

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 2

Amerta Movement and Archaeology

Keith Miller

Edited by:

Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve

Taken from the book *Embodied Lives*,
published by:

Triarchy Press
Axminster
UK

info@triarchypress.net

www.triarchypress.net

First published in 2014.

Second edition published in 2025.

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-909470-32-3

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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)



CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	x
INTRODUCTION	1
1. PRESENCE	9
Beate Stühm (Germany)	
2. AMERTA MOVEMENT AND ARCHAEOLOGY	18
Keith Miller (UK)	
3. CULTURAL ASPECTS OF THE MOVEMENT WORK	28
Christina Stelzer (Germany)	
4. AMERTA AND TIBETAN BUDDHISM	35
Monika Förster (Germany/Holland)	
5. THE EYE OF THE HAND	43
Steve Hopkins (UK)	
6. A DOG PRACTICING ‘TALKING BODY’	55
José Mulder van de Graaf (Bolivia)	
7. “MAKE LESS THE HOPING”	64
Sandra Reeve (UK)	
8. TOUCHING FORGOTTEN REALITIES	72
Bettina Mainz (Germany)	
9. THE ECHO OF LIFE	83
Daniela Coronelli (Italy/UK)	
10. I ALWAYS DO THREE THINGS	92
Shantam Zohar (Israel)	

11. A PRESENCING DIAL	98
Margit Galanter (USA)	
12. AMERTA MOVEMENT AND SOMATICCOSTUME	108
Sally E. Dean (USA/UK)	
13. CRYSTALLIZATION-PERFORMANCE	122
Lise Lavelle (Denmark)	
14. BEING AND DOING IN THE WILD GARDEN	132
Susanne Tümpel (Germany)	
15. 'MANTRA GERAK' / MOVEMENT MANTRA	142
Agus Bima Prayitna (Indonesia)	
16. THE MUSICAL PORTAL	152
Tim Jones (UK)	
17. NEAR THE UNKNOWN	160
Franca Fubini (Italy)	
18. FAMILY	170
Una Nicholson (UK)	
19. THE INFANT'S LANGUAGE	179
Katya Bloom (USA/UK)	
20. "GOING OUT OF THE SITUATION" AND "STOP, DON'T FOLLOW THAT, WALK!"	189
Regula Nell (Switzerland)	
21. AMERTA MOVEMENT AND AUTISM	201
Sean Williams (UK)	

22. "FIND YOUR POSITION"	211
Susan Bauer (USA)	
23. "BODY BODY"	221
Helen Poynor (UK)	
24. EVER-SPEAKING BEING	231
Michael Dick (Germany)	
25. MOVING IN THE LAW	241
Simon Slidders (UK)	
26. THE BREATHING EYE	249
Andrea Morein (Germany)	
27. JOY	263
Anita Lüdke (Germany/Bolivia)	
28. "RE-MEMBERING" BUTTERFLY BEACH	276
Melinda Buckwalter (USA)	
29. I WILL TRACE THE CONSTELLATION OF MY STARS WITH MY FINGERS	283
Ellin Krinsly (USA/Australia/Mexico/Ethiopia)	
30. AWAKENING ART AND DHARMA NATURE TIME	295
Diane Butler (USA/Indonesia)	
AFTERWORD: A PRAPTO COMPANION	306

2. AMERTA MOVEMENT AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Excavation Without Digging

Keith Miller (UK)

I dream that I'm with my university archaeology lecturer and a fellow archaeology student, walking along an abandoned railway line in the Highlands where we'd been excavating a prehistoric site. They're ahead of me as we go through a cutting and into a tunnel. Halfway along in the darkness I see something glint in the wall. I retrace my steps and see a relief carving, shiny black like coal, of a face in a frame. Looking closer I see that it's the bearded face of a figure sitting behind an opening like a window. Then I see the eyes are shining, alive. With a start, I realise that it is Jesus. He says yes, he is alive. Amazed, I wonder what to do – whether to stay and continue this extraordinary dialogue or go and tell my companions who by now are out of the tunnel. But how can I describe what I'm seeing? It occurs to me that I have no measuring tape or drawing materials to make an archaeological record and, even if I had, how can I convey that the face is alive, let alone that it's Jesus and he's black? Nevertheless, I decide to go and tell my fellow archaeologists at least something about what I had seen...

