

corporeal epistemics (in four parts)

authentic movement and a camera

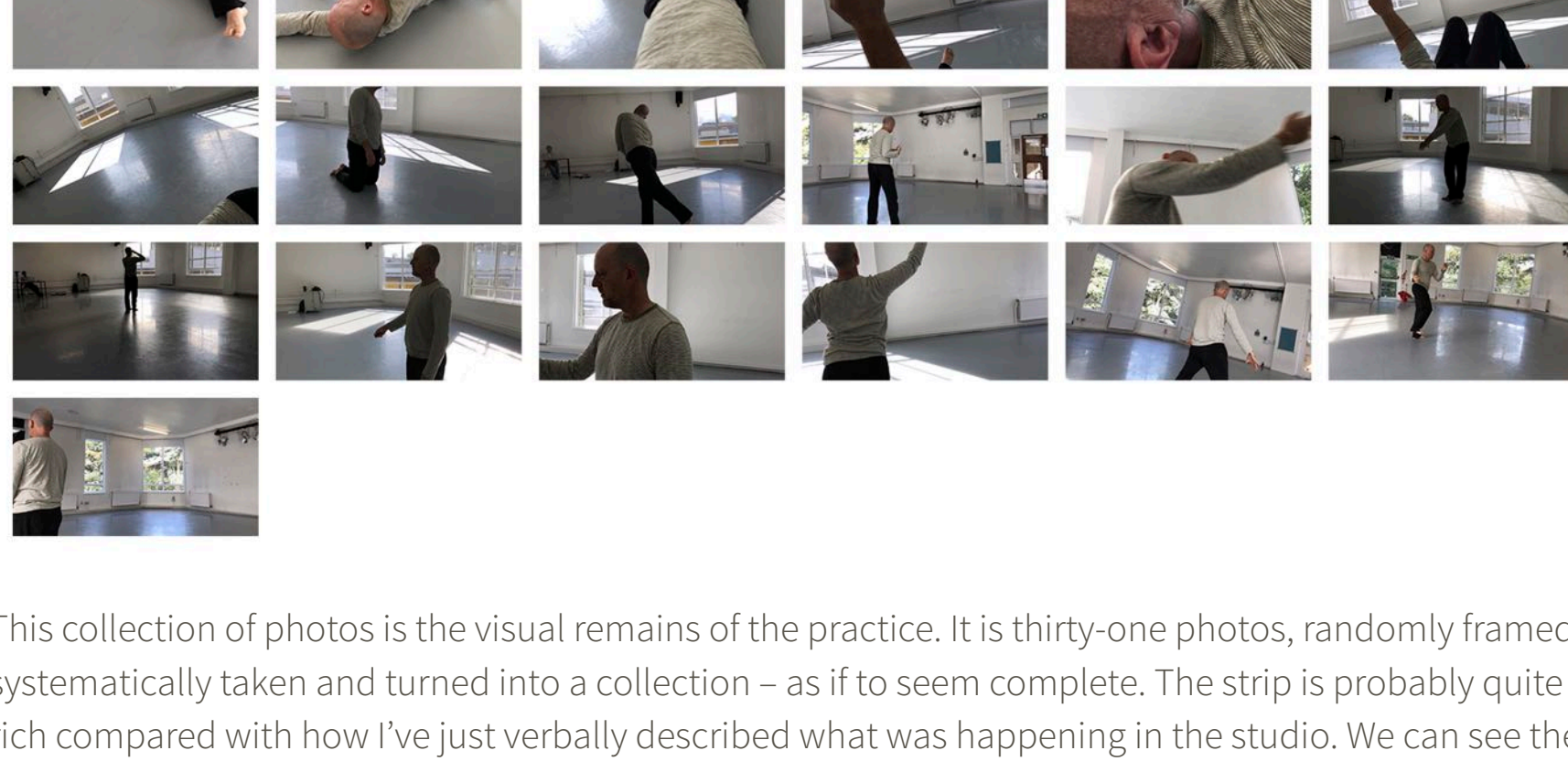
In 2019 the dancer-choreographer Shaun McLeod and I worked together with the movement practice called Authentic Movement. What can be said about what happened in that space during those six weeks of practice? If all of us here had been there what would we all have heard and/or seen that we could agree on?

One person – the mover – had their eyes closed. The other person – the watcher – was watching the mover. The watcher was also holding a smartphone *directed* towards the mover, but was not paying attention to the phone's screen. A phone hyphen camera is not a regular part of Authentic Movement and you may or may not know that.

The mover moved around the space; sometimes this was more like a series of stillnesses, other times it was everyday: like walking or sitting. Still other times the mover might do things that were a little less everyday. These movements were sometimes strung together; most of us in this room would call that – or recognise it as – contemporary dance, or maybe somatically informed contemporary dance if we were being a bit fancy. But it was definitely not the kind of contemporary dance I've seen on "So You Think You Can Dance". [expand: so.mp4] I would say the mover looked a little like they were *feeling* or *sensing*, maybe *looking inside*. But I couldn't be sure, and nor do I think we would agree on this.

