

15th NOFOD CONFERENCE PRESENTATION

The Danish National School of Performing Arts, Copenhagen 5-8 July 2022

Deep Flow: an embodied materiality of dance, technology, and bodily experience

By Dr Jeannette Ginslov

07 July 2022

SLIDE 01 INTRODUCTION

It's so great to present this paper to a real live audience that is present here in the flesh, rather than a digital one that is on Zoom. Such a good feeling!

This paper is about *Deep Flow*, an exploration of an *embodied materiality* of dance, bio-sensor technology, and bodily experience, that was the topic and outcome of my PhD studies at London South Bank University 2017-2021. This presentation is based on a paper that I wrote, and was published online on *Body Space and Technology*, Issue 1, Vol. 21 in 2022. The paper with the same title, I feel connects so strongly to this conference that I am going to borrow heavily from it.

Deep Flow, an embodied dance and artistic research practice, was born in a time of economic and climate crises, the growth of AI manipulation, the quantified self, Brexit, worldwide protests, shootings and a global pandemic, that is thankfully on the wane, we hope. Today, a year after receiving my PhD, I see now that my aversion to the choreographic in my dance and technology research and practice was pertinent and I was responding to a zeitgeist that demanded questioning notions of power; those yielding it and those being manipulated by it. Because of this I felt the need to explore the lived experience of dance in my studies, to explore it more fully, to find the gaps of embodied knowledge that may have been neglected by a desire to respond to things *outside of ourselves*, that are driven by the ocularcentric and digital world that is so manipulative and powerful.

To survive this constant barrage of manipulation and the constant desire of *looking outwardly*, being dictated by events and our reactions to it, not only in our everyday lives but also in digital dance practice, I therefore, decided to *look inwardly*, at my own lived experience whilst moving. This helped develop my own felt senses, resilience, imagination,

healing, creativity, and inspiration, that I explored and originated in my own way. This process resulted in *Deep Flow* that challenges notions of the choreographic.

In *Deep Flow* the blindfolded practitioner *looks inwardly* to explore a relational phenomenological methodology *tentacular worlding*, that entangles embodied dance, the felt senses, drawing, verbal feedback, and biometric data from a heart rate monitor. By *looking inwardly*, the dancer augments bodily sensing in the absence of visual information that challenges ocularcentric dance and technology practices so reliant on visual and aural feedback loops occurring outside the dancer's body. Ocularcentric interactions require one to *look outwardly* and this neglects the vast storehouse of felt and bodily experience that online and digital interactive technologies, used instrumentally, cannot capture nor share. To counteract these forms of practices, *Deep Flow* proposes; *a return* to bodily experience, through states of *flow*, to construct knowledge from a first-person perspective, and to expand an understanding of our bodily experiences in relation to technology, human and nonhuman materials, an *embodied materiality*.

With the absence of visual and aural feedback, the practitioner in *Deep Flow*, focuses inwardly on their embodied dance practice, their *felt-sense* and state of flow that becomes a private experience, rather than a choreographed performance for an audience to look at.

I will now describe the conceptual framework followed by the mixed methods used in this research.

SLIDE 2 Tentacular Worlding - a conceptual framework

Tentacular Worlding may be seen as a conceptual framework that is not a one-dimensional form but an ever-evolving emergent process that is itself an embodiment of lived experience, research, phenomena, technology, materialities and practices. Meaning making takes place within this relational embodied reflexivity that accommodates and makes conscious, the flowing living present and morphic bodily experiences. It is not about performance and display, but focused implicit experiencing.

Four methodologies make up *tentacular worlding*: PaR (Nelson, 2013) that enables the construction of knowledge from three ways of *knowing* through practice, *R-reflexivity* a reflexive methodology that Alvesson and Skölberg (2009) suggest reveals hidden aspects of inner experience as knowledge, *doing* a phenomenology (Kozel, 2007; 2013), and applying a *performative phenomenology* (Fraleigh, 2018).

Tentacular Worlding is, centred on relational bodily experiences as the basis for the creation of knowledge and is used to *look inwardly*. The term *tentacular* is derived from the Latin *tentaculum*, meaning 'feeler', or *tentare*, 'to try' whereas *worlding* describes a way of experiencing *being-in-the-world* or *Dasein*. Together they are used metaphorically in this research to *try out* new practices, to *world* and interlace different states of feeling, thinking and *Being*.

