

For Louise Vanneste, the idea of *expanding the notion of choreography, or even choreographing beyond the body*, corresponds to what dedicated research time can offer when removed from the contingencies of a finished show or the linearity imposed by performing for the stage at a fixed point in time. *Pangea, Towards the Territories of the Imaginary and Hybrid Practices* is, above all, an opportunity for experimenting with the sensorial, the literary and the political, but also for the inclusion of practice in collective experiences, in the shape of collaborations and public moments.

Through her contact with geologist Sophie Opferglet, Louise Vanneste combined theoretical knowledge and observations of rock metamorphosis in a reversal of perception—in terms of the scale of the (dancing) body and the natural elements in which it evolves—as well as of the hierarchical relationships between different classifications of living beings, notably by re-evaluating, with humility, the place of the human.

The research was an occasion to integrate philosophy and literature to the practice, helping to connect spaces for choreographic reading and writing that had hitherto remained separate.

Somatic practices also played a role in “undoing” in order to heighten sensation, be receptive to new emotionality and mobilize knowledge sets in service of physical dynamics and intensity.

Although a solo entitled *3 Days, 3 Nights* came out of this research period, the chosen format for sharing its breadth and depth was not a show, rather a weeklong series of encounters, workshops, collective readings, etc. in what Louise Vanneste likes to call a *gathering*.

Attentive to how she should document the perused texts, chosen words, notions made her own and the freedom to draw, Louise Vanneste entrusted the publication of research fragments to Emmanuelle Nizou and Esther Denis in the form of an *Abécédaire* [Alphabet primer] that connects sources and outputs in a reference manual for future collaborations.

The following interview was conducted in Brussels during the summer of 2023.

(A/R) To designate your research practice, you speak of “expanding the notion of choreography”, and this approach has been at the heart of your work for many years now. What need does this expansion toward other disciplines respond to, in your dance practice as well as in your thought process?

(L.V.) My choreographer’s desire is to choreograph ecosystems, and not just choreograph bodies. I was never able to think about choreographic writing without considering the air, the space, the ambient sounds, the light, the smell, the material, etc. I have this desire to take the human being out of the spotlight, to not keep it separate from its environment. As humans, we are constantly interacting with light, air, gravity, temperature, vibrations, smells, sounds, etc. What we do and who we are is in constant relation to the environment in which we are immersed. We might be able to take an intellectual distance but in reality, we are a product of what surrounds us, of this immersion.

Choreographing beyond the body is also a political stance: to resist the divisive hierarchical thinking that isolates humans and places them on top of the planet’s hierarchy. It’s also a desire to mix up artistic forms, to listen to what’s happening without limiting oneself to the framework of a show, dancers, linear composition. It leaves the door wide open to adventure. The further I go in this direction, the greater my desire for more expansion, all the way toward a choreographic writing that can be literary, oral or written. Bodies are still there, just they can be resituated. With literary choreographic writing, the bodies are imagined by the spectator. Like when you read a book, there are mental images that come up as you read.

In this context, the human body remains a true breeding ground for movements in thought and the physical movements of the world. A being becomes even more of a mediator and dance is the result of a passage, an experience, of a proximity and attention given to a phenomenon, an element, often non-human.

The body finds itself able to unfold an intelligence, a sensory awareness, a political and poetic thought process. The choreographic adventure becomes a search for ecology, the wisdom of inhabiting borne of broad transdisciplinary gatherings which include non-humans and help us to emancipate ourselves from a polarized order in favor of the richness of relating.

(A/R) What was your stance when you first started out with this research? At what point in the development of your practices did this come into play?

(L.V.) It was the appearance of this notion of dramaturgy that pushed me to begin a research period through FRArt, and this came up during a Dramaturgy residency at la Bellone in 2017 with the center’s director, Mylène Lauzon. While we were discussing my work, she pointed out areas of dramaturgical concerns that she could see. This brought to my attention the zones that were still blurry for me, like narration, non-narration, univocity or even abstraction. It also fed into an approach that was already active through my readings, but which I kept separate from the dance studio and my creation. By taking more conscious steps in these dramaturgical dialogues with questions such as: What is the choreography of the environment? What is the choreographic orality (notion that appeared during the creation of *Atla*)? What is a show that subverts the sequence of beginning-middle-end?—I naturally came to a point where the choreographic practice needed time dedicated to specialized research, where experimental speculation and trial and error could be at the forefront.

