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EDITORIAL

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Embodying eco-consciousness: Somatics, aesthetic practices and social action

This Special Issue of the *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices (JDSP)* explores the possibilities and impact of somatic and aesthetic practices in the evolution of an embodied eco-consciousness within education, therapy, the performing arts and beyond.

The issue offers a combination of *theoretical considerations, practice reflections* and *artistic contributions* towards a re-visioning of our interdependent entanglement and resonance within an increasingly endangered natural world. The featured articles and artworks investigate and put forward emerging forms of practices in response to environmental crises and offer new

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insights into somatic informed environmental education in public education or social fields. The contributions offer cross-disciplinary dialogues between contemporary critical and non-dualist theory and somatic practices including practices of non-western heritage.

The articles and the artworks featured in this volume consider how somatic practices and somatic informed arts practices might offer new modes of thinking, perceiving and of 'being-with', necessary for an embodied 'planetary citizenship' and stewardship (Haraway 2016; Morin and Kern 1999). Through the diverse voices of artists, educators and scholars, this volume attempts to articulate ecological somatic practices and ethics as acts of care, resistance, decolonization, reconnection and regeneration. How can somatically informed arts practices offer timely communal forms of expression, immersion and activism in a world facing ecological catastrophe? How does such catastrophe influence, disturb, radicalize and politicize our practices?

We were impressed and heartened by the abundance of contributions we received for this issue, affirming the desire in our various communities to reflect upon and directly address these critical questions as we teeter at the tipping point. The soma exists in relationship to all life, not as a separate unit of being, yet is culturally shaped and politically rendered.

Can expanding our personal and professional field to become more inclusive, less anthropocentric and more polymorphic, initiate a collective revaluing of the human condition – as an integral part of the planetary body?

Is eco-consciousness as an awareness of our organismic entanglement and planetary belonging sufficient for a change in human behaviour towards responsible planetary citizenship? Eco-consciousness also needs to include an increasing awareness of the cultural, historical, political and socio-economic conditions that have led to a world where our natural habitat of fragile coexistence has been reduced to a resource that can be continuously colonized, exploited, consumed and destroyed. Can we move towards a 'creative social imaginary' that is embodied, felt, reflective, relational and critically enacted (Castoriadis 1997)?

In this mindset, we selected a wide variety of contributions, allowing for a diversity of perspectives, both in terms of aesthetic practices with reference to the sensorial dimension of artistic knowledge creation and in terms of the social-ecological approaches to action, interaction and cultural resistance.

The journal volume is structured in three interrelated sections:

- theoretical and contextual essay considerations
- reflections on emerging practices, at times accompanied by links to samples of artworks
- a series of artistic contributions, including performance works, poems, photo essays and videos. Each of these includes a brief overview and abstract and, where appropriate, a link to a digitized version of the featured artwork.

While some of these submissions are showcasing artworks on video and other materials, for the full experience the reader should follow the links provided.

The contextual essays are introduced through Ann Lenore Moradian's reflections on a call for the evolution of human consciousness and subsequent change of behaviour through awareness-forming practices of embodiment in times of planetary crises and challenges. The author posits evolving our

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consciousness so that we can consciously evolve at the most critical challenge of our times. Proposing new ways of thinking and being-with, Anna Dako's essay guides the reader through three phases of experiential immersion. She presents the concept of 'felt thinking' as an inclusive method of embodied reconnection with the natural world.

Elise Nuding offers a critical perspective on eco-somatics, considering potential pitfalls and their implications. She examines the term 'eco-somatics' along with the wider prevalence of ecology and the ecological in a somatic discourse as situated within the condition of modernity-coloniality. In more pragmatic ways, Robert Bettmann's article offers considerations on how an experiential education model influenced by theoretical considerations towards 'somatic ecology' may apply to the design of public eco-somatic programmes, and how such programmes may empower practitioners within broader efforts to reconnect humanity to the natural world.

Writing from practice, Doerte Weig questions how contemporary somatic practices contribute to shifting 'eco-anxieties' and to shaping human awareness of ecosystemic diversity and embeddedness. Her essay draws on research with egalitarian Baka groups in Central Africa and with connective fascia tissues, to propose a method of somatic vocal pedagogy and a way of honouring communal 'ecosystemic nestedness'.

Elena Marchevska and Carolyn Defrin's article addresses the embodied nature of collaborative creative somatic processes in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent era of social distancing. Janaína Moraes's extends such grounded thinking through reflections on two choreographic research case studies in eco-conscious dance experimentation. These case studies address the relationships between human and more-than-human beings as political and poetic frameworks of 'becoming' through practices of coexistence. This section of the journal edition concludes with Brittany Laidlaw's critical literature review on the role of eco-somatics and dance towards ecological renewal. Her review aims to reclaim the body as a 'site of evolutionary intelligence that can guide us towards necessary shifts in relational ontologies for our collective survival'.

