something meaningful on a personal level.

What values do you gain through somatic practice, and how do they reflect in your creative path?

When speaking of values that I can articulate and clearly link to somatic practices, I would foreground sensitivity. Through somatic practice, an intention emerges to discern and recognize the deeper essence of the person with whom one is interacting.

I do not claim to possess this sensitivity in a complete or infallible way, nor to be able to perceive another person's needs with absolute clarity. Rather, in moments of interaction, I begin from the assumption that such deep needs exist. Through somatic practice and bodily attunement, it often becomes possible to "feel around" and gradually sense these needs.

This orientation directly informs the creative process and the structuring of work with a collective—actors, dancers, or performance participants. It becomes essential to cultivate an atmosphere and modes of interaction that attend not only to rational considerations but also to bodily, sensory, and deeper experiential needs. In particular, this includes the body's need for movement, expansion, fullness, and meaningful presence in spaces created to serve life.

Sensitivity to the body, attention, and internal state thus becomes a central value. Attunement to sensory experience and to internal bodily processes, as well as to both verbal and nonverbal forms of communication, is essential. Such sensitivity enables not only the perception of another person's state, but also the offering of appropriate forms of interaction, tasks, or practices through which genuine connection may emerge.

To continue, when I think about the values that emerge through this kind of work, it is important to note that for me this practice constitutes a meaning-making part of my identity. I do not want to use lofty words such as "service" or "contribution to society," because that is not how I see it. As mentioned earlier, I do not experience it as an altruistic gesture— not at all. Rather, it is something that gives me meaning, because within the context of what is happening in my life and my personal experience, this activity becomes significant. An anchor.

I have relocated several times, not because I sought a change of residence, but because of wars. At present I find myself in a situation of acute social and existential crisis. I cannot say that I find much meaning in the contemporary social order as it currently exists. As it happens, my entire life background has been tied to inclusive projects. My identity has been shaped within that context, and the values that developed for me — and that were shared by the environment in which I lived — are grounded in unmediated interaction.

Our initial reactions, even toward ourselves, are often quite crude. The sensitivity we show and the way we are affected by the surrounding world can be very primitive. Thanks to the experience I now have, I can say that I sense different qualities of being in different environments. I also perceive the social environment of communication — the values transmitted by media or political agendas. These values are not alien to me; they are easy to understand, especially when unpacked and viewed in context. Very often, however, what stands behind them is simply the

desire to suppress or to impose one's own worldview.

By contrast, in an environment where another level of sensitivity is required, we encounter values that encompass diverse ways of existing, multiple forms of communication, varying sensory registers, modes of movement, and types of contact. Working in such an environment cultivates in me essential qualities and expands my sensitivity. It gives me an understanding of the human being as a complex and rich creation — a being with enormous potential for understanding, reflection, interaction with others, co-creation, and presence.

I categorically cannot accept situations directed toward aggression — whether against society at large or against members of another religion, worldview, or perspective. These are deeply archaic modes of existence, and in the context of contemporary practices, technologies, and science, they appear both obvious and tragic. The lack of capacity for humanity to pause, to stop and consider the results and possibilities before it, leads to devastating consequences.

One of the ways I forsee transformation to take place in cultural norms and values is precisely through sustained attention to inclusive projects. Of course, this is not the only path — there are many other important and necessary forms of care — but inclusive projects, in particular, provide transformative experience and generate values that I can wholeheartedly recommend.

Analysis: Positioning the Practice within Pragmatist Aesthetics and Somaesthetics

Lex Shcherbakov's inclusive and somatic practice can be productively understood through the lenses of pragmatist aesthetics and somaesthetics, with additional resonance in the feminist perspectives offered by Carolyn Korsmeyer. John Dewey's seminal text *Art as Experience* (1934/2005) redefined art not as an object isolated from life but as a heightened form of experience that emerges from the dynamic interplay between the individual and their environment. For Dewey, aesthetic experience arises through processes of doing and undergoing, where perception, action, and reflection intertwine. Shcherbakov's work resonates strongly with this framework: his community-based theatre and somatic workshops do not aim to produce aesthetic objects in the traditional sense, but rather cultivate conditions in which participants—both disabled and non-disabled—can co-create meaningful experiences through embodied interaction.

This emphasis on participatory experience aligns closely with Shusterman's project of somaesthetics. In his disciplinary proposal (1999), Shusterman argued that philosophy should concern itself not only with abstract reasoning but also with the cultivation of bodily awareness, habits, and practices. Shusterman distinguishes between the analytic dimension of somaesthetics (critical reflection on embodied experience), the pragmatic dimension (designing methods for improving somatic practice), and the practical dimension (the actual performance of somatic exercises). Shcherbakov's practice traverses all three.

Analytically, his reflections on sensitivity, inclusion, and value formation interrogate the cultural and ethical stakes of embodied practice. Pragmatically, he devises innovative frameworks such as "social gymnastics" and "work with materials and objects," which structure somatic encounters between participants of diverse abilities. Practically, his ongoing facilitation of workshops demonstrates somaesthetics in action, where bodies in motion become sites of perception, negotiation, and co-creation.

Korsmeyer's *The Bodily Turn* (2023) emphasises how contemporary aesthetics must regard with embodiment not as a secondary consideration but as central to how we engage with and create meaning. Her work extends the pragmatist insight into art-as-experience by foregrounding the body's role in interpretation, affective resonance, and social communication. Shcherbakov's

practice exemplifies this bodily turn: the cultivation of sensitivity and attentiveness through inclusive somatic practices reveals how perception is not neutral but always corporeally mediated, shaping both aesthetic and ethical encounters. His work suggests that to transform social relations, we must begin with the body's capacities for sensing, responding, and fostering co-presence.

Conclusion

Positioning Lex Shcherbakov's practice within the frameworks of pragmatist aesthetics, somaesthetics, and feminist aesthetics highlights the philosophical significance of his work. Relying on Dewey's perspective, Shcherbakov's practice exemplifies the potential of aesthetic experience to transform everyday life by dissolving the boundary between "art" and "ordinary experience." From Shusterman's standpoint, it demonstrates somaesthetics' capacity to function as both philosophy and practice: cultivating somatic awareness, designing embodied methods, and enacting them in real, transformative encounters. From Korsmeyer's lens, it shows how embodiment is inseparable from meaning-making, revealing how inclusive arts practices foreground the body as both medium and interpreter of values.

As the interviewer, my own background in mixed-abilities Contact Improvisation, somatic pedagogy, and grief-informed artistic practice echoes and extends these frameworks. Like Shcherbakov, I approach somatic practices as "life practices," where bodily sensitivity, attentiveness, and shared authorship are not limited to performative spaces but permeate pedagogy, research, and community-building. This dialogical dimension underscores somaesthetics' central claim: that philosophy, art, and everyday life are inseparable when practiced through the cultivated body.

What emerges most forcefully from this interview is the recognition that inclusive somatic practices are not supplementary to artistic or educational activity but integral to the cultivation of democratic, empathetic, and pluralistic modes of living. By foregrounding sensitivity, attentiveness, and embodied dialogue, Shcherbakov's work — in resonance with my own — contributes not only to the advancement of inclusive arts but also to the broader project of somaesthetics: reimagining philosophy as a discipline grounded in the lived, felt, and shared practices of human beings.

Finally, the interview with Lex Shcherbakov underscores how somaesthetic practices can reclaim transformation from the alienating cultural frameworks through which it is often represented. If at first I suggested *The Truman Show* as a framework through which to consider the question of agency and choice, now I propose to reflect on Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915/2009) through the lens of othering the self. The narrative depicts transformation as something that isolates the subject, turning it into an object of spectacle or estrangement, rather than illuminating transformation as a universal condition of human life and life as such. Against this backdrop, Shcherbakov's work insists that somatic and inclusive performative practices can imbue transformation through its relational, creative, and ethical dimensions. By cultivating embodied presence, sensory awareness, and intersubjective dialogue, his practice allows performers and participants—disabled and nondisabled alike—to engage transformation not as alienation but as co-creation. This positions somaesthetics as a philosophical and practical framework that reorients cultural perceptions of disability, dance, and community toward recognition of transformation as the very ground of our shared humanity.

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Moving Bodies, Concepts, and Understanding

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Abstract: *In a post-disciplinary world, how do bodies, concepts and epistemologies move? How might we articulate the transition between artistic and philosophical thought – and the practices that give them shape? In this conversation, artist-researchers Ruth Anderwald, Leonhard Grond and artist and cognitive scientist Stefan M. Schneider approach these questions through the lenses of their respective (and often overlapping) practices in art, somatics, and research, probing scholarly, visual, performative, and conceptual vocabularies.*

Keywords: *somatic practice, art, arts-based research, cognitive science, philosophy, embodied and enacted cognition, imagination, creativity*

This interview encapsulates elements of an ongoing dialogue between the parties, initiated when Stefan M. Schneider (SMS) and Leonhard Grond (LG) convened at their Feldenkrais training institute, subsequently introducing Ruth Anderwald (RA) to Stefan. It quickly became apparent that the authors overlapping interests and varied disciplinary pursuits cultivate continuous somatic, scholarly, and artistic exchanges that expand during collaborative drawing sessions, Feldenkrais training, and their ongoing conversations.

RA: Our collective reflection aims to explore how bodies, concepts, and epistemologies are in constant movement, which immediately brings to mind the walks that Leo and I take together.

LG: It's true: since we were students, we have taken walks together. Every place that we have lived, we have crisscrossed by foot, deep in thought or conversation, and we also go hiking in the mountains, but it is first and foremost a daily practice we enjoy in our day-to-day life.

RA: These daily walks serve multiple purposes and have evolved into a somaesthetic practice. Living adjacent to a large, forest-like park grants us the privilege of engaging in these walks regularly, primarily for well-being and pleasure. Additionally, they contribute to our emotional balance and foster the discussion and development of new ideas. In an exploration of how to teach reflective thinking, Sarah Elisabeth Döring, in her "Der Spaziergang als Werkzeug der Wissenschaft" [The walk as a tool of science] (2022), proposes the 'walkshop,' a mode of walking for collective learning and thinking that teaches not what is known, but the act of knowing.

She asserts that engaging in walking activities enhances our relationship with the environment by facilitating active engagement. Such social interactions outdoors promote understanding of human nature through community engagement. Additionally, physical movement, such as leaving the seminar room to connect with the surrounding world in a different way, fosters an emotional bond. This bond encompasses the social, mental, natural, and built environments, deepening through reflections during walks and shared experiences. Perception, therefore, means not only observation itself, but also includes the practice corresponding to observation, in the sense of becoming aware of an opportunity or responsibility. But what exactly is walking?

LG: Considering walking from the perspective of our long-term interest in dizziness, and setting aside the importance of health for cognition, we can first observe that walking involves both stable and unstable states. In the lyrics to her 1982 piece *Walking and Falling*, Laurie Anderson formulates:

"You're walking. And you don't always realize it, but you're always falling. With each step, you fall forward slightly. And then catch yourself from falling. Over and over, you're falling. And then catching yourself from falling. And this is how you can be walking and falling at the same time."

As Döring shows in academic contexts, walking serves as a vital practice that fosters reflection, but it also influences our artistic endeavours, deepens our collective research, and enriches our daily lives. It deepens the relation to our natural and built environment, which has been instrumental for artistic work, such as our essay-novel written together with novelist Anna Kim (2026), and it also instigated our antifascist artistic research work (Anderwald, Grond, 2025). What role does walking play in your everyday life? Does it have a role beyond the errands we all need to run?

SMS: I very much like your joint practice, which you also do with others. I don't have so much experience with joint walks like the two of you have cultivated together. But walking has been a constant source of joy for me, as one of the easiest ways to be in contact with me and my surroundings – and my mind apparently enjoys the space that it is given. Things that occupied me, sometimes without even being aware of, surface, and often seamlessly solve themselves or evolve new Gestalts. In that respect, you could speak of " falling" as giving the space for things to "fall into their place". The mind needs these periods where it can organically sort things. I also appreciate the curious feelings on long hikes that it feels both slow and fast when considering the distance one has covered. Speed in slow motion. Consciousness apparently finds a very different way to process experiences. Experiences during walking are slow; you can muse about them, while they are not necessarily analytically scrutinised, as you would do with a tougher task. I wonder how this could affect joint walks, or – on a playful variation of Kleist's famous essay (Kleist, 1805/1878) - "die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim gemeinsamen Spazieren" / "the gradual formation of thoughts while walking together." Do you have any ideas?

RA: In 1926, Graham Wallas published his book, *The Art of Thought*, which continues to be frequently cited in psychological literature today. In our cooperation with creativity research, we have also encountered this influential text. In his book, Wallas delineates the creative process into four distinct phases: Preparation, Incubation, Illumination, and Verification.

The Incubation phase is the phase that we understand to be supported by this practice of walking, but for the incubation to work, you have to already be immersed in your work. This means you need to have gained a certain expertise on the topic, you need to be highly motivated and then a relaxed activity or distraction can support the process of incubation.

LG: Unconscious processing is a fickle and delicate process. It operates most effectively when we engage in activities that promote relaxation, require minimal cognitive effort (with some

permissible effort), and foster a positive affective state. However, individuals must not experience excessive euphoria, but rather a calm sense of well-being. Elevated negative mood states can also impair this process, as negative affect tends to narrow our cognitive focus—an adaptive response signalling the presence of a problem. This heightened focus can be understood as an evolutionary purpose by directing attention toward problem resolution. Conversely, moderately positive emotions facilitate flexible thinking without overtaxing cognitive resources. However, extreme negative emotional states can also consume a significant amount of processing capacity and energy, and thereby hindering our unconscious thought processes.

RA: So, light and pleasant distractions of the conscious, such as engaging in walking or swimming, can help bring about the formation of something new and creative. This incubation phase enables the bringing together of two or more previously unrelated elements. In our research, we have come to refer to this moment as unfolding in a compossible space, which can manifest as a conceptual, mental, and material spacetime (Anderwald, Feyertag, Grond, 2019). Thought, matter, and ideas are present in their initial form but are metastable and inclined to mix, fuse, dissolve and form anew. This demands not only enduring a more divergent way of thinking, but it also needs time, space and energy. Moreover, you need to trust the unconscious mind to process and integrate diverse information over extended periods, highlighting the need for patience, open-mindedness, and tenacity as crucial qualities for creative and artistic practice. I would thus think about Kleist's proposition, as the shaping of thought through speaking, relating to the curious and intelligent questions of his sister, rather at a later stage and in a convergent mode of thinking, in the verification part of the creative or thought practice. Here, the scrutiny of one's thinking by someone else becomes highly advantageous.

SMS: Your mentioning of Wallas' four phases of the creative process reminds me of research in cognitive science on problem solving and the kinds of mental sets that we always entertain – every situation is always understood in a particular way by us. An active preparation phase seems to set conditions - a mental set - for things "to click," and an incubation phase can be supportive of that. Especially considering that sometimes mental sets can become mental ruts – the way one conceives of things also has the potential to get stuck in unproductive thought.

Mathematician Henry Poincaré gave a famous lecture titled "The mathematical invention" (Poincaré 1908), based on his own experience. According to him, solutions to problems that he was actively working on often did not appear through this active work, but came as sudden insights during leisure time, that is, without actively thinking about the problem. He likens these wondrous workings of the unconscious mind to the free floating of bits and pieces of ideas, and connecting in myriad different ways, until eventually they connect in just the right way – and become conscious again as Aha! experiences. So here is a distinction of phases – preparation, incubation - and Poincaré also mentions a follow-up laborious phase of formulating things precisely. And there is an intricate interaction of processes of a more and less conscious nature. What we consciously experience - our stream of consciousness, involving ideas appearing, etc. - seems to be governed by the way these layers interact, but how this exactly works is still a big mystery.

In daily life, these can't be separated into clear phases. But I think that different kinds of practices can be scaffolded in this essentially integrated process with different biases. Taking walks sets a different mindset than writing a conceptual analysis. This is also where somatic practices are very interesting, how they set up their learning environment, a point that I'd like to speak about with you.

LG: While considering Wallas and analysing our walks from a meta-perspective constitutes one aspect of our reflection, it may appear somewhat mechanistic. We have immense pleasure

from taking walks in the Prater, which is also conveniently located nearby. Our motivations for these walks are multifaceted; beyond stimulating our minds and spending time together, we appreciate the sun's warmth on our skin and the variations in temperature and humidity as we enter the wooded sections of the park. These sensory experiences enable us to connect with ourselves, each other, and, most importantly, the surrounding nature. Residing in a densely populated urban environment devoid of trees can diminish one's awareness of the seasons. We remember this from living in a different district. We only saw houses and a bit of grey sky- no way to tell the season or temperature from looking out the windows. Similarly, working in highly regulated spaces where artificial lighting and air conditioning obscure the natural passage of time, weather, and seasonal changes can lead to a disconnect from these cycles. We find it particularly beautiful to observe the changes in lighting now that autumn has arrived. The altered angle of the sun's rays accentuates different colours, elongates the shadows, and transforms previously shaded areas into illuminated spots where the sun now shines into bushes and foliage. As the main thoroughfare is lined with chestnut trees, there is a particular period in autumn when walking can become unpredictable due to rogue chestnuts falling from the trees. [laughs] But this is to say, we become so much aware of our own body and the conditions of the surroundings in relation to it.

RA: There is yet another aspect to it, which we already mentioned, but I would like to expand on it. Taking walks and consciously engaging with our living environment has ignited a curiosity about digging deeper into the history of this small part of the city we inhabit. Maybe it has been sparked by an encounter years ago when we spent whole days with our kids on the playground. One day, we met one of the engineers of the subway in Vienna, and he explained to us that one of the little hills here stems from the subway construction. The city had asked the construction firm to bring it to the park and make a small hill on a spot facing north, so that in winter, the children here would have a place for sledging. Another of our neighbours has researched the streets where our apartment and studio are located, and we could build on her research and our conversations with her. Doing this research and talking with people living around here has been conducive to our practice of Performative Walks around the neighbourhood, which we adapt for different audiences. For instance, in our earlier mentioned European project on resistance against fascism, we took the Croatian, German, and Austrian participants on a walk, highlighting sites of historical significance during and after the Nazi era, such as pointing out the house constructed by the Jewish architect and close friend of Theodor Herzl, Oskar Marmorek, in which Adolf Eichmann and his family resided during his stationing in Vienna. In the building we live in, Jewish resistance fighters Irma Schwager and her husband Zalel Schwager, who had previously fought in Spain, lived just above our apartment. Their grandson, Robert Rotifer, is a renowned singer-songwriter and journalist in Austria, who joined us for this tour, and talked about them and played us the songs he composed for his grandmother. His grandfather was among those transported to Vienna, fleeing the Russian pogroms, as described by Elias Canetti in his autobiography "Die gerettete Zunge." Canetti lived just around the corner during his youth, as did Hanns Eisler, who later composed the music for Alain Resnais's pioneering film "Nuit et brouillard" (1956), about the liberation of the camps and the Holocaust. We could go on and on. Knowing all this has deepened our relationship with our environment and changed the way we move through it. I think we both appreciate this place much more. But this should also serve to say that where we live, and a conscious, sensory, and curious approach to one's surroundings can become very inspirational and has led us to explore new art practices – not only the Performative Walks (Fig. 1), but we're also talking about it in this book that we are now preparing for publishing. It is our first narrative text, interspersed with essayistic parts, which we realised

together with novelist and essayist Anna Kim. In the third part of this book, we experiment with expressing the sensory experience of Feldenkrais sessions and of taking walks, and we have our main character constantly walking different streets around our neighbourhood. Therefore, walking serves as an exemplary daily practice that contributes to maintaining our health and mental well-being, while also fostering our professional development and engagement. It has inspired new methodologies and practices in our work, including the composition of literary texts and Performative Walks, and deepened the connection to our neighbourhood, and it has strengthened our work on resistance against fascism through personal connections. Accordingly, we find it highly pertinent to examine our daily routines. Our identity and agency are influenced not only by the socio-economic, cultural, and political environments, whether real, imaginary, or virtual, but also by the natural and built surroundings in which our daily lives evolve. Thus, they are not just backgrounds, or sceneries, or serve as the experiential background of our lives, but they can unfold as agencies.

Fig. 1: Example of a Performative Walk by Ruth Anderwald and Leonhard Grond for students and artists from Austria, Belarus, Croatia, Germany, Poland, Russia and Ukraine for their project The Arts of Resistance (2024-2025) © Foto: eSeL.at (Robert Puteanu), 2024

SMS: Talking about scrutinising tasks – I was working long on imagination, mostly on the case of complex geometric tasks, using introspection and protocols to gather what I experienced, and analysing it. At a certain point, I had had enough of that and started a daily walk or "Spaziergang" investigation as a contrast – I wanted to see how the mind works when it does not have to uphold the object of its interest through imagination, but casually interacts with an "outside" world. During several months, I did daily walks of the same route, and made notes. Reading my daily notes afterwards was interesting – I found that many observations that I noted repeated themselves, often even thinking that I made them for the first time, while my notes said otherwise. Apparently, we constantly scan stuff that we know, and orientation

evolves slowly, adding bits and pieces here and there. Speaking of orientation – to me it is a very curious thing that we find our way around naturally, without thinking. We must have some metaphorical "cognitive map" (a much researched topic in cognitive science) that guides us, but that map is not something we need to consciously take out, but we just follow it. We are the map, one could say, we are guided by our orientation. And our experience is a seamless amalgam of our cognition and the outside world. Until something fails and we stumble, that is. That brings me to an aspect of your work that I find intriguing, the disorientation and stumbling that I think dizziness involves, and to which you seem to put a more positive spin than I intuitively had thought of. Can you say something how you think about this, and how disorientation, if I get you right, is important?

RA: Orientation is basal; it is already in our conscious or unconscious focus of awareness. If I am aware that I feel disoriented, my focus and attention go there, exploring this disorientation. This insight goes back to the work of Jan Evangelista Purkinje and his research on vertigo and dizziness. Purkinje emphasised that attention is an active physiological process, and as such, attention is subject to the physiological conditions of perception. In his understanding, attention is the free determination of the direction of consciousness. Thus, even when we are dizzy or disoriented, we still have means of finding our position anew. Disorientation is most often an occurrence during transformation and is seldom an endpoint, even when concurrent with a situation of aporia.

LG: You say, 'We are the map; we are guided by our orientation.' This is really interesting, and you are right, of course. The way we think about dizziness and disorientation is very subject-centred. Instability, for instance, is different. It is also relational, of course, but it can be measured from the outside. Thus, we are the map, we are the orientation in the same way, we are also the dizziness, we are the disorientation and the concomitant loss of self and relation to the physical, mental, imaginary and digital surroundings.

RA: In medical settings, obtaining an accurate anamnesis of dizziness presents particular challenges. It cannot be quantified through straightforward measurements, as, e.g., can be done with fever or blood pressure. Instead, it must be described by the individual experiencing it. This introduces cultural, personal, and emotional dimensions into the understanding and expression of the experience of dizziness. Additionally, somatic states are inherently difficult to distinguish and articulate in words. So, in exploring the paradoxical and blurry aspects of dizziness in our research, we encountered various challenges. First, the experience and impact of dizziness cannot be fully comprehended or examined without considering the subjective experience of inhabiting a dizzy body.

Another challenge in our work on dizziness was determining how to develop an artistic research concept that can evolve and transform over time. We started from the hypothesis that states of dizziness can be a resource, but everything else was open. Our artistic and research practices are deeply rooted in conceptual art. So, creating a concept was imperative for both the artistic output as well as the research. However, we recognised the need to develop a concept that remained malleable and could be enriched over time, thereby exposing our heteromorphic research approach, which includes both inductive and deductive reasoning, as well as their testing and interpretation through artistic means.

Having started our collaborative and co-creative work with experimental filmmaking, time-based practices do play an essential role in our work. Walking could be just another example of that: an exploration of spacetime.

LG: Already in our early work, particularly in our experimental film work influenced by American avant-garde cinema and the *camera stylo*, we aimed to translate visual thinking into

sequences of images and imagination, into flow and rhythms, treating the camera like a brush leaving traces on a canvas. Our driving questions concerned what we perceive when we have an insight or idea, or when we forget something. While examining the visuality of thinking and imagination, we then considered and reflected on the concept of visual thinking. If we take this research on visual thinking seriously, how should we approach the art that is its outcome? Can art be regarded as an insight-producing, reflexive activity that manifests through aesthetic expressions? But if so, shouldn't our analysis start with the processes we engage in – the art-making, the thinking about, with and alongside art – which ultimately leads to the artwork?

RA: Artistic disciplines have been developing research-based arts. Most notably, because they have reflexive and epistemic interests, as is the case in conceptual art, art-activism, or social art; also, because the methods of knowledge genesis have been diversifying throughout the academic landscape, and because of the visual culture that has become dominant, requiring a more nuanced examination from the visual field itself, which offers itself as a subject area for artistic research. However, not only visual but also performative and participatory art comes into focus, if not exclusively, then especially as an object of reflection for epistemological aesthetics, as Anke Haarman notes. Reflexive art practice, critique of knowledge, performativity, and (visual) media culture are the main parameters to gauge the practice of art as research. (Haarman 2019) The political factors responsible for the academisation of artistic research started aligning when we were at the end of our studies, in the late 1990s. I recall how amazed I was by Renee Greene. She was in my Diploma committee, and I remember discussing my burgeoning interest in Gilles Deleuze's writing on film with her. She was one of the first artists I encountered who advocated for an artist's theoretical engagement and capability.

For us, experimental cinema, its theorisation, and exploring the topic of visual thinking in our films ultimately sparked the journey of becoming artist-researchers. These hyphenate beings know how to navigate different terrains of knowledge and prefer to stay "ignorant generalists," as Luis Camnitzer writes, without ever belonging to any specific discipline they may engage with (Camnitzer 2024).

Are people who are visual thinkers imagining the world differently than, e.g., people more prone to auditory sensory input and imagination? Does the differentiation even play a role in your work and thinking?

SMS: I'm not sure yet if I am understanding what artistic research means or is. I've heard that it is filled with different meanings currently, i.e. the field of artistic research has some opposing strands? I always considered art as coming from a curiosity of some kind, maybe to produce something of a certain aesthetic, maybe to bring forth a thought, perception or feeling that one wants to express, maybe to gather people. My interest in art for a long time was to produce – it was basically just fun to do it, and to come up with "inventions;" but then I started to think about one of the (many) preconditions of creation, in my case, I was interested in the underlying cognition that brings forth art – an epistemological interest. So I started to research, and at a certain point, creating art did not help me any more to follow this interest, and I turned to, let's say, more empirical-philosophical work in cognitive science, and more text-based work. An interpretation of the term "artistic research" that makes sense to me is "doing research with artistic means" - more than "research with artistic output," maybe this sometimes feels a bit conceptual. Research with artistic means would be really interesting, because it involves ways of thinking, exploration, and creation that can differ deeply from scientific research. How would you think of your artistic work? Maybe let's talk about some examples?

I am also not sure what you mean by visual thinking, but that's the cognitive scientist talking who, amongst other topics, specialises in imagination and mental imagery. Things get tricky if

you're starting to scrutinise this, and philosophers, psychologists or neuroscientists rarely have a clear idea of imagination (apart from formal definitions or psychological operationalizations). I'll come to that later. But I am widely used to everyone having an opinion about themselves, some saying they are visual thinkers, some saying they aren't. Much like some say they can or can't draw. I've been sometimes called a non-visual thinker, even though, as an artist, I am constantly composing pictures in my imagination, sometimes more than physically painting or sketching. These attributions and self-attributions seldom hold scrutiny, maybe because no one really knows what is meant, but also because we can't directly compare our experiences. And some may interpret their experience very positively as of a visual nature and indulge in it, while others see how much imagination lacks in visual clarity. So it's also a matter of one's attitude. But, as becomes more and more clear, imagination, and I'd probably say this relates to visual thinking, is also a matter of skill. Meaning, it's not simply a talent that one has or one hasn't, but an interest that one has honed to a certain level of expertise. Imagination is very much skill-based: We can imagine what we know of much better than what we rarely know. For example, expert climbers can imagine how they move their bodies much better than novices and thus are better in route planning.

RA: A few years ago, prior to the initiation and realisation of our collaboration with creativity research, we held a keen interest in another aspect of differential psychology: the study of giftedness. Visual thinking, as we comprehend it, is based on Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, which critiques our often limited and narrow conception of intelligence and advocates for a more comprehensive approach (Gardner 1993). Visual thinking is defined as the capacity to think in images and pictures, and to visualise both accurately and abstractly, which, of course, is a very inclusive definition. Drawing from a remarkable capacity for imagination, visual-spatial giftedness is characterised by a desire for novelty and holistic thinking, challenging linear structures and thinking in terms of movements and relationships. It encompasses the ability to create artistic images, employ metaphorical language, and communicate abstract thoughts through concrete images and visualisation, as wonderfully exemplified by your reference to Poincaré.

SMS: That's a wonderful aspect that you are mentioning – the capacity for holistic thinking and its potential basis in imagination. It's well known that metaphors are often simple, inherently, but can represent a higher-order understanding of a certain domain or topic. Research in Cognitive Linguistics has shown this with striking clarity. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in *Metaphors We Live By*, argued that our conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical: we understand abstract domains through embodied experiences.

An anthropological example can be found in studies of ritual and healing practices. Among the Maya, for instance, health and illness are conceptualised through hot–cold metaphors: illness may be understood as "heat rising" or "cold entering," treated with plants and practices that restore balance (Messer 1987). These are not merely figurative, but embodied imaginative frameworks that guide concrete action. Similarly, Csordas (1994) has shown how ritual healing among Catholic charismatics organises attention through somatic metaphors — participants describe being "filled," "opened," or "carried" in ways that directly structure bodily experience and agency. Such cases support what Kirmayer (1992) called the *body's insistence on meaning*: Metaphor is not only linguistic representation but a mode through which experience demands and acquires form.

These examples resonate strongly with somatic practices I have studied. In Taijiquan, imaginative metaphors such as "sinking," "expanding," or "floating" become directly enacted in movement (Frank 2006). In Feldenkrais, pedagogical cues often rely on imaginative redirections

of attention — "lengthening," "softening," "turning the breath" — which transform how movement is felt and organised (Kimmel 2015). In both ethnographic and somatic contexts, imagination is not confined to making pictures in the mind, but structures embodied practice and perception in context-sensitive ways. I would like to talk about what it means to you that we are living in a post-disciplinary world. What does this mean to you, what do you consider important about it, what effects does it have?

RA: As you have asked about artistic research, I would shortly comment on that first. Following the groundbreaking shift that happened in fine arts through conceptual art, our practice builds on the understanding of the theorist and curator Jerzy Ludwinski, who founded an institute for artistic research already in the 1970s. He goes even further, claiming that we have lost sight of what art is and have now come to a place where art has become so wide and almost all-encompassing that we have yet to understand its capacities. He called this art beyond art "post-art" and uses this notion as the umbrella term for conceptual art, ephemeral art, artistic research and all the other revolutionary forms of making art of that time. In a conversation with curator Philippe-Alain Michaud, he stated that he believes the sole purpose of art is to broaden the notion of art, and we wholeheartedly agree with him. We always try to approach and understand things from their limits. We have been criticised for our approach to artistic research, being perceived as too topical. We are interested in a topic and open to using different artistic and scholarly ways of exploring it. Another classification of this approach would be post-disciplinary. There are, naturally, different approaches to artistic research, as well as various terms: the North American notion of research creation, research-based art, and practice-based research… Artistic research is a term mainly used in the German-speaking area. These terms carry different connotations in terms of process, methodology, mode of reflection and outcome. We are rather fond of this inherent openness and opposed to any sort of orthodoxy that might limit the expansion and explorative nature that is still prevalent in artistic research.

SMS: Something related, but maybe not the same, is interdisciplinarity. My studies and research in cognitive science made me think within different disciplines, such as artificial intelligence, cognitive psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, philosophy, and even mathematics, developmental psychology and ethnography. It's tough to find common ground between these disciplines, and the "project" of cognitive science is not at all homogeneous (e.g. Boden, 2006). Actually, there has been a recent debate about whether it was successful at all in its interdisciplinary impetus. The most integrative attempts that I have seen are people working on cognitive architectures, such as Dietrich Dörner (Bauplan für eine Seele, 1998) and Joscha Bach (Principles of Synthetic Intelligence, 2009) – building machines that not only mimic cognition (or intelligence), but try to integrate relevant findings from all other disciplines – an idealistic project towards a unifying framework!

But everyone finds their own way to implement an interdisciplinary mix, depending on their interest – sometimes more selective or focused on one area, up to sometimes embracing the full picture. Cross-overs are often happening between two or three disciplines, for example, lots of philosophy of cognition bases the analysis not on intuitions and logical arguments (although this always plays a role, too), but on reading up what cognitive psychology and neuroscience found out about a subject of their interest. Phenomenologist philosopher Shaun Gallagher is a great example of this. In his book "How the body shapes the mind" (2005), he traces many influences that, as he calls them, "non-conscious" processes have on consciousness. I think he uses the term "non-conscious" to sidestep the psychoanalytic concept of "unconsciousness" to avoid confusion. Unconscious processes, such as memories or background feelings, have the potential to become conscious. Gallagher is interested in bodily processes that typically do not

enter awareness, yet play a constitutive role in shaping consciousness, such as proprioception, motor control, hormonal regulation. Gallagher tries to understand how they do so by looking into neuroscience and psychology, as these disciplines have the methods to investigate non-conscious processes. He explicitly rejects a purely introspective or philosophical approach, instead advocating a phenomenology that dialogues with the sciences. It's interesting how Gallagher continues to talk about how the body comes into consciousness. Shall we talk a bit about that, and what do you think of this question?

But I'd like to address a related topic that runs even deeper, and that connects science, art, and somatic practices. It's that different kinds of thinking all play a role. If you are coming from art, and even more so, from somatics, you probably prioritize experience. In science, you will prioritise analysis and objective empirical work. I think it's important to connect these. What do you think of this, and how does it influence your work? Do you see other ways of thinking or acting that come into the picture, too?

RA: Concerning the prioritisation of scientific or artistic methodologies, there exists a well-documented anecdote concerning a meeting between Roger Caillois and André Breton in 1913, which is frequently cited in this context. Both individuals recall the event differently; however, upon their meeting, a disagreement ensued. Caillois was eager to join the Surrealists and met with Breton for a discussion. Nonetheless, when they observed a bean dancing, their immediate reactions diverged. Following Caillois' account, Breton was opposed to dissecting the bean to examine its internal structure; instead, he preferred to speculate about the reasons behind its peculiar behaviour. Caillois did not view this incident lightly and, in a letter sent the following day, accused Breton of favouring intuition over analysis, subsequently cutting ties with Breton and the Surrealists. In the realm of artistic research, this story is often cited to emphasise that the discipline values both scientific dissection and analysis, alongside poetic and speculative approaches. It is the balance between these diverse methods of meaning-making that Caillois advocated, which is central to the values guiding artistic research. It is not about preferences or prioritising one in order to disregard another aspect, but about a keen and curious understanding of how they might enact different findings, outcomes and ensuing questions, and what to learn from them in which context (Caillois 2003).

LG: To answer your question in a more practical way, I would like to revisit our filmmaking practice. In this practice, we are frequently asked to elucidate our methods of filming and the preparatory processes involved. Typically, we select a theme, situation, or location upon which to focus. During the preparatory phase, we diligently aim to gather comprehensive information about our topic. This stage functions as a research phase, whereby we explore various sources, interdisciplinary connections, or historical references until we establish a robust epistemological foundation. Subsequently, we initiate filming, improvising based on the knowledge and attention we have at the very moment of filming. This interaction is a somatic moment in which we decide together what section to film, at what speed and for how long. We have occasionally referred to filming as a form of free improvisation, as practiced in Jazz music. This improvisational approach is then documented on film.

RA: But coming to your work, which is focused on imagination. How do you conceptualise imagination? Recognising its central role in your scientific research, it seems pertinent to consider your background in art, specifically expressive painting – a physically engaged form of art making. We hypothesise that you experienced the coincidence of imagination and somatic movement while painting and their reciprocal influence. Was this conceptualisation of imagination evident in your early work? Did it evolve from your initial artistic pursuits?

SMS: Imagination has been a throughline in my work, but my understanding of it has

changed considerably over time – owing to the profound influence of my professor and mentor Oswald Wiener whom I first met at the arts academy in Düsseldorf. In 2000, Wiener published a collection of his lecture notes on imagination (Wiener, 2000), in preparation to a full book - which was never published. Wiener passed away in 2020, having consistently worked on the topic, as did I and a group of likeminded researchers around him. It's simply staggering how complex the topic reveals itself to be: imagination cannot be isolated from memory, embodied orientation, movement skills, constructive thought, intuition, and more – while simultaneously being obscured by folk-theoretical assumptions, such as its supposed similarity to perception and the notion of "images in the mind". The process of exploring this topic alongside Wiener and my fellow researchers has been profoundly enriching, leading to several collaborative publications (Eder et al., 2015; Eder et al., 2023), and I remain deeply grateful for the intellectual companionship on this shared journey.

In my beginnings as a painter, imagination was something I experienced as interleaving the perception-action cycle – allowing me to go beyond "mechanical" output. I pushed this to an extreme in a series of paintings where I was literally sitting in front of the white canvas, playing with what my mind could come up with, and observing myself on the patterns of ideas coming up. I there discovered certain limits of imagination - that fantasy often worked by recombining what I already knew. The results on the canvas could get stranger, more inventive, but the underlying process was less free than I had assumed. Do you know of Libet's experiments on free will? They basically found through neuropsychological experimentation that every conscious awareness follows an earlier, but unconsciousness, determination within the nervous system (Libet et al., 1983). This did not wonder me at all, as my self-study has shown to me that I don't know where sudden ideas are coming from, just that I can decide after the fact what I want to do with them. This mirror's the wonderful statement "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." (often attributed to Victor Frankl, but originally Stephen R. Covey speaking of Frankl).

LG: This space is truly fascinating, as it can play a central role in somatic learning processes such as Awareness Through Movement lessons. In our theoretical work, we think of this space as a compossible space through the conversations with Karoline Feyertag and François Jullien. Like in a sluice chamber, a spacetime opens where many things seem possible simultaneously, and the outcome is uncertain. Of course, Covey looks at it from a different perspective, the perspective of delaying an initial response by an individual to a situation and pausing for reflection. Our perspective is rather zoomed into this space, looking at the potential mingling, dissolving and transforming.

RA: Somatically, we have compared it to the movement of staggering. When you stagger, this reflex opens up more possibilities than just falling. However, you still might fall, there is no certainty to its ambiguity. Nonetheless, it affords you with what Kierkegaard (1980) calls "the possibility of possibility", which, of course, includes Blanchot's "impossibility of possibility" in our understanding (Blanchot, 1993). By the way, this is exactly what we love to do: combine abstract reasoning with artistic work and concrete somatic movements and explore if and how they connect in the different individuals.

SMS: A different perspective opened later, outside of art and not yet in cognitive science, when I began practising Taichi. Here, imagination became immediately embodied, expressed through movement - whether in spatial forms or in gestures charged with metaphorical qualities. This sparked a lasting interest in somatic practices more broadly. In Feldenkrais, for example, the quality of embodied sensing became central, adding further layers to how imagination and movement intertwine. The deep sensory awareness and gentle practising space opened in

Feldenkrais Awareness Through Movement classes brought forth so many imaginative evocations that my paintings shifted towards depicting such deeply integrated, somatic experiences (Fig. 2).

Fig 2.: Painting inspired by the tumbling sensation and curious playfulness while practicing Judo rolls. Courtesy: Stefan Schneider

These practices were personally transformative, but also deeply informed my research interests in cognitive science, and I shifted my research focus from less body-related (but not disembodied!) modes of cognition, such as problem solving and mathematical thinking, toward the dynamics of mind and body as they unfold and integrate in movement practices. We recently, for example, published an extensive account of how new metaphors are gradually becoming embodied realities in movement and somatic practices (Kimmel et al., 2024) (Fig. 3). We argue that it needs a truly integrative approach to bridge all involved facets – from linguistic understanding to imagination, to embodied sensing and bodily movement. For me, imagination is not reducible to one of these perspectives. It involves mental construction, but can also come in through autosymbolic intuitions, tethers out organically into embodied expression, and is a process that thus has the potential to cut across domains. My work aims to hold these strands together: artistic, somatic, and scientific.

