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## **Grand Gestures : A Somatic Ethnography**

Dr Trish Winter

Centre for Research in Media and Cultural Studies,  
University of Sunderland 2015







## SECTION ONE

### INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

Between January and May 2014 I worked with Grand Gestures elders dance group and the charity Equal Arts on a research project. The research is part of a bigger project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The AHRC is a public body that promotes and supports research into the Arts and Humanities. This bigger project is called the Cultural Value Project. It wants to advance the way that we think about the value of arts and cultural activities; their value to society and their value to the individuals who take part in them. You can read more about it [here](#).

This project involved me, a university researcher, working in partnership with a cultural organisation, the charity Equal Arts, and with the dancers and lead artist of Grand Gestures. The intention was to work with the participants to produce research that would be useful to them and to the wider fields of practice to which they connect, as well as contributing to academic debates. I am writing elsewhere for those academic audiences. This report is designed to speak mainly to the research participants, partner organisation and practice communities in the realms of elder arts and participatory arts more generally.

The project has worked with Grand Gestures to explore some aspects of their dance practice that are difficult to place a value on, or even to describe, but that are centrally important to what they do. Being able to identify these aspects of their work, and to find a language for speaking about them, was important to Grand Gestures and Equal Arts. Grand Gestures felt that their work was sometimes valued by others in ways that made unfounded assumptions about it.





For example, assumptions that its value was mainly in providing opportunities for 'health and fitness'. Or that dance improvisation is a kind of vague 'expressing oneself' rather than a specific, skilled and learned approach to movement and the body. At the same time, it was often difficult for them to explain to others what their dance practice involved.

This kind of communication about the nature and value of what they do is important for several reasons. Some of these are pragmatic. For example, funding depends on identifying and reporting on the 'impacts' of such activities. In addition, the group needs to be able to communicate its aims and benefits clearly, such as when the project manager speaks to care homes about what Grand Gestures will do when they volunteer there – distinguishing it, for example, from 'chair aerobics' or other forms of exercise-based activity. In addition, it is important for the artist and dancers' own evaluation and reflection as they develop and improve their practice, and it is also important for communicating the Grand Gestures approach within elder arts and dance practice more widely, and having an informed dialogue with that community.

Grand Gestures have been developing a distinctive model of working since 2012. The project artist, Paula Turner, brings many years of experience in disciplines like dance, theatre, visual art and yoga, and she draws analytically and intuitively on this embodied knowledge in the way that she shapes the Grand Gestures experience, which broadly comes under the umbrella of 'dance improvisation'. Paula is very reflective about her work, but working on a freelance project basis she doesn't always have the opportunity to spend research time analysing her model of practice. The project gave us an opportunity to work together on this.

This report is a first step towards identifying the key aspects of the 'Grand Gestures' approach and model of working, and finding ways that these elements of its value, to them as individual dancers and to society, can be communicated. The research focuses on the aspects of Grand Gestures' dance practice that involve concentrating, in different ways, on bodily (or 'somatic') sensation. It also aims to find out how Grand Gestures' work, and particularly its somatic aspects, can be described or communicated in ways that are useful for thinking and talking about its value. This is tricky, because the world of somatic sensation is one that we don't often put into words, or for which words can seem inadequate.

## GRAND GESTURES

Grand Gestures was started by Equal Arts in January 2012 as part of a five year project, *Creativity Matters*. 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. The *Creativity Matters* project was initiated by Equal Arts Director Alice Thwaite. It 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. Identifying this as best practice, she set out to replicate the *Quicksilver* model in North East England and made a successful bid to the Big Lottery *Reaching Communities* fund.

*Creativity Matters* comprises two groups of older people, (defined by the project as over the age of 50). These are the dance group Grand Gestures and a music group, each with a professional 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. There they work with people with dementia and care staff with the aim of enhancing the quality of lives and changing the culture of dementia care.

