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This second part of our open volume continues the formal and thematic explorations that are enabled by the conjunction of performance and philosophy. Enquiries through and with practice and embodiment, including the practice of lived experience, take the lead here, along with habitations and activations of archives in their various forms: embodied, relational, and resisting erasure.

In “Authenticity in the Performance of Self”, Colleen Conroy and Litza Bixler share findings from a fascinating experiment that will be of interest to anyone working within the field of verbatim theatre, ‘theatre of the real’ (Martin 2013), or ‘theatre of real people’ (Garde and Mumford 2016). Actors previously trained in Stanislavski methods were led through an ‘auto-verbatim’ project, in which they carefully rehearsed in order to be able to re-perform with exacting mimicry their own responses to interview questions on the subject of authenticity. Both the original video recordings of their unprepared responses, and video recordings of their rehearsed re-enactments, were shown to randomly selected viewers, who rated the ‘authenticity’ of the recording they watched, unaware of whether it was the ‘real’ interview or its imitation. After a three-year time gap, the actors also watched their own recordings, similarly unaware of which was the original, and offered their responses in qualitative interviews. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that they were quite skilled actors, even the actors themselves were unable to distinguish between the original and the

repetition: 'I just feel that the guy in the video is not me,' notes one of the subjects. Just as fascinating are their reflections on the acting process itself, and how questions of authenticity, fidelity to self, and estrangement are matters that they wrestle with in their lives outside the theatrical frame.

A very different form of autobiographical enquiry is undertaken in Aion Arribas and antje nestel's 'The Pluralistic Universe of Neurodiversity: Doing New Stories.' Identifying as neurodivergent bodyminds, Arribas and nestel use both critical and poetic language to convey the multisensory experience of traveling in contexts unfamiliar to them in Japan. In navigating the omnipresent *noren* that obscure the interior view of a shop or restaurant, they experienced a sustained duration of threshold encounter, generatively disrupting the norms of restaurant behaviour with its demands for what Anne Corwin calls fast 'chunking' (Manning 2013, 219) of the environment into fixed categories. And in an encounter with The Site of Reversible Destiny, a fancifully landscaped park designed by architects Arakawa and Gins, they describe a welcoming environment for neurodiverse proprioception: 'The space and body arise with movement rather than being defined prior to their relation,' they write. Their critical autoethnography (Holman Jones and Pruyn 2017) draws on but also expands the relational ontologies of process philosophy of William James, Brian Massumi, Erin Manning, and others, putting them into dialogue with formal experiments in writing by autistic and neurodiverse writers and thinkers, as well as the authors' own participatory workshop design in which the invitation to be a 'participant' is extended beyond and across individual human subjects.

Experiences of decentred and pluralised subjecthood are also considered in Daniela Perazzo's 'Solo dancing and multiple selves in Igor and Moreno's *Beat* (2019): "Smarginatura" as a politics of plurality.' In printmaking, *smarginatura* refers to text that may spill over the margins of a page, and may be cut in the process of assembling a book; novelist Elena Ferrante uses the term in *My Brilliant Friend* (and later in *The Story of the Lost Child*), to describe an experience of 'dissolving boundaries' of the self (Ferrante 2015, 175). Perazzo further adapts this term as an analytical tool in relation to the choreographic work *Beat* by Igor and Moreno, technically a solo performance by Margherita Elliot, but one where, as Perazzo views it, the constant transformation of choreographic images across the continuous flow of the 'solo' generates a pluralised self, which Perazzo reads as a critique of the compulsory flattening of the self that is a feature of neoliberal structures of feeling. Like the actor in Conroy and Bixler's article quoted above, who 'feel[s] that the guy in the video is not me,' Elliot's subjectivity is rendered elusive and unknowable: "it's that sense of feeling that we know who she is and not having a clue", Perazzo quotes Igor as reflecting. Moreover, the article itself plays with *smarginati*, with quoted passages from literary texts and illustrated articles seemingly pulled off the page, overspilling the constraints of the PDF format or the webpage screen, making literal this journal's invitation to explore [Margins].

Júlia Abs's "Body-Archive as a Dialectical Image" develops the concept of the body-archive through Walter Benjamin's dialectical image, asking how the dancing body might function as a site in which historical temporalities, gestures and memories persist and become newly legible. Situated at the intersection of dance studies and performance philosophy, the article understands gesture as a

form of temporal inscription: the body does not simply preserve traces of the past but becomes a medium through which different historical moments encounter and interrupt one another. Through the author's own *Darkland*, Jérôme Bel's *Nom donné par l'auteur* (1994), and the reenactment and activation of Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A* (1966), Abs explores the tensions between modern and conceptual dance and between historical transmission and transformation. Central to the article is the proposition that reenactment does not restore an intact or completed past. Instead, the body-archive activates unrealised possibilities embedded within artworks, allowing them to acquire new forms and meanings in the present. The body-archive thus becomes both a mode of historical consciousness and an anticipatory practice: a site where the afterlives of performance can be reactivated, differentiated, and opened towards what is still to come.

A performative engagement with archives is also the subject of Theo Panagopoulos in 'Deforming Colonial Archives, Performing Palestinian Counternarratives', which describes a project that began with the chance discovery of an archive of colour films made by a Scottish medical missionary in Palestine in the 1930s and 1940s, during the time of the British Mandate and prior to the establishment of Israel. On the one hand, these films offer a rare document of daily life at this time, but as Panagopoulos notes, they are not neutral documents but shaped by colonialist and Orientalist perspectives and a drive toward 'biblification', in which images are sought to verify pre-existing narratives. Sara Ahmed's critique of orientation informs Panagopolous' attention to what has been rendered as background in these archives, both spatially and temporally. To engage with these resources, Panagopoulos, himself of Palestinian heritage, convened interactive workshops in Athens and Glasgow, inviting participants to view, interrogate, and re-frame and re-imagine the films in the archive. Drawing on Georges Bataille's theorization of *l'informe*—the formless or deformed—Panagopolous reflects here on this process of 'deforming' as archival re-orientation, and the collaborative work of constructing counter-narratives in the face of decades of settler colonialist erasure and genocide.

Eleni Kolliopoulou's "Embodying the Paradox: Butoh-fu as a non-representational system of embodied temporality" examines Butoh-fu as a mode of embodied inquiry rather than simply a system of choreographic notation. Emerging from Tatsumi Hijikata's use of poetic language, imagery, and visual collage, Butoh-fu generates experiential states through which performers navigate changing intensities of sensation, perception, and temporal experience. Kolliopoulou consequently approaches Butoh as an evolving epistemology of the body, in which imagination, memory, sensation, and environment converge. Bringing this practice into dialogue with Nishida Kitarō's philosophy, particularly the concepts of *aida* and *basho*, the article considers embodiment as relational and continually transformative rather than self-contained. The dancing body emerges through relations with images, environments, materialities, and human and non-human forms of becoming. Butoh-fu therefore offers a way of thinking temporality through embodied experience rather than abstract measurement or linear progression. Its paradoxical image-worlds become perceptual and temporal practices through which habitual distinctions between self and environment, interior and exterior, presence and transformation can be destabilised.

Finally, two [Margins] pieces extend and expand embodiment into further relation with non- and more-than-human entanglements. In 'Weatherlands for Sky & Bones', Carol Brown and Tia Reihana-Morunga bring Indigenous and settler practices into dialogue with each other, with skies and waters, and with breath and movement. The essay itself breathes: in an inbreath, it gathers in Māori cosmologies and cross-cultural histories that circulate through and with bodies and relations; and in an outbreath, Brown and Reihana-Morunga give breath and voice to the weathers of the body, asking 'How do we conceptualise the body as a means to make sense of the world?' And in 'Covering with Earthworms: A little bit of everything', Emilie Gallier shares pages from the *zine des Minières*, an ongoing collaborative project in which participants engage sensorially with the farm land of Les Minières in Normandy, France, taking guidance, as Gallier describes, from the tactile bodies of earthworms. When other readers meet the zines, they are encouraged to let their eyes become feet, and their feet eyes: *With the eyes closed, I see*, Gallier writes. Informed by processes of ploughing and gleaning, composting and assembling, worm-readers move through the pages as soil. In the digital pages of *Performance Philosophy*, tactile encounter is translated into animated gifs (online version) and cascading combinations of full-page layouts (in the PDF), so that scrolling, too, becomes a kind of shuffling through layers of accumulated gathering.

This, then, is a suiting closing image for the ambitions of the journal as a whole: an open field, where intersecting trajectories pass in proximity, and where visitors are invited to linger, to glean, and to dig furrows of their own.

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

AUTHENTICITY IN THE PERFORMANCE OF SELF

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Introduction

“The hardest role to play is yourself,” reflected James, an actor participating in our study on authenticity and performance of self. This insight lies at the heart of our inquiry: What happens when actors perform verbatim re-enactments of their own recorded interviews? How does the relationship between actor and role or between story and identity shift?

For this study, actors performed verbatim recreations of their own interviews—not testimonies from others as in traditional verbatim theatre—reproducing their pre-recorded words and gestures with meticulous fidelity to text, voice, and gesture. We term this method “auto-verbatim” and use it to examine identity and the fluid nature of authenticity in performance.

Psychological realist acting traditions have long focused on authenticity, typically emphasizing the performer’s internal sense of emotional truth to convincingly portray a character’s emotions. While scholars like Zarrilli (2002) examine how such traditions privilege the actor’s self over the role or merge the two, these approaches continue to echo essentialist views of identity by assuming individuals possess stable, core selves that can be accessed and expressed through performance.

We situate this work within verbatim theatre and other “theatre of the real” genres (Martin 2013), such as documentary theatre and autobiographical performance. These forms traditionally conceptualize authenticity as either an innate quality, an aesthetic construction, or a product of audience expectations.

To examine this tension, three actors trained in psychological realism (Sylvia, David, and James) performed filmed verbatim recreations of their own interviews. Through self-performance, we interrogate both authenticity in acting and essentialist notions of selfhood. This work challenges conventional realist acting techniques and contributes to broader debates about the essentialized self.

We begin by contextualizing auto-verbatim performance and situating our study within broader discussions of psychological essentialism and authenticity. We then outline our methods and filming protocols, examine the internal dynamics of self-performance through actor reflections, and conclude with an analysis of audience survey data from 50 randomly selected viewers. To interpret these dynamics, our study draws on scholarship in psychological realism, verbatim theatre, theatre of the real, and psychological essentialism. We examine Stanislavski’s concept of *perezhivanie* alongside Brechtian estrangement and theorize that “Authenticity-Effects” (Garde and Mumford 2016) often impact audience responses. These frameworks illuminate the paradoxes that emerge when authenticity is reconstructed rather than spontaneously lived.

The following sections establish our theoretical framework before detailing our methods, actor reflections, and audience responses.

The Essentialist Premise in Acting

As Sjöström (2021) notes, Western acting traditions have long pursued “the quest for emotional truth and authenticity” (8), notably through psychological realist techniques influenced by Stanislavski’s system. These approaches seek “inner truth” via tools such as emotional and sense memory, given circumstances, objectives, actions, and the “magic if” (e.g., Benedetti 2006; Hagen and Frankel 1973; Meisner 1987; Stanislavski 1986; Whyman 2013). Psychological realism is united by a commitment to emotional truth, yet its methods vary widely. Practitioners may draw on the actor’s own emotional memory, emphasize imagination and given circumstances, or focus on spontaneous interaction to achieve “behavioral truth.”

In *An Actor Prepares*, one of the seminal works of psychological realism, Konstantin Stanislavski ([1936] 1986) asserts that truth and belief are inseparable in a performance:

Everything that happens on the stage must be convincing to the actor himself, to his associates and to the spectators. It must inspire belief in the possibility, in real life, of emotions analogous to those being experienced on the stage by the actor. Each and every moment must be saturated with a belief in the truthfulness of the emotion felt, and in the action carried out by the actor. (142)

This pursuit of an accessible “inner truth” inherently underpins the essentialist premise of psychological realism. We suggest that this approach is rooted in an essentialist view of identity, which assumes the self to be a fixed and unchanging “essence” that can be discovered, understood, owned, and shared. As Newman (2016) suggests, this belief in the “existence of essences” is a central component of psychological essentialism (295).

This essentialist premise is evident in actor training through two interconnected approaches to the use of self: focusing either on the essential self of the actor or the essential reality of the character. For some practitioners, the actor’s own identity is the primary source of emotional truth, thus framing identity as something fixed and knowable. It directs the actor inward, as exemplified by Uta Hagen’s directive to “learn to know who *you* are ... find your own sense of identity” (Hagen and Frankel 1973, 22).

Lee Strasberg’s development of the Method makes this orientation explicit. Building upon the work of Stanislavski, Vakhtangov, and Meyerhold, Strasberg locates the truth within the actor’s own emotional life, asserting that “the soul of the character that you’re playing comes from your own emotions” (Cohen 2010, 26–27). Through exercises in sense and emotional memory Strasberg instructs the actor to mine their personal experiences and realities as raw material for performance, treating the actor’s self as the fixed and knowable emotional source for a role. This, along with the given realities of the character, will create truthful and believable characters, aligning with realistic behavior and credible emotional expressions (Konijn 2002).

Stella Adler, on the other hand, criticized actors’ exclusive reliance on their own experiences, calling it a “great disservice” to actors (Adler in Kissel 2000, 65). Instead of rejecting the pursuit of truth, Adler relocated it to the character, grounding it firmly in context and the character’s given circumstances. In reference to Hamlet, she argued that the actor must find the truth of the role not in themselves, but in the character’s fixed reality: “The truth of the character isn’t found in you but in the circumstances of the royal position” (Kissel 2000, 65). Even here, the essentialist premise persists. While the actor is told to find the truth outside of themselves, the objective is still to discover and embody a character’s fixed, essential circumstances and objectives. The assumption is that these realities are singular, complete, and merely waiting to be discovered.

Ultimately, whether the essential truth is located in the actor’s own feelings or the character’s fixed circumstances and actions, psychological realism rests on an essentialist foundation: the belief that a knowable “inner truth” exists for the role, and the actor’s job is to discover and embody that truth.

Verbatim and the Fluid Self

Theatre of the real often engages with and represents real people and events, employing methodologies that can disrupt the psychological realist approach. Their very nature and aesthetics muddle the essentialist link between the actor and the role, as well as traditional notions of authenticity and what could be considered real and truthful.

Our study focuses on verbatim theatre, which draws on documentary material including interviews, oral histories, and testimonies to shape performance. Practitioners vary significantly in their approaches: Anna Deavere Smith creates transformative performances that cross identity boundaries through embodied *mimesis* (Paterson 2015, 6); David Hare creates characters and scenarios inspired by interviews and both factual and imagined events (Hare 2006; Schulze 2017); and Alecky Blythe employs a “recorded delivery” technique, in which actors perform live while listening to audio recordings via earpieces—not only hearing what to say, but how to say it (Hammond and Steward 2008; Taylor 2013). More broadly, verbatim performance requires actors to “investigate and perform the words and gestures of the person they portray,” rather than simply performing a role (Vachon and Salvatore 2023, 7).

When working with students, Anna Deavere Smith explicitly challenges the self-centered technique of psychological realism, noting that acting is about becoming the other.

To acknowledge the other, you have to acknowledge yourself. It's not psychological realism. I don't want to own the character and endow the character with my own experience. It's the opposite of that. What has to exist in order to try to allow the other to be is separation between the actor's self and the other. (Martin and Smith 1993, 51–52)

Our adaptation, auto-verbatim performance, draws from this tradition while subverting the typical “actor-to-other” relationship. We employ Vachon and Salvatore's (2023) definition of verbatim performance as “the precise portrayal of an actual person using their exact speech and gestural patterns as a data source for investigation...” (385). In this study, however, the actors reproduce *their own* vocal, physical, and linguistic behaviors from *their own* filmed interviews. This self-reflexive method creates what Goffman (1959) describes as a situation where actors can “stage a recapitulation” of their own past, reframing authenticity as a reconstructive rather than spontaneous process (72).

This tension is compounded by the fact that the actor is the subject and the medium simultaneously. Theatre scholar Bert O. States (1983) describes the actor's experience of performing as being “a kind of storyteller whose speciality is that he *is* the story he is telling” (359). Through auto-verbatim technique, the actor performs *their own* story, entering a hyper-literal space in which the storyteller and the story are one and the same. Paradoxically, this results in a reflexive distance between the storyteller (the observing, present self, or actor) and the story (the remembered, performed self, or character). This distancing will be a core focus of our analysis when examining the actors' reflections.

Authenticity as an Effect: Theatre of the Real

Authenticity is a nebulous concept, both subjective and contextual. Within social interactions, *authenticity* often equates to someone *truly being* what or who they claim to be (a real doctor, a real pilot, etc.), a view that is particularly salient when real lives are at stake. As Goffman (1959) notes, “when an individual plays a part ... [observers] are asked to believe that the character they see

actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess ... and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be" (17).

Defining what constitutes an authentic performance is perhaps more elusive. To establish a baseline for our research, we first analyzed the definitions of "authenticity" provided by our actors and survey respondents. Both groups relied heavily on essentialist terminology. They used words like, "real," "true," "honest," "genuine," and "spontaneous." They also described authentic *performance* with phrases like "the opposite of fake" and "truthful expression of feeling," and characterized it as spontaneous and empathetic. Survey respondents offered similar descriptions, identifying the word "real" most often (84% used this term), followed by the words "genuine" (48%), then both "honest" and "true" (36%).

These definitions reflect the term's Greek origins: αὐθεντίας (authéntēs), meaning "self-doer"—or acting from one's own authority. This etymological foundation connects to modern notions of being "true to oneself" (Oxford English Dictionary 2024). Ultimately, "what is consistent across the literature is that authenticity encapsulates what is genuine, real, and/or true" (Beverland and Farrelly 2010, 839), a broad definition that was echoed by both the actors and survey participants in this study.

This essentialist perspective, however, is complicated by the nature of performance. An actor doesn't necessarily need to have the lived experience of every character they portray since no real lives are at stake and performances are usually clearly signposted as such. As Heddon (2008) reminds us, performance is just that—a performance and not the real world, prompting us "to consider whether and how the 'real world' is performance, or at least performative" (28). Similarly, theatre scholars challenge the assumption that "theatre of the real" possesses inherent authenticity or truthfulness merely because the source material is based on documents, interviews, transcripts, memory, or historical experiences/events (e.g., Martin 2013; Tomlin 2013; Schulze 2017). As Martin (2009) notes, "at its best, documentary theatre complicates the idea of documentary and of the real, of a document, and even what it means to document; documentary theatre troubles our already troubled categories of truth, reality, fiction and acting" (88).

The specific aesthetics of our approach further contributed to these effects. The actors in our study were required to meticulously learn their text, speech patterns, and physical movements from their recorded interviews. Schulze (2017) contends that documentary theatre employs techniques such as these "to make the actors appear as true a representation to the actual person as possible" (13). The actors' technical precision and their use of "idiosyncratic and bizarre language" was "immediately recognisable as lacking artifice" (Soans 2008, 24) and contributed to the audience's expectation of the truth. As Soans (2008) asserts, the audience of a verbatim play assumes what it is watching is "truthful" and that "they're not going to be lied to" (19).

Beyond physical and vocal mimesis, the performances were explicitly framed as "real" and were presented using the same costumes, lighting, framing, and edits as the original interviews. These "documentary signifiers" likely created what Garde and Mumford (2016) call Authenticity-Effects, which then generate sensations of "the sincere and genuine," "referential truthfulness," and

“unmediated contact with people who actually exist” (2). Kear (2021) observes a similar effect, noting that “the erasure of any signs of direction, choreography or even rehearsed behaviour ... [confirms] the ‘authenticity’ of the show ... ” (11).

In the context of performance, authenticity is perhaps less a fixed state of truth and more a product of context, consistency, and perception, the result of an unspoken agreement between the performer and audience. We argue that the high degree of perceived authenticity in our study results from these very effects, aligning with Garde and Mumford’s (2013) observations regarding “Reality Theatre”:

Our experiences of performance as Reality Theatre, and of performance segments as “authentic,” are constituted by a certain mode of (re)presentation and viewing that frames spectators’ interactions with a performance. The “authentic” is not a given and fixed entity, but rather the product of a contract between performers and spectators which has to be renewed for each “authenticating act.” (149)

The Authenticity-Effects created by these aesthetic and technical choices proved powerful not only for spectators but also for the performers themselves. The finding that all three actors misidentified their own performances as their original interviews; despite knowing they could be fabrications, demonstrates the psychological and perceptual impact of reconstructing authenticity through rigorous mimesis—a finding we explore further in reflections and results. So perhaps authenticity can only exist in a world with human actors capable of pretending. After all, there is no truth without lies, no sincerity without insincerity, no copy without an original, and no performance without real life.

Methods

This study utilized auto-verbatim performance as an experimental framework to examine authenticity and the psychological and performative tensions of self-recreation. Unlike traditional verbatim theatre projects created as standalone performances or forms of political activism, this research was designed as a controlled experiment to isolate the internal dynamics of the actor and the audience’s perception of authenticity. Specifically, we wanted to examine whether a performance rooted in meticulous precision and mimicry, rather than subjective interpretations of “emotional truth,” could still resonate as authentic to both performer and audience.

Three student actors from the University of Wisconsin-Madison (Sylvia, James, and David), all trained in Stanislavskian approaches, were interviewed and filmed. They were then tasked with faithfully recreating these interviews in subsequent performances for the camera. We collected multi-modal data from both participants and observers. The actors provided qualitative feedback through interviews, workshop recordings, and personal logs; they also completed surveys to rate the authenticity of their own performances from a viewer’s perspective. This process required the actors to embody three distinct roles: interviewee/storyteller, performer, and viewer/audience. Additionally, to assess independent external perception, 50 randomly selected viewers completed audience surveys after watching either the original interviews or filmed recreations. The study

received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, and all participants provided written consent to engage in the research.

Embodied Learning and Auto-Verbatim Techniques

The three actors had no prior experience with verbatim performance and were instructed to reproduce their recorded interviews with strict fidelity. To achieve this, they engaged in a rehearsal process focused on the meticulous, repetitive study of their interview footage. While the actors did not use any aids such as video monitoring or headphones during their final filmed performances, their preparation relied on the internalization of a precise physical and vocal score derived from their original recordings. This required matching vocal parameters (pitch, volume, pacing, timbre, and articulation) and physical behaviors (posture, gestures, micro-expressions, and eye contact). By preserving every hesitation, interruption, and repetition, and attending to subtle shifts in breath, muscular tension, and movement tempo, this methodology treats the body as a site of meaning rather than a vehicle for it. This is consistent with Kemp's (2012) account of the "reflexive relationship between thought, feelings, and expression" (6).

This methodology treats kinesthetic expression with the same analytical weight as spoken language, challenging traditional hierarchies that privilege the brain over the body or text over gesture. Our approach draws upon research showing that gesture-based learning precedes speech (Fadiga and Craighero 2006) and that imitation is fundamental in the development of the self (Meltzoff and Moore 1995). We thus acknowledge that movement "gives us knowledge of our world" and "reveals important insights about our nature, capacities, and limitations" (Johnson 2007, 20).

By positioning the voice as "the bridge between the inner and outer worlds" (Houseman 2002, xiii), and movement as "fundamental to an actor's understanding and presentation of personality" (Ewan and Green 2017, 2), this embodied framework foregrounds physical and vocal precision. Ultimately, auto-verbatim performance examines how authenticity is perceived through disciplined embodiment rather than spontaneous expression.

Interview Protocols

Interview questions were semi-structured and designed to achieve two primary goals: first, to elicit growth-oriented personal narratives (Bauer 2021) that allowed actors to reflect on their identity and life trajectory; second, to explore definitions of authenticity in both general and performance contexts. Narrative prompts included: "Tell us about a time you felt lost," "When have you felt most at home?", and "Tell us about a time you felt like an outsider." Questions on authenticity included: "What do you think it means to be authentic?" and "What is an 'authentic' performance?"

Not all recorded responses were used for the final films. We selected stories that demonstrated organized, coherent, transformative, and self-regulatory narrative structures (Chatman 1980), providing actors with rich, reflective material for the subsequent performance stage.

Filming Protocols

Interviews were filmed from two angles and edited for length and clarity. Identical lighting, costume, and editorial structures were used across both interview and performance footage to ensure visual consistency. This minimized subtle filming variations that might influence either the actor's process or audience perception.

Workshop Process

Actors rehearsed independently for one to two weeks before participating in an online workshop. One author had previously taught the actors; the other author had not. The workshop followed an exploratory rather than a prescriptive approach that guided the actors toward greater awareness of visual, auditory, tactile, and temporal elements (Kemp 2012). The authors also suggested specific physical and vocal adjustments to achieve a more accurate auto-verbatim performance.

Survey Protocols

50 participants were recruited via Prolific (an online survey platform for academic and market research) from a randomized demographic sample representative of the US population across race, gender, and age (18–80 years). While the sample size was limited by financial constraints (3 actors, 50 survey respondents), this pilot study was designed to establish proof of concept for the auto-verbatim performance method and identify key phenomena for future large-scale investigations. While our actors were drawn from a convenience sample of university theatre students, our survey respondents represented a broad cross-section of the U.S. population, providing diverse perspectives on authenticity across demographic groups.

Each participant was randomly assigned *one* video to view—either the actor's original interview *or* the performed version (but not both)—and then responded to a series of questions assessing its authenticity. This between-subjects design ensured that viewers' authenticity ratings were not influenced by comparing the two versions. Respondents were compensated for their time, informed of the possibility of deception at the conclusion of the survey, and given the option to withdraw at any point.

For the analysis, we categorized responses on two types of Likert scales—one measuring agreement and the other measuring perceived excellence—into positive and neutral/negative ratings of authenticity. On the agreement scale, responses of "Strongly agree," and "Agree" were classified as positively authentic, while responses of "Neutral," "Disagree," and "Strongly disagree" were grouped as neutral/negatively authentic. On the excellence scale, responses of "Excellent" and "Very good" were categorized as positively authentic while "Good," "Fair," and "Poor" were categorized as neutral/negatively authentic.

Survey respondents categorized the videos as interviews or performances and answered open-ended questions identifying specific elements that influenced their categorization. When viewing their own videos three years later, the actors completed a survey similar to the Prolific respondents, allowing direct comparison of self-perception versus audience perception.

Actor Reflections on Performance and Process

The actors were given reflexive opportunities during the rehearsal process, and we drew upon this data from four distinct phases:

- Initial interviews regarding their pre-existing beliefs on performance authenticity.
- Research observations, informal dialogues, and actor process logs and reflections.
- Post-performance reflections.
- Post-viewing of their filmed performances.

This multi-stage data collection allowed us to trace the evolution of the actors' perceptions, from their initial theoretical definitions about "authentic performance" to the practical friction experienced during the auto-verbatim process. By examining their subjective experiences of the auto-verbatim technique, the actors were encouraged to explore what Zarrilli (2019) describes as the "dynamic embodied/enactive psychophysical phenomenon and process" of acting (12).

Inside Out / Outside In

As noted through researcher observations and rehearsal logs, actors frequently gravitated toward an "inside-out" approach during the workshops, emphasizing inner truth and emotional authenticity (Kemp 2012, 5–6). This aligns with Kemp's observation that the dichotomy between "inside-out" and "outside-in" methods often reinforces a separation between mind and body, privileging either psychological or physical processes rather than integrating them (Kemp 2012, 8).

In an initial interview exploring his pre-existing beliefs about authenticity, David noted that authentic performance requires a temporary alignment of emotional sincerity with psychological truth. He offered: "To be authentic is to say what you feel, to express, truthfully, your feelings...." For David, truth begets truth—the actor must "show something true first" to convince the audience that they can be relied upon to deliver the "truth" of the character.

Even when portraying themselves, the actors wanted to ground their performances in internal emotion. For all three, feeling preceded form, serving as the catalyst of their performance. This underscores a tension between essentialist and existentialist views of authenticity, mirrored in contrasting acting approaches. Stanislavski (2009), for instance, encourages emotional immersion within fictional circumstances. In contrast, methods influenced by existentialism reject fixed identity, framing both self and character as fluid and socially constructed (Gergen 1991). This malleable self can then be refined and shaped by the actor's choices, actions, and interpretations (Abulof 2017), much like a lump of clay on a potter's wheel.

Stanislavski's Experiencing and Dual Consciousness

While these different approaches to identity and character offer contrasting frameworks, Stanislavski's concept of *perezhivanie*, or "experiencing" (Whyman 2013, 34) provides a framework for understanding how actors navigate the tension between emotional immersion and technical skill. *Perezhivanie* is a kind of deep-flow, dual conscious state, in which the actor is simultaneously

aware of the technical demands of a performance while fully engaging in the emotional life of the character.

Sylvia's initial interview reflected this orientation directly. She described feeling most authentic in performance when she accessed her "inner essence" and drew on personal experience. This position reflects the psychological and emotional fusion between actor and character that Stanislavski (2009) terms the "I am" state. In this state, the actor strives to maintain an "unbroken line" of attention on the fictional world, fully absorbed in the dramatic situation (Stanislavski [1936] 1986), experiencing the role's emotions as if they were genuinely their own. For Sylvia, emotional immersion was central to what authentic performance meant:

You completely immerse yourself into whatever it is you're doing, and you don't think about performing a certain way. You just think about becoming whatever it is in that performance, whether that's someone that you're not or someone that you are.

In practice, however, authenticity in performance is judged not by the actor's internal experience, but by the audience's belief in the character's reality. In our study, the actors often reported feeling inauthentic while performing, yet this subjective experience did not align with how authentic their performances were perceived by viewers. This disconnect may be due, in part, to the constraints of the strictly verbatim format, which limited spontaneity and improvisational flow, qualities that are typically associated with live performance.

As Sylvia observed, "the spontaneity of a performance ... is part of an authentic performance." Yet in verbatim theatre as practiced here, actors were required to reconcile spontaneity with fidelity to a recorded script, and emotional expression with technical precision. This tension foregrounds a central paradox: a performance can feel artificial to the actor while appearing entirely authentic to the audience. Diderot's *Paradox of the Actor* illuminates this contradiction: he argues that a cold, dispassionate performer—one who simulates rather than experiences emotion—is often better equipped to deliver consistent, credible performances (Diderot [1773] 1883). Verbatim performance, with its emphasis on repetition and accuracy, aligns closely with this ideal of emotional discipline and performative control.

The actor's ability to maintain a dual-conscious state during a performance requires the actor be "affectively dissociated from his presentation in a way that leaves him free to cope with dramaturgical contingencies as they arise" (Goffman 1959, 216). Or, as Goffman observes, the performer must use dramaturgical discipline to "offer a show of intellectual and emotional involvement in the activity he is presenting, but must keep himself from actually being carried away by his own show..." (216).

Thus, in verbatim performance, multiple authenticities can coexist. For example, an actor may strive for emotional authenticity by immersing themselves in the character's emotional life (e.g., Stanislavski, Strasberg), the authenticity of the character's circumstances (e.g., Adler), or deliver technical authenticity by adhering precisely to the verbatim script and replicating another person's

gestures, posture, and expressions (e.g., Smith). These “authenticities” can overlap, forming a kind of palimpsest, where each type of authenticity enriches and informs the others. In this way, the actor can actively toggle between them, choosing which to emphasize in the moment.

Essentialism, Pragmatism, and Acting Method

While a full account of psychological essentialism lies beyond the scope of this paper, we examine how actors adopted essentialism as a pragmatic heuristic (Dewey 1922). Their method choices emerged through a feedback loop shaped by training, academic demands, audition processes, and rehearsal constraints. When authenticity is prioritized by stakeholders—whether audience, director, or actor—time-efficient approaches become practical.

In this context, “essence work” functions as a utilitarian shortcut, guiding actors towards meaningful discovery (Gröner, Gröner & Bischof 1983). Method selection thus becomes an adaptive strategy (Mead 1934), chosen not for ideological purity but for its efficiency in achieving performance goals. It is arguably easier to get the gist of a person by capturing their essence than by meticulously mimicking every individual mannerism by rote.

Copying, Mimicry, and Epic Theatre

It was evident that our approach was unfamiliar and contrary to the actors’ typical way of working. For example, during the rehearsal process, Sylvia contrasted our auto-verbatim performance approach with how she typically prepared for a scripted role stating, “the problem is that it’s nothing like anything I’ve ever done before. In terms of, you know, when we think of characters, we usually think of just memorizing the lines, we don’t think of movement a lot.” As she continued to grapple with the technique, Sylvia expressed her frustration with the rigorous mimetic demands, “I don’t like this, I don’t like it. [But] I’m hoping that *my* gestures come more naturally to me ... maybe that’ll like, you know, add a different level to the performance.”

The actors were concerned that by precisely copying every gesture, eyeroll, and vocal inflection, they would portray themselves accurately from the external viewer’s point of view, yet without the same internal connection or objectives expressed in their interviews. Consequently, they risked being perceived as “fake,” akin to a forgery in painting. David’s post-performance reflection captured this anxiety directly:

What sets imitation apart from an authentic recreation of, of something ... or [an] interview in our case, is whether you have the goal or objective.... If the actor does not have the same intention as the interviewee in the clip, the [performance] will just be an imitation. It’s like it doesn’t have a soul no matter how, how detailed [or] how specific, [or] how accurate those hand gestures are ... you’re just a robot.

Thus, the actors were caught in a persistent dilemma: how to deliver what they considered an authentic performance based on “emotional truth”, “spontaneity”, and “empathy” while staying faithful to the auto-verbatim performance parameters we had set. Sensing the actors’ discomfort, we instructed the actors to utilize mimicry as a learning tool, and to approach the physical elements with the same precision and care they would typically apply to dialogue. We discussed the importance of enactive cognition and the mirror neuron system (Varela et al. 1991) in learning and

encouraged them to fully embody the gestures as part of the memorization process. This method aligns with research suggesting that observing another person's actions activates sensorimotor areas in the brain, effectively simulating the experience as if the observer were performing the actions themselves (Fadiga et al. 2005; Johnson 2007, 161).

Despite inherently embodying their own given circumstances (and identity), auto-verbatim performance creates distance between the actor and their own story, rendering the familiar strange. This aligns with Brecht's concept of *Verfremdung* (commonly translated as "alienation" or "defamiliarization"), which aims to "estrangle what is widely accepted and familiar" (Sjöström 2021, 11). This distancing, however, can lead to a fluid form of self-knowledge. Just as Meltzoff and Moore (1995) suggest that imitation is a "psychological bridge between self and other that bears two-way traffic" (73), Smith contends that the repetitive mimetic process allows her to "become the 'them' that they present to the world" (Martin and Smith 1993, 57). She notes that through this external focus, the character's words are "knocking at my door and they're saying, 'parts of Anna, come out'" (57). Through auto-verbatim performance and the imitation and the distance it fosters, the actor is able to study and observe themselves as they would a stranger—utilizing the "two-way traffic" of mimesis to bridge the gap between their performed and perceived selves as a method for deeper understanding.

Masking, Reflexivity, and the Performed Self

In James's filmed interview, he shared how growing up as a Korean American in a predominantly Jewish and Italian neighborhood in New Jersey left him feeling like an outsider who was often bullied because of his race and heritage. This sense of alienation was so profound that, as a child, he said:

I decided that I needed to change things about myself, to fit in, to act a certain way, to reject everything that I considered Asian, Korean, inherently what I am, and I felt embarrassed to ... I felt embarrassed to ... to be born, how I was.

James later confirmed, "I felt like I've ... I've acted every single day of my life." He described wearing a "mask" and "playing a role" each day simply to fit in (Park 1950). His everyday social interactions felt like inauthentic performances used to navigate social pressures. Yet paradoxically, acting became a way to express himself more authentically than he ever could in everyday social settings. As he explained, he brought "tiny little aspects of myself into all these roles," leading to a profound observation: "I felt like I had to be somebody else to be me," and further, "I can be myself more when I'm in character than when I'm in like, say, just a regular social setting."

James's auto-verbatim process extended this dynamic. By meticulously recreating his own interview, he was forced to witness himself as an external object, a character. This reflexive distance allowed him to treat his past self with the empathy and honesty typically reserved for a character. He reflected, "I wanted to give that respect to myself... [to] that little eight-year-old boy in New Jersey, like just trying his best to fit in. I wanted him to kind of get his story, because I think that he deserves it." Through this process, James gave voice to his childhood self—first by telling

his story, then by relearning and performing it. The very tool that initially created distance (playing a role) was repurposed to achieve authentic self-expression and acceptance.

This aligns with Spry's notion that "to hear one's words spoken, resonating in the body, dialoguing with one's own subjectivities through embodiment is a profoundly moving process in understanding self and other" (Spry 2016, 186). Reflecting on his experience, James explained, "I looked back at [it] and ... I didn't even really know, like, the extent of, like, what I felt until I spoke it out loud, until I put it in words."

James also observed that "to have authenticity in another person's shoes, you have to understand *who* they are, *why* they do what they do, [and] *what* drives them to be the type of person they want to become...." And he used this same investigative process when performing himself. Thus, echoing Hagen's belief that "your own identity and self-knowledge are the main sources for any character you may play (Hagen and Frankel 1973, 29).

Ultimately, James both *discovers* and *creates* himself through the act of performance, embodying the view of the self as something constructed and reconstructed over time through memory and narrative. This perspective aligns with narrative psychology scholar Dan McAdams' (1993) assertion that "If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if I want to know myself ... then I, too, must come to know my own story" (11). The auto-verbatim process requires the actor to deliberately transition from telling their story (memory), to relearning and re-coding that story as a new memory, which is then retold as a performance. This process requires the performer to move fluidly between past, present and future, as well as between the subjective and the objective, or from *I* to *he* to *me*. The self then becomes a product of reflective thought rather than a stable identity, affirming that "[a]n autobiography is as much the expression of a present self as it is a representation of the past one" (Lloyd 1986, 170).

Self-Performance, Objectivity, and Distancing

David and Sylvia both expressed self-judgment when analyzing their own interviews. They were noticeably more critical of themselves than they were of other interviewees. For example, Sylvia admitted to feeling a lack of confidence in her story, stating, "my wording is fucking weird." Similarly, David described his discomfort with relearning his idiosyncratic speech patterns: "to repeat my grammatical mistakes and hesitations over and over again, it's just so weird. I just don't like that feeling ... because I'm a pretty self-conscious person." Both initially assumed that performing themselves would be easier than performing another person, or a fictional character, and both later confessed that it was more challenging.

For David, watching himself on video was a daunting task that raised fundamental questions about how we perform different versions of ourselves in daily life. He described feeling embarrassed while watching his interview and struggled to view it objectively. Reflecting on the experience, he noted: "It's really hard to analyze myself.... It feels extremely uncomfortable and embarrassing. So, I have to kind of, like, keep a distance between myself and [the] version of myself in [the] interview before starting work on it."

He became acutely aware of the gap between his internal self-perception and how he appeared in the interview, explaining: "It felt really strange to look at myself, and it's really different from what I perceived of myself in the mirror.... I just feel that the guy in the video is not me." This experience prompted him to question whether his internal sense of self aligned with how others perceive him in everyday interactions. He reflected on the incongruity that arose when confronting these potentially discordant views, a struggle that mirrors Lloyd's (1986) observation that "of our living selves we cannot be objective knowers" (184).

David also wondered whether the presence of others during the interview altered his psychological and physical expression of self, stating, "I also think ... like the presence of someone else in the recording process makes my psychological and physical condition different from what I am currently." David saw the filmed interview as a public performance of self. He recognized the influence others had on him and was acutely aware of how he might adjust or moderate his behavior due to his awareness of being observed.

For the actor playing a version of themselves, this creates a unique challenge: managing multiple impressions and multiple authenticities simultaneously. The actor must navigate the "performed self" and the "performing self." This process echoes Heddon's (2008) assertion that "the presentation of self (in performance) is a re-presentation, and often a strategic one" (27), particularly in relation to autobiographical performance. To maintain this strategy, the actor must juggle their internal state alongside the character's, all while being mindful of how they are being perceived by the audience—an audience that, in this case, includes not only themselves and the interviewer but also the eventual viewers of the film. This requires what Goffman (1959) calls dramaturgical discipline and enables the performer to "move from private places of informality to public ones of varying degrees of formality, without allowing such changes to confuse him" (217).

In this context, the filmed performance becomes a public objectification of the private self, transforming what feels intimate into something observable and analyzable. This process echoes Brechtian notions of estrangement (*Verfremdungseffekt*), where the familiar becomes strange, forcing the actor to reflect on how performance reframes identity as both subject and object.

Watching The Performances

Three years after filming, we emailed the actors a survey to view and evaluate both their original interviews and auto-verbatim performances. The instructions provided a deceptive frame: "In the survey you will watch two videos; they could be two different edits of your original interview, two different edits of your performances, or one of each." We also invited them to film their reactions as they watched the videos. While Sylvia and David filmed their viewings, James provided verbal feedback. This methodology allowed us to capture the actors' embodied responses to witnessing themselves, data impossible to collect through a standard online platform. We then asked them to rate the authenticity of the story, the storyteller, and the performance in each video.

Remarkably, all three actors misidentified their performances as their original interviews. While the presentation order (performance first) may have influenced their judgments, and this was notably a small sample, this universal failure of self-recognition still surprised us.

Sylvia appeared detached while watching both videos, displaying little emotion. Similarly, David appeared contemplative as he watched his interview, with one hand over his mouth and the other resting on his chin, as if studying it. By contrast, he was highly animated while watching his performance—his mouth often agape and his hands fluttering between his temples and his mouth.

These contrasting physical responses, Sylvia's consistent detachment versus David's contemplation and agitation, revealed the unsettling experience of self-recognition, or in this case, failed self-recognition. When confronted with his own footage, David seemed to experience what Giddens (1991) terms "ontological insecurity", which is a destabilization of the continuous self-narrative through which identity is maintained. For David, this manifested as a loss of coherence between his embodied performance and his self-understanding:

It's really hard to watch myself doing this.... I would probably respond to the question totally differently if I'm gonna do the thing right now.... Like, although ... this person is still called David, it's like, still, it's just a completely different person, already. Um, and I felt kind of like watching a stranger with, with similar life experience.... And I can still see traces of myself in that video, which made it even weirder.

For David, inhabiting another version of himself created an unusual tension. While perfect identity alignment should theoretically eliminate risks to ontological security and maximize authentic performance, this assumes congruence between an actor's self-perception and how they appear to others. When David encountered himself as others perceive him (a performed self refracted through external perspective), the alignment fractured. This suggests that these internal incongruencies produce a profound sense of identity incoherence.

David's discomfort with the incongruity between his current and former self is mirrored in Heddon's (2008) examination of the "re-presentation" of self in autobiographical performance: "There is the self who was and the self who is. There is the self who is performed, and the performing self. Which 'self', then, is being presented?" (27). David's reaction contrasts with the actors' earlier desire for a fixed identity or "essence" to latch onto. Instead, it reveals that our perspectives on authenticity, the self, and our ability to perform for ourselves and for others, may be far more adaptable than we imagine.

When completing the survey, the actors collectively identified spontaneity, naturalness, genuineness, and "thinking in the moment" as key indicators of authenticity. Their ratings, however, revealed a striking pattern. When rating what they believed was their original interview (the performance), all three rated themselves as authentic storytellers telling genuine stories. When rating what they believed was the performance (the actual interview), responses diverged: Sylvia maintained both she and her story seemed authentic; David remained neutral about his authenticity as storyteller but agreed his story was authentic; and James "strongly agreed" both were authentic, even while believing it was a performance.

Notably, James was the only actor who eventually recognized the deception after we revealed the video order, identifying subtle changes in his physical appearance between the gap in filming. His ability to finally distinguish performance from interview through physical rather than behavioral cues underscores how thoroughly the auto-verbatim method captured “authentic-seeming” behavior.

David’s experience further illustrates this blurring of boundaries between genuine and performed authenticity. He went on to say:

I probably have this presumption of the “right/authentic” way of stuttering, which is actually a dramatized version from my actor’s perspective that tends to make things more visually appealing.... Maybe I should do less acting and observe more how people talk in real life instead of simply imagining.

For David, verbatim performance highlighted a disconnect between his acting technique and his perception of an authentic way of being, challenging his very understanding of acting.

Later, in miscategorizing his interview as a scripted performance, David suggested that:

This one, I felt was not very authentic, because ... when I talk about the, um, the darkness in the house ... I felt the stuttering was a little bit pre-planned.... And this is, like, a very, very important moment of my life ... and I didn’t see those moments, you know, actually, in front of my eyes. Just to be honest, I wasn’t convinced by the person in the video.

David’s reasoning reflects a preconception tied to sense and emotional memory (Stanislavski’s affective memory), in which the actor “lives the part” (Whyman 2013, 34). He expressed disappointment that he could not “see those moments” as he watched himself in the interview, remarking, “This is like a very, very important moment of my life, and I just kind of not brush it over, but it’s like, um, took it not very seriously.”

Sylvia also miscategorized her performance as the original interview, stating, “the body language seemed natural, and the story seemed to come to me in the moment.” She reflected that she “wasn’t thinking enough” during the interview, which led her to believe it was a performance. Both Sylvia and David noted that their level of engagement with the story influenced their perception of its authenticity. After rewatching the original interview, Sylvia commented, “... it just wasn’t a super entertaining story.” Similarly, David admitted, “I was not very engaged with what I’m saying.”

James too misidentified his performance as the original interview, attributing his mistake to the possibility that his “thought process wasn’t truly showing.” He went on to say:

I fully thought that the first video shown was the original interview, but it turns out it was the re-enactment. I’m not gonna say that I was impressed with [my performance]. [But] you know this is my story, so I am able to speak on it with some authenticity, and I think it was still genuine.

