

# Experiments in Art Research

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How Do We Live Questions Through Art?

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## Chapter 21 To Meet in Gesture

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A Place, a Dance, a Drawing, a Study

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# 21

## TO MEET IN GESTURE

### A Place, a Dance, a Drawing, a Study

*Catalina Hernández-Cabal*

*About 15 years ago, Natalia and Catalina met dancing at Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, Colombia. They follow each other's vital inquiries as collaborators and comadres, support each other's creative and academic journeys, and share the most challenging and rich moments of their lives. Together they also develop MovEncounters ([movencounters.com](http://movencounters.com)), an ongoing project about collaboration and closeness, scores, and generative ways of being in relational tension.*

Come on in.

Sit down wherever you feel comfortable. Let your back rest against the wall if you want or just hold yourself up feeling the weight of your back held by your spine and your core muscles. As you sit there, take a couple of breaths, and be prepared to become involved in a practice of movement study, as a witness.

Pause, observe, shift your position ...

Begin.

\*\*\*\*\*

What gestures keep you in connection with bodies we love? Can these gestures teach you something? Or take you somewhere? What place are these gestures?

Where is that gesture coming from? What history, which stories?

Alternatively: Think of someone you love.

Revisit your experience of their movement. Inhabit it. Repeat it. What gestures do you find? What connections do you find between that person's gesture and their history? Between your gestures and your history?

Imagine that is the only information you have when meeting someone: their name, their gesture, their gesture's brief biography. Now you share your name, your gesture, your gesture's brief biography. You will study these gestures together, revisiting them over and over. Soon, you will begin noticing the stories and struggles that constitute the movement patterns and muscle tone needed to execute your gestures.

Now imagine you will move together to study each other's story, and maybe, craft forms to inhabit them together. This practice soothes the tensions accumulated in your bodies and histories. What would such a practice be?

### To Practice Witnessing

In Authentic Movement,<sup>1</sup> a form of practice emerged from experimental dance, being a witness means holding space for people to move as they explore what is in their body here, now. Witnesses are also responsible for keeping movers safe upon limited visibility. In the feminist of color perspectives of María Lugones (2003) and Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez (2020), witnesses are responsible for attending to what lies there beyond the evident fact and making connections to how the apparently mundane is connected to larger histories of power.

Each line you will read echoes our 16-month long gesture study with Ana Melissa Caballero. Thus, you are now a witness of movement and of history(ies). Ours, but also yours. You become a witness—as in Authentic Movement and as in feminisms of color. Witnessing, like movement, is a practice. This space may not be enough, but as you read try to hold space, to notice beyond the evident, to make connections (with larger histories, your own stories and movement), and let yourself be affected. Perhaps, this can be an opportunity to practice.

### Meeting in Gestures

Between March 2021 and July 2022, the brilliant Colombian dancer Ana Melissa Caballero and I met at least once a week from two different countries and time zones. We met on Zoom, in movement, to study gestures that connected us to our stories and entangled us in shared histories. We found ways to inhabit each other's gestures while at a distance, to repeat them over and over. With each repetition, we witnessed each other's embodied and kineshetic life trajectories. Like

Melissa wrote about the prompt I created about my gesture:

*Nos detenemos, nos miramos, cambiamos ...  
Volvemos a empezar*

We paused, we observed each other, shifted positions ...  
We began again.

In this brief text, which conveys some testimony of our 16-month-long movement study, you will experience gestures as a site of encounter and as a relational form of study.<sup>2</sup> That is, studying our physical positions and movements, we studied dimensions of our positionality. What do you find in those gestures and in that repetition, about us, about movement, about yourself, and about the possibilities of art research? As you sit there in the presence of Ana Melissa's and my movements, remember, you are a witness.

Pause, observe, shift your position, begin again.

### Witnessing and Moving With Melissa

One person lives in a small house in the southeast of Bogotá-Colombia, a vibrant working-class part of the city. She dances for a living as a dance teacher and in professional companies—and for life; hers, and her mother's. I later learned that her name is Melissa. I asked her about the gestures that connect her to her genealogy. Instantly, she turned to her mother's gestures to navigate arthritis. Melissa bears witness to her mother's pain, becoming familiar with the gestures she has developed as tactics to keep moving. Bearing witness, she too, is in pain. Melissa studies her mother's gestures over and over again, until they become a movement study, or a dance.

*Activa los dedos con mucha fuerza*

Melissa continues, reminding me to feel my fingers activated and strong.

*Siente la tensión que se toma todo el brazo. Pesa. Es difícil moverse. Reconoce esa dificultad. Siente cómo afecta la muñeca, el codo, la escápula.*

*Cada milímetro de movimiento pesa, te hace sudar.*

Melissa guides me now to pay attention to the strong tension that takes over my entire arm. It is heavy. Makes it difficult to move. She compels me to notice and acknowledge the difficulty and to perceive how those tense fingers affect my wrist, elbow, scapula.

I continue to follow Melissa's instructions, attending to the involuntary pulses she has witnessed in her mother, that in my body emerge from the tensed muscles.

Each inch of movement weighs, makes me sweat.

She closes this segment of the practice giving me an instruction to both explore movement and to consider as a sort of existential reflection:

*Siente el peso de lo que sostienes con tus manos. ¿Qué acaricias, qué agarras, qué acercas, qué alejas? ¿Qué te guardas?*

While I feel the weight of what I hold in my hands, Melissa asks me to consider: What do I tend to? What do I hold, bring closer or push away? What do I keep to myself?

