

Environmental dance: listening to and addressing the big questions gently

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Abstract

Efforts to maintain and protect the environment have recently gained notable attention. Scientists, philosophers, educators and artists, among many others, have initiated positive actions that seek to change the ways that humans relate to the ecosystem. As well, members within the dance community have inadvertently established new movement values that seek to promote and encourage ecological balance. New ideologies in environmental ethics support a non-anthropocentric value theory that recognises the intrinsic value of all species to the function of an ecosystem. In this paper I show that environmental dance can be an artistic experience in nature that upholds contemporary environmental ethical values. I evaluate past personal choreographic choices, examine movers who explore the concept of ecocentrism in somatic practice, and present a possible ideology for environmental dance artists rooted in the act of 'listening'. The role of aesthetics as a philosophy for art and nature and how it applies to social art making and environmental ethics is explored.

Keywords: dance, environment, social issues, activism

Introduction

In his acclaimed book, *A Sand County Almanac*, environmentalist Aldo Leopold (1949) scrutinises how humans relate to their outdoor surroundings. He examines the idea of recreation in nature¹ as a paradoxical human idea of environmental activism. Leopold (1949) believes that humans consume through their enjoyment of outdoor nature, which in turn has not proven to be ecologically advantageous. He therefore advocates for perception as part of recreation. 'Recreation,' he notes, 'is not the outdoors, but our reaction to it' (Leopold, 1949, p. 173). In this paper I deconstruct the current anthropocentric paradigm of the human relationship with environment and concur with environmental ethics to support the formation of a new system, one that recognises the intrinsic values of all species to a functional ecosystem. I ask: 'Can dance be used as a method to discover the innate human connection with the earth, and if so, what is our responsibility to, and dependency on, that connection?' I evaluate past personal choreographic choices and examine movers who explore the concept of ecocentrism in somatic practice in conjunction with contemporary environmental ethical theories. One possible ideology for environmental dance artists that I discover and investigate is rooted in the act of 'listening'².

Environmental dance

Nigel Stewart (2010) contends that in order to attend to an imminent environmental catastrophe we need to re-evaluate our relationship with nature and develop eco-

value based approaches such as environmental dance. This challenges human demand-based approaches that focus on fixing before understanding the problem. Stewart (2010) defines environmental dance to be 'an umbrella term for the plethora of dance and somatic practices concerned with the body's relationship to landscape and environment, including the other-than-human world of animals and plants' (p. 32–33). The proposal of environmental dance is beneficial, yet Stewart's (2010) definition is contradictory. To use the descriptor 'other-than human' (p.33), is to place humans at the centre of the environmental ecosystem, thus reinforcing the current anthropocentric relationship that humans have developed with the environment. To prevent more destruction of the environment, a shift in the human relationship with nature does need to occur to support a non-anthropocentric axiology. A non-anthropocentric value theory recognises the intrinsic values of all species to the function of the ecosystem as opposed to the current anthropocentric value theory that places human as the centre and most important species (Callicott, 1984). A new relationship would reduce the dogmatism that is a result of the human centred approach, and give way to an inquiry approach that is based on eco values.

Therefore, an activist environmental dancer, in order to aid in the conservation of the ecosystem, would be a dancer with the ecosystem and not one who uses it as a location or who views aspects of it to be 'other than human' (Stewart, 2010, p. 33). The actual act of dancing with environment supports a non-anthropocentric value theory as the dancer inquirer 'listens,' senses and supports in the ecosystem. The movement that arises would then become material for an environmental dance.

Aesthetics in art and nature

In order to explore environmental dance and activism I first examine how aesthetic theory and history relate to environmental ethics and artistic values. Aesthetics has been referred to as the philosophy of art: as an adjective concerned with beauty (Best, 1999), and 'retains a bond with its origins in the eighteenth century, when it was named the "science of sensory knowledge"' (Berleant, 2005, p. 3). Additionally, aesthetics has been used to describe natural phenomena.

