

liko posvečenega časa, da se pridobi zaupanje ljudi, ki morajo verjeti, da o slišani. Večja povezanost in vključenost v okolje znotraj univerze sta prav tako embni, da bi lahko med sabo delili odkritja in zaključke in se smiselno odzvali na umezne izkušnje na način, da bi to vplivalo na oblikovanje boljših bodočih praks.

Moj projekt je spodbudila odločitev IAS-a, da odpre pore ucije in dovoli vstop afektivnim tehnikam, ki jih ples in somatske prakse že tletja uporabljajo za prevpraševanje načinov srečevanja in odnosov med ljudmi storom. Po vrnitvi s počitnic je ena\_den od udeleženk\_cev pripomnil\_a, da je zunaj skoraj čisto drug svet. Čeprav bi običajne, neobičajne in nepredvidljive ne gibanja v prostoru skupaj z drugimi težko označili za radikalne, jim ošolski institucionalni kontekst na splošno ni najbolj naklonjen. Ko somatske in ovizacijske prakse vstopajo v netradicionalne prostore, odpirajo nove možnosti, ncial drugačnih zaznav in oblik družbenosti, ki tiho razkrivajo tudi spopad različnimi paradigmi. Somatske prakse in ples razgrajujejo mehanizme, enjene vzdrževanju discipliniranosti (akademska univerza; umetniški ervatorij), in razkrivajo, da so ontološki premiki nujni za prevpraševanje (načinov anja v) medsebojne odnose. Čeprav bi delovanje znotraj inštitucije v skladu z li EDI k temu pozitivno prispevalo, se na epistemioški ravni še vedno upirajo.

Uporaba različnih tehnik s področja plesa in somatskih praks adicionalnih prostorih je pomembna za odzivanje na in delo z raznolikimi bami številnih identitet, ki se zadržujejo v teh prostorih. To so ljudje z identitetami, reenako(merno) opremljene za (lažji) prehod skozi prostore specializiranega zhevanja, kar je pogojeno, ne sicer izključno, z razredno izključevalnostjo, nom, seksizmom in abilizmom. (Z)graditi zaupanje, tako da si vzamemo čas za vanje in spoznavanje v okviru dejavnosti, kot je izvajanje ustvarjalnih, kinestetičnih , bi na primer lahko postalo del uvodnih predstavitev in dobrodošlic ob sprejemu članov univerzitetne skupnosti, med študijskim letom pa bi se lahko izvajalo iih intervalih. Moja raziskava kaže, da je podpiranje in intenzivnejše uvajanje tskih praks v netradicionalnih kontekstih smiselno. V prostorih, kjer se izvajajo, ano prispevajo tako k ustvarjanju pomirjujočega in spodbudnega ozračja kot ostnih medosebnih interakcij. Namenjeno pa je tudi raziskovalkam, umetnicam rednicam (vseh spolov), ki bi se ali se bodo lotili odobnega. Menim, da imajo izvajalci somatskih in plesa prvenstveno odgovornost za dolgoročen tega razširjenega polja, s tem da delijo orodja in e čutenja kot del dispozicionalne etike srečevanja adicionalnih kontekstih. Poleg tega se morajo še odzivati in opozarjati na sistemsko institucionalno , utemeljeno na hierarhijah razlik, brez pristajanja promise v zvezi s procesi integracije in časom, nim za kakovostno izvedbo projekta.

ALEXANDRA BAYBUTT deluje v Veliki Britaniji in Evropi kot raziskovalka, pedagoginja in umetnica na področju plesa in performansa.

arbara Hribar

Posnetek od blizu: – papirni Moebius trakovi z napisi parov navidez nasprotujočih si ... konceptov (telo/ozemlje, poziv/odziv, težko/lahko, govoriti/poslušati), s katerimi smo drug drugemu določili, kakšne gibalne vaje mora izvesti.

Close up image of paper moebius strips, with pairs of seemingly opposite concepts written on them (e.g. body/land, call/response, heavy/light, speaking/listening) used to create movement tasks/scores for one another in the workshops.



