

EDN Atelier: Moving Ground

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Recovering from what could be metaphorically illustrated as total dryness in most cultural activities, dance communities in post-covid times still struggle with the damage caused by the extreme precarisation of our working conditions and the lack of the existent institutional framework to offer viable solutions away from the market rationale. A lot of critical examining took place during the pandemic, regarding the sustainability of the dance industry —an industry that in many ways demands a reconfiguration of practices and production modes that won't further drain the dance micro-cosmos of all its creative forces. The two-day EDN Atelier 'Moving Ground' that took place in **Duncan Dance Research Centre** suggested a reframing of the above preoccupations through the prism, or maybe, through the materiality of the very ground of dance-scape. The two days evolved around the wider context of permaculture, its core principles and applied methods, from which, if not solutions, a lot of valid arguments sprouted, diverse and unique as the complexity of the dance-scape under observation. With respect to the latter, we thought a co-authored account of the Atelier would best delineate the field under speculation and maybe also better position ourselves as working subjects within it.

A walk through the activities of Moving Ground

The notion of the garden was at the center of the two-days atelier, both literally and symbolically. Months ahead of the symposium, the disused water depository in the backyard of Duncan Dance Research Center was transformed into a communal garden, respecting on the one hand the existing natural ecosystem and on the other hand, inviting the neighbourhood to be part of creating and caring for this garden. The Moving Ground co-curatorial team invited and supported the cultivation of multiple artistic gardens, by inviting dance artists and educators to join them through communal recreational workshops and dance works that were running long before the two-day atelier. The aim was to create a diverse community of people, tuned to the urgencies of the present moment, through the concept of the communal garden but also the notion of topos as a meeting site and a space of cohabitation. Thus, Moving Ground was a culmination of wider research that involved several educational and communal workshops, as well as dance works linking the garden with practices of care, sustainability, patience, responsibility, co-habitation and the commons.

The first day started with a peripatetic stroll around the neighbourhood to guide us back to the DDRC for a lecture by permaculture designer & educator **Elena Gogou** on the philosophy of permaculture, as an introduction to the specifics of this practice and its uses. We were then introduced to the curatorial team through a playful questions game, where each member



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introduced someone else. Midday, we were free to join one of the multiple artistic workshops with the handy title **Garden of artistic practices** in several locations within and outside the venue, rounding up with an open discussion that generated questions as to the labour of dance, the notion of care -its uses and misuses- and the ways in which practices of permaculture are interwoven with the dance landscape. The day ended with the film screening of *Becoming Animal* at the yard of DDRC exploring how the multiple relations between humans and nature.

The first day was an introduction to the philosophy and practices of Moving Ground and an invitation to dive into it from the viewpoint of the dance-scape, exploring the hard and soft skills of dance, the working conditions and the possibilities for alternatives, but mostly in researching and translating the ethics and philosophy of permaculture into our multiple dance communities, creating an ecosystem that incorporated the neighbourhood as well.

The second day started with hands-on gardening in the backyard of DDRC, where participants of Moving Ground had the chance to be part of creating this communal garden, followed by two lectures: one by Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Theory of Art **Fay Zika** who discussed the notion of the garden and its multiplicity as a local and global site, as 'the smallest part of the world and still a Whole'; and one by the director, arts researcher and curator **Gigi Argyropoulou** on the ecology of the performing arts. The **Garden of artistic practices** was once again employed hosting different artists on the second day, ranging from presenting educational workshops with children and the elderly from the neighbourhood to experimenting on stage with speech, movement, and audience participation through improvisation techniques. The day was rounded through a workshop *The Body as Garden* linking the core axes of the Moving Ground, followed by a dance party and socializing in the yard.

The two-day atelier was full of different perspectives on what a garden is -literally and symbolically-, how it might root and bloom, and what is its importance not only ontologically but in our everyday life and activities, if we are to accept the politics of our time are no longer anthropocentric. What follows is our critical reflection on joining this garden.

A garden of our own; leaving the room, trusting in an unknown territory

One of the starting activities was an organised peripatetic stroll around Duncan Center. The trail was marked with yellow stripes on the road guiding us to signs hanging from trees, where we all gathered and stopped, catching our breath. While walking, we had the chance to meet and talk with colleagues in person after a very long time, somehow balancing two worlds: our own micro-cosmos with its need for socializing and the macro-cosmos of the event, walking among people going to work or going about their daily activities.



