Somatic Attention: An Introduction to Somaesthetics and Anthropology

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The editors, both anthropologists, invited the philosopher Richard Shusterman to come to Montreal in the month of March 2024 to present a public lecture on "The Man in Gold" (see Figure 1) and participate in a series of salons with graduate students in the Social and Cultural Analysis PhD and Interdisciplinary Humanities PhD programs at Concordia University. The public lecture was scintillating and the exchanges at the salons were extremely lively and illuminating. This prompted us to submit a proposal for a special issue of the *Journal of Somaesthetics* that would explore the intersection between somaesthetics and anthropology – specifically, the anthropology of the body, the anthropology of the senses, action anthropology, and sundry other topics, most notably the anthropology of consumption, design, and disability that emerged from the responses to our call for proposals. The quality of the proposals we received far exceeded our expectations, which made it challenging for us to settle on which papers should be retained for inclusion in this special issue. But we persevered, and with the assistance of the peer reviewers (whom we thank for their highly perspicacious and timely commentaries) we put together this collection, which is a testimony to the highly fruitful conjunction of the somaesthetics project and anthropology.

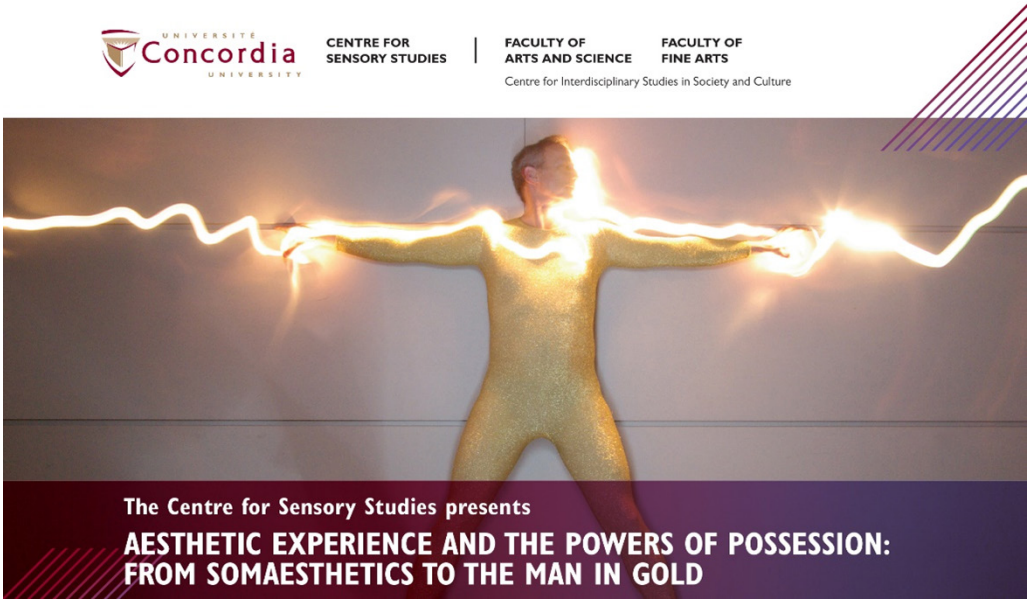

Figure 1: Poster for the Public Lecture delivered by Richard Shusterman at Concordia University in March 2024. Photo credit: Yann Toma.

Vision

In our call for papers, we invited authors to think anew about socio-cultural anthropology's longstanding engagement with "the body" in light of the "somatic turn" in contemporary thought shaped by the philosopher Richard Shusterman's extensive corpus of work on somaesthetics. "The body" has been a central concern for anthropological theorists and the focal point of ethnographic practice, extending from Marcel Mauss to Mary Douglas, Pierre Bourdieu to Arthur Kleinman, Thomas Csordas to Margaret Lock and Nancy Scheper-Hughes (and beyond). However, dominant currents within ethnographic research have tended to reduce bodies to sites for the operation of power or resistance, ideology or subjectivity, with rare exceptions. One such exception is the work of Robert Desjarlais in *Body and Emotion: The Aesthetics of Illness and Healing in the Nepal Himalayas* (1992a) which introduced the notion of "embodied aesthetics," but the idea did not catch on. It was premature: the time was not yet ripe. With a tip of the hat to Desjarlais, we invited authors to engage with the somatic condition/ing and aesthetic textures of social life and leave prior preoccupations of the field behind.