Archaeology

Archaeology is the study of material culture, the physical evidence of past human behaviour. The timespan stretches from the earliest hominids, over a million years ago, to just a moment ago. The most intensive and immersive archaeological practice is excavation, carefully digging a site to uncover and record the buried remains and residues of human activity. The remains themselves – 'finds' of pottery, bone, insects, seeds and so on – are then 'processed': cleaned,

sorted and studied in a kind of micro-excavation. But archaeology is much wider than this; it embraces the study of landscapes and buildings, earthworks and marks in the soil or in growing crops produced by buried features, and the microscopic signatures and changes in the environment brought by human activity.

Archaeological remains are fragments of people's movements and activities, intentions and experiences. Most remains relate to the ordinary daily lives of our anonymous forebears. Even in palaces and temples, it is often the incidental marks and traces of everyday life that are the most telling. All human behaviour, all human artefacts, 'speak'. Archaeologists reveal and interpret these messages, these material memories, bringing them into consciousness, re-presenting and expressing them as part of an ongoing cultural story. With its focus on the study of human behaviour and the material world we have created, archaeology holds a mirror up to our culture and to our own lives and daily experiences of moving through a world layered in history and memory, making marks as we go. Archaeology tells stories about people and places, and at its best it enriches the texture of places and communities and offers insights into personal and cultural identity.

Sometimes we feel a close connection with people from the past, for instance through their personal possessions, or their burial sites (think of those dark slumbering bodies from the European peat bogs). At other times we have a more generalised feeling of the presence of the past, seeing things as they are now as the outcome of past processes and sensing through them the passage of time.

The Embodied Archaeological Experience

There is a particular feeling to archaeological excavation – the elemental experience of digging the earth, exposed to the weather; of repetitive and often demanding physical activity, working through the ground, uncovering the buried shapes of archaeological features, scraping and sifting the crumbling soils and separating out the fragments of broken pottery or bone. Likewise in landscape work; walking to and fro looking for traces, combing the ground for clues, tuning into the texture and shape of the landform and teasing out the human patterns. At the same time we are working with the imagination, sifting through our 'mind objects' – our perceptions, feelings and hunches, our memories and academic facts – reading the human story in the environment.

Whether we dig physically or with our imagination, the process

is a kind of ritual undoing of what had been created before; deconstructing and deciphering the remains, whilst at the same time reconstructing them into imagined versions of the past until one particular story seems to fit. Here we touch the essence, the bones, of storytelling: interpreting phenomena in alternative ways, seeing different paths, other worlds.

Time and Place

We usually see time in spatial terms: the past and future as other places, near or distant, behind or in front of us. Academic archaeology follows a conventional version of this, with its emphasis on objective chronological timelines where we locate different ages and cultures and measure progress.

In the embodied archaeological experience, however, the conventional arrangement of time becomes dislocated. As 13th-century Zen master Dōgen observed, there is no time apart from things; and I now find myself among things of different ages, all simultaneously present. I am not on a neat timeline stretching behind and before me, but ‘among’ time. In the layered strata of an archaeological section, all the times are co-present, and when I scrape across the section with my trowel I am encountering centuries or millennia with each stroke. In the landscape too, features of different ages are simultaneously present underfoot and around me. Past, present and future are not located elsewhere, in separate places, but co-exist and intermingle. There is a feeling of being suspended in time, moving to and fro between the past represented by the archaeological remains, the process of uncovering them in the present, and the story that I am creating out of this material, unfolding into the future.

Our sense of place, too, is changed by the archaeological experience. History and archaeology are site-specific; all events take place *in* place. As we delve, we experience place-making at first hand: how the landscape has rhythms, textures and densities, degrees of ‘whereness’ composed into sites and places; how places are living relationships, temporary constellations of events and features of different ages, the outcome of many processes through time. Each place is in movement too and has no fixed identity but is many places, with many ‘layers’ and possible stories.

Archaeological experience is a kind of non-ordinary state of consciousness, but one we are all familiar with. At root, it is simply awareness of a historic dimension – a ‘before’ – manifest in the

environment. When we dig the garden and pick out a piece of broken crockery, or walk down the street wondering why it bends in a particular way, or unwrap an old ticket from the depths of our pocket, we are doing archaeology: investigating layers of memory and meaning, reconstructing past human activity.

