

Paula Kramer

Of Not Getting Lost: Making Use of Materials

Located within the wider context of practice-as-research, I am currently carrying out PhD research on movement practices in the natural environment at Coventry University's dance department.¹ From the perspective of being at about half time in this three-year process, this article discusses recent actions and insights regarding the use of materials in practicing as well as disseminating research on moving, being and creating in the natural outdoors.

The examples I consider are an informal performance at Cove Park in Scotland in the context of the AHRC research network 'Performance Footprint', teaching MA students in Coventry's Wainbody Wood and a research installation presented at the Nordic Forum for Dance Research (NOFOD) in Odense, Denmark.² In all instances I chose materials as some 'thing' to turn to, in order to not get lost as well as to help me build corridors that extend from research and performance as directly as possible into dissemination.

In 'Auditory Architecture' (2010) Alex Arteaga argues for a "non-reductionist way of working" when considering experience.³ This addresses a core issue in practice-as-research. How do we find ways to not represent or translate, but meet and correspond with artistic practice in the context of academic research? A further question is: How can we work in ways that do not build on control and limitation of a given situation, but provide conditions for emergent process and evolving practice? Arteaga suggests: "A process cannot be configured directly, it can only be influenced indirectly, by way of a modification of the conditions that influence its course."⁴ The examples below point to some of my preliminary answers to these questions in the context of my current research.

Embodying Material

One of the core aspects I learnt from studying with dance artist Bettina Mainz is to engage both with the materiality of the body and the materials in the natural environment through direct physical contact.⁵ Rather than 'thinking' or 'desiring' contact with self or surroundings, she encouraged me to trust and practise direct touch, physical effort, an engagement with the textured and manifest aspects of the human body and the natural environment alike. I consider this to be an intention of making contact that unfolds through the act of doing so.

This aspect of working in the natural environment has since become central to my own (teaching) practice. I use materiality in an effort to not get lost. To not lose myself in questions of the mind or in the vastness of outdoor space, where the resonances of movement and action can dissipate quickly. Through engaging with material, I invite an embodied meeting between myself and what I am surrounded by.

Dance and movement therapist Teresa Bas expressed her experiences of participating in a workshop I taught in 2009 in an email. In my understanding it is this direct route extending from the material base of the body into the larger environment that she describes here:

"[...] I felt a sense of heightened sensitivity in myself. It's strange because I could have lost myself in watching the landscape, but nothing like that happened. On the contrary, I felt my body was very present in this environment and my concrete physical as well as my intuitive feelings were heightened through the contact with the natural materials (through vision, smell, touch, etc.). This

*gave me a better focus to guide my movement from inside, however in relationship to the outside. It was really very surprising! I have never experienced this so clearly."*⁶

At a meeting of the AHRC network 'Performance Footprint' in February 2011 I specifically worked with the notion of embodying material for an informal sharing of working approaches. Thirteen researchers and artists engaged with the land of Cove Park, an artist residency on the Scottish West Coast, nestled on a hillside near Faslane, a base for nuclear submarines of the Royal Navy.⁷ We each spent an afternoon and evening working on creating site-based proposals that could inspire learning about environmental change and/or were reflective of our own way of working and experiencing the site. The next morning we shared our doings, which included sound recordings, performances, texts, reflections and photographic installations as well as drafts and outlines for envisioned and possible future projects – most of it further discussed on the network blog.⁸

The following are some excerpts of my writing in reflection of this instance that relate to working with the intention of embodying material.

Notes on rehearsal:

[...]

*i come across a tree
that grows horizontally*

here i think

here i will try again

and after moving a while

*i find the possibility of being under the tree
and ways of moving that resonate an attempt
of direct, non-assuming materiality
and open stability*

[...]



