The Porous Body: Cultivating malleability in traditional dance training

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Abstract

Contemporary dance is constantly evolving. Its landscape has transformed and developed significantly over the past thirty years, slowly shifting from a repertoire company scene to a diverse freelance environment. In this idiosyncratic milieu, the breadth of skills that dancers need to master is constantly becoming more complex. Given that emerging contemporary dancers will be encountering the new reality of an increasingly heterogeneous freelance environment, how should training institutions best prepare students for this paradigm shift? To address this challenge, I began developing 'The Porous Body', a structure of feeling that promotes the practice of heightened physical and mental malleability by following four fundamental guiding principles: flow, playfulness, metaphor and paradox. Sourcing from my own performative, choreographic and pedagogical practices, and the work of dance artists, movement practitioners, philosophers and psychologists from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I will formulate this method while sharing anecdotal feedback collected from dancers with whom I have recently experimented with this concept of physical and mental malleability.

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A changing world

For the past 30 years, the dance field has seen worldwide funding cuts, rendering previously successful dance companies unsustainable. For example, in Canada, 'for most of the 1990s, as Canadian governments concentrated on reducing their deficits by curbing spending, expenditures on culture declined' (Harvey 2006). The Canadian Arts Presenting Association notes that since then '[m]any [dance] companies have scaled down and others [have been] eliminated'(Petri 2012: 17). Even though each country has its distinct cultural environment, numerous dance centres around the world have been through comparable transformations in recent decades.

As a result of this new economic climate, full-time company dancers working with one particular choreographer or director have become rarities, and have been replaced by freelance dancers. These independent contractors are often involved in several projects at the same time, nomadically moving from one creative environment to the next. New York-based dancer Veronica Dittman describes: 'Below that very narrow top tier [of employed company dancers], dancers are all working for more than one choreographer and/or holding down outside jobs to fill in the gaps financially' (2008: 23).

These profound changes in the dance economy also have impacted choreographers. Freelance choreographers working outside of a conventional company structure are becoming the norm. Unaffiliated with traditional dance institutions, these creators with increased mobility collaborate with a wide range of artists – often across disciplines – while developing a flexible artistic mandate, movement vocabulary and choreographic vision.

With the rise of a nomadic freelance system and the multiplication of individualized choreographic styles, professional contemporary dancers must today understand and embody a huge variety of movement approaches and skills. Although exciting and inspiring, this situation creates a real challenge for training institutions all over the world: how should we now train contemporary dance students and how can we best prepare them for this evolution in contemporary dance?

The discussion around these challenges has been occurring for some time already. Many solutions have been proposed and tested. For example, some educators suggested that the idiosyncratic nature of the milieu should be met with broader training curricula so that students become accustomed to the versatility that will be required of them once they enter the professional world. This solution, although logical, comes at a high cost; students who are exposed to an extensive range of methods within the limited time of a training programme (three years on average) do not experience the long-term and rigorous commitment to a particular technique. This situation could result in even greater challenges as we could see the next generations of dancers potentially reverting to a superficial or an imitative approach to movement. Consequently, many specialists worry about this lack of profound physical understanding. As dance artist Jennifer Roche states:

> […] [I]t is easy to see how dancers operating outside a clear disciplinary history are regarded as lacking the proper markings of a movement signature. Moving freely between forms in a somewhat promiscuous manner, thus not 'belonging' to a

> particular movement style or choreographer, means that points of reference are no longer evident. (2015: 29)

Extended specialized training offers essential ‘points of reference’ to build upon or move away from, but also provides an indispensable element in dance: the profound expressive ‘meanings sewn into the neuromusculature of the body’ (Albright 2010: 53), as Ann Cooper Albright, professor and chair of the Department of Dance at Oberlin College, describes it. Broadening training curricula at the cost of losing in-depth training is not, therefore, a viable solution.

Other dance practitioners have proposed a different solution: to make training health-focused and aesthetically neutral, so that students can develop their craft as blank slates, remaining available to be easily modelled by future choreographers. In theory, this approach shows merit, although many have since argued that movement can never be completely devoid of aesthetics. Moreover, many dance professionals agree that young movers who exclusively train in holistic, somatic practices often lack technical specificity, muscular power, attack, musicality or performance skills. Somatic training, although an excellent complement to a training programme, is not the ultimate solution either.