The second part of the journal volume opens the field of practices with Sondra Fraleigh's autobiographically informed contribution 'Body and nature', which views somatic values through lenses of philosophy both East and West, particularly ecophenomenology, virtue ethics and Zen Buddhism. Jamie McHugh adds to this reflection on mutual relations between the individual soma and the larger body of the natural world: 'embodying nature' for him means to cultivate our capacity to witness, contact, mirror, respond and rest in partnership with the living planet. Carolien Hermans follows that quest for an eco-somatic ethics further by using Romain Rolland's 'oceanic feeling' as an entrance point to explore the transformative nature of dance improvisation and suggests a fluid philosophy of moving bodies that is informed by eastern philosophy and poststructuralist theory.

The following three articles highlight practical approaches, their specific assumptions and impact on relationalities: Kerstin Kussmaul and Alys Longley are claiming a *queer habitat of fascia* by understanding fascia not only as structure, but also as a relational mediator ranging from the interior to the exterior and the body in its surrounding as an ecological, interdependent part of its habitat.

The collaborative writing of Areal_Berlin members compares the three choreographic-somatic approaches of Bettina Mainz, Katja Münker and

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Sabine Zahn as a means to sensitize bodies in relation to urban and rural landscape-environments, and how those practices are (re)designed in order to meet the specific demands of outdoor work. Laura Burns emphasizes within 'Practices of reciprocity and witnessing in more-than-human collectivities' on the role of vocal sounding with more-than-human collectivities to make way for a shared field of response- and address-ability. She positions such practices as troubling of colonial-capitalism's division between life and non-life.

The final four contributions exemplify reflections on distinct practices:

Tiago Gambogi reflects on his extensive and urgent place-based performance activism and 'artivism on a planet in transformation' in Brazil. Inspired by David Abram's work and phenomenology's concepts of 'intersubjectivity and the life world', Lindsay Gilmour's article 'Nature as witness' explores the reciprocal relationship between herself and the land through the Discipline of Authentic Movement. Vicky Wright uses masks to explore earlier evolutionary states of sensory awareness and summarizes the findings of the 'Evolution Project' to study our evolution from fish to human. The practice-reflection section wraps up with Janice Pomer's 'Dance the moving world', an approach to nature-based movement education that supports the creation of dances by children and youth to articulate concerns about water, climate, ecosystems, habitats and the future of our planet.

The third part of the journal volume is dedicated to creative/social applications of, and aesthetic responses to, eco-consciousness. Through performance experiments, photography, sculpture, video art, poetry and dance, varied voices address eco-consciousness in a multiplicity of ways.

These contributions include:

- Specific direct action as a critical response to exploitation and destruction of our ecosystems as practice of Black queer resistance in the US-American desert in Ground Series Collective's video '*Stages of Tectonic Blackness*', co-produced by the collective with Miles Tokunow, Lazarus Letcher, Nikesha Breeze, Sarah Ashkin and Brittany Delany;
- Vivid displays of embodied eco-consciousness explicitly expressed wherever the human soma and the planet meet, whether in a small urban wild space in Claire Loussouarn's 'This urban wild field in Hackney Marshes', under and with a tree wherever it may be found in Helen Poynor's '*OUT!*' or in the spaces of vast wilderness of Stephanie Gottlob's 'The body is a landscape and the landscape is a body'.
- The universal felt experience of the ordinary and non-ordinary relationship between bodies, species and place, particularized Haeeun Lee, Iulia Maracine and Ludic Collective present the userfriendly guides series as a practice of perceptual, sensorial and bodily strategies to explore shared evolutionary histories and relations between us and other organisms; in European bodies inside and outside German spaces of Mira Hirtz's '*Performative Video Tutorials: An eco-somatic approach to geopolitics*'; in the interface between a modern urban US-American body and a rural locale rooted in indigenous tradition of Cheryl Pallant's '*Taos conversation*'; in Simon Whitehead's object-based 'soft matter' explorations on more than human relations towards an ecology of touch in rural Wales.
- And finally, a Mexican-American body summoning up her feminine lineage through time and space in Lorena Wolfman's '*Rain in the Marrow*'.

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Figure 1: Still Dance with Anna Halprin by Eeo Stubblefield - Rock Series.
© Eeo Stubblefield, 1998.

We hope our readers take to heart the immensity, urgency and complexity of our current planetary condition as THE focus for engaged somatic/aesthetic practice and social action. The writer and founder of Earth First! Edward Abbey succinctly wrote over 30 years ago: 'Sentiment without action is the ruin of the soul' (Abbey 1989). Our embodied action can take many forms of participation and engagement; may this Special Issue resonate, inspire and expand what is possible in our sensing, feeling, thinking – and imagining – as stepping stones into creation.

The special issue editors would like to thank the editors, editorial assistants, the *JDSP* editorial board and the publishers, for supporting the inclusion of alternative modes of practice and research presentation within this journal volume. This allowed for furthering inclusivity and diversity within

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the various contributions, echoing overarching principles inherent within eco-consciousness.

We would also like to acknowledge the passing of dance pioneer Anna Halprin (1920–2021) during the curation of this issue and honour her legacy of both including the natural environment as an essential aspect of somatic awareness and action, and in 'making dances that matter', particularly the community-based scores of *Circle the Earth* and the *Planetary Dance*. Her unstinting dedication to dance, the environment and social change has inspired many to stand up and be counted – and to carry the torch further into the unknown. Thank you Anna.

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