

What I write about writing/dancing/writing

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Abstract

Artistic writing as research is in itself a method of making for artists in the academy. As creative practitioners in performative research paradigms (Haseman, 2010) we engage with a critical dialogue with/in the practice of writing through our artistic approaches. When writing and carrying out research, I propose that the artist adapts to an approach in line with their discipline(s). For me, this is in dance/theatre scholarship and practice; where writing may occur in tandem with disciplinary choices, provocations, prompts and interrogations.

I'm reflecting on the durational performance research project I'm writing while dancing and writing. The project titled *Move* contextualises iterative processes of dance improvisation while *writing/dancing/writing* with human and more-than-human partners, during the isolation necessitated by the Global Pandemic. The *camera-dancer dyad*¹ instigates provocations shooting still and moving image clips while improvising in-the-moment as part of writing and dancing as processes. Subsequently, the *camera-dancer dyad* process also archives three years worth of still and moving images as an ageing dancer. While advocating for ageing dancers to be visible, the lack of access to fellow collaborators and performance opportunities forced me to adapt while making and writing during the Global Pandemic.

Keywords: writing dance, artist-as-researcher, improvisation, dance and ageing, global pandemic

¹ Nikolai, J. (2016) The camera-dancer: A dyadic approach to improvisation. *The International Journal of Screendance*, 6 (Spring).

Lo que escribo sobre escribir/bailar/escribir

Resumen

La escritura artística como investigación es en sí misma un método de creación para los/las artistas en la academia. Como practicantes creativos/as en paradigmas de investigación performativa (Haseman, 2010) nos involucramos en un diálogo crítico con/en la práctica de la escritura a través de nuestros enfoques artísticos. Al escribir y realizar investigaciones, propongo que el artista se adapte a un enfoque acorde con su(s) disciplina(s). Para mí, esto es en el estudio y la práctica de danza/teatro; donde la escritura puede ocurrir junto con otras elecciones disciplinarias, provocaciones, indicaciones e interrogatorios.

Con este artículo reflexiono sobre el proyecto de largo recorrido de investigación en performance que estoy escribiendo mientras bailo y escribo. El proyecto titulado *Move* contextualiza procesos iterativos de improvisación de danza mientras se escribe/baila/escribe con compañeros humanos y más que humanos, durante el aislamiento de la pandemia global. La diáda cámara-bailarina instiga provocaciones disparando clips de imágenes fijas y en movimiento mientras improvisa en el momento como parte de la escritura y la danza como procesos. Posteriormente, el proceso de diáda cámara-bailarina también archiva tres años de imágenes fijas y en movimiento como una bailarina que envejece. Mientras abogaba por la visibilidad de los/las bailarines/as mayores, la falta de acceso a colaboradores/as y oportunidades de actuación me obligó a adaptarme mientras hacía y escribía durante la pandemia global.

Palabras clave: escribir danza, artista-investigador, improvisación, danza y envejecimiento, pandemia global

What I write about writing/dancing/writing²

Critical, contextual framing of writing/dancing/writing

Introductions to academic writing remain worthy of consideration as artistic researchers continue to experiment with critical scholarly writing. Writing is a practice developed through repeated critical reflection while we make, review, compose for publication or examination within the academy. As research methodologies: practice-oriented, practice-led research, studio-based research (Barrett and Bolt, 2010), comprise diverse points of departure for how practice contextualises, leads or supports artistic research.

The practitioner writing as reflection-in-action (Schön, 2009) embeds critical reflection and commentary within the methodological process individualised by research responsive to or guided by practical enquiry. I write this as an artist-as-researcher, lecturing and researching at the academy. I write as a creative process and advocate for diverse ways of composing work-in-progress. Performative research writing, alongside archives, artefacts, our exhibitions and performances diversifies and leads to an embodied process as a method. I believe the embodied process as method-in-making through writing/dancing/writing, is similar to that of artist-as-researcher. Gathering provocations as an approach to experimenting with tactics, strategies and iterative generation invites a playful generation of embodied approaches, with artistic writing as research.

The history of writing around practice in the academy, spans the arts practices. Sullivan (2010) encourages individual or preferred methods adopted by artists as opposed to prescribing specific analytical frameworks to the process of writing theory and practice. In art practice “research draws on knowledge and experience and uses structures or enquiry designed to increase the human capacity to intervene, interpret, and act upon issues and ideas that reveal new understandings” (pp.102).

Burchenal (1998) recognises a paradigm shift in the context of academic writing on practice processes. Unlike learning how to write about artistic research, artists may write from the skills developed through their (years of) art practice. The works of art being created negotiate or guide writing approaches in a manner that suits a process or aesthetic direction.

