

Dancing Relational Bodyhood

Older Disabled Artist-Activist Tuuli Helkky Helle
(1933–2018)

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Abstract: *Being contrasted to the idea of disability-free aging as positive and successful aging, ill, impaired, older persons who are ‘dependent’ (physically, socially, economically) are often devalued and stigmatized in ageist and ableist societies. Tracing the extraordinary life course and artistic practices of Tuuli Helkky Helle (1933–2018), an older Finnish dancer who lived with cerebral palsy, this paper highlights how she had reclaimed ‘dependency’ in a positive term and had visualized the beauty and power of the interconnected, interrelated, and caring relationships in her arts and life. From her 60s until her 80s, as an artist and activist, she participated in various dance pieces, radical nude photography series, and activist performances for older adults with disability. This article is the first academic article that documents her remarkable works and examines her dancing body. Drawing on the theoretical perspective of Ann Cooper Bright (2017; 2019) about gravity, interconnectedness, and disabled and aged bodies and Pia Kontos’s notion of “relational citizenship” (2017), this paper illuminates on the alternative danceability of aged-disabled body.*

Keywords: *Integrated Dance; Relationality; Dependency; Disabled Bodies; Crip Futurity*

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Aging with Disability: Tuuli Helkky Helle's Extraordinary Life Course

Organized around chronological age and stage-based transitions, the idealized heteronormative model of the life course is primarily linear and “views individuals as progressing through normative notions or stages along a relatively linear structure, with life events occurring at particular times” (Grenier and McGrath 2016: 1–2). The age-based expectations frame the later period of life through “the master narrative of decline” (Gullette 2004), which equates aging with the loss and decline (e.g., loss or decline of physical and mental ability, beauty and sexuality, cultural activity and productivity, etc.). While this narrative of decline feeds the cultural anxiety of aging, the rhetoric such as ‘successful/healthy/productive aging’ and ‘ageless life’ promote aging without illness and disability as the ideal and exclude those who age *with and into* disability from the desirable future. The notions such as ‘the third age’ and ‘fourth age’ further demarcate the boundaries of normal and abnormal aging (Higgs and Gilleard 2014). From this perspective, both the old and disabled become a ‘problem’ against what Elizabeth Freeman (2010) calls “chrononormativity” that normalizes the notion of time for maximum productivity. Instead of revealing the problem within social and physical environments that are based on able-bodied values and standards, this perspective configures the older people and disabled people as an economic and social burden. Being contrasted to the idea of disability-free aging as positive and successful aging, ill, impaired, older, and frail bodies are configured as those who are ‘dependent’ (physical, social, economical) and cannot participate fully in the process of production. Following the work of Robert McRuer (2006) and Alison Kafer (2013), scholars in Critical Disability Studies have tackled the “curative imaginary” where the idea of a future is only be conceived through solving or curing disability and have advanced the *crip* notion of futurity which include “the widest array of bodies and minds” (McRuer 2014: 532).

To get one step closer to realize the “*crip futurity*’ Kafer (2013) has advocated for, we need to unsettle the negative implications of ‘depen-

dependency' that stigmatize and devalue older adults and disabled individuals and develop new understandings of dependency (cf. Fine and Glendinning 2005; Townsend 2007; Gilleard and Higgs 2005; Phillipson 2013). Fine and Glendinning (2005) write:

“Sociologists have scrutinized the social construction of dependency; politicians have ascribed negative connotations of passivity; while medical and social policy discourse employs the term in a positivist sense as a measure of physical need for professional intervention. Autonomy and independence, in contrast, are promoted as universal and largely unproblematic goals” (601).

Refuting the traditional understanding that equates autonomy with independence, many philosophers and scholars across multiple disciplines (Kittay 1999; Fineman 2004; Sherwin and Minsby 2011; Kontos et al. 2017) have expanded more relational views of human ontology and reconfigured that “the inevitable primary dependency on others” as “a condition of embodied human existence” (Dodds 181). Relational perspectives consider the ways familial, community, institutional connections and interdependence enable one’s agency and autonomy, and acknowledge dependency as “an indissoluble part of autonomy” (Scully 212–213). Negative attitudes and assumptions towards dependence have particularly marginalized and devalued people with serious disabilities and older adults. Theatre and Performance Studies also revisit the concept of care, interrelational mode of being, dependency; Fisher (2020) have argued that relational perspective can open up new ways of reading disability theatre by “acknowledging the hidden mutual dependencies and attitudes of care” (86).

Following this relational turn, this paper discusses the relationality that are foregrounded in the dance and artistic photography of older disabled Finnish dancer Tuuli Helkky Helle (1933–2018). This paper uncovers the extraordinary aging path of Tuuli and explores how her vigorous engagements in visual arts, performance, and activism in her later life offer counter-images and counter-narratives to the cultural assumptions that link “feebleness and helplessness” to people with disabilities and older people (Tarvainen 296). Aging, illnesses, and disability are intertwined

and conflated in complex ways, and narratives that celebrate aging or the lives of older adults often coalesce with an ableist concept that emphasizes a triumph over the limits of human bodies and minds (Aubrecht and Rice 2020: 3–4). Tuuli Helkky Helle's life does not suggest the ableist narrative of 'the triumph over disability' or 'overcoming rhetoric' (cf. Linton 1998) nor the ageist narrative of 'ageless self' (cf. McHugh 2000) although it was intended to correct the negative stereotypes of old age. I argue that Tuuli had reclaimed 'dependency' in a positive term, and had visualized the beauty and power of the interconnected, interrelated, and caring relationships in her arts and life. She shows how one can embrace and celebrate disability and old age, instead of overcoming them.

