

An autoethnographic spiral: dancing “showerhead”

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Introduction

This essay performs an autoethnographic spiral around a movement called *showerhead*—a spiralling motion that is a key motif in the duet *Duo* by William Forsythe.¹ Taking a praxeological approach, I grasped *showerhead* as a focus to explore the dancers’ extended practice of this duet over time, longitudinally over two decades. Since its creation in 1996 for the Ballett Frankfurt, *Duo* has been performed over 148 times in over 19 different countries by 11 *Duo* dancers (Waterhouse 2022, 122-23). *Duo* was reconstructed in The Forsythe Company and performed internationally under the title of *DUO2015* for the touring programs *Sylvie Guillem: Life in Progress* (2015) and retitled *Dialogue (DUO2015)* for Forsythe’s touring program *A Quiet Evening of Dance* (2018–2021), both produced by Sadler’s Wells Theatre of London. The piece lasts approximately fifteen minutes and involves precise motions in which the dancers, either two women or two men, perform side by side without touching. A program note from 2004 describes the dance as follows:

In the small space just in front of the curtain, just at the edge of the stage, *Duo* is a clock composed of two women. The women register time in a spiraling way, making it visible, they think about how it fits into space, they pull time into an intricate, naked pattern in front of the curtain, close to the eyes of the audience.... Their bodies brilliant in a shimmer of black, the women fly with reckless accuracy, their breath sings of the spaces in time. Distant music appears and vanishes as the women follow each other through the whirling, etched quiet (Caspersen 2004).

As this program text makes palpable, *Duo* breaks the heterosexual norms

¹ American choreographer William Forsythe (b. 1949) directed Ballett Frankfurt (1984–2004) and The Forsythe Company (2005–2015) in Frankfurt/Dresden, and currently works as a freelance choreographer.

of ballet duet conventions by staging a plotless, poetic atmosphere in which two women (or two men) cooperate. Together the duet partners weave motion in choreographed patterns, sensing time rhythmically and attuning to one another.

Here, I would like to return to fieldwork notes, interviews, and videos made in the context of my doctoral research (2016–2019) as well as previously published writings in order to rethink the interrelation of time, memory, and dance in my research into *Duo* as well as my prior writings and analytic strategies (Waterhouse 2022, 137–58). The intensity of *Duo* in performance is built up through long-standing aesthetic practice, and the particular example of *showerhead* helps illustrate how this transpires. My decision to focus in detail on one movement—to compare enactments across times and to learn the movement like a novice—enabled me to richly unfold a movement world from a close, embodied study. Beyond the issue of how to perform the movement well, I was interested in the praxeological aspects of how the movement was cultivated through logics inside and outside the individual body. I also sought to understand historical aspects, such as how the movement was ‘passed on’ from dancer to dancer, as well as how balletic conventions and ideologies were adapted through the iterative process of rehearsal and performance. These topics will be the focus of my writing that follows.

By researching a dance practice that was closely related to my own lived experience as a Forsythe dancer, my doctoral research had an autobiographical component.² Autoethnography was practised by writing from my ‘insider’ standpoint as a former Forsythe dancer, blending ethnographic methodology and dance studies analysis. Importantly, I had not danced *Duo* before commencing my research, enabling me to use my body as a “research tool” to learn the choreography and to compare the dancers’ perspectives with my own (Müller 2016, 78). Like anthropologist Deborah Reed-Danahay, I found it constructive to view my approach to autoethnography “as lying at the intersection of insider and outsider perspectives, rather than setting up a dualism that privileges the insider account,” or that of the distant outsider (Reed-Danahay 2017, 145; Hilari, Rothenburger, Waterhouse and Wehren 2024 forthcoming; Reed-Danahay 1997, 4-9).

While there are specific difficulties to researching the intimacy of duets

² I joined Ballett Frankfurt as a guest dancer in 2004, while *Duo* was on tour, and danced in The Forsythe Company from 2005–2012. In 2014 I enrolled in the Doctoral Program Studies in the Arts (SINTA) at the University of Bern in partnership with the Bern University of the Arts.

