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A Philosophy of the Improvisational Body

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This essay presents a phenomenological analysis and personal history. Part I, *A Philosophical Approach*, develops key terms of the chapter through a philosophy of active embodiment and being seen. Part II, *Moving Through Time*, is my story of moving through nine historical phases of dance improvisation. Part III, *Why Improve*, inquires into the improvisational body in somatics and human development, and it reviews ascendant pyramidal conceptions of power in dance improvisation, preferring attributes relative to distinctiveness in motion, intimacy with body and others, inclusive aesthetics, and variables of intentionality. It aims to show how improvisational qualities are both abstract and personal, and that they involve interplays of possibilities—how things draw

apart, alternate, disintegrate, or assemble throughout a creative whole. Love and death both live in dance, stirring the intangibles of dance improvisation.

I. A Philosophical Approach

A philosophy is a coherent school of thought and guiding principles, and it is also in large measure, a way of life. One's philosophy of life is a way of life. I define philosophy in the above ways for purposes of this essay. In particular, I use phenomenology as a philosophical method for discovering and describing the contents of consciousness. If I am the investigator, my consciousness is on the line, but I also understand the competing view of phenomenology that the individual ego cannot be separated from others or the world. What we suppose to be other is not. My consciousness is more than I am, and even more than it seems to me. We all breathe and share the same air; we share this with every creature on the planet and with every aspect of the eco-system that sustains or fails us. We are actively involved in our perceptions, not passive recipients of incoming data, and not separate from the perceptions and thoughts of others. Dance improvisation demonstrates such connectivity through intuitive, embodied means. I enter the discussion below with this perspective in mind.

The Lens of Phenomenology and Purpose

Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, advocated study of the structures of consciousness, and Martin Heidegger added to Husserl's view that one could study the structures of experience in order to understand consciousness. Heidegger shifted concerns in phenomenology from consciousness to existence, rendering

phenomenology more personal. Husserl's depictions of consciousness were alien to psychological conceptions, whereas Heidegger described aspects of existence on the periphery of awareness (Nathanson 1973, Safranski 1998). Merleau-Ponty created an ontology of relationships in *The Visible and the Invisible*. His kinesthetically informed concepts of flesh and folding hold that perception, however directional, is also reversible and symbiotic (1968, chapter 4).

Phenomenology draws the key terms of our study together. As a method it is improvisational itself, relying on lateral thought processes, intuitions of phenomena (a phenomenon is anything we are aware of), and how we finally make sense of insights through reflection and analysis. Like dance improvisation, phenomenology is not a linear process, but develops unpredictably. Phenomenology is the branch of philosophy that takes the body as a key topic, often through its critique of erroneous dualistic views of body and mind. If it doesn't somehow speak to you of transformative possibilities and influence your life, it isn't phenomenology. The philosophy of Husserl questions 'the natural attitude', holding that suspensions of inherited biases and assumptions can bring us closer to phenomenal features of experience. Merleau-Ponty used expressions like 'the lived body' to indicate that features of experience are always being expressed through our embodied presence. His work *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) develops a philosophy of the lived body, one that informs my first book, *Dance and the Lived Body* (1987). Phenomenology also holds that philosophical findings are not final, since life itself is a work in process.

The entrance of somatic methods into the field of dance studies draws phenomenology in yet another direction, especially in context of movement in human

development. Core concerns for perception sustain both phenomenology and somatics, as also improvisation; thus, we explore these links. It also occurs to me immediately to ask 'why' one would want to study the improvisational body in dance. What is unique about or valued in the improvisational experience? Do dancers improvise simply for the feeling and sensations of moving spontaneously? This would be an intrinsic 'for itself' value of improvisation, since intrinsic values are experiential, or 'the good' in experience. Or do they improvise to create interest in dance presentations for audiences? This would be an extrinsic use. Extrinsic values are not inferior by definition; they indicate a purpose beyond the experiential *per se*. Philosopher Paul Taylor, a value theorist, draws these distinctions between intrinsic and extrinsic values (1961). Dancers might also improvise to improve mood or outlook, to unblock sedimented energies held in the body through stress or trauma, or to relate to others through dance. These are matters of connectivity, healing and well being, which are themselves intrinsic values of experience and personal development. Dancers also explore performative concepts and kinetic complexity improvisationally.

To ask into improvisational experiences and their values is to inquire into active embodiment. In this endeavor, I turn first to my experience, as phenomenologists often do, and I cast a wide net.

Toward Improvisation

I am an improviser. I cultivate spontaneity in life, even within my plans. Sometimes I call my husband 'Mr. Spontaneous', because he isn't. Happily, he is OK with my recognition of his penchant for planning everything down to the last detail. It's how he is. I'm

different. I like to pack up everything on a moment's notice, and go do something new—without too much thought for the consequences. Sometimes this gets me into trouble. I'm happy I can call my husband when my car runs out of gas. This is when I realize that within my improvisations, there is need for order and foresight, or there should be. I have noticed that resilience comes through *adaptation*, an improvisational principle, and that I get along better with others when I can adapt and not insist.

