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# Religion in Austria

## Volume 7



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# **“Coming Home to Oneself through the Body”: The Holistic Dance Institute in Austria**

*Lukas K. Pokorny and Gabriella Voss*

## **1. Introduction**

A key premise of this article is that seekership (Sutcliffe 2017) is a core characteristic of a specific part of today's dance community. More precisely, many “movement practitioners” pursue personal transformation, a process that is often emically captured through the notion of “healing.” In this context, healing principally refers to the (gradual) liberation of the individual from behavioural and psychosomatic (or “spiritual”) constraints. Socio-economic and interpersonal pressures may thus be lifted culminating in the appreciation of the empowered self, being mindful of one's authenticity and existential interdependence. Dance in this respect has a soteriological dimension, which naturally makes it an area of interest for the Religious Studies scholar. In fact, the Religious Studies community has hitherto largely turned a blind eye to the wider subject of this article, mostly ignoring the related research (that is chiefly produced by practitioner-scholars) coming out of Dance Studies (cf. LaMothe 2018: 63–67).

Another hypothesis is that the specific dance context under scrutiny carries a strong family resemblance with the alternative religious milieu. We would even argue that it is effectively part of the holistic field. Besides the transformational agenda, many variables are frequently to be found, such as a charismatic teacher, a dedicated followership cherishing a seeker mentality, a distinct religiously laden terminology, and specific spatial arrangements. While this article does not attempt to explore these aspects systematically and exhaustively (or investigate the validity of the overall hypothesis), it does contribute a much needed first data collection through the case of the Holistic Dance Institute founded and operated by Sabine Parzer (b. 1971). More case studies shall follow and hence an increasingly reliable and convincing set of data will be established.

We chose the Holistic Dance Institute as the first case study for several reasons. First, it is an easily accessible and active organisational entity that

garnered visibility in the dance community. Second, it mainly operates in Vienna and its vicinity. Third, its very identity is based on bringing together various major movement disciplines with the aim to harness their concerted transformational effects for the practitioners. By drawing on one particular case study (Holistic Dance Institute), it allows us to actually outline several traditions (feeding into the former) at once.

This article comprises three main sections. In the following section, the three chief movement disciplines employed by Parzer for her concept of Holistic Dance are introduced with an additional glimpse at the Austrian situation. Section Three addresses the foundress, the Institute, and the idea of Holistic Dance. Section Four starts with an outline of Holistic Dance in practice before turning to an autoethnographic account informed through two workshop participations in 2021 and 2022. The last part provides four representative vignettes of Holistic Dance practitioners. Finally, Section Five contains some brief concluding remarks.

## 2. Context

Holistic Dance is a methodological toolbox. That is, Parzer creatively employs (or assigns her co-teachers to do so) and altogether orchestrates a range of forms/methods to meet transformational ends. This section briefly introduces the three guiding practices of Holistic Dance, namely, Somatics, Contact Improvisation, and Authentic Movement. Lastly, a quick glance is cast at the Austrian context of these disciplines.

### 2.1. Somatics

Frederick Matthias Alexander (1869–1955), Rudolf von Laban (1879–1958), Ida Rolf (1896–1979), Moshé Feldenkrais (1904–1984), and Milton Trager (1909–1989) can presumably be regarded the most pre-eminent pioneers in the field of Somatics—often referred to as “self-awareness through movement”—whose methods are still widely practised. The term “Somatics” was coined as recently as 1970 by the philosopher-cum-movement theorist Thomas Hanna (1928–1990), who propagated a common string of “evolutionary-revolutionary” thought in the writings of Charles Darwin (1809–1882), Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), Konrad Lorenz (1903–1989), Jean Piaget (1896–1980), and Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957) (Hanna 1970: 51–137). Hanna states

that “[s]omas are the kind of living, organic being which you are at *this* moment, in *this* place where you are. Soma is everything that is you, pulsing within your fragile, changing, growing and dying membrane that has been chopped off from the umbilical cord which lined you [...] with millions of years of organic genetic history within this cosmos” (ibid.: 35–36). The discovery of this “innate intelligence,” stored in the soma of all sentient beings—stretching from the protozoan to the homo sapiens—is thus, according to Hanna, the leitmotif of the five eminent scientists mentioned above: “Every man, every animal is born into this earthly environment already armed with a somatic wisdom encoded neurophysiologically into its living body” (ibid.: 99). Neurobiological research would affirm the claim that soma “designates the elusive body of the precognitive self” and refers to the “cellular, watery, organic state of the body” (Fraleigh 2015: xxi). Among the first generation of somatic pioneers dedicated to somatic human movement five core processes can be identified: “slowing down to feel, breath and relaxation, releasing into gravity, three-dimensional use of space, and new coordination/awareness” (Eddy, Williamson, and Weber 2014: 161). In contemporary dance and movement education, somatic experiences are commonly regarded as having “the potential to extend consciousness and transform lives” (Fraleigh 2015: xiv), further enabling an extended cross-fertilisation between Somatics and New Age spirituality, where “the supernatural force is located within the self” (Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2013: 21). Along with a rekindled interest in non-Western/pre-modern cultures, it is argued that “[d]eep-body listening, as cultivated through somatic awareness, can lend itself to spiritual ‘awakenings’ and experiences of greatness from within if one chooses to listen and observe soma closely” (Eddy, Williamson, and Weber 2014: 178). Somatic methods reportedly also “potentially [disrupt] patriarchy and patriarchal symbols by repositioning the body as a locus of spiritual authority, and [...] by advocating for the senses as a reliable source of spiritual wisdom” (ibid.: 170). To practitioners, somatic movement education may also “foster a richer sense of authority and agency in a person” (Schwartz 2014: 315) as the individual is encouraged to re-validate experiential knowledge. Apart from the usage within the dance context (re-patterning of movements, explorations of self-awareness, self-regulation), somatic modes currently incorporate “community programs for youths at risk, movement for recovery from addiction, and trauma recovery” (Fraleigh 2015: xx)—and the field of application is currently ever-expanding.

## 2.2. Contact Improvisation

The US-American dancer and choreographer Steve Paxton (b. 1939) developed Contact Improvisation with fellow dancers—inter alia, Daniel Lepkoff, Nita Little, Lisa Nelson, Nancy Stark Smith (1952–2020), and Ray Chung (b. 1952)—in a socio-cultural setting characterised by community living, egalitarianism, and artistic experimentation. The dance piece “Magnesium” (1972) investigated “extremes of physical disorientation” (Novack 1990: 64) where dancers in pairs executed risky falls and hurls, followed by the so-called “small dance”—that is, a minute attentiveness to tiny bodily impulses while standing still on two feet—marked the birth-hour of the form. As implied in the name “Contact Improvisation,” the dance was never based on a set vocabulary but, since its beginning, it has been understood as a kind of research project, developing itself through experimentation. The early years were influenced by the zeitgeist lingering on from the 1960s: performances were often carried out in museums, galleries, and university campuses by ad hoc ensembles without any directives or given trajectories, with “athleticism, risk-taking and extensive touching” (Novack 1990: 73) being at the core of this “touch revolution” (Schaffman 2001).

As Contact Improvisation evolved, pair-work extended to trios or larger formations, investigating the non-intentional touch. Generally, in Contact Improvisation touch can be understood on three levels: as a means to movement, to establish communication, or to give impulses. Based on principles from martial arts (predominantly Aikidō), considering the body as “responsive” and “intelligent” with the capacity to “think faster than the mind,” Contact Improvisation was part of a broader “counter-culture concerned with the exploration of consciousness” (Little 2014: 21). Different spiritual practices (e.g., meditation, tǎijǐ, and Zen Buddhism) were combined with somatic research in order to foster the “bodymind”<sup>1</sup> and develop an understanding of the concept of “controlled abandon,” referring to “a state of release aligning with gravity” (ibid.: 215; see also Barrero González 2019). Striving for a

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1 “Bodymind” is a concept often used by scholar-practitioners (e.g., dance, meditation, and martial arts) referring to the experience of the body and the mind as constituting one inseparable single unit. The co-founder of Contact Improvisation states that “[t]here is an upwelling within the sciences and the humanities to acknowledge the bodymind” (Little 2014: 11), that “there is no ‘everyday’ mind, there are only less trained or culturally trained bodyminds. [...] when one begins to have a unique or trained bodymind, a divergence occurs in social experience. Attentional flexibility, experiential breadth and range, the force of an embodied mind that meets the world energetically and enactively holds real/life experience differently” (ibid.: 14).

dance “starting from within” focusing on the “felt sensation” instead of aiming for a given aesthetics, contact improvisers were oblivious of the audience in their extensive experimentations with weight, speed, rolling, and touch, breaking “the barrier between dance performance as presentational [...] and dance performance as exploration, investigation and play” (Little 2014: 24; see also Kimmel, Hristova, and Kussmaul 2018). Although focus on momentum, gravity, rolls, and the “little dance” remained central, the 1980s brought more fluid, soft, and controlled movements into play, whereas the initial idea to offer Contact Improvisation as a performance for an audience waned.

