

Somatic Arts and Liveable Futures

Embodying Ecological Connections

Raffaele Rufo
International Forum for Eco-Embodied Arts (IFEEA)

Abstract Based on the author’s practice-based ecosomatic research, the article explores the role of the somatic arts in challenging the culture of separateness between humans and nature typical of Anthropocentrism. The aim is to enhance the debate on how to grow liveable futures in the face of ecological disaster. The author reflects on the possibility to re-activate our eco-consciousness through embodied practices of interconnectedness with nonhuman living beings and systems. Then he discusses the cultural conditions shaping the growing field of ecosomatic practices and evaluate their political implications as acts of caring, collaboration, and cultural resistance. The importance of awakening the memory of the body and grieving for anthropogenic ecological losses is foregrounded as a key passage towards regeneration. The concept of ‘Planthroposcene’ proposed by Natasha Myers is mobilised as an inspiration for envisioning the emergence of embodied alliances with other forms of life. Throughout the article, the reader is invited to engage with a series of somatic interactive processes offered as a pathway for challenging the widespread apocalyptic perception of ecological crises.

Keywords Ecosomatics. Critical embodied practices. Crisis of perception. Anthropogenic ecological losses. Apocalyptic thinking. More-than-human ecologies. Planthroposcene.

Summary 1 An Introduction to Ecosomatics. – 2 The Dangers of Apocalyptic Thinking. – 3 Awakening the Memory of the Body. – 4 Embodied Ways of Conspiring with the More-than-Human. – 5 Where Do We Go from Here?



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1 An Introduction to Ecosomatics

This is an article on how somatic movement practices, and somatically informed art practices more in general, can help us regain ecological futures by challenging the supremacy of mind over body and the dominance of humans over other species and living systems. The focus is placed on the growing ecological orientation of dance, movement, and other healing, expressive, and community practices based on somatic awareness and attention, and how this international and interdisciplinary trajectory of practice and research offers new resources to change the ways we perceive and value our more-than-human connections. The article is based on the interactive public lecture and the ecosomatic workshop I presented at the “(Re-) gaining Ecological Futures - Ecosomatics” programme at Floating University Berlin in June 2022.¹ The materials of the lecture and of the workshop are deepened and extended by reflecting on the movement-based ecosomatic research and applied artistic and pedagogical practice conducted before and after (Rufo 2022; 2023; 2024; Rufo, Gallo 2024).

I propose an approach to ecological consciousness that interweaves the ways in which we perceive our environment with the ways in which we perceive our bodies within our environment. In this sense, ecological consciousness is not an abstract function of the mind looking from a distance at the world we are destroying, but an incarnated process of encountering what French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty called “the flesh of the world” in his phenomenological investigation of perception (Merleau-Ponty 1968). This is a painful process because to feel the wounds of trees, oceans, the soil, nonhuman animals, the air... we need to accept the grief we have caused to our own species by severing the ancient bond of solidarity with the earth. Let us consider the suggestion by activist eco-oriented scholars like David Abram (2010; 2017; 2018) and Wayne Mellinger (2022) to approach the ecological crisis as a crisis of perception.² We are part of the earth, not separate from it. The larger perceptual field in which human life is corporeally embedded is referred to by Abram as the “more-than-human” world. Abram describes the “more-than-human” as a “living landscape” that can be accessed through the recuperation of “the incarnate, sensorial dimension of experience”

¹ Programme curated by Berit Fisher at Floating University Berlin (23-25 June 2022). Part of the project *Natureculture Pedagogies*, funded by: Spartenoffene Förderung für Festivals und Reihen (zweijährig) der Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und Europa. <https://floating-berlin.org/programmes/re-gaining-ecological-futures/rgef2022>.

² I have discussed more at length the perceptual roots of the ecological crises and the role of ecosomatic art practices as a vehicle for embodying personal and cultural processes of grieving with the rest of nature in the public lecture delivered at the Italian Culture Institute of Bucharest in March 2024 as part of the ROOTS dance residency (Rufo 2024).

(Abram 2017, 65). Trapped in a sort of collective myopia, we tend to focus our attention on human lives and events and on the isolated ‘things’ that surround us. Mellinger (2022) argues that to change our worldview we need to change the way we perceive the world and that to change our perceptions we need to change the way we think about the world. So, where do we start? Critical embodied practices can offer us the gateways needed for experiencing the continuum between human-and-natural worlds by reinhabiting our bodies as ecologies nested within larger (and smaller) more-than-human ecologies.

