

## **Towards Radical Intimacy with The More-than-Human in Co-Somatic Performance**

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## Towards Radical Intimacy with the More-than-Human in Co-Somatic Performance

### Abstract

*Metamorffosis Movement* is a somatic movement experiment exploring intimate inter-species connectivity and opening up ways of staging the entanglement between the human and more-than-human through embodiment. Drawing on notions of art engaging with the *more-than-human* or concepts of inter-species creativity, this research challenges paradigms of modern Western aesthetics, ranging from authorship to beauty. This article will be the first to introduce the concept of co-somatic performance and consider notions of uncanny intimacy, thus enabling an understanding of how inter-species connectivity translates into an aesthetic experience for performers and audiences of *Metamorffosis Movement*. Using a transcorporeal analysis of *Metamorffosis Movement*, including its multisensory, multimodal, cultural and ecological dimensions, It will further discuss how its aesthetics subverts concepts of Western normativity and thus carries transformative power beyond the ecological.

**Keywords:** Somatic Movement, Performance, Kinaesthetic, More-than-Human, Inter-Species Sociality, Site-Specificity

### Introduction

Following the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns introduced to mitigate the spread of the Coronavirus, many people increased their time spent outdoors. As Welsh Government regulations allowed people to leave their houses for recreational purposes, walks in parks and woodland gained in popularity, and so did various new recreational trends. One of them was ‘forest bathing.’ Emerging from the ecotherapy niche into mainstream lockdown reality, forest bathing takes mindfulness and meditation into the outdoor natural environment to harvest therapeutical benefits. Unsurprisingly, the ‘experience economy’ had already cottoned on to this trend, with *National Geographic* offering a global map of best

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forest bathing wildlife areas a year before the pandemic began.<sup>1</sup> Supported by scientific data concerning its beneficial effects on blood pressure and cortisol, the National Trust presents forest bathing in their wellbeing programme, advertising it as an activity to “escape the hustle and bustle” and to “return to your roots.”<sup>2</sup> In these examples, forest bathing is mostly promoted as a way of re-connecting with nature in a comforting and uncontested manner. Although challenging the “somatophobia”<sup>3</sup> rooted in Western society, forest bathing reaffirms the culture of nature distinction and its quest for recreational effects; the natural environment is once more approached as a resource for recovery and as a site for contemplation. Health service providers or nature organisations seem ignorant of the fact that our reading of the natural environment is as much a cultural construct created at the level of the human as the hustle and bustle we seek to escape. Leaving aside the liberal, managerialist reformism intrinsic to discourses and policies on mindfulness and wellbeing in the UK,<sup>4</sup> the promotion of forest bathing is representational of the blindfolded call “back to nature” resonating in the public discourse for promoting an ecological turn.<sup>5</sup>

This is in direct contrast to current shifts towards ecological thinking in scholarship, be it in fields of Object-Oriented Ontology e.g., by Timothy Morton,<sup>6</sup> Physics as with Karen Barad<sup>7</sup> or New Materialism most prominently argued by Donna J. Haraway and Jane Bennett.<sup>8</sup> All question the boundaries of embodiment and entwinement with environments and suggest viewing nature “in terms of dynamic forces, fields of transformation and upheaval.”<sup>9</sup> In an extended sense, ecological thinking proposes a radical transformational power when re-

1 Sunny Fitzgerald, “The Secret to Mindful Travel? A Walk in the Woods,” *National Geographic*, 28.10.2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/forest-bathing-nature-walk-health>.

2 “A Beginner’s Guide to Forest Bathing,” National Trust, accessed 09.06.2022, <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/lists/a-beginners-guide-to-forest-bathing>.

3 Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 7.

4 Joanna Cook, “Mindful in Westminster: The Politics of Meditation and the Limits of Neo-liberal Critique,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6, no. 1 (2016): 141–61, <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau6.1.011>.

5 A seminal monograph on the discourses on nature to consult on this is Kate Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

6 Timothy Morton, *Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

7 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

8 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

9 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies. Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 5.

thinking the relational ontology of the human and more-than-human.<sup>10</sup> A full exploration of their meaning far exceeds the scope of this article. The pertinent point here is that ideas of a non-hierarchical and process-oriented ‘becoming-with’<sup>11</sup> may imply the possibility of an extended sociality, namely that of humans and more-than-humans entwined.

