

# Breathing with

## Building a Dance Practice during Times of Isolation

---

Katelyn Skelley

Dance practice, often involving time together in the studio, was highly challenged during the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Instead of enjoying the routine of meeting and moving together, we were home in isolation, presented with more solo spacetime than previously accustomed to. At the same time, there was an overload of devastating news via the media that needed processing. The climate and cultural crises were ever present, and the future of the dance field was full of uncertainty. This contribution shares material from a dance practice that was developed during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic between April 2020 and December 2021.<sup>1</sup> Titled *Breathing with: practices of coexistence*<sup>2</sup> the basis of the practice is breathing, through which we are in constant exchange with each other and our environment. Pulling from both theoretical and practice-based movement research, the process aimed to enrich the own movement practice and build towards material for teaching contexts. With limited options to meet in the studio, the research fluctuated between reading, observing the vegetal world, creating movement tasks from home and meeting for some workshop phases together in the studio.<sup>3</sup> The practice is based on and

- 
- 1 The practice was developed in collaboration with dancer, choreographer/researcher and dance educator Susanne Schneider. See: <https://susanneschneider.org> The research was supported by Kulturreferat der Landeshauptstadt München, Tanztendenz Munich, the Tanzplattform Rhein-Main and the Hessischen Kulturstiftung.
  - 2 The term "coexistence" was pulled from the book *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives* and is used in reference to the peaceful coexistence between humans and between humans and the vegetal world (Irigaray/Marder 2016: 31).
  - 3 During the project period, Susanne and I worked together in-person for three research phases. In November 2021, a two-week research phase was held at Künstlerhaus Mousonturm in Frankfurt. In July 2022, a two-week research phase was held at HochX in Munich. In December 2021, a workshop week was held at Tanztendenz in Munich

inspired by the book “Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives” written by Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder (Irigaray/Marder 2016). In the workshop phases, new routines on “breathing with” were explored in relation to concepts from the book. For example, an exploration called “Air as Medium” was inspired by Irigaray’s thought that air, beyond being essential for life itself, is also a medium to pass on sensory messages and to move in with ease (Irigaray 2016: 28). In this paper, references to *Through Vegetal Being* are briefly outlined, followed by the presentation of three examples from the practice.

### Gathering inspiration for dance practice

Written as a series of letters between Marder and Irigaray, *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives* is an exchange on the significance of the vegetal world for our lives, our ways of thinking and relating with each other and nonhuman beings. Looking critically at how Western culture has taken care of the atmosphere and beings that maintain it, they shared alternative ways of coming into communication with each other and the natural world. They invite the reader into experiencing their own relationships with the vegetal world; Marder having a more direct relation with plants and Irigaray sharing what the vegetal world brings to her and its potential to provide a space of retreat, renewal and transformation of the human experience. Throughout the text, Irigaray and Marder exchange on how the cultivation of breath and a heightened awareness to the sharing of air, can be pathways towards reconfiguring our way of being and relating to each other in the world. For example, Marder emphasizes that breathing can only happen in interaction with the world, through close relationships with other living organisms. He points out that “like leaves, we breathe through the surface of our skin, not only through our lungs. Every one of these innumerable tiny breaths is a channel between the body and the elemental milieu wherein it is immersed” (Irigaray/Marder 2016: 159). In relation, Irigaray speaks about how breathing is also a gesture that “can define our internal and external space or place,” (2016: 31) and that “breathing reminds one of the differences between outside and inside and between the other and myself” (2016: 23). For Irigaray, the cultivation of one’s breath is a resource to simultaneously nurture oneself and share with others and the environment.

---

with invited participants. Workshop participants included: Olive Bieringa, Patscharaporn Krüger-Distakul, Ouindell Orton, Alexandra Paal and Laura Saumweber.

In relation to dance, breathing is utilized and referred to in a number of ways. For example, attention to breath has been integrated into dance trainings through the incorporation of somatic practices. (Brodie/Lobel 2011: 82; Bales/Nettl-Foil 2008:146) Dance techniques, notably the Graham Technique, link breathing to formalized movements of contraction and release to connect to muscular action and emotion expressed through movement (Reynolds 2002:16). In choreography, audible breath can be used as a tool to bring different dynamics to movement or as a way to stay together in unison movement phrases (cf. Henderson 2018). In our project, breathing is explored as a means to look at the individual as coexisting with a group and within an ecosystem. While breath is discussed on different levels in *Through Vegetal Being*, the connection to corporal breathing, relating directly to the body was of focus. Through movement research done in nature, at home and in the workshop phases, concepts from the text were gradually formed into material for dance training contexts. To gain insight into the practice, three examples including a brief introduction into the research material are presented.<sup>4</sup>

