



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **Spiritual corporeality: towards embodied gnosis through a dancing language**

Tunca, S.A.

### **Citation**

Tunca, S. A. (2023, October 31). *Spiritual corporeality: towards embodied gnosis through a dancing language*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3655503>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3655503>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# **Spiritual Corporeality: Towards Embodied Gnosis through a Dancing Language**

Proefschrift  
ter verkrijging van  
de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit Leiden,  
op gezag van rector magnificus prof.dr.ir. H. Bijl,  
volgens besluit van het college voor promoties  
te verdedigen op 31.Oktober 2023  
klokke 13:45 uur  
door  
Suzan Ayşe Tunca  
geboren te Rottweil (DE)  
in 1975

**Promotor:** Prof.dr. Janneke Wesseling

**Copromotor:** Dr. Sher Doruff, Stockholm University of the Arts

**Promotiecommissie:**

Prof.dr. Kitty Zijlmans

Prof.dr. Anke Haarman

Jeroen Fabius (Amsterdamse Hogeschool voor de Kunsten, artistic director DAS  
MA Choreography)

Dr. Bryan Brown (University of Exeter)

# Spiritual Corporeality: Towards Embodied Gnosis through a Dancing Language

## Table of Contents

Table of Contents .....	2
Prologue .....	7
I, my dancing body, and You .....	9
Perspective and context .....	12
Staging dance knowledge: artistic-epistemic framing .....	15
Research questions .....	17
Dance Language .....	17
Dancing Language .....	19
Argument .....	22
Key concepts .....	23
Chapter Overview .....	32
Intentional dispositive .....	35
PART I .....	36
Weaving together corporeal language and verbal discourse: history and method .....	36
CHAPTER 1.....	37
Circling around the unspeakable: .....	37
situating the gap between wordless corporeal language and verbal discourse .....	37
Historical positioning. Circling around the unspeakable with dance and words .....	38
Dance: between the corporeal and the metaphysical .....	49
Diving deep and reaching high: underneath and beyond the rational .....	55
Spiritually ignited: the beginnings of modern dance.....	58
CHAPTER 2.....	60
Invitation to Join the Dance: .....	60

bringing together dance theory and academic scholarship on esotericism.....	60
Invitation to dance: Western esotericism .....	60
Altered states of knowing - spiritual corporeality - embodied gnosis.....	64
Where being and knowing embrace: dancing the imaginal .....	68
Reason, Faith and Gnosis as foundations for constructing worldviews .....	70
Towards a Dance Language .....	71
CHAPTER 3.....	76
Dancing Language between Mind and Matter: .....	76
methodology of a dialogue between corporeal theory and discursive practice.....	76
Dancing language between mind and matter .....	77
Complementarity .....	78
Corporeal Theory + Discursive Practice = Dancing Language .....	80
DANCING LANGUAGE.....	85
Retrospective dance writing as documentation and research method .....	87
A dancing methodology .....	92
Methodological positioning .....	96
PART II .....	99
Towards Embodied Gnosis through Dance.....	99
CHAPTER 4.....	100
Into the Subtle Body: Esoteric Forms of Thought and Body-Based Practice.....	100
Through a dancing language towards embodied gnosis .....	100
Into the subtle body: exploring the context of the 'subtle body' and related body-based practices .....	104
Rudolf Steiner and Eurythmy .....	110
George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866-77? - 1949) and Movements .....	123
Rudolf von Laban and esoterically inclined modern dance .....	129
The Sema Ceremony and the subtle body in esoteric Islam .....	134

Carl Gustav Jung: the somatic and the spiritual unconscious .....	144
Authentic Movement: esoteric influences in contemporary dance.....	149
Conclusion .....	151
CHAPTER 5.....	154
Attuning: orientations for corporeal consciousness in dance .....	154
Through embodied gnosis towards a dancing language .....	154
Attuning the Dancing Body .....	156
Attuning .....	158
For Dance: let it pass through you .....	158
Preparing the canvas.....	163
Opening to a dialogue with the real .....	169
Tuning the psychophysical tonality .....	176
Activating Axis of Reverence.....	182
Euthus Body .....	186
Conclusion.....	194
CHAPTER 6.....	198
Dance, Music and Dance Language in SEI.....	198
SEI.....	198
SEI#1.....	201
DUE.....	205
SEI & DUE .....	208
TRE .....	209
SEI#3.....	211
SEI.....	214
CONCLUSION.....	215
Revisit – Remember .....	215

The path traversed .....	218
Potentialities for knowing .....	221
Artistic Research .....	225
To be continued .....	226
Intentional dispositive .....	227
Epilogue.....	228
GLOSSARY.....	229
SUMMARY.....	238
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	240
Curriculum Vitae .....	254





## Prologue

Welcome to my research.

I wish it to be yours as well.

Whenever I say I, me and mine,

I would like you to be able to think and feel I, me and mine as well.

Because we all carry a body and we mostly don't really know and understand what is living in the depths of it's being.

Or how our movements relate to the nature, origin and belonging of our inner life, to each other, to our earth and the life of the cosmos.

May I invite you to dance this search, to search this dance together with me?



*The logic of a dancing body, 3: Infinity Loops* <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/824480971/1dd90ae21f>  
ATD (Amsterdam school for Theatre and Dance), 2015.



