INTRODUCTION

2021/2022 IMAGINING THE GENUINE POSSIBLE

The Laboratory for Social Choreography is entering its second year at the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University. More than ever, we are dedicated to collectively re-envisioning what is possible, oriented by our ethical imperatives: To expand awareness, to imagine more, to birth change.

COVID-19 and the ensuing global pandemic required that we pivot and change our plans for our first year. Instead of an in-person program, we presented a series of virtual Social Dreaming sessions in collaboration with the Centre for Social Dreaming in London. We hosted 22 online, public sessions in which over 500 individuals wove a matrix of dreams and associations. Many ideas were crystalized through this practice, and we begin the new academic year ready to bring these ideas into being.

To face the pressing challenges of our time—climate change, immigration, racial inequality, and frenzied capitalism—we are prepared to stretch our imagination, examine our own formation, and enact alternative realities free of narrow constraints. As Camus reminds us, all great deeds have ridiculous beginnings, and we stand ready to will these new realities into being. In 2021, we begin by seeding pedagogical formats, social technologies (Parliament and Amendment), visionary initiatives (the 11th School), and a resistance network called the 11th Organ, to lead the rigid into a state of dance.

Michael Kliën
Director, Laboratory for Social Choreography
ABOUT LABORATORY FOR SOCIAL CHOREOGRAPHY

LSC focusses on the equitable transformation of social structures and the articulation of new modes of governance through aesthetics.

Founded in 2020, LSC (Director Michael Kliën) is concerned with the creation of experiences and conditions that overhaul fundamental assumptions about mind, body, society and environment. In doing so, the laboratory brings together individuals from diverse disciplines and backgrounds to envision human relations that can meaningfully respond to the challenges of our times. LSC focusses on the equitable transformation of social structures and the articulation of new modes of governance through aesthetics. Furthermore, the laboratory is a hub for the research and development of transformative embodied pedagogies and experimentalist social technologies.

LSC is part of the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University (NC, USA) and generously supported by the Franklin Humanities Institute at Duke University, Duke Arts and Duke Dance.

Social Choreography permeates the tightly knit fabric of socialization, for other potential realities to be sensed and experienced, and for new relational fields amongst human and non-human to be forged. The practice of Social Choreography deals with the uncovering of underlying social relations and patterns—the choreography of the social—through embodied practices, and always, engages these dynamics for new social choreographies to emerge simultaneously.

—— Michael Kliën

LABORATORY FOR SOCIAL CHOREOGRAPHY ENDEAVOURS

• To examine the role of corporeal awareness in the determination of ethics, relations and social structures
• To emancipate embodied knowledge in response to excessive rational, narrow thought-processes in Western society
• To stretch imagination through embodied experiences of interpersonal, -disciplinary and -institutional relations
• To envision equitable, sustainable social structures upon an expanded awareness of ecological human and non-human relations
• To design courses, actions and formats in response to academic and institutional stagnation
• To glean new visions of community and potential modes of governance
ABOUT SOCIAL CHOREOGRAPHY

Social Choreography is a holistic practice originating from the field of dance seeking to unify organizational dynamics as held in the body, politics and social relations.

Choreography has become a wide-ranging metaphor for movement processes that are not necessarily pre-planned in time and space, but describes the myriad relations and forces at play, that shape the way life unfolds. As an expanded practice, it has come to designate the act of 'setting the conditions for things to happen', preparing the psychic and social soil for permanent and ongoing change. Social Choreography is equally rooted in micro- and macropolitics, and traces the interdependent patterns at play between the different scales of interaction. In terms of micropolitics, Social Choreography is concerned with the manifestation of truth on the level of the body, examining the constructed nature of our deepest assumptions and recognizing the embodied reality of our senses, each deeply entwined with, and developed according to, context-specific cultural evolutions. Hence humans across different epochs, cultures and generations move distinctively different in every aspect of everyday life, poignantly expressed in the dances they dance.

Geography, economics, philosophy, ethics, aesthetics, religion, sociology, an immense body of knowledge of humanistic ideas are embedded in the dance and the dance event. Dance is, in fact, a microcosm of culture.

