

The Body as a Story. Queerstories about Movement and Health

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INTRODUCTION

I am a 45-year-old non-heteronormative man with a disability. I have lived with multiple sclerosis since the age of 21. I am a social researcher, sociologist, community arts worker and educator. I come from a working-class family. My father worked in a shipyard – the same one where the historical strike took place in August 1980. Some shipyard workers became famous after the strike; my father did not. Nor did my mother, who worked as a laundress and maid in the tallest hotel in Gdańsk, watching history unfold from its windows. I like to watch birds and calving glaciers. My economic capital allows me to travel thousands of kilometres by plane to Argentina (with suspended ecological awareness) to observe this process. The cultural capital I have acquired through formal and informal education allows me to write. To write in this way. I stress this from the outset to make it clear that this research report is not objective. It is rooted in and – on many levels and across many dimensions – filtered through my private history, personal sensitivity and awareness. The knowledge I help generate and circulate is, as Donna Haraway wrote, situated (in experience, class, gender, ethnic position in society, etc.).¹ My research and personal ethics require me to state this at the beginning, because every thread and thought in the rest of this study is, in some sense and to some degree, related to the opening sentences of this introduction.

Multiple sclerosis (MS) differs for every person who has it. It also differs for healthy people, who can only imagine the experience or (mis)construct it from media narratives, for example. For me, after many years, MS is an addition, a feature, a modality of my body. I can no longer separate it from what is considered healthy. Numb hands during sleep, spasticity in my left leg, a constant sensation of tingling and electric currents, headaches (in various parts of my head), tired eyes, and a generally tired body are only some of the difficulties that accompany me constantly. This is not a confession meant to elicit sympathy. It signals that I have learned to register carefully the many voices of my own body – to accept them and, through long practice, tame and “own” them. The experience of chronic illness means different things to different people, also at different stages of life. Some people – often following the dominant narrative from the centre of the healthy world – fight it using military, ruthless, and exhausting language. They drill their bodies, focus on “coping” and set the bar high; they often remain alone.

¹ Donna J. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–181.

In the pursuit of normative fitness and a flawless appearance that reveals no “defects,” one can get lost.²

(...) my psychotherapist was actually the first person who listened to me, because... Even my loved ones somehow didn't – they didn't fully realize how I was experiencing it. (...) It really annoys me when someone says: smile, you can do it, you're strong. No. What I'd like to hear is: you can cry, you don't have to be strong, you don't have to cope.

(...) I wish someone would allow me to be weak. Just to be myself, accepted with my weaknesses. To hear that I'm already enough as I am, that I don't have to struggle and prove myself.

Really, now I can see what patterns they carry in their heads. That illness is weakness. That there are limitations I must overcome. That I have to give my all. Because of this, I felt exploited, emotionally and physically. And now I see a change in my own approach. It's...

Even the idea of fighting the illness is ... It's not the right approach. Fighting the illness – because if someone loses, then what? Does that mean they didn't fight hard enough? R1

I was lost too. My illness was (and sometimes still is) invisible to outsiders. Only my partner saw the injections I took in the evenings, and only the curious looks of other swimmers in the pool changing room indicated that they had noticed the adhesions on my skin. “Cheer up – you can do it.” Well, no. You don't have to.

In 2019, I completed a research project entitled *Unseen. Experiences of Living with Invisible Multiple Sclerosis*. At that time, I conducted twelve in-depth interviews with adults living with MS. Our conversations focused primarily on their stories, the difficulties they faced in finding support within their immediate social environment, and their struggles with the (in)visibility of illness and with accepting disability. What all these narratives shared was fatigue with the constant medicalization of identity. The language of the clinic, the comments of family members and colleagues – all framed them primarily as patients. As weak, different, perhaps “defective” people who, in order not to be “defective,” must fight for themselves (there has even been a social campaign: “MS – Fight for Yourself”), as if the only alternative on the other side of this continuum were surrender or resignation. My interviewees spoke about feeling unheard and the need to talk about their health stories – but not exclusively, and not always, within the framework of normative (restorative) “healing.”³

This diagnosis and reflection led to the idea of creating a space for chronically ill people – with visible and invisible disabilities – and for anyone burdened by this experience and seeking, even temporarily, to free themselves from it. A space where it would be possible to speak. But speaking – understood conventionally, through words – can itself be difficult and increase stress (though not always, and not for everyone). Because I am not only a sociologist but also a community arts worker, another idea emerged in my head. Using my workplace at the time – a cultural centre – and together

² Cf. Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London and New York: Verso, 1995).

³ Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

with professional dancer, actor, and choreographer Antek Kurjata, I attempted to respond to this need. I also did this for myself. I wanted to help myself, to increase my own comfort and my own “healing” (as I define it, and for me). We initiated a series of workshops entitled *Unseen*. These meetings were not only for people with MS, but for any adult who self-identified as fitting the project’s general assumptions. On the one hand, participants recognized the pain of not being heard (“there’s no way for my story to be heard,” “no one listens to me”); on the other, they shared exhaustion with discussing their situation solely in medical terms.

When I moved from Poznań to my hometown of Gdańsk, the need to explore and respond to similar experiences travelled with me. Here, the project – running since spring 2025 – was given the title *The Body as a Story. Movement and Improvisation Workshops*. From the outset, it was clear to me that, alongside reproducing tested tools from movement practices based on free, intuitive, and private choreographies of participants, I wanted to develop a structured reflection on these activities. This led directly to the decision to frame this project as research. Once again, this happened through action: through my constant presence in the group, observing the process from within while carefully recording and identifying new information and data. These materials may be useful to others who wish to replicate a similar approach in their own communities, galleries, cultural or community centres. In addition to action research and observation, key points of reference include my own reflections (autoethnography) and information gathered through conversations with workshop participants (4 interviews), one person who – despite an initial declaration – decided not to take part (1), and experts, including practitioners working with the described methodology (3). In total, eight interviews were conducted. All conversations were recorded with consent, transcribed, and coded. Fictitious names are used in quotations.

