pressure, stress and strain – the body in time in practice as research

self-introduction: I am a body

My name is Simon Ellis and I have a body, and this body is not just a head and shoulders.

That word *have* in "I have a body" is strange. Like a possession. As in: I have a car or I have a cat. If I were to say "I *am* a body" then, in English at least, it seems to diminish my agency or identity, as if I am *only* a body. How would that idea translate into your mother tongue?

So in English when we say "I have a body" it's hard to shake this sense of it being something external that we have possession of. The neurobiologist Antonio Damasio simply states that consciousness itself is the recognition that feelings and sensations are assumed to belong to the body each of us identifies as mine (Damasio 2021). In their 2021 book *The Dawn of Everything*, anthropologist David Graeber and archeologist David Wengrow describe the sacred quality of private property in historical European social thought, and how this sacred quality extends to ownership of our own bodies as a kind of human right.

In saying all this – in this rather strange introduction – you might have guessed that I am a dancer, and to state the obvious, this means I am interested in the body and bodies. Graeber and Wengrow describe "extremely human activities" like "gossiping, arguing, playing games, dancing or travelling for pleasure" (2021, chap. 4, n.pag). I love that dancing is up there with gossip and arguing as an extremely human activity.

I make dance performances and films and I've been doing this for about 30 years. They have all been tiny. Insignificant. Perhaps this is where human beings are most equal: in our complete cosmic insignificance. You might even say these performances I made were microscopic. Well, that's not true, all were able to be seen with the naked eye although I like the idea of making literally microscopic dances. These choreographies reveal how my interests have changed through time.

You might even say – if you were being unkind – that these choreographies were all really just about me. The health and mindfulness specialist Jon Kabat-Zinn describes how, in meditation (and in life) even the *not me story* is the *story of me*. It's fine, by the way, if you'd like to be unkind.

What follows this morning is a guided – or maybe misguided – tour of the body under pressure and in time. At its heart are the things each of us makes, and for whom – and for when – they are made.

a brief aside

There's an Artificial Intelligence theorist Eliezer Yudkowsky who is best known for creating the term "friendly artificial intelligence." In his blogging days he used to include what he called *meditations* or "puzzles" for readers to think through (Yudkowsky 2012 n.p.). I'm going to steal Yudkowsky's idea but with two different purposes in mind. The first is to recognise that time in this online space – a webinar – is experienced as a different kind of time with different kinds of pressures, affordances and limits; and to acknowledge that how I choreograph this space-time makes a difference to how you experience it. The second is to provoke specific reflections from you. Each meditation will last 1 minute, and each will give you the viewer a chance to reflect, note or drift as you prefer. I imagine some of you might even flick over to check your email – maybe something important has arrived. You. Never. Know.

Meditation 1: If a practice is something we do regularly or repeatedly then *what is your practice?* Not what you think it is, or what you want it to be, but what it actually is.

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understanding practice-research

At a certain point – just over 20 years ago – I started to integrate ideas about research into my dancing. Here's a brief and rather curious list.

- Science research
- Pizza research
- Music research
- Dance research

When we attach the word 'research' to anything it implies a desire to find out or understand something differently. If I say to a friend that I need to do some research before choosing a pizzeria tonight they'd understand that there's a decision to be made, and that without the *research* we might not get to eat the best pizza.

But what about this?

- research about science
- research about pizza
- research about music
- research about dance

The word *about* tells us the object of the research, but not how that research might happen. For example, research *about* music might be something relatively informal or trivial like a web search to find the latest release from a particular artist. But research *about* music also might use formal historical methods (within the traditions or conventions that historians use) to understand a piece of music differently. In the same way, research *about* dance might use anthropology, history, sociology, or science (etc) as methods to increase human understanding of dance.

And this?

- research through science
- research through pizza
- research through music
- research through dance

When we research *through* something a method is already implied, but the object is not. Research through science uses the scientific method to explore a phenomenon. Research through dance uses the practices of dance in order to explore ideas, phenomena, etc. In both cases, what is able to be examined, what is understood, and how understanding is presented (or made accessible) is in no small part determined by the methods used.