² A response to Murakami, H. & Gabriel, P. 2008. What I Talk About When I Talk About Running: A Memoir. 1st U.S. ed. Alfred A. Knopf. Haruki Murakami's (2008) book on writing and moving practices while experiencing the process of ageing.

Equally a challenge and an opportunity for artists as researchers lies in what Renwick (2006) identifies as challenging the theory and practice stages of synthesis. In practice-based making, reflecting, writing, in any cyclical manner therefore “by naturally crossing strict divisions, both academic and cultural, an epistemological challenge for practice-based research becomes to synthesise” (pp. 180). Synthesis of theory/practice may be synonymous with making and writing, with embedded theory/practice.

The use of the term practice may imply a vocational and a theoretical component that are in some ways separate. It may be accepted that studio-based work is practice and written work is theoretical. This scenario can be avoided – there may be an interlinking of the activities. Otherwise, neither is relevant. This novel interpretation is the result of a creative impulse which is informed by many elements, including knowledge of facts (Conchubhair 2005).

The theory/practice synthesis, as suggested by Coe et al. (2002), includes the dancer in the writing process. In this instance, the artist as dancer is integral to the writing process, the dancer-writer. Alys Longley (interdisciplinary artist) shapes the performance writing discipline as much as the process of performance practice and writing in the context of living and making in Aotearoa New Zealand. Longley’s (2021) ‘light hearted’ approach to writing as scholarship refers to practices of ‘performance making and crafting’ as experimentation (pp. 280). I liken this to improvisation with forms including written, danced, sketched and photographed moments³. Performance writing scholarship with a light touch, a non-proprietary approach that contextualises a space, as Longley (2021) suggests and leads to performance writing as its own buoyant form. Performance writing as a space analogous to creating with dance, with breath and buoyancy carries its own breath. The lightness implied by Longley (2021) echoes the inspiration that Longley’s work provides to the performance writing context; practitioners experimenting with forms that suit the process of artistic creation.

I would also like to mention choreographer and writer Tru Paraha, maker of literary and performance works in Aotearoa New Zealand. Paraha contextualises a responsiveness to the experience of living, making, writing performance/scholarship in Aotearoa New Zealand. Paraha (2018) identifies the challenges for performance writers, for dance writers as “palpable tensions for the artist-as-witness of the twenty-first century” (pp. 49). Webbed between global performance, writing projects and the domestic, ancestral, geo-cultural contexts from which we are born or migrate to and from, Paraha (2018) also mentions a lightness, the sky in which we contemplate and the water that carries us.

³ Alys Longley acknowledges her visual approach to writing (2021) as supported by visual layout and photography supported by Jeffrey Holdaway.

Jo Pollitt (2019) contextualises the *writing as dancing* project process as it “aims to uncover the embodied texts of a dancer to make the energetic, choreographic and imaginative state of performance visible in words” (pp. 2). Pollitt (2019) discusses embodied knowledge that the dancer carries as a kinaesthetic transfer to the audience, the viewer. In the Paraha et al., (2021) collaboration (with Pollitt, Raheem, Schmidt), Amarra Raheem uses the concept of reader as mover, the embodied experience of a subtle warm-up that brings the submerged body of the reader into the body of spoken text.

My narrative

My research historically applies technology in the form of the handheld camera or a smartphone (digital) camera. I’ve created and written works based on how handheld recording devices may lead to curatorial choices, compositional openings and exhibition-based viewing. The experimental improvisation between moving and dancing with a handheld camera leads to reminders of play(fulness) that otherwise may not be provoked.

I propose a critical methodology crafted through years of studio research in improvisation; a *camera-dancer dyad* (the camera in the hands of the autonomous dancer) invites sustained practice(s) as ways of looking, enquiring and creating (Nikolai, 2016). My position towards writing at the academy is referential to the parallels between the visual practice of seeing, composing, recording and reviewing moving images. The practice of capturing recorded still and moving images while looking through the lens during improvisation is synonymous with the act of making words that guide the movement choices I improvise with while moving, speaking or writing as I’m moving.

Alternatively, the camera in my hand, while dancing also guides what I want to take a closer look at, what I am attracted to, through the dyadic process or through the lens that guides my next move. The camera is guided by the mover’s agency as opposed to that of the camera-person, distanced from the shot choices made in-the-moment by the improvising dancer. The hand-held camera in an improvisation with the dancer guides the choices as the *camera-dancer* in tandem. Compositional choices are informed, through the frame and in the space shared between moving and capturing, in-the-moment, informing choreographer and camera-operator as shared (Dodds, 2004).