"Tentacular Worlding" is a multimodal methodological approach that is animated or made performative by cat's cradling (Haraway, 2016) the four methodologies described above. Cat's cradling a Navajo game of string figures

SLIDE 3 Cat's Cradling

Cat's cradling is relational and interactive, requiring physical movement to shape, reorganise and reshape patterns, that represents processes of "*thinking as well as making practices*" (ibid., p. 14) For Haraway (2016, p. 14), *cat's cradling* is a way of thinking, where one is always "giving and receiving patterns, dropping threads and failing but sometimes finding something that works (or) relaying connections that matter". It is never still.

SLIDE 4 PAR

PaR is a methodological approach that ROBIN Nelson describes is a way to research through "doing-knowing" rather than "looking from above" according to Merleau-Ponty, as used in scientific research. This "discovery through doing" makes tacit intelligence and embodied

knowledge, often beyond verbal expression and description, visible and readable. PaR is about researching and learning between three different knowledge sets:

SLIDE 5

- “Know-how” is a tacit knowledge gained by *knowing-doing* that is beyond verbal explanations, such as dance for example;
- “Know-that” is traditional academic knowledge, as well as the knowledge gained through reflective processes of a practice such as embodied dance practices that are articulated in words;
- “Know-what” is that which is gleaned through reflexivity about the processes of making and its modes of knowing, a combination of *know-how* and *know-that*.

Tentacular worlding includes a reflexive approach, *R-reflexivity* that Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) suggest is a way to include personal yet critical views and reflections of the researcher who interprets all the knowledge sets they have learned from *within* a research practice. This *reflexivity* is a re-presentation of “truth” that illuminates what is left out, personal and marginalised, and aims to “open up new avenues, paths and lines of interpretation to produce ‘better’ research ethically, politically, empirically and theoretically” (ibid., p. 313).

Tentacular worlding is a *sympoietic system* that is a cooperative, relational and non-hierarchical amorphous system, where both the human and non-human engage in processes of *becoming with* a world. To do this, *doing a phenomenology* becomes necessary.

Phenomenology according to Susan Kozel (2013) is centered on the validity of first-person lived experience and may be used for the construction of knowledge. She suggests *doing a phenomenology*, sliding across the words, method and methodology, as the method refers to *how to* do research and phenomenology is a methodology that has at its root: phenomenon, which means something that happens. She goes on to say:

SLIDE 6

It is one of the subjective, experience-based methodologies that is used to anchor practice within research, to overcome unhelpful divides between theory and practice, between the mind and the body and between my solitary experience and shared experiences.

Doing a phenomenology, is a way to conduct research as something that one experiences on a practical level. It is not prescriptive as practitioners should set up their own methodology based on the project that they are developing. One starts by *doing*, then one becomes aware of *doing* and finally one selects “a line of thought, or a line of questioning that uses a process of “describing, not of explaining or analysing”. In this sense, it is different from normal analytic thought and operates “through resonance rather than truth”. This orientates pre-reflective experience as being unrestricted by universal and abstract rationalist notions of *truth*. It enables the researcher to practice *looking inwardly* and *doing* a phenomenology, to explore phenomenal presences, going back to the body and bodily knowing, the *lived experience* of embodied consciousness, or *the mind in the body*.

SLIDE 7 – the felt sense

This includes exploring the *felt-sense* that Eugene Gendlin describes as a “bodily knowing [that] is not an immediately identifiable specific emotion or sensation, but something ‘fuzzy’ and difficult to pin down, yet also clearly ‘there’ inside you, telling you about your situation.”

SLIDE 8 Methods of artistic research practice

Deep Flow is a method of embodied dance practice that entwines two practices: phenomenological methods and artistic research practices, that includes self-reflexive methods such as drawings, paintings, verbal description, and a HRM. These methods enable the researcher to access and interpret pre-reflective experiences, whole-body experiences, the embodiment of technology, and relations between human and non-human materials. It

enables them to *look inwardly* through their own *felt-sense*, visual imagery, and verbal feedback. A HRM is also used in the practice to measure heart rate variability (HRV) in relation to lower levels of stress induced by the meditative state of *Deep Flow*. This creates an ecology of lived experience, biometric data, tangible, and intangible materials, collapsing notions of inside and outside, subject and object. In this way it proposes; a return to bodily experiencing and felt sense perception, states of flow and relational embodiment, to construct knowledge from a first-person perspective, and to expand an understanding of our experiences in relation to technology, human and nonhuman materials. Through this the dancer discovers a multiplicity of relational sense perceptions and intentionalities, originating from within the experience of being in a dancing body, immersed within a state of *embodied materiality* or *Deep Flow*.

