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“Lately, she’s been seeing  
things differently”

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# Situating the Gaze: Towards an Embodied Ecological Approach to Screendance

Lux Eterna and Sarah Pini

## Abstract

This article presents an interdisciplinary conversation between the authors discussing the potential of cultivating a feminist, embodied, ecological approach to screendance and environmental attunement in video dance performance. It draws from Lux Eterna's artistic research and body of work including the film *AURA NOX ANIMA* (2016) filmed on the sandy dunes in Anna Bay, New South Wales, Australia, and her current development in dance film production: *THE EIGHTH DAY* (2023) in conversation with Sarah Pini to consider the presence and embodied situatedness of the artist-maker in shaping visual experience in screendance. Through open-ended interviews to one another, the authors ask if the cultivation of an ecological perspective can offer forms of resistance to hegemonic modes of seeing and experiencing the body on screen. These reflections are theoretically contextualized through establishing their relation to ecological frameworks, feminist literature and an ethnographic approach to dance and the lived body. With this dialogical article, the authors invite a reconsideration of the notion of place and *emplacement* as key elements informing processes of screendance and aesthetic experience.

## Situating the Body

Performance scholars and feminist philosophers have offered alternative perspectives to the ways artistic expression is developed and produced (Carruthers; Ettinger; Haraway). These thinkers see the world as an active subject, where “acknowledging the agency of the world in knowledge makes room for some unsettling possibilities” (Haraway 593). On these premises we offer a shared reflection on the role of the artist-maker in shaping the creative process and product of her research, more specifically on their presence and embodied situatedness in shaping visual experience in screendance. Screendance is a hybrid movement-based art form blending visual art, dance, and cinema. Although screendance is an emerging art form combining movement of the camera with filming and editing dance and choreography (Rosenberg), there is extensive literature in the field (see also Brannigan; Whatley). Here we are focusing on the work and artistic research of Palestinian-Australian visual artist Lux Eterna and her recent body of work. Through open-ended interviews with one another, the authors ask if the cultivation of an ecological perspective can offer forms of resistance to hegemonic modes of seeing and experiencing the body on screen.



Fig. 1: Lux Eterna. *AURA NOX ANIMA*. 2016. Video still.

Sarah: We believe that dance cinema has the power to reconfigure subjectivity and intimacy. On this matter I would like to start with your dance film *AURA NOX ANIMA*. The film offers an embodied reflection on the themes of death and decay, inviting the audience to acknowledge the precariousness of human existence in face of the transience of time. How did you work with the dancers to create this feeling and how did your participation in the practice influence the process?

Lux: *AURA NOX ANIMA* is a long durational performance that was filmed during a stormy day on the dunes in Anna Bay (New South Wales). The dancers in this film, who are trained in Body Weather (BW) - a radical movement practice, synthesis of Eastern and Western dance traditions (Pini 36; see also Candelario 11; Fuller 484). The performers have practiced frequently together before the filming took place. BW training fosters a somatic responsiveness to the environment, working with and through imagination. In *AURA NOX ANIMA*, the dancers are moved by the wind and sand, slowly drawing a minimal choreography across the dunes. Here the dance was probably more connected to literally the weather and how it moves us. How it creates the impulse within us to move. Every day you wake up to its own microclimate; a microcosm specific to that day and of your body. This initialising practice of tuning one's attention inwards and sensing, listening to and yielding to what is, grants an immediate accessibility, to what is the weather of one's body, subject to change and to be moved to any particular environment. It is through this sensitivity training that a dancer attunes to not only the fluctuations within themselves, but also to and with their surroundings.

Sarah: I have heard you frame your creative process as a practice of 'weathering', or a training for deep sensitivity to the array of bodily perceptual fluctuations in relation to the environment. What does this practice mean for you and how did you incorporate this idea in developing the film *AURA NOX ANIMA*?

Lux: One of the techniques and practices we applied during the making of *AURA NOX ANIMA*, is taken from the practice of Body Weather. As the title literalises the body's own weather system and the interplay between space and body, weathering to me is also a life journey. The weathering can inform marks, can inform movements, can inform a richness that gets deeper over time. The question that my research often asks is: can we view from inside the field and not from outside of it? For instance, Pallasmaa said that "My body is truly the navel of my world, not in the sense of the viewing point of the central perspective, but as the very locus of reference, memory, imagination, and integration" (11).



