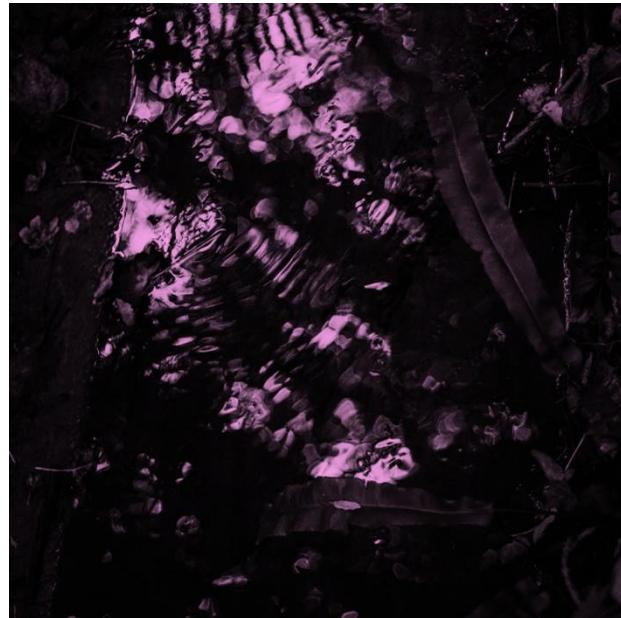


NOTES TOWARDS AN AMBIENT DANCE.



By Billy Maxwell Taylor

MA Expanded Dance Practice at London Contemporary Dance School

2024

ARRIVAL.

What if reading this document was an ambient dance?

A space to slow down, ponder and contemplate.

Starting with a deep breath.

What does spaciousness look like to you?

The square is a window.

It is a gateway.

Sturdy, robust and harmonious as a shape,

It can be a threshold into another world.

What if each page is a gateway?

What if each link to a video is an invitation into the memory of a process?

Could the words, sounds, images extend

outwards to the landscape you are within

and inwards to the landscape that is within?

Feel free to drift between this document, the videos and your own space.

Let's start with a deep breath.

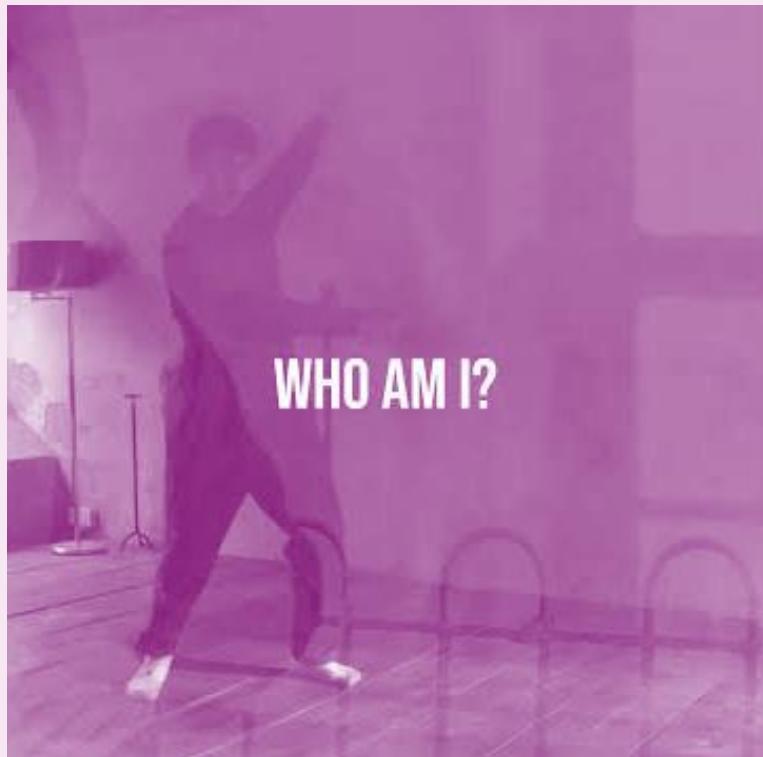
I am Billy Maxwell Taylor, an interdisciplinary choreographer from the United Kingdom, creating spaces that strive to offer 'stillness in the busyness', a core mantra of my work. This ranges from audiovisual installations such as *Our Branch That Stopped Singing* (2023) to stage productions such as *Rain Pours Like Coffee Drops* (2022). I draw from site-inspired dance research, particularly within *butoh*, and continually explore a harmony between vitalised floorwork and moments of tranquility, rooted in my early practice of *chado* (the Japanese Way of Tea).

Like many independent choreographers, I spend large portions of my daily life writing applications, dancing in living rooms due to a lack of studio space and people-watching in cafes. Rehearsal periods are small glimmers in this process that often require weeks of mind-numbing Arts Council bid writing to achieve. And even then, it is never a guarantee. As such, I have become preoccupied with questions surrounding sustainability and the possibility of working as an artist in the 21st century.

After experiencing the burnout of retail working in my teens as well as 3 years of creative freelancing following my BA at Rose Bruford College, I have embarked on a journey to consider the following question:

WHAT IF DANCE OFFERED SPACE FOR CONTEMPLATION IN A TIME RIFE WITH SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL DISSONANCE?





ENCOUNTER #1

What landscapes do you carry within you? Ponder whilst looking around your current space.

THE RATIONALE OF AMBIENT DANCE.

