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To cite this article: Juliet Chambers-Coe (2023) Exploring Rudolf Laban's flow effort: new parameters of touch, *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 14:2, 158-176, DOI: [10.1080/19443927.2023.2184854](https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2023.2184854)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2023.2184854>



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Published online: 28 Jun 2023.



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Exploring Rudolf Laban's flow effort: new parameters of touch

Juliet Chambers-Coe 

This article explores the practice of Rudolf Laban's Flow Effort as a form of touch which is perceived in the energetic, subtle body of the mover. Central to the discussion is a series of reflections on studio practices undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic, in Laban for Actors classes, at Rose Bruford College in 2020. In these sessions students and teachers returned to studios wearing masks and maintained a two-meter distance: through studio practice we considered energetic touch without physical touch. In this article, I explore how Flow Effort can be perceived as vibration in the subtle somatic body of the mover, and how the interplay of intensive-extensive vibrational rhythms in body movement may constitute a kind of energetic touch. This field of 'energetic touch' radiates from the mover and is emphatically relational reflecting Laban's perception of touch as not simply proximal contact between people or things but as deeply regenerative and socially significant.

Keywords: Laban, flow, vibration, energetic touch

This article explores the practice of Rudolf Laban's Flow Effort as a form of touch which is perceived in the energetic, subtle body of the mover. Central to the discussion is a series of reflections on studio practices undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic, in Laban for Actors classes, at Rose Bruford College in 2020. In these sessions students and teachers returned to studios wearing masks and maintained a two-meter distance: through studio practice we considered energetic touch without physical touch. I suggest that Laban's notion of touch as 'fundamental sense' (Laban 1966, 4) enables the mover to see 'the amazing unity of all existence' (ibid) in which the subtle body's elements, 'solid; fluid; airy; etheric' (Laban, n.d., L/E/7/38) 'meet' the physical body's senses and 'touch'. As Laban notes, 'Tasting [is] Touchable; Smelling [is] Touchable; Felt to be touched; Audibly touchable; Visually touchable' (ibid). Our reflective

studio practices of 2020 explored the Effort quality of Flow, both Bound and Free, illuminating a crucial aspect of Laban practice which has hitherto remained unexamined in the canon of actor and dance training.

In response to my students' questions and concerns about touch and lack of touch as we re-entered studio spaces mid-pandemic, I wanted to find alternative ways to support their engagement with touch. We were told by Government agencies that touch could transmit the virus, rendering the training space a territory of unknowns, risks, and anxieties. Thus we were re-entering the movement studio without the possibility of physical contact, and with a fear of it. My students lamented the loss of touch and wondered: 'How do I know when I'm with someone without touch?' 'How can I affect and be affected without touch?' 'Will this change me?' 'How can I feel supported in my community when isolated?' and 'How do I exist with myself?'

With two-meter 'social distancing' in place it was impossible to even work with back-to-back or peripheral touch. Even eye-contact took on a different quality since we were all masked and could not read the whole face. But my students and I could feel energy, could still experience one another's physicality through the expression of feelings, use of space, rhythm, breath, flow, and what we understood but found difficult to name – the extended, invisible but tangible field of the 'subtle energetic body'.

The Subtle, soma

The notion of the subtle body has an extensive intercultural history. Subtle body concepts appear in numerous religious and spiritual practices which have their own technical vocabularies. It is not desirable or appropriate to impose a Western vocabulary on the predominantly Eastern traditions of subtle body concepts (as seen in Indo-Tibetan, Chinese and Islamic cultures), but it is possible to discern a common thread throughout the various world-wide practices which seek a contact with the subtle energetic life of the body through somatic encounters.

In broad terms, we can speak initially of the:

realm of barely conscious drives and desires, of the subtle levels of attraction and repulsion between people, the impulses, below or beyond individuals' conscious awareness, that lead them to behave the way they do. (Samuel 2013, 251)

Given this understanding of psychological aspect of subtle energy which is located within one's consciousness, I focus on Laban's perception of energy as an embodied, vibratory phenomena which is revealed in layers of somatic experience within movement practice. Laban articulates this through psychologically based terms in particular Carl Jung's theory of the 'Functions of Consciousness' which he correlates with 'Effort' - the expressive, dynamic energy of the body¹.

A contemporary understanding of the subtle body places it within the realm of the 'soma'² which is ineluctably entwined with the 'soul'. Sonda Fraleigh, somatics practitioner and embodiment philosopher reflects that

¹ Laban correlates Jung's Functions of Consciousness – Thinking, Feeling,

Sensing, and Intuiting (Jung 1971, 11) with the Efforts Space, Flow, Weight, and Time respectively (Laban 1980, 115).

2 Thomas Hanna defines 'soma' as "the body as perceived from within by first-person perception" (Hanna in Hanlon-Johnson, (ed) 1995, 341).

for the ancient Greeks, the soul is intrinsically interconnected to the body: what we might more accurately refer to in the study of movement experience as 'soma' which is always in union with the *psyche*. She suggests:

soma in both ancient and modern Greek refers simply to the organic physical body and that *σώμα και ψυχή* means body and soul (or psyche)[... ...]. Psyche is the triplicate unity that Plato posits as soul-spirit- mind, not separate from body[...]. For him soul (as psyche) is not a precious spiritual entity; it is part of aliveness in everything, also animating the "patterned energy" of art. (Fraleigh 2015, xx)

Taking Fraleigh's cue, I situate my understanding of the 'subtle energetic body' as deeply connected to the soma, and reachable through somatically informed movement practices. I use the term soma inclusively as *embodied conscious awareness*. Here, the subtle body and soul (as *soma-psyche*) are not 'precious spiritual entities'. Rather, as Fraleigh suggests, they are elements of our everyday lived experience. Somatic practice works directly to integrate these aspects whilst simultaneously bringing them into one's conscious awareness. Laban proposes somatic awareness in movement as an approach to working with the body-mind-spirit-soul of the subtle body, or 'ghost function' as he calls it (Laban, n.d., L/E/5/37).

