



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).

CONCLUSION

Revisit – Remember

With this dissertation, I developed written and danced responses to the questions posited at the outset:

Is it possible to gain new perspectives on the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical through a dancing language that weaves together corporeal and verbal discourse?

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

At this point, these questions can be condensed to one central question:

How can the idea of embodied gnosis be experienced, investigated and communicated through a dancing language?

One of my goals with this dissertation was to strengthen and better understand an intuitive knowing - amplified by dance experience – about meaningful living relations between mind/spirit/consciousness and matter, and more specifically the matters of the human body. I aimed to find ways to communicate and to elaborate on this intuitive knowing through dance and words so that others can participate in its becoming, so that it may become stronger through us.

Another goal of this research was to learn how to speak and to read the movements that come from the unknown depths of a (my) dancing body. From this perspective, I wanted to explore how to shift from a conceptual and intellectual mode of reading and writing the text of the dancing body to probing into its trans-rational and sacred dimensions.

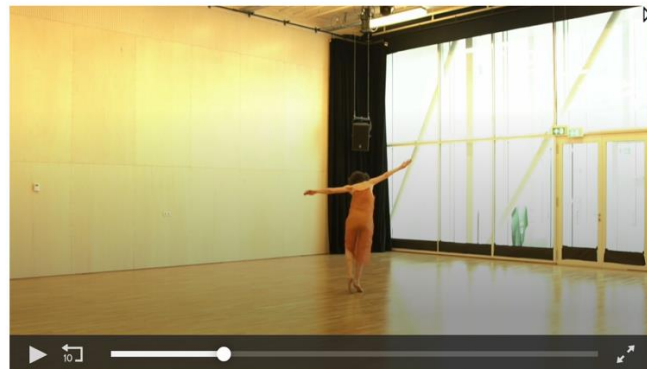
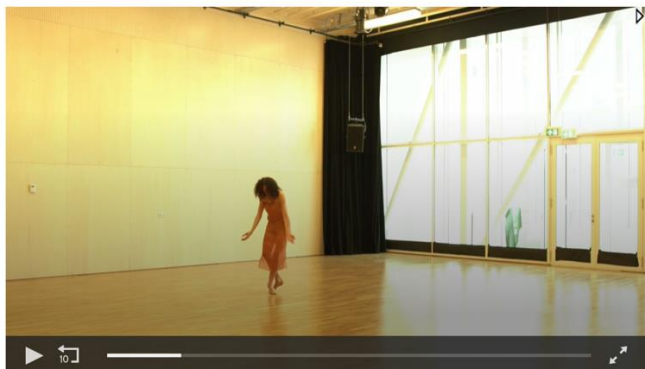
The dance and music performance SEI, the written dissertation, and the online documentation of the creative process with the [retrospective dance writing*](#) are the outcomes of these targets. They respond to the research questions from various perspectives and through non-verbal corporeal and verbal modes of [linguaging*](#).

I framed the relation between my wordless experience of dance and the world of words as complementary to each other. A [dancing language*](#)⁴⁴¹ suspended between the physically sensible and the intuitively intelligible draws both realms of experience together to become a larger [spiritual-corporeal*](#) whole that transcends their strict distinction. It bridges apparent incompatibilities between non-verbal and verbal modes of performing research through a method derived from the experiential logic of a [dancing body*](#).

Through [altered states of knowing*](#) enacted and communicated by means of a *dancing language* I hope to have carved a path for perceiving the metaphysical and the physical as mutually interpenetrating aspects of a spiritual-corporeal whole. I also hope that this path may in one way or the other eventually enable the realization of a state of [embodied gnosis*](#).

The perspectives gained through the dance and music performance SEI, the written dissertation, and the online documentation of the creative process support the main argument: that it is possible to conceive of the dancing body as an interface that can creatively mediate between the metaphysical and the physical; that an artistic-epistemological state of *embodied gnosis* can be investigated through a *dancing language* suspended between and in dialogue with the physically sensible and the intuitively intelligible metaphysical, and that the dancing body carries in itself the potentiality for realizing and communicating this state.

⁴⁴¹ See diagram 3, chapter three (“Dancing Language between Mind and Matter”), 87.



threshold 5

The voices remind me of something
beyond what we can imagine to be.

I bow my head and I open my palms.