Since it began in 2012, Grand Gestures has grown, largely by word of mouth, into a stable core group of about 14 dancers. The group has developed a strong sense of a collective artistic identity that has extended beyond the volunteering remit of the *Creativity Matters* project. For example, it has branched out into a series of improvised events that it calls 'Happenings', and has made some short films, listed at the end of this report. The group has a growing profile. It has had 21,000 hits on its blog. It has international connections with elder arts practitioners and participants, largely forged through Paula Turner's 2013 Winston Churchill Fellowship, and connections with elders dance groups as far afield as Tasmania and the USA. It has also, through this research project, begun to contribute to international academic debate in the field of elder arts.





## WHAT IS SOMATIC ETHNOGRAPHY?

Ethnography involves studying something through taking part in it. Its main method is known as participant observation, which means just that – participating in a culture and observing it at the same time. I studied Grand Gestures' work by 'being there', experiencing Grand Gestures first hand over a period of time.

The word 'somatic' refers to the body. I have used the term 'somatic ethnography' to indicate that this ethnographic study has a particular focus on bodily, somatic issues. It looks at the place and significance of somatic sensation in Grand Gestures' practice, and the way that Grand Gestures training and practice works to shape the dancers' somatic experience, and that of the people they encounter, in some particular ways.



## WHAT I DID

During the project I joined in with Grand Gestures' regular Friday classes and some other events and kept notes about my observations. This built on a previous twelve months of involvement with the group, prior to starting the project. Although the fieldwork had not formally started in this period, I was able to draw on this extended knowledge of Grand Gestures, as well as on the fieldwork done during the five months of the project. I also did in-depth interviews with the dancers, the artist and representatives of Equal Arts. The dancers had been invited to keep a reflective journal about their dancing and wider creative lives, and many of them also shared the contents of those journals with me, as well as their other creative outputs such as painting, drawing, writing and pottery. Some of the movement explorations done in Grand Gestures' training sessions were devised by Paula and occasionally by myself, as ways of doing movement explorations of issues of interest to the research, and were followed up by

group discussions that were recorded. In addition, I kept an eye on the Grand Gestures blog, where members of the group reflect on their activities in words and pictures.

The main focus of the research was on Grand Gestures' creative practice, as developed through their Friday meetings, rather than their volunteering work in care homes and day centres. The different aspects of their work did, however, sometimes prove difficult to separate out, and I did talk to the dancers about their experiences of dancing in care homes. What I did not do was involve the care home staff or residents in the ethnographic research (although that might make an interesting future research project, as discussed in the conclusion). It was the experience and perspectives of Grand Gestures that were the main focus of the study.

An important aspect of the project was its collaborative approach. The intention was not to do research *on* Grand Gestures but to collaborate with them on it. Members of Grand Gestures have been involved in discussions about the emerging research results, they have read and commented on drafts of this publication and they have been involved in presenting the research results in academic and public forums.

## **ETHICAL MATTERS**

The project was planned according to the ethical guidelines of the University of Sunderland and approved by the university's Research Ethics Committee.

There is one way in which this project differs from some other research approaches, and that is in the question of anonymity; whether people are named or not in the research publications. It is usually expected by the University that researchers will not divulge the identities of the people who take part in their research, but will protect their rights to privacy. This is not always appropriate, however. In research where the participants take an active part it is often considered to be more ethical to give them the opportunity to be named, so that their contribution is recognised and acknowledged. This was discussed with the research participants, and they were given the choice as to whether they were named or not in this report. The majority did indeed ask to be named. Pseudonyms have been given to those who decided to remain anonymous, and some comments recorded during fieldwork, where the speaker is not identified, are labelled 'dancer'.



## SECTION TWO

### THE GRAND GESTURES SOMATIC APPROACH

The Grand Gestures approach has been developing since the beginnings of the project, led by the artist Paula Turner in interaction with the dancers. The approach focuses on the art of improvisation. The research has not tried to give a full description of all aspects of the Grand Gestures approach, but focuses on its sometimes overlooked somatic aspects. This section will describe three key elements of Grand Gestures' practice: sensory awareness; connectedness; and being in the moment.



#### SENSORY AWARENESS: GETTING IN TOUCH WITH YOUR BODY

*'You feel in touch with your body; with bits that you just take for granted'. (dancer)*



The dancers sometimes talk about their Grand Gestures training as a 'getting in touch with your body', and becoming more aware of parts of it. For example, Joan McLeod speaks of being reminded to be aware of her legs: 'When you're improvising, 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!"'. As Walter Matthews puts it, 'you become friends with your own body'.



