

# EMBODIED LIVES

*Reflections on the Influence of  
Suprpto Suryodarmo and Amerta Movement*



*Edited by: Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve*

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Suprpto Suryodarmo and Amerta Movement

**OPEN ACCESS**

***Chapter 11***

***A Presencing Dial***

**Margit Galanter**

Edited by:

Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve

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## A Balinese Saying

*Ilmu Padi* (a lesson from the rice plant)

*semakin tua semakin berisi, dan semakin merunduk*  
(the older, the fuller, and the more it bows)



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## 11. A PRESENCING DIAL

Margit Galanter (USA)

In my preparation for writing this chapter, I decided to choose a thread of Amerta that was a simple and specific practice. I have found that it can be quite challenging to express the impact of this work, as its coherence is astounding, pervasive, and elusive, like mist or the movement of *qi*. What revealed itself through this process was that even to express a 'simple' practice was to open into a mosaic of possibilities. So, in following a line, I found that there is not only the line itself, but also the lines that cross through it, as well as the spaces between, the navigation through, and the bigger living composition made. In this chapter, I include my earlier (and more simple) understandings of the practice, later syntheses, and an excerpt from a conversation that further articulates and enriches the original view, which developed through the writing process.

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In 2000, I came to meet Prapto on his land in Java through the recommendation of dance mentors and years of interest in his work. From the first encounter, I began to land into a contemporary and culturally-rooted movement conversation that bridged more facets of life than I imagined possible. After years of movement and cultural studies in Indonesia up until that time, through this work I found a new kind of integration; in Amerta, I found a rich movement world and a living constellation of practices that continue to unfold through my life today.

### **Practicing Presences, Presencing**

The practices of Amerta Movement affect many aspects of living. One powerful element has to do with 'presence', which is a basis, filter, and medium for how one enacts in the subtle currents

of a situation. Our quality of presence in a given environment affects how we experience it, and while certain movement, somatic, contemplative, and performance research forms access this awareness, in my experience these tools are uniquely developed in this work. Amerta invites participants to relate with multiple realms of experience – in interaction with one another, the environment, and the subtle qualities of felt sensation. In doing so, our inheritance of ideas and beliefs is often revealed through the movement and conversation, and this invisible context becomes an element of the dance as well. The communication amongst these various realms of experience invokes what I think of as a ‘mobility in presence.’

With practice, one can navigate presences and experience consciousness of their changes, ranging from being as loud as a brightness that enjoys being seen, to as quiet as a *happy shadow*,<sup>1</sup> with multiple tones along a full spectrum. Presence is not just something to have or achieve, but rather is a continual process of *presencing* that can shift in relation to varied elements as they arise, including being present within one’s own center. In this way, presencing is a medium and filter; both. The practices of Amerta can take years to integrate, and over time I have slowly developed in my ability to experience a greater range of qualities of presencing. Through movement and attention, I can broaden my focus while simultaneously attuning to both the subtle elements of the environment and the spaces and movement between. I can be less self-conscious in my own actions, and come from a ‘dialogue view.’ This encompassing perspective has helped me tremendously in my work as a movement artist, practitioner, student, and teacher. It brings forth a vividness of experience and has an effect in my artistic practices, vocation, and daily life.

In the first month I worked with Prapto, I was introduced to a particular movement practice that has had a huge impact since. The following skeletal description of the teaching is translated through the vagaries of memory and sparse notes.

*With a partner, move with three different intentions: first ‘hooking,’ then ‘leaving,’ and finally ‘catching.’ Practice with various combinations of the three within the duet.*

As I remember from what we did at the time, with hooking, the mover continually intends to get the other person into their game,

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<sup>1</sup> In 2008, Prapto mentioned *happy shadow*, which I translate most concisely as a joyful and quiet presence in a mover. This image was strongly evocative, and would take me years to recognize I could access it experientially.

to draw their focus; with leaving, the mover is really anywhere else attentionally than where their duet happens to be, perpetually running away; and finally with catching, the mover does their own thing in the presence of the other, noticing when they are in flow. While in action, movers may happen to slip from one mode to the other, but through practice, they begin to feel the nature of each, so much so that these qualities become accessible and recognizable.

There are paradoxes that emerge through this practice, and when I experience the felt sense of paradox in an embodied context, there is often some potent seed of an idea present. Some of the experiential mysteries I have encountered are that:

- ‘leaving’ can actually keep you stuck in a process, even though you want to run away
- ‘hooking’ can keep you separate from your own coherence and felt presence of action
- with ‘catching,’ despite your focus in your ‘own’ movement, you may experience a kind of communion in the flow of shared actions, which I have come to call a state of ‘dancing-with.’

