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## Letting the Body Lead

Amanda Boggs

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Letting the Body Lead

A Thesis Presented

by

AMANDA BOGGS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

September 2020

Art

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# Letting the Body Lead

A Thesis Presented

by

AMANDA BOGGS

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DEDICATION

*To Indigo and Dianne*

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ABSTRACT

LETTING THE BODY LEAD

SEPTEMBER 2020

AMANDA BOGGS, B.A., AMHERST COLLEGE

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Directed by: Susan Jahoda

*Letting the Body Lead* is an exhibition and workshop series that focuses on embodiment in social context and invites attendees to engage with the work, both as viewers and active participants. Embodiment in social context refers to the understanding of lived experiences in the body. Within my creative practice, I explore the body's creativity, knowledge, and agency while bridging and bringing together the fields of fine arts using movement-based and socially just art making. I believe in the transformative potential of how movement and contemplative practices can support a more liberated way of being both within an individual and, by extension, within broader communities and social movements.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: EXHIBIT AND CREATIVE PRACTICE

*“Our experience of moving through the world is a vital mode in which we learn about ourselves and about our world. This knowledge is both incorporated and embodied: it is brought into our experience through the body and is expressed through it. It perceives the position of the body parts and processes the scores of information about laterality, gravity, verticality, balance, tensions, dynamics, as well as integrating and coordinating rhythm, tempo, and sequences of movements.” --Fiona Buckland<sup>1</sup>*

*“Somatic practice is intentional practice, with the aim of shifting what we embody. Our somatic practices simultaneously draw us into deeper awareness, while reinforcing and strengthening the skills that are part of our emerging “new shape”. Whatever the competencies we’re trying to develop--whether the ability to declare clear boundaries on our time and labor, take greater accountability for our actions, communicate directly and authentically, coordinate effectively with others, or sustain our focus toward goals even under pressure--they become solidly embodied only through ongoing practice.” --Alta Starr<sup>2</sup>*

Movement is a form of embodied knowledge and communication, housing and sharing vast amounts of information. Movement is also an expression of the human spirit, allowing people to know themselves and one another from the inside out. In examining the experience of the moving body, its impulses and reactions, one can learn about the ways human beings know one another. The body’s movement is a product of a lifetime of practices formed by individual experiences. Born from a childhood climbing towering Magnolia trees, playing competitive sports, and dancing for endless hours, my movement practices have always been a vital way I engage with my environment to create and deepen relationships with my family, friends, and even strangers on the

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<sup>1</sup> Fiona Buckland, *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World-Making* (Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 95.

<sup>2</sup> Alta Starr, “Cultivating Self, Embodied Transformation for Artists” from *Making and Being* (Pioneer Works Press, 2020) 54.

dance floor. In my life today, I maintain this practice through collaborative and improvisational movement experimentation, as demonstrated by my relationships with my mother, Dianne Dunn, and my son, Indigo.



Figure 1. *Generations*, Movement Study, December 2017.

It is important to note that the presentation of *Letting the Body Lead* was directly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The research and creative art making for *Letting the Body Lead* rests in a liminal space as the world shifts between pre-pandemic, initial outbreak, and post-outbreak realities. As I write this, the pandemic still rages across the United States. This work began in the Fall of 2019, before even a whisper of the pandemic was heard, and is scheduled to be exhibited at the UMass Herter Gallery in the Fall of 2020, as people around the world adjust to new social behavior and movement patterns. The reality is that many of the works created in January of 2020, including experiments in space and object exploration, would not be safe to perform during the pandemic. Other works, focusing on more meditative and individual practices,

are well suited to support individuals as we collectively grapple with embodiment in a pandemic reality.

*Letting the Body Lead* was designed to host the *Movement Lab*, a series of somatic based workshops, and show a series of movement studies, videos documenting movement experimentation. *Letting the Body Lead* was scheduled to take place at the UMass Herter Gallery from March 31st to April 6th, 2020. On March 23rd, UMass moved to remote learning, effectively closing-down all campus facilities including the Herter Gallery. The *Movement Lab* was most immediately affected by the pandemic because the scheduled daily workshops could not take place. However, during the academic year, I led several embodied practice workshops in preparation for *Letting the Body Lead*. The research gleaned from these workshops will be referenced in this paper, when relevant.

The Herter Gallery is made up of two large galleries and one small gallery. In one of the large galleries, I intended on hosting the *Movement Lab*, a series of events that would provide attendees the opportunity to participate in object exploration, yoga classes, and mind/body centering workshops. In the other large gallery, I envisioned a large-scale, immersive video and sound installation, *These Embodied Walls*, using a short throw video projector. In the small gallery, I planned to exhibit a series of documented movement studies, *Basketball/Spinner*, *Mom and I*, *Red Coats*, and *Lake Terramuggus*, on flat-screen monitors. Written that corresponded with each movement experiment would have been next to each work. These scores were to act as an “offering”, inviting attendees to take the scores home with them.

At the heart of my creative practice lies a deep curiosity about discovering new ways of moving through the world and understanding the implications related to how these new forms of embodiment can act as a catalyst for personal and collective transformation. I am deeply interested in how movement with everyday objects within familiar places can moderate social relationships. I ask how can we use creative movement and improvisation with these objects and within these spaces to help us create a “new shape” and shift what we embody. It is my hope that those who eventually attend the exhibition and experience the workshops will carry these new practices beyond the gallery walls, into the fabric of their own lived experiences and to their communities.

I argue that the study of movement experimentation within a social context can provide a vital form of knowledge that can illuminate new ways of being through the exploration of alternate movement patterns. In this research, I focus on the development and sharing of improvisatory and collaborative movement experimentation. Objects and spaces provide a container for movement that diverges from and challenges normalized patterns of behavior.

For example, in Western culture, when we move through a traditional, white-walled gallery, we know the rules of engagement. Walk through the gallery slowly, stay three feet away from the walls, and don't touch anything unless given permission. The practices inculcated in children become habitual in adults. Your body must stay in line and obey the rules. But what happens when we push against the socially sanctioned playbook? It is only when we diverge from normalized behavior patterns that we can recognize the extent we are adhering to the rules and perhaps experience the transformative liberation when new forms of movement arise. My motive in this work is to

create new movement practices that offer another path when we move from the heart of who we are.

Improvisatory movement provides the structure for experimentation. Danielle Goldman, associate professor of critical dance studies at The New School, looks at social, cultural, and historical conditions that affect how people move. Goldman describes how “full bodied engagement with the world is characterized by both flexibility and perpetual readiness.”<sup>3</sup> In my practice, I create movement experiments in which participants must improvise, be both flexible and perpetually ready. Furthermore, Goldman’s work explores improvised dance as a vital technology of the self -- an ongoing, critical, physical, and anticipatory readiness that, while grounded in the individual, is necessary for a vibrant sociality and vital civil society. In *Letting the Body Lead*, participants and performers react to the spaces around them and work together, considering unusual variables including rotating walls, upside chairs, spinning playground apparatus, and snow-covered landscapes.

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<sup>3</sup> Danielle Goldman, *I Want to be Ready* (University of Michigan Press, 2010), 22.

## CHAPTER 2

### PERSONAL EMBODIED HISTORY

I grew up in Washington, D.C. and summer afternoons were often intensely hot and humid. It was not uncommon for temperatures to rise above 100 degrees. It was August 1983, the dog days of summer, and I was ten years old. To escape the oppressive heat, my family of six piled into our blue Volkswagen Vanagon and drove to the Mount Vernon College Swimming Pool. Never has a fifteen-minute drive taken so epically long. Every fiber of my body longed to be engulfed by the cool, chlorinated water, a blue, swirling, liquid oasis. At about 5 o'clock, we arrived at the Olympic-sized, outdoor pool, surrounded by a smattering of white, plastic chairs, tables, and chaise lounges within a chain link fence.

The sky was incredibly blue, cloudless, and the setting sun cast long chaise lounge shadows across the pale grey cement. I wore my favorite bathing suit, a one-piece number with purple and black diagonal stripes. Instead of entering the water in the shallow end near the pool entrance, I made the long trek to the deep end. I approached the edge of the pool, pressed my toes into the warm cement, and peered into the depths of the twelve-foot deep water. No one else was swimming in the deep end and I felt as if I was alone in this semi-aquatic world.