In somatic movement practice we become aware of the interconnectedness of parts which have been named into mutual exile – body/mind/-thought/emotion – and other elements which have become largely disassociated and fragmented in our everyday lives. Through movement practice I aim to stir and sift the unconscious, so that energies which are usually below the threshold of awareness are made sensually apparent. Subtle energies can be brought to notice via physical practices, can be 'awakened', enlivening the individual in their 'soul' life which illuminates and grants meaning to physical movement. Through conscious awareness in movement the mover integrates multiple aspects of their *being*. The subtle and the material merge consciously and the mover may achieve a sense of integrated wholeness. The subtle becomes embodied.

What I suggest here is a multilateral description of the life of human movement, in which bodily movement involves a *fully sensate* organism, and where notions of the subtle body mark the site of energetic experiences and overlaps of the various systems we encode as 'soul' and 'spirit' and 'body' according to various cultural maps. It is useful to resort to a widely inter-cultural model of energy flow: that is to say, that all manifestations of movement, whether bodily or in thought, emotion or will, are comprehensible as vibrations.

Flow effort and 'vibration' as energetic touch

Beneath the surface of our awareness lies a vast world of vibration. Like water beetles busy skimming over the top of a lake, we often miss expansive realms that exist just below the very waterline of our immediate perception. (Gordon 2006, 26)

Laban positions the 'Flow' of body movement within his Eukinetic framework. It is a qualitative, expressive dynamic of movement which, like the other three Efforts (Weight, Space and Time) is constituted of two opposing poles. Flow Effort is both Bound Flow and Free Flow. However, whilst these poles of opposition are useful in discerning particular Flow quality in movement, in reality the embodiment of Flow is a continual flux *between* poles. Movement, however imperceptible, is continually shifting between Bound and Free qualities, altering in 'grades of intensity' (Laban 1980, 173). The element of Flow is 'always present in our movements and of very great importance if clearly manifested' (177). That is, whilst Flow Effort is always present, its significance is established via innumerable degrees in which it is intensified, foregrounded, or backgrounded.

In my practice I make a connection between Laban's Flow Effort and the notion of *vibration* in the body, as a form of energetic touch. For Laban, vibration is constituted by the invisible yet ubiquitous 'currents which are constantly moving between bodies' (Laban cited in Ruprecht 2015, 30). This is one mode of 'energetic touch' in movement work: an engagement with aspects of embodied experience which fall outside of the universally observable and describable, and which may not be constituted solely in the corporeal domain. The mover becomes a kind of seismographic receiver and transmitter of these 'currents' and 'waves'. These produce both gestural and progressive movements in the body:

We perceive the image of a gesture... light waves carry it towards our eyes. We hear the image of a gesture trembling at our ear. We also grasp [...] the shape that the tension of a thought takes on when it is transferred by unknown currents, which are neither air waves nor light waves, and which speak without sounds or signs. (ibid).

Laban leaves the notion of vibration quite mysterious in his published writing, referring to it as particular 'intensities of a rhythm' (Laban 1971, 41). He draws on the idea of vibration as experienced in sound to consider its aspect in movement, suggesting that:

almost invisible shadow-forms can be compared with the almost inaudible overtones in music. When a tone sounds, a series of sympathetic vibrations occur which are audible as very soft overtones. ... only when the emotional tone or action-mood is determined does the real trace-form become visible in the kinesphere. (Laban 1966, 66)

This understanding of invisible, almost imperceptible movement as *vibration* puts it at the heart of how we might become conscious of the initiation of movement and its location - as an 'invisible' inner impulse, or 'shadow' preceding visible actions of the body in space.

Whilst much of Laban's published writing analyses space and rhythm, in archived notes and lectures he writes in more mystical tones about the quality of vibration in movement, dance, and nature: the 'universal happening' (Laban 1971, 20) where:

the star-like scintillations of electric currents... have parallels in dance movements... The open book of the inner stirrings and eddies which are shown in our movements, is the source of inspiration and knowledge of the universe. (Laban 1984, 51)

In Guild lectures and in unpublished archival notes, he suggests that an understanding of energy and life's inherent rhythmical vibrations may take us beyond artistic creativity and could awaken our power to 're-create... lost and weakened relations and connections with the source of life' (Laban 1971, 21), reflecting his spiritual thinking and engagement with Rosicrucian philosophy. It is well documented that Laban was a member of a masonic order and was engaged in Rosicrucianism³. Interestingly, Rosicrucians believe that when subtle vibrations radiate from the body, they 'tend to reproduce themselves whenever the opportunity is afforded to them' (Incognito 2010, 121). In other words, 'these vibrations tend to influence others in their field of induction and tend to set up in others similar vibrations' (ibid). In the context of Laban's energetics, vibration understood as a Flow rhythm may be considered as both a part of the anatomy of the subtle body, as well as having a social function where the mover is energetically connected via these 'currents' to the collective unconscious, to the vibrating subtle bodies of others.