## **I, my dancing body, and You**

I have a lifelong relationship with my body. It speaks to me, and I speak to it. Although we are well acquainted with each other, we often do not understand each other. There remains something intriguingly unknown about the nature and meaning of the spaces between my sense of self, my body, other bodies and the world in which our bodies live. Where do our bodies begin and where do they end?<sup>1</sup> My body can do much of the work of life without me attending to it. While my inner being can be drawn out of my body into a text, an artwork, a person, or something else, my body never forgets gravity, knows how to stand upright, how to walk and to reach out – without the delay of hesitation - to an other who might be stumbling next to me. Who or what animates my body? How is this who or what intertwined with other bodies, our planet and the cosmos? What difference does it make if my inner being is consciously inhabiting my body from the top of my head to the tip of my toes, or not? Is my deepest sense of self corporeal or incorporeal, or both at the same time, and is this deepest sense of self the same for everybody? These somewhat naïve but fundamental questions create the momentum for the movements of my research. It is through experiencing my body in dance, that the continuity of this momentum is maintained, while in the meantime propelling the research forwards. I seek possible responses to these questions through a dancing dialogue between my ever-morphing dancing body and the ever-expanding sense of self it imparts on me. Through dance, the human being I am becomes *differently* than without dance. I see the dancing body as a complex and creative interface between spirit and matter. To dance, can allow a human being to perceive oneself as taking part in and belonging to two worlds at the same time. To be and to belong to something intangible yet real and to concrete physical reality simultaneously. I search for how to communicate this intangible reality as I perceive it through the dancing body. To allow it to infiltrate physical reality and to enter the interiority of whoever encounters this text and the dance that grows in parallel with it. I do not know what it is that I imprint into space with dance, but there is the urge for it to come out of me. Through dance, it speaks about something unspeakable<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Thank you dear Janneke Wesseling for raising this question during a conversation about this research.

<sup>2</sup> For a study about “the unspeakable” in relation to music and esotericism see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Unspeakable and the Law: Esotericism in Anton Webern and the Second Viennese School,” 2010, 329–354.



*DUE* rehearsal Amsterdam, DAS. 2.2.2020.

With this dissertation, language dances in body and words. It is a dance moved by a thirst for mutual illumination of corporeal ways of (not) knowing and communicating and other dimensions of verbally articulated discourse.

Swaying like a pendulum between words and experience, between experience and words, meaning perpetually conceals and reveals itself. At times, words and experience eclipse each other, at other times both shine their light on each other brightly, sparking meaning and insight where movements of thought and body find and infiltrate each other.



*SEI*, fragment No.6, slow. Amsterdam, Broedplaats de Lely 30.9. 2018.

## Documentation

The creative process of the dance and music performance SEI in collaboration with composer Giuliano Bracci<sup>3</sup> is documented using the method of *retrospective dance writing*\*<sup>4</sup>. Fragments from video recordings of rehearsals and performances are here annotated from the first-person perspective of a dance experience.<sup>5</sup>

## Glossary

A selection of ideas and concepts that came into being through the dialogue between the movements of my body and other fields of discourse are gathered in the glossary. These ideas are written **bold**, *cursive* and are marked with an asterisk\* the first time they appear in a chapter. Throughout the rest of the text, they are written *cursively*. Through [hyperlinks](#) you can directly navigate to this glossary to become familiar with the main ideas behind the conceptual apparatus that supports the architecture of this investigation.

## **Perspective and context**

I am writing this dissertation from the perspective of my experience of dance, as it unfolds towards a [dancing language](#)\* through my [dancing body](#)\* and written words. With my *dancing body* - which I perceive as a creatively mediating interface - I investigate relationships between the intuitively intelligible and the physically sensible, between mind and matter, between the spiritual and the corporeal. My investigation unfolds through a *dancing language* in body and words, through which I aim to communicate my quest towards proximity with an unspeakable creative source.

---

<sup>3</sup> Giuliano Bracci is a PhD candidate at ACPA docARTES. "Giuliano Bracci", [giulianobracci.com](http://giulianobracci.com), accessed 7.5.23, <https://giulianobracci.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> See also chapter three: dancing language between mind and matter.

<sup>5</sup> "Spiritual Corporeality: Towards Embodied Gnosis through a Dance Language", [researchcatalogue.net](https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/520371/2167629), <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/520371/2167629>.

I unveil, challenge and contextualize my non-verbal dance experience through other forms of [linguaging\\*](#): poetically inclined and rather abstract verbal language born from the inner realm of my dance experience and esoteric forms of thought<sup>6</sup> related to other body-based practices. I frame the relationship between the inner, wordless experience of my dancing body and the contextualizing verbal discourse as [complementary\\*](#) to each other. Together they become a whole. In this dissertation, the *complementary* relation between the wordless danced experience and the contextualizing verbal discourse is enacted by overlapping and intersecting [corporeal theory\\*](#) with [discursive practice\\*](#). *Corporeal theory* stands for language (non-verbal and verbal) that is articulated from the first-person perspective of the dancing body. *Discursive practice* stands for verbally *linguaging* thought from the perspectives of different types of written discourse.