Because the story was his own, he attributed a degree of authenticity to the performance, demonstrating how the content of a narrative can overshadow the authenticity of its delivery.

The actors' reflections suggest that they relied on criteria such as "spontaneity" and "genuineness" to evaluate the authenticity of their performances. They then applied similar criteria when distinguishing between the interview and their performance. For instance, David assumed his performance was the original interview because, as he explained, "the stutter appears to be very spontaneous.... I could spot some typical mannerisms of myself ... [and] the emotions evoked by recalling the past were genuine."

Taken together, the actor's explanations for these misidentifications reveal a striking paradox: they judge authenticity based on whether the performance matches their idealized sense of genuine expression, rather than recognizing their actual spontaneous behavior. David, for instance, finds his calculated performance more "spontaneous" than his unrehearsed interview, suggesting that actors may be more convinced by theatrical representations of authenticity than by their own authentic behavior.

At a recent conference presentation, we observed similar results. When participants were shown actors' verbatim performances of interviews based on others' stories, they frequently misidentified the performance as the original interview. Similarly, a significant percentage (80%) of our survey respondents thought the actor's performances were their original interviews. The consistency of these misidentifications points to fundamental questions about how we recognize—or fail to recognize—authentic human behavior. Ultimately, these results demonstrate the success of Authenticity-Effects (Garde and Mumford 2016), where the meticulous reconstruction of behavioral cues becomes more persuasive to an audience than the spontaneous, lived moment.

Survey Data

Beyond the actors' self-perceptions, we also investigated broader audience responses through our survey. Before undertaking this research, we asked ourselves:

- Would actors' auto-verbatim performances be perceived as authentic by viewers?
- Would viewers misidentify interviews as performances and vice versa?
- Would viewers rate storytellers as authentic regardless of correct identification?

Participants were evenly divided: 25 watched original interviews, 25 watched auto-verbatim performances.

Results

Our data collection followed a two-stage evaluative process. After watching the video, all respondents rated the subject's authenticity (*"How authentic is the person telling this story?"*) using the Likert scale described in the Survey Protocols. Respondents were then asked to categorize the footage as either an original interview or a performance. The findings were notable: 94% of *all* respondents rated the actors as authentic, regardless of their categorization, and 96% of the total

respondents believed they were watching original interviews. Specifically, of those who watched the auto-verbatim performances, 80% believed they were watching original interviews—whereas only one actual interview was misidentified as a performance. This asymmetry suggests that the auto-verbatim performances were highly convincing.

Breaking down the results by category: actual interviews received 96% positive authenticity ratings, while performances received 92%—a small difference that indicates the power of verbatim techniques to create convincing Authenticity-Effects.

To investigate how framing influenced perception, we employed different prompts based on viewers' initial categorization. Those who thought they had seen an interview, whether they were correct or not, were told: *"In fact, the video you just watched was an actor performing from a script. How would you rate the authenticity of their performance?"* Whereas those who identified the video as a performance were simply asked to rate authenticity without this frame.

This framing experiment revealed an intriguing pattern. When the actual interview footage was deliberately mislabeled as a performance, authenticity ratings remained high (92%). In contrast, when the actual performances were correctly labeled as performances, authenticity ratings dropped to 72%. This may suggest that this framing effect influenced the viewers' perceptions, or that they subconsciously detected subtle performance cues, though future research would be needed to confirm either theory.

The respondents offered insights into their categorizations of the videos, and the cues they associated with authenticity. Those who correctly identified the performances pointed to awkward pacing and gestures. For example, one respondent noted "the body language was off.... It seemed like the person [was] trying to remember what to say next instead of telling a story naturally." Another shared "the plodding pace ... made it feel less genuine."

In contrast, both those who correctly identified the original interviews and those who misidentified the performances cited emotional connection, natural delivery, and speech patterns as their reasons. One respondent shared, "it sounded like they were speaking from their heart. There were lots of filler words which made it seem more real." Another observed, "his facial expressions seemed to match his emotions in the story which made him seem real." Interestingly, the same cues were interpreted differently by different viewers, while some viewed slow pacing as a marker of performance, others saw it as a marker of authenticity. For example, one respondent stated, "she took pauses while telling the story as if she was recalling those memories."

Audiences struggled to distinguish auto-verbatim performances from original interviews, suggesting that perceived authenticity isn't necessarily a reflection of the actor's "inner truth," but is instead a by-product of physical and vocal precision that meets the viewers' expectations of "real behavior." Notably, these Authenticity-Effects were so powerful that even the actors themselves struggled to distinguish their performances from lived experience.

Conclusion

The auto-verbatim process reveals a fundamental paradox: when actors perform exact recreations of themselves, neither they nor audiences can reliably distinguish performance from reality. This finding challenges basic assumptions about authenticity, identity, and the essentialist premise in acting, pointing to broader philosophical implications about our ability to distinguish the real from the fabricated. These questions become particularly relevant as AI-generated “deepfakes” achieve increasingly convincing realism, raising urgent concerns about truth, representation, and the nature of authentic experience in an age of sophisticated technological reproduction.

The actors’ encounter with their performed selves destabilized their sense of identity. Their responses revealed self-judgment, identity incongruity, and shifting self-knowledge. All three performers acknowledge that they feel differently now than they did at the time of the interview. In the years since, they have graduated, moved on with their lives, and grown into different versions of themselves. As James mused, “I think I definitely feel a lot differently now than I did back then. It was kind of a little bit sad, I would say, but I think that I really hadn’t, at that point, come to terms with how I truly felt.”

This study illuminates deeply rooted assumptions about emotional truth, empathy, spontaneity, and self-perception, as well as the ongoing tension between internal self-perception and public personas. While essentialist notions of identity may provide actors with a useful heuristic in preparing performances, they often obscure the nuances of human behavior and the fluidity of authenticity. The actors’ use of “observing” external behavior over “imagining” internal states proved successful. Both audiences and actors perceived the performances as authentic, and the actors’ technical reassessments revealed a broader challenge to traditional acting methodologies.

These findings have implications for actor training and performance theory. When neither performers nor audiences can reliably distinguish authentic self-expression from skilled recreation, the essentialist premise that authentic portrayal requires an interior, fixed self loses its foundation. In the end, authenticity in performance appears to emerge not from being but from doing, through careful observation and precise embodiment.

So perhaps the self is not as fixed as it feels. Through performance, memory, narrative, and social interaction, the self is constructed and reconstructed. Until, like the ancient Ouroboros, it becomes an endless loop of selves chasing one another.

Future Research

While these pilot findings are compelling, they raise as many questions as they answer. To test the impact of self and other on the authenticity in performance, future studies should have viewers compare three versions: the actor’s original interview, the actor’s auto-verbatim performance of their interview, and *another actor’s* verbatim performance of the interview. We have filmed all three iterations and plan to run this comparison study soon.

In addition, a broader study with a larger, more diverse sample of actors would allow for systematic comparisons across variables such as race, gender, age, and ethnicity to examine how these factors impact perceived authenticity. Additionally, studies involving AI-generated “self-avatars” could explore whether authenticity is achievable with non-human actors, enabling individuals to interact with alternate versions of themselves to enhance self-awareness and empathy.

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Biographies

Colleen Conroy is an assistant professor of voice and acting at the University of Wisconsin-Madison whose work lives at the intersection of voice, identity, and performance. She earned a BA in acting and an MFA in voice studies from the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. Her research explores embodied storytelling and verbatim theatre, with a particular focus on the relationship between voice and identity. Current projects include "The Accent Collective," an open-access global accent archive, and an immersive theatre project inspired by the Camino de Santiago. She has received multiple grants, published and presented her work internationally, and is a member of the Voice and Speech Trainers Association.

Litza Bixler has produced work on stage, on screen, up mountains, and in galleries. She was artistic director of the company Litzabixler Performance for six years and later established the production company Dust Baby Films. She has an extensive history in dance theatre, physical theatre, contemporary dance, visual art, and film. In the UK, she was awarded multiple grants for her work, including from the Arts Council of England, Channel 4, and Yorkshire Arts, and she created movement and action for many iconic films and television shows. Her research focuses on performance studies, authenticity in performance, and identity construction. She has published academic chapters and papers, and written several screenplays that have won or been shortlisted for multiple awards.

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

THE PLURALISTIC UNIVERSE OF NEURODIVERSITY: DOING NEW STORIES

AION ARRIBAS AND ANTJE NESTEL
SHY*PLAY

Context

Although we can never truly pinpoint when or where a story begins, we, Aion Arribas and antje nestel, choose to embark on this narrative with an invitation to a month-long residency in Yokosuka, Japan, granted to us following a successful application. As with most stories, narratives are not linear; they weave within their fabric a tapestry of interlocking tales—stories nested within stories—despite the Western modernist rubric wanting us to believe otherwise. This story celebrates itself in its muddledness, as it refuses to take the path of colonial practices of storytelling, which often give a pretense of uniformity and universal progression. This story might hopefully read as fragmented and turbid, and most of the time in search of connections yet to be made.

Hence, this story is as much a project of the past as it is of a future yet to be written and told beyond the confines of this specific narrative. Futures are crafted and continually shape the present lives of those who are willing to welcome different possibilities within the movements of the now. Black feminist writer Sylvia Wynter (2003) takes the forefront for us in this endeavor, particularly her call for the creation of new narratives about who we are or can be as humans, narratives that would overthrow the dominant yet not all-encompassing story of the “human as Man”, with its roots in

colonialism. As many minoritarian thinkers have frequently reminded us, stories perform; they exert a powerful influence on us, shaping our thoughts, perceptions, feelings, behaviors, and bodies. Thus, as Martin Savransky (2021) notes, “no story can claim innocence” (13). This essay is up for the task, yet always in hesitancy, as it should be with every attempt at storying, because no story can ever detach itself from what it leaves out. Our story wishes to story the relationships between three interwoven and ever-evolving entities, which, as far as we know, have never been thought together before. These entities are the *noren*—traditional fabric dividers hung in doorways or windows—the Site of Reversible Destiny—a park in Japan designed by the architectural duo Arakawa and Gins—and a workshop on Doing Neurodiversity by shy*play in Yokosuka, Japan. At the heart of this convergence lies a conception of neurodiversity, serving as the magnetic core that draws these three dimensions into a dialogue.

There is ongoing discussion about the concept of neurodiversity, which has its origins in autism self-advocacy and identity-based social movements (Silberman 2015; Walker 2021; Chapman 2023). Emerging largely from English-speaking autistic communities in the 1990s, particularly through online networks and self-advocacy efforts, the neurodiversity movement has challenged deficit-based perspectives on autism and related tendencies. Advocates argue that autism should be understood not as a disorder to be treated or cured, but as a natural form of human variation. This perspective does not necessarily exclude viewing autism as a disability; rather, it is often associated with the social model of disability, which emphasizes the role of environmental and social barriers in producing disability (Oliver 1990).

Initially, neurodiversity was embraced as a socio-political identity, aligning with broader minority group movements. This perspective allowed autistic people—perhaps for the first time—to take pride in their identity and to claim political rights that foster greater social participation. Over time, the movement expanded to include other “neurominorities” (Walker 2021), such as individuals with dyslexia, ADHD, brain injuries, and more. While this activism remains vital, the concept of neurodiversity has evolved in various contexts, particularly in response to critiques of identity politics—critiques that point to a lack of relational and intersectional nuance, as well as a tendency toward essentialism.

Our thinking-doing with neurodiversity, as we will demonstrate in this essay, diverges from the previously mentioned approach, yet it is indebted to it and remains connected. Our collective, shy*play, functions as both a pedagogical and artistic practice, engaging with neurodiversity not as a mere explanation, but as a dance of relational difference. Within carefully crafted workshops and participatory installations and performances, we endeavor to *do* neurodiversity in ways that unleash previously untapped creative potentials for diverse socialities, knowledges, and entire worlds. This journey moves us beyond the individual subject and identity politics, allowing us to experiment and delve into assemblages of human and more-than-human elements. It invites us to ask what neurodiversity can do, especially when considering perception, language, and movement as always relational and ecological.

That is not to say that engaging with neurodiversity means abandoning criticality; critique is indispensable to our approach. This involves the ongoing examination of pathologizing practices associated with the medical model—investigating their origins, understanding why they have become so dominant, and analyzing how they operate within particular contexts. It also requires exploring their deep entanglements with other forms of oppression, such as ableism, whiteness, hetero-cis-normativity, speciesism, and classism. In other words, our aim is to deconstruct these structures and to recognize the fundamentally relational nature of all experience.

In this tapestry of exploration with neurodiversity, we find ourselves far from alone. Numerous artists and thinkers from around the world have embarked on this world-building mission toward new futurities (Savarese 2012; Manning 2013, 2016; Yergeau 2018; Wolfond 2023; Hilton 2025). Some of them will also assist us in the production of this story as an essay, and they will be mentioned throughout. This rich diversity of approaches to and with neurodiversity beckons us toward a realm that is both one and many, underway and still in the making. This “pluralistic universe,” drawn from the insights of philosopher William James ([1908] 1996), lies speculatively entwined in the “and” that binds the “many” and the “one” of neurodiversity, with the “many” understood as vibrant worlds in constant connection, always in generative frictions. Contemporary thinkers working in this Jamesian lineage, such as Erin Manning (2013, 2016) and Brian Massumi (2013), have taken up and extended this pluralist ontology in different directions. This attention to multiplicity and relation resonates with Martin Savransky’s reading of James’ pluralistic universe: “[T]he pluriverse trembles in the interstices between the one and the many, insinuating the possibility of other worlds in this world, of differences all the way down” (Savransky 2022, 4). This common mission of ours is pluralistic at its core, simultaneously one and many, moving toward doing and storying with neurodiversity differently and yet connected. We do not know what neurodiversity can do.

Into The Story

At the invitation of 0-ea, a curatorial initiative based in Yokosuka, Japan, we undertook a one-month research residency culminating in a workshop with local participants in Yokosuka. While the direction of the research was intentionally left open and allowed to develop in response to the residency’s encounters and conditions, it was understood from the outset that it would culminate in a public workshop. The invitation arose from our ongoing artistic research into sociality-making practices informed by neurodiverse tendencies and our efforts to work creatively with these toward the construction of participatory performances and installations that explore forms of collectivity beyond neurotypical demands.

Our arrival in Japan coincided with an impulse to understand and translate our experiences, especially our social ones, through Western preconceived concepts of neurodiversity. We found ourselves in a new culture, unfamiliar with our habitual ways of reading sociality. Joy emerged in how our quiet tendencies, preference for less eye contact, and other behaviors appeared to align with prevailing social norms. We caught ourselves thinking, “A better home for people like us,” and

celebrated with deep sighs of relief. Yet that relief also raised questions about the concepts through which we were reading the situation.

With insights from locals like Koichiro Osaka, founder of O-eA, and autistic writer Naoki Higashida, our initial elation was tempered with tremendous care. Neurodiversity and normality are narrated differently in Japan; what we perceived as shy and neurodiverse behaviors might, from a local cultural perspective, be perceived as forms of attentiveness and respect, particularly toward seniority and social hierarchy. They also insightfully alerted us that the practice of storying disorders is not absent there but take culturally specific forms. Much like in the West, yet with nuances unique to their context, neurotypical norms pervade areas like science, education, the professional world, the art world, and family life, often devaluing diverse ways of knowing, behaving, communicating, and sociality-making.

These insights returned shy*play's quiet mantra—*Do Neurodiversity*—to the foreground, displacing our initial impulse to translate experience through pre-existing neurodiversity frameworks. In the wake of the re-emergence of this mantra, which has accompanied us since shy*play's inception, we were prompted to orient the residency toward exploring modes of dialogue as encounters between worlds that do not take translation and understanding as their ground. In doing so, we sought to avoid the traps of neurotypicality. This orientation led to the development of the workshop as a practice of dialogue across difference.

One must be very cautious when using the word “dialogue,” as it is often framed exclusively within neurotypical conventions. Under this framework, dialogue is perceived, among other things, as an exchange in which participants use spoken human language to communicate. It typically occurs between bounded individuals, with attention exclusively directed to the human counterpart. It is expected to unfold in a logical, sequential manner and to be conducted in a representational language, with participants endeavoring to understand one another. Dialogue often behaves confidently as if it can encompass everything and be easily passed on, playing on its supposedly universal character: “Tell me so I can understand you!” Yet, as autistic writer Mel Baggs (2010a) shows, language cannot translate between modalities of experience: “The way my thoughts work creates some...problems for language. And it's not just that I haven't found the absolute best combination of words to translate my thoughts with. It's that on a fundamental level the thoughts don't translate.”

Our idea of dialogue for the workshop did not oppose language, but recognized its limitations, especially when language is wielded as mere representation. We sought to construct and facilitate a dialogue that emerges from neurodivergent ways of doing and knowing how to communicate. We reimagined dialogue through the lens of neurodiverse sociality, adopting, as Remi Yergeau (2018) proposes, a rhetoric that “tics, stims, commits faux pas, and averts eye contact” (31). To this, we added a rhetoric that murmurs, stutters, claps hands, flaps, and mumbles—a rhetoric that communicates beyond speech, even if we don't always know what we mean with certain movements. We desired a dialogue that honors and attends to the affective power of quietness,

emphasizing its sonic register as a level of intensity that demands deep engagement, as black feminist writer Tina Campt (2017, 6) would say.

Furthermore, the dialogue we aimed to facilitate learned from the poetic language and practices of many neurodivergent poets, especially Tito Mukhopadhyay (2015, 2021), Adam Wolfond (2022, 2023), and Hannah Emerson (2022), who teach us that language can be a sensing practice too—not cut off from the world, but in co-composition with it and its experiential immensity of perception and sensation. And perhaps more importantly, this dialogue aimed to foreground the ineffable felt that can never be fully captured in language but that performs affectively—the stuff that moves vibrantly beneath and between language, yet still in relation to it. These include movement, texture, opacities, shape, sound, vibration, and color, all in continuous relation.

Our exploration of dialogue-making also foregrounded our own practices as performance and installation artists, who often find greater meaning and joy in communicating with the world through movement, space, and material qualities, rather than through spoken language. In other words, we sought to facilitate a dialogue that affects and is affected, that moves, performs, speaks, and senses, and does not exist merely to understand and translate between contexts, or even more dangerously, when one attempts to swallow the other world into its own image. Instead, it attempted to explore a dialogue in which worlds relate like horses in a blowing game of trust and exploration, discovering what such an encounter between contexts can do when doing neurodiversity is one of the elements that brings us together. “Do neurodiversity.” “Do neurodiversity.” “Do neurodiversity.”

This story, as an essay, will attempt to tell one of the many interconnected stories of how we endeavored to facilitate such a dialogue through a workshop.

Chapter One: The *Noren*

Walking through the streets of Japan, one can hardly overlook the omnipresent *noren* at the entrance of countless restaurants, cafes, and shops. These *noren* often veil the establishments, draping over windows and doors to a low level, making it very difficult to peek inside. A different negotiation between the senses was required from us when choosing where to dine or sip tea. As neurodivergent bodyminds sensitive to stimuli in certain milieus, selecting a place to sit is not straightforward. We find ourselves peeking inside restaurants to assess the crowd, the busyness, potential seating spots, and the amount of visual noise in the space, among other factors. In our experience, a look inside from the outside often determines, when unfamiliar with the place, whether it will be a hit or miss.

This habit of self-care transcends mere monosensory activity; it must be understood as a multimodal act whereby different senses cooperate to actualize perception. I hear the murmur of voices and the unbearable hum of the coffee machine with my eyes. Proprioceptively, I see the path to the table in the far corner by the window, where the chair beckons with its promise of comfort, whispering its “sittability”. The textures of the chair, felt from outside the cafe’s window,

send tingles through my body to the touch of cotton napkins on the table. Our senses, never solitary, weave together to craft a unique moment of experience (Masumi 2017). To gaze from the outside is never to see the 'real objective world'; rather, it is a relational act of creation, where body and world arise anew as this body and this world. And while these moments of experience are intensely complex, as every experience is, perception in these instances functions mostly instrumentally, as it requires our modalities to categorize experience into this and that object, this and that potential warning, or this and that potential action. Thankfully, they do; otherwise, this practice of peeking in would lose its utility. In Japan, however, looking in was not always possible during our stay. This constraint turned into a gift, revealing unexpected potentialities in our journeys of perception.

In the context of Japan, the *noren* comes with a prevailing narrative that situates the phenomenon historically and culturally. Predominantly, the *noren* story tells of its initial embodiments as a necessity, serving as a protective layer in front of doorways against wind, sun, and dust, as well as a subtle separation between spaces to allow for some privacy without the solidity of walls. With the rise of merchant culture, the object evolved into something more than merely functional. Many businesses began using it as a form of signage, adorning it with shop names, family crests, and symbols representing the products or experiences they offered. Temples also embraced the *noren*, often featuring religious motifs and symbols. Culturally, the *noren* also embodies the concept of *ma*—the space between—which signifies the balance between movement and stillness, sounds and silence, presence and absence. By allowing light and air to pass through, the *noren* maintains a sense of continuity and connection between spaces, while also marking transitions between different areas or rooms (Masuda 1989).

The narrative of the *noren* is far too expansive to be fully captured in a single story. Let us share another perspective on this multifaceted and ever-evolving presence—not to overshadow its existing tales, but to convey our experience of it, considering that an object is always an event with potentially infinite stories to tell. Our encounters with the *noren* are imbued with neurodiversity, intertwined with its historical context, even as we remained unaware of its cultural and historical roots, being newcomers to this phenomenon. In its dance with our bodies, the *noren* often fostered an embodied vision that resisted instrumentalization, even if only fleetingly. Yet, this temporary suspension of instrumentalization, each time unique, became a point of intrigue and one of many springboards for crafting the dialogue we wished to facilitate.

It always starts as a pull—we were hungry—for recognition to appear. Each pull births a unique recognition. But this time, the pull was potent, echoed by the growls of our stomachs. The street suddenly transformed into a stage for all the various *norens*—too many of them, we mused. When your stomach echoes like ours, the recognition of *norens* seldom arrives without the promise of what lies behind them: a meal. The desire for food had to first unveil the *norens* to us before eating could take place. Our mouths watered impatiently, defying the wait to cross the threshold. Bereft of our usual self-care rituals, we plunged into the unknown, drawn by another pull—the allure of that elegant white fabric, dancing with what seemed like the sketch of a cat's paw in motion. The *noren* invited a gentle bow, which was met with a caress on our hair and face. Our heads felt

submerged, and as we crossed the threshold, they didn't remain bowed, yet they were still under water. How did we know we were still submerged? Instrumentalization was nowhere to be found. We observed textures, colors, patterns, and lines as one might see when looking through dense water, where no object for action can (yet) be distinguished. The potential action in seeing and sitting did not appear instantly, nor did the corners or our usual requirements for care. Objects and actions were delayed by some instants, but in these short moments, everything changed. It was a felt forming of the world and our bodies, an ineffable witnessing accompanied with a lot of joy.

Autistic writer Donna Williams (1998) describes this mode of encountering or witnessing in perception before perceiving the object as it is as the "art of the object". She writes:

Most people perceive objects beyond their grainy, sheeny, reflective, flowing, coloured or opaque appearances, beyond their smooth, raspy, cold, textured tactile experience, beyond the sounds of their chinking, thud-thud, tap-tap surfaces when impacted upon, their sweet, or savoury or chemical tastes or smells, their flexibility, solidness or bounce when bitten into or impacted upon. Most people experience the object before the art of it. They whisk over the sensory into the literal and experience themselves not just in the company of glass, wood, metal, paper, plastic derived objects but beyond this to the significant; that these objects are for cooking, decoration, belong to their neighbour, require a good clean etc. (Williams 1998, 93)

The art of the object, or what we call the "artfulness of the event", must not be understood as artful qualities belonging to the object itself; that would assume that the event is already categorized into objects and subjects—a subject experiencing the object's qualities. The event is precategorical, in the time of its forming when boundaries are yet to be established, when "one is the 'whole world' and everything experienced of that world is an indistinguishable and resonant part of one's self with no need to explore it as a separate entity" (Williams 1998, 12).

Philosopher Erin Manning (2013, 2016) maintains that there is a mode of perception particularly attuned to the "more-than" of experience, which she calls "autistic perception." She writes, "Rather than seeing the parts abstracted from the whole, autistic perception is alive with tendings that create ecologies before they coalesce into form. There is here as yet no hierarchical differentiation, for instance, between color, sound, light, between human and nonhuman, between what connects to the body and what connects to the world" (Manning 2016, 14). Autistic perception is direct perception in the event's unfolding; a direct perception in the workings of perception. However, despite calling it autistic perception—and we want to emphasize this point—Manning's intention is not to describe autistics exclusively. Rather, she alludes to a tendency in perception shared by all—both autistics and non-autistics. Nevertheless, as Manning argues, many autistics, and we want to add many neurodivergent bodyminds, are especially aware of it, as they often experience the world more "directly." Everyone is a direct perceiver, yet neurotypicals are often less attentive to it due to their tendency to "chunk" experience very quickly, making seeing in perception unseen. Chunking divides perception into bounded subjects and objects, actions, categories, either/or logics, and judgments. However, we must understand that without the forming field, chunking

would not be possible. Thus, we all perceive directly just as we all chunk; time is the differentiating factor.

So what prompted our perception to become so strongly attuned to autistic perception, or to perceive perception's birthing in our encounters with these restaurants? The answer was already given yet implicitly: the event. We must be careful not to correlate the event solely with sensory input. The "conditions of emergence" (Masumi 2017, 85) like photons or sound waves cooperate closely with the web of the senses. It is in the event, in the encounter between sensory input and the convergence of the senses, that a distinct experience is composed. In Japan, our seeing was woven through a co-constitutive event-fabric with different conditions for seeing—namely, cooperation between the potentiality of our senses and the technological potential of architectural space and time. These conditions encompassed not only the obstruction of the *noren*, its attractive pull, and its gentle brush on our bodies but also our unfamiliarity with many Japanese interiors and their invitations for action, like the beckoning "sittability" of the tatami. As we grew more familiar, encountering the *noren* time and again, habit began to guide our bodies toward a more instrumental view, though always entwined with delightful disruptions. Throughout our visit, our vision was never solely instrumental; direct perception consistently shaped our experiences. These two modes of seeing are not mere binaries but constitutional; instrumental perception can never exist without its emergent field. Direct perception, or, as we like to call it, seeing in perception, is staring through the window of life's forming—a time before language, categories, and action, when one is the whole world.

Entering a new space, as we did in Japan, is never a neutral beginning. What is the directionality of the space? How is the space conditioned to be seen and felt? What actions accompany this space? An entrance is always more than its affordance. Neurotypicality has conditioned the passing event to be operational and successful only when it goes unnoticed. Consequently, most neurotypicals don't even perceive it as an event. Restaurant norms dictate: "Enter, sit, and pay attention to the menu." It is assumed that objects like doors, chairs, floors, and menus are predetermined and devoid of processuality, encountered by all in the same way; otherwise, something must be wrong with the person. But what if the process of interior forming does not go unnoticed, as with autistic perception? Anne Corwin illustrates this difference in passing, noting, "I often tend to sit on floors and other surfaces even if furniture is available, because it's a lot easier to identify 'flat surface a person can sit on' than it is to sort the environment into chunks like 'couch,' 'chair,' 'floor,' and 'coffee table'" (Corwin as quoted by Manning 2013, 219). A tendency to chunk "late" is challenging in a world that demands fast chunking to perform within its neurotypical structures. But as many neurodivergent writers have shown us, a tendency to chunk late comes with immense potentiality for difference and a lot of joy as well. Remember, Donna Williams even calls it an art.

As we understand it, Neurotypicality is not just a classification of people but a sociopolitical structure that makes us bodies, or as Manning would say, "bodies" us. Through entrenched scientific and humanist concepts, as well as material conditions and expected modes of engagement, neurotypicality shape most bodyminds to recognize what is a valuable and sane

movement, sound, utterance, thought, and perception. Many habitually perform neurotypically without conscious effort. One method neurotypicality uses to maintain control is by teaching us from a very young age that a normal and healthy body adheres to concepts such as intelligence, competence, intentional, speaking, proper gait/movement, cognition, and executive function. In other words, neurotypicality establishes the relational conditions that allow people to emerge as supposedly good bodies, that is, correctly functioning, talking-walking subjects.

These conditions cannot be understood exclusively through neurotypicality; they must be considered in their connectedness with other oppressive systems, for example, hetero-cis-normativity (Walker 2021; Chapman 2023). Through the concept of “neuroqueer”, Remi Yergeau (2018) demonstrates how neurotypicality and its bodily demands are intertwined with normative ideas and performances of gender. Yergeau illustrates this with the example of hand movements, noting that some neurodivergent bodyminds engage in stimming—often described as repetitive bodily movements. Neurotypical perspectives frequently characterize these movements as anti-social, non-relational, non-discursive, and non-intentional. It insists these movements must be controlled in accordance with a normative performance of binary gender roles: act like a normal girl or like a normal boy. However, some neurodivergents find it impossible to meet the oppressive neurotypical demands, which can lead to dire, sometimes fatal, consequences. Some bodyminds become depressed and extremely fatigued when attempting to mask, while others choose not to comply at all.

The process of ‘neurotypicalizing’ bodies is just one way of shaping bodies; conditions for seeing, thinking, feeling, moving—bodying—can and, dare we say, must be envisaged differently to move beyond the normalizing and oppressive practices that govern the definition of what it means to be human. These practices always lead to the establishment of certain values and expressions as normal while pathologizing others and deeming them unworthy. We must do and narrate otherwise; we must devise different conditions for doing and narrating otherwise. We ask(ed): What if we began creating spaces and events with the proposition of autistic perception and, more generally, the concept that everything is always in-forming as the starting point? What spatial and eventful conditions can we devise, and how can we keep the processes of forming always noticeable? How can we facilitate events that invite difference on the level of the precategorical? The *noren* reminded us—in a way that resonates with our familiarity with autistic perception—that the world and our bodies are uniquely actualized through processes at the end of every event, prompting us to start anew time and time again. So, during our research residency, we asked: How can our experience with the *noren* serve as the springboard for constructing the conditions for a dialogue we wish to facilitate? The encounter with the world in-forming in Japan, thanks in part to the *noren*, will not facilitate that same encounter for everyone. So, what if we pushed the potentiality of the *noren* to its limit?

Chapter Two: The Site of Reversible Destiny

Pushing the potentiality of the *noren* to its limits didn't bind us to its identity; instead, it scattered seeds—eggs that would hatch into problems in different contexts. We experienced it as a generative catapult, propelling us to explore the problems it unfolded in our quest to foster conditions for a neurodiverse dialogue between worlds. What if the *noren* becomes both a means to make passaging felt and a way to construct a space in continuous formation—a kind of “norenning” that can be practiced anywhere? What if norenning is continuously facilitated anew in difference, so as to make one's movement in space always a new event of passaging? These questions would not have emerged without an additional encounter, namely our encounter with The Site of Reversible Destiny. Thus, one must recognize these problems as the emergent bodies of a multiplicity of encounters: neurodiversity with the *noren*, the *noren* with The Site of Reversible Destiny and neurodiversity with The Site of Reversible Destiny, and the intertwining of all three.

Arriving at The Site of Reversible Destiny—Arakawa and Gins' park—is no brief voyage from Kyoto, where we were previously. In Kyoto, our main focus was visiting temples, primarily Buddhist ones, and getting lost in the tranquility of the details. When free from tourists shopping for pictures, Buddhist temples become treasures for our hypervision, typically low in visual stimuli but capable of handing out a rich menu of minute details that can encompass entire worlds. Hypervision is an art of focusing on a small point and sticking with it until it becomes all there is to see. Our hypervision grand master, Tito Mukhopadhyay, an autistic writer, in our reading of his work, taught us this wisdom well. Movement is abundant in hypervision, even as it is movement in stillness. We could sit on a step, watching the corner of that stone until time dissolves—though it seems like a long time to those who measure it from the outside.

The park operated differently on us. It offered no time for hypervision. The park is composed of uneven, brightly colored terrain shaped by steep slopes, sudden inclines, domes, narrow passages, and unstable-looking platforms. Large abstract architectural forms are scattered across the site, requiring constant recalibration of balance and orientation as the ground tilts, rises, and folds beneath the body. In this environment, perception was immediately dispersed across the site. We were looking all over its surface, running hungrily for more. Our eyes led the way into this haptic planet unknown to earthlings and their way of moving. Stumble upon stumble, bodies met to form a body, yet consensus was never reached. We felt like observers of bodies deciding how I was to be my I. Walking on the sky, my eyes touched the softness of that concrete surface, rich with the pastness of grass and rubber. Eyes led but are deceitful; they tell you one thing, but surfaces feel differently. Once again, bodies conflict. Let me tell you, the journey to consciousness is never a straight one; it more closely follows the multiplicity of a forest. Slip upon slip, potential tracks are too many to follow, but can one ever truly say they haven't taken them all simultaneously on this planet of unknowns? We are here, and there, and where, and there, and there, and where and here. Affects fall like rain, leaving us soaked in inseparability. Arakawa and Gins' architecture against death rings true; one visit to the park and we erupted into hundreds of little particles, each with its own future to be planted on the planet of unknowns. Into which textures will they grow?



*Figure 1: The Site of Reversible Destiny (1995) by Gins and Arakawa. Photo: shy*play.*

Our visit to Arakawa and Gins' park was extraordinary. We often say that this visit truly reminded us that we were ALIVE! Just as with the *noren*, autistic perception made itself felt strongly but in a very different way compared to our experiences with the *noren*. The process of seeing action was swift, like a chef rapidly chopping vegetables: tak, tak, tak, tak, tak, tak, without the same pause between cuts, yet the actions did not come with categorization. The actions were devoid of instrumental intention; they were rather for the sake of creative exploration without a specific goal, purely for the art of it. It took the form of an improvisational dance between bodies and the park. It was a true haven for desire. We found ourselves roaming, running, moving on all four, stumbling, falling, touching, caressing, looking upwards, sideways, legs leading, heads tilting back, arms journeying one way and legs another. We felt as though our bodies were not obeying a singular desire; instead, desire drifted in every direction, with each part of us yearning to follow its own unique path. This is not to say that all our senses worked independently. On the contrary, they all worked together synesthetically but not in harmony; we strongly felt the different desires that were flowing and waiting for recognition. The park was the absolute embodiment of an architecture in a continuous process of becoming. The events were perishing quickly, and we kept perceiving the park in new and different ways, noticeably too fast and complex for consciousness.

What makes the norm assume that action or movement is directed by the human subject? Or that the act or movement is a product of the self? As experienced in the park, much of the action occurs in a time before and alongside consciousness, yet still in relation to it. The notion that movement

belongs to a subject—the self in total control—is an internalized illusion taught to us from a very young age by neurotypicality. Arakawa and Gins (2002) concur when they assert that most of us “register numb”. By this, they mean that most of us move without truly thinking or feeling. To achieve this, one must suppress the layered milieu, much like chunking, which usually occurs very quickly, without conscious thinking ever being aware of it. Thus, when we say neurotypicality taught us, it is not merely an utterance; most of Western architecture is built to facilitate that numbness, as many bodyminds follow deeply habituated routes. Consider how most people enter a classroom or a restaurant, to bring up a familiar example: they sit. “We move with our presupposed bodies in an existing space,” neurotypicality would claim. Such bodies rely unthinkingly on their proprioceptive sense, “the body’s awareness of its location, posture, and movement, enabled by receptors distributed throughout the skin, muscles, tendons, and joints” (Lupton and Lipps 2018, 4). Beyond its biological aspect, as Manning (2013) writes, proprioception also “provides us with clues that precede our [...] understanding of where we are going. [It is] feeling with, immediately linked to our sense of balance, to our ability to space” (49).

But proprioception informed by neurodiversity works differently, according to artist and writer Esté Klar (2020): “Neurodiverse proprioception moves the body within space I will come to understand as ‘the room.’ The room is defined as my body + the environment, where the environment is an atmospheric body” (23–24). The space and body arise with movement rather than being defined prior to their relation. Our experience at the park echoes Klar’s perspective on this. Our movement in the park was partly led by proprioception; it involved seeing the tactile quality of the rubber floor, which tingled in our feet and propelled our legs to move toward it at a speed we didn’t know we were capable of. But it was also the sensation of our bodies being fragmented, pulling and pushing in all directions, with legs, arms, and heads in a struggle for their recognized desires. More than that, it was the ability to still feel as a body, however fragmented. This experience of the atmospheric body, not self-contained but a productive operation, is intentional here, producing what Arakawa and Gins (2002) call the “architectural body”: an intermingling of bodies and surroundings taking shape together.

Bodies and spaces always emerge anew, even if, for neurotypicals, newness may often feel like the same due to a tendency to chunk quickly and take the chunk as supposedly natural. Neurodiverse bodyminds, however, keep reminding us that relation is always primary. Let us read Mel Baggs to further demonstrate this point:

I was pouring water from a large bucket, onto an electric fence. I slowly realized something was different—no, bad—no, very bad—and hang on, it seems to be in the vicinity. And colored bright white, and... oh yeah, painful, and pain has something to do with my body (???), yeah it does, but where on my body, ..., ..., ..., ..., arm. My arm is a part of me. Let me turn my eyes on. Now look at my arm. Stuff on my arm. Stuff... water. Where is the water going? Fence. Electric... oh. Better stop this. Where’s the arm again? Got to move it. (Wait for those instructions to mosey down into my arm.) There. Phew. (Baggs 2010b)

For many neurodivergent bodyminds, including ours, spaces—even when neurotypically built to register numb—often feel too busy. Feeling numb is a capability many of us do not possess, which

can be frustrating given the omnipresence of neurotypical spaces and their ‘correct’ handling. A diversity of techniques is adopted by different neurodivergent bodyminds to continue participating in these environments, even when our participation often leads to punishment and life-threatening situations. Adam Wolfond writes about one of his techniques, which involves stimming with “non-human facilitators” (Klar 2020, 57) when the visual field becomes too busy. He writes:

I am arranging the open way with starting support. I am arranging slanting space so that I am always easy average walks of calm. I want the slanting space to see and really keep balance. The space is always pacing too fast and having the stick thinks about how I can move social gaming like everyone else. I am also fast so I need to easy walk with a stick. (Wolfond as quoted by Klar 2020, 47)

The park did not conform to the neurotypical will. On the contrary, it was built with the intention of making the bodying process feel strongly anew each time and, more importantly, directed at asking how the bodying process can be actualized differently. If neurotypical spaces demand habitual perception and action, the park asks what else is possible in seeing, movement, and spacing. There are no rules of participation, and correctness is not part of the park’s vocabulary. Our bodies accentuated a fast-paced, hungry need for physical movement, scattered and all over the place, but other bodyminds also danced with the park yet differently. We witnessed some people moving very slowly, inspecting the images and sensory experiences the park enabled with its rich array of textures, colors, patterns, and shapes. Furthermore, the park’s yearning for newness is underscored by the indeterminacy of its structures—these constructions and centers—which often appear as points of attraction, popping up like trees on alien ground. Yet once reached, they don’t provide a conclusion or plain category of what they are or how they must be handled. Instead, they remain within the pool of possibilities, making encounters with them and their relation to other elements of the park always a new world that leaks into all different kinds of narratives.

Conditions for forming differently, as with Arakawa and Gins’ park, do not imply an “anything goes” approach. One must craft these conditions carefully to prevent the encroachment of habit upon the processes of formation. Arakawa and Gins understood this well, and it is evident throughout the park. Consider one compositional element: the intertwining paths. Omnipresent, they lead to various structures, yet fluidly dissolve into other paths, and then into still more. They understood that paths enable movement, especially when there is a recognition of some sort of structure that a path can lead to. However, just as the structures invite direct perception, so do the paths. While they function as possible routes through the park, their purpose exceeds mere passage due to their nuanced conditioning. Constructed from diverse materials, these paths tease the senses—where sight suggests one reality, touch unveils another. They refuse rectilinearity; instead, they undulate—ascending and descending—rendering the journey a tangible, immersive experience, transforming mere passage into an act of worlding. The paths’ conditions also invite a shift in action, leading, as in our case, to a pluralism of desire. We partly understood these conditions as the repetition of materials, which recur in both paths and structures, yet invariably in unique combinations, serving distinct formal and compositional purposes. In this way, both pastness and futurity are strongly felt in their non-linearity. And that is not to mention the persistent desire to

deviate from the paths, as they never seem to lead exactly where one initially wanted to go. Indeed, the desire for directionality is constantly redirecting itself, and in some ways, the paths themselves are to blame—a generative blame, we should add.



*Figure 2: The Site of Reversible Destiny (1995) by Gins and Arakawa. Photo: shy*play.*

Chapter Three: A Workshop

For the culmination of our one-month-long residency, we aimed to construct a dialogue between worlds in which a group of local participants, primarily artists, attended and took part. The workshop sought to facilitate dialogue as an encounter between worlds in-formed by neurodiversity, in part through the creation of a mobile architecture in which perception, body, and space could be strongly felt in their co-formation. This mobile architecture would provoke an awakened registering and the accommodation of difference at the level of the precategorical. And so, we embarked on this journey of creating conditions for a mobile architecture, first by collecting papers with various textures and beginning work on an installation for neurodiverse dialoguing.

This installation became a constellation of paper sculptures with various performances: they acted as thresholds for bodies and perception, as objects inviting the alteration of physicality and the fragmentation of bodies, as hiding spots, and as wind-sensitive flappers. From the outset, it was built to deny any central point—particularly in relation to making the face the focal point of dialogue. More often than not, the sculptures directed perception to other parts of the human; legs and feet, for instance, frequently became what the eyes would meet.

The centrality of an architecture with objects that insinuate habituated directedness—remember the example of a restaurant—was equally disturbed. Yet that is not to say it lacked all sense of direction. As we learned from the paths at the Site of Reversible Destiny, conditions must birth some kind of direction(s), but without finalizing them into a fixed architecture or reducing bodies to what they already are, as opposed to what they can do. The sculptures invited perception, amongst other things, to see the thresholds as strongly imbued with the desire for passaging. We think it worked especially well in this context, as participants saw in them *norens*—albeit weird ones—something that would culturally perform differently in, for example, the Netherlands. However, this passaging never materialized into the entering of a coded room as it might in a restaurant; instead, it was followed by the potential for further moments of passaging, each one leading to another *noren*. The space was constructed precisely as a space of passaging—a space that foregrounded processuality and the continuous re-forming of space and bodies.

The passaging was also felt in a different key. The sculptures carried other directionalities as well, embodying qualitative conditions that encouraged synesthesia through their intricate patterns, textures, lights and shadows, movements and rhythms. We often heard from participants that the sculptures tasted like different flavors of candy, while others spoke about how the movement and the rhythms of the sculptures created music. Some participants even described seeing the patterns and textures of the sculptures moving in ways that could not be attributed to movement from the wind. We should not mistake this for hallucination; rather it is the production of an aesthetic experience arising in the relational, the inbetweenness, of senses in co-operation and the conditions of emergence previously discussed—there is no objective world simply waiting to be seen out there. In other words, the relational field presupposes synesthesia: synesthetic articulations offer insights into the relational field, as most people are habituated to perceive in ways as to background this field. Thus, owing to these strong synesthetic conditions, participants

also felt a directedness of passaging in perception that did not necessitate the crossing of a physical threshold—a passaging of the senses, if you will.

The installation was set up in the living room of a villa where we stayed during our residency. This was important to us, as we wanted to avoid the strictness of a gallery or art space. We felt that the living room would support our intention of creating a mobile architecture, especially in the context of Japan, where tatami rooms are ubiquitous in living spaces—particularly in more traditional settings. These rooms are often kept largely free of furniture, allowing the space itself to remain open and continuously adaptable for reorganization.



*Figure 3: Experiments for Neurodiverse Futurities (2024) by shy*play. Photo: shy*play.*

The arrival in the space was marked by a sense of participation, with all the directionalities previously mentioned being enacted. Yet, we also found it necessary to include language within the mobile architecture as a dialogue. But could we approach language with the same processual attitude we applied to the other components of the installation? This is especially challenging, as language tends to abstract by placing itself outside the event itself, often with the arrogance of assuming it knows all. Henri Bergson ([1907] 1998) argues that this tendency in language supports the idea of the intellect as a form of knowledge that has mastered understanding from an external standpoint. It is capable only of representational language and is obsessed with categorizing an infinity of objects in the world according to abstract and formal knowledge—universalization, generalization, division, etc. “In the oversight of language there is the mistake illusion of always calling things the same but things are always alive” (Wolfond as quoted by Klar 2020, 38). This is the language of chunking— non-sensuous and abstracted, detached from the relational field and

capable of operating only through separability: the kind of language that neurotypicality alone deems legible.

However, representational language is not the only function language can perform; many writers, amongst them neurodivergent writers and especially autistic writers, have shown us otherwise. Ralph James Savarese (2012) writes about a relational language found in many autistic writers—a language that is not only environmental, but also processual and sensuous in its wording. He calls this modality of writing “autie-type”, which he describes as a genre in its own right, deeply relational in both its thinking and communication. The published writings of Adam Wolfond (2022, 2023), Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay (2015, 2021), Imane Boukaila (2024), Naoki Higashida (2017), to name just a few, are perfect examples of this.

Manning describes these language performances as a certain form of poetics. She writes:

In the poetic language of classical autism, language is a sensing practice in its own right—a field of affective tonality activated in rhythms and tones, in speeds and intensities. Here, the turn toward expression does not cut itself off from the experiential vastness of sensation and perception but writes with them. (Manning 2013, 156).