But whilst archaeologists are good at describing the minutiae of sites and finds, we tend to forget ourselves. My student dream encounter expressed the conundrum of formal academic archaeology: the lived archaeological experience, the very thing that emotionally engages us with these remains from the past, cannot be easily mapped and measured and is largely absent from academic accounts¹. Personal subjective experience is not seen as relevant to the scientific archaeological enquiry; the wider environment, including ourselves as active participants, is not part of the story.

Amerta Movement

For me, Amerta practice offers a way to explore and bridge these gaps and to integrate the academic with the experiential; non-stylised environmental movement and archaeology can inform and complement each other.

Amerta movement practice, like archaeology, is rooted in, and inspired by, place. Working, individually and with others, in different places, in all weathers and conditions, returning time and again to places chosen for their natural, historical and cultural importance, has always been at the heart of Prapto's practice. In such places, the environment and their significance for previous generations combine to support our own movement work. Of the many historic sites in the UK that have been used for Amerta work, the prehistoric stone circle at Avebury has seen the most activity and has much in common with places in Java where Prapto works. This has been my main study area. Movement sessions at Avebury up to two weeks long have been held regularly over several years, a pattern not unlike archaeological fieldwork with its seasons of survey and excavation.

Working with Layers

Recognition of layers is fundamental to human understanding. As well as being familiar in daily life (think for instance of clothing, cooking, gardening), the theme of layers, levels and sequences is

¹ Exceptions include the work of Chris Tilley, Julian Thomas and others taking a phenomenological approach. Others, such as historic re-enactors and neo-pagans, pursue forms of archaeological experience but mostly outside the mainstream.

common in the humanities, arts and sciences, whilst for archaeology and geology, the investigation of successive historic layers and deposits is the very foundation of the disciplines.

Amerta also works with layers. A key practice is the investigation of sensations, perceptions, feelings and memories; starting from daily life movement and then “*excavating, skin by skin, layer by layer, to discover what is the story, the motive, the source*”.² The process whereby memory and past experience arises, or is retrieved, to meet the present, is a form of somatic survey, excavation and processing of ‘finds’, where bodymind itself is an archaeological site.

On a historic site like Avebury, through movement-based research I can explore different layers of myself and the environment: the material and functional (my body, the earth and sky around me), the perceptual and sensual, emotional and attitudinal, cultural and historical, social and religious.

Whatever the focus of my attention, the aim is to maintain an awareness of both subject and object. Through a process of continuous self-reflexive investigation, a dialogue develops between ‘subject’ – myself as mover-in-the-environment, and the object of my research in the environment – an ‘environment-with-mover’ that includes me as an active participant. I am reading both myself and my context; surveying ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ landscapes – but as different views on a continuum rather than as separate places.

By moving and changing my position and attitude, my pace and focus of attention, I can investigate various perspectives and points of view. I become familiar with different aspects of the object I am investigating and I also acknowledge my own responses throughout the process: the feelings, memories and associations that arise. Attending to subtle sensations and perceptions, I notice phenomena that I may have previously overlooked or ignored because of habitual patterns of posture, movement or attitude. As I pass to and fro among the layers, I am as imaginative and exploratory as I can be without losing my reference point, my home ‘anchor’, or losing the line I am following. This line, a path of enquiry and expression, is a creative dialogue between myself and the environment, a co-creation through mutual influence and interaction.

Living Measurement

For exploring layers we need measurement. Archaeology, using tools ranging from hand-tapes to lasers, has refined the practice of

² Prapto speaking at Lemah Putih, 23 July, 2013.

objective measurement. But inevitably, these tools narrow attention to particular viewpoints and perspectives. Above all, they reflect our visually-dominated cultural perspective which privileges sight, ‘the sense of science’, and visual information. With this comes a sense of distance and separateness from an environment which, ‘flattened’ and objectified, lends itself to sub-division and two-dimensional representation. The measurements tend to replace the things they measure.

Embodied archaeological experience, engaging all the senses, challenges the primacy of sight and its view of a static objectified world, and points to a wider reality, to something more alive. Amerta movement too, through its multi-sensory exploration, loosens the hold of the hungry eye and broadens perceptions.

Amerta recognises that, consciously or not, we are in constant communication and adaptation with our environment, measuring our relationships with our surroundings and each other. To help me recognise this process, and maintain awareness of position and proportion in my movement and my relationships with the surrounding environment, I use the Amerta practice of *living measurement*. This is a dynamic, subjective measuring of body, mind and relationship which takes the basic movements of daily life – walking, sitting, standing, crawling and lying down – as a reference. Through this I check my ‘form’ – my shape and position, sensations and feelings; the focus and extent of my awareness, and how I am receiving and digesting information and experience.

