

The Currency of Play

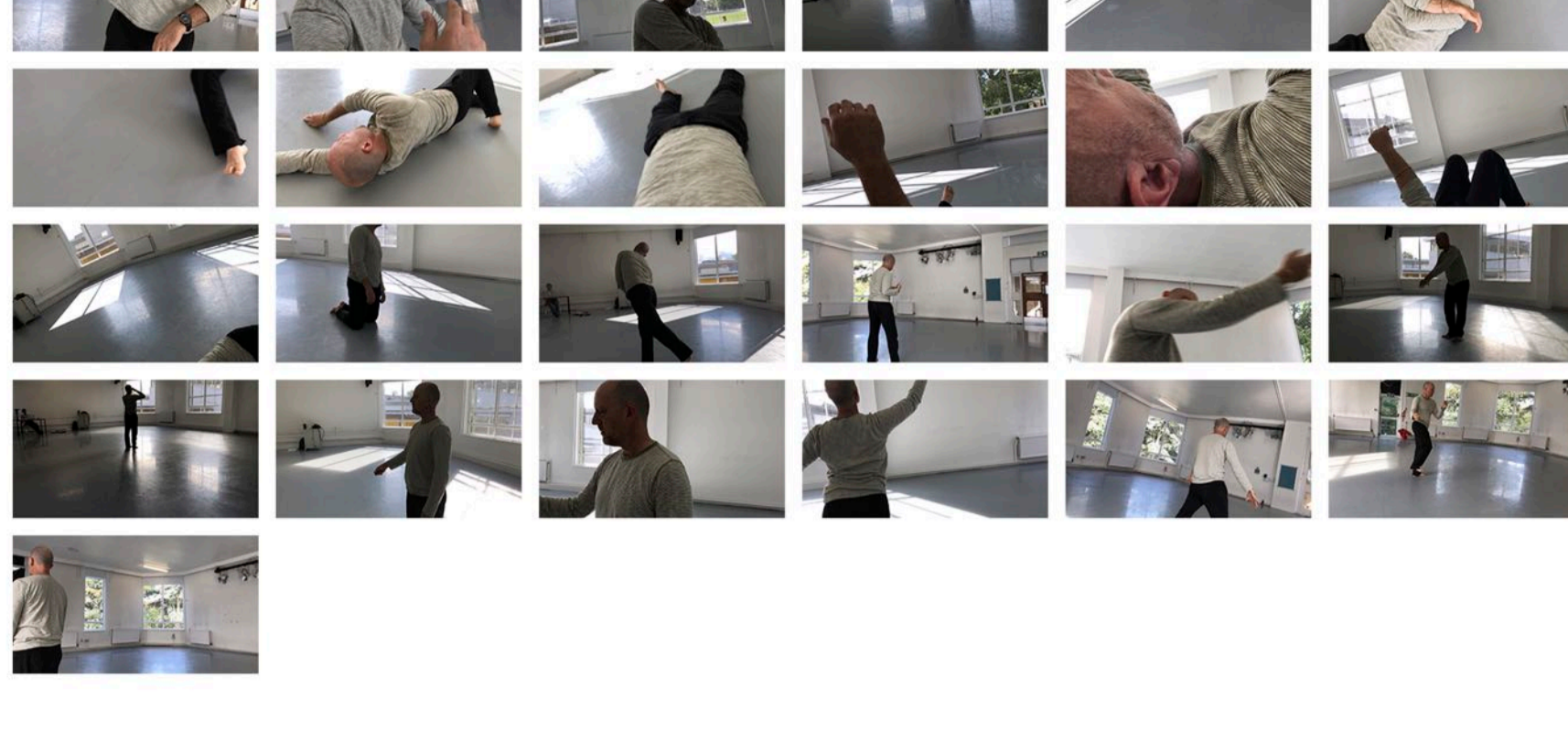
Shaun McLeod and Simon Ellis

Introduction

Authentic Movement is a movement practice used by dancers as a creative source and as a practice of improvisation. We have been practicing and considering the implications of Authentic Movement as an end in itself. The practice is a defined relationship between a mover and witness in which the mover moves (usually with eyes closed) according to their own free associations while the witness watches. Both the mover and witness attempt to avoid making judgments on what happens. The mover tries to let things happen without concern for what it looks like or how to interpret things – something that is surprisingly difficult given that judging our actions and thoughts is deeply habitual. The witness is there to support the mover: to keep them safe, provide structure and to reflect back to the mover after the practice.

