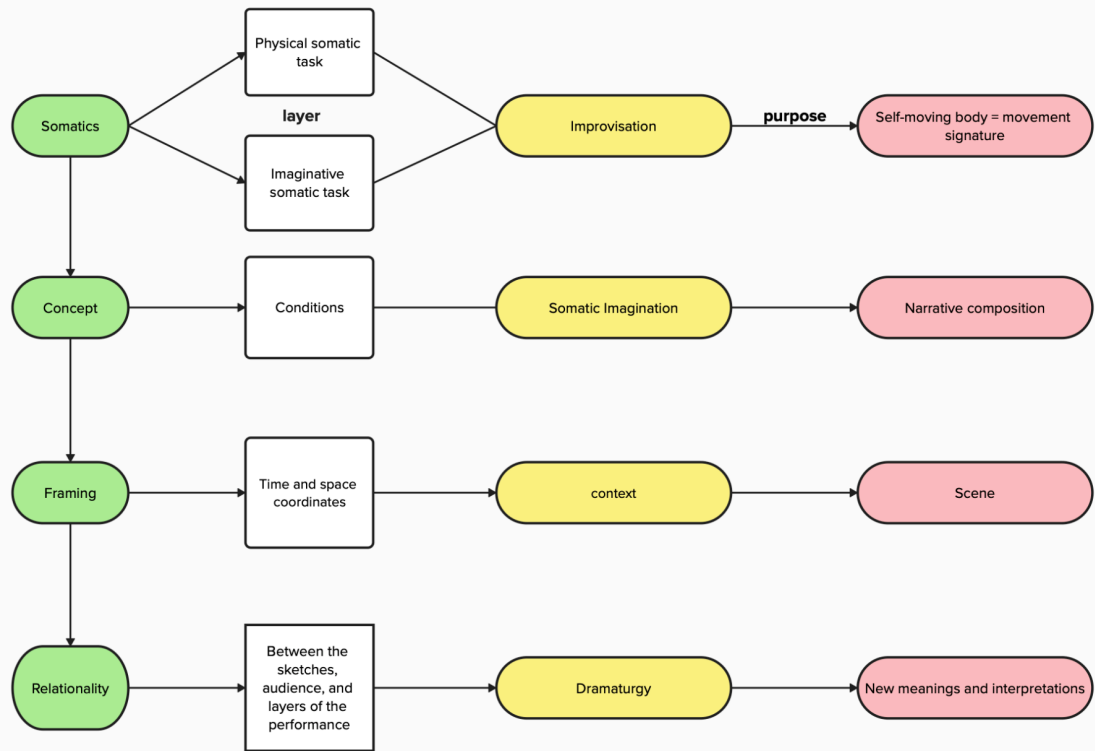


Master Choreography COMMA
Choreographic Praxis 2: The Embodied Choreographer
Block/Period: Block E / February-March
Niels Claes

Introduction



Process of transmission

During Bertha Bermudez's lecture, we were asked to analyze our process of transmission through the following questions.

What is your mode of transmission to the dancers?

- Physical: showing, doing, action
- Verbal: parameters, instructions, conditions, framing
- Co-creative: discussion, feedback
- Characteristic: My process of transmission is iterative (cyclical).

What is needed for this transmission?

- Duration | Taking time for a task to develop is essential in the process and thus a short process does not work.
- Documentation
- Preparation
- Metaphors
- Terminology
- Specificity
- Openness to the unknown
- Trust
- Background knowledge

Tools

- Personal experience
- Mental/emotional states
- Tasks
- Movement library = self-moving body
- Narrative compositions
- Interpretation/adaptation to the interpretation
- Relation to space/objects/audience/body
- Interaction

Development

- repetition
- quality/speed/dynamics/scaling
- release/tension
- architecturing
- pulling/pushing the structure through the space
- minimization
- intention/motivation
- pattern/score/trajectory
- levels/direction
- zoom
- isolation/body area/whole body

The following are general important observations: Articulating ideas and findings is crucial, as is engaging in dialogue to establish a common language within the team. Since I work with imagination to generate impulses, I should allow reorientation of the topic at any moment in the process. Rather than searching for meaning, I allow for open interpretation, letting meaning emerge organically from the material itself. (Meeting with Suzan Tunca, 22/02/2025)

The process

1. Somatics and the self-moving body

My process starts with a task-based improvisation tool for movement creation. The outcome emulates the sensation of the body being moved by an external or internal force, forming what I define as a *self-moving body*. Achieving the physicality of the self-moving body is one of the goals of the embodiment process. The following tasks serve as strategies used in rehearsals, requiring practice to develop the specific movement qualities desired. (Meeting with Suzan Tunca, 22/02/2025)

a. Physically transform the body with or without help from others or surroundings.