I like to think I have cultivated resilience through practicing improvisation in dance, having time and dedicated space to move freely, or within designs of my choosing. Over the many years of being an improviser in dance and life, I have seen how practicing spontaneous responsiveness has served my development. It has helped me become a better listener, and when I fail to listen well, it has taught me that self-forgiveness is just a step away. I can always let go and start over.

Improvisation is universal and encompassing; cooking can be as improvisational as dance. I believe that life itself is an improvisation when we see it that way, and that it can be a grand dance, a fun one, or just exceptionally dreary. What we perceive in the everyday can potentially compel us and hold our attention? We can see life as drudgery, or we can appreciate the spontaneous core of ourselves in action.

I distill several experiential values of improvisation from my exploration thus far. These could rightly be called intrinsic values because they arise from the experiential good. Spontaneity, resilience, presence, adaption, readiness, responsiveness, risk, and willingness, come to me first, and not in any order; then come somatosensory attentiveness, connectivity, and reversibility. All of these seem very like global perceptual features in awareness, human ways in which intention is directed during

improvisatory moments and actions. Temporal perception is abstract and draws forward improvisational features of fleetingness, evanescence, or passing away—momentary dances of death, evaporation, and smoke. What if nothing ever went away or vanished? We would simply be stuck and never heal.

Embodying the Moment and Being Seen

Dance improvisation invites an active engagement of the body and unique ways of being seen. First comes body. Body is a verb when it becomes active in the term 'embodiment'. We could say that we embody an idea or a dance, as we often do, and then body becomes active as lived. I like to speak of 'active embodiment' in order to emphasize that the body is not finished, but ongoing as anything alive is always coming into being and going away, seemingly at once. To me, this precipice is one of the most fascinating feelings to arise in the dancing body, the body aware of itself in motion, allowing itself to be in the moment, frustrated or just right for the time being, and sometimes at its peak.

Thus, I don't judge my emergent actions. When I improvise in any dance context or compose music improvisationally on my computer, I don't question myself, or what I'm doing in the moment. If I do, I freeze. I need to be alive to potentials and not judge the emerging actions. I spend hours composing music improvisationally on my computer and midi-keyboard, inputting notes, phrases, chords, and whole lines of music in chosen keys or atonally. I can choose orchestral instruments and synthesizers from hundreds of possibilities I have imported. I listen to my original input, say a long improvised piano phrase, and then improvise other lines of input, maybe overlapping

the harp. Thus I build a composition, all through improvisational means. I don't write anything down; rather it gets written as I play what comes to me. I can go back and fix what I don't like, however. I can't do this when dancing. *The first take is it!* The same is true when musicians improvise live. Dancers and musicians alike muddle into situations that aren't working, but if they are good, they can quickly get out of the mire, and make it seem an interesting detour. In dancing, I like to work in somatic improvisational settings where there is no right or wrong, just the moment of emergence, with verbal reflection validating body memory.

The social milieu of dance improvisation is unique. Dancers often improvise in community, except when they are choreographing by themselves, exploring movement that will later become set in choreography. Dancers might also improvise alone for their own enjoyment, like I do when dancing in my kitchen. But I want to address the typical social settings for dance improvisation: classroom and workshop settings, informal performances in community, and staged performances for audiences. In all cases, *being seen* is a factor—dancers see each other perform and are sometimes seen by audiences. Being seen is not usually addressed as a feature of dance improvisation, and yet this is a very ubiquitous phenomenological feature. Why? And what does being seen have to do with *embodiment*?

We embody being seen experientially (somatically). For instance: Jean Paul Sartre developed a phenomenology of felt helplessness in being seen, which he called 'the look of the other' and 'the gaze' in *Being and Nothingness*. Unable to see ourselves as others do, we are powerless against their glance (Sartre 1965, p. 340). Somatically, this is a self-conscious fear-based way of **being seen**. In his book, *Ways of Seeing*, art

critic and poet, John Berger takes the gender position that men look and act, and women appear. As women envision themselves being looked at, they are captive to the gazes of men. Being seen represents a form of passivity in Berger's analysis (Berger 1972). 'The male gaze,' a theoretical construct from cinema studies originating with Laura Mulvey in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (Mulvey 1975), presents a view similar to that of Sartre and Berger. But, is being seen passive of necessity, or is passivity just one of its manifestations, and in any case subject to intentional consciousness? Phenomenology would assert the importance of intentionality.

Consider also that seeing is more than a visual phenomenon. We commonly say, 'I see' when we understand something. *I see* can mean *I understand*. Still further and in warmer tones, 'seeing' can mean 'appreciating'. Being seen evokes the larger than visual phenomenon of 'seeing' when 'I see' means 'I perceive' or 'I get it'. And when heart-felt, seeing can also be emotionally close to the personal body, enigmatic and sensitive. In dance, seeing and feeling are related, as all the senses are part of bodily movement as a whole. We typically interpret dance through sense agreements, for instance: 'I sense sadness in your dance; its relentless oppositions irritate me.