The relation between both modes of performing research is conceptually framed by a third discourse: the Jung-Pauli conjecture, a scientific/philosophical proposition that hypothetically posits mind and matter as *complementary* aspects of a larger unifying whole. This unifying whole is speculatively shared by both aspects yet at the same time transcends both.<sup>7</sup>

Wolfgang Pauli (1900 – 1958, pioneer of quantum physics) and Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961, founder of analytical psychology) attempted to gain a better understanding of the interface between the physical and the mental and questioned the kind of reality on which it could be grounded. They speculated about a “psychophysically neutral” reality (*unus mundus*) that would both lie beyond the categories of mind and matter as well as mediate between them.<sup>8</sup> What unites these different types of discourse (corporeal, verbal poetic and abstract based on corporeal experience, academic esoteric, scientific/philosophical), and how do they relate to my experience of dance? They are different takes on the relationship between the metaphysical and the physical, between mind and matter, between psyche and physis,

---

<sup>6</sup> To classify esoteric discourse as “form of thought” is derived from Antoine Faivre’s conceptualization of modern Western esotericism. Antoine Faivre was the spearhead of establishing Western esotericism as an internationally recognized academic field of research. Faivre held the chair for the “History of Esoteric and Mystical Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe” at École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris. See for example Antoine Faivre and Karen-Claire Voss, “Western Esotericism and the Science of Religions,” 1995, 48–77.

<sup>7</sup> The main target of Wolfgang Pauli and C.G. Jung’s joint investigation was the relationship between mind and matter, the “psychophysical problem”. H. Atmanspacher and C.A. Fuchs, “Introduction: The Pauli-Jung Conjecture,” 2014, 1-6.

<sup>8</sup> Harald Atmanspacher, “Notes on Psychophysical Phenomena,” *The Pauli Jung Conjecture and its Impact Today*, 2014, 184. (See also chapter five: Attuning).

between the spiritual and the corporeal, between the transcendent and the immanent. These perspectives coalesce in a tapestry of intertwining lines of corporeal motion, words and thoughts.

Please be invited to experience the textures of this dance and the dance of this text as a shared process of sense making that aims to unite a non-verbal corporeal dance language with movements of thought in a dance between mind and matter.



*SEI#1* fragment No.9, slow, 15.12.2018 DAS Third Forum.



## Staging dance knowledge: artistic-epistemic framing

Informed by extensive dance experience<sup>9</sup>, it seems to me to be evident that there is some kind of intrinsic relation between my corporeal being, the physical realm where this corporeality is situated, and the metaphysical realm. With the metaphysical realm I point towards a dimension of reality that is neither perceivable by the senses nor scientifically measurable.<sup>10</sup>

In dance, I intuit an unfathomable and meaningful relation between what lives beyond my skin (not only in the physical realm but reaching further, towards the intuitively intelligible realm), and what lives underneath my skin. How both relate to each other, and what the meaning of this relation could be is unknown to me. Therefore, I am investigating this relation. I am targeting my humble yet sincerely aspiring searching arrow towards a dimension of experiential reality that is not perceivable through my senses, towards what might possibly live behind or underneath sensible phenomena, towards a realm of being that causes in me the urge to seek meaning. With experiential reality I refer to what is real in my experience. I am pointing my searching arrow blindfolded, without seeing the goal, but learning to trust my inner compass, hidden in the dark depths of my corporeal being. It silently waits for me to recognize it and to listen to its hunches. Whatever it is that I cannot sense, but that I intuit, it is real to me. At the innermost point of subjective experience, something may come to light that holds truth for all of us. A ground of being, a fundamental perspective, a natural experience, a pull towards the future interlaced with the fabrics of time that could be the same for every (human) being whether we are consciously aware of it or not. I do not make claims about a true nature of reality, but I suggest that it is possible to get a glimpse of an experience of something *real\** and sacred through the dancing body understood as a creatively mediating interface between the metaphysical and the physical.

I imagine the dimension of experiential reality that imparts in me a sense of the *real* to be both immanent and transcendent to my corporeal reality. I cannot see, feel, hear, taste or

---

<sup>9</sup> I performed professionally as a dancer, choreographer, choreographic assistant, dance teacher and dance researcher since 1998. For more information see Curriculum Vitae.

<sup>10</sup> I am working here with definition 2a of “metaphysical” in the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary: “of or relating to the transcendent or to a reality beyond what is perceptible to the senses,” accessed, 30.04.2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/metaphysical>.

touch the goal that draws my searching arrow towards it. I can intuit it from the deeper layers of my body, and I experience these deeper layers more intensely through danced motion.

This intuition of the *real* moves me, at times, very deeply. It is passionately personal and aloofly impersonal at the same time. It is the experiential foundation on which this research builds its questioning lines of thought and motion. In dance, I seek to gain proximity with it. It pulls my inner being towards it with a subtle yet mighty force. Through dance, I seek to find ways to articulate and to communicate this inner movement that magnetizes my inner being into proximity with an unspeakable sense of the *real*.

As I need to give the unspeakable a verbal container that allows me to identify and to communicate to a certain extent what this research is about, I will address the unspeakable as a creative source.

I perform this research in and through my dancing body. With the dance and music performance SEI (the performative component of this dissertation) I develop the non-verbal/corporeal aspect of a [dance language\\*](#). Here I dance with the musical landscapes created by composer Giuliano Bracci. By discursively contextualizing the *dance language*, a [dancing language\\*](#) comes into being. With *dance language*, I refer to the non-verbal language of my dancing body as well to verbal reflections on this experience from the first-person perspective that build up towards a *corporeal theory*. With *dancing language*, I refer to the totality of this dissertation project which brings together wordless movements and verbally articulated movements of thought. The movements and the words influence and complement each other. Through this *dancing language* I question the relations between the physically sensible and the intuitively intelligible metaphysical.

I am not making assumptions about the knowledge of dance in general. I describe the knowledge of dance according to how it informs me. That some of this knowledge can resonate with the experience of other dancers is possible and intended, but not claimed.