Pas de deux

Through everyday technology, dancers can partner with playful provocations that double as a variation on the *pas de deux* theme. During the Global Pandemic, I stopped dancing in public spaces. I no longer had access to open classes, studios and shared spaces or other collaborators to have dialogue with. I began writing more. I wrote as an embodied practice, then adapted my writing into storyboards. I started sketching storyboards showing figures moving within the frame with a brief reference to shot types and camera angles, suggesting my presence in the frame (although subtle) but intentionally de-centring myself. I began writing. Writing led to storyboarding. Storyboarding led to location allocation; in the context of this project, location was determined by strict lockdown rules to remain within my residential post code. So the paper from my printer and the beach I see from my living room window guided my first provocation.

I soon became aware that I would not be casting fellow dancers in the near future. Therefore, I continued to trial self-portraits, bringing storyboarded sequences to life through handheld recordings of short movies on my smartphone in 2020. As I archived my daily movies, I began improvising with the themes arising. I recognised that I had improvised my solo approach to the thematic development of a short *screendance* piece I refer to as *Move*.

My writing as I dance similarly reflects on writing as a provocation for my recent theory/practice synthesis titled *Move*. *Move* is a collection of still and video images captured as I danced during the Global Pandemic in 2020, 2021 and 2022. Hence, this process of writing/dancing/writing relies on methods of improvisation and composition as works-in-progress during a three-year creation process during mandated isolation.

My reflexive practice contextualises writing/dancing/writing as I age; an ongoing research project I co-collaborate on advocating for lifelong moving. We (Nikolai & Markula, 2021) propose that we have developed an approach to digital dance theatre “to empower mature dancers to act as agents of their own, ageing, performing bodies as it disrupts negative assumptions about ageing female dancers’ bodies and abilities” (pp. 111).

Ageing and dancing continues to carry the possibility of being visible, of changing states as our constant. The aim is to advocate for the visible, if sometimes invisible, to shift that invisible state to impenetrable visibility so that ageing and dancing are observational processes. “Time is slippery. It is like water – transforming from something solid as ice to something as fleeting as vapour. It can go from being invisible to impenetrable, and the transition is imperceptible” (Tharp, 2019, pp. 173).

The autobiographical reference to my practice is significant in that I continue to discuss how making by moving relates to my writing. In this essay, I reflect on my 2020-2022 artistic research project significantly shifting my methodological approach to writing/dancing/writing due to historical and social circumstances; timed and placed within the Global Pandemic.

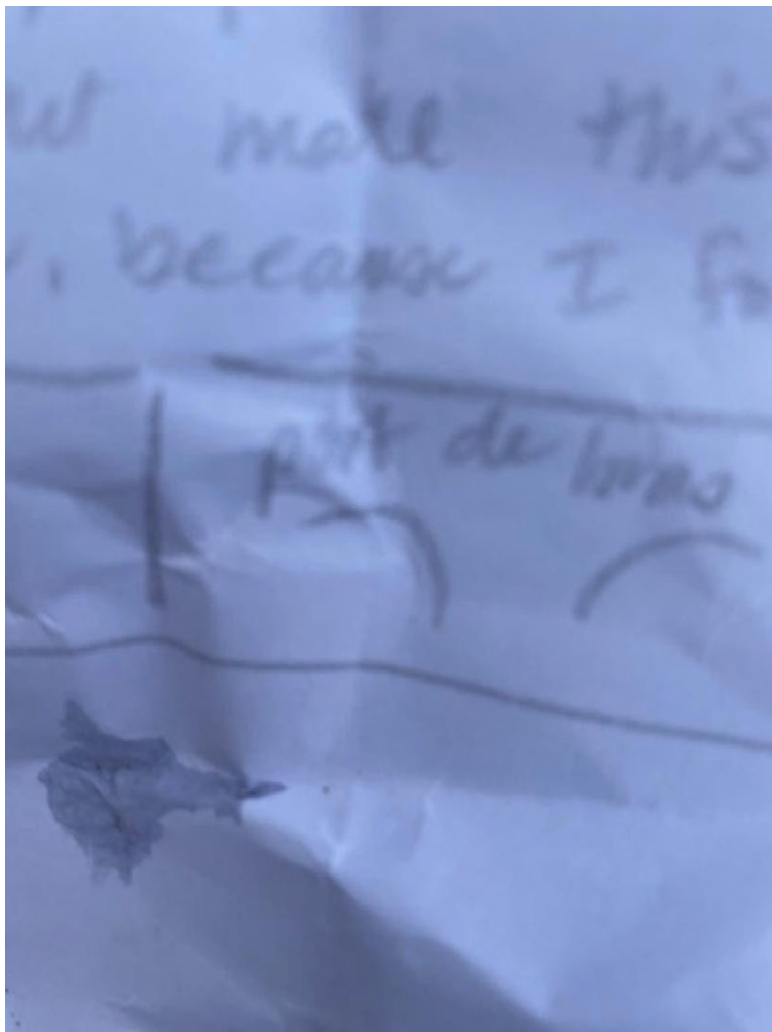


Image 1. Photo credit Jennifer Nikolai. December 2020. My first provocation. Very early stages of the *camera-dancer* process: Storyboard #1 sketched in pencil, taken to the ocean to guide improvisation; it became wet and wrinkled.