Being seen can be scary, whether in an improvisation or in planned choreography. To show oneself in dance is to feel vulnerable. It might be easier to hide, but not really, because one will be seen in any case. Others see us, and we see them. I know I'm seen, and that I don't really want to be invisible. People generally want to be seen (just not all the time), and are individual in this regard. I have had long spells of shyness, and not wanting to be seen. Now I have a secret antidote; I *invite* being seen in dance improvisations and conjure more adventure than fear. I have learned how to

absorb the gazes of others with empathy in mind. I make a decision to be assured in the sight of others, and to see them as a mirror of how I would want to be seen. But this doesn't mean I don't have stage fright. I have had bad dreams about blanking out whole sections of memorized choreography; then I slip into an improvisation and wake up happy. What interests me when I reflect on improvisation as social, communal, and performative, is how individual people are in their tolerance for being seen.

I facilitate a lot of improvisational dance events in community and on stage, and notice how people get more comfortable with being seen in these contexts over time and with practice. I have said that performance improvisations, however informal, represent an extrinsic use and that extrinsic uses can be beneficial. One of the values of dance improvisation is that people have a chance to practice being seen (and disappearing) and to improve body image along the way. People can become more comfortable with being seen and less self-conscious. As a teacher, I address students about the importance of letting themselves be seen, because we are seen in many contexts: in job interviews, for instance, in any presentation we make, and daily when we are completely unaware. Being seen is all encompassing; a little practice can go a long way in terms of confidence.

Seeing and being seen are deeply phenomenological features of active embodiment. Being seen is not necessarily passive in psychological terms, especially if one invites presence. I'm not talking about attention getting, or acting out. Being present and unafraid of the gaze of others is a choice one can make in being an agent. What others see is in their eyes and hearts. We have no control over how people see or understand us, but we don't have to interpret others as against us. An important part of

the aesthetic venture of Authentic Movement Practice and the related practice of depth-movement dance lies in this very phenomenon. We get to participate in what others see as witnesses to our improvisations and *vice versa*. We become connected in an active and nonjudgmental process of improvisational embodiment, which I say more about in the final section.

II. Moving Through Time

Dance improvisation has a history, or maybe several depending on the genre. The practices and mores of modern/postmodern dance, and still later, contemporary dance, have evolved through the years—as my own dance history indicates. My experiences with a variety of practices span a lifetime of seventy-seven years going back to the early modern dance and continuing still, with more than fifty-seven years in community with other dancers. I'm happy to move into old age as an improviser. Thus, I can dance as I like without fear of being wrong. If I fall down, I can stay there, or else someone will help me up, as we make it part of falling down and getting up. In creating my own institute for somatic studies, I have had to invent a lot, to trust and take chances. Fortunately, I have practiced inventiveness through dance improvisations of many kinds, as I outline in nine phases below. If they seem linear in the writing, they nevertheless overlap in my experience. Others will likely have different personal histories with dance improvisation. I offer mine as one vantage point.

A Burning Hunger

I started university studies as a music major in 1957 and began dance studies in 1959. Inspired by my dance teachers, LaVeve Whetten (Southern Utah University), and later Joan Woodbury and Shirley Ririe (University of Utah), I learned *how to improvise with images, forms, objects, props, and others*. I had danced since childhood, but not through formal study. I was already an improviser. Woodbury and Ririe taught me technique and composition, and alongside this, how to move without set choreography. Dr. Elizabeth Hayes taught me how to examine dance as art and history. I developed a genuine hunger for learning, dancing, history, aesthetics, and improvisation.

Risking,

Trusting playful instincts,

Dancing from inner sources,

Letting my emotional body take shape spontaneously,

While paying attention to form.

I was about twenty-one.

It was my first improvisation class with Shirley Ririe.

I remember rummaging through a box full of props,

Coming up with a captain's hat—and making everyone laugh.

Performing was mine.

In love with humor, I played with objects and props, especially through my summers with Hanya Holm and Alwin Nikolais. Hanya prompted improvisational studies on space

and the kinesphere, stories, and pranks. Nik used the abstract relativity of space/time/movement/design as motivation. In widening my vision, I learned how to pay attention to others in the dance.

Moving together,

Sensing together.

Summoning health

In explosions of cellular retention.

Our glad knees on the floor,

Grazing the wounds and

Mettle of turbulent things.

These ways of improvising extended to my study with Mary Wigman in Germany in 1965-66. Her improvisation classes often focused on discrete movements such as 'whirling', or 'moving quickly/slowly'. Or they might hold a body focus like 'follow the hands'. She used short narratives and imagery a lot. I remember dancing 'into the depths' and 'up toward the heavens', for instance. Frau Mary (as we called her) encouraged individuality in improvisation:

Gratitude for life in every detail of dance,

The face full and shining,

A fisted presence, throwing it

to the wind.

