Ways of being a body

Body and Performance

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The body does not move into space and time, it creates space and time: there is no space and time before movement.

Erin Manning

Movement is intrinsic to human expression. It precedes and underpins cognition, language and creative art. Movement may be seen as the underlying skill of skills and one that adapts to the environment as well as the fundamental basis of ecological perception.

Sandra Reeve

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The Inter-subjective Body

Natalie Garrett Brown

Abstract

This chapter introduces the inter-subjective body as a further expression of the Ecological Body discussed in the first book in this series (Reeve, 2011). Notions of the body in flux and co-created in relationship with the environment, for example, can be seen as central to both. Specific to the inter-subjective body, however, is an interest in the inter-relationship between dancing bodies. This focus thus brings a particular interest in corporeal exchange and the related ethical and political significances of subjectivity as co-created.

Theoretically this lens is informed by Deleuze and Corporeal Feminism and advocates an affinity between Deleuzian-inflected corporeal feminism and somatic-informed movement practice. Both, it is suggested, offer a critique of the mind/body dualism implicit within humanist understandings of subjectivity. Accordingly each can be argued to re-cast subjectivity as an always-embodied activity, an inter-corporeal exchange between 'self', recast as shifting and multiple, and 'otherness'.

From this conceptual ground, the chapter proposes three key characteristics of the inter-subjective body within contemporary dance practice: the cultivation of a somatic mode of attention; touch as a mode of communication; and the possibility of corporeal exchange between dancers within the context of site responsive performance practice. Case studies drawn from the author's experience as a dance artist working in the field of somatic informed dance, accompany the discussion, and are offered to illuminate the formulation of the inter-subjective body.

(2001) Alongside others, in a movement workshop drawing on Body-Mind Centering (BMC), I'm asked to bring attention to the quality of elasticity and plasticity in the connective tissue within my body. As I move, the earlier hands-on work with my partner exploring this body system resonates with, and supports, my exploration. Individually and collectively we take time to sense and move from this place.

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As we continue this inner exploration, a second invitation is offered and I/we are reminded of the external environment. As I continue to move I hear the suggestion that I might find relationship with the walls or the floor of the studio as a way of increasing awareness of the spine; I try this. Partially succeeding, I am helped by the reminder that the body might connect with ground or surface through yielding and pushing – movement development patterns I have come to know in previous explorations. I continue with this possibility and notice myself experiencing a dynamic suspension in my moving self as I shift my attention between inner connective tissue and the outer space of dance studio.

Improvising with these somatic images, sourced experientially, I am reminded of the inter-connection between the spaces of the body and the 'real' space(s) outside the body.

The inter-subjective body might be understood as a further expression of the 'ecological body' outlined in the first volume in this series, in that it resonates with notions of the body as co-created in relationship with the environment and thus not characterised by stasis. It is a lens which revisions humanist understanding of self as stable and given, thereby aligning with contemporary philosophical concerns that presuppose an interconnection of mind and body.[1] Specific, however, to the inter-subjective lens is an interest in the inter-relatedness of bodies, considered here through an exploration of corporeal exchange between dancers.[2]

The case studies offered in this chapter are drawn from my experiences as a dance artist over the last ten years.[3] In particular my work as a dance artist is coloured by an advocacy of the interconnectedness of theory and practice, and interest in somatic practices, specifically Body-Mind

1 See Reeve (2011) for a succinct account of post-humanist understandings of subjectivity.

2 As Stephanie Skura (1990: 183) observes, the somatic dancing subject argued for here is dissimilar from that found in conventional modes of dance-making which privilege the visual, placing the choreographer as outside 'eye/I', arranging objectified bodies in space and time. A focus on detailed and accurate replication of complex movement sequences and spatial patterns derived by the single choreographer from a visual perspective can be seen to shore up aspects of humanist subjectivity through its privileging of the 'logic of visualisation'. I argue that somatic-informed dance can disrupt this ocularcentrism through a process of creating and performing which emphasises the continued exploration of movement responses to the experientially sourced image or score through the kinaesthetic and the visual realm, not just the latter.

3 The framing of these case studies as examples of the inter-subjective body began in my doctorate studies (Brown, 2007).