Vibration is a means of manifestation inside a rhythmical form as Laban suggests in his comparison with music and permeates all life, 'Miraculous vibrations... seem to constitute all matter' (Laban 1971, 56). By considering Flow vibration as a kind of rhythm, since 'the much misused word "rhythm" literally translated from the Greek means "flow"' (Laban 1980, 172), we can begin to engage with it in a conscious, bodily way in the subtle 'energetic' body.

What is Flow effort in practice, and how does it work as a subtle and tactile vibration?

I offer various activities for students to explore the polarized elements of Flow Effort. We explore Flow via breath rhythms, as grades of intensity, in varying degrees of body tension, in games, improvised dance and through music. My students describe Free Flow like this:

Free Flow is... Ongoing, streaming, I can't stop, out-pouring, peripheral, endless, expansive, liberating, nothing to hold on to, vulnerable, exposed, this room is too small for meeee!!!!, I don't care, I can fly!, I'm letting go, spinning, waves, circles, I can't hold this in, rush of feelings like a tsunami. (RBC student reflections 2019)

Laban describes Free Flow as movement which is 'unhampered' in its progress (Laban 1980, 18). Free Flow is observable in movement which originates in 'the centre of the body, flowing gradually out towards the extremities of the arms and legs' (ibid) and has a 'yielding enduring, accepting, indulging' attitude (ibid). Free flow is observable as outwardly

3 Rosicrucianism is an esoteric form of Christian mysticism. It is well-documented that Laban was a member of a masonic order and was interested in the Principles of Rosicrucian philosophy (Moore 2009; Preston-Dunlop 2008; Chambers-Coe 2022).

streaming movement of the body, but also as an attitude of release closely connected with the outward expression of emotion.

4 Effort is readily understood by Laban to be the physical manifestation of emotional, thoughtful, intuitive, and sensing life of the body (Laban 1980).

Laban corresponds Effort dynamic with Jung's 'Functions of Consciousness', and correlates Flow Effort with the Function of *Feeling*⁴. Emotional qualities are the 'inner participation' in Flow (Laban 1980, 115), revealing the emotional aspect of the psyche. In this matrix, emotions are either freely released in Free-flowing physical expression or are held-in resulting in Bound Flow tensions, where movement remains limited and close to the body. In my practice, actors naturally tend to respond to the emotional aspect of Flow and tend to experience it primarily as an emotional quality even when a movement task may highlight another, more functional aspect of Flow - as in being precise or imprecise in their movements. Flow is rarely experienced as a purely physical quality and is almost always connected to its emotional and energetic aspects.

Bound Flow exercises, which inwardly intensify feelings of restraint, caution, limitation and where the breath is held or shallow, produce a tightly wound intensive energy. Students describe Bound Flow like this:

Bound Flow is... tight, inward, careful, central, cautious, keep it all in, swallow it down, pull it in, tense and intense, limiting, control, controlling, creeping up not wanting to be seen or heard, I can't breathe, breath is high, breath is held, I'm holding on, I'm walking on eggshells. (RBC student reflections 2019)

Laban describes Bound Flow as movement 'hampered' in its progress (Laban 1980, 18). Bound Flow is revealed in movement where 'the centre of the body remains motionless when the limbs begin to move' (ibid) and has a 'restricting, constricting, withholding, fighting attitude' (ibid); 'the flow of movement is bound when the feel of it takes an inward direction, starting at the outer ends of the extremities, and progressing towards the centre of the body' (Laban 1980, 19). Touch becomes an important hallmark of Flow – in Bound Flow, the mover tends to condense their movement, to come 'inwards' towards the centre of the body and the limbs fold touching, colliding, tightening, and compressing as in a kind of process of crystallisation. In Free Flow, the mover seeks more expansive ways of moving in space, beyond the body and in connection with the environment and others. Touch in Free Flow is generally looser, fleeting and encompassing. Ensemble mood played a significant role in the intensity of Flow explorations, with moments of infectious negativity, shared delight and spontaneous group singing. Student's comments include:

"That was a rollercoaster of emotion"; "I couldn't believe how BIG my body became in Free Flow"; "I hated Bound Flow, I thought I was going to break, I thought everyone could see me disappearing". (RBC student reflections 2020)

This kind of information grants an understanding of students' experience of Flow as connected to their whole body, their history, their use of space and relationships. I suggest that the body's direct encounter with Flow

