

Rea Dennis

Our body recognises kindness: Moving, nature and labours unacknowledged

This article takes us outside. In the outdoors there is access to scale and perspective in ways that is reduced indoors. Contemporary built environment practices interrogate ideas of bringing the outside in and inside-outside living. As our lifestyles become increasingly more sedentary and the place of the device screen increasingly more dominant, the perspective and scale afforded by moving out of door acts to disrupt this and highlights our intrinsic need for off-task activity; not activity that is purposeless, rather activity that might discover its own meaning, movement that enacts knowing, practice that might be considered nomadic. Examine a cat's movements in what might be idle downtime; she is by the window, on the sofa, at the back door. Perhaps it is the airflow, the light or warmth she is drawn to or indeed avoiding. In our own lives we might be less attuned to the natural changes in airflow or the shifts in temperature. The demands of intellectual work and our working practices as artists and scholars can operate in contradiction to what a body needs. The research reported in this article has emerged in response to my own questions about being well within a neoliberal university structure. It asks questions of women's labour and explores deliberate off-task outdoor activity as creative practice and as scores in which somatic experience in nature might be noticed. It examines how the sensory play afforded by the outdoor practices in nature constitute self-kindness and discusses the necessity of nondiscursive meaning through two performance installations that emerged within the research. The final section, explores how the research is drawn on to conceive performative encounter *Moving out of Door (MooD)* which asks the question: *How might I design a performance that enacts this shift into a state of self-kindness for others?*

Practicing Outdoor: Body <=> Nature

Walking by the river I am overcome by an unexpected welling of joy. I am not joyful at the first step. Joy is not immediate. Rather, the feeling builds incrementally, as my body falls into rhythm with the environment, as time passes and the duration of the walk increases, and as my initial impulse or decision "to walk" morphs into the experience of *walking by the river*. Ingold and Vergunst (2008:2) state that "walking is not just what a body *does*; it is what a body *is*." For me, giving over to the walk is nourishing. To continue walking is a self-kindness. My body seems to

dematerialise and become air. At the same time the walking is a distraction and allows a shift in meaning potential for me. These walks underpin the *practice research* reported in this article.

Artists' curiosity with nature and the drive to investigate their interconnectivity with nature can be seen in Norwegian artist Annette Arlander's work *Becoming Juniper* (2015: np), a durational work in which she visited a specific juniper tree every week to hold hands. She asks how we might relate to a living being that we don't recognise as our kind?

A plant is hard to see as a partner in interaction although plants are actually our collaborators with regard to production of oxygen and carbon dioxide. Plants are our allies, since they produce, via their photosynthesis, the basic ingredients of our food. They are the true creators of our world. There is a kind of symbiotic relationship between plants and animals, in this case a shrub and a human being. Most plants are stationary, reliable to be there for us.

Drawing on Abrams' *Becoming Animal* and his consideration of the uninterrupted interconnectedness of body and the earth, Arlander (2015) underscores the sensing body as deep interactive knowing. Abrams states "The sensing body is like an open circuit that completes itself only in things, in others, in the surrounding earth" (2011 cited in Arlander 2015, np). My own inquiry, while not titled *Becoming River*, could well be titled *Being River*. My interest in rivers and waterways stems back to my earliest years living beneath the majesty of Wollumbin (Mt Warning) on Bundjalung country in norther NSW. The source of the Tweed River, which winds through Murwillumbah, alongside my Gran's place and on through the cane fields to the sea – is scored into every cell of my being from a childhood lived outdoors.



Fig. 1. Wollumbin, Bundjalung country (Mt Warning), from my mother's veranda, image courtesy of Christine Dennis.

In the doing, I know.

Growing up wild in rural 1970s Australia I found myself constantly between the mountains and the sea, in sunshine and rain and as part of the natural world. As an adult and as performer, exploring my connection with nature has been persistent. The way in which the outdoor seeped into my body as a child characterises the way I think and what I know. Karen Barad (2003) states:

[T]here is an important sense in which practices of knowing cannot be fully claimed as human practices, not simply because we use nonhuman elements in our practices but because knowing is a matter of part of the world making itself intelligible to another part. Practices of knowing and being are not isolatable, but rather they are mutually implicated (Barad 2003: 829).

Practice research is a methodology in which what *I do matters*. My practice is driven by the necessity of water. Water wets and flows, whets and seeps. As the waterways – deluge and trickle – are the aliveness of nature, my interior pulses with water and the materials of my life interact with their own intelligence, with a humbling agency.

