

SIMON ELLIS

Seeping into the Land

The rain is pelting down. I am standing with my arms outwards, head tilted up towards the skies, blinded by the water as it plummets through this body and into the body of sand beneath my feet. Saturated. And cold to the bone in a British summer.

In the rain on the sand, a simple practice begins. It is a practice that dissolves in and through the body; a soluble body being known. It is also a counter-practice, a corporeal balm that resists the machinations of the default digital logic. In this practice we live as creatures not machines.

The artist is Helen Poyner. She is a movement artist and a conjurer. She is the real deal. She says 'I feel most fully myself when alone in the environment'; embedded in the world rather than standing against it.

We dancers are given scores to follow that involve being on site in different environments for an uncertain amount of time. There is the Iron Age hill fort called Blackbury Camp, or the tidal area under the cliffs down from Beer Beach where the cormorants nest along those same cliffs. Helen's instructions include things like 'stay at animal height' or 'sprawl with part of your body contacting a rock and another part the pebbles' or 'change position, shifting your weight and points of contact, land in the new position, then change again'. The scores are a guide, and their simplicity belies the transformative complexity of being on and in and with these sites while weathering the weather.

With scores as scaffolding we enter what initially seems like private zones within public sites. The practice makes enormous sense at the scale of the human animal. This ever changing body starts to slow down as time yields to deep presence. There is nothing to do, nothing to know, nothing to want. I become a type of non-activity, and gradually there is no longer any sense of being outside of this activity or this location. As my senses are filled with the site, my desires, my hopes, my needs fall away. I feel deeply of the land. Whoever that 'I' is.

This is what the practice feels like.

I have practiced dancing for nearly 40 years. This body-of-mine is steeped

in somatic actions, feelings and languages as a means to filter and understand the sensorium.

A somatic practice is any body based practice that foregrounds the body as it is felt from the inside. This is the body as soma. Nearly all dance practices do this, but some more than others. Classical ballet, for instance, has a well-known obsession for how the body is seen from the outside. The presence of mirrors in ballet studios is a dead giveaway. But for those of us immersed in sensing the body as it feels from the inside, it's easy to forget just how radical such a proposition is.

Somatic training foregrounds and sensitises the corporeal beyond the way we humans usually think of our bodies only when something is wrong with it or it needs something, or when we are having sex. The body as soma can be rendered as feeling language. The feeling of dryness. The feeling of cold. The feeling of stillness. The feeling of wet. The feeling of weight. The feeling of earth. But the language of feeling can itself be distilled further. In the practice, and as a matter of direct experience, there is really only pressure, tension, temperature and movement. And these are all always transitory or in motion. This is what all that training makes possible. It makes possible awareness-ing of the fleeting nature of pressure, tension, temperature and movement. These are pure experiences – sensations of the body dancing with perceptions of the world – that need not be named to be understood. It is not 'my hand' that feels cold. A hand is merely an English word that proxies as an abstract shorthand for a part of the body. Without such a construction or naming, without such an object as described by a subject, the direct experience is simply cold-as-awareness.

The land also experiences transitory pressure, tension, temperature and movement. I-as-body am seeping into the land.

The English philosopher Rupert Spira describes how human experience is formulated as I and other (e.g. 'I don't like them') or me and the world (e.g. 'I cut down the tree'). He describes a subject experiencing, judging and manipulating objects that, crucially, conditions the way the world appears. Such a subject-object rendering of the world includes the body as a special kind of object. When we say, 'My hand is cold', or even 'I have a body', who is the 'I' that possesses such a body or feels its hand to be cold, and where is that 'I' located?

In the time of reckoning with this work, it is as if my sense of subjecthood – of being an 'I' outside or separate to the environment – starts to resolve itself as being merely imagined. The feeling in those direct and extended experiences of being with dirt and rock and ocean and tree is of

widening time and consciousness underpinned by profound humility. There is awe here in the diminishing scale and imagined palpability of the self; a discombobulating beauty in the way that Iris Murdoch called beauty 'an occasion for unselfing'. The site-as-object softens and as a matter of direct experience the 'I' becomes site. Such an experience is akin to the difference between me dancing the site, and the site being danced.

It is self seeping into land.

There is nothing for this practice to be reduced to. I can discern no clear constituent parts. It has merely been gently set in motion and in the end for me any sense of agency, of power over, of the desire and ability to exploit, slips away. The I-as-subject is fatally diminished, and even the capacity to distinguish is reduced to nothing. There is no distinction left to be made between the weather, the site, and this skin-covered collection of bones. Nor between I and them, me and the world. Without such small and grand distinctions, heaven and earth are inseparable.

When we become sensation, or surrender to it, we disappear. This is a different kind of selflessness. It is a return to the absence of self that sharpens experience. It is the estranged and other twin to self-consciousness. There is no longer a self standing against the world. The deep porosity and solubility of the body render that same body as an amorphous collection of tangible and unmediated experiences. If there is no self standing against the planet, then the self seeps into the cosmos and what remains is a body without boundaries.