It turns out that the smartphone was taking a photograph every 30 seconds, and the screen was darkened so the watcher wouldn't know when a photo was being taken nor how anything might be framed in the lens of the camera.

Here is a set of photos from one 20 minute Authentic Movement session with Shaun as the mover.



This collection of photos is the visual remains of the practice. It is thirty-one photos, randomly framed, systematically taken and turned into a collection – as if to seem complete. The strip is probably quite rich compared with how I've just verbally described what was happening in the studio. We can see the room, positions on the floor, clothing, the light, postures, hints of gestures, expressions. But an enormous quantity of experiential data have not made it from what was in the room to what you can see here.

We can also infer some things from these photos, the most seductive being what kind of movement occurred. But we are *inferring* movement, and by that I mean *implying*. We'd also be inferring understanding, and we would be inferring the presence or absence of this thing that gets called *embodied knowledge*.

not embodied knowledge

In dance scholarship we seem to use the verb *to embody* and the concept of *embodied knowledge* rather loosely. Here's an example:

... somatic intelligence is prioritized as the main tool in this research process. As one of the forms of the physical intelligence, it is an experiential corporal modality, a form of embodied knowledge ...[1]

The author is suggesting that somatic intelligence is a form of embodied knowledge *and* is a subset of physical intelligence. Three abstract terms that refer to each other in an intricate choreography of circular logic.

But at least this person attempted to make sense of the terms. Search for the word *embodied* in a random selection of dance scholarship and there will be few if any attempts to be clear about its meaning and use.

This absence and lack of precision is not really surprising. The philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone describes the term *embodiment* as "little more than a lexical band-aid covering a three-hundred year old Western word" – that is, the Cartesian split of mind and body.[2] And she suggests that this split remains "part of our thinking because we have not yet fathomed what it is to be the bodies we are".[2] In other words, "When we have recourse to [the word] 'embodiment,' we avoid coming to terms with bodies, with what is actually there, sensuously present in our experience ..."[2]

But coming to terms with what is there is not a trivial ambition. The temptation to assume to know what is there is enormous; to project our desires, ambitions and feelings onto what we can see. In some respects our livelihoods and identities as dance scholars are dependent on the existence of a concept like embodied knowledge. And if we say enough times "this is embodied knowledge, this is embodied knowledge" – like a mantra to the academic gods – then we start to accept it as the truth.

The problem gets trickier still because, as a participant in these simple Authentic Movement dance experiments, I can *testify* that there was something quite profound going on that is not at all visible from the outside. In Authentic Movement both the mover and the watcher are working with a discipline of non-judgement. This discipline underpins all that is radical about the practice. If I were to describe the experience from the inside I would use words like freedom, patience, calmness and playfulness. These were rich and complex experiences for us. We kept going back to the practice like children going back into the water – excited to try again, to re-enter that state of wildly still abandon. The photographic strip of Shaun carries *none* of that experiential information.

The temptation to want to make this research about embodied *something* is strong. But in this work, the state, quality or even quantity of body-based understanding – sensuous presence in experience – was merely a thing. But it wasn't any *thing* special, and it wasn't anything that people haven't already been doing for a long time in Authentic Movement. What I *do* think is critical is how I might respond to the following fundamental questions:

**What do I understand differently as a consequence of this practice?
How might those understandings be important to our research and professional community?
How might these ideas be shared?**

two insights

I could say that the following two insights came about through the practice. But that would not be the entire truth because most of my understanding evolved in the weeks and months after the practice ended while I was reading and thinking *about other things for other projects*. These understandings were, in reality, circumstantial and arbitrary; just happen-stance. This is not to diminish their value; I care about them and I think they might matter to us.

1. the analogue body and datafication

There is an epistemic crisis in body-based practice-research that is underlined by the rise in scholarship exploring things that get called *embodied knowledge*. In much of that research, the idea that the body *knows* things as a proxy for the epistemic limitations of practice-research. In other words, artist-scholars who research through movement practices are valorising and reifying the concept of embodied knowledge while failing to address what I see as the key epistemic paradox of practice-research: that its ontology lies at least in part in what is *not* able to be known, understood or articulated as a consequence of body-based creative practices.[3] This is a humbling limitation for any research method or process, and a crucial problem for practice-research to acknowledge if it is to continue its development in the Academy.

The contemporary cultural backdrop for the tension between so-called embodied knowledge, the unknowable, and the inarticulable is the datafication of human experience. [expand: econ.jpg] In 2017 *The Economist* declared that the "world's most valuable resource is no longer oil, but data".[4] Around 2014, the social psychologist Shoshana Zuboff popularised the term *surveillance capitalism* to describe the "extractive operations in which our personal experiences are scraped and packaged"[5] as raw materials – a process of datafication in which the end game is more than the prediction of our future desires as consumers, but the control of those futures.