My own experiences with physical frailty and a persistent dissatisfaction with the intellectual pursuit of understanding turned me toward nondiscursive practices and knowledge that is less tangible, less measurable. When I fell ill with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome some years ago, the discursive cacophony of instructions *to rest* overwhelmed me. Rest will restore me, heal and repair me. What I found instead, over about a six months period, was an immersion in sensory noticing. This fostered a deepfelt sense of my interior world and a compulsion to feel outward through all my senses. A window in the bedroom, framed a tree in the yard, and beyond the tree a vast blue sky, clouds scudding. I played with looking, with the intention "to see", and with what skin feels, and what movement knows. This sensory play revealed a strong impatient impulse toward movement. Rest was making me restless. It was my experience with illness that started me on the pathway to movement and perception as the central concerns of my practice and research. These knowledges have subsequently informed a series of performance research investigations that have support me to adopt these sensory plays as scores and to set about designing an approach to investigate the feeling of walking as nature.

We are all matter. We all matter.

How might research act to resist discursive meaning in a similar way to Barad's (2003) refusal of language. Barad asks, "How did language come to be more trustworthy than matter?" (Barad 2003, 801). In slowing down and thinking with nature, it is possible to consider how a more sensory approach to research can open spaces for co-existence with others where matter leads. Resisting the easy research output and persisting with questions that demand slower processes and deeper analysis can enable new perspectives and kinder approaches to emerge. Kathleen Gallagher (2018, 98) calls for critical examination of the expedient explanations and proposes fierce resistance to individualism in research toward friendships and a methodology of imagination and reciprocity. Shoshana Magnet, Corinne Lysandra Mason and Kathryn Trevenen (2014, 9-10) state that such methodologies resist structural oppression and can open spaces for women to impact on what are otherwise emaciating and reductive institutional agendas. Creative research practices such as walking enable an exploration of such resistance and also

support inquiry that seeks as affinity with nature. Walking performances offer a site for noticing myself as nature. In walking I practice noticing. I set up conditions to do noticing practice. Noticing affords me the opportunity to give attention to myself. Selma Sevenhuijsen (2014: 3) suggests that the giving (gift) of attention "is aimed at human flourishing".

It might seem that attention is primarily an other-regarding activity, something that we give to others. I argue that we have to take a different starting point. Practising active attention starts with our self, with a willingness to reflect on our own actions and reactions, with the intention to improve the quality of our caring interactions with others.

Meehan and Carter (2021: 3) argue that the attention to the body's sensations and the systematic call to stay present in somatic practice liberates embodied agency toward self-kindness through self-management. Placing attention on nature, on noticing the natural world brings me more fully into awareness of my interconnectivity. The performance practice enacts connectivity and is constantly in search of moments of immersion, moments of presence and of coming alive. It is in performance practice that questions of perception and experience can be explored. It is also within performance practices that agency and action matter deeply. The walking practice affords me a score which has rendered my body material alongside all matter in nature. It made all matter, matter (Barad 2003: 801). In the next section of the article, I share two examples of the way in which noticing in nature was reconsidered and extruded. The first practice example titled, *Geo-choreographic Flow*, a video and material installation, was discovered over three discrete practice episodes that investigated ways to speak about my experience of walking by the river. Constrained by discursive meaning making, I turned toward my archive of digital documentation. I had carried an iPhone as I walked and held it haphazardly to capture what was passing, as if the phone was seeing what I was seeing. It didn't of course. Watching the vision on my computer screen afforded little connection to my felt *riverbody*. What I found compelling in the documentation was the sound that was captured as I walked. This footfall felt meaningful to me. In listening to the footfall, I discovered further non-discursive avenues for presenting the findings. Projecting the video onto a screen or wall seemed to flatten the feeling and flatten the body out of the experience. Yet when I played with projecting it onto the river rocks I had reclaimed from an old project, the knowledge embedded in and accrued over the time of walking felt immediate and tangible. In the second example, *In Search of Tidelines*, the scores were deliberately set to enable an exploration of the molecular body, the momentum of walking and of gravity. *In Search of Tidelines* set out to explore the paper as a body. Trays of river water were set up and paper suspended so that the paper touched the water surface. I discuss this work later in the article.