A key way in which this process of getting 'in touch with' the body takes place is through becoming more aware of bodily sensation, and particularly the sensations of the body in movement. 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. For example, on occasions the dancers are invited to 'close your eyes and watch your breath', paying close attention to the movements and sensations of breathing. Throughout the movement and improvisation activities of the sessions there are regular and often detailed reminders to pay attention to what the experience of movement feels like.

This development of sensory awareness goes together with an awareness of the body's structure, particularly that of the skeleton. For example, when sitting the dancers are often invited to take time to sense the 'sitting bones' (the ischial tuberosities) 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. Often, imagery is used to support and guide these movement explorations, such as the image of radiating, starfish-like from the centre out through the limbs. Through such exercises the dancers work to develop a heightened somatic awareness.

So what does the focus on somatic sensation bring to the dancers? This is often experienced as an 'inward looking' state; '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 spark a wider reflection on one's self and identity. This can relate to feelings of losing or forgetting oneself. 'I sort of forget who I am', says Claudine Zardi. When dancers talk about such feelings of 'losing' or 'forgetting' oneself, these are usually made positively – it is spoken of as a pleasurable state, often linked with being able to escape from 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, '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. Norma Charlton speaks of how being somatically aware can create a sense of creativity and spontaneity that is different from the way that she inhabits her everyday life: 'I suppose it taps into, triggers, creative responses.' In everyday life, she remarks, 'A lot of what I do is thinking'. When dancing, 'I don't have to think and prepare, it's something which is spontaneous'.

Through their dance practice, some of the dancers speak of gaining a more 'true' sense of 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*'. Tommy talks about this experience of dancing as having created a profound change. He says 'It's transformed me'. Margaret Jones speaks about having a new sense of presence in the world, saying that it gives her a feeling of 'Yes! I'm here!'.

The dancers also recognise that this can be a challenging process. When he speaks of how Grand Gestures requires him to 'be me', Allan 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.'



As well as being a way of expanding one's experience and sense of self beyond the limitations of everyday life, enhanced sensory awareness is also something that the dancers talk about as enriching their everyday existence. For example, Lillian puts a somatic awareness technique to use in her everyday life as a way of 'getting herself going' in the morning, a technique that involves 'a shaking of the fingers and the whole body'. She uses creative visual imagery to do this:

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'.



## CONNECTEDNESS

Another facet of the Grand Gestures approach is about developing a sense of connectedness between the dancers. 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 repeated stroking of one hand down the outside surface of the opposite arm and back up the inside surface. 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 the use of 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 developing a feeling of presence, as in the previous section.



We will focus here, however, on touch between dancers. 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 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 the

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).

Other exercises involving touch include, for example, working with partners to explore the articulations of the spine. One dancer 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 as a form of communication is beginning to be more widely recognised. 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)

Touch, in the work of Grand Gestures, is explored in many registers; tentative, light, firm, responsive, guiding, fugitive, invigorating. It is investigated 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' work is usually remarked on positively by the dancers as something pleasurable. Lillian 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 says 'It's broken down some barriers'. Claudine remarks on how touch can be particularly pleasurable for those who 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.'

It can also be experienced in more ambivalent terms. Lillian describes having taken her sister along to a Friday session:

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! [said with a smile] But it was nice in a way to have that connection again with my sister.'

The slight ambivalence that she acknowledges here, when she says, 'it was a bit creepy!' speaks of the powerful nature of touch and its highly regulated character in human cultures, particularly so-called 'non-contact' cultures such as ours. 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 conventions concerning touch in the context of the Grand Gestures dance class are different from those that apply in the outside world, and in recognition of the need to acknowledge this the dancers, together with the *Creativity Matters* project manager, have drawn up a set of ground rules, codifying the need to '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 feeling a connection to it. In this the dancers are practicing something that has been called 'kinaesthetic empathy'. The idea of kinaesthetic empathy has recently become a focus of research in both dance and neurophysiology. The concept has also been explored in the work of the dance scholar Susan Foster in her book *Choreographing Empathy* (2011). A research project, 'Watching Dance', focuses on kinaesthetic empathy in the act of watching dance, the ways that '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).