SOMATIKA

# Somatic Practice and Dance Improvisation in Non-Traditional Contexts: Ethics, Responsibility, Hospitality

HIGHER EDUCATION, SOMATIC PRACTICES, DANCE, EQUITY, DIVERSITY, INCLUSION

Alexandra Baybutt

This article reflects upon an experience of facilitating somatic movement and dance improvisation in a university as a non-traditional context for these practices. This was part of a short post-doctoral research project held in 2021-22 called *Moving the modes of encounter: Embodying (in) equalities in the university* responding to the theme of equity, diversity and inclusion. It explores the ethics of encounters between the researcher and the institution; the researcher and the participants; and between the participants themselves. It argues for the affordances of somatic practices on developing foundations of trust, and the limits posed by institutional constraints on duration and timing with the aim to inform future attempts of doing somatics in non-traditional contexts.

SOMATICS

## Where I was Coming from and Where I Went

I started facilitating somatic practices and the Laban/Bartenieff Movement System in 2010, following the completion of a certification programme in movement analysis. I chose to do this after discovering these practices whilst undergoing a BA in contemporary dance theatre at Laban, London (2002-05), since which I have been working in dance and performance as an artist, performer, dramaturg, collaborator and educator in a variety of spaces. In 2020 I completed my PhD that had little to do with my practical experience as a dance artist and movement educator, but a lot to do with practices of curation, and histories of European politics and cultural policy affecting dance worlds or scenes. I was what is referred to as an “early career researcher,” splitting my time between teaching, researching, dancing. I wanted to explore bridges between the somatic and improvisatory dance paradigms that privilege the experiential, and the written, discursive, analytical approaches of academic practice in the humanities.

In 2021 I saw a job announcement for an 11-month post-doctoral fellowship at the Institute of Advanced Studies (IAS), an interdisciplinary unit at University College London (UCL), UK. The theme of the fellowship was “Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.” EDI initiatives, committees and policies are predicated upon broader aims of widening access to higher education and increasing hospitality to welcome a range of identities and experiences. To me, EDI work includes the everyday encounters between people and environment in both the more obvious spaces of teaching and learning, as well as how someone crosses a threshold into these frames. I proposed that although theorisation of mind and body takes place in university contexts, their split in Higher Education (HE) institutions perpetuates mind over body in ways that impact upon efforts to be more inclusive as movement is forgotten or taken for granted. The directors of the IAS accepted me into what I present here as a non-traditional context for somatic practices and dance.

## Arguing for Somatic Movement as Responsiveness

Following political theorist Emily Beausoleil's articulation of a dispositional ethics of encounter<sup>1</sup> in which responsibility concerns responsiveness, I proposed to research the embodied encounter through somatic movement and dance improvisation and hold a series of creative process-oriented workshops. I would share some tools from somatic practices and the Laban/Bartenieff Movement System that emphasise the integration of function and expression and create improvisation scores in correspondence with workshop participants. I argued that ethics starts from the affordances of the body: sensation, perception, affect. These elements are known and felt to me from my other work dancing, performing, creating, and facilitating somatic

1 Emily Beausoleil, “Embodying an Ethics of Response-ability”, *borderlands* XIV/2, 2015, p. 6, [https://www.academia.edu/29574054/Embodying\\_an\\_Ethics\\_of\\_Response\\_ability](https://www.academia.edu/29574054/Embodying_an_Ethics_of_Response_ability) (last accessed 6 Oct 2023).

movement education with people in a range of performing arts contexts. I was interested in bringing "outsider" practices to UCL, not simply as styles to learn but as embodied techniques for the everyday.

I will explain more about the research and problematise the context after first arguing that somatic practices and dance improvisation structures do what they can do in most contexts: increase sensation, perception and awareness of individual moving bodies and bodies in relationship. Pleasure in self-discovery, play, interaction and inspiration was palpable amongst the participants of the research sessions. One participant pointed out that it felt good to move, and that "witnessing other people enjoy the experience of their own bodies is also a very fulfilling experience." Another participant commented that "just exploring and engaging with the world around me sensorially, and my position in it, made me feel a lot more connected to myself and my surroundings, and the people I was with too, which is really comforting." Participants' impressions evoked stepping over a threshold. In dance and somatic work this is often referred to as "landing" or "arriving" to slow down and develop a space of reflection and creative potential over time.<sup>2</sup> As familiarisation happens, what it takes in order to step over that threshold is so often quickly forgotten. But I want to highlight those processes here as part of the value and effect of somatic practices.

