

## How to Unfold

By Madelyn Sher

In The One-Straw Revolution, Masanobu Fukuoka writes of the “do-nothing” natural farming method as an alternative to conventional farming. His reasoning is that the earth has the ability to produce food naturally; rather than create a system that creates dependency upon the farmer’s intervention, the farmer should get out of the way in order to allow the natural growth process to take place. This method leads to a continuous regeneration of healthy plants and soil, rather than a depletion of the fertility of a site. Fukuoka’s legacy speaks to the importance of the continuous pattern of growth and decay in the agricultural world which persists without human mediation. Studying the pace of these patterns provides the insight needed to support their perpetuation. In the world of choreography, cycles of growth are present on numerous scales: from a single gesture, to a section of material, to the duration of the performance itself. The entire choreographic process is filled with instances of bloom and decay. The translation of Fukuoka’s agricultural ideas to the choreographic realm inspired the process I engaged in the making of “Growing rice in a dry field”, a 10-minute dance performance with two dancers, myself and Yun Lee, and one musician, Emmett Sher.

As in life, what defines a moment is not only its center, but its edges: what comes before, what comes after, and how it moves between being and not being. I see this structural story told through the bloom and decay of choreographic gesture. In the studio I researched many seeds that arose through a close reading of Fukuoka’s words. Other influences for this work were the aesthetic and philosophy of *butoh*, the antics of mime and slapstick physical comedy films, and contact improvisation. Fukuoka’s ideas aided me in finding cohesion among these disparate forms. Knowledge of the earth’s natural patterns of growth and decay is extremely important to a farmer’s ability to guide crops towards their most healthy development. Fukuoka describes timing the planting of seeds, the laying of straw, and the drying of a field in tight relationship to the timing of the current crops’ life status. For example, as the rice crop is still in the ground, just on the verge of beginning to decay, he scatters winter grain seeds throughout the field, so that these seeds take root before the weeds can, and will already be on their way out of the ground as the rice crop is being harvested. Similarly, in a given dance, one movement idea might emerge, and before it has fully dissolved another idea is on its way towards the surface. There is a simple, basic fact at play: things happen, and things end. The nature of this growth cycle - *how* it unfolds - is variable. Ideas come to be and fall away, but the tempo, duration, and texture of these changes can be affected by intention. Lining up and overlapping gestures (and each of their becomings and undoings) together produces the syntax of the whole work.

The emergence and decay of gesture is always already happening and yet difficult to be precisely aware of. It is inevitable that one thing will emerge and that same thing will eventually die out. What gives a particular character to the idea is how its edges of being are dealt with. The form of this dance piece is a series of five scores, each of which differently addresses the bloom

and decay of gesture and form. In particular, the *time* it takes for ideas to form and disappear distinguishes these scores from one another for the performers. Of course, scores are merely guideposts in an improvisational work, with which we are in a dynamic relationship. In the moment of performance, our commitment to them wavers, fluctuating between embrace and betrayal. Channeling one's attention towards the particular timing of a gesture's life cycle provides a limitation that incidentally produces a sense of increased agency in the performer. The anchor of this score makes navigation through a sea of choices more possible. Varied approaches to the cyclical emergence and disappearance of gestures steer the ship of this work.

Staying with a gesture so that it elongates and deepens gives the effect that its decay is hardly noticeable. It doesn't decay at all; rather, it transforms organically into the successive idea. In the initial score in "Growing rice in a dry field", Yun and I fall into the circular playing space and practice "welling", or saturating whatever color emerges in our movement<sup>1</sup>. By staying with our emerging gesture we are extending its life, creating continuity between its initiation and its unfolding. The effect is ongoingness. We perform this score along set pathways which I find amplifies the determined confidence of this moment in the dance. This score feels like keeping afloat a ball, never quite catching it but instead tapping it upward so that it never touches the ground. This score doesn't leave room for re-setting. Every gesture is a justification for the gesture that came before it: in fact, they are inextricably linked. Yun continues dancing, and when she leaves the room, disappearing from sight, it is as though the score continues because we never see her stop.

Another way that a gesture grows is through repetition and duplication in space. The next section of the piece has a marked change: Yun and I link up in shape and time to do Jishin walks, which come from a Korean traditional dance that celebrates the ground god who is tenderly ensuring the embedding of seeds in the soil. After exploring a few different versions of this section, we landed on the decision to have these walks begin and end unevenly among us. Yun's initiation of these walks begins decidedly from the doorway, birthing a repeated gesture that is distinct from the ongoingness of the previous section. The repetition of this walk to a steady beat creates a continuous renewal of the same gesture; it restarts over and over again, delaying its transformation into newness. By moving together, we practice blending into one another, combining. We initiate and finish this movement at different times from one another, gently moving in and out of synchronicity, like two sister plants growing in the same conditions with slightly variable results. The choice to stagger the beginning and ending of the movement related to a choreographic desire to portray the possible simultaneity of distinctness and togetherness. We are individuals whose paths collide, thus our Jishin walk grows and ends in us at different times.