(A/R) Did this period of research represent a continuation of your practice, or a break from it?

(L.V.) It’s a continuation, because I’ve always valued taking time for research in my creation process, and at the same time, it’s a break, since the goal was to research and not create a piece, which definitely changes things! It allows you to stay longer with the question rather than the answer to that question, and to appreciate the process rather than anticipating a result. It allows for the unknown to emerge, for surprises. And the “answers” come up out of that process.

(A/R) For the project *Pangea*, you mention the “inclusion of the non-human” as well as a “hybridisation of practices and knowledge”. What fields did this lead your research to, and how did this change your way of addressing the public?

(L.V.) I went deeper into scientific practices, actually. That’s where I discovered, above all, an even richer stimulation for the body than I ever could have imagined. I remember when I took a geology class on rock metamorphosis. A few days later I was in the studio and experienced a surge of situations, movements and physical qualities that gave rise to an entire choreographic vocabulary that I’m now going

to use to create the solo *3 Days, 3 Nights*. Listening to bio-engineer and geologist Sophie Opfergelt talk about rock metamorphosis also shifted the center of my perception to a different scale. I felt myself enter the rock, zooming in on a smaller, more detailed scale and recognizing the intense dynamic activity there, even though a rock appears immobile to our “usual” scales of perception. The way I see and relate to this non-human element changed. It’s an experience that I’m constantly on the lookout for in my work: to be overcome, unsettled.

The artistic, political and choreographic concerns come to me more and more now as a hybrid gathering. I approach the tool and action of the “imaginary” through a choreographic research practice but also in relation to different scientific and somatic practices (Body Mind Centering¹, Fascia²). You start to question how you relate to images and the way in which you translate and manipulate them, but also how they might manipulate you. It’s like a big game that unfolds according to various points of attention: the body and a poetic approach to movement, its anatomy, physiology and the cerebral system or even scientific language. They make certain phenomena visible from a specific observation point and through what this seeks to understand. All of this meets on a shared field of exchanges and activities. And again, it unsettles us and makes us relate. So you get out of your “niche.”

I discovered a scientific community that was interested in a form, I’d say even an esthetic, that could feed the practice of a researcher, that could literally inform these academic researchers through a sensory approach based on other points of departure, other viewpoints, other ways of responding to what is perceived. It weaves together different ways of listening and reacting to phenomena, and to the intensities of the universe. For example, Sophie Opfergelt is currently working on Alaskan permafrost, the ice melt phenomenon. The melt is accelerating and in places where observations did not include movement (since rocks and ice have a long and slow temporality), now she sees that there is indeed movement (an acceleration in the movement of time). It made her want to work with me on these movements, with the body as a mediator.

Regarding the audience, it seemed obvious that I should develop ways of sharing this hybrid circulation. I try to include this presence and these scientific contributions, or others, not only in the presentation formats but also in a purely artistic form. This could mean going from a body-based workshop directly to a collective reading or a performance followed by a meeting between artists and scientists and artistic practices other than choreography, or even a transdisciplinary conference or a performance commissioned by a scientist. I want to be generous in sharing this hive of relations and exchanges that have punctuated the process.

I was fortunate to pursue the FRArt work in the context of an artistic residency at a university (UCLouvain) where I met professors, researchers and students in disciplines as diverse as bio-engineering, biology, literature, neuroscience, etc.

(A/R) Two creations came out of the project *Pangea*: a solo created in collaboration with a geologist, and a quintet that borrows what you qualify as “dramatic” depth from the opera. Could you say more about these two pieces?

(L.V.) The solo *3 Days, 3 Nights* arose from the time spent working on plant life during my previous creations, and above all from the change in perceptual scale that I experienced after meeting geologist Sophie Opfergelt. I decided to turn my approach toward the non-human, toward geological phenomena, that is, the chemical and physical elements of erosion, rock metamorphosis, fire combustion, etc. All these phenomena that seem to be high-intensity. This brought out a new dynamic in my body! Parallel to the choreographic score, I also develop a literary score that uses many voices to combine choreographic testimony and scientific information/observation (for example, that a rock’s metamorphosis occurs under pressure and heat, blue flames occur at 2000°C and yellow-orange ones at 1000°C).