From that place of beyond what we can
imagine to be, the dance enters back in
with yet another texture of corporeality.

It has to come down, working on it, bring
it down, bring it down.

Movements written before the moment
of this dance become containers and
vehicles to bring through the life juice of
the dance.

That juice then breaks open again what
has been written and finds another path
to spill itself outwards.

I am about to disappear in the sound.

Screenshot Research Catalogue exposition [“Through a dance language towards Embodied Gnosis”](#).



The path traversed

I began this journey with situating the gap between the non-verbal corporeal language of dance and verbal discourse in relation to a historical lineage ranging from the early phases of modern dance to latest developments in contemporary dance. Positioning dance as an artistic-epistemic practice, I highlighted how dance specific forms of knowing keep evading the analytic grip of rational understanding and pre-defined knowledge categories. I affirmed the intrinsic irrationality (or arationality) of dance. Yet I emphasized its potential for articulating knowledge from another ground for reasoning, based on *altered states of knowing*. These altered states are generated by a human body engaged in danced motion that perceives its relation to other bodies, to the planet and to the cosmos otherwise. I emphasized the need for creating vocabularies from the inside perspective of dance experience to make dance knowledge more explicit and thus able to dialogue with other fields of knowledge and discourse. I drew attention to the spiritual impulses that ignited the evolution of modern dance and to the tension between implicitly experienced embodied spirituality in contemporary dance and the problems surrounding its verbal explication (chapter one).

I invited the academic discipline of Western esotericism to, metaphorically speaking, join the dance. I elaborated on how the dialogue with this field from the perspective of dance research led to the key concepts *spiritual corporeality*, *altered states of knowing* and *embodied gnosis*. I introduced the triangle of reason, faith and gnosis as foundations for constructing worldviews and associated them with the performative states of knowing, believing and imagining. I posited that these states can blend into an experience of *embodied gnosis* if a felt experience of something [real*](#) understood as sacred occurs (chapter two).

I outlined a methodology derived from the experiential logic of a *dancing body* that experiences itself in a state of being suspended between the intuitively intelligible/metaphysical (levity) and the physically sensible (gravity). These two mutually interpenetrating artistic-epistemological orientations are drawn together through a *dancing language*.

Two [complementary*](#) variations on performing research speak to each other to enable a dance specific knowledge process: [corporeal theory*](#) (non-verbal corporeal and verbal reflections on dance experience from the first-person perspective) and [discursive practice*](#)

(articulating thought with written discourse from other fields of knowledge). Through this dialogue a different kind of sense making comes into being. It brings together various perspectives that range from the non-verbal corporeal to the verbally contemplated intelligible, from the first-person subjective experience to objectively reflective distance and philosophical speculation. A strict distinction between *corporeal theory* and *discursive practice* dissolves along the way. Through the key concepts *spiritual corporeality* and *altered states of knowing*, they are drawn together and blend with each other in intermediary zones of knowing-being suspended between the physically sensible and the intuitively intelligible in a movement towards making sense of *embodied gnosis* (chapter three).

Different perspectives on the idea of the [subtle body*](#) were explored in relation to esoteric forms of thought and related body-based practices. In *intermezzi* I dialogued with these perspectives from the point of view of my dance experience, contextualized in the contemporary dance field.

I epistemologically situated this research as walking a middle path between “naïve materialism” (i.e., scientific reductionism that is incapable of accommodating religious and supernatural phenomena) and “naïve idealism” (an uncritical appropriation and acceptance of subtle body phenomena as “real”).⁴⁴²

To be able to experiment in dance with an expanded understanding of human corporeality, I work with the *subtle body* understood as a mind-matter continuum of subtle and dense corporealities that encompasses different degrees of [matter-consciousness*](#).

This speculatively expanded idea of corporeality can inform an [artistic truth*](#) of expression that generates and makes perceivable multilayered and meaningful relations between the physically sensible and the intuitively intelligible. It can impart a sense of the [real*](#) that shines through from underneath or beyond phenomenal reality (chapter four).

I verbally described intentional orientations for corporeal consciousness to elaborate on how the dancing body can be attuned to act as an interface between the metaphysical and the physical. These [attunements*](#) are presented as psychophysical foundations for the state of *embodied gnosis* in dance through which I can explore a sense of intimate proximity with a creative source.