Something that became sensitised through the workshops can be described as a dispositional ethics of encounter relating to responsiveness, or the ability to respond. Actively noticing responsivity to inner and outer stimuli is part of somatic work through heightening sensory awareness. I facilitated exploratory tasks for (self)perception and creative use of space that were underpinned by the notion of the body as first affordance with capacity to affect and be affected (from a philosophy of immanence, *pace*<sup>3</sup>). Concepts like the *Kinesphere* (the space around the body as far as you can reach in all direction, after Rudolf Laban) and *Innersphere* (the space inside the body) helped participants to step over another threshold of moving in less familiar ways, seeing each other and being seen seeing, all affecting their own perception as well as each other's. One participant noted that "when I think of re-territorialization and reclaiming space, I usually think of destruction, like the symbol of a broken window and assault upon private property or whatever. So, I usually think of disruption. But this was profoundly constructive. It was like we were making something rather than breaking something." Another commented that "I really enjoyed the workshop, it was nice to have permission to be curious and explore the space, it felt so nice especially in a building that I associate so strongly with an academic context." One mentioned that "sometimes when I walk around UCL I feel like I'm treading on like a historical ground and I'm taking the steps that lots and lots of other people have taken. In that room, there was a sense of new steps being taken, in new configurations."

Simon Ellis, co-editor of the *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices*, has argued that the authors' tendency in its articles is to make more claims than arguments.<sup>4</sup> To do so risks no ground for debate when the possible applications of somatics is claimed to be unlimited. Ellis draws attention to the gap in the discourse on exactly how practices achieve their conditions of experience and transformation, as authors instead foreground descriptions in highly abstract ways. I argue that somatic practices generate practical conditions of ontoethics<sup>5</sup>:

in which something addresses the question of how to act in the present, and how to bring about a future different from the present. These "somethings" include fundamental patterns of relating to gravity, breath, weight, sensation, perception, set into chains of response, reaction and interrelation in groups to animate spaces inside the body and out. Remembering that the body, not reducible to biology or neurology, renders such encounters in movement more than exercise or wellbeing, but rather social contexts to practise how to bring about a future different from the present. This is a modest argument, but one needing to be made many times. It is bound up with institutions (especially the non-traditional ones for dance somatic practices) being resistant to embracing the body and movement as inherent for thought (if not as modes of thought), and not separable. Disciplining bodies into stillness and quietness affects trust and reduces the ways in which connection might occur. Creating the conditions for sensorial and affective experience and transformation relates to structures and processes outside of the space they take place in.

## Somatics as EDI Work in a Non-Traditional Context

Presenting somatic practices and dance improvisation in the context of this post-doctoral research fellowship was a privilege: I gained access to a non-traditional space for such practices. The affordances of the University to open itself to questions about how it functions enabled my entry. But there are limits to how far self-reflexivity on EDI work might be taken in institutions when the duration of intervention is itself limited. By attempting to do somatics in non-traditional contexts as EDI work for EDI research, I achieved spaces of pleasure, connection, new sensorial and spatial awareness, trust, and a sense of permission. But I also learnt about the layers of impenetrability the academy produces whilst or even in order to sustain something about itself.

The rationale for my project, entitled *Moving the modes of encounter: Embodying (in)equalities in the university* was to challenge long-standing university paradigms that largely privilege mind over body. This binary underpins many other problematic violent hierarchies and epistemologies sometimes obscured by "diversity work."<sup>6</sup> Following epistemologies from dance, choreography and somatic studies, this project thought through and with movement, and I particularly focussed upon the space of meeting itself as potentially foundational for trust and becoming inquisitive together. Because embodied arts techniques from dance and somatic practices (also known as somaesthetic practices) emphasise presence, sensation and risk, they draw attention to unique differences between us in capacities to attend to ourselves and others, to affect and be affected. They seek to expand those capacities, whilst recognising the hypervigilance of those highly aware and attuned to risk and possible violence in the everyday in which the arousal of the nervous system is very active. They expose lack of awareness and attention to others by gently creating conditions for increasing social sensitivity, curiosity and play where such observation of differences can arise, and ideally lead towards greater empathy

6 Sara Ahmed, "Embodying Diversity", *Race, Ethnicity and Education* XII/1, p. 43, and Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life, USA*: Duke University Press, 2012, p. 53.

in Cooper Albright, *How and: Finding Ground in an Unstable World*, Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 8.