In line with the inclusiveness and communal spirit of the form, Paxton dismissed various “policing initiatives” or ideas of creating a trademark around Contact Improvisation, which has left the form genuinely open: anyone can teach and share it without specific credentials, and non-professionals can join professionals to joyfully explore (although—for practical reasons—sometimes training is divided into groups according to proficiency). This has allowed for Contact Improvisation to maintain a rather unique vitality on a highly international scale: although touch, weight distribution, rhythm, and speed are at the core of the “jams” (dance sessions), heated debates regarding the right code of conduct during the jams—and also beyond the dance floor—continue to shape and influence the shared practice.<sup>2</sup> The most controversial issues focus on gender, identity, and safety (negotiations of the appropriate touch) to also include broader concerns of health and self-sustainability (awareness, discovery, responsibility) in an economically and ecologically destructive world. Contact Improvisation can thus be understood as an exploratory dance form which investigates and challenges a variety of inter- and intrapersonal boundaries, with the ultimate aim to transcend the ones regarded as limitations to “personal growth,” both within and outside of the dance context. Trying to find a balance between the individual and the egalitarian aspects of Contact Improvisation, “personal growth” also refers to the further development of a “responsive body” represented through “honesty, reality, spirituality, and the suppression of selfish, egotistical striving” (Novack 1990: 186).

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<sup>2</sup> The first *Contact Newsletter* was distributed in April 1975 and turned into the magazine *Contact Quarterly* in 1976 (Novack 1990: 81). After more than forty-five years, the magazine is still actively providing a platform for dancers and educators to share and discuss their work and current ideas. See <https://contactquarterly.com/> (accessed: March 15, 2022).

### 2.3. Authentic Movement

Authentic Movement goes back to the dance therapist Mary Starks Whitehouse (1911–1979), a disciple of the modern dance pioneers Martha Graham (1894–1991) and Mary Wigman (1886–1973). A lay Jungian analyst (even studying for a time at the Jung Institute in Zurich), Whitehouse sought to employ dance qua “active imagination” in line with Carl Gustav Jung’s (1875–1961) aim to tap the unconscious and translate it into reality (Whitehouse 1999). Accordingly, Whitehouse devised Movement in Depth in the 1950s (later to be called Authentic Movement) to effect self-realisation based on the assumed transformative potential of one’s “bodily consciousness.” Unsurprisingly, Whitehouse was a frequent guest teacher at the Esalen Institute, the Californian hub of the Human Potential Movement, in the 1960s and 1970s. Her chief disciples, Janet Adler (b. 1941) and Joan Chodorow (b. 1937), developed the practice further. Whereas Chodorow—a Jungian analyst-cum-dance therapist and former president of the American Dance Therapy Association (1974–1976)—theoretically expanded the form drawing heavily on Jung (Chodorow 1991) and calling it Active Imagination in Movement, Adler—a Ph.D. in Mysticism (Union Institute, 1992), dance therapist, and founder of the first standalone Authentic Movement school (i.e., the Mary Starks Whitehouse Institute in Northampton, Massachusetts, operating from 1981 to 1985)—stressed its religio-mystical dimension (Adler 2002; Haze and Stromsted 1994). Their disciple and presently chief representative of Authentic Movement is the Jungian analyst and dance/movement therapist Tina Stromsted. She distinguishes three areas of application: Authentic Movement as a form of psychotherapy, an instrument of artistic expression, and meditation or “sacred dance” (Stromsted 1999). Today, numerous hybrid or “extended” practices exist that employ Authentic Movement at their core, such as Parzer’s Authentic Movement Plus.

The basic or “ground form” of Authentic Movement consists of the dyad, namely, the mover (*Bewegende*) and the witness (*Zeugin*). With eyes closed, the mover naturally responds to “body-felt sensations, emotions, memories, movement impulses, and/or images” expressed through spontaneous and non-stylised movement (and stillness). This is focusedly observed by the witness, who “provides a safe, contained, and receptive presence, maintaining an awareness of her mover’s bodily expression as well as her own embodied experience” (Stromsted 2009: 202). Once the predefined time slot of the dyad (ranging between ten and twenty minutes for beginners) has come to an end, the mover and the witness engage in a joint verbal reflection of what has been intimately perceived. The self-directed sequence of movements is understood

as the “surrender to one’s inner listening” (Musicant 1994: 93), the embodiment of one’s unconscious—thus being one’s “authentic movement”—which might lead the mover to experience transcendence, that is, “transformative shifts, as the boundaries of time and space, ‘self’ and ‘other’ begin to soften, allowing for the possibility of experiencing a sense of union, and a profound participation in the larger resonant field or life force” (Stromsted 2009: 202). Likewise, according to Adler, “[t]he witness practices the art of seeing” (1996: 86), which means that while internalising the mover’s bodily dynamic and expressive state, the witness might establish spiritual resonance sharing in the mystical transformation. The ground form may be variously extended to a group setting with one witnessing several movers or—as promoted by Adler—the collective fluidly, and interchangeably becoming movers or witnesses. Such could create a “soundscape and kinaesthetic landscape, constantly responding and contributing to collective needs as they unfold,” out of which a wide range of emotionally enacted “choreographies” might arise, a “collective body” (Goldhahn 2007: 28) that spiritually “heals” (or elevates) its individual parts. Ultimately, Stromsted takes Authentic Movement as a means to “embodied experiences of the sacred,” which potentially also has a wide-ranging impact upon one’s ecological and socio-political self-positioning in the world (Stromsted 2009: 210).

## 2.4. Some Notes on the Situation in Austria

Promoted for its capacities to “re-educate the nervous system,” somatic work is currently expanding into different areas where healing modalities are being used. In Austria these areas include clinical medicine (alleviation of pain), trauma-prevention (both physical and psychological), and spiritually inclined “awareness practices.” Numerous providers can be found throughout the country and figures are still on the rise.

The first steps of Contact Improvisation in Austria took place in the mid-1980s,<sup>3</sup> and there are currently numerous venues throughout the country where Contact Improvisation can be practised (weekly trainings, jams, workshops, and retreats).<sup>4</sup>

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3 Inge Kaindstorfer (b. 1963) brought Contact Improvisation to Austria upon completing her dance education in New York in the mid-1980s (Personal Communication with Kaindstorfer on April 7, 2022). The dancer and choreographer Sebastian Prantl (b. 1960) and the choreographer Willi Dörner (b. 1959) were also among the first persons to teach Contact Improvisation in Austria.

4 See, for example, <https://vienna.contactimprovisation.at> (accessed: June 6, 2022).

Reportedly, Authentic Movement was part of dance therapy education in Vienna in the early 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Hannah Folberth-Reinprecht (b. 1957) also followed the educational programme—taught by the US-American Cary Rick—from 1988 onwards. In 1994, Folberth-Reinprecht learned Authentic Movement through Janet Adler in Italy, and subsequently taught it at the renowned yearly Viennese dance festival ImPulsTanz (from its inception in 1984 until 2000 named International Dance Weeks Vienna) and has ever since continued to teach the practice in Vienna (Personal Communication with Folberth-Reinprecht on May 29, 2022). Currently, Authentic Movement is predominantly taught in Vienna and Graz. Commonly, the practice takes place during three-day workshops, taught by professionals with background either in the fields of psychotherapy, psychology, and psychoanalysis or in movement pedagogy (dance or somatics).<sup>6</sup>

### 3. The Holistic Dance Institute

#### 3.1. Foundress

Born into a Catholic family in the “concrete jungle”—“literally without a single tree to climb”—of Vienna’s tenth district Favoriten, Sabine Parzer discovered her love and talent for dancing at an early age (Interview on May 27, 2021). At the age of fifteen, regular dance classes served her as a refuge from a stifling environment, and in her later teens she left Europe for modern (now called contemporary) dance education at Columbia College in Chicago where she learned the techniques of Merce Cunningham (1919–2009), Martha Graham (1894–1991), Lester Horton (1906–1953), and José Limón (1908–1972)—as well as ballet and the Klein technique<sup>7</sup> through Barbara Mahler.

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<sup>5</sup> The German “Langen Institut Monheim” had its first international branch in Vienna (now discontinued), where Authentic Movement was part of the curriculum at least in some of the years between 1992 and 1996 (Personal Communication with Helga Schimmedberger on January 4, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> To this day, a chief Vienna-based provider is Clarissa Costa (b. 1957), who was practising (and later also teaching) Authentic Movement on a monthly basis between 2000 and 2010, making her one of the few protagonists in the field to practise and teach with a set peer-group over many years (Interview with Costa on January 4, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> After a severe injury at the age of nineteen, Susan Klein (b. 1949) started developing her own somatic technique, focusing on healing and general injury prevention through correct body alignment.



