

## **Some Fleshy Thinking: Improvisation, experience, perception**

**Vida L Midgelew (Middlesex University)**

### **Introduction and a few contextual thoughts**

Conceived as a playful conversation between myself as dancer and as practice, the performative form of the duologue is used to explore how somatically based dance improvisation practices might be said to be a way of thinking and to question how this critically embodied thought is recognized and understood by both dancer and viewer. In doing so, I tussle with ideas based in phenomenology to illuminate the ways that deeply internalised experiential movement practices enter and expand perceptual fields. What follows thereby entails a consideration of the relationships between body, experience, perception and knowledge.

Drawing upon my own dance improvisation practice, which is underpinned by skinner releasing technique and other somatically informed approaches, I emphasise image and sensation based anatomical exploration and interior impulse as a basis for, and as developed through, improvised compositional activities. This practice is a phenomenological 'knowing in doing' formed through what French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty names intercorporeal being. I propose that this somatically based performance practice activates a perceptual consciousness in the dancer and viewer.

Another frame of reference for these deliberations is that of performance practice as a mode of research. The debates surrounding practice-as-research have developed in the UK/AUS over the last 10 years, such that there is now a substantive body of researchers and PhD candidates undertaking and presenting live and mediated artistic work with the equivalent academic status to that of the written word. Building on this approach to research I address notions of embodied knowledge for this has been a core and recurring debate for the field.

The mode of embodiment I refer to throughout encompasses a dancers bodily knowledge – that is the deep understanding of the body at rest and in particular forms of action attained and shaped through years of practice and experience. And also a bodily ontology in which experiencing, conceptual ideas and physical practices are embedded and embodied, existing in and emanating from movement practices in reflexive and critical ways. Thereby

embodied forms of knowing and knowledge are understood to be varied and interconnected – abstract and concrete, experiential and conceptual, physical and visual. These interconnections form a complex nexus, for, as Les Todres nicely puts it: ‘One could say that embodying is where being and knowing meet’ (2007: 20).

In this meeting of knowing and being am interested in the bodymind at work - knowledge in the making. Thereby through this discussion there is a consideration of the nature of knowledge that as movement artist and academic, I hold, carry, draw-upon and engender in and through dancing. These multifarious knowing’s often remain implicit, but I suggest that they can be recognized and are locatable, and therefore it possible (at least in part) to form languages for, and from, them. Further, I seek to understand the ways in which others, the viewers of improvised performances, may come to know and make ‘sense’ of these embodied knowing’s.

In what follows below I suggest there are process that occur across key interconnected two stages as I ask:

Firstly: How, as an improviser, is it possible to know ‘something’ of the dancing body whilst ‘in-action’?

Secondly: How is improvisation, as a mode of embodied research and knowing, developed with, and made ‘sense’ of, by an audience?

And so, to the dialogue between dancer and practice...

### ***Mindbody knowing in action***

*Dancer and Practice lay supine on the studio floor.*

*Eyes closed.*

*They spend time easing into the floor that raises up to support their bodies.*

*As air comes in and out of their lungs, they work to release muscle tension and their bones begin to sit more lightly in their sockets. Dancer lets the weight of her head roll to the side and notices the tension in the left side of her neck.*

Dancer: You know this stuff is difficult.

Practice: Well that is why we are here, resting on the floor, and talking about it isn’t it?

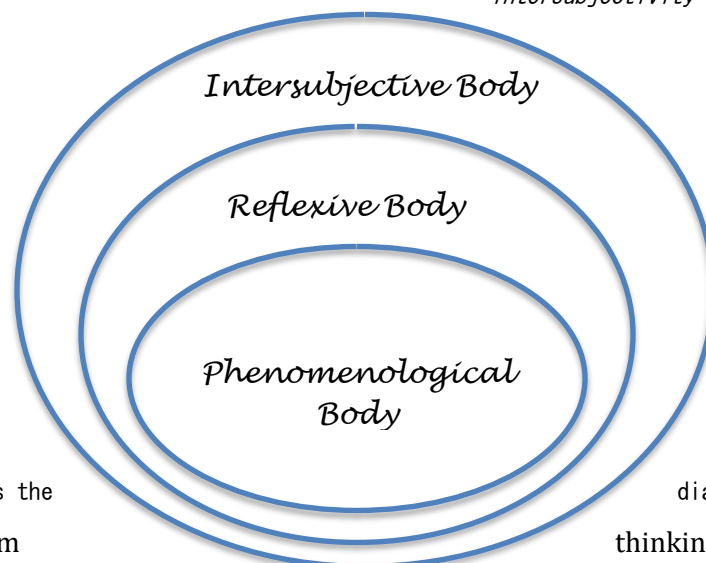
Dancer: It is nice down here, I can feel my body sinking, easing, and melting into the wooden surface.

*Both Dancer and Practice rest a while in a comfortable silence.*

Dancer: So how is it that we really come know 'of' or 'through' the body? It is one thing to have a body, another to know something of it. That is, it is one thing to dance and another to be able to know what your body is doing, to have an interior sensibility of it and to recognize your own practices at work. It is yet another thing to be able to share that knowing, for knowledge also entails an interaction, an agreement of sorts, between perceiver and perceived.

I am tussling with this as you can tell. There is in dance something important about the ways in which the particular (my interior experiential knowing of the act of dancing) relates to and can illuminate the general (as a shared recognition and understanding of that knowing with others). How, I might ask, is it possible, through somatic improvisation forms, to extend a circle of meaning or understanding?