With ceaselessness and busyness being characteristic of modern capitalist society, moments of stillness and reclaiming ownership of time are vital in imagining a future that prioritises wellbeing. From temples to libraries to coffeeshops, people have often sought out dedicated spaces to be still, meditating on life through a process of slowing down and observing; spaces that 'induce calm and a space to think' (Eno, 1978). Within my research I have concerned myself deeply with these spaces, considering how they apply to the theatrical context of dance creation and presentation.

This research feels radical in its gentleness, an act of resistance against a fast-paced social system 'designed to maintain our exhaustion and our experience of ceaselessness' (Hersey, 2022). Against a backdrop of a society where '9 in 10 UK adults experienced high or extreme stress in the past year' (Mental Health UK, 2024), how can dance meet the fatigue of both the spectator and the artist? Within the latter, this research explores how ambient dance shifts our approach to workplace wellbeing in the arts, an industry that currently 'extracts its value from deeply human places, [offering] little in terms of stability, or remuneration and erodes community support' making burnout an 'inevitability' (Georgiou, 2022).

The word ambient is primarily circumscribed to the musical genre. So, by framing this research around principles of ambience, I hope to explore the intersections of these mediums, perceiving choreography, spectatorship and dance through ideas proposed by ambient artists such as Lawrence English, Loscil and Brian Eno. The aim of this research is to find an ambient dance that "allows you to still inhabit the world but more peacefully" (williams, 2024). These are further contextualised in relationship to *chado* and to wider literature including ecophilosophy, meditation and dance practices. Through this, I hope to contribute towards the growing conversation of how we hold space in dance, whether that be in rehearsals, in the theatrical event or in the day-to-day life of freelance dance artists.

In the spirit of Rob Hopkins, a self-proclaimed champion of collective imagination, I conclude through curiosity as to what ambient dance could be: What if dancemaking was not tied to notions of ceaseless production? What if slowness was the pathway? What if dance allowed us to land in ourselves, our communities and our environment? What if, through an ambient dance practice, each day could have a handful of moments of arriving, seeing, breathing, grounding and encountering? What if, in the chaos of everyday life, we felt empowered to allow space?

AMBIENT.

"Ambient dance is everything and everywhere"

(Teng, 2024)

"from PIE root **ambhi-* "around" + **i-re* "go" (from PIE root **ei-* "to go" (Etymology Online, 2024).



*Photo of Southbank at night, encountered in a slow walk
after a Chado class*

AMBIENT HISTORY.

Contextualising ambience, the word itself invites us into a spatial relationship; one directed outward towards 'immersion... we were making music to swim in, to float in, to get lost inside' (Eno, 1996, p. 294). This quote by Eno, the pioneer of ambient music, builds upon impressionistic composers such as Claude Debussy, Eric Satie's *musique d'ameublement* (furniture music) and Maurice Ravel's pieces that 'ripple around the listener' (Toop, 1995, p.271). They demonstrate a shift towards a mode of composition which offers a general tone or impression, often surrounding the listener in a diffused manner and blending into the background of social situations.

Yet in some cases, ambience also becomes foreground in our attention, such as in John Cage's 4'33" which confronts us with 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence/ambient noise. This could be traced further into R. Murray Schafer's acoustic ecology, a study that interrogates "the effects of the acoustic environment or SOUNDSCAPE on the physical responses or behavioural characteristics of creatures living within it" (Schafer, 1977. P.271). So, in these examples, the ambience is not ignored but instead our "attention turns toward the background, past the foregrounded sounding objects to create a new foreground present in our consciousness" (Holbrook, 2019, p. 66). Therefore, this history of environmental sound presents the harmonious paradox of ambient listenership (or spectatorship); it exists in the in-between space of attentiveness and inattentiveness. Encapsulating this is Eno's iconic phrasing: it is 'as ignorable as it is interesting' (Eno, 1978).

40 years after Eno coined the term ambient music, I watched Canadian musician Loscil perform at the Southbank Centre in London. Through an hour of blending drones supported by progressive projections of geometric shapes and videos of Canadian landscapes, I was immersed within depths of imagination and reflection. Time expanded as my attention blended between the internal and external landscape. As Loscil describes, this curation of sensory space 'automatically leads to a meditative, introspective, contemplative head space' (Loscil, 2020). So, within my research, I became inquisitive into how this same experience can be achieved within dance theatre encounters, offering an 'ignorable as it is interesting' (Eno, 1978) choreography in which the spectator can lean in and pay close attention to engaging embodied dance or lean back with a diffused attention towards a gradually changing tone of space.

CONTEMPLATION.

The word 'contemplate' finds its etymological root in *templum* which forms the Modern English word temple. This suggests a dedicated area for thought, separate from our usual perception of time and space. This shift in spatio-temporal perception could be called 'deep time', which is

A means not of escaping our troubled present, but rather of re-imagining it; countermanding its quick greeds and furies with older, slower stories of making and unmaking. (MacFarlane, 2019, p. 15).