Geo-choreographic Flow

My *riverbody* connectivity was manifest through an immersive installation. The installation aimed to bring the outdoors in and to interrogate sensory body nature connectivity. The installation engaged the audience members' embodied knowledge on the value of walking. It proposed that remembered walking is restorative and attention shifting, enabling what Tim Ingold (2013) refers to as training our attention. The projector threw light onto the table from

above. The table was covered with river rocks of various sizes. The effect was immersive and transporting. People lingered in the room, at times the light catching the tops of heads and diffracting onto the floor or the opposite wall. It activated the kinaesthetic body through the footfall amplified in the sound work. It activated the tactile body through the texture afforded by the boulder and the river rocks. The absence of the artist is contested by the presence of her footfall; a sonic presence that evokes the listener to presence, and shifts them between their own presence and absence, as attentions, as bodies, in nature, and in the world more generally where a somatics of thinking embed us in place and time.

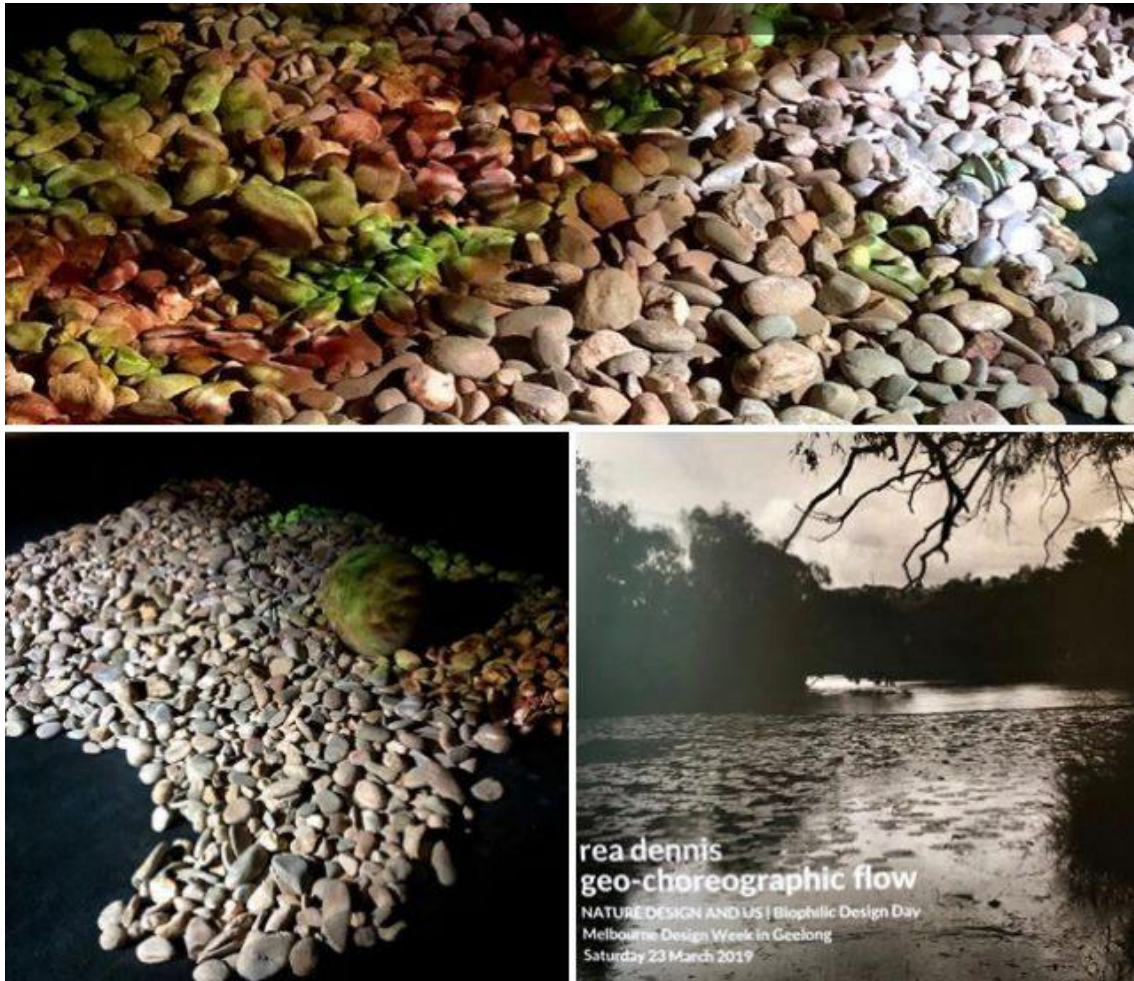


Fig. 2. Rea Dennis, *Geo-choreographic Flow*, 2019. Walking performance, video, and material installation (river rocks and boulders) from the exhibition *Nature, Design and Us*, The School of Lost Arts, Geelong. Part of Melbourne Design Week in Geelong with the National Gallery of Victoria, 2019. Image courtesy of the author.