I prepared to dive and found my balance by spreading my arms out to my sides. I inhaled deeply, expanding my lungs. I bent my knees slightly, pushed my toes into the ground, and activated the muscles in my feet, calves, quadriceps, hamstrings, glutes and core. My body exploded up towards the sky as I jackknifed, remained suspended for



a moment in midair and then plunged, hands first, then arms, head, torso, legs and toes, towards the gently rippling surface. As I catapulted into the water, my body both relished and recoiled at the shock of the intensely cold water. I pushed the water with my cupped hands, arms extended in front of my body, then rotated my arms and hands back to my sides, my eyes focused downwards. My legs and feet kicked vigorously as I swam deeper and deeper. With one final stroke, my fingers touched the gritty surface at the bottom. I felt the familiar sensation of water pressure squeezing my ears, eyes, and skin. My body's internal gages sensed that I still had more than enough air in my lungs for my ascent. I pressed my feet into the grainy cement, bent my knees, and gently pushed my body upwards.

The ascent was where the magic lay, a weightless dance, like flying, feeling my body move in superhuman ways, liberated from familiar laws of gravity even as my breathing was constrained by a limited supply of oxygen. I somersaulted, twisted, and floated my way upwards. I burst through the undulating surface into the oxygenated and vibrant world. My lungs inhaled deeply, expanding my diaphragm and chest. I treaded water for a moment and then lay back to float, supported by the water's surface tension, upon a blanket of water. My skin felt the sun's warmth and my mind rejoiced in the brilliance of the blue sky above.

Throughout our lives, there are movement practices created through an accumulation of profound, unforgettable moments, as well as quieter, more seemingly, unremarkable moments that shape who we are. These movement practices accumulate with the days, months, and years of our lives and reside within our spirits and the very cells of our bodies. On a biological level, these practices shape the structures of our body's systems, most clearly seen in our muscular, skeletal, circulatory, and nervous systems.

Additionally, these movement practices combine to create an individual's unique movement vocabulary and pulsate within our bodies, allowing us to access vital parts of our spirit and support creative impulses.

Diving down into the bottom of that swimming pool and dancing my way to the surface felt effortless. However, the ability to do this was a product of hundreds, if not thousands, of hours of both structured embodied learning (practices that fit within an existing organized framework including lessons, classes, and trainings) and unstructured embodied learning (practices that are performed without anyone overseeing or dictating movement).

An example of a structured, embodied learning experience was the swimming classes I took every summer with drill master Audrey at the Cleveland Park Club pool. In these intensive classes, I honed my skills in swim strokes, diving, and life saving techniques. I never wanted to go to swimming class at 9 am in the morning during summer vacation. My mother cajoled us kids into going but with all those hours of training came a fluency of movement and safety in the water. Unstructured embodied practices also played an equally important part in my ability to creatively swim up from the bottom of the pool. These practices often spring from the joy of movement. For me, improvisatory dance, whether social or individual, has been a life-long practice. The energy of other people dancing and moving in space calls me to move and react with them. Music also plays an important role, as it invites me to engage with it and interpret it. As a child, social games allowed moments of unstructured embodied learning. For example, every summer my siblings and I went to the pool and played water games like Marco Polo and Sharks and Minos. We held our breath and had imaginary tea parties underwater. Starting at about six years old, I developed a daily practice of jumping rope and doing

gymnastics. Like music, my jump rope was a constant and ever available playmate that I engaged with alone or with others. The accumulation of these structured and unstructured embodied learning practices fostered confidence and creative expression.



Figure 2. Amanda jumping rope as child, circa 1982.

My childhood was full of creative play and constant movement. We moved into our beautiful, slightly ramshackle home in 1979 with my twin brother Nicholas, older sister Erin, father Rod, and mother, Dianne, who was soon to give birth to my younger sister, Abbie. The three-story house provided plenty of space to play, often through physical games. My siblings and I ran up and down creaky stairs and sprung at one another from behind jutting corners. The house, wrap-around porch, and large yard were our playground. We spent hours playing games such as gotcha-last-tag, hide-and-seek, sardines, basketball, freeze-tag, laser-tag, and ghost-in-the-graveyard. The architecture

of the house and yard allowed us to relate to one another through a non-verbal, improvisational, and embodied language. My parents had a profound impact on my movement practices. As a family, we did many activities together, including basketball, tennis, swimming, and hiking. I became a highly successful athlete and competed in sports including soccer, basketball, and track on the varsity level in high school and college.



Figure 3. Bidy basketball team photo, circa 1984. Amanda holds the basketball and her sister, Erin, sits to her left. Their mother and coach, Dianne, sits in the back row in pink jumpsuit.

Growing up, my mother supported my love of creative movement and dance. She enrolled me in ballet, modern dance, musical theater, clowning, and gymnastics. I quickly discovered that I disliked restrictive practices such as ballet and had absolutely no talent for memorizing strict choreography beyond a count of sixteen. Instead, I preferred to develop a fluency in a variety of movement styles, including martial arts, modern dance, sports, gymnastics and ballroom dancing, and then merged these movement styles. My favorite daily practice was dancing by myself in the living room as '80's music blasted on the radio. Whatever chaos might have been taking place in the

rest of the house fell away as the music took over and my spirit moved to each new rhythm and vibration.

When I was 16, I started going to DC dance clubs including the 9:30 Club, 18<sup>th</sup> Street Longue, The Vault, The 5<sup>th</sup> Column and Tracks, a primarily gay club in Southwest Washington, DC. At these clubs, I was surrounded by a diverse group of people who shared my passion for dancing. Tracks was my favorite place to go because it felt like my personal Nirvana, a place where I was surrounded by others who loved to move to music as much as I did.



Figure 4. Tracks Nightclub, circa 1990. From MetroWeekly.com.

In the book, *The Order of Play, Choreographing Queer Politics*, author Fiona Buckland challenges the notion of gay club culture as a utopian community. Buckland theorizes that gay club culture is often defined by class, gender and race. Individuals are described as active agents of queer world-making while learning how to be with others on the dance floor and in queer life through incorporation. They can realize “the shape”

of who they are both through embodied practices of energy transmission and movement mimesis. Buckland states:

“The impulse to dance revealed a desire to compose a version of the self that moves out of its prescribed column and dances all over the map. Improvisation developed in complex and beautiful ways from an individual’s own body-consciousness, experiences, and memories of moving in everyday life and moving on other dance floors or on the same floor in times past. Dancers had to measure the space around him or herself, and to be aware of others at the edges of the space they made for themselves on the floor through movement. Movement created the space of the dancer -- their kinesphere -- in the soundscape and on the dance floor, a place for more play.”<sup>4</sup>

On the dance floor, I moved on the fringes of a primarily male, gay, adult night-club culture. I was a young, white, heterosexual female and mostly socialized within my small network of straight high school friends. Friday nights at Tracks was promoted as an ‘eighteen and older’ house-music night with both gay and straight scenes. I did not ask to be invited into the older, social scenes but neither was I rejected by it. Instead, we shared the space and were connected through a common ‘kinesphere and soundscape.’ We shared aspects of who we were through energy transmission and movement mimesis. Their movement and energy became mine and mine theirs.

At Tracks, I experienced a sense of acceptance and freedom as I absorbed and incorporated the movement practices of those around me. With this embodied familiarity came an acceptance and respect for queer culture. I felt safe and accepted within this queer environment more than I did in ‘straight’ environments. When I moved through the choreographies of everyday life within ‘straight’ spaces, I felt a compulsion to adhere to

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<sup>4</sup> Fiona Buckland, *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World-Making* (Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 94.

restrictive movement choreographies. Sit this way, walk that that way, and, whatever you do, don't dance! At Tracks, I could move how I wanted to move. I did not feel objectified or categorized but instead felt liberated to be and explore aspects of myself without fear or shame.

These childhood and adolescent structured and unstructured movement practices merged to create my healthy body, full of strength and vitality. However, as I moved through adolescence and into adulthood, even with an outwardly appearing confident spirit, there was a large part of me still desperately trying to fit into prescribed and disempowering heteronormative ways of being.

In opposition to movement practices of expansion, there are movement practices of constriction. As an adolescent, a series of social interactions created constrictive practices that affected my body's movement patterns for decades. When I was 10 years old, I shared a large, third-floor bedroom with my 13-year old sister Erin. Our single beds were located at the opposite ends of the room. This arrangement provided an ideal space for me to dance, leap, and cartwheel from one side of the room to the other. One afternoon, as I exuberantly danced around our bedroom in the buff, my sister walked into the room, stared at me and simply said, "You are so weird." At that moment, I felt a wave of shame wash over my body. My unbridled, liberated movement and unclothed body became an odd thing, not right, too free, too "weird". I didn't dance around naked anymore.



