

Merger Matters

Environmental Elements as Source of Somatic-Performative Research

Ciane Fernandes

On earth, everything is movement: the slow dislocation of the continents, the light sea currents, the speedy atmosphere winds, the super fast sun light. Flows which form everything that exists in our planet. Light, air, water and earth are as four oceans which compose and involve us. The floating fabrics undulate as the different flows of the planet. The continuous movement of the fabrics stands for the mutual influence among the elements which compose the climatic interactions.

Daniel Wurtzel¹

Spatial Pulses (Fire)

This text presents an ongoing enquiry which associates dance and somatic practices in natural environments. The work has been in development since 2010 and been undertaken at fluid environments, such as rivers, waterfalls or at the sea, mostly in three main locations in Bahia, Brazil: Lençóis BA, Chapada Diamantina National Park (2010-2015), Salvador BA (2015-present) and Itaparica island (2018-present). The practices are part of the following activities under my coordination at Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), Salvador: artistic explorations of the A-FETO Dance Theater Collective; Performance Laboratory at the Graduate Program of Performing Arts; different undergraduate classes on body technique for performing artists at the School of Theater at UFBA. Environmental elements

1 Part of the kinetic sculpture *Fluxos (Flows)* at Museu do Amanha (Museum of Tomorrow), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

have constituted the experience of what I have named Body Environment Merger, as both creative process and public performance, in the context of academic teaching and research. For this reason, each section of the present text has been named primarily as one element, although all elements are present in all sections, as both experience and inspirational metaphor and poetics, as they have been in every activity, procedure and phase of this project.

These natural elements are present in the practice by perceiving, connecting, and exploring body and space as *soma* – “holistic processes of structure and function, in constant interchange of matter and energy” (Hanna 1976: 32). Such gradations between matter and energy define the different densities of the physical world. In vibratory waves, densities can be understood as “dancities,” – that is, undulating exchanges among diverse somatic materialities. In Body Environment Merger, it is not just the human body and live organisms that are taken as *soma*, but all space (inside and outside living organisms) is understood as alive. This spread out “somatic field” (Nagatomo 1995: 202) is based on Rudolf Laban’s “dynamic space” or *dynamosphere* (Laban 1974: 36), which associates his two main categories: “Eukinetics” (*Antrieb*/effort or dynamics; inner attitude towards the four motion factors of flow-space-weight-time) and “Choreutics” (visual forms or “trace-forms” created by the movement in/ with space). I have named this association as “spatial pulsing” (Fernandes 2014: 75), based on the Lacanian translation of Freudian *Trieb* as “pulse,” rather than “instinct” (Mills 2004: 673). In fact, *Trieb* corresponds to “driving force” (2004: 675), without a clear reference to an inner expression towards the environment or even a separation into inside and outside categories.

In Body Environment Merger, the spatial pulses that permeate both body and environment are vibratory interchangeable waves that alternate intensities between “Stir and Stillness” (Laban 1984 [1939]: 68), in nuances of rhythm. Body Environment Merger is the process of connecting inner and outer rhythms through the art of movement, which activates and integrates different levels of perception and consciousness in a state of deep ecological attunement. In that sense, it consists of a somatic practice that “encompasses a diversity of knowledge where the sensory, cognitive, motor, affective, and spiritual domains mingle with different emphases” (Fortin 1999: 40).

In the *Rigveda* (Griffith 1896), the word *soma* was already used to describe both a sacred drink and inspiration or motivating force, corresponding precisely to what Laban (1960) called *Antrieb* – translated into English as *effort*, not with the sense of exertion, but of expressive dynamics. As stated by Antja Kennedy (1994), Eukinetics’ qualities of flow-space-weight-time correspond to natural elements of water-air-earth-fire, Carl Gustav Jung’s faculties of feeling-thinking-sensing-intuiting. By merging with/in the environment and its natural elements, a state of “attunement and somatic knowing” (Nagatomo 1995: 201) is developed,

one that composes different faculties through moving nuances, in the form of a “wisdom of the body moving” (Hartley 1995). This process shifts the dichotomy between movement and thinking into a dynamic awareness that creates meaning in improvisatory motion. Dance with/in the environment creates and organizes knowledge, in a branch of Somatic-Performative Research (Fernandes 2014) I have recently named Merger as Research/MaR, an unfolding of Practice as Research/PaR. Curiously enough, the word *mar* also means “sea” in Portuguese, a primordial fluid environment which contains 118 minerals and oligoelements and can be considered the blood of planet earth.