Move (2020-2022)

The project I'm still making (at the time of publication) is titled *Move*. As I shift between isolation, immobility, mobility and responses to living and making collaborative works during the 2020-2022 in Aotearoa New Zealand where I live and work, I am a guest, as I was born as a first generation settler in Canada. I've been using the mobile recording device with my storyboard sketching improvisational tasks, as provocations for how to shoot and write; between moving with my camera and moving in response to improvisations recorded on my camera.

Artist Judith Dunn refers to dance improvisation as 'compositional improvisation', where improvisation is a means of composing while performing, simultaneously. I propose that writing about embodied research as enquiry has characteristics similar to the process of compositional improvisation. When the writer as improviser considers "structure, order, space, time, materials and 'tone', and one practices daily to make these decisions quickly, consciously and with control..." (Buckwalter, 2010, pp. 108).

If I experience improvisation with camera(s), as parallel to that of improvisation of the moving body; experimenting with order, contextualising space, place, time, material, colour, tone, framing, orientation, line, shape, making conscious and quick choices while I shoot; is the camera-dancer improvisation occurring moment-to-moment?

The process of reviewing my still and moving images moment-to-moment has an iterative quality embodied between moving, writing, dancing and capturing footage for further openings. With *Move* (2020-2022), the writing in isolation twinned with the dancing and capturing in isolation, shifted my making process into the current year 2022. The shift was most significant in the themes I capture in response to the method of making in isolation with more-than-human collaborators I'd never previously partnered with.

Where to partner/duet is a co-equal relationship, each responding to the other's cues. A response between co-equal partners may be each responding to the other's cues, outputs, offerings, responses through contrast or imitation, creating a discourse in the emerging forms (Buckwalter, 2010, pp. 109).

The significance during the Global Pandemic was that I was not able to return to comfortable approaches to improvisation from years of training in theatrical and dance forms, from years of producing live and digital or hybrid performance and exhibition pieces/works. I am still not collaborating with other humans. But I am gathering movies as a source of material, to which I apply written provocations, with my more-than-human environ-

ment, engaging in provocations with my salt water, sand, seaweed, rock and camera in hand. This is how I write with camera in hand, with captured stills and movies as provocations while I write and write about dancing as I age during a Global Pandemic.

What I write about as writing dance as I age

Writing about the still and moving image(s) I compose(d), improvise(d), edit(ed), and view(ed) during the years impacted by the Pandemic (2020-2022) is my main source of inspiration for what I write about writing/dancing/writing; that I equal to Haruki Murakami's *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running: A Memoir*. Murakami (2008) reflects on the process of training for marathons as supportive of the rigorous writing process. He reflects on ageing as significant to his training regime, his recovery and his preparation for performance (running the marathon). As I age and attempt to stay mobile in my practice, I reflect on how his pondering on the ageing body in training reflects my practice as ageing in a time of restricted mobility.

Move as an iterative piece aims to challenge socially constricting stereotypes limited to youthfulness and dance. Literature critiquing social expectations that dancers are young in age is supported by research quantifying that dance encourages a playfulness associated with a life of youthful playfulness (Southcott & Joseph, 2019). So, in the context of *what I write about as writing dance as I age*, the method of iterative, generative writing/making focuses less on the ageing process and more on the practice of writing (over the years) as synonymous with that of art and writing practice.

Murakami (2008) also writes that with the practice of writing: repetition of practice and reflection on practice resonates with the objective of hybridisation of process-based methods:

I don't think certain types of processes allow for any variation. If you have to be part of that process, all you can do is transform – or perhaps distort yourself through that persistent repetition, and make that process a part of your own personality.

Phew! (pp. 68)

The repetitions that I sometimes identified with monotony, others with transformation, have become iterative variations on the first provocation theme, with subtle shifts I retrospectively associate with mobility (physical and geographic).

Move 2020

Move themes in 2020 concern space, isolation and elements of the *pas de deux* with sand and water in my residential neighbourhood despite ‘lockdown’. The autobiographical referential condition was that I would have a presence in the shots and that the stills in themselves would become writing prompts in 2020. (This characteristic also plays a role in the 2021 and 2022 improvisations).