Upon completion of her Bachelor of Arts, she worked some years as a professional dancer in New York. Deeply influenced by an encounter with a Hopi Indian inspired healer,<sup>8</sup> as well as the work of Stephen Yoshen at Earth Dance,<sup>9</sup> she began questioning her profession, which she deemed to be characterised by competition, strenuous work (often followed by physical injuries), and solitude in an urban studio setting. Hence, she returned to Austria—where she gave birth to two children—and started working as a body therapist at the Allgemeine Unfallsversicherungsanstalt “Weißer Hof,” a rehabilitation centre in Klosterneuburg, Lower Austria, for the following fourteen years (ibid.). Specialised in post-traumatic stress disorder, the rehabilitation centre offered Parzer ample opportunities to “develop a very intuitive sense of what people learning therapeutic tools on their way might need,” thus using a “counselling, systemic way of looking at people” (Parzer 2021). The process of “learning through doing” also helped Parzer to reconsider the essence of dancing, the intrinsic value of movement—and how it is ultimately connected to healing, as “moving, touch, taking a conscious breath *is* healing” and available to everybody, even paralysed individuals, as “we can all find our energetic path” (ibid.). While working as a body therapist, Parzer was also highly engaged in dance as a performer, teacher, and organiser (e.g., she was the artistic director and founder of Contact Festival Austria from 2012 to 2017) and in 2010 she founded what was later to be called the “Holistic Dance Institute,” partially influenced by the “US-inspired attitude ‘I can do it’—create my own method” (ibid.). Although never addressed within the context of the Holistic Dance Institute, Parzer is a Tibetan Buddhist practitioner of the Karma Kagyu lineage and recognises a variety of aspects where Buddhist

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8 This healer reportedly conducted a kind of “Rolfing” based on Ida Rolf (see Section 2.1), referring to a very deep tissue work, which made Sabine “changing trajectory from being a dancer to becoming an investigator beyond this personal cause” (Parzer 2020b).

9 Based in western Massachusetts, Earthdance “was a community [...] founded by contacters [...] and it is located in the middle of a forest and many of the contacters also lived there or in the surroundings. For instance, Nancy Stark Smith, one of the co-founders and key persons for the further development of CI [...]. It was a hub of contacters and I had my first experience of Authentic Movement there, outdoors, in nature and it was, it was an igniting spark [...]. I think that essentially this experience was so formative that it became clear that work is also involved with nature” (“ist eine Kommune gewesen [...] von Contactern gegründet [...] und es liegt mitten im Wald und vielen von den Contactern haben dann eben auch dort gewohnt oder rund herum gewohnt. Zum Beispiel Nancy Stark Smith, eine Mitbegründerin und Schlüsselperson in der weitere Entwicklung von CI. [...] Es war so einen Hub of Contacters und ich habe damals das erste Mal Authentic Movement erlebt und dann gleich in der Natur draußen und das war, das war so eine Initialzündung [...]. Ich glaube im Kern war diese Erfahrung einfach so prägend, dass es klar war, dass es auch um die Arbeit mit der Natur geht”) (Interview on May 27, 2021).

thought and practice influence her work. Regarding the Tibetan Buddhism as life-affirming, Parzer appreciates its “tangible qualities” and the “inner colourfulness” which is “ultimately very tantric, not directly related to sexuality but to energy, to the union of opposing qualities. Buddhism is just as essential for me as dance, as work in nature. I don’t talk about it, I am not a Buddhist teacher. It is my core, my core practice, it is my meditation—and it is also my inner alignment and orientation” (Interview on May 27, 2021).<sup>10</sup> Dance improvisation could also be understood as “the best pre-meditative or pre-Buddhist practice” as “there are *a lot* of Buddhist values in improvisation, to be present in the given moment, sympathetic, non-judgmental, also the listening skills, a lot of mindfulness aspects, and also the union of opposites”<sup>11</sup>(*ibid.*). Parzer also finds a connection between her own work and the fundamental principles of (Tibetan) Buddhism within: the energetic dimension, expressiveness, need of discipline, attentiveness, and focus—as well as in the interplay between structure and freedom. Being a single mother for the last decade, she realised that “clarity and structure enables the free space” (Parzer 2021), thus the creation of efficient structures has been key in her life, both professionally and personally. Another area where Buddhism is particularly visible for her is within meditation: “a deeper meditation practice means clarity in the process of witnessing” (referring to Authentic Movement; Interview on May 27, 2021).<sup>12</sup>

### 3.2. History

The concept of the Holistic Dance Institute was reportedly born on a train ride between Zagreb and Vienna in 2010. After giving workshops in Croatia for some years, Parzer was asked where students could continue and deepen

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10 “sehr tantrisch letztendlich [...] nicht direkt mit der Sexualität [...] sondern mit der Energie mit dieser Vereinigung von gegensätzlichen Qualitäten. Ja, der Buddhismus hat mich, es ist einfach genauso ein Kern wie, wie der Tanz, wie die Arbeit in der Natur. Ich spreche nicht so viel darüber weil ich, ich bin keine buddhistische Lehrerin. Es ist mein Kern, meine Kernpraxis, ja es ist meine Meditation aber es ist genauso sozusagen im Inneren drinnen meine Ausrichtung.”

11 “Eigentlich ist Improvisation die beste pre-meditative oder pre-Buddhist practice, also *ganz* viel von buddhistischen Werten sind in der Improvisation präsent ja, also im Moment sein, mitfühlend sein, nicht wertend zu sein, auch das Zuhören – ganz viel von dieser Achtsamkeit die da – aber auch die, die Verbindung von Gegensätzen.”

12 “Je tiefer die Meditationspraxis ist, umso tiefer sitze ich auch im Prozess des Bezeugens.”

the kind of training she was offering (combining body work,<sup>13</sup> Contact Improvisation, Authentic Movement, Somatics,<sup>14</sup> and applied anatomy<sup>15</sup>), upon which she realised that there was no such place, apart from a slight chance to learn something similar in San Francisco, USA. Parzer thus instantly decided to establish an Institute—integrating both the quality of education and research—while also enabling her to give the method a proper name and certify her students upon completed education. The “Holistic Dance Teachers Training Program” has essentially remained intact since its inception in 2010 and constitutes the core of the Holistic Dance Institute. The programme includes ten modules within eighteen months (thirty-two days of training) and approaches dance from a “therapeutic, healing context,” enabling “individual transformation through dance, movement, and touch.”<sup>16</sup> There are neither professional prerequisites nor age limits; however, all students are required to have at least one year of experience in conscious movement practice. The training programme is directed towards people working in creative, therapeutic, pedagogical, social, and medical fields, focusing on development related to embodiment. An increased capacity to notice inner impulses, enhanced mindfulness in face-to-face encounters, while also strengthening the individual expression through dance are regarded as key elements. In Parzer’s understanding, embodiment can be seen in a triangular relationship with transformation and healing, where all aspects influence and shape each other. Embodiment “is about a practice (yoga, contact jam, or training) [and] lives off the manifestation within our daily life. It is something that we need in our western daily lives in order to feel centred” (Parzer 2020a). As transformation is often triggered by major life events, or “moments of condensation”—such as loss, divorce, and crisis—having embodied practices in our daily lives help us reconnect (to nature; own body; “self”; soma; world) and will enhance our abilities to heal, which is “the all-encompassing goal [...] what we are all

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13 In Parzer’s repertoire, “body work” refers to different kinds of work with or on the body (e.g., giving or receiving massage), which can be separated from Somatics, as it is neither proprioceptive nor does it necessarily include the introspection that is essential to all somatic work.

14 Since the Croatian workshops, Parzer has steadily expanded her repertoire and refined her ideas, also with a view to “dance in nature,” which is now to be found within the context of what she calls “eco-Somatics.”

15 Applied anatomy refers to theoretical sessions where specific anatomical functions (e.g., fascia, hip joints, lumbar spine) are explained—sometimes accompanied by a plastic skeleton for better display—which is then followed by a practical session. Commonly, in the practical session the practitioners are working in pairs to experiment with the anatomy in focus (e.g., how the fascia moves, the hip joints rotate, or the lumbar spine influences movement throughout the body).

16 See <https://www.holistic-dance.at/> (accessed: March 3, 2021).

aiming for. A highly individual process” (ibid.). Learning “how to connect to the body on a deeper level gives us so many tools” which are not limited to dance but can be regarded as foundation for professionalism in a variety of occupations. Many students in the past years came to the Holistic Dance Institute from a “verbal based” background (counselling, psychotherapy, or other forms of therapy) wishing to learn more about a “physical form of introspection.” Parzer further firmly believes that “you will sell yourself much more efficiently if you own your experience” (Parzer 2021). Embodiment also means “a way of creating peace,” which can also encompass a spiritual dimension “re-connecting to our self, others, the world” and generally foster “a more compassionate way to navigate through life” (ibid.). The teachers training year groups generally consist of twenty-two to twenty-five individuals, women being in the majority commonly about eighty per cent of the participants.<sup>17</sup> With growing popularity, the Holistic Dance Institute has expanded and currently includes: single “somatic body work” sessions with Parzer (visionary craniosacral work<sup>18</sup> and body work<sup>19</sup>) as well as open workshops—typically lasting between three and six days—in the field of embodiment (e.g., “radically intimate,” “natural body in depth,” “formless archetypes,” “authentic beings,” “anatomy of touch”). There are two further educational programmes: embodiment training and advanced teachers track, both intended for individuals who wish to deepen their practice upon completion of their teachers training.<sup>20</sup> Currently, the workshops and training sessions

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17 In February 2022, Parzer launched the fifteenth Teachers Training, and as of now (April 2022) approximately 350 persons have finished the programme. Apart from one programme in Croatia, one in Germany, and two in Russia, they have all taken place in Vienna or in its vicinity.

18 Developed by Hugh Milnes (b. 1948), “Visionary Craniosacral Work” aims to evolve Cranial Osteopathy (originally developed in the 1930s). The practitioners, who are also regarded as “visionaries,” have to be able not only to perceive the anatomical needs of the clients but also their “inner spiritual journeys, emotional states, and energy levels” (<https://milneinstitute.com/>; accessed: April 15, 2022).