It is the arts in particular that have been engaging with ways to access such extended sociability. For instance, for artists, attentiveness to multi-species agency opens new pathways to understanding authorship or creative process, and venturing into the more-than-human world requires them to experiment towards new aesthetics.

The following article engages with the co-somatic performance project *Metamorphosis Movement* (June 2021) to explore how ecological thinking and multi-species agencies generate new art forms and new aesthetic experiences within and with the environment.<sup>12</sup> It is mostly concerned with the strategies adopted via *Metamorphosis Movement* to enable *interspecies sociality* in the artistic process and, at the same time, to communicate intimate connectivity with the *more-than-human* to the audience. Here, I will introduce an enhanced concept of somatic movement practice which I provisionally want to call *co-somatic* performance to describe the multimodal trajectory of intimate interconnectivity. I will then carve out how the *Metamorphosis Movement* succeeded in co-creating an intimate aesthetic situation that made strange what were ostensibly familiar perceptions of body and place. This will highlight paths towards a new aesthetic of the more-than-human which suggests its subversive power in radical intimacy.

Although the genealogy of the project was informed by the psychotherapy and movement therapy background of the leading artist Samina Ali, the rehearsal process as well as the context and historical situation of the performance pushed

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10 The term *More-than-Human* stems from ecocriticism and ecology studies but is more and more applied in other disciplines as well, particularly in the Arts & Humanities for thinking beyond the Anthropocene. More-than-Human is often used to describe what we used to call nature but from an ethical standpoint which emphasizes that we exist in ‘a communicative, reciprocal relationship with nature’ (John Cianchi, *Radical Environmentalism: Nature, Identity and More-than-human Agency* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 32, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137473783\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137473783_3)) and engage in inter-species relationships (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*).

11 Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

12 Stacy Alaimo has advanced into this field when introducing the concept of “trans-corporeal.” According to her, the “trans-corporeal subject is generated through and entangled with biological, technological, economic, social, political and other systems, processes, and events, at vastly different scales” (Stacy Alaimo, “Trans-corporeality,” in *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 436). A trans-corporeal approach in critical thought allows a consideration of manifold agencies with a focus on embodied non-human agencies. This summarizes the holistic approach to co-somatic performance pursued in this essay.

the project beyond lifestyle aestheticism or naive attempts to find comfort in nature. Instead, it generated a subversive quality, only very unlikely attainable when simply going for a walk in a forest.

## Methodology

The following explorations emerge from ethnographic observations I made as part of the research-project “Re-Inventing the Live Arts Event with Local Communities (Covid-19),” funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and based at Bangor University. The project examined how practitioners creatively re-invented live formats to align to government regulations for mitigating the Covid-19 pandemic and how audiences experienced potentially unusual event formats resulting from such artistic innovation. The project involved a week-long combined-arts festival *Metamorphosis* (June 21–27, 2021) which enabled me to study artists, art formats and audiences.<sup>13</sup> The evidence is drawn from qualitative and quantitative data I collected through seven artist interviews, which includes one interview with an art group of seven artists,<sup>14</sup> and two questionnaires. The bi-lingual questionnaires were circulated immediately after the festival, one designed for artists,<sup>15</sup> one for audiences, using a mix of open questions, multiple choice, multiple response, rating and likert-grids. These data are complemented by field notes in form of writing, film, photography, and sound, alongside film documentation of the festival by the film company *Culture Colony* (Machynlleth).

*Metamorphosis* offered 25 different events with some running multiple times. Though diverse in genre, format and theme, the most cutting-edge contributions experimented with interspecies aesthetics or encounters with the more-than-human world. These events enabled a radical shift from imagining a community of human beings towards a community of human and more-than-human beings, often echoing experiences made during lockdown. Most events, including *Metamorphosis Movement*, were site-specific and were seeking an affective involvement of the audience with the multi-species environment, its atmosphere and

13 For an overview of the programme, see the bi-lingual website: <https://metamorphosis.jimdosi.com/>. There is also a playlist of videos introducing most of the participating artists and their event available via the following link: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLeyZpVVVr6i\\_QOktoJ6zm5q1uarqIf-WW](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLeyZpVVVr6i_QOktoJ6zm5q1uarqIf-WW). Both accessed 09.11.2022.