Figure 5. Nags Head Beach, North Carolina, vacation, circa 1985. Amanda kneels in the center frame and wears the white t-shirt to cover-up her lack of breasts. Her sister, Erin, stands on the upper right corner in a blue bathing suit.

When I was 11, Erin and two of her 13-year old friends were chatting in the living room. I entered the room and, in my typical theatrical style, proceeded to playfully pound my chest and howl like a gorilla. My sister and her friends looked over at me and laughed derisively. One of Erin's friends knowingly turned to Erin and said, "We can't do that anymore". Again, a wave of shame shot through my body. My powerful chest, the place that housed my heart and my lungs, allowed me to "run like the wind," hold my breath and dive into deep water, became an "undeveloped chest," a lack of, a space where breasts should be but weren't. Deflated, my shoulders hunched over and my back slouched.

On another occasion, during a fight with my twin brother Nick, he said in response to something horrible I had probably said, "Well, you're a flat chested bitch." And with accumulation of these body shaming experiences and an '80's culture of misogyny,



including grotesque boob jobs, I spent my teenage years hiding my newly realized deformity, an undeveloped chest. My athletic form did not make the cut. My body did not appear the way a true woman should look. I altered the way I moved through the world to protect myself from the judgment and shame I felt. I moved with shoulders hunched, arms crossed, a covering and protecting of my body, always imagining people talking about my lack of breasts.

## CHAPTER 3

### TOWARDS EMPOWERMENT: THE MIND/BODY RELATIONSHIP

*Letting the Body Lead* focuses on unearthing and sharing movement memories and experiences of liberation through the incorporation of somatic practices. Somatic studies provide an effective framework for understanding the relationship between thought and movement. Alta Starr, leading facilitator and co-founder of Generative Somatic, describes the “new shape” that can be formed when we shift what we embody. Starr explains:

“Embodied transformation, the goal of the somatics path, means radically and deliberately changing this shape, first by becoming aware of our habitual relations, moods, and ways of relating, and then, over time, through a holistic and comprehensive approach, becoming able consistently, even under pressure, to generate different actions in alignment with and in service to what matters to us.”<sup>5</sup>

She states, “In that act, we can disempower negative thoughts that guided us to move and engage with others in disempowering ways.”<sup>6</sup> New patterns of movement create new spaces, potentially more empowering patterns, to emerge within our bodies, minds and spirits.

In her workshops, Alta Starr uses the somatic practice of Centering, a way of coming home to your fullest self, to your sensations, emotions, and purpose. In the practice of Centering, Starr asks participants to “notice the sensations in your body, drop your breath into your belly. Now center in your length, your full natural length, letting the top and bottom halves of your body connect and come into balance. Let your weight drop

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<sup>5</sup> Alta Starr, “Cultivating Self, Embodied Transformation for Artists” from *Making and Being* (Pioneer Works Press, 2020), 48.

<sup>6</sup> Alta Starr, “Cultivating Self, Embodied Transformation for Artists” from *Making and Being* (Pioneer Works Press, 2020), 48.

into gravity, while you let more breath and space into your spine...”<sup>7</sup> In accessing this new “shape,” there is a process of somatic opening that Starr defines as “the release of long-held contradictions that allow life to move freely and fully throughout our being.”<sup>8</sup>

Starr describes the experience of one of her workshop participants, Rob, a 13-year-old black teenager. During a Centering exercise, Rob fainted and fell to the floor. He explained that he wasn’t sure what had happened but, “after talking it over with his mother and reflecting on the experience in his journal, he described that by the time he was 13, he was already over six feet tall. Rob told the group the next day that growing up in Birmingham, Alabama, and being that tall and black, he’d learned to fold in on himself and make himself appear smaller. This wasn’t a conscious decision on his part, of course. The learning lived in his muscles and tissues, and had molded a shape necessary for his survival as a black male in that time and place, a place where once, black people had to step off the sidewalk into the gutters to allow white people to pass.”<sup>9</sup> The practice of Centering allowed Rob to experience a somatic opening, illuminating long held, constrictive movement patterns.

My own somatic opening was sparked after I gave birth to my son, Indigo, at age 39. Giving birth prompted a realignment and shedding of key aspects of my identity that were no longer serving me. This process was supported by the teachings of Buddhist nun and philosopher Pema Chödrön. In intellectually understanding and physically

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<sup>7</sup> Alta Starr, “Cultivating Self, Embodied Transformation for Artists” from *Making and Being* (Pioneer Works Press, 2020), 56.

<sup>8</sup> Alta Starr, “Cultivating Self, Embodied Transformation for Artists” from *Making and Being* (Pioneer Works Press, 2020), 55.

<sup>9</sup> Alta Starr, “Cultivating Self, Embodied Transformation for Artists” from *Making and Being* (Pioneer Works Press, 2020), 56.

internalizing Chödrön's basic concepts like mindfulness and maïtre or loving kindness, I developed a sense of equanimity about my own way of being. I realized that I shouldered a serious lack of respect for my own intelligence and creativity. Chödrön's concept of *shenpa* gives shape to my understanding of the mind and body relationship.

Chödrön states:

“In Tibetan, there is a word that points to the root cause of aggression, the root cause also of craving. It points to a familiar experience that is at the root of all conflict, all cruelty, oppression, and greed. This word is *shenpa*. The usual translation is “attachment” but this doesn't adequately express the full meaning. I think of *shenpa* as “getting hooked.” Another definition, used by Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche, is the “charge -- the charge behind our thoughts and words and actions, the charge behind “like” and “don't like.” Here's an everyday example: Someone criticizes you. She criticizes your work or your appearance or your child. In moments like that, what is it you feel? It has a familiar taste, a familiar smell. Once you notice it, you feel like this experience has been happening forever. That sticky feeling is *shenpa*. And it comes along with a very seductive urge to do something. Somebody says a harsh word and immediately you can feel a shift. There's a tightening that rapidly spirals into mentally blaming this person, or wanting revenge, or blaming yourself. Then you speak or act. The charge behind the tightening, behind the urge, behind the story line or action is *shenpa*.<sup>10</sup>

For two years after my son was born, I studied Buddhist philosophy, meditated daily, unintentionally practiced celibacy, and cared for my infant son as a single mother. My body intuitively used its energy to help me heal from the effects caused by my *shenpas*. After this process, many constrictive thought patterns fell by the wayside. After I gave birth to my son and took on the responsibilities of caring for him, I learned to love my body and to love essential parts of myself. My chest housed my vibrant lungs and beating heart. It is the space of power, function, life and energy. My son lay on my chest and found nourishment and security. I learned to embrace the seemingly contradicting aspects of my body. My breasts provided both comfort to my infant son and were a place to give and receive pleasure with sexual partners.

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<sup>10</sup> Pema Chödrön, “Don't Bite the Hook,” *Tricycle, The Buddhist Review* (Website) <https://tricycle.org/magazine/dont-bite-hook/>

## CHAPTER 4

### EMBODIED PRACTICE RESEARCH: SITUATING *Letting the Body Lead*

In *Letting the Body Lead*, I build upon my background in embodied practices, including post-modern dance, Meisner-based acting, competitive athletics, and over 15 years as a professional physical performer, most notably in the harness-based, aerial Off Broadway show, “De La Guarda.” I also draw from my background as a certified Embodyoga Instructor and Federal Aviation Association Certified Drone Pilot. As part of my research, I synthesize these diverse experiences to create experiments, scores, and dialogue.

Embodied research focuses on studying the body’s movement in social context. The movement of the body is a product of one’s lived experiences and often reflects behavioral and cultural norms. As an example, when I walked down 34th Street in New York City last summer, I watched hundreds of people hurry up and down the sidewalk, passing inches away from one another, as if they were a terrestrial school of fish. Each person’s movement choice was built upon an embodied knowledge of the most efficient and effective ways to create space for others in the social context of a busy New York City street. In my work, I study vernacular movement that is often unconscious and ingrained within individuals. People seldom question the ways they walk, sit, or manipulate objects as they move through their daily lives. In looking at a person’s specific embodied history and unique movement vocabulary, we can understand truths about the ways we fit in society more broadly. The ways we move, whether voluntary, prescribed or directed, is a product of the people and environment that surround us.

