

# European Dancehouse Network

## The Body of Skill and Opportunity: Equity Through Embodied Practices

EDN Atelier report by Alexandra Baybutt

Dansateliers Rotterdam & ICK Dans Amsterdam  
17 - 19 May 2023



**dans  
ateliers**

**ICK** dans  
amsterdam



European  
Dancehouse  
Network



Co-funded by  
the European Union

There is lots to be discussed while diving into the notion of equity. But how does it take shape in practice?

During the three-day Atelier we explored different attempts at approaching equity as an integral part of dance practices. Dance artists Connor Schumacher, Jija Sohn and Aleksandra Lemm, and Christian Guerematchi each curated a day and were given the opportunity to invite other artists. The Atelier focused on sharing embodied practices and tools for working from a (more) equitable ground; such as in the way we organise ourselves professionally and in artistic choice making.

### **17 May 2023 / Dansateliers Rotterdam**

This day was co-curated by NL-based US artist **Connor Schumacher** who placed emphasis on equity as a practice, and aimed to use the word as little as possible during the day. 'Equity' as a transactional, often legal term does little to explain its contours or processes. Instead Connor proposed a new definition through an equation:

$$\text{equity} = \text{healing} \times \text{access} + \text{invitation}$$

He offers some statements, for example, 'I know what I'm doing. I don't know what I am doing', situating himself, 'I feel afraid because I don't have answers about equity in dance but I'm not worried because we are going to dance'.

Dance, he argues, is a shared ground for building up and breaking down cultures.

On a table in the common room space in Dansateliers, based in an old school building, Connor assembled books from science and lived experience 'by cis het white men and radical queer femmes':

- The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics (eds Rebekah J. Kowal, Gerald Siegmund and Randy Martin)
- Metaphors We Live By (George Lakoff and Mark Johnson)
- Philosophy in the flesh (George Lakoff and Mark Johnson)
- Changing the conversation: the 17 principles of conflict resolution (Dana Casperson)
- all about love: new visions (bell hooks)
- Holding Space (Aminata Cairo)

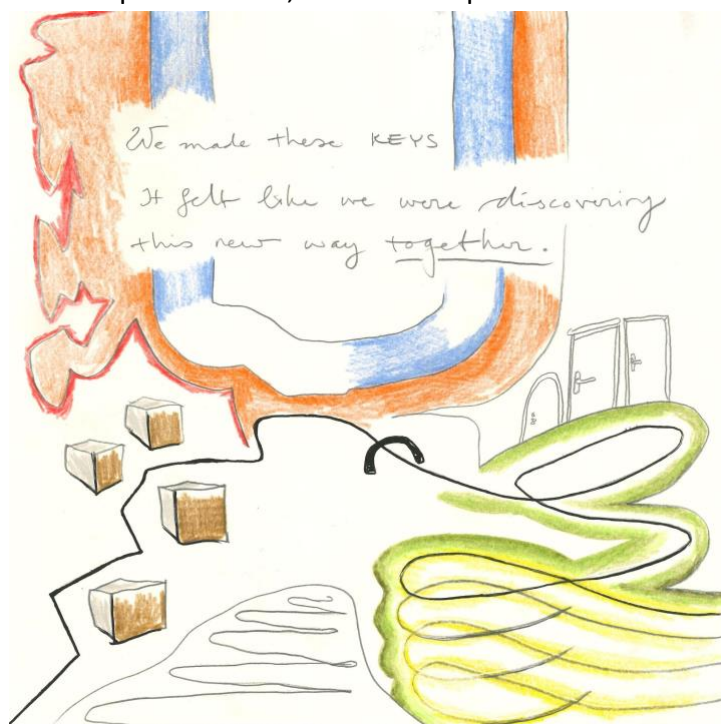
Holding each up, he tells us stories about how these texts were meaningful to him, that he hadn't necessarily read all of them cover to cover, and reads extracts aloud. He highlights points about body-mind as already-always integrated, how reason is consciousness is embodied and shaped by the environment, and that emotion is engaged within this.