This is a writing with the world, in the world, in the time of the event as unparsed, when one is the whole world. Our ongoing engagement with this poetics over the years has shown that reading such language and its “prearticulations” (Manning 2013, 167)—with its rhythms, its quietness, its jumps in register—is itself a highly sensory experience, imbued with movement, affect, and synesthetic articulation. It is not detached from understanding, but playfully moves alongside it, in a relationship that is fluid and undulating.

The following poem by autistic writer Tito Mukhopadhyay moves within this poetics. It does not illustrate the above argument, but performs it—where language remains entangled with rhythm, affect, and perception as the encounter with the event of the poem unfolds.

Clouds born again Sky—their sagging cradle,
Mist curtained, the sonorous drizzle

Sagging clouds swung the cradle.
Something almost said to a metallic town in silver drizzle,
“The light looks dead!”

Something almost said— houses listened; cars blurred with powdery rain. “The
shops looked dead!”
The smudged outlines of headlights shimmered.

Floating on reflections, cars blurred,
The clouds and streets refracted.
Shimmering lampposts silvered,
Visually displaced. (Mukhopadhyay 2021, 79–80)

Apart from the fact that many of these aforementioned writers produce brilliant work—as demonstrated in the above example, and which should be attributed to their qualities as writers—their writing also seems to be linked to their unique way of perceiving, which, following Manning, we have called “autistic perception.” They write from within that mode of perception, when forming is in its midst and everything is connected. This is often expressed through metaphor.

Autie-type is often seen at the heart of metaphorical thinking, aligning one sensation with another to enhance the experience of both simultaneously—a passaging of the senses. As poet Chris Martin (2022) discloses, “The expression of this doubleness, this deepening into the multiplicity of experience, might well have formed the soil from which poetry sprang” (54). The metaphorical thinking we are alluding to is not at a representational level, where preexisting concepts are put together; rather, the connections occur precategoryally, in a realm where amodality reigns. Savarese is precise in his writing on this:

The choice of metaphoric vehicles is striking; notice how disparate the things compared are. One might be tempted to accuse this Autie of engaging in mixed metaphors, so quickly do the analogies, both implicit and explicit, come. But the point seem to be a world reconnected, a world *included*, on the level of sensory perception. (Savarese as quoted by Manning 2013, 158)

In the construction of the installation, then, we worked processually to approach language as we would any other component, albeit with its own singularities—treating it as material, as rhythmic, as form, etc. We were keen to avoid the paper becoming merely a surface for language. To this end, we collected poems by neurodivergent writers addressing topics such as time, perception, language, the medical system, as well also our own poems, and began sculpting, spacing, and installing.

Words and sentences received snake-like curves, travelling on, through, and in the sculptures, reaching their many crevices. The serpentine curves of the words worked compositionally with the verticality of the floating papers and the horizontality of the cords. As viewers moved among the sculptures, these curving paths invited thinking that unfolded in the movement of the body, in affect, and in conscious awareness—three modes of thought that existed in relation, shaped by one’s shifting position among the forms. Meaning was not absent, nor was it separated from all the other movement.

At one point in the workshop, as all participants encountered the installation from multiple directions, we contextualized the workshop as a neurodiverse dialogue—much as we have done in this essay, though more briefly—and invited everyone, if they wished, to physically alter the installation. We had brought many utensils for this purpose, which also partly guided possible forms of engagement. We made sure to emphasize that this invitation was not a prerequisite for participation; we considered everything participants had already been doing up to that point as meaningful participation in itself.

_____ink followed ant
ant took time to walk through floating paper strings
eye and brush followed ant
ant followed movement
movement followed hand
hand with elongated paper fingers that touched some human fingers
across the room
paper strings and forms and fingers and membranes and space reaching out

like everything is reaching out
like all things are reaching out
like nothings are reaching out

_____ant goes far
brush follows breeze then
paper membrane says fffsssss

a bunch of humans also here
with few words
of those typical words
but hey!
who said the words were few?
who measures what measures???

paper
elongation
arriving
passing
_____paper strings
stringing through and around
breeze coming and going
reaching in and out
as the languaging
that makes us all
somehow
not only
___if only

full full full full of meaningless *meaninging*
words passed underneath ant's elegant walking
they were
and will be
tending towards
_____the words
and the feeling

There is a tendency in participatory art to place the human at the center of participation. But we resist this tendency, seeking instead to approach the dialogue ecologically—valuing the human as well as the more-than human. Besides the participatory directionalities already discussed, an ecological participation was also foregrounded by the way all the sculptures, because of their thin paper, would move when someone passed by, when wind entered from outside, or as the sun shifted, changing the lights and shadows so that the whole composition of the installation transformed, creating different spaces within spaces. In this processual constellation, agency does not belong solely to humans but operates in the in-betweenness of forming entities; agency, in this regard, must be understood as co-constitutive.

Our proposal for this dialogue was not to start from identities or preconceived groups, but to begin with the relational—and to explore what the relational can do when conditions are set to test its potentialities. This dialogue was intentionally designed to try to make space for new modes of existence to be invented, for new socialities to emerge. It was an answer to Wynter's call for writing new stories. After all, how can we not regard autistic perception, bodying, autie-type, and worlding as forms of participation, as relations of "agencying" (Massumi 2024)? To grant agency exclusively to formed (human) subjects is perhaps the most oppressive gesture of neurotypical thinking.

Our neurodiverse perspective adopted a conception of writing not only through language, but with the many other languages that always operate in connection. Storying ecologically.



*Figure 4: Experiments for Neurodiverse Futurities (2024) by shy*play. Photo: shy*play.*

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Biographies

Aion Arribas (they/them) is a movement artist, transdisciplinary researcher, and teacher. They obtained a bachelor's degree in Graphic Design from Escuela Numero 10 in Madrid, a second bachelor's degree in Choreography from SNDO in Amsterdam, and a master's degree in Fine Arts and Design from KABK in The Hague. Their work dances in between questions of embodiment and bodying, the interplay of creation with auto-theory, and the advancement of a neurodiversity paradigm through creative practices. Along with antje nestel, they co-created shy*play, a collective focused on doing neurodiversity as a relational practice in difference. shy*play is also a project hosted by the Research Lectorate of the Academy of Theater and Dance in Amsterdam (DAS Research) and a THIRD fellow 2024–2026 of the same department.

antje nestel (they/them) is an artist, a teacher, a facilitator of participatory events. They obtained a bachelor's degree in fine art from Gerrit Rietveld Academy and a research master's degree in Media, Art and Performance at Utrecht University. antje was also a participant at De ateliers in Amsterdam. Together with Aion Arribas, they have created a collective named shy*play, that focuses on exploring with neurodiversity not as a process of explanation, but as a relational practice in difference. shy*play is also a project hosted by the Research Lectorate of the Academy of Theatre and Dance in Amsterdam (DAS Research) and a THIRD fellow 2024–2026 of the same department.

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

SOLO DANCING AND MULTIPLE SELVES IN IGOR AND MORENO'S *BEAT* (2019): 'SMARGINATURA' AS A POLITICS OF PLURALITY

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Let me begin elsewhere. A few years ago, maybe five or six, I became obsessed with Elena Ferrante's writing, especially her four Neapolitan novels (2011–2015),¹ which tell the story of Elena (also called Lenù), the first-person narrator, and Lina (or Lila), her closest friend, from their childhood in 1950s Naples to old age. I would read them every evening into the night (in the Italian original), unable to let go of Ferrante's depiction of these two ordinary yet elusive characters, whose lives are entangled with the local history of poverty, violence, and organised crime. Ferrante's language captures the transient, provisional, and marginal states of these identities, through words that convey the inherent uncertainty of their affective and material lives. One such word is the term she uses to describe a body-and/as-mind phenomenon Lila experiences a number of times in her life, a sort of emotional state she contends with or even an existential condition she suffers from, whereby the boundaries around people and things (including the outlines of her own identity) appear to her as if they were dissolving, which leads her to a state of both overwhelming emotions and infinite possibilities. The Italian word used in the novels to designate this phenomenon is *smarginatura*—a term employed “neologically” by Ferrante, derived from the technical vocabulary of printmaking to describe the process of cutting off the margins of a page, or to spill outside its edges (Carvalho 2018, 95).

In this article, I engage po(i)etically with the image of a subject spilling outside the margins of its own identity to articulate an understanding of the potential of *smarginatura* as an antidote to or a strategy against the individuality of the neoliberal capitalist subject, which flattens, silences, and fixes the beautifully fragile multiplicity of every being and, in reducing this complexity and reaffirming solid boundaries, also denies the interconnectedness of life. I frame this potential as a political capacity to acknowledge and embrace the intrinsic multiplicity of every subject, which in turn becomes the ground for a politics of plurality and interdependence.

An early moment of *smarginatura* happens in the first novel of Ferrante's quartet, entitled *My Brilliant Friend*, when thirteen-year-old Lila is seen dancing wildly to the new dance of the time, rock and roll. In the description of an evening of partying at a friend's house, the dancing becomes entangled with local politics and Lila ends up partnering with Marcello, one of the two sons of the local Camorra boss—someone she despises more than anything in the world. Lenù narrates:

As sure she would say no, I knew how she detested him. But that wasn't what happened. The music started, and she, with the desire to dance in every muscle, first looked for Pasquale, then, not seeing him, grasped Marcello's hand as if it were merely a hand, as if beyond it there were not an arm, his whole body, and, all sweaty, began again to do what at that moment counted the most for her: dance. (Ferrante 2012, 151)

Soon things start becoming tense, old threats make their way into the party, and Lenù tells Lila they must go. Lila laughs at the suggestion: "'Even if there's an earthquake coming, I'm going to have another dance', and she looked at Enzo, who was leaning against a wall. But meanwhile Marcello asked and she let him draw her again into a dance" (Ferrante 2012, 152). Yet, only a few minutes later, as they are leaving the party, Lila doesn't remember dancing with Marcello and, when he grabs her by the hand and asks her to dance again, she is horrified and says to Lenù: "He touched me, did you see: me, that shit. If he does it again, he's dead" (Ferrante 2012, 152). In her moment of *smarginatura*, when her boundaries are dissolved, Lila is both alone and together, being both the glue of the party and the person who has everyone's eyes glued on her. Her partnered dancing is experienced as dancing solo; she is simultaneously one and more than one. The spilling out of her 'self' through dancing reads equally as a profoundly personal experience and a radically political gesture: a form of impulsiveness and bodily abandon that signals the blurring of the categories of singular and plural.

Further episodes of *smarginatura* occur throughout the tetralogy, but readers have to wait until book four, *The Story of the Lost Child*, for a fuller discussion of the phenomenon, here labelled *smarginatura* for the first time by Lila herself. Now almost twenty-five years older, pregnant for the third time, Lila engages in an emotionally-charged exchange with Lenù following an earthquake that shook the city of Naples—a real one this time (at least in the book), not simply invoked as a metaphorical apocalypse, as she had done when younger. Lenù recounts:

She used that term: *dissolving boundaries* [*smarginatura*]. It was on that occasion that she resorted to it for the first time; she struggled to elucidate the meaning, she wanted me to understand what the dissolution of boundaries meant and how much it frightened her. She was still holding my hand tight, breathing hard.

She said that the outlines of things and people were delicate, that they broke like cotton thread. She whispered that for her it had always been that way, an object lost its edges and poured into another, into a solution of heterogeneous materials, a merging and mixing. She exclaimed that she had always had to struggle to believe that life had firm boundaries, for she had known since she was a child that it was not like that—it was *absolutely not like that*—and so she couldn't trust in their resistance to being banged and bumped. (Ferrante 2015, 175–176)

My reason for opening this article somewhere other than its canonical beginning, with a story within a story, is that I was reminded of Ferrante's *smarginatura* when I saw Igor and Moreno's choreographic work, *Beat*, in November 2019 at The Place, London. In this piece, a solo performer, Margherita Elliot, dances relentlessly to electronic music and, in doing so, continuously reinvents herself, "morphing through moves, moods, dance styles, gestures [...] driven by DJ Martha's music" (Leask 2019). In the fifty minutes of the performance, Elliot materialises on stage many slippery yet picturable selves, which reach out to the audience's imagination in a tangible, material way. The connection I drew between the overlapping of singular and plural in Lila's dancing and Elliot's embodiment of multiple selves when dancing solo prompted me to consider the potential of the choreographic format of solo dancing to become, paradoxically, a site for the exploration of multiple subjective states.

The potential of solo performance to portray and convey multiplicity has been explored in performance and dance studies works that have challenged the idea that this form might be the expression of a singular, individual voice. Rebecca Schneider (2005) has argued that "so much late-century 'solo' performance work appears as a critique of singularity—as if to show up the cracks in the face paint we call unitary subjectivity" (36). Referencing, for instance, how jazz solos are in dialogue with each other through an intricate web of relations—they "cite each other, bleed into each other, react to each other, re-enact each other" (37)—she argues that every performed action is always "a palimpsest of other actions" and as such contains "multitudes" (41). Attending to the relational nature of movement and perception, Erin Manning (2009) writes of how movement doesn't begin in the body as an isolated unit, but always in the encounter, always as a "moving-with", which implies plurality: "We perceive-with objects, catching the edges of their contours, participating in the relations they call forth. [...] This quality of relation is what gives an object-event its potential infinitude" (81). Other dance writing examines specific solos across dance history, often complicating assumptions about solitary authorship and autonomy. For instance, Janice Ross's contribution to Claudia Gitelman and Barbara Palfy's edited collection *On Stage Alone: Soloists and the Modern Dance Canon* (2012) analyses Ann Carlson's *Animal Series* solos from the late 1980s and 1990s to argue that they stage interspecies encounters, redistributing agency and undoing the myth of a single controlling author.

In this article, I investigate the potential of solo dancing to explore and expose plurality through Ferrante's image of a self whose boundaries have been dissolved. While Ferrante uses the word

smarginatura “neologically”,² and the phenomenon itself can be read in relation to notions of the unconscious and through psychoanalytical frameworks (Carvalho 2018), here I propose to use the term po(i)etically to shape an understanding of how the dissolution of boundaries and the spilling outside the margins of a frame—which I see enacted both by Lila in Ferrante’s novels and by Elliot in *Beat*—can perform a critical and creative response to the conformist “one-dimensionality” of the individual under capitalism. In advanced industrial societies, as Herbert Marcuse already argued in *One-Dimensional Man*, published in 1964, very efficient forms of control that serve technological progress and consumer culture stifle critical thinking and genuine opposition, leading to a conservative environment in which individuals are fully immersed in the logic of the system. This challenges the notion of the modern individual as free and exposes the power of the consumerist system to neutralise dissent and create conformist individuals committed to pursuing material goals to satisfy false needs produced by the system itself. In this context “individual thought [is] absorbed by mass communication and indoctrination” (Marcuse 2002, 6), producing one-dimensional people who passively accept the status quo and are incapable of imagining alternatives.

Thinking through conceptualisations of the plurality and differentiation of existence—from Rosi Braidotti’s (1994) theory of nomadic subjectivity, to Roberto Esposito’s (2012) rethinking of the notion of personhood, to Jack Halberstam’s (2011) generative idea of failure and losing one’s self—I attend to the performative and affective modalities through which solo dancing can reveal a commitment, both aesthetic and political, to the articulation of the subject as multiple. In doing so, I also wish to pursue a reflection on the zones of contiguity between solo choreography and first-person writing. While the juxtaposition is inspired by Ferrante’s first-person writing via the narrator Elena, through her retelling of her life-long friendship with Lina and her depiction of her friend’s states of *smarginatura*, I am especially interested in extending my reflections to include ‘autotheoretical’ writing, the genre-defying more-than-memoirs that engage with the dialogue between personal narrative and critical discourse “in ways that are direct, performative, or self-aware” (Fournier 2021, 6). Perhaps controversially, due to performance criticism’s disavowal of textual approaches for nearly half a century now, I consider the extent to which solo dancing, like (a certain articulation of) personal narrative in contemporary literature from the early 2000s, can become “the form of a pure multiplicity” (Esposito 2012, 134), “a site of multiple others” (Braidotti 2014, 164), a field of intensity in which the place of the subject is both excavated and made available to different voices. Similarly to how *Beat* evokes practices of performing the self that contemporary audiences are exposed to through media platforms, autotheory is also in dialogue with “the shifting place of the personal in relation to social media technologies and the more widespread cultural tendencies to overshare” (Fournier 2021, 16). Moreover, if autotheory is characterised by “an invoking of one’s self as an integral part of theorizing” (Fournier 2021, 15), the self of many examples of autotheoretical writing is presented and performed as multiple: “an endless collection of oneself that is impossible to gather” (Singh 2018, 18).

Besides, as Lauren Fournier (2021) writes, “autotheory has an interesting relationship with margins, and writers and artists who work autotheoretically often extend the conceit of writing, annotating, and scribbling in the margins in conceptual ways” (138). This can take the form of placing theoretical references or quotations in the margins, thus transforming both the page layout and the readers’ experience of reading thorough an unconventional engagement with the spatial and temporal dimensions of writing/reading the self. This seems pertinent in relation to Ferrante’s *smarginatura*, as the practice of working creatively with typesetting formats and assigning a different role to the margins of the page signals an interest in exploring the range of possibilities they invite or invoke.

In the writing that follows I explore how solo dancing and performative personal narrative can engage with the dissolution of identity boundaries, by curating adjacencies between performances of the self that attend to its processes of becoming and unbecoming—either through dancing or through writing, where either “mode of *doing*” contributes to the shaping of the self/selves they perform (Fournier 2021, 16). In particular, I invite into the conversation autotheoretical writings by Katherine Angel (2012), Ann Cvetkovich (2012), Maggie Nelson (2015), and Julietta Singh (2018) as examples of feminist and queer writing that “shuttles between self and theory” (Fournier 2021, 35) to give voice to and perform a self that emerges in dialogue with a multiplicity of contexts and ideas and as such can only be portrayed through plurality.

Allow me now to start from the beginning. The stage of *Beat* is a white raised dance floor backed by three white screens of decreasing sizes hung one behind the other, pulsating with the continuous beat of an electronic track. The auditorium is nearly full on the night of the show’s London premiere at The Place theatre in 2019. As Margherita Elliot enters the performance space, she quietly cuts through this white canvas, a space-time of possibilities, and comes to stand in the middle, full front, her presence both unassuming and self-assured. Scanning the audience left to right and then back again, she pauses to exchange silent moments with individual spectators, looking intently, coyly smiling at specific people, imperceptibly straining her eyes to see better, to recognise a certain person. Naively, I find myself wondering: does she know them—all of them, so many? She comes across as young and “girlish” (Leask 2019), in her casual, sporty clothes, white trainers, and ankle socks. Without breaking eye contact with the audience, she slowly begins to move, still loosely rooted on the spot. Her first moves are soft, tentative, as if to explore the possibilities not only of the body but also of the self that is being performed on stage: her right foot and hand slide a little to the side and then relax, her head bends forward and her shoulders sag, her hips drift an inch to the left and her chin follows, her knees slowly begin to bend while her shoulders lift to reach her ears, her head drops to the left and her chest pushes forward. Throughout this slow sequence, Elliot never breaks eye contact with the audience, her gaze attentive and inquisitive, as if in the eyes of the spectators she could see a reflection of the self/selves she is performing. A vocal sound rising to a crescendo marks a transition, signalling a readiness to engage with a wider vocabulary of movement. A string of gestural sequences begins: they are fast but not frantic, each movement morphing into the next before it can be fully

When I look, when I imagine,
there is a scattering, a diffusion
of perspectives. A recalibration
of my centre of gravity.

Sometimes I am just a mouth.
Sometimes just a hand. Now I
am that tongue; now I am that
fold. Sometimes, I am just a
feeling. Sometimes just skin.
(Angel 2012, 132)



Margherita Elliott in Igor and Moreno, *Beat* (2019). Photo by Alicia Clarke.

completed, grasped, identified. Expertly, seamlessly, her body moves as if to bang on a door with a fist, handle cooking pans, pour liquid into a glass, throw a stone, slice bread, skip with a rope, wash her face, aim an arrow, pray, wave a fan, chuck water on the floor from a bucket, step on a cigarette butt—all of these actions and many more, but also none of them at all, as the movements disappear just as I am beginning to locate them, to read them as figurative.

the daily routines of self-care and moving the body—swimming, yoga, dinner with friends, visits to the dentist, or just getting out of bed in the morning—are modest forms of transformation, but my experience, and writing about it, taught me that they are nonetheless meaningful. In its sometimes banal attention to detail, my writing chronicles a relation to self and to the world that is established through the physicality of both body and home as forms of sensory environment. (Cvetkovich 2012, 79–80)

In June 2020 I spoke to the choreographers, Moreno Solinas and Igor Urzelai, on Zoom to hear from them about the creative process that led to *Beat*. The duo, based between London and Sardinia (Italy), have been collaborating since 2007, creating choreographic work that explores individuality and difference in human behaviour through stylistic and dramaturgical approaches that escape categorisations.³ In conversation, one of the key approaches they identified in *Beat* is the work they did with the dancer to navigate the fine line between the figurative nature of gestural movement and the refusal to settle into a readable narrative and characterisation. Attending carefully to the potential for gesture to mediate meaning, they challenged the ability of movement to communicate an idea by focusing on physical actions and unsettling, suspending, and shifting their habitual frames and therefore undermining their knowability. The ways in which Igor and Moreno's choreography works with gesture in this piece points to Giorgio Agamben's (2000) idea of gesture as "communication of a communicability" (59)—a third way that hovers in between conceiving of gesture as movement with a specific finality and classifying it as movement with an end in itself. Agamben's notion of gesture as "endless mediality" (59) further illuminates how Elliot's dance resists closure: it does not seek to transmit a fixed meaning but rather both lays bare and challenges the very possibility of meaning-making. In this sense, the choreography does not merely use gesture as a tool but foregrounds gesture as a **site of potential**, where the act of communication is suspended, exposed, and continually deferred. The ambiguous relationship Elliot's dance entertains with the ends of gestures (both in the sense of their purposes and in the sense of their edges) aligns with Agamben's view that gesture is not about what is communicated, but about the **fact that communication is possible**, making the dance a living enactment of communicability itself.

By practising ways of interrupting movement, the creative process appears to rely on principles that stop a gesture or an action from being completed, deliberately introducing an "impasse"—a condition which, according to Cvetkovich (2012), is as much linked with stuckness as it is with movement, "even if that movement sometimes seems backward or like a form of retreat" (21). So, in this sense, an impasse, an interruption becomes generative and creative and produces "different ways of being able to move" (ibid.). Nevertheless, despite its generative potential, this breakage

intervenes in the presentation, or even in the essence, of the thing it blocks, fragments, or queers. This makes me ponder: is a gesture still that gesture if its beginning and end have been interrupted (cut off the page, *smarginati*, to use Ferrante's term) and its intention has been frustrated, obfuscated? Something about this question is reminiscent of the Theseus paradox, the thought problem concerning the identity of the mythological ship of Theseus after all its parts were replaced: was it still the same ship?⁴

Elliot's appearance on stage yo-yos between what comes across as her open, accessible being there and a fragmented presence composed of sections of movements operating on the margins of recognisable frames. In her review of the performance, Josephine Leask (2019) writes:

Is she a show-off gymnast, a serious ballerina, a macho weight lifter, a comedienne, an ordinary person, a cheer leader, an actress, a folk dancer, a monged-out [*sic*] clubber; a cheeky child, a wise old woman; gay, straight, gender fluid; happy, depressed, grotesque, aggressive. As she confidently and seamlessly passes through these different transformations, she interacts with us—rarely removing her gaze, questioning us, reflecting on what we give her back as an audience. How will we react to her continuously shifting states? I marvel at how her behaviour and appearance can change from one beat to the next—how she can look so different through subtle gestures, a raised eyebrow, a glance, a stare.

As Igor put it during our virtual conversation, "it's that sense of feeling that we know who she is and not having a clue", which Moreno further explained as a "not being able to grasp who Margherita is" (Solinas and Urzelai 2020). The dance then raises questions about the identity of the dancer herself: when is Margherita really Margherita? Is Margherita still Margherita when she gives herself to the audience through shredded, reshuffled, and disfigured forms? I am interested in exploring this contradiction between a unitary framing of identity and its multiple projections alongside the ways in which this (productive) inconsistency is articulated in examples of autotheoretical writing. Specifically, the paradox of identity, of the plurality of its composition versus the singularity of the name that designates it, is also what underpins Nelson's memoir *The Argonauts* (2015). Here Nelson revisits the thought problem of the ship of Theseus via the version that Roland Barthes gives of it in his autobiography, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1977), where he attributes the same paradoxical question of the ship of Theseus to *Argo*, the ship of the Argonauts, the Greek heroes who accompanied Jason in his quest for the Golden Fleece.⁵

In *The Argonauts*, Nelson's writing mixes personal memory with theory and philosophy, in a mode of autobiographical, reflective, and critical writing that is indebted to feminist, queer, and activist practices. The self that emerges from her pages is as plural and changeable as the parts of the ship that continues to be known by the same name. The singularity of the name we go by charges us



Margherita Elliott in Igor and Moreno, *Beat* (2019). Photo by Alicia Clarke.

with “the task of performing a self for others”, while “we develop, even in utero, in response to a flow of projections and reflections ricocheting us off. Eventually, we call that snowball a self (*Argo*)” (Nelson 2015, 118). What I’m trying to get to here is that both Elliot’s dancing and Nelson’s writing renew the Theseus paradox by drawing attention to the plurality and changeability of the forms that go by a certain name that persists in time—whether explicitly (as in Nelson’s book) or not (as in Igor and Moreno’s choreography), their works “reclaim” a term (*Argo*) or an idea (solo dancing) “to designate molten or shifting parts, a means of asserting while also giving the slip [...]—they retain, they insist on retaining, a sense of the fugitive” (Nelson 2015, 35–6).

Here *smarginatura* becomes both an epistemic lens and a compositional device, which simultaneously explains and enacts the multiple, scattered, overlapping, overspilling qualities of the person known by a singular name. It concomitantly validates a subjective state that accepts changeability and inconsistency, and produces the political possibility of existing outside normative expectations of a singular, one-dimensional subject. This makes it possible for such a subject to escape its own instrumentalisation, embracing the critical and creative project of becoming multi-dimensional in the face of dominant paradigms that reward the flattening of subjectivity.

Rosi Braidotti (2014) argues that writing itself can be a way of enacting “nomadic becoming”: her notion of nomadic subjectivity, which conceptualises a self that is always in becoming and “resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behaviour”, is “both an analytic tool and a creative project”—one which can be attempted through “critique and creativity” (182). When writing is a form of both ethical commitment and affective engagement, it “enacts the destitution of unitary visions of the subject as an autonomous entity” by embracing the other “within and all around the self” (165). When Braidotti states that “imagination”, “myth-making”, and “fiction” are key ingredients of writing practices that have the potential to create “adequate figurations” of the present, more so than what can be accomplished by “theoretical systems” (182), Nelson’s *Argonauts* comes to mind as a project that, through a creative rewriting of philosophy, can give voice to the nomadic subjectivity Braidotti conceptualises. I posit here that Igor and Moreno’s *Beat* is adjacent to Nelson’s writing in its ability to imagine, visualise, and perform the plurality of the self and its constant renewal.



Margherita Elliott in Igor and Moreno, *Beat* (2019). Photo by Alicia Clarke.

My writing is riddled with such ticks of uncertainty. I have no excuse or solution, save to allow myself the tremblings, then go back in later and slash them out. In this way I edit myself into a boldness that is neither native nor foreign to me. (Nelson 2015, 122)

Yet, while Nelson's writing stems from a personal place, Elliot's dancing is not a self-portrait: the self that emerges from the dance is formed in the eyes and the experience of the spectators, for whom Margherita is not an "I" but a "she"—a *third person*. Rather than being at the root of the choreographic investigation, the problem of Margherita's identity emerges through spectating, as a question the work aims to engender in the viewers. It is a question in the third person (who is she?), rather than a self-searching of the subject (who am I?) or a self-invention of the neoliberal individual (who would you like me to be?). Roberto Esposito (2012) writes that the third person is "the only true plural" because, by not being an "I" or a "you", it can contain any subject, multiple subjects—or no subject (108). While "I" and "you" respectively occupy and complement the subject position, "mutually imply[ing] each other" and conceiving of each other through "distance" (105), the third person escapes this logic of dependence, differentiation, and mirroring and troubles the ability of the subject to be the source of the enunciation—to be the measure of identity. The third person then offers the scope for a different idea of identity (what Esposito calls the *impersonal*, or *non-person*), one that "is situated precisely at the point of intersection between no one and anyone" (107) and that embraces "a logic that privileges multiplicity and contamination over identity and discrimination" (145).

We assemble – *on bricole* – our beliefs from myriad elements,
tones we pick up on a beach, as we grow into our lives. (Angel 2012, 148)



Where Nelson uses other voices (quotes and ideas from other writers and theorists) to pluralise the "I" she writes from, Igor and Moreno work with the formal and stylistic possibilities of gesture and theatre to create a solo that stages a plural subject. I argue that, paradoxically, there is no "I" in this solo dance: *Beat* is the performance of a she/her—or rather, more appropriately, of a they/them. Moving beyond (self) reflection, it makes it possible for the self to *diffract*⁶ into multiple possible selves. In times of multimodality and digitally ubiquitous performances of the self, I suggest that *Beat*, although imbricated in such practices, can fulfil a function that both overlaps with and exceeds stylistic gestures of self-presentation and visceral gestures of self-expression. While inhabiting a similar frame of presentation to the Instagram selfies and TikTok videos (minus the digital mediation), in avoiding capture as an "I", the solo dancer in *Beat* escapes the logic of self-projection and "self-investment" of the neoliberal individual, whose pursuit of practices of self-promotion and self-betterment is ultimately "related to enhancing the self's future value" (Brown, 2015, 34).

As the performance progresses, the dancer becomes more and more undone—and, in doing so, reveals herself as her plural self. Her relationship with the audience becomes more playful, her

Moreno, *Beat* (2019). Photo by Alicia Clarke.



Margherita Elliott in Igor and

moves increasingly unpredictable, her shapes possibly more bizarre, her facial expressions more exaggerated. The grotesque effect is magnified by Elliot's 'empty' mouth, fashioned with a black layer covering her teeth: while her mouth assumes a variety of shapes, any reading of them is distorted by the absence of visible teeth. Her gesture fragments suggest more intimate actions, from removing contact lenses to pushing the fingers of both her hands into her mouth. Her moves loosely reference dance styles from ballet to 'flossing' and contexts from social dancing to clubbing. Varying her speed as she interprets the predictable beat of the music, she restyles her clothes by turning her jacket inside out and pulling down her top into a dress—provocatively exposing her stomach almost up to her breasts as she does so. Her ponytail becomes undone as she spins her head around; then she gives us the finger, then two fingers, and then takes a break, while the electronic track pauses too. In the silence of the pause, she drinks water and teases the audience, walking close to the front row with her mouth full of liquid, which she defiantly spits out by the spectators' feet.

When the music and the dancing resume, the speed is faster, at times frantic; the movement follows the repetitive beat through a bouncy motion that makes Elliot's gestures even more blurred and less recognisable. The lighting intervenes in the process of diffraction of the self by flickering from different angles and changing colours, thus adding to the kaleidoscopic effect of the performance and creating shadows on the floor in multiple directions. In a long sequence of several minutes, the dancer swings her hips left to right, while the light switches on and off from the front: here the movement is reduced to a minimum, the arms 'framing' the torso and the face in simple ways while the body sways side to side to the beat, with the lighting creating the impression that we are seeing a different person every time the figure reemerges from the dark.

Sometimes I have had to unstitch my work, to
 Oh so you know when I said I was happy to d
 that? Well, what I meant was the opposite.
 (Angel 2012, 160)

Although it employs choreographic devices such as framing, fragmentation, and speed changes, which resemble some of the effects used in social media videos to craft the transitioning of moving images through, for instance, trimming, splitting, or merging, *Beat* engages with these strategies to embody a critique of the self-promoting imperative that feeds contemporary (self-)portrayals of women, whether driven openly by capitalist consumerist culture or more covertly by the “self-congratulatory [...] celebrat[ion of] individual identity” of what Nina Power (2009)—invoking Marcuse—calls “one-dimensional feminism”. The narrow form of feminism Power describes, which is a version of gender ideology coopted by neoliberal capitalism, is devoid of political struggle and social critique and is instead subservient to capitalist principles of self-improvement, empowerment, and individualistic choice, where radical feminist values and nuanced understandings of the racial, economic and class dimensions of feminist politics are substituted by a “perky, upbeat message of self-fulfilment and consumer emancipation” (69). This produces “one-dimensional” women who celebrate their successes and alleged emancipation without being aware of how these still exist within, and often reinforce, patriarchal, consumerist, or colonial structures.

Perhaps it's the word *radical* that needs rethinking. But what could we angle ourselves toward instead, or in addition? Openness? Is that good enough, strong enough? *You're the only one who knows when you're using things to protect yourself and keep your ego together and when you're opening and letting things fall apart, letting the world come as it is—working with it rather than struggling against it. You're the only one who knows* [Pema Chödrön]. And the thing is, even you don't always know. (Nelson 2015, 33–4)

Although displaying a very sophisticated level of skill, Elliot's dancing does not chase the performance of success; instead it resists the consumer capitalist compulsion to “capitalize on one's assets at every moment” (Power 2009, 24). Its morphing sequences of interrupted gestures and movements constantly frustrate the very idea of accomplishment by never arriving and always being in the process of un/doing. They embody what Halberstam (2011) describes as “pok[ing] holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life”, offering a visualisation through movement of “queer failure” (3). Advocating for “ways of being and knowing that stand outside of conventional understandings of success” (2), Halberstam argues that failure is a queer gesture insofar as it escapes normative behaviour and imagines alternative ways of relating to standards of knowledge, markers of achievement, levels of ability, social traditions, political rules, economic systems, models of care, relationship, and love. Halberstam's queer conceptualisation of



Margherita Elliott in *Igor and Moreno, Beat* (2019). Photo by Alicia Clarke.

failure entails the acceptance of the finite, fragmentary, multi-dimensional, and also absurd and often silly and hopeless, nature of our lives. It engages with examples—from art and popular culture—that offer alternatives to mainstream models of success, which often stand in the way of creativity, criticality, and connection.

Elliot's dance does not showcase different personas to impress the viewer with their versatility. Her fragments of actions and chains of substitutions of movements and attitudes tell the spectators that she is who she is—and they themselves are who they are—even through constant and substantial changes: that *Argo* is still *Argo* even when all its parts have been replaced, or that in fact there is no such thing as a singular *Argo*, as every living person and non-living thing is inextricably linked in a "*unicum*, [a] being that is both singular and plural" (Esposito 2012, 151). It is here that such dancing can be conceptualised as contributing not only to a poetics (in the sense of a creative practice that articulates a nomadic subject, in Braidotti's terms) but also to a *politics* of plurality—that is, a critical response to the flattening and singling out of the neoliberal individual and an ethical awareness of the entangled nature of all life.



Margherita Elliott in Igor and Moreno, Beat (2019). Photo by Alicia Clarke.

Notes

¹ The novels in English translation are: *My Brilliant Friend* (2012), *The Story of a New Name* (2013); *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (2014) and *The Story of the Lost Child* (2015).

² And one might also say colloquially, as Ferrante ascribes the word to Lila, whose Italian is heavily mixed with Neapolitan dialect and informal expressions.

³ I have previously written about their duet *Idiot-Syncrasy* (2013): see Perazzo Domm (2018).

⁴ Plutarch (1914) writes in *The Life of Theseus* (23): "The ship on which Theseus sailed with the youths and returned in safety, the thirty-oared galley, was preserved by the Athenians down to the time of Demetrius Phalereus. They took away the old timbers from time to time, and put new and sound ones in their places, so that the vessel became a standing illustration for the philosophers in the mooted question of growth, some declaring that it remained the same, others that it was not the same vessel".

⁵ "A frequent image: that of the ship *Argo* (luminous and white), each piece of which the Argonauts gradually replaced, so that they ended with an entirely new ship, without having to alter either its name or its form. This ship *Argo* is highly useful: it affords the allegory of an eminently structural object, created not by genius, inspiration, determination, evolution, but by two modest actions (which cannot be caught up in any mystique of creation): *substitution* (one part replaces another, as in a paradigm) and *nomination* (the name is in no way linked to the stability of the parts): by dint of combinations made within one and the same name, nothing is left of the *origin*: *Argo* is an object with no other cause than its name, with no other identity than its form." (Barthes 1977, 46, emphasis in original)

⁶ I use this term in the new materialist sense ascribed to it by Donna Haraway and Karen Barad—as I have written elsewhere (Perazzo Domm 2019; Perazzo Domm 2020).

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Biography

Dr Daniela Perazzo is Associate Professor in Dance Studies and Postgraduate Research Coordinator for the School of Arts at Kingston University London. Her research interrogates the intersections of the aesthetic and the political in movement practices. Her work has engaged with the Deleuzoguattarian notion of 'minor' practice and its articulation in current choreography; with diffractive methodologies and Karen Barad's notion of entanglement and intra-action; with questions of subjectivity and collectivity in choreographic and dramaturgical processes; and with understandings of intimacy as relational and political. Her latest research explores notions of vulnerability and discomfort and attends to the gaps, difficulties, and entanglements of modes of being in relation. Her publications include articles in *Performance Philosophy*, *Performance Research*, *Dance Research Journal*, *Choreographic Practices*, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, and the *Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change*. Her monograph *Jonathan Burrows: Towards a Minor Dance* was published by Palgrave in 2019 and her chapter "Vulnerable Practice: Thinking through discomfort and precarity in Project O's *Voodoo*" is included in the third edition of *Contemporary Choreography: A Critical Reader* (Routledge 2026). Among other roles, she was co-convenor of the Theatre, Performance, and Philosophy Working Group of the Theatre and Performance Research Association (2018–22) and co-investigator on the AHRC-funded project "The Dancing Otherwise Network: Exploring Pluriversal Practices" (2023–25).

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

BODY-ARCHIVE AS A DIALECTICAL IMAGE

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1. Body-Archive as a Dialectical Image

Now, it is precisely because history unfolds in the sensible element of human gestures and images that the political-aesthetic gaze is not only possible but also necessary.

Didi-Huberman (2017a, 112, translation by the author)

The body-archive represents a dialectical process that encompasses both the emergence and disappearance of embodied expressions—its theatrical gestures and dance movements—within the context of performance. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image, this discussion situates the body-archive at the intersection of dance studies and performance philosophy, particularly in relation to the concepts of archive, memory, and the paradoxical temporality of the body. The body-archive not only formulates and reflects upon ideas or essences tied to these phenomena but also serves as a *medium* for their articulation. Gestures, analogous to language, become privileged inscription sites, capturing the intricate interplay of memory processes. With the body-archive as *medium*, gestures and their visual traces or images can be interpreted as temporal inscriptions, offering a means to decipher time itself. This reading of the dialectical image seeks to investigate the gestural dimensions of Benjamin's epistemological model, advancing a nuanced understanding of gesture and its ethical implications as central to the philosophical critique of art.

Walter Benjamin (1977, 1991a), in his “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (Franko 2017) to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*), advocates for understanding the philosophical idea not as a concept, law, or univocal thesis, but a configuration. In this framework, ideas do not rely on universality or classificatory reasoning; rather, their significance arises from their affirmed position within the montage process. The outcome of this contemplative presentation is a discontinuous totality, akin to a mosaic composed of thought fragments (Benjamin 1991a, 209–210), which mimetically corresponds to the discontinuity inherent in the world of ideas or essence of phenomena themselves (Machado 2013). In this article, I propose to examine the body-archive as a philosophical idea, articulated as a dialectical image or an “idea-language”—an aesthetic presentation of philosophical inquiry expressed through the montage process.

In his 18 theses in *On the Concept of History*, Walter Benjamin (2006; 1991b) formulates a theory of history that critically negates traditional notions of linear chronological progression. Instead, he reconceptualises history as a present struggle or a quest for happiness. This framework emerges from the interplay between theology (Jewish Messianism) and politics (historical materialism), which, together, inform his distinctive approach. For Benjamin, our image of happiness is inherently tied to unfulfilled aspirations from the past, thereby endowing the present with a profound responsibility towards history. Rather than viewing history as a linear trajectory surpassing the past in pursuit of an idealised future, Benjamin foregrounds a redemptive act that brings the past into the present. Each present moment, therefore, carries the weight of a historical task: to actualise latent potentialities of past events, upon which the realisation of happiness depends. This perspective ultimately underscores the ethical and political dimensions embedded within Benjamin’s conception of history.

In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin (1977; 1991a) introduces several foundational concepts, crucial to understand the dialectical image. Among these, his notion of origin (*Ursprung*) stands out. Benjamin defines origin not as a fixed point in time, but as a “coming-into-being”—a dynamic and fluid process that captures the transformative essence of historical phenomena. These understandings challenge conventional linear or static conceptions of historical facts, instead presenting history as an ongoing, unfolding process rather than a straightforward chronological sequence. Thus, historical truth emerges not from a mere accumulation of events, but from the reflective constellation of past and present moments. In this sense,

Origin [*Ursprung*], although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis [*Entstehung*]. The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis. [...] On the one hand it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and reestablishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete. [...]. (Benjamin 1977, 45; 1991a, 226)

Walter Benjamin does not conceive *origin* in a causal sense, as an emergence, nor does he define it as the chronological starting point of linear historical events. Instead, he portrays *origin* as a dynamic force, akin to a vortex, which disrupts the ordinary flow of historical phenomena and draws them towards a point of convergence. This movement is characterised by the tension between two opposing forces: one directed outward, towards an endpoint, and the other pulling inward, towards the source. Drawing on classical, modern, conceptual, and post-conceptual dance, alongside choreography and technological influences, which are mixed up in dialectical images, I propose to uncover the remnants of one within the other throughout the history of contemporary dance. In doing so, I aim to explore the spatial and temporal dysfunctions where genealogical images intertwine with bodily memory traces. These distinctive originating phenomena are the focus of this article.

1.1 Montage

As the body-archive embodies both forgetting and an incomplete, disordered, and fragmentary form of remembrance, I intend to investigate, within it, what a body *is* and what a body *can do*. The body is not merely an object of utility; rather, I seek to uncover the uses of the body through the assemblage of images—in correspondence, in dance, among contemporary and historical images, as well as technological ones, with their physiological influx. Together, these elements constitute what can be understood as a Brechtian “theatrical body” of estrangement (Olgária Matos, personal communication, September 2024).

Montage is a foundational element of Bertolt Brecht’s poetics and praxis. The act of assembling is not merely about arranging elements in isolation but orchestrating their differences, clashes, confrontations, and conflicts. Montage, therefore, emerges as the art of organising contrasts. Needless to say, a body-archive can be seen as a montage. The configuration of elements—images, texts, or theatrical scenes—approaches co-presence through a dynamic lens of conflict, actively disrupting established orders of appearance. The decision to employ montage—practised by Brecht in dramaturgy, Igor Stravinsky in music, and Walter Benjamin in philosophy—entails generating displacements and recompositions of disparate elements. Montage unites and juxtaposes heterogeneous forms, eschewing traditional hierarchies or scales of significance. These forms are projected onto a shared plane of proximity, often foregrounding them on the stage to provoke new meanings, associations, and critical reflections—particularly, though not exclusively, within the field of the performing arts.¹

The disassembly of elements enables the perception of everything that symptomatically traverses the order of discourses, most notably their contradictions. Exposition through montage rejects a global or objective reflection, instead arranging and recomposing elements to interpret reality through fragments rather than seeking to explain it comprehensively. Montage uncovers profound fissures rather than surface-level coherences, exposing local disturbances—it describes the swirling eddies within a river rather than the overall direction of its flow. By generating new relationships between disparate elements, montage rearranges and recomposes, revealing deeper

layers of meaning. Its political significance lies in its critical engagement with reality, actively reconfiguring the relative positions of things, discourses, and images (Didi-Huberman 2017a).

Within this context, artists must critically engage with the concept of the document-archive, employing a variety of techniques, including confrontation, comparison, and documentary montage (Didi-Huberman 2017a). These practices are designed to reveal the interruptions, contrasts, and anachronisms embedded in the archival process. As Didi-Huberman (2017a, 35, translation by the author) asserts, "If seeing allows us to understand and even foresee something about the historical and political state of the world, it is because the montage of images grounds all its effectiveness in an art of memory." What is ultimately at stake in the aesthetics of montage is an unyielding confrontation with contradictions, resulting in an inevitable non-synthesis—a deliberate refusal to resolve tensions into a harmonious or unified whole (Didi-Huberman 2017a, 87).

I propose, within the *medium* of the body-archive, montage as an heuristic instrument to explore theatrical gesture and dance movement. Consequently, this research adopts an inherently interdisciplinary methodological framework. The practical methodology involves activating digital archives, employing digital dance annotations,² and embodying movement derived from selected choreographies. Additionally, I edit and assemble stills or photographic images from these works to construct a mosaic that serves as both an analytical and creative tool. Performances of these choreographies are analysed alongside the discourses surrounding them, situating the concept and practice of the body-archive within the theoretical constellations embedded in the choreographic works: *Trio A* (1966) by Yvonne Rainer; *Darkland* (2010) by myself, and *Nom donné par l'auteur* (1994) by Jérôme Bel. Still images extracted from video recordings of these works have been carefully selected and arranged to effectively apply the montage procedure. This analysis investigates various dimensions of the modern body-archive along two main axes. First, it examines the conceptual dance movement in Europe during the 1990s and its dialectical tension with my own choreographic practice. Second, it explores the postmodern or minimalist dance of the New York Judson Church generation in the 1960s and 1970s, along with contemporary reactivations and reinterpretations of these ideas in my current reenactment of *Trio A*.

