

Poetic Felt Space: Embodying Poetry as Dance Movement Imagery

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Introduction

The notion of poetic felt space was coined by the author in the attempt to literally name praxis, to describe the lived experience of creative process; specifically, in this case, to derive meaning from the interaction of experience and concepts during the journey of a practice-led doctoral study undertaken through the development of a performance installation entitled *Living Lens* (2006-2009)¹. 'Poetic', used in an expanded sense, refers here to the way a creative act comes into being, whilst more specifically, it also pertains to poetic imagery used in the dance-making process. Commenting further on these areas, this paper aims to shed light on the inner workings and articulation of creative process from the perspective of a performance installation-making practitioner.

The role of 'felt experiencing'

The articulation of a creative process, given that it also evolved under the lens of academic study, assumed a two-fold mode: on one hand, to describe the interaction of lived, creative experience with theoretical concerns, and on the other, to give name to something, as yet unnamed, that seemed to be operating as a connective principle between the dance, sound, and visual elements in the work *Living Lens* (2006-2009). Noted philosopher and psychologist Eugene Gendlin has examined and written extensively on the relationship between concepts and experience. His notions of 'felt experiencing', and 'felt sense' (Gendlin 1997, 2004) open up the possibility of a receptive inner sensing, or felt quality, to conceptualising activities. As he states:

The roles of felt experiencing in all our conceptual operations are not illegitimate "biases". They are natural and proper functions... we cannot even know what a "concept" means without the "feel" of its meaning. (1997, p. 5)

And further, in relation to this felt sense:

It is not at all vague in its being there. It may be vague only in that we may not know what it is. We can only put a few aspects of it into words. The mass itself is always something there, no matter what we say it is. (p. 11)

Gendlin acknowledges a pre-conceptual, feeling stage of experiencing, claiming that through Focusing² it becomes possible to give language to something bodily sensed and felt, yet inchoate; something that gradually, through an ongoing process of applied attention, takes on greater coherence and shape. Thus Gendlin's felt experiencing is a filter through which a notion of poetic sensing and feeling emerged, and in this case, was further extended to an understanding of kinesthetic, tactile, visual and sonic realms in the creation of *Living Lens* (2006-2009)³.

Poetic felt space and extended, porous body

To whom shall I give all that now flows through me, from my warm, my porous body? (Woolf, 2000, p. 42)

From an ontological perspective, poetic felt space might be understood through metaphors of fluidity and porosity as a permeable process rather than a specific or fixed state of being. It can also be imagined as a kind of overall connective tissue or membrane. In this way, space takes on an embodied aspect. This may sound paradoxical, for indeed space is generally conceived as an expanse bounded in some way, or as an interval or gap between things, whilst a body in contrast, is an object or entity differentiated from other objects or entities. That is to say, space and bodies are different and do not share all properties in common. Yet the intention is not to obfuscate, rather the positing of porosity of bodies and sheath-like quality of space seems to point to a realm of indiscernibility between the two, a zone that cannot be fully articulated and hence for the purpose at hand, a *poetically* felt space. Perceived as an encompassing "extended body", the entities of performing bodies, visual images and sounds, are all "bodies" integrated within the "body" of poetic felt space, at a material, palpable level, yet also at an invisible, less tangible level. In relation to the subject area of performance installation, however, the notion of extended body is also a practical means for understanding immersive qualities afforded by the soundscape and projected visuals, as well as for conceiving the performers' interconnections with the surrounding environment.

Regarding performer connections to external space, Rodaway (1994) offers four touch ranges that can be applied to the felt experiencing process. The author has previously referred to these touch ranges (Verdaasdonk, 2007, 2009) and cites them here in full to clarify their role in the conceptualising of poetic felt space: 'global touch' as the sense of one's body in contact with an environment such as a surface, texture, pressure or temperature; 'reach touch' as the body stretching out and exploring the dimensions of a space; 'imagined touch' as tactile experience embedded in past experiences or expectations; and 'extended touch' as touch mediated by a tool, in this case, for example, motion sensors that amplify a performer's movement to projected

graphic representations on a screen⁴. Whilst these touch ranges offer valuable modes for relating to external space, a certain quandary, however, arises for performers: to be attentive to felt sensations within the body, that is, to an inner sensing, and thereupon, how to manifest or translate these internally felt experiences as outer creative expression? This concern is addressed by applying the concept of poetic felt space through embodied imagery to the dance-making process.