In the last two decades the somatic arts have become an important reference point for articulating the possibility of working towards liveable futures. They have done so by enabling the circulation and interpenetration of knowledges that for a long time had been indifferent to each other: on the one hand the sensory experience of body and place, and, on the other, ecological and political thinking. It is quite remarkable to see how the work of somatic artists, and particularly of dancers, performers and choreographers is helping philosophers, anthropologists, natural scientists, and other eco-oriented scholars to co-create a field for observing, criticising, and rearticulating the embodied connections with more-than-human phenomena. Some of these processes were documented and critically analysed in two recent collections: the book on ecosomatic thinking edited by Marie Bardet, Joanne Clavel and Isabelle Ginot and published in 2019 for the French-speaking world;³ and the special issue on somatics and eco-consciousness of the *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices* edited by Thomas Kampe, Jamie McHugh and Katja Munker in 2021.⁴ Ecosomatics emerges from the meeting of two relational paradigms. As discussed by existential philosopher and Feldenkrais practitioner Thomas Hanna in the 1970s and the 1980s, somatics is a term derived from the Greek word *soma* to reengage the human body as an integrated physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual phenomenon observed “from the first-person viewpoint of [one’s] own proprioceptive senses” (Hanna 1986, 4). Ecology is a term derived from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning household, habitat, or dwelling place, and used to indicate the study of how organisms interact with one another and with their environments. The ecological approach encourages humans to take responsibility towards the planet (Bottoms, Franks, Kramer 2012). Ecosomatic practices displace

3 Bardet, Clavel, Ginot 2019. Based on two five-year collective, interdisciplinary and international research projects, the book presents a range of conceptual frameworks and methodologies articulated and contaminated through a series of workshops, conferences and shared projects.

4 Kampe, McHugh, Munker 2021, 4. This special issue on somatics and eco-consciousness includes a wide range of theoretical considerations, reflections on practice-led research, and documentation of artistic practices across different academic and artistic disciplines.

abstract cognition and modern technology from the centre of the world to foreground the role of other forces like gravity and other species like plants in shaping our perception and well-being. With ecosomatics, attention shifts from the body and the environment as separate entities to embodied ecological connections as a perceptual continuum.

Francophone pioneers Bardet, Clavel and Ginot describe ecosomatic practice as “a way to put attention to work” and

take into account the relationships of co-construction and co-invention between gestures and contexts, between perceptions, thoughts and affects. (2019, 15-17; transl. by the Author)

This attentional work is coupled with an ecologically conscious process of positioning, of placing somatic experience in the larger scheme of things. Kampe, McHugh and Munker argue that:

The soma exists in relationship to all life, not as a separate unit of being, yet is culturally shaped and politically rendered. (2021, 4)

With ecosomatics, we start to consider how the actual, in-the-flesh sensory experience of the artist is shaped by atmospheric phenomena and biological processes as well as by cultural and political forces. Moving in this direction, the question that could unravel the potential of this promising field is the following: how can the practical and conceptual meetings between somatic and ecological paradigms help us articulate new ways of growing embodied alliances with the non-human and with matter which defy the global system of extractivism, consumption, and exploitation that is devastating the planet? Natasha Myers' concept of 'Planthropocene' is as an example of how we can envision the emergence of non-anthropocentric collaborations between humans and plants (Myers 2015; 2016; 2018; 2020). I will discuss this example in section five of the article.

But before addressing this key question, I think it is important to take a step backward. It is important to expose the powerful role played by apocalyptic narratives in the ways we come to care for the possibility of eco-futures. In what follow I will ask the reader to connect to the sense of frustration and disempowerment for the terrible wounds that humans are inflicting on the rest of nature. To regain ecological futures, we need first to regain access to the capacity of the human body to have a felt sense of these wounds. To clarify and vivify this delicate passage, I will invite the reader to engage in a guided experience of sensing and moving. I will start from ecological wounds and then open the path of deep breath and skeletal awareness.

2 The Dangers of Apocalyptic Thinking

In a recent speech on “The State of the Planet”, António Guterres, the secretary-general of the United Nations, claimed that “Humanity is waging war on nature”.⁵ We live in the age of ecological disasters. Humanity is facing the end of the world as we know it. For Guterres, the worst disasters show the direct or indirect influence of humans on the environment. Shutting down whole countries for months during the long Coronavirus emergence has not made things better: the pandemic has generated more than 8 million tonnes of extra plastic waste globally (Laville 2021). Just to give an example, Amazon’s plastic packaging waste increased by nearly a fifth between 2020 and 2021 to surpass 300 million kilograms – with this amount of plastic we could circle the world 800 times (Elton 2022).

During the interactive lecture at Floating University on which this article is based, I proposed a list of some of the terrible wounds inflicted by humans on the rest of nature in recent years. Before reading the list, I invited the audience to warm up their proprioceptive senses. I would like to ask the reader to do the same [fig. 1].



