

## Movement Improvisation and Somatic Research: Entwined Practices of Freedom



**Abstract:**

This paper looks at how the practice of dance improvisation and somatic movement modalities inform and transform our experience of being in our bodies (via embodied knowledge, kinaesthetic awareness). In both individual and collective practice, they offer an alternative means for engaging with ourselves and others that allows us to transcend individual and social constraints within certain conditions. I'll discuss these practices as an ongoing process or state of freedom in the performative space, in daily 'non-performative' life, in the many spaces in-between, and the conditions necessary to thrive.

**Individual practice towards a knowledge of self**

The practice of dance improvisation and somatic movement modalities inform and transform our lived experience via aesthetic experience, embodied knowledge, and kinaesthetic awareness. In both individual and collective practice, they offer an alternative means for understanding ourselves and engaging with the world around us that allows us to transcend individual and social constraints within certain conditions.

Here, I discuss these practices as an ongoing process or state of freedom in daily 'non-performative' life, in the performative space, and in some of the many spaces in-between.

Every human being's body is their primary vehicle for expression. This domain does not only belong to the performer - it's true for all. Body is mind - as Buddhist scholar Willa Blythe Baker calls it, "somatic nonduality."<sup>1</sup> All of our senses are a means to heighten awareness of

what we are doing: touch, taste, smell, hearing, seeing. The kinaesthetic sense, often called the sixth sense, refers to our awareness of ourselves in our body. It's a primary tool for enlivening self perception.

Tuning into our sensation, we can better attune to the physical experience of moving, thinking, feeling. In doing so it's possible to cultivate an awareness of our own physical, intellectual, and emotional habits and question learned and internalized value systems. This practice moves us toward having greater freedom of choice and the ability to consciously direct ourselves in action. Frederick Matthias Alexander, who developed the Alexander Technique, referred to this as “conscious guidance and control”<sup>2</sup> as opposed to “habitual unconscious control of human reaction.”<sup>3</sup> As a teacher of The Alexander Technique, I guide individuals toward a heightened awareness of themselves in movement, helping them gain clarity of how their thoughts affect their actions, and recognize they have choice in how they move. I consider the principles of this work basic to my understanding of embodiment and a primary resource for the practice of nonduality.

The practice of movement improvisation is a space designed for heightened awareness. It is a means toward an alignment of the conscious and unconscious. I find strength in understanding my habits and limitations, and from moment to moment I figure out how to move in the spaces between to find new uncharted territory. These elisions allow for a momentary freedom from constraint.

### **A brief historical overview (of a revolution in western concert dance)**

Beginning in the early 1960s, the post-modern vanguard revolutionized the aesthetics of western concert dance, bringing about a democratization of the body. Collaborative communities of like-minded artists, most notably Judson Dance Theater in Greenwich Village, aligned with other artistic and cultural movements in performance art, experimental music, jazz, and visual arts to challenge preconceptions of what constituted “art” and “performance.” Choreographers began exploring everything from pedestrian everyday movements to martial arts, prioritizing the daily reality of the body over its virtuosic possibilities, and spotlighting its weight and limitations rather than feats of grandeur and technique. Movement became a form of research.

These developments ushered in an era of bodily autonomy, breaking the classical model of a dancer martyring themselves to a choreographer or a technique. In the original text from the 1968 program of choreographer and filmmaker Yvonne Rainer’s dance *The Mind is a Muscle*, she expresses a wish to move away from overstylized forms of dance and toward presenting individuals in all their mundanity and complexity, saying “It is my overall concern to reveal people as they are engaged in various types of activities, alone, with each other, with objects.”<sup>4</sup> She wanted to prioritize thinking, feeling, autonomous people, as opposed to using bodies as objectified vehicles for highly stylized expression. Honing the mundanity, the everydayness of experience provided valid choreographic vocabulary; these types of actions were seen as more closely aligned with the body’s innate intelligence.

