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The atmospheric attunement of diversity interventions: learnings from a dance performance

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ABSTRACT

Since the start of diversity management in organizations, interventions have been primarily oriented toward altering individuals' cognition, missing out on the potential of the embodied and materially mediated character of learning and interacting as experimented with in arts-based interventions. In this study, through ethnographically exploring a dance performance, whose main purpose is to create a community between a diverse cast and audience, we aim to rethink interventions around diversity. In particular, we turn to the notion of atmospheric attunement to investigate how, in this artistic context, a diverse group of people learns to relate differently. From this, we theorize two conditions of possibility for thinking differently about diversity interventions: (1) a sentient focus on atmospheric attuning that collectively connects embodied differences, and (2) the material mediation of nonhuman elements that enables the co-creation of these affirmative experiences. Together, both conditions suggest considering diversity intervention as a politics of affirmative experience.

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Introduction

Since the start of diversity management (Cox and Blake 1991), altering cognition of individuals is seen as one of the most suitable approaches to overcome the challenges of differences in organizations. Building on social psychological theorizing, which explains discrimination, conflictual intergroup relations, and exclusion as the result of cognitive stereotyping and in/outgroup dynamics, practices such as bias-free selection, training, mentoring, and networking (Roberson 2013) tend to be forwarded as effective ways to counter negative cognitive processes and create more socially just and equal organizations. Yet, while this approach is increasingly criticized, either by empirically showing its ineffectiveness (Dobbin and Kalev 2022), or by critically questioning its potential to address power inequalities (Janssens and Zanoni 2021; Plotnikof et al. 2022), alternative ways to think about diversity interventions in organizations remain rare.

In this paper, we question the cognitive and disembodied conception of many diversity interventions and instead aim to explore how, through the notion of atmospheric attunement, the embodied and material nature of diversity intervention can be emphasized. We conceive diverse encounters or

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settings – meeting a new, blind colleague, becoming part of a new multicultural team, or taking part in the annual Pride event – as a relational event where one attunes to other bodies while feeling enveloped by an atmospheric sense of strangeness, surprise, or solidarity. Such atmospheric tones seem to emerge accidentally even if they are formed in the moments and spaces of our embodied interactions. They are part of what Kathleen Stewart (2007) situates as everyday, ordinary affective scenes where ‘lived sensory moments’ of attuning (Stewart 2011, 445) can travel quickly, wane or endure. They foreground the question of affective transmission or atmospheric contagion which appears to bypass any logic and comes with bodily changes (Blackman 2008; Brennan 2004). Thus, if diverse encounters are so quickly imbued with uncanny moods and joyful feelings, we doubt that only altering individuals’ cognition is sufficient to establish change. The orientation toward altering cognitions only addresses the mind of people, not the embodied ways of how people, things, and spaces can relate differently to each other, affected by the changing atmosphere of these complex connections. This continued focus on cognition in the diversity management literature is further surprising as affective embodiment and the politics of affect are increasingly discussed in relation to gender (Just, Kirkegaard, and Muhr 2019; Vachhani and Pullen 2019) and diversity (Fotaki and Pullen 2019; Pouthier and Sondak 2021).

While non-cognitive interventions are undervalued by the diversity management literature, the potential of the embodied and material character of learning and interacting is widely accepted by arts-based approaches in a range of themes within organization and management studies, such as health (Fox 2012), management education (Michels and Beyes 2016), atmospheres (Michels and Steyaert 2017), or critical performativity (Cinque and Nyberg 2021). Within this stream of literature, Lafaie et al. (2022, 230) underline that performative arts can be seen as a ‘destabilizing and disturbing force that enables affective experiences and transformative possibilities of knowing (Berthoin Antal 2014; Kostera and Wozniak 2020; Taylor and Ladkin 2009)’. In this study, we turn as well to an artistic context to theorize how diversity interventions that focus on embodied ways of interacting between diverse people, objects, and spaces may look like. In particular, we explore the dance performance ‘INVITED,’ whose purpose is to establish, through movement as the main language of interaction, a temporary community among its diverse cast and audience of about 120 people. The cast consists of 15 non-professional dancers, different in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and ability, and, because of the dance organization’s deliberate purpose to attract people from socio-demographic groups who usually do not go the theater, the audience is diverse as well.

To analyze how this dance performance attempted to create a sense of community, we turn to the notion of ‘atmospheric attunement’ or the ways in which we collectively open up and pay attention to what comes to us in specific events (Stewart 2011) as a sensitizing concept. Witnessing the emergence of sensuous affirmative experiences within a diverse group, the research question that guides our analysis of this dance is: How may a diverse group of people learn to relate differently through experiencing intense connections between bodies, things, and space? Analyzing the dance performance in this manner, we aim to identify what can be called in Grossberg’s words (2010, 332) the ‘conditions of possibility’ for reimagining an alternative diversity intervention.

In the remainder of the paper, we first discuss how arts-based interventions have the potential to move beyond the logico-rational and activate embodied and material dimensions of learning and interacting, to then bring in the focus on atmospheric attunement as our conceptual sensibility. Subsequently, we introduce INVITED as the creation of a temporary diverse community – being an experimental intervention in the field of dance as well – and discuss the methodological orientation underpinning our study of this dance performance. The findings section consists of three evocative accounts in which we discuss how embodied and materially mediated forms of attuning emerged. Finally, we discuss the study’s contributions in terms of theorizing interventions around diversity as embodied and material conditions of possibility that together form a politics of affirmative experience that may enable differences to connect and attune.

Enriching interventions around diversity with arts-based approaches

Based on the social psychological insight that information may reduce bias (Fiske 1998), interventions around diversity tend to focus on altering cognition as a suitable approach to improve the way differences are dealt with. More awareness and knowledge about each other's differences are seen as essential in improving differences at work. Although the traditional diversity interventions of training, formalized HRM practices, mentoring and networking are based on this plausible theoretical argumentation, their effectiveness is increasingly empirically and theoretically questioned. Empirical studies on these interventions' impact show disappointing results (Dobbin and Kalev 2022), even indicating that stereotypes and prejudices are reinforced, and intergroup conflict being produced. From a theoretical perspective, critically oriented diversity scholars highlight the reproduction of inequalities because the interventions fail to address organizational structures and routines that normalize the dominant group's privileges (Calás, Smircich, and Holvino 2014; Janssens and Zanon 2021), being de-political in nature (Plotnikof et al. 2022). Acknowledging these critiques, we turn in this study to the potential of arts-based interventions to rethink the way in which differences in organizational settings can be approached.

