

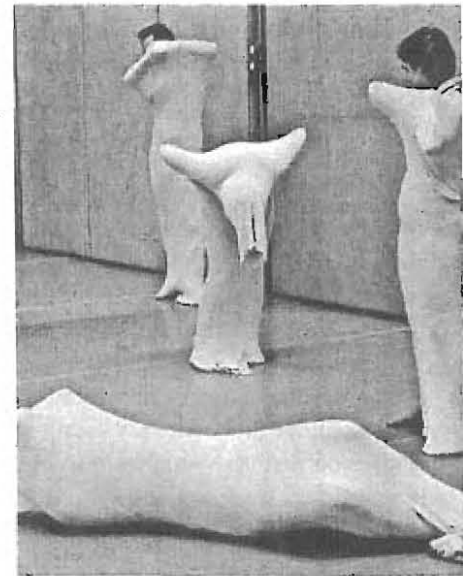
12. AMERTA MOVEMENT AND SOMATIC COSTUME

Sourcing the Ecological Image

Sally E. Dean (USA/UK)

"Amerta Movement is the nectar of life of the movement – or the movement of the nectar of life. So that means how we can find the position – it's like the source of life – how to be in the source of life." (Prapto Interview, Solo – April 2008)

The approach and the methodologies of the *Somatic Movement and Costume Project* led by me, in collaboration with costume designers and visual artists, Sandra Arroniz Lacunza and Carolina Rieckhof, have been influenced in different ways by Amerta Movement. In this chapter, I will focus on one key influence: Amerta Movement's relationship to image/metaphor/symbol, in particular the worlds of *Fact/Fiction* or *Reality/Dream* and the impact of that approach on my somatic movement and performance practice.



Boundary costumes at Siobhan Davies Dance Studios, Independent Dance Improvisation Class, London taught by Sally E. Dean. Photo: Sandra Arroniz Lacunza. Feb. 2014.

Description and Aim of the Project

The aim of the *Somatic Movement and Costume Project* is to create a praxis whereby costumes act as a somatic resource for moving, creating, teaching, performing and being, a resource that leads into multi-sensorial experiences. The original key research questions were: how can we create and design costumes that generate specific body-mind experiences and support new and enhanced kinaesthetic awareness? How can these 'somatic costumes' shed new light on socio-culturally informed psychophysical habits? And how can they offer new ways of moving, being and performing?

Over the past three years, the *Somatic Movement and Costume Project* has included a series of workshops, performances, lecture/demonstrations, and a published article. Twelve prototype costumes were created and performances were often site-specific with the audience becoming active participants through wearing the costumes themselves. I use the term 'somatic' following Thomas Hanna (1988), to refer to bodily practices and perspectives on embodiment that give attention and value to the subjective experiencing of the whole self and its perceptions, and emphasise the role of the body in that experiencing. Although all senses are important, we have typically started our work from the kinaesthetic sense or kinaesthetic body consciousness.¹ For example, the material, texture, weight, form and movement of the costume itself typically create a direct and tactile experience for the wearer. In our daily life, what we wear (a heavy coat, high heels) affects the way we move and how we are perceived. The basis for our interactions with the environment and with others also changes.

Although costume has been incorporated in performance for centuries, the *Somatic Movement and Costume Project's* approach differs in the following way: the aesthetic and movement of the performance work comes from the somatic experiences (kinaesthetic and sensorial) of wearing the costume, rather than the costumes being designed to enhance an aesthetic already established in advance. The visually dominated performance approach to costume is replaced by an experience of costume as a multi-sensorial experience.

¹ "Kinesthetic body consciousness is awareness of the body's movement, position, and level of muscular tension. It is achieved through perception of muscle and joint movements and through the senses, primarily the tactual; the auditory is also frequently involved, and all of the senses can play a part" (Storm 1987, 306).