1 Spatz, *What a Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research*, Oxon: Routledge, 2015, p. 8.

Simon Ellis, "Somatics and the Body Politic", conference paper presented at the 2017 Dance and Somatic Studies conference, Coventry, [https://www.skellis.net/\\_resources/somatics-unlimited.pdf](https://www.skellis.net/_resources/somatics-unlimited.pdf) (accessed 6 Oct 2023).

Abeth Grosz, *The Real: Ontology, Ethics and the Limits of Materialism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.

and creative experimentation. They reveal effects of environments, and habitual modes of interacting that can be taken for granted. In somatic body work and creative improvisation (experienced solo, duo and in groups), often nothing much else needs to be added beyond facilitating a frame and a series of tasks for sensing, meeting, moving and creating with varying degrees of complex instructions and ways of reflecting afterwards. The point is to use tasks as heuristics to see what arises. Bringing awareness to how one responds opens the possibility to then consider different functional as well as expressive or communicative choices, as well as appreciating differences between oneself and others.

## Stages of the Process

I had intended to lead a series of eight weekly practical sessions across February and March, open to staff and students in the faculties of Arts and Humanities to emphasise meetings between people from different roles and courses. I wanted to amalgamate feedback from the sessions and interviews with participants afterwards to better understand what participants were making of the work and how it reflected upon their individual and shared experiences of equity at UCL. After four months, approval for my research from the UCL Ethics Committee was granted. With a new timeline, invitations by email went out to students and faculty across the Schools of Humanities, Social Sciences and Art departments for a shorter series of workshops with the possibility of a follow-up interview and questions. In May 2022, I created and facilitated six sessions with undergraduate and postgraduate students that foregrounded the body and movement, with group discussion.

The delay to when the research could officially start meant the practical sessions took place during the university exam period rather than term time, affecting participation. May 2022 also was a time of shifting ground regarding Covid-19-related restrictions on meeting and travelling. Staff and students who initially signed up to participate wrote to tell me that they no longer could because: of having Covid; being able to travel internationally for fieldwork again; being overwhelmed by the amount of work to do. Whilst the workshops themselves were meaningful to the participants, the depth to which the questions posed could be fulfilled was limited by conditions of the post-doctoral fellowship itself which had a non-negotiable end-date of the end of September. It acted more like a pilot project or stepping-stone towards future university job markets, as well as insight into the modes in which the early career researcher is hoped to produce “new knowledge” in compromised circumstances.

Workshop participants were self-selecting and unified simply by being members of the UCL community. 11 people participated in the sessions: 6 BA students, 3 MA/MASc students and 2 PhD students, and some participants attended several sessions. Ages ranged from 18 to early 60s. Three participants were from the global majority. One identified as disabled. Three identified as LGBTQ+. One was an international MA student visiting for a semester. Of those who attended, three consented to interviews after the workshop, and three returned feedback to me by email. One arranged an interview online but did not appear.

## Layers of Hospitality<sup>7</sup>

One participant with a sensory processing disorder and who is neurodivergent agreed to an in-person interview following the workshop. I had already learnt several things about how to create a more supportive context for the interview, such as welcoming movement when needed, to not use eye contact if it was not comfortable, that bright lights could be dysregulating and so to check before turning lights on. Before we sat down to speak, I asked them if they wanted to move a little first, and we spent a few moments moving however we wished. They said that this invitation was welcome, and that moving before the interview was recuperative and grounding. In the workshop with this participant, we had discussed how movement had become understood through notions of appropriate and inappropriate “body language,” and our shared culture included a need to perform or confirm things like “I am listening to you, I am taking in information you’re saying” by making eye contact. They remarked that “I have been used to being told to ‘sit still, don’t fidget, face the front, make eye contact’ as ways to kind of demonstrate I am learning, or engaging.” They said our work together was a refreshing contrast to these other expectations and modes. “It was nice to still learn and participate [...], to take up space and experience, and tune into sensations.” Somatic movement and dance improvisation can provide a preparation for other activities as well as a site of inquiry in and of itself. A couple of participants referred to “permission”: the permission to explore, to take up space, to be seen “especially as a woman.” This implied that other spaces have not felt safe enough to move in through freely, and the experience of how one appears to others produces uninvited comment or attention. Disclosure of experiences often arose through the insights participants gained from undergoing a task and reflecting upon it, rather than me asking for specific examples of when people may have felt singled out or disadvantaged because of visible or invisible differences of identity.