The Creature ... is a created thing, or lower animal

...of woods and fields,

...or outer space.

... a living being

... a mortal mammal.

... its authenticity, not likely relevant.

When I taught at San Jose State University in California in 1966-1969, my students and I improvised with jazz music both live and recorded in syncopated and lyrical styles. Sometimes we performed with musicians on stage. Through my studies in music theory, I knew that jazz was generally improvised within a form, and that it could also be free form. I also noticed that much of what we commonly call jazz dance bears no relationship to jazz music, and does not include improvisation. Inspired by Marshall Stern's perspectives on jazz and improvisation in vernacular dance (Stern 1968), I wrote my first dance research paper on the relationship of jazz dance to jazz music ('Revitalizing Jazz Dance' 1971).

Yes, my first foray into writing about dance was a study of jazz.

Instinctive

Intense

Cool

Syncopated

Torqued
Flung
Quickened
Dropped
Broken

Free
Tight
Percussive
Lyric....

*Or, the winged bird could be a
creature of heights,
caught midair, and
held on a note*

FIGURE 1. Sondra Fraleigh, Jazz Improvisation, circa 1973. Photograph courtesy June Burke.

The Lake Between Shifting Grounds

*Happenings accept what happens! They open participats to dialogue
about the moment and perceptions of place and change.*

Happenings arose as loose forms of structured improvisation for large groups, erasing the distance between performer and spectator.

Happenings (I like to write 'happenings happening', over, and over) were first conceived as Performance Art through the work of Allan Kaprow and associated with the "hippie" culture of the 60s. I organized a few Improvisational Happenings in the late 60s at large conference gatherings and studio installations where everyone present was included, sometimes in mirror relationships with experienced dancers.

Possible-Self-in-a-World was one of these, performed at San Jose State University in 1969.

More recently, I led a butoh happening in 2010 in the Kayenta Labyrinth in Southwest Utah, called *Plant Us Butoh*. Those who came moved with dancers amidst the rocky landscape and wind sculptures surrounding the labyrinth, and then we all walked the labyrinth in community. Such happenings have vague guidelines that everyone can grasp in a quick explanation, and they often make use of surrounding props, visual art, sculpture, or special landscapes.

When I take people out of the studio to dance with the red-desert earth of Southwest Utah, or in burnt-out trailer homes, or abandoned construction sites, I think of these events in at least three ways—as 'place dances' in the environment, as butoh morphology, and as happenings.

Whatever happens happens.

We accept the happenings of the moment and the place.

And we like to photograph these.

FIGURE 2. *Plant Us Butoh* (2010) in Kayenta Utah with Japanese and American performers. Photograph courtesy of Teresa Koenig.

FIGURE 3. Community in *Plant us Butoh* (2010). Kayenta Labyrinth in Kayenta, Utah. Photograph courtesy of Teresa Koenig.

Sentinel Peaks

How about Choreographed Themes as Spur to Improvisation?

From about 1975 continuing through 2003, I was teaching dance improvisation and also choreography courses at State University of New York, College at Brockport. This juxtaposition taught me about the improvisatory root of choreography. In a phenomenological frame of mind, I came to understand that every dance begins through exploration—read, 'improvisation'.

Dance as discovery fascinated me then and still does. I like to use short choreographed phrases, easy movement motifs, or images to get people

moving; then encourage possible variations. The individual responses are mayhem and magic, streaming character, the self-uncovered—today.

Upholding

The top of a curve,

Today I care.

Tonight Will Be For Laughter

Maybe Dim Candlelight

Scores, Maps,

Some Structure Entailed.

The next stage overlapped the former one and entailed making and performing structures for improvisations called scores or maps. Improvisers could relate to written instructions on when to enter and leave the space, for instance, such as: ‘use falling movements’, ‘stop in the middle of the stage and wait in silence for 60 seconds’.

Structures might provide simple templates for performance, which were easy to grasp and full of open possibility so that dancers could remember the structure and feel free in the event. These might also be done outdoors, as in a pedestrian and mindful *Walk About*.

Walk About (1989)

I facilitated a two-hour improvisational walk around the town of Brockport New York for dance students and community participants using the *I Ching* (Chinese Book of Changes) as a means to structure the event. People walked around, using directions and changes indicated, and they could reflect on images we derived from the book if they chose to. We gathered together at the end to discuss our experiences.

I had been involved with the *I Ching* for many years, having encountered it first in philosophy classes and later through study with Merce Cunningham, eventually using it as a map for two choreographies: *Trigrams of the I Ching* for six dancers (1976) and *He Mounts to Heaven on Six Dragons* for four dancers (1980). These choreographies involved improvisation in performance.

They had Created a Child

And they called it 'Contact Improvisation'.