Project Background

The initial impetus for this project came from my experience of living in Java in 2007-08, practising Amerta Movement and witnessing and learning traditional Javanese dance forms. I noticed a quality of 'containment' in the movement of many Javanese people, both in daily life and in dancing and performing, which I could clearly see and sense, but found I was unable to embody for myself – until I tried on the traditional Javanese dance costume. The costume itself created a kinaesthetic experience of 'containment' in the mid to lower body: a *sarong* tightly wrapped around my legs and pelvis, held in place by a *stagen* (sash). The costume helped me to find an experiential understanding of the feeling state of 'containment' inherent in the movement I was seeing around me.

Prapto also uses the term *clothing* as part of his movement practice – as both a functional and symbolic element to his work. This planted seeds, in my own practice, of how one's clothing affects one's movement.

I began to wonder how costumes could act as 'portals of perception' – supporting people to find gestures and movement qualities that might otherwise be missing from their repertoire.

What is a Somatic Costume?



'Balloon Hat' worn by Sally E. Dean. Middlesex University Artist Residency, Trent Park Campus, London. Photo: Sandra Arroniz Lacunza. April 2012

Somatic costumes typically begin with what often gets overshadowed in the performance and costume world – the kinaesthetic sensation and experience that the costume generates while wearing it. They are designed specifically to bring awareness to different areas and qualities of movement in the body – offering intentional sensorial experiences. For example, we created two prototype somatic costumes for the head: the Balloon Hat to give the experience of the buoyancy and volume of the skull and the Pointy Hat (see the final image in this chapter) to give an experience of the direction of the skull in space as a development of the spine as an axis. These multi-sensorial experiences are costume-specific, person-specific and site-specific. They aim to access, integrate and reprogram body schema and body image². The somatic costumes not only have the potential to change our relationship to ourselves (by including body schema and body image) but also to change our relationship with others and with the environment.

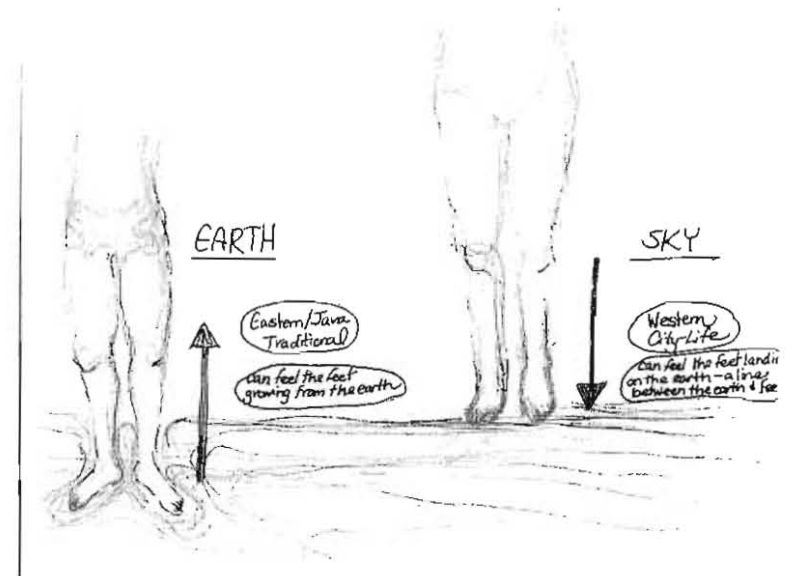
Somatic costumes are worn before, during, and after somatic exercises³. The experience of wearing somatic costumes is intentionally influenced and enhanced by working with somatic movement in different sensorial capacities, which include the adding, working with or removing of a sensorial experience (e.g. by introducing music or removing sight with a blindfold).

Somatic Costumes and Amerta Imagery

The somatic costumes and exercises arose out of the process of translating many of the changes I had experienced – in relationship to my own body, to the environment and to others, while practising Amerta Movement – into an approach or method for others to experience.