19 Body work here refers to Systemic and Integrative Movement Theory (*Systemische und Integrative Bewegungslehre*), which combines the Feldenkrais method with “outcome-oriented, system-therapeutic methods” (<https://www.isib.org/>; accessed: May 4, 2022). The Feldenkrais method, devised by Moshé Feldenkrais, comprises two different approaches. The first one, “Awareness Through Movement,” consists of a teacher guiding a group of practitioners through slow movement sequences. The second one, “Functional Integration,” refers to a one-to-one (teacher and student) hands-on session. Through numerous repetitions of very tiny body movements, one is thought to be able to deepen his/her own body awareness and “liberate oneself from the narrow range of stereotypical movement patterns that we learn in our culture and to find a wider range of moving, and being” (Johnson 1995: 109).

20 See <https://www.holistic-dance.at/> (accessed: April 22, 2022).

are either held in the spacious Buddhist meditation centre Samdrubling—home to the International Dzogchen Community—in Vienna’s sixteenth district Ottakring, or in St. Andrä-Wördern, a small town in Lower Austria, located about thirty kilometres from Vienna.<sup>21</sup> Apart from serving a small group of Tibetan Buddhist devotees, Samdrubling offers a variety of dance, meditation, and yoga courses (which are not related to Buddhist practice) on a regular basis. The venue is popular possibly due to its atmosphere combining colourful elements (an entrance hall with a small library and tapestry, as well as a separate reading room) with elegance (bath and showers), practical amenities (kitchen with utensils and a changing room), and a bright 200m<sup>2</sup> room with floor heating and roof windows, as well as a second door, opening into a lush public playground. In the dance context, a workshop can be seen as a “mini-retreat,” a possibility (albeit a very short one) to step out of everyday life and experience something radically different, which makes the inviting atmosphere of the venue all the more important.

### 3.3. Holistic Dance

Built on the perception that any human can thrive substantially—if given the possibility to move and express him/herself beyond prescribed forms—“holistic dance” is not moulded around an *Urform*. Instead it is employed as a generic label variously assigned by dance teachers as their umbrella form, which draws from a range of dance styles and therapeutic tools that are uniquely and creatively merged to “assist people in experiencing and transforming the self through awareness relative to the living world, the environment, and others” (Fraleigh 2015: 5). Although there is no set framework of how holistic dance ought to be taught or performed, there are some core concepts in Parzer’s particular repertoire that are possibly universally shared. One element is the setting: the physical space has to be spacious (outdoors also being a possibility) yet safe, and psychologically the teacher will implicitly have the responsibility to create a free, “non-judgmental” atmosphere, where the practitioners—who have possibly never met before—ideally feel instantly liberated and invited to move as they please, peeling off inhibitions caused through outer/inner expectations or judgments. At its core, the holistic

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<sup>21</sup> Parzer lives in St. Andrä-Wördern, where she also built a yurt—serving both as facility for single sessions and accommodation for students staying overnight during the workshops.

concept naturally embraces embodiment understood as a “never quite finished” ongoing process, characterised through “mindful dynamic play” where individuals are “making and doing with attention to bodily experience” (ibid: 227). Drawing strongly from Jung’s philosophy (which has been particularly formative for Authentic Movement as described in Section 2.3), Parzer’s foundational key theme—which is also addressed throughout her teaching sessions—holds that “all the seeds for all of our potentials are already there, we just need to give it space and time to grow.” Breath, touch, and movement expressions give “everyone of us the space to grow into ourselves,” which would show that Holistic Dance is not about a technique, as it is “not adding anything,” but rather enabling “growth from the inside” (Workshop communication in 2021 and 2022).<sup>22</sup> As embodiment refers to reconnection—to the own body, other sentient beings, and nature—“ecology” would also have an important role, because “if I start sensing myself and my body as a living structure, I will realise that I am a part of nature and vice versa, which also results in a different ecological awareness because it is experienced” (Parzer 2021). Being somewhat at odds with ecology as seen from a natural science perspective, ecology is nevertheless often used in the dance context when referring to an extended spiritual and emphatical awareness, which might trigger a new responsibility for one’s own actions, both in a political and ecological sense.

[I]n the last couple of years, it has grown more central in my language [...], my political point of view towards dance and the body [...]. I don’t know if you know permaculture, but there are zones. Permaculture assumes that connections between the zones allow for sustainability, and in permaculture the body is the zero zone, that is *the* home that we have. We experience ourselves *in* this body *in* this world and we *are* nature, we are part of nature, and we need nature to survive, and even if the predominant element that I externalise is dance, is art, it also always has a political and an ecological dimension to work with the body. In the moment I am more attentive towards myself, in the moment I work with *breath*, with energy or body awareness, I work on being

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22 “Growth from the inside” reportedly refers to the conviction that all human beings already possess personal “inherent wisdom.” Through a process of introspection (e.g., using the elements provided though Holistic Dance), we may start tapping into this wisdom, which—unrestrained from cultural conditioning—can offer possibilities to “become our authentic selves.” These “authentic selves”—once woken from their sub-conscious, dormant state—can then allegedly take agency in the world. As “growth” in this sense can generally be translated into “agency,” there is also a socio-political dimension, because the “authentic self” would be less prone to accept compromises based on cultural conventions.

healthier, more efficient, more *aware*, and these are *all* aspects that we actually also need in ecological work (Interview on May 27, 2021).<sup>23</sup>

Charlene Spretnak (b. 1946) coined the term “ecological postmodernism” describing this conceptual and philosophical shift. “To be truly *postmodern* is to reject the discontinuity by opening the box to connect anew with our larger context: the Earth, the cosmos, the sacred whole” (Spretnak 1999: 66). Contrary to what Spretnak regards as (deconstructionist) postmodernist thought, namely, getting lost in socially constructed, fragmented, and relativistic conceptions of human experience, the “[e]cological postmodernism, then, replaces groundlessness with groundedness, supplanting freedom *from* nature with freedom *in* nature” acknowledging “our constitutive embeddedness in subtle bodily, ecological, and cosmological *processes*” (ibid.: 72–73). Key concepts in this ecological postmodernity strongly inform Parzer’s teaching: the overarching metanarrative is not related to personal salvation through external forces (God; science) but to “the cosmological unfolding”; reality is not regarded to be a social construction but a “dynamic relationship”; the sense of self is neither socially engineered nor fragmented, but “processual,” and rather than control over the body “trust in the body” is encouraged (ibid.). Parzer subscribes to Kimerer L. LaMothe when she states “[w]e don’t need freedom from the body; we need the freedom to become body [...]. With this freedom and health, we have a moral compass for creating life-affirming values and practices that remain faithful to the earth in us and around us” (LaMothe 2014: 147). Another element, also drawing on Jung’s philosophy in Parzer’s Holistic Dance vocabulary, is “shadow work.” If we recognise our own shadows (*Schatten*)—which are not necessarily “negative” but contain various aspects that we, consciously or unconsciously, suppress for a variety of reasons—we can allow suppressed emotions and expressions to emerge,

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23 “[i]n den letzten Jahren ist es mehr in meiner Sprache hineingerückt [...], meine politische Sichtweise dem Tanz gegenüber und dem Körper gegenüber [...]. Ich weiß nicht falls du die Permakultur kennst, aber die Permakultur lebt ja davon das Verbindungen gibt und Rückverbindungen, Nachhaltigkeit entsteht quasi auch aus der Verbindung der Zonen und in der Permakultur ist der Körper der Zone null ja, das ist *das* Zuhause, das wir haben. Wir erleben uns in diesem Körper auf dieser Welt und wir *sind* Natur, wir *sind* Teil von der Natur und wir brauchen die Natur um am Leben zu sein und auch wenn sozusagen das vorrangige Element, das ich nach außen trage jetzt der Ausdruck, der Tanz, die Kunst ist, ja denn ist es für mich noch immer auch eine politische Arbeit und eine ökologische Arbeit mit dem Körper zu arbeiten. In dem Moment wo ich achtsamer mit mir selber umgehe, in dem Moment wo ich mit dem *Atem* arbeite, oder mit *Energien* arbeite oder mit Körperwahrnehmung arbeite, arbeite ich daran gesünder zu werden effizienter zu werden, ahm, *bewusster* zu werden und das sind *alles* Aspekte die wir eigentlich in der ökologischen Arbeit auch brauchen.”

through which we could gain awareness and ultimately free ourselves from the burden they might cause us. Holistic Dance teachers profess these shadows as extending beyond the individual person, oftentimes containing somatically stored information from earlier family members, invoking memories of past traumas or distress. A teacher and facilitator of Holistic Dance must thus have appropriate training (in dance therapy or other relevant therapeutic fields) and adequate experience to deal with a variety of challenging situations that might arise related to shadow work within the dance context.<sup>24</sup>

## 4. Parzer's Holistic Dance in Practice

### 4.1. Tools

As introduced in Section Three, Parzer's version of Holistic Dance is predominantly built on applied anatomy, Authentic Movement, body work, Contact Improvisation, dance in nature, and Somatics. With these different experimental, practical, and theoretical elements, the dancers are meant to be presented with a variety of possibilities to explore, expand, and release their "bodyminds." On a physical level, this refers to a broader range of motion, more alertness, and refined listening skills; on a psychological level, a sensation of raised awareness, and mindfulness—sometimes even accompanied by "peak experiences" characterised through awe, gratitude, and unity. These experiences could thus be described as having spiritual qualities for the individuals involved. Holistic Dance practitioners also commonly express an urge to find a path to their own "life-affirming qualities," a wish that is often reported as being met at the end of a Holistic Dance workshop (Workshop communication in 2021 and 2022).