This is what practice-as-research is. It is when we investigate ideas through artistic practices. It is not necessarily *about* those practices (although it often is), but it is most definitely through those practices.

jump cut to talk about pressure, stress and strain … and neoliberalism

I have a friend who is an exercise physiologist. His name is Jim, Jim Cotter. Here he is. Not so long ago he and I were in a car together and I asked Jim if he was stressed. He smiled because his first thought was to think of stress the way physical scientists or engineers think about the term. It goes something like this:

Stress is "generated whenever a force is applied on a body to deform it" (Deyin no date n.pag.). Stress occurs inside a material body.

Pressure, then, is the "intensity of external forces acting at a point." Pressure is exerted on the body (Deyin no date n.pag.).

Jim also used another word: strain.

Strain is how stress is measured in the physical sciences, and is a material property of a body's change in shape. It refers to the "amount of deformation experienced by the body" (noauthor nodate). Think of how a flexible or malleable body responds to pressure – an external force – differently from a rigid body. Not better or worse, just differently.

In psychology, stress is the feeling we get when we perceive pressure from internal or external conditions as being beyond our ability to cope. In both understandings of stress, there is a point beyond which we – our bodies, or the material bodies in question – cannot cope. There is some quantity of psychological or physical deformation beyond which we – or systems, or bodies – break. We cannot continue deforming.

In the arts and humanities in the UK, when we talk about pressure, stress and strain at work, we often pair those experiences or feelings with the word neoliberalism. In some way, neoliberalism generates pressure that causes stress that – in time or at times – we feel unable to cope with. That we are being deformed by neoliberalism.

The everyday version of neoliberalism underpins unregulated hyper-individualism, ill-conceived faith in the meritocracy (Sandel 2020), loneliness, and the commodification of behaviour and thought (see for instance, Zuboff 2019). Neoliberalism drives the idea that each of us is solely responsible for continual production. The pressure to produce without careful consideration of the physical, temporal, material and psychological resources available both now and in the future is disastrous. This. Now this. Now this. *This* is a body under pressure.

Each of us – as academics, as artists, as teachers, as human beings – will have felt these demands in various volumes and ways. But the worst part is that "short-termism is built into the genetic code of the neoliberal paradigm" (Krznaric 2021: 196).

Meditation: How does *your* body feel right now? Where does it feel right now? What weighs heavily on your body that you might let go?

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zoom in: presence, body-based practices and now

being present

In dance and performance practices – both in and outside of the University – what do we choreographers and artists do? We make art and performances. I'd like to propose one thing all dance (perhaps even all performance including theatre and opera) has in common – from social dancing, to artistic dancing – is a concern for, pleasure in, and deep curiosity about something called many things, but most often *presence*. That *being present* is an essential part of dancing – perhaps even an essential part of being human – and somehow not being present is a bad thing, or something to be avoided. Being present is the opposite of blanking while performing; or being so self-conscious – or perhaps hyper-judgmental – while out social dancing that your body refuses to move, or you refuse to move it.

And if you were to quietly agree with me, at least for a moment, that being present – whatever that really is – seems important, then it is more than a little odd that most products or things we make – including performances – can be summed up by the economist Kate Raworth as "take, make, use, lose" (Raworth, in Krznaric 2021: 206). In other words, we take the Earth's materials, make them into things we want or like, use them a bit (or present them), and then they are discarded or lost.

I think you can entertain or imagine the tension or contradiction between such a mode of production, and a set of artistic practices predicated on presence. It's a strange formula:

Take. Make. Use. Lose … and be present.

now: process-oriented body-based artistic practices

The linear model of production in dance and performance is unsustainable. The feeling of running to stand still is getting stronger.

Under these conditions of production, I've become increasingly curious about process-oriented body-based practices. By these I mean things like somatics that distinguish the body as observed from the outside versus the soma as perceived from the inside. These are practices known by names like Feldenkrais, Alexander technique and Skinner Releasing Technique.

The distinction I've just stated between inner and outer worlds, between what can be seen and what can only be felt, is an important one. It is perhaps even *radical* given our oculocentric TikToking world, and that body-based practices

like somatics seem to resist so many of the tropes of the body under pressure: pressure to take, pressure to make, pressure to use, pressure to lose. The pressures of production.