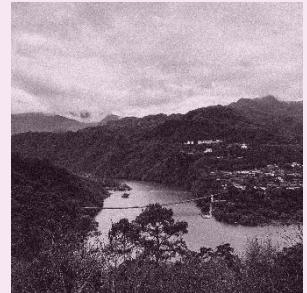
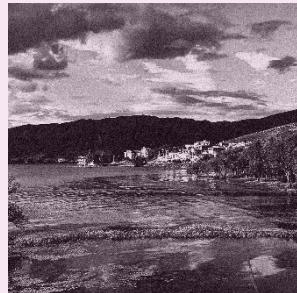
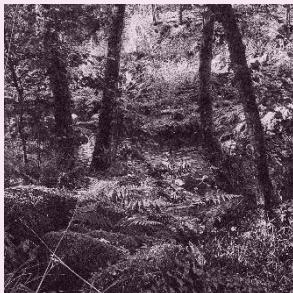
If ambient dance is not an escape, then it begins through an acknowledgement of society's busyness, followed by an intentional slowing down. Ambient dance is not an ignorance to modern difficulties but a facing of them. It is in this act of slowing down that we can demonstrate a form of resistance; activities such as 'slowing down, letting your spare time expand... are radical acts these days but they are essential' (May, 2020, 14).

My mantra of 'stillness in the busyness' depicts this resistance, acknowledging that whilst we exist in a fast-paced Capitalist society, we can reclaim agency in how we curate spaces of stillness. Within these spaces, 'the quietness is emptying, ecstatic and sometimes painful. Like perfect snowflakes, they are glimmers of something almost sacred' (Ruth Allen, 2021, p.100). Therefore, the drifting and daydreaming that ambient dance offers is not a disengagement but a vital *re*-engagement with the world we inhabit, externally and internally. Ambient dance invites us to activate the Default Mode Network in our brain through 'tasks that require a little of our attention but also leave enough freedom for the mind to wander' (Hopkins, 2019, p. 77). This network opens 'a space in our mental life to think divergently, expansively, and to integrate different ideas, possibilities and scenarios, often without our even realising it' (Hopkins, 2019, p. 76).

Ambient dance research advocates for theatre's potential as a catalyst for slowing down. Speaking to the future of theatre, Chloe Naldrett posits that it could return to its initial purpose as a place to go and 'talk with ourselves, to reflect and meditate on what's going on around us' (Naldrett in Hopkins, 2022). This encounter is reminiscent of my aforementioned experience watching Loscil as well as other contemplative theatrical events which offer 'time to think and the space to dream' (Wilson, 2023). This practice-as-research is concerned with *how* we can achieve this daydreaming state reliably through intentional methodologies.

MEMORY AS A PATHWAY TO IMAGINATION.

Memory flows like a river, and it is through its constant flow that we come into being. We live in the moment: the everchanging, ever-forward-rushing current of now. The flow of experience, once retained, constantly reshapes the land of self. (Farrell, 2024, p. 29).



Images of rivers in the homelands of my dance collaborators: Spain, Taiwan and China.

Within my research, memory has served as a key in understanding the choreography of ambient dance. Contextually, this arose after experiencing Ryuichi Sakamoto's post-humous event, *KAGAMI* (2023), an augmented reality concert combining a holographic Sakamoto playing piano surrounded by digital landscapes of falling petals, blizzards and cosmic journeys. This work was tinted with reflection upon his death, the ambience teeming with traces and ephemerality. After the concert finishes, the hologram fades and we are left in an empty space. Recalling the concept of ambient dance as the interplay between internal and external landscapes, I believe that the theatrical space exists between worlds. It is inhabited not only by the floor we can feel, the person sat next to us, the light on our skin, but also by the ambiences we carry within us – our memories, imagination and the internal world. Memory then, in my definition, does not exist within the past but is a presence within the present. By acknowledging this, ambient dance strives to evoke memory, both in dancer and spectator, offering a gateway into the contemplative present moment.

AMBIENT DANCE IS PRESENCE WITH MEMORY.

Video documentation from my first week in the Forest of Dean.



This presence of memory inspire imagination as:

The imagination draws from the palette of options and possibilities that we carry in our memories. It re-assembles, cuts and pastes, and makes unique combinations of experiences and ideas we have seen before. The greater the diversity in the natural world around us, and the greater our capacity to notice it, the more we can draw on it as our muse for how to exist in the world. (Hopkins, 2019, p.61).

Methodologically, this research is grounded in *butoh* studies under the tutelage of Marie-Gabrielle Rotie. The attention of the *butoh* dancer is often 'looking inward to look outward' (Rotie, 2024), existing in the liminal space between worlds. We achieved this through the embodiment of *butoh fu*, a 'method that uses words to make an imaginative *butoh* space and manages and shares time and space, physicalizing imagery through word' (Waguri, 2015). Through this, the dancers were able to conjure worlds that radiate from their phenomenological presence on stage. This continual presence with remembrance was a gateway for both the dancer and the audience to be with the traces of yesterday within the present moment, transporting them into the depths of imagination. Relating back to this research's rationale, the opening of the imagination through the theatrical event offers the 'ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise' (Dewey in Hopkins, 2019, p.9), inspiring us within a world of socio-ecological crisis.

ENCOUNTER #2

The following is Mei Ting Fang's score in *Streams of Gentle Yesterday*. What worlds do they conjure within you?

*"An autumn leaf lands on a pure stream,
Soft springs emerge from the eyes,
A small black stone across the expanse of time."*

CHADO.