Metaphor is introduced as a potent source from which to create new realities. From hooks, the point that the will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one's own and another's spirit is shared to foreground a sense of shared intent in making art.

→ Aminata Cairo offers perspectives on positionality as a frame for relations, as there is no such thing as a level playing field.

Connor reads extracts and suffuses them with new inference by changing the noun, for example reading one section as if it was 'dance' speaking aloud. Connor observes how dance is steeped in its own politics, and reads an extract from Cynthia Oliver's 'Epiphanic Moments: Dancing Politics' chapter in the Oxford handbook that exposes the ways in which dance artists must behave to self-promote and secure opportunities using a list structure where each instruction starts with 'you better'. Discussion follows about the familiarity and accuracy of this list, and includes some considerations around specific positions affording greater access to or welcome in dance institutions and contexts, for example, Connor observing that his non-(hetero)normative identity operates as an advantage, as well as whiteness.

Connor asks 'how do we make more of dance's progressive parts and break down the parts we don't want any more?' To this end, he mentions the most memorable statement that arose in the previous Atelier in Paris concerning institutional gate-keeping and access: **make more keys**. Simply put, yet multiple in meaning as the 'key' is both metaphorical as well as material. Such a statement forces the question: what keys do I have? What keys do I need? If I can open the door, do I hold it open for others?



©Tosca Mitkowska

We travel upstairs to a space with a tree growing into it. As we enter the studio, the [Empowering Dance](#) terms are on stuck on three of the four walls, and Connor mentions that the array of terms are not to be interpreted as a one size fits all guide. Later over lunch we use them to discuss our experiences so far, which becomes an opportunity to unpick the concept of 'soft skills' itself, and see how the ones identified relate to what we already know and do. The methodology of the project is discussed, making it extend itself as a discursive tool amongst people who are meeting for the first time over soup and concepts.

The *Physical Therapy Rave Session* involved a warm-up facilitated through Connor's overview that everything moves, everything changes, everything opens and everything closes. Internal awareness and external awareness are sensitised, and interaction invited through travelling, hand shaking, high fiving, other kinds of touch, leaping onto smaller wooden podiums that had been dismantled from a larger one in the centre of the space. We are encouraged to move and not look down, and to seek connection with others. The music is loud, a bit too loud sometimes, and there is a range of degrees of ease in the room with the dancing proposed. Framing the dance session as a rave space, Connor shared his process of extracting experiences from the rave dance floor which becomes practical philosophy, such as how we share responsibilities, and proposes that 'the things we practise physically become our skills mentally'.

Joining Connor for the afternoon *Dialogical Practice* was NL-based US performance, installation, and movement artist and educator **Joy Mariama Smith**. Joy's welcome introduction acknowledges multiple possible needs, stating for example if you need to move to get comfortable, or leave, please do so. The group are explicitly invited to ask 'what do you mean?' if we want to. Later speaking in one's own language was invited instead of the usual default to English. First Joy led a somatic sensory visualisation and mobilisation task of 'seaweed' to support everyone arriving in the space (and in our own nervous systems) again. Joy names their friend from whom they took this practice, and declared 'it's open source, feel free to take it, too', continuing an important citation practice Connor began earlier.