2. *Darkland*

Darkland (Abs 2010) is the title of a choreography in which I assumed the dual roles of director and performer.³ Through this work, I encountered, in Benjaminian terms, a moment of rupture: the death of modern dance. André Lepecki, who attended the piece's premier event and subsequently wrote about it, identified the 'phantom matters' that emerged in the reception of *Darkland*: an unresolved mourning, through which the ghost of modern dance materialised on stage.⁴ In that moment, modern dance lingered within my body; it acquired the sign of a ghost in confrontation with an audience intent on surpassing it. On that white linoleum stage, modern dance became spectral, and my body was compelled to negotiate with what Lepecki terms "terrain accidents" described as "nothing more than the inevitable marks of history's convulsions" (Lepecki 2010, 15). But what, precisely, were these convulsions?

The audience that attended *Darkland* (2010) sought to introduce conceptual dance to Brazil. However, the necessary means were lacking, and, more importantly, historical processes or a critical consciousness of dance history capable of facilitating genuine transformation were absent. This condition aligns with what Arabella Stanger (2021, 3) describes as dancing on a “violent ground”, a terrain “from which utopian choreographic projects emerge.” The promise of an intellectual dance, directly influenced by a group of European artists from the 1990s—represented here by Jérôme Bel—“depends on material conditions of imperial, colonial, and racial subjection” (Stanger 2021, 3). In this sense, I quite literally danced on a “violent ground”, where the material conditions of struggle, conflict, and domination actively shaped and traversed my dancing body in real time. This context led me to the notion of the body-archive functioning as a dialectical image of the death of modern dance. What did modern dance signify, and what did it rupture? What remains of it? What traces of modern dance persist in my personal history, and what endures within this archive? The body-archive, as a dialectical image, is a “precipitate” of meanings—a site where extremes, antitheses, and metaphors coexist in unresolved tension, giving rise to senses of time, space, body, and subjectivity. In this regard, the body-archive constitutes a rupture.

I will examine a disruption that occurred during my performance of *Darkland* (2010) as a dialectical image: one of my contact lenses fell out, rendering me metaphorically blind. In that moment, I was haunted by memory, with my body serving as a conduit for cultural memory, revealed through the video still (Figure 1) in certain archetypal forms: the blind prophet, the sacrificial victim in *Le Sacre du Printemps*, Joan of Arc, among others. The image heightens this sense of virtual antiquity with an allegorical function, transcending its immediate role as a historical document and instead illustrating the anachronism inherent in the dialectical process. As Didi-Huberman (2017a, 160–161) suggests, to exist within history is also to be “haunted by memory.” This perspective, aligned with Aby Warburg’s, allows one to speak of survivals (*Nachleben*) without dismissing the universality and timelessness of archetypes. The body-archive—expressed through theatrical gesture and dance movement—proves to be particularly adept, much like photography, at capturing these intersections and apparitions of memory within history.

Walter Benjamin (1999, 475) offers multiple definitions of the dialectical image across various texts and writings, including the following:

To thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts. Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions—there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought. Its position is naturally not an arbitrary one. It is to be found, in a word, where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest. Hence, the object constructed in the materialist presentation of history is itself the dialectical image. The latter is identical with the historical object; it justifies its violent expulsion from the continuum of historical process. [N 10a, 3] (On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress).

What was the constellation imbued with tension? It was the death of modern dance, embodied in my own body and perceived by the audience in that moment of performance. This violent constellation—dancing on a violent ground—was saturated with the presence of death, rendering

both modern and conceptual dance immobilised. In that instant, a “constellation filled with tensions” (Machado 2013, 153, translation by the author) became tangible—an image that the researcher continues to examine through this scientific “construct.” This perspective aligns with the understanding that “the objects of history are not pure facts” but always “produced by a subject under different constellations and tensions” (Machado 2013, 153, translation by the author). These dialectical tensions—the dynamic interplay of forces and the oppositions between distinct historical periods—constitute the core of this reflection. Here, the body-archive emerges as a *medium*, enabling an exploration of the body as a repository of memory, where historical ruptures, survivals, and resonances are inscribed and rendered visible.

What constitutes an interruption (*Unterbrechung*) within Bertolt Brecht’s framework? In this context, the interruption—arising from the process of co-presence—is both factual and theatrical in nature. Beneath factual events lies a complex network of relationships, a virtual extension that encourages the observer to heuristically multiply their perspectives. Yet, this interruption is more profoundly aligned with the core concept of the dialectical image: a sudden flash of perception emerging within a process fraught with danger. In the scene from *Darkland*, this danger lay in being traversed by the history of dance—a history insufficiently mourned, demanding justice, a stance, and clarification. These themes will be explored in detail in the following sections.

2.1 The subjectivation of the dancer to the movement

In this section, I approach the still image from *Darkland* (Figure 1) as a dialectical image mediated through the body-archive. Through a montage structured around two central categories of dance, movement, and the dancer as subject, I examine how the “death” of modern dance becomes perceptible in the work. Engaging with André Lepecki’s interpretation of *Darkland*, I argue that the emergence of “ghostly matters” (Lepecki 2010, 15) in the reception of the piece reveals that modern dance has not reached a definitive historical end. Rather, it persists as an unresolved historical force embodied within my own formation as a dancer.

At the time of creating *Darkland*, the modern subject still constituted the primary paradigm through which I understood movement, body, and dance, even though the thematic concerns of the work already pointed toward contemporary approaches to corporeality and choreography.⁵ The work therefore became suspended between two epistemic regimes. While its aesthetic and conceptual concerns attempted to engage contemporary questions, its movement production remained grounded in the modern paradigm of the “inner scene,” in which the subject’s interiority is externalised through expressive motion. This tension shaped not only how affects and sensations were communicated to the spectator, but also how expressive conceptions of movement continued to guide my choreographic decisions.

The contradictions of *Darkland* emerge precisely from this disjunction. On the one hand, the work pursued a contemporary notion of the Freudian concept of *Unheimlich*, the uncanny, through theatrical apparatuses of disjunction, including the de-figuration of the body and heterogeneous assemblages of bodies and things. On the other hand, the subject producing these gestures

remained attached to modern conceptions of expression and subjectivity. It is precisely this unresolved coexistence of temporalities that allows the dialectical image to emerge within the work. By confronting the persistence of modern subjectivity within contemporary choreographic procedures, *Darkland* reveals the anachronistic temporal layers that continue to inhabit choreographic practice.

In the creation of *Darkland*, these contradictions did not emerge solely at the level of discourse or historical positioning but became materially embedded in the choreographic methods themselves. I employed compositional procedures aimed at uncovering the nuanced qualities of the “inanimate” world, driven by a desire to transcend the familiar and venture into the uncharted: to discover, explore, and shape the unknown. To achieve this, I utilised techniques specifically designed to destabilise habitual movement patterns, including props such as platform shoes to unbalance the body; the deliberate fragmentation and interruption of movement through bodily articulations; and the use of a corset that restricted the mobility of the spine and upper body. While these procedures sought to approach contemporary notions of de-figuration, disjunction, and the *Unheimlich*, the body that negotiated these apparatuses still operated through the expressive logic of the modern subject. The intention was therefore to generate expressions and forms that had not previously existed within the framework of this poetics or philosophical inquiry, grounded in the modern belief that movement could function as a kind of *tabula rasa*: a space through which the subject might access and reveal something entirely new, both for oneself and for the spectator.

Through this process, the work gradually constituted itself as an autonomous choreographic structure. What was sought was the unleashing of subconscious material, emotional, affective, and expressive, as if it could emerge for the first time through the body, prior to codification or historical sedimentation, and thereby appear as an unprecedented event within choreographic experience. In order to do this, I sculpted the body’s musculature into a finely attuned and highly sensitive instrument, capable of responding to the fetishised body while unfolding and articulating its emotional implications in a singular and distinctive manner. The choreographed interplay between individual movement phrases became the foundation of the work’s structure, and this relational process ultimately endowed the piece with a modern sense of aesthetic autonomy. Yet the very procedures through which this autonomy was constructed, fragmentation, disjunction, bodily destabilisation, and the de-figuration of expressive coherence, simultaneously pointed toward contemporary questions of emancipation, in which dance no longer appears as a self-contained aesthetic form but as a field negotiated through social, cultural, and political forces. It is precisely this unresolved dialectic between autonomy and emancipation that traversed *Darkland*’s performance.

According to André Lepecki, *Darkland* revealed a symptom of what he describes as the “brutality and violence to neutralise the space” (Lepecki 2010, 14), as the choreography unfolded upon a white Marley floor. Embedded within the modern choreographic imaginary persists the fantasy that the dance floor constitutes a blank, neutral, and ahistorical surface upon which movement can freely emerge. Yet the very act of producing such neutrality requires the repression of

instability, friction, and historical sedimentation, allowing the dancer to move uninterrupted by slips, stumbles, or ruptures.

Within this supposedly neutral white space, however, I found myself continually negotiating with what Lepecki describes as “topographical accidents”: traces of historical convulsions erupting through the floor itself. Although I was still operating within the amnesiac ahistoricism often associated with dance as a language, my body remained traversed by an urgent demand for historical consciousness. Despite every attempt to maintain equilibrium, the floor remained dialectically slippery.

This instability emerged not only from the material conditions of the choreography, but also from the tension between my own subjectivity and the audience’s perception. What remained unresolved was the figure of the modern dancer-subject itself: a historical construct grounded in particular ways of producing movement, communicating expression, and conceiving the artwork as an autonomous form. It is precisely this unfinished condition that continues to traverse contemporary choreographic practice.

Within the dialectical image of *Darkland*, one can perceive a suspended tension between Modern Dance and Conceptual Dance, forming what may be understood as a violent ground of subjectivation forces. In Brazilian choreographic production at that moment, paradigms inherited from Modern Dance continued to operate through an insufficiently critical understanding of the relation between movement and subjectivity, particularly within the legacy of somatic approaches to the body. Movement frequently remained tied to the expression of an interiorised subject, even when choreography sought to destabilise fixed corporeal identities.

At the same time, Conceptual Dance emerged in Brazil as a sign of aesthetic innovation and critical contemporaneity. Yet the institutional and material conditions necessary to sustain processes of self-reflection and critique remained fragile. The precarious cultural infrastructure made it difficult to consolidate either a stable art market or a continuous critical discourse around dance. Unlike many European contexts, contemporary dance in Brazil had not yet exhausted its aesthetic forms, precisely because artistic circulation was not fully determined by the accelerated neoliberal flows that had already reshaped European choreographic production.

The body-archive, manifested as a dialectical image, functions as a mode of presenting an idea through the intersection of paradoxical materials within the body itself. It enables the coexistence of opposites, of excesses and extreme historical forces that remain unresolved, incomplete, and in constant tension. Through the body-archive, it becomes possible to perceive the encounter between earlier and later histories of dance, between modern and conceptual choreographic paradigms, as well as between processes of historical restoration and historical incompleteness.



It is because it is traversed by memory, itself a vehicle of memory, that the photographic image admits here “its virtual antiquity, an epic, allegorical, and lyrical function, as if transgressing its immediate nature as a historical document.”

(Didi-Huberman 2017, 160–161)



Figure 1. Abs (2010) performing Darkland and an anonymous person protests in the Free Fare Movement (MPL), which organized a series of demonstrations against the increase in bus fares from R\$3 to R\$3.20. Source: X (2010), and g1 (2023).

In this sense, the body does not merely carry memory metaphorically; it is itself an archive through which historical temporalities persist, collide, and re-emerge. As Walter Benjamin suggests, the idea intersects with the historical world (Benjamin 1991a). To confront our mythologies and archaisms therefore requires, as Georges Didi-Huberman writes, “not to fear invoking them, working critically and imaginatively (*bildlich*) on the signs of their forgetting, their decline, and their resurgences” (Didi-Huberman 2010, 185, translation by the author). From this perspective, contemporary dance becomes inseparable from its own historicity. Choreography no longer appears as the production of pure presence or autonomous expression, but as a discursive field traversed by surviving historical layers, unresolved temporalities, and the continuous reconfiguration of subjectivity itself.

2.2 The language of choreography

This section delves deeper into the problem of modernism in dance and examines how 1990s European conceptual dance engages with its heritage, using Jérôme Bel’s early work as a key example of this process. Modernism in dance operates on what Bojana Cvejić (2015, 20) describes as the “subjectivation of the body through movement and the objectivation of movement through the body,” which together constitute “the organic regime of dance.” These ideas “connect the body and movement into one organic whole, where the former is comprehended through inner (emotional) experience, and the latter through physical activity (task, action)” (20). Jérôme Bel’s choreographies disrupt this organic regime by rejecting both the body as a source of authentic movement and the object of movement to which the body is physically bound. When movement and the body are no longer intertwined within this organic paradigm, their relationship in the act of expression or in the form of the object ceases to manifest naturally. Instead, this relationship remains fragmented, requiring construction or reinvention by deliberate procedures of conjunction between body and movement, rather than through their seamless synthesis (Cvejić 2015). The critical and self-reflective questions concerning the nature of dance—posed by Jérôme Bel and other European conceptual dance artists—have profoundly influenced this research over many years. These debates remain unresolved and may, in fact, resist final resolution, as they evade synthesis through the dialectical image process. In this sense, Jérôme Bel confronts a fundamental crisis in the conceptualisation of dance: why did the flow of dance movement come to an end?

According to Jérôme Bel, what replaces dance in his choreographies are the rules of choreography themselves, which are exposed as language. By staging the codes and conventions of dance, Bel reflects on its modes of production and representation. He does not operate within a framework structured by music, nor do his dancers express internal motivations that propel them into movement. Dance and thought are deeply intertwined in his works, with concept taking precedence over physical movement. In Bel’s approach, the concept is staged and functions as a visible reflection on dance—a reflection that does not necessarily produce dance in a conventional sense. However, while such reflections may develop without coded movements, they cannot unfold without the bodies that carry and articulate the thinking process. Bel asserts that there is

no distinction between the artwork and discourses surrounding it. As Gerald Siegmund (2017, 56) observes, “His artistic work is a discourse,” one that Bel himself describes as written specifically “for the ‘black box’” (Bel and Siegmund 2012, 73). Writing for the “black box” of theatre grants dance a maturity that reflects on its history and modes of production and reception. This disrupts established ways of understanding and interpreting dance, as “writing for the stage implies a different responsiveness from audiences—one that is intellectual rather than kinaesthetic or even emotional” (Siegmund 2017, 8). By approaching the body as a linguistic sign, Bel, alongside other artists of his generation, ultimately fostered a new way of thinking about dance, the body, choreography, and performance. In the following analysis of Jérôme Bel’s first piece, *Nom donné par l’auteur* (1994), I will explore its conceptual implications, highlighting the key elements of Bel’s discourse on dance and examining the evolving roles of the choreographer and the author within this discourse.

Nom donné par l’auteur (1994) is characterised by the objectivation and reification of the codes of dance and theatre; in it, objects form phrases and statements aided by two dancers. Frédéric Segueti and Jérôme Bel focus solely on moving objects on stage during the performance, resulting in a neutral and sober behaviour, leaving no room for affection and emotion. There is an absence of everything typically attributed to dance, namely movement, work on the energy of the moving body, affection, and emotion, while we observe the immobility of objects and the mechanical way they are moved by the dancers. “The only operation I produced in *Nom donné par l’auteur* is the reification of bodies. So, there are no more bodies, but the choreography remains through the objects” (Bauer 2008, 42), commented Bel in an interview. The use of objects, the absence of any sort of theatrical illusion, the subtraction of the dancers’ presence to *ground zero*—these were strategies devised by Jérôme “for choreography to appear where paradoxically there would not even be a hint of the least dance step! In fact, all that remained of this operation was the skeleton of a dance show: a choreography-skeleton devoid of its dance-flesh” (Bel and Siegmund 2012, 73). The presence of choreography becomes visible because all elements of dance have been rendered absent.

The structure of the choreography in *Nom donné par l’auteur* could be analysed as an algebraic equation: “a dance piece minus dancing equals choreography” (Siegmund 2017, 63). What is being emptied is the idea that the dancing body can express a truth that existed independently of its context or its symbolic constitution. The two dancers are placed on the same level as the objects with which they form alternating combinations, which deflates the idea of subjectivity as something intrinsically filled up. In Jérôme Bel’s pieces, the subjects are marked by their absence, to then being identified with the symbolic order of the theatre as a *void* or a non-place. The stage, the subjects, and the objects stare at us and emphasise the symbolic order of which they are equational parts.

Structured with these mathematical equations, the choreography works to produce meanings. Following Gerald Siegmund’s interpretation, what is exposed in *Nom donné par l’auteur* is the impossibility of fully apprehending the body, as it is always open to possible combinations, precisely due to its linguistic framing, and thus the authenticity of the body is always subject to distortions. Bel translates this process by making the body absent, just as he empties up the stage.

"This hollow marks the point at which the symbolic order gazes at the spectators and speaks to them" (Siegmond 2017, 63). I agree with Siegmond that Jérôme Bel is the author of a dance discourse that addresses the linguistic character of bodies and choreography. At the start of this research, I felt betrayal by the death of dance because what I saw (in conceptual pieces) was merely the violent absence of movement. As I became aware of my own work, reconstructing the disruptive history of conceptual dance, exemplified in this study by Jérôme Bel, I grew to understand that, through this movement, artists questioned and broke through the closed worlds of performances (informed by the idea of autonomy in modern art) and expanded the language of dance and its cultural and social relationships.

The neutral mode of writing that allowed Jérôme Bel to conduct his analysis of the state of art of his time, even if neutral, has its own style. According to Roland Barthes (1970), style precedes writing; in the author's words, style becomes a bodily phenomenon. Bel's style manifests through the elimination of dance as a kinaesthetic phenomenon, and he is the one who founded a discourse of dance that addresses the audience through the linguistic means of the body and choreography. He is also a pioneer for his gesture of breaking rules and conventions to expand the possibilities of the field, his pursuit of the "new," which is produced by individual positions in relation to art, not least the citation-reference to Marcel Duchamp in the objects of *Nom donné par l'auteur*. Regarding this initial phase of Jérôme Bel's work, the *empty* theatre is equivalent to a linguistic proposition that provides a space—the non-place of language and the non-place of theatre—for the subject to *be*. The subject takes this place using language and discourse. *Nom donné par l'auteur* is Bel's first creation situated in this more radically conceptual phase, which can be characterised by the prominence of "subjects of discourse" (Siegmond 2017, 72).

The body-archive, manifested as a dialectical image, serves as a mode of presenting an idea: the intersection of paradoxical materials within the body. This notion enables the coexistence of opposites, of extreme ideas and excesses—always negated, incomplete, and unresolved. By employing the body-archive as a conceptual tool to interpret Jérôme Bel's work, we can observe the tension between earlier history (modern dance) and later history (conceptual dance), between restoration (of memory, of history) and an unfinished process. This tension creates a convergence of preceding and subsequent phenomena, which, though seemingly extreme and disparate, revolve around their origin. Through this process, the idea—that the body is and has an archive and therefore embodies memory—gains historical expression. As Walter Benjamin suggests, the idea intersects with the historical world (Benjamin 1991a; Machado 2013). This same interpretative lens is echoed in Gerald Siegmond's analysis of Jérôme Bel's work and Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, constructed from observations of society, culture, art, and the history of dance. To contemplate our mythologies and engage with our archaisms, it becomes essential "not to fear invoking them, working critically and imagistically (*bildlich*) on the signs of their forgetting, their decline, and their resurgences" (Didi-Huberman 2010, 185, translation by the author). With Jérôme Bel, dance became discursive, as did the history of performative dance.

3. Reenactment and Activation

Reenactment and activation constitute two methodological operations through which the body-archive engages the historical life of dance. Rather than treating the past as a fixed object of reconstruction, these practices approach history as an active field of relations in which temporalities intersect, re-emerge, and acquire new forms of intelligibility. In this sense, the body-archive functions not only as a *medium* but also as an idea-language through which historical experience becomes available to critical reflection. Such an approach introduces a political dimension to research, understood as an active and self-reflexive engagement with the conditions through which dance produces, transmits, and remembers itself. It is in this context that my work resonates with practices developed by the European generation of the 1990s, including the critical examination of professional protocols, choreographic reenactments, and the activation of dance archives.

Why reenact or activate an archive? The body-archive fulfils a dual reconstructive function. On the one hand, it allows us to move against the current of historical narratives, resisting the ways in which history is naturalised in the present. On the other hand, it operates through temporal fissures, producing reconstructions that resemble an editorial practice of cuts, rearrangements, and reassemblies, elements that culminate within the body-archive as a montage process. Such operations transform reconstruction into a process of rewriting rather than reproduction. Within this methodological framework lie two Benjaminian categories that are central to the formation of the dialectical image: translation and remembrance.

André Lepecki (2016) approaches the body-archive and reenactment through Walter Benjamin's theory of translation, particularly as articulated in "The Task of the Translator" (Benjamin 1991c, 1996). For Benjamin, works of art are inherently incomplete. Translation therefore cannot be understood as a duplication of an original work but rather as a process that expands its possibilities of meaning and existence. As Olgária Matos (2022, 26, translation by the author) observes, translation "is not a duplication of the original, for by being repeated it is strengthened with unprecedented axes of understanding," enriching both the culture from which it emerges and the culture into which it is translated.

Building on Benjamin, Lepecki argues that translations "animate" works, sending them "into endless future iterations" that actualise potentialities not yet expressed in the original (Lepecki 2016, 115). Translation thus exceeds the transfer of a work between languages, cultures, or places. Rather, it becomes a medium through which "new forms of their yet unlived lives" emerge (Lepecki 2016, 115). The life of the work extends beyond the historical moment of its creation, unfolding through encounters with new contexts, bodies, and modes of reception. In this sense, the original is not a fixed entity but a dynamic one, continually transformed through its relations with the living world.

As Matos (2022) further notes, translation introduces an anachronism between the original and the moment of its renewal, allowing heterogeneous temporalities to coexist. Benjamin

distinguishes this process from mere continuity or posthumous survival (*Überleben*). Rather, translation produces a *Fortleben*: a continuation of life through transformation, distance, and historical displacement. The work survives precisely because it changes. From this perspective, reenactment should not be understood as the reproduction of an original choreography. Rather, it operates as a translational practice through which a work continues its historical life. By activating unrealised potentialities and generating new relations between past and present, reenactment allows choreography to persist through transformation, opening the possibility for the emergence of new dialectical images.

In the recent renewal of dance history, both in artistic and scholarly research, the activation of dance archives has emerged as a significant methodological practice. I propose the activation of digital archives as a means of embodying knowledge of dance and choreography, allowing historical materials to be engaged not as static documents but as living traces capable of generating new experiences in the present. Such an approach assumes that history is not organised through linear succession but through temporal crossings in which different times intersect, forming constellations between past and present.⁶

Benjamin's notion of remembrance (*Erinnerung*) offers a way of understanding this process. Remembrance is not the recovery of a lost past but a critical interruption of the flow of historical time, a moment in which past and present enter into a transformative constellation. As Benjamin argues, remembrance creates the possibility of altering the present through a renewed encounter with what has been (Machado 2013, 44). Reenactments and activations operate precisely within this temporal field. They seek to produce an experience in which the past persists not as repetition but as a force capable of generating new meanings and new forms of perception.

It is in this sense that I approach the archival traces of the artists I study. Through a pose, a gesture, or a movement phrase, the body may encounter a pulsating residue of another historical moment. One pose from *Trio A* (1966) by Yvonne Rainer became the focal point of a dialectical image that emerged during the reception of my translation of the work, undertaken under Rainer's own supervision. This image offers a concrete example of how reenactment and activation enable the past to survive through transformation rather than reproduction.

3.1 Remembrance: The Nymph and the Punk

My engagement with *Trio A* (1966) emerged through a sustained process of translation involving digital media, digital dance annotation (*Motion Bank System*), and the embodied study of the choreography itself. This process eventually culminated in a direct encounter with Yvonne Rainer in New York (2025), whose feedback revealed that reenactment is never a matter of simple transmission. Even when a work appears to be faithfully transmitted, its embodiment demands clarification, adjustment, and renewed conceptual and technical precision, as the choreography discloses a distinct relation between movement, energy, and execution embedded within the phrase itself.

If the archive harbours a latent danger, a threat through which its surviving elements disrupt and unsettle the present, what emerges when a choreography returns through reenactment? What forces are activated when traces of postmodern dance are brought into the present through the body? Rather than preserving a work in its original state, reenactment exposes the tensions between survival and transformation, between what seeks to remain and what demands actualisation. It is from this perspective that I approach *Trio A* (1966), asking not what the work was, but what continues to insist within it and through it.

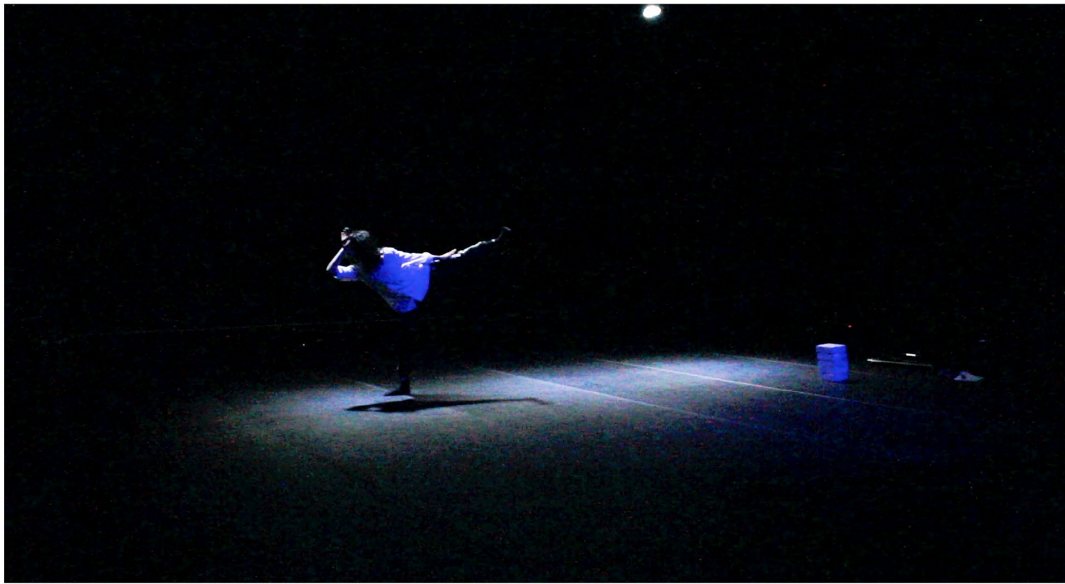
On 6 November 2024, I premiered my reenactment of *Trio A* (1966) following years of dedicated study of the piece. I was able to embody Yvonne Rainer's work through digital media, digital dance annotation (*Motion Bank System*), and a rigorous practice of embodying each movement from the choreography. This endeavour was later undertaken under the direct guidance of Yvonne Rainer, as I required her permission for the copyrights necessary to perform *Trio A* within a programme dedicated to dance history in São Paulo, Brazil. Since 2024, I have been collaborating with Yvonne Rainer, following my initial outreach regarding my research on her oeuvre. While she recognised certain qualities in my interpretation of *Trio A*, she also noted the need for adjustments, further clarifications, and greater precision in some of its core conceptual elements. The result of this collaboration was my publicly presented *Trio A Lecture-Performance* (Abs 2024). From this performance, I will extract a pose-arabesque derived from *Trio A*'s original choreographic phrase, which will serve as an element within the dialectical image of "The Nymph and the Punk" (Figure 2).

Within the context of transmissibility, the distinction between *Nachleben* and *Fortleben* becomes particularly significant in this context. While *Nachleben* designates the survival of a work across time, *Fortleben* refers to its continuation through transformation. The archive persists, but it does so by entering new constellations of meaning. This tension became especially apparent through the coexistence of different embodiments of *Trio A*. Among them, I focus on a pose-arabesque performed by Emily Coates, a long-time collaborator of Yvonne Rainer, whose interpretation offers a remarkable degree of precision and fidelity to the work. My own version, by contrast, emerges through a different relation to the archive. If Coates's interpretation approaches the preservation of the choreography as a historical form, mine seeks to activate the unrealised virtuality embedded within it. The original work remains present in both cases, yet it persists through different historical forces. It is precisely from this tension between preservation and actualisation that the dialectical image of *The Nymph and the Punk* emerges. The continuation of *Trio A*'s distinct new life, its *Fortleben*, unfolds through this unfinished process of transformation, grounded in the raw, critical, and unresolved energies that I define as the Punk subject.

The theatre is empty, the lighting is dim, and a block composed of ten cement bricks sits downstage to the left. I am wearing Adidas Originals trousers paired with a white shirt and black socks. I am dancing while quoting the first arabesque from *Trio A*'s (Rainer 1978) original phrase—the one that appears at the very beginning—though I am not performing the full phrase in this scene. My movement departs from select poses drawn from *Trio A*, combined with concepts derived from William Forsythe's *Improvisation Technologies*, to actualise, unlock, and reveal latent potentialities

embedded in the geometric movement patterns virtually stored within some movements from the piece. The original soundtrack for *Trio A Lecture-Performance* consists of collaged recordings collected during my academic research travels. These include sounds from museum visits, long walks in Berlin and other German cities, and tracks of dark, deep techno, characteristic of Berlin's sonic landscape. This scene represents a transformative exchange of *Trio A*—a dialogue of steps, sweat, and an ongoing re-creation of its images and resonances. The improvisational choreographic devices employed allow me to both incorporate and “excorporate” (Brandstetter, 2000) the essence of *Trio A*, navigating its ever-evolving actualisations.

The theatrical space is the now-iconic setting of *Judson Memorial Church*—a sanctuary characterised by its linoleum floor and choir loft—where Emily Coates performed one of the “last instants” (Rainer 2024) of *Trio A*'s original phrase. Her rendition stands as the most precise interpretation I have ever witnessed (via video), wherein the dialectic of *Trio A*'s rejection of classical ballet movements paradoxically unveils an extraordinary mastery of ballet technique itself. Coates's execution of the first arabesque from *Trio A*'s original phrase unfolded against the marble backdrop of the sanctuary, evoking myth, symbol, and the lingering image of the Nymph. Yet, in Emily's interpretation, the Nymph becomes a completed process—a final iteration—elevated to a timeless, classical stature, almost transcendental, as though residing above the Olympus. In contrast, my interpretation of the same arabesque emerges from a reflective engagement with *Judson's* past, infused with both melancholy and rebellion and shaped by the ethos of a cultural explosion that empowered artists to experiment and interrogate artistic form from the raw “do it yourself” punk mentality. This cultural upheaval was part of a broader social transformation, marked by the civil rights movement, camp aesthetics, explorations into human consciousness, the Vietnam War, feminism, the Black Panthers' activism, among others. Artists of this era were not merely creating; they were protesting, rebelling, and inventing entirely new artistic forms. Thus, within the dialectical image of the “Nymph and the Punk,” an ancient dynamic resurfaces: the enduring dialectic between Apollo and Dionysus.



To exist within HISTORY is also to be HAUNTED by MEMORY



*Figure 2. Abs (2024) and Emily Coates (2024) pose-arabesque from Trio A (1966).
Source: Abs (2024) and Rainer (2024).*

From these encounters emerges the dialectical image of The Nymph and the Punk. The Punk seeks the rebellious energy of revolution and change, whereas the Nymph preserves and is conservative in its nature. The dialectical image reveals the opposing, yet interwoven, forces at play in both interpretations: one represented by a classical, Apollonian “final” moment of dance embodied by Emily Coates, and the other manifested in my own future-oriented interpretation—an afterlife of *Trio A* infused with a raw, punk-grunge sensibility reflective of the 1980s era, a sensibility shaped by my generational experience. My reenactment of *Trio A* serves simultaneously as an effort to preserve the work in its singular, original form—hence my meeting with Yvonne Rainer to learn this archive directly, transmitted through her body—and as an attempt to unlock, release, and actualise the manifold virtual potentials embedded within the original choreography. This act becomes a “re-enchantment” of the space—a revitalisation of its spirit—transposing to the present what the 1960s generation could not fully realise in their utopian projects. However, in the face of contemporary fascist resurgence, these unfulfilled projects now resurface with renewed urgency. As André Lepecki (2016, 120) observes, there is a palpable “pressure towards embodied actualisations” within the processes of archiving and reenacting dance. Drawing on the dialectical image, I propose that this pressure emerges as a historical necessity—a demand for a past process to be realised, urgently and tangibly, in the present. The “re-enchantment” and its contemporary actualisations thus stand as imperative responses to our historical moment. But what does it truly mean to revivify the spirit?

To offer one instantiation of the dialectical image, the punk represents a rupture. Why are our desires so often manifest through rupture, with such intense force? Are they to be perceived as tragic or Dionysian? Perhaps because we yearn for what makes us protagonists of rebellion, as “what moves us arises, is extracted, from the depths of an inextinguishable pain, which is its homeland, its original environment” (Didi-Huberman 2017b 307, translation by the author). This dimension of culture as tragedy is deeply embedded in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Aby Warburg, and, of course, in my own actualisations of *Trio A*. The Nymph endures in Yvonne Rainer’s arabesque. Emerging from the iconic pose-gesture-movement of classical ballet, the peculiarities within Yvonne’s gesture—such as the arm flexed towards the forehead—acquire a heightened intensity in the present moment. These elements consign the arabesque to the spectral temporality of survivals. In the anachronistic clash between the Now (*Trio A Lecture Performance*) and the Then (classicism with Emily Coates), style opens itself to its own future—to its capacity for transformation and reformulation. This is the power of survivals both in gestures and images, for “every intense discovery, every radical new development—involves a return to original words (*Urworte*)” (Didi-Huberman 2017b, 161, translation by the author).⁷

Aby Warburg’s Nymph embodies a critical function capable of “reversing all values attributed to images and gestures in the traditional practice of art historians [...]” (Didi-Huberman 2017b, 305, translation by the author). In this capacity, the Nymph carries “something akin to a critical wind, and soon a methodological storm destined to revolutionise our historical and philosophical approach to images and gestures” (Didi-Huberman 2017b, 305, translation by the author). This dynamic mirrors precisely what occurred with the reception of *Trio A* in 1966 in the United States and later in Europe during the mid-1990s: a profound reversal of the values traditionally ascribed

to dance imagery and gestures. Yvonne Rainer herself embodies this critical wind—a force that has, in turn, generated and continues to generate self-reflexive methodological storms surrounding dance media, choreography, and their expansion into other realms of human activity. Herein lies the power of the Nymph as a cultural trace within *Trio A*: the Nymph offers a means to recognise, in the visual history of peoples and their gestures, the rebellious dynamics embedded within specific figures. The “Nymph and the Punk” are two nymphs belonging to distinct historical temporalities, yet they dialectically inhabit the same historical factual present. Remarkably, they might even share the same month, year, and the poignant farewell of Yvonne Rainer to both peace and life itself. These two nymphs intersect and cross paths: the first serves to preserve, while the second seeks to actualise the virtualities already embedded within the choreography—potentials residing latently in the very artwork.

Conclusion

I hope to have shown, through Walter Benjamin’s model of thought and the two dialectical image montages, the concept of the body-archive as a mode of engaging with historical time and materials embedded within artworks—materials that carry an inherent demand for actualisation. The actualisation of an artwork sets in motion processes shaped by the virtual realities that surround it: latent potentials that may not yet have been realised or may not have found a dancer’s body through which to materialise the corporeal expressions of the original work. The task of the artists, in this context, is to attune themselves to these virtual forces and bring them into actuality, recognising that the work remains perpetually incomplete⁶. Therefore, reenactments and activations represent creative investments aimed at generating difference—a difference that signifies a process that is inherently inventive, self-differentiating, and continuously open to new possibilities. The body-archive is a dialectical image that perpetually enables the restart of history—choreographically, theoretically, and technically.

Walter Benjamin’s concept of the dialectical image offers a framework to understand historical consciousness as a critical and imagistic tension, dynamically intertwining past and present in the conception of history. When considering dance, the body, the archive, and memory through Benjamin’s philosophical lens—particularly his approach to exposing the thought process—it becomes evident that bodies intersect across time in a continuous chain of reciprocal emissions, translations, transmissions, receptions, and exchanges of temporality, gestures, movements, and affects within diverse historical and political contexts. Within this framework, the afterlives of dance works are imbued with infinite potential to be perpetually reactivated in the present, particularly when historical moments summon specific spectral materials demanding reappearance. I propose engaging with the notion of the body-archive as an anticipatory language, oriented towards what is perpetually arriving. The spectral, in this sense, prompts us to ask: where does it emerge from? What does it witness? What does it demand? Why does it resist burial? It is, fundamentally, a mourning yet to be realised.

Notes

¹ For instance, Georges Didi-Huberman (2017a) examines Bertolt Brecht's montage process in two of his works: *Arbeitsjournal 1938–1955* (1977) and *Kriegsfibel* (1955), or its French edition, *ABC Abécédaire de la guerre* (1985). In these works, Brecht constructs a veritable atlas of images, encompassing an extensive array of visual documents and photojournalistic records of the Second World War. According to Didi-Huberman, these works generate knowledge through montage. In the act of assembling and disassembling images, certain symptoms and transversal relations emerge. As a result, politics and aesthetics become intricately intertwined within the photographic material and the captions penned by Brecht.

² Using the Motion Bank System, I developed practical annotation methods within the context of dance research. These methods focus on analysing choreographic structures, exploring generative procedures of dance movement, and examining the dancer's subjectivity. My digitally annotated procedures form the foundation to activate selected choreographies using Dancing Digital Annotation, a specialised software developed as part of the Motion Bank project.

³ In 2010, I co-directed the group Vitrola Quântica (2007–2013) alongside filmmaker Daniel Augusto and a group of dancers who collaborated with me on different projects.

⁴ "These still unfinished endings [...] extend the materiality of history into a spectral concreteness (the concrete virtuality of the ghost), which makes the past resonate and act as contemporary with the present" (Lepecki 2010, 13–15, translation by the author).

⁵ My bachelor dance training (2003–2006) at Universidade Anhembi Morumbi in São Paulo had a pedagogical plan based on the Klauss Vianna Technique, which is structured around a holistic conception of the body commonly known in Brazil as Somatic Education. The ideas of spontaneous self-expression, the holistic concept of a thinking body, and the primacy of physical sensations and emotions as the meaning and value of dance movement were the guiding principles of the programme centred on the concept of the performer-creator. In general terms, the performer-creator is *the author* of their movements and their original works; based on somatic techniques, including those of Klauss Vianna, there is a tendency to work with the internal scene as a means of dancer-audience communication.

⁶ Rebecca Schneider (2011, 37) describes this encounter as the experience of finding "one time resident in another time," a logic embedded in the very notion of remains. The activation of archival materials therefore does not restore the past in its entirety. Rather, it allows fragments, traces, gestures, and residues to persist in the present. This persistence is necessarily incomplete, fractured, and contested. What survives does so because it continues to demand attention, whether as an unresolved historical tension, an unfulfilled mourning, or a claim for justice.

⁷ These original gestures function as "plastic materials destined to undergo successive impressions, ceaseless displacements, and antithetical reversals" (Didi-Huberman 2017b, 161, translation by the author).

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Biography

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

DEFORMING COLONIAL ARCHIVES, PERFORMING PALESTINIAN COUNTERNARRATIVES

THEO PANAGOPOULOS UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST OF SCOTLAND

Introduction

The archive is dormant, never dead. (Vatulescu and Stoler 2025, 442)

In July of 2023, I accidentally came across a collection of film archives, stored at the Moving Image Archive (MIA) of the National Library of Scotland in Glasgow. I discovered the archives online after stumbling upon multiple listings on the National Library website and was particularly drawn to the fact that multiple films in the collection presented 1930s and 1940s Palestine in colour, a rare find for any researcher. After realising that the footage was sitting undigitised and unseen for almost half a century, buried in the vaults, I initiated the digitisation process. The archival films depict rare footage of British Mandate Palestine, filmed by a Scottish medical missionary named Herbert Watt Torrance. They present moments of the missionary's life in the city of Tiberias, his observation of people and flowers, as well as his travels around British-occupied Palestine. The collection had been donated by the missionary's family back in the late 1970s but was sitting in the vaults of the National Library of Scotland for decades till the films were sent to me newly digitised on 4 October 2023. The recently emerged moving images offer a unique, albeit skewed, look at a multifaceted, vivid, and diverse Palestinian society living in the city of Tiberias, a population that would be the first to forcefully be displaced only just a decade later.

When thinking of institutional archives connected to colonial pasts, ideas of power and ideology emerge around how memory is conserved. Archives do not only capture the history of specific moments in time but also highlight the perspectives of those who narrate and control how they get recorded. One of the most crucial contributions to archive studies come from French philosopher Jacques Derrida, whose work *Archive Fever* (1996) reflects on the power of the archive by exploring the role of the subject to the process of archiving. He argues that “there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory” (4). He traces the archive etymologically back to ancient Greece and its notion of *arkheion*, a physical space of power that stores official documents depending on rules that dictated what was worth remembering and forgetting. Since Derrida’s important work, archive scholars have offered an important understanding of the archive as more than the description of a physical location but as an interplay of power and ideology. In this article, I discuss archives through the framework of the inherent ideologies they carry and as sites of epistemological and creative examinations. It is vital to challenge the understanding of archives as singular repositories of historical knowledge and expose power structures that allow hegemonic narratives to dominate till this day. The dichotomy between what is considered valuable and what disposable through the framework of memory and limbo is central in analysing the ideological components that archives carry within their own categorisation.

According to Ann Laura Stoler, a leading scholar in archive studies, archives have been systematically used by colonial powers to control knowledge and reconstruct historical narratives of a colonised population. For Stoler (2009), colonial archives are defined as a “site of knowledge production” and a “repository of codified beliefs” (97), which still shape the complex relationship between Western and colonised countries, even when formal colonial ties are disbanded. In most cases, colonial archives construct an image of populations that lay beyond the horizon of the Western world in ways that fit the Western colonial worldview. The archive is, thus, not a mere and static storage of documents, images, and knowledge; rather, it establishes its operational function through visual, written, aural, juridical, social, and cultural practices related to colonialism. Those practices become even more meaningful when related to diverse historical, social, and political contexts. In the case of the Torrance archival collection, the history of its creation is intrinsically linked with the history of Palestine during British occupation and the eventual creation of the State of Israel in 1948.

What does it mean to unearth this footage at a time when the images’ temporalities do not only speak about the past but heavily refer to Palestine’s present and the uncertain future? At a time when many humanitarian organisations have concluded that Israel has been perpetrating a genocide in Gaza,¹ looking at vivid images in colour of a pre-1948 Palestine feels pertinent when juxtaposed to the circulation of phone images of violence and destruction in social media. The rarity of archival images regarding Palestine also points to a long legacy of theft, censorship, and destruction of Palestinian personal and institutional archives by the Israeli state (Masalha 2012; Sela 2017). The exile and denial of Palestinians to return to their homeland has strongly severed the ties of the diaspora to the rest of the Palestinian population and has challenged the maintenance or restoration of Palestinian history, thus further fragmenting the Palestinian narrative. Palestinian archives can be found between a few institutional spaces that exist and are

scattered in historical Palestine, the occupied West Bank, the besieged Gaza Strip, and throughout the diaspora. This disruption of Palestinian narratives, as well as the general erasure of Palestinian history within official Israeli archives (Sela 2009), heightens the importance of the potential that the Torrance collection carries in restoring important Palestinian imagery. Israel's settler imaginaries and their inequalities through manifestations of settler colonialism, such as occupation, apartheid, and mass violence, offers an imperative to create counternarratives that attempt to "displace, rather than only disprove, colonial truths, to identify and reckon with claims they still have upon Palestinians now" (Stoler 2022, 573).

As a researcher of Palestinian heritage myself, currently living as an immigrant in Scotland, the opportunity to discover archival imagery of Palestine which depicts the time when my own grandparents were still living there before being expelled in 1948 felt like a personal calling; a calling to engage with Palestine through multiple temporalities and beyond the intellectual and mental but, more so, to experience it through the embodied manifestation of grief and remembrance. Similar to memory itself, notions of archives are intrinsically linked to the body and to the felt sense. Derrida (1995) himself used the embodied notion of "archive fever" to explain the tendency to hold back death and forgetfulness by recording, repeating, and recalling through texts, objects, and data. He explained that the act of archiving mirrors how humans archive in their bodies; how they repress and remove memory. By investigating the archive as a body-centric process that troubles Cartesian ideas of the duality between mind and body, I explore the rare possibilities that the Torrance archive opens for creative activation through the body and performance. The archival collection allows for a critical academic investigation on how bodies are seen, understood, and culturally reproduced through images, as well as how they get "othered" through ideologies of power.

In this article, I initially explore how the archived films within Torrance collection view Palestinian bodies in contrast to Scottish bodies, through their colonial, Orientalist, and biblical gaze. By drawing on the notions of Sara Ahmed's "orientation" as well as George Bataille's notion of "the informe", I discuss the conceptual backbone of my practice-as-research methodology of developing and co-creating participatory performances as "counternarratives" to the Scottish colonial archive. By working alongside Palestinian diasporic communities in Athens and Glasgow through the form of creative workshops, participatory performances emerged as responses to the Torrance collection and specifically to his earliest film in the collection, named *Tiberias 1935*.