Tuuli Helkky Helle was well aware that arts and performance are cultural spaces in which "disability and aging are created and experienced [...] [and] where taken-for-granted meanings and materiality of disability and aging may become exposed, frayed, and unraveled" (Aubrecht and Rice 5). She was a rare older woman who has performed in contemporary stage while living with a severe disability; her various art practices are testimony that she perceived her double-marginalized subjectivity—old and disabled—as the site for research and activism against the ageist and ableist social gazes and perspectives. She was born with cerebral palsy, which seriously impacted her mobility and verbal communication. In a short film about Tuuli, *Muuten menee katuskottavuus* (*Otherwise, You Lose the Street-Credibility*, 2016)² created by disabled artist Jenni-Juulia Wallinheimo-Heimonen,³ Tuuli says she

2 The information on this film can be found on Jenni-Juulia Wallinheimo-Heimonen's website http://www.kolumbus.fi/jenni_juulia/muuten-menee-katu-uskottavuus-or-you-loose-the-street-credibility/index.html The full video of the film is available on YouTube https://youtube.com/watch?v=aH2yAx_1Miw&feature=shares.

3 For information of her works, see this interview with Jenni-Juulia Wallinheimo-Heimonen <https://no-niin.com/issue-12/accessibility-is-not-static-a-conversation-with-jenni-juulia-wallinheimo-heimonen/> One of her artistic films on disability, *Squirrel* (2017) is featured as the cover image of *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies 2nd Edition* (2019). http://www.kolumbus.fi/jenni_juulia/authenticity-and-resources/index.html.

lived with her parents until she was 40 years old and her life was extremely protected in her expression despite her desires for social life and adventure. She was self-educated – in her words, she was “mercifully released from compulsory education” (Helle 3), and she could communicate with people mostly through emails and written formats by using a communication assistive device.

However, after her father’s passing, she decides to live on her own after living in a care home for a year. Although she struggled for a few years to be on her own, she states that her life becomes “wild” at this time (*Otherwise, You Lose the Street-Credibility*, 2016). She began to connect with other women living with severe disabilities and engage with dance, painting, writing, and photography. Freed from the normative life course, she began her artistic career at the age of 60 – according to the neoliberal idea of the life course, the period of ‘third age’ when someone retires from their profession and begins to enjoy new leisure lifestyle until they hit the ‘fourth age’ which is accentuated with the ideas of decline, frailty, and “unbecoming” (Higgs and Gilleard 2014: 13). Her life course and aging story and view of life radically refuse the stigmatized narratives of aging with disability. I argue that she permits us to see “disabled and aging futures as livable and even desirable” (Changefoot and Rice 174). Without trying to ‘fit into’ the idealized, normalized life course that is constructed through chronological age and institutions (e.g., school, family, work, retirement) (Hockey and James 2017: 91).

It may be ‘late’ to the standards of the normalized life course, yet she had engaged with diverse forms of arts for more than twenty years in her later life. From 2000 to 2009, at her age 67–77, she toured multiple countries as the central dancer in *Olotila* (*State of Being*)⁴, a profes-

4 The premiere of *Olotila* was performed at the Zodiak Centre for New Dance, in Helsinki, Finland, September 13, 2000. Following its premiere, it was also invited to the Full Moon Dancer Festival (Pyhäjärvi, Finland), Theatre Festival (Tampere, Finland), Kulturhuset (Stockholm, Sweden), Dansstationen (Malmö, Sweden), Hebbel-am-Ufer HAUS (Berlin, Germany), Bergen International Festival (Bergen, Norway), Théâtre de l’Aquarium (Paris, France), and Hong Kong Mime Festival (HongKong) (<https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/25102143/zustand-state-of-being-tomi-paasonen>).

sional integrated dance-theatre piece of Rajat'on (Limit'less) ensemble⁵, choreographed and directed by Tomi Paasonen⁶. After its premiere in Helsinki in 2000, *Olotila (State of Being)* was awarded with the "Theatre Event of the Year 2000," which is annually given by the Theatre Centre in Finland (Paasonen, "Olotila – State of Being"). According to Tomi Paasonen⁷, Tuuli once mentioned that she had an idea about creating a nude photo series with a disabled body; she had long thought of finding a beautiful 'model' for it, but through conversation and discussion with Tomi, she became the model herself at the age of 70. Over multiple years of collaboration, the radical and experimental work called *Gala Dress* (2002), featuring collections of nude photographs of Tuuli's aged and disabled body, was created, and the collection was exhibited at Fort Mason Center in San Francisco, Lasipalatsi Galleria in Helsinki, City Gallery of Forssa, Full moon Dance Festival in Pyhäjärvi, Finland, and Rise Berlin in Germany. She was also one of the founders of DanceAbility Finland, and in her 70s, she danced in Kaaos Company, one of the most significant integrated dance companies in Finland. Notable dance pieces