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like *Duo*—such as the expertise level and gaining access to backstage processes—many of the methodological challenges I faced as a dance world insider and academic researcher, negotiating multiple commitments and practical logics, are obstacles well considered within the scholarship of dance ethnography (Davida 2012; Waterhouse 2023). Like many dance ethnographers since the 90s, I approached my fieldwork on *Duo* not in an ‘exotic’ or ‘foreign’ location, but in European dance contexts in which I was highly familiar. I constructed ‘the field’ around an artistic work by travelling to Rome, Paris, and London to watch performances of *Duo* on tour. I invited the dancers to dance with me, instruct other dance students, record interviews, and share memories elicited by watching archival videos. These meetings were interwoven with my life as a doctoral student at the University of Bern, often jarring me with the discontinuities of switching identities and contexts. While I valued learning closely from the dancers, I was not striving to ‘go native’ and become a *Duo* dancer; instead, I preferred the unique vantage point that allowed me to move between conditions of dance practice and theory. Thus, I practised participant observation through my stiffening doctoral-student body, vacillating roles as an ‘insider-outsider.’ I conscientiously engaged my body as a tool for remembering, learning, and narrating my research (cf. Okely 2012). In my theoretical writing, I have consciously drawn upon my memories as a Forsythe dancer—which I recognise as an active process of remembering—to reflexively develop this praxeological understanding of the group that I had danced with. Interweaving the dancers’ narratives, my autobiographical memories, and ethnographic reflections on our dance ensemble, my autoethnographic inquiry has challenged the insider/outsider dichotomy and questioned the interrelation of self and other, dancer and partner, researcher and researched. I aimed to legitimise but also to critically understand the dancers’ experiences, and to write a polyvocal narrative that would examine the bodily cooperation in *Duo*.

I am not the first to describe ethnography as a cyclical process of participant observation, analysis and writing—iterative and extended over time (cf. Breidenstein et al. 2013, 45-46). Here, the opportunistic spiral of my ethnographic process and the spiral of the gesture of *showerhead* come together in an intensive movement analysis. These practices are rhythmical circles that revitalise themselves. For the artists, the movement *showerhead* existed synchronically, in the co-presence of dancing together, not diachronically, changing over time, as I was able to ponder through the construction of my fieldwork. Initially, I wrote evocative prose about *showerhead* in the present tense to convey the movement’s vitality (Waterhouse

2022, 137-58). I merged different dancers' phenomenological accounts with my own experience as a novice to find common themes and concepts. The sensual and poetic tropes of ethnographic writing, I argued, would give the reader insight into the dancers' movement logic. Here, to reflect more actively on memory construction and writing dance historiography, I unwind a new narrative from my fieldwork vignettes, bridging the present time of writing to dancing *showerhead* in the past. The vitality of *showerhead* was produced through practice—connecting, differentiating, and relating times. Could I, as dancer Jill Johnson encouraged, show this multiplicity? Johnson advised:

There aren't eras in this work. Only ongoing explorations that continually connect the infinite possibilities of the ideas within it. It's so clear that these experiences are all mapped onto each other, in concentric circles and networks of shared embodied ideas across time (Johnson 2021).

In the writing that follows I illustrate how dance historiography may depart from a teleological narrative of the performance process and a linear reconstruction of chronological time (cf. Thurner 2018); instead, through an autoethnographic spiral, I account for embodied memory that is holistic and nonlinear, articulated relationally and defined by the particularity of *Duo's* choreographic labour and curvilinear movements.

Dancing Showerhead. First fieldwork encounters

Upon my request to learn more about her dance practice through my body, *Duo* dancer Allison Brown took me under her wing in a dance studio in Frankfurt, Germany. Brown had performed *Duo* frequently in the context of Ballett Frankfurt and taught it to other dancers, making her a key witness. Though I was an 'insider' from this dance community, I had no first-hand experience dancing *Duo* and was eager to learn. Traces of these dance studio encounters with *Duo* dancers are integrated into the analysis of the movement that follows.

Fieldnotes. September 20, 2016

Walking through Frankfurt to the cafe, I remember when I lived in this city. I find [dancer] Allison [Brown] waiting for me outside Café Glauberg. I feel light in my chest and smile immediately upon seeing her. She has arrived by bike. We remark the strangeness of time: that it feels like yesterday, and yet years have gone past since we last saw each other. We say that we both look young! We both also deny that we do not look young and that with age we feel old. Allison remarks that she

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has a lot of pain, especially in her knee. Her skin and face have aged, but she is even more beautiful than I remembered. We are almost the same height, but her center is more lifted than mine. It feels good to be by her side. We talk in the cafe and agree to meet on Thursday in the dance studio where she teaches and to do a biographical interview afterward.

Fieldnotes. September 22, 2016

Allison [Brown] is in a rush and late, explaining that she was looking for her notebooks from when she learned *Duo*. Upon arriving at the dance studio, she throws off her black boots, opens the windows to let in fresh air, and dumps herself and her bag on the floor, also shedding balls and bands [objects for training]. We talk while she begins to move: circling her ankles, stretching her feet, opening her legs with bent knees, like a frog. We warm up together and I begin learning to dance *Duo*. It is my first time trying this movement with a partner. I'm out of shape and enjoying it!

