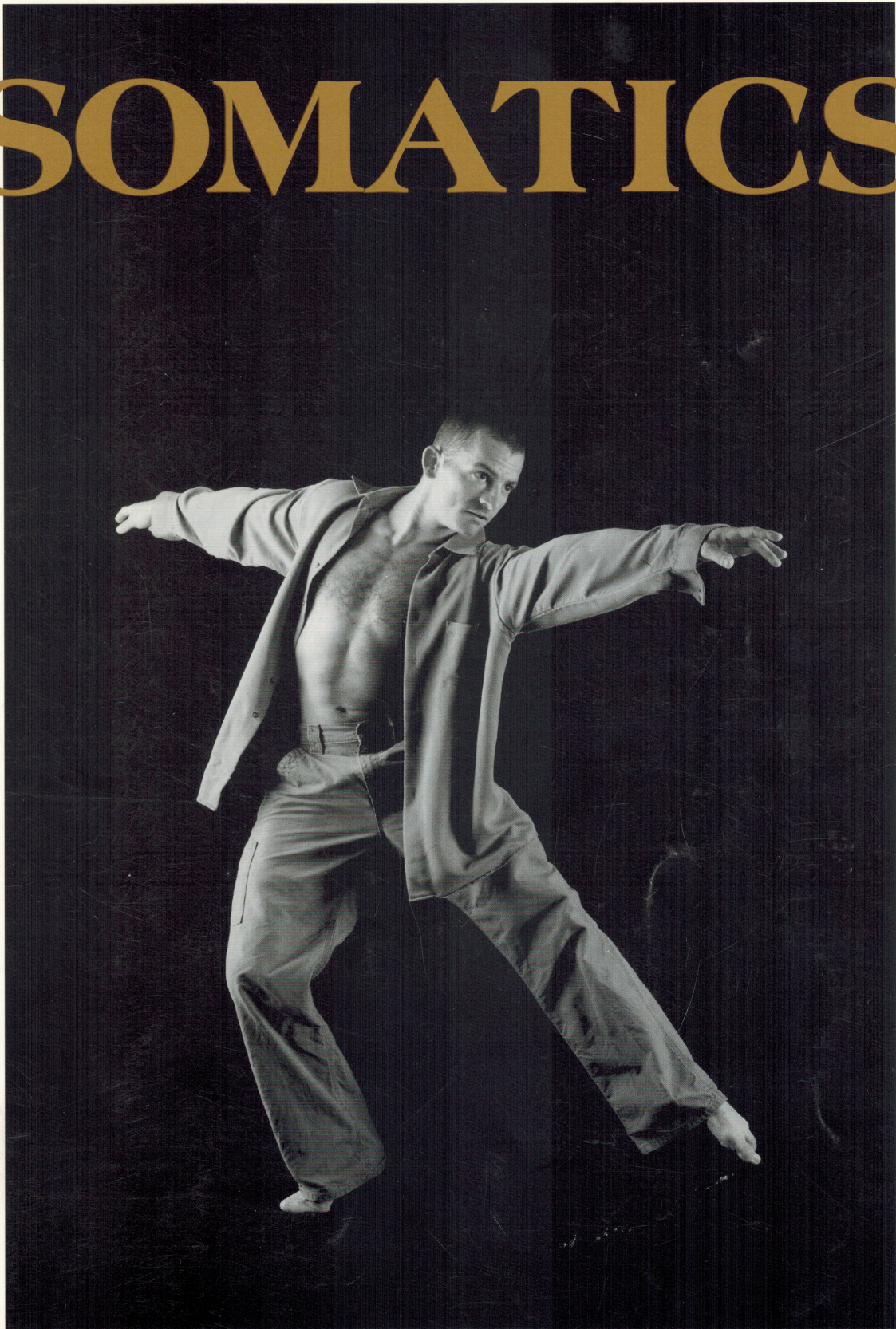


2009
Volume XVI Number 1

SOMATICS®



MAGAZINE-JOURNAL OF THE MIND/BODY ARTS AND SCIENCES

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SOMATICS is sponsored by the
Novato Institute for Somatic
Research and Training