©Tosca Mitkowska

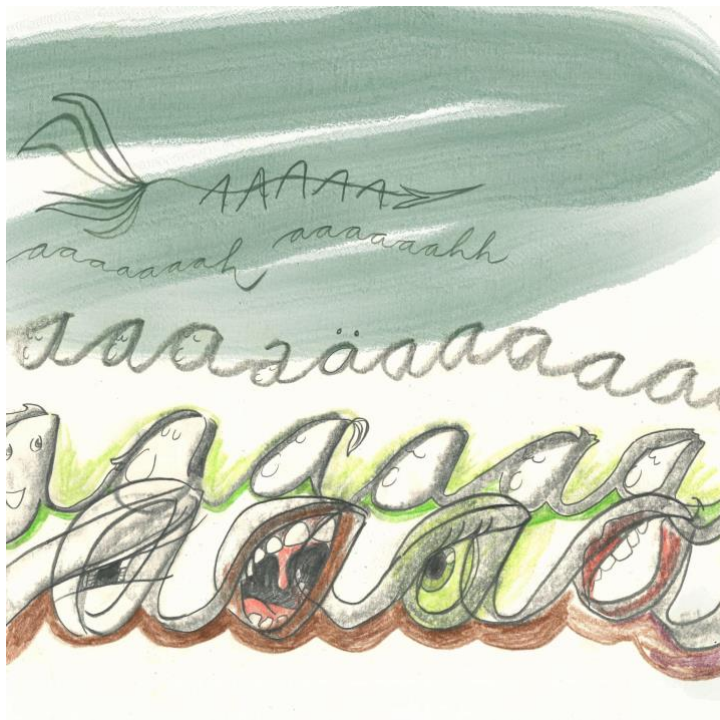
Joy is wearing a large bright neon yellow t-shirt that says 'kinfolk not skinfolk' on it, Connor is wearing a large bright neon orange t-shirt that says 'stop acting white' on it. We listen/watch a 20-minute conversation held through movement and talking, with dance music tracks and a recording of a previous conversation between the two friends also played intermittently. Witnessing this unprepared conversation and experiment, with the possibility of maybe even taking care of the interlocutors at the same time, was to see the messiness of working through ideas in real time, rather than performing fully formed answers. It was a bit awkward and this was the point: not only for the content but the modes it blurred. Audiences implicated as observers, companions, accomplices, space-holders was continued into the next phase of the afternoon, a *Social Choreographic Dialogue*, in which participation was through responding to questions by orienting oneself in the room relative to one of the three walls, this time labelled with signs that read 'social', 'personal', 'political', whilst listening to the conversation continue and shift. A group discussion followed this, sharing key words of impressions from the day.

### 18 May 2023 / Dansateliers Rotterdam

Japanese/Korean artist **Jija Sohn** and Polish therapist and artist **Alexandra Lemm** co-facilitated the second day at Dansateliers. First, we watched Jija's film [Landing on Feathers](#) and heard a bit more about the work and process. This helped to land also into the qualities of care and expansion of time exemplified in the rest of the day. Arriving in the space with bags of cushions, mats and blankets was a reminder of their usual hard properties that assume bodies that do not think they need or want something softer or more supportive.

Questioning what support is needed at multiple levels of what that might mean, from blankets to walking devices to a sense of respect from partner institutions to meet one's work on its terms, Jija and Alexandra led us in affirmative practices where differences can be present, but not made to matter in superficial ways. Like Connor Schumacher, the body as the first affordance in the world in relationship to itself and others and a space, is visited at length and depth through emphasizing and relishing somatic awareness.

Simple instructions for *embodied relating* created conditions for experiencing fundamental principles: being in gravity, being held by the ground, the movement of breath, yawning, mobilizing joints. A phrase Alexandra occasionally used was '**losing the social face**', a reminder not only of the muscular holding around the eyes, teeth or jaw, but of the masking of other things in order to pass or be seen as something particular, particular to cultures, spaces, places, histories and dense networks of expectation. Small details of release become larger expressions through an ensemble ground-tapping, sounding vowels, finding a voice of moaning, shrieking and sighing. We moved from the circle to interweaving and travelling, sometimes in pairs, moaning together to share in and acknowledge all the unspoken heaviness. The next task involved humming a tune in the gentle absent-minded way found maybe 'whilst cooking or on a road trip', where the melody makes itself. We were to hum next to a partner whose task it was to listen, join, harmonize, support in whatever way they could without taking over or being joined. Embodying the support of presence was the aim of the practice. Then followed more partner work exploring qualities of touch, balancing out the dominance of spoken language through prioritising the body's languages.