In the studio session described in my fieldnotes above, Brown asked me if I knew the movement *showerhead*, the first movement of the piece. I had seen it but not learned it, so I invited her to teach me. She demonstrated how the dancers would practise the movement of *showerhead* to synchronise time and form. The dancers performed this nuanced motion with particular attention to their *right hands*. The continuous curvilinear movement lasted about two seconds, involving the dancers' whole bodies in a delicate, smooth, and virtuosic spiral (see Figure 1).

Bringing me close to her torso, she explained sometimes the dancers would practise *showerhead* nearly touching, almost hip to hip. In this close proximity, Brown showed me, they had time for comparing and contemplating the movement *showerhead*—shifting the fingers so that your and your partner's hands looked identical, “you looking at your hand and your partner's hand” (Brown 2016a). Moving closely to Brown, I perceived a kinaesthetic sense of my body moving, with visual and tactile attention to another body: a feedback loop. My sensing was fused with relation and kinaesthesia, merging bodies ('I' and 'partner'). Writing fieldnotes that evening, I was reminded of the affective capacity of the dancing body, feeling emotionally and sensually close to another person. Although *Duo* did not involve any touch-based partnering, the connection between partners was intimate and touch-like.

From further discussion with other *Duo* dancers, I learned that *showerhead* was practised mostly by new dancers, helping them master the movement coordination of the piece. As a scholar, I took this as a fortuitous way to initiate participant observation. *Showerhead* became a microcosm within my research and a common referent for asking questions.

Sharing images

Why was the motion called *showerhead*? The name, the dancers explained, referred to an image associated with learning the movement: the image of twisting a round shower dial. Each dancer used slightly different names and terminology: “showerhead,” “shower,” “head.”³ For *Duo* dancer Jill Johnson, the image helped to enact a highly precise coordination. She demonstrated for me in a studio in Boston. Johnson explained: she would imagine the surface of the shower wall in front of her body and upon that a bulbous dial. She associated this image with a gesture of twisting the water on—a twist of the right hand. This image appeared to amuse her and seemed helpful for learning the coordination (Johnson 2016b). But *showerhead* was not pantomimic. I could not recognise the dancers were imagining a shower, and it was not their aim to convey a showerhead to the audience. They were using this image as a sharable *tool* for mastering and transferring their coordination. The geometry of the dial and the fun of moving around it, became a lure for moving. The showerhead image initially served as a memory aid, although it was sometimes forgotten after the movement had been mastered.

Showerhead involved tracing the fingertips of the right hand around the imaginary shower dial—especially the medial surface of the pointer finger, the part that you can stroke with your thumb. The pointer finger curved around the shower dial clockwise, from 9:00 p.m., all the way around to 8:00 p.m. To try this, imagine your fingers tracing along the inside of a bowl so that the palm turns; now make that movement in front of your ribcage and you’ve started to *showerhead*.

While *showerheading*, the dancers’ hands were loose and alert, their fingers sensitive. Their bodies were not held stiff. Rather, more like how a clarinetist would swirl out a sound, the dancers developed the spiral potential of the circular image, the showerhead, through subtle shifts of their reverberating centres. “If it involves both sides of the body it is most effective, I would say,” explained Jill Johnson (Johnson 2016b). By including or integrating the left side of the body, the gesture of the right

³ Johnson used the term “showerhead” (Johnson 2016a; Johnson 2016b; Johnson 2018). Brown used the term during a studio session dancing in Frankfurt (Brown 2016a) and in Bern with dancer Cyril Baldy (Brown and Baldy 2017); Watts also used the term (Watts 2017; Watts 2018b) and referenced the nickname “shower” (Waterhouse, Watts and Blasing 2014). In setting the piece, Cyril Baldy used the term “head” during rehearsals with CCN – Ballet de Lorraine on April 21–22, 2015. Neither the dancers nor Forsythe remembered how this movement was invented; my research suggested antecedents (Waterhouse 2022, 233).

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arm was consumed in an action of the whole body. Twisting the torso, the showerhead image began an interplay called *épaulement*. Jill Johnson illustrated this beautifully in our studio session, just a few months after my first meeting with Allison Brown.