SOMATICS (ISSN 0147-5231) is published semi-annually in the fall and spring at the subscription rate of \$20.00 per year for individual subscriptions and \$25.00 per year for institutional subscriptions. Single copies are \$10.00. • Editorial, Subscription and Advertising offices: 1516 Grant Avenue, Suite 212, Novato, CA 94945. Copyright© 2009 by the Novato Institute for Somatic Research and Training, (415) 892-0617, Fax: (415) 892-4388. Website: www.somaticsed.com. E-mail, info@somaticsed.com. All manuscripts are to be addressed to the Editor. Advertising rates are available on request. Advertisers may not, without prior consent, incorporate in a subsequent advertisement the fact that a product or service has been advertised in SOMATICS. The publisher reserves the right to refuse ads not in consonance with its policies; however, the publication of any advertisement is neither an endorsement of the advertiser nor of the products and services advertised. • All rights reserved. Written permission must be obtained from SOMATICS for copying or reprinting text of more than 500 words. Permission fees are waived for authors who wish to reproduce their own materials.

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Photograph of a dancer by Stephen Weiss.

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Moving Wholeness on the Streets of LA

The LAPD (Los Angeles Poverty Department) Glimpses Utopia

By Laura Fuller

You may think of somatic healing within a single body: I give breath to any piece of me that died. I return movement and flow to my parts that got scared-frozen in the past. I draw a circle around the fragments of my mind through time and space. Healing brings all of my cells to the present, reconnects any feeling or experience that I forgot was also God. I integrate in perfection what I once saw as shadow and seek an ever-expanding wholeness. My single body is just one tiny cell in the body of this world . . . this world, one cell among infinite worlds. Acknowledging this hologram, I will consider the somatic healing of the body of this world. By moving our bodies, can we move bodies of power? By remembering feeling, can we envision solutions that are anchored in the truth that we are all individuals *and* all One? The following is an account of my experience in a project that looked at the somatic healing of social structure, seeking to move the energy of a city.

Utopia/Dystopia

From June to December of 2007, Los Angeles Poverty Department—a Skid

Row-based theatre group—organized the project *Glimpses of Utopia*, focusing on issues of poverty and homelessness. The project included public talks, performances, and improvisational movement and writing workshops using the experience of the body—touch, movement and emotion—as a way to get beyond the duality of Utopia/dystopia and look for a vision that could relate to the whole. Participants worked from their individual visions of Utopia to create a meditative movement sequence that was composed of each person's vision. On performance day, the sequences were repeated for fifteen minutes in a line spanning the ten blocks between Skid Row and Los Angeles City Hall. Some passers-by spontaneously joined in with movements of their own, and one woman held her arms to the sky and sang. Many of the performers were homeless or affected by poverty. The installation of dancing bodies on the sidewalks of L.A. at Friday rush hour made visible the people that some might want to disappear, and called into question bodies of power and bodies of flesh, and how, through feeling, we might move out of division to a life that is fluid and sustainable.

Soft, Smooth, slow. Was it a forced

move? Easy. Poof. The body moves its own direction, unless you want it to move differently. In the middle of a movement. Can you change to another? Not without making a mistake. A fall. A break in the pattern. Sloppy. Oops. There it goes again. Movement (Sharonda Taylor, workshop participant).

Bodies get dense and stuck sometimes, like the cells are glued together and forget to dream and change. Maybe it's because they dreamed so hard before, but gravity would only pull down. Maybe because they went so far in one direction that it got hard to turn around. I led a workshop at the Downtown Women's Center in Los Angeles. I was supposed to lead two workshops, but nobody showed up for the first one. I was told that this was because it was near the first of the month and people went out to spend their welfare checks. They disappeared each month, but would return when their money was gone. I thought about survival—it's amazing that these women are alive, but many get just enough to keep going, not enough to go anywhere else. And circles make people tired. Domesticated. The organizer walked me through a TV room filled with women

in easy chairs. We asked if anyone wanted to do the Utopia workshop and most did not turn their heads. They were tired. I was very aware of my whiteness and of my body's freedom to move. It seemed ridiculous that I was asking them to dance.

Can we, I, them, see today? The feelings showing through the skin? How it walks across the street to the shelter, then the clinic, to the food line. Or maybe the phone can hear the feelings of relief. I'm here. My Utopia is starting. Seeing, feeling myself apart. We, them (Pat Nix, workshop participant).