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This walking experience had a profound effect in making me present in time and space, observing my surroundings, but also noticing my own body and its resistance to keep on going due to the heat. I think that the most interesting part of the walk was strangers wandering what we were doing, joining us in reading the signs hanging from the trees, and cars stopping to look at what we were looking at, creating concentric circles around the site. For me, this stroll operated as an invitation to mind our surroundings and our own bodies before entering the discussion on the principles and ethics of permaculture and their relation to the dance-scape. At the same time, it enabled this process as part of a working relationship with others rather than that of a stroller who mindlessly walks around the city.

Erratic care; radical, inconsistent patterns of care and modes of survival:

When do we realise the landscape has changed?

At one point in the second day, the focus turned to survival strategies in the performing arts making parallelisms between strategies of nature and the cultural landscape, emphasizing notions of survival and disappearance, outlining the field of performance art as one that is constantly composed and de-composed through diverse agents and processes, in visible and invisible ways.

A great point, actually, noted by Gigi Argyropoulou who also brought up in her presentation the Derridean concepts of survivance and inheritance. What I understood from the argument Gigi was making, is that every presence is haunted by an absence, we inherit an absence in our way of being and dealing with the world. However, these concepts in relation to the cultural landscape also signify the inability to fully possess and control the transformative activity that takes place within it. As Gigi was saying, we walk through the landscape but the landscape is changing as we walk, so we are already in the practices that institute a form of survivance. Institutions are the structures that support us but also the structures we go against; we sustain them as we change them. Our 'self-instituting' does not necessarily derive from our agency, implying that we already plan our responses to the existent structures, but as something that takes place while we adjust to the shifts of the environment/landscape. This is not just to simply deny 'agency' but to underline the very constitution of time, the nuances of change, repetition, difference.

Romanticizing VS incorporating

Perhaps at times, there was an over-romantization of nature and its capacity to find solutions, regenerate and foster co-existence and diversity, without also including the so-called force of nature, its 'violence'.

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I will stay with what choreographer **Mariela Nestora** mentioned in one of the meditative scores that were given to us randomly during the first day of our visit to the garden: "dance, get rid of what you no longer need, maybe someone else needs this dance". This triggered me to think of dance as residue, as something that might be useful to someone else. If dance is considered an ephemeral art, could it be then the art form that produces the least impact on earth? Could we think of art as waste? In nature, waste is considered the factual evidence of culture; to think of a waste-less art, would imply an art without traces. This radical approach would also demand accepting the truth of the environmental impact of art; to paraphrase the above, it would actually demand art not to communicate just some ecological ideas, but to take physical responsibility, on a material level, of the impact it has on earth. To make things more complex, this would actually mean to negate human dominion and the semiotic power of art. Whereas we think of art as something that applies meaning to a semiotically empty site, nature doesn't come into being through this type of semiotic designation. This stream of thought is also related to one of the primary concerns of the Arts and Crafts movement; to connect the art world to everyday life. It actually meant to de-romanticize art and to reconnect work with creativity, so that 'beautiful surroundings' was to be considered a precondition for 'beautiful creations.' Hence, in a deleteriously changing world, there can be no art that could make amends for the damage. I think a lot of what we discussed within the frame of permaculture turns to this re-examination of work and creativity, of what are the end products of both. It somehow recalls the old debate of the 'usefulness' of art, if art is a matter of aesthetic contemplation and how we think of this experience in a world that is aesthetically brutalized by humans. The scale of things is important, to make something meaningful for the community, the landscape that surrounds us before we even attempt to say something bigger. This type of 'modesty' is the counter-example of greenwashing, where the ecologic is just another empty referent for corporate logic. Ecological reforms, even within the micro-cosmos of art, cannot happen without an ethical and materialist reconsideration of work, wealth, productivity. I think this also brings to mind the connection Fay Zika attempted in her presentation "The smallest part of the world and still a Whole', that the micro is already saying something about the ordering of the world.