## 1. Respiratory rate

Respiratory rate is an exploration that invites “dancing together” yet with a heightened attention to one’s own breathing rhythms and the simultaneous awareness of others. From a physiological standpoint, a person’s respiratory rate is the number of breaths taken per minute at a state of rest. It can be measured by counting the number of times that the chest and belly rise per minute. The rate of respiration has to do with ventilation and gas exchange, regulating how much oxygen rich blood is maintained at any moment. It is part of our bodies ability to regulate itself and maintain an overall wellbeing. Therefore, respiratory rates can change in response to exercise, emotions, sleep and signs of imbalance (Nicolò et al. 2020: 2). For the practice, the respiratory rate was utilized as a means to explore the idea that breath is a resource to nurture oneself and at the same time share with others and the environment. As participants are encouraged to follow their own breathing rhythms while recognizing and

---

4 To apply the practice into dance training contexts, open trainings and a workshop week were held at Tanztenenz in Munich in December 2021. Open trainings were offered that combined multiple explorations into a 2-hour frame. Afterwards, a workshop format was offered for invited participants where developed material was tried out, reflected upon and adapted from the perspectives of the participants.

respecting others, a further aim of the exploration is to bring awareness to the differences between self and other, all while dancing together.

The exploration can be done in pairs or in a group. It begins by identifying each person's personal respiratory rate. Working in pairs, one person begins lying down and the other uses a timer to measure how many times their partners chest and abdomen rise in a minute. Then the roles are switched so that each person identifies their personal respiratory rate. The remainder of the exploration is led by one person who continually feeds in verbal cues. To begin everyone is invited to find a comfortable position and to attend to their own breathing. Participants are guided to follow the breath in their chest and belly, noticing the timing of the breath, the depth, the space after each inhalation and exhalation. The group is reminded that the steady, constant rhythm and breathing volume that they are experiencing, is nourishing their bodies as they need it in that moment. The group is gradually invited to link their breathing rhythm with movement to make their personal respiratory rate perceptible from the outside. The first step is to start moving the hands only on the inhale, then only on the exhale, only on the pauses between inhale and exhale and finally on both the inhale and exhale. Each of these steps takes time. Eventually participants are invited to bring their movement to other joint spaces in the body to create more full body movement while continuing to use their respiratory rate as guide. A next step is to invite the group to begin moving in space and to open their awareness to others while maintaining their connection to their personal respiratory rate. By giving the instruction for each participant to move at their personal respiratory rate, while having awareness of others, each of the participants breathing rhythms become visible and relatable to the others in space.

As seen in photo 1, the participants are invited to get closer to the people around them to notice subtle differences between their movement rhythm and others. After some time, participants are invited to find a partner and match to their partners movement rhythm, so that they depart from their own breathing rhythm and join in with their partners. Important is that each participant knows that they can always return to moving with their personal respiratory rate. The exploration can take time to unfold and continue for a long duration.



*Fig. 1: Quintell Orton and Katelyn Skelley in the Respiratory Rate exploration during the final workshop week (Photo: Susanne Schneider)*

## 2. Lung lobe explorations

The Lung lobe explorations focus on the lungs, as they are the main organs of breathing and taking in and out air.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the lungs can be a channel between our internal and external space or place. From an anatomical standpoint, the lungs are divided into five main sections, which are referred to as “lobes.” The right side of the torso has three lobes, and the left side has two lobes, as they share the same side of the chest with the heart. The lungs have

---

5 The lung lobes explorations are inspired by the work of Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen and Body Mind Centering (Bainbridge Cohen 2012:28).

a spongy texture and according to Body-Mind Centering, the lungs connect to buoyancy, inspiration and action filtered through the air (Cohen 2012: 39). For the practice, the Lung lobes explorations were developed as a means to experience how an awareness of the lungs could affect the “inside” sensation of one’s own movement as well as “the outside” connection to others and the space.

The explorations can be done individually, in pairs or in a group. As a first step, images of the lungs are shown as a reference point. To begin, each person is invited to identify the placement, form, structure and size of their lung lobes through self-touch. In lying, sitting or standing, participants are invited to bring one hand to touch the area of the middle of the left collar bone, to sense the movement, volume and direction of the upper left lung lobe while inhaling and exhaling. After some time, participants are invited to bring their hand to the lower left lobe, eventually bringing the touch to each of the three lobes on the right side. Participants are encouraged to notice how the touch affects the lobes as well as the possible different capacities between lobes. Following this individual exploration, participants are invited to find a partner. The task is to find different positions in space, for example, upside down, in rotation or extension, so that the lung lobes can be experienced in different relations to the pull of gravity. Partners do it together and match each other’s positions to share a similar experience. Moving back to an individual exploration, participants are invited to come to standing, to tune into the expansion and condensing of their lung lobes. They are invited to create a dance by moving the upper body, initiating movement from the different lobes (see Fig. 2).

Eventually participants are encouraged to bring the exploration to the whole body and to move through space, also utilizing different levels. Participants are invited to have lung lobe movement conversations with partners in space or to relate to the space as a whole through movements initiated by the lung lobes, as seen in photo 2. As a variation, participants are invited to observe each other to identify interesting movement qualities, relations between people and the overall atmosphere in the room.