Susan Leigh Foster, choreographer and scholar, is a distinguished Professor in the Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance at UCLA. In her essay, *Choreographies*

*Protest*, Foster frames a new perspective on individual agency and collective action, one that casts the body in a central role as enabling human beings to work together to create social betterment. She does this through the examination of physical tactics and interventions for social protest including the sit-ins of the 1960s and ACT-UP die-ins of the 1990s. She approaches the body as a vast reservoir of signs and symbols. The physical body can create physical interference and make a crucial difference. In this essay, Foster provides important questions a scholar might ask in embodied practice research:

“What are these bodies doing? What and how do their motions signify? What kind of choreography, whether spontaneous or pre-determined, do they enact? What kind of significance and impact does the collection of bodies make during its social surrounding? How does choreography theorize corporeal, individual, and social identity? How does it construct ethnicity? gender, class, and sexuality? How have these bodies been trained, and how has that training mastered, cultivated, or facilitated their impulses? What do they share that allows them to move with one another? What kind of relationship do they establish with those who are watching their actions? What kinds of connections can be traced to their daily routines and the special moments of their protest? How is it possible to reconstruct and translate into words these bodies’? vanished actions? How is the body of the researcher/writer implicated in the investigation?”<sup>11</sup>

Foster’s guiding questions aid in the close study of social dancing, vernacular movement, and protest movements.

*Letting the Body Lead* is in dialogue with practices and ideas shared in the book *Making and Being* by Susan Jahoda and Caroline Woolard, two visual arts educators and members of the collective BFAMAPhD. *Making and Being* offers a framework for teaching that emphasizes contemplation, collaboration, and political economy. Jahoda and Woolard describe their work as a “hands-on guide that includes activities, worksheets, and assignments and is a critical resource for artists and art educators

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, “Choreographies of Protest”, *Theatre Journal* 55 (John Hopkins Press University, 2003), 395.

today. *Making and Being* provides a pedagogical structure that allows vital aspects of self to be questioned, acknowledged and contemplated to create an experience of holistic art education. One's lived experiences do matter, have value, and sit firmly within previously existing structures."<sup>12</sup> Susan Jahoda eloquently expressed to one of her photography students in a course that I was a teaching assistant for, "This work is not just about how you live in the world but how the world lives in you." Connected to this, a central concept of *Letting the Body Lead* is each participant's lived experiences and embodied histories has value and is connected.

The practice of engaging the viewer as active participants has been effectively utilized within the practices of contemporary artists including Jeff Kasper, UMass Assistant Professor of Art, interdisciplinary artist, writer, organizer, and integrated designer. As described on his website, Kasper's work explores how trauma-informed practices, nervous system education, empathic communication, and nonviolence impact the design process, queer health, and public engagement. In his recent exhibit *boundary objects*, the audience participates and activates the work, including text, time-based media, games, and soft objects.

Kasper describes his recent exhibit, *boundary objects*, "The entire installation serves as a temporary social space for navigating interpersonal boundaries. Visitors are encouraged to use the exhibition to slow-down, rest, and practice playful 'choreographies of support' that can be applied to real-world conflicts, conversations, and collective situations."<sup>13</sup> When I experienced Kasper's piece, *calm cube*, from the related work *wrestling embrace*, I was drawn to lay down on the large, cushioned floor

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Jahoda and Caroline Woolard. *Making and Being*, (Website) <https://makingandbeing.com>

<sup>13</sup> Jeff Kasper, (Artist Website) <https://jeffkasper.co>

mats and engage in unexpected and unprompted conversations with others laying on the mats. In providing an alternative way to engage with a gallery space, Kasper upended the relationships gallery attendees had with one another. Likewise, in the *Letting the Body Lead*, attendees experience the gallery space as a space for movement experimentation and social engagement.



Figure 6. *boundary objects* by Jeff Kasper, UMass Herter Gallery, 2020.

Chloë Bass, Assistant Professor of Art and Social Practice at Queens College, CUNY, is an American conceptual artist who works in performance and social practice. In chapter four of her work, *The Book of Everyday Instruction*, Bass focuses on the accidental and incidental choreographies created by engaging with other bodies in space. In both Bass and Kasper's work, attendees engage with the work on an embodied level with the use of prompts, learning tools, and scores.





Figure 7. Chloë Bass, *Book of Everyday Instruction*, Chapter 4.

She explains on her website:

“This chapter uses the sociological field of proxemics to investigate forms of storytelling. The chapter’s title (“It’s amazing we don’t have more fights”) is a paraphrase of a quote from my mother about successful social behavior on New York’s subways and buses. The project investigates states of flow, play, and conflict that we experience when interacting with only ourselves and one other. Conceptually, the project is the next step in my creation of performance work for no audience. The majority (if not the entirety) of *The Book of Everyday Instruction*’s performance aspects will be conducted without witnesses: as shared pair activities between artist and participant. These private works served as the research platform for more public exhibition elements. Each chapter had its own focus and central inquiry question, moving from direct ideas of partnership through shared activities or space, to more abstracted pairings, such as safety as a partnership between a person and his/her city.”<sup>14</sup>

I designed the *Movement Lab* for active participation and not for a passive encounter. As with Bass’ works of private engagement, these semi-private works may serve as the

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<sup>14</sup> Chloë Bass, (website) <https://www.chloebass.com/book-of-everyday-instruction.com>

research platform for more public exhibition elements, such as a live demonstration of the LEG Gallery experimentation.

In *Letting the Body Lead*, the goal in working with objects and within spaces is for participants to discover the ways in which objects concretize social relationships when invisible patterns of social interaction become visible. For example, in Western culture, “boys” and “girls” are taught specific choreographies for sitting in chairs based on their gender identification. As a child, I do not remember being instructed to sit with my legs and thighs pulled closely together or the boys being instructed to sit with their legs apart, spine erect and shoulder back. However, the reality is that the boys’ seated position gave them a groundedness that the girls did not have access to in their seated position. Girl’s bodies had to compensate for this lack of groundedness by leaning forward, twisting their spines, and arching their backs. In workshops of *Letting the Body Lead*, I invite participants to listen to and observe the movement of their own and other people’s bodies, recognize existing contradictions, and explore new and perhaps more liberated movement practices.

Furthermore, in understanding the relationship between objects and the movement of the body, we can illuminate what happens when we collectively challenge ingrained or enforced movement patterns within broader social contexts. Susan Leigh Foster argues that, “Approaching the body as articulate matter, I hope to demonstrate the central role that physicality plays in constructing both individual agency and sociality.”<sup>15</sup> She cites the lunch counter sit-ins of the 1960s as a prime example of the, “marked discrepancy between the ostensible laws governing public space and the actual practices of participants within that space. This discrepancy created an opportunity for concerned

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<sup>15</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, “Choreographies of Protest”, *Theatre Journal* 55 (John Hopkins Press University, 2003), 395.

citizens to make that very contradiction evident. For the Civil Rights movement, the laws regulating equal, desegregated access to public facilities strongly contrasted with social practice.<sup>16</sup>



Figure 8. Sit-in, Woolworth's lunch counter Jackson, Mississippi, 1963. This photograph depicts protesters getting taunted as anti-protesters pour ketchup and mustard onto their bodies.

The very act of a 'colored' person sitting in the 'whites only' section at a public lunch counter became an act of protest, an act of physical interference and a performance of the very action they were protesting.

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<sup>16</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, "Choreographies of Protest", *Theatre Journal* 55, (John Hopkins Press University, 2003), 396.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE MOVEMENT LAB

The *Movement Lab* was intended to invite exhibit attendees to immerse themselves in experiential, social experiments while respecting the different, unique histories housed in the moving body. What can we learn from listening to the body -- yours, another's? How does a dialogue with the body enrich a dialogue with the world and vice versa? The workshop structure draws on the practices of dance improvisation, somatic movement, and mindfulness meditation.