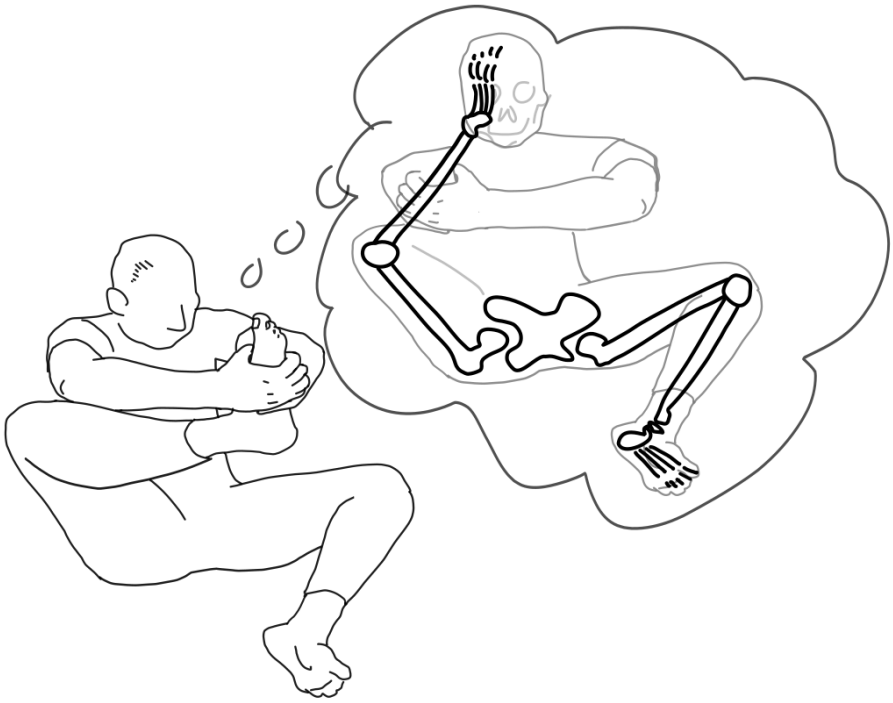

Fig 3: The movement instruction to "put your foot on your forehead" is supported by the imagination that a skeleton without muscles and tendons could easily do it. Example from a Feldenkrais "Awareness Through Movement" lesson. Image from Kimmel et al., 2024.

This might be a good point to connect back to our starting point with leisure walks, or to your artistic work, and your interest in finding reflexivity as well as making this reflexivity an integral part of your art. You recently published an article on artistic reflection, associated with a video overlaying daily views out of a window with other visuals. I very much like what you say there, that "it is important for the artist-researcher to simultaneously get lost in thought and stay on track" (Anderwald, Grond 2024, p. 219). This touches a thread running through our conversation, namely the integration of different facets of human experience.

RA: Yes, we are referring to Alain Ginsberg here and his thinking and teaching of the relation between artistic and epistemic processes (Ginsberg 1974). The integration of different facets of human experience is important in our artistic research, but we do not regard this integration as finding a final form or reducing it to a formula. In our work on dizziness, we must repeatedly employ a wide variety of perspectives and scales, ranging from individual to systemic levels, and thus also across disciplines. Dizziness is paradoxical, unpredictable and cannot be encapsulated in a single concept or discipline. This moment of unpredictability, unbalance and precarity always strikes the human experiencing it anew. It always attacks us unexpectedly, engendering a sense of precariousness and vulnerability. In our workshops, we conduct balance training sessions, which involve assigning participants various movement tasks in a group setting, such as standing on one leg with eyes closed. Subsequently, we discuss the experience of losing and regaining balance. In this sessions, at least, one of the participants describes feeling exposed and vulnerable. What does this precarity do with us, with the way we hold our bodies and the

way we build and (re)imagine our societies? To date, we have not thoroughly investigated the relationship between imagination and dizziness satisfactorily. Thus, we are eager to continue our conversation and learn more about your definition or conceptualisation of imagination.

SMS: Regarding the definition of imagination you are asking for, I can tell you a bit about my research and how it is situated within cognitive science. Imagination is a tricky topic, and some have called it a hallmark of understanding how the mind works (Gallagher 2017, Clark & Toribio 1994). Imagination has often been likened to perception (and its multi-modal variants: visual, kinesthetic, auditory, etc.), and there is something very true about this, but also something strongly misleading. In cognitive science, there are different conceptualisations — and with them, different research paradigms for how the phenomenon is investigated. On one side are representational accounts: Stephen Kosslyn and others argued for a pictorial account, where mental images are literally like pictures in the mind (Kosslyn, 1981; Kosslyn et al., 2006). In contrast, Zenon Pylyshyn defended a propositional or descriptive account, closer to structured symbolic descriptions (Pylyshyn, 2003) — an approach closely related to artificial intelligence research of that time. They directly addressed each other in an argumentative back-and-forth in what has been called the "imagery debate."

Lawrence Barsalou's simulation theory (Barsalou, 2009) can be seen as bridging these positions. Like Kosslyn, he emphasises that imagery involves perceptual systems, but rather than assuming static inner pictures, he argues that we *simulate* perceptual and motor states in a context-dependent way. Imagination, in this view, is the partial reactivation of the same neural and cognitive systems that operate in perception and action. Later, when phenomenology and the embodied mind trend gained traction, even these representational debates were put into question. Much recent research in embodied cognition suggests that imagination is less about conceiving internal images and more about conceiving one's *possible actions* in a hypothetical situation.

That still leaves the question: how does imagination work? Representational theories (pictorial, descriptive, or simulation) view it as the manipulation of internal analogues of external objects or images. Embodied-enactive theories, by contrast, see it as the actualisation and coordination of actions. The debate thus plays out as an object–subject opposition: one camp insists imagination is about objects, the other that it is about the subject's actions.

I think both got something right – and both get something quite wrong in their radical negation of the counterpart. My research shows that we imagine our actions, but we also sometimes invest a lot into imagining the object counterparts of these actions. But basically, imagination is a dynamic process, and nothing is stable there. When you do a bit of self-observation on your imagination, you'll find that your stream of consciousness is ephemeral - as William James famously asserted - images appear and disappear, and much effort goes into trying to stabilise what you want to "picture." I've therefore come to the conclusion that imagination is a performative activity, in which both fleeting constructs, i.e. imaginary stand-ins for objects, and covert actions mutually shape one another. And what emerges is not a picture, but a context-sensitive readiness for action, a way of orienting ourselves toward what is possible (Schneider 2013, 2015, 2026).

And when you look at the whole picture again, the organism in its environment, perceiving, imagining, acting, I would argue that imagination is like perception in some ways, insofar as some (but not all) of the same cognitive structures are recruited. But I would propose a reversal of the relation - not to think of imagination as a kind of "internalised perception," but rather to see perception itself as always imbued with imagination. Imagination is not the production of inner pictures; it is the establishment of cognitive structures that shape how we look at, and can

act within, the world.

I need to add an important point here, which traces back to where we started, how bodies, concepts and epistemologies are in constant movement. The kind of imagination that I characterised here testifies to how fragile this process is, and how much its stabilisation – if intended – (through cognitive but also social pressure) builds on and uses (sometimes abuses) all the organic and cognitive functions our evolution brought with it. The way thinking has been understood in early cognitive science, as disembodied information processing, certainly does not hold. "Living thought," as Piaget calls it, relies on all the layers of our embodied being. And this being is a dynamic one, in constant interaction, in constant engagement with changing circumstances and thoughts. I think this reflects the topic of dizziness very well, and the value you attribute to metastable states.

LG: This seems like a good statement to leave the conversation for now…

RA: …only to pick up on it soon again! Let's walk home for now.

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Unearthing AfrOist Body Governance (ABGs): A Dialogue

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Abstract: *Unearthing AfrOist Body Governance (ABGs): A Dialogue, intuitively examines somatic practice through the artists' extensive experience in movement and dance within African diasporic and global forms. Prompted by a 16-weekAlexander Technique course facilitated by Hunter-Valentine at The Ohio State University, this dialogue initiates an ongoing exploration of a new somatic framework rooted in African diasporic epistemology, drawn from longstanding African traditions and ontologies and based on a theory of cultural continuity (AfrOism) introduced by Dr. yaTande Whitney V. Hunter.*

Keywords: *decolonize somatics, wellness, spirituality, Africanist, sekpoli, embodiment*

The dialogue below captures a conversation initiated by choreographers Orlando Hunter-Valentine, then an MFA graduate student at The Ohio State University, and Dr. yaTande Whitney V. Hunter. They sought an alternative to the Alexander Technique. The prompt arose from a request for Hunter-Valentine to facilitate a 16-weekAlexander Technique course at The Ohio State University. In response, Hunter-Valentine and Dr. yaTande began talks that led to the conception of AfrOist[1] Body Governance (ABGs).

This dialogue documents the initial virtual conversation between the two artists as they explore the need for alternative somatic methods. Through these discussions, they identify core issues and challenges that inspire the development of a new somatic practice, AfrOist Body Governance (ABGs). ABGs is a practice rooted in African diasporic epistemology, drawing from longstanding African traditions and ontologies and based on a theory of cultural continuity (AfrOism) introduced by Dr. yaTande. The dialogue examines somatic practices through the artists' extensive experience in movement and dance within African diasporic and global forms, initiating an ongoing exploration of new somatic frameworks and inspired by such artists-practitioners as Ade Ola[2], Dr. S. Ama Wray[3], and Oludaré[4] for their contributions in centralizing Africana perspectives on the subject of somatics and embodied aesthetics.

1 A theory of cultural continuity coined by Dr. yaTande Whitney V. Hunter

2 OriBata, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Quo892UeV9M

3 Embodiology, https://www.embodiology.com/

4 Kiire Wellness, https://www.kiirewellness.com/

Orlando:
Recognizing the body as African Americans in the United States, specifically, with the knowledge of diasporic somatic understanding.

yaTande:
I would venture to say even more that, yes, it's [AfrOist Body Governance/ABGs] another take, it's an alternative.

These concepts that we're going into, existed long before any of this socio-cultural "stuff"of slavery and colonization and all of that. So it's like, how can that teach us? Which is why I think it is so important to think about, the Orisha[5], the divinities, of deities, because that system of knowledge goes back so far that I think there's something in there that we can learn from to bring forward into the contemporary right?

The body has always existed. But to take this idea from the fact that in AfrOist, Africanist, African diasporic, however you want to say it, cultural understanding, the body is deeply engaged in the process of living. Right? It's not, we've never tried to escape the body. And furthermore, we have understood that the body becomes a medium and a vessel for other energies to pass through to inhabit.

And that's really, I think that's the key to this [ABGs] because it says, *oh, okay, my body is not just my own*. So, then you can say that extends into the idea even that, well, if my body is not my own, my body is the community, belongs also to the community, then what is the responsibility of my well-being in this body that I am possessing at this point or inhabiting at this point? What is the larger responsibility?

Um, If you don't have a *well* body then what spirit can come through.

How can you hold that?

And, you know, I think it's really interesting that in... the Lebou people[6]. And this Ndeup dance is performed, this ritual, really, this ritual is performed when people have some ailment, largely mental ailment, and they need to discover is going on. But the main focus of this ritual is to communicate with the ancestors, to say, "hey, what is going on with this person's body?" What is going on with this person? Right? And so right away, you go like, oh, okay, so, right, it's not about just going to a therapist and sitting and talking about it. It's about going into the ritual, into the circle where everybody is present. The public is there. The community is there. The spirit comes invoking spirit. Spirit speaks. Spirit speaks in terms of language. Spirit speaks in terms of song. Spirit speaks in terms of movement to reveal what is needed for the well-being of this person.

And so in that sense, right, the body, a body that is well is one that can sing, one that can dance, one that can be okay with being in community. Um, and so that's a different concept,

5 Orisha – commonly known in Yoruba-based cosmology as manifested forces of nature.

6 (The Drum's Voice: African inspired dance and rhythms from beyond, https://drumsvoice.wordpress.com/2013/03/21/african-dance-as-a-ritual-of-healing-senegalese-ndeup/)

right?

Orlando:
So we're concerned about wellness? Right.

yaTande:
Yeah. Well, right. Because as I see it, wellness and healing is slightly different. One reason is that healing presumes being unwell, being sick.

I have to get well. I have to heal myself. You have to heal a wound or whatever.

Whereas wellness, I think is more about sustaining, a sustained sense of being whole.

And I love all of these ideas because every word that you use around like wellness, feeling whole, holistic, this idea of emptiness is there, this idea of like a well, a deep well is like a deep hole. It's like, right?

Holistic implies in some way this sense of, you know, there is a whole, there is something that is not there. And in some way, you kind of think about it like, I think about it like, well, that's interesting from an Africanist point of view, because in, you know, Haitian Vodou, this idea of the gros bonnaj, which is the big angel, right? The big good angel, good big angel, is the one that during possession, goes away.

Right? So it's this big space that is left for then this other entity, this other energy to enter into your body. And when that entity is finished, *the big angel* comes back as opposed to the tibonnaj, the little angel.The little angel never leaves. That's always with you until the end of your life. And then that goes away and has to be captured into a vessel.

But just this idea of the *big angel* leaving, it implies to me this kind of this big hole that's now in your body to allow and to invite this other energy, a space to inhabit. And so maybe, you know, maybe from an Africanist point of view, you know, like, being well is about having a kind of hole inside of you, a space

Orlando:
for spirit to [inhabit]

yaTande:
Right!That it's not about you trying to feel everything up in you, but it's about leaving a space that things can pass through.

Orlando:
I feel like this is going into, like, is it Taoism or something like that where they talk about emptiness?

yaTande:
Oh, okay.

Orlando:
Like, or Buddhism or a Zen Buddhism or just like, yeah.

In Zen Buddhism the focus of the dogma is to have no thought. Removing the concept of there being something to be or do. However, the Zen Buddhism concept is to be fully present in just being. Removing the need to fill up space on the inside births authentic spirit movement.

You have, there's that sense of nothingness. Like to reduce yourself all the way down to nothing so that then pure spirit can be.

yaTande:
Yeah! I mean, I think that somehow, okay, so let's even think about, let's think about these principles of elongation. You know, I know that in Graham [Technique', for example, we always talked about, you know, lengthening the spine and think about the space in between, right? The space in between the vertebra where movement actually begins to happen, can happen, because there is space.

Orlando:
Right.

yaTande:
And if everything is compacted down, there's no movement because there is rigidity and everything. So if space is what promotes mobility, then and space is a hole or space is nothingness, then you do need a certain amount of nothingness as a part of your body, for your well-being.

I don't know.

Orlando:
That makes me think about, the organs. And because those are just kind of like these holes in these spaces, they're kind of like. Puffed up, you know?

I mean, I'm thinking more like the intestines

I don't know. The pancreas seems like it's kind of like there's no hole in the pancreas. It's like a solid.

yaTande:
Yeah, they always talk about the pancreas looking like a feather or something.

Orlando:
The heart, the heart has holes, the arteries, different arteries of the heart.

Because I was also looking in Dancing Wisdom and she [Yvonne Daniel] was saying that "beyond understanding, body systems, respiratory, digestive, muscular, skeletal, and physiological personality, characteristics and psychology are understood in terms of the associated divinities

in the dancing religions of the Americas." (Daniel, 2005, p. 5)

So, I think also what we were just talking about earlier was like, keeping that space open for spirit because that's like spirit is what's missing in Western education.

So they remove spirit so it can be more, like you said, accessible. Or so they think it's more accessible.

yaTande:
Well, the removal of spirit was, you know, a project of the philosophers because they wanted to be able to talk about these things without having to talk about religion.

Basically, they were trying to get power from the religious people. They created philosophy as a
way of engaging with the same ideas, just in a secular, non-religious way. Which is how we're able
to talk about these things without having to talk about how Ifá or, you know, how whatever the
religious, the religious body, even though, you know, in our [African spiritualists] way, you know,
it's more about spirituality. It's not religion, religious doctrine, per se. It's about understanding,
understanding the body and spirit, you know, in a different way. But in any case, right, that there
is, you know, there is a lack of. There's lack of I'm just thinking about like, you know, Bartenieff [7] where it is very corporeal, you know, in terms of, you know, *feel the arm doing things sensationally*, you know, like *feel the arm doing this thing*. And so then, I guess a question for us is, you know, what, you know, what really, what does spirit have to do with that? Right?

All right. Yeah, that's, that is kind of the question, you know, like, right? Is this [ABGs] is this a thing about spirit or is this something about, I mean, the body- as spirit. I mean, we yes, we know that. You know, it's interesting because there is the idea that the body is spirit.

So you're like, if the body is. spirit, why do we have all of these organs in, you know, things, physical things? And I guess these are like our biological anchors on this terrestrial plane, which we will not need once we leave this.

Orlando:
Right.

yaTande:
But if sekpoli[8] is about the breath of life, then none of this would work without the animation of air, of breath, of life.

7 The BartenieffFundamentalssm (BF) are a set of principles developed by Irmgard Bartenieff, who studied with Rudolf Laban. Bartenieff developed a methodology exploring the principles of kinesiological functioning that can be used to observe and analyze our bodies in motion and which can be extended to all types of movement possibilities.(Laban / Bartenieff Institute for Movement Studies, https://labaninstitute.org/education/) https://alexandertechnique.co.uk/alexander-technique),

8 A concept that refers to the primal breath that is provided all living beings by Mawu (the supreme deity of Ewe/Fon cosmology)

Orlando:
So then that goes into thinking, so maybe it [speaking of the methodological order of the ABG system] goes breath into organs or digestive systems.

Because I think that those [the movement of the organs within the body] are the first dances.

yaTande:
The way that, yeah, that's the good way to think about. Like the way that the organs are moving in relation to each other, right?

The way that they are constructed in the body, the heart, right. Right. Yeah, I think that's a good I think that's a useful thought. The way that what happens when the heart pumps moves, that sends energy, that sends blood and such to this place within, which makes this one move.

I mean, like, these things are all happening in our body. Right? The movement, the water is allowing these things to these organs to glide across each other, expand, and compress, you know, and all of that..

Orlando:
So, like, breath, digestive systems. Because initially I think we were like, breath, then, spine. But we still have to have to be in the soft goods first, I think.

Yeah. before we start we get to structure, which is maybe the fourth one, right? I think because the fourth one here was muscle or organize as you had it. And I'm like, if we think about that in relationship to Saturn with which it relates to the bone instead of muscle.

yaTande:
So is?

That's not the question.

Orlando:
So two's the question. So two.

Oh, okay, this is really good! This is really good. Because it's kind of forcing us to do this kind of. I mean, it's a real stretch because the serpent body is also soft

you know, but we're relating it to the hard quality of the spine, which is a bone structure. So… *digestive*. So we going from the breath, sekpoli, and understanding this animation of the body and the first dances being that kind of parasympathetic movement.

Orlando:
And then muscle..

yaTande:
Or, I mean… Thinking, you know, it's the breath. breath comes into the body, right, we're

born, we're animated by breath. We already have… until we're born, and we're depending on air and such from our mothers..

Orlando:
Right.

yaTande:
But once we're born, it's when we then, get our own breath then, to go by. And also at that time, we have our body already. Right.

And so from then, that moment on, we're just, our body is just growing at that point.

Orlando:
Right. Right.

yaTande:
So. And our different systems [what kind] are kicking in as our body matures. So I'm just thinking about, right, this idea of having the body already, right? Which is that part of this kind of wholeness principle, this wellness principle, is that if we are here, we have the body, so it's about creating consciousness about what of the body is functioning and how that body is functioning, versus having to do so much work in… sort of like… detailing what the…
Well, no, you got to detail what the thing is.

Orlando:
So, thinking about leaving space, because I love the idea. I mean, when we talk about thinking about the in between, you know what I mean? We know that that's where we can find, you know, that kind of expansiveness.

And so, what were you just saying about wholeness?

yaTande:
Yeah, just this idea that wholeness is a, through wholeness, there is a possibility of mobility, of, yeah, of mobility. I mean, you think about stretching the muscles, what you're doing is bring, you know, you talk about breathing into that muscle.

So and that's all for purposes of flexibility and mobility. And it is, right? It's the air.

Air is the principle here because even in fluids, even in the water… There's so much air in water. So you know, this idea of lubrication, lubrication as connected to aeration.

These two principles are always together because, for example, we can talk about moving as, you know, Damballah, Agwe, whatever, as the ocean, La Siren [the mermaid] , as the ocean. But we can also talk about that motion as blowing wind, as wind blowing, right? So perhaps there's something, right, there's something in that that helps us understand or get clearer about what the activity of breathing.

I think that's what we're doing. I think we're bringing consciousness to the function, to the productive function of the body. Maybe not productive, but something…

Because I'm thinking about when people say, "oh, no, I can't dance; I don't dance."

Orlando:
That's because, right.

yaTande:
You know, there's a part of that that's like, it's because you don't, you're not aware of the fact that.

Orlando:
You're already dancing

yaTande:
you are already dancing because of dance is movement and that dance is so, so much like a cultural thing. Right?

That, you know, this expectation that I don't, it's also like saying, "I don't have to dance." Oh, no, I don't dance. It's not that you don't dance. It's like, " I don't have to dance to be a productive and functioning person in this society. But we know that in our indigenous communities, particularly in Africa, you know, like the king, the queen, the Oba, they have to know how to dance. If you do not dance, you cannot be... You cannot be the leader of this community. [laughing]

So, you know, from that perspective, it's like, okay, so then, how does this thing that we're building function to bring consciousness around the fact that dance movement is, you know, a fundamental, a prime activity of a well life.

Orlando:
Right. Yeah. And "Afro solo, man", uh I just do different kinds of like installations.And so one, I have this one that's like wellness recipes. So I just have a marker there and people just write what their recipe for wellness is. And so that's been one way that I've kind of thought about wellness because that recipe is specific to each person..

You know, it's like, what we're telling people, or what we're having people experience is not that this is a one-off kind of prescription of something. You know, this is a way of existing consciously

Around what helps you feel the most mobile and flexible.

And it's not productive.

What is it in, I mean, it is this idea of product/production, but I don't want to use the product

yaTande:
Right, right.

Orlando:
Let me see…
That's what it is. Creating. Helping people to create their own recipe for wellness. And not just saying "well, the recipe for wellness is if you get your spines sitting up straight and you sitting in your monkeys".

You know. So, yeah, it's helping people to create this. What they feel as necessary for them, and we're helping them through this African/AfrOist cosmology of body organization practices. That are spirit induced.

Because it is you can't, for AfrOist practices, you can we don't decouple spirit. It's like we are spirit. So, we experience the world and the processes that we created are spirit. I mean, hoodoo, voodoo, like wherever we go. It's like, okay, y'all feel is there's something there.

yaTande:
I mean.
I'm thinking if we say that everything has spirit, well, I say every living thing has spirit, and every animate object/being has spirit, and every inanimate object can be imbued with spirit.But ultimately, the premise here is that spirit is breath.

Orlando:
And where there's no breath, there is no life.

Well there's no breath, there is no life, and we can look at soil and see that you need aeration. And again, that goes back to what we were talking about earlier. You need aeration in the soil for the plants to live, for the seed to grow.

yaTande:
Right.

Orlando:
If the soil is packed tightly, there's no opportunity for that seed to move towards the sun.

Or for the roots to even spread down into the earth.

And also, if the soil is too aerated, the seed washes away. And I mean, it gets planted somewhere else, but that's a whole other thing. Okay.

So it was like how this wholeness is also about something about balance.

yaTande:
Right having just the right amount of air, space to grow.

Which, um.. um which talks about which talks about balance and harmony because someone who is, say, got a lot of air, needs something to ground them.

Someone who's very, you know, for lack of better word, sort of flighty. It's something [earth] to ground them.

Which, I guess, is why the organs and the bones and such exist in our bodies.

Orlando:
Right.

yaTande:
Because gravity, as the universal force, all of that stuff has weight. So it is a *thing* that it is what actually grounds us.

So. if we're moving from a perspective that is Afro-centered, not particularly, not necessarily Afrocentric, Afro-centered. Then there are some things that are necessary to consider.

An Afro-centered embodiment principle says that there is consciousness about the body as a vessel/conduit of spirit – that the bodyis not yours alone, perhaps..

That there is a consciousness around the body as nature.

Orlando:
Right. Okay, the Umfundalai technique, what is it called?

yaTande:
Umfundalai Technique[9] is a pan-African dance technique that is premised on Afro-centric theory. Umfundalai is a theory. [As I understand, first
it [Umfundalai] started as a theory that then was applied to the body, the dancing body.

And so it is an effort to reorient the dancing body to principles that are African-centered pan-Africanist principles of nature, of community, you know, a lot of what we're saying here. Right. They don't talk about spirit so much.But they don't not talk about it. You know what I mean? As opposed to Dunham, for example.

Orlando:
Right, right.

yaTande:
It is very much centered about these spiritual forces in/of the body. In fact, the vocabulary coming from, you know, this pantheon of [Haitian Vodou], right?

9 Umfundalai,https://www.umfundalai.net/

And so that's a very good question because it makes me, reminds me that in my estimation, this has to be a pathway to wholeness wellness, a well body as opposed to and that and that the exercises and the whatever's don't have to be all the same and codified as this is the prescription.

Orlando:
Right, right, right.

yaTande:
Because it's not aesthetically based.

Orlando:
It's more... Conscious based.

It's about the awareness of how you're thinking and organizing the body when you're like, oh, yeah. If I see, you know, um I don't know, seashell somewhere. Am I, like, associating that with what in the world?

You know what I mean? Like, if I'm engaging in the soil, am I understanding that I'm also an image in a reflection of the soil?

You know, in terms of how I think I can grow and and literally be alive because soil, you need living soil..

I wonder if it's useful to think about the body and that concept, in which I have in the past, you know, thought about the soil of the body is the marrow Or, the body of the earth, yeah.

yaTande:
The heart... is like a sun.. The bones are like, um. tree, you know, something that gives structure. Bones are like, yeah, like trees.

You know, the blood is like the water. Right. Okay.

Orlando:
I mean, I love that too, because it goes... So that's why I was like, how do we as, because, again, we are teetering a line inside of the academy in terms of how much, again, this is where that spirit comes in and in terms, in the philosophy and religious practice and all of that stuff. Because speaking of it that way in terms of the body as the earth, too, because that's also the principle we say that the consciousness is we see the body as nature.

And again, we keep having these conversations about this reflection back into how we can organize the body towards these things we see outside of us. You know, so use as the sun is the heart. The blood is the water, you know, the breath is the air we breathe.

You know what I mean? So, like, having that kind of constant interplay and then saying, oh, and this is also Oya or Yemaya. You know what I mean?

Like, I think having the consciousness of the natural elements being the forefront and then

sliding spirit in there because they are already the elements.

So I think just because I'm like, if we use *spirit* in the language of the… Well, could you, can you?.

yaTande:
Well, I mean, sure, you just have to define it, you know, I think. Right, because when you start, talking about *spirit*, then there's a lot of ideas

Orlando:
Exactly.

yaTande:
But there's you just simply have to, you know, orient, you know, the participant to what we mean by spirit.

I mean, also, you know, to talk about deities, the divinities is really focusing this around a kind of cultural representation of these things that we all share.

Orlando:
Right. Right.

yaTande:
So my question then, is it actually important to talk about as air, or is it the main importance to talk about breath, air, space, and one of those ways that it manifests in the world is through this divinity that in Yoruba is called Oya.

Right. Is this about Oya or is this about breath? And air? You see what I mean?

Orlando:
Yes, yes, yes.

yaTande:
Because in one way, one way, it could be, oh, well, this is nothing, but, you know, some kind of spiritual / religious experiment.

Orlando:
Right.

yaTande:
Let's say. Versus to remove that to remove that frees us up of having to be, um, uh,.. obligated to Yoruba mythology.

Orlando:
Right, right, right.

yaTande:
Pathology and Pantheon? But I also understand that. I mean, like, for me, a monkey is a monkey.

Right? But based on why you're using monkey as a symbol, then is determined by how monkey is considered in from your cultural perspective. Right.

Which is the rub for you, as you're saying.

Orlando:
Right, right..rough.

You can't tell a black man.
You white woman, can't tell a black man to, you know, "embrace your monkey."

Get into a monkey, you like....

yaTande:
So, for me, I'm almost like, so do we. Do we remove that component or do we just,not overlook it, but do we restore it to a kind of…, I don't even know if that's possible. To a kind of neutrality that is, if we remove the racial implication, is that possible, right?

Is it possible to remove the racial implication of these things, of these ideas and restore them?
I don't know that's possible because there's always like…
I used to think about this. The way that I teach Graham from my perspective, like I might say in a movement, this is like a Shango movement, right?

And then I have to explain what Shango is. But in the sort of codification of Graham you can use whatever imagery, whatever label you want to put on that imagery to get them to this understanding, this consciousness, this understanding about that movement.

Orlando:
Right.

yaTande:
So what I'm saying is that another teacher who teaches Graham may never use Shango, right, because they don't have that reference. Right.

But it's not about Shango per se. It's just the way that I evoke that energy. It's the language that I used to evoke that energy to do this technical thing in the technique.

Maybe it would be different if what Graham had done was to maintain the [Classical] Indian cultural references to her movement, then maybe we wouldn't see it as, because then we would realize, oh, this is nothing but Indian dance.

Orlando:
Right, right. Right.

yaTande:
So, in Alexander, you know, with this, they're pulling from a lot of different places.

Orlando:
Right.

yaTande:
And so I guess ultimately the question is, why couldn't you learn Alexander and employ different imagery as your way to it?

Like, why does it have to be monkey? Does it have to be, you know, what if you use the language of the Fon/Ewe for the monkey instead of just the English word 'monkey'? You know, is it enough to change, is it enough to change the language of the thing? Or, is the language of the thing also codified? You understand what I'm saying?

Orlando:
Right, right, right.

Well, I think, I mean, because it was created from this, I mean, it was pulled from different things. But the consciousness of where it comes from in the 18, 1860, whatever the hell he created this in.

And it's still living as a thing as a he was he has things called "Man's best something." Like very patriarchal, very, you know, I mean, it's a white supremist, man situation. Like the whole idea of it needs to go.

And so here we are like, oh, well, if that's going to go,

yaTande:
What could replace it?

Orlando:
Yeah, especially inside of this space where people are learning about their bodies and having to generate from this white.. I mean, now it's the face of it is a white woman, an older white woman.

So she's translated. You know what I mean?

It just don't feel right to me.

And I'm like, to, it's like, Again, we can't tear down a master's house with the master's tool. Right.

yaTande:
Okay.

Orlando:
We need a whole, we need need the whole shit to be fucked up and we're like, okay, so what's here? We got what we got. What do we have? What do we got? What do we got? Well, I mean, right.

yaTande:
And so my response to that is, so actually, what we are doing, because it is what Alexander is doing as well in terms of, though it's not explicitly expressed, he's moving from a phallocentric Western ideology that is based in Christianity.

That is supported right. So a Christian centered, even though that part of it is not expressed in Alexander, the notion is implicit, right?

Because we know that the West is primarily Christian oriented. Okay, so this option here is Afro-centered organization and consciousness around the body, which means you have to talk about spirit. You have to talk about certain things.

Orlando:
Yes, okay, okay, okay, okay. [clapping].

yaTande:
You understand what I mean?

Orlando:
Yes, yes.

yaTande:
And in essence, it is a kind of Ifá for the body because what we're trying to do is reorient thinking…

Orlando:
Yes, yes!

yaTande:
away from the Christian centered Western ideal of the body, an idea and ideal of the body, towards an Afro-centered consciousness, idea, and ideals of the body.

Orlando:
Yes.

yaTande:
And the way that that happens in those circles is we talk about things in relation to spirit.

Yes. And those spirits in the various cultures of the African paradigm is they have specific language. They have specific words that are names and things that are used for their power.

So Iyansa is not just "mother of nine", but it is all that that means [culturally]

Ogoun, is not just metal, but it is the deity that has this history that's attached to it.

Right. So in some way, I guess what I'm arguing is that we actually can't get away from this notion of this proximity of the sekpoli, which we never can and Africanist, you know, ideal, right?

You can never get away from the intersection of sacred and the secular. They coexists. They coexists.

So in this system, this there's no way to just talk about what the body is doing. Right. Because it's not just the corporeal body that is active.

There is something else active. And this, in fact, is what has actually been removed from the Western centered idea

Is that it's not about spirit; it's about the physical, physiological body, but that doesn't jive in this way.

Because we also know that so much of healing and wellness has to do with how we think about our body in relation to being well, being healed and such. You cannot get healed. You cannot heal yourself if you don't think that you can.

If you don't have the mental consciousness around what it means, how breathing can and encourage well-being.

yaTande:
[Laughing]

Orlando:
Um, I think that's.

yaTande:
Oh, so, so so, okay.

So then, Okay, so the sekpoli principle, then, is really about finding where breath as a healing force exists in every part of the body. From the organs to the bones, to the marrow, to the ligaments, to the testes, to the ovaries, where is the breath that exists in all of that in all of those body parts and all of those parts of the body?

yaTande:
And once you get breath, as you were talking about with the soil. And once you get breath and air into those parts of the body, then you can instigate and encourage wellness and healing

in the body.[as] a state of wellness in the body.

You can restore your body to a state of wellness. So it is about, it is, this was this way. This was my thing that I was going crazy about in my head, my own head.

It is absolutely about the breath. It's not about just the breath coming into the body as an animated force, right? But it's about where breath is in my pancreas, where breath is.

Orlando:
Yes, there we go! There we go! Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. [snapping]

yaTande:
It is in my elbows? And that is really the polycentrism of the body because it means that there is no one nucleus that physiologically, yes, the blood is pumped from the heart and so on. But once that blood gets into that area, it's got to activate something..

So it is. it is a polycentrism that is happening that is about, I'm going to keep doing this with my finger until I get flow, until I activate and really use that air, that spirit, that energy that is in my hand and possible with my hand.

It's about locating, locating the breath in and the various, you may have written this already, but locating the breath in the various parts of the body and using it. Using it to encourage wellness, flow, whatever you want to call it.

Right.

Oh! So okay, so it's like, yes, the sekpoli principle is Mawu has given us breath, animated us. But now it is our capacity, our agency to use that breath in our body to maintain our well-being.

Orlando:
And you can do that through petitioning and knowing Oya, who governs [the breath].

Okay, there we go! Okay, okay. And who.

yaTande:
And that gets us to the Orisha, the divinities, because it's like, okay, then you ask yourself, well, why is Oya? Why is she governed? Why is she considered to govern, you know, the lungs or Obba, the stomach…

yaTande:
So like. Great, great. Yeah, okay.

Okay, so, now I feel like we have the foundation.

yaTande and Orlando:
[Laughing…]

yaTande and Orlando:
The foundation, yes!

Right? It's like, now we understand why, fully, why this *breath of life* is so central. And how it's functioning for us in this system.

Right? Because what we're asking, now we can begin to think about the exercises, right?
Now let's focus on that foot that is inactive. How can you get more mobility in that foot?

yaTande:
Bring, use, how could articulation circle the foot, you know, stretch, peel the foot, you know, all of these things that fold focus on animating, right?

Mawu has given us the air. Now, we have to use what we've been given.

Orlando:
You have to send breath to it. You have to send breath to it. You have to send breath to it.

Orlando:
[Yelling and shouting affirmatively] And there goes the principle. Like, Ananya always has said to me, "there's nothing breath can't move." "There's nothing breath can't move." And every since she said that to me, I was like, she's right. And so any time I'm feeling something in my body, I'm be like, okay, it might be painful. And you'd be like, -itch. Find it. We breathe it.
I' breathe it, I'll breathe it out. And you know, like, that breath is healing.

And it's the healing. Oh, my gosh! Oh, my gosh!

yaTande:
It's the space. It's the space that you give that area. It's the intentional space that you begin to use in that area.

And any area of the body that has a joint has space.. And that's really the Damballah principle.

yaTande:
That's why it's the serpent body.

Orlando:
Yes!

yaTande:
Every part that has mobility in our body has space, and that's what we want to start to use and move and encourage more space in that area where you feel stuck.

You feel stuck in your shoulder, begin to slow.

Orlando:
Yes.

yaTande:
Initiate. Slow big, you know, 'til that shoulder begins to open up. You start to go for space and energetically, that shit changes how you feel about that area.

Because you're giving that you're acknowledging the space that that area has that is already there by virtue of the joints that are there.

Like. That was a breakthrough too.

Orlando:
That really was.
Like, that. Yeah. And that's the grounding principle. Sekpoli!

It is. I mean, we have it there. I mean, we know it, but I think it's like we begin to all the way embodied.

yaTande:
And then how and then that influences [and] determines how we then think about, you know, that vocal breath, those three breaths.

Orlando:
Yes.

yaTande:
Why that's important because vibration moves through, right?

Finding out how the vibration gets into the knee, gets into the thigh, gets into… the right?

All of that. Because it becomes a really important thing, right? Because basically we're saying, okay, now we're clear that what we're doing is we're, you know, activating air.

We're using air, air as breath, breath as air, to bring consciousness and thus, and, ultimately wellness to a space. Opening, opening..

Orlando:
sekpoli
That is so good! That is so good! That is so good!

yaTande:
I have a whole new idea now about articulations and isolations, right?

You know, I always think about it, yes, in terms of mobility to the area, but if we think about it, mobility is the use of space, is the actualization of space in the body, then that becomes something to like, oh, sensations start to happen. And that's what we want.

Orlando:
That's right!

yaTande:
We want sensations to happen. We are not just more movement. We want those movements to trigger sensation.

"Oh, my God! I can feel this now. I can feel my shoulder now. That reminds me of when I was 10 years old when I used to play in the meadow!!"

Orlando:
Memory and then that comes in. Exactly. Right.
And that's in the muscles. Memory is in the muscles.

yaTande:
Yes!

Orlando:
And in the blood.

Okay, I have to get on this call. Thank you so much. I love you, I love you, I love you.

yaTande:
I love you; love you too.

Orlando:
Thank you. Yes, we're doing great work.

yaTande:
We're doing the work.

Personalized Somaesthetics: An Actress' Explorations for the Stage and Life
An interview with Roberta Carreri

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Abstract: *This interview with Roberta Carreri, former actress of Odin Teatret/Nordic Theatre Laboratory, explores the interplay between professional actor training and personal life. The conversation traces Carreri's journey from her initial fascination with theatre and dance to five decades of rigorous body-based practice. She reflects on the transformative power of physical training, intercultural techniques, and lifelong artistic discipline—framing them as both professional necessity and a form of self-cultivation. Key themes include embodied awareness, freedom through mastery of technique, and the integration of artistic inspiration into everyday life. Carreri's experiences reveal how somatic practices shape identity, resilience, and a philosophy of living, culminating in an acceptance of aging and mortality as part of a fulfilled existence.*

Keywords: *Theatre, Acting, Body Technique, Awareness, Training, Skill*

1. Introduction

This interview was conducted on 22 August 2025 in the living room of Roberta Carreri's home in Holstebro, Denmark. The interviewee is Roberta Carreri, a former actress with the Odin Theatre[1] /Nordic Theatre Laboratory, Denmark. Today, she is partly retired and partly engaged in conducting seminars and directing theatre productions. The interview followed a semi-structured guide that had been sent to the interviewee beforehand.

This article presents a transcript of selected parts of the interview. The criterion for selection was relevance to my investigatory focus, which I will outline later in this introduction. As both the interviewer and the interviewee are non-native English speakers, the transcript was copy-edited for grammar, readability, and style.