(Abb. 01) Stephen Bottoms, Being-not-Being a Tree, Paula Kramer, Cove Park 2011

Notes on performance:

As I perform, I stay close to myself. [...] I lie face down under the horizontally growing stem of a tree. [...] and immerse myself into the task at hand. I am with a tree. I intend to sense treeness in my body and move it. I intend to involve the whole of my body in it. Being-not-being a tree, this is the task at hand. Thanks teacher Bettina (Mainz) who thanks to her teacher Prapto taught me to practise: 'knowing-not-knowing'. [...]

I breathe into the wet leaves against my face and work towards finding/meeting/being tree in my body. From the top of my head to the tip of my toes – what is being-not-being a tree in movement? [...] My feet touch the stem and I can feel cold raininess and bark. I can feel my body, I can feel getting interested, I have a sense of possibility. There is tree in me and the world falls silent.

I work on a muscular level, a) to not lose myself, b) to have something to show my audience. If they see nothing of tree, at least they see a body at work. [...] Water drips off of me like heavy rain when I first lift my torso from the ground. I find this reassuring, something is happening.

I am on my hands and knees, maybe sometimes my feet are on the tree, I push the whole of my back up against the stem. Is this exchange of forces visible?

My vision is mostly close to the ground. I am muscles and body. [...].

In these texts I write about my bodily engagement with materials and textures of various kinds in an instance of solo rehearsal and sharing of work. It allowed me to practise, experience, register and reflect on physical and embodied engagement with materials in my vicinity - breath and leaves, leaves and face, rain, bark, skin, muscles, ground etc. In the rehearsal notes quoted above I mention an “open stability”, which is a quality of being that in my experience stems directly out of practicing direct and embodied engagement with the materiality of the environment.

Handling Material

A one-off session I spent with MA students of Coventry University’s dance department in Wainbody Woods was based on this notion of embodying material and used a layer of handling material as additional ‘support’. After an extended warm up that was directed at establishing a physical connection between the materiality of the body and the materiality of the woods, each dancer offered a short solo improvisation. For this they received a small package to take along as companions for their movement practice. Each parcel contained a poem, a small bundle with raisins and almonds and a yet smaller bundle with tobacco. Everything was wrapped by colourful fabric and tied with a ribbon.⁹ The suggested starting point for the solo was to create a spontaneous and individual ritual at or around a chosen site, which could include an engagement with the contents of the parcel, but did not have to.

As an extension of the body and the materials in the woods, I chose to give the dancers something additional to hold on to. Something to invigorate the mind, the body, the senses and the imagination. Something to touch, to discover, and to receive, something to give away again and place at a chosen location, something to mark a space, something to engage with, something that creates visible and lasting change, something to handle. Something perhaps, that is a bit



(Abb. 02, 03, 04) Paula Kramer, MA class 10.02.2011 01, Wainbody Wood Coventry 2011

out of place in the woods, and invites to play and dialogue.

In the short solos we then witnessed it was exciting to see the variety of engagements with the materials – of the parcel, of the body, of the woods. Some of the dancers chose to leave the parcel unopened, whilst others interacted with both the items handed to them and the poem. A small garden was made, branches received ribbons, a hand moved like the ‘perhaps hand’ of E.E. Cummings poem, which was one of three in the parcels.¹⁰

What I seek to encourage here is an engagement with the world, using ‘things’ as manifest markers in the space, things that remain a bit longer, whilst the visible aspects of our movement constantly transform and vanish. Objects allow us to return to them “again and again in time”, they let us “linger” - as Richard Sennett notes in *The Craftsman*.¹¹ I have found that a thing can provide a bridge between imagination and reality, an item can support the journey into the space of creative process.