As part of the *Movement Lab* at Herter Gallery, I planned on hosting a workshop led by Andrea Olsen, Professor Emerita of Dance at Middlebury College, dance artist, author, and certified instructor of Holden Qigong and Embodyoga. Professor Olsen is a seminal figure in her field and her workshop was to be entitled, *Embodiment: Awareness and the Arts*. In addition, I planned on hosting yoga classes led by Dr. Brenna Werme, chiropractor and certified Embodyoga instructor. Brenna Werme was invited to lead two yoga based workshops on techniques in connecting mind/body centering through movement and breath. I also planned to lead a series of open studio hours and workshops for UMass undergraduate and graduate students exploring the gallery space and manipulating everyday objects. These participatory workshops focused on guided visualization, object experimentation, and movement scores. Yoga mats, pillows, and support blocks were to be provided for participants.

*And in that Movement, I Was Free*

This score can be done alone or with others. Find a comfortable seated position. Close your eyes. Place one hand near your heart and one hand on your abdomen. Focus on your breathing. Breath in and out for three deep breaths into your lungs then into your diaphragm. With each inhale, feel energy rising from your belly pit, creating space between every vertebra of your spine. With every exhale, feel the muscles in your body relax, like water flowing down a waterfall.

Let your mind wander to a movement memory from the past when you felt free, a time when this movement allowed you to feel a sense of liberation and wonder.

Where were you? What were you doing? Were you alone? Were there others with you? How did your relationships with others affect the movement memories?

Remember with your senses.

- What did the air smell like?
- What did the air taste like?
- What did the ground feel like?
- What sounds did you hear?
- What did your body feel like?
- What did your spirit feel like?

With eyes closed, take ten minutes to let yourself explore this space and experience the movement in your memory.

Open your eyes and document what you experienced. You may do this by writing, recording your spoken audio, or drawing. Describe what it felt like to be in that moment from your body's perspective. We will then share our movement memories with one another.

Figure 9. Guided Movement Memory Visualization Score.

Prior to *Letting the Body Lead*, I led a series of workshops that guided participants to manipulate and experiment with learning tools, including stainless-steel mixing bowls, fabric loops, and a variety of different chairs. These learning tools were to be included into the *Movement Lab* for my Open Studio and Object Exploration Workshops.

Accordingly, I will touch on the design of the works for Herter and the workshops done prior to the exhibit (where applicable) instead of processing outcomes. In the following pages, I provide photo documentation of the work and share scores generated from each of these experiments. The chairs and mixing bowls were chosen because they exist within the fabric of our everyday lives and, in manipulating them in unexpected ways, participants learn about ingrained and codified patterns of behavior. The fabric loop experimentation explores the relationship between space, control, and moving body.



Figure 10. Fabric Loops Learning Tools.

### *Fabric Loops*

Fabric Loop Fabrication -- To make a fabric loop, sew together a stretchy, strong piece of fabric, 16 ft. by 3 ft., into a circular loop.

You will need one fabric loop for every two-people participating. A minimum of four participants are required for this exercise. Before starting, it is recommended that participants become familiar with the fabric loops. Groups of two should be given a fabric loop and asked to experiment by stretching it or standing and moving with it, to get a sense of the material and in relation to the movement of the body to develop confidence in doing this experimentation.

#### One Fabric Loop Duo -- Exercise #1

1. Two people stand in the middle of the room with fabric loops stretched between them.
2. All other participants stand on one side of the room and walk to the other side of the room.
3. The fabric loop duo experiments with obstructing or opening pathways of movement.
4. Walkers experiment with changing the tempo of their walk when one person (instructor or designated participant) calls out a new tempo.
5. Each person gets a turn being part of the duo in the fabric loop pairings.
6. Sit and share observations and experiences with the group.

#### Multiple Fabric Loops -- Exercise #2

1. Two fabric loops duos stand in the middle of the room (total of four people).
2. All other participants stand on one side of the room and walk from one side of the room to the other.
3. The fabric loop duos experiment with working together to obstruct or open pathways of movement for those walking.
4. Walkers are asked to experiment with changing the tempo of their walk when the designated person (instructor or participant) calls out a new tempo.
5. Add in one more fabric loop duo to the middle of the room for a total of three.
6. Repeat Steps 1-4.
7. Each person should get a turn being a part of the multiple fabric loop pairings.
8. Sit and share observations and experiences with the group.

Figure 11. Score of Spatial Control.





Figure 12. Mixing Bowl Learning Tools.

*A Handheld Object (Mixing Bowls)*

This exercise can be done alone or with others. You can substitute any other hand-held object for the mixing bowl. You will need a pen and paper.

Observe the stainless-steel mixing bowl placed in front you. Write down your observations.

What is the function of the object?  
What material is it made from?  
Where was this material sourced?  
What labor went into making the object?

Close your eyes and hold the object in your hands. Write down words that describes what you observe.

How does it feel in your hands?  
What does the surface feel like?

Manipulate the object in a normal way. Write down words that describes what you observe.

How does your body feel when you move it?  
Your fingers, hands, arms?  
What actions do you feel compelled to do and why?

Manipulate the object in the opposite way you are accustomed.

Suggestions: Turn it upside down. Turn it sideways. Spin it. Push it. Hug it. Drape your body on it. Lie on your back and balance it with your feet.

Share your movement exploration and observations with others.

Break up into groups. Explore the objects together. Let the objects interact and bounce off one another. You may document work with video or audio and write down your observations. Share your movement exploration and written observations with others.

Figure 13. A Score of Object Exploration.



Figure 14. Chair Learning Tools.

### *Have a Seat*

This exercise can be done alone or with others. Space should be set up with a variety of different style chairs, at least one chair per participant. You may write down or sketch your observations at any point during this score.

1. Choose a chair and observe it. What materials is it made from? What was it made for? What is the function of the chair? Where was it made to exist? Who has access to the chair and why?
2. Sit in the chair and connect with your body. How does your body feel? How do your feet, legs, back, shoulders, neck and head feel?
3. Begin to move in the chair in a normal way. How does your body feel? Your feet, legs, core, back, shoulders, neck and head? What actions do you feel compelled to do?
4. Interact with and manipulate the chair in the opposite way you are accustomed. Suggestions: Turn the chair upside down. Turn the chair sideways. Spin the chair. Push the chair. Dance with the chair. Hug the chair. Drape your body on the chair. Lie on your back and balance the chair.
5. Each person is given an opportunity to share their movement experiments and observations with the class. Group discussion about movement experiments.
6. Participants pair up and experiment with their two chairs. How do these objects reflect social relationships? Group share and discussion.
7. Participants break into groups of three and explore the ways the chairs moderate social relationships. Group share and discussion.
8. All participants create a score based on previous experimentation.
9. Final group discussion.

Figure 15. Score on Furniture Exploration (Chairs).

## CHAPTER 6

### MOVEMENT STUDIES

*Letting the Body Lead* presents a series of deep listening movement studies in familiar, outdoor environments, including playgrounds, athletic spaces, and public parks. The work is documented using video and drone cinematography, allowing unorthodox movement to be viewed and documented from new perspectives. At the core of the work lies a practice of deep listening, influenced by the work of embodied practitioner and dancer Tyler Rai. She describes her practice:

“Deep listening is a multi-sensory, multi-model process when I try to listen with all of the faculties of my body. This includes listening to space, listening to history, listening to my own impulses in generating my own movement. When I’m dancing, my body can speak in the language it enjoys most fully and that’s a relief. My mind is not the leader. Movement allows me to express things I cannot express in words. It allows me to process traumatic experiences and recuperate. It saves me. I feel the most connected to the people around me when I dance. Dance allows me to take in and communicate with other people through other signals that we often ignore such as body heat, eye contact, or proximity to another person. When I dance, I acknowledge that all that is a language and information and can be played with, it opens another realm that is magical and sacred. Nature is my biggest inspiration. It expresses itself exactly as it is, with integrity. When I dance in nature, I get de-centered which is helpful to feel connected. I move the way the wind is blowing and the feel of earth. Nature leads me to find new pathways of moving.”<sup>17</sup>

In the *Movement Studies*, this ‘decentering’ plays a vital role as the mover reacts to the natural world, the sky, the wind, temperature, as well as music and the movement of people and objects around them. In deep listening, focus can be taken off the self by allowing the outside environment to guide movement.

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<sup>17</sup> Tyler Rai, Excerpt from video interview by Amanda Boggs, December 2020.