In attempting to 'capture' something about the practice, we (as witnesses) started taking photographs of each other as the mover. But taking photographs implicates the photographer in a field of assessments, personal preferences, camera angles and so on. In other words, the photographer makes lots of judgments. To maintain the app which is non-judgmental watching, we blanked the camera screen and installed an app which took photos every 30 seconds. In this way we never knew exactly how the photo would turn out.

The photos on this site are individual collections arranged in grids of 31 photos. Each photo in a grid evenly marks 30 second intervals of a 20-minute practice session during the final three days of our work together. The writing that accompanies the images is based on questions that arose from our practice together.

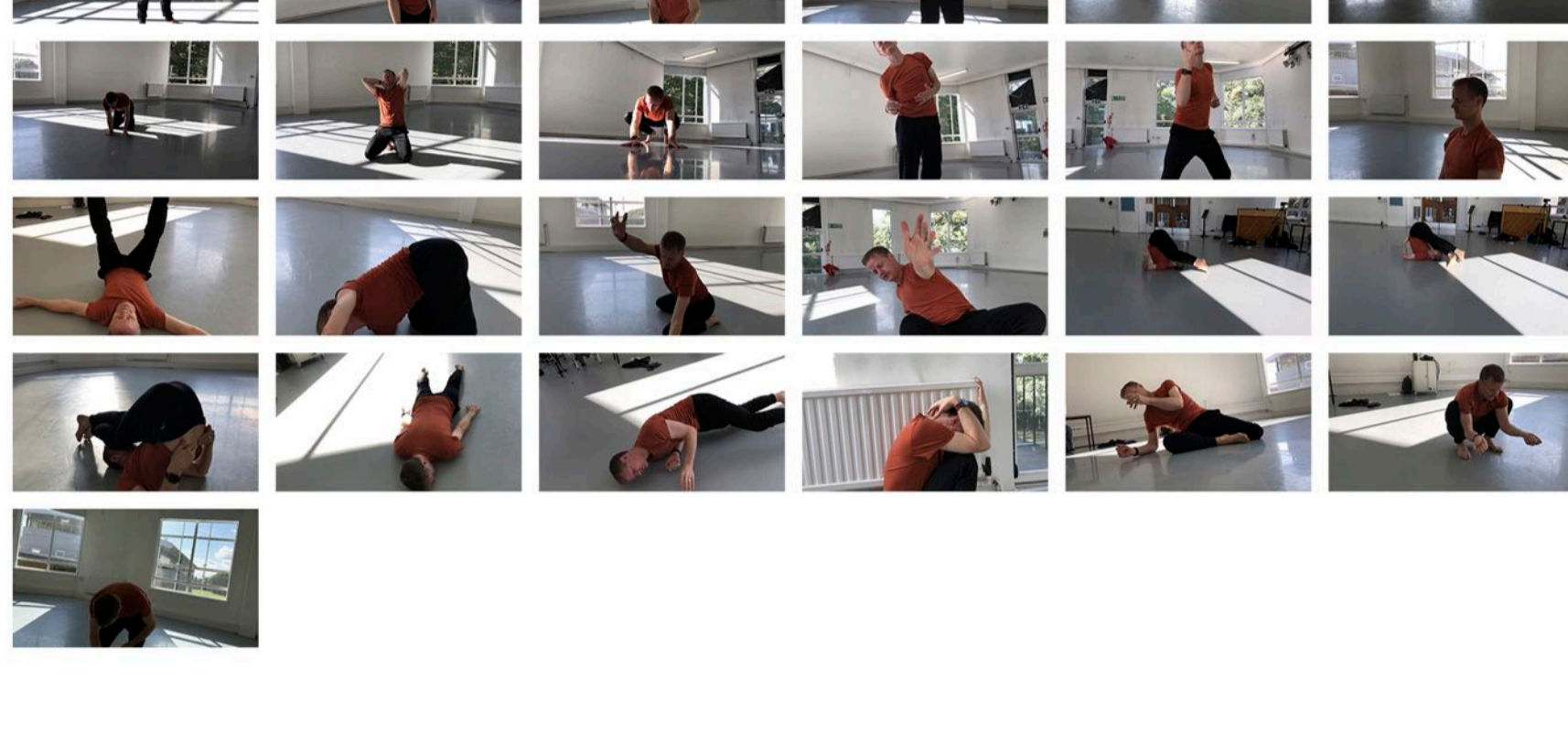


Without Judgment

Only when active artists willingly cease to be artists can they convert their abilities, like dollars into yen, into something the world can spend: play. Play as currency.