As part of the introduction, I would like to briefly introduce myself and my relationship with Roberta Carreri. I began one of my professional careers as a theatre actor, first in Germany and later in Denmark. In the early 1990s, my path as an actor led me to the Odin Theatre in Denmark, where RC was one of the company's actors. She became my teacher when she invited me to a three-month seminar. After that seminar, I took over a role in one of Odin Theatre's ensemble performances and another in their street parades. At that time, my relationship with

1 Odin Teatret is an internationally renowned theatre group founded in 1964 by Eugenio Barba in Oslo, later relocating to Holstebro, Denmark. Known for its experimental and intercultural approach, Odin Teatret combines rigorous actor training with research into performance traditions from around the world. The company has developed a distinctive style that blends physical theatre, music, and storytelling, often exploring themes of identity, memory, and cultural exchange. Beyond performances, Odin Teatret is a hub for workshops, publications, and the development of theatre anthropology.

RC was that of master and student. RC worked at the Odin Theatre/Nordic Theatre Laboratory throughout her entire professional career, which lasted approximately 50 years. I left the theatre some years later to pursue my own path—first as an actor and theatre director, and later as a researcher and professor of performative and participatory aesthetics at Aalborg University, Denmark.

My academic interest in interviewing her grew out of my awareness that she had worked intensively with her body (including her voice) as an artistic medium. One of the defining characteristics of the Odin Theatre is its highly body-based approach to acting and training. Its declared ambition was that continuous body and voice training should constitute the actors' daily practice, serving both the deepening and broadening of expressive proficiency and the cultivation of a discipline that enables the transgression of subjective limits which might otherwise hinder the full development of a theatrical figure. In my view, lifelong work with one's embodied mind and mindful body must also be a form of self-cultivation—one that serves not only the theatre but also the understanding and acceptance of one's personal life. In that sense, actor training may imply an art of living.

But what does it mean to train one's body as a tool for self-cultivation? What is the relationship between work on acting techniques—aimed at creating theatrical figures and performances—and one's personal life? Is the motivation to explore numerous body techniques found solely in an actor's professional ambitions, or does it also stem from a desire to gain insights and develop practices as a means towards a fulfilling life?

The term *fulfilling* encompasses a multitude of meanings depending on one's perspective and ambitions. However, it primarily expresses a hope and a vague vision of a life in harmony with the contextual conditions of our particular existence. Evidently, working as a professional actor or actress differs from participating in yoga or Tai Chi workshops or other somatic and mindfulness practices, which widely promise a better, healthier, and happier life. This is not necessarily the case for actors, for whom other criteria—such as creating high-quality artworks—may be more important. Yet, I assume that even this ambition must be motivated by the wish to experience moments of fulfilment.

Thus, my overall strategy for this interview was to encourage Roberta Carreri to reflect on and articulate the significance of her professional work for her personal life, whatever that may entail. Furthermore, I aim to refrain from theoretical interpretations or forcing her words into a philosophical straitjacket, because I want to give readers the opportunity to sense what is described in their own bodies. Many of Roberta Carreri's reflections employ a professional discourse on acting and its various techniques. However, their content can readily be applied to other somatic practices involving body techniques.

To get to know her a little, let us begin with the beginning of her professional life as an actress.

2. The interview

Falk Heinrich (FH): What drew you to acting as a profession and a lifestyle? How did you get started in theatre?

Roberta Carreri (RC): I started studying at university. I chose history of art, but I also decided to take exams in the history of music, theatre, and cinema – and I was fascinated by architecture as well. In a way, I was pursuing beauty. Another thing I was doing at that time was dancing – not professionally, not even as an amateur. I was dancing in discotheques, and I loved it. When I danced, I felt good. Apart from drawing, dancing was my first real perception of my

body in a pleasant way. I felt my body was free to do what it wanted, and I felt good doing what it wanted. I wasn't thinking; it wasn't about seduction. I danced because I liked it.

While preparing for my theatre history exam, I was working on sacred theatre – texts by Grotowski and Eugenio Barba. Then, in 1973, Odin Teatret came to Bergamo, a city near Milan. I saw their performance, *Min fars hus (My Father's House)*. There were only about 60 spectators sitting on benches without backs, framing a rectangular wooden floor. They had asked for a wooden floor for the performers. I remember entering, sitting down, crossing my legs – and then the performance began. It unfolded not only in the centre of the space but also in the passages between the benches. The actors moved behind us, singing behind us. When they sang behind the benches, I could see the spectators opposite me. It felt like being embraced by the performers.

They performed in a language no one understood – Danish actors speaking invented Russian, gibberish – except for the first phrase: "For you, Fodor Dostoevsky." Their bodies were beautiful, moving with an energy as strong as Dostoevsky's writing – passionate yet precise. I was never afraid they'd hurt themselves. It was what I would call perfect bodies in motion, giving us energy and astonishing us. But not because they were virtuosos – that only stimulates the brain. No, they affected me existentially. For the entire hour, I didn't move. When the performance ended and everyone left, I was the last one sitting, my legs still crossed as when I arrived. That had never happened to me in theatre before; I was usually shifting about. Here, I was hypnotised – like a rabbit caught in headlights. It was so powerful that when everyone left, I felt at home in that space because I knew the people working there. Then I started crying – a real outburst of emotion.

The next day, I returned to see a demonstration of actor training by two actors, Iben Nagel Rasmussen and Jan Christensen. They showed the training while Eugenio Barba explained what they were doing. I was amazed at how hard it was to perform. It looked like improvisation, but it wasn't – everything was fixed. Two things struck me: first, these people did what they said, unlike those who say one thing and do another. Second, I wanted to write my thesis about them. I even had a title: *From the Body as a Statue to the Body as Music*. Once again, these bodies were beautiful – young men and two women, all between 25 and 30. They were also very… how can I say… free, though that's an imprecise word. I could feel they were completely in their bodies. They weren't just doing something; they were what they were doing. They *were*. And that fascinated me.

> [At this point, RC recalled that Eugenio Barba agreed Roberta could follow the theatre to write her university thesis, on the condition that she took part in the actor's training and the development of a performance as an actress – a process that would take two years. She accepted these conditions.]

RC: So, one year later, I joined the group. Mm. And the first thing, I was feeling the enormous resistance of my body. Doing acrobatics, running in the mornings. It was so hard working with a *bushman* – this piece of wood you're meant to use for exercises. I was hitting myself all the time. For two years, I really suffered. I cried from frustration and pain every day. Those first two years were extremely hard for me; painful on different levels. They were like the Sun Dance of the North American Indians – that ritual, that painful ritual of transforming from an adolescent into an adult.

But then what happened was that life at Odin Theatre was so intense and so painful that I didn't really have time to study much. During the first six months, I managed to pass one exam.

Slowly, slowly, I realised it was no longer a thesis I was writing. I was writing my life.

And then, slowly, slowly, after two and a half years, I started to feel much better in my body. I began not only doing the exercises I was told to do, but also creating exercises inspired by performances I saw– for instance, one by Bob Wilson. What inspired me most was seeing the dancer, Lucinda Childs. Lucinda Childs crossed the space in a performance called *Einstein on the Beach* in a way that really fascinated me, on a sensory level. When I came back to Holstebro, I started using Philip Glass's music in my training, and I began imitating her walk and all the small changes. It was a repetitive walk with subtle variations, like Philip Glass's music – repetitive, but never the same. And that is the miracle; that's what fascinated me.

So, I must say that over time, my training has been inspired by performances, by dance forms I've seen and that have affected me. I've tried to translate them, make them my own movements, make them part of my body through daily work.

RC: And of course, meeting masters through ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology), where I was introduced to the different inner tensions of the *tribhanga*[2] and of Balinese dance – using the tension between shoulders, toes and back – and all these strategies: the gliding on the floor of Noh theatre, Kabuki, all these different ways to make the body extra-ordinary. One has to embody these strategies and, when you've got the technique, then… then you can feel very well inside it.

One of the strongest experiences I had was working with Katsuko Azuma in 1980 in Bonn, Germany. Eugenio had decided that I should learn the "lion dance" from Kabuki theatre because he wanted to include it in a performance called *The Million*. For two weeks, I worked with Katsuko Azuma, who was a teacher of Nihon-Buyō. The first thing she asked me was to take the basic position. When you think about a position, you imagine something static. But this position was very complex. You had to place your heels one fist apart, then stand and bend your knees slightly, and feel that your coccyx – your tailbone – was being pulled down to the centre of the earth by a wire. Then imagine another wire starting from the top of your head and going up to the sky. And you had to feel a bowl of steel covered with velvet in your belly.

All these words meant nothing to me at first, because I was looking for a position – and it didn't work the first day, nor the second. I was very frustrated until I understood that it wasn't a position. I had to be in action. It was an action, then another action, then a third action; only then did I get the action inside me. And this action was wrapped around my axis. After six years at Odin Theatre, I knew how to work with my arms, legs, hands, feet, torso – but I had never felt my body from inside. It was like having one of those poles, dancers swing around inside you; a kind of internal pole dance of intention.

FH: May I just ask a question? So, you were fascinated by other dances, other actresses, other forms of theatre and acting on stage. And you decided to experiment with them and copy them. But what was the reason for that? Was it because you wanted to do the same thing and affect the audience in the same way you were affected when you saw them the first time? Or did something else happen as well – something inside you that made you more content, surprised, happy, astonished? Something you didn't expect? Because – now I'm interpreting you, or what actors do – you want to be on stage in a certain way that affects people.

RC: No. That would be a result, but no. When I saw Lucinda Childs and said, "I want to do the same," it was for my own pleasure.

FH: Okay.

RC: It was because I wanted to feel what I imagined she was feeling there. Because she was

2 *Tribhanga* is is a standing body position or stance used in traditional Indian art and Indian classical dance forms like the Odissi.

free in a very structural way. And the only way you can be free – really free – is if you know the technique. Only if you know how to play the piano, like Glenn Gould, can you break free when you play Bach. If you don't master the technique, you don't master what's beyond the technique. You have to learn the technique in order to forget it. And that's what I saw in Lucinda Childs. She had it so much, she could forget it and be well in her body and shine – and make us spectators dance, sitting in our chairs. So, it's because I wanted to be like her. Of course, another result could be that I'd be more efficient as an actress. But the first step was to feel as good as she felt.

FH: Okay.

RC: And the same when I saw the performance of Natsu Nakajima, the Butoh dancer. Torgeir[3] and I went to see the performance. We sat down, and then it started with two dancers barely moving. It was very slow. And I was completely hypnotised. At a certain moment, I heard (she makes snoring noises) – Torgeir was sleeping, and I was fascinated. She took me with her on this trip. And three years later, I went to Japan and worked with her for five weeks – with her and with Kazuo Ohno. And there, I went even deeper into this work on the axis, which I ended up calling the Snake, just because it's long.

FH: …and it's also moving.

RC: Yes, that's it. Because then I transformed the axis from Kabuki, which is straight and kept all the time. Working with Butoh, it started to move. Working with Kazuo Ohno was fantastic because he said: "For you in the Western world, dance is what the body is doing. But the real dance is what happens within, inside the body of the actor." And this inside, what he called *kokoro*, means heart, centre, soul – all three words in one. *Kokoro*. When he made us dance, he wanted us to dance with our *kokoro*, not with our limbs.

And this was another trip. After my experience with Natsu and Kazuo Ohno, I transformed this axis into the Snake, because it was moving – but it wasn't the spine. It was an invisible muscle parallel to the spine, but from inside the body, not outside. I decided that the eyes are the head of the snake. And this finding has been crucial for me as an actress.

FH: As an actress or as a person experimenting, a person trying to discover something?

RC: Yes, of course. Yes. Yes, of course. Okay. Of course…

FH: So being an actress – or rather working as an actress – means discovering things or searching for things you didn't know existed, but which you were searching for. For example, trying to find an embodied type of inner energy.

RC: Yes. Also later, I started to learn from flamenco. I wanted to learn flamenco, not because I wanted to become a flamenco dancer, but because I was fascinated by it and wanted to feel what they were feeling when they danced: where the feet do something completely different from the hands, and where there is also exactly the same inner tension between the lower part of the body going down to the earth and the upper going up to the sky, like in Nihon Buyo.

It fascinated me to continue that line of work with these two energies in the body – to feel that one part of you is grounded and another part is flying. Yin, yang – call it what you want. I'm a woman, but I've always considered myself a person before a woman, which entails this composition of yin and yang. What you feel working with Butoh – this energy of the bodies – they were unisex. The same score I was doing, a man could do, because it goes deeper than muscles and bones; it unfolds inside you.

FH: I have two questions now – actually three. The first one: Have you ever had the feeling, the experience, that it's not you doing the action on stage or while training, but that something else – another force, another thing – does the action, and you're simply partaking in it? Meaning

3 Torgeir Wethal was a founding actor of the Odin theatre and worked with the theatre until his death. He also was Roberta Carreri's life partner.

you have time to do something else, for example, to be aware of what you're doing, because you don't need to do it yourself. I know Odin Theatre performs plays for many years – some for decades. You played your solo performance *Judith*, I think for… I don't know how many years?

RC: Thirty-five years.

FH: And you're still doing it?

RC: No, I closed it down in '22. I said, now it's enough – I don't have *le physique du rôle* any more.

FH: Okay. So you were showing this performance from the year I left the theatre – that's a long time. I guess some movements were just so incorporated, so automatic, so much part of your nervous system, that you could do it sleeping, actually. But then, one challenge is, of course, not to do it automatically, not to do it in your sleep, but to be present. This, I guess, is also an opportunity – because you don't need to spend energy to do the movements and actions, they're done by themselves, so to speak.

RC: There was one moment, during the rehearsal of *Brecht's Ashes* – it must have been in '79 or '80. We were rehearsing a scene – Tage, Francis and I – with Eugenio. And we were repeating and repeating it, over and over. And at a certain moment, during one repetition, something happened to me: I felt that I was not doing, but I was being. And that surprised me. It was like I… and then we repeated the scene and I found it again. It was as if I'd found a switch inside myself. Click – pong – my presence was different. I was totally present. I wasn't doing what I was asked to do. I wasn't doing the movement – I was doing the action, because the action has an intention, and the intention has something to do with your body and mind. This switch, that I found then, I've been using ever since. And because, as you say, when you've rehearsed a performance for so many months, you internalise all the movements – and the risk of doing them mechanically is very big. But on the other hand, if you know them, if your body knows them so well, you have the time to enjoy doing them.

Once again, take Rubinstein playing Chopin's *Nocturne*. One thing is if you've just learned to play the *Nocturne*, like my daughter did at a certain moment in her life – listening to her and then listening to a record of Rubinstein playing it was completely different. Rubinstein was free: free because he didn't need to think about where to put his fingers. He was free to pour his flow into it, to mould it.

It's been the same for me performing *Judith* for 35 years. Over the years, the performance became more and more like a song I was singing. What does that mean? It means the words are the same, the melody is the same, but you have to sing it each time. And that implies, once again, enjoying the moment and filling the moment. It's always been a great pleasure for me to perform *Judith*, or *Salt*, or *Flowers for Torgeir* – these solo performances where I'm… where I'm moulding my energy in there.

But sometimes, in group performances, I had moments where I was sitting down, looking at the other actors, doing small actions – because another actor was in the middle of the scene and five of us were sitting around – and then I started thinking: "I should buy some milk tonight because I don't have any milk for my tea." And this annoyed me a lot. So that's why I was very happy in performances where I was very little on stage, or where I wasn't on stage all the time – when I was outside the stage, I had technical things to do, like we always had. In *Oxyrhynchus*, we had to change costume or pull the curtains so the others could come out. And this kept me in the flow.

FH: Good. Very interesting indeed. Another question: all those experiences you recall and recount now – the ones you had on stage, while training, or working with other masters – all those revelations… have they had any consequences for your personal life? For how you live

your everyday life? Or is that totally separate? Stage and the training space are part of your work, your professional life. And when you come home, you lie on the sofa watching television series or do something else?

RC: Of course, I also lie on my sofa. I also watch *Morse*. But I am me – this kind of work affects my body and my mind. It's not mechanical work, like putting tissues into a box, like I did when I was 18 years old to earn money for a holiday. Our work is work with our body and body-mind.

And there's the constant reading too – it could be art books, it could be novels. That's a big freedom after I stopped at the university: I can read all the novels I want. I don't have to read only academic books.

FH: I've hardly read novels for 35 years – or poems – just academic stuff.

RC: And it's so nice to read novels, because there's so much life in it. There's so much life. Authors like Philip Roth, like Elizabeth Strout – they really have this capacity to distil life with their words. And that's something I find very inspiring, as a person but also as an artist, because there's a wealth of images, a wealth of… yes… stories that suddenly pop up when I direct, or when I work for myself.

For instance, when we were working on *Salt*, a performance we made in 2002, Jan and I worked for five years before it was finished. We worked four years alone, and only the last year with Eugenio – which spanned just 17 weeks, you know, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that when the training started for me to become my garden – my actor's garden – which means I was starting to find texts I wanted to use and explore and work on, to put actions to these texts. I started to find paintings I wanted to give life to through my actions, and then put the text on top of the acts. This work is an osmosis of my passion as a private person and my work as an actress. If I didn't read, if I didn't look at art books, I wouldn't be inspired to do what I was doing. Do you follow me? So it's…

FH: But I guess you're also reading the books with all your experience as an actress?

RC: As a woman. As a woman. As a person.

FH: Yes, but also as an actress, I guess?

RC: No. I don't know… maybe, maybe. Maybe, for sure – because I am me. […] I can't escape that. Even if sometimes – I must confess – I'd like to divorce myself. Well, for instance, I went to Copenhagen and forgot my phone at home in Holstebro. Yeah. And then it was beautiful. Three days without a phone. Fantastic.

FH: Let's get back to theatre. Were there any scenes or actions you hated – things you had to do because your director told you so? When you thought: "Oh no, I won't, I can't." But maybe those scenes turned out to be transformative – or not?

RC: Yes. Yes. The biggest example is a performance called *The Tree*. I even wrote an article for the programme of that performance where I gave air to my frustrations. Eugenio wanted me in this performance. It started with the idea that I should be Snow White. And he gave me the DVD of Walt Disney's *Snow White* and said: "Do something with that." The only thing I found dramatic, that I found interesting, was when Snow White runs away into the woods, where she eventually finds the dwarfs' house. That runaway scene – with all the thorn bushes pulling at her – I found fascinating. So, I put on Mozart's *Lacrimosa* and started to work on that.

Then Eugenio saw it, and after a while – which means six months later – he came and said: "You, in this performance, are going to be…" He gave me a book entitled *Half of A Yellow Sun*[4] and said: "You have to find your character in this book. I know which one it is." It turned out to

4 Adichie, C. N. (2014). *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Fourth Estate, London.

be a woman who runs away from a massacre in Africa with a calabash – a kind of big pumpkin, emptied and dried. Inside this calabash is the head of her dead daughter. The head has been chopped off, and she takes it and runs away through a train. And then Eugenio said: "You have to be that woman." And I said: "Okay." I created scores, and then he said: "But you have to be angry, the whole time. You have to speak with this voice the whole time" (Roberta speaks with a harsh, angry voice). I said okay, but I didn't like it at all, because my preferred figure was very soft, a little bit Butoh-like. But no – he wanted me violent and angry. We worked a lot with the voice. I lost my voice because it never sounded angry enough for him. I hated the character. I had to be mean, and I had to have very strong, bad energy. I really didn't like it.

Then he said: "But your costume is going to be white. You're going to be white and beautiful to make the contrast." I made a kind of sponge in the shape of small children's hands, which I stamped on my face and body with white paint. So I had these small white children's hands on me, a big white 'thing' on my head, white clothes, and I was barefoot. And this anger I had to have the whole time – barking almost.

There's a moment in the performance when I'm very still, just going around the space while something else happens in the middle of the stage. I'm like a ghost, a ghost going around without any inner life. But I have all these pictures in my mind – of the massacre, of horrible things seen and lived. It was so dark, this character, so angry. It was hard for me to enter it and painful, and I think I never really enjoyed that performance fully.

FH: But did you take something with you from that fight and that anger – the fight against this figure, but also the physical, emotional anger you had to display, or had to be?

RC: Yes. Well, now I know I'm able to express it – but I'd try to avoid it in my daily life, because it doesn't give anything good. Yes, of course, it was an experience. And each experience, each performance brought with it a grain of sand that made me what I am today.

Also *The Chronic Life* was a very strong performance for me, where I tried to create a character that was the opposite of myself. What I am not. What is not Roberta? Roberta is not a bimbo. So I found a platinum blonde wig, put in green contact lenses, found a very feminine dress and apron, and shoes with big butterflies on top. So one can say that through the years, the work on new performances has been, for me, a fight against myself – not to repeat, trying not to repeat myself. I had to find something completely different. And Eugenio helped me with that. It was also his request for some performances. When you work for many years, you have the tendency to find strategies, to find the switch, and you know what works on stage. And you start to repeat yourself. That's what I didn't want to do – and what Eugenio didn't want me to do. So this angry woman was part of the process of doing something I hadn't done before.

The last two years at the Nordic Theatre Laboratory, I was asked to write down every day how many hours I'd been working. The administrator said this was a request from the European Union; something everybody has to do, no matter the kind of work. Bah – ridiculous, because this is my life, not only my work. Sometimes I wake up at three in the morning because I get an idea and write it down. It's not that I'm only at work from eight to four. My work is my life. And this relates to your question about me as an actress and me as a person – it's impossible for me to cut this relationship. It's a constant osmosis.

FH: Looking back at your life – or rather, looking from your life's history towards the next years, the next ten, twenty years, until your death – did the work with your body, with your bodily energies, and through that also with your mind (and vice versa), make you more satisfied, more happy, more relaxed about what will come in the future?

RC: Oh yes. I think it's both that – and having a garden.

FH: Mm.

RC: Being aware that this is the moment of the roses, and this is the moment of the anemones, and this is the moment for… Two things. First, having lived my life fully at all levels – having experienced being a child, a daughter, a lover, a fiancée, a married woman, a divorced woman, a mother, then again, a married woman, a widow, an orphan. I've experienced it all – and now a grandmother. Grandmother: the best in life. So, by experiencing the whole spectrum, and by living a work that has been a continuous work on myself, I must say: I've lived my life fully. Which means that if I die tonight, it's okay. I have no regrets. I have, yes, no more wishes in a way. So everything from now on is a gift.

I'm aware that I'm slower now than before. I'm aware that my hands hurt because arthrosis is deforming them. But that doesn't mean I can't be happy. And I'm grateful that it's only this and not worse at my age […]. In a way, I have a sense of great gratitude. As I had when Torgeir died – I was so, so sorry, so desperate – but at the same time, I could see the great chance I was given: living 28 years with the big love of my life. Sharing every moment with him, 24 hours a day – work and home and holidays and everything. That's a great privilege.

When I look at my life, exactly because of the work I've been doing and because of the love for the garden that Torgeir introduced me to, I accept. I don't need to be forever young. I accept and I enjoy the stages. I enjoy being retired – even if I now have my own homepage, even if I still travel and work, even direct. But this is something I choose to do. It's not something I have to do. That's another feeling. And that is also part of freedom.

FH: This is a good ending. I think I want to conclude the interview here.

3. Epilogue

Evidently, the somatic practices described by Roberta Carreri in this interview is not the identical to the practice themselves. The apparent incommensurability between somatic practice and linguistic description touches on one of somaesthetics' foundational aspects: the relationship (and distinction) between practice and analysis (Shusterman, 2000). Although somaesthetics is a philosophical discipline, it claims a practical dimension: engaging one's own body in somatic practice—whether dancing, walking, hiking, practicing yoga, or playing a musical instrument. I have been working with and writing about this problem in my recent and forthcoming publications (Heinrich, 2023, 2026).[5] In my view, this is not only a challenge for philosophers of aesthetics; actors (and other practitioners) also read and listen to other masters' theoretical, descriptive, and methodological explanations and instructions. Practitioners face the same dualistic problem: how to embody concepts, make them fruitful in practice, and describe them for others.

My answer to this problem simply is somatic awareness. Both somaesthetic practices, acts of recounting important life-shaping experiences, and analytical endeavours are grounded in awareness as a basic aesthetic faculty. Awareness—arising from attention directed at details: here, the spoken or the read, the relationships between words and actions (whether remembered or imagined), and feelings as our embodied reaction to stories—is the basis for both aesthetic practice and philosophical aesthetics. Embodied awareness lies at the core of Roberta Carreri's work with actor training: with her inner "snake" (the energetic dance of tension between the upper and lower body), with the creation of a theatrical figure and its actions, and with the task of being alive on stage when not at the centre of audience attention. Furthermore, her awareness of the seasons for various flowers underpins her pleasure in gardening. And, of course, everyone

5 How can we integrate the embodied (always already past) experience of practice into (philosophical) thinking, narrating, and writing? And how can we incorporate questions and reflection into our own practice without destroying that practice through theoretical concerns while engaged in it?

needs pauses from (self-)awareness; everyone needs relaxation on the sofa.

Awareness seems a simple concept, but in fact it is an extremely vague and complex notion, spanning many meanings depending on the discursive context. Phenomenology understands it differently from pragmatism. Even in everyday language, we use the term in many ways: awareness as consciousness, as realisation, as alertness, embodiment, love, concentration, focus, and so forth. Nonetheless, in my view, awareness always situates the aware person and establishes a sensory and agentive entanglement with their specific surroundings. Awareness lets us inhabit this world. Awareness-in-action creates worlds, be it on a theatre stage or in our lives.

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Life-Size Dance: Improvisation, Somaesthetics, and the Practice of Toru Iwashita

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Abstract: *Toru Iwashita, born in Tokyo in 1957, is a dancer specializing in Butoh and improvisational dance. From the 1980s until 2024, he performed with the internationally renowned troupe Sankai Juku while also developing a parallel solo practice. He continues to be active today, presenting numerous improvisational works Since the 1980s, Iwashita has also led dance therapy workshops, including long-term work at a psychiatric ward in Saga Prefecture. He has explored improvisation as a form of empathetic communication—with oneself, others, and the world. His "life-size" dance is based on everyday movements such as lying down, rolling, or standing up, rooted in his own experience of overcoming a mental health crisis by reconnecting with his body. Evolving from "dance as a scream" to "dance as communication," his improvisation seeks states where the self emerges and is pushed out through the body, moving beyond choreographed form or representation.*

Keywords: *butoh, dance improvisation, embodied experience, middle voice*

Toru Iwashita has been active for over thirty years in *Butoh*[1], improvisational dance, and dance therapy workshops. After leaving the Butoh company *Sankai Juku*[2] in 2015, he has continued to explore improvisation as a way of connecting body, self, and world.

In May 2025, during his workshop at Sophia University, participants lay on the floor, sensing their bodies against the ground. As I rolled and stood to the beat of drums, the horizontal floor seemed to turn vertical, and the space itself shifted. In August, he performed in Shibuya with saxophonist Taiichi Kamimura and bassist Masao Tajima. Their improvisation, titled Rock-paper-scissors-swirl, unfolded as a dynamic interplay of attraction and repulsion, filling the small theater with an intensity. In September 2025, I met with Iwashita again to discuss his practice. I began this conversation by outlining my background and explaining how I came to focus on the body and somaesthetics.

1 *Butoh*, or *Ankoku Butoh* ("dance of darkness"), is a Japanese avant-garde dance that emerged in the late 1950s and was initiated by Tatsumi Hijikata. Known for slow movements, grotesque or distorted imagery, and explorations of bodily and existential themes, it also draws on movement patterns rooted in Japanese farmers' and common people's everyday bodily labor. In this interview, Iwashita quotes Hijikata a few times.

2 *Sankai Juku* is a Butoh company founded by Ushio Amagatsu in 1975. Since beginning its international tours in 1980, the company has performed in more than 40 contries and 700 cities worldwide, playing a major role in bringing Japanese Butoh to global audiences.

The Body That Hurts, the Body That Dances

BAE: I used to be an elementary school teacher, and I came to believe that before anything else—even studying—what matters most for a child's future is learning to face themselves through their "body." That's what sparked my research with "body" and "education" as keywords.

IWASHITA: Was there a specific situation that led you to think that?

BAE: Children often have difficulty controlling their emotions and bodies. When they get angry about something, they just burst out, like "Waaah!" I had to physically hold on to and respond to them. At that time, their bodies would become incredibly hot and sweat-drenched. I wondered what made the children react this manner.

IWASHITA: Yes. That reminds me, years ago, at the "AI HALL (Itami Municipal Theater Hall)" in Itami City, Hyogo Prefecture, an annual event called "Play," meaning both to perform and to play, was held. I was involved with it for approximately ten years. The AI HALL had a very avant-garde program in art, dance, and theater back then, and this was around that time. It continued before and after The Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, but I couldn't continue my association because my physical stamina had declined slightly. My performance was usually about an hour, during which I would constantly interact and dance. Previously, under the guidance of another artist, the children would create an installation and set up the space. I would then enter the situation through dance. There were also musicians present; so it was improvised music and dance with children present. The children created all sorts of things, expressing themselves, their impulses reaching a peak. At first, they watched the dance from a distance but gradually drew closer, following me around. Then, rather violent behavior would start to emerge, such as hitting, kicking and smacking. I felt that the children were releasing something they must have been suppressing daily, letting it burst during that time. That is the feeling I got. Some children were very gentle; they patted, stroked, or spoke softly. However, I recall that the violence seemed to have intensified each year. This was particularly true after the earthquake. It felt like it grew stronger after the disaster. Even adults were affected. I think the trauma lingered, and it was an event that couldn't be easily resolved. Through the dialogue between the bodies, I sensed that the children's bodies were pushed to their limits.

BAE: You have been engaged in both workshops and solo dance performances for over 30 years. You have conducted workshops for a long time in the psychiatric ward of Konan Hospital. Did you feel any mutual impact or change in both patients and yourself, and what motivated you to continue?

IWASHITA: I believe there has been mutual interaction. I'm often asked if there are any specific impacts on the patients, but there is no concrete "evidence." I have written essays, but they are entirely in insider language and written in a very closed discourse. I sent them to my close workshop participants and dance therapists for reading.

When I was 25, I fell into a severely depressed state, and couldn't move forward at all. There was a turning point; I was able to accept my body for the first time. There was no doubt that my body had always been there, but I had not really felt it before. At 25, for the first time, I could positively recognize that my body was here, that I was alive here and now. I chose to pursue improvisational dancing to do what I could with only this body. There were no other options, so I didn't care if I could do it or not.

BAE: That was after you had met the "Sankai Juku" and started working with them, right?

IWASHITA: That was sometime around 1979-80. In March 1980, Sankai Juku went to Europe and France, and had a successful run in Paris. Right before that, I had left Sankai Juku

and returned to the university.[3] After returning, I played in bands and did theater for a while. But that didn't work out either. It was a period in which I completely lost any means of self-expression and fell into a slump. I couldn't do anything anymore—express myself or connect with the outside world. I had lost that ability.

At this point, Iwashita traces the roots of his depression and helplessness back to his earliest encounter with the world. He recalls being born with the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck—an actual event that later became a life-long bodily metaphor for his enduring sense of disconnection. His reflections reveal how low bodily self-esteem, from being poor at physical activities, shaped a deep feeling of alienation from his body and the world.

IWASHITA: When I was born, the umbilical cord was wrapped around my neck, and I was in a state of near death. The doctor untangled the cord and tapped me, and I started crying. From the very beginning, my encounter with the world was a bit off. I remember an entrance exam for kindergarten where we had to do skipping. The other children skipped perfectly, but I couldn't. I guess that it was a real emotional wound. I wonder whether it still lingers inside me. Even now, I am bad at things such as skipping.

Returning to the story, once I had accepted my body from that depressive state—accepting that it was okay just as it was—I could finally realize that even if I couldn't do skipping, even if I was bad at physical education, it was okay to have a body like that. I may be exaggerating, but the turning point at 25 felt like I had died and been reborn. Without that experience, I wouldn't have been here now. About a year later, I finally managed to get through it and perform an improvisational dance. It was only for about 15 minutes. I still remember that feeling.

BAE: Fifteen minutes, all by yourself?

IWASHITA: I had a friend who played the piano with me. He's a composer now, but back then he was doing monthly concerts at a venue, and he let me join. That was my start. There were about five people in the audience then, all of whom were my friends. After the concert, everyone returned backstage to talk to me and share their thoughts. That was very heartwarming. My closest friend said, "Iwashita stood up, then your left leg moved really well," but I don't remember moving like that. My body had moved naturally. I think that spontaneous movements like those are the ideal state for improvisation.

Because of how it started, during my interaction with the patients at the Konan Hospital, I felt a strong sense of kinship, although it might have been my one-sided attachment. I had escaped my depression in this way. I thought, couldn't I share the kind of treatment or rehabilitation I had been doing for my own body with them? I wrote a letter to the then Director, and immediately received a reply saying, "Yes, please do." That was in 1989, and I have continued almost monthly ever since.

BAE: Do you get good feedback from the patients?

IWASHITA: It is difficult to say. Some patients may stop coming or leave midway, whereas others continue. Earlier, I mentioned the "standing up" movement. Recently, a woman with severe schizophrenia has been actively participating lately. During the workshop, she sat on a mat for the entire duration. She had knee pain and back problems and was unable to move. However, one day, at the very end—I always give patients a white fabric to move freely with—she took her fabric, twirled it around, and rushed right into the group. It was incredible. She'd been sitting the whole time but standing up like that at the end was amazing.

3 He rejoined the company in 1986 and continued performing with them until 2024.

BAE: Before participating in your workshop, I had fewer opportunities for improvisational dancing, and perceived it as something avant-garde, unfamiliar, and in a sense deviant. In your workshop, we carefully practiced basic movements such as lying down, rolling over, sitting, and standing up. This made me realize that these are the foundations of all movements, including dance. As a result, the fear I felt about improvisational dancing and the image I had of it being far from myself became more comfortable. Basic movements are truly important.

IWASHITA: I agree. In that sense, it doesn't matter whether you're a dancer or not; we're all the same. In terms of "being a body" and "being accompanied by the body," everyone is equal. That is where I always want to be. Then, disability or illness becomes irrelevant. The woman I mentioned earlier—her movements in themselves were not as beautiful or graceful as a so-called dancer's. However, even in the small, shrunken state of her body, a tremendous strength emerged, which was very moving. There are various types of dancing. However, it's okay to have this approach to dance that is not measured by high physical ability, large movements, speed, or beauty. I would like to dance this way. Moreover, not moving is also a form of dance; something is still being expressed there. You can feel that.

What Emerges, What Is Pushed Out

BAE: I was impressed by your story of how, during your depression, you learned to affirm your own body, which led to the beginning of your solo improvisational dance. I also want to highlight that the first actions you engaged in were "cleaning" and "walking." Have you ever experienced everyday actions like "cleaning," "cooking," "walking," "eating," or "washing your body" as dance?

IWASHITA: That is a very difficult question. "What is dance?" I do feel a desire to see various everyday actions—cleaning, cooking, eating, and washing the body—as dance in the broadest sense. But actually, what I currently perceive as dance is something that slightly deviates, shifts, oversteps, or distances itself from those everyday actions, movements, and gestures. Purposeful movements are movements done for a purpose, to accomplish something, but when you strip away that "something," the movement itself is what we should call dance.

BAE: So, for example, would you say that dance begins when one moves out of a state of lying down—being aware of the contact between the body and the ground, or focusing on various bodily sensations?

IWASHITA: No, that is the foundation. In doing so, something spontaneous and organic emerges from within the body. "What emerges, what is pushed out." This is what I refer to as a dance. To achieve this, relaxation, release, and letting-go are necessary. That's the purpose of this work. Doing this allows you to become aware of various sensations, not just within your body, but also externally—what's happening now, what you hear, and what you see. The body opens up.

"What emerges, what is pushed out." Iwashita cites this remark, along with other ideas of Hijikata, in this interview, in his published essays (Iwashita, 2001; 2019), and in several unpublished memos he shared with me. The expression forms the core of his philosophy of dance. Although he did not clearly remember the exact source, the phrase appears in *Utsuwa to Karada: An Approach to Hijikata Tatsumi's Ankoku Butoh Techniques*, a study by Kayo Mikami (1993), who trained under Hijikata from 1978 to 1981. Drawing primarily on training notebooks kept by three Hijikata's disciples, including her own, the book conveys Hijikata's ideas in his own words. According to Mikami, the essence of Hijikata's Ankoku Butoh lies not

in "expressing" something but in yielding and allowing oneself to *become* something. Among Hijikata's remarks, he emphasized movements that "emerges, that are pushed out" (Mikami, 1993, p.132), highlighting not movement produced by the will to express but movement that inevitably overflows when one reaches an expressive impasse. Iwashita's thinking resonates deeply with this philosophy of movement.

BAE: I believe that guiding people to experience this "what emerges, what is pushed out " is one of your goals in workshops. Do you use any specific methods for this?

IWASHITA: It is all about taking it carefully. Slowly, layer by layer, I want to create a situation, a space where participants can gradually focus on their own bodily sensations.

BAE: In the university session I attended, you also played the drum. Do you use that often?

IWASHITA: We do it in complete silence, but sometimes we deliberately use the drums or other instruments. However, I don't use ready-made songs. When live sounds are heard in real time, they create a co-equal relationship with the bodies present on the same plane. That is, where improvisation lies. It is not something premade; it is something performed for the first time in that moment, a sound emerging for the first time. The body encounters that, and I think that's incredibly important.

BAE: So, first, you carefully sense your body, and then spontaneous movement emerges, which leads to interactions with the surrounding space?

IWASHITA: Yes. The people around you experience the same thing, although there are different degrees and variations. Consequently, the entire space becomes very soft, open, and warm, transforming into a gentle atmosphere. Initially, the air may feel stiff or cold, but by moving your body, the space itself begins to move.

BAE: So, do you feel this way both when you perform on stage and when you're in a workshop setting?

IWASHITA: Yes. I listen to my body while I perform, but in a workshop, I accompany the participants' bodies. While observing their bodies, my own body reacts in some way. I am not actually moving, but it feels like my body is reflecting them in real time, receiving a kind of reflection.

Dance as Communication and Connection

BAE: I know that in general dance forms, such as ballet or Japanese classical dance, there are set practice styles and routines. What about improvisational dancing? How do you practice in your daily life?

IWASHITA: I do stretch as part of my daily routine, which is mainly influenced by yoga. Then, I move improvisationally for approximately an hour. Earlier today, before coming here, I danced for about 20 minutes under the station exit. Also, today I'm thinking I'd like to move somewhere for about 45 minutes. You see I prefer to be outside. Outside, there are all sorts of things—people passing by, the sky, cars going by, and all kinds of things. It is about moving while feeling these things. The movements themselves don't change that much, but the sensations in my body do. Today, I have moved into this corner space with square walls, and what I feel in that space influences my movement. If I have my back to the wall, the front is open, and I can see people passing by; if I face the wall, I can't see that but still see the sky. The interaction changes. It is interesting. However, this doesn't mean that I'm doing street performances; it's not about expressing something to the people or the place. For most passersby, it probably just makes them think, "What on earth is that person doing?" Or maybe they don't even notice at all. But very

rarely, would someone speak to me. That genuinely makes me happy. I am driven by the desire to be connected with someone, to become one with the world. I feel as if I can't quite encounter the world properly, can't really connect with it, and that's why I want to be connected. But this feeling is subtle. Even when I'm dancing, there are moments when I feel connected, but it's only for an instant. It vanishes immediately. That's why I keep dancing.

BAE: Seems to me that the feelings of "wanting to connect" and "being connected" come from an enormous sense of "not being connected." But maybe most people just are not sensitive enough to that feeling of disconnection?

IWASHITA: I think it's because most people live their daily lives without issues, just going about things calmly. I cannot do that. This might be my biggest problem, and perhaps that's precisely why I feel the urge to dance. So, in response to your earlier question about whether I ever feel everyday actions as danse—actually, I don't. This is a wish. I do want to feel so, though. If I did, then maybe I wouldn't need to dance the way I currently do. If I could find contentment in simply living each day, there would perhaps not be a special need to dance. Everything would be a dance. If I acquired the sensation of becoming one with the world, my desire to dance would probably fade.