Somatic Attunement (Air)

Although apparently in stillness, nature is constantly moving; temperatures, for example, provide the transformation of water into rain and back to the ground. The earth itself changes its geological features along the years, although in a much longer and unapparent cycle. In fact, the earth is going through dramatic changes in its landscapes in a much faster fashion, due to climate changes. So lately we have witnessed intense movements of nature, such as tsunamis, storms and hurricanes. Nature moves in motion factors as much as human beings are constituted by natural elements, such as minerals, fluids, unicellular and microscopic structures, in constant flow, exchange and transformation.

In a somatic-performative approach, performing activities which involve the whole body in/through/with the dynamic space inspire us to connect concepts and construct meanings out of a “somatic ecology” (Hanna 1976: 3), integrating emotion-intention-sensation-intuition – corresponding to effort qualities of flow-space-weight-time and natural elements of water-air-earth-fire (Kennedy 1994) – with/in the environment. As we move through different contexts, in both daily life routines and dancing in nature, motion factors combine in two or three (flow-space-weight-time) along different phrasings, at times more accented, others more even, alternating condensing (bound-direct-strong-quick) and indulging (free-indirect-light-sustained) gradations in our relationship to the surrounding environment. Both human body and environment are constituted by these effort qualities, although in nature they manifest themselves in the movement of animals, plants, rivers, wind currents, rocks, sunlight etc. For instance, plants grow in a spiraling pattern of spatial progression (Mathern 1989). According to quantum physics, the universe is in constant rotation and expansion (Barrow 2001: 187).



Fig. 1: Ciane Fernandes in *Body Environment Merger*. Lençóis BA, 2013. *Body Painting* by Rosel Grassmann. Photo: Susanne Ohmann, edited by Tom Lima.

Therefore, in this project, the connection with natural elements is realized through the perception of this pulsing interchange between body and environment, which leads to unpredictable ways of moving, born out of a resting state which is intrinsically dynamic, restoring the connections with one's own rhythms. This state of Dynamic Stillness allows for the perception of the *dynamosphere* which permeates everything. The released sense of embodiment facilitates a sense of connection with the environment, which we might call “attunement” (Nagatomo 1994: 195). From this melting state into the environment, different effort qualities emerge, in unpredictable combinations of rhythms.

The personal body must be open toward the living ambiance for an adaptation to take place, particularly in the form of somatic knowing. [...] [T]he term, attunement, is descriptive of the *relationship* obtaining in the fluid bilaterality between the personal body and the living ambiance. This means that we have shifted the locus of the traditional epistemological investigation away from both the mind as an epistemological *subject* and the shaped thing as an epistemological object. (Nagatomo 1995: 200 f.)

This openness provided by Dynamic Stillness shifts our perception of ourselves and of the environment, and creates a sense of knowledge that is created through relationship, rather than through exertive production of material goods and abstract ideas. In this fluid and relational perspective, meaning comes out of experience and creates a somatic knowing in a continuous process that transforms the way in which we live and learn.

Going and Growing with the Flow (Water)

In the day of the activity, we start by being aware of our state as we wake up, how we go through different daily actions in the way to nature, and how we select different materials to take along (or are rather selected by them). As we all meet close to the trail or by the beach, we talk briefly about directions, schedule, and review general principles. These principles come from the main influences on my careers – dance theater, dance improvisation, performance, Authentic Movement, Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis and, lately, Body Mind Centering™. General rules need to be discussed before it starts, because many times people spread out on space and it is difficult to keep track when it is time to shift to some new input or some important warning needs to be done (e.g. taking care with the tide coming up).