So here lies the conundrum that challenges our schools today; in-depth understanding, technical proficiency, aesthetic specificity and diversity in training all appear to be indispensable, a combination that cannot possibly be inculcated well in only three years. The dance training world needs a shift, and many believe that we have not fully discovered its new model yet.

The cultivation of malleability

What should this new paradigm be? Does our current system need a complete overhaul? Probably not. Existing full-time training programmes offer a constancy, intensity and focus that are essential to the fruition of reliable and articulate professional dance artists. Based on my experience teaching modern and contemporary dance and choreographing in numerous institutions across Canada, I believe that the most successful training programmes consist of long-term commitment to a core group of contrasting and complementary techniques, with some exposure to a range of styles and ideas through special workshops, master classes or smaller courses. With this template, students access the profound physical transformations from extended practice, while gaining some variety and perspective.

However, even with this effective formula, a considerable proportion of students still struggle with their progress. Therefore, codified conservatory-style dance training[1], although transformative and beneficial for many, can make others inflexible – mentally and physically. These students progress with very fixed ideas of dance or themselves, making them unadaptable and non-versatile. Ironically, this high-quality and well-balanced training can hinder one of the most vital attributes for a successful performance career in today's climate. How can we overcome this? How can teachers help as many students as possible gain technical and aesthetic specificity without falling into a rigid or protected mode? The key factor here, which conservatory-style dance education can easily overlook, is the cultivation of malleability.

The term *malleability*, a scientific term used to describe the ability of a solid – usually metals – to bend or to be hammered into other shapes without breaking, in a human context is used to describe someone with high adaptive qualities. The concept of malleable intelligence has gained popularity in recent years to describe the processes by which intelligence can be increased through alterations in brain plasticity. My current goal is to incorporate and foster the practice of physical and mental malleability as a way to increase the receptivity and intelligence of both mind and body within the specificity and rigour of traditional technique classes. This approach considers the state of mind in which movement occurs to be just as crucial as the movement itself, and so, too, the class environment in relationship with its content. As Mary Starks Whitehouse, founder of Authentic Movement, said: 'It was an important day when I discovered that I did not teach Dance, I taught People' (1999: 59).

If we accept that we do indeed teach people, rather than just dance, then which environmental conditions increase malleability? According to psychologists Blackwell et al., 'the belief that intelligence is malleable' (2007: 246) rather than fixed or frozen is sufficient to result in greater accomplishments. Two studies conducted on seventh-grade students concluded that 'students who learned about intelligence's malleability had higher academic motivation, better academic behavior, and better grades in mathematics' (American Psychological Association 2003). Dweck also states that praising students for their intelligence can be damaging. She proposes praising them for 'things they can control, such as effort, rather than things they cannot' (Glenn 2010).

How does this all translate to dance? How can a teacher nurture a malleability-friendly class environment? Talking to students about the non-fixity of their minds and bodies is a natural first step. Being conscientious about complimenting students on their effort and progress, as opposed to their talent, facility or beauty, is another. However, beyond the external environment, what state of mind encourages malleability? What tools can students learn to access this mindset? I spent a considerable amount of time in the past year pondering this question. I discovered that, unconsciously, I have made the cultivation of malleability a central component of my performative, creative and pedagogical practices for several years already, and that I have intuitively built a series of conceptual tools to support it. Despite my long-term experience with these ideas, this is my first attempt at defining and organizing them into a system. This new concept is currently at its formative stage and may transform considerably in the coming years.

I consider this model a 'structure of feeling' (Turner 2015) that focuses on the practice of an approach to movement as opposed to the practice of movement itself. Its goal is to nurture the ability to transform willpower into a state of malleability, responsiveness, openness and vulnerability. This paradigm can be easily incorporated into different dance contexts and environments, such as dance classes, rehearsals and performances. I currently call it 'The Porous Body'. It shares intriguing similarities with other contemporary concepts recently developed by dance artists, notably: Ohad Naharin's Gaga (Katan 2016), Anouk van Dijk's Countertechnique (Siegmund and Van Dijk 2011), Gill Clarke and Eva Karczag's conclusions from Mode05 and the Vienna Research Project (2007), Eiko and Koma's Delicious Movement (Eiko & Koma), and Butoh.[2]

Below are the four guiding principles that are currently the foundation of The Porous Body.