### 3. Air as Medium

As most of the text *Through Vegetal Being* directly relates to being outside in nature, the exploration, Air as Medium aims to enliven the presence of air in the studio space. Beyond air being essential for living, air can also provide a sense of companionship and a means to pass on and receive sensory messages (Irigaray/Marder 2016: 28). As the vegetal world is constantly in interaction

with their environment through air, attention is brought to the presence of air through the entire surface of the body. This exploration aims to bring a heightened awareness to the air as a vital element to move in.

The exploration can be done individually, in pairs or in a group. It begins by inviting participants to move with ease through the atmosphere created by air and to sense the air's presence even though it is not visible. After some time, different words are used to change the ways of interacting with air. The first direction is to "caress" the air. To understand the quality of caressing, participants are invited to touch the surface of their own skin in a caressing way. Eventually participants are invited to caress the air with their hands and then with all surfaces of their skin. As a second way to interact with air, participants are invited to "whirl" the air around them. Thirdly, participants are invited to "cut" and "slice" their bodies through the air.



*Fig. 2: Patscharaporn Distakul and Susanne Schneider in the Lung lobe exploration during the final workshop week (Photo: Katelyn Skelley)*

*Fig. 3: Patscharaporn Distakul and Susanne Schneider in Air as Medium during the final workshop week (Photo: Katelyn Skelley)*

Using the three cues: caress, whirl and cut/slice, participants are invited to play between the different modes of interacting with air, seen in photo 3. After time exploring independently, participants are invited to find a partner to play with the different ways of interacting with air together. A focus is to change the air around their partners through implementing the different ways of interacting with air and playing with proximity. Eventually participants are invited to return to an individual exploration and to find different balancing points (on one leg for example) to notice the support from the air around them. The next step is to practice falling from different balancing points, into the companion of air. Balancing points can be found on all different surfaces of the body and on different levels in space. The frequency and repetitions of falls into the air can be played with. To give participants a chance to observe one another, each parameter of interacting with air: caress, whirl, cut/slice and fall into, can be done moving across the space in small groups.

## Conclusions

In this contribution, exercises for dance trainings focusing on breath are presented. Within the project, the collection of 30 developed exercises was documented and made available online for open access.<sup>6</sup> The research reflects a unique period of practicing dance, where there was time and space to slow down, look inward and bring attention to breathing. As we return to our normal routines of everything moving faster, bigger and more, the collection of exercises serve as a reminder to attend to the tender space of breathing. First in the preparation phases and then in the workshop phases, ideas from the book *Through Vegetal Being* were used to build new routines on “breathing with” for dance trainings. While breathing is always happening, new routines were established by giving attention to the processes involved. Participants reflected that spending time with the functionality of breath deepened their internal sensation of self and sense of singularity. It was also reported that bringing awareness to how air moves through the body enlivened creativity and a conscious relationship between self and the environment. In the teaching of the material,

---

6 The summarized collection of the explorations, including photos and short videos are accessible on Susanne Schneider’s website: <https://susanneschneider.org/MA-breathing-gallery>.

attention to breath and the sharing of air was offered as a tool to support movement as well as foster artistry and expressivity in solo and group dances. For future research, elements of the practice could be applied in technique classes with the aim of investigating the relationships between the own self, the group and the dance studio environment. Explorations such as Air as Medium that bring awareness to air yet can be easily layered onto movement material could be promising approaches.

## References

- Bales, Melanie/Nettl-Fiol, Rebecca (2008): *The Body Eclectic: Evolving Practices in Dance Teaching*, Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Brodie, Julie/Lobel, Elin (2004): Integrating Fundamental Principles Underlying Somatic Practices into the Dance Technique Class, in: *Journal of Dance Education*, Vol. 4 No. 3, pp. 80–87. DOI: 10.1080/15290824.2004.10387263
- Cohen, Bonnie Bambridge. (2012): *Sensing, Feeling and Action*, 3. ed., Northampton, MA: Contact Editions.
- Henderson, Garnet (2018): *These five breathing tips will transform your dancing* [online] <https://www.dancemagazine.com/these-5-breathing-tips-will-transform-your-dancing/> [22.01.2023]
- Irigaray, Luce/Marder, Michael (2016): *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Nicolò, Andrea/Massaroni, Carlo/Schena, Emiliano/Sacchetti, Massimo (2020): The Importance of Respiratory Rate Monitoring: From Healthcare to Sport and Exercise, in: *Sensors*, Vol. 20, pp. 1–46. <https://doi.org/10.3390/s20216396>
- Reynolds, Dee (2002): A Technique for Power: Reconfiguring Economies of Energy in Martha Graham's Early Work, in: *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, Vol. 20 No. 1, pp. 3–32. <https://doi.org/10.3366/1290867>