©Tosca Mitkowska



Subsequent discussion touched upon the value given, or not given, to process and process-based artistic work, and how Jija and Alexandra have sought to develop different relationships with institutional partners that invite a more intimate knowing of their practice, rather than the perhaps more typical approach of partners appreciating an artistic work at a distance.

→ The implications for this require cultural workers to question existing ways of knowing and evaluating, and a willingness from inside an institution or organisation to self-reflect upon how and where relationships with artists are carried out. If these relationships with artists and organisational frameworks demonstrate a new flexibility and multiplicity, so too the kinds of relationships between artists and people who are implicated in artistic works who did not experience a particular dance or performance training that encultures specific shared values. Revising expectations of one another becomes necessary.

Other elements of the conversation concerned the need for an adaptive and responsive approach when working on a project where one's role is multiple, as in the case of *Landing on Feathers* whereby Jija was both artist with and care-worker for the performer in the film, Elmer. Jija and Alexandra emphasise deconstructing expectations of a space (a studio, a living room) through opening conversations with or through them.



©Tosca Mitkowska

The afternoon practices involved more experiences of bodily co-presence work with touch and holding limbs, leading from awareness of micro-adjustments to larger leading/following

possibilities and playfulness. Discussion included questions around when vulnerability might be a choice as well as a condition of existence that is more or less intensified for individuals at different times and in unequal ways. To close the day, we worked in pairs to deeply listen to one another. Jija shared how this was a process she and Alexandra used for Alexandra to better understand what was coming to the foreground in Jija's thoughts about her work or future projects, and for Jija to allow some space for these thoughts and words to arise. Revisiting some of the vocal work that was present throughout the workshops, the group ended by sounding the noise a ship makes when coming into port, a large 'vooh' sound to mark the destination of the end with the gradual but definite heavy glide of a vessel we are all in and making at the same time.

### **19 May 2023 / ICK Dans Amsterdam**

Slovenian dance maker **Christian Guerematchi** co-curated the third day in Amsterdam, taking place in the relatively new space of ICK Dans.

Iranian dance maker **Roshanak Morrowatian** was due to have a première of *House of Strength* not long after this workshop, and shared some of the physical practices entailed in that research. As the title implies, Roshanak's interest is in strength in all its facets, not only muscular, and draws upon Iranian 13<sup>th</sup> century battle preparation. Carried out only by men, she questions which parts of Iranian histories to bring forward, develop or discard. The practices emphasised preparing the body through heightening joint mobility, bouncing and keeping the energy up, blood flow, breath awareness, and connection to each other, then moving from whatever had accumulated in sense-awareness and concentration built over some time into shorter and longer improvisation processes led from body, not planning or thinking through a decision. For example, in small groups, all involved in a process of looping individual movement was a foundation from which if an accent was given from one to all, it was to be followed immediately in a process of sharing attention between oneself and those in close proximity to be as responsive as possible but not simply in a state of 'waiting'. A longer period of vocalisation practices including humming and increasing volume to decrease again that further sensitised bodily-listening and sharing.

Chris Guerematchi gave a presentation that began with a definition of equity from [Professor Alford A. Young](#) and studies into Africanamerican identities and schemes of interpretation through analysis of social realities.

→ 'Equity: the access to or distribution of resources according to need'.