Another somatic practice commonly used in dance is the oddly named Authentic Movement. Authentic Movement was developed as a therapy, but it is also used by dance and movement artists as a way to tune the body's senses, and less commonly as choreographic process and performance (e.g. McLeod 2016). There are two roles; the first is the mover who has their eyes closed. This person moves in direct response to what they are experiencing, remembering, feeling, sensing or imagining. Their task or activity is to be awake to the "full universe of sensations associated with the body being itself" (AB 2021 n.pag), and to cultivate awareness without judgement. The other person keeps the mover physically safe, and simply observes them without judgement. They change roles. Two people, one observing their inner world and moving, the other observing the other person in the outer world.

What is profound about Authentic Movement is the simple-in-theory attempt to practice internal and external observation without judgement. How often in our lives – other than when we were very small children – do we get to move, play and be without judgment? For adults it's difficult to imagine what lies outside of judgement.

It might already seem quite clear to you that Authentic Movement is really a contemplative practice like mindfulness; a set of processes in which we practice "the timeless present we call now" (Kabat-Zinn in AB 2021 n.pag.); where we breathe and move out of clock time and into non-judgemental awareness.

But so what?

I want to propose that such practices remind us that there is an opportunity – regardless of our roles as artists, or teachers or researchers – to seek methods of doing what we do that distill production from consumption. That rather than making something simply to be seen (or consumed in some other way), we interrogate our responsibilities as practitioners and seek to de-instrumentalize processes of making in order to understand more slowly and deeply their purpose; to consider deeply that to understand their purpose (including the possibility that they have no purpose) is one's only task. That as soon as we cease "holding the whole body in awareness" (AB 2021) we jolt into the unwieldy self-consciousness of instrumental production: I do this in order to get this sometime in the near future. These are our bodies that gravitate towards wondering what something might bring us. The consequences of this gravitational pull towards I, me and my are devastating. They are devastating

not only because of the profound internal and external stressors created by short-term production, but because they lead us to turn our backs on promises to the future in which we "expand our understanding of responsibility to include how our actions effect people we will never meet" (Jacobs 2018 n.p.).

a brief excursion into another type of now

I want to briefly note that there is another type of now that is different in kind from what I've just been describing as presence based on non-judgemental awareness. It is summed up by the cultural anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson as follows:

> "the great irony of our time is that even as we are living longer, we are thinking shorter." This is the age of the tyranny of the now (Bateson, in Krznaric 2021: 4–5).

The *sine qua non* contemporary mode of such tyranny is doom-scrolling. The philosopher of technology Albert Borgmann – building on the thinking and writing of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton – describes technologically induced distraction as a "permanent, if attractively glamorous, fog" (Borgmann 2012: 8).

Distraction under these everyday conditions is time unfelt as it is smothered or erased by streams of algorithmically delivered images. It is a feeling of being *lost in now* closely related to neoliberally induced hyper-productive busyness, and is the precise opposite of the timeless quality of now experienced by re-membering the body in non-judgemental awareness. I see this as a kind of paradox of time, or perhaps paradox of now. One version of *now* voids the past, present and future. The other harnesses the present to expand our understanding, experience and imagination of the past and the future.

And it is to the future that I now turn.

zoom out: artistic practices for the future

being out of touch

What became clear, even in the earliest days of the pandemic, was that touching others – making physical contact with others – was under direct and immediate pressure to change. We went from people who touch each other all of the time (in different circumstances, conventions and situations) to a species that avoided touch. We became out of touch. Touch was dangerous. Touch was contagious.

To be *out of touch* in English means of course to be disconnected or out of date, as if we have no remaining touch left. During the pandemic, I reflected on the possibility that all of this work – and in particular all of *my* work – was out of touch.

This had nothing at all to do with the pandemic and everything to do with fire.

In *On Time and Water* Andri Magnason reminds us of the 1700s in Scotland when James Watt gifted humankind the steam engine.

Magnason describes it like this:

> Watt allowed us to tame fire; gradually we learned to hide the flames better, isolating the heat, smoke and soot until fire has become invisible under the glossy hoods of air-conditioned cars that go cruising around the world with their upholstered seats and pumping music (Magnason 2021: 191).

This is how we humans are really out of touch: the mechanisms by which we burn resources are powerfully hidden from view. These invisible fires have fueled, and continue to fuel, what is now commonly – but not officially in the geologic time scale – referred to as the anthropocene.

I seem to have created a terrible mess here.

