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# Immersive Performance and Somatic Practices:

## Joan Davis and the *Maya Lila* Project

Emma Meehan

### Abstract

In this article, I focus on the work of Irish choreographer Joan Davis in order to draw out a debate on the value offered by somatic movement approaches to the field of immersive performance. Such works immerse audiences and performers in sensory, site-based and participatory performance. There has been a recent surge in popularity of immersive theatre experiences and scholarship on this topic, with the writings for example of Alston (2013), Harvie (2013), Machon (2013), and White (2012) examining issues such as the agency of audience members and the relationship between individual freedom and group responsibility. What do somatic performances, which often physically immerse participants in outdoor environments, found spaces, or designed installations, have to offer this field of theory and practice? Drawing on ideas in environmental theatre and performance ecology, including the work of Reeve (2011), Kershaw (2007/1999) and Schechner (1973, 1993), I explore the relationship between people, sites, objects, and wildlife in somatic performances as part of a whole ecology in shifting negotiation. I propose that although active, individual, experiential participation is part of these performances, body-mind reflective engagement in relationship to context is a vital contribution somatics can offer to immersive practice more generally. This will be discussed in relation to Joan Davis' *Maya Lila* project (2002-2015), as she invites participants to become aware of their behaviours within installation environments, as a means to explore being within and separate from a community, as well as challenging expectations, perceptions and actions.

Key words: somatic practices, immersive, interactive, Joan Davis, installation, site

### Introduction

In this article, I examine the work of Irish choreographer Joan Davis and her *Maya Lila* performance project, to investigate what a somatic approach can offer immersive performance.<sup>i</sup> Although somatic practices are often part of a therapeutic exchange between client and facilitator, a substantial body of practice and research has developed internationally on the relationship between somatic movement and performance making, which this contribution addresses (see for example the *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices*). Specifically, Davis works with Authentic

Movement practice, which involves an ethical exchange between the mover who engages in free-form movement exploration in the presence of a 'witness' who notices their own experiences while watching the mover in a non-judgemental manner, followed by a structured dialogue between these co-participants (see Adler 2002). The focus of Davis' *Maya Lila* project is to develop the discipline of Authentic Movement for performance, through exploring body-mind awareness and expression in a series of site-responsive works in Ireland. In my view, Davis' approach adds to immersive work by encouraging reflection on behaviours in public space, and addressing conflicting feelings of connection and separation. Davis' somatic methodology values the difficulties of immersive works, confronting 'freedom' with patterned behaviour, and reflecting on the place of the individual in relation to the wider community. Somatic, immersive practices can therefore provide ways to introduce body-mind reflection on experience, and for people to mediate between the sensory information that they are receiving, and how they are perceiving and acting in response.



Figure 1: Willow and Mirror Tunnel, interactive performance environment by Joan Davis, photograph by Emma Meehan

Over a period of six years, I gathered an understanding of Davis' work by taking part in her training workshops, attending her performances and later becoming a 'host' and assistant in her work. I

was curious about how Davis' use of space and audience participation related to what can be described as 'immersive performance'. Immersivity in performance is characterised by the placement of audience and performers in a site, usually outside traditional stage spaces, where there are elements such as freedom to roam and make choices, an emphasis on the sensual and inter-personal encounters. As Machon notes the term 'immersive' is 'now attached to diverse events that assimilate a variety of art forms and seek to exploit all that is experiential in performance, placing the audience at the heart of the work' (2013: 22). In many ways, Davis' work resonates with historical precedents to immersive performance such as the work of the Situationist International group, Allan Kaprow and Richard Schechner who proposed events that occurred in the relationship between audience, performer and space and often encouraged the audience to participate in rather than primarily view works of art (see Plant 1992, Kaprow 1966, Schechner 1973). More recently, there has been a wave of immersive, experiential work produced by companies, organisations and individuals such as Punchdrunk, Coney, Shunt, Blast Theory, dreamthinkspeak, You Me Bum Bum Train (Kate Bond and Morgan Lloyd), and events within the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, which invite the audience to wander and interact within the frame of the art work (see Harvie 2013 and Machon 2013). Such works could be viewed as 'utopian' in the way aim to build community, propose to offer freedom and/or attempt to tear down barriers between diverse participants. Also, despite the apparent desire to interrupt consumer culture by earlier practitioners, such work can also be critiqued today for the ways in which they commodify audience experience and feelings of momentary connectedness, reiterating the contemporary marketing of brands in the 'experience economy' (see Alston 2013).