Outdoor

Daylight

The score – river walking

Camera – handheld, oriented outward from the active body toward the environment

Indoor

Installation, video projection, sound design, natural materials

My practice shifted subtly and over time an ecology of practice emerged through the walking, sensing, video capture and gathering of natural materials in the creation of the immersive installation. The coherence of what might be thought of as an eco-aesthetic methodology is perceptible in which the system takes into itself materials, felt experience, concepts, actions, knowing, filming, writing. Everything matters: all the walks, the videos, what I have read, my experiences now and in the past, the environments in which these experiences occurred. The darkened room brought the sound centre stage. People became immersed and later shared insights into the way they became attuned to their senses, noticed the responses in their body and the ways they found the experience affecting. While the artistic practice might be seen as quite isolated, the connection to nature and to others was brought into sharp relief when the experience of the installation was contrasted with the abrupt extinguishing of light for deinstalling.

I was struck by the loss when the projector was disconnected and natural light let into the room. There was a nothingness and less. The elements of the installation had evoked my deep embodied experience of walking by the river. The light had enabled the river to flow. Physical properties of light are explained by particle wave theory. That is, light is both a particle and a wave. I picked up the stones one by one, grateful for their uniqueness and heartened by their agency. In the dust they left behind and its intersection with the materiality of the light that was the life of this installation, was born my next provocation.

How might I perform the affective dimension at the molecular level; not as small as atoms, but not as large as the dust the river stones left behind. The body is made up of molecules, it is porous, it is air.



Fig. 3. Rea Dennis, *In search of tidelines*, 2017. Time-based installation (walking performance, gravity, paper, water, and ink). From the exhibition *Moving out of Door* School of Lost Arts, Geelong, 2017. Image courtesy of the author.

In search of tidelines

In Search of Tidelines is an investigation of gravity, of falling/not falling, as a provocation of perceptual awareness, mental restfulness, and as an intentional strategy in creativity. Propelling my body mass, noticing effort but not exertion, I focused on giving attention to my resistance to gravity. The body's lymphatic system acts against gravity. Walking activates muscle and the muscles propel the fluid up through systems and channels to lymph nodes that act as filters and contain immune cells. A body that has been attuned to its own interior-exterior experience over time develops a unique knowledge about the body's limits, its materiality and its complexity. I set about exploring the feeling of the lymphatic effort and its kind actions of filtering harmful substances from the body. The outcome was a time-based installation in which porous paper, suspended from the roof, provided the body and river water with organic food colouring made visible the movement of the molecules against gravity. The water snaked up the paper carrying with it the weighted organic molecules. As gravity defeated the molecules of different weights, a tideline remained. Figure 3 shows the installation, while Figures 4 and 5 show the tideline residues once the water had completely evaporated.

Outdoor

Daylight

The score – body as mass, body as molecular

No camera

Indoor

Installation, paper, water, organic food colouring, Perspex trays, wire, and wooden dowel for suspension



Fig. 4. Rea Dennis, *In search of tidelines #5*, 2017. Time-based installation (walking performance, gravity, paper, water, and ink). From the exhibition *Moving out of Door*, School of Lost Arts, Geelong, 2017. Photo courtesy of the author.









Fig. 5. Rea Dennis, *In search of tidelines #1-#4*, 2017. Time-based installation (walking performance, gravity, paper, water, and ink). From the exhibition *Moving out of Door School of Lost Arts*, Geelong, 2017. Photo courtesy of the author.

The investigation of perception and time through materials and gravity opened space for vulnerability through creative practice and extended my sensory play. The crafting of a pattern of practice activities became the conditions in which I could recognise that I am nature, rather than being *in* nature and shaped the research design in which I am perceiving / noticing as nature. Barad explores the way in which the performative resists words and opens sites for alternate meaning.

