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# Cultural Value

## A Somatic Ethnography of Grand Gestures Elders Dance Group

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Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

# **A Somatic Ethnography of Grand Gestures Elders Dance Group**

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**Centre for Research in Media and Cultural Studies  
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## Executive Summary

This research addresses itself to the specific cultural experience of the Grand Gestures Elders Dance Group based in Gateshead in North East England. It has three aims: firstly, to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of what constitutes cultural value by attending to the place of somatic sensation as an integral component of the cultural experience of Grand Gestures; secondly, to identify ways of articulating somatic sensory experience - ways that will be both subtle and useful for the purposes of evaluation; and thirdly, to examine the usefulness of a 'somatic ethnographic' approach for the consideration of cultural value. Grand Gestures can be located in relation to its political, cultural and artistic contexts; lottery funding; the 'elder arts' movement and the bodies of artistic work that converge in dance improvisation practices. The cultural value of Grand Gestures is understood from multiple perspectives including the funders, its parent organization Equal Arts, the dancers and the artist. Somatic sensation is a key element of Grand Gestures and there is a research focus on three related aspects of the practice: the cultivation of heightened somatic awareness; connectedness; and 'being in the moment'. These feed directly into the individual and social values that are enshrined in the aims of the lottery funded *Creativity Matters* project that encompasses Grand Gestures. The question of how to articulate the experience of somatic sensation for the purposes of evaluation is approached through the ethnographic investigation of how the members of Grand Gestures 'speak' of their somatic experience through writing, painting, drawing, pottery, photography and film. Somatic ethnography brings some challenges but it also offers access to dimensions of cultural experience that can be missed by other methods of evaluation.

## Researchers and Project Partners

Dr Trish Winter, Principal Investigator  
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**Key words:** Dance, ageing, embodiment, improvisation, happening, somatic ethnography

# A Somatic Ethnography of Grand Gestures Elders Dance Group

## Introduction

This research addresses itself to the specific cultural experience of the Grand Gestures Elders Dance Group based in Gateshead in North East England. It set out with three aims: firstly, to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of what constitutes cultural value by attending to the place of somatic sensation as an integral component of the cultural experience of Grand Gestures; secondly, to identify ways of articulating somatic sensory experience - ways that will be both subtle and useful for the purposes of evaluation; and thirdly, to examine the usefulness of a 'somatic ethnographic' approach for the consideration of cultural value. The research asks three central questions:

1. What is the place of the 'somatic senses' [Paterson, 2009: 768]) in the cultural value of Grand Gestures?
2. How can somatic sensory experience be articulated in a way that will be of use for its evaluation?
3. What are the uses and limitations of a somatic ethnographic approach to a consideration of the value to individuals and society of such activities?

These questions have been approached through a 'somatic ethnography' (see Appendix 1) conducted over a five month period from 31 December to 31 May 2014 and drawing also on a previous twelve months of informal involvement with the group. This report will: firstly, introduce the work of Grand Gestures and place it in context; secondly, examine the place of somatic sensation in the work of Grand Gestures and consider how it relates to cultural value; and thirdly, address the question of how to articulate the experience of somatic sensation for the purposes of evaluation. The Appendix will outline and reflect on the methodology of somatic ethnography.

## **Section 1: Grand Gestures**

### ***The Story of Grand Gestures***

Grand Gestures was started in January 2012 as part of a five year project, *Creativity Matters*, by the UK charity Equal Arts. Equal Arts have been delivering arts and older people's projects for 25 years, and their mission is 'to improve the quality of people's lives by helping older people participate in high quality arts activity' (*Equal Arts*, 2014). The *Creativity Matters* project was initiated by Equal Arts Director Alice Thwaite. In describing its origins she highlights two things. Firstly, the seeds of an idea for an elders dance group had been sown in conversations with the dance artist Paula Turner after she had seen elders dance work facilitated by Paula for Equal Arts some years before. More directly, the *Creativity Matters* project grew out of her 2010 Winston Churchill Fellowship visit to the USA, where she had met with the Washington-based dance company *Quicksilver*, a group of accomplished elder improvising dancers who regularly dance in residential care homes (See Thwaite, 2010). Identifying this as best practice, on her return she set out to replicate the *Quicksilver* model, and made a successful bid to the Big Lottery *Reaching Communities* fund for the *Creativity Matters* project. *Creativity Matters* comprises two groups of older people, the dance group Grand Gestures and a music group, each with a professional dance or music artist as facilitator. The groups meet weekly to develop their own dance or music practice, and are also invited to volunteer in residential care homes, where they work with people with dementia and care staff.

In the two and a half years since it began, Grand Gestures has grown, largely by word of mouth, into a stable core group of about 14 mature dancers, aged between 60 and 90. The group has developed a strong sense of a collective artistic identity that has begun to extend beyond the volunteering remit of the *Creativity Matters* project. For example, it has branched out into a series of improvised events in public spaces that it calls 'Happenings', and has made some short films (See Appendix 2). This additional creative work has taken place outside of, and in addition to, the funded *Creativity Matters* activity.

### ***The Context for Grand Gestures***

Within this story of its origins are hints of the many threads from which Grand Gestures is woven: the work of Equal Arts, a key and longstanding example of a wider body of charitable and arts organisations promoting arts for older people; the priorities of *Reaching*

*Communities* Lottery funding; the methods of the Washington-based dance company *Quicksilver*; and the approach of a particular dance artist, Paula Turner. This section will briefly delineate the predominant political cultural and artistic contexts for Grand Gestures as the network of ideas that converge on it and the frames within which its cultural value is articulated and circumscribed.

The emergence of the National Lottery as a vehicle for funding the arts has to be considered in its political and cultural contexts including: the spread of neo-liberal political ideologies; particular cultural policy contexts; and the expansion of public spending on the arts and culture linked to instrumental approaches with an investment in delineating the individual and social ‘impacts’ of the arts. (see Bishop, 2012; Matarasso, 2009, for discussions of this context). This is also the context within which the rise of arts evaluation has taken place, and the attendant notion of ‘cultural value’ (Matarasso, *Ibid.*).

*Reaching Communities* lottery funding is for ‘funding projects that help people and communities most in need’ (*Big Lottery Fund*, 2014). The website explains that:

Every project we fund must respond to need. Need is the term we use to describe a problem or issue, or situation where something needs to change to make things better for a person, group of people or environment.

This funding is explicitly linked, then, to instrumental outcomes; the idea that arts funding will be changing things, making things better for those perceived to be in need.

Another frame within which Grand Gestures operates is a growing ‘elders dance’ movement, part of a burgeoning ‘elder arts’ or ‘creative ageing’ movement. For example, a number of festivals have sprung up in America, Australia, and Europe, dedicated to older people’s dance. Elders dance is a diverse and amorphous field that takes many forms, from companies of older professional dancers, such as the London-based *From Here to Maturity*, to participatory dance projects working with older people in a range of settings. Despite its diversity it is a recognisable movement, and the Grand Gestures dancers are beginning to view themselves as part of it, particularly through exchange visits. They have hosted two visits from representatives of Elders dance groups in Australia, and have had exchange with several groups and individuals in Australia and the USA, including their ‘parent’ company *Quicksilver*, through visits made by Paula as part of her Churchill Fellowship research in



2014. Posts from *Quicksilver* and MADE (Australia) on the *Creativity Matters* blog (2014) illustrate these links.

The Elders dance movement is a phenomenon that responds to the demographic shifts that are producing aging populations in this country and others. One strand within it is concerned, explicitly or implicitly, with the politics of ageing, and particularly the politics of representation. For example, professional companies like *From Here to Maturity* resist the marginalisation of older dance performers with the field of professional dance, asserting the need to explode some unhelpful stereotypes about older people who can, as they demonstrate, be magnificent highly skilled dance performers. Another strand within the movement responds to anxieties about the economic, health or social consequences of a growing number of dependent ageing people in suggesting that through dance older people can maintain their health, lead more fulfilling lives, and resist social isolation. Both of these strands can be discerned in the work of Grand Gestures.