It was at this flux point in western concert dance that many forms of somatic practice and modern dance began to align more closely. The embrace of pedestrian movement in performance necessarily called for a change in dance training, as the idea of the ‘neutral body’ came to the fore. Unfortunately, there was a very narrow definition of what constituted a neutral body: white, gender conforming, thin. Nonetheless, it was a movement away from objectification, and away from a separation of physicality and intellect. Radical new forms such as contact improvisation and release technique served as explicit antidotes to the restrictions and hierarchies of classical ballet or the formal exaggeration of Martha Graham Technique and of her disciples.

By the mid to late 1990s (the era I came up in as a dancer), the world of dance in New York City had returned to the primacy of technique, sublimating the radical values of the Judson era into simply another tool of composition. While intense physical training is still dominant in the field, somatic practice remains vibrant, offering body-friendly alternatives that center self-care, healing, and pleasure-practice. Though somewhat affirming for these practices to be accepted into the mainstream, something is lost when they become just another tool for training (as opposed to untraining our trained bodies).

Complete bodily neutrality is a myth. However, I appreciate the concept as a means of working toward more natural aesthetics in the highly stylized world of dance. Though deeply flawed, it potentially opens the door for a more inclusive culture where greater diversity and

representation can thrive. There is much greater inclusivity today in some areas of the dance world, honoring the range of different body types and embracing non-traditional training.

### **The Alexander Technique and John Dewey - more historical context**

The Alexander Technique (AT), referred to by its founder F. M. Alexander (1869-1955) as “psycho-physical re-education”<sup>5</sup>, is one of a wide range of modalities fit into the category of somatic practices or somatic research. Alexander used the term re-education explicitly as an antidote to what he saw as the systematic separation of mind and body (and of theory and practice) in formal education. Learning takes place seated in the classroom, while awareness of the body is relegated to the realm of physical activity as fitness or competitive sport. Without the option to utilize one’s whole coordination in relation to their activities, children lose that vital connection. Alexander’s concept of re-education reconnects the mind and body via our conscious awareness and control, something he believed to be fundamentally relevant to systemic educational reform. In 1924, he founded a school in London where children applied AT principles during lessons and in all activities, which lasted until the beginning of WWII; a subsequent school established in Pennsylvania was active until the late 1950s.<sup>6</sup>

An important caveat: some of F. M. Alexander’s writings are racist. He used Eugenics to support his theories of human potential and development, and described non-European people as “savages” and of a “backward race” while using images of them as examples of innate physical coordination and prowess. These writings are not a reflection of the Alexander Technique as it is

understood and taught today. AT teachers around the world, and the societies and associations that support the work, have publicly disavowed these beliefs while still finding value in other aspects of the technique that still bears Alexander's name.

Alexander was an actor who initially developed his Technique to successfully resolve severe vocal problems. Today many AT teachers are performing artists themselves and/or work closely with performing artists, and are deeply aware of the pedagogical challenges and pitfalls as they relate to performance training. Dancers can train intensely for many years without much improvement, as poor coordination can get in the way without the dancer even being aware of faulty movement patterns. Bringing the unconscious into one's consciousness is paramount in becoming aware of and addressing issues of malcoordination and unleashing an artist's potential. The Alexander Technique is fundamentally grounded in teaching all individuals to reconnect their body and mind through improved sensory awareness and in doing so, refresh their approach to learning, whether it be in dance or any other field. It allows individual experience to return to the physical, to the world of action and experience.

*It (The Alexander Technique) bears the same relation to education that education itself bears to all other human activities.*<sup>7</sup> John Dewey

*Dewey has in the technique of Alexander a method for translating his philosophy into experience.*<sup>8</sup> Frank Pierce Jones



Philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey was a great supporter and believer in the Alexander Technique, writing the introduction to three of Alexander's books.<sup>9</sup> Given the way in which Dewey clearly articulates the concepts of AT (better than Alexander himself whose writing is dense and often prosaic), it's no wonder one finds many quotes from Dewey in the literature about it. Dewey first met Alexander in 1916 and soon began studying with him. He did so for over fifteen years, then continued with Alexander's brother (also a teacher) and with another well known practitioner, Frank Pierce Jones, a classics professor and author. Dewey found in Alexander's discoveries what Jones described as "a kind of laboratory demonstration of principles that he had arrived at by reasoning."<sup>10</sup> Jones notes Alexander Technique lessons provided "the concrete, sensory evidence" which gave Dewey's concepts "a solid grounding in experience."<sup>11</sup> The influence of Alexander and his method is evident in much of Dewey's celebrated philosophical discourse.