The mixed methods approach not only explores bodily experiences, the *felt-sense*, phenomenal and embodied states of *flow* but also embodied dance practices. Mainly it is inspired by the embodied method of dance practice, the *Full Drop* created by choreographer Margret Sara Guðjónsdóttir, that requires an “intensive deep inner listening and surrendering to inner body systems and rhythms,” and fascia release, as well as other known methods such as *dwelling* by Martin Heidegger and Tim Ingold, *listening* by Jean Luc Nancy, *direct experiencing* by Eugene Gendlin, and *flow* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

SLIDE 9 Methods of Practice: Deep Flow Practice

Deep Flow is an embodied meditative practice that synchronises states of *flow*, physiological, implicit, and affective states of awareness. By *looking inwardly* directing one’s attention to the bodily senses, sensations, feelings, internal visualisations, and thoughts begin to materialise. It should be practiced in a quiet warm room, with comfortable clothing, an eye mask, and a yoga mat. The HRM is started. One begins by deep slow breathing, then a body scan focuses the mind on every part of the body. Then one thinks of *melting the bones* and one feels gravity changing. Time is slowed down by *dwelling* on bodily experiencing. One releases the fascia which relaxes the entire body and suddenly the body is experienced as a whole-body phenomenon, without tension and stress. Sometimes the arms start to float up by themselves, without any effort or control by the conscious

mind. This is recognised as being in a state of the *Deep Flow*. When this occurs, one steps onto the yoga mat to further experience and deepen states of *Deep Flow*.

You move extremely slowly, with a minimal amount of effort, feeling connected, lighter, and expansive. This equalises the spatio-temporal dimensions in your body and you are no longer aware of the sensorimotor and proprioceptive systems. Internal visualisations of colour, memories and emotions emerge in your mind's eye; your body sometimes feels like it is melting into the world around you, and you are moving in a thick viscous environment. This fosters a state of calm and flowing relations between subjectivity, the *felt-sense*, the sensorimotor system, the autonomic nervous system (ANS), the fascia, the kinaesthetic, proprioceptive, and sensorimotor systems. Attending to every shift of experiencing the body and mind are experienced as a unified whole. The slow deep breathing stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system which lowers heart rate and increases HRV. This implies that *Deep Flow* has activated the “rest and digest” response via the vagus nerve, the body's major parasympathetic nerve. This leads to an increase of HRV, making you feel relaxed, focused, calm and in a state of *flow*.

SLIDE 10 Movement Hieroglyphs

Movement hieroglyphs are drawn, using a piece of paper and pen, after *Deep Flow* as a form of *writing from the body* to visualise one's internal “body's voices” according to Nancy Stark Smith. They are created by connecting one's body to the pen and allowing “a bit of body energy to move on the page” to draw the “energy you feel in your body.” These are single line drawings or glyphs drawn spontaneously without reflection using a pen as an extension of one's body. After drawing you the “read” and reflect on how it was drawn and resonates in your body. Hieroglyphs register how the state of flow has left an imprint on your body and embodiment. Done iteratively over many times, one can build up a narrative about how your personal experience changes daily.

DOING A HIEROGLYPH!!! WITH THE AUDIENCE.

SLIDE 11 Figuring-Figures

Figuring, according to Gansterer et al., (Figure. 3) starts in the body by paying attention to the experiential shifts, intensities, sensations or feelings beneath the register of external visibility. Sensitivity to *figuring* gives rise to *figures*, that are spontaneous drawings-paintings not controlled by a drawer's cognitive abilities but through their body-mind awareness. *Figuring-figures* may be seen as symbiotic and reciprocal, like a *Möbius strip* as "*figuring* gives rise to *figures*, whilst they attempt to activate the *figures*, create the conditions for (further) *figuring*." These may later in the day, as way to connect to the memory of the experiences.

Verbal description

Verbal feedback may be directed to a documentary camera immediately after the hieroglyph, to "express something fundamental about one's *Lifeworld*" and what you have experienced through your *felt-sense*. It moves the exploration of lived experience beyond the "reflected upon and languaged dimensions of experience" according to Boden and Eatough to additionally exploring the "pre-reflective, bodily, felt experience through various means."