Parzer often initiates her movement sessions with a somatic exercise. Lying on the floor in stillness, the first step can be an invitation to "listen deeply" to the body. What does it need in this very moment? Which parts of the body could be invigorated through breath? Where do we feel light or heavy, and what does that mean (see Figure 1)? As a second step, the participants will then be guided through an exercise (e.g., based on Feldenkrais) lasting for

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24 In Parzer's understanding, psychoanalysts of the 1970s "gave up on the integration of the shadow," a tendency that lingered on for decades. However, now shadow work has regained recognition, and Parzer regards Verena Kast (b. 1943), Professor of Psychology at the University of Zurich and lecturer at the C.G. Jung Institute, as an important figure for this development.



twenty to thirty minutes, which might eventually transform into a more dynamic dance, as the participants had enough time to search and find a deeper connection to their own movement language. At the core of somatic processes, especially if they last for an extended period of time (in workshop settings from three to seven days, in teachers trainings over many months) there is a lingering aspiration to discover “the concept of the liminal [...]. In the disruption of the habitual, we open to newness. In the state of newness, we can enter the ‘beginners mind’ (a Buddhist concept) or perceive the world as if we were a baby (e.g., opening to innocence; of Christ consciousness)” (Eddy, Williamson, and Weber 2014: 174). In the search for “wholeness and the transcendent” (ibid.) within the somatic field, spirituality is detected as an “*active and ongoing* process that not only seeks out the sacred but maintains and even changes in one’s life” which is “*unlimited* in its experience [...] accessible in all aspects of life”, as well as “*pragmatic*” and “*emotional*, connecting individuals to their lived environments in deeply affective ways” (Stanczak 2006: 5, original emphasis).

Contact Improvisation is another essential element within Holistic Dance. However, due to the immensity of the (often unexpected) emotional register activated through touch, Parzer is well aware of the immanent risks related to the form. When does touch serve as a healing tool and when does it perpetuate trauma? And how can that be negotiated? Parzer says we can clearly discern “clean” pain (e.g., such as experienced in Rolfing or body work) from a “dirty” pain, which is intentionally caused (Parzer 2021). However, this is not easily translatable into the field of touch in Contact Improvisation, as intentions might not be entirely clear, either to the “giver” or to the “receiver.” Since 2000, when the Contact Improvisation community started taking action based on the awareness that many women did not feel entirely safe when dancing, there have been different approaches for how to solve this problem in practice. Recognising that a Contact Improvisation jam session is “a collective pool of energies” as the dancers “collectively create the space and share the responsibility,” Parzer steps in to co-create this responsibility, offering a slightly altered form of Contact Improvisation, which she calls “integrative.” Integrative Contact Improvisation includes no acrobatics and only a few technique skills to instead focus more on grounding, Body-Mind Centering,<sup>25</sup> and ATM (Awareness Through Movement) (Workshop Communication in 2022). It thus also refers to a more embodied “entering process” into

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25 Developed in 1973 by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen (b. 1941), Body-Mind Centering is an experimental embodiment study including movement, touch, voice, and mind.

the dance: oftentimes pair work is carried out, establishing qualities of confidence and touch, which enables a safe and smooth transition into the improvisation. Inviting the students to move from the inner impulses, certain skills, such as rolling points, weight sharing, centring, supporting, lifting, and flying will also be gradually introduced.

As Contact Improvisation is meant to help refining the quality of “deep listening” through the skin, it sometimes develops into a choreographic score, opening up for unison group experience, playing with a spontaneous shared rhythm which might even allow for a short tilt towards so-called “ecological dancing.”

To consider dancing ecologically we will be shifting our experiential scale in both time and space. [...] There is an elastic aspect to this present moment [...] like the wake of a ship moving through water. [...] We can “be,” as in “experience,” the size of the whole ship [...] we can also be the size of the ship and its motion in the water, which is a more fully embodied experience. [...] It is an ecological practice to experience the ship and its waters, not to separate the “we” that experiences this moment from the multiple events of our making (Little 2014: 17).

The “ecology” of dancing as described above refers to a kind of “holistic shift,” an awareness that the contours of the self—in specific situations of heightened susceptibility—may actually seem negotiable.

When Parzer talks about “eco-somatic” awareness she refers to dance in nature (see Figure 2), where “the depth and intelligence of our bodies, alone with a partner, with the group in nature” is investigated (Interview on May 27, 2021). This is celebrated as the culmination of the teachers training through five days seclusion in nature. Combined with a group ritual, where the participants create a “full circle,” everybody is given the opportunity to share comments, thoughts, or feelings that have emerged during the programme. As writing and drawing are regarded as important supportive elements during the programme, all participants keep their own diaries. Dancing in nature (sometimes with eyes closed) might mean applying full body contact with trees (leaves, bark, branches) and the soil, but could also refer to sitting in stillness, listening to the outer sounds (of birds), or the inner senses of the body. There are no rules how to interact in space; every individual is free to give and take what they find necessary or useful. Parzer states that this “move with introspection” is one of the core healing aspects, the allowance *just to be*, to exist in this world, without duties and expectations.

A further key element of Holistic Dance is Authentic Movement, in Parzer’s version referred to as Authentic Movement Plus, including a physical

preparation (somatics or body work) as well as further preparation (e.g., verbal input, reminding the practitioners of individual demarcation, if necessary, as well as the self-responsibility to move towards the “nurturing aspects.”<sup>26</sup> Creating pairs, a time is set (the first session normally lasts fifteen minutes) where one person from each pair—that is, the mover—enters the circle, eyes closed. Moving spontaneously “from a bodily impulse, trusting the body’s wisdom” the other person—that is, the witness—benignly observes. The soft sound of a gong calls the session to an end, whereupon a conversation about what has been experienced within the past fifteen minutes takes place. It is important to talk from the “first person”—that is the “I” perspective (“I saw you raise your hand”; “I felt as if you might be sad”) in order to eliminate assumptions and also increase general awareness of how we carry out conversations in our personal lives. Authentic Movement is regarded as a self-explorative, meaning-making practice to “cultivate presence, heighten insight, and build self-esteem.” Parzer claims that her version of Authentic Movement—namely, Authentic Movement Plus—facilitates the entering process as the body has been physically prepared through somatic exercises or body work.

Through basic anatomy and body work (based on Systemic and Integrative Movement Theory), Parzer explains some theoretical concepts while also showing the exercises with the help of a student (see Figure 3). Pair work is generally used with focus on awareness, breath, and somatics in order to help one’s “bodymind” as it enters into a deeper state of relaxation.

## 4.2. Workshop: Autoethnographic Reflections

The following section aims to recount personal experiences from two different workshops with Parzer. In terms of structure, setting, and execution they are both representative of the large number of workshops offered by the Holistic Dance Institute.

During the week of Catholic and Protestant Easter celebrations (March 31 to April 5) in 2021, Parzer was leading a six-day workshop in the Buddhist meditation centre Samdrubling (Friedrich-Kaiser-Gasse 74, 1160 Vienna).<sup>27</sup> The workshop “Dancing (Em)Body Transform” was open to “everyone with

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<sup>26</sup> Parzer underlines that we should work “das Heilsame zu vermehren” (to augment the wholesome), instead of “die Neurosen der Kunst nachgehen” (following the neurosis of the arts). When we have the choice, we should embrace the “nurturing aspects,” thus choose what feels grounding and beneficial for our own health and wellbeing.

<sup>27</sup> See <https://www.samdrubling.at> (accessed: May 5, 2022).

basic movement and contact experience” while also serving as a module within the Holistic Dance Embodiment Training.<sup>28</sup> In the past, Parzer used to teach alone, but since a few years her wish to invite other colleagues to co-teach is continuously growing (Interview on May 27, 2021). Due to the pandemic, Alicia Grayson<sup>29</sup>—a long term friend and colleague of Parzer from Colorado, USA—could not be physically present but instead co-taught via ZOOM at this workshop, aiming to “open a space for healing and nurturing the unseen, unknown and secret places within the self” using dance and related techniques “to let the bodies speak, to physicalise content, and to embody wisdom from within. Moving toward a full range of humanness is a primary (conscious or unconscious) aim in all of us.”<sup>30</sup>

Emotionally touched by the numerous participants—twelve women and two men (between twenty-five and fifty years old) were present despite the challenging socio-political situation—Parzer conveyed that the chosen dates did indeed bear a significance, inviting the workshop participants to consider the multiple layers of transformation, connected to spring-time in nature, as well as death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Seated on cushions in a circle, fresh flowers being placed in the middle, we made an introductory round, followed by a warm-up session to find spaciousness in the body. After a short break, trios were created with the intention to move as a single body, without anyone leading. This exercise was very likely also carried out as a way to perceive how we were able to interact despite current COVID-19 regulations. Had the general uneasiness also taken hold of our bodies? Would practitioners need more space to feel secure? Would this inhibit, or at least alter, our abilities to move in unison? Would some individuals choose to wear a mask when dancing?<sup>31</sup> In the common space, however, all these precautions evaporated as everybody seemed to internalise the essence of the workshop (which was also the topic the following afternoon), namely “coming home to oneself through the body.”