*Thus the question of integration of mind-body in action is the most practical of all questions we can ask of our civilization. It is not just a speculative question, it is a demand--a demand that the labor of multitudes now too predominantly physical in character to be inspired by purpose and emotion and informed by knowledge and understanding. It is a demand that what now pass for highly intellectual and spiritual functions shall be integrated with the ultimate conditions and means of all achievement, namely the physical, and thereby accomplish something beyond themselves. Until this integration is effected in the only place where it can be carried out, in action itself, we shall continue to live in a society in which a soulless and heartless materialism is compensated for by soulful but futile idealism and spiritualism.*<sup>12</sup> John Dewey



**Art as an ongoing experience: possibilities of collective improvised movement practice as it relates to my own experience, limitations and transcendence**



[Me Reeds Birds](#) (Vimeo link to very short film)

*The norms dictating appropriate bodily movement often relate to aspects of one's identity, including race, gender, age, and sexuality. But a skilled improviser will be intimately familiar with her habitual ways of moving, as well as with the shifting social norms that give those movements meaning. Then, on a moment to moment basis, she figures out how to move.*<sup>13</sup> Danielle Goldman

Performance scholar Danielle Goldman outlines the innate challenges for any improviser, understanding that ‘freedom’ in improvisation is always contextual, predicated on the existent conventions of time and space. Goldman refers to “tight spaces”<sup>14</sup> as the transitional spaces existing between more rigid expressions of experience, which invite moments of creative choice making.

Robert Innis asks a vital question: “Since attitudes are essentially habits and habits arise from practices, can the production of original ideas be practiced or cultivated?”<sup>15</sup> Originality in improvised dance has as much to do with the practitioner as with the form. Here, how an artist navigates and transcends constraints will shape the content and determine how far the form can stretch. Responding to the moment is a practice that sometimes bears the fruit of a new idea and other times feels predictable and falls flat. Megan Craig, like Goldman, suggests that “Freedom develops in tight spaces. What matters is playfulness, experimentation, absurdity, chance, devotion.”<sup>16</sup>

Goldman cites a contemporary of Dewey and Alexander, the French sociologist Marcel Mauss, who in 1934 wrote an essay entitled *Techniques of the Body* in which Mauss attempts to better understand how movement habits develop, arguing that they “vary especially between societies, educations, properties and fashions, and types of prestige.”<sup>17</sup> Mauss offers that there’s no innate coordination or natural way of moving. It is all context-dependent. Put together, Alexander’s texts and Mauss’s statements about the nature of habit offer a picture of how habits form. When we are disconnected from our physical experience we cannot know ourselves, our

patterns, nor understand how they are shaped by the societies in which we live. Our structures, generally the same anatomically, vary greatly in functionality which is a product of our history, biology, and environment.

When I improvise, any experience of being temporarily unbound by constraints is fleeting. But I do my best not to be goal oriented when I improvise. I am satisfied to stay grounded in the process. I watch my thoughts as they pass by. I may follow it or dismiss it. Then hopefully I move on without judging. In a group, my orientation, my center of gravity, constantly moves between myself and the collective. This frees me from myself, in a way. I want to cultivate a kind of emptiness, where things pass through but nothing gets bogged down. I know this is almost impossible, but the metaphor helps me to move through constraints. It's like meditating in that way, but with eyes open and while dancing with other people.