1. The spine

The spine houses the central nervous system, connecting brain activity to the rest of the body. (Chang, 2024) Its movement has the power to transform the body, allowing us to shift between abstract and humanized forms. In the first rehearsal—and at the start of most rehearsals thereafter—I bring attention to the movement possibilities of the spine.

Tasks: Cirkels, undulations, spirals

Located: Internally

Quality: Skeletal

Effort: Low

Variables: Direction, plane, levels, amplitude, speed, continuity

Source of inspiration: <https://www.materialforthespine.com/>

2. Vertebrae

The separation of the vertebrae adds a completely new dimension to movement richness. I cultivate dancers' awareness of their vertebrae by pairing them and instructing them to select a vertebra as a *USB*. The other dancer then moves from the chosen vertebra.

Tasks: Linear, circles, undulations, spirals

Located: Internally

Tasks with weight: bounce, drop, jump

Located: Externally

Quality: Skeletal

Effort: Medium

Variables: Direction, plane, levels, amplitude, speed

Interview with the choreographer Alban Richard: <https://youtu.be/mYd5oFDBICA>

3. Head-Pelvis weight connection

The correspondence of the heaviest parts of the body is explored through partnered work. Dancers first support the head or drag the pelvis of the other dancer downward. In the second phase, the support or extra weight is used to give impulses to the head or pelvis, while the other responds authentically to the impulse. The third phase extends this response, allowing the sensation to develop the movements and follow where the body's information leads.

Tasks: Supported, echo (structures), continuous (evolution)

Located: Internally/Externally

Quality: Skeletal, heavy

Effort: High

Variables: Direction, amplitude, speed

Video of the dancers Helena and Katja during rehearsal:

<https://youtube.com/shorts/49IRr6KcJr0>

4. Joints

The next part of the skeletal body, the joints of the limbs —such as toes, ankles, knees, hips, fingers, wrists, elbows, and shoulders—offer a diverse range of movement possibilities, including folding, circling, and rotating. Dancers can actively direct these motions.

Additionally, with the assistance of partners and the incorporation of added body weight or specific directions, these movements can evolve into actions like dropping, swinging, and twisting, further enriching the dance vocabulary.

Tasks: Folding, circling, rotating (inside/outside)

Located: Internally

Tasks with partner and bodyweight: Drop, swing, twist

Located: Externally

Quality: Skeletal

Effort: Low

Variables: Direction, amplitude, planes, speed, isolations/full body, movement traveling between body parts or jumping

Video of a class led by me on skeletal exploration: <https://youtu.be/hN0VBBV-Zyo>

5. Muscle

The tasks related to muscles are directly connected to levels of effort. With the help of other dancers, we explore muscle activation, tension, and the strength required to move through varying degrees of resistance. The exercises involve pushing, pulling, or offering body weight to each other. The focus may be on a specific body part or the entire body.

As dancers, we register the different gradations of effort and observe how the body responds to each. We become more aware of gravity, recognizing body weight as a prominent tool, and identifying which parts of the body can be released within the action.

Tasks: Push, pull, body weight

Located: Internally/externally

Quality: Muscular

Effort: Low-high

Variables: Effort, speed, isolations/full body

Video of the dancers from Sixth Dance Company: <https://youtu.be/0y4gTeiwalk>

6. Skin

The dancers use each other and the rehearsal space to heighten awareness of the skin. The sequence of exercises includes: rubbing against the floor, against each other, and against oneself; gliding on surfaces, on each other, and on oneself; and touching surfaces, each other, and the self. Throughout the exercise, dancers register the textures, shapes, consistency, and heat of the objects they interact with, observing how these sensory inputs influence the effort and direction of movement.

Tasks: Rubbing, gliding, touching

Located: Externally

Quality: Touch

Effort: Low

Variables: Textures, shapes, heat, consistency, speed, isolations/full body

7. Breath

Somatic practices such as yoga and meditation introduced me to breathing exercises. My fascination with the relationship between breath, movement, and presence led me to *Ways of Better Breathing* by Carola Speads. Through structured explorations, Speads examines various breathing techniques, revealing how breath influences physicality, perception, and emotional states. These techniques often require a series of attempts to achieve an effect on your life, but that is not my goal. In my practice, I explore how these techniques can influence the physicality of movement by implementing them as tasks.