Actually, there was a woman who had a difficult-to-treat form of chronic depression. She was told that it would probably never go away. Initially, she exhibited very powerful movements. However, as her life changed, she went through various things; now she doesn't dance in any special way. However, she says she sees her daily life as "a dance to barely survive." This phrase has become a shared language between us. She always replies with it in her emails. She still intends to live each day that way. That makes me incredibly happy. Even though she doesn't dance anymore, holding on to that feeling makes each day precious, doesn't it? I hope I can live like that. For me, it's a wish and an ideal. I cannot do it right now.

Another woman participant from the workshops at the Konan Hospital wrote a letter after she got discharged. What struck me was this line: "Back then, I could dance because I was so ill. But now my heart dances. After leaving the hospital, my heart began to dance. So, I don't need to dance like I did back then anymore." Indeed, some patients at Konan Hospital suddenly burst into dance when their conditions are severe. As their condition improves, they stop dancing. That happens quite often. It's strange, isn't it? I always wonder what dancing really is.

BAE: In your workshop, it was not like "dance freely," which differed from my original image of improvisational dance. The dance began with basic movements such as lying down and rolling over.

IWASHITA: Ultimately, this leads to spontaneous movement. I think that was also the case during that session; eventually, everyone ended up standing in a certain setup.

BAE: You used a couple of metaphorical images.

IWASHITA: Having one or two of these helps you get started. Even within a bounded framework, despite its limitations, I think there is freedom within that. Sometimes, I even think that it might be a way to become freer. Therefore, when working on a choreographed piece, you have to execute the choreography perfectly; but if asked whether there is no freedom within that, I don't think that's true. There is freedom within it. As you just said, even if someone says improvisation is being free, there's a kind of constraint where you think, "I don't know what to do."

This reflection on freedom within structure also resonates with Iwashita's experience in Sankai Juku, where he devoted himself to choreographed work—a practice that, at first, seemed irreconcilable with improvisation.

IWASHITA: I returned to Sankai Juku in 1986 and remained there until recently. When I first returned, I saw improvisation and choreographed pieces as completely opposed and mutually exclusive. Though I could say my body connected the two. Back in '86, there was a very painful period for me at Sankai Juku when it came to dancing choreography. It was because there were choreographers, directions, obligations, and compulsions to perform what they had created. I recall feeling terribly distressed by that; but looking back now, I realize that I chose that path myself. It was my free will. I wonder now, why I couldn't dance that way as I had chosen it, rather than as the choreographer's creation.

I have been involved with Sankai Juku for a long time after that. There was a piece called "*Toki* (the time)." Back then, the world premiere was always in Paris. It ran for a week. It was the final day of the world premiere. It was an extremely intricate piece which was meticulously crafted. Yet, mistakes would happen somewhere. Timing being off, a movement being wrong—subtle things, things only the performers and their partners might notice. But I just couldn't quite get into it properly. Only on that final day, after it ended, while I was showering and washing off the white makeup, I thought, "Ah! Today was perfect! A 100 percent performance." In that instant, I realized, "Ah, this is how it should be." Until then, I thought improvisation and choreography were completely different, even opposing things. But that wasn't the case. I realized that my dancing with Sankai Juku was all on the same stage and connected. At that moment, I wondered, maybe now I am free? It sounds dramatic, but until then, I had been feeling constrained by Sankai Juku's stage. However, by dancing without making any mistakes, I felt an immense sense of freedom within myself.

BAE: You mentioned practicing yoga, and you include bodywork techniques in your workshops. Do you practice any other somatic techniques?

IWASHITA: Just yoga and qigong. I learned about them when I was young. Now, I just keep doing them, interpreting them in my way. When I learned about them, they just felt right for my body. I might have tried other things but if they didn't feel right, I just couldn't stick with them. Other activities such as musical bands or theatrical drama neither did work. Bands require multiple people. You can't form a band without other members, right? That's where it stopped for me. If I truly had the desire to perform, to make music, I think I would have done it alone. But I have not yet reached that point. However, at the turning point at the age of 25, I started alone. It made a huge difference. It was about solitude and being a solitary individual. I think that standing at that point was important. Precisely because of that, I think the desire to "connect" became clearer. This is contradictory too, but I seek solidarity because I am a solitary individual.

Dance in the Middle Voice

BAE: Being alone is what allows us to connect—that's a powerful statement. You quoted Hijikata, "Isn't being born itself improvisation?" (Iwashita, 2001) Ancient Greek had a "middle voice" that was neither active nor passive, with "to be born" being a well-known example. Do you think "to dance" would take the same verb form?

The middle voice originates in ancient Greek grammar, which posits it as an intermediate category between the active and passive voices. Forms of the middle voice also appear in languages such as Sanskrit and Latin. Unlike the familiar active–passive opposition in modern grammatical systems—to act versus to be acted upon—the middle voice indicates a different

axis: it designates actions or states that are intrinsically attributed to the subject itself. While this usage is common in Greek, in Latin it survives only in a limited set of verbs, such as *nascor* (to be born), *morior* (to die), *patior* (to suffer/undergo), and *loquor* (to speak).

In the interview, Iwashita's notion of "dance" likewise does not arise from the dancer's explicit intention to dance, nor from being compelled to dance by an external force. Rather, dance appears when something within the self manifests of its own accord. It is neither active nor passive, but emerges in a space between the two. The concept of the middle voice may therefore offer a useful framework for articulating this mode of emergence.

IWASHITA: The state of dancing, as I reflect on it now, what would you call it? It feels like moving through these states—sometimes active, sometimes passive, or sometimes drifting through an undefined realm. A strange sensation, really. You can't pin it down to one position; it's always shifting. It makes me wonder whether living itself might be like that.

BAE: Being born is surely also about the baby having its own will while simultaneously being pushed out.

IWASHITA: Exactly. I think it's both. There must be areas we still don't fully understand. I sense that. Sometimes, you move actively (Iwata leans his body forward slightly while twisting and extending his arm), and other times, you're pushed like this (leaning his body back and retreating). Sometimes, it's unclear, and you can't tell which is which. However, what I can say for sure is that it's all about sensation. We need to look more closely into what state that sensation is in; but no matter how much we analyze it, that sensation is here now, existing as it is. I don't think that it can be analyzed. There's a saying that you can't understand or divide the world by splitting it up. You can't understand it; you can't divide it. That's where dance certainly operates—in the undividable. I think that's what it seeks. Segmenting, dividing, breaking things down endlessly into finer parts—I think that's how the world's becoming increasingly fragmented now. But that's not actually the case. It's about connecting those parts.

BAE: From your explanation, I can now see how dance moves between active and passive states. Do you think there are other examples of these verbs from daily life? For instance, "walking" is mostly active, yet there are moments when it feels like we're somehow "allowed to walk." In your view, are there other everyday actions that straddle both active and passive states?

IWASHITA: As previously mentioned, stripping away the purpose of an action changes everything. Everyday actions, movements, and gestures, are socialized gestures. These are movements within norms; therefore, any movement that deviates from social norms is suspicious. Suspicious person! Why suspicious? Because you can't tell what they're doing. You can't categorize it. You can't properly name it. It becomes movement that defies labeling. So it can be a bit frightening too. Even everyday movements such as walking are usually heading somewhere. However, what happens when you eliminate that sense of heading somewhere? Just walking. The next part is this: slowing down. If you reduce speed from the everyday pace to an almost unlimited degree, it ceases to be normal walking. In this state, your bodily senses become incredibly sharp. You feel all sorts of things through the soles of your feet. You can perceive information around you that you couldn't feel before. It's fascinating. Things you would pass by at everyday speed; you can now see again, right there. The world is speeding up increasingly these days, but this is the opposite—slowing down gradually. Even so, the middle voice is a wonderful discovery.

BAE: Well, yes, the existence of middle-voice verbs in ancient Greek grammar has been

drawing attention in Japan for several years[4] .

IWASHITA: I wonder if this aspect might not be limited to Greek but could also be present in our daily lives.

BAE: That's right. The classification system is limited to active and passive; therefore, we fit things into these categories.

IWASHITA: Yes, they end up being one or the other. But this is a truly remarkable discovery.

BAE: Finally, when you also quoted Hijikata in your memo, "What emerges, what is pushed out, that's what's important, " you described something embedded within us before socialization and institutionalization as a "vast darkness." The experience of that vast darkness surfacing and being pushed out might not necessarily be pleasant. What kind of experience is that? Also, do you think that practice or training is needed to draw it out?

IWASHITA: The "vast darkness" being pushed out. As I mentioned earlier about the patient who stood up, I felt that there was deep inner turmoil within that patient. Practice or training was not needed to draw it out. It just happened that way for that person, and that darkness was suddenly visible. Therefore, even if you practice or train, it's not necessarily guaranteed that such things will be drawn out. But I do feel that everyone carries great darkness within. I sensed it in that patient, but surely, everyone lives with something like that. When they die, they return to that darkness.

BAE: Do you sometimes feel that what emerges from within yourself is also darkness?

IWASHITA: Whether what emerges from within me comes from darkness... that's quite a deep question. I might not have reached that level yet. But what I feel isn't just from within my body, this skin bag filled with blood. Something I sense also comes from outside my body. For example, the sensation in the soles of my feet that I treasure now—it's a connection from the ground, something beyond, and outside. The movement comes from there. It "comes" "rises" "ascends," or "stands up." I imagine that, at its source, there must be a vast darkness.

Based on this interview, somaesthetics principles were found in Iwashita's approach to improvisational dance. His practice begins by de-purposing everyday movements—lying down, sitting, standing, walking—and slowing them to the point where one can focus on their felt qualities. From this state, interaction with the environment naturally unfolds: with the floor, the physical setting, the surrounding air, the situation, and the presence of others. Movement then emerges spontaneously in response to these relations.

The question "Why do we dance?" usually presumes a voluntary act motivated by emotion or intention. Yet in the interview, Iwashita emphasizes that he dances not because of an external cause but because movement inevitably overflows from within. This understanding resonates with somaesthetics, which highlights the body's intrinsic ambiguity (Shusterman, 2012). The body is both subjective and objective, sacred and animal, burdensome yet the very medium through which action becomes possible. Iwashita's dance also shares this ambiguity of the bodily experience.

Gibson's concept of affordances (1979) further clarifies this point. Affordances refer to the action possibilities that the environment allows to an organism; they neither reside solely in the environment nor solely in the individual, but emerge relationally. Thus, even when we initiate

4 According to Kinoshita (2016), the notion of middle voice in Japan was introduced in the 1980s and 1990s, mainly within human studies and anthropology, through interpretations of *das Mediale* in Walter Benjamin's language theory and Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophy of play. Nishimura (1989), for instance, argues in *Phenomenology of Play* that modes of existence in which subject and object cannot be clearly separated—such as "play"—are fundamentally intermediate. Since the 2010s, philosopher Koichiro Kokubun (2017) has offered a more precise account of the middle voice based on Émile Benveniste's linguistics, bringing renewed attention to the concept, especially in relation to the modern emphasis on will.

an action, that action is shaped, guided, and invited by the environment's structures, textures, and resistances. This relational dynamic complicates any simple distinction between active and passive modes of bodily agency.

As Iwashita describes in the interview, the origin of dance emerges in this relational, ambiguous space. By attending deliberately and closely to the sensations of basic postures and movements, one can embody subtle impulses that arise without intention. Dance begins with this heightened somatic awareness, but it becomes aesthetically refined when even thas focus softens and movement is allowed to emerge on its own. In this sense, dance is not something the dancer does but something that arises through the reciprocal interplay of body, sensation, and environment.

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Body Rhythm and Martial Roots: A Somaesthetic Return in Chinese Classical Dance

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Abstract: *This article presents a comparative interview study with Xin Li, a leading educator in Chinese Classical Dance at the Beijing Dance Academy, and Wenlong Li, a martial arts practitioner in the Tai Chi and Bajiquan lineages. Through their reflections, it explores how principles of Shenyun (Body Rhythm) and martial practice illuminate somaesthetic cultivation, linking inner awareness with outward expression. The dialogues show how embodied traditions of dance and martial arts contribute not only to aesthetic training but also to resilience, presence, and well-being in contemporary life.*

Keywords: *somaesthetic practice; Chinese Classical Dance; Body Rhythm (Shenyun); martial arts; somatic cultivation; embodiment; well-being; fluid movement; bodily awareness*

Introduction

This interview-based article explores the evolving somaesthetic logic of Chinese Classical Dance through a comparative lens, drawing on separate but thematically aligned conversations with two expert practitioners: Xin Li, Associate Professor and Director of the School of Humanities at the Beijing Dance Academy, and Wenlong Li, a martial arts master trained in the Tai Chi and Bajiquan lineages. Each interview was semi-structured: I prepared key prompts on embodiment, cultivation, and aesthetic experience, but the dialogue remained open to spontaneous reflection. Both interviews were conducted online, in Chinese, and later translated and edited by the author.

Having studied both Chinese Classical Dance and martial arts under the guidance of the two artists, I approached these conversations from within the shared field of embodied practice. This experiential grounding enabled a deeper understanding of their meanings and facilitated a dialogue that unfolded as both scholarly and somatic inquiry. The thematic focal points were established from the outset through a somaesthetic framework. Yet as the conversations unfolded, new resonances and meanings emerged organically, reflecting the artists' distinctive ways of articulating traditional Chinese embodied knowledge in forms that deeply resonate with somaesthetic thought. While the central focus remains on Chinese Classical Dance, the inquiry unfolds in dialogue with traditional Chinese martial arts to illuminate the layered somatic foundations and shared aesthetic principles of both disciplines.

Developed in the mid-20th century through institutional efforts led by dance pioneers at the Beijing Dance Academy (Li, 2017), Chinese Classical Dance has evolved into a modern performance genre grounded in Chinese aesthetic principles yet shaped by hybrid pedagogical

influences. The term does not refer to a single historical dance tradition; rather, it designates a contemporary system that draws selectively on multiple sources — including traditional opera, martial arts techniques, folk movement practices, and codified training developed within state institutions. Its characteristic qualities include curved and spiral pathways, dynamic shifts between softness and strength, integrated use of breath and intention, and expressive coordination of the body and mind.

Figure 1. Xin Li (right) and her colleague Rongchen Liu (left) demonstrating Chinese Classical Dance postures as part of an ongoing movement process. Video Link: A compiled video of Xin Li performing selected excerpts is available here: https://youtube.com/shorts/cdUnj3p1dCE?si=74ieLT1hxLBSAC3Q

The early codification of Chinese Classical Dance drew on elements of ballet's technical system and pedagogical structure, a process that led to an externally legible form characterized by verticality, codified extension, and formalized lines. Simultaneously, it incorporated stylized movement vocabularies from traditional Chinese opera, a performative form historically intertwined with martial arts, ritual practice, and folk movement traditions (Hu, 2012). In early training models, particular emphasis was often placed on traditional opera's gestural stylization and theatrical form (Tang & Jin, 2018, p. 145).

Over time, however, a gradual pedagogical transformation has emerged, led by successive generations of dance educators seeking to recover the deeper somatic dimensions embedded within these inherited forms. Among the most significant sources for this renewal are traditional martial arts, whose emphasis on internal energy, bodily coherence, and intentional movement has begun to reshape training approaches. This shift is reflected in developments such as Shenyun (身韵, Body Rhythm), a system that has gained influence since the 1980s and highlights breath, intention, and internal resonance as foundational to expression (Li & Liu, 2025).

This evolving pedagogical orientation resonates with Richard Shusterman's (2000) pragmatist conception of somaesthetics, which frames the turn to embodied practice not as a nostalgic retreat, but as a revolutionary reorientation of philosophy—one that grounds self-cultivation, social awareness, and aesthetic transformation in somatic experience. As Shusterman (2008) writes, "the body is not only the crucial site where one's ethos and values can be physically displayed and attractively developed, but it is also where one's skills of perception and performance can

be honed to improve one's cognition and capacities for virtue and happiness" (p. xii). Across his work, Shusterman (2008) insists that the art of living is inseparable from the art of self-styling, and that the body serves as a central medium for this ongoing process of transformation (pp. 12-16).

In this spirit, the present article structures its comparative inquiry into four thematic sections, each juxtaposing reflections from the two interviews under a shared conceptual focus. The insights offered by the martial arts teacher provide a valuable comparative perspective—not as a direct interlocutor, but as a bearer of a parallel lineage of embodied knowledge. Rather than seeking convergence or contrast for its own sake, this format enables a layered examination of how embodied traditions shape somatic awareness, artistic training, and aesthetic experience, while offering a culturally rooted contribution to the broader discourse of somaesthetic practice.

1. Entering Practice: Pathways, Pedagogies, and Somatic Lineages

In order to ground this inquiry in lived practice, I began by asking each practitioner to reflect on how they entered their respective disciplines—not simply as a matter of training or career, but as a path of somatic cultivation. Their responses[1] reveal two strikingly different trajectories. Xin Li recounts her entry into Chinese Classical Dance through the formal system of state-sponsored arts education, shaped by shifting pedagogical ideologies and historical currents. In contrast, the martial arts teacher Wenlong Li offers a deeply personal narrative of existential awakening, in which martial practice emerges not from institutional lineage but from an urgent, lived confrontation with loss and survival. Together, these accounts open a layered view of how embodied traditions take root: through cultural structures, historical negotiation, and intimate, often unrepeatable, life experiences.

Xueting Luo[2] :

To begin, could you share how you first entered your practices? I'm especially interested in how you came to understand your work as more than technique—as a form of somatic cultivation, or as an embodied way of knowing.

Xin Li:

My entry into Chinese Classical Dance began within a particular historical and institutional context. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, there was a national emphasis on building professional arts education, and dance became part of this broader cultural project. At that time, three main approaches informed the development of what would become Chinese Classical Dance. One drew on the technical rigour of Western ballet, transmitted through Soviet experts working in China during the early 1950s, and valued for its systematic and scientifically structured training. Another emphasized modern expressive dance and the representation of contemporary social life. The third, proposed by Ouyang Yuqian, a theatre scholar and artist, advocated drawing from traditional Chinese opera (Xiqu 戏曲) as a foundation. This Xiqu influence brought stylized gestures, rhythmic patterns, and culturally embedded movement aesthetics into the early vocabulary of Chinese Classical Dance.

1 All quotations from the interviewees were originally given in Chinese. They have been translated into English and lightly edited for clarity by the author. Both interviewees reviewed the translated material, and revisions were made in accordance with their feedback to ensure the accuracy and integrity of their intended meaning.

2 Note on names: Chinese names are presented in Western order (Given name + Surname) for the interviewees and author of this article. Historical and contextual figures are cited in the original Chinese order (Surname + Given name).

Over time, however, dance educators continued to explore additional sources of embodiment within Chinese traditions to deepen the somatic foundations of training. While Xiqu provided rich stylistic and expressive resources, its performance conventions are shaped by particular dramaturgical needs and aesthetic lineages. As educators sought to further expand the internal logic of body method, many turned to martial arts—not only for movement vocabulary, but for their deep reservoir of embodied knowledge grounded in Chinese philosophical traditions. Although many Xiqu movements already reflect martial influence, martial arts offer a more direct and less theatrical engagement with the body, opening new possibilities for cultivating internal awareness and expression.

I entered the Beijing Dance Academy's affiliated school in 1986, at the age of ten, where the training system was notably informed by ballet. For a long time, I experienced Chinese Classical Dance through that framework. It wasn't until I began my graduate studies in 2004, under the guidance of Li Zhengyi, one of the founders of the Shenyun (身韵, Body Rhythm) system, that I had my first direct and immersive experience of martial arts. She asked me to spend a semester training with martial art teachers, focusing a great deal on the foundational stepping pattern. That experience transformed how I understood the body. The movement seemed simple, but it reorganized my internal perception: I began to sense differences in alignment, in coordination, and in the flow of energy. It was unlike anything I had experienced within the institutional training system in which I had grown up. That was when martial arts began to open up for me as a path of somatic awareness and inner cultivation, not merely as a source of stylistic influence.

Wen Long Li:

My path was not shaped by childhood training or family inheritance. Although I've had the honour of studying under respected masters from different traditions, I never saw my practice as defined by lineage. I studied finance at university but spent several years drifting without direction. It was only after a series of life events—especially the sudden loss of my family—that I began to search inwardly for a way to reorient myself. What emerged was not a plan, but a will to live. Martial arts became the form through which I could channel that survival instinct. I didn't consciously 'choose' it. Looking back, it feels more as if life itself had been gradually guiding me toward it.

This turn was not driven by cultural expectation or technical interest, but by something more personal and urgent. It wasn't about career or identity. It was a question of survival—and of how to live, if I were to go on living. Martial arts became the form through which I could stay grounded, stay conscious, and stay alive.

For me, martial arts is not primarily about performance, lineage, or technique. It is a response to life itself. My students often ask: can this movement you teach be used in a fight? My answer is: in a fight, you don't rely on movement; you rely on the will to survive. Combat is not choreography. Martial arts, in its origin, is not art—it is necessity. My focus has always been on why a movement exists, how it works, and what it reveals about human intention and instinct.

I often reflect on the term Wushu (武术, martial arts). The word has accumulated cultural weight, even mystique in Chinese tradition. But at its core, it is about what we do with the body when confronted with fear, threat, or the possibility of death. It is not the art (Shu, 术) that uses me; I use the art. I master the technique. The technique does not master me.

My focus has always been on survival—not only in a physical sense, but in an existential one. When I train, I'm not asking how to replicate a form. I'm asking: how do I stay present? How do I correct myself through movement? How do I live with awareness? In that sense, martial

arts became a method of self-study, of somatic reflection, and of reclaiming life from the edge of despair.

Figure 2. Wenlong Li demonstrating foundational martial arts movement. Video link: A compiled video of Wenlong Li practicing movement sequences is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8Lip6t8aYw

2. Embodied Cultivation: Nature, Harmony, and the Ground of Meaning

Having explored how each practitioner entered their discipline, I turned to the question of cultivation. As Shusterman (2008) has argued, "the body is not only the crucial source of all perception and action but also the core of our expressive capability and thus the ground of all language and meaning" (p. 49). This somaesthetic perspective suggests that movement is never merely functional or ornamental; it is also the medium through which meaning is generated, shared, and transformed. With this in mind, I asked both teachers: How do you understand the relationship between movement and meaning, whether in dance, martial practice, or daily life? And how was the idea of cultivation present in those foundational experiences you described?

Xin Li:

For me, cultivation begins with self-knowledge: to cultivate the body is to cultivate the self. But how does one truly know the body? In our Chinese tradition, the answer is to learn from nature (Shifa Ziran 师法自然). My own encounter with martial arts deepened this understanding, because in Daoist thought the body is never separate from nature but always part of a larger whole. The chest, abdomen, back, eyes, and even the smallest movements of the hands or feet all correspond to natural processes. The body responds to nature, and nature resonates through the body.

This view is beautifully articulated by the scholar Liu Junxiang in his book *Eastern Body Culture* (1996). He describes the universe as a harmonious and ordered unity, and the aim of cultivation is to return to that cosmic order, to rejoin nature, and thereby achieve true freedom of life. He presents the human body as a kind of Bagua (Eight Trigrams), where each

part corresponds to a force of nature: the head corresponds to heaven (Qian 乾), upright and expansive; the knees and feet to earth (Kun 坤), bearing all and responding to touch; the chest to fire (Li 离), open and spacious; the abdomen to water (Kan 坎), grounded in the Dantian; the back to mountain (Gen 艮), able to curve, stretch, and support; the hip to thunder (Zhen 震), storing energy; the hands to wind (Xun 巽), mobile and adaptive; the shoulders to lake (Dui 兑), relaxed yet resilient. This perspective sees every part of the body as having its own distinct qualities, yet always working together within a larger whole.

Building on this vision of the body as both differentiated and integrated, my recent work with Hehe Zhi Yun (和合之韵, The Rhythm of Harmony) has developed as part of ongoing collective explorations within Chinese Classical Dance pedagogy. Rooted in Shenyun practice and shaped by collaboration with colleagues and earlier generations of practitioners, this system seeks to translate the cosmological view into a practical training and theoretical framework. As I have elaborated in a co-authored monograph with Rongchen Liu (2025), published under the same title, the framework understands the body both in its individual parts and as an integrated whole. The head and eyes, upper limbs, torso, lower limbs, and steps each follow their own methods and rules, yet together they form a complete and harmonious unity. The guiding principle is Daofa Ziran (道法自然): movement must accord with the rhythms of nature, cultivating coordination and harmony as the foundation of expression.

Wenlong Li:

I understand cultivation as a path, a process—not a final goal. This insight comes from nature, and also from Chinese philosophy. In the *Dao De Jing* there is a line: "For the Way [Dao] is a thing impalpable, incommensurable. Incommensurable, impalpable"[3] (official translation, Waley, 1999, pp. 42-43). Buddhist texts also suggest that life is sometimes like walking in a fog[4] : at times you glimpse a direction, at times not. Yet cultivation means continuing to walk, step by step, as attentively as you can. Even a single clear step is already precious.

Because life itself is uncertain, why insist that dance movement must reach a certain standard, or martial arts a certain level of mastery? When you are too eager to perform, too anxious to succeed, you begin to act a role rather than live your own life. But a life cannot be an act. The hardest and most valuable thing is to live truthfully as yourself, to experience life with authenticity.

Nature teaches me this. People often want to solidify the Dao[5] into something visible and fixed, but that is like forcing water into ice. Ice cannot flow or adapt; it loses the ability to respond to change. To live well is to remain like water, not rigid like ice. True cultivation is not about imitating what seems fluid on the surface, but about returning to your original process of being—simple, uncontrived, alive.

In my own case, I once felt lost. Sitting by the river, watching the wind move and the water flow, I realized: everything in nature is moving, yet I felt stuck. At that moment, I wanted to follow the wind and the water, to let movement carry me forward. That was how I began to

3 The original text: "道之为物,惟恍惟惚".

4 The imagery of fog and obscurity is frequently found in Buddhist texts. For example, the Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra (大寶積經) describes ignorance (avidyā) in this way:"Through false views and attachments, beings sink into a defiled world, just as the open sky is obscured by clouds and fog" (由诸见趣浊世间，譬如云雾障虚空; own translation, Puti Liuzhi, 1985, p. 19a). In this passage, the clouds and fog symbolize ignorance and afflictive delusion, while the sky represents the innate purity of Buddha-nature. When obscured by fog, the sky cannot reveal its luminous nature.

5 The term Dao (道), commonly translated as 'the Way', encompasses a range of expanded meanings. These include: (1) the guiding principles or laws governing various domains—such as the natural order of the cosmos ('the way of heaven') or the ethical structures of human society ('the way of man'); (2) the universal patterns that underlie and connect all things; and (3) the primordial source or ontological ground of being, which transcends form and gives rise to all phenomena and human activity (Editorial Committee of the KCCTC, 2015, p. 13).

practise martial arts. I didn't know where to go or what form it would take—I only knew I had to start moving. Looking back now, I see that every experience in my life, even the times of confusion, was preparing me for that decision. It feels as though my whole life had been pushing me toward this path.

3. Martial Resonances in Dance: Process, Expression, and Transformation

In the previous section, both perspectives converged on the idea that movement is not merely an external technique but a medium through which the body aligns with nature, discovers meaning, and reorients life itself. This opens the question of how martial arts, with its emphasis on process, intention, and existential awareness, could shape the pedagogy of dance. From a somaesthetic perspective, this inquiry engages both dimensions of the term: soma, the disciplined cultivation of the living body, and aesthetics, the expressive transformation of movement into meaning. To explore this, I asked each teacher about the role of martial principles in their own field of practice, how these principles are expressed aesthetically, and how they understand the resonances between dance and martial arts.

Xin Li:

For me, aesthetics and bodily form are two sides of the same problem. In the system of Hehe Zhi Yun (和合之韵), the first He (和, harmony) represents the overarching pursuit—integration, balance, and cultural harmony. The second He (合, concordance) refers to specific methods: coordination, correspondence, and practical alignment. The first marks the aesthetic aim; the second provides the bodily means by which it is realized.

Aesthetics and method are mutually dependent. The goal of the body's parts coordinating with one another is to achieve overall harmony, and this harmony is sustained by specific methods. The Tai Chi diagram is the clearest example: it is both an aesthetic form and a philosophical principle of Yin-Yang transformation. In dance as well, my aesthetic and philosophical aims depend on technical methods. Aesthetic ideals are not abstract theories to be contemplated from afar; they must be embodied through repeated practice, methods of movement, and refinement of skill. Only then can one understand what Yin-Yang transformation truly means in the body.

This is why I value the lessons drawn from martial arts. My teacher Li Zhengyi placed her emphasis not on fixed choreography as an end in itself, but on the principles and applications that underlie movement. While structured sequences were certainly part of her training, she used them as a means to illuminate deeper laws of coordination and expression. Her approach was like searching for fundamental principles within movement—not limiting us to predetermined combinations, but opening methods that could be extended and varied. It was a mode of thinking almost scientific, like deriving infinite melodies from basic musical scales, or like the *Yijing*, where simple principles generate countless transformations.

In the system of Hehe Zhi Yun, we distil this into eight characters: Zhouzhuan Lundong, Sanjie Liuhe[6] (轴转轮动，三节六合, literally "pivot rotation and circular movement; three nodes and six concordances"). These express the enduring principles at the heart of our movement logic. The waist and hip serve as the body's pivot, driving circular motion. From

6 Sanjie Liuhe (三节六合) is a core concept in Chinese body philosophy, referring to the method of achieving integrated force (Jin) and expressive spirit through the coordination of inner and outer relations. Sanjie (三节), meaning "three nodes", divides the body into root, middle, and tip—for example, foot–waist–hand in overall movement, or shoulder–elbow–hand in a local sequence—emphasising that force must begin at the root, follow through the middle, and reach the tip. Liuhe (六合), meaning 'Six Concordances', includes the Three External Concordances (shoulder–hip, elbow–knee, hand–foot), which require the alignment of limbs in space, and the Three Internal Concordances (heart–intention, intention–breath, breath–force), which seek unity of spirit, energy, and strength (Li&Liu, 2025, pp.28-30). Together, this system produces integrated force in martial arts and expressive resonance in dance, realizing a process of unity between inner and outer, form and spirit.

this pivot, movement passes through the body's joints in continuous linkage. When the internal relations are correct, inner force (Jin 劲) and external form achieve unity. What is visible on the surface always arises from these hidden processes of breath and energy. Too often dancers pursue the external image and neglect the inner process, but the true aesthetic emerges only when the two are unified.

In the same way, the expression of intention (Yi 意) in dance is not something contrived or deliberately imposed. It emerges from within, layer by layer, and is transmitted outward through the body's processes until it bursts forth. By contrast, much contemporary expression of emotion—joy, anger, sorrow, or happiness—is detached from inner generation. The difference is in whether movement is full or empty: when a posture is reached directly as an external shape, it lacks resonance; when it unfolds through a full process, the resulting form carries entirely different power and meaning.

Wenlong Li:

I studied with many masters over the years, travelling widely in search of answers. Yet after all the detours, what I discovered is simple: what sets people apart is not flashy skills or second-hand experience, but steady cultivation of the basics. If martial practice were like eating buns, I would rather make and eat ten myself than merely taste the last one.

The value of martial training lies in perseverance. A single posture that looks ordinary often requires thousands of repetitions before its meaning is revealed, and through practice I came to feel the wisdom of earlier generations inscribed in those movements. A tall building only stands because its foundations are deep. So too in training: instead of inventing shapes from thin air, I pay attention to how each channel of force flows, and I find joy when the circulation becomes smooth and natural. That is what it means to enter a more refined stage of practice. Through this process, I realised that practice is not for performance or display, but for one's own cultivation.

To me, martial performance is rooted in humanity's most basic reflection on life and death. There is a saying in our culture—Wuwu Tongyuan (武舞同源)—that suggests a common origin for martial action and dance: both are human expressions whose vitality returns us to source. In both movement and stillness we search for the balance that arises from instincts for survival and reproduction; out of that balance beauty emerges.

Like dance, martial practice concerns the coordination of hand, eye, torso, and step. These elements are not decorative: they come from the most primal human acts—hunting, farming, defending. You see with your eyes so that you can seize; you act with intention so that the body follows. This is why technique must be rooted in purpose.

When it comes to expression, I tell my students not to stop at the surface. Beauty is not in the gesture or the voice, but in the deeper intention that drives them—the desire to live. At its core, martial practice always returns to survival. Borrowing Shakespeare's familiar words, it is a matter of "to be or not to be". True expression arises from silence, from the power that flows like water, stirs like wind, or strikes like thunder. Let life be life, not a neat explanation of life.

Silence itself reveals more than performance. When you look into someone's eyes, you can see the heart—what is most essential and pure. For me, nature is not something external to seek in distant landscapes; it is already within us. If the heart is narrow, the world will feel small. If the heart is open, the world will open.

4. Beyond Form: Intention, Energy, and Spirit

Both teachers highlighted that the true value of movement lies not in external display but in

the processes and intentions that give it life. This insight points us toward the more elusive dimensions of practice, where form is inseparable from the invisible forces that animate it.

Beyond technical training, both Chinese Classical Dance and martial arts traditions rely on an interwoven system of somatic concepts, forms of knowing and cultivating the body that extend far beyond physical mechanics. Among these, Xin (心, the ethical and emotional heart–mind), Yi (意, intent), Qi (气, vital energy) and Shen (神, spirit) stand as foundational terms. Each is rich with aesthetic, ethical, and philosophical significance.

In this section, I asked each interviewee to reflect on how they understand these concepts in their own practice, and how they guide others—whether dancers or martial artists—to recognise and embody them in movement. Their responses reveal how deeply these concepts shape not only how one moves, but how one lives.

Xin Li:

Part 1—Pedagogical Practice

For me, the foundation of Shenyun (Body Rhythm) training in Chinese Classical Dance lies in inner–outer harmony. This is also where our practice connects most closely with martial arts. Outer coordination of the limbs is essential, but equally important is inner coordination: the integration of spirit, breath, and force. To achieve true harmony requires not only physical adjustment but also a steady, focused heart–mind to guide and regulate movement. Breath, in particular, plays a decisive role in filling and sustaining the fullness and fluency of outward form.

Let me give a simple example. In Shenyun we often begin with the basic element of Ti-Chen (提沉, lifting and sinking). At the start, the task is not to move, but to stand still and sense oneself. I tell students not to rush into action but to remain with themselves for a moment. As they stand, I ask: can you feel the central pivot of the waist and hip? Do you sense the shoulders dropping, the elbows releasing, the strength grounding through the hips and into the soles of the feet? Can you relax the brows and open the eyes? This is the cultivation of the very first impulse of intention. Only after this self-sensing begins can I guide them step by step: first engaging the waist and hip, which in turn brings awareness of force and of the body's relation to the ground; then extending into the arms; and finally into the head and eyes. The process unfolds layer by layer. But the very first step is always to become still and to perceive oneself.

From this stillness, I ask students to find a state of balance—calm, upright, centred, neither too tight nor too loose. From calmness, movement can emerge. Here the heart must be pacified, the spirit gathered, and the energy focused. What we call Shen (神, spirit) begins with concentration. Once a dancer is fully absorbed, a sense of immersion arises. This is not only about training but also about performance: when stepping on stage, the dancer must no longer be themselves but embody the role, aligning their present experience with that of the character they portray.

Part 2—Conceptual Framework

When I reflect more directly on the relationship between Xin, Yi, Qi, Li, and Shen, I see them as a sequence of gradual externalization. Xin (心, the heart–mind) comes first, then Yi (意, intention), then Qi (气, energy), and finally Li (力, physical force). For example: if I am thirsty, the heart gives rise to the desire for water. Yi is the intention that supports and directs this desire. Qi provides the propulsion—I take a breath, prepare the body, and then move. Finally, Li manifests as the visible action of raising the cup and drinking.

As for Shen (神, spirit), I see it as slightly more manifest than Xin (heart-mind). The heart is the first impulse, but Shen is the concentrated will that compels one to act. For example, before I begin teaching, I may think about it abstractly, but to actually step into class I must gather and 'lift' my Shen. It is this lifting of spirit that transforms thought into directed energy, into action.

Finally, Qi is not simply breathing, but 'a sense of breath'—a dynamic that mediates between intention and force. Its role is especially important at the thresholds of movement, in beginnings and transitions. In such moments, breath activates and directs force. Once movement is underway, breath often transforms into force and no longer remains as an isolated act of respiration. This is why I tell students: do not fixate on breathing itself. If you try to count every breath against musical phrases you will suffocate. Instead, breath should serve as the spark that mobilizes force; the rest returns to natural breathing.

Wenlong Li:

Students often ask me about the concepts of the Six Concordances (including the Three External Concordances and the Three Internal Concordances; [see Footnote 6]). I tell them the External Concordances join the limbs and joints: elbow with knee, shoulder with hip, hand with foot. Then they ask, "What about the internal organs?" I explain that although the organs are inside, they also belong to the external concordances. They find this puzzling, but I describe the organs as the 'inside of the outside'. Inner and outer always permeate and transform one another; nothing is absolute. Just as in Tai Chi, Yin and Yang are never fixed but include old and young, strong and weak, always in transformation. The organs, too, influence our joints and framework. In martial arts we often speak of Jin-Gu Li (筋骨力): Jin (tendons, fascia) represents the body's coordinating capacity, Gu (bones) provides structure, and Li (force) manifests through them. The organs also participate in this coordination of structure. This is, in fact, a kind of body aesthetics. It provides a fundamental logic: the body's movements must conform to their natural trajectories, from inside to outside, in complete correspondence.

So when we speak of Xin (心, heart-mind), Yi (意, intention), Qi (气, energy), and Li (力, force)—the elements of the Three Internal Concordances—I see them as parts of a single, continuous movement. Xin is the impulse: 'What do I want to do?' It could be hunting, farming, cutting wood—the basic impulses of life. But where does this impulse come from? In ancient times, when humans first fought or hunted, they did not ask why; the impulse was instinctive, written into the genetic chain. Yi arises when this impulse becomes focused and conscious. Qi gathers the body's energy to support the movement. Li appears as the force that manifests when the body actually acts.

Thus, by action, I do not mean a polished technique or an external performance. For me, action is the moment when intention enters the body—when breath shifts, weight changes, or the limbs begin to respond. Reflection follows this action: a kind of sensing and awareness of what the movement has revealed. Only from such reflection can meaningful expression emerge, whether as emotion, meaning, or artistic communication. These then extend naturally into transmission: making others feel what one has understood, creating resonance, continuity, and shared meaning.

In this way, Xin, Yi, Qi, and Li are not four separate steps but a single flow: I want to do something; I direct it; I act; I sense and reflect; I express and pass it on. And yet the cycle always returns to the root: 'What do I want to do?' Everything begins and ends with this impulse.

All of these processes—impulse, intention, energy, and force—naturally lead toward Shen (神, spirit), which I do not see as a separate mental faculty but as something inseparable from the

body. When spirit arrives, the body instinctively integrates into that state. The blood and energy stir—a process I describe as 'moving the blood'. This is not literally pushing blood around the body but shifting the whole state of being. Qi activates the blood, the blood creates heat and readiness, and then Shen gathers it into intention. Spirit directs action: it leads through the eyes. When the eyes arrive at a point, the blood and energy of the whole body gather there, and the movement follows. At its essence, spirit is the power of will that transforms perception into embodied change.

Conclusion

In bringing together these two voices, we encounter different ways of speaking about practice—one articulated through the frameworks of pedagogy, the other through reflections that draw on lived experience and embodied philosophy. Yet beneath their differences of style lies a shared insight: movement is never only external technique, but a way of cultivating the self through the alignment of inner and outer, intention and expression, body and world.

From a somaesthetic perspective, such cultivation is not a luxury but a necessity. It is what Richard Shusterman calls the art of living: the capacity to refine perception, deepen awareness, and shape the self through the body. Chinese Classical Dance and traditional martial arts, though distinct in their histories and forms, converge in this ethos of practice.

As Xin Li notes, this cultivation also carries a dimension of well-being: "Many students tell me that after my class, the whole world feels quiet. In today's society the body is gradually losing sensitivity—we travel in elevators, sit in cars, spend our days in buildings, with air-conditioning and heating regulating the climate, but also dulling bodily perception. In both classical dance and martial arts, balance of body and mind is emphasized. To calm anxiety and restlessness, to quiet the heart, is the first step in recovering sensitivity. This is part of the wisdom of our tradition".