Finding myself in a place I've never been before is disorienting. For that fleeting moment I'm okay with the instability. It brings a rush of pleasure, like fresh air. Sometimes I get to a flow state of heightened responsiveness, invention and interaction. No crushing internal dialogue. There is seemingly nothing in my way. Even when I return to a familiar movement or idea, the moment feels new.

When improvising in a group we collectively agree on a framework: a structure or score to hold collective intention. Good improvisation is not totally free; it requires some kind of structure or compositional element to hold it together, a container that supports spontaneous

choice making. By creating generative limitations, structure offers freedom. Freed from the paralysis of infinite choice, we are invited to inhabit our bodies, to become more conscious of our moment-to-moment thoughts, feelings, and sensations. In this state we can consciously direct and redirect our functioning. We are creating the conditions for the intangible moments where we surprise ourselves and those we are dancing with. These moments are the result of an ongoing commitment to the practice of opening to the unknown.

My deepest experiences with collective improvisation come from the long-term project *Masters of Ceremony*, an interdisciplinary quartet of two dancers (myself, Melanie Maar) and two musicians (Abraham Gomez Delgado, Taylor Ho Bynum) that began in 2011. We came together to be in conversation and communion, to test boundaries and constraints, to share wishes and concerns, to blur definitions of genre and discipline. The conversation spilled out into free-form movement and sound exploration in the communal, ritualistic space of rehearsal and performance. Different from the experience of improvising alone, the group juggled individual agendas and collective desires, which pushed things into unknown territory. Everyone was acting with great sensitivity to the collective. Ideas and experiences flowed and were interrupted. Ideas failed. Sometimes we tried again. We often didn't get where we wanted to go. Things fell out of focus. These were still deeply rich moments that informed our experience of being and improvising together. We were taking a lot of risks, managing disappointment and missed connections, accepting disruption as a generative force. Always, there was a consistent shared understanding amongst the group. Without that the improvisation would fall apart. Failure was inevitable and therefore released us from any anxiety of failure.

American choreographer Meg Stuart refers to this as “improvisation’s paradox”: “the only moment you really fail is when you don’t accept failure as part of the experience.”<sup>18</sup> Accepting failure felt liberating.

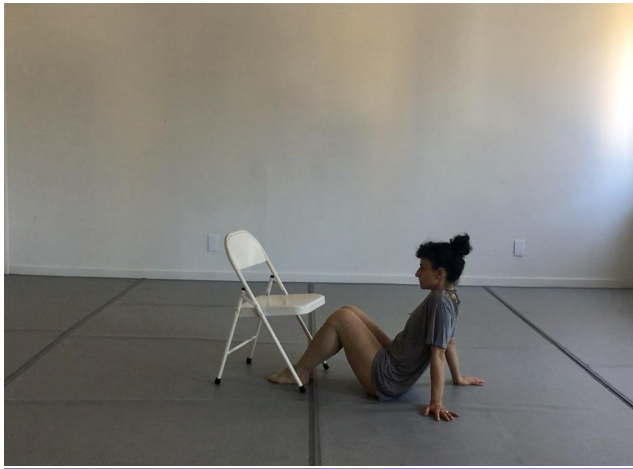
Aligning the conscious with the unconscious in the act of improvising - movement spontaneity as form is an act of connectivity. It is a product of whole body connection. Everything working together in harmony: one action/choice counterbalancing another to create a strong fluid equilibrium. A moment of balance and effortless interrelation.

The accompanying films, photographs and drawings were made during the pandemic, while isolated from improvising with others. They are a reflection of my continuous artistic practice, “altered daily” and the reality in which I was and am still existing as an artist.<sup>19</sup> I am communing with nature, dueting with objects, continuing my attempt to connect myself to the world around me and to my imagination. The pivot from performing to visual art making at first felt like a space holder, but I discovered an aesthetic convergence in film, drawings and animation, an expression of my sensibilities in composition, indeterminacy, and improvisational spirit. Though my skill is limited in these mediums, they give me glimpses of their expressive possibilities.