In this chapter, I want to argue for the ways in which Joan Davis' work encourages the potential for reflection on perception and action in ways that engage with Jen Harvie's (2013: 61) call for immersive works that: 'can help audiences not only to identify and critique problematic social relations but also begin to resist them, and to seek to form better social relations by participating in models...of shared social responsibility and mutual dependence.' Although I am aware of this potential as an 'immersed' participant-researcher in Davis' for several years, I am unsure whether an audience member who experiences Davis' work always learns to become aware of their behaviour in the performances, and if this later informs how they act in everyday life. However, the aim of sharing a reflective practice and inviting the audience to see this within a wider context is invited within the performances, and I will therefore argue for the contribution a somatic approach can offer to the field of immersive performance practice.

Beyond Davis' work, many contemporary somatic-based performance practitioners (such as Sandra Reeve, Helen Poynor, the *enterandinhabit* collective, Anna Halprin, amongst many others) explore the performance context as a central component, making work in found spaces, moving within nature, responding to built environments or creating installations. Elements of their work, in line with Josephine Machon's 'scale of immersivity' (2013), can include audience involvement, sensual contact, opportunities for intimacy, direct encounter with space/objects/people and the inclusion of site or environment to stimulate engagement. Immersivity in somatic performance practices is therefore often developed through the relationship with landscape and site, along with the shifting topographies of bodies and local communities as they negotiate space. The immersion is less a 'placing' of the audience by the choreographer and tends instead towards an exploration of relationships with spatial arenas, reflecting on subjective sensory experiences and perceptual fields as both bodies and spaces move together. Somatic practitioners, who also often operate within the realm of private and personal development through therapeutic somatic work, are therefore occupying the public arena through performance and inhabiting contexts where shifts in expectation, perception and action can occur, even if briefly.

### **Joan Davis, *Maya Lila* and Immersion**



Figure 2: Joan Davis and audience members in the Willow and Mirror tunnel, photograph by Leslie Davis

The *Maya Lila* event includes a journey through the vast gardens at Gorse Hill, an exploration of a 'Willow and Mirror' installation, and a dance performance in an amphitheatre space overlooking the sea. The installation at Gorse Hill is a figure of eight-shaped maze constructed from growing willow. The structure contains many interactive objects such as wool for weaving, distorted mirrors, boxes with instructions such as 'smell this', instruments and so on. The performers and audience are invited to enter the tunnel and become absorbed in their own sensory experience, at times meeting and interacting with each other. In the Willow and Mirror tunnel, audience members are engaged in their own sensory experiences, alongside the 'performers' who move in the space and respond to what emerges. The photograph above (Figure 2) depicts three audience members in the Willow and Mirror tunnel, while Joan Davis moves in the space above them. One woman sits upright, wearing a large white scarf and glasses attached by a chord around her neck, seriously intent on something in her hand. Beside her, there is what looks like a couple in bright summer clothes. The young woman is holding bubbles and her partner looks on as though he is about to speak. Above them, Joan Davis hangs out of a branch, and they appear to be oblivious to her 'performance'. I notice the juxtaposition of dancers and audience, and I imagine they could be on a train, passengers sharing a space but not the same reality. In this environment, personal experiences are developed within the environment, although they change throughout the course of the event, and are also framed through the perception of other audience members.

After experiencing the tunnel for an extended period of time, the performers and audience move to an amphitheatre at the bottom of the garden, where dancers perform in solos, duets and group movement sequences, sometimes involving the audience through the use of tasks or physical contact. While the tunnel may appear to be the most immersive aspect of the event, the amphitheatre performance can give space to the audience to sit and watch while still immersed in the wider Gorse Hill environment. The use of the space as an environment shared by performers and audience is a feature of both the installation and the amphitheatre, reflecting Schechner's (1973: 19) comment that:

... the lighting and arrangement of space make it impossible to look at an action without seeing other spectators who visually, at least, are part of the performance. Nor is it possible to avoid a knowledge that for the others you are part of the performance. And insofar as performing means taking on the executive function, every spectator is forced into that to some degree by the architecture of environmental theater.