Flow and the loss of self-consciousness

In which moments did I feel like I danced at my best? What happened in these instances? How did it feel? These fleeting moments of grace all had a surreal quality to them. Space and time were warped. I felt present and in control, and yet I was completely letting go as if something else was making me move. There were no worries, no doubts; there was no pain, no self-consciousness […] only energy, intention, and movement taking over. What is this state, often described as *being in the zone*?

Psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi calls it *flow*, which is primarily characterized by the absolute engrossment in what one does, leading to a feeling of stimulated attention, full participation and gratification. Although flow research in the west became widespread in the 1980s, the concept has been a source of fascination across cultures throughout history. Buddhism and Taoism depict it as *action of inaction* or *doing without doing*. Hindu philosophy and yogic writings also depict a similar state.

What exactly is flow? Jeanne Nakamura and Csíkszentmihályi have identified six factors surrounding the flow experience:

- Intense and focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment

- Merging of action and awareness
- A loss of reflective self-consciousness (i.e., loss of awareness of oneself as a social actor)
- A sense that one can control one's action; that is, a sense that one can in principle deal with the situation because one knows how to respond to whatever happens next
- Distortion of temporal experience (typically, a sense that time has passed faster than normal)
- Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding, such that often the end goal is just an excuse for the process. (Nakamura and Csíkszentmihályi 2009: 90)

Consider the experience of dancer Jordana Deveau, recounting her experience performing 'edged', a solo that I created on her with the goal of making her achieve a flow state: 'I had to go through something, while observing myself going through it, without judgment, but with an awareness of being true to myself without putting on a performance – the layers of consciousness and awareness became dizzying' (2016: personal communication by e-mail).

Whitehouse's description of the 'core of the movement experience' shares similarities with flow:

> The core of the movement experience is the sensation of moving and being moved. [Ö] It is a moment of total awareness, the coming together of what I am doing and what is happening to me. It cannot be anticipated, explained, specifically worked for,

> nor repeated exactly. In order that it may happen, one must have a bodily awareness of movement. (1999: 43)

How can flow be generated? According to Whitehouse, these moments of heightened awareness cannot be ‘specifically worked for’. Indeed, one cannot force flow, but certain conditions can increase the chances of its manifestation. Psychologist Owen Schaffer puts forward seven flow prerequisites:

- High perceived challenges
- High perceived skills
- Knowing what to do
- Knowing how to do it
- Knowing how well you are doing
- Knowing where to go (where navigation is involved)
- Freedom from distractions. (2013)

To promote flow in the context of a class, the teacher must then be clear as to what needs to be achieved and how it should be done. The class environment must also be focused and without any disturbance. Since flow is more likely to take place ‘when above-average challenges are matched to skills’ (Csíkszentmihályi 2000: 34), the teacher must push students beyond their comfort zone, while giving them positive reinforcement for their accomplishments. Since the experience of the activity should feel intrinsically rewarding, the teacher should also

communicate a sense of satisfaction to the class, which brings us to the second guiding principle of The Porous Body.

Playfulness and collectivity

I wonder why codified conservatory-style dance training can sometimes be so devoid of pleasure. One would think that an art form with the human body in motion as its base material would inherently carry a fair amount of sensuality and exuberance in its practice, although ironically, technical dance training can sometimes become more about control and repression than pleasure. Why is this?

At its most basic level, a dance life is just plain hard. Physical exertion, the constant risk of injury and the continuous reaching for ideals, combined with the lack of professional opportunities, often result in aspiring dancers who are exhausted, pessimistic, overly ambitious or self-conscious. These qualities can have severely detrimental effects on a dancer's evolution. Einav Katan, a research associate at the Humboldt University of Berlin, states:

> […] the mood of a dancer, and the internal emotions that evolve, can be either supportive of or obstructive to perceptual processes. When a dancer places too much ambition in a movement direction, the process ceases, as it does when a dancer gives up. (2016: 91)

'Connect effort into pleasure' is one of the principles of Gaga, a contemporary movement language emphasizing the somatic experience. As explained by Ohad Naharin, its originator, this

concept not only allows dancers to embody sensuality but, more importantly, it reminds them, despite the inevitable struggle, of their love of dance.