Arts-based interventions are increasingly used in organizations, often to help address challenges of leadership and management (Berthoin Antal and Strauß 2013). Taking on a wide variety of forms and involving all kinds of arts such as theater workshops, poetry sessions, art collections, workshops with painting or sculpture, music projects and presentations by orchestra conductors or jazz bands (Biehl 2017), these interventions are expected to have a wide-reaching impact. Among others, their impact is to help organizational members to see things differently, create new energy, foster collaborative ways of working, relate in different ways, and personally reflect on work-related issues (Berthoin Antal and Strauß 2013). Underlying these effects is the importance of 'ending the body-mind divide in management practice and reflection' (Lafaire et al. 2022, 231), where learning and interacting are not only cognitive but also embodied, emotional processes that are embedded in cultural dynamics (Kostera and Wozniak 2020). Embodied learning is activated because the artistic expression is suggested to form an 'interspace', suspending the norms, routines, and conventions of the organization where it unfolds, opening the possibility of thinking and acting differently (Berthoin Antal and Strauß 2015).

Looking more closely into this stream of literature along the idea of diversity, we note how arts-based interventions foster activities and experiences that engage differently with differences. For example, an artistic intervention of narrating a story together created an interspace for empathic engagement through aligning oneself to the other and acknowledging the agency of the other (Lafaire et al. 2022). Theatrical improvisation and its embodiment stimulated people to practice relationality with the other because reflection about their embodied actions regarding the other before there is any physical contact was triggered (Moreira, Davel, and Pina e Cunha 2022). Or, in the context of leadership development, planning and performing a theater broadened feelings of uncertainty and anxiety to the experience of a community and empathy toward the other and oneself (Firing, Thorkelsdóttir, and Chemi 2022). What these studies suggest is that through arts-based approaches, a different kind of felt relationality with others and other things is made possible. By engaging their senses in different ways, people start to reflect on how they are oriented to others, and how they can experience a sense of connection that was absent before the activities were performed.

In this study, we turn to dance as the artistic setting. Dance is a rather new addition to organizational arts-based research methods that have proven to be useful to access the body in motion or the fleshy side of organizations (Biehl 2017; Biehl and Volkmann 2019). By focusing on actual movement and its choreography, dance can be a way to explore the connectedness and interaction of bodies, advancing our understanding of organizational interaction and the 'structures of interaction that reside in people's bodies and are embodied' (Biehl and Volkmann 2019, 286). It also potentially changes social interaction as, when 'conceiving of the moving body as the element that links us to

the world' (Biehl 2017, 148), an alteration of bodily movements may open up considerations of changing that orientation and relation with other bodies. Or, as Mandalaki, van Amsterdam, and Daou (2022, 250, italics in original) compellingly argue: 'When we dance, we listen to each other and develop new ways of knowing grounded on the *experience* of our vulnerable bodies, not on constructions of ourselves as 'knowers' based on totalizing categorizations of the process and the other as 'known beings'. Dance thus appears to offer a lot of potential to counter the cognitive approach of current diversity interventions and instead explore the embodied, sensorial dimension of organizational life.

To conclude, we acknowledge the critique that the deployment of arts-based interventions may have an instrumental character, sometimes being used to enhance corporate agendas by 'teach(ing) people within organizations to become effective leaders, great public speakers, or trustworthy team members' (Cinque and Nyberg 2021, 116). In this study, we aim to avoid this instrumental emphasis and focus on the critical potential of dance – 'a political space with its own critical capacity' (Cinque and Nyberg 2021, 116) – to theorize diversity interventions differently.

Atmospheric attunement as theoretical, sensitizing concept

To analyze the dance performance, its affective forces and what moving bodies can do together (Cull 2009), we draw upon the conceptual work of Kathleen Stewart (2007; 2010; 2011; 2017) and her notion of 'atmospheric attunement' as sensitizing concept to respond 'to the need to think more rigorously through the question of the human's relationship to the world' (Hynes and Sharpe 2015, 117). Our relationship to a world is not formed in our minds but stems from how we have first lived in it and sensed it: 'rather we come to know and enact a world from inhabiting it, from becoming attuned to its differences, positions and juxtapositions, from a training of our senses, dispositions and expectations and from being able to initiate, imitate and elaborate skilled lines of actions' (Anderson and Harrison 2010, 9). In a similar way, Stewart (2011, 445) focuses on our relationship in and to the world, and therefore, she understands atmospheric attuning as a process of worlding, 'an intimate compositional process of dwelling in spaces that bears, gestures, gestates, worlds'. To understand this process of worlding, we underline two conceptual points, namely (1) attuning is performative as it comes from what bodies do and how they relate, while simultaneously (2) attuning can only respond to other bodies, objects, and spaces contingent upon the latter's shifting affordances.

We adopt Stewart's understanding of attuning as 'becoming sentient to a world's work, bodies, rhythms, and ways of being in noise and light' (Stewart 2011, 445). Whether we walk hastily through a busy underground or stroll through a desolate wood during sunset, our bodies become alerted by the hurried rhythm and speed of commuters, making one feel breathless or in panic, or our bodies become attentive to the diminishing light and the crispy echo of one's own slowing footsteps, becoming overwhelmed by a mystical, silent atmosphere. Atmospheric attunement thus emerges from bodies, their joint activities, and how they can resonate with each other. Therefore, 'the body has to learn to play itself like a musical instrument in this world's compositions' (Stewart 2011, 450). The notion of 'atmospheric attunement' is thus very apt to study diverse encounters as attunements make us (feel) 'in tune' or 'out of tune' with a diverse situation or event we take part in – in similar ways as we understand that musical instruments are in tune or out of tune and are in the (not so) right condition to play (Slaby 2017).