Dewey (1934) examines aesthetics in art as a human experience that is grounded in the synesthetic and intrinsic. Berleant (2000) argues that aesthetics is not actually a kind of experience but the most natural mode of all possible human experiences, and for that reason it is the experience that most closely relates to art. Art is not and cannot be apart from human life because it 'gives us the opportunity to experience' (Berleant, 2000, 152), to be the experience, and thus feel it more fully and intensely (Berleant, 2000). However it is important to point out that although artistic values are not necessarily aesthetic, aesthetics can describe a sensual and immediate mode of how we experience art, and thus life. Aesthetics can therefore be perceived as a mode of experience beyond the art world, although for much of the nineteenth and part of the twentieth century aesthetics was almost solely concerned with the philosophy of art.

Callicott explains that as a result of the philosophy of art long being the philosophy used for aesthetics, natural aesthetics in Western culture has been at the discretion of the lens of the artist (Callicott, 1983). As a result, 'discrete artificial objects' (Callicott, 1983, p. 345) often represent and articulate the sentiment found in the

beauty associated with nature. Paintings such as *America's Forgotten Landscape* by Robert S. Duncanson and Monet's series of the gardens at Giverny are examples of Callicott's artificial objects that express sentiment found in picturesque natural environments. Furthermore, the fact that the Giverny Gardens are built natural environments exacerbates the artificial natural aesthetic problem because a main function of the gardens' planned ecosystem is to please human sentiment. In the dance realm the scenery and painted background in some ballets, such as the forest scene in *Giselle*, present an idealistic natural environment. Some site specific dance works, where the scenic beauty juxtaposes the choreographed dance, can also be considered representative of human-centric and picturesque dance. For example, photos from Diane Eno/Fusion Danceworks environmental dance performance on Monadnock State Park show dancers on a mountain in turquoise costumes performing stylised movement variations. The dancers appear to have been actively staged for a picture.³

In the twentieth century, Hepburn (1966) argued that an aesthetic theory derived solely to be the philosophy of art could not be applicable to the natural world. He pointed out that an aesthetic art theory for nature, based on the picturesque, would work only if the experience of nature were solely concerned with the 'shapes and patterns' (Hepburn, 1966, 301). He argued that a model for the natural aesthetic should take into account sensual experience as well as diverse human relationships with nature, which includes, but is not limited to, nature being provider and the place of death. Moreover, the experience of the natural aesthetic is intrinsic to unplanned phenomena, as opposed to art, where although the actual feeling might not be pre-known, the structure of how one will experience the feeling pre-exists (Hepburn, 1966).

Callicott (1983) and Leopold (1949) advocate for a land aesthetic that focuses less on the picturesque-ness of an environment but appreciates more an ecosystem for its function and all of its biotic components. The land aesthetic involves a 'subtle interplay between conceptual schemata and sensuous experience' (Callicott, 2003, 41). Leopold (1949) and Callicott (1983, 2003) both encourage a shift in human perspective of our relationship with land that upholds perception versus use. An aesthetic experience is inherently human. How can we then use an aesthetic experience in both art and nature to re-evaluate our relationship with the ecosystem and to find our non-anthropocentric role within it?

Dance

I investigate here the possibility of answering the question above by turning to dance and physical movement. Best (1999) explains that it is from the primitive action that language and art developed. 'The meaning of "wanting," for example, 'is rooted in the primitive action of trying to get' (Best, 1999, 110). Meaning does not come first from a linguistic thought; rather it is intrinsically human to understand gestures or actions. He is not saying that movement or gesture is opposed to thinking or apart from thinking, 'it is rather that the thinking and rationality are implicit in, inseparable from, and spring from the activity' (Best, 1999, 116). This pre-linguistic action, which is 'the *dance* that *we* are,' (Best, 1999, 116) is a natural and primitive reaction to events, experience and life. Gestures and movements therefore, Best (1999) argues, are the root of all human concepts. Dance, or my own position on it, is rooted in

movement, gesture, action and body communication. Thus it is the closest art form to being human and to understanding humanism (Best, 1999).

Our current and past relationships with nature, with art and the aesthetic have proven to be through concepts far from the root of being human. Capitalist agendas of certain institutions and individuals have become the decisive judges for what the aesthetic should be for art (Dewey, 1934). These institutions and judges have been decisive about the beauty associated with nature as it has been portrayed through the medium of art. Dewey (1934) argues that as a result, an artificially made divide has developed between what is considered high art and low art, removing inherent human appreciation and understanding of the aesthetic experienced in art. Dewey (1934) proclaims that, 'when artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance' (p. 3).