Contact Improvisation—giving and taking weight spontaneously in a playful form of dance partnering—overlapped several phases of my dance history. I became aware of it in the 1970s. It remains an influence in my present somatics teaching as impetus for *Contact Unwinding*. *Contact Unwinding* is related to *Contact Improvisation*, except that in *Unwinding*, one partner supports and guides the movement of the other using somatic bodywork techniques. The relationship is not symmetrical in other words. One

person moves as they wish, and with the support and guidance of the other. Either partner can say 'switch' to reverse the roles.

I agonized about the issue of 'touch' in developing my shin somatics program. I had used touch techniques from the beginning, but incorporated them cautiously, improvisationally, into the whole. The methods developing in my teaching and practice began to make sense to me in terms of 'pattern'. I realized that this was nothing new, however. Somatic methods like the Feldenkrais Method® and Body-Mind Centering® had developed movement patterning as a formative touchstone. My study of Feldenkrais Functional Integration® gave me a template for this. I eventually linked pattern to somatic yoga including five stages of infant movement development. Over time, I saw that *Contact Unwinding* could also augment my touch methods. In my struggle to find the right words, I came to see '*Contact Repatterning*' as the term that would identify shin somatics uses of touch. I continue to develop this bodywork practice, which has been evolving improvisationally and structurally since 1990.

Listening through touch,

Matching others

In pulsing improvs,

While holding patterns in mind.

Call these models,

But let them go in finding

How pattern repatterns

Traveled paths

*In each bossy
Or meekly held body part.*

Her Great Weariness, Her Rheumy Eyes

*Butoh grabbed her by the neck
And held her captive.*

Butoh represents a distinct phase for me, also relative to somatics. I call it a phase here; it is really a dance genre that implicates strong movement and powerful forces, but also finds potency in weakness. *Butoh* admits weariness, and allows aging an honest place. Its improvisatory element is morphic. The *butoh* body in its morphology is always in process of becoming. *Butoh* arose in post World War II Japan as a new genre and very basic form of dance, theater, and therapy, later adapted internationally. Power and empowerment have never been *butoh* goals, and vertical ascent is not its direction. I like it for this reason among others.

Butoh is transformational, and thus it probes the margins of consciousness, the places we ignore, misplace, and hide that existential phenomenologists like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Beauvoir, explored as *ambiguities* (See especially Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* 1948)

*When I improvise my embryo-self in butoh,
 or become stone, or lightning,
 or an 'ash pillar';
 when I disappear and reappear,
 or when I become rubbery,
 or hang up a body part,
 I let go my conscious thoughts.*

Then my 'ancient body' (as we call it in butoh) speaks to me, and I come home to my self. I suspect that when many of us reach this point, we are not so different from each other.

*Butoh invites ambiguous dance experiences that morph into
 light while holding darkness.*

I hold that in its improvisations, butoh is a transformational somatic practice (Fraleigh 2010, pp. 37-62, also *Moving Consciously*, 2015). I teach butoh for its metamorphic potentials, and also to encourage ugly beauty or messiness on the margins. Butoh entered my life in 1986. I've been a butoh addict ever since.

*The life world of which we are a part inspires my butoh body;
 fish and stones, mud and water dance in my scars.*

FIGURE 4. Sondra Fraleigh in her environmental butoh, *Butch Cassidy's Cabin* (2008). Photographed by Mark Howe in Circleville, Utah, where Fraleigh was born. Photograph courtesy of Mark Howe ©2008.

FIGURE 5. Youtube Video, Sondra Fraleigh at age 75 dances *Ancient Body Butoh in Greece and Utah with Influences from Japan* (2014). Video and music by Sondra Fraleigh. Video includes explanations of butoh, which is not necessarily 'creepy'. Ohno-sensei says: 'There is enough ugliness in life'. <http://youtu.be/26qQlvyyask>

Chunks Coiling

Lately, I am aware of an eighth integrative phase of my story that I call '*Collage Improvisations*'. These arise in the moment or with minimal structure and reflect parts of all of the above. Inclusion of everyone present is important, along with the option of moving the performer/audience vantage point, as dancers adopt the audience position whenever they wish. Collage Improvisations also include aspects of somatic dance practices delineated in Part III below.

MORPHOSE (June 2014)

In Hannia, on the island of Crete, I recently facilitated MORPHOSE, a somatically inspired collage with international participants. We moved as a single group seamlessly from the indoor studio to the beach, beginning with butoh metamorphosis improvised on edgy imagery and ending with Contact Unwinding partnerships in the sand and water. Performers, morphed in and out of the one-

hour improvisation, joining the audience when they wised, and in the stairway descent to the beach, the audience joined the dance. It struck me that in the ensemble improvisation of twelve performers, each dancer found distinctiveness.

FIGURE 6. MORPHOS, improvised performance in Hannia, Crete: Front to back, Amy Bush (USA), Virginia Alizioti (Greece), Hillel Braude (Israel), Kayleigh Crummey (USA), Angeliki Rigka (Greece). Photograph courtesy of Kay Nelson.