A performative understanding of discursive practices challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent pre-existing things. Performativity, properly construed, is not an invitation to turn everything (including material bodies) into words; on the contrary, performativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real. Hence, in ironic contrast to the misconception that would equate performativity with a form of linguistic monism that takes language to be the stuff of reality, performativity is actually a contestation of the unexamined habits of mind that grant language and other forms of representation more power in determining our ontologies than they deserve. (Barad 2003: 802)

Through attention to my own somatic experience I encountered a textured flow of alternate meanings. In somatic practice experience is understood as layered; "the first layer is a flow of sensations ... words become a second layer" (Trujillo 2019, 9). Emma Meehan and Bernie Carter (2021) write that somatic practices enrich our "attention to the lived, subjective experience [and enable] creative modes of articulating experiences of pain which are difficult to describe" (Meehan and Carter 2021: 3). Springing from this somatic agency is "the desire to take ownership of one's own life experiences; this is somewhat akin to ideas of self-management" (Meehan and Carter 2021: 3). In an eco-somatic approach, we might understand these encounters as a return to yourself, to noticing rhythms, sensations, and atmospheres. These ideas enabled the research to incorporate questions of how such infinitesimal actions of kindness might be collective, with other human bodies. To explore how somatic attention is an act of kindness and how kindness informs the creative process and can foster a regenerative dynamic in which one might become familiar with how we perceive on the inside of the body, attuning to perception as strata of atmosphere, tactile, haptic, kinaesthetic, proprioception. Just as I set up opportunities to sift through experiences and meaning in my own practice, I was curious about what might enable others to engage in this sensorial awakening and somatic agency towards a kindness to self. It is not always obvious what conditions are required to support these investigations, yet my longevity and persistence with the inquiry afforded me clues to follow. In dynamic change, we must adapt. We evaluate our priorities and come to terms with our limitations. We thin out those things we expect to accomplish and design a new vision for the process, and from this a new, different, or adapted methodology to get there. As researcher and artist disrupting the habitual and the examining habits is made possible through the performativity of materials, attentions, and actions. In asking questions of how infinitesimal actions of kindness might be collective, with other human bodies, with nature, a clarity about practice out of doors emerged. I asked how I might share this with others. *How might I design a*

performance that enacts this shift into a state of self-kindness for others? The result is *Moving out of Door (MooD)*.

MooD: Moving out of Door

Moving out of door was designed as an act of solidarity.¹ A kindness drawing inspiration from the practices that have sustained me over years, across transitions and during periods in which time has felt like an inadequate measure, and where meaning sits beyond discursive practices. In some ways, the encounter was a choreographic act in the way Sandra Reeve writes. For Reeve, "regenerative choreography" sets about integrating "loving kindness" into its methodology (2018, 78). The inquiry sought to resist the emaciating impact of institutional agendas on women's approaches to creative practice research and to illuminate what might otherwise be neglected as the negative space in the lives of the female academic creative. Accumulating fragments of time where her practice was active. Not because of any expected exchange such as academic merit, or critical acclaim, rather as an experience of longed for vulnerability. A micropolitical act and a reclaiming of women's labour as an essential form of kindness to self (Magnet, Mason, and Trevenen 2014, 8).

Moving out of Door (MooD) was a one-day encounter held in a Victorian homestead on Wuthurrung country (Geelong) conceived as a co-created collective mingling with nature, aesthetic practice, and non-discursive meaning. Part exhibition, part conferral, part deliberate engagement with off-task or perceived distraction activities, *MooD* enacted a collective recognition of self-kindness and a disruption to outcome or productivity driven agendas. The early Victorian homestead, completed in 1855, plucked from the jaws of a swinging demolition ball in 2015 by Mary-Jane Walker, stands within an acre of garden. In front, three stately Norfolk Island Pines estimated to be over one hundred years old tower over the area. The proximity to the Barwon River, and the sense of immersion in nature afforded by the gardens, prompted its choice as the place of encounter.