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- 5 Rajat'on ensemble is a Finnish dance collective, consisting of both disabled and non-disabled performers (Karhunen 2014: 11).
- 6 Tomi Paasonen, born in Helsinki in 1970, is a Berlin-based director, choreographer, and visual artist. After dancing as a soloist in Hamburg Ballet, the Lines Ballet, and the Joffrey Ballet, he founded KUNST-STOFF in 1998, a San Francisco-based interdisciplinary physical theatre and arts-event production company. However, Paasonen's dance career was prematurely interrupted in 1999 when a piece of the ceiling in a Chicago theatre fell on him during rehearsal and injured his spine. The accident changed his artistic direction, and he began working under the name Public Artistic Affairs (PAA) in Berlin and started to work with dancers with diverse backgrounds and abilities. In 2013, Paasonen was appointed as the new artistic curator of the ITAK Regional Dance Center of Eastern Finland, an organization which supports the visibility and development of dance in Eastern Finland, and he is currently working internationally producing his dance pieces (Kunst-Stoff, "Tomi Paasonen, Choreographer." Kunst-Stoff Website <http://www.kunst-stoff.org/artists/Tomi-Paasonen>; Maija Karhunen, "Tomi Paasonen: A Maximalist with All My Heart," *Finnish Dance in Focus: 2013–2014* volume fifteen, pp. 11–12).
- 7 T. Paasonen. Personal communication. December 21, 2022.

she participated in are *Kaleidoscope – the Unbearable Beauty of Difference* (2010) and *Aurora Borealis* (2012), both choreographed by Sally Davison. Tuuli performed in multiple dance pieces until she was 83 years old when she passed away, and she had explored and foregrounded her own experience and views of aging and disability, and the beauty, power, and vulnerability of her unique body.

In addition, Tuuli always painted and produced many visual arts from late 1980s to 2000s; and the subjects of her paintings range from her childhood memories, portraits of people around her, self-portrait. In her 60s, she self-published two books of poetry: *Elämä on oivaltamista* (*Life is Understanding*, 1996) and *Palvelukseen halutaan* (*Looking for an Assistant*, 1996) which address her lived experiences with disability, her dreams and desires, the ageist gaze imposed on her body.⁸ Tuuli was not only an artist, but also an activist who passionately fought for disability justice and against ageism and ableism. Most remarkably, two years before her passing, Tuuli made a short activist film, *Muuten menee katukottavuus* (*Otherwise, You Lose the Street-Credibility*, 2016) with Jenni-Juulia Wallinheimo-Heimonen. This film, which captures Tuuli writing a petition letter to the minister of Family Affairs and Social Services in Finland and her rap song called “Granny Rap,” had a huge political impact against the disability service legislation reformation which suggested removing personal assistance for older people with age-related disabilities (cf. Era 2021). Shortly after this film, Tuuli also participated in another activist performance that was documented as a short film *Method for Better Service* (2016)⁹. Created by Jenni-Juulia Wallinheimo-Heimonen, *Method for Better Service* (2016) gathered five aging female

8 The English titles of these books were included in the short film, *Or, You Lose Street Credibility* (2016), made by Tuuli Helle Helkky and Jenni-Juulia Wallinheimo-Heimonen. Further information about the books can be found here: <https://www.lounakirjailijat.net/lounakirjailijat/kirjailijat/?authorid=41&newstitle=Helle+Tuuli+Helkky>.

9 Full video of the film is available on YouTube <https://youtube.com/watch?v=uLyMzTbygmo&feature=shares> Further information on the film can be found on Jenni-Juuli's website http://www.kolumbus.fi/jenni_juulia/method-for-better-service/index.html.

activists including Tuuli who live with long-term disabilities; in this activist performance they go around the small streets of Finland on wheelchair, naked, and raise awareness of accessibility and different bodies. While other activists were middle-aged, Tuuli was 83 years old when she participated in this performance and needed to wear an adult diaper; yet, nothing stopped her and she led the radical march from the center of the group.

Tuuli Helkky Helle's *extraordinary* life-course, arts, and activism counter “the accepted notions of physical disability” and aging as “an absolute, inferior state and a personal misfortune” (Thomson 1996: 6). Her unique life story and bold acts reconfigure the old and the disabled as figures of desire, power, and subjectivity, and counter “the normate’s frequent assumption that a disability cancels out other qualities, reducing the complex person to a single attribute” (ibid: 12). Tuuli’s extraordinary life course gives us an insight into the inclusive model of crip futurity which does not project the idea that disability-free or ageless life is ideal and successful. In this essay, I illuminate how Tuuli uses her aged-disabled body as a political and artistic site to reveal and challenge the ableist and ageist gaze, expectations, and prejudices. Despite her artworks which urges us to rethink the definition of body’s capacity and beauty that are based on ageism and ableism, Tuuli did not receive much academic attention from both Age Studies and Disability Studies in her lifetime. Tracing more than 20 years of active engagements in arts in her later life, this paper will shed light on how her arts fervently unsettle the various norms and assumptions applied to old-disabled bodies, as well as, to the narratives of aging with disability.