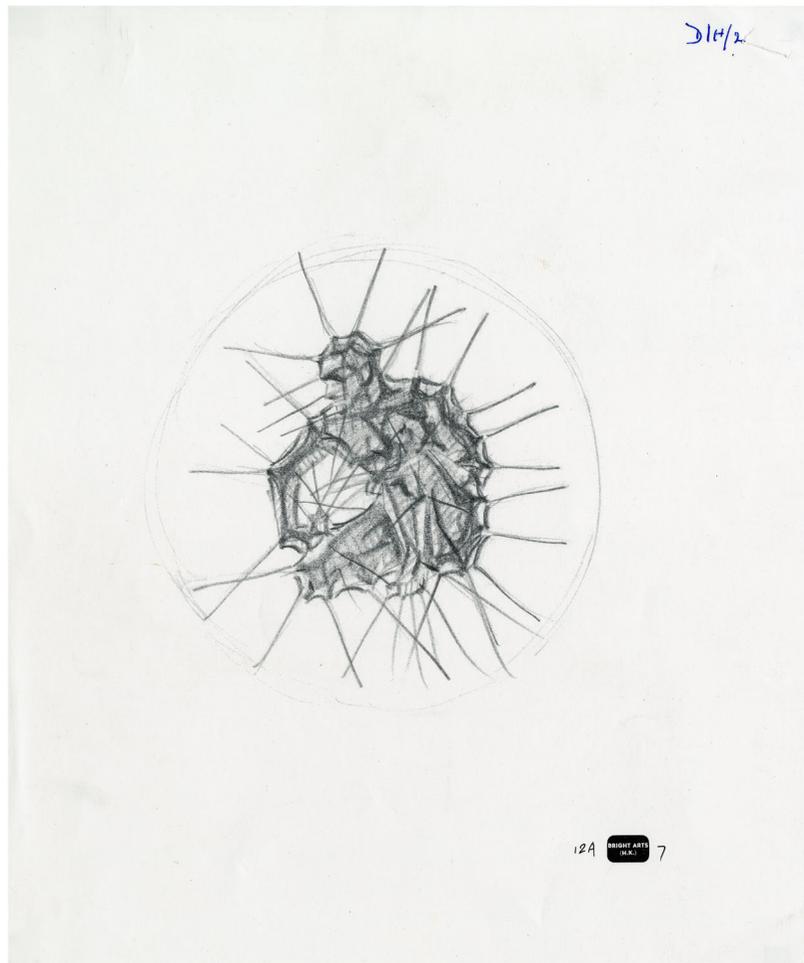


Figure 1. Figures within static form\figure within a circle (Ref No: L/C/4/4). This is a copy of an original drawing held in the V&A Museum (Ref THM/253); copy held in and obtained from the Rudolf Laban Archive, University of Surrey. No re-use without permission.

Effort awakens impressions made in the subtle, energetic body. These are, as Laban says, 'shadows' of feeling, thought, or other sense impressions.

Whilst Laban's taxonomy for movement description synthesizes thinking, moving, and naming somatic experience, his development of movement notation and use of visual images provides additional means of depicting movement and exploring its meanings. In the following drawings by Laban, we glimpse how he understood movement and its vibrational flow as a process of intensive-to-extensive activity. In the image above (Figure 1) lines of tension extend through and within the body into space: as if space were intensifying its vibrational impact on the body, binding and pulling the body which reciprocates in its intensity of inner feeling. The relationship of body to space is taut, defined, contained. Energy is pulling inwards against the outward pull of space.



Figure 2. Figure Drawings\Impressions of Figures (Ref No: L/C/3/12). From the Rudolf Laban Archive, © University of Surrey. No re-use without permission.

In the next image (Figure 2) the same mover as described in the example above is experiencing Bound Effort, but this time without the extensive lines of space-body tension. The dark pencil marks, and zig-zag outlines communicate tension, a pulsation of in-coming/out-going energy which is more contained and remains close to the mover's body. The position of the mover (deep) and the firm pencil marks indicate Strong Effort, a natural affinity of Bound Flow. On the right, the mover's tension is dispersed, a feeling of out-going energy, expansive, spacious as in release, Free Flow in quality. The position of the mover (high) also suggests Light Effort, a natural affinity of Free flow.

The next image (Figure 3) was drawn by a student after a class in which movement focused on the experience of Bound Flow. It suggests a similar sense of the intensive, energetic qualities of the movement experience where subtle Flow vibrations both radiate haphazardly, and close-in



Figure 3. © Juliet Chambers-Coe 2020. RBC student drawing.

on the body, almost obscuring the face. Lines of tension emanate from the body into an energetic ‘field of vibration’ around the mover.

Another student made this next image (Figure 4) directly after a prolonged improvisation exploring Bound-Free and Free-Bound qualities in preparation for work on the ‘Dreamlike’ Inner Attitude (Laban 1980, 79). They remarked: ‘In Bound and Free, space emanates from me and I am nothing in the centre’. In this instance the focus is on the space surrounding the body, the ‘field’ created by the body’s Flow Vibration. When set alongside Laban’s image of the mover on the right of the image in Figure 2, we get a sense of how the body might ‘give way’ to or open porously to space in Free Flow.

Witnessing Flow Effort is a complex activity. Unlike weight, space and time Efforts, Flow permeates all movement in greater or lesser degrees because it is ‘the connective tissue (the cement) by which the W S T



Figure 4. © Juliet Chambers-Coe 2020. RBC student drawing.

elements are brought and help together in a basic effort' (Laban, n.d., L/E/5/82) - and it is often only discernible through the reciprocal, energetic feeling it induces in the witness.

Flow has an almost inexplicable, intangible quality to it which is not present in the other Efforts. Although the Efforts of Weight, Space and Time can be measured as mechanical 'functions' of body movement, the 'cause' of their embodiment is 'less easy to explain' (Laban 1980, 19) because it is often accompanied with a certain degree of Flow: 'the inner impulse of a mysterious autonomic will' (Laban 1966, 18).