Figure 1 An image of the audience of the public lecture given by the author at Floating University Berlin in June 2022. The audience is engaging with the somatic interactive process of listening to a list of anthropogenic ecological disasters. Photo by Lorène Blanche Goesele

5 Message by António Guterres, Address at Columbia University, 2 December 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/ywfvjss5>.

If you are sitting, as I imagine you are, start by noticing the workings of your sitting bones. Where are they? Now I invite you to shift weight across your feet, pushing just a bit forward and then backward. Keep both feet under the knees. Bring the feet just a bit closer to the seat than the knees are. This is a way to create a nice movement dynamic between feet, knees, and pelvis. And while you do so, allow your pelvis to fold in and out, doing little rotations, like a wheel. I would like the reader to observe how there is never an end to movement even when we are sitting. In subtle and very small ways we are always moving, even when we are still. Somatic practices are gateways for becoming aware of the internal involuntary dynamics of movement. While you are reading the following list of anthropogenic ecological disasters out loud, I ask you to attend to how your breath changes, how the feeling of your chest changes. Notice any contraction in your muscles and in your bones. Don't think about doing this. Just notice while hearing your voice. Observe where the centre of your attention moves: towards your head? Your belly? Your feet? Try to stay with your body while your mind is trying to take over. After reading the list out loud, I invite you to close the eyes and notice the responses of your body.

First Somatic Interactive Process: Sensing Apocalyptic News

Deserts spreading
Wetlands lost
Biosphere shrinking

Oceans overfished and choked with plastic
Dying coral reefs
One million species at risk of extinction
Floods, hurricanes, and powerful storms scarring the globe
Devastating oil spills in sensitive areas of the oceans
Air pollution killing nine million people a year
Deadly wildfires consuming millions of acres of land.
Failing dams flooding entire towns
Half the world living with severe water scarcity

In 2020, Cyclone Amphan hit the Sundarbans region between India and Bangladesh displacing 5 million people
Last year the Amazonian rainforest lost an area nearly seven times bigger than greater London and thirteen times the size of New York City

Over the past 30 years, the oldest and thickest ice in the Arctic Sea has declined by 95%.⁶

These are the kinds of apocalyptic news on the future of the planet we are faced with every day. How did you feel about it? How did your body feel about it? I invite the reader to write some notes on what was noticed through the internal sense of the body. Please use a simple language and simply describe what happened (or didn't happen) without judgement.

We can think of information on ecological disasters as a call to action. However, apocalyptic thinking is dangerous. It is dangerous because it reinforces the paradigm of nature as something separate from us upon which we are acting. Going back to Guterres and his speech as secretary general of the United Nations, apocalyptic thinking assumes that humans act without considering the negative consequences of their actions and that, consequently, "Nature always strikes back ... with growing force and fury" (Guterres 2020). But weren't we connected with nature before having to face the consequences of our actions against nature? Aren't we part of nature? And is the agentic force of nature limited to revenge against us? It is hard to change our modes of perceiving the world, as it is hard to change the ways we think and act upon the world. Can we just expect, following Guterres' line of thinking, that, since "Human activities are at the root of our descent toward chaos... human action can help to solve it" (2020)?

The environmental humanities have deepened our understanding of the ethical and political importance of bringing ecological crises to the foreground of the cultural debate. However, as claimed by Owain Jones, Kate Rigby and Linda Williams (2020) in their critical discussion of the geographies of extinction, our capacity to respond to ecological crises depends on the way we frame their discourse. We need to be careful in weaving narratives which integrate the urgency of the problems faced by communities around the world with a sense of hope. This, in turn, involves recognising our inability to mourn for anthropogenic

⁶ Sources: United Nations. <https://indonesia.un.org/en/107181-message-antonio-guterres-address-columbia-university-state-planet>; Harvey, F. (2020). "Humanity is Waging War on Nature, Says Un Secretary General". *The Guardian*, 2 December. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/dec/02/humanity-is-waging-war-on-nature-says-un-secretary-general-antonio-guterres>; O'Sullivan, F. (2022). "The World's Fastest-Growing Cities Are Facing the Most Climate Risk". *Bloomberg*, 28 February. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-28/global-south-cities-face-dire-climate-impacts-un-report>; World Meteorological Organization (2021). *State of the Climate in Asia*, 26 October. <https://public.wmo.int/en/media/press-release/weather-and-climate-extremes-asia-killed-thousands-displaced-millions-and-cost>; Hancock, L. (s.d.). "Six Ways Loss of Arctic Ice Impacts Everyone". *World Wildlife Fund*. <https://www.worldwildlife.org/pages/six-ways-loss-of-arctic-ice-impacts-everyone#:~:text=We%20lose%20Arctic%20sea%20ice,in%20the%20summer%20by%202040>.