The Grand Gestures dancers practice and develop the capacity for 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 in response to a flocking exercise. This shows 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 to others: 'So although I am part of the flock I tread my own path'.

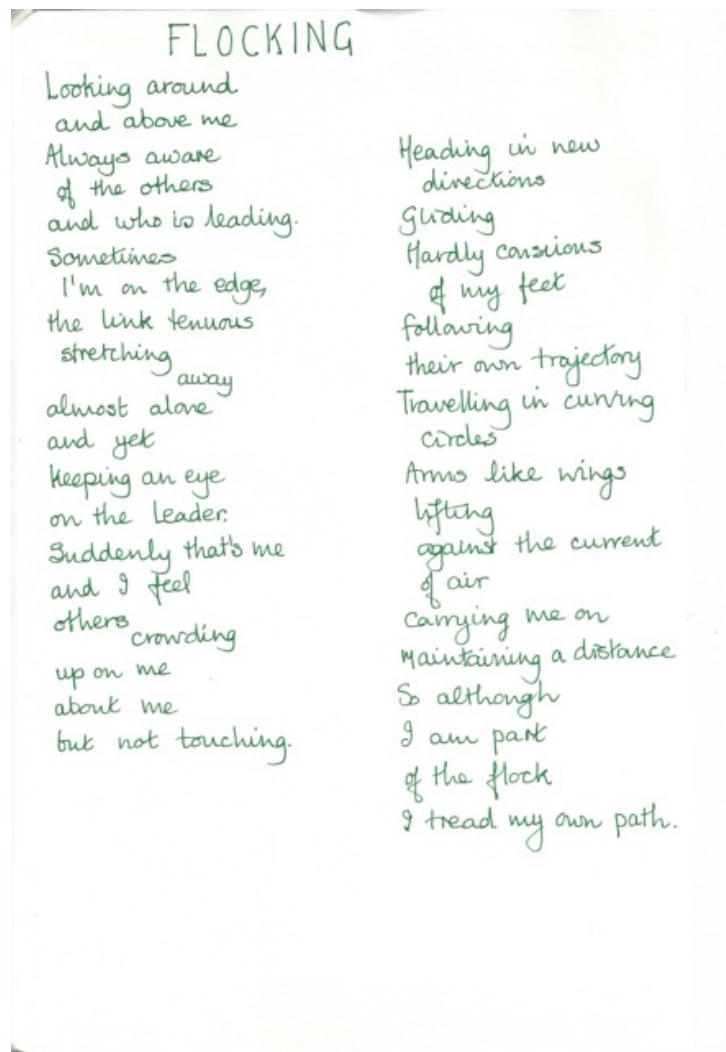


Figure 1. Poem from Norma Charlton's journal written in response to the exercise 'flocking'

Recognising that it is difficult to express, Norma 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'.

Similarly, Tommy 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.

The sense of 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 sensed experience of somatic connection. 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.

Although we tend to think of this as a 'natural' human capacity, the work of Susan Foster (2010) shows how the idea of kinaesthetic empathy has changed over the years in relation to changing cultures and ideas about the body. Kinaesthetic empathy is something that we *learn* to develop in particular contexts. The training and practice of the Grand Gestures dancers works to produce in them a developed sense of kinaesthetic empathy. Through their practice they develop this aspect of themselves, and this is a key element of Grand Gestures' value – to them, and, they feel, to the elders that they work with.

## **BEING IN THE MOMENT**

There is an emphasis in the Grand Gestures' approach on the idea 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, open and responsive to the choreographic situations in which they find themselves moment by moment. The state of 'being in the moment' is understood within the discipline of improvisation as a state that is neither mental nor physical, but a combination of the two.

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 connects to the idea of living each moment of life fully, and being fully present in each moment. For example, 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 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 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.'