– Allan Kaprow¹

Moving or watching without judgment is a radical proposition. This framework for moving (or choosing not to move) also creates an aimless, playful quality – we move not to objectively achieve anything. The 'purpose' of the practice may be defined or discovered afterwards, but always starts simply by moving. Avoiding judgment is a means of making this open-ended perspective possible. But in a neo-liberal capitalist world in which all activities need to prove their worth (even the arts) such a re-positioning of value is unsettling. If the experience of Authentic Movement has inherent value it is because it allows embodiment and dancing an open space in which to exist, without having to answer to the demands of productivity or public approval. But what is always available in the practice is the immediacy and vitality of moving – of dancing that is animated by nothing other than curiosity.



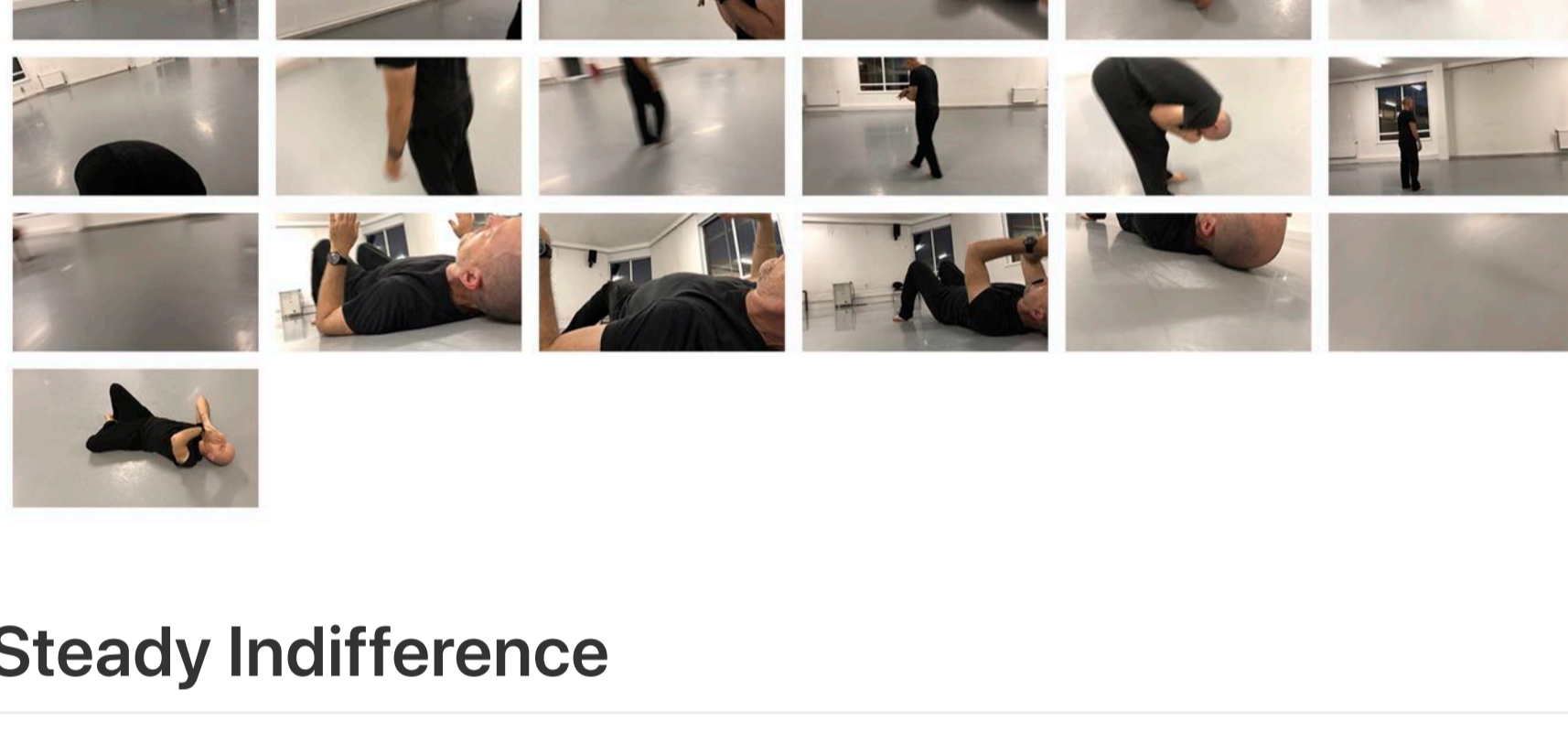
Beyond Representation

Much of witnessing work in photographic or visual art has to do with the way photographs might bear witness to historical events. Susan Best goes deeply into the nature of photographs by artist Anne Ferran (in her 'Lost to Worlds' series) which attempt to bring attention to atrocities suffered by indigenous people in Tasmania. Yet these austere photos of a site of great trauma contain virtually nothing of the event.

We cannot bear witness to this past in the usual sense of finally knowing things that were concealed or comprehending things that no one ever wanted to know about, but, on the other hand, we are engaged by the quest for that history which must, at least visually, elude us.