Importantly, the instruments, the undergrounds, or woods (in the above examples) are not static but also becoming, altering possibilities to attune. To understand the emergence of atmospheric attunement, we need to consider the shifting potentiality of entangled material elements to make a difference in how bodies resonate with and respond to these elements and to each other. This idea has been termed 'affordance' by Gibson (2015), a notion that he developed based on Kurt Lewin's term 'Aufforderungscharakter' – translated as 'invitation character' – to indicate how specific materialities, objects and bodies 'invite', summon or solicitate a person to act in a specific

way. As indicated by Brown et al. (2019, 14), attunement and affordance 'may be thought of as complementary terms', as 'to be attuned is to be able to 'hear' the summons of the invitation character' of a specific material element, be it an instrument, an underground, or a sunset light. Yet, Jarzabkowski and Pinch (2013) have warned to not focus one-sidedly on the functionalities of materialities, as if affordances would be inscribed in objects or tools in a fixed way. Rather, affordances with the possibilities and constraints that objects bring along are neither deterministic nor completely open. This interplay between attunement and affordance creates open-ended and volatile atmospheres as 'bodies in encounter exhibit continuous variability in their powers to affect and be affected and these constant increases and decreases of potential alter their openness to the future' (Hynes and Sharpe 2015, 118), which can orient us both to tomorrow's different potentiality, one more or less hopeful. Therefore, our study will focus both on bodies' responses of attunement and how they engage with – read attune to – the recurring invitation of the material arrangements in performing INVITED, which we will introduce in the next section.

Methodological orientation

Contemporary dance as an experimental intervention for diversity

Our empirical study focuses on the formation and performance of the dance production, 'INVITED', created by choreographer Seppe Baeyens and co-produced by the contemporary dance organization Ultima Vez. INVITED can be seen as an experimental intervention, or a postdramatic performance (Lehmann 2006). It is the result of a long trajectory of community work where the dance organization engaged in organizing accessible dance workshops for people for whom it is not easy to find a way into the worlds of dance and theater. Most of the artistic guidance for this community work is provided by the team of choreographer Seppe Baeyens, whose aesthetic view is that dance starts from ideas, rather than from technique, a balanced group choreography, or symmetrical movements.

Linking artistic and social purposes, the central idea of INVITED is how to create, in the timeframe of an hour, a diverse community. Baeyens breaks here with the main ideology of modern dance that only a select group of well-trained and young-aged persons are suitable dancers. Rather, the cast consists of 15 non-professional dancers who were recruited and trained through the series of open dance workshops, showing a wide range of differences¹: a mix of male and female dancers, different in age (from 10 year-olds, to teenagers, adults and people in their 70s, even 90s); ethnicity and race (Flemish, Moroccan and Congolese background), ability (person in wheelchair, persons with down-syndrome) and spoken language (Dutch, French and English). For two years, the choreographer, together with the cast and other participants, conducted in a self-reflexive and 'research-oriented' way (Beyes 2016) a series of rehearsal workshops, work-in-progress performances, and in-residencies – from Brussels, Berlin, Dusseldorf to St. Petersburg and Zagreb – to inquire what kind of movements, music and scenography are best suited to generate a diverse community. That the aim is also to make the diverse audience part of the performance made the prerequisites of staging very open and partially contingent upon the interactions between the cast, audience, and material elements.

Empirical material

Drawing upon an 'affect-inflected ethnography' (Stewart 2017, 195), we conducted a type of research where researchers become 'embodied, embedded and affective practitioners' (Bispo de Souza and Gherardi 2019, 4). Aiming to understand the conditions of possibility of this experimental intervention, we attended to the intensities of everyday scenes in the workshops, rehearsals, and performances. Our own emerging methodological practice was enacted through increasingly interactive and embodied forms of participation giving us experiences and sensations of encounters with

dancers, audiences and spaces during workshops, rehearsals, try outs and performances. This approach, characterized by “switching-on’ the researcher’s sensory faculties’ (Satama, Blomberg, and Warren 2022, 171) facilitated the development of our own aesthetic reflexivity (Springborg and Sutherland 2016) on how bodily experiences may become a means for diverse community building.

Therefore, while at first, we took notes of dance rehearsals observing from the side or engaged with small talk with participants during breaks, rather quickly, we took part, for instance, in warming up exercises, that formed an extensive routine at the start of any rehearsal. This embodied participation gave us in a similar way as the dancers a sense of the movements learned and a chance to interact with and attune to the cast members in an embodied and nonverbal way. As the performance was oriented at including the audience in the dance performance, the dancers often asked us to act as audience during rehearsals. In that way, we explored with the dancers the possibilities and limits of various interaction-exercises. As opening night came closer, we were invited together with other people familiar with the production to take part in run-throughs and dress rehearsals. After attending opening night, we joined several performances in different cities, and thus continued to take part in performances, and ‘collected’ each time experiences of the ‘feel’ and force of how audience members on that particular day resonated with each other (or not) and aligned in joint rhythms. As the performance often ended with (almost) everyone on the floor, this gave us ample opportunity to mingle with the audience and ask about their dance experience, while we could also listen in to how the cast had sensed the particular dynamics of that evening, noting down the different experiences after the performances. Table 1 presents an overview of the research material generated for this study. In addition, we could draw upon the analysis of the master thesis of one of the cast members (Azpillaga 2020), that focused on the audience’s experiences collected during focus groups.

Table 1. Summary of the empirical material for this study.