The work of Grand Gestures must also be located in its artistic context.

‘It’s not easy to describe the class’ (Cynthia Richardson, interview)

Many members of Grand Gestures have spoken, like Cynthia, about how difficult it is to describe to other people exactly what it is that Grand Gestures do. When the group had been going for about a year and wanted to look for new members, some of the dancers got together to make a poster. This sparked discussion about the problem of describing the class to potential new members. They decided on the description ‘dance improvisation’. The Grand Gestures approach to elders dance is, in this respect, quite unusual in that it engages with a particular set of improvisational dance and movement techniques and approaches that are not culturally mainstream.

The catalyst for the Grand Gestures approach is the dance artist who leads the group. A dance, theatre and visual artist who has worked in community and participatory settings for 22 years, Paula Turner brings an approach that draws on and brings together a specific set of practices from dance, theatre, participatory arts and beyond. She has a particular interest and expertise in working with older people, and was awarded a Winston Churchill Fellowship in 2013 in the Elder Arts category (see Turner, 2013). Through the leadership of Paula Turner, Grand Gestures can be located in relation to the ethos that underpins the community dance movement. She draws on ideas about the relationship between dance and

community, referencing her interest in the idea of dance as a means of building community, and in 'the democracy of dancing' (Turner, 2013: 1). Grand Gestures can also be located within the genre of improvisational dance that burgeoned, primarily in the USA, in the 1960s, and continues to be practiced. In fact, many of the key figures in this movement were born between the 1920s and the 1950s, and are still practicing now (See De Spain (2014) for interviews with some of these artists). This is the dance world with which *Quicksilver*, Grand Gestures' 'parent' group is associated. Some specific influences identified by Paula as impacting on her practice include: the 'Action Theater' of US artist Ruth Zaporah whose trainings 'integrate movement, vocalisation and speech into present expression.' (*Action Theater*, 2014); British dance artist Julyen Hamilton, who views improvisation as a performance form, a mode of 'instant choreography'; and the US artist Anna Halprin, who views dance as a 'healing art'. (*Anna Halprin*, 2014). Paula Turner has trained with both Hamilton and Zaporah. Underlying many of these approaches to improvisation is a set of approaches to movement training that is often termed 'somatics', or 'somatic practices'. Exponents of these approaches include Mary Fulkerson (*Mary O'Donnell Fulkerson: Releasedance*, 2014). These approaches highlight the idea of mind-body integration, often using terms such as 'bodymind' or 'the thinking body'. Paula identifies herself as adopting a 'somatic' approach, integrating it also with her experience as a yoga teacher.

### **Grand Gestures and cultural value**

Grand Gestures, as a Big Lottery funded project, operates within the parameters of Equal Arts' remit and that of the *Reaching Communities* funding that supports the project. The aims of the *Creativity Matters* project are to:

- Provide active older people living in the community with opportunities to develop their own creative interests and skills and to contribute to their communities.
- Develop the capacities of care staff to offer a more person-centred approach to the care of older people living in residential care.
- Combat isolation and improve the quality of life of older people with dementia, living in residential care homes.
- Contribute to the evidence base regarding the benefits of creative activity for older people's wellbeing.

(Irving, A, 2013)

The project thus aims to produce a range of outcomes at individual and social levels. These range from the personal and social development of the individual dance participants: developing 'their own creative interests and skills', and their 'wellbeing', as well as the opportunity 'to contribute to their communities'. There are also aims that address broader social improvements, and are to be achieved largely through the volunteering aspect of the project, which aims to improve both the culture of residential care and the lives of individuals living with dementia. From the point of view of Equal Arts, the personal and creative development of the dancers and the volunteering aspects of the Grand Gestures remit are both important and, crucially, linked. The group is conceived of by Equal Arts as 'an elders dance company that develop in their own right but have this element of going and working with people with dementia... changing the culture in care homes as well' (Alice Thwaite, interview).

There are multiple stakeholders associated with Grand Gestures. Firstly, there are the three groups of people targeted by the project: Grand Gestures members, termed 'volunteers' in project documentation (Irving, 2013: pg); care staff in residential care homes; and the residents of care homes. Then there is: Equal Arts, a charitable organisation with its own strategic objectives; the funders, the Big Lottery; and the dance artist Paula Turner, who is engaged to lead Grand Gestures. Each of these organisations and individuals have their own priorities, needs and perceptions when it comes to the value of Grand Gestures, so it is important to specify from whose perspective 'value' is being considered here. These multiple perspectives can produce some tensions around the role of Grand Gestures, a point to which we will return.

Just as there are multiple perspectives on the 'value' of Grand Gestures, so 'evaluation' takes place at different levels and in different ways within and around it. As a lottery funded project, *Creativity Matters* is formally evaluated in relation to its stated aims, by an independent evaluator. The project artist is, at a different level, engaged in ongoing processes of evaluation as part of her artistic practice. Not only does she provide Equal Arts with a short written evaluation of each session, but she reflects continually on her practice and on her experience of the sessions, and this is an integral part of her ongoing creative thinking around Grand Gestures. The dancers are invited to contribute to the formal project evaluations, and they also engage in reflective activities, sometimes as part of the structured sessions, sometimes outside of them, as when they are invited by the artist to keep reflective journals. Evaluation is an integral part of their artistic practice.

This research has sought primarily to enquire into the value of Grand Gestures dance group from the perspective of its participants, the dancers, and has included consideration of the full range of Grand Gestures' activities. This includes their experiences of volunteering in care homes. The research has not, however, sought to engage with the perspectives of the residents or staff in care homes. These stakeholders have not been directly included in the ethnographic research, although this might be a fruitful avenue for further research (see Appendix 1 for methodological discussions). The research has also not been confined to those parts of Grand Gestures' activity that are directly funded by Equal Arts/the Big Lottery but has also included ancillary activities such as informal social trips and 'off piste' creative activities.

## **Section 2: What is the place of somatic sensation in the cultural value of Grand Gestures?**

This section will examine the somatic sensory dimensions of Grand Gestures' practice and consider how they relate to cultural value. It will focus on three related aspects of the practice: the cultivation of heightened somatic awareness; connectedness; and 'being in the moment'.

### **1. The cultivation of heightened somatic awareness.**

'Close your eyes and watch your breath', says Paula, and there's a little giggle in the room. We obediently close our eyes, and I watch my breath enter in a cold rush, prickling the edges of my nostrils. It triggers a kind of release in my throat, before being sucked into lungs which I imagine as monstrous tree branches, waving and pulsing in the dark cavity of my chest. This watching takes in a universe of sensation - the temperature and movement of air into my body, the muscular stirrings, tensions and releases involved in both breathing and sitting still, the temperature of the room registering both on my skin and from inside my body as the occasional shiver.'

This extract from my fieldwork diary paints a picture of just one moment where the Grand Gestures training process calls on the dancers to pay attention to somatic sensation. Even though the exercise involves sitting still, the 'watching' of the breath is an invitation to witness the fact that even in stillness we are always moving. It invites the dancer to pay attention to that movement sensation, particularly the movements associated with breathing. The Grand Gestures sessions very often begin with exercises that home in on the world of sensation, inviting the dancers to experience and focus on their somatic sensation. This frames the work of the training session, and is a signal (though not the only signal) that we are entering a circumscribed space/time, that of the Grand Gestures Friday session, and that somatic sensation is a key part of that world. When Cynthia Richardson says in interview that It's 'quite hard to switch off external thoughts... I do it but it's a conscious effort to focus in instead of out.' she implicitly acknowledges that this is a way of *working* on the body/self; it's the *conscious* cultivation of a particular way of being and it requires an effort to move beyond one's habitual ways.