*Resting on her elbow Dancer picks up a marker pen and begins to draw three concentric circles, radiating outwards. She draws each circle with a dotted line and writes within and around each circle. Her hand hovers as she considers the 'right' words to describe things: bodily, reflexivity, intersubjectivity - are these the words she muses?*



Dancer: [She finishes the back on her elbows] I'm

diagram and rests thinking in circles. I'm

visualizing this set of things as three layers of awareness and interaction. In the centre lays the phenomenal body, around the edge of that we have processes of/for heightened awareness – reflexivity if you will. This provides the basis for a bodily empathy and knowing of self and other. This in turn enables a fluid merging of a fuller embodied intersubjective exchange. Within and between each layer there is a porosity and a process of learning – a considering and expanding of how and what we perceive. There is in this process a constant (re)checking in with the bodily experience and a sliding back and forth between this and knowingness.

Practice: Ok this schema seems useful. But to open it up I think we need to go a bit further. It seems to me that these questions, as well your dance practice, writing and methodology, might all be seen to tend toward a phenomenological approach. And I know you have been drawn (like many others before you) to phenomenological insights as away to research, frame and articulate your ideas – ideas like those embedded in your diagrammatic sketch. Would it be useful for you to rehearse this thinking? Could you say a little something more about this approach?

*Dancer rolls to sitting. Resting on her knees she turns to address Practice. Her eyes cast upward and to the side as she considers the question, organizing her thoughts before tentatively starting to speak.*

Dancer: Ok. I guess it would help.

Phenomenology (like improvisation) develops unpredictably, for, drawing on immediate experience it is not a 'reflection of pre-existing truth but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being' (Merleau-Ponty 1962: xxi). I find that phenomenology offers a method through which to consider lived experience and study first hand accounts providing a useful and appropriate way to illuminate and articulate somatically based practices, which, in and of themselves, prioritize experiential first person modes of knowing.

Merleau-Ponty suggested that it is the body as lived, as lodged in the world, which is the basis of being and knowing. Reflecting and analysing the lived experience, through the human capacity for self-reflexivity, Merleau-Ponty made it clear that the body is not just an object in the world, but through acts of perceiving, it is the very medium whereby our world

comes in being. This thinking forms the basis of his phenomenology wherein the embodied self is understood as an integrated being that lives, breathes, perceives, acts, speaks, reasons and, yes, dances (although Merleau-Ponty himself never directly discusses dance).

Significantly, in Merleau-Ponty's last (incomplete and poetically tantalisingly) work *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), he offers a radicalised phenomenology of embodiment. Here he proposes intercorporeal being as a kind of corporeal reflexivity that eliminates the ontological dualism of body subject and body object:

We are the world that thinks itself-or that the world is at the heart of our flesh...once a body-world relationship is recognized, there is a ramification of my body and a ramification of the world and a correspondence between its inside and my outside and my inside and its outside. (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 136)

In other words, this is the phenomenal body, the living-lived body, which participates and is inextricably entangled with the world. Significantly the intercorporeal body understands its worlds without recourse to symbolic or representational processing, that is, without explicit symbol, sign and image manipulation as aligned to representational thinking. This is significant I think for understanding largely experiential movement practices and sits alongside those approaches that are more representationally directed.

This interconnection with the world offers insights of how I come to 'know' (my/our) dancing selves and how we connect with others. It is such foundational concepts, alongside the words of Les Todres (2007), Drew Leder (1990) and Alva Noë (2007 and 2004), that resonate for me. They each, in their differently nuanced ways, give space for bodily-lived-experiences, that often reside before, inside and around representational or symbolic references, to be the basis of understanding. This 'feels' right, 'feels' akin to how I come to know something of (my) dancing whilst improvising.

Whilst this sounds very subjective, indeed in some ways it is, it is an attempt to 'bracket' pre-expectations and assumptions in order to consider things anew. As dancer and phenomenologist Sondra Fraleigh writes: 'Phenomenology seeks the intangible obvious, that which lies before our eyes and in our hearts however obscured through habit, even as its existential conscience reminds us that innocence, the river of our body's memory, is not

naivete' (2000: 55). So while emanating from an internal place the aim is not to rest on or valorize the singular uniqueness of experience. Like improvised performance itself, the draw of phenomenology is that it is intersubjective – connecting self and other, dancer and dancer, viewer and performer, establishing ever-looping hermeneutic circles.

Practice: Hummm. I am glad you mentioned Fraleigh and dance focused writings here. Philosophy is all very interesting and fine as far as it goes but movement artists have been developing practices that have fundamentally challenged the notion of body as object, valuing instead the whole person and bodily awareness too.

Dancer: Indeed, the contemporary currency of somatically based dance practices is a testament to these developments. Practices as promoted in dance by artists and teachers such as Joan Skinner (Skinner Releasing Technique), Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen (Body Mind Centring) and Mary Starks Whitehouse and Janet Adler (Authentic Movement), alongside Contact Improvisation (Steve Paxton and Nancy Stark-Smith), and Alexander Technique informed practices (as developed by dancers such as Eva Karczag), cultivate a deep attentiveness to the body, working within principles of bodymind integration and the connectedness of soma to kinaesthetics, psyche, imagination, aesthetics and the world.