14 Edited interviews accessed 09.11.2022: <http://re-inventing-live-events.bangor.ac.uk/interview.php.en>.

15 The artist questionnaire was circulated after *Metamorphosis* (June 2021) to 34 participating artistic participants (professional and non-professional artists), yielding a total of 12 responses.

manifold history. The artist questionnaire suggests that the pandemic restrictions significantly triggered these shifts in artistic formats. For almost all involved artists *Metamorffosis Festival* acted as a platform for testing out ideas and practices with which they expanded into new art forms, new materials, or new collaborations, resulting for most artists in art formats which were experimental and took more risk than usual.

## Metamorffosis Movement

*Metamorffosis Movement* was an experiment challenging traditional genres of performance for exploring human encounters with the more-than-human world through physical movement and perceptual processes around feeling and sensing, as Samina Ali, the facilitator of the experiment, stated in an interview in 2021. Informed by somatic movement practice and the emphasis on intimate intersubjectivity in psychotherapy, Ali guided a group of eight people (in the following addressed as performer/s) aged between 30 and 78 over the course of one month. In five meetings prior to the performance at the *Metamorffosis Festival* in Northwest Wales, the group met at four different sites in Gwynedd (a grove in Llanberis; a slate mine at Dinorwig Slate Quarries; the Menai Bridge Stone Circle; the Paxton Cascade at Treborth Garden)<sup>16</sup> for a 20-minute long experimental performance.

### Towards the Co-somatic

All sessions started with exercises derived from established techniques in somatic dance practice to develop “a deeper sense of connectivity and intimacy between self and place.”<sup>17</sup> The exercises raised everyone’s proprioceptive awareness, focusing on the felt body and its position within the site. Ali intended for non-mentalistic and embodied experience of and being with and within the site. This method emphasises the manifold nuances of body-informed engagement with the world rather than a conceptual mapping of space, bodies and objects. At the same time, Ali was seeking to avoid the privatisation of subjective experience. While some somatic practice advertises stillness and focuses on attentiveness to the interiority of experience, Ali deployed bodies in motion to trigger and

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16 Edited footage from the fourth rehearsal at the Paxton Cascade: “Metamorffosis Movement – Exploring New Forms of More Than Human Intersubjectivity through Movement,” Video, last modified 23.11.2021, <https://youtu.be/cH27q67DihU>.

17 Miriam Marler, “Stillness, Touch and Cultivating Intimacy with ‘Vibrant’ Landscapes,” in *Performance of the Real*, 2 (2021): 71, <https://doi.org/10.21428/b54437e2.8866cd9c>.

maintain an affective involvement and entanglement with the environment. This kind of kinaesthetic approach enabled performers to experience not only their own body as moving in the site but to relate to the site as being in motion itself.

The sessions began by warming up the body, stretching it, breathing off the immediate experiences of the day. As Ali explained to the group, the exercises were aiming to enable the group to unlearn the intellectual routines and social protocols we perform and apply in our everyday lives. The following kinaesthetic exercises included a sharing of everybody's favourite movement. Each performer was asked to demonstrate a movement they enjoy doing and the group was asked to mimic it, thus gaining an embodied sense of what the other person physically enjoys and how the movement feels for oneself when mimicked. These movements varied with each meeting and ranged from familiar Yoga poses (warrior, tree etc.) to classic warm-up exercises to more playful movements.

Those preparation exercises were followed by 15 to 20 minutes of individual exploration of the felt body and the site. Guided by invitations rather than instructions from Ali, and supported by music, the performers moved to a spot they felt attracted to. To avoid motionless contemplation in nature, Ali guided the performers into a movement within and responsive to their environment, sensing the nuanced intimacy of embodied encounters with the more-than-human. Learning to withdraw from mentalistic objectivation in favour of feeling into the body and site in motion, the performers also avoided integrating the lived experience into our symbolic system via conceptual reflection.

Yet, when gathering as a group afterwards, everyone was invited to share their experiences, meaning the performers were required to translate the somatic experience into linguistic discourse the performers admitted to be almost impossible. Still, the conversations uncovered that the kinaesthetic engagement with the site varied for each performer. For some mimicking the other being was a way for relating and understanding, for others, it was about focusing on the movement their own body performed when approximating the other being – for a river the movement was different than for a boulder or a tree –, and for others it was about positioning themselves within the shared space with other beings. During this first session, some participants reported that they almost lost sense of the presence of the other human members of the group, as they merged into the multi-species environment.