As "an ameliorative discipline of both theory and practice," somaesthetics as defined by Shusterman, concerns the body "as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning"; it "aims to enrich not only our abstract, discursive knowledge of the body but also our lived somatic experience and performance" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 27). These dual aims (somatic analysis and self-cultivation) are intimately familiar to anthropological fieldworkers concerned with the question of how it is that meanings and values become felt qualities in the everyday use of (our) bodies. However, inquiry into the somatic and aesthetic immediacies of everyday experience has remained at the periphery of ethnographic analysis, until recently (Masquelier and McDowell, 2026).

As editors, we envision this collection as an invitation for ethnographers and somaestheticians alike to find their own ways across an obviously makeshift but nevertheless traversable crossing between anthropology and the field of somaesthetics. As a reminder for those coming to these

papers from other disciplines, much of this bridge-building is dependent upon ethnographic efforts to *show* rather than explain the influence that people's (un)selfconscious habits of thought, movement, sensing (and so on) have on shaping their spontaneously felt inclination to "go on" with their everyday in ways that ultimately serve to reiterate its ordinariness – "this is just what we do" is a popular refrain from interlocutors that every ethnographer has heard and had to wrestle with in the field. Yet, come to think of it, isn't it in just those moments that ethnographic practice intersects with the somaesthetics project in the sense that bodies unavoidably, manifestly and quite literally *embody* our conditions of life?

Making the "right" moves or responses in life is dependent upon our training to become persons, virtually from the moment we are born (see Guerts and Komabu-Pomeyie, this collection). We "body forth", as the German phenomenologist Medard Boss memorably put it (Schatzki, 1996, p. 45). Significantly, when in the early 1990s Desjarlais in his work on illness amongst the Yolmo Sherpa people in the Nepal Himalayas was writing on how "[e]mbodied aesthetics pattern the ghostly presences, the emotional resonances, of cultural experience" (1992b, p. 1116) Shusterman was simultaneously staking out the aesthetic conditions of life that lie "beneath interpretation" where language mastery is, he would write, not necessarily mastery of "a system of semiotic rules for interpreting signs" but rather, or at least in part, "the mastery of intelligent habits of gesture and response for engaging effectively in a form of life" (1990, p. 192). Even before somaesthetics got off the ground then, a complementarity between a new ethnographic project and Shusterman's emergent philosophy appears to have been in formation. Indeed, as Desjarlais would phrase it in his aforementioned book *Body and Emotion*: "There is much to experience that eludes the logic of signs, and a key mandate of future ethnographies will be, in my opinion, to evince the felt immediacies that mark songs of grief, rhythms of healing, divine presences … the following pages try to bring the reader's body into the ethnographic endeavour" (1992a, p. 32).