FIGURE 7. *Contact Unwinding* improvisation in Hannia, Ruth Way from the UK and Alikei Hiotaki from Hannia, Crete. Photograph courtesy of Kay Nelson.

FIGURE 8. Youtube Video of MORPHOSOS performance in Hannia, Crete (June 2014). Video and music by Sondra Fraleigh: <http://youtu.be/e-7k2Rb3SWQ>

DUNE

Her fair hair flew in lapping coils

As inward—she sunk in sand,

Her arms of elemental praise

First burst into that silence.

In the last twenty-five years until now, I continue to explore *somatic dance practices*, the ninth landmark phase of my story that I speak about extensively in the next section. The

figures below capture images from this phase, especially improvisation influenced by butoh imagery and environmental dance.

Figure 9. *DUNE* (2011) improvisation in Snow Canyon, Utah. Photograph of Angela Graff courtesy of Sondra Fraleigh.

FIGURE 10. *DUNE* (2011). Photograph of Amy Bush courtesy of Sondra Fraleigh.

FIGURE 11. *DUNE* (2011). Youtube Video of a group dance improvisation in Snow Canyon, Utah. http://youtu.be/kCCeD3_ZLNQ?list=UUN808Mh6W6ARoFV7ZFGjcUw

FIGURE 12. *Soft Sandstone Butoh* with Angela Graff (2012). Photograph courtesy Sondra Fraleigh.

FIGURE 13. Youtube Video of *Soft Sandstone Butoh* (2013). Video and music by Sondra Fraleigh: http://youtu.be/eUiZw7c_OhQ?list=UUN808Mh6W6ARoFV7ZFGjcUw

Figure 14. *Be Spinach and Stone Butoh* (2012). Photograph of Kristin Torok courtesy of Kay Nelson.

Figure 15. Youtube Video of *Be Spinach and Stone Butoh* (2013). Video and music by Sondra Fraleigh:

<http://youtu.be/QMjCzcCWQXg?list=UUN808Mh6W6ARoFV7ZFGjcUw>

III. Why Improvise?

Somatics, Improvisation, and Human Potential

My experiences with dance improvisation have allowed me to explore several possible-selves and modes of creativity. As a whole, they seed my current concerns with the improvisational body in somatics, and they lend a perspective on somatic approaches toward improvisation? At their core, somatic processes reflect an ethic of care, not always present in dance improvisation, existing as it does in many differing frameworks. Facilitating safe and encouraging contexts for improvisation is one of the tasks of somatics as a field, whether in education, therapy, or socially in community. Dance improvisation experiences are not always positive, especially in their social milieu. Moving spontaneously and freely might signal license in the eyes of some, or lead to objectification of participants in negative and exploitive ways. There is no control for this, as in most human undertakings. Dance improvisations are risky and vulnerable ventures. Dance itself is risky, and in its varied forms might invoke sexual objectification and unwanted advances, as one woman explains her experience in a Contact Improvisation Jam (Rythea Lee, *Contact Quarterly* 2014, pp. 34-35).

When we dance, our body is on the line, so to speak, and thus social and sexual boundaries need to be clear. Artists will always question boundaries, but that doesn't mean that just anything goes. Should explicit explorations of sexual acts enter in, for instance, as they have in some Contact Improvisation Jams (Keith Hennessy, *Contact Quarterly* 2014, pp. 36-38)? The photograph on the back of this *Contact Quarterly* journal shows overt sexual contact as part of Contact Improvisation, with sexual healing

in groups as one of the stated intentions of participants. I'm more apt to ask why people would shift from dance to intentional sexual behavior. This seems a sea change to me. Sex and dance are different acts and activities. For me personally, and as a teacher, the line between sexual contact and dance contact is clear, even as I believe that sexuality as eros (vitality) is part of everything. I like to joke that 'there's no such thing as sex: because everything is sex'. However, we know that wrestling is not sex, even when the contact is sexually close, and dancing is not sex, however sexy it might be or seem.

Somatic approaches to dance court vulnerability in other ways, and in this lies their strength. How can it be that dance processes turn toward soma? Soma is body perceived or known by the self and in relation to others. Soma and psyche (vital essence) together indicate ability to commit to an action or emotion. Greeks never use the word 'soma' by itself, Aiki Hiotaki says, except to indicate the organic body. Rather Greeks use both words: 'soma and psyche' σώμα και ψυχή, to convey a living essence (Hiotaki 2014). Somatics is a field of human development that begins with 'subjective body awareness', a term first expounded in phenomenology. From there it looks outward relationally, cultivating intersubjective awareness and intra-sensory, eco-friendly dance experiences. The broad field of somatics lends itself to a variety of perspectives in education, dance, and movement practices.