Through institutional aesthetics as discussed above, we have removed ourselves from our conceptual experiencing roots and the ability to value our intrinsic relationships with art and nature. Environmental dance could be one viable option to help eradicate the aesthetic separateness that is a corollary of the current anthropocentric and capitalist Western culture.

The development of *CRUDE*

In 2010, prior to the theoretical research presented earlier, I began a choreographic journey focused on environmental issues. As a Houston, Texas native, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill directly affected my home and established, for me, a paradoxical ecological connection with the Gulf of Mexico because of Houston's economic dependence on the Gulf's oil supply. I developed a dance piece, titled *CRUDE*, with focus on the negative effects of the global tension over natural resources. The intention was to highlight the imminent environmental catastrophe that is a direct consequence of the current over-use and misuse of the earth. My hope was that the piece would move viewers to be more environmentally conscious, to find new energy sources, and to make different economic choices that value longevity over short term returns. Personally, the making of *CRUDE* piqued a research interest in environmental ethics and environmental dance practice. I began to recognise that I created *CRUDE* with didactic human intentions. As a result, I questioned if it was possible to make environmental art that is non-anthropocentric. I also questioned whether dance could be used as an approach to exercise environmental ethical theory. Stewart (2011) claims that 'environmental dance can disclose values of nature within nature itself by exploring human kinaesthetic consciousness of non-human nature' (33). This idea makes sense but at the same time contradicts the land aesthetic, the crux of which is that only humans experience the aesthetic, but in order to aid in the conservation of the environment we need to 'listen' to it without anthropomorphising it.

Ecologically-minded dance artists

Here I turn to examine ecologically-minded dance artists who show that environmental dance can act as a catalyst for environmental social change because

it provides the performer and viewer with an intrinsic and cognisant connection to the ecosystem.

Merián Soto, Associate Professor of Dance at Temple University, is one influential choreographer who makes dance in the environmental community. Different from the artist whose essence is to objectify an aesthetic experience in the environment, the purpose of her dance making is to provide a present experience within the environment for her, the dancers and the viewers (Soto, 2013). Soto danced in the same ecosystem for one complete year, through rain, snow, sunshine and wind.

Branch Dances (2013) is a series of dances in which Soto explores movement qualities with branches.

The branch dances are simple, yet powerfully communicative, works centered on consciousness in action, in performance, in practice. They are grounded in a meditative movement practice involving the detailed sequencing of movement through inner pathways; the investigation of gravity through dynamic shifting of balance and alignment; and the investigation of a spectrum of tempi. The simplicity of the performance task—to connect/harmonize (body/mind/place) while approaching stillness always results in heightened consciousness and a sense of centering for both dancers and viewers. (Soto, 2013)

‘Crown Balance’ (OYWPP’s Channel, 2010) is a dance within the series in which Soto negotiates movement while carrying a large and heavy branch on her head. Soto allows the gravitational impact of the external object to determine the movement quality and phrasing. ‘Crown Balance’ is an example of an environmental dance in which the dancer negotiates movement in the environment as the dance unfolds. A sense of time, place and relationship emerges solely from within the experience. When viewing her performance I experienced a sensual reaction in which my body felt in place with her body, in tune with the environment and in harmony with the elapsed time.

Melinda Buckwalter, dance writer, movement researcher, and author of *Composing While Dancing: An Improviser’s Companion* (Buckwalter, n.d.), specifically explores the idea of a somatic movement culture that avoids egocentric making and ‘counteracts the possibility of spin and propaganda in communication’ (Buckwalter, n.d.). She was a co-curator of the SEEDS (Somatic Experiments in Earth, Dance + Science) festival of arts and ecology. During the SEEDS festival, and simultaneously the spilling stage of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, Buckwalter crawled on all fours around Earthdance⁴ and in and out of workshops held on the grounds. She carried a log on her back and when it fell she had to retrieve it without her hands. This became her movement score. Buckwalter (n.d.) notes, ‘as this went on, I realized that putting the equipment in place underwater to cap the well could be a somewhat clumsy operation. So, through the somatic action, there is some kind of “empathetic participation.”’ By coincidence it turned out that the day that Melinda crawled is the day that the oil spill was finally capped.