For modern people, whose lives are so often pulled toward fragmentation by speed, stress, and disembodiment, these practices offer profound relevance. To stand still and sense one's breath before moving, to repeat a single movement until it reveals its depth, to feel intention carry through the whole body—these are not only artistic skills but ways of reinhabiting life itself. Both teachers remind us that in cultivating Xin, Yi, Qi, Shen, we are not only learning how to dance or to fight, but how to live with greater harmony, resilience, and presence.

At the heart of Chinese Classical Dance, the pedagogy of Shenyun (身韵, Body Rhythm) enacts this integration. Shen (身) refers not only to the body itself but also to its methods—the external techniques and the coordination of its parts (Li & Liu, 2025, p. 27). Yun (韵) may be understood as the aesthetic resonance that emerges when inner intention and outer form converge. As Xin Li reminds us, Chinese art places Yun at the highest level of artistic achievement: elusive, ungraspable, yet profoundly felt. Here martial practice offers more than vocabulary: its emphasis on intention, breath, and inner-outer alignment provides the very ground on which Yun can take shape. In this sense, the martial roots of Chinese Classical Dance do not constrain form, but rather enable the emergence of rhythm—the resonance of body and spirit—that defines its essence.

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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.

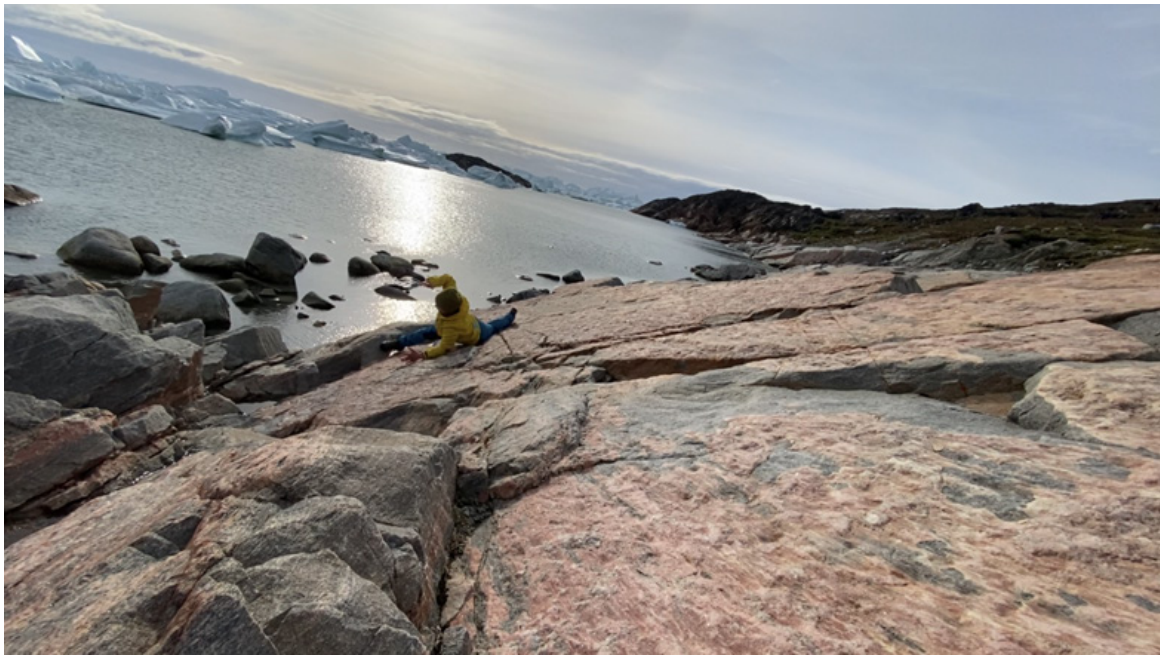
Flavia: And your body got wider and wider, actually becoming a part of the landscape?

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.

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Mētis and Somaesthetics in Polish Craft Practice: The NÓW Initiative

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Abstract: *This study examines, through a phenomenological interview, the ceramic practice of Olga Milczyńska, a member of NÓW—a Polish initiative dedicated to revitalizing traditional artisanal techniques through contemporary methods. NÓW's manifesto foregrounds embodied making processes that integrate sensory experience with cultural heritage, and Milczyńska's practice exemplifies this orientation through attentiveness to material behaviour and manual engagement.*

We argue that her ceramic practice offers a productive site for expanding somaesthetic theory by demonstrating how embodied making generates a situated, corporeal mode of knowledge. This form of bodily intelligence aligns with the notion of mētis (Klekot 2018), challenging the dominant framing of craft as primarily technical and rule-governed (technē). Accordingly, the interview investigates how reflective and unreflective bodily know-how are negotiated during the making process, how mētis is transmitted through practice and how aesthetic and somatic responses guide interaction with the material.

The analysis reveals a critical gap in how craftspeople articulate their own work: Milczyńska foregrounds technical efficacy in her self-narration while leaving unexpressed the somaesthetic dimension that substantively informs her practice. By tracing the dynamics of her working process, the study forges an explicit conceptual link between mētis and somaesthetic theory, offering a contribution to both somaesthetic discourse and contemporary craft studies.

Keywords: *Somaesthetics; embodied knowledge; mētis; embodied making; ceramic practice; material engagement; craft practice*

1. Introduction: Craftsmanship / New Craftsmanship in Poland

All bodily actions inevitably involve human interaction with the material world. They both shape it and are shaped by it. In this respect, the human body is one of the key factors that determine how individuals function within material culture.

Regardless of the meanings associated with the objects it consists of, contemporary material culture is largely created by design and industrial mass production. These two fields are typically viewed as hallmarks of modernity and are analyzed as such in philosophy, including aesthetics (Haug 1986; Adorno and Max Horkheimer 2002; Foster 2002; Baudrillard 2005). In light of

this reading, however, both design and industrial mass production are heavily influenced by the intellectual input required to generate the ideas behind the projects and plans and to create the necessary technologies. As a consequence, the production of material objects is increasingly being passed on to machines that are becoming more and more separated from humans and their bodily actions.

This historical novelty, characteristic of modernity, has determined not only the progressive scattering of traditional manual craftsmanship but, more fundamentally, a growing distance from embodied knowledge and material sensitivity that were once essential components of the relationship with material culture. However, traditional crafts have not disappeared, even in post-industrial societies in the Global North. They still exist, albeit more often than not in a specific context. On the one hand, craftsmanship is viewed nostalgically as a symbol of the 'good old times' and of a higher quality of life before mass production caused its decline. On the other hand, precisely because it functions as a symbol of a higher quality of life, it is seen as an economic luxury expressing one's worldview and social status.

In one way or another, the place of contemporary craft within material culture is defined by its contrast with design and industry. Its manual, i.e. bodily nature—once typical of all methods of production—determines its aesthetic qualities and economic value. This is why a somaesthetic approach seems to be very helpful when analyzing the 'identity' of craft within contemporary material culture, given that craft is often seen as the only field where manual work can still be highly praised, aside from the fine arts.

It is worth remembering that the term 'craftsmanship,' denoting a material activity consisting of transforming materials with one's own hands, derives from the English term 'craft,' which originally meant physical strength and power, and over time also physical activity requiring skill and ability to design and make an object. The Italian word 'artigianato,' like words denoting craftsmanship in other Romance languages, derives from the Latin 'ars,' meaning art, craftsmanship, understood as the ability to act or behave skillfully. The term 'ars' was equivalent to the Greek word 'technē,' meaning any activity based on knowledge of rules that could and should be mastered because they guaranteed effectiveness and, thus, the achievement of the intended result. This understanding of art therefore not only included the creation of paintings, sculptures, and buildings, but also the production of everyday objects, politics, and warfare. Much of the meaning of these terms remains in today's understanding of craftsmanship: it is still associated with manual labor requiring physical strength, skill, and knowledge of specific rules that allow an object to be designed and made in accordance with its intended shape and purpose. It is also these traditions that allow us to understand why, in the contemporary world, the adjective 'craftsmanship' is synonymous with the 'high quality' that industrial production is supposedly unable to guarantee, due to its mass character.

However, craftsmanship can be associated not only with good work, i.e., with the desirable products that are well made, in a thoughtful manner, and from good materials, but also with activities that merely replicate proven patterns, requiring reliability and knowledge but not necessarily imagination or creativity, which are associated with intellectual abilities. This association also has its historical justification. In the Middle Ages, there was a division of the arts into mechanical and liberal based on the kind of skill required. The former involved physical work, working with one's hands on a specific material, while the latter required only intellectual effort. Thus, the liberal arts were recognized as intellectual activities, which over time evolved into *studia humaniora*—the theoretical disciplines (e.g., mathematics, history, philosophy) believed to require the intellectual skills necessary for artists, but not for artisans, who remained solely practice-oriented (Tatarkiewicz 1970, 1980; Kristeller 1951, 1952; Shiner 2001).

The place of crafts within today's material culture is determined by the tensions outlined above regarding how craftsmanship is understood and valued. Additionally, craftsmanship sometimes borders on the realm of art, whether folk art, applied art, or fine art. It plays with tradition, originality, and innovation, while always engaging with the physical nature of the materials used and the bodily actions of the craftspeople (Braunstein-Kriegel and Petiot 2018; Risatti 2007).

This is also the case for Olga Milczyńska. She is a professionally trained ceramicist based in Warsaw who creates functional objects, such as vases of different sizes and purposes, as well as artistic pieces of various sizes (Milczyńska, 2025). She is also one of the founders of *NÓW. New Craft* in Poland, an association of craftspeople specializing in various crafts, whose aim is to promote new forms of craftsmanship. "We—they claim—get inspiration from traditional craft, but we do not rigidly stick to ready-made rules of craftsmanship. What we choose is the freedom of experimenting with the form, material and production process." (Nów 2025) The NÓW manifesto reads:

> *In the present world destroyed by thoughtless mass consumption and chase for more and more profit, craft is being reborn in its creative, new version – just like the moon coming back to its full shape. Nów. New Craft Poland is an association that gathers new craftspeople. Contemporary new craft—regardless of the craft specialization—stands, first and foremost, for taking direct control over the whole production process by a single person. The craft product is different from the industrial product in that it is not alienated from its maker. It is not because craftspeople do not use machines; in this case, the relationship between the maker and the product is based on the highly complex bodily knowledge.*
>
> *In our view, craft means co-operation with the material.* (Nów 2025)

Due to its open and "grassroots" character, the *NÓW* association essentially differs from the Polish Craft Association, which is the largest and oldest organization in Poland, uniting numerous cooperatives and local guilds and offering its own system of education and professional certificates (e.g., for butchers, clockmakers, farriers, hairdressers, locksmiths, masons, mechanics, and tire specialists).

Compared to this more institutional landscape of Polish craftsmanship, ceramics—especially as practiced by Olga—represents a form of making in which bodily contact between the craftsperson and the raw material, and then the finished object, is more explicit. Moreover, the hand serves not only as the main tool but also as the primary organ of tactile intelligence that guides the entire creative process. Thus, ceramics as a technology and technique (*technē*) is particularly distinctive because of the direct bodily engagement it demands from the craftsperson. Unlike many other crafts, ceramic work often implies constant physical contact with the raw material without—or with minimal—mediation of tools, making it perhaps the most immediately tactile of all craft practices. The hand's importance in this process indicates that the somatic dimension is central to both the technique and the practitioner's experience. Such bodily engagement, being a fundamentally sensory experience, lends itself to an aesthetic approach. This insight guided our research question: we—Monika Favara-Kurkowski and Mateusz Salwa—sought to understand how Olga, as a ceramist, experiences her craft and describes that experience in terms of bodily engagement. Specifically, we sought to understand how she expresses and values her practice through the lens of embodied knowledge, particularly attending to how tactile intelligence and material responsiveness shape both her making process

and her understanding of what craft means.

2. The interview with Olga Milczyńska: hands-on ceramics

The interview took place on 30 June 2025 in Olga Milczyńska's studio and was recorded with her permission. During the meeting, Olga worked on a vase and showed us around the studio, intending to accompany the dialogue with her manual work to help her feel more at ease, as well as to use this opportunity to continue working on the vase. The clay vessel had been started not long before our arrival, and given that the clay was still fresh, she could not leave it for much longer before adding a new layer. She used the coiling technique, which involves building the walls of vessels by adding long cylindrical pieces of clay on top of one another. This traditional technique is known all over the world and dates back to the Neolithic era.

The questions we asked Olga come from our philosophical background and shared interest in the aesthetic side of creative practices. Mateusz Salwa's work in contemporary aesthetics and philosophy of art—particularly around materiality, representation, and more recently everyday aesthetics—led us to explore how ceramic craft configures specific modalities of dialogue with matter. Monika Favara-Kurkowski's interdisciplinary background, combining design and philosophy, helped shape questions about the relationship between embodied aesthetic experience and practical knowledge. It should be noted that the original interview took place in Polish; what is presented here is necessarily a translation (approved by Olga), with all the limitations this entails.

Monika Favara-Kurkowski & Mateusz Salwa: Where did the idea for what you do come from? Would you call it "craft"?

Olga Milczyńska: Yes, I call it craft, and I really like that term. I think it's the most truthful of all the possible descriptions. It's working with materials and understanding them. It's a continuous process of learning and understanding what the material can do... it cracks here; why does it crack? *[Pointing to a drying piece in the studio]* Will it let me build something bigger or smaller? It's a constant attentiveness to the material. And it's always about improving my physical skills too... I can see I do things differently now than I did five years ago—better, faster, and more efficiently. And the idea? I'm the daughter of gardeners, who weren't gardeners at first but worked physically for many years. That's one part. Second, I started working with ceramics in high school. I took some ceramics classes here and there, and ceramics kept appearing in my life. But at that time in Poland, you couldn't really do it the way you can now. There were no shops with ceramic materials. No one threw on a wheel. It was quite limited. Only after I graduated, I went to Bornholm, to the Folk High School.[1] There, I met a wonderful teacher and had access to the studio 24/7. That's how it began. She really motivated me.

MFK&MS: From the perspective of our research, we're most interested in your relationship with the bodily and material dimension of your work. On one hand, we are interested in your physical and embodied engagement, and on the other hand, we are interested in the materiality of the objects and the medium you work with. Have you ever thought about how you experience it? Would you say something about the physicality or manual nature of your work? Do you even think about it, or is it fully automatic?

1 Bornholm Folk High School, https://bornholmshojskole.dk/english/

Fig. 1

OM: I believe it is somewhat automated. I once did a project with Ewa Klekot,[2] and we made an exhibition about craftspeople.[3] The exhibition was excellent, resembling an outdoor gym that showcased the gestures most commonly made by a craftsperson. You had to imitate them. At the time, I was casting, so you had to pour something like this [*she demonstrates the gesture*]. I don't think about it. I only think about it when I have interns. They don't usually make my pieces, but sometimes I have them make half or a simple, independent part. When I see how they do it, I sometimes think, "No, that's wrong." Then I start thinking about the gestures I make. Like here, now [Fig. 1], the coil is placed just so; the thumb is here, helping set the height—I like it when coils overlap, not just sit on top of one another. This allows the next movement to be efficient and create a smooth wall. Only when I explain it to someone do I become aware of it. The shape I'm making now is basic—a straight cylinder—but not so easy. Every shape requires a different hand posture and way of working. When I had to make those diffusers *[*Fig. 1, *in the background]*, I told the client, "You have to order at least ten." When I produce two, I learn the shape from the second one. But if I make ten or fifteen—some are still in the kiln—then they turn out similar. I get into an automatic rhythm.

MFK&MS: And then it stays in your body?

OM: I think so, but not always *[laughs]*. Not always, because with glazing, for example, I might glaze something—like those diffusers—and then do it again six months later. I don't do

2 Ewa Klekot is a Polish anthropologist of art, with a background in archaeology and ethnography. She works as an assistant professor at SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw.

3 For more information and photographs of the exhibition *Robić Rzeczy [Do Things]*, see: https://kosmosproject.com/project/do-things/

it all the time. So the first one is like, "Hmm, how did I do this? No, not like that... oh, okay, this way!" If I did it all the time, I'd retain the knowledge. But because it's every six months, I have to recall it. Either by making a mistake or trying once and realizing, "Oh no, it wasn't like that." So it stays somewhere, but I have to dig it up. Whereas when I do it regularly, I know exactly how, and I don't make mistakes. For example, if I had to make those little elements now, by the third try I'd do it efficiently.

MFK&MS: Are there physical sensations that tell you everything is going well, that this is the process and result you want? Do you suddenly feel under your hands that something isn't going right, or it's not going as planned?

OM: Yes, for example, clay… I open a package, and it's wet. As I work it, it gets harder. So I work with it differently at the beginning of the bag and at the end. Now I'm attaching a coil and checking if it's done right.

MFK&MS: But you check with your hands?

OM: Yes. I check with my hands. From the outside, you can't really tell. At least, that's what I think.

MFK&MS: Were there any manual skills or forms that you found particularly difficult to master for any specific reason? For example, was there something you had imagined that turned out to be much more technically challenging than you expected—a real struggle?

OM: Yes, definitely—those large amphora forms that I create for hotels, which are one meter high… I can only show you a photo, as I don't have them here. Okay, this one is small *[shows a slightly different project on her phone]*. With those, the round body is fine, but the opening in the back… Making sure the clay doesn't collapse is really difficult. And I usually build those big pieces in the spring, because when it's cold and damp, it's very difficult to work. So you can only add about a centimeter at a time, and then the clay has to set. That is why I never work on just one piece at a time. I always have several. I add a bit here, and then it becomes too soft to control the wall. So I move on to another one. It needs to firm up a little before I can add more. Which means I always need to have multiple pieces in progress so I have something to work on. I have my production flow set up. It's not like I work on a single piece and just see what happens. That's also part of the craft—understanding efficiency. I always try to make my workflow efficient, so there's no downtime. It's always this, this, this, this. Again: this, this, this. Then: "Ah, now I can do that." That's how I think about my work process. I don't come to the studio wondering what I'll do today. I know. I have to do this so it doesn't dry out, then that, and that—every gap is filled. For instance, today I'm finishing a piece. I'll load another biscuit firing, do one more glaze firing, and then I have to clean everything up, prep the glazing area, and have one day just for glazing—then I can start building again.

MFK&MS: And you mentioned at the beginning of our conversation that your way of working has changed over the years. Is that about efficiency, or is it more about your hands changing, gaining experience, or approaching things differently?

OM: I've also changed the kinds of things I make. I always liked hand-building, but for a long time I worked with porcelain and casting. That's one thing. When I started building large pieces again, I had to relearn some things—I've been building for about five years, or possibly four—like understanding what type of clay works for what, and also mastering the craft. I used to be able to roll coils like this *[she shows us a short coil]*; now I can roll coils like this *[she shows us a long coil]*, and the speed is entirely different too.

MFK&MS: And that comes from repetition?

OM: I think it's purely from repetition. You just have to do a lot of it. The first time I made those tall pieces, it took me two months to make three. I had to redo a lot because I rushed it.

Now I don't have to adjust things—I just work at a slightly slower but actually faster pace because I don't have to go back and correct. But it all comes down to repetition.

MFK&MS: And in terms of your relationship with the material—would you describe working with clay as a kind of dialogue? In the sense that you have something in mind, but the material resists or suggests something else?

Fig. 2

OM: Yes, I think so. It's like a partner when you're building. I don't know how to put it... For example, I'm working with this clay now, and I know exactly how thin it can go. And how thin this other clay can go. I know that if a certain crack appears, it's fine, but if another kind appears—I need to act. When I'm building, I also know how far I can open up the form before it just stops working [Fig. 2]. It's not a dialogue like we're having now. It feels more akin to a companion. I can't do everything on my own. It's a conversation. Especially with more difficult pieces, like those arches [Fig. 3]. That was a real experiment. The idea of the arches came from my work with bricks—I collected around 4,000 bricks on Bornholm, and they had been sitting at a friend's place. I used those bricks to build different installations. But when I came back to Poland, I didn't have those bricks anymore. I couldn't build with them. I've always been fascinated by how bricks are used to build things and how they can last centuries—like Gothic cathedrals and vaults. So I thought, "Okay, I have this clay that I'm currently working with, so let's try to make vaults. How can I make vaults with clay?" Clay doesn't like those shapes—it bends and

warps. We couldn't even load the largest ones into the kiln. Four people tried, and they always cracked. I got to about 60 centimeters, and we still couldn't fire or move them. They'd start warping even while drying. So how do you make them stable enough to survive drying without toppling over? *[laughs]* Those arches on that little base [Fig. 3]—they were completely straight when they were placed in the kiln. This is because clay, especially porcelain, "remembers" how it has been touched and worked. A common issue with beginners: they make something, and—because clay is soft, especially in summer—they pick it up like this *[mimes rough handling]*, and I'm like, "Ahhh! No!!" You have to be gentle. When you move it, you do it slowly and carefully. You can play with it—it feels great—but if you treat it like a toy, then it needs to rest before you can make anything out of it. You can't build something and keep thinking, "Maybe like this? No, like that?" *[gesturing]*. That won't work. Once you decide "it'll be like this," then something warps here or there... When you start building, you need to know what you want. Sure, there can be small deviations—like here, you can see the cylinders are slightly irregular, like trees—they lean a bit here or there. That's fine; you can adjust that as you go. But not like I showed you before—because how would that even work?

Fig. 3

MFK&MS: So in short, you need to have an idea at the beginning and then negotiate from there?

Fig. 4

OM: Yes, yes, yes. Definitely. Without a concept, you can make small things. I do that sometimes; I make little sketches [Fig. 4]. That is a size with which one can play. So I sketch some shapes, and now I'm trying to make them bigger [Fig. 2]. But then I have to know exactly what I am going to make.

MFK&MS: Have there been moments when the material surprised you? For example, did you not anticipate a specific reaction or outcome?

OM: There are two separate things. Ceramics is difficult for two reasons. First, the clay has memory and behaves in its own way. Second, you have glaze. Glaze is chemistry—and I don't really know chemistry. I understand some basics: zinc with this makes that, iron does this, manganese that... but it's a whole other lab. I had chemistry classes, but they were in Danish, and I didn't understand everything then. So I'm operating at a basic level. I can identify feldspar, quartz… And at school they made us start from scratch. You had powders and a lab—you mixed your own glazes. You had the base, and you made them. In Poland, you couldn't even buy those powders then. Maybe some people did it, but... I started buying glazes, and the problem is that commercial glazes don't list the chemical composition. It's their "secret recipe," supposedly. When you start mixing them—you get all kinds of results… *[shows her glaze tests]* Sometimes I mix… This is my library, and here too. These are glaze tests—some very surprising results. I've been working with these glazes for two, maybe three years. I am still experimenting with some of these glazes, and the results are surprising. I try to do proper samples. But when I make a finished piece, I look at the tests… and then kind of ignore them. I mix stuff and end up with weird results. For instance, this one has four layers of glaze—fired four times to keep adding more *[*Fig. 5, *black vase on the fourth shelf]*. That's not how it was supposed to look. That one wasn't either. So yes, it definitely surprises.

Fig. 5

MFK&MS: Are there material properties that can't really be explained or described, for example, to apprentices? You have to somehow feel it, learn it on your own skin?

OM: I think so. When it comes to building, I can tell them, "Hold your hand like this or like that." But everyone has slightly different hands, and they might not feel comfortable "in my hands"—just as I tell them to put them—they have to work themselves through those materials and a certain amount of clay, because these are details that, if not handled properly, can lead to shrinkage or other issues. On the potter's wheel, you can see very clearly that every hand position matters a lot, because it's spinning and things happen fast. So if you hold your hand this way or that way, it's immediately visible on the clay. Probably the most important thing is to sit comfortably and feel the clay yourself. There is no single recipe for that. It's the same with building; there is no single recipe like "Hold it this way, not the other; you have to do it this way or that way."

MFK&MS: And how do you teach that? Do you give them some options, or do you say, "You should achieve this effect, and now try to achieve it"?

OM: At the beginning, whoever comes to me has to make these *[she shows us pieces of ceramic shaped like elongated domes, about 15 centimeters in size]*. Two hundred… Nobody has done that, but a hundred of those. It's very difficult to achieve a uniform wall thickness, not too thick or heavy. Since I build the ends with them later, I need them very light. *[She refers to her works, like Ukwiał 8 (Sea Anemone 8) or Journey—the latter visible in Fig. 5 on the lower shelf—made of elongated domes in various shades of blue.]* These have been corrected. If they make them too thin, they will crack. If they knead it for too long, it ends up crooked and can't be

straightened anymore. So that's the first thing. They have to make these little cylinders and keep making them until they're good. I mean, they aren't everywhere even. You can cut it and see.

MFK&MS: Do you cut them, or is it sufficient to simply hold them in your hand?

OM: I just hold it in my hand, and I know.

MFK&MS: Frustrating… Does this imply it is like musical hearing—you either have it or you don't? Is it that you develop a certain tactile sensitivity—something that can be trained to some extent—but if you lack it, well, you just can't get past it, and it might be best to focus on something else?

OM: I think many people have it, and they just have to practice; it's a matter of training. I don't have extraordinary hearing—at least that's what I think—but I started learning to sing at the age of 40, and now I can sing a song without going off-key. So here too, I think it's possible… The example I gave concerns a student who completely lacked those skills. I'm not sure what that depends on, but I believe that most people are capable of building simple things.

MFK&MS: One could argue that manual skills were once more widely valued and commonly practiced. In your view, has the contemporary approach to bodily intelligence changed? Do you see this kind of craft as particularly distinctive because of its manual nature?

OM: I believe it is. Your body has the ability to create an object that you can later use. This represents a unique form of agency—there's something special about making something entirely by yourself, from start to finish. And for the brain, it's like a dessert after dinner; it's pleasant, and you feel that agency. This is very, very important, especially in the context of how we approach many things—having a sense of agency, of actually creating something. Many people work nowadays without experiencing that sense of agency at all. Here, instead, you see it with your hands, and that's an aspect of craft that's also used in various therapeutic projects. I don't know what to call it...

MFK&MS: There is one more area that interests us, namely the question of the aesthetic experience, or simply aesthetics, in your work. Do you derive any sensual pleasure from it? Is it important to you in any way?

OM: Yes, definitely there is something like that. I don't know how to say it *[she says this while serving tea]*. When something nice comes out, it's super satisfying. There are a few pieces I don't want to sell, simply because I'm not ready to part with them yet.

MFK&MS: Is it an attachment to the object itself or to the process of creating it?

OM: To the object itself. Sometimes to the process too, but probably more to the final result, because in that final result there's a bit of the thought process… But in the end, it's about that particular work, which looks like this and not otherwise, because if it looked a little different, the satisfaction wouldn't be the same.

MFK&MS: Does the process itself give you pleasure? For example, maybe you enjoy working with a particular batch of clay more than others, or find creating a certain shape especially satisfying, or find fulfillment when you manage to accomplish something very difficult.

OM: I like it a lot. I like the process, how the piece grows upwards. I really like the building process, how it slowly takes shape. I also like those technical aspects… like with that one… Maybe I can show you these boxes here. *[She pulls out a plastic container filled with wet clay forms, carefully wrapped in wet sponges.]* When I have interns, I have many such boxes with elements from which I can keep building and constructing things. These are a little bit like toy boxes. Here I have this, and that, and this. I can see how they look together and… This I also find very pleasant. I'm glad I looked in here, because some were already dry. They can lie in this box for months, waiting for their right moment, if only properly protected. So I have these joyful toys here. I don't know if that's what you asked about…

MFK&MS: Yes, yes. I imagine you can also approach it simply as a process in which the most important thing is the result, which can only be achieved by handwork.

OM: I think the building itself is very pleasurable.

MFK&MS: How would you define craft if you had to put it in some form? What makes something genuinely craft rather than just small-scale production—like when people label things 'craft beer' or 'artisan ice cream'? How would you define craft?

OM: Oh my. That's super difficult. Because probably…

MFK&MS: I don't mean a strict definition, of course…

OM: I can only talk about the crafts I do—that is, artistic crafts, let's say. It is work with a specific material that bears marks of originality and is designed and produced by one person. That's what I think…

3. *Mētis*

The main challenge of this interview was the attempt to translate into words forms of knowledge that seem to resist verbal discourse. This difficulty may reflect the situated and tactile nature of ceramic practice; in fact, during our dialogue, numerous objects created by Olga spontaneously became visual examples—almost "incarnations" of the reflections we were developing together. When possible, we sought to capture these material references through images, attempting to convey not only the words but also part of the sensible context in which they were born.

According to Olga, craftsmanship requires that an individual creates an original design and executes it in a particular material. It is precisely this tension between planning in the most efficient way and carrying out the physical, manual work that gives rise to a form of embodied knowledge that, as evidenced in Olga's practice (and words), transcends the conventional technical understanding of craft skills.

Once acquired—she claims—this type of knowledge tends to remain stored in the body, even when not in use, making it possible to rediscover it as soon as needed. The "hand" must recollect the movements required to create the intended shape, and the craftsperson learns to come to terms with the plasticity suggested by the material. In other words, there is no complete identity between the form of the project one wants to impress upon matter (even if it is often the starting point) and the way the material "informs" itself. Moreover, there is a kind of automatization of hand movements, resulting from learning, that makes the objects resemble one another if they are produced not as single items but as serial ones. This shows that automatization occurs not only in industrial production but also in craftsmanship, albeit through embodied knowledge that requires direct tactile engagement and not thanks to pre-designed technological solutions.

The hand also allows the craftsperson to check whether the shape is correct—it is not possible to judge by looking alone. This is why the knowledge inherent in craftsmanship cannot be transmitted in any way other than through practice, not only by demonstrating how to move one's hands but also by encouraging repeated practice of the movements oneself. The required movements are determined by both the desired form and the material used. Knowing the desired shape from the outset is essential because there is no room for experimentation, as the material has its own memory and the intended form may not hold after firing due to structural weaknesses caused by whimsical trials made during the creative process. Additionally, one must take into account that the material may react in unpredictable ways at different stages of the creative process. Therefore, the material should be considered an active "partner" rather than as a passive medium for imposing designed forms.

Finally, contemporary awareness of the craftsmanship involved is the result of the experiences

of numerous past generations of craftspeople. This heritage is encapsulated in the movements of one's hands. In other words, craftsmanship is characterized not only by its manual nature and the fact that it is performed by an individual, but also by the craftsperson's awareness of the agency of the materials used and his/her mindfulness towards them.

As far as the aesthetic experience is concerned, Olga associates it mainly with the final object, although she acknowledges that the process itself is a source of pleasure. When asked about the relationship between these two experiences, she declared that the pleasure she gets from the object she creates ultimately includes the pleasure she felt while working on it.

What emerged from our conversation suggests that ceramic craftsmanship can illuminate somaesthetic theory in perhaps unexpected ways. The embodied practice of making—especially through manual and tactile engagement—seems to establish a distinctive mode of situated and corporeal knowledge. This bodily knowing can be read through the concept of *mētis* theorized by Ewa Klekot (2018) as a cunning, adaptive intelligence. This concept addresses a dimension of craft that has been left unthematized by established frameworks, such as Michael Polanyi's concept of tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1966, 1998) and Martin Heidegger's understanding of *technē as poiēsis* (Heidegger 1977). While tacit knowledge encompasses the implicit knowing underlying all skilled performance, *mētis* addresses something more specific: the tactical intelligence demanded by unpredictable, rapidly changing situations. Moreover, *mētis* provides an alternative perspective on craft compared to *technē*, which is a rule-based procedure.[4] Heidegger describes *technē* as bringing forth a form that has already been conceived through the craftsman's contemplative gathering of causes (Heidegger, 1977, pp. 10-12). *Mētis*, by contrast, operates through improvisation when materials, for example, behave unpredictably. It foregrounds the craftsperson's capacity for cunning negotiation with material agency and the contingencies inherent in making. Olga's peculiar position as both ceramist and Klekot's collaborator made her a particularly compelling subject for exploring the intersection between embodied knowledge and aesthetic practice.

Through our conversation, we explored how Olga embodies Richard Shusterman's concept of 'somatic awareness' through her material practice. Particular attention was given to the negotiation between reflective and unreflective bodily knowledge, somatic responses prompted by material properties, and the transmission of embodied knowledge within craft traditions. Central to our analysis has also been the materiality of crafted objects as the critical medium through which corporeal knowledge operates and manifests. What emerged from this exchange reveals the layered nature of aesthetic experience in craft. Somaesthetics, understood as a theoretical framework that integrates embodied experience with aesthetic perception, offers a valuable lens for understanding some of the dynamics between these layers, particularly those related to the practitioner's awareness of their own practice.

However, the main point of this research is to address a significant theoretical gap between analytic somaesthetics and craft studies. While existing somaesthetic literature has explored embodied knowledge in various aesthetic practices (e.g., visual arts, dance, architecture), and craft studies have examined corporeal knowledge (Detienne and Vernant 1991, Sennett 2008, Malafouris 2013), these domains have not been directly connected. This is evident from the absence of explicit connections between somatic awareness and *mētis*—a form of bodily intelligence—in existing literature. Our central thesis is that *mētis*, as described by Klekot, possesses an inherently aesthetic dimension that has hitherto remained unthematized in existing literature. The conversation with Olga represents a first attempt to map this largely unexplored

4 See Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book VI, and those who later translated and interpreted his work. For a more contemporary reading, see Tatarkiewicz (1980) and Sennett (2008).

theoretical territory. From Olga's words and reflection on artisanal making, it emerges that the concept of *mētis* refers to something central for understanding her conception of craft. Therefore, our analysis focused on how Olga—both as an individual practitioner and as a representative of the *NÓW* initiative—enacts *mētis* as a specific modality of embodied knowledge that integrates sensory perception and somaesthetic awareness.

Drawing from Klekot's analysis, craft practice does manifest *mētis*: "non-discursive knowledge of the body" (Klekot, 2018, p. 85)[5] that resists the Aristotelian-Cartesian dualistic framework, which segregates mind from body and theoretical from practical knowledge. *Mētis* is "largely non-linguistic in nature, grounded in experience and practice, which forces one to confront a series of situations that are similar but never identical and that require quick adaptation" (Klekot, 2018, p. 85) in the engagement with the material. Through her ethnographic examination of pottery practice, Klekot demonstrates how *mētis* manifests when the potter, attempting to center clay on the wheel, relies not on visual cues or abstract principles but on "feeling of weight, balance, center of gravity" (Klekot, 2018, p. 80).

This corporeal knowing is irreducible to verbal instruction, as evidenced when she notes that "nobody explained to me that centering involves placing the center of the clay mass on the axis of the wheel's rotation" (Klekot, 2018, p. 85). Instead, this knowledge exists in the dynamic relationship between practitioner and material—what Lambros Malafouris identifies as "material engagement" (Malafouris, 2013, p. 221, 210), where "the potter's being is interdependent with the becoming of the vessel and inextricably intertwined with it" (Klekot, 2018, p. 80), and Richard Sennett calls "material consciousness," where "the craftsman [or craftswoman] has learned to sustain labor in the smallest moves" (Sennett, 2008, p. 279). Olga herself assigns students 100 repetitions of the same form to help them internalize the movement, allowing their hands to learn the subtle adjustments needed to work with the material's changing conditions. *Mētis* thus represents a mode of bodily intelligence that operates through tactile sensitivity, proprioceptive awareness, and responsive adaptation to material contingencies—a form of knowing that cannot be abstracted from "the concreteness of experience" of embodied practice "in the relation between that body and the world in the here and now" (Klekot, 2018, p. 85). This responsive adaptation emerges from the interview when Olga explains that, depending on the season and changes in the natural environment, clay allows certain types of work but not others. Or when she notes that the pieces stored in the box, lacking luster, need to be rehydrated. As Klekot observes, what unites these cases is that "changes occur in connection with each other, often in a specific sequence, and their appearance signals to humans that matter is inclined to change in a certain direction." (Klekot, 2018, p. 86)

Another aspect of the definition of *mētis* that apparently links this conception to somaesthetics is that it "operates through attentiveness. *Mētis* is the result of careful observation, not a reaction to a sudden impulse" (Klekot, 2018, p. 86), yet it remains dynamic and in motion.

However, while this theoretical framework illuminates the embodied nature of craft knowledge, our research reveals a more complex picture. Despite the evident presence of *mētis* in craft practice, a rigid dichotomy between craft and design that attributes to the former an exclusively bodily stance risks overlooking how practitioners themselves understand and articulate their work. It emerged from our conversation with Olga that she tends to privilege in her self-narration the aspects of technical efficacy and functional achievement, while relegating aesthetic appreciation primarily to the evaluation of finished products rather than recognizing it as inherent to the embodied process itself.

5 All translations from Klekot (2018) are by the authors.

This tension between the actual presence of corporeal intelligence and its lack of explicit aesthetic recognition by Olga reveals a possibly significant gap in somatic awareness. While the body and materiality operate as media of situated knowledge—as Klekot's analysis clearly demonstrates—craftspeople articulate the aesthetics of their practice by privileging end results over process, leaving largely unexpressed that "somatic awareness"—that is, reflection upon the somatic feeling—which nonetheless fundamentally informs their making. In other words, practitioners might not consciously focus on their somatic experience of labor; they do not thematize the aesthetics of the "metistic" component character of their own work. *Mētis* requires a sort of "bodyfulness" that allows one to decide whether the product is good or bad, i.e. to aesthetically appreciate it. The criterion of this somatic act of appreciation is one's bodily feeling (the object feels right or wrong). "I just hold it in my hand, and I know," Olga said. This implies that *mētis* is aesthetic in two ways: it refers to sensory experience (mainly touch) and its qualities, and it refers thusly to the qualities of the object being made. In fact, when directly questioned about the former dimension, Olga acknowledged that the embodied experience of making itself is equally aesthetically significant, suggesting that the tactile, proprioceptive, and also affective dimensions of the practice carry their own aesthetic weight beyond conventional aesthetic categories. This became evident both when she spoke about the pleasure she experiences in the construction process and when she mentioned that, compared to when she started, her work now proceeds "at a slightly slower but actually faster pace" because she no longer needs to correct her pieces.

Here lies the potential contribution of somaesthetic theory to craft practice. The somaesthetic approach allows us to thematize the pre-reflective dimension of craft knowledge that manifests through *mētis* in aesthetic terms. While *mētis* (according to Klekot) constitutes a form of bodily intelligence that operates "below the threshold of discursive consciousness," Shustermanian somatic awareness represents the possibility of bringing this intelligence to the level of reflective consciousness by cultivating attention upon one's bodily sensations in the making process.[6]

The potential emerges from the fact that craftspeople practice *mētis* without recognizing it aesthetically: they privilege technical and efficacious aspects in their self-narration, leaving unexpressed that somaesthetic dimension that nonetheless informs their making. Therefore, these two concepts articulate according to a logic of potential complementarity: *mētis* operates as tacit embodied intelligence of making, while somatic awareness represents the theoretical tool for making it explicit and deliberately cultivable.

Craft does not automatically offer "mindful embodiment," but rather manifests a form of embodiment that requires somaesthetic mediation to become conscious.

4. Conclusion: the potter's wheel, hermeneutics and somaesthetics

Olga's view of craftsmanship, understood as an embodied practice as well as a theory, i.e., as a set of ideas accompanying handwork, both integrates and transcends the traditional views of crafts. It integrates them insofar as it refers to traditional techniques and materials as well as to a close bodily relationship between the maker and the object she/he makes. It transcends them given the fact that it deliberately opposes both industrial production and design—crafts' somaesthetics is a matter of choice and not a necessity—while having some affinities with art. In fact, the objects she creates (as other *NÓW* members do) are single pieces, even if they are serial insofar as they exist or may exist in multiple "copies." In this respect, she seems to endorse a perspective shared by numerous contemporary craftspeople as well as by people who buy their

6 Shusterman defines this specifically as "somatic cultivation of heightened body awareness and control." (Shusterman, 2008, p. 19).

products, inspired by this sort of practice and theory.