Overview of the Articles

We open this collection with a piece on "bodies at burning man" by the poet-anthropologist John Sherry. In a marked departure from the conventional ethnographic monograph, Sherry's experiential-experimental (poetic) ethnography of the Burning Man festival creatively contrasts word and "somagram" to explore the narrator's (fieldworking) voice as a source of somaesthetic awareness. The ethnographic stage that Sherry sets for the somatic and aesthetic encounter is followed by two novel contributions to a field of ethnological study inaugurated by Marcel Mauss in his classic 1936 essay 'Les techniques du corps" (Mauss, 1979): Kei Nagaoka on the kinaesthetics of prostration both in the home and at religious pilgrimage sites in the eastern Himalayas, and Tiffany Pollock on the affective dimensions of fire dancing as a tourist attraction in Thailand. In that 1936 essay, Mauss wrote: "By [*technique*] I mean the ways in which from society to society [people] know how to use their bodies" (1979, p. 97). He went on to list a series of examples of different cultural styles of walking, running, marching, dancing, jumping, throwing, digging, swimming and even sleeping (e.g., dozing while riding a horse, or the use of wooden headrests in Africa), and concluded that "there is perhaps no 'natural way' for the adult" to perform any of these actions: the body is our "first and most natural instrument" (1979, p. 104). In prostration and fire dancing we find two new (and also very ancient) techniques to add to Mauss' list. Nagaoka and Pollock also extend Mauss' project (which was basically a classificatory one) in another way, by transitioning from constructing a typology to "doing sensology" (Newhauser, 2014): in Nagaoka's case, by practicing prostration alongside the

Tibetan Buddhists she befriended and offering an account of what this practice *feels* like – that is, from within (after Desjarlais 1992a, 1992b); and, in Pollock's case, by setting aside the debate over whether fire dancing in Thailand is "authentic" (or not) to focus on the somaesthetic "flow" (after Csikzsentmihalyi et al., 2005).

The next paper entitled "Seselelãme: Aŋlɔ-Eʋe Refractions of an African Somaesthetics" by Kathryn Linn Geurts and Sefakor Komabu-Pomeyie explores the enculturation of the senses in Aŋlɔland (southeastern Ghana). It is, we suggest, a landmark contribution to the anthropological literature on the "techniques of the senses" (a field inaugurated in 1990 which extrapolates on Mauss' 1936 essay on "techniques of the body": see Howes, 1990) and does double duty by pointing to the utility of thinking somaesthetically in ethnographic field research. By centring Aŋlɔ-Eʋe bodily ways of knowing (or *seselelãme* – literally meaning *perceive-perceive-at-flesh-inside*), the authors persuasively demonstrate how people's efforts to make sense of the world surface the multiple ways in which bodies serve as loci for "sensory-aesthetic appreciation" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 27). The authors also cunningly disrupt the hegemony which the discipline of psychology has long exercised over the study of the senses and perception, not to mention the definition of intelligence.

The focus of the following article by Elena Giulia Abbiatici and Robert Mastroianni entitled "The Incomplete Body: Somatic Pathways between Body Art and Posthumanism," is on body modification and the augmentation of the senses in the techno-aesthetic practices of Stelarc and the Transpecies Society, among other hackers. Further building out anthropological interest in reconfiguring understanding of the "human," the authors explore the transformative somatic and aesthetic experiments of these self-styled Posthumanists and Transhumanists who seek to radically reconfigure human biological capacities, and push the bounds of sense. The next contribution, by Jonathan Ventura and Shilpa Das, focuses on the disabled body from the perspective of design anthropology and somaesthetics. It challenges both the medical model and the social model of disability – that is, of disability as deficit vs. discriminatory, of disability as something to be overcome vs. an identity that is no less worthy of respect than that of the so-called able-bodied. Ventura and Das shift the onus from a focus on othering to the many artful ways in which disabled people negotiate barriers and generate "activist affordances" (Dokumaci, 2023) that upend the playing field rather than simply levelling it. In their argument for a value-oriented design practice, Ventura and Das uphold the need to recenter aesthetic considerations in pursuit of a new framework of transformative inquiry, or what they call "somaesthetic socio-cultural design for disability" (S^2CDD), with particular reference to the case of "disability *jugaad*" in India.