Fig. 2: Lux Eterna. *AURA NOX ANIMA*. 2016. Video still.



Fig. 3: Lux Eterna. *THE EIGHTH DAY* (rough cut). 2018. Video still.

Sarah: It seems that your work and research is closely informed by your training in Body Weather (BW) where the practice of 'weathering' is configured as a cultivation of fine tuning of the senses. Through my research into BW, I discovered how tuning into the subtle sensations of the body, and through an attention towards the ways the weather moves us, can shift the focus from an egocentric perspective towards an ecological attunement (Pini; Pini and Deans). You and I met in 2016 during a BW workshop led by members of the dance company *Tess de Quincey Co* in Sydney. Tess introduced this radical movement practice in Australia in 1989, after having joined BW initiator, the choreographer Min Tanaka and his performance group in Japan for several years. The practice of 'weathering' locates the performing body within a wider ecology, situating the body, grounding it into the environment. Did you employ this methodology in your other works?

Lux: Yes, in AURA NOX ANIMA and in my latest piece THE EIGHTH DAY, in development at the moment, we also investigate ways in which sharpening awareness and attention not only heightens sensitivity yet becomes an omni-central modus operandi when working in every present moment. By means of extending awareness beyond what we may be sensing acutely in our bodies, in proximate spaces and being weathered by the ever-shifting elements and passing time around and within us, we connect with the wider ecology. Furthermore, I've started going further in my practice, exploring fine-tuning attention with the aid of imagination (another element informing BW practice) towards the far reaches of what I call the 'container,' the space in which all unfolds. While simultaneously - using imagination - maintaining our embodied connection to the immediate place, we begin taking our awareness to the edges of space, to what we envision to be a container. Not only do we open ourselves up to the wider ecology, but we give ourselves over to a greater cosmological map, beyond the earthly plane. In considering the development of these works from a more embodied approach to working with camera, also referred to as 'lens media-apparatus', we're considering ways in which the prosthetic relational reciprocity between cameras and bodies (dancers and operators) can be subverted, to equalise power differentials. My work plays with shifting similar power dynamics between screen and spectatorship, thus encouraging less passivity in the audience, but attempting to make them engage more actively with moving images pertinent to dance and space. There is another environment of technological terrain which works with the body, space and screen very deliberately, however, this is another conversation altogether. Returning to your question, I would also like to reference the work of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone who emphasizes that "humans learn 'which thing we are' by moving and listening to our own movement. We sense our own bodies.



Fig. 4: Lux Eterna. *Studio Study I.* 2023. Video still. Slow somatic intricacies.

Indeed, we humans, along with many other primates, must *learn* to move ourselves. We do so not by *looking* and *seeing* what we're moving; we do so by attending to our bodily feelings of movements, which include a bodily felt sense of the direction of our movement, its speed, its range, its tension and so on" (Sheets-Johnstone 49 – emphasis in original).

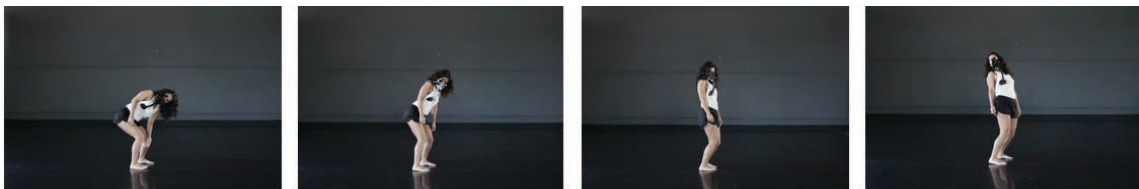


Fig. 5: Lux Eterna. *Studio Study II.* 2019. Video stills. Moving with shoulder rig – upright range.