⁴⁴² Samuel, “Subtle-body processes. Towards a non-reductionist understanding,” 2013, 53-57.

In *intermezzi*, a vocabulary and concepts drawn from the danced experience (*corporeal theory*) are explored in relation to other fields of discourse such as esoteric forms of thought, the scientific/philosophical speculations of Pauli and Jung and other dance practices invested in embodied spirituality (*discursive practice*) (chapter five).

I outlined the creative process leading to the dance and music performance SEI, the performative component of this dissertation. In SEI, I perform a quest to enter the state of *embodied gnosis* while at the same time exploring how to communicate this quest through a non-verbal corporeal [*dance language**](#). I described how the dramaturgy of performative states that I traverse in SEI are supported and inspired by the musical scenarios created by composer Giuliano Bracci. The deepening stages of performative states become through activating a [*polyphonic body**](#) - a multilayered, sensory-suprasensory creative vehicle comprised of very dense to very subtle aspects of *matter-consciousness*.

A conclusive insight gained is, that experiencing the state of *embodied gnosis* in dance seems to be intimately intertwined with processes of *linguaging*/communicating this state with the intent to activate a resonance with it in the observers or other participants of the dance. This implies that the potential to realize this state appears to be co-dependent to some degree with its communicability.⁴⁴³

⁴⁴³ In Walter Benjamin's essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man", Benjamin defines language as always tending towards the communication of mental meanings in diverging contexts of for example art, technology, justice and religion. Language with Benjamin is the direct expression of "that which communicates *itself* in it" while the "*itself*" is seen as a mental entity. With my take on *dance language* and *dancing language* as mediators between the physically sensible and intuitively intelligible, I am exploring what is communicating *itself* through my *dancing body*, and how this non-verbal communication can become meaningful through a dialogue with other types of language and discourse that are also concerned with the relations between the physically sensible and the intuitively intelligible. That it is my *dancing body* that allows expression to unfold implies that the "mental entity" is here seen as inhabiting the entire body while at the same time transcending it in the context of a larger spiritual-corporeal whole beyond the individual entity of a dancing body. The "I" as the prism through which the unspeakable unknown that expresses itself is experienced through the *dance language* does then not only imply the consciousness of an individual human being but also the larger (unknown and unconscious) metaphysical-physical context that speaks through the *dancing body*. *Embodied gnosis* in dance is communicable when it triggers a resonance with or speak to the "I" of the observers of the dance and to the readers of this text. An inner subjective experience of a dancer can then resonate with the inner subjective experience of an observer of a dance. This experience can be mediated by an outer – speculatively objective – reality of a larger "I" shared among the participants of a dance that speaks itself through the dance. The esoteric and the exoteric then blend into each other, dissolving a clear-cut distinction between them. Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man", 2012, 233. I warmly thank Prof.dr. Anke Haarmann for her questioning which enticed me to develop this line of thought.

Potentialities for knowing

With this dissertation, I have presented insights into dance specific knowledge processes based on an understanding of the dancing body as an interface between the physically sensible and the intuitively intelligible. These insights are derived from how dance informs me. They are enriched through a dialogue with other fields of knowledge that have drawn my curiosity because they reveal other perspectives on relations between mind, spirit or consciousness and the matters of our body. These relations lie at the heart of dance as I experience it. That my discursively enriched perspective may resonate with the experience of other dancers is possible and intended, but not claimed.

In contemporary dance and its discourse, the presence of the spiritual within the physical is only rarely addressed. On my part, however, I associate a logic of spiritual evolution with complex processes of incarnating consciousness. I posit that dance practice and research can give a unique perspective - other than biological, scientific, psychological or theological perspectives - on this process of incarnating consciousness.

I hope to have been able to give an insight into how the *dancing body* can provide new perspectives on relationships between the physically sensible and the intuitively intelligible in a way that it can trigger the speculative imagination of the readers and the spectators. I also hope to have given credibility to the idea that human corporeality can be intuitively experienced as spiritually informed. Although this hypothetical aspect of human corporeality is yet unconscious to a large degree, I posit that it might hint towards a transformative future of the human body that is yet unknown to us.

The idea and experience of *embodied gnosis* in dance is an attempt at refining and explicating a potentiality for knowing that I intuit to be amplified by dance experience, but it might eventually be possible to be experienced in everyday life and by everybody as well.