Participants become part of the visual, sensual and perceptual field of the environment which creates the event, and are invited at times to watch their experience or to experience 'watching' differently.

At a performance in 2006, I recall sitting in the amphitheatre space at a performance where very little movement happened and the dancers were quite still. I was very tired at the time as I was struggling to fit many aspects of my life together, including my doctoral research and performance projects. I remember one moment where a dancer tried to push a stick into the ground and it kept falling over. I felt a slight discomfort that the dancers were not 'performing' or trying to entertain the audience. At the same time, I felt a great sense of relief that permission was given for improvisation, trial and error, 'imperfections' and experiments – in contrast with my own striving to get everything 'right' in my life. I made the connection between the performance and my own ingrained patterns of behaviour, and began to question my own expectations. As I relaxed, I started to notice the surrounding landscape and a flock of birds flying overhead, which I hadn't noticed before, so that resting my focus allowed me to take in more of the environment surrounding me. Although I was sitting and viewing in the amphitheatre, rather than actively participating, I could still experience a sense of interconnection with the performers and environment.



Figure 3: Performers in the amphitheatre, photograph by Kevin Logan

Davis designs immersive environments which stimulate sensory engagement, movement, stillness and awareness in space. Her spatial constructions have the capacity to move themselves, and to alter the activity of those participating, creating a fluid and shifting landscape of bodies and spaces. In addition, Davis immerses the participants in her home-place, and dancer Penny Collinson (2009) notes on Davis that 'her whole self was involved and she was doing it in her home as well.' Family and friends take part in hosting and documenting the event, while her grandchildren and family pets play together in the gardens. The performers live and work at Gorse Hill centre while preparing for the performances, so that they are immersed in the space for periods of up to four weeks. Audience members must also choose to travel from their familiar places of entertainment into Davis home place in order to access the performances, becoming submerged in the environment for the duration of the event. This starts from the journey to Gorse Hill which is in a remote location, several hours at the event, time for refreshments and discussion after, and the return journey home in groups on a mini-bus.

Baz Kershaw has discussed theatre as a living and interdependent system of exchange in *Theatre Ecology* (2007: 194), suggesting that 'the reduction in the authority and power of the theatre audience is a suppression of vitality in the ecology of performance, and an undermining of the theatre's democratic potential.' Kershaw's discussion of theatre ecology is one way of assessing the quality of an immersive event, by questioning the extent to which the performance allows for dialogue, intervention and response by the audience. Davis encourages the mover (performer and/or audience) in their choice of pathways through the work, and also considers the environment as an equal counterpart with the human participants, allowing people and places to inform the experience of the artwork. Sandra Reeve (2011: 48) describes how an ecological movement approach views 'the world through a lens of flux, from movement and constant change.' Davis' project could be considered to be in constant motion, loosening structures and shifting positions, while the fluctuating ecology allows the inclusion of difference, negotiation and change.

### ***Maya Lila, Community and Separation***

The idea of an immersive environment is often connected with ideas of community (and its opposite such as difference, alienation, incompatibility or separation). Davis' performances refer back to Authentic Movement practice where individuals come together to form a movement collective (Adler 1999), informed largely by Jungian psychology. Operating within the sphere of the *Maya Lila* performances, there are various communities at play within the collective. On the



micro level, there are the performers, audience, and 'hosts' described later; on the macro level, there are the contexts that inform the work and perceptions of it. On this broader contextual level, *Maya Lila* emerged in a period of rapidly expanding globalization in Ireland, during the 'Celtic Tiger' financial boom and later a period of recession. The introduction of the Euro currency in 2002 emphasised Irish identification with Europe, there was a significant rise in immigration, and an increasing accessibility to travel which influenced performance training and production (see Lonergan 2009, Pilny 2005 and Sweeney 2008). Within this economic and historical context, it is also significant that most of the *Maya Lila* performances have taken place in Davis' home place and residential centre, Gorse Hill in Co. Wicklow, Ireland. The idyllic, rural location around thirty kilometres from Dublin city seems to yearn for a pre-globalised Ireland, with the placement of *Maya Lila* in the unsullied landscape of Gorse Hill, and the centrality of local space and community. Davis builds communities of sharing, such as inviting people to sessions where they offer their time and expertise to make materials for the *Maya Lila* event, give feedback on the installation and performances, along with sharing tea, snacks and conversation. This could be described as reverting back to the Irish tradition of 'meitheal' where local communities shared labour in rural Ireland (O'Dowd 1981), and resonates with a recent interest in alternative currencies and exchange economies as a political response to the current financial crisis.<sup>ii</sup> At the same time, *Maya Lila* represents the mobility of identities in a globalised society, with the building of a global community in a local space. The performance team have over the years drawn from Ireland, England, Germany and America to name a few, while the audience are a community of interest rather than from the locality. Davis also notes connections with the work of international somatic practitioners and practices, having trained with Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen who developed Body-Mind Centering and Janet Adler of Authentic Movement practice, rather than making reference to Irish influences.

