



Veli Lehtovaara in collaboration with Jani Hietanen: *Laituri | The Pier* (2025)
Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries research exhibition in Kuva/Tila gallery, 5–21 December 2025, Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki.
 Photo: Petri Summanen

ECOLOGICAL POETICS IN DANCE: AN INTERVIEW WITH VELI LEHTOVAARA

Lyenne Palü

In his work, choreographer and researcher Veli Lehtovaara explores how the porous, sensing body can open pathways to ecological awareness – and how choreographic writing can generate its own kind of poetics.

Bodies carry a knowledge within them that is too often overlooked—the sediments of our sensuous memories, the bodily feeling of being in this world. In times of multiplying ecological crises, connecting with our physical habitat and entering into more conscious relations with our environment becomes especially crucial.

In this field, choreographer and researcher Veli Lehtovaara situates his practice. He investigates the relationship between language and dance through an open, experimental approach to choreographic writing and finds, on the many thresholds within the realm of dancing, the space where ecological poetics can emerge.

This interview traces the flow of language in Veli's choreographic processes, his encounters in the forest, and a transformable pier that will begin its journey to different bodies of water throughout 2026 as part of the research exhibition *Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries*.

Lyenne Palü: You move between the roles of performer, choreographer, doctoral researcher, and artistic director, among others. To begin, could you share how dance has shaped the way you experience and relate to the world?

Veli Lehtovaara: Growing up in an environment where conceptual and scientific knowledge was dominating, bodily knowledge was often pushed aside or not trusted. Dance, especially somatic and perception-orientated practices, changed that for me. It gave me access to a new kind of knowledge: different ways of relating to my body, but also to other bodies, human and more-than-human, through my senses.

In the past few years, I've worked a lot with practices that connect visual perception with the sense of weight—with movement as a shift of weight. Seeing is not passive but an active process full of often unconscious choices. I can choreograph my seeing: for example, through directing attention to the periphery or a focal point, to what is mobile or still in relation to me. These practices have changed how I move through the world and how the world appears to me.

Working in experimental dance and theatre also gave me tools to focus on the relation between the inner experience

of my body and the sensory experience of the environment. A choreographic question that has emerged is how energy and information move between the two. I situate dance on this porous edge between the sensing-feeling body and the habitat, which is shared and created together with other kinds of living beings. I'm interested in methods involving deconstructing and rebuilding how we use the senses in dance and performance, and I've learnt ways of cultivating bodily awareness together with environmental awareness.

Your research explores ecological poetics in dance and choreographic writing. Beyond theory, how do you encounter ecological poetics in practice—in movement or in writing?

I can try to explain, but as long as we speak about it instead of experiencing it, we are in the realm of language and theory.

In my writing, I've noticed that an embodied, collective choreographic process can produce its own kind of language and literal poetics that is able to communicate and be ecologically relevant.

In terms of dance, I'm thinking of *Nature Untitled – Movement III*. This performance takes place in a shopping centre in Kalasatama, Helsinki, where the audience sits on boxes filled with fresh wood while the performers dance among and around them. At the same time, another environment is present through headphones: field recordings from an old-growth forest and a voice describing ecological processes, phenomena and creatures living there.

The dancers have visited that forest—the Siikavaara protected area in the Kainuu region—together with nature guide, environmental educator and forest activist Riitta (Nyyskä) Nykänen, whose voice the audience hears. So, the audio track can invite the dancers' bodily memories of that place while they simultaneously respond to the very concrete, tactile and visual environment of the shopping centre.

There is a juxtaposition of two very different, almost contradictory environments. The dancers move in a kind of liminal third space between them, continuously linking the two.

Do you see this linking as the poetic act of the choreography?

I do. This in-between space—that's where the poetics come into being, through the dancers' bodies, through their movements. That is the case in all my choreographies, but that in-between space always manifests itself in different ways.

The most fundamental in-between, for me, is the relation between the inner space of our bodies—our internal experience—and the surrounding environment.

Finding the right language for a dance is important for you, and you describe your choreographic writing as a “score, instruction, script, spell, recipe or code.” Could you share what such a spell, for example, might look like? And how does the choice of this range inform your dances?

Here's a small fragment of text from *Nature Untitled – Movement II*, spoken aloud during the performance, that can function like a spell:

spider

finger, tiger

error



Photo: Jussi Virkkumaa / Saari Residence

An instruction for it could be this: repeat these words speaking aloud, always in different speed, order and rhythm, including hesitations or getting stuck. Continue as long as you stay curious to find new ways of embodying the words with your voice and movement. For example: spider, finger, tiger error, finger spider. Error, tiger, finger, error. Spider tiger spider finger, error.

I wanted to open the windows and doors so that choreographic writing could be all those things. It's also a task for me to think about what choreographic writing can be. For example, it can mean a specific notation: symbols that were invented for dance. It can also mean literal written task scripts. Another way to think about choreographic writing is to consider how dance inscribes itself into a specific place or environment—how it becomes part of that place, or more specifically, part of our experience of that place.

So in that sense, dance is a form of writing?

Yes, you can look at it like that. Dance inscribes itself into a place, and through that, we experience the place differently—our memory of it changes. This applies to the performers as well as to the spectators.

When I think about this relation between dance and place, it also connects to certain practices I've carried into my work. One of them is the act of greeting—something that happens before the dance. Sometimes I use it as part of a choreographic score. Greeting a place, another living being, or an element like water, wind, or a season.