While the first meeting focused on developing somatic attentiveness and its state of sensual openness to dynamic entanglement with the more-than-human world individually, the following meetings expanded to also observe the movements of other performers in order to then imitate or respond to them through movement. *Metamorphosis Movement* would thus only be understood to a limited extent, if linked to neuroscientific knowledge on the relevance of so-called

mirror-neurons for empathy only.<sup>18</sup> While mirror-neurons enable the echo of observed movement through our own somatic sensation, Ali's aim was to enhance the mirror-neuron effect by physical activity: somatic communication so to speak. This kind of embodied communication was deployed as a kinaesthetic network, consisting not only of human performers, and co-created not only by human agents. The kinaesthetic network and somatic communication were multi-species kind. It was co-created with the more-than-human beings at the site, insofar as the performers' movements were an immediate embodiment of the mutual encounter-in-process.

As this somatic and communicative dynamic is beyond the usual understanding of somatic movement practice, I propose to introduce an enhanced term of co-somatic performance to describe *Metamorphosis Movement* rather than simply using somatic. On first sight, the suggested term might seem an oxymoron, given that Thomas Hanna denies somatic its communicative potential when defining it as an experience within and of the body from a first-person perspective.<sup>19</sup> However, Ali's aim was to enable embodied understanding beyond language, including 'visceral empathy,' when inviting the performers to mimic each other's movements. It should be noted, that the group also gained a sense of each other's somatic sensations, when mimicking the various warm-up movements.

Here, applying Thomas Fuchs' terminology of "embodied interaffectivity" allows for a better understanding of the co-somatic communication in place. Embodied interaffectivity is grounded in bodily resonance which "conveys an intuitive understanding of others' emotions in our embodied engagement with them."<sup>20</sup> Though Fuchs deploys concepts of intercorporeality and interaffectivity<sup>21</sup> mainly for mundane social situations, it opens a pathway to better understand how somatic practice can expand from individual states into a co-somatic, i.e. social situation. The idea of the co-somatic enables us to acknowledge *Metamorphosis Movement* as "a process of mutual modification of bodily and emotional states"<sup>22</sup> through movement; movement which is embedded in and entangled with an environment equally integral to the mutual process as the performers. Focussing on such interaffective movement, we con-

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18 For a comprehensive review of existing scholarship on dance and neuroscience, see: Andrea Zardi et. al., "Dancing in Your Head: An Interdisciplinary Review," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021): 649121, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.649121>.

19 Thomas Hanna, "What Is Somatics?," *Somatics* 5, no. 4 (1986): 4–9.

20 Thomas Fuchs, "Intercorporeality and Interaffectivity," in *Intercorporeality: Emerging Socialities in Interaction, Foundations of Human Interaction*, ed. Christian Meyer et. al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 195, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190210465.003.0001>.

21 Ibid., 195.

22 Ibid.



ceive emotions, empathy and experience not as inner states exclusive within individuals who then consciously express them using representational techniques, e.g., a repertoire of classical dance choreographies, but rather we understand movement as an invested embodiment and immediate expression of an intimate dynamic between affected and affective agents.

### Uncanny Intimacy

Fuchs' concepts of intercorporeality and interaffectivity still allow to uphold the concept of subjectivity as a firm entity, through which all beings potentially relate to each other. Expanding this relation, Morton's ecological thinking transgresses the idea of the Western self to an almost unfathomable degree. For Morton, all living and non-living things are interconnected as a so called mesh of "infinite connections and infinitesimal differences"<sup>23</sup> that turn subjectivities into ambiguous intimate intensities within the mesh: "Who or what is interconnected with what or with whom? The mesh of interconnected things is vast, perhaps immeasurably so. Each entity in the mesh looks strange. Nothing exists all by itself, and so nothing is fully 'itself'."<sup>24</sup>

In the co-somatic practice of *Metamorphosis Movement* every movement is, so to speak, always moving as such intimate intensity. Definitive interior and exterior boundaries of beings become obsolete and former familiar entities – such as the human self – are rendered ambiguous by their infinite and utmost intimate interconnectedness with other beings.<sup>25</sup> *Metamorphosis Movement* intensifies this intimate connectedness by sensing into the relation itself. Considering Morton's notion of the strange mesh, the co-somatic situation of the performance turns into one of radical intimacy with the strange stranger. In the following, I will show how this intimacy is integral not only to the aesthetic experience of *Metamorphosis Movement* but for an aesthetic of the more-than-human in general.