This research has also drawn me to consider ambient dance's role within a society of environmental disconnection. As 'Britain ranks bottom in Europe for nature connectedness' (Barkham, 2022), how can slowing down and listening to landscape reconnect us to the natural world? A shifting attention to ambience involves 'listening to the world... and the impact humans have had on nature' (Loscil, 2020). As Arne Næss' ecological self suggests we are deeply involved in our environment and 'in, and of, nature from the very beginning of ourselves' (1986, p. 23). Moreover, the philosophy that has acted as a continual reference point within my inquiry into ambient dance has been the Japanese Tea practice of *Chado*, which I began studying in 2020 first through books, then videos and now through frequent lessons with Yasuhiro Yamaguchi, a teacher of *Urasenke*. Albeit I must acknowledge my beginner nature within the long journey of studying tea, the core principles defined by Sen No Rikyu resonate deeply with ambient dance. These four principles are *Wa* (Harmony), *Kei* (Respect), *Sei* (Purity) and *Jaku* (Harmony). Underpinning these principles is a profound yet gentle appreciation of nature and a deep listening to environment.

Within the experience of *Chado*, attention is paid to the complete surrounding. The sound of the kettle is described as *shohu* meaning wind through pine trees. Noriko Morishita writes when experiencing *chado*, 'I felt as if I could hear every single raindrop. It was something like listening to music... forming a magnificent multi-layered symphony of rain' (2020, p.160). *Each* bowl is selected depending on the occasion, *each* flower placed within the atmosphere of the season. And within the *temae* (the preparation of the tea), the host moves with calm poise through a precise routine. It is no surprise that, during my classes, Yamaguchi has often drawn on choreographic language from ballet (*en dedans, en dehors* etc.). The entirety of the experience is held by a sensation of care and attention. This harmonises to offer a tranquility

not to be confused with a sort of dreamy psychological state. Instead, it represents the dynamic force of one's innermost being that, stemming from the heart-felt realisation of the uniqueness of each moment, embraces and infuses the practice of tea by giving significance to it' (Zen Wonder, 2024)

So, within my research, there has been particular attention paid towards spatial curation, both for the dance artists as well as the audience. Ambient dance is an act of intentional care and deep listening.

ENCOUNTER #3

Do you have time to make a cup of tea? What if you created a cup of tea with care? Each Sunday during this research, I made a cup of coffee and listened to Keplermomo's "morning piano" on YouTube, a practice he calls a "meditation" (Keplermomo, 2024). I listen patiently and write any thoughts that come to my mind. How can you curate the space to drink a cup of tea or coffee? I invite you to listen to [this piano meditation.](#)



Image by Rocio Chacon from Expanded Dance Practice Unit 1 Sharing, We Are Bubbles of Earth (Chacon, 2024)

AMBIENT DANCE: A GENTLE MANIFESTO.

Within the process of this research, myself and my dance collaborators regularly returned to a question: what is ambient dance?

As these ideas developed, a flexible manifesto began to form. My invitation is to read these with the gentle flow of your breath. First, inhale the air around you and as you exhale, allow the sentence to be land like a snowflake, whether that be silently or out loud.

Ambient dance is a moment of stillness in the busyness.

Ambient dance is the interplay between internal and external landscapes.

Ambient dance is an arrival that grounds, an encounter that deepens and a departure that lands.

Ambient dance is in the immensity of the ocean or the intimacy of a stream.

Ambient dance is a reclaiming of agency for the spectator to lean in or to lean back.

Ambient dance is opening to the river of sensation and memory.

Ambient dance is as ignorable as it is interesting.

Ambient dance is applicable to the movement of everyday life.

Ambient dance is an act of care.

“Ambient dance is endless” (Teng, 2024).

Background sketch of the Thames by Yung Chih Teng (2024)

Like Bruce Lee's water philosophy, I perceive ambient dance less as the container and more as the water that can flow between:

Be formless. Shapeless, like water. If you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put water into a bottle and it becomes the bottle. You put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now, water can flow or it can crash. Be water, my friend. (Lee, 2020)

I invite you to read the manifesto again, but this time imagine pouring it throughout your life. Pour it into how you make your cup of coffee in the morning, how you stand on the train. How you dance. How you see the world when waiting for a traffic light. How you cry or how you smile.

This manifesto recognises that this research sits within a wider context of busyness and burnout and calls for faith and belief in our own agency. Crucially, it acknowledges its existence *within* society, not detached from it as a hermit or recluse. Lawrence English writes that Ambient is

never only music [or in this research's case, dance] for escapism. It is a zone for participation in a pursuit of musical listenership that acknowledges sound's potential values in broader spheres (the social, political, cultural etc). It is a freeing up, an opening out and a deepening, simultaneously. (2018)

Ambient dance may be small acts, yet these compound over time through individual and collective moments, recalling the fractals idea posited by adrienne maree brown where 'what we practice at a small scale can reverberate to the largest scale' (2021, p.54).





REFLECTIONS.

AMBIENT DANCE IS SPACIOUS ARRIVAL, ENCOUNTER AND DEPARTURE.

At the beginning of this research, I posed the central question: what if the theatrical event became a space for patient contemplation? Within this, I have become increasingly interested in the experiential journey of the audience. During my first production, *Rain Pours Like Coffee Drops* (2022), I allocated 10 minutes at the end of the work to allow audiences time to settle before stepping out into London. Moreover, I was inspired further by Maris Meos' facilitation of Eden Cave's *Red Bird* (2024) screening, a zoom event that first invited people into a landing meditation to then watch the film and concluded with a series of reflective questions.

