

# Becoming the Dancing

**Bettina Neuhaus (Netherlands)**

## **Introduction**

If a sugar cube is put into a glass of water, a fascinating process can be observed: at first the sugar cube retains its shape as a clearly defined object in the water. If one takes a sip of the water, one's taste buds might not even detect the presence of the sugar cube. After a while the cube starts to crumble and begins to dissolve until even the tiniest sugar crystals have disappeared. Taking a sip of the water, one's taste buds discover that it has turned sweet.

The following self-interview sheds light on how – similar to the way sugar dissolves in water, suffusing it with its sweetness – Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT) permeates different dimensions of my artistic practice as a dance artist and how it emerges as a palpable presence in all its facets.

In my artistic work, SRT manifests itself in how I approach generating and exploring with movement as well as in my overall practice of dance-making. The latter is especially informed by the principles of attentiveness, *letting go* and appearing and disappearing. These principles aid with developing availability and responsiveness to what is arising and with exploring ways of participating in the act of dancing.

Becoming available to the possibilities offered by a situation and its context – whilst 'listening' to body-mind-heart and continuously refining awareness, choices and actions – has for me crystallized into a particular practice of paying attention and responding to what is imagined and/or sensed and felt moment by moment. It is through attentiveness that my being engages and participates fully in emerging movement material and the composition. Similar to the way in which connective tissue spreads as a three-dimensional elastic web through the entire body, the process of attentiveness has become a lively fabric spanning my artistic practice.

The following conversation is derived from audio recordings made during several studio sessions in which I alternate between being an interviewer and interviewee whilst dancing. The conversation reveals my dance practice in both its material and ephemeral natures. It reveals

dancing to be a process of becoming and disappearing, in which an ongoing refinement of attentiveness also enhances the process of *letting go* while embracing change or transformation. Underpinning the dialogue are SRT principles that are at the heart of my artistic practice.

### **How would you describe the essential characteristics of paying attention?**

When considering attentiveness, I find that characteristics and images come to mind: it is dynamic and relational; it operates like a light beam that is always modulating, shifting and varying in amplitude from a concentrated small dot of a laser beam to a wide, soft ray. It elongates, shrinks, opens, expands, is still and scatters.

Anton Ehrenzweig proposes that we can differentiate between the mode of attentiveness that is steered by our conscious intention and thinking processes and that which is more “multi-dimensional, polyphonic and scattered” (Ehrenzweig, 1967, cited in Pallasmaa, 2011: 65). The latter operates on a subconscious or unconscious level. It apprehends more complex and divergent data, such as images, which can become an essential mode of inspiration for creative processes. In my own practice I observe that I continually oscillate between these inextricably intertwined modes.

I suggest that the nature of attentiveness is motion with its inherent fluctuation and morphing quality. Paying attention is in itself an inner movement through which I experience my being navigating through time and space. Being attentive engages the entire body-mind-heart, which includes the senses and imagination. I perceive paying attention to be a highly creative act that is always present while in the waking state; it is the expansion and fine-tuning of it that guides and enhances my artistic process.

Moreover, attention is inherently relational. As I pay attention to something, my awareness expands, is directed and reaches out towards something or someone and connects with it. This dynamic is reciprocal: what I pay attention to, is in turn, connecting with me. As I touch I’m being touched; as I see, I’m being seen. Paying attention means building a relationship. Thus, attentiveness exists solely by virtue of my relation to self and to ‘other’: an object or person I see, touch or hear; a movement, a sound, a sensation, an image or a thought.

## **What role does SRT play within your practice of attention?**

Often I embrace *doing less* or move into being still – this is something I have especially learned from SRT. We are invited to experience moments of *just being on the floor* or *just being*, which support the process of refining attentiveness. We practice being open and available to whatever comes into our awareness wherever we are. I'll often move in what Joan Skinner calls a *watchful state*: being fully present while practicing *doing less*. I am moving as a *dynamic* stillness. With ongoing practice we become adept at maintaining a *watchful state* during any activity, even when we are immersed in highly energetic dancing. There is an inner stillness.

Becoming still *and just being* are places in which I experience how *letting go* and activation live together. Taking and giving time to staying a little longer with what I am paying attention to sometimes opens into a vast field of information and future possibilities.

## **Can you concretize how paying attention is an integral part of your practice?**

The following are examples of windows into my practice. Depending on my activity and what my attention is focussing on, a window gives insight into a particular 'site' or area of my practice.

Window 1 captures occupying a place of 'being with' what is experienced when standing, sitting or lying down. In Window 2 I focus on discovering details within the process of paying attention while moving in simple ways. The later example, Window 3, reveals how details appear and disappear in my attention while dancing vigorously and using more complex movement material.