According to Dweck, loving what we do is a fundamental element of success: ‘The students who thrive are not necessarily the ones who come in with the perfect scores. It’s the ones who love what they’re doing and go at it vigorously’ (Glenn 2010).

Morgan O’Neill-Sharp, a former student of mine at the University of Calgary, felt her dancing transform with the incorporation of playfulness:

> In class we did one pass of this exercise thinking about dancing to please yourself. I covered much more space than I ever have before in that exercise and felt a sense of ease in my movement. My body knows much more than I give it credit for, and allowing my body to move freely gave my movement depth and purpose. We all dance because we love it, yet somehow I forget to allow myself to enjoy class. The joy of movement is what makes it beautiful. (2016: personal communication by e-mail)

What can a teacher do to incorporate more playfulness within the struggle associated with dance training? Informing and reminding students about Naharin’s ‘connect effort into pleasure’ concept while meeting Schaffer’s flow conditions is a good strategy. Dance has often been used as a social activity. However, conservatory-style training, although usually practiced in groups,

has been mainly focused on the individual, often leading to feelings of isolation and competitiveness in the studio and beyond. As a remedy to this, there should be a stronger focus on building a sense of collectivity among classmates. Feeling part of a collective not only helps self-consciousness subside, but it also brings a joyful sense of belonging. Consequently, I often have students work in pairs or small groups, watching each other's dancing, giving and receiving oral and tactile feedback, and making conscious eye contact. Also, the incorporation of humour can do wonders. However, the most successful factor in bringing a sense of playfulness to class is encouraging students to connect with their creativity through the use of their imagination. This element brings us to the third guiding principle of The Porous Body.

Guided mental imagery and metaphor

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* describes mental imagery as a 'quasi-perceptual experience [that] resembles perceptual experience, but occurs in the absence of the appropriate external stimuli' (Thomas 2017). The addition of the word *guided* refers to mental imagery consciously directed and sustained for a period, as opposed to being completely random. This mental imagery is not limited to an internal visual mode but includes other cues such as auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory, haptic and so forth.

Guided mental imagery has been used in dance for quite some time. Butoh's form and expression have been, since its conception, steeped in the embodiment of profound mental visualizations. In the west, its use gained popularity amongst dancers and health professionals in the 1930s through Ideokinesis, a form of somatic education conceived by Mabel Elsworth Todd, Barbara Clark and

Lulu Sweigard. Since then, Ideokinesis has inspired an extensive list of artists and movement specialists, which has led to the development of numerous physical practices such as the Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method, Gyrokinesis, Contact-Improvisation, Body–Mind Centering, Skinner Releasing Technique and aforementioned Gaga, among many others.

Personally, I have used imagery for the past 30 years, as a student, performer, choreographer, teacher and rehearsal director. I have absolutely no doubt that it can enrich the dance experience tremendously. Not only does it 'improve skeletal alignment and posture through the re-patterning of neuromuscular pathways' (Pavlik and Nordin-Bates 2016: 56), but it also taps into our creative selves by propelling our movement into the poetic and infinite realm of metaphors. According to renowned Ideokinesis practitioner Irene Dowd, 'Metaphor can be the fist that breaks through the dark glass between what is already known and what is still mystery. Through the vehicle of metaphor, we can participate in that movement from what is to what can be' (1995: 69).

O'Neill-Sharpe discovered a new way of inhabiting her movement through guided mental imagery:

> Overall, working with Louis has emphasized for me the power of imagery. A simple thought can make all the difference, allowing an exercise to become a dance. I have perhaps made this realization, at least in part, in choreography but there is no doubt that it enhances movement in a technique class as well. I have felt a change in my

> dancing and the way that my inner self lives while I am dancing. (2016: personal communication by e-mail)

Working with imagery requires energy and attention. For a mental representation to impact one's movement, state or alignment, attention must be directed and sustained. This process requires mental stamina, which in turn entails practice. The ability to use and embody mental imagery effectively is an essential skill for today's contemporary dancers. Therefore, I always include visualization exercises in my technique classes and consider this element of training to be as fundamental as the practice of movement itself. Just as it is primordial to cover a range of variations in the movement material of the class, I make sure the guided mental imagery practice also contains differentiated instruction: sometimes done with movement or in stillness, with eyes open or closed, lying down or standing, in silence or with sounds, with or without touch, individually or in groups. Through guided mental imagery, I aim to practice not only efficient movement, but also creativity, focus, enjoyment, connectedness and empathy.