These developments in the field of dance built on the work of 'first generation' practitioners such as F M Alexander, M Feldenkrais and I Rolf, amongst others (Behnke 2009 and Eddy 2009). Thomas Hanna drew the work of these practitioners, each of whom developed distinctive approaches to bodywork, into the rubric of 'somatics' in the 1970's. Describing typical features of a somatic approach Martha Eddy writes:

Each person and their newly formed 'discipline' had people take time to breath, feel and 'listen to the body,' often by beginning with conscious relaxation on the floor or lying down on a table. From this gravity-reduced state, each person was guided to pay attention to bodily sensations emerging from within and move slowly and gently in order to gain deeper awareness of 'the self that moves'. Students were directed to find ease, support, and pleasure while moving – all the while paying attention to proprioceptive signals. Participants were also invited to experience increased responsiveness as they received skilled touch and/or verbal input as

'fresh stimuli' from a somatic educator or therapist.

(Eddy 2009: 6)

Principles such as these, developed by the pioneers of somatics, became 'a canon inclusive of exercises, philosophies, methods, and systems of inquiry' (Eddy 2009:7). Enhanced by the concurrent developments in phenomenology, Thomas Hanna defined the "soma" of "somatics" as "the body experienced from within" (in Behnke 2009: 11). Through such thinking the interface between phenomenological thought and somatic (dance) practice is evident.

Practice: It seems that these particularized practices and ideas enable us to experience and perceive the body differently – differently that is from what might be our everyday usage and awareness. Further, they each implicitly seek to address how hard it is to stay connected and present in our bodies.

Dancer: That's true and it is difficult. Difficult to stay connected for the body (my body) has a habit of disappearing.

Practice: Drew Leder in *The Absent Body* (1990), heavily influenced by Merleau-Ponty, describes the paradoxical nature of bodily presence. The 'fuzziness' that surrounds your body in any moment, the difficulty in being really aware of it, is described as the receding of the body, reflecting the erasure of the body from perception. Even in moments of extreme physicality – for example when playing a sport - we may not attend to our own embodiment – caught instead in the game or the result of an action.

Pointing to the ways in which we are generally present in the body in only limited ways, Leder argues that it often through dysfunction and discomfort that we can become aware of otherwise latent bodily processes or functions. So, in everyday usage we only note for example the expansion of the ribs on the intake of the breath in to the lungs when we take an extraordinary breath – be it short, sharp or long. You might try it - go on - take in an extra deep breadth. *[Both Dancer and Practice take a deep intake of breath, and on the exhale Dancer makes a long hissssing sound squeezing the air out of her lungs.]* It is in this passing moment that the body, the lungs and ribs, become what Leder calls 'ecstatic' and the fleshly

body is present to us. Whilst I find the emphasis on the body in discomfort, uncomfortable (!), the relationship to our bodies Leder describes is very resonant.

Dancer: Yes, Leder's ideas work for me. In somatic improvisational practices it is this ecstatic body that is to the fore. In these moments and through improvisation I am 'paying attention' and dancing in such a way that the body retains its ecstatic state for extended periods.

Given the difficulties of perceiving the body, of bringing it into an ecstatic state, it is perhaps not surprising that many somatic approaches (and certainly in releasing practices – the basis of my own approach) tend to begin in stillness and often in a supine position. The stilling of the body, and the support of the floor, reduces the number things one has to concern oneself with, and allows attention to dwell in the detail, for example, on the temperature of the skin, the movement of the rib cage, the shape of the collarbone, or the weight of the pelvis. As a session develops the dancer works to maintain these interior images and sensations – carrying them into extended movement through improvisational activities. This adds another layer of difficulty, but with practice it is possible while experimenting improvisationally to note, in the moment, shifts between ecstatic and recessive states that occur in and across different parts of the body at any one time.

Let me elaborate a little: *[as she speaks dancer begins to trace movement through her body: an opening of the shoulder ripples in a successive flow to her fingers and a dip forward in the head triggers pulses down her spine]* Training in releasing techniques – particularly Skinner and Alexander based approaches - has led me to follow and develop an improvisational form that focuses on a muscular releasing and deep listening as a basis for moving. This approach to improvisation practice is based in 'livedness', in sensation and in anatomically based imagery. When improvising I am not performing pre-composed movement, rather I am responding through an embodied reflexivity to internal and external information as part of a complex nexus of 'data' arising for the being in / of the world. This interoceptive and exteroceptive data includes proprioceptive information about positions of the body - of limbs in relation to torso, of torso in relation to the floor, of floor in relation to the roof of the mouth - drawing on mechanical receptors in the muscles, joints, vision and inner ear.



Dancing with an awareness of my movement and relationship to space and through duration - I rotate and shift my kinesphere and follow different paths.

This sound's all well and good as I say it, but it is also true to say that I struggle to pay attention to all these pieces of sensory information and to draw upon all these skills at the same time. It is much easier without distractions, without trying to talk at the same time, and without an audience watching. This 'paying attention', enabling an ecstatic state, is most easily achieved in a quiet studio (with ideally a partners hands or voice to guide me) when there is the time and space to focus on the interior workings of the body. *[Dancer lays prone upon the floor and Practice lays her hands onto her back. Her hands feeling, and at the same time drawing attention to, the expanding and deflating of the torso as Dancer breathes].*

Even in these quiet moments it is important to recognize that the body, like improvisation itself, is in perpetual flux, for as Leder writes:

The lived body constantly transforms its sensorimotor repertoire by acquiring novel skills and habits. [...] A phenomenological anatomy cannot then be thought of as fixed over time, or even confined by the physical boundaries of the flesh. It must take account of the body as living process

(Leder 2007: 30)

Such is the quandary of knowing in relation to the body. However through somatically based improvisation it is possible, I think, to continually explore the changing phenomenology of the body – to take account of the body in process.