Flow vibration as the location of 'impulse' – an inner 'touch'

If we pursue the idea that Flow energy is experienced in the body as vibrational currents *in* and *between* bodies, we might usefully draw on Polish director Jerzy Grotowski's notion of 'Impulse' as a useful way to harness this feature of movement for acting students. Grotowski says:

Before a small physical action there is an impulse...the impulse is a reaction that begins inside the body and which is visible only when it has

become a small action. The impulse is so complex that one cannot say that it is only of the corporeal domain. (Grotowski, cited in Richards 1995, 94)

For Grotowski, the ‘impulses’ preceding action are ‘profoundly “inside” the body and then extend outward’ (ibid) in much the same way we might consider Laban’s description of Flow Effort which starts in the centre of the body and emanates outwards to the periphery, into dynamic space and as mysterious ‘currents’ of energy which communicate thoughts and feelings. Grotowski’s ‘impulse’ indicates to the actor ‘an essential current of life’ (Richards 1995, 95) and is the preconscious movement of the action ‘already born in the body’ and is ‘invisible’ (Grotowski, cited in Richards 1995, 94). The impulse is not the ‘same’ each time, but varies in its ‘In-tension – intention’ (Grotowski cited in Richards 1995, 96) and is highly nuanced, relating to ‘physical memories, to associations, to wishes, to contact with others, but also to muscular in/tensions’ (ibid). The same description of Grotowski’s ‘impulse’ can be applied to Laban’s Flow Effort - internal, invisible impressions made in the mover in Free or Bound tension.

Grotowski’s notion of impulse is a preconscious gathering of energy, or impression preceding action. For Grotowski, it is not the *amount of energy generated*, but the *quality of energy* which matters. In the same way, the quality of movement dynamic experienced as discrete Flow rhythms in Laban’s Effort matrix generates subtle energy, or *vibration*. This transforms into action from its initiating impulse or, remains internally experienced as emotion, thought, sensation, or image as ‘impressions’ in the subtle body. These impressions communicate through their vibratory frequency and field of induction.

My practice research suggests that we perceive and emit these subtle vibrations via our perceptual structures in thinking, feeling, intuiting, and sensing⁵ in their pre-conscious/or unconscious state in the subtle body. The perception of an impression from outside the body or from within moves the senses and has an affective, vibratory ‘frequency’. This frequency either intensifies and breaks through into physical action or remains an inner ‘impulse’ expressed in the breath and Flow quality of the mover or, as Laban suggests, their ‘shadow moves’ (Laban, n.d., L/E/33/8, 25). We get closer to an understanding of the location of the interplay between inner impressions and outward action by looking at Laban’s sketch below (Figure 5).

Laban charts the flow of exchange between intensive to extensive movements. He focuses on the flow of inner activity which begins with ‘impressions’ as ‘carriers of supposed significance’ (Laban, n.d., L/E/33/8, 25). These reach the ‘5 senses’ and the ‘receptacle of the 5 shapes’ (ibid), presumably referring to the five Platonic solids⁶ which he uses to map the geography of movement in space. Laban says that whilst ‘dynamospheric currents are secondary in respect of their spatial visibility, they may be regarded as the primary factor in the actual generating of our movement’. This means, in reality, that Effort and its spatial ‘form’ in

5 This theory is articulated by Laban in *The Mastery of Movement* (1980), and in the table below.

Motion Factor	Function of Consciousness	Affluence, or ‘Power of’
Weight	Sensing	Intention
Space	Thinking	Attention
Time	Initiating	Decision
Flow	Feeling	Precision

6 Laban modelled human movement in Platonic geometric structures (cube, octahedron, tetrahedron, dodecahedron, icosahedron), as a way to map the longitude

and latitude of movement in space and which is deeply entwined with the sacred geometry of the body's anatomy.