Type of empirical material	Amount of material	Value for the analysis
Observation of dance workshops	36 h of open dance workshops (cast and other dancers) 34 h of closed workshops (only cast)	Enables identification of the material elements that stages the creation of a diverse community
Participant observation of rehearsals with audience and follow-up discussion with audience	4 rehearsals with audience and 2 h of follow-up discussion	Enables a sensing of the atmospheric attunement when diverse cast and audience members interact
Qualitative interviews with choreographer	7 interviews of 2–3 h	Provides an understanding of the choreographer’s conceptual sensibilities of how to create a diverse community through dance
Qualitative interviews with other actors (dancers, musicians, marketing manager, general director, staff of dance company)	12 interviews of 0,5–1,5 h	Provides insights in the experiences of producing and organizing the dance production
Informal conversation with choreographer and dancers during dance workshops	Short talks with 15 cast members during 14 dance workshops	Enables a sensing of the cast’s experiences and feelings in staging the dance production
Audience member of dance performance	6 performances	Reflects upon the researchers’ own feelings and senses
Informal conversation with audience after dance performances	Short talks with 4–6 audience members after 6 dance performances	Enables a sensing of the audience’s experiences, feelings, and thoughts
Formal documents on the dance performance (subsidy applications by choreographer and press release by dance company)	19 pages	Provides knowledge on the rationale and approach of the planned performance
Press reviews on the dance performance	28 pages	Provides critical views on the dance performance and audience’s experiences

Analysis: writing evocative accounts

Our analysis emerged in the intersection of ethnographic approach, conceptual sensibilities and (re-)reading our observation notes, interview transcripts and press reviews. It was also infused with ideas of performance studies that focus on questions of 'presence, liveness, agency, embodiment, and event' (Schechner 2006, 3). Starting to read our empirical material while remembering its liveness and explicating our own embodied engagement, we quickly noted how the dance performance implied intensive experiences of relating to other – human and nonhuman – elements of 'agency'. Similar to our experiences of relating during workshops and rehearsals, audience members primarily talked about their surprise of feeling connected with people they have never met before, and press reviews praised the genuine contact and diverse encounters that the performance was able to produce. To understand how this 'feeling together' and 'sensations of connections' could emerge, we conducted an analysis inspired by the theater scholar Laura Cull, who connects performance studies with a Deleuzian focus on affect. In her view, a performance analysis should not represent emotions, rather aim to 'extract the affects of bodies, to somehow reconstruct in performance the power of another body to pierce us like an arrow, force us to think, and enable us to act in new ways' (Cull 2013, 193).

Therefore, in a first exploratory step, we identified which material elements were crucial in enabling the affective and sensuous connecting of diverse bodies, who otherwise would not have met. From our material, we recognized the importance of three elements that stood out in staging the performance and infusing its atmospheric impact: a long and heavy 'Rope', the main scenographic element of the performance; the interaction templates used by the cast to engage with the audience; and the soundscape produced by the live music. During this first reading, we also aim to extract the different (collective) feelings and intensities generated by the performance.

In a second step, we analyzed in-depth the affordance of these three material modalities for different ways of attuning. For example, analyzing the affordance of the spatial arrangements of Rope, we uncovered how its invitation to the group of carrying it produced an attunement through which the whole group and Rope started moving together. Similar, the music was a vital affective force which encouraged the audience to become part of the cast, a collective attunement through improvising and imitating. During this step, we often met and exchanged memos and commentaries on how each material element produced particular experiences and sensations of relating.

In a third and final step, through a process of comparison and contrast between the various materialities and their different sensations, we developed an understanding of three forms of attunement. We did not have apriori categories to frame them, but by grounding our analysis in the specifics of this dance setting, we discovered that the three material elements were especially inviting through different sensory modes (e.g. tactile, physical, auditory) and in different time periods of the dance performance. For instance, the affordance/attunement of Rope enabled in a tactile manner the formation of embodied connections in the beginning of the performance; the use of the interaction templates gradually offered confidence to physically move (around) and improvise with each other; and the auditory force of the soundscape was especially vital toward the end of the performance, immersing people in the group. We therefore labeled these three sensations: waking up attunement, activating attunement, and intensifying attunement. Together, we argue that these forms of attuning present an affirmative, affective experience in which people learn to connect, sensing a 'feeling together' that resonates with these material modalities.

We now present our analysis of the three forms of atmospheric attunement and their material mediation in three 'evocative accounts' where we use language as an extension of the performance's affective force (Farrell 2022). Inspired by Stewart's (2007; see also Michels and Steyaert 2017) creative nonfictional, or 'ficto-critical' form of writing as a way of performing a research account that is both sensitive and evocative, we aim to write evocative accounts so that readers get a sense of (and feel for) the processes of attuning. Writing differently, we aim 'to touch vulnerable flesh' (Gilmore et al. 2019, 3), emphasizing the relational, non- or supra-individualist stance of atmospheric attunement

(Stewart 2011). In contrast to a traditional findings section where a specific interview quote or observation is given, followed by its source and interpretation, we thus opt for a narrative that voices and concocts all empirical material as a collective assemblage. When giving individual quotes, we consider them as voices that give testimony to joining into atmospheric attunements instead of evidence of an individual stance.

INVITED and its forms of atmospheric attunement

Woken up through tactile attuning

The opening situation of INVITED consists of an ambiguous, slightly nervous, and insecure feel. When entering the theater, the audience is hesitant: where to sit? Everyone quickly realizes that there is no usual performance set-up with a stage for the dancers and chairs for the audience. Rather, a big blue woven rope with a thickness of 30 cm, called Rope², catches everyone's eyes. It lies on an otherwise empty, dark stage, distantly entangled with other, heterogeneous elements, such as benches in the corners, music instruments, and dimmed lights. The ambiguity and openness of this beginning implies that audience members cannot fall back on their theater habitus: some members spontaneously sit down on Rope and try them out as a 'not-so-comfortable', wobbly seating, while others stroll through the theater, and some others hurry to the black benches, relieved to have found a regular sitting place. As Rope is impressively long and heavy, many more people can sit down, especially when moving closer to each other. Without any form of instruction, the space is organized through this collective partition of the crowd along Rope and benches (see Figure 1).