How to knit together these various things I've placed on this shared desktop? I am trying to make sense of the scale of this fleeting, fragile, hungry human body in a way that each of us might find useful. This is not some abstract, hypothetical game with no consequences. Pressure. Stress. Strain. Time. If I start to take into account the time beyond one's own lifetime, individualism, now-ness, personal ambition, and most pressing of all the climate emergency, I start to wonder, what might a body-based practice be in the long now? In deep time?

the game of people you have loved and who will love you

There's a simple game to play. The game is to measure the span of time of people you have loved and who will love you (Magnason 2021: 308).

My grandmother, Gladys Hopkins, was born in 1913. Here she is singing. Gladys gave birth to my mother, Gabrielle Eastwood, in 1937. Here she is in 1960. I was born in 1968, and here I am in about 1971. My niece Rebecca was born in 1980; and Rebecca's daughter – my great niece – Zoe Ellis-Craig was born in 2016. If we imagine that Zoe lives until she is 90 then this would mean she would die in 2106.

From 1913 to 2106 is 193 years of people I have loved and who have loved me. 193 years. This small, insignificant, delicate body extended through time, and "beyond the ego boundary of [my] own mortality" (Krznaric 2021: 14–15). This body's hopes, dreams, traumas, desires, and limitations; its 206 discrete bones, 650 or so muscles, and 100 billion neurons. This a body that counts. These are the bodies that count.

to be a good ancestor

In this next part I'm going to draw heavily on the writing of Roman Krznaric, who describes himself as a "public philosopher." In particular, I'm using some of the ideas he presents in his book *The Good Ancestor* (2021), and I want to acknowledge just how inspiring that writing has been for me.

Krznaric writes about Jonas Salk. Salk was an American virologist most famous for one thing: the development of the polio vaccine in the 1950s. Salk refused to patent the vaccine so it would be a gift to humanity, and he also said that the most important question we must ask ourselves is this:

"Are we being good ancestors?"

I love this question. It is haunting, and for me it operates on two profound levels. The first is that it engenders a strong sense of what Krznaric describes as "deep-time humility" (Krznaric 2021: 39) in which our radical insignificance as organisms is underlined. The second is about responsibility towards the bodies and lives of the future. These temporally remote bodies are the bodies under real pressure. They are out of sight and out of mind, and their futures are being colonized by our rapacious present. We are, according to the Paleontologist Tim Flannery, "the future eaters" (in Krznaric 2021: 141).

None of this is surprising particularly given just how seductive is the logic of instrumentalization. The writer Oliver Burkeman describes the global economy as a "giant machine for instrumentalizing everything it encounters – the earth's resources, your time and abilities (or "human resources") – in the service of future profit" (Burkeman 2021 n.pag.).

The blooming of practice-research as part of the professionalisation of the arts in Western academies over the last 30 years means that artistic research is profoundly caught in this web of instrumentalisation. Practice-research predicated on short-term instrumentalization creates bodies in the service of hidden fires; the body as yet another resource to be consumed; the body as a technology. To be this. To be that. To be more of this. Less of that. More published. More awarded. More promoted. These are bodies under stress that

exhaust resources and colonise the future. These are bodies living in the short-term me-future.

It's a future that sounds like I, I, I. Me, me, me. My, my, my.

And under such conditions of stress, strain, and pressure, if we collapse into the various and shiny short-term futures that are always pulling us, cajoling us, haunting us, then I think we fail to understand and indeed experience the body as it is, and the body as a means to be a good ancestor. The body de-instrumentalised is radically in the present of awareness, and is not judged or massaged for other short-term future means. This is a body filled with the humility and dignity of its insignificance, while profoundly aware of bodies yet to be.

The question then that each of us must ask and understand deeply – and then ask again, and understand differently – is, what is the fundamental purpose of one's practice?

And if your practice is body-based then the question becomes more specific: What is the fundamental purpose of this body in this practice?

Perhaps only then might we continue to understand and be in bodies that are less pointed at. That are not abstractions or tools for something else, including bodies to be admired, fetishised, mocked, and measured. These are not bodies as tourist destinations or instagrammable bodies to be swiped or scrolled. These are radically analogue bodies deep in non-judgmental awareness that are meeting and sensitive to deep time or the long now. These are bodies as stewards for those organisms yet to exist.

two descriptions

I'd like to describe two art project ideas – one imagined, the other started – that attempt to consider the body beyond its lifetime, and harness humility and responsibility, while not being built on hidden fires. Both are inspired by art works like Katie Paterson's *Future Library* (2014) or Danny Hillis's *Clock of the Long Now* (1999), or Walter de Maria's *The Lightning Field* (1977). They are descriptions of practices or activities that are defined by not being able to be completed. They stretch into time beyond those we love and who love us.