I have articulated this journey as three stages: arrival, encounter and departure. The articulation of these is heavily inspired by two models that I discussed with Eleanor Buchan during my Forest of Dean residency in October 2024: the hero's journey and the Active Hope spiral. The first of these, proposed by Joseph Campbell, is a narrative structure used to describe storytelling and filmography but also is now used often in spiritual retreats such as the residencies at Eden's Cave. It begins with a sense of departure from the norm, stepping out of the village to encounter something else. Through a process of trials and tribulations, facing dragons, mentors and the typical tropes of the hero genre, there is a process of transformation or change. At the end the hero's journey, the hero returns to the village with an elixir or message that changes something within the world. The Active Hope spiral is a more contemporary model, created by climate activist Joanna Macy, which discusses a process called 'The Great Turning', the shifts needed to address the climate crisis. It begins with grounding through expressing gratitude and then delves into an acknowledging and honouring of our pain. The next stage is 'seeing with new eyes', dreaming potential futures and then going forth to make meaningful change.

So, within ambient dance, there is a process of arriving and grounding, encountering change that inspires a shift in perception and then integrating the experience into the everyday with the hope of nourishing a more spacious, connected life.

AN AMBIENT DANCE JOURNEY

An audience enters a theatre space.

They land through a meditative arrival (a voiceover, gentle piano or soft movement).

They encounter blending textures and 'deep time'.

Their attention drifts between the internal and external landscape.

After encountering depths, they are guided in a return.

In the departure, they are given space to consider what traces remain and to carry these onwards from the theatre space.

As well as a malleable framework for choreographic structure/dance dramaturgy, this ambient dance journey could be applied to filmmaking (as seen in [my meditative video essay documentation](#)) or within rehearsal planning. Similar to an audience entering a theatre, the entry of the dancer into the studio can often act as a space to be outside of the worries or hustle of their daily lives. This is not to neglect these qualities, but instead to appreciate the benefit of a dedicated space for dance practice.

AN AMBIENT DANCE REHEARSAL (EXAMPLE FROM MY NOTEBOOK)

Arrival: ground through 30 deep breaths and meditating back-to-back with a partner. Afterwards, slowly roll through the space. Play music by Chihei Hatakeyama in the background.

Encounter: Explore the embodiment of small poetic phrases such as 'footsteps brush away time', translating them to different degrees of intensity throughout the body.

Departure: Distil the essence of the exploration by drawing an image on a small playing card and then talk about these with the group, giving space for silence.

ARRIVAL.

We are often crossing the threshold into theatres or rehearsal studios with the baggage of life: daily tensions, responsibilities and the burnout that effects 1 in 3 people in the UK (Arctic Coffee, 2021). Moreover, with traffic noise, social media and bombarding advertisements, we are a sensorially overwhelmed society and, as a person with sonic sensitivity, I have found myself often drained by theatrical events that plunge me straight into chaos. Inspired by my research into *chado* and Zen Buddhism, the arrival acts as a slowing down so 'that the human senses are fully open to receive the world' (Watts, 1957, p.176). Within *chado*, the guest enters and takes time to make their way around the tearoom, observing and respecting each flower, bowl and material. This encounter is held by the term *ichigo ichie*, loosely translating to 'one time, one meeting', acknowledging a deep presence with the shared moment. This encounter often invites silence and, as theatre director Robert Wilson suggests, "sometimes, when we're very quiet, we hear more carefully than we do when we're making sound" (Wilson, 2023).

So, a space of quietening and grounding is where the arrival begins but what methodologies can we use to achieve this? One particular method utilised in my research was voiceover, inspired by my encountering of Miranda Tufnell's *A Widening Field* as well as recordings of Steve Paxton facilitating 'the small dance'. The scores from Tufnell invite a slower experience where we

move out of our heads and into the sensory world of the body awaken[ing] us not only to sensation but also to a slower, deeper landscape beneath the surface of everyday awareness, a landscape of feeling, memory, impulse and dream (Tufnell, 2004, p.3)

This began as dance research, guiding the body into a state of readiness for movement. However, I soon became curious as to how this score could be encountered by an audience. What if the theatrical event started not with a reminder to turn off your phones but instead a guided 2-minute meditative score that lands us into our breathing, our seat and our imagination? Through this meditation, the audience is “landing in now” (brown, p.67) which involves a process of releasing concerns regarding where we have come from and anxieties of where we may go to land into the present moment. Of course, within the encounter, there may be contemplations about our lives, our futures and what lays ahead. Yet, through a slow arrival of grounding, sipping relaxing tea or listening to a soft soundscape, we can meet these inquiries with a gentleness. This was tested during the process with small audiences of my peers, with one feeding back that they felt ‘taken care of, going into the depths of water and floating up into seeing the light again’ (Chan, 2024).

This sense of care recalls the respect (*Kei*) present within the *temae* of *chado*. This suggests that, prior to the voiceover, the preset or entrance in the theatre space is just as important within the arrival. As the tea master selects exact flowers, flavours and images based on the unique moment of that season and time, so too can the choreographer consider the curation of space even before the dance begins. Within this research, this involved consideration into the marketing material which for many will be the first contact with the world of the work. In the research, I drew on Louise Stigell’s concept of ‘calm marketing’ which involves “sharing your personality, philosophy and work with the world, in a way that lights you up and provides value to others” (Stigell, 2024). This infuses the entirety of the process of ambient dance production with a quality of care that resists the typical commodification of theatre seen in capitalist models of marketing. Once the audience enter the building consideration can be placed to the Front of House’s tone of address to audiences, the beverages and, of course, the ambient soundscape. When they enter the theatre/performance space, the preset then continues this journey into the arrival even further through the presences on stage, the lighting, the comfort of the chairs. For the choreographer of ambient dance, care should be placed onto all of these elements, as if you were arranging flowers in a vase.