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<sup>1</sup> "Welling" is a score that was introduced to me by Angie Hauser in a Choreography course taken at Smith College.

The image of growth and decay resonated with me in part because it reminded me of butoh scores that I've encountered in the past.<sup>2</sup> Butoh typically manifests as slow movement that contains distortions of the body, although it is permeable to the influence of scores, sensations, and emotions. Recently I have been interested in condensing the time between growing and dying, and actually experiencing both simultaneously in the body. How can I sense the forces of growth and decay moving within my body, and hold both of these sensations at once? In order to hold this multiplicity of growth and decay, I consciously amplify my awareness of gravity as well as my body's constant resistance to this force, almost as though facilitating a dialogue. I also held images of growth and decay (of plants, people, stars, etc.) in my imagination, allowing these to gently inform the intention of my movement. Yun and I practiced this score many times in the studio. We watched each other, and reported back our observations and reflections. This score creates a marked tension in the body, as the forces that pull it in opposite directions (generally, growth pulling upwards and decay pulling downwards) find a precarious equilibrium. I acutely notice my relationship to gravity, with surrender and activation competing for central attention. This score is an attempt to imaginatively suspend both the growth and decay of my actual body in a given moment, and the result tends to be slowness with very subtle visible changes.

By contrast, there is a certain direct, definitive quality of gesture that requires a clear beginning, development, and finish. To accomplish this definitive quality I find the "finish" of action in particular needs attention from the performer. "One thing at a time" became the name of a score in which Yun and I imagine that each gesture we make corresponds to some specific verbal counterpart. We are in a space of embodied story-telling, omitting the actual words which leaves behind the ridiculous context-less gestures that emerge from an exuberant re-telling of an experience. In this case, gestures have a clear start and finish. One thing happens at a time, meaning that a gesture emerges and ends before we move onto the next one. We perform this score one at a time at first, and then our movements begin to overlap with one another temporally. The score was initially inspired by set choreography I made to rhythmically match a chunk of text. Here we attempt to achieve the appearance of specific choreography without setting the individual gestures ahead of time. To do so, we direct our attention to the particular finish of things. This section requires clear attention to what we are doing at each moment, in order to give each gesture a finish. This finish refers to shape, space, and time; what the movement looks like, where it happens, and how long it takes. Each gesture snaps into existence; it doesn't slowly form, but instead quickly assembles. It ends just as abruptly, even if during its lifespan it carried a more continuous quality. A decisive finish calls for attentional stamina that can withstand the entire lifespan of the gesture.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, in May 2023 I took a workshop with butoh and Noguchi Taiso practitioner Julie Gillum at Earthdance, and there we danced the score of a flower's life cycle, from a seed to a dead flower.

There is a tension between ongoingness and finish; in this piece we explored how our dancing can hold both at once. Though challenging to dance with this multiplicity, it is possible. Following relational gestures to their completion and sensing the shape of them before moving on deeply affects the successive emerging ideas. Commitment to the initial idea and seeing it through to its end creates a sense of continuity even amidst particularity. The final improvised section in this work was the “relational” score, in which we carry on the “one thing at a time” sensibility in terms of having directness, intentionality, and an inner monologue running, while incorporating interaction and a sense of one another. While working on this score, Yun and I noticed and received the feedback that we have an inclination to change, or to plant new seeds and begin their growth process without tending to the seeds that have already been planted. It is difficult to see things to their ultimate end for both of us who are typically excited to move on to the next interesting idea. To resist this tendency we practice sensing or recognizing the shape that our two bodies form before continuing the dance, and abandoning worries that a given gesture isn’t interesting or worth deepening. We must trust that the gesture truly is worthwhile, and deserves attentiveness to its completion. This shift resulted in more spaciousness, stillness, and awareness in our dancing.

An emerging sub-theme I notice is holding multiplicity. Growth and decay, embrace and betrayal of scores, ongoingness and finish: thoughtful dancing happens between the ends of a defined spectrum. The viewer’s experience too is marked by multiplicity, as they notice both the appearance and disappearance of gesture, and both the formal elements and poetic meanings of a work. Tuning attention to the growth and decay of gesture and form is a lens through which to see the craft of choreography. A dance work is not only the collection of ideas but the way in which those ideas rise into and fall out of the audience’s awareness. As an improvising performer I have agency over the way that I begin and end my gestures, though I may have certain tendencies and aversions that influence those choices. Deciding in advance what mode of growth or decline of gesture I’m working with is a way to add specificity to how I’m dancing. Inevitably, there are changes in a dance, as gestures and motifs crystallize or assemble and then crumble or vanish. If everything were to appear and disappear at the same pace and with the same importance, this would be a monotonous, decidedly unnatural dance. In holding the edges of gesture within my consciousness, I grasp for a fleeting moment the other life cycles that exist within and around me: cells regenerating, relationships changing, seasons shifting, history unfolding.