The films and images feel like a solo continuation of the improvisational interdisciplinary work in which I feel I've most thrived as a dance artist, such as Masters of Ceremony or my collaborations with visual artist Megan Craig. Together Megan and I created a shared language across disciplines, born through improvisation. It allowed us to enter into the realm of the unknown when language was not sufficient to overcome the unsolvable conundrum of how to bring our practices together to make a performance. We rooted our practice in repetition, experimentation and experience, all forms of exchange. We also had many long, fruitful conversations about our interests and intentions. These conversations then naturally folded into the non-verbal, exploratory, improvisational process that gave our work shape. We were not interested in defining our work through genre or discipline and felt we did not have to answer the question of 'what are we doing.' Instead we just did it. Many substantive ideas and performance works grew out of this process. I see our work together as born of a unique process between two artists interested in transcending discipline, aware of the limitations, and forging ahead.



*Myself & Megan Craig in Traveling in Place, Yale University Art Gallery. Photo: Stephanie Anestis*





[What Silence](#) (Vimeo link to short film)

## Invitation to awareness and improvised performance as a practice of freedom

*The here and now is the very stuff of liberation.*<sup>20</sup> Willa Blythe Baker

*Awareness is simple. Just notice, without bias, what is happening.*<sup>21</sup> Ruth Zaporah

Awareness is a state of being attuned to the present moment. Without judgment. Turn up the volume of your sensation to notice what you are doing. To take the temperature of your internal state. What you're thinking, feeling, doing. Allow yourself to be available, open, attuned.

Awareness is not prescriptive. It's the practice of being open to the unknown - which is true of any moment you're in. Concerns about the past and wishes for the future are not a reflection of where you are in the moment. Shelley Senter, my first Alexander Teacher and a long-time Trisha Brown dancer, refers to that kind of preoccupation as living in "a fantasy land" - a land of regret about the past and anxieties about the future. I appreciate that statement as a reminder of the unreality of that way of being. The only reality is now. The idea of awareness seems easy ('just tune in'), but it often demands a lifetime of practice.

Performance invites a heightened state of awareness. It's a place to put into practice self-knowledge, to experience the deep satisfaction of responding to impulses in real time. For

improvisers, the performative is an extension of the process, not an end in itself. It is where principles and structures are put into practice in a higher stakes environment. There is an audience.

Spontaneous action unfolds as a performance, as a choreography, as music composition, as theater. Failure is a real possibility, which is thrilling. There are often pre-determined constraints: rules or structures decided upon by the group. These can include time limits or a score. The group has been doing the work of setting the conditions for the surprising and the unknown.

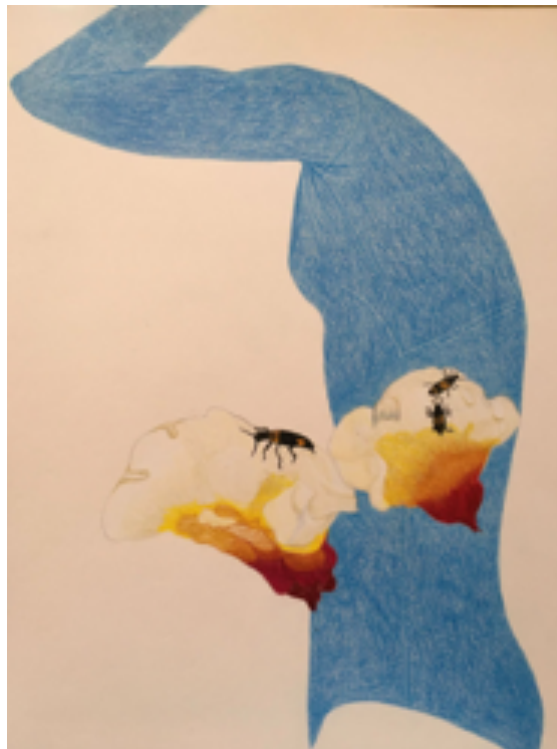
The rehearsal space can also be a place of experimentation and risk, a laboratory for research and experimentation. Here too, without the audience, momentary elisions of structure and improvisation open up previously untrod paths. No eyes are watching and no cameras are turned on. Sometimes these are the most transcendent moments - totally ephemeral, without witnesses.