ENCOUNTER.

After the audience have arrived into the space, the choreography can begin to take them on a journey into different worlds. This is called the encounter, which could be paralleled to the trials and tribulations the hero faces within the hero's journey, the stages identified as "Crossing the Threshold to the Special World... Approach to the Innermost Cave... The Ordeal" (Volger, 2003). Albeit these examples from Campbell's model prove quite dramatic, for our purposes it brings to light a journey into depth, stepping into the world of deep time. This world may involve a continuation of tranquility as seen in the arrival, or it may evolve into darker worlds of grit and tension. Dark ambient is a genre in and of itself, with Loscil's *Monument Builders* or Rafael Anton Irisarri's *Solastalgia* which revolves "around the existential dread of climate change" (Irisarri, 2019). Within the studio, my dance collaborators and I would continually test the boundaries of this, considering how we can explore the totality of our experience instead of treating ambient dance as a blissful ignorance towards turbulence. Principles of totality within Zen were useful here, understanding that "opposites are relational and so fundamentally harmonious" (Watts, 1957, p.175). Within *Streams of Gentle Yesterday*, Xinyi Du's score offered a counterpoint to gentle tranquility by exploring the chaos within memory and streams. After discussion with Xinyi, we decided upon creating a 6-movement choreographic phrase that will act as the base for her score. Each shape was created as a memory of a movement, a body position that she had witnessed in previous rehearsals. We then explored the edge of each one, finding the extremity of tension before releasing into the next shape. With time, the form of the shapes 'eroded', becoming flow as opposed to fixed statues. As a choreographer, I offered the image of 'releasing into the whirlpool of time', which invited Xinyi into a sensation of letting go. Being with the moments of tension allowed Xinyi (and in turn the audience) to experience a deeper appreciation for the eventual landing and tranquility at the end of the

work. Moreover, I invited Xinyi to always return to the breath (a common technique in meditation) and we adapted her costume to be barefoot to allow a real sense of groundedness. As such, we were able to encounter chaos without becoming lost within it.

So, it is both the audience and the dancer who cross a threshold during the encounter. In the studio, we worked closely with *butoh*-inspired poetic scores and Deborah Hay's choreography of language where 'as few words as possible, can inspire experimentation that expands a dancer's movement resources and performance potential' (Hay, 2015, p. 3). These poetic scores were defined as traces, relating to the presence of memory mentioned previously. Within the act of performance, the dance artist would exist between two ambiances, conjuring the internal whilst seeing and being within the external. Upon further discussion with my supervisor, Henry McGrath, I began to consider ambient dance as intertwined with principles of *ma*, a word present in *butoh*, *chado* and wider Japanese spiritual philosophies. This word is often translated as the space in-between. Kazuo Ohno speaks to this within the concept of gaze, suggesting that 'your soul constantly needs to come and go, so keep your eyes wide open as you move at all times' (Ohno, 2004, p.203). The dance returns then to this paradox or harmony of oppositions; a movement in which we 'feel the world around us' (Ohno, 2004, p.207) whilst simultaneously transforming through the internal world. Mei's score of 'an autumn leaf lands on a pure stream' infused both the body of the dancer and the spectator between two places: the imagination and the present moment. It is

Through the performer's presence, [that] the spectator experiences the performer and himself as embodied mind in a constant state of becoming – he perceives the circulating energy as a transformative and vital energy. (Fischer-Lichte, 2008 p.99)

Our studio research found that this approach inspired a trance-like state or 'trip' as Lin Hwai Min describes within his choreography of Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, a company whose practice is rooted in meditation and tai chi. This 'trip' is what I have previously experienced watching Cloud Gate's *Lunar Halo* (2023), where I am simultaneously pulled into the lifeforce and energy of the mover as well as expanding outwards, daydreaming and drifting.

When on these trance-like journeys, it was my responsibility as choreographer to compose the montage of elements in a manner that allowed drifting and a slow shifting tone without it becoming too busy on stage. Returning to the curation of the tearoom, I imagined and experimented with the harmony of spatial curation, using choreographic variations alongside scenographic variations. This was prevalent

within Yung Chih Teng and Marta Guerra Doblas' score which involved a single floorwork crossing, guided by the phrase 'spend time together as if each touch was a cloud in a sunset'. Marta was often so deep within the duet that time blurred and audio cues were hard to pick out. So, in rehearsal, it became important to work with the controllable element which was the starting time. Similar to the crossfade within music production, we had to experiment with what point we can introduce new elements to allow a smooth transition without it becoming a battle for attention. If they started 30 seconds earlier, they would run the risk of pulling the audience's attention too soon from Mei's score and if they start too late, they would not have the time to fully develop their journey.

As a choreographer, I aimed to curate an environment that supported these scores, and intentional lighting and projection design was key to this. Collaborating with Ali Hunter, we worked with creating sections of the stage that would be 'activated' by slow fade ups of spotlights.