Épaulement

JILL JOHNSON: Thinking of it [the showerhead image], as this surface (*she gestures, illustrating a flat horizontal surface with her left hand*) and this part of the hand (*she touches the medial surface of her fingers*) is going (*with vocal emphasis*) around the showerhead. The bulbous ones, it's not the handle one (*she shows the different gestures of working with each, and looks at the camera and laughs*) to be specific. And then, you're going along with this part of the hand around it, and then when you go to *tendu* (*she steps back*) it extends very gently, rather than it being (*she does the movement deliberately incorrectly—quickly, with no torso movement*) this way. So, you'll be standing (*she inhales and demonstrates correctly*). If it involves sides of the body [later she adds: through a series of diagonal or cantilevered alignments] it is most legible, I would say. Because it can easily (*she exaggerates to demonstrate incorrectly, by pulling her right shoulder up towards her ear and showing an isolation of her arm*) if it's just one side, so it's just this back shoulder *épaulement*. In other words, if I do it without this (*she gestures to her left*) shoulder, it can easily become a hunched-ey thing as opposed to (*she smiles and unfurls her arm*) an *épaulement* (Johnson 2016b).



Figure 1: Jill Johnson demonstrating *showerhead*. (Johnson 2016b). Screenshot by the author.

Figure 1 shows the ending of Jill Johnson’s movement lesson. Though I find this picture graceful, it does not capture the affective quality of watching Johnson move *live*, in which the coordinative spiral richly grew through and transformed her body. Live, her movement profoundly motivated me—invited me to try and move *like* her, *with* her. The interview transcript included here is marked with movement, showing how fluidly Johnson interwove communication, teaching gestures, and *showerheading*. She highlighted the principle of *épaulement*, which was a fundamental process in rehearsal.

Épaulement, from the French for shouldering, is a term describing the style of the positioning of the upper body in ballet—part of one’s carriage of the arms, or *port de bras*. Forsythe dancer Dana Caspersen has written: “In classical ballet, *épaulement* is the practice of creating specific linked patterns of complex, dynamic relationships between the eyes, head, shoulders, arms, hands, legs, feet and the exterior space, as the torso engages in rotation” (Caspersen 2008, 12). Choreographer William Forsythe has similarly described *épaulement* as a “perceptually gratifying state” that “synthesizes discrete parts of the body with multiple layers of torqued sensation that leads to the specific sense of a unified but counter-rotated whole” (Forsythe quoted in Foster 2016, 17). My interviews with *Duo* dancers echoed such statements: with accounts of complex bodily perception of twisting, spatial awareness, and feelings of pleasurable excitement.

Fluctuating in time and place, as dance scholar Geraldine Morris has emphasised about all movements of the *dance d’école*, *épaulement* has been expressed in each ballet ensemble as a style (Morris 2022). With dance expertise, styles of *épaulement* are easy to differentiate—reflecting the technical training of ballet schools and company repertoire, as well as the body ideals and ideology of the context of dancing. As a dancer in The Forsythe Company, I was told by my peers that *épaulement* originated within the performance of imperial ballets in Russia—that deferent ballerinas learned to keep their eyes positioned upon the Czar in performance, who was seated at a special place, in the centre loge of the theatre. As she moved and turned, this led to angles and shading of her movement. *Épaulement*’s history is certainly more complex than this single-origin anecdote (cf. Blasis 1820; Bournonville 2005 [1848]; Falcone 1999; Jürgensen 2006; Anderson 1992 [1977], 101). Linked to Forsythe’s choreographic experiments, in Ballet Frankfurt, *épaulement* was developed as a generative feel for coordination, enabling complex improvisation. *Épaulement* can be regarded, in this way, as an aesthetic-corporeal *habitus*. As Pierre Bourdieu (2018 [1977], 82-83) describes, *habitus* operates as “a system of lasting,

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transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions*” (my emphasis). *Épaulement*, as a coordinate potential of twisting the body and relating to others, rhythm, and space, was drawn upon in nearly all of Forsythe’s choreographies. Forsythe dancers experimented with sensing, enhancing, grooving, fragmenting, and inventing *épaulement* and some found the affective capacity of this sharing “ecstatic” (Caspersen 2008, 2; Forsythe 1999, 24).

William Forsythe, as a choreographer, had many strategies to catalyse movement around him. But *épaulement* would be mistakenly characterised as a top-down process—of contamination and the reproduction of only Forsythe’s bodily proclivities. Forsythe had shaped the performance of *épaulement*, as is common in Western dance and athletic training, through spoken “collective correction” (Wacquant 2006, 104). Additionally, Forsythe’s rehearsal assistants and the dancers themselves further cultivated *épaulement* in the dancers’ ballet class each morning. Most importantly, learning from one another—dancers among dancers, watching, imitating, feeling—was vital.