As part of the *Movement Studies* research, I interviewed and worked with collaborators who participated in the experimentation, including Marissa Malison, Johanna Nerenberg, Nehara Kalev, and Dianne Greco. Marissa Mailsen, a Brooklyn-based dancer and choreographer, performed as a principal dancer in the immersive, Off Broadway show “Sleep No More” for over seven years. Johanne Nerenberg, Brooklyn-based choreographer and documentary filmmaker, is the founder of the Dancewalk, referenced later in this chapter. Nehara Kalev, Los Angeles-based director and choreographer, uses dance, theater, and aerial imagery to explore “states of being” in her work. Nehara and I have worked together as collaborators for over ten years. Dianne Dunn, my mother and collaborator, has a background in modern dance and spent over twenty-five years teaching music and directing children’s theater. In the pages below, I describe each movement study, provide photo documentation of the work, quotes from collaborators, and a generated score.

*These Embodied Walls* is a large-scale video installation that explores improvisatory and collaborative movement in spaces of flux and the importance of deep listening and embodied awareness. *These Embodied Walls* investigates the LEG Gallery space in the UMass Studio Arts Building. The LEG Gallery houses work by undergrads, graduate students, and professors and hosts art events for the broader community. The gallery has two central architectural features. One wall consists of floor-to-ceiling windows and the opposite wall consists of two large walls that pivot on a central access. These moving walls can be spun into different configurations, opening and closing space to the outside lobby and hallway. After studying this space, I was drawn to the movement potentialities of the spinning walls, the various high and low pitched sounds they made when pushed at different velocities, and the way the sunlight plays upon spinning surfaces.

*These Embodied Walls* present documentation of a solo, duo, and trio of women interacting with the moving walls. As one of the performers, I was struck by the way my own energy constantly returned to me when I pushed or pulled the walls. It felt like a karmic dance, as space and pace expanded and contracted, reversed direction, slowed and paused. My body was required to be constantly aware because the swinging walls could easily swing back and injure me at a moment's notice, perhaps breaking a few fingers or bashing into the back of my head. My years as a competitive athlete came into play as I anticipated the wall's movement while pivoting and dodging collapsing spaces. My mind had to take a back seat and let my body's reflexes and kinetic knowledge take the lead.

When working with one or two additional performers, Nehara Kalev and Marissa Mailsen, we discovered that embodied empathy played a vital role and guided our movement choices. The stakes were raised when more movers were added to the experiment, each person's action affected their own bodies and the other bodies in a very immediate way. We relied on our backgrounds as modern dancers and embodied practitioners. We had to look out for one another, be aware of the location of the other movers, and anticipate one another's movement choices. We had to trust one another and ourselves to handle the heavy moving walls. At one point, I sensed the walls were moving too quickly, the squeaking intensified and the sound of the rotation grew in strength. I immediately moved into the space to slow down the revolving walls to protect my fellow movers and the walls themselves.

As an installation, *These Embodied Walls* is designed to be projected in a large empty room, at a life-sized scale. The audio encompasses the dissonant sounds of the

spinning walls, like two whales communicating deep under water. The viewer is invited to stand directly in front of the video projection. Combined, these elements are designed to create an immersive environment for the viewer.



Figure 16. *These Embodied Walls*, Video Stills, 2020.



Nehara described her experience working with the spinning walls during an interview.

Question: What did it feel like to work with the spinning walls?

“I’ve worked with large, moving props and sets before. I felt ready to dive in and I had a feeling for it. I felt comfortable because I had a sense of the things to look out for in terms of the hazards. And the fun! I felt free because once I knew how to keep myself and others safe as the heavy walls moved. I sensed the heaviness and the lightness of walls. The heaviness from going from stillness into motion, getting velocity started, having to start slow. It’s also lighter than me, faster than me. There was a delight in playing with something that pushes back on you so hard and then runs away from you at other times. Also, the sound, the rhythmic sounds of the revolutions of the walls, clued me in to the motion. I could sense where the walls were and the speed. The sound also set the mood and tone, bringing a sense of kinesthetic understanding of space.”

“Really, it’s very metaphorical, two wheels, like in our bodies, lungs; I liked the scale of it, how large the space was, how oversized the spinning walls were. They became little spinning parts in a computer or airplane propellers and reminded me of many things large and small. With each turn you have a new space. A reset. This structure was designed to be still and we flipped that around. The stillness may be the beginning or end, the real meat of it came through motion. When working with other bodies in space, the spinning walls are dominant, but the people are the ingredients and elements to work with.”

“The more time spent with experimentation, the more you can take risks because your awareness expands. The door can be pushed in a way that another must react. That moment is calling for that movement. I know that the other is there with me. Back before the Covid pandemic, when we used to walk in lines down sidewalks, we had to trust that people will stay where they need to be, an understanding that people will make space for one another. One of the first things I had to do when I started moving was mark out where I was safe in the space. An inch here or there made a difference of whether you are safe, a zone of safety. If you’re inside the danger zone, then you need to go with it or first absorb its energy to change its direction.”<sup>18</sup> –Nehara Kalev

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<sup>18</sup> Nehara Kalev, Excerpt from video interview by Amanda Boggs, June 2020.

*Public Spaces*

This score can be done alone or with others. Choose a public space that you use as part of your everyday life such as a hallway, classroom, stairway, or public building.

Sit within the space and write down observations. Take in the space. Write down your findings. Where are you? What is the space used for? Who has access to this space? What does this space mean to you? How do you interact with others in this space? How do you usually move through this space?

Inhabit the space the way you do every day. Move through the space. Walk through the space. Touch the space. Document your findings by writing, drawing, or recording audio.

Notice: patterns of movement

parts of the space you touch

posture of the body

the tempo your body moves

the way your body reacts to other people's bodies

Move in new ways that challenge the patterns discovered above. Document your findings by writing, drawing, or recording audio.

Explore opposite movements from what you do every day.

Let different parts of your body touch the surfaces of the space

Transform the posture of your body as you move

Change the tempo of your body as it moves

Let your body or body react to other people's bodies

Share movement experimentation and documented observations with the group.

Figure 17. A Score on Public Space Exploration (LEG Gallery).

*Mom at Lake Terramuggus*, documents the experience of a person listening and connecting with a familiar space in the outside environment. The work was designed to be viewed on flat screen monitors. The performer, Dianne Dunn, both my collaborator

and my mother, has a background in teaching, dance, and creative movement. Lake Terramuggus is located about five minutes away from Dianne's home in Marlborough, CT. Dianne is deeply connected with Lake Terramuggus and she goes there often to swim, walk her dog, play tennis, and play with her grandchild. In discussing her experience, I was struck by the parallels between my own sensations of moving freely in water and my mother's similar experiences. I discovered that we both feel deeply connected when moving in water because the water 'decenters' us, shifting our focus from pedestrian movement to creative movement.



Figure 18. *Mom at Lake Terramuggus*, Video Still, 2020.

Here Dianne Dunn describes her experience in the *Mom at Lake Terramuggus*.

Question: What does it feel like to move in water?

“It was a moment of letting everything else go. Being in water is ethereal, another mode of movement. It's relaxing. It's almost indescribable what comes over your body. Floating on your back and looking at the sky. It's a connection with

childhood. They are movements we don't often take in our adult lives like when I was a child looking up at the blue sky in the apple orchard. My mother could not swim. She always feared the water. She somehow knew it was important that we (children) learned how to swim. The swimming skills I learned as a child gave me the confidence to fearlessly enjoy the water experience. It's different than when you're on the land because I have support in a different way. It's a way of knowing your body and finding out what it does in different mediums. I also find moments of calm, peace and exhilaration."<sup>19</sup> –Dianne Dunn