Practice: Would you say then that your somatically based improvisation entails a consciousness of action? *[Her hands move to the sides of Dancers ribs and then begin to shift her body side to side.]*

Dancer: Humm, Yes. There is an emphasis upon strategies that foreground a heightened awareness of the body in stillness and in motion, the interconnectedness to that which we are made of and that which is around us. Tracing this relationship in through somatic practice places the emphasis upon the living body that integrates the physical, emotional

and cognitive realms.

Whilst for example it is clear that we cannot actually 'see' the interior of our own bodies in any remotely normal circumstance. It is possible to activate a lived kinaesthetic consciousness of the dancing body. Through recognising the pre-articulations of the human body – 'its sensory organs, its forward directedness, its muscular capacities' (Leder 1990: 29), we can categorise the lived body into its usual forms of absence and presence, tracing out a 'phenomenological anatomy' (Leder 1990: 29). As such we can note that the surface of the body is knowable through the interaction of sensorimotor capabilities. I can, for instance, gaze upon parts of my own skin - I can look at my hands, but, I cannot see my own eyes or the back of my neck. Also my hands can touch each other and I can feel the shape of my ribs under my skin. But the internal spaces of the body – organs, joints, and tissues – cannot be observed or touched. Exploring this interceptive field relies on inner sensations, imagination and the application of conceptual understanding.

Practice: So how does this work in practice when dancing?

Dancer: Well let's see...*[Dancer and Practice come together and lay side by side]*. I might for example look at an image of the rib cage, touch a skeleton and locate the ways it moves. I can, through my imagination and my cognitive abilities, place these images inside my own body – enhancing my appreciation of the structure and viscera of the body. As such this perceptual field is known indirectly, and while relationally ambiguous and discontinuous, it can be sensed through metaphor and through images giving rise to renewed understandings of our embodiment.

This sensing of the body, the tracing out my 'phenomenological anatomy', it just one of the fields of awareness that I draw upon whilst dancing. Others are in the territory of the body as located in space and time, the purposeful tracking of the dance (just) past – or compositional memory and the implicit and explicit (body) memory of my own history, images and knowledge. These areas of awareness are not singular or hierarchical in nature, but are experienced as a nexus, each informing, layering and weaving into the other.

Practice: We might say then that in developing what you are calling 'fields of awareness' through various senses and through imaginative acts, the interaction between self, body and

world become more evident. This is a pro-active process – a perceptual mode of practice even. For perceiving is, Alva Noë (2004) argues, something we ‘do’ and it requires a purposeful engagement. In order that the lived experience when dancing be more present in you and to you, your perceiving must be active – it is not done to you, nor it is a pre-natural state of awareness.

To take it a bit further, and as Noë suggests (2004: 1), in a perceptual mode of practice, that it is not merely enough to have sensations, rather it is (necessary) to have sensations that we understand. Further, I think you would subscribe to the view that it is not enough to recognise what any particular movement feels like, but important to be able to thematise their inner logic with other experiences and contexts.

Dancer: Certainly. The thematising of inner logic is a crucial part of my practice and of Practice as Research per se. Rather than trying to fit within a pre-existing theoretical scheme, as an improviser I am drawn toward materials that emerge within the process of dancing. Through listening these experiences (from) within the act of dancing, clustered themes begin to take shape forming an inner logic. Taking account of experience (which incorporates experiencing the physical, sensate, emotional, philosophical and conceptual) allows the phenomena of improvising to be articulated and understood ‘as actually had rather than laying some invented theoretical scheme on experience’ (Gendlin in Todres 2007: 27).

Practice: So – so far we have suggested that coming to know what we know of somatic practices requires attention to sensation to the body whilst in action. We might usefully describe this process of coming to a thematised logic as a mode of embodied reflexive learning.

Dancer: Hum, yeah that feels right – what you describe feels akin to what I experience when improvising as a critical and curious mode of enquiry. This embodied reflexivity happens both in the moment and upon reflection.

Practice: In the moment reflexivity though might seem to go against the grain of improvisation practices. Many improvisers value the ability to ‘be present’ and to ‘go with

the flow' and as such a reflective approach might seem to suggest a distancing of self from the doing, leading to a generally undesired level of 'objectivity'.

Dancer: This is true. Indeed Todres points to this paradox too noting that 'embodied understanding', forges on the one hand 'a fruitful distance from the specific embodied occasion', whilst on the other had requires 'they remain responsively connected to the aliveness of the specific experiential occasion' (2007: 29).

With this in mind I think I would want to say that developing a reflexive sensibility, a reflection in the midst (as Merleau-Ponty might say), doesn't intervene in 'the flow' but enables me to remain immersed, deepening the kinaesthetic experience in a purposeful mode. Though small intersecting loops, and with practice, this embodied-reflectivity, deepens the experience – for through this process it is possible to become more present, in more multifaceted ways. It is this reflective practice that enables concepts to be drawn out of raw experience.

The interior thematising and naming of experience and sensation is achieved through the finding of 'good words' (Todres 2007: 28) to make fresh sense of lived experience, opening the said, as well as the unsaid, life of improvisation. These 'good words' are then a significant part of developing the synergy between somatic and conceptual knowledge – for in tight multi-directional looping circles experience, words and knowledge intersect.

Practice: And so for me a picture of improvisation as a thinking research practice is emerging, and it becomes possible to recognize improvisation as both a way of practicing thinking and a way of making present embodied thought.

We might try it together.

