



Sonic Kinesthetic Forest: Fostering Ecological Empathy

Rennie Tang, Landscape Architecture, California State Polytechnic University Pomona, United States, rktang@cpp.edu

Lisa Sandlos, Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies, York University, Canada

Eleni-Ira Panourgia, Teaching and Research Fellow, Gustave Eiffel University, France

Sonic Kinesthetic Forest is an interdisciplinary research project that explores novel methodologies for studying trees and forests through embodied sound, movement and drawing practices. Our video article reflects on this interdisciplinary research through the lens of a performance piece in which embodied sound, movement and drawing practices were intricately interwoven with a forest landscape. The process of developing this artistic work has strengthened our conviction that embodied interdisciplinary knowledge is urgently needed to support and bring new dimensions to the wide array of nature-based climate action initiatives happening around the world today.

Keywords: landscape research; kinesthetic sound; multisensory; scoring process; performance



VIDEO ARTICLE

Available to view here: <https://doi.org/10.16995/jer.9165>.

Available for download here: <https://doi.org/10.16995/jer.9165.mp4>.

STILLS FROM THE VIDEO ARTICLE





VIDEO ARTICLE TRANSCRIPT

[Note: This is a transcript of a video article. Onscreen text appears left justified, while spoken words are indented. Individual elements from the transcript, such as metadata and reference lists, may appear more than once in the document, in order to be properly read and accessed by automated systems. The transcript can be used as a placeholder or reference when it is not possible to embed the actual video, which can be found by following the DOI.]

[0:10]

Sonic Kinesthetic Forest: Fostering Ecological Empathy

Prof. Rennie Tang, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, USA

Dr. Lisa Sandlos, York University, Toronto, Canada

Dr. Eleni-Ira Panourgia, Film University Babelsberg Konrad Wolf, Potsdam, Germany

Rennie Tang, Los Angeles, USA/Eleni-Ira Panourgia, Berlin, Germany/Lisa Sandlos, Erin, Canada

[Rennie Tang:]

As three interdisciplinary researchers we are interested in the potential for human beings to be in a symbiotic community with nature.

We explore the question: How can ecological empathy and agency be fostered using integrative experiences of landscape design, sound art, and dance choreography? We approach the topic through a collaborative and co-creative perspective and organize interactive workshops to guide participants in exploring forest landscapes.

[0:53]

How can ecological empathy and agency be fostered using integrative experiences of landscape design, sound art, and dance choreography?

Sonic Kinesthetic Forest

[5:21]

Choreography: Lisa Sandlos

Soundscape Creation/Workshop Facilitator: Eleni-Ira Panourgia

Landscape Drawing/Workshop Facilitator: Rennie Tang

Camera & Editing: Todd Buttenham

Dancers: Guelph Youth Dance

Blue Company: Azalea Borges, Marissa Chung, Sadie Clark, Sarah Cook-Cummings, Luka Hazl, Cybelle LeBlanc, Katherine Phippen, Meagan Pitts, Isabel Segal-Grossman

Young Company: Jillian Alac, Sasha Baldwin, Zoey Brown, Taylor Grace GillOrme, Audrey Lawson, Molly Linder, Maddy Major McDonald, Quinn Stewart, Kate Thompson, Katy Thomson-Bayne, Audry Withers

Special Thanks to

Guelph Youth Dance, Janet Johnson, Catrina von Radecki, Janet Groves, Lisa GillOrme, Kathy Major, Arianne Bouchard, Dave Mattar and Shannon Kingsbury.

Tree design in opening title by

Atticus Lee

[6:14]

[Lisa Sandlos:]

7 pine boughs, 12 cedar boughs, numerous sticks and branches of various lengths and textures, 22 pieces of compressed charcoal, 3 large strips of white paper rolled out across a studio floor – these were the raw materials that were used in the Sonic Kinesthetic Forest project in Guelph, Ontario, Canada in the spring of 2022. But more fundamental than any of these materials was the materiality of the body itself, as well as its capacity for expression through movement.