This potentiality for knowing can be meaningful in relation to society at large because we all carry a body and are carried by a body, regardless of political orientation, faith, gender, nationality, social status, background, skin color etc.

I understand the movement towards *embodied gnosis* through a *dancing language* as a post-secular project that seeks to give space and societal relevance to an artistically fuelled, non-dogmatic questioning of the possibility of an embodied realization of spirituality. It is intended as a positive, meaning giving impulse in the context of a secular society that appears to be in dire need for new values that unite people with each other and with our planet. I hope that this impulse may contribute to re-enchanting the creation as well as the reception of a secularized art practice without forgetting the merits of having gained independence from representation, meaning and linear narrative during the post-modern and contemporary evolution of dance.

Instead of verbally describing my approach to languaging dance in terms of representation, meaning and narrative, I work with a dramaturgy based on the realization of psychophysical states as foundations for movement generation and as an artistic-epistemic framing for the dance. I speculatively explore an intertwinement between metaphysical and physical dimensions of *matter-consciousness*, to trace one of the many possible futures of the ontological, epistemological, communicative and esthetic potentials of dance in the 21st century. An ethical dimension is intrinsically hooked up with the search for *embodied gnosis* because it ignites a thorough re-consideration of what it means to be human with respect to our own bodies, to each other, to our planet, to the living beings we share this planet with and to cosmic evolution.

Through the dialogue between my experience of the dancing body as an interface between the physically sensible and the intuitively intelligible and other fields of discourse concerned with the relations between mind/spirit/consciousness and matter, a variety of perspectives have been presented. Despite diverging experiential and epistemological backgrounds, they all point in the direction of a worldview that approaches the nature of reality as constituted by an interpenetration of spiritual and material realms of being. I posited that a human body engaged in danced motion can act as a vehicle that enables the perception as well as the actualization of this speculative idea about reality. Although I refrain from making any claims about a true nature of reality, I do suggest that it is possible to experience a glimpse of something [*real**](#) and sacred through the dancing body.

With the dance and music performance SEI, we want to actualize or at least spark critical questioning of a sense of the *real* and its relation to subjective and intersubjective experiences of an [*artistic truth**](#). These questions could lead to new perspectives which might be

meaningful in relation to other fields of knowledge as well as in relation to re-conceptualizing the value of the arts in society. Evidently, the notion of *artistic truth* in artistic discourse cannot be equated with a scientific truth. Artistic truth is subjective or intersubjective rather than objective. Yet from the point of view of being immersed into artistic creation processes, there appears to me to be an objective of art, a will and an agency of the artwork that supersedes my individual personal will and that I associate with a compelling presence of a positive spiritual force that drives us forward from within and possibly without, physical reality. In the context of a worldview where physical and spiritual aspects of reality blend with each other, a work of art can facilitate an opening, an alethic⁴⁴⁴ experience, a revelation of the presence of the spiritual within the physical, its liberation into perceivability, igniting a sense of the *real*.

I positioned this research as navigating a middle line between a scientific reductionist approach that is incapable of accommodating religious and supernatural phenomena and an uncritical appropriation of a reality of the subtle body that exists beyond our categories of space and time. Against the background of reason, faith and gnosis seen as mutually interpenetrating foundations for constructing worldviews⁴⁴⁵, I traverse this middle line from an artistic-epistemic point of view. Whether and to which degrees the *polyphonic body* that I work with in SEI corresponds to the layers of the subtle body as described in esoteric forms of thought is subject to speculation.

Subtle body ideas and practices are suggestive of an ontology of human existence that extends along a continuum ranging from dense physicality to increasingly subtle and even divine dimensions of being. Discourse around the *subtle body* and especially the so-called “ether body” is concerned with understanding the enduringly unresolved question about the nature and the existence of the human soul and its mortality or immortality.⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴⁴ “Alethic,” Merriam-webster online dictionary, accessed 27.4.23 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alethic>. “Of or relating to truth, Greek *alēthikos*, from *alētheia* meaning truth.”

⁴⁴⁵ Hanegraaff, “Reason, Faith, and Gnosis: Potentials and Problematics of a Typological Construct,” 2008, 138-139.