This illustrates how the practice of *épaulement*, a significant aspect of *Duo*, was embedded in an intricate social system and web of professional activities, producing a movement style that was communal. The dancers *shared* this practice. Yet the dancers did not view their custom as homogenization or limiting. No two dancers performed *épaulement* identically, and this in itself was significant. As a Forsythe dancer, I understood my *épaulement* was part of my signature as a dancer, as well as a sign of my membership within a specific group. Our *épaulement*, as Forsythe dancers, was more extended and shaped differently than that of other ballet companies. We expressed form differently, I venture, because of our intersubjectivity through this practice—how we sensed the potential of our bodies, in relation to others and space. The practice was *individual-collective* (cf. Wacquant 2006, 17-18).

Time and rhythm

The timing of *Duo* was another focus within the dancers’ rehearsal. The choreography required precise co-timings of synchronised movement as well as passages of related motion, with precise cues and alignments (cf. Monda 2016). The dancers all agreed that extensive practice was required to connect well enough with one’s partner to perform these timings accurately, musically, and playfully. Timing and rhythm, what some Forsythe dancers and I called *entrainment*, was a vital component of

Duo (Waterhouse 2022, 171-85). Time-based and rhythmical processes were commented upon throughout my fieldwork, some traces of which I offer below.

ALLISON BROWN: [I remember] going out on stage in the dark. Trying to find your glow-in-the-dark mark on the floor and hoping that it's good, that we're in good alignment and we're ready. And the audience taking us in and us taking the audience in and this first moment, standing naked there basically. And yeah, I remember the whole thing actually, in lots of different places, and lots of different times, and in lots of different bodies (Brown 2016b).

LIZ WATERHOUSE: When you are on stage and about to begin motion. Was there a cue for that?

JILL JOHNSON: I gave that cue. And it was to spend some real time—in other words, not choreographed time, not the two of us getting to our first places and waiting for two [musical] eights before we started. It was ... we waited for the audience: for the two of us to settle and kind of feel each other. But also, there was always a response from the audience, in part because we were so close to them, and they weren't necessarily expecting that. There was always a bit of like (*she vocalizes, similar to a sigh*) "ahm." In Frankfurt, with our home audience, they were like "oh, ok." And it settled pretty quickly. In Orange County [Los Angeles, a tour in 2003] for example, where we were (*pause*) restricted because there was quote "nudity"—it was a conservative bubble ... there was all kind of (*she vocalizes*) "flaahflahflahhh" and we had a heckler, you know? So it varied, with where we were. But a time when we could really feel that it settled. And then a borderline, not pushing the audience, but let's see how far we can (*pause*) have this moment be ... just being with each other (*she inhales, starting showerhead*) and then start. [...] You would feel the audience finally in real time settle, and then you take a really long second or five and then start (Johnson 2018).

Fieldnotes. September 23, 2016

I want to understand how Allison [Brown] teaches *Duo*. She explained to me that she begins with the rhythm of the section of the dance "umpadump" or the breathing. She demonstrates "umpadump" and teaches too fast for me to follow. I ask her to go more slowly. Her voice changes to instruct me, becoming more dynamic and musical. She explains that she would warm up like this: she takes me into her right side, holding my hip to her hip with her arm. She begins a fast walk, hitting her heels on the floor with each step. She says Regina [van Berkel, the woman who taught her *Duo*] would sing a song, very loud. Then Allison starts singing. I am a bit shy and ask her if I should sing too. "Yes!" We sing and make the rhythm together with our legs. She remembers that in Ballett Frankfurt, Bill [Forsythe] would often stop rehearsals when things were getting too dispersed and ask the dancers to make a rhythm like this, to listen to the music with their bodies.

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Learning and performing *Duo* involved cooperated timings and remembered rhythms, dancing without an external musical pulse, or beat. This affective process tuned the dancers into one another, and also the audience’s attention, making them attentive to the subtle sounds of their bodies. They perceived fine connections and suspensions in time, through joint attention. The musical accompaniment by composer Thom Willems, for piano and electronics, created different sonic atmospheres and often took cues from the dancers—rather than giving them the rhythm. Their listening bonded them in their shared project of dancing *Duo* well—for themselves, Forsythe as well as for spectators.