Lisa Sandlos on movement

[Lisa Sandlos:]

In the Sonic Kinesthetic Forest project, we worked with 29 members of the Guelph Youth Dance company (ages 9–17).

[Lisa Sandlos speaking to dancers:]

Strong weight, bound flow tension, stop and go, acceleration.

[Lisa Sandlos:]

As the dancers developed their own movement vocabularies contributing to shared narratives and interactive communication between themselves and the surrounding trees, they were asked to consider questions such as: What is the kinesthetic essence of a tree?

[Lisa Sandlos speaking to dancers:]

You are really dancing with the trees, imagine what a duet is between you and the tree, how it's moving with you.

[Lisa Sandlos:]

How does one honor the identity of a tree through movement? Who am I in relationship to the trees before me? How is this relationship changing me?

Sonic Kinesthetic Forest takes an open-ended approach that invites possibilities for human beings to shift consciousness and engage in a process that philosopher Kimerer L. Lamothé calls “bodily becoming” (2015). As Lamothé points out, by dancing, bodies can shapeshift, morph, and engage in processes of radical transformation and changes in the body arrived at through experiential movement are often accompanied by changing states of mind. Furthermore, by practicing “kinesthetic empathy,” a concept from dance studies (Sklar, 1994; Foster, 2013), movement is a modality for deeply knowing oneself and the Other.

[Lisa Sandlos speaking to dancers:]

It's actually cool that you're getting curious about what you're seeing in front of you. Some of you are picking the grasses and, just tuning in.

[Lisa Sandlos:]

In dance, moving bodies can become multiple and fluid subjects within emergent narratives while also communicating stories through gestures, postural shifts, movement dynamics, and spatial configurations. In other words, bodies-in-motion are the stuff of stories, and they are also the storytellers. The immersive experience of moving in a forest environment allows for humans and trees to co-create multiple narratives about their embodiment, their lived experiences, and their relationships (Liberone and Myers, 2019).

[10:06]

Meagan Pitts, Dancer, GYD Company

[Meagan Pitts:]

I remember at the beginning when we didn't have the music or the soundscape that we were using and we were doing the choreography it was really built around breath and how we were doing it together and as I was watching the video I remember doing the movement up and breathe in and out to the ground ... We were kind of involved in the whole process too as opposed to just a choreographer giving us all the choreography and then us doing the dance. This was much more integrated because we were working on the soundscape and the drawings and I think including both of those things definitely just kind of opened up for me new pathways to approach things and especially dance that like you can integrate all these different things in it and it's only gonna make it better and the experience cooler. Even if we just...even if the video at the end didn't have the charcoal drawings that would have still like changed the dance in a complete way and it wouldn't have been the same if we didn't do that part, so I think it's just that iterative process of adding in different things that are going to change the movement and change the whole piece overall.

Eleni-Ira Panourgia

[Eleni-Ira Panourgia on sound:]

Sound allows for embodied and sensory engagement with landscapes, spaces and bodies. We are interested in engaging with tree-body relationships through sound and listening and their multiple dimensions including temporal, spatial, material, ecological, biological, and geographical. We delve into forest landscapes to explore sound as a "continuous now", as Hildegard Westerkamp asserts (Westerkamp, 2019, p. 45). We focus on the sonic potential of human-tree relationships by considering both agencies in-relation. We take an ear-body approach as suggested by Tim Ingold —

"...instead of being a body with ears, it becomes something like an ear-body. The whole body becomes an antenna that is reaching out and attending to this unfolding of the events..." (Ingold 2023, p. 31)

— and consider sound as a medium that has the capacity to facilitate an acoustic and embodied understanding of presence with trees. We are listening and sounding while moving, touching and relating to trees and to each other. Methods of in-situ listening, sound-making with trees, vocalizations and body percussion are employed to engage acoustically with the forest landscape at Guelph and as the means to explore the transformative potential of spaces and bodies.