Returning to the micro level, the dancers live together in community during the course of the project; while the performance can be viewed as a community event of participation. The performance occasion, or 'offering' as it is described by Davis, is facilitated by intermediaries called 'hosts' whose role lies between the separate groups of audience and performers to encourage a sense of guiding and connection with what unfolds in the performance. The hosts are trained to guide the audience through the event, with a range of tasks such as offering tea and snacks, leading a procession from the residential centre to gardens, stimulating the audience's senses through providing smells such as herbs and flowers, or offering touch through placing objects on the audience. The hosts act as bridge between the audience, performers and

the new environment, becoming a familiar point of contact within the chaotic, immersive space of the performance event. Circles of participation through the groups of performers, hosts and audience form distinct communities within the event but also blur as roles cross-over, forming a larger community whose levels of participation interchange.

As a host at a performance in 2010, I recall feeling nervous and self-conscious about how I might interact with the audience. I decided to 'model' sensorial play for the audience and also to calm my nerves, by picking up pieces of wood from the installation, allowing my finger-tips to feel the texture, which was rough and bumpy. I started breathing more freely as my limbs eased out, and I looked around at another audience member. As she stood nearby, I offered a young girl a 'necklace' or adornment constructed by Davis from natural materials to try on. She said 'yes' but her eyes looked away awkwardly and again the feeling of discomfort came back to me as I was lost between deciding whether to put the necklace on her or to leave her alone. My experiences as a host fluctuate between facilitator, intruder, insider, and outsider. I consider this role as being part of but separate from the visiting audience, participating and observing (similar to my role as researcher). As a host, I can experience mobility and sensorial engagement, along with reflection, separation, and observation. While Davis hopes to create a sense of participation and connection through community, this does not always occur. Davis (2007: 158) comments that:

After a very difficult offering where everything felt like it fell apart, the feedback from several people was one of disconnection. I always feel a sense of failure when I hear this and it makes me go back and try and work out what went 'wrong'. However, I now begin to see that this is just a dynamic that sometimes happens in this work.

This recognition of the conflict between the desire to build community but also the need to allow for the varying experiences of individuals is, in fact, a critical part of the performances where ideas of liberty and democracy confront each other.

At one Gorse Hill performance, Davis had left a supermarket chicken, amongst other ordinary objects, in the gardens in order to provide a bridge from everyday life to the topsy-turvy world of the performances. During the event, the chicken was placed by a dancer in the amphitheatre and Davis' cat started circling around the edge of the space. As a viewer, I felt a palpable sense of tension as we looked and waited to see what would happen next, and I wondered whether the cat would pounce and whether it was safe for her to eat a raw chicken. While I do not know what this image evoked for them, two audience members who looked very uneasy ran out of the

amphitheatre space, creating a drama of two individuals staking out freedom from a community event with which they could not identify. Immersion can cause experiences of discomfort, being overwhelmed and not having enough space to stand back, for performers and audience alike. Dancer Penny Collinson (interview, 2009) notes: 'I found it challenging at times, on a practical level. I found being out there for three weeks and being with everybody ... I know we all struggled with that at times, living together.' The idea of the community as a coherent group has also been questioned by legal disputes between Davis and some neighbouring residents regarding parking rights which requires management during performances (such as the introduction of a mini-bus service to Gorse Hill from the local train station). Clearly, conflicting needs come into dialogue during *Maya Lila* as the colliding forces of individuals and communities come into contact.