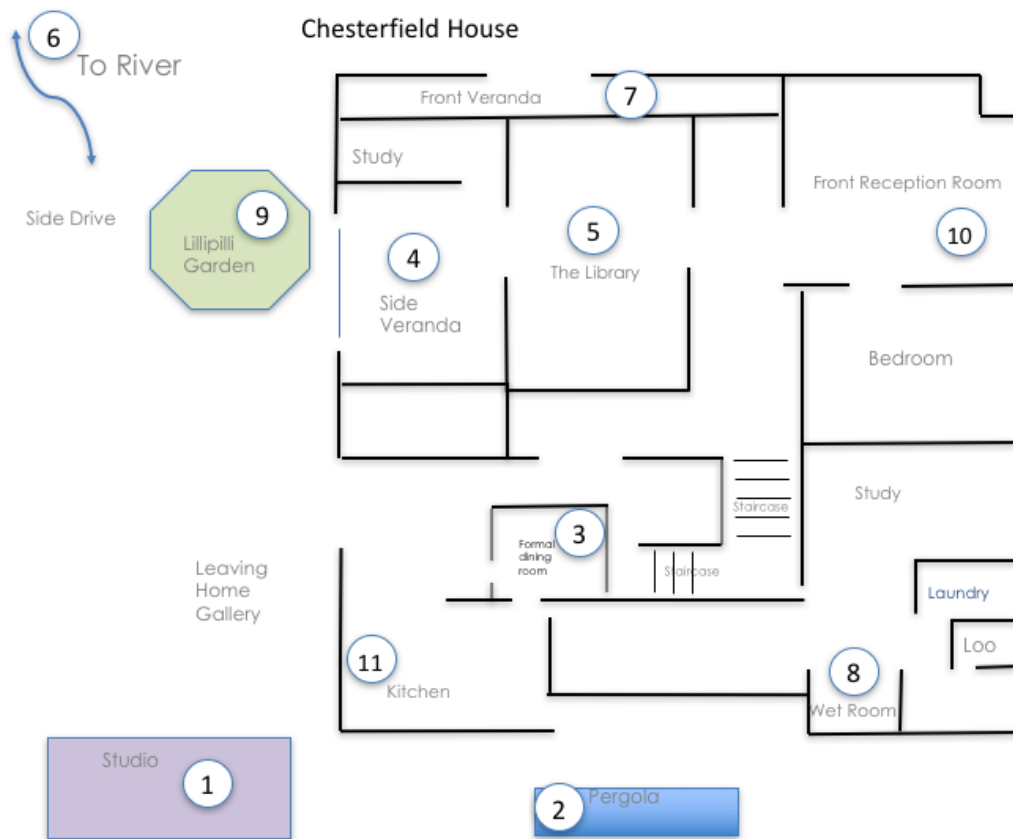


Fig. 6. Chesterfield House – the floor plan for *Mood*, 16 Nov 2017. Image courtesy of the author.

The house and gardens acted as a site for women's creative labours which we positioned ourselves over eleven areas: in the garden shed that was used for an art studio, under a pergola, on the front and side verandas, in the Lilly Pilly garden, and in the wet room, the dining room, the kitchen and the library. Works explored nest weaving (*The Gathering* – Mary Jane Walker), patterns and rhythms of habit in the intersection of walking and weaving (*Looming the everyday, In progress* – Jane Bartier), constraints of "not having much time" (*Body of Work: A study in Paper and Water* - Kate Gorrington-Smith, Magda Miranda and Rea Dennis), people, experiences, and happenings of the past, and present (*Hilary and the Lilly Pilly Tree* - Maddison Newman, see Figure 8), hoarding (*Empty Bags* – Olivia Fisher), Fragility (*Fragile – a sculpture* – Magda Miranda), food sharing (*Fair Share Fare - This is not catering* - Jen Rae with Lorna Hannan), and body as nature (*Geo-choreographic flow* – Rea Dennis).



Fig. 7. Pathway through Chesterfield House Gardens;² courtesy of the author.

Performance practitioners frequently question human impact on the environment and ask what sensory and non-discursive processes might have to offer in making a kinder world. Dance artist Rosalind Crisp of Omeo Dance (Australia) has cohered her action through the [DIRt](#) Project. With a focus on Dance In Regional disaster zones, *DIRt* was launched in 2017 in regional Victoria following devastating bushfires. It seeks to bring artists and ecologists together to explore how collaborative actions in arts and dance might "embody, understand and respond to the unfolding environmental crisis." Almost a decade earlier, choreographer Jill Sigman of ThinkDance (USA) strode out into the wilds of urban space turning her hands to make sense of the interactivity between the natural and manufactured in her work [The Hut Project](#) (2009-ongoing). Conceptualised as a site responsive work it was driven by questions of sustainability and shelter and has produced a series of site-specific huts made from found and re-purposed materials. There is a deepening of our agency when we shift from conserved practices that have shored up a world that is crashing around our ears and causing great damage to our bodies and our environment. Crisp and Sigman adopt a performative understand to design eco-aesthetic methodologies to bring audiences and artists together with concerns of the world. In the *Moving out of Door* experience we questioned assumptions about artistic labour/s and sought to resist neo-liberal productivity through noticing and valuing our experiences in aesthetic and outdoor activities.