ecological losses (Jones, Rigby, Williams 2020). There is not just an individual psychological resistance to change. Our ecological connections have been impoverished by centuries of sensory deprivation and cultural alienation from the livingness of the earth. Thinking and feeling with David Abram, ecological crises can be traced back to a fundamental lack of perceptiveness towards nonhuman living beings and systems. Borrowing Abram's words, the challenge of our time involves "turning our animal senses to the sensible terrain" to become "a creature of earth" (Abram 2010, 3). Where do we start? Let us begin by recognizing the "horrific wounds" that fill "the sensorial world of our carnal experience" (Abram 2018). Yet if the pain from these wounds is "unbearable", as Abram claims, how do we avoid retreating "*from the body's world to avoid the sensuous terrain with its droughts and its floods and its flaring wildfires*" (emphasis in the original)? How do we find an alternative to "*taking refuge in ever more mediated and virtual spaces*" (Abram 2018; emphasis in the original)?

3 Awakening the Memory of the Body

The somatic arts can help us find a way out of apocalyptic futures by offering a balanced approach to repairing the damage we have caused to the connective tissues of life. We need to restore the reciprocity between body and mind and between body and earth. Where do we start? Regardless of how complex the problems are, I suggest we always start from our direct sensory experience of the body. In describing the philosophy of Deep Ecology, Arne Næss talks about the intrinsic value and inherent meaningfulness of all forms of life and about the possibility of breaking the chains of abstract thinking that separates the human individual from the rest of nature by listening to the silent presence of the world in which we are immersed through the senses (Næss 2008, esp. 61). Moshe Feldenkrais, one of the pioneers of modern somatics, makes a methodological point that is quite important for building the eco-soma alliance. We know the reality of the world through our senses. One would expect most of our nerve cells to be directed towards the outside world to manipulate, analyse, and integrate this information. However, only one nerve cell per thousand informs us about the external environment. Our sensorium is much more directed towards the reality we experience on the inside than we would expect (Feldenkrais 1981, esp. 87-8). We need to rediscover our relationship with the external world based on the awareness that we receive so much sensory information from our internal systems, our organs, our fluids, our breath, our muscles, and our bones. According to Feldenkrais, this involves "reducing all stimuli to their bare minimum" to facilitate noticing and integrating the finer changes in the muscular and nervous systems (Feldenkrais 1975, 2).

But there is more to this. My experience as a dance artist and as a scholar of perception has led me to think that, in the somatic experience of sensing we are not only reconnecting with our interiority and our place in the world in this present moment. Somatic sensing is a gateway to reconnect with our genetic, biological inheritance as members of a family, of a tribe, of a nation. Not only that, the sensing of what happens here and now is grounded in millions of years of evolution of the human species to which we all belong. Indeed, following recent scientific discovery, I should say that human sensing is grounded in millions of years of co-evolution with other species of life and living systems.⁷ If we want to promote the emergence of life-affirming modes of relating with each other and with the more-than-human, we need to awaken the memory of the body. By recognising what we have forgotten we can create an opportunity to sense new possibilities for the future which are not totally defined by anthropocentrism and by the capitalist and colonialist systems of extractivism, consumption, and exploitation in which we live.

Second Somatic Interactive Process: Grounding

The sensory reappropriation of our evolutionary right to be part of nature can start right here, right now. I would like to ask the reader to join in a second sensory experiment. This proposed somatic interactive process is inspired by the 'Ecokinetics' workshop I conducted during the "(Re-)Gaining Ecological Futures" programme at Floating University Berlin [fig. 2].

This time I ask you to stand up in front of your chair. To awaken the memory of the body we need first to reconnect with breath and with the ground. We start with bringing our attention to the flow of breath moving in and moving out. Now notice how the ground is supporting your body weight in the face of gravity. Weight moves into the ground and off the ground, like a wave, like breathing. Now focus on your feet and your legs. When breathing in, feel the pressure of your body weight being poured into the ground. Then release that pressure by breathing out at that point of contact between the feet and the ground. Play with shifting weight from one foot and one leg to the other foot and the other leg. Notice how the legs support your bipedal experience of the body, one at a time. The other leg observes what is going on.

7 For a somatic evolutionary approach to the study of the body systems and the inherent neurological developmental patterns that underlie human movement, see the pioneering work of Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen (Bainbridge Cohen 2012).



Figure 2 An image from the workshop *Ecokinetics: Embodying Reciprocity with Plants* conducted by the author at Floating University Berlin during the “(Re-)engaging Ecological Futures” programme in June 2022. Photo by Lorène Blanche Goesele

Third Somatic Interactive Process: Becoming a Witness

Now we are ready to connect internal sensations with the perception of the world around us at a more conscious level [fig. 3].