Dys/connection

Felt-sense knows that the body was essential for this project. Standing in front of a person, feeling the warmth and breath, is much different than calculating on paper. Dancers understand that the body knows the truth—in both a personal and transpersonal sense—and that if you move from truth, you move energy, and that will move the world. Giving people opportunity to dance reminds them of the importance of accessing their own truth, and the fact that this movement was performed in public space reminds everyone of the reality we are creating together, how it impacts each individual on the levels of mind, flesh, and soul. I interviewed John Malpede and Henriette Brouwers, two of the organizers of *Glimpses of Utopia*. Malpede (LAPD artistic director) told me that one of the main intentions in forming the Los Angeles Poverty Department was to “get the real-deal out to normal-ville and connect social policies that keep systems in place to the lived experience of the people who are, to a certain extent, run by them.” He explained that “just telling people about others’ experience is not good enough because we have a disconnect where hearing it doesn’t mean doing anything about it. We live with 47 million people without health insurance and for some reason that doesn’t seem to be a problem, until we feel it ourselves.” The participants in the workshop I led—some of the people who have really felt poverty—agreed that understanding connection is what we need. I did not have to explain to them that the body is the same as the mind, is the same as the soul, is the same as the world. And, with their sense of unity, they expressed a great hope: if I can move my heart, I can move the world. Our discussion centered around disconnection. I start-

ed with the Utopian vision written in 1516 by Sir Thomas More, the passage that coined the term “Utopia.” More thought that problems came from greed and that, since some took too much, others got too little. His solution concerned equal division of resources. Division—exactly what my group thought was the problem. His Utopia was still a closed system with limited resources. And his idea of good society was so solid that it cast a shadow—dystopia: bad society. In that paradigm, for there to be sweet dreams, there must be nightmares. One woman described how separation was concretized in city planning. Housing projects were single-person spaces, not good for families or community. Downtown L.A. itself has taken on the shape of this Utopia/dystopia dualism. Over the past 40 years, the map has split between Bunker Hill, the redeveloped financial district standing above, and Skid Row below, the area with one of the nation’s largest homeless populations. At the same time, the creation of luxury artists’ lofts has made the area unaffordable for many local artists. Utopia, of course, is a matter of perspective. In the example of Bunker Hill and Skid Row, who is to say which is light and which is shadow? Skid Row, often described by the media as the worst of the worst, is also, according to Malpede, one of the largest recovery communities in the world. However, as the Utopia of those in power grew, Skid Row was declared its shadow and given less and less space. The compartmentalization that once said, “You stay over there” started to say, “You can’t even stay there anymore.”

More Parades/ More Smooth Space

In Fall 2006, the L.A. Police Department enacted the Safer Cities Initiative to “re-vitalize” (or as some joked, “re-whitelize”) down-

town. It created ways to arrest people on the streets. Drug possession was prosecuted as dealing, and it became illegal to sleep on the streets at night or even to sit down on the curb during the day unless, as explained in the ordinance, you are “watching a parade.” The ACLU fought this ordinance and ultimately won; however, in the time of its enforcement and throughout the process of appeals, 8,000 arrests were made. One of the inspirations for the movement element of this project was that, so long as people do not stop moving—are not standing, sitting, or lying for too long—they are not violating the law. Some Utopian visions written in these workshops included a request for more parades. That makes me wonder what a parade means today. Used to be that a parade was a stroll in public, a promenade, a walk with the intention to be seen. Now, it is something to be watched. A procession of other people. A culture of observers viewing from designated areas. We all need to be participants and we all need to be seen. What about the people who can’t stand up? Who need help? Who will look at them and see their