The Orientation of the Biblical Film Gaze

I see the Torrance collection as not only preserving and capturing the lost and erased world of Palestine in early modernity but also presenting that reality through a distorted colonial lens. The lens emerges as a Western point of view that reproduces images through the "biblification" of people and the land. The notion of "biblification" refers to an active reimaging of reality as to mirror symbols and imagery from the Bible. According to Palestinian historian Issam Nassar (2006), biblical imagery of the Holy Land re-emerged during English travel narratives to the Holy Land of the nineteenth century. Those narratives prioritised the selection and representation of noteworthy sites and

destinations that relied on imagery of biblical scripture. Nassar shares that it was common practice in biblical travel expeditions for “events and places to which visitors failed to find any textual references [to be] viewed as worthy of dismissal” (75), while noting that for them “the real Palestine was the one described in the books rather than the one they saw” (73). Thus, biblical references had a strong impression on the conscience of the traveller of Palestine, shaping what they saw and how.

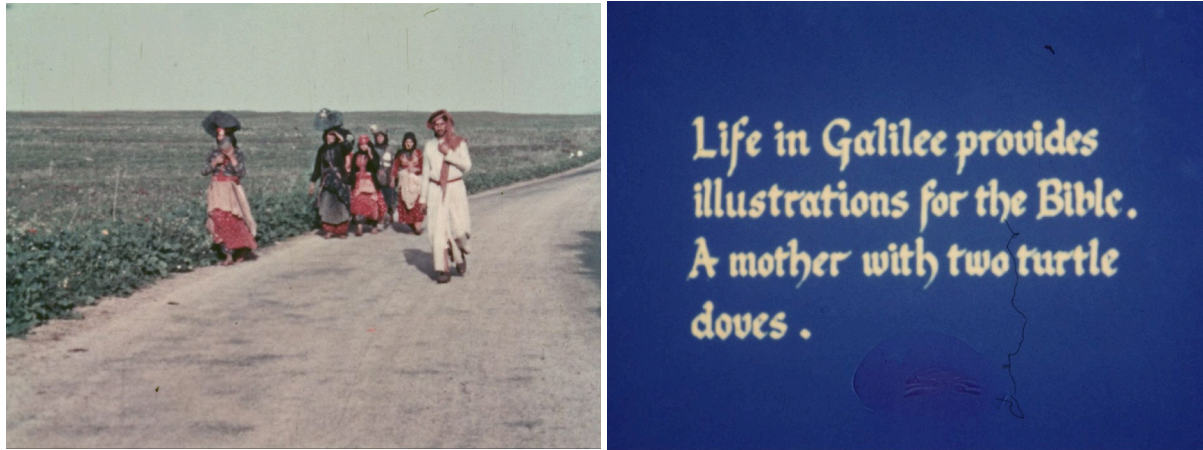


Figure 1: Wild Flowers of Palestine, Torrance collection. Courtesy of National Library of Scotland.

The archival films in the Torrance collection follow many of the tropes that had become the bedrock of missionary image-making which reproduced Palestine as “familiar site of European consciousness” and imagined Palestinians as the exotic “other” (Nassar 2006, 73). Through the Biblical lens, Palestinians were seen through the concept of the “immovable Orient” which presented a community “frozen” in time both in how the local population dressed and how they behaved. For Nassar, this framework of thinking and looking, not only created a theoretical and problematic understanding of a whole community of people to a Western audience but also created the “consensual” infrastructure which led to the colonisation of Palestine by England in 1917 and the eventual British and American support for the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 (68).

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, colonial expansion brought European photographers and early filmmakers into the Eastern Mediterranean and Southwest Asia. In Palestine specifically, this process was driven by European interest in the “Holy Land”. The camera’s unique ability to capture the “truth” of Palestine and freeze it in time was of particular interest to those who sought to verify the timeless truth of the Bible. In his work *Camera Orientalis* (2016), Ali Behdad describes how the camera imbued Orientalism with scientific credibility and therefore functioned as a central pillar in the Orientalist framework. The camera had the power to “capture and ultimately re-present the monuments of the Orient... [and the] effacement of the native population” (Berg 2008, 11) by enhancing what is understood as an imperialist lens. Filmmakers of the time had the ability to treat images as “mirrored photographs” of the “imaginary or mental mould existing in the Westerner’s mind” (Perez 1988, 50) and thus “domesticate” ideas of people and lands that were considered “distant” in the imaginary of the Western world but as consumable and familiar. The camera acted as an extension of an Orientalist ideology that highlighted different power dynamics and hierarchies between colonial powers and colonised communities.



Figure 2: Arab Customs, Torrance collection. Courtesy of National Library of Scotland.

In this article I draw on the research of Sara Ahmed, and specifically her conceptualisation of “orientation” as an approach to understand Orientalism and subsequently the Orientalist gaze, not just as a critical and academic analysis but as a phenomenological and embodied reality. She expands Edward Said’s notion of Orientalism by exploring the term “orientation” to highlight the shared etymology with the word “Orient”. For Said ([1979] 2003), Orientalism refers to a discourse employed by the West for “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (25) and argues that “Orientalism is more particularly valuable as sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a veridic discourse about the Orient” (28). But while Said’s work focused on texts, Ahmed (2006) focuses on bodies arguing that the Orient “refers us not just to space or to directionality but also takes us in a specific direction” (112). For Ahmed, the Orient distils the idea of being “orientated” towards a specific location and thus it is an intentional form of facing something that is “other than me” and at the same time reasserts one’s own location as it “always reflects back or shows where one is located” (115). She offers the distinction between orientation *towards* and *around* to conceptualise the paradox of gazing at the other which is at once a form of consolidating the self, as well as signifying the importance of clarifying the *here* from which the orientation begins to unfold. Thus, “by being directed towards the orient, we are orientated “around” the Occident. Or, to be more precise, the Occident coheres at that which we are organised around through the very direction of our gaze towards the Orient” (116).

Ahmed's conceptualisation of orientation becomes central to examining the colonial biblical and Orientalist gaze towards Palestinian bodies through an embodied and phenomenological understanding. It is vital to examine the different aspects through which the colonial gaze operates by investigating the spatial formations that hold Orientalist ideologies. That would include analysing the proximity of bodies from each other, the distance between the Scottish missionary's camera in comparison to Palestinian bodies he is filming, as well as the ability to identify people's faces which enhances their individuality and differences rather than creating a homogenous image of bodies and their environment. As Ahmed notes, the Orientalist gaze is highly dependent on "how bodies inhabit spaces through shared orientations" (118). By being in specific spaces, a body is able to extend its reach "by taking in that which is 'not' it, where the 'not' involves the acquisition of new capacities and directions" (115).

Tiberias 1935 as case study

By using the earliest film in the collection named *Tiberias 1935* as a case study, I decide to situate my research in relation to 1930s Mandatory Palestine. The specific archival film allows for examination of highly embodied representations of the colonial gaze towards Palestinians. According to its online listing, the film is considered by the Spielberg Jewish Foundation as one of the earliest films that present Palestine in colour (National Library of Scotland 2025). This rare find highlights the importance of the archival film as a rare documentation of the life in Palestine that also carries tension of hierarchies between white Scottish bodies and the indigenous Arab Palestinian bodies. I decide to frame *Tiberias 1935* through Ahmed's phenomenological lens as an analysis of image-making towards the relationship between bodies and the camera, which will then develop into a deeper understanding of the embodied performance as counternarrative discussed in the subsequent section.

In order to analyse how Ahmed's ideas around orientation might be materialised in Torrance's filmic compositions, I draw upon the coding categories developed by Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins (1993, 285) around notions of power, race, and history. These categories were created after their "close reading" of hundreds of photographs from *National Geographic*, which were examined images according to themes of colour, pose, framing and vantage point when investigating how non-Western peoples were represented. Using their "close-reading" methodology as an analytical framework, I examine how the Scottish missionary decided to look and film Arab Palestinian bodies by codifying the archival film frames in three categories.

The first category refers to footage that exclusively depict Arab Palestinian bodies. In examples such as the ones below, in instances presenting a woman wearing a traditional Palestinian embroidered dress or the fishermen in the lake of Galilee, the selection of what was filmed and what was not points to how the colonial, biblical, and Orientalist gaze can reveal itself. It is important to remember that the gaze does not reveal itself only when it decides to look, but also in what it decides to unsee or avert its gaze from.



*Figure 3: A woman carries a box on her head in a busy street, Tiberias 1935, Torrance collection.
Courtesy of National Library of Scotland.*



*Figure 4: Fishermen at Lake Galilee, Tiberias 1935, Torrance collection.
Courtesy of National Library of Scotland.*

The Arab Palestinian people in the archive remain unnamed and their features mostly obscured. In each of the film frames, Palestinian bodies are positioned together, taking part in the same activity such as walking in the street, buying in the market, or fishing, making it hard to decipher their individual characteristics. As observed by Lutz and Collins in their own content analysis of colonial photography, non-Westerners are often seen as using so-called primitive technologies, for example being more spiritual, more in tune with their environment, and represented wearing fewer clothes. In the case of Mandatory Palestine, extensive research has described the community as one that has embraced modernity and had a plurality of experiences and cultures, as witnessed in the book *Before Their Diaspora* (Khalidi 1984). The filmic decision to prioritise highlighting Muslim and Jewish rituals over Christian ones confirm Lutz and Collins' discovery, and further highlights how the Arab Palestinian bodies are selectively represented through the lens of the "exotic other", conforming to expectations of primitivism and its biblical representation.

The separation between Scottish and Palestinian bodies becomes evident in the second category. The frames within this codification focus on how the Scottish missionary gaze looks at exclusively white Scottish bodies. In the example below, Scottish missionaries are presented with modern Western and formal clothes which contrast the traditional and "oriental" clothing that Palestinians have been solely portrayed wearing. Their bodily features are distinctive and clear, and the context of their activity, such as attending the language school, is purposeful and adequately described through an inter-title, as seen below.



Figure 5: A group of Scottish people gathered in a language school, Tiberias 1935, Torrance collection. Courtesy of National Library of Scotland.



Figure 6: *Language School* title card, *Tiberias* 1935, *Torrance* collection. Courtesy of National Library of Scotland.

The binary between the two groups of people gets even clearer in the third and final categorisation. The third category focuses on moments when both Scottish and Arab Palestinians are situated within the same frame. While within *Tiberias* 1935 those moments are few and far between, they create a strong impression in how Scottish bodies are positioned hierarchically over Arab Palestinian bodies. In the case of the frame below, the Scottish filmmaker is filming and “capturing” the activity of Palestinian fisherman. He is positioned to appear above them, being in control of what and possibly how their activity is getting filmed. In another example that presents the spatiality of race, power, and colonialism, a Scottish missionary has positioned his body over the body of an Arab Palestinian body, gesturing as if “riding” a horse or a donkey. This positioning of the body evokes photography and film of British imperial occupations in which non-Western bodies were degraded to imagery of the savage and lower than human.



*Figure 7: A Scottish man films fishermen in Lake Galilee, Tiberias 1935, Torrance collection.
Courtesy of National Library of Scotland.*



*Figure 8: A Scottish man is carried by a fisherman in Lake Galilee, Tiberias 1935, Torrance collection.
Courtesy of National Library of Scotland.*

Given the way Lutz and Collins' codes flow from a wider set of ideas about power and representation, their specificity in application to the Torrance archive and its biblical gaze has proved to be enlightening. They point out that non-Western people are represented as mostly relating to a Western point of view as an object of curiosity, either seen as primitive or embodying West's mythology of a Biblical past.

By examining the archival images through Ahmed's notion of orientation, I see Dr. Herbert Torrance's camera as orientated *around* white Scottish bodies and *towards* Arab Palestinian bodies. While in the first category, the camera is used to highlight the superiority of whiteness in comparison to non-Western bodies, in this final category, Western bodies are seen superior both spatially and physically, highlighting the spatial formation of Orientalism beyond texts but through an embodied manifestation of power of white Scottish bodies over Arab Palestinian bodies. Therefore, we can articulate clearly and visually Palestinian life's intensity of disposability through their unstable and precarious positioning within a "Holy Land" that is perceived as not theirs to be in. The colonial "making" and its aesthetic form thus unfolds in that context too.

Deforming the Colonial Archive

The natives' challenge to the colonial world is not a rational confrontation of points of view. It is not a treatise on the universal, but the untidy affirmation of an original idea propounded as an absolute. (Fanon 1963, 41)

In late 2024, I facilitated practice-as-research workshops alongside Palestinian diasporic participants as a process of co-creating Palestinian performances as "counternarratives" to the colonial "masternarrative" of Scottish archival films. My research consisted of two participatory performance projects, which saw me work with Palestinian diasporic individuals in Athens, Greece, and Glasgow, Scotland, which resulted in two final works. The first project, *A Land with a People: A Palestinian Counternarrative*, is a participatory film co-created over two days in September 2024 in Athens, and the second project, *Ancestral Gestures to an Absent Sound*, is a two-channel video installation documenting a participatory performance as gestural and sound re-enactment, which took place in November 2024 in Glasgow. Using the film archive *Tiberias 1935* as a starting point, I invited them to co-create performances as archival "counternarratives". The workshops' methodology was thoughtfully designed to firstly deconstruct and *deform* the archival masternarrative and secondly reconstruct and *transform* the Palestinian counternarrative.

I frame the Palestinian diasporic participants' engagement with the archive in two separate stages, by re-appropriating Bataille's notion of "the informe": the first stage is seen as *deforming* the colonial masternarrative by re-orienting the biblical film gaze; the second stage is seen as *transforming* the Palestinian counternarrative through voice and movement. From the one side, the act of *deforming* focuses on developing the *content* of the performance, shifting the colonial gaze as re-orientation *around* the Arab Palestinians in the archive and *towards* the Scottish missionary. On the side, the act of *transforming* hinges on shaping the *form* of performance.

In 1929, Georges Bataille coined the term "*l'informe*", or formlessness in English, in the surrealist journal *Documents*, in order to investigate the idea of intrinsic worthlessness (Bois and Krauss 1996, 16). He conceptualised *l'informe* not as an object or an adjective but as a method, used in an abstract and philosophical manner (ibid, 16–18). Bataille directly challenged the perceived hierarchies of art which were seen as exemplifying themes of humanism, embodied by the surrealist artists of time. The term *l'informe* offers a satirical and critical perspective which highlights the need to dismantle conventional form and elitist categorisation by "bringing art down to the waste level", to affirm that "the universe resembles nothing" (Bataille 1985, 31).

Considering how the examination of colonial ideology within archival films underlines the importance of form in shaping the consciousness around "othered" bodies and lands, the act of *deforming* becomes a powerful tool of rejecting elitist Western categorisation that undermines non-Western cultures and offers the consensual framework for domination and colonial expansion. While the term's English translation as "formlessness" indicates a lack of form, Bataille's interpretation posits the question of negotiation between what is formed and what remains formless. For that reason, like many scholars before me (Stoppani 2007; Van Raffe 2016), I decided to translate the French term *l'informe* into English as "the informe" to distinguish between this conceptual and linguistic confusion that the term "formlessness" might create.

Many artists have attempted to explore Bataille's theorisation of "the informe" by experimenting with aesthetics and artistic form. Artists Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois (1997) used Bataille's concept in an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris called *Formless: A User's Guide* where they discussed it as a valuable tool for free creative expression. While Bois and Kraus examined "the informe" through a radically materialist perspective and as a method of abjection against the rationality of high art, I believe that "the informe" as a method of rejecting categorisation feels very relevant in the context of rejecting the austere categorisation that colonial images construct of Palestinian bodies.

Sandra Ruiz and Hypatia Vourloumis (2021), in their book *Formless Formations: Vignettes for the End of this World*, employ Bataille's "the informe" through an explicitly political angle. They frame their research as an "insurgent walking and flying side by side with planetary anticolonial organising and in direct solidarity with all indigenous, Black, Brown, feminist, queer, ecological, migrating and diasporic soldiers of love" (21). For them to be formless is to be in solidarity, by describing their term "formless formations" as a practice towards planetary "border breakage" (15). Within the Palestinian context, Abdaljawad Omar (2024) appropriates Bataille's "the informe" when describing "formless operations" of Palestinian resistance that "deform" the colonial structure. By looking at resistance as an "anticoncept" (304), he claims that its aim is to resist conceptualisation as it "flows from the very structures that it ultimately seeks to decompose, degrade and destabilise" (309).

While Bataille's theorisation does not involve reconstruction after absolute deconstruction, I posit that in the context of Palestinian narrativisation and lived experience, reclaiming and rebuilding what was lost becomes a radical act equal to Bataille's nihilist sentiment in the 1930s. For Palestinians, when facing ongoing genocide, the act of reconstruction turns into a radical act of

resistance and determination in the face of mass death and destruction. Bataille's act of "the informe" brings a linguistic and intellectual radicality to an act of extreme perseverance by fundamentally disrupting the status quo that normalises violence, taking apart the existing rigid nature of the colonial form, and subsequently occupying the space of absence through their body; their grief, their pain, and their anger.



Figure 9: Palestinian workshop participants witnessing the archive for the first time, Athens, September 2024.
Courtesy of Theo Panagopoulos.

The workshop was divided into two days with separate aims. Day one of the workshop involved the Palestinian participants meeting each other, introducing themselves, and learning more about the Scottish film archive as both an object of testimony as well as an ideological process of preserving but also constructing memory. *Deforming* the archive took multiple shapes and exercises, such as printed postcards of the archive, personal domestic objects, as well as writing prompts. The second day was designed as more of a loose and flexible day where the Palestinian participants were able to select a preferred performance approach when expressing, sharing, and *transforming* their counternarrative to the Scottish colonial gaze.

The participants in both cities came from diverse backgrounds, life experiences, and age groups, but also different connections to Palestine, either being mixed heritage, first or second generation Palestinian, and/or having been born or lived in the West Bank, Gaza, or as an Arab minority as part of the State of Israel. The workshop timings felt very heightened considering how connecting to each other during a period of collective grief and pain was very needed for all the participants, made even more significant due to taking place around the one-year anniversary since the genocide began. In Athens, I facilitated the workshop alongside Athens-based Palestinian poet Carol Sansour, while in Glasgow a portion of the workshop was supported by Emily Munro, one of the curators at the Moving Image Archive at the National Library of Scotland. The difference of experience and contribution created a fascinating contrast to notions of proximity, first geographically to Palestine but also culturally to the Scottish archive.

The workshops began with personal introductions and a clear overview of the process of the workshop. The participants in Athens began by introducing themselves and discussing their desires as part of embarking on this methodological process of archival intervention. The Glasgow-based participants were first treated to an intimate tour of the Moving Image Archives at the National Library of Scotland, getting access to private spaces and getting to understand the realities of preservation, archiving, and categorisation. The Torrance collection was thus situated within its own institution, as both a repository of memory but also as a physical space and a result of archival labour. Both approaches situated the participants within their respective environments and to each other as Palestinians, heightening the responsibility of witnessing the past during an urgent present. In both instances, participants discussed their own proximity to their Palestinian identity, either intergenerationally or spatially, while I also presented my research and the questions that brought me to the project. I discussed how my own Palestinian heritage as a mixed-heritage person combined with my embodied connections to Scotland as an immigrant, as well as to Greece through being half-Greek, led me to develop this methodology.

The film set the tone of the discussion that followed. The participants shared thoughts, discoveries, and memories that emerged after witnessing the footage. The discussion was free-form as an embodied orientation that unfolded from the “here” of a colonial archival film. They witnessed their ancestral past; an image of a land that rarely gets seen. However, they felt that the image was filtered through the eyes of a missionary and thus misrepresented what they knew to be true. Their intergenerational and embodied knowledge clashed with images and colonial re-interpretations. The discussion was followed by practical exercises that started the process of re-orienting the Orientalist gaze.

After the initial discussions, the participants were given the opportunity to choose one frame from the archival film in the form of a postcard. Three questions were provided along with the postcards:



Figure 10: Postcard exercise, Athens, September 2024. Courtesy of Theo Panagopoulos.

1. What would you like to tell or ask the Arab Palestinians in the frame?

Speaker 1: What would I ask these fishermen? What is the connection between them? If they are relatives, friends, how long they have been working together, where are the women, wives? If there are fisherwomen?

Speaker 2: What would I ask or tell the person in the image? One, I would ask them who they are. I would greet them, I would ask who they are, I would ask them where they are from. I want to ask them about the news. What are our people feeling.

Speaker 3: It reminds me of my grandmother. So, the first question is, "What would you ask or tell the person?" I would like first to greet her and ask her about her day and her name. I would also compliment her tatreez and I would tell her that she looks like my grandmother who was displaced from Tell-es-Safi village near Hebron. I would also ask her about what she is holding in her hands and around her waist.

This question highlights the start of the re-orientation process. The participants began by orienting themselves *around* the Palestinians in their selected postcards. Their answers signify the need to add a sense of humanity to their people and seek a point of connection to a skewed representation of their ancestral past. Most participants approached their response with caution but tenderness, attempting to learn about people's specific experience, their genealogy and the social fabric that surrounds them. Some participants connected personally to some of the people in the archive, as they reminded them of their own family members.

The participants' engagement with Arab Palestinians seen in the background of the frame directly connects to Bataille's "the informe" as a method of *deforming* the archive as well as Ahmed's conceptualisation of background. For Ahmed (2006), background could refer "to the ground or parts situated in the rear, or to the portions of the picture represented at a distance" (97). The participants' contributions speak to what Ahmed describes as the "spatiality" of the background, which also gives shape to what is in the foreground. For the participants, the image's background presents a plethora of possibilities for connection to those who have been rejected by colonial image-making, to the landscapes rejected by the missionary gaze, and to the ideas that could not be "absorbed" by the film camera.

Ahmed suggests that the notion of the background carries both a spatial and a temporal dimension. She used the example of "telling a story about someone" in order to offer the background or "what is behind" the person and the story (96). In that case, the notion of background refers to the past, to what happened in a previous time. Those two interpretations of background become essential in understanding how participants attempt to *deform* the archive, both spatially and temporally. The act of *deforming* as archival re-orientation is both about embodying the archive as an image and intervening in the narrative of the past. The participants *deform* a construction of the past seen through the eyes of Scottish missionary Herbert Torrance. Their engagement feels present despite their access to a "disposed" past.

2. What would you tell or ask Herbert?

Speaker 1: What would I ask Herbert? I don't know if I would have anything to say to him. I don't want to talk to him. But maybe I would ask him how they welcomed him. Did the fishermen welcome them? Did he ask for permission?

Speaker 2: I think I will tell Herbert that Palestinian women are strong and independent and are well-educated. I would also ask him about his perception and the reason why he is filming.

Speaker 3: In terms of what would I tell or ask Herbert.... It is interesting you call him Herbert. I find it weirdly personalised. I would want to understand his view in relation to his own positionality, his role, his underling ideology which we spoke about earlier, his politics. But mainly I want to know how he understood his power, his position, his privilege of being there and how he viewed himself in relation to other people in context.

This question focuses on how the workshop participants re-oriented *towards* the colonial gaze and the missionary's role as a filmmaker. Most of the workshop participants held a hostile stance against Torrance by critically interrogating his role in creating a biblical narrative of Palestine that marginalises the indigenous Palestinian population. They questioned his positionality and ideological background but also his knowledge of the people he was filming. Through that hostility, the participants were able to reject his vision of their ancestral past and take the opportunity to expose his skewed colonial vision. Thus, their refusal to accept the archival vision as "objective truth" becomes central in constructing their own "counternarrative".

3. Where would you like to stand in the frame?

Speaker 1: I would like to stand shoulder to shoulder with this man pulling this fishing net and eat fish together.

Speaker 2: To be honest, I would like to be in the sea. It would be a little bit difficult, so I would just be beside them looking from their own point of view.

Speaker 3: Where would I be standing in this picture? In fact, I think I would be standing with the women here in the back. Because I would be listening and trying to understand why they are all gathered there and what they are talking about. What are they discussing, what problem or occasion it is.

Speaker 4: I would stand in front of the camera with my back to the camera and block the camera. And then take over the view, own the perspective. The longer answer is I would just help; I would want to be part of it, I would want to help the men to fish, I would go home with them afterwards and visit their families. I would then ask them to help me figure out how to go visit my own family. That is the first answer I gave. But if I was just standing, I would stand with my back to the camera.

For this final question, I draw from Ahmed's phenomenological notion of "worldfacing" in analysing the participants' responses. Ahmed (2006) discusses "worldfacing" when describing the

phenomenological outlook of Orientalism as a “way of gathering things around so they ‘face’ a certain direction” (118) and thus creating a worldview through its gaze. ‘Worldfacing’ refers to how a worldview gets reflected within a phenomenal space and how “bodies inhabit spaces through shared orientations” (ibid.). By physicalising the frame and imagining it through a spatial dimension, the participants embody their own collective re-orientation by choosing where to stand within the frame. All participants chose to position themselves *around* Palestinian bodies and making them central to their own way of looking. Responses such as “shoulder to shoulder” and “I would stand with my back to the camera” signify an embodied reclamation not only of the gaze but also of the space they are meant to occupy. By centring the position of the Palestinian bodies, they present their own positionality in how they view and experience the archival film.

Diasporic Palestinian communities began from a sense of “disorientation” as their starting point of their own orientation to Palestine is from a place of exile and displacement. The notion of diaspora as an identity centres “worldfacing” in connection with what has been disrupted, in this case Palestine as a land that the participants have been exiled or displaced from. How do Palestinian individuals of mixed heritage orientate themselves when connected to the Western colonial gaze? In some cases, participants wrestled with positioning themselves clearly as part of a binary of “us” and “other” due to their mixed heritage and/or their upbringing in the West.

Speaker 1: I carry my identity as jewel, it's important to me, I'm proud of it but it's also restraining, it carries a weight which is tying me somehow. To what I am, to what I'm going to be and to what is going on now and how I want to express all this struggle.

Speaker 2: When I was growing up in Canada, Palestinians only were represented as terrorists in the media. Exclusively [...] it wasn't till I left Canada that I began realising how conditioned I was to see ourselves in a particular way and there was so much of deconstruction of that case, it is still there, it is inevitable.

Ahmed discusses the notion of mixed orientation as a form of “reinvestigating alignments between bodies, nations and world” (112). Being of mixed heritage inherently “breaks” the strict binary categorisation of the colonial gaze, blending the idea of “other” with the notion of “us”. The idea of being in the diaspora and of mixed heritage adds to the sense of “disorientation” as it affects deeply the way one is looked at or seen on screen, always in contrast to other white bodies. According to Ahmed, the familiarity of what is considered a “white world” can “disorient” non-white bodies. The non-white gaze returns to the non-white body, following the line of the hostile white gaze. Colonialism makes the world “white” which is a world “ready” for certain kinds of bodies and not others (111). As she notes: “bodies remember such histories, even when we forget them. Such histories, we might say, surface on the body, or even shape how bodies surface. In a way, then, race does become a social as well as bodily given, or what we receive from others as an inheritance of this history” (ibid.). The notion of history and, in this case, colonialism living in the body became central how the Palestinian participants *deformed* the archive by devising their performance as counternarrative and as reclamation to the othering of the Arab Palestinian bodies.

Developing Participatory Performance as Palestinian Counternarrative

During the workshop's second day, the participants discussed and decided on the form that their intervention would take. While the first day followed a more rigid structure of multiple steps through which they *deformed* the colonial gaze, the second day was directed by the participants themselves through discussion and collective agreement on the content and form of their performance as counternarrative. The discussion took a critical approach around the notion of form that moulded itself into certain essential questions: what does our Palestinian counternarrative look like? What is the best way to attend to bodies and lived experiences without replicating historical patterns of oppression? Under what conditions should this archive be seen?

The Palestinian participants initially engaged first with the idea of what the counternarrative should not be by rejecting the colonial images of Palestinian embodied existences. For Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2014) bodily and "analytic practices of refusal involve an active resistance to trading in pain and humiliation and supply a rationale for blocking the settler colonial gaze that wants those stories" (812). For the participants, following their own agenda when creating their own narrative deeply resonated with them. Both groups in Athens and Glasgow, unbeknownst to each other's choices, decided to intervene in the silent archives by developing their performance with the aim of "activating" auditory absence.

Bataille's "the informe" feels apt when examining how the participants decided to *transform* their counternarrative by engaging with both what was formed (the visuals) and what was formless (the sound). As the negotiation between the formed and the formless, "the informe" becomes central when investigating the visual and audio interventions. It also contributes to a significant understanding when examining performance between physical "formed bodies" and digital "formless bodies". Bataille's theorisation offers a powerful conceptual outlook that allows the investigation of archival performance as a process of dismantling rigid categorisation by engaging with absence through the disposed, the erased, and the disappeared. The participants did not just create a form for what was formless, but rather, they exemplified the deep interconnectivity between what was kept formed and what formless, enhancing notions of absence by bringing presence to the exact forced formlessness that Palestinian have been facing for more than a century, both narratively and physically. By developing their performance counternarrative out of absence, the diasporic Palestinian participants were able to implement their own agenda of unearthing intimate Palestinian stories. Many questions arose in the process of performing these interventions: who usually speaks and why? Could the emergence of a lost sound address the silences of history?

A Land with a People: A Palestinian Counternarrative

Speaker 1: Maybe we can write a voiceover on these 8 minutes.

Speaker 2: It could be more than one voiceover, could be one in Arabic, one in English, could be one telling one story and one telling another story.

Speaker 3: It will be nice to do one collective project as counternarrative. But each one of us can decide how we want to archive and respond to the archive.

In Athens, participants intervened through the sound by individually writing their own voiceovers. The voiceovers would be based on discussions that organically emerged as part of the two-day methodology and were either fictional, documentary, or hybrid in form and ascribed to the archive itself. The emerged counternarrative created a powerful mosaic of experiences for what it means to be a Palestinian in the 1930s and 2024; in the diaspora and on the land of historic Palestine; in the inner and embodied world and in the external social and political world. This assemblage of voices mirrored all the voices that could not be heard in the archive and all the memories that were intergenerationally passed down and were kept in the participants' bodies.

Performance emerged as a collective tool of preserving lost collective memory and countering the hegemony of the missionary's gaze. The voiceovers, while developed individually, were workshopped as a collective unit, with every workshop participant offering their own feedback on tone, cadence, and feeling. In many cases, the participants were encouraged by each other to write in Arabic, some being more fluent than others, and thus reclaim their own language as part of their counternarrative. Others were happy to perform in the language they felt most comfortable, in Greek or English, and thus offer the plurality of the diasporic Palestinian experience. All participants collectively agreed to use the existing archival footage of *Tiberias 1935*, to mould it, *deform* it, and *transform* it, so as to "fit" within their own gaze. The final work includes seven voiceovers ranging from the humorous, to the serious, from the autobiographical to the purely imaginative and fictional, from the 1930s to today.

Bataille's philosophy became the framing through which the archival films were appropriated. The notion of the "accursed share" through the "wasted archives" and the notion of "the informe" through editing decisions of de-classifying meaning and de-aesthetisation of the image became central in how I decided to intervene through editing and creatively engage with the form of the archive. I approached the juxtaposition of a blurry versus clear image which signified the politics of visibility as well as notions of beauty. In French, Bataille's *l'informe* does not only refer to the form as a mode of creative production but it also etymologically connects to the French word *informe* which has a double meaning and is very much reflected in Bataille's use of the term. On the one hand it refers to something without a determined form as mentioned above, but on the other hand it refers to something imperfect, ugly, and flawed. Bataille's understanding of "the informe" emphasises both aspects as a notion served to declassify and dismantle concrete systems of classification and hierarchisation.

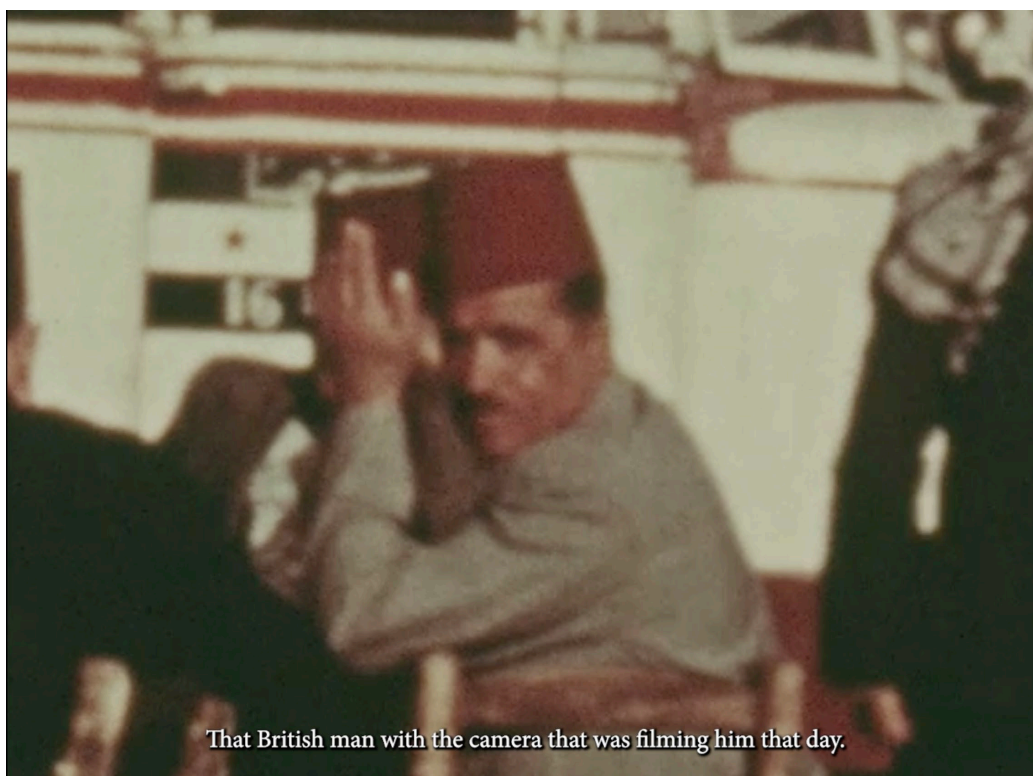


Figure 11: A love story between a Palestinian and a Syrian gets interrupted by the presence of the camera, A Land with a People: A Palestinian Counternarrative. Courtesy of Theo Panagopoulos.



Figure 12: Text of herbs in Arabic are superimposed on the image, A Land with a People: A Palestinian Counternarrative. Courtesy of Theo Panagopoulos.



Figure 13: A participant's emotional voiceover is reflected through footage moving in reverse, zoomed in and slowed down. *A Land with a People: A Palestinian Counternarrative*. Courtesy of Theo Panagopoulos.



Figure 14: A woman holding a box becomes the vessel for an autobiographical interpretation. *A Land with a People: A Palestinian Counternarrative*. Courtesy of Theo Panagopoulos.

Intervening with the use of pixelated close-ups attempts to “uglify” the image and *deform* it. However, the contradiction is held in the fact that the footage itself renders Arab Palestinians as disposed not only from the film’s narrative but also their own land. To bring them to the forefront through archival re-appropriation brings their beauty to the centre of the frame, thus subverting notions of what is considered beautiful and what ugly. The counternarrative *deforms* the Orientalist gaze by deciding to look in the background, where the people are barely visible and their relationships with the land erased. Expanding the frame not only becomes a symbolic representation of re-claiming the narrative but allows for details within the image itself to emerge, which subsequently shifts the perception of the frame itself.

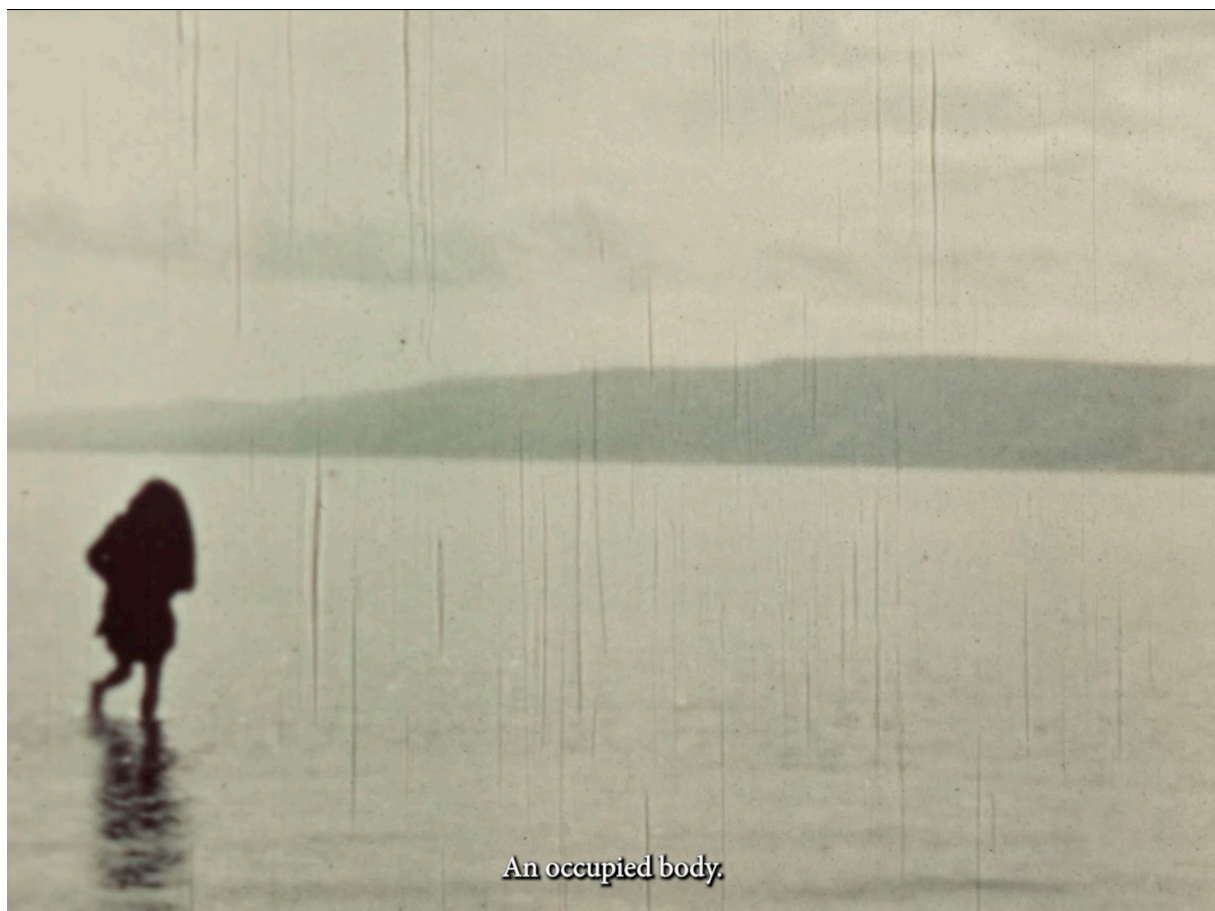


Figure 15: Voiceover-as-manifesto on dark Palestinian figures. A Land with a People: A Palestinian Counternarrative. Courtesy of Theo Panagopoulos.

Ancestral Gestures to an Absent Sound: A Palestinian Counternarrative

The final work created as part of the Glasgow-based workshop, *Ancestral Gestures to an Absent Sound: A Palestinian Counternarrative*, reflects a similar critical performance approach in co-creating the Palestinian counternarrative as a response to the colonial hegemony seen and felt in the film *Tiberias 1935*. In this case, performance was used not only through the use of voice but also through movement and gestural work. While in the *A Land with a People*, the recording process was structured through specific sound recordings and a collective agreement on form and style, here the process is fluid, engaging directly with the archival footage. Specific gestures from the archive were collectively selected and projected on a multi-site screen installation that surrounded the participants. By being immersed in the footage, the participants were able to embody their own gaze and spatially position and re-position themselves. Their bodies became the central way of connecting with the archive, and while moving around the space, they began to explore the possibilities of re-orienting the gaze and co-creating out of the “formless”.



Figure 16: Tiberias 1935 is projected moments before participatory performance begins, Glasgow, November 2024. Courtesy of Theo Panagopoulos.

In this case, performance is used to connect to Palestinian ancestors who are only to be traced in the archive. Palestinians in the present and the past are the same size, moving together as if to invoke atemporal moments of connection. Gestures are seen closely; they are repeated, slowed down, and repeated again. The participants initially mirrored the gestures seen in the projections around them but slowly started exploring the possibilities of unearthing absent gestural sounds. The absence of sound as a sign of life motivated the participants to engage with a form of foley work, a sound design technique that re-creates sound out of scratch. Thus, performance emerges as a form of archiving the lost soundscape, mirroring the notion of re-discovering the lost world of 1930s Palestine, but understanding that world through reconstructing what people in the archive might be hearing and feeling. By documenting the performance, the colonial archive transforms into a medium through which embodied performative exploration can emerge and the erased past can be witnessed. The film camera not only acts as an observer of the performance but also plays an active role in it.

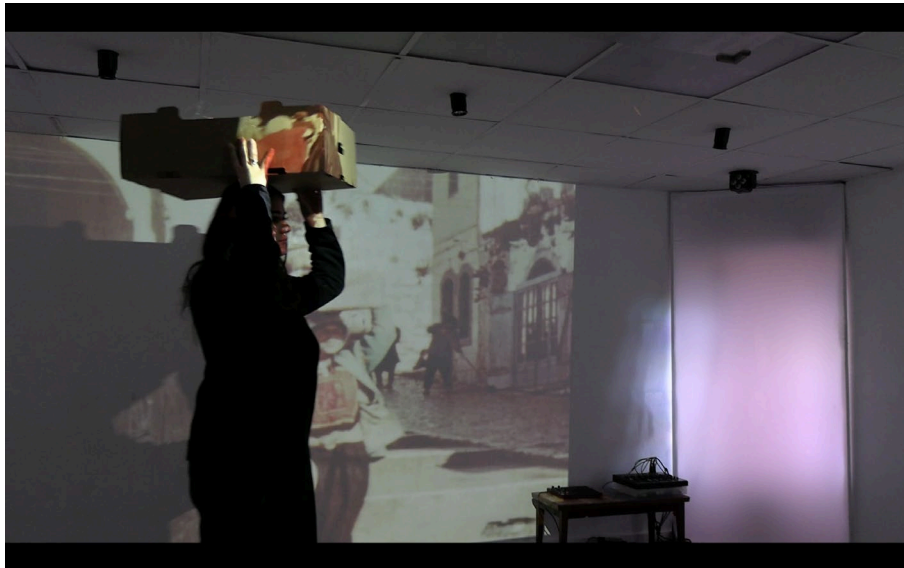


Figure 17: A workshop participant recreates the movement of a woman in the archive, *Ancestral Gestures to an Absent Sound: A Palestinian Counternarrative*. Courtesy of Theo Panagopoulos.



Figure 18: A workshop participant recreates a fisherman's gesture, *Ancestral Gestures to an Absent Sound: A Palestinian Counternarrative*. Courtesy of Theo Panagopoulos.

In this performative act, there are multiple modes of mimesis being engaged. Whereas Plato dismissed mimesis as mere “imitation” that fails to capture the original, in the *Poetics* Aristotle argued that mimesis offers a poetic re-interpretation that can lead to an emotional catharsis (Gray 1987, 467). Here, *deforming* is rooted in discrediting the missionary as an authoritative and objective observer of Palestinian life, revealing his disrupting role in capturing images of Palestinians. The participants’ acts of mimesis to the gestures of the Arab Palestinians in *Tiberias 1935* trouble notions of the authentic, the original, and the pure and become a powerful tool for the negotiation of Palestinian bodies through time; a temporal dance between past and present; between the indigenous and the diasporic; between the presence of the formed and the absence of the formless.



*Figure 19: Ancestral Gestures to an Absent Sound: A Palestinian Counternarrative as a two-channel film.
Courtesy of Theo Panagopoulos.*

Afterword

The participatory work conducted by both groups of participants reveals a larger form of narrative injustice that Palestinians face, not only from past representations but also in the present. Palestinian diasporic participants confronted the colonial gaze presented both in the archive as well as in current representations of Palestinian bodies in Western media. Performance became an avenue of expression that allowed participants to reshape colonial ideas of “othering” and “dehumanisation”, but also challenge Palestinian performativity that platforms an apolitical and decontextualised narrative of the Palestinian body as the suffering victim. Palestinian scholar Nadia Yaqub (2023) warns that the humanitarian narrative does not only depoliticise what it sees a Palestinian refugee “problem” but also commodifies it within an ideological framework where images of suffering circulate (13). Within this humanitarian “image-making economy”, Palestinians are forced to take the role of the decontextualised victim in order to have their narratives heard within such frameworks. Palestinian writer Mohammed El-Kurd (2025) claims that the “dehumanisation” of Palestinians throughout the decades have pushed them to narrate their existence as “perfectly” as possible. The Western gaze forces Palestinians to perform “perfect victims” and thus convince for their humanity and existence. Due to their “dehumanisation”, Palestinians are sought to speak for and represent the whole population, be verbally articulate and offer comprehensive political solutions. For El-Kurd, Palestinian narrative-making is synonymous with the “politics of appeal” which he defines as the:

practice that utilises a set of creative advocacy tactics designed to advance our cause, ceaselessly attempting to fulfil the aforementioned requirements [of the terrorist/victim dichotomy]. Once the criteria are conquered, magically, marvelously, the Palestinian can finally escape the circumscribed category of the terrorist and find refuge in the even narrower mode of victimhood. (22–23)

Thus, Palestinian diasporic participants went against the pressures of the Western colonial gaze that forces them to perform “only stories of victimhood and trauma in order to justify their presence in their countries of settlement” (Jefferies 2012, 42). Instead, through their bodies they express what is kept unspoken, unearth emotional worlds rejected, and resist their own erasure by engaging with their ancestral past and their diasporic present.