You know, I think that you talk about yourself, that you give a fragment of your life story, and that’s how you introduce and connect it to what you do. I think that’s wonderful, because in a sense it’s both courageous and – well – I feel a kind of connection when someone shares their story like that. I really admire people who talk about themselves and do so naturally. For me, it feels like something that comes naturally from a person, something I accept naturally.

And it neither surprises nor shocks me. If someone wanted to talk about it, I’m ready for that conversation. For me, that wouldn’t be a problem.

I feel the same way, and I think there are no perfect people. Even if someone is physically struggling with something, and it’s not visible, it’s written somewhere in their body. And I think that’s probably why we met in this group. E

The subtitle of this report – *Queerstories about Movement and Health* – is not decorative. It emerged out of necessity. From the beginning, it was clear to me that what happens in the workshop space cannot be contained within a narrative of “ordinary” physical activity. What was created there exceeded norms: norms of appearance, ability, tempo, and even norms governing health narratives. The non-normativity of bodies –

tired, sick, traumatized, forgotten, recovering; adult bodies that are rarely granted the right to free, uncontrolled movement – found a safe space for expression here.

Queering, in this context, is not simply a declaration of identity. It is a way of looking at the body that does not need to perform “correctness.” It accepts bending, twisting, stopping, and imperfection – elements often concealed or marginalized in mainstream narratives. In these meetings, imperfection became productive. It generated movement, opened impulses to search for new ranges, new trajectories, new stories.

Queerstories do not follow a linear narrative of improvement, healing, or progress. They move sideways, avoid the centre, resist convention. They are close to crip thinking, which has long insisted that disability is not a deficit but a different configuration of the world – a different logic of functioning. In this project, crip was not a theory but a practice. Uncontrollable ants under the skin, tremors, uncertainty, compensation, slowness, irregularity – all of these were integral to movement. The body did not have to “cope.” It was allowed to speak in its own language.

For this reason, *Queerstories about Movement and Health* are about bodies that do not fit narrow definitions of health, ability, or normality. They are about bodies negotiating limits and discovering other possibilities. About health as a relationship – with oneself, with others, with space – rather than as a test result or functional scale. They are stories (histories and herstories) that I do not merely describe but co-create, as I move through this non-apparent, non-normative journey within my own body. Perhaps that is why they remain so close to me.

Selected themes and issues addressed during the project:

→ **what happened during the workshops and sessions**

Each session took place in the same room at Instytut Kultury Miejskiej (City Culture Institute, IKM): bright, slightly austere, with wooden floors. We worked without shoes. Some participants were barefoot, others wore socks – whatever felt most comfortable for the body, which was meant to move at its own pace. The group usually consisted of around ten people. The sessions were led by Aurora Lubos – attentive, present, but not directive.

At the beginning, she introduced warm-up exercises, often drawn from mindfulness practices. During the sessions, she played music that was delicate and atmospheric, sometimes with a more pronounced rhythm. The music was not meant to be danced to. It functioned as a support, helping the body enter spontaneous movement – the kind that emerges on its own. Free movement was the foundation: not a task, but an opening. Each person began differently – through swaying, trembling, slow

breathing, or shifting weight. From this emerged private choreographies: gestures for oneself, in one's own rhythm, without the need to adjust to others.

We spoke about how every body carries its own memory and has its own way of speaking. For this reason, we worked through intuitive movement – unplanned, impulse-driven, arising from an arm, a shoulder blade, or the breath. Aurora did not give instructions. She invited: “see where it takes you.” This was not a metaphor. The point was to follow the first physical impulse to move.

This was not a dance class. It was not about the aesthetics of movement or normative grace. No one corrected posture or expected synchronization. On the contrary, the focus was on authenticity: trembling, wavering, stopping, rocking. At times, the group would naturally fall into a shared rhythm; at other times, everyone remained in their own movement worlds – and that was equally valid. All forms were treated as equal.

This was the character of the sessions: simple, physical, grounded in presence.

(...) that's where these things come out, and you know, those etudes we did when I was there – I don't know, maybe a month ago – movement, you know, these are really wonderful things. And no one is asked if they can dance, if they know how, what experience they have. They don't have to show it, and everyone has it. Even if someone thinks they don't have it at all – it's there. C

→ **what made you interested?; about the opacity of the researcher-organizer**

Some participants came because they were struggling; others because they were looking for movement without pretence or the pressure to conform to a norm. In several conversations, the same simple reason emerged: the invitation I circulated before the project began. I wrote openly that I have multiple sclerosis and that these meetings were not a dance course, but a space for free and intuitive movement – addressed to those who wanted to express themselves not through medical language, but through movement.

For some, this **openness** was decisive. The fact that the initiator did not present himself as a neutral observer, did not remain on the sidelines, but also had limitations, a personal history, tremors and pauses. One participant said this was the first time she had encountered an organizer who openly disclosed their illness in the project announcement instead of concealing it.

This transparency – the refusal to position myself as someone “outside” the process – helped build trust. As one participant put it:

“When someone says directly who they are, I can also come as I am.”

Perhaps this is why the group included people of different ages, with diverse bodily histories and varying degrees of confidence – or lack of it. What they shared was that the

invitation – sincere, simple, rooted in the lived experience of illness – allowed them to find something familiar in the project.