USE OF THE HEART RATE MONITOR is also part of the practice:

DEMONSTRATION: A POLAR H10 CHEST MONITOR, POLAR V800 WRIST MONITOR THAT IS CONNECTED TO THE ONLINE SITE POLAR FLOW where you can discern your data in relation to your states of flow.

SLIDE 12 - HRM DATA

During the practice of *Deep Flow*, the HRM is not looked at as one is blindfolded. As the HRM is embodied, that is it has become "invisible" to the experienced user, one is no longer aware that it is there, thereby avoiding visual referencing to something outside whilst *looking inwardly* during the embodied practice. This is used as a strategy to subvert *looking outwardly* replacing ocular centric behaviour with experiencing. The biometric data is read

after *Deep Flow*, is not treated scientifically and is another strand of description that feeds back into the experience of self as “the perception and interpretation of the biometric data feeds back to one’s embodied being” according to Yoni von den Eede. The experiential self is realised through this relational self-reflexive praxis and makes one aware of how the HRM has been embodied in the practice and that we have become embodied in the data. According to Don Ihde, Subjectivity is realised through embodied relations with the technology and data, a more post-phenomenological approach.

The verbal descriptions, drawings and biometric data are then analysed using phenomenological methods from the Social Sciences such as Peter Ashworth’s analysis of Lifeworld. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this more fully.

Deep Flow: relational embodiment

Deep Flow is about embodied phenomenological *morphic intentionalities*, according to Sondra Fraleigh, and may be understood as a *relational embodiment*. This is a concept of synthesis, unifying the material body, the phenomenological, the technological, the imagined, the drawn, the languaged and the practice. The HRV data, bio-mediations, HRM and the experiential are considered as being co-equal and indissociable “complementarities” set in a “perspective of relationism”, according to Willis Overton. In *Deep Flow*, these entities flow into each other through “relational thinking.” Here the body and mind exist in relation to each other and the *worlding* in which they exist. This entwinement could be seen as a Merleau-Ponty’s *chiasmus*, entangling body-self-world. This collapses Cartesian binaries defining the inner and outer to find relations between self, world, and technologies.

Deep Flow: an embodied materiality

Deep Flow is also an *embodied materiality*, a *worlding* of visible and invisible, tangible and intangible, human and non-human materials, technologies, and embodied practices. This *dance of agency* is reliant on *embodied interactions*, that entangle the human and non-human through a spectrum of sense modalities situated in the body and our lived experience of them. Through this I have defined *materiality* as being the quality of the experience of materials that are both tangible and intangible, experienced in our material,

phenomenal and embodied world that leave remarkable effects on our embodied states of being.

The experience of tangible materials arises through our physical engagements and our *embodied interactions* with them. A potter for example working with his hands, clay and wheel, may be described using Material Engagement Theory, described by Ciano Aydin as a synergistic process where bodies, agentic actions and materials merge. This is reflected in the actions of HCI designers who work with digital and analogue materials where the materials “talk back to their hands and thoughts,” shaping their designs. In arts practice materiality also encompasses studio practice. according to Christina Mills (2009).

Deep Flow reveals an admixture of materials that are visible and invisible, tangible and intangible. For example, the HRM becomes perceptually transparent when embodied into the *Body Schema*. The HRM becomes materially tangible again after *Deep Flow* and when the biometric data is printed out. However, after its interpretation, the data becomes embodied and intangible again, as the interpretation of the data feeds back into one’s embodied being and into the next session of *Deep Flow*.

Embodied materiality challenges the use of visualising and self-tracking technologies that mediate invisible events such as HRV in the body outwardly, making them visible for the user to interact with. *Deep Flow* rather, allows a practitioner to *look inwardly*, to experience *embodied materialities* of the human and non-humankind as a way to get closer to the *felt-sense* and bodily experiences.

CONCLUSION

Deep Flow focuses on experiential lived experience by removing the need for ocularcentrism by unearthing the earthy experiential side of ourselves. This could, in an ethico-political sense, reorientate a person’s visual mastery over things as being the purveyor of unequivocal *truths*. By relinquishing ocularcentric behaviour a practitioner may begin to trust their *felt-senses* and lead to a better understanding of our relations with the non-human, that de-emphasises human exceptionalism, choreographic manipulation and visual mastery over things that feeds into notions of manipulation and power. Through the practice

of Deep Flow, one may find new ways of experiencing interiority in relation to materials, technologies, and the world, embracing the human and non-human, and an *embodied materiality*, by *looking inwardly*.