Throughout the movement and improvisation activities of the sessions there are regular and often detailed reminders to pay attention to the sensed experience of the moving body. These are often tied to the development of an enhanced awareness of the body's structure, particularly the skeletal structure. For example, when sitting the dancers are invited to take time to sense the ischial tuberosities ('sitting bones') in their contact with the chair, and to feel how the structure of the body balances on them when sitting. More lengthy exploratory exercises focus awareness on anatomical structures such as the spine and its many articulations that the dancers are invited to explore through improvised movement.

Focusing on sensation in this way is often, as noted above, framed as a kind of 'tuning in', the adoption of an internal focus. Although there is sometimes an invitation to close the eyes or soften the focus in order to facilitate this, it does not mean that sensation is being understood as separate from, or privileged over, the visual sense. In 'watching' the breath above, for example, my visual imagination is engaged together with my kinaesthetic awareness. The focus on sensation is presented more as a re-integration of somatic sensation with the other senses, particularly vision.<sup>1</sup> This is linked, too, with the idea of mind-body integration that underpins the practice. Through such exercises the dancers are invited to develop a heightened and continual awareness of themselves as embodied, sensing subjects.

Asked about somatic awareness, the dancers sometimes express it as 'getting in touch with your body', and becoming more aware of parts of it. As one dancer put it during a session: 'you feel in touch with your body; bits that you just take for granted'. Joan McLeod speaks of being reminded to be aware of her legs: 'When you're improvising, she [Paula] will say "how are you feeling? and 'what do your legs feel like?" and I thought "well, I never thought of my poor legs!"'. It can be expressed as being reunited with the body. As Walter Matthews puts it, 'you become friends with your own body'.

Norma Charlton recognises that this state of awareness is one that triggers creativity and spontaneity: 'I suppose it taps into, triggers, creative responses. So I don't have to *think*. A lot of what I do is thinking. I don't have to think and prepare, it's something which is spontaneous...' (interview)

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<sup>1</sup> A further example of this can be found in the teaching of dance artist Julyen Hamilton. One exercise led by Hamilton (in 1994) involves one person dancing, another person watching, and a third person placing their hands on the back of the 'watcher', the purpose being, through touch, to 'ground' their watching in sensation, so that they experience vision as an embodied sense.

Lillian Read uses creatively imagined imagery when using an exercise to get herself going in the morning, 'this shaking of your fingers and your whole body that Paula suggested once':

I have an image of all these cells in my body, you know, intermingling. But first thing in the morning they're just solid and they're stuck to each other and I've got to get them tingling, and get them moving'. (interview)

This imagined image sparks another idea as she goes on, referring to her interest in pottery: 'Now I'll have to make a figure! With all these bubbly bits inside!' Many members of Grand Gestures have wider creative interests that link to and spring from their experience of dancing; examples of their painting, drawing, writing and pottery will be discussed in Section Three.

A state of intensified somatic sensory awareness might be understood as a mode of reflection on the self, and as producing such reflections: 'When I'm floating around dancing sometimes I'm aware of the fact that I'm not looking at other people, I'm sort of inside myself' says Lillian Read. It can be linked to the idea of 'presence', a reflective and potentially empowering sense of inhabiting the here and now: For Margaret Jones, 'It gives you a "yes, I'm here!" kind of thing'. It can also lead to ponderings on identity. The reflectiveness that is implied and required by this process lends itself to the use of a journal, and many of the dancers have kept journals where they reflect, write, draw, collect photographs and memorabilia related to their dance activity.

The state of improvising with somatic awareness can sometimes take the form of experiences described as 'losing oneself': 'I sort of forget who I am', says Claudine Zardi. The expression of 'loss of the self' is usually made positively – it is emphasised that this is a pleasurable state, often linked with being able to elude the constraints of everyday life and identity: 'It takes me right out of the problems of everyday life and I just get lost in it' says Tommy Appleby. For Claudine Zardi, 'Improvising enables me to forget who I am and my self imposed limitations' A recurring theme is that within the Grand Gestures session it is possible to forget or 'lose' the self that one performs in the outside world, and have access to a more authentic self. Allan Robinson, for example, compares being in Grand Gestures to his performances, as a clown. Of Grand Gestures, he says 'It's *me*, yes. And that is a big difference. You can't hide behind [being a clown], It's *me*'. Margaret Jones emphasises that in this respect Grand Gestures is different to some other groups of which she is a member, such as a painting club: 'I think when you're in a [different] group you're *you*. But when I go

*there* [to Grand Gestures] I'm not me.' Here, she refers to 'being *you*' as her usual socially performed identity, and 'not me' as an identity that moves beyond those constraints. She explains further: 'When I go [to the other groups], I mean, we joke and carry on, but you think '*Margaret*'. She says her name with emphasis, sitting up straight to signify a return to formality and correct behaviour. 'But [at Grand Gestures] you can more or less do the movement [she's demonstrating, with expansive movements]. I mean it's got structure and everything, its got rules, but you've got *freedom* too.' Later, she says: 'There's more to me than putting that coat on and going to Fenwicks'<sup>2</sup>, which seems to suggest that Grand Gestures offers her a way of exploring aspects of her identity (the 'more' that there is to her) beyond the constraints of her everyday social and consumer identities. Tommy Appleby talks about this as a profound change. He says 'It's transformed me'. To 'lose' one's self is, then, to have an experience of finding oneself.

It is also recognised that this can be a challenging process. When he speaks of how Grand Gestures requires him to 'be me', Allan Robinson recognises that it can be difficult: 'That does take a bit of getting used to and it's taken nearly a year to feel a bit happier doing it and not so self conscious.'

## **2. Connectedness**

Another facet of the Grand Gestures work is about developing a physical sense of connectedness with the other dancers through somatic awareness. This occurs both with and without the use of touch.

Touch is fundamental to many of the movement activities of the Grand Gestures session. For example, one class begins with the stroking of one hand down the opposite arm. With repetition, the instructions invite attention to both externally and internally registered sensation: the touch of hand on skin and the internal, felt dimensions of the sensation. It also suggests using touch to identify and explore the muscular and skeletal structure of the arm. This exercise uses touch as another means of 'focusing in' on somatic awareness, and becoming present, as in the previous section.

This section will focus however, primarily on touch between dancers, and its communicative aspects. Just as the 'watching the breath' exercise frames the opening of a session, so the sessions sometimes end with the group of dancers sitting on chairs in a circle, reaching out

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<sup>2</sup> Fenwicks is a major department store in Newcastle upon Tyne.



and taking hold of each other's hands in acknowledgment of the end of the training session and of their connection as a group. As anthropologist Ruth Finnegan points out, 'a group of people joined by touch, perhaps through direct or serial hand clasps... can experience and intend this as a symbolic mark of social, not just physical, solidarity.' (2014: 194).

More extensive and exploratory exercises involving touch include, for example, working with partners to explore the articulations of the spine. One person does an improvised exploration of the articulations of the spine, exploring its range and quality of movement while the other uses the touch of their hands to help draw the mover's focus into the sensation of the spine in movement.