Being in the form of a spiral, Rope spreads everyone randomly and equally across stage. Remarkably, it creates an anonymous intimacy as it gently forces people to look at each other. Attunement is woken up. Some smile to a stranger, others whisper to their accompanying friends. Bodies are oriented toward each other through resonating with Rope. A non-hierarchical and sensuous relation between those present is created. On its own blog, Rope is given its own voice to write about what it

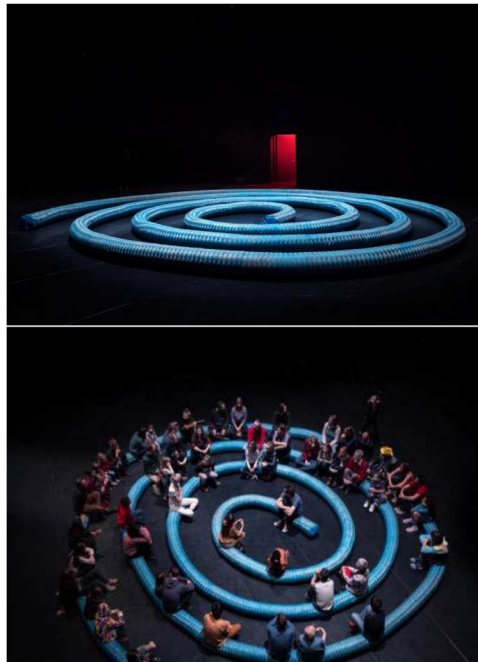


Figure 1. Rope and material agency. © Danny Willems

has experienced while performing in INVITED, offering us a take on the world from the perspective of this absurdly big object:

I am here in my most fundamental capacity: an object upon which you can sit and which you can carry. Thanks to my size, the people who use me are linked together. That would seem to be the unavoidable consequence of a large group of people sitting on the same thing. Or holding on to the same thing at the same time.

Then, as the space gets even darker, people feel their breathing, and other senses are activated as nobody can see anymore; a single voice starts to sing, and others join in; three canons evolve, and some audience members sing as well. More people join the singing. Singing or quietly listening intensifies connecting, making people feel part of the group even if they also feel dis-oriented as nobody knows who is singing and who is listening. An audience member expresses it as follows:

That singing at the beginning has, yeah, those kind of camp songs, sitting around a campfire, just being together and I think everybody knows that and because of that, you start right off with something that just everybody is going to feel at home with.

As the lights come up, people feel how close they sit to each other, shoulder to shoulder, while the echo of the music turns into a strange silence. The thing starts moving, hesitantly at first. Four people are lifting the heavy Rope and very soon, everyone helps, joins in, and lifts the heavy rope, holding it high, both arms stretched or rested on their shoulder (see [Figure 2](#)). This mostly tactile connection of touching Rope and rubbing shoulders with each other feels wonderful, creating a sense of shared responsibility among strangers, including strange, blue Rope. Together, the group slowly walks around to unfold Rope and creates an oval, large arena right in front of the benches where one would normally expect the performers to entertain the audience. As people sit down on Rope again, the three-headed band plays live music. Through the connection between Rope, performers and audience members, space for further interactions has been jointly arranged. As a theater critic remarked, 'you can immediately sense that in INVITED the boundary between inside and outside, viewer and performer, active participation and passive watching will become blurred'. Who will as first enter the empty space?



Figure 2. Attuning to Rope. © Danny Willems

In our conceptual interpretation, a process of attuning is initiated through the encounter between diverse bodies and this object Rope – but also entangled with theater lights, singing, music and the dance concept. It colors how this performance beginning is sensed and felt collectively: woken up through tactile attuning.

Activated through physical attuning

One feels the continuation of collective alertness when the audience starts to discover who the performers are. While the band plays a mélange of jazz-rock and Tom Waits-like blues, one by one, a few performers stand up from Rope and enter the arena. They cross the space, invite through gentle gestures a few audience members to enter as well and lead them by the arm to the other side of the space. More people are invited to repeat this simple movement and soon, many people are crossing the arena back and forth. There is some confusion, it is not clear who is doing what in what capacity – especially as the cast had mingled under the audience when entering the theater, wearing clothes that were carefully selected, yet do not differentiate them from the audience. Then, a new kind of concentration is emerging. A few cast members invite members of the audience to gently perform small gestures of trust. A young girl takes the left hand of her invitee and places it on her heart. She looks her partner right in his eyes. She doesn't laugh, he grins uncomfortable. This exercise instigates simple but focused connections: guided by the primary senses of looking and touching, they provoke a shudder of intimacy. The cast and audience enter into a mostly sensual exchange, a very different form of communicating as there is no verbal exchange, at most sounds of mumbling or laughter. They jointly explore these poetic entries to interact with one another and eventually rediscover and respond to a fellow human being, out of curiosity, without obligation as the performers never impose anything.

These various physical exercises – which often come from improvisation theater – and their pre-determined structure form open and flexible interaction templates, 'anchor points' as the dramaturg calls them, which activate further attunement. One learns the rules of the game to enact such a template along the way, following examples and imitating gestures: as verbal instructions are never given, other senses are activated. Through exploring how to use the space and how to interact with each other, audience members are astonished by how quickly they become active in co-creating the performance, and, even more, by participating in encounters with people who they would perhaps otherwise ignore 'in the outside world' and by how they learn to attune to them.

These interaction templates are the result of the two-year long research trajectory. Through improvisations in open dance workshops, work-in-progress performances and in-residencies, the choreographer and his team, searching for intuitive and natural ways of moving, discovered along the way what worked and what did not. They came to appreciate that 'stepping' and 'walking' are the most accessible, even democratic forms of moving, adding 'rolling' when people in wheelchairs take part. As templates of interacting and moving together that can be quickly learned, they form the building blocks of the performance, leading to a sober but elegant choreography of walking, running, carrying each other, or jumping over one another (see [Figure 3](#)). This is what the choreographer calls 'stripping bodily movement', peeling off any kind of redundant traces of acculturated posing into a 'basic presence', a kind of deconstructing of one's embodied habitus and letting their own specific embodiment attune to that of others as one experiences how each body comes with its own affordance, inviting for running quickly or a surprising touch.