*Dancer and Practice come to standing. Taking time they work to note that which draws their attention and noting anatomical 'glitches' and the sounds around them they ease into movement. Following these small beginnings, exploring and elaborating their dance emerges as they both dwell in curiosities and traverse through space. Sliding around each other, never in contact, but always aware - they dance their duet.*

## ***Seeing/Sensing the (in)visible and knowing the others body***

*Dancer and Practice sit on a mat in the far corner of the studio. Leaning back to back they share their weight, the warmth of each other backs passing between them, as they are at the same time touching and being touched.*

Dancer: I want to shift focus from what I know as a dancer to what others can come to know through watching. This requires a further consideration of the seer/seen and touched/touching relationship, evoking a challenge to conventional modes of reception, leading to an expanded notion of dancer/viewer exchange.

Practice: Ok.

Dancer: I am aware for instance that some aspects of the particularised perceptual field that is my internal embodied knowing whilst improvising are available to viewers, and are some not.

Practice: What do you mean?

Dancer: Well my dear Practice, if I stand here in front of you, [*Dancer stands*] I guess you can see that I am standing with my weight spread evenly between my two feet. You might also perceive that as I say these very words I am beginning to pay more attention to the nature of that standing. I am trying 'let go' of muscular tension in my shoulder girdle, I am deepening my breathing to enable my ribs to soften and drop downwards, I am shifting the balance of weight across my feet which requires a easing of the muscular grip in the thighs and buttocks. But can you tell that the coffee I drank earlier is causing my stomach to churn and is pressing on my bladder, or that my heart, which usually pumps away without my awareness, is beating hard and thereby calling my attention to it?

Further, I would think that many of the images and remembered sensations that I use to enrich my bodily actions are obscured to you too. For instance, the image I use of a man's suit being filled and emptied to deepen the breath is hidden, my memory of the sensation of hands on my pelvis as a partner encourages the loosening of the legs is hidden. These sensations and images are in the interior of my body, and unless I share them in someway

these aspects of body knowledge remain largely out of view, but are no less experientially resonant for me. So bodies certainly contain knowing's, but the detail of my body knowing's might not always be communicated to you in precise ways. Even if we accept this fact I suggest that something resonates between bodies that can be perceived - perhaps in the softness of the body and or the focus upon easing into moving. So while a viewer doesn't have the same image bank or sensorial memory as me, there is perhaps a sense of this through the textures in the movement that reverberate with my knowing's, these might be found in the sense of weight, or the differing quality of action at play.

Practice: It might be useful to go to phenomenological accounts and Merleau-Ponty again to help us think through the nature of bodily exchange and empathy. [Extending her hand toward Dancer, they firmly grasp each other's hands and lean away from each other and, in counter balance, they lower to the floor].

I am reminded of the analogy of touching hands - in which hands both touch and are touched (and in the studio I might call attention to the such sensations as back rests upon back as we were sitting earlier, or point to the our interconnectedness as air in my lungs is exchanged with the air in your lungs). This interconnectedness is, I think, important to the way in which the dancing exceeds the representational or projected image, and how the perceived and perceiver become intertwined.

Yet Merleau-Ponty surpasses even this position. His articulation of intercorporeal intersubjectivity enables the relationship to the other (in our case other dancers and the audience) to begin with our bodies but suggests that intercorporealities are not constructed through a seeing or touching of the other. Rather by recognising that our bodies are in constant intercorporeal contact, he enables us to recognise that we do not passively sense or actively observe the behaviours of the other, but are co-participant beings in the world.

Dancer: Hum yeah. These ideas are pick up by dancer writer April Flakne, who in a reconsideration of Derrida's reading of Merleau-Ponty, playfully illuminates them through contact improvisation. She writes that intercorporeal intersubjective interactions, understood as a form of choreography, suggest mutual marking and constitute a space between bodies or among bodies:

The other body impacts my body, even when there is no direct touch, because my body is in constant contact - even if indirect - with other bodies that share and inscribe the space comprising heres and theres.

(Flakne 2007: 45)

Through this we can start to understand that being-in-relation is always subject to multiple and shifting sensibilities that are in contact (if not literal touch) in with others.

Practice: I like that essay and the way she brings phenomenology into the processes of contact improvisation.

She describes how in contact improvisation 'the body and self as self-same, is/are not assumed in advance. Rather, they are a perpetually improvised centering and de-centering, of balancing and falling in contact with the improvisations of others in an open, dynamic space, a chora-graphic field' (2007: np). As such she argues, our sense of the body, is a performative accomplishment, one that requires continual re-enactment in intercorporeal, intersubjective, imaginary and rational chora-graphies (spatial practices) (Flakne 2007: np). As such the body radiates beyond itself.

Dancer: In Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible* he talks about the intercorporeal and develops the somewhat ambiguous notion of 'flesh'. I think this idea is relevant here too.

Practice: Go on.

Dancer: Flesh, as Merleau-Ponty speaks of it, is not simply synonymous with the body per se. It might be more useful to think of flesh as the shared corporeal condition between oneself and the world. So, flesh is not limited to the individual body, it is a more encompassing, even elemental, state of the world. Merleau-Ponty writes: 'The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance' (1968: 139).

Exploring this in relation to movement, dancer and author Susan Kozel, writes that we are 'porous beings, and we are part of flesh as well as being flesh' (2007: 33). Flesh for Merleau-Ponty is always immanent, it always exceeds, remaining beyond grasp. For, when flesh is

understood as my body, your body and, importantly, the space between bodies it becomes possible to recognise that flesh is 'capable of weaving relations between bodies'... and that this will not only enlarge 'but will pass definitively beyond the circle of the visible' (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 144).

Practice: Hum. Passing beyond the visible – that sounds like it could offer a tantalisingly way to consider an embodied response.