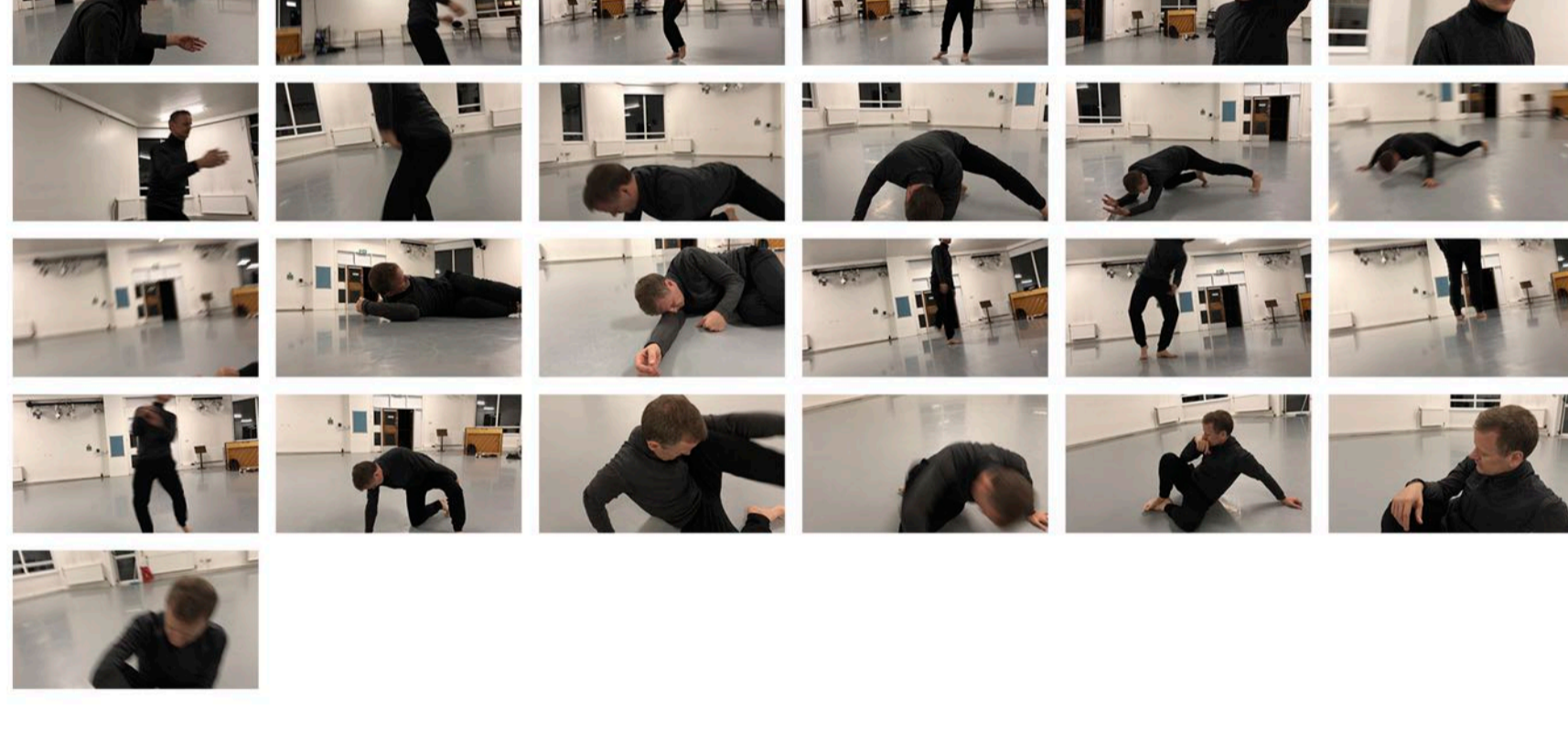
– Susan Best²

Although we have not been somehow archiving or photographing history, we are – in some way – making a visual record of that which is not visible. We are working with materials (the internal, embodied experiences of Authentic Movement) that lie beyond representational means, or beyond straight-forward transmission, but in those 'beyonds' what becomes possible? Best hints at a "mood, a disturbance, a feeling of loss or destabilisation" but Ferran's photographs that she is considering are so powerfully aestheticized (and worked) in a way that our simple time-based photographs (one every 30 seconds) are simply not. What might be gained and/or lost through these visual representations of the movement practice?