² **Body schema** is the physiological construct that your brain creates “from the interaction of touch, vision, proprioception, balance, and bearing. It even extends it out into the space around your body. You use it to help locate objects in space or on your body” (Blakeslee & Blakeslee 2007, 32). The costumes become part of your body schema. By wearing a Tall Pointy Hat, over time, you will unconsciously begin to develop an awareness of how tall and wide it is, and your body will bend and adapt when going through doorways as if it is part of you. **Body image** is the psychological construct that includes learned attitudes, expectations, assumptions and beliefs about yourself, your body, others, the environment and the world (ibid, 42). It is highly influenced by your social and cultural context.

³ Key somatic exercises applied to the *Somatic Movement and Costume Project* are from my background in some of the following practices: Skinner Releasing Technique (to include the teachings of Stephanie Skura), Amerta Movement (to include the teachings of Helen Poyntor) and Scaravelli Yoga (as taught by Giovanni Felicioni).



Drawing sketch with support from Carolina Rieckhof

For example, Amerta Movement imagery and my experiences in Java changed my relationship to my feet and the earth. In my journal there are two images of feet drawn: one of feet resting on the top of the earth, and the second of feet coming from underneath the earth.

The latter experience was new for me. Prapto's movement images and instructions often invited us to awaken the sense of our feet to what is underneath the earth: “*Feel the sole of your feet – the soul of the earth*”. This supported me to drop into my body – especially the lower half. As I describe in my journal: “I can feel the feet growing from the earth – feel what is underneath – connected to the earth – merging?”⁴

During an artist residency in Java, I made clay with colleagues by standing in mud up to my shins and kneading it with my feet. I sensed kinaesthetically (and literally) my feet underneath the earth further solidifying my earlier experience.

The “Lentil Socks” were created to support the experience of the feet coming from underneath the earth rather than resting on top

⁴ Here and elsewhere, unless otherwise stated, Prapto's words and my responses are quoted from the movement journals and interview cited in the References.

of the earth – a direct example of how the imagery arising out of Amerta Movement evolved and became a somatic costume.

Amerta Movement and the Role of the Image

An important aspect of Amerta Movement is that it inter-weaves images, metaphors and symbols – and the roles and definitions of each can overlap and intertwine in the work. Prapto's use of image may represent something literal (to include its function), or it may act like a metaphor and symbol and represent something non-literal. The image may act to represent something specific (like a metaphor) or it may act to represent something more abstract – without a fixed or inherent meaning (like a symbol).



Bedbog Artist Residency as part of the Kemanapun project in Java. Artists shown: Susana Miranti Kröber, Sally E. Dean and Konihrawati, Aug 2008. Photo: Emilia Javanica

For example, one of Prapto's movement instructions was, to be "*aware of your clothing – what clothing you are wearing*" – a literal/functional approach. Clothing also took on metaphorical properties: "*opening and*

closing is the clothing"⁵, or "*function and relation are types of clothing*" or "*the boundaries or clothing of the heart*". From this experience, clothing became both a literal boundary between my body and the world, as well as a metaphorical one – a 'second skin' – a living and breathing membrane between 'inner world' (inside the body) and 'outer world' (outside the body).

Amerta Movement's *clothing* made me not only question the role clothing plays in our movement, but also led me to explore both the literal/functional and metaphorical methods of approaching costume through an exercise I devised called 'Second Skin'. Participants are invited to sense their everyday clothing, how it affects their movement, as well the relationship between the clothing and their body:

"the skin is touching your clothing and your clothing is touching your skin" and "moving with this sense" –
The literal/functional, 'Reality/Fact' approach.

"as you move, your clothing becomes a second skin... slowly a duet between your two skins emerges – sliding over each other... sliding skin... sometimes meeting, resting on each other, sometimes having space between each other. Finding moments of movement and moments of stillness. A dance between the two skins" – The metaphorical, 'Dream/Fiction' approach. (Workshop notes: March 2012, December 2012).