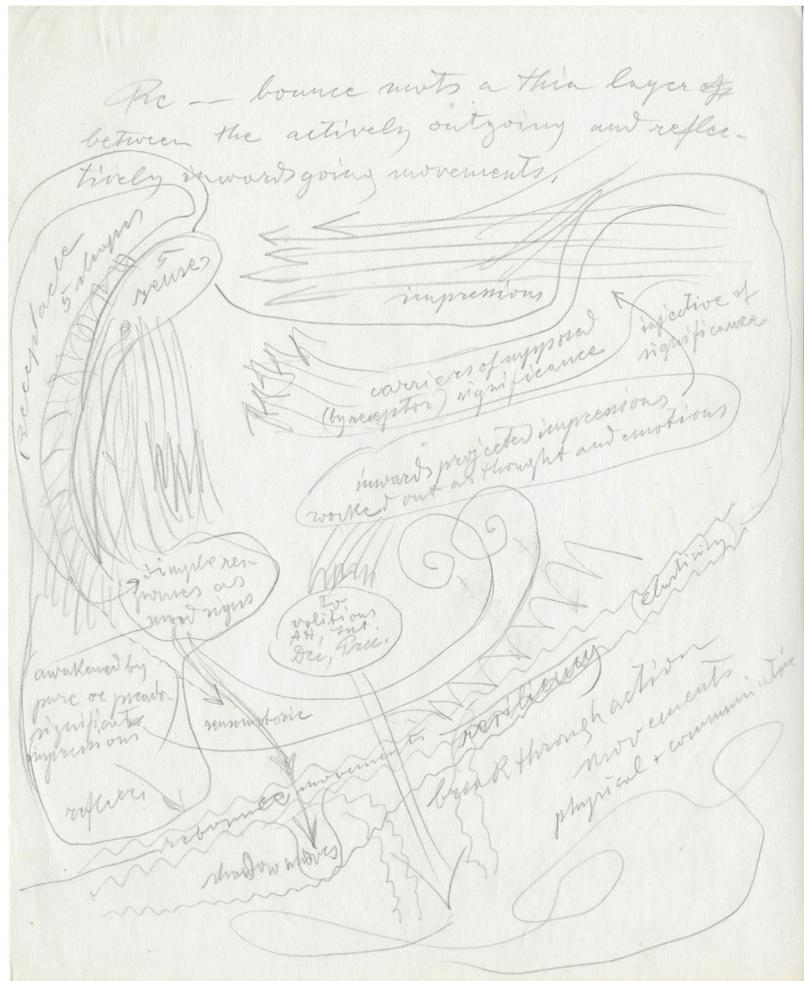


Figure 5. Lecture notes on various subjects. Notes and diagrams by Rudolf Laban: diagram of primary scale as basis for other patterns, diagrams of dial structures, physiology of work, the discovery that man continually lives in two different media, notes on types of movement, personal abilities (Ref No: L/E/33/8, 25). From the Rudolf Laban Archive, © University of Surrey. No re-use without permission.

body movement 'are entirely inseparable from each other' (Laban 1966, 36).

Another kind of 'impression' (on the right side of the page), which Laban terms the 'inward projected impressions' are 'worked out as thought and emotions' (Laban, n.d., L/E/33/8, 25). These are expressed as inner volitions in Attention, Intention, Decision, Precision, but may also be 'injective⁷ of significance' (ibid). These connect to 'outer' impressions made upon the mover which then reach the senses and form of the Platonic shapes. Laban refers to the 'volitions' of Attention, Intention, Decision and Precision as the 'mental effort preceding purposive actions' (Laban 1980, 114) which also may 'accompany' the Effort attached to them (ibid).

⁷ 'Injective' is a word derived from mathematics. An 'injective' function maps distinct elements of its domain - in this case the domain of "inwards projected impressions" -

to elements of its codomain, which is in this diagram the realm of "impressions" coming in from outside which reach the senses. Both "inwardly projected impressions" and "impressions" are "injective of significance" meaning they map across domains but maintain their distinctiveness.

From the five senses, the mover's sense impressions which precede action become 'simple responses as mood signs' which are 'awakened by pure or pseudo-significant impressions' resulting in 'reflexes' (Laban, n.d., L/E/33/8, 25). These reflexes and the 'sensomotoric' aspect then occupy the permeable boundary between inside and outside, the location of 'rebound movements, resiliency, elasticity, and shadow moves' (ibid). Only the 'inwards projected impressions worked out as thoughts and emotions' (ibid) which have the strength of volition in attending, deciding, intending and precision and are able to 'breakthrough' into 'action' where movements are 'physical + conscious' (ibid).

Rhythmanalysis and Western philosophy scholar Paola Crespi has also examined this image and other drawings by Laban in the archive, recently (Crespi 2019, 64). She points to Laban's depiction of rhythm across several of his drawings as 'a quantifiable phenomenon (Takt) unfolding in space and a qualitative variable' (Crespi 2019, 55). She describes Laban's topological modelling of Effort dynamics in geometric forms as his attempt 'to overcome the binary division of inside–outside and also to conceive of a continuous space of transformation without interruption' (Crespi 2019, 56) which she says defines Laban's understanding of rhythm. This is a useful reading of Laban's sketches, but I would like to suggest that there is greater subtle, somatic knowledge of rhythm, beyond the interplay and blurring of intensive-extensive body movement – as subtle body vibration - being explored in this drawing, which is difficult to name but which is evident to the mover when experiencing Flow Effort in movement practice.

The impressions made in the mover's inner life as mapped by Laban in this sketch are a quality of vibration, experienced as pre-conscious Flow, Weight, Space and Time Efforts which 'touch' the mover, since all 'which we see, hear, smell or taste are literally tactile impressions' (Laban 1966, 29). What is significant when considering subtle energy is the in-between territory of the embodiment of sense impressions Laban describes: where 'Re-bounce meets a thin layer between the actively outgoing and reflectively inward going movements' (ibid). This suggests two things: firstly, that sense impressions 'meet' and result in a kind of 'touch'; and secondly that the 'thin layer' between 'actively outgoing' and 'reflectively inward going movements' may be the site of activity of the subtle body and is where 'In a mysterious way the home of a personal volition is born' (Laban 1975, 19). Energy is metabolised in the subtle body located in the territory of sense-impression.

In *Choreutics*, Laban refers to the natural vibration of the body the heartbeat and its timing, 'a conventional unit of time, the second' (Laban 1966, 29). He describes the heartbeat as 'a contraction of a part of the body' (ibid) which is ultimately a 'crystallisation'. This is significant when we consider Laban's use of crystalline forms in mapping space surrounding the moving human body. The body extends into space through 'rays' of movement (Laban 1966, 14), whereby movement from the centre of the body travels toward the periphery and into space. But this can be considered in opposition, whereby 'the outer parts move towards a centre, as for instance in crystallisation' (Laban 1966, 29). Like the