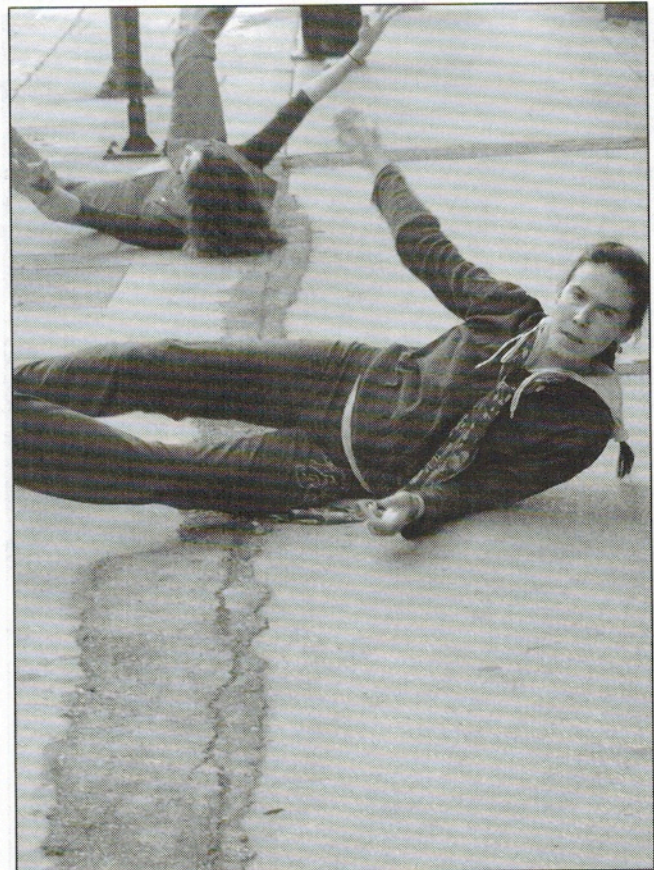


Photo by Pamela Miller-Macias

The “Safer Cities Initiative” made it illegal to sit or lie on the street in Los Angeles. Here, the dancers perform this taboo.

needs? Sometimes we need to sit down. Sometimes situations drop us to our knees. Sometimes we have to lie flat on our backs. It is a beautiful idea that we should always be moving; it holds the understanding that balance is not a still place. Dance, fully embodied, is a political act as it considers bodies and then negotiates force to move. However, it is important to look at why and how we move. Are we moving only because we are afraid to be still? Dancing can also be twirling in circles; repetition and training can carve the grooves deeper. Are we really going anywhere? And when do we get to lie down?

The question is whether our movement is out of habit, or out of conscious choice. I asked John Malpede where he thought our disconnect came from, and he said, "The solution is the problem, we are all so busy trying to do stuff." I was reminded of the density of cells pressed together, no room for one to slip past another, no liquid, no space for a new structure to be born. We are busy being busy. Busy sustaining an old way that probably isn't working any more. No time for things to restore. No time for people to be sick equals

no time to heal. God forbid you need something from somebody. Henriette Brouwers said, "We have to look for new ways of protesting to really create some space in all this busy-ness. Even protests have gotten so organized. Being on skid row and just moving is so much more profound—because it's slowing down. It makes you perceptive of who you are with and the reactions of people to what you are doing. And so your mind sort of opens and you are really connecting on a different level." For Brouwers, the solution of seeking space reconciled the duality of Utopia vs. dystopia. The dances were "not just on a directional level of 'I am protesting against this,' but a real movement of people trying to get a different energy out." Malpede added that "protests have become formulaic and discrediting them is formulaic—at least if you do something new they have to go back to the drawing board to discredit you. The notion of sound bytes, staying on talking points, Power Point and multiple choice . . . it's all about 'Let's remove the infinite and shrink wrap it.' In a culture of quip, canned response, and overstimulation, when you slow

down and create space, the humanity that comes through shocks people." Imagine these physical meditations, firmly rooted yet deeply moving. Imagine the normal traffic of cars and pedestrians rushing by. It is revolutionary to slow down and feel.

The Drop and the Ocean

A raindrop falls from the sky to the ocean and it is hard to discern one bit from the whole. As it hit the surface, did the raindrop feel different than the ocean? Or maybe it dissolved and disappeared. Now, a wave rises up. Many drops build energy, crest, then subside. The feeling of waves rolling through reminds us

we are both: individuals holding different parts, and completely One. There is always this dance between individuality and unity. You and I must be two separate things in order to connect, but not so separate that we forget our unity. It is also important to remember that unity does not mean sameness. I cannot assume that what I experience is the same for somebody else. Can I really know what other people want or need? When we move an idea into the relative world—there is difference and there is choice.

The idea of making choices in the relative world made me wonder: When I take my idea of Utopia and put it into the world, does it cast a shadow? Does it necessarily create both Utopia and dystopia? Is there a possible world where the existence of light does not require darkness? But, really, who am I to say what is light and what is darkness? And what is it in me that wants to make darkness disappear? I think that the important thing is freedom and movement. We are not making choices for others or judging their lives, we are just making sure that everything has space to move so that it can find its part in the harmony. We create a possible world where all can be happy and free.