Amerta Imagery – The Ecological Image

One characteristic of a symbol, according to its definition, is that an image, as well as one's relationship to it, can change over time and be influenced by the culture, society and context from which it comes.

Prapto's Central Javanese roots and background in Javanese mysticism are very much interwoven into the Amerta imagery he uses – and his symbols often are in a state of flux. These symbols interweave the environment and the body into multi-faceted metaphors.

For example, in one of Prapto's movement exercises, we practise simply moving from pillar to pillar in the *pendopo*⁶ site – a literal/

⁵ This metaphor refers to "the places in-between open and close – how much you open and how much you close, in the movement".

⁶ A *pendopo* is an architectural structure that has a roof, but no walls, held up by pillars running from floor to roof. They are common ritual spaces in Solo, Java and many of the classical Javanese dances are performed in *pendopos*.

functional exercise. But, in Javanese culture, the *pendopo* site is resonant with meaning:

The central *saka guru*⁷ typically has four pillars⁸ or 'brothers'. In the centre of these four pillars is the axis or 'fifth brother', which Prapto calls "*The source... the nectar*".

The term 'brother' also connects to the body – in Central Javanese culture, the umbilical cord is called 'the little brother' and the 'brothers', according to Prapto, represent the four elements while "*the fifth is the 'jangkar' [anchor] means like a pillar like the axis*". So a 'brother' can be an umbilical cord, an element, a pillar or axis.

In the *pendopo*, pillars and the spaces between them can be taken literally, metaphorically or symbolically – existing in a 'state of flux', where site and the body are interwoven into the symbol.

If we draw on Sandra Reeve's (2011, 51) definition – "An ecological body is situated in flux, participation, and change" – then Amerta imagery, by encompassing the values of an ecological view, acts as an 'ecological image': an image that embodies the roles and definitions of the literal, the metaphorical and the symbolic, connecting body, movement, environment/site and others through "embodied states of 'interbeing'" (ibid.) in a state of flux.

Somatic Costume and the Ecological Image

The somatic costumes themselves embody the elements of the ecological image – they can be approached literally, metaphorically or symbolically, are often in a 'state of flux' and connect the body with the environment. Somatic costumes act in a similar capacity to Prapto's *pendopo* site – embedded symbols yet dependent upon context.

Wearing somatic costumes can connect and change the performers' relationship to their bodies, movement and the environment. For example, in the *Myth of the Porter's Mess Room* – a site-specific, promenade performance in which the audience was taken on a journey through particular environments wearing the Pointy Hats at the Battersea Arts Centre in 2010 – the hats changed the audience's kinaesthetic relationship with the environment. As they passed through low doorways and narrow corridors, their Pointy Hats would run into the environment, creating

⁷ 'Saka' means 'wood vertical' and 'coming from' in Javanese, according to Prapto. 'Guru' means teacher in Indonesian.

⁸ The pillar is made from a tree trunk. 'Tree' is 'wul' in Javanese and 'begin' is 'wuwil'. Prapto says it's like 'the tree of life' idea that many other cultures have. According to Prapto, the word 'brother' can be interchanged with the word 'sister'.

new limitations and requiring them to move in new ways. Like an ecological image, the somatic costumes acted as gateways – interlinking body and environment in a state of flux.



'Tree Skirt' worn by Sally E. Dean. Middlesex University Artist Residency, Trent Park Campus, London. Photo. Sandra Arroniz Lacunza. May 2012

The somatic costumes themselves are also in a state of flux – some becoming 'site-specific' costumes. For example, during our *Middlesex Artist Residency* in 2012, after taking our prototype somatic costume called the Hula Hoop Skirt into the natural environment on the Trent Park Campus at Middlesex University, the costume changed: we took the frame of the Hula Hoop skirt and covered it with found tree branches. This shifted the mover's sense of an embodied relationship with the forest environment, and stimulated new movement qualities that reflected this

new relationship. The tree branches attached to the costume had a shaking and shuddering quality, which began to translate to the moving body as well. The somatic costume was mediating a two-way dialogue of influence and exchange between body and environment.