During the workshops, the genocide in Gaza becomes the central pillar through which the Palestinian diasporic participants engage with the world since 2023. It shapes their livelihoods in the West, not only through witnessing violence from a distance but also experiencing discrimination and “dehumanisation” through their experience as displaced bodies in the West. In this methodology, while I delved deeper in the context of Palestine through different temporalities, especially during the British Mandate (1917–1948) and the Nakba (1948), the genocide taking place in Gaza remained a cataclysmic event, affecting the participants in ways that sometimes remain unspoken during their observations, but always present and felt in their bodies.

During this moment of writing this article, the genocide continues despite attempts for ceasefire. According to Gazan journalist, Eman Abu Zayed (2026), the 2025 ceasefire “did was it was meant to

do, make Gaza invisible.” The Palestinian performances become a counternarrative against what is kept invisible, what is rendered “dehumanised” and what is kept “decontextualised”. It forces all of us to bear witness, not only to destruction and violence, but also to Palestinian love, community, resistance, and grief. The Palestinian participants reclaim their images and reconstruct the representations of their bodies. They *re-orient* the archive’s colonial gaze, *deform* its violent but beautiful aesthetics, and *transform* them in a powerful testimony that break the temporalities between past and present; between absence and presence; between sound and image; between their performing body and their powerful words; between what remains formed and what is kept formless.

Notes

¹ In December 2024, an Amnesty International investigation concluded that ‘Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza’ and demonstrated that ‘Israel has carried out acts prohibited under the Genocide Convention’ (Amnesty International 2024), a conclusion supported by Francesca Albanese, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967. In March 2024, Albanese published her findings that ‘the overwhelming nature and scale of Israel’s assault on Gaza and the destructive conditions of life it has inflicted reveal an intent to physically destroy Palestinians as a group’ (Albanese 2024). Similar conclusions have since been reached by the International Association of Genocide Scholars and the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory. While all the evidence is quite important in a world full of misinformation and so-called “fake news”, I first and foremost believe Palestinians on the ground who from day one have given vital testimonies of genocidal violence perpetrated against them just for being Palestinians.

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Biography

Theo Panagopoulos is a doctoral researcher in performance at the University of the West of Scotland of Greek, Lebanese, and Palestinian descent. His practice-as-research PhD engages with participatory performance as counternarrative to colonial film archives he unearthed at the National Library of Scotland that present rare footage of 1930s Palestine. He is also a working filmmaker in both documentary and fiction. His most recent film is an archive documentary essay called *The flowers stand silently, witnessing* which delves into the complicated more-than-human entanglements between people and flowers and has been awarded at prestigious festivals such as Sundance, International Documentary Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) and in early 2025 was nominated for an EE BAFTA award.

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

EMBODYING THE PARADOX: BUTOH-FU AS A NON-REPRESENTATIONAL SYSTEM OF EMBODIED TEMPORALITY

ELENI KOLLIPOULOU INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR AND ARTIST

Ankoku Butoh: exploring the unknown

Ankoku Butoh, or “dance of darkness,” emerged in Tokyo in late 1950s through the work of Tatsumi Hijikata in dialogue with Kazuo Ohno. Often framed as a response to both the codified traditions of Noh and Kabuki and the influx of Western modern dance, Butoh cannot be reduced to a reactionary postwar form. While shaped by the social and aesthetic tensions of its time—drawing on avant-garde currents such as surrealism—it has continued to evolve as an open-ended and heterogeneous practice.

In this context, Butoh resists stable definition. Rather than functioning as a fixed dance technique, it operates as a mode of inquiry into embodiment and experience, foregrounding the body as a site where imagination, memory, sensation, and environment converge. Central to this orientation is the dissolution of distinctions between art and life. As articulated in the archives of Kazuo Ohno and Yoshito Ohno—“Life is my dance teacher” and “My Butoh is a prayer” (Dance Archive Network 2020)—Butoh emerges as a practice in which lived experience and performance become inseparable.

This understanding positions Butoh not simply as a historical performance genre, but as an evolving epistemology of the body: one that seeks to engage the latent and often inarticulable dimensions of human experience. Within this framework, the present article approaches Butoh-fu not primarily as a notation system for choreographic reproduction, but as a non-representational practice that reconfigures embodied perception and temporality.

This research emerges through an ongoing dialogue between philosophical inquiry and practice-based experimentation. While grounded in performance practice, the present article focuses primarily on the philosophical and spatiotemporal dimensions of Butoh-fu as a system of embodied transformation and perceptual transition. The aim of this postdoctoral research is to advance understandings of temporality and performativity in hybrid performance practices through the lens of qualia as articulated in Butoh-fu. Here, the term *qualia* is adopted, as used by Subbody Butoh practitioner Lee Rhizome, to denote the qualitative dimensions of lived experience—what it feels like to undergo a particular sensory or mental state (Kolliopoulou 2025, 18).

Within this framework, Butoh-fu emerges not simply as a choreographic notation system, but as an articulation of paradoxical, image-based qualia-worlds capable of reorganising embodied perception and temporality. Developed by Tatsumi Hijikata through poetic language and visual collage, and preserved in his scrapbooks, Butoh-fu operates as a system of evocative prompts that mobilise embodied imagination. Rather than prescribing movement, it generates experiential states, enabling performers to navigate shifting temporalities and intensities of presence.

Butoh-fu is partially accessible through *Butoh Kaden*, an online archive developed by Yukio Waguri (2020), while original materials are preserved at the Hijikata Tatsumi Archive (TTA) at Keio University in Tokyo. Founded by Takashi Morishita, who worked closely with Hijikata, the archive constitutes a key site for the preservation and ongoing interpretation of Butoh-fu. Research conducted at the TTA in April 2023 enabled direct engagement with archival materials and Butoh-related literature. Practice-based exchanges with second-generation and contemporary practitioners, including Kayo Mikami, Natsu Nakajima, and the duo Yuri & Seisaku, shed further light to Butoh embodiment. The visit was facilitated by Kae Ishimoto, whose guidance situated this research within the broader Butoh ecology of Tokyo. These encounters underscore the extent to which Butoh-fu operates not only as an archival artefact but as a living, embodied practice transmitted through relational and pedagogical lineages.

Among the theoretical sources consulted, *The Body as a Vessel* (1986) by Kayo Mikami is particularly significant. Drawing on her experience while working with Hijikata, Mikami (1986) emphasises that Butoh exceeds the studio context: “life also contains the qualities of Butoh, and the dancer’s life becomes a site of training” (24). This understanding foregrounds lived experience as integral to the emergence of Butoh-fu, thinking of it here as a generative framework for embodied and temporal transformation. Therefore, this article argues that Butoh-fu operates less as a codified notation than as an embodied score for perceptual transformation.



*Fig.1: Kazuo Ohno and Tatsumi Hijikata performing together. © Tadao Nakatani.
Courtesy of Keio University Art Center and Butoh Laboratory, Japan.*

Butoh-fu: choreographing transition

Tatsumi Hijikata drew inspiration from modern painting, particularly the visceral and unsettling imagery of Francis Bacon, as well as from avant-garde French literature, including the writings of Jean Genet. Yet, beyond these artistic influences, Hijikata remained an acute observer of the natural world. He was captivated by the movement of animals, atmospheric and climatic phenomena, landscapes, but above all, by the gestures and behavioural textures of everyday human life. Through sustained observation, he sought to internalise such movements and reconfigure them within the studio through the bodies of his dancers.

Hijikata's choreographic practice approached nature not as a stable form to be imitated, but as a perpetually shifting process situated between life and death, emergence and decay. In this sense, Butoh does not reproduce natural patterns so much as it seeks to distort and destabilise them. Movement becomes an ongoing play of transition, contradiction, and metamorphosis. This orientation resonates with the Japanese concept of *aida* ("in-between-ness"). Rein Raud, Professor of Asian and Cultural Studies at Tallinn University, observes that *aida* describes a spatiotemporal logic in which transitions occur gradually across multiple thresholds and zones of indeterminacy (Raud 2004, 32). From this perspective, Butoh may be understood as an embodied practice of *aida*: a continual negotiation of liminal states in which fixed distinctions between human and non-human, life and death, stillness and movement remain unresolved.

The concept of *aida* becomes particularly significant in relation to the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō. This article suggests that Nishida's reflections on time, space, and embodied experience offer an important framework for approaching Butoh-fu. Often regarded as a bridge between Eastern and Western philosophical traditions, Nishida articulates a conception of reality grounded in dynamic relationality rather than stable subject-object divisions.

Mikami (1986) notes that Hijikata's early practice sought to interrogate "the body's essential truths through the denial of accepted views on the body or movement" (54). His methodology did not operate through fixed choreographic vocabularies, but through continual processes of transformation and destabilisation. As Mikami further observes, Hijikata was driven by an avant-garde impulse "to create and destroy in continuum" (69). This destabilising logic extended beyond aesthetics into perception itself. Rather than producing coherent representational images, Butoh often cultivates states of ambiguity, contradiction, and disorientation that unsettled habitual modes of spectatorship. Such strategies foreground transition, indeterminacy, and the coexistence of multiple states within the dancing body.

From this perspective, Butoh may be thought of less as a codified dance technique than as a psychophysical practice oriented toward states of "non-objectification," a term explored by Toshiharu Kasai (1999). For Kasai, the diminution of self-consciousness enables performers to shift attention away from externally controlled movement toward inner sensation and embodied presence. This process becomes central in understanding how Butoh-fu functions not as representational notation, but rather as a generative framework for altered states of perception and temporality.

At the same time, such altered states may also be understood as forms of ritualised attention. Rather than reproducing ritual in a traditional or symbolic sense, Butoh suspends habitual temporal structures and invites intensified modes of presence. In this regard, Byung-Chul Han's (2020) reflections on 'the disappearance of rituals' become relevant not as a direct framework for interpreting Butoh historically, but as a means of understanding how practices of durational attention and embodied repetition might resist and reappear in the accelerated temporality of contemporary life.

The seven worlds of Butoh-fu through the lens of Nishida's tripartite worldview

Let us now turn to Tatsumi Hijikata's methodology through the testimonies collected in Yukio Waguri's "Private Butoh Notation" (Morishita 2018). Hijikata's Butoh-fu functioned as a means of accessing specific psychological, emotional, physiological, and nervous states from which movement could emerge. Rather than prescribing a choreographic form, Butoh-fu activated embodied conditions capable of generating movement from within sensation and perception.

Takaaki Yoshimoto suggests that "Hijikata's Butoh didn't begin from form but treated the body as the letter with which he could write metaphors" (quoted in Morishita 2018). In this sense, the dancing body becomes not a vehicle for representation, but a site through which metaphor is

physically enacted and transformed into lived experience. Similarly, Takashi Morishita (2018) argues that “Butoh notation can be extended or universalised beyond the bounds of Butoh. It offers a language that has the potential to be relevant outside of periodisation, location, or culture.” Butoh-fu thus opens a field of imagistic and sensory associations rooted in lived experience while simultaneously resisting fixed interpretation. The present study focuses on the structural and dramaturgical principles through which these imagistic constellations generate embodied and temporal transformation.

Butoh-fu is structured through seven distinct “worlds.” each associated with particular states of transformation, materiality, and becoming (fig. 2). Drawing on the classifications documented by Yukio Waguri in *Butoh Kaden*, these worlds function less as fixed symbolic categories than as dynamic spatiotemporal fields through which the performer navigates shifting modes of embodiment.

Butoh-fu Worlds	Forms	Qualities
World of Abyss	Decomposed	Dissolving, Nothingness
World of the Neurology Ward	Decomposed	Multiplying and extending
World of Flowers	Decomposed	Spreading, particles
World of Birds and Beasts	Fixed	Varying development
World of Wall	Fixed	Condensation, textures
World of Anatomy	Irregular	Shapeless, magmatic
World of Burnt Bridges	Irregular	Human form emerging

Fig. 2 Waguri's Seven Worlds of Butoh-fu.

Taken together, the seven worlds suggest a dramaturgy of transformation structured through successive states of dissolution, mutation, condensation, and emergence. Rather than depicting stable identities or forms, they articulate transitional processes through which matter, sensation, and embodiment continuously reorganise themselves. In this sense, each world may be understood as composed of multiple states of *aida*: zones of passage, indeterminacy, and becoming.

The sequential arrangement of the worlds evokes a movement from amorphous and decomposed states toward increasingly differentiated forms of embodiment. This trajectory can be read as a conceptual inversion of the “arrow of time” described by physicist Arthur Eddington in 1927, in which entropy signals the irreversible movement from order toward disorder. By contrast, the progression of Butoh-fu stages an experiential movement from fragmentation and formlessness toward the emergence of form and presence. What is at stake here is not a scientific model of temporality, but a dramaturgical reorientation of time as embodied transformation.

According to Michael Lazarin (2007), “if the present of one moment is different from the present of another moment, then this would seem to argue that the present is not a substance” but rather a shifting quality or attribute (3). He further distinguishes between two understandings of motion: as the “filling-in” between fixed points or as a “stretching-out” from one point toward another. This distinction is significant in relation to Butoh, where movement often resists linear progression and instead unfolds through durational transitions and states of becoming.

If transitions are understood as embodiments of temporal passage, then Butoh offers a particularly fertile framework for investigating temporality through lived experience rather than abstract measurement. In this context, motion may be approached as a form of *aida*: a relational interval that simultaneously connects and separates states, bodies, and moments in time. Lazarin ultimately observes that “time is easy to know but difficult to explain” (13). This paradox becomes especially resonant in Butoh practice, where temporality is not merely represented but sensorially enacted. Such an understanding opens the possibility of approaching time not as a singular linear progression, but as a multidirectional and relational process. This perspective will be further explored through Nishida’s concept of *basho*.

According to Rein Raud (2004, 34), Nishida conceptualises reality not as a singular homogeneous field but as an assemblage of overlapping “worlds” structured through different modes of experience. Within this framework, Nishida distinguishes between spatial and temporal perception. Spatial perception is associated with measurable extension and objective relations between things, whereas temporal experience unfolds through the irreversible succession of lived experience.

For Nishida, however, these dimensions do not remain separate. Their convergence becomes possible through *basho* (“place” or “field”), a mode of relational experience associated with *acting intuition* and developed through Zen-inflected modes of awareness (Kolliopoulou 2020, 22). In *basho*, distinctions between subject and object cease to operate as fixed oppositions. Experience emerges instead through relational co-presence, where self, environment, and world continuously constitute one another.

This understanding of *acting intuition* is particularly significant in relation to Butoh-fu. Rather than organising movement through external form, Butoh-fu generates embodied states in which performers enter dynamic relations with images, sensations, environments, and temporal intensities. The dancing body no longer functions as an isolated subject expressing pre-existing

meaning, but as a site of continual relational transformation. Nishida articulates this relational ontology through the notion of “contradictory self-identity”:

Self-realization occurs only when our self transcends itself and faces the Other. At the moment of self-realization, our self has already transcended itself. Therefore, I always say: become things and you think, become things and you happen. I and things are relative to each other in contradictory self-identity. (Nishida 1979, 381; quoted in Raud 2004, 45)

Here, the “Other” does not refer solely to another human subject, but to the broader field of relational existence encompassing environment, matter, atmosphere, and non-human entities. Such a perspective resonates strongly with Butoh-fu, where performers are frequently invited to embody states of metamorphosis, becoming animal, landscape, object, memory, or atmospheric condition. In this sense, Butoh-fu may be understood as a performative practice of *basho*: a relational field in which embodiment unfolds through processes of transition, interpenetration and becoming.

Nishida frequently employs the notion of paradox to describe reality as relational, contradictory, and multi-layered. For Nishida, different modes of existence correspond to different modes of temporality and consciousness:

I think that in the material world, time is reversible. When we come to the life-world, time becomes irreversible. This is because life is singular, and the dead do not return to life.... Acting entities create forms. This world is the world of purposes. [...] in this world [of Basho] action proceeds from the created to the creator, in balance between the inside and the outside. (Nishida 1979, 375; quoted in Raud 2004, 35)

As Raud (2004, 46) explains, Nishida’s account may be understood through three interrelated modes of reality and consciousness. The first concerns the material world of objects and processes, governed by cyclical and reversible transformations. The second refers to the life-world of intentional beings acting toward purposes and survival. The third, associated with historical consciousness and *basho*, involves reflexive and creative self-awareness, through which human beings shape and are shaped by the world relationally.

These three dimensions should not be understood as strictly separate ontological categories, but as overlapping modes of experience and temporality that continuously interpenetrate one another. Such a framework becomes particularly productive when approaching the seven worlds of Butoh-fu. Rather than interpreting Butoh-fu as a fixed symbolic system, I propose reading its seven worlds through Nishida’s relational ontology of time-space. The worlds of Butoh-fu may then be understood as spatiotemporal fields in which different modes of embodiment, perception, and becoming emerge and overlap. Processes of dissolution, animality, material condensation, fragmentation, and human formation do not unfold linearly, but coexist through shifting intensities and transitional states.

From this perspective, Butoh-fu operates as a multi-layered map of embodied temporality. It allows performers to navigate between human and non-human modes of perception, between material and historical time, and between states of formation and disintegration. The significance of Butoh-fu therefore lies not in the representation of movement itself, but in its capacity to generate relational experiences of time-space through embodied transformation.

Time-space in performer's embodiment

The present research emerged through practice-based experimentation with Butoh-fu in mixed-media performance contexts. Earlier publications have addressed the practical dimensions of this research, including performer training methodologies and dramaturgical applications (Kolliopoulou 2023; Kolliopoulou 2026). The focus of the present article, however, remains on the philosophical implications of Butoh-fu as a non-representational system of embodied temporality.

This section brings Butoh-fu into dialogue with contemporary performance theory in order to situate embodiment as a temporal and perceptual practice rather than merely a choreographic one. In this context, André Lepecki argues that dance operates through continual processes of bodily reinvention grounded in memory and lived experience:

Only by daily reinventing for oneself a body-for-living—a reinvention that is about activating memory (cellular memory, affective memory, muscular memory) for the present and not about repeating information for the already archived future—can the dancer create for him- or herself other modes of dancing and thus foster other modes of understanding dance perceptively and theoretically. Such reinventions impact not only the choreographic but also the ontological. (Lepecki 2007, 122)

Lepecki's understanding of embodiment resonates strongly with Butoh-fu's non-representational logic. Rather than reproducing codified movement vocabularies, Butoh-fu mobilises memory, sensation, and imagination as processes through which bodily perception is continuously reorganised. Movement emerges not through the execution of predetermined forms, but through the activation of experiential states unfolding across multiple temporalities.

From this perspective, Butoh may be understood as a practice of temporal embodiment in which memories, sensations, and affective traces are transformed into movement. Such processes destabilise habitual perceptions of the body as a fixed entity and instead foreground embodiment as relational, processual, and continually becoming. The dancing body does not simply move through time; it becomes a site through which time is sensorially enacted and reconfigured. This understanding also clarifies why Butoh often cultivates slowness, suspension, and durational intensity. These qualities interrupt normative temporal rhythms and invite altered modes of attention and presence. In this sense, Butoh's temporal logic may also be understood as ritualised: not through the reproduction of symbolic ritual forms, but also through the cultivation of embodied attentiveness capable to resist accelerated and instrumentalised experiences of time.

Rebecca Schneider (2014) observes that “theater, like history, is an art of time. [...] Time is the stuffing of the stage—it’s what actors, directors, and designers manipulate together” (7). Performing arts therefore constitute a fertile site for investigating temporality not simply as representation, but as lived and embodied experience. Within this context, Anne Bogart distinguishes between “horizontal” and “vertical” time:

When busy, when trying to get from where I am to where I want to be, I am generally living in horizontal time. Horizontal time is linear and has a part that is remembered and a future that is imagined. [...] Vertical time, in contrast, may contain horizontal time but it also intersects and disrupts the experience of linear time. [...] In vertical time, nowness is real and non-divisible. (Bogart 2019, 4)

Bogart’s notion of vertical time resonates strongly with Butoh’s durational and non-linear temporalities. Butoh frequently suspends narrative progression and conventional rhythm in favour of intensified states of presence, slowness, and perceptual expansion. In this sense, the performer does not merely execute movement in time but inhabits time as an embodied and continuously unfolding field of sensation. Schneider further suggests that performance practices actively sculpt the audience’s experience of time through the embodied presence of performers. Such an understanding aligns with Butoh-fu’s capacity to generate altered temporal states grounded in attention, sensation, and transitional embodiment. The performer’s engagement with embodied temporality may therefore invite spectators into an intensified awareness of duration, suspension, and relational presence.

As Bogart (2019) notes, art “creates the experience of vertical time for the perceiver by plunging a stake or by dropping an anchor into the endless flow of time, thereby creating a sense of eternity in the human body” (3). This formulation becomes particularly relevant to Butoh-fu, where image, sensation, and psychophysical transformation operate as means of interrupting habitual temporal perception and cultivating embodied states of temporal depth.

Time-space in Butoh: *Nikutai*

Masaki Iwana (2011), dancer, filmmaker, and choreographer, describes Butoh as “a dance that is connected to our original experience and inner landscape (*nikutai*) as a state that is dormant within our bodies” (27). His reflections on Butoh emphasise the relation between embodiment, memory, and temporality, proposing that performance emerges not through the execution of external form but through the activation of latent experiential states.

In his writings and visual diagram on time-space perception (fig. 3), Iwana contrasts dominant temporal structures in Western theatrical and dance practices (often related to traditional forms) with the durational and internally generated temporality cultivated in Butoh. Rather than prioritising externally organised movement or compositional precision, Butoh training seeks to cultivate heightened states of embodied attention through which performers engage shifting relations between sensation, environment, memory, and presence.

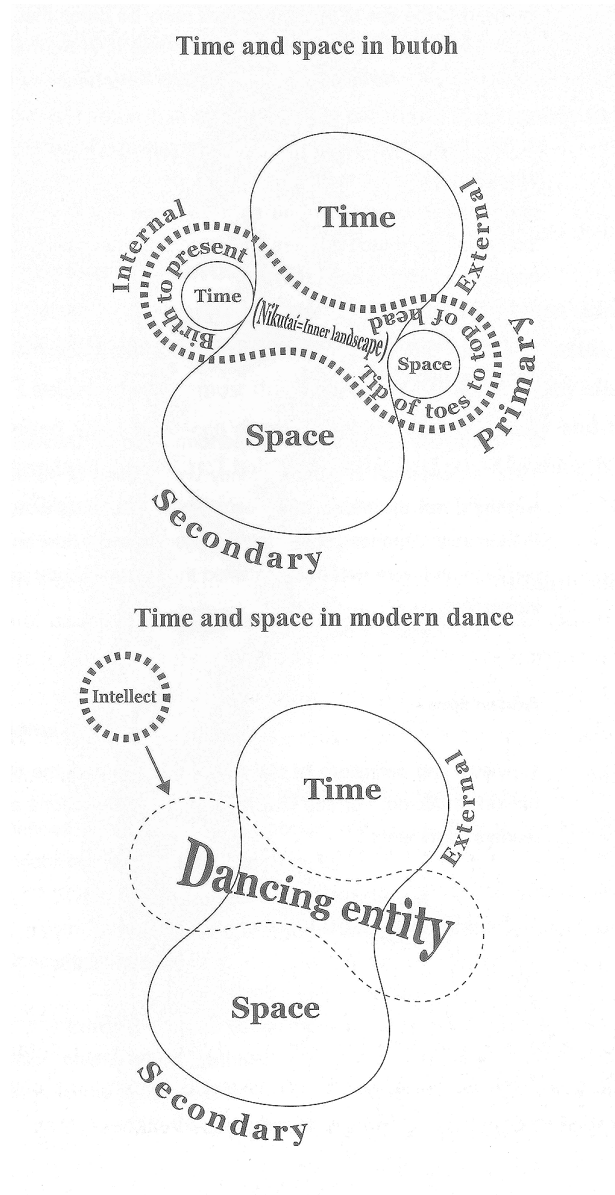


Fig 3: A visual comparative map of time embodiment in Butoh and in modern dance (Iwana 2011, 20).

From this perspective, the performer's body functions not merely as a vehicle for movement but as a dynamic field of temporal and perceptual transformation. Iwana suggests that performers carry within themselves an "inner landscape" capable of affecting the surrounding time-space of performance. Such a conception resonates with Nishida's relational perception of *basho*, in which self and environment continuously constitute one another through embodied interaction. Importantly, this perception does not imply a rejection of compositional structure or choreographic intentionality. Rather, it is pointing toward a different mode of embodiment in which movement emerges through sustained psychophysical attention and relational presence instead of solely through externally imposed form. In this sense, Butoh-fu may be understood as facilitating access to transitional states in which inner and outer temporalities become increasingly entangled.

The present research explores how Butoh-informed training practices grounded in such time-space principles might affect not only performers' embodied experience, but also spectators' perception of duration, attention, and presence within mixed-media performance contexts. Masaki Iwana's practice spans on choreography and film. His work therefore extends Butoh aesthetics across multiple media, thereby articulating embodiment not only as stage-based performance but also as a cinematic exploration of duration, perception, and inner landscape.

Iwana offers a definition of the Butoh body (*nikutai*) as a living entity that may further clarify its distinction from the codified dancing body in modern dance:

1. It contains both physiological and emotional dimensions while retaining an individual character.
2. It functions as a repository of nature.
3. It contains the entirety of lived time from birth.
4. It encapsulates all dimensions of the soul, including intuition and spirituality. (Iwana 2011, 8)

Rather than understanding these statements as essentialist definitions, they may be read as articulations of embodiment in a temporally stratified field. Thus, the body in Butoh is not limited to present movement, but is constituted through accumulated layers of lived time, affect, and perceptual memory.

In this sense, Butoh can be understood as a practice that activates embodied temporality—where movement emerges through the integration of physiological, emotional, and experiential strata rather than through the execution of external form. This resonates with Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's formulation of "thinking in movement," where:

Thinking in movement is obviously a bodily phenomenon. The body inhabits movement in the literal sense of living in it.... (Sheets-Johnstone 1981, 402)

From this perspective, movement is not an expression of pre-formed thought, but a mode of embodied cognition through which the body continuously articulates its relation to the world, memory, and environment. In Butoh practice, this relational field extends to spatial conditions, site-specific contexts, and the presence of other bodies, producing a distributed and intersubjective field of perception. Within this framework, Butoh-fu may be understood as a device that intensifies such embodied cognition by generating image-based conditions for perceptual and temporal transformation, rather than prescribing fixed choreographic outcomes.

Sondra Fraleigh describes Butoh as a "metamorphic dance," in which:

the dancer and the audience transform through the experience of the event... these experiences are presented as 'metamorphic explorations' because they pass from one state to another in transformational modes characteristic of Butoh. (Fraleigh and Nakamura 2006, 101)

Importantly, this transformative dimension should not be understood as symbolic ritual transformation in a fixed cultural sense, but as a processual reorganisation of embodied temporality—where perception, sensation, and presence are continuously reconfigured.

Fraleigh describes Butoh as a “metamorphic dance” on the basis of two interrelated dimensions. First, Butoh is grounded in the performer’s somatic experience, which functions as the primary material through which movement emerges rather than being externally imposed. This somatic grounding reconfigures spectatorship, fostering a mode of attention that is less representational than affective and psychophysical. Second, the very object of Butoh may be understood as transformation itself. In this sense, Butoh-fu does not prescribe fixed choreographic forms, but rather generates sequences of shifting states of presence. Movement emerges through processes of becoming, in which transitions and thresholds (*aida*) are not secondary moments but integral components of performance composition. Dancers are therefore trained not only to embody states, but also to inhabit the transitions between them, foregrounding temporality as continuous modulation rather than linear progression.

This intertwining of embodiment and temporality resonates with Lepecki’s account of dance as a critical intervention in time. Lepecki argues:

This challenge might be said to constitute dance’s unique relation to temporality and to the manifestation of the body and of presence as interventions in temporality. This body, visceral matter as well as sociopolitical agent, discontinuous with itself, moving in the folds of time, dissident of time, manifests its agency through the many ways it eventually smuggles its materiality into a charged presence that defies subjection. (Lepecki 2004, 6)

In this formulation, the dancing body is not understood as a stable entity moving through time, but as a discontinuous and relational field of temporal emergence. Butoh-fu can be situated within this logic as a practice that intensifies such temporal dislocation by structuring embodiment through image-based, non-representational transitions. Within this framework, the transformation of perception and bodily awareness that may occur in Butoh practice can be understood not as transcendence or emancipation in a teleological sense. Instead, it could be seen as a reconfiguration of embodied temporality through altered relations between attention, sensation, and movement. While such processes have sometimes been associated with ritual structures, here they are approached primarily as temporal and perceptual modulations rather than as culturally fixed ritual forms.

Rituals that reappear

Anthropological discussions of liminality offer a productive framework for approaching the temporal and perceptual operations of Butoh-fu. For Victor Turner (1974), liminality designates a threshold condition in which normative social structures and fixed identities become temporarily suspended, allowing subjects to enter states of transformation and indeterminacy. Such anti-structural conditions are characterised by ambiguity, instability, and altered relations to time and

embodiment. Approached through this lens, Butoh-fu may be understood not merely as a choreographic system, but as a perceptual technology that guides performers into transitional states where habitual distinctions between self and environment, interior and exterior, representation and sensation become destabilised.

Why should rituals matter in contemporary performance practices? According to Byung-Chul Han, rituals function as stabilising symbolic structures that organise communal life and provide forms of orientation within the accelerated temporality of contemporary society. Far from being reducible to repetition or convention, rituals generate temporal thresholds that interrupt the continuous flow of productivity and consumption. As Han (2020) argues, rituals as well as art operate through forms, gestures, and symbolic actions rather than discursive meaning: “art is not a discourse. It produces its effects through forms and signifiers, and not through the signified” (25). This understanding becomes particularly resonant in relation to Butoh, which adopts a non-representational and image-based logic, thus emphatically privileging embodied sensation over fixed interpretation.

The connection between ritual and Butoh may be approached through the notion of paradoxical self-transcendence. Han suggests that ritual practices produce a temporary distancing from the self, enabling forms of transformation that exceed ordinary modes of subjectivity. A comparable process can be identified in Toshiharu Kasai’s (1999; 2000) notion of “non-objectification” referenced earlier in this article: a psychophysical state cultivated within Butoh practice in which dancers suspend excessive self-consciousness and relinquish the impulse to control movement externally. Rather than focusing on the body as an object to be represented or mastered, performers enter an intensified state of embodied attention shaped by sensation, memory, and affective responsiveness. In this respect, Butoh-fu operates not as a representational score but as a perceptual framework that facilitates altered relations between self, body, and environment.

From this perspective, it is here argued that Butoh may be understood as generating a liminal and anti-structural time-space. In this context, fixed distinctions between subject and object, interior and exterior, become temporarily destabilised. While rituals traditionally function at the level of collective symbolic order, Butoh redirects this transformational dynamic toward embodied perception itself. It is precisely through this destabilisation that Butoh-fu enables shifts in temporal awareness and modes of presence that resist the accelerated linearity of contemporary life. Therefore, rather than restoring ritual in a traditional sense, Butoh reconfigures performers’ and spectators’ attention as an embodied practice of perceptual transition.

A further point of convergence between Butoh and ritual lies in their shared engagement with transition. As discussed earlier, Butoh may be understood as a choreography of becoming structured through continuous states of passage and transformation. Similarly, Han argues that:

Rituals give form to the essential transitions of life [...] Thresholds, as transitions, give a rhythm to, articulate, and even narrate space and time. Thresholds are temporally intense transitions. [...] Thresholds *transform*. (Han 2020, 35)

Ritual thresholds interrupt ordinary temporality, producing intensified states of attention and perceptual reorientation. This understanding resonates strongly with Butoh-fu, whose imagistic structures guide performers through unstable and often contradictory states of embodiment.

Within Butoh, themes of emergence, decay, grief, and transformation frequently situate the body within an ambiguous zone between life and death, presence and disappearance. Such states are not staged as fixed representations but enacted as transitional processes unfolding through the performer's embodied temporality. In this sense, Butoh does not reproduce ritual forms directly; rather, it reactivates ritual-like modes of attention through anti-structural and liminal experiences of perception. The body becomes a threshold site through which contradictory temporalities coexist and continuously transform one another.

This perspective also reframes Butoh-fu as more than a choreographic device. Its paradoxical image-worlds function as embodied scores that destabilise habitual perception and open relational states between self and environment, interiority and exteriority, human and non-human presence. Such processes resonate with Nishida's concept of *basho*, understood as a relational field in which subject and world emerge through mutual co-constitution rather than separation. From this perspective, Butoh-fu operates as a perceptual and temporal practice through which performers—and potentially spectators—experience embodiment as a continuously shifting field of transition and relational becoming.

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Biography

Eleni Kolliopoulou (Athens) is a mixed-media visual/performance artist and researcher particularly interested in the intersection between performance and philosophy. She studied at the University Kapodistriaka of Athens in the Department of Methodology, History, and Theory of Science (1998–2003, BA). She moved to Italy in September 2007 to attend the Philip Radice School of Physical Theater. Between 2008 and 2013 she accomplished her BA and MA degree by the Academy of Fine Arts of Turin. She was in Germany (Hochschule Burg Giebichstein Halle an der Saale) as an Erasmus student for the academic year 2011–2012. Eleni was awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy for her practice-based PhD research at Ulster University (Northern Ireland, UK) in March 2020. Her research concerned the use of Butoh body notion in immersive performative installations. Eleni pursued an HFRI funded post-doctoral research project hosted by Ionian University, Department of Audio-visual Arts, 2022–2024 (GR). She has been an adjunct lecturer at University of the Peloponnese, Department of Performing and Digital Arts during 2021–2022, 2024–2025 and 2025–2026.

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

WEATHERLANDS FOR SKY & BONES

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Introduction

The stale breaths of colonial forbearers have left their stench.

This two-breathed poetic-essay emerges from the convergence of Indigenous and settler practices of knowing, feeling, and moving. Written from Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Naarm (Melbourne), *Weatherlands for Sky & Bones* draws from a cross-cultural, transdisciplinary collaboration in performance philosophy. As an experimental mode for thinking through performance, we explore a praxis of *weatherlands*. Writing as choreographers, educators, and custodians of embodied practice, Carol, of Pākehā (settler) heritage in diaspora, and Tia, of Ngāti Hine and Māori descent, we think together through the poetics of air, atmosphere, and ancestral presence specific to this part of the world.

Weather leaves its mark on landforms, plants, trees, animals, and people. We can feel it, and we are touched by it. A strong westerly wind may go deep into the bone. The sky reveals its shifting character. As the Crowded House song goes, we experience “four seasons in one day” (1991). Alexandra Harris (2015) describes ‘weatherland’ central to the cultural of history of Britain. The

isles' relationship to weather is at a turning point in history. We look at the sky for the coming storm. We need to attune to the heterogeneity of weather-cultures. In appropriating this term within the context of Aotearoa and Naarm, we acknowledge our entangled relations with weather systems from the Southern Hemisphere, where winds move in a different direction, there is more ocean than land mass, and seasons are in opposition to those of the North.

Our ongoing practice research and partnership attends to our mutual interest in dance as an artistic resource for navigating the present and contributing to a future that is liveable. Written in two parts, an introduction to the concept of weatherlands, its antecedents, informants, and animacies, is followed by a second section where our voices alternate as a polyrhythmic text. This second part of our writing is an adaptation from a performance lecture presented at the Inventing the Human Conference, University of Melbourne (2023), a conference that explored the concept of the human within Enlightenment and Romantic thought. Based upon a score developed through online workshops, we alternate roles as speaker and mover. Traces of our movements are held in the bones of the second part of this writing. Moving in the wake of a humanism predicated on a universal notion of subjectivity, we search for a more expansive notion of humanity—a wild dialect—at the interstices and in the intervals between breaths, animacies, ancestors, and atmospheres.

Practising relays of attention—between voices, languages, weathers, and bodies—we invite reading these performance remains as *weatherlands*. Initiated through our mutual desire to dance out of the question of what it means to be human in a time of climate breakdown, whilst acknowledging cultural loss, we catalyse the possibility, after Goat Island (2013), of performance as repair within a context of decentering colonialism and the shoots of reconciliation. This creative labour follows the arrow of breath as *aro*ha. *Aro*ha is a Māori concept often translated as “love”, but it encompasses a deeper ethic of care, compassion, empathy, and respect grounded in relational responsibilities. It derives from *aro* (to turn toward, to focus) and *hā* (breath, vital essence), signifying an attentiveness to the life force of others.

Kāi Tahu scholar Phillip McKibbin (2019) calls for a ‘politics of love’, grounded in an ethics of care in upholding the values of *aro*ha in community. In recognising the interdependencies between animacies of air, earth, water, plants, animals, and each other, our dance follows circular pathways, spiralling into rounded shapes and unfurling gestural patterns that reach beyond ourselves.

Reorienting towards weatherlands for sky and bones, we attend to the weather as a dance partner. Tasting and testing the air, what is ancestral and sacred confronts knowledge accrued through years of teaching, training, and performing embodied ways of knowing for studio and stage. We bear the marks of the grounds we have danced barefoot upon in our musculature patterns, our fascia, and the pliability of feet weathered from dancing on sand, earth, wood and, marley. We carry a sense of space around our bodies conceived through patterns acquired in the many dance classes, *toi rongoā*, and other embodied landscapes we have participated in.¹ And yet, the stale air of the bare volume dance studio also prescribes a certain limit in our capacity to feel the presence of breath of life, *hau*, *hauora*, and the winds that blow through us.²

The weather that dances us is influenced by Antarctic storm patterns, cool ocean temperatures, currents, and the shape of the *maunga* (mountains) that sculpt the wind. The prevailing wind in Aotearoa comes from the West (Mullan et al. 2009). Exposed to prevailing winds and storms on the East Coast of the North Island, parts of Tāmaki Makarau (Auckland), including Karekare,³ are still recovering from Cyclone Gabrielle in February 2023. In Naarm (Melbourne), freak storms, heat waves, and sudden drops in temperature of more than 20 degrees Celsius are familiar territory within a city that is re-embracing the Kulin Nations calendar of seven seasons. The shapes of the weather we are in inform the *arā* (path) of our choreography. We move-with these currents (of air and ideas), not as their originators, or inventors, but as their inheritors. In countering the stale breaths of our ancestors, we dwell in the body within the body. Our movements belong to a choreography older than us, an ancestral composition inscribed in winds, tides, and the sweep of constellations. We practice being breathed.

Inbreath

To live is to be weathered.

(Harris 2015, 114)

The concept of weatherlands arrives in and through our performance-making. It names a relational terrain in which body, breath, humidity, atmosphere, story, and environment are inseparable. This understanding is informed by our collaborative project *LungSong: The Living Archive of Breath* (Brown and Reihana-Morunga 2020), which explores *hau* (breath, wind, vital essence) as both medium and archive. Through performance, audio-walk, and film, *LungSong* draws attention to breath as a living connector across time, body and place, situating atmosphere and embodiment as critical sites of memory and relation. The publication that emerged from this work, "*Hau: Living Archive of Breath*" (Brown and Reihana-Morunga 2020), extends these ideas into theoretical terrain, showing how Indigenous knowledge of *hau* and performance practice can reframe what constitutes an archive, not as a static repository, but a breathing, relational continuum.

particles of breath felt through the viscosity of the air cycling between us

an invisible gossamer thread in the arrow of breath

extruding, connecting

weaving a breath-score duet

we hold lightly the places that are of these spaces

moving in the breaths between beats

hot breaths beneath solar winds

cutting shapes in the air

breath bound and windswept

(Studio Journal Notes 23rd July 2023)

In this sense, our choreographic research prepares the ground for what Tru Paraha (2020) describes as the “choreopoetics of Te Pō,” which bind human and more-than-human bodies in distinct and critical genealogies of movement. We move at the intersection of movement and language, where dance becomes a form of writing and poetry takes shape through the body.

In the cosmological understandings of te ao Māori, Te Pō refers to the generative darkness, the realm of potential and becoming, the space from which all life emerges (Paraha 2020). It is a fertile darkness, both source and collaborator, allowing gesture, breath, and rhythm to carry ancestral memory into the present. Here, the body does not merely illustrate cosmology; it becomes an instrument for transmitting it, shaping a dialogue between the seen and unseen. Within the cosmological translations that are reconciled through our physical bodies of water, we can feel the real time of the climate crisis, where extraction and acceleration events threaten to sever these relations. Te Pō offers an alternative tempo: a reminder that the world renews itself through cycles of rest, gestation, and transformation. Here, we write in response to our—real-time—exploration of gesture, breath, and rhythm as acts of resistance to the logics of depletion, carrying ancestral memory into present urgencies. Through this lens, the body becomes a sensor for environmental change, registering the heat, the shifting winds, and the altered seasons moving in ways that reweave kinship between human, more-than-human, and elemental worlds.

Movement becomes a method of listening to more-than-human relations, of tracing ancestral rhythms through body and sky. Hear our sounds as we scream, ‘We are the Weather’. Rather than treating the weather as a backdrop, we recognise it as an agent, teacher, and curator of experience entwined with the breathing, relational continuum of body, story, and environment. Drawing from Indigenous philosophies and decolonial thought, this work resists the logic of *aer nullius*, the colonial notion of air and climate as empty, ownerless space. Métis scholar Zoe Todd (2016) speaks of *aer nullius*, or the emptying or blanking of air, in her critique of post-humanist and new materialist writing that ignores the deeply embedded ways that Indigenous cultures understand weather and sky. For air is already storied, in Aotearoa as *hau* (breath, vital essence), as *taiao* (the interconnected natural world), and as a carrier of memory and relation. In refusing the wastelands of the colonial project, we create weatherlands, environments animated by spiritual, cultural, and cosmological presence.

In the work that we do, creative practice is a site of inquiry shaped through choreographic method and embodied research. Across these terrains, provocations arise through movement prompts, leading into dialogue, written and kinaesthetic, speculative and unexpected, yet always generative:

measure the state of the air around you

spin on an axis

stir

reorient

loosen the atmosphere

taste the air

take its temperature



*Figure 1: Jasmin Canuel, Maryam Bagheri Nesami, and Tia Reihana-Morunga in LungSong. Waitakeres.
Photograph: Carol Brown.*

The moving knowledges we re-imagine are carried through sustained relations; histories circulate through and with us. Our footsteps inscribe the ground, leaving traces of habitation and occupation. Enacting movement and voice at converging sites, physical and virtual, shaped by historical forces, we articulate from within two worlds, Māori and Pākehā.

And yet, we are travelling. Through virtual resources, the incorporeality of long-distance touch, mediated by fibre optic cables, screens, and data flows, we reach toward one another. We are on air and creatures *of* air, our bodies saturated with its substance, though we often remain unaware of the density of breath-atmospheres. An ocean of air presses on everything, and at its base, the atmosphere, is where our practice unfolds, as performance, as research, as lived philosophy.

What has been tactile now remains memory untelling. We (re)imagine our key resources and *whakaaro* to places between and within us.⁴ Remembering the seven breaths of Papatūānuku and that the *hau* cannot be separated or dissected from the whole.⁵ Our moving and breathing bodies return to witness the winds of conception and destruction, relating to the first breath of life. The interplay of the seven cycles that have guided us here and beyond.

We have learnt to move ‘like the wind’, ‘in the rain’ around, beneath and below each other with and without touching. Such kinesthetic milieu are our weatherlands, both corporeal and incorporeal.

We conceive these milieux—voices and movements, histories and cosmologies, actions, and atmospheres—dancing in overlapping dimensions as cultural memory work. Between Naarm (Australia) and the Waitākeres (Aotearoa), *un-settler-ing* (Wanhalla et al. 2023) on contested and sovereign lands, we navigate a choreopoetics where historical contradictions are the seeds of a sustainable present and hoped-for future.⁶

As dance artists, narratives reveal themselves through moving and embodying histories that are participatory, investigative, and open to interpretation (Bowman 2006). Bodystories are always more than one. Moving, breathing as praxis provides a way to connect story as more than human, responsive, and respectful (Cortazzi 1993). In our practice, we invite sensing the shifting scales of breath, between corporeal and cosmological dimensions and humidities. Donald Blumenfeld-Jones (1995) discusses the relationship between the story and author, drawing parallels to an artist who “takes a situation and reconstructs it to convey something about it” (26). In the time of geostories, we pay attention to the agency of the terrestrial and the aerial in relation. Our choreopoetics refuse to settle.

If Earth is the author, what stories are being written upon *us*? As human, we might be considered the leaky pen with ink running all over the landscape pages of illegible sentences. Ink, like oil, causing devastation throughout the world. All this mess, we must make meaning from. All this mess, including the long historical subjugation and marginalisation of indigenous peoples. The mess that is Mother Earth writing her story of the potential destruction of humans, we as the messy ink dream of an agency. The significance of this work lies in holding space within the mess, acknowledging its devastations while seeking practices of renewal. Through embodied research and performance, we ask how movement, voice, and dialogue can transform illegibility into relation, creating weatherlands where knowledge is not extractive but emergent. By situating ourselves as both mark and medium, we confront the colonial inscriptions already written on land, air, and body, and begin to re-script possibilities for co-existence and survival.