In movement improvisation, as in improvised music or theater, one practices cultivating a state of attention, a deep state of listening. We prepare for the experience of the indescribable, that beyond which we can make happen, beyond the limits of what we know. The ineffable resides at the limits of our ability and conscious mind.. We prepare, hold the space for it. We cannot *will* it to happen, we do not know how to make it happen, and we do not know when it will happen. We set the stage and prepare ourselves for the unknown. One learns to wait softly

in a state of openness. We cultivate, nurture the conditions in ourselves that foster openness, readiness, alertness, presence. As Innis writes, “Creativity is also an *event* that seems to bring from nowhere.”<sup>22</sup>

Liberated from the limitations of our own mind we temporarily exist on another plane of pure connectivity. Unburdened by past or future. A total immersion.

### **Conditions needed to thrive - moving toward greater freedom of the self in everyday life**



Within certain conditions we can invite the possibility of release from habitual ways of being and moving. These conditions can vary greatly as one individual's constraints are another's freedom. We must be sensitive to this on many levels. Self awareness, nonduality, is a repetitive,

continuous practice. Each day the practice begins again. In our non-performative lives the conditions necessary to thrive are the same: we cultivate means for self-knowledge and develop a greater tolerance for indeterminacy. As Dewey said of his AT lessons, by the accumulation of “concrete, sensory evidence...grounded in experience.”<sup>23</sup> In the accumulation of this knowledge we are in tune to the infinite variation of our experience, shifting day to day, moment to moment.

In my experience, the needs of an individual are that of the artist and performer: a safe, quiet space where one can slow down, reflect, and just exist. There must be the opportunity for rest and doing nothing. Dance artists often speak of the need for a clean floor in a quiet studio, simply to lie on the floor to rest and think, sometimes for hours before starting any creative process. These are all means of cultivating the conditions for deeper self awareness and an openness to the unknown. Craig eloquently lays out how this kind of attention invites a shift in time: “Devotional attention counters and resists the speed of the information/digital age, slowing things down, stalling them.”<sup>24</sup> Getting to know our own mind is a fundamental pursuit in many meditation practices. As Tibetan Buddhist lama Thubten Yeshe writes, “Many people understand how machinery operates but they have no idea about the mind...meditation is the right medicine for the uncontrolled, undisciplined mind.”<sup>25</sup>

Repetition is a guide. Returning to the same line or movement over and over again invites the revelation that nothing is ever the same, that we are never the same at any given moment. We return again and again from different angles, perspectives, and changed sets of circumstances. The conditions of ourselves, our internal and external worlds, are always in flux. Repetition

grounds us and reminds us of the things to which we can return, such as the ongoing movement of our breath.

As a long time student and teacher of somatics and the Alexander Technique, I've had the benefit of many years of lessons and training and the advantage of being part of an experiential educational process. I've accumulated direct experience and knowledge, generated through movement, transmitted and reinforced through touch. Direct, sensory experience is a vital practice for learning about oneself and for relearning how to learn. As a long time dancer and choreographer, the realm of improvisation has been my primary movement and performance practice for the past twelve years; perhaps my years of somatic education led me to this choice. I find improvisational practice to be more complex and interesting than executing learned movement, offering another level of challenge that best inspires my technique and creativity. By losing myself in the moment I always know where I am. For me, improvisation is an ideal aesthetic constraint: a series of situations to spontaneously explore my own visual and stylistic interests, to let ideas unfold within other ideas, unburdened by another's pre-determined style or vision. When in communion with others, we are all constantly, thrillingly challenged, thriving within the limitations of spontaneous structure and non-verbal communication. Using improvisational practice as the scaffolding to build ideas, then taking them apart to build anew.



[Odyssey](#) (Vimeo link to short film)

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