Tasks: Implementing breathing techniques or patterns

Located: Externally/internally

Quality: Air

Effort: Low-high

Variables: Length of breath, rhythm

Video from exploration on the breath: https://youtu.be/ZjdkuWtvO1Y?si=wXt_PSjgsjmETDUE

8. Vision & auditory perception

The first addition to the physical tasks involves vision and sound perception. During practice, dancers are asked to investigate the difference between internal and external vision, as well as the awareness of the observing gaze. This means the intensity of vision can be altered, which I consider an important aspect of achieving the desired presence for dancers in the performative state of my work. This same distinction can be applied to the auditory system, where we can consciously focus on either internal or external sounds.

As an extra task, I sometimes ask dancers to cover their eyes and/or ears to investigate how this changes their physicality. This experiment is inspired by Juhani Pallasmaa's *The Eyes of the Skin*, in which she discusses how we've lost our humanized connection to our surroundings by favoring the dominant sense of vision. Many dancers also have a dominant

sense of hearing, partly because we usually dance to music, but also because our auditory system is connected to the vestibular system.

Video from exploration on the loss of vision and sound perception:

<https://youtu.be/Wnpg2-V7ujY?si=yBayOemk1jYKTeM->

9. Location

The second addition focuses on the area of the body that is moving. We distinguish movement in terms of backside/front side, lower/upper body, and left/right side. As we go through the previous tasks, I might ask the dancers to move only from one part of the body while neglecting the other, shifting their focus entirely to the specified area.

I realized there is an entire world behind us—one we cannot see. This led me to explore backspace and movement in a backward motion. My whole body, both front and back, tries to experience this unseen space, with the skin actively sensing the world behind me. (Diary entry, 20/10/2024)

b. Imaginatively transform body

1. Skin

The exercises of rubbing, gliding, and touching serve as preparation for sensing through the skin. Once the skin is activated, we can extend our awareness beyond the dance studio, using imagination to perceive textures, shapes, heat, and consistency. This task, borrowed from Martina La Ragione, involves touching— with different surfaces of the body—what the dancer envisions in the imagination. This may be an existing place, from an image, or a creation of one's own fantasy.

The skin is also part of the study of organs, allowing dancers to envision its breathing, expansion, function as a barrier or even the sensation of being turned inside out.

Source of inspiration: Ahmed, S., & Stacey, J. (2001). *Thinking through the skin*. Psychology Press.

2. Nervous system

The imagery of the nervous system influences the movement aesthetics of my practice. I share with the dancers an image of the nervous system as a web connecting every fiber of the body—the spine to the organs, the eyes to the extremities. This encourages them to engage the entire body in movement, leaving nothing out, and also discover imaginative interconnections between different body structures.

I also envision the nervous system extending beyond the physical body, drawing inspiration from the concept of qi, derived from various Eastern philosophies. In these traditions, qi is seen as an energy that flows through the body, linking the physical and mental aspects of a person, resembling the nervous system. Qi also extends the physical body, influencing the environment around the body.

The tasks can range from envisioning strings or energy waves activated by the nervous system to embodying the sensation of a blocked nerve.

Source of inspiration: Gregg Dunn, a neuroscientist who uses a reinterpretation of the nervous system as inspiration for creating art.

https://youtu.be/unfVu-dqfRk?si=6dIZv6JROE_Vx7MQ

3. Organs

In my practice, I use the organs imaginatively to challenge our perception of them. Various tasks can be explored, such as unfolding the gut or brain and wrapping oneself inside what has been unfolded, allowing an organ to direct the body, enlarging an organ, stepping inside it, or floating on top of it. The imaginative possibilities of organs are infinite.

This video features dancer Jenny Bonetti exploring the heartbeat outside the body. Initially, we focused on concepts like pressure, vibration, pulse, and muscle contraction, as well as how the heart's state changes in different conditions. She found the contractions led her to explore blood circulation as a smooth, pump-like motion through the heart's chambers and arteries. In her final reflection, Jenny noted a striking image of the heart's chambers as a forest of strings. https://youtu.be/lh_ry5bg1i4

4. Fluids

The fluids in the body respond to internal and external environments, having the potential to influence how we approach movement. I participated as a dancer in a project that incorporated BMC®, introducing me to working with blood flow and density levels. Other bodily fluids can also be explored—our bodies are 60% water, with liquid present in the

brain, digestive system, sweat (muscles and skin), and ENT system. I found that these fluids can be imaginatively manipulated by considering their flow, density, evaporation, and more.

5. Hollow parts

Anne Juren's research on *Fantasmical Anatomies* led me to explore the body's hollow spaces. Influenced by the Feldenkrais method, she describes entering the hollow space between the forearm bones and dancing within it.