Look around you as you keep shifting weight from one leg to the other, very gently. If you are not outdoor and if you can, move towards a window so you can directly access the presence of the outside world. Let the vibrations of light touch your eyes. The eyes are soft. They are not trying to grasp what you see. You are allowing what's there to address your senses. Look at all the plants and trees around you, if there are any – otherwise, look at the other human and nonhuman elements composing the outside world. Feel their presence with your body, in your body. To awaken the bodily memories of being a creature of the earth, we need to become witnesses of the sensuous presence of the nonhuman life that embeds us and that makes our survival possible. You can close your eyes again for a moment as you breathe this more-than-human life in.⁸

8 I have explored the experience of becoming a witness of the bodily earthly ground in which human life is entangled in the ecosomatic research project *Sensing with Trees*. The internal adventures of movement involved in this research was articulated in a somatic storytelling which functions both as an account of what happened and as a guide for readers to engage sensorially with the presence of trees (see Rufo 2023). For an



Figure 3 An image from the workshop *Ecokinetics: Embodying Reciprocity with Plants* conducted by the author at Floating University Berlin during the “(Re-)engaging Ecological Futures” programme. Photo by Lorène Blanche Goesele (2022)

Fourth Somatic Interactive Process: Childhood Memories

I will conclude the experiential part of this article with an imaginative task I have borrowed from Maya Ward (2022), a creative writer who lives in Melbourne (Australia) and teaches courses on how to “write wildness”.⁹ I invite the reader to stay with the embodied ecological connections that might have emerged so far for by engaging with the proposed somatic experiences. Keep standing. You can face in any direction you want. You can close your eyes or allow the vibrations of light to touch your retina. I ask you to imagine a place of your childhood where you could go to play in nature and with nature. Can you remember the sensations of those playful moments as a child? Imagine with your senses. Let these memories flow in your body.

What places did you travel to? What sensations and images did you bring back to this present moment? I invite you to write down some notes. Try to stay close to the direct sensory encounter with these memories you have experienced. I want to share the text that I wrote during my first engagement with this exercise in spontaneous writing:

in-depth discussion of the relation of reciprocity between witnessing and being witnessed by the presence of the rest of nature, see Rufo 2022.

⁹ See <https://www.mayaward.com.au/> for information on Maya Ward’s approaches and activities for “coming home to the alive world”.

These little feet running around. These little hands picking figs from the tree. These little children playing at throwing figs at the cars. Little hands touching bark. Little feet running without plans. Summertime. School holidays. An urban child meets his peasants' roots. My ancestors worked this land and walked these fields for generations. Their sweat still lives here. The light of the sky turns brighter. The texture of the soil gets richer. My fellow wheat, the yellow spark of your leaves begins to speak in this empty space.¹⁰

Now I invite you to tell your story of body, place, and playfulness from the perspective of the more-than-human natural elements you have been playing with. What would water, the sea, the soil, the tree, the island, the mountain, the rocks... say about you being there, about the encounter with that child?

4 Embodied Ways of Conspiring with the More-than-Human

We are back to the key question addressed by this article: In an anthropocentric world threatened by ecological catastrophe, how can the somatic arts help us find a sense of belonging and support the development of collaborative and regenerative forms of research, expression, and activism? My movement-based ecosomatic research and applied artistic and pedagogical practice foregrounds the importance of building intimacy with the rest of nature through tactile embodied experience. This is combined with the need to articulate pathways for supporting the eco-cultural regeneration of the land and the community on which our individual sustenance and wellbeing rely. Ecosomatic connectedness can be described as an emergent way of dwelling in the porous spaces between the inside and the outside that challenges our anthropocentric perceptions. This is a practice that involves attuning with the rhythms and patterns of nature (inside-out trajectory) while paying attention and bringing awareness to how the (outside-in) direct embodied encounter with the nonhuman and matter can affect our bodily experience of self and other (Rufo 2024; Rufo, Gallo 2024). In this sense, the question of growing liveable futures can be offered to somatic artists - dancers, theatre and performance practitioners, therapists, educators, facilitators, etc. - as a call to position their individual practices, worldviews, and internal adventures of interconnectedness from the perspective of the ecological threats they are confronted with and the cultural resources they can learn to mobilize (and vice versa).

¹⁰ Memories written by the author during the *Writing Wildness* online workshop conducted by Maya Ward (2022) in February-March 2022. See <https://www.mayaward.com.au/> for more information on Ward's writing workshops.

Growing arts-based embodied alliances with the more-than-human involves developing a capacity of listening and mediating through praxis that stretches spatially and temporally the transformative power of the singular pedagogical and performative event. It is through this encounter of the inner and outer trajectories of being-with that we can try to overcome the sense of frustration and disempowerment for ecological losses and start repairing the connective tissues of life.