The act of improvising and the practice of somatic awareness 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 by Paula Turner) that emphasises improvisatory, in the moment, engagement over reminiscence, albeit with more of an emphasis on words (*TimeSlips: Creative Storytelling*, 2014).



## **SUMMARY: THE GRAND GESTURES SOMATIC APPROACH**

The creative training process undergone by the Grand Gestures dancers produces and practices particular kinds of somatic attributes and skills. One of these, we have seen above, is the capacity for enhanced sensory awareness. Another is that sense of connectedness that we call kinaesthetic empathy. And these are developed alongside the improvisational idea of 'being in the moment'. This adds up to a way of being that is characterised by particular orientations to the self, to others and to time. A reflective orientation to the self, senses and identity; a connected orientation to others and a

The orientation to one's self, senses, and identity is a reflective one. The orientation to others is characterised by a notion of connectedness, and the orientation to time is produced through the sense of being in the moment.

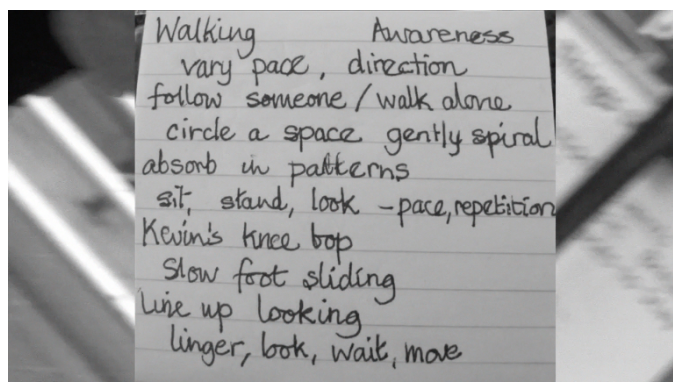


## SECTION THREE

### COMMUNICATING ABOUT SOMATIC SENSATION

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

The problem of finding the words to write or talk about dancing and somatic experience has long been recognised by dance theorists and other academics. One strategy adopted in this research was to learn from the way that Grand Gestures dancers themselves communicate about their somatic experience. Here I will briefly summarise three ways of 'speaking about' the somatic that are used by Grand Gestures. Firstly, language; secondly, other artistic media such as painting, pottery, photography and film; and thirdly the event of the 'Happening'.



#### Words

There are some established methods for talking about the somatic realm that have been developed as tools for teaching within the discipline of dance improvisation, and these are drawn on by Paula 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 create 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 when she decided to use an exercise and image suggested by her experience in one of the classes ('jiggling cells') 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. These words, drawn as they are from the scientific discipline of anatomy, tend to refer, however, to the structures of the body rather than to the experience of moving.

Norma 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.

A comment was posted on the blog by the Australian Independent dementia care consultant and dancer Beverley Giles, who had visited Grand Gestures in May 2014. Her response was as follows:

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.

Beverley, in other words, sees the poem as a way of communicating about the *value* of the care home Happening. Some academic writers have suggested that creative uses of language can be useful ways of speaking of somatic matters. The experience of Grand Gestures bears this out.

### **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 things.



Figure 2. Pencil drawing by unnamed grand gestures dancer

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.

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.

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<sup>1</sup>

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 world of the dances and photographing them from 'inside'. She uses kinaesthetic empathy in the taking of photographs and film. These photographs of Grand Gestures offer a range of images that evoke the connectedness of the dancers even when, as in Figure 5, they are all doing different things.

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<sup>1</sup> This photograph was awarded second place in the Age Action Alliance Photography Competition in the Diverse Ageing/Improving Attitudes to Ageing Across Society Category (2014).



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 suggest in different ways the qualities of somatic awareness, touch or kinaesthetic connectedness.



Finally, let's consider film. Grand Gestures have produced a number of short films, facilitated by Paula Turner and filmed and edited by Frances Anderson. The film *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 with which the dancers were working; these are, after all, important skills developed by 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 by this audience. Film can be a powerful means of communicating about Grand Gestures' practice.