My exploration brought me to inhabit the hollow space of the skull—seeing the eyes from the inside, sensing the nerve endings, and feeling the flow of fluids and air within the skull.

Source of inspiration: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1395394/1395395>

c. What does the self-moving body reveal?

There is a substantial exploration period before the movement signature emerges. In this process, the movement possibilities of the tasks are identified and thoroughly explored. The physicality develops through the repetition of the tasks, with the goal of achieving the self-moving body. (Meeting with Suzan Tunca, 22/02/2025)

My personal research on restrictions and limitations has revealed that I often feel controlled by my fears. When I embody the image of restriction, I find that limitations manifest in my body as a persistent state of fight-or-flight awareness. Through this observation, there has been a shift in the understanding of my practice. Rather than accessing imagination through the body, I layer the body with imagination. This process uses both physicality and imagery in search of new knowledge in the mind—shaping meaning, intention, and motivation.

My findings suggest that the self-moving body, on its own, does not reveal anything new to the dancer or the observer. It functions as the foundation of the practice, offering a pure form of movements, without added interpretation of the dancers. While this physicality eventually has a distinct form, it does not inherently offer inner motivation. For movement to gain purpose or resolution, the self-moving body must be infused with conditions.

When working alone, I naturally engage with conditions, experimenting with different variations of a task to generate motivation. However, this aspect was missing when working with others. (Residency in Latvia, 18/02/2025)

2. Concepts and conditions

Physical and imaginative tasks are layered in a process I call “Somatic Imagination”, forming different versions of the self-moving body. The selection of these layered tasks—which I refer to as conditions— is guided by a specific concept, such as restrictions and limitations. The goal of the conditions is a directed embodiment process—guided by the choreographer’s subconscious and validated by the dancers’ subconscious. Through this process, new interpretations emerge, forming the groundwork for further development in the next stage. (*Lecture with T. Falk*)

Together with the dancers, we create an inventory of resources related to the concept—books, movies, music, images, artwork, and places that spark creativity. Personal experiences or imagery gathered throughout the process can also be seen as valuable. They serve as inspiration for the narrative compositions.

This image is from the integrated assignment in April 2024, where I explored the physical potential of imagination with bachelor students from Fontys Dance Arts in Context. The mural is by *Rita Fonseca Barbosa*.

This process is best illustrated through an example, using the work of Fontys Dance Arts in Context student Rita Fonseca Barbosa. The initial task was to float on a three-dimensional lung, inspired by surrealism's challenge to our perception of reality. She explored maintaining balance as the lung moved—experiencing the sensation of sinking into its tissue or being pushed away by its inhalation.

A tool in this process is questioning the dancer to support the dramaturgical development of the narrative composition. An inventory of questions proposed to Rita:

- Why would you get up?
- Why would you go to the edge of the lung?
- How did you get up the lung?
- What is the texture of the lung? What textures surround you?
- Are you positioned within a body? Do you see the ribs or a pulsating heart?
- Does the lung maintain a consistent breathing cycle or rhythm?
- How does this movement affect your body? Are there micro-shifts or full-body adjustments in response?

The second task was inspired by *In Our Gentle Solitude*, an essay by choreographer Kenzo Kusuda, in which he describes crawling into the skin of figures in paintings, feeling their textures and surroundings to enrich the imagination. Rita's resource was the intense paintings by Egon Schiele, characterized by twisted body shapes.

The second part was derived from surrealist art—creating new imagery by merging two different objects. To facilitate this, I used zoom, a tool within my practice that helped develop a narrative composition. This resulted in a surrealistic landscape atop the lung, situated within the embodied body of Egon Schiele, with a continuous zooming in and out of that body.

https://youtu.be/9LSrmFHawGA?si=23wbkAD8uMZy_ulj

b. Feedback from the dancers

I am interested in the potential directions my tasks can take based on the dancer's interpretation. I want to gather feedback from the dancers on their associations and experiences with the physicality that emerges from a specific version of the self-moving body formed by the narrative compositions. What does it do to you? What images appear in your mind? What associations do you make? (Meeting with Suzan Tunca, 17/03/2025)

The core task is to activate the imagination, and the feedback from this process is then used to refine the task. This means that during this part of the process, the journey becomes a

scene with clear reference points. In the next phase, we add an additional framework, and the inspiration for this comes from the images that arise organically within the process itself. (Meeting with dramaturg R. Vomvolou, 25/02/2025)

c. What context appears?