→ **about the title: what it means to you (how you interpret it) *The Body as a Story* (a combination of the verbal and the non-verbal)**

The title of the project sparked the participants' curiosity from the very beginning. In post-session conversations, the same association appeared repeatedly: the story is not understood here as a linguistic narrative, but as a mode of bodily revelation. What happens during the sessions – free and intuitive movement, pauses, micro-gestures, shifting weight from heel to toe, tremors, swaying – forms non-linear “sentences” articulated by the body rather than verbally.

When the participants reflected on how they understood the title, a shared conviction emerged: the body remembers more than can be expressed in words. It tells stories through tension and release, through rhythm, through private choreographies that do not need to be visible to others in order to be meaningful. One participant avoided definition altogether and said that only during the classes did she realize that each body “speaks differently,” yet all these different ways of speaking make up a shared experience. Another pointed out that the title brings together two orders that are usually kept apart: movement and language, body and word – echoing the persistent but false Cartesian division between the body and mind. Here, these orders are brought closer together. The body is given a legitimate voice as something that also knows and also “speaks”.

For them – and for me – *The Body as a Story* became an invitation to rethink expression. Not as something that requires syntax or logical closure, but as something that emerges in muscles, breath, and gestures repeated not to demonstrate anything, but because the body is trying to remind us of something. It is a story drawn in movement, not written in text.

(...) I really like the name, and in a sense it *is* a story, because we are telling a story about ourselves, about life. I don't know, it's because our body expresses us in a certain way – our movement, how we are perceived – and certainly the less tense we are, the better we connect with others. I admit I'm a bit thirsty for this contact, because at one point life treated me harshly and I withdrew a lot. Now I'm slowly coming back, and maybe I'm a bit greedy, but I think that's okay, isn't it? R1

(...) I associate it with expressing myself through my body – through a kind of work where I show something, tell a story, or convey an impression through movement. But at the same time, it's also a combination of storytelling and the body, because there is reflection too – we sit down, we talk, what was important to you, what you liked. So it's both the body and storytelling, a combination of the verbal and the non-verbal (...). C

→ **various motivations and things to do (participants):**

Illness (and recovery – non-normative, non-medical)

For some participants, illness was the starting point – chronic, persistent, sometimes invisible. However, illness did not function as an identity label, but as a background condition with which one learns to live. In conversations, the theme of recovery recurred, but in a meaning distinct from medical discourse: recovery as regaining agency, restoring the body’s right to fatigue; as being with the body rather than against it; as respite, not as a repair project.

(...) the previous period of my life was marked, I think, by suffering. But also by a struggle to function normally. The fact that the illness is not visible meant that I didn’t feel fully understood. People on the outside have no idea how much strength, energy, and time it takes just to try to function normally. R1

(...) people are becoming more and more open to alternative ways of spending their time and trying new things, like what an institution like this offers – sometimes without really knowing what they’re signing up for, what will happen there, whether it’s some kind of dance, some kind of movement. Everyone probably imagines something different. For many, it’s a leap into the unknown. For me, it’s part of a therapeutic process. I’ll repeat myself here, because I suffer from recurrent depression, and this year I’m experiencing a more severe episode, with anxiety as well. I’m in verbal therapy, but that’s one hour a week, and I’m looking for forms of support that can extend the healing process through activities like this. It helps me a lot. It has often pulled me out of very difficult states – simply through movement. That’s why I believe in it. I’m living proof that, over the years, I’ve explored movement in my own way, and it works. It helps. That’s probably why I believe in it so strongly (...). C

I do have coordination difficulties. I also have poor eyesight – I wear contact lenses, glasses – you know, sometimes I get confused, everything blurs. When I stop thinking about what is difficult for me, I feel like I start speaking about something. E

Loneliness (and the need to be with others)

Other participants arrived with experiences of loneliness – not necessarily understood as a lack of people, but as a lack of spaces where one can appear “unarmoured,” where there is no need to explain one’s limitations or mental state. For them, the workshops became such a space. Being among others – in silence, in movement, on parallel trajectories – was in itself a source of relief.

(...) there are also people you meet and with whom you establish some kind of relationship and bond. Sometimes you may not even remember their name, but you feel that someone matters, because you are here with them and sharing this. In these joint activities, in this shared process, I have the opportunity to be with people I don’t really know – what they do, who they are – but we are together and get to know each other from a completely different side. I don’t always have that opportunity. In fact, I rarely do, because I’m quite an isolated person. I don’t have many friends (...). C

Being heard (the physicality and materiality of the meeting)

Another strong motivation was the need to be heard – not through words, but through presence. During the sessions, participants listened with their bodies: sensing the weight of another person, their breath, the direction of their movement. This physical closeness – the experience of being noticed without being judged – was something many

of them lacked in everyday life, particularly in medical or professional settings. A key element of the process was/is the suspension of control – the silencing of the “inner policeman” that disciplines and normalizes.

I have to switch off my shyness. I have to stop thinking that something is limiting me. Then something really starts to happen – outside, well, outside of control. I don't like it when control appears in these situations.

It's a kind of space where, with every class and every meeting, there is a greater chance of disconnecting from these layers – unnecessary layers. You can't force it. I feel that something like telling your own story is definitely happening there. There's no other possibility, because I'm not pretending to be someone else. I'm not acting. I'm not a character. I'm E. E

Professional ambitions (expanding competences)

For one participant, involvement in the project formed part of her professional development. She is considering working in art therapy, dance education, or socio-cultural practice. The workshops offered her an opportunity to experience movement from within, observe group processes, and understand the relationship between body and emotion – without the rigid framework of a formal course.

(...) I attend these kinds of workshops to observe and learn for myself, because I'd like to do this work myself. I plan to enrol in psychology again in October, and I want to combine my interest in movement and its therapeutic dimension with strictly academic psychological education. C

Taking care of oneself (care, meditation, emotional closure)

There also emerged themes of self-care – deeply physical and sometimes meditative. Some participants spoke about the need to “hug themselves,” about mourning the past, and longing for earlier forms of ability, lightness, and identity. The sessions created a safe context in which to approach these feelings through movement, without having to name them.