Dancer: I think so... It leads us toward and understanding of how the body functions as a locus of transaction and how the relation between dancer, dance, spectator, and the visible world constitutes the trajectory of meaning-making in relation to dance. An audience might be thought of as been in a quasi-immersive state in relation to the dance, for a phenomenological view assumes that the viewer is not merely physically located in relation to the dance, but is incorporated in it, and formulated as a viewing subject through this corporeal relation (a co-participant in a virtual (contact) improvisation).

Practice: So, this idea of flesh is, in Merleau-Ponty's writings, interwinned with the relation between the seer and seen, such that he states; 'the flesh that one sees and touches is not all there is to flesh' (Merleau-Ponty 1968; 144). Through reversibility of the seer/seen relationship (I can see that I am also seen), the exchange between flesh is understood to be constantly sliding and twisting, reaching beyond the purely visual to acknowledge touch-in-vision. The resonance of reversibility gives us a way to describe perceiving the world and others in it:

not to see the outside, as others see it, the contour of the body one inhabits, but to be seen by the outside, to exist within it, to emigrate into it, to be seduced, captivated.... So that the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen.

(Merleau-Ponty 1968: 139)

Read materially as by Kozel, we can note that there is, 'that which reaches the eye directly' but also in Merleau-Ponty's thinking 'that which reaches vision from below ("profound postural latency") and from above ("of flight, of swimming, of movement"), thereby Merleau-Ponty introduces kinetic and kinaesthetic qualities to vision (in Kozel 2007: 41).



Dancer: Yet Merleau-Ponty doesn't seek a full fusion between the comprehending of the known and knower; rather he describes this as a chiasmic encounter. I suggest flesh at once surrounds and is 'held' by the chiasm, for the chiasm represents a moment of exchange or overlap between an individual and the world (and within an individual herself). The model of the chiasm becomes a way to understand reciprocal perceiving/perceived that, having started with seeing/seen, visible/invisible, extends through the phenomenal body. The chiasm is further developed, and complicated, as a process that occurs between senses - 'not only between the touched and the touching, but also between the tangible and the visible...' (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 134) and ultimately pertains to an individual's entire inhabitation of the world:

...the idea of chiasm, that is: every relation with being is simultaneously a taking and a being taken, the hold is held, it is inscribed and inscribed in the same being that it takes hold of.

(Merleau-Ponty 1968: 266)

Through this thinking the gap between the dancer and the viewer could be described as chiasmic. Obscure and resisting full disclosure, the chiasm is a pulsing space that animates the visible, offering us the possibility of slippage and allusion, for as Kozel very nicely describes it, the invisible gives depth and texture to what we see (2007: 40).

Practice: I wonder then if we might consider strategies through which the phenomenological chiasmic space of flesh might be activated, made more present? Akin to the dancers heightened interior awareness that enables a more extended presencing of the ecstatic body (to recall Leder), perhaps flesh can be brought forth too in the shared space of dancer and viewer. Perhaps this activation is found in the emergent nature of improvisation that incorporates the (at times tacit) inclusion of the audience?

Dancer: Yes, and perhaps if we recognize that improvisatory performance only becomes fully present through the co-presencing of/with the audience, it becomes possible understand the way knowing's and knowledge's are generated in this sharing.

*While Practice watches, Dancer rolls long the floor, shifting between radiating her limbs outward, extending out in differing directions, and letting her weight drop, she uses the momentum of each roll to propel her into the next.*

**A self-revealing practice: *spiraling processes of movement, perception and excess***

Practice: So what does all this mean really in relation to an audiences viewing? What potentials do the inherent blurring of viewer/performer positions that the tacit inclusions of the viewer in improvisation enable? What are resonances, reverberations and repercussions that carry between bodies? Is it possible that there are ‘things’ that exceed the visible frame of dancing to be perceived by the audience such that a phenomenological experience can unfold?