Image 2. Photo credit Jennifer Nikolai. March 2020. Despite a lack of visible reference to other humans in my neighbourhood, traces of animal and human presence were observed. Human footprints left in the *mānawa*/mangroves on walks to my neighbourhood beach, The Waimanawa Shoal Bay biodiversity focus area on Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland's North Shore.

Locating the *Move* project in its particular cultural and historical context (Francisco, et al., 2022), a contextual reflexivity further informs my ethics of care and responsibility to the land, the water and the ancestors resonating in my approach. The emergent process carries specific observations that alter, anew. Each day I experience the unpredictable practice of writing, recording and moving with respect to my *pas de deux* partners with as little impact as possible, in the reflections and shadows of *where* I observe my wondering of *what*.

“As the relevance of improvisation in non-performing arts shows, improvisation does not always coincide with performance in the sense of a live event shared between artists and the public.” Either “*intentional* improvisation or *reactive* improvisation” acting responsively with what that moment offers in the improvisation is a characteristic of artistic improvisation (Bertinetto, 2021, pp. 28). Reactive improvisation continues to drive my methods. If I find myself going to my neighbourhood ocean locations, away from other humans, I care for the more-than-human (Haraway, 2016); the seaweed, sand, tide pools and salt water. I’m aware of the multiple possible metaphors; of dancing near muddy footprints during a Global Pandemic where signs of fellow humans are otherwise missing.

In terms of writing and making using human and non-human material, I value making amidst moving tides. The camera in my hands may support the agency of making with and around material surrounding these circumstances (Lovino & Oppermann, 2014). Can this carry a gentle approach to “material narrativity” (pp. 8) guiding a less human-centred approach to literature, to writing/dancing/writing during isolation from visible humans?

Signs of previous presence are echoed, but not visible or heard. My awareness in avoiding dualisms that might source a narrative, perpetuating matter as a metaphor, might under these circumstances open a disanthropocentric lens revealing “similarities and symmetries existing between humans and non-humans” (Lovino & Oppermann, 2014, pp. 8). The camera as an agent sees non-human forms surrounding my shadows, my footprints. Can this “playing together” of human and non-human agents lead to “new narratives and discourses that give the complexity of our collective a voice” (pp. 8)? My provocation in this narrative is shaped by choices to avoid my own image or shadows as signs of presence, but footprints instead.

Move 2021

Move circumstances during 2021 are still isolationist. As with the marathon, my attention turned to land and water; waste from land was now in the water. I find my *Move* dances aim to be light, with a light touch, light impact. There have been many years I've collaborated with dancers, cameras in our hands, dancing as an ensemble. This light treading on sand and rocks draws me closer, or draws me to take a closer look as is standard in the discipline of screendance. Screendance does not need to look like dance, in that the proscenium representation of dancers, framed through looking through a camera, asks for the presence of the camera to have an impact on dance, aside from it being choreographed before or for the screen (Kappenberg, 2008). Douglas Rosenberg (2006) would echo this in his call for "camera-looking" as "an active performance that frames an event and elevates it while 'screening out' all other information" (pp. 14).

I experience my improvisations by relying on the camera and the capacity to shoot a close-up. Brannigan (2001) identifies the close-up as having a long history in the arc of narrative storytelling (and the star persona) (pp. 39). Though in this instance, my close-up is taking a closer look at the mangroves I have not previously looked so closely at. A significant observation in my reliance on the camera as the agent is that, as I age it is a challenge to use my eyesight to see so closely without the assistance of the zoom, which I now activate through my smartphone. In the field of visual anthropology, Luvaas (2019) debates the historical weight given to the camera (as agent). The presence of the (digital) camera as less significant; being able to shoot on any camera, that getting a good shot is up to the photographer. Thus recognising that in visual anthropology there are historical attempts to "minimalise the importance of cameras... fetishising the written word instead" (pp. 76), I am now supported by the smartphone in the palm of my hand. During the Global Pandemic, when shooting my dance studies' still and moving images, my images appear alongside mundane images of my repetitive daily life. Images of family members, pets and flowers blooming in the garden, appear amidst my "reel" of *Move* documentation.

Here, Luvaas' (2019) critical debate lies in my own questioning of this "passive tool" (pp. 77). That the smartphone camera I bring to my writing/dancing/writing process has a potential "co-agent" role in image-making (pp. 78). In recognising collaborations with human and non-human materials as I create with this camera in my hand, I again agree with Luvaas recognising autobiographical age, place (demographics) and for me my ageing, with this "humble" camera in my hand seeing "along with me" (pp. 78). As a dancer/choreographer and screendance scholar/maker, I personally propose that the camera in the hands of the moving agent with their own autonomy leads to compositional investigation between the moving body (foreground/background) and the environment (background/foreground).