The philosophical dimensions of metaphor and imagery resonated with Elizabeth Burney, another student at the University of Calgary:

> […] [N]ever before has philosophical styled thought been such a large component of my training as it has been in Louis' class. I have always been taught through the utilization of analogies, and found them exceptionally helpful, but Louis' approach to his work pushes past the boundaries of conventional analogies. This technique and

> style of thought force you to really visualize and feel the movement; and through the use of association to extreme circumstances and images, Louis is able to take our bodies and movement to where his imagery has taken our minds. (2016: personal communication by e-mail)

The primary challenge with mental imagery is that sometimes, the images can become either static, lacking in life, predictable or one-dimensional. How can we make sure that an image stays alive, organically morphing, surprising and multi-layered? This brings us to The Porous Body's fourth and final guiding principle.

Paradox and unknowingness

'Gravity is the root of lightness; and stillness is the ruler of movement' Lao Tzu.

The positive effects of paradox are three-fold: embracing paradox takes away the rigidity of absolute beliefs, dissipates the desire to overly control and allows us to reveal ourselves genuinely. As David Appelbaum, Professor of Philosophy at State University of New York, states: 'The force of contradiction alone provides the tonic against hiddenness' (1990: xii).

Emily Hobbes, a Toronto-based freelance dancer, experienced the freedom that can arise from dealing with impossibility:

> Sometimes it was about exploring the impossible; becoming so invested in multiple tasks at once that you are able to shut off the 'thinking' portion of your brain and sink into the 'experiencing' side. As a person who tends to overthink everything to the point where I paralyze myself with thought (and often doubt/insecurity), these are my favourite types of explorations. (2017: personal communication by e-mail)

As with mental imagery, paradox has been used in dance for a long time. Butoh is, once again, a good example. Countertechnique, a relatively new contemporary dance technique developed by Anouk van Dijk, uses paradoxical opposition as a fundamental movement concept:

> The heightened alertness that is typical for dancers trained in Countertechnique stems from the need and ability to be in at least two places at the same time, both mentally and physically. Dancers have to think and focus on direction as well as counter-direction, thus dividing their attention. (Siegmund and Van Dijk 2011: 76)

I myself have been part of several choreographic works built on paradoxical tasks and ideas, and found these works particularly rich and fascinating. However, as a young student, I have unfortunately rarely experienced a technique class using paradoxes within the context of my training programmes. Indeed, codified dance techniques can often be instructed in predetermined, inflexible ways, which can be highly damaging since this suggests that there is an absolute set truth about movement. Not only can forms contradict each other, demonstrating that truth is ever-changing and relative, but movement principles are filled with paradoxes within

themselves. For example, for years, I was genuinely confused by the use of the hamstring muscles in relationship to pelvic alignment. Some teachers kept telling me that the only way to think about this was to push the floor away with the back of my legs so that the hamstrings remain engaged. Others swore that the answer was in lifting these same muscles away from the floor so that they could support the pelvis without gripping. Still others told me that ultimately the hamstrings must be relaxed and therefore the only sound strategy was to think of them as loose or noodly. I got angrier year after year, as I kept being thrown from one direction to the next, often being told that my approach was wrong or misguided. Years later, I realized that each of these options had equal truth to them and that the answer I was looking for was within the impossibility of the paradox itself. I started thinking about reaching down and up at the same time, while both engaging and relaxing, holding on and letting go, floating and melting, condensing and evaporating, oscillating between these seemingly contradictory ideas. From then on, my alignment, musculature, movement quality and overall mood improved noticeably. If only this concept had been explained to me earlier, or if my teachers had spoken to me in relative terms, my approach would have been much more malleable, which would have probably saved me years of mental, emotional and physical stiffness. Since then, working with paradox and impossibility has become an important aspect of my pedagogical practice, and I consciously direct my classes with a sense of relativism within specificity.