The concept I work with to shape the conditions for movement development exists within a context. While initially introduced through imagery, this context remains fluid—I am curious to see how a context emerges through physicality. It ultimately guides the direction of the performance and finding this context is part of the strategy during the third phase of the choreographic development. This context appears in dialogue between myself and the dancers. (Meeting Suzan Tunca, 22/02/2025)

3. Context and framework

I posed myself the question of what is needed for the movement material to solidify. Based on the emerging context, I am building a framework around the existing movement material, placing its physicality in relation to space and time. This process directs the meaning of the movement and how the material can be framed in a way that allows for potential interpretation—creating a context that the audience can also relate to. These function as points of reference to score or set material without losing the imaginative capacity of the movements. (Meeting with Suzan Tunca, 22/02/2025)

In this stage of the process, we define the coordinates of the movements, linking them to the spatial and temporal details of the developed physicality. The spatial coordinates establish a frame for movement, encompassing direction, level, trajectory, planes, and the size of the space being navigated. A spatial framing task might involve setting a pathway or score with specific spatial parameters. The time coordinates create a framework for duration without distracting the dancers from the imagery. This frame considers the necessary timing of the material, factoring in build-up and repetition. The combination of spatial and temporal coordinates results in instant composition. This strategy is guided by Laban principles and influenced by my experience with Maciej Kuzminski's dynamic phrasing methodology. (Meeting with dramaturg R. Vomvolou, 25/02/2025)

An example of this process is the work I did during a residency with Sixth Dance Company in Riga, Latvia in February 2025. After a week of research, I identified two potential sketches that function as instant compositions. By structuring them based on the concept of physical

occupation, we discovered a context of collective tension and the desire for release—reflecting the experience of inhabitants in occupied territories.

https://youtu.be/WDr3sg2kO8g?si=nvWfdT04uWDa0_ah

<https://youtu.be/0Lz8ZqFizOk?si=maaCh-XIAHotOM9D>

The framework evolves intuitively, guided by choreographic knowledge that emerges from the body's inherent logic. Decisions are made through instinctive choices, seeking to understand why something works or doesn't. This is a process of trial and error, uncovering the needs of the material within each scene. (Meeting with Suzan Tunca, 17/03/2025)

It's not just about my understanding as a choreographer, the dramaturgy of the composition must resonate from a third-party perspective, making sense within the larger narrative. In this phase of the process, I step into the audience's experience, ensuring the logic of the work translates beyond my perspective. At the same time, the framework must make sense for the dancers. Their logic doesn't have to align with mine, but their motivation for the entire journey must be present.

4. Relation and new meanings

Integrating a concept into my movement practice situates the movement within a broader context through the creation of narrative compositions. The next phase of research focuses on how these compositions connect dramaturgically. We search for relation between sketches while simultaneously questioning their relation to other layers of the performance and the audience. The dramaturgical line emerges from the relational probabilities of these elements. While I am still refining strategies for this phase, these are my findings so far.

An important strategy is to remind myself why I initially chose to create a performance around a particular concept. This will be the motivation for the choices made throughout this part of the process. It encompasses searching for the message of the performance and the resolution at its conclusion. (Meeting with Suzan Tunca, 17/03/2025)

For the work to be presented at the COMMA Festival, the interest emerged in exploring how people are obstructed by the current economic system, using this context to examine physical restrictions and limitations. What impact does this system have on individuals? On their behavior? How do they interact with one another because of it? What processes occur within the body as a result? Ultimately, it all comes down to the question: How does

capitalism manifest as restrictions and limitations within the body? By exploring and answering these questions, I aim to work toward the performance's resolution.

The following strategy informs my definition of imagination in the creation process. For me, imagination in creation means worldbuilding, reflecting aspects of reality while adding elements of the absurd, much like surrealist art or fantasy films. For example, fantastical creatures often have human-like qualities, portraying social behaviors such as fear or excitement. The storylines are also infused with commentary on cultural or social biases (Taylor, 2013).

Performativity is an effective tool, requiring consciousness of how meaning is transferred to the dancers. Narrative compositions serve as reference points, helping dancers understand what the material is intended to speak. The relationality connects it to the wider dramaturgy, therefore clear direction on performativity is essential so that the intensity of execution aligns with potential interpretations. This means guiding dancers not only in what they do but also in how they do it—the quality, energy, and intention behind each movement.

The other layers of the performance can enhance or add meaning to the movement material. Considering their development in earlier phases is essential, as it enables experimentation with these elements throughout the process. This, in turn, informs decisions at this stage, contributing to the dramaturgical development.

An essential part of this phase is sharing the work, receiving feedback, and gaining insight from different perspectives. While my dramaturg provides guidance, feedback can also come from studio showings or video documentation shared with peers and other professionals in the field.