The cast members invite audience members sitting on Rope as well on the benches, and after the exercise place them in a different spot. This mixes up the overall group, those sitting on Rope or the benches, but also family members or friends who suddenly experience that they are distantly located. What is even more striking is that the diversity comes with surprising interactions. As shown in [Figure 3](#), we see a cast member with down-syndrome carrying a young girl of ethnic origin, or, in [Figure 4](#), leading a group of cast members into a joint dance movement during the



Figure 3. Embodied attuning. © Danny Willems

rehearsals. Yet, at the same time, these embodied encounters are not so surprising at all: as everyone is constantly invited, the exercises which can be performed by everybody are democratic and avoid almost any kind of hierarchy in the audience – everyone can move, run, and participate along their



Figure 4. Learning to attune in rehearsal. © Danny Willems

own rhythm and potential. The effect is that audience members – in the same way as cast members have in rehearsals learned to sense each body's affordance and to attune to each other (see [Figure 4](#)) – learn to attune to all kinds of embodied specificities of audience members – whether older, younger, or in a wheelchair, and to different rhythms, bodies, and other elements of this collective improvisation. An audience member expresses this attuning as follows:

What also made it more approachable for me, it wasn't that they did dance steps or something where you were then invited to try that too. No, it was about stepping, it was about touching, it was about standing in a triangle and occasionally walking, so it was actually something you couldn't do wrong. You could maybe walk a little faster or slower or something.

This ongoing, crisscross attuning thus creates a collective movement, a shared activation that comes with jointly speeding up, altering the rhythm of interacting and coloring the collective performance with intense alertness and confidence. Whatever people do, even when 'just' walking, one can see how each person embodies a part of the performance, coloring and fleshing out the open templates of INVITED. The audience has become part of the choreography, enacting its movements, speeds and slownesses. The various combinations of exercises form small, concentrated circles that literally enact the space – a liquid spatiality of encounters. The alertness with which audience members transform themselves from the traditional role of 'viewers' into co-acting is based on physical attuning, that is exploring, imitating and learning flexibly a movement repertoire, a different, embodied language that creates intensive contacts between the moving bodies of both cast and audience, while at the time drawing upon the differences of the diverse group and making these differences 'irrelevant' as they become part of the overall composite.

Conceptually, what is added in this second evocative account, is how the connection between the interaction templates, cast and audience members creates a different attunement of mostly physical encounters. This entanglement offers chances to jointly move around and experience forms of mostly physical attuning. And, it collectively activates a different atmospheric layer through in increasing alertness and resonance.

Intensification through auditory attuning

Music is brought live on stage by three musicians. The trio joined the rehearsal a few months into the process and composed original music, trying out different musical instruments that join in with the spontaneity of the performance. As the choreographer states:

The music enters into a direct dialogue with the dance. I knew from the start that this would be a key reinforcing factor. Admittedly there is a basic score, but the dancers, audience and musicians will have to be perpetually attentive to one another and learn to trust one another in order to bring the activity to a successful conclusion.

During the performance, the music's intensity is growing, overcoming individual hesitation and timidity, and enabling the audience's confidence in such a way that some audience members are getting bolder and taking over the scene. At a certain moment, three cast members invite three persons to stand up from Rope and place them in the arena, close to each other, forming a triangle. They then leave the arena to sit down on Rope. Everybody suddenly realizes that the roles are now reversed: performers become the audience and the audience become performers. Several people laugh, also the three people in the midst, albeit a bit more uneasy. But they quickly engage in what they have learned. They make eye contact and when a person starts to move, this movement is the impulse for others to respond. The musicians join in with their spontaneity: they attune to the improvised interaction and support musically what is happening in the space. The three dancers gain confidence and, on the uplifting music, try out the movements they have seen before. Soon there is little that distinguishes them from the cast. The better rehearsed cast is maybe less inhibited, but the improvisation of these audience members comes with much immersion and enjoyment, giving now

dominant impulses to the atmospheric colors of the performance. Increasingly, the joint performing of musicians, cast and some audience members enters everyone into a world charged with feeling.

After this moment, it seems as if the audience no longer needs an explicit invitation from the cast. For some, their inhibitions to participate have completely disappeared. Others still doubt, but a smile, eye contact or a hand that reaches out, not only from the cast but from anyone in the arena, is sufficient to stand up and join. Still others remain seated on the bench – often to take a rest or to just ‘simply’ watch. The often-jazzy music composition turns increasingly punk-like, producing an edgy soundscape which gains rhythm, serving to encourage the joy that comes free, but also often adding to personal histories of frustration and isolation an intense moment of courage and expression. Overwhelmed by the music’s punk-like intensity, many more people immerse themselves in the performance, running and jumping with others; with every round, the wave of exuberant enjoyment intensifies. It seems possible, after all, to keep attuning to the main surprising movements others offer in small runs or gentle touches – often provoking a feel of intense connection, even a sense of belonging.

Toward the end of the performance, the female drummer forces up even more the energy level on stage while the motley sea of people (see [Figure 5](#)) swells into a whirlwind, a rousing going-around where the crowd speeds up and slows down, only to be interrupted by a poetic counterpoint. One of the dancers with down-syndrome holds some drink-straws, which he has been carrying throughout the whole rehearsal process, and hands them over to a neighboring audience member. The dancing crowd, still shaking and twirling, starts to applaud and cheering, moved by this poetic gift. For this performer, these straws formed an anchor during the two-year long, often overwhelming preparations, especially when rehearsals turned chaotic, confusing, and loud. In this ‘goose-bumps-moment’, we realize we almost forgot about the differences of this assemblage – the



Figure 5. Joyful attuning. © Danny Willems

human and nonhuman, old and young, all differently abled, coming with different languages, ethnicities, and social status.