Images of the three scores on stage, Mei Ting Fang (left), Yung Chih Teng & Marta Guerra Doblas (centre), Xinyi Du (right) (Taylor, 2024)

Moreover, I was inspired to explore projection by Loscil's audio-visual concerts. Reflecting upon my first work, *Rain Pours Like Coffee Drops*, the piece juxtaposed rain-inspired choreography with cityscape

projections and an ambient piano score. Choreographer Richard Chappell commented that 'the work is multifaceted in sound, projection, text and movement, representing avenues to engage with diverse audiences' (Chappell, 2023). This comment reverberated into this ambient dance research and the creation of *Streams of Gentle Yesterday*. If the projection became too dominating, as fed back in an early sharing, it would detract from the presence of the dancers. As Kakuzo Okakura writes 'a solo of flowers is interesting, but in a concerto with painting and sculpture the combination becomes entrancing' (1964, p.59). This care towards harmony was central in my choreographic role, deeply considering each element to offer a diverse but unbusy world of ambience for the audience – an "ignorable as it is interesting" (Eno, 1978) journey.

With this attention decentralising the dancer, my research questions whether ambient dance is posthuman. I sense that the human energy is vital on stage and I have been continually drawn to the powerful radiance of Cloud Gate and *butoh* dancers. For me, they exhibit the true presence of embodiment that meditation offers – by offering spaciousness and slowing down, we can truly arrive into the vitality of the present. However, alongside this energy in ambient dance is that of the ambience itself, which interplays with the dancer either consciously or subconsciously. Relating back to Næss' concept of ecological self, we are in and of the environment we inhabit, drawing parallels to Astrida Neimanis' posthuman phenomenology which explores how 'for us humans, the flow and flush of waters sustains our own bodies, but also connects them to other bodies, to other worlds beyond our human selves' (2017, p. 2). Therefore, ambient dance tends to this harmony of energy, vitalising both the human and the ambience that they inhabit so that the spectator can experience the world through wide eyes or through a close focus.

To conclude, the encounter offers a gradually evolving space of various avenues for the audience, inviting them deeper into contemplation and imagination through the body and through the environment. This research has drawn deeply on dance practices that centralise the energy of the body and its potential to exist between the internal and external landscape. Through this encounter, the spectator can engage in a dance that is full of life and imagery whilst also experiencing it with a wider lens, like an impressionistic world of shifting tones.

DEPARTURE.

After the depth and spacious meditation of the encounter, how do we land back into reality and transition outside of the theatre? I call this the departure, yet it also resonates with 'the return' within the hero's journey. This stage involves the integration of ideas through what Campbell calls the 'elixir':

Once the hero's transformation is complete, he or she returns to the ordinary world with the elixir, a great treasure or a new understanding to share. (Peterson, 2018)

The effect of this elixir on an audience member could be simple, such as remembering someone important to them or a place they wish to return. It may be a deeper appreciation of the present moment, watching the swell of the Thames at night with eyes like those of Hirayama in Wim Wenders' *Perfect Days*. Ambient dance embraces that, since the arrival, there has been an environmental change in the theatre space and in the audience's internal space, reminiscent of the ephemerality of *ichigo ichie*.

When curating this departure, Joanna Macy's *Active Hope* offers insight into the concept of 'going forth',

We have come to see with new eyes our ineluctable place in the web of life, our connections with all beings through space and time and the kind of power that is ours for creating a life-sustaining culture. Now we use this new vision to discern more clearly the distinctive role we each can play in the Great Turning. (Macy, 2021)

Cyclical journeys prove effective within this particular journey structure. It invites us back to the moment, grounding the audience into the material reality of the theatre. Within *Streams of Gentle Yesterday*, I guided the audience back into this space by repeating a piano motif and having Mei finally look up

towards them (her face had been concealed for the majority of the performance). The rest of the dancers on stage were guided by a final score: 'find a position to rest'. These all harmonised to hold the audience with a sense of care which was often fed back to me. Once the show has concluded, it is possible to offer even more reflective time if organised in advanced with the Front of House team. The difference made when you don't feel rushed to leave your seat should not be ignored; in fact, this moment may be the integral point of settling needed within the journey. Mirroring the arrival, the choreographer may consider each part of the departure with care and gentleness. For example, when the audience leave the theatre space, remnants of the soundscape could be playing quietly in the foyer with a small table with cups of chamomile tea available to drink. There could be a piece of paper on a table by the door with the phrase "what traces remain?" on it. These small acts of transition bolster the integration of experience, the going forth, particularly in urban environments where the shock of going from a space of tranquility to a space of chaos can be quite challenging and destabilising.

When considering the departure in relation to rehearsals, care is also vital. Too often do processes end and freelance dance artists are plunged back into unemployment after weeks of opening up their spirit and soul through dance. What if the last weeks of a process didn't involve frantic preparation for a piece but instead deep reflection upon the journey we have come on together? During this research period, I explored what it meant to offer even more space closer to the show. This meant more gentle contact improvisation tasks, more coffee chats and printing photographs of our time together, sitting in a space and *being together*. As this phase of research ends, I invited my collaborators to sit with hope, a difficult task in an era of bloody war, climate crisis, unstable politics and personal exhaustion. What if hope was a possibility? Again, this departure relates back towards Joanna Macy's practice, as we

relinquish our isolation, we come home again . . . We are not doomed to destroy [the world] by the cravings of the separate ego and the technologies it fashioned. We can wake up to who we really are, allow the river to flow clean once more, and the trees to grow green along their banks. (Macy, 2021, p.16-17)

Through this journey of arrival, encounter and departure both the audience and artist have taken time to contemplate, to settle, to dive into their imagination and, in the process, change something about their experience. This whole journey is painted with colours of deep listening, respect, tranquility and harmony in an era of socio-ecological dissonance.