At the beach, one of us might propose a warm up,² and sometimes even spreading sun lotion and lent hats and shirts to each other can be part of the mutual caring and exchange. Before entering the water, we might gather by the shore for a moment of rest, breathing and contemplating. Different approaches have guided the explorations at the sea. For example, depending on the tide, we might explore how the research object is advancing and taking us almost completely, how we succumb to the waves totally effortlessly, or how we can resist firmly and go against the tide, and then how we balance these two forces, being moved and moving, indulging and condensing, subject and object, both active partners at a Merger as Research. New discoveries come from such moments, as we might notice how we resist letting go and lose control of the situation, for example.

Such improvisatory motion can be facilitated by some prior somatic exercises, such as the Basic Developmental Patterns/BNP. These were initially developed by Irmgard Bartenieff as six basic neuromuscular body organizations, later further unfolded by her student Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, founder of the Body Mind Centering™, into sixteen BNP (four pre-vertebrate and twelve vertebrate patterns). Many times I have taught the six BNP devised by Bartenieff at the sea, in duets, trios etc., followed by exercising balance at the stand up paddle practice, and Space Harmony Scales at the beach.

Lately, I have selected initially two of those BNPs devised by Bartenieff, which are also part of BMC pre-vertebrate patterns, therefore present in live forms of fluid environments: Cellular breathing and Navel radiation. These two patterns seem to be quite suitable for merging with the sea ambiance. From these two basic patterns, following Bartenieff's set up, we would go to Spinal pattern (head-tail),

2 Some frequent participants of these activities at the sea have been Prof. Leonardo Sebiane, Prof. Maciej Rozalski, post-doctoral fellow Daniel Becker, performing arts doctoral students Diego Pizarro and Ludimila Nunes, masters student Gabriela Holanda, among others.

which is BMC's first vertebrate pattern. But I have felt the need to expand to other BMC systems which are more related to fluidity, prior to step into vertebrate organization. Therefore, I have included specific fluid systems of the body, such as intracellular fluid, intercellular fluid, blood and cerebrospinal fluid. What I have noticed from such associations is that they support each other. For instance, intracellular fluid helps sensing Cellular Breathing, blood prepares to Navel Radiation pattern as we gradually learn to grow and shrink with the whole body from the core, and cerebrospinal fluid gives a moving sense of the Spinal pattern (head-tail). Other systems might come up in a moment or another and redirect the whole laboratory, as when Diego Pizarro³ noticed the influence of the ovaries during one of the exercises on Spinal pattern with his partner, and the group turned their attention to that experience, developing a whole improvisation guided by him. All of these exercises clearly facilitate the sensing of our fluid constitution and, therefore, enhance our interaction with the sea.

I have also, lately, performed Space Harmony scales (Laban 1974) not only at the beach, but alternating between sand and sea, and even with the whole body under water, alternating slight moments for breathing outside water during spatial transitions. Designed within crystalline forms, Laban scales and their pathways cross through different levels of the environment, connecting body and space in a very intricate manner. Through such experiences, it is possible to alternate different elements, as we alternate between standing (air) under the hot sun (fire) into the water and down to the sand (earth), in different combinations of rhythms and body parts. As we move along the scales in open space, our kinesphere also shrinks and grows to infinite ranges as we have an open horizon around us.

Grounding (Earth)

The above laboratories at the sea follow principles developed earlier on this project, while we were having activities in Lençóis BA, Chapada Diamantina National Park. At trails in our way to waterfalls, we walked along in silence, or singing if one felt like it, paying attention simultaneously to our walking and surroundings, developing a sense of inner and outer awareness and connection. We did have an initial plan in terms of where to go, but many times plans changed as we went along the trail and discovered other spots to which we felt somatically connected, willing to interact. As we settled in one place, we dropped our objects in a safe spot and continued to follow our inner impulses (as we often practice in Authentic

3 Diego Pizarro is a certified BMC practitioner, a dance teacher at Federal Institute of Brasília D.F., Brazil, and a doctoral student at the Graduate Program of Performing Artists of Federal University of Bahia.

Movement sessions indoors), which sometimes asked for some rest and contemplating, eating, drinking water, or just wandering around, or gradually – sometimes immediately – getting in touch with some special element, such as colorful mud, rounded leaves, crystal clear waterfall etc. Sometimes we chose to get dressed and use make up right away as we arrived, or later on, differently from person to person, and costumes, make up and specific objects were sometimes used by more than one person, as improvisations developed and we passed on things to each other in a group composition.