As I make *Move*, the ensemble is not the other humans but the non-humans that I have improvised with, and therefore this shift towards dancing with sand, shoal, seaweed and the ocean's reflective surfaces has opened an even more sustainable durational practice. I rely on my moving, dancing body. I am similar to salt water from The Pacific Ocean⁴. I find seaweed as my partner, and observe rock pools from afar; reflective surfaces form the basis of moving image studies I conduct from afar. The 'afar' refers to my intention not to touch or physically engage with seaweed or rock pools but to observe, capture and curate written provocations for future improvisations. Psarras in *Initial reflections on site-performances in the sea* (2021):

used verbs and prepositions as methodological devices with embodied and performative potential: drifting, floating, walking, standing or into, across, with are verbs and prepositions that highlight conceptual, methodological and technological aspects of selected site-performances between the artist and the sea (pp. 1).

My position is that the presence of another actor or dancer in a shared improvisation cannot be replaced. I have a melancholic response to Goldman's (2021) recognition that contact improvisation (for example) and shared dance practices "in the time of the novel coronavirus has rekindled anxiety regarding the body's permeability and the unpredictability of shared physical practices, especially those that embrace improvisation..." as this mirrors a current sense of loss, of the unknown, volatility (pp. 68).

The Pandemic, while raising the stakes of research-creation, has also shed light on the durational elements of my moving image piece/process: *Move*. The stakes raised include those experienced through prolonged isolation. How delightful is the process of walking to the ocean and improvising moment-to-moment from there!

The melancholy of not sharing physical practices of other humans carries with it a responsibility towards the partners I do share a careful collaboration with. I am not to share my weight with partner rock as I do with partner humans in a contact improvisation context (Goldman, 2021). Partners previously become more recently partner rock, sand, partner seaweed. While the lines I live along are linked to seaweed and tide pools, the reflected surfaces I look into while shooting *Move* reflect my concern for our polluted oceans. Tide pools once occupied with busy sealife, now contain rubbish, newspapers, and masks. I keep finding more masks.

⁴ The Pacific Ocean named (1520) by explorer Ferdinand Magellan; to its Polynesian inhabitants it is named Te Moananui a Kiwa - the Great Ocean of Kiwa.

The careful tread of my footstep on the rock weighs heavily. Rocks as a partner, focus on the partner, the weight of my body, transferring onto the rock. Rocks and salt water, human creatures and non-human. We as “inhabitants of the world, creatures of all kinds, humans and non-human, are wayfarers” (Haraway, 2016, pp. 2). The awareness of my body standing on a rock may not be illustrative in the image(s) but critical commentary on the presence of my body standing on a rock in the Waitemātā Harbour, Pacific Ocean, contextualises my improvisation. I see as a dancer, moving guided by the dyadic act, of choosing the shot, framing seaweed and myself. I experience a compositional enquiry with wayfarers; sand, seaweed, shadows; partnered while improvising together.

Barad (2007) advocates for the in-betweenness caught here during the Global Pandemic as the improvisational choices between non-human wayfarers and this *camera-dancer dyadic* partnership I’ve only previously experienced with human partners, holding the agency of the camera movements, camera angles and framing. Our intra-actions with the material world as improvisational partners suggest that it is the ripe time as educational scholars to shift our thinking with this collaborative embrace (Kuby, 2017).

With improvisation, the point is not to show my interaction specifically with the audience/viewers, but to interact with the object with a concentration as presence, for what this brings to the colour, texture, temperature, weight of the work, the piece, the process outcome (Scruggs & Gellman, 2008).



Image 3. Photo credit Jennifer Nikolai. October 2021. Self-referential scale within a rock pools/ tide pools partner study. Reference to partner as rock pools/ tide pools in the *Waitematā* Harbour, Aotearoa New Zealand. My responsibility remains as a guest in these waters with a duty of care. The shadow distorts the scale. How big am I, how small am I in the tide pool/partner duet?

As a process of contextual reflexivity, my *Move* project emerged due to social and historical circumstances during the years 2020-2022 (Francisco et al., 2022). I reflect on the opportunity that arose for me as a visitor to this land; Aotearoa New Zealand, emerging in my artistic identity through embodied processes of moving, being, and observing my neighbourhood waters, acknowledging the ancestors of the land I am in. The emergence of themes, topics, and research questions arising from the improvisational conditions of being in this place at this time, lead to even greater opportunities for me. I would not otherwise have made, durationally, for more than two years, iterative works as sketched, recorded, reflected upon, in and around respecting the land and waters during the Global Pandemic.