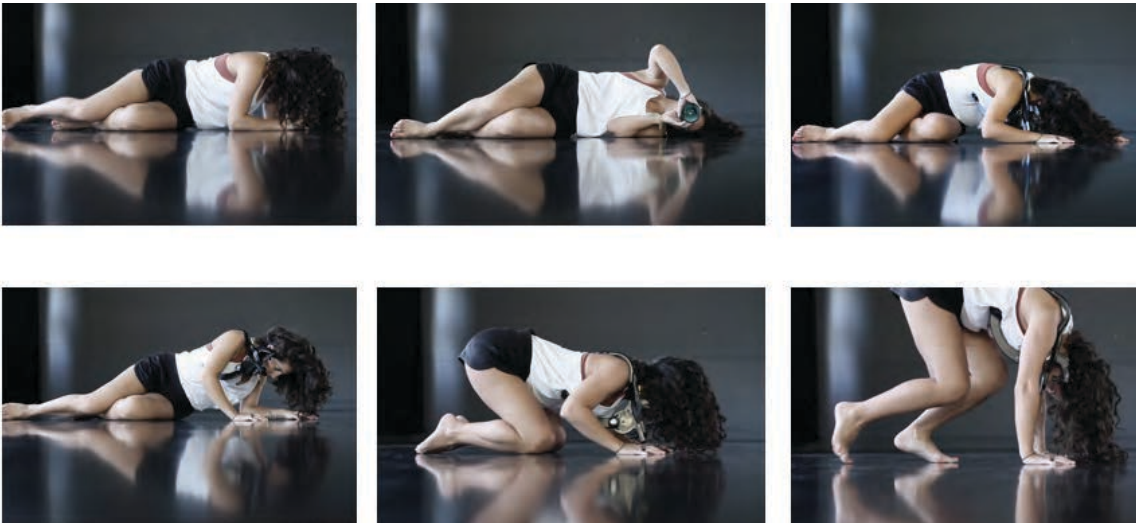


Fig. 6: Lux Eterna. *Studio Study III*. 2019. Video stills. Moving with shoulder rig from ground to stand.

## Situating the Gaze



Fig. 7: Lux Eterna. *Soft Prosthetics and Metal Gods*. 2018. Performance. Photo credit: Heidrun Lohr.



Sarah: How does this idea unfold in your work? For example, is it when using a lens apparatus (camera) as a prosthetic extension of your gaze, having it attached to the body?

Lux: Definitely when having the camera rigged closer to the body, attached to torso and working with dancers and performers, including oneself and a mirror, a greater intimacy is achieved, as is the capacity to hold them in your frame which is in the camera attached to you, held closer to your body with your arms. Through this intimate connection, a relational reciprocity presents itself and in that both subjects read each other through presence and the immediacy of movement, even at the most subtle provocation. Of course, the eye(s) incessantly equalize the scene, whether watching live action, or on screen, or when shooting on set with camera, but a rapid fire exchange emerges between the eye and the body; movement and instinct are guides and the eye keeps making adjustments from and towards that place.



Fig. 8: Lux Eterna. *Studio Study IV*. 2019. Video still. Mirror intimacies – moving with camera, shoulder rig.

Beth Carruthers argues that it is not that we see an image, but that “we enter the image” and that “the image enters us” (Carruthers 12). According to Carruthers,

Through vision, we experience the world as a place of intimate connections, of constant interchange among self and others. This intimacy frightens and entices, we want to hold it back: but this intimacy does not have to be one of control, of taking, all of appropriation. Real intimacy is not about power over another, but of power with another – or with many others. (12)



Fig. 9: Lux Eterna. *THE EIGHTH DAY*. 2023. Video still, triple channel video work.

Through understanding ourselves as relational not only to others, yet to our contexts and emergent possibilities with others, including places and apparatus; these continual reciprocities may help map out imaginative blueprints for existential wholeness. This approach can move us beyond dualisms, conventions of mind-body splits and separations between the gaze and the subject. Considering contemporary society's engagement with screen media and how much access it has granted us to new visual literacies in photography, video and new media; the manner of our consumption of it, has become more passive. These explorations of embodied resonances between camera and operator and dancers within a contextual space, may be seen as evocations of haptic cinema. These embodied approaches, which are deliberately scripted and applied during the creation of new video work, encourage more intimate and connected

viewing between audience and screen. Pallasmaa writes that sound ensconces, receives, encapsulates and is omni-directional in opposition to sight, which instead reaches, isolates and is directional (49). Can we challenge this modality and explore ways in which the moving body can become the eye? As we fine-tune and become deeply aware of both our peripheral fields of vision and acute gaze, we can further focus on how our attention rapidly scuttles between them. Entraining an ocular and embodied synchronicity, as a type of framework for an omni-central awareness, something which may challenge the monodirectional and deliberate operation of the eye that Pallasmaa asserts.