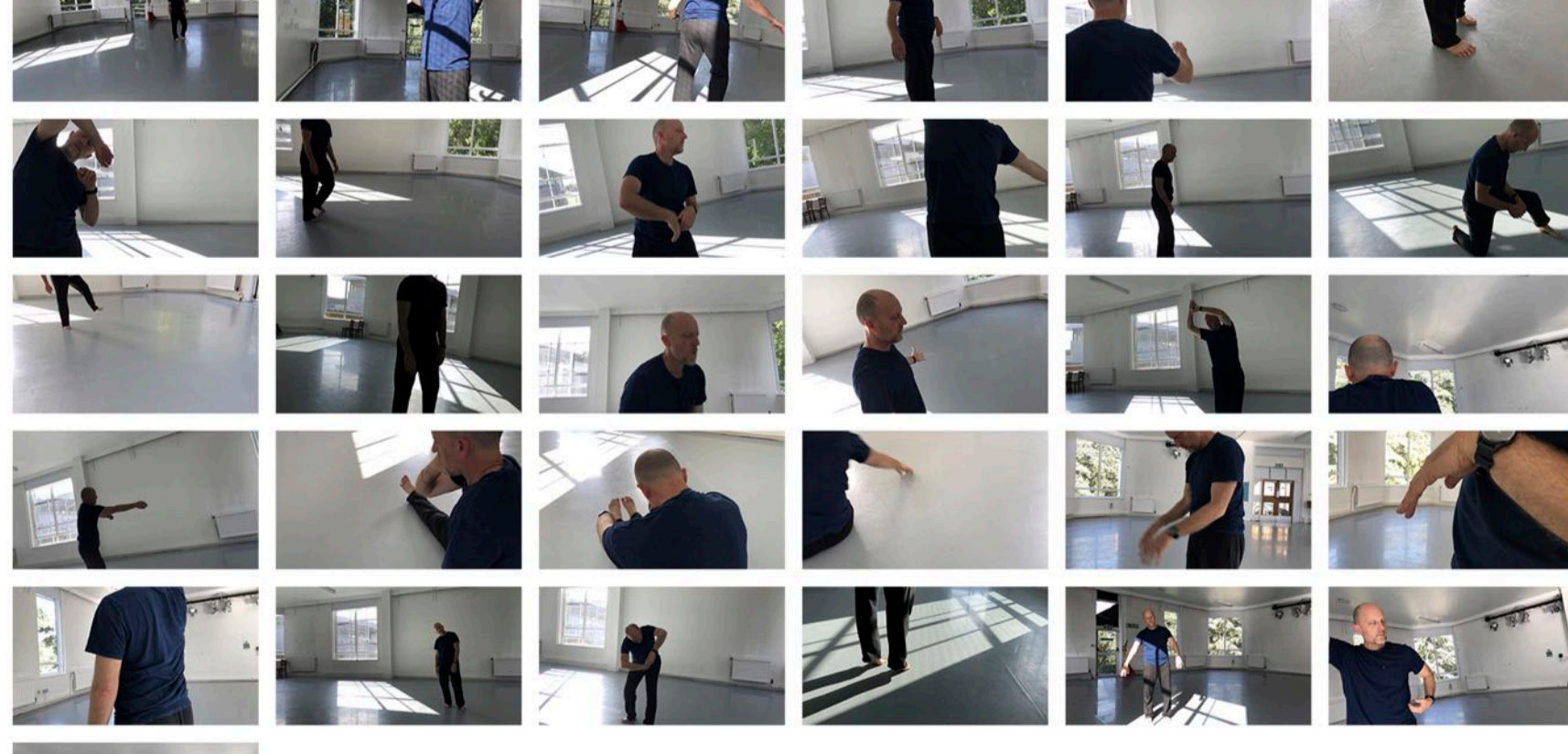
Steady Indifference

The relationship between what happens in the practice, and the photos of these experiences, is ambiguous. You see something of the activity – the shapes marked in space, the intensity of a moment inscribed in the face or body, or even what clothes we wore. The privacy of the experience seems to be reflected in our faces, as looks of internal concentration. There is novelty but also repetitiveness. Things seem to fluctuate – sometimes quiet, sometimes busily engaged, sometimes restless. The photos indicate a sense of time passing. The photos also capture the internally directed attention that is maintained throughout each session and that the practice requires attending over this time. Sometimes the photos look like the movers are listening, as if whole-bodied attention is similar in physical tone to noticing sound. But the photos fail to adequately demonstrate the internal experiences of the mover – anything from an elusive memory elicited from a bodily disposition, to the levity of physical caricature or being gripped by poetic rapture. Much of what is experienced by the mover remains concealed. The camera, photographing on a predetermined time-cue, maintains a steady indifference to what is happening.