I believe that practice-oriented research during forced isolation propelled research-creation toward dance and ageing as an intentional act and action. *Move* therefore carries durational reflection, synonymous with my experience of ageing while being limited in movement, literally or figuratively, in isolation, quarantine and socially distanced. *Move* also allows me to continue to find dance partners in the reflective surface of the tide pool or wave, in the seaweed that washes against my human foot, happening in the moment while I engage with the *camera-dancer dyad*.

Move 2022

Move in isolation 2022 continues as a proposal to practice making and moving with accessible recording devices while moving (in-the-moment). Global circumstances that impact the immediacy of dance opportunities also lead to different propositions that maybe moving is no longer about the performing body being central. As with propositions, “if you restrict them to a performed body, a stand-alone object, they become judgements or evaluations” (Manning, 2008, pp.18).

Image 4. Photo credit Jennifer Nikolai. August 2021. Author captured in shadow. Newspaper washing ashore with surgical masks in the Waitematā Harbour, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. More waste washes up in the meantime but is not captured in stills or movies during the August 2021 improvisation.



Image 4. Photo credit Jennifer Nikolai. August 2021. Author captured in shadow. Newspaper washing ashore with surgical masks in the Waitematā Harbour, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. More waste washes up in the meantime but is not captured in stills or movies during the August 2021 improvisation.

We need to continue to consider the possibility that the mobile allows change(s). This ideally opens us up to an ethos of care. When noticing the increased number of surgical masks washing ashore, and the small pieces of plastic amidst paper items, still in full colour amidst a tidal pool bed, I find myself observing closely. *What to do, what to say, what to make of this? How can my theory/practice synthesise an ethical responsibility while writing and making?*

My perspective supports Sullivan's (2010); Artists writing with years of personal practice and creative insight in discipline knowledge allows for a tacit experience to substantiate as impactful towards ways of writing. That ways of doing become synthesised as one informing the other. Sullivan also inspires the artist to respond to empirical understandings to review conceptual strategies; I respond to this suggestion as implied in reflexive practice. The synthesis may lead to questioning content and contexts as problematic, towards change at a social, political, cultural or educational level (pp. 110).



Image 5. Photo credit Jennifer Nikolai. January 2022. Shadow and mānawa/mangroves provocation during beach clean-up, Shoal Bay, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Shadow-led moving image provocations 2022 become variations of previous shadow still images captured in January 2022.

Global Pandemic 2020 regulations said one could only walk within one's own post code. My 2020 daily walks where at first I storyboarded my sketched ideas, the still and movie studies in 2021 and 2022 became weekly beach clean-ups on Shoal Bay. If creative enquiry is "selecting, adapting and constructing ways of working and ways of seeing", the process of constructing and composing, might ask one to turn to "an array of practices" (Sullivan, 2010, pp. 111). I agree with Sullivan's proposal that the researcher/artist applies a suitable methodology beyond the content boundaries into open-ended methodologies. For me, the playfulness afforded in adapting a suitable methodology, an array of practices, implies a playful improvisation embedded with responsibility; an *if this then what else approach, a what if... or why not?* towards future possibilities.



Image 6. Photo credit Jennifer Nikolai. August 2022. Move now includes regular beach clean-up projects. Emergent process documentation, Shoal Bay, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. August 2022 documentation of waste informs future provocations capturing seashells and sand only, following beach clean-up projects.

What I write about writing/dancing/writing

Reflections on improvisation as writing/dancing resonate with Demircioglu (2019) on integrating improvisational elements (of performance) into the writing. That improvisational elements may prompt a creative improvisation with moving bodies that also apply to the conditions an artist sets towards writing. Choosing (physical) locations, for example, may shift any pre-conceived expectations on responding through embodied writing. Demircioglu guides the lead into a research question as *follows*: “What composes the essence of the relationship between letting-go and shaping?” (pp. 21).

The challenge for me is to avoid what I pre-conceive to shape; in studio and journaling in the written form. The shaping process ideally releases expectations for the opportunity to open observations to what is there, under those circumstances momentarily. This is a “letting go”, which I suggest also supports the writing process. Writing in the arts, as practitioner-researcher, Demircioglu (2019) refers to a process of finding ways to sense and play with each other. For example, two improvisers, one reading-acting text, the other moving; when the moving improviser let go of distinguishing the differences in their languages (the language of speaking text, and the language of moving), “our mediums merged; and some of the experiences I had inspired my decisions as I was writing this book” (pp. 147). Open play, through improvisational studio methodologies, has supported my methods of moving. The writing; provokes the moving; provokes the making, in no specific or predictable order.