The cultural and financial capital of seeing and understanding the world-as-data means it is not surprising that delicate and fiscally precarious artistic practices and processes located in and through the body – like dance and somatics – have also become enamoured by the doctrine of datafication. The growing number of online archives, digital forms of documentation, and virtual and augmented reality projects are all implicit or explicit attempts by dance scholars to transform the radically analogue nature of bodily experiences into data.

The datafication of human experience and the limitations of body-based practice-research are related because the construction and production of knowledge is never based on the simple observation of worldly things. Rather, to understand what we say we know and do not know, the vital epistemic question is, according to the social scientist Walter Mignolo, "who, when, [and] why is constructing knowledges?"[6] If the overwhelming contemporary phenomenon is the extraction of data from human experiences, then the question of *who, when and why is constructing knowledges* necessitates an encounter with the limits and excesses of datafication.

I want to propose that complex and radically analogue human experiences like those at the heart of experimental choreographic and movement practices are underpinned by two key characteristics: 1) they defy the capacity to be accurately and wholly articulated and shared; and 2) they exceed "algorithmic description".[7]

I see Authentic Movement as an experimental practice that foregrounds radically analogue human experiences: It is process-oriented; it is not made to be publicly viewed or judged; much if not all of what happens that is important is invisible to the eye; it is a practice of non-consumption; it is simple in form, but vastly open-ended in possible experiential complexity; and it is available to anyone that wants to be involved. I see it in this way as a paradigmatic example of a movement practice that exceeds algorithmic description.

2. resolution of experience

Shaun and I were aware early on of the discrepancy between the complex and rich internal experiences for the mover *and* the watcher, and what was visible. We asked: "What if we insert a camera into this predominantly invisible experience? How might *the* ocular-centric recording device of our time – the smartphone – relate to the unseen?"

A couple of months after we finished, I happened to read Boaventura de Sousa Santos's 2001 article *Toward an Epistemology of Blindness*. [8] In it, he states that "the resolution level of our [scientific] methods is higher than the resolution level of our theories." [8]

I think his concept of resolution is useful, even if I am robbing him of his thinking that was written for a particular context in a particular field. My digital theft of de Sousa Santos' thinking is to remind us that when we are dealing with body-based practices that we can observe bears little or no relationship to the experiential complexity of what happened. That is, we have high resolution experiences, and low resolution representations of those experiences. And that gap applies irrespective of how fancy our technocratic solutions are to the problem of archiving movement and choreography.

In dance and the performing arts there's a long history of scholarship exploring the relationship and differences between the *liveness* of movement practices and those practices as mediated on video. I used to imagine Philip Auslander and Peggy Phelan scrapping it out in a kick-boxing bout. In my dreams, it was carnage; there was blood on the dance floor.



What I think I'm doing here is re-packaging an old idea with a history as old as the advent of recording technologies. *That* history has tended to speak of loss or death when describing the transmutation of live performance into some digital other. But I propose that the word *scrumptiation* – to change into another nature, substance, form, or condition – is less than helpful. Those photographs of Shaun practising Authentic Movement are coarse-grain materials that both belong to the practice *and* tell us plenty about how that world looked. These photographs – at least in their original digital form on my hard drive or on servers around the world – also possess an enormous quantity of metadata. And metadata is not – as Edward Snowden says – "some benign abstraction" but "the very essence of content".[9]

These photos tell us everything, *and* they tell us nothing.

These photos so directly and beautifully capture the hyper-visual nature of our time, as well as the power and seductiveness of superficiality. These visual data are both thick and thin. They are everything and nothing. They are both sides of a boolean operator. On *and* off. Zero *and* one. Yes *and* no. They provide all of the answers *and* none of the answers. They are knowing *and* not knowing. They represent an epistemic paradox.

staking claims and humility

If it's not already clear, my curiosity lies with experiences that are not really able to be articulated. They are experiences with, in and around our bodies that resist description. They are experiences that are cloaked and revealed in movement and stillness. This is not to say that we shouldn't keep seeking ways to articulate that which cannot be articulated. That in such a paradox we might inadvertently step into alternative tangles and mangles.

The epistemics of a paradox around resolutions of experience and articulating the inarticulable are important because I understand the Academy to be the ideal place to attempt to contain or hold the things we cannot know: the sublime, the unsayable. And we must strain to keep this paradox alive, and not dilute it with imprecision, or "reductionist interests and goals".[2] To keep the paradox alive demands that we approach the body and the context for its deployment in the construction of knowledges with humility.

And why humility? Because the body can also be a thing that is not for staking claims like we all do in academia, and that perhaps I am guilty of right this moment. That the politics of humility demand collaborative inquiry, an excess of community, of being alongside; a deep engagement with (and love for) uncertainty, a dance with the unknown. It is humility that resists reductive datafication; these beautiful bodies: refusing to disappear as they go on in their vital project of denying the extractive processes of surveillance capitalism. And the stakes are high; what Shoshana Zuboff describes as "our fight for a human future".[5]

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