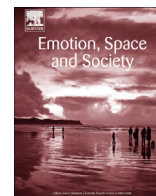




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Walking on glass

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1. Introduction

Tower Bridge, spanning the Thames, is a historic site, a busy thoroughfare, a tourist attraction and an exhibition center. Visitors come to marvel over the construction of the Victorian engine rooms, or to watch the bridge slowly lift to allow ships through. Since the 1980s the public have been able to experience another spectacle: a view of London from the high walkways, 42 m above the river, that span from one tower to the other. These walkways offer an additional thrill for visitors, as the central stretches are constructed of glass floor panels (see Fig. 1).¹

In November 2015 I was invited to take part in a public relations marketing exercise for Tower Bridge. The event was called *The Glass Floor Challenge: Conquer Your Fear of Heights at the World's Most Famous Bridge*.² The proposal was to meet Sean Fletcher, a presenter for the TV show *Good Morning Britain* who experiences vertigo, and offer him somatic (mind-body) practices for crossing the glass walkways, tools that might alleviate his symptoms of dizziness and wobbliness. Our meeting was filmed and broadcast the following morning in a program about common phobias.³

This writing documents that event, from the perspective of artistic practice, drawing on my experiential knowledge as a dancer, psychotherapist and somatic movement practitioner. At the time of invitation, I was involved with a cross-disciplinary research project that focuses on acts of falling – physical, metaphorical and psychological. The Tower Bridge event tempted me with a complementary strand of enquiry, an opportunity to engage with the phenomenon of acrophobia – fear of heights and fear of falling. The

Tower Bridge event is presented here, for the most part, as a 'what if' auto-ethnographic proposition. My idea behind the venture was that a somatically informed relationship between body and ground might help to alleviate sensations of falling associated with acrophobia. Reflecting on the wider processes and practices surrounding the event, this writing raises questions around sensory awareness, the body's relationship to gravity, and emotions (especially fear) of heights, contributing to broader debates on bodies, feeling and vertical space.

Before the filmed event with Sean I undertook fieldwork, to experience walking the glass floor myself and to observe others. I was curious. What if I experienced vertigo myself? Could I cross the glass walks? How might somatic body awareness support me while crossing? The following section presents reflections on the embodied experience of walking on the glass floor, before the paper moves on to consider the potential of somatic movement practice to alleviate a fear of heights. To support this 'what-if' scenario, I call on a process of potency (as used in homeopathy) and 'window of tolerance' (as used in sensorimotor psychotherapy).

2. Fieldwork

I feel nervous as I walk towards the edge of the glass. What if the glass shatters under *my* weight and I fall to my death below? Countering this egotistical fantasy is another internal voice telling me the structure is safe and I am fairly insignificant in the grand scheme of weighted things. Even so, as I walk towards the glass I am experiencing the same adrenalin rush of fear/excitement that I experience before a fairground ride, or a mountain pass.

I step on the glass. I cross back and forth several times, familiarizing myself with adrenalin rush while I try out my somatic movement tools of support. The different speeds and directions of vertical and horizontal movement happening far below impress me. There are people walking, cyclists, cars and buses, moving at different speeds, moving up and down the two lane roadway below, activity that moves in parallel with the walkway. Then there is the river, choppy waves and fast flowing water, flowing horizontally to the walkway. As I walk the glass I can sense how any attempt to fix perception on these different active movement pathways below could disorientate a person's sense of balance. Perception is playing tricks.

Standing to one side, I watch as two teenage boys run from the

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¹ The glass floor across each Walkway comprises of six panels, each weighing 530 kg, supported by a carbon steel framework weighing approximately 1000 kg. The Walkways original steel lattice structure has been preserved under the glass.

² <http://www.towerbridge.org.uk/Glass-Floor-Challenge/>.

³ <http://www.itv.com/goodmorningbritain> December 4th, 2015.