⁴⁴⁶ As a speculative anthropological counterpart to ether metaphysics in esoteric forms of thought, speculations about the continuity of the subtle body beyond physical life extend beyond philosophical, religious and esoteric discourse into the fields of epistemology and cognition and problematize the subjective and intersubjective boundaries of the self. In Asprem, “Pondering Imponderables: Occultism in the Mirror of Late Classical Physics,” 2011, 149.

The *subtle body* is thus suggestive of an amplified idea of human corporeality that is not limited to the physical body. Although this understanding of human corporeality is incompatible with a materialistic scientific knowledge paradigm, I have inhabited it as a territory for generating knowledge processes. These processes were triggered by altered states of perception experienced through the *dancing body*. From subjective and intersubjective points of view, it is evident that the space between the body of a dancer and the surrounding space, or between the bodies of several dancers is neither empty nor insignificant. A dance can change the experience of the space around and in between us. This space behaves like another kind of body, a [*spatial body**](#). Its quality can be influenced by the inner life of thoughts and feelings, it can be positively or negatively imprinted through psychophysical states that extend from underneath the skin into the body of the space outside of the skin. How this perceivable energetic presence of a *spatial body* relates to a possible afterlife is veiled to my ability to perceive. But I am confident to claim that an inner intentional disposition can palpably change the body of the space between us and that this changed quality can be shared intersubjectively. I experience this *spatial body* as a most subtle kind of corporeality. It is possible to attune one's awareness to it and it can change the quality of the space between us in this life.

One of the main differences between a secular scientific and a religious, esoteric and spiritual understanding of human existence is whether a self-conscious "I" is seen as a perishable subject, a materially generated epiphenomenon in the brain and nervous system, or whether this "I" is seen as the immortal core of a soul incarnated in a body of flesh and bones. Consequently, the perspective taken also determines the worldview into which a dance is embedded or that it seeks to create and enter in dialogue with. The perspective taken eventually also influences the intentional dispositions of the dance and the potential interpretative scope of the dance.

Embodied gnosis as explored in this dissertation and in the performance SEI, proposes a sense of an "I" as the deepest core of subjective experience, as an unspeakable unknown cause for creative movement and as an impulse to communicate and to share itself. Neither SEI nor this written dissertation give an answer to the question about the nature and existence of the soul and whether it is perishable or immortal. Yet they provide an experiential and performative scenario that may trigger an imaginative contemplation of this question.

Artistic Research

Literature, music and the visual arts have already been extensively investigated in relation to scholarship on esotericism, yet there still remains a largely undiscovered territory to be explored in these areas.⁴⁴⁷ Research performed in and through art practices related to scholarship on esotericism are still very rare.⁴⁴⁸ Research in and through artistic practice implies that the creative process itself (or aspects of it) constitute the pathway by which new perspectives on knowledge, insight, as well as new artistic creations come into being.⁴⁴⁹

Whereas spiritual and esoteric interests may be implicitly present in several contemporary choreographic and dance practices, a critical relation between these practices and the academic study of esotericism has to my knowledge not yet been established. This dissertation project may be seen as a first baby step into this direction.

I see the “insider” perspective of the artist and the “outsider”⁴⁵⁰ perspective of the artist as scholar as complementary to each other. They might seem incompatible with each other at first sight because the artistic experimental perspective is necessarily subjective, while the scholarly academic perspective obliges to a certain extent to maintain a sense of neutrality and objectivity. Yet I posit that both perspectives are needed to gain a more encompassing picture about the possibility to understand the dancing body as a mediating interface between the physically sensible and the intuitively intelligible. Both sides are needed to enable an attuned alignment and a living bridge between concepts and experience and I see the academic discipline of artistic research as perfectly able to facilitate this bridge.

⁴⁴⁷ See for example Wuidar, *Music and Esotericism*, 2010 and Bauduin, “Science, Occultism, and the Art of the Avant-Garde in the Early Twentieth Century,” 2012, 23 -55. For a bibliography on Theosophy and the Visual Arts focusing mainly on the art and art writings of Piet Mondriaan and Wassily Kandinsky see: The History of Art Research Portal, “Enchanted Modernities. Theosophy, Modernism and the arts, c. 1865-1960 <https://hoaportal.york.ac.uk/hoaportal/enchanted-modernities-bibliography.jsp>. For Literature and Esotericism see for example Versluis, *Restoring Paradise. Western Esotericism, Literature, Art, and Consciousness*, 2004.