A: I'm moved by the fact that I can allow myself simply to be in a space where I'm not judged by performance. I'm also moved by the empathy I receive from others. I'm very happy with Aurora's way of leading and the energy she brings to this project.

But there are tears as well, because there are difficult emotions too – a longing for freedom of movement. I'm experiencing a kind of mourning for the life I couldn't live because of my illness.

Bartek: So it's not mourning for a life that ended, but for something that never happened.

A: The illness took so much from me that I had to give up my dreams. I lost a lot. But maybe it has also given me a perspective: now, when I feel a little better and still have the strength, I want to make the most of the time I have. Lately, I've been approaching this very philosophically. R1

I feel that people with chronic illnesses often blame their bodies for not being as perfect as they would like them to be. Contact with one's own body is necessary – to see softness in movement, gentleness, to comfort oneself a little, to look at oneself differently, and to have safe contact with others. R1

(...) it always takes a few minutes at the beginning to return to the mode of the class, but once it starts, I feel pleasure in being here and participating in this focus on myself. I believe, I'm convinced that this is a moment to be, to commune with the body – which is truly a support – and to observe it in a different way. There is no other context where I can simply be with myself like this. It is a form of meditation, I think. R2

Closeness of bodies (safer space)

The workshop space made it possible to experience closeness in a non-invasive way: parallel movements, shared rhythms, someone passing nearby, a light displacement of air. Closeness was not imposed. Everyone could keep the distance they needed or enter into relation – on their own terms.

(...) for me, these are always small celebrations of togetherness. When there are exercises in pairs or in a group and I can be with another person, it feels empowering. You see the other person. You see that they are also going through something, that they also have emotions, that it matters to them. That helps. Simply being with others can be healing, if you are open to it, because others can reflect you. You can extend your experience through them. This is especially important in situations like mental disorders or difficult moments, when darkness appears and you realize you are not completely alone in it. C

(...) observing other people and how we interact with one another is essential. If we were all separate, it probably wouldn't be as interesting. We draw energy from Aurora and from each other. With a different group, these classes would look completely different. Everyone brings their own individuality, but together we become a kind of collective. There is trust. Aurora also emphasized that we come together as people who treat each other with respect and trust. What happens here stays within these four walls. If someone watched us from the outside, they might wonder what is going on. Inside, everyone can feel at ease and do whatever they need – walk on the walls, lie down, sit. No one judges anyone else (...). R2

Here and now – “non-therapeutic” self-therapy

As organizers and facilitators, we clearly stated that the workshops were not therapy. They were not designed as emotional work or intervention. Yet some participants said that the classes helped them in a simpler, more basic way: by directing attention to what the body is doing at a given moment. Not necessarily as meditation (though for some it was), but physically – feeling breath, weight, shoulder tension, the placement of the feet.

(...) I often use art in a therapeutic way myself. It's part of my own process – intuitive painting, without overthinking, or writing. I turn to different forms of art to help myself a bit. C

(...) living in the here and now may sound like a cliché, but it really hits home when you receive a diagnosis like that – when you realize that what your body is capable of can change very quickly, and that it can change how you function with other people in everyday life. It has a strong impact on what happens next. I live with this illness, but I don't want to limit myself (...). R2

This “here and now” did not result from technique, but from the nature of the classes themselves: slowness, lack of pressure, permission to stop when the body needed it. For some participants, this complemented work done elsewhere, such as verbal

therapy, but here it was simpler. Intuitive movement offered a brief suspension of constant control and interpretation. Neither therapy nor ritual – rather a temporary focus on oneself in the most basic way: through the body.

(...) if I feel like coming today, or should I stay at home? That definitely comes up somewhere along the way. But then, once I'm here, when the doors close and there's this quiet, when it's just us in the group, it's as if... things change very quickly. It feels like the focus shifts entirely to being here and now – to the hand, to the arm, just drifting somewhere – and that helps to switch off the head that's constantly running around with all these thoughts: about work, what's for dinner, the child, a thousand different things. And there's simply this moment. That's why I called it a kind of meditation – because there's this concentration on the body. Someone in the group, I don't remember exactly who, also mentioned that, in the end, the body is really the only thing we truly have. That might sound like a cliché, of course, but here you feel it more strongly: that you really are just this bodily being, and that because of the illness you never know how that body will evolve. And this is a time to make friends with it. R2

Fatigue with medicalization

For several participants, including myself, the project offered relief from a reality dominated by clinical language: test results, MRIs, status scales, pharmacology. Here, the body was no longer only an object of diagnosis. It could be a source of movement, meaning, and comfort.

This observation that chronically ill people are really exhausted by the medicalization of their lives. That they must constantly put time and energy into simply being able to function. Because at one point, I had to go through a lot of different treatments, like physiotherapy.

I knew that if I forgot about myself, I would suffer later. And here I realized that it's good that I can show that I'm not always in shape to give one hundred per cent. I can give as much as I want to, and I'm accepted for that.

And also that I can see my body not only as something marked by illness, but as something that holds a lot of emotion. A lot of openness, a lot of space for movement. Not something strong and demanding all the time, but also something that allows for slow being – with myself and with others. R1

Fun – return to the inner child

The atmosphere was relaxed. At times, movement shifted into play – play without goals, rules, or correctness. For some of us, this meant a return to a nearly childlike sense of freedom: a brief suspension of illness, pain, fatigue. We laughed, sometimes to the point of tears.