The interview allowed us, however, to notice two more things. First, Olga's words echo the manifesto of the *NÓW* that reads:

> *The essence of our work is incessant searching. Hence, our products are the outcome of experience inferred from countless trials, failures and successes.* (Nów 2025)

Craftsmanship is, thus, treated as a distinct manner of shaping material culture rooted in a particular organization of labor, one that is focused both on somatic experience and what we called *mētis*.

Second, the implications of Olga's approach go beyond craftsmanship itself and can be seen as shedding new light on somaesthetics. We, so to speak, mirrored Olga's work on the potter's wheel as our inquiry moved in hermeneutic circles: on one hand, adopting a somaesthetic standpoint on crafting ceramics allowed us to "discover" *mētis* as an important factor defining craftsmanship; on the other hand, this contributes to how somaesthetics may be studied, since *mētis* is a category that has not yet been fully recognized in this field. This circular process suggests that *mētis* may be seen as an important aspect of human "being-in-the-world," one that is present not only in craftsmanship but in all somatic interactions.

Indeed, *mētis* represents a fundamental form of somaesthetic experience that, over time, results in bodily routines capable of establishing felt (aesthetic) guidelines in craft practice, both for evaluating the work process—such as the instinctive recognition of the proper consistency of clay—and for evaluating the product—for instance, distinguishing a glaze that will vitrify correctly. The statement "I just hold it in my hand, and I know" points to craft-based aesthetic judgment that not only transcends traditional formal evaluation but also operates through tactile intelligence rather than discursive criteria; that is also why craft education can be mainly taught ostensively. The "metistic" evaluation of the product, which assesses the object and the quality of the embodied process within it, exemplifies the aesthetic dimension inherent in *mētis* that our research brings to light.

Furthermore, *mētis* transforms how the craftsperson perceives and conceives their body (somatic awareness), and in turn, somatic reflection on one's way of working with matter affects the development of *mētis* itself. However, this transformation occurs without necessary awareness. *Mētis* becomes an integral part of the craftsperson's bodily identity while operating beneath reflective aesthetic consciousness. Olga describes a transformation where body and matter co-constitute themselves through practice; this process often occurs below the threshold of reflective consciousness. Understanding the mechanisms through which somatic reflection on one's work influences the development of bodily intelligence could illuminate fundamental aspects of embodied cognition in creative practices.

Thus, making *mētis* conceptually visible through philosophical reflection and its integration into somaesthetic debate and craft pedagogy can address this absence of awareness, turning it into a concrete tool for improving craft practice. On a pedagogical level, integrating the concept of *mētis* with insights from somaesthetics offers promising possibilities for craft education. Such integration could help develop teaching strategies that, as Shusterman argues, make "the quality of our experience more satisfyingly rich" while making "our awareness of somatic experience more acute and perceptive" (Shusterman, 1999, p. 305). The exhibition *Robić Rzeczy* [Do Things] that Olga mentions seems to open precisely these pedagogical avenues of awareness.

In conclusion, our investigation has shown how the concept of *mētis* works alongside somaesthetics to create a productive theoretical framework for understanding embodied craft

experience. However, the intersection of these ideas seems to offer more than mere theoretical enrichment—it provides practical pathways for deepening our understanding of how craftspeople develop and deploy their embodied expertise, both practically and aesthetically. Finally, if we treat craftsmanship as a magnifying lens offering an insight into embodied practices requiring skills in general, *mētis* as a somaesthetic concept may be seen as a key to understanding ourselves—we are *homines fabri*, after all.

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Artroversion: Crafting Rest Through Creation:
Interview with Alexander Clinthorne, MFA

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Abstract: *The article presents an analysis of a semi-structured qualitative interview with ceramic sculptor and community college faculty member Alexander Clinthorne. He introduces artroversion, a somatic practice of rejuvenation cultivated through meaningful creation. Clinthorne explains how working with clay fosters somatic intimacy, patience, focus, and tactile engagement, enabling embodied ways of knowing through the creative process. Drawing on these insights, the article situates artroversion within somaesthetic practice for rejuvenation and self-connection. The discussion concludes by outlining strategies Clinthorne offers for artists seeking to restore creative vitality through artroverted engagement.*

Keywords: *artroversion, somaesthetics, art, ceramics, clay, aesthetics, aesthetic experience, embodied practice, creative process, artistic intuition*

Following a two-hour interview in the artist's classroom studio, it became evident that defining an embodied concept like artroversion required ongoing collaborative analysis. Alexander Clinthorne, MFA, is a ceramic artist and community college studio art faculty. He primarily works in detailed pieces with delicate materials, requiring careful and controlled manipulation. Through this artistic journey, he encountered limitations that prompted a revision of his approach; an evolution that led him to discover artroversion.

Artroversion is a somatic practice cultivated through meaningful creation, which the artist experiences as inseparable from beauty. It emerges through tactile engagement and reflective making, supporting creative rejuvenation and self-connection, while cultivating patience, intimacy with an artistic medium, and engagement with oneself. Building on Shusterman's (1999; 2018) definition of somaesthetics as a "critical and ameliorative approach that focuses on the experience and use of the soma" (p. 302), the article situates artroversion within somaesthetics to illustrate how artist-generated concepts can advance both studio and practice practices.

The research method employed a semi-structured face-to-face interview, recorded via Zoom for transcription. The transcript underwent collaborative revision by the artist and principal investigator (PI) to ensure accuracy and readability while preserving the tone of the dialogue. The transcript was then independently reviewed, annotated, and coded using Microsoft Word and the open-source software Taguette. Recurring codes such as "making_detachment" and "patience" guided thematic clustering and informed the selection of quoted material.

These thematic clusters shaped the analytic structure of the article, particularly the description of the process of artroversion. The artist authored the section detailing this process, while the PI wrote the introduction and conclusion, linking the interview insights to scholarly discourse. The full manuscript underwent joint proofreading to ensure coherence. Selected excerpts are integrated with analytic commentary; the complete transcript is available through Figshare[1] .

Artroversion: Crafting Rest Through Creation

What is the strange sensation of watching a movie in the theater during the day, only to be surprised that the sun is still out afterward? There is a momentary disconnect from one's sense of place in time; in other words, one is displaced from a personal timeline. When this disconnect occurs, one might have an experience of timelessness. Moments of timelessness are mundanely referred to as "feeling in the moment", but feeling present goes further than simply placing one's pin between the past and future. This principle also applies in the creation of art and connecting with one's soma.

The sense of timelessness that results when present is a somatic sense of an expansion of space around one's body; time does not slow; it becomes less influential in the experience of moment-to-moment awareness. It is in this interval of timelessness that one can find a new understanding of the word *'patience'*.

When discussing the topic of patience, it is common to meet the word with resistance. This could be from childhood experiences of our parents or teachers urging us to "just be patient!" Perhaps what was meant was, "just wait nicely!".

At first glance, being patient sounds like an arduous task, a feat of mental gymnastics. But patience is really an opportunity to rest. Patience can encompass the feeling of having all the time in the world to accomplish something. A lack of patience can manifest as the feeling of continuously leaning forward into the next moment or an unyielding drive for productivity and efficiency. The push to make the most out of one's time, because 'time is money,' motivates many but can be harmful to the natural development of an artist's body of work.

One essential part of learning to improve as an artist is considering the artist themself. Many artists hit plateaus of development, but sometimes it can seem that an artist has come to the end of the road of their creativity. After several years of living as a frustrated maker, Clinthorne noticed that he was not improving as an artist and felt like he had hit the wall of his own creative potential. Creating no longer brought him joy. Making art became tedious and exhausting.

> "I wasn't getting any better. You know, I kind of hit a spot where I felt like I was my own limitation. I make the same things, and maybe they technically get better and more impressive, but it wasn't really changing in the ways that I want. I wasn't growing in the ways that I wanted to grow. And I think I had to learn to be patient. And that's what changed me. A lot was learning a sense of patience." [12:39:59]

Perhaps many artists experience frustration with their own creative output, and like many, Clinthorne might have stopped sculpting if not for an experience he had in a bathtub. During a residency abroad, he lived unknowingly with stage-four cancer. The progression of the disease forced his body to slow down, and he spent several hours each day immersed in the bathtub. Despite the challenges it brought, it found the experience of this ritual to be enjoyable as,

1 Graves, Kei (2025). Appendix_Interview Guide and Adapted Transcript. Figshare. Dataset. https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.30677678

> "[I]t was, like, complete peace, and I hadn't really understood it at the time, and I spent several years trying to understand what that was … sitting in the bathtub for a long time, feeling very tired, and not knowing–still enjoying making art, but not knowing what's next." [12:39:59]

These intentional moments offered a respite that allowed him to sit with his thoughts silently until time seemed to slow. As he disconnected from his usual thought patterns, he found space for patience. Shusterman (2018) claims that a goal of somaesthetics is to advance knowledge, both in learning and self-discovery (p. 11). Clinthorne's developed awareness of patience exemplifies this claim as the embrace of timeless presence enabled him to refashion his own creative process. In this sense, patience becomes not only restorative but epistemic, a form of knowledge-making that emerges through the soma. Reflecting on this period, he notes,

> "It did feel like something was ending, or like life can't go on like this. I think my body kind of deeply knew that it was dying. And there's something resisting, of course, but then there's something also very peaceful." [14:06:07]

This moment illustrates how a bodily encounter with the space between life and death catalyzes a profound shift in perception and creative engagement.

The value of patience is not only evident in extreme circumstances. Disconnecting from the drive to be efficient with one's time can open space for small, everyday experiences of presence. Many people recognize this feeling through activities such as waking from a nap and watching dust motes drift through the air, leaving a theater at midday to find the sun still shining, or lingering after finishing a captivating book before returning to daily responsibilities. These ordinary moments echo the same somatic attentiveness that artroversion cultivates, allowing the body and mind to inhabit the present more fully.

This perspective shift can also be reminiscent of the overview effect, the sensation often described during space flight when one observes the vastness of the universe and the unyielding flow of time (Kluger, 2021). While few of us will experience space travel, we may encounter similar moments when we are reminded of the wide world existing beyond our personal stories and aspirations.

Awareness of one's mortality can produce a related shift. When the future feels uncertain, thoughts of later outcomes lose authority over direct experience. Clinthorne reflects,

> "If you were gonna die, would you care about the piece you're gonna make, how it's gonna look later? There's this huge letting go, at least for me, when I was dying, it was like thing after thing after thing, I was letting go of, and every time I let go of something, I felt so much better…It always feels better, you know, when you're able to accept that." [14:06:07]

This openness is essential for rest. When one allows events to unfold without forcing outcomes, it becomes possible to fully engage in the creative process. "Beauty is not what happens," Clinthorne notes, "the beauty is the meaning that comes from what's happening. And art making, for me, is a chance to play out this scenario of resting while I do stuff." [14:06:07]

It is the shifting of perspective that releases one from the pressures of time, allowing a sense of timelessness to emerge, which is central to cultivating patience. Tarvainen (2023) emphasizes that "[t]o understand human embodiment and related well-being, we need to grasp our corporeal situationality in a specific time, place, and socio-cultural setting — and identify the myriad dynamic factors that relationally influence us" (109). For Clinthorne, attending to

these elements was essential to forging a deeper somatic connection and overcoming the factors that had previously held back his creative progression.

Learning to take one's time and follow one's curiosity, letting go of time lost through mistakes, and approaching art lightheartedly are all supported by this type of patience. There is also an important somatic element that is supported by establishing timeless patience. When an artist can slow down to a pace not subject to time pressure, one can minutely direct every touch of the clay, finish each small part of a whole before moving on, and allow the work to be incomplete for as long as necessary. There is also space for enjoying each step of the process. There is something physically pleasurable about interacting with most artistic mediums. Clinthorne indirectly found his path to improvement not by practice or study, but by learning to find joy in every pinch of the clay.

If patience prepared the ground for Clinthorne's rejuvenation, intimacy with the medium provided the somatic practice through which artroversion emerged.

Somaesthetic experiences may serve as a throughline that connects brief moments of artroversion to create a more unifying, intimate moment throughout the practitioner's life. Once Clinthorne learned to momentarily disconnect from his placement in his personal timeline, art making became unhurried. He had the realization that to pinch clay is not simply just to bring one's fingers together around the clay, but it is to carefully guide each minute portion of a sculpture to exactly where it needs to be. Once he slowed down, he learned that a pinch could happen in many directions; it can happen between the fingertips or between the pads of the fingers. It can be a pull, a slide, a twist, or a compressive push. The impact of subtleties like the level of moisture of his fingertips also becomes evident when working at a pace detached from a sense of time.

It is common for artists to use a spray bottle to drench a raw clay artwork in mist to prevent drying. This approach is fast, but it distributes water unevenly, water slides off thin exposed pieces that need moisture, and pools in crevices, causing cracks. While working slowly, rather than using a spray bottle, taking the time to pause, moisten a fingertip before touching a tiny porcelain flower petal's edge is an obvious solution to manage clay dryness and cracking. To focus on the form of just a small part of a sculpture while gently meeting it with an attuned fingertip directs the focus from the sculpture to each tiny act of applying moisture and pressure; there is a sense of fingertip dance about it, like fingertip Tàijí[2] ! The practice allows the artist to inhabit each delicate movement fully, building patience and attentiveness that extend beyond the sculpture to the practice of artroversion.

> When I'm working on [something] each touch requires more than a pinch. You know, when my students are pinching, they when they start, they pinch the clay like this, and it goes out. But when you get better at pinching, you control each little movement of every single pinch. And with porcelain, it'll crack if you touch it the wrong way.…It's really about each instant, and I don't want to say it's instantaneous, because that's the wrong word, but it's instant-focused making, something like intuition. I'm not thinking about putting it together until each little piece is perfect. That would be the deeper somatic pieces. It's a natural absorption, since we're maybe using that language over concentration [13:31:38].

There is a deep level of somatic intimacy involved in the sculpting of clay, one that binds bodily knowledge to material engagement. As Sheets-Johnstone (2012) emphasizes, craft depends on a corporeal, nonlinguistic dialogue with the material, a dialogue guided by proprioceptive

2 I use the pinyin "Tàijí" rather than the anglicized "Taichi" to emphasize the practice's philosophical and somatic dimensions and to honor the tonal integrity of the original language.

and kinaesthetic awareness or knowledge that is lived through the body rather than abstracted from it. Clinthorne's practice embodies this intimacy in his attention to the smallest gestures: moistening a porcelain petal with his fingertip rather than spraying the entire sculpture. The smoothness of Frost porcelain intensifies this sensation by amplifying the sensory pleasure of each touch. In such moments, the clay becomes not only a medium for creation but also a mirror that reflects the artist's own somatic awareness back to him.

> "I'm experiencing only what my fingertips experience. [It's] this moment that I can let everything else go for a while— [homeowner, husband, father responsibilities…] The distraction of what this final thing might be can inhibit our Artroversion. There's no masterpiece waiting to be completed here. What I'm left with after the art-making experience is a record of that wholeheartedness. It's like a memory of that very focused, embodied engagement. Eventually, we kind of get disconnected from ourselves, and this is about connection to the physical body, which doesn't get much attention these days [i.e., because it's over-emphasized in media]." [13:19:15]

In this intimate setting, the experience no longer becomes about completing an artwork; it becomes about the pleasurable act of leaving time pressure behind, fully engaging with a medium, slowly bringing beauty to life, and finding rejuvenation in the process. The rejuvenation of artroversion happens when one steps out of one's personal timeline to meet beauty, pinch by pinch, or one brush stroke at a time. Antal (2018) described this level of engagement within photography as a brief moment; this idea can extend to clay and to Clinthorne's ritual practices for artroversion. In this way, brief moments connect from one to the next as a unifying collection of somaesthetic experiences.

Together, these individual moments of engagement reflect the innate human need to rest and restore energy. The term artroversion was coined by Clinthorne when he officially recognized it happening in his own life. He noted:

> I've realized that once my family was asleep, I still had some kind of need. And I felt compelled to go sit on the kitchen floor and have this physical experience that felt very personal, and like I said before, it's very sensual and draws you in.
>
> And it's also this sense of building a greater whole, little by little. There's something really exciting about that kind of growth. That happens so incrementally and slowly. [12:49:06}

Clinthorne describes a need felt by many at the conclusion of a long day, the desire for rejuvenation. While some perspectives in the social conversation tend to linger around the extrovert-introvert binary or perhaps the more likely but less discussed ambivert, Clinthorne found in his experience that the term 'artrovert' resonated with others.

> I noticed that it really resonated with students, and when I brought it up at a faculty meeting. I noticed it resonated with other faculty members, too, which is interesting, and it resonated with faculty members that were in professions [outside of the arts]. But why would it resonate with somebody who's an auto mechanic, right?
>
> I think there's this sense of [somatic engagement], where you get really absorbed into what you're doing. That's a big component of it, where we're so drawn in different directions all day long. Attention is said to be our most valuable resource. So, everyone's trying to get it

> from you when you have that opportunity, just to say, "this is the most important thing to me right now, be able to put everything else down." [12:54:38}

Beyond these possibilities, the idea of somatic engagement may afford individuals who are otherwise struggling with finding moments of intentionality and the space to find what they deem 'beautiful.'

> I think sometimes we don't recognize what we find beautiful, because we're so distracted, and we've got so many obligations, so much is going on. So many people are trying to get our attention, and there's a lot of beauty out there. A lot of beauty to be distracted by, right? So, I think we can really connect to what we find is beautiful, and we can make space for ourselves to have that moment. [12:57:30]

Intention, Clinthorne says, can be a key factor in creating the right opportunities for artroversion to occur. By this, he means that an individual is making time for themselves, making something purely for the sake of engaging in the human experience of making art, or making something beautiful, as opposed to for someone else, for work, or another purpose. He affirms that this differs from art therapy, wherein the purpose is to process an emotion or experience. Instead, artroversion provides an opportunity to redirect attention, allowing individuals to engage fully with what they find beautiful.

To create the right circumstances for artroversion to occur, practitioners must ensure they strive to create a sense of timelessness through patience, allowing for the creative process to follow its natural timeline. Clinthorne describes this as "slowing down to the pace that things actually require rather than seeking shortcuts." In ceramics, following this timeline ensures pieces are not broken, cracked, or malformed. For artroverts, they will find that this allows them to organically seek the beauty of their chosen mediums. In this, patience, or as Clinthorne defines it, the "denial of a natural timeline," is required. Additionally, in this process, expectations are reduced, and the focus shifts to somatic engagement with the medium itself.

> It changes the perspective from something being about that final product, [like] my first approach to artmaking was, and now it's just about enjoying what happens with each little moment that I'm working on something, not knowing exactly what's going to happen afterwards, but just getting absorbed into each single pinch of the clay. It's the difference between playing music for recording and playing music just to get lost in the melody. [12:38:30]

To help support patience, focus, and well-being during artroversion, Clinthorne developed several acrostics that he repeats like a mantra while making work. One such practice is BEDROCK:

B - Breathe:
Focus the mind's attention on the inhalation and exhalation of breathing. Fully invest awareness in breathing and become the breath. What is enjoyable in breathing?

E - Embody:
Direct awareness of the feeling of having a body. Fully experience bodily sensations and bodily containment. How is this body?

D - Drop in:

Bring attention to the current moment. Sense the pace of the moment. Be as wakeful as the mind will allow. What sensations arise and pass?

R - Release:
Let go of any striving from within or pushing from without. What can be let go of?

O - Open:
What is causing stress? Identify anxieties and attempt to open to the possibility of things not going as planned. Welcome the unfolding of what we cannot control.

C - Compose:
Find a posture that demonstrates comfort and capability. Compose action with the intentionality of a conductor. What could use refinement?

K - Kind:
Create an atmosphere of kindness within and without. The intention for kindness can be a place to return to when feeling lost or anxious.

By internalizing practices like BEDROCK, artroverts cultivate the conditions for patience, attentiveness, and somatic engagement, allowing each moment of creation to become a site of rejuvenation and embodied knowledge.

Conclusion

Clinthorne's artroversion models rest, rejuvenation, and embodied presence through the creative process. By embracing patience, artists inhabit each moment fully, engaging in sustained dialogue with the medium, the soma, and what they find meaningful or beautiful. Through these incremental, somatic interactions, creation shifts from producing a final product to cultivating embodied knowledge and personal insight.

Beyond the studio, artroversion provides a framework for intentional somatic engagement, guiding creatives into a natural rhythm of patience and revealing what truly matters in the use of time. Clinthorne's practice enriches somaesthetic understanding and challenges the binary introvert-extrovert notion of restoration. Artroversion invites artists and non-artists alike to reclaim attention, bodily presence, and time often lost to efficiency-driven culture, offering a tangible way to engage fully with life through the deliberate act of making.

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Body Art and Somaesthetics: A Shusterman-Stelarc Dialogue

Richard Shusterman and Stelarc, moderated by Dorota Koczanowicz

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Introduction:

This dialogue occurred on October 10th, 2023 at the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts' Center for Somaesthetics and the Arts. The conversation was between the artist Stelarc and the philosopher and performance artist Richard Shusterman, and it was moderated by Dorota Koczanowicz. This was part of an event that was organized by the Center for Somaesthetics and the Arts at The Jan Matejko Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow. The conversation has been edited for length and readability. Audience questions have been removed. Images have been provided by Richard Shusterman and Stelarc.

Dorota Koczanowicz:

It seems to me that one of the common grounds of your work is the negation of the Cartesian dualism of mind and body. So my first question is: how do you understand what the body is?

Stelarc:

Well, to give a concise idea of what I feel the body is and has become: I think the body is historically an unstable construct. It's socially constructed, historically fashioned, and technologically augmented. I think it's simplistically naïve to imagine that we are merely biological bodies—or that we have ever been purely biological bodies. The body is not seen as a kind of Cartesian subject measuring, monitoring, and evaluating objects in a kind of Cartesian theatre.

For me, there's no distinction between body and mind. In fact, the more performances I do, the less I think I have a mind of my own—nor any mind at all in the traditional metaphysical sense.

Richard Shusterman:

Well, I was never happy about the traditional concept of the body—or even the term "body." That's why somaesthetics was created, and why I prefer to talk about the soma.

The old dominant idea in philosophy—already from Plato but certainly reinforced by Descartes—is the split between body and mind. The idea that the mind is either a prisoner in a tomb or some kind of navigator of a physical ship. So soma was introduced because I wanted to

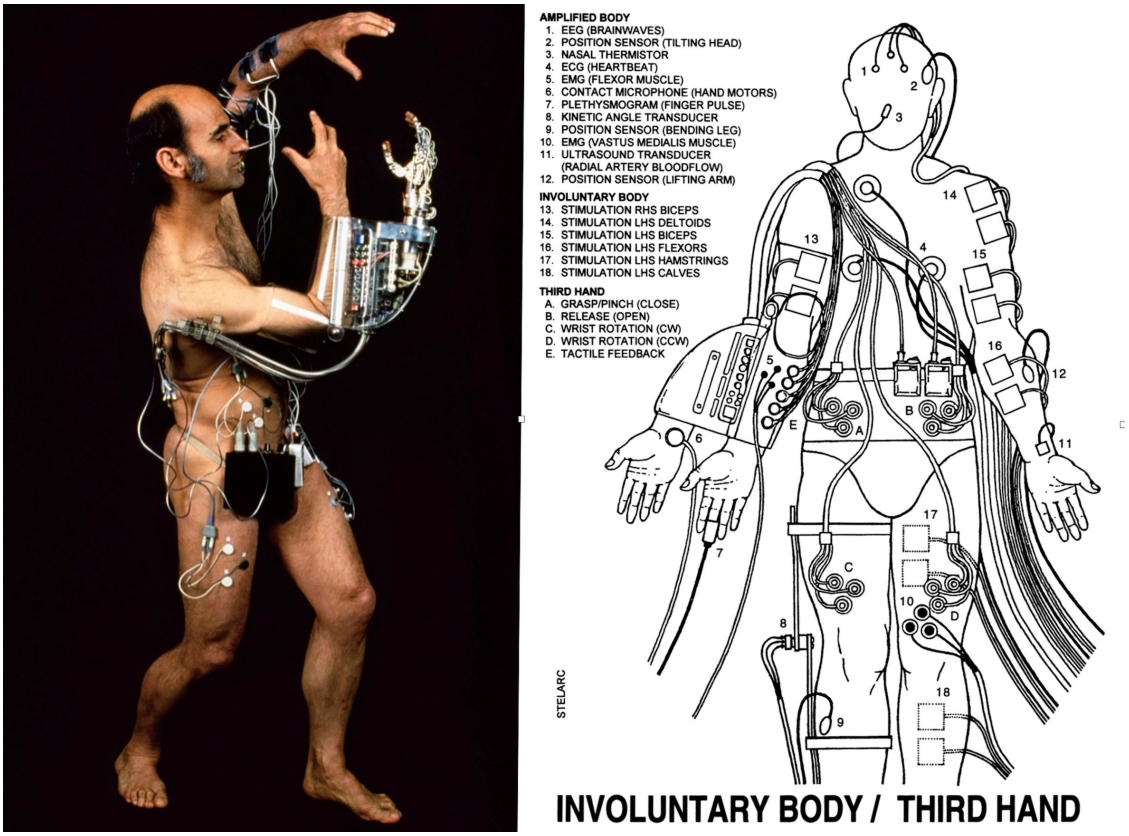
talk about the aesthetics of the body, but the word "body" gave all the wrong directions. It made a somatic approach to aesthetics seem like it was for top models and bodybuilders.

I introduced the term *soma* because I think of the *soma* as an embodied subjectivity—as ontologically one thing in which we can make distinctions, with some predicates that are more physical and others that are more mental. Here, I know I converge with Stelarc: there are lots of experiences—particularly experiences of pain—where it makes absolutely no sense to say, "Oh, my pain is mental," or "my pain is physical." In some performances, that kind of division simply evaporates.

That's why I like the term *soma*, because it doesn't carry all the bad baggage that "body" does. Merleau-Ponty had a term, *flesh*. But we're in a Catholic country—we all know about St. Paul—and the flesh is seen as something negative, something that even corrupts your mind. You can have a fleshly mind, a carnal mind.

The *soma*, by contrast, is something neutral. It allows perhaps a new start. And *soma*—also picking up on what Stelarc said—is always a product of culture. Even from its gestation in the mother's womb, the *soma* is shaped by what the mother eats. It's affected by the music the mother hears. It grows into habits that are determined by the culture in which it grows up.

So the idea of a body—or *soma*—that is somehow independent of culture (and history, since there is no culture without history) is just a chimera.



Third Hand, Stelarc 1980, Tokyo / Yokohama / Nagoya, Composite Image- Photographer: Simon Hunter

Dorota Koczanowicz:

So, the body is the center of your artistic activities. You use the body as a material, as a medium, as a place of experimentation. I'd like to ask: what does this medium convey, and

between which realms does it mediate?

Stelarc:

Well, I guess this body is the convenient expression and actualization of certain ideas. For the artist, ideas are easy—it's the actualizing of the ideas that's difficult. And in a sense, the ideas are authenticated by the artist's actions.

There's a position of seeing the body as a sculptural object interconnected with other objects and other bodies, in a kind of object-oriented, ontological way. In other words, there's no hierarchical position that the body takes. The body, a microphone, an algorithm, a microbe—these all have the same ontological status.

So that's the position this body takes. And when I speak about a body, I mean this physical, phenomenological, interacting, and aware entity in the world. An intelligent agent is one that is embodied but also embedded in the world.

Richard Shusterman:

I understand that artistic sculptural idea and by now I'm not uncomfortable with it. It kind of makes me feel like a brother to Stelarc. But the artistic dimension of somaesthetics, for me personally, came relatively late. It actually grew out of my speaking a lot at art schools in France. The students were genuinely interested—or at least polite enough to pretend they were interested—in what I had to say. But there was always this question: what does somaesthetics do for contemporary art?

I could give them all sorts of explanations, but it didn't satisfy the students. They wanted something practical.

Unfortunately, he was unable to arrive for the event today, but Yann Toma—a professor of art at the Sorbonne—knew I was a philosopher of experience. In French, the word "expérience" has the connotation of experimentation. So he thought I would be willing to get into his father's dance outfit. His father had been the principal male dancer of the Paris Opera Ballet.

Yann has an interest in science, but it's more parascientific. He's very interested in aura and energy—very New Age. He had a project that involved tracing the energies of various subjects. He thought my energy would be much clearer if I wore the gold lycra dance unitard of his father.

I didn't want to disappoint him. I was almost sixty years old at the time, and I didn't think I could get into that lycra suit—either physically or psychologically. But I appreciate my friends, so I tried. I managed to get into it. And then, once I did, we began a still photography session in a style invented by Man Ray—what he called light writing.

The subject has to strike a pose and not move. The camera has a long exposure. Jan would open the shutter, then hurriedly walk by me and trace what he felt was my energy with a lamp, and then return to close the shutter.

The interesting thing is: my energy was a function of his energy, which was also a function of my energy. There's this recursive combination that creates interesting images.

What happened next is that I—being an ex–Tel Aviv beach boy who likes sunshine and not being static—ran out of the studio, which was in a medieval abbey [the Abbey of Royaumont], into the sunlight to talk to the tourists. That's when the project evolved from merely photographic art into performance art. I was no longer a static subject; I was interacting with the outside world, channeling energies, using props and objects around me.

So the body—the *soma*—is central. But the way I understand it is that it's the Man in Gold who is doing the performance. Because the Man in Gold does things that I would never do. You see me now, speaking (hopefully) coherently and intelligently as a philosopher. But the Man in

Gold is silent. He expresses himself in gesture.

And that's something that is a challenge—not so much for art, which is already a gestural form of expression—but for philosophy, which is identified with *logos*, a Greek word meaning both logic and word. So the idea of a philosopher without words is a challenge to philosophy. But it connects me with artists who also express and create and inquire but not always verbally—and those expressions are sometimes far more intelligent than what philosophers express with their *logos*.

So the body, for me, is a place where I can invite a friend—the Man in Gold—to join me in expressing things I could never express in this [verbal, discursive] format.

Image credit: The Man in Gold in 23rd Street Subway Station, March, 2023, New York City, Photographer Yann Toma

Dorota Koczanowicz:

You've started answering my next question already. The next question is about distance and identification. Because in both your works, that seems to be important. You said you are somehow the Man in Gold, but you also write about the Man in Gold as someone else. So at the same time, you embody and accompany him.

There's this interesting tension—you and him. I think something similar appears in Stelarc's work. For example, I thought about *Prosthetic Head*, which appears on a screen and could be seen as a kind of avatar or replacement of the self. So I would like to ask both of you about the relation between the performer and the persona you perform. About that tension between "me" and "him." What is the result of that tension, and how do you construct it?

Stelarc:

Specifically about the *Prosthetic Head*—this was an avatar head: a 3D model of the artist's head, projected five meters high. It had a database and a conversational system. So you could

interrogate the head, ask it questions, and it would respond with real-time lip syncing and facial expressions.

This project began when I kept getting queries from PhD students who wanted to interview me. But sometimes I'm busy or traveling. So I thought—what if I construct a *Prosthetic Head?* Instead of interviewing the artist, they could interview the artist's head.

The head had a lot of information about me in its database. And it was the first project I did using language. Ordinarily, you don't speak when you make art. But this installation used language, and it had to be reasonably seductive—reasonably convincing. If you asked the head a question, it had to respond adequately and appropriately.

Sometimes the head sounded especially intelligent. Sometimes it sounded rather stupid. Kind of like the artist himself.

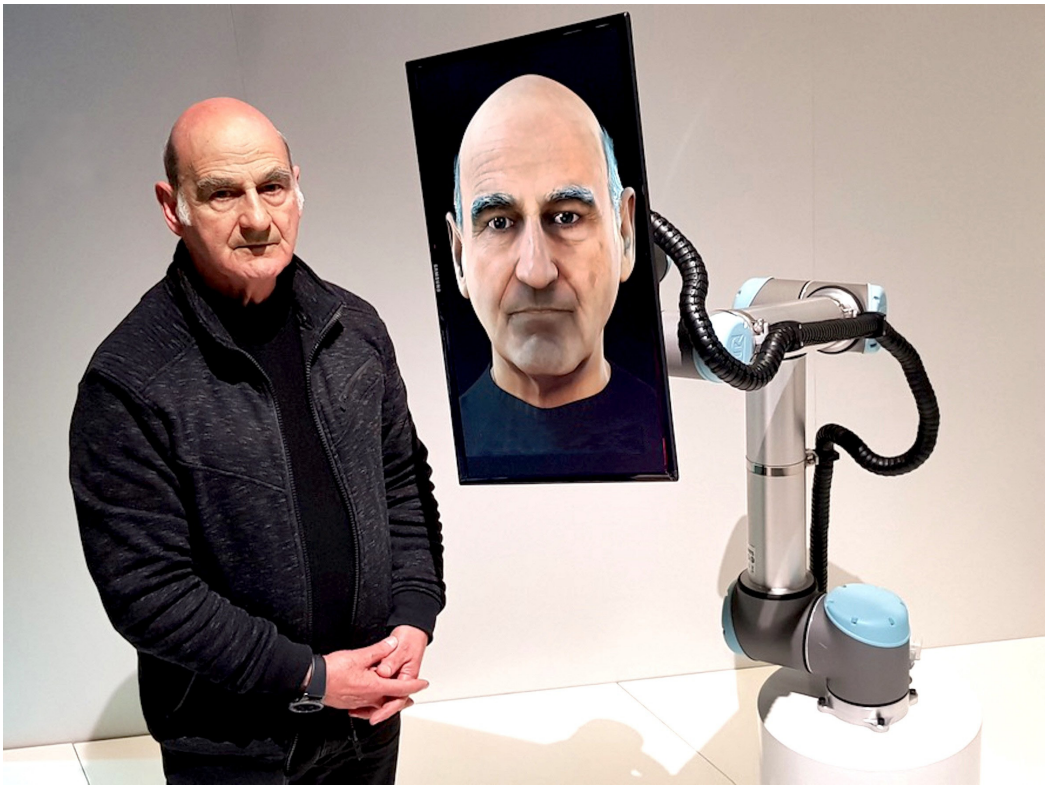


Image credit: Articulated Head, Stelarc / Herath / Kroos 2019, Questacon, Canberra 2019 Photographer Damith Herath

I think it was a successful project. But I also think the dilemma you're pointing to is very real—for performative philosophers or artists who speak. There needs to be a distinction between concept and action. There may be feedback loops between the two, but I never think of my performances as illustrating ideas.

If I say that the human body is now a contemporary chimera of meat, metal, and code, I'm not saying the performances illustrate that. The idea is generated by the performance, but it doesn't belong to the action. As Richard said, when he's performing, he finds his body enacting in a very different situation than when he speaks as a philosopher.

Richard Shusterman:

That's right. And I think there's another dimension to this distance: the Man in Gold needs more than myself to appear. He needs Yann, because Yann is the one who has, keeps, and takes

care of the golden skin. I would never engage with the Man in Gold without Yann.

There's a message in that. One of the ideas we traditionally have about ourselves is that we are autonomous individuals—independent from others. Especially in Western countries and under capitalism, there's this pride in being individuals with freedom—freedom to buy things, to choose, to be self-reliant. Part of the Man in Gold project is to question that. He doesn't exist without Yann. He would never have existed without Yann. So there's that layer of dependency and collaboration.

Plus, you know, the Man in Gold doesn't talk. Where there is an overlap is that he relies on my body for his existence. But—and without pushing this too far into psychoanalysis or psychiatry—though I will be speaking to the Polish Psychiatric Society in the city of Wroclaw on Friday—I think many of us have within us different personalities that take over. It doesn't have to be bipolar disorder or multiple personality in a clinical sense. But we have different perceptions and personalities that emerge through our single body.

Image credit: The Man in Gold on Battery Park Pier, October, 2022, New York City, Photographer Yann Toma

We also have different bodily habits depending on the roles we play. A female police officer who is also a mother behaves bodily in very different ways when handling a baby than when dealing with a criminal. Artists who rock climb, for example, might move differently when performing art versus climbing. So part of this work with the Man in Gold is loosening the simplicity of what a *soma* is—and dealing with its complexity.

As a *soma*, we can investigate one part of the body with another part. For instance, I can feel a bump on my face with my finger. My finger, in that act, becomes an embodied subjectivity, touching my *soma* as an object. That's one of the core ideas of somaesthetics: the *soma* is both

subject and object.

Our bodies exist in the world as objects—like Stelarc said earlier, the body is like other objects—but also as subjectivities that are aware of those objects, including themselves. When I look at my hand, I see part of my body as an object, though I am the subject observing it. Much of Stelarc's robotic work plays with that switching of perspective—from object to subject. The extended body part can be something very mechanical—or something subtle, like a contact lens. You don't even notice it, yet it's part of that extended body.

So the *soma* is not simple. These experiments—of coming in and going out of oneself—connect with Helmut Plessner's concept of *eccentric positionality*. You can stand apart from your body, or be fully immersed in it. And I think both the Man in Gold and Stelarc's work deal with that—being in and being out.

Stelarc:

Just to add to that, I was thinking—while you were speaking—about Graham Harman's definition of an object. He riffs on Arthur Eddington's idea that there are two kinds of tables: the scientific table, which is really just vibrating atoms, and the manifest table that we subjectively experience—something solid, with a surface, that can hold things.

What Harman adds is a third table. In his theory, an object can neither be reduced to its physical components nor entirely understood through its effects or relations. Rather, it's something *other*, something partially inaccessible. You can never exhaust what an object *is*—neither through scientific observation nor through subjective experience.

The other thing you alluded to is *distancing*. And now, proximity itself is becoming less relevant. We are not just biological bodies performing offline. We are also bodies performing online. That means we can project our physical presence to remote locations.

Image credit: Ear On Arm, Stelarc 2006, London / Los Angeles / Melbourne, Photographer Nina Sellars

Intimacy now is not just a result of being physically close. You can have intimacy without proximity—without skin contact. This challenges what we mean by presence and absence. Absence can be a double presence. And all presence can be a double absence. We're neither

entirely here nor entirely elsewhere. We appear as flickering images online, distributed across many places. So proximity is no longer an issue when it comes to intimacy.

Dorota Koczanowicz:

Let's continue with the body and technology. On one hand, technology allows us to transcend the body's limits. But in this situation, is the body somehow undermined by technology? And should we be afraid of technology—especially now, with all the discussions around artificial intelligence?

Richard Shusterman:

Let's see. My own artistic work, in some ways, uses very little technology—except for the suit. On the other hand, it really wouldn't have existed without cameras, electric lights, and movie equipment. Those were facilitators—or as Gibson would say, affordances. I wouldn't have opened myself up to the energy of the Man in Gold without those props that created the right atmosphere.

Also, if there weren't an art world, the Man in Gold would make no sense. The costume is from ballet, my partner is an artist and professor of art, and the whole idea of performance comes out of that context. Though I'm not particularly fond of the term "performance"—it's more like an event, as Stelarc might say, or a happening. Something that just happens without a script or a specific venue.

So the artistic work has an ambiguous relationship to technology. Now there are films and photographs that wouldn't exist without it, of course. But somaesthetics has actually attracted a lot of interest from the Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) community—because people want products that are user-friendly. One way to think about that is to consider what's *somatically* friendly.

I do a lot of workshops with people in that field. One of them, Dag Svanæs from the Norwegian Institute for Science and Technology, also knows Stelarc. We've both worn Dag's "tail"—a computerized body extension that's like the long tail of an animal. It has sensors, and the movement of your hips and bottom sends signals to wave the tail.

The tail is heavy enough that you really feel it in your hips and bottom, and that, in turn, affects your body. These kinds of robotic or technological extensions are becoming more present—and more popular.

Now, people our age—and your age—still learn to do things the old way. We think of proximity in terms of physical distance. But proximity can also be understood as what's *familiar* or *close to you*. Our habits are close to us. New generations of humans are learning new habits.

For example, when we learned to read and turn a page, we'd go like this (*gestures flipping a physical page*). But children who grow up with screens—they do this (*gestures swiping on a touchscreen*). I remember giving a book to one of my grandchildren, and he didn't know how to turn the page—he tried to swipe it.