[13:15]

Meagan Pitts, Dancer, GYD Company

[Meagan Pitts:]

I think the relationship between the dance that we did and kind of the forest and how we developed the soundscape or it was developed in relation to kind of the water and the forest and then seeing how that worked because when we were dancing in the forest we didn't have the sound it was just, like I was saying earlier, the breath and the movement that we kind of all had together and that kind of connecting to the nature and the wind blowing and when we were by the river we could hear that and it all just kind of simultaneously worked together. We were also involved in making the sound. I remember when we brought in the sticks and other leaves and other nature stuff and we were also just using body sounds and clapping to start developing the soundscape that was a really cool experience to kind of develop that alongside the dancing.

Rennie Tang on drawing

[Rennie Tang:]

Our sonic kinesthetic methodology seeks to draw out the sensory, often invisible, qualities of trees that can be more effectively communicated through sound and movement. The role of drawing is to translate these embodied qualities to paper through a medium such as charcoal, focusing on the use of weight, tempo, speed and gesture rather than a visual depiction of the tree.

Through our research we seek to soften this separation between trees and humans through the practice of embodied drawing, one in which we use sensory-based tools to draw WITH trees rather than focus on the visual imagery OF trees.

Drawing is a form of bodily engagement that finds expression through a medium such as paint, graphite, charcoal etc. When drawing a tree, the act of reading and transferring the contours and textures of the tree to paper deepens our understanding of its form. While drawing as a visual practice connects us intimately to our subject, it also forms a distinct separation between the tree, as the thing being observed, and the artist who is observing the tree in order to draw it. Conceived as a pictorial image, the tree becomes a portrait frozen in time.

The pictorial, a static depiction of a landscape viewed from a single standpoint, creates a tension between observation and inhabitation (Wylie 2007) and distances the designer from their medium, the landscape itself (Corner 1992).

[Rennie Tang:]

For example charcoal may be used to express movement and sound qualities of tree branches reaching towards the sunlight or the meandering sensation of the roots as they seek moisture within the soil. As the artist manipulates charcoal on the page, they should be asking themselves: what are the qualities of these movements and what do these qualities sound like? Thus, embodied drawing WITH trees produces material residue and tangible marks that archive the ephemeral nature of sound and movement. The fluid exchange of knowledge between our disciplines provokes a generative spirit of co-habitation between humans and trees that we believe is instrumental in addressing our ecological crisis.

[16:57]

Luka Hazl, Dancer, GYD Company

[Luka Hazl:]

My experience with the charcoal was really fun. I remember specifically it being super messy and just everyone's hands feet, all our clothes got really dusty but I think that was also part of the fun of using a medium that we have never kind of used before but then in that setting, like I've done art with pencils or painting and stuff but never with charcoal and so what stood out to me that was really messy but I think that was part of the experience that we were kind of fully immersed in it.

Meagan Pitts, Dancer, GYD Company

[Meagan Pitts:]

Seeing how the movement and the soundscape transcended on to the drawings was also a really cool experience and just kind of a different way to visualize the project we were working on and seeing how the same movement and sound could transcend into two different forms of the charcoal drawings and then the physical dance that we were doing. So, it was definitely the first time that any of us had really used several different aspects in a piece that we were working on, which was awesome.

Luka Hazl, Dancer, GYD Company

[Luka Hazl:]

Dancing in that setting being in nature and in the forest made me more appreciative of it, it's something I've never done before like dancing in nature like that but then

doing it was really special like I think it was around this time in April that we filmed it and it was kind of just when all the flowers were starting to bloom and the sun was finally out and thinking like now this week especially the weather's been kind of similar it kind of had me thinking like it would be fun to go outside and dance outside and have that experience again.