You can forget a little – about the fact that your body is sick. A different perspective: playing with movement, feeling lighter. Catching contact with your inner child. A bit of spontaneity. R1

→ The body

The body and physicality were central axes of these meetings – not as abstract ideas, but as concrete experiences: the cold of the floor under bare feet, tension in the neck that

eased after a few minutes of movement. We worked without shoes because only then did the body respond more directly.

At the first meeting I wore socks, but at the second I didn't. And it matters, for example, that I am barefoot. When I was younger, it was obvious that you exercise barefoot on a dance floor. It used to be obvious to me. E

The diversity of bodies was immediately visible. This was not a division between “able-bodied” and “disabled,” but a spectrum of ways of moving: stiff and light bodies, bodies tired by illness, bodies after injury, bodies accustomed to exertion, and bodies long unused to movement. Imperfection was not treated as an obstacle, but as a source of possibility. Injuries – like the one mentioned to me by one of the dance experts – became reasons to search for a different range, a different tempo, a different path of movement.

For me, the presence of others and their diversity helps me be myself. It's much easier to enter an exercise when I see that people are individuals, that they bring something of their own, that we are not repeating or reproducing something. (...) If I have to focus in a fixed way, with no room for my own approach, I feel worse. When I am constrained, my concentration drops, the flow of movement breaks, tension increases. Here, when I see that everyone has their own pace, it helps me enter my own process. It doesn't matter if I sit down now, if I stop, if I do it my way. There is space for that here, and that is important and helpful for me. C

Because of this diversity, no one had to conform to a norm. There was no “right” or “wrong” movement. Physical non-normativity – rooted in illness or in the history of one's body – was treated as one form of presence among many.

At first, there was occasional awkwardness: nervous laughter, avoiding eye contact. Over time, this shifted into something calmer. One participant described it as “kind seriousness” – the moment when the group becomes safe enough to look at one another without nervous smiles.

Body language played a key role – non-hierarchical, separate, requiring no commentary. Someone raised a hand. Someone rolled on the floor. Someone made micro-gestures with their fingers. This was also communication – often more precise than words.

(...) non-verbal communication is a completely different kind of contact and exchange with another human. I think we are tired, as people in general, of words – of speaking, explaining, analyzing, interpreting. From early childhood we are taught how to speak, what words are allowed, how to describe things. It's words, words, words all the time. If there is no space to communicate non-verbally, you can get stuck, and words eventually lose meaning. I sometimes notice that when I talk too much – when I'm verbally hyperactive – I lose words altogether, I lose their meaning. I start speaking and don't know what I'm saying. C

Stillness was also important. Aurora told me that stillness is movement directed inward. For me, this was often the most significant state: feeling the “ants” under my skin, spastic muscle twitches, blood circulation – micro-movements like those on the

boy's face that Aurora once described to me. Nothing spectacular. Just the ordinary functioning of the body, which usually goes unnoticed.

The project as a whole created distance from the logic of “drilling the body” – a language imposed by medicine, rehabilitation, gyms, and productivity culture. It was not about striving for normative fitness. Rather, it was about recognizing the body as it is: sometimes tired, sometimes asymmetrical, sometimes resistant, sometimes unexpectedly ready. A body that does not have to cope but can simply be.

(...) sometimes I regret that I pushed myself beyond my limits just to avoid deviating from the norm. (...) I forced myself instead of allowing myself to... I think my body was asking for rest. And I didn't listen. R1

→ **features of the project (what made it attractive to me?):**

Cyclicity (process)

Classes were held as regularly as possible: from spring to late autumn (with a summer break), on average once every two weeks. Each session lasted two hours. This regularity enabled a process to unfold – not a one-off experience, but something that could be returned to, continued, and developed, with its own internal dynamics (the instructor ensured continuity). Repetition built a sense of safety: participants knew what to expect and could observe changes taking place within themselves over time.

The group remains relatively stable, so it's easier to open up among familiar people than among complete strangers. R1

(...) I have to admit that I find it difficult each time a new person appears. This is not a rejection of the method – I understand why people come and go – but consistency is very important to me. When someone new arrives, I feel that I take a step back. I need to observe again, to get used to them. I think I am an observer by nature. Maybe that's natural. E

Intimacy (a sense of closeness)

The group was relatively small (up to ten people), allowing everyone to feel the presence of others while still having space for themselves. This closeness made it possible to work without pressure and without the feeling of being exposed. In this atmosphere, no one had to prove anything. Intimacy – during movement, stillness, entering and leaving the room – became something natural.

When you create such a close-knit group – perhaps thinking similarly, perhaps a little differently – exchange happens. Sensitivities meet. For some reason we find ourselves there together. That matters to me. E

Non-judgement

From the outset, we clearly communicated that movement range and aesthetics were not subject to judgement. No movement was better, worse, correct, or incorrect. This principle was crucial: it freed participants from constant evaluation of their own ability,

body shape, smoothness or coordination. Every movement – even the smallest, most hesitant one – was sufficient. I often separated myself from the group, listening to my body and resting when needed. No one questioned this.

(...) here, there is no better or worse movement. Everyone has their own movement, and regardless of ability, it is part of that person. So I think that is more important here than any hierarchy of movement or ability. R2

Non-professionalism

The project was not a dance course or training programme. It did not aim at achievement or measurable progress. Non-professionalism was an advantage: it allowed movement practice outside the logic of performance and expertise. At the same time, participants emphasized the professionalism of the facilitation – not in terms of technique, but attentiveness, preparation, and competence in working with people.