Cassie Meador, artistic director of the Dance Exchange⁵, investigated power resources by walking over 500 miles to the electricity source powering her home. In

her neighbourhood in Washington, DC the energy source is based on coal mined from mountain top removal. She stopped at power plants, farms, schools and towns along the way. Dance Exchange dancers, affiliates and town locals joined her during the two-month walk. The group held outdoor movement workshops and collected stories from community members. During the year following the walk, Meador and her artistic collaborators returned to the studio to create the dance work, *How to Lose a Mountain*, based on the walk, experiences and the actual process of the mountain top removal (Dance Exchange).

Soto, Buckwalter and Meador are three examples of dancers who investigated without a predetermined time frame and allowed for their experience to be the art. Cultivating presence was important. In practice these artists 'listened' somatically to themselves, to their surroundings and to the energy of the moment.

Theory into practice

In my own work I investigated ecological somatic and ethical practices at WEAVE, which was a series of workshops held at Earthdance that brought together intellectual individuals, specifically those from the worlds of somatic awareness, wellness, and ecology. Attendees were interested in finding feasible answers to tough 21st century environmental problems. At WEAVE I took classes on ecological reciprocity, contact improvisation, primal movement theories and herbal and Native American medicine. I shared research inquiries, processed experiences through somatic movement, and I took the time to 'listen'.

In the next paragraphs I include a pivotal segment from my research notes taken at WEAVE that answered one of my research questions: 'How can dance be a method to discover our human connection with the earth and our responsibility to and dependency on that connection?'

In the final class I took at WEAVE, titled 'Exploring the Right Relationship through Movement and Play,' and taught by contact improviser, Abbi Jaffe, an exercise called 'Authentic Movement with nature' was introduced. Abbi Jaffe explained in her class that in Authentic Movement one person takes on the role of the mover while the other takes on the role of the witness.⁶ The mover closes her/his eyes, waits, and then moves in response to body-felt sensations and movement impulses. The witness watches the mover and allows a safe space for the mover to explore and surface deep emotions or memories. Often when done between two practitioners they will interchange roles. In Jaffe's class, our task was to do Authentic Movement with a tree. As Jaffe introduced the exercise, questions arose such as: How does one move authentically? How does one understand the authenticity of another, especially when that other is not of the same species?

I found a huge pine tree with many intricate branches and I lay down under its canopy as I began to witness the tree. I then began to look at all the interwoven branches and I noticed the beauty of the sun pockets shining through them. Peacefully and gently, the branches swayed with the slight breeze. At first I tried to understand what it must feel like to

be a tree. I kept trying to imagine what it would be like to have a million arms and legs interwoven around the trunk of my stable body core. I stood up and did a few arm-twisting yoga poses. I thought, 'if I can look like the tree then maybe I will be able to understand its inner authentic spirit.' Something wasn't right though. An 'aha' moment occurred. I wasn't 'listening' to the spirit and character of the tree. I was just superimposing what the tree looked like onto my body. But I didn't need to replicate the tree to find its authenticity. I realized that I needed to stop trying to personify the tree and to instead 'listen.' So, I stood still as a witness, I stood long and tall next to the tree. My body felt strong with my confidence in my feet and I stood tall with the tree, knowing that we could both make it through the harsh winter that was to come. Then I began to move with my eyes closed and I let the tree be my witness. Feelings of apprehension surfaced as I reflected on my personal struggle with ethical dilemmas. In this exercise, I understood how dancing with the environment through movement activities that require trust, 'listening', understanding, and connecting encourages empathy between species. I understood that I cannot know what the tree needs or experiences and all I can know is what I experience, but in doing so I can understand my reciprocal role in an ecosystem.

At WEAVE I also attended a lecture class offered by Darcey French on the human relationship with trees. French explained the ecological relationship between trees and humans as an example for the broader ecological perspective. She explained that humans rely on trees for survival. Trees provide oxygen, firewood, paper and shelter. French said that it is not inhumane to use a tree for survival, but that destruction of trees' ecosystems occurs when humans exploit and overuse trees. Similarly, overuse of any natural resource, not just trees, leads to the destruction of the specific ecosystem. French explained that as part of a species who rely on natural resources, we need to understand how to live and survive while sustaining these resources. According to French, sustainability occurs when there is an equal give and take relationship in an ecosystem. French argued that through 'listening' we can learn what the ecosystem requires from us for successful survival.