Changing into couples, we opened up the space between us, yet we were able to feel a bond, a kind of “energy cord” linked to the partner, despite the twenty-five metres of distance between us. In the afternoon, we had a first encounter with Grayson, discussing the so-called “Shared Commitments” for

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28 Educational programmes were allowed to be carried out *in situ* despite the total lockdown and dusk-to-dawn curfew imposed in Vienna, Upper Austria, and Burgenland as a consequence of politics related to the COVID-19 pandemic. All programmes (with just a few online replacements) could effectively take place because the Holistic Dance Institute formally offers educational training.

29 <https://www.aliciagrayson.com/> (accessed: May 5, 2022).

30 <https://www.holistic-dance.at/> (accessed: March 20, 2021).

31 FFP2 masks were mandatory in all spaces of Sambrubling apart from the main room.

the following days. Stressing our individual contributions to a greater purpose, the Shared Commitments felt associatively close to the biblical Ten Commandments, and asked us to "create a safe container to support optimal growth," committing to "not being a victim and not blaming," raising up to a "greater awareness and empowerment in the face of challenges," in "celebration and amplification of power and creativity of the others," all strung together through mutual confidentiality.<sup>32</sup> Grayson invited us to see our "bodies as our temple," and reflect on the posed questions individually (e.g., what does "coming home to my body" mean? What would it feel like to change—for instance, career or partnership—and how would this change my body?), either through writing or drawing, which was followed by somatically inspired directed movements.

The following morning session—starting seated in a circle in fifteen minutes of silence—was followed by Parzer's request to show an individual spontaneous clear body movement, without complexity (as it weakens the message/strength/agency of the movement). There was no time to reflect or be self-critical because the movement might seem "weak" or "boring." There was a general remainder to remain throughout the workshop—"authenticity it shall be, not show"—which cautioned us from merely "performing" or even "over-performing" when getting so much attention. Standing in the circle, the first person showed her movement, which was immediately copied by all other participants (including Parzer). This exercise seemed to serve different purposes, as it reportedly taught us to: 1) be "authentic". Only an honest gesture can be rewarding or relieving for the person who perform it; 2) stop comparing or judging. No gesture can ever be better, stronger, wittier, or more

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32 The complete list of the Shared Commitments in bullet points, which was handed out to the workshop participants as the session with Grayson started reads: "In services to creating a safe container. To support optimal growth for each of us. We agree on the following commitments:

1) I commit to be 100% responsible and show up in my power. I align with the story that I am a powerful creator. I commit to not being a victim and not blaming. In the face of challenges [*sic*] I commit to greater self-awareness, evolution and empowerment.

2) I commit to celebrate, mirror and amplify the power, creativity and intentions of the others in the group. Non [*sic*] of us can become ourselves by ourselves. Historically many of us compare, criticize and judge ourselves and others. Transformation is amplified by bonding and holding others in their highest. Intentions are strengthened when a group holds them for each other.

3) I commit to confidentiality. What happens in the workshop stays in the workshop. I will only talk about my own experience and not reveal the identity of others.

4) I commit to not solicit business from the other participants. This creates an even playing field for all to learn.

5) I commit to refraining from alcohol and drugs during the classes."

“valuable” than another; 3) learn to transform a feeling into a movement, which is a first embodied step. Through the collective re-enactment of the personal movements, there is also a re-connection to the Shared Commitments: as the group embraces all expressions without judgment, even a movement of vulnerability or self-pity may in this collective process be invigorating for the person who invented the movement and exposed herself.

After a theoretical introduction to the various functions of the fascia (connecting tissue under the skin) underlining the difference between mobility and motility (*körper eigene Bewegung*, that is, movement made by the body itself, e.g., heart, lungs, the fluids, the fascia) a body session followed where we tried to sense the fascia of our partner. “Listening” with our hands to the movements of our partner’s body, we let the hands sink into the body. The hands became a pleasant meeting place, and we began to dance in unison, trying to stay connected to the fascia’s impulsive motility. This sequence eventually transforms into a shorter session of Authentic Movement.

All afternoon sessions with Grayson were dedicated to a different “chakra,” starting with the perineum, which we were requested to explore in its connection with the soft part of the feet and the hands. Touching the pelvic bones and the coccyx, we would discover the connection to the balls of the feet. After a short break, Grayson introduced the connection with “our ancestors.” Grayson asked what challenges they might have had. Somehow reluctantly, I (i.e., Gabriella) came to realise that one side of the family was inflicted by war.<sup>33</sup> The children grew up with a violent mother, pushing the cart to the market every morning at four a.m., barefoot between the fronts of east and west. Then a third child was born, who died at the age of eighteen months. On the other side, the main story is alienation. But maybe these two topics are in fact universal? War and alienation? However, it feels good to have a story, regardless of content! Infinite compassion for the ones, bereft of a personal narrative, I found myself thinking. Yet there was an unwillingness to participate to Grayson’s exercise:

*Should these ancestors really be stored in my pelvis? Quite ridiculous to claim something like that! I have no personal trauma, no stories of abuse, violence, or similar... I just have no “issues” whatsoever to be rehabilitated, or “processed.” So, what do I do now? I enter into some random movement, and the Eastern European grandmother appears in my mind. Thinking of her, I write her some few words as I can’t be eloquent in her language. Later, asked to sit*

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33 A brief contextual information is in order: Gabriella is a doctoral candidate in Religious Studies with a background in European Ethnology and East Asian Studies. She brings along decades of experimenting and training within the fields of dance and movement. However, this is her first contact with Holistic Dance and its “toolset.”

*back-to-back with a partner in complete stillness, we are both suddenly filled by an inner heat that even makes our hands sweat.*

During this exercise a woman had an emotional melt down. She was screaming, but not so loud. Then another participant followed. She was very loud, stomping her feet with full aggression and screaming at low pitch. Both of them seem to be in painful birthing processes. Then another, calmer one, followed. All exercises were very slow, allowing plenty of time and space for development.

On the following day we again started in a circle, this time with the question “what is your superpower?” We started to move, bearing the exercise of the previous day in mind: trying to feel the fascia. In couples, one person was moving while the other held her hands on the moving partner’s coccyx and belly. From this exercise we moved into a session of Authentic Movement.

In the afternoon, we worked with the third chakra (one supposedly pertaining to “power”) and Grayson asked us what it felt like when we gave away our powers. How would that change our personal relationships (with partners, children, work colleagues) if we did not give them away? What kind of strategies did we adopt to keep our hearts protected? I wondered if no forgiveness was my answer—to keep a certain distance? Or not entering into pain, not thinking about the past? Grayson asked us and, while the questions entered our bodies, they “travelled to body parts” that I never considered before. A hand raised to the head, a sudden pain arose in the neck. Swaying in a movement maybe would allow us to find some answer to questions we were never brave enough to pose?

Later, about sixty word-cards were spread out on the floor, and we were invited to walk around, sensing which words attracted us. Touch, real connection, space, security, closeness, sexual expression, self-determination, coincidence, feedback, honesty, and to be seen and heard were some examples. Parzer meant that they may attract us because they pointed at something missing in our lives. Sometimes a movement would spontaneously surge when reading a word, or when we would stop to contemplate. Like magnets, these words were disturbingly in charge of our movements, instead of the other way around. Having found the words with which we truly resonated, we entered into pair-work. One person would start moving with the word in her mind—the other person would follow with one hand placed on the mover’s heart and the other on the respective place on the back.

*With my partner’s hands on heart and back I start to dance. The arms spread on the side like eagle wings I slowly start flapping. Then quicker and quicker. The giant, somehow broken eagle wing-arms flap frenetically. The dream of*

*taking off. Immense sadness arises, while the clumsy broken eagle runs in all directions, unable to fly.*

Once the exercise was over, I was happy, calm, and totally relieved, an inner smile spreading between the ribs.

*In the evening, when trying to find words for the past events, my Eastern European grandmother returns to my bodymind with full might. Immediately filled with heat, I cry so heavily that the tears run down behind my ears.*

Back in the workshop, we had a free session of dance. Letting loose my “bodymind”:

*Busy dancing in space, she suddenly came to me. I felt such a strong, totally unexpected feeling of tenderness towards this hard woman. Just imagining how she must have suffered in her life.... I can't imagine. I try, but I cannot. I don't want to go there. The only thing I feel is tenderness. She has turned into the size of a doll. I caress her. Stroking her hair, I repeatedly whisper “I forgive you.” Heated waves of tears drip on my shoulders.*

This was the end of the workshop but also a new beginning, for its effects reverberate to this day.

Between January 15 and 17, 2022, Parzer was leading a three-day workshop of Authentic Movement Plus in the Buddhist meditation centre Samdrubling. Starting on Friday evening at six p.m., all nineteen participants (fifteen female and four male, ranging between twenty-five and thirty-five years old) had to pass a quite meticulous COVID-19 control to enter the building.<sup>34</sup>

For twenty minutes Parzer talked us through a warm-up exercise, inviting us to see what our bodies needed in that very moment. Then, seated in a circle, Parzer explained that Authentic Movement is *not* a method but rather a meditation practice. We introduced ourselves by our given names and had a short break. A twelve-minute session of Authentic Movement followed, and all participants were moving, with both Mrs V and Parzer assuming the role of the witness.