I cultivate somatics in terms of healing through dance, yoga, and touch. Somatic developments of dance improvisation are also distinct as intentionally oriented toward personal development, building relationships through sociality, and also advancing modes of neutral witnessing and non-judgment. In practice, somatic strategies are focused on change in the person, and participation for all, not on high-tech performance

for audiences, even as informal performances can serve somatic goals. Somatic improvisational processes also hold ecological perspectives, envisioning the human in and as nature (See Alison East, 'Body as Nature' in Fraleigh, *Moving Consciously*, in press).

Improvisational practices in aesthetic and performance contexts have for years held many of the same developmental values as somatics, but have not by design always emphasized these. Somatically inspired improvisations do not in their basic intent aim to be expressive, beautiful, or impressive. Nor do they aim to empower dancers to any given end. To the contrary, they brave vulnerability. In view of perception and process, witnesses to such improvisations accept what happens in the event and in the moment, and they use this consciously, sometimes reflecting back the experience, verbally or in painting. Somatically conceived improvisations often aim toward personal transformations, which are pragmatically open to an array of outcomes.

Such improvisations also intersect with community projects after traumatic events, and use somatic tools for healing through group processes. Anna Halprin was famous for facilitating community healing through somatic rituals. The actual events are less important than group cohesion. Somatic dance is autotelic in character, that is, done for the value of the doing, and for no other purpose. Earlier forms of aesthetically conceived improvisation also hold autotelic elements, but not when the dance projects the awareness of participants toward the success of the improvisation in terms of audience reception.

My present work with depth-movement dance (or depth-movement) takes inspiration from Authentic Movement, the improvisational practice that grew out of the

work of Mary Whitehouse, but it uses Body Mapping as a therapeutic method. Whereas Authentic Movement also employs an art/movement interface, it doesn't generally start with people tracing their partner's body outline on large body-size pieces of paper as in Body Mapping. In beginning this way, participants have a body outline as a reference point. If it is an outline of my body, I can find places of pain, trauma, and conversely feelings of depth and wholeness in the outline, paint them, and eventually dance them for a witness. Or the witness can dance an aspect of my map for me.

I always feel better when someone else dances my pain as I have painted it, or at least as they see it. I like to join in at the end, improvising the (now doubled) pain away. In another instance, the witness might paint her experience of witnessing my dance. There is also the option that the dancer and the witness might paint on or outside a body outline in tandem. *Intersubjectivity and empathy* develop in Body Mapping depth-movement processes, which can be structured for partners or group connectivity. Depth-Movement can also be improvised directly through *dance and response* without visual art intervening. Relating to others creatively is significant to what psychologist Abraham Maslow called "self-actualization" (Maslow 1954).

The Fluid Self: Flow and Forgiveness

'Why improvise' has many possible answers. For somatic practices, improvisation is a way of accessing seemingly hidden treasure of human experience, and a way of allowing tears to flow. People get to know themselves in ways they cannot anticipate or conjure on a therapist's couch. They get to know themselves not through words, though these may help, but through immediate bodily affectivity. Happiness and sorrow want to

surface! Emotions are not bad actors; their expressive flow is needed to sustain physical and mental health. One of the values of improvisation is to provide a safe place for movement expressions, a place to practice, and also a way to distance emotional life aesthetically, distilling and reflecting on states of feeling and being through dance. Merleau-Ponty (1968) spoke of “the flesh of the world” in view of human abilities to reverse perceptual activities. Perception “folds” in its active and receptive aspects. I can relate to my in-sights while also relating to outer otherness, to a visible object and to its invisible properties. Perceptual life is symbiotic and continuous with all life, even in its disruptions. I can step forward and also backward, reversing my motions. Time is relative.

Embodiment is ongoing, as we have said, and never quite complete. This is part of the philosophy we are developing. How we find language for improvisatory values is important, because language is formative in consciousness. Words are formative. We embody them as we speak, write, and communicate. Why improvise? Perhaps one doesn't need a reason, but eventually some understanding or purpose will arise—when we feel better, expand awareness, or understand something we didn't quite get before. The body is affective, a feeling state in itself, a reason to improvise, and to dance.

I like to find words for dance experiences—a daunting task. In looking back over my experiences with dance improvisation, I see how they have been developmental avenues for me. I wouldn't say, however, that improvisation has empowered me to any given end, in or out of somatic contexts. Concerning the latter, I contend that the language of 'empowerment', which has been brewing in dance for several years, does not facilitate the liberation we hope to foster in somatically inspired improvisations.

Other terms emerge from my analysis that I believe better state the existentials of human potential, terms like 'encouragement', 'self-realization', 'intersubjective awareness', 'eco-friendliness', and there are many more.