Meagan Pitts, Dancer, GYD Company

[Meagan Pitts:]

Other parts I loved about it were just how specifically when the choreography was made it was kind of made in like thinking about trees and in nature and in the forest and when we were specifically doing those tree parts in the trees and the camera was kind of going between us swaying and the trees was really cool to see how the inspiration was so clear.

[19:17]

Lisa Sandlos reflections

[Lisa Sandlos:]

From my discussions with the Guelph Youth Dance company members about their experiences of the Sonic Kinesthetic Forest project, it was apparent that the dancers appreciated how sound art and landscape drawing could expand their range of expression. It was significant to me that the dancers understood that humans and trees have much in common— for example, embodied ways of knowing and communicating—and that humans can learn from forests about empathy, caring and cooperation. From working with the dancers in Guelph, as a dance/movement educator I am inspired to introduce other groups of dancers, or any humans who are interested in embodied expression, to Sonic Kinesthetic Forest experiences.

Eleni-Ira Panourgia reflections

[Eleni-Ira Panourgia:]

As a remote collaborator, I became familiar with the local forest through recordings, video footage and verbal descriptions shared by Lisa. This material allowed me to develop a connection with the soundscape of the forest and create a sound environment using recordings from the area and the same sound-making actions as the ones performed by the dancers. The composed sound environment allowed us in this way to enter into a sonic kinesthetic dialogue with trees, bodies, and collaborators across locations.

Rennie Tang reflections

[Rennie Tang:]

I appreciated the way the dancers moved with the charcoal, not only with their hands and arms but also with their entire bodies. Focused on action over depiction, their marks made on paper evoked the rhythms and sensations of the forest landscape they were envisioning. Furthermore, the pine boughs, fragments of the natural world, brought into the studio gave the dancers a visceral connection to the forest that they could touch and explore.

[21:10]

Abstract:

Sonic Kinesthetic Forest is an interdisciplinary research project that explores novel methodologies for studying trees and forests through embodied sound, movement and drawing practices. Our video article reflects on this interdisciplinary research through the lens of a performance piece in which embodied sound, movement and drawing practices were intricately interwoven with a forest landscape. The process of developing this artistic work has strengthened our conviction that embodied interdisciplinary knowledge is urgently needed to support and bring new dimensions to the wide array of nature-based climate action initiatives happening around the world today.

Keywords: landscape research, embodiment, kinesthetic, sound, multisensory, scoring process, performance

Sonic Kinesthetic Forest (SKF) is a collaborative project that highlights the potential for human beings to be in symbiotic community with nature. Through SKF, Lisa Sandlos, Rennie Tang, and Eleni-Ira Panourgia are exploring the question: How can ecological empathy and agency be fostered using integrative experiences of landscape design, sound art, and dance choreography? SKF organizes interactive workshops to guide participants in experimental modes of listening and sound-making, embodied drawing, and somatic-kinesthetic exploration of forest landscapes.

References:

Barbour, K. (2011) *Dancing Across the Page: Narrative and Embodied Ways of Knowing*. Bristol: Intellect.

De Certeau, M. (1984) 'Walking in the city' in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, CA and Los Angeles, CA: The University of California Press, pp. 1566–63.