Methodology and Theoretical Frameworks

A major part of this research consists of tracing and documenting her artistic works by examining multiple archival materials such as video recordings of her dances, photographs, and poems. Although her traces scarcely exist online, I could obtain hard copies of her poem collections and a photobook, *Tuuli Helkky Helle 80 Years* (2013), which Sirppa Kinos

(Tuuli's niece) created to celebrate Tuuli's 80th birthday and her life. This photobook is an invaluable source as it contains Tuuli's paintings, photos of her dances, conversations Sirppa had with Tuuli in the summer of 2012, and include excerpts of studies discussing disability policies and justice in Finland. In addition, the artists such as Jenni-Juulia Wallinheimo-Heimonen, Tomi Paasonen, Sally Davison who dearly remembered their works with Tuuli shared the video recordings of her dance works and other related materials for this research. My discussions of Tuuli's dance and body are based on the full video recording of 2009 Hong Kong production of *Olotila*, which is 100 minutes long; I draw on this particular production because it was performed in English while other productions were performed in Finnish. I also draw on the photos of *Gala Dress* (2002) to discuss the performance of her aged-disabled body. Only short video clips were available for more recent works such as *Kaleidoscope – the Unbearable Beauty of Difference* (2010) and *Aurora Borealis* (2012) by DanceAbility; so, this paper only briefly discusses Tuuli's performance in these performances.

As most materials are only available in Finnish, the author employed translation tools such as DeepL and Google Translate. While the biographical materials offer important insight into Tuuli's approach to her life and arts, my analysis of her dance and body focuses on the phenomenological and aesthetic aspects that are evident in these archives. From a performance studies perspective, I draw on phenomenological approaches and analyze her aged-disabled body performed in multiple dance pieces and photography, and discuss her body's corporeality, physicality, presence, movements, costumes, and relationships to the other bodies and beings. My study is mostly guided by the theoretical perspectives of Ann Cooper Bright (2017; 2019) about gravity, interconnectedness, and disabled and aged bodies. Drawing on their discussions on the "alternative danceability" (Nakajima and Brandstetter 2017: 61) offered by aging and disability, I examine Tuuli's dancing body and how her body pushes back against the typical meanings of dance, beauty, mastery, and virtuosity.

To articulate the ways in which Tuuli's dancing body reconfigures the ableist notion of dance(r), I bridge these theoretical discussions on

disabled dances with the theory of “relational citizenship” advanced by Pia Kontos (2017) in her research about persons living with dementia. Through an analysis of her body in dance and photography, this paper asserts that Tuuli’s performance allows us to reimagine a dancer’s body through *relationality* and *dependence*. I conceptualize her aged-disabled body as a possibility of *relational bodyhood*. Furthermore, I argue that the relational bodyhood Tuuli has foregrounded through her arts gives an insight into the crip futurity which both people age with and into disability can have their full participation in life. I will also contemplate on how her artistic engagements at the last stage of her life challenge both ableism and ageism, and how her activism disrupts the stereotypical narratives of older persons with disability, making them a burden of society and invisible through the politics of concealment.

Reconfiguration of Dancer’s Body: Relational Bodyhood

Olotila (*State of Being*, 2000–2009) stages seven dancers – five of them are disabled (four dancers are wheelchair users and one dancer is blind) and two of them are non-disabled. More precisely, there are nine performers including a dog and a robot who appear onstage in *Olotila*.¹⁰ In this piece, the central figure is Tuuli even though one might say she has the ‘least’ movements. The performance starts with Tuuli’s voice and her poems are woven through the performance. In the first scene, the audience sees her small body—approximately three to four feet in height, bent and curled up both due to her disability and old age—laid against an able-bodied younger male dancer, Stephane Hisler. Looking directly into the audience with a subtle smile, she speaks, however, her words are indecipherable; therefore, the male dancer translates her words sentence by sentence:

10 The performers are Tuuli Helkky Helle, Stephane Hisler, Riikka Kekäläinen, Tom Leidenius, Dog: Ninnu, Riita Pasanen, Kalle-Antti Raunu, Sari Salovaara, and Eeva Simons. (Original order listed by Public Artistic Affairs, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/25102143/zustand-state-of-being-tomi-paasonen>).

Today begins an adventure. A huge, exciting, and fascinating adventure.

It is beyond comparison, and it will make me a great free person.

Oh, my wonderful adventure.

You who could release me from the change of my everyday life.

But I am so small – too small to live up to you, today.

So, today, I will make you a doll and trivial incident.

Change to my habits. I cannot see the wonder of moments, today.

I can only expect the great adventure to occur tomorrow.

Not today.