The gravamen of this collection then shifts to the anthropology of consumption, and features two ground-breaking articles on "the sensori-social life of things" (Howes, 2022) – specifically, Maggi cubes; and, secondly, on the design culture of IKEA. The former article, by Yaiza Bocos Mirabella and Stephan Palmié called "Collective Soma: the Aesthetics of Maggi" reveals that the globalization of the consumer society, far from turning the peoples of Africa into passive consumers with their tastes dictated by the organolepticians of the global North,[1] is more in the nature of a "culinary cubism," as they put it. They interrogate how African subjects appropriate (indigenize) Maggi cubes in an extended "agentive, even discerning manner," incorporating them into homecooked meals that by their saltiness do not just satiate the taste buds, but also feed into the "relations of care of self and others" that it is the responsibility of food-providers to

1 Organoleptician is the old name for the chemists in white coats whose mission is to perfect the sense appeal of food and beverages and other commodities; now they call themselves "sensory professionals" (Bull & Howes, 2025). Their science is one of the new "sciences of subjectivity" born of the aesthetic-industrial complex (Shapin, 2012).

sustain. The global success of Maggi is actually "a success of the plural," the authors argue, not (as is commonly supposed) one of massification, or the homogenization of gustation.

The subsequent article entitled "The Fittedness of Home: Sensorial and Somatic Dynamics in the Era of IKEA Homes" is by Balint Veres. An aesthetician with a perceptive ethnographic eye, Veres explores the aesthetic capitalism of IKEA home displays through an engaging glimpse into how our "sensorium and somatic routines" cooperate in producing the "ideals of home." Unpacking the production of home as a core component of late capitalist consumer lifestyles, Veres brings ethnographic inquiry into conversation with various somaesthetically aligned theories and sensory studies scholarship in remarkably generative ways. This article will be of significant interest to researchers concerned with the role that materiality plays in the discursive and somatic (re)production of everyday life.

The last two papers in this collection take the intersection of somaesthetics and anthropology in a different direction by attending to the "aesth-ethical" (Sriram, 2025) – that is, the conjunction of aesthesis and ethics. Arturo Esquivel's article, entitled "Proving Fear: The Corporeal Witness and their Role in Asylum Seeking," is a troublingly compelling ethnographic portrayal of the difficulties faced by Central American asylum seekers in their encounters with US border officials at the Mexico-US border. Based on long-term anthropological fieldwork in a Catholic migrant shelter in the Mexican border town of Tijuana, Esquivel focuses on the processes of "aesthetic self-creation" that migrants must engage in when attempting to pass the U.S. authorities' "credible fear test." In relating the storied journeys of two migrants, he shows how the asylum-seeking process is shaped and made credible by an aesthetics of suffering that necessarily changes how migrants experience or "make sense" of their bodies and how others (mostly those in positions of authority: e.g., border agents, shelter workers, psychologists and so on) acknowledge or, otherwise, disavow knowledge of, the migrants' expressions of traumatic pain. Beyond the contribution that Esquivel makes to understanding the somaesthetic conditions of these legal claims to asylum, his ethnographic approach provides another exemplary illustration of the value of such writing for developing an anthropologically informed somaesthetics.

Finally, in a self-described "exploratory" article called "Thinking Through the Body in Action Anthropology," Mark Watson re-reads the writings on "action anthropology" from the 1950s by the Chicago anthropologist Sol Tax through a somaesthetic lens. As a participatory action researcher (PAR), Watson argues that one can discern in Tax's writings an alertness to the primacy of felt experience (for researchers and participants alike) in the action encounter. Watson elaborates on his position by drawing on Shusterman's philosophy to reimagine the efficacy of participatory action research to initiate social change as anchored in an ethics of self-cultivation, a project that, he shows, returns us to what is always in front of researchers' eyes but which they rarely report seeing: the somatics and aesthetics of personal renewal.

A Brief Excursion: On Somaesthetics and Anthropology

In the course of assembling this collection we, the editors, found ourselves repeatedly returning to discuss variations of the same two questions: What can the somaesthetics project bring to anthropology? And, conversely, what can anthropology bring to the somaesthetics project? In lieu of offering a comprehensive final statement, here are some brief provisional remarks.