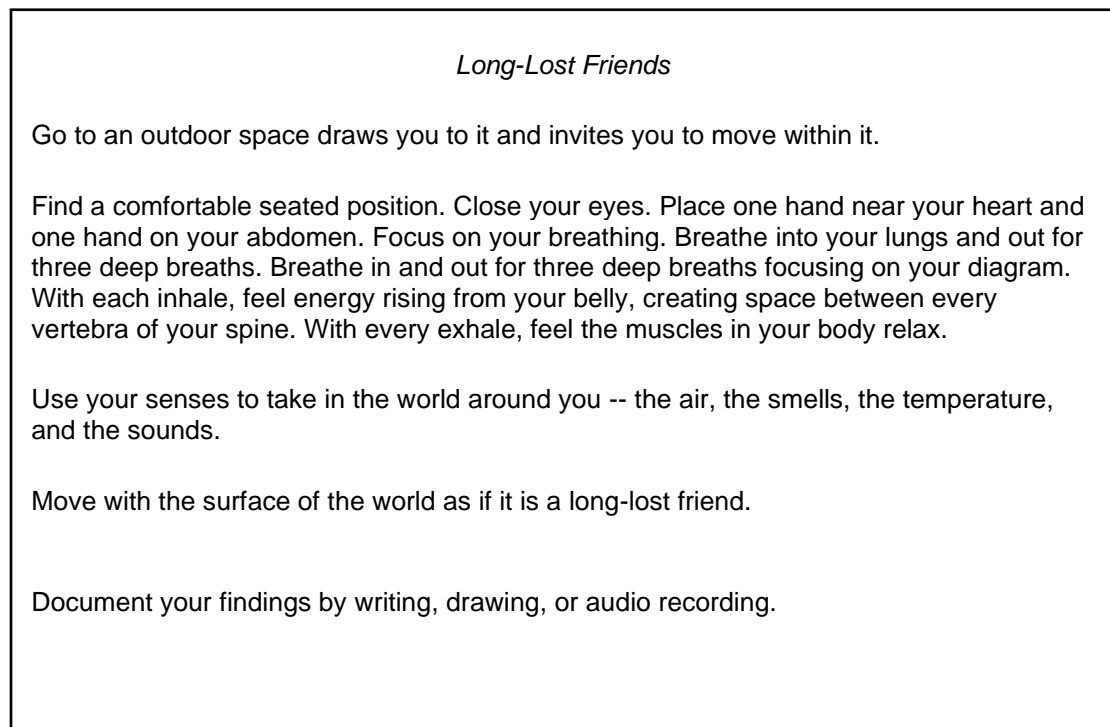


Figure 19. Score of Outdoor Exploration (*Mom at Lake Terramuggus*).

*Mom and I, Red Coats* is a two-channel video that documents two separate movement experiments of a daughter and mother, myself and Dianne, moving across an outdoor space. The work was designed to be viewed on two, side by side, flat screen monitors. Dianne and I chose our own music to listen to while we moved across a landscape in two separate locations, contrasting the movement of my mother with my own movement. Music played on speakers or on an I-phone. My mother chose Lake Terramuggus and I

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<sup>19</sup> Dianne Dunne, Excerpt from Video interview by Amanda Boggs, June 2020.

chose a path along the Connecticut River in Hadley, MA, close to my home. Specific music was chosen by the performer because they were inspired to move to it. The location was chosen because the performer felt a connection to the place.

In looking at the movement side by side, I noted the similarities and differences of our individual movement styles. My mother had a bounce and joy in her movement. My movement seemed more internal and measured. Even though our movement was different, I could identify a relationship between our movement vocabularies as our embodied histories overlapped. In every phase of our lives, Dianne and I have shared and learned about one another through movement. Through this movement study with Dianne, I understand that movement can be a generous act, an act of love, freely offered and received.

*Mom and I, Red Coats* was influenced by the work of Joanne Nerenberg, founder of the DanceWalk practice. In this practice, participants assemble at a public park with headphones and audio device prepped with their favorite music and dance their way around the park to their own music. Participants can interact with one another or remain mostly by themselves as they move, generally staying within eyesight of one another. Nerenberg describes her experience:

“DanceWalk was not designed as a performance. It is a practice that harvests my expression and energy. This practice frees the mover from the constraints of the pedestrian body, inviting a range of different motions and locomotion. The moments are live with possibility, all the time, inviting different ways the body can move. Music supplants my brain’s thoughts and the more I feel the soundtrack that is flooding my body is a score I am conducting and enacting. The music is inside my body, an energy source. I become the musical score. Then there is the inspiration of the park and the trees and the people walking by. All else falls.”<sup>20</sup> -Joanne Nerenberg

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<sup>20</sup> Joanne Nerenberg, Excerpt from video interview by Amanda Boggs, November 2019.

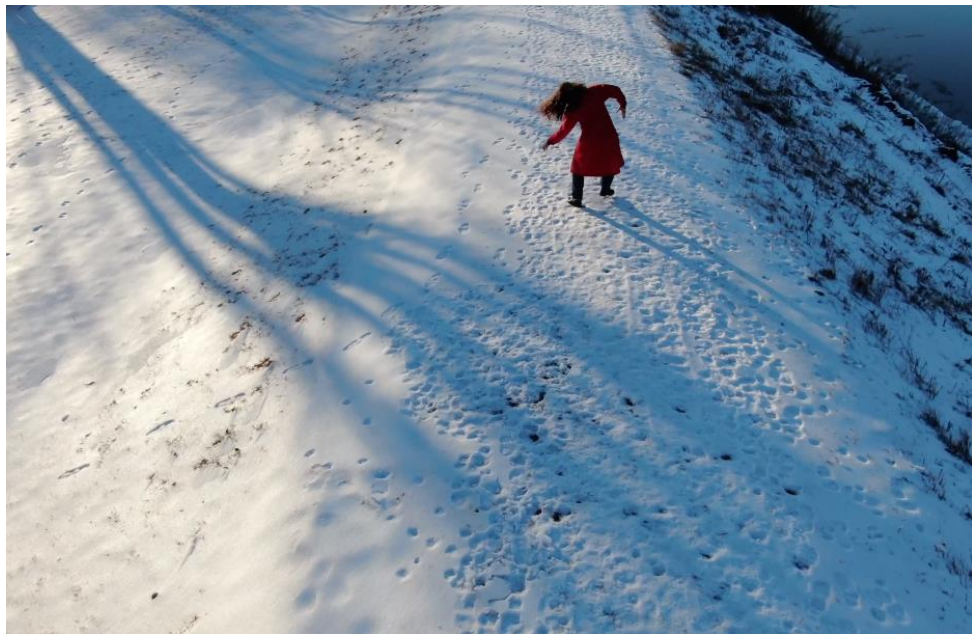


Figure 20. *Mom and I, Red Coats*, Study, Video Stills, 2020

Dianne Dunn describes her experience performing *Mom and I, Red Coats*.

Question: What does it feel like to move just for the sake of moving?

“Whenever I move, just for the sake of moving, I feel freedom. Any way I move is okay. No one is watching me, no performance. There is no wrong. Everything is right. I feel joy. There was this hallway, a rectangular space, upstairs in the farmhouse where I grew up. There was a wooden floor that felt great on my feet. I went to this space and put on music, usually classical music because that is all we had. I must have been five or six. I responded to music. I just let myself move as the music told me to. I just let the music push me around, drive me. And in this experimentation, I felt a release. Again, nothing was wrong. Everything was right.”<sup>21</sup> -Dianne Dunn

*Movements of Expansion*

(Based on the DanceWalk practice by Joanne Nerenberg)

This exercise can be done alone or with others. You will need to have a set of headphones and audio device (smart phone) with music prepared that inspires you to move. It is suggested that you wear comfortable clothing and shoes. The duration of this practice can be between twenty minutes to an hour and a half.

Solo Practitioner

1. Choose a space designed to move through such as a path, sidewalk, or trail.
2. Stand in the space, focus on your breath, and connect with your body.
3. Walk or jog through the space for several minutes.
4. How does your body feel when it moves in this way?
5. Place your headphones on and turn on your music.
6. Feel the music and move across the space using creative movement and dance.
7. Once you are done, stand and focus on your breath.
8. How does your body feel when it moves in this new way?

Group Practice

1. Choose a space designed to move through such as a path, sidewalk, or trail.
2. Stand in the space, focus on your breath, and connect with your body.
3. Walk or jog through the space for several minutes.
4. How does your body feel when it moves in this way?
5. Place your headphones on and turn on your music.
6. Feel the music and move across the space using creative movement.
7. You may dance with others, make eye contact, or dance just by yourself.
8. The group should stay in a pod, generally within eye shot of one another.
9. Once you are done, stand and focus on your breath.
10. How does your body feel when it moves in this new way together? Group discussion.

Figure 21. A Score for Moving Through Space in New Ways.

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<sup>21</sup> Dianne Dunn, Excerpt from video Interview with Amanda Boggs, May 2020.