Cultivating sensation

Enacting *showerhead*, the dancers did not look at their right hands as if contemplating their own gestures. Nor did they look into each other’s faces or eyes. *Duo* foregrounded peripheral attention. Dancer Riley Watts explained that while dancing *showerhead*, he wished to catch a glimpse of his partner in his peripheral vision. Given the absence of scenery in *Duo*, the black background provided little for the dancers to focus on. Sometimes the audience members near the stage were visible to the performers, but they were predominantly heard and felt, with other senses than the eyes. Watts explained that he knew a performance was going well when he watched a video afterward and saw that he and his partner’s heads were turning to watch one another. They do this, he said, to stay in sync (Watts 2017; Waterhouse, Watts, and Bläsing 2014). For Brown the use of the eyes in *Duo* was an unusual type of vision: “this seeing each other with other senses and other body parts than the eyes” (Brown 2016b). Jill Johnson described vision—“hawk-eyed” on one’s partner—combined with listening for the sound of one’s partner’s breathing movement (Johnson 2018).

This testimony illustrates how the dancers’ sensorium was cultivated—in a relational manner—by performing *showerhead* and the other movements of *Duo*. Based on my embodied knowledge, I imagined what it might be like in performance: combined with breath, the dancers heard their own and their partner’s body, inhaling and exhaling. There was the heat of the stage lights, the texture of one’s costume, and the temperature of the air. The dancers recounted feeling and hearing the audience. But predominantly they remembered focusing on their partners and kinaesthetically feeling the movement. They remembered their energy: from adrenalin to exhaustion. This panoply of sensation moved beyond the Western five-sense model by intermixing temperature, balance, breath, skin, listen-

ing, attention, energy, and proprioception. Moreover, this was a sensation in stereo: doubling and grafting between two shifting bodies.

How was this learned? In 2013 when the dancers learned *Duo* in The Forsythe Company, they struggled in rehearsals. They explained that although the visual appearance of the movement was important—central to spectators and Forsythe—they also wanted to focus on their inner feelings and experience of movement. Riley Watts emphasised that for him, “the big thing was to understand, to appeal to what does this [movement] feel like, not only what does it look like” (Watts 2015a). The dancers rarely remember using the mirror in the studio, as is common for ballet dancers, to evaluate and correct their posture. Instead, the vision of how the movement should appear was reinforced through seeing one’s partner more than oneself. They dialogued about their sensations. By the dancers employing comparisons of feeling and appearing, thus began the entanglement of bodies critical to *Duo*.

Hands and skin

My experience becoming a Forsythe dancer gave me first-person insight into techniques for cultivating a dancer’s sensorium. In studio rehearsals of The Forsythe Company, we practised attuning to our hands, skin, and breath. Forsythe believed that the hand is a keystone to train the whole body, given the amount of nerve endings and dexterity. For instructing ballet dancers, who have often laid more emphasis on training their feet than their hands, a Forsythe adage was “the shape of the foot is the shape of the hand.”⁴ This instructed dancers to articulate their hands as if they had the same cultivated capacity of their highly trained feet. In rehearsal, Forsythe encouraged: “*Épaulement* is a conversation between your foot and your hands. So make a wonderful conversation” (Forsythe quoted in Ross 2007, 107).

In Forsythe’s ensembles, the hand was studied in relation to other body parts: the hand in relation to the shoulder, moved from the back, reflected in the hip, and supported in the feet and knees. This integrated quality of movement was further developed through sensual attention to the border of the body, through the feeling of the skin. Skin stretches, touches, and senses. It registers intensity and gives a sense of others (such

⁴ These are my personal memories of the rehearsals in The Forsythe Company.

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as the sensation of feeling watched). Sensitivity to skin was nurtured in *Duo* by the dancers directing attention to all the delicate surfaces of their hands and furthermore their relation to the stretch of the skin in the arms, neck, and back. This skin sensation produced an intensity of movement that differed from daily life, where such awareness is not cultivated. *Duo* dancer Riley Watts described skin sensation as a way to register bodily form—the shape of his body (Watts 2018a). Feeling light, heat, temperature, tension, and release, the skin helped, in my view, to register movement around the body, through a sensation of moving with and for others—a quality of intensity and excitement. Watts, as a later-generation *Duo* dancer, was the dancer who most frequently used the word *sensation* in our discussions. He described *Duo* as “a process of attention to sensations that the dancers are experiencing simultaneously” (Waterhouse, Watts and Bläsing 2014, 9). Not only having sensations but considering and comparing them, *Duo* dancers built a common reserve of understanding.

Breathing-movement

Over the course of *showerhead*, the dancers inhaled and exhaled—typically they inhaled through the nose, with a light and long sniff, and exhaled through the mouth. The more tired the dancers were from prior exertion, the more this sounded like a sigh. *Duo* dancers breathed implicitly with their movement. Their breathing-movement was a *logic of practice*. For Pierre Bourdieu, a “logic of practice” is not abstract or external to practise, but a logic constituted within and through activity, “performed directly in bodily gymnastics” (Bourdieu 1990, 89). The breathing practice was a subtle layer of the choreography, helping to create the right movement quality (delicate and precise) and sustain synchronisation with one’s partner. Dancer Brigel Gjoka told me, “We synchronize breathing, not the steps” (Gjoka 2016). Forsythe concurred: “*Duo* is finally, for me, a breath score that has choreography that generates it” (Forsythe 2019).