Embodying poetic imagery: sensing the imaginary

An embodied imaging process, as intuitively felt experience, involves the use of metaphorical images to explore physical sensations within the body and, in accordance with Rodaway's aforementioned 'imagined touch', to imaginatively feel connections to the external environment. The affective nature of imagery lends itself to an embodied and organic process of perception; thus a cultivation of the felt sense of poetic imagery may facilitate this process towards potential pathways for dance making and expression, discussed further below.

Butoh-fu: kinesthetic pathways for dance

*Her nerves crack a tiny whip
on her fingers...*

Hands are touching the surface of a wooden door in front of you.

*The antennas [sic] stretching out of your fingertips
infinitely trace the grains of wood on this door...*

You feel the very tip of the faraway nerves.

*The nerves are then withdrawing into the body... (Waguri, 1998,
2004)*

Butoh-fu, developed through the Japanese dance-theatre form known as butoh, can be understood as a kind of imagistic dance notation⁵. Butoh, emerging in late 1950s Japan with its origins attributed to Japanese dancers Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, is a name that covers a diverse range of movement techniques and practices. Many butoh exercises, however, involve image-based work as the basis for movement. With the butoh-fu, movement material emerges from a variety of sources, including pictorial and painterly images, sculpture, and literary texts. Particularly inspiring is the butoh-fu of one of the founders of butoh, Tatsumi Hijikata, orally transmitted through the teachings of his wife, Akiko Motofuji, with whom this author studied extensively from the early to mid 1990s; and, more pertinently in this case, through the published transcriptions of one of his students, Yukio Waguri⁶. As Waguri states, 'Butoh-fu seems like poetry, but it is the "physical language" that indicates a dancer's movement, a method for a dancer's physical being, and a way of relating to space' (Waguri, 1998, 2004). While Waguri's method correlates butoh-fu to specific forms and gestures developed in the studio with Hijikata, the point in developing dance material for *Living Lens* (2006-2009) was not to

attempt to replicate these forms; rather, the words are prompts, poetic evocations, for arousing tactile and kinesthetic sensations.

To develop kinesthetic awareness of movement sensations, examples of imagery adapted from Waguri include the tracing of nerves throughout the body and into the surrounding environment. With the body thus envisaged as ‘a gigantic kingdom of nerves’ (Waguri, 1998, 2004), performers imagine extending nerves from their fingertips to trace grains of wood in a distant door as Waguri’s poem indicates above, and moreover, to envisage cracking tiny whips at the very ends of these nerves. This tactic provides a means for imagining invisible lines and connections to other bodies and points in space, with the highly tactile fingertips perceived as antennae extending from the body. The imagery of extension and retraction of nerves through the fingertips helps to awaken and deepen kinesthetic and tactile awareness, a way to actively palpate space, both within and around the body. In a performance installation such as *Living Lens*, this becomes an evocative mode for sensing connections to the projected visual imagery, for example, to images of organic life such as branching vein and nerve-like structures of skeleton leaves that suggest ligaments or nerves within the human body. The projection surface thus becomes a kind of living “skin” (see Fig. 1).