In her study of the multiple avenues of human communication, Finnegan notes that the significance of touch, largely absent from many accounts of communication, is beginning to be recognised (2014: 194). Examining touch as communication, she identifies its many dimensions:

It can convey intimacy, affiliation, protection, dominance, intrusion, dependence, or the giving and accepting of care. Friends touch to communicate empathy or agreement, comrades share their solidarity by an arm round the shoulders. Links of kinship or affection are expressed and reinforced in tactile processes like combing someone's hair, applying cream, tending minor hurts... Avoiding bodily contact where it might otherwise be expected communicates too; so does the manner of touching or being touched... Touching can also acknowledge mutual participation in some experience. (2014: 201)

The art of touch as explored in the work of Grand Gestures, works with touch in many registers; tentative, light, firm, responsive, guiding, fugitive, invigorating. It also works with it in many dimensions, including: as a prompt to sensation; as an aid to understanding the mechanics of the body; as creative stimulus; as an acknowledgement of group identity and mutual participation, and as communication between dancers.

The use of touch in Grand Gestures is usually remarked on positively as something pleasurable. Lillian Read remarks: 'I like the tactile bit. I like when we have a get together and you can touch people and the holding of hands and things, it's good.' Speaking of its effect on the group dynamic, Walter Matthews says 'It's broken down some barriers'. Claudine Zardi speaks of how touch can be particularly pleasurable for those who live alone

(the majority of Grand Gestures members do live alone), and do not have regular physical contact with other people:

'It is nice. Particularly for people who live on their own I suppose, and don't have much physical contact with people... I think it brings people a bit closer to one another and it is an important part of being alive, I think, physical contact.' (Claudine Zardi, interview)

Lillian Read describes having taken her sister along to a Friday session:

Now my sister and I ... we're not really all that close, even though we visit each other. Paula had us doing something tactile with a partner and [my sister] and I were partners, and we used to share a bed when we were kids! But it was the first time that, you know, we were actually stroking each other and touching each other and... it was a bit creepy! But it was nice in a way to have that connection again with my sister.' (Lillian Read, interview)

The slight ambivalence that she acknowledges here speaks of the powerful nature of touch and its highly regulated character in human cultures, particularly the so-called 'non-contact' cultures of Northern Europe (Finnegan, 2014: 206). This is echoed by another dancer who says that she can sometimes feel uncomfortable with some moments of very close proximity when they occur in the dancing.

The implicit conventions concerning touch in the context of the Grand Gestures dance class are different from those pertaining in the outside world, and during the course of the research the dancers met with the *Creativity Matters* project manager and drew up a set of ground rules that attempt to provide a regulatory framework, including: 'respect each other's space and also recognise that this can sometimes be difficult' and 'Be aware that the dance has different social rules.'

Beyond touch, there is also the skill of sensing the presence or movement of another person and connecting to it. This kind of communication has been called 'kinaesthetic empathy'. See, for example, the 'Watching Dance' research project (*Watching Dance: Kinaesthetic Empathy*, 2014), a project that focuses on kinaesthetic empathy in the act of watching dance: 'Spectators of dance experience kinesthetic empathy when, even while sitting still, they feel they are participating in the movements they observe, and experience related feelings and ideas.' (*Watching Dance: Kinaesthetic Empathy*, 2014). It is also a sense that

dancers use when 'tuning in' to another dancer's presence and movement, that soldiers use when marching in formation, and so on. The Grand Gestures training works with, and develops the dancers' capacities for, kinaesthetic empathy as they improvise. They practice kinaesthetic empathy as they dance.

One exercise that develops and depends on this is called 'flocking'. Flocking directly references the flocking of animals or birds; a group of dancers move with awareness of each other and of their physical connectedness as a group and they, literally, flock around the space. Figure 1 shows a poem written by Norma Charlton as a reflection on a flocking exercise. This illustrates how the modes of communication in flocking are both visual, 'looking around and above me' and sensory, 'I feel others crowding up on me', and how, though this, she is experiencing herself both as an individual and as connected: 'So although I am part of the flock I tread my own path'.

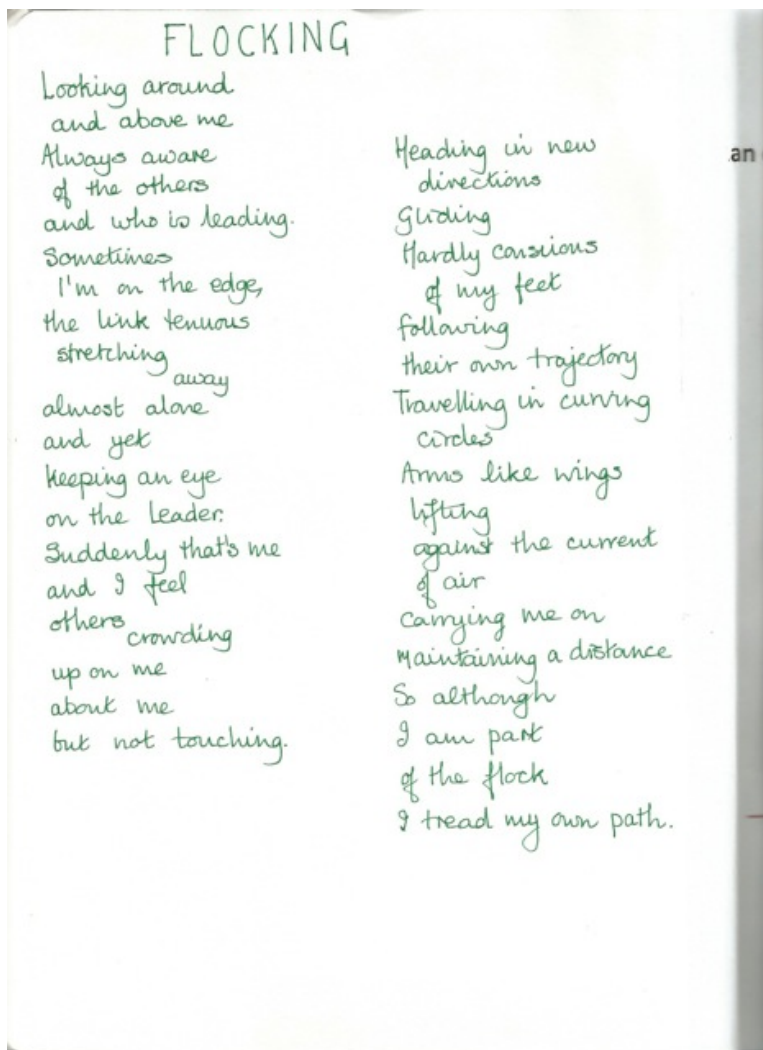


Figure 1. Poem from Norma Charlton's journal written in response to the exercise 'flocking'

(Alt Text: dancer's poem 'flocking')

Although the experience of kinaesthetic empathy may be hard to describe in words, it can be recognised when people are communicating in that way. On one occasion when members of Grand Gestures were in the audience for a performance in a city dance theatre, one of them turned, smiling, to me at one point and said, pointedly, 'Flocking!' Recognising that it is difficult to express, Norma Charlton attempts to put this into words:

'There's something you feel as you watch somebody dance. It's difficult to actually express. There's kind of an inner response, both to the music and to the movement, and sometimes when I'm watching other people it's as if what they're doing is partnering something that's inside me' (Norma Charlton, interview)

Tommy Appleby, during a group discussion, says:

The dancing that my partner did this morning was great. And when anybody's dancing I can identify with it when I'm watching because I feel part of that dance.... I'm sort of dancing with them.

Connecting with others through touch and kinaesthetic empathy is an important element of Grand Gestures. The dancers often talk about their enjoyment of the social aspects of the group, but their connection goes beyond simply making friends and having a shared activity. Practicing dance improvisation together makes and reinforces their social bonds through both the metaphor and the experience of connected physicality. A skilled ability to connect with others in this way also plays a significant part in the interactions that the dancers have with residents in care homes. Nuanced, responsive touch and the ability to 'tune in' to movements and kinaesthetic states are some of their primary modes of communication in that context.