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Centering (BMC).[4] This interest has informed a collaborative, site-responsive project called *enter & inhabit*. Begun in 2007, *enter & inhabit* explores process-driven dance-making in public sites characterised by flow and transition. The project includes durational movement improvisation, photography and writing to create live and virtual installations and is drawn upon in the case studies included here.

This chapter, therefore, offers a play between the hypothetical and the real case study. The reflections offered here, while grounded in my experience, are multi-stranded in their references and untethered in linear time and space. They are further characterised by the range of subject positions from which they are written. At times I am the observer, at others the observed. Within this approach the case study examples seek to offer accumulating perspectives on key experiences that for others and myself point towards a manifestation of the inter-subjective body in western contemporary dance practice.[5] Thus, in the following pages, overlapping layers of the inter-subjective body are unveiled through an interplay between case study and theoretical reflections, inviting the reader to think and feel into this lens as a lived possibility. In offering this lens, I propose three key characteristics of the inter-subjective body within contemporary dance practice:

- the cultivation of a somatic mode of attention
- touch as a mode of communication
- the possibility of corporeal exchange between dancers within the context of site-responsive performance practice.

The inter-subjective lens rests upon a presupposition of the inter-connection of mind and body and, in so doing, undermines the idea of the body as a sealed, predetermined and given entity and instead suggests the boundaries of the body as permeable – allowing embodied experience, a dialogue between inner and outer, self and other to constitute subjectivity understood as an emergent and ongoing process. This is something argued

4 For BMC and somatics, see the glossary. For more on BMC see Cohen (1993) or Hartley (1989).

5 Here I am drawing on a theorisation of this term as offered by dance scholars informed by corporeal feminism. However this term is used by others working in the fields of psychoanalysis, psychology and philosophy, specifically phenomenology, when formulating understandings of relationship.

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for by corporeal feminists informed by the philosophy of Deleuze and explores the notion of multiple subjectivities created via the mind/body's continuous interrelation with dynamic structures of power as an alternative to the humanist notion of the stable subject.[6]

Cultivating a somatic mode of attention; subjectivity as inherently embodied

Alongside two other workshop participants I am led through a hands-on exploration to invoke awareness of the cerebrospinal fluid [7] (CSF), the fluid that bathes the brain and flows up and down the spinal column. We take turns in the shifting roles. One lying down to receive the hands-on work while two others use a 'light', 'listening' touch to offer sensorial feedback, placing hands-on over the three areas where, for BMC, the pulse of the CSF is palpable: base of the skull, tail bone and ankles.

In this exploration I came to know experientially an aspect of the body, my body, that I had only previously grasped intellectually through the theorising of anatomy images on the page. As I offer hands-on it takes me time to perceive the flow of CSF in my partner's body but eventually I became aware of the slow pulsating rhythm of the fluid, slower than the rhythm of the breath and characterised by a wave-like, rippling flow of sensation from the ankle up to the skull.

When receiving this touch, however, I am surprised by how different my experience is in contrast to when I was listening to another's. Rather than having a specific sense of the flow of the fluid I had just experienced, I am left with a sense of being settled, deep in the body, my usual availability to language momentarily absent and my limbs and torso experienced as one integrated entity.

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6 I discuss this point further in Brown (2011).

7 BMC brings attention to the high proportion of fluids that form the material body, thereby challenging muscle and bone as the major substances of the body. The Fluid System is seen to consist of cellular, intercellular, blood, lymph, cerebrospinal (CSF) and synovial fluids: all distinguishable but fully interrelated in terms of their function and physical properties. Fluids are understood to move through the different systems of the body, merging, transforming, and intersecting as they fulfil their function within the whole. Cohen, the originator of BMC, says, "All the fluids are essentially one fluid – largely made up of water – that changes properties and characteristics as it passes through different membranes, flows through different channels and interacts with different substances" (Cohen, 1994: 67).

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This possibility of attentive listening to another through the CSF with this doubling sensation of inner and outer, self and other comes with me as the group moves into a Contact Improvisation score. Beginning solo, we play with the possibility of allowing our own movement to emanate from attention to the CSF, before opening up our awareness to the others moving in the space and finally allowing a transition into selective response to others.

As we reflect back on the experience of dancing the given score, one participant, experienced in the form of Contact Improvisation, comments that remaining with his attention on the CSF had enabled him to shift effortlessly in and out of new and changing partnerships throughout the improvisation – a comment echoing my own experience.