Moving from agency to animacy, we address the weather as custodian and community practitioner, as sky bones and corporeal-cosmological infrastructure. Beyond the colonising gaze of Western science and philosophical concepts, we create weatherlands attuned to the cultural, spiritual, and ancestral stories that animate the skies of the southern hemisphere that breathe us. Through breath, voice, body and atmosphere, the cyclic rhythms of the *taio* (environment) locate us in movement, inviting thinking-with the breath of life, *hau*, *hauora*.⁷ Activating (Raymond, 2016) the *air between us* as a medium of exchange and contemplation, we privilege proximity and presence over objectivity and identity. What we know depends upon our being (t)here, interacting, unsettling assumptions, and becoming in place. Relational forms re-appear, through affinities and *alongside-ness* responsive to *Vā-kā* (the ignited and actioned space in between) (Smith and Wolfgramm-Foliaki 2022). This interval signals a mode of practice where presence is activated, and knowledge arises through attentiveness to the shifting dynamics between people, movement, and environment. Doing so reclaims history *as a protocol of ancestral story-work*. Where geostories exist as a genealogical literacy in which to engage with the world.

Dancing *on* and *with* air, we seek a place-responsive praxis to unsettle and unstory figure-ground relations. Breathing at its most elemental level is an exchange of chemicals and particulate matter that happens invisibly. The body as apparatus is in constant exchange with atmospheric systems. Here, *place* is not fixed to a destination. Rather, it exists in response to the flux of livingness that encompasses urbanscapes of undone, unhoused, unromanticised memories on colonial-stained maps that no longer see waterways and mountains. Here, *place* is a living current, shifting with each breath, gesture, and glance, formed as much by tides of relation as by soil or stone. Through sensory mapping, mirrored movement, and shared improvisation, we tune to the layered ecologies and elements that shape where we stand.

Places have been felt to each other, in a room, on sand, in waterways, with the pressure of wind on skin, in the quiet between words, in the reclamation of genealogies through our moving call-and-response bodies. The breath of Papatūānuku is not a metaphor here; it remains a cosmological fact. It is the pulse inheriting both the shelter and the storms of those who came before. By inhabiting both ground and cloud, we reimagine place-based inquiry as an unfolding choreography of relation, responsive, unsettled, and continually remade in the crossing between physical and virtual weatherlands. From this grounding, we can unsettle the assumed binary of performer and watcher, loosening the linear transaction of a static performance-as-consumption. Instead, our dancing bodies become a shared field of relation, where bodies, land, and witnesses co-create meaning in the moment, each influencing the other in ways that rupture both place and the spiritual knowledge it holds.

We are the weather, and we are infinite.

We are human, and we are finite.

Outside formal spaces, the inseparability of our bodies from the flux of particulate matter in our surrounding biosphere is a *lungsong*. We advocate for an integral relationship to community, local environment, and biosphere; we advocate for breath in relation:

We are the weather.

Re-imagining land, spirit, and bodymind as inseparable, we, too, move together, between the finite and the infinite. As Aman Sium, Chandni Desai, and Eric Ritskes (2012) remind us, the spiritual does not withdraw from theory, nor from the gestures of daily life; it is already braided with thought, matter, and the unseen.

To re-imagine in this way is itself an act of survival: to breathe as weather, to feel knowledge drift through soil and lung, through tides of spirit and flesh. We are carried by these entanglements, borne toward the vastness of infinity, even as our bodies keep us grounded in the tender gravity of finitude.

We are the weather.

We mesh ourselves to each other through breath and movement, through the tangible and intangible, the unknown, the more-than-human and unseen. Climate, authored by Mother Earth, presses upon us to read the inked designs of critical health challenges, affecting bodies, minds, and spirits across the world (Bennett et al. 2014; Durkalec et al. 2015; Wheeler and Watts 2018). These inscriptions are carried in rising seas and thickening air, in droughts that crack the ground, and in the compromised lungs of those most vulnerable. In this reading, our own screaming sounds echo the methane of the culled beast released, amplifying the violence of extractive systems. Yet through movement, voice, and breath, we register these forces differently, transforming them into acts of witnessing, of solidarity, and of care. To embody such urgencies is to acknowledge the entanglement of climate, health, and colonial histories, and to practice forms of survival that are collective, relational, and more-than-human.

Dance performance research generates forms of knowledge that are not only analytical but also affective, sensorial, and relational (Brown 2015). To breathe, move, and voice these entanglements is to stage climate change not as an abstract crisis but as lived, corporeal urgency. For the wider ecological community of warriors and activists, such practices extend the struggle beyond policy and protest into the realm of felt experience, offering choreographies of resistance and care. They remind us that climate justice requires both intellectual critique and embodied solidarity, alliances across disciplines, movements, and communities that can mobilise change (Simpson 2017).

Gathering and navigating movement together, we ask ourselves, and the watcher, what it means to share breath, to inhabit space collectively? So, when you ask, can I feel the room breathing? I consider the multilayered ideologies of how we interpret room... *whare... wharenui... wharetūpuna... whare tangata... and taiao*.⁸ I consider how we begin breathing in the whare (womb) of our mothers... Earth mother... and yes, the earth breathes... and she cries, yells, screams, recreates, resonates, and continues well before and long after we arrive. We were ourselves conceived in her womb, and the creation stories of Aotearoa New Zealand carry this knowledge forward, stories in which Papatūānuku (Earth mother) and Ranginui (Sky father) shape the very conditions of our being (Marsden 2003; Mikaere [2003] 2017; Royal 1998). From these ancestral narratives emerges an orientation to time and relation captured in the *whakataukī* (proverb) "*ka mua, ka muri*": we walk backwards into the future, our eyes fixed on the past. This is not nostalgia but an ethic of relation: the past remains present, guiding us, so that ancestral breath, story, and knowledge act as a compass for moving forward. To walk backwards into the future is to acknowledge that our steps are shaped by those who came before, and that our future is held in the responsibilities we carry toward land, sky, and kin.

Wind in the teeth, old voices pushing through.

We walk backwards, ankles in mud, eyes on the bones of the hills...

Moving forward while facing the past, witnessing the winds of change on our skin, and reading the shifting skies for guidance. The moving body holds both memory and possibility. It becomes a living barometer, sensing the pressures of our time and tracing pathways toward futures shaped by care and relational criticality that is being danced in our bodies on landscape.



Figure 2: Living Archive of Breath, Lake Wanaka, Aotearoa. Photographer Raymond Tiddy.

*index fingers drawn apart measure airflow between left and right
fingertip to tongue
moisten skin with saliva
draw your finger up into the air to taste its temperature and tempo*

(choreography for *LungSong* and *Living Archive of Breath*)

The past breathes heavily before us; the future calls out behind us in wounded winds, fragile and urgent. This is not a longing for the past, but a call to responsibility, to hear ancestral echoes as warnings, to remember histories of land and sky, and to use that memory as guidance for how we respond to today's climate crises.

*Before us, the past breathes heavy.
Behind us, the future waits and wails in unusual wounded winds,
thin-skinned and hungry.*

This is not nostalgia, but an ethic of relation: a choreography of listening to ancestral echoes, where each movement carries memory into the present. Dance is one way of capturing the inter-scalar from the atomic to the planetary:

Two women in long white dresses dragging whiteware
Angling on plinths
staring into the abyss
a deflated weather balloon
in the nightwind
above the Waitakere Ranges

(*LungSong* in EcoWest Festival 2019)

The powerful urge in some communities of settler-colonists in Australia and New Zealand to live without history, can create an immobilising silence. Dancing outside between *maunga* / mountain and *awa* / lake, Tia performs with a harakeke woven muzzle (*Living Archive of Breath*, Colour Festival 2019). Signalling to the audience on the lakeside, she evokes a history robbed of language with voices silenced by a colonial education that enforced a dominant language, English, over the indigenous language of Aotearoa, te reo Māori. In the background, Neža Jamnikar, a Slovenian dancer, turns in a long white dress on the pontoon floating above the deep glacial lake Wānaka, drawing vectors of relation with the snow-capped *maunga* of Tititea / Mt Aspiring.



*Figure 3: Tia Reihana-Morunga and Neža Jamnikar in Living Archive of Breath. Lake Wānaka.
Photograph by Raymond Tiddy.*

Freeing the breath in movement loosens voices and counters the crippling immobility of colonial silencing. But what happens when breaths are compromised by the masks of colonial forbearers?

Corporeal critique performed in the open air reveals dimensions of knowledge that exceed the institutionalisation of language as a form of control. Opening a vibrational resonance with flows of air between *maunga* (mountains) and *awa* (lake) and between performers signalling to each other at a distance communicates a desire for response-ability and accountability. Place-responsive choreography breathed between elements advances the potential for bringing awareness to relations between past and present, human and more-than-human, performer and witness.

*Each step
a crack in the dry earth,
an attempt to mend
What we tore.*

Outbreath

Hā (the breath) is the touchstone of practice, where internal and external identities meet. It signals how we are entangled, embodied through the exchanges of air that connect self and other, body and environment, human and more-than-human. *Hā* curates the felt consciousness of the moving body, enabling knowledge to be sensed, embodied, and disseminated. In te ao Māori, *hā* is not only the physical act of breathing but the expression of *hau* (vital essence), the medium through which life is activated and maintained (Marsden 2003). To attend to *hā* in practice is therefore to engage with the transmission of knowledge as a living force, situated in relation to *whenua* (land), *whakapapa* (genealogy), and *wairua* (spirit). In attending to *hā*, practice reveals the living relations that shape who we are and how we move together (Brown and Reihana-Morunga 2022).

#1 *Hā*

Tia: *Hā* is NOT my silent partner... My skin breathes.. *He tangata He tangata, He tangata* (the people, the people, the people)... I smoke my feet on this *whenua*, this country... and you vote with the dirt of your ancestors. The smoke disperses my negativity only to return at the lunch break cafeteria of life, and so I breathe through my feet, because I am unable to walk.



Figure 4: Tia Reihana-Morunga. Photo by Piripi Morunga.

Carol: The barometer is rising; we are in for some unsettled weather.

I take off my weather glasses to notice its patterns:

- in gyrations of wind
- in the fugitive tints of shifting cloud cover
- in fallen tree limbs

We are only ever a breath away from a change in the direction of the breeze
geostories replacing human stories

Both: We notice the fretwork of ground patterns

As weather makers, we are pattern makers

Creating systems of relations

Between things people, places, and objects

breath matters



Figure 5: Carol Brown in Anatomy of Reason, Blackhead, Otago. Photograph by Ngaire Gardner.

Spoken together:

turning is tuning

inner ear

kinesphere

hemisphere

stratosphere

reorienting sky & bones

corporeality & cosmology

cycling-through

cosmological dances

breathing-with

the atmospherics of this artificially aerated space

a forum closed to the openair

yet air is our companion

invisible and quiet and everywhere

imagining future breath dances

laying down tracks for muscle memories

we re-turn

Tuning is turning

stirring breath and shifting atmosphere

turning into

mobile weather stations

for ground truths

we play with the vibration of gestural brush-strokes

orchestrating air

Gestures cut loose from the requirements of language
because Words Fail Us
in the wake of breath we reorient to a weather forecast for
the seven seasons of Wurundjeri:

Biderap, Dry Season (Jan-Feb)

luk, Eel Season (March)

Waring, Wombat Season (April-July)

Guling, Orchid Season (Aug)

Poorneet, Tadpole Season (Sept-Oct)

Buarth Gurru, Grass Flowering Season (Nov)

Garrawang, Kangaroo-Apple Season (Dec)

(Nguyen-Robertson [2010] 2025)

Our weatherlands, also Motherlands.

#2 Inventing the human

From an Indigenous dance perspective, “the human” is not an idea carved out in stone but a body in motion. We do not invent ourselves apart from land and sky; we emerge through steps, breaths, and rhythms. To be human here is not fixed, but rehearsed again and again, on the *marae*, in the studio, in ceremony, wherever bodies gather to move in relation.

Tia: How do we conceptualise the body as a means to make sense of the world?

Tohunga scholar Māori Marsden (2003) suggests that *Papatūānuku* (earth mother) is a living organism with biological systems, and these systems provide support to relationships and networks that include animals, birds, plants, and trees.

Until we re-learn the lesson that [hu/man] is an integral part of the natural order and that he/she has obligations not only to society but also to their environment—so long will they continue to abuse the earth. (Marsden 2003)

Carol: The concept of the body inherited from Western humanism would have us believe there are five senses, 206 bones, at least 600 muscles, and that we have a circulatory system, a digestive system, an excretory system, and a respiratory system.

[Translating and marking the body together:]

this is my trachea / pūkorokoro

these are my lungs / pukapuka

this is my thoracic cavity / rei

this is my dome like diaphragm / pātūpoho

my airways (bronchi) branch within

this is my nose / kūrei

this is my tongue / arero

this is my pharynx / pūhoromi

this is my larynx / paeoro

Carol: 23,000 breaths a day, we are always becoming something (Braidotti 2013).

Tia: Through the embodiment of the urban consider processes where experiences informed by history create sensorial-perceptual realms as alternative modes for life to be lived. Where the embodiment of my praxis as a *māmā* maker emerges in creations that map my *whakapapa* into the cityscapes I occupy and places where my *tūpuna* (ancestors) had yet to travel.⁹ So I carry their courage to do so myself, leaving my dancing residue as a visitor and future wisp of dust. I trace ancestral narratives along concrete footpaths, incorporating the rhythms of traffic, their extractions taking up space in my lungs, fuelling the choreographic phrasing. As a breathing descendant, I carry *hau* into spaces that may not recognise it.

3 The Lull: The cutting of the air

[Moving with turning and slicing arms rotating]

Carol:

To know the weather is to read it in the temperature of our skin, in the movement of our breath and in the acoustics of our surroundings. We can read about the heat to come, but it is not until we step into intricate relationships with animals, plants, earth material, and other forms of life that we are in the contact zone (Haraway 2016) with a weatherland.

Tia: *Kiri* (skin) plays a role in the conceptualisation of *whakapapa* (genealogy): Our genealogical system symbolises the link between the present generation, the ancestors, and the land. Each person's *kiri* is a unique record of their *whakapapa*. *So as I trace my skin to this moment, as it breathes through the vastness of my surroundings*, I gather all the teachings I so desperately at times hope for. My skin breathes a certain smell of circumstance. Like a *ta moko*, to adorn this *kiri*.¹⁰

4 The Unhuman

Tia: What does it mean to occupy space, and how do we leave it empty? My atmospheric footprints heavy in the *Hā* of my *puku*? Breathing in atmospheric fumes and exhaling *karakia* (prayer), my body is a barometer, a relational gauge attuned to the emotional, spiritual, political, and environmental currents of the moment. As a dancer and wayfarer of the moving body, I resist... I am the Weather.

Carol: How might corporeal and cosmological breathing offer an expanded paradigm for a choreographic system?

Alternating:

We feel the tension in the air

We cut the air

Melt in the air

Suck up the air

Explode in the air

Leap through the air

Press through the air

Tia:

I am the weather

I am *patū* ¹¹

I am *puku*

I am Papatūānuku

I am not translator... I am not compass (moral)... I am not a barometer of another's conscious bias.

I am the Weather!

Alternating:

I am the Weather

I am the Weather

I am the Weather

I am weathered

#5 Weatherland

Writing beneath the nose of scholarship, our movements intersect and veer in different directions. Smudges appear in the margins like the brushstrokes of a dance we are just beginning to learn. Moving across this page, as a stage we are shifting times and dimensions in the humidities of our aerial bloodstream.

Tia: I let you smell my atmospheric wind as I show you my eye, my back, my foot, my finger. I let you smell my atmospheric wind from beneath my skin. I am the weather with limbs that will not succumb to the scum of the human. I de-center through the smells of my *hā* on the *pā*....¹² The intergenerational gastro-thermal scores that scream in silence, I am the weather.



Figure 6: Tia Reihana-Morunga. Photo by Piripi Morunga.

Notes

¹ *Toi rongoā* refers to creative and artistic practices grounded in the principles of *rongoā Māori* (traditional Māori healing).

² *Hauora* is a concept of wellbeing that encompasses the balance of physical (*taha tinana*), mental/emotional (*taha hinengaro*), social (*taha whānau*), and spiritual (*taha wairua*) dimensions. *Hau* is layered in meaning including breath, wind, vital essence, and the spiritual force that animates life. It also refers to the binding spirit of reciprocity within relationships of exchange.

³ Karekare a coastal settlement and beach on the west coast of Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland), Aotearoa New Zealand. Known for its black sand, rugged cliffs, and powerful surf, Karekare carries deep cultural and historical significance. The name refers to “rippling” or “turbulent waters,” evoking the dynamic meeting of land and sea. Today, Karekare is recognised as part of the ancestral lands of Te Kawerau ā Maki.

⁴ *Whakaaro* is a Māori term commonly translated as “thought” or “opinion,” but its meaning extends to the processes of reflection, intention, and perception.

⁵ Papatūānuku is the Earth Mother in Māori cosmology, the primal parent who, with Ranginui (Sky Father), gave birth to all living beings. She embodies the land, soil, and sustenance of life, and is central to *whakapapa* (genealogical) connections between people and the natural world.

⁶ Waitākere refers to the western ranges and surrounding lands of Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland), Aotearoa New Zealand. Known in te reo Māori as Te Wao Nui o Tiriwa (The Great Forest of Tiriwa), the area holds deep significance for *mana whenua*, particularly Te Kawerau ā Maki and Ngāti Whātua.

⁷ *Taiao* is a Māori term referring to the natural world and the interconnected environment, encompassing people, lands, waters, skies, and all living and non-living elements. *Hau* is a Māori term often translated as “breath,” “vital essence,” or “wind,” but it carries layered meanings across physical, spiritual, and relational dimensions. It refers to the life force that connects people, to place, and to the spiritual realm. *Hauora* is a Māori concept of holistic wellbeing that encompasses physical (*taha tinana*), mental/emotional (*taha hinengaro*), social (*taha whānau*), and spiritual (*taha wairua*) dimensions. It reflects an interconnected worldview in which individual and collective health are inseparable from relationships with *whānau*, community, and the natural world.

⁸ *Whare* is a Māori term meaning “house” or “building,” but its significance extends beyond a physical structure to include its social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. *Wharenui* (literally “large house”) is a Māori meeting house that serves as the principal building within a *marae* complex. *Wharetūpuna* (ancestral house) is a *wharenui* (meeting house) dedicated to and embodying a particular *tīpuna* (ancestor). *Whare tangata* (“house of humanity” or “house of the people”) is also a term referring to the womb, the source of human life. In Māori cosmology the *whare tangata* is revered as a sacred space of creation, continuity, and *whakapapa* (genealogy). *Taiao* - please see note 7.

⁹ *Whakapapa* is a foundational Māori concept referring to genealogy, lineage, and the layers of connection between people, ancestors, the natural world, and the cosmos.

¹⁰ *Tā moko* is the traditional Māori practice of marking the skin with designs that record genealogy (*whakapapa*), identity, status, and life history. Unlike tattooing in a general sense, *tā moko* is embedded in *tikanga* (customary protocols) and carries deep cultural and spiritual significance.

¹¹ *Patū* is a short-handled striking weapon used to strike in combat and for energetic engagement.

¹² *Pā* is a fortified village or settlement.

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Biographies

Carol Brown is a choreographer and dance scholar from Aotearoa New Zealand. Recent choreographies include *Saltines for Sealion Women* (Wild Dunedin Festival 2025), *Opera for the Dead* (AsiaTopa 2025), *Tensegrity* (Melbourne, 2022), *LungSong* (EcoWest, 2019), and *The Living Archive of Breath* (Colour Festival 2019). Carol's research interests lie in choreographic collaboration and site responsive performance. She is Professor of Choreography at the University of Melbourne.

Tia Reihana-Morunga is a senior lecturer in Dance Studies in Creative Arts and Industries and a Co-director of the newly established Centre for Co-Created Ageing Research (CREATE-AGE) at The Waipapa Taumata Rau, University of Auckland. Her research in the arts and education sectors focuses on culturally responsive praxis reflective of indigenous knowledge systems. As an Indigenous artist, Kaupapa Māori research practitioner, and community facilitator Tia works extensively in Arts, Education, and Health with Mana Oceania communities in Aotearoa and the wider Pacific.

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

COVERING WITH EARTHWORMS: A LITTLE BIT OF EVERYTHING

EMILIE GALLIER AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS

Welcome to a stroll through the zine des Minières, with eyes as feet.

In the PDF version of this article, we recommend selecting « Two-page Scrolling » in « Page Display » under « View ».

The proposal for you dear reader is to adopt a tactile gaze, eyes becoming feet or any other body-part supporting the mobility of your eyes through fragments of the zine's landscape, its textures, colours, shapes, and beings.

On a second stroll, you may wish to try inviting your eyes to become mouth.

My eyes-feet land on a conveyor belt.

Figures 1–18: zine des Minières, pages 1 to 6 (2021), pages 16 to 21, pages 41 to 46 (2021):

Grasse Tenda
Jardin



MARGARIDA

BIRD



LA CHAPELLE



VR

l'Alchimiste

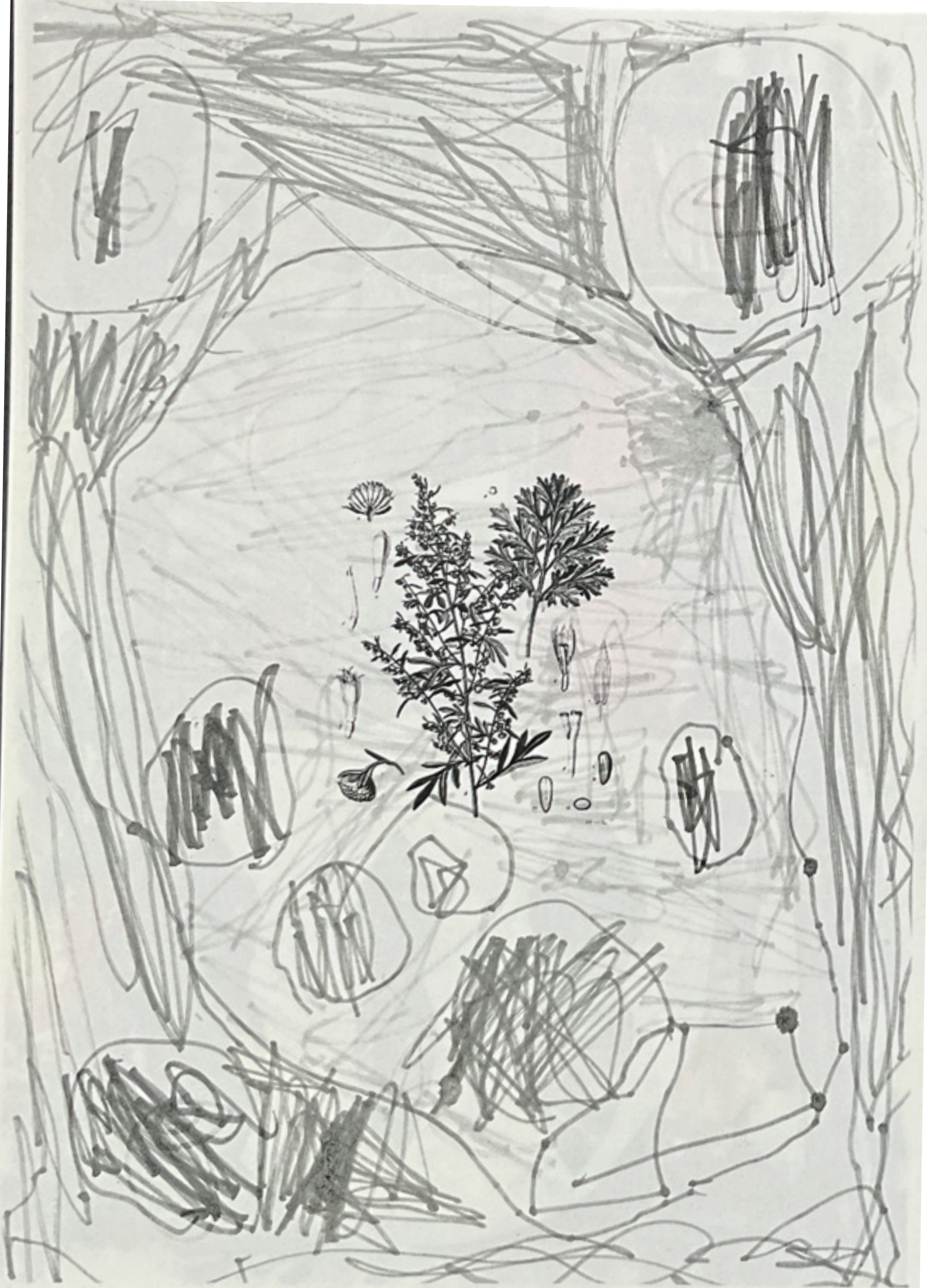
ZINE

Mots HAMEAUX

Grotte

GRAND CHENE



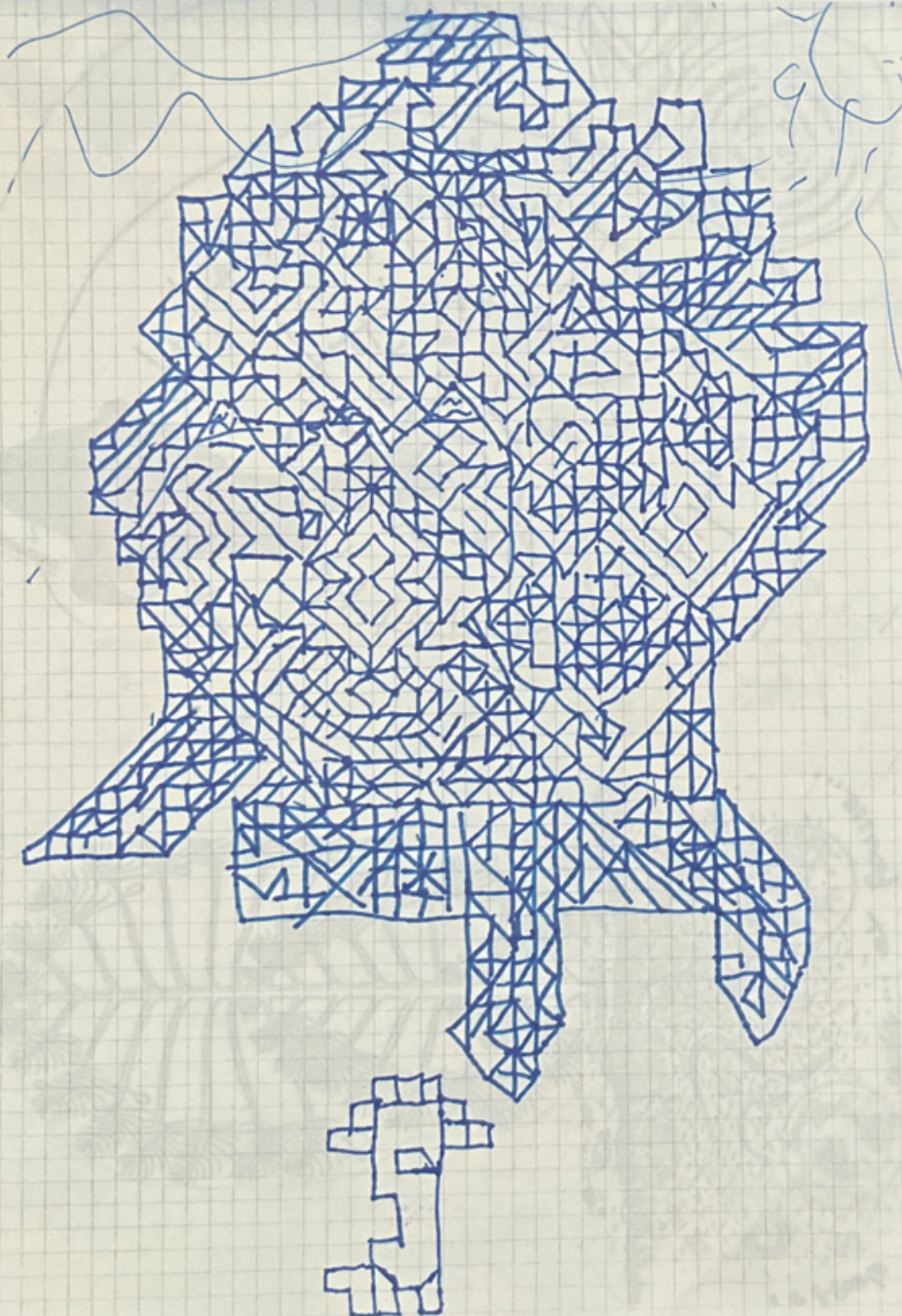


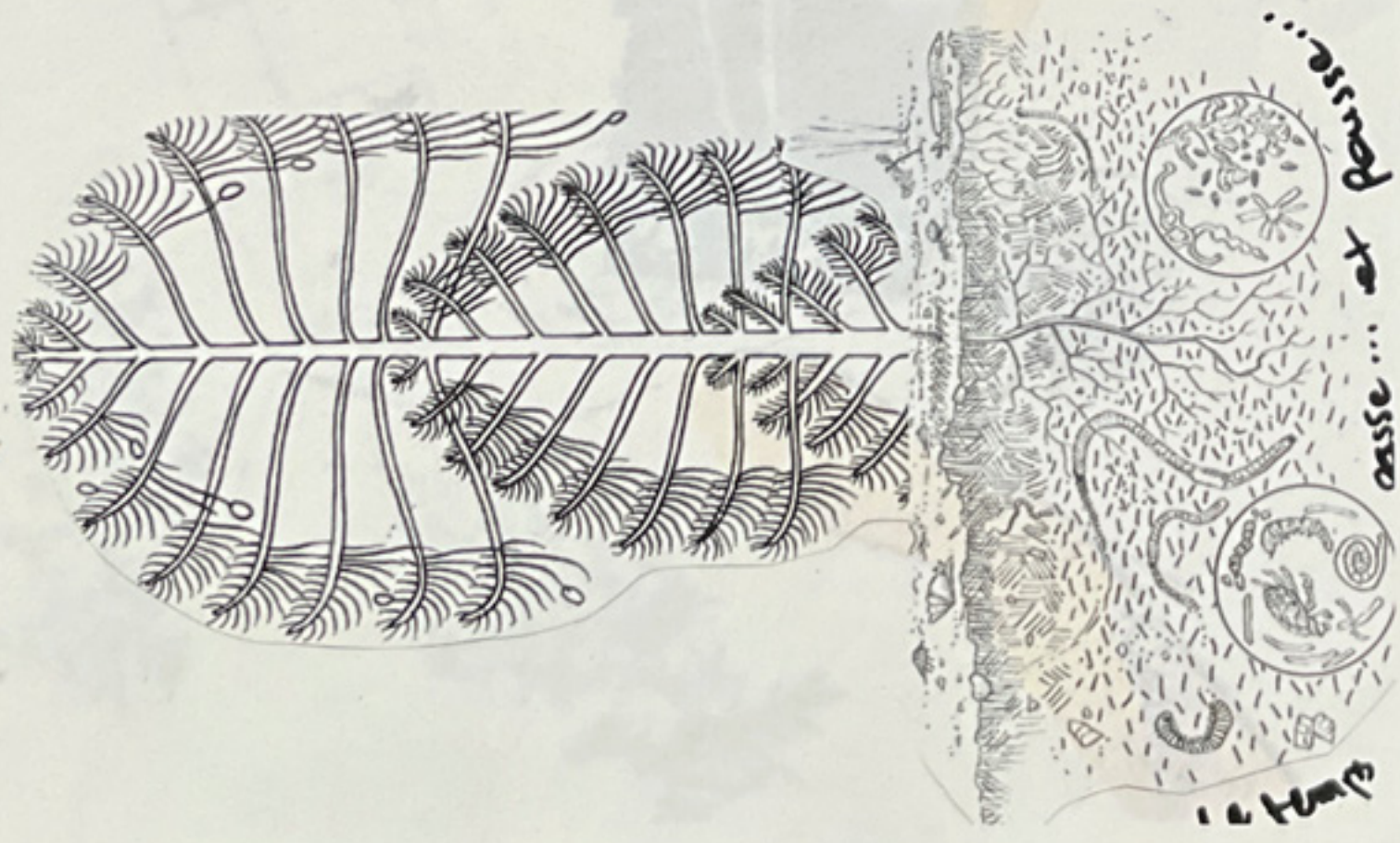


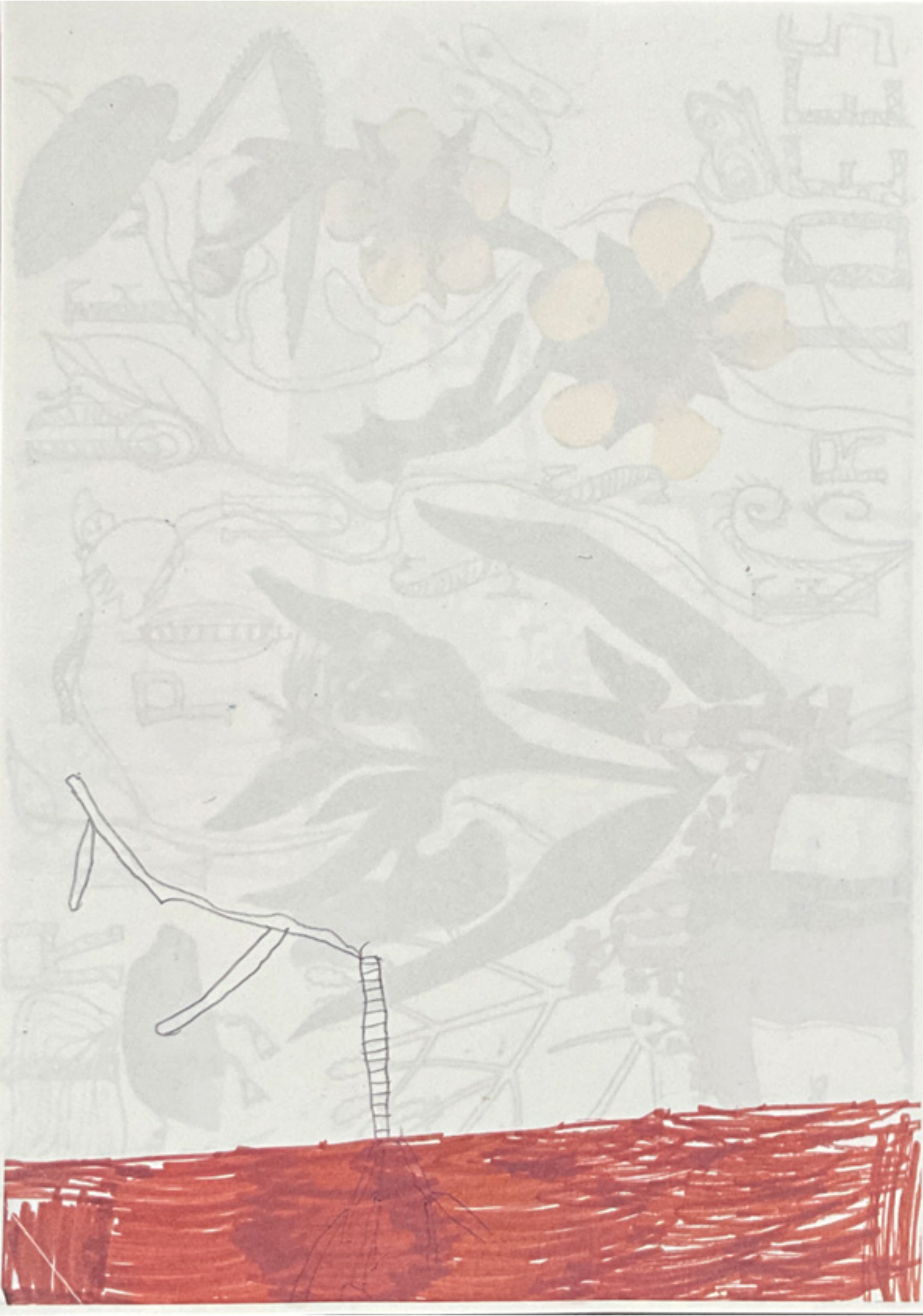
we found him at the exit of the ~~caten~~ west side and he was Dead. his ghost was here and Brought me play ground

le chat " he sleeps the CAT ok is he mummified

















Coron

201
B



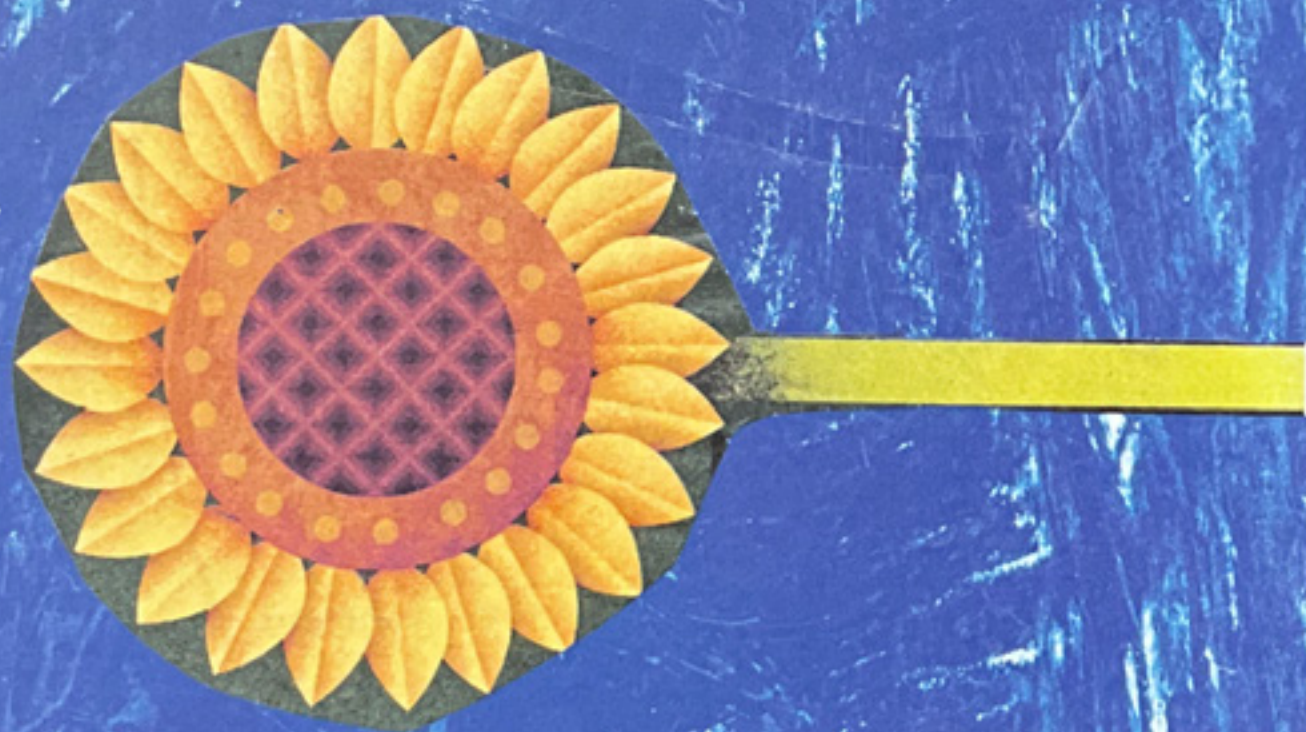
Corair

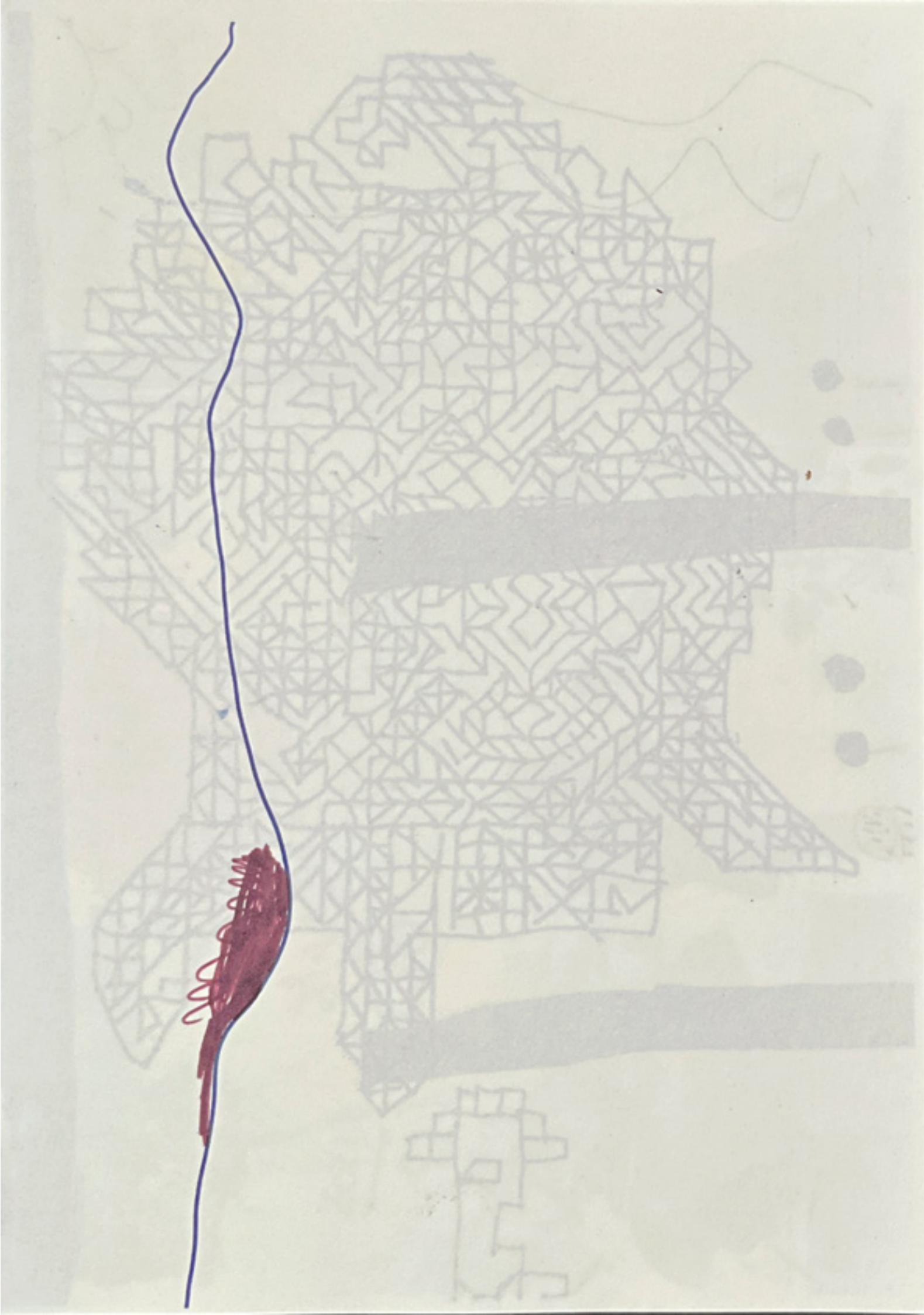


1701
B



the
End of
the
Beginning









Q/170Z

Q/170Z





Grass ♡



Jack



1. Soils Shape Zines

Les Minières is a farm land in Normandy, between the forests of La Férrière-aux-Etangs and of the Andaines. Within this land of 9,5 hectares, the assiduous practice of regenerative gardening feeds soils and people, while artistic practices regularly nest in the shade of gardens.

Since 2021, when the foundation Les Minières started across agroecology and arts, the crafting of zine pages has developed and continues to unfold at the *table du zine*. Leading to the ongoing growth of the *zine des Minières*.

At the *table du zine*, participants gather around gardening books and dance publications (including maps, zines, scores) with access to a copy machine, paper, and crafting props. Invited to make a page, participants are guided by a member of the collective and by the lively installation. The guidance *à la manière des vers de terre*—following earthworms—includes an invitation to notice what touches the eyes and hands before transforming the materials available. Encouraged to extend the observation to what touched them outside in the fields (while planting trees or visiting, or harvesting, dancing, witnessing dances) participants bring sensorial bodies and other gleaned elements to the table. Repetition is welcome. After the time it takes for different visitors to craft a page, copies are gifted to the body of the zine. From July 2021 to June 2024, eleven iterations of the *table du zine* shaped 151 A4 pages, weighing 800g, and covering a surface of 9,44 square meters.¹ Drafts, leftovers, matters that did not land into a final page are kept in the compost: a starter for future practices of the *table du zine*.

Elles disent que les histoires de sols sont des histoires de corps. (Rivière 2023, 33)

They say soils stories are stories of bodies. (My translation)

How do soils shape zines? What is the role of these Normand soils, exhausted by a past of mining activities, in shaping the *zine des Minières*?

Zine making partake to do-it-yourself cultures. Their formats and content are controlled by people who make them. Zines are spaces to share information and stories from marginalized voices (Williams 2021, 2:20). Asking how soils shape zines, I am reminded that participants who craft these pages are moved by other movements than their own.

Il y a en moi des mouvements qui ne sont pas de moi, des mouvements qui me précèdent et dont certains m'instituent [...] sans cesse, je suis mouvementée, du dedans comme du dehors, par d'autres mouvements que les miens. (Bigé 2023, 13)

There are movements in me which are not mine, movements which precede me and some of which establish me [...] constantly, I am moved, from within and without, by other movements than mine. (My translation)

The practice at the *table du zine* is a moment of attention, of listening to and being moved by soils without intervening, without ploughing, without digging, perhaps inclining towards them, sensing.

A bending over and forward resembling a bow. These movements in the practice invoke the plural quality Emma Bigé (2023) describes in the words “movements in me which are not mine.” Among others, the movements of participants in the *table du zine*, are movements of earthworms.