After the applause has faded out, people are reluctant to leave the theater; rather they remain on stage, smiling, looking around and starting another cycle of connecting, but now attuning with words. Again and again, after a performance, people easily reflect on their experiences with others they have just met in joint exercises, realizing they would never open up to 'strangers' in other contexts and exchange so easily what they have felt and learned in the last, intensive hour. For example, one person talks about how we no longer greet each other in the bakery, and, having sensed the possibility of intensive and joyful diverse encounters, suggests that this kind of performance should be 'scheduled' at weekly markets. The power of collective connecting is recognized. A warm humming follows those going home, after all, they sense their backpack is filled with new experiences and repertoires to attune to others, at home, at work, in the streets.

Conceptually, this final evocation documents the entanglement between the soundscape, cast and audience members, creating an intensive force throughout the whole performance – the singing together during the first minutes, the supporting music while learning the rules of the game – but especially in the final part of the performance. This auditory modality, intimately involved with sensing and listening bodies is remarkably impactful in generating possible moments of intensification and transformation.

Discussion

So far, interventions around diversity are primarily oriented toward altering individuals' cognition, assuming that correcting for biases and stereotypes are suitable ways to address differences in organizational settings. Yet, in INVITED, affirmative experiences were established through a materially mediated process of atmospheric attunement that foregrounded embodiment and sensation. From this, we distinguish two interrelated conditions to rethink diversity interventions: focusing on embodied forms of atmospheric attunement, and opening to the affordances of material elements. Underlining the entanglement of these embodied and material conditions, we understand the performance's invitation as a compositional process (Michels and Steyaert 2017), a human-non-human co-creation where material elements 'matter not because of how they are represented but because they have qualities, rhythms, forces, relations, and movements' (Stewart 2011, 445) that other bodies can respond and attune to. Together, both conditions suggest considering diversity interventions as a politics of affirmative experience, which would help diversity studies to (re)turn 'to sense and sensation, materiality, and viscera' (Stewart 2017, 194).

Focusing on embodied forms of atmospheric attunement

The storytelling of the dance performance highlights how a diverse cast and audience started to move together – not through speaking, but through using their senses – that attuned them to each other and from which an atmosphere of 'feeling together' emerged. As a first condition of possibility, we therefore suggest a 'sentient' focus on embodied forms of attuning. Key to these forms of attuning are the ways in which bodies participate in creating diverse spaces. The body, as Massumi (2002, 1) argues, earns its name for the following reason: 'two things stand out. It moves. It feels. In fact, it does both at the same time'. For diversity interventions, this attention is not just on moving and feeling as such but how a collective process of moving and feeling is initiated that allows diverse bodies to relate and attune. What the performance suggests is the crucial role of drawing upon the full range of senses – not just the usual visual but also the tactile, physical and auditory –, through which a diverse group of 'strangers' engaged with each other, producing different forms of attunement or 'affecting rhythms' (McCormack 2008), i.e. waking up, activating, and intensifying attunement. As cast and audience members touch each other, playfully interact, and feel the force of the music, they become increasingly attuned to each other, taking turns in

who is fully engaged or slowing down. Or as stated by Ahmed (2014, 17), 'to be attuned to another is to share a certain rhythm by 'picking up' a feeling, thus picking 'each other up'.

The performance further evokes that attuning in the context of diversity results from intensive contacts between moving bodies that draw upon the group's differences while at the same time making these differences 'less relevant'. The constant interacting with other bodies intensifies the collective connecting as everyone is responding to different tempi, ways of walking together or rapid jumping. Differences among diverse bodies are not focused upon as 'problems' or 'hindrances' but experienced as possibilities for joint, often unexpected, interaction. We thus suggest that, through atmospheric attunement, differences are not overemphasized or under-represented; rather, they form a rich incoherence that is modulated into the joint activities and experiences of the ongoing performance. Attuning implies that being-different is not about making differences stand out; rather it is what Deleuze and Guattari (1980) call a 'becoming-imperceptible' through which 'every-body' contributes to the collective connecting, moving together and immersing intensively. Atmospheric attunement thus seems to come with a collective sense of belonging as 'becoming imperceptible' 'requires leaving behind not only the perceptible boundaries of the body but also one's conventional understanding of oneself, of others, and of one's world, in order to respond to the informing impact of imperceptible encounters' (Lorraine 1999, 189).

This first condition of possibility resonates with how other studies have considered interventions through embodied and sensuous ways of collective attuning. For instance, the study by Islam (2019, 264) on a socially engaged, avant-garde theater group brings attention to 'the body and its ability to cohabit with other bodies and to exhibit forms of 'corporeal generosity' (Diprose 2002)' where he also argues to move away from an ontology of communality via language and individual separation toward the body as a way of contact. Or, studying the interventions of a Polish oppositional artistic collective, Marsh and Śliwa (2022) document how resistance is enabled through affective atmospheres that result in transitions that overcome affects like fear found in those intensities that spread again and again from body to body.

To further develop insights on this first condition of possibility, we would like to highlight, as suggested by McCormack (2013), the potential of establishing research encounters with dance. Dance offers the opportunity to think about how moving bodies and their embodied subtleties are both implicated by and generative of atmospheres (see also Janssens and Steyaert 2020; Satama, Blomberg, and Warren 2022). In the case of diversity, this would imply not only understanding the ways in which bodies participate in the world, but also attending to how sensing bodies relate to each other, and how their differences play a role in embodied connections.

Opening to the affordances of material elements

As our storytelling of the performance also aimed to illustrate, matter matters for diversity (Ahmed 2010) and, we suggest, is an important condition of possibility for alternative interventions for diversity. In particular, our proposal is to attend to how human and nonhuman elements become entangled, along with their momentous consequences (Bennett 2004). Importantly, in appreciating matter's agential qualities (Bennett 2010) and its affordance (Gibson 2015), humans and nonhumans are not separate entities (Barad 2003). Rather, in line with a relational ontology on diversity (Janssens and Steyaert 2019), they only emerge through being in relation to each other. Key in this interaction between human and nonhuman then are the affordances of material elements to connect a diverse group. The attention is not just material elements as such but how they summon or solicit persons to act in a specific way (Gibson 2015), and through this entanglement, afford particular diversity experiences. Or as stated by Brown et al. (2019, 13), 'to become enveloped by an atmosphere is then [to] follow the invitation of the affordances that are arrayed within the elements through which it is constituted and to become part of the relational possibilities it may express'. The potential of attuning cannot bloom without the invitation of a materiality – whether music, food, spaces, or uniforms – that affords diverse groups to experience different sensations of relating.