Starting from this definition, Chris highlighted how it is sometimes presented as an aspirational or inspirational term, and went on to compare the concept with equality. Drawing from Erving Goffman's sociology of everyday life that explores how humans create



and sustain frames of knowing through cognitive filters, he outlines his own social reality and its connections to inequity. Chris, born in Slovenia when it was the Social Federal Republic of Slovenia as part of SFR Yugoslavia, understands himself also from the backdrop of the **Non-Aligned Movement**. Tito's Yugoslavia played a leading role in this bloc, a 'third way' between the Warsaw Pact countries and NATO in a 1950s post-WW2 context. NAM considered the IMF-branded 'third world' countries in a new way that acknowledged those seeking autonomy or recently independent in the shifting borders of the globe through which colonization re-routed identities whilst extracting and re-routing wealth into global hierarchies worthy of question and contestation. Whilst NAM as a political entity is over, it nevertheless remains a useful proposition. Later in his talk, Chris poses the question as to what non-aligned methods might look like in dance worlds and production contexts. The early NAM principles state: mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in domestic affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence.

Chris' work starts from the black body in relation to western cultural and social structures. As a queer man of colour from multiple experiences of having 'identity' and identities projected onto him, Chris outlined his needs: of being understood and equally placed among other bodies; representation; having a voice; having ownership over the narratives of his body. He found the Netherlands to be a supportive context in which to develop as a dance artist.

→ Though on stage with his body placed under lights, he explains how a Eurocentric gaze is heightened in that frame that also frames how to look at bodies. Unless questioned, such stages racialize bodies. As such, a movement into his artistic practice is a reclaiming and shifting of the narrative.

Chris shares theories of **Afropessimism**, a term most associated with Frank B. Wilderson III who argues from the context of North America, that the emergence of the nation(ality) is the violent grammar that originates in slavery. He writes, "No other place-names depend on such violence. No other nouns owe their integrity to this semiotics of death". This connection to the problems of the nation-state reflects Chris' own witnessing to the transformations from the violent end of a Socialist regime to new nation-state formation through the implementation of a market capitalist so-called liberal democracy (in which claiming Slovene national identity was made at the expense of other plural identities). Chris mentions Afropessimism in relation to the project *Hissy Fit* with Richard Kofi, and with regards to a wider conceptualisation of the theatre that he sees as a (relatively) safe space to address cultures of violence and anti-blackness, and where identity can be talked about.

→ He argues that allyship is needed with programmers in cultural institutions to counter the racialisation of bodies, and the need for theatre to respond if it

addresses a future direction, one characterised through the fight against climate disaster. Chris lists the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, creating and sustaining discourse, and working with people of colour, sharing experiences, approaching contemporary social topics, reaching out towards whatever periphery is understood to be away from a hegemonic centre.

Chris acknowledges that as a black European, 'my idea of blackness is not *the* idea of blackness', and stresses the ongoing need to engage with intersections and questions of multiplicities and diaspora. Later Richard adds to this question of what does blackness mean with an observation that 'whiteness is a constructed identity that all Modern people want to fit into'. Chris brings the topic of Afrofuturism into the presentation. It's a perspective predicated on empowerment, as well as an aesthetic philosophy of science and technology in which any human can be the centre of the future, mentioning examples of different philosophies of Frantz Fanon and Sun-Ra. What is now, and what now might be tomorrow are generative questions from which to act and reflect. Concluding this part of the presentation, he questions where do you stand in this modern, colonised space? Are you bridging between positions? Are we taking hands and moving forward together?

Chris shared the film [CRNI TITO: Blaq Tito addressing the Parliament of Ghosts](#) (2023)

Following this, there is a lecture and interactive panel by artist/curator **Richard Kofi** with Christian Guerematchi, sharing more perspectives on **Afrofuturism** through the prism of various projects across film, performance and installation in several different contexts including former UK colony, Ghana and former NL colony, Indonesia.

→ Richard observes that he and Chris often find themselves in positions where they are asked if they have solutions to the problems of the world, and proceeds to a complex argument, connected to Afropessimism and Wilderson's writing. Racism, amongst other violence such as misogyny and ableism, are required for the 'mental health of the capitalist system', or said another way, expressions of inequality and inequity serve a capitalist economic system through maintaining ongoing hierarchies, myths that justify the violence, and the extraction from peoples and resources racialized and labelled as 'other'. If this situation in which the violence of oppression and the violence of what it maintains is not treated as an issue of health, such tendencies will linger, fester, and strengthen. The implication is to be aware of the myths and consider ways to disrupt the system, which for Richard often mean working in interdisciplinary ways.