For years I have practiced these three states – they have become signposts in my own improvising, and at times I have facilitated them with students and colleagues, to communicate and share these fine distinctions in presencing.

As I prepared this chapter for publication, I was in contact with Prapto with Diane Butler’s aid in translating. I was trying to understand if my definitions of ‘hooking,’ ‘leaving,’ and particularly ‘catching’ were even close to their originally intended use, since I had encountered them so long ago. Through the email conversation, I found that the terms, of course, have a great deal more to them than I had originally understood. Here is an excerpt:

*“Actually, ‘leaving’ is because the being of dance changes and, as it turns out, that is leaving the space and time. In a sense, we want things to be in eternity because we are afraid of changing – because that changing will give a feeling of losing something.*

*We have a tendency of ‘hooking’ so that something is continually in our network for giving a feeling of safety. Or we want to add to our existence by ‘absorbing.’*

*'Catching' is actually the same as 'hooking', but catching has a gradation that is more momentary.*

*For this, actually the practice of Jaged Amerta is a study that emphasizes more toward how we can study movement while conscious of changing in the changes of movement itself."*

While I had not caught the full meanings of these practices entirely, they expanded and found applications throughout the next ten years, both as specific practices, and in the doors of presencing they opened up.

### **2004, Brooklyn, NY**

Several years after that first encounter with Amerta, I began working with people in new ways. With a colleague who is a choreographer, we did a series of 'embodied dramaturgy' sessions. For this, we worked on a regular basis in movement and other creative experiments to access, develop, and articulate the substance of his dance performance piece. Interestingly, I never went to a rehearsal nor met with his dancers; rather we chose for the process to take place in duet in the privacy of his studio, a space for him to anchor his public project with his own discoveries.

In one session, after he took some time to speak about the current state of his piece, we did some hands-on Feldenkrais practice to facilitate an integrated state of body-mind. Then what unfolded was a series of movement practices that ended with him in free movement, 'digesting.'<sup>2</sup> After witnessing his movement for some time from sitting, I rose and joined in, dancing near him. The desire to join and the term 'dancing-with' both arose through an inner voice at that time, making new language. There was something about the clarity of his state (being in his own action-flow, or what I thought of at the time as 'catching') and my role as both witness and participant in that moment that I felt I could more actively support and sense him through moving. The particular state of presence I found had roots in the Amerta practices.

Later we discussed how that movement practice made the day's

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<sup>2</sup> Often in sessions, I will make sure there is time provided for integration. In the context of a dramaturgical session, this is particularly important, since composition requires space to sense and synthesize (this is also valuable in somatic arenas, as well). It is this time and space, and the alternation between composition, sensation, and integration, that facilitates cultivating mobility in presence. This term 'digestion' developed through my collaborations with Josiah Hincks.

session more vibrant for the both of us, that it clarified the work we had been doing up until then. From my own perspective, in dancing-with him, I found a new way to commune not only with the content of his process and this process between us as it was unfolding, but also a new intimacy and vividness arose, which was a third thing, as if I could touch into his movement and empathize from some kind of shifting sense-feeling; it is this felt sense that remains with me most strongly today. I don't think I would have accessed a sense of his work so clearly had I not danced with him and it. It is as if finding him through the movement helped me indeed sense myself, which created something novel and mobile between us, that in turn provided mutual enrichment.

Many aspects of this potent time in Brooklyn became stitches on a thread that I continue with students, collaborators, and clients today. It turns out that this kind of creative enquiry with people gives me great satisfaction, and it developed on its own, as a new quality of presencing opened up. So, a state of presence itself was a basis for future unfolding and change.

### **2004-2006, New York**

I did graduate work on 'permeability' as a phenomenal state in movement, but did not specifically attribute this to Amerta, since other movement forms were more in my focus at the time<sup>3</sup>. Amerta is so pervasive that at times I have not been able to grasp or articulate its effect on me. This particular state of 'permeable' presencing tends to manifest as quieting down self-consciousness, attuning to the various elements in interaction, as a whole and living constellation. The interconnectivity amongst and through is somehow the substrate of mobility. With permeability, there is a palpable shift in the space between whoever is 'we' at a given moment, which in turn affects 'our' actions together.

Now, years later, I see how my understanding of the state of permeability is inextricably linked to practicing presences with Prapto; as I have experienced more measures on an increasingly sensitive 'presencing dial,' it has become clear how the earlier practices set up a foundational palette of states for navigation.

Through the influences of Amerta and other movement forms,

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<sup>3</sup> My thesis addressed permeability as a state that arises in the context of dance – Lisa Nelson's Tuning Scores, somatics – the Feldenkrais Method, and in my own movement and performance practice.