The practice and process of 'listening'

Tamara Ashley, lecturer at University of Bedfordshire and a researcher on dance and environment, followed, and created, with three ecologically concerned dance artists to research how dance artists work with environmental change. Ashley (2012) observed that each of the artists regards their homes and daily lives as an extension of their ecological art practice and hence 'moves with the earth.'

In view of a reciprocal ecosystem, the idea of human as a separate entity that lives off the natural environment is unsustainable. At WEAVE, when I tried to personify the tree, I saw environmental dance as a human-centred reaction. However, environmental dance advocacy as a catalyst for social change seeks to create a holistic positive change for ecosystems. One way to shift the 'human separate' paradigm is to begin to view the ecosystem as community. Environmental dance

is not about getting the environmental message out as a task but rather it is about habituating non-anthropocentric practices and values.

The role of an environmental dancer, and any environmental activist, I propose, is to find a practice that habituates 'listening' and non-anthropocentric values. Authentic Movement is one such practice as well as Contact Improvisation (CI). The basic structure of CI allows for dancers to interact with each other without any allocated dominant dancer occurrences integrated into the form. It involves 'listening' with your own body to the other bodies moving in space. CI removes hierarchal positioning from the dance making practice and is not an 'I'-centred dance methodology. In fact, it shares the same principles of community, sharing, 'listening' and reciprocity as an ecosystem. Similar to CI, ecological dance and activism should evolve through a reciprocal connective understanding. Practising CI is an effective method for developing the empathy and 'listening' skills needed for ecological dance making and perceptive outdoor relationships.

CRUDE deconstructed

A new understanding of environmental dance inspired me to think about how I could improve and repurpose *CRUDE*. Originally, when making *CRUDE*, the idea was to bring awareness of a specific environmental problem. I drew inspiration from pictures, conversations, news reports and journaling about the effects of the oil spill. The dance investigated human emotions in reaction to an environmental casualty that was a result of human negligence. If I were to remake *CRUDE*, I would let the initial 'impulsion' (Dewey, 1934, p. 81) guide the somatic exploration process without taking the viewers' perception of a possible advocacy message into consideration. I cannot provide a concrete answer to what will bring awareness to the oceans or to what will encourage less exploitation of natural resources. I do, however, present a list of ideas, which I hope to transform into habitual actions through practice. This process will help the practitioner to understand how to be non-anthropocentric, to 'listen' and to embody ecological holism. The list is as follows:

1. *Find places and moments to integrate somatic movement into daily life.*
2. *Practise Contact Improvisation and expand the practice by teaching it. Introduce CI in open movement situations.*
3. *Practise Ujayi Pranayama (Ocean Breath), specifically in stressful situations.*
4. *Be present in parks and with nature. Pick up any trash.*
5. *Support and buy local food and goods.*
6. *Continue to teach somatic movement.*
7. *'Listen' to body to experience the seasonal changes, environmental stressors and natural occurrences.*
8. *Practice Authentic Movement.*
9. *Take the time to feel the earth.*
10. *Take time to meditate away from technology.*

I have discovered in my own practice of Contact Improvisation that breath, body contact, kinaesthetic space awareness (an awareness of what is going on around my body, in my own body without the need to see), and a heightened sense of 'listening', all encouraged through my relationship with my partner or other dancers, become the values that measure time and space. I apply these values in my own ongoing ecological practice. I remember the body-felt sensations and I allow time and space to be influenced by the environment I am in. This is more easily done at some instances in my life than others, but I use CI as one way to remember. For example, I recently visited the Gulf beaches in the hope of establishing a relationship with the ecological space void of social time constraints. I began to breathe with the ocean and to match my breath to the sounds of the waves, as I would do with a partner in Contact Improvisation. Breath is one way to remember the present sensual experience. As I sit down to create a reworking of *CRUDE*, I visit the ocean breath and start from there. I recognise that it is not possible to completely remake the natural aesthetic experience in the studio or on the stage. I can attempt to produce an aesthetic experience through art more true to a natural aesthetic and less true to my discretion, as did Meador and Soto. One idea I will try is to invite the audience to breathe with me, or maybe they will just begin on their own.