I find resonance for this poetic engagement with material for example in Jane Bennett’s work on *Vibrant Matter* in which she probes into “Thing Power” and asks how “[...] wonder can persist even without the postulate of a God who is actively infused into all facets of the sensible world. Today things can and do enchant people by virtue of their material complexity, or by their sheer this-ness, or by their refusal to fit into the categories we bring to bear upon them.”¹²

I am similarly inspired by Graham Harman’s Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) in which he envisions a “multipolar model of the world”, one where “all relations are on equal footing.”¹³ Whilst I am not yet able to fully position my research and work in relation to Speculative Realism (SR) and OOO, both of which Harman and several colleagues currently actively promote as a new philosophical paradigm, I am inspired by the emphasis on ‘things’ and their agency as well as Harman’s suggestion that even though objects withdraw from each other and from us (meaning the full truth about them cannot be known), he suggests that objects are “approachable only with a good deal of [...] ‘poetry’.”¹⁴

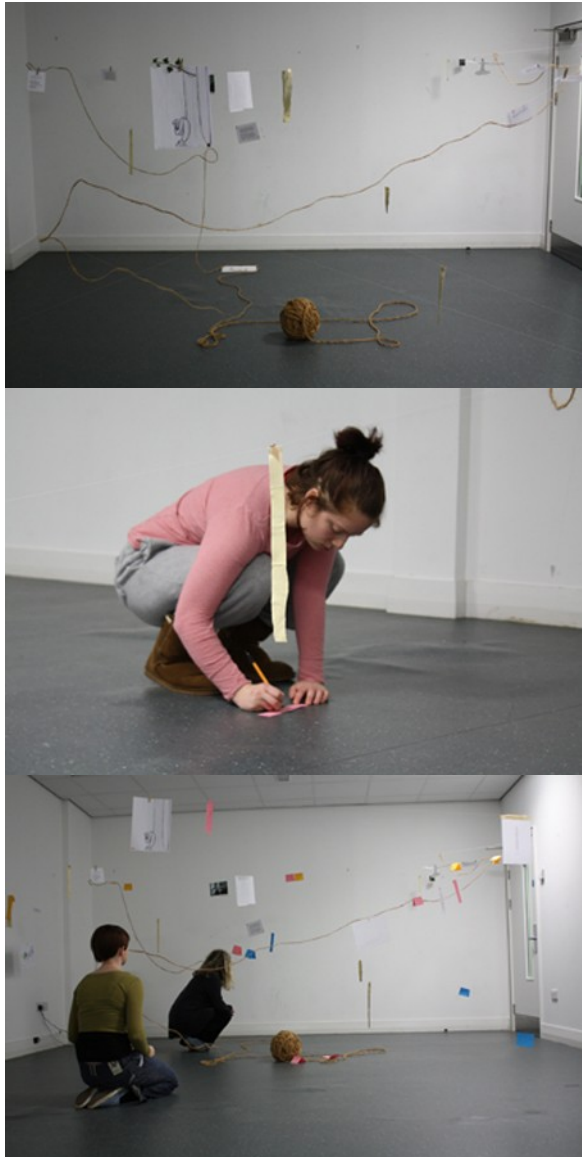
Building Corridors for Dissemination

In order to find my own “way through the woods”¹⁵ in the context of disseminating my practice-as-research, I turned to working with installations as another material measure of not getting lost. I did this because no matter how many different registers I chose in writing about movement and research experiences, I could not fully match my desire to work in a way that

Arteaga calls ‘non-reductionist’. I was looking for ways to “modify conditions” rather than “configuring directly”¹⁶ how my research is communicated and received, and offer a possibility for performative instances to be disseminated performatively.¹⁷ For the time being I refer to this tactic as *building corridors*, corridors that extend from practice-as-research into practice-as-dissemination, not by collapsing into identical instances but by extending the space from one to the other.

For a research installation in the context of a dance research conference in January 2011 in Odense, Denmark (NOFOD) I thus installed materials, poetry, photographs, interview excerpts, quotes and drawings from movement practice and suspended them in the space on thin white thread, with a big ball of coarse string anchoring in the middle of the room, with its two ends floating upwards interweaving with the thin thread. The sound score was mixed of field recordings from research sites (the Jurassic Coast of Devon, the train to and in the city of Aberystwyth, Wales) and collaborative improvisations with the musicians of Coventry’s Transgression Ensemble.