I want to reflect on this proposition by drawing on the vision for regaining ecological futures proposed by Natasha Myers. Myers, a cultural anthropologist with a background in biology and dance, claims that we can and should build liveable futures by searching for ways of knowing and living in a close and collaborative relationship with plants (Myers 2015; 2016; 2018; 2020). While inviting us to approach the co-creation of liveable worlds by “staging solidarities with the plants” (Myers 2020; see also Myers 2018), Myers uses the image of ‘conspiring’ to express the specific interdependence between humans and plants. Conspiring is intended by Myers both literally and metaphorically as a way of “breathing together” (Myers 2018). Breathing with plants implies recognizing their ancient and fundamental function of making human life possible on this planet. Contrary to humans and other animals, plants can produce their sustenance by photosynthesizing water, carbon dioxide, and sunlight into oxygen and sugar. Indeed, plants are the paradigm of radical relationality. Their existence is already a co-existence with humans and other animals from whom they get oxygen and sustain their autotrophic being (Myers 2016). Myers (2020) argues that we have been blinded by the paradigm of human exceptionalism and colonial common sense to see plants as “extractable resources we can bend to our will”. On the other hand, as organisms that have evolved “in a responsive relation with other plants, animals, insects, microbes, and fungi”, plants might have a deeper awareness of and care for their surrounding world than we will ever have (Myers 2020). As an alternative to the Anthropocene, which sets forth an epoch of linear progress led by the *Anthropos* as a singular agent, Myers envisions the emergence of the ‘*Planthroposcene*’, an assemblage of “scenes or epistemes”, both ancient and modern, in which plants and people figure out how to breathe together as a collective formation – the ‘*Planthropos*’ (Myers 2020; see also Myers 2016; 2018).

What role could the somatic arts play in finding ways for conspiring with plants – and with more-than-human living beings and systems more in general, then? To support the aspirations of ecological futures, we need to inquire into our anthropomorphic tendency to relate to plants by making them more like us. Otherwise, following the lines of Myers’ eco-criticism, we will keep reinforcing the boundary between human and nonhuman. Plants sense the world in ways that are very different from how we humans have configured the experience of sense perception for ourselves. We are called to find ways of

letting go of the drive to assert the superiority of human cognitive capacities and impose human needs and values as the measure of everything (Myers 2015). The somatic arts can help us move in this direction by reclaiming the human propensity for engagement with every aspect of the perceptual world as sensible and sentient. They can provide us with fresh perspectives and practical frameworks for learning how to engage with plants as a measure of human knowledge and experience, that is, to feel more like them. Myers sees this as a process of ‘vegetalizing’ the senses. This process requires getting ‘entangled’ both kinesthetically and affectively in the behaviours, rhythms, and temporalities of plants to deepen our perceptiveness and sensibility towards them (Myers 2018; 2020).

We can envision the emergence of what Myers calls the ‘Planthropocene’ as a process of exploring and embracing the reciprocity of perception between humans and plants. During the movement-based ecosomatic research project *Sensing with Trees* (2020-22), I engaged the encounter with trees in urban parks and forests as a slow improvisational dance of listening and attunement through which the human sensorium is imbued with arboreal attention and trees are recognized and honoured as intimate companions of movement and becoming (Rufo 2022). What began as a series of improvisational movement tasks evolved into a repertoire of rituals of belonging and thanksgiving to the body and the earth.¹¹ To sense with trees, we need to accept the frustrations of waiting and suspending judgement. Something unexpected and unintended is invited to address our conscious awareness whilst remaining outside our grasp. We are also called to confront the repressive and exploitative histories of the human relationship with trees. This requires placing oneself in a painful and yet beautiful position of vulnerability. In these in-between spaces, between touching and being touched and between witnessing and being witnessed, the soma is reached sensorially by ecological wounds and somatic experience is reclaimed as a healing force:

You are lying on your back under the crown of this tree, resting, with the eyes closed. What do you see when you look up? The tree is watching you, isn’t it? You can yield your weight and your thoughts into the ground. You are in good hands. Listen to your breath: can you hear the earth breathing? Observe the points of contact between body and earth. Some parts of the body are touching the

11 Among these somatic improvisational modes of experiencing body and earth, wandering, lying, grounding, and shaping were the ones through which I gained the deepest insights into the reciprocity of perception between humans and trees. The internal adventure of movement involved in this research was articulated in a somatic storytelling which functions both as an account of what happened and as a guide for readers to engage sensorially with the presence of trees (see Rufo 2023).

earth directly; others are not. Where do you sense your heart beating? Is it the chest? The belly? The hands? The arms? The legs? Then bend the knees and soften the pelvis into the earth. Play little games of pressure with the feet. Notice the smallest impulses in your inner landscape. Just stay where you are. Stay vulnerable. This is a process of waiting. (Rufo 2023, 95)