The somaesthetics project advocates for a first-person perspective, with an accent on embodiment. At the same time, and anthropologically speaking, its commitment to aesthetics as an organizing energy of everyday life implicates the individual in a field of "sociability": what Georg Simmel (1949) famously referred to as the "art or play-form of association," a "special

sociological structure" that makes space for expressive interaction and original thought, albeit subject to the array of constraints imposed by politico-economic interests and/or group-oriented agendas (1949, p. 254). Simply put, the ethics of self-cultivation, of becoming *a* person, derives its significance, its "meaning" if you will, from a social aesthetics – a specific feeling or sense for how things are or could be. This is, we surmise, where the field of somaesthetics intersects in significant but apparently as yet unexplored ways with ethnographic practice. Putting to one side the historical debates over what "ethnography" truly means,[2] it is à propos that Geurts and Komabu-Pomeyie (this collection) think to draw on the French anthropologist, Francois Laplantine's description of ethnographic practice: "The experience of [ethnographic] fieldwork is an experience of sharing in the sensible [*le partage du sensible*]. We observe, we listen, we speak with others, we partake of their cuisine, we try to feel along with them what they experience" (Laplantine, 2015, p. 2).

Notice that for Laplantine ethnography is first and foremost an *experience* derived from undertaking fieldwork rather than a method. Further, and as he expounds in his book *The Life of the Senses (Le social et le sensible)*, it is an *aesthetic* experience through which the ethnographer seeks to *try* to attune themselves to a people's "way of going through life" (2015, p.122). For Laplantine, fieldwork is a somatic encountering of *le sensible* which in French - as opposed to its limited derivation in English - refers to "whatever affects the body" (Howes, 2015, p. 131n4); or as Laplantine himself puts it, "a word designating the body in all its states and multiple metamorphoses" (2015, p. 84).

It is in this realm of 'the sensible' – or, in other words, of what feels right (sensibility) and what makes sense to people (intelligibility) – that life unfolds; 'the sensible' we might say connotes a form of life in which the ethnographer ultimately seeks to orient themselves by engaging not in "participant-observation" as Malinowski famously had it, but *participant sensation* (Howes, 2023; see Nagaoka, Esquivel, Sherry, this collection).

Indeed, Laplantine went as far to claim that "all anthropology is anthropology of the body" (quoted in Howes, 2015, p. xii). On the one hand, this serves to underscore both the centrality of the body to anthropology and how the anthropology of the body and senses takes the social as its starting point (rather than the *sujet de goût*: see Bocos Mirabella and Palmié, this collection) with the result that its focus is on the cultural underpinnings and contingencies of the sense of self itself (i.e. the self as a product of the intersection of the division of society along gender, ethnic or racialized, and class as well as able-bodied/disabled lines (see Ventura & Das, this collection). Intriguingly, and on the other hand, this vision of the Self correlates strikingly with the break John Dewey sought to make from traditional philosophy by celebrating "the importance of nondiscursive immediacy" (Shusterman, 1997, p. 166). As Shusterman writes, "[Dewey] always insisted that our most intense and vivid values are those of on-the-pulse experienced quality and affect, not the abstractions of discursive truth" (1997, p.166). For Laplantine then, as for Dewey, the primacy of nondiscursive experience was *aesthetic*.

Laplantine was preoccupied by the aesthetics of people's everyday experience. He concludes his book, *The Life of the Senses*, with an analysis of the "mediating role" that the aesthetic plays in social life (see Laplantine, 2015, pp. 121-123). Moreover, Laplantine readily identified an "anthropological aesthetic" running through ethnographic practice. As he explains, the "aesthetic" is a "necessary mediation" in any anthropological consideration of "the relationship between the

2 According to Clifford and Marcus in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), "textualization" is the end of ethnography. This rather literal definition of what ethno-*graphers* do supplanted the more sensorially-minded practice of the previous generation, for whom "sensing patterns" across cultures was de rigueur (Bull & Howes 2025). Anthropologists have been striving to come (back) to their senses ever since the heyday of the "writing culture" movement in the 1980s (see Howes, 2023, Willis & Trondman, 2000). Anthropologists are not alone (see Stehliková, 2025).

social and the subject" because of its "aporetic and questioning" modality that inevitably "[frees] oneself from a certain number of oppositions" such as that between "rationalocentrism" and a "moralizing humanism" (2015, pp. 121-122).