(...) I don't want to jump around or show off. I just want to do something for myself, in harmony with myself and with the limitations I already have – limitations I have accepted somewhere along the way. Not to demonize them, but to use them. I feel I have reserves and possibilities within me. It's really about the right place, space, meeting, time, mood. And something important: in this *Body as a Story* there is regularity. (...) It's simply about what's possible. And I feel good in it, in this rhythm. For me, it has a rhythm, and that rhythm is good for me. E

Competences and teaching style (Aurora in duet with Bartek)

Aurora Lubos led the sessions by inviting rather than instructing. Her style was supportive and generative: she created a framework while allowing the participants to move in their own directions and at their own pace. I, as co-facilitator and participant, brought the perspective of a chronically ill person, along with experience in cultural work and research. This pairing – two people with different competences and lived experiences – proved significant for the group. It offered complementary forms of presence.

(...) the facilitators – you and Aurora – really create this space through your personalities and temperaments, through who you are and how you speak to us. I feel a balance. You are different, and that helps me. I need someone I can follow for a moment and then let myself go somewhere else. E

Slowness (freedom, slowly)

Slowness functioned as a principle – not imposed, but emerging from the group's needs. The aim was neither to push the body beyond its limits nor to artificially restrain it. Everyone moved at their own pace. This created freedom: the freedom to act intensely or gently, to do much or very little. What mattered was alignment with what was actually available at a given moment.

Openness and stability of space (including its imperfections)

Classes always took place in the same workshop room at IKM. This stability mattered. The familiar space functioned as an anchor; the body returned more easily to known stimuli. The room's imperfections were also part of the process: sometimes it was cold, sometimes sounds came from the corridor. But it also became part of the process.

→ **why others did not participate:**

I ask myself why, despite initial positive responses, some people who signed up ultimately withdrew. Based on my analysis and a conversation with one prospective participant, I conclude that mechanisms of self-selection or self-exclusion were at work. Some potential participants likely withdrew already at the stage of reading the announcement. Perhaps the project intimidated them; perhaps they assumed their physical capacity was insufficient; perhaps they lacked a language that would allow them to familiarize themselves with the space. This is an important lesson for us as organizers: to speak about the project without suggesting that it is intended only for people with specific experiences or a "serious enough" problem.

I imagine that for some people this will simply be a barrier – coming to classes like this – because even though you reassure them that these sessions are for people regardless of ability, those who have greater limitations will probably always have a bigger barrier to actually come here and take part. So yes, there is still a lot of work to be done. And not just for you, but for any kind of inclusive activities like this. To have both men and women together, but also people with different levels of ability in the same space. Because there is probably this kind of "self-selection" – a selection of people who are perhaps a bit more able-bodied for this type of activity. Simply because they have to come here for two hours, get here in the first place, and we know that for some people that can just be too much effort. R2

Another strong factor may be fear of closeness and exposure – both emotional and physical. Almost exclusively women participated. Many conversations pointed out that men more often avoid situations where the body becomes exposed, vulnerable, and unprotected, except in culturally sanctioned contexts such as sport or strength-based competition. Cultural associations of masculinity with control, strength, and toughness clash with intuitive movement, physical closeness, and moments of helplessness. In the background were also questions of physicality and sexuality – especially non-normative – and ironic comments about the absence of male narratives during the workshops, such as jokes about "feeling the power of a lumberjack." This space proved more accessible to people who allow themselves bodily sensitivity – primarily women. The self-exclusion of hegemonic men from such experiences (with homosexual men often less subject to this disciplining of the body) ultimately works to their detriment.

I think stereotypes play a huge role here, unfortunately, and that men sort of lock themselves into this cage of limited perception. That dance and activities connected with expression and emotions are simply for women. That they're unmanly, that they might be perceived in a certain way. So it seems to me this comes from culture and from a kind of social connotation, and from the way dance and movement are still perceived. (...) heterosexual men are afraid that if they go to classes like this, someone might think they're gay, because men are terribly afraid of that. It's

actually ridiculous how afraid straight men are – as if they could be infected or something, you know, as if it would somehow harm them if someone thought they were gay (...). C

Class and capital also mattered. One conversation referred to the generation of our parents, who, with lower cultural capital, rarely found space for bodily practices beyond functional necessity. For people from similar backgrounds, activities involving introspection, bodily awareness, and free expression may appear as something “not for them.” This reminds us that the body remains strongly class-coded: accessed, disciplined, and incorporated into everyday life in different ways depending on resources, habits, and patterns learnt at home.

At the same time, our discussion revealed an apparent paradox. While the idea behind the project – free movement, body awareness, improvisation – may seem less accessible to those with lower cultural capital, the **body** itself is the most democratic medium. It precedes language. It is available to everyone, regardless of education or cultural habit.

(...) the language of movement is fundamental. It comes first. Before we develop speech, we begin to move. In fact, we move from the very beginning – already in the womb, these kinds of micro-movements are there. C

This paradox recurs repeatedly: language – especially the language of institutional announcements and project descriptions – can exclude, create distance, and signal “this is not for me.” Meanwhile, the body (usually) does not require familiarity with cultural codes. Movement, even minimal, is recognizable and intelligible. In this sense, bodily practices can be more inclusive than word-based workshops.

For us as organizers, one task remains clear: to search for a language that does not discourage participation, but opens people to what is most fundamental in the project – the experience of the body, which rarely needs translation in order to be understood.

→ **project life (what happens between)**

Between one meeting and the next, the project continued to live. I did not want contact with the group to be limited to the moment of entering the room, so I regularly sent short messages to the participants, making sure they were not formulaic. Over time, I noticed that this form of communication opened a space between us: the participants began to reply, share reflections, ask questions. They wrote because they knew that on the other end there was someone genuinely interested not only in organizing the classes, but in the entire process and in them as individuals.

A second element that strongly shaped what happened “in between” was the process of photographing. I was aware that the presence of a camera could be distracting, especially in a project so deeply focused on physicality and intimacy. For this reason, I introduced the photographer gradually and always explained why

documentation was taking place. The photographer understood the nature of the workshops and quickly gained the group's trust. Before any photograph was used, it was sent to the participants. They could approve or reject it without providing justification. This gesture – full control over one's own image – strengthened participants' sense of safety and agency.