When last year I was scouting the Ostia territory of the Natural Reserve of the Roman Coast (Central Italy) in search of inspiring sites for conducting “*La Selva* International Ecosomatic and Regenerative Arts Residency”, I was struck by a particular place where the traces of the great fire that in 2000 burnt nearly 300 hectares of preserved forest are still very tangible.¹² In this clearing I was faced with a spontaneous scenography of the tragedy and touched by an ancient sense of solidarity with the dead trees. Indeed, this sense of solidarity was only deepened through the experience of being immersed in a dynamic space between life and death: where the pine trees lived (planted by humans as monoculture for commercial purposes), now the plants of the Mediterranean scrub (the *macchia*) are thriving again. As co-facilitator of the group of artists in residence, I proposed a somatic-improvisational movement practice of sensing and grieving with the dead trees and with the land. After an initial phase of wandering the field in a process of synesthetic listening, I invited the participants to engage with an intimate experience of lying on the fallen trunks and shaping into their dead bodies. I asked the participants to work on the sensation and embodied image of being touched by the trees, by the air, by the light and by the voice of the birds both kinesthetically and affectively. The invitation to shape human bodies into the trunks was offered as a way of acknowledging and coming to terms with how humans shaped the land anthropomorphically and exploitatively and how this played a key role in creating the conditions for the fire that burnt those trees.¹³

During the months that followed the *La Selva* residency I became more acutely aware of the presence of tens of thousands of dead pine trees killed by parasites in just a few years but still standing on their feet, scattered across the urban territory of Ostia with their grey crowns deprived of leaves. Soon after the residency, the municipality of Rome decided to start cutting down the dead trees for safety

12 The residency took place between 5-8 October 2023 and was coordinated by Raffaele Rufo and Thomas Kampe and organised in collaboration with Inter-cultural Roots’ (UK), Teatro del Lido di Ostia (Rome) and the Archeological Park of Ostia Antica (Rome). For more details, see <https://www.raffaeleeruf.com/ecosomatics/2023-la-selva-human-nature-connect-residency-rome>.

13 For an in-depth account and reflection on the experience of the *La Selva* residency as a gateway to a process of grieving and regeneration, see Rufo, Gallo 2024.

reasons. I was left to witness their felling and eradication on my own, powerless. It felt like a betrayal. Humans planted these pines here, one next to the other, for their own interests; then humans cut these trees down, always for their own interest. I began to reflect on the kind of eco-cultural regeneration that could ensue by honouring the death of these trees in a collective ritual of mourning positioned between the performative and civic intervention. I spent months collecting what was left on the margins of the streets after the intervention of chainsaws, bulldozers, and drilling rigs: broken branches, decomposing and very fragile shields of bark perforated by insects, and fragments of the marrow shattered at the base of the trees and once connected with the roots. These vibrant materials became a key inspiration for developing “Listening with the Planet”, an ecosomatic immersion and intervention with a group of local artists.¹⁴ With the aim to create the conditions for intimacy and trust, the event took place in the more contained outdoor space of an old farmhouse. I placed the remains of the dead pines gathered from across the natural reserve around the lying blocks of the trunk of a tree that had just been felled. I composed the scene of the funeral of the tree before the arrival of participants: the shields of bark stacked a bit away from the trunk, the fragments of marrow wood on the soil to form a circle around the stump, a bucket of water on top of the stump, a big tray with small bits of charcoal near the water, and the broken branches on the other side of the main lying trunk. Before inviting the participants to enter the scene one by one, and engage the elements positioned there to build the ritual, we shared the story of the dying forest. Soon after that I witnessed quite clearly what I referred to above as the meeting between the inside-out and outside-in trajectories of ecosomatic connectedness. The focus went on the large pieces of bark and one participant asked to be buried under them. The group responded with incredible care and intensity. The funeral for the tree transformed quite spontaneously and rather quickly into a death ritual where it was hard to tell whether we humans were grieving for the death of trees or whether trees (what was left of them, their dead ‘flesh’) were grieving for the human condition (see Rufo, Gallo 2024 for an in-depth discussion of this experiment).

5 Where Do We Go from Here?

I want to reiterate the basic proposition this article began with: if we want to reach out towards more liveable futures, we need to start by engaging our failure to grieve individually and collectively for the

¹⁴ See <https://www.raffaelerufo.com/ecosomatics/masterclass>.

pain caused by anthropogenic ecological disasters. In an article published in *The Guardian*, journalist Jo Confino (2014) reflects on our unresponsiveness to the fact that half of the nonhuman creatures across land, rivers and the seas have been decimated in the past 40 years. He asks: “Why aren’t we on the floor doubled up in pain at our capacity for industrial scale genocide of the world’s species?” (Confino 2014) I concur with Confino when he contends that more scientific data or superficial behavioural change initiatives will not be enough to reappropriate the process of ecological grieving and create the narratives needed to transition into a more sustainable political-economic system. People need to be engaged at a deeper level psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually. How can the somatic arts help us repair the more-than-human connective tissues of life (and death) torn by the global exploitative histories of colonialism, capitalism, and consumerist culture?