From the point of view of this special issue, Laplantine helps us reimagine the ethnographer as a kind of practical somaesthetician for whom the experiential (fieldworking) Self serves as a locus of "sensory-aesthetic appreciation" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 27). As Laplantine succinctly states:

> Reflecting on the sensible, or *in* the sensible, and more precisely still in the infinitely problematic relations between what we hold to be sensible and what we hold to be intelligible, leads us to think about the ethical and the aesthetic together, as Wittgenstein invites us to do in a proposition from the *Tractatus* that has often seemed obscure: "ethics and aesthetics are one" …. It leads us to think them together, but not in any which way. Not the aesthetic based on the ethical …. but the opposite: "the birth of the ethical on the basis of the aesthetic" as Romain Gary wrote. (original italics, 2015, pp. 121-122)

All ethnographers are preoccupied by the complex web of intersubjective relations and concrete contingencies that fieldwork opens up. Commitments to *try* and grasp other ways of knowing are first and foremost claims that anthropologists make on their own experience. As the renowned ethnographer Michael Jackson put it in recasting ethnography as a radically empirical practice, "[e]xperience … becomes a mode of experimentation, of testing and exploring the ways in which our experiences conjoin or connect us with others, rather than the ways they set us apart" (Jackson, 1989, p. 4). How else to characterize this image of the relationally-responsive ethnographer who is "continually being changed by as well as changing the experience of others" (Jackson, 1989, p. 3), if not as a locus of "creative self-fashioning" in Shusterman's terms? Ethnographic *style* is a profoundly somatic and individualizing practice but it is ultimately shaped by the practical (and professional) aim of socially attuning oneself to one's surroundings; of becoming aware of how to inhabit those deeply structuring and utterly ordinary "agentive spaces" in everyday life which "call" people into action (Shotter, 2013; also see Watson, 2022). In the same chapter, Jackson reflects on the example of Renato Rosaldo who set out to 'make sense' of head-hunting among Illongot men in northern Lauzon, Philippines. Predisposed to analyze, by digging deeper, into the explanations men gave about their murderous actions, Rosaldo was left frustrated by and largely dismissive of the men's accounts which always spoke of the same "rage, born of grief," which "impels [the headhunter] to kill his fellow human being" (Rosaldo, 1984, p. 178, quoted in Jackson, 1989, p. 4). Fourteen years after recording these simple statements, Rosaldo would write of his wife, Michele's, tragic accidental death while in the field and how this lived experience "repositioned" him, suddenly making him "better able to grasp that Illongot older men mean precisely what they say when they describe the anger in bereavement as the source of their desire to cut off human heads" (in Jackson, 1989, p. 3-4).

For Jackson, the value of Rosaldo's example is the attention it draws back to the neglected locus of the body and emotions in ethnographic practice and the transformational qualities of such experience in the production of knowledge which, as Jackson came to reason, undermines and rejects any claim to take up the position of a detached, objective observer. Taking the Self as a site of experimentation in fieldwork speaks to the value of "improved experience" for ethnographic practice, but this sense of self-cultivation is always cast as an openness to the cacophony of lived contradictions rather than moral perfectionism per se. Indeed, we can anticipate how the focus on melioration in somaesthetics, usually of the inquiring Self, might