Amerta Movement's Approach: "Dream/Reality" or "Fiction/Fact"

One of Amerta Movement's key practices in relation to imagery is called *Fact/Fiction* or *Reality world/Dream world*.

Fiction/Dream refers to "the imagination, the symbol" while Fact/Reality refers to "the concrete". Fact/Reality typically encompasses objective experiences while Fiction/Dream does not mean that the experiences are untrue, but instead, enters the terrain of the subjective. In general, when approaching an image, symbol or

metaphor (or even an object or person) we can consider both its Facts (the function, colours, texture, orientation, location, weight, shape, etc.) as well as its Fictions (associations, meanings, metaphors, feelings, characters, etc.).

A Somatic Costume affects the wearer directly through the kinaesthetic sense – the material, texture, weight, form, movement (Facts) of the costume itself typically create a direct and tactile experience, similar for all wearers. But the subjective experiences and associations (Fictions) are different and unique for each person. For example, one person associates the Bin Bag skirt with “flying” and feels a sense of freedom, while another associates it with the feeling of “suffocation”. In creating and performing *The Myth of the Porter’s Mess Room*, both approaches, Fact and Fiction, were applied. For example, if I move with the Pointy Hat costume following its sense of weight and direction in space, I am following the



‘Bin Bag Skirt’ worn by dancer Mariana Camiloti, at Siohhan Davies Dance Studios, Independent Dance Improvisation workshop, London taught by Sally E. Dean. Photo: Sandra Arroniz Lacunza. March 2012

Fact. If I move with the costume of the Pointy Hat, beginning by following my associations with it of the Klu Klux Klan or Dunces Cap, I am following the Fiction.

In working with costume in this Fact and Fiction framework, we literally create a meeting or a dance between body schema and body image.

According to Prapto, there are four approaches when working with Fact/Fiction:

- Starting with the Fact to create the Fiction: I find a tree branch and I create an imaginary monster from it.
- Starting with the Fiction to create the Fact: I imagine a cup and then I create that cup.
- Starting with the Fiction and this is the Fact: I start with the symbol of a bird, and then approach it as though it were a fact

– finding out as much as possible what this symbol means. Prapto would call this approach *The Life of the Symbol*.

- Starting with the Fact to find more Facts: like a scientist, I would start with water and then find out all the facts about it – its chemical make-up, its properties, and what it can be turned into, etc. Prapto would call this approach *The Life of the Fact*.

Amerta Movement and My Shifting Relationship to Image

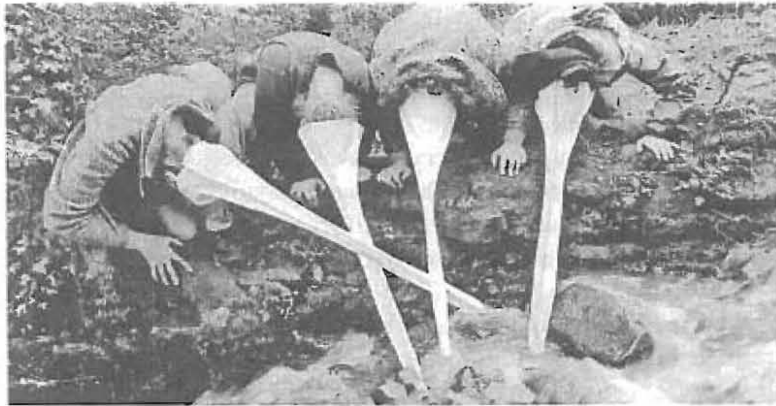
Before I practised Amerta Movement intensively, my performance work typically started with Fiction to create the Fact (Approach 2). Images in my mind would often translate to imagery with movement on stage. I would also place images inside and outside of the body to move to – very much inspired by my training in Skinner Releasing Technique and Butoh. After leaving Java at the end of 2008, my relationship to imagery came to exist even more in the concrete world, starting with Facts: objects, costumes, sites and the physicality of my body. I began to shift from the “view of the mind” to the “view of the body” (Reeve 2011). Images began to come from facts.