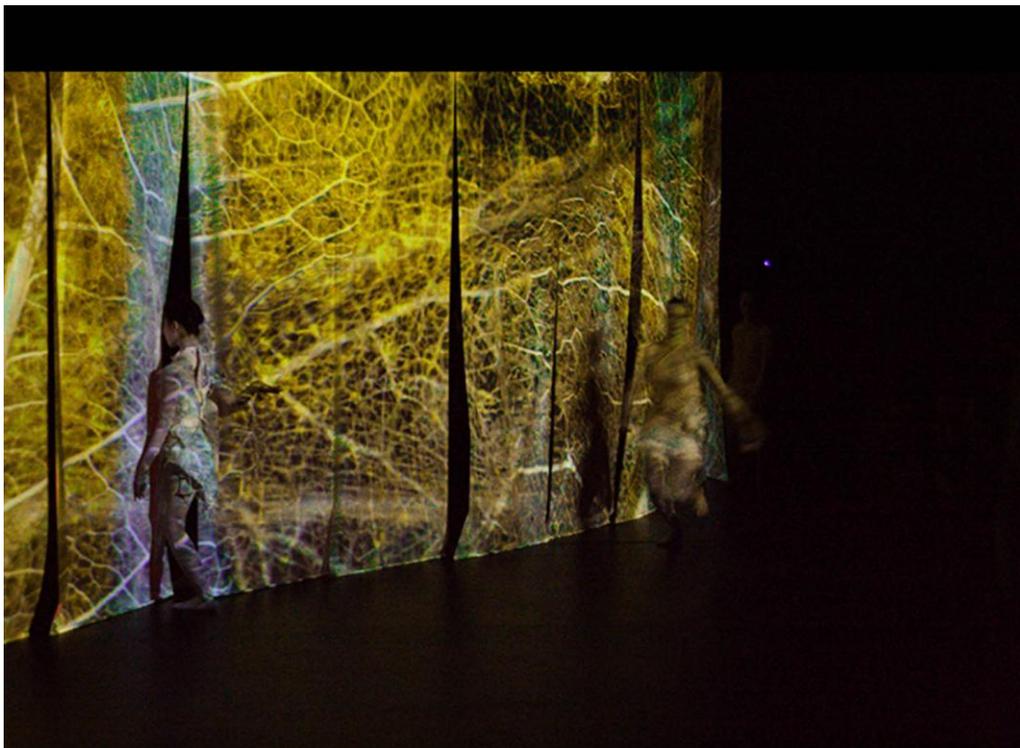


Fig. 1: *Living Lens* as an “extended body of nerves”. Dancers: Ko-Pei Lin (left) and Elise May. Photo: Aaron Veryard

Accordingly, the above example of sensory connections between performers and projected visual images illustrates the idea of “extended body”, mentioned earlier in this paper, highlighting the

affective potential for projected visual images to heighten a performer's kinesthetic awareness – in this case, as a “body” within a “body”. Sound potentially deepens this sense of the extended body, especially given that multiple speaker systems afford many possibilities for the spatialisation and layering of sounds⁷. In *Living Lens* (2006-2009), this was achieved through nature-inspired sonic elements, such as the rasping of tree branches or the dripping of water, or effects suggestive of inner realms of the human body, such as the pulsations of a heartbeat or spasmodic electrical pulses reminiscent of synaptic firings in the brain. In this manner, performers, visual images and sounds were integrated in the installation to form a resonating sensorium of invisible and tangible presences, amplifying the imagery of the butoh-fu as an extended, immersive nervous system. In this way, the affective potential of butoh-fu is extended beyond the generation of dance movement material to the realisation of the total dance, sonic and visual environment.

Outer and inner worlds: being moved

*The face turns inward and down
on the head's bud;
Curves to its inner world
of shaping flesh and blood... (Wright, 1974)*

In preceding sections, the author has expressed the potential of poetic imagery to affect a performer's kinesthetic sense, and also noted the way projected visual images and sounds can help stimulate a performer's sensory awareness. The implication is that these are externally derived influences upon the body, which the performer feels and perceives through inner bodily sensations. In terms of the previously stated concern of how to manifest or translate these internal experiences as outer creative expression, a possible approach – at least in training or in dance-making, if not in actual performance – could be to *allow* oneself to be thus affected, to move from the felt sense, rather than concentrating attention on how this experience is formalised outwardly. That is to say, to an emphasis on how it *feels* in contrast to how it *looks*. From a butoh-inflected perspective, this lies in allowing oneself to be moved from an inner sensing, for the 'Butoh dancer, in contrast, is not aiming to 'portray' his/her perceived mind-body, but simply to experience it and allow this to arouse motion' (Kasai & Parsons, 2003, p. 59). What is indicated here is the idea of “being danced”, rather than enacting or “performing” dance.

This openness and receptivity to being moved echoes approaches taken in Skinner Releasing – one of several well-known dance-training methods employing metaphorical images⁸ – to explore physiological sensations, tap into imaginative experience and develop connections to surrounding space. Skinner, Davis, Davidson, Wheeler and Metcalf (1979) categorise images used in their methods at a basic level as 'specific' or 'total imagery': 'Specific imagery is concerned with

segmented movement patterns, while total imagery cultivates an overall state in which an integration of multidirectional movement is realized' (Skinner et al, 1979). An example given of 'specific imagery' is having strings attached to the knees, marionette-like, as an aid to increasing range of movement in the hip socket, while an example of 'total imagery' is as follows:

the image of floating in a pool – the outer edges of the self becoming the outer edges of the pool. At times the specific string image is integrated within the pool totality. (Skinner et al, 1979)

While the use of 'specific imagery' such as marionette strings (an image which, relevantly, is also used in butoh) leads ostensibly to greater freedom of movement and better alignment, Skinner et al recognise that

in working with totalities a certain loss of orientation is often experienced. This loss of orientation gives the opportunity of a fresh, unconditional response which allows new kinesthetic patterns of muscle to emerge. (Skinner et al, 1979)