Reflecting on the experiences of others in this workshop and remembering my own journey through the CSF improvisation, particularly the sense of availability and receptivity I experienced when dancing with others, I am reminded of Albright's observation that some contemporary dance practices can be understood to cultivate a dual attention to inner and outer sensation. This involves a balancing of receptivity, perception and response which in turn enables dancers to experience and embody another's external or internal rhythm, shift in direction, movement or energy from moment to moment. Within this honed, somatic mode of attention, Albright suggests, is to be found a process which opens up the possibility that identity can be multiple and shifting, claiming that "in the midst of these improvisational exchanges of attention, gesture, sweat and energy one is trained to confront an other in such a way as to confound the usual distinctions between self and 'other'"(Albright, 2001: 1).

Developing this further, Albright suggests that contemporary dance practices that cultivate a somatic mode of attention can serve to shift a dancer's embodied knowledge of his/her relationship with the world. "By shifting our somatic imagination, we can reorder our cultural notions of selfhood... the self becomes an interdependent part which flows through and with the world" (*ibid*: 3). In so doing, the humanistic assumption that the creation of self is distinct from, and unrelated to corporeal other is brought into question and the embodied and emergent quality of subjectivity is once more realised.

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> "If the world is already inside one's body, then the separation between self and other is much less distinct. The skin is no longer the boundary between the world and myself, but rather the sensing organ that brings the world into my awareness. In this intersubjective space in which one can be penetrated by sensations both external and internal, the heretofore unquestioned separation of individual and the world (or me and you) becomes more fluid. What I am talking about here is the possibility of re-conceptualizing the physical borders of bodies through attention to sensation." (Albright, 2003: 262)

As such, her work can be understood to evoke the possibility that moving with and from a somatic mode of attention serves to create an inter-subjective space, a shared third space in which a series of momentary meetings and interrelations between self and 'other', conceptualised as individual or environment, offers subtle shifts and changes in the individual's first person perspective [from the soma] of self, thereby experientially demonstrating subjectivity to be a process of becoming; one that is non-monolithic and wholly embodied.

Albright's assertion that certain forms of contemporary dance can create an 'inter-subjective space' foregrounds the need to move on from a position of identity politics. In doing so, she acknowledges the importance of the essentialist/constructivist feminist debate in unveiling how Western philosophy rests upon a division of the world into oppositional categories, mind/body, self/other and the extent to which these were offered as the 'natural' order of things. She therefore recognises the ways in which feminism has disrupted the hierarchies this had held in place and proposes that it is necessary to re-conceptualise difference as 'always in motion' (Albright, 2001: 2).

Using the imagery of a dance form familiar to herself, Contact Improvisation, she argues that in order to step outside the binaries of Western philosophical structures of thought, we must 'launch ourselves across that metaphysical slash between self/other' (*ibid:* 2). Such claims as to the significance of dance forms, which foreground motility in understandings of difference, might also be made about site-responsive projects and outdoor-dance practices. For example within the *enter & inhabit* project there is a desire to work in spaces and places characterised

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by flow and transition. These have variously included ring roads, river crossings, plazas, common pathways and symposium corridors and give us a heightened experience of the inherent change to be found in all environments. Sometimes we have moved in the same sites repeatedly through the seasons, a process which once more re-inscribes the quality of change to be experienced in these places and spaces as ever-present and emerging.

This we might understand as a Deleuzian becoming, whereby the tension between original and copy becomes obsolete and a flat hierarchy of difference pervades. Or to explore this another way, as we move in these sites of change, witnessing our own activity of sensing, perceiving and response, we are simultaneously attuned to the shifts and stillness present in our constellation of three, and the emerging space and place we co-create. And in this constellation of three, we develop and hone, moment to moment, our doubling of attention to soma and other, co-creating a third or inter-subjective space which emanates not from a merging or collapse of one into the other but rather derives from the vitality of both in attentive conversation, a multi-directional listening through the body.