Improvisation leads to attentiveness to adapt as the mover observes, takes cues, responds and considers the relationship between self and fellow improvisers. Improvisational proposals call for quick call and response. Dancing with cameras subverts existing ways of knowing, making and imagining dance which can mobilise a shared space for our choreographies as screened or shared through dialogue(s) of experimentation. Improvisation as an embodied process supporting writing/dancing/writing has been significantly motivated by Erin Manning’s (2008) suggestion of proposals as the stakes of research-creation are being pulled together.

Manning (2008) also proposes “know not what the body can do” (pp. 10). The compulsion to compose is an aesthetic drive with a will to power. As a collective will, it “activates the power of a force to move a body to its limit” (pp. 10). In the context of *Move*, I recognise signs of my own ageing as I navigate the Global Pandemic. I recognise these signs in loved ones who have lived longer than me. This is not the limitation (of ageing) that is suggested to us socially. The body moving at its limit, in contrast, has been the limited access to shared spaces, shared groups of people and as artistic researchers, limited access to fellow collaborators in itself, became the collective will where individuals pushed the

writing/body/writing to its limit. In the context of *Move* as an embodied process, ‘limitations’ act(ed) as provocations for what is (yet/still) to be adapted.

I’ve (just) gone to the beach where the *Move* process began in December 2020. In December 2020, I wrote a storyboard, identified written reflections arising from the year that had passed. My only provocation was to trial *camera-dancer* moments. The materials I used were limited: handheld camera and chalk. Chalk for writing, the handheld camera for documenting dance studies. This provocation lasted many hours, over the entire month of December.

On my first day of improvisations in December 2020, I found a piece of waterlogged wood. The wood had small holes in it. The wood lay amongst the mangroves, I gathered it as the tide went out. On that day 1: I wrote “MOVE” on the piece of wood with chalk. At the end of my *camera-dancer* process I took the wood back home. I’ve had it with me every day since then. As I conclude this text, with 2022 provocations, I return to that same beach, the same space on the sand and I (now) have (just) returned the wood. I subsequently return to my archive of still images captured on day 1 of my 2020 *Move* studies. I have multiple images of this:



Image 7. Photo credit Jennifer Nikolai. December 2020. *Move* wood found and chalk text inscribed. Materials I took for December provocations were storyboard#1, chalk and camera. While dancing on the sand in Dec 2020 I observed this surgical mask stuck in the mangroves. This is where I found the wood washed ashore, *Move* was born. Shoal Bay, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

Today, as 2022 draws to a close, I observe that there are no surgical masks washed up on the shore, stuck in trees, hanging from random branches in multiple ocean locations. Today, I return the *Move* wood, and notice that the text I wrote in December 2020 has faded significantly, is less than recognisable and 2023 is rapidly approaching. After 2020, there was 2021. After 2021 there was 2022. If I carried *Move* as a piece of wood, as a process of writing, dancing, writing some more, then dancing again; from 2020 into 2022, with writing/dancing/writing what is left now?⁵ I experience a melancholy, leaving the *Move* wood behind with the chalk text to wash up on another shore. The unknown circumstances of the past three years still carry the unknown ahead. I recall this sense of melancholy in 2020, acknowledging the loss of improvisational partners, a loss of contact, as we lost the flesh to flesh partners of contact improvisation.

What do I talk about when I talk about dancing, while ageing during a Global Pandemic? I talk about the process that has been; that has maintained my dancing from 2020 to 2022 while I age. While I observe through more-than-human partnerships, while I collaborate with partners in a manner not previously experienced; what is left on this page, is that which move(s). The proposal that is left, is that which illuminates the writing/dancing/writing process adapting to mobility, to ageing while writing and dancing, proposing that we still move.

⁵ What is left now is inspired by Schmidt, T. (2018) "What's Left on the Page." *Performance Research*, volume 23, no. 4-5, pp. 343-346.



Image 8. Photo credit Jennifer Nikolai. November 2022. *Move* wood returned, after remaining with me and my process since December 2020. Back to Shoal Bay, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

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Jennifer Nikolai's research platform questions and investigates how 21st-century digital technologies can support the creation and presentation of dance performance, framed in her research as the camera-dancer dyad. Jennifer's practice-led methods are grounded in over two decades of experience as a dancer, choreographer and scholar. Jennifer lectures in the School of Sport and Recreation at AUT University Aotearoa New Zealand where she also supervises Master's and PhD research projects. Nikolai conducts research in Aotearoa New Zealand where she resides and in Canada, her country of origin.

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