

Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

July 2019

This month, we share with you an article about a living art project that was designed to engage the public in the mind-body-relationship experience....

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Participating in the “livingness of life”: The Feather Nest Community Project

In this article we share a special and innovative project designed to build community. The Feathers Nest project is our attempt to engage with the wider public around forms of relationally oriented movement improvisation. We created the Nest in Beijing, China, where economic growth and capitalistic production have also led to aching bodies and chronic feelings of not being enough or not working hard enough. With the Nest, we wanted to co-create with the public a context to transcend our stereotypical modes of relating to one another. We wanted to remind people and ourselves about the experience of being present in the primordial nest/home, being cared for, and participating in the “livingness of life” through meeting one another as living bodies (Shotter, 2004).

In the beginning, we had the image of a room full of feathers, in which to rest, swim, and dance. In the months that followed, we began to design a nest space and create audio guides that would foster a moving meditation. To create this participatory public art project, we sought help and collaboration with various organizations (Taos TAG Grant, Lispace architects, Beijing Contact Improvisation community, Minsheng Art Museum). In the nest creation process, despite trying hard to control everything from the materials to the location to what the participants would experience, we found ourselves continuously encountering the unexpected, challenging us to stay open to different possibilities of bringing the Nest into being.



In the Nest, we designed three structured ways to experience relationships: individual and partnered audio guides, participatory public performance, and a two-hour guided group movement-based workshop. In unstructured Nest experiences, people could also rest, sleep, talk, dance, and move. Participants, ranging in age from 2 to 65, signed up to experience the Nest. Participants were both those native to China and people from other countries. All structured experiences were translated into both Chinese and English.

More than a physical space, the nest was a relational space. In their feedback, participants shared how they began to experience themselves and experience “relating” itself differently. One participant described his experience with his body, “Because of the spiral shape, it reminds me of everything that spirals: the wind, air-currents, the human body’s movements. The feathers and the soft carpet really stimulate our tactile sense; it really helps to sensitize through the skin the entire nervous system.” Many participants described the experience of relating to another through touch, “The touch I was given was tender and light, sometimes

we were not even in touch, but I felt that the dance was continuing. And I started to cry because it was like I was given permission to be exactly how I was, and there was also the gentle touch supporting me.” And

“The touch really felt very warm and light. I think if we all treated one another interpersonally with the same type of care and touch, relationships would be much easier...When I was dancing with different people, their boundaries felt different, looser, softer. Inside, you still know who are your friends from outside, but the possibility that you’d roll on the floor together outside the Nest is very slim. It really transcended the boundaries for me.”

Many other people talked about the magical nature of their experiences, being a child again, where “anything can happen.” One participant shared that having experienced much trauma in her life, she felt unsafe in many unfamiliar places, but being in the Nest felt like a homecoming. She explained, “I had no idea what to expect of this event, and when I got here, I didn’t know what to do with myself. But even in the beginning, just seeing the Nest, I felt safe. In the Tibetan mythology, there is a place, a circular structure just like this one, where you go to before you die. It has all sorts of animals and ghosts in it. Going there can be very scary for people. And if you experience something like it while you’re alive, then your passage into death will be a more peaceful one. This is what I experienced here.”



Others, shared their experiences and relationships were beginning to be put into words and explored; “I was sometimes a part of it, sometimes I was on the outside of it. Sometimes I would feel my own blood flowing inside me, sometimes I would see and feel the feathers, sometimes it felt like a movie scene to me.” “I noticed while touching and moving that some people opened up very quickly and totally, while other people, no matter what I did, there continued to be a layer of something between me and them.” “I felt more comfortable interacting people of the same sex than opposite sex.”

Bachelard (1994) reflects that we can tremble and feel unsafe behind the thickest walls. However, when our body-mind-relationship finds shelter, the barest illusion of a wall can be found in a shadow, in a leaf, or in a tree branch. Our Nest was an invitation to the public to rediscover shelter and relationship in rest and play. When inside the Nest, people formed a group organism, and participated in dialogues that were already happening, carried out with a variety of languages, including the language of touch. Participants listened with their minds and bodies, let go of their expectations, and played with the unfolding of relationships.



Bachelard, G. (1994) *The poetics of space*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Shotter, J. (2004) Responsive expression in living bodies: The power of invisible ‘real presences’ within our everyday lives together. *Cultural Studies*, 18(2-3), 443-460.