I was motivated to create a temporary space for people who did not know each other to meet to move together and develop somatic tools of awareness, kinaesthetic response and improvisation/composition. Conversations about equity, identity and experiences of being at UCL appeared during the sessions or after through interview or email feedback. I was curious as to what might arise from participants themselves more so than looking for particular forms of oppression (e.g. racism, ableism, sexism, ageism). Attention to the phrasing of encounters between me, the participants, and the room at the IAS repositioned the epistemic value of the body and movement. These encounters were not the “everyday” interactions with UCL as a space, but they returned participants back into it with some shift in sensitivity, self-awareness, and inspiration for their academic interests. I do not doubt the commitment of the IAS to attempt to redistribute advantage through creating the post-doc position that enabled this small intervention. Nor do I doubt its interest in ongoing research and discourse on issues related to equity, diversity, inclusion and access, or said another way, anti-racist, anti-ableist work. My research showed that the tools and techniques from somatics and dance improvisation enhance the ways people relate to one another by building trust; a necessary foundation for then challenging oneself

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/752862950> (last accessed 31 Oct 2023). Participants were filmed taking part in the workshops. Initially this material was not intended for public dissemination as it was anticipated that participants may not have familiarity with movement practices and might feel self-conscious. However, four agreed to the use of their image for this short film accompanying the research that offers an impression of what happened during the workshops themselves. This film is sped up to show pathways travelled, movement shared and contrasted, and the phrasing between moving and discussion.