Fig. 2: Ellen de Paula, Daniela Botero and Neila Baldi moving with and being moved by their research objects. Lençóis BA, 2013. Photo by Thales Branche.

In a first moment, in any of these choices of procedures and ambiances, instead of focusing on the action *per se* or pushing to do something, we perceive Dynamic Stillness as a means to facilitate somatic connections and the dissolution of preconceived ways of thinking-moving. As stated by Caryn McHose and Kevin Frank: “Rest, our birth right, eludes human beings. Most of us need to relearn how to truly rest. The level of flight-or-fight reaction that lives in our body requires considerable attention to undo” (McHose/Frank 2006: 22). These moments of rest can permeate the whole performance, following our somatic need to attunement. In waves of stir and stillness, experiences happen and compositions are gradually built by unpredictable moves with/in the environment. Little by little, the psycho-physical separation between body and environment gives place to the awareness

that we are constituted by the very same vibratory elements. In moments of somatic wisdom, we kinesthetically relearn that we are nature-made:

Our tendency to assume ourselves as subjects in a world of objects is intensified in a manmade environment such as a contemporary city. Surrounded by commodities, which function like fantasies, the subject is more likely to see what it has made, rather than feel itself to be connected with, or part of, what has made it. (Arlander 2012: 2)

Moments of stillness attune us to the fact that the environment is actually moving in very specific and complex combinations of rhythms, according to a spread out composition of spatial dynamics. That perception shifts the notion of dance as the act of moving on a passive background, towards the possibility of, in stillness, being moved by a creative landscape. In this scenario, not just *everyone* is a dancer – as praised by Laban – but *everything* is a dancer. Trace-forms can be perceived not only in man-made movements, but in an active environment as a whole (Laban 1984), permeated and constituted by spatial pulsing in “constant change” (Hackney 1998: 17): “Laban further argues that if the stability and harmony of the universe is reflected in the cell, free from the control of the central mind, then these qualities can be said to have existed before man. They are not, therefore, subject to his control, and were not initiated by him” (Thornton 1971: 26-27).

These autonomous forms of intelligence permeate dynamic space, connecting inside and outside of living organisms. The multiplicity of *somas* makes us aware of space as trans-cellular intelligence, to which we belong as matter and energy. This gives us a sense of belonging to a transitory place, even when we apparently remain still in a specific spot. So the game neither resides in an active mover (subject) dancing over a passive landscape background (object), nor on a passive performer being moved by a pulsing ambiance, but precisely in perceiving how both body and environment are alternating in stir and stillness within gradated somatic attunements.

In this context, grounding does not necessarily imply rooting in one specific place, as it evolves as patterns of change in the *spacetime continuum*, in an increasing sense of (be)coming home to our somatic attunement with/in a dynamic ambiance. So we actually come closer to a sense of rooting as we move from place to place following our connection to a pulsing environment. Paradoxically, it is as displacement that dance becomes the art of settlement. As (dis)placement, the art of movement reaffirms itself as relevant political engagement, by enhancing somatic resilience in the face of contemporary destabilizing conditions: “As ‘envisionaries,’ artists should be able to provide a way to work against the dominant culture’s rapacious view of nature [...]. We need artists to guide us through the sensuous, kinesthetic responses to topography” (Lippard in Lacy 1995: 128 f.).

Beyond isolated personal expression, the art of movement as Body Environment Merger fulfills an ecologically aesthetic purpose. Through merger, dance's ephemeral nature (Gil 2001) is reborn as unrestricted somatic attunement, thus fulfilling the prophecy of a deep ecological art form: "And thus one can hope someday to arrive at the point of fulfillment where the ego will hold fast, will consent to erase itself and to make room, to become, not the hero of the scene, but the scene itself: the site, the occasion of the other" (Hélenè Cixous in Williams 1996: 77). As Body Environment Merger, the art of movement opens up coherent possibilities of legitimate enquiry not only in dance, but in any field concerned with the development of life on an endangered planet.

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