Combining this personal measured approach with a creative exploration of varied points of view, I perceive differently and sense more connections than I would from conventional body positions or through narrowly-focused instruments. Various techniques help with this: *stopping* (pausing in my movement and becoming aware of my own form and condition and that of my surroundings); *window* (changing my viewpoint, my frame and perspective, opening fresh choices in direction and awareness); and *naming* (simple recognition and naming of the object of attention, sensation or activity at any moment). The techniques are similar to the Bare Attention technique used in Theravada Buddhist mindfulness meditation. As with meditation, there is both distance and involvement at the same time. By maintaining my connection with ordinary everyday movement and experience, and by expanding my awareness, giving value to the gaps and spaces between and not jumping through the layers or across distances, I develop a fuller appreciation and understanding of relationships between myself and the environment.

Position and Perspective

The Amerta technique *point, spot, place and space* enables me to work with different positions and perspectives, from close focus on a point to the whole of a place and its wider context. For close work at Avebury, I might focus on one stone in the circle, or just a small part of it. Using all my senses, I explore its materiality and the ‘functional’ realm of angle, line, volume, shape, texture, density, temperature – not just as objective data, but as psychophysical experiences – receiving, responding, translating and expressing the information and experience through my movement. At the same time I am aware of my wider context and surroundings: the grass and trees on the earthworks, other people, the weather and wider landscape.

Having established my home position, I extend my exploration into feelings and attitudes, imagination and ideas; the realm of personal and cultural stories. What am I, and the objects of my attention, ‘saying’? What stories are unfolding? I try to observe my choices and to notice habitual patterns in my movement, in my thoughts and feelings, and in my cultural preferences and attitudes – all of which might limit perception and awareness. In these ways, embodied movement-based research can assist academic interpretations, for instance by ‘ground-truthing’ ideas about the form and function of ancient sites and their relationships with the landscape.

Through these movement practices, I become more aware of the process of widening my perspective and view, and learn to recognise occasions when I hold my position too tightly or when I get pulled into the distance, lose my home position and ‘fly away’ into disembodied thought and speculation. Maintaining my sense of measurement and proceeding step-by-step, giving value to the ‘space’ between myself and the object I am investigating, I notice my tendencies to become absorbed or lost, or to unthinkingly assume a ‘stand-point’ or ‘leap’ to conclusions, in pursuit of particular sensations and outcomes.

There are direct equivalents in archaeology: becoming so absorbed in looking for coins that you miss the pottery; ‘chasing features’ but missing their context; digging too deep or too quickly through the layers in pursuit of desired results, or simply ignoring the evidence that doesn’t fit. A *living measurement* approach is required, with the right pace, right attention and intensity of looking, attending both to objects and their context; and also with a watchful eye on personal and collective habits and motivations.

Using Objects or Tools

Archaeology still retains a strong element of physical human interaction through digging in excavations or working in the landscape. Alongside the latest scientific instruments, the simplest tools – spades, trowels, buckets and barrows – are still the basic equipment for excavation. The physical work, and the textures, smells and sounds, help to balance our habitual emphasis on sight and open other pathways of knowing.

In movement-based work, simple items like a stick, a leaf, a stone or a cloth can be used as ‘tools’ to excavate the layers of personal and cultural memory and experience. Prapto introduced this to me whilst working on an Indonesian temple site. To my surprise, moving with a leaf and a stone opened the site to me, providing me with a ‘handle’, a way of orientating myself and of measuring my investigation of the many layers of the place; giving me a link to the people around me both past and present, and a way of understanding their own interactions with the many manifestations of leaf and stone.

The more time spent in a place, the more attuned and receptive we can become. It is unusual to spend longer than a few hours on a heritage site unless you are working there, and in both Amerta work and archaeological investigations, a site can become a ‘home’ – its latest phase of human activity. Whilst there, our activities and experiences may resonate with those of the earlier builders or users, providing a bridge between past and present. Movement-based research, extending beyond the reach of spoken or written language, expands these possibilities for correspondence with our forebears. When I trudge up the hillside or haul a bucket of excavated soil, when I bow or sing, or sweep the ground with a handful of grass, or walk along an old pilgrims’ path, I may well be following earlier footsteps, echoing previous activities and stirring similar areas of the autonomic nervous system with its deep layers of memory and experience. I cannot objectively verify such ‘correspondences’, but if I heed my own intentions and the environment around me, maintaining my connection with everyday life in steering between sentimental wishful thinking and cynical detachment, then I can deepen my experience and understanding of my relationship with a place and with its communities both past and present.