What is powerful about *Olotila* is that this piece positions her as the main speaking subject, not a deviant object for the ableist and voyeuristic gazes. Instead of asking the disabled bodies to overcome their physical limits, this piece brings down the able-bodied to her height and her eyesight. The two dancers on the left side of the stage are lit from above with a pin light; there is a red rope hanging from the ceiling—the rope invokes the image of a noose and idea of suicide. When Stephane points to the rope, Tuuli shakes her head with a gentle smile. Behind them, the backdrop is a projection resembling a close-up X-ray image of a beating heart – in contrast to the rope and Tuuli’s old body, it signifies both birth and death. While laying on the ground, Stephane gently lifts her off the floor and raises her body up with his arms; Tuuli’s small body floats in the air while he continues to move with his back on the floor. Mirroring the idea of *Pas de deux* of a classical ballet, he supports Tuuli’s body, lifts her up, turns her body, drags, and assists her to walk little by little. Being fully rested in his arms, Tuuli’s arms are curled toward her torso and stiff legs are lifted upwards. Through these movements, her disabled body, which has always been “smaller,” crips the normative idea of physical aging which assumes that a person’s body becomes curled up and gets smaller as they grow old. Her body constantly communicates the irony and simultaneity between the newborn and the old age in *Olotila*, and this juxtaposition is also found in the photos of *Gala Dress*. But these representations are not in function of infantilizing her. I argue that her body becomes the site to question and critique the rhetoric and

politics of (in)dependency that hunts many older adults and disabled individuals.

This slow intro without many typical dance movements takes about ten minutes—which is a significant length for a dance piece. As the sound of the heartbeat gets faster and mixes with the beeping sound of a heart rate monitor from a hospital, other dancers join the stage. The blind dancer Tom Leidenius and Sari Salovaara with a stiff spine from rheumatism navigates the stage while maintaining physical contact with each other; another duet dance of Eva Simons in wheelchair and able-bodied dancer Riikka Kekäläinen follows the next. Because all the dancers in this piece are wearing the same costume—white top and white tights—the bodies of dancers seem intertwined and expanded; sometimes they make one big amalgam. Another duet dance of Eva Simons in wheelchair and able-bodied dancer Riikka Kekäläinen follows the next.

During the remaining first half of the 100-minute-long performance, Tuuli remains seated on a giant white bean bag, in a white Tutu, holding a female doll also wearing a white Tutu. Nonetheless, she never recedes to the background. There is a scene where Tuuli dances a variation of classical ballet of *Don Quixote*; her dance is characterized with micro-scale movements [see Figure 1]. The movements of her foot and hand are so subtle and delicate, yet, they are moving at her best and exert tremendous energy and powerful presence. The micro-scale movements are barely visible in the video recording, and there is a high chance it could have been hard to notice from a far distance during live performance. Yet, as the prima ballerina, she is dancing her version of this classical ballet with other dancers surrounding her while sitting around her – these more able bodies do not override her and give her space while maintaining still. Holding a fan in one hand, her face is enlightened and gracefully expresses elegance and joy.

Fig. 1: Tuuli's solo dance in *Olotila* (2009), Hong Kong



Photo Credit: Tomi Paasonen

Tuuli's reflection on her body and her dream to be a dancer, documented in the photobook made by her niece, is worth quoting at length:

"When I told my parents at the age of 5–6 that I was going to be a dancer, I didn't understand at all why they were confused. My dearest dream above all has been to be able to dance. So, in the early 1990s, I applied to wheelchair dance, and got to know the Rajat'on dance community. I participated in the Unlimited Dance 2000 project, the goal of which was to create new cooperation between dance professionals and disabled dance enthusiasts. *Olotila* premiered in September 2000, and it was performed for the last time in Hong Kong in 2009. I was selected as the 'prima ballerina' of *Olotila*. And indeed, I danced – although I borrowed moves from other dancers. I performed my solo number lying on the floor on pillows. This is how the little girl finally came true after decades of waiting!" (Kinos 44).

Her dream, reflection, and actions disclose and confront the normative and ableist assumptions about dancing bodies—emphasizing “a traditionally virtuosic body”, which not only present rigorous skills and technical mastery but also “sexual desirability” (Albright 2017: 64–65). For instance, in a traditional sense, dancing bodies are imagined as

those who have excellent controls over their bodies and transcend the limits of our material body and present “a perfect body—one completely unhampered by sweat, pain, or the evidence of any physical negotiation with gravity” (ibid: 65). By many postmodern dancers, the narrow vision of dance has been challenged, however, as Anne Cooper Albright (2017) addresses, “this does not mean that we have sufficiently deconstructed the paradigm of the virtuosic dancer” (65).

Olotila enables Tuuli to dance on her own terms and celebrates her different bodily presence, without disguising her age and disability. This piece also does not suggest the common ‘triumph’ over disability narrative that are commonly found in disability dance (cf. Albright 64–68 for her critique of these examples that focus on the capacity of disabled bodies to overcome their physical limits and in turns, paradoxically reinforce the exclusionary practices that it was meant to dissemble). Tuuli’s expression, ‘borrowing moves from other dancers’ (Kinos 44) is striking because she suggests a new idea of dance and dancing body. Her idea of dance suggests something greater than simply dancing with an assistant or help.