Skinner et al thus indicate a beneficial aspect to the possible loss of orientation, which, in some dance training systems, could also be perceived as a less desirable element given the implication of uncertainty and lack of equilibrium. Yet such loss opens up opportunities for gain, specifically, for something advantageous to be allowed to enter. For Skinner et al, it appears that the experience of being *dis*oriented opens up ways for being *re*oriented – to awareness of multidirectional space and thus to moving from shifting points of centre; and further, to releasing habitual holding patterns, allowing for new kinesthetic possibilities. According to Fraleigh (2004) such

"Uninhabiting" or letting go of the body is part of somatic strategies that lower kinesthetic thresholds to release a habit's hold on movement, "to allow" rather than "to make" the movement happen. (p. 169)

Skinner et al also view this as a process of allowing or letting, for as they state:

the imagery conveys a sense of effortless in moving – of being moved rather than commanding or making movement. Instead of moving with an underlying conception that force is needed to defy gravity, inertia, and friction, the students operate with the conception that other forces support or propel them through movement. (Skinner et al, 1979)

While this author makes no assumptions about any "effortlessness" inherent in Waguri's butoh-fu, it is the idea of being moved, either in response to outer stimuli or inner feelings and sensations, that here resonates with the notion of poetic felt space.

Reverberating further with this author, is the aforesaid implication of Skinner et al, concerning the generative capacity of the unknown, and, to re-invoke Gendlin (1997, 2004), what might seem initially vague or unclear, is also a site for possible emergences. With reference to the author's work *Living Lens* (2006-2009), from the point of view of the young contemporary dancers involved in the piece, working from an exploratory image-based approach was a relatively unusual way to create dance material. An initial concern for one of the dancers, Elise May, was whether to "strip away" the various styles and encodings of her previous dance training to explore more intuitive bodily reactions. However, in participant feedback (March, 2006), she found that working intuitively in this way eventually

opened up a new world of possibility in terms of finding innovative ways to develop movement and imagery in performance and has had a profound effect on my own creative process⁹.

For the dancer, Richard Causer, on the other hand, a particular dilemma arising for a dancer accustomed to developing concrete phrases of movement, was undertaking exploratory image-based work that often did not lead to any specific, structured material. Nevertheless, as he reported in feedback (March, 2006), he found that eventually he was able to

fuse what I learned into my own style of movement. I found a way of moving that I have never experienced before on my own body, discovering that my body can do much more than I thought¹⁰.

It would appear from the participant comments given above, that while working intuitively through image-based sensing may at first seem vague and disorienting, with persistence and training, it can also add useful strands to choreographic and performance processes. The felt experience of inner sensing through image work, however, also offers possible applications beyond dance making specifically for audience-viewed performances. The author thus extends the notion of poetic felt space to a series of participatory workshops currently being developed, summarised below.

Current and ongoing directions: *body flow*

*Like petals unfurling,
I move out from my centre...
Spinal waves,
Energy flows through my spine,
Connection between sky and earth...*

From June 2010, the author has initiated a series of participatory workshops in Tokyo under the working title "Body Flow", conducted as further inquiry into image-based approaches to movement. Participants have come from various fields, including mental health care; bodywork modalities such as massage, shiatsu and yoga; and the performing arts

such as dance or music. Brief clusters of texts (an example is given above) are movement prompts to help the body unwind naturally and allow new movement options to open, to allow, as outlined in the previous section, possibilities for “being moved”. These are part of a set of experiential somatic processes focusing on breathing, grounding, inner sensing and connectivity. Imagery, for example, includes connections to gravity, centripetal flows to explore inward movements, and centrifugal movements to explore connections to other people and surrounding space. These workshops are seen as means to extend the notion of poetic felt space to a wider group of participants as a therapeutic and restorative resource, whilst also providing a vehicle from which to elicit feedback.

What is emerging through informal workshop sharing sessions and participant feedback, is that while participants are on the whole rediscovering mind-body connections and enjoying the relief felt in moving freely, there is also a question as to the *purpose* of moving. In general, people are accustomed to moving in order to produce some kind of effect or result in the environment, whether that is through performing daily life actions, work-related actions or dance techniques. Specifically, the consequences of the movement actions are generally known or predictable at the outset; that is to say, they are *purposeful* movements. In accordance with Skinner et al (1979), it may be that the categorising of images as ‘specific’ and ‘total imagery’ offers a concrete means for further investigating the way imagery can be used to explore bodily sensations. For indeed, practitioners of experiential anatomy and somatic modalities such as Ideokinesis, Feldenkreis, Alexander Technique and Body Mind Centering, to name a few, have long used image-based methods for improved performance, body alignment, ease of movement or furthering the body-mind connection. Thus while poetic felt space, as a practice-based concept, may present insights into the use of imagery for the explicit purpose of dance and installation making, it is imperative that this author further looks to the connections and divergences with other somatic processes in order to extend the meaning and application of poetic felt space towards therapeutic and restorative environments.