*I search for more darkness than my closed eyes can provide. Holding my hands tight on top of my eyes, I am still more outside than inside.*

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<sup>34</sup> Parzer had “outsourced” this task to a colleague, Mrs V, who was also present throughout the workshop.



There was no “feedback” of this movement session by the witnesses. After a break, a fifteen-minute session of Authentic Movement followed. Again, Mrs V and Parzer took on the role of the witness.

*I immediately feel the centre of my palms somehow burning. I hold the hands in front of me, I blow on them to reduce the sense of heat. It hurts. I blow. The hands stretch out to both sides of my body like a cross. The hands are burning. I want to get rid of the sensation, and move slowly backwards, until my back touches the wall. It is cold. It is nice for the palms to feel the cold wall. I realise the symbolism and decide to break it. I am not obliged to continue this story! I can take my hands down. They burn. So what? Let them burn as much as they like. I don't have to call on that suffering.*

We drew our experiences on paper with material that Parzer provided (crayons, pencils, and different kinds of paper). Once again, we gathered in a circle. Invited to share our drawings and talk about them, seven individuals chose to do so.

On the next day we met at ten a.m. Seated in a circle on the floor, we said our names rhythmically, marking the syllables. More exercises followed in this vein, transforming the spoken language into a body movement (e.g., answering the question “how do I feel right now?” with a body movement). Then floor work followed. Giving weight, like a bag of sand. Parzer said that we shall “send the sweetest breath” through our bodies. A fifteen-minute session of Authentic Movement followed.

*Hands are again immediately my topic. Although my hands are always cold due to bad blood circulation, the centre of the palms is warm. Not hot, but comfortably warm. Gently, I create an “energy ball” between my hands. I think about the healing power of my hands. How the hands long for an encounter.*

A body session followed. In pairs, one person was massaging the other—the latter being sprawled on the ground (first on the back, then on the belly)—with full body weight. From this massage we would eventually transform into a duet dance, full of body touch. In the afternoon an Authentic Movement session took place: I was so calm, no emotions or inner motion to be recalled.

Next morning, seated in a big circle, we started with a meditation session. Afterwards, everybody said one sentence about their current embodied state. An ATM exercise followed. Lying on our backs we “sensed into our bodies.” What did the right side feel like? What did the left? We realised that feeling light equalled ungroundedness. We continued, “feeling into our hands” (holding them high, towards each other, with the palms facing inwards and then

outwards). After this exercise we progressed into a dance, which had an entirely different quality: having awareness of the arms, the whole body can effortlessly follow. An Authentic Movement session followed, this time in couples.

*I close my eyes, kneeling to the floor. I am waiting. I stand up, and suddenly realise where I'm going once the workshop ends: to the cemetery where my Eastern European grandmother is resting, yet for another reason. Why this strange coincidence? In "real life" I never ever think of her! I am struck by the thought that there is still space in her grave... Why have I never thought before about that before? I would like to go under the floor, but I am a grown up. I will have to carry the people left behind. They are many. How much strength will I need? A lot. I stand tall, turn in all directions, calling out for strength from east, south, west, and north.*

Parzer's Holistic Dance as are its individual parts are meant to foster stepwise transformation—an unending process evermore closely familiarising the practitioner with their innate sacredness and *Weltverbundenheit* (in-rootedness in the world). Exploring one's spiritual depths is thought to come about in episodes, however small and disjointed they may often initially seem. But a golden thread is deemed to ultimately exist, namely, that of healing and, concomitantly, transformation. Gabriella's workshop experience was crystallised through the formation (or mending) of a relationship that had been torn apart—the relationship with a deceased grandmother she hardly knew. In hindsight, after weeks of digesting the experiences made, some reflexive insights came to the fore. The reinstated and intensifying relationship might have been the narrative shape of her own transformative episode. Drawing on the Holistic Dance vernacular, Gabriella perhaps engaged in “shadow work,” that is, the emotional encounter with the “Eastern European grandmother” (i.e., the “somatically stored information” of past trauma and distress) enabled her to unearth the loving kindness within, briefly tapping the inborn compassion, which seemingly awaits to be marshalled as a future life compass (cf. Parzer 2021). Moreover, Gabriella ultimately conjured the first of Grayson's Five Shared Commitments, that is, the “commit[ment] to greater self-awareness, evolution and empowerment,” for she energetically resolved to be more responsible and caring vis-à-vis others and thus with herself (both being epitomised by her grandmother).

### 4.3. Vignettes

#### Conversion and Self-Transcendence

Twenty-seven year old Magdalena lives in St. Andrä-Wördern, a municipality nearby Vienna. She recently completed her educational degree in French and Psychology-cum-Philosophy at the University of Vienna. Driven by the personal aim to contribute to a positive transformation of the world, the teaching profession appeared to her as a natural choice. However, she was rather ambiguous towards the institutional construct of school itself. While studying in France, she immersed herself in Contact Improvisation (having gained some initial, albeit hesitant, experience with this practice in classes she took at the University Sports Institute Vienna) and especially Body-Mind Centering. Her own practice eventually cast aside her worries with a view to a possible career as a schoolteacher. Back in Vienna, a friend (and former student of Parzer) introduced her to the Holistic Dance Institute. Magdalena recalls that upon reading the course description of the one-year programme she “suddenly and unexpectedly started crying, weeping so hard and feeling a strong desire to do it; so it was like I have to do this, it’s really necessary. My whole body somehow said I want this nosh, I want to have this nourishment.”<sup>35</sup> She was mesmerised learning that this was about cultivating a “non-judgmental view towards oneself.” She felt instant relief that there was a way to overcome her inner pain that resulted from constant self-criticism and emotional self-mangling. In hindsight, she thinks that reading the mission statement indeed unveiled her “longing for living in lieu of just surviving.” She knew that Holistic Dance was a means of “simply being affectionate and gentle with yourself.” Given that she had also developed a keen interest in “accompanying processes,” she immediately embarked on the Holistic Dance teachers training, so that she could not only embrace it herself but guide others to do the same.

For Magdalena, the group setting of the programme, comprising some one and a half dozen practitioners, was invaluable. Abandoning a sense of individualism, it was about the shared occupation of space and joint experiencing of processes. With respect to the Authentic Movement portion of Holistic Dance, she stresses that one’s subconscious takes control of the movement,

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35 “Ich habe durchgelesen und habe auf einmal so ganz unerwartet für mich total zum Weinen begonnen und habe voll geheult und habe einfach so ein krasses Verlangen gespürt es zu machen; also es war so, ich muss das machen, also so richtig eine Notwendigkeit. Mein ganzer Körper hat irgendwie gesagt, ich will dieses Futter ich will dieses, diese Nahrung haben.”

evoking sensations that are deeply “personal but also collective and spiritual”—and by extension indeed “universal.” One “clearly feels that something shifts,” a “transformation is triggered.” Holistic Dance offered her various tools for bodily “digesting” issues and feelings. She compares this to “walking through a thick layer of fog” at the other side of which awaits positive change, clarity, and tranquillity. Through her practice she attained a “shift of focus,” replacing a mind targeting self-deficiency with one that cherishes its fullness. It has readied her to “cross thresholds,” realising episodes of self-transcendence. These in turn increasingly impact daily life by “extending her repertoire” of dexterously coping with situations. The practice vested her with a great sense of “improvisation,” that is, a rhythm of action naturally responding to one’s environment free of a “capitalistic habitus.” Her way of life has come to be “not so linear but rather a bit more circular, yet more wholesome.”<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, her practice empowered her to fully appreciate a “materialistic-feminist mode of being,” ensouling her pursuit of societal transformation that now fleshes out as, what she calls, “caring activism” which would be tied to the “Care Revolution.”<sup>37</sup>

### Dancing Transnationalism and the Missing Link

Thirty-six year old Karen lives in Brussels, Belgium, where she works as a Haṭha yoga teacher and a social worker.<sup>38</sup> She has always been “interested in the way people connect to each other and the way that people connect to themselves.” She therefore takes becoming a social worker as the professional manifestation of this genuine curiosity for interpersonal relations and other people’s identity-building. Complementing this is her fascination with the passions and spiritual mindsets of others, being an extension of her own “looking for the meaning of life” and “searching for the stories beyond” standardised religiosity, that is, the spiritual subsurface. She considers her father’s passing some ten years ago as a personal watershed entailing a “complete existential crisis,” expressed by the question “what it would really mean to be *alive*.” She left for India and upon her return started her Haṭha yoga

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36 “[...] der Weg halt nicht so linear, sondern eher ein bisschen zirkulärer – aber aber halt heilsamer.”

37 The Care Revolution is a political activist initiative, to date only present in the German-speaking world (Austria, Germany, and Switzerland). Striving for a more solidary society, the Care Revolution combines forceful capitalist criticism with various insights from feminist politics in the field of reproductive work.

38 Since the completion of the Holistic Dance teachers training programme a few months later, Holistic Dance marks the key aspect in her professional (spiritual) life-coaching portfolio.

practice to which she later added 5Rhythms.<sup>39</sup> Karen understands this as an organic transformational development in that Haṭha yoga taught her to “relate to herself” building inner connections, while 5Rhythms showed her how to “direct herself to others and to nature” building outer connections.