I argue that her statement counters the fundamental idea that a dancer’s body or anyone’s body should stand alone – the individualistic, autonomous, and independent understanding of the body. Throughout the performance of *Olotila*, the ideas of relational, interdependent, and interconnected bodies are explored and foregrounded. The dancers continue to support each other’s body, move other’s bodies, and even *become* each other’s bodies. It is not only that; Tuuli’s body that is rooted on the ground highlights our profound relationship to gravity. Her body that is always supported by something else (a pillow, other bodies, stage, wheelchair) underscores how our physical body is supported by nature, environment, and other beings including both humans and animals. In the first half of the production, the projected image of heart in the background implies a life; a frontal image of a fully-grown fetus appears in the last ten minutes of the performance [see Figure 2]. When Tuuli’s old, disabled, and dependent body is paralleled with this image, it has a risk of infantilizing her—which often occurs in the narratives of elders and disabled persons; but instead, this image functions as a testimony

about the inherent dependency all human beings and living creatures had experienced and still experiencing without realizing it. All of us grow in our mother's womb and are surrounded and protected by amniotic fluid; all of us first learn how to walk by holding onto other people or objects; all of us live by breathing air every second. But most of us, who do not experience an illness or disability, forget this, and assume that our body has always been autonomous and independent.

Fig. 2: An Image of Fetus at the Background of Olotila



Photo Credit: Tomi Paasonen

Scholars in Critical Disability Studies already have tackled the modernist idea that creates an illusion of autonomous, independent, and individualized self and an illusion of a clear distinction between self and other (cf. Goodley 2013; Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2016; Shildrick 2019). They have urged to shift the fundamental and ontological understanding of subjectivity to “the postmodernist contention that the self is always embodied, dependent on its others, unsettled, and always in progress” (Shildrick 2019: 37). Gibson et al. (2012) similarly discusses how the “self-as-individual” has been called into question by postmodern theorists, and proposes “viewing persons [with disability], their carers, and their assistive technologies as assemblages of bodies/technologies/subjectivities that together achieve a set of practices” while

refusing the view of the contained and sufficient self and negative assumptions of dependency (10).

These ideas of assemblages, dependency, interconnectedness penetrate throughout the performance of *Olotila*. The dancers' bodies are often overlapped and interconnected; the beeping soundscape reminds us of our dependency on medical machines (e.g., ventilator, heart monitor); our bodies' relationship to gravity are visible in the repeated actions of disabled bodies falling from the wheelchair to the ground, climbing back up, as well as other dancers moving by hanging onto the rope from the ceiling. There is also a scene in which all disabled dancers are laid down in a confined space (outlined by light), able-bodied dancers, representing either carers or parents, mechanically cut food, while a surgical procedure description is typed onto the screen behind the performers. It is followed by the scene where an able-bodied dancer feeding the food to Tuuli sitting on the beanbag; a voice-over, representing Tuuli's voice, says: "I had grilled meat and ice cream all at the same time. I had to because one was getting cold, and one was melting. ... Grilled meat and ice cream all at the same time. Boy, interesting life." This is brought from Tuuli's poem. While *Olotila* remarks the interconnectivity and dependency that are essential for our beings, in this scene, it reveals and critiques the reality of dependency and care in ableist society which makes many disabled and older people to bear inhumane treatments. Later, a dog and a robot also appear as performers; dogs are also casted as models who pose together with Tuuli in *Gala Dress* [see Figure 3]. I interpret the inclusion of animals or robots in these representations as a statement about the interconnectivity between disabled bodies with different living creatures and non-living things such as assistive devices and technologies (e.g., prosthetic limb, wheelchair). The interconnected relationship with other humans, animals, and technologies highlights the "embodied state of connected identity" (Whitburn and Michalko 2019: 230) of many disabled individuals. By including an image of fetus living inside mother's womb and another Tuuli's poem about how dandelion gets its colors from the brightness of the sun, *Olotila* reveals the inherent interconnectivity and relationality among any living organism; therefore, disrupts the narrative which frames only disabled and old people as dependent.

Fig. 3: Tuuli and Two Dogs in Gala Dress (2002)



Photo Credit: Tomi Paasonen

In this piece, Tuuli reclaims dependency in her own terms and achieves her dream to be a dancer and to be freed. At the end of the piece, she comes out to the stage, carried by the young male dancer again. With his support, she walks little by little—a similar image to the opening scene is repeated. He lays her down to the ground and lifts Tuuli to the air by supporting her from below, and Tuuli reaches her hands towards the sky, making it appear as if she was floating. As the stage gets darker, we do not see Tuuli, but instead see a blurry image of a body in the same position as Tuuli flying and swinging while hanging on to the rope—I think Tuuli is borrowing another body to achieve the movement/dance she imagines and desires. In this image, the initial implication of the red rope that was drawn above Tuuli changes its meaning – from death or tragedy to freedom and dreaming.

I argue that Tuuli as an old and disabled dancer exemplify a mode of alternative danceability. Just like Joshua St. Pierre (2015)'s discussion on how the disabled speaker offers new modes of posthuman communication (331), Tuuli's dancing body eschews the autonomy and self-mastery of body and offers a new way to dance through relationality, reciprocity, and interconnectedness. Tuuli says in the opening: "I am too small to live

up to you”; she does not try to overcome her disabled and aged body to perform the normative idea of dance. Instead, she focuses on the movements she can make, and her intention, physical and emotional feelings, facial expressions, energy, and perhaps breathing. The changing scenography in *Olotila* shows the dynamic movements of different organs such as heart, brain cells, and muscles; in front of these images, the audience are invited to see the *inside* of bodies. Dreaming to be a dancer for more than 60 years, on this stage, as prima ballerina, we can imagine her inner dance: the fast pumping of hearts, dancing muscles and bones, flows of air and heat, and tingling sensations at her fingertips and toes.