It's actually easier to swipe like this (*gestures swiping left/right*) than like this (*gestures swiping upward*). One Chinese smartphone had an upward swipe function, but it didn't work well—people found it somatically uncomfortable. There are limits in our anatomy that constrain how we can interact comfortably with technology.

Actually, Stelarc can talk about this—his work with robots often involves machines moving him through sensors and communication. But there are limits. The robot could destroy you. So maybe he can speak about that—especially the exhibit downstairs where you [*gesturing to*

Stelarc] have to balance on one leg. There are limits to what the robot can do before it harms you.

Stelarc:

Yes, well—first, as a preface to what Richard mentioned: as a person with only half a brain, I need all the artificial intelligence augmentation I can get! I think artificial intelligence, machine learning, large language models—none of this has happened all of a sudden. AI was being researched back in the 1960s. But it didn't develop much back then because researchers realized you couldn't create truly intelligent systems that were merely computational. Intelligence needed embodiment.

So from artificial intelligence, we moved toward artificial life. If you release a simple robot into a complex, real-world environment, that robot—with only a few sensors—can learn to avoid obstacles or follow a human by sensing their body heat, for example. I think AI will augment and accelerate some of our functions. It's useful. I don't have a dystopian view of AI suddenly taking over. These projects and performances aren't meant to enhance the human body, but to experiment with alternative anatomical architectures. How does the body perform with a third hand? Or with an extended arm? How does the body walk with six legs? The relationship with technology is conditional—it's not simplistically "enhancing." It's always ambivalent and needs to be contestable. There's no definitive enhancement that's universally valid.

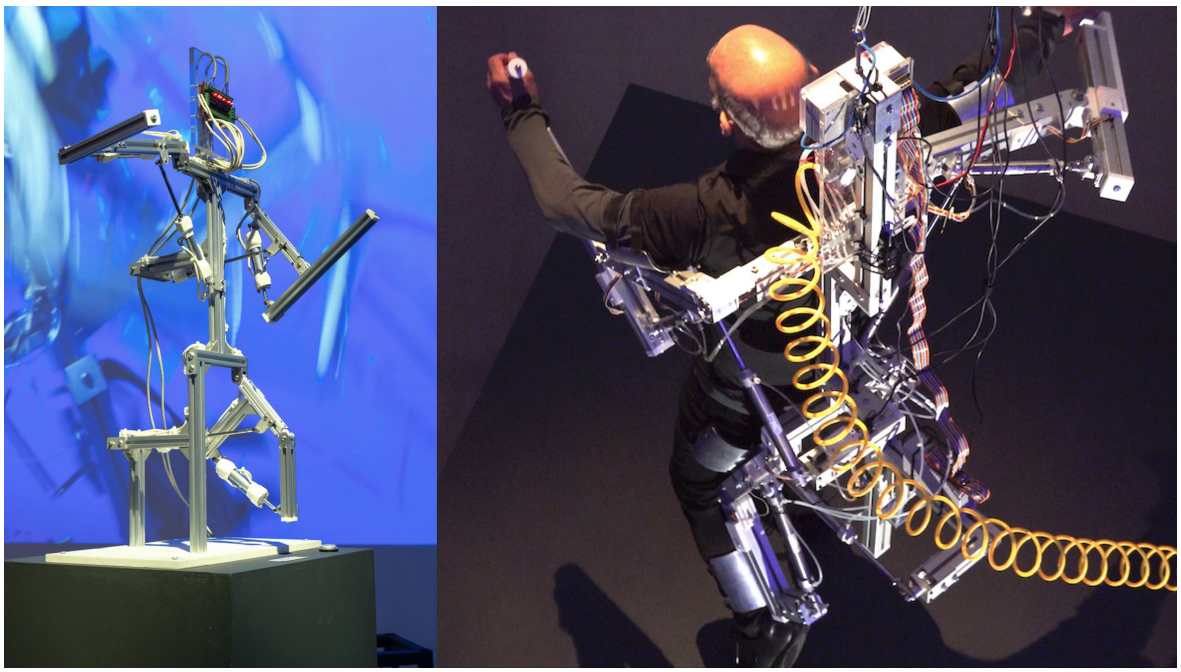


Image credit: StickMan / miniStickMan, Stelarc 2022, RMIT Gallery, Melbourne, Composite Video Still

For example, the exoskeleton Richard mentioned was part of a five-hour performance. My body was algorithmically actuated by a six-degree-of-freedom exoskeleton. I had one leg to balance on. On one hand, I could pivot and control the shadow on one wall; on the other hand, I could turn and control the video feedback on the opposite wall. But during all of this, two of my limbs and one leg were being actuated by the exoskeleton. So it was a possessed and performing body—a body controlled by the machine, but still with some agency to complete the aesthetic experience.

Richard Shusterman:

And that's a perfect example—one reason I brought it up—of the limited agency and autonomy we have with our bodies. We still haven't figured out how to live forever. We get hip replacements, knee replacements, heart surgeries. I have a colleague who just had a procedure to stop sleep apnea, where your tongue can cover your glottis and suffocate you. Now, there's a sensor that detects when your tongue stays in that position too long. It sends a signal to a nerve that makes your tongue stick out—so you can breathe again.

If it goes wrong, you may have someone sticking their tongue out mid-speech—but it ensures survival. And the procedure takes about an hour—it's an outpatient procedure. So, we have these amazing advancements. But part of our somatic heritage is recognizing limits. With all these affordances, there are also constraints. When we consider climate change, famine, and overpopulation, we start to think that maybe the fact that our bodies are mortal is not such a bad thing after all.

Part of this work on the *soma* is not about idolizing the body, like Greek sculpture did. It's about recognizing our limits and mortality. On one hand, people may view body-based art as egotistical or self-centered. But on the other hand, it's often about showing human vulnerability—acknowledging it and affirming it. We suffer, and we learn. That ambivalence—the tension between suffering and insight—is part of the human condition. It's better to embrace it. And it's also been a source of artistic energy for millennia—energy that helps us overcome those very limits.

Stelarc:

And to add to that, we have to remember that with every new generation, we're essentially rebooting—we're bootstrapping our species. Each generation introduces a new series of genetic variations that animate bodies in different ways and generate ideas we might not have encountered before. So while the idea of longevity or immortality might be seductive on an individual level, from the perspective of the human species, that's not how it works. Each new generation brings with it a range of genetic and qualitative capabilities that weren't necessarily experienced by the previous one.

Dorota Koczanowicz:

In academia, we now have a new methodology called art-based research. I'd like to ask about your approach to the epistemic possibilities of art. For example, you examine the boundaries of the body and put the body in sometimes dangerous positions in order to know or discover something. In some cases, your work seems closely connected to science. So what can we get to know from artistic experience? And what is the difference, for example, between artistic research and scientific or philosophical research?

Richard Shusterman:

That's a very good question. My artistic work actually challenges that distinction. With the Man in Gold, it's not always clear—is it art or is it life? This work is not usually performed in an artistic venue (I recall only two exceptional occasions). It has no script. It has, however, documentation that's been exhibited in museums and galleries. So it exists in this fuzzy space, which is a fascinating space for a philosopher.

But to get closer to your question: is it art done by a philosopher, or is it philosophical research in aesthetic experience—through the medium of art? Again, it's impossible to say. Is it

artistic research, or is it research in aesthetics by a philosopher? That's why this kind of project is exciting. The French have a term—*partager*—which means both to share and to divide. Most of our understanding of the world comes through dualisms. Gender, for example—male and female. But lots of things, including gender, don't fall into such neat binaries.

We also divide art and reality, philosophy and art. But those boundaries are often artificial. This kind of work shows that beneath those divisions there's continuity. And sometimes, the boundaries are arbitrary.

If we're talking epistemology—what have I learned from working with the Man in Gold? I've learned that my body can and will do things I never knew it could or would do. Of course, I also learn new movement patterns—because his movements are different from mine. Sometimes, he is running from menacing people or embarrassing situations, even from the police.

I've had political run-ins with the police in my life—but never those other kinds that I've had with the Man in Gold. So yes, I learn new things. Ethically speaking—but also epistemologically—I learn about my own limits: what, for instance, I'm comfortable doing and what I'm not. But one thing I'm sure Stelarc can speak to: you learn a lot through discomfort. Most of our learning is sparked by discomfort. Even something as simple as navigating an unfamiliar city: do I turn left, or right? (*mimes a left/right turn*). If I'm confident, I don't have to think about it. But doubt—the discomfort of doubt—is what spurs inquiry. The pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce said that doubt is the source of all inquiry. If we're comfortable, we don't think about other ways of doing things. I know that Stelarc has learned from discomfort. Some of it extreme.

Stelarc:

Yes. And sometimes people don't realize what's actually difficult. The most difficult project for me wasn't a suspension performance, which is mostly about external pain. It was the stomach sculpture. That was a simple machine inserted into my stomach. Inside the body, it opens and closes, extends and retracts. It has a flashing light and a beeping sound. It's a simple choreography of a machine inside the body. That was far more difficult to endure than suspension. When you're gagging, feeling sick, wanting to throw up—it's an entirely different kind of discomfort. And yes, that discomfort generates new experiences, new ambivalences, new sensitivities.

Now, going back to the question of art and science: I feel very uncomfortable with the simplistic meshing of those two, which is quite common these days. It often feels institutionally driven. Institutions don't know what to do with artistic practice, so they try to authenticate it by attaching scientific labels or purposes.

But art and science operate with different methodologies and goals. Scientific research is often very focused, very reductive, iterative—it gathers information to improve prediction. Those are standard scientific strategies. An artist doesn't think that way. Artists don't create or perform using the same logic. We also have to distinguish between *science* and *technology*. Artists use technology. They hack it. If they use science, it's often in a trivial or metaphorical way. I don't think we should call what artists do "research" in the same sense as scientific research. I get very upset about this. Even though my work often gets categorized as "sci-art" or "art-science," I find that discourse very problematic.

Richard Shusterman:

I think one of the problems is that "art" is a big word—and there are lots of very different artistic practices. "Science" is also a big word. In Anglophone cultures, we tend to identify science with natural science or STEM disciplines. But in German—or even French—*science*

includes history, philosophy, the humanities. In German, it's *Wissenschaft*. Philosophy is a science. History is a science. So these are all research domains, but not in the same sense as laboratory science. It becomes impossible to universally define what art is or what science is, or how they relate. Even the word *research* extends from simple curiosity to complex grant-funded investigations.

One question I think is worth raising—especially since we're in an academic art institution—is whether academies of fine art should have PhDs. I'm not saying they shouldn't. But I know there are debates with strong views on both sides of this issue. A dear friend of mine, who used to be the rector of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Art, believed it was actually *bad* for art to adopt a university model—with its focus on academic journals, hierarchical ranks like associate professor or full professor, and so on. That kind of institutionalization works against the romantic idea of the artist as a free, creative, non-bourgeois figure.

In philosophy, there's no escaping the academy. But I know artists who refuse academic jobs because they feel those positions conflict with what being an artist should mean—particularly in terms of freedom.

A Conversation with Rachel Gadsden

Mark Tschaepe

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Rachel Gadsden is a British visual and performance artist whose internationally exhibited work explores universal themes of fragility, resilience, survival, and hope through a practice that bridges mainstream and disability art sectors. Her art is deeply informed by her own experience of living with a chronic hereditary lung condition and visual impairment, including the use of a syringe driver that administers medication at frequent intervals, and she employs expressive, psycho-geographical methods to examine human vulnerability and embodied life. Gadsden holds a BA (Hons) in Fine Art from Wimbledon School of Art and an MA in Fine Art from City and Guilds of London Art School, and her career has included major residencies and commissions such as serving as the first contemporary artist in residence at Hampton Court Palace since Holbein and creating Unlimited Global Alchemy, a cross-cultural collaboration presented during the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad. Her work often engages participatory processes with marginalized communities, and she has received numerous awards and honors, including an Honorary Doctorate from London South Bank University, in recognition of her contributions to art and disability culture. Currently, she is a PhD researcher at Loughborough University. More information about her work may be found on her website: https://www.rachelgadsden.com

Rachel was kind enough to chat with me over Zoom on 2 May 2025. The discussion has been edited for length, relevance, and clarity.

Rachel Gadsden: My name is Rachel Gadsden, and I'm a visual and performance artist. Originally, I came from a background of theatre so that obviously has had quite a significant element to my practice. And I studied method acting. And I say that because it has quite an important effect on how I've evolved as an artist as well, and I've also lived with a very serious medical condition all my life. And so once you are resuscitated a lot, you have a very clear understanding of your mortality and your life and your life expectations. Now I may live quite a long time due to incredible medical support. But that whole sense of my body, and how I want to express myself as an artist is because of the phenomenological. It's almost an expressionistic feel I have for living my daily life. and it transcends itself into my work. But I began very much as a formal figurative artist because, like many young people, I wanted to prove to myself that I was really good at art. And people relate to really good art with really good skills. In fact, we know it's nothing to do with that. But at the point I wanted to learn all the skills I needed to learn, and when I started losing my sight it was, although I'd done lots of expressionistic work, it just gave me the freedom to say, "Hang on a minute". I can just do what I want. and I'm going to do what I want." So, it's become really physical, visceral, phenomenological.

Mark Tschaepe: In *Body Consciousness.* Richard Shusterman says, "Somaesthetics centers on the soma as a site of knowledge, action, and aesthetic appreciation. It is concerned with the critical study and meliorative cultivation of how we experience and use the living body, or Soma as a site of sensory appreciation, or esthesis and creative self-fashioning." I want to ask you; there's this distinction that's often made between the body as object and the body as subject. Soma brings those things together, so it doesn't artificially separate them, and I am interested in how you view your work as honoring that combination of both body as subject and body as object.

Rachel Gadsden: Well, I know I do. It's quite interesting to think of how I would describe it in terms. In fact, when I started looking into somaesthetics it just all was language that completely describes what I know I've been doing for a very long time, but may not have had the articulated voice to be able to express that.

We don't think about our bodies at all unless they start being broken; and then we become extremely aware of our bodies. If you can't breathe, you become very aware of the fact that if you don't have breath, you're not going to stay alive, and all of those sensations, and on a very corporeal level. To some degree, it's been something that's so unconscious within my practice because it's just what I experience every single day. But also I'm incredibly interested in the whole sense of the human condition. And unless I look outside the human condition, then how can I look inside? So, it's that journey backwards and forwards, and even to some extent looking how the body sits within the whole world context. I am completely trapped in this whole sense that we're all a living, breathing entity, and we all survive or don't survive. As a subject, obviously thankfully, all the time and then, now I have lost some sight. I wonder what I'm drawing, because I almost feel I do all of my work without actually seeing through my eyes, although I can see some things. But it's a very distorted, blurred view. And so, even if I'm drawing something which isn't me, I am creating art. To separate the body from the subject becomes more and more difficult because it's so close together and intertwined, and has become more and more so, and then doing a live, performative work. It is just one whole thing together, but they are both because if somebody's viewing the world, the body is subject or the body has a phenomenological sense. I don't think I'm articulating it very well, and probably more trying to express a sensorial feeling of what I think it means. If that makes sense.

Mark Tschaepe: It does. I wanna talk a little bit about this notion of the world as body, because one of the ways I've seen your work described, especially some of the earlier work you did is as psychogeographic. I want to talk a little bit about the idea of atmosphere and sort of a somasthetics of atmosphere, and how that plays into your work, because it seems as though your work is acknowledges that context has everything to do with the body, that the environment has everything to do with the body. I'd like to hear more of what you have to say about that, because it seems so important to your work regarding where your work is coming from and what your work is expressing and what it's commenting on.

Rachel Gadsden: When I started, you know, I obviously went to art college and started creating art and deciding how I want to describe the world! It was at a moment where any form of disability, or any form of work that really started to express your own sense of the human condition became very difficult because it was almost like, "You're being a victim, and you're not expressing an outward thing. This is just about therapy." I very quickly decided that this wasn't a platform that I wanted to start getting in discussions about being a victim, because I've never felt that I'm a victim. and I thought it was more. It was quite an aggressive approach. So I started going out out into the world, and I used to find people. I'd go on long journeys, and I'd walk to marketplaces wherever and just wandering around, and then maybe looking for somebody

that could become my subject, and then I would approach that person and talk to them and say, "Tell me about your life. I'm an artist. I'm really interested. I've been watching you for a while." There's something very narcissistic about being approached by an artist and being asked to be painted, or something like that. So, I was going out into the landscape, out into places. I went to a marketplace once, and I ended up actually telling a story about a very famous circus performer who had spent time in a prisoner of war camp in Japan, and this whole quite horrific story unfolded. That wasn't necessarily the depth of the story I wanted to tell, and so I became very interested in that outward thing, and how we exist, and and how art exists in the bigger picture. I did come across psychogeography, and I was always interested in the fact that it isn't necessarily a static time. And now there's these layers of time and layers of of a space. It's hard to explain, because I'm not a religious person. So it's not that it's coming from that bigger place. I work a lot with very religious people. But it's not how I find my work, but more just so aware of the atmospheres, so they became part of the work. Then I finished art college and started doing residencies, and I did a big residency in an old derelict coal mining region in a big powerhouse, and I saw the whole mind is this sort of living, breathing entity. From there I went in to start making a huge body of work in old derelict asylum hospitals to tell the stories of the people who had been incarcerated. It was almost like the building was the living, breathing thing. People were the living, breathing thing. It sort of wasn't separated. In all of that, I'm also discussing my own human fragility and my own sense of survival, which was always probably underpinning the work, and I don't think I necessarily at that point thought about it too much on an intellectual level. It was very much just going on the journey and being really open. And now I can't separate any of those things. I've always done a lot of research, and I think maybe I've spent a lot of time on my own in hospital or in oxygen tents a lot when I was a child on my own. So there's always been that thinking mind going on all the time. What's this? How can I interpret this?

Rachel Gadsden – Trapped 2 Walls "Live Art" Performance, Loughborough University, UK, 2024. Still Photograph of Rachel Gadsden. Photo credit: Tim Hayton

How can I survive this? I also wanted to know how other people survive, and then that led to commissions to go abroad and work in some very challenging places where the whole sense of survival is very difficult for everybody, whether it's conflict region or whether it's working in a township where many people have HIV/AIDS, and how they manage to survive those circumstances with poverty and other social conditions that are very difficult. So, it's all intermingled and can't ever be single a single thing. It comes from that bigger picture.

Mark Tschaepe: You have done work in South Africa. I also did a lot of work in South Africa at one time.

Rachel Gadsden: Oh!

Mark Tschaepe: You had a presentation in a show called *Ubuntu*. One of my papers that was published over 10 years ago is on ubuntu, so it was interesting to me that there was this crossover even there between us. What comes to mind is this notion of community and various communities and the importance of embodiment in terms of community. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about any thoughts you have with regard to somaesthetics and community because somaesthetics, I think, sometimes gets misinterpreted as if it's just about the individual. But I think through your work there's this real importance of community that comes through, and I'd just like to hear you speak about that in terms of whatever you have to say.

Rachel Gadsden: I think you're completely right. As soon as I came to somaesthetics, it was also the sense of the community. If you if you have a medical condition and an intense medical condition, it's not something I'm going to keep going on about, but you cannot survive on your own. So, I have had at different times all sorts of intervention. So I'm reliant on a community, whether that's a medical community or the support to just get from A to B, and also understanding that from a psychological point of view, if you are just completely on your own, your ability to be able to survive those circumstances is very hard. and having other people around you enables you to sort of get out of yourself, and actually sort of see things in perspective. In fact, it's a very strange story, how I got to South Africa. I knew the Olympics were coming up in the U.K. I knew there were going to be some very major commissions, and I was competitive enough to decide that I wanted to go for one of these, and I'd gone to an exhibition, and I saw a body map which I'd never seen before, and was really taken by these bodies, and I knew one of them that the person was surviving something I wasn't quite sure what they were all about, other than they were body maps, and I thought that these were maybe more psychological stories, people dealing with their mental health issues. Anyway, I decided that whoever painted this, I had to find this person, and I didn't know where to find them.

I did loads of searching on the Internet. I also wrote hundreds of emails all over the world. "Have you heard of Nondumiso Hlwele I want to find this person. Do you know her?" And then, after about 4 months, this email popped in. "Somebody's told me. You're looking for me. I'm from Khayelitsha Township, Cape Town ". And that was the starting point of my story that I wanted to tell as part of the commission for what I submitted for the Commission for the Olympic games. One of the very interesting things is that when all of them were collected together as the Bambanani group, and when they came together, or when they first began to get treatment from Medecin Sans Frontieres, before they could even start [FH1.1]treatment, they had to tell somebody that they were having treatment, which none of them wanted to do, because they didn't want to admit their circumstances. Very difficult, it still very is challenging. They had to start sharing with that another person, which really intrigued me. Because again, it's not just you. It's about a bigger thing. Obviously, as they got to know each other as a group, that became the most important thing, and they were a living, breathing entity together. I came across your work. I think it was yesterday or the day before, because I was looking lots of things up, and it

was like, "Oh, my God! You understand all this too and that sense of community efforts. Sadly, many of us have lost that. It doesn't exist as a hypothesis in many communities. But once you start going to much more fragile communities. not necessarily the warring ones, where they're not going to speak to you, and you're not going to speak to them. But the ones in those different groups support each other in a really massive way. and that's something that, as I've gone around working on these different projects and with these community groups, how empowering it is to see that they look after each other, and actually breathe together and live together and support each other and survive because of that. That's all part of the somaesthetics hypotheses as far as I'm concerned.

Mark Tschaepe: Could you talk a little bit more about body maps, what those are, and what's so striking about them?

Rachel Gadsden: Yes, they're really interesting. I hadn't really come across them before. I can't just this minute remember the person who started using them, but it was in Birmingham, in the U.K in the 1960's, and some psychologists and psychotherapists were working with mental health patients and saying to them, "Well, you know, let's talk about what's going on," and they'd say, "I've got so much pain. I've got so much pain", and they would pull into their body. And the psychotherapist said, "Well, is that the pain in here? Where is this pain?" It was very hard for people to articulate, and going back 40-50 years ago, it was even more difficult for people to express things in an emotional context. I think one day someone suggested, "Let's just get on the floor, and I'm going to draw around you. This is going to be our body. We're going to start talking, and you're going to start telling me what hurts or what doesn't hurt, or where you sense those things that matter." It became a storytelling process. Through that process, it's your own body which you can't draw yourself. We can draw some of it. I draw some of my body. You would quite often see me outlining. It's almost a sense of saying, "Yes, I do still exist. I am still here." But it's pretty impossible to draw around yourself completely, so somebody else must do it for you. So, it's again that parallel. It's about sharing the story. And then that map outline, which looks a bit like the outlines you get when there's been a criminal act, and police come and draw around the dead body, which is a bit strange to have the two going together, but the body map becomes the vessel for you to tell your story in whatever way you want to tell that story. With the Bambanani group, they were used by Cape Town University to tell the stories of the individuals who were surviving HIV/AIDS through their medical treatment, then administering the treatment because they were the only ones that did. It was 1990 before they did that.[FH2.1] A lot of people had died already, and they became sort of like the the catalyst to go into the community and say, "Look, look at my body map. This is my story and my survival story." They'd done these beautiful maps. "Would you like to do your map, and let's talk about you?" It was obviously a healing therapeutic process of understanding the body and what they were going through. I think it's really interesting, because even when I work with many of my friends in South Africa, there were some of the individuals that would never, ever mention HIV/AIDS. They would say tuberculosis, but they would never mention, because obviously with any illness or anything, there's certain stigmas that arise. I don't walk into a room ever with my white cane. In fact, the only thing I'll use my white cane for is in my artwork. It's not because I have any issues about having a sight problem myself, but it's because of other people's perceptions. "How can this person who's lost sight be an artist? Did she really do that, or is she doing it?" You know, it's those sorts of questions, and I understood that for the Abenani group or my individual artists, that they felt the same. So, I think the body maps tell another story, an important story, and there are many of them that are beautiful. And that's something you've touched on, because it's not about trying to frighten people or terrorise people through your art. It's about trying

to draw them in. In fact, my Master's degree really was all about that. How do you tell one of these epic stories in history without repulsing everybody, you know. If you want to make work that considers the notions of the holocaust, for instance, if you create some very tragic looking images, nobody can bear it. We can't bear it. Nobody can bear it. So how can you? You need to tell that story or the current story that's going on in Israel and Palestine. You know, it's a very, very tragic story. How can you tell those stories? And that was what I really was concerned about, because I think I felt I needed to tell. I needed to discuss something about those contexts in my work. For me, beauty and the other reason I loved the word, somaesthetic, was because of the word aesthetic. It's critical. It's about pulling people into the work. and they'll see the pain and the tragedy, or the hope and survival. But if you can't get them into the work., then you, as an artist or philosopher, or anything, you aren't communicating.

Rachel Gadsden Creation I 2025. Mixed Media & stitching on Fabriano Paper 300gm, 70cm x 100cm. Photo credit: Rachel Gadsden

Mark Tschaepe: For you, now, where is your story going? In terms of your art. I have looked over the trajectory of a lot of the stuff that you've done, and there's a story there, and it's gone through evolutions and touched upon different things. You've highlighted various aspects of different communities, and, as you said, different tragedies and things that are very personal and things that involve community. What about now? Where are things going now for you in terms of your work, especially regarding the expression of embodiment.

Rachel Gadsden: When Covid arrived, I was told in the January before it really become something we all knew about. I don't think it was even called Covid, but because of my medical condition. I was told, "You're going to be locked down from today," literally the beginning of January, and it was very shocking, and you know I think I'm going to lose my salary. I'm self-employed, so it's not that I've got some salary that will pick up somewhere. I was supposed to be going abroad on lots of projects. Then I decided I may consider doing a PhD, which had sort of been at the back of my mind, but not necessarily, because obviously I'm practice based and didn't want to just be in books for the next five years, or whatever. But I did, for various reasons, find an interesting angle into how I could create my PhD that would be relevant. Then I realized I didn't even know you could do it by practice all those sorts of things. I thought, "Well, I must do something that has an authentic approach. I am going to use all the things that I draw upon,. and the work will become much more. My experience, my life. All those other things are there. But it will be much more honest about my survival and my everyday survival." So, the exploration has been about looking at artists who have also lived with chronic illnesses and chronic disabilities, and what journeys they've gone on as artists, and how the disability has brought richness to the work. Not because disability makes you anything better or worse, or anything like that, but it just brings another voice to to a subject, and I very much believe every voice has to exist. Otherwise, we don't have a democracy, or we don't have a 'we.' We can't exist if all the voices aren't heard. It's disaster. I've gone much deeper into my own sense of story as opposed to that outward story, but every week I get antibodies that are donated by between 10,000 and a 100,000 people. Now I have a consideration that I don't exist on my own, and I'm surviving because of the generosity of all those people who decide to give plasma. I almost feel that I've become swept into this Gaia experience of survival. If everything's possible, it's sort of been a freedom. It's been another incredible freedom. So, I think anything's possible.

Mark Tschaepe: Are there any artists that you think other people have to know about? You talk about the importance of voices being heard. What are some of the artistic voices for you, that people should go out and look up their art?

Rachel Gadsden: I mean, there are many artists, all the expressionistic artists that I was always drawn to at the very beginning. But of course I had that thing about wanting to learn particular skills. The voices that have spoken to me, I mean, there are some very famous ones, but the ones that often that I I touch upon are people that don't necessarily have a huge status but are creating incredible work that brings another dimension. And I mean, there's various artists. Recently there's a fantastic performance artist called Martin O'Brien; who has lived with cystic fibrosis all of his life, and he does some really quite extreme performance work.

He does very graphic performances where he shows the treatments and all the challenges, really pushing the lived experience context to a wide extent. He's a gay man, and touches on queer identity as well. There's lots of elements around that. The violence that occurs through medical treatment. Really interesting work.

Somebody everybody knows is Frida Kahlo. Everybody knows Frida Kahlo. But in fact, Frida Kahlo's deeply important work is often the work that people haven't seen, and it's the brave work that she was making at a point where she was telling very deeply resonating stories about

her own lived experience, at a time when no work was made like that. It's almost grown into being very contemporary art that we all look at. A lot of her medical notes have been released recently, and I've seen exhibitions, and you get that sense, "Why does somebody who have a condition make work like that? What is the gravitas of that work?"

If there was one person who set me on the journey, it was Francis Bacon. When I was about 18, I went to an exhibition. My first one. I didn't go to galleries at all because I grew up abroad, and my parents didn't really know anything about that, so we didn't do that. I walked in. It was *3 Figures at the Base of the Crucifixion*. It's the famous one where you've got those distorted heads, violent breathing, screaming out and teeth. I just remember thinking, "This artist can't breathe. I just know that this artist has probably got something like me, and this is his experience, and this is what he does." I liked his work. I like the sort of the violence that exists within some of the work, the physical violence, the viscerality as well. You know the whole sense of that. You almost feel like you want to eat some of it sometimes, it's really almost as if you are experiencing the art through your throat, as opposed to just you looking at it through your eyes.

Sophie Pretorius, archivist at the Estate of Francis Bacon has done a lot of research because his [Bacon] medical notes have been donated to the Francis Bacon Estate, and she was on the radio one day and said that this was Francis Bacon's experience, and most people knew that maybe had a breathing problem, but not to the extent of his situation, because he was also living at a time when to admit you had anything wrong with you was not macho. Also, he was a gay man and certainly didn't want to show anybody that he had any weaknesses, but she [S. Petrorius) told us the story, and I began to realize he had the same medical experience as me. He was treated at the same hospitals as me. Maybe there's something here that I need to investigate his work, and I'd always been under the impression that the violence in the work was not necessarily to do with his masochistic gay experiences. It was much more to do with something else that was much deeper within him. Then I began to sort of think about how types of violence affect you, and how that might make you express your art or draw your artwork. That was the basis of my PhD at the beginning, but it's gone much further as you go through these. It gets bigger, and then you've got to get small again and so that's almost not relevant. It's much more about what it is that I'm bringing to my work. "Why do I make these performances? And why do I make performances that are fully accessible?" That's obviously to do with my own experience. If somebody's blind and they come to my performance, they aren't going to see anything that I've painted. So, what can I do within that performance to make the blind person know exactly what I'm saying? I then work with composers and work closely with different artists that I believe understand what I want to be expressed, and we work together and create the narratives that way. It's the same if somebody's deaf making sure that if there's a narrative, how are they going to appreciate that narrative? In a video, it's easy: you put in captioning. But how do you do that when you're on stage? And do I want sign language? There are many amazing BSL interpreters who are positioned on the side of the stage interpreting, but I want the interpreter be embedding within the performance? If I'm doing it live, they must be part of the performance. How does that fit into it? I suspect that ultimately my PhD will focus much more on those elements because that's that little bit of extra knowledge that I'm bringing to the subject.

Mark Tschaepe: What for you is one of the most important takeaways that you want people to get from your work, especially about experience and somaesthetic reflection.

Rachel Gadsden: I think that if somebody walks out after looking at my work or out of a performance, that they take a deep breath, and just say, "Life is really precious, and I'm going to try and move forward and live it in the best way I can, because it's so fleeting, and even if we live a hundred years, it's not very long. How can I live? You know, if I am a very unhappy person, how

can I find a way to try and just look outwards and see things slightly differently?" I work with lots of people who have very severe mental health problems––I'm not asking for people to be happy, it's not about that, but I hope they can find some sense of being able to live comfortably in their state. Then I feel that maybe I'd done something. Yeah.

Rachel Gadsden - PostHuman "Live Art & Sound" Performance, University College London, 2024. Still Photograph of Rachel Gadsden. Photo credit: Maria Meyers

Reflections on the Somatic Core of Ideation

Veronika Mayerboeck, Kristina Höök, Alé Duarte

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Keywords: *Design Education; Interaction Design; Embodied Learning; Ideation; Somatic Practices; Somatic Experiencing; Somaesthetics; Child Pedagogy, Spatial Cognition, Architectural Experience, Embodied Design Strategies*

This article is a condensed version of a virtual 3 hour live conversation on September 4th 2025 between Veronika Mayerboeck, Kristina Höök and Alé Duarte, three experts from distinct yet interrelated fields - Spatial Design, Interaction Design and Somatic Experiencing.
The discussion centers on the somatic core of ideation within creative processes, drawing on diverse perspectives from Somaesthetics, Embodied Design Theory, Interaction Design and Design Education, Embodied Learning, Child Development and Cognitive Science.

Taking the role of the Author, Veronika Mayerböck initiated this exchange having met both interviewés before already in person. This gave inspiration to set up a virtual discussion in the style of an "essayistic journey", aiming to extrapolate and identify the various somatic layers of ideation processes. Grounded in the participants' pedagogical and academic expertise in facilitating ideation there is a central consensus on the importance of felt experience and the role of the body in creational processes. Headings embedded in the text structure the interview along the topics discussed throughout the conversation which has been facilitated by:

Kristina Höök (Interviewee), professor of Interaction Design at KTH Stockholm. Her research spans affective interaction, somaesthetic design, the Internet of Things, and design methodologies. With Soma Design, she promotes a slower, body-centered design process that foregrounds perception and human values. Her influential work has shifted Interaction Design toward more experiential, embodied, and sustainable practices across the whole design and use cycle.

Alé Duarte (Interviewee), somatic educator, certified in Somatic Experiencing and Rolfing, and creator of the KidSoma Method—a body-based framework supporting children's self-regulation, ideation, and expression. With over 30 years of experience in trauma-informed education, embodied paedagogy, and neuro-affective development, he has worked in 30+ countries. His workshops foster physiological attunement, relational coherence, and dynamic

group engagement.

Veronika Mayerböck (author), architect/ lighting designer, dancer and educator. Across her works in Media Art, Interaction Design and Lighting, she researches the interplay of space, light and movement through the lens of the sensing body. Her Sensing Space method fosters ideation through perceptive resonance and kinesthetic awareness. It has proven effective in 10+years in Architecture/Design education across Europe.

The KidSoma Method

Supporting self-regulation in children and adults

Veronika Mayerboeck:
Dear Alé - would you like to begin our conversation with an introduction about your professional background and expertise? Of particular interest would be how your methodology and approach relates to creational processes on a deeper level.

Alé Duarte:
Of course. First of all, thank you for inviting me. So, to give you a bit of background — I worked for many years as a teacher, and then I started to get into body-oriented therapies like Rolfing, which I practiced for about twenty years. Later, I met Peter Levine and began working with Somatic Experiencing (SE). Before that, I used to perceive the body mostly in terms of shape and form. But through SE, I began to understand the body more in its "energetic form" — how it reacts in relation to a situation or a moment, and how we can distinguish between what happens before and after that moment. This time-sensitive awareness of how our body responds changed a lot in how I see things.

Later, I was invited to work with children in Thailand after the tsunami, and that experience brought everything together — my background as a teacher, my work with Rolfing, and Somatic Experiencing. That became the foundation for what I now call the *KidSoma* method (Duarte, n.d.). But I don't really see it as a method, more as a body of work. At its core, the Kid Soma Method looks at the child not only through their actions, but also through the body — its shape, its form, and its energetic functioning. The focus is on supporting self-regulation in both children and adults — leading them in a balanced state of activity, not just to be calm or quiet.

When I speak about self-regulation, I mean being able to do something without draining your own resources. For example, if I'm running or playing ping pong, I'm self-regulating — because as I'm moving, my body maintains balance, it knows how to use and sustain energy. The idea is to keep this balance within the moment of the task. If the goal is at the end of the run, then self-regulation is the relaxation that comes afterward. But if the task starts before the run, self-regulation means tolerating the anxiety or uncertainty that comes with starting — and still finding the strength to move forward.

CYCLES OF IDEATION

…the importance of "owning" your ideas or how to help a child to have ideas

Alé Duarte:
If I had to define the baseline of my work, I'd say it's about discovering *how we see a task*. A task can be anything — eating, showering, sleeping — each with a beginning, middle, and end.

Within that arch, experience becomes more organized through the body's own dynamics.

My method combines different techniques and tools to support this process. When parents visit my office with their children, I usually begin by playing. Through play, I observe key moments in how the child interacts — small signs of hesitation or confusion that reveal whether something is blocked. Even a pause like "I don't know if I can start" already exposes a question behind it: "Do I really want this?" or "Is this what my mom wants?" Decision-making already becomes blurry for the child. Together, we begin to clarify intention. When a child says, "My intention is to do this," I respond, "Great, let's try and see what happens." That small act empowers them to take ownership and responsibility.

So when I think of ideation, it's very simple: How can I help a child to have their own ideas? Whether that idea is to play tag, to watch something, or even to avoid something — each still follows the same arch of beginning, middle, and end.

Today, this natural cycle of ideation is breaking down. Phones and screens provoke fast, reactive play that leaves no time for reflection. Repetition of this passivity suppresses genuine ideas and creates doubt — "Is this really my idea?" — since most inspiration now comes from digital content rather than personal experience.

So my role is to help them return to the very start of an idea — to recognize and claim it: "This is my idea, and I like it." From there, we develop it step by step through the full arch of experience. And again and again, it's striking how much disorganized behavior must be cleared before an idea can truly grow.

I am thinking about a teenager who could only communicate if the conversation was related to a videogame he was playing otherwise he would become aggressive. So I realized this boy simply had no more repertoire for engagement — not in the sense of lacking intelligence or cleverness, but in his *ability to own any of his ideas or beliefs about himself*. He could not locate where his impulses or choices came from. In this sense, I would say that Generation Z, growing up so early with computers, is not repressed in their ideation compared to earlier generations, but rather confronted with a strong automatism of ideas — ideas that arise almost by default, before genuine reflection or ownership can occur.

Veronika Mayerboeck:

I really like your expression of "*owning your idea.*" Referring to your earlier thoughts on bodily expression and energetic response, it seems you observe how a child approaches something. Would you say that owning one's ideas is connected to a self-regulated sense of balance or calm? How would you describe the state in which someone can "perfectly own" their ideas ?

Alé Duarte:

That's a great question. Every idea serves a purpose, often *tied to an inner need* — for instance, self-regulation or the need to be cared for. A child might, for example, choose to play doctor to meet that need. Through play, the child receives what was missing, and the idea becomes affirmed: "That's a great idea."

Veronika Mayerboeck:

So the fulfillment of an idea depends on fulfilling the need behind it. But to follow an idea also requires trust — trust in the idea itself, and in one's own ability to engage with the environment?

Alé Duarte:

Let's say I have a need. My body responds and orients me toward actions or tasks associated with it, often unconsciously. For example, someone feeling alone might seek belonging. One person might pursue a luxury item to connect with a community, while another might start a walking or climbing group. Both are addressing the same basic need, but without consciously recognizing it. Their decisions operate on an automatized level, providing a sense of fulfillment — "Yes, this is what I want to do" — yet at a deeper level, both are responding to the same core need: belonging, care, or fear of abandonment. How these needs are interpreted is shaped by individual culture and social environment.

THE MYSTERIOUS MESSENGER

… on the relation between inner needs, unconscious actions and resulting tasks

Alé Duarte:

To outline this unconscious aspect and help children become more aware of their needs, I created specific characters within my methodology. One of these is the mysterious messenger. He comes and secretly places ideas into the "idea box", like a post office or a personal mailbox. The messenger remains mysterious because no one knows who or what introduced the note—it could say "hungry" or "food." In the end, it is the recipients themselves who interpret that initial message and transform it into an action, such as deciding to bake a cake.

This is just one translation of a need into what we actually do—there are infinite possibilities. Many children—and adults—get lost in this process because they end up fulfilling needs that may not truly belong to them. Perhaps the idea comes from an influencer they watch on YouTube, or from parental expectations, rather than arising from their own authentic sense of need.

Veronika Mayerboeck:

Thank you for that. I feel this "idea box" is where we work with young architects or designers trying to re-engage students into this quality of observation, identifying needs and seeking a solution for that need, while being honest about this need. Often, design just becomes a personal statement, "I liked it that way," similar to the gadget industry where technological development happens often simply "because we can do it," without reflecting on the underlying purpose. Culture and societal pressures strongly shape whether individuals claim and act on their own ideas.