In the context of this dissertation, my aim is not (yet) to create a transferrable movement method. It is not a research in dance education or about transferring movement ideas to other dancers. This would be a possible next step. This does not mean that (aspects of) this research could not be performed, translated or interpreted through other approaches to dance. This

also does not mean that I am writing this dissertation only for myself. I do want to address the contemporary dance community, the community of artistic researchers and other academics who are vested in the history and actuality of dance related ideas and practices and who are curious about how artistic knowledge can infiltrate and be infiltrated by other academic disciplines.

### **Research questions**

The main concern of this research is the relation between the metaphysical and the physical, between mind and matter. I explore this relation through a *dancing language*. Twisting, bending, spiraling, extending, balancing, collecting, distributing and metamorphosing movements and words, I carve into space experiences and potentialities for knowing from within the deep fibers of my being. I am questioning how my *dancing body\** can be attuned to become a *creative interface\** through which I can gain a deeper understanding of possible relations between the metaphysical and the physical. I am also questioning how I can investigate and communicate my experience and progressive apprehension of these relations through the language of dance.

### **Dance Language**

For this research, I am repurposing my dancing body from being primarily a vehicle to actualize a dance, towards becoming a creative interface that allows me to investigate relations between the physically sensible and the intuitively intelligible. My goal is to amplify an inner knowing about this relation, to learn to understand it better and to communicate it through dance and words. This so that others can participate in it's becoming, so that it can become stronger through us.

More specifically, I am interested in the performative state in an intermediary space between conscious and unconscious movement origination. From within this in between state or space creative qualities and textures of movement can emerge which are yet unknown to me. How to learn to speak and read these movements is one of the main targets of this research.

This means that I am shifting the artistic center of gravity from an emphasis on elaborating a style or an aesthetic signature of movement towards unearthing epistemic potentials from the dancing body and towards finding ways to communicate them. I aim to actualize potentialities of knowing-being through a *dancing body* that seeks to articulate a *dance*

*language* through which it can communicate a progressive sense of proximity with its creative source.

To be able to investigate and to communicate relations between the physically sensible and the intuitively intelligible through a *dance language*, I also need to become more consciously aware of the states of being that allow me to enter in proximity with that dimension of experience from where I intuit that this relation is meaningful and worth investigating. I am thus also asking how the dancing body can become attuned to gain a deeper sense of proximity with the unspeakable, with the source of its creativity and a sense of the *real* (see chapter five on attuning).

With [attuning\\*](#) I refer to intentional orientations for corporeal consciousness. It stands for cultivating and intensifying a sense of proximity with a creative source, a sense of the *real*. This requires for example making myself transparent, to clean the canvas so to speak, so that the unspeakable may communicate something of itself through my dancing body, so that the observers of the dance can participate in it, so that they can participate in its becoming.



*SEI & DUE* at Peel Slowly and See Festival, Scheltema, Leiden. 25.9.2021

## Dancing Language

With the *dancing language*, the world of words enters the stage and participates in the dance. Through a *dancing language*, I aim to unearth epistemic, ontological and communicative potentials of that dimension of experience from where I perceive to be in touch with a creative source. To allow it to speak through different types of voices.

How the *dancing language* in body and words manifests esthetically is a consequence of this artistic-epistemic framing. With artistic-epistemic framing, I am not only referring to a solely rational kind of epistemic potential. Rational intellection does play an important role in making sense of this dissertation project in body and words, but it is to another kind of knowing that this artistic-epistemic framing seeks to give argumentative space. Through a *dancing language* I seek to communicate about a region of experience that exists somewhere underneath or beyond rational reasoning. Questioning relations between the metaphysical and the physical through my dancing body and through related, but different types of discourse, implies for me also challenging and deepening my understanding of and relation to spirituality. This means that I am re-orienting both the non-verbal corporeal as well as the verbally discursive excursions towards other modes of writing and reading dance.

Following my inner compass, I reorient my understanding of dance towards its sacred and spiritual dimensions. To actualize this re-orientation, I bring together the wordless world of dance with the world of words. My goal is to enable an experience of a spiritually infused corporeality, for myself as well as for the reader of this text and for the observers of the dance. In contemporary dance and its related discourse, the presence of the spiritual within the physical is rarely addressed. On my part, however, I associate a logic of spiritual evolution with complex processes of incarnating consciousness. I posit that dance practice can give a specific perspective - other than biological, scientific, psychological or theological perspectives - on this process of incarnating consciousness. The artistic-epistemic goal is thus in fact also a spiritual-corporeal goal. It is derived from my experience of a specific kind of knowing that can be ignited through dance. The potential for this kind of knowing to grow, becomes more concrete through a progressive exposure of my inner being towards ever receding boundaries of the unknowable. Where will this lead me? I cannot know, I can only speculate. My speculations are based on intuitive hunches, fragments of thought and

intensities of wordless experience that appear from inner and outer spaces and from states of being during the dance where distinctions between the inner and the outer are dissolved. These hints lead me to other fields of discourse that circle around the relation between the corporeal and the spiritual from differing perspectives. I draw these perspectives together, with the aim to make sense, to create some kind of coherent meaning out of a dance of thought and corporeal motion.

In sum, the research questions that generate the momentum for this searching dance, for this dancing search are:

Is it possible to gain new perspectives on the relationship between the physically sensible and the intuitively intelligible through a dancing language that weaves together corporeal and verbal discourse?

How can the dancing body be attuned to act as an interface between the physical and the metaphysical through which I can investigate and communicate a sense of intimate proximity with a creative source?



