



From our L'AiR

Traces on the Body

by Hiie Saumaa, France/Estonia
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In the midst of the Paris transit strikes in January 2020, they came, from Armenia, Canada, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, Australia, USA, and elsewhere. A group of international artists, writers, actors, and choreographers, selected to participate in the multidisciplinary L'AiR Arts residency program on the theme of the intercultural artistic exchange in Montparnasse during the Roaring Twenties. These aspiring creators were ready to explore the Paris of the 1920s through guided tours, workshops, readings, and a symposium. They were eager to inhale, live, and embody the Paris of 2020 through opening their eyes to what and who is around them. Their dreams as artists were ready to merge with their dreams of Paris and the ineffable dreaminess of the city itself.

I participated in this nearly month-long program as a co-host. Mila Ovchinnikova, the Founding Director of the program, had gathered an inspiring team of specialists from different fields of art to guide the group of international artists. The co-hosts formed an international team itself, all residing currently in Paris. As a dance and movement educator

and dance writer, I facilitated a few movement events.

*One of these was a joyous and liberating embodied dance class at Columbia University's interdisciplinary **Institute for Ideas & Imagination** located at Reid Hall in the sixth arrondissement of Paris, in Montparnasse. We danced in the Institute's seminar room, usually reserved for the fellows - a group of fifteen Columbia scholars and international artists in residence at the Institute for an academic year. In this space, lit brightly by the sunlight coming in through the large windows, the fellows exchange ideas about their projects, manuscripts, and musical compositions. For an hour, this room turned into a lively place for ideas and imagination but received and practiced through dance, in movement. We mixed simple choreography, free dance, playfulness, and sensitivity toward how we felt physically, emotionally, and mentally. There was energy, joy, tears of relief, connection, community, sweat, and laughter.*



At the renowned [Micadanses](#) dance studio in the Marais, the heart of Paris, I led a longer workshop on the potential of somatic tools for creativity. “Somatics” is an umbrella term for a range of physical awareness practices that emphasize participants’ embodied experience and moving from the inside out. I dedicated this workshop to exploring heartfulness. We discussed whether impacting the audience’s feelings is important in our work as artists. What is at the heart of the project we are creating, be it a dance work, a poem, or a play? If that project had a heart, a liveliness, what would that heart be like and what would it communicate? By extension, can we develop a heartfelt connection to our project?

In the artistic process, there are ebbs and flows, ups and downs – periods of enthusiasm, absorption, and flow but also of uncertainty,

unclearly, and disconnection. We might even feel like abandoning the project. In the workshop, we used inner-directed, improvisational movement, spontaneous writing, free-form drawing, and witnessing/sharing with a partner to awaken or rejuvenate our soulful connection to what we create via art. We enlivened the artist within, through movement, colors, and words.



As I was watching the performances of our three resident dancers-choreographers at one of the culminating events of the program, a celebratory dinner at the famed restaurant La Coupole, a symbol of the history of Montparnasse, I felt excitement and inner peace. I saw three different approaches, three distinct personalities, themes, and methods of composition. I saw a sensitive dancer exploring vulnerability, strength, and grace. Another dancer exploring questions of ancestry, methods of verbal and kinetic storytelling, and the call for the audience to use their imagination actively as they watch movement. And yet another dancer examining

what it is like to be an artist - using his clothing as a canvas, he let dance guide the movement of the red, blue, green, and black markers as he drew lines and circles on his grayish white clothes. Rolling up the sleeve of his garment, he showed me later how some of these lines had left bruises on the skin.

What are the experiences that touch us on the surface, like the colors of the markers on the clothes of the dancer? And what are the experiences that reach us underneath, that leave us with marks that go deep? Witnessing how this group of international artists has stayed in contact months after the residence, reflecting on their time spent in Paris individually and as a group, I feel like their time in the residency program and the bonds they created were amongst the experiences that go deep. They and their art were touched beyond the outer layers.



To learn more about Hiie's work as a dancer, writer and educator, visit her website www.hiiesaumaa.com

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