Grosz, E. (1994) *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

- Grosz, E. (2001) *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*. Cambridge (Mass.): Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.
- Hackney, P. (1998) *Making Connections: Total Body Integration through Bartenieff Fundamentals*. Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach.
- Ingold, T. (2015) *The Life of Lines*. London: Routledge.
- Ingold, T. (2023) 'What do we Actually Mean by Sound?', *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, Special issue sound, fiction, occupation, pp. 30–31.
- Fernandes, C. (2014) *The Moving Researcher: Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis in Performing Arts Education and Creative Arts Therapies*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Foster, S. (2013) 'Performing Authenticity and the Gendered Labor of Dance' in Yvonne Hardt, Y., Angerer, M-L. and Weber, A. C. (eds) *Choreographie, Medien, Gender*. Zurich: Daiaphanes, pp. 125–38.
- Laban, R. (1966) 2011. *Choreutics*. Annotated and edited by L. Ullmann. Alton: Dance Books, 2011.
- LaMothe, K. L. (2015) *Why we dance: A philosophy of bodily becoming*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Liberone, A. and N. Myers (2019) *Root into the Planthroposcene*. [online] Available at: <https://youtu.be/PHEwLmK7dBM> [Accessed April 18, 2024].
- Meyer, E. (1997) 'The Expanded Field of Landscape Architecture' in Thompson, G. F. and Steiner, F. R. (eds) *Ecological Design and Planning*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 167–170.
- Sklar, D. (1994) 'Can Bodylore Be Brought to Its Senses?' *The Journal of American Folklore*, 107(423), pp. 9–22.
- Studd, K., and Cox, L. (2013) *Everybody is a Body*. Indianapolis: Dog Ear Publishing.
- Tang, R. (2021) 'Moving Across the Terrain: Perceiving and Performing the Landscape', *Performance Research*, 26(3), pp. 59–65. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2021.1977503>
- Westerkamp, H. (2019) 'The Disruptive Nature of Listening: Today, Yesterday, Tomorrow' in Droumeva, M. and Jordan, R. (eds) *Sound, Media, Ecology*. Cham: Palgrave Mcmillan, pp. 45–63. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16569-7>
-

References

- Barbour, K. (2011) *Dancing Across the Page: Narrative and Embodied Ways of Knowing*. Bristol: Intellect.
- De Certeau, M. (1984) 'Walking in the city' in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, CA and Los Angeles, CA: The University of California Press, pp. 1566–63.
- Grosz, E. (1994) *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Grosz, E. (2001) *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*. Cambridge (Mass.): Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.
- Hackney, P. (1998) *Making Connections: Total Body Integration through Bartenieff Fundamentals*. Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach.
- Ingold, T. (2015) *The Life of Lines*. London: Routledge.
- Ingold, T. (2023) 'What do we Actually Mean by Sound?', *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, Special issue sound, fiction, occupation, pp. 30–31.
- Fernandes, C. (2014) *The Moving Researcher: Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis in Performing Arts Education and Creative Arts Therapies*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Foster, S. (2013) 'Performing Authenticity and the Gendered Labor of Dance' in Yvonne Hardt, Y., Angerer, M-L. and Weber, A. C. (eds) *Choreographie, Medien, Gender*. Zurich: Daiaphanes, pp. 125–38.
- Laban, R. (1966) 2011. *Choreutics*. Annotated and edited by L. Ullmann. Alton: Dance Books, 2011.
- LaMothe, K. L. (2015) *Why we dance: A philosophy of bodily becoming*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Liberone, A. and N. Myers (2019) *Root into the Planthroposcene*. [online] Available at: <https://youtu.be/PHEwLmK7dBM> [Accessed April 18, 2024].
- Meyer, E. (1997) 'The Expanded Field of Landscape Architecture' in Thompson, G. F. and Steiner, F. R. (eds) *Ecological Design and Planning*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 167–170.
- Sklar, D. (1994) 'Can Bodylore Be Brought to Its Senses?' *The Journal of American Folklore*, 107(423), pp. 9–22.
- Studd, K., and Cox, L. (2013) *Everybody is a Body*. Indianapolis: Dog Ear Publishing.
- Tang, R. (2021) 'Moving Across the Terrain: Perceiving and Performing the Landscape', *Performance Research*, 26(3), pp. 59–65. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2021.1977503>
- Westerkamp, H. (2019) 'The Disruptive Nature of Listening: Today, Yesterday, Tomorrow' in Droumeva, M. and Jordan, R. (eds) *Sound, Media, Ecology*. Cham: Palgrave Mcmillan, pp. 45–63. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16569-7>