*Basketball/Spinner*, a two-channel video designed to be viewed on two flat screen monitors, pairs two separate experiments in outdoor spaces. In envisioning this work, I wanted to revisit a space of structured movement practices from my past, a basketball court, and a space of unstructured movement practices from the past, a playground space using a merry-go-round play structure. The basketball court represents a space where movement was incredibly specific and regimented. I needed to abide by the rules of the game and have developed the high-level skills required to compete and win. I did not “play” basketball because I loved to compete in the game. The playground location was chosen because it represents a space of play and freedom, designed specifically for improvisational movement. In my experiences as a child, and in playing with my son today, I relish the fact that playgrounds are spaces designed for experimentation, learning, and joy with others.

In both these experiments, spaces and bodies rotate. The basketball court spins slowly on a central axis, shot with a rotating drone camera from a bird’s eye perspective. In the first section of the piece, the lines of the court constantly shift, appearing and disappearing in and out of the frame, as a still body seemingly floats in a circular pattern. The performer then stands up and moves across the court, exploring the white, painted lines and shadows. The playground spinner apparatus was also shot with a drone camera from above but instead of rotating, the camera remains still and steady. The rotating body is created by movement of the spinner pushed and pulled by the performers.

In processing the experimentation with my collaborator, Nehara, we agreed that the spinner experimentation and LEG experimentation have many similarities. In both pieces, performers had to react to the movement of large objects initiated by their own or



other people's movement. In the basketball court experimentation, I felt a deep sense of liberation as I moved across the space in unorthodox ways. Nehara and I also discovered a common and surprising element that affected the way we both moved with and on the spinner. When we were outside working, the weather was very cold, hovering around freezing. Our bodies were forced to react to the cold as we moved with the spinner. We had to embrace. In the basketball piece, the cold forced me to get up off the ground and move for warmth. The sun invited me to turn my body towards it. The frigid temperatures and warmth of the sun became an unintended prompt and initiated new movement patterns.



Figure 22. *Basketball/Spinner*, Video Stills, 2020.

Nehara described her experience moving with the spinner in an interview.

Question: What does it feel like to move in the spinner?

“There’s a delight in setting something in motion, a delight in seeing how energy applied to something continues beyond your body, like when kids play with a ball. The energy that you put into something reflects back to you in the path it takes, like basketball. These objects don’t decide on how you move, they reflect the actions you put into it. Actions are a consequence, like right now in life. The more precision and control you have in manipulating the ball, or wall, or relationships, the more you are taking responsibility.

How would you compare the experience of experimenting in the LEG Gallery and experimenting on the playground spinner?”

“With the spinner, I was aware of the viewer from above, the illusions created when the camera was above. I have a background in aerial performance and it’s like when you’re doing an aerial piece, I thought about things with the spinner from that perspective. It also seemed as if I was riding on something, a sense of containment. There were clearer bounds than with the LEG Gallery space. The spinner was a contained space with many fewer possibilities than when I was working in the LEG Gallery.

I approached the spinner slowly at first, observing the safe and hazardous places. One of the more challenging parts of working on the spinner was the cold. I felt both the physical discomfort and the beauty of the space. I had to convince myself of that in the moment and invite it. I had to surrender to my environment, surrender to the cold, accept discomfort and acknowledge it.”<sup>22</sup>

-Nehara Kalev

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<sup>22</sup> Nehara Kalev, Excerpt from video interview by Amanda Boggs, June 2020.

*Familiar Places Revisited*

This exercise is a solo practice. Choose a space that you feel connected to, a familiar space such as a park you visited as a child, playground, or natural environment. Sit within the space. Take in the space.

Where are you? What did you use this for in the past? Who had access to this space? What does this space mean to you? How do you interact with others in this space? How do you usually move through this space?

Inhabit the space the way you do every day. Move through the space. Walk through the space. Touch the space. Document your findings.

Notice: patterns of movement

parts of the space you touch

posture of the body

the tempo your body moves

the way your body reacts to other people's bodies

Move in new ways that challenge the patterns discovered above.

Suggestions: Move throughout space in new patterns of movement

Explore opposite movements from what you do everyday

Let different parts of your body touch the surfaces of the space

Transform the posture of your body as you move

Change the tempo of your body as it moves

Share observations and discoveries.

Figure 23. Score for Familiar Spaces Revisited.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

Space plays a central role in *Letting the Body Lead*; space within the body, between bodies, and within architectural and outdoor environments. Space is required for the body to move. In creating this work, my identity as a white, heterosexual female and my choice in working with other white, females provided us access to spaces based on our privilege. We accessed spaces that others from more marginalized communities would not have equal access to. My identity allowed me to inhabit public and private spaces and do things queer, brown or black bodies might be prevented from doing. My identity as a UMass graduate student gave me access to academic and financial support, not afforded to those who are not part of an academic institution.

In the future iterations of this work, I would like to work with a more diverse range of collaborators, including people with different gender identities and cultural backgrounds. What would happen if brown bodies manipulated the movement patterns of white bodies with the fabric loops? What would the implications be of a gay man's body dancing across a landscape with a sense of freedom and delight? How might a trans identifying body make meaning when swimming freely from the depths of a swimming pool. What would happen when different identifying bodies did the same movement score? How would we view the movement differently? The movement experiments become the constant and the identity of the performer the variable. We all have the right to listen to and express our authentic, embodied selves, our erotic selves. Lorde states:

[Indent this graph below five spaces on the left and five spaces or thereabouts on the right]

“When we live outside ourselves, and by that, I mean on the external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our

lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual's. But when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible for ourselves in the deepest sense. For we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, begin satisfied with self-abnegation, and with the numbness that so often seems like their only alternative in society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within."<sup>23</sup>

As with the expansive and constrictive experiences of my own childhood, embodied impulses can be either supported or disallowed. It is my sincere hope that those who experience *Letting the Body Lead* will discover a safe space to explore their own erotic impulses.

It's August 2020 and I am forty-six years old. The Covid-19 pandemic has raged across the country since mid-March. A few months ago, partly due to issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic, my son and I moved in with my boyfriend, Chris Cox, who lives in Leyden, Massachusetts, a small, rural town close to Vermont with a population of about 650 souls. We decided to become a "pod", oddly, a phrase I used to connect mostly with dolphins and whales. The weather has been unseasonably hot, humid and rainy. One evening, as the temperatures floated at about 75 degrees, I headed up to a local lake. It was an extremely clear night and stars danced across the sky, their images reflected on the still water, like two parallel, horizontal mirrors. I dipped my toes into the water to gage the temperature. Ripples radiated out across the water causing the reflected stars to gently vibrate. The water felt refreshingly cool and I gingerly stepped into the lake, careful of the slippery, rocky lake bed.

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<sup>23</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Ten Speed Press, 2007), 58.

I confidently eased my way through the water using the breast-stroke as my muscles joyfully extended and retracted. My splayed nervous system relaxed and my body temperature cooled. I stopped swimming, lay back, and happily floated with my arms and legs akimbo, like a starfish cushioned upon a dark, expansive, star-filled surface. I inhaled deeply and held my breath as the contained air inside my lungs kept my body buoyant and afloat. I looked up at the infinite universe above and the distance between myself and the cosmos seemed to melt away. I floated within the stars, overtaken by a sense of awe, respect, and gratitude for the water, the earth, and everyone that has and continues to support me over the years. I felt inspired to teach and support others in the same way when called.

With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, the development of an embodied and somatic awareness, for both the individual and collective, is more important than ever. Globally, social movement patterns have been dramatically transformed by the Covid-19 pandemic, forcing us to move in more constrictive and self-aware ways. We are connected through every breath, laugh, sneeze, and touch. Habitual movement patterns have been supplanted by new movement patterns including the wearing of masks, social distancing, isolating, and quarantining. Simple acts like walking down the sidewalk of a busy city street, sharing food at a crowded restaurant, or hugging a grandparent, are no longer possible until a vaccine is available.

My father, Rod Boggs, almost eighty, recently told me that the pandemic is particularly hard on people his age because the virus is stealing precious time away; the time remaining is finite. It is preventing my father and others from vulnerable communities

from spending time with the people they love in comfortable and familiar ways. Social interactions are fraught with fear of contagion and the elderly are some of the most vulnerable to the effects of the virus. To conclude, I come back to the breath. Breath is movement and movement is life. Breath is symbiotically shared and freely exchanged between humans and the natural world. And with the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, even our breath is politicized and monetized. Perhaps, when we truly value the very act of breathing, moving, and connecting within ourselves and with one another, we can open space to collectively grow and expand our capacity for gratitude, empathy, and love.



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