In post-cycle conversations, many participants emphasized that the classes did not end when they left the room. Movement – both performed and imagined – stayed with them. They returned to what had happened during the sessions in thought, in memory, sometimes through recalling a single small gesture. This kind of “after-work” was not the result of an assignment or technique. It signalled that something initiated during the class continued to unfold after the formal meeting had ended.

The same applied to the time before subsequent sessions. Some participants spoke about thinking ahead to the next meeting, wondering what it would bring and how their bodies would function that day. This was not preparation, but anticipation – a sign that the workshops had become more than a calendar entry.

(...) It's such a nice word, *resonating*. It just kind of pulses. You know, I have the opportunity and the pleasure to cycle to work, and during those rides a lot happens in my head. A lot of things come up then – thoughts, images. And of course it's alive. I come back to different things, different thoughts, different words that were said. It lasts. It's not just two hours once every two weeks. It goes on. And that makes me really happy, because it means it's truly alive. I'm very happy about that, because I also feel that it carries me, you know. I just feel it. It's a kind of feeling. E

Within the group, there was also a clear need to continue the project. Not as a mechanical extension, but as a continuation of being together in the process. At the same time, participants stressed that this desire was accompanied by caution regarding the admission of new people. Openness mattered, but it needed to be regulated so as not to disrupt the intimacy that made freedom of movement and exposure possible.

All these elements – ongoing correspondence, careful handling of photographic documentation – meant that the project existed beyond the workshop room. Because of them, the workshops became not a series of isolated meetings, but a process.

Perhaps it is the storytelling that sustains this continuity: not a single meeting, but a sequence – our shared storytelling. R2

→ **comments from the facilitators:**

In conversations with the facilitators – Aurora and Antek – the theme of co-creation was central. Their approach was not about offering ready-made solutions, but about responding continuously to what the group brought into the space. Flexibility was fundamental. The facilitators established a framework, but the participants filled it. Learning moved in both directions: we learned from the group, and the group learned from one another.

(...) my experience as a mother of a child with a disability has also meant that my path has been going in a slightly different direction as well, alongside the artistic one. And it looks like I'm becoming more and more interested in this.

I'm interested in people, in meeting people in general, and workshops are the best way for me to share my experience and my knowledge. But it's never one-sided for me. It's never a one-way arrangement. These meetings and workshops are always like this: I try to give a lot of myself, but I also receive a lot from them. (...) Every meeting is different. Of course, there is continuity in my head, and things are planned in detail. But there's also a lot of freedom – for improvisation, for change, for listening to one another. Because I think that's what it's really about. In general, it's about listening.

Aurora and Antek emphasized that the focus was on **movement, not dance**. This distinction is important. Dance, in its narrow sense, implies technique, style, evaluation and reference to standards. By contrast, movement is accessible to everyone and requires no prior skill. This perspective allowed participants to focus on their own experience rather than on performance.

For me, the least interesting thing is working with movement or dance if the people you work with are treated only as objects – people who are supposed to perform a certain movement. That doesn't interest me at all. No matter how wonderful the dancers might be, how great they are, or what kind of people they are, I wouldn't take on something like that. As I said, this project is *Body – Story*: it's not me telling a story with my body and imposing on your bodies how they should tell their stories. What matters is what is written inside you. Each of you is an individual, each of you is a unique body with a unique history. And that is what is most beautiful about it – that each and every one of you reads, in your own way, what I say, what I show, and the direction I try to guide you in. But none of this would happen without your individual histories, without the unique records written into your bodies, the memory of your bodies.

And that is the most beautiful part of all. A

In my conversations with experts, **professionalism** also emerged as a key issue, though understood differently than in the artistic field. Here, professionalism did not mean perfect performance, but responsibility for the process, attentiveness to group dynamics, and the creation of conditions for safe movement. This understanding coexisted with the declared non-professional nature of the project: it was not a course, there were no tests, no hierarchy of skills, no expectation of progress.

Another recurring theme was disability – or more precisely, its symbolic disappearance during the sessions (or the unveiling of the social construction through which disability is produced by a “normative” environment, along with the barriers and limitations it imposes). In free movement, differences in ability lost their usual significance. The question emerged: **When does a “new body” begin?** Is it when movement is no longer measured against what it once was? When one allows oneself to move differently? These intuitions closely align with crip studies – not as theory, but as practice: recognition that the body can function outside the norm and does not need to try to return to it. This generates new visualities, choreographies, modalities, and narratives, enriching the public and discursive space of corporeality.

And that's what's so great – that movement, dance, whether it's improvisation or some kind of theatrical task, has an incredible impact on our awareness. And it turns out that the body, which seems to give us limitations, is actually read differently. Those limitations give us even greater possibilities. Or as I would put it – they're not... they're not really limitations at all. A

One of the most beautiful elements of the work, as both facilitators noted, was **“liking oneself in the process.”** Not in social sense, but as finding a place in movement that is one's own – unforced, not shaped by external expectations. The facilitators created conditions that allowed the group to remain in that place and develop it at their own pace.

→ **CONCLUSION: culture and respite**

This project, in its simplicity and focus, has become for me an example of **reflexive accessibility**.⁴ It is not limited to adapting physical space but also modes of work: language, tempo, and the possibility of participation across different bodily states and levels of energy. Above all, however, it responds to real needs. The process begins with observation, diagnosis, and conversation. Only then – on the basis of collected stories and voices that speak of absence or neglect – does it make sense to propose solutions, preferably with the involvement of those directly concerned. In *The Body as a Story*, reflexiveness meant speaking openly about my own experience as a researcher and organizer, seeking other stories, and drawing conclusions from them. It also meant testing – checking whether something is working and bringing us, as facilitators and cultural practitioners, closer to a slightly better reality in which positive change can occur. This is the form of accessibility that Jakub Walczyk and I seek to define and develop – not as an add-on, but as the foundation of the relationship with participants.