I began to practice my communication in ways that were creative, receptive, interactive, humanizing, and broadening. In certain moments I have become less self-identified and more interested in the conversation and ambience of which I am part. The phenomenon of permeability is perhaps a medium through which I can understand how I am engaging in this dialogical presence. For example, when I am focused on movement, form, and muscularity in dancing, I can recognize that my receptivity is low and there is physical tension – becoming aware of this can help me access a more permeable state. From the experience of permeability, I can more easefully listen to other elements than those on the surface. So, different degrees of permeability are measures on a presencing dial, eliciting specific qualities of interactivity.

### **The Garden**

The aspect of Amerta that I described earlier as ‘dialogue view’ opens up our cultural inheritance of enclosures and categories. Amerta practices have helped me to understand the ways that movement can have an affect not just on things we have categorized, such as a ‘body’ or ‘art,’ but also on the multiplicities of living a vivid life. This sense of interconnectivity had been a pursuit of mine before I encountered Prapto, yet before Amerta (and living in Java) I had only experienced hunches and tastes – what now is the tracing of a thread was then more like a succession of dots, knots and clumps. My own limitations had tended to get in the way: for example, the loudness of my presence – an inherited and learned materiality – is consonant with the culture I live in, my family upbringing, my heritage, and my personality tendencies. Movement practice has the power to create change.

The image of a garden is used in Amerta Movement to imply the rich web of relations that one experiences through moving, developed through the lives of people who share in the Amerta practices. In general, gardens are cultivated, and out from this tending, life unfolds. In a garden, there are multiple forms of life in an interconnected arrangement of movements, operations, and flows. There is a spectrum of colors, tones, elements, and frequencies. Creatures serve different functions; all are in relation and have overlapping effects. We can look at the different beings in the garden as individual matter, but in fact, there is something about the ‘interactivity’ that engenders being part of the garden.

I consider Amerta a living constellation, and that part of what makes it ‘living’ is that it is a regenerative set of practices; it invites individuation, conversation, and development for all those who participate. In its interactivity it resonates with a garden’s nature. The practice unfolds from dialogue, between humans, art, and the natural world; between our consciousness and our bodily sensations; amongst people from diverse cultures, and more. We explore the multiplicitous aspects of life through practice, which has a deep impact on how we are present in the world.

### **2008, SEEDS Festival<sup>4</sup> Showing, Western Massachusetts**

In Prapto’s workshop, in the Circle group, where our focus was “*the sense of bowing and praying*,” he proposed we each dance with a flower or leaf. With the flower, my movement changed. I was caring for something. It mediated my dancing and my movement communication. I did not need to focus on myself, the actions, how I was doing, nor how I appeared. I experienced a kind of suppleness that only comes from the whole being’s actions in a dynamic mobility. I danced with another person while feeling my own hand holding the flower... ‘Dancing-with’ in a performance-type setting, the flower mediated the duet, allowing for a sense of calm presence in flow. At the time I understood it as a kind of catching, but now with these new understandings of the terms, perhaps the best term would be simply ‘presencing,’ a kind of dancing-in-the-garden experience, *inter-independently*, from my own shifting position.

### **2011, Subterranean Arthouse, Berkeley, California**

More than a decade after I had begun to study with Prapto, I heard him use the term *inter-independence* as an approach for communication. Instantly, it clicked, giving name to my own experience – not the lonely objecthood and power of ‘independence’, nor the stickiness of ‘interdependence’, but something much more fitting the experience of how I had earlier understood ‘catching.’ *Inter-independence* is imbued with implicit dialogue, sharing space

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4 Somatic Experiments in Earth, Dance, + Science (SEEDS) Festival was a multi-year experiment. The international gathering and investigations of ecology and interdisciplinary arts was co-founded by Olive Bieringa and myself in 2008. It was produced at a rural dance center, called Earthdance, in Western Massachusetts. At the first SEEDS, we invited Prapto as one of the main teachers, which set a powerful tone for the whole project. The garden was present as an image for the Festival, as well as being a theme in the dialogues throughout.

in a garden, in which all beings are conversing from their own flow of action. This is an interactivity where one dances from one's own mobile axis, sensing oneself and the other aspects present, be they people or atmosphere.

By tracing a thread of the Amerta work, I am faced with some of my own complex and disjunctive ways of thinking and absorbing. I am not sure if the threads of this chapter are being woven so clearly. The propensity towards multiplicity is a part of my heritage – I have been educated in post-structuralist, post-modern perspectives that utilize a morass of images accessible in the U.S.; my thinking is informed by an understanding of movement and energy that is spiralic and organic; and I was raised on the Jewish habituation of questioning and layering. My complex perspectives at best have a propensity toward the feltedness and entanglement of experience.<sup>5</sup> I am inspired by images that enrich the tension and reductiveness of a binary, opening to include the majestic image of an embroidered brocade – both interwoven, and coherent. With this, the circuitous pathway of thread and lines finds clarity and inter-independence through its navigation.