The body is the perfect instrument to negotiate any seeming binaries: self and other, individual and whole, utopia and dystopia. The skin—the point of contact—defines inner space and outer space, and an individual center connects to the center of everything. The feet are connected to the earth while the head reaches for the sky. Waves of emotion roll inside us and between us: deeply personal and universal, immediate and timeless. A group of Buddhist practitioners participated in the Utopia workshops. They described the project as a big meditation on something beautiful. I am reminded of the Buddhist practice of compassionately holding everything. The feeling of loving life as perfect just as it is and there is always room to improve. That brings in the feeling that Utopia is an intention. The Buddhist group said that they were blown away that this intention was lived beyond the heart and off of the cushion—outside, in front of everyone. Henriette Brouwers said, "It is good to write about Utopia, but Utopia is something you imagine, not make manifest. Utopia, in definition, means nowhere, it is something that doesn't exist, but it is something that we all long for. Uto-



Photo by Pamela Miller Macias

The participants performed slow, physical meditations: firmly rooted and deeply moving.

pia is more about an energy, and when you are moving, you are it. And also you become more than yourself. We all lived together for 15 minutes—both as individuals and as a community—living in harmony without losing our individuality. And the feeling of losing one's self is always what brings the conflicts in the world."

So, how does one relate to connection without losing individuality? John Malpede said, "By learning to be a good improviser. If you are a lousy improviser, you'll lose yourself in it, or you'll stay too much yourself. If you are a good improviser you will find that balance." Individuals have a choice in how they participate in this ocean. They can choose which wave to follow, or maybe shift the tide. Like I said in the beginning, maybe some people are tired and they just ride where the waves take them. I talked with the women in my workshop about how lucky we are to be able to dream, to take the time and the energy to envision the new world. To choose which current we ride.

There are those who try to tell you . . . and there are those who teach by example. Tony Parker falls into the latter category. He teaches by example. Through hard work and perseverance he has learned to walk the walk. His mission is spiritual in nature. His goal is to raise consciousness and give hope to people who have seemingly lost all hope. Tony Parker who was once one of the walking dead, by example, shows

on a daily basis that there is indeed life after death. Tony Parker is a man who decided to stop crawling, to get up, brush-off, stand strong and walk forward. His mission in life . . . (Tony Parker, workshop and LAPD theater group organizer).

Is the world split between Utopia and dystopia? Is there a line between healthy and sick? Sometimes I think there is, so I stop dancing and try to do something. I think: how dare I dance through poverty and war—probably my energy could be better spent! Funny thing is that dancing is exactly what's needed. It is important that we figure out how to move free and awake and give others the right to do the same. Plus, maybe the body can heal the idea of a world divided and at odds. Maybe our cells hold the memory of the deep connection of everything, before I was different than you, was different than the earth.

Movement and stuckness. Moving fast, is there somewhere to go? Easychair and blue glow. Is there magic? Is there somewhere else to go? Is there more here than we know? Do I need you to see it? So I can see it—so we can see it. This mass. This density. Break it light as air so everything is true at once and everything is different. Somehow (Laura Fuller).

* * *

Quotations within this article are from an interview by Laura Fuller with John Malpede and Henriette Brouwers on November 19, 2007, Santa Monica, CA, and from text generated by workshop participants and printed with their permission. Thank you.

Groups involved in creating the Utopian movement included Para los Niños, Downtown Women's Center, Labor Center MacArthur Park, LA Community Action Network, Transition House, Drama Stage Qumran,



Laura Fuller

LAMP, The Village, The Safe Haven, Saint Vincent's Center, Midnight Mission, Skid Row 3 on 3 Basketball team, Buddhist Center Cloverdale, Brent Blair and USC students, Arianna MacBean and dancers, Tanya Kane-Parry and Cal State LA students, Gillian McGinty's intergenerational dance group, John Malpede, Janna Shadduck-Hernandez and Peter Sellar's students from UCLA, the Youth Justice Coalition Free LA Charter High School, Cynthia Lee, Sukha, Laura Fuller, Jan Kain, Ron Allen.

"Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) creates performance work that connects lived experience to the social forces that shape the lives and communities of people living in poverty. LAPD is committed to creating high-quality, challenging performances that express the realities, hopes, and dreams of people who live and work in Los Angeles' Skid Row, and is dedicated to building community and to the artistic and personal development of its members" (Los Angeles Poverty Department web site, <http://www.lapovertydept.org/about-lapd/index.php>).



People danced their visions of Utopia along the streets of L.A. from Skid Row to City Hall.

Photo by Pamela Miller Macias

—Definition—

SOMA:

The body experienced from within