### **3. Being in the moment**

There is an emphasis in improvisation on the concept of 'being in the moment'. The dancer works to cultivate a state where they are not rushing ahead or planning, and neither are they staying with what's gone, but they are being present and open and responsive to the choreographic situations they find themselves in moment by moment. The state of 'being in the moment' is understood within the discipline of improvisation as a kinaesthetic state that is neither mental nor physical, but a state of the bodymind, and it is a state that is supported by the work on somatic sensory awareness that was discussed above.

The idea of being in the moment is a concept that seems to have resonated for the Grand Gestures dancers, particularly in relation to ageing. It resonates in relation to the idea of living each moment of life fully, and being fully present in each moment. Grand Gestures made a short film where they responded in words and in dancing to the idea of 'living long in the day' (*Live Long in the Day*, 2013)

In the film, Norma Charlton says:

I'm very conscious now that I have less time ahead of me than there was before. Up to about three years ago life still was stretching ahead and I had this sudden concept – oh it's not! You know, I'm not going to live another sixty odd years. So it's a

question of not letting life narrow down because there's less time, but neither do I want to throw away or dash into doing things without really thinking about them and valuing what I do.

Talking of how his experience of Grand Gestures had helped him to recover from the impact of bereavement, Tommy Appleby says: 'I'm in a completely different world now. I'll be honest, I've completely forgotten the past and living for the day to day.' I ask him if this is related to the improvisational 'being in the moment' and he replies in the affirmative:

'We're enjoying it for that moment. I don't believe in looking ahead too far because sometimes it never happens. It's best to enjoy what you've got when you've got it. Not looking back now... Not looking forward now.' (Tommy Appleby, interview)

The act of improvising and the practice of 'presence' perform, rehearse and embody the idea of being in the moment, an idea that is, perhaps, particularly resonant when you're nearer to the end than the beginning of life's journey.

This is also a meaningful approach in the context of the group's work in care homes. It might be aligned, for example, with the *Timeslips* approach to dementia (also adopted elsewhere by Equal Arts and Paula Turner) that emphasises improvisatory, in the moment, engagement over reminiscence, albeit with more of an emphasis on words (*TimeSlips: Creative Storytelling*, 2014).

## **2. How can the somatic experience of Grand Gestures be articulated in ways that are both subtle and useful for purposes of evaluation?**

'I think it's difficult to put into words somehow' (Claudine Zardi)

The problem of finding the words to write or talk about dancing has long been recognised by dance theorists. For Susan Foster, 'Bodies' movements may create a kind of writing, but that writing has no facile verbal equivalence'. (1995: 9). From a different disciplinary perspective, geographer Mark Paterson asks, 'how do we write meaningfully about those everyday embodied experiences of touching and feeling, conjunctions of sensation and emotion that cannot arise without the physicality of the body?' (2009: 766) As well as arguing that there is a place for introspection and direct reporting of the ethnographer's sensory experience, Paterson offers an echo of Foster's nuanced and creative style of writing dancing in claiming that 'evoking and describing sensuous dispositions and haptic knowledges benefits from the styles and methods involved in experimental or creative writing.' (2009: pg).

Two strategies have been adopted in this research. The primary, and initial, strategy was to consider, through collaborative ethnographic study, what there might be to learn from the way that Grand Gestures themselves articulate and communicate their somatic experience. Secondly, a strategy that emerged through the research process was that of testing out the usefulness of some academic language and terms, such as those identified by Paterson (2009) in communicating about somatic sensory matters with the research participants. This section will consider three ways of 'speaking about' somatic sensation: language; other artistic media such as painting, pottery, photography and film; and the event of the 'happening'.

### ***Language***

As noted above, during the course of the research I began to realize that I had been using, in conversations with the participants, terms such as 'somatic awareness', 'kinaesthetic sensation' and 'kinaesthetic empathy'. I also realized that some of the dancers were using these terms too, presumably finding them useful to speak of phenomena for which there are few available words. The term that seemed particularly useful in these contexts was 'kinaesthetic empathy', as a term that captures something that is a tangible phenomenon but doesn't have common modes of expression. When talking to the dancers about kinaesthetic

empathy, they could immediately understand the phenomenon that it was referring to. The ease with which the terms 'somatic', 'kinaesthetic sensation', and 'kinaesthetic empathy' were picked up and adopted by some members of the group may suggest that they could be of use in communicating about and evaluating somatic matters outside of an academic context.

There are some established methods for addressing and accessing the somatic realm that have been developed as tools for teaching within the discipline of dance improvisation, and these are drawn on by Paula Turner as she works with Grand Gestures. The first of these is the use of metaphor; sometimes auditory, as in 'listening to the body', or 'let the ankle speak to the knee', or the instruction to 'call' sensation into the back surface of the body. Just as often, they are visual. She speaks, for example, of 'watching the breath', of 'running a little searchlight' over parts of the body to stimulate awareness. An extension of this is the use of visual imagery to effect somatic awareness and change. In one example, the dancers are invited to imagine water running down the back, over the shoulder blades; such images can effect somatic change, such as muscular release, as well as stimulating visual and somatic creativity. This use of visual imagery was adopted, as described earlier, by Lillian Read when she decided to use an exercise and image suggested by her experience in one of the classes ('jiggling cells' and 'bubbly bits') to help her get herself ready to act in the world. Paula Turner, in teaching, also uses anatomical language. When referring to the body's skeletal and muscular structures she frequently uses anatomical terms, sometimes also translating them for the dancers (such as isheal tuberosities/'sitting bones'). These terms, drawn as they are from the scientific discipline of anatomy, tend to refer, however, to the material structures of the body rather than to the experience of moving.

When asked for one word to describe 'how do you feel?', at the end of a dance session, the dancers gave the following words:

happy

mellow

exhilarated

settling



exuberant

energised

invigorated

ready

alive

tingly

tingling

“jingly jangly”

‘ahem’

These words are on a spectrum ranging from, at the top of the list, words that are mostly used to describe emotional states (such as ‘happy’) to, at the bottom, words that seem to refer more to somatic sensation, (such as ‘tingly’) and many that evoke felt emotional states (such as ‘alive’), a reminder that emotional and somatic ‘feeling’ states are entangled. The final word, ‘ahem’, registers either the difficulty of finding a word or the speaker’s unwillingness, in such a context, directly to offer a negatively charged assessment of how she feels. This list provides another illustration of how difficult it is to capture complex somatic-emotional states in words, or at least in one word. It also demonstrates the paucity of common terms available to describe somatic states, when words like ‘jingly jangly’ are invented to capture a state for which there is not an available descriptor. Perhaps the difficulty here is that the dancers were asked to find a single word to encapsulate a complex state. Norma Charlton, often makes writes reflections in her journal in the form of poems. Looking back at a Happening in a care home, Norma wrote the following poem, which she later posted on the Grand Gestures website:

Moving

to the rhythm of my breathing

Tentatively

the first hand uncurls  
fingers reaching out to match my hand.  
As I breathe in and raise my arm  
her hand follows  
stretching up  
pointing finger lifted high  
following with her eyes  
as I breathe out  
and allow my arm to fall hand first, diving down.

Her eyes are focused now.

She looks at me.

At this moment she really sees me

looks into my eyes.

And now she has entered the dance

Chair bound, lower limbs immobile

Nevertheless she is dancing with me.