[listen to an excerpt of the sound score](#)



(Abb. 05, 06, 07) Paula Kramer, Research Installation No. 2, ICE Coventry 2011

I aimed to create an environment for visitors/participants to physically enter, filled with information and resonances, yet available for change and transformation. I wanted to provide an experience of being within, one that allows for memories and the visitor's own associations to emerge, whilst concrete physical conditions had to be navigated in the here-and-now. Aspects of my research journey were available to be looked at, touched and taken away. In some way the participants walked straight into my research, finding traces of what had happened thus far.

The invitation was to enter the space, spending some 20 minutes inside (as a group), navigating the space, engaging with the materials, and adding comments on small pieces of coloured paper. Comments on previous comments were also allowed, as well as shifting materials around. Following this phase the participants were asked to remove one item from the installation and bring it back with them. We then first spoke about what they had chosen to take out and why, after which I gave a short paper to further contextualise the installation as a method within the specificities of my research, offering some preliminary distillations from my engagement with the work of artists I am case-studying as well as reflections on my own work.¹⁸

Just as I turned to embodying and handling materials as strategies of not getting lost in outdoor spaces, I assembled materials in an indoor space to not lose the textures of practice when communicating and disseminating my research. Turning to material then – be it organically grown or prepared by myself, be it the body or outside of it – allows me to get a hold of and communicate *with* and *through*, rather than *about*. It's a way to imagine direct connections. By insisting on going through the body rather than starting with the world of thought, passing on items as companions for practice or creating environments that allow to be stepped into, I am discovering helpful properties in dealing with materials.

This is not to suggest that fixed notions of truth reside in material, it is more about reinvigorating playful dealings with materials, to find my grounding as a performer-researcher, to rediscover places hidden in the forbidden forest of the material, to test and try beyond what I already know, beyond what can be defined by words and into what needs to be touched. 'Things' I have found, allow me to work and communicate in a frequency slightly denser than that of 'just words'.

Endnotes

1. In the context of my research I use 'practice-as-research' to define a location as well as a conceptual and praxical context of my research. In the monograph with the same title (Allegue *et al.* 2009) this is the proposed term and style of writing (hyphenated, lower case) and I place myself within the field of Performing Arts in British Higher Education with this choice. It is difficult to use terminology in this field with accuracy at present, but I would suggest that practice-as-research can be used interchangeably with 'artistic research' or 'künstlerische Forschung', which is more prominently used in the context of Germany.
2. AHRC network Performance Footprint: <http://www.performance-footprint.co.uk>, accessed on 28.02.2011; NOFOD conference: <http://www.nofod.org/conferences/index.asp>, accessed on 02.03.2011.
3. Alex Arteaga, *Auditive Architektur. Einführung in eine neue Disziplin*, in *kunsttexte.de*, Auditive Perspektiven, Nr. 4, 2010, S. 2. Translations of the German original are by Paula Kramer.
4. Arteaga 2010, *Auditive Architektur*, S. 4.
5. Bettina Mainz is based in Berlin and studied dance in Amsterdam at SNDO as well as extensively with movement artist Suprpto Suryodarma both in Europe and Java. She has since developed her own practice called Body of Becoming over the course of many years.
6. Teresa Bas (2009) My Memories [email] to Paula Kramer [24.08.2009].
7. <http://www.covepark.org>, accessed on 24.03.2011.
8. <http://www.performancefootprint.co.uk>, accessed on 12.03.2011.
9. The overlaps with materials used in specific Native-American rituals (fabric and tobacco) were intended, however not discussed and offered as an artistic rather than a distinctly spiritual gesture.
10. E.E. Cummings, Spring is like a perhaps hand, available for example at <http://mslinder.wikispaces.com/Spring+is+like+a+perhaps+hand>, accessed on 08.02.2011.
11. Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*. London 2008, S. 15.
12. Gulshan Khan, *Agency, Nature and Emergent Properties. An interview with Jane Bennett*, in *Contemporary Political Theory* 8 (1), 2009, S. 100. Accessible at <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/cpt/journal/v8/n1/full/cpt200843a.html> [07.03.2011]. Interview on Bennett's work in general and her then forthcoming book *Vibrant Matter* in particular. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham 2010. Thanks to J.D. Dewsbury for bringing Jane Bennett's work into the Performance Footprint network and to Janneke Adema for alerting me to the interview almost simultaneously though completely unrelated.
13. Graham Harman, *I am also of the opinion that materialism must be destroyed*, in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 28, 2010, S. 772.
14. Harman 2010, *I am also of the opinion that materialism must be destroyed*, S. 789. Harman is well known as a Heideggerian, framing his philosophy for example like this: „My own contribution is simply to replace Whitehead's relational model of things with Heidegger's model of things withdrawing from all presence, while retaining Whitehead's cosmic scope and dumping Heidegger's human-centrism.“ (Harman interviewed by Mike Watson on <http://dialogicafantastica.wordpress.com/2011/03/06/graham-harman-interviewed/>, accessed on 07.03.2011).
15. Annette Arlander, *Finding your way through the woods – experiences in artistic research*, *Nordic Theatre Studies* Vol 20, 2008, S. 28-41.
16. I refer to Arteaga's quote that I used in the text further above here. Arteaga 2010, *Auditive Architektur*, S. 4.
17. I draw on Arteaga here, who argues that „Performative instances can only be researched performatively.“ Arteaga 2010, *Auditive Architektur*, S. 3.
18. In this instance I considered the dynamics between 'decentralisation' and 'belonging' in the context of dance in the natural environment. The paper will be published in the NOFOD conference proceedings, Paula Kramer (forthcoming), *Dancing in Nature Space - Reflections on a Research Installation in Conference Proceedings*, 10th NOFOD Conference, 'Spacing Dance(s) - Dancing Space(s)' 27 – 30 January 2011, Odense, Denmark.