Testimonials from the performers how the rehearsals left them with a sense of discomfort or vulnerability, suggesting that the intimate encounter, which the co-somatic technique engendered, eventuated in the self being challenged. The somatic opening and intimate relating to the strange strangeness triggers an experience of ambiguity, perceived as uncertainty. At the same time, all performers agreed they had gained a sensitivity for the mutual entanglement of human and more-than-human beings as something precious but fragile. *Metamorphosis Movement* thus offers an experience of the natural world quite opposite

<sup>23</sup> Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 30.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 39.

to the recreational and comforting purposes intrinsic to the practice of forest bathing. Whereas forest bathing envisages participants emerging as re-invigorated versions of themselves, *Metamorphosis Movement* resulted in unsettling the self and gaining new experience. The intimacy intrinsic to the co-somatic encounter with the more-than-human is radical in a literal way, as it impinges upon prerequisites of the Western master subjectivity. It is also aesthetically transformative in developing a sensibility of being-with the more-than-human, as interaffectivity and intercorporeality in the co-somatic situation intimate a more-than-human co-authorship. The performers' movements are no longer simply expressive of human agency only. However, if we allow ourselves to envision the intrinsic paradigmatic shift of uncanny ecological experience, the embodied sociality of *Metamorphosis Movement* also suggests a sense of solidarity with the uncanny ambiguity of the strange stranger we encounter in the co-somatic practice.

However, if uncanny intimacy is so intrinsic to *Metamorphosis Movement*, we need to ask how an audience, not engaging in the somatic practice nor familiar with concepts of the more-than-human, would experience such performance? In order to examine this, we need to consider its historic situation and specific context as part of the week-long *Metamorphosis Festival*.

### Metamorphosis Movement as Uncanny Performance

Emerging from the mitigating measures in place during the Covid-19 pandemic, the festival was organised from within the local art community and attracted mostly local audiences. The audience was very likely to be familiar with the site and venues used for each performance, particularly in the case of the Paxton Cascade for *Metamorphosis Movement*. Furthermore, the art community of rural Northwest Wales is well connected, and it was thus very likely that members of the audience knew the performers of *Metamorphosis Movement* either in their role as artists or as friends. The audiences were also small in number due to government limitations to maximum gatherings of 30 people, and given the festival context, it was also likely that members of the audience know each other, either from previous festival events (*Metamorphosis Movement* was the last but one event on the last festival day) or from other occasions. This familiarity of performers, audience and site was beneficial to generating a sense of connectedness and intimacy which most participants of the audience questionnaire highlighted as a unique feature of their festival experience. Despite the Covid-19 protocols implemented for the festival, audiences and artists felt they were part of a community. Responses also suggest that the more experimental art forms bridged the pandemic-related physical distancing as they enabled new forms and intensities

of audience engagement. Here, almost all answers used terms such as “intimate” or “intimacy,” “interaction” or “connectedness,”<sup>26</sup> Based on these findings, I will engage with the aesthetic dynamic of intimacy and familiarity of the event.

This dynamic is particularly relevant for *Metamorphosis Movement*, as some members of the audience will have watched familiar bodies moving in a strange way at a well-known local site which would not necessarily have invited such movement. It is this making unfamiliar that will be core to understanding how *Metamorphosis Movement* engendered a sense of uncanniness for the audience, albeit an uncanniness quite different in nature to that of the performers.