*Fragment SEI, DAS Third Symposium, Amsterdam, 15.12.2018.*

<https://vimeo.com/328165248/5c9ea7a962><https://vimeo.com/328165248/5c9ea7a962>



## Argument

I perform this research in and through my dancing body. I argue that it is possible to conceive of the dancing body as a complex and creative interface that can mediate between the physical and the metaphysical. I advance the notion that the experience of dance can generate a dimension of experience and a specific state of knowing that I experience as suspended between and in dialogue with the physically sensible and with the intuitively intelligible metaphysical.

I support this argument with excursions into esoteric forms of thought and related body-based practices. I enter in dialogue with this field of discourse from the perspective of a *dance language*. This language evolves through my *dancing body* which I deliberately attune to a state of a radical opening towards the unknown, with trust.

I further argue that this specific state of knowing, for which I have developed the notion of [embodied gnosis](#)<sup>11</sup>, can be investigated and suggestively communicated through a *dancing language* in body and words. The channels for communication knit together non-verbal corporeal, verbal poetic, esoteric and scientific/philosophical discourses. By framing the relation between my wordless experience of dance and the world of words as being of a *complementary* nature I aim to facilitate a path towards perceiving the metaphysical and the physical as a spiritual-corporeal whole.

The purpose of the *dancing language* is to communicate. It includes spaces of reflective distance and relative objectivity that invite the reader and spectator to participate in this investigative journey, to make sense out of it together.

This *dancing language* speaks through my embodied being in movements of body and thought. It filters through the subjective lens of my experiences, my curiosities and my fascinations yet it is contextualized within a broader framework of related fields of discourse and practice. Relative to my ability to take you - the reader of the text and the spectators of

---

<sup>11</sup> The term “embodied gnosis” came into being through a dialogue between my dance practice and the study of esoteric forms of thought. I found afterwards one other author who arrived at the same concept, yet through other pathways and in another context: Jeff Gundy, “What Is It I Know?: Notes Toward an Embodied Gnosis,” *MQR Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 2005, 69–88.



the dance - along with me, and to the extent that both of us can remain attuned to a radical opening towards the unknown, the written text and the dance can also become a dance between you and me. It can become our dance towards *embodied gnosis*.

### Key concepts

Three key concepts function as focusing lenses, as anchors and bridges that span the abyss between the wordless corporeal logic of my dancing body and other dimensions of discourse that are brought in relation to it: a verbal poetic language born from an idiosyncratic corporeal experience, academic scholarship on esoteric forms of thought and scientific/philosophical discourse. The description of these key concepts evolves throughout this text, gaining new layers and dimensions of significance along the way.

The three key concepts are: [spiritual corporeality\\*](#), [altered states of knowing\\*](#) and [embodied gnosis\\*](#). These concepts came into being by allowing my dance practice and my understanding of it to be infiltrated by vistas opened by the academic study of esotericism.

Drawing together different types of discourse through the lens of these key concepts provides multifaceted perspectives on possible relations between the metaphysical and the physical and their potential significance. These perspectives are grounded in differing ontologies, epistemologies and worldviews. Filtered through the focusing lenses of the key concepts and in response to the research questions, the collected perspectives will be synthesized towards a concluding set of propositions. These propositions are not intended to be interpreted as being true or false, but as potentialities for knowing.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> For a proposition understood as a potentiality see Steven Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze and Aesthetics*, 2009, 2.

## ***Spiritual corporeality***

Based on a definition from Religious Studies, I tentatively define spirituality as a human practice that seeks to establish and maintain contact between the everyday world and an intuitable, but neither verifiable nor falsifiable, meta-empirical source of being, life and meaning.<sup>13</sup> Establishing a meta-empirical (metempiric) research horizon implies working with concepts and relationships that are related to empirically gained knowledge yet reach beyond empirical knowledge towards the metaphysical.<sup>14</sup>

I experience the dancing body as a [\*psychophysical resonating space\\*\*](#) that is grounded in the concrete corporeality of the body in motion, yet always also moves in relation to the metaphysical by its intrinsic relation to space, time, mind, being and known and unknown forces.

In dance, I use the term *spiritual corporeality* in a sense whereby cultivating a specific quality and texture of corporeal consciousness through attuning intentional orientations is experienced as a practice of maintaining contact between the everyday world and a psychophysically intuited metaphysical source of being, life and meaning.

---

<sup>13</sup> This understanding of spirituality is partially based on a definition by Wouter J. Hanegraaff: "I would define as a specific spirituality: 'any human practice which maintains contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning by way of the individual manipulation of symbolic systems'." Hanegraaff, "The Dreams of Theology and the Realities of Christianity," 2003, 719.

<sup>14</sup> "Metempirics," Merriam- Webster Online Dictionary: "the study of concepts and relationships conceived as beyond and yet related to knowledge gained empirically". Accessed 10.11.2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/metempirics>.



SEI threshold 4, slow. Filming session at DAS theater, July 2019, Amsterdam. Image Ester Eva Damen.  
<https://vimeo.com/507217763/339c83f36d>



In relation to this dissertation project that coalesces non-verbal corporeal discourse with different dimensions of verbal discourse, the concept of *spiritual corporeality* also embraces these complementary research components as a coherent entity that moves towards a unification of complementary counterparts. Not only the movements of the dance, but also the movements of the written text are seen as belonging to a human practice that seeks to establish and maintain contact between the everyday world and an intuitable, but neither verifiable nor falsifiable, meta-empirical source of being, life and meaning. The written text is grounded in the subtle, but nevertheless also concrete corporeality of thoughts and words that unleash movement towards the metaphysical by their intrinsic relation to inner and outer space, time, mind, being and known and unknown forces. The notion of *spiritual corporeality*

thus encompasses movements on a wide spectrum that ranges from the gross materiality of flesh and bones to the more subtle materialities of thoughts and words.