As a researcher and community arts worker, I see deep meaning in this activity. In participants' gestures and conversations, small yet significant changes became visible: increased self-confidence, greater acceptance of personal limitations, a readiness to listen to the body, and sometimes simply joy in moving together. These effects do not appear in statistics, but they matter. For me, they confirm that the project is meaningful and that its value extends beyond a single year of activity.

The project also aligns with a broader discussion around **culture and health** – the idea that culture can support well-being, and that artistic and movement-based practices can offer relief. Not as “treatment,” but as an opportunity to catch a breath, regulate, and gently shift attention from pain toward a body that can also be a source of pleasure.

⁴ Bartek Lis and Jakub Walczyk, eds., *Dostępność urefleksyjniona* (Gdańsk: Instytut Kultury Miejskiej, forthcoming 2026).

Movement, in its most basic form, proved sufficient as a form of storytelling. It also proved sufficient as a language with which to begin the change I hope to continue developing with care in the future.

(...) if someone has physical or mental difficulties of different kinds, and if they're actually coping with them in a medical sense, or if they've – well – accepted them... I'll speak from my own experience. I've accepted certain things that affect me, and I think this has really been going on throughout my adult life. I've always been looking for some kind of outlet – you know, what we now nicely call *respite*. But really, it was about having another world. Having something parallel, something where I could experience things alongside everyday life – something that gives me hope, that gives me impressions, that gives me strength. Strength to work, to be a friend, to be a parent, to fulfil myself. Something that gives me energy on a daily basis. And I've always found that in culture. It's always been a parallel world, one that overlaps with my own – and that's still the case. I can't imagine any other kind of space. And bringing all of this together into one kind of metaphorical mass, something you can shape – something you can work with, something you can tell a story through – where there's an element of theatre, an element of creation, an element of imagination, something that might have been there in childhood or is there now, something you can even work things through with... it's just – well, it's cosmic. It's something really unique. So I feel very lucky that I found my way to your project. It feels like a kind of fulfilment, in a space that feels close and intimate, even though the people in it are strangers. E

The Body as a Story. What is this project about? (easy-to-read and easy-to-understand version)

About the project

The Body as a Story was a series of calm movement workshops for adults. The participants met at Instytut Kultury Miejskiej in Gdańsk.

The classes were led by artist and educator Aurora Lubos. The initiator of the project was Bartek Lis, the author of this report. He took part in the workshops and researched them at the same time.

The workshops focused on movement, the body, mindfulness and closeness – but they were not a dance course.

What did we do in class?

We moved barefoot or in socks.

Calm music played in the room to support movement.

Everyone moved in their own way: fast or slow, a little or a lot.

There was no judgement.

Sometimes the group moved together. Sometimes everyone followed their own rhythm.

It was also possible not to move at all. Stillness was part of the work.

The main idea was to listen to the body and let it speak.

Why did people come?

The reasons were different:

Illness or fatigue from being ill – movement helped them feel their bodies without pressure to “fight for health.”

Loneliness – the workshops created a safe space to be with others.

The need to be heard – not with words, but through presence.

Professional development – some wanted to learn how to work with movement and emotions.

Self-care – the need for calm, pause and rest.

Closeness and trust – without being forced, at one’s own pace.

Fatigue with medicine and control – a break from diagnoses, tests, assessments.

Fun – lightness, play and spontaneity.

What does “the body as a story” mean?

The participants said that:

- the body can tell a story,
- movement can be a way of speaking without words,
- the body remembers things that are hard to describe.

The workshop combined storytelling with words and through movement.

What was the group like?

The group was small, usually around 10 people.

This helped create a sense of safety.

Most participants were women. Men came less often, partly because of embarrassment and stereotypes about masculinity.

Bodies were different: more able, less able, tired, injured.

Everyone was treated equally.

How did the facilitator work?

Aurora Lubos:

- did not teach steps,
- did not correct the participants,
- listened to the group and responded to its needs,
- created a framework but allowed everyone to find their own way.

The project author was also part of the group. He openly shared that he has multiple sclerosis (MS), which helped build trust.

Why did some people not come?

The report suggests several possible reasons:

- self-selection: “this is not for me,” “I can’t do it”,
- embarrassment about showing the body,
- the belief that physical activities are only for able-bodied people,
- stereotypes about gender and sexuality,
- unfamiliarity with the language of culture and art.

The author stresses the need for a more open language that includes rather than excludes.

What happened between meetings?

The project continued outside the workshop room:

Bartek sent thoughtful, personal messages to participants.

The group replied and stayed in touch.

The experience stayed with the participants after the classes ended. They returned to it in their thoughts and memories.

Photos were always consulted with, and accepted by, participants. Everyone had full control over their own image.

What did the facilitators say?

Movement is more important than dance.

The workshops are based on co-creation, not instruction.

This is not a “course,” but an ongoing process.

During the sessions, differences in physical ability often stop being important.

Conclusions and significance of the project

The project offered a moment of respite – break from stress, pressure, pain and expectations.

It shows that culture can support health and well-being.

It is an example of reflexive accessibility: one that is based on real needs, not only on technical adjustments.

The workshops led to real changes: more self-confidence, greater acceptance of the body, a sense of community and joy.

Most importantly, simple movement proved to be enough to move people – physically and emotionally.

COLOPHON:

The Body as a Story. Queerstories about Movement and Health

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