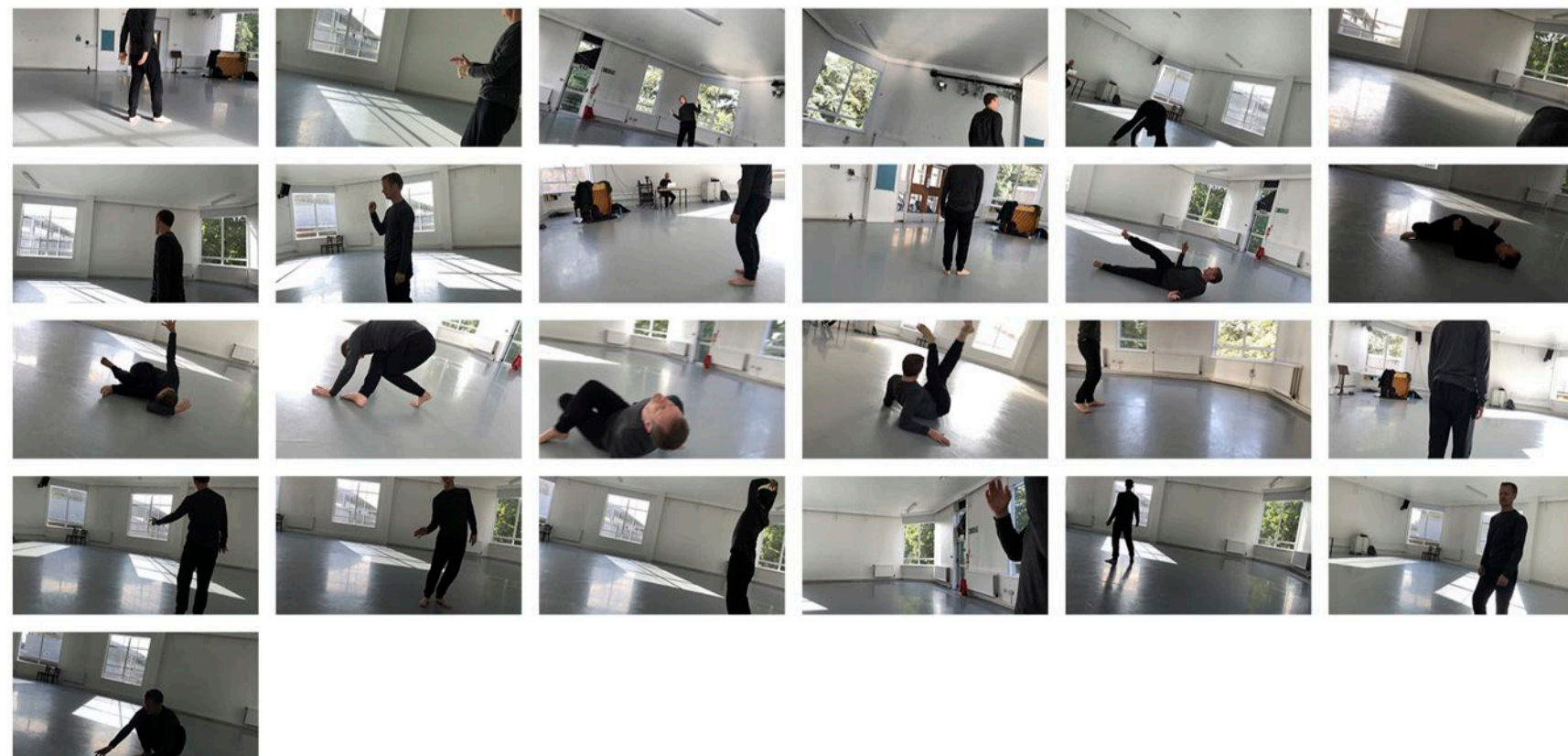
Solidarity

Authentic Movement is a disarmingly simple movement practice that anyone can do. What someone does in the practice can never be assessed according to principles of virtuosity, making it as accessible to an experienced dancer as to a novice mover. The meaningful concerns of anyone who participates are instantiated and acknowledged and does not rely on choreographic vision or technical skill. As such it is egalitarian. Dancing that doesn't have to produce anything, or that cannot readily be commodified, sold or reproduced is antithetical to the neoliberal, capitalist status quo. Yet this dancing is meaningful to its participants. Authentic Movement also frustrates the artist's impulse to 'make something' as crafting the elements of the experience would entail making judgments. Equally, the audience (witness) cannot harbour expectations for what they are watching. But in the relationship between mover and witness a powerful exchange can take place. In the vitality that emerges from a shared creative situation, one that is free from judgment and expectation, solidarity is fostered. The conditions for this connection are always in flux as both people attempt to 'tune in' to the quality of the mover's attention.



Ways of Looking

Photos of embodied experiences are not the same thing as embodiment. In the traditional therapeutic circumstances of Authentic Movement, the mover's experience is privileged. But through the eye of the camera, these photos present things from the witness's external perspective. Can we look at someone and not use this looking as a tool, as a probe, to extract something from them? Can we look without expectation or judgment? Perhaps not. But avoiding judgment while watching is a proposal. Taking this proposition seriously is enough to unsettle the ways we look, to openly receive rather than narrowly react, so that habit and prejudice don't invariably spring to the fore as the advance guard of our responses.



Cradling Attention

Taking time is important for this practice. If we are not in a hurry, if we can forget about time, then thoughts, impulses and feelings that are not the result of some ultimatum, can bubble up. It's mysterious how having no goals for where the practice is leading can lead to a state of complete absorption. The practice creates the conditions which facilitate emergence, that is, letting things happen and keeping personal demands or desires for the practice at bay. For example, the performer's demand of themselves when moving to 'be interesting' in anticipation of an internalised, imaginary audience. The qualities that emerge without demand, and which then sweep you along, are often the most satisfying. Simone Forti calls this the dance state – a state of enchantment.

But is this the same thing as paying attention? Attention is certainly part of it, but a particular understanding of attention. It isn't a precise, directed, piercing quality. Sometimes it is about releasing a strong grip on attention, and facilitating a softer, cradling of attention. It is about attending less in some instrumental way ('pay attention!'), than in the way you might tend to animals, plants or children that have developmental processes which need supporting over time.

1. Allan Kaprow (1993), 'Education of the Un-artist, Part II (1972)', *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, University of California Press, pp 110-126. ↩

2. Susan Best (2012) Witnessing and Untimely Images: Anne Ferran's 'Lost to Worlds', *History of Photography*, 36:3, 326-336. ↩