Taking into account the issues of individual freedom and community collaboration, the work has developed away from some of the utopian ideals of participative theatre in the 1960s and 70s, which included nudity and sexual contact between performers and audience members. Issues of sexual violation arose, for example, during a performance of the Living Theatre's *Paradise Now!* (1968), indicating the problematic issues of free expression (See Kershaw 1999: 197). More recently, philosopher Jacques Rancière (2009: 15) notes that while placing the spectator on the stage and the performer within the audience has enriched theatre, he questions 'the requirement that theatre assign itself the goal of assembling a community which ends the separation of the spectacle'. He suggests (2009: 10-13) that the role of viewing spectator should not be equated with passivity, as the spectator 'observes, selects, compares, interprets'. Within *Maya Lila*, there are opportunities to both take part physically and to watch as a spectator, in the movement between tunnel and amphitheatre – although these roles sometimes crossover in the different spaces. I consider that opportunities for material immersion within somatic environments are vital to the work whether through participating or watching (or doing both simultaneously). However, while a sense of interconnection between performer, audience and space may happen in the performances, I suggest that Davis' does not attempt to end experiences of separation or distance between individuals. Rather, feelings of disconnection are as important as those of engagement, which is an issue often not addressed in large-scale, commercially-oriented immersive performance events. Davis' choreography offers a space to contemplate patterned behaviour rather than suggesting that it is a hurdle to free expression, as the work has potential to awaken the audience participants' capacity to notice their impulses to engage (or not) in the performances. In fact, the jarring experience of disorientation and disconnection have provided some very important moments in *Maya Lila*.

Klein (2013: 204) examines the conflict between the needs of individual and group, commenting that 'a community can only escape from this dialectic, if it continuously questions itself with regard to its own openness, finiteness, and foreignness.' This questioning is apparent in *Maya Lila* through the unfixed content of the performance that changes according to the co-creative activity of the audience. The performances reveal moments of mutual sharing and also conflicting interests, with provisional communities forming at each performance which are in constant flux as they respond to the changing circumstances. Through communal participation, Davis also hopes to create a social sphere for reflection on interpersonal and inter-spatial relationship. As contradictory impulses and preferences meet, Davis attempts to facilitate participants to observe choices amongst the complex interactions that emerge, uncovering questions about relationship, communication, and collaboration.

### **Indoor Immersion: Expectation and Perception**

Between 2009 and 2011, many *Maya Lila* performances took place in public arts venues across the counties of Dublin and Wicklow in Ireland. Setting the work in rural and urban arts spaces opens up the work to an extended community of new attendees who might not have travelled to Gorse Hill. Davis (personal email communication, 2011) suggests that she has started to move the *Maya Lila* performances to small galleries and arts centres as the next step of the project, but these spaces do not have the same relational connections and sensorial qualities of the Gorse Hill gardens. How do these venues allow for somatic approaches such as the agency of the participant to be stimulated? How do expectations in these indoor spaces linked with 'performance' and 'dance' affect the work? And finally, how does Davis adapt the locations to create immersive environments in such spaces?

*Maya Lila* was performed at The Courthouse Arts Centre in Tinahely, Co. Wicklow in 2009, where the audience mostly decided to stay seated around the edge of the lower floor. From their place of security – the seats – the audience seemed to be able to interact, watch attentively, make comments, and laugh. This indoor performance does not appear to be totally 'immersive' like the gardens at Gorse Hill, as audiences are not taken into an alternative space and encompassed by an interactive environment. Instead, the spatial layout at each indoor venue brings habits, codes and expectations which inform the performances, at times reproducing systems of interaction found in proscenium arch theatre. Kershaw (1999: 32) describes this as the 'disciplinary functions of theatre' where the behaviour of performers and audience members are contained and diffused

in the system of performance. The expression of the audience has been reduced to a number of contained actions, such as applause, and the architecture of the space separates audience and performers from shared experiences, which does not invite high degrees of physical, vocal or social exchange.