From my hybrid experience of observation at a more microscopic scale, and of writing about what is happening in my body and my imagination while I dance, I noticed a phenomenon: that engaging with the microscopic made me enter a very strong emotional state. To come back to the example of the rock, imagining myself inside it, to physically embody the phenomenon of when two rocks meet under a certain pressure and heat, all this led me to very emotional territory. These emotions stemmed from a sensitivity to the connection, the exchanges, the transformations between the geological and the human that revealed the life of a world beyond its visual self. I was surprised by this trajectory. I passed, for example, from the material of rock to the sensation of density, the largeness of the mountain, all the way to a sensation of mountain-mother and motherhood. By writing out this trajectory and naming these sensations, I realized that I was dealing purely with relationship, with connection. This made me want to explore a form with others, and to gear the choreographic writing towards writing emotions as well. Hence the reference, albeit distant, to opera, which is related to my childhood experience of seeing *La Traviata* and how drama was staged to the fullest; enacted, lived.

(A/R) You organized a public event to bring together the thinkers and authors who accompanied your practice, as well as all the people with whom you

collaborated on dance and choreography, sound, scenography and lighting, and also editors for a publication.

What does it mean to you to share, to make public, this plurality of thinking, of disciplines and the relationship that connects you with these people and these forms of knowledge?

(L.V.) It was a week of gathering everyone together! I felt like, together with my collaborators, I was able to put into place a truly generous journey that took us—the contributors together with the public—toward an entire field of perspectives rather than one single point of view. Depending on what it wanted, the public could engage in a somatic and/or artistic practice on their own, participate in artistic exchanges in the form of an installation, a performance, a reading, but also listen to exchanges between artists and other people from diverse fields such as literature, philosophy and geology. It was an experience we would love to reiterate as a form for sharing! It feeds what I would like the piece to contain as well as the mode in which I hope to share it.

(A/R) In a conversation between you and Tristan Garcia, there’s a particularly significant moment that touches on the following line of questioning: “What is the body we use to write philosophy or literature?” Which brings us to “somatic writings”. Could you tell us which experiments you undergo in the writing process that involve the body in a mindful and voluntary way?

(L.V.) I’ve been developing a writing that I would define as *otherly conscious*. I’m actually seeking to undo an overly intentional and frontal way of dancing in favor of a dance that listens and that shares an experience. Somatic practices such as Body Mind Centering and Fascia are precious tools that help the body-mind strip away its tensions and habits, and open us up to a very subtle imagination and finely-tuned physical and physiological awareness. Just as geology incites me to view things from another perspective, to change my perception and scale, somatic practice re-centers us on our body and from within the envelope of our flesh. These two practices revealed themselves to be symmetrical processes, mirror experiences. One moving toward the non-human, the other toward the supra-human! Both are territories, vacant areas, places, habitats, relationships, etc.

Somatic practice enables me to attain what I call an “undone state”, that is, to begin with a release in the body, bringing in stillness and rest. It’s an unloading of the accumulated events that make up our daily lives. There’s a muscular release and availability in the body that sets in. The majority of us are voluntary, active beings, especially at this time in history. It’s interesting to undo that intention before entering into movement, dance, improvisation. It allows the body to develop a state of listening and to be moved by what it receives, hears, feels, even more than through reasoned

intention with a pre-established objective. So the body is available for instant writing, a here and now where it can fully embrace whatever it is busy with.

Aside from this experience, it also helps performers to be more in tune with their bodies, to take care of them by ultimately offering the body the possibility to expand its range of experience and undo habits.

Somatic practices also enable us to visualize what makes up our body. A somatic practice always includes anatomical exploration.

(A/R) *Pangea* is presented as a way “towards the territories of the imaginary”. What is this imaginary that unfolds when it comes into contact with philosophical and geological forms of knowledge, in particular?

(L.V.) Essentially, it reveals an intensity. You form a connection with the people who observe, think, and speculate on the matter in the universe that we inhabit and that inhabits us. It’s stimulating, like little stories of varying complexity being told to me. This stimulates my mental and embodied imagination. I can try to counteract my habits, alter the scale and take a kaleidoscopic approach.