This notion of waste resurfaced several times since one of the core principles in permaculture philosophy is the notion of sustainability and zero waste. What would be regenerative or sustainable in the dance field and our practices, given the precarious working conditions, and the agora-driven dance-scape? This was one of the questions posed at the end of the first day provoking different reactions as to what regenerative means, highlighting the need to create meaningful encounters and long-lasting relations which are not always project or product orientated. This project mentality that dominates the performing arts field creates a certain temporality wherein the present time is always projected to an enclosed future replicating what already exists in the here and now, thus minimising any possible alternatives. On the contrary, one of the co-curators of the event, **Vittoria Kotsalou**, suggested that within the dance field we need to rethink the body as knowledge in the present moment, which could lead



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to the moving body as a practice of resensitizing that actually moves and re-shapes things; and -if I may add- moving away from this future frenzy that seems to dominate the field, jumping from one production, research, dramaturgy to the next, and so on. As Mariela Nestora argued, producing choreographies feels sometimes like producing waste if these dance works are not part of longer and more sustainable research. Overall, the ethics and philosophy of permaculture generated thoughts, questions and proposals in relation to the operating modes of the dance field, emphasizing the need for developing communities which are not defined by market rules and practices. As Fay Zika noted in her lecture a garden might be the smallest parcel of the world but it can still be the totality of the world.

Words that matter

It seems that it is becoming increasingly difficult to talk about dance and its working modes, without employing words and thus notions that are at the same time necessary and always-already-assimilated by a neoliberal culture. Think of care, sustainability, zero-waste, network, collaboration, and enjoyment, and how they have contrasting connotations that can be very restrictive in our modes of thinking and practising as if every possible alternative is already a non-alternative. How can we then reclaim and embed these notions in our practices as resisting or regenerative forces? If the garden is a micro-cosmos and such was also our dance-meeting, what then are the seeds we grow, the plants we cultivate that mirror what permaculture describes as “As above, so below”. Where are we rooted in this seemingly inescapable landscape and dance-scape, and what kind of relations do we create?

I have two observations here; first, what we call matter is already meaningful. Matter is always materialized, that is, it has a history and it is always narrativized in different contexts. This brings to mind how Butler discusses the concept of matter as a process of materialization. So, according to what she proposed, words also stabilize over time to produce the effect of fixity and boundary, namely the very surface upon which matter appears.

We don't just think of words, but how we materialize their meanings. Hence, institutional care is very different from promiscuous care, a corporate zero-waste slogan is applied differently in communal practices when sharing and upcycling come from care and sustainability. Secondly, we need to think of institutional materiality, which is how these concepts are negotiated and materialized in institutional policing. Mrs Elena Gogou, in her presentation “Understanding nature through its choreography” cited Viktor Schaubergger to introduce this model of natural equilibrium, “As above, so below”. However, to think of choreography in other terms is to understand it, also, as an apparatus of capture (Andre Lepecki), namely, choreography requires what we mentioned before as boundary and fixity. Choreography materialises in the bodies of the dancers. Choreography, thus, requires labour. Labour cannot be conceptualized in nature, because nature works for itself. It doesn't produce value, unless we consider value how humans profit from it. I think the irony here is that ‘nature’ becomes a metaphor for the

commodification of labour, process becomes the absolute tool for operations management. I see here a generational gap; how nature is narrativized and conceived so that it contributes to further exploitation of human creativity and labour. To quote Fanon, “what matters is to stop talking about output, intensification and the rhythm of work.” I’d be tempted to say, words don’t matter, what we do with words does matter.

Troubling the earth; disordering the order of things

We think a lot of the above arguments have the value of an aporia; how to escape capitalism? Whether talking about sustainability/regeneration, about self-instituting and survivance, or nurturing and caring, I realize that a lot of the above schemes are articulated as an alternative to necrocapitalism, which like a giant bulldozer seems to flatten the earth. However, unlike any institutional critique which is engulfed by mainstream art institutions to expand their agenda further and diversify their profile, the DDRC remains a curious case if not a rare example of an entity working on the edge of what might be called the ‘market logic’. This is not, again, a statement to create a fake dichotomy; I think what was made obvious in this two-day atelier is that we remain stuck with the problem of living despite ecological and economic ruination. If any solutions are viable, those will be found in collaborative survival. Very often, the outcome of these collaborative encounters depends on the scale of things. The DDRC has been an entity in harmony with the community, its initiatives consistent with understanding the relations and desires among its members. In a way, DDRC has been the fertile ground upon which different humans bring their stories to meet the challenges of the encounter; as the challenges become more complex these encounters seem more and more vital if we want to adapt to our rapidly changing world.