However strong these two practices were, she felt something to be missing, merging or rather transcending their transformative power. This “missing link” she discovered in Holistic Dance. In 2020, a friend put her in touch with Parzer and in September of that year she commenced the one-year teachers training programme, once a month commuting to Vienna from her temporary home in Upper Austria. And indeed “all parts I had collected over the past ten years of who I am really melt together in it,” likewise “giving me direction to how to bring myself in the world.” Karen is fascinated how Parzer entwines so vividly and fittingly different “super beautiful tools,” such as Contact Improvisation, Authentic Movement, and other kinds of body work methods to lead the practitioners to a “very intimate, authentic level” of self- and interpersonal connection. Holistic Dance epitomises “spirituality, connection, and transformation,” a triad also crucially informing Karen’s conduct of living. The practice spiritually establishes connections within and with the outside world effecting transformation of being. For this to happen, the “peer group setting” is essential, proving tremendously powerful during the formal training sessions and beyond. Holistic Dance empowered her in many ways: despite social conventions, she is now capable of truly sharing emotions and needs, openly appreciating the beauty of her practice and being. Her mode of action is informed by a context-sensitivity, which she likes to employ as a teacher by guiding others to effect whatever positive transformations on their own. What evolved out of her practice is the “quality of compassion,” that is, to be “loving to myself and to others.” She thus acquired the “power to invite whatever energy into her life,” rendering her able for the first time to “authentically” engage in a “deep partnership.” Holistic Dance brings about “answers and changes” to her. In its every workshop part, it is “a whole journey and a whole story,” “so beautifully woven together from the beginning till the end” by Parzer.

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39 5Rhythms is an inclusive dance form (no age or skill requirements) developed by Gabrielle Roth (1941–2012) in the late 1970s. The aim of the dance is to reconnect to the personal energy, intuition, and creativity using five different rhythms: flowing, staccato, chaos, lyrical, and stillness.

## Spiritual Traveller

Thirty year old Eve-Marie lives in Switzerland. An academically trained social worker, she quit this profession in late 2020, now working in an organic grocery store to free up time for pursuing her own spiritual self-development, which she deems her “main focus in life.” Some ten years ago she embarked on a busy travel routine leading her around the globe. While working on a farm in Spain at the age of twenty-four, she had “what people call a spiritual awakening.” The “big shift” materialised in her becoming a devout Theravāda Buddhist and member of Association Mudita, a group founded in 2006 by Anne Michel in the Thai Forest tradition and presently headquartered in Les Moulins in the canton of Vaud. While she contemplated to become a nun at some point, even sojourning to Thailand for several months, she eventually felt spiritually “locked up” by the practice and the “too strict and too rigid” theory behind it. At the time, by chance, she encountered a Thai shaman, who helped her “reconnect to other things,” thus having her break with old patterns and granting her “new perspectives.” A rising appreciation of astrology aside, one such perspective was the realisation that Buddhist meditation had “kept her body still for years” despite its need to self-express.

Whereas she had gained some contemporary dance experience before, occasionally participating in rather mundane 5Rhythms sessions early in her spiritual quest, it was through a one-day Authentic Movement workshop that her enthusiasm was ignited. The practice allowed her to “connect to the unknown within.” For Eve-Marie, it was a similar yet different (i.e., complementary) spiritual dive into the profound depths of herself. The workshop was organised by a friend who, as it turned out, is a graduate of Parzer’s Holistic Dance teachers programme. Eve-Marie picked up a flyer of the Holistic Dance Institute at the premises and started some online research. What she found fully resonated, even more so with the fresh spiritual insights gained at the workshop. Holistic Dance seemed to teach how to employ the body as a key to unlock the path and “connect to one’s deeper layer.” Eve-Marie booked a slot for the Holistic Dance Easter workshop and travelled to Vienna.

She notes that during these six days Parzer masterfully created a “safe space” for the participants, “a space full of tenderness,” where one could overcome primal fears. This “old fear” of being in the world was acknowledged and put to rest. Holistic Dance provided to Eve-Marie the means to explore the world by embracing her sensitivity and “see all the beauty and all the wisdom and richness” therein. Holistic Dance let her first uncover what was lacking in life and how to possibly fill this lacuna. It subsequently established an “experimental” field where she could spiritually test notions and ethical principles by “listening” to her moving body and the story it relates—

by following the “intelligence, knowing, and wisdom of the body.” She could therefore do a trial run and experience how the implementation of a new mindset would work out in the world at large. Specifically, she realised the importance of the role of care for her own life and, by extension, care for others. Accordingly, she is now determined to live a life centred on care. She opines that Holistic Dance in fact enables practitioners to “embody tenderness and sensitivity” and in this way “inspires” other people, bringing this sense for spiritual transformation to the world. Yet, Eve-Marie believes that Holistic Dance is a continual practice for its transformative impulses need to closely accompany one’s spiritual growth and this-worldly application. Ultimately, the very aim of doing Holistic Dance and the concomitant “tough” process is to be capacitated to “bring the fruit into the world,” instilling to oneself and to society “the will to put oneself on service.” Alongside Buddhism and Shamanism, Holistic Dance offers her a new powerful tool for spiritually accompanying others. In fact, since Eve-Marie is keen to work in “the field of spirituality” as a way to offer care also to others, she is intent to tailor her own method drawing on the very instruments that facilitated her spiritual evolution. To this end, doing the Holistic Dance teachers training might be an important means, along with engaging on-site (i.e., in South America) with Amazonian Shamanism—the latter being the reason why she had given up her job as a social worker in the first place.

### Advanced Exploration

Fifty-one year old Martin lives nearby St. Pölten. A trained Catholic theologian at the University of Graz, he presently works as job, organisational, and personality coach. Whatever his professional engagement in the past, his entire occupational life was indeed marked by “accompanying people,” assisting others in their biographical development. Early on he had set himself on a quest for meaning, enquiring the essentials of being, which is why he enrolled to study Theology in the first place. This intrinsic impulse for social and pastoral care is ever present. An avid hobby dancer of classical forms, he first got in touch with contemporary dance via a friend, participating in a Contact Improvisation workshop in Graz. It was a relieving and comforting experience to engage with the space surrounding him but also, in a completely egalitarian manner, with the other practitioners. Already having had ample familiarity with Christian spiritual exercises, Martin was so taken aback by the meditation-like “coming home” experience he had that he subsequently committed himself to this—occasionally, however, to similar practices as well.

His one-time workshop encounter with the Holistic Dance Institute was upon recommendation by his wife who had herself completed the teacher course. He deems Parzer's practice "high level," likely too challenging for the novice, but those with a sound basis aiming at "high-quality" contents will certainly be pleased. He stresses the ritualised forms that are embedded in settings arranged by dint of a clear empathy vis-à-vis the practitioners. The appropriate matching of individuals for joint practice came about so natural, reminding him of the Amerindian "talking stick," which likewise evokes harmonious interaction. A most powerful practice during the Holistic Dance workshop in Vienna was the chakra work sessions, whose impact upon him was gradually increasing over the six days. Ultimately, he felt his mind-body duality literally gone, fused into one vital essence energising his being, a state lasting days if not weeks beyond the workshop. He notes that the transformational aspect of Holistic Dance connects well to the shared core ambition of all religions—including his own Christian faith: that is, to embrace the inner workings strengthening one's spiritual faculties. Moreover, some rituals they conducted and feelings shared therein were a manifestation of a symbolic vocabulary universal to all religions. Through the practice one learns to live "*in the moment*," to be holistically present. It very much elevates one's mindfulness. Ultimately, he views Holistic Dance as a ritual means of "becoming whole," "rediscovering connections," augmenting one's sensibility and ability to witness life. It creates a ritualised "space for trying things out, gaining courage, and exploration," empowering everyone physically, mentally, and spiritually.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Parzer's Holistic Dance is a case in point with respect to our hypothesis, which is locating this and similar movement forms within the holistic religious spectrum. Holistic Dance has it all: the foundress, the setting, the language, the seeking clientele, the experiential space, and the overarching narrative. The latter centres on personal transformation by virtue of one's own power; a power that would lie dormant waiting to be unleashed through praxis. Hence, Parzer states right on top of her website: "Holistic Dance is an invitation to transformation through dance, movement and touch."<sup>40</sup> The transformation so triggered may come in different guises. According to its methodological conception, Holistic Dance may serve as a standalone soteriological instrument in its own right; yet, practitioners ordinarily deem it a

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40 See <https://www.holistic-dance.at/> (accessed: June 8, 2022).



complementary practice (with varying efficacy) to previous or additional ongoing self-cultivational action, introspective journeys, and spiritual advances. Notably, for Parzer, the transformation elicited through Holistic Dance does not stop at the individual level. Personal transformation would *eo ipso* entail the manifestation of awareness for interdependency. Such heightened sense of spiritual connectedness would thus ultimately result in a determination to do good to others, the environment, and the world at large. In other words, Parzer recognises in Holistic Dance a millenarian means, an armamentarium of positive collective change actualised by one's soteriological progress. With this noble aspiration in mind, Holistic Dance is again paradigmatic for a wide array of movement forms.

## Appendix



Figure 1: Parzer conducting a somatic exercise.



Figure 2: Parzer and a partner dancing in nature.



Figure 3: A session of applied anatomy at ImPulsTanz.

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