I have chosen to name this practice *breathing-movement* to emphasise the way it is a hybrid medium of movement, sound, communication, choreography, and sensation. In *Duo*, I observed the dancers typically used inhales as upbeats and paired them with actions rising in level; comparably, they recruited exhales for lowering actions and other forms of exertions (such as the endpoints of twists or swings). For example, in *showerhead*, following inhale and exhale, respectively, the weight of the body rose and descend-

ed. Elsewhere in *Duo*, the dancers also used their breath communicatively to signal timing via cues (Waterhouse 2022, 198-202).

The breathing changed from performance to performance, rich with improvisation. *Duo* dancer Brigel Gjoka demonstrated this to me while dancing in his kitchen, vocalising “eee-ahhh” while changing pitch and tone melodically. His breath interlaced with his voice (Gjoka 2016). Similarly, performer Regina van Berkel (who originated the role that Gjoka danced) also used her sonorous voice melodically in breathing-movement, though never forcing her breath or deliberately trying to sing (Berkel 2017). Her partner, Jill Johnson, demonstrated to me over videoconference how she used her nasal passages more than her throat, but was there to whisper words as needed: such as “new beginning” and “Almost there!” (Johnson 2018). Not all dancers spoke and sniffed like Johnson. They all found their way to synchronise and cue their partners.

Late-generation *Duo* dancers—male dancers Watts and Gjoka—breathed more loudly than early-generation, female *Duo* dancers. Despite this, no *Duo* dancer viewed the breathing practice as gendered. I wondered extensively about this. What I perceived was a generational shift in practice over time. There was a greater emphasis on breath scores in the repertoire of The Forsythe Company, in parallel to Forsythe’s “exploration of the visual-sonic affordances of movement and its presentation in performance” (Vass-Rhee 2011, 1). His breathing practice, Riley Watts insisted to me, was not “ornamental” (Watts 2017). The acoustic qualities of the dancers’ breathing-movement were a sign of their relational bond, linking form, expressivity, and timing.

The dancers remarked on the difficulty of teaching the breathing of *Duo* to students or dancers in other companies. Ballet training teaches dancers to silence their breath—dancing while making as little noise as possible. Novices had to cultivate the freedom to acoustically release breathing-movement; they were also typically less experienced in using breathing-movement communicatively as a way of dancing together. All dancers reminded me of the importance of ample rehearsal: *Duo*’s breath was the result of shared experience, requiring time to attune. I ventured that after so many hours of practice, *Duo*’s breathing practice must compose the dancers’ subjectivity at a deep level, at the cusp where dancing meets music, communication, and sociality. The agency of *Duo* dancers was complexly immersed in an organisational array of activities—cooperatively constituted in movement.

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As ballet?

In which ways does *showerhead* make visible (dis-)continuities with ballet practices and history? How did the dancers re-signify their bodies and ballet conventions through the motions of *Duo*? Between 1996 and 2018, *Duo*'s extensive touring across metropolises in the Global North brought the dancers in contact with new audiences, with differing expectations about the aesthetic conventions of contemporary ballet and duets (Waterhouse 2022, 123-30). Through my interviews, I learned that the dancers were highly conscious of the changing frames and times in which they were perceived by spectators (Waterhouse 2022, 174).

The dancers held high reverence for the balletic virtuosity of the first pair of *Duo* dancers: Regina van Berkel and Jill Johnson. Many dancers adapted their training, to better accomplish the balletic extensions and jumps of *Duo*. The male dancers pressured Forsythe to change the costumes from leotards to pants and knee-length shorts, limiting the visibility of balletic ‘line’ and ‘turn-out,’ and defying the codes of proper ballet attire. Some dancers adjusted the steps to less balletic movements. Additionally, the gendered norms of ballet performances influenced performers of both genders. Some women dieted, to achieve the norms of thinness for female ballet dancers, concerned about their appearance in the *Duo* leotards; in contrast, other female dancers appreciated subverting these norms by having their muscular legs and rumps visible and also expressing acceptance of their bodies through dancing confidently in sheer costumes revealing their breasts. William Forsythe brought to my attention that the male dancers were also crossing the norms of male performance, by avoiding aggressive motions and instead sustaining “masculine delicacy” (Forsythe 2019). The emancipation that *Duo* generated over two decades happened through rupture and renewal: merging feminine and masculine bodies, differently inscribed by ballet histories, and re-inscribing these possibilities on stage and in rehearsal.