Circle, Oval, Square

Academic archaeology, like anthropology, employs categories like religion, ritual, economy, social networks and so on. In Amerta work,

for exploring different aspects of personal and cultural activity and belief, Prapto uses various open experiential forms or themes, such as *Human, Nature, God; Home, Road, Temple, Stage; Circle, Oval, Square*. These last three have been particularly useful in Amerta work at Avebury. Circle relates to the world of devotion and the attitude of “*bowing and praying*”; Oval relates to nature and the process of “*purification in circulation*”; Square relates to the marketplace and human dialogue, with the theme of “*unity in diversity*”. Working with other people in groups on these different themes offers insights into the functions and qualities of places and how they shift and change; and insights into our attitudes, behaviour and beliefs and how these colour how we see and relate to places and to each other. These themes also provide a language and shared ground for inter-cultural dialogue, both with contemporary cultures and those of the past.

Ritual, myth and personal belief are not usually recognised by archaeologists as being actively present in their own work. The relationship with ‘ancestor’ similarly goes unacknowledged except, perhaps, in a genealogical sense; ancestor is not seen as an active environmental presence. But archaeological practice inevitably expresses the practitioner’s attitudes and beliefs. It takes only a small shift of perspective to see the archaeological excavation of a site and its dutiful recording as a ritual of respect and devotion, of cleansing and purification, of translation and expression; and the archaeological approach itself, with its recognition and respect for the traces of the past and the people who left them, as a commitment honouring a shared history, a process of remembrance and an offering to the ancestors and to ourselves and our successors.

The Art Approach

The more I work with historic sites, the more I am aware of their multiple layers and multiple stories. They do not have a single story or fixed identity – any more than we do. There is no single Avebury: there are, and always were, many Aveburys. This diversity provides many openings and opportunities for understanding and many seeds for creative expression and art; many bridges to heal the sense of fragmentation and separation from a ‘lost’ past and an objectified environment. This creative diversity is central to Prapto’s *Gardening* approach, based on mutual respect and co-creative partnership.

Amerta movement work on historic sites usually culminates in crystallisations: individual and collaborative presentations,

installations and site-specific performances. Art, rather than academic reports, is the medium of expression. The world of archaeology and heritage is rich ground for artistic expression, and although academic archaeology is dominated by the paradigm of scientific objectivity, fieldwork is still essentially a craft, and art is never far away. Art is essential for interpretation: only through archaeological experience and imagination can archaeological facts be transformed into stories for understanding. And archaeology itself can be art: excavation and survey as sculpture, performance, storytelling.

Heritage sites are also frequently used for art events. Often, though, the site is simply used as a background setting, rather than as a partner in a creative dialogue between present and past. The most successful 'archaeological' art³ is embodied and participatory, responsive to place, recognises the role of ritual, and has breathing space for the unseen and unknown. Through such work archaeology and subjective personal experience can be integrated and expressed together. For me, Amerta Movement and its 'art approach' offers a way of individually and collectively exploring and creatively expressing the many layers, stories and manifestations of time and place, whilst still remaining embodied and connected; not using or exploiting places as background or simply 'material', but offering a collaborative expression, where environment and human, past and present, are in dialogue, speaking together.

~ ~ ~

Keith Miller has worked for many years as an archaeologist and landscape and buildings historian, and now works for English Heritage, managing the conservation of sites and buildings in southern England ranging from the Stone Age to last century. He first encountered movement work in the 1980s as part of his Satipatthāna mindfulness meditation practice with teacher John Garrie Rōshi, and has been practising Amerta Movement with Prapto and with fellow Amerta practitioners since the 1990s. A keen artist and musician, for several years Keith and his wife Kristina Bourdillon, with Simon Slidders, have been running movement workshops at Avebury in the UK.

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³ I am thinking of site-specific performances like those of Prapto himself, Sandra Reeve, Helen Poynor and Brighton-based Red Earth; writing by Kathleen Jamie and Robert Macfarlane; Seamus Heaney's bog burial poems; Andy Goldsworthy's work; and music and song, for me a basic constituent of place.

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