In the distinction between 'power-over' and 'power-for', the first speaks to control and the second to opportunity. But I believe we can find a better words than 'power' and 'empowerment' to value dance experiences. We might cultivate a language of freedom and agency, of self-affirmation and self-knowing, not one that suggests authority. We are sometimes powerful when we improvise, but we are also exposed. Mastery, power, and empowerment all result from pyramidal structures of thought and action. (A critique of mastery is thematic in my book, *Dancing Identity: Metaphysics in Motion* 2006.) They imply an end point of control and solidifying of ego. I imagine that writers on dance don't mean to imply this, but the language is problematic and in repetition becomes cliché. I think it derives a lot from the early liberation era of feminism when women sought power over their lives, and this is still an important goal today. I have identified with feminist issues since reading Beauvior in my 20s, often teetering between anger and inspiration, but reasons to improvise are complex and only sometimes hang on issues of empowerment.

Several articles in a recent dance publication favor the language of empowerment in articulating values of dance and improvisation (See: *Dance, Movement & Spiritualities* 2014). One article examines the term 'empowerment', and places it at the top of a pyramid of learning and experience (Deasy 131). The author cites several somatic steps leading toward empowerment: freedom, self-discovery, authenticity, and individuality. These words are repeated often in dance writing. 'Individuality' is assumed

to be valuable, and yet it has so many appearances. To be individual is not a singular somatic value, unless it indicates independence of thought and the ability to act.

Sociality is just as important as individuality. Authenticity is also problematic as a human value or movement marker. Antiques can be authentic, but it is very difficult to say what is authentic in emotional and developmental life, or in human movement. All movement is authentically what it is, neither good nor bad until we judge it so.

The word 'authentic' deserves its own article. What seems authentic one moment has veered in another direction the next. If a movement feels good, we might say it feels right (authentic) for that moment, but what about movement that grates against the grain—as in *butoh*, which pays attention to offbeat affects that don't necessarily feel right or good? Which movements are more and which are less authentic? Freedom is also one of those packed words or ideals that lose meaning without context. In movement, freedom can imply ease of breath and readiness to move in any direction. In improvisation, it often indicates the ability to choose. The improvisational body implicates *potentials* rather than *power*. Martin Heidegger states this existentially: 'Greater than actuality stands possibility' (1962, pp. 62-63).

Let us draw a simple distinction between 'empowerment' and 'fluency', and then project this distinction toward a philosophy of the body. After becoming empowered, what comes next? Authority emanates from power, and is also an egoistic dead end. Can we find a new language that is more circular, spiraled and moving, a language that draws ability as 'can do' from a well of potentiality?

The dynamic growth I envision moves toward self-knowing and positive relationships. Confidence might be a result, at least in the moment. I am aware of

courting confidence daily, inviting it, losing it, and winning it back in moments. It isn't something I own on any permanent basis. Sometimes I feel strong, even powerful, but the feeling can turn weak. I actually like to do improvisations on 'the weak body' in butoh, which its founder Hijikata Tatsumi demonstrated as more to the point of his dance than strength. To my mind, weakness, humility, and strength are all necessary to a full spectrum of feeling. They are movement affects to be explored, and not always singularly. When I improvise, I move through many states, most of which I seldom name. But when I reflect back I can tease some out, and sometimes say how they mix. Power inflected with love radiates, for instance. It is full, hopeful and complex.

What language would suffice then to speak of the benefits of the improvisational body? I nominate a language of embodied fluency. This might translate in felt terms as 'affective fluidity', or more concretely as *the emotionally fluid body*. I learned from this *fluid body* in outlining phases of my own improvisational dance history, which seemed best summoned in felt imagery and poesis. In this, I follow the lead of scientist Candace Pert who explains emotion throughout the body as fluid, tidal, weather-like and ever changing (*Molecules of Emotion* 1997). The emotionally fluid body arises existentially from what I think of as 'water logic', a fluid environment in consciousness that can move in any direction. Fluidity generates resilience, forbearance, and a life of 'yes'. 'Yes we can' and 'yes we care' are much more useful as existentials emerging from improvisation than assertion, control, and power.

Out of this grows skillful acquaintance with motion that I mentioned in the beginning. This, we could say, grows through practice, as do particular matters of style in performance. We who improvise for personal development are less concerned with

skill as we cultivate unique opportunities to experience intimacy with body and others, surrender in relation to strength and will, and a generative flow that keeps us centered and moving into the happening of the moment. Not making things happen, we participate in the larger whole. Gratefully, we learn that we are not the doers, but that we live in doings and surprises that surpass us. We become more resilient and accepting—less forceful. We experience the place of failure in success.

Figure 16. Sondra Fraleigh improvising in performance, circa 1984. Photograph, courtesy, June Burke

In the beginning of this essay, I rejected individualism in lieu of human connectivity. I've learned as an improviser that everyone matters. To have an effect, to feel the self projected into the future while holding presence, and to know oneself as implicated positively in the world and others are potential benefits arising from fluid processes and conceptions of the improvisational body. When I improvise I move toward my best self. I brim with joy and past hurts. Sometimes I cry, and find ways to forgive my foibles. I let go of guilt and forgive others. I move, and move more, as one moment dances into the next without dread or anticipation.

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