Consider the balletic aspects of *showerhead*. Using the affordances of balletic training, the dancers’ hips opened flexibly, rotating the dancers’ legs from parallel into a turned-out ending position. Rolling through the feet and ankles, the footwork in *showerhead* was quiet, and the weight transition was smooth—also aspects of ballet practice. Moving through a soft bend in the knees, or *plié*, the *showerhead* movement was flowing and continuous. The artists’ right ankles and toes extended into a balletic stretch, or *tendu*. The hamstrings lengthened to hinge the body: the torso inclined forward, while the hips moved back. Contralaterally, one

leg provided support, while the other gestured. Bringing it all together: *épaulement* brought into play the spirals, linking perception of tensions and counter-tensions. Though I have seen students without ballet training learning to perform *showerhead*, extensive ballet training is helpful.

But how was ballet practice adapted, through dancing *Duo*? And how was *Duo* changed, through the dancers' reflection on balletic heritage? In *showerhead*, the movement mechanics and style also deviate from ballet and these divergences were explicitly practised. Allison Brown reminded me in particular of the "ass" (Brown 2016a). The ass is rarely called upon in classical ballet technique, which focuses more demurely on the hips and the facility of turning out. As dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild has shown, the buttocks have been tucked under in ballet, to achieve the ideal European alignment of the controlled and poised vertical subject (Dixon Gottschild 2005, 144-145). Instead, within the movement style of Ballett Frankfurt, dancers were encouraged to move their rumps down and back. Brown remembered that coming to Ballett Frankfurt after extensive labour in ballet companies, she was very surprised to have a dancer tell her in rehearsal to move her hips back *more*, like sitting on the toilet. By the 90s, the rebellious Ballett Frankfurt dancers (like Brown) knew the power and sex appeal of the 'butt' codes in popular culture. This appropriation of moves from black dance and popular culture was part of Ballett Frankfurt's larger resistance and re-inscription of the white ballet body. Forsythe publicly embraced the influence of rock 'n' roll and hip hop on his work, grateful also for the black dancers' contribution to the Ballett Frankfurt (Waterhouse 2022, 95-97; Driver 1990, 94). Non-white dancers also contributed to *Duo*: African American dancers Francesca Harper and Bahiyah Sayyed Gaines learned *Duo* together in the 1996–1997 season of Ballett Frankfurt, and Iranian German dancer Parvaneh Scharafali was part of the reconstruction in The Forsythe Company. Although these dancers did not perform *Duo* often, for reasons such as injury and changing programs, they were important within its history (Waterhouse 2022, 82; 125-27; 275-80).

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Conclusion



Figure 2: The bodies of dancers Riley Watts and Brigel Gjoka, superposed.
Photo © Riley Watts.

How did dancing *Duo* shape the dancers’ bodies and, vice versa, how did their bodies produce *Duo*? Certainly, these are processual and entangled bodies, defined dynamically through enactment. One of the central notions within this article is the way dancing together emerges through bodies *individual-collective*: through singular bodies with individual histories and proclivities, who collectively fabricated and negotiated their shared choreographic project of *Duo*. Dancer Riley Watts shared an image in which he had digitally superimposed his body onto an image of his partner’s (see Figure 2). He explained that this feeling of togetherness, of becoming one body, was central to *Duo*. From Watts and through my fieldwork, I learned how intimately dancers defined themselves by the knowledge and sensations of *their* bodies and *their partners’* bodies. I saw how this is begotten by one’s particular body aptitude, while also changing in accordance with lineages of roles and dyads in *Duo* partnership. In this, bodies are individual and collective: developing what they can do, with potential for extensive transformation.

When examined longitudinally, *showerhead*, like most of the movements in *Duo*, went cooperatively beyond one person—or even a couple—rehearsing and practising the piece. In other words, the dancers’ logic of *showerheading* relied heavily on individual coordination and sensorimotor skills, amassed through histories of relational interaction. This connected the dancers, as remarked by dancer Jill Johnson, not linearly in time, but rather in “concentric circles and networks of shared embodied ideas across time” (Johnson 2021). Though each dancer’s body has a unique history, through moving together, they fused. They negotiated differences, discerning and discussing what was aesthetically and socially appropriate. The shifting choreography of *Duo*, like their bodies, was a becoming-with—choreography, identity, and bodies merging. My autoethnographic spiral with the dancers, helped me to explore both the history of a movement and a movement itself, as an embodied history.

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