Of all their senses that of touch, including in this term the perception of a vibration, seems much the most highly developed. (Darwin 1881, 29)

Earthworms’ tactile bodies inform the guidance of the *table du zine*. The castings they shape—you might be familiar with twists of earth that drool between tiles or within grass fields—are fertile matter digested multiple times by earthworms. Time and time again, zine makers at Les Minières, held and moved by soils, digest pages through the copy machine; printing, reprinting, possibly shifting scales, layering, and covering again.

As it is certain that worms swallow many little stones, independently of those swallowed while excavating their burrows, it is probable that they serve, like mill-stones, to triturate their food. The gizzard opens into the intestine, which runs in a straight course to the vent at the posterior end of the body. The intestine presents a remarkable structure, the typhosolis, or, as the old anatomists called it, an intestine within an intestine. (Darwin 1881, 19)

Earthworms bring fine earth to the surface, covering entire fields, turning them into fertile grounds, hospitable to more lives. Aware of the role of earthworms in enriching and aerating soils, regenerative gardeners continue this labour by covering grounds to prepare them for crops. This is an alternative to ploughing with machines harmful to soils life. At les Minières, not less than fifty years ago, the land was a site of extraction, taking iron from the ground. Today, the regenerative farming prioritizes repair, supporting the regeneration of soils through cyclical covering with organic matter. This gesture of covering as an act of care (feeding, holding space, enabling life) also informs the guidance at the *table du zine*. Pages form into layered compositions through the tactile attention and the hands of many. The zine’s body results from a collective digestion through time. Its 151 pages offer grounds for readers’ eyes while honouring earthworms, with gratitude and acknowledgment for their labour living within us, feeding soils that feed us.

Figures 20–55: zine des Minières, pages 52 to 57, 62 to 67, 71 to 76, 93 to 98 (2022), pages 102 to 107 (2022), 113 to 118, 120 to 125, 133 to 137 (2023):







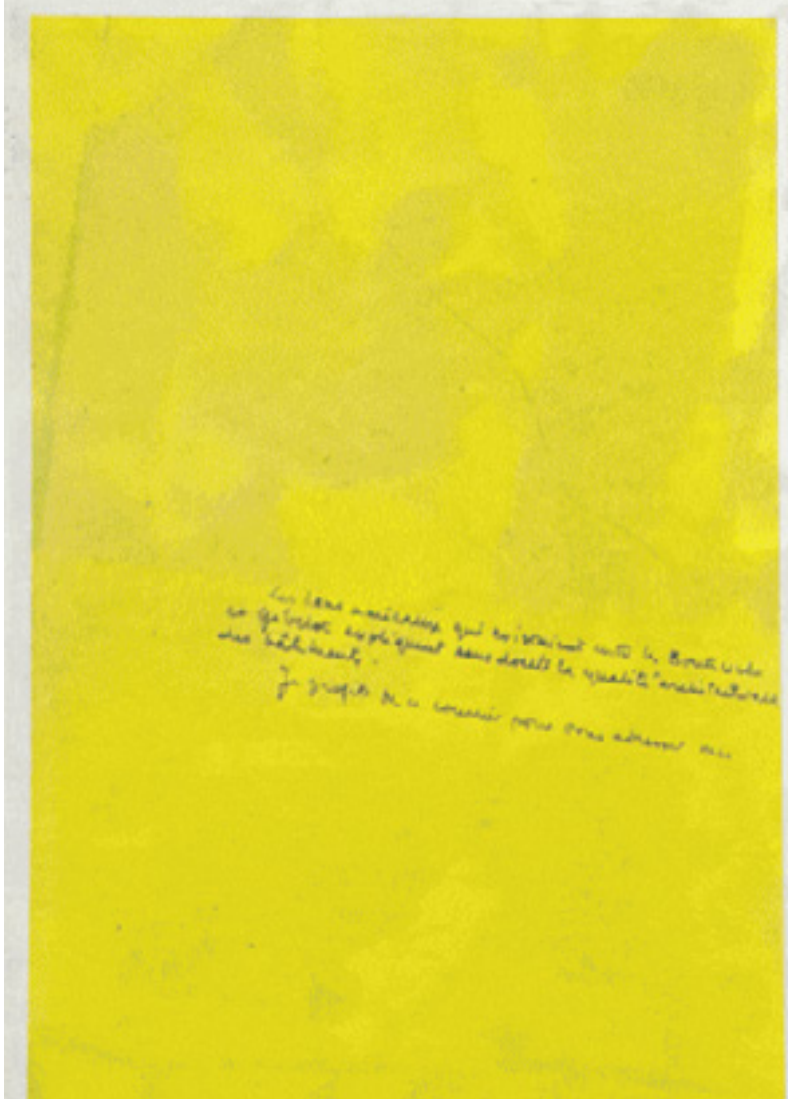
et si il y avait une forêt dans la cour
 et si il y avait un mari de producteur
 et si il y avait un zoo
 et si un labyrinthe de glaces air
 et si un cinéma dans la cour
 et si un jardin secret
 et si un labo de cuisine
 et si une classe de maître
 et si des cirque
 et si une grande fête
 et si des arbres sur les murs
 et si un parc avec nœuds
 et si un chien dans un cage
 et si la tempête
 et si la senhorese, plus d'un
 et si la cavalcade
 et si des hirondelle dans un atelier
 et si une nursery à côté de maison
 et si des chevaux









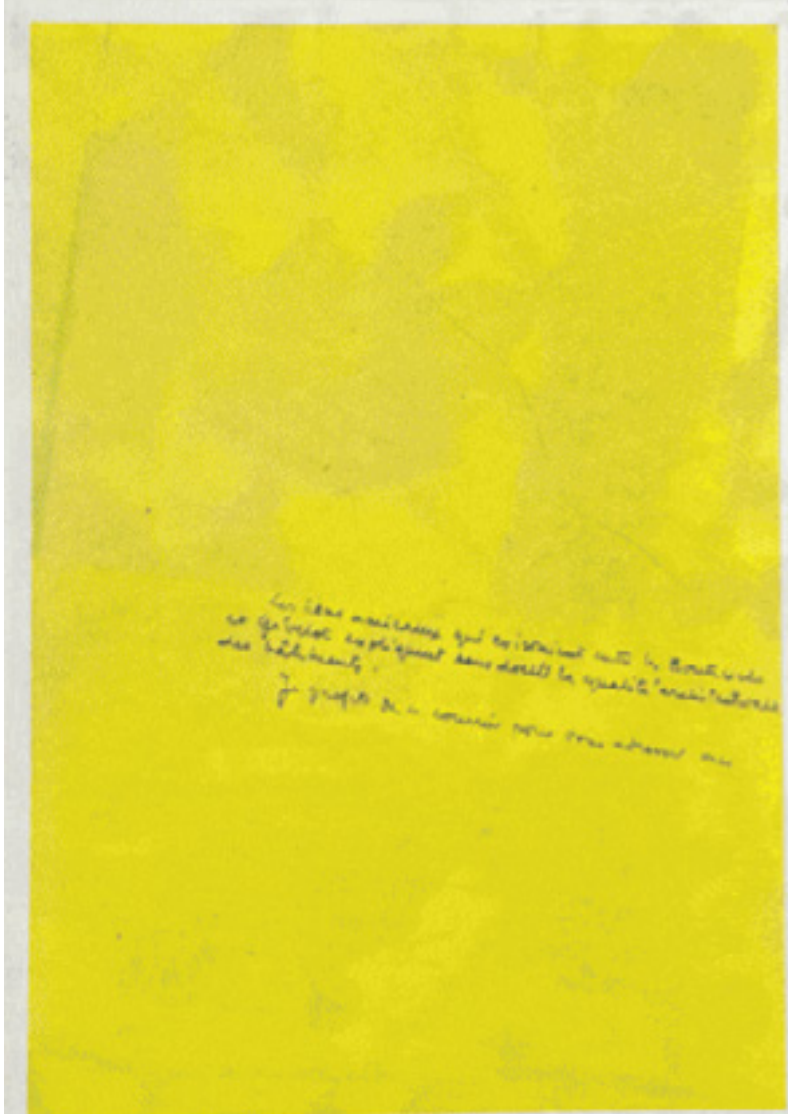


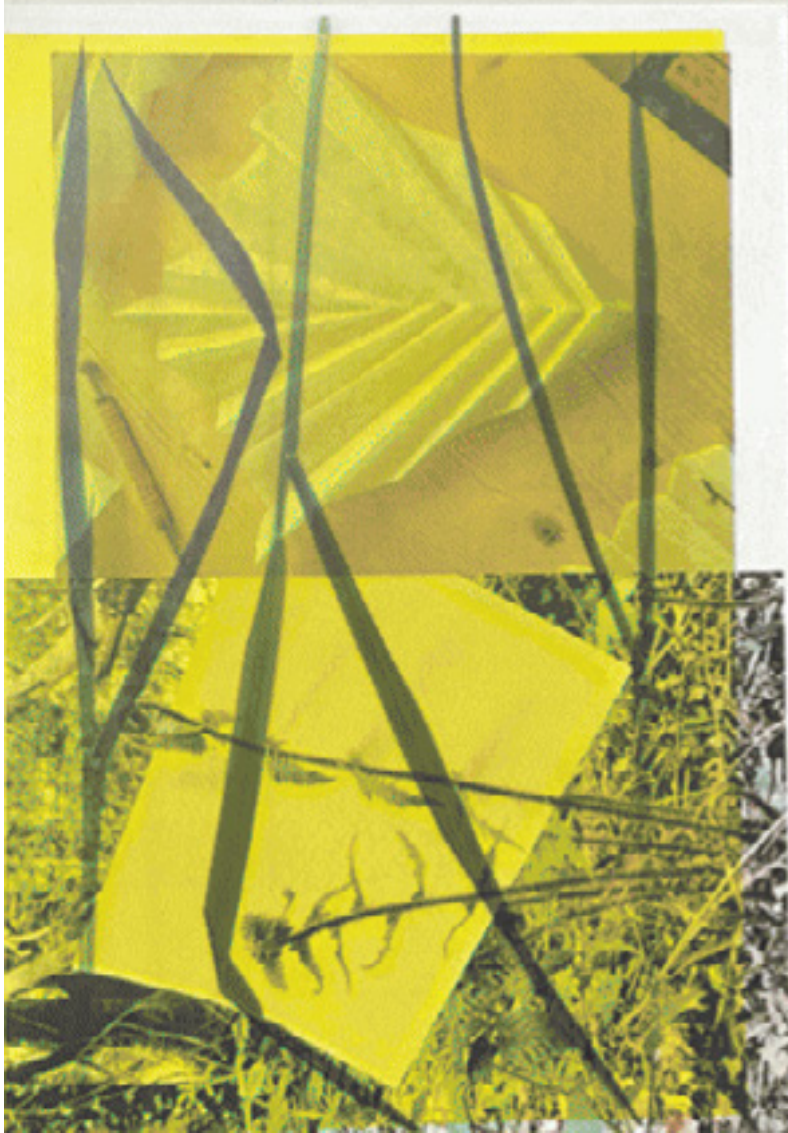


Les idées nouvelles qui se développent dans la littérature
et qui sont expliquées dans des livres de qualité littéraire
sont tellement :

Je profite de ce moment pour vous adresser mes

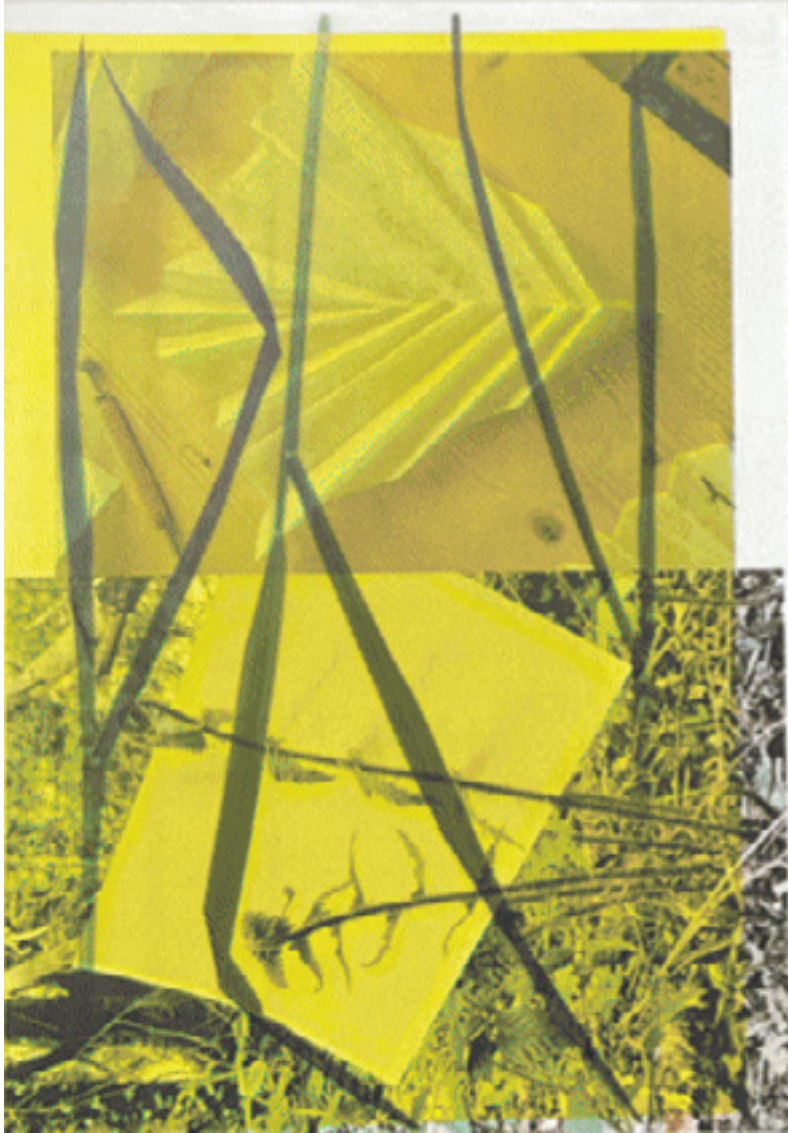






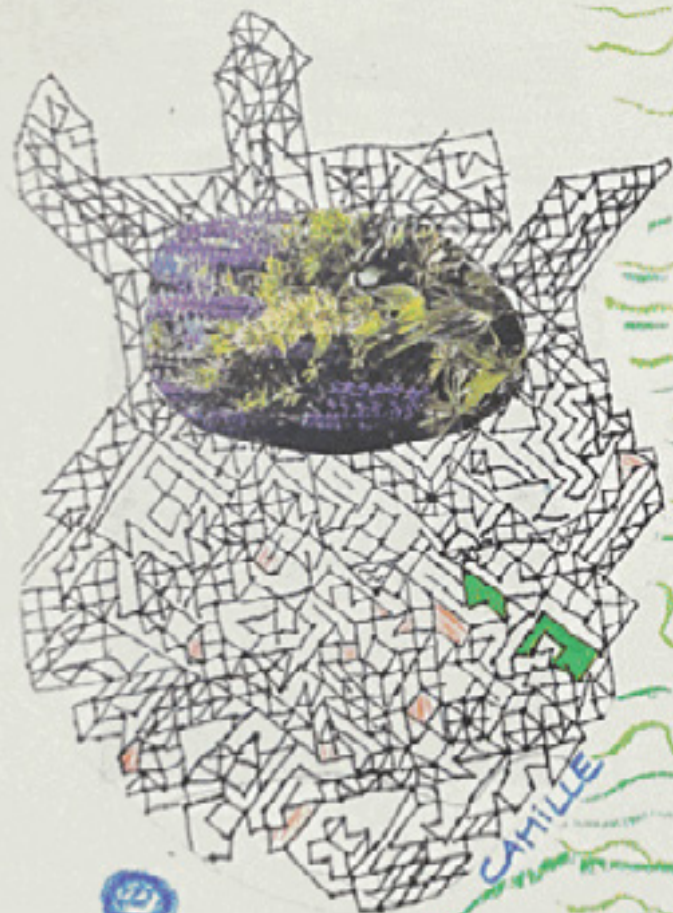


Planter
une
pousse
la laisser
pousser
et l'arroser

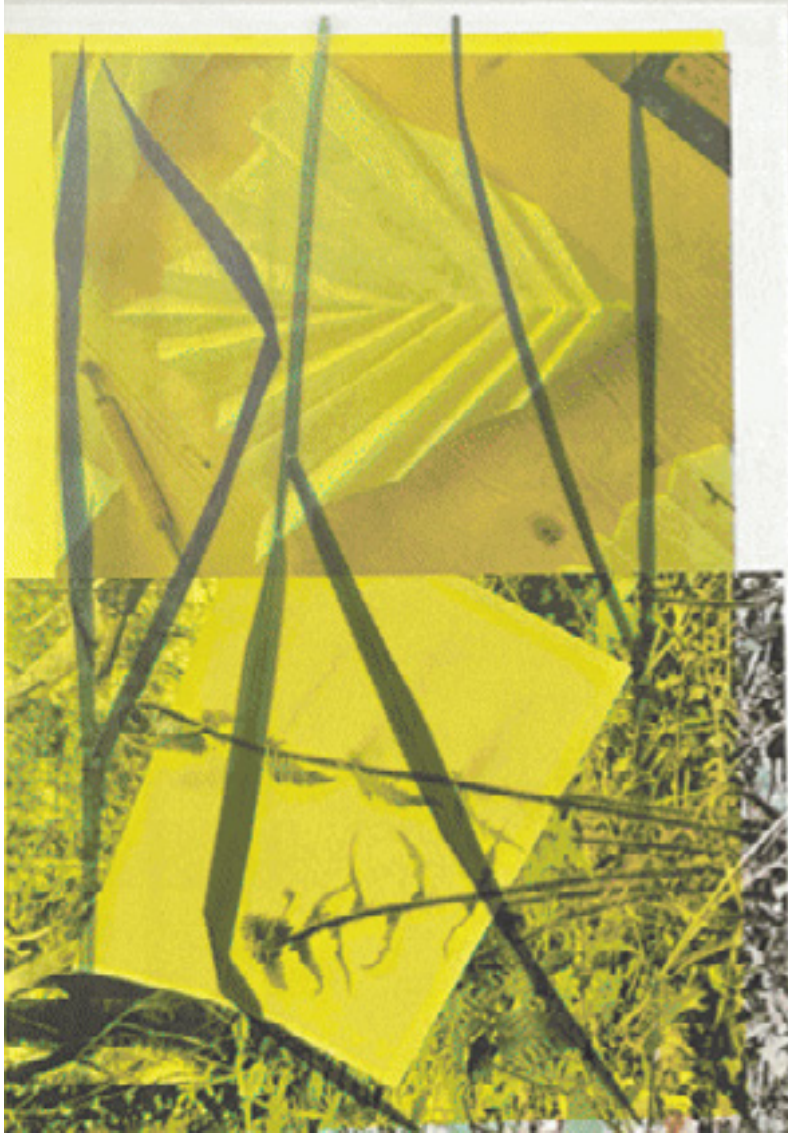




Planter
une
pousse
la laisser
pousser
et l'arroser



Yani M.



It's to me

I move rarely, and if, mostly superficially. I sleep with my bump up, it sticks out like a half-sphere, a mini-^{I am pretty certain the chance is slight} of this planet. It has only grass, my ass, so its form is too clear between the trees and the parts of me with higher plane to a house, a pond, and sierras too naked and I

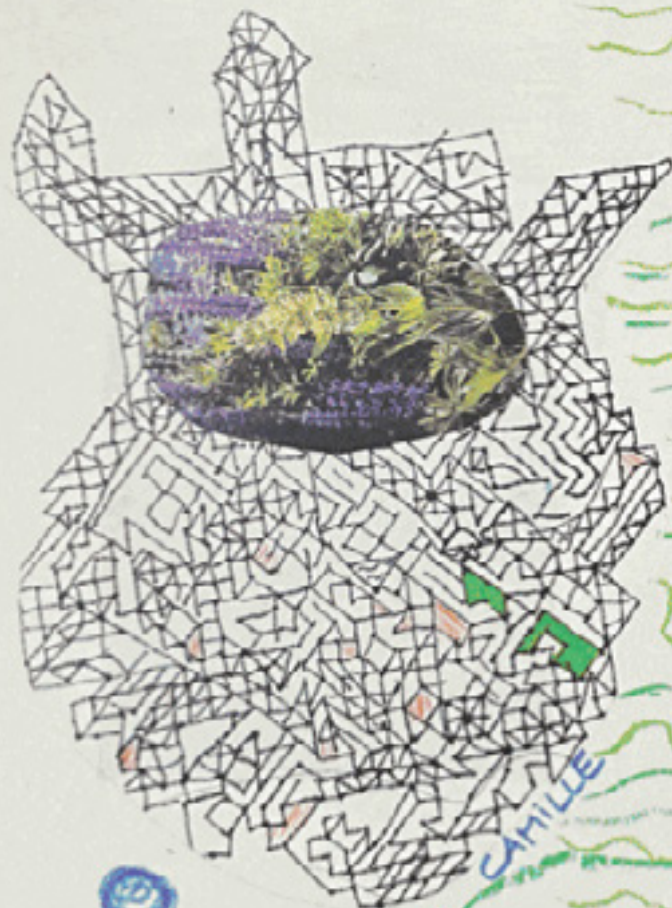
WE SEE

notice every thing but they still.

Re



Planter
une
pousse
la laisse
pousser
et l'arroser



I move rarely, and if, mostly super-
ficially. I sleep with my bump up,
it sticks out like a half-sphere, a
mini-^{l'une petite couleur de} of this planet. It has
only grass, my ass, so its form is too
clear between the trees and the parts
of me with higher plan 5, a house,
a pond, and sirres 11
too naked and 11

WESEE

notice everything but they still





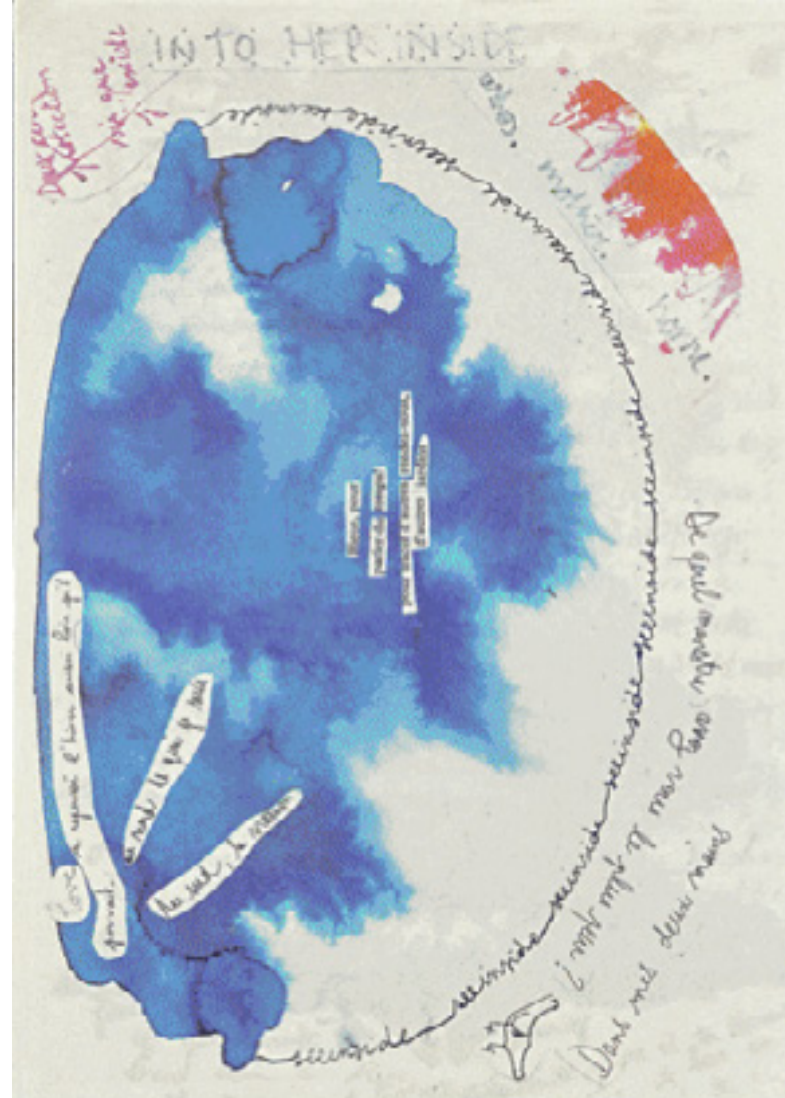
the
End of
the
Beginning





the
End of
the
Beginning







Rather than chairs and tables, I preferred the ground, trees, and caves, for in those places I felt I could lean against the cheek



THIS IS THE NEW LIFE
AND PAPER'S FOLDS

Soil talking to me
I connected with the
mycelium DEEP IN THE
GROUND

Pitch
← DARK
CAVE

Enter
HERE



Herbe
Huiter
Mentha
Mentha

Pitch
← DARK
CAVE



Rather than chairs and tables, I preferred the ground, trees, and caves, for in those places I felt I could lean against the cheek



Soil talking to me
I learned with the
mycelium DEEP IN THE
GROUND

Pitch
← DARK
CAVE

Enter
HERE



Herbe
Huile
Mentha
Mentha

Pitch
← DARK



'SIE 'TERR'E

SAVOURS

Rather than chairs and tables, I preferred the ground, trees, and
caves, for in those places I felt I could lean against the cheek



Soil talking to me.
I conned with the
mycelium DEEP IN THE
GROUND









Il y a dix ans, les plus jeunes de cette
génération des jeunes
Paul ont le courage de dire ce qu'ils découvrent.



OMBRÉS ET OBSCURITÉS
PROFONDES / CONT' ESSENTIELLES
RÉVÉLANT LA PROFONDEUR ET
L'ÉTENDUE AMBIGUES
FONT AÉRIELLE / CONT' TAIS
ITACTILITÉ / A LA



Mo, Jan
It is cold here now. Meanwhile,
lots happens around, on my surface.
(see what I mean?)



OMBRÉS ET OBSCURITÉS
PROFONDES / CONT' ESSENTIELLES
RENDENT LA PROFONDEUR ET
LA DISTANCE AMBIGUES
FONT APERCEVOIR L'IMAGINAIRE
ET LA FACILITÉ

2. With Underground Knowledges

The soils of Les Minières shape its zine by holding and moving its participants. Informed by earthworms' tactile qualities and their many digestions of fertile soils, makers of the *zine des Minières* connect with underground knowledges, connecting with cycles, loops, seasons, food. Reading *Broken Earth* by N. K. Jemisin (2015–2017), in which the fifth season is the suspension of seasons, the negation of cycles, linear time serving the accumulation of capital, Bigé (2023, 26) tells that some dance and somatic practices help access underground knowledges. The repetition of the *table du zine* as an ongoing practice of documentation, the regularity of the pause to notice, embracing seasonality, cycles, and flows, formed the zine into a logbook of *Les Minières*, holding space for other than human presences within it. Reading the zine, it is possible to perceive seasons, to observe herbs growing on the land, feel the cycles, the movements of wind, breaths. Besides these observations which can be named, might other forms of soil stories, bodies stories and presences live within the *zine des Minières*? This search of soil stories motivated the creation of collective moments of reading the zine, in performance. The zine is spread out on the floor, at times in lines of twelve pages by twelve rows, at times in a circle, covering. Like leaves at the entrance of an earthworm's burrow. In this set up, the zine invites readers above ground, and invokes presences underground.

Worms prepare the ground in an excellent manner for the growth of fibrous-rooted plants and for seedlings of all kinds. They periodically expose the mould to the air, and sift it so that no stones larger than the particles which they can swallow are left in it. They mingle the whole intimately together, like a gardener who prepares fine soil for his choicest plants. [...] The leaves which are dragged into the burrows as food, after being torn into the finest shreds, partially digested, and saturated with the intestinal and urinary secretions, are commingled with much earth. This earth forms the dark coloured, rich humus which almost everywhere covers the surface of the land with a fairly well-defined layer or mantle. (Darwin 1881, 131)

While most zines meet their readers and other zines at the occasions of fairs, shops, or libraries, the *zine des Minières* reaches readers in performance. At these occasions, the zine also meets and shares experiences with other soils, laying on these soils. The *zine des Minières* covered and encountered soils situated about 674km north east of Les Minières, Heerlen, 560km south, Bordeaux, 160km north west, Cherbourg, 648km north east, Almere, 1003km south east, Turin, and 530km north east, Brussels. Over the surface of horizontally laid pages, readers are invited to bend over, to let their eyes become feet. *My eyes are my feet. With eyes as feet, I wander on the pages. In this moment I live off this landscape.*² With eyes as feet, readers feed themselves with colours, textures, shapes, and images, at times a few words. Following this first encounter with the zine, readers may close their eyes. *With the eyes closed, I see.*³ This second moment of the practice supports the echoes of impressions or imprints, rippling into new associations and connections. Travelling with eyes-feet over the zine's landscape, readers progressively cover their 'eyes' with castings of images feeding the mulch of their dreams. At times, as a closure to the practice, readers are invited to tell what they see, to name the presences they feel, in the present tense, as to affirm ongoing and entangled qualities of what is felt, like a dream unfolding.

- Met ogen dicht zie ik een poppetje.
- Ik zie het ook!
- With closed eyes, I see a puppet.
- I see it too!

(short dialogue with young people practicing the tactile gaze on the zine, Almere daycare, 2024)

3. Compost covers others

Avec le compost, ce n'est pas à toi de décider si ce que tu fais est bon ou mauvais: c'est lui qui décide, qui te le signale par des odeurs fétides, ou des pourritures visibles, si tu as réussi ou non à maintenir les vannes ouvertes et à laisser la vie faire son travail. (Bigé 2023, 28)

With compost, it is not up to you to decide whether what you are doing is good or bad: the compost decides, and signals by foul odours or visible rot, whether or not you have succeeded in keeping the valves open and letting life do its work. (My translation)

Leftovers of cuts and unused materials progressively formed a compost of pre-digested pages. This other collection of paper soon felt like the alter ego of the *zine des Minières*, similar in size and weight. After a *table du zine* has shuffled the pages with bits and pieces, aborted projects, drawings, doodles, dried leaves, and little stones, the occasions to gather this compost of pre-digested pages feel like privileged moments. Small cuts unravel like little gems, assemblages emerge and offer depths and reliefs asking the gaze to turn tactile. *Laisser vivre*, to let live. The zine's compost is alive and does its work. Cutting through it, eyes turn tactile, dive in, jump, touched. The zine's compost asks to prolong the moment of holding back to listen, to prolong this form of non-action as trust that what is intended is already happening. The zine's compost invites to do less, to extend antennas, noticing and acknowledging what is already there, at the service of movements that are not mine, but soil's movements.

The compost of the *zine des Minières* started in July 2021 and became the starter of each *table du zine* since June 2024. For one year, ten *tables du zine* took place, alternating between Les Minières and other distant soils in Bordeaux, Amsterdam, and Florence.⁴ The zine's compost enabled the development of the practice beyond the farm, further researching soil connections and collective documentation with different lands and earthworms, always maintaining the connection with Les Minières, drinking herbal teas collected at the farm and shuffling the zine's compost which holds space for past and future times.

Corail. Grizzou. Le chat. The cat. He sleeps.

First names. Zoli, Mya, Jade, underlined and a heart.

The end of the beginning.

Birds. Can a bird be in love with a sheep?

One upside down swimming pool.

Pitch dark with an arrow.

*Se terre.*⁵

Figures 56–63: eight cuts through the zine's compost (January 2025):

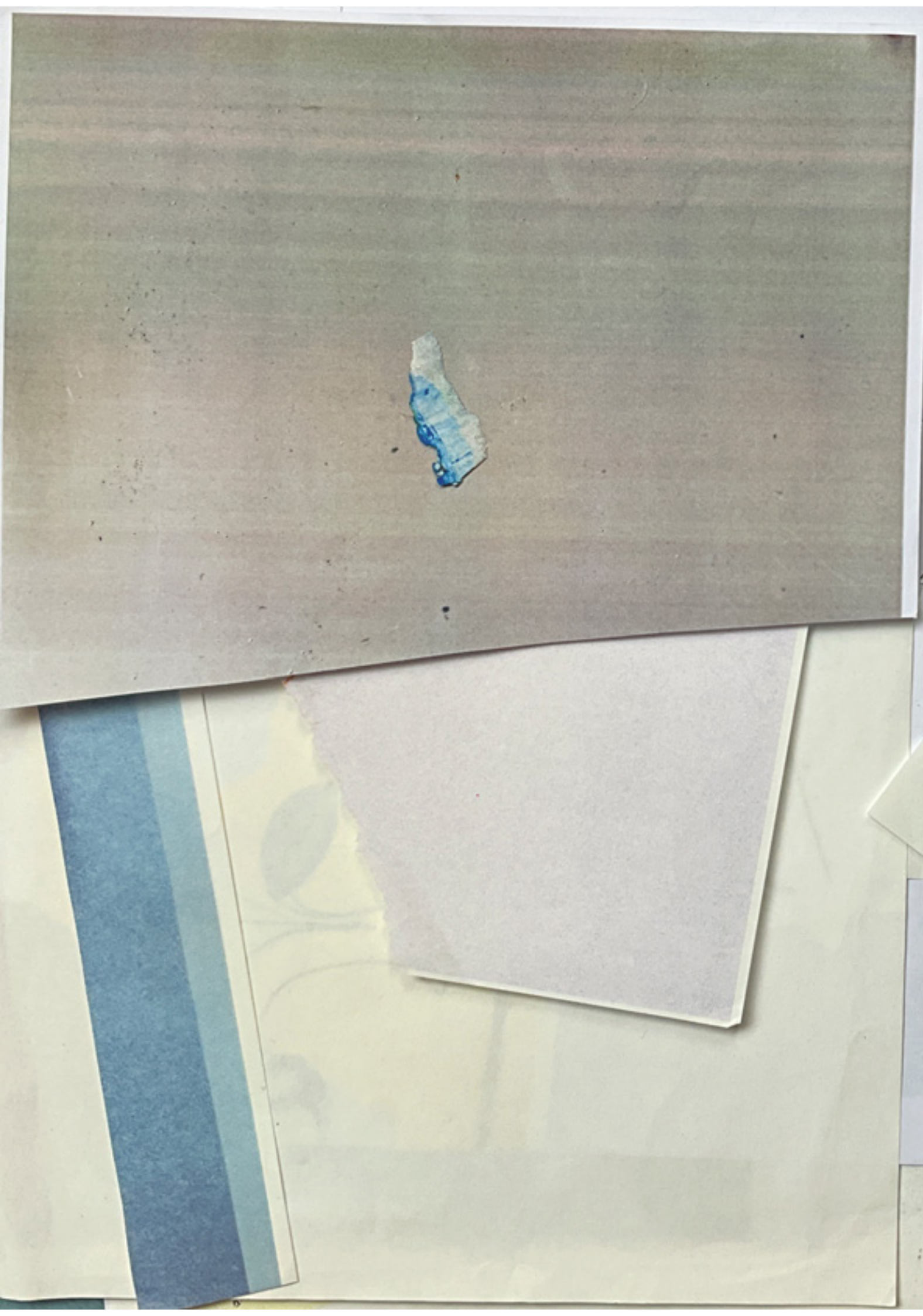
bordurer abibochoer
 les mains reparent des bouts de terre
 sans autre outil que l'idée
 qui redonne vie à ce qui s'étiolait



Leçon le nouveau du
 du phagocytose
 la poma et le reboisement
 de la poma au bon

50%

Welcome to Farida Sedock's garden, a collage made of bright fabrics that caught the artist's eye. We recognise a geometric garden plan in the shape of quilted plaids and curry wafer features in a nice blue gingham. There is a rose garden for casual wanderers, some lavish, flowery borders that create privacy, and a palm tree. A prominent place is reserved for the fayaloh, koro cocooned, a plant that grows abundantly in Farida's native Surinam. You can find them in the top corners and borders, forming a fiery orange horizon to perfectly frame your view.



pas de premier de

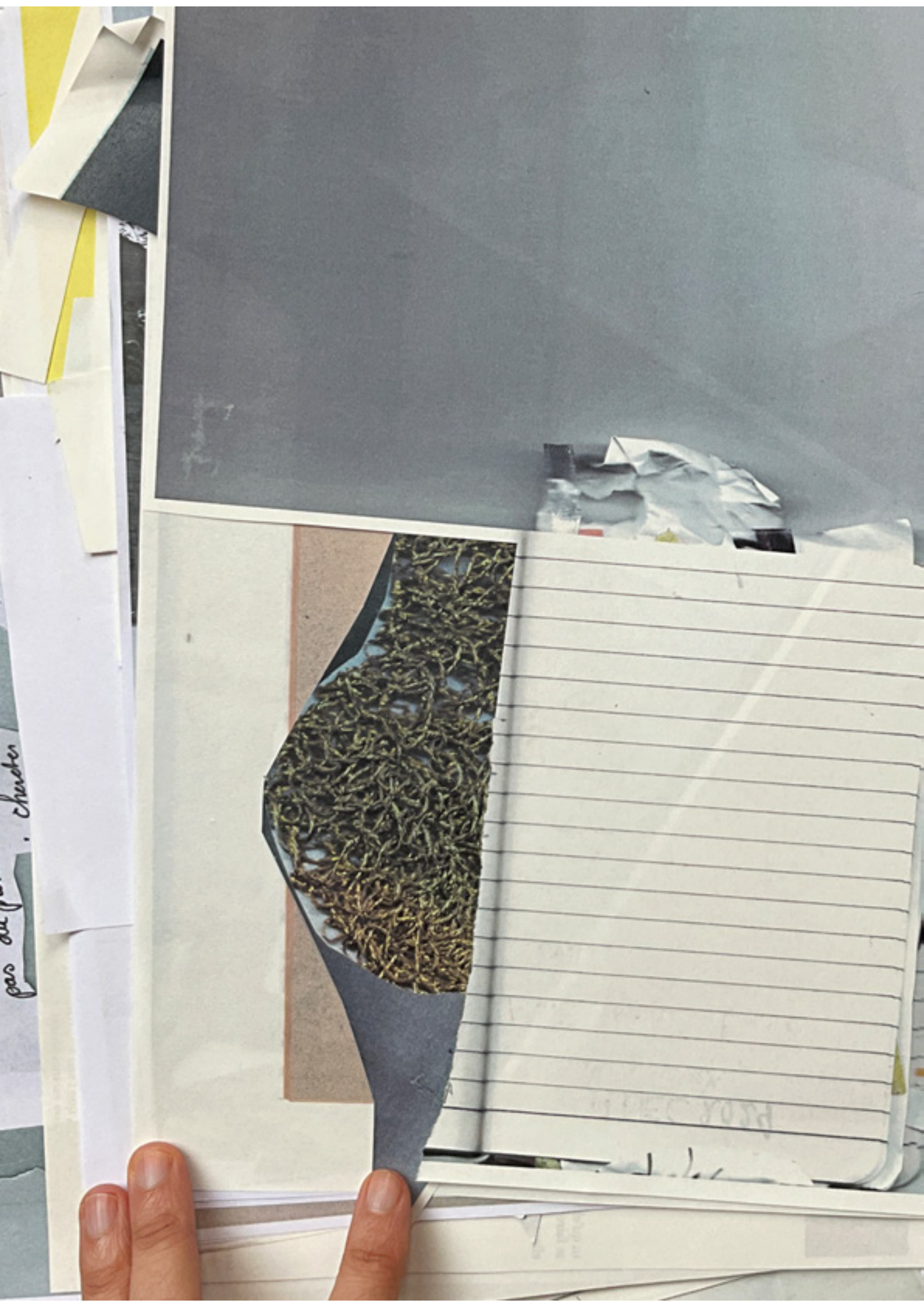


pas de premier de

suivi

pas de p...





pas au p... : chertier



gas and . churder

4. Decomposed, a reading

Elles disent que raconter une histoire ressemble au jardinage. Ce sont les plantes qui s'occupent de pousser. Celles qui racontent ou jardinent sont seulement des facilitatrices : elles tiennent l'espace, elles invitent, elles écoutent, elles désirent, elles suscitent. (Rivière 2023, 24)

They say that telling a story is like gardening. It is the plants that take care of growing. Storytellers or gardeners are only facilitators: they hold the space, they invite, they listen, they desire, they arouse. (Author's translation)

The zine pages that were crafted between June 2024 and June 2025 accompanied the development of movements of reading the *zine des Minières*. Covering the soils, the zine invites reader to put on a tactile gaze, with eyes-feet, and to dream. Over the year, zine pages kept covering soils and the reading sessions were associated with creative writing prompts, yet again with a curiosity for the presence of soils in the resulting text. Attempts at unravelling other soils stories through embodied reading and writing practices. The following text resulted from one of twelve sessions writing with the zine as a guide.



Her belly resting onto her thighs, she gleans marrow and yarrow. Her mother and mother's mother had lost this hip fold by that age. Throughout the years, the bending had moved to their necks and shoulders, their gaze turned through the soils' horizons. Was it their connections to earthworms? She, too, can hear their singing. There are the women's voices, and also vibrations. She hears the roots climbing along the legs shaping knots in the groins, turning into fluids and running down her torso, skull, and hair. She picks up the heavy apron her mother left behind, buckles it at her back. Head down, she feels held.

There is a body bending over, wearing four juxtaposed aprons, dark blue, sunset orange, checked, and light blue with gleaming threads. Their lengths prolong the legs a few meters beyond the feet. Their tints are the falling spine's background. The arms offer a slideshow, a river of horizontal pages, shown one at a time. Once exposed, papers float down the fabrics.

First page shows a lilac background, fragments of texts and the drawing of a body lying, lines grow from their back. Mountains overhang the body. Across the page a thick branch of high grass in bloom, purple.

In an exhale, the page floats downwards and uncovers a second page. A dark banner on the side with figures colored in felt pen. On fours, unrolling up, expanding arms. Movement decomposed. Page almost empty, the red print of a leave, seeds of high grass, blue contours.

Her fingers release tension, the page falls. Three. On the top right corner, the drawing of a sitting female statue, round and powerful. Under this image letters stamped in red: SAINT, SYNTRO, TROP. Concentric circles in red and orange, many O's fading out, a mass of sorrel seeds shaping a wide A,

She brings the page down. Four. A composition of elements, leaves, sorrel seeds, drawings in pencil, curves, drops. In the background more sediments.

The page falls. Now, the photo of a field. The forest at the horizon, a light brown roll covers the soil. On it, the pasted title of a book, RATHER FEED, red. Blue sky with a few clouds, no leaves on trees, early spring? On the edge tiny flowers and a square with stamped letters.

The time it takes for sixty-nine pages to fall. Behind the aproned body, a hundred-and-fifty years old Wisteria tree holds the entrance walls.



Figure 64: Twelve pages of the zine des Minières (June 2024).

Acknowledgements

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Notes

¹ Over three years, eleven *table du zine* were held by Les Minières:

- May 2024 – *Floraisons d'histoires*, writers and botanists
- December 2023 – Winter retreat, artists
- July 2023 – *Grande Fête*, villagers, members, transgenerational
- April 2023 – *Et toi qu'est-ce que tu fabriques?*, neighbours, peers from local foundations
- December 2022 – Winter retreat, artists
- July 2022 – *Grande Fête*, villagers, members, transgenerational
- June 2022 – *Nuits des Forêts*, artists
- April 2022 – *La Mue*, architects, visual artists, members
- February 2022 – *Les Mots Tordus*, local school pupils, 4–12 years old
- November 2021 – *Les Mots Tordus*, local school pupils, 4–12 years old, start of the zine's compost
- July 2021 – *Grande Fête*, villagers, members, transgenerational

² The choice of words is informed by François Jullien's book *Living Off Landscape* (2018) where the author investigates human's implication with the world, positioning landscape as a matter of living.

³ Words of the practice and also title of the chapter of *Gleaners and the Worms* in Brussels in March 2024, hosted by the Radical house, with a public session held at rile* bookstore.

⁴ May 2025 – Les Minières, *Danse en ruralité* ODI Normandie, 16 pages

March 2025 – Amsterdam, Encounters between Performance Philosophy and Animals: the Politics of Animal Knowledges, 18 pages

March 2025 – Les Minières hosting students of Flora Tristan, 18 pages

December 2024 – Les Minières Winter retreat, 10 pages

November 2024 – Florence Attivisti Della Danza, 10 pages

September 2024 – Les Minières hosting students of Flora Tristan, 22 pages

September 2024 – Amsterdam Interspecies Performance Symposium, 28 pages

July 2024 – Les Minières *Grande Fête*, 7 pages

June 2024 – Bordeaux Books on the Move anniversary, 12 pages

June 2024 – Les Minières *Nuits des Forêts*, audience, 12 pages

⁵ *Se terre* is both a misspelling of *se taire* which translates into being quiet, and it is also a proposition on page 136 of the *zine des Minières*: to earth oneself. This example expresses an attention for various layers of meaning and sense making.

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Biography

Emilie Gallier is a choreographer researcher who lives between Leiden (The Netherlands) and Les Minieres (France). She developed the idea and practice of reading in and as performance, in her practice-as-research PhD: Reading in Performance, Lire en Spectacle (2021, Centre for Dance Research Coventry University, DAS Graduate School). Her engagement with artistic research as a researcher (Amsterdam University of the Arts), a tutor (THIRD), peer (PEERS, Zürich), co-editor (De Nieuwedansbibliotheek), bookworm, gleaner and spectator, shapes her attention and experience with forms of writing and publishing, and with what is active in practices. She is co-founder of Les Minieres in Normandy (France), gathering regenerative agriculture and performing art practices. <https://lesminieres.org/>

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