This condition of possibility aligns with current studies that emphasize how material and aesthetic practices can change the ways we (learn to) live together with our differences. A significant illustration is offered by Keevers and Sykes (2016) in their study of a community-based, social justice organization, where they highlight how food and music, as socio-material dimensions of practices, choreograph affective processes that are associated with producing connections, recognition, and respect among diverse people. In this way, processes of difference are not primarily about representing but about affecting through the affordances of food and music. Similar, the sociological study by Kuruoğlu and Woodward (2021) on intercultural conviviality in two different spaces shows how atmospheres of inclusivity are enabled by the emergent affordances of certain socio-material arrangements. Situating social interactions within the material and textural elements of space, the study illustrates how ‘forms to openness of differences are socio-materially constituted and texturally shaped’ (123).

Together with Gibson (2015), we note though that the affordance of materiality is not only potentially enabling, but also constraining. This latter is well illustrated by Just, Kirkegaard, and Muhr (2019) who show how the body possibilities of the uniform for a soldier affectively charges different bodies differently. Whilst ensuring uniformity for the military, it casts individuals’ deviations from the normal soldierly body as minorities. Future research thus needs to attend to when the affordances of materiality ‘invite’ affirmative experiences connections to emerge while also inquiring how the human-nonhuman entanglement can reproduce discrimination and exclusion, and, in this latter case, how to unlock these negative effects (Janssens and Steyaert 2019).

Toward a politics of affirmative experience

To us, INVITED is not just a dance performance, it is a political intervention where people felt, even if this might only be momentous, the possibility of transformation. It is, in Grossberg’s words (2010, 332), a ‘context of hope’ where there is a whole excess of doing and feeling that emanates throughout the performance that goes way beyond the norms and habits of how any theater audience usually acts and shows presence or absence. This is what explains the surprise and even a feeling of uncanniness (Brown et al. 2019) that participants often shared after the performance: stepping out of the envelopment of the atmospheric experience, they realized to have related differently to others, still sensing in a visceral way how this comes with vitality and hope, but also with a feeling of fragility and fluke.

Our overall proposal to rethink interventions for diversity is thus to not completely shift the focus of social transformative efforts away from meaning but to enrich it with affirmative experience. In addition to ideational interpretations of a diverse organization – as mission statements tend to do –, the practice of diversity should also foreground visceral experiences, senses, feelings, and energies that offer the potential to relate differently to other bodies, things, and space. Accordingly, the kind of politics we propose is an experiential one – one like INVITED that offers people chances to expand and rehearse their capacities to be affected, to attune and to respond to the affordances of a diverse world. As also shown by previous studies, it is the visceral sense and affective resonance that come with participating in demonstrations (Tyler 2019), social movements (Vachhani and Pullen 2019), or artistic interventions (Islam 2019; Michels and Steyaert 2017) that create the political potential to alter how we attune to otherness (Pors 2019) and to articulate new ways of caring (Grossberg 2010).

The responsibility of diversity practitioners is then to create an ‘interspace’, where norms and routines of the organization are suspended (Berthoin Antal and Strauß 2015; Lafaie et al. 2022), and where people in interaction with material elements can start experiencing the possibility to expand their sensorium in attuning to diverse encounters and to learn ‘improvising with the already-felt’ (Manning 2009, 30). Also, inclusive leadership where the core idea is that it is first and foremost the leaders’ responsibility to create experiences of inclusion (Ferdman, Prime, and Riggio 2020) may turn to a politics of experiential pedagogy. Rather than a particular style or behavior, we propose to approach inclusive leadership as enabling certain forms of embodied attuning

that open for 'generative repetitions of care and potentiality' (Stewart 2010, 353), which might be inscribed in new scenes of diverse encounters. Turning to various forms of arts-based interventions, not only dance as our case illustrates but also theater, poetry, or music (Biehl 2017), may provide diversity professionals and leaders the apparatus to stimulate people to practice and rehearse novel embodied ways of connecting. Guided by the potentiality of materiality, such aesthetic interventions would attend to new possibilities of feeling and acting collectively in an embodied manner, while simultaneously though also acknowledging the openness and unpredictability of atmospheric attunement to emerge or not (Michels and Steyaert 2017).

Concluding remarks

We recognize that enabling atmospheric attunement through affordances of bodily and material elements in organizational contexts or elsewhere in society will not be obvious. Differences at work are imbued by past histories of contact through which we already recognize others as hated or loved, as giving pain or pleasure (Ahmed 2010). This molding of feeling in relation to a dominant cultural imagery (Ahmed 2004) is certainly present in settings where societal power asymmetries are reproduced and further institutionalized. So, questions arise surrounding the use of embodied and material entanglements that can infuse or modulate atmospheric attunement in such ways that a sense of connection within a diverse group is enabled and new kinds of relations are made possible. In that regard, the experimentation of a dance performance like INVITED calls for even further experimenting with the conditions of possibility that afford new sensations of encountering others as we learn to attune to each other. To us, it is precisely this political power of sensuous and embodied experiences that creates a visceral potential to re-work differences in our everyday organizational lives.

Notes

1. While we later argue that affirmative experiences are not about differences standing out but about 'becoming imperceptible', we present here the cast's socio-demographic differences to highlight the wide variety of differences that contrasts with the norm of the young, abled, and muscular dancer.
2. Rope is a project by the visual artist Ief Spincemaille. Rope travels around, coming to a stop in neighborhoods, organizations, and public spaces. Over the years, Rope visited Florence, Berlin, Leuven, and Potsdam, to name a few. Although Rope's size means that it doesn't fit in wherever it goes, it has a huge capacity to feel at home anywhere: it is a radical open-design instrument. Like an immense nerve, it feels, absorbs, and reacts to the contexts in which it finds itself. See ropeblog.net.

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