Although Ali is a trained psychotherapist and studied movement therapy with Beatrice Allegranti, a choreographer, clinical practitioner, and theorist, Ali does not have training or experience as a dancer or choreographer herself; *Metamorphosis Movement* was the first time she had applied movement practices to create an artistic performance. Ali understood her role in facilitating a collaborative encounter which is indeed the role of the choreographer in contemporary dance.<sup>27</sup> However, for *Metamorphosis Movement* Ali did not work with professional dancers, but with lay performers who did not command dancing skills nor classical dance moves, nor did they have any inner mental image of modern or classical dance repertoires – neither did Ali. With the exception of one performer trained in acrobatics, none of them fulfilled the physical expectations of dancers in terms of flexibility, strength, balance, or elegance. Their movements were within the average scope and limitations of their age group. This did not only result in *Metamorphosis Movement* breaking with body images still predominant in professional modern dance. Furthermore, by not drawing on familiar dance repertoires, *Metamorphosis Movement* transgressed into the uncanny terrain of a semantically less coded realm, further feeding into the effect of “making unfamiliar” as it subverted attempts to understand the performance by reading it via semantic systems of choreography.<sup>28</sup> Frustrating the meaning-making process might result in increased unfamiliarity and discomfort, as the unfamiliarity of the grotesque bodies which almost embarrassingly deviated from all aesthetic and social norms could not be read as a meaningful script. Not redeeming common expectations of beautiful moving bodies, the intimate artist-audience relationship is challenged. Watching a friend or respected artist moving in a strange way at a site that has not been used for such purposes before, creates an ambiguous situation. Spectators could either respond with abjection and opt

26 The questionnaires, however, were not designed to identify how the artistic formats of the individual events interrelated with bridging social distancing, nor is it possible to see what understanding of intimacy or connectedness was implied.

27 Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (London: Routledge, 2011), 6.

28 Foster, *Choreographing Empathy*, 5.

for a more distanced and self-aware spectator position or – as questionnaires suggest – maintain the intimate relation and remain open to the emerging unfamiliarity. Although the performance did not include the audience in the cosomatic situation itself, it transgressed aesthetic expectations and generated notions of uncanny intimacy.



Fig. 1. Uncanny Bodies – *Metamorphosis Movement* performance. © Huw Jones (2021).

Similar defamiliarization happened to the site of the performance at the periphery of Bangor's Botanical Garden which is a popular destination for walks or evening strolls. The marginal "Paxton Cascade" that Ali has chosen for the performance, comes with semantic layers, well known by locals. Its most prominent and name-giving feature is a small cascade, named after its creator Joseph Paxton. In the late 19th century Paxton, then renowned architect of Birkenhead Park, had ambitious plans for the not yet developed Treborth area. Though his grand spa hotel complex never came to fruition, some of Paxton's drainage and sewerage plans did, which resulted in the cascade. Supported by light masonry, a natural stream now finds its way over the steeply sloping terrain into the Menai Strait. The Menai Strait separates the island of Anglesey from mainland Wales. The location between the Menai Suspension Bridge and the Britannia Bridge is also known as The Swellies which is considered particularly difficult to navigate because of the varying speeds at which the tides wash around the island of Anglesey. Shoals, whirlpools and unpredictable surf have caused legendary shipwrecks throughout history, and even today a spectator can easily

visualise risks. The movement of the water is audible up the cliff by the Paxton Cascade, accompanied by the rather mild sound of its falling waters. Small trees and wild undergrowth – the botanic park management barely intervenes here – however, frustrates any potential sublime panorama.



Fig. 2. Bench at Paxton Cascade, facing slopes and view to The Swellies. © Sarah Pogoda (2022).

The North Wales Coast Path passes at the back of the Paxton Cascade and a centrally situated bench invites walkers to linger on the perfectly balanced drama this natural theatre deploys. The bench offers a safe spot to enjoy the dramatic view and contemplate the numerous existential struggles of sailors with nature. The Paxton Cascade can be read as a man-made stage for “shipwrecks with spectators,”<sup>29</sup> to refer to Hans Blumenberg’s seminal work on the metaphor of existence. It stages life as a drama of man vs nature, while the spectator is on safe terrain. Their safety however is only guaranteed when sitting on the bench, otherwise, they risk slithering down one of the many slopes.

Ali’s short introduction to the performance draws the audience’s attention to *more-than-human Beings* as equal participants, without being ignorant of the aforementioned semiotic layers of the site which was familiar to most of the audience members in its purposes for contemplation, a contemplation of a

29 Hans Blumenberg, *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1979).

human-nature dichotomy so intrinsic to Western philosophy and Western dramaturgy. However, the non-professional performers' bodies and their strange movements did not support the aestheticization of these semantic layers and juxtaposed its familiar dramaturgy as follows:

Different to an indoor or theatre venue with an empty stage which can be designed appropriately to a rehearsed choreography, the "found location" of the Paxton Cascade enforced limitations on bodies in motion,<sup>30</sup> forced the performers to respond to the givens of the site, moving "within distributive agency rather than dancing away on [their] own."<sup>31</sup> At the same time, the location frustrated the common panoramic gaze provided by a theatre stage. If *Metamorphosis Movement* spectators were to have full sight of the human bodies in motion, they would have to move around themselves, confusing sight and physical engagement with the locality further. With spectators in motion, everyone risked blocking the view of other spectators, thus mutually forcing each other to continue moving around. The site thus demanded an audience in motion to observe the individual performers in motion. At the same time being in motion required the audience to be cautious of the site topography. This attentiveness also enabled the perception of often unacknowledged non-human elements feeding into the experience, such as the fleeing sunbeams falling through leaves, themselves set in motion by the coastal breeze. In this respect, *Metamorphosis Movement* did not only perform entanglement in motion but also deployed it among the spectators and afforded the spectators to physically invest in the performance. This enabled a corporeal understanding of its choreographic agency. Spectators in motion embodied the infinite entanglement of human and more-than-human agencies in place for this performance. The resulting intimacy countered the dichotomic shipwreck with spectator trajectory which the Paxton Cascade once was designed to contemplate.

If spectators did not move around, as was the case for some, they either had to accept the limited view or enter an aesthetic mode that does not read human bodies as central to the performance. The latter approach could result in a flat understanding in which foreground/background perceptions dissolve.<sup>32</sup> This was further supported by the clothing the performers picked for the performance

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30 Foster refers to Kenneth Olwig's study on landscape and body politics in her study on choreography, making clear that a shaped and cultivated landscape suggests a choreography for bodies to move within the designed landscape and to experience it in a particular way. Kenneth Olwig, *Landscape Nature and the Body Politic: From Britain's Renaissance to America's New World* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002).

31 Paula Kramer, "Bodies, Rivers, Rocks and Trees: Meeting Agentic Materiality in Contemporary Outdoor Dance Practices," *Performance Research* 17, no. 4 (2012): 87.

32 A seminal study on nature as background can be consulted with Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1993).



Fig. 3. Audience and performers at Paxton Cascade just after *Metamorphosis Movement* performance. © Huw Jones (2021).

(brown, green, beige). In this scenario, *Metamorphosis Movement* was not a performance in a scenic landscape, but rather an emerging landscape itself. This co-creative aesthetic mode allowed the audience to become landscape, too, thus flattening the anthropocentric hierarchy still in place in contemporary dance aesthetics.

## Conclusion

The co-somatic performance *Metamorphosis Movement* responded to paradigmatic shifts in ecological thought. For all parties involved, it expanded the ecological senses that a walk through the forest does not usually hold.<sup>33</sup> It realises a shifting away from the anthropocentric subject-object relation between humans and nature towards an uncanny intimacy. It was an endeavour which challenges the ingrained concepts of Western master subjectivity that also inform our social behaviours and aesthetic preferences. The intimate performance crossed boundaries and common sense in terms of how to behave within and towards ‘nature’ and ‘non-nature.’ It transgressed norms intrinsic to social-

33 Lara Stevens, “Anthroposcenic Performance and the Need For ‘Deep Dramaturgy,’” *Performance Research* 24, no. 8 (2019): 89–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2019.1718436>.

isation of the self. Its performers' strange physicality and movements destabilize seemingly fixed categories of meaning rooted in Western subjectivity.

It is true to say that *Metamorphosis Movement* emerged from a historically unique situation. The respirational management introduced as part of the mitigating measures during the Covid-19 pandemic made us physically experience that our bodies are fluent borders rather than contained units. The mask preventing us from incorporating other bodies' respirations, made material reality that being social creatures had always implied – consciously or unconsciously – the suspension of our bodily integrity and the fact that the respirational connection with our environment is the indispensable presupposition for human life. Thinking ecologically requires a radical acknowledgement of this ontological entanglement, challenging Western ideas of human autonomy and subjectivity. Therefore, *Metamorphosis Movement* found an audience that had gained a sensibility for the strange strangeness of being with others. Its review in this article, suggests the need to start discussing a new aesthetic, an aesthetic of the more-than-human. In the context of an encroaching economising of arts as creative industries that serve our desires for comfort and entertainment, such new aesthetics are intrinsically subversive, intimate and draw us into a space in which radical change is possible.

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