### ***Altered States of Knowing***

In the field of transpersonal psychology, a branch of psychology that includes research into spiritual and mystical states that extend beyond the limits of the personal or the individual,<sup>15</sup>

Altered States of Consciousness are defined as:

Any mental state(s), induced by various physiological, psychological, or pharmacological maneuvers or agents, which can be recognized subjectively by the individual (or by an objective observer of the individual) as representing a sufficient deviation in subjective experience or psychological functioning from certain general norms for that individual during alert, waking consciousness.<sup>16</sup>

In his article “Altered States of Knowledge: The Attainment of Gnōsis in the Hermetica,”<sup>17</sup> esotericism scholar Wouter J. Hanegraaff shifts the interpretative perspective on the philosophical Hermetica from emphasizing its Greek and philosophical characteristics to a focus on its Egyptian and religious dimensions. As these texts are based on “ineffable revelatory and salvational insights,” he assumes that they were received during extraordinary, ecstatic states of being. Rather than interpreting these texts as literary fictions, Hanegraaff interprets them from the perspective of a “hierarchy of ‘levels of knowledge’,” in which *gnosis* is seen as the highest attainable level. These altered states of consciousness are understood as “‘trans-rational’ stages of direct experiential knowledge.”<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> “Transpersonal,” *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, accessed January 24, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transpersonal>.

<sup>16</sup> Ludwig quoted in Pekala and Cardeña, “Methodological issues in the study of altered states of consciousness and anomalous experiences,” 2000, 58.

<sup>17</sup> Hanegraaff, “Altered States of Knowledge: The Attainment of Gnōsis in the Hermetica,” 2008, 128-163.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 128.

With the concept of *altered states of knowing*, I am adapting the notion of “altered states of knowledge” and its relation to *gnosis* towards my research into specific states or dimensions of knowing in danced experience. The choice for replacing *knowledge* by *knowing* has to do with an emphasis on *processes* of gradual embodiment of spiritually oriented states of consciousness that are constantly evolving, open-ended and naturally evade being fixed into pre-defined knowledge categories.

### ***Embodied Gnosis***

I propose to interpret the term *embodied gnosis* as a radical opening towards the unknown, with trust. The concepts of *spiritual corporeality* and *altered states of knowing* are a foundation for the idea of *embodied gnosis* in dance, to which I aim to give argumentative substance as a potentiality for knowing. To relate these concepts to already existing categories of knowledge, I suggest affiliating *spiritual corporeality* with ontology, *altered states of knowing* with epistemology, and *embodied gnosis* with “ethico-onto-epistemology”, a term coined by physicist and philosopher Karen Barad. “Ethico-onto-epistemology” belongs to the discursive realm of feminist new materialism. It refers to the inseparability of ethics, ontology and epistemology in the work of the creation of (scientific) knowledge.<sup>19</sup> To explore resonances between the notion of *embodied gnosis* and the discourse on feminist new materialism would be a worthwhile endeavor yet falls beyond the scope of this dissertation. One aspect that differentiates the forms of thought that circulate around (*embodied*) *gnosis* from feminist new materialism is that – to my knowledge – feminist new materialism does not include any explicit reference to the involution of spirit or consciousness as an animating force for the evolution of matter characteristic for esoteric forms of thought. For Barad for example, it is rather the entanglement between matter and meaning that is at stake<sup>20</sup>. In my tentative adaptation of Hanegraaff’s definition of spirituality, I define it as a human practice that seeks to establish and maintain contact between the everyday world and an intuitable, but neither verifiable nor falsifiable, meta-empirical source of being, life and meaning.

---

<sup>19</sup> Karen Barad quoted in Evelien Geerts, “Ethico-onto-epistemology”, accessed 31.1.21, <https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/e/ethico-onto-epistem-ology.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantumphysics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 2007.

How the interpretation of meaning in relation to spiritually oriented body-based practices relates to Barad's entanglement between matter and meaning contains a seed for a potentiality for knowing. I will not be able to water this seed here, but I would be happy if someone else would do so.<sup>21</sup>

In line with the radical opening towards the unknown that I suggest with *embodied gnosis*, I propose to keep the three key concepts – *spiritual corporeality*, *altered states of knowing* and *embodied gnosis* - as nothing more and nothing less than focusing lenses, conceptual anchors and bridges that span the abyss between the wordless experience of this dance about gaining proximity with an unspeakable creative source and the world of words in the context of this dissertation. *Embodied gnosis* might be akin to the "ethico-onto-epistemological" dimension according to Barad, yet I intend to enter my argument to substantiate the idea and experience of *embodied gnosis* through another door: the door of a *dance language* in dialogue with esoteric forms of thought and related body-based practices and with the scientific/philosophical worldview that underpins the Pauli-Jung conjecture (see below). *Embodied gnosis* suggests a process of entering and deepening a state of knowing-being in dance, where sensory as well as suprasensorial<sup>22</sup> qualities of experience, such as for example performative intuition and projected and incorporated spatial imagination, permeate and transform the corporeality of the motions of the dancer.