Dialing in to multiple presences enables a flexibility as it filters, so we can commune with the very basic senses of everyday living right through to the kinds of conceptual complexities that can open up, as seen above. In my own understandings of harmonizing energy, primarily through Qigong and Chinese energetics, I have found complex energetic presences can also be transformed over time and enriched through intentional and practice-based shifts, through the interaction of movement, breath, and attention. We can loosen tangles, following lines to feel the clarity and space through things. These physical processes of aligning can be a doorway to coherent, felt spaces. For example, in Qigong, there are a series of exercises called 'reeling silk,' through which the practitioner cultivates energetic lines, threads, and space within by doing physical movements to gently follow imaginary silken lines in the immediate space in front of her, so as not to break the delicate threads. Tracing

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<sup>5</sup> By placing 'felt' in this paragraph and chapter in two different meanings, I am making a comment on the relationship between felt, the spiralic woollen substance, and felt, as in felt sense, or a feeling-state more primary than emotions, embodied. The former is articulated comprehensively in the book *Felt*, and the latter is a term developed by Eugene Gendlin in 'Focusing,' which is a process where one finds the implicit language through accessing a felt sense by pausing in an ongoing situation and listening, creating space to bring it forth. Often in this chapter, the word implies the ranges of these meanings.

threads can be an integrative, embodied, and conceptual practice, encompassing a multiplicity and invoking flow both within and through the garden of attention and experience.

### **2013, East Bay, California**

Currently, I am working on a long-term dance poetry project called *Relay*. One summer, I took walks with people who are practitioners from diverse fields, audio recorded our conversations, and we made maps of the walks. The encounters took place in a nexus of several neighborhoods where I have spent much time and has personal and geomantic power. In the project I was literally feeling dialogue and place, and ‘catching’ moments where the language embodied vibrantly, so much so that it inscribed itself into our imagined sense of the path. These moments where something living ‘shines’ is a felt space, and it arises through the interaction of the conversation in flow.

In one of my *Relay* encounters, I realized that I am finally in a performance process where I can access the *happy shadow*. Rather than wanting to be seen, to express with an undercurrent to prove my persona through art, I am enjoying being with people, dancing-with, and letting a larger environment guide me, quietly, accessing new modulations on the presencing dial. I am beginning to more fully follow the line of the inquiry itself, attuning to the thing that makes it *It*, unfolding through the wisdom that shows up through conversation. This is a cultivation of a state of not knowing yet watching things grow. As I have taken the conversations into the next phase of the project, making performance, I have a range of presences to work with, multiple tones on the dial, a whole spectrum.

### **2010–2013, Ellen Webb Studio, Oakland**

I was working with a client who is an artist and has a unique facility in creative process, yet at the time he was not dancing as he would have liked to, and had some medical issues that were affecting his life and art. We found it especially potent when I offered gentle prompts that provided atmosphere, focus, and trust. On this day, we were working with the reciprocity of language and embodiment. At first, we did some ‘Focusing’ to help him access his felt sense and the words implicit in this state, as a base step. Then I led him through three phases of a process I have developed, called ‘inscriptions,’ where he could access ideas through speaking and drawing, then embody

the ideas through movement in space. Inscribing often ends with witnessed movement, with time after for digesting.

Recently, this client and now friend remarked that the session a few years before had been a breakthrough moment for his art life process, that the way he had found language for that particular constellation of ideas offered him a clear imagistic foundation that was supportive for his art-making until today. I couldn't help but think about the influence of Prapto in our work and in my development. We used a variety of practices from the view of art in daily life. We did not segment out the body, nor the person, from the bigger picture. And through the practices, we helped him find connections between the various aspects of himself in the world. We found an atmosphere of discovery, a field where he could rediscover his whole self.

Through the process, as practitioner, I became aware that what we had done 'for him,' I had also experienced for myself, and that we were in the garden, together.

~ ~ ~

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**Margit Galanter** is a movement investigator and dance poet living in Oakland, California. Her practice, 'Physical Intelligence,' encompasses her unique research perspective, helping people experience the innate clarity and vitality one can uncover through the potency of movement. Margit is trained as a movement artist, Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner, and Chinese energetic practitioner, and her fascination regarding the construction and value of movement has drawn her to collaborative embodied research for decades. Margit has lived in Indonesia several times since 1991. She is thrilled to be a co-editor and contributor for this book, honoring the paths inspired by Amerta.

**Art Site:** [www.margitg.wordpress.com](http://www.margitg.wordpress.com)

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