Wilderson III, Frank B. (2009). "[Grammar and Ghosts: The Performative Limits of African Freedom](#)". *Theatre Survey*. 50: 119–125. [doi:10.1017/S004055740900009X](#)

I also was reminded of these authors:

Balibar, E. (2009). Europe as Borderland. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 27(2), 190–215. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d13008>

Hobsbawm, E. and Ranger, T. eds. (1983) *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press.

We then saw a film of [Hissy Fit \(2021\)](#) and some questions were posed, including one about Richard's working methods with a group of young people in Indonesia. Richard's answer reflects how there is no one size fits all creative method. However, certain inspirations and points of reference can help inform the sensibility from which a process might emerge in correspondence with whom one works, and mentions the seminal text [Borderlands](#) by Gloria Anzaldúa that confronts topics related to linguistic and social belonging, multiplicities and the limits of white academic feminism.

Richard declared 'Let's fill up the last part of this talk with shout outs' to other artists' projects, which demonstrates in practice what an equitable way to close their lecture looks like.

The next session, *Intuitive movement practice* was led by Christian Guerematchi. In pairs, one blindfolded, the other sighted, we embarked on long-form processes of guiding, following, sensitisation, observation and trust. Starting already from an explicitly unequal place, the practice of taking care of one another and building trust over time through a myriad of encounters could take place. How individuals handle themselves, allows the handling of others and experiences their senses is very much an individual journey, but the context set up the possibility of stepping softly and clearly towards what the trust in and of a community might be, whilst nevertheless facing how intent does not always inform outcome or impact, and that there are differences between how much people want to be led or left alone.

The final movement session led by researcher/dancer **Suzan Tunca** was *Breathing & Rebounding* (from the Double Skin | Double Mind movement practice, the foundation of Emio Greco and Pieter C. Scholten's work, who were not present). It involved, amongst other elements, elongating breathing with level change and again, connecting to oneself in order to connect with others.

The 'body' of skill and opportunity is not a singular body. The body as first affordance means that opportunity is already unevenly distributed as a possibility. Skill can only flourish or be apparent through conducive conditions that are going to always be different for each individual. Inclusivity might well be impossible, but nevertheless aiming to open opportunity through different approaches to skill and bodies has been made apparent through sharing artists' practice via this Atelier series interrogating equity in dance.

#### About the author

Alexandra Baybutt (PhD, RSME, CMA) works in dance professionally since 2004, and engages freelance in postdoctoral research, somatic movement education, and artistic practice in the UK and Europe. In 2023, EDN commissioned Alexandra to map and highlight equitable practices in contemporary dance in Europe:

<https://www.ednetwork.eu/news/equityreport2023>

**EDN Atelier report**  
**by Alexandra Baybutt**

EDN Atelier hosted by Dansateliers & ICK  
Dans 17 - 19 May 2023

This report is part of the EDNext Focus on Equity

**published by**

Associació European Dancehouse  
Network  
Carrer Lleida, 59  
08004 Barcelona  
Spain  
[info@ednetwork.eu](mailto:info@ednetwork.eu)  
[www.ednetwork.eu](http://www.ednetwork.eu)

**dissemination contact**

Gaja Lužnik, EDN  
[gaja@ednetwork.eu](mailto:gaja@ednetwork.eu)

This publication is distributed free of charge. You are free to reuse and share this publication or parts of it as long as you mention the original source.

This publication should be mentioned as follows: A. Baybutt, “The Body of Skill and Opportunity: Equity Through Embodied Practices”, EDN Barcelona, May 2023.



**Co-funded by  
the European Union**

Co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or EACEA. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.