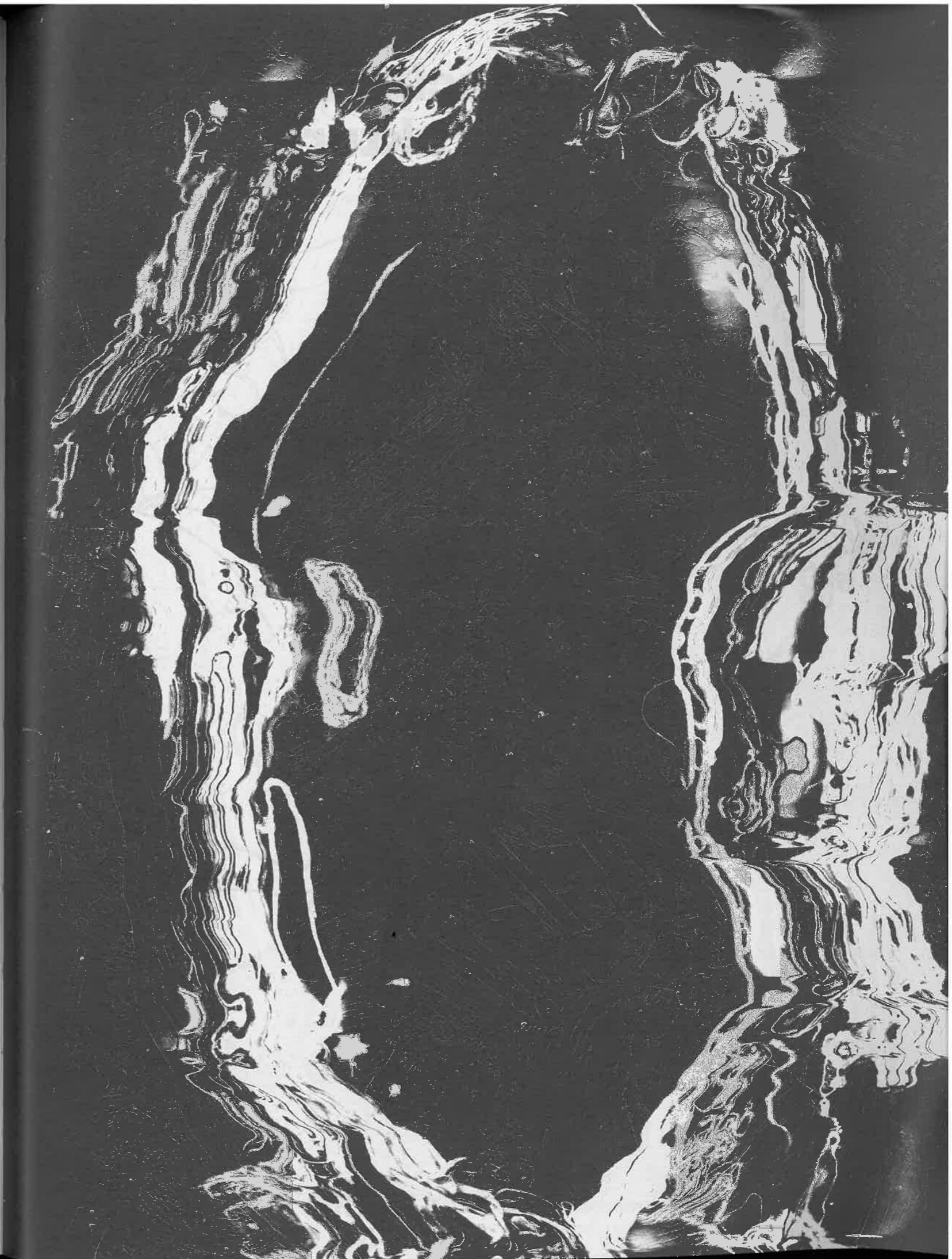
and each other further, as well as disclosing uncomfortable experiences. Through the workshops, I emphasised relational experiences that recognise the individual amongst a group, affecting it and being affected by it. This research attempted to point towards practical solutions for gulfs in empathy, trust and understanding at UCL and consider the wide variety of EDI work as ongoing and everyone's responsibility. But the differently distributed abilities, as well as motivation to respond to different needs underpins why the University has so many EDI initiatives, including post-doctoral research positions, albeit compromisingly short ones. A longer project is needed to better understand what might be achieved through more regular embodied, creative practice and any lasting impact. A qualitative approach to learn more about the experiences of the people who make up the University requires firstly more participants, and second, dedicated time to gain their trust to hear them. Being more connected and embedded within the University itself matters in order to share disclosures and findings, and to meaningfully respond to individual experiences through shaping future practices.

My project responded to the choice of the IAS to open the pores of the institution to allow in the kinds of affective practices dance and somatics has done for decades to challenge the modes of encounter between people and place. Coming back from a break, one participant remarked that it was almost like another world out there. Moving in pedestrian, non-pedestrian and unruly ways in a room together is hardly radical, but the ambience of Higher Educational institutional contexts generally does not invite it. The potency of allowing somatic practices and improvisation practices to permeate non-traditional spaces is revealed in these affected perceptions and sociality, quietly showing a clash of paradigms. Somatic practices and dance undo mechanisms for containing disciplinarity (the academic university; the arts conservatoire) demonstrating how ontological shifts are needed to challenge modes of engaging and relating from which EDI work in the institution would benefit, and yet are often resisted on epistemological grounds.

The use of the diverse practices from dance and somatics in non-traditional spaces is relevant for responding to and working with diverse needs of the many identities passing through them, people whose identities are unevenly disposed to an easier passage through specialised educational spaces based on, but not limited to, classism, racism, sexism and ableism. Creating trust through taking the time to meet through creative, kinaesthetic practices could be part of new-comer orientation and welcome sessions, and perhaps returned to at intervals before discussion meetings. My research helps to argue for the further application of somatics in non-traditional contexts through its capacity to create restorative and challenging spaces of generative, meaningful encounter. But it also acts as a warning to future researchers, artists and facilitators attempting to do so. Nevertheless, I argue that practitioners of somatic practices and dance firstly have a responsibility for the longevity of the expanded field to share these tools and sensibilities as part of a dispositional ethics of encounter in non-traditional contexts. And secondly, to continue to respond to and challenge systemic institutional violence based upon hierarchies of difference, but not to compromise on duration and processes of integration in the work itself.

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SOMATICS





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