Finno-Baltic myths and folklore, once written down from older oral traditions, allow us to read traces of these greeting practices today. In these texts, you can read about habits of greeting places, buildings, and various beings—gestures that were once part of everyday life.

What does that look like when you greet a place? Do you say hi?

That's one possibility. The greeting can be spoken, or it might take another vocal form, like singing or humming. It can also be a gesture you make within your mind and body – or a movement, a way of directing your attention toward whatever you're encountering. Sometimes it's also a question: "can I be here? Is it okay if I enter this temporary relationship?"

Do you ever feel that a place doesn't welcome you?

Yes, sometimes. It's just like with humans—if you pay attention, you feel whether you're welcome or not. I think that's

also possible with places, other living beings, and even natural phenomena.

Here's one nature-connection practice I learnt from Osma Naukkarinen and often do in a forest: I begin by wandering and listening with my whole body, noticing where I feel drawn. When I arrive somewhere, I ask if I can be there. If it feels like "maybe not", I keep walking; if it feels welcoming, I stop and simply stay—doing nothing at first, just arriving. Then I begin to explore the place through my senses: through touch, smell, sight, listening/hearing... From that, movement may emerge. It might look like dancing, or it might be barely visible, but the focus is on connecting to the place through the senses in that moment. For me, this is one way of working with ecological poetics in movement.

When you return to the studio to write choreography, what does the process look like—for you and the dancers?

I usually propose simple words, directions or orientations—quite many of them—and together they form a kind of landscape that the dancers navigate by choosing what to include and what to leave out. Ultimately, their choices shape what the dance becomes. It's a collective, embodied and iterative process: we dance, we watch, and we try to find words for the dance.

Some fragments of language come directly from working with scores and specific performers. Later I edit, re-edit, translate, and maybe add something – in performance the text returns to the body when a performer speaks it. So it becomes re-embodied. The words move from the dancing body to the page and back to the body again. It becomes a cycle, a flow of language.

Creating dance is, for me, a very oral process. Sometimes we write something down and return to it later; sometimes the text becomes a score for speaking. Some of these texts aren't danced at all—they emerge from dance but then exist simply as choreographic speech or text.

How do you think about authorship in that process?

Authorship, for me, is fluid, and agency is distributed. But the agency of the performer is fundamental. I'm interested in creating circumstances where the dancer can follow their own curiosity and imagination.

You aim to develop choreography to think about ecological problems. I wondered if you could share your thoughts on what choreography can actually do in the face of ecological crises—and where you see its limits as a tool for real-world ecological change?

The environmental changes and ecological catastrophes that we are creating and facing are so complex and interconnected that we need to respond to them on many scales and in many fields of human activity. Art and dance have their share in this. Yet in ecological and environmental discourses—especially in Western approaches—the body is often forgotten, or we don't know how to include it, and I think that's part of the core problem.

Bodies carry enormous amounts of information and knowledge. Experimental dance practices, in my experience, recognise this and have developed methods to cultivate an embodied environmental awareness: an awareness of our own body, of other bodies, and of the materials and forces shaping our environments. For me, this corporeal awareness is necessary in our struggle to respond to ecological crises.

There are some somatic techniques I work with that create access, in dancing and choreographing, to the body's

memory. What you carry in your body is your whole history—from infancy until today: things you've done, things you've practised, dances you've danced, encounters you've had. Your body holds traces and memories of all of these. I think of them as sedimentations that can be revisited and that can surface in the dancing body when you relate to it with care and with certain techniques that can be used in dance.

***Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries* introduces a pier, which continues your earlier *Nature Untitled* works. What will visitors encounter in this installation, and how does it initiate the research you'll be developing over the next year?**

The exhibition marks the "launch" of a year-long practical research process. In this, I will bring a pier to different locations and place it on natural waters—lakes, ponds and the sea. It's shaped like an eight-directional compass, but it's modular and can also take on other forms. In the exhibition space, the pier functions as a sculpture and invites visitors to imagine, bodily, what it might be like to float and drift at Gilbbsjävi, Ypykkälampi, Pääjänne or in the bay of an island in the archipelago. I hope they can slow down for a moment, rest on the pier, and tune in to their own bodies—feel where they are and how they're feeling.

The sculpture will also include sound elements and choreographic speech that address the visitor's body through different registers of sensuous information.

What questions do you take with you for this research, and what kind of encounters do you hope to make with it?

I'm curious about what will happen when I bring this architectural object on water—something that floats and can even detach from the shore. How does my body experience the surrounding environment from that position? How do I connect with the water, its temperature and conditions, with the air and the sky that opens above, and with the land that borders the water? I think of the pier as a kind of vessel or interface between these elements, and I want to explore how a body can situate itself differently through this platform.

Another question I take with me is how the pier can invite people: how it can make the research accessible to communities with very different backgrounds and different relationships to body, dance and art. I also hope to create opportunities for people from the places I visit and for researchers from other disciplines to engage with the practices I've developed so far. This time the work is an ongoing process rather than a finished performance, and I'm interested in opening it up while the questions are still unfolding.

Lyenne Palü is a Swiss artist and writer, currently on exchange in the Master's programme Praxis – Curating and Writing in Contemporary Art while collecting ghost stories, weather reports, and medieval memes.

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