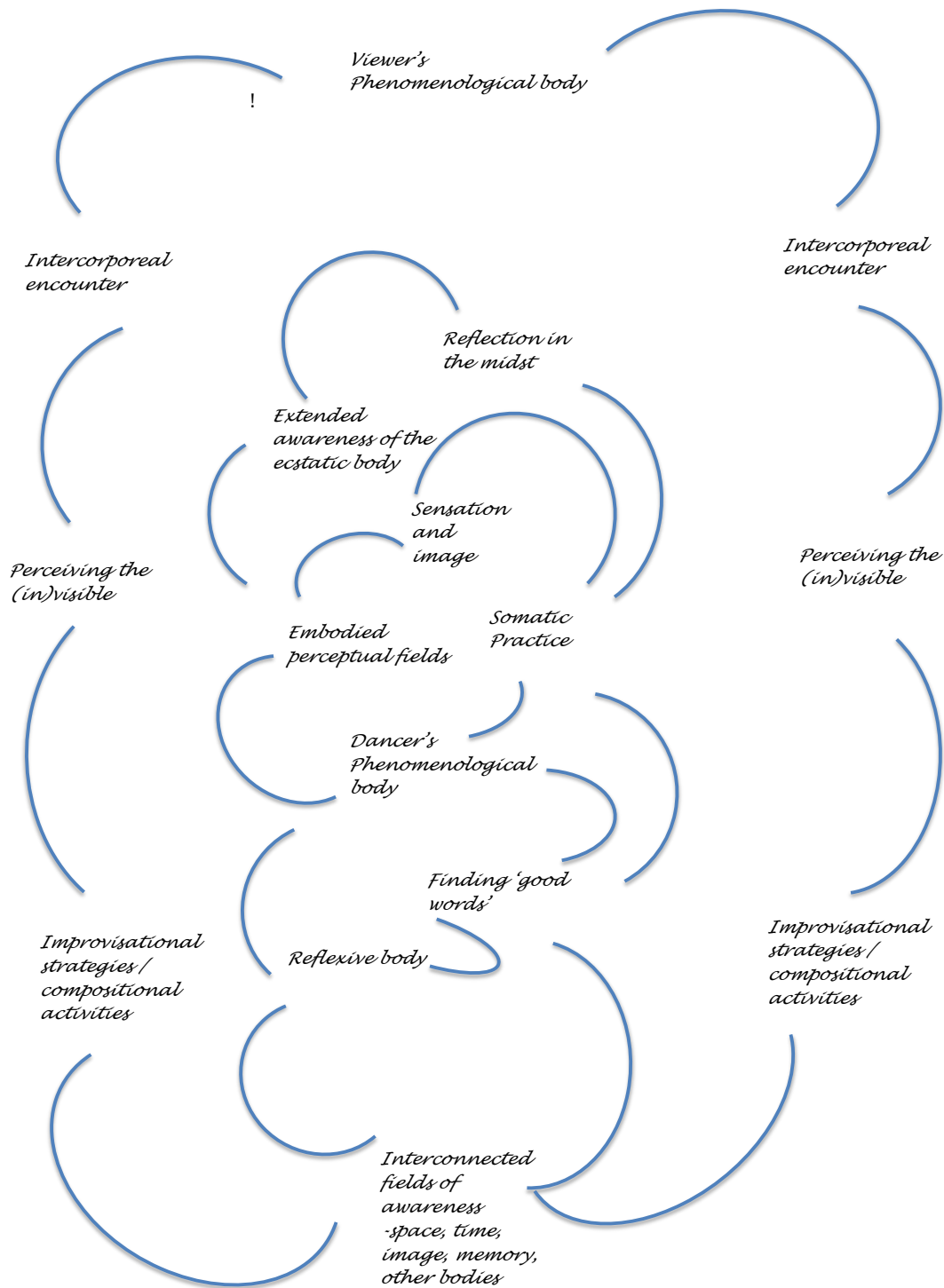
Dancer: Yes. In my experience there is, in this unfolding, such an excess. There is sense in which improvisation exceeds readability, exceeds full comprehension. Yet it is also overflowing with potential. To paraphrase Alva Noë, and his discussion of embodied perception, nothing and everything is hidden – there is too much to take in. As such we might say, that everything is available to us, but it is difficult (if not impossible) for viewers to perceive everything that is present. Further, just I said earlier that it is not enough to experience the body, but we must understand those experiences too. It is also not enough for an audience to merely have sensory stimulation. Rather they need ways to grasp and apprehend those sensory stimulations (Noë 2007: 180).

Practice: Noë argues that to fully experience, one must be able to appreciate *how* the experience presents things as being, writing that ‘the world shows up for us in experience in so far as we understand, that is, know or anticipate it’ (Noë 2007, 121). The implication of this is that the viewer needs some framing mechanism in order to perceive and apprehend improvisation.

Dancer: So to bring this closer to the practice and into a diagrammatic form I wonder if perceiving a somatically based improvisation might it be visualized as a spiraling process that encompasses multiple surfaces – off which echoes resound as the sensations and images of the improvisation roll outward, entering the dancer and audience from different directions and allowing differentiated echoes to reside in the bodymind?

I visualize it something this this,

*Taking up a marker pen Dancer begins to draw a series of intersecting circles. The long looping spirals forming mobile a spine-like centre - within which each element, each vertebra, is able to rotate and curve intersecting with its partners. Then in a sweep of the hand she draws two large looping semi-circles at either side of the spine, these connect and enfold the central spine whilst encompassing and holding the wider spatial terrain - a circle that suggests the ways in which the these central spine reaches out in encompass much more than it can physically touch.*



*Putting down the pen, dancer traces the shape of this organic structure. She muses of how the central spine like curves, radiated out in circular tendrils that reach out to touch others, and in turn they are touched, rotating back to her body in an exchange of interconnected flesh.*

Practice: This gives us a framework through which it is possible to understand the way in which embodied knowledge might be formed, with improvisation operating as a self-revealing form. In the central 'spine' you have the dancers interior processes which are developed through self-reflective processes including expanding perceptions and the 'finding of good words' in order to give structure to awareness.

Dancer: Yes. And the outer circle seeks to map out how these interior processes interconnect with exterior ones, foregrounding the immediacy of improvisation and the use of choreographic strategies as a route through which the interior becomes visible. In doing so I am proposing that improvisations offer special kinds of processes in which creation/performance become the same generative occurrence. Similarly activities of making and viewing, experiencing and interpreting, are collapsed into each other, activating the intercorporeal encounter.

In this thinking I am drawing on Lisa Nelson's 'Tuning Scores' (or rather Noë's discuss of this score at work). Noë describes a process in which the improvisational structure provides a method through which the dancers (as both participants and observers) 'attune themselves' to the other dances and the environment. Developing this analysis Noë uses Wittgenstein's language games as an example of how we might learn through the practice itself to perceive.

Through language games Wittgenstein sought to reveal the nature of language asking us to think of language games as a way to build a primitive language that exhibited the elements essential for developing more complex linguistic exchanges. To use Noë's own example, while listening to an unfamiliar language may be perceived as sound, what is being said (the words themselves) is invisible. Yet it is possible to start to 'make sense' of that which is at first unfamiliar (the new language) by building blocks from small modules and couplings.