After the initial showing of *CRUDE*, I had one audience member state that the work was a profound look at humanity. The dancers that I worked with on *CRUDE* set up a donation basket for the Gulf Relief Fund. *Show the Spill* was a website created by JB Reed and posted on Facebook that gave viewers access to live footage of the spill. I filmed *CRUDE* and Reed put the video on *Show the Spill*. *CRUDE* was well received and could possibly have made an impact on its audience to explore environmental concerns. Yet, after further investigation and commitment to ecological change, I recognise that as a dancer, I can raise awareness about environmental catastrophes through dance, but I must also find a way to change my connection with the environment.

Conclusion

A paradigm shift that values a more intrinsic relationship with the natural would deconstruct anthropocentrism. 'Listening' to nature, encouraged through somatic practice, reconditions picturesque and anthropocentric notions regarding natural aesthetics. Buckwalter (n.d.) believes that bringing the body as perceived from within into environmental and social activism would be of 'benefit to humankind as we face the terrible consequences of our collective thoughtlessness.' Primitive actions and gestures develop first and become the thoughts we share towards 'empathetic participation' (Buckwalter, n.d.). In this paper I explore how we can use an aesthetic art experience through dance in nature to perceive the natural aesthetic, formulate that experience into thought, share it through language, and use it to make an allied change.

1. Nature in this paper refers to the phenomena of the physical world and the intrinsic characteristics of life. This definition includes and is often referred to in the paper as geology and wildlife. Natural, therefore, is anything existing or caused by nature, as defined in the previous sentence.

2. I use 'listening' in this instance and throughout the paper to represent the idea of 'listening' with all the senses, not just with the ears as an active practice, as in 'listening' with the sensory nervous system, and with energy and spirit. 'Listening' in this sense can be internal as well as conscious.
3. To see a visual representation of the paintings see: Duncanson, Robert S. (n.d.) *America's Forgotten Landscape*. Retrieved from <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/americas-forgotten-landscape-painter-robert-s-duncanson-112952174/?no-ist> See Giverny, Non-for-profit Organisation. (2014). Giverny Monet's garden. Retrieved from: <http://giverny.org/gardens/fcm/visitgb.htm#visit> For examples of the forest scenery in *Giselle*, see Butler University Department of Dance. (2001). *Giselle, The Ballets Russes Collection*. Retrieved from <https://www.butler.edu/dance/about/ballet-russe> or to see more current *Giselle* scenery see Dancetabs. (2014). Search *Giselle*. Retrieved from: <http://dancetabs.com/?s=giselle> For Diane Eno/Fusion Danceworks see Dance Magazine, August 2005 and <http://www.fusiondanceworks.net/upcoming.htm>
4. Earthdance is an artist-run retreat and residency centre that provides a mix of dance, somatic, and interdisciplinary training with a focus on sustainable living, social justice and community. For more information see www.earthdance.net.
5. Dance Exchange is an intergenerational company of artists that creates dance and engages people in making art. For more information see www.danceexchange.org
6. Authentic Movement is a movement practice usually performed with two or more people. One person moves, generally with eyes closed, while other people witness. The mover allows the movement impulse to come from within at that present moment. The witness(es) watch without judgment and with a focus on inner awareness and feeling in reaction to the movement. For more information on authentic movement, see www.authenticmovementcommunity.org

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Biography

Joanna Stone is a Brooklyn based performer, teaching artist, and researcher. Currently she dances with *Dance to the People* and *LEIMAY*. Inspired by her current environmental dance research, Joanna recently directed and presented *Evolution is not Anthropocentric*. Joanna has a BA in Theater and Dance from the University of Texas and an MA in Dance with a graduate certificate in Women's Studies from Texas Woman's University. She collaborated with Rosanna Gamson and Contradanza on *Aura* and performed in schools and venues throughout Mexico and South America. She was the editorial assistant for *Contact Quarterly* and is a contact improviser.