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Dancing with Nature off the Leash



Plaque names, specimen preservation, delineated pathways, cultivated gardens, careful pruning, collected species, Latin denominations, herbaria, glasshouses, tropical, alpine, and other exotic plants: nature is kept in order at Kew Gardens. Each specimen has a place and a name, and planting regimes cannot be disrupted. Or can they? In the wild high herbs, which somehow proliferate incognito next to *Ophiopogon formosanus*, *Polyxena ensifolia*, and *Arum purpureospathum*, plants remind us of their capacity to exist beyond such classifications. Following the steps of Emma Waltraud Howes in her conversation with the surrounding nature, my camera and I started our journey with the scene of a massive trunk, bushes, high herbs, and branches intertwined and bending together, with Emma and her pointing arm shifting with the wind from side to side (p.65, top). What do plants have to say after all? It is my first time at Kew Gardens and I could not have a better guide. Emma invites us to follow her, to bend as she bends with nature, to listen to its music and to disregard our taming artifacts.



Emma reminds us that nature is everywhere at Kew Gardens, and not merely where it has been named, arranged, and put on display. Her performance comfortably comes alive in the weeds which have been left unmanaged and have grown to considerable length: as the camera gently observes her at knee length, she stands and moves in harmony within their turf. Her pointing arms rotate softly and deeper toward the ground, sinking into a blurred cushion of dancing stalks (p.65, middle). In a still frame taken from further away, the weeds in the foreground have taken over most of the screen, whilst Emma has become smaller; disappearing in the distance she has utterly blended with them (p.65, bottom). Leading us on, Emma takes us through the more gardened areas: playing with tree branches; rolling on the grass; disrupting visitors on the way; and letting the wind caress her petal-like costume.



Documenting Emma's dance performance was a co-creative process between her the dancer, and myself the filmmaker, made by being in the moment as she was dancing and as I was filming her: I let windy leaves drift in and out of shot (p.67, left); I went down to the ground with her as she reached to the grass (p.67, right). My approach was to intuitively connect, sense, and move with Emma as she was evolving as a plant among plants. My toolbox was a critical understanding gained as an anthropologist that observation, no matter how purposely objective, is always tinted by our subjective nature, and a kinesthetic ability gained as a dancer to converse with another body. Somehow, the open flexibility that anthropology enabled in me also echoes my twenty years, experience of partner dancing—at first sight an unlikely match, but in practice a great one. While anthropology gives me the analytical distance to appreciate the value of my subjective perception, its academic framework often limits a real exploration of its potential in a more visceral manner. Anthropology has shown me the advantage of self-reflection when making sense of what I'm observing but it has not provided me with much guidance on how to use the tool of my physical body and senses as a way of sharing the world which unfolds before my eyes to others. My experience of partner dancing fills this gap as it has indirectly trained me to tune into the intuitive voice of my moving body as a way of connecting with what I am observing through the frame of my camera.

Most forms of partner dancing, often epitomized by ballroom dancing, are structured by specific steps and the lead and follow gender divide which is typically understood as men leading and women following, a partnership with a clear hierarchy and division of tasks. In contrast to that, my personal experience of partner dancing is rather different and marginal as I was always more geared toward improvisation and mixing traditions (zouk, merengue, tango, swing, blues, salsa, forró, contact improvisation, etc.) rather than following learned steps. Based on many years of practice, I argue that in the lead and follow partnership there is the potential for something much more fluid and open, less prescribed and structured. Partner dancing, I experienced, can also be more like a conversation: where one starts making suggestions, the other responds in agreement, disagreement, why not or with more suggestions, and vice versa. Neither knows which direction it is going. The real accomplishment of a lead and follow partnership, in my experience, is in truly trying to connect with the other body in the present moment without assumptions of what the next step should be; listening, even for the leader, and being able to speak and assert oneself, even as a follower. When both partners are tuned in, to themselves and to the other and to the unexpected potential of that connection, who is leading and who is following becomes blurred and both bodies merge into one; a body with



four legs. Applying that philosophy to camera work is what led me to follow Emma's steps instinctively and to be present with her, as she was in her movements, with the plants and the environment at Kew Gardens.

This act of presence is, I believe, more authentic to the act of documenting, because it is not constrained by the idea that reality exists objectively and that it can be documented as such. My subjective matrix, therefore, becomes a tool and an asset for connecting and dialoguing with a fleeting moment with awareness. It is with that mindset that I approached Emma's performance: by following, exploring, using, and ultimately sharing what it made me feel like. Documenting Emma's dance performance starts with being moved by it, getting into her artistic zone, and ultimately dancing with her.