Sarah: This perspective is sympathetic to the accounts of the many artists I encountered during my research, where I addressed dancers' experience of presence in different contexts of practice. My research challenged the more traditional individual-centered notion of presence in performance, and argues instead for an ecological approach to phenomena of presence in dance (Pini 6-19). Through releasing control by tuning in to the surrounding elements, a different sense of agency can emerge that expands beyond the individual, both in relation to others, and to the broader environment (Pini 44-46). Your practice of 'weathering' or finding a deeper connection across the senses and the environment echoes Min Tanaka's approach to dance: "When I dance, I don't dance in the place, but I am the place" (qtd. in Goodall 122). I find this view also resonates with Sarah Pink's approach to *emplacement*. Pink suggests that locating the performing body within a wider ecology can allow us to see it as an organism in relation to other organisms, thus recognising "both the specificity and intensity of the place event and its contingencies, but also the historicity of processes and their entanglements" (Pink 354). This form of 'emplacing' the senses and connecting to the weather allows the dancers to "learn to become attuned to what the weather of your [their] body is in any given moment, in any particular environment." In this way, "their experiences are not simply embodied, but part of a unique environment in progress which both shapes and is shaped by their actions" (344).

Pink reinterprets the notion of place and emplacement building on the work of the philosopher Edward Casey, who observed how the concept of place in Western philosophy is subordinate to the more abstract idea of 'space'. Casey challenged the idea that 'space' pre-exists a notion of 'place', and that place is more than an empirical reality people can go to and occupy. Space is often conceived of as 'empty', a space that pre-exists, where instead 'place' is understood merely as the meaningful occupation of it (see Casey). By calling for an embodiment and emplacement of the human subject

and stressing the connections that ground mind into matter—and bodies into places—theories of emplacement reinstate the primacy of ‘place’ over the more abstract and metaphysical concept of ‘space’. I think this approach to senses, bodies and environment emerging so vividly in your work has potential to offer alternative perspectives to hegemonic modes of seeing and experiencing the body on screen. As I have discussed elsewhere, it is in the broadening of an intentional focus to the surroundings, and in the alteration of the experience of time that allows for the cultivation – and transformation – of the ways participants can be-with what arises (Pini and Deans 8, see also Pini and Maguire-Rosier). I hope such an embodied, ecological and situated approach can offer interesting points of reflection to inspire more artistic explorations of the mutually informing relationships between moving image art and dancing bodies on screen.



Fig. 10: Lux Eterna. *AURA NOX ANIMA*. 2016. Video still.

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## Filmography

*AURA NOX ANIMA*. Directed by Lux Eterna [short film, 7:45 mins], Australia, 2016.

*THE EIGHTH DAY*. Directed by Lux Eterna [multi-channel dance video work currently in development], Australia, 2023.

Lux Eterna is a Sydney based interdisciplinary artist of Palestinian heritage, working across 2D/4D media forms underpinned by awareness and embodiment practices, decolonisation, authoring post-human & more-than-human futures. She is currently producing her next major video/dance work, out in Australia's central desert landscapes, to feature alongside a developing new body of contemporary drawings for her next major solo show at the Australian Embassy in D.C, USA in 2023. Lux's auto-portrait *Motherland, Here On In*, 2017 is touring several USA academic, arts and cultural institutions for an exhibition: *Inherit the Earth*, Mar - Oct, 2022; Venice Biennale 2022 and *ABAROMA* 2023.

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Sarah Pini is Associate Professor in dance and movement practices at the University of Southern Denmark (SDU). She works interdisciplinary across the fields of cultural and medical anthropology, phenomenology of the body and illness, arts and health, dance, and embodied cognition. Her work addresses notions of *presence*, *embodiment*, *agency* and *alterity* in different performance practices and cultural contexts. Sarah's research has been published in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Ballet*, *Collaborative Embodied Performance: Ecologies of Skill* (Bloomsbury), *Performance Research*, *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, *Synthese*, *The Journal of Embodied Research*, among others.

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