The noun "gnosis" can be contextualized within a broad and complex semantic field related to perception, cognition and intuition.<sup>23</sup> In Hellenistic culture, "gnosis" was understood to be a form of knowledge by which the soul of the human being would achieve liberation and salvation from being materially entangled with a physical body, in order to re-unite with the divine mind.<sup>24</sup> The kind of knowledge that is called "gnosis" is suggestive of an investigative

---

<sup>21</sup> Philosopher and film theorist John Ó Maoilearca investigates for example new spiritualist movements during the 20<sup>th</sup> century as embodied by artist and mystic Mina Bergson (sister of Henri Bergson) and leader of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in relation to Barad's new materialist paradigm in a forthcoming publication: *Revenge of the 'New Spiritualists': Lindsay Seers Meets Karen Barad* (date expected publication unknown).

<sup>22</sup> Related to "suprasensuous," Merriam-Webster online dictionary, accessed 30.4.23, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/suprasensuous#:~:text=%3A%20transcending%20the%20merely%20sensuous%20or%20sensory>.

<sup>23</sup> Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 1992, 96.

<sup>24</sup> Hanegraaff, "Gnosis," 2016, 381.

attitude that is open to divine intuition. “Gnosis” distinctly does not operate only through the intellect. It must be implemented into ethically conceived ways of life or into ethically conceived practices.<sup>25</sup> Gnosis can be described as seeking to make sense out of ineffable experiences by constructing speculative worldviews about the nature of reality.

This dissertation too, may be seen as an attempt at unearthing speculative propositions (potentialities for knowing) about relationships between the metaphysical and the physical derived from ineffable experiences encountered through a *dancing body*. “Gnosis” is based on intuitive, non-discursive and spiritual experiences that may lead to deeper knowledge about one’s self and God via imagination and transformation.<sup>26</sup>

By questioning and working with the notion of *embodied gnosis* in dance, I am performing an experimental inversion of the Hellenistic idea of gnosis (where the soul is being disembodied) by positing the body in danced motion as a potential catalyst for the embodiment, or speaking in religious terms, incarnation of consciousness (or psyche, soul, mind and spirit). This inversion stands for a performative attempt to re-embody the ancient idea of gnosis, originally understood as disembodied knowledge based on religious experience, through a contemporary dancing body situated in the post-secular era<sup>27</sup> of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

To discover a new perspective on the relations between the metaphysical, the spiritual and the corporeal in dance, this research began in 2013 with positioning the dancing body between science and religion in an academic context during a MA artistic research at the University of Amsterdam.<sup>28</sup> The relatively young sub-field of religious studies Western

---

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Pierre Mahé, “Gnostic and Hermetic Ethics,” 1998, 22.

<sup>26</sup> Hanegraaff, “A Dynamic Typological Approach to the Problem of ‘Post-Gnostic’ Gnosticism,” 1992, 17.

<sup>27</sup> The post-secular can refer to discourses that maintain a critical stance towards a hegemonic status of secularism. The main endeavor of post-secular discourses is to “re-enchant” the “dis-encharnted” experiential world partly due to processes of secularization. The religious, [or spiritual] dimensions of the world are given a potentially positive societal role by developing new perspectives on what religion [and spirituality is] and can be. Kenneth Granholm, “Esoteric Currents as Discursive Complexes,” 2013, 65. The [spiritual] in brackets is added to Granholm’s definition of the post-secular by the author of this text.

<sup>28</sup> I am very grateful for the steadfast and inspiring guidance and supervision of my MA thesis “Esoteric Dimensions in the Logic of the Dancing Body” (2015, unpublished) by Dr. Marco Pasi, Associate Professor in History of Hermetic Philosophy and related currents at the University of Amsterdam.

esotericism,<sup>29</sup> whose epistemological dynamics navigate between science and religion<sup>30</sup> has since then been a major academic orientation for the verbally discursive contextualization of the non-verbal dance language that evolves in parallel with this text.

---

<sup>29</sup> A Chair of “Christian Esotericism” was established in the Religious Studies section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études at the Sorbonne in 1965. Antoine Faivre took over the chair in 1979. The name of the chair was then changed to “History of Esoteric and Mystical Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe”. The chair for the “History of Hermetic Philosophy and related currents” is currently held by Wouter J. Hanegraaff at the University of Amsterdam since 1999.

<sup>30</sup> Andreas B. Kilcher, “Seven Epistemological Theses on Esotericism: Upon the Occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Amsterdam Chair,” *Hermes in the Academy. Ten Years’ Study of Western Esotericism at the University of Amsterdam*, 2009, 146.





*SEI#1* runthrough, studio de Vlucht, Amsterdam, 26.7.2020

## Chapter Overview

In chapter one I will retrace the beginnings of modern dance, highlighting the spiritual, religious and esoteric roots of the art of dance. I will situate the *dancing language* developed through this research in relation to the history of modern dance and in relation to a rough mapping of the contemporary dance landscape. I will emphasize the tension between non-verbal and unspeakable aspects of dance and the realm of concepts and language. I will position my dancing language as an endeavor to investigate and to communicate possible relations between the metaphysical, the spiritual and the corporeal and I lay the foundations for an ontology and epistemology of dance derived from my experience of dance as generating *altered states of knowing* underneath or beyond the rational. I will further highlight the relevance of articulating language from within the logic of dance creation and experience for dance to be able to participate in other knowledge discourses.