forming processes of dynamic crystallography, space contracts around the body, condensing inwards, whilst internal dynamics collide and create form. This kind of movement becomes significant as it produces 'touch' or 'collision' of parts of the body, 'causing an impact or pressure' (ibid). The vibration resulting from the heartbeat generates an 'electromagnetic field' which 'envelops the entire body and extends out in all directions into the space around us. The heart's electromagnetic field – is by far the most powerful produced by the body – can be measured many feet away' (Childre & Martin, cited in Williamson 2022, 151). According to HeartMath Institute founder Doc Childre, 'The heart's electromagnetic field is dramatically affected by emotional states' (ibid) which as we have seen, are experienced in the binding and releasing of Flow. Furthermore, the heart's electromagnetic field responds to that of others, either in 'coherence' as in feelings of 'care' and 'appreciation', or stressful feelings which 'produce incoherence' whereby 'The resulting energy is transmitted through our bodies, and the fact that it radiates outside of the body has tremendous social implications' (ibid). We pick up on another's vibrational energy and sense it as compatible or incompatible with our own. The extending and condensing of the body via the vibrations of heart-sensed emotions in Flow Effort reveals that space 'appears and disappears between and around objects and in the movement of the particles of the object', since 'matter itself is a compound of vibrations' (Laban 1966, 4), which are emphatically relational. Flow vibration as 'touch' both communicates and creates form in movement of the body, rendering space visible, because 'space is a hidden feature of movement and movement is a visible aspect of space' (ibid).

Laban's focus here on the sense of touch, or collision as in dynamic crystallography, also has a social significance, as he perceives touch as a 'fundamental sense' (ibid) which he says humans are increasingly losing capacity for – 'his increasing tactile incapacity' (Laban 1966, 6). Laban's perception of touch is not simply proximal contact between people or things. Rather, movement with 'all its significance for the human personality can have a regenerating effect on our individual and social forms of life' (Laban 1966, 8). Laban's reference to the heartbeat as an illustration of vibration as touch, or collision, indicates the vital depth of a somatic-temporal connection, an awareness which allows access to the rhythmic, vibrational qualities of our bodies: and these bodies are reflective of the world around us, including our relationships with our environment and with other people.

Flow, vibration – energetic touch in the Covid-19 studio

Using Flow Effort to connect without touching became a potent tool in live classes during the Covid-19 pandemic. Without physical touch we were still touching in our energetic Flow, in the connections of our subtle bodies. One student described this experience as follows:

We were reaching out for each other. I had the experience of what I would describe as feeling someone's aura. I am not spiritual, but... this

experience today of reaching out to someone – you could feel a part of them that extends outside of their body which you could say is hair, heat or electromagnetic fields, I could feel them without touching them. I don't mean you just sense their presence; I mean that your hand, your body will tell you that you can **feel** the other person even though you aren't actually in physical contact. (RBC student reflections 2020).

This response echoes that of the esoteric philosopher Rudolf Steiner, who argued that a person's energetic, subtle body or 'aura' could be depicted with the use of colour and photographic techniques. Occultists such as Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater called these vibrations 'thought forms' (2016, 12–14), created when:

animated matter responds very readily to the influence of human thought and every impulse sent out, either from the mental body or from the astral body ... such a thought or impulse becomes for the time a kind of living creature, the thought-force being the soul, the vivified matter of the body. (ibid)

Occultist literature is very much a growing concern of contemporary academia and despite its historical positioning as 'pseudo-scientific', a number of highly regarded contemporary scholars are turning to esoteric concepts of the occult to describe subtle and somatically embodied phenomena⁸. Indeed, much literature on Laban's historical engagement with occult organisations points to the somatic and creative relevance of his ideas, as Laban scholar and practitioner Valerie Preston-Dunlop suggests, 'Rosicrucian subjects appear again and again in Laban's choreographic work' (Preston-Dunlop 2008, 11). Laban's Rosicrucian thinking and practice may be understood as an antecedent to the contemporary somatics movement and forerunner of 'new age' ideas about the body and somatic practices which seek contact with the 'energetic' body for health, balance, and dynamic expressivity⁹. Furthermore, an understanding of Laban's fascination with the occult and spiritual practices of Rosicrucianism and Theosophy, illuminates his much misunderstood use of sacred geometry in mapping the interrelationship between subtle and physical movement. The icosahedron, commonly referred to in theatre and dance practice as the 'kinesphere', and the 'Effort cube' are both regularly used in much theatre and dance practice and pedagogy without reference to their spiritual significance and root in Neo-Platonic thought via Plotinus¹⁰. An understanding of occult thinking, therefore, can support a deeper and more embodied comprehension of the movement of subtle energy and its bodily and spatial manifestations, as Preston-Dunlop concurs, 'Laban seems to have developed the conviction that the body holds truths which, through sensitising practices, can be reached and should be sought' and that 'these [Rosicrucian] ideas formed Laban's decisions and lifestyle. The evidence is everywhere in his practice and in his writings' (Preston-Dunlop 2008, 12).

The image below (Figure 6) of a 'thought-form' is an example of the spatial and energetic manifestation of the subtle body and is 'intentionally

8 Occultism and esoteric studies are not only included in academic journals such as *Intellect's Dance, Movement, and Spiritualities* and are the core enquiry in others such as *Correspondences – Journal for the study of Esotericism* to name just two, but the field is also well established in other highly regarded academic publishers such as the Oxford University Press and their Oxford Studies in Western Esotericism book series; additionally the State University of New York Press publishes extensively on the subject, see Bogdan (2007) and Faivre (2000).

9 See Preston-Dunlop (2008), Moore (2009), Doerr (2008), and Chambers-Coe (2022).

10 In archived notes and typed manuscripts Laban writes extensively about Plotinus's notion of 'the One', the 'centre' of the body and the 'centre' of movement

in-flux as embodying the 'Divine'. (Laban, n.d., L/E/26/56, 20).