One of the other dancers posted a comment of a single word: 'Moving'. There is indeed an emotional force to the poem to which I will return in the conclusion. There is another comment too: the Australian Independent dementia care consultant and dancer Beverley Giles, who had visited Grand Gestures in May 2014, posted the following response:

Norma has captured the essence of a profound connection engaging in the dance can create with a person who is living with dementia. I'm sure other empathetic people have felt the same, without Norma's ability to find just the right words to express what they have felt. Norma's words make it possible for others, who may have something to offer, to realise how truly valuable visits from groups like Grand Gestures are. Without people like Norma to make the connection, a unique and

irreplaceable person can be trapped behind the mask of dementia. Thank you Norma, and all the people from Grand Gestures who share their love of the dance with people who would otherwise miss out on all it offers.

This response speaks directly to the concerns of the current research. Firstly Beverley Giles suggests that the poem 'captures the essence' of the 'profound communication' involved in dancing with somatic awareness of both oneself and the other dancer. And also, and most significantly for this research, she says that: 'Norma's words make it possible for others, who may have something to offer, to realise how truly valuable visits from groups like Grand Gestures are'. In other words, she responds to the poem as a way of communicating about the *value* of the care home Happening.

### **Other media: painting, drawing, pottery, photography and film**

Grand Gestures use a range of media to communicate about, reflect on and extend their dance practice: Drawings, sketches and paintings are made in and outside of their journals, sometimes posted online; tactile pottery figures and pots are made; photographs are taken, and films have been produced. This section will examine a range of these artefacts.



Figure 2. Pencil drawing by unnamed grand gestures dancer

(Alt Text for Figure 2. Pencil drawing showing outline of torso with large feathers superimposed)

The drawing shown in Figure 2 was produced during a reflection activity immediately after an improvisation exercise, and evokes a particular quality of somatic sensation in the back, using the metaphor and image of feathers.



Figure 3: Grand Gestures Dancers, painting by Walter Matthews. Oil on cotton duck.

(Alt text for figure 3. Painting showing seven dancers in motion)

Unlike the previous drawing, the painting in Figure 3 was not produced in the immediate context of the dance session itself, but separately and, as an oil painting, over a longer period of time. Grand Gestures dancer Walter Matthews is a prolific painter and has produced many evocative images, sketches and oil paintings of the dancers in action. This example, chosen by Walter for this report, evokes the energy of the group of dancers moving together.



Figure 4: Pottery figures by dancer Lillian Read.

(Alt text for Figure 4. Photograph of glazed pottery sculpture of two figures, their forms moulded together as one takes the weight of the other on its back)

Dancers Lillian Read and Linda McGeever were both potters before they started dancing, and both explore through clay some of the somatic, tactile, movement and visual elements found in their dancing. Figure 4 shows a photograph of a pottery figure that was posted on the *Creativity Matters* blog, and is described there as 'dancer Lillian Read's creative response to a Grand Gestures session exploring the nature of touch and the giving and taking of weight'. (2014)



Figure 5: Grand Gestures improvising. Photo by Frances Anderson

(Alt text for Figure 5. Black and white photograph of five dancers improvising)

The visual artist and photographer Frances Anderson is a friend of Grand Gestures, and regularly takes photographs and films them. Her most recent body of print and photography based work is called 'Immersion'; it captures the world of the sea from inside, from the perspective of one who swims in it daily. In the Grand Gestures context she also immerses herself, working rather like both a dancer and an ethnographer, inhabiting the spatial and kinaesthetic world of the dances and photographing them from 'inside'. She demonstrates kinaesthetic empathy in the taking of photographs (as well as film, to be addressed next). These photographs of Grand Gestures offer a range of images that illustrate visually the connectedness of the dancers even when, as in Figure 5, they are all doing different things.



The taking of photographs from this 'immersed' perspective may invite the viewer of the photography, seeing through her eyes, to sense the kinaesthetic empathy of the dancers and photographer and view the image from that somatically aware perspective. This can only ever be an invitation, however.

The visual and tactile media of drawing, painting, pottery and photography are all used by members and associates of Grand Gestures to explore and 'speak' of the experience of dancing with its somatic sensory dimensions. They can all evoke in different ways different aspects of, for example, somatic awareness, touch or kinaesthetic connectedness. In considering how far these 'ways of speaking' might be useful for evaluation, it should be noted that they already are part of the processes of reflection and self evaluation of the artist and dancers concerned, whether privately kept in journals, shared and discussed between each other or publicly posted on the *Creativity Matters* blog.

The final mode to be considered is film. Grand Gestures have produced a number of short films, facilitated by Paula Turner and filmed and edited by Frances Anderson. *Passing* (2013) will be considered here. *Passing* was made during a Happening staged by Grand Gestures in a public space, the railway station in Newcastle upon Tyne. The idea of being at the station came from the dancer Linda McGeever and arose from technical ideas that the group had explored and improvised around, concerning space and pattern. The film captures moments of improvisation. The dance consists of simple everyday movements like walking, looking, sliding a foot, and standing in a queue. Out of these everyday movements emerge patterns, repetitions, spatial groupings, moments of timing; choreography, in fact. In *Passing*, the dancers are open to and interacting not just with each other but with the environment of the station; its sounds, its spaces and architecture, and the ebb and flow of its mundane human choreography as well as the movement of trains. *Passing* gently rides the waves of what the geographer David Seamon calls the 'place ballet' of the station, the everyday choreography of people and things through which places come into being (Seamon, 1979). The dance sometimes becomes visible and sometimes disappears into the everyday rhythms of the station. The dancers' sense of 'being in the moment' is palpable as they come together for a moment and travel around in a circle like children playing. They seize the moment to join a queue at a cashpoint machine, and then vanish one by one so that the genuine queuer, an unwitting participant in the dance, finds herself suddenly alone. Their use of kinaesthetic empathy is tangible as they move sideways in unison with an arriving train, or three women sit on a bench and slowly cross their legs.



*Passing* was screened at a public event, the Women Ageing and Media (WAM) Public Symposium, University of Gloucester, in June 2014. The audience was a mixture of academics, postgraduate students on the WAM International Summer School, care providers and members of the public with an interest in 'ageing and cultural activity'. The screening was accompanied by smiles and, sometimes, laughter, of recognition from the audience. Participants from the care sector in particular commented that they could recognize the many different qualities of touch and kinaesthetic empathy that were being worked with; these are, after all, important skills for caring professionals. As with Beverley Giles' recognition of the power of Norma Charlton's poem to communicate the 'value' of Grand Gestures' work in care homes, so the same somatic elements were recognized and valued in this film, made and filmed completely outside of the care home context.

### **The Happening**

Grand Gestures have taken part in a series of events that they, at the suggestion of Paula Turner, have termed 'happenings'. This term directly evokes the art world happenings of the 1950s-60s 'that made the private process of art making public and performative' (Sandford, 2005: preface). (For discussion of happenings see Sandford, *Ibid*). Grand Gestures happenings do just that – they take the improvisation practice of the group out of its private setting of a church hall in Gateshead and into a range of public and other spaces. The Grand Gestures happening involves firstly choosing a place. Public happenings have, so far, taken place in the Central Station, Newcastle upon Tyne (*Passing*, 2013); the vicinity of a public sculpture in Newcastle upon Tyne; and a Northumberland field (see *Improvisation and Murmuration*, 2014). Usually a 'movement score' will be brought to the happening. Working with movement scores – sets of instructions that form the parameters for the improvisation – is a key element of Grand Gestures' improvisational practice; the happening takes the movement score into a public setting. Thirdly, the dancers assemble at the place at an appointed time, and improvise according to the score. All three of the public happenings have been filmed by Frances Anderson. Although a detailed discussion of Grand Gestures happenings is beyond the scope of this report, a recent development regarding happenings has a bearing on issues of cultural value, and will be addressed here.