### **The Happening**

Grand Gestures have taken part in a series of events that they, at the suggestion of Paula, have termed 'Happenings'. This term evokes the art world Happenings of the 1950s-60s 'that made the private process of art making public and performative' (Sandford, 2005: preface). 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; a Northumberland field (see *Improvisation and Murmuration*, 2014), and a university campus (*GG Taking Tea for Charlie*, 2015).

The process of a Happening usually starts with a 'movement score', a set of instructions that form the parameters for the improvisation. Working with movement scores is a key element of Grand Gestures' improvisational practice; the Happening takes the movement score into a public setting. The dancers assemble at the chosen place at an appointed time and improvise according to the score. Some of the public Happenings have been filmed by Frances Anderson.



About two years into the project, from the point of view of some of the dancers, a slight gap had developed between the idea of Grand Gestures as being about the individual and creative development of this group of older people and the element of volunteering in care homes. This might be expressed as a tension between the individual (artistic development) and social (volunteering, active citizenship) aspects of the project's value. It was experienced as a disjunction 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. The proposed way forward was to adopt a different model of working in the care homes, one that would be treated as an extension of the spirit of the Friday morning sessions rather than as, primarily, a training event for care staff. So the care home events were 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. Many Happenings have since taken place in care homes and a day centre. Responses from the dancers and artist suggest that they have been experienced as energizing, enjoyable and successful events for them and, from their perspective and according to anecdotal accounts collected along the way, for the majority of the residents and care staff involved. The interaction that sparked Norma'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 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 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



#### THE CULTURAL VALUE OF GRAND GESTURES

The Grand Gestures approach cultivates somatic awareness, connectedness, the sense of 'being in the moment'; and an improvisational sensibility. These 'ways of being' are valuable for the dancers in many ways. They help them to reflect on and explore their identities, and they spark creativity. They build a sense of connectedness and community, and this 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. They provide a set of tools for enhancing everyday life and navigating the ageing process.

All of this is significant, too, in the volunteering part of their work, when Grand Gestures go into residential care homes to work with people living with dementia and care staff. 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 is used by Grand Gestures to facilitate what they view as meaningful interaction with people living with dementia.

These somatic skills and approaches also enhance the dancers' experience of connection with a range of others including visitors to their sessions, with whom they have established 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 tangible sense of communication experienced between dancers who share a somatic language and understanding.

## **It's not just about health: cultural disruptiveness**

Somatic sensory awareness and connectedness are mechanisms through which the dancers can experience improvements to their sense of health, personal and social wellbeing; indeed, many of them do speak in these terms. They are, however, often at pains to point out that they see any health-giving properties as a by-product and not as the main focus of their creative activity. A key element of the Grand Gestures approach that was not directly addressed by the research, and that has developed even further since the research project began, is the cultivation of a spirit of disruptiveness.

A gap between the expected 'impacts', which form the basis on which participatory arts activity often has to be formally evaluated, and the fulsome experience of the project, is identified by dancer Cynthia:

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 identify.

## **COMMUNICATING THE VALUE OF GRAND GESTURES**

### **Creative acts are a useful way of communicating the somatic dimensions of value**

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. Use of language can be helpful and necessary, as in the descriptions and analysis given in Section 2, that have attempted to

pin down some of the hitherto undescribed elements of the Grand Gestures approach. But in communicating the value of Grand Gestures the strategy should not be only about 'terms' and 'vocabulary' but about ways of speaking, writing and communicating. Norma'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 communicating about, the somatic.

## **WAYS FORWARD**

- There is scope for Grand Gestures to explore creative ways of communicating the results of this research about the value of the somatic dimensions of their work; through film and through Happenings, in particular. There is particular scope within this for further academic-practitioner collaboration and partnership.
- This research has focused on one specific facet of the Grand Gestures approach. This has meant that other elements of its practice have gone relatively unexamined. In particular, the Grand Gestures approach works in many ways to offer new stories about, images of and representations of ageing; representations that disrupt and run counter to many of the ways that older people are conventionally represented in the media, for example. Their somatic approach relates to this, but these important issues about the politics of representation haven't been considered here. This is another area for future research.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that the Grand Gestures approach to working with people with dementia is ground breaking and successful. The value of this somatic, improvisational, approach to arts based dementia work would repay more detailed research.



## **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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