There is a haiku by the Japanese poet and Buddhist priest Kobayashi Issa (1763-1828). I include it here because some 300 years later it places side by side a simple physical practice that happens to acknowledge the hidden fires that sustain our unsustainable way of life.

In this world
we walk on the roof of hell
gathering blossoms.

description 1: custodians (imagined)

Perhaps you know of the Shinto shrine in Japan called Ise Jingū in which the inner and outer shrines have been torn down and rebuilt to the same design every 20 years for more than 1300 years. It is described as a "building forever new and forever ancient" (Krznaric 2021: 96).

Perhaps you've also thought about how cities are more than just fixed things that last for centuries; and that "in human terms they are never stable" (Graeber and Wengrow 2021, chap. 8, n.pag.) with people constantly arriving and leaving. According to Graeber and Wengrow a city is a place that is thought of – or imagined to be – a city because we humans "think and act as people who belong to the city – as Londoners or [...] Calcuttans" or Melbournians (Graeber and Wengrow 2021, chap. 8, n.pag.).

These two things – one an ancient re-building in Japan, the other a way of understanding the city as an imagined structure – generated a simple idea for me. What kind of score could be created that mirrored these things? What kind of framework to be replaced or rebuilt every, say, 10 years? That through its cyclical destruction and reconstruction it might gather resilience and motility – the capacity to absorb pressure, be ready for unseen and unknown stressors, and to be flexible. What if this *infrastructure* were predicated on a literal and metaphorical body unable to be owned, a public body. What if one dance were to be performed at the same time in a specified place each year? That one body, one person, were responsible for organising this dance every year, for 10 years. To be a custodian of that dance for 10 years. What if, at that point, another custodian took over and rebuilt the same infrastructure and acted as a steward for another 10 years? And so on. One dance for the long now, with or without an audience. The smallest of footprints. How would this body be named?

description 2: this body (started)

This is the simplest of ideas that attempts to express how each of us is a humble steward for our bodies. Whenever I meet or see someone, I've been asking them a simple question. *What is your body to you?* I then ask them to respond by starting with the words "This body".

Meditation: What is your body to you? ("This body ...")

I would love for you to email yours to me in whichever language you choose. This would be a treasured gift and it would honour the work that I'm slowly starting to realise is my life. It's strange how a life sneaks up on you. Being young is most definitely poor practice for becoming old.

I like to imagine having a physical location to collect all these instances of *this body*. Perhaps like the sociologist Niklas Luhmann's zettelkasten. Each instance of *This body* would be a removable card: something to be held, to be touched, reflected on. Something that would not require any hidden fires to sustain it, but just a little bit of space in someone's home. People could visit it, photograph it, steal from it, add to it. Perhaps such a simple thing might be a way to become a good ancestor while paying attention to the smallness and profound humility of the human body.

Here's Zoe Ellis-Craig to dance for you.

And here is a sample of what I have collected so far.

This body is aging. This body makes things possible. This body is constantly reinventing itself. This body is beautifully asymmetrical just like all the other bodies. This body knows how to walk, run and dance. This body is not like the others. This body feels. This body is wounded. This body is bruised. This body sees and is seen. This body is a chameleon. This body has buried the bodies of others. This body adapts. This body has been exploited. This body cannot be known. This body will die. This body has a birthmark. This body is no longer the same. This body is "the supreme instrument of sanity and self-regard". This body is at a loss. This body is enveloped by skin. This body houses these feelings. This body is consciousness and self-knowing. This body cannot escape technology. This body is unknown and cannot be known. This body is bleeding. This body has bled. This body is technological. This body is broken. This body is a time-traveler. This body is overwhelmed by detail. This body is the place through which experiences flood. This body is where I need to go. This body belongs to this mind. This body trusts you. This body has a 4.5 billion year old memory. This body is in pain. This body has no boundary. This body has betrayed me. This body is worthy of trust. This body is mine. This body is always reinventing itself. This body is not far from death and I am not afraid. This body humbles me over and over again. This body takes pleasure. This body plays. This body is untouchable.

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