About two years into the project, from the point of view of some of the dancers, a slight tension had developed between the notion of Grand Gestures as facilitating the individual and creative development of this group of older people and the element of volunteering in

care homes. A tension, in other words, between the individual (artistic development) and social (volunteering, active citizenship) aspects of the project's cultural value, as enshrined in the project aims outlined in Section One. This was experienced as a tension between the joy and creative energy of the Friday meetings and the experiences in care homes, where the interactions with residents were satisfying and often moving, but the aim of changing the culture of care could sometimes seem overwhelming and unachievable.

There were several reasons for this, that are not discussed here in full; it is the outcome that is significant for the purposes of this report. The proposed way forward was to adopt a different model of working in the care homes, one that would be conceived of as an extension of the spirit of the Friday morning sessions rather than as, primarily, a training event for care staff. The care home events were thus re-framed as happenings. The dancers would arrive, and would dance five short scores which residents and care staff would be invited to witness. In the improvisational spirit, they would 'be in the moment' and see what transpired. At the time of writing three happenings have taken place in care homes and a day centre and initial responses from the dancers and artist participants are that they have been energizing, enjoyable and successful events for them and, from their perspective, for the majority of the residents and care staff involved. The interaction that sparked Norma Charlton's poem, for example, took place in one of these sessions.

The *Creativity Matters* project manager, whose responsibility it is to set up the care home sessions, remarks that it is slightly more difficult to explain in words to care home managers just what a Grand Gestures 'happening' will involve. This is compared, for example to the *Creativity Matters* music group, who play the ukulele and sing popular songs. The content of the care home happening, however, speaks in a somatic language that seems to be immediately recognizable to many care home residents. Just as the audience for *Passing* at the public symposium recognized and responded to the kinaesthetic communication between the dancers in the film, so do the dancers speak of recognising and being affected by the communication that they sense amongst themselves and between themselves and the residents.

The happening, as a live, tangible, in the moment, event, can be a forum for direct and touching communication both through and about somatic matters.

## **Section Four: Conclusion**

Grand Gestures' dance practice is predicated on particular sets of ideas about the embodied subject and it was argued in Section two that it works towards the production of specific kinds of embodied selves through the cultivation of heightened somatic awareness, connectedness, the sense of 'being in the moment'; and the improvisational sensibility. This speaks of a particular set of orientations: an orientation towards the self (the focus on sensation); towards others and towards space (connectedness), and towards time (being in the moment). It would also be possible to argue, too, that it offers an orientation towards power, through the experience and exercise of creative agency and control over the means of representation. (Lack of space has precluded discussion of this element in this report, but it will form the basis of a future project output). This practice offers to these elder dancers a new or alternative set of resources and options for working on themselves and for navigating their movement through the latter stages of the ageing process.

We might thus argue that the somatic processes outlined in Section two can feed directly into the instrumental aims of the project and related aspects of cultural value, as mechanisms for producing more reflective and creative individuals with a greater understanding of their own selves and identities. Heightened sensory awareness is a reflective state that feeds into other kinds of reflection such as the keeping of journals and the production of other artworks in response to the experience of dancing.

We might also argue that through the dancers' enhanced facility for connectedness through touch and kinaesthetic empathy this project palpably builds community amongst the dancers. Communication through touch and kinaesthetic empathy is, it has been argued, integral to the sense of community that is experienced within the group. Connectedness can have a particular value in the context of ageing when, due to circumstances such as bereavement or living alone, feeling close, experiences of communication and social bonds are valued. All of these somatic sensory aspects are significant, too, in the volunteering part of their work, when Grand Gestures go into residential care homes. A high level of attunement to the somatic realm, awareness of one's own somatic sensation and the ability to calibrate touch and kinaesthetic empathy can facilitate meaningful interaction with people living with dementia. The somatic skills and approaches that can be put to use in Grand Gestures' engaged (volunteering) citizenship, enhance their experience of mutual connections also with a range of others including international visitors such as Beverley

Giles with whom they established direct and tangible mutual communication and understanding through dancing together. This is not to recycle the cliché (and misnomer) of dance as a universal language; but to emphasise the direct and tangible sense of communication experienced between dancers who share a somatic language and understanding.

We might argue, too that somatic sensory awareness and empathetic connectedness are mechanisms through which the dancers can experience improvements to their sense of health and wellbeing; indeed, many of them do speak in these terms.

One of the initial aims of this research was 'to develop a useful set of terms and vocabulary for evaluation of somatic sensory experience', and this was considered in Section three. This was rather an ambitious aim, and it perhaps also missed the point. To an extent, the research has suggested that the academic language for delineating aspects of somatic sensation might have some use in speaking about the cultural value of these areas of experience, as may metaphorical strategies adopted within the field of dance improvisation teaching. The strategy should not, however, be only about 'terms' and 'vocabulary' but about ways of speaking, writing and communicating, and Section three endorses Patterson's call to draw on more creative uses of language. Norma Charlton's 'Moving' poem points a way forward here. The range of media and modes of communication adopted by Grand Gestures dancers and artist were also identified in Section three: drawing, painting, pottery, photography, film and happenings all function as evocative and multi-layered ways of speaking through, and speaking about, the somatic.

Considering their usefulness 'for purposes of evaluation' raises the issue of what is meant by evaluation; as pointed out in Section one, different evaluation practices coexist around this project. As seen in Section three, creative ways of 'speaking' of the somatic realm, through poetry, drawing, painting, pottery, photography and film, are all spontaneously adopted by the dancers and project artists as part of their own strategies for reflecting on their experience and evaluating their practice, and appear to work very fruitfully in that context.

But how does this relate to those processes of evaluation that, for example, speak back to funders? Evaluation practices are social practices. As (usually) writing practices they do cultural work and they are designed to speak into particular contexts (see Pare, 2007). At one point in the research I asked the project artist if she would give me access to the written evaluations that she submits to Equal Arts because I was seeking her perspective on an

activity in which I had not been able to participate. She declined, not only for ethical reasons – these are intended as in-house documents and written for that purpose only – but also because the formal evaluation reports ‘are written very differently to how I lead Grand Gestures’ (Paula Turner, pers. comm.). The use of creative language and other media for ‘speaking of’ cultural experience does not speak easily into the cultures of evidence that exist around evaluation that is meant for organizations and funders.

A gap – in fact, an incompatibility - between the instrumental imperatives, which form the basis on which an arts activity has to be formally evaluated, and the fulsome experience of the project, is identified by dancer Cynthia in an interview conversation:

Cynthia: ‘One of the reasons I stopped going to pottery was because I felt that it was having to start tick boxes and you were having to reach targets and evaluate what you’d done each week. And I didn’t join for that. I joined pottery for leisure, and I don’t like the fact that it’s being judged and can’t just be looked at for what it is. And who’s deciding which boxes you’ve got to tick? I mean, I know funding’s got to come from somewhere; I understand that. But what people are saying is of value, who decides that? Who’s telling me what I should get out of something?’

Trish (interviewer): ‘Is that a rhetorical question? or are you asking me for an answer?’

Cynthia: It is! I’m just saying it. I mean, I’ve had to do those sort of things in the past myself, you know, where in order to get funding you’ve got to say you’re doing this and this and this. I know it’s got to be done but I don’t particularly like it because I think you miss so much when you’re having to tick those boxes. You’re missing other things’

It is some of those ‘other things’ that this research project has attempted to access and describe through its somatic ethnographic methodology. This methodology is discussed in Appendix 1.