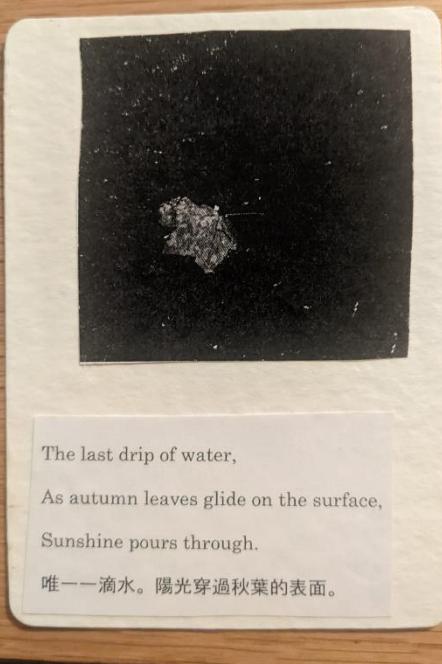
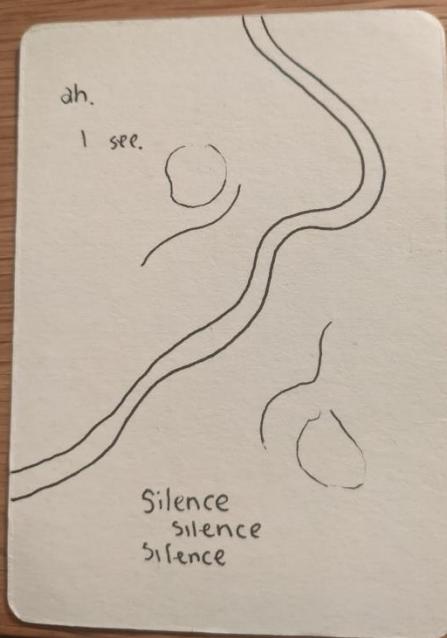
SEEDS.

As we come to the closing of this document, where do I locate myself as a choreographer, in this fleeting moment? In the spirit of *ichigo ichie*, I am even aware that as you read this, the world may be altogether different. Yet to speak to what is alive in my practice now, I draw on another branch of ambient music, returning to the thoughts of Brian Eno. Within ambient music creation there is often an interest within the generative, which is an approach of programming software to make music based on certain parameters and randomness. Talking on this further, Eno suggests that

The idea is that one is making a kind of music in the way that one might make a garden. One is carefully constructing seeds, or finding seeds, carefully planting them and then letting them have their own life. And that life isn't necessarily exactly what you'd envisaged for them. (Eno, 2011)

Within this process then, there has been another harmony of paradoxes which is relating to authorship and the choreographer's control of the process. Considering *ma* and the space between, this research has highlighted the beauty and the vitalness of deep listening within collaborative relationship.

Translation was a key word that emerged repeatedly within the process, both within the multilingual nature of the collaborators as well as the process in which a memory is transferred. During my residency in the Forest of Dean, I created a pack of playing cards with traces drawn or poems written on them. These were inspired by the site-specific encounters of myself, the conversations with collaborators or the wider reading of my research. Here is a collection of traces...



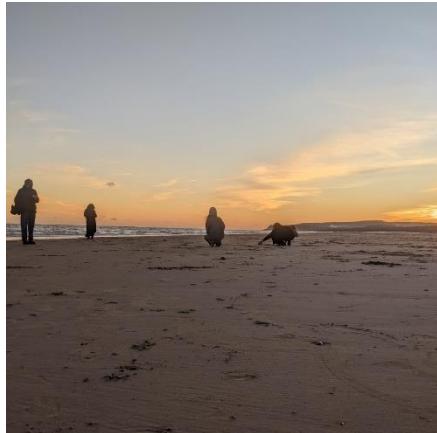
When returning to the studio in London, there was a process of letting go necessary with this material, releasing it into the space to then be encountered by the dancers. In this process, they were invited to draw on 2-4 traces that resonated with them. This was then the starting point for the choreographic development, listening to the dancer's words and movements to try and understand what fills their dance with life. Respect is central within this journey and a deep care that reminds me of the gardens that my Mum and my Gran tended to. It is through the patient act of listening and nurturing, supporting through the weathers of each day that we can grow. This has emerged as the central task for me as a choreographer: to nurture a space through caring and intentional composition.

As well as listening, this process has taught me the importance of clarity. Drawing on *butoh fu* and Deborah Hay's choreography of language, I kept returning to the clarity of my communication as a research, considering each word as if it were a touch in a duet, each sentence a raindrop on a seed. As Brené Brown suggests 'Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind' (Brown, 2018). Therefore, this process has unearthed a choreographic attitude, space holding and creative leadership that comes back to simplicity and gentleness time and time again – what if we slowed down and listened?

Ambient dance is a stillness.

Ambient dance is a movement.

Ambient dance is a glimmer, “here and gone, here and gone, here and gone” (Hay, 2015).



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