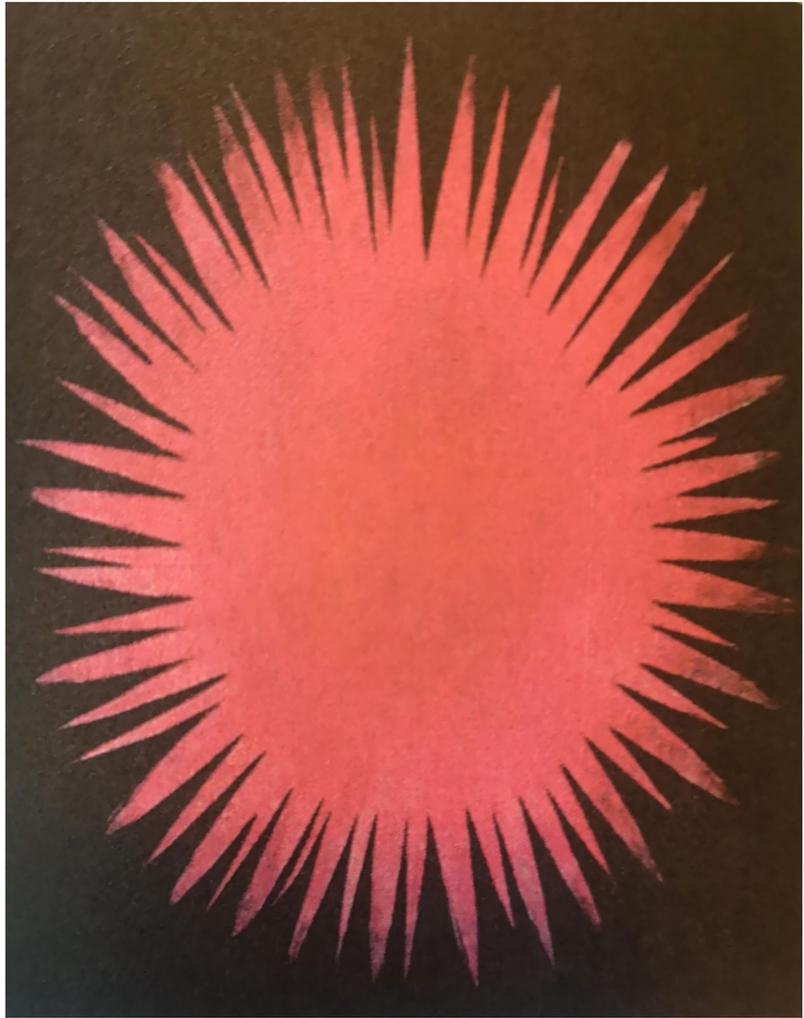


Figure 6. Besant and Leadbeater (2016). "Radiating affection" in *Thought Forms*. Aziloth Books. Image in the public domain.

generated' (Besant and Leadbeater 2016, 24). Our studio practice 'intentionally generated' Flow vibration. By thinking and moving with Flow as vibration, students found connection to each other which might be modelled as 'thought-forms'. Students reported feeling attuned to the energy of their partner and the whole group, 'I feel my body differently through the group, I mean, I felt connected to the class's heartbeat' (RBC student reflections 2020).

Based on Laban's assertion that 'The opposite of movement is stillness', yet stillness too is 'full of tensions' (Laban, L/E/6/62, 22) we continued to play with Flow as an 'energy'. In exercises which foregrounded stillness through pausing the Flow of movement, students reported feeling a strong inner energy which they found difficult to describe in words. However, one student referred to it as a 'shoosh', a 'sparkle' - a feeling or echo of the eternal energetic held within. She reflected on the feeling

of inner impulse in connection with another mover, and the decision to move into action which comes from it. She wrote:

I notice when you're engaging with others and breathing out/releasing and you choose to stay with the person, that's when the excitement happens, when there's a 'shoosh', a sparkle – that's the place you want to find as an actor. (RBC student reflections 2020)

Conclusion

When the mover experiences the vibration of Flow Effort as a 'pulsation' of contact without touching another, and experiences it as physical contraction and expansion – then invisible currents of Flow Vibration radiate and communicate. This may be what Laban describes as a 'refinement... of the social life of the soul' and as the fostering of a 'desire for harmony' (Laban, cited in Ruprecht 2015, 30). Vibration experienced within the self and the collective stimulates a 'force which enables us to resonate forever with the primordial universal dance of being' (ibid). Through embodied knowledge of her own subtle vibrations of Flow energy, the mover can better attune to those around her. Another's vibrational Flow energy refracts within her own embodied experience.

I suggest that vibratory, Flow energy is inherently social, embodied, and illuminated when directed in contact with another. In this kind of practice, I came to understand how myself and my students have occupied a third space: the threshold between energetic and physical contact, the place where the conscious and unconscious merge and where I most experienced feelings of wholeness and connection.

Via this teaching practice my students came to re-appraise their bodies and movements as sensitive agents in the creative process. They became confident in self-directing their movement work, and experienced their movement creativity as being informed by the energy of their subtle soma. As such, they started to believe in their somatic authority. They started to see their body, movement, creative energy in most intricate connection to others. They came to see their body not as a mere 'material' which could not be touched or could not engage with touching, but as possessing a subtle energy through which tactile creativity finds its expression in the subtle Flow of movement.

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