In this article I have suggested that, as earth-body practices, the somatic arts can offer the pathways needed to start making space for sensations, words and modes of responsiveness and relationality that can nurture a deeper engagement with ecological crises. This involves shifting the focus from cognitive-linguistic processes and objectives to the tactile, kinaesthetic, and affective aspects of the human-nonhuman-more-than-human encounter. Let us begin by quietly observing and attending to the sensuous presence of the surrounding world and noticing through breath, through touch, through movement and the other proprioceptive senses what happens within us as a response to what we are constantly receiving from the world. Let us challenge the comfort zone of our urban body: a clean, safe, and detached body. We can lie and roll on the soil, the grass or in the piles of leaves fallen from trees, dry or wet. We can come into deep contact with the bark of the trees, soft or rough. We can touch the gelid water of the river with our bare hands and feet. All these things are simply a given for people living a rural life. However, it is important for the people of the city to be out in nature every day, to step over the line of abstract thinking and meet the earth halfway with an open attitude of playfulness and investigation. Be it with a warm sun and a clear sky or on a cloudy, windy, rainy, or freezing day, it is important that we address the carnal presence of what, in our culture, is simply reduced to the absence of human qualities. Let us also embrace the possibility of naming the internal adventure of our senses as it unfolds, without the urge to judge or explain. We might surprisingly feel addressed by the moving presences and the bodily voices of what we have always considered to be non-sentient or nothing else than inert matter.

I want to conclude this article with a practical task for the reader. I invite you to engage with the healing power of “wandering in

movement”.¹⁵ I believe this can be a useful starting point for embodying ecological connections. Wandering in movement is a task that I engaged in every day for several months when I moved from the periphery of Milan to the abovementioned nature reserve on the coast of Rome and that I try to engage in every time I travel to a new city or rural area. I invite the reader to approach this somatic experience as an embodied form of mapping the perceptual field beyond the familiar, the well-known, the safe boundaries of existence. Have you ever considered how your sensory perception changes when you cross the door of your home or your workplace and step into the outside world? Next time you cross that threshold, I invite you to let go of any specific destination. Let go of any set of directions you usually rely on. Give your body a chance to be a key player in this experience. Use your feet or a bicycle. There is no need to go too far from where you are. Once you are out, in the public realm, before you decide where to go, wait to be moved by the impulses you receive from the living beings and systems around you. Let yourself be touched by what happens in that very moment. It can be the reflection of light blinding your eyes or the appearance of shadows on the ground. It can be the color of the sky, a hole in the street, the chatter of people, the noises from a building site, the engine of a car, the singing of birds, or the sound of your breath. Once you are out, I invite you to wander until you feel you have reached a place that calls you to meet anthropogenic ecological losses, in any form they may appear, in an intimate exchange. Find a place where you can return, every day, or a few times a week or at least every week for an extended period. Give yourself the time to get lost, to go back to where you came from, to try another way. You cannot know in advance what will move you, but you can refrain from automatically behaving the way you always do. Waiting to be moved might feel awkward, especially when you realize other people might be looking at you. I invite you to meet this awkwardness as a chance to honour the somatic intelligence of the body.

Where do we go from here? Wandering in movement teaches us that we can embody ecological connections by accepting the possibility of falling into thinking and acting without a preordained plan - in the subtle and delicate spaces between presence and absence, doing and not-doing. We don't have to know in advance the direction and the purpose of changing our lives and the world. We don't have to name in advance where we are going if we keep listening in the spaces between our internal impulses and the sensory information we receive from the world. We need to learn how to wait to allow something more-than-human to happen. Foregrounding the ecosomatic arts as

15 For more extended guidance on the somatic experience of wandering in movement, see Rufo 2023.

a possible gateway to embody ecological connections might lead to an important doubt: how can an intimate, slow, first-person approach to ecological and ecosocial change tailored to individuals and small groups be combined with a political approach? When we think of the political, we tend to imagine a phenomenon based on power which involves large numbers of people and a strong organizational and often institutional aspect. Let us avoid falling back into the culturally sanctioned dualisms between action and contemplation, body and mind, inner and outer. Let us engage the ecosomatic to reimagine the political. What happens if we attend to collaboration, shared vision, and collective care as an embodied encounter with the more-than-human world? We need to come together and practice. Only by practicing and developing awareness through embodied practice will we have a chance to find a way out of Anthropocene.

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