Furthermore, she shows her excellence in surrendering to the other’s bodies, to the environment, and to the gravity – it is a special somatic skill to feel how the other body is and to completely entrust and to let go of one’s control over their own body. I am using the word ‘surrender’ in a positive meaning, implying being able to entrust others including both other beings and environment. Tuuli’s dance and her dancing body reminds me of Albright (2018)’s investigation and theorization of the act of falling, and how it teaches us to be responsiveness, resistance, and resilience to falls and failures literally, emotionally, and financially. Throughout the performance Tuuli never loses her agency and personality; and maintains her unique calmness, grace, and warmth without any signs of anxiety, tension, or fear. Her powerful presence, positive and playful energy, and calmness breaking through her small body are evident signs of the strong resilience that she had developed over seventy years of living with severe disabilities.

Anyone who has been onstage would understand how difficult it is to be present without many visible actions for the extended duration of time. Albright writes, “instead of nervously trying to avoid falling (metaphorically and literally in a world in which so many aspects of our social, political, and economic environment are being turned upside down, I believe we need to learn how to fall with grace, connecting with gravity to find a place to ground our impact” (Albright 2017: 70). In the Western world that foregrounds “the cultural hegemony of the vertical” (ibid: 71) and in the Western dance which “focuses on the virtuosity of the up,” Tuuli showcases how one can “celebrate the down” and teaches us

“to dwell on the floor, revel in the process of rolling, sinking, crawling, and pushing” (ibid: 71–72). Her dance, grounded in connectivity and relationality, “radically refigure the very category dance[r]” (ibid: 66).

Similarly, in the intimate photo collaboration *Gala Dress* (2002), Tuuli brilliantly demonstrates the ways in which her body navigates the world in deeper connectivity, interdependency, and kinship with other beings. In this photo series, she poses her naked, disabled, and old body in relation to animals and nature such as forest, stream, ice, and sand. In the photo book created by her niece, Tuuli says: “I have been dependent on the help of others since I was born. I haven’t been able to choose who I’ve been naked in front of. But this nudity was my own choice” (Kinos 33).

By exposing her aged and disabled body through performative photography, Tuuli “reclaims her right to be seen naked” (Millett-Gallant 39) at the same time, she questions the social practices and values that render disability and aging both invisible and hypervisible. Tuuli’s artistic self-exhibition was used by many disabled artists such as Mary Duffy, Susan Harbage Page, and Sandie Yi, who “confront[ed] stigma, manipulate[d] the gaze, and cleanse[d] shame” by performatively posing their disabled female bodies in nude (ibid: 40). While Tuuli shares this approach, her old age adds an extra layer to her photographs of naked bodies. Tuuli’s exposed body—with saggy breasts and skin, wrinkles, white pubic hair, distorted legs—confront “the artistic and social traditions that have deemed [old and disabled female body] shameful and unacceptable” (ibid: 27). In addition, similarly to *Olotila*, the softness and vulnerability of her body, which simultaneously layer images of a young child and an old woman, create irony and unsettle the stigma around the dependency older or disabled bodies require. In most of these photographs, her body is laid on the ground; there are a few photos where her laid-down body is tilted via photoshop which makes her look like she is standing and dancing in water [see Figure 4]. In these photos, she as the speaking subject and active performer makes her aesthetic choices, shapes her bodies while laying down, and creates images full of dynamism and a wide range of affects.

Fig. 4: Tuuli in Gala Dress (2002)

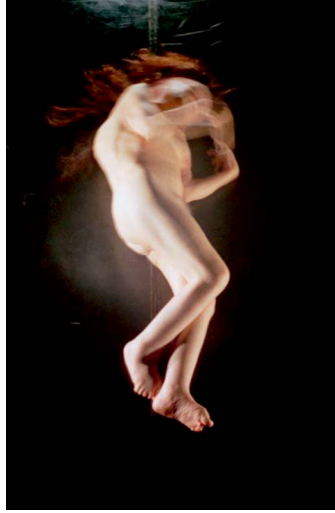


Photo Credit: Tomi Paasonen

While making intentional and creative choices, Tuuli's body in these series of photography again display her mastery of relational engagement with other beings and environment. She comfortably surrenders or sinks into the surroundings, and therefore exemplifies *relational bodyhood* that relinquishes control over one's body and exists in reciprocal trust, relationship, and engagement with others. In this way, I argue that this project not only challenges the ableist perception which frames disabled bodies and old bodies as non-desirable and asexual, but also remarks disabled bodies as the critique of an autonomous, arrogant idea of the self. Her performances in both cases show her life-long lived experience of disability and dependent relationship with others gave her a gift that most able-bodied persons have lost. In both cases, Tuul's *relational bodyhood* shows a tactile and corporeal touch and contact with other beings and surroundings and offers critical insight into the possi-

bility for human bodies to overcome the border of the self and exist more porously.