Figure 4: Audience and performers at the Courthouse Arts Centre, Tinahely, photograph by Leslie Davis

Although a seated and silent audience member may be actively decoding a performance in diverse ways, Kershaw questions where the opportunity to alter the course of events resides in such work. In bringing *Maya Lila* to arts centres, audience expectations are brought into relief, which perhaps reduces the extent of interpersonal exchange and physical participation. However, I also view this as a chance to witness responses to a somatic performance while immersed in an arts centre, therefore exposing responses to *Maya Lila* while in more regulated contexts than Gorse Hill. Occasionally, surprising moments of collaboration can occur, and as the performance unfolded at Tinahely Arts Centre, a human chain started to form. A dancer held fast to the pillar and a chair, then another dancer tagged on, joined by an audience member, slowly forming a line reaching out towards the hallway. Klein notes (2013: 207) that ‘political activity is understood as the sensual practice of visualizing and transforming cultural and social codes, especially in the public sphere’ and suggests that participatory choreography can be political when ‘the aesthetic

practice rankles structures, norms, habit and conventions.’ Davis is attempting just that, to reframe habitual modes of expectation and action, which is keenly brought to the fore in spaces which usually restrict behaviour.

In *Maya Lila*, the choreography is not just concerned with shifting action but also perception, which has been highlighted by the *Maya Lila* performances at Dance House in Dublin city centre. Davis has returned on several occasions to this space, using a large, grey dance studio space that is surrounded by mirrors, big windows and brick walls, offering no nooks or crannies for the participants to explore unlike Gorse Hill. The first performance at Dance House in 2009 was considered to be challenging by the dancers, with the space bringing up self-consciousness about physical appearance (Montes 2009). In addition, no audience participation happened at all during the initial performance at Dance House. Davis began to invest in building environments at the venue that, although quite different from Gorse Hill, could create an absorbing and interactive environment while amplifying the contextual issues of the mirrors inherent in the space.



Figure 4: Plexiglass at Dance House, photograph by Paul Harris

Mirrors and glass appear in *Maya Lila* as a recurring theme, such as the convex and concave mirrors that distort physical appearances at the Willow and Mirror Tunnel or the shards of mirror that are offered to audience members to view fragments of their appearance at performances. The presence of the mirrors could reference the emphasis on visual appearance in society (especially in the context of dance training), but also specifically highlights the concept of shifting realities of perspective running through Davis’ work.<sup>iii</sup> In 2010 and 2011, Davis installed large,

hanging sheets of etched plexiglass at Dance House, so that they could twist and turn in the space. Plexiglass is both a reflective and transparent material, depending on the position of the viewer, so that images of self, other people and the space are visually overlaid in a confusing phantasmagoria of reflections. Adding to the unsettling 'mirroring back' of experience and shifting of perspectives, Davis projected live streamed images of bodies and objects in the space in 2011. The aim was not simply to engage with the visual image from the mirrors and projections but also to interact with the reflected and projected material as another sensory, active and live component which was constantly changing. The performers and audience could move in and out of this scenographic arrangement, exploring the glass and how it altered perceptions, while the swinging sheets continually displaced and circulated the reflected images. The plexiglass and projected images lie in stark contrast with the colour and sensuality of Gorse Hill, but the overall effect in my experience is of an immersive, absorbing space with reflections creating images of many more bodies and spaces in the room.

In the photograph above (Figure 4), the mover behind the large sheet of plexiglass is mostly hidden, with hands appearing to the edges. On the same pane of glass, Joan Davis is reflected, seated in another part of the room, but now appearing where the hidden mover's body should be. Perspective is skewed as Davis' distant body now seems near through the mirroring process, though she also appears as a small figure beside dancer Henry Montes who is playing with the hanging materials to the side of the glass. Elmar Jung, a host, also appears to the right-hand side of the frame, who is sitting on the opposite side of the room from Davis – although it seems as though he is sitting on the same side as Davis because of her reflection. Depending where the viewer is positioned, this image would appear entirely differently, with the effect of creating a fragmentary, surprising and shifting perception of people and place. This process was further multiplied by the projection of live-recorded images of objects, people, and reflections in the space in real time onto surrounding surfaces, captured by me and another participant in the project.

While the plexiglass installation is unlike the multi-sensory environment of Gorse Hill, it invokes the sense of perception which is important in Authentic Movement practice. There is structure surrounding the reflection on practice or 'witnessing' which involves the use of language to 'locate the perceptions (and the feelings that accompany them) in the speaker rather than in external objects' (Stromsted and Haze 1999: 59). This is in order to acknowledge subjective perspectives, reflect on personal judgement, and develop a form of non-violent communication. The unpicking of perception is part of this wider thrust of Davis' work towards understanding human relationships and developing modes of exchange that reflect on the subject positioning of each person. While

it is a high ideal to expect to be able to produce this effect through immersive performance, Davis makes attempts to promote awareness through inviting the audience to take on a role of responsibility for their expectations and perceptions in the performances. Somatic practices emphasise reflection which is not simply about personal insights, but about becoming aware of our perceptions and using these to understand our interrelationship with other people and contexts that we inhabit.