Illustrations

- (Abb. 01) Stephen Bottoms, *Being-not-Being a Tree*, Paula Kramer, Cove Park 2011
 (Abb. 02) Paula Kramer, *MA class 10.02.2011*, Kerry Allsop, Wainbody Wood Coventry
 (Abb. 03) Paula Kramer, *MA class 10.02.2011*, Kerry Allsop, Wainbody Wood Coventry
 (Abb. 04) Paula Kramer, *MA class 10.02.2011*, Tara Rutter, Wainbody Wood Coventry
 (Abb. 05) Paula Kramer, *Research Installation No. 2*, ICE Coventry January 2011
 (Abb. 06) Paula Kramer, *Research Installation No. 2*, Tara Rutter, ICE Coventry January 2011
 (Abb. 07) Paula Kramer, *Research Installation No. 2*, Kerry Allsop, Sarah Whatley, ICE Coventry January 2011

Abstract

Drawing from practice-based PhD research in dance, this article focuses on the use of materials in relationship to moving, being and creating in the natural outdoors as well as in the context of disseminating practice-as-research. It considers three examples of engaging with materials – firstly to embody material as a performer, secondly to handle and appreciate materials as companions for movement explorations and thirdly as allies in communicating research that deals with the ephemeral and experiential. Materials are considered not for an assumed truthfulness, but for the imaginative capacities they elicit when approached poetically.

Author

Paula Kramer is currently a PhD research student in Dance at Coventry University. Her practice-as-research focuses on movement in the natural environment. As a performer she works in movement laboratories in outdoor locations, attending to improvised relationships between the body in movement, the local site/environment and those who inhabit it.

Site-specific performance, awareness based improvisation, somatic practices and a postgraduate degree in political science (FU Berlin) all influence her practice, which is principally inspired by studying and working with Bettina Mainz (Berlin). She is currently in the first year of the 'Walk of Life' training with Helen Poyner in Devon (UK). Both practitioners are connected to Amerta Movement and have trained intensively with Suprpto Suryodarmo in Java and Europe.

Title

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