Alé Duarte:

Exactly. Owning an idea is complex. Sometimes it's difficult even to recognize one's own idea. For instance, someone may dislike their job but feel trapped; the suppressed idea—of what they truly want—remains active, generating frustration.

Veronika Mayerboeck:

I would add here, how important it might be to have the ability to listen, hear and verbalize ideas at some point, even supressed ones.

Alé Duarte:

Yes. Listening from Outside helps enable a person to talk about a suppressed idea, giving them space to explore whether the idea is actionable. Quite often, suppressed ideas are already constructed in mind. So verbalizing is one step forward, rather than keeping it muffled inside your system, within the body. Another person supports construction and imagination, key is moving the idea forward along its arch—either integrating it if it dies, or realizing it fully if it leads somewhere. Understanding these suppressed ideas is crucial: are they realistic, or are they childish impulses I can easily give up?

Veronika Mayerboeck:

Isn't this precisely the point where the social or societal dimension comes into play, given that we are inherently social beings? Perhaps the early mother-child connection is particularly relevant, as a child who learns early to exchange or verbalize ideas, experiences either support or suppression of their own ideas. How significant, then, is the role of social interaction, empathy, emotions, and bonding? And is there a direct connection between these social experiences and self-regulation?

Alé Duarte:

Let's imagine a scenario where someone has social support and experiences genuine social bonding yet lacks discernment about what they truly want. In such cases, a decisions can easily be dragged by aspects that do not belong to you. A person may grow up in a loving, accepting, empathetic environment, but still never advances toward what they genuinely desire. Often, social norms can suppress one's own ideas, creating a subtle suffocation of personal initiative.

It is therefore crucial to cultivate the ability to distinguish one's own ideas from those of others. This skill rarely develops in isolation—it typically emerges through external support, from someone who can facilitate and help reflect on your ideas. I mean understanding deeply: "Why do I like what I like? Why do I want what I want?" And then considering how life might change if you allow one idea to move forward while containing another.

RELATING SENSE-MAKING AND MOTOR MEMORY

…the nervous system as a container of (un)realized decisions

Veronika Mayerboeck:

Could you outline a practice from one of your workshops? I recall an exercise on conscious decision-making for adults, where we identified intuitive actions like going for a walk, eating, or finishing work, and then deliberately postponed or reordered them to observe the effect on our body.

Alé Duarte:

Yes, I remember. Well, let me give you an even simpler example: imagine I am in a room, looking around for anything that sparks my curiosity. I notice a lamp across the room. I focus on it, observing its shape and wondering how it might feel. I feel the urge to approach and touch it. But as soon as I start to move I deviate to the door knob instead. At that moment, I observe what has happened: much of the initial energy of attraction remains stored in my system, still active in my soma, in my body, in my nervous system. The effect can be so strong that I find myself repeatedly turning my neck toward that lamp, drawn by the lingering impulse.

Veronika Mayerboeck:
So you say the soma is reacting accordingly to this first impulse to action. Would you say these first impulses are always related to movement in space, underlining our "gestural approach" to what we intend to do next when we point and orient in space?

Alé Duarte:
Yes. When we are drawn to something, our body prepares for action. Internally, we "see" ourselves reaching the target, whether a lamp or a castle. If this moment is interrupted, the readiness to act is redirected, but the core of that dynamic remains, like a half-constructed castle or lamp still existing within us.

Veronika Mayerboeck:
Interesting that you use "construction"—very architectural.

Alé Duarte:
Exactly. You can compare it with a building with many rooms you intend to build and fill with furniture. And then these "constructions" are not realized and left half-way in your psyche like the perfect chair you never bought. They leave an energetic experience.

Veronika Mayerboeck:
You call it some leftover "energetic experience", I think I would call it as well some sort of "simulation". Your earlier description of bodily orientation towards the lamp made the importance of bodily movement, gestural orientation and desire for exploration very clear to me. So I would like to open up some perspectives from cognitive science, looking at the relation between space and our understanding of the world we are in. Tracing how this "idea of space" is evolving in early child development, we can say space is "supra-modal", meaning that all senses contribute to our orientation and knowledge of space. Which means we are "learning" through movement, so there is a tight relation between development of the brain and movement, meaning our cognition is shaped through a form of "enactive practice" that allows movement simulation and abstraction. Or as Engel states it "cognition [...] is grounded in a prerational understanding of the world that is based on sensorimotor acquisition of real-life situations." (Engel 2014, p. 219)

Returning to developmental psychology, force embodiment is a foundational subcategory for the development of language and cognition. To outline that I would like to shortly sketch a beautiful experiment from developmental psychologist Esther Thelen. She was researching infant motor development. In the so called "Leg kicking experiment" a toddler was placed underneath a baby mobile with strings attached to some limbs. The child then was observed in its way to learn through movement interaction to develop variations activating the pendant mobile by kicking limbs.

According to Thelen & Smith (1994) humans develop already at a very young age of about 3 months a differentiated motor memory within dynamic learning processes and begin to distinguish and generalize various types of action solutions for specific environmental affordances and assign those into different categories. So, the experimentally tested, experienced, and applied bodily force serves as basis for abstraction. Within this process of dynamic learning, motor memory becomes central to recall and use a specific action solution so that an infant of 3

years for example already connects the sight of a mobile to a learned motor response while being able to adapt to real life variability and diversity of experience.

Following Thelen (1995) this kind of abstraction lays ground for simulation of movement, thinking to act, planning to act, or talking about actions. So, in summary the Simulation of movement serves as bodily foundation to emergent higher order abstractions.

And I think it's very interesting to relate motor memory and your mentioned response of the soma when the arch of construction is cut.

Alé Duarte:

This is a good example of the process of construction. Not necessary about the initial idea, but about the middle of the arch— where these small movements of the toddler initiate the process of creating connections and derive relations. It is the beginning of a constructive development , where things are put together and make sense somehow.

SUPPORTING MEANINGFUL ACTION

…the importance of your ideas being seen and responded with value

Veronika Mayerboeck:

So to be aware about these processes might support a smoother transition between a first spark to some kind of outcome?

Alé Duarte:

Yes. Recognition of where you are in this arch is crucial. If this is not recognized correctly from outside that most likely gonna mess up the construction process.

Veronika Mayerboeck:

So that means we need the social echo, the social resonance as a mirror, the "being seen" through the lens of another human being?

Alé Duarte:

Exactly. Imagine a child with very low self-esteem who doesn't believe in their own ideas. If we engage them in a task, their internal model engages reinforcing beliefs of failure messaging " I am a loser" or wanting to give up. But as an external witness, you can pause this spiral, guiding the child back to the decision point that sparked the insecurity. By offering new correlations and perspectives, the child can gain reaffirming insights. Without this witness, the meaning of their actions may vanish, and negative self-judgment can persist. It's like someone unnoticed in a village who then moves to a city and suddenly experiences validation. The difference in perceived reality is profound—and this story repeats countless times.

Veronika Mayerboeck:

So this social mirroring—how does it impact the body? I personally observed in somatic experiencing that sometimes therapists are mirroring my body posture or movement and that this has an effect in my body.

But referring to the mentioned very introvert, shy child who believes "I cannot do it": So how would that affect the soma, the posture, the inner body organization, if you receive such a

valuable feedback?

Alé Duarte:

The feedback will already give a sense of validation for the child and impact inner and outer orientation for example. So that means where the child is pointing at, makes sense, it will be articulated not aimless.

As this unfolds, physiologically, the child starts to focus more and develop genuine interest. Dopamine cycles become activated, and endorphins follow, producing a sense of reward: "That was so good. People really like me. Wow, I cannot believe it." In this way, the child experiences affirmation of self and action—they like themselves, and others appreciate what they do. This creates a meaningful connection between identity and activity.

SENSING SPACE

…design education across bodily exploration and social interaction

Veronika Mayerboeck:

I like how you emphasized play and iterative playfulness — it brings lightness, makes ideas visible, and opens space for meaningful feedback as the process of creation unfolds.

I use similar principles in my Sensing Space methodology (Mayerboeck 2022, 2024) when working with adult students. In my design workshops, I combine key elements that foster a state of flow through bodily exploration and social interaction. Participants engage in collaborative and individual kinaesthetic activities — for instance, a blindfolded guiding exercise in pairs, where one leads and the other follows, then they switch roles to experience both perspectives. I've noticed that students who go through this initial somatic phase create more grounded and insightful design outcomes. Their shared physical and sensory experiences strengthen both their creative process and their sense of co-creation.

Referring to what you said earlier, Alé, I'd describe that shared experience as a state of witnessing and bonding, using your terminology.

I notice a strong sense of bonding among participants through this experiential way of reflecting on their physical environment. I'd also add trust — since these practices of witnessing, sharing, and reflecting together happen on a very basic human level. We all have a body, and that allows us to communicate beyond cultural or professional differences. Speaking from lived experience creates common ground and supports a sustained sense of playful ease in ideation. Even as the workshop progresses into more complex design tasks, students tend to remain in that shared, fluid flow of action.

I believe this preparatory phase helps participants develop a self-regulated state of awareness, where they can sense and explore their own actions in direct response to another person — a kind of embodied preparation. This open, trusting atmosphere forms the foundation that allows them to truly own their ideas later on, moving with confidence through the ups and downs of ideation as tasks become more complex. Once this organic, collaborative flow is established, the level of complexity can increase quickly. For me, the process follows a clear order: *share – trust – own – ideate – construct.*

SOMA DESIGN

… developing a skill for aesthetic through the senses

This is where I'd like to bring Kia into the conversation. I'd ask you to share your perspective because I see many parallels with your approach to soma design, and with what I understand of your philosophy- that the soma, rather than the brain alone, holds the core of our wisdom.

Kristina Höök:

I work in a completely different field, but I recognize a lot of what you've been discussing with Alé, and I see echoes of it in my work and in your practice, Veronika. I work in interaction design, which means shaping digital technology into forms that users can engage with—to accomplish tasks, enjoy themselves, or otherwise interact meaningfully.

You're right, Alé, a lot of designs today take away the end user's initiative, limit body awareness, and reduce creativity. But that doesn't have to be the case. We can design technology differently. For a long time, I've been working with technology strapped close to the body—sensors, actuators, but also devices that cover the whole body. And then the question becomes: what happens when you do that? What do you want to achieve? What are the possibilities? Why would you strap technology onto the body?

This led me to look for a framework, a way of thinking about design ideals—reasons for doing this kind of work. And that's where I found the theory of somaesthetics by Shusterman. To unpack this: the notion of soma refers to —as you've already said— the interlinked processes of body, emotion, and thinking: a subjectivity, a way of being in the world with your whole self. And somaesthetics, according to Shusterman (2000), is the idea that this soma can change. I can change my way of being in the world, and if I want, I can change it toward richer experience. Aesthetic skill is something I can develop through all my senses. I'm not limited to educating my mind or ways of thinking; I can also cultivate my dancing, or train myself through all the senses. Why do this? To have richer experiences—and, as Alé mentioned, to be creative, to develop an identity where I'm allowed to shape my own ideas.

From this perspective, I developed my approach to soma design, building on these ideas as well as inspirations from George Khut (2006) and others. It can be described as follows:

"Soma design allows us to 'examine' and improve on connections among sensation, feeling, emotion, and subjective understanding and values […] It concerns the orchestration of the "whole," emptying materials of all their potential and thereby providing fertile grounds for meaning-making." (Hook 2018, 12f)

Many of the ideas you mentioned are present here, Alé. When you notice your body turning toward the lamp and recognize the link between sensation, feeling, and the impulse to explore, you create fertile ground for meaning-making—something technology can also support. As you described, Alé, in therapy or interaction with a child, or as Veronika noted between two people, we can build shared experiences. Coming from the technology world, I ask: how might technology enhance that, rather than take initiative away?

Another inspiration I took from Shusterman was his interest in Moshe Feldenkrais and his somatic pedagogy. I particularly love the idea that for everything we do—sitting, walking, or any other action—we should do it in a way, to say it in Feldenkrais' own words:

"… to expand the boundaries of the possible: to turn the impossible into the possible, the difficult into the easy, and the easy into the pleasant. For only those activities that are easy and pleasant will become part of a man's habitual life and will serve him at all times." (Feldenkrais 1977, p. 57)

A positive experience with our engagements with the world is crucial. So this is what we're trying to do when we build our systems. We want to help scaffold an experience that ends in a positive outcome, and that might be some increased body awareness of your pelvic floor muscle, as we talked about before, or it can be a system for figuring out how to slow down so that you can handle your stress issues. Or even a system that let's you bodily feel somebody else's way of singing and thereby expanding your appreciation of opera, singing, or whatever.

As a designer of technologies, I'm not so interested in replicating human-human interaction. Like, you can give me a hug, that's lovely! But I don't need a robot to hug me. I'm not interested in that. What interests me is touching and feeling technological materials and exploring their aesthetic potential. Like an artist, I want to know my materials: if you paint, you learn what oil and color can do. But it's also about understanding how this connects to emotion, sensation, and body. Only when all of that comes together can creation truly happen.

SENSEMAKING WITH MATERIALS

… defamiliarization of the habitual

Veronika Mayerböck:
Can you tell something about strategies you are using in soma design?

Kristina Höök:
When the two of you talked about coming up with novel ideas or novel ways of doing stuff you mentioned important concepts such as playfulness, awareness, trust, and sharing, but also about habits. One of the key things we do in soma design is, we try to figure out what is already habitual to you, and work with that. That might also be a negative habit, for example that you always walk in one way, and that harms your body in some bad way. Then we deliberately do the non-habitual, making the familiar strange. For example, if you fold your arms one way and then switch, you realize, *oh, I can do it differently*. This act of *defamiliarizing* brings to the surface patterns so deeply embedded we can't easily think or talk about them—and allows us to change them.

Another example involves cultural norms. When I give talks, I sometimes ask the women in the audience to "manspread," to sit with their legs apart. They usually try it, but after a short while, almost everyone closes their legs again. It feels exposing, uncomfortable—because the habit of sitting modestly is so deeply ingrained.

And then the question becomes: do you design for the norm, or for allowing women to sit however they want? It depends on your design goals. But if you're unaware of how deeply such

norms are embedded—how strong that feeling of embarrassment is—you can't design with or against them. That's what we do in soma design: we engage with *estrangement*, making things strange, moving beyond the habitual—both in what technology can do and in how our bodies, movements, and emotions respond.

Veronika Mayerboeck:

When you speak about defamiliarization and breaking habits—could it be that technology, or interaction design more generally, already plays the role of the previously mentioned "external witness"? Serving us slow down, sense our bodies, and become more aware? Maybe that's a core aspect of any meaningful interaction design: to provide that reflective feedback, regardless of whether the goal is to help us breathe deeper or do something entirely different. Would you say that this capacity for feedback and self-awareness is a baseline requirement for good interaction design?

Kristina Höök:

Both harmful and empowering designs—those that limit us and those that inspire creativity—are built on the same foundation. As interaction designers working with digital or haptic technologies, we orchestrate how users can behave. We build movements of the body, the mind, and emotion into the design of whatever artifact we create. The problem arises when those built-in movements become restrictive—when all initiative rests with the system and there's no space for personal creativity or variation. Many digital designs, for instance, neglect the body entirely, confining us to narrow patterns of interaction. This limits not just movement but also our capacity for aesthetic appreciation and self-awareness. I think we can do better. As interaction designers, we can stay open to shaping how these orchestrated experiences unfold—allowing for greater freedom and richer connections among sensation, feeling, emotion, and subjective understanding. That's where I want to go.

Alé Duarte:

Could you say a bit more about this?

Kristina Höök:

It has both to do with me, the designer, and the end user, where we want them to examine and improve on the connection between sensation, feeling, emotion, and subjective understanding and values. But it's also about how we can engage with the technology and orchestrate it such that we use all of its potential, I would call it, aesthetic potential of the materials, to create meaning. That might sound a bit abstract, so let me give a simple example. We designed a lamp – **the breathing lamp** - that you can lie beneath and which registers your breathing and responds by dimming in sync with your inhale and exhale. Nothing more, just a quiet dialogue between your body and the light.

Alé Duarte:

Oh, amazing. It's actually lovely.

Kristina Höök:

And we worked really hard with the subtleness of this, so that you can lay there with your eyes closed, and it influences you, even if you don't think about it. And then underneath you, we have this mat with heat elements, this was work we did with IKEA, so this is why it's big

furniture stuff. We tried this out in a long-term study, and found that it had profound effects on their breathing and body awareness. One 13-year-old used the experience to calm herself before a school talk. Another participant was constantly stressed but couldn't recognize it—no feedback from friends or colleagues made a difference, and even we were concerned for her well-being. Through engaging with the breathing lamp, she gradually learned to notice her inner signals, slow down, and find better balance. This awareness rippled through her life: she began changing how she walked, how she structured her days, and eventually even decided to move from Stockholm city center to a quieter suburb. But it's not meditation—it's simply a gentle way of reconnecting with your breath and body.

We also built a wearable fibre system with shape-changing elements worn on the body now, this might seem a bit weird or even scary. It's a sort of corset around the ribs, belly, and spine—that contract and expand to let the audience feel a singer's movements, translating her muscular and breathing patterns into a haptic score that creates a ghostly reminder of what kind of muscles are used to perform.

We also worked on what we called the ***pelvic chair***. It was designed for women who are told after childbirth to strengthen their pelvic floor muscles—but often don't know exactly where those muscles are. The chair guides you into the right posture by inflating behind your lower back and between your legs, positioning the pelvis correctly. First, the seat surface relaxes, prompting most users to release their pelvic floor, which we tend to keep unconsciously tense much of the time. Then it begins to gently poke at precise points in the pelvis, helping you locate and feel how to move the muscle—forward, backward, or side to side. It became a subtle, bodily way of learning awareness and control.

Perhaps you can see from these examples that what we're trying to do is scaffold an experience: guiding people to engage in a particular way so they can increase body awareness, develop new abilities, and expand their sense of what's possible—not just physically, but also emotionally and intellectually.

THE ABILITY OF DISCERNMENT IN DESIGN

…enabling innovative sensemaking through estrangement

Veronika Mayerboeck:
Can I ask two things? First, you mentioned defamiliarization – do you first have to sense what's different, to become aware of what's familiar – or the other way round? Second, how do you engage with somatic experience, to uncover the aesthetic or artistic potential when designing the pelvic floor chair or the breathing lamp?

Kristina Höök:
So what's the pattern of ideation in design? Estrangement has to align with the goals of your work. Recently, we wanted to design around attunement—how people connect, following theories like Daniel Stern's (Stern, 1985). But first, we had to figure out how to attune with each other. We spent hours together in silence, out in the forest, without any purpose, task, or goal—just being and noticing.

Veronika Mayerboeck:
That sounds like a shamanic vision quest - though not in isolation, but together. *(laughs)*

Kristina Höök:
It was fascinating because our group of six came from very different places—Chile, Greece, and so on—and had different relationships to nature. But what is nature? There's no pristine nature, nor a single way for humans to be in it; it's all entangled with culture, shaped by what we choose to notice or ignore. I'm Swedish, and we went to a Swedish forest in the middle of winter—it was bloody cold —and I noticed layers of detail the others didn't, which isn't strange, just part of my perspective. For example, many Swedish forests are planted for timber. When I pointed this out, they were surprised, and started to note things they did not before, for example that all trees are spaced.

But anyway, the *attunement to one another*, the intercorporeal understanding, means that if you remove language and symbolic reasoning, you defamiliarize certain processes and other aspects come to the fore. Much of this connects to what Alé mentioned earlier about children and the ways we behaved as kids. So what we ended up doing were playful activities—having fun, skipping along the road, or handing over a stick and saying, "This is a magical wand I'm giving you"; doing snow angels, all the kinds of things we did as children.

Many Feldenkrais exercises are similar—they defamiliarize habitual, narrow movement patterns by returning you to a childlike movement repertoire. One exercise, for example, has you lie on your back, hold your feet, and roll back and forth like a baby. It's so much fun—you rarely do that as an adult—but when you do, it reminds your entire nervous system of all the possible movements available to you.

Veronika Mayerboeck:
What's interesting—and a parallel to what Alé described and also to my work—is that returning to these early cycles of exploration—trying something, skipping it, doing something else, sharing all those experiences—can dehabitualize your usual patterns, even your conceptual patterns. But the tool is the body. From a lighting perspective, you have to train observational skills, meaning to develop the ability to have discernment for light and shadow. A good lighting designer can translate any visual environment into the actions occurring within it. It's a refined practice of sitting, observing, and identifying the needs of the situation. And this takes time …

Kristina Höök:
Yes, this takes time! As a designer, the way you change yourself is that you try to become more sensitive to whatever it is that you're trying to design for. It might be light, that you're designing with, it might be shadows. And if you are more sensitized to shadows, then suddenly you see shadows everywhere, and you use shadows in your design work.

We also recently worked with chronic pain. In our group of designers, each of us had some experience with pain—avoiding movements that hurt, suppressing it, or even integrating it into our self-identity, thinking, "I'm a weak person because of this." The body keeps the score, right? The challenge was learning to engage with pain in new ways.

Veronika Mayerboeck:

Indeed, the body remembers pain—even after it's gone, we may avoid certain movements, carry specific body patterns, or maintain limiting self-images. This expectation of pain can disconnect us from the outside world. Reorienting toward the external environment, staying between body awareness and the outside, can create a space of possibilities, where we can question boundaries shaped by habits, patterns, or past experiences.

In general, would you say that body awareness serves as a foundation for novel sense-making—observing, creating, or at least remaining open to new possibilities?

Kristina Höök:

Body awareness is endless, in my view—I can keep improving and changing throughout my whole life. Of course, it can sometimes touch on trauma—by accident, you might engage someone in an activity or touch a part of their body where they have pain. It's not always comfortable, but encountering the unexpected is also part of the richness of human experience.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MONSTROUS EXPERIENCES

… challenging the simple scale of pleasant–unpleasant

Veronika Mayerboeck:

I'd like to connect this to Alé, regarding the trauma-informed approaches you use with clients or in children's work. I see a strong parallel between trauma work and the defamiliarization of habits. When trauma is triggered, bodily sensations intensify—different flows arise in the body and emotions, and this can also delimit us. But you can also learn to acknowledge these as resources and expand that awareness to other sensations. Would you say there's a parallel or overlap here?

Alé Duarte:

Yes, the body is central, but I think it's like approaching the same thing from different ends. From one side, you come in working with body awareness for design; from the other, we're coming from trauma. Trauma triggers present red flags, showing limits or very constrained body awareness at times.

Veronika Mayerboeck:

But in somatic trauma work, you learn to expand body awareness intentionally, using it as an active tool: traveling within the body, moving between inward and outward orientations, and learning to own how you "keep the score".

Kristina Höök:

I did not work with trauma, but if I did, I'd need someone like Alé in the room, because I'm a designer. I'm not a psychologist, a physiotherapist, or a Feldenkrais practitioner. That's not my work. So, I have to have someone who really understands it—how to work with it, how to engage with it. A lot of what we do is about finding someone who's a somaesthetic expert, someone with a practice we can build on. For example, when we built the pelvic floor training chair, we worked with a physiotherapist who specializes in women's pelvic floor issues. She guided us through exercises that help people become aware of their pelvic floor muscles and how to work with them.

Veronika Mayerboeck:
So, you brought in different practices depending on the approach—more physiotherapy, or more Feldenkrais and soma-based perspectives?

Kristina Höök:
Yes. But it's an exploration, because as I said before, it's not interesting to me to only replicate what a physiotherapist already knows how to do, or build a tool based on their instructions. I am searching for a dialogue, and I am asking, what can this or that technology add? Can it add something unexpected? Can it make the experience richer, more interesting?

When we were working with shape-changing tech on the body, people reported strange experiences. Some said it felt like they were part human, part machine; like it was sucking the air from their lungs; like their heart was on the outside; or like an animal was pressing against them. At first, you just want to get rid of that—after all, you're trying to build something that works. But eventually, we realized it was fascinating. We needed to explore it.

The theories that helped us the most came from monster studies in the humanities (Carroll, 1999). Every culture has monsters—Sweden has trolls, elves… I don't know what monsters are in your culture. But they all serve a role. They help us deal with what's impure: combinations of human and machine, living and dead, human and animal. Think werewolves, centaurs, mummies, Frankenstein's monster, and whatnot.

And those were the kinds of experiences our work was creating, sometimes unintentionally. And that's super interesting, because monstrous experiences challenge the simple scale of pleasant–unpleasant. They can be both. Feeling an animal press on your organs is unpleasant—but also eerie, fascinating, thrilling. Why are we so drawn to monsters? They tell us something about what we believe, about what should or shouldn't be, about purity, impurity, and what we consider "dirt" that should be removed and cleaned.

"DON'T TOUCH THE MONSTER!"

…iterations of experience between curiosity and alert

Veronika Mayerboeck:
But it's… it's a different kind of spark when a monstrous character enters a scene. On one hand, it triggers alarms—like, is this dangerous? That instinctive fight-or-flight alertness. But on the other hand, it's also about facing our fears. And I think that's something deeply psychological. It makes me think of your very powerful monster practice, Alé.

Alé Duarte:
Monsters, monsters, monsters (laughs) …. But first let me say that this is awesome, what you're sharing, you know, this amazing research and examples of your work you're bringing here. I like design, I like those experiences with the body and the experiences with using different types of explorations, and I like questioning why reproduce something a human is already doing? Why not add something extra? Or something that could be, you know - beyond what we already do and know?

So there's a natural attraction with monsters, which both involves alertness, as well as curiosity. It is two drivers that start working against each other. If I have more curiosity, your body goes forward. But if we have more alertness and less curiosity, your body goes backward. Unless it's counter-phobic, you know? When someone reacts by jumping straight into what they fear just to make a point, to reclaim control. But when those forces are more balanced, or when one side is just a bit stronger—say, 51%—then it becomes this constant back and forth, back and forth… yet still moving forward.

We see that in kids all the time. There's this game I like to play with them — "*Don't touch the monster!*" And I'm there, playing the monster in the corner. The kids are like, "*What am I gonna do here?*". So they start trying to touch the monster — even though the cue is *don't touch the monster!* You can see this alertness happening, but at the same time, their curiosity kicks in. Like, "*I think he's inviting me to play… I wanna see what happens if I touch him — is he gonna play with me?*"

And for example, one kid goes back and forth, back and forth, many times. And we see this iteration of experience — the first round it takes the child very long before he finally dares to touch the monster. He just touches my back, really softly.

The second round is already different, the kid already knew what was going on, so he started playing right away — "*Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah!*" — getting into it, building up the courage, and then he just went and touched the monster. And then the third round — he didn't even hesitate. He just went straight up and touched the monster.

So you can see how that balance between alertness and curiosity starts to normalize. It becomes part of the play. And then, as we kept playing, I said, "*Yes, but now… you are the monster.*" I flipped the whole thing — now he was the monster. He looked at me, like, "*Me? A monster?*" So he became his own fear, his own alertness and curiosity.

That's how it works, you know? If you think about spaces or objects, that same dynamic — alertness and curiosity — plays a big role in how we're drawn to them, how they function, how we deepen our relationship with them. The more we engage, the more alertness comes — and with it, more curiosity.

That's what I mean when I talk about video games and all those things — they measure interaction inputs. They build these feedback loops, like, "*Oh, I can see this player is more afraid of this part of the game… so let's put in fewer monsterish bombs.*" Then the next day, he wins more. So they keep adjusting, constantly fine-tuning through those feedback loops.

Another part that really caught my attention was when you talked about familiarity — how something familiar can become unfamiliar, or how the unfamiliar can start to feel familiar. And I was thinking about that word, familiarity. It comes from family, right? So it's about belonging — even if the family isn't always a safe place. There's still this sense of, "Well, this is where I belong." It carries that feeling.

But this belonging can also shift to bad sorts of conditioning, or even approaching addiction, automatic patterns, or something more impulsive, happening constantly: "*As soon as I see it, I*

grab it," and then they say, "*Oh my god, I see something to buy, and I buy it impulsively.*" Such compulsion, when you know it's bad for you but still do it, over and over, and it gets worse. So these terms, and the different levels of behavior they describe, really make me think about *how familiarity operates — how it creates patterns, automated or semi-conscious, good or bad, beneficial or detrimental.*

Kristina Höök:

I totally agree. Even if we aim, as I said before, to improve the connection between sensation, feeling, emotion, and subjective understanding or values, there's always a risk. We might introduce a new habit that isn't necessarily good. We disrupt what's already there and then put it back together in a novel way. For some, that could be detrimental—or not. It depends. Of course, it can also be used positively.

Veronika Mayerboeck:

I do believe this happens a lot within our professional work, that we lose connection to our somas as in Design we often need to switch between a more user centered and the Meta perspective of a project. While our means of work through computers don't engage the body, but mainly support some sort of linear and quite abstract thinking, not to forget omnipresent influences like cost efficiency and time optimized workflow.

Kristina Höök:

Returning to the body takes effort. Shifting attention from here (*points at her head*) to the whole body, or moving it from inside to outside and back, dissolves boundaries — between thinking, feeling, and the body, or between my movement and another's. You can train this, as William James said, using strategies to attend (James, 1905). But after being fully in the intellectual sphere — writing papers, thinking up here — sometimes there's nothing. I don't even feel like I have a body.

LIBRARIES OF EXPERIENCE

…the importance to facilitate and articulate lived experiences

Kristina Höök:

It's amazing that we have this awareness — that we can deliberately work with practices that let our attention travel and dissolve boundaries. What's inside my body, and what's outside? I breathe in and out — things from the outside enter my body, then leave again. I pee, I sweat, I release. So what really is inside, and what's outside? The idea that the skin is a boundary isn't so clear.

Traveling with my attention across that edge has helped me many times in design work — especially in technological design. Is this technology part of me? Yes, in a way — like my glasses, it's me. But also, maybe not. By moving attention back and forth, I can sense where I want to place it — to shape or craft something differently.

Veronika Mayerboeck:

There are many mind-body practices that train attention to move between inside and outside, abstraction and application. However, not many help you consciously verbalize and reflect on your experience. Somatic experiencing is one of the few that does — guiding you to

sense, reflect, and move back and forth between the two.

Kristina Höök:

Articulation is so important in our design processes. It's fascinating — like with wine. When you learn how to talk about wine, you develop a whole vocabulary, and suddenly you can discern subtle details and understand it differently. Does it make the wine better? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. But in design, you absolutely need that articulation. You have to know what you're doing if you want to change something — am I adding sweetness, or am I shifting something else?

We work with articulation a lot, and it's very difficult. Take chronic pain, for example — how do you even begin to describe it? Hip pain, stabbing pain, a burning background pain, pain that travels — muscular, nerve-related. There are so many kinds. And I know which ones are dangerous for me and which ones I can ignore and keep moving through. But I've learned that the hard way.

Veronika Mayerboeck:

I think about this quality of articulation when building up libraries of embodied experience. To give an example, participants of my classes need to move with different pace through a space, to actively change how the space changes in their perception. You need to connect all of that — the doing, the iterating, the changing — with light, with the source, with whatever you're working on. I see that in your work too — these layers of embodied experiences across different design projects and ideas.

If teaching focuses only on the abstract and theoretical — without any link to lived, applied experience — it becomes hollow. I'm a doing person: I come from engineering, I studied architecture, and I'm a mover. For me, theory and practice have always gone hand in hand. Yet when you step into academic teaching of lighting, it's often shockingly dry. How can you teach without facilitating such experiences — without letting students test ideas in their own bodies and learn through doing?

Kristina Höök:

Have you read Donald Schön's "The Reflective Practitioner" (Schön, 1984)? It's a sharp critique of academic teaching — how it focuses only on rules and general principles. But to become a good practitioner, you need personal experience. You need to know what light is and how it works, yes — but also to reflect on what you did in a particular design situation, abstract that insight, and carry it into the next one. Step by step, you build a library of lived experiences.

At the same time, you need novelty. Otherwise, you just keep repeating yourself. That's where estrangement — or defamiliarization — comes in. When something feels completely new, you have to stay with it, explore it. That's how meaning-making happens. So maybe we all need to keep training ourselves to "touch the monster" from time to time.

HOW TO SEE THE "MAGIC"?

…cultivating an ecology of the senses in design education

Veronika Mayerboeck:

Departing from what we talked about before - the novelty, curiosity, and the spark of engagement

— and also what Kia mentioned about observing things anew, whether in a natural environment or elsewhere… it's about being able to engage repeatedly, noticing what's unfamiliar, new, or interesting.

So, within my "Sensing Space" Approach I raise the question: *How do we teach students to "see the magic,"* particularly in lighting? And more broadly, how do we foster an integral understanding of light and architecture, cultivate sensitivity, observation, and an empathic approach to design? That became the foundation for developing this methodology, where I try to teach *design as a corporeal, spatial practice*. For me, coming from vision and movement, it was clear, even imperative, that good lighting education needs to cultivate an *ecology of the senses.* I aim to bring students into a mode of moving, sensing, and feeling ahead of whatever we do. In any workshop — whether stage lighting, outdoor lighting, model work, or even a technical, linear design exercise — this first phase involving embodied experience is always the first part.

But it does not stop there. We need to teach a range of skills, regardless of the often-diverse backgrounds of students: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor, each with context-specific demands. In lighting, *psychomotor skills* are crucial — using a lighting desk requires manual dexterity, motor control, spatial-motor integration, timing, coordination, and technical proficiency. *Affective skills* are equally vital: empathy, sensitivity, and perspective-taking. Stage lighting, for example, demands constant shifts between the performers, the intended message, the overall stage, and the audience. Students must collaborate effectively, develop aesthetic judgment, and cultivate discipline, responsibility, and resilience. *Cognitive skills* — visual-spatial reasoning, attention to detail, color perception, observational precision, creative and analytical thinking — integrate with the others, enabling fully embodied, reflective, and practical engagement with light, space, and design.

All of this also ties into language and differentiation. What I try to do is to emphasize that educational experience irreducibly requires social interaction. As we were discussing before, this includes social bonding, mirroring, being seen, and the intersubjective sharing of experiences and ideas. This shared dimension is a crucial fabric through which learning unfolds, and it shapes how adult students engage, reflect, and evolve in the process.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CYCLES

… from discernment in observation to taxonomies of experience

When it comes to design, I usually structure learning in stages of experiential engagement. It starts with a specific, embodied activity — playful, physical, and engaging — and is always accompanied by reflective observation. From there, we move into abstract conceptualization, and finally into active experimentation and design. The phases build on each other: knowledge gained in one round is altered and transferred into the next cycle, while reflection acts as a kind of resting state in between.

One practice I borrow and slightly adapt from Portuguese choreographer Joao Fiadeiro (n.d.) illustrates this beautifully. In his real-time composition method, participants work within a 1x1 meter square, performing three different actions with objects — one person starts with an object, another adds a second, and a third shapes the outcome. This training focuses on non-intuitive interaction. Like in chess, you learn to observe, wait, and engage without overreacting, following patterns between objects until the action completes itself. I often adapt this to bodies instead of objects, sculpting movements together, then replacing the participants with chairs

to explore the transition from body sensation to object abstraction, seeing how composition emerges from movement and spatial positioning.

Another method I use involves taxonomies and spatial mapping of autobiographical experiences. For instance, students might go through the previously mentioned guided blindfolded self-exploration of space and then place post-its where certain sensations or experiences arose. Walking through the space afterwards, they see a multitude of subjective perspectives from the other participants— one object, ten different interpretations — which is like glimpsing into each participant's way of experiencing the environment. This exercise develops active observation, empathy, intersubjective awareness, and teaches participants to adapt to changing patterns and perspectives, moving at different speeds or interacting unpredictably.

Further integration happens in phases where students lie down and are guided through virtual architectural journeys, approaching imagined spaces from a body-centered perspective. They choose favorite spots, analyze spatial relationships through movement, then draw and finally co-create in groups. This process ties embodied experience to storytelling and collaborative design, forming a direct bridge from bodily awareness to applied creative work.

For example, in a four-hour workshop in Wismar on educational lighting, students began with body exploration in space, experiencing different angles and positions. Then they reflected on two autobiographical memories — one where they could fully focus and another where focus was impossible — writing and sketching their experiences. These insights flowed directly into model-making and lighting exercises, allowing students to design elaborate solutions rapidly, grounded in felt experience and narrative. In another workshop in Stockholm, groups of students went out and re-interpreted and re-organized the Workshop location and hallways, with surprising and playful results (Cranz, Mayerboeck et al., in press).

I do believe we would not have reached this variety in design outcomes without this two-hours ahead, sort of preparatory program, which actualized body awareness and storytelling. The framework emphasizes moving fluidly from reflective states to playful co-creation, and then into specific design tasks. It can even become a challenge to manage students' curiosity and motivation: they are often so absorbed that it's hard to pause them once they start.

Kristina Höök:
Beautiful, beautiful work, it's amazing. Your work excellently reflects what quite a few thinkers — like Tim Ingold or Claudia Ines Pacheco —emphasize: that symbolic or cognitive work doesn't need to be separate from the body. Even in programming or technical description, you can adopt an embodied language. Expression exists along a gradient: some ways of describing design are highly abstract and removed from felt experience, while others are much closer to the body and the senses.

Ingold, for example, has discussed how academic research often forces this very abstract language, removing the "I" and privileging third-person accounts. Historically, this came from the 17th century, when science in the UK was done by gentlemen who didn't want to take personal credit. That approach is just one way to describe the world. You can choose to remove yourself and your embodied experience, or you can integrate it. Both approaches have their place. Sometimes, to complete programming or technical work, you must engage in a more

disembodied way — but that doesn't mean the embodied perspective is lost; it's just a matter of context and tactics.

Veronika Mayerboeck:

What is interesting to me is that I am rediscovering these layers, extending my work meanwhile to children in movement and play pedagogy. I've noticed something similar, at the core, the processes I use with children and adults are often the same. I feel like I'm engaging with the "inner child" of my students, in a sense. Observing these parallels across ages and contexts makes me curious to explore this interplay from different perspectives and has inspired me to invite you both for this conversation.

Alé Duarte:

Your approach shows such depth of engagement, Veronika. I was struck by your earlier remark — "not all actions are the actions." In your lighting workshop, what was the intended action?

Veronika Mayerboeck:

The goal was to help students quickly reach a deep understanding of an educational space and reflect on how lighting could support concentration. The first hour is usually exploratory — testing lamps, adjusting props, playing. Only after that their intentions, materials, and actions begin to align into a coherent design. It's like painting: you need hours of preparation for one good hour of true work.

Alé Duarte:

That resonates. I understand what you describe as phases of preparing readiness, construction, and integration. The somatic exploration prepares the body and perception; the design phase constructs; reflection integrates. Many confuse body work as an end in itself, but in your case, it's the means — the foundation that enables the design to emerge!

Veronika Mayerboeck:

Yes, and I shaped this readiness phase precisely because many students, especially architects, resist abstract movement exercises. They come to design, not to dance. Yet once they engage, they laugh, focus, and forget to stop — the body becomes the bridge that connects everyone, regardless of background.

Alé Duarte:

That bridge depends also on how it's communicated. If we frame the body as the goal, people might resist; if we show it as a path to refine design awareness, they listen. And in your work, the work with the body is not the end, but in fact it's the means toward more thoughtful design.

Veronika Mayerboeck:

That's beautifully put. The body work and autobiographical memories act as anchors. With a small cue, students recall spatial and sensory details — the light, the sound, the atmosphere — and from there, design becomes intuitive and precise. Perhaps that depends on the audience. With architects, I must speak in their language, but the principle holds: embodiment grounds imagination.

Kristina Höök:

I think this is a good moment to bring our conversation to a close. Thank you both for such a rich exchange — mind-boggling, or perhaps body-boggling is the better word!

Alé Duarte:

Thank you, Kia and Veronika, for sharing your work. It was a pleasure to engage with these ideas and their relation to my work with children.

Veronika Mayerboeck:

Thank you both. It's been inspiring to hear how our practices intersect and to witness the depth of reflection that emerged between us, and how somatic experience is at the core of all our work. It's been a real joy — and a reminder of how these dialogues, between body, light, personal growth and learning, keep evolving through shared experience.

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