Following this argument he suggests that Nelson's tuning scores offer the dancer/viewer a way through which to navigate experience – a way through which to come to 'make perspicuous our mode of perceptual being-in-the-world' (Noë 2007: 126). In this way he argues: 'A Tuning Score, like a grammatical exercise, is an occasion to being to acquire the skills necessary for access to the world. [...] It is an activity of bringing the world into focus for perceptual consciousness' (2007: 127). Through his analysis Noë begins to open up ways improvisation practices unfold perceptions, by offering building blocks and strategic tools to the viewer as a route toward shared understanding.

Dancer: Yes, by offering strategic tools, combined with our understanding that the depth of bodily experience is relational and exceeds precise formulation, improvisation might provide ways to activate the invisible space of flesh. For, just perhaps, it might it be possible that the emergent nature of improvisation, in that it reveals itself for and with the audience in the moment, could allow an audience 'to learn its way about', enabling a skillful consciousness to be developed. Therefore we might think of somatic dance improvisation as a tool for the study of a perceptual phenomenological consciousness.

Dancer: Yes. I think so.

In this process the audience enter a somatic and choreographic relationship with me as a dancer. As movement ideas unfold they come with me on a journey. Entering a kind of somatic mirroring, audience members may begin by recognising small building blocks or the DNA of the dance, which form the basis of that which follows. Thereby a viewer engages with the practice of improvisation and learns their way about at the same time as I do. As I dance I am sharing with my fellow dancers and my audience my thinking/moving, and they are a part of my thinking/moving. We are in it together - entwined in something akin to a pedagogical process. So I think it is possible to see and learn through the thinking-in-action processes that are being played out in front of /with the viewer.

Physical possibilities are 'found', explored and developed together.

Spaces are animated and made more present together.

Time is expanded and truncated together.

*One at a time Dancer and Practice, support each other's movement - stroking, holding, guiding, following each other with their hands. Through this touch they guide the emerging solo, and echo it with their touch and in their bodies.*

*After a while they exchange roles - passing from guide to guided.*

*As the dance between them develops and extends, a duet takes shape. The roles of following and leading blur, and a dance with or without touch/contact is formed. They notice how this dance resides within them. how one movement possibility is explored and transformed, how an image forms between them becoming more present through their mutual yet unspoken manipulations.*

*Then, after a time Dancer and Practice drift away from each other to explore this dance as a solo, each tracing their own path. Informed by their previous duetting and altered by their own curiosities and bodily practices.*

*They work to notice what has changed, how things have moved one and been transformed.*

Dancer: Through the intercorporeal encounter processes of watching emerge that draw upon the sensory basis of perception and lived experience. These experiential processes are activated through the use of one's body as a locus of sensory appreciation and critical engagement. Through such processes knowing's and knowledge's occur in relation to the improvisation as it is formed, as the dance unfolds. In this way improvisation evokes relations wherein an embodied experience is cultivated and viewers are encouraged to pay more attention to the phenomenology of their experiences to access the 'world' presented before them.

Practice: So to complete the circle of perception - even whilst recognizing it is messy and porous, the important task of phenomenology, and of experiential movement practices, ought not to be so much to depict or represent or describe experience but rather to catch experience in the act of making the world available, drawing an audiences attention to an activity, to dance thought in the making.

Dancer: Nice. So perhaps we should dance?

---

## **Bibliography**

*Behnke, Elizabeth A. (2009) 'The Human Science of Somatics and Transcendental Phenomenology', Man & the Word / Zmogus ir zodis, 11/ 4: 10-26.*

*Eddy, Martha (2009), 'A brief history of somatic practices and dance historical development of the field of somatic education and its relationship to dance', Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices, 1/1: 5-27.*

Flakne, April (2007) 'Contact/improv: a synaesthetic rejoinder to Derrida's reading of Merleau-Ponty', *Philosophy Today*, 51, SPEP Supplement: 42-49.

Fraleigh, Sondra (2000) 'Consciousness Matters', *Dance Research Journal*, Summer 32/1: 54-62.

Kozel, Susan (2007) *Closer: Performance, Technology, Phenomenology*, Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT Press.

Leder, Drew (1990) *The Absent Body*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M (1962) *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Smith, C., London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968 (first published 1964)) *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Lings, A. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Noë, Alva (2007) 'Making Worlds Available', in Gehm, S., Huseman, P. and von Wilcke, K. (Eds), *Knowledge in Motion: Perspectives of Artistic and Scientific Research in Dance*, New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers.

Noë, Alva (2004) *Action in Perception*, Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT Press.

Todres, Les (2007) *Embodied Enquiry: Phenomenological touchstones for research, psychotherapy and spirituality*, Houndsmills, Basinstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

### **Authors Biography:**

Artist/academic **Vida L. Midgelow** is Professor in Dance and Choreographic Practices (Middlesex University, UK) and co-director of The Choreographic Lab. Prior to this position she was Director of Research and Professor of Dance at University of Northampton. A committed educator and creative facilitator, she studied dance at The Place and University of Surrey, where she completed her doctoral studies. She has published in various journals, including *New Writing Journal*, *Journal of Artistic Research and Choreographic Practices*, and published the monograph *Reworking the ballet* in 2007. Her research led movement works have been presented internationally and her practice focuses upon somatic approaches to improvisation in movement and video installations. Recent works include *TRACE: playing with/out memory, screenbody* and *Skript*. Further her accumulative blog, video extracts and associated writings on improvisation and nomadism can be viewed at: <http://danceimprovisationpractice.blogspot.com>. She is also co-editor of *Choreographic Practices* (an internationally peer reviewed journal with Intellect publishers), an executive editorial board member for Society of Dance History Scholars (sdhs) and until recently Chair of the Standing Conference on Dance in Higher Education (Dance HE).