### **A Pulse, a Mark, a Drawing, a Dance**

With this body, heavy and tensed, we explored mark-making. Drawing helped us materialize and share somehow the reverberations of this practice. Remember, we had never met in person. Picture this:

One continuous line that carves the paper and the surface underneath. The line is frantic and unpredictable almost. A series of short marks, interrupted, emerged from pulsations. Each of these short, interrupted marks has a different color, a different intensity. These intense pulsing marks take over almost the entire paper, becoming an overarching texture of a landscape. Then a thin, thin line, in which the mover-drawer was able to take a quick rest and breathe through the avalanche of pulsations, contorted fingers and arms. Next, several very thick angled lines which, despite all the effort put into drawing them, only made it halfway through the page.

Taking advantage of Zoom's features, we inhabit our drawings as our landscape—as shown in Figure 21.1.

I dive through Melissa's frantic lines and shake in spirals through the thick entangled line she drew with tensed wrists. As I glide down the thick line that ripped the paper, it makes me stumble several times. Recovering from the ground, I meet the colorful interrupted marks, each of which makes my limbs move in a different direction.

*Pause. Nos detenemos, nos miramos, cambiamos.  
Volvemos a empezar.*

Melissa shudders and throws her limbs around as she navigates the short, interrupted, pulsating lines. She manages to pause when her body meets the long thin line, and rests on top of it. She is held by the line I created through my muscular rest.

As we continue to study what this tension entails in our body and movement, we realize that the difficulty and pain we explored is, however, not a



**FIGURE 21.1** *Catalina and Melissa dancing in the landscape emerged from their gestures.*

Still of screendance by Catalina Hernández-Cabal and Melissa Caballero, 2022.

synonym of stillness. We continue to move. Melissa's mother continues to move, despite pain, or with it. We realize that we can feel each other's muscular tension, miles away, through our drawings. We can inhabit the landscapes emerged from our muscles' pulsations, spirals, and efforts to extend and grow from that which holds us in place.

### **[What I Hold to Myself]**

Here, I intended to guide you through prompts I offered from my story for this study of gestures. However, it feels necessary not to distract you from Melissa's and Melissa's mother's resolution to continue to move. Yet, I will share some

of the key questions guiding my invitation and what Melissa wrote in a letter to me about what she witnessed in the gestures that I offered.

Catalina:

- How to extend from what restrains you? Use the restraining force as a support to free another part of your body.
- What is the difference—in your body—between hugging and restraining? Can one become the other?
- What is heavy in your body? What is heavy in your story? Can you feel both?
- How can you rest from that place of ambiguous hugs-restraints, and acknowledging what feels heavier in one's embodied history?

*Fui testigo de un cuerpo que se balancea. Un cuerpo que insiste y que persiste en la dificultad. Observé la lucha para encontrar estabilidad y equilibrio de los apoyos inexplorados del cuerpo. ¿Cómo se pende de un hilo? ¿De dónde emergen las tensiones? ¿Qué nos sostiene? ¿Qué nos hace querer cierta estabilidad? Empujas ese cuerpo para seguir, para estar en pie, para resistir.*

Melissa witnessed my body balancing, insisting, and persisting within difficulty, struggling to find stability and balance with unexpected emerging supports. She asks: How do you hang from a thin thread? What holds us/you? What makes you/us desire some stability?

*Nos detenemos, nos miramos, cambiamos.  
Volvemos a empezar.*

We pause, we observe each other, shift positions ...  
We begin again.

**We begin again, we hold, we repeat, we reverberate.**

**We resonate. R E S O N A N T E**

All these feelings—physical and affective—continue reverberating after our meetings, throughout the 16 months of practice, up to this moment. I remember my muscles and jaw tight for hours after our gesture study of Melissa's witnessing of her mother's movement tactics, pain, and strength. They're tense now, as I write about them. I became used to a lingering sense of dizziness from intense efforts of simple movements. Melissa's strength (muscular and vital) reverberates up to this moment, as I keep witnessing her tenacity working and dancing in the number of jobs and projects necessary to—like her mother, like mine, like me—continue moving despite adversity.

We met online, because there was a global pandemic, but also, because I lived in Blacksburg, Virginia and Melissa in Bogotá, Colombia. Through many hours of practice, of drawing, of conversation, of recorded meetings, we decided to compose a video-dance with material from this process. We collaborated with Colombian video artists Paula Andrea Meza and Jonathan Vargas (Goz), with whom we gave this process another form, the three-minute video we called *RESONANTE*.

*RESONANTE* exists for now as a piece that gives testimony of the practice. It is similar to what Erin Manning and her group SenseLab call an anarchiv: not the actual artwork, “not documentation of a past activity. Rather, it is a *feed-forward mechanism* for lines of creative process, under continuing variation.” (SenseLab, n.d. Para. 2). Ours is a curated and composed “repertoire of traces” (Manning, 2018. Para. 1) of a gesture study. This study crafted a friendship and helped us learn from our own stories and each other’s, and about the possibilities of movement, proximity, drawing, and entanglements through space-time. Our gesture study is still active and may take new forms in the future. We never saw each other in person until we launched *RESONANTE* in Bogotá in July of 2022, when we gave each other a long and sounding hug.

We paused, we observed each other, shifted positions ...  
We began again.

## Notes

- 1 To learn more about Authentic Movement visit the website “Discipline of Authentic Movement” dedicated to the work and legacy of Janet Adler, who is known as the practice’s founder (<https://disciplineofauthenticmovement.com/>) and The Authentic Movement Institute (<https://www.authenticmovementinstitute.com>).
- 2 I want to highlight the role of dancers-educators like Kirstie Simson, Jennifer Monson, Chris Aiken, and Lisa Nelson in my approach to movement as study, as well as the genealogies of practice where they dwell like Pauline Oliveros, Simone Forti, Nancy Stark-Smith and Steve Paxton.

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