## **Conclusion**

Joan Davis' *Maya Lila* project emerged at a time when immersivity has been widely debated especially in relation to its potential claims for agency. However, there are significant differences between Davis' work and large-scale, profitable immersive performances like those produced by Punchdrunk, such as the fact that the *Maya Lila* performances are free to attend, they are small scale, and they have developed away from art market centres so that no reviewers or international festival programmers have attended. I feel it is therefore important to frame *Maya Lila* within the context of immersive performance to contest the primary association of such work with neoliberal agendas and funder requirements for audience engagement (see Conibere 2017 on arts policy, audience development and neoliberalism). Alston (2012: 130) connects immersive performances with such experiences as theme parks and strip clubs, engaging in neoliberal entrepreneurialism on the one hand, and 'hedonistic and narcissistic desire' on the other. On the other hand, I want to argue for the hopeful potential of many immersive works emerging on the side lines of commercially successful enterprises to explore the space of exchange between audience, performer and space, and which I have seen in the work of various somatic-based performance practitioners over the years.

The immersivity in *Maya Lila* is developed not only by shaping the scenographic space, but also the passing of participatory bodies through it. Davis choreographs opportunities for chance and choice through including sensory and reflective activities in the work. Along with immersing audiences in somatic landscapes at Gorse Hill, Davis' experiments at indoor spaces meet the limits of what can be considered 'immersion'. I consider that literal physical encompassing can occur in any space but, as Machon points out (2013: 67), it is the 'intention' in creating immersivity that is crucial. Creating immersive experiences of sensuality, participation, choice and reflection is clearly an intention of both Davis' indoor and outdoor performances. The surprising and unruly combinations that appear and disappear in the performances are part of an aleatory, mutating choreography. However, there are limitations to the possible movement of bodies and interactivity



in *Maya Lila* due to spatial, personal, and legal restrictions, along with the aesthetic choices made by Davis. At the same time, unlike many participatory performances, in my opinion, *Maya Lila* is not a utopia of free expression and pleasurable experience as restrictions in the social and cultural desires for freedom become apparent. Immersion in somatic landscapes is not simply to create an 'experience', but rather to stimulate integrated body-mind responses that are in proportion to the situation inhabited, negotiating between connection and disconnection, freedom and limitation. The immersive environment is an important aspect of the work, providing an incubation space for experimentation and play, which is hoped to have a ripple effect on peoples' perceptions in their everyday lives. Immersion in somatic performances offer opportunities to reconsider social interactions with other people, the choices and judgements we make, and the ways in which we relate to the environment and our communities. However, they can also produce clashes between individual, community and environmental needs, which give food for thought rather than providing easy answers.

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## Biography

Dr. Emma Meehan is a Research Fellow at Coventry University's Centre for Dance Research. She received her BA and PhD from the Drama Department, Trinity College, Dublin. Her research is primarily on somatic movement practices, practice as research and Irish contemporary dance. In 2016-2017, she toured a performance and exhibition called *Live Archive* on the work of Irish company Dublin Contemporary Dance Theatre funded by the Arts Council of Ireland. Publications include the co-edited collection *The Performing Subject in the Space of Technology: Through the Virtual Towards the Real* with Matthew Causey and Neill O'Dwyer (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). Emma is an associate editor for *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices*, and co-convenor of the Performance as Research Working Group at the International Federation for Theatre Research.

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<sup>i</sup> *Maya Lila* is the title for Davis' project, meaning 'illusion/play', which she borrowed from Richard Schechner's (1993: 34) description of the traditional Indian dance *Rasliila* where 'maya-lila generates a plenitude of performances: interpenetrating, transformable, nonexclusive, porous realities.'<sup>ii</sup> In Davis' performances, illusions of reality appear and disappear as performance continually transforms in the play between audience, performer and space.

<sup>ii</sup> See for example, the *Giving into Gift* project, <http://givingintogift.org/>, accessed 13 December 2013.

<sup>iii</sup> For more information on mirrors, self-image and identity in Davis' work, see Meehan (2010: 225-227)