# Appendix

## Research Methodology and methodological advances

### Somatic Ethnography

There is a body of academic and arts professional publications that set out to examine the impact of dance on health and well being amongst older people. A 2010 literature review identified 103 publications issuing from the dance and health fields and covering the physiological, psychological and social impact of dance on older people across a range of social, creative and traditional dance styles (Connolly and Redding, 2010; see also Organ, 2013). Whilst sensory, embodied, experience is central to the practice of dance, the *experience* of moving is rarely examined in detail in these studies, nor is the culturally specific meaning of that experience and its sensory dimensions. Physiological impacts of dance have been evaluated in terms of quantifiable measures of aerobic power, lower body muscle endurance, strength and flexibility, balance, agility, and gait, or impacts on health status. Studies tend to have been made within a scientific frame, or based on interviews, observation or questionnaires. The relative paucity of attention to the sensing body is not surprising, as sensory experience is subjective, slippery and tricky to describe, particularly within the constraints posed by evaluation. As a key element of cultural experience it is, however, important that it is acknowledged with the notion of cultural value and this project sets out to use an ethnographic methodology that focuses on the somatic, examining its usefulness for the consideration of cultural value.

In the field of dance ethnography, issues around dance and ageing have been considered by Cooper and Thomas, (2002); Thomas and Cooper (2003). This research is notable for its acknowledgement of the embodied, experiential dimensions of older people's social dance practice. Although its published results tend not to have a primary focus on this aspect, it suggests a way forward. It is possible to draw not only on the long tradition of dance anthropology flagged up by Thomas and Cooper, but also on recent developments in the arts, humanities and social sciences, where there has been something of a 'sensory turn' in

scholarship (see, for example, Howes, 2005; Paterson and Dodge, 2012). The proposed research takes a cue from Stoller's 'sensuous scholarship' (2009) and the 'sensory ethnography' of Pink (2009), which pay attention to the sensuous and multisensory nature of cultural experience. The term 'somatic' has been used for two reasons. Firstly, the research places a particular focus on the 'somatic senses' (Paterson, 2009: 768) as especially relevant to elders' dance practice. These senses, as outlined by Paterson, include touch, kinaesthesia (sense of movement) and proprioception (awareness of position in space). Secondly, the term references the 'somatic dance practices' that are a key part of the Grand Gestures approach. This is not to suggest that the somatic senses can be 'separated out'. Far from it – all experience is multisensory. It is a matter of emphasis, and it is an emphasis that is invited by Grand Gestures' own focus on the somatic realm.

The project is at the collaborative end of the ethnographic spectrum. The intention is to involve the project participants in the research process as participants, rather than as research subjects. This extended into co-presentation of research findings (see outputs). The ethnographic approach also shades into creative, or arts-based (Leavy) research methods. Working in collaboration with the lead artist, some creative activities were set up as specific movement enquiries into areas of interest to the research, and reflection activities were incorporated, which produced research materials such as recorded discussions, drawing and writing.

There is also an autoethnographic dimension. Introspective reflection on one's own sensory experience is one of the approaches proposed by Paterson (2009) in his consideration of how to approach somatic issues, and it is an approach taken by others who have investigated the somatic realm through their own experience. See, for example, John Hockey and Jaqueline Allen-Collinson's work on the sensory dimensions of sport (Allen-Collinson and Hockey, 2013; Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2007; Hockey, 2005.) and Buckingham and Degen (2012) on yoga as means of entering their research field and connecting with their research subjects. I approached the research in an embedded way, joining the group as their resident ethnographer, and reflecting in particular on my somatic sensory experience of the fieldwork. I also draw for my understanding of their practice on my own embodied experiences as a practitioner within related fields of dance improvisation and community dance practice, between 1986-1996. Doing participatory arts work is, in some ways, rather like being an ethnographer, and I draw on its ethos and several of its methods in my ethnography practice: e.g. an ethos of co-production; facilitation of group

creative and devising activities; attunement to somatic sensation, non verbal communication; a reflective attitude and an alertness to the surprising and the serendipitous.

## **Methods**

The central ethnographic method is participant-observation fieldwork with the Grand Gestures group. This involves participating in classes, happenings and, on one occasion, volunteer work in care homes, as well as organized and informal social events. The participant-observation is supplemented by a series of semi-structured interviews with the lead artist, Grand Gestures dancers, and the director of Equal Arts. These include artwork-elicitation interviews, where works produced by group members are used as the basis for interviewing (see Jenkins, Woodward and Winter, 2008, on the related method of photo-elicitation and Pink, 2009 on its relevance to sensory ethnography). Finally, ancillary texts and artworks produced by the group, such as paintings, pottery, journals, and blogging, are collected and analysed.

## **Reflection on Methodology and Methods**

In the spirit of collaborative research, the participants were invited to reflect on the research methodology and methods. That discussion informed this reflection on methodology, and some of the participants' comments are also included here.

## **Advances**

The general advance offered by this research is to propose an ethnographic approach which pays attention to the somatic dimensions of cultural experience, often ignored in existing approaches to evaluation. Two specific aspects of this can be identified:

### **1. Awareness of the unspoken**

Attention to the somatic realm can access multi layered or ambiguous meanings and values that can escape when the main focus is on language. For example, somebody who does not interact verbally very much and might seem, from some perspectives, to be socially cut off, might feel a profound sense of kinaesthetic connection to others when dancing. The somatic ethnographer can experience such phenomena, which might be missed using an evaluation method that relies mainly on language and/or self-reporting.

### **2. Being in the Moment**



The importance of ethnographic 'being in the moment' can not be underestimated when dealing with somatic matters and the ethnographic Touch and kinaesthetic sensation are immediate and ephemeral, and this might be one reason why the dancers were much more forthcoming with words to describe that feeling immediately after moving than in the context of an interview conducted at a different time. In interviews, at a remove from the dance session, they were much more likely to pause, contemplate, say that it is difficult to put into words, and veer off in other directions. Workshop-based reflection activities and direct researcher experience are able to access immediate responses, in the moment.

### **Challenges**

Ethnography is a relatively time consuming methodology for the researcher. This project, at five months, is short by ethnographic standards, but it also draws on twelve months of prior involvement with the group as well as relevant embodied researcher experience. Its time consuming nature may mean that in terms of practical application it is expensive in comparison to other qualitative methods of evaluation, such as survey or questionnaire-based methods.

Somatic ethnography requires a specialised set of enculturated somatic sensitivities more likely to be developed through, for example, dance or sport training, than ethnographic methodology training.

There is a challenge involved in integrating ethnographic research results into existing cultures of evidence around arts evaluation. There need to be robust arguments in place that challenge positivist notions of rigour that are not appropriate to ethnographic approaches and distinguish ethnographic description from anecdotal evidence.

### **List of Interviewees**

Alice Thwaite, Director, Equal Arts

Paula Turner, Dance Artist

Claudine Zardi, Dancer

Joan McLeod, Dancer

Lillian Read, Dancer

Linda McGeever, Dancer

Kevan McGeeer, Dancer

Norma Charlton, Dancer

Margaret Jones, Dancer

Tommy Appleby, Dancer

Walter Matthews, Dancer

Allan Robinson, Dancer

Cynthia Richardson, Dancer

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The Cultural Value Project seeks to make a major contribution to how we think about the value of arts and culture to individuals and to society. The project will establish a framework that will advance the way in which we talk about the value of cultural engagement and the methods by which we evaluate it. The framework will, on the one hand, be an examination of the cultural experience itself, its impact on individuals and its benefit to society; and on the other, articulate a set of evaluative approaches and methodologies appropriate to the different ways in which cultural value is manifested. This means that qualitative methodologies and case studies will sit alongside qualitative approaches.