Fig. 1. Looking down.

far end of the walkway. As they approach the edge of the glass section they jump, landing well into the middle of the glass panels and they laugh, high on the release and relief of their experience. They do it again, running from the opposite end, jumping as before. A young woman holding a camera with protruding lens, walks nonchalantly onto the glass, seemingly disinterested, her intention is to film from one of the side windows, unconcerned and oblivious to what is below her. A baby crawls and sits, looking down, looking around, with open curiosity. An elderly couple approaches the glass holding hands. I sense they have made a pact together before coming. They seem determined to walk across. They step onto the glass in unison and cross slowly, holding hands throughout, plodding stiffly, faces serious, without turning to look at one another. They hold their bodies upright and look straight ahead. When they get to the other side they smile at each other – task accomplished! A gaggle of teenage girls tease and push each other onto the glass, daring each other to cross over. Eventually the entire group moves slowly across, clinging onto each other, bumbling into each other's bodies, shrieking with high-pitched laughter and excitement as they reach the center and look down, camaraderie seeming to outweigh any focus on what they might actually be seeing.

Other people come to the edge, consider the task, make jokes, but cannot take that step onto the walkway. These people grip on to the bars at the sides of the walkway, a secure structure, finding support and safety from the sights below. They walk around the outside. Curious, I ask some of them what they are experiencing as they attempt to step on the glass. They tell me: the visual sights below warp and distort, their lower backs tingle as if vertebrae have clashed together, legs become fuzzy and have a life of their own. My evaluation of this information tells me that their postural balance might be affected by the loss of reliable visual cues and as a consequence their bodies are tricking their nervous systems into fearful sensations of falling associated with vertigo (see Fig. 2).

3. Somatic movement practice

Postural balance depends on how vestibular, proprioceptive and visual systems equally impact the central nervous system (Todd, 1975). Balance is constructed through a multi sensorial experience where sensations of weight, contact, touch and hearing have

equal sensory input to visual cues. If we rely too heavily on visual cues, which are thrown into distortion when looking down from a great height, our bodies can feel unstable. Somatic movement practices encourage multi-sensory awareness, particularly focusing on our physical relationship to the environment, thus elements of these practices might be useful to restore a bodily sense of balance.

Mind–body-sensory integration is core to somatic movement practices, encouraging awareness that our bodies are a source of knowledge about ourselves in the world.⁴ Somatic practices draw attention to our bodies as neither static nor solid, but constantly changing and adapting in relation to our environment (Hanna, 1980). Fundamental to these practices is a relationship between body, breath and ground, a creative partnership that develops environmental contact and possibilities for mind/body growth and change. Indeed, somatic practices such as Body Mind Centering (Bainbridge Cohen, 2012) and Release Technique (Todd, 1975; Matt, 1993; Skinner, 1999; Lepkoff, 1999; Agis and Moran, 2002) have impassioned the work of site-based artists because these practices offer somatic understandings of body in relation to environment. See for instance the work of Anna Halprin, Helen Poyner, Body Earth, Sandra Reeve and Body Weather. Further, for many contemporary dancers, yielding to the ground – dancing with the ground – is like breathing out, necessary. Release Technique for instance (Skinner, 1999) encourages yielding to gravity to sense support from the environment. Somatically, sensing gravity in relation to the ground is a necessary pathway for changing fixed physical patterns in our bodies, encouraging kinaesthetic understanding of our skeletal frame and release of muscles and joints, to initiate physical, emotional and psychological change.

To introduce somatic engagement with falling, as a possible way of managing acrophobia might seem paradoxical, given that the symptoms for vertigo are anxiety and sensations of whirling, dizziness and lack of balance. Surely we should be looking for ways

⁴ The most familiar somatic movement forms to influence Western dance since the 1970s are Release Technique, Alexander Technique, Body Mind Centering, Authentic Movement and Feldenkrais. Earlier somatic influences can be found in the work of Laban Movement Analysis and Bartenieff Fundamentals. Somatic pioneers include Mabel Ellsworth Todd (1975), Barbara Clarke, Eugene Gindler, Alexander, Reich, Feldenkrais, Klein, Schultz and Jacobson (Johnson, 1986).

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