Amerta Movement changed my relationship to image and this then translated into the *Somatic Movement and Costume Project*. Although the somatic costume can be approached either by starting with Fact or Fiction, serving dual roles as an ecological image, typically in the *Somatic Movement and Costume* workshops or performances, I begin with the Fact of the somatic costume. Fictions are often created from there – either by myself or the participants.

The Image and the Audience

The somatic costume is translated to the audience by inviting them to wear the costume. For example, in both *The Myth of the Porter’s Mess Room* and the performances at the Dance and Somatic Practices Conferences at Coventry University in 2011 and 2013, the audiences were invited to wear Pointy Hats. The somatic costume, since it embodies both Facts and Fictions, can serve as a bridge between the inner somatic experiences of performers and the outer form as perceived by an audience. For example, wearing a Pointy Hat creates

particular kinaesthetic experiences and generates particular creative material for the performer; but at the same time, aesthetically, Pointy Hats in the space also create a unique spatial relationship to the environment. They tend to create a particular performance 'world'. Thus somatic costumes can allow both the performer and audience to experience, both visually and spatially, reflections of the kinaesthetic experiences a performer is engaged with. For example, choreographically the audience may see the performer making long direct lines with the Pointy Hat in space, an aesthetic manifestation from the visual form of the hat itself. At the same time the Pointy Hat may create the kinaesthetic experience for the performer of the spine extending out of the top of the head through the hat like an axis – an inner experience of the outer form of 'line.'



'Pointy Hats' worn by Kate Pyper, Carolina Rieckhof, Shantala Melody Sacco, and Rachel Gildea. Still from *You're Not Supposed To Be Here 2*, filmed and edited by Sergio M. Villar, directed by Sally E. Dean, with idea and concept in collaboration with Sandra Arroniz Lacunza and Carolina Rieckhof

Future Applications

Through my intensive experience with Amerta Movement, my relationship to imagery changed. Images began to embody for me both Facts and Fictions. With the 'ecological image' existing in a 'state of flux', images were able to interweave body, movement, environment/site and others into a value of 'interbeing' where meaning is based on a participating and changing context. This not only changed my body and movement, but also my performance and teaching work – and laid many of the foundations of the *Somatic Movement and Costume Project*.

One of the key aims of the project is to integrate, access and reprogram our physiological and psychological constructs – our body schema and body image. What if our body image was like an 'ecological image'? So that our Facts and Fictions, our learned beliefs, attitudes and assumptions about ourselves, others and the world all existed in a state of flux, participation and change? The 'ecological image' is a gateway into possibility – moving us into the source of life and our greatest potential.

This project has the possibility to bridge many art forms: dance, theatre, visual art, fashion design and live art. In the future, we would like to explore how somatic costume might act as a vehicle for understanding not only the experience of oneself, experience of one's relationship to another, and experience of the environment; but also how these kinds of experiences vary across cultures and across different cultural forms of human embodiment.

Note: Costume designer and visual artist Marta Jiménez Salcedo, joined the 'Boundary Costumes' project (picture p.115) in February 2014 as a collaborator.

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EMBODIED LIVES

Sally E. Dean has been a performer, performance maker and teacher for over 14 years – in university, professional and community settings. Her work interlinks the fields of health, movement, expression, culture and performance. She is a certified teacher of Skinner Releasing Technique, a teacher of Scaravelli yoga and trained in Amerta Movement with Prapto. Informed by somatic practices, Sally's teaching and performances integrate nature, site, object, sound and costume.

As Artistic Director of Sally E. Dean Performing Arts and the Kolaborasi Project, her mission is to facilitate artistic collaborations and dialogue among American, European and Asian people.

www.sallyedean.com

www.kolaborasi.org