Touch as a mode of communication; subjectivity as co-created and relational to other

(2001/2002) Seated in a circle, amongst a group of experienced dance artists during a workshop exploring BMC I listen to a discussion on the sense of touch, touch as continuum of possibilities, a dialogue between receiver and giver. At one end of this sliding scale the receiver is considered an active recipient. The giver of touch is there primarily to support and offer a 'sounding board' for his/her partner's experience. At the opposite end the giver takes some body weight and strongly guiding or directing the movement of the receiver's body, whether that is internal or external. In between these two extremes exists the possibility that the giver 'listens' via touch to his/her partner, and connects with his/her flow of energy in order to follow and stay with it and to emphasise and direct the receiver's existing movement, or gently but consciously suggest another option or direction.

We move to a partner to explore this continuum and the felt sense of this possibility, I realise a few years on that this informs my own practice working

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in the outdoors. Writing reflectively on an experience of a duet improvisation from an interest in surface and sensation I note how the sense of touch and an opening of all the senses, not just the visual, underlies my continuing exploration of an inter-subjective being in the world through my own collaborative creative practice...

As we have seen in this lens, subjectivity arises through our being in the world and central to this is an acknowledgement of the role of touch and movement in relating, communicating and comprehending space. While the ocularcentric nature of western culture privileges the I/eye in conceptualisations of self, contemporary dance practices that cultivate a somatic mode of attention implicitly question this hierarchy of the senses. In deconstructing this hierarchy of the senses, subjectivity is revealed as a process of becoming through the sensory-perceptual feedback loop that relies on all the senses, not just the ocular.

For example, in sympathy with the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, BMC recognises that one can touch and be touched in many different ways. Underlying this is an understanding that in touching, the individual is simultaneously touched, a constant inter-corporeal process that invokes a cycle of responses via the regulating neurological feedback systems of the body. This acknowledgement of the tactile exchange of information between self and other is conceived of as always present, a continuum of potential rather than something that is either present or absent. This understanding of touch is advocated too by Deane Juhan, who writes:

> "We can never touch just one thing; we always touch two at the same instant, an object and ourselves, and it is in the simultaneous interplay between these two contiguities that the internal sense of self – different from both the collection of body parts and the collections of external objects – is encountered... my tactile surface is not only the interface between my body and the world, it is the interface between my thought processes and my physical existence as well. By rubbing up against the world I define myself to myself." (Juhan, 1987: 34)

The idea of touch as inherently inter-subjective is substantiated by a number of evolutionary and biological 'truths' offered by scientific enquiry. In particular, Juhan draws attention to the development of touch in the

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embryo, cited to take place as early as week six. He also emphasises the shared origin of the nervous system and skin tissue, both of which are seen to develop from the ectoderm layer of the early embryonic cells.

Maintaining a simultaneous awareness of inner and outer sensory information, dancers working with a somatic mode of attention and informed by practices such as BMC relate to each other in space through a corporeal exchange rather than recourse to the visual. The corporeal interrelationship between dancers has various manifestations depending on the artist's particular experience and interest. However, common to many of them is a conscious dismissal of sight as *the* way a dancer can be aware of another in space. In particular, their relationship is characterised by the use of touch, a felt sense or kinaesthetic awareness of each other and an increased attention to sound. And in this multi-sensory communication between dancers and place, the inter-subjective body, is evoked once more.

A case for flattening the hierarchy of the senses and recognising touch as inherently central to subjectivity is made similarly by Manning (2007) with reference to Tango as an improvisational form. That the hegemony of humanist subjectivity can be disrupted by a re-ordering of the senses, a de-privileging of the visual via a foregrounding of touch, is taken as a given by Manning. Making this point she prefaces her study by stating:

> "I explore the ways in which research on the senses can extend beyond commonsense approaches to the senses and to the body. To write about the senses it is necessary to write against the grain of a mind-body reason-senses model that continues to privilege staid readings of gender, biology, and politics." (Manning, 2007: xii).

Underlying this assertion lies the recognition that "the rational modern subject" is one incompatible with "a sensing body in movement" (*ibid*: 159) and as such her reading of Tango resonates with the major themes and concerns of the discussion here.