provoke anthropologists to decry its obsession with the Self as not sufficiently social for serious consideration (Bocos Mirabella & Palmié this collection). Notwthstanding the fact that as Pollock and Esquivel demonstrate in this collection, the fieldworking Self is a site of embodied sociality, others have argued that to equate somaesthetics with an 'inward-turn' is too simple a characterization of a project that does not so clearly distinguish the personal from the social (e.g., see Shusterman, 2014; also see Koczanowicz, 2023). Indeed, in returning to the pragmatist roots of the somaesthetics project, Shusterman questions the underlying assumption that "working on oneself" necessarily entails the withdrawal of a person into an inward-looking activity; after all, "[e]nlarging oneself by losing oneself in community action" was, Shusterman reminds us, one of John Dewey's prime contributions to theorizing social action (1997, p. 40) – or "knowing-action."

For these reasons, the somaesthetics project may be hailed as opening the way for anthropologists to reconceptualize their practice – namely, fieldworking – as turning on the promotion of an *anthropology with feeling*. In Watson's article, for example, he argues that participatory commitments to providing people the opportunity to speak with authority to their own lived experience is also about acting on what people *feel* needs to be done; in effect, any claim to action research is about changing (with the idea of 'improving') the world 'knowledge' represents as part of people's struggles for rights and social justice (Giroux, 2013, p. 30).

One last provisional remark has to do with what anthropology might contribute to the somaesthetics project in terms of the *aesthetics of things*. To add a twist to that famous pronouncement of Georg Simmel in "Sociology of the Senses" – namely: "That we get involved in interactions at all depends on the fact that we have a sensory effect upon one another" ([1907] 1979: 109), we maintain that the same could be said of the interactions between persons and things. Anthropological appreciation for material aesthetics speaks to how things constitute extensions of human capacities and possess or display sensible qualities in their own right. For instance, media theorist Marshall McLuhan put this point well in *The Medium is the Massage* (McLuhan and Fiore [1967] 1996) where he characterizes the house as an extension of the skin, the automobile of the foot, the book of the eye, the telephone as an extension of the voice and hearing, and so forth (see further Bille, 2017; Howes, 2005; and, Geurts & Komabu-Pomeyie, Bocos Mirabella & Palmié, Ventura & Das, this collection). This goes to a point made by Michael Taussig in *Mimesis and Alterity*: "Sentience takes us outside ourselves" (Taussig, 1993). This might be an area for a future special issue where anthropologists could open the way for somaestheticians to get out of their own bodies, out of their own bodyminds and contemplate the conditions of existence in all their social, sensory and physical multiplicity. To fuse these two complementary sensibilities (without attenuating their difference) could be source of tremendous synergies. At the same time, it would (ideally) attune us to exploring the material contradictions of our being in the world. As Claude Lévi-Strauss famously wrote of cuisine in *The Origin of Table Manners*: "cooking is a language through which [a] society unconsciously reveals its structure, unless – just as unconsciously – it resigns itself to using the medium to express its contradictions" (1978: 495).

In closing, we would like to sincerely thank the journal's editors, Mark Tschaepe and Falk Heinrich, and Richard Shusterman for their kind invitation to pull this special issue together. Our intention for this collection is to set the stage for what promises to be a fruitful dialogue between two complementary if socially-distanced fields of inquiry. We hope the papers in this collection illustrate the kinds of collaborative intersections possible moving forward: whether they be more critically oriented or mutually generative is for the reader to decide.

One last word, about the cover of this issue of the *Journal of Somaesthetics*. It features a work

called "Energy Bodies" by the interdisciplinary artist-researcher Emilie O'Brien. She calls her approach "bilateral drawing." It is two-handed, and implicates the whole body. Like a human gyroscope, the artist positions herself in front of the textile and, by turns standing and crouching, across numerous sessions "traces the contours of a self that is fluid, connected, motion-filled, intelligent abstraction." In this way, the person of the artist intersects with the environment through the medium of the textile. The resulting drawing pulses with energies in a marvelous rendition of the emplacement of the subject, or ecology of sensing.

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