Conclusion

Presented from the perspective of a performance installation maker, poetic felt space is a multi-nuanced term coined to convey the way felt experience is translated into a creative act; to refer to sensory awareness evoked through dance imagery, specifically butoh-fu; and, to conceive performers’ connections to staging elements of visuals and sound. Acknowledging the issue of how internally felt experiences are to be translated as tangible outer expression, the author proposes that the strategy of allowing oneself to be moved by, rather than moving from, poetic imagery, offers ways to open up the body to new possibilities. Whilst such processes help stimulate the senses and activate the imagination towards the creation of dance movement

material, further work is needed to more definitively ascertain the affective potential of dance imagery, both in dance-making for performances and in therapeutic expressive arts contexts. In particular, the categories of specific and global imagery proposed by Skinner et al (1979) offer a practical framework through which to examine this in greater depth. In addition, given that the author's intent is to develop the therapeutic and restorative properties of poetic felt space, continuing investigation into comparative somatic practices would elicit possible action pathways in terms of kinesthetic, proprioceptive and imaginal aspects of dance imagery.

Acknowledgements / dedication

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Notes

¹ *Living Lens* is a practice-led doctoral study undertaken at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. The academic study was completed in 2007, with further iterations of the creative work taking place in Australia and Japan between 2008 and 2009.

² Focusing (written with an uppercase letter F) is a psychotherapeutic method, as well as a training institute, developed by Eugene Gendlin. While the author has not undertaken any specific training in this area, she has found the principle of felt experiencing to be effective in articulating creative process.

³ The author has previously detailed these aspects in more depth (2007, 2009) and given the scope of this paper, does not elucidate at length here. The author refers interested readers to the co-authored article published online by QUT and Ausdance (2009) listed in the proceeding reference list.

⁴ The author has previously described in depth, work undertaken with dancers and motion sensors (2007, 2009); given the scope of this paper, the author here refrains from further discussion.

⁵ There is an ongoing project to record the butoh-fu of Tatsumi Hijikata, as noted in his scrapbooks through image and text, being undertaken at Hijikata Tatsumi Archive (Research Center for the Arts and Arts Administration, Keio University). This project, *Hijikata Tatsumi's Notational Butoh: Sign and Method for Creation*, involves digitally documenting specific movements and transcriptions of several of his students, including Yukio Waguri, Moe Yamamoto and Saga Kobayashi.

⁶ *Butoh Kaden* (1998, 2004) published by Yukio Waguri and Kohzensha /Justsystem as CD-ROM/DVD-ROM, categorises the butoh-fu as seven interrelated worlds.

⁷ For the *Living Lens* installation piece, spatialised sound was achieved through the use of multiple speaker arrays, and ultrasonic speakers with the directional capability to "throw" sound as a sound beam. The author has previously described this in greater detail (2007, 2009).

⁸ Other image-based approaches of note include Ideokinesis, a training method that uses imagery to affect postural alignment, and Ohad Naharin's Gaga technique, which uses sensate imagery to extend physicality and stimulate the imagination.

⁹ *Living Lens* (2006 iteration) was part of the *Accented Body* project, 2006 Brisbane Festival. This report was elicited under the *Accented Body* final feedback reports and previously cited in the author's PhD thesis (2007).

¹⁰ As above, this feedback was elicited under the *Accented Body* final report and cited in the author's PhD thesis (2007).

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Biographical Information

Maria Adriana Verdaasdonk is a theatre studies / visual arts graduate who based herself in Tokyo in the early 1990s to study aikido and Japanese dance-theatre butoh. In 1994 she co-founded Tokyo-based media performance unit 66b/cell, a project-based collective of performers, visual artists, sound creators and researchers in information design. Ongoing investigation employs a layering of visual and sound textures to integrate performers within virtual and imaginary landscapes. In 2007 she completed a practice-led PhD at Queensland University of Technology in the area of dance performance and multimedia. She is a certified yoga instructor and is currently undertaking further training through East West Somatics Institute for Dance and Movement Studies towards certification as a somatic movement educator. Performances and presentations include media arts festival Ars Electronica, Seoul International Dance Festival, Japan Virtual Reality Society, Brisbane Festival, WDA Global Summit (Brisbane) and Kobe Biennale.