The particular understanding of touch that Manning offers is in sympathy with Juhan's identification of touch as inherently inter-subjective (described above). She notes for example, as Juhan does, the biological development of touch *in utero* and the significance of touch to the healthy development of young in both humans and other mammals. Echoing BMC, she also highlights the way in which touch is an always-present

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sense and the skin the largest sense organ of the body. She thus re-casts the relationship between the senses and the body. In particular she takes issue with the model of one body giving or withholding touch from another to argue for the notion of "a stable body that exists in a pre-given space-time which contains an active giver and a passive receptor" (*ibid*: xiii). In contrast to this, Manning argues for "positioning the senses *relationally* as expressions of moving bodies" (*ibid*) which thus leads to:

> "...not a subjective body that identifies itself as something concrete one could call a *self* or an *individual,* but a series of intensities, through which endlessly diverse populations are engendered." (*ibid:* 95)

Corporeal exchange and dancing inter-subjectivity

(2011) Moving in relation to my collaborator, aware of the sound of her moving, a shared interest in perching, shifting, a play of form and constellation emerges. Amongst this my own interests momentarily fall to the fore before merging, and converging interests reassert themselves once more. In this I notice a shifting back and forth across the shared and the singular. Monitoring moments of fusion, alertness, quickening, whispers of slide and shimmer against the surface of the earth appear followed by pause, stillness, rest. In the amphitheatre of sound I hear rich and full the depth of space mapped through bird call, trains, dogs, children's voices, and planes overhead. Slipping under, moving across I feel the appetite of my muscles to move, lean, find support and ground. We breathe and find shared stillness once more.

On another day I'm reminded once more, re-remembering as though stumbling upon a revelation, the subtle and detailed knowing of place and space that unfolds when moving with attention to skin and the sense of touch, in companionship with others also following the same score or task. Beginning with attention to my own and partner's breath as we sit in contact, I find my form as I meet the surface of the muddy, ivy strewn, leafy ground. In this a fluid spine, softened by the contact of my partner's breath guides my coming to know that place in that moment. Her materiality reminds me of mine. In tracing and tracking the detail of the ground I simultaneously experience the layered shifting fullness of my own being...

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The sound of cars, ripple of stream, weave of branches and the mounding curving sweep of the bank edge lead me to a journey of reach and pull crawl along the mud, a mud which pours and creeps and I make the smallest of journeys through a cavern of time, from web to white mushroom before laying sideward to receive a droplet on the skin of my cheek moments before dislodged by my partner's moving, and clear but delicate sounding.

Manning suggests that recognising the inter-subjective quality of touch leads to a particular concept of space and time. This is different from that which emanates from the delineation of self and other – the humanist subject position. Importantly it is one whereby movement pre-exists space and time. Drawing on her example of Tango understood as an improvisational form, she highlights the way in which dance forms rooted in the sense of touch can function as a site for the expression of otherness within the dominant order, claiming:

> "Tango will remain the dance of the milieu – the in-between... It is not the dance of cities or countries, but the dance of the ghetto, of the space that cannot be accurately named or defined." (*ibid*: 17).

Doing so leads her to share Albright's contention that a meeting of other with a somatic mode of attention leads to an experience of emergent subjectivity. In the moment to moment of improvising with a partner, claims Manning, each dancer is not reaching out towards a known, predetermined other or destination but rather moving forwards towards the not-yet-modulated or formed.

> "The body is the intermediary through which I create, with you, the shared space of our touch, our subjectivity-in-process. ...Touch is a movement toward an other through which I recognize myself differently, spacing time as I time space." (*ibid*: 60)

Thus, for Manning, the inter-subjective body might be said to challenge the body politic of state sovereignty which rests upon a delineation between self and other. State politics, argues Manning, requires a stable body - one that is accountable as legitimate and appropriate as well as responsible within the organising principles and practices of the dominant order. Bodies of difference might claim to threaten and undermine this, their material excess a reminder of an embodied resistance to the body contained by boundaries.

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> "In a model of consensual politics, the citizen cannot have an unstable body, for that body would challenge the organization of the body-politic...The body, every body, and most certainly the 'nonexistent' body at the borders of the state, threatens the state's strict dichotomy between inside and outside. These deviant bodies emphasise the porosity of their mobile, sensing fleshiness." (*ibid*: 70)

(2012) We didn't apply to be there/here. In developing our outdoor practice over the last two years, we befriended the dogs and their human companions as they passed. We offered the visiting policeman our website address to validate our activity as art. In that moment one of us had an art for PR. He was responding to a call of concern. A concern for adult female bodies, sometimes in contact, paused or moving horizontal on the ground while a man with machine photographed close by. The word pornography was jokingly used. We were wearing rain gear and walking boots.

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http://www.enterinhabit.com ~ http://c-dare.co.uk

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