While performing ‘edged’, Deveau went through a deep experiential process while facing impossibility:

> I had to do so many things […] so many things at once. And I like to be busy, and to be challenged, but I also like to get things right, and to be 'the best' and to strive for 'perfect' especially when I perform. Louis created a situation that was both joyfully, and frustratingly impossible for me. There was actually no way that I could prepare or practice what it was that I was supposed to achieve. I could rehearse. I could keep working at the tasks. I could practice the juggling of a million ideas and embodiments and connotations and implications and ways of breathing and points of focus and pop culture references and historical facts as well as personal stories and layers and labyrinths and chakras and places in space and my place in the sounds and the sounds that I made and so on […] but I could not practice doing all of that in performance, while also not performing but just being myself doing all of those things. (2016: personal communication by e-mail)

The focus required to navigate through endless contradictions often leads to a meditative flow state, which ideally results in a return to The Porous Body's first guiding principle and creates a positive sense of circularity in experiencing each of its components: concentration, pleasure, imagination and wonder.

Continual metamorphosis

The contemporary dance world is in perpetual mutation. Considering the current state of flux and nomadic nature of the professional dance scene, how should training institutions best prepare students for their future careers?

I have not ultimately found an answer to this question as there are systemic changes that are beyond my present understanding of institutionalized dance education. However, I think formal codified training is still relevant and necessary in our current context, although to be entirely pertinent, it should be taught with a strong focus on cultivating physical and mental malleability. It is my hope that The Porous Body, a structure of feeling that I recently started developing to help dancers achieve a state of responsiveness, openness and vulnerability in different dance contexts – including traditional training classes – will help fill this gap. Of course, I need to spend more time refining this approach through continuous practice and experimentation. However, at this point, I continue to work with my four guiding principles, which are the current foundation of The Porous Body:

- Flow and the loss of self-consciousness
- Playfulness and collectivity
- Guided mental imagery and metaphor
- Paradox and unknowingness

While this system at this point is in its infancy, I have experimented with these concepts extensively throughout my dance career within my performative, choreographic and pedagogical practices, with positive results. In the short term, I plan on building a bank of exercises, games, meditations, guidelines and images which that support the practice of these principles and could

be easily incorporated into dance classes. However, here are a few rules for teachers that I have already identified through my research thus far:

- Consider the state of mind in which movement occurs to be just as crucial as the movement itself.
- Consider class environment to be just as critical as class content.
- Talk to students about the non-fixity of their minds and bodies.
- Praise students only for things they can directly control, such as effort and commitment.
- Be clear as to what needs to be achieved and how it should be done.
- Make sure that the class environment is focused and without any disturbance.
- Push students beyond their comfort zone, while giving them positive reinforcement for their accomplishments.
- Communicate a sense of satisfaction to the class.
- Build a sense of collectivity among classmates.
- Work with humour.
- Encourage students to connect with their creativity through the use of their imaginations.
- Make working with guided mental imagery, and building mental stamina for it, an essential part of the daily training.
- Foster the ability to work with paradox, unknowingness and impossibility.
- Direct classes with a sense of relativism within specificity.

The combination of flow, playfulness, imagery and paradox offers multiple bi-poles between which move the energetics of metamorphosis. The daily practice of embodied transformation paired with a clear sense of self-awareness within community are probably some of the most valuable tools that professional training programmes can offer its students today. Not only do they effectively prepare students for a freelance career, but they also teach them about themselves and their value to one another. After all, dance training is not just about dance, but about teaching people.

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Endnotes

[1] By codified conservatory-style dance training, I refer to traditional western-based concert dance methods organized under a specific movement aesthetic and philosophy, and practiced with the aim of becoming a professional dancer. These techniques include, but are not limited to classical ballet, modern (such as Graham, Limón, Horton and Cunningham) and contemporary styles that incorporate some of the components of a formal dance class, such as pliés, tendus, développés and jumps. Of course, some of the challenges that I perceive with this particular type of training may also apply to other dance forms. However, I am only speaking from my own experience, which is rooted in classical ballet, modern and Euro-American contemporary techniques.

[2] Butoh is a Japanese dance form that includes a broad range of techniques and exercises. Most butoh exercises use guided mental imagery in a variety of ways. In many cases, the body is perceived as ‘being moved’ rather than consciously moving on its own accord. The movement can be generated from an internal or external source. (Baird and Candelario 2019)