— Allegra Fuller

These micro-politics, from which the individual emerges and resides in, extend themselves in reciprocal interaction with others and in turn determine macro-politics, expressed in the institutions of any given society and their underlying ideologies of education, production, family, love, etc. Social Choreography claims that alternative futures cannot simply be imagined, and that such a presumption spells the drama of our age, but that they need to be first felt. To meaningfully respond to the urgent issues of our times, the widely longed-for ecological, anti-racist and hence cultural, revolution needs to be aesthetic in nature and take hold of us on the level of our movement, emotions and senses.

Micro and macro politics are deeply entangled. They recursively affirm and shape each other, hence, distinction between them blur, and remain, in Batesonian terms, arbitrary. Separating micro-relations, as carried within the body, from macro relations as maintained in society, harbors the danger of ignoring the complex nature at play outside of rational models. The results is a reductionist worldview, that engages magical thinking in place of rooted, embodied thought.
LSC generates experiential strategies to overcome entrenched patterns of perception, ideas, assumptions and positions.

The laboratory conducts experiments in the emerging field of Social Choreography, organize events, design interdisciplinary courses and publish its outcome in various media (print, online, performance, exhibitions, etc.). LSC probes established realities and worldviews through lived experiences and embodied knowledge.

I
SOCIAL CHOREOGRAPHIC SITUATIONS

PARLIAMENT

Parliament is a pioneering work of situational choreography, that has been situated around the world. It offers participants a critically needed withdrawal from normal modes of social action. A diverse cohort of citizen-performers, working in silence, comes together to hold council amidst the elemental phenomena and fundamental concerns of collectively lived experience.

LSC will host a series of Parliaments as an ongoing collective practice amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. These performances will be paired with a spring term panel discussion to explore Parliament’s significance in the age of COVID-19. Together, these events will offer Parliament as a site for discerning and discovering embodied wisdom amidst the ethical questions about bodies, space, and sociality that have forcefully emerged during the global pandemic.

Furthermore, LSC will prepare the national presentation of this work and publish a book about Parliament in partnership with the CUNY Segal Theatre Center.

AMENDMENT

Currently in development, Klén’s new social choreographic work Amendment is an immersive situation for 20—200 citizens, with or without social distancing parameters in place. In times of irreversible damage to our environment, Amendment offers a container to reform our relationship to ‘the other’. The work provides cultural citizens (workers, teachers, immigrants, poets, etc.) rare, lived experiences in movement, and manages to temporarily transcend the human/non-human divide into a relationship of reciprocal belonging.

Amendment is presented in collaboration with Duke’s Bass Connections project Fostering Social Integration of Displaced Populations through the Performing Arts, with performances in spring 2022.
II
SOCIAL CHOREOGRAPHIC INITIATIVES

11TH ORGAN

Launched in 2021, 11th Organ is an open, distributed matrix of individuals who dare to profoundly reimagine their disciplines and society at large upon an aesthetic base, free of immediate constraints. As the matrix grows concrete actions will emerge across the world. 11th Organ is a beautiful riot of the imagination—a neural network of resistance everyone is welcome to.

... a collective dance birthing new realities ...

11TH SCHOOL

*How do you bring a classroom to life as if it were a work of art?*

— Félix Guattari

As part of the 11th Organ initiative, we ask what a complementary, passionately radical educational initiative would look like at Duke University? How far can our imagination stretch? We want to insert a new organism into the fabric of Duke, that will systemically and virally change how we learn, and what we can become. We propose to use our collective imagination to engender ideas and futures outside of tired paradigms and instill a communal breathing space: to envision wild pedagogical.

Throughout the academic year 2021/2022 LSC will host bi-weekly meeting at the Kenan Institute for Ethics to co-imagine the 11th School.

III
PUBLICATIONS

• Seeding the first comprehensive Wikipedia page on Social Choreography drawing from various national and international contributors
• Online-publishing a 5-part in-depth interview with social choreographer Steve Valk
• Publications of a book on the work Parliament, a collaboration with the Segal Theatre Center at CUNY
• 11th Organ Zine created by Duke undergraduate students

IV
KENAN MFA IN DANCE FELLOWSHIP IN SOCIAL CHOREOGRAPHY

The Kenan Institute for Ethics awards a second-year Fellowship to one MFA student whose proposed social choreographic work aligns with, and extends, the mission of the Kenan Institute for Ethics and LSC.