### **Window 1: - Wandering through poetic terrain**

Knelling on the floor, allowing my attention to wander.

Almost immediately it detects the sensation of my legs and feet touching the ground and the ground touching me.

As I stay with this sensation, things shift and move.

My skin becomes permeable, allowing the ground to 'rise' throughout my body.

For a moment my attention spreads out.

A felt sense of ground in its horizontal presence stretches out as an infinite landscape of which I am part.

I'm taken into its depth as my imagination takes me to the centre of the earth.

The ground bends into the all-covering surface of the earth, becoming its skin.

This spacious image reflects immediately back into my body, offering a sense of dimension and volume.

Details of my shape drift through the foreground of my awareness: collarbones floating above the fold of my legs, my body in space and space in my body.

Attentiveness keeps my attention meandering through infinite layers, searching for details.

As my shins continue opening to the ground, the arches of my feet face the ceiling, providing a sense of the vast space behind me.

Two minutes have passed since I started kneeling on the floor. My mind is in a different state: thoughts that were present before have vanished; my mind is quiet, alert.

I feel more anchored in my body, energized and more receptive to my surroundings.

I'm emptier - I'm fuller.

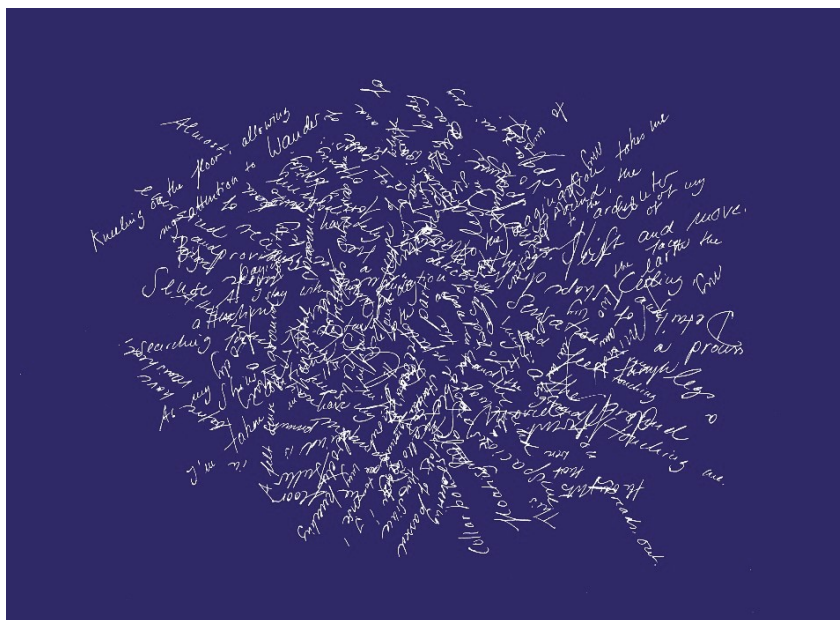
By paying attention I have moved through a process and I have changed.

Capturing my experiences in words results in a linear sequence which, when being read, engages the linear thinking mind that navigates through text, unravelling it word by word. But the original bodily experience differs because movements, sensations and processes are happening at the same time: blood, lymph and cerebrospinal fluids are flowing, each at its own pace; the heart, the breath and the organs are operating in their individual rhythms as all vertebrae coordinate into spiralling whilst an arm is performing a smooth gesture and the eyes a minuscule, percussive blink.

In every moment a multitude of movements flow and their oscillating frequencies, each with its unique 'voice' and 'tune', arrive simultaneously and interact. Some might be more prominent, vigorous or fierce, while others are quite soft and tranquil or even imperceptible in the background. But removing any of the participating 'voices' would unavoidably alter the

whole. This bodily process of synchronized and interacting ‘voices’ I think of and describe as ‘polyphony’ of the body.

Experimenting with ways to capture some of the radial and multi-layered nature of this ongoing polyphonic process resulted in a layered writing that is similar to a palimpsest.



Drawing and photo: Bettina Neuhaus. Photo editing: Edwin van Munster

When I’m dancing and composing, this ‘polyphony’ becomes a multi-directional field.

Being led by my attentiveness and steering myself to follow one creative path or another becomes an interplay of tuning and playing that turns into a voyage of me moving within this multi-directional field through time and space while the dance and composition unfolds.

The act of dancing is another ‘site’ upon which I can disentangle aspects of my process of paying attention:

[.....]

The rest of the chapter can be read in

**Skinner Releasing Technique: A Movement and Dance Practice**

A Paperback edition by Manny Emslie in English (27 Sep 2021)

ISBN-139781913743291 - Publisher Triarchy Press