In chapter two, I will introduce Western esotericism, an academic field of discourse that engages with the epistemological tensions between scientific knowledge and religious belief.<sup>31</sup> I explain how the three key concepts *spiritual corporeality*, *altered states of knowing* and *embodied gnosis* are derived from bringing dance research in dialogue with this intellectual habitat. I will introduce an artistic adoption of the term *imaginal\** (a term coined by Islam scholar Henri Corbin)<sup>32</sup> as a place of knowing-being where the sensorial movement logic of a dancing body and a suprasensorial faith in – and at times “gnosis” of – an unseen, yet intuited and transcendent divine or sacred realm of being embrace each other. I will touch on reason, faith and gnosis as interpenetrating foundations for constructing worldviews<sup>33</sup> and I will map them in relation to knowing, believing and imagining as *psychophysical* performative states in dance. I will further situate my approach to *dance language* as an artistic-epistemic process geared towards a transformative knowing of being.

---

<sup>31</sup> Kilcher, “Seven Epistemological Theses on Esotericism: Upon the Occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Amsterdam Chair,” 2009, 146.

<sup>32</sup> Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth, From Mazdean Iran to Shi’ite Iran*, 1989 and Corbin, “Mundus Imaginalis or the Imaginary and the Imaginal,” 1964.

<sup>33</sup> Hanegraaff, “Reason, Faith, and Gnosis: Potentials and Problematics of a Typological Construct,” 2008, 138-139.



*SEI & DUE* rehearsal run-through, Crea Amsterdam, 23.9.21. Image Ester Eva Damen.

In chapter three I will outline the methodology. It is based on understanding the relation between [corporeal theory\\*](#) (corporeal and verbal reflections on dance experience from the first-person perspective) and its contextualizing [discursive practice\\*](#) (articulating thought in dialogue with written discourse from other fields of knowledge) as *complementary*: both approaches may at first sight appear to be incompatible with each other because of their strongly diverging logics and modalities of *linguaging*. At the same time, both taken together are seen as necessary to approximate a complete picture of a dancing body that experiences itself as a mediating interface between the physical and the metaphysical. More detailed working procedures for each component (*corporeal theory* and *discursive practice*) and the [dancing language\\*](#) that encompasses both components will be explained and brought in relation to each other and to the three key concepts. The documentation method of [retrospective dance writing\\*](#) will be looked at more in depth and in relation to the three key concepts.

In chapter four I will focus on the notion of the subtle body\* in the context of esoteric forms of thought and related body-based practices. The *subtle body* refers to a metaphysically oriented understanding of human spiritual physiology. It can also be conceived of as a mind-matter continuum that encompasses different degrees of matter-consciousness<sup>34</sup>. Subtle body awareness is associated with spiritual development and situates the human being in a context of cosmic evolution. This chapter on the *subtle body* is intersected with intermezzi,\* textual insertions that complement the main body text with my own experience of dance, contextualized in the contemporary dance field.

Chapter five describes intentional orientations for corporeal consciousness (*attuning* the dancing body towards *embodied gnosis*). These intentional orientations allow the dancing body to recognize and to stabilize its ability to function as a mediating interface that can perceive and communicate subtle yet profound dimensions of experiential reality.

This chapter is intersected with *intermezzi* that respond with theoretical moves from other fields of discourse to terminologies used to describe the intentional orientations from the perspective of the dance practice.

### ***Intermezzi***

The *intermezzi* are textual movements inserted in the main body text of chapter four and five. The main body text in chapter four (The Subtle Body) delegates the center of gravity to the theoretical/discursive domain. The main body text in chapter five (Attuning the Dancing Body towards Embodied Gnosis) delegates the center of gravity to *corporeal theory* derived from the dance experience. The aim is to create a state of dynamic balance between *discursive practice* and *corporeal theory*. The three key concepts *spiritual corporeality*, *altered states of knowing* and *embodied gnosis* facilitate fields of intersection where a clear-cut distinction between *corporeal theory* and *discursive practice* dissolves.

*Corporeal theory* and *discursive practice* blend with each other in a state of suspense between the physically sensible and the intuitively intelligible, between a gravity bound logic of dance

---

<sup>34</sup> "Matter-consciousness" is a term developed by Jay Johnston to describe esoteric subtle body subjectivities as onto-ethical desire in a process metaphysical context. Jay Johnston, *Angels of Desire. Esoteric Bodies, Aesthetics and Ethics*, 2008, 2.

and weightless heights of speculative theory. These movements enact a search for the state of *embodied gnosis* also in the written text.

In chapter six I elaborate on the evolution of the creative process of the dance and music performance SEI, the performative practice component of this dissertation. I focus specifically on how the dance language evolves through a variety of performative states accompanied, supported and inspired by the acoustic scenarios created by Giuliano Bracci.

In the conclusion I articulate potentialities for knowing that speculatively address possible relationships between the metaphysical and the physical in dance as well as in relation to contemporary society. These potentialities for knowing are based on a synthesis of the gained vistas that unfold from the main research questions. These vistas will hopefully give argumentative substance to the idea and experience of *embodied gnosis*.

### **Intentional dispositive**

It is my intention with this investigation to maintain a stance of deep humility towards the unknown while at the same time not being afraid to poke the limits of the knowable. I will not attempt to grasp or contain the unspeakable via culturally pre-determined filters of rational reasoning, religious dogma or aesthetic codification. Instead, I am searching for a way of speaking of the dancing body that seeks spiritual realization based on an intuitive hunch, that the human body has an intrinsic spiritually corporeal proximity with its creative source by its very nature. However, we seem to be mostly only barely in touch with it and dance appears to be one possible pathway to amplify the experience of this intuition.