Conclusion: Living Relationally

I would like to conclude this paper by talking about Tuuli's incredible resilience that is exemplified throughout her artistic works and involvement in activism, which continued until the very last stage of her life. Tuuli's last artistic works are two activist short films, *Otherwise, You Lose the Street Credibility* (2016) and *Method for Better Service* (2016) that were collaboratively created with Finnish multidisciplinary artist Jenni-Juulia Wallinheimo-Heimonen. *Otherwise, You Lose the Street Credibility* (2016) is an activist work about the rights of older adults who age *with/into* disability but also is an autobiographical documentary of Tuuli; and the film was invited to multiple film festivals such as Serbia Film Festival: Seize the Film in 2017, Grand Rapids Feminist Film Festival (GRFFF) in Michigan in 2017, Bluenose Ability Arts and Film Festival (BAAFF) in Canada in 2018, Art Color Digital Cinema International Film Festival in Montreal in 2018. This work was a response to the Finnish government's announcement that from 2018 they will remove the rights to personal assistance for people older than 75 years old. In 2016 when this was announced, Tuuli was 83 years old, and she wrote a rap song called "Granny Rap" to fight against the governmental disability service legislation reform. Although the policies of disabilities and older adults vary in different countries, this is an obvious example that reveals the complexity surrounding aging and disability and indicates the socio-political frame that tries to demarcate and contrast *aging into disability* from *aging with disability*.

In the film, she says: "I would like to ask Mr. Rehula (Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services in Finland). Ten years from now, are you going to sit in a rocking chair and just stay at home? We all should come up with something to do, otherwise we will lose the street-credibility." Then, clips of Tuuli follow with her rap song (sung by a younger volunteer performer): Tuuli on her electric wheelchair with a personal assistant taking the elevator, crossing road, sending mails, doing grocery shop-

ping. It is followed by the video where Tuuli writes a petition to the minister by using a communication device that translates her spoken words and types in written languages. The film mixes Tuuli going around the neighborhood; her talk on her life journey and artistic works; young person singing the rap song, and the process of growing beans which is an artistic installation by Jenni-Juulia. 83 years old Tuuli not only subverts the ageist assumptions about older persons by choosing ‘rap,’ but also the lyric humorously and critically reveals the ageism, elder abuse, and generational conflicts by talking about old women from an ageist perspective:

“Grandmas slosh around on the road [...] [with] care services—paid by my tax money! Why don’t they stay home? [...] Grannies don’t need supportive services. Such don’t delight old bones. So, let’s pack the grannies nicely into paper envelopes!”

At the end of the film, she says: “I am privileged. ... I’m probably just a slowly growing individual. There is always something fun waiting to be found.” It is evident in her works that Tuuli was always open to new and radical ideas, and always appreciated and cared about people around her. *Method for Better Service* (2016) is a similar short film about a middle-aged disabled woman who acquired dystonia later in her life; the film questions if disabled people would get better service from carers if they could see one’s personality and their life history. This film includes a clip of street performance-protest about accessibility in Finland. According to Jenni-Juulia¹¹, when she asked her friends and activists who live with disabilities to join this sort of radical performance, only five people came along and Tuuli was one of them. Covering their face with a thin fabric mask, five aging disabled women on wheelchair go through a busy street of Helsinki behind Finnish National Gallery Ateneum; they pass through the crowd until they encounter the stairs at the end of the street, turn back to where they started, and put their clothes back on and take off their masks [See Figure 5]. Similar to the strategy of *Gala Dress* (2002), the nudity/nakedness of older and disabled bodies in public addresses

11 J.J. Wallinheimo-Heimonen, personal communication, December 27, 2022.

the double state of old-disabled bodies which are invisible and hypervis-
ible at the same time.

Fig. 5: A scene from the street performance in Method for Better Service (2016)



Photo Credit: Jenni-Juulia Wallinheimo-Heimonen

Even though I do not know Tuuli personally nor met her in person, I feel honored to learn about her unique and daring life journey and arts that underscore relationality, dependency, and care between beings and environment. Perhaps, her life-long embodied experience of falling in everyday life and in dance practices has trained her to be resilient (Albright 2018: 20). As an activist and artist, Tuuli raised her voice for others until the last stage of her life, and her works communicate her extraordinary mind which is characterized with extensive creativity, wonder, passion, openness, and compassion for others. In 2017, she was awarded “the Kunnia-Vimma (the honor-Vimma)” by Kynnys ry (The Threshold Association)¹² for her “versatile, irreplaceable life-long works where her

12 The Threshold Association (or Kynnys ry in Finnish) is a cross-disability organization, which focuses on the basic and human rights of persons with disabilities. <https://enil.eu/meet-kynnys-ry-the-threshold-association-our-members-from-finland/>.

contribution to the development of integrated dance in Finland is central” which is given to people who has been promoting disability arts in Finland (Purhonen 2018: 4). Her life journey and aging story reconfigure aging as an ongoing process of becoming and living with disability as a chance to exist more relationally to others, and therefore, exemplify an alternative crip aging future that are enabled through enhanced embodied connections and relationships.

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