Fig. 8. Maddison Newman, *Hilary and the Lilly Pilly Tree*, 2017. Socially engaged performance from the exhibition *Moving out of Door*, School of Lost Arts, Geelong, 2017. Photo courtesy of the author.

Concluding statement: Of sensorial kindness

Somatic practice has afforded a lens through which to consider the interconnectedness of the human experience *as nature* in this article. It also enabled a gathering together of the kinds of noticing that somatic practice enables and a consideration of forms of meaning that arise in nondiscursive creative practice research. The Japanese have a practice of forest bathing. Known as *Shirin-yoku*,³ literally, forest bath, this ancient practice is the next thing to be constructed as a western medical cure for "illnesses including cancer, strokes, gastric ulcers, depression, anxiety and stress ... boosts the immune system, lowers blood pressure and aids sleep" (Sherwood 2019: np). These types of kindness practices serve to reconnect us to our natural selves and to give attention to the flow *between* and to interrogate our vulnerability which Phillips and Taylor (2010: 7) suggest fuels our enduring ambivalence to kindness, as a species. The sensing body can listen beyond itself and intuits outwards so that it might complete itself "in things, in others, in the surrounding earth" (Abrams cited in Arlander, np). *Being River* is not simply a state, rather it is encountered over time, a methodology in which I, as the artist researcher, enact kindness in reciprocity. The distraction afforded by walking outdoors shifts meaning potentials for me and others in which activity that is perceived as off-task is far from purposeless, rather it engenders and discovers its own meaning and as such supports me in being well within a neoliberal university structure. The playing with attentions as research foregrounds and appreciates actions beyond outcome-driven activities and releases the silent potential of honest relational kindness that Sevenhuijsen (2014) advocates. The ethos of kindness in research and performance practice has its foundations in our extraordinary capacity to accommodate pain and loss, to perform emotion, trauma, and integrate crises. The skills and sensibilities of performers and makers to bring people together and to co-create, co-exist, and to honour life are essential for humane workplaces, and for all life on our planet. Contesting limited tropes through what we know and communicate un-makes and un-performs what suffocates and constrains. Experiences and encounters such as those of *MooD* resist habitual capitalist structures through a range a micro practices and contributes to an ecology of exchange in which we feel/sense into our understanding of what works for the body or not in the way that Sylvie Fortin describes (2018, 160). Sensory play and connecting as nature, affords a collective performativity of kindness and a culture in which to embrace the exploration of vulnerability together.

Notes

¹ Part of research project: *Creative Sustainability and distraction as a strategy in the artistic practices of women*, funding by Deakin University, the *Moving out of Door* design was inspired by the many conversations I have had since arriving in Melbourne in 2014 after living and working abroad. Participants were many of the women with whom I had had these conversations. Their invitation stated: "Within the inspiration for the day are the practices that have sustained me across transitions and during periods in which time has felt like an inadequate measure, and where meaning sits beyond discursive practices. Thank you for accepting the invitation to participate." (Dennis 2017)

² Across the day, there is time to wander and engage in the various practices installed around the house and in the yard. Artists included: Mary-Jane Walker, Jen Rae and Fair Share Fare, Maddison Newman, Olivia Fisher, Jane Bartier, Shelley Hannigan, Kate Gorringer-Smith, Magda Miranda and Rea Dennis. The day also featured a *Walking Library* hosted by Dr Misha Myers (see Heddon and Myers 2020).

³ See Harriet Sherwood's 2019 Guardian article "Getting back to nature: how forest bathing can make us feel better" <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jun/08/forest-bathing-japanese-practice-in-west-wellbeing>

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REA DENNIS is a performance practitioner based in the School of Communication and Creative Arts, Deakin University, where she is Associate Professor and heads the Dance and Drama programs. She produces theatre and performance that is embodied and socially engaged, and designs multimedia installations that are material, digital, and participatory and that interrogate questions of embodied knowing, somatic practices and nature, felt experience, perception and affect in/as performance. Rea has published on performance writing and autobiography, refugee performance, actor training, and theatre making. Her performance and installation works have been presented in UK, USA, Taiwan, UK, Brazil, New Zealand and Australia.

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