⁴⁴⁸ For the seminal article by Henk Borgdorff about the distinction between research *for* and *in and through* art, see Borgdorff, “The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research,” 2011, 44-63.

⁴⁴⁹ Borgdorff, *Ibid*, 46. Henk Borgdorff is Professor emeritus Theory of Research in the Arts at the Academy of Creative and Performing Arts Leiden University.

⁴⁵⁰ For an in-depth analysis of the tensions between “insider” and “outsider” perspectives in the context of Western Esotericism exemplified by Antoine Faivre, the first scholar who conceptualized and established esotericism as an academic field of study, see Hanegraaff, Brach, and Pasi, “Antoine Faivre (1924-2021) The Insider as Outsider,” 2022, 167–204.

With this dissertation project, I define artistic research as a creative investigation anchored in an artistic practice that allows itself to be transformed through a dialogue with academic scholarship and other (artistic) practices. Its aim is to contribute to the further evolution of the artistic and epistemological potentials of the art of dance. Artistic research generates new perspectives on knowledge processes in and beyond an art practice (here dance) by synthesizing ideas and concepts with embodied experiences.

To be continued

Many speculative ideas that emerged through the encounter between my perspective on dance experience and other fields of practice and discourse remain potentialities for knowing that could be explored in further research. For example, how the idea of mind and matter as not separated from each other but intertwined in a spectrum of dense to subtle *matter-consciousness* relates to the Pauli-Jung conjecture, to their ideas about dual-aspect monism and an underlying psychophysically neutral reality that takes part in both aspects yet transcends their distinction in a larger whole (*unus mundus*) has not been elaborated here. This could be taken up by whoever would see value in pursuing this line of thought.

Another worthwhile endeavor would be to elaborate on possible resonances between the idea and experience of *embodied gnosis* and the entanglement of matter and meaning in feminist new materialism. I stated in the introduction that I chose to not include this discourse in this investigation because it would require an in-depth study of new materialist thought on my side but also because I chose to limit the scope of discourse to a creative process in dance brought in dialogue with scholarship on esotericism and the Pauli-Jung conjecture.

I also did not venture into a comparative analysis between Christian and Islamic subtle body schemes. This would be a fertile area to explore spiritually informed ideas about human corporeality and could possibly contribute to interfaith dialogue. The difference between the emphasis on subtle body processes that occur in the afterlife in esoteric Islam, and the emphasis on subtle body processes during the incarnation into this world in esoteric Christianity is meaningful on many levels and invites more research.

For the continuity of the *dance language* and the *corporeal theory* derived from it, a next step would be to expand the list of *attunements* as presented in chapter five. In parallel, I envision to continue to explore different dramaturgies for realizing and communicating psychophysical states through dance and music creations, related to the idea of *embodied gnosis* or to other

states that might appear as worth striving for along the way. The *attunements* could eventually also be transposed into a transferrable movement practice.⁴⁵¹ This would require another research trajectory in an educational setting where I could test and observe how other dancers would experience these orientations for corporeal consciousness and what kinds of *dance language* and *corporeal theories* might emerge from their experiences.

Intentional dispositive

It has been my intention to cultivate and to maintain a stance of deep humility towards the unspeakable unknown while at the same time not being afraid to poke the limits of the knowable. I have attempted to not 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 I argue that dance appears to be one possible pathway to amplify this intuition. I hope that this research can inspire other dancers and choreographers to open their practice to other knowledge domains for the further evolution of the art of dance and its enduring significance for society at large. I also hope that academic institutions will increasingly realize the value of knowledge processes generated in and through the arts and that a dialogue between different avenues towards knowing will become common sense. I also hope that this research may open doors to better understand and connect with the natural regenerative intelligence of our bodies, supported by forces that stem from outside of their physical boundaries. May this work inspire and support the dancers of the future to carry forward the evolutionary forces as they manifest through dance.

⁴⁵¹ Another worthwhile trajectory could be to explore the development of conceptual and ethical tools to ensure that (neuro)diverse realities can be included in the experiences generated by this practice and in finding ways to integrate the acknowledgement of harm and trauma. Although a therapeutic approach has so far not been included in my goals for this research it could nevertheless be interesting to explore this potential. Many thanks to Jeroen Fabius to alerting me to also consider the ethics of inclusivity in further steps.