Theoretical practice informs how I think about the form and context for sharing, its abstraction and its narrative. Of course, there are also political stakes that aren’t necessarily announced as such, but which influence and orient the process. I’m thinking essentially of the writings and meetings with Tristan Garcia (*Laisser être et rendre puissant*, 2023) and Dénétem Touam Bona (*La Sagesse des lianes*, 2021)³.

(A/R) Is language something that supports the imaginary?

(L.V.) More than language, it’s the sharing of experience or knowledge that can become a support for the imaginary. Language is, of course, the way of communicating (literature, a lecture, etc.) but it’s the way of sharing that comes to stimulate our senses. The way in which things are transmitted, told, explained, feeds the imagination and the processes. It can be the language of an image, an explanation or a metaphor. What is remarkable in the conversations I had with philosophers and researchers, is that they are so completely

immersed in their research, practice and thinking. So here we go, intensity again.

With regard to how language is used in my literary practice and through a form of choreographic testimony, it allows me to share a choreography of the invisible: that which moves the dancer and their relationship to the performance space, sound, etc., the anatomical description of movements (flexing muscles), but also what happens in one’s own mental activity and imagination.

(A/R) What is written through your dance practice?

(L.V.) Shifts, transformations, personal stories, anatomical descriptions and a great many other possible things. Writing that comes out of experiences that the body undergoes through listening practices, embodiment, translation and transformation. Sometimes there are true stories, sometimes an abstract line. It’s not so much about the content as it is about how we journey through the body’s experiences. Of course, I outline some territories, for example plant life, geological phenomena, etc. but I’m interested in the bifurcating choreography within these territories, that is—and this brings us back to the beginning of our interview—a choreography that includes the multiplicity and diversity of what we go through, and goes through us, when we have an experience. I want to share this experience through the formal and esthetic choices that make up a piece.

By extension, I’ve developed this written practice parallel to writing choreography. When the two evolve together, it reveals the invisible parts of the choreography of my body, in my body, of my thinking. The spectators have access to an invisible part of what is being danced and choreographically written by way of the words.

(A/R) Maybe we could discuss the documentation and transmission role you attribute to the *Abécédaire* created alongside the research and that, for now, exists in only one copy?

(L.V.) With Emmanuelle Nizou, a research collaborator, there was also a desire to write

about the process and each of the collaborators’ experiences. The idea of a glossary emerged as a way to compile and organize our recollections and sources of inspiration and influence. The meetings were recorded and then excerpts were transcribed in the glossary. The latter is both a resource for the team and an object that recounts my choreographic and artistic trajectory with the collaborators. A digital version of it is shared on my website⁴ and was laid out and published by the artist Esther Denis in a standard format for sharing, as well as in a large, higher-quality format for each of my research collaborator’s personal archive.

In the hopes of expanding the notion of choreography, in the future I’d like to work on laying out and editing the content using the recurrent choreographic strategies in my work: similarities, dissimilarities, symmetry, stripping down through writing (writing in layers), cohabitation, etc.

1. Body-Mind Centering™ is an approach to experiential embodied movement and learning, initiated by the US-American educator, therapist, and movement artist Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen in the 1970s.
2. Fascia or fascia therapy is a hands-on approach based on fascia, the membranes of connective tissue present throughout the entire human body.
3. The research project led to a weeklong gathering for sharing and exchange, a time dedicated to dialoguing across disciplines, at La Bellone (Brussels), with the participation, most notably, of Tristan Garcia and Dénétem Touam Bona. Archived sound from this week is available online at: <https://www.bellone.be/F/event.asp?event=7326> and <https://www.bellone.be/F/event.asp?event=7328>.
4. The *Abécédaire* can be consulted online at: <https://www.louisevanneste.be/publications/abecedaire>.

CAPTIONS

- fig. 01 *Pangea* week, La Bellone, 2023. Photo credit: Caroline Lessire.
- fig. 02-03 *Pangea* week, La Bellone, 2023. Photo credit: Caroline Lessire.
- fig. 04-06 *Abécédaire* [Alphabet primer], 2023, Louise Vanneste & Esther Denis.
- fig. 07 *Pangea* week, La Bellone, 2023. Photo credit: Caroline Lessire.
- fig. 08 *Abécédaire* [Alphabet primer], 2023, Louise Vanneste & Esther Denis.
- fig. 09 *Pangea* week, La Bellone, 2023. Photo credit: Caroline Lessire.